

FLEAS ON THE DOG

COMPLETE ISSUE 3

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46 SUBMISSIONS

WELCOME !

Issue 3 July 1, 2019

Sure size isn't everything but we still like it when people think we have a BIG...um...Issue. And a BIG issue it is! Welcome to *Fleas on the Dog*. We're a no frills, brown bag online lit rag. (We like to think we're underground with our heads sticking out.) We don't care about pretty pictures or fancy layouts. We're interested in one thing and one thing only: GOOD WRITING! Our lone mandate is quality which means if your mother likes your writing we probably won't.

A special feature we are introducing with Issue 3 is HOTS--'hands off the submissions!' As you peruse the stories and articles you will notice that each has a different look. That's because we upload our accepted submissions exactly as received. We like this approach because it creates a sense of visual diversity and emphasizes the writer as an individual in a way a uniform format does not. Similarly, while we occasionally soft edit, in some stories we don't correct typos or grammar glitches in the interest of voice authenticity.

We're proud to announce that three writers are making their publishing debut in this issue. Congratulations to Rachel Adams, Lou Morrison and Tom Smith!

And among our roster of distinguished veteran writers we are honoured to feature the 2017 Mona Schreiber Prize Winner for Humorous Fiction and Nonfiction (Debbie Miller), Poetry in the Arts First Place Award and Dorfman Prize winner (Gerard Sarnat), First Prize winner Autumn House Press Fiction Award (Ashley Cowger), the 2017 Lorien Prize winner (Howie Good), the 2 times winner of the Excellent Awards from Ohio Arts Council (Ivars Balkits) and 2 Pushcart Prize nominees (W. Tyler Paterson and Dennis Pahl).

It's a big fresh lineup with lots of diversity and talent that rocks. We hope you enjoy it. Until we meet again in Issue 4, spread the love and remember, READ is the best four letter word in the world.

Tom, Charles, Richard, Robert and Steve

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FICTION

ARTIFICIAL MOTHER

By Tina Cabrera

WHY WE LIKE IT: *What was science fiction in the past is reality now. The consequences of this unstoppable advance are both frightening and exciting. When it comes to writing, sometimes genre fiction—speculative, sci/fi, dystopian-- is a more amenable avenue to address the concerns of the future—our future, than the more traditional literary routes. We can't think of any better example of this than 'Artificial Mother'. And while in the very best stories we don't believe you can really isolate style from content, we admit to being spellbound by the author's translucent prose, fluent voice and the effortless facility with which she summons images and le bon mot. A superlative experimental short story that left us star struck.*

When you try to imagine the birth, you imagine it more as a retrieval than a sudden appearance brought on by hours of maternal agony; unlike your birth and that of every other baby for thousands of generations, this one will not require hours of physical suffering. No element of surprise. Your baby will have evolved before your eyes, that is, if you visit regularly as suggested in the coming weeks.

Talk to the baby – that should be especially easy considering the baby is suspended like a lovely seahorse for anyone to see. Don't hold back, for she can hear you. Sing to her and then watch for a response. New Birth means greater transparency. Mimic a natural pregnancy if you hope to form a bond before arrival. *Arrival. Emergence.* Which word best describes New Birth birth? “Arrival” and “emergence” can be used

interchangeably to denote the appearance of something new. Nothing can quite compare to observing close-up and personal your baby's growth from conception to emergence; that's right--you decide that you prefer the sound of the word "emerge" and all that it connotes. Traditional mothers claimed they *felt* their baby's growth within their bellies, but you can't help but balk at that sentiment. You get to witness your baby's transformation before your very eyes. That's right, she's *your baby* despite the distance between her body and yours.

At first, you feel a bit self-conscious, cooing and cawing and making your best baby noises, even though there is no one else in the holding room but you and her. Just behind the biobag on the wall hangs a diagram of gestation from Week 1 to Week 28. Tiny as a pea, you are relieved to see that your baby is just the right size for Week 8. The perfect artificial pregnancy. No physical discomfort, unpleasantness, or ill effects; no nausea or vomiting. No pelvic pressure, no itchy, expanding belly.

At Week 12, you play your choice of music in place of pre-recorded lullabies that mimic the human heartbeat. This set-up is well intentioned but an obvious hold over from traditional pregnancies. With neither you nor the baby possessing one, you decide that to continue playing musical rhythms similar to the human heartbeat would be pointless if not deceiving. Still, you agree that music is the universal language no matter the advancements, and so you play a variety with rhythms, beats and melodies conveying a range of emotions, from melancholy to elation, resignation to confusion. You play your favorite albums on the antique record player that they permitted you to set up in the private hospital room, wishing to expose your baby to the musical richness

of your childhood. You are quite pleased to see signs of excitement: the baby jolts, and like a betta fish gulping underwater, her mouth rounds into an O of pure joy.

In the ensuing weeks, you play music of various eras from before the Change: Wagner's Faust Overture; Billie Holiday's Essential Rare Collection; Mariya Takeuchi's Variety; Keith Jarrett's Koln Concert, circa 1975, the year your own mother was born. You close your eyes and imagine piano fingers liltng across the keys with speed and grace. Taking particular pleasure in exuberant bursts of "Ooh" and "Aah," you lift the needle and set it down on to repeat that part, hoping the fetus will sense the joyous human energy. You and your twin got piano lessons at age six. You used to dream of becoming a solo pianist, while Sister immediately lost interest. Sister so often resisted similarity. This is how you remember it.

At one point, you think your precious baby--just look at how utterly miraculous the thing, she's yours, she's really yours!--your precious baby she looks bored, for she yawns and stretches her arms. Anything and everything she does excites you with a thrill for living that you have never felt before. Then your thrill turns into chill when you realize you cannot be certain that she is responding to the music. It could very well be the programmed simulations of a waking mother's movements, for whether naturally birthed or not, babies are often rocked to sleep this way. The baby does not need your body, and though you knew this going into it, if you still had a heart, you would have felt it drop just now. To change the mood, or rather your mood, you play something more exciting -- Takeuchi's *Plastic Love*, the original version.

Don't hurry.

I'm sorry.

Don't worry.

I'm just playing games

I know that's plastic love

Dance to the plastic beat

Another morning comes

Remember how you got a kick out of annoying Sister by humming along to the tune, inserting words indiscriminately: I'm not in plastic love. Da-da da plastic beat, I know that morning co-o-o-o-mes. You never could be bothered to look up the actual lyrics, even though this was for you the best pop song in all the world. You were and still are fine without understanding every word, but Sister for her part found two translations of the Japanese lyrics and placed them side by side for critical analysis.

Don't mess up the program of love

Despite my sudden kisses and passionate looks

With your sudden kiss and fiery stare

Don't get upset with the program of this love

I cleverly plan every hello and goodbye

I've been dealt with hellos and goodbyes so

neatly

Because everything comes to an end

In due time, everything will end - Don't hurry!

Don't hurry!

Comparing the two versions, Sister insisted that the switching of the first two lines is of important significance. "Trivial you say?" she said in her slow, matter-of-fact tone. "I think not. The first version emphasizes that "you" not mess up love with your lust actions, whereas in the second, the speaker places responsibility on herself for failing to inhibit her passion. The actor of the first version, then, is "you," whereas the actor of the second is the speaker, "I" signified by "my." Sister approached everything in life with her penchant for literary analysis, which always irritated you. Unlike you, she could not seem to compartmentalize. You both possessed a keen intellect, consistently performed at the highest level, top of your class, but you saw her inability to acclimate to changing circumstances as a character flaw. "Lighten up," you told her, "Which translation accurately describes the songwriter's intentions? Well, I don't care all that much."

Hoping to one-up your twin, you rolled your eyes. "The gist," you insisted, "is this: 'Don't hurry me up to fall in love because I've been hurt so badly.' It doesn't really matter who said what. Get to the big picture, to the heart of it straightaway. If you really want to get technical (and just then, you had to work hard to suppress your impatience), the phrases "program of love," and "plastic love" both connote a sense of the fake. The speaker has learned her lesson; she wishes for love as an automatic performance, as cold and distant as she has become." You don't stop there. You're on a roll:

Every guy that asks me out ironically looks just like him

For some reason my memories run wild

"She must have fell fast and hard for 'him' in the heat of passion, and just as hard and fast, the romance crashed and burned. Her memories of him have made her cautious.

Don't hurry, don't make the same mistake, besides

Never take loving someone like me serious

Love is just a game, I just want to have fun

"Very good, very good!" Sister mocked. "See, if you take the time to break things down, then you can understand anything!"

With her coaxing, you just participated with Sister in sucking the life out of your favorite song. Music, like all art is highly subjective, and what this song means for you won't be the same as what it means for others. What does it mean to you, Baby? you say, returning to the present. Your Baby's eyes are closed. Caught up in a reverie of memories, you forgot to observe her reactions. But that's okay. This isn't the last time you will play one or another version of Plastic Love.

On your next visit, you post clever quotes about motherhood all over the plain white walls to help keep your spirits up:

"[Motherhood is] the biggest gamble in the world. It is the glorious life force. It's huge and scary – it's an act of infinite optimism." –Gilda Radner

“When you are a mother, you are never really alone in your thoughts. A mother always has to think twice, once for herself and once for her child.” –Sophia Loren

You find the latter especially relevant, holding up despite having been articulated so many decades ago. You haven’t been a mother for very long, but like a long-distance lover, your thoughts are consumed with your prospective descendent and you long for the moments when you can be together.

You wait until Week 16 to speak intelligible human language. Early language development still begins before birth as far as you know, and as with music, babies remember certain sounds such as vowels from their mother’s language. Hi there, baby. How are you? You over there, me over here. Even with the reassurance that the baby can hear and react to all sounds – inside and out – you can’t help but think it all pointless; for even if the child may someday remember it, speaking as a way of communicating will soon be rendered obsolete by the ability of Trans-humans to communicate wirelessly.

Within you, an internal battle ensues. The more you speak to the baby, the more impatient you become. Just like the restlessness of your younger days. Only now, it feels visceral, physiological. Your tongue cannot keep up with the rush of thoughts and memories. So you spew un-sentences instead: *When Tommy met Annabelle gale storm umbrella. Sister marathon sweat breath* and feel guilty all the more. Does it really matter whether or not you speak in complete sentences or in fragments? The point of talking to the baby – *your baby* – is to soothe it by the sound of your voice, isn’t it? The way that the sound of music soothes whether or not the words make any sense? Yet, you find

yourself wanting to slow down and enunciate each and every word, as Sister used to do. With her propensity for details, Sister was more like Father and his skill of storytelling.

Frustrated by the things she could no longer say, she thought to write instead. That's it. She would write in the hospital room and in her bedroom. The hand had the strength of bone and muscle, didn't it? Whereas the tongue was soft and weak. Tame her impatient mind by the force of a strong hand. Wouldn't typing be faster? Yes, but as she found with her first penned pages, there was nothing like the sensation of the hand gliding swiftly across paper like that of a pianist, nothing like the thrill of the hand-writer's high. From then on, with just three months left, she kept a journal of her thoughts addressed to the Un-Emerged.

Week 17. I would be feeling signs of the quickening by now. Like Mother. Look! she said to Father, look one them is kicking! He felt the kick on the palm of his hand just then and relished the moment. Will you be kicking soon?

Dearest, should I tell you a story about me and Em? By the time you read this, you already know your roots. You know that you originated unconventionally, untraditionally, from my skin and from his nanobot sperm. Writing that just now reminds me of just how unreal all of this still seems. Maybe Em has told you his story. More likely he hasn't had to. You can communicate from one brain to another instantly, so why wouldn't you? As for me, you may have already plugged in, and so you will have perceived that we shared a close kinship, have sensed the wide bandwidth of

pleasant emotions. When I had to choose, I chose him and he was all in. I will no longer linger in this narrative. Rather, I will tell you the story of your grandparents, two very special biological human beings whom you sadly, will never meet.

There was nothing extraordinary about the night that Val met Annabelle in Swansea, Wales. Caught in her very first gale storm, Annabelle sprung open her umbrella, useless against the powerful winds. She held the inside-out umbrella over their heads as they ran into the campus flat together. It was the small things that moved him: her upturned nose, the glow about her as she tripped over the threshold. Later in the haven of his dorm room, he wept neither tears of joy nor of sadness, but an array of emotions combined. So caught up in the reverie of her, he had not even noticed the seconds slip into minutes, the way I imagine time for you bears no significance. There he sat soaked down to his skin, anticipating when they might meet again.

Anabelle, on the other hand, had not thought much of their meeting; in fact, for her it was neither chance nor fate that brought them together, but a sort of good-natured defiance. The wind gusts would not get the better of her, just as no challenge ever had. Don't tell your father, she said. It took me awhile to warm up. After all, your father was like me just an American. Truly, I expected to meet someone more exotic during my study abroad. It was his consistent efforts to win me over that won me over, she said, in her abridged version.

Father had been hyper-sensitive. The opposite of Mother, who couldn't be bothered with the time and energy it took to attend to intensity of feeling. He told — *not just any story* — but those uniquely his. He narrated with such vividness and feeling that

brought his story alive in my mind's eye. He story-told to both me and Sister, your aunt, who would have passed Father's stories down to her own children just as I am doing now, had she survived. It hurts — my hand, for I have never written this fast before; but I command, the biological part that refuses to give ground to the nano-bots that infiltrate my mind and expand it exponentially.

Week 20. Sorry to wake you. I've learned that in my absence you started to sleep and wake on regular cycles. It has been three weeks. I took a "baby moon." Silly right? It's not like I've done anything particularly strenuous or stressful with this "pregnancy." But again, in imitation of a traditional one and as one last hurrah before...I'm sorry. I didn't do any "baby" things, such as getting your baby room ready. I didn't even go out of town. I stayed in mostly, once in a while venturing out to the Virtual Theater. I can't seem to stay away from those few public venues that remind me of Mother Father Sister. Though they've changed drastically, the old movie house bars and eateries-turned virtual reality domes preserve remnants of the past. Thanks to the few left like myself who've retained biological human-ness, posters of 20th century classics like Planet of the Apes, Star Wars, and early 21st century ones like Blade Runner 2040 still ornament the walls, pay homage.

I'm supposed to be feeling pretty good at this point because the risk for miscarriage or premature labor would have passed by now. In lieu of a natural pregnancy, how do I feel? I miss you when we are apart. I am sorry you don't get the advantage of close proximity, to respond to a hand rubbing the belly, or to be lulled to sleep from Mother's activity. But the advantage is that negative feelings, like the blues, do not directly

impact you. With you inside that biobag and me outside, we are forced to bond from a remove. Of course, that doesn't mean we cannot bond at all. Trading one kind of blindness for another, or if you like, the heightening of one sense over another. I can't feel you but I can see you with my own eyes.

Your intelligence will surpass even Em's—certainly mine. He chose a total mind upload, and soon, his mind will interface with yours. Call it foolish, but I wanted to retain what I could of this biological body, though limited and cumbersome by comparison to the new and improved 2 and 3.0's. Oh, there I go, writing about Em and me again, even though I said that I wouldn't. There is so much you will learn, quickly and effortlessly, when you emerge.

Your skin is wrinkled and transparent, like the skin of someone who has sat in the bath too long. You may or may not get to experience the unique conditions of having human skin for long; it depends on your choice of embodiment. Your hair appears feathery and fine, the color of dark chocolate like mine. What have you, or will you inherit from Em? First, his intellect. Second, genes completely free of disease. As for physical traits, I cannot say, for Em is constantly altering his physical manifestation, his embodiment. He loves the plasticity.

Plastic Love. I love that song so much. Exactly how many times I've listened I cannot recount, but it replays in my mind randomly, different lines at different times. Oh—listen to the haunting sounds of almost every song on the album. You don't need to understand the Japanese language to be moved. Before Sister forced translation on me, I was transfixed by the entirety, like standing from a distance and absorbing the whole of

a painting, as opposed to standing close and examining each brush stroke. Hard to explain in words what in a song moves one. Sister was not as inspired; for her, the literal meaning of the words overpowered the aesthetic effect of musical melody. For her, such talk of love and broken hearts was too prosaic. Not that she did not enjoy music. If she did, she didn't say. I can only go by memory, which is lucid now and pristine. Oh the thrill of it, to suddenly remember all the things connected to those I love the most, like waking up remembering all of last night's dream.

Just to annoy Sister, I amped up the volume of *Plastic Love* even more, just like I'm doing now. I want to make sure the music breaks through the barrier of the plastic bag where you reside. *Plastic love. Plastic love.*

I just re-watched the classic "Being John Malkovich," the premise being much like experience-beaming. I haven't tried it myself, for I find no need. I relish my memories of real-life connection to those closest to me. I'm sure you will relish experience-beaming the way kids in my day were addicted to video games. I can't say I can blame you. To literally have access to anyone's sensory experience, including mine. You will be so addicted to the phenomena, fully realizing what it's like to be someone else through virtual reality. To make up for the absence of a real childhood, you will spend your credits on Parent-Child Adventures at Disneyland, Disneyworld, all the now nearly extinct theme parks. Just saying this now sends chills through me. You'll be able to experience that feeling too, artificially.

Week 21. Valencia, born 1969, had a twin named Lulu. They were born the year the

first humans walked on the moon. Before the Internet, smart phones, and virtual reality video games, they had the outdoors to explore – Indian clay, marbles, and tadpoles. For the 5th grade book float contest, they re-created a scene from Winnie the Pooh and won first place. Lulu molded and baked figures out of playdough. Val found the shoebox and cut out construction paper. Lulu designed the float but shared the prize money with her twin brother anyway, a whole five dollars which bought them a Beverly Cleary book, stickers, and a Mad Lib based on their favorite Saturday morning cartoon, Scooby doo. Aunt Lulu lived with us after her husband died. Within a year of Father's death, she died too. Not surprising for siblings as close as those two. Theo Van Gogh died 6 months after Vincent Van Gogh, my favorite artist of all time. Though the cause of death was said to be syphilis, more likely he died inconsolable, separated forever from the one closest to his heart.

Why did I choose to have a child now, so much later in life? On the other end of the spectrum, why not wait? With the prospect of eternity, time ought to be a luxury and endeavors ought to lose their sense of urgency. Yet, as an In-Between, I felt more than ever that it was either now or never to finally have a child of my own. Maybe because it is still hard for me after all these years to fully embrace a life without fear of sickness or death. Mother died at 50, Father at my age, 55, and sister at 30, not long before bio technology triumphed over the deadliest diseases. I lived the first few decades of my life pre-Singularity, lived to see those closest to me die premature deaths. Shock turned into anger, then anger into grief, grief into fear, which led to the decision of a hysterectomy. Mother died of uterine cancer. With a 50/50 chance of acquiring the same

cancer, I did not want to gamble on my life. I had always wanted a child, but I told myself I could adopt. This was when cancer was still the number one killer. How was I to know the cure was just around the corner?

I tried to ease the loss by adopting pets. But I felt something was still missing. A friend told me that as much as she loved her kitties, it could not come close to the sensation of having her own baby. Though by artificial means — you are still my offspring. I almost couldn't believe it possible, but here you are, developing before my eyes.

When I had my womb removed, I thought I had lost my chance to conceive permanently. But just when I thought I'd made peace with it... here we are. I didn't deserve it, but I got a second chance.

Oh dear *Amelia, Annabelle, Simone, or Veronica* — you get to decide, for one name cannot encompass all that you are or all that you will be. Sadness engulfs the most of me, having nothing of course to do with you, but all to do with the irrevocable past. Why them, not me? I smoked, while Sister never did. Yet she was the one who died of lung cancer, likely from secondhand smoke. Started in her lungs and spread like wildfire to her brain. If only she had lived to see — she could have had her mind freed from the brain consumed with disease, and uploaded to another substrate. That's what Em did; he chose Body 3.0, not because of the threat of disease, but because of its plasticity. *Plastic love*. Not only is my memory precise and pristine, so is my ability now to predict with certainty; based on where we have been, I know where we are going.

[Circa 2060, Age 5]

You are precocious. No public schooling, for all you need is available through inter-neuronal connection. In your wisdom, you will have chosen to outweigh your biological characteristics with the nonbiological so that the latter will outweigh the former. You'd rather interface with the Interconnected Mesh rather than bother with face-to-face contact.

[Age 20]

You are a completely software-based human now, for why wouldn't you? With nonbiological intelligence billions of times more powerful, and with the essential promise of immortality, why wouldn't you? The Singularitarians have argued all along that nonbiological intelligence is still human, derived from a combination of human and machine civilization. Is software-based *human* an accurate description?

[Circa Pre-and Post-Birth]

When you emerge, you won't need Mother's milk; all the better since I have none to give. You'll learn to walk very early on. Between Sister and me, she was the late bloomer. I learned to walk at two, while she did at three. I got my period at 13, she at 14. Late to life milestones, early to death. Started getting headaches every day and slept most hours of the day until sleep became permanent. Just two years after her death, they found the cure to cancer. I tried to console myself that the naysayers are right, that with death no longer a threat, life has lost some meaning, if not all. How can you appreciate life without its opposite? How can there be positive without negative, Ying without Yang, darkness without light. You need contraries, opposites to make

complete. None of this is consoling, for I still miss Sister Father Mother. Especially Sister, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

You'll have no reason to bask in memory, to respond with feeling. For even if I chose to live eternally, you and I – this parent-child relationship – will have become obsolete. Already as I speak, Mother is unnecessary for you to thrive. If any biological humans are left, they may or may not be the storytelling animals they once were. If they are, they prefer the storytelling power of virtual reality. Already you have grown impatient with slow, language-based communication. My storytelling, primitive by comparison.

I have sent out the entire flow of my sensory experience onto the Web that you can access by simply plugging into virtually. So why bother leaving you this diary? Why when you can think and feel all I've thought and felt instantaneously? Because I need you to know the story of your ancestry, the stories of those you'll never get to plug into – Mother, Father, Sister. I wish I wish for you to learn and understand your heritage in the manner of a biological human. Consider experience beams as supplementary to the richness of first-person connection. For true, some things cannot be expressed with words. But do this for me and for Mother Father and Sister's memory, as you read please, close your eyes and form images in your mind, rather than having them formed for you. Like the superior sound of a vinyl record, this is the real thing. I tell you stories from the heart I once had. I hope my stories touch you to the soul as Mother's and Father's touched mine.

Since I can remember, Sister looked for ways to make herself different. When I grew my hair out, she cut hers every month. When we shopped for clothes, she said You

choose first, then when I picked out multi-colored attire, she ran to the black rack. One thing she could not forego even if she tried was our shared love for running, addiction to the runner's high. We trained together for our first triathlon and finished at the same time, hands on thighs, flushed faces, sweat pouring down our faces, panting. She felt my heartbeat and I felt hers. Our hearts beat rapidly, eyes fluttered, then we embraced.

As she lay dying she said, "No more pain, no more pain," I held her right hand and pumped the Morphine accordingly. Consoling me rather than the other way around, as she had in her own way when we were children, when I feared death more than anything. Disenchanted with magical thinking, I came to understand quite early that the reason Road Runner kept returning even after falling off a cliff over and over again was because cartoons were moveable drawings. When our bunny froze to death in a rainstorm after we forgot her in the backyard, I knew she wasn't coming back. Sister made a stuffed snake and gave it as a gift offering, taking the blame. Never mind that I was not fond of snakes. It was her way of saying it was going to be okay.

Her heartbeat slowed as mine raced. Each beat like a tiny hammer in my chest. Sometimes I still feel for a pulse when caught up in memory. I should have lay dying too, should have felt my heart slow to a stop in perfect synchrony with hers. Now I have no heart, but I still have my breath. I chose to keep my lungs. I had been a coward by having my heart removed, but I would not let them touch my lungs, no. I would keep the lungs in tribute to Sister, and maybe, just maybe, I would develop my just desserts.

Baby girl, if you've placed me deep, deep, in your mind file, how often, if ever, do I emerge in memory? Does the thought of me make you feel sad, angry, or a combination of feelings? Do you then choose to file me back, far back, and like a dream that quickly fades upon waking – will I fade away for you? Will you still be able to dream even though you will no longer need sleep? Do you dream? If not, plug in. Connect to a dream of a dream. I will be frank, no hiding anything from you, for all this I am writing right now is not part of the flow of experiences I already sent into the worldwide archive. For true, I desire death, and desire – as long as it is unfulfilled, is a form of dream – elusive, just out of reach.

Oh beloved, if you are reading my words, then I have not burned my diary as I was often wont to do. Optimism won over pessimism and through the fog of doubt, I see a spark of me in you, just a glimpse. I chose calendar time, limitation, the Old-World Ways, Death as a way of Life. Whatever form you have chosen, you have, you will, thrive. I know this. I know the world had to change, I just couldn't change with it.

.....

I'm just playing games

I know that's plastic love

Dance to the plastic beat

Another morning comes

Because everything comes to an end

Don't hurry! Mind racing. Story slipping-slipping. Never pregnant. Anticipation. Nesting instinct *I'm sorry* never kicked in. Should have baby-proofed room for You. *I'm sorry*. Ought to have cleared out clutter: letters, photos, greeting cards. Concert tickets, sheet music, drawings and doodles. For you. This shirt salvaged like so many things from the good years. Soon forge immortal clothes replace any and all reminders of fragility, mortality. Words like these immortal too, emblazoned in your perfect memory. *Play play play beat beat beat beat I'm just playing games I'm not I'm not playing games playing play play play I know that's plastic I I know I know that's plastic love -tic love -tic love* What is Mother? *Don't mess up You I Don't worry* Mother instructs. *Plas-tic lo-o-o-o-ve. Never take loving someone like me seriously Love is just a game* Mother Woman of few words. *Woman cold as ice*. Words — heavy, burdensome. Dreams remembered in fragments. Wake half cognizant of dreams. Will you, do you dream?

Another morning *co-o-o-mes*.

Touch of a hand *plastic* brushed against brow and cheek *plastic* sitting by fire lilt of voice sight unfiltered without crutch of *plastic* technology *plastic* through veil of transformation — *plastic* — I see you in me.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *My idea for 'Artificial Mother' was born from the merging of two concerns: motherhood and advances in technology. With the former, I've never wanted to have children, and even if I changed my mind it is no longer possible because I've had a hysterectomy. With the latter, I started reading Ray Kurzweil's book *The Singularity is Near*, which predicts that in the not too distant future our biological thinking and existence will merge with our technology and that humans will thus transcend their biology. I couldn't stop obsessing over what that might mean for humanity. If there comes a time when we will be able to upload our minds to computer technology (such as the Cloud), does that mean that immortality would be within our reach? Somewhere along the line the two ideas converged: what if a woman like me could get a second chance at having children? What is behind the idea to bare children vs. adopting? The urge to leave behind your legacy through your own flesh and blood (a desire to be immortal)? What if Ecgtogenesis (growing the fetus outside the body in an artificial womb) were to become a reality at the same time as the Singularity? And so 'Artificial Mother' was born, with motherhood, mortality and humanity as the main themes. My main stylistic and literary influences have been the philosophical bent of Borges' wonderful stories/essays in addition to the philosophical writings of Todd May, Kierkegaard and more recently, Spinoza.*

BIO: Tina V. Cabrera earned her MFA in Creative Writing in 2009. She writes various forms including creative nonfiction and hybrid work, which has appeared in print and online journals such as *Pleiades*, *Eclectica*, *Hobart*, *Quickly*, *Crack the Spine* and *Big Bridge Magazine*. Her first play was recently published at *Ecletica Magazine* and she is currently working on her first graphic novel. You can visit her blog at <https://tvcannyuncanny.com>

GOD IS DEAD

By Debbie Miller

WHY WE LIKE IT: *There exists the misconception that comedic writing is an easier gig than stories that are ‘dark-themed’ but we don’t agree. As in standup, timing and word choice make or break and things can go wrong very quickly with comedy. More than most genres, it runs the risk of being overtly self-conscious—like someone laughing at their own jokes. The author gallantly sidesteps these landmines to deliver an entertaining and droll comedy of modern manners. The characters are wonderfully realized in a carefully crafted off hand manner and the understated final sentence is one of the strongest endings we’ve read in a while. But what we really love love love is the self-deprecating, long suffering voice of the young narrator. Quote: ‘I’m getting my English composition book out of my bag when she lunges at me with a pair of library scissors that look like the pruning shears our gardener uses back home. I spot Karen a few tables away and fear she may be about to witness a murder. People like my parents will study this phenomenon and write dissertations about it. They call it *Scholasticide*.’*

“You, with the hair!”

I’m sitting in the school library. I’ve been in the United States—North Olmsted, Ohio, to be exact—three weeks and my parents have enrolled me in summer school to give me a head start on the fall when I’ll enter ninth grade.

I’m at this ancient, ink-stained oak table covered with pithy phrases gouged into its surface, admiring the calligraphy of one particularly artistic “Eat Me” carving, when Mrs. Grimms, the school librarian tears into me.

Mrs. Grimms is built like a linebacker. She’s wearing a plaid, red and gray pleated wool skirt and a bulky black cardigan with giant buttons, sleeves rolled up exposing her hairy

forearms. Her outfit looks more suited to the 1940s than 1967 – un-hip on so many levels, definitely not groovy. Her hands are enormous. Her hair, which is short and straight and black, like Moe of *The Three Stooges*, with a streak of gray above her left temple, is shorter than mine.

She dives at me like a hawk swooping down to devour a field mouse. Her eyes sparkle through her black spectacles and she positively glows like someone’s just offered her a bathtub full of M&Ms.

“Your pass from study hall.”

“Uh, I’m not sure I have it.”

She’s not buying it. You can’t fool librarians. There was one back in my neighborhood in London who could read minds. She looked like she was sleeping, but she was just focusing real hard, in some kind of meditative state like those Indian gurus who can sit still for days on end. She could spot trouble from across the room. Although I can’t imagine Mrs. Grimms sitting still for even a minute. She’s always moving, like a caged tiger; trying to pick up library infractions on her radar.

Her mouth curls like a line on an Etch A Sketch. “That’s too bad, because if you can’t produce your it, I’ll have to send you to the principal’s office. If I were you, I’d find it.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She stands with her arms folded over her chest, her man hands hidden under her gigantic bosom.

I have the pass, but debate whether being sent to the principal’s office wouldn’t be less of a hassle than matching wits with Mrs. Grimms. I decide it’s not a good idea to get dispatched to the authorities so soon after arriving in America, so I dig the crumpled pass out of my pocket and offer it up.

She snatches it, then squints and inspects it with her giant fish eyes. I glance at the aquarium tank on the wall behind her, thinking she'd feel right at home in there.

"I can't read it," she mutters. I shrug my shoulders, but inside I'm squirming while she mulls over her answer.

"I'll let it go this time, but from now on, fold it neatly and put it in your notebook -- not in your filthy pocket." She tosses it at me and it lands on one of the more prominent "Fuck You's" engraved in the table.

*

Two months ago, we're in the middle of dinner—soy steaks in miso sauce with root vegetables and brown rice--when my parents tell my brother Jeremy and me that we're moving to the States.

"It's an educational opportunity," says Keith. "Living in a different culture expands your horizons. Social Anthropology is *happening* in the States. Here in Britain, it's stagnant—all studies of pre-colonial Africa tribes. In America, the sky's the limit."

Felicity and Keith got married their first year at university, then went to graduate school and did fieldwork together in Kenya, with me and my brother in tow. After that, they got jobs in London and, now they've been hired to share a professorship chair at Case Western University in Cleveland, a big deal in the Anthropology world. I hated leaving my mates, but figured if it was that important to my parents, I could tough it out in America. How bad could it be?

According to the *Cleveland Press*, no sooner had we touched down at Hopkins Airport than we started complaining we were misunderstood and subjected to discrimination. We didn't seek out publicity—it found us. Two weeks after we arrive, a reporter interviews us and spends most of the interview asking about our hair.

Keith tells him he doesn't understand why it's an issue. He says long hair is a tradition in our family. But, everyone in North Olmsted thinks we're hippies, even though it's 1967 and everyone's got long hair. Keith calls North Olmsted provincial and bourgeois.

The day after the article is published, we find a dead squirrel in our mailbox and dog poo smeared on the front door. Then, the phone calls begin (the newspaper published our address and phone number), day and night. We change our phone number three times, but the calls don't stop.

*

To say our arrival rankled the citizens of sleepy North Olmsted would be an understatement. Not only do we have long hair, but we're vegetarians. When Felicity casually mentions this, the reporter gloms onto it like a snail in an aquarium tank. Man, nobody in America is vegetarian. America is the home of McDonald's, Sunday pot roast, cowpokes, and cattle. Our family rejects everything this country stands for. We may as well wear the American flag on our bums.

When I get home from school, I walk into the kitchen to look for something to eat. The only sound is the drone of the ancient refrigerator. I scan its contents: mushrooms, tofu, bean sprouts. My stomach is growling as I consider the veggie loaf, a pale gray blob with shades of brown, and reconsider. I grab celery sticks and tofu spread for my snack, if you can call that a proper snack. The other kids at school eat pizza and candy bars. I hate being vegetarian. Back home, I used to eat chicken biryani twice a week with my Pakistani friend, Sami. It would kill my parents if they knew.

Our kitchen looks like a jungle. Felicity has managed to find about a million plants in just a few weeks. She fancies herself an herbalist. The kitchen is less kitchen, than *still room*.

Felicity concocts her own herbal remedies because she doesn't want to use conventional medicine. Her book collection lines the wall with titles like *Food is Your Medicine*, and *Eat Your Way to Health*.

But, being vegetarians is nothing compared to the hatred we face for being atheists. Keith let that slip during the newspaper interview. I read somewhere that to Americans, Atheists rank at the bottom of the moral barrel, just below rapists and child molesters. So, in the eyes of North Olmsted we Edmunds are godless, moral-less heathens. The newspaper describes Keith and Felicity as "ruthlessly unapologetic" about their atheism. They might as well be convicted murderers instead of the gentle, idealistic scholars they are. Most people don't question the existence of a deity and don't see believing or not believing as a personal choice the way my parents do.

*

So, Keith and Felicity sell our London flat and buy a house in North Olmsted on the advice of the University's Anthropology department. The real estate broker assures them North Olmsted is the perfect place for a family like ours. After we arrive at Cleveland Hopkins airport, we get a taxi to our new home. It's a cloudless June day and "Respect" is playing on the radio. I see it as a sign of good things to come. *Don't worry*, I tell Jeremy, *America is going to be great*. He's younger than me and takes my word for everything.

It's a short ride, past street after street of manicured lawns with black-faced lawn jockeys who probably wonder what they're doing in the suburbs.

"Excuse me, sir," I ask the driver. "Will we be going through any ethnic neighborhoods?"

"Any what?"

"You know, places where Pakistani or Indian people live? Immigrants, I mean."

“Good one. You had me going there for a minute, son!”

He pulls up to a white Colonial clapboard house surrounded by a weedless lawn. “Here we are. One of the safest neighborhoods in Cleveland. No coloreds, just white folks like you and me. The schools are the best, too.”

The house looks like it’s had a new coat of white paint. A rather blinding white, in fact. The neighborhood is white, too. I’d heard America was a melting pot, but since we left the airport, I haven’t seen one person who doesn’t look like they’ve just stepped out of a laundry soap commercial.

*

The next time I go to the library, my hall pass is neatly folded and stowed inside my notebook. I’m following the rules. After all, I’m new in the country; I need to blend in. Felicity and Keith tell me that America is a place where you’re allowed to be an individual as long as you show people you’re making an effort to fit in.

I take out my notebook to get a head start on my English homework when a shadow falls over my paper. I look up to see Mrs. Grimms, hovering.

“You again,” she says.

I stand and produce my hall pass, flashing my best smile.

“So, what’s with the hair? Are you a boy or a girl?”

I brush my hair from my eyes. I’d never been asked that before. It wasn’t an issue in Britain, where my hair, which barely covers my ears, is shorter than most of the blokes in my class.

“Get a haircut, *hippy!*” She kicks my chair with her clunky librarian shoes. The flab under her chin giggles like Jell-O and her breath smells like burnt toast.

Then, she shoves me and when she tugs at my hair I nearly fall out of my seat, so I duck and cover my head. I read in a book that American school kids in the 1950s practiced this drill to protect themselves in case of nuclear attack.

She yanks my hair. Some kids are starting to stare, tearing themselves away from the Archie comic books hidden inside the textbooks they're fake-reading. The dim schoolhouse lights glare down on the pitiful scene.

I spy Karen, my new best friend, watching it all go down from across the room where she's reading her Geography book.

*

I miss a lot of things about England: my Gran (Gran Allen, Felicity's Mum), my drum kit. I had to leave it back in London with my friend Eddie. We were about to start a band when my parents got word about the job in the states. I had a lot of friends in London. But, I wasn't sure I'd have friends in America, until I met Karen.

Karen was the first person to speak to me the day I entered North Olmsted Junior High. She was carrying a stack of textbooks and wore a pencil over one ear and a pink barrette over the other. The pencil was covered in teeth marks and her nails looked like they'd been bitten down by a raccoon. She was the blondest person I'd ever met and the white cat-eye glasses attached to a chain around her neck matched her white angora sweater and made her look even whiter.

I'm wandering the halls trying to find my locker. I stop a couple of blokes to ask for help, but they just scrunch up their faces and walk away. Karen walks right up to me, puts out her hand, and says "Hi, I'm Karen Peterson. You're new here, right? I just love your hair." She smiles and flashes a mouthful of metal. She talks fast and is direct, but in a friendly way, which is what we Brits have heard about Americans. She's got bullocks. I like that.

“Are you finding everything okay?” she asks as she eyes the paper bearing my locker number. She leads me to another hallway and spots my locker, which has definitely seen better days. She inspects it, then motions for me to follow her as she leads me to the office where she tells the secretary I’ve been given a locker with a bent door that doesn’t close properly. The secretary assigns me a new one and Karen leads me to it.

“You’re from England, right?” she asks as we make our way down the hall. “That’s a great accent. Have you met the Beatles? I’m a big Beatlemaniac. Ringo’s my favorite. Your hair’s just like his. Far out! Who’s your favorite? No, don’t tell me! Let me guess. You’re a *John*.”

“I’ve never met them, but I’ve seen them in concert with my parents. You’re right, I like John. He’s the intellectual of the band.” As soon as I say it, I realize I sound like a snob, but Karen doesn’t seem to notice.

“I saw them at the stadium last summer,” she says. “I waited in line all night for tickets. They were \$5.75. My parents said that was too much, but they gave me the money anyway. My friends and I rushed the stage. It was so groovy!”

*

When I get home, Keith announces that we’re going to a restaurant to celebrate our arrival in America.

“Celebrate?”

“Well, we’ve been here a few weeks and things seem to be working out well, don’t you think?”

I just smile and say nothing.

We drive around a while and Felicity spots a place called The Palace whose sign boasts *Home Cooking at Family Prices*.

“This looks lovely,” she says as she pulls our used Chevrolet into the car park; I mean, parking lot.

The inside walls are covered in rose wallpaper like an American’s idea of an English tea room. We sit at a table covered with a plastic tablecloth that matches the wallpaper. Everything looks okay, but I can’t help but think something is going to go terribly wrong, when the waitress approaches us wearing a fake smile and staring at us like we’re from Mars.

“Do you have vegetarian dishes?” Felicity asks, studying the menu.

“Ma’am?”

“Meals that don’t have meat.”

“I have to check.” She disappears.

“Well, that was odd.”

“Maybe she didn’t understand your accent,” Keith says.

The waitress confers with the man behind the cash register. My brother and I look at each other and I know we’re thinking the same thing: we are not going to be served at this establishment. I can feel our different-ness, like we’re wearing white shoes after Labor Day. (Karen says this is some kind of rule in America. I don’t understand, but I guess she would know.)

The waitress returns with a man who’s smiling way too much for somebody who works in a restaurant covered in rose wallpaper and lace curtains.

“I’m Bill Dyson, the manager. Can I help you?”

“Yes,” Keith says, “we’d like to know if you have any vegetarian dishes. We don’t eat meat.”

“I’m sorry,” Dyson says.

Nobody says a word. Jeremy and I look at my parents and then at the waitress, who’s busy straightening her name tag. Bill Dyson doesn’t budge.

“Is there a problem?” Felicity asks.

“You’re that Edmund family from the newspaper. We don’t serve long-haired hippies who don’t believe in God.”

Keith and Felicity look at each other like they can’t believe they’re being rejected by a culture they’ve come to live amongst and study.

“Right, then,” Keith says as he motions for us to leave.

*

The next day, after school, Karen and I go to her favorite pizza place. I feel relaxed for the first time since I arrived in the States. Karen is genuine. Real. I don’t have to worry about how I look or what I say. She’s smart, too. The other girls in school act a bit thick when they talk to boys.

“See, in junior high, boys don’t like smart girls,” she explains. “It’s different in high school, though, where boys are more interested in girls’ minds than the way they look. I can’t wait until high school.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes and I sneak a glance at her. Most people would say she’s *brainy*, because she wears glasses and doesn’t use makeup. But, when you look at her, you see that she’s actually pretty. I’m not saying I have a crush on her. It’s not like that.

In her notebook, Karen carries the newspaper article about my family: “Long-Haired Atheist Brits Invade Quiet Suburb,” which features a photo of a bearded Keith smoking a fag and Felicity in her Marianne Faithful haircut, looking like a folk singer.

“Your parents are so cool! I love that African blouse she’s wearing,” she says.

“It’s a *dashiki*. Felicity got it when we lived in Kenya.”

“You lived in Africa?”

“Yeah, but I was only six. I don’t remember much.”

“That’s so boss!”

Felicity and Keith don’t believe in hierarchies in the family. That’s why Jeremy and I call them by their first names instead of *Mum* and *Dad*. They live their values. They took us to Findhorn to learn how to grow organic vegetables and live communally. They participate in anti-war protests at the U.S. Embassy and they fight for the rights for native peoples. Sometimes, it’s like they’re one person instead of two. In one way, that’s great because I know they will never split up. But, it means I can’t work them over one at a time or play them off against each other because they’re of like mind.

But, for all their platitudes about how to live an examined life (they’re big Thoreau fans), the truth is, here in Ohio, they’re just different and that makes them freaks. And, being hassled by Mrs. Grimms has taught me one thing: in Ohio, *different* equals bad and nothing can change that. Not logic, not good deeds, not humility. And, not the fact that I study hard and keep my nose clean, like an All-American kid.

I remember something from my American History class last year. In early colonial America, undesirables were tar and feathered and run out of town on rails. I wonder whether that

tradition is still alive and whether anyone is planning to do that to my family. Karen's voice pulls me back into the moment.

"Carl, I think it's neat that your family is from England and you wear your hair long. That's so cool. Can't people see that?"

"Yeah, but being attacked in the school library isn't cool."

"I know. Teachers are either really great or totally crazy. In fourth grade, I had Mrs. Sponable. She used to stuff rags in boys' mouths and make them sit in front of the class on a stool when they were bad. Once, she made a boy sit inside the metal cabinet in the back of the room."

"Is she still teaching?"

"I think she's in a mental institution or something."

*

I'm sitting in English class on Friday when Mr. Stewart, the principal strides into class.

"I need the boys to line up here," he says, pointing to the wall covered with maps.

We line up and Mr. Stewart walks past like a general inspecting the troops. He stops in front of a couple of boys and peers at their heads. Then, he stops in front of me.

"You. What's your name?"

"Carl Edmunds."

"Well, Mr. Edmunds, your hair is the worst of the bunch. Now listen up, boys. The four of you need to get haircuts, he says as he points to the offenders. I expect you to return to school on Monday with more reasonable styles."

"Yes, sir," the other guys say in unison.

"Did you hear me, Edmunds? You didn't nod your head."

“Sir, I don’t want to cut my hair.”

The other kids stare at me.

“And, just why is that?”

“I don’t understand why I need to.”

“Because I told you to.” He turns to my teacher. “Mrs. Bryant, will you excuse Mr. Edmunds and I for a few moments?” He grabs my arm and pulls me toward the door.

*

On Monday, I’m in the library again, staring at the clock on the wall. It’s the size of a ship’s porthole and it makes this clicking sound with each sweep of the second hand, ticking away the minutes until the bell rings and I can go to English class. I’m staring at the clock, in a trance, thinking about how I like being surrounded by books. I’m feeling pretty mellow and I’m chanting in my head. *Om Shanti Om*. At least, I think I’m chanting to myself, but apparently, I’m audible to Mrs. Grimms, who must have ears like dogs who hear sounds humans can’t.

“Are you talking to me, Boy?”

I stop chanting.

“So, you don’t believe in God, eh?”

Oh, balls. She’s seen the newspaper article. I want to tell her that America is supposed to be the land of freedom of religion. A lot of Brits are atheists. It’s not a big deal. But, then I remember she’s crazy, so I say nothing.

I’m pulled out of my musings as Mrs. Grimms, who looks like a mountain lion about to rip open a deer, grabs my shirt and pulls me to her face. This time, I look her in the eye and I don’t blink. The pores on her face are moon craters and she’s got kind of a mustache. I stand up straight, still looking into her eyes. After half a minute, she pushes me back down into my chair.

The stand-off is over. I can relax, so I continue my passive resistance, drawing myself in and meditating. I guess she thinks I'm ignoring her, which of course, I am, because she pounds her fist on the table. By now, students who were staring put their heads down and go back to their reading, like in those American Western movies where the crowd dives behind the bar when the bad guy enters through the swinging doors.

Until now, I haven't defended myself. Mostly I've just sat there and let Mrs. Grimms pull my hair, yell in my ear, and call me everything from *godless vermin* to *Pinko Commie coward*.

For some reason "All You Need is Love" is running through my head: "*Nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be, It's easy . . .*" I try to take solace in the words, bury myself in the song.

I'm getting my English composition book out of my bag when she lunges at me with a pair of library scissors that look like the pruning shears our gardener uses back home. I spot Karen a few tables away and fear she may be about to witness a murder. People like my parents will study this phenomenon and write dissertations about it. They'll name it *Scholasticide*.

Karen buries her head in her book as the tirade continues. She looks up just as Mrs. Grimms pulls me out of my chair by my hair.

"You need a haircut, long-hair!" She whacks off a hunk of my hair. She's like a three-year-old who's gotten a hold of his Mum's sewing scissors. "I'll teach you to believe in God!" she cackles like the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. Nutter. I just sit there and act like I don't care, but the truth is, I can't believe this is happening. I'm in some kind of time warp.

She lunges again and I realize she intends to cut off all my hair. She's swinging the scissors around and the next thing I know, I stand up and grab them. Then I do something I would never do: I shove an adult. Not much, mind you, just a bit, but it's a push just the same.

“Leave me alone, you cow! You’re mental!”

She trips over her own feet and falls, right on her bum. I feel kind of bad for her. I mean, when you’re an adult, you’ve got your pride. And, it looks bad to fall down, especially in a roomful of kids. I didn’t mean to make her fall, but I had no choice. I couldn’t let her cut off my hair.

The library goes quiet, so quiet, I swear I can hear the fish swimming in the aquarium. I rub my scalp as the bell rings and head for the door. Karen follows.

“You want me to go to the Principal’s office and report what I saw?”

I feel like I’m going to cry. “Naw, it wouldn’t do any good. I doubt anyone would listen to a student defending a long-haired British vegetarian atheist.”

*

That night I eat dinner alone with Keith (bean burgers and beet salad). Felicity is at a faculty meeting and my brother is at baseball practice.

“Your hair.”

“Yeah?”

“What happened?”

“The school librarian thought I needed a trim.”

“And you let her?”

“Just doing what you taught me. Passive resistance.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to be a doormat.”

“Well, actually, I fought back. You’ll probably be getting a call from the school. I pushed a librarian.”

“Okay, we are going down to that school.”

“But, the school officials--”

“--Idiots.”

“Idiots with power. Look, a few students tell me they think my hair’s cool but most of them talk behind my back, call me *weirdo* and say I look like a girl. And, the student council president says ‘rules are rules’ and agrees with the principal.”

“It’s a popularity contest. Just how do you think these student council kids get elected?”

“We’re hippies and I’m a juvenile delinquent.”

“You’re a good student who doesn’t cause trouble. They just want you to conform.”

“Nobody cares about your theories, Dad. Everybody hates us here.”

“Keith.”

“In America, kids don’t call their parents by their first names.”

“Well, we do. And where are your clothes?”

“They went missing during gym class while I was showering and I was forced to walk to the school office wrapped in dirty towels.”

“You should have called me.”

“They gave me these old clothes from the lost and found box. I was going to tell you I traded my clothes to a poor kid. I knew you’d love hearing that because it would show charity. Except, I’m not feeling particularly charitable today.”

Keith closes his eyes, trying to process the information. Sometimes I wish my parents didn’t have a combined IQ of 300. Why couldn’t they be more like other people, or, at least if they had to be different, couldn’t they just not let on and not tell anybody? Let people assume they were Christian, that they ate meat. They could cut their hair, take lessons to get rid of their accents, and fit in.

But, it's too late for that. I'm beginning to think moving to America is an experiment gone awry. Felicity and Keith had approached it like anthropologists, but for me, there's no professional detachment, no participant-observer status to grab onto and I'm in the thick of it.

*

The next day Keith and I meet with the principal.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Edmunds. There's nothing I can do."

"Now, you listen to me. I will sue you and the entire school system unless you offer an apology to my son and make sure that woman never comes near him again."

"No can do. Your son used profanity with one of our staff and instigated a near-riot in the library. I won't have it in my school."

"I imagine you have witnesses to this alleged incident?"

"Don't have to. It's the librarian's word against his. Mr. Edmunds, this is a discipline issue. Your son's hair is distracting and disruptive to the classroom learning environment. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have paperwork to do."

*

The Board of Education has got me. I'm in trouble for not attending school. I'm not attending school because I was suspended. I was suspended for refusing to cut my hair. Since I wasn't attending school, I was violating state law, so I was sent to Juvenile Court.

"Do you understand why you're here, young man?" the Juvenile Court judge asks me. "Since you refuse to cooperate with your school officials, I have no choice but to remand you to Juvenile Detention for a psychiatric investigation as to why you will not conform to the school's rules and return to class. You are truant because you are not attending school."

"I'm not attending school because I was suspended."

“Yes, that is correct. You were suspended because you refuse to cut your hair as ordered by your school principal.”

I think it would be cool to be a lawyer and protect people’s rights, so I have a go. “Your Honor, everyone talks about the possibility that my long hair could somehow disrupt school. But, there’s no evidence nor proof that students with long hair disrupt school. By suspending me from attending school, I have been denied a right to receive an education. How can they deny me that based solely on the way I look? Isn’t it just possible that the principal at my school personally doesn’t like long hair and that I’m a scapegoat?”

“Young man, that is a well-thought out argument, but unfortunately an incorrect one. You will be sent to a Juvenile Detention Center for secure confinement for one night as a status offender, pending a psychiatric investigation and a decision on your case. You will be held for 24 hours.”

“This is insane!” Keith yells.

So, I was to be banged up, locked up in Juvy like a criminal. The whole night, “Purple Haze” runs through my head. Maybe they won’t let me out and I’ll be here forever. The other kids in the cell look like murderers and thieves. In the middle of the night, I wake up crying. I’m afraid someone will hear, so I stuff my fist in my mouth and try to get back to sleep. Just another in a litany of scholastic humiliations that began with *Fag Brits Go Home* scrawled on my locker and likely ends with permanent incarceration.

*

The psychiatric interview the next morning is bonkers. Keith and Felicity hire a lawyer, who tells me how to answer and what to say. I feel like a ping pong ball bouncing back and forth. The psychiatrist keeps asking me why I was suspended and how I feel about it. He talks to me

like I'm retarded. Then, he asks me why it's so important to me not to cut my hair. He asks a lot of questions like: am I on drugs, am I angry, do I ever have thoughts about killing my teachers or harming myself. The lawyer keeps stopping the psychiatrist and talking with me and Keith, and then it's over. I guess they decide I'm not crazy, because they let me go. But, it doesn't end there.

*

"Keith, I cannot sleep. People drive past the house day and night, and the phone never stops ringing. It's an invasion of privacy," Felicity says. "Maybe I should just go back to England. Carl, I am so sorry this is happening to you," she says, hugging me.

"It's not your fault. Maybe I should just cut my hair."

"Absolutely not. You can't back down now. Keith and I support you one hundred percent.

"Son, Felicity and I have decided, on advice of our lawyer, that the best thing to do is to file an appeal to the Court of Appeals about your suspension and truancy charge. How does that sound?"

"Okay, I guess. Do you think it will help?"

"That's not the issue. We have to fight this. It's about what's right," Keith says.

So, we fight it. Keith files lots of paperwork and meets with the lawyer. Meanwhile, the harassing phone calls continue and I've stopped going to the library during study hall. Karen stands by me, but no one else talks to me. I dive into my coursework. I read a lot. I sleep a lot.

*

The delinquency charge was reversed. The court says since we weren't given written notice under the Ohio Revised Code stating that I was truant from school, I was denied due

process of law. But, the hair issue isn't settled. Keith takes my case to a lower court but loses. He wants to take it to the Ohio Supreme Court, but we're out of money and Felicity's nerves are shot. And, it's likely just a matter of time before I'm suspended again for refusing to cut my hair.

If I stay here in the States, this could mess up my future. I mean, people keep talking to me about my permanent record, whatever that is. I hear that a lot from other students and teachers use it as a discipline method. There are all kinds of things here that can mess you up. But, it really doesn't matter now, because we're going back to England.

Keith and Felicity try to sell the house, but nobody comes to look at it. It's in foreclosure because we can't make the mortgage payments. The lawyer's fees have eaten Keith and Felicity's savings. And, while the university said it would support them and fight for them, when push came to shove, it refused to get involved and sent each of them a letter "releasing you from the obligation of fulfilling the duties of your appointment." Keith and Felicity would have fought it, but that would have meant paying more lawyers and besides, as Keith said, "There's no point in staying somewhere where you're not wanted."

So, the Edmunds family – long-haired hippies, Godless, vegetable-eating foreigners – leaves the Land of Liberty, bugged by a country that prides itself on protecting civil liberties. I feel bad for Keith and Felicity, but I can't wait to see my friends and Gran again and play my drums. Felicity and Keith borrow money from Gran for our plane fare, because they're skint.

Karen and I hang out before I leave. We stay up late and talk about a lot of things—poetry, philosophy, life. We exchange addresses and promise to keep in touch. I invite her to visit me in London.

*

We're on the plane now, suspended somewhere over the Atlantic. When we boarded, an angry yet giddy mob bade us good riddance. Karen was there to see me off. She gave me a hug and said, "Carl, as far as I'm concerned, you leaving America means the British Invasion is officially over." As the plane pulled away from the gate, I could still see her in the waiting area window, waving like crazy.

*

A few days before we leave, Jeremy and I help Felicity and Keith clear out their offices. As we drive away from campus, I spot some graffiti on the wall of the student union. It says, *GOD IS DEAD*. I brush my hair from my eyes and think *No Shit*.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I was inspired to write 'God is Dead' by several things. First, I am interested in all things 60's and I'd heard there were teenagers who were discriminated against for wearing their hair long at that time. I did find an article in a Cleveland newspaper about a family from England whose son had long hair and suffered problems in school because of it. It got me wondering about whether 50 years later, in today's climate of xenophobia, we're doing any better in the way we treat those who are different from us. My intention was to show this through a teenager's perspective and the consequences of discrimination and intolerance when taken to an extreme. I live in a multi-cultural neighborhood in Brooklyn where I have daily contact with immigrants and I couldn't imagine living somewhere where I couldn't experience that.*

BIO: Debbie L. Miller is a Brooklyn, New York writer, who writes plays, monologues, short stories, flash fiction, essays and humor. She won the 2017 Mona Schreiber Prize for Humorous Fiction and Nonfiction and has been published in *Alaska Women Speak*, *The Diagram.com*, *fiftywordstories.com*, *the fable.com* and *The Reproductive Rights Festival Anthology*. You can read more at DebbieLMiller.com

THROUGH AMAZED EYES

by Leila Allison

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We think 'Through Amazed Eyes' is about as close to a perfectly written story as you're likely to get. The complicated estrangements of the mother/daughter dynamic are explored with the same confidence and compassion as one would expect to find in Alice Munroe. Word by word, their relationship unfolds, escalating with each revelation, and moving with steady ascending grace to a startling conclusion. Perfect storyline. Perfect voice. Perfect characterizations. Perfect prose. You get the picture. We have the honour. Quote: '...she no longer got enough blood to her brain to support a mind. That fate seemed about right because Mom had most definitely been a 'Live Now' sort of person—which is just fine, unless you forget to die when you run out of now.' And: 'She was working chewing gum like a cud, which made me want to relocate her face to the back of her skull.'*

It's three feet farther to hell from New Town Bridge. The city recently installed an eighteen-inch "safety" extension to the pedestrian rail. Since it opened in 1978, at least twenty persons have jumped off the ugly gray span and found death waiting two-hundred feet below in the beckoning Philo Bay Narrows. Northern seas swiftly kill the pain; and when that comforting certainty outweighs the threat of damnation, I don't see another foot and a half up, *and down*, getting in the way.

I'd often pass sarcasms about the safety extension to my mother whenever we drove across the bridge to one of her many doctor appointments. Sometimes I'd wisecrack about the extra yard to hell, other times I'd express admiration for the courageous jumpers. After her second stroke it didn't matter what you said to Mom; she took it all evenly and uncomprehendingly, as though she were an infant or a dog.

Endgame Mom had amazed eyes. You enter life with amazed eyes, live too long and you go out with them as well. After seventy-six drama-packed years Mom had experienced a pair of events like those experienced by Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the close of World War II. Although she had been spared lasting paralysis by the strokes, something known as "vascular dementia"

prevented Mom from being a person--plainly put, she no longer got enough blood to her brain to support a mind. That fate seemed about right because Mom had most definitely been a "Live Now" sort of person--which is just fine, unless you forget to die when you run out of now.

I never liked Mom much, yet I found myself missing the old witch, all the same. She was already married and just seventeen when I was born, and we bore an astonishing twin-like resemblance in face, form and *difficult* personality. Neither of us cared to be put under the light of understanding; thus Mom and I incessantly and successfully explored each other for the evil in our own hearts. And as it is said to go with sibling twins, we had a private psychic link, of sorts, which sometimes opened and allowed us to snipe at each other in silence. We never discussed the connection for it implied a special closeness that neither of us desired.

I used kid myself and think that our relationship might have been better if my father hadn't died suddenly prior to the start of my memory, and I'll allow that it improved some (at least to the degree that I didn't institutionalize Mom until the very end) when my younger sister passed shortly after Mom's first stroke. But, really, all things considered, I've never believed that we could have had it any other way.

I now know that you should always be as careful of what you think you miss as much as of what you ask for. I've learned this at the cost of my *lack* of faith, for my disbelief in a higher power has suffered a pair strokes of its own and may not survive. Not two weeks before the thing that had become Mom shut its amazed eyes for good, Elsbeth Spahr, *my mother*--the one and only, a local legend who'd once gone unpunished for firing "some guy's" pistol into the back-bar mirror at the White Pig Tavern--which was just one of maybe five-thousand crazy-assed actions on her part--came back online to take a final swing at the world, and me in particular.

All receptionists I endure at medical clinics are females named "Misty." This is the greatest meaningless coincidence in my life, and I'm unable to account for it. Although the receptionists *do* vary in age and size from clinic to clinic, the fact remains that they are all females named Misty. Mature *Mistys* tend to wear slightly out of style business suits and glower plumply at you from a point on the high, while younger members of the tribe sport pastel scrubs and fixate on their split ends when they think nobody's looking. I got a younger Misty the day Mom crawled from her foxhole to toss what was to be her second to last grenade.

"Has Elizabeth fasted?" *The Misty* asked without looking at me after I'd presented Mom's appointment card to her. She was working chewing gum like a cud, which made me want to relocate her face to the back of her skull. Since the law discourages that sort of behavior, I did the next best thing.

"How should I know what Elizabeth's up to?" I said. "Could be waxing her tramp stamp, for all I know. Now if you're asking me 'has Mrs. Elsbeth Spahr fasted?' then the answer is no. It's not that kind of appointment." I paused to check the Misty's eyes. They weren't quite pissed off

enough for my taste--just mildly piqued. I had more pushing to do. "Hope there's nothing *wrong* with what I tell you. Just doing my best to clarify matters."

The Misty--hardly more than a girl, replied with a whisper: "No. Please have a seat until the nurse calls for you." Her childlike eyes were holding back tears of hurt and frustration. I suddenly felt bad about myself as I always do when I push too hard. Only a bully slings "wit" at a person who can only defend herself at the risk losing her job. I have done this sort of thing to people for more than forty years and not once have I ever tried to stop myself from pushing too hard. Unfortunately, I'm better at wounding than healing, but at least I did attempt an apology: "Sorry," I muttered. "Been a day."

Mom and her amazed eyes were right where I'd left them. Unlike sundowners, Mom never wandered unless she needed the restroom, which was unnecessary that day due to the miracle known as the adult diaper. I sat down beside her and tried to spit the bad taste of cowardice out of my head.

"Said some 'wanna take this outside' stuff to the little girl. She had to sit and take it. Poor thing's the sensitive type."

Mom had lost the ability to speak after she had what the doctors' unanimously referred to as the "second event." This made her an excellent sounding board for my observations. I saw that while I'd been gone spreading the love she had grabbed a magazine off the low, faux blonde-wood table. Amazed eyes cannot read, but they are attracted to colors. She was gazing *into* the cover of an old *People* or *Us*--a "Special Edition" dedicated to "Classic TV Memories." The usual suspects were on the cover: Lucy Ricardo, Archie Bunker, Carol Burnett, and so forth. Yet it seemed to me that Mom was fixated on the central image, that of the starship *Enterprise* as it had appeared in the original *Star Trek*.

She turned to face me and my blood immediately turned as cold as the Philo Bay Narrows. Her eyes were no longer amazed, and I saw something *in there* as trapped as a fossilized insect preserved in amber; yet unlike a preserved bug that something was still alive. How I wanted that something to go away. Although it had been made in hell, having Mom linger on as a mindless organism on her way out was something I had gotten used to, and even could be philosophical about. But suddenly being presented with the possibility that she--the *real she*--or at least some portion of, had been existing *alone* in a personal betwixt-between netherworld for almost a year, made me sick inside, and caused a phrase I hadn't spoke since I was a little girl to echo in my head: "*It just hurts something awful.*" Like that. "*It just hurts something awful.*" Like a child.

The greatest arrangement of fatigue I have ever seen in a human face replaced the amazement in Mom's eyes. She held her relentlessly tired gaze on me and began to tap on the picture of the *Enterprise* with her right index finger. She did it over and over and again, and she did it with a purposeful rhythm: *one whole-note tap-rest-two half-note taps*. At first I had assumed that this was just another random oddity concocted by her blood starved brain, and I might have

succeeded in doing so if Mom hadn't *spoke* a memory *into* my head via what proved to be a still lively psychic link.

Ever since I could remember, our link spat out the same stupid pattern. Our eyes would meet, something got "said," and then the race to the Cross. Always two villains and two martyrs in our little melodramas, and never a resolution. It was a predictable process; an idiot's tradition.

But this time, the second to the last time (which had been the first "event" suffered by atheism), a complete story, with a beginning, middle and end, played out. I cannot say *how* Mom had been able to tell it to me, but the why of the thing didn't remain a mystery for long.

The memory of Friday night, 1968. I was ten, which would have made my little sister, Tess, seven. We were in the "old place" in Corson Street, where we lived from '66 to '69 (which was little more than three rooms and a bath on the bottom floor of a hulking, ramshackle turn-of-the-century house that had been divided into "down-and-outer" apartments).

I was sitting on the floor and leaning against the foot of the Murphy bed that Tess and I shared for all three years we had lived there. Tess was lying on the foot of the bed behind me and was making a pest of herself. I was trying to watch our ancient TV, (whose picture often fuzzed and rolled and made a weird humming sound for hours after it had been turned off) but goddam Tess was bent on sticking her big toe in my ear.

"Quit it, Tess, I'm watching."

"Just tryin to see if it fits."

"Do it again and I'll bite it off and flush it down the toilet."

"Flush what down the toilet?" Our twenty-seven-year-old mother asked as she entered the room. She was trying to put a curl in her bangs while at the same time puffing on a Winston. There was always a nebula of blue smoke hanging in every room she spent time in.

"My big toe," Tess said.

"Why? Did you lose one?"

"Sara says she's gonna bite it off."

"Bite off two of hers in return," Mom said as she continued to get ready to "go out," as she did every payday Friday night. "Must I tell you everything?" she added as she returned to the bathroom.

The toe in the ear thing usually stopped when the program resumed after station break. It was Star Trek, the episode in which Spock faced the death penalty for kidnapping his horrifically

crippled former commanding officer and overriding the computer as to send the Enterprise to the forbidden world of Talos IV. A two-parter, which utilized footage from the series' pilot episode--in which Leonard Nimoy as Mr. Spock had been the only cast hold-over,

Although the message Mom had sent to me lay fifty years in the future, I began to understand its import in both time frames. The girl I was began to experience a heavy sense of déjà Vu upon the site of Spock's former C.O., who was confined to a space-age wheelchair and could communicate only "Yes" or "No" through a set of beeping bulbs on the front of his contraption.

1968 Mom re-entered the room and glanced at the program. "What's up with that guy?"

"Pointy ears is going to get hanged," Tess said, all funny-like.

"No, not him--I mean head-on-wheels, what's his story?"

"He got boiled alive for sticking his toe in Captain Kirk's ear," I said, all funny-like.

"Don't get smart, Sara."

I didn't reply. It seemed that Tess always got a pass while I got the shitty end of the stick, no matter what.

"You hear me, right, Sara? Hope there's nothing wrong with what I tell you."

"No, Mom." I said, and I could feel myself holding back all the hurt and the fury which I could do nothing about save for always getting in trouble for fighting on the playground.

Then Mom's body and voice changed. She morphed ahead fifty years. Although we were still in the old place, and I was still a young girl, we were alone because Tess had run out of future forty-eight years later.

"I don't have much left and I can't stay up for long," Mom whispered in a papery voice which barely formed coherent sounds. "But when we go in, it's one for yes, two for no...just like head-on-wheels in the TV show. Nothing wrong with what I tell you, is there, Sara?"

"No, Mom," I said.

"I'm glad," she said with a complicated smile, which conveyed all her smallnesses toward me, but also something else, something contrite, even honestly apologetic. "Cos if you mess this up I won't care how much further it is to hell from anyplace, let alone the goddam bridge you babble about--If you catch my drift."

The link severed the instant a tough-looking nurse called out Mom's name (Mistys usually summon the clinic's resident badass to deal with "pills" such as Yours Truly).

I motioned to Mom to come along with me. "All right," I said, fully understanding the import of her message, "we'll do it your way."

