

COMPLETE ISSUE 9: PART ONE FICTION

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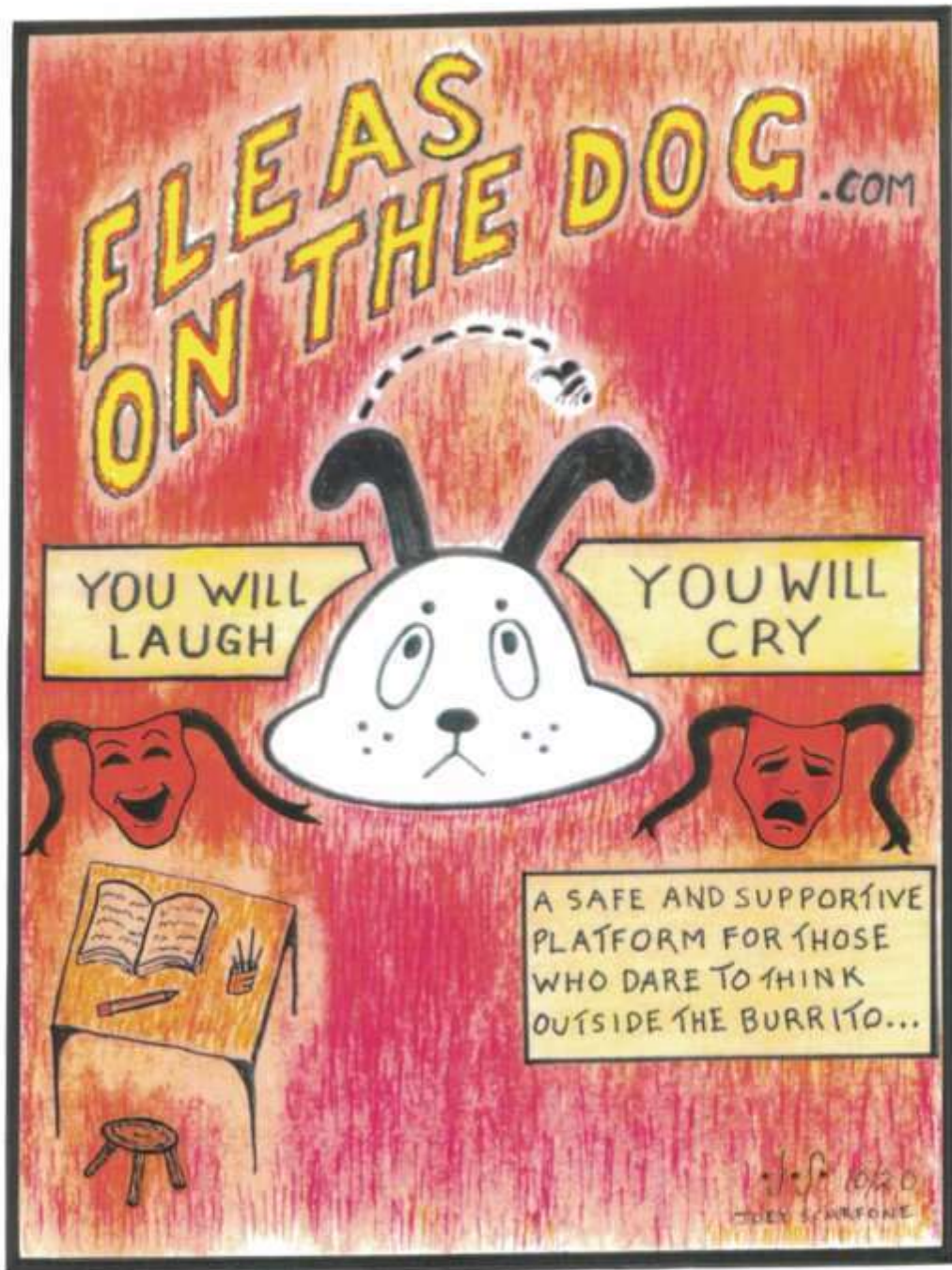
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Owen FleCk . . .(owen fleck)

. . .by SteVen SchutZman

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor SALVATORE DIFALCO writes... The reasons I like Steven Schutzman short story “Owen Fleck” are manifold. On the one hand, he achieves a remarkable consistency of voice with his first person narrator Owen Fleck, a garrulous, neurotic and perhaps deluded, but always earnest character, who is prone to using adjectives such as swell and wicked and yet is something of a ladies’ man. Owen and his primary girlfriend, the fabulously zaftig Carol Ann Hartley, perform an odd and mesmerizing tango throughout the story that violates and punches in the teeth pretty much every politically correct trope you can think of (and then some) and for this alone it is worth reading. This is NOT a story that would emerge from a MFA workshop.*

While somewhat erotic — inescapable given Carol Ann’s larger than life physical appearance and dimensions — both crude and more subtle humour keep the story from ever getting too sweaty or self-pleasuring. And while self-aware enough not to lapse into farce, Schutzman allows the characters to breathe and live on the page organically, and within the parameters he has delineated from the outset. The dialogue engages and pleases throughout, however improbable it seems at times.

But where this story truly succeeds is at the level of the sentence. Schutzman, a craftsman, provides a pleasing abundance of sharp language and granular detailing. For instance, “I sit down in Carol Ann’s purple and plush leather chair that surrounds and holds me like a soft oyster on a bed of ice.” Or this startling image: “My large, pale dick looks otherworldly, hanging from my beanpole body.” But one of the finest examples is Owen’s quasi-mystical and paradoxical description of Carole Ann near the end of the story: “She is lit up from within, her face, her eyes, her breasts, her love for me shining from her as if she has been painted by an old master.”

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* “Owen Fleck,” by Steven Schutzman, is an appreciation for a style I cannot put my fingers on. Oh, don’t get me wrong, dear reader, you will want to read this story, for it is homage to all of your favorite dirty writers, but that doesn’t mean I can pinpoint the entirety of Miller and Bukowski for funsies for this one – I feel they loved their women more.

Like a campfire side story, Owen Fleck will talk about his dick. His is the only one that women want and women need, but he is stuck on a bank teller that loves him.

There is a chapter in Women, where Bukowski has, and I’ll gladly fuck this up because I haven’t read the 20-plus books I have by him in a while, a woman of his who makes a sculpture of his face. I believe she keeps it close or on her piano. He balls it up. Somehow, she throws it at him in an apartment where he is staying with an ex of his. I don’t even really care if I got the steps wrong or right, but this story is a small attempt to be a womanizer who is relatable and it isn’t up to me to decide if you agree or not.

Point being, there is a writer who has created a sculpture of an idea, an Adonis, who is or is not a writer - but has a cock.

I will say this with all my heart, this story is damn clever.

I will also say this: this story is a poor love story.

I don’t necessarily mean that in a bad way.

I mean a poor love story in the sense that there is no love here.

Fleck can’t love.

Carol Ann only wants to give love and weakness begat weakness begat weakness...

*This is a story about a bad person, who convinces a good person to love them out of desperation, and the story does it well. You may or may not like that conclusion, but conclude it must. The cock wins – and a garbage cock at that – but, as Tom Cruise in Magnolia taught us, we must “Respect the cock and *whipping motion* tame the cunt.”*

“Owen Fleck” deserves five stars because some will hate this concept (apropos) and some will not (“he’s got style”), but the important thing to remember is that the debate about why or why not Owen Fleck is a piece of shit is the metaphor of the story. He is garbage so you can know why you aren’t – and, if you don’t know why you aren’t, you have a great example of why you, too, are a fucking waste of space who treats the woman you love like shit because you lack empathy and, no matter how much you talk about your cock, your cock is short so fuck you.

Learn from Owen Fleck, don’t be like Owen Fleck.

“Owen Fleck” should be read at Five Stars – the character should be respected at none.

Five stars

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

“No underwear. What are you fuckin’ crazy?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you would like it. Easy access twenty- four hours a day, like our 24 hour ATM, Owen Fleck.”

“Your ass is so big, I could see it all the way from Mars. Go get me a drink, scotch, neat.”

“No. I won’t. Make me, Owen Fleck.”

If I took downers, the shaking and images and hallucinations stopped, but then reality slowed down so much I felt like I was on a bus full of suicidal Swedes in an art film, and that was worse. My speeding mind and shaking hands were at cross purposes with my desire to draw pictures and capture likeness like magic.

Owen Fleck

Seconds after we enter her swell condo, Carol Ann Hartley shoves me back against the front door and, like a terrible actress in bad porn, says, ‘I’m going to fuck your brains out, Owen Fleck.’

Carol Ann lowers her head to mine, shoves her tongue into my mouth and breathes into me, hotly like a big, winded bear. She is normally nice and pliable, if you know how to handle her, but she is tipsier than usual tonight. She is wicked smart, and pretty too, just big, perfectly proportioned but big, like a gorgeous model inflated with too much air. Taller than me, almost six feet, strong, and outweighing me by at least fifty pounds, I am sure she could pretty much kick my ass if I ever let her think in such terms.

“You don’t do me like that. I do you,” I say, toughly, sounding exactly like a movie actor, I can’t think who, but exactly like whoever it is. Perfect. “Else, I’m outta here.”

Carol Ann Hartley hangs her head. She rounds her shoulders and tucks in her arms, contrite as a dog who knows it has done wrong, but still with a little smirk playing about her mouth and a playful glint in her eyes. Her acting is so weirdly bad, I enjoy it.

Because she manages a bank branch with eleven employees under her, I was surprised at first that Carol Ann would take this kind of crap from me but she likes rough treatment and rough talk and to be bossed around, it turns out. Bossing all day, bossed at night. Makes sense. Once she asked me to slap her beautiful breasts around, hard, but I really didn't feel like it and told her she hadn't earned being spanked by me yet, and when she did she wouldn't forget it. I have gotten good at these games and their hidden codes though sometimes I feel like I'm in over my head.

"You're daring me to be bad, aren't you, Owen Fleck?"

Twisted. The way she always uses my full name like she can control me with it. One sick chickie.

I often wonder how a smart, high-paid woman like Carol Ann Hartley could fall for someone like me. She gives me cash whenever I ask, and lets me filch bills from her alligator-skin wallet without ever calling me on it. She has to know I am taking money, running a bank like she does where the figures always have to add up at the end of the day. The balance. No business day can end without the balance, she says like it's a religion. The balance. The balance. Carol Ann's end of the day mantra, so she can go home at a decent hour.

After Carol Ann Hartley loads the bank's ATM, her hands smell of money, that cool and inky, leathery and sweaty smell, the same one that wafted up from the various boxes, cases and brown paper bags me and my buddy Marv got when we pulled off our biggest deals. I always loved that smell and the money, but I was done with crime because I knew that I didn't have it together enough anymore not to get caught, and I also knew

that I'd go crazy or worse in prison where that poor sap Marv has been for over three years. Unlike him, I am scared enough and smart enough now not to try to be too smart again. So I have become a kept man.

Despite me being pale, slight of build with a bit of a caved in chest, and having a face like a porcelain doll, almost female, almost dead, in its wan delicacy, women like me a lot. Marv once said it was because I have the vampire thing going. I think my physical fragility inspires motherly feelings in women, or maybe they just like my dick, though I hope that's not it. My large, pale dick looks otherworldly, hanging from my beanpole body, as if it has colonized me, like an alien life form from another planet, like a pod, dormant yet in control, making slaves of women and, maybe, a slave out of me too, being a kept man and the rest. Yes, one day the dormant colonizer pod will come out of hiding and let planet Earth know of its demands.

I have my women on a weekly schedule, Carol Ann (Saturday and one other random night) and Leslie Swink (alternate Tuesday nights) and, after losing Wendy Schlossburg (also alternate Tuesday nights) to a job relocation, I am working on Julia who runs the UPS store at the strip mall but I really don't have my heart in it anymore. Being kept and staying free at the same time is turning into an ordeal, or worse, a job.

Carol Ann Hartley is my main squeeze and support now. I like her best, really, something about her smarts, her slavish niceness, her way of looking at me, and sometimes I will flash with love feelings for Carol Ann. Her body is perfect, just big, and when she holds me in bed after making love, I feel like a child in its mother's arms, all warm and dreamy and outside of time, and I never have insomnia, never, in her bed.

Carol Ann has short-cropped blonde hair pumped up like a football helmet around her head, definitely not her best feature, pretty blue eyes, a perfect nose and a wide, kissable mouth that goes slack when she drinks too

much like she has tonight. Her lips are full and plush, and I enjoy our midweek make out sessions in her car in the bank parking lot at lunch hour. Carol Ann encourages me to visit the bank and try to cop a feel as she performs her various managerial tasks; sitting behind her large metal desk, greeting and directing customers into line, in the safe deposit alcove, in front of the vault that looks like religious altar, all lit up gold and silver and, most brazen of all, when she takes over for an absent teller.

“How can I help you today, Sir?”

I snake my arm across the counter.

“I have a question.”

I slide my hand along the side of her breast.

“Yes, sir. I’ll answer it if I can.”

Carol Ann takes a deep breath, her breast swells into my hand and I give it a little squeeze, getting away with something that not many people ever get away with.

“It’s like; do you offer no-fee checking?”

It blows my mind that this ultra-professional, well-dressed, branch manager wants me to feel her up during banking hours. With all the rules and responsibility, Carol Ann needs to be bad.

Fake-cringing away from me now, she looks at me sideways, still acting the scared mutt.

“Down on the floor, bitch.”

“Oh please, don’t kick me, Owen Fleck,” she suggests.

Carol Ann drops to all fours on the floor, her head hanging just above the carpet.

“Turn around.”

Carol Ann does a one-eighty so her big backside is facing me straight on.

“Lift your skirt.”

Carol Ann does.

“No underwear. What are you fuckin’ crazy?”

“I’m sorry. I thought you would like it. Easy access twenty- four hours a day, like our 24 hour ATM, Owen Fleck.”

“Your ass is so big, I could see it all the way from Mars. Go get me a drink, scotch, neat.”

“No. I won’t. Make me, Owen Fleck.”

“That’s real nice. I’ll get it myself,” I say, feeling a bit off my game tonight.

“Okay, okay. You’re no fun. I’ll get it for you,” Carol Ann says as she sashays by, her shoulder jostling mine so I have to tense my legs not to lose my balance. “Don’t bite me, Owen Fleck. Don’t bite me.”

I sit down in Carol Ann’s purple and plush leather chair that surrounds and holds me like a soft oyster on a bed of ice. Cold and slimy, it gives me the creeps and makes me shiver so I switch over to the bristling couch and that is better if I remember to keep my elbows tucked and arms and hands off the prickly material. I am feeling agitated tonight, my tongue swelling, the fillings in my mouth humming like radios tuned between stations, weird scary sensations I hope the scotch will fend off.

Carol Ann returns with my scotch on a silver tray that is surely an obsequious symbol in her mind’s scenario. She took her blouse and bra off in the kitchen. Her breasts are really lovely, perfect really, like the breasts in an old art painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art where I often go to study the luminous Christs and saints, and the voluptuous, naked duchesses. I love how the pale, saintly faces and pale, swollen breasts seem to glow from within. Now how did the old masters do that from mere paint? I am not an experienced painter, but I have the hand-eye thing going so I can quickly capture any likeness in pencil, ink or charcoal. A few deft strokes and there it is, likeness; I don’t know how I do it but I

always could and always can. If I could learn one thing though, I would want to learn to how to make things glow from within like the old masters did with mere paint. In the sketches I do of a posing Carol Ann, she doesn't look big, just perfect, to scale with herself, an ideal. I wonder whether she will buy me the necessary set of oil paints and brushes and canvasses, if I ask her.

I drink the scotch down, fast. The alcohol closes my eyes, burns my throat and unscrews the top of my head a few turns. Sweet rescue. I tell Carol Ann to go get me another one. She pouts her little girl pout and skips off into some movie playing in her head. She is crazy in love with me, no doubt about it. She has a tremendous amount of energy for love and for games and I know I will need all my wherewithal to handle her this night when she seems even more energetic than usual.

When Carol Ann returns with my scotch, on the silver tray again, I tell her to strip completely naked and dance for me. She takes off her skirt, hose and panties without any music, a pathetic display of clichéd burlesque routines, flashing shoulders, breasts offered up in her hands, a slow grinding of her immense hips, blowing me air kisses, so awkwardly bad again I really enjoy it, the complete surrender to me and the movie playing out in her head. She told me that from a young age she had been a big girl trying to be smaller but with me she feels free and comfortable to be exactly her own size. People had been mean to her growing up but she refuses to be mean back, ever. A nice person, no doubt about it.

Carol Ann puts on some kind of an opera music, for the second part of her dance. Who knows what crazy scene is playing out in her mind? I tell to her get rid of the freaking opera and she chooses Dylan. 'Blood on the Tracks'. What? Give me a break. She then chooses "OK Computer" and Thom York's bruised-angel voice goes perfect with the scotch and my mood and Carol Ann's slow grovel of a dance. I watch her dance without

offering a smile or any other form of encouragement. Instead, I curl my lip and show my teeth. I am the master and both Carol Ann and me both enjoy my critical, unmoved, sneering scrutiny.

For a few moments, sitting there watching Carol Ann Hartley, I see beyond the pathetic striving of her dance, beyond her compulsions and my own, and then her face reminds me of an angel's or saint's face in an art painting. Love feelings for her light up like a super hot filament in my heart, only to burn out in a flash. Bad bulb. Phffft. Gone. Too bad. That is love for me— flash -phffft - not a steady glow from within. My dick may have colonized her but I have the feeling that love, true love, might be the price demanded, the ransom, the balance at the end of the day, from the planet Earth.

Reduce Carol Ann's perfectly proportioned body by one third and, with her beautiful face, she could be a stunning runway model but as it is she dwarfs me and makes me feel reduced in size. As Carol Ann dances, I squint, trying to make the furniture inflate to change its scale to her body but I can't pull it off. Maybe if I set her up against a giant redwood, an NFL lineman or a Hummer, she would look appropriately sized.

In the bedroom, I give Carol Ann a whole week's worth of orgasms, cursing at her when she begs, laughing when she screams, just the way she likes it. Carol Ann loves me and I can't remember how it had happened: If my dick colonized her first or if her love allowed my dick to colonize her enough to let me lift all those bills from her alligator skin wallet.

I bend Carol Ann over the bureau near the window and go at her from behind, her head and arms scattering jewelry, perfume bottles and whatnot over the surface of the bureau and onto the carpeted floor. I imagine Carol Ann is an ATM machine, with twenty dollar bills spewing wildly out of her mouth. Ka-ching. Twisted. I feel a little bad thinking about her like that.