As a Live Now sort of person, Mom never made a will nor did she provide even as much as the vaguest instructions on what to do with her when the bell at last tolled her name (unless you count "leave me in the woods for the wolves to eat" as useful information). Since I was her only living relative, it fell to me to decide what to do with her.

Post stroke Mom was neither alive nor dead; the best she could do was follow when summoned and lift a spoon to her mouth with minimum assistance. Sometimes, especially when dressing, her amazed eyes would *almost* convey intelligence, and she'd slap away the blouse I'd choose for her but allow me to fit her in what seemed to me to be the ugliest blouse possible. On those occasions I figured that somewhere in the burnt out ruins of her mind, a wisp of what had been Mom lingered and did whatever she could to piss me off. But there had hardly been enough of her left behind to make big decisions.

Or so I had thought.

We had come that day for a consultation with a Dr. Zale. Three doctors back, it had been discovered that Mom's kidneys were going the way of her mind. They'd be useless soon, just a couple chunks of spent meat that wanted out after seven-plus decades' of ceaseless work. Zale was a surgeon who was to perform a "fistula" on Mom. She had recessed veins and the procedure, to simplify, would "unzip" her one of her inner arms from pit to elbow as to allow for access for dialysis.

It's a bit late in the day to start lying--lying as in not addressing something that needs it; lying with silence as opposed to words. Nobody wanted Mom dead more than I. This was neither for gain nor revenge; nor did I ever do or seriously consider any sly action that would have hastened her departure ("Why I guess we crossed up her pills. She takes so many"). Simply, plainly, I wanted Mom dead as I would want that for any formerly lively creature who no longer had fun.

Ironically, I suppose, my guilt for my wanting *my own mother to die*, was what kept making me drive her across New Town Bridge to various appointments for procedures that would extend her existence as a zombie. I erred on the side of caution--that's about how I'd sell that lie to myself: "I'll err on the side of caution." Now that all is settled could the truth be even darker? Had I kept her going as a means of humiliating her? Although I cannot believe that of myself, the idea persists.

I immediately began to speak after we took our chairs in Dr. Zale's office. "Mom doesn't want to do this. She doesn't want any of it anymore. She's ready."

Doctor Zale raised an eyebrow to that, as I would have done if I had been in his place. *Then why the hell did you come here?* his arched eyebrow said. A perfectly rational question to which I had no good answer. We could have just walked away, I suppose; people blow off doctors all the time. But we went in anyway because I *needed* independent confirmation in regard to the state of my sanity. I also wanted Mom to place her hand on the plug, so to speak, because that is one hell of a lousy position to be in alone.

“I wanted the procedure for her because she never told anybody what or what not to do,” I said. “You’ve seen her chart, right? Probably says right there in medicalese that my mother, in her current state, is as capable of making decisions as pineapple would be. I hope there’s nothing wrong with what we tell you, but I have just discovered that Mom here *can* still think and get it across, a little.”

“How so?” Dr. Zale, obviously annoyed with the whole mess, said as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

I faced Mom, “Here’s your big chance to be a royal pain in the ass one last time,” I said. “One for yes, two for no, like head-on-wheels, remember?”

Although Mom’s eyes had once more become heavily amazed, that *It just hurts something awful* light still shone, yet it was flickering, and the pattern would soon go out. She lifted her palsied right hand and shakily struck her left palm with it once.

This got the doctor’s attention. He leaned forward and studied Mom for a moment and then looked at me. I spied thoughtful sorrow in his eyes. *It just hurts something awful* got around that day.

“Do you know what day it is, Mrs. Spahr?”

One.

“Is it Tuesday?”

Two. (It was Wednesday.)

Dr. Zale asked a few other desultory questions before popping off a big one. “Without this procedure you will most likely die within a month,” he said. “Do you understand?”

One.

Dr. Zale had scored some points with me until he got sly and crafty toward the end of the interview. “Has your daughter coached or instructed you in any way?”

Mom didn't reply as she had. Instead, she raised her right hand in a fist and slowly raised her middle finger. Although the gesture was creakily performed, it got across.

"Thank you, Mom," I said, "I appreciate that."

It's still three feet farther to hell from New Town Bridge. I went there yesterday, on foot, for the first time since I was young; back when the rail stood no higher than the average person's mid-drift; back when there were persons in the world who knew secret things about me without having to be told.

Safety extensions no more prevent suicide than the worry-stone I'd always carried in one of my pockets ever eased my troubled mind. Only Mom and Tess knew about my worry-stone without having to be told first. I tossed it off the bridge yesterday because I no longer had anyone to worry about. It was a sentimental, self-pitying little gesture, but it was all I could do.

Mom's shell quit breathing twelve days after her final appointment--three days back. The next morning she refused to get out of bed, and wouldn't take food or water. Although nothing else seemed abnormal about her, I called for an ambulance. The ICU staff finally settled on a "silent heart attack." I guess they had to call it something. But I knew that she had already died after she'd exerted the last of her will in Zale's office. There had been talk about getting Mom strong enough so she could go the die in a hospice. There was a weird and twisted sort of sense to be found in that, but I've since let it go because it is the sort of thing that pisses me off when I look too hard at it.

Besides, *It just hurts something awful.*

After I had cast my worry-stone over the rail extension, a silent proxy of God, I guess, entered my mind. I know. *I know.* But there's no clearer way for me to put it. I have never bought into handmade religion, nor will I ever; but now I suspect that there is *more*, and that a so-called higher power is even more miserable and lonesome as we are. Yet the possibility of its existence can be a comfort to us, although I sincerely doubt that the reverse is true. As long as people walk the earth there can be only sad angels.

The Narrows merges with greater Philo Bay about three hundred yards to the south. The Seattle super-ferry passes the head of the Narrows on its way in and out to the downtown terminal. One was coming in then, and as always, it would soon sound its horn as to herald its arrival. Sometimes the horn would sound just once, other times there'd be two shorter bursts lasting just as long as the single. This choice of one or two soundings varied from captain to captain, and it seemed to me as fifty-fifty as a thing gets.

Upon seeing the incoming boat my mind began to exist only in the moment. There was no then no future, only now. And I felt sorry for the silent and sad angel within; for she was a compassionate presence who wanted to help but didn't know how.

“Tell you what,” I thought *to* the angel, “I’ll help *you* out. I’ll make it easy. Ferry’s coming in: one blast of the horn’s for yes, two means no.” I clutched the rail extension with both hands and laid my right foot on the bottom bar. Even at fifty-nine I knew that I could easily propel myself over the side, if that was to be my destiny.

“I can do this,” I said, joyfully, and anticipating the horn. “I can really do this...”

Just as the horn began to sound my phone rang louder than I had ever heard a cell ring. It was as though ten phones had gone off at once. The noise had successfully drowned out the ferry’s horn. The angel smiled sadly, unfurled her wings and flew away. Time resumed its normal flow and I was left unable to tell if the horn had sounded once or twice. I guess I could have gone over anyway, but the magic of the moment had passed, and doing such would have been as empty a gesture as tossing the worry-stone had been.

I managed to dismiss the call. It was from the mortuary. (For the record: Mom was ready for her burial.)

It then occurred to me to check my settings and I wasn’t surprised to see that my ringer had been turned all the way down as I had gotten into the habit of doing while Mom had been in the ICU. Yet it had gone off loud enough to drown out a super-ferry’s immense foghorn.

I began to laugh. It felt like years since I had last laughed. “You did it!” I yelled, still laughing. “Just had to get the last word in, didn’t you, bitch? I so hope there’s nothing *wrong* with what I tell you...you, you magnificent bitch.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The story was for my late grandmother, who was a prideful, energetic and maddening woman. Sometimes, I hated her. But when her mind died I learned to appreciate the great bitch she had been, and felt a great loss.*

BIO: I am a pen name who lives in the Pacific Northwest. My ‘employer’ is a shy and timid person who hides under the bed with her pets until ‘it all blows over’. Just what that means is anyone’s guess.

The Complete Plays of Shakespeare, Condensed

by Rachel Rodman

WHY WE LIKE IT: *As if the title didn't knock our socks off, the sheer brazen pluck (or Puck?) of taking on the Big 'S' and reducing his plays to a few pages on a lit rag of questionable character blew everything else off us too. Naked, we stood amazed! The 'toil and trouble' this must have taken could only have been 'double, double'. Alas, an inspired (duh) witty conceit! (in the Elizabethan sense). Duds back on, we agreed that, apart from everything else, we loved the way the author conjured a blended dramatis personae, with Shakespeare's characters commingling with those from an extracurricular fictional genealogy. Zounds! If 'the play's the thing' this farce be it! 'And now the deed is done!' Read on! (Be sure to scroll down to the family tree that follows the author's bio.)*

Henry IV, part 1

Falstaff was fat.

Henry IV, part 2

Really Fat.

The Merry Wives of Windsor

He was fat, in fact, and the fairies of Windsor, perched in the treetops, concurred. So they winged down angrily in order to pinch and burn him.

Henry V

Until he died.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

To celebrate, the fairies distilled a purple intoxicant, sourced from a rare flower. Under its influence, they engaged in a raucous orgy, using Falstaff's soft belly as a pillow.

"He's so fat!" they moaned. "So fat!"

As You Like It

In the happy melee of it, Puck--ever the cheeky one--sidled up to King Oberon and revealed: "I am a woman."

Two Gentlemen of Verona

"A real woman," he--now she--clarified, and loosened the ties of her bodice.

Twelfth Night

Until her breasts were prominent and obvious and free. "You are a woman," Oberon agreed.

Henry VIII

So he called upon all his holy men, including Cardinal Wolsey, to engineer a breach with Rome, and annul his marriage to Queen Titania.

Antony and Cleopatra

Oberon and Puck shared an appetite for violent conjugal play. By the end of their honeymoon, their breasts were scabbed with sword wounds and fang marks--the marks of their ardor.

But, outside their bedchamber, the rage of Rome burned too, and the two remaining pillars of the world, Pope Anachronism IX and Octavius Caesar, combined their forces, vowing to annihilate Oberon, the Heretic, and Puck, his whore. And, of course: to take Windsor.

Cymbeline

So a vast army advanced from Rome to England.

Henry VI, part 1

As Oberon donned his war gear, his trusted adviser, Joan of Arc, assured him,

Macbeth

“No man of woman born can defeat you.”

But Caesar, who had enjoyed an eponymous birth, without any vaginas at all, cried, “I can! I can!” and smote Oberon through the heart, excited to prove it.

The Tempest

Puck fled, aided by the sea god, Setebos. And soon, on a distant island, she gave birth to a misshapen burden: a boy, whom she named Caliban.

The Comedy of Errors

And, moments later, to a second, ostensibly identical boy, whom she named Caliban #2.

The Merchant of Venice

Under Caesar's rule, Windsor entered a golden age of trade, profiting from the export of Falstaff's belly fat. To prepare the flesh, Windsor's merchants sliced it into exactly equal portions, defined by law: one pound apiece.

Hamlet

To secure the new political order, Caesar took the jilted queen, Titania, to his bed.

But Titania's son, Hamlet, took exception to the marriage. Moody and morose, he came to spend an inordinate amount of time in Windsor's charnel yard, brooding over Falstaff's skull.

"What a piece of work is this fat, fat man?" he wondered, sighing lugubriously.

Othello

Windsor's witch, Joan of Arc, spoke privately to Caesar:

"You, my lord, were not born of woman. And, when it comes to your woman, you should be usurped by no other man."

She whispered this shrewdly and well, directly into Caesar's ear, until Caesar took the suggestion, just as Joan wished him to, and then he throttled Titania.

The Winter's Tale

As Titania died, a baby, Perdita, exited her womb--the true seed of Caesar. But Caesar, certain of the girl's illegitimacy, ordered her to be cast into the sea.

Julius Caesar

"No man of woman born can defeat you," Joan prophesied, just before stabbing Caesar.

"Et tu?" Caesar gurgled.

And Caesar fell.

King John

To consolidate her power, Joan hired an assassin, Hubert, to eliminate Hamlet.

Pericles

But Hamlet absconded, hiding himself behind a pallet of Falstaff's belly flesh, inside the hold of one of the merchant ships.

Weeks later, at sea, the vessel encountered a terrible storm. The crew was lost, the ship was wrecked, and Hamlet was cast onto a strange shore, the sole survivor.

"What country is this?" he asked.

Troilus and Cressida

"Troy," answered Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek army.

Timon of Athens

With the Greeks, Hamlet shared the wealth of the wrecked ship. For many days, they caroused on Windsor wine and engaged in a vigorous orgy, assisted by Windsor's aphrodisiacal potions.

After a fortnight, convinced of their love, Hamlet requested their help. "My friends," he said, "I must kill Joan of Arc."

But the Greeks simply laughed and cried, "More wine!" and "More penis!" and otherwise refused to assist him.,

So Hamlet, enraged, stormed away, dragging the remaining pallets of Falstaff's flesh behind him. To the Trojans, he revealed the position of the Greeks' camp, and directed the construction of a new war-machine: the catapult.

Then, together, they set the ultra-flammable pallets of Falstaff's belly fat alight, and shot them over the walls, so that the entire Greek army went up in flames--every man destroyed.

At the spectacle of it, Hamlet laughed and laughed, maniacally. "Hawk from a handsaw!" he chortled, like a man unhinged. And: "Methinks it is a weasel!"

Two Noble Kinsmen

On Puck's distant island, in the meantime, the Caliban twins had grown up together, the closest of friends.

But that closeness ended one morning when a weatherbeaten raft scraped onto the sand and a beautiful woman stepped ashore.

It was Perdita, the foundling, whom creatures of the sea had nurtured to adulthood, entranced by her great loveliness.

“Choose me!” both Calibans cried in chorus, throwing themselves at her feet.

But Perdita, squinting, protested: “I can’t even physically distinguish you.”

So the twins set up an elaborate jousting ring, and called all the fairies of the island and sea, together with the entire Greek pantheon, to witness their battle. Again and again they clashed, with desperate rage, so that, with each collision, lance to lance, the whole world shuddered.

Finally, Caliban #1, benefiting from the stumble of #2’s charger, threw his brother to the ground and cried: “Perdita is mine!”

“Whatever,” said Perdita, shrugging.

Richard III

Back to Windsor, Hamlet sailed, leading a contingent of Trojans. At the shore, Joan’s army met them, and a grand battle ensued.

Mid-conflict, Joan was thrown from her horse. Sustaining a head injury, she began to babble distracted nonsense, like: “No man is a horse!” and “My

kingdom for a horse of woman born!” until, with a triumphant cry, Hamlet disemboweled her.

Hamlet ascended the throne. His Trojan queen, Cressida, accompanied him. In the joy of it, the war-weary nation staged a celebratory orgy, from the happy stupor of which it would not rouse for many weeks.

“Nymph!” cried Hamlet, entangled with his queen. “In thy orifices have all my sins been committed!”

Richard II

“Curse you!” cried Caliban #2, made sick by #1’s happiness. And he built a boat and sailed away, accompanied by a heavily-armed contingent of island and sea fairies.

If he could not have Perdita, he was determined, at least, to claim his birthright.

The Windsorites, still mid-orgy, mounted little resistance. So Caliban’s forces handily assassinated Hamlet, who died gurgling querulous protests like “The undiscover’d orifice?” and “Quintessence of penis?”

After the regicide, the assassins forcefully disentangled Queen Cressida, mid-copulation, from her dead husband, then escorted her weeping back to Troy.

Love’s Labour’s Lost

On the throne of Windsor, Caliban #2 still dreamed bitterly of Perdita. So he established a sex-less court, devoted to study and serious contemplation--no females allowed.

One evening, lifting his eyes from his book, Caliban noticed one of his fairy servants, standing uncomfortably close. It was a servant that Caliban had never, until that moment, looked at very carefully before, and was now uncertain how to classify.

“Are you a male or a female, Ariel?” he asked sternly.

“Does it matter, my lord?” Ariel whispered.

And Caliban’s voice caught, and his heart hammered, and he decided: no, it did not matter.

Measure for Measure

But in the morning, damp with sex, Caliban #2 remembered his vow. “Get out!” he cried, driving Ariel away.

Afterwards, in his anguish, Caliban decided that it had not been enough--not nearly enough--to banish sex only from his court. To safeguard Perdita’s memory, he must banish sex from the entire nation.

So he called upon his father’s old supporter, Cardinal Wolsey. Together, they legislated the closure of all the bawdy houses, the execution of all of the adulterers and lechers and whores, and the destruction of Windsor’s aphrodisiacal potions.

But it didn't help; nothing helped. It didn't matter how many draconian laws he drafted, or how many disgusting philanderers he destroyed. Ariel's memory remained with Caliban, all the same--Ariel's eyes, Ariel's lips, Ariel's genitals, and Ariel's love--as visceral and immediate as his own heart, and he could not root it out.

Henry VI, part 2

For many years, Hubert, the assassin, had fruitlessly scoured the seas. Now, returning home, he discovered that his target, Hamlet, was already dead, and that his old commander, Joan of Arc, was too.

On top of that: all of Windsor's bawdy houses were closed.

It was too much. So he fomented a revolution.

Combing the countryside, Hubert and his rag-tag band of supporters seized and beheaded all of the constables and prison wardens, then set the bodies on fire.

With particular relish, they decapitated Cardinal Wolsey, then threw his flaming head into the charnel yard, where Falstaff's flesh was prepared for export.

Fire met fat. In the resulting explosion, gobs of Falstaff's burning body were flung across the whole of Windsor, bright and deadly, like rain from Hell.

Coriolanus

In the sting of Caliban #2's rejection, everything became twisted in Ariel's heart. Loyalty into betrayal; love into hate.

So the jilted fairy made an impulsive journey to Rome.

"Crush Windsor!" the heartsick Ariel implored the pope. "And kill King Caliban!"

Romeo and Juliet

The sea god Setebos, who had been long absent, returned to Puck in a dream, and revealed to her the awful secret of Perdita's parentage.

"No!" Puck cried, beating her breasts.

"Seed of Caesar!" she spat, pulling Perdita from her son's bed.

"Murderer's daughter!" Then, with a long sword--the very sword that she had used, years ago, to lovingly wound her husband during their honeymoon--she stabbed Perdita in the back, up to the hilt.

"No!" cried Caliban #1. Energetic in his anguish, he clutched his beloved tight, impaling himself on the same blade, where it protruded from Perdita's belly.

The Taming of the Shrew

Under the cover of night, Setebos slithered quietly into the couple's tomb.

"I have come to this island to wive it wealthily," he reported. "And be she unwilling, or previously married--or dead--I will still have her."

Then, with shake, he disentangled Perdita—heiress of Windsor—from the limp grasp of her Caliban.

“You are so bright, my Perdita,” he said, caressing her grey, shriveled flesh.

“And your breath is so sweet,” he said, kissing her mold-speckled mouth.

Then, whispering additional compliments, he dragged her down with him, down, down, down, to his lair at the bottom the sea.

King Lear

Behind them, Perdita and Caliban #1 left three young daughters. In her grief, Puck, their grandmother, devoted herself entirely to their care.

Each girl had been christened with a distinct name. But Puck found these bothersome to remember, and not at all in accordance with her own ordinal-based child-naming philosophy, and so she preferred to call them Goneril #1, #2, and #3.

Within a few years, the older two had had enough of the tiny island, and were determined to claim their royal birthright.

“I loved you more than space,” yawned Goneril #1. “I love you so much I wish I was dead,” snorted Goneril #2. Then they sailed away.

After the girls’ departure, Puck and Goneril #3 became mortally sick with heartache. Before they died, however, they had the foresight to arrange

themselves, with impeccable blocking, about the corpse of Caliban #1: stage left and stage right, respectively, to his stage center; three generations in one tomb.

Henry VI, part 3

Once they'd disembarked at Windsor, Goneril #1 and #2 looked cunningly at one another. Then, with a primal scream, each of them simultaneously sliced off the other's head, speared it onto a pole, and planted it in the earth. "I am the Queen of Windsor!" both cried.

For a few moments, their lips continued to move, suspended on their quivering poles. But then they both died.

Titus Andronicus

After decades alone with his corpse bride, Setebos emerged from the ocean. During those years, he had thoroughly tamed Perdita, tamed her down to the bone, and now he was excited to show her off: well-mannered, demure, and fleshless.

But Windsor was in the middle of a civil war, and no one seemed in the least interested in Perdita's shows of obedience.

Later, in the charnel yard, Setebos made an even more upsetting discovery. In place of the rich dowry that he had expected to claim, as Perdita's husband, he found only a charred pit. Following the attack by Hubert's rebels, not an ounce of Falstaff's flesh remained.

So, in a rage, Setebos began slaughtering everyone, absolutely everyone, making a slow, bloody path toward Caliban's castle.

As Setebos continued his brutal spree, Queen Cressida's forces, sensing their moment, swarmed onto the shore. At their helm marched Hamlet's adolescent son and heir--a morose, bookish child, called "Poor Yorick," who had been conceived at the very moment of his father's death.

"Make way for King Yorick!" the Trojans cried.

Just a few oar strokes behind, a fleet of Romans, led by Pope Anachronism IX, also reached Windsor. Ariel, who had since had a change of heart, cried, "Stop! Stop!" attempting to impede them. But it was no use.

"Make way for the army of Christ!" the Romans shouted, shoving past the repentant fairy.

A beat later, a horde of Goths, too, attracted by the turmoil, poured opportunistically into the harbor. They ate the local children, assaulted the local women, and cut off their opponents' hands, or deviously induced them to cut off their own hands themselves.

The struggle lasted many days. But, by the end of it, everyone, everywhere--the entire population of Windsor, from the royal retinue to Hubert's rebels; Queen Cressida and Prince Yorick and the other Trojans; Pope Anachronism IX and his Roman soldiers; Setebos, the Goths, and all the

miscellaneous fairies of the earth and sea--all of them, to the last soul, had perished in rage and pain.

Much Ado About Nothing

Amid the heaps of corpses, two long-sundered lovers lay close to one another: eye to eye, heart to heart. They were significantly feistier than the other Windsorites, and so took a few moments longer to die.

“Let’s get married, you irascible creature, you,” said Ariel, extending bloody stumps in place of fingers.

“Forsooth,” wheezed Caliban #2 through a punctured esophagus.

All’s Well that Ends Well

So they did.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Earlier in the decade, I read the Complete Works of Shakespeare. It was lovely, of course. Just a bit on the long side..So. I marshaled my editorial scissors, in response to the problem. And a stack of black markers. And a little LSD...Voila!*

BIO: Rachel Rodman (www.rachelrodman.com) writes fairy tales, food poetry and popular science. Her work has appeared in *Fireside Fiction*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Future Fire* and elsewhere.

SALT

By Warren J. Jones III

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The turbulent prose, syncopated syntax and colliding emotion that characterize this post-millennial word spree were welcome percussion to our jaded ear drums. Another reason we liked it is because we have no idea what the title refers to. But seriously, there's something beautiful going on here—beautiful and timely. The language of texting is the new voice of the emerging artist and the run on/incomplete sentences and absence of expected punctuation in 'Salt' is sublime 'digi-speak'. The whole thing just rocks.*

On the odd chance that someone way in the back unseen from the stage was actually listening I pulled out one last trick from the bag unloading a torrent of notes using chromatics and fourth-y patterns and climaxing with my now famous ruptured rhino squonk. The sound not to be confused with music was not a result of carefully planned and practiced etudes but due to the poor shape of my old but not ancient enough to be valuable saxophone of torture. The drummer had provided the proper accompaniment of cymbal thrashes double bass drum bashes stick disintegrating mashes and was currently standing with arms thrust skyward a copious amount of perspiration both on his person and puddled at his feet. I had hired a bassist who bailed on me an hour before the show something I should have planned for as bassists as a rule can't keep track of anything more than the cleanliness of their strings and perhaps where a free meal might be obtained. This was not supposed to be so much work. Music is a blessing to be nurtured and shared my choir director instructed as she attempted without success to provide proper pitches for the disinterested and tone-deaf dozen teenagers robed and robbed of a perfectly fine sunday afternoon to be enjoyed outdoors not sniffing bad perfume and pew polish.

The three fanboys that had shown up an hour early to suck some kind of useful knowledge out of the sound check thereby improving their limited ability to produce coherent sound from unearned high quality instruments sat staring at their mobile devices similar to how my now dead dog had gazed at the empty supper dish he shoved into the corner by the stairs. Lump #1 elbowed #2 and so on and a lame type of clapping or perhaps snapping of fingers wet with beer foam and snot was produced causing my drummer to lean over precariously and yell DUDE with the proper hand positions typical of young privileged males of a certain age and lack of social graces once considered necessary in society.

The aforementioned gentlemen seated in the audience portion of the theater reacted in a similar manner thereby securing an immediate social connection with my drummer and assuring all involved a further bonding opportunity not limited to public intoxication but including the secretive sharing of prohibited items of some hallucinogenic nature of which I may or may not have past experience with and had conceded defeat to after several attempts at relieving a chemical imbalance such as is found in irresolute members of a certain caste in modern society. Drumset abandoned the now four amigos headed out to bathrooms unknown and the unsuspecting ambivalent world at large.

Reaching behind me I snagged my can of tepid malt beverage and chugged the remaining tepid foam while looking to the side of the stage where I observed the club owner trying to smooth out a waitress' apron by passing his hairy knuckled hands over the front of her body repeatedly in a fashion not apparently to my knowledge condoned by the server or even perhaps the lawful authorities. This particular female and I had recently become more than just friends that seek the company of people of similar age and occupation even perhaps a relationship had been formed and my impression of the interaction between this man and that woman caused an odd climbing a rope in gym class feeling in my loins.

Not knowing to a certainty of the exact nature of the mutual or even distinct dependency upon each other between myself and the waitress as we had only had coffee and not had a chance to consummate in an adult fashion a physical animal and perhaps emotional bond requiring much attention to the details of interactional relationships of which I am a member of the side of the species that uses only a small percentage of available mental capacity to process information and single syllables to communicate results requests and responses I was unsure of what if any reaction I should be forthcoming with and stood near in mute paralysis as the alleged assault continued. I finally awoke from my stupor and yelled hey stop it and both parties turned suddenly in my direction as if a secret meeting in an office downtown had just been interrupted by armed insurgents or at least government agents in phalanx with handguns drawn stooped to avoid return fire from the enemy.

A look of questioning annoyance from the manager accompanied his request that I mind my business as the staff meeting currently underway was taking up all his available time and he would address my concerns during our upcoming and possibly last paycheck dispersal appointment to be held at a later time not at my convenience as the other business at hand was

delayed by my interruption. The lady of my observation showed a countenance not of surprise or even the concentration of one who had been brushing or perhaps rolling lint from an article of clothing in a manner that was neither perfunctory nor indulgent yet also lacking the sophistication necessary to maintain a clear conscience during such a seemingly mundane activity. I accepted this visual and made the decision to avoid confrontation thereby perhaps maintaining my ability to collect the remuneration which was promised me after the performance of recent musical duties mentioned in a written contract supplied by the manager and signed by me. I partitioned to the rearward portion of my previously stated small brain the now supremely obvious knowledge that I will remain alone for a major portion if not indeed the entirety of my remaining extantivity.

I breathed in slowly and turned back to the stage observing one of the more surly and shifty and smarmy looking stagehands as he ducked behind the unused bass amplifier supplied at no small cost by me carrying my soprano sax. This action was not requested by me or even implied in a manner that could be mistaken for permission and as my brain caught up with my vision I shouted out for him to stop immediately. The shady looking aforementioned miscreant spun towards me dropping my horn on the back edge of the stage causing a loud unwanted clanging sound to enter my awareness along with the realization that my next 10+ job monies would be going to fund the repair or replacement of one of my now even more worthless instruments of my and possible many other peoples torture. The previously spoken of helper who is obviously no such thing beat a rather hasty even speedy retreat out the side door and I went to collect my ex sax and contemplate yet once again the possible reasons for taking up this punishing and futile line of work.

I meticulously packed up the broken pieces of a once promising future into their ancient and worn cases while sighing to myself allowing me even more time to contemplate a seemingly miserable but perhaps mercifully short future in the music biz. I repeated aloud the phrase I used silently in meditative mode attempting to delete the wrongful gig experiences built into a great help of clinging woeful resentment and solitude. It was not supposed to be this much work.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'Salt' was written as I was reflecting on my 40+ years as a jazz bassist. I have experienced all the emotions expressed in the story and have had contact with the characters. The dark overtone that the story exudes was produced by concentrating on some of the exasperation I have felt from time to time when examining my bank account in relation to the man-hours necessary to become and remain somewhat successful and useful in a pursuit many consider frivolous or ignore completely.*

That being said, I love my job. I love writing. I am a voracious reader of Harrison, Gaiman and others and re-read often.

BIO: Warren L. Jones III is a jazz bassist, composer and writer working near the White Tank Mountains in Arizona. He has been published in print in *Kyso Flash 2016*, *State of the Art* and *Four Ties Lit Review*. Warren is color blind.

Fifty-Four Minutes

By Ashley Cowger

***WHY WE LIKE IT:** To say we were reminded of Sylvia Plath takes nothing away from the integrity and strength of this magnificently written story about a young girl coming to terms with her twin sister's suicide. Kylie's psychological post-mortem of their symbiotic relationship is a harrowing (and sometimes galling) plunge into the twilight id that deeply enlists our interest and empathy. Eloquent, unobtrusive prose mirrors a colloquial voice poignantly mature beyond its years. The ending is a butterfly that closes like a freight train and all five of us were thinking about 'Fifty-Four Minutes' long after we finished reading it.*

My sister Kayla's suicide note took the form of a Tweet. Someone, I can't remember who, took it as a joke—well, because how else are you supposed to take something like that?—and commented: “The way you choose to kill yourself says more about you than just about anything.” Kayla used a kitchen knife, which she cleaned, for some reason, with bleach, before she ran it down her wrists several times. Despite the antiseptic smell that mingled with her blood, it was a messier death than I would have expected of Kayla, who was always the neat twin, the polite one.

Anyway, that was really how it all began: the compulsion, if you want to call it that. I like to call it my OCD shining through, because everybody you've ever met claims to be “a little” OCD, so I don't see why I shouldn't, too. It started as a result of Kayla's death, or anyway, a

result of the time I got to spend reflecting on life and death—especially the self-inflicted kind—as I lay awake in our shared childhood room. It gave me time to think. About all those things you tell yourself you’ll think about when you have time, which is pretty much never when you’re a sophomore in college and your English professor thinks you should write twelve drafts of every paper, and your Psychology professor seems to think that his is the only class you’re taking. I thought about blood, and how it looks different on the outside of your body than the in. And about life, how short it really is when you stop and add it all up, how quickly everything goes by. It feels like just yesterday Kayla and I were eight years old, swinging on the swing set in the backyard—Kayla going higher and higher, me screaming, “No, Kayla. You’ll fall!”—and then just like that I’m nineteen, and she’s gone.

And I thought about death, of course, about how it can come on so unexpected like that, and yet in Kayla’s case we were warned. We were all warned. Because I saw that Tweet when I was pretending to do research at the library. For some reason, she’d tagged me in it:

@KylieTrubright. I saw it and put off coming home for two more hours. But what really got me, what really kept clanging around inside my head as I stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars Kayla had arranged as the constellations on our ceiling, was that Kayla had given *herself* fair warning too. We all die, sooner or later, and only the most delusional of us try to pretend that away, but Kayla got to say when and how. Kayla took the guesswork out of the whole thing.

I don’t want you to think that I’m some kind of apathetic bitch. She was my sister, after all, my twin, and I loved her. I thought about the other things, too. The regular things. Wondered why she did it and how long she’d been feeling this way. If there was anything I could have done. But there was no way I could ever know the answers to those questions, philosophical questions, if you think about it, and not fit for the mind of a journalism major like myself. Kayla

had been the one with the mind for abstract thought. I was more interested in the facts: the who, what, when, where, why, and how of it all. And the first fact was that we all die. The second fact was that if we don't choose when and how, some force outside of ourselves—fate, if you want to call it that—chooses for us.

And the third fact was that Kayla had chosen for herself.

When I finally fell asleep that night, I dreamt of swiping a rag across the ground of our apartment where I had found Kayla earlier that day, then wringing it out into our big blue popcorn bowl.

When we were little, Kayla and I used to trick people by pretending to be each other. It worked on almost everybody—our Sunday School teachers, our friends, even our aunts and uncles. When Aunt Cara picked us up at the bus stop sometimes, she used to say out loud what color shirt each of us was wearing: Kayla, red; Kylie, purple. Then, we'd switch shirts in her bathroom, and she'd call me Kayla and Kayla, me. She'd ask me questions about Math club, and Kayla would try not to laugh as I made up fake lingo and fake equations. Our mom was the only one who could always tell the difference. She said we had distinct facial expressions and that Kayla's voice was gentler, her eyes always opened a little bit wider.

I never thought we looked exactly alike either. My hair was frizzier than Kayla's, for one thing, so even when we'd style it the same, hers looked smoother. Her chin was set slightly higher than mine, too, more upturned. I used to look at her and try to see myself. We came from one egg that had split into two. That separation marks you for life. They say twins have a sort of metaphysical connection, that they can feel each other's pain. When we were eleven, I pricked my index finger to see if Kayla could feel it. I blindfolded her, so she wouldn't know when the

pin entered my skin, and asked her to tell me the moment she felt the sting. I pressed the pin in slowly, watching as my skin ballooned around it before giving into the pressure. Kayla said, “Ouch,” but I couldn’t tell if she had really felt it or not. When we reversed the roles—Kayla pressing the pin into her forearm this time, so my already sore finger wouldn’t invalidate the experiment—I lied and said I could feel it.

I didn’t sleep at all my first night back at the apartment after Kayla’s death, after the funeral and the procession of well-meaning but distant relatives and family friends who patted me on the back or squeezed my shoulders and told me how sorry they were, or how much I reminded them of Kayla, or what a beautiful soul she’d had. I went to bed and closed my eyes and then just lay there, watching suicide on parade. Kayla was acting out all the different ways there are to kill yourself. I knew it was fucked up, imagining my sister, my best friend in the whole world, killing herself in any and every crazy way I could think of, but I couldn’t stop the images from coming: Kayla mixing drain cleaner with her morning coffee. Kayla slowly taking the stairs to the top floor of the library and then going through that door in the back corner—the one with the sign that says Emergency Exit, even though it couldn’t possibly be, why would they put an Emergency Exit that leads out onto the roof?—and jumping. Her long, brown curls slithering like little snakes through the air. The crunching sound when her body hit the cement.

I opened my eyes and rolled over, but that didn’t really help. The nightmare images of Kayla killing herself stopped, but then my mind just started thumbing through the different ways there are to kill yourself—overdosing on Tylenol, drinking poison, choking myself with a jump rope—like I was trying to commit a grocery list to memory. If Kayla were alive, I would have

gone into her room and woken her up, told her we should make some popcorn and watch a movie, or I would just ask her to make me laugh. She could always make me laugh on cue.

The next morning was when the compulsion really got going. I remember it well because it was the first. I climbed out of bed and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth, and when I stuck the toothbrush in my mouth, I had this impulse to push it all the way down my throat, just jam it down there and watch myself in the mirror as my eyes widened and bulged. I pulled the toothbrush out again and stared down at it, my hand shaking. Even holding the toothbrush at sink level, I could still see it all clearly in my mind—me pushing the toothbrush so far down I couldn't pull it back out again, watching my own face turn red, then blue.

The impulses just kept coming. I'd be at work and imagine plunging my face into the fryalator. I'd see an empty nail sticking out of a wall and think about banging my forehead against it repeatedly, until the nail tore through my skull and pressed into my brain. It was weird, because it wasn't like I actually wanted to kill myself. I wasn't really depressed. I mean, I missed Kayla, yeah, of course I missed Kayla. She was the only one who knew all of my secrets—or most of them, anyway—and I'm pretty sure I knew most of hers. You don't lose someone that close to you and not feel it, you know, hard. But depression, to me, seems like a deep, low down kind of feeling. Like you cry a lot and feel a lot of pain. I didn't feel like that. I felt more, I don't know, tired.

Anyway, in spite of the fact that I kept having those violent impulses, I kept on doing all the things a person in my position was supposed to do. I emailed all my teachers and explained the situation to them, I guess expecting a little leeway, even though I hadn't really been a star student before my “emotional distress.” I even went to talk to the school counselor, at the request of both my Anatomy professor and my mom. The counselor asked me all kinds of inane

questions about whether I felt angry at Kayla and whether I blamed myself. I answered honestly—yes, I guessed I felt a little angry; no, I didn't really blame myself. When she asked me if I ever thought about killing myself, I quickly told her no.

I only went to the counselor a couple of times, and I stopped going to my classes altogether, but I kept going to work. The knives made me nervous, but otherwise it seemed like the safest place for me to be. Sometimes I'd get so busy, I didn't really have time to think about the urges. I didn't have time to think about anything, and that suited me just fine. I told my boss I would probably be dropping out of school, so if he needed me for extra hours, that would be fine. He said he'd keep me in mind for when people called in sick or whatever. It wasn't really what I was hoping he'd say, because sitting around the apartment by myself was starting to get to me.

See, even though I didn't like it, I'd started to think of the compulsion as kind of a game. I realized that however you kill yourself is really like your last chance to speak before people put words in your mouth for the rest of eternity. However you do it, that's the first thing that will come to everybody's mind whenever they think of you. Kayla Trubright? Oh, she's that girl who slit her wrists. Her blood made purple pools on the wood floor. I think of that before I think of her laugh, or how she used to tug on her lower lip when she was nervous, or the millions of other memories I have of her. And so the compulsion seemed like kind of a test run. If I *were* to do it, how would I go about it? What message would I want to send?

Without even meaning to, I'd begun a running list of the various ways of committing suicide I'd thought about so far and how each way might be perceived. Downing a cup of broken glass would be like saying, "Hey, world, fuck you." Whereas something less painful, say overdosing on sleeping pills, would be more like saying, "I'm sorry. I just can't take it anymore." Kind of wimpy, if you ask me. I mean, if you're going to do it, *do* it, you know what I mean?

What slitting your wrists meant, I couldn't decide. Had Kayla been trying to tell us she was sorry, or was she flipping off the entire world? It seemed like a painful death, but a quiet sort of painful, and she did, after all, do it in the privacy of our own apartment. I couldn't quite put my finger on what she'd been trying to say, and for some reason, that really bothered me. It felt important, her final message. Felt like, after what she'd put herself through to send it, we should all try our best to decode it and listen.

A few weeks after Kayla's death, I got a phone call from Student Services. "Every single one of your professors," he told me, "has filled out an academic intervention form for you."

I told him about Kayla and how the school counselor had told me I shouldn't push myself too hard with school right now if I didn't feel I could handle it, which was true.

He said that was alright, but I should know that it was too late to drop my classes, and if I didn't work something out with my professors so I could get deferrals and finish the classes out later, I would end up with a bunch of F's on my transcripts, and that would mean I'd be on academic probation. His voice was brusque, and he seemed like he was in a rush, as if I was the one who had called to bother him.

"Thanks for letting me know," I told him and hung up before he had a chance to say anything—you're welcome, probably, because he surely didn't even know I was being sarcastic.

I thought about calling my mom and telling her I was dropping out, but she was helping out with Kayla's half of the rent. Plus she was sending me supplemental money on the side to help cover the holes my part-time salary left behind. If I dropped out of school, she would cut me off, emotional distress or no, so instead, I went in to talk to my professors and asked them about getting a deferral. My Spanish professor said he would have been happy to help me if I hadn't

already missed so many classes prior to “the incident,” as he called it, but everyone else said we could work something out. My English professor even said if I still completed the final paper, an investigative report, I might pass the class with a C, depending on how well I did.

I didn’t really feel like writing an investigative report, but I didn’t want to end up on the streets because I couldn’t make rent, either, so I told her I would do the best I could. The question was, what the fuck was I going to investigate? Professor Tilden gave me a bunch of possible topics: issues relating to the local economy, politics, and things like that. Nothing that sounded really worth investigating to me. I heard myself ask her if I could do something a bit more personal, like suicide rates in our area.

“That could work,” she said. “Only, I don’t want you to take on a topic that’s going to be,” she paused, “overtly . . . stressful. For you.”

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “I was just thinking I’d interview someone at the suicide hotline or something.” I’d seen this big, hand written, poster board sign for the suicide hotline nailed to the oak tree outside the Liberal Arts building. “Feeling lost? We can HELP,” it said.

“That sounds like a great place to start,” Professor Tilden told me.

The place where they answered the phones was cramped and stuffy, just one long room with cubicle walls partitioning one desk off from the next. Brent, who was the Managing Volunteer, showed me around before I interviewed him. It was depressing, actually seeing the volunteers—my age, most of them, or not much older—sitting around at these cubicles talking earnestly on the phone, taking notes. “We keep detailed records of each phone call,” Brent told me. He had those big, circular glasses that nerds always wear on TV, the kind you expect no real person to buy. On top of that, he was overweight, not obese or anything, but his face was circular and soft, and I wondered if he ever got made fun of at school and if he had many friends.

“And over here,” he told me, pointing to a bulletin board with letters and printed emails tacked to it, “is where we post letters we receive from past callers, thanking us for helping them.

I glanced over the pages pinned to the board. “There aren’t that many.”

“Well, for every hundred people we save, probably only one writes to say thank you. If that many.”

“So how do you know you saved all one hundred then?” I asked.

“They called, didn’t they? They reached out for help. People who reach out for help almost never end up killing themselves in the end.”

If the people who end up calling are not the ones who end up killing themselves, what good was the suicide hotline doing anyone, I wanted to ask. Kayla would never have called a suicide hotline, I was sure of it. She never so much as mentioned to *me*, her closest friend in the whole world, that she was feeling a little down. Who were these people who called suicide hotlines, I wondered, and why did they do it? What did they hope to gain?

Brent led me into his tiny square of an office and motioned for me to sit in the stiff, foldout chair across from his desk. I pulled out my portable audio recorder and placed it on the desk between us, then pressed the red button. My mom had given me the recorder when I graduated from high school; she said all journalists need something like this, but I hardly ever used it. Why would I need to? I had a phone.

I told Brent again what I was writing about and asked him why he thought suicide rates were so high in our area.

Brent told me, “College towns invariably have a lot of potential suicides, or just people who need to reach out to someone who will listen.”

“Why do you think that is?” I asked.

“Stress. From school, from romantic relationships, from trouble with their parents, from being on their own for the first time. It’s a hard time in any kid’s life.”

I pursed my lips, wondering how old he was that he was referring to me and Kayla and people like us as “kids,” but I let it drop. “Can I ask,” I said, “have you ever thought about suicide? Or is that too personal?”

“I think most people have thought about it to some extent or other, don’t you?”

“But seriously, though. Like where you’re planning out how you might go about it,” I said.

“No,” he said—too quickly, I thought. “I’ve never seriously thought about it.”

I glanced down at my notebook, where I’d scribbled some half-formed questions a few minutes before the interview. “Can you walk me through a typical call? What do the callers usually say, and how do the operators respond?”

Brent leaned back in his seat. “Well, of course every call is unique, just like every caller.”

“Do they ever, like, tell you how they’re planning on doing it or anything like that?”

He shrugged. “Most of them haven’t gotten that far in the planning process. Like I said, most of them aren’t really going to do it. Their calling us is a cry for help.”

I looked down at my questions, which all seemed pointless now that I knew that most of the people calling weren’t the real suicidal people anyway. This whole interview seemed like it was going to be a bust unless I thought of some way to salvage it. I tapped my pen against my notebook. “Let’s say,” I said, looking up at the ceiling. “Let’s say someone calls and tells you she can’t stop thinking about killing herself. She doesn’t *want* to kill herself, but she thinks about it, like, constantly. What would you tell her? How would you answer that cry for help?”

He folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling too. “Well,” he said, “I’d probably start by telling her she did the right thing by calling. It’s important to encourage them,” he said, now looking at me. “Let them know that they *are* taking the right steps, that there *is* something we can do to help.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “Okay, but like, then what would you say? How are you going to keep her from actually going through with it?”

“It doesn’t sound like she wants to go through with it, which is a great place to start. I’d probably talk to her about the feelings she’s been having, ask her when they come on and how she handles them, if she’s ever attempted to act on them, that sort of thing.”

“Let’s say she tells you they come on randomly, several times a day. She’s never tried to act on them, but when they hit her, she feels like she has to hold herself back or she might do it. Let’s say she tells you she’s afraid she might actually do it one of these days, even though she doesn’t want to.”

“I’d ask her to tell me a little about herself. What’s her life like? Is everything going okay at school? Is she in a romantic relationship, and if so, is it a happy one? Has she been having problems with her friends or with her parents? That kind of thing. Usually, it doesn’t take long to get at the heart of the problem. Usually there’s some stimulus, something that’s bothering the person and making them feel hopeless.”

“What if there isn’t?”

“There usually is.”

“But let’s say this time, there isn’t. Everything’s fine. Nothing’s going wrong. She just wonders, sometimes, you know,” but I stopped. Suddenly, my mouth felt full of saliva, and I didn’t want to but I had to swallow before I could say anything more. “Like, what’s the point?”

He stared at me for a few long seconds, then sucked in his breath. “To be honest,” he told me, “I’d probably recommend she seek professional help.”

I headed straight home after the interview with my portable audio recorder propped up in my lap so I could listen to the muffled recording. As I drove, I listened closely to my voice. It sounded different than how it had sounded in my head. It was hesitant, kind of unsure of itself, maybe even pleading. I’d thought I’d been poised, sort of stern during the interview. I thought I’d had a wry, cynical undertone. This person on the recording sounded like someone other than me.

The interview was a total waste, I decided. I thought about emailing Miss Tilden and backing out, just taking the F and being done with it—who cares? Writing this paper was pointless. Finishing school was pointless, too. If the Hot Dog Shack didn’t have full-time hours to offer me, maybe I’d take a second job somewhere else, or just quit, move even, start over somewhere new. I’d tell my mom to go fuck herself; if she thought a college education was so important, she could get one. I had better things to do.

Except that I didn’t, really. Have better things to do.

The interview ended with me thanking Brent for his time, followed by the sound of me picking the recorder up and turning it off. I reached down to press stop, but before I pressed the button, Kayla’s voice came on, in mid-sentence. At first I thought this was some sort of suicide note. My cheeks flushed. But then my voice came on, and I remembered what it was. I’d forgotten all about this recording. We’d made it not long after I’d gotten the audio recorder. It was just some fake interview I’d done with Kayla, for fun.

“Just wait ‘til school starts,” Kayla’s voice said. I remember the way the light in her eyes had seemed to sort of dance as she’d said it. She was joking, but then, she wasn’t joking at the

same time. We'd made the recording just after freshman orientation. We'd just moved into our new apartment, our parents had furnished the place and filled up our kitchen cupboards, and all we had to do, now, was wait for our lives to begin. "Everything's going to be different," Kayla's voice said. "Just wait," she said. "Just wait."

And then, one of the urges came on. Maybe it was hearing Kayla's voice so unexpectedly like that; maybe it was the realization that I would find no answers here, either. Whatever brought it on, I suddenly saw myself turning the steering wheel sharply, veering into the other lane and colliding, head on, with oncoming traffic. I pulled off into the parking lot for the community park and sat in my car, tears blurring my vision as I listened to the rest of the recording. Kayla's voice, hopeful, excited, talking about the future, about her goals, about how good things would be, soon. It was a different Kayla—one I had completely forgotten about—than the one who had slit her wrists. When had she changed, and how had I not noticed?

When the recording ended, I climbed out of the car and walked to a bench in the small park. I wanted to listen to the recording again, but I knew it would do no good. Kayla was gone. I held the recorder in my lap and stared at the playground: the monkey bars, the sandbox, the swings, rising and falling gently in the breeze. There were two little girls, maybe three or four, climbing up and down the slide from the wrong end. The girls' mothers sat on separate benches, each alternating between tapping away on her phone and glancing up at the girls to call things like, "Corrine, don't put that in your mouth," and, "Megan, play nice." But the girls seemed to be playing nice enough. I watched as one girl, whose hair was long and curly, climbed up the slide while the other, her short, brown hair pulled taut into pigtails, sat at the top of the slide and held out her hands. When the curly-headed girl reached the top, the brunette pushed her back down

the slide and then slid down after her. Both girls giggled as they started climbing back up the slide.

Without really understanding why, I started to giggle too. It felt maniacal and weird, with the tears still drying on my cheeks, but I couldn't help myself. It all just felt so funny, all of it: the recording of Kayla, taped over with the Brent interview; the likelihood that I was about to flunk out of school. I was laughing so hard I started to hiccup, and one of the girls' mothers looked over at me. She didn't say anything, and I didn't either. When I regained control of myself, I restarted the recorder at the beginning and pressed the red button. Then I held it up to the sky like a lightning rod until I heard the click of the recorder reaching the end of its capacity. On the drive home later, I listened to what I had left: fifty-four minutes of birds chirping, wind cascading over the microphone, and the barely audible, faraway laughter of two little girls.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story has been in the works for years and has been through countless drafts. As someone who suffers from severe depression myself, I've always been interested in how a person's depression and/or suicide might affect those around her. In the original draft, though, Kayla and Kylie were not even sisters, let alone twins. Once I had the idea to make them twins, the story came together for me. I'm an avid reader—well, all writers are, right?—and have surely been influenced by any number of authors. Some of my favourite short stories include Curtis Sittenfeld's 'The Prairie Wife' and George Saunders 'Victory Lap'.*

BIO: My first book, a short story collection entitled *Peter Never Came*, was awarded first prize in Autumn House Press's Fiction Contest and was published in January 2011. My short fiction has appeared in several journals including *Jabberwock Review*, *New Ohio Review* and *Pedestal*. I hold an MFA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and am an assistant teaching professor at Penn State Harrisburg.

An Unwritten Love Letter

by Tom Smith

WHY WE LIKE IT: *'Stars in the eyes smitten' is the only way to describe our collective reaction after reading this beautifully written love story with its overtones of reverie and the poignant presence of longings lost lurking behind quietly unobtrusive prose. Although the POV is third person singular, the voice projects such an intimacy of tone we feel that it is Enoch himself sharing his bittersweet confidences with us. The author writes with a light touch but strung together the words thunder. Quote: ' "I knew we'd get along by the way you danced," she said once; one New Year's, in his arms, many years ago. He had taken lessons from a great aunt who lived two doors down, had won awards, stressed a gliding step. Their little girl was born that late August.' And: 'Persistence can lead to life sentences of all sorts.'*

Enoch Pratt was a tiresome equivocator, given to tergiversations. He couldn't make up his mind as to whether to stay or go, and with all those tubes in him hooked up to a room full of machines. He was in a coma but, like everyone else in comas, he was still cognizant. Maybe he would listen to one more confession of his wife's, Enid.

She had not held his hand so tenderly in so long. Enid and Enoch had been married nearly fifty years, so they had both logged quite a number of secrets they had kept from one another. He was half waiting for their only daughter to fly in from out west, but she was so flip as to be entirely unpredictable. She may have been stalling for the death certificate discounts. Besides, for all they knew, 'Daddy wasn't really there anyway.'

A maid was just in now to straighten his unaltered bedclothes and make some marks on a chart at his feet. He called them maids because his imagination was still vivid and he preferred to think that he had just slept late at some first rate resort somewhere tropical. For a man who had done very little with his life, he was easily bored. The one thing he surmised nobody knew when they were in a coma was whether or not you would come out of it. It was a waiting game, but he could afford to be patient.

Life was not that different though. His wife talked and he listened, or not. Indeed, there were times when he even wondered if he ever wanted to come out. His body was no longer good for much anyway. The things that used to give him pleasure were either cranky or hampered, or outright unserviceable. He did miss his jam on toast, mind. His wife would arrive at just after one each day. You think you need a watch or clock to tell time, but your circadian rhythms are a very precise timepiece.

‘I knew we’d get along by the way you danced,’ she said once; one New Years, in his arms, many years ago. He had taken lessons from a great Aunt who lived two doors down, had won awards, and stressed a gliding step. Their little girl was born that late August.

* * *

Enid always entered carrying bags. She was an avid shopper. And Pratt liked to guess how much she’d spent by the amount of rustling and crackling. She never told him what she’d bought, so he could only assume it was a lot. Why she didn’t just leave them in the car, he never knew. (There are still things you cannot know, even in a coma.)

The fact was she would take the bus because driving in the car without him made her cry, but why? It was too close quarters. The one thing they still shared was the front seat of that car: Shopping, visiting, taking doctors’ appointments. Enoch had the wheel, but Enid was ever in

charge: Sighting stop signs, making turns, watching the curb; holding fast to speed limits—braking too late, things of that nature.

Enid was now washing his bald head like he was being anointed and patted down the fringe that circled his ears. She took a little comb out to groom his eyebrows. Why wouldn't she have used it for what he had left on his head, he thought? If she attempted to trim his nose and ear hairs, he just might snap out of it. After all, he still had feelings. Thank god she sat down to hold his hand, presuming the ablutions had ceased. Now she was paring his nails. She had once cut the cats claws to the quick. Click-click-click, at least it could yowl and leap out of her lap. Now it was time for their little chat. How their days were going.

It was as one-sided as always. Naturally, he was losing his hearing but it was times like this he was almost certain he had surrendered it. He would routinely daydream during these discussions—for the last forty years anyway. He was sleeping better and his joints were not troubling him like they could when he was unnerved. He didn't miss those looping interjections, 'are you listening to me?' If she thought he had responded incorrectly. Enoch silently prayed that when she visited his gravesite she might be somewhat muted.

He had loved her once, he still did. The one thing he knew in his heart was that she was the one thing he could never have lived without. She was the only thing he ever knew he had to have. In every other aspect of his life, he had never been as determined or so absolute. He was timid by nature, but he sometimes thought he had practically bullied her into marrying him. He had certainly worn her right down to the nub. And she had two other admirers with much better prospects. He knew it. And over the years she had sometimes proclaimed it. Persistence can lead to life sentences of all sorts.

* * *

He recalled when they first introduced each other to one another.

‘I’m Enoch—’

‘—I’m Enid.’

It was as if they had both shared an imaginary flash in a puff-of-smoke; like those old box cameras with the bulbs held above the subjects as the grand seer hid under a dark sheet shuttering.

‘We just might be meant to be a pair with a couple of monikers like ours,’ he said. She paused for a paining instant and then smiled that smile that still stuck in his head. Everyone was someone else’s fool, he thought. They were just lucky enough to be each others.

* * *

He could see her in his mind’s eye at every changing age they had engaged: Her long dark hair, cut short and curled, coloured, and then let go grey. The weight she’d gained that had been so pleasing at first, as her shape changed for good, or better.

Now her feet ached, her face would knot and her hands looked like gnarled roots. But even without his eyes closed, all he could see was that same girl with the long dark hair. If he hadn’t have had her, she would have been the one he could never forget.

* * *

He sensed an eye twitch, and he hoped she hadn’t noticed because he felt so peaceful. She would summon a nurse at the slightest token gesture. Now, all he could hear was that the machines had stopped. He could smell the perfume their only daughter always wore, as they commenced to removing his tubes and pulled the bed sheet over his head.

End.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *a fascination with the qualities, shortcomings and vicissitudes that cause people to stay together—even the prospect of death becomes richly incidental. (To be honest, I just find a new word like ‘tergiversation’ and try to write a story around it.)*

BIO: ...growing too old to play the long game. The mail I get tells me I live somewhere in Ontario, Canada. I have no idea what this has to do with blood type.

KAIJU!

By David Stevens

WHY WE LIKE IT: *As lovers of all types of writing we raise a middle finger to the notion that genre specific storytelling is not the equal of literary fiction. Is the overcooked steak superior to the perfect hamburger? KAIJU! formidably acquits itself of this prejudicial charge and then some. Through burnished prose non-human creatures passionately convey distinctly human qualities and with no back story or indication of what's ahead, the mystery of the tumultuous present we find ourselves in only deepens. There are humbling passages throughout, and the surgery scene is startling, like nothing we've read before. KAIJU! is stellar fiction (genre or otherwise) and if, in Pound's words 'the age demanded an image of its accelerated grimace', we're pretty sure this juggernaut dystopian fantasy would be one of them.*

A cop vibe first, then, no: junkie. Both? Whatever: the guy gave off weird. Then he proved it by waving a naked stump at Tati, the melted remnant of his handless arm clubbing the air near her face. *Ahh, prescription pain killers*, and now she was all ready for a confab, to compare notes, when he bent to confide in her.

“I feel it,” he spat, sweating. “It’s freezing down there.”

Not here, Tati thought, too short to escape the trapped body heat of the dozens around them on the basketball court. “No,” the doctor had barked over the phone at her when she questioned the location, “it’s not sports therapy. What the hell is *sports therapy*?” A question that was pointedly not an answer.

The cop/junkie was at her. “The depths are crushing, you would think it could not survive. But late at night I feel my hand down there, searching, feeling its way through the silt, traversing deep canyons. Sharp ridges. The chewed-down rib cages of whale carcasses. All the shit in the world – its gotta end up somewhere, right?”

Her arm was grabbed, distracting her from the crazy. Tati turned. When she saw it was Dr Thurston, she slowly unclenched her fist.

“Tatiana.” She winced, not the habitual response to her pain, but at the way the extravagance of her name plumbed its way out of the doctor’s mouth. Like her mother thought she was the second last of the Romanoffs or something. “Kindly cease chatting with Sergeant Burns and assume your position.”

His commanding voice, impossible jaw, the broad shoulders and chest, the silver mane – she saw it all, could appreciate it in a detached way, but the combination was never going to work on her, not with a penis in the package.

“Yeah, no, I’m just gonna go now.”

“Preposterous. With portents like these? With the sigils freshly in place, and the gang all here? Nonsense, we’re just commencing.”

Tati didn't know what the doctor was rambling about, but a boy with skin grown over where his left eye should have been distracted her before she thought to yell at the doctor about it.

"I don't belong here, not with –." She gestured randomly, then looked and saw she was pointing at twin brothers, identical down to their crutches, except one had an empty trouser leg pinned up at his left knee, the other his right. *Far out.* "These people are missing bits. That's not me. I don't fit in."

"You are such a snob Tatiana. They'll accept you. Come along," and he clapped, "doctor's orders."

"Can't you just write me a prescription, for my back?"

The doctor drew an exasperated breath and again clapped his hands, this time at her face. "Tatiana - there is nothing wrong with your back."

Just like that.

Sound left the room, except for the pulse of blood in her ears: *thump-thump; thump-thump . . .* . A shield came down all round her, blocking out the world. Her face went blank, one corner of her mouth stroke-tugged downwards. She rocked on the balls of her feet, waiting. She knew an impulse would arrive to direct her actions, that her anger would rise and do its thing.

The doctor looked down, still speaking. Words filtered through. "*Your back is glorious. Our whole enterprise depends upon your back and the burden you carry.*" Everyone in the room was staring, except of course the ones with both eyes missing.

An eternity of a few deep breaths later, she turned to leave. Thurston was fast for a big man, though, and blocked her path. Next to him stood a man without a nose, sticking his face out, daring her to stare.

“Tatiana, your back is perfect.”

What a fool. She was an idiot. He was no different from the rest of the long line of doctors. All the clinics, the specialists, the mandated wastes of her time because for some reason you had to earn a pain killer. Tati remembered them all. The many who told her to learn acceptance. The particular useless moron who lectured her about meditating on Marcus Aurelius every morning, when she couldn't even lift herself off the floor. The emergency room doctors who left her until last because she was a regular, because if your pain is chronic, well then, you should be used to it, shouldn't you? Its only pain. Not a disease. If they could not explain something, it wasn't real. If they could not cure it, it wasn't happening. If they didn't understand it, the patients were lying. No greater affront to a doctor than a problem they couldn't solve. On cue, her back throbbed in response, a great dragging pain at the base of her spine, tearing all the way up to her shoulders. She wasn't Sisyphus rolling a rock, she was dragging a great truck load of the bastards. Those dickheads on TV who pull 747s along the tarmac with just their teeth had nothing on her. Her eyes watered, she felt like vomiting, but she refused to show emotion in front of yet another useless quack.

She didn't want to speak, didn't trust what might come out, didn't want to give him the satisfaction of a meltdown in front of all these people. She stepped to the left, moved to the right, but a wheelchair rolled through the crowd to block her. A black

man, bald, but it wasn't absent hair that brought him to this gathering. His arms were powerful, his shoulders broad, his torso locked into a turret on wheels. She guessed there was not much of him left below the chest. His lips moved, pulling words up from some place she could not guess at. "We love your back".

"Move!" And now that she had started screaming, she could see no reason not to continue. "Let me out!"

The words did not work. A room full of creepy was coming right at her. Faces she did not want to see. Some that were hardly there at all.

Outside, the sun was bright. Tati caught a last glimpse of blue as the crowd moved in. Why hadn't she kept driving? Hit the beach, float for a while, and let the sea take her pain away. A deserted spot far from people. In the heat of the bodies, the noise of their limping, stumbling, crawling into position, she weakened. Her mind drifted from the press of the crowd for a moment. *Swimming beyond the breakers.* She imagined her hair long; thick tendrils of it spreading away from each other, reaching outwards over a gentle swell. Then she realised that it was not her hair that she pictured but a caul that the light shone through, her own skin peeling away gently, boundaries dissolving as salt water washed between her cells. Buoyant, just beneath the surface, basking plant like, the energy of the ocean oscillating through her expanding being. Fish nibbling, colonies forming: sponges, polyps, tiny crustaceans. *The pain distributed thinly over a vast surface, diluted, gone gone gone spread almost to nothingness...*

Sick of thinking, sick of planning, sick of having to deal with it all. Worrying about how she would get through each day, whether the pain would be bearable, how

she would be able to cope. Tati reached back and rubbed at the base of her spine, the spot near her flecked birthmarks.

“We want to share your burden, Tatiana.”

Awake, alert, returned to the room, she slapped at Thurston’s outstretched hand.

“It took me so long to find you again.” She did not have a clue what he was talking about, but what the hell, he looked like he was going to cry. Meanwhile, the crowd of the rest shuffled closer. “We all depend on you. Be one of us.”

One of us ... There was no room, though she kicked out to create some. She would have run, but she was surrounded. They were touching her, she *hated* to be touched. Tati struck out, pushing a woman backwards, she should have fallen and cracked her skull, but the woman shifted only inches before bouncing back, her momentum dissipated amongst the tight scrum of bodies. Tati threw a quick right into the chin of a man reaching for her, but it turned out he had no chin. Then they were all against her, and she screamed and kicked, but could get no purchase as they lifted her off the floor. *We accept you, we accept you ...*

Amidst the hubbub, above her own cries, Thurston’s repeated words reached her: “So long to find you again”.

They were marching on the spot, establishing a rhythm. Shoulders, arms, flanks rubbed against her. The heat grew. She guessed at absences she could not see: open sores, draining abscesses, cancer-chewed holes. The stink of sweat, the multitudinous

belches of yeasts and bacteria feasting on oils and proteins. Flesh rubbed roughly against flesh, skin cells flaked into the air, and they were all breathing in the meat of each other. Tati knew her resilience, but she feared she would not last long, that the crowd was a wave that would overwhelm her and carry her down. She gasped for air.

The march continued. Surfaces wore away. Their long loneliness was threatened by the exposure of everything below, the intermingling of their nerves, a new intimacy infinitely beyond: *Now, tell me, where does it hurt?*

Breaching the surface, sucking down hot air, as Tati swung her head she glimpsed the one-legged twins, each on a different side of the group, banging their crutches in time.

She was surprised to discover that she had joined in.

Her back ached. It was always throbbing.

Her back did not ache. *It never had.* But pain was the only language she had to describe her experience. Nothing else made sense.

They were a stretched ball, starting to break out into preliminary limbs.

Sweat still poured from her, salt stung her eyes like the ocean. A whiff of brine. The heat from the bodies was a physical cloud, pressing down. She was still dizzy, but she could not fall, the others would not let her. They crushed each other upright.

The sprung floor shook. Thurston was near the front, losing it, swinging his shoulders from side to side, his head bobbing in rhythm. Sergeant Burns' stump of an arm was a waving baton, directing traffic.

Tati's back ached. *No* - it exhausted her with its demands. She lived with it, but she did not understand it.

The pace quickened. The noise deepened. The one-eyed boy screamed. Thurston bent and hoisted him aloft. Covered his good eye, the boy yelled, "I can see the darkness." The crowd bellowed infrasonically, Tati hearing it in her gut. The stomping grew harder. They bounced from the floor, aloft for longer and longer periods.

Tati recovered impossible memories. There she was, a baby. How could she be looking at herself? The images were stolen from the mind of someone else in the crowd. A man held her down, his hand nearly as large as her body. He was cutting at her! The meat of her body resisted. She felt the man's urge to press the blade, to break the tension of her skin at the base of her spine. He made careful incisions, but in the end, it was butcher-work. The bone beneath the meat was too thick for shears, even at her young age, so he had to carefully saw through it. In two places at once, she looked down on herself, and simultaneously felt the tug of flesh at her back. The man lifted the little slab of brawn. No vestigial stub this, she felt the heft of it in his hand, and the absence of it from her back, as he dropped her tail, brown and scaly, into a pan. A flash of light, a reflection caught in instruments or a mirror or a window, and there was an image of Dr Thurston, much younger, pulling away his surgical mask.

Memories, dreams, reflections danced amongst them all. She saw the twins running on the spot, crutches thrown away, phantom limbs taking their weight, throwing froth and bubbles off through the air. Through the boy's lone eye, she

watched as the doctor's incredible jaw stuck out further. With his free hand, Thurston grabbed his own bottom lip and pulled roughly. Tati screamed, feeling the skin come apart as though it was her own, unable to stop the doctor's hand. He kept tugging, down, down, until his mouth split along the line of an ancient scar. His cheek came away, the skin dangled. Tearing with his nails, digging his fingers in deep, he ripped the flesh away from his chin. They all screamed, sharing his pain. Meat hung loose over a titanium prosthesis, flapping about as Thurston shook his head, wild now, flecking the boy and the others around him with drops of blood, spots of flesh. He leaned back, stretching his shoulders so his chest bulged, then thrust forward, pushing into a mighty roar. A window burst. The glass flew outwards in slow motion. The sound came to Tati through deep water.

Tati tilted forward, her feet off the ground, suspended by the others. There was no pain now. Everything was as it was supposed to be. Buoyed with relief at agony's absence, Tati swam within the pool of meat, reaching with her arms, kicking frog-like with her legs. "Move," she demanded, joining Thurston's roar, and now they obeyed, pushed away by the command of her swinging hips. Nerves carried the sensations to her brain unhindered by gravity or rationality. She felt the long, heavy weight of her long-lost tail move behind her, a rudder guiding them, a whip thrusting them forward. The others were fortunate, ironically. Their absences were obvious. How could she ever have understood the phantom pain from an impossible missing limb? Tati drove them, and they were one, directed in their mission by her massive tail, the burden she gratefully shared with them all.

Somewhere in the abyssal depths, a massive body glided towards the distant continent, climbing from the seabed. Bit by bit it came together, claws, jaws, eyes, legs, tail, genitalia: the missing parts found each other. The fingers of Sergeant Burns' hand twitched as it reached upwards from the silt, and his wandering arm was wrenched free from the muck by the surging current generated by the passage of the forming creature, twisting, tumbling until it found its place. The missing leg of each twin torpedoed into position. Reformed from ash from a hospital incinerator, Thurston's jaw locked into the structure.

Irresistible, the creature surged through the Sea of Japan (where else?), powered by memories of pain and frustration. A mountain range of water preceded it. The gymnasium thundered. Together, they would tower above the land. Tens of thousands would flee before them, deafened by the roar from Dr Thurston's returned jaw, the hubris of Tokyo's skyscrapers swept away at Tati's whim by her great tail. Rough-hewn, asymmetrical with its bubbles of eyes, dozens of them, its mixed assembly of suckered arms and tentacles and dinosaur talons, its mesh of hairless puckered multi-coloured skin and a broad swell of gargantuan muscle cascading off into eternity. One hundred hearts thrilled in unison, joined closer than melted flesh. Gaps were erased as they filled each other. Huge bubbles rose to the sea surface as the air between them was squeezed out. Tati shared their happiness. Together they exhaled their atomic breath, together they sucked in the sea and drowned. They felt no pain, endured no loss, suffered no more.

KAIJU! Uneasy at first, each step on land will be a ground shaking query as the legs of the twins find their way, as they learn to trust their queen and her steadying tail.

The beast will lean against Mount Fuji and Sergeant Burns' charred hand shall caress its peak. The beast will rend the sky with a torn-metal scream as it challenges the stars, affronted by their luminescence. A horn will spear out of its head, bleeding the sky, threatening to bring down the moon. There will be no stopping it.

Where does it hurt?

HERE! declares the massive foot, as a titanic leg pile-drives it down, down, down into the earth's crust, heedless of the viscous magma.

Navigator! Powerful and sinuous, her long lost tail stretches out into the distance far behind her. Tati has found purpose, infinitely better than the acceptance everyone had demanded. Consciousness shifted, but one clear thought spread from her to the rest of them: *well, this is better than a day at the beach.*

Tsunami! Onwards it rushed. They screamed inwardly in delight in their relief, ready to emerge and conquer as the walls of the basketball court swelled then exploded in their exultation, and the deep, deep ocean poured out, flooding all of the land.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Tatiana was originally a very feeling-sorry-for-himself middle age man, with a name like Trevor, sitting in a group therapy session for people suffering from phantom limb syndrome, who was a bit reluctant to share that his missing limb was something human beings normally do not have to begin with. It was all a bit droll. Trevor seemed too close to some of Philip K. Dick's 1950's characters, so he became a short, tough young lesbian with an exotic*

name. I also thought the group therapy situation was hackneyed and it was all feeling like a New Yorker cartoon. (I wish I could write like PKD and I wish I could publish cartoons in the New Yorker, by the way.)

The drafts became infused with the real life horror story my family has lived through over the past decade. Two of my daughters suffer from a horrible chronic Lyme-like disease, with distressing and painful symptoms, which was neither diagnosed nor treated properly for years, because the disease is not recognizing as occurring in Australia. I recall many nights sitting in emergency rooms in the wonderful high tech hospitals of my first world country, staring at signs warning patients not to disrespect or assault staff. Quite right, too—there had been an ugly spate of attacks on people who were just doing their job. However, I would look at these signs and dwell on the cognitive dissonance as my beautiful girls were disrespected, disbelieved and disregarded by dismissive, condescending and awful doctors who accused them of malingering or being unduly sensitive. If only those doctors respected my children. And why must patients always be polite and obedient? Why shouldn't they emerge from the sea, and, destroy Tokyo? However, I hope that I have avoided didacticism.

Influences? I don't know, I can only say who I like to read and reread: George Orwell, Franz Kafka, Stephen King's early work, PKD, Tim Powers, The Exorcist, Marilynne Robinson's Gilead books, Jane Gardam's Old Fifth trilogy, Saint Mark...

BIO: Returned from exile in The Hague, David Stevens lives in Sydney, Australia with his wife and those of his children who have not yet worked out the locks. His fiction has appeared, amongst other places, in *Crossed Genres*, *Aurealis*, *Three-Lobed Burning Eye*, *Pseudopod*, *Café Irréal*, *Not One of Us*, *Kaleidotrope* and the anthologies 'Love Hurts', 'At the Edge', and 'Chthonic'. He blogs irregularly at davidstevens.info

My Man Clarence

By L. B. Davis

WWLI: We like the way the author employs parallel monologues that never quite intersect in this 'dirty realism' story that nods to Bukowski. It's a literary device that effectively mirrors the breakdown of communication and trust between the junkie and his PO. This is a well-written example of its genre where good guys finish last and some don't finish at all. The knuckly prose gives it heartbeat but in the end the story works because of voice. Lyrical phrasing in street rags abounds: ...And the last line, to our minds, is like, you know, the very definition of what used to be called 'Soul'. Dig?

Clarence rotates the pipe in his fingers slowly while he's hitting it—like you would with a cigar. It makes him look like a sophisticated junkie. You would think he's getting ready to drop some serious life knowledge on you, but when he finally exhales, he can barely finish a full thought. He'll need about two minutes to get his shit together. When he finally does, he'll break into song.

He can sing like a bird. You would think after so many years of free-basing, his voice would be shot, but if you close your eyes and listen to him, you'd think he's Al Green in the flesh—the young Al Green.

After a note-for-note rendition of "Let's Stay Together," he'll once again launch into the story of how he got locked up.

I was making a run. I was supposed to be delivering a package, but when I got there, they was getting raided. When I headed back to the spot to tell them, they was getting raided too. I stashed the rocks in some bushes and waited for everything to clear up. When it was all done, I had more rock than I could smoke in a month. I didn't tell anyone I had it, obviously. I didn't want to give it back, and I didn't want to get caught with it. I also wasn't feeling very generous. You know how crackheads is—they find out I got all that shit, it's gone in an hour. So, I took it home, made a fire in the fireplace, closed the flue...

He spent two months in the jail infirmary; crack-overdose and smoke-inhalation.

I was all fucked-up. I couldn't breathe. They had me hooked up to all this shit. Meanwhile, I'm sick with withdrawals, can't eat or drink anything...

When he was well enough to leave, he spent five years in Federal Prison.

They hit me with a reckless endangerment charge on top of the possession—said the pigs and paramedics were put at risk due to 'exposure.' They said I would've gotten more time, but they couldn't confirm the actual amount of rock. Most of it was burnt up, you see?

Today was my last day as his Parole Officer. I was fired for Gross Misconduct. Clarence doesn't know yet, but it's his fault, and right now I'm fighting the urge to snatch him by the collar and scream "Shut the fuck up! Do you ever shut the fuck up?" It doesn't matter now, though. I always knew it would come to this. All it would take is some fool, not honoring our arrangement for the walls to cave in.

First time he came by here, I was high as fuck, man. I had just got out, had some friends over, and we was celebrating, right? This dude shows up out the blue—talking bout he called like five or six times over the past 24 hours, so he had to come by. He wasn't even mad though.

I realize when a junkie gets released, their typical first line of business is getting back to the business of being a junkie. I understand this, and I told him so. I told him if he asked his friends to leave so we could speak in private, I didn't see any reason for this to be a violation.

I couldn't kick them out fast enough, but I was nervous. He's a P.O., but he got some street in him, you know—intimidation techniques. I thought maybe he asked everyone to leave to spare me some embarrassment or something, but he was all about that square biz.

I've been a Parole Officer for eight years. In most ways, I'm a typical P.O. I help parolees find housing, employment, education and training. I help them get welfare benefits and so on. My main objective is to prevent recidivism. I realized early on, though, drug-offenders re-offend all the fucking time, and the recidivism rates for black, male offenders is sky high. I started taking it personal.

Addicts are the worst about it. I got so tired of locking up addicts—people who probably shouldn't have been locked up in the first place. My conscience started fucking with me, not just because of the re-offending either. Newly released addicts are something like 40% more likely to overdose than the general population. It was exhausting.

I'm not the first P.O. with a heart. Even the most jaded among us get frustrated when parolees go back in for stupid shit. The difference between them and me is when they get fed up, they tend to quit. I decided to do more.

A couple years ago, I read an article about a guy in Indonesia—I can't recall his name, but he opened a drug rehabilitation facility there. He had been through AA himself some years back, but he found the fight for sustained sobriety wasn't necessarily the right approach for every addict. He developed a strategy built on what he called "harm-reduction."

The idea is that 100% sobriety is not what everyone needs. He believed if a person's affairs are in order, if they're not causing any harm to society, if their relationships are intact, then perhaps it's okay to indulge in their vices, responsibly. You wouldn't necessarily ask a sex-addict to abstain from sex forever. You certainly wouldn't insist a food-addict stop eating. They need to learn self-control and discipline. He applied that logic to drug-addicts.

He helps the addicts supply their habit, based on agreements they make when they enter the program. They negotiate what an acceptable amount of indulgence looks like for each individual. He wasn't without his doubters, but apparently, the program had found some success, and addicts were getting their lives back on track.

I was fascinated. I decided to enact my own version of that program for my parolees. Drugs are allowed. We agree on a responsible amount of use, and I supply that. As long as they're taking care of their business, doing well at school or work, and they shut up about it, I won't allow them to go back for drug-offences. I even take their drug tests for them.

I make a similar arrangement with parolees who return to the drug trade. I protect them as best I can, and that's how I supply rations to the addicted parolees. Sometimes they give me shit for having to supply me for free, but protection and freedom to operate without fear of prosecution trumps that conflict. I had a crisis of conscience early, but the results patched that up, no problem.

In the past two years. I've put a record-low, seven total parolees back in prison. Unfortunately, the ones I do send back are for major violations, and most of them are in for life, with no chance of future parole, but none of them went back for drug offences.

All the collateral damage which tends to accompany addiction was also eliminated. Free access to dope keeps the addicts from engaging in other illegal activity—theft, prostitution etc.—to supply their

habit. Rationing the drugs keeps them from losing control, employment, family and any remaining community respect. Most importantly, not one of my parolees has overdosed in two years.

The happiness quotient improved too. The joy ran deep in post-prohibition-parole-land, and Clarence was probably my most satisfied parolee yet. It had been years since he experienced the kind of stability he presently enjoys. It was a strange, beautiful, successful arrangement.

The first thing he asked me was how I was enjoying my freedom—sounding like Morpheus and shit. How are you enjoying your freedom, Clarence? HA! If he wasn't a P.O., and I wasn't a junkie, I would've thought he was gonna offer me a pair of pills, feel me? But he just offered me some help; the kind of help I could tolerate.

Clarence hasn't been honoring the arrangement. I've never heard him tell this story, but I've heard about him telling it. I could have been charged with a plethora of crimes, but the Parole Commission couldn't prove anything, so they just fired me. They said they understood my motivation, and they were impressed with the results, but they obviously couldn't look the other way.

Maybe I'll inspire a colleague to follow suit, and all won't be lost. I suppose it depends on if they see me as a cautionary tale or a tragic hero, but for now, the arrangement is over.

I'll tell Clarence later. He'll be disappointed and apologetic. A lot of people stand to suffer because of this. He's a sweet man. He just talks too damn much. He sure can sing, though.

I'm so tiiiiired of being alone...

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I feel like all story telling stems from 'what if?' This story is my version of 'what if' drugs were legal? I read an article about a rehab program in Indonesia, and the idea*

came together. When I write, I try as best I can to sound like myself. Bukowski was great at that. He really projected his voice well, and he inspires me to project my own.

BIO: My name is L. B. Davis. I'm a call center employee who likes to write. I've been published by *Brilliant Flash Fiction Magazine* and *The Raven's Perch*. I live in Chandler, AZ.

GET OFF ME

by Berren Thamper

WHY WE LIKE IT: *English and Afrikaans are used to powerful affect in this moving metafiction story within a story that brilliantly details the suffering of a young South African woman and her struggle for some kind of closure. But it's as much about the strength and nobility of language as about conflict and there are breathtakingly beautiful passages throughout. Characters rise from the page as if conjured and the author's effortless facility with different levels of reality is the stuff of envy. And while there is no question the writing is sophisticated; we sense in some places a struggle to express through an obstructing patois — a hard won fight for the right word. There are a few typos and misspells along the way but as is our style with such outsider stories we left them uncorrected in the interest of authenticity and voice. The dialogue puts the 'A' in astonishing. Quote: 'This rant when (sic) on for a while until the for once mute principal faded to grey. She woke up screaming, which frightened the Hadedas on the lawn outside away. Their arm flapping and squawking were as real as her parched mouth. And, 'Almaria's blood had been boiling on the sun for some time. The solar flares were bitchin' for space.' And 'Death was a kindly visitor who wanted to make friends, who offered her safety from the body that kept letting her down.'*

Berren brushed her teeth in front of the mirror, thinking about her twin. Almaria stood staring out the window behind Berren. She struggled to coax her out. She kept fading stubbornly into Berren's dope of a brain. But the men were the worst. They would hardly answer questions, so they always felt a bit flaccid on camera. Berren took a nap at 12:24. The blunt swords of sleep paralysis quietly closed in.

She was dreaming of being stuck in high school, distressed that she had to redo it, she was sure she finished school. Why was she back in this place? Did she commit a crime, and this was her

punishment? She fought hard, and then woke up and rolled out of bed onto the floor, but she couldn't walk, she was stuck on the ground. Berren was still asleep and increasingly distressed. The REM curtain for the next scene drew apart.

She was sitting for an exam. She hadn't studied for it, and she had no idea what the subject was. 'Shit, I have no stationery. Don't panic.' Panic.

She didn't recognize the invigilators, but she was wearing that deplorable, embarrassing grey and mid-tone green school uniform. The skirt was too tight in her last year at school, and it was even tighter now. She looked down and saw the sole of her right shoe cracked in two in the same way it had been 14 years ago.

Back on the bed. 'Thank heaven!' But the theatre of the absurd is never really over. She couldn't move. She fought, but she was tied to a hospital bed and swearing at the nurses to untie her. She thrashed, but they said she'd pull her tubes out again. The same doctor came by with his invariable disapproving look. She was misbehaving and not worth his time.

She looked at the TV playing arcade video games. The TV, she knew from experience, would turn out to the patient monitor screen. It was only when half-comatose and shot through with sedatives that she perceived it as more colorful and animated. She turned away from it, feeling the tug against her wrists so that she could not fold her arms over herself and feel more human.

The final scene was her taking on her high school principal with all the words she never knew how to say as a child. She marched up to him where he stood one storey up, always looking down at the kids below him. He enjoyed keeping them after school and making them stand in the hot sun. Even if someone fainted from the heat, he was not moved.

He was using that word 'gutter' again when she launched at him. She told him he was a bully and he didn't care about any of the kids unless they were boys who played rugby. This rant went on for a while until the for once mute principal faded to grey. She woke up screaming, which frightened the

Hadedas¹ on the lawn outside away. Their arm flapping and squawking were as real as her parched mouth.

A little while later, she sat down in front of her desk. She'd way overslept, but she was in the zone. Clickedy, clickedy...

'Get off me. I can't do this now.'

Zander dismounted.

'I'm so sorry babe. I just can't now. Please, I'm sorry. I am sorry if I hurt you.'

'It's ok. You don't have to apologize for everything.'

Almaria pulled her panties over her legs and bum and let the elastic snap around her waist. She took her t-shirt and held it up against her breasts. Her head dropped to the side, and her breath became shallow. She reached down to touch the tattoo of an iced twirl of a Chelsea bun on her ankle. She planned to get a circlet of flowers around the bun. It was healed but would never stop hurting.

Zander went into the bathroom and started trimming his beard. Almaria liked it with its few wiry coppers in a sheaf of dark blonde. Zander wondered what might happen if he said what he was thinking. 'Just speak your mind, Zee,' she had said, 'I do.'

'I got a bit of a strange call from your dad.'

'What did he say?' Frowning, in a lower tone she said, '*Bel om te preek?*'²

'Yeah, there's always some of that. But he said that he was talking with Johan. He had to try calm him down. He was ranting about *kak*.³ Johan has all those mommy issues, ya know... He said *kak* about everyone. Even told your dad that we have a problem in our marriage.'

Now poor Zander. He did not know what he gone done.

¹ Ibis species found in Southern Africa.

² 'Called to preach?'

³ You know what it means.

'The fuck!?' Almaria's blood had been boiling on the sun for some time. The solar flares were bitchin' for space.

'Yeah, I don't know where he got that idea... I think he's just pissed your sister left him.' Zander stared wide-eyed at his twin. Possibilities for salvaging things at this point would come no more to the one than they would ever to the other.

'W h a t t h e f u c k i s h e! He! fuck!' She growled with clenched teeth, 'Grrrrrr, AAAAAAA!'

Almaria stood up and grabbed the *sjambok*⁴ that leaned against the wall next to Zander's side of the bed. It was for self-defense, and Almaria had the rifle under her side of the bed. She turned and whipped the clotheshorse, thrashing the *sjambok* against the half-dry t-shirts and jocks. Rabid rabbit foaming obscene word pairs with each strike:

'Jou⁵-bitch!

and-fuck!

and-slut!

and-whore!

and-hell!

She stopped and threw the whip at the wall. Her small hands clutched into fists. She looked like a round-eight featherweight. 'And *poes*⁶ ALSO!' She sat down on the bed. The distance was over in minutes.

Watching, frightened, not of, but for her, Zander padded across the room and said, 'Alley, no. Don't *liefie*.⁷ You gotta calm down.'

⁴ A whip. Some antique *sjamboks* are hippo or rhino hide. Mostly made from cowhide now, or from plastic. /sham-bok/. Afrikaans borrowing from Malay *cambuk*.

⁵ 'You' /yo/.

⁶ Afrikaans swearword for lady part. /puss/.

⁷ 'Love'. /lee-fee/.

'I can't!' Almaria burst into hot tears, digging her nails into her palms.

Zander sat next to her and lightly took her hand. 'This is not you. You are really not yourself.'

'I'm so tired, so tired,' she sobbed, lips apart and joined by spit.

Zander worried for her sanity. Almaria ended up a meltdown mess by way of four things. Actually, five things. The first was an unlucky collection of genes which made for faulty proteins (which, bitches, you can't fix with bean sprout juice, Jesus, hormone therapy, and what all la la land nonsense works for your 'rhoids). Discombobulation happens.

The second reason was Chelsea. Though Almaria was about nine years older, that seemed to boost their friendship. Chelsea lived on a farm in Oudtshoorn.⁸ Remote, non-working, red dirt plot. Too far from people for conversation or for smiling at. Stimulating as a legs-in-the-air Christmas beetle in February.⁹

There are still whites in South Africa who believe that a white woman only works because she's greedy. It's ok for black women to work though because they are poor. Many think women belong at home. They don't really know why, but when you ask them, this is the kind of answer they come up with. If Chelsea got a job, she would need to be taken to work or learn to drive and have a car of her own. Young ladies don't need such things. They just need pretty dresses for church.

Chelsea needed medication like Almaria, but it didn't move her father's heart to take her to the pharmacy once a month. When he did, he would grouse about the cost anyway, and there is a fear of a father, a specific type, that only a young daughter can know. She didn't know how to drive, and public transport also runs on profit the same as private companies. So she rationed.

Chelsea found a dusty old box of slug pellets in a cupboard in the wendy house.

⁸ Explaining pronunciation is a complicated affair. I will make a note and come back to this. But it's a place in the Western Cape of South Africa. Name is Afrikaans and means 'old horn'. P.S.: try /oats/ who/run/.

⁹ Christmas beetles are harmless copper-colored critters abundant in December all around South Africa. They wait underground all year for a few days or weeks in the sun.

You probably wouldn't find the variety with metaldehyde so easily on the shelves of gardening shops in nanny states. South Africa is somewhat still wild country. Although Parliament is starting to become an exasperating dai these days!

Nevertheless, people resist mollycoddling nonsense about wearing your seatbelt, or driving a 'roadworthy' vehicle (whatever that means – it's either working or it's not!). And pedestrians mind and move out the way of the cars, like they're supposed to, not the other way around!

We don't ban Squishies, novelty cigarette lighters (WTF?), or toys with tiny metal balls. They offer some hope for population control, especially of stupid kids and stupid parents who never stop breeding so that they can't provide for all their runts. We did ban matador Barbie though, coz that's pure evil!

The pellets stayed under Chelsea's bed for a while in a Checkers packet. She didn't touch them again for some days, but she thought about them as she loaded the washing machine, as she waited for the machine to finish, as she hung the wet clothes, as she waited for them to dry, as she folded them and put them away.

It made sense. She felt there was beauty and comfort in death. Death was a kindly visitor who wanted to make friends, who offered her safety from the body that kept letting her down. If only it would work again. She waited, hoping the medication would just get her through one more day, make her mind her ally for the moment, but rationing it was a risky strategy.

Waiting for sanity is *Waiting for Godot*. You need a whole new play for him to arrive, and even then, he might abandon you again. Chelsea was effervescing away slowly in tiny bubbles and bits of her humanity, escaping into the ether. When this process started, her crying stopped. She watched her

human-being dissolve without emotion. Although her tongue seemed to stay in place for the moment, it wouldn't move. It was too thick and heavy.

She stopped playing with the soccer ball. When it rolled her vertigo made it feel like she was being pulled towards it, like she would get stuck to it, roll underneath it, and be crushed. Music was also a terrifying and painful experience. Any beat made her heart thunder inside like racehorse hooves.

When Chelsea was a kid, one time she found a long strand of hair on her shoulder. She took it and looped it around the handle of her father's empty briefcase and lifted it slightly. The hair snapped in the time between four and five seconds, but it was strong enough to lift it. That was pretty amazing to her. She must have strong hair. It was in the time between four and five seconds. At least that's how she remembered it.

She would stop sometimes and count the seconds, and then she would simply exist between four and five seconds. Ordinary life was nought to four seconds. In the brief moment following, she gazed at her mind, and in the corner of it, death smiled with sympathetic kindness. At five, she would break.

And so a young woman's everything hung by a strand of hair, and the hair was now nanoseconds from five.

Chelsea. Almaria. Chelsea. Why had the one survived and the other not?

Almaria's sister started dating Johan with the mommy issues. Actually, it was all women issues. Things would go well for a little while, but then he'd get angry that she looked across the room at some guy. She said she didn't even know who she was looking at, it was a vacant look. He eventually decided to throw her out the house. He put her things outside and told her to leave. Later he was sorry and wanted her back. She left him finally, but he wasn't done with her.

Johan phoned Almaria's granny. He was doing the rounds telling everyone how hard done by he was. Gossip is a bat-shit crazy affair, especially when it crosses through the brains of unoccupied little old ladies. Almaria's granny was half deaf and senile too.

So when Almaria told her granny that she and Zander had a silly spat about what wine to buy, granny's later interpretation to Johan was that Almaria hit Zander because Zander wouldn't stop drinking. This is how Johan came to think that they had a problem in their marriage and, in his rounds, he told Almaria's father, who then called Zander to give marriage counseling. And so it goes...

The Johan-granny muddle was the strand of hair that broke Almaria's equanimity. This came a few weeks after Chelsea died. Now there were other things which troubled Almaria, but I think I've said enough for now.

Berren pulled out the roller, Rizlas, and bankie¹⁰ from her desk. 'Your mama's so fat,' was how Berren rolled. Almost in high society style, she noticed it was 4:18 as she lit up.

Almaria, Almaria, why do you elude me so? Always escaping into the mist just when I think I am starting to understand you. Chelsea. Almaria. Chelsea. Chelsea. One had survived and the other not. Chelsea was a little more accessible. Why?

What a thing it is to stand outside yourself. Berren. Chelsea. Almaria. The three women stood before her briefly, and many more men, women and children in the deep shadows behind them. Berren. Chelsea. Almaria. Mute, receding into the grey mist, enveloped, gone. Eyes closed, shallow breath. In the time between four seconds and five, she joined them in the darkness.

¹⁰ Rolling paper brand; weed is typically sold by bank bag in South Africa.

Author's notes on the text

This story is about struggles with characterization. I place a premium on characters with depth. I try to get them to answer questions and draw them out. Often they elude me, especially male characters. This reveals the personal areas I need to work on, particularly my understanding of men, which is constrained by bad experiences. There's a lot more to 'the male' which I need to learn to flesh out. Perhaps it helps to realize that the differences between men and women are not as great as one might think.

The story is also about my struggle to accept the suicide of a close friend. They say you cannot really lie to yourself, you can only choose to focus on other things. Hence, for me, 'Chelsea' is always in the time between four seconds and five. The story deals with the nightmares I have about high school and hospitals, as well as the incorrigible nature of gossip.

Bio

Alive, despite ambitionless agoraphobia and cataleptic vermiphobia. Even bad ankles, communistphobia, and hives can't keep this girl down! I enjoy making up names for my cats. My big cat loves to be held like a baby and dribble on my shoulder.

He is called 'Oemus'
pronounced like 'Seamus'
mistook for 'Homeless'
which made mama 'Hiss!'

Oemus fulfills my maternal needs by being independent, save for when he wants to be fed, babied and told he's a mama's boy. Mommy opens her arms and he jumps into them.

Graduated from talking to herself aloud at home, to continuing the conversation on the occasion she does go out. The Mall Soliloquy Berren invented will become an art form of its own to take the fight to consumerism, and spawn ever more dumbass YouTube vids.

Born into a fundamentalist Christian home, rose to become a huge disappointment, now rolls in the long grass of agnostic limbo. Persecuted as a youth for membership with the Itty Bitty Titty Committee. On account of the first Krispy Kreme outlet to reach Africa, Berren is no longer a member.

When high, Berren gets lost on the staircase. Right now trying to write! But scrapping with husband about her boots left in the basin. Loves her husband to death, who was her last hope for a cure from haphephobia. Please pray for her.

STILL DREAMING

by Brantly Hutchison

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We love the innovative circularity of this existentialist urban-angst drama where repetitious variations on the same conversation and variations on the same actions and settings are played over and over from different POV's—including the use of both first and third person singular. The issues discussed by the characters are never resolved and their pointlessness introduces a claustrophobic nihilism that is greatly enhanced by the intentional mechanical voice of the narrator. Deliberate variations in spacing reinforce a visual feeling of isolation. A technical tour de force by an author in full control of his considerable gifts. Quote: 'A rock standing tall as a man and shivering, the gray mute waters breaking and passing around him. He fancied trying to stem them altogether but every position he took, they overtook. He shifted to the left, they went right, he stretched out his arms, they went under, he laid down, they walked over. He gave up and returned to work, not a minute early. This time both his co-workers were in, they echoed each other, where one arm reached, so there were two.'*

“Lets talk about things.”

“Things?”

“Important ones!”

“Okay.”

“Okay!”

“And what are they?”

“Who knows?” She giggles, standing from the couch. She's in the middle of the room now. Under the light, the chain to turn it off is a few centimeters away from her hair. She breathes in deep and twirls around. Her back is to me, shadowed heavily. “Who really knows?”

She's in my face now, close, I can feel her breath against my skin, hot, not unpleasant. Suddenly full of shame I move away, I'm sitting on the edge of the couch. It's uncomfortable, I can feel the springs and wood supporting the cushions, which are faded, stained, and no longer serving much of a purpose. She giggles again, I turn my head.

The alarm sounded surely, as it always did, at six am. He woke up, never one to sleep through an alarm, he was sweating again. He breathed out deeply, rubbed his eyes, and laid back down. A few minutes later and he was up, washing, readying and leaving.

His route was short. Through the parking lot, down the alley, descend into the pathway by the river and follow it a few more blocks to work. The trees were barren, the sun hidden. His

shoes echoed on the path way. These were old, the sole was peeling off of the left foot, it flapped up and down, clicked, as he walked. Distant were the sounds of cars, people, murmurs, and down below the river softly bubbled. He emerged from the river pathway onto the street, cars passed by driven by people he couldn't see. Other people occupied the side walk, they too had their own rhythmic clapping as they walked. They were colorless and did not speak.

He turned suddenly and opened a door, the glass reflected a shadow that was vaguely himself. He went behind the counter into the back room, no one else was present. He peeled off his jacket and hung it on a rack near the employee washrooms, he took a hat from the closet and put it on. He walked back out into the front of the store.

Refrigerators hummed and an analogue clock ticked slowly and surely. It announced every second. He realized he was not alone. Behind the register was a co-worker, the opener. She looked in his direction and gave him a nod, he did the same. Customers didn't start to enter the store for another hour or so with any regularity, he had a lot of time for nothing. He'd pretend to clean, to see to issues that needed mending, like he was checking the isles for stock and making a mental note of what to bring out, but he wasn't doing any of that. He was waiting. She was waiting too. The customer who came in waited as well, bought something, and left to wait somewhere else. Everybody was waiting-
for something.

Hours passed. His shift was over, he retraced his steps. Down into the riverside pathway,

up into the street and the alley, across the parking lot. To the left of the dirty pale blue building, in through the security door, the frosted glass of which was cracked, up the stairs, once more to the left, and into his apartment. He peeled off his jacket again and flung it to the floor. He sat in front of the television but did not turn it on. He yawned, looked at the clock, and tried to think of something to do.

“Have you figured it out?”

“Hmm?”

“What's important?”

“No. You said no one knew. I didn't think about it.”

“I thought you'd be the one to figure it out, you have to be the one to figure it out.”

“I'll try.”

“Good!” She said. The room is different, not in structure but in decorum. The posters on the wall had changed, the light now attached to a ceiling fan. The couch remained the same. “If we can't talk about important things, what should we talk about?” She sits down on the couch and it bounces a little, her head is turned to me expectantly. I feel smoke in the air, but there is

none.

“I’m not sure.”

She grows tense, her mouth flickers, she breaks out into a grin and starts to laugh. “You never are!” She points a finger. I feel accused. “That’s okay though. Who is? Right? Right?” She nudges me.

“Some people, I think.”

“They’re wrong.”

“Are you sure?”

“You’re a funny one.”

He woke with a stiff neck. He had fallen asleep on the sofa, it was still dark out. The light from the street lamps seeped in through his covered windows. He raised his head from where it had fallen on the arm rest and stretched it back and forth. He checked the microwave for the time and decided to have breakfast, he opened his grimy fridge and selected one of two items inside, he turned on his stove and fried one egg. He went into the other room and laid down on his bed,

he set his alarm before going back to sleep. She did not appear this time. She didn't always.

His morning routine was concluded ten minutes earlier thanks to his thinking ahead and premature breakfast. He could have been at work ten minutes earlier too, but he dawdled, sitting on a bench along the river side pathway, staring down into the churning gray cold water as it bubbled over rocks and forced it's way forward. His co-worker was already there by the time he arrived, which one he couldn't say, she looked like the other one, if she wasn't already the other one. He manned the tills for the majority of the day, "Thank you." Click. "Thank you." Click. Exhaustion set in, the hours drudged on and by the time he was cleared to leave, he felt already in his coffin. He returned home, stopping at a different convenience store for simple amenities before sitting back down on his couch and thinking. He turned on the television, a lady in a dull suit spoke in a monotone about money, about an important man, and about the rising need for doctors in certain municipalities. He didn't pay attention, by the time it was ten pm he was ready for sleep.

"That will be all for today."

Everyone starts to stand up, there's a general buzz, notebooks are closed, laptops shut, everyone heads to one of two exits and files out. I stand up and do the same, under my shoulder

is a portable computer, my clothes are nice. I feel like I'm nice. I suddenly sense that something is missing. I have forgotten something at my seat, I look down, I look around on the floor. There is nothing there, I get confused, and then I look up and I see her.

“Hello!” She chimes.

“Hi.”

All around her things are slow, my fellow students, the ones still inside, they hardly move an inch a second. It would take them a year just to finish leaving the room at this pace. I don't find that strange. I think that they don't either.

“I know what we should talk about!”

“You do?”

“Yes!”

“What?”

“You!”

“What about me?”

“You're the subject of course!”

“I'm not that interesting.”

“True.”

He woke much later in the day. It was his day off, he was free to do as he pleased, provided he returned on the morrow. He didn't do much, he went grocery shopping, he needed food to live. His fridge was empty, his cupboards were empty. When he returned home, spending frugally, as he must meet rent on the first, he cooked himself a meal. Nothing fancy, primarily prepared by boiling water. He ate, and then sat on his couch. He wondered what he should do, and ultimately, he did nothing. He stayed up late simply because he could, and when he went to sleep it was with heavy eyelids.

“I'm starting to feel sorry for you.”

“You shouldn't.”

“You do, don't you? Feel sorry for yourself.”

“Doesn't everyone?”

“I guess that's true.”

I'm back in the room. I know we are above ground, in an attic. The couch is gone. I'm sitting on a chair. There are no posters, there are no features aside from the wood paneling, and the shag carpet.

“You know...” She's speaking softly, her cheerfulness is gone. I feel cheated.

“I know?”

“Nothing. Nothing, never mind.”

The alarm once more summoned him from his sleep. He did not work until ten, and thus, had ample time to wash and ready. He left around nine and endeavored to take at least forty five

minutes walking his normal fifteen minute route. He counted seconds for every step, he was not going to show for work early, he was not going to waste his time. He stopped all together when he noted the time on his wrist and that he was going to be early if he continued. Other pedestrians passed him with out notice, hardly changing course until the last possible second, he was like a rock in a stream. A rock standing tall as a man and shivering, the gray mute waters breaking and passing around him. He fancied trying to stem them all together, but every position he took, they overtook. He shifted to the left, they went right, he stretched out his arms, they went under, he laid down, they walked over. He gave up and returned to work, not a minute early. This time both his co-workers were in, they echoed each other, where one arm reached, so there were two.

“Thank you. Thank You.” they echoed.

He grit his teeth.

He worked, he went home, he slept.

There are bags beneath her eyes. She looks at me, “I’m tired,” she says.

“I know.”

“You're tired too.”

“Yes.”

“You should sleep.”

“Am I not?”

“That's true. Then maybe you should wake, aren't you tired of sleeping?”

His chest rose and fell, he broke out in a cold sweat. He looked at the clock, it was the early hours. He felt exhausted, drained, thoroughly empty. His eyes weighed down on his cheeks, he felt they'd pull his entire head down, through the bed, under the carpet, past the bedroom of the unit one floor lower than his, into the basement, with the washing machines, and still further yet, until he resurfaced in his bed, some years later.

He went back to sleep, and he did not wake for two days. On his answering machine there was a message he could not hear. It barked and cracked, he had missed work. He was sorry. He needed money. He went into work again, and nothing had changed for his absence, the merchandise, lined up neatly along the isles, had not moved, if something was bought, it was restocked, there was always more stock. The convenience store was too convenient to run out of supplies, more would be made if all was exhausted. The refuse of which, buried, buried, until it

encompassed all of the ground, could then be picked up and used again. He would always be needed to ensure that others could buy, to stock the shelves that would always have supply. Or if not he, then some other.

She stopped coming around.

Nothing else changed.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I have an unfortunate propensity to view the world in grey scale. You know, "Woe is me," and "What's the point of all this?" and "Why can't I love?" and other tired bullshit. 'Still Dreaming' no doubt came from such a place. A pervasive sense of frustration. I can't say if I wrote it with the intention to depict a bit of lower-class ennui (having written it years ago and dug it out of my hard drive as yet untitled) but on reading it now that's what it appears to be. My strongest literary influence comes by way of Vonnegut, with Murakami making pasta somewhere in the background.*

BIO: I grew up in various apartments and trailers in rural Northern Ontario. In elementary school a kindly teacher of mine read a short story I wrote in front of the class and thereby consigned me to a truly miserable life of day-dreaming and praying that said day-dreams might somehow materialize into self-worth and maybe a little monetary compensation. Is there an honest love for the craft somewhere in there? I sure hope so.

Oh the Buoyancy of the Unmoored Heirship!

by **George Constantin**

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The obvious comedic opportunities are played to the hilt in this devilishly ribald serio-comic Joycean satire that wonders about familial strains of flatulence. And while there is plenty of hilarity here we know from emails that the author has a scrupulous concern for the tone, weight and heft of each word and there is a vast difference in nuance between say, 'feel' and 'feeling'. It is this alchemical, straight-faced prose that demands we take the content seriously—or at least pretend to. The tightly balanced contrast between subject and delivery accounts for the success of 'Heirship' which, without it, would just be so much hot air coming out of a...um...balloon. We 'see' a bit of Vonnegut here, but really, it's not the sense that predominates, if you get our drift...A masterfully written send-up by a consummate wordsmith of blazing talent.*

I have inherited my mother's anus.

I know it: I am A Man.

I lived at home a long time. You live around people and you become each other. You go around and maybe you get back to yourself. But you might lose yourself, too. You become a thing – no longer individualistic but a collective creature. It is as organic as mold. We compost heap together into the rotten slime of life.

Offspring meld a merge of their parents. Notice how the son often looks like the mother. The daughter frequently looks like the father. But there are other things. As a Hayvensmouth IV I know my ancestral line.

I know I have inherited my mother's rectum because of the way she passes gas when she is walking down the hall in our house – either in the assumption no one is listening or in the blissful blithe unmoored drift of being free in one's home.

The Sound.

The way she farts – her f-f-f-farts and my f-f-f-farts are akin.

They sound alike because our assholes are constructed the same.

I know it.

Wahhntt The Fart. Mommy and Me.

My Father's Fart: **Brohhpp**. Tuh-tuh. Low basso staccato.

My father's farts are blunt solid bursts normally one debowelling debarkation two to three in delivery. I imagine geometrically perfect tubes of toilet paper cardboard substructures. Rounded edged but firm and decisive. This is what he emits.

My mother: This is the sound. Sometimes high – impossibly brief. Clipped. A pitted peach studded with marbles. Pitched pinched decibels. Then there is the low: The *wahhntt*. The sphincter. Age-eroded opening of outage. The gas dispenser near stink-free.

I often heard these sounds and then not until on my own bed one day made the discovery. Leaning back on back reading *The Odes of Horace*, right leg propped up to provide crossed legs. Comfort.

The announcement: A herald to the *Blessed Day of Gas* and time to pay tribute unto the protectorate of the room air.

Ignition. Fire button. Launch!

Wahhnntt. The f-f-f-fart.

I laughed pleased with myself.

But the mind – it grasped.

It swung wildly. It wondered.

That sound.

That *sound*

That sound: My mother. And I was ashamed and alarmed – we inherit every little but of ourselves from our ancestry. Everything. From the Divine to the Base – all. Even the ephemeral soul and the mind's cast-off thoughts. Nothing is our own. It's on loan. We pass it on. We pass gas that was passed to us.

I could not let it go.

I thought of the family fart. I knew without hearing that my sister had my dad's ass.

Of course one has to make an exploration of the family when faced with such discoveries and predicaments. I knew that I would commit myself to this new found thing – thinking that in fact it would be an old rigidity that would fight its unearthed revilement in revealing. So be it.

To get it is to get to it. It must be gotten. I had to get at this thing. It meant more than a fart – a shared sound through a common passing of genetics. How do we pass on parts of ourselves? What is it that allows

essences of us to be transmitted along the familial cables – where are the insulators? What is the terminus? Name the recipient.

I positioned a recording device in the washroom – near the toilet tank by the seat – and to embark on exploration. The findings were outstanding: One fart blast I was able to trace to sister. A dynamism that rattled the little digital talk recorder between porcelain rim and wooden seat.

Decree: She is so much like Our Father. Filial veneration.

We can understand the purpose of the anus and we are pretty in tune with our own examples.

I have this most utilitarian and exclamatory appurtenance and I know that it has really been the only thing I recall being in control of in moments of joy and exultation to fear and even in romance

The control in tender intimacy that makes the mind say:

Please God not now. Oh let me hold this in.

I thought back to the time as a youth when I was burgling the office at the flight school I worked at. The airport police circled the airfield in clockwise fashion about every half-hour. Three cars patrolling in the daylight and two at night. I opened up the thick-teeth-zippered vinyl bank-deposit envelope and pulled out that near-inch-thick pile of green paper and popped it into my right jeans pocket. I'd have a go at some boosted liquor that night and a delirious deluded dream of the hunt for beddy-broads the next day. But as I was sneaking out to the car parked behind a

hangar, I tripped a red beam or a shielded cable or something and there were alarms sirens and bright white floodlights.

Out now!

I had already made the path to the bicycle leaned against an oil drum in my mind but the feet had not realized the same as it was still and then I saw the coned white beams of cop-car prowler headlights widening on one side while the building corner of corrugated metal wall stayed dark. I saw a sport plane that I knew could be opened by using a key or any flat-edge to open the silly lock on the cockpit canopy-door. I did so and slipped into the front pilot's seat and tried to duck down ditch and disappear towards the floor. They parked and entered the dispatch office.

Shit! Now the cruiser was between me and my bicycle.

I felt the body building gas inside from the hours-under-heat-lamp convenience store hot dogs and chimichangas, from biological backlog backup, from God laughing and wanting me to make a sound at a time of supplication-like silence. Torch-lit rays slitted through slatted shaded windows. The truncated murmurs of authoritarian black-hatted men of dubious education and bereft of proper elocution. Do they fart in jest and after they ingest donuts and hoagies and scrambled eggs and cheesey enchiladas washed with black coffees and padded with pecan pies ? When they arrest a homeless perp and cuff him to the bumper do they each take a hit and plunge a knuckled-fist into the crumpling belly of the

suspect, forcing a groan from the mouth and an assley-rippled wrinkley-haloed exhaust from the bungling bum's bungler?

I was about to find out as they exited the office and walked to the cruiser.

I was gripping the control stick and pushing both feet on the rudder pedals while pushing on the tops with toes applying brakes to try and stop this dirigible floating down my backside canal.

~ Wahhnntt.

'That sounds like Missus Hayvensmouth....' one fatty cop said.

'What?'

'Yeah: Ole Margie farted once during choir practice. It was It was a loud fart, man! *Wohnntt*. Even Father O'Flaherteagh was surprised.'

'Fingal or Fergus?'

'Who goes to practice with Father Fergus? Father Fingal of course. Anney-way, we were in the middle of *Hail Holy Queen Enthroned Above Salve Regina*. It was a holy moley salvo nearby her vagina! It was almost louder than the organ, and poor Mister Magourney lost his place on the sheet music.'

The pigs laughed, and I wanted to kill them.

Fuck these fuckers! This was personal! This was my mom! No one can talk about her like this! About her farting.

And my caboose aloosed and I farted again.

'That's it again!' the marginal cop said.

They stared out along the ramp. Other parked planes were around me, and they flashed lights on a Cessna 150 and then a Piper Cherokee and finally a Beechcraft Bonanza. Soon the lights would swing onto the canopied door of the aerobatic sport trainer I was hiding in.

And there it was:

The burgeoning billowing feeling bounding below about to unbind.

Oh God have mercy please don't let me fart. I promise ... And whatever else it was I attested my newfound faith to.

The exhaust vented aperture of buoyancy was bursting out.

~ **Wahhnntt.**

'Hey: Check this out!' Pig 2 said and lifted a leg and farted right when I let go.

His: Prattz.

I could feel the sound of what I released pass through the wing spars and the wing-rib lightening holes and against the doped Ceconite fabric on the control surfaces and the wooden floor boards. Wave dynamics.

But Pig 2 flew in Winged Victory. His fart won.

Marginal laughed and shut off his flashlight.

'Let's go. Hey: I gotta tell you about this flamer in the choir who colors the top of his head yellow and I think uses eyeliner, too. Can't raise the flag for a woman.'

'A frosted flake, huh?'

I entered home carefully that night, clasping rear flanks to oppress the possibility of anal expression and announce with late night landing at the family nest. Under the sheets, I could at last let pass all that I withheld from the world.

Wahhnntt met *wahhnntt*.

My mother farted in the breezeway. Dad laughed. **Brohhpp**. He punctuated her exertion.

Please God, don't let my sister fart tonight.

Now if I have a child I suspect that our family will be like a roadside rest stop on the long line of anuses from the little winking dust motes of ancient light that burst forth of an ignorant nothing into a universe or history and memory and uncountable farts past to those yet to be yet unmade but to be delivered and then all the way to the end of time as it all burns out with a last wheezy peep from the behind.

For now I can only go back to Horace.

Oh Young Offspring:

Who will have your anus?

★ ★ ★



Author's Note

The opening sentence was originally '*I've got my mom's @\$shole.*'

The sentence trailed me and invaded my brain like a non-evictable tenant. To kick out the lout I had to finally write the story.

I really was reading a copy of Horace poems (and possibly did oust vapor) as does Hayvensmouth IV, but the similarities end there.

I want the language to be original. I want readability and energy.

If not in this story then in my heart and head are crammed **James Joyce**, Aristophanes, W.B. Yeats, Frank O'Connor, Patrick Kavanagh, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Langston Hughes, **August Wilson**, Gabriel García Márquez, Alice Walker, Raymond Carver (Lish-ful and Lish-less), Larry Brown, Steve Tesich. All writing is influential: Transcendent to mucky-sludge. This list is incomplete.

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Author's Bio

George Constantin is a California community college English professor.

Publications include short-stories and poetry in: ***Fleas on the Dog*** (Canada, Issue 3), ***The Penny Dreadful*** (Cork * Ireland), ***Phoebe***, (Virginia * USA), ***Lively-Arts*** (online), ***Flies, Cockroaches, & Poets*** (Fresno * USA).

4 PROSE POEMS

By Howie Good

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We love Good's incorrigibly literate footholds on the anti-rational and that so much information—literal, symbolic, philosophical—can be packed into so few words. And what words! This master of compressed form combines the density of poetry with the music of prose to create flashes with the sting of revelation. His lyric ear scrupulously exploits every phonic possibility along the way and there is never a false note. Quote: '...you have to know how to tell at a glance night from darkness.' And 'They have a word in their language that means to get drunk in your underwear with no intention of going out.' You see? Read Howie Good's '4 x 100' in Issue Two-Fiction.*

Air Like Poison

Hey, did you see those sea turtles down there? I often see them, though not as often or as many as I did before there were boats, the bridge, some buildings, even a small amusement park. Wherever they go, the turtles seem to leave a trail of watery stools behind. The ocean feels a little sick right now. There's actually too much sunlight, too much air like poison. And it all comes from the same place, a collected disarray of memory and daydreams, the millstones that early New Englanders used to crush Giles Corey to death for being a witch.

Grandson (with Apologies to Werner Herzog)

Now that you're 8, you have to know how to travel on foot. You have to know how to make fire without matches. You have to know how to catch a trout with your bare hands. (It's fairly easy. You just have to understand how the trout thinks.) You have to know how to forge a document, let's say a gun permit, in a country under military rule. You have to know how to open a safety lock – surreptitiously, of course, with burglar tools. Most important, you have to know how to tell at a glance night from other darkness.

Lost in Blockbuster

There are places a person can get lost and not even realize he's lost. I had to cross the creek by tiptoeing over a rotting tree, ignoring as best I could whatever that was, I felt grabbing for me with big, meaty hands. Some of you actually believe in fight, fight, fight, the three worst things you can do. So, it wasn't just happenstance that no one but me happened to be there, or that it was night by then, or that everything was also nothing, a lot like when the next to last Blockbuster Video store on Earth closed.

'This Message Has No Content'

They have a word in their language that means to get drunk in your underwear at home with no intention of going out. This is becoming, I guess, normal. And we never wanted something like this to become normal. First, they took the chiefs and warriors away. Then they took you and put you away, and now no one knows where you are, even who you are. We're what's left from the massacres. Yep, I see it a lot, a balloon that's not a balloon. There's no meaning to it, and it's of no real use, whatever exactly "it" is.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *There are too many answers, too many paved trails, too many Sherpa-like guides. I think puzzlement is really good. I believe in puzzlement. You can see it. You can feel it. It's a starting point. These prose poems are little bits of puzzlement.*

BIO: Howie Good is the author of *The Loser's Guide to Street Fighting*, winner of the 2017 Lorien Prize from Thoughtcrime Press and *Dangerous Acts Starring Unstable Elements*, winner of the 2015 Press Americana Prize for Poetry. His latest collect is *What It Is and How to Use It* (2019) from Greybook Press. His microfiction quartet '4 X 100' was published in FLEAS Issue 2-Fiction.

Tommy Tutone

By Dan Cardoza

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We love the street smart beat in this fast moving monologue of a biracial castoff cast adrift in the wilds of Chicago. Inspired by an 80's hit parade classic, Tommy's actions have the feel of a comic strip storyboard as we watch him hip-hop from insult to brush off, deflecting his fear of a cold-hearted world by personalizing the objects in his environment: Yoda, the mailbox, even himself: 'Today I'm Tom Sawyer.' His unscripted future in a blended society is a game he already is beginning to win but neither we, nor Tommy, know at what cost. The voice is clipped, edgy and full of sass. Quote: "I should have been named Trouble, cause' from what I've been told, that's all I've been. I have other names too: Loiterer, pilferer, truant, incorrigible, God-What-Potential, stupid as ever there was.' And: 'In Chicago, if you quit moving on the street in winter, you either freeze or get robbed.'*

On the street, the word is I was conceived at Harrison Court, in the projects off East Garfield, near the rail yard. Not true, it was on the banks of Lily Pond, in Washington Park.

One of my daddies is white, my mom soul black. I'm only twelve, but I have a street name already. *Tommy Tutone*. My last name should be *867-5309/Jenny*, like the 80's one-hit wonder.

He says, "Boy, come over here. I got something you might want to see," as he slips his hands in his pant pockets.

I shout "Shut the fuck up, perv!" to the man behind the crocodile smile, and stolen CVS shades. I know about him from the other boys.

Look! That's me running away as fast as Steph Curry.

~~~

Foster care was supposed to be Easy Peezy, after about seven homes, if my counting is right. None of my placements have lasted, even the one in the Milwaukee suburbs near the good schools. At least the police helped me move out just in time.

I should have been named 'Trouble, cause' from what I've been told, that's all I've been. I have other names too: Loiterer, pilferer, truant, incorrigible, God-What-Potential, stupid as ever there was. Some of the names get me into kids clubs. Even the Bloods and Crips have yakked my way about joining up. But they say I'm part white, the devils gang sign.

"Kid, buy something or get lost!"

"Yes sir," I say in Lou's Market, and restock the Snicker's from my back pocket.

Today my gang name is Tom Sawyer, not Tommy Tutone. I'm the rough and tumble feral child in the book. The streets are my country side, including Washington Park after dark. I just don't have a best friend like Huck Finn to explore with me. In fact I have no friends. If a tumble weed was human, it would be me.

Deep down, in my thoughts, in the place where I first started to remember, there was someone I wanted to be. Not a family member, because I only know a few, but someone on TV. I think the protagonist was almost a super hero, but not quite, at least that is what I recall or wanted him to be. He did things with his life, and traveled a lot, not just when someone gave up on him. It was like a dream, he went to college, so maybe it was the Hallmark Channel. He even had kids *one of these days*. They loved him and he loved them. In the movie, no one left or died or said go away. He and his wife even button kissed in the end. It's been so long, maybe that's the movie I made up in my head, after being afraid, when my third foster mother and father were breaking glass, and throwing furniture. I am not really sure?

"Boy, get the hell out the street," Yells a gentleman in a fine hat and a long car with shiny wheels, chalk full of fancy women.

"Do you think you own the hood?" he says all dressed in his one solid gold buck-tooth.

I don't want trouble, "My bad," I say in the way I told the dads in foster care, or to the teachers who yelled, "You're an under achiever. You have potential" Potential is worth a whole bunch of money I

read in books about the Civil War. They call it confederate. It means when you possess something, but you can't or won't use it.

~~~

I find myself leaning against the cracked plastic sidewall of the Red Line bus stop at 47th, against a giant blonde girl selling shades of lipstick. On the other side of the plastic, I see my grandmother waiting for her uptown ride.

Her lips are moving. She seems friendly. So I swing around the see through wall, and take a seat on the opposite edge of the bench.

“Now son, why ain't you in school?” Her lips move again, this time with sound.

I wish I could call her grandma. “Alternative schedule,” I say, thinking this is what she wants to hear.

She seems friendly enough, maybe caring I think. So I scoot a bit closer to listen and talk. That's when she looks up the street, right through me, like she sees her bus. We both know it's not due for five minutes.

Then she says, “Son, ain't you got somewhere else to wait?”

That's when I realize it's not grandma, and that she never was. No matter how hard I want her to be. To make her feel safe, I stand up, place my hands in my pockets like their cold, and walk away.

I glance back over my shoulder. I say, “Have a nice day ma'am.”