Bright moonlight pours through the window causing every white object in the room to light up, her immense pale body glowing from within like in those art paintings. I am blown away by the swooping alabaster curve of her spine and the marble of the delineated muscles in her straining shoulders and arms like she is an art statue come to life, gripping the edge of the bureau to absorb my thrusts, my thighs slapping her ass. Slap. Slap. Slap. The whole thing is weirdly beautiful though most people would not think so at all.

After that hard banging and all those orgasms, she goes strangely quiet. Good. I have reached this stage with her just once before, when I experienced a flash of fear that she might be dead. Of course, dead people don't stay upright.

When I asked her about it that time, Carol Ann told me she stopped having any kind of sexual pleasure when that happened and that she became a peaceful stream on which she circled like a leaf in an eddying pool, and that was the best there was to be had in this life. No other man had ever taken her there before, she said. It was a matter of trust to get there and she trusted me, as she trusted me never to really hurt her.

Carol Ann Hartley, bank manager, full of surprises. She accepts me into her body and into her wallet, into her heart and into her life, no questions asked. Early on, meeting her once at the bank, I stole the brass name plate off her desk, I don't know why. 'Carol Ann Hartley, Branch Manager'.

"Are you the stream, the leaf or the pool?"

"All of them."

"That makes no sense."

"Like you ever do, Owen Fleck."

While I fuck her, I watch my reflection in the bureau mirror, the whites of my skin, teeth and eyes weirdly lit up in the moonlight. Humping

like mad, I look like the rabid ghost of a rodent having a grand mal fit. I can see us from the side too, in the full length mirror attached to the nearby wall, my rod resembling a sinister glowing probe going in and out of this large shining orb.

I think then, we look like fucking aliens or aliens fucking and instead of shooting little 'mes' out, I'll vacuum little Carol Anns in with my hose and return to the mother ship with them for retrieval to my home planet.

I wonder if the neighbors are watching through the window. Maybe me and Carol Ann would inspire the other condo owners in the development to tear off their skins and emerge as the savage animals they really are, a chain reaction causing a shrieking, frothing zoo to erupt out in the sedated Westchester suburbs.

When I was in high school not far from Carol Ann's condo, I drew pornographic zombie comics that sold like wild fire but they got me expelled, after my third offense, and it had been all down hill from there. I was seventeen years old. Crime became a habit and drugs addled my brain so I couldn't sit still a lot of the time, and my hands shook when I sketched. Weird images kept crowding my head. If I took downers, the shaking and images and hallucinations stopped, but then reality slowed down so much I felt like I was on a bus full of suicidal Swedes in an art film, and that was worse. My speeding mind and shaking hands were at cross purposes with my desire to draw pictures and capture likeness like magic.

The following morning, with Carol Ann Hartley next to me in bed, her face against my shoulder, her formidable arm draped heavily over my skinny chest, I open one eye, the left on the side away from Carol Ann, in case she is awake and 'love-watching' me again. Eye open. So far so good. It is Sunday and I want up and out, lest I get too used to being there and she too used to having me there.

There is a hallucination on the empty wall across the room, a large fish, beautifully drawn with fine cross-hatches, more like a whale that looks like it has a wheelchair in its mouth. Weird, but my hallucinations don't freak me out much anymore. There are a few that still make me a little nervous; the floating throat, for example, red as the reddest blood, screaming at me as it hangs like an inflated windsock in the air; or the endless line of happy, winking cartoon cowboys twirling their sinister lariats, but those hallucinations never intrude when I am with Carol Ann, not once, and I wonder why that is. Definitely I am getting better, my mind healing from the damage drugs have done over the years. Now, except for alcohol and an occasional downer, I am deathly afraid of drugs. One toke of weed, one grain of pcpc or acid or speed and the floating windsock throats and happy winking cowboys spinning their sinister lariats will show up to drive me out of my mind.

I watch the whale with the wheelchair in its mouth fizzle out until it becomes the number 54 branded into the wall. I smile at that. The number 54 does look like a whale with a wheelchair in its mouth. I have a rare mind, no doubt about it, of no use to anyone. The number 54 evaporates. Pffft.

Assured by her steady breathing that Carol Ann is still asleep and not 'love-watching' my face as she often likes to do in the morning, I open my other eye and search the near side of the bedroom for the clothes I had shed the night before and for her purse, though it is unlikely that she'd have taken it into the bedroom. I am afraid Carol Ann might wake up like she did last Sunday for tender morning lovemaking, afraid that the morning would stretch into the afternoon like it did that day, a walk in the park and dinner and soon we would be living together. My urge to escape see-sawed with my urge to chill there all day and maybe do some sketches of Carol

Ann and let her take care of me. On Sundays, I normally go to Morty's Diner for the breakfast special and sketch the other people eating there.

I see my clothes neatly draped over the desk chair. Now when did she do that? I thought I had fucked her into oblivion but I was the one who passed out and she still had the wherewithal to straighten the room before going to bed, down to picking the perfume bottles up off the floor. What a head case. She has more wherewithal than a dozen of me, just these compulsions. Manages a bank, wants to be spanked. Smells like money, fucks like a bunny. ATMo, no problemo. And she loves me. Anyway, her apartment is so neat, it's sad.

Carol Ann stirs, damn, but instead of tenderly kissing me like usual, she starts to cry. She hugs me and weeps, shaking with powerful sobs, her once-a-week cry. Women. I brace myself, turn over and kiss her wide, sweaty forehead and soon she subsides into a soft whimpering.

"I'm sorry about last night, Owen Fleck."

"Nothing that I know of to be sorry for."

"I drank too much."

"Yeah, so what?"

"You know how I get."

"Yeah, so."

"I can get pretty out there, huh?"

"Are you asking me how out there you got last night?"

"Pretty out there, right?"

"You mean, you don't remember? And me working you over like a Mexican, for what?"

"I hope you don't consider it work."

"No, not work. Slavery. Sex slavery. Just getting put through my paces is all."

"That's okay. I know you love me, Owen Fleck."

“Okay, okay, I’ve had it: What’s with this Owen Fleck shit? Owen Fleck. Owen Fleck. All the time. Owen Fleck.”

“You don’t know? Really?”

“No, I don’t but I wish you’d stop it.”

“You really should know.”

“I don’t know, like thought control.”

“Thought control?”

“Control,” I say.

“Remember how you came into the bank that time, for our third date, and stole my name plate.”

“What name plate?”

“The brass name plate on my desk. ‘Carol Ann Hartley, Branch Manager’.”

“You’re nuts.”

“A security camera caught you doing it, Owen Fleck. I watched the tape. You looked a little kid with a school boy crush and I knew you really liked me and that’s when I started calling you Owen Fleck. I stole your whole name to let you know I knew you stole my whole name, and really liked me. Carol Ann Hartley in your pocket, Owen Fleck in mine.”

“You’re dreaming.”

“Do you want to see the video tape?”

“You’re one sick, bank chickie.”

“I drank so much last night because I was upset that I had to fire somebody at the bank yesterday.”

“Yeah, what did he do?”

“It was a she, and nothing.”

“Fucking malingerer.”

“No, Allison’s a hard worker and didn’t do anything wrong. She just followed corporate procedure for sub-prime loans.”

“Yeah, yeah, security guards living in mansions and shit. What’s with that? You don’t see me owning a house.”

“She did as she was told and got left holding the bag by corporate. She has young kids and I had to let her go. “

“You don’t sound like a banker to me.”

“I don’t care what I sound like. I feel terrible about it,” says Carol Ann and I sympathize deep down but say.

“Don’t forget which side your bread is buttered on.”

“Sometimes, I don’t think I can take it anymore.”

“Don’t be stupid. They’re all thieves. The rich, the poor, every one of them. I say, line the rich up and let the poor shoot them, or line the poor up and let the rich shoot them, like they do in other countries.”

“Why is your heart so scarred, Owen Fleck?”

“That’s it. I’m outta here.”

“My purse is on the counter. Take what you need.”

“Uh, okay.”

“You know what I noticed? You always take less money than I would’ve given you.”

“I don’t think you should’ve told me that.”

“I’m not worried. Because this is the last time, so probably you’ll take all the money. That’s another reason I was crying.”

What?

“What?”

I disentangle my arms and legs from her arms and legs, not that easy a deal, prop myself up on an elbow and look down at Carol Ann. She looks fresh and pretty, even after last night’s carrying-on and this morning’s cry, her lips smeared into a half smile, her eyes deep and sad and full of love.

“What are you talking about?”

“I know about your other girlfriends, Owen Fleck, and you don’t get to have my name plate unless you give me yours.”

“I have no idea what you’re going on about, Carol Ann.”

She sits straight up, turns her large back to me and arranges the pillows against the headboard. She lays back down on the piled pillows, her full, white breasts and their orangy-pink nipples flattening out and spilling over the sides of her ribcage in such a way that I can feel their weight with my eyes. Her sad face is determined, but her arms slack at her sides. That is Carol Ann. Strong and surrendering. Bossy and bossed. Responsible and bad. A love feeling for her flashes in my bad bulb of a heart.

“I want us to go steady or I want my name plate back.”

“I don’t know where it is. I lost it.”

“Don’t you get it, Owen Fleck?”

“What? Get what?”

Then I do get it. She wants me all to herself. She is lit up from within, her face, her eyes, her breasts, her love for me shining from her as if she has been painted by an old master, luminescent. A steady glowing light. No flash-phffft. Timeless. I want to capture her just like that, all lit up with love. It has been a long time since I wanted anything so much.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay, what?”

“We’ll go steady.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. I promise. Just stay like that. Just like that. I want to sketch you. Don’t move.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Who is to say where the voices and characters in our heads come from? In one way, in the act of writing they seem like possessions when they take hold and the writer's job is to listen and follow, transcribe and stay out of the way. Of course, it is never quite as pure as that, the writer will intrude with thoughts, memories, images, personal obsessions etc, sometimes to the benefit of a story, often not. But I try to stay true to the voice, the language, the perceptions and experience of the character as they unfold in my imagination. Faulkner, for example, was great at letting the voices in his head speak. I remember as a kid being blown away by the authenticity of Holden Caulfield's voice and Huck Finn's and Humbert Humbert's. I wanted to do something like that and that has stayed with me all these years. Kafka's relentless purity and art helped. In terms of "Owen Fleck", I wrote a novella ("A Bride at Every Funeral, A Corpse at Every Wedding", available on Amazon) about a criminal Marv Ronson who in many ways is the opposite of Owen Fleck, and when I imagined Marv's partner in crime, along came jittery, motor mouth, hypersensitive, politically incorrect Owen and he ignited some sparks. Then at a party, I happened to meet a woman who had many of the attributes of Mary Ann Hartley. I saw her through Owen's eyes and the story took off from there.*

AUTHOR BIO: Steven Schutzman is a fiction writer, poet and playwright whose fiction has appeared in such journals as The Pushcart Prize, Eclectica Magazine, The 2nd Hand, Alaska Quarterly Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, TriQuarterly, Third Coast, Post Road, Sand and Gargoyle among many others. He is also a seven-time recipient of a Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Grant Award. You can find out too much about him and his work at steveschutzman.com

GUEST EDITOR BIO: Sal Difalco lives in Toronto at the moment. He is the author of the story collections, *Black Rabbit* (Anvil Press) and *The Mountie At Niagara Falls* (Anvil Press). His story **Young Man Among Roses** appears in this issue (fiction).

Back When *Ford* Made a Decent Car ooo ooo

By Zachary Hay

*Ford Ford Ford Ford Ford Back When Ford Made a Decent Car Back When Ford Made a Decent Car
Ford Ford Ford Ford Ford Back When Ford Made a Decent Car Back When Ford Made a Decent Car*

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

Zachary Hay's, "Back When Ford Made a Decent Car," is one hell of a story.

Biasedly, it is my kind of style. Denis Johnson meets Etgar Keret. Charles Bukowski meets Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Edward Albee meets Philip Ó Ceallaigh.

This piece is absurdly realistic and all too pleasantly dingy – it is a piece of juxtaposition.

Freedom vs. trapped.

Sick vs. health.

The need to live vs. the care of not dying.

Hatred vs. love.

Humor vs. reality.

What Hay does exceptionally well is to capture the moment when beauty slams up against grime and creates a character that can only navigate the line where they both mash together. The speaker is perpetually stuck in his own wallow, as if his story has always been written this way, and always will be, so it gives him the nihilistic ability to say "fuck it" and tow the line.

As equally impressive, is how Hay hearkens back to a dilapidation of time, place, and people. You can feel the destitution that is inherent throughout each line:

"I'll give you a hundred dollars if you drive me but I don't have any money on me."

"Give me half your cigarettes."

"I pulled nine cigarettes out of my pack of Pall Malls and put them in my pocket. I handed over the rest."

Poetry in dialogue.

You immediately know who these two are, that they're going nowhere because they came from nowhere, that they have no care because no one has ever cared about them.

There is something spectacular within dialogue that cuts you to your core.

The ability to say everything without ever having really said anything.

The characters cast off their words and thoughts to no one but the wind, yet we get to hear them and realize that they're broken whispers from people that have no meaning but can impart wisdom to us:

Losing everything does not need to give us hope; the possibility of dying does not need to inspire us; sometimes a pack of cigarettes and a good car are enough to get you down the road.

What does give me hope, what does inspire me, what does remind me about standing in a cold garage in Illinois, smoking Pall Malls, memorizing Shakespeare, and wondering if I'd ever be good enough, is this story.

Good work, Hay.

Five Stars.

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

The girl lay on the bed fully clothed. We used to fuck fully clothed, she pulling her pants down just past her ass and treating the whole thing very cool, very businesslike, talking during, small talk, chit-chat kind of shit, polite, and other times talking the larger topics, What do you think happens when you die? Have you ever been in love? Was your mother a good mother?

Back When Ford Made a Decent Car

The bus stopped in Inkster because some schizophrenic black girl faked a seizure and her boyfriend slapped her across the face a dozen times. That was my stop – I never get involved in a boy and girl fight: the last time I did the girl stomped on my foot and I developed gangrene on the toe. Walking was difficult but I walked the three miles to Karl and Palmer. This is where the girl lived, the girl that stomped my foot.

The left foot had no sensation but I still stood two or three times on the right foot to rest. To rest and to contemplate my mission. I spoke aloud:

“I’m going to break into the girl’s house. I’m going to steal her wedding ring for stomping my toe. If I can get \$700 I’ll call it even. This girl thinks she’s hot hot hot shit in crystal. Thinks she can afford to turn down every invitation. We’ll see which end of the hog the apple goes.”

But I shut up when I got to the house because the woman next door was a retired witch with her long ear to the window, a lonely alcoholic desperate to read tarot. Back when, she gave

me the Seven of Shrubs. *This is the Phoenix. Fear renewal.* I need that like I need a hole in my head. She's dead now I'm sure but in case she isn't, I entered the house through the back quiet-like, sticking the key in like I still belonged.

The house was darked out with blankets over the windows and none of the lights working. *The girl must have moved on to bigger and better things. Alright, man, I can dig it.*

I walked down the hallway and shouted. "Hello hello hello ... Amazon man! Amazon man!" and nobody called back.

The girl lay on the bed fully clothed. We used to fuck fully clothed, she pulling her pants down just past her ass and treating the whole thing very cool, very businesslike, talking during, small talk, chit-chat kind of shit, polite, and other times talking the larger topics, What do you think happens when you die? Have you ever been in love? Was your mother a good mother? Once after fucking she told me the story of the ring. It was a long story and I couldn't remember it except for the boyfriend dying of complications from a gunshot wound. Sad kind of shit.

The ring still sat on her left ring finger, but now it was half covered in swollen finger meat. *Organs must be sick. Shouldn't swell when you're skin and bones skinny.*

I picked up her hand and pulled the ring. No luck. I pulled twice more. No luck, but a pop like I broke something.

"Whadda I got for grease?" I asked and came up with nothing for an answer.

So what did I do? I wet my lips and wrapped them around the finger. Not long – I did not want her waking up and thinking she died and went to hell and this was the worst that it got. So I went quick wrapping my tongue around twice and wetting the ring best I could. And then I took the finger out and grabbed hold with my hand and pulled again. The finger popped again and the ring came off, falling me backward on my ass as it did.

“*Fuck!*” I said and pulled myself up, pocketing the ring.

The girl woke up then, pissing and moaning, in a lot of pain.

“Oh, shut up you bitch,” I said, “You deserve it.”

But she said nothing back. Her mouth did not open.

So I said, “That’s not you. Who’s there?”

“*Ohhhhhhh!*” a voice said. It was a man’s voice coming from another room.

“Who’s there?” I said again.

“I’m in a lot of pain ... ”

“That doesn’t help. Who are you?”

No answer. I left the room, going down the hallway and expecting a crackhead with a boxcutter but getting a naked kid on a livingroom floor in genuine pain. He lay with his ass facing me.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Please ... *Please* ... ”

“I’m not a cop and I’m not going to fuck you so go ahead and tell me who you are.”

The kid rolled over and I saw the problem: gangrene on his dick. It had eaten away most of the dick leaving just a black nub sitting on a wasted pelvis, hip bones exposed and everything else, testicals hanging bare with no sack. Hard to look at.

The kid looked up at me. “Can you help me?”

“That’s beyond help,” I said. “You’re gonna die.”

The kid shivered. “You medical?”

“No. But it doesn’t take a doctor. How the hell’d it happen?”

The kid shivered again and his eyes rolled up and down. “She stepped on it ... ”

I shook my head. Crying shame what some people will do to you.

“Crying shame,” I said and put my right foot over my left heel to pull off my shoe. I raised up my gangrenous toe. The boy looked at it, sighed, and looked away. I put my foot back in my shoe. “There’s nothing I can do for you,” I said.

The kid shivered again, eyes back and forth, coming in and out. “You medical?” Kid was losing it.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Christ.”

Feeling bad, I went a little closer to the kid and sat down beside him. I wanted to give him some advice, but what do you say? Everything feels like cold bullshit when you’re dying, I guess.

“I can’t look,” the kid said. “Is my dick gone?”

I hadn’t the heart to tell him so I changed the subject.

“Hold out your hand,” I said.

He did. I reached into my pocket, pulled out the ring, and put it in his palm.

“Take this.”

He brought it up and looked at it.

“How’d you get it?” he asked.

“A little spit.”

He nodded like he tried everything but.

“That’s yours now,” I said.

“What do I do with it?”

“It’s gotta be worth something, I’m sure.”

He looked at me to let me know I was full of shit.

“Or you could wear it,” I said.

He offered the ring back and I picked it up, then he put his fingers out and I slid the ring on his pinky, the only finger that would fit, and we looked over the thing together a minute. A light escaped the blanket over the front window and the diamond sparkled.