Grandma shakes her head no, over and over again, likes she's mad, and then looks way up the street again for her invisible bus. As I head up the sidewalk I look down at the gum that seems to pock the sidewalk. It's been stepped on a lot.

~~~

I venture further up the block and then rest against Yoda. That's what I call the last blue US mailbox on Garfield. I wonder if all the Yoda's left in Chicago's smell of pee. My head is a swivel. In Chicago, if you quit moving on the street in winter, you either freeze or get robbed.

As I look up South Martin Luther King, toward the Greyhound Depot, I again count the six bills in my pocket, carefully, like a new litter of puppies. I wonder *how far west the money will take me?*

I glimpse the front cover of the Chicago Sun-Times skittering down the street in the opposite direction, tumbling and scraping along in the wind like dingy crape paper. All I can read is that another boy's been shot dead.

I imagine the paper escaping or maybe just thrown away, like any bad news?

The End

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I recommend that the reader open up YouTube and play this song in the background. The song, 867-5309/Jenny, the band Tommy Tutone. Recently rediscovering this song, I again looked up the band that recorded this hit. The band, Tommy Tutone. The band had just the right kind of edge for this piece. I must say, I frequently listen to music that moves me while I write. At times, it's just the right spark.*

*Tommy Tutone is biracial and thus, why he was given the nickname Tommy Tutone. Not to simplify but Tommy's early life startles a black and white universe; where he is, he finds himself not totally comfortable in either world.*

*Tommy was conceived in a park near a pond. More than likely by a homeless couple. The park in the story is in the bad side of town. Tommy also experiences multiple Foster Care homes, where he is faced with even more difficulty, lack of acceptance and abuse. My favorite part of this story? When Tommy Tutone is at the bus stop, before leaving town. He very much wants to be*

*nurtured, and thus his interaction with the woman at the bus stop, I believe the Chicago Redline. Yet, he is only rejected again. But he's not a smart ass, he apologizes and moves on.*

*But if the reader looks closely, near the end of the story, Tommy has cash, and is getting ready to purchase a bus ticket out of his hell. I let the reader decide if he fails as an adult.*

*My take, Tommy being so resilient, only learns from his tragic roots. He then grows up smart and strong, obtaining his measure of what he decides is his American dream. Tommy is America's future, he's biracial, blended. As an adult, he and millions of other Americans will find themselves comfortable, with a rainbow of color, including Carmel.*

*Stylistic and literary influences: I grew up on Tim Robbins, James Baldwin, Ken Kesey, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Thomas Pynchon, J. D. Salinger and my man Richard Gary Brautigan. Who do I like today? Chimamanda Ngozi Aiche, Daniel Alarcon, 33, Sarah Shun-lien, Rivka Gal, Nicole Krauss and ZZ Packer.*

**BIO:** Dan Cardoza has an MS degree in Education from University of California Sacramento. He is the author of four poetry chapbooks and a new book of fiction, *Second Stories*. Recent credits include: *Adelaide, Cabinet of Heed, California Quarterly, Chiron, Cleaver, Confluence, Crossways, Entropy, Esthetic Apostle, Forrest tales, Frogmore, Foxglove, Gravel, High Shelf Press, New Flash Fiction Review, Peeking Cat, Picaroon, Poetry Northwest, Riggwelter, Runcible Spoon, Skylight 47, Spelk, Stray Branch, Synchronized Chaos, Tulpa* and *White Wall Review*.

# BOOK OF OURS

*by Adam Houchens*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A vastly intelligent, ferociously literate dystopic speculation about the wiles of staying human while in the clutches of a tyrannical technology. Characters emerge from the densely packed narrative as essences and the crystalline prose sharpens their struggle for lasting self-expression. There is a sense of blind entrapment at work and we feel the presence of an invisible oppression. The last sentence, which lives on many levels, is beyond beautiful. Quote: 'Legend says despondency turned to speculation as the apple sickened.' And, 'It's a common mood-swing. Some call it a commitment complex, others the latest manifestation of a self-loathing that goes back to Cain'. And God said, "THIS is writing!"*

*Our Book* was born in the middle of a polar vortex on a campus known for agricultural science. Details are fuzzy and few, but we know there was an apple bong, a bottle of watermelon schnapps and four English students huddled around IBM's latest *Boswell*, mocking the mad-lib narratives served in seconds but secretly comparing the pages buried in their lonely corners of the cloud. Thoroughly discouraged they closed the program and cursed the course of fiction—hopelessly commercial for a century, sure, but so much more than the binary fantasies they'd been reading—structurally interesting—moving, even—but so unbearably *fake*. If the *Boswell* has taught me anything it's that every story—even yours—was air-brushed long before you were born.

Legend says despondency turned to speculation as the apple sickened. Someone said, at least there's poetry. Another added, that's literature. That's soul. You can't program soul. Then Houchens-The Book of Ours-2

someone said, every soul's a poem scribbled on a closet door. We just don't know how to read them, a thought that supposedly struck them dumb until the cold sun rose.

A poem? A twenty minute walk carves thirty pages in my spine. Surface, some would say—the Essential still eludes you. *One* Essential? Is anyone that simple?

Decades of suit and counter-suit in the state courts and courts of public opinion (another tell-all was released last week) have failed to clear up who came up with the site where everyone could pin themselves to the web in ONE unspecified (though preferably versified) expression, but the only people who care are paid to care. For the rest of us *Our Book* is ours, and the so-called

Founders are just letters on the home page with all the authority of a no-smoking sign on Bourbon Street. They live on in the rules, I guess, the most important of which is NO

REVISIONS—what’s posted is posted, profile locked to READ-ONLY. Length is open, though it’s known that anything longer than a page will only get a glance from patient friends and relatives. Scrolling through the posts is like strolling through slow and steady snow—a variable onslaught.

Sonnets, dithyrambs and haikus. Tragedies, comedies, manifestoes and novellas. There are confessions—a thirty year-old cold case was cracked when the perpetrator (dead by overdose at fifty-seven) admitted to the crimes in a disturbing villanelle called, “Columbus Day.” There are parodies—half-assed swipes that barely graze the earnestness despised. Some posts only last a word: *Love*, *Help*, a dying child’s, *Fart*. One’s the length of a high school library’s entire stock, the author—obsessive, obviously—adding to his posthumous draft until the heart attack predicted early in the “opus.”

Everyone keeps a posthumous draft—who could live knowing death would silence them for good? Most refrain from posting until they’re sure death’s inevitable, recalling all the famous Houchens-The Book of Ours-3

cases of regret—the briefest recognition, the towering mass of time to pass. The trick is to drop your post early enough to gauge reaction but late enough to avoid any serious second-thoughts. There’s a shelf of books about the “Balance”—I wouldn’t waste your time.

So death is carried daily with the draft, endings edited as fate clarifies its aims, eventually accepted as indifferently as anything else. But until indifference—dread, that irrational fear of club-foot syllables and words misused, a semi-colon that should have been a comma. How many midnights have I almost pulled the trigger to kill the strain? My posthumous draft awaits my passing with the rest, adjusted back and forth until I love it, knowing I’m bound to wake up hating it again. It’s a common mood-swing. Some call it a commitment complex, others the latest manifestation of a self-loathing that goes back to Cain. My friend says it’s just the pain of apes who think they know the future but don’t.

When I throw my tablet down the stairs in despair—no, *disgust*—I am an ape in pain.

*Our Book* developed slowly. Initial posts were what people had come to expect from the Internet—poorly edited, hardly considered, often off-color or embarrassingly personal. It wasn’t until Seymour Stein’s essay in the *New Yorker* (“Read Me”—nineteen pages of death and possibility) and posthumous post (“Once More—From the Top”) and the celebrity dogpile that ensued that the site started getting the serious attention it deserved. Suddenly subway conversations were full of rhyme and meter, ghostwriters multiplied, dead poets were resurrected as everyone struggled to find a voice—any voice—that wouldn’t shame them in the grave.

This was not a uniform reaction. Around the world the critics rose against the latest plague to pock their pristine Culture. This was different, they insisted. This was the death of Literature—the standards passed from hand to hand like torches through perpetual eclipse. Conferences were organized, articles expanded, tenures secured. A generation of doctoral Houchens-The Book of Ours-4

candidates signed petitions against posting, and while some relented most stood firm. Later they’d say it was the thrill of their accomplished lives.

But no stand lasts forever. Traitors emerged and tore the front to squabble. It was interesting, they insisted. Another species to devour. Suddenly the universities were full of dissertations cataloguing differences between East and West, North and South, class and desperate class. Mine was one (“We are I: Personal Pronouns in South Milwaukee Posts”) and like the others I grew into an adjunct assigning classics interspersed with pages carefully selected from a sea of faces begging for attention, presenting evolutions of Me and You to colleagues

waiting for their turn to speak.

On dark days I feel like a statistician charting infant death, but when they pass I feel like an astrologer tracing palm-lines in the sky.

Locking my office door is like waking from a dream or slipping into one. Either way my senses change and everything is something else—the sky above the setting sun the pale innerlining

of a Clementine rind, streetlights neurons flickering against the insurmountable. My route varies, but I always seem to see the same homeless crowded on the corners carrying cardboard covered with posts in motion like *I was torn from a dead girl, sold to a lost war that stole my legs and testicles. Now I'm prophet of a dead God's world. Feed me.* I swear I've loved them in another life...I drop a dollar in an empty bucket and move on to the beach.

There, under moonlight or starlight or clouds soaked with city light, waves of peace and expectation rise and fall. Looking at the lake that, were I less entangled, could be Pacific I can feel it coming—the Essential, that final link between I and It that only comes in words. Phrases rise and fall, some so lovely I have to stop and catch my breath, but the Essential doesn't come, and gradually the phrases dissipate against the weight of the Pacific and I turn away.

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If *Our Book* has taught me anything it's that genius is a question of perspective, a particular presence meeting its moment like a key worn from countless unobliging doors that finally—mercifully—clicks.

But even broken keys can cool the palm in summer. Steps lighter, phrases resurfacing with a sizzle-pop, walking through the city is three and a half miles of smile, streetlights brighter, steadier, faces less invasive, noises more in tune with whatever music's tickling my ribs. And I know that I made the same mistakes yesterday and that I'll make the same mistakes tomorrow but I don't care because I know that my Essential is growing ripe around my spine even if there's no one there to read it.

When the evening's wander finally drops me home to lift you from your crib with kisses I want to tell you that it isn't finding what's right but sifting through what's wrong that really molds the maker, but I know that even if your ears were grown you wouldn't understand. So when I set you down with one last kiss I can only hope you live to miss your target with a zigzag half as wonderful as mine.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This story came about after reading an article on one of Twitter's founders—he regrets, fears and hopes for the future. I started asking myself what value personal expression has in the information storm and how this might affect the development of literary expression. From there the story expanded at its own volition. I've always loved interrogators—Emily Dickinson, William Gibson, Kafka and Joan Didion to name a few—and always will.*

**BIO:** Adam Houchens has been published in *Blue Canary*, *Foliage Oak literary Magazine* and The Art Night Books' collection, *Revolution and Reclamation*. He lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

# Heaven Starts Here

**By Larry Smith**

***WHY WE LIKE IT:** We were smitten by this hard-hitting example of 'dirty realism' that isn't afraid to shoot from the hip. The author overcame two formidable challenges in writing this story: adept control of the volatile subject matter that many a writer wouldn't touch (no spoiler here, you gotta read it) and the conflicted voice of the young narrator with its necessary adolescent complications. The toned prose is rugged yet lyrically vital. The portentous mood assures the absence of sensationalism and the nuanced emotional shading broadens the spectrum of poignancy. When the title hits home, it's just a blow away. Quote: '...and one thing led to another and I don't really remember what I said but whatever it was one thing led to another and it led him to say they were going to run a train on somebody...'*

It was back in the day when Corona was still almost all white with a lot of Irish like me and a lot of Germans like her. For me it began behind Nicky's a few blocks off Roosevelt Avenue and on that little street where cars never go, which was catty-corner to the Woolworth's. DiMaio and Crawford said to meet them there on that street and then I'd go together with them to where they were going to do it but I wasn't sure I wanted to go at all. The thought of it made me very embarrassed and sort of scared too to tell you the truth. But I went anyway because it would have been awful to act like I was scared and I didn't have my wits about me enough to make something up about why I couldn't go. They'd scoff at me and they wouldn't believe me for a minute anyway and that would make it worse. For her it must have begun at the beauty parlor where she worked a block over from 108<sup>th</sup> Street, so which, I

guess, was really Corona Heights, but I wasn't that sure where exactly they were picking her up and I didn't have any real reason to ask. Stone and Sullivan would pick her up in the car, and when DiMaio and Crawford met me over by Nicky's they said, Let's go and oh by the way Bell and Gresto are going to be there too. That's seven, counting you, said DiMaio, the magnificent seven, he said, and he grinned. We started walking and I said, We gonna walk? What do you want, a limo? asked DiMaio, and I said, Why can't Stone and Sullivan pick us up, they got a car? I don't know why I asked because I didn't care one way or another. DeMaio said, Fuck that shit, but I don't know why he said that. But it was ok, because walking made me less nervous. We passed by the barber shop where I used to meet my uncle Ben but he died. Also, you know there must have been a half-dozen pizza parlors on those four, five blocks in those days and one very nice restaurant named Butterfly's, my mom told me because it was named after an opera that was a tragedy. So when we walked past it, I wondered why they would call a restaurant after a sad opera rather than a happy opera but looking back now I guess while we were walking I was just trying to distract my mind with anything I could think about rather than what was going to happen when we got to the grassy old yard behind Silver Hardware, which was gone out of business almost a year before and the building was still empty. I was really nervous about what I'd have to do when we got there and what might happen, and if I could even do what they'd want to see whether or not I could do. I felt ashamed one way or another and I even had trouble sleeping the night

before. I knew her to say hello to and I guess she was all right enough. She was pretty too in her way but I really wanted to be left alone and the only reason I got involved in the first place was because a week or so earlier I saw Crawford in study hall, he was the only one besides me still in school, and one thing led to another and I don't really remember what I said but whatever it was, one word led to another and it led to him saying they were going to run a train on somebody and he'd talk to DiMaio and Stone about my riding along if nobody else had any objections. I didn't know how to back out right there and then before it went any further and then he told me who she was and he grinned and I didn't say nothing, so there I was with one thing leading to another until there I was walking toward Silver Hardware where everybody else was going to be. Stone and Sullivan were there first, I don't know how much earlier than us, but they had the car so it made sense they'd be there first. Everybody walked to the back behind the store, she was like in a little semi-circle of the five of us. It was daylight savings time so it was getting dark already and before I knew it *was* dark. Where's Bell and Gresto? asked Crawford. They're coming, they're coming, said Sullivan, and DiMaio said, They're not coming yet, and the others laughed and I looked at her and she smiled a little. But it wasn't like what you might think, in fact, it was as if some part of her didn't deep down inside really want to be there, and she was nervous too, maybe not in the same way or for the same reasons as me, but she was nervous. Let's get started anyway, said Stone, and goes up behind her and lifts her sweater and pulls her brazier down and he feels up her

knockers. Come on, kid, he says to me, you do the honors next, but I sat there on my knees and said nothing and all of a sudden I just didn't care about them and there wasn't anything I could do or would do even if I did care about them. Besides, DiMaio isn't paying me any attention anyway, he's yanking her pants and panties down and soon she's standing there naked except for her white socks. DiMaio takes her arms and makes her cup her hands behind her head and he says to her, Put on a show. So she smiles a little, the same kind of smile as before, and she starts swaying and going her hips around in circles. Stone tells her to beg for cock and she does, I can still hear it. Then I see Bell and Gresto walking through a shaft of moonlight from the left side of Silver and they're smiling as they walk up almost as if they're dancing toward us, dancing in the moonlight and Gresto doesn't even stop walking but like in a single motion he gets her down on her knees. He goes first and I look away right away and I watch Bell watching and then Crawford does it, and then DiMaio puts his thing into her mouth while Crawford is still doing it. So then Crawford growls and smiles and takes it out of her. Then Sullivan does it and while he does it he spreads her fanny, and says, Watch it dance, I'm gonna make her asshole dance. DiMaio makes some kind of noise and he gives out a groan and then I hear her choking and Crawford says, Gulp it, gulp it down. Then he finishes and Stone turns her over and down on her back and keeps doing it and doing it and doing it until DiMaio says, Will you goddamn finish up, for Chrissakes? and now she starts

to make noises like she was in pain, and she says, Damn, damn, oh damn. She was so unhappy, I guess she was from the start, and why she was doing all of this at all I don't know, it didn't really matter and I didn't care, I don't know why it didn't matter and I didn't care, but I didn't except I felt bad for her. I watched and kept watching but I wasn't going to do nothing, nobody would make me do nothing, I don't care what they said or what stories they were going to tell on me later on. I shouldn't even have been watching, I should have just left and I wouldn't have cared what they thought if I had done that, I mean if I had just got up and left. But I sat there, I don't know why. Then Bell goes over and turns her over again and says, I like what I saw, and I guess from what I saw he put it in her rear end and she started hitting her hands on the ground and making some noises I don't want to talk about. When Bell finishes that, he has filth and blood on him, and I kept watching, I knew I had to stay there even though they might mock me out for not doing anything and there was no way in the world I would do anything, I didn't care what they said or thought, but the only thing anybody said right then was when Stone said, Man, that Bell just went ding-dong and Gresto laughed. I'll take a piece of that too, Crawford says, and goes and does it where Bell did it, only Crawford had just done it before the other way so he gets too tired or something to finish this time. Then Stone and Sullivan and Crawford yank their pants up, and Gresto and Bell do too after they clean themselves off with their own underpants which they throw away and leave on the ground next to the old store. It's funny how many details I remember,

and how even the smaller ones of all those details still make me sad. For an example, I remember the shade of green of her brazier, it was so pale green. I remember Gresto's glasses when he danced through the moonlight, Gresto wears glasses by the way, the rims were black as black, and the moonlight squinted off the lenses. I remember an old poster that was faded and filthy on the back wall of Silver, it said to come to a picnic at Transfiguration of Christ, which is a Greek Orthodox Church, I think it's on 98<sup>th</sup> Street, and I remember thinking even as I was watching Stone do it to her, which it seemed forever, that I didn't know anybody who had that religion, not a soul, I couldn't think of a single Greek or Russian I knew even in school. And I remember the ruby red polish on her toenails when her feet were up because Stone was doing it to her that way. It was funny when the guys left, they didn't mock me or anything, or tell me to do anything, they hardly minded me at all, only Crawford turned toward me as he walked away and asked, You coming? I just shook my head, I didn't even want to say no, because I was afraid of what my voice would sound like just saying that. So Crawford said, Later, and they all left. I was squatting on the ground, my trousers were good and dirt-stained, but then I got up and got over a little closer to where she lay there, and I squatted back on my knees. She was still naked, she seemed numb like she couldn't even figure to put her clothes back on. She didn't look at me or anything, she just stared straight ahead. I didn't look at her body, I looked at her face, and she was just staring straight ahead like

there was something in the dirt there in the yard that she was seeing and couldn't stop seeing. I don't know how long it was that we didn't say nothing. Finally I touched her on the elbow.

“Are you hurt, Sarah?” I asked.

“I'm ok, Danny,” she said.

I felt bad, so that was good to hear.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *'Heaven Starts Here' began as a kind of dialogue with another story, also about ganbanging: 'Tralala' the only story in Hubert Selby Jr's famous book Last Exit to Brooklyn that I found compelling. Very compelling, in fact, but wholly devoid of the slightest mitigation. So, I wondered, as I always wonder, if there are any crevices in hell through which a little light can meander. If so, how transformative can even that slightest light be? I'm basically a religious writer, I guess.*

**BIO:** Larry Smith's 'Heaven Starts Here' is from a collection called *Floodlands* to be published in October 2019 by Adelaide books which also just published his collection *A Shield in Paris*. Smith's novella, *Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick*, was published by Outpost 19. His stories have appeared in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *Serving House Journal*, *Sequestrum*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *The Collagist* and *{PANK}*, among numerous others. His poetry has appeared in *Descant* (Canada) and *Elimae* among others. Smith lives in New Jersey. Visit [Larrysmithfiction.com](http://Larrysmithfiction.com)

# *TOM the SHEEP*

*By Rachel Adams*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Aesop meets Monty Python on SNL! We were WTF is going on here when we first read this clever little yank on an age old fable. But it was the wonderful consistency of the metaphor as it spread to details throughout the story that won us over: ‘...becaaaause...because it is better graaass than ours maaan’. Like sheep taaalking, OK? The breezy tone and sprightly prose combine to deliver an entertainment that in its quirky originality reminds us of certain stories by Sherman Alexie. And that’s our laaast word.*

There once was a sheep named Tom. He lived in a big flock with all his buddies. That was the great thing about Tom, he was a likeable guy, made friends with everybody. He was known for his jokes, and was always playin pranks, and messin with other sheep. Tom was the class clown, the rebel, the Mr. funny guy, a trailblazer, if you will. The type of guy you’d want to hangout with for a good time. He liked to party hard and prioritize the fun things in life. For instance, Tom always liked to put chapstick on his whole face then roll around in the grass till his face was covered and hide behind stuff to scare baby sheep just for fun. Some of his other favorites were peeing in the water bowl, tapping sheeps on the shoulder of the opposite side he was on, tying his friends paws together while they were asleep, feeding them peanut butter, and pushing unsuspecting ones over really fast. But one of Tom’s greatest pranks of all time was when he shaved his fur off and went streaking around the pasture pretending he was possessed. The only

bad thing about Tom was, he didn't know when to stop the foolishness, always took it too far. Although people liked him, sometimes they needed a break from the tom-foolery.

There was one guy however that never got annoyed at Tom, and that was his best friend Howard. When Howard was a baby his mother accidentally suffocated him with her fluff, and his brain didn't get oxygen for a long time. He's been slow ever since. Slow talker, walker, and thinker, but Tom liked him despite all that. Once when Howard and Tom were in 5th grade, the whole class had made a circle around Howard and were throwing rocks and things at him because he smelled bad and was ugly. Tom felt really bad for Howard and knew that he shouldn't be treated like that so he went and laid by Howard in the middle of the stoning. He knew they wouldn't throw things at him since he was cool and popular. He was right, the tormenting stopped and Howard couldn't understand why someone like Tom would do that for him. They quickly became best friends and sheeps left Howard alone from then on. Howard loved Tom.

Howards most favorite thing to do all day was eat grass. He would lay on his stomach in his favorite spot in their fenced in pasture and eat the grass till he felt really happy. Tom joined him often but not nearly as much as Howard spent out there. Howard couldn't go one day without chillin in the grass. It was where he did all his best thinking. One day when he and Tom were laying on their backs, eating grass together he said,

“Heyyyy Tomm”

“yah man”

“Sometimes I think thaaat...that they don't let us have the graass on the other side of the fence becaaause...because it is the better graaass than ours maaan.”

“yah I don't believe what they say about it being too strong for us.”

“Tomm that is some soliiid adviice.”

“That wasn’t advice Howard.”

“Yahhh man you said we should go eat the graaass outside the fence.”

“Did not say that but I really want to know if that grass is actually deadly”

“Nooooo wayyy mann I’m not coming with you”

“But you just said we should.”

“Tommm”

“What”

“I dare you to...to try some of that graaass.”

“No man what if it actually is deadly?”

“Puussyyy”

“Okay okay I’ll do it.”

Tom and Howard trotted out to edge of the fence and made sure no other sheep could see them. They spent around twenty minutes trying to figure out how to get over the fence, they tried digging under it, running through it, trying to naw a hole in it, until Tom got the idea to get on Howard’s back and go over the top of it. He landed on his back and Howard said,

“Baaaad ass maaan baaaad ass.”

Tom walked and sniffed around for a minute and said to Howard,

“We were right man, this stuff isn’t deadly it smells way better than our grass. They were just depriving us from the good stuff.”

“Sickkkk maaan I want some good graaass I thiiink it would...would taste good with soome...some vienna sausaaages or chocolate brownies.”

Tom climbed back over using some logs on the other side and said,

“Howard do you think it would be the sickest prank ever to lay out here and pretend I’m dead for a long time to freak everybody out like this grass really was deadly and then scare people when they check on me man.”

“ha ha ha...world claass maaaaan world claass.”

“Man thas what I thought, this is the sickest prank I have ever thought of, Howard go run to the others and tell them I got over the fence and the grass made me dead el oh el.”

“Ha Ha savage. Foor suuure maaan but can you hand mee sooome...some of thaaat...that good graaass first maaan”

“Honestly Howard you need to lay off the grass”

“Nahhhh maaan.”

Howard ran to the other sheeps and told them as best as he could that Tom was dead and they needed to go get his body. Soon all the sheeps were galloping toward the location of Tom’s dead body. When they were all staring through the fence at lifeless Tom, he jumped up and screamed really loud. Half of them fell over because they got scared which made Tom and Howard laugh really hard. They thought that was great. Most of the sheep were annoyed and warned Tom that they were not supposed to go past the fence but Tom didn’t care, he was already planning on doing this again and again. The next day he did the same thing and everybody got more mad at him. Howard never got to go on the other side of the fence because after Tom used him to get over, there was no one to help him over, so he sat and was a good boy on the safe side and stuck his face in a whole in the fence and just watched Tom eat all the good grass without him. Sometimes he even teared up a little thinkin about all the grass he didn’t get to have.

Tom pulled this prank for four days in a row. Each day he played dead for longer but fewer sheep showed up and no one cared, no one thought it was funny. After the sheep left on the sixth day he could barely stand up he was so baked. On the seventh day Tom told Howard,

“Howard, I’m gonna play dead longer than ever so they really think I’m dead this time”

“Tomm you are thee...the funniest guuyy i ever met maaan. That is savage mann.”

This time only one sheep came and waited to see if anything was gonna happen. Tom was doing an excellent job playing dead this time. Howard noticed that his eyes were open and that was really adding to the affect. The one sheep stayed for about an hour, then rolled his eyes and peaced out. After he left, Howard said to Tom,

“Maaan they are are gonna think you're dead soo good thiss...this time Tommm. This is the the longest youu have been dead foor maaan.”

Six hours later Howard starts to get tired and hungry and lays down as close to his friend as he can with the fence in the way and just waits for him to wake up. He tries throwing stuff at Tom to see if he’ll quit but he knew he wouldn’t. He knew Tom was pulling off the best prank of his life and nobody was gonna stop him. Tom wouldn’t even flinch when a big fly went up his nose. Howard was so impressed, he just sat there and thought about how much he loved that guy and cherished their friendship. Tom was his only friend, nobody else was nice to him. Nobody liked him, everyone made fun of him. He knew it was because he was different but Tom treated him like he was normal and that’s why Howard wanted them to be best friends forever. So he talked to and watched his friend lay there for hours thinking about all his favorite memories with him. Eventually he asked Tom,

“Heyy maaan you want soome...some vienna sausages....I could...could bring us some if you want.”

“....”

“I’m pretty hungry maaan so I’m gonna go get soooome...some vienna sausages  
andddd...and I’ll be baaackk maaan.”

“....”

Howard came back with some vienna sausages and thought maybe Tom would get up because those were both of their favorites, but he didn’t. So Howard rolled them to Tom under the fence. One even touched Tom’s mouth but he still didn’t move. Howard sat there all night with Tom and patiently waited. He was still very impressed by how long Tom was playing dead for but was slightly concerned that he wasn’t eating. So every day Howard brought Tom Vienna sausages and rolled them one by one to Tom. He did this for two weeks and noticed that bugs were eating the sausages and accidently eating on Tom because they thought he was a sausage too he figured. Howard missed talking to Tom and waited for hours. He noticed Tom smelled because he hadn’t showered, and was swelling up like a balloon. He thought something might be wrong so he went to the other sheep for help. But nobody came. They were all sick of his jokes and didn’t want to waste their time. Howard didn’t know what to do, so he went back to check on Tom only to see the shepherd carrying him away. Howard didn’t know where they were taking him and a tear rolled down his face. Tom was the only guy that was nice to him and they were taking him away. Howard stuck his head through the fence and watched the Tom till his tears made his vision blurry. He didn’t know where he went, but Howard never saw his best friend again.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *The idea of this story hit me like a brick in the face, when the idea first entered my head about two sheep who get high off the grass they ate I just knew the world needed to know, and frankly, would want to know. Just kidding but really I think I just read somewhere that some sheep got high and thought it was funny. So a mixture of that and*

*probably subconsciously that old cartoon 'Shaun the Sheep'. My only intention when writing this was to make somebody laugh. As for stylistic and literary influences...John Green. His humor and voice control is flawless. Oh and my man Aesop of course, I ripped off 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf'.*

**BIO:** I'm a junior at the University of West Florida majoring in Pre-Law and will be attending law school. I have never had anything published before (clearly) and randomly took a creative writing class 'just for fun'. I ended up really enjoying it. One of the assignments was to submit something to a publisher, so I did, thinking I'm only going to make the editors hate their job even more but alas! Here I am!

# SO JUST SO

*By John Kuligowski*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *What impressed us most about this superbly realized flash is the way the characters seem to merge into object-hood—each becoming a numbing de-personalized entity in a world, environment, of escalating absences. The routines of ordinary living are disengaged of meaning and a sense of accustomed entrapment defines a relationship that is more dispassionate osmosis than love, even symbiotic love. The second person present singular POV distances the narrator from the characters and assumes something like the voice of conscience. The prose, deceptively simple, is fine tuned to a perfect pitch. Quote: ‘Like an angst-stricken middle-schooler, he just nudged and worried things on his plate. After a while you’d dismiss him from the table, and he’d go to his study where he drank single malt scotch.’*

You were living like a refugee then—a comfortably middle-class refugee, but a refugee nonetheless. Always awaiting the next disaster, you asked yourself, Wheat bread or rye? Which wattage of light bulbs? Poultry or beef, and what for dessert?

A fusillade of options assaulted you up and down the gleaming aisles of the supermarket. You’d take survey and wait for an epiphany. All the labels looked the same. Everything was hermetically sealed. You’d begin to throw items into the cart in a hopeless, desultory way. You thought every option as good as the next, and there’s a kernel of truth to that notion; Tom would simply stare at the meal you’d prepared. He’d begun to bald then, and he’d never lost the desperate, cagy look you saw develop over night when he turned thirty-eight. Like an angst-

stricken middle-schooler, he just nudged and worried things on his plate. After a while, you'd dismiss him from the table, and he'd go to his study where he drank single malt scotch.

Then you crossed another border—but was it he or you? In either case, you eventually forced your way into Tom's skin. Remember the feel of your acrylic nails entering his flesh like the tines of a serving fork into a freshly steaming roast? You laughed when the smell of strong booze poured out. The scotch had long since become a kind of febrile passion with him, but, after that, it was *yours*. He'd take three hours doing dishes and tidying up the kitchen (and there was no reason it should take so long). That had once been your febrile passion. When he'd finished tidying, he'd gaze out the window at the myriad flowers beneath the suburban streetlights. Almost time, he'd think. Everything so just so, he'd walk upstairs.

You always dissembled unconsciousness on the floor in his study, and, always, the nine-millimeter and the empty tumbler that had held his beloved scotch were beside you. He never asked if the gun was loaded (though you were). He covered you with an old quilt each night, and, in the morning, you would kiss Tom and tell him that you didn't know what was wrong with you then, but now (*right now*) you loved him. Over morning coffee and toast, he'd confess with the most impassive of expressions that for the first period in his life, he'd found that he was genuinely happy.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I have a great deal of respect for literary works that in some way play with the concept of ambiguity. For me, ambiguity lends extra dimensions to a work; just beyond or behind the concrete details of the story, an intimation of something else can be felt by the reader, and in the most successful cases, this other frustrates a succinct and straight forward expression. The Russian formalist school would likely have described this as something akin to defamiliarization.*

*What I attempted in this piece was to defamiliarize a suburban couple's life through the ambiguity of the two characters' relationship with each other, and ultimately, even their identities.*

*My literary influences are far and wide, really. During my formative teenage years, I was encyclopedic regarding the Beats. These days I find myself examining and re-examining Beckett, Saramago and Kafka.*

**BIO:** John Kuligowski currently lives in the Midwest. His work has appeared (in no particular order) in *Word Riot*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Maudlin House*, *Unlikely 2.0*, *The Northville Review* and several others. He has a weird fascination with semiotics, and capitalism leaves a really bad taste in his mouth.

# Talking UFOs

By Robert Spiegel

***WHY WE LIKE IT:** Not science fiction, but an insightful postmodernist group portrait of urban angst in which characters define themselves more through 'states of feeling' than actions and words, feelings that reflect a deeper disquiet smoldering beneath the surface: something that reminds us of novelist Anne Beattie. The UFO is a symbol of engagement but also the storm center in a conflicted deteriorating relationship. Spiegel's understated prose, convincing voice and perfect pacing make this story a stand-out. Neophytes should be taking notes when it comes to his dialogue. Quote: 'They're around us all the time. We see them when something inside us becomes sensitive, sensitized. It's more like we uncover them. When we're ready to see, the veil begins to lift. It's a slow process. It can take years before you finally understand what you're seeing'.*

Jean had always been crazy – crazy in the way most women are crazy. But recently things had started to unwind. She was convinced she had seen a UFO and maybe she had made contact with those inside – not all at once, but in stages.

It began like an affair. She told you, “I met this guy.” Innocent words on the surface, but every man cringes when he hears them. Trouble has arrived.

“I met this guy at Toastmasters. You’d like him.”

The words, “You’d like him” finish the set-up. She probably has no idea how these words act like a virus, infecting the relationship. Add to it: “He’s really smart” or “He has some really interesting ideas.”

You’re a dead man. You can count the days till she says you don’t understand her, that she needs some time alone, which of course is never “alone.” If you object to her new interest, you shorten the time till she goes. It’s a dreadful ride.

\* \* \*

The guy, of course, is tuned into UFOs. These days, UFOs aren't what they used to be. They're not simply UFOs. There is a mystical component. Contact with a UFO is a spiritual experience. Decades have passed since UFOs were imagined to be a bumbling species looking for life or rare minerals on a far-away planet.

UFO sightings are now a deep, near-religious experience. They're often accompanied by a budding interest in healing herbs and scented oils designed to combat the poison in our systems that comes from processed food and too many hours watching the code that is embedded in TV commercials. Dial soap will have to go – it leads to brain damage.

Jean wanted to give you a spiritual makeover based on the things Ralph was talking to her about over coffee. First, it was coffee after Toastmasters, but soon it was coffee two or three times a week. She focused her new interest on changing you. This is always the first stage of the affair. She turns her new ideas on you out of habit. You're still her number-one intimacy. When that doesn't work – and it can't work even if you want it to – she will turn all her attention to “this guy I met.” After that, it's only a matter of weeks.

\* \* \*

Jean had been gaining new confidence in the weeks leading up to Ralph and the UFO sightings. New confidence is never a good sign, but you have to go along with it, support it, praise it. If you don't, you'll get swept away almost immediately. You'll eventually get swept away anyway, but you can stall the process by supporting her “growth.” It buys time.

There's an odd chemistry in this. Her new confidence becomes a powerful hook. Not that she becomes necessarily more attractive as her interests expand, but she becomes someone who could actually outgrow you and leave. That shifts the power, and power shifts are a hook. Once she starts growing, you're stuck for the ride.

“I'd like to have Ralph over for dinner next week,” she declares.

“Sure,” you answer positively. You have to go along. Faltering here would set off an unpleasant series of deadly conflicts.

“How about Friday?”

You agree. “Friday would be fine.”

You know it's going to be horrible. You're going to have to watch her hang on his every word. Trapped. And Ralph – with his secret knowledge of UFOs and their related spirituality – will condescend to you while focusing most of his attention on his new smart-student, Jean. He'll share inside jokes and allude to her budding insight. It's all bullshit, but there's nothing you can do about it. Challenging him would confirm you're an ignorant dupe who is defensive about new ideas and an impediment to her growth.

A few days before Friday, Jean comes to bed saying she saw something in the sky while she was out in the backyard just now.

“The colors were unbelievable. Purple with green flaring out,” she explains excitedly.

She wants to share it with you. That's the kicker.

“It was right in the middle of Orion's belt.”

You nod. She's looking for more enthusiasm from you. You don't have it to give, and faking it would seem a betrayal to simple honesty.

She continues without your enthusiasm. “Do you know what that means?”

You shake your head politely.

“That means there will be contacted soon.”

Of course it does. You nod. There's no way you can give her what she wants. If you tried, it would just be pathetic. She'd see through it anyway.

“I have to tell Ralph,” she says, perking up. She dials his number on her cell and walks out of the room. You try to sleep. You know she'll be on the phone for the next two hours as he explains the significance of green with purple flares on Orion's belt.

\* \* \*

You have been with Jean for four years. She wants kids, while you're not so sure. You would love to have kids, but you are not convinced Jean is the right partner. For the past year, you have considered breaking things off. That idea ended when she said, “I met this guy.” Suddenly you have to reconsider everything. You start to notice she's very attractive and getting more attractive by the day. Funny. You hadn't noticed that in years.

Now there's no way you can let go. You find yourself thinking kids with Jean might be a good idea. You distrust this new thought, but you can't deny how striking Jean seems all of a

sudden, her warm chestnut hair, the bangs she flicks out of her eyes – they bring out the beauty of her face. Plus, she has a nearly perfect body. You hadn't noticed this in forever. Funny how two months ago she seemed somewhat annoying.

\* \* \*

The day before Ralph comes over for dinner, Jean initiates lovemaking. You go along and it's enjoyable, particularly because it's so different from the usual. It's more oral. She ordinarily shies away from oral, but tonight she's very enthusiastic. You can't shake the sinking feeling, though. You know there are only two possible reasons for this exuberant display. Either she's teetering and wants to gauge whether she has tipped over completely toward Ralph, or she has already tipped over completely and wants to be in practice for a new lover who is undoubtedly more advanced than you. She wants to have her licks down.

When you first made love to her four years earlier, she was quite wild. But as the months and years wore on, she grew fussy, settling into a fairly narrow space that consistently brought her to orgasm but didn't stretch. When questioned, she insisted she couldn't get to orgasm any other way, so that ended any experimentation except on special occasions such as your birthday – or the night before Ralph was coming over for dinner.

\* \* \*

Ralph wasn't nearly as impressive as you expected him to be. He is just a guy, a bit older than you, clearly intelligent, somewhat quirky. He is someone you would know and be friends with under other circumstances. But not these circumstances.

Oh, come off it. You're being too generous. He is pompous and boring. If it hadn't been for Jean's infatuation, you wouldn't have spent two minutes with him.

Before dinner, you have to go out for wine. Just to be polite, you ask Ralph to come along. Unfortunately, he says, "Sure."

In the car, you start out with the usual, "What kind of work did you do?" You know he is retired and now just tracks UFOs. Turns out he was a design engineer in the automotive industry

for 30 years. Now he makes a few extra bucks selling scents, oils and supplements, all for the purpose of spiritual alignment. He, of course, asks you nothing about yourself.

You were planning to get a bottle for the three of you, but after a few minutes with Ralph, you decide to get three bottles, just in case you get particularly thirsty during dinner.

Once home, Jean is putting out an assortment of cheeses. Ordinarily you do the cooking, but for this dinner you had decided not to volunteer. You figured if Ralph was investing his spirituality in UFOs, chances are, he was going to be weird about food. You didn't think it would be a good idea to risk a homemade meal on the possibility that Ralph would quietly announce he can't eat this food. You had suggested to Jean that she prepare the meal. You knew she would, because after all, this was Ralph. She made dinner by shopping at Whole Foods for organic vegan dishes that she transferred to serving bowls.

When you are all seated, you pour three glasses of wine. You had picked a decent cabernet, deep cherry with an undertone of dark chocolate. The first glass goes down easy and quick, at least for you. Jean and Ralph barely touch theirs. You pour yourself another.

After the three of you have picked through the cheeses, Jean passes around the plates of food. Even though it isn't homemade, it is actually quite good – curried tofu on rice with a variety of chopped veggies, a side of spicy lentil soup.

“When do you think you'll see another UFO?” Jean asks as we graze.

“A lot of that depends on when I'm ready again. Or maybe it depends on when I need to see one again.”

You struggle to keep from rolling your eyes. Jean and Ralph don't seem to read your implicit skepticism. Time for another glass of wine.

“Do you think I saw one the other night? Do you think that was a UFO I saw?”

Ralph nods sagely and takes a sip of wine. “I'm beginning to think you did. I think you're close to ready. The oils and herbs are helping you to prepare.”

They were acting as though you are not even present.

“How can you be ready to see a UFO?” you ask. “You either see one or you don't, right?”

Ralph turns to you with all the patience of an elementary school teacher. “They're around us all the time. We see them when something inside us becomes sensitive, sensitized. It's more like we uncover them. When we're ready to see, the veil begins to lift. It's a slow process. It can take years before you really understand what you're seeing.”

Jean looks at you like she's thinking, "Careful, now, don't get rude."

You find Ralph's comments just amusing enough to push on.

"What on earth do UFOs have to do with spirituality?" You try not to sound antagonistic, but the wine is rushing through your system, so it's hard to judge.

Ralph is a pro. He's been through this a hundred times. He matches you cool-for-cool. He takes a slow sip of wine. He is in no hurry. "The aliens are traveling here to make spiritual contact."

"They're not here for our minerals?" I do my best to sound inoffensive.

Jean seems calm now. She had apparently given up trying to control you. Either that or she trusts you. Maybe she just has confidence in Ralph's ability to handle anything you can throw at him.

You take a deep drink of wine as Ralph continues. "That's a common misperception. They are not miners. They have outgrown the need for individual materials. They can create the materials they need from existing mater. They seek instead spiritual communion."

"What on earth do we have to offer them? We don't do well with spirituality down here."

He smiles. Nearly a smirk. "They're far ahead of us. They don't need our spirituality. They've come to help us. They've been coming here for centuries."

"So why didn't we hear about them centuries ago?"

"We were too ignorant to see them. Most of us anyway. That's changing. That's why there are more sightings. We're becoming ready."

Jean asks Ralph how they appeared in centuries past. He recites a litany of appearances to aboriginal populations, explaining how the aliens were depicted in primitive paintings and stories.

The haze of the cabernet is beginning to give you a rosy view. As Ralph talks about the depth of UFP spirituality, Jean listens intently. Oddly, you find a gentle river of calm in the warm wine. While it is common for anger to rush up when alcohol was poured over emotional upset, for some reason you find yourself reflective, thoughtful. Your jealousy goes fluid and begins to leak away. You are floating, now, and you're thankful for the relative peace.

From your warm-wine distance, you can listen to Jean and Ralph and enjoy what you hear. Emboldened by this strange liberty, you decide to be of service. You clear the table, refill each of the wine glasses, and put out the dessert that Jean had bought earlier. It is some kind of

chocolate-on-chocolate presentation – cake smothered in mousse, dribbled with thin dark chocolate swirls, a perfect match for the cabernet.

Jean smiles at your helpfulness. You return an affectionate look that lets her know she doesn't have to worry. Things are fine.

You are not sure whether your ease is simply a pause before a new phase of conflict, a darker path. For now, you can taste the full flavor of the wine, each sip beginning in the front of the mouth and swishing slowly to the back of the throat. Earlier, the wine was a getaway tool to help you to sink and vanish in the face of Ralph and everything he might come to mean in your life.

Now you can see that Jean is ravishing. Ralph is gentle and patient. You are free for the first time in weeks. You are immune to all the negative feelings. It comes about for absolutely no reason. You look kindly on everything.

You clear the dessert dishes and serve up coffee and tea for Jean and Ralph while you stay with the wine, sipping it slowly enough that it doesn't lose its luster and doesn't get you inebriated. You excuse yourself and walk out into the backyard. The summer evening is cool and the stars are bright.

You leave the door open. You can hear the soft dining-room chat like quiet music, reassuring of all things. Maybe you can learn to love Jean again. Or, maybe she will leave you for Ralph. It doesn't matter. That's the best of all – it no longer matters.

You look up at the stars. Though the city lights reduce their shine, you can still see your favorites, the Big Dipper, Orion's belt, and then Orion himself. You also notice something odd, some unusual lights that are purple and green.

Purple and green are a strange and confident pairing. Like plane lights, they are distinct from stars and planets. You take a full sip of wine, swishing it in your mouth to get the full spectrum of flavor. The lights are clearly in a rectangular pattern of green with a circle of purple that blinks as the circle rotates around the green rectangle. They seem to be drawing closer to you.

You walk back into the house to refill your glass of wine. Jean and Ralph are sitting next to each other and Ralph seems to be going over some chart. He is deep in explanation.

"Um, could I ask a quick question, Ralph?"

Ralph looks up. "Certainly."

"When UFOs show up, you see their lights, right?"

"Yes," says Ralph looking helpful.

“What colors?”

“Pardon?”

“What colors are the UFOs?”

“During the day they appear behind clouds – you can’t really see them. At night, well they’re usually green and purple.”

You nod and say thanks. You wander back outside and the green and purple lights are still drawing closer. So close, now, you can see through what seems to be windows and into the ship, if indeed that’s what it is. You sense there is something gentle inside, not that your senses can be trusted. It comes even closer. You feel a rush of acceptance and, perhaps, love. It’s stronger than the wine. Then poof, it disappears.

You go back inside and sit at the table as Jean and Ralph continue talking. Now Ralph is explaining supplements and how they prepare you for new ways of experiencing the world. You’re calm. Some of the peace you felt while watching the UFO – if that’s what it was – lingers. You sip the wine and enjoy the good choice you made, both in the quality of the wine and the quantity of bottles. Jean’s and Ralph’s voices are comforting.

After about another hour, Ralph announces he better be going. You go through the usual goodbyes, Ralph’s thanks the two of you for the wonderful food and company. You’re relieved by how easy it is now. You even accept a quick hug from Ralph.

Once he’s gone, you start to clean up. Jean pitches in and you say, “It’s OK, I got it covered.”

Jean smiles, appreciatively. She gives you a long deep hug and announces she’s going to bed. She can’t thank you enough for helping to make this a wonderful evening.

\* \* \*

When you slip into bed she is sound asleep. You give her a whisper kiss on the cheek. She offers a slight contented sigh. All is at peace.

You accept the obvious. You’ve been with her for the wrong reasons for years. You know there are probably no right reasons. You accept there is little that you can do to keep her, and that’s OK. You know one thing: you’re going to miss her when she’s gone.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** *'Talking UFO's' unfortunately, is mostly true. Yet it's not quite memoir. My intention was to capture the sickening feeling of a deteriorating relationship while also showing its humor. The ending of love is usually bumpy even if it's needed. And for influences, it's George Saunders, Sue Monk Kidd, TC Boyle, Joyce Carol Oates and every one of the hundreds of short story writers I've read in the last 20 years. I've been guided by the notion that voice is paramount. I believe in letting the plot flow naturally from the voice.*

**BIO:** Robert Spiegel is a writer living in New Mexico. He serves as senior editor for the trade magazine *Design News*. In addition, he is widely published in fiction, poetry and drama. His work has appeared in such diverse publications as *Rolling Stone* and *True Confessions*.

# MUSTACHE

**By Dennis Pahl**

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** When a man shaves off his mustache the result is like a planetary shift and the consequences of his trivial action reshape reality and play out to an absurd conclusion. It's a technique employed most famously by Kafka in *The Metamorphosis* (Gregor Samsa woke up one morning to find he had turned into a giant beetle.) and later by Jerzy Kozinsky in his beguiling novella *Chance*. It's a literary balancing act because if for one moment the reader loses faith in the illusion; the whole story comes crashing down. No such problem here. Pahl pulls all the right strings and with his swift authoritative prose delivers an entertaining and satisfying existential farce that is a credit to its genre.

One day in August, in the middle of a heat wave, which was tending to make everyone a little dizzy, Steiner got up early, looked into the bathroom mirror, and, realizing he'd grown tired of gazing at the same face everyday, decided to cut off his mustache. That would change things, he thought. Besides, the mustache was getting on his nerves. It was always itching in hot weather. Worse than that, he found himself touching it habitually, as if he couldn't stop grooming it

whenever his hands were free. Enough was enough, he told himself. So he cut it off. It was a simple act. And harmless, as far as he could tell.

But that morning something strange happened. Before going off to work, Steiner came into the bedroom to say goodbye to his wife, who was still lying in bed, half-asleep, her dark hair spread out on the pillow. He calmly bent down to kiss her, but as she turned to him with her usual sleepy-eyed smile, she looked up and saw his face—and screamed. She jumped back to the head of the bed, instinctively clutching the sheet to her body.

“Who are you?” she asked, trembling. “What are you doing here?”

Steiner, shocked at his wife’s reaction, took a step back and almost tumbled.

“How did you get in here?” Her voice turned to a whisper. “I’ll call the police if you don’t leave this minute.”

He wondered if his wife were still in the middle of a nightmare. On the other hand, maybe she was recalling something offensive he’d done or said the day before, about which she’d been angry ever since. She could have been still fuming over one of his comments about last night’s dinner, or annoyed he never listened carefully to what she was saying. She could have been upset about one thing or another. But why would she want to call the police?

Steiner, mystified, left the apartment, thinking he’d deal with his domestic problems later. His wife must have been in one of her moods. When he got to his office building he put the whole incident out of his mind. Coming out of the elevator on the fourth floor he walked down the hall and waved to Gloria, the receptionist at the front desk, with whom he’d always exchanged a few friendly words each morning. But today she acted differently. She looked at him curiously and asked what she could do for him.

“Oh, nothing. Thanks. I’m fine,” he said, thinking she wanted only to be helpful. He continued to walk past her desk.

“Excuse me, sir. You cannot go in without an appointment.”

“Appointment? Oh, I see. Very funny...”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said, stopping him. “How can I help you?”

Just then, his business colleague Kransky showed up. Instead of greeting Steiner, however, he looked at him strangely and asked Gloria if there was a problem. Steiner looked back at both of them, confused. He couldn’t understand what they were up to. It must be some sort of joke, he thought. An April fool’s day prank in August. Yet maybe it was something else entirely. Was it a sign of something having gone terribly wrong with his job? Was their odd behavior a way of distancing themselves from him, from somebody whom the higher-ups in the firm had suddenly found unworthy?

Steiner, coming to his senses, then thought there was no reason to be paranoid. He wasn’t, it was true, being too productive lately. But that was just a dry spell he was going through. He’d always been a valued employee, so what reason was there to worry? Then it dawned on him what it could be. He smiled to himself and saw it was probably all a big misunderstanding because of what, in his foolishly impulsive way, he’d done that morning when he decided to change his appearance. “Of course,” he mused. “It’s my new look. People see you one way for so long and then you go ahead and alter something about yourself and they have a new impression, even a new attitude about you. They are just not used to the new me.” He now relaxed, feeling relieved to have discovered the source of his concern.

“Oh, I see,” he said to Kransky, now hoping to clear up the misunderstanding. “You didn’t notice. I got rid of my mustache. It’s me, Steiner. Look.” Steiner stood up straight,

turned in profile, then turned again, face forward, and, smiling broadly he put his forefinger above his lips to give the likeness of the mustache that used to be there. “You probably didn’t recognize me. Ha, ha.”

But neither the receptionist nor Kransky saw anything humorous in this. They simply regarded him as a stranger, one possibly with bad intentions, who had intruded into their place of business. Kransky raised an eyebrow at Gloria, and then signaled that she should call security at once. Steiner, noticing her getting on the phone, understood they meant business and, not wishing to make a scene, thought it wise just to go away, perhaps take the whole day off. So he headed toward the elevator, baffled, not saying a word or nodding goodbye to anyone.

If it was some kind of practical joke they were playing, it was not funny anymore. When Steiner got out of the elevator and stepped into the lobby he paused before one of the mirrors there and looked intently at himself. Except for the mustache, everything about him was intact. There was Steiner, good old Steiner, with the same old hazel eyes, the same old delicately narrow nose, the same old chin... Only the expression on his face seemed a little more worried than usual. Otherwise there was nothing really new about him.

When he turned around he saw another one of his colleagues, Solomon, who was walking through the lobby in his direction. Steiner purposely tried to put himself face to face with Solomon, but the latter didn’t even acknowledge him and walked right past him, to the elevator, as if Steiner were a ghost. What accounted for this attitude toward him, a devoted worker? He wondered if he was about to lose his job, his livelihood, all because some higher-ups wished to downsize, perhaps selfishly to enrich themselves further, reaping more of the company’s profits. He’d always suspected that loyalty didn’t count for anything at this firm and now he had his proof.

As he made his way through the hot city streets, and finally into the park, he thought it possible that Kransky, who, as he always imagined, was secretly jealous of him, decided to malign him somehow. That might explain everything he had witnessed at the office this morning. He tried hard to shift away from such thoughts, but they kept surfacing in his brain, until he became mentally exhausted. He sat down on a bench, under a shady tree, and fell asleep and had a dream.

He dreamt he was in the office of a psychotherapist he'd known years ago, somebody he had once thought of visiting regularly to discuss his life and to sort out whatever conflicts, real or imagined, he was having. In the dream the therapist, a Chinese man with wire-rimmed glasses, sat in a corner of the room. Because he spoke so low and with such a thick accent, Steiner had to strain to hear whatever came out of the man's mouth and sometimes had to guess what he was saying. Or he would pretend to understand so as to avoid any awkwardness about asking the man to repeat, in a louder voice, almost everything he said.

As far as he could tell, the therapist, named Dr. Liu, was asking Steiner why he felt he was living the wrong life and if he thought there was a better one. Steiner was at first confused, not sure if the therapist asked whether he was living the wrong "life" or living with the wrong "wife." When he asked for clarification, Steiner still could not make out with certainty Dr. Liu's words. So, covering his bases, Steiner answered that he was satisfied with both his wife and his life and had no expectation of doing anything differently. Then, in a sudden spurt of candor, he questioned if he should even be talking to a therapist in the first place, at which point Dr. Liu told him he was living in denial and it would do no good at all to pretend to be satisfied when he was obviously deeply troubled.

“I don’t think I’m deeply troubled,” said Steiner. “Besides, this is only a dream. So why are you laying all this on me?”

“Even if it is only a dream,” Dr. Liu explained, “it is made of the stuff of your inner consciousness, what’s deep down inside you, and there is no escape from that, no matter where you go or how much you try to change yourself on the outside.”

Steiner had a vague idea of what the man was saying but at the same time knew he was not trying to run away from himself. He only decided to cut off his mustache, that’s all. Why should there be any deep meaning in that? Sure, he wanted to have a new look, but also it was a matter of hygiene. He felt cleaner when he shaved his whole face and moreover discerned a kind of smoothness above his upper lip he hadn’t felt for years. Sometimes things go no deeper than that. No more than skin deep. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

“A cigar is never just a cigar,” the therapist replied, answering Steiner’s thoughts.

At that point Steiner, coughing, woke up from his dream, noticing that there was a man, an African-American man, sitting next to him on the bench, a pencil in his hand, turning the pages of a notebook and puffing on a cigar, the smoke drifting toward Steiner’s face. Steiner, clearing his throat, looked over at him and their eyes met.

“Sorry about the smoke. Didn’t mean to disturb you,” the man said, waving the smoke away with his hands and turning his head to take another puff on his cigar.

“That’s alright. No problem,” said Steiner. He felt drowsy and thought this encounter could be a continuation, just another part, of his dream. He saw the man on the bench, seeming to be in his thirties, slim, without a hair on his head or face, except for his eyebrows and a thick, well-groomed mustache.

“What are you reading?” asked Steiner. It was unlike him to talk to strangers in the park, or anywhere else for that matter, but today he was not quite himself.

“Poems.”

“Is that so?” Steiner asked.

“Yes. I write.” He paused. “I also teach literature at a yeshiva.”

“Really?”

“For three years now. Mostly part-time.”

“Hmm.... Interesting.” Steiner peered at the notebook.

“It’s a series of poems,” the man said. “About the African-American slave cemetery in lower Manhattan, not far from Wall Street. The wall, you know, was originally built by slaves in order to prevent the British and the Indians from getting close to Dutch property.”

“Things haven’t changed too much, have they?” Steiner said. “Only the players. One group is always enslaving another, always taking advantage... Sometimes I feel enslaved myself—at my job. But mostly underappreciated.”

“You don’t know what slavery is,” the man said. “As for the other, you mean you don’t get the recognition you deserve?”

“Recognition? They literally don’t acknowledge my existence,” Steiner said. “I’m just a nobody for them. I’m practically invisible.”

“A nobody? Try being a black poet in America. Then you’ll understand what it means to be invisible.”

“You’re right. I guess I shouldn’t complain.”

“Go ahead. Complain all you want. I’ll just sit here and smoke my cigar, if you don’t mind.”

Steiner sat with the man for a while and told him his experience that morning and said that he traced back all his bad luck to cutting off his mustache.

“It was probably a fatal error. I’m not superstitious, but ever since I cut it off, things haven’t been the same.” Steiner looked almost enviously at the man’s mustache.

“If I had any luck, I’d never attribute it to facial hair,” the man said, patting down his mustache.

Steiner admitted that the man had a point. After talking some more, about how long the heat wave would last, they shook hands and wished each other well. Of course Steiner couldn’t continue to blame his disappointing day on his decision to cut off his mustache. It was too ridiculous an idea. But he needed to have some explanation, and he searched his mind as diligently as he could, only to come up with nothing.

An hour later he wandered out of the park and crossed a few avenues. On the corner of one street he saw a sign, posted on a door, advertising tealeaf readings by Gabriela. “Why not?” he told himself. He had nothing to lose. So he went in, climbed up a staircase, and knocked on the door, where a young woman greeted him warmly. It would be good, he thought, to escape the scorching heat in an air-conditioned room and enjoy a nice cup of tea.

She asked if he ever had a reading before.

“No,” he said. “I don’t actually believe in this stuff.”

“Is that right? Then why are you here?”

“Curiosity.”

“Are you having a bad day?”

“I guess you can say that.”

He sat at a table, sipping green tea and watching the woman spread Tarot cards in front of her. She picked up one of the cards, looked carefully at it, and asked Steiner if he'd been through some changes lately.

“How did you know? You got that from the cards?”

“Yes. But I also feel things? I noticed your aura, for example.”

Steiner searched around him to see if he could discern his aura and wondered what color it was and if he could have seen it with 3-D glasses. He had a pair at home.

“No, 3-D glasses aren't necessary,” she said. “You either have special gifts or you don't.”

“I don't have any gifts, not that I know of. As far as any changes, there have been a few. This morning I went into the bathroom and cut off my mustache.”

“I meant, more substantial changes—in your home-life for example, or at your work. You don't have to provide details. I'm beginning to sense strongly that you've been through a lot. You've had difficulties. Hardships. You probably know what I'm talking about.”

Steiner nodded his head in agreement.

“Still,” she went on, “you have great energy inside you. You have the capacity to reclaim anything you might have lost. It's all up to you. Everything depends on how much you want it. That's what I'm seeing.”

“You see that in the cards?”

“No, I see it here,” she said, pointing to her solar plexus.

“Then what are the cards for? And what about the tea leaves?” Steiner asked.

“That's all for show, frankly. I don't need any of that. I see things, I sense things the moment a client comes in.” Steiner began cautiously to get up from the table, and when he made some movements toward leaving, the young woman ran to block his way.

“Please,” she said, standing by the door.

“Please what?”

“Please...that will be twenty dollars.”

“What? Twenty? I thought the sign outside said ten dollars.”

“That was yesterday’s special,” the young woman said. “On Monday everything is half off. Today it’s the regular price.”

Steiner reluctantly paid the fee, thanked the woman, and left. He decided to return home, where he knew his wife would be waiting for him. He only hoped she had, over the course of the day, come to her senses after this morning’s episode, after he had woken her up perhaps too abruptly and, as it seemed, in the middle of a nightmare. He had called her earlier in the day but she hung up the phone, claiming she had no idea who was talking to her. She didn’t recognize his voice and had stated very firmly that she didn’t appreciate prank calls.

When Steiner entered the door of his fifth floor apartment he found nobody home. The place was horribly hot and there was no sign that the air conditioner had recently been on. Removing his tie and sports jacket, he went into the bedroom. It was a mess, looking as though it had been ransacked. The dresser was nearly empty of his wife’s things, the closets were open, and a large suitcase was missing. There was no note left anywhere explaining why she had left, but for Steiner it was obvious his wife was still under the same impression she’d been under that morning, when she had treated him like a stranger, like a home invader who’d come to rob her or to do something worse. He opened up one of the middle drawers and pulled out a photo album and riffled through it. Then he took it to the bathroom mirror and looked at the pictures of himself, comparing them with the face he saw in the mirror. “The same,” he thought. He shook his head in disbelief.

On the way out, locking up his apartment, he ran into the porter, who was mopping the floor. He'd known Kenny, the porter, since he had moved into the building. Steiner greeted him with a smile and was naturally surprised when the porter asked if he was a friend of Steiner's visiting for the week.

"What did you say? Friend? Visiting?"

"Yeh...are you his friend?" he asked, holding onto his mop.

"Kenny, don't you recognize me?"

"No."

"It's me, Steiner. Just without my mustache." He opened his wallet and showed him a fairly recent picture of himself. "Look," he said. "I'm the same person."

The porter chuckled, as if the strange man before him, one of Steiner's visitors as he thought, was joking with him. Steiner, frustrated, then pulled out an older picture of himself, showing him before he'd grown a mustache. "Here you go. You see the resemblance now?" Already he was rummaging through his mind as to what neighbor's door he could knock on to get confirmation that he was who he claimed he was. But he knew none of the neighbors would be home at his hour. The porter, having leaned his mop up against the wall, was now studying the picture.

"No, that's not you..." he said, shaking his head.

"Of course it's me. Only a bit younger. You can't see that?"

The porter showed a half-smile and gazed at Steiner skeptically. "What are you doing with Mr. Steiner's wallet, anyway?"

Steiner stared back at the porter, turned, and hurried down the stairs. He stopped in the courtyard, bewildered, and then began walking aimlessly down the block. He passed other

apartment buildings and a row of stores. On the other side of the street he saw a local realtor he knew. Why not try his luck one more time? Someone had to recognize him. This was the realtor who, over three years ago, had helped him find an apartment right after Steiner had gotten married. The two of them had been friendly ever since.

“Hey, Bob...how are you?” Steiner asked. He was making believe he was rubbing his nose so as not to show his whole face, trying to hide the area where he had cut off his mustache.

“Do I know you?” Bob smiled cordially.

Steiner’s own smile froze on his lips. He stood in front of his friend, looking him straight in the face, and realizing Bob had no idea who he was. Steiner was demoralized.

He just said, “Sorry...I must have mistaken you for someone else,” then stepped aside and went down the street, back to the subway station.

Standing in the crowded subway car, holding onto a metal pole, he looked at the passengers on either side of him, all of them unknown to him just as much as he was unknown to them. He almost felt home among strangers. He was dead tired and practically fell asleep standing up, just as he came to the station he wanted, near the park. He was hoping to find some peace amid the grassy hills and leafy trees of the park, but he also wished to go back to the bench where the man he had met earlier had been reading his poems. When he got there, however, no one was sitting on the bench. There was just an ice cream vendor nearby.

Steiner asked the vendor if he had noticed a black man on the bench in the late morning, a guy who was smoking a cigar and reading. Steiner knew that nobody sits on a bench all day long, but he was desperate and looking for answers. He had no idea what he would have asked the man on the bench, had the man been there. Nor did he know how the man would be of any help to him.

“No, I don’t remember anyone like that and I’ve been at this location most of the day.”

“Really?” Steiner didn’t remember the ice cream vendor having been there before, but took him at his word.

“Hey, there are so many people who come and go, it’s impossible to keep track. Sorry about that, bud. Would you care for a popsicle?” The vendor wiped his brow.

“No, thanks,” said Steiner, who was no longer thinking straight.

The vendor, not busy, seemed suddenly sympathetic. He asked Steiner, as if to humor him, “So what about the guy on the bench? Anything else you can tell me?”

Steiner seemed to be out of breath, and was quite beside himself. He thought for a second.

“He had a mustache.”

**(end)**

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I once saw the French movie ‘La Moustache’ in which a man shaves off his mustache, only to realize, much to his dismay, that no one notices. That is, people continue to view him same as before. I wanted, in my story, to follow the basic idea and take it further, that is, to take the absurdity to its logical conclusion: when the man cuts off his mustache, he unexpectedly alters his life completely and no one recognizes him at all.*

*My interest, in most of my writing, is to explore the strangeness of ordinary experiences, to illustrate how one small step can have existential implications: in this instance, how a simple desire for change can lead to bizarre consequences. The story is about alienation, both psychological and social. It is also about the desire, however futile, for meaningful human contact. My poet-friend David Mills, who has written about the African-American slave cemetery in New York, inspired one character. Anyone who sees a video of him will understand*

*immediately why he is a big inspiration. My other influences are Kafka and the Russian absurdist Daniil Karmis.*

**BIO:** Dennis Pahl is a professor of English at Long Island University. His fiction has appeared in *Confrontation*, *New Feral Press*, *Vestal Review*, *Epiphany Magazine* and *Leopardskin & Limes*. One of his stories was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and he was awarded 'Honorable Mention' in a *Glimmer Train* short fiction contest. Three of his stories were made into short films. The last production, 'The Museum of Lost Things' won 'Best Story' at the 2018 Long Island International Film Expo and was nominated for 'Best Comedy' at the 2018 Madrid International Film Festival.

# GRAVEYARD SHIFT

*By Pamela Dae*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Read this macabre little Alt bedtime story to the kiddies and neither you nor they will get any sleep. And yep, there are people out there like that. Just be sure your Toronto Blue Jays cap is buttoned down! EEEE-YUCK! factor aside, we love the unscrubbed voice with its dirty feet and street drawl and the way it nails down the narrative like a hammer blow. It's kinda Stephen King, kinda Twilight Zone, kinda totally original. You've been warned.*

Patrick picks her up from lab to take her for a short drive along the dark lanes twisting between the slave-laid stone fences guarding thoroughbreds. He reads aloud the farm names as they pass: *Calumet, Castleton, Spendthrift.*

"I worked at that one," he says, pointing to shadow trees and misted horse movement. Blood rims his fingertip from a bitten cuticle. He withdraws his hand, afraid she'll notice. "Groomed the horses -- walked em too. I could handle any a them horses. Still be there now but for that office manager. Bitch."

A sniff of sweet hay, horseshit, and dewy grass through his open window nearly breaks his heart. Maybe shouldn't've said that last. He checks her reaction but she's chill. He smiles. She doesn't interrupt like his mother does. Or his fifth grade teacher. Don't even get him started on that "career counselor" who looked at him like he was something stuck to her pointy high-heel.

When he brings her back that night, he leaves her with a smile.

The next time, they drive down Manchester Street where abandoned bourbon distilleries have transformed into craft beer breweries, ice cream parlors, and trendy restaurants. He idles the Pacer in front of the infamous graffiti scribbled across three-stories of abandoned brick: gas-mask, four hands gripping iron bars, slash of red tape reading 'Caution Do Not Feed'.

"That's something, huh?"

He thinks she might have shivered so he turns the car and swings down into the Recycling Center's football field-sized parking lot.

"I worked here til I got the job at the hospital." He chugs his car to the bay doors of the quonset hut headquarters. He lowers his seatback, then hers, craving comfort for his explanation. "Trucks pull in here, dump the trash, then the bulldozer shovels it onto the belts. Paper goes up first, then giant magnets pull out cans, and air puffs separate the plastic. Then glass falls out and gets crushed." He turns to admonish her with raised index finger. "One plastic bag'll stop the works."

He coughs importantly. "My buddy Ted and me, we picked bags for five damn years. Ted's got the best eyeballs in three states -- says he can grab a bag doing 40." She fairly shimmers in delight.

He revs the engine. "I bout got promoted to driving the dozer. But the one time I did some tightass woman unloading some New York news from her *Mercedes* claimed I hit her." He trills his voice with a fancy la-de-da, pleased with himself now.

That night, Patrick kisses her before he goes.

Patrick plans. He works 7 to 3 a.m., not easy but he likes the quiet after midnight. He arrives in the lab after his shift and he's pleased to find her waiting. He cuddles her walking to

the car then drives through Mickey D's on the way to his apartment, shielding her with his jacket at the pick-up window so the glass-eyed zitty kid won't stare.

All is ready: he'd vacuumed the rug, tossed food-crusting paper plates, even swirled cleaner around the toilet before he left for work.

After bringing her in, he flips on the lamp. "So, this is it." Should've thrown out that dead fern. She doesn't seem to notice as he seats her on the straight wooden chair. "Comfortable?" He slides the McDonald's bag on the table between them and unwraps a burger, chomps it.

"I like you let me talk," he says. "Most people . . ." A fistful of fries swallows the sentence. "I got plans, y'know. I won't always be just some orderly. I'm gonna get certified, be a radiology tech. Maybe ultra sound."

He chews, waiting for approval but she remains still.

"Look how far I got already." His voice rises in speed and volume. "From picking through piles of other people's stinking trash to Pine-Soling the hospital."

He glances sidelong, appraising. "But you're right. It ain't normal to go on no date at 3 in the morning."

She remains impassive.

"Look," he says. Several fries fall to grease the rug when he stands. "I don't need this attitude. *I found you. I saved you.*"

Nothing. Absofreaking nada.

"And I can get rid of you."

He crumples the waxy paper of the bag, tosses it into the kitchen sink, free throw style, misses. "Fuck it."

Patrick carries her down the stairs and shoves her into the passenger seat. Frigid, disapproving cunt. The Pacer rumbles through the night, crossing flashing yellow signal lights on Nicholasville Road and the last college kids stumbling home.

He checks his Casio watch; 3:45 a.m. He turns on High, ignoring the silent basketball mecca. He whips right onto Jefferson and then left on Manchester. The gas-masked face rises from the wall. Caution. Do Not Feed.

A final turn into the recycling center where they find trash waiting in front of the open bay doors. At 4, his old crew starts up the belt. More trucks trundle in around 4:30, then the dozer pushes that heap up the belt. Paper sorted away before Ted and the hand-pickers eyeball it, then the glass rolls for crushing.

He hauls her out of the car. "I ain't gonna be disrespected."

Patrick holds her in one hand. Easy as that. She's just a glass jar with some dead brain floating inside that he found on a shelf, that's all, he tells himself. Still. "We coulda had something."

He shrugs off the hurt, hitches his Wrangler's by a belt loop. No way ole Ted's quick eyes would miss a brain in a jar. Patrick twists off the lid, dumps the mushy grey onto the top of the refuse pile and then digs around, shifting trash until she must be near the bottom. He tosses the glass jar and metal lid at the heap. The machines will take care of the rest -- crush the jar into a broken pile of glass cullet and leave her a stain on some worthless paper.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *There's a gigantic mask mural of the type as described across the street from the recycling center in my hometown of Lexington, Kentucky. The graffiti image is certainly nightmare-worthy. I believe art inspires art, and it certainly did in the case of 'Graveyard Shift'.*

*My literary influences are the great Southern writers Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Donna Tartt and Harper Lee.*

**BIO:** I am a federal criminal defense attorney who longs to be a writer and I'm working on my first to-be-published novel 'Rush' which centers around the opioid epidemic. I have been published in *Nowhere Magazine* and *AvantAppalachia*.

# CHOCHECHERRY

*BY CONNOR DE BRULER*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Apart from Michael Howard's 'Can anyone else feel that?' (Issue Two-Fiction) you won't find better dialogue on FLEAS than in Connor de Bruler's 'Chokecherry'. The exchanges between Carlo and Tillandsia are truly mesmerizing and we think the author's descriptive prose is almost too beautiful. This is the kind of writing that looks easy but is hardest to craft. And while we're gaga about his style, it's the story itself that really impacts. Who wouldn't want to read about a sexually conflicted young hustler with murder on his mind? A hypnotic narrative haunted by dark and elemental strains from a writer you want to watch. Quote: 'A game of pool commenced in the back room like the cracking of a whip.' And, "Do you seriously want to go to prison?" / "I'd rather go to prison than deal with this anymore." / "And what the fuck do you think happens to people like us in prison? You think I don't know how bad you hurt? I was inside for just a year and a half, general population with men." ...Uh-huh.*

On paper, Carlo was molested just once, but he had suffered for years. The real difficulty came in articulating that the manipulation and confusion it caused was almost worse than having to perform those alien sexual acts. His parents' therapist (not his personal counselor) called it "grooming" as if his hair was constantly being shampooed and brushed in those days.

The future became the household religion and he started to see ghosts in the margins of life.

His parents divorced and his mother regressed into conservative ideology. His father, the only son of a tenured English professor, had not instilled enough masculinity in her son, so she embraced a man closer to her own father's likeness: a Staff Sergeant at Fort Bliss.

She remarried a couple weeks after they moved to El Paso. Carlo never learned how she had met this new man, but a blank room with a window view of the mountains was waiting for him the day they

arrived. Their ceremony was held in a small desert chapel and the reception took place in the driveway and garage of his pueblo-style house off base. The dry heat was oppressive. His ice-cream melted down his wrist. Plastic cups emulsified in the sunlight.

When Carlo returned to the coast of South Carolina, he was twenty-three years old. The low country marshland beneath the iron bridges and single-lane roads looked like pools of spilled crude oil in the dusk half-light. Clouds parted with twice the speed in the coastal breeze, hiding and then revealing the low arch of a chalk-colored moon as he drove further into the festering swampland toward a fractured coast. He was still in men's clothes as he drove (a faded nicotine-yellow T-shirt and dust-worn jeans) but his face still carried the remnants of makeup he hadn't tried in earnest to wipe away. Eye-liner still traced the irritated, sleep-deprived flesh above his lashes and some smudged Revlon sat on his lips like a wine stain. His aquamarine fingernail polish was chipping where he compulsively bit down on the tip, something he had done since his move to El Paso. He kept his suitcase in the seat beside him in the beat up Honda. The suitcase belonged to his mother. He had stolen it.

Arriving somewhere unfamiliar at night was like sneaking into a stranger's home. His old hometown ran on a Southeastern schedule and just as the communal energy began to settle, Carlo was out of sync. The lights of 24-hour drugstores and gas stations shined bright on his contracting pupils. The streets were empty. He rolled down the driver's side windshield to smell the salt and exhaust in the air. There was blood on the night sky. He knew the difference between death and life. There was something supremely dead about this area. The windows of the doublewides were dark as if hollow inside. The palmettos shuddered in the wind but the trees, the kind seen more often inland, were unmoving. A bad omen.

He took a cigarette from the soft pack in the cup holder at his waist and lit the end with the weak flame from his neon Bic. He punched the cabin lights and read over two addresses scribbled on the worn sheet ripped from a legal pad. His headlights dimmed until he shut off the cabin bulbs. The battery and car around it was getting old.

He headed down Red Bend road and took a right at Chokecherry Lane. Carlo ashed the cigarette out the window with his left hand and steered with his right. In the headlights, he caught glimpses of raccoons

and possums scuttling along the wood and chicken-wire fences. He hadn't heard the yapping of coyotes all night. It would take getting used to.

He found the first address from the legal pad's hectic scrawl at the edge of a cul de sac of empty timeshare cabins garnished in a boathouse aesthetic. Lightning struck in the distance, illuminating the expanse of swampland beyond the small backyards surrounded in waist-high alligator fencing. The only house that had any activity was the squat ranch home at the cul de sac's center. There were two cars in the driveway: a beige Impala and a black pickup truck. Warm red light pulsed on the heavy curtains.

He parked in front of the mailbox to give the other cars enough space to pull out and sat in the darkness smoking. It started to rain. He tossed the spent cigarette butt out the car and lit another. He didn't bother to roll up the window in the rainfall. He liked the way rain felt on his face. He leaned back in his seat and stretched his legs. He had been driving for two days. He stopped for the night in Alabama, sleeping in the back of the car. A strip mall security guard knocked on the window around six a.m. and told him to get lost.

He continued to wait. Early night turned into late night and he lost patience. He took some personal things from the car like a tube of lipstick and a bottle of pills as well as his Bic and cigarettes and shoved them in his pockets. He opened the glove compartment and took out the black, wooden grip revolver and box of .38 special and stuffed them in the front zipper of the rolling suitcase. He had not stolen the pistol or the ammunition. His stepfather had given him the gun to take to the range when he was seventeen.

He locked the car and took his suitcase up the shallow steps to the concrete patio in the rain. He rang the doorbell and knocked twice.

Mistress Tillandsia cracked the door open by a meager inch. The several chains hooked onto the doorsill divided her face.

"It's Carlo," he said.

"You're a day early."

"I made good time comin' from Texas."

"I'm with a client, you'll need to wait."

“I can crash on a couch or something.”

“I don’t have a couch in my house. I run my business through most of my living space. Things aren’t ready for you yet. Go around back. There’s a hammock under the veranda. Give me at least two hours.”

“Alright.”

He went to the back and saw the hammock. What she called the veranda was an uneven slab of repurposed boardwalk below a corrugated tin roof. He set his suitcase behind the headrest of the hammock beside the dry spigot in the vine-eaten brick. He lay back, halfway sheltered from the rain, and breathed in the musk of the swamp air. Even in the rain, the still water gave off an odor.

He fell asleep.

When he woke up, Mistress Tillandsia was yelling at him to get inside through the screen door. Carlo pulled himself out of the cocoon-like folds of the hammock and grabbed the suitcase. He passed through the heavy rain and up the creaking boards to the kitchen entrance where she stood in the fluorescent light. Her client was still inside, hanging out in the kitchen in his underwear, sipping from a glass of Evan Williams beside the open bottle at the wooden table. He was a bearded guy, five to six years older than Carlo, a confederate flag tattooed on his bare shoulder. The flag had been separated into thirds by several long calluses as if someone had tried to cut it off with a razor. Carlo noticed a Ziploc bag full of ice shoved into his boxers.

“The fuck you looking at?”

Carlo turned away and followed Tillandsia out of the kitchen through a narrow wood-paneled hallway. The dominatrix got her name from the scientific “*Tillandsia usneoides*,” otherwise known as Spanish moss. She had an air mattress blown up in the corner of her bedroom beside the bathroom door. There were two pillows, an ill-fitting, bunched top sheet and a thin gray blanket. It looked more welcoming than he could have imagined. He gave her twenty-dollars which she took from him without hesitating.

“I have to go back to the kitchen.”

When she was gone, he dove on top of the mattress and buried his face in the pillows. He fell asleep again. He dreamed about suffocating in a plastic bag, about the feeling of duct tape around his neck; the horrible noise of suction it made as a length was peeled off the roll. The terrible feeling of foreign textures and the taste of bodily fluids marred his unconscious mind.

He woke up the next day around noon. It was still raining outside, or perhaps it had stopped at some point and started over. The mattress was beginning to deflate. He sat upright and the opposite ends lifted from the carpet. He looked around the room. Mistress Tillandsia wasn't in her bed. The blinds were closed. His suitcase was gone. His clothes were neatly and carefully folded atop her dresser. He stood up and moved into the hallway. She had set his suitcase in a small alcove beneath a shoe rack. He pulled it out and checked the front pocket.

She was rustling in the kitchen. Carlo walked over to the wooden table where his cigarettes and lighter had been set out for him.

“Do you drink coffee?”

“Yes,” he said, sitting down and placing a cigarette between his lips.

“How do you take it?”

“Luke warm and straight black.”

She set the cup in front of him.

“You'll have to wait for it to cool down.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Thanks for everything, for the bed and a place to stay. For setting my stuff out. I appreciate all of it...”

“There's a 'but' coming,” she said, interrupting him.

“Where's my gun and my bullets.”

“I was actually looking through your stuff to make sure you didn't bring any hard drugs into my house.”

“I get it. It’s your place. You don’t want something dangerous like that around. It was disrespectful to bring it inside. I should have kept it in my car.”

Tillandsia took a seat at the table and sipped at her cup of coffee.

“It *was* disrespectful and I don’t want anything like that in my house,” she said.

“I’ll go put it back in my car.”

“Nice try. You’ll get it back when you leave.”

He smiled and ashed his cigarette in the crystal tray between them.

“Why can’t I just put it away in my car? I was gonna go to the range tomorrow.”

She set her cup on the table.

“You’re so transparent, you’re almost invisible.”

“I know it doesn’t look good. But the truth is, when I had to leave El Paso, where else did I know anyone who could help me get situated. You know, get a job and get a place. I’d be living in my car if I went anywhere else.”

“Carlo, baby,” she said. “It doesn’t look good because it isn’t good. Why do you think I said yes?”

“So you’re just letting me stay here so you could talk me out of it?”

“I’m not going to talk you out of anything. I’m just not going to let you.”

“Why not?” he said, his face turning red.

“Because it’s not worth your life.”

“It’s not worth my life? It is my life. It’s always been my life.”

“Things can change. You’re still a kid.”

“The way things changed for him. Everyday he’s out there talking to people who don’t know. Every time he’s given...”

“You’re obsessed. You’re wounded and you’re full of rage and you’re naive.”

“But I’m right. You can concede to that one fact. Whatever I do, or what you’re trying to prevent, you can agree with me that I’m right.”

“I can’t say that. No, I can’t say that you’re right. I can agree that he’s wrong.”

He began to breathe heavily through his nose and wiped tears from his face.

“Give me my fuckin’ gun back, Norman!”

She reached across the table and gave him a powerful, open-handed slap.

He squinted from the pain.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“You say something like that again and you can get the fuck out of my house. And I will call the police and tell them you have a plan to murder someone. Do you understand?”

He buried his face into his hands and began crying, nodding his head.

She set a box of tissues in front of him and told him not to get snot on her kitchen table.

He took one and cleaned his nostrils.

“Do you seriously want to go to prison?”

“I’d rather go to prison than deal with this anymore.”

“And what the fuck do you think happens to people like us in prison? You think I don’t know exactly how bad you hurt? I was inside for just a year and a half, general population with men.”

“I want him to die so bad.”

“You need to forget he exists,” she said. “You should look for your father, or your grandfather. Find a job. Create something.”

He tried to stop crying.

“I was thinking about...seeing if...I could spend some time with my dad’s dad.”

“Maybe you need to go back to Texas.”

“Don’t make me go back. I can’t go back there.”

“Then what am I going to do with you, Carlo?”

He had to leave the house when she had clients over. He could go to the Bojangles a mile up the road or stay in the backyard when it wasn’t raining and watch the alligators sunbathe on the mounds of pluff mud like statues. She had a regular list of men who came to the house. Not one looked the same. Some of

them came with gym bags stuffed with gear and outfits they liked to wear. One guy had a suitcase record player and a milk crate of vinyl albums he brought to each session. Another showed up with a different bottle of champagne and assortment of European chocolates. Not all were so innocent. He had seen her throw at least two men out the door with their clothes half off.

The first guy he had seen with the swollen groin came around again. He spent about four hours inside and left. Carlo took the beat up Honda and followed his black truck to a dive bar called Ollie's at the edge of the marsh. The parking lot was nothing but white dust and pine needles. He watched him pass through the void of dark neon after the doorman glanced at his license. He followed him inside, letting his eyes adjust to the lightlessness. Tillandsia's client sat alone at the edge of the bar top with a bottle of Miller Genuine Draft in front of him, the bent cap still latched to the top of the long neck which he hadn't yet touched. There was shame in his eyes. A game of pool commenced in the background like the cracking of a whip. Carlo sat across from him and ordered a shot of tequila. He made eye contact and swigged the drink. He didn't say anything and averted his eyes from Carlo.

"Hey, you remember me?"

He said nothing.

"Hey," he whispered as low as he could while still being heard. "It's me. I'm Mistress Tillandsia's friend. I saw you..."

"Why don't you get the fuck out of here, man. I ain't tryin' to talk to you."

"It isn't like that. I was just looking for somebody who might be able to get me a gun?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm looking for a..."

"Why are you whispering at me, man. I ain't trying to listen to you. You need to get the fuck out of here."

The pool game behind them stopped. The bartender walked over to them.

"What's going on?"

"Get this faggot out of here, Reg."

The bartender turned to Carlo.

“Pay for the drink and get the fuck out of here. This isn’t that kind of bar, snowflake.”

Carlo said nothing and placed the wrinkled bills on the bartop. He walked out the door into the thick humidity, the tread of his shoes grinding against the dusty lot and noticed a man with a pool cue following him to his car. The doorman had his back turned as he smoked a cigarette. Carlo dropped to one knee, acting like he was tying his shoelace. The young man following him wore a plain white T-shirt and pulled the bill of his baseball cap low to hide his face. He came up behind him with the cue raised. Carlo knocked him in the groin with his elbow before whipping around and hooking him with a bony fist. He fell to the ground, his back covered in pine needles. The doorman was still ignoring them, thinking the fag was getting beat. Carlo’s adrenaline surged. He picked up the pool cue and rammed the heavier end against his attacker’s face. The young man’s nose broke and blood rippled over his wispy mustache and dry lips. He raised the cue high and swung it against his kneecap, then threw it into the bushes like a javelin before racing to the Honda. He drove away without looking back.

Tillandsia had been paid, in part, by one of her regular clients with a bag of very potent Miami cannabis. She characterized it as less of a payment and more of a large tip, or gift. She decided to take the following night to offer Carlo a good time. She had no couch in the living room, so they watched TV and talked and smoked a bowl while lounging on her bed. The flat screen was on the dresser. She didn’t have cable, but it didn’t matter what was on.

They watched the ending of a Mexican soap opera and Carlo translated the dialogue and taught Tillandsia some of the terms. He had been learning Spanish in school since childhood and picked up even more from the streets of El Paso. Throughout his life, he was either speaking or reading, or even thinking in Spanish, but still did not consider himself fluent. Teachers mistakenly used to call him Carlos on his first day of class. His mother’s maiden name was DiAngelo.

Tillandsia flipped through channels while Carlo painted her nails. He was stoned and took two minutes on each nail. She didn't care. She had done her fingers earlier. He mentioned ordering a pizza and she got out her laptop to place the order. She asked what he wanted and he hesitated for another few minutes, lost in rerun of *The Simpsons*. She snapped her fingers to break the trance and asked him what he wanted. He wanted sausage and black olives. Tillandsia wanted onions. Carlo agreed to red onions.

He finished painting her nails. They continued to watch the same channel as the rerun episode broke for commercial. The local news broadcasted a short teaser for a gas station robbery near the Charleston Highway. A fast food ad sped by at a manic pace. After, an old man's face took over the screen. He was sitting at a large mahogany desk in a stark white office in the foreground. Behind him were a series of open windows with white shutters facing the cobblestone streets below, stray bands of palmetto tree leaves jutting inside. The old man talked about integrity and his time as a deacon. He mentioned his military service and community outreach. He illustrated his years on the tourism board and gave vague allusions to his conservative religious beliefs. The old man gave his name and said he was running for Mayor of Charleston.

They lay on the bed in silence.

Carlo finally said something.

"Do any of your clients like choking?"

"A few," she said.

"Receiving?"

"Of course."

"He was really into choking. I blacked out a few times during."

"And your folks didn't press charges?"

He pointed to the television.

"Does it fuckin' look like they pressed charges?"

"What was your plan?"

“I wasn’t gonna make it public. I know a golf course on Mount Pleasant. He likes to play there on Wednesdays.”

“Have you given up on it?”

“Yeah.”

They finished watching *The Simpsons*. The doorbell rang.

In his dreams, the former deacon had contacted Tillandsia for sex and Carlo was able to corner him in a spare room. He stabbed him with a kitchen knife as many times as he could, but he would never die. His dreams denied him that catharsis. He’d be standing over the sink washing blood out of his hair and face, the handle of the blade sticking out of his shoulder.

Carlo had found a job he didn’t mind at a chain makeup boutique in the city. He had a steadier income and began saving up to move out of Tillandsia’s home. He knew he would need a roommate or two in order to make it work. He spent the last of his prostitution money to buy a button-up white shirt with a black vest and a pair of dress slacks, something to look dapper in while he chose the best foundation for teenage girls and fifty-year-old women. It was better than sucking off construction workers behind a movie theater at four o’clock in the morning.

He decided not to look for his father.

His mother found out where he had gone and called one of Tillandsia’s cell phones. His bitterness had abated and, rationalizing that she’d continue to give him trouble if he didn’t placate her, he spoke to her and let her know he was fine, living with a friend, working a real job. She let him go like she would never see him again.

Election day came. Carlo was not registered to vote. The former deacon lost. The campaign posters were gathered up from the roadsides and stripped from billboards. The commercials on television also ended. Not that he ever watched much television after Tillandsia’s night off.

He got home from work on a Tuesday night. A new client was just leaving the house as he got in. Tillandsia was decompressing in the kitchen with a thin joint. She had a shoe box on the table. He asked her what she had and she told him that she would keep her word. He sat down and looked at the box and thought about the former deacon and the golf course on Mount Pleasant. He opened the shoebox and saw the gun and the smaller box of .38 special, then closed it, tapped his fingers on the table.

She asked him what was wrong, but he said nothing. She passed him the joint and he took a drag and passed it back.

“Maybe you should keep it,” he said. “You know, for protection.”

She set the joint in the side of her mouth and took the shoebox outside. He got up and watched her through the screen door as she threw the handgun and box of .38 into the swamp. He went back to the table and sat down and placed his head in his hands. She stayed outside, listening to the cicadas a few minutes longer.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *‘Chokecherry’ came from a pervasive sense of guilt that I was writing too much about North Carolina and Tennessee and not enough about the midlands or the coast. I spent most of my life ping ponging between North and South Carolina. I had just finished another novel that took place in the mountains and I realized that I was sustaining myself on memories of the crisp air and foliage covered boulders. But I live near the coast around the swamps now, and I remember the proper coast from my teen years too. I like to take pictures of copperheads on my phone and I notice when banana leaves grow each year around the palms. I know the alligators, the snakes, the beaches, the darkness, the desolation. Writing this story was my way of artistically metabolizing this particular region of the Southeast. It’s also a pretty rough place. We have a lot of stabbings and shootings. A truck just drove clean through an apartment a few doors down the sidewalk from me. The weekend before that, a body turned up in a McDonald’s parking lot across from my street. I wanted to convey that brutal daily life through the characters own sense of urgency within the story.*

**BIO:** Connor de Bruler was born in Indiana. He has been published in *The Rambler*, *Pulp Metal Magazine*, *FRESH*, *The Horror Library Vol. 6*, *Yellow Mama* and *The New Flesh*. He is the author

of three novels: Tree Black, The Mountain Devils and Olden Days. He is 28 years old and lives in Columbia, South Carolina.

# PSST!

*By Stephen Baily*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A compelling existential narrative with strong dramatic affinities to Beckett that could just as easily have been titled Huis Clos. We were taken with the open-ended dialogue between the speaker and a stranger that has no real beginning or end and plays upon the absurdist possibilities of miscommunication—all the while thinking they are communicating. The absence of setting and the clever use of in media res fine tunes the sense of isolation and entrapment and Baily's astute, phonic vernacular is the credible voice of alienation.*

Not long after I announced I was leaving home, my father began complaining of pains in his chest.

—I'm sorry—what was that?

You heard me.

—Of course I heard you, but were you talking to me?

I don't see anyone else on this bench.

—Because—correct me if I'm wrong—I've never laid eyes on you before.

That makes two of us.

—And yet out of the blue you expect me to take an interest in your father? No offense, but what nuthouse did they just let you out of?

I admit my abruptness may seem a bit odd, but—

—I don't like the look of you either. You're the kind of guy, if I saw you coming, I'd cross the street.

I keep forgetting to go to the barbershop.

—Leave your grooming habits out of it and tell me again why I should give a damn about your father. I had a father, too, you know.

I don't doubt it for a minute.

—Except I wouldn't dream of buttonholing a complete stranger about him.

My apologies. You looked to me to be suffering from the heat. I guess I thought you could do with a little distraction.

—I can always go to a movie if that's what I'm after.

I meant verbal distraction, not some spastic quasi-opera that's all recitatives and no arias. Christ, movies are ridiculous. Remind me not to watch another ten thousand of them.

—Remind yourself. I'm not your conscience. You're nobody to me.

I suppose not, but you still haven't said if you are or you aren't.

—If I are or I aren't what?

In need of verbal distraction.

—Well, since you mention it, I could probably do with some—yeah. But I warn you, the muggier it gets, the shorter I am on patience.

Fair enough.

—So did he have a heart attack or not?

I didn't stick around to find out. A carnival was passing through town and I made my escape with it.

—Not so fast. I thought this was about your father.

When did I say that? It's about me—about what happened to me after I left home.

—But I don't know a thing about your home, so why should I care what happened to you after you left it?

To cite only the high points, on my first night with the carnival I lost my virginity.

—Who to?

The bearded lady—whose beard turned out to be real, by the way.

—That's why they invented electrolysis.

She also gave me the clap.

—That's why they invented antibiotics.

In a month, I dropped twenty-five pounds from living on rice, peas, and margarine.

—That's why they invented food stamps.

I sank into anomie.

—That's why they invented antidepressants.

You don't believe in making things easy for a person, do you?

—I didn't approach you, you inflicted yourself on me, in the apparent smug conviction I'd find the story of your life captivating. Don't take this personally, but there's a name for someone like you—someone who expects other people to drop everything whenever he opens his mouth. It starts with a W and ends with a—

Okay. I plead guilty to too much haste. Suppose I go back and focus a little more on my father.

—You had your chance.

You wouldn't enjoy hearing about the medal he won in the war for taking out a machine-gun nest with a water pistol?

—Some other time. Right now, it occurs to me there's a new feature at the RKO.

Piece of garbage.

—Maybe so, but at least the place is air-conditioned, they sell popcorn by the tub, and—who can say?—there might even be a lonely housewife in the seat next to mine.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

*What inspired your story?*

*The muse,—t hat obdurate bitch—for a change condescended to spare me a spark.*

*Your intention when writing it?*

*To save the world—what else?*

*Your stylistic and/or literary influences?*

*No comment. I wouldn't want to appear to be holding others responsible for my defects.*

**BIO:** Stephen Baily has published fiction in some forty-five print and online journals. He's also the author of ten plays and three novels including 'Markus Klyner, MD, FBI' which is available as a Kindle e-book. He lives in France.

# That Time I Watched Iron Man 2 with James Franco

By W. Tyler Paterson

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A conflicted 20 something dude's grapple with the meaning of life raises more questions than it answers and the seamless introduction of James Franco can be seen as both a projection and catalyst of his intellectual and spiritual bewilderment. This is RPF (Real People Fiction) and the first example of the genre we've published. A lot of times in these stories things get out of control, with the real person stealing the scenes or a breakdown in fictional credibility. Not here. The convincing narrator is exactly the kind of existentially troubled hombre we like to read about (and hang out with) and besides, any writer who has the pluck to dangle 'Schrodinger's cat' before our eyes is almost a guaranteed shoe-in.*

I was at my buddy Chad's place sitting on a lush blue sectional fidgeting with a bong listening to him drone on about his new three thousand dollar skis when he got a text.

"My buddy James is gonna swing by," he said, looking at his phone. It was a phone that he had to recently repurchase after leaving the old one on the roof of his car and driving it into traffic. When he picked up the new device, he once again opted out of insurance and paid twelve hundred dollars out of pocket. Asshole. "Just be cool."

"I'm always cool," I said, and ripped a gnarly toke.

"If I wanted lip from you, I'd pull down your pants," he said, really proud of that one. I started to wonder why I was even friends with such a dick, but the weed started to kick in like a slow moving river through a springtime forest and I remembered exactly why I was friends with such a dick.

“Seriously,” I said, “I’m always cool.”

“Jonah,” he warned, and I sat back into the plush cushions and started staring into his sixty inch mounted flat screen, which was hooked up to Bluetooth stereo surround sound. We had been gearing up for *Endgame* and going through the Marvel movies, one or two per night, and wildly out of order. For instance we watched *The Avengers* before we watched *Iron Man*, which – if you’re familiar with the series – is like going the wrong way down a one-way street with your dick out to piss all over the *Do Not Enter* sign. A few nights before we’d stuffed our faces with Dominoes pepperoni pizza and parmesan knots and pulled a double feature with *Winter Soldier*, and then *Thor: Ragnarock* hollering at the screen like mad men.

Chad lived alone in a baby blue ranch style house in the burbs that he filled with really expensive toys. Most of it he had just to have, like a two thousand dollar guitar for his home recording studio, only he didn’t know how to play. He figured someone else would and then he’d just record *that* person.

As far as romance, Chad was just past the age where it was considered cool to be a swinging bachelor. I never saw him with the same woman twice, but through the years I noticed a change in how the women responded to him. In his mid twenties, they saw his potential and kind of dug it. A young charismatic guy, well-groomed, a great job selling cloud space to tech companies, it was like the ladies saw him as their ticket into a life of elegance. Now in his mid thirties, women left feeling sorry for him. It was like the best thing that they could do was wish that he was someone else.

My cell phone buzzed. One of the games I had been playing – a restaurant simulation where I had to cook and serve hungry patrons their specific meals - told me that a new location would be opening soon. It made me realize how hungry I was, so I dug my fingers into the ceramic bowl of Cooler Ranch Doritos on the coffee table with wood supposedly from the Amazon rainforest.

“Save room, I made chili. James loves my chili,” he said.

“Dude, are you in love with James or something?” I teased.

“What did I say about being cool?!” he said from the kitchen, pointing at me with a long wooden spoon stained dark red at the wide end.

I grabbed the remote and queued up *Iron Man 2*, the one with Mickey Rourke playing the villain Whiplash, only Mickey Rourke looks like he’s only in the movie for the paycheck. It makes the movie really funny because major villains aren’t supposed to phone it in. Thank goodness Sam Rockwell, who is a national treasure, was able light up the screen bright enough for the both of their dark characters.

My mind started to drift and the evening room was steadily growing darker. The THC was kicking in hard because I kept running my dry tongue along the dry roof of my mouth, and then taking too large of gulps from my water. Chad had one of those fridges that auto filled any glass under the built-in faucet with the right amount of ice and water, and a part of me was looking for an excuse to use it.

Chad walked into the living room with empty bowls and clean spoons while I stumbled toward the kitchen using my hand to balance on the wall, and clinked the glass into place. The nozzle began to spray water and ice looking like it was hot syrup seducing ice freshly scooped ice cream. I thought about ice cream and pulled open the freezer expecting to hear Chad yell for me to get out of there, but he didn’t say anything so I took note of the unopened pint of cookies and cream.

When I walked back into the room, James had showed up and was sitting on the opposite end of the couch catching up with Chad, who was standing near the coffee table.

James was James fucking Franco. He was in the Spider-Man movies with Toby Maguire before both of the reboots. He played Tommy Wiseau in *The Disaster Artist*, which is based on the movie *The Room* - which is considered one of the worst films ever made - and got an Oscar nod for

it. Really, James Franco did a great movie about a bad movie and was recognized by his industry for turning the same story into one of the best films of the year.

My brain started to hurt so I sat down on the couch. If a movie was bad, but the movie about that movie was amazing, was the first movie ever actually bad? How could two things exist on the same spectrum on polar opposite ends and still be linked as the same?

“Jonah, this is James,” Chad said.

“Whaddup,” I said, leaning over and giving James fucking Franco a fist bump.

“Hey,” he said. He smiled his movie star smile – inhuman and otherworldly, a changeling, a slip-skin hag come to collect - and me in my infinite coolness started to blush and giggle like that smile had activated some sort of twisted auto-pilot of internal lame-ness.

“Don’t mind him,” Chad whispered, but still loud enough for me to hear. “He lost his Dad in February.”

Normally such a statement would have been cause for me to return fire. Vulnerabilities should be kept under lock and key of their confidants, but I let it slide because mostly I’d never been in the presence of a movie star before. Even though he was wearing blue jeans and tan work boots and a grey zip-up hoodie over a white tee shirt, his presence filled the space with both imagined and perceived status.

“I haven’t seen this one before,” James said, nodding at the title screen of *Iron Man 2*. Chad patted him on the shoulder and told him to kick back and relax, that the sofa becomes a recliner and there’s the lever.

Why did James Franco deserve our intimate creature comforts? I had been friends with Chad for years and he both never mentioned a friendship with a movie star, though all things considered it kind of makes sense, but I’ve also never been shown how to make myself more

comfortable. As a human being, did James possess something that I did not that made people want to give him things?

As the movie started, I could only imagine what it was like for a movie star to be watching a movie that he wasn't in, and one by Marvel no less. A part of me wanted to ask him if he felt bitter over the Spider Man reboots, to watch a franchise move on without him, but it also felt rude. When people asked me about my dad and how I was doing, I was never sure what they were looking for. Certainly it couldn't have been the truth, that life felt meaningless and banal, that the person who brought me into the world was gone and I felt horribly alone, that the pain never actually went away even if I was smiling, so I knew that they kind of wanted me to lie so that *they* felt better.

It made me think about the soul, and if the soul has a soul, and how the soul can't exist as one singular thing because how could a soul know what it wanted if all that it ever knew was me? Then I wondered if the soul *did* have a soul and that maybe I was the soul of a bigger thing that I couldn't see. The idea of a soul started to feel empty, as just a thing that people talk about when they can't be bothered to actually understand themselves. I found it hard to believe that my father's soul was watching me from heaven because I'm not very interesting and if he could have been anywhere, he probably would have been golfing at Pebble Beach because apparently his soul loved getting birdies.

"That's cool," James Franco said, watching Tony Stark jump out of an airplane in the Iron Man suit dodging fireworks on the way down.

"God isn't real," I said, clicking my dry tongue against the roof of my dry mouth. The idea that all of us were watching the same movie, acting as receivers for the same information, and each of us taking away something different felt less than divine. Unity was divine, togetherness. What James was experiencing wasn't bliss, it was watered down excitement so that he could relate to us plebeians.

“Jonah, cool it,” Chad said. James looked at me curiously and then back at the movie as the surround sound system rumbled the couch like summertime thunder sometimes did. Chad was sitting on a black leather barstool with the Led Zeppelin logo on the top, and I thought about how *Stairway to Heaven* was lyrical bullshit. Musically it’s amazing, but the idea of paying your way into eternal happiness felt asinine because how can shadows be taller than souls when souls cannot exist?

Then I wondered about metaphor and how maybe the world existed in codes as a way for us to make sense of chaos. It was like *The Disaster Artist* and *The Room* both being one in the same, but both existing as opposites. Chaos might be easier to understand when we think about how multiple realities exist all at once in the same moment and inside of the same space. Watching *Iron Man 2*, all of us were getting something different.

James was chillaxing on the opposite end of the couch.

Chad was putting on a show and playing it cool for James.

I was stoned as a motherfucker and yet, all three of us were on the same ride through space and time.

James reached towards the table for the ceramic bowl of Doritos and I got nervous because he has an image to uphold.

“Should you be eating that?” I asked. James turned to Chad.

“Should I not be eating this?” he asked, confused.

“Eat whatever you want, bro,” Chad said, and then shot me a mean look. All I could think about was how Doritos sometimes give me diarrhea and I eat junk food all of the time. What would they do to someone who ate clean and worked out a bunch? What if he went to a meeting with studio execs and had to excuse himself because he had to pinch his butt cheeks together so hard that he waddled as he walked to the bathroom because of diarrhea?

But then I saw James Franco as human who just wanted to be human. He probably enjoyed Doritos. My perception of him was probably wrong because what do I know about anything? When the doctors told me that my dad's cancer had metastasized I started laughing I thought they had made the word up. It sounded like something that would describe Godzilla when Godzilla got hit with electricity and started to grow. *We need him to grow bigger and defeat Mothra! What size? Metastasized!*

Also the idea of a giant moth isn't very scary, at least not scary enough to coax a giant lizard into fighting it to the death over a Japanese village. But maybe moths were scary and I just didn't know why. The writer's probably did, which is why they included it, and I started to think about all of the things I didn't know.

Then I started thinking about some of the things that I did know, like how birds fly south for the winter, and how the fuck did we ever figure that out? It had to start with an idea, then a theory, but what made someone even want to test that theory? I imagined it as a happenstance piece of dialogue.

"Hey Jim! Remember that bird you described when I visited you in Maine? Well I think I saw the *exact* same bird in Florida."

"Don't you pull my leg, Robert. How could a bird fly all the way to Florida, and why would it make such a treacherous journey?"

"You're right, I'm being silly."

And then at the same time, they both looked at each other with wide eyes and said, "Unless..."

But even then it would take years and years to gather data, test theories, and confirm information so whoever it was that figured it out did an amazing thing that we just take for granted. And then they died. I didn't know his name. Or her. I don't even know, so I began to wonder if

birds *actually* flew south for the winter because I was in no position to really question the validity of the idea. Even if I did, there was no way for me to realistically test the findings and so all things continued to exist on a spectrum of both existing, and not – like Schrödinger’s cat.

I realized I had been spacing out and snapped back to the present. It was the part of the movie where Whiplash confronts Tony Stark at the racetrack and people are freaking out because only Tony Stark is supposed to have that technology. Mickey Rourke is whipping his electrified cables and slicing cars in half in slow motion.

“Nice,” James Franco said. Chad laughed and echoed the *nice*.

I took a sip from my glass and spilled water down my chin and onto my shirt.

“Ice,” I said, but no one got the joke. They both looked at me like I was about to have a seizure. I wondered if they were judging me because I was high and couldn’t sip my water the right way, and if later on James Franco would text Chad to talk shit about me.

“Napkin?” James said, pinching a white piece between his fingers and handing it my way. I took it and dabbed the front of my shirt.

“Do you miss Spider Man?” I suddenly asked, my itchy eyes growing watery. “Is it hard for you to keep going on knowing that Spider Man isn’t part of your world anymore and you have to figure out new movies to be in, but sometimes they don’t feel right and it’s like you’re drifting from thing to thing just because you have to, and not because you want to?”

Chad looked furious. He was as red as a stop sign and his eyes filled with venom.

“I would have loved to have been in *Endgame*,” he said, then frowned. “But I don’t really have a say in what happens to the world or the people in it. The best I can do is live with the cards I’ve been dealt.”

I thought about *The Room* and *The Disaster Artist* and how good and bad can coexist as one. I thought about my Dad and how on the days when I didn’t see him and he was alive, I carried on just

fine, but in the days after his death and knowing I'd never see him again, everything carried a different type of gravitas. I thought about birds and the soul and golfing and how all three existed together in non-linear lines.

“You were great as Tommy Wiseau,” I said.

“That’s what’s up,” James said, and leaned over to give me another fist bump.

I started thinking about other stuff and before I knew it, the movie was over. James Franco left and Chad wasn’t mad at me anymore.

“Old family friend,” he told me, as though reading my mind about how he knew James fucking Franco. It made sense – Chad always filled his home with expensive toys. “You want to crash here tonight? I’ve got lots of leftover chili that needs some eating.”

I realized he was lonely, and that I was lonely too, and even though we were together, we were still alone. We existed as the same, but different, which made me realize that we maybe weren’t so different despite what we felt. Everything we did to fill the time was to divert our attention away from the dark void of death, and so I kicked my feet up onto the sofa and stared into the bright flashing lights of the flat screen TV. Chad sat where James had been sitting and pulled a blanket up to his neck.

“Do you think birds really fly south for the winter, or do you think it’s all bullshit, like the idea of heaven?” I asked.

“Man, fuck birds,” Chad said, and pressed play on the remote so that *Iron Man 2* started up again.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I wish I had an interesting origin story for this piece, but it really came out of boredom. I had been writing more traditional literary stories and kind of got bored with the same ol’ themes so I started asking myself a bunch of ‘what ifs’ to kick start the creative wheel*

*in my brain. Somehow I landed on the idea that people act differently around celebrities even though they're just people too, which made me chuckle. I imagined James Franco sitting on a couch watching a movie and THAT made me chuckle again because of course he likes movies and of course, he has opinions on them. Then I wondered what would happen to someone under duress if they met a celebrity and couldn't get a hold of themselves but for very different reasons than just being a fanboy. Next thing I knew I had a draft of this story. I loved the idea of the main character being emotionally wiped out, physically exhausted/stoned, and mentally in a dark place when he meets Mr. Franco, which allows him to follow his inner monologue to unique places and actually lets him start to heal. Mostly, it was fun to write—especially imagining the speaker in the story to be similar to the character of Jonah from Veep on HBO, the type that says whatever they're thinking without regard to anyone else. I'd also watched a ton of Marvel movies to get ready for Endgame so that for sure played a role.*

**BIO:** W. T. Paterson is the author of the novels 'Dark Satellites' and 'WOTNA'. A Pushcart Prize nominee and graduate of Second City Chicago, his work has appeared in over 50 publications worldwide including *Fiction Magazine*, *The Gateway Review* and *The Paragon Press*. A number of stories have been anthologized by *Lycon Valley*, *North 2 South Press* and *Thuggish Itch*. He spends most nights yelling to his cat to "Get down from there!"

# LITTLE RIVERS: A STORY OF HALEY'S HYPERHYDROSIS HANDS

by Charles J. March III

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Quote: '...she crossed her arms and grabbed the gameskeeper's pale and hale left hand with hers, and at that moment, their arches formed a fundament of freedom, and it was like the universe took a deep pant.'* *A strange and hauntingly prepossessing story that reads like poetry and settles in the mind like a dream awakened. Words and phrases tumble in startling deconstructions and their textures contend for melodic harmonies that resonate through the dense, gorgeously smithed alliterative prose like birds of paradise.* *Quote: '...she stood them up and hurried to sit on the kitsch, backless bar stools the barback had situated in the back by the kitchen and bathrooms.'* *We love the way the author explores alternative meanings to familiar words, word order and concept exchange. Snatches of dialogue gleam like starbursts: 'Well, sanguinely he's sagacious enough to decipher them," delphied Haley.'* *If you think a girl suffering from chronically sweating hands is an unpromising subject for a short story, this dazzling Nabokovian prestidigitation of dancing syllables will shut down the argument once and for all.*

As Palm Sunday drew near, I was reminded of the deep and profundus times I've had with my brother, Ryan, and his young lady, Haley, in Chiraq, The O.C., and elsewhere.

I thirst for this to be a tributary to her, owing to the fact that she has the freshest freshets anywhere, and since I know she'll never send him down the river; however, she'll most likely take up ligament litigation against me and give me the finger after flicking through this, for

lightly extending the tendons of her truth. Albeit, little does she admit—Ryan might put a ring on it.

At this point, you may have a funny bone to pick with me, due to striking a raw radial nerve with my radicalness; but I assure you—the subject of her handedness is a heavy one.

This brevis story not only deals with a dyad of youthful lovers trying to figure out life's phalangic equation and metacarpal metaphysics, but is also a diegesis that chronicles the chronic condition of a naïve Fräulein's hyperhidrosis nieves. It begins in the Ganges infested City by the Lake, at a tiny restaurant off of Canal St, on an eve during the Christmas season *a couple of* years ago.

In the wishy-washy neon glow of a hole in the wall, her aquamarine optics twinkled like a scintillating star on a twilight thalassic, and her old chestnut postiche cascaded down-and-out like the ripples left after ships passing in the night. It was manifest who my man's best friend was going to be in those hours of darkness, and for many moons to come; but hitherto he received her digits and proceeded to dogg her, he cat-called her with his Siamese eyes and batted his long lashes at her on his way to the baño. He has an aptness for doing this whilst flying past beautiful barflies he's titillated by, and he recognized that there was something magical about this one, because her mitts moved quicker from his keek than her peepers, and they were extremely tawny—even the palms.

Despite this sheepishness, she hypocritically thought him a bit of a pussy for not saying anything, but he was in fact using opposition reflex, a canine training technique our Father taught him while wrangling Rottweilers when he was a runt. She was hoping that he'd wind up being her black knight in perspire glistening, garbage bag (helping him to cut weight for an upcoming amateur wrestling tournament) armor, after what she just went through while waiting hand and foot on some foot-in-mouth diseased derelicts.

And Ryan had indeed just witnessed one of these piss artists trying to spit game at Haley, after he peered the half-pint up and down while giving him his beer, "Hey, honey, how's about you get off your feet and have a seat right here," as he patted his lap with a creepy sleight of hand. "No, thanks, I'd rather do a handstand," she rendered, as she stood them up and hurried to sit on the kitsch, backless bar stools the barback had situated in the back by the kitchen and bathrooms.

This diminutive handmaiden fathomed that she had an interest in my brother, and wanted to invest in him by depositing her number, but a flood of trumped-up fears began running through her veins and into the depths of her soul, due to him being too hot to handle, and even though she's hands down one of the coolest people I ken, and is far more fun than a super soaker, she became hot and bothered by the thought of this teeny-weeny George Clooney look-alike coming out of the comfort station and giving her the cold shoulder again, with bupkis to talk to but his hand. So she bolted into the little loo, locked the door, and started taking a bird bath in the sink to cleanse her hands (one washing the other and vice versa) of the muck sweat circumstance that surfaced, in case her and Ryan ended up coming into contact with one another and shaking hands, at which point she could have an excuse and remark, "Oh, my apologies, I just washed

my hands before returning to work.” Knowing my easy going bro, he’d probably reciprocate with, “No sweat,” and/or “Don’t sweat it!”

As a rule of thumb, this is regularly what happens when her rivers rage—it precipitates her perturbation, and causes her to sweat the small stuff and runoff. She actually habitually just bathes in sweat, wiping herself with her wet paws like a feminine grimalkin, but even they need a rinse from time to time, usually as a last resort, like this one. And speaking of feverish felines—every time she golfs, her handicap causes her to scratch herself, and she gets the yips.

She also anticipated that this decontaminating would convey on multiple levels that she was a very hygienic girl and didn’t have the clap or anything, but as she ogled into the looking glass after splashing herself all about, she took a sip of the faucet’s well water, in the hopes of it causing her hands to run dry, and she started to get really self-conscious, thinking herself a hot mess, and began to cry. Be that as it may, most of mankind would contend that she’s a perfect 10, minus her manus, much like Megan Fox and Handgelina Jolie, if they were to break a sweat when going on stage. And, fortunately for her—her Lubriderm faucet fingers are a turn-on. Her spongy savoiardi, reverse osmosis, omnipresent wetness has the ability to boost any man’s ego, and obliterate impotence.

But for a lass, I digress. Back to the matter at hand.

The situation in the outhouse was starting to get out of hand. Like a schoolgirl, she started getting really giddy, and everything felt backwards, due to her autonomic dysreflexia, much like

my brother's dyslexic reactions (notwithstanding, he can read people like the back of his hand, and hand picked this pygmy honey, because *the one* expression was written all over her face). Her right hand didn't know what the left was doing, and she started to wonder if this is what love feels like. But the hour was at hand where she didn't have anymore time on her hands to trance. She had to get off of her hands, which were underneath her on top of the thunderbox, and get back to the business at hand. Howbeit, she began to cerebrate—on the one hand, she could just loiter in the water closet until her dikes broke loose—and on the second hand, she was still on the clock, and knew she needed to take the law of attraction into her own hands. So this queen of my brother's heart took the upper hand by royally flushing the toilet with the hand(s) she was dealt, as a front for her latrine trip, and after wringing out her fingers, she shamefully came out with them up in the air and swinging, so they could air dry. As she did this, she blazoned to her coworkers, but really to the patrons, "We're out of hand towels," so nobody would interrogate this eccentric sweat gland, love-struck server.

When she returned to her section, the luses were still there, lusting after her, but the tables had turned. She had a renewed sense of confidence, partly because she noticed that one of her playfellows was waiting on Ryan and his friends, and she could force her helping hand.

"Palmela, do you remember what drink that man ordered offhand?" Haley cross-examined.

"A diamantina cocktail," Palmela mentioned.

This passed her pilot study and proved that he wasn't like *the other guys*, so she proceeded to give her number in the form of handwritten Roman numerals to Ryan, via Palmela.

“These letters/numbers are all smudged!” Palmela exclaimed.

“Well, sanguinely he’s sagacious enough to decipher them,” delphied Haley.

When Palmela asked Haley why she was taking such a cryptic approach, she contended, “My hands are connected to my brain, but have a mind of their own. They channel ideas from my streams of consciousness.”

As Palmela handed Haley’s sopping number to Ryan, the Donald Trump lookalike drunkard was beginning to harass Haley again, and Ryan beheld her starting to sweat bullets, looking like she was getting ready to blast the man with a bitch-slapping, brackish water backhand. Ryan wanted to interfere, but didn’t want to get caught red-handed, engaged in hand-to-hand combat, where he’d surely beat the blood orange man to a pulp. That would really precipitate some blood, sweat, and tears. So he decided to take his leave.

Haley watched as he walked out to his truck, and wished upon a comet that he’d pick her up later from the bar. This homuncular girl’s Horner’s syndrome kicked in, and she started envisioning looking at him with her naked eye, and her as the focal point of his, as her astronomical assets and conjunction lay in, and on his trunk. In that short-period of thought, she realized that a celestial body like Ryan only orbits a girl like her once or twice in a lifetime, so she tried to remain calm and collected while waiting for him to call on her, but her hope was dwindling, as it was getting a little too late.

However, her wish was his command, as the little leaguer did indeed crack the code left by his sweetheart’s sweat, and called her from a decrepit pay phone, due to not receiving a signal from

his ivory cell tower. She knew he was invested in her as well, due to depositing money instead of making a collect call, so she tried her best to collect her wits before she spoke, but got all choked up, and needed to hit the head again to hydrate, as she had lost a lot of electrolytes through her hands (she once thought about selling her sweat as mineral water to help the clean water crisis, but didn't see any silver lining in it).

When she was finally able to easily speak, she said/asked, "Hi, how's it going?"

"It's going. And when I say it, I mean you—you're going to come with me to my winter sweat lodge in the Forest Preserve District. Meet me in my Dodge."

Haley was so intrigued by this stranger taking the ram by the horns and commanding her to go away with him into the copse where anything could happen, but if she once wished for her hands to be nailed to a cross, she was now incontrovertibly inclined to claw her way to heaven, even if it meant fighting for her life in the heat of psychotic eroticism.

"Okey-dokey, let me see if I can get off of work early."

When she asked her boss if she could leave to give love a chance, she was met with the established, high-handed response...

"I'm parasympathetic, Haley, but my hands are tied. We need all hands on deck. Now, please get yours dirty, so we can make light work of what's left."

Even though she was making money hand over duke, the cash that was in her customer's hands changed with hers for the last time, and she handed in her notice that she'd been planning to do for days, before walking out the entrance of the sweat shop and parting ways.

As she took hold of the handrail and traipsed down the stairs to his truck, she thought about how the touch barrier ice breaker would go, as she was always tactful with tactile situations, and a lot went into figuring out what to do with her fingers. She was in a cold sweat, so she plunged her hands into her pockets where there were some hand warmers, but only for a brief moment, because she didn't want to burn him. When she got in the vehicle, even though my brother is a lefty, he put out his right hand, as he wanted to unconsciously convey that he was going to be her right-hand man. Haley put hers in his, but couldn't keep her hands off of him, so as The Beatles' first American number 1 hit started playing in her head, she crossed her arms and grabbed the gamekeeper's pale and hale left hand with hers, and at that moment, their arches formed a fundament of freedom, and it was like the universe took a deep pant. All was well with the world, as it was in the palms of their hands. She now knew she had him under her opposable thumb, and that he'd soon be consuming melted M&M's out of the palm of her hand (time will tell if he bites it).

As their meat hooks were interlocked, they both felt new and infinite power flow into one another. His flexor muscles flexed around hers, and he lubricated her lumbrical muscles as he massaged her pinky finger. Then her intrinsic desires became inextricable, and she went hat in hand by asking if he wanted to lay in the bed of his truck with her and hold hands.

So they skipped shacking up at the lodge, and proceeded to have a hand-held love all-night long in the parking lot.

I love it when their rivers are braided. It's very touching, and makes me feel like we all enter the folds of their snuff boxes. I picture their contrasting fingers as all the colors of the world's rainbow, together, joined in brotherly and harmonious betterment.

In the morning, he took her back to her mother's dwelling where Haley lived, and since Haley felt that she had been in such good hands—there wasn't a drop of sweat on hers. When she went inside, she exclaimed, "Look, Ma, no sweat on my hands!" Her mother rolled her eyes, because Haley had forgotten, again, that her mother had recently gone as blind as a bat. Her mother also distinguished that Haley had been drinking (she had polished off part of a handle before leaving work, as it helps to steady her hands), because when Haley is under the influence, she slurs her words, due to the slurry of liquid that forms sediment at the mouth of her rivers. When it gets to that point, she encourages Haley to use sign language, because she can still espy the shadow play of her hand puppets, and would rather not discern any scent of her sloppiness. But Haley was way too excited to do that.

"Haley, what's gotten into you?"

"A man's gotten into me, Mama, and I think he might be the one to illuminate our survival and steal us away from this dark carpal tunnel!"

They indubitably abducted each other's hearts, and their fingerprints were all over the local love scene as they started going steady over the following couple of months; but it wasn't all puppies and rainbows. There were some inflammatory moments, but they usually just smoked peace pipes and billabongs to alleviate their love handles and joints. On Valentine's Day, Ryan picked out a French Bulldog for Haley, because he noticed that the pup was sweating like a little pig,

and he wanted to do something nice for Haley, to help her feel beleaguered by others like her. They named him Capone, after the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre. Haley loves that whelp, and frequently puts her paws up to his (like human beings have a habit of doing with their sucklings and such), because they're as soft and smooth as mascarpone, but also as practice, so she can feel comfortable when having to touch others.

If their romantic entanglement ever hits bedrock and they have a little Bamm-Bamm of their own, Haley's hands will rule the world by rocking his cradle.

And speaking of little bambinos, Haley is now working hand in glove with Ryan at his baseball academy as a hired hand, as she has a natural knack for breaking in baseball mitts, due to the heat and humidity produced by her hands. They've really turned the place into a mom and pop shop, with Haley being the first face the customers see at the front desk, and Ryan waiting on deck with his deckhands to do lessons in the batting cage batter's boxes. They keep things chirpy at work, and you can occasionally catch Ryan trundling Haley around in one of the hand trucks from his father's moving company pantehnicon parked next door. Natheless, he still sometimes gets caught in the little phoresis spider monkey's web when he tries taming his shrew's River Thames.

It was all fun and games until one day he detected Haley melting down some of the baseball bats, to form a highly concentrated aluminum treatment for her hands. He had recently descried his angel struggling and using formaldehyde dust in the hopes of preventing chronic perspiration, but didn't know things had gotten this demonic. When I questioned her opinion on what caused

her condition and what else she's done to remedy it, she responded, "I suppose I have POEMS syndrome." Notwithstanding this, due to my training as a colloquial "doc," I'd say the cause is causalgia. She also uttered that one day she went to get a boob job (even though she can win any sweat t-shirt contest), and figured she might as well start getting Botox injections in her hands, but they engendered syringomyelia and made things worse. She just about broke the bank trying to curb her brooks, even going so far as to buy some holy water (which was blessed by a shaman) off of Amazon.

Although, nowadays, everything is pretty much smooth sailing—but there are still highs and lows; however, even during her night sweats, she's still his little miss sunshine. Specifically, she had an especially gorgeous depression when Ryan went to Canyon, TX, to host a baseball clinic, and she also had a devilishly offhandish hangover when her and Ryan came to see me in Orange County, after visiting one of Ryan's university teammates in Riverside. She was very dehydrated, due to her Gatorade continually slipping out of her palms, and it wasn't until I put some expired ondansetron in them that she was able to keep some fluids down.

What will betide Ryan & Haley? The sky's the limit; however, she's frightened of heights. I got a fix on this, because last Christmas, while we visited my Mom on the fifth floor of the infirmary she labors at, Haley took a dekho down onto lobby, then gyrated to me with a nervous excitement and pleasantly exclaimed, "Look, C.J., my hand lines are like little rivers!" This is when I savvied that they'd always be my lifeline to a healthy propinquity.

Optimistically, hope will hot spring eternal, and they'll blow up like a hand grenade; regardless, let's just pray that the mercury lines in her hands don't poison her and retrograde. Perchance, the día will come, if it's God (the phosphorescence of the world)'s will, where they make it to the spire on time and walk hand-in-hand down the aisle, a while after Ryan asks for her hand in marriage.

I believe we're all pretty bent on Ryan and his swain building their life around the baseball institute, but they mouthed interest in wanting to peregrinate, possibly winding up out here with me or somewhere in the Southwest. So they are currently going with the flow, meandering around the country. And I have to hand it to them—because they are doing everything hands-free, without any hand-outs or hand-me-downs—except for my Dad's beloved Bluetooth that he bestowed upon Ryan before departing the hardball venture and heading off on an avant-garde adventure.

Will the twain of them make it to the rivers of Phoenix and the Pacific Ocean before skinny dipping in the Dead Sea? We'll see. Nothing's foreshoreway. God only knows where time and *the bends* of their rivers go.

Contemporarily, if you'll dispense me, I'm having a bout of scrivener's palsy and am pretty petered out—but I fancy my hand's job is ancient history.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *To the gentle reader—thank you. I hope you enjoyed what you probably just painstakingly consumed.*

*I was inspired to write this story after Haley excitedly turned to tell me that her palm lines were like little rivers. It felt like lightning had struck me, and I, for whatever reason(s) found a lot of meaning in that very human divulgence, as I am also no stranger to diaphoretic panic attacks. I was honored that she chose me and I believe it brought us all closer, making us more embracing of ourselves and others.*

*Per what I believe was divine guidance, I knew I needed to tell the love story of their relationship in a humorous and interesting way, for myself, for my family and for anyone else who might care. I've been in the habit lately of writing ridiculous short stories with common themes and may someday compile them into a collection.*

*I have too many influences to list but I am moved by anything that is avant-garde, dark, experimental, surreal, absurd, postmodern, witty, funny, vulnerable, innovative, chaotically organized etc. Pretty much everything that the editors here seem to appreciate. To perhaps give but one name, I suppose I'll say...William S. Burroughs.*

**BIO:** Charles J. March III is a US Navy hospital corpsman veteran from Chicago, who is currently trying to live an eclectic life with an interesting array of creatures in Orange County, California. His work had appeared in *Literary Orphans* and is forthcoming from *Stinkwaves*.

# Denise

By Gregorio Tafoya

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Stories about the trials of single motherhood are heavily charted territory when it comes to fiction—both short and long. In fact, we received four such submissions for this issue. But the one we took was ‘Denise’. A comfortably paced, smoothly written portrait of a woman of colour who is determined to make a life on her own terms—at least when it comes to men. As you might expect, things don’t always go as planned. Characters are vividly modeled, the easygoing prose is likable but sharp and the voice, sometimes funny, sometimes arch, strikes a perfect balance.*

Denise made up pasts while she cleaned teeth. Checkered herself with intrigue and worldliness, as she scraped tartar and water picked molars. It had started, when an attractive, but terribly obnoxious, twenty some year old male waltzed into Dr. Galbreath’s after three years of “funneling through Europe,” and proceeded to not so elegantly hit on her while she sucked saliva out of his mouth with her periodontal instruments.

She wasn’t completely turned off by his floppy gums, borderline gingivitis, and the slight, off-white discoloration on his upper lip, but more by how easy he thought she was gonna be. Like here is this local woman, for his intents and purposes sex-starved and scrubby, and here comes me: young, hip homecoming king who’s accustomed to bedding older, trysty European women.

So, when the young man proffered an unsolicited, “yeah, Madrid gets so rainy in the winter,” as she dabbed at his prominent chin, “but you wouldn’t know nothing bout that huh, sunshine,” Denise couldn’t take it any longer and told him:

“Actually I don’t mind the rain, when I lived in Seattle, it was my favorite part. You know, how the city smells afterwards.”

That seemed to put a damper on his fantasy of her, but he did manage to ask, between her sucking more saliva out of him, “What part?” and later, “For how long?”

Where she came up with “Federal Way,” and then, “for six years,” Denise couldn’t say, but six sounded like a strong number—giving her age and stability— and “Federal Way” was maybe the name of a bank off of Eubank, a street Denise traveled on during her short commute to work.

Dr. Galbreath told the swaggering traveler that he might consider getting his wisdom teeth pulled, and that, at the very least, he should come back to get his cleaning finished, because “your tartar was too thick to take care of in one sitting.”

When Dr. Galbreath left, the kid—cause that’s really what he was, his birth year dangerously close to the year Denise started high school—acted like his three-years of built-up tartar was all just some desperate, libidinous façade Denise was using as an excuse to see him again.

“Well thanks for spending so much time on me,” he said sarcastically, and Denise asked if he worked and when would be a good time next week to schedule the rest of his cleaning.

“What’s a good time for you?” he said painstakingly flirtatious.

“Weee,” Denise said, “have an opening at the same time next week, if that works.”

“Okay Denise,” he said, make-cute reading her nameplate by her terminal, “I’ll see you next week.” His tone was all, you-crazy-lady-I-bet-you-can’t-wait.

“Yup,” Denise said, her eyes not leaving her computer monitor, like the root canal scheduled at two required her immediate attention.

When Ron—a strange name for a male in his generation, or strange to Denise because he struck her more as a Ronnie—came back to “fine tooth” his mouth, he asked her more questions about herself, like if he’d read somewhere that this was a better way to pick-up women than poorly humble-bragging about your travels.

“So did you go to hygienist school in Seattle?” he asked, shrugging on “hygienist school,” like he just coined the term.

“No,” Denise said out loud, “actually I went to Alberta for school. In Canada,” she finished smugly, while also not having any idea how her lie would hold up under any interested scrutiny.

“Wow,” he gagged under her, “I’ve heard dope things about Canada. Do you like know how they’re one of two countries to completely legalize marijuana?” At least Denise thought that’s what he said, because she was scaling his disgusting mouth pretty aggressively.

“Yes, I always thought they’d be on the cutting edge of that,” Denise said matter-of-factly.

The rest of the short cleaning went like that, he gargled up questions from under her and she answered them to the best of her creative ability.

When it was through, and it was clear he was gonna ask for her phone number, Denise racked her brain to come up with a way of including her factual children into her fictional past. But he beat her to the next line, stepping a little bit closer to her and saying:

“So is there like a floppy gum hotline I could call?”

Which, if Denise was being objective, was not a bad line at all, in fact it made her smile for the first time, but also regretfully smile because that line was wasted on this guy. And Denise said, gently:

“No unfortunately, but it’s like I tell my kids, just concentrate on brushing away from the gums and, of course, floss.”

That pretty much put a bow on it. Ron got a cleaning scheduled again in six-months but didn’t make any other overt come-ons towards her. The wisdom teeth didn’t even get brought up.

Denise had never lived anywhere other than New Mexico. She was born on Indian land north of Santa Fe—Tesuque—and she wasn’t even considered Native American. She went to Pojoaque High School and lettered in volleyball and track and was too bright to fall for the reserved Native boys and bombastic Hispanic ones that chased her.

After high school she was practical: she went to community college for dental hygiene in Santa Fe, lived at home in Tesuque, and worked at CamelRock casino at the buffet. But now, instead of boys flirting with her, she got used to the vacant leers of grown drunk men—especially at the casino.

She’d never dated, not seriously, in high school—nobody at Pojoaque did she deem worthy of committing her feelings towards. In Santa Fe, she saw a string of loser boys who she never really committed to, but it was expected that she at least entertain their advances. One, Nicanor, was a waiter at a surprisingly affordable little restaurant inside a downtown hotel.

Denise didn’t know he worked there until their first date, when he took her to Del Charro, his work, and proceeded to leave her stranded at their table for long stretches of time as he

chatted up employees and disappeared into the kitchen. Maybe he thought that would impress her.

But really, Nicanor was the sweetest of the Santa Fe boys she met during her two plus years of school there. Once, when a drunken patron of the casino had cornered her in a secluded area of the dining hall and preceded to tell her vulgar things, she had called Nicanor and he was there before her shift was over.

The drunk Indian hadn't touched Denise, but it was demeaning all the same—made more humiliating by that fact that she had let his words get to her. Nicanor was a tiny comfort though. She hugged him in the lobby of the casino, and his tough guy act made her laugh—like he was really gonna track this Indian down and kick his ass. Oh brother.

Occasionally, she let Nicanor make love to her—always on her terms and with his complicity that it wasn't to be taken as a sign of their inseparability. His face killed her afterwards though. He'd look at her, his thick eyebrows craving her approval and needing to be trimmed, while his eyes urgently loved her. She was embarrassed for him—how hopelessly he was in love with her was mortifying.

When she graduated and moved to Albuquerque for her first dental job, he still called her and pretended like she was a big shot too good for him. Sometimes, she would give him the go ahead on driving the forty-five minutes to see her on the weekends.

Her first job was a far step from Dr. Galbreath's in the heights. She worked in a strip mall dental clinic—next door to a Mexican supermarket—off of Central and Atrisco in the Valley. Most of their clients didn't speak English. The ones who did, were South Valley parolees or older, retired white woman, who had lost their dental insurance.

Denise roomed with a local *buque* girl, Alicia, who owned her own house off Lead and was a reclusive, mature-aged student at UNM who had some vague connection to northern New Mexico. Maybe their *tias* had once been friends.

Alicia and Denise grated on each other's nerves for six months, but by that time Denise had saved enough for a proper security deposit and moved out of the crummy house off Lead and got a one-bedroom on the Southwest side, below Coors.

When Denise turned twenty-three, something changed inside of her. It was like she emerged from her hardened cocoon and was now a kowtowing, sentimental young woman. She looked at her new self from every angle, trying to determine what had happened, why all of sudden did she feel this repulsive compulsion to be loved. Maybe even to love.

It was in this state of softened shell that Denise met Tanner, a blonde Midwest transplant stationed at Kirkland Air Force base. Denise told herself he was a novelty—his name, first of all, was hysterically Caucasian that she couldn't imagine introducing him, by that name, to any of her northern New Mexico relatives.

Denise was drinking at a Nob Hill bar, and he'd been buying her drinks and disinterestedly making her laugh. Before closing, he said, with such evident disdain that she couldn't help but cracking up, also she was drunk:

“Wouldn't it be cool to fall in love tonight?”

They hooked up at his house in the heights, but just made out. In the morning, for some unknown reason to appear less prudish, Denise started to scratch an underside of him with two nails, and he woke up to her touch.

“You're going to scar me Denise,” he said. But she didn't—eventually employing her thumb. He just came and then went to brush his teeth.

At some point in their three years together they moved past scratching and Tanner impregnated her twice. After the first time—Denise three months pregnant—did he accompany her to Tesuque to meet her parents.

There was nothing funny about it. She wasn't sure who was more embarrassingly awkward, Tanner or her parents. Tanner didn't even make a pretense of trying the *posole* and tamales her mom had cooked, and her father kept saying Tanner's name like he'd tasted something bitter, "Tan-NUR."

The idea of marriage was a land mine they all avoided, and Denise tried to assure her parents that *they* were living in antiquity and had no business advising on matters of modern heart.

It wasn't six months after the birth of their second child, their baby boy Daniel, did Denise learn he'd been researching leaving her. They were living together, but he'd been tele-interviewing out of the state and had put his house on the market.

When she confronted him, one night after dinner, about the real-estate agent calling when he was at work, he told her unforgivable things. Mainly unforgivable because they were things not composed in the heat of the moment, but things stewed on, sharpened and edited in dark, vicious places in the mind.

"You think cause you're hot for Northern New Mexico that makes you beautiful. And you're so damn self-consuming, you don't even realize it." In the course of their yelling, he accused her of, "never actually loving me Denise. You're incapable of loving another adult."

Denise mainly cursed at him during this entire episode, and cried, but not in front of him.

Feebly, he told her in the preceding weeks that he was sorry, “for that exchange of words,” and that she and the kids could come with him to Maryland where he had been clandestinely promoted.

But Denise ignored his apology and told him to, “fuck off,” and that if she was incapable of loving another adult than he was insufficiently equipped to be a father and that the kids were staying with her. He didn’t fight her.

He helped her get an apartment off Eubank, and moved their children’s stuff into it, and the only thing that prevented her from scratching his eyes out was the way her daughter asked him, “Daddy fly, but be back?”

Denise had been working irregularly around her pregnancies at the clinic, and though they would have taken her back with open arms, she wanted a clean, fresh beginning.

Dr. Galbreath’s wasn’t even hiring, but she walked into his carpeted waiting room, one week after Tanner left, and dropped her resume off with the receptionist at the faux marble front office.

Two weeks later she was working their part time and unsuccessfully muffling her cries at night. Amelie, her three-year old, asked her in the mornings “why mommy sad, daddy be back.”

The sadness twisted to hate, and then the hate was just wrung out by time and Denise was comforted by that fact that she could recognize herself in the mirror again. She was back to just being Denise.

At thirty-four, Denise was continually mistaken for being in her twenties still—which was both complimentary and infuriating at the same time. She was petite, and supernaturally

thin—though she exercised more than ever now—and her skin still smoldered with smooth youth, except around her fingers, where it was clear from her wrinkled webbing that Denise had been through all kinds of hell, and not just the periodontal kind. She'd taken to wearing gloves, even into late April.

The white mothers at Amelie's Montessori school looked at Denise with unconcealed pity, not only because of her single motherhood, but also, because of her appearance and Amelie's age, they assumed Denise had been an irresponsible and poor teen mom. Like she was the poster child they had in mind for their Planned Parenthood donations.

Their looks suggested to Denise a young-and-pretty-can-be-a-motherfucker attitude. At least that's how Denise interpreted their overwrought, passionate inquiries into "how she was holding up."