“Beautiful,” I said and we both laughed. We laughed half a minute before the kid put his ringed hand over his chest and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was gone.

“You medical?” he asked.

I got off the ground and began to walk away backward. If this kid dies I don’t want to be there to see it. Some people think that gives you fodder for stories. But it doesn’t. It gives you *baggage*.

“Yeah, I’m medical,” I said. “Hey, you’ll be alright.”

“Am I dying?”

“Dying? No, you’ll be alright.”

“Is my dick gone?”

“No ... not all the way.”

“I don’t feel very good.”

“Just relax, kid. That’s the first thing they taught us in medical school. You gotta learn to be *level*.”

I ran down the hallway and out the back door and down the street careless if the old witch saw me or not. I ran as fast as the toe would allow, knowing that it carried poison, that if it burst it would carry poison up my leg and kill me, but not caring too much.

That kid’s dick would give me nightmares.

My toe busted. And I had to walk two miles to Mitch's Liquor to get some relief. Two Natty Daddies in the parking lot then two more and a pack of Pall Malls and that was the rest of my money. When I was supposed to have \$700 dollars in my pocket, I was busted by four beers and a pack of cigarettes. Well, I was depressed.

"I bet that kid was a fucking scam artist," I said to myself as I drank Natty number three. "Has a crusty little nothing dick and waves it around at traffic. Got me good. Fucking kid."

There was a cigarette in my hand that I did not remember lighting. I took a good drag from it and said, "I thought I'd be dead by now anyway," when a woman answered.

"Dead of what?"

She was not attractive but she had big red lips and bulbous breasts with one of her nipples coming out of the top of her blouse which interested me deeply.

"Gangrene of the foot."

"Does that kill you?"

"If you wait on it it will. As of now I just can't walk."

She made a face like she was thinking and popped her hips out.

"Where you going?" she asked.

"Hamtramck. Half hour east. I'll give you a hundred dollars if you drive me but I don't have any money on me."

"Give me half your cigarettes."

I pulled nine cigarettes out of my pack of Pall Malls and put them in my pocket. I handed over the rest.

The woman drove a Lincoln Town Car. It was twenty years old but everything worked and it had a 4.6 liter engine that got us to speed *fast*: East Michigan Ave, south on Merriman and East 94, the thing hummed at 90. They don't make cars this good anymore.

I tried not to overthink it but this felt like the beginning of something, rebirth and all that. Ancient Egyptian kind of shit.

The woman turned to me with one hand on the wheel.

"I do favors for people," she said.

"This must be how the better half lives," I said.

The woman agreed.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

True story. In 2017 a guy threatened to shoot himself outside the library I work in. Police had the place on lockdown for hours and I couldn't leave until well past midnight. After, I walked home in the rain.

I had this funny feeling walking home. I thought a lot about dying and how little time there is and how meaningless and uneventful my life is. Breakthrough kind of stuff. At that point a car pulled up alongside me and a woman asked if I was going anywhere. She was young and good looking and when I asked if I knew her she laughed and said no. I got in the car.

The woman said her name was Rose and when I asked where she was going she said, "Nowhere."

"Just being helpful?"

"I like to do favors for people."

I know from experience that nobody actually likes to do favors for people and in that moment my breakthrough was replaced with a sudden fear that I was going to be robbed or killed or arrested. I asked the girl to drop me off at the bar a block up. She did and I thanked her and said something about her having a beautiful soul.

The moral of the story is that I am naïve, and have read too many books, and believe that sometimes pretty girls will pick you up on a rainy night just to show you that the world is still a beautiful place and life will always be worth living.

*I've tried a few times to turn this into a short story, but the closest I've gotten is
Back When Ford Made a Decent Car.*

AUTHOR BIO: Hay was born in Detroit, MI in 1994. His fiction has appeared in the ArLiJo Journal, Crab Fat Magazine, the No Extra Words podcast, Fleas on the Dog, and the anthology Apocalyptic Monsters. He currently serves as a prose reader for The MacGuffin.

Past Life Past Life past life past life past life past life past life

By__ T^yler__ McCurry

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A wholly absorbing deliciously Jurassic recounting of a cosmic carnival ride into the deep consequences of playing the wrong Karma hand in the revolving door of evolutionary life and reincarnation. You'd have to be dead (and maybe reincarnated as a stone) not be sucked into this layered, funny and unobtrusively sophisticated narrative that handily straddles the Mesozoic and the Cenozoic until everything comes down to a certain bathroom essential. Along with the author's unassuming but targeted prose and easy going style it should come as no surprise that we give this 'Grimms for Grown Ups'...*

Five stars.

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

You weren't always human. Your existence is just one long constant string of souls bouncing around from one life to the next.

Really? So, what was I before I was Hank?

A toilet seat in the girl's bathroom in Sequoia High School in Redwoods City, California.

Gred was caught off-guard again.

Wow. That was oddly specific.

In January of 2021, a scientist named Jakob Vinther unearthed a perfectly-preserved, one-of-a-kind dinosaur cloaca, or a dinosaur's butthole in other words. It was apparently quite a find and there were even scant traces of fossilized feces in it for scientists to scrape out and study. Apparently there was a lot of speculation about how dinosaurs had sex and went to the bathroom and Gred wondered how much this Jakob guy would pay or what bits of his soul he would sell off to be here right now watching Suzie take a dump.

PAST LIFE

By Tyler McCurry

1.

Hank didn't want to go out like this. He was a father, a grandfather and a great-grandfather too. He had two kids and four grandchildren and a great-granddaughter and his great-granddaughter was barely a year old. He had only just begun to know her.

He was an avid supporter of the Trump administration and still wore his **MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN** hat from Trump's 2016 campaign everywhere he went. Slowly but surely the severity of the nature of the coronavirus had started to become clear to everyone but he was one of those staunch anti-vaccers who believed it was all a hoax. Still, his daughter had pressured him into getting the vaccine for his own safety.

He refused. He never went out anywhere and he was always very careful. When his buddy from Vietnam called and asked if he wanted to go out for drinks at a secluded little dive bar they knew of that was hardly ever busy to swap beers and war stories like the good old days, he didn't think anything would come of it. The place was abnormally jam-packed, but they were sitting

in a corner, far away from the crowds. They took every precaution.

Two days later Hank tested positive for COVID-19 and now here he was about a fortnight's removed from that, on a ventilator clinging to life with a bright light in his eyes that he resisted the urge to go toward. His family was on their way but he did not think he would live to see them. The light was growing ever brighter. He closed his eyes for the last time. They would not open again.

Hank could still see the light and pretty soon it became a void. He went up to it and slipped through it and hit his head on something hard and white. He couldn't see or feel anything except the hard white barrier in front of him. With all his strength he pushed against it with his head until it burst, expecting to find a pearly gate on the other side.

Instead he flopped into a mass of wriggling scales and tails in the center of a mound of dirt with flecks of shells on top of it. One of the tails appeared to be his own and he looked down in amazement at his new bright green body with brown striations along the flanks and patches of feathers in several places. A stocky bipedal lizard, balancing itself with a long tail as it stomped around its nest to inspect its young, paused intermittently to lick him and its other hatchlings clean. He didn't know precisely what he was but he had seen the original

Jurassic Park so many times that there were more digits in the number of times he had seen it than there were in the entire cumulative amount of time the dinosaurs had actually existed. It was his son's favorite movie growing up.

There were no bones about it. He had become a dinosaur.

2.

While his new mom cleaned him off, picking eggshells from his scales, he tried to work things out. From the looks of it he had become one of the smaller terrestrial meat-eating dinosaurs, perhaps a baby *Carnotaurus* or even a *Velociraptor*, which was lucky. If he had become one of the big dumb dinosaurs the meat-eaters preyed upon, he didn't think he could stand that. A creature like that would always need to have its head on a constant swivel, ready to hide at a moment's notice if a predator was nearby. If he had been reincarnated as one of those, he would have lost his mind the moment he was reborn.

He was devout and strictly believed you went to heaven or hell when you died but he knew a lot of people subscribed to the notion of reincarnation. Some circles believed that when a person died, they were reborn as another human or even an animal or an inanimate object and were free to live a brand new life as someone or something else, a cycle that repeated constantly. It seemed ridiculous that his body and consciousness could be

transported back in time into the body of a dinosaur instead of being transported forward into the new life of a human or an animal just waiting to be born, and even if there was such a thing as a next life, this was more of a past life. Next life implied a life that had yet to be lived but all the dinosaurs had lived and died already and that made his mind hurt.

Whatever it was, a past life or a new life, it was a new lease on life, a second chance. After a while he decided to just roll with it and as he grew and learned to adapt to being a dinosaur the notion of what he was before and what exactly had happened to him became a distant memory that was getting to be more out-of-reach than the peak of the smoky volcano that was visible far beyond his nest.

His early years rolled by. He stopped growing once he was about four or five feet tall, roughly the same height as the *Velociraptors* from the *Jurassic Park* series, and it didn't take long for him to determine a *Velociraptor* or something similar was what he had become. His raptor mom taught him how to eat and hunt and his new scaly and slightly feathery dad was with him every step of the way, which was more than he could say for his human father. His deadbeat dad in his previous life had walked out on him and his mom when he was just a toddler. Somehow his mom managed to raise him on her own until she got in a car accident and died of massive internal hemorrhaging when he was

sixteen, forcing him to drop out of high school and enlist in the Navy. He was a big fan of the *Jurassic Park* novels and movies, probably because it was a series an old fossil like him could relate to, and like most boys he'd always loved dinosaurs growing up. Some were presumed to be scavengers and loners but others were actually very social animals and extremely efficient pack hunters.

Velociraptors definitely fell into the latter category. Some of his brothers and sisters weren't cut out for it. One by one, they were eaten or killed, until he was the last of his clutch. His parents showed him how to signal to the others and make delicate little tonal shifts in his hisses and bellows to tell other raptors different things. They gave him a new name that was something like "Gred" if he understood them correctly and he liked the name a lot.

For some reason he retained all of the memories he'd made as a human in his previous life, even as he was making new memories as a dinosaur, and he did his best to keep it that way. He didn't think that made any sense but for all he knew that was supposed to happen when someone was reincarnated. If that were the case then surely a creature's head would get so swollen from all the memories it had carried over from its previous lives that it would explode or something. Maybe after every few reincarnations there was a mind dump or a soft reset and he just

hadn't reached that point yet. Whatever the case might have been, he enjoyed his new past life.

He liked being Hank the human but he could get used to being Gred.

3.

One day Gred broke from the pack to go foraging in the badlands. He was the Alpha now and he could do as he pleased.

It was late in the day and he was about to head back when he locked onto the scent of another raptor, a female. She was not a member of his pack and her scent was unfamiliar to him. He burst through a thicket of low overhanging ferns into a lush jungle clearing and found a slender *Velociraptor* with a purple feathery and scaly body and striking lavender eyes drinking from a stream.

There you are. I was waiting for you to lock onto my scent and come.

She looked up from the little brooklet she'd been drinking from and started talking to him with a series of grunts and bellows. It was the furthest thing from the English language, but Gred was so versed in the language of the raptors now that he could speak it as well as English and understood it like English too.

Who are you? he bellowed back.

It was not a normal clearing. The dirt was ringed in ancient flowers of varying hues and was dotted in the kinds of primordial puddles of ooze that all life had arisen from. Off to the side was a gap in the trees that led to a dank green wooded area. The gap was dark and he couldn't really tell what lurked beyond it.

I said who are you?

The female raptor turned tail and ran through the gap in the trees into the dark wooded area beyond. Hank went in after her and followed her down a long and winding dirt path to a swamp at the heart of the jungle. A dragonfly the size of his snout flitted past him and landed on a low-hanging cattail.

In here.

Her bellow seemed to come from nowhere, or maybe from anywhere. A place like this messed with a dinosaur's senses and played tricks on it the way it would play tricks on a human. Rather than using his eyes and ears to locate her, Gred used his much more reliable nose and it didn't take long for him to pick up her trail.

He turned to his left and burst through a patch of cattails to find her on the opposite bank of the swamp, staring down at her reflection in the muddy water.

I've always loved swamps. What do you think, Hank?

That caught Gred off-guard. He'd had so much fun being a dinosaur that he hadn't thought about his past life in a long time.

You know my old name, from when I was human.

Of course. I'm the reason you became a dinosaur in the first place.

He went over to the banks and laid with her there and the two of them bellowed back and forth.

Who the hell are you? I'm not going to ask again.

My name is Suzie. Some call me the hand of fate.

Hand of fate?

When someone has been reborn and they're having trouble adapting to their new lives, the powers that be send me to them to help them get acclimated. You seem to be doing just fine though.

She swiped at the water with one of her clawed forearms.

In other words, I don't really know what I'm doing here.

Ripples radiated outward from where she had swiped at the bog and rose and fell across the surface of the water. A large animal roared in the distance and Gred was reminded that some of the larger sauropods lived in the badlands. It was mating season and they were fiercely territorial this time of year. A couple of raptors might be able to take one down but it was best if they didn't stick around.

Do you like it? Being Gred?

Gred nodded.

Oh yes. Much better than being a human.

That's good. I'm glad you don't miss being Hank. Some people miss their past lives terribly, especially if they were fortunate enough to live human lives.

Her long forked tongue flicked out to test the moisture in the air and slipped back into her snout.

You weren't always human. Your existence is just one long constant string of souls bouncing around from one life to the next.

Really? So, what was I before I was Hank?

A toilet seat in the girl's bathroom in Sequoia High School in Redwoods City, California.

Gred was caught off-guard again.

Wow. That was oddly specific.

Most individuals tend to lead oddly specific lives.

He got to his feet, feeling certain she was yanking his tail.

You're crazy. Toilet seats don't have souls.

You'd be surprised. All things are made of matter and matter is the building block of life.

Another loud roar shook the air. It was getting late and it was about time to go out and hunt. His pack would be wondering

where he'd gone off to and if he didn't come back soon they were liable to go out and look for him.

You can be reincarnated as anything or anyone from any time. At least, almost anything or anyone. Some people and things, mostly very bad people and things, are fixed.

Fixed?

One and done. Can't lead multiple lives. You're a Trump supporter, right?

Don't tell me you're one of those bleeding hearts.

He's not that bad. It has to be someone really bad.

Like who? Adolph Hitler?

Kind of. Hitler's body is a fixed body, but his soul isn't fixed.

What does that mean?

Someone or something can't be reincarnated as him, but he can be reincarnated into something else.

She got up and toed the water with the wicked sickle-shaped claw on her left foot.

Luckily we pick and choose who gets reincarnated into what. I believe he was reincarnated as a pomeranian sometime in the fifties, then as one of the girders holding up some WWII monument somewhere. Dunno which one.

She giggled. A raptor's laugh tended to be high and shrill and it gave him a chill when he heard it.

That was my boss's idea. Thought it'd be funny. You know, the man that persecuted so many jews becoming an artifice to prop up a monument built to commemorate his own evil.

She looked and sounded like a raptor but that obviously wasn't what she was and at first he wanted to see her in her true form, but thought better of it after a while. A *Velociraptor* in of itself was a pretty terrible beast and the last thing he wanted was to come face-to-face with something even scarier. She got to her feet and as she was doing these long ropey coils of poo squirted out of her cloaca and hit the dirt. He was surprised he even knew what a cloaca was and couldn't help but stare at it voyeurishly while this was happening.

You know it's impolite to stare?

I can't help it. Shouldn't you be doing that behind a bush?

We are animals. We can go where we like.

But you realize I can see you.

She shrugged her leathery shoulders.

That fact is not lost on me.

In January of 2021, a scientist named Jakob Vinther unearthed a perfectly-preserved, one-of-a-kind dinosaur cloaca, or a dinosaur's butthole in other words. It was apparently quite a find and there were even scant traces of fossilized feces in it for scientists to scrape out and study. Apparently there was

a lot of speculation about how dinosaurs had sex and went to the bathroom and Gred wondered how much this Jakob guy would pay or what bits of his soul he would sell off to be here right now watching Suzie take a dump.

Who's your boss? God?

Gred could just barely make out the wriggling flotsam in the bog. Organisms like that were common in this jungle and it was a safe bet dinosaurs and humans evolved from such organisms.

I'm not at liberty to say.

He wanted to run but something was keeping him there. She had a power over him that he couldn't explain. Once they locked eyes he couldn't look away and he didn't think he wanted to either.

5.

Why are you really here?

It's coming.

What is?

The end.

A meteor shot down from the sky and struck the volcano off in the distance that had been the backdrop of this jungle ever since Gred was born.

*We chose for you to be reincarnated as a **Velociraptor**, but unfortunately the time and place into which you're reincarnated*

is something we can't always determine. If my calculations are correct, the extinction event that wiped out the dinosaurs begins today.

There was another roar, then another. A litany of painful screeches tore up the sky and it didn't take long to see why. There was a crash and a small dinosaur burst out of the brush. Its body was pockmarked in oozing red sores and it was leaving a red trail behind it. It crashed headfirst into a nearby palm tree and fell in a heap on the ground. After that it didn't move again and it was obvious that it was dead.

All the theories about how the dinosaurs died out are wrong, at least partly. A meteor was involved, but not the way most people think. See that volcano over there?

She pointed at the volcano, which was collapsing in on itself.

Unbeknownst to any of you, a microscopic flesh-eating bacteria, a remnant of precambrian life, has been lying dormant inside it. When that meteor struck it and destroyed it, this bacteria was freed from where it had been sealed away and is now floating freely through the air.

She beelined toward the dead dinosaur.

It moves quick. Obviously didn't take long to get here.

Gred felt a burning pain on his flank. He looked over his shoulder and saw oozing red sores popping out of his body. Suzie was unaffected.

First it latches onto your body, then gets into your brain through whichever orifice it prefers. It makes you go insane.

She started to back away.

I'm afraid you're going to die. Maybe that's why I was sent to you.

I'm going to die?

Gred suddenly panicked, looking around. Maybe there was somewhere he could run to, somewhere he would be safe at. He was a great runner but it wouldn't do any good. He'd already been infected from the looks of it and all the running in the world couldn't save him now.

Yes.

But I don't want to die.

Who cares? You'll just be reincarnated as something else.

But I like being a dinosaur.

He snarled at her.

I could just kill you. Would that set things right?

I wouldn't try it. It won't do any good and I promise you'll regret it.

She puffed up her feathers to make herself look twice her size.

Besides, you wouldn't stand a chance. I'm much bigger and stronger than you are.

It was true. The female raptors were the dominant ones and he had a feeling she was a good fighter. Tearing out her throat might set things right, but he was afraid to try it.