Karen, the mother to Amelie's closest friend Hailey, was the absolute worst. Amelie had let blab to Hailey one time when she was eight that she was secretly not showering in the mornings because the hot water was out. Denise had been getting around to fixing the boiler, but didn't want just any old handyman to walk into their new home.

Karen had taken Denise aside, as they waited for the kids after school, and not gently at all offered her husband to fix "any of those annoying male things that need to get done around a home."

Denise didn't take her up on her offer, but politely said, "thank you Karen, but the hot water was fixed today," lying but also congratulating herself for not telling Karen to go to hell.

"Oh you just keep us in mind for the future sweetie, my Bill has gotten so lazy since he retired, it would do him some good to remember how to fix things."

And for the last two years, every conversation with Karen was a reminder that Bill was at her beck and call. And had she mentioned he was retired, at the ripe old age of 45.

Denise had moved from the apartment Tanner had helped her get after three years—an interval where she had budgeted diligently, once she had been hired full-time at Dr. Galbreath's. Denise was determined to give her children a true home, not a baby mama's apartment, so she bought a three-bedroom single-story close to the same neighborhood where she had roomed with Alicia. Now that neighborhood had a bougie new title, University Heights, but Denise was still able to get an affordable mortgage before the property value truly shot up.

It had a back and front yard, and they planted a garden in the backyard, and when Daniel turned five he was insistent on installing a waterfall, having seen it somewhere and it sticking in his childhood fascination. Denise eventually acquiesced, but made sure the pool at the bottom could never exceed six inches.

They had a home, and Tanner called once a month, but Denise never talked to him for longer than it took to shuffle the phone from child to child. After a year in the new house, Tanner started to make up excuses to talk to Denise too, things about the kids he was worried about. Telling her to cash the occasional checks he was sending them. She corresponded coldly with him for two months, and one phone call ended with Tanner saying:

“Denise, I miss you.”

She pretended to mishear him and said:

“The kids miss you too,” hoping her tone said they had forgotten all about him.

“Stop it Denise, you heard me. I miss you.”

“No you stop it,” and Denise hung up. But it had been a small vindication for her.

When he called back sooner than usual, and had talked to the kids, Denise was on the verge of suggesting, that if he visited she wouldn't be completely opposed to it, when he said, “Denise I need to tell you something.”

Tanner confessed to having an affair with his hairdresser, basically the whole time they were together in Albuquerque. Denise didn't say anything, just hung up on him. He wasn't apologizing to her she figured, he was relieving this guilty burden for himself.

Denise called him the next day, and cut him off before he could get started:

“I'm getting Amelie a phone, not to use outside of the house, but you are going to pay for it and it is so you can call her directly. I never want to hear your stupid voice again.”

It was the most leveled, mature insult she felt comfortable wasting on him.

All his reckless, arrogant self said was, “I'm sorry for hurting you Denise.”

Even in apology, the prick was acknowledging the power he had wielded over her.

The kids still talked to Tanner, but lately he was calling less and less often. Denise distracted them with whatever they wanted, and she didn't know how to feel about the fact that they seemed resigned to the fate of never seeing their father again. Not any time soon at least.

Friday's were Denise's off day. After dropping the kids off at school she did her grocery shopping, renewed any of Daniel's allergy medications that needed it, and occasionally bought him new, irregular t-shirts at Fallas, the discount retailer he was adamant about outfitting him.

Daniel was always falling in love with places based on their name.

Once, Denise had driven them on a lazy Sunday to the clinic where she had first worked at in Albuquerque, and Daniel wasn't so much interested in her old place of employment, but in the Mexican supermarket next door that had been renamed "El Super."

They had to go inside, and Daniel spent a good thirty minutes squealing in delight over the raw tripe, beef tongue, and menudo at the *carneceria* window. Since then, Denise had to pretend like she got all their groceries at "El Super," and kept spare plastic "El Super" bags around to put her co-op and Wal-Mart purchases in for him to unpack on Friday afternoons.

Amelie was more difficult to please, but she never betrayed her mother's grocer's deception to Daniel. Instead, she dragged them from the Winrock to the Coronado mall on the weekends, and made Daniel and Denise follow her while she shopped, but at a safe distance in case she ran into anyone she knew.

Sometimes, Denise let her see a matinee with a group of white girls from Montessori, or her afterschool Spanish group, but Denise was always careful to inspect the group for XY chromosomes.

Once, Denise had made the mistake of waiting for her right in the lobby of the theater and Amelie had been crushed to find her kid brother and her mother waiting for her as her and her friends giggle emerged from something PG. She hadn't made a big deal about it in public, but pouted in the front seat on the way home.

Amelie cried in her room, and Denise had sat on her bed and tried to apologize but then turned mother on her when she couldn't believe she was bending under her own daughter's whim.

They argued and Denise went with the old stand by, "You aren't like those other girls," and truly she had meant it to mean Amelie was prettier, brighter, and overall just special, but

Amelie yelled, “I know mom, I’m not white, you don’t trust me, and you think, you think, ughhhhh...I hate you.”

Denise rose and left Amelie’s room, not necessarily angry, and later she almost smiled, thinking about times she, as an almost teenager had had similar spats with her mother. There was a contentment to know Amelie was just a normal pre-pubescent girl.

She had already forgiven Amelie before her somber and beautiful daughter knocked on her bedroom door before bedtime and said, “I brushed and flossed mommy,” a word she hadn’t used since she was seven.

“Good, get to bed Amelie,” Denise said pretending to be stern.

“I’m sorry mommy, I don’t hate you.”

“I know you don’t, but it’s late,” it only being 9:30. Amelie walked into her room, lay on top of the comforter and hugged herself against her mother.

Denise brushed her daughter’s wild chestnut hair, and after a moment, Amelie said:

“He doesn’t love us like you love us.”

Denise didn’t say anything initially, composing herself, and then told her daughter that her father loved her very much, more than she knew, and not to compare her parent’s like that. But it bought Amelie thirty minutes more of screen time, as they watched some forgettable, original E! News programming.

Before ten, in trickled Daniel, wearing his one sleeve wider than the other Fallas special shirt and Avenger’s boxers, and he said, “I love you too mommy,” climbing into bed with them.

Around noon on Friday’s, when Denise had all the week’s errands ran, she texted Caleb. Caleb was the result of a drunk, ironic Thursday night perusal of Match.com about six months

ago. Denise had filled in her profile with white-zin inspired platitudes, proffered from Pinterest and commandeered with steering sarcasm.

“Fate is made by the bold.”

“Don’t need the validation.”

“Don’t regret anything because at one time it was exactly what you wanted.”

For the smoking section she wrote, “only fools,” and for the children she put, “yes, two lil monsters.”

In the morning, erasing the “only fools,” part, she reluctantly checked her matches and saw that a square jaw and close crop had messaged her:

“You seem really selfless and grounded.”

Caleb was a twenty-seven year old med student at UNM-H, and Denise had only entertained going on an initial date with him to Wild Avocado because truly she wanted to get a look at this guy in person and ask, what in the fuck was he doing on Match.com.

He was on Match.com because “Tinder has changed for the worst, and really it’s too superficial,” and also, Denise determined, because he was stupid.

“I really need someone who challenges me intellectually,” he said and Denise tried hard not to upchuck her avocado bagel. He wanted to “eradicate diabetes from the ground-up, that means starting with the children,” and the most intellectual thing he did, from what Denise could gather, was Sudoku. But she was pretty sure he pronounced it wrong. Tall, handsome and stupid.

When she determined Caleb maybe wasn’t a psychopath, she texted him before their third lunch date, “Lunch my place,” and then her address.

He showed up with a tilted grin, and said, “What a cute neighborhood,” and she took him to her bathroom, the only place the kids didn’t make regular appearances, and when it was over she told him he should leave.

“You mean there’s no lunch?” he asked, and she thought he was kidding, but then she looked him in the eyes for the first time and saw he was sincere. She shuffled him out of there when he started to kiss her.

She considered putting a stop to it, after one Friday, when they weren’t making eye-contact in her bathroom and she already knew she couldn’t text him the next Friday because Daniel would be off from school. He decided to blurt out, mid-coitus, and with a pause between every third syllable, “You’re such a freaky girl Denise,” like he was some rap star, and not a wanna be pediatrician. And he said it like she needed to hear it, more than he needed to say it.

But she just ignored his texts for two weeks, and then messaged him when she felt certain her hatred for him had been mistaken and was more indifference than anything else.

Denise’s mother still kept her apprised of the life of Nicanor Torres—who her mother had always carried a flame for since he had dropped Denise off one night thirteen year’s ago and spent an hour watching a *telenovela* with them in the living room.

Nicanor was divorced, still living in Santa Fe, but as a restaurant manager, and had a gorgeous little girl—around Daniel’s age—whom Nicanor worshipped. From what Denise gathered, the mother was out of the picture, living in Texas somewhere. Nicanor had turned his beautiful daughter, Gabriela, into a Seahawks fan and a flamenco dancer.

Sometimes, when Denise closed her eyes, she imagined a world where her Daniel and Nicanor's Gabriela would meet and have a torrid, perfectly symmetrical romance. That they would be high school sweethearts and go to college together and then matrimony.

Maybe Denise's mother was the one to remind her of Nicanor, but also maybe Denise liked all the Facebook photos of him and his daughter at CenturyLink, and at flamenco performances, and of Gabriela sitting on the oak bar of the restaurant her daddy managed. Maybe Denise messaged Nicanor weekly, telling him how beautiful his daughter was and how great of a father he was. Maybe Denise did all this under the alias of Nicole Newman.

Nicole Newman lived in Federal Way, Washington, was a rabid Seahawks fan, and was a recent 34-year-old divorcee with two kids.

*strikes a perfect balance.*

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I hate New Mexican authors. Or authors that write about New Mexico. I wanted to write something that I didn't hate. If you are reading this, correct me on my disdain for New Mexican authors. But yes, clearly I am the terrible plaque-stained character in the opening paragraphs. Please forgive me.*

*My literary influences are embarrassingly numerous but the one I tried to channel for this piece was Ottessa Moshfegh. What a poor hack job this is. I hope she never gets wind that I dared to mention her as an influence.*

**BIO:** Gregorio Tafoya is an aspiring novelist with an advanced degree in comparative literature from Project Gutenberg. Forever jealous of the creator of *storiesaboutprince.blogspot.com* and wishes to have been the first author to lament, in an author bio, about not writing the play 'Arcadia'. Currently reviews books for *Drizzle Review*.

# The Girl Who Wanted to Live in a Greenhouse

By César Valdebenito

Translated by Toshiya Kamei

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *There's a Kafkaesque thread to this dystopian morality flash that happens at the end of the climate war we are in the midst of fighting today, but we also sense the strong presence of Latin American, 'magic realism'—Borges, Garcia-Marquez. Anguished characters in torturous predicaments bereft in blasted landscapes that waver trance-like in the imagination like curtains hung by Mephistopheles. It is akin to fourth dimension reality with an edge of naivety. The author's abrupt, minimalist prose delivers a strong message that here and there startles with luminous beauty. Quote: 'Cities that disappear as if by magic are replaced by toxic cyclones' and 'I mean the idea of getting drunk with a stranger to make the planet disappear exudes a wonderful naiveté. In the old days one could afford to be naïve.'* *Translated from the Spanish.*

The caravan starts rolling again, clattering through the dunes. The engine roars, and Pablo notices some commotion in the camp, which rises some three hundred meters above him. A toxic fungus explodes at the foot of *Cerro Caracol*. People come out of the camp, getting out of carcasses of cars dragging children. Thirty meters ahead a driverless car rolls across the road. Pablo slams on the brakes and skids to a sudden halt, hurling Pamela right through the windshield. When Pamela opens her eyes twenty minutes later, she finds herself in Pablo's arms.

"All we need is a chance," her voice says.

"We'll leave this planet and fly somewhere else."

"And where is that?" Pamela asks.

"We must go around the airport and there we will see."

"Are we going fifty-fifty?"

"Fifty-fifty."

"Aren't you afraid I'll kill you?"

"Why do you go there again, Pamela?" Pablo smiles. "I could kill you."

"There will be vegetables, plenty of fresh air. The persecution will end. So will traps, bullets, crazies. Cities that disappear as if by magic and are replaced by toxic cyclones. We won't have any more worries," says Pamela.

"Yeah."

"Do you really think we can get out of here?"

"Of course."

"Is there really pure air on that other planet?"

"Listen to me. I promise you."

"Okay."

He hears the whistle he has heard so many times. When he looks up toward the camp, the vision has turned into an atrocious and painful fantasy; men, women, children, and old people fly through the air. Pablo goes to the car, returns with a half-full bottle, looks for a match, and lights a cigarette. They drink and smoke for a while. Without a word. Thinking about the future. Pamela is barely breathing. From a cluster of neo-Gothic apartment buildings on Cerro La Pólvora people start screaming like hyenas, two long rows form down the hill, and their hyena-like howls are mixed with a chorus pleading to heaven. One hour later, the multitude of protruding heads is fifty meters away. Pablo stands in the middle of the road.

"My father's name was Juan Carlos Sutterlan," Pablo shouts, and the crowd stops. "I was named Pablo Carlos Sutterlan. My father made his reputation at an advanced age by inventing

'sonic hyperesthesia.' It's not that he hasn't invented other things before then. But at first, before becoming famous as the mad scientist who blew up the planet, he always put his reputation first. He tells me the story a dozen times. He's on a subway train, somewhere between Hualqui and Chiguayante, sitting next to a man named Santos Chávez. Santos Chávez pulls out a bottle, and he and my father get wasted. He tells my father a good story. Santos Chávez is on the verge of making a great discovery. Old Chávez says what he needs is time and enough funds to cover the costs. He explains the details of the experiment. *I have a great experiment in hand, but I'm not exploiting it as I should.* And after those words, my father takes out a pencil and begins to draw on a piece of paper. He sketches a battle scene, with ships, rockets, an arsenal, hundreds of troops, and a large flag fluttering over the battlements. Next, he draws a single line under the image: Santos Chávez, the new Einstein. Finally, and this is the best of all, he tells Santos Chávez to give him the formula. And it works. It becomes the most lethal weapon in the entire history of the planet. That's how things were done in the old days, boys; drunk as skunks on a car on the south subway line. In my opinion, it exudes a pleasant naïveté. I mean, the idea of getting drunk with a stranger to make the planet disappear exudes a wonderful naïveté. In the old days one could afford to be naive."

He becomes quiet. Silence cuts the air like a knife. A scrawny man comes forward from the crowd. Pablo thinks, *he's leading the flock.*

"Do you believe in war?" the leader asks him.

"No."

"Do you want to go to war?"

"Yes."

Pablo has the crazy idea of moving toward them until they beat him to a pulp.

The leader remains silent for a while. Then he looks up.

"Of course. In two more days we will go hunting again, but first we will offer up a prayer to the sun. Will you come?"

"No."

"Okay, you don't have."

"Where?"

"Pablo, you didn't think we would understand you, right?"

"I guess."

All that makes the mass of creatures believe that they are seeing an apparition. First their faces look incredulous, then horrified, and in the end disappointed. Little by little, the herd slowly retreats and retraces its steps. No doubt they believed they were facing a ghost. Pablo fixes his gaze on the river. What was once an expanse of water is now a sea of white dunes extending to the horizon. He looks toward the empty city and hears the whistle of the wind making the doors, gates, and windows of the buildings creak. Pablo turns around and looks at Pamela. He caresses her petite body. Her white, shrunken face gapes at Pablo with blind eyes. **She seems to him an image of his own destiny.** Then he remembers Pamela two days ago. They enter a deserted supermarket, Bigger or Santa Isabel – he doesn't remember. Pablo puts the newspaper on a counter and takes off the thick glasses he wears. He serves himself a drink, picks up a five-thousand-peso bill, drops it, then reaches for a cloth, passes it across the counter, and then sits in a folding chair under a photo of an overcooked steak in which a bridegroom appears with his best man. He turns and takes out a bottle and a glass from a shelf.

"What are you drinking?" Pamela asks.

"Whiskey."

"It's fascinating to watch it. The ice cubes gleam. It seems as if tiny things explode. Like explosions everywhere."

"Why do you want to live in a greenhouse?" asks Pablo.

"I want to live in a humid and huge greenhouse where grass grows. Grass growing in all the pots. It would be great. And anyone who wants to live there could do it. There would be a natural slope and you could eat fruit ice cream. It would be just great."

This last conversation with Pamela is the one Pablo likes to remember for the rest of his days. At times, he keeps thinking about the calm he felt when he closed his eyes as she let her fingers slide through his hair. He kept thinking about the delight of those fingers in his hair, which was beginning to grow again.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *'The Girl Who Wanted to Live in a Greenhouse' is part of a trilogy of short stories that form a complete unit but also stand alone. In the story presented here, translated by Toshiya Kamei, I was interested in capturing a very vivid image of characters that lived in an apocalyptic future. This story started from an idea that consumed me. I wanted to delve into the conflicts of the human race subjected to the great pressure of a world that falls apart. I wanted to create a story where I could be ambiguous yet perfectly clear. I was also captivated by the idea of creating stories that conveyed certain nervous dismay and that characters should be aware of their painful wounds from the past. Maybe it is because it entices me to explore human beings and the conflicts they hide in the deepest chambers of their soul when they live on the edge. My influences come from all the authors I have read: Carver, Ray Bradbury, Philip K. Dick, Chekhov, Hemingway, Mario Levrero, Bolano, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Saint Augustine and many others.*

**Author's Bio:** Born in 1975 in Concepcion, Chile, Valdebenito is a poet, fiction writer and essayist. His books include the novels *La vida nunca se acaba* (2017) and *Una escena apocaliptica* (2016) as well as the short story collection *El bindu o la musa de la noche* (2017) and *Pequeñas historias para mentes neuroticas* (2018).

**Translator's Bio:** Toshiya Kamei holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Arkansas. His translations of Latin American literature include *My Father Thinks I'm a Fakir* by Claudia Apablaza, *South Exit* by Carlos Bortoni and *Silent Herons* by Selfa Chew.

# THE FOOLHARDY BOYS

*By Jim George*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We love this cornball upbeat retro-retake on the 'Hardy Boys' (Frank and Joe, amateur sleuths, popular from 1927 to the late 50's) but we warn you, it's a challenging read. What's going on here is a word play called idio-speech (as in idiomatic), or more melodiously, as the Italians say, il linguaggio fuggitivo . Word formation is phonetically determined, and words are sounded out rather than correctly spelled. In fiction, it's an experimental literary device that can quickly become mannered (like a joke told too many times) and/or disengaged from the real point of the story. But 'The Foolhardy Boys' cleverly holds its own while staying true to form and is refreshed throughout by an appealing 'aw shucks', 'gee whiz' humour. Besides, after you've read a few paragraphs it stahts tu beekum, wail, soda lyk takkin normell, yu no. Sew wot the fok, wee tuk it. Sure, it's a double-down read, but it's also a hoot.*

Brooders Frack and Joke Foolhardy funcied themselvs as deteectives. Perhopes it was because their farther was a police cuptain. While he moistly sad around seeping coughee, his boys gat into ill kinds of treble budding in where not wellcombed and attampting to solve grimes which were more oven than not all in their imargination. This mite have been fargiveable when

they were roombunctuous jungsters, but now that they were groan men of 43 and 45 disrespectively, it was radder unseamly if not downrite embareassing. Consequenchly, these woot-be oaffishers of the law needed to be baileyed out by Captin Foolhardy on a regularge basin, much to his dismayor.

The boys' mane focuss was their naybor Silence Appletart, a crinky, will-to-do, reclusive old mean with a queeg temper. Frack and Joke were constuntly trespassing on his pryvate perperty, cornvinced he was uppity to somethink illegall. While Appetart was hardly a lickable guy, such irktions were tauntamount to herrassment and prunishable by lore. Litter did he know that things were aboot to come to a headline.

Frack and Joke were out sprying on the Appletart residue wince again when they witlessed a Federal Espresso truck pull into the drivewait. A mien in a unifirm holding a porkage rang the doorbelch. Appletart antsered and led him inword.

"I wander what's gearing on there?" wandered Frack aloud. Joke nooded in agreement, then oaffered a passible axplanation.

"Maybe he had a tum hankering for some coughee and ardored sum."

"HMMMM," hmmmmed Frack with skipticism. "Maybe that's whit he *wonts* us to think!"

"But," queeried Joke, "how does he nose we're even kleeping an eye on him?" Of curse, that was a prepesterous question, in déjà view of the brooders' histery with Appletart. They were illways wartching him, and he was illways wartching them wartching him.

"Oh, I've scene him piqueing out through his blands," said Frack. As he steered through his binocularks, he soddenly grasped, "Weight! Do you seize whart I seize? Checker out that licenseless plate."

“A2T4LU,” readied Joke. “Wad abowel it?” His aye brows were undulately like Eugene Levity’s.

“A Toot For All You!” said Frack breastlessly. “Gad it?!”

“A pass-gasser?”

“No, no—it alloots to cocainery! That dealiveryman must be a dope posher! That unifrom is jist a coverall so he won’t be suspected!”

“Which miens Appletart’s a headhopper!” kincluded Frack. “That expleens why he’s such a crabappletart. He gets donrite trumpy when he needies a snoot.”

“He’s willthy enough to affort it, too,” Joke panted out. “Wait ‘til Pop heroes about this!” But Frack had to clam him down.

“No, Joke,” he raisined, “we can’t tale Pop until we have sum salad proof. We have to romaine sighlent untill then. In the moontime, we needle to frigure out how to get the evidentials.”

Nether one could fall aslip very oosily that nide as their imatchinations ran awry with them, manifestering in a cavalcadence of nightmares. By moorning, they were reddy as a kilowatt to firmulate a curse of action.

Joke upspoke farst.

“We muster get some peektures of the FedEs guy going into Appletart’s with a porkage.” Frack eggreed and said, “Yes, that’s the easel part. The trucky part is getting into the dealivery veerhicle and getting snagshots of the dope he dealers. If we can dew that, we’ll have Appletart by the bawls. Pop’ll finely be prowld of us.”

Just then, Capt. Foolhardy came down the debasement where Frack and Joke had their roam.

“Whart’s up, buoys? Whart’s on yer agender todate? I hope you’re straying out of treble. Rememo, I don’t want any mere problooms or you’ll both be groinded for good.”

“Groinded?!” said Frack. “But we’re in our farties!”

“I dunce care,” oomphasized the Captin. “As log as you’re under mein roof, you’ll keep your knowses clean and abay my ardors. Got dat?”

“Sure, Capt. Pop,” said the unisons.

“OK, I’m off to the stationary. Seize you later.”

“Whew,” whewed Joke soon as the Captune had vacated the promises. “We batter hit a hamrun with the basis looted—a gram slam-- this time arund or Pop’ll keel us.”

“He won’t factually keel us,” said Frack, “but I think he’s seerious about groinding us.”

“That would be tearable,” Joke invisioned. “The list time we got groinded was when we mad a sittyson’s arrest of that old ladle we thought was a dabble agent for the KGB. Remembrain she had “KGB” momogrammed on her poorse?”

“Uh-huh,” oddmitted Frack, “but then we frowned out that was ownly her initials—Kay Gertrude Babisher. Butt hey, it was an onus messtake.”

“Amensch.”

“OK, time to roil!” Frack said in anticipaytion. “Grap the eyephone and the lungeboxes and let’s git crackerin’!” And arf they wend like two blurdhounds. Snaking through the butches, Frack and Joke lowcated a comfartable spot and coonceded themselves in the shruggery. For

several hours, they chomped at the bite, eating liversthe worst sandwiches and chatter cheese crackers and downing Popsi after Popsi, all the while preying for the deliveryman to poppy up.

Joke lout out a burp.

“Shhhhhhhhh!” warned Frack like a warner brother. “Somebaddy will here us.” Jist then, his eyes whidened. “Loog! This is id! The FedEs truck! This is whoot we’ve been wayting for!” They hi-fifed each odder and stillthily creept up to the perperty as the dealiveryman, porkage in ham, knacked on the door. Like beform, Appletart invitald him in.

The brooders sneakered up to the heevicle and realeyesed the door was portially open. Frack suggestured, “Joke, go in and get sum foetographs of the stuff insite.” He deed, but reparted, “It’s all in pickages and larch envelopes. I’ll have to curt one open to seize insize.”

Using the cub scoot packit knife he had since he was 11, Joke slyced a hole in a randomly chosen balky envelope. He instuntly got pulpitations as some whyte powder spieled out. After snapshotting the everdence, he scoopered some of it into his hindkerchief for safekreeping.

“We god it! Pop’ll be so prod!” Joke sonbeamed as Frack trioomphantly raced his fists and deed a vectory dance. Swebt up in the exsitement, they hadn’t knowticed the delibbery guy rueturning to his vanhicle. By the tam they did, it was two late. He cawt them rude-handed.

“Whart kind of foal do you think I am?!” he hissied. “You overgroan oddolescents think you can reap me off in bored daylight, right under my knows?!”

In any odder circustance, Frack and Joke would’ve been scared sheetlist, but even though this dayvelopment was unforscene, they were noonplussed at being confrontaled in this meanner. In factuality, they became doneright airrogant.

“Don’t movie--I’m culling the powlice!” said the uniformatted man.

“That’s a funtastic idea!” said Frack.

“Yap,” Joke agreeet. “We were joust about to cull ‘em ourselves.” The dealiveryman was taken abag. Then Joke said, “Ask for Cabtain Foolhardy.”

“Wise guise!” snipped the mien as he tellaphoned the poorlice. By this punt, Silence Appletart himsylyph had vantured out to seize what was gooing on. He steered coldly at Frack and Joke and said in his wrankled voice, “Whad’s the meanie of this?! Whad are you two treble-muckers dewing on my perperty! I thort I tolled you never to set food here again!”

Joke wisecrocked, “A bitter question is, Whad are *you* dewing on your perperty?!” Appletart gave him a darty loog and said, “You two overaged juvial dullinquents have at long list compately lost your marples. This icecapade is the one that’s finely going to end your poorthetic careen as hamateur defectives.” The Foolhardy bothers just smurged at him.

When two offisirs arrifed on the seam, they instuntly recognosed the captin’s sons. Said Off. Schmillman, “Frack and Joke, wad is it this timex? Your dud is not going to be two happy that you’ve mainaged to gad yourselves into yet anodder fine mesh.”

Frack said with the utmoist confidentures, “I beg to defer, Offysir. This time he’ll be swilling with pride when he heroes about how we crocked this case.”

“Whart case is that?” wondermented Off. Doocane. Joke chummed in, “*This* won!” He then eekerly pulled out his hinky with the misterious powder insite and said, “Gad a lode of this!” handying it oval to him. Off. Schmillman inspectacled the evidunce and sed, “So? Whad’s this suppost to be?” Joke ansaid drumatically, “Corkaine or maybe even smirk! This goy’s a dupe dealer and ol’ mean Appletart is his cusstomer!”

“Where deed you Foolhardy boys git this?” irsked Off. Doocane, dibbing his indextrose finger in the powwow and tasting it. The FedEs man disgushtedly said, “These muddle-aged wholigans sneakered into my van and slyced open one of the pickages I’m deleaving! This is pawdered milk, not croakaine! Mr. Appeltart ardors it frequenchly, what with not being ample to get to the supermarkup becurse of his bump lag and all.”

Frack’s and Joke’s phases turned beat-red as Appletart spittered, “This is oddrageous! I damand that these loonatics be lacked up. These milky mouse defectives have been herrassing me for jeers. It’s peeback time!”

Off. Doocane said, “We’re gonna heave to take you guise in. This is sorrious stuff: trusspassing, beaking and intering, defussing feederal preperty, barglary, fallse accusaysos—you outdeed yoursolves this timing.” Off. Schmillman atted, “We almoist drad this as mucho as yoo doo. The cuptin is gonna go bawlistic.”

“As wail he should!” scoughed Appletart. “And my addedvice to you boys is: *do* cry over spillaned milk!” The Foolhardys lacked at him shempishly as they were red their riots and taken into curstody. Off. Doocane taled Appletart not to worry, they’d be in torch. He then instructed the FedEs dryver to fellow them to the staytion to give a formale stainment. The failsely accused dilliveryman said with grate realish, “I’m more than hoppy to do my pard to git these helligans off the streek.”

Down at hatquarters, Frack and Joke had to phase their farther after he was given a loondry list of his sons’ infractures. Capt. Foolhardy was understandableak at the end of his robe.

“You’ve shammed me for the list time!” he yalled. “You promised me you would behoove yoursolves and now thus! Whart do you hab to sayso for yoreselves?”

“Geez, Pop, we saw that varnity lisenze plate: A2T4LU, and the goy looked susspicious, so we connected the dots,” expained Joke.

“Whad *about* the lisenze?”

“A2T4LU—A Toot For All You!” Frack contained. “It seamed orbvious.”

“And *that’s* what stirted all this?!” huffed Capt. Foolhardy. “Orbvious? Deed you ever steep to consitter that maybe the vain’s owner jist may be a clearinet player!” His sons looked done and in unisum they sad, “I’m sorrowy.”

“Sorrowy won’t cot it this time,” worned their farther. “A retorter from the lowcall noosepaper alruddy got ahowld of the story. They’ll mack a laughingstork outa me. This is awl I needle. What a disgraze.”

After a pragmant pawse, he put his handy on his farhead and sad, “I’ll try to calmmunicate with Mr. Appletart and seize if I can raisin with him. He canny be difficurt, although in this instanza, I heave to say I can heartly blame him for being insensed and peppermentaled. But in the mantime, you’ll be spanding sum time in jell. I have no alturnatiff but to fellow the lore.” Joke, being the babble, brook down and sopped.

“I don’t warna be no jailbud!” he whaled as Frack trite to consoul him as pest he could, saying, “We’re in this togather. We’ll maddle through samehow.”

The brooders Foolhardy were then photograbbed, finkerprinted and lacked in a halding cell. Frack joked to Joke, “I feel like Jammy Gagny in *Public Enema!*” But Joke flailed to see any humerus in having a bonefide criminal wreckord.

To his credit, Capt. Foolhardy was miraculastly able to parsuede both Appletart and Federal Espresso to droop the charges on one candition. The captarin had to premise that his

treblesum oaffspring would leaf town, never two come within a houndred miles of Appletart's helmstead. Arcepting the deal, all things being sequel, he oopted to turn in his budge and retire, thereboy inabling him to take Frack and Joke fur away and keep them on a shirt leash.

Fatter and sons relowcated to another stayte and suddled downy in a runted cattage. Although the boys had nearrowly escraped a jail sentience, they deedn't get off scoot-free. The ex-cappertain had been sonburned once too oven, and theirfoe he steadfastly kept his premise to grund Frack and Joke. He now spands his daze drinking beer and plying solitear while the Foolhardy boys are coonfined to their badroom where they make the beast of it with bored games, Clue in partickulish. Needleless to say, it's an eyeronic choice for indivisuals who are the veery dafinition of clueless.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Inspired by my title which is a play on The Hardy Boys, this humorous story updates and reconceptualizes the popular duo of yore as bumbling 40-plus-year-old-would-be-sleuths with arrested development and overactive imaginations, desperate to find and solve crimes while still living with their long-suffering elderly police captain father. The dense word play and absurd scenarios, which are hallmarks of my fiction, are influenced by Lewis Carroll, James Joyce, Edward Lear and John Lennon.*

**BIO:** Jim George is a writer-artist-songwriter-musician from Reading, Pennsylvania. His fiction and artwork has appeared in *The Sea Letter, The Ear, Praxis, ANON, The Disappointed Housewife, Hock Spit Slurp, Queen Mob's Teahouse* and *The Five-Two*; his Q & A's have been published in *Playboy* and *Cinema Retro* and his songs have been used on network television shows. *Jim Shorts*, his book, is a collection of wordplayful stories, poems and specialty forms and line drawings, available as a PDF from the author. More info at <https://byjimgeorge.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/first-blog-post>

# AND YOU THOUGHT DRAGON'S DIDN'T EXIST

*By Dave Thomas*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We liked this quirky little what if starring Adam (somewhere), Eve, another guy and the Instigator of all human misery for all time. Grendel's distant cousin is a vampy reptile who's about to get a make-over in an Eden whose days are numbered. Short and perky and very curiously inspired.*

"Fig leaves... Fig leaves..." I chanted, trying not to stare.

She blinked. "Are you God?"

"Nope. So, um, where's your husband?"

"He's busy," she said, "but I'm expecting another visitor very soon."

"Oooooooh, I think I know who. Where is that slimy little snake? I'll squash him."

She smiled innocently. "He's behind you."

I whirled around, ready to stamp him into the dust. I peered at the ground in front of me. A gleaming black claw sunk into the grass like a sickle. The claw lifted and retracted into a scaly foot, attached to a muscular front leg about three feet high.

I looked up. Waaaaaaay up. Towering above me was the head of a serpent, attached to a long silver neck. His neck formed a hairpin loop as his head descended.

He stared me in the eye. His head was the size of a cow's.

I backed away. A serpent, 30 feet long. A midsection the width of a cider barrel, supported by powerful legs. His feet remained planted as his body undulated like a sine wave.

His slippery orange tongue flicked like fire, but his eyes were laughing. He spoke with a smooth voice: “Sssssso, you wishhhhhh to squishhhhhh me.”

“He was just kidding,” piped Eve.

“Um, yah, that’s right,” I said. “Just kidding.”

The creature stepped forward, then lifted his right foot up to the level of my face. His foot had long toes, and worked like an eagle’s, but with five digits upfront, and two at the back.

His seven black claws extended—like a cat’s—and he partially closed his foot like a hand...as if grasping a head-sized sphere in his talons.

I backed away again, then stumbled and fell.

He ignored me and turned his head to the right. The tip of his tail pointed to the tree in the centre of the garden. “Eeeeeeeve, my dear—let me show you ssssssomething...”

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *In Genesis, the Lord God curses the serpent and says, “On your belly you will go and dust you will eat all the days of your life.” I’ve always been fascinated by the idea that the serpent originally had legs but lost them after he was cursed.” If so, he would have had the appearance of a Chinese dragon. My theory is that the ancient Chinese culture retained a memory of that original dragon.*

**BIO:** Dave Thomas is a former member of the Cambridge Writers’ Collective. With a background in science he enjoys speculating about the future of technology. He is currently working on a script for a YouTube video related to religion and government.

# MUKDUK

By Charlie Leo

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *There are actually two stories in this teensy weensy inspired 55-word nano: the one on your screen and the one that unfolds in your imagination after reading it. If you need a break from a long read, take a bite of this spooky little literary confection. We love the way the author packs so much into so little and finishes with a smart O. Henry.*

She pulls up to the taped off, wooded area as forensics arrives. Walking over, the detectives reviews the suspects and leads they have. She works to regain composure as she looks into the shallow grave and another detective calls her over.

“Thoughts?”

“One thing just doesn’t add up. This isn’t where I dumped the body.”

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I was inspired when writing this by other 55-word fiction pieces. This is a genre in which all short stories are 55 words and usually have a twist at the end. I focused on the twist in my story and intended for the reader to be shocked by the ending. I am heavily influenced by murder mysteries or any novel with an unforeseen twist that is subtly foreshadowed.*

**BIO:** Charlie Leo is a dedicated and passionate student who enjoys photography and Netflix comedies. He spends too much of his time appreciating music and playing the piano. He has a love for writing and follows his heart while creating his work.

# ANYONE CAN SEE IT

*By William Blome*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We don't know if there's a genre called 'grudge' fiction but these two resilient postmodernist flashes come close to putting a name on it. The twice set-upon author is circumstance challenged by a pre-occupied girlfriend and, in 'Tomahawk' a taunting readership, but appeals to reality are superseded by fantastic excursions into a hinterland of paranoia and metafiction. And yet it's not quite paranoid and not quite metafiction. Not only do we love the voice in both stories—we love how it pleads, not with the characters at hand, but with us. We feel as much a part of the stories as the fictional characters themselves. Glistening wizardry by a 'writer's writer'.*

Mary wants to come with me, anyone can see it, but Raglan keeps putting physical pressure on her upper arm to stop her from following in my direction. That, and he won't stop reading aloud to her from *my* translations of the classics, as we're all fanning out and tripping home in the August twilight. You see, he earlier prepared a scroll-like printout that lets his eyes easily toggle back and forth between three points: the stanzas of Catullus (a plucky-and-smartass poet), the lines of Plautus (a raucous-and-dirty playwright), and the wondrous curves of alive-and-well Mary. Don't ask me to illustrate what Raglan's saying with specific text examples, because you're not going to get that out of me. Let's just say Mary likes listening to classics, and thus she's favorable toward bastard Raglan at the moment. That can and will change any time now—anyone can see it—but until it does, I'll stay truthful with you and assert that he may not have to

actually put much pressure near Mary's elbow to keep her from straying toward me. She likes my translations of the classics that much, she adores my scholarship.

I'm compelled to repeat, however, that deep down, Mary wants to physically be with me, she wants my cozy harbor for her dreadnoughts, she craves my caring kennel for her poodle, she wants my safety razor with my brand of soapy lather determining what gets shaved and what doesn't, and it will require zero persuasion on my part to soon override Raglan's crude coercion and sweet speech. Never forget: those are *my* words he's reading aloud to Mary. Fuck the Romans and their Latin phonemes: *my* English syllables are what Raglan's setting afloat on the evening air, it's *my* word-stock being stuffed in Mary's ears.

Oh, if I come to believe the situation's taking too long to naturally resolve, don't you worry—make book on it—I have a method waiting in the wings to snarl Mr. Raglan good and tangle him in the sound of his own goddamn voice. I'll be deploying the three little drones Priscilla gifted me on my last birthday. They're here in my pockets, and anyone with squinting eyes can discern the bulge they're making, and don't for one second think I haven't previously been up and about in the open fields at dawn testing these mothers out and discovering the things they're capable of. Why, I've come to realize they can be made to not only hover over and follow a given target, but they can be pre-programmed to do so accompanied by several disgusting noises. For today, I have one already calibrated to fart loudly after Raglan's every fifth utterance. I have another prepared to belch like a slob following his every seventh word, and I have number three ready to ape the maddening, high-pitched hum of a female mosquito letting loose with randomly activated nine-second bursts of buzzing annoyance.

So I'm ahead of everyone, oh anyone can see it, and I can guess exactly what some of you are thinking: you're wondering how in hell my nasty drones won't offend Mary just as sure as they'll nonplus Raglan. And I'll grant that in a farfetched and reverse-engineering kind of way, that sort of forethought may constitute a hunk of nosey Priscilla's jealousy rationale in gifting me these drones in the first place. But see, I know my Mary; I know she'd never be the first to cut and run here. That will be Raglan, you can be certain of it, and when I spot Mary free and clear of his bossy ass—free and clear and eager to begin hoofing her way in my direction—I'll whip out my electronic remote and joyously command my drones to silence-the-fuck-up and start winging their way toward oblivion.

## TOMAHAWK

I thought writing about a hatchet attack nicely fulfilled my goal of always wanting to pen fictive stuff that has mammoth meaning beyond a minimalist format or the “just-can't-seem-to-get-out-of-this-enveloping-fog” predicament of many of my characters, but judging by reader vitriol and several stonings I've experienced when I've been out and about recently, swinging my arms back and forth and walking in the open, I must conclude I'm way wide of the intended mark when it comes to my tale about Dannon Higbee and his victim, Eleanor Roseate. So permit me to state (without any obfuscation or what Elmer Fudd might call “twicker-wee”) that my overwhelming and primary interest was in Eleanor Roseate and how she ever managed to so gracefully survive Higbee's furious assault.

I mean, when you find yourself with a character (post-attack) whose dominant concern is not with her unsightly scars and deep gashes; not in obtaining justice from the apprehended and forever-snarling Higbee; and not in the least obsessed by any known species of revenge: no, when you have instead someone who is passionately interested in finding a pair of sturdy, red high-tops she can wear to correct an imbalance or crick she now affects in all her shuffles and struts (a problem many readers will likely surmise is caused by an undefined and lingering fear born and growing from Higbee's attack); when you have a person like that in your midst—a star of such a magnitude in your fucking galaxy—I think she deserves great consideration and uncurdled respect.

Evidently, however, some of my irritated audience believes I've either refused or failed to show the proper deference. My guess is they're the ones who used fine gravel in their flinging and stoning, something they could grab whole handfuls of, and while I wasn't physically hurt in either of the two fusillades, my attitude as a writer has turned nasty.

I've gone so far as to probably adapt and embrace a version of a mean-spirited curse I first heard long ago, and I recently had that bad boy brush-painted on an inside wall of the bathroom that services us residents on the floor of the rooming house where I live: "Fuck you and the palomino you cantered in—or galloped up—on!" Moreover, if my readers aren't careful—if they don't cap the acid and drop the rocks—I've a good mind to do a total rewrite of my story and focus far more this time on the Dannon-Higbee personage and that multi-notched tomahawk of his.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Both of these pieces share the commonality of choiring in praise of the creators who refuses to be passive when facing his audience. 'Anyone Can See It' goes so far as*

*to suggest an up-to-date scenario (if not a rationale) for the use of drones to support the cause. I'll only add my hunch that I suspect these works occupy grounds I likely won't be crossing again.*

**BIO:** William C. Blome writes short fiction and poetry. He lives in the States, wedged between Baltimore and Washington, D. C. and he once swiped a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. His work has previously seen the light of day in such fine little mags as *PRISM International*, *In Between Hangovers*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Roanoke Review* and *The California Quarterly*.

# I dreamt a little dream of me

By lance manion

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The elusive nature and symbolic language of what goes on inside our heads when we are asleep is the biggest obstacle the writer faces when trying to recreate the experience as fiction. Manion succeeds brilliantly through a combination of flesh-toned, as opposed to purple, prose and neither explains nor tries to make sense of the action. The emotions at play resonate as they do in waking life and the comfortable, even familiar voice of the astonished narrator makes this dream within a dream all the more human. Surrealism at its most real.*

*“At the heart of quantum mechanics is a rule that sometimes governs politicians or CEOs – as long as no one is watching, anything goes.”*

— Lawrence M. Krauss

I had a dream where a mathematician came up with a unique solution to the over-crowding issue and I was one of a team of astronauts sent out to prove whether or not it would work.

I could provide you additional details but by the end of this your imagination will be taxed enough without trying to make you picture some nerdy mathematician in the first paragraph. I'll let you know when I want you to expend your finite energies.

The premise was simple, unless you want to look at the seventeen thousand pages of math that proved it was possible, most of that math included squiggly lines that seemed like they were made up on the spot but were instead symbols used in quantum physics as routinely as the numbers zero through nine.

The simple premise?

That if we, the astronauts, were sent off into space on a rocket of unimaginable power, unimaginable until recently anyway, a certain distance and then we returned back home through a small fold in the space/time continuum we would find everything as we left it... except for one small detail.

Every human, along with some hominids (great apes), would be gone. Or shifted or moved on or over or something. It wouldn't be Earth as if no humans had ever been there at all, overgrown with vegetation or run by cockroaches. Nope. It would be Earth just as we left it, just devoid of people. Every building and radio tower and ice cream truck would be sitting right there waiting for us.

Eventually in my dream we blasted off and went hurtling through space for the requisite amount of time until it was time to hang a U-turn, which we did. Soon afterwards we fiddled with some knobs and then slipped through a small tear in the fabric of reality and were suddenly putting down the landing gear back where we started.

I have dreamt many a crazy dream but when I looked out the window as we went through the makeshift wormhole it will always remain the most interesting image my mind has ever created. Really. I'm so happy with my brain. To try and describe it to you in any significant way would be doing it a disservice. Remember when I mentioned your finite energies? This might be a good time to expend a little. But don't get discouraged if you don't come up with anything more than the usual garden-variety *Star Wars* hyperspace or *Star Trek* warp speed visuals. Try it again when you're asleep tonight and see if you don't do better.

Anyway, we touch down and soon some of the crew are out of the vessel and walking around a completely deserted city.

It worked. It worked! Euphoria.

My shipmates are both ecstatic and terrified.

"What now?" they all seem to be asking.

Finally I get out and walk into the street only to find it's full of people. I report this to my associates and they come running back to see approximately a dozen people milling around me confused. Very confused.

In my headset I hear the captain of the mission, a much brighter guy than I am, asking me to come into a small convenience store just around the corner and I do exactly that with all haste.

I stride in to see him standing in the middle of the store and behind the counter there is a young man ringing up items for an old lady while two teenagers are in the back opening a refrigerator to fish out some sodas.

"Oh shit" he says under his breath. "There was nobody in here until you walked in."

"What are you saying?" I ask.

"I'm saying get back to the ship and stay there before you repopulate the whole damn planet."

So I walk back to the ship, all the while seeing people popping into existence from who-knows-where. I wonder quickly if I can find my ex (does she have to be in every damn dream?).

Once back in the ship I sit and listen to the other members of my team debate what to do with me. One of them suggests that it might be necessary to kill me.

The last thing I remember thinking before I wake up is that if I were in their place I might have suggested the same thing.

*"As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality."*

— Albert Einstein

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Comedian Pete Holmes, when trying to explain sleep to an alien that doesn't sleep describes how we shut down for the night but how our brain "plays movies for us". This was one of those movies. I try my best to capture not only the urgency I felt throughout it but the overwhelming sense of "What the fuck?" I can reread it a hundred times and still see some new meaning or metaphor. There's just so much to dig through. The perfect recipe for interesting flash fiction. I include the quotes to make myself appear brighter than I am.*

**BIO:** Lance Manion has released eight collections of humorous/odd short stories, been published in more than fifty literary publications and has contributed stories to a dozen anthologies. He blogs (almost) daily on his eponymous website and finds the na at the end of banana as annoying as you would if it were bananana.

# *All the Colors*

*By Sandra Bazzarelli*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *In this sensitively written reverie with its bittersweet notes and nostalgic key a woman reflects upon the men in her life in a quest for self-reckoning. The first person present singular POV creates a sense of intimacy and we feel she is talking to us in confidence, as a friend. Characters rise vividly from the page: fleshed out, three-dimensional people we know in our own life. A wry, self-deprecating humour wends its way through the capable prose and adagio colourations make the ironic ending all the more poignant. Quote: Then he'd held up his vanilla cone and made a declaration. "This is you," he'd said. "Unadventurous, boring and predictable." To that I'd responded, "Isn't vanilla what you ordered?" And our favourite line: 'He comes home a little bit later than I do when he comes home to my home. 'Gasp!*

The painting arrives and I'm anxious right up until I pull it out of its box. The back of the frame immediately falls out and slides back down into the broken pieces of Styrofoam that rise with static and stick to everything including my eyelashes. I catch the painting before it too slides out. The metal tabs that have been holding it in place have not survived the journey the way the smell of cigarette smoke has. Not only will I have to fix the frame, I'll have to wash it in vinegar and air it out. Or just throw it away and have the painting reframed. I am angry about this. So angry that I barely look at the painting before I set it aside to contend with its frame. This is not how I wanted it.

He comes home a little bit later than I do when he comes home to my home. I live alone but allow him to stay overnight. He only stays over one night a week because his overnight stays cost him money that he has never volunteered to pay. I won't pay for him. If he wants to visit me he can fork over the \$35 parking fee. So he does. He says he doesn't mind but then he never stays over more than once a week, which is fine with me. I don't enjoy having him around anyway. He isn't smart. He doesn't put ice in warm soda. He sleeps all weird and he wears white socks with black sneakers.

The concierge at the front desk calls. He's here. I tell the concierge to let him come up even though the thought had occurred to me to not answer the phone at all. I could have pretended I'm not home, but I'd stopped at the grocery store earlier so there's an extra piece of chicken that I don't want to eat myself. I could eat it myself; I just don't want to. He can eat it.

It smells like smoke in here, he says. Do you smoke now? Yes, I say. I've smoked for fifteen years straight since last week. He's confused. It's the painting, I say. He doesn't get it. It looks like a lot of colors swimming around, but that's all he can tell me about it. He doesn't understand

why I like it because he didn't finish college. This is what he says when he doesn't understand something. As if his finishing college would have made him a smart person in every way that he isn't, which is all of them. He would offer to cook, but he didn't finish college so he doesn't know how. He would read a book about WWII or write more than happy birthday on birthday cards, but he didn't finish college. The truth is he never even started college. The truth is he barely finished high school. But I let him lie to me because he has nothing better to say. At least the lies require some creativity.

It is clear that I don't really like this guy. The guy I actually did like didn't like me very much in the end though, so I just went along with this idiot because, at the very least, he looks good standing next to me in pictures. All of them are selfies, however, because I don't want to introduce him to my friends and family because they might ask him a question like, When you mix yellow and blue together, what color do you get? And then he'd tell them that he didn't finish college. Selfies also work because it's just our faces. I don't do full-length mirror selfies with him. No one on Instagram will ever see the white socks and black sneakers unless I do fulllength

mirror selfies or exist among other people who can take pictures of the two of us from head to toe. So I don't.

The guy I actually did like did finish college, but that's not why I liked him. I liked him because he made me feel like I was really beautiful, which is a terrible thing to have to admit to yourself when you've tried to present yourself as a woman who doesn't care about that. Look at my forehead. It moves! Look at my lips. They don't quack! I'm practically a feminist hero for keeping this face of mine this face of mine. He also made me feel special, mind you. Like there was something within me that mattered in a way that made everyone else matter more.

He was smart, yes, but he didn't look good standing next to me in pictures. I didn't mind though. Not enough to not post carefully curated pictures of us together. Still, after some time together, it turned out he didn't like all of me either. I was, apparently and according to his practiced judgment, a snob. I didn't want to sit on the hood of his car parked outside an ice-cream shop, you see. The hood was hot and dirty and my skirt was thin and too short to protect my undercarriage, so I stood while he sat. I'm not a snob, I'd said. A snob wouldn't have gotten into this car at all, never mind sat on the hood of it. For someone who isn't a snob, he'd said, you sure do know how one thinks. Then he'd held up his vanilla cone and made a declaration. This is you, he'd said. Unadventurous, boring, and predictable. To that I'd responded, Isn't vanilla what you ordered?

We dated for another month after that, but it wasn't good anymore. I knew that. He liked the sound of my voice, the way I walked, but how my wallet and checkbook matched? He hated me for it. Soon enough he'd grown chattier with all the hostesses, bartenders, and servers. Where were they from? He loved their blue hair. Their pointy red nails. Their piercings. Their green forked tongue tattoos that licked their earlobes. They were creative people who matched his vibe. So he'd leave me behind at every table to go smoke outside with one of the many interchangeable nonconformists. As it happens, he had a sixth sense for people with talent...and cigarettes. And for women who could only be described as vanilla until they consciously and vigorously rainbow sprinkled themselves into obvious obscurity.

He asks, Where are you planning on hanging those colors? The painting, I say. In my office, over my desk. He tells me that's cool and takes off his pants. He's always trying to hang them in my closet, but I never allow him. He reminds me that I have extra hangers and plenty of room, but I take his pants from him and drape them over the chair in my bedroom. This is fine. He doesn't

get angry. He never does. He just moves on to his next almost thought. His body is good, but I don't really turn him on just by standing there in front of him. That's another difference. When he sleeps next to me, I don't sleep. He twitches like he's short-circuiting and I don't care enough about him to wonder if maybe he's dying of something. It's 3 AM and I'm awake. That's the only thing I care about, until I remember the painting. The frame that I had bathed in vinegar and left to air out on my terrace is still there. Outside I mostly smell the vinegar, but still the funk of cigarette smoke lingers. I leave the frame where it is and head back inside. On my desk, propped up against the wall, is the painting. It also smells like smoke, but only like a wisp of it now. I hold it in my hands and look at it so that I can actually see it. It's beautiful. Really beautiful. All the colors swirling unpredictably. Hard and soft. This is you, he'd said, unveiling the painting to me in his studio on our fourth date. This is you.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This is the story that emerges when you buy an expensive piece of art online only to have it arrive in a degraded state. You start to think about all the other things that contribute to the degradation of something beautiful and find yourself drawing parallels between art and love. In the same way you can restore a painting, you can restore the artist's intention by reminding yourself that to appreciate the inspiration behind it. And inspiration is nearly always borne out of some form of love.*

**BIO:** Sandra Bazzarelli is a singer/songwriter and writing instructor from Bergen County, New Jersey who earned her B.A. in literature-writing from Columbia University and her M.A. in Teaching and Learning from NYU. Some of her creative writing has been published in such literary journals as Quarto, Jersey Devil Press, Instigatorzine, Mad Swirl, amphibi.us, Clapboard House and Cease, Cows.

# THE PART OF ME THAT WAS ACTUALLY ME

*By Franco Amati*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We took an instant shine to this unpretentious portrait of the artist as a young wallflower and we like the way Amati presents the social hiccups in group dynamics that we've all suffered at one time or another. The voice is appealing in its earnestness and there are some sit up and take notice passages of dialogue that made us sit up and take notice. A deftly crafted unassuming story with vibes that resonate.*

The work day was waning. I kept looking at the clock. I wondered how I could sneak out before people started gathering for the holiday party. I wondered: *Is it really that bad if you RSVP to something, and then don't stay for it? Would they even notice if I wasn't here? They'd notice. It wouldn't actually change much, but they'd notice. Someone would probably mention it casually: 'Oh did Desi leave? That's odd. Why did he accept the invite? And someone else would reply: 'Well he's like that. He's kind of flakey when it comes to social gatherings.'*

The truth is I knew that staying or going wouldn't make them think any differently. Leaving would allow me some time to rest. It would free me up from more self-conscious rumination. It would spare me the anxiety of awkwardly standing around in groups of three or four trying to talk over music and voices. I wouldn't have to desperately try to seem adept at small talk. It would save me from laughing at jokes that aren't funny. Sharing vacuous comments about the latest shows or movies.

It was all nonsense. Their favorite way to wash down nonsense was with fancy cocktails and costumes. They always needed a stupid theme. The theme this year was New Orleans. We had to wear something New Orleans related. This perfect theme was chosen by the manager, Martina, who made no secret of spending weeks of vacation time in the Big Easy, brushing up on her French, and mixing it up with other pretentiously posh young professionals who were also there on business.

I didn't wear a costume though. I was depressed as shit about my mom who just had a stroke and about what was going on with my girlfriend and the guy she was having sex with. It was all stupid to me. *Kids wear costumes for parties*, I told myself. *I'm not like that*. These are a bunch of adults who get paid way too much to stare at screens and tap away at keyboards all day, and then they act like high school kids outside of work hours. They all have about as much emotional depth as the software they design. And I couldn't stand wasting any non-work related time getting to know them. It's like devoting hours upon hours of precious time digging and digging for some kind of treasure that might make you think for a second that these people are decent humans, but all you find is that deep down they're just walking bags of shit.

I stayed, made the small talk. Listened to one person after the other comment on why I didn't have a costume. Listened to people try to stupidly guess each other's costumes. Watched

as people jacked each other off about how creative they were to come up with one kind of costume or another.

"You have to guess," the new intern said. "Martina gave me the idea, but you guys have to try to guess what I am."

She had on a maid outfit and a big twenty-five cent piece hanging around her neck.

“Um, you’re a cheap prostitute?” I wanted to say. No one ventured a guess.

“No one gets it?” She looked around at the three men standing around her holding beers.

She gestured to the giant-sized coin. When no one responded after about thirty seconds of stupefied looks at different parts of her costume, Martina walked by us with two big liquor bottles in her hand.

“Don’t you get it guys!?! She’s a play on words- French Quarter!”

“Ahhh, ahhh, ahhhhhh,” the three guys, including me, said in harmony.

“How clever!” guy one said. “Leave it to Martina to come up with that one!”

“Yep, such a wordsmith that Martina,” guy two said.

“Cool,” I said, nodding. Then I walked towards the pizza.

I stuffed my face and drank my drinks. I tried to keep my mouth as active as possible on non-verbal activities so that my lack of conversation might seem less unnatural than I felt it usually was. I wondered: *Is there anyone here as remotely aware as I am of the fact that I haven’t said one single meaningful utterance since this party started? Does anyone else realize that all I’ve done is nod, fake smile, chuckle, and say the barest of backchannels like “oh nice” or “cool” or “awesome” or “that’s interesting” without contributing one single anecdote about myself?*

Someone must realize. Someone must see how ill-equipped for this sort of thing I am. Someone must have even the slightest inclination to grab my hand and want to save me, to tell me it’s okay, I know this is not you, I know this is not your thing, you can go, we won’t take it personally, we won’t judge you. You’re free to go, my friend. I can see that you don’t like this, and I can’t bear another minute of seeing you like a fish flapping around out of water for such an

extended period of time as if the act itself is the only way to guarantee yourself a decent place to swim and live in the future.

Nope. Instead of someone trying to save me, all I got was the occasional “Hey Desi, stop talking so much.” That would be followed with increasingly intensifying peer pressure to participate in Karaoke. “Hey guys, Desi is going to be doing the Karaoke opener tonight. What will you be singing Desi?” “Oh I think Desi should open up with a ballad” Maybe something from *The Boss* or the *Bon Jovi* archives, what do you say buddy? Represent! Jersey in the house!”

“I’m not singing,” I said.

“I have to leave soon...,” I said.

“I’m still eating...”

“I’m not drunk enough...”

“No, I don’t want to... I can’t...”

“Naaahhhh...”

“I never do Karaoke. I just can’t do it.”

I did what I could to stave off the solicitation. I exhausted my reasons. They all fell on deaf ears. No one gave me a way out. No one let up. The pressure mounted. Everyone had a turn.

It eventually became so blatant that I was the only one who had not yet had a turn at singing. My resistance and worsening reticence had gotten so unbearably awkward and uncomfortable that some unknown part of me broke through.

Maybe it’s that same part of someone that comes out when they’re being raped, the part that decides to stop resisting, that says I’ll just lay here and take it, so it’ll be over sooner. It’s the part of you that doesn’t want to do battle anymore. This part of you emerges and takes over for

the part of you that is actually yourself. It's that unknown force in you that becomes an entirely different person in order to save the part of you that is real and true and sincere from being suffocated into nothingness. It's the stranger inside you that is capable of absolutely anything. It lashes out and protects that other part of you so that you can both go on with your business and stop being torn up from the inside out.

Anyway, that part of me eventually said "Ok fine. I'll sing."

"Yay! He's really going to do it!" multiple faceless people said.

"What song will you do?" Martina, the song maven asked."

*"With or Without You. By U2"*

It was the only song I was certain I could belt out all the words to even if there was a gun to my head. It was my favorite song, but not because it's a fun party song. In fact I'm almost certain it was a terrible choice for Karaoke because it has a falsetto, and there's no way I could mimic Bono's vocal range. He goes deep to baritone and then raises up at various parts. I only did it because the song held great significance to me in my life, and it's the only one I confidently knew all the words to.

I started singing. I went unconscious. I vaguely remember my leg moving Elvis Presley-like to the rhythm of the bass. I'm pretty sure I sang the chorus way too loudly. And I think I did the same gestures that Bono does in the music video.

People cheered. My coworkers were starting to become riotous. Clapping. Woos upon woos from everyone in the room.

When the song was winding down, my consciousness started to return. And as I came back to Earth I caught the last bits of clapping and cheering.

"Wow Desi actually did it!" they said.

“Desi you did it! I’m so proud of you!” Martina yelled.

She smiled, and ran up to me, and gave me a huge hug. “You did it!” she shouted again in my ear. “That was awesome! I’m so happy you did it!”

That was the most sincerely positive reaction Martina ever had to anything that I did the entire time I worked there. I rode the high of her reaction for days. I barely slept that night. And it took some time for the part of me that was actually me to come back out of hiding and breath the natural air again.

END

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *My intent was to describe the anguish an introvert can feel when facing an excess of ‘voluntary’ social interaction. Co-workers can seem terrible when your inner resources are depleted. Even a trivial event like singing karaoke can be the pinnacle of discomfort. I’m not good when I have to interact with groups in loud settings, so this was my attempt to put that struggle into words. One literary influence was Celine’s ‘Journey to the End of Night’, particularly the frenetic, trapped-in-your-own-head, misanthropic kind of narrative style.*

**BIO:** Franco Amati has gone from academia, to the tech sector, to the gutters and back. He lives in New York and writes as much as he can. You can read more of his work at <https://francoamati.wordpress.com>

# NONFICTION

# REVIEW OF THREE RESTAURANTS

By E. Avery Cale

***WHY WE LIKE IT:** We could say ‘Review of Three Restaurants’ is off the wall—but wait! There is no wall! Schizoid destroyer prose and Nabokovian neologisms plucked out of a personalized lexicon of Lobjan vocab—patroned, perpin, turnt, blaow, skrt—is for real gonzo. If Meatball Mulligan and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were joy-riding down Moxy Avenue and rap-slammed going 180 into a junkie locomotive piloted by Hunter S. Thompson, this is the neo-Dada train wreck you’d get. We’re breathless and we still don’t know why. There are slurs here and there that will get the Political Correction officers off their butts but it just so happens that at FLEAS we value the freedom of the artist to offend—without it, there’s no chance for art. As to the theme? Well, we think ‘Review of Three Restaurants’ bears the same relation to food as BDSM does to procreation. Buckle up, kid, you’re in for a bumpy ride. It’s just beautiful writing.*

I know you are in Hell- that is to say L.A. which we all know is Hell because both are full of Liberals- and thus you may be surprised to find this sitting on your desk right now. But I have my ways.

Food is culture. I proceed with this saying that I made up and did not steal from anyone<sup>11</sup> because this is a food review of three restaurants, only one of which I have lent the honour of my patronage. But that is unnecessary, as by following the above dictum I can extrapolate from obvious facts about the cultures represented. One can do the same for any restaurant, really. Take a taco truck. Why are tacos sold from a truck? Because trucks are indigenous to Mexico, as is the taco. Trucks were originally used for driving cows around Mexico and tacos were originally made from Mexican cows, and therefore the linkage is impossible to rend.

Now, one may be tempted to ask why I, who have not eaten at two of the three restaurants to be reviewed, should be qualified at all to pass judgements upon them. But One forgets that I studied Political Science. Which is nothing less than to say I studied nothing at all really but learned to judge every other subject. As a Political Scientist I am a qualified expert in speaking on matters I cannot possibly understand, in making decisions based upon scant information as distorted by my own preferences then imposing said decisions upon other people, and in then justifying my impositions by gilding them in objectivity and altruism with empty displays of eloquence. To this of course you may object, saying something like “That is not the true province of Political Science but of Real Scientists! That is what Neil Degrass Tyson does when he talks about putting more Scientists in Congress or the economics of football, or Richard Dawkins

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<sup>11</sup> Of course there is a book by this name. But I will assume it is a book about cultured and fermented foods like yoghurt and sourdough bread.

when he tries to talk about epistemology, or Bill Nye when talks about running an amusement park.” But you can shut your fat whore mouth.

The one restaurant at which I have eaten made rather tasty food, I must say. I got a bento box. Which is not a box at all but more of a square plate divided into separate bowls. Which seems odd, as plates are a baseball thing and bowls are a football thing, but just like the beautiful mix of cuisines on my bowlplatebox- Korean spicy pork bolgogi, Tempura<sup>12</sup> vegetables and shrimp, and Japanese sushi – this sporty mashup worked. It was black on the outside and red on the inside. There was in the dead centre a cute little dimple shaped like a voluptuous triangle and filled with soy sauce. There was in the northwest corner a set of four pieces of sushi, California roll of course because that is the cheap ass roll era’body throw in for free cause who really likes that shit anyway. The New England corner held the Tempuran food- a slice of sweet potato, a slice of zucchini, a slice of eggplant, a single shreemp that had been uncurled from its comma-like natural shape, and a porkstuffed gyoza. Apparently the Tempurans are a sound-oriented people when it comes to their cuisine because it is fried a delicate gold that crisps and snaps pleurably when eaten. In the bottom right corner was plain white rice I mean really W.T.Fuck is that about. Then the star dish, the spicy pork bolgogi, was in the double negative quadrant and it came atop cut romaine lettuce which is weird because Romania is nowhere near Korea but I guess North Korea is Communist and at one time Romania was a Soviet Socialist Republic. From this we conclude that romaine is the People’s Lettuce. And we should not be overly surprised that Romanian stuff is odd as the country is a weird one, they speak a language of Latin extraction despite being surrounded by Slavs. Interesting story, that. It happened like this: we all I am sure know about the Varangians who took the many rivers of Russia down to Byzantine territory and thus converted to Orthodox Christianity and there was of course the glorified contingent of Varangian Guards who fought under the Emperors of Constantinople, justly famed as they are for their prowess in battle and their remarkable stature, this much is known and repeated only to bring one to mind of the next historical episode, that is when Antonio Banderas joined a group of Vikings on their way to the East Roman Empire and was waylaid by animalskin-wearing cannibalistic peoples in what is now Romania, whose men he duly vanquished then took upon himself to repopulate the country by siring many heirs with the local women, and that is why they are Latin. Anyway the spicy pork bolgogi was good. Samantha ate a noodle dish. The noodles were wide around and lengthy. If one considers, say, a ramen noodle to be equivalent to the size of a massasauga (*Sistrurus catenatus*) then these noodles would be the size of a gaboon viper (*Bitis gabonica*). It had some green stuff on it and some meat.

What of the other restaurants? I mean literally, what are they? What are they called? Chill. Imma tell you. The northernmost of the trio is *Lanna* Thai. The middle is Sobahn, and this is where I have eaten. Thirdlimost is Hibachi Grill *Super* Buffet.

What jumps out at us here?

Obviously the fact that the two which I have not patroned are both related to Superman. This makes sense because I do not care so much for him as a character. When I want to read about God I read the Bible or Kant or Flannery O’Connor or something.

But if we may abstract from the particular performative living of my life into the organic life of the whole collective which is the only true wellspring and reference point for cultural criticism and discussion- which are truly one and the same for to engage in discourse is to critique- then what is the meaning of this? Why are both of these restaurants explicitly named after Superman?

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<sup>12</sup> I do not know where Temper is, but I assume somewhere there next to Japan and Korea off the Sea of Japan.

Perhaps a Greimas square will help us. If you do not know what that is I apologize to the world for your ignorance and hope you never breed. But as I am a nice perpin I will splain it to ya. The Greimas Square was discovered by Algirdas Julien Greimas, a French-Lithuanian Literary Scientist. Literary Science is definitely real science. They use tools like the aforementioned square, which is vaguely mathematical looking. That is how you know it is a real science. To use this Square one places a term on the lefthand side and its corellary antithesis on the righthand, then fills in the spaces above, below, and between them with recombinations of the terms. As so:

**Superman**

**Namrepus**

To those who do not know what a Namrepus is, read a biology book. But I will give you ignorants a brief sketch. A Namrepus is kin to the platypus, which if you don't know what that is it is like a beaver-duck. The Namrepus is like a beaver-swan. It has a beaver tail and a bill, and a long elegant neck. They are migratory and winter in Barbados. Their summer home is Lake Baikal. Their yearly migration is the lengthiest on earth. Many die on the journey. But they have strong powerful swan wings and never give up. They are incredible to behold. So what are the characteristics of Superman, and of Namrepus?

Superman + Namrepus= Semi Aquatic Egg Laying Superhero

**Superman**

**Namrepus**

Super Manly Super Man=

Supermanly Namrepus/

Really Namrey Pus=

Action hero, demigod, ubermensch

Namrepusish Superman

Magically beautiful

And so on. I could tease this out for hours. Lithuanian semiotics is a head of hair and my typing-figures are a comb and boy when I get hot and going you know that volume will be risin, and we fixing to get turnt. But I am sure you do not have time for it. That or you are scared. You are scared what a proper understanding of psychoanalytics will mean, aren't you? That a proper grammar leads to a proper ethic and a proper political action is obvious.<sup>13</sup> You do not want to risk your fragile class consciousness as a well-educated bourgeois. But you know, rich young niggas/you know we never really had no old money/we gotta lot of new money though, hah/(If Young Metro don trust you I'm gon' shoot ya)/Raindrop, drop top (drop top)/Smokin' on cookie in the hotbox (cookie)/Fuckin' on your bitch she a thot, thot (thot)/Cookin' up dope in the crockpot (pot)/We came from nothin' to somethin' nigga (hey)/I don't trust nobody grip the trigger (nobody)/Call up the gang, and they come and get you (gang)/Cry me a river, give you a tissue (hey)/My bitch is bad and boujee (bad)/Cookin' up dope with an Uzi (blaow)/My niggas is savage, ruthless (savage)/We got 30's and 100 rounds too (grrah)/My bitch is bad and boujee (bad)/Cookin' up dope with an Uzi (dope)/My niggas is savage, ruthless (hey)/We got 30's and 100 rounds too (glah)/Offset, whoo, whoo, whoo, whoo, whoo!/Rackings on rackings, got backends on backends/I'm ridin' around in a coupe (coupe)/I take your bitch right from you (you)/Bitch I'm a dog, roof (grrr)/Beat the ho walls loose (hey)/Hop in the frog, whoo! (skrt)/I tell that bitch to come comfort me (comfort for me)/I swear these niggas is under me (hey)/They hate and the devil keep jumpin' me (jumpin' me)/Bankrolls on me keep me company (cash)/We did the most, yeah/Pull up in Ghosts, yeah (woo)/My diamonds a choker (glah)/Holdin' the fire with no holster (blaow)/Rick The Ruler, diamonds cooler (cooler)/This a Rollie not a Muller (hey)/Dabbin' on 'em like the usual (dab)/Magic with the brick, do

<sup>13</sup> Just sayin, they don't call them Grammar Nazis because they are apathetic.

voodoo (magic)/Court side with a bad bitch (bitch)/Then I send the bitch through Uber (go)/I'm young and rich and plus I'm boujee (hey)/I'm not stupid so I keep the Uzi (rrrah)/Rackings on rackings, got backends on backends/So my money makin' my back ache/You niggas got a low acc rate (acc)/We from the Nawf, yeah dat way (Nawf)/Fat cookie blunt in the ash tray (cookie)/Two bitches, just national smash day (smash)/Hop in the Lamb', have a drag race (skrt)/I let them birds take a bath bae (brrrrr) Raindrops, drop top (drop top)/Smokin' on cookie in the hotbox (cookie)/Fuckin' on your bitch she a thot, thot (thot)/Cookin' up dope in the crockpot (pot)/We came from nothin' to somethin' nigga (hey)/I don't trust nobody grip the trigger (nobody)/Call up the gang, and they come and get you (gang)/Cry me a river, give you a tissue (hey)/My bitch is bad and boujee (bad)/Cookin' up dope with an Uzi (blaow)/My niggas is savage, ruthless (savage)/We got 30's and 100 rounds too (grrah)/My bitch is bad and boujee (bad)/Cookin' up dope with an Uzi (dope)/My niggas is savage, ruthless (hey)/We got 30's and 100 rounds too (glah)/Pour a four, I'm droppin' muddy/Outer space, KiD CuDi (drank)/Introduce me to your bitch as wifey and we know she sluttin'/Broke a brick down, nuted butted, now that nigga duckin'/Don't move too fast I might shoot you (huh?)/Draco bad and boujee (Draco)/I'm always hangin' with shooters (brrah)/Might be posted somewhere secluded (private)/Still be playin' with pots and pans, call me Quavo Ratatouille/Run with that sack, call me Boobie (run with it)/When I'm on stage show me boobies (ay)/Ice on my neck, I'm the coolest (ice)/Hop out the suicide with the Uzi (pew-pew-pew)/I pull up, I pull up, I pull up/I hop out with all of the drugs and the good luck (skrrt)/I'm cookin', I'm cookin', I'm whippin' I'm whippin' into a rock up, let it lock up (lock up)/I gave her 10 racks/I told her go shoppin' and spend it all at the pop up (ten)/These bitches they fuck and suck dick/And they bustin' for Instagram, get your clout up/Uh, yeah, dat way, float on the track like a Segway (go)/Yeah, dat way, I used to trap by the/Subway (trappin')/Yeah, dat way, young nigga trap with the AK (rrrah)/Yeah, dat way, big dyke ho get it on, Macy Gray (hey)/Raindrops, drop tops (drop top)/Smokin' on cookie in the hotbox (cookie)/Fuckin' on your bitch she a thot, thot (thot)/Cookin' up dope in the crockpot (pot)/We came from nothin' to somethin' nigga (hey)/I don't trust nobody grip the trigger (nobody)/Call up the gang, and they come and get you (gang)/Cry me a river, give you a tissue (hey)/My bitch is bad and boujee (bad)/Cookin' up dope with an Uzi (blaow)/My niggas is savage, ruthless (savage)/We got 30's and 100 rounds too (grrah)/My bitch is bad and boujee (bad)/Cookin' up dope with an Uzi (dope)/My niggas is savage, ruthless (hey)/We got 30's and 100 rounds too (glah)/Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah/My bitch she bad to the bone, ay/Wait, these niggas watchin'/I swear to God they be my clones/Yeah, hey, huh/Switchin' my/hoes like my flows (what?)/Switchin' my flows like my clothes (like what?)/Keep on shootin' that gun, don't reload/Ooh, ooh, now she want fuck with my crew/Cause the money come all out the roof/Drive the 'Rari, that bitch got no roof (skrt)/Wait, what kind of 'Rari? 458 (damn)/All of these niggas, they hate (they hate)/Try to hide, shoot through the gate/Look, go to strip club, make it rain, yeah/So much money they use rakes/Count 100 thousand in your face (in your face)/Yeah, then put 300 right in the safe/Met her today, ooh/She talk to me like she knew me, yah/Go to sleep in a jacuzzi, yah/Wakin' up right to a two piece, yah/Countin' that paper like loose leaf, yah/Gettin' that chicken with blue cheese, yah/Boy you so fake, like my collar/You snakin', I swear to God that be that Gucci, ay/And you know we winnin' (winnin')/Yeah, we is not losin'/Try to play your song, it ain't move me (what?)/Saw your girl once now she choosin', yeah/Raindrops, drop top (drop top)/Smokin' on cookie in the hotbox (cookie)/Fuckin' on your bitch she a thot, thot (thot)/Cookin' up dope in the crockpot (pot)/We came from nothin' to somethin' nigga (hey)/I don't trust nobody grip the trigger (nobody)/Call up the gang, and they come and get you (gang)/Cry me a river, give you a tissue (hey)/My bitch is bad and boujee (bad)/Cookin' up dope with an Uzi (blaow)/My niggas is savage, ruthless (savage)/We got 30's and 100 rounds too (grrah)/My bitch is bad and boujee (bad)/Cookin' up dope with an Uzi (dope)/My niggas is savage, ruthless (hey)/We got 30's and 100 rounds too (glah)

And that is about all I have to say about Lithuanian semiotics.

Let us proceed to the historical discussion.

To fully understand these restaurants we must explore the histories of their respective countries of origin. History is of course a sensitive subject, especially when written by an Outsider. That is why Pony Boys' book "40 Acres and a Mule my Ass" did not stay golden. I am not of the cultures in question. And as a white American male I must be mindful of the legacy of oppression which follows me and the potential to misinterpret and unjustly distort the history and cultures of these peoples. And one must be extra careful when speaking about Oriental cultures, as Asians are prone to misreading things, what with those squinty little eyes and all.

While reading this I ask that you be mindful of the fact that my reference material is of highest quality and impeccable accuracy, and that therefore if a claim seems suspect to you you are wrong and full of shit. My source, of course, is Age of Empires II, as of the Rise of the Rajas expansion. If I may, let me briefly lay out the history of my source, a procedure we academics call "historiography."

Age of Empires, the original game, came out sometime when I was a toddler and therefore is a Poopy Old Game. But Age of Empires II came out 1999, and I guess I had a computer at that time because I played it quite a lot. And a dedicated group of heroes have worked in the underground and continued to mod<sup>14</sup> and update the game, and over time this community has grown and developed until like something stuck way down in the throat of Old Faithful it has exploded with Steam into the world. And so a while back they put out Age of Empires II: The Forgotten in which were remembered the Italians, the Indians, the Incas, the Slavs, and the Magyars. I doubt these teams were forgotten by the original development team, it seems more likely to me that they were all on the "I" page of the binder in which the civs<sup>15</sup> were kept and it must have fallen out. One could of course ask why the Magyars and the Slavs were on the I page. The Slavs are obvious, it stands for "Ivan the Terrible's people, the Slavs." The Mayars are more difficult. Magyars are basically Hungarians. If you drop the H, Hungary sounds like Uyghur, which also looks like Magyar, and the Uyghurs are Central Asian so the mistake is plausible. Then if we assume the person transcribing the notes for the binder heard "Eager" instead of Uyghur, as in "Eager Diaspora" instead of Uyghur Diaspora, then the next person heard Igor instead of Eager, well I guess it makes sense.

After the Forgotten came "The African Kingdoms," which included the Malians, the Berbers, the Ethiopians, and the Portuguese. The Portuguese look pretty sweet. Their special unit is the Organ Gun, which looks like a guy pushing a shawarma cart and can be built in the Castle Age without having researched Chemistry even though it is a gunpowder unit, so that is neat. The other civs are not even real.

Lastly we have Rise of the Rajas, which includes the Burmese, the Vietnamese, the Khmer, and the Malaysians. More on these later.

Now, the three restaurants we are reviewing here each represent the cuisine of a different Asian civ<sup>16</sup>: the Chinese, the Koreans, and the Thaietnamese.

We shall start our Very Historical Analysis© with a discussion of the Chinese, as they first appeared in the Age of Empires II base game and so can be considered as chronologically prior to the other two. The

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<sup>14</sup> Short for "modify" in Lobjan.

<sup>15</sup> Lobjan for "Civilization"

<sup>16</sup> "Civ" being equivalent to "culture," as in, "Hey Science Professor Brah look at this sweet *Staphylococcus* civ I grew on my Petri dish.

Chinese are a strong economics team, and have a unique tech<sup>17</sup> that upgrade the damage of their Heavy Scorpions, and so one could say it packs quite a *sting*, ha ha get it that is some hilarious shit right there. But really though Heavy Scorpions are the bee's knees, if bees had knees that mowed down infantry like a lawnmower mows a lawn. Little infantry bits chopped up all tiny like and left there to slowly decompose and fertilize the ground and mmmm can you smell it mmmmm or maybe you could chop them all up and fling them into a bag and then dump the bag into a pile that gets bigger and bigger every time you mow oh yea look at that pile of chopped up infantrymen oh hell yea that is hot when it decomposes I'm gonna throw that in my tomato garden and grow some bomb ass Cherokee Purples. Which brings us to our next point- the Chinese have a killer farm bonus, each farm starts with +45 food. And let us talk about that unique unit, the Chu Ko Nu, that guy is pretty nifty, shooting as he does not one, not two, but three, yes indeed sir three arrows, or rather crossbow bolts, at almost exactly the same instant, bop bop bop like a gansta tommy gun bop bop bop three bolts all in ya eye bop bop bop and for you too sucka. Mass a whole mess a them boys together and what do you got? An army that is probably still inferior to the equivalent resources spent on an army of Heavy Scorpions, if we are speaking honestly.

Next we have the Koreans. I used to love these guys. Mayhap I still do. They have two unique units, the Turtle Ship and the War Wagon. The Turtle Ship looks metal AF. They got a dragon head. Not a turtle head. Unless it is a dragon turtle. On man that would be so badass. But with a normal turtle head. So it would look all boring like and you'd be like "What a cute turtle" and go to sit on it and it would be all like "Dracarys" but in its own head because it can do that, if a dragon says something in its own head it still hears it so it would say dracarys in its head and BAWCWAW FIRE ALL OVER EVERYWHERE and you'd be like "Damn that is one badass turtle I bet he countin that paper like loose leaf, ya, and getting that chicken with blue cheese too donchaknow, in fact I would venture to say that his niggas is savage, ruthless (savage!) and that they got 30's and 100 rounds too (grrah!)." So yes Turtle Ships. They shoot out cannon balls. Two at a time! And they go bkoo bkoo and crash blam into the bad guy ships or buildings or whatever and they look awesome but are they effective? I mean I know Donald Trump, may his name be Blessed Forevermore and Sing Between the Stars Until Rangnarok takes the White People to Heaven, I know we can dump a big bomb- a huge bomb, a real big league bomb- onto the Enemies of Blue Jeans and Apple Pie and it just kills most of them and makes the rest love us but can Turtle Ships do that? They damn well better, they cost 180w/180g<sup>18</sup>. I think they are pretty good. And the Korean unique land unit is the War Wagon. It, too, looks quite metal. It is like a normal wagon, similar to that one on Beauty and the Beast that the sneaky guy with the angular face, the one who helps Javert capture Jean Valjean and tries to sell him to Amelie because he thinks Blue is the Warmest Colour before the Three Musketeers and Ratoulli rescue him. Or something like that. I don't watch French films, those Commie Pinko Basterds are just trying to corrupt our minds, man. The wagon shoots two big ole arrow out the front over the top of the horses. Not sure where the driver sits. Maybe the horses drive themselves?

There is not a Thailand team. Which makes me think it is not a real place. But it seems some people think the Khmer Empire was roughly where Thailand is now. Seems shandy but I will go with it. Mostly because I know a whole lot about the Khmer, as I just last Friday started a game piloting them against Samuel and Tanner. We are playing the map Black Forest, and I am rocking it. So that should tell you right off the bat that the Thais are good at dessert. As to concrete, real life, historical details, it is a fact that their Battle Elephants are the bomb dot commander in chief of the battlefield, brah. They have a

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<sup>17</sup> Lobjan for "technology"

<sup>18</sup> This means "One hundred and eighty wood and one hundred and eight gold" in Lobjan.

unique tech<sup>19</sup> called Tusk Swords<sup>20</sup> that boosts their attack by +3. +3!! Como se WHAAAAAT? You read that right. Plus. Three. Attack. Them tusk swords slash through enemies like Slash slashes through enemies, that is, real fast. Mass them songuns and boy you get your elephant stampede on. A whole mess of spearmen can stop that after a while but it is right satisfying as hell to watch them get trampled all over. And then, their unique unit- mon dios!- an elephant that has a double giant crossbow mounted upon his back like he just don't care, boy that is like some kind of Grand Theft Auto cheat mode shit right there. BAMBAMABAMABAMBAMABAMA ELEPHANT ARROWS YEA BITCH. Combine what I said about how elephants can nail the solo from November Rain and what I said about how ain't nobody grow a salsa garden like a Chinamen and you basically have these bad boys. And when you have to fight these bad boys, bad boys whatcha gonna do? Whatcha gonna do when they come for you? Huh? Cause I tell you what they are here and ready to crush your Constitutional right just like they was written on a moldy piece of parchment that couldn't stop a bullet even if it wanted to, but guess what? It doesn't want to, because the Supreme Court told it "Stand down, Boi, let that bullet through."

Alright alright alright, he said McConaugheyly, I will tell you how I will defeat them. As I am sure you know, Black Forest is almost entirely wooded. And on this random map there is an entire quadrant- the quadrant where the California Roll would be, if it was Bento Box- that is wooded over, a primal virgin forest. And like Saruman the Great I will fell those trees in droves and sicken the very earth with the destruction I shall wrought. And that will bring me up behind Tanner's base. Not to be crude here, but once I am positioned behind Tanner, right up snug behind him, I'll extend myself into his rear and much like RuPaul I'm gonna make P nah P nah P Nah Peanut Butter Peanut Butter Peanut Butter Peanut Butter out of his base. I'm only gonna say this once: That boy should watch his Wood.

OK, we are near the end, so it is time to get down to Brassed Axe.<sup>21</sup> Have I eaten at all these restaurants? No. Why should I? Asians all look the same, so their food is probably all the same. How is sushi different

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<sup>19</sup> This still means technology.

<sup>20</sup> Tusk Swords? Are you freakin jokin? How nifty, eh?

<sup>21</sup> The Brassed Axe is of course the universal symbol of cultures or "civs" as brass axes are what finally allowed humans to overcome the Ents and invent fire. That is why to this day people say "Get down to Brassed Ax" because it means "Get down to the most important details, that is, mankind overcoming nature."

from cashew chicken? Trick question- cashew chicken is from Springfield Missouri. But how is 腰果雞丁 different from 腰果雞丁? Hell if I know.

P.S. You asked for this, sucker.

P.P.S. 4513 words, who went above and beyond?

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I was inspired to write this when I still lived down south and a friend who had moved to LA told me he wanted a full report of one of the restaurants in town by Monday. So I did it. My influence at the time was beer, playing a ton of Age of Empires 2: HD and padding my word count with lyrics from Bad and Boogie. My intention was something like 'Try to sound academic while using irrelevant sources to make points that do not follow'. And in that way I think it was much like any academic writing.*

**BIO:** I grew up in the South, under clouds of humidity and mosquitoes. So I moved to Alaska and live under clouds of ice-fogs and gnats instead. I've not seen any grizzlies but I've seen tons of moose. They're like raccoons but bigger and tastier. I do not think my biography is important but if you want to know something personal about me well I guess I can say I have no running water in my house and that's bohemian as hell, ya'll boogieass high pocket writers with your cold water flats don't even know.

# The Man of My Dreams Deferred

*By Kimberly Diaz*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We like the foxy voice in this briskly paced 'chick lit' all grown up girl meets boy girl meets disappointment dramedy recap where romantic ideals clash with self-serving reality. A dry and not altogether self-deprecating humour and visible characterizations combined with dishy prose lifts 'The Man of My Dreams Deferred' above the crowd in an overcrowded and too often underwhelming genre. Quote: 'I have a strict rule NO SEX WITH REPUBLICANS. But actually it's just been NO SEX period for a very long time.' You go, girl!*

The man of my dreams is hurtling through the air 30,000 feet above me heading to a country on the other side of the world where the streets are clean, everything's orderly and efficient, and the people, he believes, live in peace. I looked it up online. It's a repressed population with the world's greatest income inequality. They can't afford guns to run around shooting up schools and theaters. And though it's free they really should not breathe the air there.

He texted me from his first class seat to tell me he was "as sick as a homeless dog in Africa." Is that even a thing? Are there a bunch of mangy canines puking all over the streets over there? I know there are a lot of people dying and starving and all. And was I was supposed to feel sorry for him leaving me behind to attempt to teach the nation's zombie-eyed, video game-addicted children and eat frozen dinners while he was on his way to a five-star hotel in his idea of paradise?

He didn't even ask me if I'd like to go. I might have been able to swing it. Make some kind of half-assed lesson plans and find a substitute but really I'm not much of a traveler. I want to see the world –I really do--but I hate to fly. The minute I enter an airplane my body tenses up and I become hypersensitive. *What's that sound? Do you smell that? It smells like something electrical is burning. Is that a crack on the wing? Does the pilot look exhausted to you? Is that guy going to use the bathroom or kill the pilot?* It's nerve-racking. I think, *Is it really worth falling 30,000 feet to my death to go to this place?* Usually, the answer is NO. I made an exception for Paris.

And what is he looking for in every nook and cranny of the globe? I'm right here. The one he said was "perfect" for him. The right age, shape, personality, and astrological sign. Even

our Chinese astrological signs were the ideal match. He said I made him nervous “in a good way” the first time I went to his place. He beamed at me in his kitchen, poured me fine wine (he’s got a hell of a wrist) and prepared a candlelit dinner for two with placemats and everything. I gave him a sweet lingering full body hug before I left. He told me the next day that when I hugged him it “did something to him” and invited me for dinner again.

He’d thoughtfully left his luxury condo door ajar so I wouldn’t have to rough up my delicate knuckles knocking on the door (or put nosy neighbors on alert) yet still looked shocked to see me when I strolled in wearing my usual jeans, heels, and black top. Sweet perfume. Choker necklace. Right away he wanted to show me some song lyrics that were supposed to send me a message about how he felt about me. I read the lyrics while he played the decades old tune on his laptop watching my face to see how I would respond. I cocked my head and blinked a lot. I had no idea how any of these words related to me. I couldn’t fathom it. It was a song about a stoned taxi driver. Huh?

He seemed disappointed by my reaction but we moved on and had another amazing meal. He served me Alaskan King crab legs, broke the shells apart for me, and removed the meat from them too. He lovingly placed the delicate meat on my china plate and smiled at me like he was in Heaven. I know I was. I sipped the yummy wine and dunked the crabmeat in the melted butter and thought maybe we were falling in love or something.

After dinner we got cuddly on his leather couch with a view of the bay and the city behind us and talked about Bernie Sanders for a while. He said he didn’t think Bernie had a chance. I got up to leave because I love Bernie but he pulled me back down and said, “Don’t go.” I pouted and squirmed a little but then he leaned over and kissed me on the neck and I swooned. Kiss me on the neck and I’m yours. Don’t tell anybody...

So naturally I let him lead me by the hand into the bedroom. I didn’t object when he pulled down the macho-looking gold and black-striped comforter. He gently pushed me onto the bed. Or maybe I jumped. We kissed a lot. We were making out but I knew we wouldn’t go too far. I’m not that kind of girl-this was only our second date- and I thought he might have Republican on his voter’s registration too so I really had no business even being there at all. I have a strict rule NO SEX WITH REPUBLICANS. But actually it’s been just NO SEX period for a very long time. Can I help it if he turns me on?

It wasn’t just a physical thing. He was into real estate, had a wine business, a couple of vineyards. There were millions, maybe even billions of reasons why a struggling teacher could find him attractive. I was tempted to excuse his fucked up political affiliation. In my wine-addled, turned on state of mind, I blamed it on him not understanding how the Republican Party had morphed from a party of self-serving assholes into a way more crazed, backward and dangerously evil one.

My black slinky blouse found itself on the floor, shockingly close to my black bra which was (gasp) soon topped by my dark rinse size 00 jeans. He kissed me on the neck again. Then lower and lower and lower. And I happen to have a somewhat short torso--I'm long in the legs. It felt so good. I was losing control. My rule, my rule was about to be broken. I couldn't stand it anymore.

*"Fuck me!"*

He looked kind of shocked and sort of jumped up then and said, "No, I don't want to get addicted. I'm not ready for that yet." I'd never heard anyone use having an addictive personality as an excuse before. Actually, I'd never had anyone use any excuse. It was usually full speed ahead. What was happening here?

I was disappointed but at least he sounded somewhat anguished about it. And I was flattered that he thought being with me might be irresistibly pleasurable....but I'm not sure if I just took it lying down. I might have tried to talk him into it a bit more, maybe I begged him. But we just got dressed again instead. My memory is a little fuzzy for some liquid reason.

In his kitchen, I asked for water and *that* he had no problem giving me. With ice even. I told him I should go on account of a pack of wild eight year-olds expecting me early in the morning. I kissed him goodbye and stopped down the hall to wave at him leaning in his doorway watching me walk away.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I actually wrote this during the 2016 election cycle and just tweaked it now as we are gearing up for another 'election'. At that time I was not only in the market for a lover/companion but after losing my house in the real estate market collapse, I was also longing for financial security. No luck on either front but luckily I'm an existentialist with an amazing capacity to be fairly happy no matter what. I'm still on my own, still in debt and working weekends to support my teaching habit, but that's the least of my worries now as I crouch down with my students to hide or run out of the building hands in the air during active assailant drills.*

*In America, our lives are insane. We are not represented but ruled by corporate interests and religious nuts with more money than brains. It seems authoritarianism is spreading worldwide now. I'm desperate to get our democracy back so when I'm not working for chump change, I'm volunteering once again to help Bernie get the revolution started.*

*My all time favorite author is Stephen McCauley and I'm also a big fan of my playwright/screenwriter brother David Caudle's work. Other favorites include Augusten Burroughs, Armistead Maupin, John Nichols, Tom Perrotta, Dave Eggers, Ali Liebegott, Amy Tan, Al Gore and John Dufresne.*

**BIO:** Kimberly Diaz studied Creative Writing at Eckerd College. Her works have been previously published in the *Eckerd Review*, *Enterese*, *the St. Pete Patch* and a few other newspapers.

# A ROCK

By DONALD MITCHELL

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *When it comes to distinguishing between a writer and a writer, a sure-fire test is to see what they do with the most mundane subject matter. With the former all you get is typing; with the latter you stand before a miracle. 'A Rock' is surely that. According to the author it was a long time coming, but the wait was worth it. Every word of the liquid prose crystallizes into passages of spellbinding beauty and we love the way the narrator seamlessly slips from the physical into the metaphysical. What starts out as an intellectual inquiry evolves into a meditation on the nature of Being. The rock is both image and symbol, separate from us but the same. Quote: 'A vast reef of shining coral has grown over her lids. It's as if, surrounded for ages by such tender and forgiving beauty, she could no longer bear ordinary sight. Somehow I recognize her as the voice of the rock. I feel her words rise...Most of can only dream of writing this well.*

I found a rock. It's almost perfectly rectangular and about the size of a bar of soap. It looked out of place where it rested, sitting in an ancient rut on the old skidder road. It sat there quiet, as any rock would, but it's not like any rock I've ever seen. So I couldn't just leave it on the moss and mud. I had to pick it up and stare at it all the way down the mountain.

It's not even the shape so much but what's all over it. Or *throughout* it. White, zig-zaggy quartz veins crisscross each other on all sides like zippers made of frost, and the zippers dive down into the dark body which is opaque green. I say opaque, and it *is*, but more like the night is opaque—it seems to flux and wobble as if something inside the darkness is trying to free itself.

I felt compelled to draw it. I took it up to my room, found a pencil I hadn't used since middle school and on the back of a bank receipt came up with a kind of cartoon fish—a *deep sea* cartoon fish. It made me laugh and gave me the shivers. The rock is funny like that and serious too, soaked with dark and outrageous mystery.

I've already thrown away the drawing but I can't let go of the rock. Some of the icy stripes, it's true, are thick and heavy like reef scars on whale skin, or like the jagged fractures in tree bark; I feel a powerful and uncomfortable dignity seeping out through those half-mended wounds. In fact, I think the rock might heal something in me. Or make me go insane. It's so beautifully and abhorrently odd.

I didn't want to admit this, but if I stare long enough between the lines into the dark green matrix of the rock, it shatters alive into portraits and scenes. Yes, I see them there, as supernally real and inexplicable as UFO sightings, but they seem to come from a place very deep and darkly human—they seem to come from way back in our past and way out into a future that may or may not be ours.

Honestly, on one side of the rock I believe I can see all the way through to the century before last, or even the one before that. There's a man in deer skin. His head is turned slightly away but I can make out a deep gash on his scalp, right at the widow's peak—as if some Iroquois or French trapper has tried to make some extra fur. It looks painful but the man seems okay. I think he wishes the mark to pass down to his descendants, that it might be a star on the brow of their heavens forever. That it will say a lasting word against the inevitability of a programmed extinction.

And there's a Pharaoh who hasn't been reborn yet, sleeping under his dune of golden sand, lying on his bed of sapphire and quartz. He's thinking about the right curse, a fresh one for every unit of Planck

time, ready for the exact instant his tomb will be pried open. And there's a woman: she lies under the ocean and her eyes are shut tight. A vast reef of shining coral has grown over her lids. It's as if, surrounded for ages by such tender and unforgiving beauty, she could no longer bear ordinary sight. Somehow I recognize her as the voice of the rock. I feel her words rise—now a lump in my throat.

The little stele of rock is speaking through me, I suppose, trying to explain itself. *It was all invented so long ago, it says, and will continue for such a long time after the world is finished.* That's hard to really grasp, that I'll die and the rock will go on living, getting smaller and smaller, as rocks do, until one day it will be less than a grain of sand, less than a fleck of dry clay. I try to imagine a rock so small, so many ages beyond my reckoning, imbedded in a tiny cell—maybe in the cell of a deep sea fish.

And I know it will get smaller yet, beyond the siren's call of gravity by which even light is charmed. It will find itself wiped clean of this universe. What will have taken over by then, I wonder? What other calculation necessary?

Sometimes this life is only a flicker of déjà vu: suddenly we're impossibly aware of too much too late. It feels like this to me as I carry the rock back up the mountain, to the moss and the mud and the rut, and return it to its way.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I've hammered away at 'A Rock' for over ten years now so I don't have a clear memory of my intent. I've found lots of funny pebbles, cobbles and boulders but never had the urge to ink anything about them; that one was different somehow. I remember the rock just appearing to me on the logging road as out of a lucid dream. And there have been more than a few instances during that decade of hammering. I would say the most direct and personal influence was from Ursula Le Guin, with whom I shared a long, sweet, always lively and occasionally fierce correspondence until her death early last year. I sent a version of this piece to her a few years back and she sent me her own little story of a rock's painstaking, glorious evolution. That exchange contributed much to later versions.*

*Personally, 'A Rock', allows me, for a minute or so, to leave our species' parting gift, The Holocene Extinction, in time's refulgent dust.*

**BIO:** Donald James Mitchell lives in Deming, WA, a tiny town in the footholds of the North Cascades. His work has been published in various literary journals including *River Teeth*, *Moss*, *The Boiler*, *Four Ties Lit Review* and others.

# How Sexbots will Trigger a Consent Revolution

*By Victoria Brooks*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We've read a couple essays by this radical feminist author and in both cases she manages to raise hackles by drawing our awareness to some controversial aspect of life in 'The Matrix'. Here Brooks tackles the thorny issue of sexual consent, adroitly readdressing the problem as it exists between heterosexual men and the women they choose to sleep with—women (and by extension, sexbots) who may find themselves compromised or compelled to participate—even when they have expressed the desire not to do so. A cogent, inspired disruption of the status quo that pushes against comfort zones and challenges fundamental assumptions in the heterosexual dynamic. Brooks is an articulate, impassioned social crusader with scopes squarely set on a straight-jacketed, gender-static adversarial ethos. It's the kind of writing that changes society when enough people get behind it. Quote: 'In helping us understand the problems at the foundations of consent, sexbots have the power to bring us to re-evaluate the use of the concept entirely.' And 'Consent keeps us focused on appearances and not experiences.'*

Sexbots have begun to look a lot like us, with life-like flesh and skin, as well as real-sounding orgasms. These notionally female robots can be constructed in whatever image the customer desires, with options as to breast, nipple and lip size, vulva type, and 'manner'(one can select from a range of pornographic caricatures from domineering to intelligent and 'sluttish' to prudish). These sex robots do not look nor act like real women, but rather like a male-centered, commercially packaged fantasy. The commercial potential is undeniable, with the industry worth already in the region of £30 billion.

Despite the sex robot's augmented appearance, they are constructed clearly to appear human, and to be active, *consenting* partners in sex with human beings, mainly heterosexual men. Especially in the context of the #MeToo movement, there is increasing awareness of the problems of applying the man-made concept of consent to our robotic sexual partners. In helping us understand the problems at the foundation of consent, sexbots have the power to bring us to re-evaluate the use of the concept entirely.

First, sexbots cannot, by law, consent. Although they might be able to make the ‘right noises’, they cannot *legally* consent since they are not legal persons. At present, sex with a robot is always non-consensual. To prove a sexual offence there must be a lack of consent and belief that the complainant was consenting. Consent is when a human being has the ‘freedom and capacity’ to agree to the sex as their own choice. The offence of ‘rape’ occurs where there is no consent, together with intentional penetration of the anus, vagina or mouth of the complainant with a penis, without reasonable belief that the complainant was consenting. The wording varies across jurisdictions, but the elements of the offence at law are largely the same. Given that a robot cannot have capacity (since they do not have human consciousness) nor can they have freedom (since they have no human agency), and given that humans know this, full sex with a robot is always, technically, rape.

Beyond this legal argument, there is an ethical argument too. Consent keeps us focused on appearances and not experiences. To consent, our partners need to have an intricate appreciation of the range of pleasure and suffering within human sexuality, knowing what they want and what they don’t, and not just giving an appearance of this. Indeed this is what an ethical human desires. Take for instance, Samantha the sexbot, who was allegedly sexually ‘assaulted’ under human law.

Arguments against concern for any sex robot in this situation are that they cannot, in the human sense, suffer. Whilst this may be true, if our basis for deciding that something non-human is not entitled to legal protection because it does not *appear* to be suffering—not that it is *not* suffering—then we find evidence for Slavoj Žižek’s assertion that human legal and ethical regimes are not worth saving. What is worse, is that given the industry is booming, it seems that the male consumers of sex-robots prefer it this way.

Consent currently endorses this view and is retained as the ‘gold standard’ of ethical sex. With #MeToo and decades of feminism, humans are yet to achieve an understanding of how women communicate suffering and desire in sex. I argue that the reason for this is that consent itself is rooted in male heterosexuality (both gaze and desire). This manifests in both the *mens rea* or ‘criminal intent’ required for an offence of rape, and the construction of the crucial term ‘freedom’ that is intrinsic to consent. The priority of the male gaze is confirmed by placing emphasis on the offender’s perception of whether the victim is consenting, by holding that ‘lack’ of belief in consent satisfies criminal intent for sexual offences. The law is explicitly saying that part of the evaluation of consent is the offender’s perception, and that ‘appearances’ are prioritized over the complainant’s reality of the sexual encounter. The ways in which the law accepts women’s freedom can be curtailed (and therefore that she is not consenting) shows that it knows nothing of women’s sexual experiences.

The limits to freedom the law explicitly accepts are the threat of violence (to self or others), involuntary intoxication (drugging), being unconscious at the time, deception or impersonation. Yet contemporary feminism has accepted especially in light of #MeToo, that these are not the only, nor are they the most likely restrictions of women’s

freedoms. An example of this is emotionally and psychologically abusive relationships. This point is forcefully made by the controversial (and contested in the field) second-wave feminist Germaine Greer, who tells us that instances of such non-consensual sex and long-term suffering are incalculable. While this may not be rape at knife-point, this is still violent and traumatic rape over many years, yet implicitly sanctioned by law. The present conception of consent would mean a woman in this situation would have difficulty providing evidence that she was not 'free'. Traditional victim-blaming arguments and domestic violence myths arise here in asking 'why didn't she leave', further attesting to the limited construction of freedom.

Whether focus remains on the victim's state of drunkenness, her clothing or demeanour (was she flirting? Did she kiss him?) the court prioritizes how the woman appeared, and whether the offender was therefore justified in his actions. Feminist Andrea Dworkin said that 'getting fucked and being owned are inseparably the same...they are sex for women under male dominance as a social system'. In valuing the offender's perception, affirming his actions and sexuality, law uses consent to retain male entitlement at the centre of sexuality.

This is further entrenched through the court process. Feminist legal thinker Catherine MacKinnon, argued the law is deaf to the suffering (and desires) of women's bodies, in not giving them the space nor the language to express their traumas and desires. This shows when the trauma of the offence, and in cases of domestic violence, the abuse, continues by extension into a hostile court process. The process can be horrific for victims, with low conviction rates once a case comes to trial (often many months after the crime). A rigorously cross-examined victim must explain to prejudiced judges and juries—in a courtroom not built for them, nor for the discussion of sex—why they were not free, and why the offender should not have assumed consent.

The consent-crisis brought about by our robot partners is demanding that we must de-centre consent, to imagine an ethical sexual future. This will involve seeking the meaning of sexual freedom, without male pleasure at its centre. It is then necessary to consider how humans with our perceptual limitations can begin reconfiguring (or abandoning altogether) the concept of consent as a foundation to our sexual ethics. Consent is harmful for women, that is more than half of the world. Our current system of consent is an echo of a patriarchal legal system that has oppressed women and is founded in white supremacy to oppress women of colour.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Post #MeToo, it is essential that we revisit ethical and legal frameworks that set the standard for sexual relationships. I was inspired to write this piece since the case of Samantha the Sexbot which caused me to feel discomfort at the way humans will treat something that does not have the appearance of human consciousness. It seems that consciousness is a big problem for humans, causing us to have an arrogance which blocks us from connecting with all kinds of suffering. I thought this essay was important to write since it reminds us that our laws reinforce this arrogance and that #MeToo, and now the rise of sexbots, calls us to rethink the law, even the very concept of consent.*

**BIO:** Victoria Brooks is a writer and researcher on sexual ethics. She has published academic, media and fictional pieces on the connection between philosophy and sex. She uses her queer desire to create new worlds and to challenge ethical frameworks that do not fit women's sexualities. Her book *Fucking Law: the Search for Sexual Ethics* will be published in June 2019 by Zero Books. She is currently working on an academic project on consent and queer sex clubs, while also writing an anthology of erotic fiction and philosophy. She lives in London, UK.

# RED PILL

BY ZEN WANG

**Recap:** In 'The Red Pill' Part One (**Issue 2-Nonfiction**) Zen Wang discoursed on the choices we have in this life and the power of money. He expanded upon this to include the problems with education and the problems with pharmaceutical companies. He further addresses issues on health care, nationalism and the politics of power. An insightful and realistically forlorn look at the long picture. Part Two is the conclusion of his brilliant social diatribe.

## Episode Seven: Politics and Democracy

Title sequence followed by JFK's speech: "A government by the people, for the people and of the people." Footages of the JFK assassination. Richard Nixon's Watergate. Vietnam and cold war.

SERAPH

You may have wondered whether democracy is still alive today. The answer is OF COURSE NOT! True Democracy was never born so how can it be alive? There were a few men whom tried to give the power to the people but in every case their legacies fizzled because the system is inherently corrupt.

Democracy is a tool to appease the masses. You inject a dairy cow with democracy, it will feel like it is the master of the farm, it will think it chose to eat and shit in a prison and get its teats sucked out by machines. All the chemicals they pump into you are for your own good. That nasty dog who bites your legs and watches your every move is just there to protect you.

ORACLE

Democracy today is a lie because ultimately those in power do not want to share their power. Their plan is extremely simple: To stay in power and stay in control. In the West, every four years they put on this elaborate puppet show to make everyone feel like they are part of the democratic process.

SERAPH

Behind closed doors at the corporate boardrooms across the nation they decide whose term is it to be the figure head for their game show. They do this by doing loss and gain calculations, not by weighing public opinion. Because public opinions can be bought quite cheaply. By election day they magically narrow the choices from hundreds of millions of eligible citizens to just two candidates. When the bell rings, Peas or Carrots, your choice. Either one will benefit the multitude of corporations that are behind them.

ORACLE

When the show is over everyone is quite satisfied. The winning side got their figure head. The losing side comfort themselves by saying 'at least we tried'. Like little children they swallow up their peas

and go back to their lives. Many defeated citizens fantasize about having carrots. If only we can have carrots life would be so much better.

#### SERAPH

The truth is, peas and carrots both came from the same frozen, rotten bag of flavorless fake food they serve up every four years. You never had real choice. To make the matters worse you are not even informed enough to make the choice. The system saturates the airwaves, the internet, the mass media, the schools, the news-stands with trivial news so that the average person cares more about Justin Bieber's hairstyle than the US involvement in Somalia.

#### ORACLE

So-called 'Western Democracies' are dictatorships run by a handful of powerful corporations. They come from highly profitable sectors such as energy, construction, weaponry, chemicals, food, prison, manufacturing, mining, etc. These corporations are mandated to focus on only one thing --- Annual Returns.

Here I have to clarify something. Up until now we have not said anyone, or anything is evil. We are not saying Western democracy is evil or the corporations are evil or the people that work within are evil. People are basically good but the System is inherently corrupt. Corporations are designed to have legal rights but no real accountabilities. It is written into their by-laws to be selfish and greedy. They are only responsible for their share prices.

SERAPH

How many times have you seen a local strip mall being converted into a shopping mall? They fill that mall with name brand stores. You are happy until you realize these are the same stores as you see everywhere else. Soon your charming hometown becomes exactly like every other place on earth. Soon you start to dress like everyone else because you can only buy things from the same stores. You start to look like everyone else because you can only get the same junk food. Your thoughts and behaviors also start to change because you watch the same TV and listen to the same news.

ORACLE

As an individual you are dying. Before you can realize the similarities between you and that factory produced chicken you are eating you have a murmuring thought. Hey wait a minute! I never wanted this! I never voted for this! Where was my choice? Where are my children's choices? Where is democracy?

SERAPH

This is where the shit hits the fan. Unless you start to do something about it this tragedy will continue until the entire earth is covered with homogenized, boring, mediocre consumerism that neither enriches nor nourishes your body, mind or soul. Your children and your children's children will be condemned to the same demeaning and undignified existence inside the System.

ORACLE

We feel bad for you, but we do not apologize for telling you the truth. Here are some of our suggestions on how to strive for true democracy and become masters of your own destinies.

1. Do not restrict your voting to once every four years. Vote everyday by making smart choices. Vote with your money and support institutions that are moral.

2. Be informed about the government's involvement in citizen's lives. Do not let them take away what little rights you have left through their strategy of fear.

3. Support truly local businesses and help your neighborhood succeed. Teach your children to appreciate local charms instead of global brands.

4. Be extremely weary of the mass media and what they are trying to feed you. Their information is often tainted, partial, incomplete and outright wrong. Their mandate is to keep your minds occupied while the corporations steal your lives.

5. Join and support organizations that strive for more transparency to the government and the electoral process. Support electoral reforms. Though they may not be enough they are moving in the right direction.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and Purpose during your time on earth.

(End of Episode Seven)

*Search Keywords: Capitalism a Love Story, The Corporation, Zeitgeist, Noam Chomsky, Fallacy of Democracy, Communism, McCarthy era, Cold War, Where to Invade Next, Michael Moore,*

## Episode Eight: The Food Industry

Title sequence smash to McDonald's commercial. Burgers Fries and Soft drinks. Seraph throwing down a half-eaten burger. Grease drips from his fingers.

SERAPH

You are what you eat. So, what in the world ARE you eating? Do you know? Where are they coming from? Who produces them? Why do food prices go up even if the costs go down? Who is getting rich on your hard-earned dollars?

ORACLE

Have you ever tasted a tomato? I mean a real tomato. Not that pesticides, herbicides, GMO, ethylene ripened red rubber ball they call tomato, but a real one that your grandmother grew in her own backyard.

Oracle eats a juicy organic tomato by biting into it with relish.

ORACLE

A real tomato tastes good because it has what the body needs: Vitamins, natural minerals, fiber, water and the sun, lots of sun.

SERAPH

Factory produced foods are engineered to look like the real thing, feel like the real thing but taste like a piece of wood. Since they don't allow you to taste test before you buy, you often end up with the best-looking fake foods. Over time you forget what real food tastes like, and you think you saved money.

ORACLE

In reality you cheated yourself on the enjoyment of real food and

their nutritional value and health benefits. Tomorrow you buy supplements to fill those deficiencies. The day after, you start to get addicted on medicines that only masks your pains.

SERAPH

(interrupts)

Catching! What you saved on groceries flows right back to the system ten-fold. We don't have to tell you what to do. You already know the right thing to do. You don't do it because you are full of excuses such as 'I don't have time to eat healthy. It's too expensive to buy organic. It's too much work to find good food. Blah blah blah.'

ORACLE

There is only one of you in this world. You are the most important person to you. Your healthy body should be one of your top priorities. So, make time and make the effort and put the money into the most important investment --- You. Sure, you can save a few hundred bucks to buy more bonds or blue-chip stocks, but if you die who is going to collect?

SERAPH

We don't want to bore you with horrific graphics on the modern food production system. It should be enough to know that 99% of traditional farmers are bought out by giant international corporations. To maximize their profit, they use the cheapest and fastest ways to bring fake foods to your table. They are full of harmful hormones and chemicals. They jack up the prices at any excuse and rarely reduce them. They

reinvest their profits by acquiring more family farms.

ORACLE

It is also important to note the corporations do not care a stick about the well-being of farm animals. They treat millions of living beings like profit making resources. They could not find enough cruel people to do their dirty work, so they automated the process. Now a chicken can go from an egg to a drumstick on your plate without ever touching a person's hand; or knowing its own mother; or seeing the sun; or been able to sleep; or smelling the grass; or finding a mate. A chicken's lifespan is a mere sixteen weeks.

SERAPH

You are what you eat. If you eat enough fake foods that were produced in industrial farms you eventually become one of them --- a mass fed, mass produced living being without a mind of your own. You will only be a source of profit for the system.

ORACLE

The good news is that food choices is one of the easiest things, that is in your control today. Here are some of our suggestions:

1. Buy local, buy organic, buy in season. Organic foods still have a lot of controversies surrounding them, but at least they try to be better. We need to reward their efforts.

2. Read labels and know what you are putting into your body. Educate on what chemicals may be responsible for certain health problems.

Identify and eliminate foods that are harmful to long term health.

3.Plant your own vegetable garden. Take back control one small step at a time. Trade with neighbors. Visit local farms. Join an organic farm cooperative.

4.Pay attention to the modern food chain. Know what goes inside the animals will eventually go into you. So don't let garbage and toxins get to you.

5.Avoid fast food restaurants and 'convenience meals. They are extremely inconvenient when their side effects catch up to you.

6.Most importantly, love yourself and care for your body. The universe does not want you to suffer or die before your time from horrible diseases. You are destined to live a long, full, healthy and meaningful life. This cannot happen unless you start to put good things inside your body.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and Purpose during your time on earth.

(End of Episode Eight)

*Search Keywords: Food Inc, The Cove, Chemicals in your food, HGCS, Supersize Me, Cowspiracy, Food Choices, Foodmatters, Hungry for Change,*

## Episode Nine: Capitalism & Consumerism

Opening Quote: "If the only reason you are walking is to show off your new shoes then maybe you need better directions."

Title sequence transition to "Barbie" song. "I am a Barbie girl in a Barbie world. Life in plastic it's fantastic..."

Juxtaposed images of consumer goods transition into mountains of garbage. Clear-cut forest, polluted river and air.

SERAPH

What is the difference between humans and locus? Viewed from the outer space --- very little. Humans migrate from one area to another; consuming everything in their path; leaving behind mountains of trash. They then find a new area to invade.

ORACLE

Humans did not always behave this way. There was a time when they produced what they consumed without causing long term environmental disasters. Humans also got along much better with their neighbors because they didn't have to move so often.

SERAPH

Then came capitalism. This single idea transformed the human destiny and the face of the planet. Simply put, capitalism is a system that encourages groups of individuals to pool their resources together so they can offer products and serviced to the rest of the world at a price. Competition forces the groups to be efficient in converting their resources into products or services. Sounds like a great idea doesn't it?

ORACLE

I don't mean to sound like a broken record but once again a good idea is derailed. Remember those colonial pirates we talked about back in episode six? Re-enter those greedy pirates. Somewhere in the 1900's people decided that continuous raping, pillaging and plundering are distasteful, so they outlawed colonialism and outright piracy for good.

SERAPH

The newly unemployed pirates then put their loot together and started international trading companies. Like so many criminals they can't help but to bend the rules here and there. They are also addicted to taking advantages of people.

ORACLE

The idea they cooked up between them is called "externalizing costs". In a nutshell they let other people pay for part of the cost of production but keep the profit for themselves. Here is a very simple demonstration.

SERAPH

To produce a T-shirt you need cotton, dye, machinery, electricity, manpower, gasoline. In a developed country the costs of these resources are high. So, the pirates go to a desperate country. In this poor country the cotton can be sprayed with highly toxic chemicals, the dye can be dumped straight into rivers, the machinery does not need to be safe, the electricity is produced by polluting coal, the workers are under-paid with no benefits, the gasoline does not come with carbon tax.

ORACLE

It is like hosting a big party at your neighbor's house and charge people at the door. You cook up a huge meal in their kitchen. Leave trash all over his back yard, oil stains on his driveway, mud on his carpet. Meanwhile most of the benefits of the party goes to you. Since you don't have to do the clean up your pocket becomes fuller and fuller. This allows you to knock on more and more doors in the neighborhood.

SERAPH

Of course, over time you turn your street into a major dump. Your own house now looks like a mansion when compared to the ghetto and slums around you. Your family members are so proud and everyone else tries to be more like you. Eventually you die from all the filth and poison you introduced to the world in the name of profit. But that will be years from now. Now you are happy and satisfied. Human beings tend to have very short-term thinking and very narrow vision. Very much like a certain insect we know. Yes, you guessed it, a locust.

ORACLE

Back to the pirates. Their externalization of the cost works very well for them. After a few generations they become respectable members of big boys' clubs all over the world. They call themselves "Masters of Mankind". Money buys you Might and Might is Right. But soon they find themselves facing a new problem. They have too many products that no one wants.

SERAPH

So, they hire up people with low morals and high ambitions, men close to their own hearts, to convince the general public they need more things. Why get a toaster that can toast two slices of bread when you can get one that makes four? Why get a car that can fit your family when you can get a car that can fit your extended family? Why settle for a dishwasher that can do a regular load when you can get one that does super loads?

ORACLE

Where does the old toaster, old car, and old fridge go? Eventually they get buried in your neighbors' yard. The neighbors have no time to clean up because they are busy making more products. Products you don't need, but products you want. You want them because of the powerful consumerism propaganda machines tell you so every time you tap into them.

SERAPH

This endless cycle of 'bigger, newer and more' stuff keeps you working harder and harder at your hamster wheel. It puts you deeper and deeper into debt and further and further away from true happiness. Soon you find yourself alone and surrounded by junk. The mailman is the only one who says hi anymore. And he delivers nothing but bills and more propaganda.

ORACLE

Let us face the truth. Capitalism is broken. Mindless consumerism is bankrupting our planet. This road only leads to one place: the destruction of humanity. If you do not want a lush green home for your

children and their children, then this is not a problem for you. But if you have any higher aspirations about the future for humankind then you must act.

#### SERAPH

You must act because not acting is also a choice. Not acting during times like these will make you a conformist slave, a hypocrite and a coward.

For your convenience we compiled several actions you can do to combat materialism and consumerism.

1. Become a Minimalist. Keep only things that serve an essential purpose in your life. Donate and give away redundant things. Live sustainably. Buy experiences, not things.
2. Live within your means. Reuse, reduce and recycle before you look to add more stuff to your homes. Have multiple uses for one item.
3. Choose wisely when shopping. Support local ethical businesses. Buy with your heart. Know where the products came from. Connect with the people who made them. Hear their stories.
4. Demand change from your government. Make corporations responsible for all their production costs. Stop garbage transferring.
5. Avoid brainwashing. Limit your exposure to consumerism propaganda. Do not use shopping to fill your void.

6.Share more, lend out things and swap more. Buy second hand and donate. Benefit your local charities instead of multinational corporations.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and Purpose during your time on earth.

(End of Episode Nine)

*Search Keywords: The Minimalists, Plastic China, Garbage dumping, Denmark sustainability, India heavy metal recycling, India Ship recycling,*

## Episode Ten: Information Control

Title sequence transition to electronic sounds: phone, pager, fax, dialing tone, keystroke, trash bin, download complete, fire alarm. Mirage of the explosion of information age.

ORACLE

As a species, humans have arrived at the age of information. It has never been this easy to create, consume and to share information. In fact, we are doing exactly that, we are sharing digital information with you right now.

SERAPH

Technological advances brought humans to this era, but the System wants to control the new media. The government say they want free market competition, but they really want monopolies. Because monopolies are easier to control with legislations.

ORACLE

To gain control the government sets up a spy agency using your money. They tell you it is for your own safety and protection. They pass a few legislations through congress or senate. Then, Presto! They get the master key to everyone's house.

SERAPH

You may say 'it's not that easy to pass legislation.' Oh, but it is my young friend. Most of the people voting for the bill are dinosaurs who do not understand the internet. You put a so-called expert in front of them and they can be convinced of imminent attacks from the cyber space, or China stealing out national secrets, or Saudis hijacking our banking system...

ORACLE

*'But the internet is a scary place.'* There is child porn, hate crime, scams, bullying, hackers etc. Of course, there are. The cyberspace is part of this world. It is bound to have light and the dark places. Bad things happen in parks, streets and homes but do you want your government to install spy-cams everywhere and watch you go to sleep. Similarly, you do not need the System to spy on you and your neighbors in cyberspace.

SERAPH

The system wants ultimate control. To do this they want your secrets. Maybe you surfed on porn sites; maybe you downloaded pirated music or movies; maybe you cheated a little on your taxes; or exchanged flirtatious messages with a co-worker; or lied a bit to your insurance company. Most people are guilty to one thing or another.

ORACLE

Like the mafia, the system wants to have your secrets so it can blackmail you at will. You are already guilty, so you better stay in line. If you cause any form of trouble, they will arrest you and produce evidence from years of spying.

SERAPH

Sounds familiar? Yes, the church has used this strategy for centuries. You are born guilty, so you have to spend the rest of your lives pleasing the church authorities in order to be saved. Guilt is a very powerful controlling tool.

ORACLE

You are a free person. You did not come into existence to serve a government, to serve corporations, to serve the church or any other institutions and authorities. You are a child of humanity, and as a child you are entitled to all the knowledge and information that was create in this world.

SERAPH

The System wants to dictate who can view, who can leave a comment, who can blog, who can upload, who can download. And they want to monitor all your activities on the web. If you question them the answer is "We are protecting you."

ORACLE

Well it is NOT good enough. By controlling the flow of information, the system is creating a virtual reality for the citizens of the world. The system imposes its world view on the masses. It is Intellectual Dictatorship.

SERAPH

Case in point. One explosion happens in a major city that is linked to 'terrorism'. Another explosion happens in a nearby town as the result of corporate malpractice. Same number of people dies in both incidents. But the 'terrorist' act will get a hundred times the media coverage than the latter incident. Because the government and corporations have an agenda to expand the war on terror. There is profit to be made, when people are scared. Corporate crimes are small potatoes that get swept under the carpet.

ORACLE

Information is power. Power is control. The System wants it and will stop at nothing to obtain it.

Here are some of our suggestions on resisting the System's control on information.

1.Fight against all government bills and legislations to take away your rights to privacy and freedom of information exchange.

2.Support Net Neutrality and Freedom of Speech.

3.Consume and share stories that matter. boycott the mass media monopolies' propaganda. Bring substance to your circle of friends' interactions.

4.Identify and call out all attempts to control free flow of information. Ask for help from other organizations. Remember that you are not alone. There are millions of brothers and sisters around the world who fight for your rights.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and Purpose during your time on earth.

(End of Episode Eight)

*Search Keywords: Snowden, Oliver Stone, Net Neutrality, Jim Wu, Kim Dotcom, Lawrence Lessig, Peter Ludlow, Edward Snowden, Aaron Swartz, Bilderberg, JSOC, Homeland Security Bills, Patriot Act, Texas fertilizer plant explosion, Virginia water poison, The Untold history of USA*

## Episode Eleven: Modern Addictions

Title sequence transitions to Amy Winehouse's Rehab. Images of modern addictions. Skulls, Skinny druggies, needles intercut with images of glamour, beauty, wealth, industry.

ORACLE

We are going to talk about addictions. Not just your backyard variety but the bigger problem. Much bigger.

SERAPH

In a way all humans are addicted to one thing or another. Some addictions are harmless, and some are extremely detrimental. We are going to focus on the bad ones.

ORACLE

Addiction, when used against a population is the most powerful kind of control. Imagine a company making an addictive substance. They package it in colorful wrappers; blast the airwaves with commercials and then distribute the substance in all the schools and on every street corner. What's more, the company knows about the negative effects of the substance, so it buys up shares of drug companies that treat patients who suffers from prolonged use of this substance.

SERAPH

Sounds like a dark fantasy? No! The substance is called HGCS High Glucose Corn Syrup. It is cheap, it is bad, and it is in almost every packaged food item. It is one of the leading causes of diabetes worldwide. The makers of HGCS and the diabetes drugs companies are in bed with the government while tens of millions of young addicts walk

around the earth looking for the next sugar high.

ORACLE

Think we are too pessimistic? Look at tobacco. A known carcinogen that costs the health care system billions of dollars a year, but it is allowed to be sold on every street corner, because the government makes a handsome profit. Fast food, painkillers, sodium, pop... need we say more?

SERAPH

We don't want to bore you with more examples. But we do want to show you how this powerful controlling tool is used against citizens of earth. In the 1960's the system had a problem controlling the population. There were enough people rebelling against the System. They organized themselves and took to the streets. They incited many incidents to unite the common man and woman. They were striving for equality, brotherhood and freedom for all.

ORACLE

As always, the system fought back using a three-pronged approach: crackdowns, assassinations and subversions. They use violence to beat down on the demonstrating masses. They hire criminals to kill the leaders. But it is their less known subversive weapons that put an end to the rebellion.

SERAPH

The system intentionally loosens controls on hallucinogenic narcotics, so they became available in the underground. The "hippies" and revolutionaries quickly inhaled them up without much thought on

their side effects. Very quickly their fury dissipated, and their drive evaporated. They became docile and passive. They preferred to live in a haze of imaginary utopia instead of reality. They sing songs around fires and write poems while beating on drums. The chemicals transformed their brains into mush. They no longer had the focus and drive to accomplish anything substantial. The rebellion fizzled and died.

ORACLE

Sometime in the 1980's the hippies woke up and all their dreams and aspirations remain unfulfilled. Their head hurts and they feel like failures and disappointments to the movement they once belonged to. They have been beaten down by a covert chemical warfare and they don't even know it.

SERAPH

Too far-fetched? Chemical warfare was conducted on North American Indians in the form of smallpox and alcohol. Opium was launched on China. Agent Orange was dropped on Vietnam. Mustard Gas, Nerve gas. Governments do not think twice about using chemicals against people standing in their way. If they want to use them against their own citizens all they have to do is to declare those people "enemies of the state and disturbers of peace"?

ORACLE

Those that control the flow of powerful narcotics control the population. The so-called war on drugs is a futile lip-service mandated by every new government. The modern debate on legalizing marijuana is simply an argument

about who gets to tax them. The government does not want a drug-free population because happy, healthy, free-thinking citizens are harder to control.

SERAPH

Imagine this, a group of environmentalists take a break from a hard day of protesting by standing in a circle and smoking. What is wrong with this picture? Well for one thing they are inhaling toxic chemicals into their own lungs while they are against polluting the lungs of the earth. Is this not the definition of hypocrites? If you are a smoker, a drug user, an alcoholic you are supporting one of the most powerful, wealthy and evil controlling system of humankind. If you are a non-discriminating consumer of addictive substances then you are supporting a giant structure that preys on addictions of men, women and children.

ORACLE

You are unique and precious. Do not let narcotics and other addictive substances take control of your body and mind. Step away and reassess. Preserve the spirit that is you. Get help. Clean up and serve as an example to your children.

SERAPH

When we are all free of dependencies, we will be strong. Time to wake up and rise up once again. This time armed with knowledge of the Truth.

Here are some of our recommendations:

- 1.If you currently use tobacco, alcohol or other substances, determine if you are an addict. Stay away from the substance for a reasonable period of time and assess its hold on you.
- 2.If you determine that you are an addict, get help immediately. Overcome the shame and talk to family and friends.
- 3.If you are around substance abusers who are unwilling to change you have to leave those people behind until they are ready to be helped.
- 4.If you determined that you are not an addict but a casual user then you must keep a close eye on your usage. Addiction is a sickness that will gradually take control your life if you allow it.
- 5.Talk to your children about addictions. Do not deceive them or beat around the bush. They will find out one way or another.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and Purpose during your time on earth.

(End of Episode Eleven)

*Search Keywords: Human Experiment, Sugar High, History of Sugar, Coca Cola Company, History of Cuba,*

## Episode Twelve: The Environment

Title sequence followed by Adam Lambert's Ghost Town. Images of wasted, ruins of civilization. Mountains of trash and garbage. Clear-cut forest, open mines, poisoned waterways.

SERAPH

Protect the Environment! Save the Planet! Love Mother Earth! These are empty slogans. The environment does not need protection. The planet does not need saving. They are doing fine. It is citizens of earth that needs saving.

ORACLE

The truth is, Earth is a livable planet only for a limited time. Soon or later it will become a desert planet like Mars. All humans can do is to affect the 'soon or later' part.

SERAPH

Earth is a finite living space. Even pigs know not to shit where it eats so how can a species as intelligent as humans not know this? This is because we are disconnected. We are divided and the System is conquering us.

ORACLE

Imagine this scenario. One day you get a phone call. It's China calling.

"Nihao my friend, we just got a giant heap of plastic garbage and they came from you."

"Oh really, my fault. I will get that back and think of a better way to dispose of them. Better yet maybe I don't even need to make things out of plastics anymore. Better yet, maybe I don't need as many things in my life to be truly

happy. Thanks, my friend for bringing this realization to me. Let us work together and make sure our home planet stays livable for a long, long time."

SERAPH

Sounds fantastic does it? 'It will never happen' That's exactly what the system wants you to think. Several Scandinavian countries have already achieved 100% energy self-reliance and 100% local garbage disposal.

ORACLE

The System wants to deny the fact that solar, wind, geothermal, wave and biomass are a feasible alternative to fossil fuel because they are making huge profits and do not want to change. The truth is the sun gives us enough energy in one day that can power us for a year. Geothermal energy is renewable, and it will power us for at least four thousand years. Then there's wind and waves.

SERAPH

We have renewable energy all around us. In many forms. They do not cost us an arm and a leg, they do not result in irreversible damages to our living space and they do not hasten the desertification of Earth to become Mars.

ORACLE

The System hides these abundant resources from you and just goes for the low hanging fruits -fossil fuel, virgin forests, clean ground water, international fishing grounds etc. Then they divide up the world and make people pay.

SERAPH

By the time the common man realizes what is going on they already got you by the balls. You are so dependent on the System you cannot risk breaking away.

ORACLE

That's exactly what the System wants you to think. 'You are attached to the system by an umbilical cord like a fetus to the womb.' It is our mission to make you realize that you are not a fetus.

SERAPH

You are a standup adult, damn it! You do not need the system, but the system needs you, all of you, in order to fuel their greedy manifesto of infinite growth and absolute dominance. You all have a right to self-determination and pursuit of happiness and a meaningful life.

ORACLE

Let me show you what you ARE connected to.

You ARE connected to the universe; to the ancient life force; to the eternal divine spirit; to the creator; to each other; to every living being that came before you and will come after you. You are brothers and sisters not just to other human beings but to all other living and non-living beings, on earth and alien.

SERAPH

If you met someone on a plane and he tells you that he's from your hometown and his destination is the same as you, don't you feel immediately attached to him? Does he not feel like family? The truth is that we all came from the same

stardust and we will all eventually return to the same stardust.

ORACLE

We are all connected in the most intimate way possible. We are temporarily in individual forms so we can harvest starlight and write our own stories. Do not let anyone or anything make you feel that you are alone and weak because you are with us. Together we are the universe and we are the strongest force in existence.

SERAPH

The deranged and mutated System wants to divide humankind and make us ignorant. It wants some of us to be totally addicted to materialism while all of us pay for the high price of a ruined environment. It wants to enslave all of citizens of earth in a dictatorship of power and control. The System is cancer to all humankind, and it will spread and consume the entire planet if we let it. The only way is to wake up and fight back.

ORACLE

We are extremely proud of you for taking the red pill. Now if you agree with us please spread the word so more brothers and sisters can detach from the System and wake up to join in the fight.

SERAPH

As usual, here are some of our suggestions:

1. Pay attention to what trash you put on the curb.
2. Look at toxic chemicals in your house.

3. Start a compost program.
4. Consume with a purpose. Everything you own should bring value to your life. Adopt minimalism as a lifestyle.
5. Use reusable drinking bottles, shopping bags, coffee cups etc.
6. Educate your children and show them excellent documentaries.
7. Spread the word and call people out when they're in the denial stage.

SERAPH AND ORACLE  
May you find Truth, Freedom and  
Purpose during your time on earth.

(End of Episode Twelve)

*Search Keywords: Gaia, Cosmos TV series,*

### Episode Thirteen: Religion

Opening Quote: "Sometimes the questions are complicated but the answer is simple." Dr. Seuss.

Title sequence transition to hymns and boy choir. Images of religious paintings. Oracle dresses like an angel while Seraph dresses like a demon.

ORACLE

We saved the best for last. Our final topic is religion. Religion makes us feel so good. Like a bowl of hot steamy chicken noodle soup on a cold wintery afternoon. You just can't wait to slurp it all up inside of your stomach. That warm blissful feeling of satisfaction stays with you for a long, long time.

SERAPH

But at the same time religion also seem so very unnecessary and harmful to humanity. Religious people committed unforgivable aggressions all over the world and all through history. Since there are some 42 000 different religions in the world chances are the 'bad' people are from other religions than your own. It is easy to conclude that all other religions are bad or wrong and the one true religion is the one you happen to be a part of.

ORACLE

This couldn't be further from the truth. We all know how silly it is when a child declares his favorite hat is the best and he will wear it forever and ever. But millions of adults blindly follow their favorite religion without questioning it.

SERAPH

People sit around debating about the afterlife while we still haven't figured out this life yet. A religion is like a glass of water you just scooped up from a lake. If you let it settle, you will discover it has both good and bad in it. Near the top the water looks clean and clear while the bottom looks cloudy and questionable.

#### ORACLE

All religions have the two parts to them: the pros and cons. Pros of religion are: sense of community, sense of belongingness, brotherly love, spiritual attachment, emotional support, sense of purpose, enlightenment, humbleness, law and order, decency, generosity, connectedness, guidance... The list goes on and on. This is why people love religion so much.

#### SERAPH

The cons of religion are: superstition, mythicism, bigotry, single-mindedness, brainwashing, lack of acceptance, intolerance, divisiveness, power abuse, racism, stereotyping, fact-denying, illogical behaviors, outdated rituals and traditions, xenophobia, self-righteousness, closed-mindedness, hatred, adverse to facts, denial of science... The list also goes on and on. This is why people hate religion so much.

#### ORACLE

Let us go back to that glass of water. Within this glass there is H<sub>2</sub>O the stuff you need to stay alive, but at the bottom there is also microbes that can make you very sick. So, a single religion contains both what you need and what can harm you. This is true to

all organized religions of the world.

A table full of glasses of water in different containers appears.

SERAPH

Not one glass is purely clean and not one glass is entirely dirty. Thirsty people everywhere simply reach for the glass closest to them and drink up. And they keep going back to the same glass for more. Most of them claim their glass of water is the only clean one while all other glasses are dirty.

Oracle at the stove boiling a pot of water. Steam rises up in front of her face.

ORACLE

The best way is to take what is good in all the glasses and to make it safe and good for everyone. Purify the 42,000 religions and extract from them what is valid and up-lifting. Leave behind residuals of superstition, mysticism and outdatedness. Say goodbye to traditions that does not make sense. Be a free thinker.

SERAPH

Sweden and India. Sweden is among one of the least religious nations on earth and India is the most religious. Sweden is not flooded with fires of vengeance and plagues of retribution. India is not blessed with unparalleled abundance and abnormal amount of joy and peace. God, if he or she exists, is not vengeful or petty or grudge-holding or attention-seeking or needy or whiny or shy. The all-powerful does not need your flowers, food, money, incense or even love. To be religious or not

should be your own choice. Not something God or his followers force or pressure you to do at the risk of condemnation.

ORACLE

If you want to believe in something believe in this. We are all connected in the most intimate way possible. We come from the same place and will return to the same place. What can be more intimate than that? We are all born good. We cannot live in isolation and be happy. We enjoy love, sunshine and the sound of laughter of others. And we would absolutely love to be connected with everyone if given the chance.

ORACLE

All humans are made of stardust. One day we will all return to it. This fact makes us all family. Our lives are simply the time given to us to harvest star light. With the abundant star light of our sun we can shine out our own brilliances. Let us not waste this precious time on focusing on the small and petty stuff. Love is the energy that connect us all. The oneness of humanity is not a fable or a dream but a fact of nature and science.

SERAPH

As always, we must say goodbye. But we are here for you always. Here are some of our suggestions on how to treat religion.

- 1.If you are a religious person and your religion is unifying the citizens of the world under love then keep going. If you notice inconsistencies and sermons that divides citizens of earth, then it is time to quit. You must be

allowed to question and challenge their teachings. Otherwise it is a single-minded dictatorship and it is not worth your time.

2.If you are a non-religious person do not look down on your brothers and sisters who are religious. They were near a certain glass and they were thirsty. Remember one day you will all dance in the same light, hand in hand. Allow them to come to you instead of attacking them and poking them at every opportunity.

3.Find spiritual solace. This is not the same as religion. It is allowing your body, mind and soul to receive guidance from the center of the universe. Keep looking for higher purpose and meaning in your life. Do not let the daily struggle keep you from doing this. Do not be a busy sailor without a compass.

4.Keep your heart open for knowledge from the world. No Religious text, be it the Bible, Qu'ran, Torah or any others contain all the truth with in it. Piece together the mysteries of life by looking out and looking in. Learn from your brothers and sisters. Learn from nature. The truth is all around you. It beams down on you every second of everyday. Receive it and be thankful.

5.Demand your government to stop religious favoritism such as funding religious schools with public money. Allowing profiteering religious institutions to evade tax.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and  
Purpose during your time on earth.

(End of Episode Thirteen)

*Search Keywords: Religulous Bill Mahr, The selfish gene,  
Richard Dawkins, The Theory of Evolution, Creationism,  
Intelligent Design vs Evolution, Darwin.*

## Epilogue

### QUOTE FROM THE CREATORS

"You may never have ALL the answers, but you should always be looking for the REST of the answers."

### ORACLE

Humans are easily deceived creatures. A child raised in prison can be made to believe he lives in a heavenly society. The real world outside may seem scary and cruel. The human brain is highly fluid and malleable. Over time it can be made to believe almost anything to be the truth.

### SERAPH

Do not believe us so easily. Do not trust us so simply. Do your own homework and research on the things we tell you. Ask critical questions then make up your own damn mind.

### ORACLE

If you still trust us after your independent research, then come back to us and help us spreading the word. Help others to liberate their minds.

### SERAPH

One thing you should not do is to go back to your old lives and old selves, hoping that you can just be happy and contend.

In the 1860's many blacks were freed during the American Civil War. Some of them fought in the war. Some of them died. Some of them suffered long and hard. Some of them endured unimaginable pain. Some of them even lived to their old age. But no one, not one person

ever expressed regret for becoming a free man. Not even when they were faced with death at the hands of the confederate army. They truly lived and they truly fought for their freedom. The sunrise on that day may very well be their last but it truly belonged to them. They were bathed in the sun's glory as an upright standing child of the universe, beautiful and free!

ORACLE

If you continue to be a slave one day your reckoning will come. You would have wasted your one and only chance to be a free citizen of Earth. You would have squandered away your divine right to be a soulful, loving, caring, conscientious, generous, righteous, spiritual and healthy human being.

Now I don't think there is anything more important than being a soulful, loving, caring, conscientious, generous, righteous, spiritual and healthy human being. Do you?

I didn't think so.

Oracle takes a candy out from her pocket, unwraps it and puts it in her mouth. She smiles like a kind mother. Seraph takes her arm and lead her away. The two of them walk up a snowy hill and disappear into the forest. Wind continues. Leaves begin to grow. Time laps photography of the seasons appears. When it is late autumn the scene stops. The viewpoint rises up and looks down on earth. It continues until the entire earth can be seen. Then a blind light...

Barbara Streisand sings "The Way We Were" over a slide show of natural beauty and human warmth finalizing on the cosmos and the infinite universe with its grand mysteries.

(End of Epilogue, End of Season One)

*Future Topics: Cosmetics and Fashion Industry, Entertainment Industry, Sex and Relationships, Energy Industry, GMO's, NGO's, Communism and Macaque Monkeys, Religion and the Sexually deprived, News and propaganda.*

# Master of the Obvious

*by ken mootz*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The author cites George Carlin as one of his influences and 'Master of the Obvious' certainly has the feel of standup improv counterculture comedy. It's also a blackly funny 'Rule of Reform' for the socially damned and voluntarily idiotic. The author's acid tongue is the perfect vehicle for these gallous barbs and if you don't learn from them, then buddy. you're smokin' the wrong stuff. Quote: It isn't an accident that nostalgia rhymes with nausea.'*

- 1) Don't set yourself on fire.
- 2) Saying, "My God has a bigger dick than your God" will not get you laid.