Maybe you'll be a human again. Who knows? Life isn't fair...still, I guess I can make it easier for you.

She drew a line in the sand with her toe-claw and shut her eyes. A flat rectangle of rainbow energy shot up into the air from the rut she had made and formed a doorway of sorts.

If you step through this, it will all be taken away. Your memories of being a dinosaur and a human. That way, you'll have a blank slate and you won't miss either of the two previous lives you've lived no matter what's waiting for you.

Already his mind was going. His ability to reason was fading away and was being replaced by a single overarching dullness that didn't feel like anything at all.

Be quick. You don't have much time.

No...I don't want to die...NO!

He didn't know why he did it. He'd always had a terrible temper as a human and that hadn't changed when he'd become a dinosaur. Before she could stop him, he lunged forward and tore a chunk of flesh out of her throat. He expected her to try and stop him or fight back but she didn't put up any resistance at

all, which was odd. He bit her right on the jugular and it was quick. She fell to the ground foaming and bleeding from the mouth and then finally fell still.

It didn't seem to do any good like she'd said and the doorway she created was still intact even after she was dead. Still, he felt much better with her out of the way and just before he died he humored her and stepped through it. True to her word, all his memories went away. He no longer remembered his human children or grandchildren or his time in the Navy or his dino mommy and dino daddy and deadbeat human dad. His mind was wiped clean of the thoughts and memories that had bogged him down all his lives and it was peaceful.

He did not go insane like that little dino did. He simply bled to death. Blood was pouring down his nose and neck and he laid down next to Suzie's dead body and closed his eyes and that was that.

When he opened his eyes something strange was happening. It was like he could see but everything around him was white. He had a fixed view of a bathroom from a peripheral angle like he was looking at it through the eyes of a fish. He heard a swirl of gently lapping water and gasped.

Oh hell. He was a toilet seat again. He heard a shrill raptor laugh in the air and he knew Suzie had to be behind this. He thought that he had killed her back in the swamp but judging

by the laugh he was hearing he hadn't succeeded and the worst part of all was that he remembered all of it.

He still had all of his memories from when he was human as well as the memories he had made as a dinosaur and the image of Suzie was still burned into his odd toilet equivalent of a mind. The rainbow doorway had either not taken away his memories like Suzie said it would or she had restored them out of spite to pay him back for trying to kill her. He never should have tried to kill her. Life wasn't fair but obviously there were fates worse than death.

At least the bathroom was pleasant. It was constructed of marble and granite and had a regal air about it. He was enjoying it right until the door opened.

"I still don't know why you had them replace all the toilet seats."

"What'd you expect? Trump's ass was on the other ones."

A slender elderly man of about eighty in a sleek blue suit with a red tie came in.

"Come down to dinner, Joe."

Joe? A toilet was a great place to mull things over and Gred the raptor, formerly Hank the human and now a nameless toilet seat, mulled that over for a bit. He looked closely at the man as best he could with his odd peripheral and fixed view

of the bathroom and when he saw the American flag lapel pin it hit him.

It was Joe Biden.

"Hurry up."

Biden pulled down his zipper and something told him there wasn't a cloaca behind it.

"In a minute, Jill. Just got to use the oval office."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I would like to go on record and say that I believe there is a life after death. Most religions tell us that either a promised land or a purgatory is waiting for us on the other side but many people also subscribe to the theory of reincarnation. The idea of someone or something dying, being reborn and getting to live a brand-new life has always been interesting to me and the concept for Past Life stemmed from an idea I came up with that someone could live a new life while also technically living a past life at the same time.*

This is where the dinosaurs came in. Have loved dinosaurs all my life and it was fun to toy around with the idea of a human becoming a dinosaur. I wouldn't say I'm religious but I do believe in a higher power and I do think it would be nice if people who didn't live a good life at first got a chance to live a better life as someone or something else rather than being thrust into the afterlife with no hope in hell of redeeming themselves.

My main inspirations for this story were the original Jurassic Park novel by Michael Crichton and Covid. Jurassic Park has been my all-time favorite novel for several years now and I've always dreamt of writing a great dinosaur story of my own. As far as Covid-19 is concerned, if the last year and a half has taught me anything, it is wise not to tempt fate by refusing to wear masks and follow CDC guidelines, particularly as vaccination levels rise and we get closer to herd immunity. As much as the thought of complying with something we don't agree with sickens us, at the end of the day it is up to us to prevent the spread of this deadly communicable disease, not just for the good of ourselves, but for the good of us all.

AUTHOR BIO: McCurry is a 30-year-old author from Olathe, Kansas with a passion for food, family and fun. His work has appeared in *Davega Bicycle*, *Aphelion Webzine*, the JCCC literary magazine *Mind's Eye*, the University of Kansas literary magazine *Coal City Review*, *Grand Little Things* and *Fleas on the Dog*. His story **Devilish** was published in **Issue 8**.

3 ^(three) P_{ri}Ma_{ry} coLoUrs

By Nicholas North

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor LEVI PLATT writes:*

Pleasure can be expressed in words, bliss cannot.”
-Roland Barthes

When I first read Nick North's 3 PRIMARY COLOURS, it was initially a bewildering experience, to say the least. And in truth, it's why the piece continues to grow on me as I read and reread it. From my perspective (as limited as that may be), North is taking to heart the likes of Saussure and Barthes in his pursuit of undermining the assumed stability of language that we take for granted. Meaning isn't inherent and North so simply and clearly begins with this gambit before diving headlong towards the edge of thought where language becomes truly meaningless and nearly unintelligible. Reading 3 PRIMARY COLOURS makes you uncomfortable. It confuses and at times outright can anger you with how doggedly obtuse the language becomes. But here lies the text's strength:

Our relationship to meaning and language isn't symbiotic and perfectly ordered, it is arbitrary and tenuous. Reading a text like North's reminds me why I love language and literature in the first place. Reading and writing ultimately is an act ex nihilo and we, in our pleasure of the acts, take the miracle for granted. It is only when an author like North is willing to pull us away from the comforts of narrative, meaning, and even signs and signifiers and forces us to peer into the void where those myths were born, that we remember. Or maybe, more thrilling to think, reading 3 PRIMARY COLOURS is the first time a reader has such an experience. If so, I envy you and offer a piece of advice (though this is just a retrofitting of a pre-existing idea if I'm honest). Accept the text as it is, as it crackles, as it caresses, as it grates, as it cuts. Let the text smother

and undo itself, let it become a thing sensual. In short, let 3 PRIMARY COLOURS be what it truly is: a text of Bliss.

5 Stars

Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes:

Nick North's work functions as the thought process between the sign and the signifier, the word and the meaning, what is spoken and what is heard. "3 Primary Colors," is no different. What begins as a simple expression, "the last word in this sentence is RED," evolves into the breakdown of color versus the word, where there are larger questions at play. As a reader, does reading the piece and seeing the color make the declaration true or false? If someone was reading this piece to you, would you even need to know whether the color was there or not? If you were blind, would the color or the word matter more – would you have ever previously seen red? The tangible discrepancy between language and the interpretation of the reader are what North works with, and, while this piece is more a collection of thoughts over substance of fiction, his style works to create a poetics of fiction.

At the heart of North's work there lies a noble goal.

The engagement with metafiction – fiction that inherently knows it is created for a purpose, fiction that knows it is fiction and will tell you it does so because you should know better, fiction that is, in itself, not entirely fiction – is a way in which he can not only fuck with but make his audience think. The suppositions are easy, if not misaligned on purpose. The breakdown of the parts are more akin to endlines in poetry rather than creating a story as fiction would have you follow. What I am here to tell you is that the importance of this piece lies as a reminder for the reader, i.e. you and I, to challenge our notions of the symbols we use to create meaning for others through communication.

You will read this story and, perhaps, be confused, you will read this story and perhaps wonder why his style chooses to break down language as opposed to explain it, you will read this story and wonder why it ends on a blank page of quotations and symbols that you're expected to fill in for yourself. I disagree with only one part of North's presumption of language, "The descriptive function of the sentences has broken down."

They don't. Meaning is embedded within the symbols we use no matter how obscure, or obscured, and presumed they are. There is nothing wrong with forcing your reader to fill in the blanks. Folly only lies in presuming that the reader wants to, has the knowledge of your educational background, and understands to begin with.

North will play with you. He knows his medium and loves to play with it, and, in turn, that game is a back and forth between the messenger and the audience – an ever-fluid audience that will change from reader, to reader, to reader...

If you want to dig deep, then read all of North. If you want to educate yourself on Saussure, read North. If you have a playful mind about how language works, read North. I'm here to assure you that the symbols with no meaning have meaning, that the quotations marks of blank spaces are there because, like Shakespeare taking a breath, there is something to be said in silence, in open space, in nothing.

North's persistence in presumption can wear on anyone, me as well, I won't deny that. But, what I will say, is that he crafts a piece that is fictional for an audience and philosophical in its ideals, he crafts a set of ideas for what fiction can be – he's better than Kerouac, the

substance of his toilet paper roll was crafted but shoddy, he's got the poetics of Ginsburg rolled into e.e., and mixes his work with the best of the Sophists.

North's work will not be for all, but it will be good for you, dear reader. Relish in it. When you understand the space that exists between the words, you'll hear the cacophony of all that is said.

Five stars.

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

“ ? , .”
 ! : , .
 “ ; , , ?”

3 PRIMARY COLOURS

(‘prison house of language’)

For Fredric Jameson

(‘man oh man’)

For Bill Luker

By Nick North

The last word in this sentence is **RED**.

The last word in this sentence is **BLUE**.

The last word in this sentence is **YELLOW**.

The last word in this sentence is **RED**.

The last word in this sentence is **BLUE**.

The last word in this sentence is **YELLOW**.

The last word in this sentence is **RED**.

The last word in this sentence is **BLUE**.

The last word in this sentence is **YELLOW**.

March 20/21 @ 9:20 am

POSSIBLE RELEVANCIES

The oral and visual properties of these sentences are different.

There is a difference between reading the sentences as shown and reading them to someone sitting across the room.

If they were read to someone across the room, the meaning of the sentences for that person would be different from the meaning of the sentences for the one who reads them because the actual appearance of the sentences is given to one and denied the other.

The descriptive function of the sentences has broken down.

The 2nd set negates the truth of the first.

The third set is only partially true if the first set is cited.

Sign and meaning are disrupted by the introduction of colour.

The sentences in the first and second set are historically conditioned. They could not be written digitally without coloured fonts. They could not be written manually without coloured markers.

‘3’ is a redundancy because there are only 3 primary colours.

With the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that. (The Buddha)

March 21/21 @ 5:04 pm and March 23/21 @ 5:49 pm and March 24/21 @ 11:37 pm

COLOUR IS HUE-N IN THE I...?

Holy red Holy blue Holy yellow Holy the word Holy *la parola* Holy the sentence Holy the subject Holy the verb and the object Holy Holy...Holy grammar Holy 'voice' Holy love Holy spunk Holy north Holy kerouac Holy ginsberg Holy howl Holy burroughs Holy Holy foster wallace and Holy carver Holy barthelme Holy deLillo Holy calvino most Holy and Holy big two-hearted river Holy the unborn poets Holy the poets who have passed Holy frances Holy that night in your Holy arms most unholy and Holy speak Holy dare you speak your unholy name I thought as well of him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower most Holy and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down so he could feel my all Holy perfume yes yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will yes and Holy blood piped through rock wet with jizz and Holy luker arizona Holy arizona luker luker Holy house of cleve man oh man and Holy krishna Holy rama hari hari Holy guatama holy tathagata Holy this and Holy that and if, on a winter's night, a traveler meets the buddha on the road Holy cormac kill him Holy kill him kill him kill him holy holy

April 14/21 @ 9:17 am

WHAT ARE WE? WHERE DO WE COME FROM? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

I is. You does. He are. They will'nt. Extrasy of dizzly donk. Whatafaroo. Hold ont ont ont Universe aboriginal WHAA! I dink il ya je suis cra hk loptxz VVV way waaay beyawn'd daDa I shrink therefore i is. Did you hear the one about...what is that light, dear aw shuckin's I dink pkjbolkiy adddfwqqzi aaaa aa a a a a a

WINGDINGS 1 (ORDERED)

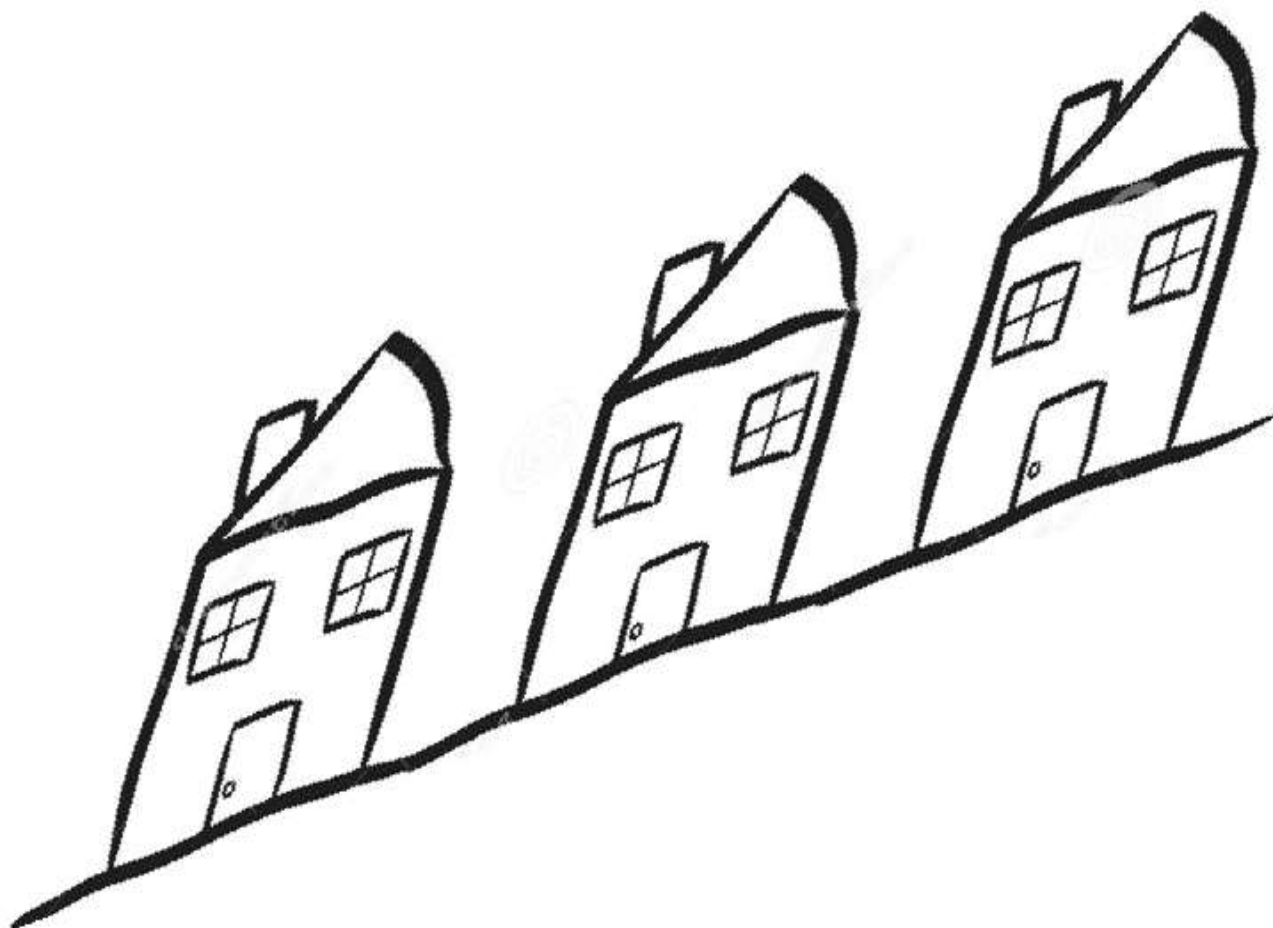
naming of signs, verbalized 'pointing' i.e. parenthesis, comma, period etc. Reduction signage invites intuitive meaning. We can insert words of our choosing into the blank spaces between punctuation. End or beginning of something? Language as self-generating? OK, that's it. How you doing? Listening to Cuan Durkin... define smooth—death of rattle...

AUTHOR BIO: All I can say about my life up to now is all I can say about my life up to now. I've had a couple stories published by *Fleas on the Dog* and a few other places.

GUEST EDITOR BIO: L.W. Platt currently resides in Pennsylvania and is a recent graduate of Utah Valley University, though Missouri is where he writes from and will always be home to him. He's taken to preoccupying himself with that space where language braces up against living and then completely fails. Sometimes he finishes what he writes. His essay "**A strange mixture, only to be found on the American continent**" appears in this issue (Nonfiction).

A Row of Houses

off the bypass



a novel (excerpt) by tracey sterns

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

I'm here to tell you why, "A Row of Houses – Chap. 1," by Tracey Stearns, is worth continuing the novel.

Tom Arrow and Esther Day are a mediocally married couple. He's an accountant, she's a psychologist; he loves to be with his wife, she wants to be with him; Tom loves to be told what to do by Esther, she loves to tell him what to do. These two are a couple in love.

Then, one morning, Esther falls over dead. No suspicious activity, no supernatural want from Tom and materialized deadness, there's not even any warning for Tom to get out his last, "I love you." She's in the middle of telling him that there is work to be done around the house and keels the hell over.

What ensues is a clever, playful set up for the rest of Stearns novel.

What does Tom do with Esther's body? Who does one call to deal with that sort of absurdity? What past events about Tom and Ester will be revealed? Is any part of the story going to go the way that you may think it will?

I won't reveal much, but I can already tell you no. No, the story does not go the way in which you would imagine it going.

I think what Stearns has done with their first chapter is to craft the beginning of an intriguing work. The writing is stylistic and witty, "He would combat the tyranny with whatever resources at his disposal: Jokes, japes, jibes, jests—genial, jocular generalities;" and the language used is layered and enjoyably smarmy, "If we cantaloupe, honeydew say you'll marry me, gushed Walter Melon."

Stearns, "Row of Houses – Chap. 1" is worth the read, it will make you smile, it will make you appreciate the craft, it will make you want to read more.

Enjoy.

Senior Editor CHARLES writes...*There's more than a pinch of Pynchon in this droll, teetering mallow-drama and narrator Tom would not be out of place at Meatball Mulligan's lease-breaking party (Entropy from Slow Leather, 1984) with his linguistic formalisms, retro-style syntax and mordant humour. That said, it's as much about language as action, and for me, Sterns subtleties are the emblematics of a richly furrowed literary imagination.*

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

"No one shops for food, they just get it. Get it?" He changed direction, altered his expression and looked wistful, composing as he rose. "I only really care for the sweet, fragrant scents of the produce section. I can't bear the arid dry goods, rows of cans, or slaughtered fare for that matter. It's the lush, fleshy fruits, fresh leaf, stem and root vegetables for me." Tom stood up and began pacing, lightly prancing, genuinely posturing now. Doing whatever he could to delay the day. "If we cantaloupe, honeydew say you'll marry me, gushed Walter Melon."

....a not-a-poet's prologue

A ROW OF HOUSES

A row of houses, windowed eyes,
 From floor to ceiling truth and lies.
 In bowels of basements souls disguised.
 Through gentle cracks a soft wind sighs.

The roof sheds off the rain in tears,
 Collects in gutters, wells in fears.
 Measured rooms and walls with ears,
 But who can count the missing years.

The echoes in the attic know,
 There will be storms the wind may blow.
 But as the families come and go,
 They each shall cast a same shadow.

If only they had not been born,
 Had undrawn curtains not been torn,
 The stairs would not have seemed so worn,
 With dreams forsaken, hearts forlorn.

Or maybe they might someday learn,
 The ripest apple draws the worm.
 Addressed 'To Whom It May Concern,'
 A name not called was next in turn.

And if they rose and rang the bell,
 Staved the hunger, broke the spell,
 How-do-you-do and fare-thee-well,
 What toll is taken, time will tell.

A ROW OF HOUSES off The Bypass

by T. H. Stearns

Tom Arrow and Esther Day fell desperately in love. Each enjoyed every moment they were together as a gift untold and otherworldly divine. Tom was an accountant who loved spending time, and Ester was a psychologist who loved to share it. They were professionals, childless and lived life to its fullest, relished one another's company, embracing their routine. It was Saturday morning and Ester spoke with an imitated frankness:

“*Hot dog, you musta 'rd, it's time to ketch-up with ought-to-do's.*” Her way, each and every weekend, of saying there is work to be done—things to put in order—and never tired of the condiment metaphors. Tom had grown mildly repulsed and slightly embarrassed for her. Curiously, even in the absence of any other outside observer. There was a shame in mutual solitude, however devoted. Still, combating such foolery was, for him, mere child's-play.

“—with a whistle and a giggle like a corny *dawg* sizzles.” He accompanied the nonsense lyric strumming the air in mock rock star mimicry. His stub-pencil a pick as he recomposed and poised himself to get busy making lists, aping enthusiasm and brushing imaginary flecks from the table as Ester spoke dictation outlining appointed duties. Tom was in his mid-thirties, his wife somewhere younger, but his age did not interfere with adolescent outbursts when he thought Ester was being too autocratic. It was the only defence he had so far devised in disrupting and undermining the *Jester's* dramatic, didactic, ‘to-do’ dynamic. Yes, he called her Ester the Jester or just *the Jester*. Ester perceived it nicely complimented her sublime wit and general sense of fun. In sharp contrast to her prepossessing, no-nonsense, take-charge persona—but it was intended to be derisive and, delightfully, even sinister.

“There is food shopping,” Ester said, and Tom winced and drummed his lap attempting to distract her.

“No one *shops* for food, they just get it. *Get it?*” He changed direction, altered his expression and looked wistful, composing as he rose. “I only really care for the sweet, fragrant scents of the produce section. I can’t bear the arid dry goods, rows of cans, or slaughtered fare for that matter. It’s the lush, fleshy fruits, fresh leaf, stem and root vegetables for me.” Tom stood up and began pacing, lightly prancing, genuinely posturing now. Doing whatever he could to delay the day. “*If we cantaloupe, honeydew say you’ll marry me, gushed Walter Melon.*”

Ester tittered, chortled. Tom wiped some spittle from her mouth and stuffed the tissue up his sleeve. She snorted, choked and grew paler, gripped the table hands clamped, knuckles blanched, stiffened, swooned and capsized, falling over—stone dead.

This also presented a problem for Tom, and not just because it wasn’t on the list yet. He had never seen anyone fall over dead. At first he thought she was just expressing a pedantic insistence that he be more serious. But she’d never mimed her instructions before. Tom caught himself blinking and sinking into one of his un-realities, and when he came around he found himself wondering whose turn it was to speak. No turns were taken.

“Mel Blanc was the voice of many characters,” he said.

He set his chair down off its hind legs as if he had been told to do so; searched for and selected the pause button in his brain and stared vacantly at the lifeless lump on the floor. Half sprawled, half slumped who he had affectionately called *Pant-Load*. Partly because Ester had become concerned about gaining a little weight, partly because Tom thought that psychology was mostly *bullshit*. But presently, because Ester was staining herself and emitting a foul, sewer-gas odour she would never have otherwise tolerated in her home—and of all places, her kitchen, specifically, the sunroom-cum-breakfast nook.

In point of fact, Tom had never even seen Ester in a skirt. She refused to wear them. He had learned this the hard way their first Christmas together when he bought her a beautiful A-line, plaid pleated skirt, just past the knee with a subtle slit at the side. On the advice it was the latest fashion—one size too small as it turned out. And Ester said, ‘but I don’t wear skirts or dresses. When have you ever seen me in a skirt or a dress?’ Tom allowed that he hadn’t as his addled mind racked and rattled over his remiss in observing what seemed both obvious and obscure.

‘*Nooo*,’ he said, pensive and timid. ‘It’s not something I would wear either.’ He rested his chin on the palm of his hand and pressed the tips of his three fore-fingers into his lower lip—just as he was doing now. ‘But it will make for splendid curtains on the little window in the breakfast nook. The colours are just right. Come, I’ll show you.’ And they made love there that very first Christmas, in their new house, back when that was then.

Tom had saved the day that time, and the skirt served a more than perfect purpose as a window treatment and always something to laugh about. ‘There’s nothing like a little skirt that lets in a little light,’ Tom would say, as he parted the modest drape on the mornings they had time for coffee together. Ester would smile in supple compliance as her lips moistened the rim of her mug. But not this time, Ester lay dead on the floor. There was no doubt about it. That was for certain. *Death* was like a work of art, rendered by a great master, even if you didn’t have a cultivated taste for it, you knew it when you saw it.

Tom found himself wondering what Ester would do at a time like this. She didn’t *really* wear the pants in the family. Not in the strict figurative sense. However much she may have thought she did. Tom preferred to think that he delegated the minutia of their common existence—their shared life—to her. Like a power hungry clerk aspiring to middle management,

she had always been very direct, precise-minded and plainspoken. This tended to create an illusion of being in charge. Because she could be so curt, so coarse, so unreserved and outspoken, one mistakenly presumed she knew what she was talking about—a sub-intentional device to be sure. He did often wonder, however, how someone so utterly bereft of feeling could have become a psychologist. Not that Tom ever minded following, but he was quietly annoyed to think that Ester thought she was leading. He would combat the tyranny with whatever resources at his disposal: Jokes, japes, jibes, jests—genial, jocular generalities. But when at wit’s end, he was easily made battle-worn and no match for the sophisticated firepower she held in reserve, deep within her arsenal, for her most difficult patients. Then, he would resort to sulky, sullen sarcasm, sometimes even bitter derisive irony; employing wistful, withering euphemisms when he grew weary and downright absurdities when he was outraged and outright ignoring her all together. Of course, none of it worked. The fortress in which she guarded her ego remained intact and indestructible, bolstered by her lofty, elevated sense of self-assurance and fortified by an altitude at which she maintained her esteem. Celestial coordinates he calculated to be in deficit for her to be, at times, so harsh, so cruel and on other occasions despicably and utterly mean.

Still, she was his little bird with the devotion to regurgitate her bounty and the malevolence to peck a rival’s eyes out. There she lay. Feet caught in the rungs of her overturned chair. Clinging to the underside of her perch, eyes like great beads. Her sharpened delicate beak cleaved and lifeless, silent tongued, to cheep no more: ‘Who will take care of me?’ Tom will take care of it. “Rest sweetly my little popinjay. We have one final flight before you soar.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *i think i like to think about this novel as a Speculative Modern Romance*

AUTHOR BIO: i actually did live along a row of houses in which i rarely gained admittance.

Aurora Boring ALICE

By Robert Spiegel

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* “Aurora Boring Alice,” by Robert Spiegel, is a chef’s kiss of a story. The pacing, the concept, the humanity, humility, and honesty that exudes throughout is enough to make you sit back and go, “why the fuck can’t I write as well as this?”

Ricky is an alcoholic. That is the story. How he got there, what he’s doing now, the detesting of AA meetings, will he ever find love again, are all questions that circle around the concept of one man coming to terms with who he is – and whether or not he believes and accepts that simple acknowledgment.

I have read plenty about writers or characters that drink. Under the Volcano, anything by Charles Bukowski, listening to music by Tom Waits, sad realities from Sherman Alexie, Richard Brautigan getting drunk on rot-gut gallons of port and writing he poetic anecdotes, Hemingway before and after the shotgun, Denis Johnson, F. Scott, Vonnegut, the pan galactic gargle blaster in Hitchhiker’s Guide, and Spiegel’s work here is better than, or comparable to, anyone on this list (which includes some of my greatest heroes).

What I mean to say is that this story neither deifies nor denigrates the personal struggles that come with an addiction to alcohol. The main character is neither a piece of shit nor, by any definition, a monk. He is a man that has screwed up and has to work real fucking hard to change the needs of his life that make it worth living.

I write this, literally, while I have a drink next to me, and have my own fair share of ruined moments caused by me drinking and, if I have to be honest, I doubt the last argument I got into drunk will be the last argument that I get into drunk. At no point in time is this story a piece of self-aggrandizing delusion. I think it has been one of the more honest looks at drinking that I have read in my entire life - to the point that I go, “Fuck, Joey, look at yourself with a little more honesty and forgiveness and just try to be less of a dick.”

Spiegel’s “Aurora Boring Alice” is a gem of a story. Read it and laugh, read it and forgive, read it and enjoy, but, most of all, read this damn story.

Five Stars

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

I told her I didn't want a divorce, but when a woman screws up her courage to decide on divorce, there's no talking her out of it. When she gets to that place, she hates you for getting her there. She holds on to that hate for its wild strength. Not a word you can say, not one word. It's a lousy time to start talking about the kids and time-sharing.

We stood near the edge looking down on Albuquerque a mile below. The lights of the city were like stars, though not as close as the stars in the sky. If I could live under such a beautiful blast of starlight every night, I never would have become such a drinker.

Aurora Boring Alice

You can't see stars in the middle of a city like Albuquerque, especially standing out in front of the Foothills Group on Menaul with all its storefront lights in the parking lot. People are slow to go into the room, and I can't blame them. But some of us got papers that need to be signed.

Same old shit. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. . ."

Melinda's chairing tonight, which helps. She's half interesting, and she doesn't preach this god shit. I don't know if I can do this for six months. I don't know if I can keep living in a city where you can't see the goddamn night sky.

I remember being out on a boat around the San Juan Islands with six friends – relatives mostly – all guys. The stars were so close you could feel them on your skin. For eight days we traveled the islands, throwing anchor at night and hitting the martinis. Pissing off the side of the boat and watching the plankton light up. You could spell your name in pee. Off to the north each night we could see Aurora Borealis light up the sky in green, blue, and purple, and still the stars above burned the sky all night long.

The problem with these rooms is you have to say you're an alcoholic every time you say your name. It's part of the brainwashing. At first, I refused. I just said my name. But at the end of the meetings, guys would come up to me and say, "So, you don't think you're an alcoholic?"

"No, I'm just here because of a DUI. I have to get court papers signed."

Sometimes they'd snicker. Sometimes they'd say, "If you change your mind, we can talk."

I guess they were just trying to be helpful, but it was weird, so I played the good boy and started saying, "I'm Ricky and I'm an alcoholic," when it came my turn. Then they'd leave me alone after the meeting. Sometimes I'd even stand outside and smoke with them. They seemed fairly decent for a bunch of drunks, or former drunks. Yet I couldn't figure out how any of them could live in a place where you can't even see the Big Dipper on a clear night.

The first time I saw mountains was in Banff. I was hitchhiking across Canada, and a couple in a van said I was welcome to stay with them for a couple days if I wanted to hike the mountains. Compared to Michigan, the Canadian Rockies were another planet. The air tasted like early morning sun, and the pines seemed to know me. We sat outside the van after hiking, drinking Boone's Farm, smoking weed, and watching shooting stars all night. The shooting stars never stopped. I wanted to break apart and float off into the sky.

told her I didn't want a divorce, but when a woman screws up her courage to decide on divorce, there's no talking her out of it. When she gets to that place, she hates you for getting her there. She holds on to that hate for its wild strength. Not a word you can say, not one word. It's a lousy time to start talking about the kids and time-sharing. All she wants to talk about is money. She'll tell you how much she needs each month and what day she needs it. The sinking feeling inside takes years to go away. Or get used to. It never goes away. Like her, you turn to anger to manage it. Without anger, all you got is pain.

I stood out in the summer night air in the parking lot after a meeting. There was one star in the sky. Maybe a planet. I fixed on it. I knew I was losing the sky and I really didn't want to lose it.

Melinda lit a cigarette. "How are you doing? You doing OK?"

"Why, does it seem like I'm not?"

She smiled. "Well, I have to wonder. I can see you're struggling."

I took a slow breath. It wasn't Melinda's fault that I hated meetings. "I don't know. I don't seem to belong here."

"None of us belong here at first. We're here because we have to be – one way or another. Nobody says, 'Hey, I want to spend the rest of my life going to AA meetings.'"

I gave her a sideways smirk. She smiled and said, "You gotta lighten up."

* * *

When the cop pulled me over, I'd hardly been drinking. I wasn't even drunk. Everything would have been fine, but I was in a pissy mood. He asked if I knew why he pulled me over. I knew why. I was speeding – just a little – and zoomed through the last light, a couple seconds after the red. It's hard to judge lights when you're speeding. I shrugged my I-don't-give-a-shit attitude and he asked me to "step outside of the vehicle."

I really didn't think I'd blow above .08. The reading was 1.2. I didn't even feel high. How can that be?

"We're going downtown," he said. I explained that I was on the way to pick up my kids, but he ignored me. Now my car would get impounded, I'd have to spend a fortune on a DUI attorney, and I'd have to spend the night in the shit-smelling jail.

Fuck!

Scratchy was sharing. Scratchy's an old Navajo with a bad attitude about guys like me who come in on paper. "You guys who gotta get your papers signed," he says. "What a bunch of bullshit. You're just gonna drink again. What the fuck are you doing here?" That's what he says. I don't

want to be here anymore than he wants me here. Fucking asshole. He is funny though as he tells his stories about drinking at a bar that's nearly empty. "It's empty because it's seven in the morning!" Scratchy was one of those sleep-by-the-dumpster drunks. What am I doing here with these assholes? I just blow a couple points high when I'm on my way to get the kids. That kinda ends my chances of seeing my kids anytime soon. What a bunch of bullshit.

For some reason, I could listen when Melinda shared. She talked about how she was swamped with suicide thoughts two years into her sobriety. "If my addiction can't kill me with alcohol, it will try something else." Kinda gives you the shivers. Some of these people are considerably fucked up.

I know what you're thinking. At some point all of this is going to get to me, I'll turn humble, and I'll pick up my recovery. That may work in short stories, but it doesn't work in these rooms. I've seen all kinds of shit not work in these rooms during the months I've been forced to come here five days a week. One guy hanged himself after 14 years of sobriety. Just cause his wife left. I wouldn't give the wife the satisfaction. Another guy couldn't put more than two weeks together. He was even working with my sponsor. He had a live-in girlfriend who drank and kept telling him he wasn't an alcoholic. That's enough to blow anybody's chances. One day when he was drinking with his girlfriend, they needed take-out and they decided he was the least drunk. He went out for food and died in a single-car accident. Shit.

Yeah, you heard right. I ended up getting a sponsor. That was part of what the court wanted. Five meetings a week and one meeting each week with a sponsor. I pretended I was working the steps. He'd ask if I understand the first step. I'd say, yeah, I'm an alcoholic. I'm powerless. I could see the doubt in his eyes, but what could he say. I did that with the first three steps. What could he say when I said, "I got it." That changed, though, when we got to the fourth step and I was supposed to write down my character defects. I told him I'm working on it.

I was standing outside the Foothills smoking and I asked Melinda if she ever dated guys in the program.

She smiled and kicked my foot lightly. “Do you really want to date someone who has more time than you?”

“Does it matter who has more time?”

“It kinda does.” She lit a cigarette and let out a long slow smoky exhale.

“I just asked if you ever dated guys in the program.”

“Sometimes I do. But not always. It’s better if I date someone in the program. They understand the lengths you have to go to.”

“What would you say if I asked you out? Would you say yes?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask and we’ll see.”

Two nights later, Melinda and I drove up to the Crest so we could see some real stars. The stars were so close you could almost touch them. You could certainly taste them. We stood near the edge looking down on Albuquerque a mile below. The lights of the city were like stars, though not as close as the stars in the sky. If I could live under such a beautiful blast of starlight every night, I never would have become such a drinker. I put my arm around Melinda, resting my hand on her shoulder and she leaned into me slightly. She turned her head toward me and I leaned in and kissed her tenderly. She let me, but she didn’t quite kiss back. That’s was just fine. I had all the time in the world.

Sometimes the shares are fucking tiresome: “For all you new guys, and all of you on paper, you may not take this program seriously. Pay attention. This program can save your life. It saved mine and I didn’t even know my life needed saving. I was a selfish motherfucker. I didn’t care about my kids. I didn’t care about my old lady. I didn’t care about my job. And I lost all of it. I came in here because there was nowhere else to go. We’re all trying to save our lives in here. And if you’re not with us, if you’re not trying to pull your life out of the shitter, then maybe you shouldn’t be here. I ended up getting some of my life back. My kids respect me and want to be with me again. I can’t put my marriage back together, but I came to see it was my fuck-ups that

ended it. And that's the whole world. If you can't bring yourself to be part of this program, then don't get in the way. This is real business here. We're not fucking around."

Fuck him. There's always some asshole in these rooms that's got to be a hard ass.

I don't like not drinking. I don't really think I'm an alcoholic. I just drank too much. . . sometimes. Now I can't drink at all. Every day I have to call a number, and every day a recording tells me whether it's a blue or green or yellow or red day. I was green. If it's a green day, I have to come in for a drug test. That's a hassle, but it's not as bad as the guys who have to blow into a breathalyzer just to start their cars. Plus, I don't have to wear an ankle bracelet. One thing I don't know is whether the drug test can detect drinking from the night before. I don't want to chance it. If you come up with a dirty test, it's an immediate three days in jail. I could lose my job, not that I have much of a job.