- 3) Evacuate your bowels at least once a day, preferably while sitting on a toilet.
- 4) Keep your swearing to a minimum, especially while in church.
- 5) Don't confuse someone listening to you with that person actually respecting you.
- 6) Catching darts with your face is not a useful skill.
- 7) Every bath or shower you walk away from without drowning is a good bath or shower.
- 8) Learn to overcome disappointment. You can't spell failure without L-I-F-E.
- 9) It isn't an accident that nostalgia rhymes with nausea.
- 10) Bragging about your bottled-up rage during the job interview isn't going to land you the job.

- 11) Most people are idiots; no sense getting upset about it, they're still going to be idiots.
- 12) Asking your wife if she wants a peanut butter and penis sandwich will not be met with applause.
- 13) When voting in an election, choose the candidate whose bullshit you believe in the most.
- 14) There's a fine line between optimism and delusion.
- 15) Don't spice up your morning commute by driving with your eyes closed.
- 16) It's ass paper, not toilet paper.
- 17) There are two kinds of people who want everyone to like them: politicians and idiots.
- 18) Don't trim your toenails with your teeth.
- 19) If you're disappointed with the way life has worked out for you, get in line with the rest of us.
- 20) Saying, "Open the door, please" will yield more positive results than saying, "Open the door, fuckhead."
- 21) Live your life like *this is it*, and behave like God and your lost loved ones are watching over you.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wanted to write something observational that had a George Carlin edge and a David Sedaris insight. I'm a fan of artists and films who don't break a sweat in making me laugh, such as Mark Twain, The Coen brothers, Network, Casablanca, Carrie Fisher, Jerry Seinfeld and Woody Allen (before he became weird).*

**BIO:** My short stories 'Grocery List, 'Toothbrush', 'What happens After You Die' and 'Suicide Notes Are a Bitch' were published in *Empty Sink Publishing*, *Livid Squid Literary Journal*, *Weirderary* and *Toad Suck Review*. Additionally, *Gold Man Review* has just published my most recent story, 'The First Time I Dropped Acid'. I have also written two novels and seven screenplays, one of which was optioned by an independent studio.

# Reading 'Gravity's Rainbow' in Exile

By Lou Morrison

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Gravity's Rainbow* is a little like *Finnegan's Wake*—in that we're usually wary when someone chirps, "Sure. I've read it. From cover to cover." Frankly, there's talk that even Joyce didn't read *FW* from cover to cover. The same, alas, holds true for the highly contentious, exorbitantly controversial, lionized, ostracized, demonized and mythologized *Gravity's Rainbow*. Is it a masterpiece or a mess-terpiece? Who knows? None of us have read it from cover to cover. (And isn't anyone who reads it in some kind of exile anyway?) But like any smorgasbord worth the name, we've sampled some of its delectables. Whole chapters, extended passages, a juicy paragraph, a line here and there, a word. 'V' was magic and remember, the same magician wrote *GR*. So maybe we're just not (as readers) genius enough to recognize a fellow genius. This whole ramble is starting to sound Pynchian. The way Morrison gets under the skin of Pynchon's voice and eclectic streaming prose is so total it's scary. Once settled into the work, you'd swear it was ole Tom you were reading. We won't say anymore. Just a couple of quotes to let you know what you're getting into: 'I couldn't afford the calories to go over there every day anymore, and the streets were full of quotidian pain.' And: 'He's smiling and all. He's got a Bart Simpson button on and it's supposed to make me relaxed, all these cute touches amid the Danger and High Voltage signs. On the button, Burt Simpson is saying, "Don't have a cow, man!"' A magnificently realized postmodernist expiation by a 'bred in the bone' writer. This is the real deal, folks.

*"But the rocket engine, the deep cry of combustion that jars the soul, promises escape."*  
--*Gravity's Rainbow*

Some years ago, I read *Gravity's Rainbow*—the seven-hundred-something pages of it—in seven days with only Chinese tea as my nourishment the entire time. I was on the skids, as it were, in a Taipei tenement guesthouse and I had nothing else to do.

I was a prisoner of bureaucracy in Taipei, though it was not Taiwan's bureaucracy I was up against, but Korea's. I was changing jobs in Korea and to change jobs as a foreigner in Korea you had to—and still do, apparently--leave the country so your new boss could kiss some bureaucratic ass to move the paperwork along, and in this sort of case “kissing bureaucratic ass” meant hosting the government official in question to an evening in one of the ubiquitous “room salons” around Seoul where they would drink foreign whiskey and do other things I wouldn't like to imply my new boss would pay for while I awaited the outcome in some foreign city, low on cash. There were no ATMs in those days.

The guesthouse was on the second floor of a back-alley tenement. The room was a high-ceilinged plywood box with a couple of bunk beds—a bare sheet of plywood for a mattress and a woolen military blanket for cover on each—and a bare light bulb hung from the ceiling on a cord bedecked of cobweb bunting. There was a chair in the middle of the room, at a cockeyed angle vis-à-vis everything else. No one else ever came to stay there. There were no windows, only the four, thin, plywood walls. It was dark in there, even with the light on, and the light had to be on during the day if I was reading and when I turned it off during the night the landlord was through the plywood wall with his TV on at full blast.

The landlord was an older gentleman, a widower, who spent the day in his small white apartment through the plywood wall watching shrill game shows massively in his chair, smoking cigarettes, amid the porcelain gods of China, a bikini girl calendar, and an exotic bird in a cage. When he had guests—friends of his own age and temperament—they all smoked more cigarettes and drank tea, laughing loudly.

He was a nice fellow. He seemed sympathetic to my situation. He was always friendly to me and once offered me noodles, which I had to resist, as I knew I would have to begin the starvation process all over again.

It was 1987 and I didn't have communication with anyone except through the expensive and byzantine landline system you could access in a gray building downtown. On top of all that my new boss was a pretty hard-core Christian and he wasn't going to no room salon. My wife had to go kick his ass into gear finally.

Meanwhile, I checked at the Korean consulate every day. I had left my guest house phone number there, but there was only a slim chance they would have called me. Who among them would have called me? The consul himself? The sub-consul? Their secretary? None of them could speak English, and giggled hideously among themselves at the very thought of it every time I walked up to the window to enquire about my visa. I was familiar with this behavior everywhere in Seoul back in the eighties.

As dispiriting as it all was, going over there every day at least gave me something to do during the long and empty days. I had not thought this process would take a full ten days, for a chop on a piece of paper that amounted to nothing more than "permission" to change places of employment as a lowly English conversation night school instructor. Nor had I anticipated that the last seven days would be endured without money or food.

I stood in a bookstore contemplating my last meal as the busses, the cold autumn day blew smokily by outside. Visiting the big bookstore on the way to the consulate to get laughed at was something else I did those days to pass the time. I paged through *Gravity's Rainbow* three days in a row, on my way to and from the consulate. My visa application was buried in a yellowing

stack of papers on a wooden desk in the back of a dark storage room somewhere on a silent fifteenth floor in the heart of Seoul. Or so I imagined. I was buried. I was broke. If I were going to spend the last of my money on a meal, it had to be a good one. And if I were to spend the last of my money on a book, it had to be a feast in itself. I was thinking about roast duck, a little of that egg drop soup, and a glass of whiskey. Last meal kind of thing. But a meal is so ephemeral. You eat it and enjoy it, then they strap you into the electric chair.

I was standing on the English language floor of this big modern Taipei bookstore with *Gravity's Rainbow* in hand, hefting it, paging through it, as if all came down to this: a meal, or a book.

On the back cover of the Picador edition of *Gravity's Rainbow* I weighed in Taipei there was a blurb from Christopher Lehmann-Haupt's *New York Times* review: "If I were banished to the moon tomorrow and could take only five books along, this would be one of them." Well we've all imagined what it would be like to be banished to the moon tomorrow, for some odd reason, and we've all mused what books and music we would take along. I felt I was about to find out what that was like. I handed over the last of my Taiwan dollars for the book—enough for two light meals--and pushed out into the blast of noise and dust.

I had read the opening sentence many times: "A screaming comes across the sky . . . ." etc. I lay down on my rack and read it again and began to read the novel, with the purpose of actually reading the novel, what with nothing else to do.

I read a hundred pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* each of the seven days I was in the room. I finished the whole book before I got on the plane back to Korea addled and hungry. That night back in Seoul, with fresh cash and belly full of noodles and beer and soju, I got stomped in an alley by some dudes from the bar I drunkenly outraged shouting "Don't fuck with the

Rocketman!” The upshot of this was that the next day, when I went in for my first day of work at the new Christian language school I had so bravely held out for in Taipei, I faced my new students for the first time with a putrescent black eye and a half a front tooth gone, blood still matted in my hair, and reeking of booze. This is the outcome of this story.

The setting of the novel is the final months of the Second World War in Europe, and its central thematic image is the V-2 rocket; conceived, designed, built, tested until it successfully arcs toward London, falling ballistically into the heart of the city faster than the speed of sound so that its explosive impact is preceded by silence and followed by the shriek of the machine. Following VE day the Allies search for the mysterious rocket called the Scwarzgerat, designated 00000, built by a Nazi regiment of Hereros from Southwest Africa: the Scwarzkommando. The purpose of this hidden rocket is unknown and ominous, as the Scwarzgerat is the only one of the six thousand produced by the Nazis to carry a device involving Impolex-G, a mysterious heterocyclic polymer whose properties may include artificial intelligence.

When I turned the light out for the night and crawled down against the cold, pulling the woolen blanket over my head, I felt drained and had weird dreams. When I awoke in the morning I re-familiarized myself with my shrinking world, had my morning tea with a rolling belch, and took up the book again, hoping when I thought of it to get a phone call from the Korean consulate. I couldn't afford the calories to go over there every day anymore, and the streets were full of quotidian pain. At some point each day however I went up to the cluttered roof. It was the only sunlight I saw. My hunger gnawed ceaselessly, as it does in that first, and last, week of a starvation cycle.

Four hundred pages along late some Chinese afternoon I lay the book down and pulled the blanket around me to shiver a while. Sitting in the chair I had just read a scene where Yank and Brit Army officers in dress uniform break out into song and dance, arms around shoulders and high-kicking, like the novel is a musical, thinking what the heck is all this about now sitting there in the chair in the middle of the room with the blanket around my shoulders. I absently read the blurb again on the back cover. “If I were banished to the moon tomorrow and could take any five books along . . . “

Banished to the moon tomorrow. Five books. And I wondered, Why is it always five books if banished to the moon tomorrow. Five this, five that if banished to a desert isle, or, from the nineteen-sixties with the big space-race jive, to the moon. Five songs. And in my ruminations there with the TV blessedly off and the old man gone, and with just me and the macaw with its occasional, sudden, but not entirely un-pretty squawk, I considered the weight and space limitations in a space capsule. It couldn't be a whole library. Be thankful you get the five!

I imagined myself on a beach, or in a Starbuck's on a Sunday morning enjoying my last cup of espresso and everyone in the ville knew it, they knew about me and the wife breaking up, they'd seen me drunk at parties. In the beach scenario I was this hungry-as-hell and stinking-of-rum wretch and looking it, as I watched the Coast Guard cutters and coke runners race past each other in opposite directions, and in either situation—the Starbuck's loser and the on-the-beach loser--I was waiting for that lucky break when whammo, something in the newspaper caught my eye. In the on-the-beach scenario it dances down the breeze smack into me, wraps around me annoyingly and I glance angrily over the line that leads to the lucky break just before I fling this blown-newspaper annoyance away, and I even crab-crawl a bit down the beach after the paper,

and only by chance, in a desperate tussle, do I grab, out of all the blown pages, the critical page with the information about how to make some bucks by going to the moon forever, holding it triumphantly over me where I stand waste-deep in the stinging surf.

In the Starbuck's scenario I glance at it, poised defiantly at my small round table, wonder if I appear to be balding to them, begin to turn the page, then snap quickly back to it, once it hit me, then, catching myself, scan the room of abjuring faces coldly before I dive back into the cesspool of plasma ads and ads for phone sex workers. And there I read the same thing the guy on the beach was reading: "If you were banished to the moon tomorrow, and could take any five books along, what would they be? Call NASA at dit-dit-dit and let us know!"

Both the man in the Starbuck's and the man on the beach felt the first comma in the text was superfluous and that is how they became the two finalists.

Now here I stand on the launch pad itself. The liquid oxygen is fluffing slowly, heavily out into the cool Florida dawn, but you know what the old snowbirds say down here in Florida: "The sun comes up here fast in the morning."

They are making these little adjustments on my spacesuit I don't even know what, and everybody is frantic but in a kind of controlled, practiced kind of way and the moment is fast approaching. The moon is hovering up there, distant, faint, full and waiting. And then out of the fleet of tractors and white vans emerges this bookmobile. It is a big shiny white trailer with BOOKMOBILE on it officially in black, with a yellow "Rescue" arrow coming down off the B and the E. I say, Oh, yeah. The book thing. It has been such a whirlwind three weeks since I answered the ad and I had forgotten completely about the book thing. There's been training films and cocktail parties, and even the Vice-President one day came over to the training center to

shake my hand with cameras whirring and clicking. Me, with the Vice-President. So you might imagine how I might have forgotten the whole purpose of this project, which was to answer the question of if I was going to go to the moon, the emptiness, the silent surround forever and I could take but five books what would they be.

“All right,” Hank, my handler the technician, a real nice fellow who has been real good to me throughout this whole thing says as the bookmobile rolls up. “What’s it going to be, Bub? You get fiiive books.”

He’s smiling and all. He’s got a Bart Simpson button on and it’s supposed to make me relaxed, all these cute touches amid the Danger and High Voltage signs. On the button, Bart Simpson is saying “Don’t have a cow, man!”

Well what with this being the year of the burning icebergs and Monster Hurrricanes and all I can’t imagine anybody really caring what five books I would want to take to the moon, the shimmering emptiness, the grey surround for cold eternity, much less if they knew my rakehell past, but there we are. There we stand, with the orbs orbiting and the ice that covers the rocket cracking in the crisp morning light, and everybody down on the beach, up since dawn to watch the launch, and all the hawkers selling “Banished to the Moon” t-shirts and hats and because they are overstocked kooky, ridiculously out-sized sunglasses, sunglasses as big as boomboxes and boomboxes blazing and all the journalists in their places, and Walter Cronkite filling in the odd moments of inactivity and the LOX and the President is there, with his wife and their dogs and their friends and colleagues and whatever their coldly political relationships are all sitting in their respective bleachers waiting, waiting as the planets whirl mile by undiscerned mile through the sky and Walter suggests that, “It is estimated that somewhere in the depths of New Guinea somebody doesn’t know this is happening today. They will continue to look at the moon, as they

do in their atavistic night, by their whispering cannibal river and never know not only that a man sits on the moon alone tonight reading the only five books he could think of to take along, but not know even what a book *is*. Even less, a space capsule.” Walter puts it all in perspective—New Guinea nights unknowing—and he brings us back, and back we are, to the question. The books.

I look at Hank hopelessly. It is going to be forever, after all, in that empty desert, that silent unmoving sea, and the only thing I can utter is,

“But why only five?”

A glitch, this answering of the question with a question. Glitches are absolutely out of the question. In Mission Control they are cursing and spitting Skoal. For there is the problem of time. For there is but one moment, fast approaching, one narrow window to shoot through to the moon as it passes slowly overhead. They’ve got to get me in that bomb gonna blast me at a vastly mounting velocity up to seven miles per second per second ten rib-cracking Gs and stages blasting off out beyond the surly bonds etcetera as the worlds drift into place, out of place, and this is a one shot deal, one chance then we’ll have to wait until next month sometime because even that little moon will not hold still.

And Walter, sensing disaster but not naming it, not missing a beat because he was there, D-Day and the Berlin Airlift and all that and now this, the culmination of all our technology sticking like a pin into the pastel blue sky where hovers a devouring moon, is speaking of bolts and miles just to cover for me as I try to get to the bottom of this, my latest big fuck-up.

“And remarkably there are three hundred thousand platinum bolts in and of that ice-caked rocket, each of them programmed to burst away from the rocket exactly one hundred miles overhead. And the important thing we can be assured of and so cast our worries to the great

vacuum of physical uncertainty is that not one, not one of them will ever drop into anyone's upturned, gaping, aptly gaping mouth because they will never come down. Never. And neither will he, our lonely lunar arhat. He too will never come down, never again fall into anyone's mouth or loins again because the moon, as it beckoned Li Po who drowned in its wat'ry reflection, beckons he who now stands beside the gantry wrestling with the question . . . “

Hank leans in to whisper in my ear.

“Listen, bud. How much room you think you're going to have in there? We just don't have the lift for any more than five books *plus* the forever.”

I look up to the little life support system strapped to the top of the skyscraper rocket and, indeed, it doesn't look like much room. The world is watching. I must respond.

Dry-mouthed I manage, “It's the forever I'm worried about.”

“That's right, guy. That's the what's this is all about. Let me run this by you again.”

He sounds uncharacteristically testy, but I understand the pressures he is under.

“If you were banished to the moon tomorrow, no, *this morning*—and you *will* be banished to the moon here in about fifteen minutes—what five books are gonna get you by? If I were you,” he adds at a lower, confidential register, “I'd throw in the Bible and a nice thick Clancy.”

“Yeah, I understand. Space limitations, weight limitations and all that.”

He winks.

“Gotcha,” I respond.

We separate our conspiring heads. What with all the photo sessions and scary rides I had to go on to prepare me for space travel I had forgotten about the book question. And so I'm a little stuck, what with the moment itself of eternal banishment upon me. Meanwhile sun moon

LOX etcetera. The President squirms in his seat, smiles it off, winks to someone. The First Dogs are getting restless. Down on the beach people are getting sunburned. A suspicious looking character is Tased and arrested. Cronkite digs up another gem.

“The melting point of liquid oxygen is . . . “

Fast approaching. The melting point of liquid oxygen is fast approaching as the sunlight broadens over the cape. I get the hint, as the moon slips toward the edge of the window.

Cannibal grunts, shifts on his haunches, scratches a mosquito bite. He’s thinking of yams.

Hank nudges me, brings me back. He’s been such a pal through all of this. I think of the weeks we have worked together, and that night we went drinking in Cocoa Beach and those stews who just had to meet the banished man, and we took them back to his place and we all got naked in the Jacuzzi at his apartment complex doing Cuervo shots around two that morning and I want to say Hey Hank, remember those stews, but time is running out. The countdown, the ten-nine-eight part, is but minutes away. And Hank is beginning to look a little steamed, an aspect of his personality I had never seen at this compression, had never anticipated seeing. And I’ve never even seen this kind of compression.

The bookmobile is right there in front of me. The drivers of it, dressed in immaculate white coveralls and hard hats, stay in the futuristically-faceted cab and watch me through their aviator shades. Hank’s hand points the way. Five books. For forever.

I think about all the books that might get me through forever on the Moon. Keeping the Earth and its stories in my head forever on the Moon. Earth forever in my head as I lie up there in my tiny capsule on the Moon. Earth in my head.

I think of all the plots, the ten plots in their varieties of detail and circumstance and all whatever, like it’s a universal constant, the Rule of Ten. I think of the rendering of things in the

simulacrum of pictograph, then in the first sunbaked cities' numbers, and then alphabets. In alphabets the stories told from the beginning of time are inscribed, and re-inscribed, and are moved and transformed by scribal drift. And far off in some unimagined future with towering temples and cathedrals they are set in type and printed. Then Kafka's cockroach. Then *Gravity's Rainbow*. And still they drift. The oeuvre of the Earth is like the story of a million eternally unfolding and interweaving novels that opens with the simple splitting of a rock, a tryst between gods, and the stifling terror of history swallowing them and us up and "A screaming comes across the sky . . . but there is nothing to compare it to now."

I realize with this banishment to the moon thing I have an opportunity here for a new idiom.

"Lookit," I say. "I don't think I want any books."

Hank just gives me a cold stare.

Cannibal runs his hand over a battle scar fondly, absently. A pair of black horn-rims hangs from his neck, a rare trophy passed down the generations. His great-grandfather got them off a white long-pig name of Rokfella lost his way in the swamp long ago. Possession of these glasses is the powerfulest taboo. Already on the beach there have been drunken brawls.

"I think," I say, "I'd just like some blank paper."

"Blank . . ." Hank says.

"Blank," I say, letting the word, the blankness of it hover, take hold. I glance over at Hank to see that it did seem to be taking hold of him, the blankness of it. "That's it," I say.

"That's all I want. Reams of blank paper. I will create," I announce, "My own world, and its own literature."

"Oh, really."

He's pissed and he upbraids me and he tells me it's not in the game plan I don't take books I take paper. "We don't have paper. We have books!" he says, jamming his hand in the direction of the bookmobile. Its drivers cock their heads at this motion.

"You have scrolls of computer paper, miles of it, over in the bunker, don't you?" I say indicating where the launch crew are poised, downrange a mile, with their computers chirring out mile on mile of computer paper.

"Sure, bro. But we ain't got a pen," he snarls, then glances wildly around the world, its shapes and ideas, then barks with bald incredulity into my eyes, "Dude!"

And as we argue about it the moon drifts out the window, drifts silently along its eternal arc. And by then, of course, it's too late. The hawkers down on the beach begin to fold up their tents. Cranky kids and their tired parents begin to load up their cars for the long traffic jam home. The President and his wife and the First Dogs are ushered under armed guard to their helicopter. All the mission control guys remove their headphones and toss them against their consoles.

"It's an opportunity," I insist, "To wean myself off the Earth's formulae. To create my own."

"Yeah you're gonna tell it like it is are ya'?" Hank crows, walking away, never to look in my eyes again.

All around me I hear machinery being shut down. The loud hissing vapors are sealed off and I notice for the first time how quiet everything really is without the rocket.

"And there you have it," Walter says, closing the broadcast. "Blank paper. A dream of a new language, a new literature born in the eerie silence of the moon . . ."

I stand alone by the gantry. Everyone has wandered off. The bookmobile's drivers--in their white coveralls and hardhats--back it away, confused, irate, another crazy day at work. A

child's balloon is adrift in the sky getting smaller over the sun-bleached sea. I follow it with my eye until it disappears one way or the other.

I drift down the concrete hallway to the little shower room and peel off the blanket, my clothes. I stand under the cold water and my body thrills with the shock and I feel a slow roll of nausea. I open my mouth and the rusty water splashes over my white tongue.

I finish, dry off, dress, wrap the blanket around me again. Weakly I ascend the concrete steps to the roof. The roof is scattered with debris: a broken sofa, a hollow TV cabinet. Rats scamper into the shadows. It is just dusk, and bracing cold. The skyline is a pall of light and smoke. Giant neon signs are coming on all over the city. Rooftops bristle with TV antennae. The streets are filled with motorbikes and busses. I hear jet motors in the sky.

Hunger is not so bad after the first few days. Only after thirty days does true starvation set in. I am just in the craving stage now.

The End

**AN:** *I wrote this piece soon after my return to Korea from Taiwan. The situation in Taiwan is described factually, although I failed to mention I carried Robert Coover's The Public Burning with me for the trip and finished it there before I bought Gravity's Rainbow with literally the last of my money and the weeklong starvation process began. Reading two thick metaphysical novels in a row like that may have had some unmooring (i.e.: liberating) effect on my thoughts and voice at the time. Probably the reverie regarding the 'banished man' by the launch gantry did not occur to me until my return to Korea as I began to write. But obviously it was the funnest part to write. Life's most mundane speculations, such as, "If you could take only five books to the moon, what would they be?" can be mined all the way down to a quiz show with the Saturn Five over your shoulder with Walter Cronkite's sonorous ruminations as its rhythm. I mean, what would it look like to send someone to the moon with only five books? How absurdly realistic can we make it? All this occurred in 1987 and I've been in tougher jams since. Indeed,*

*without going into details, I'm in one now. If there's a takeaway, it's this: don't panic. Read a book. Or write one. As to the question of influences, as a writer I've read a lot and I'm not sure who has necessarily influenced my voice, except to say that reading Richard Brautigan from my middle school days is probably what first awoke me to the beauty of words and what could be done with them.*

**BIO:** Lou Morrison received his MFA in Creative Writing from Arizona State. Being a writer has been his life's goal since he was 5, at which time he wrote graphic novels about monsters. He has not yet been published (*until now.Eds.*) and hopes to get one lousy piece in any journal before he dies. In 2001 he arrived in South Korea to write his PhD dissertation on Korean Buddhist painting of the Joseon Dynasty which he didn't finish. He subsequently taught English at a university for 15 years but just lost that job. What's ahead for me? Keep writing I guess.

# COW IDEAS

by Ivars Balkits

*WHY WE LIKE IT: We were more than a little intrigued by this 'talk-umentary' that has the feel of both a report in the making and a rumination on our kinship with cows, the situation of cows and how they impact our lives. Although the information conveyed may seem inconsequential to all but the people who make a living in the dairy and farming sectors, it at the same time quietly raises questions of philosophical and moral weight. Is the controlled environment in which the cows live and die a metaphor of our own entrapment within a conformist capitalist economic regime? The impersonal voice is merely a cover for the troubling questions that lie beneath. And as for prose, on a scale of 1 to 5, we think the last paragraph is 6.*

Cow ideas can make you think of cow eyes. Then you can see the cow eyes like wallpaper or bugs in grass. You can see the fright more than you can the eyes. Fright or caution or just "Huh?" You see their death. It might be your own fright.

Cow ideas. It's whether it's cruel to keep them confined to barn and milking parlor. They are chained at the cheesemakers part of the time. Those are pastured a good part of the time. Most of the time, in fact. They are maybe not sociable cows like the Jerseys and may need to be chained while in small spaces. Maybe to prevent them from mistreating each other.

Jerseys don't seem to need to be chained. They get to walk around the barn and piss and shit and get water whenever they want. To get water, they just walk in shit and piss. They seem to enjoy that. After that they get to lie in their sand beds. Which are clean and replenished. Just because Jerseys are bred to be inside cows is that justifiable?

Shit-splatter up to their knees, but not up to their udders, thankfully. Do I continue to drink milk or eat cheese or spread butter after seeing that shit and that piss and that confinement? Such is my probe in these cow ideas:

This small farm with Sweet in its name...

does have natural ventilation, one or two lights, sun windows – clear panels on the roof – the structure is good up to -40 without alternate heat, is not a tie-down barn. The farmer milks 30 cows by 7 a.m., has two helpers. The milk parlor allows him to milk 3 at a time, Every 12 hours he pastures them on new grass, having moved electric fences to create a new paddock. Heritage breeds, they are a “closed” herd, no genetics are brought in, and what does that mean? I forget to ask him. He uses traditional milk cans for his 40 directly marketed accounts. Any amount over goes to Boston on a the big cooperative truck. Runs right by here.

The medium farm operation, considered that, defined as that, MFO, of five hundred plus milking cows may lie all the way across the county, I don't know, I wasn't paying attention, with heifers about to begin hefting and oldsters to be done with their lives. The price being good for beefing this year, as it so happens. How can we justify the excess methane in the atmosphere from their rear-end emissions? That's another question I would like settled sometime. Sorry to interrupt...

this probing process.

Why can't all operations be small and serve the immediate area? Why can't all the animals be pastured? I ask but I know it is capitalism.

Coming back to cow ideas and the doe-eyed calves that become milking cows or the three day-old bull calves still glowing with fetal light, off to be beefed... I ate cheese after that and added cream to my coffee.

I guess just seeing so much of dairying I'm a little awed. Awed by the number of cows in those MFO barns. Awed at the amount of shit the animals generate. I am under the smell's spell really. I am awed by the mounds of manure under black plastic held down by truck tires, car tires, tractor tires. I am awed by the mountain of shredded corn silage.

I was impressed by the small farmer, how he managed, how he managed with integrity. I was glad for the cows in his pastures and glad he wanted to keep these heritage breeds breeding. I was impressed with the individual conviction of the farmer. The individual exertion of the small farmer. I was impressed by his arrangement. I was glad for the grass and open barn and the cleanliness of the sand bedding. I was awed by the fermented hay, 50 percent moisture content, which can caramelize and then for winter it's "cow candy!"

I also wanted to see into the psyche of the cows that live in the large farm barns and never see pasture.

It seemed like a city to me, a cow town. I wondered about the reality of the Jersey's sociability and the freedom of the small farmer's cattle. I wondered about cattle, in general. The beasts of the prairie, of the veldt, of the plain, of the range. Their ancestors, their sires, their offspring, their service to humanity. Their nourishing milk and cheese and ice cream. Their lives, just-so tedious? Or, were they having fun?

While it lasted?

I was impressed how they liked to crowd, the Jerseys, the Elsie Borden cows. How they liked to rub hide to hide, bulk to bulk, the comfortable pushing and shoving, movement toward and then suddenly away from the barking little farm dog. Their tastings of my shirt. Their slobber on my shirt and jeans. Their interest and what it might be they were interested in. I saw what looked like fear in the calf pens, already, taken from their mothers at birth. The rolled eye. The shy head.

How unnatural.

Yet, we are bred to be urban too. No, that's not true. We are forced into being urban through the need by capital for labor. Herding the billions into their corrals, into their units, in chains, not a new idea, I think of a lost play, Aristophanes' *Babylonians*. I think of a play called *Cows* (nonexistent), written from the perspective of the cows in the medium farm operation.

Is that too trite? So much, so much shit on the brain today.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *'Cow Ideas' was practically written on site. I was taking notes while serving as a publicist for a study tour of a number of Ag or food studies programs in Vermont a few years ago. We visited the dairies described in the piece. I composed it based on the notes and my 'gut reaction'. I don't really have a strong opinion either way about ingesting cow milk products. It is good to recall the environment, however, in which they were generated.*

**BIO:** Ivars Balkits has most recently had work published on the websites for LitroNY, cahoodaloodaling, Angry Old Man, Plural Prose Journal, Uut Poetry, Helios MSS, Unbroken Journal and Otoliths. He is a recipient of two Individual Excellence Awards from the Ohio Arts Council, for poetry in 1999 and Creative Nonfiction in 2014. Ivars works as a writing tutor and course facilitator at Ohio University.

# Notes on Losing Things

By Holland Morris

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We kind of had our hearts in our throats after reading this moving internal monologue about the special kind of loss that only a woman can know. As our curiosity as to its nature grew, the un-named mystery only deepened. It is at once a poignant meditation and a painful coming to terms. The gentle sermonizing voice embraces and the prose is so tenderly close to poetic reverie we're tempted to call it prosely. Quote: 'Many things will be said in passing to you. You will forget most of them—we both know you are still only thinking about that one lost thing. It is okay.' A masterful 'study in brown' on the heartache of loss.*

Sometimes it is difficult to recall when you first lost it: Was it when you were in line at the gas station to put ten on pump two, and suddenly something “wasn't right”? Or did the realization hit you just as you were falling asleep next to the boyfriend who was the love of your life that season? Did you sit up in bed, consider the possibility, and then take action? Did you wait – did you think everything was fine? (Everything wasn't fine. Why did you wait so long?)

Once it is gone, then it will all start to fall apart.

<sup>2</sup> You will find yourself tracing your steps, looking between crevices, muttering unintelligible things: *I remember leaving it over here, why is it gone now? This isn't fair. I need to find it. Where is it? This isn't fucking fair.*

It is okay. It didn't matter; you lost it before you even knew you had it.

<sup>3</sup> People will question why you are so fixated on this lost thing. They will wonder why you can't seem to move on past it. Your best friend will tell you, "It was meant to be." Your older sister who turned into a religious fanatic will explain that "[some higher being that may or may not be real] had other plans for it." Your father will say nothing; you will not even tell him that you had this thing in the first place, let alone lost it. He never trusted you would hold on to much in your life.

<sup>4</sup> Many things will be said in passing to you. You will forget most of them – we both know you are still only thinking about that one lost thing. It is okay.

<sup>5</sup> When those select few tell you, however, "it isn't your fault," I need you to listen to them. I need you to believe them. This will help for the nights when you are lying in bed alone, hiding under that ratty, decimated quilt your mother gave you last winter when your apartment lost power for four days straight. It will be especially difficult when you let your mind wander to far-off places, places that make the idea of waking up seem mundane and overrated. It will be easy for you to think of the "What Ifs" and imagine a picturesque life with your lost thing, now found.

<sup>6</sup> This idea will consume you.

It will infiltrate your thoughts.

You will forget what it is like to dream about anything else.

~~(What color eyes do you think he might have had?)~~

<sup>7</sup> This thing won't find its way back to you; this much I promise you. It is still okay.

Your biggest fear will be that this won't be the only time you lose it.

<sup>8</sup> Most music will make you cry – you will find a way to relate everything back to your lost thing. Some friends may start considering you to be selfish, concerned only of yourself. This is only slightly true.

<sup>9</sup> You won't be able to talk to your new boyfriend about this lost thing; it is from an era of your life which holds little to no importance to him. He will assume that you have overcome this part of your past and come to terms with it. The histories which include the epics of old boyfriends and lost love will not interest him. When these feelings of isolation and fear come rushing back to you, he will not understand.

<sup>10</sup> Please remember: this does not mean he does not love you. He might not like you, but he still cares. You'll feel alone though, and that will ultimately drive the wedge between the two of you. You will think he is jealous that he couldn't have lost this thing too. The dichotomy between pity and anger will be lost on you, as you cannot possibly fathom his lack of understanding, his callousness. Some things, you will think to yourself, deserve to be lost.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps you will take lighter steps, eat less, caress your bare stomach, feeling for the slightest movement that gives an inkling of hope. (It will not move, though; it never really could.)

<sup>12</sup> When you understand, when you accept it, I will be here to remind you that some things will stay lost forever, but they won't ever leave you; they will choose to tiptoe past you, years later, in hope that you will catch some sort of scent like a bloodhound and tumble after it, barrel

through those doors you thought were sealed off and scramble to your feet, looking up, so far up that you become unsure of where exactly the sky ever started.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This piece has taken on many faces in terms of format and content. It is different from how it first looked when I wrote it, and I hate it and love it for how it has changed. It's also odd and doesn't necessarily have a place of its own. I have laughed with my Creative Writing class as I showed them just how many times it has been rejected, just to help them understand that sometimes things don't fit. Some writing doesn't belong in certain journals, some lost things are meant never to be found and some people don't get what they didn't know they even wanted.*

**BIO:** Holland Morris is a high school English teacher in rural New Hampshire as well as a part time bartender and a wannabe slumlord. With a pink living room and a full heart, she's got a good thing going.

# In Style

*By Sopphey Vance*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *There's almost a visionary quality to this dark-themed discerning memoir of an inpatient detox facility. We like the spin Vance puts on 'style' and how he plays it out. The cloistered voice and fractured prose create a sense of anxious isolation but there is a silver lining with the emergence of empathy and the prospect of resolution. A nicely controlled confessional with just the right amount of 'drama'. Quote:'...vitamin and mineral deficiency due to poor eating habits. Sleep style, insomnia since childhood. Ride to inpatient facility? State trooper style. Seated in the back seat while crying all the way and trying to make proper conversation.'*

Style. Hair style, buzz cut without the buzz on the top. I preferred to keep my mane. Clothes style, the clothes appropriate for the day. Blue top, as per the uniform recommendation by the director. Black capris to compliment my frame and budget as an overweight person who shops at discount stores. Flat tennis shoes with tied in shoelaces that didn't make it through inspection. I couldn't forget the nurse's look of disgust when he saw the soles. A giant, flattened ghost of gum, rocks, and hair right dab in the middle.

A lot of things didn't make it through inspection. My markers, a bag of snacks for the children at work, my wallet with 300 dollars and change. Credit cards, phone, house keys, medicines, and supplements. They all went in contraband. I didn't know what to expect. I started

that morning by going to my caseworker appointment at the low cost mental health clinic. I had a few to drink the night before. And my first psychiatrist at the clinic prescribed an array of medications to help with my binge eating disorders. A half of this and a half of that, I had diligently cut in half the appropriate amount of pills. Expertly I placed them in my pill box inside my sequined purple pouch.

Gone for broke, the night before I purchased a multi pack of flavored wine coolers. Peach, coconut-pineapple, cherry, strawberry...the four flavors of summer packed in a box at the gas station. They were even chilled. One bad idea in the video series of my life. Thirty seasons in, I finally decided that drinking was always a great idea, though it wasn't.

That morning I walked into my caseworker's office. Sat in the chair, still buzzed from the night before. Nodded blindly to the questions. Nearing the end of the appointment my brain froze. My defenses down by the questioning, antidepressants and medication in my system: I did it.

"I'm fine now." I put my hands on the chair and grasped the edge. "But, I can feel that I won't be."

More questions. And a realization from one mind to the other.

"That's exactly what I'm saying." I began crying, the familiar pounding in my heart. "I'm fine now, but in the back of my mind I'm thinking about my stash of pills at home."

The next few hours lapsed into moments of tears and moments of silence. Physician cleared me first, after prodding in four different locations for blood. Obviously, one becomes dehydrated after being a heavy drinker. The probing needle left shot glass sized bruises. Crying, waiting, and finally an inpatient facility has an opening.

Style. Suicidal ideations with a plan. Type: overdose with pills. Substance abuse style alcoholism. Top 5% of all alcoholic users. Vitamin and mineral deficiency due to poor eating habits. Sleep style, insomnia since childhood. Ride to inpatient facility? State trooper style. Seated in the backseat while crying the whole way and making proper conversation.

The state trooper had my ID. But I could still run. I knew the way back home. I had my stuff in my arms. I'd still be on time for work. But I follow into a holding room for admissions. The front door obscured from view.

There were four green chairs in the room and a drawer with my stuff under lock and key. I've been in one of these rooms before. I've done this before. Cop ride, inpatient center, holding room. Then I got to go home. I was cleared to be safe before. But I wasn't safe. Not this time.

That's the first I became acquainted with the routine questions.

- How are you feeling?
- Are you hearing or seeing things?
- On a scale of 1 to 10 how do you rate your depression?
- On a scale of 1 to 10 how do you rate your anxiety?

From holding room to adult hall. Everybody's away at an activity but I'm standing in front of the charge nurse's booth. A tech tells me I can't go anywhere after a skin test. I had to pee. She pointed to the direction of the restroom but I had to leave the door open. The restroom, a two part room where a wall divided a bathtub and toilet from a sink and mirror. No shower

curtain or rod. Top of the toilet locked in with nowhere to hide anything. Toilet paper readily available but not locked in. Mirror nothing but steel that reflected.

I pushed down the knob for water. A small sprinkle tinkled in the light of the small room. I wiped my hands, dried in time for the skin test. Into the laundry and hygiene room. One tech and one nurse and me. Arms out. Gloves on for the two. One scooping behind my neck, double checking for anything foreign. For rashes, for anything that would be unsafe for me. I couldn't help but cry. To them they only saw the body of a female, but deep down I never saw myself as such. The thought furthers my misery.

Silently, tears streaming down my face. I finally joined the day room. More crying and more tears. I sat in a chair. Sobbing, closing my eyes to the world. Wondering why I did this to myself? Was I feeling so awful that I wanted to die? Did I hear or see things, no never. On a scale of 1 and 10 my depression sat at an 11. My anxiety level made new records on the Richter scale.

Lifestyle. Respectable member of society with a full time job. Member of the local Rotary Chapter. Future seminarian. Graceful individual with published poetry books under his name. Low budget outfits, but stylish nonetheless. Friends with people who live in country clubs.

Forlorn poet. Tame party animal that dances till the lights turn on at clubs. Devilish romantic. Prey to the kindness of others. I only stopped crying when a kind person brought me a snack to my chair. Graham crackers and pudding. The whole lot of us were in there for the same things. Maybe in different regards, with different back stories, but ultimately under stress.

Keeping each other afloat.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *It is a distant memory but there are things I will never forget about the first inpatient facility I went to. The patients and staff brought me into their world day after day. And though I have never spoken about it to anyone 'In Style' is the beginning of an adventure and a nightmare I'm finally learning to understand.*

**BIO:** Sopphey Vance is a poet and literary editor escaping life to live in the wind. He is neither here nor there but has made guest appearances in anthologies and magazines. He boasts star spotlight in his very own chapbooks available on Amazon. You can connect with Sopphey Vance on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

# *Fight Me, the Romantics Would Have Loved Emo*

## *Music*

By Aurora Dimitre

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *GET UP KIDS. DON'T WAIT. IF FURTHER SEEMS FOREVER* it's because of *THE PLACES YOU HAVE COME TO FEAR THE MOST*. Dimitre's thesis that Keats, Byron, Shelley and Coleridge would have some kind of *CHEMICAL ROMANCE* with Emo is like *A FEVER YOU CAN'T SWEAT OUT* but *WAIT*, pull the black bangs out of your starry teenage eyes and *KNOW* any poet with *A MARK, A MISSION, A BRAND, A SCAR* on the *BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS* does no hip-jive but *FEELS* so entropic anthems is *WHERE YOU WANT TO BE* with other *ALL AMERICAN REJECTS* on a Grecian vase with *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* because she even includes footnotes and *F\*\*\*ING, RESEARCHES* her stuff! Was it Byron/ Colbain who burst into teary flames as the *DIRTY LITTLE SECRET* grew near thus *YOU ARE WHERE YOU WANT TO BE* because 'I have learned to love despair!' As essays go, we think it's Nirvana.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *As someone who desperately wanted to be emo in middle school but had the misfortune of growing up in rural North Dakota, and someone who grew up to be an English major in college, there was no way I was going to learn about the Romantics and not connect them with emo music my friend who cried all the time listened to in the study hall. This, mixed with I can do whatever I want with my writing (thanks, Anthrax-the-thrash-metal-band-from-the-80s-that-does-whatever-they-want) pushed me to looking farther into the similarities. And that pushed me to sit down and pound it out. As someone who got an English degree, there's a pretension in a lot of liberal arts majors that tend to look down on things like emo music, heavy metal, bad horror stories and terribly written (but fun!) books—and you can enjoy Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Pierce the Veil, because, in the end, humanity shows through in all art, and just because one is currently seen as superior doesn't necessarily mean that it is.*

**BIO:** Aurora Dimitre is a young author from North Dakota. She likes heavy metal music and Keanu Reeves. Her work has appeared in *North Dakota Living, Plainsong* and *Angry Old Man Magazine*.

“A solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity.<sup>22</sup>”—is this a description of emo music, or a line out of a poem by William Blake about rape? I mean, it is a line out of a poem by Blake, the footnote will tell you that much, but it is also pretty much a good description of emo music of the late 2000s, which, like most Romantic poetry, focuses pretty implicitly on the inner self, feeling, and how this all affects us. Take this line from Hawthorne Heights’s “Dead in the Water”: “She’s a ghost, a silhouette calling out my name.”<sup>23</sup> or this line from My Chemical Romance’s “I’m Not Okay (I Promise)”: “What will it take to show you / It’s not the life it seems.”<sup>24</sup> or from Pierce the Veil’s “Caraphernelia”: “Hold my heart, it’s beating for you anyway.”<sup>25</sup> Hawthorne Heights, My Chemical Romance, and Pierce the Veil are just a few of the many emo bands that rose to power in the late 2000s/early 2010s, a time that I like to refer to as ‘The Emo Renaissance,’ but just a couple of handpicked lines from their songs pulls out that image of these eyeliner’d up men (and women! Amy Lee, where you at?) who wore their hair in their face, screaming into the void.

This is not the first time I’ve thought that the romantics would love emo music—every time I learn anything about Percy Shelley, the fact that he’s just about as 2008-emo as Prince Hamlet really speaks words to me. And when talking about emos and the Romantics, Mary Shelley’s got to be mentioned, because she’s about half an Evanescence song away from being the gothest girl that’s ever lived; according to urban legend, girl lost her virginity on her

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<sup>22</sup> “Visions of the Daughters of Albion,” William Blake, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, Ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling.

<sup>23</sup> <https://genius.com/Hawthorne-heights-dead-in-the-water-lyrics>

<sup>24</sup> <https://genius.com/My-chemical-romance-im-not-okay-i-promise-lyrics>

<sup>25</sup> This is a line that every emo kid definitely had scrawled on their Converse. I know this because every time I hear it I have to resist the urge to scrawl it on my Converse.

mother's grave, and that is super metal. But even beyond that, emo music is pretty much the voice of the modern Romantic.

The subject matter is not exactly the same; the Romantics could be very focused on things like the French Revolution and the overbearing church and how they related in reference to that; something that really puts them more on par with 'modern' (modern being a relative term, of course; even emo at this point is pretty dated, even though some emo bands have been continuously putting out new stuff) pop-punk than 'modern' emo music, but you're insane if you don't think that the speaker of Green Day's "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" (a song that makes Green Day waver between pop-punk and emo; they are usually pretty solidly pop-punk) is not a Byronic hero, the song opens with "I walk a lonely road, the only road that I have ever known."<sup>26</sup> As well as this, Black Veil Brides, who are pretty commonly accepted as an emo band<sup>27</sup>, have a song titled "Wake Up" that pulls from a lot of these themes, so there is some overlap.

Overall, though, while pop-punk lyrics might have more in common with the academic definition of a Romantic, it's emo that's the soul. Vic Fuentes wailing about heartbreak really screams Samuel Taylor Coleridge to me more than Mark Hoppus complaining about how he doesn't like his dad. There is a big overlap between emo and pop-punk; each of them really have a distinct sound (emo is the lovechild of pop-punk and screamo, really), emo tends to be more emotion-focused and pop-punk tends to be more rebellion-focused (hence the punk part; it's a lot less rebellion-against-society than the Sex Pistols, but Good Charlotte does have some stuff to say about how the world works), and you always have those bands that straddle the middle, like All Time Low and Mayday Parade, who confuse the genre pool even more when they feature

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<sup>26</sup> I didn't actually have to look this one up because every self-respecting emo or emo-wannabe would know the first line of "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" just as they would flinch a little bit when the "Welcome to the Black Parade" G-note is played on a piano.

<sup>27</sup> Sadly, Black Veil Brides is no more, but their lead singer still makes music. He looks and sounds like a David Bowie who decided to be emo.

Vic Fuentes<sup>28</sup>. All Time Low is too happy-sounding to be emo, really<sup>29</sup>, but then they've got lyrics like "And I'm so sick of watching the minutes pass as I go nowhere"<sup>30</sup>, which is decidedly more wistful-emo than pissed-off-pop-punk.

I'm mentioning Fuentes a lot, and that's because I think he's got the real emo voice. That's another big thing about the emo genre, is that it *wails*—which is, of course, where All Time Low confuses itself more, because Alex Gaskarth doesn't have that wail, which should be a massive outpouring of emotion that really rejects what else was popular at the time; the ultra dance-y, ultra-pop-y; ultra-bubblegum: Britney Spears, Ke\$ha, late boy bands. Vic Fuentes might look like a young, Mexican Jason Lee, but he's got a shaky tenor that breaks into a hard emo scream at the drop of a hat. The poem "Hatred and Vengeance, My Eternal Portion" (which, by the way, has just about the most emo title I've ever heard) by William Cowper (not technically a Romantic, but an influencer) can be edited into a Pierce the Veil song very, very easily. The emo genre is a push-back against not feeling your emotions. It's a push-back against brushing your teeth with a bottle of Jack<sup>31</sup>.

But you can't learn about Percy Shelley and tell me that he wouldn't love My Chemical Romance. It just happens to be that poets living in a slightly oppressive century had a lot more serious things going on than people in a band in the 2000s. So while it is true that the Romantics do have more thematically in-line with the punk movement (and I mean all versions of the punk movement: original punk, grunge, post-punk, pop-punk, all of it), they've got that deep emotional line like bands like Pierce the Veil or Bullet for My Valentine have; it's just connected to different things. There's a lot more Romantic in Vic Fuentes or Amy Lee wailing than Mark

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<sup>28</sup> All Time Low's "Love Like War" and Mayday Parade's cover of "Somebody That I Used To Know"

<sup>29</sup> Or maybe it's just Alex Gaskarth's happy puppy-dog face he makes when he sings; I could be one hundred percent swayed by that. He just always looks like he's having a great time.

<sup>30</sup> "Weightless," All Time Low, <https://genius.com/All-time-low-weightless-lyrics>

<sup>31</sup> To paraphrase Ke\$ha.

Hoppus or Deryck Whibley (who... also sometimes runs emo) yelling, even if the wailing is about a romantic relationship and the yelling is about breaking free to do what they want. Pop-punk and emo are very closely tied (as I've mentioned; there are those bands that straddle the line; All Time Low, Sum-41, The All-American Rejects...), but it's that extra note of emotion that makes emo more Romantic than pop-punk. Pop-punk is angry in a way that emo isn't<sup>32</sup>, and... while the case can be said for both genres, pop-punk is *whiney*.

The case can be made that emo is whiney, too, don't get me wrong. But the way that the lyrics are written in an emo song versus how they're written in a pop-punk song make emo sound more important. Emo music uses more metaphors, more flowery language; they're more concerned with form. Emo lyrics are more poetry than pop-punk. As an example:

“What if I can't forget you?  
I'll burn your name into my throat  
I'll be the fire that'll catch you  
What's so good about picking up the pieces?  
None of the colors ever light up anymore in this hole”<sup>33</sup>

versus, some pop-punk:

“Storming through the party like my name was El Niño  
When I'm hangin' out drinking in the back of an El Camino  
As a kid, I was a skid and no one knew me by name  
Trashed my own house party 'cause nobody came.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Pop-punk is pissed off; when emo gets mad, emo is the kind of rage that precedes death.

<sup>33</sup> “Caraphernelia”, Pierce the Veil, <https://genius.com/Pierce-the-veil-caraphernelia-lyrics>

<sup>34</sup> “Fat Lip”, Sum-41, <https://genius.com/Sum-41-fat-lip-lyrics>

Granted, the second song has a stronger rhyme scheme; it's 'a-a-b-b' rather than 'Fuentes doing whatever he wants', and in the strictest sense of the word, it is a stronger poem, if you take those four lines alone, which isn't really fair to "Caraphernelia."

*But.*

Compare it to some Keats:

"And this is why I sojourn here,

Alone and palely loitering,

Though the sedge is withered from the lake,

And no birds sing."<sup>35</sup>

It's pretty obvious that "Caraphernelia" has more similarities than "Fat Lip" does—and it is true, maybe this isn't a good example of each band. But it is a good example of the genre. The first line that pops into my head whenever I think 'emo music', is the first wailing "Sunshine!" of "Caraphernelia", and the first line that pops into my head when I think 'pop-punk' is the first line of the chorus of "Fat Lip": "I'm not gonna waste my time / be another casualty of society." Both songs, even if the bands have more to them than that song, encapsulate the whole of the genre.

While the Romantics, especially the earlier ones like Blake, had a lot to say about society, a lot of them did talk a lot about love, and the fleeting of life (Hello, Keats). And even the ones that did talk about society have an air about them that they're kind of lost—they don't have that solid anarchy in their poems that pop-punk singers scrawl out in their songs. As a whole, the Romantic poets would have loved to have *Sleeping With Sirens* pumping through their headphones while they wrote their poems, and I will literally fight anyone who says differently.

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<sup>35</sup> "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," John Keats, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44475/la-belle-dame-sans-merci-a-ballad>, which I really want to put as all lower-case because that's how the French write their titles after the first word but that's not what we do in English, thanks, Keats.

# *Apocalypse then and now*

by Gerard Sarnat

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We were almost hyperventilating when we finished reading this opulent, hybrid take on gonzo journalism where memories, impressions, and emotions boil to the surface with startling hallucinogenic realism. The apocalyptic trajectories, then (Conrad), now (Coppola) detonate a frenzied narrative tension where chromatic images (past and present) collide like particles in the literary equivalent of freeze-frame stop-action photography. The author's impressionistic technique—one favoured by Conrad—to make you see, hear, feel brings the world—conscious and subconscious—into hyperbolic clarity and it's all played out against the gaudy tropical dark hearted surrealscape of Fiji. Quote: 'Buddhist bardo-brained black happiness painful passageway cauliflower abbatoir wet dreams ankle deep ash-filled strange gravely sandstorm sounds narrow train track freeways travel through the mind.' And 'When electric generators black out (frequently), the phone and computer inside what was an air-conditioned room melt into sweetmeat treats for ravenous red fire ants.*

**The Horror**” -- from Conrad's book *Heart of Darkness*, adopted into Coppola's movie

*Apocalypse Now*.

i. Admirer Approaches 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Apocalypse Now*

Lifted straight from pages of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* cinematography, dropped right out of Coppola's insane Colonel Kurtz/ odd Brando lips...my own bad trip, how to get distance or some rest there on bare cot under mosquito netting -- this grown boychick squints toward bloody sky at one maybe more Apache 'copters' whirring blades to avoid being scalped perhaps sliced into unSolomonic hellish halves by that goddamn overhead fan...



## ii. Kadavu Sabbath

... Stale chicken soup, wintry morning taste, Sunday dry mouth hangover forty bowls into impossibly hepatic communal wood basin, all night *kava* root circle clap-clap ceremony; post grog, groggy on three case stubby beer washdown, I try to keep up with the big boys getting down on Cliff and Marley.

Does the gentle terrain explain why this laid-back tropical turquoise paradise's gentle folk evoke Jamaica -- minus the stoned green glazed *ganja* gleams?

Buddhist bardo-brained black happiness painful passageway cauliflower *abattoir* wet dreams,  
ankle-deep ash-filled strange gravely sandstorm sounds narrow train track freeways travel  
through my mind.

Organisms rise sweaty under bug netting waking from cold noisy silence onto laughing waves...

One of three hundred magical Fijian islands, overlooking likely-named Raintree Lake, it pours  
and pours some more off and on day and night.

A blond lad spends mornings on the deck outside his family's *bure*. Unhurriedly, time after time,  
he drops in a corked breakfast-baited line. Sometimes he pulls out little wiggles which I've  
observed him learn how to dehook and toss back, waiting for a larger one the lodge has offered  
to cook. He looks like the serene child moonfishing at the beginning of *DreamWorks* movies.

In the nearby sea, while porpoise dorsal fins play with surfers while sunny sailfish peek above  
whitecaps. Beneath the storm novice scuba divers kiss and worry that hissing raindrops are  
leaking oxygen lines.

Inside, does the whirring circular ceiling fan turning over hot air signal the beginning of an  
*Apocalypse Now/Heart of Darkness* nightmarish-insane-Morrison/Conrad *This is the End*  
*Willard*-terminating-Kurtz detritus cycle -- a horror-of-it-all upriver hallucination? (Thirty-five  
years ago on the ocean's other side, in Marin County where Francis lived; dear Aggie, wife to

Coppola's editor-supreme Walter Murch and more importantly our midwife; cajoled, Lamazed, and natural childbirthed, then taught us to suckle our first.)

Outside our torrent-pounded thatched roof, bleached-out blond fatted Mr. Wimpy Michelin Man doughboy tourists snorkel and float in remote South Pacific lukewarm amniotic fluid.

Covered head to toe, wary Australians and Kiwis from New Zealand, where an ozone layer hole has created a melanoma epidemic, drip messy suntan and bug lotion.

It wouldn't surprise me if to local eyes, we self-proclaimed apparent masters of the universe seem lifeless avoidant droids, vamped blood-sucked servants, deluded enslaved worker ants.

When electric generators black out (frequently), the phone and computer inside what was an air-conditioned room melt into sweetmeat treats for ravenous red fire ants.

... Manual typewriter nursing Chivas on ice boozy Hemingway fantasies ...

Boats of vibrant brown curved curly men wearing sperm whale teeth and sounding turtle shell trumpets, lower shark and octopus lures, bamboo crayfish and shrimp traps. Nets knitted from fruit bat bone-needles snare yellow fin tuna in mass scare lines. Razor-toothed barracuda trolls encircle confused gemfish, boxing them in with bubbles, pushing to the surface for the kill.

Predatory seabirds rise and fall time after time until finally dive-bombing when the catch arrives at the top. Trawling fishermen come in behind.

Back on shore, roosters crow, palmed parrots talk, mynahs squawk from Captain Bligh's *Munity on the Bounty* bread trees. Crickets chirp: I try to remember how to derive formulae to calculate the temperature from the speed of hoppers' leg-rubbing. Sunday morning bells chime method-to-their-madness rhyme, calling the natives to Methodist prayer in the nearby village of Naikorokoro.

After peppermint tea, I redon last night's traditional *sulu* skirt, scurrying behind Epi, Veranando, Samuel, Seta, my peer elder Alfredi, Thomas, Reverend Alex and the rest of the *kava* and alcohol-wasted guys. Isaac offers a shortcut in his old-time warrior double-hulled dugout outrigger. Not really old school, appearing like a sharply-dressed Eddie Murphy, he drops the religious among us past the coral reef on the village's beach, then quickly excuses himself for more pressing affairs.

Leaving the canoe, learning from recent *faux pas*, I pause to lift my long skirt. A pig with earrings, feet swollen from bites and anti-bite cream allergies, my ample ankles are my late grandma's thick tree trunks. My wife cautions me to cross my legs in church.

Missionaries eliminated slave-snatching blackbirding from this island about a hundred thirty years ago. But it is said the evangelists only rid Kadavu of cannibalism around 1964 — when the current chief was already an experienced man.

...Native Americans encircle cowboys: the shooter who kills the most Indians gets the girl -- or is it the man shooting the most girls who's rewarded with a good-looking Indian? Ladies who think nasty thoughts in their hearts of darkness start growing hair in all sorts of body parts...

In any case, no fool, I hop to the proper amenities too: why take chances they're still a few checkerboard tattooed, scarred ashen five foot-wide hairdo'ed human-flesh *scrapie*-virus infected warriors insane with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, pickling arms and carving sailing needles from human shins, long forks from long bones? Which one might drink *kava* from my skull, make me watch others eat my body parts, climax being forced to consume myself before thrown in an oven alive, cooked to humiliate my soul, remove my body's sacred *tabu*?

Approaching the village, my daughter removes from her shoulders what looks like a long light scarf, which she's worn like a Jewish fringed *tallis*, and now turns it into a traditional wrap-around *sulu* skirt. She also wears a Princeton head lantern that from a distance looks like Jewish *tffilin* phylacteries.

...In 1935 quite a few Polish Jews faithfully fatefully fatally felt the only ones not to be afraid of were the Germans. If only Hitler would come. At least in Germany there's law and order, everyone knows his place. It doesn't matter so much that the mob is terrified of *Der Fuhrer*. What matters is imposing order.

The nightmare scenario, of course, was that one day the priests would say Jesus' blood was flowing again because of the Yids who drink Christian children's blood. That they would start to

ring those scary bells; the peasants would pick up their pitchforks. That's the way the butchering always begins.

Like when a piglet is killed, it squeals and pleads with that pink-cheeked voice of a tortured child. God sees and hears every creature's grunt, and has no pity on anarchist Antichrists.

No body imagined what was really in store. Wealth is a crime, poverty a punishment. Fear and faith are synonyms in Hebrew...

Corrugated tin roofed shacks lead to the stone church. Men dressed in black and red and blue western shirts and jackets and ties with matching traditional Fijian *sulu* skirts, greet us warmly. (I think of yesterday at the movies when Fijians howled during *The Hostage*. Something went over our heads, something about Bruce Willis being the chief of police.) The chief comes up to me as our crew's likely elder: we exchange *Bula! Bula!* greetings, bizarrely reminding me of the totally dissonant beany-wearing flag-waving Yalies' wailing their *Boola! Boola!* fight song. Women all in white and pink guide us inside to front row seats of honor.

The Fijian-speaking chieftain, leaning on silk pillows and drapes, leads the service. His presumed in-training son sits next to him: maybe still drunk; he yawns, stares out the window, eventually catches a few zzz's, a *kip*, a nap. We're handed feathered bamboo fans to swat away disjointed long-bodied stinging wasps. The WASPS among us seem to know that numbers 116, 221, 174 on the wall indicate hymns: they sing along in English with the amazing chorus' four-part Fijian harmony. A trumpeting angel Gabriel hovers.

The village spokesman extends us greetings in English, preaching we're all brothers and sisters before God. Kids in the pew behind me give up their good-natured giggly pinching, get up to pass the collection plate.

... If only they knew we were Jews. The Old Testament and *Eretz Israel* are big-time around here: New Guineans asked my bearded longhaired son whether he was Taliban or descended from Abraham before honoring him...

A few *Bula Vinaka* thank yous and we're on our way down the oval mountain path, through groves of cassavas, mangos, guava, cocoanut, orange flame, killer figs, lantana, taro, bougainvillea, avocado. Low tide, we arrive at the sea's crab holes, lobster and kingfisher nests.

An underground oven cannibalizes mahogany wood to fuel a special goodbye *lovo* feast slow-cooking since dawn. Yesterday we brought produce back from the open market in a huge wheelbarrow. This morning, the kids caught fish from the boat. Isaac put down a pig. It all smells yummy. Before putting unknown meat in my tummy, I ask the old chief man-to-man to assure me that the banana-braided hairy fatty white flesh between the chicken and red snapper is just good old pure unkosher pork —not human.

### **iii. Upriver**

Last night's festivities behind, it's last-chance-for-adventure time before we head back home.

Wolfing down blood oranges and poached eggs with the family, I head out alone east along the northern shore. Kadavu musk-parrots shriek "KANDAVU!" -- probably the reason natives add an "n" when pronouncing the island's name. Marveling over exquisitely spiraled yellow, pink and white scallops, conches, whelks and starfish; the world is my oyster.

I follow the creek inland. About a hundred yards upstream, zany Dr. Seuss-ish skipper fish, heads up like alert water skiers, surf the surface on their flipperlike tails. Another fifty Darwinian yards inland, they've increased from small guppies to medium trout. An owlish turtle's head bobs up from its shell like Captain Nemo's periscope. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was one of my favorite kids' movies. Exquisite slithery slivery fluorescent geckos and red smushy newts slide underfoot.

Sand gives way to rock as I ascend southeast. The lush green canopy shelters the cut-glass crystal-clear blue lagoon from the rain. Black and white millipedes inch along the ground. Monarchs surge overhead, reflexively triggering my humming, "Zippity do dah, Zippity eah. My oh my what a wonderful day. Plenty of sunshine heading my way. Zippity do dah, zippity eah." I flashback to childhood Ur-memories of the amazing butterflies in the animated feature film *Uncle Remus*.

Leaving the rainforest's cover, it's drizzling pleasantly. Slipping on the sharp boulders, I break off a sturdy tree branch to better support cartilage-less knees. My internal soundtrack flips to Doc in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go."

It's a regular Disney moment out here.

Thud! My glasses and I fall. Although body parts seem no worse off than before, a palm and elbow sting and drip blood. Feeling a bit like Piggy in *Lord of the Flies*, I fumble around for my glasses. Luckily, my searching fingers find them unbroken. Reaching over, I'm startled by two bare brown feet a foot in front of me. Looking up, I gradually see raggedy filthy shorts, a broad tattooed chest, a tangle of disheveled hair on a young man with nose bones holding a wood pitchfork with three sharp metals blades. This guy looks just like the hundred-plus year-old cannibal photos in the museum. What's going on? Who is this dude?

Be real, Ger, no time to panic, learn from past mistakes when you've overreacted. Within a millisecond, my spinning mind retreats into a flood of loony-in-retrospect family jokes I'm the butt of, stories I'm constantly kidded about.

On safari in Kenya, a horde of tall thin red-robed spear-bearing blue-black Masai tribesmen wade across a river toward us: I yell for my wife and two small kids to get behind me, I'll protect you; the warriors cross over... smiling, sheepishly offering to sell trinkets, trade a spear for Eli's camera.

Stripping to undies, jumping into the Pacific to rescue a capsized middle-aged lady...who turned out to be a most ungrateful master kayaker.

In Belize, the brute jumping out from nowhere toward my younger daughter, three hours into what felt like a forced-march through torrential mud looking for Indian ruins...to give her an umbrella.

Alone with my older daughter deep in northwest Thailand's rice paddies, hours after leaving the Lanu Red's village, a man runs at her wielding what looked like a club...a generous, if blottoed, Lanu White extending us his opium pipe, inviting us -- *Come Over to My House, Come Over to Play* -- to stare at a receptionless blank TV screen.

So, cool it, man. I gather myself, rise to stand tall (all five feet five inches of me), and summon a hearty *Bula! Bula!* Unlike every other Fijian, who's out-smiled and out-*Bula Naka'd* me back, this fellow just stares, suspicious, clearly not happy to see me, arms on spear, holding his ground, not moving on. I hold my walking stick firmly in front of me.

Although last night I'd dismissed Susan's news as so much gossip, I reconsider. The owner of the adjacent resort recently fell to his death from a cliff. He catered to the high-end \$3000 a night likes of Madonna, offering cement bunker security and isolation instead of our up-close-and-personal bourgeois experience. Rumors have it that he abused the Fijian staff, which may have had something to do with his accident.

Now I'm totally focused, no yucks or campy drama-king inner giggles about what a cool story this will make. I pause to look briefly into his ghostly eyes. Then, careful not to touch, I slowly walk around him as calmly and confidently as I can muster. Not looking back, I proceed up toward the suddenly threatening misty peaks. From nowhere, a gibberish of Wounded Knee, Slippery Rock, and Captain Ahab jangle my head. Good job, Sarnat, no point fooling around if there's any possibility he didn't understand or wouldn't be deterred by the international ramifications, the big hurt that would descend if he ate an American.

Not hearing rustling or steps behind me, the self-recriminations and second-guessing start. My god, what if you've violated his tribe's territorial boundary? You idiot, he was just as shocked as you, he's probably hightailing it back to the village where you attended church yesterday. You ridiculous wimp!

Nevertheless, relieved to be safe, my adrenalized fight-or-flight rush turns romantic, into a Wordsworthian *Intimations of Immortality* natural high. A half-eaten honeycomb and an intact tiny blue egg generate sublime epiphanies. I go forward. The ecstasy proves short-lived.

Way too full of myself, not concentrating on my next step, I collapse into a mud hole. Skittish crookedly black crabs scoot from their holes under my feet. Delusions of grandeur instantly shift back to dread. Pulling myself up, tubers become snakes entwining my ankles. Twigs become giant walking stick insects snatch at me. Low-slung gnarly black-hooped mangrove trellises, strangely rooted in the sand at both ends, come alive to entangle me in the nasties. My sweat and blood attract every kind of bug. Sheets of rain bite into my skin. I retreat under a tree -- until I

see smell lightening char. The rocks are impossibly slick. The path is sometimes underwater, sometimes washed out.

With that, I'm done. No trouble convincing myself that I've got a good excuse for the family, that after two hours in the elements, they're all worrying about my whereabouts. We've got a plane to catch. Time to turn around, retrace my steps down.

He's nowhere in sight as I return to the point of our brief encounter. The storm rat-a-tats the now black lagoon like a machine gun. A black and tan water snake -- the tan camouflaged by the sandy bottom making it look like a string of undulating black diamonds -- swims toward my open sandal. Making it back to the open-spaced beach, I stumble on sharp shells, cutting my big toe...

Now showered and comfy, I wonder what the hell actually happened.

I'll bet if the kids had been in my shoes, they'd have made friends and invited him back for tea right now.

Although sympathetic, my family obviously doesn't know what to make of my story. In any case, enough is enough for me at sixty. Back in time for a quick nap and snack.

Before lunch, I pull *Papagena's* Canadian manager aside. "Don, I have no idea what really occurred, but you should know about it. I'd appreciate your being discrete if you make inquiries..."

Don said he'd never heard another like this before, that all tourist-Fijian meetings have been friendly. "Every once in a while, the villagers chase off a hunter spotted poaching game on Naikorokoro land, but it's never happened on the resort side."

After lunch, Mele comes over, formally but sheepishly. "I apologize to you and your family." That was all. He left without further explanation.

Then Samson sidles over, putting his arm around me. A huge affable brown New Zealand Maori who's been the divemaster here for six years, he often serves an intermediary role between the Fijians and the Westerners. He's the only person who eats at both the staff and the guest tables. "My little white man, I heard you had a scare today. You encountered Mele's brother. He's the village idiot, an idler, no good. Never works, a longhaired hippy. He was sneaking off to spearfish in the ocean when you came upon him. At times he gets stoned into oblivion, so bad he can barely talk or walk. But you needn't worry, he's meek and mild and wouldn't hurt a fly."

With all remnants of a Kurtzian mystery dispelled, I join the family on the *Nunu Moi* to motorboat to the local airport, then puddle jump to Nadi before jetting home into our routine California lives. But before we hop on, our hosts, the sweetest people in the world, place *leis* around our necks and hold us around our waists as we sing our last four-part harmonies together. After kisses and hugs, we jump on board, wave, and toss our flowers back toward shore, leaving our hearts in Kadavu, our intention to return.

*Au sa liu mada*, see you later, not goodbye.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *'Apocalypse Then and Now' was meant to be a kickass memoir from Fiji visiting my entomologist ant-man son doing field work. Stylistically, Joseph Conrad's novel Heart of Darkness and even more so Francis Ford Coppola's eponymous film suggested the feverish pitch. PS: his Fijian dog 'Cassava', had really catchy fleas!*

**BIO:** Gerard Sarnat is a physician who's built and staffed homeless and prison clinics as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. He won the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and been nominated for Pushcarts plus Best of the Net awards. Gerry is published in academic related journals including Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Virginia Commonwealth, Arkansas, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, Slippery Rock, Appalachian State, Grinnell, American Jewish University and the University of Edinburgh, University of Canberra. Gerry's writing has also appeared widely including recently in US outlets such as Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, MiPOesis, American Journal of Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, Poetry Circle, Clementine, New Verse News, Blue Mountain Review, Danse Macabre, Canary Echo, Fictional Southeast, Military Experience and the Arts, Poets and War, Cliterature, Qommunicate, Texas Review, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, The Los Angeles Review and The New York Times. Pieces have also been accepted by Chinese, Bangladeshi, Hong Kongese, Singaporian, Canadian, English, Irish, Scottish, Australian, New Zealander, Australasian Writers Association, French, German, Indian, Israeli, Romanian, Swedish and Fijian among other international publications. Mount Analogue selected KADDISH FOR THE COUNTRY for pamphlet distribution nationwide on Inauguration Day 2017. 'Amber of Memory' was chosen for the 50<sup>th</sup> Harvard reunion Dylan symposium. He's also authored the collections *Homeless Chronicles* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014) and *Melting the Ice King* (2016). Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids, five grandsons and looking forward to future granddaughters. You can visit him at [gerardsarnat.com](http://gerardsarnat.com)