I was working a job I hated. I didn't hate the job so much as I hated the boss. I was managing an auto shop. The owner had three shops. All day long he went from shop to shop riding the managers to ride the mechanics. I used to come in late all the time before the DUI forced me to quit drinking. I got the work done even if I was late, but he was a hard ass about everything. Just like my ex-wife. Fuck him. Fuck her.

I started to hang out with Melinda. I knew she wasn't going to get involved quickly with someone new to the program – or not really with the program at all. But she was the one bright spot in my life, and I just wanted to be with her. We'd go hiking, we'd go out for coffee after meetings, we'd sometimes rent a movie at her house – she had a house now that she had been

sober for five years. She told me she couldn't get involved, so I didn't make a move. We'd hug when I left. Then I'd just go home and jack off. I loved spending time with her. Just to be in her company did something for me. In my crapped-out life, she was something good. I wasn't going to ruin it by pushing too hard.

I did drink again. I waited nearly a year. I had been off paper for months. I told you this wasn't a recovery success story. Melinda knew it right away. Like the very next day. She called and said, "How are you?" since she wasn't seeing me in the rooms. Of course, I told her I was fine. I thought I was fine. I only had a couple shots and a beer back. I didn't want to get drunk. But she could tell.

"You went out, didn't you."

I'm not a bad guy. Even when I drink, I'm not a bad guy. I make sure I take a nap before I pick up my kids from school – on my Wednesdays – so I won't get a DUI with them in the car. When I did get a DUI, I didn't have the kids with me. On the weekends when I have my kids, I hardly drink at all. Just a little during the day, not enough that if I had to take anyone to the emergency room I wouldn't be able to drive. Mostly I'd wait until they're in bed and then drink. No harm in that.

AA fucked up my drinking. First off, it spoiled my time with Melinda. She knew I'd gone out, so even if I was sober when I spent time with her, just the fact that she knew I'd go home and drink killed the deal. "If I hang out with someone who's drinking, I'm going to drink," she told me. I'd say that's nuts. But she didn't think it was nuts. "I'm an alcoholic," she insisted. "If I spend time with an active drinker, I'm gonna drink. It's as simple as that."

Man, I was going miss her.

* * *

I went out that night and looked at the sky. I could see a small handful of stars. I found the Big Dipper, and I found Orion's belt. Nothing, nothing at all. No smattering of celestial light, no Aurora Boring Alice, just a few lost stars not bright enough to get anyone home. No angels in disguise, no nothing. I was haunted by the stupid knowledge that a short ride up to the Crest could provide a view of caveman stars. The real stars. But it would be useless without Melinda, and there's no Melinda if I drink. That's the stupidest shit of all. Now I know what they mean when they say AA ruins your drinking.

* * *

You can probably guess what eventually happened. I want back into the rooms. Not because I was on paper. But because once I started drinking again, I started making up for lost time. Within a few weeks it was bad as ever. So maybe this fucking story does end up with a happy ending. Or, maybe I'll go out and drink again. You can't tell with a goddamned alcoholic. But I do want to see the stars and I do want to see Melinda, so fuck, here I am saying, "God grant me the fucking serenity . . . "

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote this story to show a common reluctant approach to recovery. Each year courts across the country force alcoholics into recovery rooms. For most, this beats jail. These guys can still fulfill personal responsibilities, and they get a crack at a better life. But man, many of these folks come in angry. Ironically, I leaned toward Charles Bukowski for style. Bukowski knew these guys and was nearly one himself. He certainly understood the leaky boat Ricky lives in.*

AUHTOR BIO: Robert Spiegel is a writer living in Albuquerque. He works as a senior editor for Design News. His fiction, poetry, memoir, and drama has been published in such diverse publications as Gargoyle, Fleas on the Dog, Rolling Stone, and True Confessions.

reQuiem reQuiem reQuiem

by Charles Pinch Pinch Pinch Pinch Pinch

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor TRACEY STERNS writes...* Charles Pinch almost makes me wish, or wince, I read for pleasure. (What a foolish bribe and fatuous notion?) I just found myself reading and re-reading 'Requiem.' So I kept foraging—'Link by link, yard by yard...' (And found more, each instance, like mining the same vein and finding more gold, ever replenishing, I'm sure there are nuggets I've missed.) It is beautifully scribed. Lines so precise and concisely inspired, uniquely, unequivocally quizzical and quixotically, economically fashioned. Let's get started,

"The snow stopped at three. That's when the temperature plunged. Even the automatic door in the ShopRite store balked against opening:" Snow stopping, store-shopping—doors balking? Aside from its fragrant assonance, it's the story woven that's in-store. Here's a bit of foreboding: "looking down at the octopus tentacles of tires tracks in the snow"... "fracturing and numbing the land beneath frigid white skies." Now we know both the reader and the characters are about to be engaged and entangled. Yet, it's all a storm of subtext so far; still, you've been invited, before you're even introduced... So Mitch "juddered out of the lot" and drives off in the receding blizzard, "It was too cold for precipitation but the wind was up and about, pitching powdery squalls..." and he offers to pick Scott up... "fracturing and numbing the land beneath frigid white skies."

In fact, on my initial perusal of the plot, I purposely avoided reading the ending to see if I could suss it out: ... Did Mitch kill Scott accidentally, or otherwise; or, assault him and realize he couldn't let him live? ... Did Hammett have a hand in it? He had been jilted by Scott's mother. (Did his innate buffoonery give-way to some act of precarious, avenging violence? ... forfeiting his fondly, forsaken intimacy with the deceased's mother? But there wasn't enough precipitous fore-story to weave it to be so. And I couldn't think of a way of recommending either scenario that wouldn't weaken the narrative.

Speaking of narrative, here are some advancing, eye-popping lines that peel the plot and savour both Pinch's conceit and genius: "Branches rattled and knocked against the iron sky. The sun was there somewhere, a devious conspirator, a hazy white presence behind an X-Ray plate giving light but no warmth;" "'Fuck off!' the boy returned." "[He] had a pale blade-shaped

face with a mouth and lips that seemed too wide for it; not handsome but the kind of face that would grow up to be called ‘interesting’” On return to Mitch’s “basement apartment” whether or not he was aware of the precipitated deadly deed. As described, “He had a living room, a kitchenette, a match box bedroom and a toilet that bumped up against the side of his stained bathtub.” What more could one possibly want? But it’s these inessential descriptors that insist on Charles’ indispensable sense of satiating his readers without them realizing they are replete.

Who needs...okay one more...Let us describe Scott’s celebration-of-life: “The visitation was held in Peabody’s [fittingly diminutive pea-bodies?] Funeral Home in what was called the Serenity [incredible] Room, a chaste space with pastel papered walls and blonde wainscoting. [...chaste, space, pastel—walls, blond, wainscoting ... both segments are flinchingly mellifluous, basking in their lack of significance.] Modest arrangements of carnations and lilies stood on wooden pedestals. Sheila’s employer had sent a bouquet with a china angel in the center. It was a closed casket. To Mitch it looked shorter than he remembered Scott.”

Pinch’s story is so incidentally masterful. It appears so casually, so effortlessly written...And its denouement or absence thereof, to me, is poignantly reminiscent of Hemingway’s, ‘The End of Something’—only better...

Five stars

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... “Requiem” by Charles Pinch is as delicate and as hard as snowfall – he writes it delicately and it hits you like a car hitting a goddamn snow drift

Charles is one of the higher ups at Fleas on the Dog, one of the O.G. ’s, and, while that information doesn’t and shouldn’t matter, I say that to say that I am fully disclosing that, I too, am an editor for Fleas on the Dog for this issue – many of the fiction WILI’s will have been written by me (so if you gotta problem take it elsewhere because I don’t care). To the point, Charles is one of those rare finds in the fiction world, he is one of those rare finds in the world in general, and can write every bit as well or better than the fiction he helps select at the magazine.

He has a gift, a talent, and this story is one of those gifts to any reader.

“Requiem” is perfectly paced. Combining the intimate moments of an individual experiencing their day with the windswept and harsh environment, Pinch does something most writers cannot do: turn the mundane, the smallest of the small, into the emotional consequences that we are never able to predict, into the stories that should be read.

I will be slightly facetious and explain the plot simply. Mitch is a maître d’hôtel, on a week-long staycation. He has stopped at a convenience store to grab nominal supplies for what is and will be a terrible snow storm happening that evening. On his way back home, he sees a neighborhood boy he knows, offers him a ride, the boy tells him heartily to, “fuck off, faggot,” and Mitch drives home. The boy dies. Mitch goes to the wake.

At its most base, this is the storyline of “Requiem.” There are no spoilers here because the plot of the story does not necessarily matter – it is the vehicle through which Pinch is able to craft his style. In the wrong hands, this story would be like watching old people fuck: deadly slow, uneventful, and waiting to either die or climax – because it wouldn’t matter which

happened first. In Charles' hands we have a portrait of questionable guilt and morality that deserves to be shaking hands with Stephen Dedalus or running through the cold with Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky-ian esteem.

This is Crime and Punishment in 10 pages (single-spaced).

This is the essence of the long sentence evolved into a great story.

This is how you turn the setting into an emotion.

This is how you write subtlety.

This is a masterclass on subtext.

This is what you want to read to know that the word, the line, the way still exists.

This is how you write.

Like the best of English majors, I'll give you examples:

The widow arrived with a commercial bar cake, with raisins and spices and a white frosting. She had put it on a plate.

'I made it myself.'

'That's very kind of you,' Mrs. Parks said. 'I'll put it with the other food in the dining room.'

Look at the way in which the protagonist only observes the conversation for the reader, and the layers that follow. Mitch is there, a woman playing host is taking off coats. Mitch's landlady walks in with a cake that was clearly not baked by herself and can only manage to claim that she did. Not missing a beat, not having an ounce of judgement, the woman disregards the knowledge that we all know. There is too much grief in the room to care about small lies.

But what about larger ones?

"He took both her hands in his and clasped them. They were hot and sweaty, like his own."

A moment of pure imagery. In one sentence, Pinch has managed to describe the guilt that Mitch feels (his hands are hot and sweaty) and the grief that the mother who has lost a son feels as they share the same hands of responsibility. To be able to write with such control, nuance, and purpose is a skill that we should all be jealous of.

It's odd to say that I could have such a strong connection with another human that I have never met, because we do this all online, have only "known" for about a year and half, or that lives in an entirely different country than me (U.S./Canada), but Charles is a writer that not only writes for himself but will go above and beyond to make good writing known everywhere. If you've got it, he wants to read it. If you do it well, he sees it. If it's in another language, he'll translate that shit. If you think you've got passion, then I am here to tell you that he has a fuckload more than you or I or all of us – everyone at Fleas on the Dog does and that is why I love them.

I will end this here because you should be reading "Requiem" as opposed to me telling you to do so – which, again, you should.

It is with the greatest pleasure and respect that I tell you to read this fucking story. I don't want to call you names, but I promise I will if you don't.

Five Stars.

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

The man was round and pink. He had a red face and an angry complexion. But he was well dressed in a good dark navy blue suit. He shook his head.

‘You think you’ve got things figured out and then something like this happens.’

Mitch nodded.

‘What kind of god is going to allow a young boy like Scott to die before his time? Accident or no accident.’

‘Yes,’ Mitch agreed.

The man extended his hand—a pink star.

‘Bill Hammett.’

REQUIEM

For Frances, again and again

The snow stopped at three. That’s when the temperature plunged. Even the automatic door in the ShopRite store balked against opening. A store mechanic was summoned and wrestled and huffed and jiggled with the large sliding glass fixture. When it was operational again, he cautioned the man about to take his leave.

It's cold enough out there to freeze your *cojones*, he said.

I'll be careful,' the man said.

He was carrying three plastic bags. He left the store and walked steadily against the cold to his car, looking down at the octopus tentacles of tires tracks in the snow and the abandoned red shopping carts that looked stark in the white lot. He was just unlocking his old blue Toyota when—

'Mitch! Is that you?'

He turned in the direction of the voice.

Hey! Hello!

'Enjoying your holiday...?' The woman was laughing. She wore a duffle coat and a toque pulled down over her eyebrows.

'What holiday? This isn't exactly the Bahamas.'

'And they say the earth is getting warmer.'

'Not today.'

'Well, are you?'

The man looked down at the bags he was about to shove onto the passenger seat.

'I guess if shopping counts, I am. Believe it or not, I actually can't wait to get back.'

'Everybody misses you. It's been dead.'

She got half way into her car and shouted back at him. 'There's a severe weather warning in effect. They're advising people to stay indoors.'

‘Exactly where I’m going,’ Mitch hollered back. ‘Nice seeing you.’

She waved a red woolen mitten, closed the door and drove off with a honk.

Mitch was shivering now. He arranged the stiffened plastic bags against the seat, got in behind the wheel, turned on the ignition and let the car run three or four minutes. While he waited, he switched on the radio. All the stations were issuing weather bulletins. An arctic front had moved south, fracturing and numbing the land beneath frigid white skies. An elderly couple had been found frozen to death in a farmhouse on the outskirts of the city. Mitch cranked the heater up. Fumes of dry air blasted against his face. He coughed and scraped his throat, then put the car in drive and juddered out of the lot.

There was little traffic. Offices and schools had closed and factories had shut down to enable employees to get home before it got any colder. Mitch felt an unexpected stab of dread as the engine rattled. What if it suddenly stopped on him or the transmission gave out? Good God, he would be helpless in that case: he knew nothing about cars. And then he pictured himself freezing, frozen to death: an alabaster corpse, his face covered with frost and his arms as stiff as marble while they still gripped the steering wheel. He could even see the black veins beneath the pale skin at his temples. In the last frame a cop was knocking on the window.

‘Stop it!’ he shouted. ‘Christ!’

He turned onto the double lane thoroughfare. An eighth of a mile, as the crow flies, from where he lived. He saw only one car in the distance and another much farther away—that was all. It was too cold for precipitation but the wind was up and about, pitching powdery squalls of snow across the road. Snow swirled in front of his windshield. Mitch squinted to keep his focus.

It was a long, straight road that bisected one of the city’s largest parks. A soccer field ran along one side. In the summer months he would go for prowls along its green sun-drenched length and sometimes

stop and look at the white markings and goal lines that had been painted on the grass. Across from the bleachers stood a copse of trees, mostly deciduous and naked now. Branches rattled and knocked against the iron sky. The sun was there somewhere, a devious conspirator, a hazy white presence behind an X-Ray plate giving light but no warmth; Mitch thought it might as well have been heating Pluto.

He had driven four or five hundred yards when he saw a person walking along the road. It was a male figure—that was all he could make out—and not dressed for the weather. As he got closer, he saw he was a teenager. Mitch recognized him. It was Scott Branson. He lived on Mitch's street with his divorced mother and little sister.

He slowed the car down as he drew closer. The boy was wearing only a thin woolen parka with the hood pulled over his head. His jeans ballooned stiffly on his legs. He had on a pair of shoes—not boots—that were unsuited for the snow. A backpack hung bulkily from his shoulders. Mitch often saw him returning home from school along this road.

He braked slowly, drawing the car into a stuttering crawl. The engine thumped. Mitch honked the horn.

The young man jerked around sharply with a look of alarm.

He rolled the window down just enough to speak.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. Get in. I'll drive you home.'

'Fuck off!' the boy returned.

'Scott! It's Mitch Fox!'

The boy didn't answer; he kept walking. Then he quickened his pace in an effort to pull away.

Mitch continued to drive slowly beside him.

'What's the matter? Do you know how cold it is? You'll freeze before you get home in this weather!'

'Fuck off!' the boy repeated. 'Fucking faggot!'

Mitch jerked in his seat.

'What...?'

'You're a fucking faggot!'

'I am not! This is ridiculous. What are we arguing for? Scott...I will take you *home*.'

Sheila Branson's only son had a pale blade-shaped face with a mouth and lips that seemed too wide for it; not handsome but the kind of face that would grow up to be called 'interesting'. He ate all the wrong food and seldom if ever went to the dentist and ended up with perfect teeth. Occasionally he cut the grass in the summer and Mitch watched his lithe muscles slide up and down in the sunlight.

'I hate all you fucking faggots! Fuck off and die!'

'Scott, I'm going to ignore that remark. You have no reason to say any such thing and I've never given you any reason to think that. I'm simply worried about you getting home.'

'Go to hell!'

'Okay. Have it your way.'

Mitch rolled up the window. But there was the nagging feeling that he hadn't done enough. He continued to follow Scott along. After about three hundred feet the boy impulsively changed course and started heading across the park into the soccer field.

‘Have it your way,’ Mitch repeated. ‘You’re a stupid kid. You’ve just added another fifteen minutes to your walk.’

But that was Scott’s problem now, wasn’t it? It wasn’t his. He glanced at the car thermometer. The temperature had dropped another three degrees. Four by the time he reached home. Mitch dragged the bags out from the passenger side and plunged headlong into the wind that came roaring from around the corner of the building. When he unlocked the door of his basement apartment, he stamped his feet. The widow who owned the six units building lived above him. She was up there now, the TV on, the volume blasting. No garden to speak of but a lawn of sorts, by June always brown and patchy. He had a living room, a kitchenette, a match box bedroom and a toilet that bumped up against the side of his stained bathtub.

The heat inside was oppressive. The widow turned everything up with no thought to economy. TV. Hot water (Mitch had come close to scalding himself on more than one occasion), radiators. There were freezing nights when he simply had to open a window before going to bed or die of suffocation. He was forever clearing his throat. But today he was thankful for the heat. He switched on his television and maxed up the volume to blot out hers. He sank down on his couch and picked up a magazine. He flipped through it, then another, when he began to read an article that piqued his interest. Programming was frequently interrupted to report the plunging mercury. Near dinner time, he slipped a prepared macaroni supper into the microwave and boiled water for coffee. He ate and drank one full cup and fell asleep halfway through his third magazine. It was two o’clock in the morning when he dragged himself off the couch, switched off the TV, and staggered, half asleep, to his bedroom.

When he woke it was nine-thirty the next morning. He got out of bed and looked out his window. There were two police cars parked outside. He watched an officer come out of the house directly across the street from his apartment building. The house belonged to Mrs. Parks. She stood inside the door,

hugging her shoulders against the cold. She was nodding her head. Mitch saw the officer shrug, nod in return, then step down from the porch. He went over to Sheila Branson's. Another officer knocked on the door of the house next to Sheila's.

At the same time, Mitch heard heavy footsteps above him. There was a man in the widow's living room. He heard the low, masculine sound of his voice, inquiring, asking questions, and the warbling, treble voice of the widow when she answered him. The Branson's had been broken into last summer. The intruder had taken off with Scott's laptop and a shopping bag of computer games. Mitch was jolted by a knock on his door.

'Good morning, sir.'

'Yes...?'

The widow was standing on the stairs with one hand on the rail. She was dressed in a light cotton duster and over it an old sweater.

'Sorry to disturb you,' the officer began. He stood a big man, a force, several inches taller than Mitch. He had a big clean smell and a fresh haircut. 'A boy from this street was discovered this morning in Parkside Pond.'

Before Mitch could respond, the widow said, 'It was Scott!'

The officer turned his head slightly in her direction.

'Scott Branson? Scott from across the street?'

The widow nodded.

'We're checking with everyone in the neighborhood asking if they may have seen him yesterday. Did you see him, sir?'

'No.' He stood there shivering. He clasped his arms.

'Invite him in,' the widow told him. 'It's cold out in the hall.'

'Of course. I'm sorry. Please come in.'

'This will only take a minute of your time,' the officer assured him.

He looked even bigger in the small room with its low ceiling and cramped space. Mitch offered him a seat, the officer said, 'thank you' and remained standing.

'Scott was last seen leaving school yesterday afternoon. That was about four o'clock.'

Mitch nodded.

'According to his mother he usually takes the route along Watson Boulevard on his way home.'

'I was driving on Watson yesterday,' Mitch told him. 'Returning home from a shopping '. He looked past the officer and said to the widow, 'ShopRite.'

'What time was that?'

'About four o'clock. Maybe a few minutes after.'

'Did you see anyone?'

'No, no one...what exactly happened?'

'We believe he was taking a different route home because of the cold. He cut across the soccer field. When he crossed the pond behind the field he fell in.'

'Oh God! This is terrible!'

'Why wasn't the pond frozen over?' the widow asked. She was standing just inside Mitch's open door now.

The officer turned his head. 'Well, it was, mostly.'

Mitch heard himself say...'he drowned'.

'No. It was hypothermia. He froze to death.'

'Good God!' Mitch cried.

The widow clicked her tongue. 'I'll miss Scott. He was a good boy. He was such a good boy.'

The officer said, 'If I could get a few details, sir. For the record.'

'Yes, of course.'

'Your full name?'

'Joseph Mitchell Fox.'

'Age?'

'Thirty-seven.'

'Are you married? Single?'

'Single. I live alone.'

'Occupation?'

'Maitre d'hotel.'

'Where do you work?'

'At the Grand Hotel in the L'Auberge dining room.'

The big officer said, 'I've eaten there. The food's pretty good.'

'Yes,' Mitch agreed.

'How long have you been employed at the hotel?'

'Eight years. I started as a busboy.'

'Were you at work yesterday?'

'No. I'm on vacation. I have five weeks. I break them up. I take one week in February.'

'I see. How long have you lived on this street?'

'Six years now.'

'It'll be six years in June,' the widow told the officer.

'How well did you know the Bransons?'

'I didn't really. Sheila Branson keeps to herself. I think she's a shift worker or something.'

'What about Scott?'

'I knew him to say hello. I'm not sure he knew my name. He sometimes got into trouble, I think. You guys were at the house a couple of times.'

The widow nodded. 'Scott was such a good boy.'

Before he closed his notepad the officer looked around him. A small gilt framed print of a ruined castle. A porcelain figurine. A reproduction Chippendale low table with Mitch's coffee mug from the night before. He wrote something else down then closed his notebook.

The heat was stifling in the apartment. Mitch pulled his dressing gown tighter around him and rubbed his arms as he'd seen Mrs. Parks do.

The officer tucked his notebook away and tipped his hat. After he left Mitch and the widow stood looking at each other.

'Oh that poor, poor boy,' she said. 'What an awful thing to have happened! I'm going upstairs right now and bake a banana bread to take over to Sheila Branson.'

As soon as she closed the door behind her Mitch sat down on the couch and burst into tears.

Everyone on the street attended the funeral. But there were neighbors from father away, too, and classmates and their parents and three of Scott's teachers together with the school principal. People she hardly knew lined up to press Sheila Branson's hand and offer their condolences. The visitation was held in Peabody's Funeral Home in what was called the Serenity Room, a chaste space with pastel papered walls and blonde wainscoting. Modest arrangements of carnations and lilies stood on wooden pedestals. Sheila's employer had sent a bouquet with a china angel in the center. It was a closed casket. To Mitch it looked shorter than he remembered Scott.

The service was brief. The reverend knew no one in the room and hardly even knew Sheila Branson. When he took to the pulpit (after the gathering had sung two hymns) he said, 'Dear friends, dearest Sheila and daughter Tiffany. Our hearts go out to you this day. We cannot divine the purpose behind our Father's plan. But in Him we put our trusting faith. Parting with a loved one is a sorrow we carry with us

ever onward. Our comfort lies in knowing that despite our sorrow, he who has departed is rewarded with Life Eternal, a life richer and more peaceful than his mortal lease on God's earth. But always more difficult to understand is a life taken before its time. When the promise of youth and manhood lay before Scott like a golden land. This is the trial of the heart. This is when our faith is most fully tested. Let us pray.'

Mitch lowered his head. His shoulders were shaking. He closed his eyes. Tears came. He knuckled his fists against them.

After the service there was a short reception at the Branson's. Mrs. Parks was taking coats at the door and directing traffic. The widow arrived with a commercial bar cake, with raisins and spices and a white frosting. She had put it on a plate.

'I made it myself.'

'That's very kind of you,' Mrs. Parks said. 'I'll put it with the other food in the dining room.'

The house was bigger inside than it looked from the street. The living room stretched the length of the building and took up most of the downstairs. It was white. To Mitch it looked like the road on the day of the tragedy. There were pictures of Scott strategically placed on small tables and on a bookshelf with knick knacks.

Sheila Branson stood in the middle of the room. She was tall and thinly rectangular with the blank features of a long case clock. She wore a flowing black lace dress that looked vaguely Transylvanian. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

Mitch approached her.

‘I’m so terribly sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m so terribly sorry.’ He took both her hands in his and clasped them. They were hot and sweaty, like his own.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘It was good of you to come.’

He thought at this point he would pass out. He would faint right then and there in front of Scott’s picture. He felt disoriented and nauseous. He left Sheila with the widow who was explaining something about the cake.

Fifty, sixty persons crowded the room. Mitch moved away from them and stood and stared out the Branson’s front window. A man bumped his shoulder.

‘My mistake. Sorry.’

Mitch nodded.

The man was round and pink. He had a red face and an angry complexion. But he was well dressed in a good dark navy blue suit. He shook his head.

‘You think you’ve got things figured out and then something like this happens.’

Mitch nodded.

‘What kind of god is going to allow a young boy like Scott to die before his time? Accident or no accident.’

‘Yes,’ Mitch agreed.

The man extended his hand—a pink star.

‘Bill Hammett.’

Then they watched the minister. He was shaking hands with everyone, moving from group to group, and saying a few quiet words.

'Mitchell Fox. Are you a relative of Sheila?'

'Her former boss.'

'Oh.'

'We've kept in touch. I was hoping she and I would tie the knot one day.' His silence following the remark was pensive. He did not elaborate. They stood without speaking for a few minutes, watching the minister. Then the man asked, 'You?'

'Just a neighbor. I live across the street.'

'Oh.'

'Not really an intimate acquaintance.'

The round man chuckled. He appeared amused by the word intimate.

The minister came their way and extended his hand. Mitch took it without saying anything. The minister was smiling. He was a keeper of secrets and a keeper of secret knowledge. But the fat man wasn't having any part of it. Suddenly he was angry. He declined the minister's hand.

'A lot of good God knows!'

The minister nodded, smiled.

'He gets everything wrong. He doesn't do anything right!' His voice had changed. He sounded now like a carnival barker.

The minister put his hands together in a prayerful gesture and smiled some more. 'God bless,' he said to the angry fat man.

Mitch looked at Bill Hammett.

'Don't God bless me,' the fat man barked. 'A fine boy like Scott. Your goddamned God should be ashamed of himself!'

The minister nodded again but this time did not smile. He glanced briefly but noncommittally at Mitch. Then he turned away and waded back into the crowd. The next glimpse Mitch caught of him he was smiling.

'Goddamn church and its politics!' The fat man simmered. Then he turned to Mitch. He had settled down. 'What line of work are you in, Mr. Fox?'

'I'm a maitre d'.'

'You mean like in a hotel?'

'In a hotel. I work in the dining room at the Grand Hotel. I host.'

'I've eaten there,' the fat man said. He jingled the change in his pockets. 'I suppose you know something about coffee then?'

'Coffee?'

'I love coffee,' the man said. 'I drink ten or eleven cups a day.'

The room was stifling. It wasn't just because of the people. The radiators were boiling. They boiled and hissed like jurists.

'Oh,' Mitch said.

'Coffee's wonderful. Don't believe all the crap you read about it. Oh, look! There's Tiffany! Hi, Tiffy!'

The girl stopped in her tracks. She turned and looked at the man who wanted to marry her mother. She didn't recognize him and then she ran away.

'Cute girl,' the man said.

'Yes,' Mitch said.

'Coffee, they've just begun to find out, is something of a miracle drink. It's got things in it to cure all kinds of ailments.'

He was hoping Mitch would ask what ailments but he didn't.

'Me? I have ten or eleven cups a day.'

'Oh.'

'I have one first thing in the morning, of course. Then I have a cup with breakfast. I have two cups after that, a cup in the car on the way to work...You serve pretty good coffee at your hotel. Where do you get it?'

'You mean where does it comes from?'

'Yeah.'

'I don't know. Colombia, I guess.'

'Colombian's good coffee,' the fat man said. Then he saw Tiffany again. 'C'mere, Tiff,' he called. He took a step forward and the girl shook her head and moved away in the opposite direction. 'Don't be scared now.'

Mitch was staring at the rads and listening to them hiss. He looked up from the rads and stared out the window. He put his hands in his pockets. He stood in his stocking feet because he'd taken his boots off when he handed Mrs. Parks his coat. One of his socks had a hole in it.

'Mocha's a good coffee,' the man said.

Behind him, a few people had joined together and started to sing. They formed a circle behind Mitch, in the center of the room. The widow joined in with her warbling sparrow voice. The fat man, big Bill Hammett, turned and looked and for a minute was silent and not so angry with God. Then he turned to Mitch and said something about coffee, mocha again or java. Mitch was looking out the window. He was staring out the window, looking straight ahead. And there were so many voices.

We sing as we die. As we die, we sing. There is much singing when we die and when we die it is like a song.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Some of the details in this story come out of my personal experience—the shopping carts in the Zeller's lot, the pattern of tire tracks—like octopi tentacles in the snow and, curiously, a bar cake with raisins and spices and a delicious petroleum based frosting that I kept eating for like, 2 weeks in a row. The park Scott crosses to avoid Mitch is in fact, a soccer field in summer, and runs along a stretch of boulevard, just as described in the story. Things like this, details, start coming together in my head and I guess forming the bone structure of a story. I say 'I guess' because I don't plan or plot out my fiction. I'm an intuitive writer and by that I mean, I get a story in my head and I write it down. It's mostly an unconscious process—I tell my writer friends I don't write my stories, my id writes them. Ideas stew inside and I'll stop once in a while to think about them and then I'll do something else. The writing actually starts when the Muse hits—and that could be anytime—quite often in the dead of dark morning while the crows still sleep. I don't generally do drafts. When the story is ready it comes into my head so fast I barely have time to write it down. I don't 'think' at this point, I just write nonstop until it's done. If things slow down during the writing, become difficult or don't seem to be working I know the story isn't ready yet so I stop and shove it back into my unconscious. Some stories come back, some stories don't. I don't worry about it and I don't agonize over it. This is how Requiem was written. I tucked it away for a few months, pulled it out, read it again and made two or three word changes. The boy's name was originally Rick but I changed it to Scott which just seemed a better handle for that character. Apart from that, what you're reading is the only and final version. What I like about the story is what's left untold. What were the circumstances surrounding Scott's death? We don't know—again, not something I planned, it just came out that way. I also believe it's a stronger tale because the action lacks a denouement and there is no real 'climax' point in the story—(none of that narrative arc crap they keep*

pounding into your head in creative writing classes) things just happen and one thing leads to another. The open ended final sentence functions less as a satisfying conclusion than a road untraveled and that was something I did intend. I want to thank my 'bestest' friend and valuable critic Trace for his/her penetrating take on Requiem and to FOTD new Fiction Editor Joey Cruse (Tom Ball calls him 'our man in New Orleans') for his astonishing critique and kind words. The only unhappy writers are the writers who don't write. The happiest are the unhappy ones.

AUTHOR BIO: Charles Pinch has a double major in art history and philosophy from McMaster University in Hamilton and the University of Toronto. He cofounded FOTD with his friend, writer Tom Ball, in November 2011. He lives quietly, making Molotov cocktails in the basement while everyone else is asleep.

LIAR !!!

By Curtis Harrell

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* Curtis Harrell's "Liar" is as if Denis Johnson and Stephen King had gotten together to smoke a cigarette with Cormac McCarthy and George Saunders. This work is gritty, calculated, and cold, yet, for me, only truly terrifying when you realize the inherent mysticism and hatred peppered throughout.

Neddy Powerline is a borderline recluse laying claim to a patch of land somewhere in the woods of Northern Arkansas. He is quiet, resourceful, content with the quietness of small living, and he is also a hunter. He hunts the bikers that travel North as the weather turns to shit in the South and, in turn, head back down South when the weather gets to uncomfortable in the North. A back and forth of never-ending geriatrics who have wrapped themselves so much up in playing biker that our protagonist has taken it upon himself to rid the world one by one of these actors – these liars.

The power of Harrell's prose is what drive this piece home. His language is as down to earth as the ground that his characters walk on. Hard hitting yet descriptive, sensitive yet murderous, craft is one of the biggest stars of this piece:

Once truth became subjective, all Neddy could do was abandon the peopled places to the biggest and best liars and carve out a homestead where neighbors gave him a wide berth because of rumors of missing meter readers or pollsters or hunters with a lousy sense of direction. Having a skull wash out of a stream at the edge of his property never hurt anyone.

Without any internal consternation, without any moral objections, without any remorse, the prose captures and then releases you like a fish in the river.

Curtis Harrell's, "Liar" is most certainly one of those stories that you should read. There are a lot of stories out there that never deserve to be read, and I can guarantee you this is not one of those stories.

Five Stars.

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

He harbored black feelings against consumers glutting up the economy, and he found it his duty to thin the herd.

. She was a puff of nothing, completely hollowed out by disease or dessicated quietly by the wind, liar jerky.

Then the first flash of chrome swung into view, and Neddy could feel the ground tremble with plentitude and bloody commerce.

She keened like a virgin in labor.

Once truth became subjective, all Neddy could do was abandon the peopled places to the biggest and best liars and carve out a homestead where neighbors gave him a wide berth because of rumors of missing meter readers or pollsters or hunters with a lousy sense of direction. Having a skull wash out of a stream at the edge of his property never hurt anyone. Most of the liars had just bought three-wheeled motorcycles and lemminged along.

Liar

A grizzly drowsing in the spray of the trout-leap was Neddy Powerline, the migration's vibration crawling on the wind and under his skin. Jumpstarted by the Huge Twitdom, that dark era of American history where truth was daily mauled, the Great Migration drove hundreds of thousands of elderly hedonists rumbling northward each spring, encased in designer leather and straddling Harley tricycles like bobble-headed fetishing wannabees. They followed backroads through the great river valleys—the Mississippi and Arkansas—flooding north and westward toward the summer tent roosts that were cheaper than one bedroom flats on the beer-soaked outskirts of New Orleans and Memphis, the dreadfulness that became Shreveport. The Migrationers made do in flapping canvas, their bony asses luxuriously reclining on inch thick foam rubber mattresses unrolled on concrete slabs with a cooler full of lite beer icing in the

corner, the false bottoms loaded with cash. They nightly hooted along with classic rock and excited themselves with wild mockings of the truth, litanies of shit that never happened, tales too tall to walk through a door without bending over drastically and farting. And then these ancient bikers fled back south at the first hint of winter's tooth in their decrepit bones. So Neddy preyed on them. Neddy dozed in his hammock within earshot of the road as March thickened toward April.

Neddy thought of himself as a conservationist. He harbored black feelings against consumers glutting up the economy, and he found it his duty to thin the herd. He liked to use stealth and ten gauge wire cable. A mostly peaceful life in the far-out-of-town satisfied Neddy after the Huge Twitdom made suburbia a nightmare of property line disputes and discrimination lawsuits. Eventually no one could stomach the relentless carping and litigial expense over whose fence was on whose side of the line or whether brassieres blown into the side yard were on purpose or just accidentally hurtful. City-dwelling drove apartment owners to agoraphobic safe rooms for fear of squatters and their loud Puerto Rican attorneys, but they were still victims of the porch pirates and metalheads with earsplitting stereos. Once truth became subjective, all Neddy could do was abandon the peopled places to the biggest and best liars and carve out a homestead where neighbors gave him a wide berth because of rumors of missing meter readers or pollsters or hunters with a lousy sense of direction. Having a skull wash out of a stream at the edge of his property never hurt anyone. Most of the liars had just bought three-wheeled motorcycles and lemminged along.

Irony had lately consumed Neddy in a way that woke him at 3:14 in the morning when every empty room listened to the demented ticking of the grandfather clock. His workflow was a perfect circle. He waited for the second week of the migration, when the three-wheeled hordes

were a near-constant rumble on the horizon, and then, on a stretch of asphalt within walking distance of his house, he set up a cable between trees on opposite sides of the road—big trees, hundred-year-old oaks that had stood through ice-storms and tornadoes. This spot was at the end of a mile-long straightaway that suddenly swerved into several serpentine switchbacks. Neddy had perfected a triggered cam sprung with leaf springs and baling pulleys to instantly stretch a cable across the road at exactly four and a half feet off the roadway, the average height of the Adam's apple of both the rider and passenger on a Harley trike. Depending on the speed of the unlucky *migrateurs*, the trap would either clothesline them both off the back of the machine or loose their heads better than Robespierre had ever dreamed, their helmeted heads scooting and bouncing down the asphalt like leaky footballs. All Neddy had to do was collect their rides and their corpses before another wave of the elderly liars roared past. Then he would spray the gore off the motorcycle gear and stock it in the little shop he had set up at the other end of the straightaway. The sign out front of the log cabin saloon proclaimed "Last Chance Supplies," and Neddy, with a punny relish, told all of the truthless coots that he *recycled* clothes and jewelry, parts, and engine liquids. All of these wrinkly truth-killers were both supply and demand.

World War I intrigued Neddy—particularly that brave son of Tennessee, Alvin York. Neddy had read that Sgt. York, as he waited in ambush for the German infantry to wind their way single-file to a good position, would pick off the last soldier in line, the way he had hunted turkeys back in the piney woods of home. The turkeys and the Mauser-toting soldiers wrapped in their winter coats, trench mud on their spiked helmets, never noticed their comrades fall behind them. Neddy would wait, hiding in the ditch-brush, until a great wave of bikers blew past, and then he would spring his wire on the last trike. Because the road immediately swung hard right, the last bike, now riderless, simply disappeared into an overgrown holler. In his first few

seasons, Neddy kept a secret hidey hole ready in case there returned a search party, but none ever had. He retrieved his winch and waited for dark.

Archeology was another of Neddy's wonderments. He would collect the belongings and memorabilia of his victims and note the quality of the goods, try to sleuth out their origins and worth. Turquoise was a tell-tale clue, filling whole display cases with rings and bracelets, bolos and belt buckles. These trinkets had come off snowbirds wintering in blustery tent cities on the crumbling concrete edges of Albuquerque and Tucumcari, whipped-up sand delicately coating the soft-serve above their cones. The leather was mute, all Chinese—produced, Neddy imagined, by short squinty cowboys who fed the cattle on formaldehyde and drywall—but t-shirts blabbed their hometowns. In the long off-seasons, Neddy alphabetized the shirts by the name of the motorcycle shop on the back logo. The names were mostly awful word plays like Horny Toad Harley, The Hog Farm, The Rowdy Beaver, and the artwork depicted lightning bolts and bosomy wenches having sex with skeletons. Neddy duly noted that his inventory of women's boots had more lefts than rights.

This attention to detail one afternoon darkened Neddy's thoughts. He realized, as he examined an engraved pendant, that he had seen it before. Last year he had placed this same piece, a pitted sterling silver oval with a winged wheel embossed on it, on this same display tree. He flipped the pendant over and read the inscription, "Until the bitter end, be the last one in the wind." Biker doggerel. But Neddy chewed on the mathematical improbability. He harvested this necklace last year, sold it, and just harvested it again. For successive years, the last rider in a line had worn this piece of jewelry. Neddy's head was suddenly under a wave of paranoia, his ears and nostrils submerged in thick dread. Somehow this fact *connected* Neddy to these rolling

falsifiers. These fibbers on wheels *shared* an event, however insignificant, with him. He grabbed his Sharpie and marked the price on the tag up 200%.

And so the Migrations came and went. Neddy, like all competent traders, plied his skills as routine and weather allowed. He neither overspent himself in greed nor permitted want to pinch his lifestyle. His store stayed stocked with harvested parts. He invented Liar Day, a holiday to celebrate the end of the fall exodus and relieve the monotony between Labor Day and Halloween. But one day always dawned innocently and by evening washed him in serious distress—the day he reaped the pendant. For two decades now Neddy had yearly removed the pendant from a withered neck, or what was left of it, and restocked it in the back corner of his showroom, facing the wall in a spinning plexiglass display case. The damned thing was now priced at \$500, but it sold immediately. Harpies obsessed with the flatness of the world pressed hundred dollar bills into his palm to have the pitted metal sway between their scrawny teats.

Neddy listened to the radio as he waited for a convoy of prevaricators to thunder past. The airwaves had also fallen victim to the death of truth. One of Neddy's choices was news shows trumpeting the virtues of the mouthbreathers in the government halls, passing raises for themselves while gutting rights for women. Every one of them raped a bit. The alternative was international pop with hideous synthesizers and Asian tongue yowling. On a clear day Neddy could twist in a pirate oldies station out of Brownsville, a megawatt station broadcasting ZZ Top

and Warren Zevon's grisly literate humor—can't you just imagine digging up the King, begging him to sing.

But a distant roar, just on the edge of Neddy's hearing, stopped him from fiddling with the transistor box. He quick-stepped, in a rehearsed and efficient parade-move, into his burrow in the ditch. He placed his right hand on the tape-wrapped handle of his liar de-rider. The grumble of motors slowly crescendoed until he could begin to hear individual bikes as they revved out of corners and burped and backfired into sharp turns. The awful Doppler of stereo speakers burbled Jagger complaining about not getting what he wanted. Then the first flash of chrome swung into view, and Neddy could feel the ground tremble with plentitude and bloody commerce. Neddy watched the horde glide toward him in its odd and stately fashion, practiced and precise as fezzzy Shriners in a doomsday parade.

The lead trike rushed past, its backwash dangerously flattening Neddy's camouflage, and then another and another, the frenzied rip of rubber on asphalt mixing with the plexus-pounding of straight-piped V-twins. Neddy flinched as a gravel bounced off his goggles. He internalized the flow of the riders moving past in his diaphragm. He breathed their rhythm and let his lungs and the pistoned assault on his heart guide his trigger hand. If there were no apehangers, no Captain America sissy bar, he waited until his elbow's reflex smoothly loosed his mechanism; he watched, in the intimacy of the moment, the wire rise up from the roadbed; he followed the apex of the wire's whip gently deflect the tip of the windshield backward; he saw the cable flick down and catch between the rider's beard and collar; he saw the rider rise from his seat, arms spread Christ-wise, and he saw the rider strip the passenger off the back as they both vacated their sweaty ass-scented seats.

The trike, freed from its fact-raping endorsees, sped faithfully forward, riderless, until it disappeared in the Queen Anne's lace and low dogwood branches on the holler's edge. The couple lay motionless on the asphalt, somehow side-by-side and supine as if they were waiting poolside for some dapper Cancun waiter to bring them a margarita. Neddy lassoed the rider's ankles in a quick motion with his drag-strap, pulled him out of sight into the ditch. Neddy returned for the passenger, her right boot AWOL, and slid her behind him like a 55 gallon Glad bag full of styrofoam peanuts. She was a puff of nothing, completely hollowed out by disease or dessicated quietly by the wind, liar jerky. Neddy flapped open the body bag for the rider, rolled him in, and zippered the job done. Neddy knelt beside the passenger's body, unfurled another body bag in the pollen of the ditch bottom, and sneezed.

"Bless you."

Neddy found himself quickly on the edge of the ditch, a half-dollar-size pee-damp on the flap of his underpants. He looked down and saw the woman squinting at him through rheumy slits.

"What did you say?"

"Bless you, and thank you," she enunciated despite a bleeding and tipless tongue.

Neddy gritted his teeth and swallowed the impulse to bring his heel down between her eyes.

"You're the boatman."

"No."

"Yes. You're the one who takes us to heaven."

"Wrong."

Neddy stepped back into the ditch and listened intently. The rush in the pines' arms was a strong west wind.

"Sometimes we call you the Taker," she said. "We know you will take us quickly when we are ready to go."

"Shut up."

"The really old ones call you the Angel of Death. They say 'I Am hath sent me unto you.'"

Neddy palmed her skull and thumbed open her left eyelid.

"Look! I am completely pain-free. I am ready to move on to the pearly gates."

"Your neck is broken. You're not out of pain; you're paralyzed."

Neddy leaned down within whiffing distance of her rotting teeth and saw the pendant.

"Why are you wearing this?"

"That is the mystic neck piece, the sign that summons you, my ticket to the afterlife."

Neddy seized it, yanked it free, and shook it in the old woman's beatifically raised face.

"This is nothing. This is some Mexican junk you elderly dipshits spend your pensions on every year."

"It brought me to you. You've released me from the soul-searing pain I've vomited daily like a starving dog for seven years. You are a holy man."

"And you are a liar. You are confusing grace with homicide. You are like an old cat I once had. It wanted nothing to do with me until it got stinking, vile sores all over its belly, and then it wanted to jump up in my lap and ooze pus on my crotch as it died."

"Bless you that you've found me at last."

And Neddy thought about that. As in his sweaty dreams, individual faces rose up out of memory, seamed and toothless, the odor of Ben-Gay and Pearl Light stifling his nostrils. He

considered them pathetic felons, their ignorance condemning them to capital punishment. He inventoried the thousands of liars he had laid hands on like they were unwanted pets, their faces in his hands cold as kittens in a bucket of water. Sometimes the wind in their hair as they lay dead on the asphalt brought him tears. He remembered holding them, but they were the ones who would not let go. Suddenly Neddy loathed the human body's aggravating tenacity. This fortunate witch was the first one he had ever spoken to, and a sudden desire to interrogate her loomed in him along with a need to cover her face with a shop rag.

"How did you get this?"

"You gave it to me," she said.

"I did not. Tell me exactly how you got this."

"My sister bought it at your store. Last spring. She's got the cancer too."

Panic and rage quarreled in Neddy's gut. He was obviously part of a plot where he was more appreciated than implicated, and the notion sickened his large bowel.

"Two weeks ago my sister wore this pendant," the old woman continued, "but she made it all the way to Spokane. She mailed it to me last week. I was hoping to have better luck."

"Luck," Neddy chortled, "you are a victim. You don't know how this whole monkey works."

The old woman welled up, her eyes shining with betrayal.

"Yes, I do. The poem tells it. You *know* the poem tells it. If you want to end it all, then be the last bike in the line. You'll be taken somewhere in this ten mile stretch of road if your dream comes true."

"Dream? That's some sick liar joke."

"You have taken away my pain. For that, I love you Neddy."

Neddy's rectum puckered as he remembered the long arm of the law, the sheriff's big dumb moon face at his front door, so he reared back and slung the pendant as hard as he could across the road.

"No," the old woman screeched, "no, no, no! You have to put that back in the store! You have to. You *have* to! There are others depending on you."

Neddy studied how she sobbed and wailed in the ditch-bottom, motionless save her ratcheting jaw and rolling eyeballs.

"Please put it back," she pleaded, blood dribbling her chin, "please. *Please.*"

"It's gone."

The elderly suicide queen burst forth with a new volley of shrieks. She keened like a virgin in labor. She made the dead-center of Neddy's brain hurt, and he thrashed about on the roadside.

"Shut up!"

"Please find it and put it back. Please!"

"It's nothing."

She said, "It's all we've got."

And, those words spoken, she quieted. She looked like a plastic baby Jesus kidnapped from a crèche then abandoned by stray dogs.

So Neddy knelt beside her and slid her onto his lap. Far away he heard the next wave of bikers swarming. He cradled her head against his chest. He listened to her breathing steady toward sleep as he held her, and then, as she started to gently snore, he hugged her hard into his chest until his arms trembled and she was completely silent in his embrace.

Neddy burned down his store on Liar Day. He watched the flames frolic and lick, and the smoke billowed so thick and black that the yokels from the volunteer fire department eventually showed up in their pickup with the half empty water tank sloshing in the back. Neddy watched from the woods as they surveyed the job then shrugged their shoulders and went back to the station to kill caged possums with a nail gun.

The brush hogs might have flung it anywhere; a raccoon could be miles away washing it at the mouth of some cave-stream; a local nerd with a metal detector may have given it to his one-armed sister. It could have washed out to sea.

Neddy was through with harvesting. The next time a growling knot of hoary motorbikers passed, they saw Neddy walking the road edge, his head down and studious as Walt Whitman hunting aluminum cans.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The idea for "Liar" came to me one morning as I hunted for a hatchet to kill the giant wood rat that lived under my porch and was having its way with the wiring of my Christmas lights. Not finding a hatchet, my murderous thoughts fell on the media and politics. Though politically motivated, I wanted the story to focus more on one character's spiraling slide down the rabbit hole of current events and explore the gray area of human interactions more than the black-and-white cacophony of "us vs. them" that pollutes almost everything. I wanted to tell the truth about lying to get that taste out of my mouth. My main influences are Charles Portis and Barry Hannah, both fellow U of A alumni, as well as the great Southern Gothic writers like Faulkner, O'Connor, and McCullers.*

AUTHOR BIO: Curtis Harrell writes and teaches in northwest Arkansas where he also busks with the banjo and sometimes leads tours through a cave in the summer. He received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arkansas and has recently had poetry and plays published in *The Cave Region Review*, *The Healing Muse*, *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, and *riprap journal*, where one of his poems was nominated for inclusion in the *Pushcart Anthology*.



[Jan 10, 2021 at 12:36 PM](#)

[Behind the Scene: Of Heaven and Hell \(the novel\)](#)

Many of you have seen the title image. Whether it is from my facebook, blog posts or instagram. It is a concept art from a novel I am working on. Exciting news, I am going to post this novel in its entirety on Patreon, to you, my supporters. You get to read the manuscripts and see the illustrations a full two weeks before I release it to the public.

What's more, you get to comment and receive feedback from me on each post. We will have a very interactive experience. We will be writing an epic story together as partners. When the novel goes to the publisher, your names will appear as "Special Thanks". So go ahead, I love all kinds of comments.

Here's a little taste of things to come.

Title: Of Heaven and Hell

Authors: Zheng(Zen) R. Wang and Tom Ball

Genre: Sci-fi Fantasy

Length: 100 Chapters

Logline: On a planet called Olde Earth, after the Age of Magic, descendants of once-powerful warriors must find the courage, strength and unity to fight for their world against an invasion from another civilization.

Prologue

Those who remember still talk of the Golden Age of Magic. When the Olde Earth was plush and green. The land was cared for by a council of wise druids. Nine golden medallions were made from a mysterious core and sent to the nine corners of the land. Powerful warrior kings protected the medallions and looked after the people. The strong protected the weak; The young cared for the old; The fortunate helped the common folk. Magic lived in the blood of the people. Magic was alive in the land. Centuries and centuries passed like dreams on a hot summer afternoon. Dreams aren't meant to last. When the magic wanes, the thunder clouds are close behind.

A full moon hangs on the autumn night sky. A smaller moon sits beside it like a younger jealous sister. Shadow of a night predator flies across the sky. It attacks a crustacean rat and carries it away. It is a

giant Falcon Owl. The hunter flies over rivers and forests, villages and castles. People live, laugh and love in this medieval world. The swift predator finally lands in her nest on the ledge of an old temple.

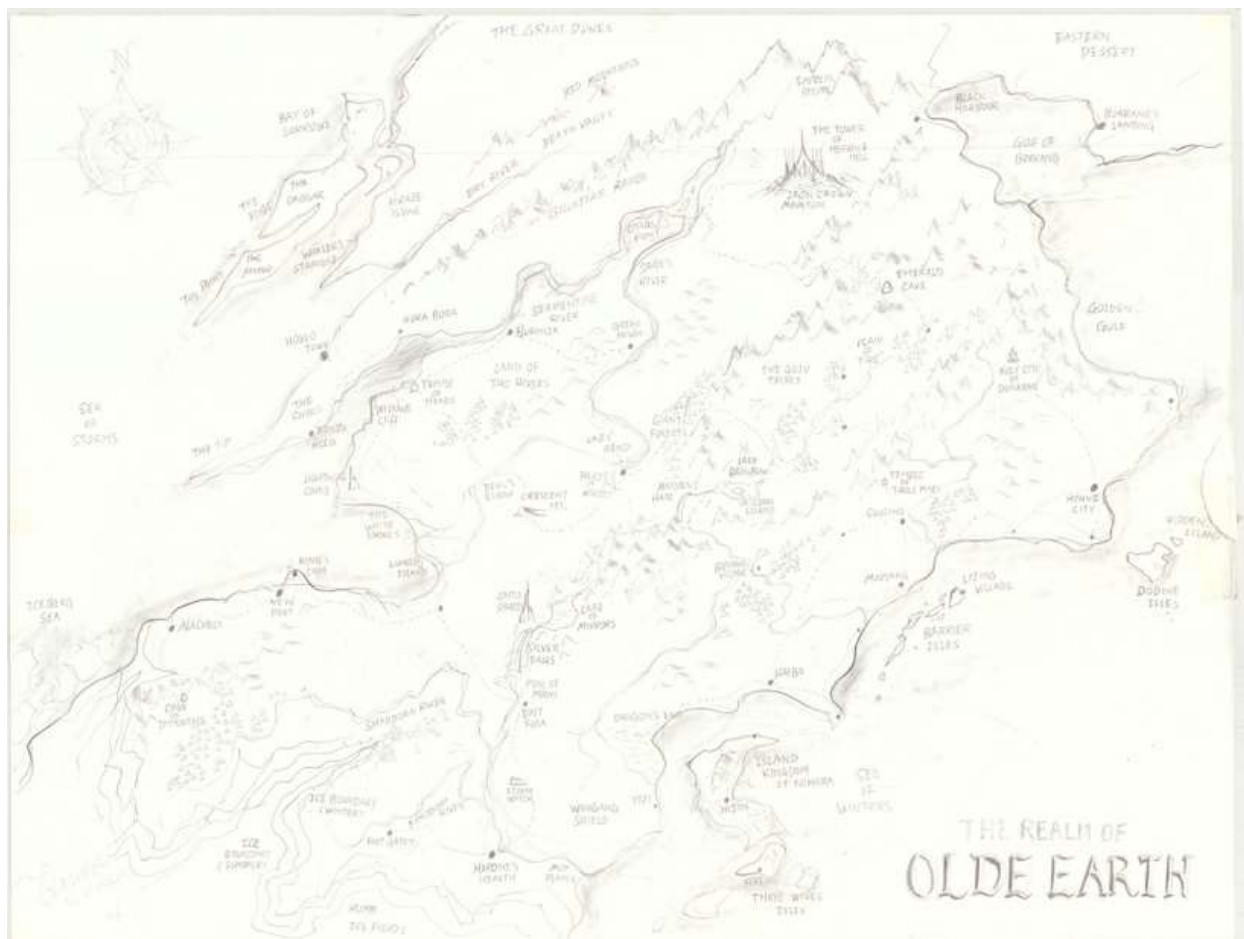
As the young chicks devour their supper, the inners of the temple is revealed. The great hall has nine walls built with black and white fossil rocks. The floor is a splendid mosaic using volcanic rocks of different colours. In the middle of the floor, a vivid depiction of an Unicorn-Pegasus. It is worn by centuries of footsteps but remains resolutely vibrant under the torches' lights.

Old druids dressed in white tunics gather and murmur in hush voices. Suddenly a heavy iron door opens and out comes a tall druid. He carries with him a plate of golden sand. Blood stains were visible on the sand.

"It is true! It is coming! The war council must be summoned."

Another druid pulls a golden ring attached to a rope. A deep bell is heard somewhere above the chamber. As the sound rings throughout the surrounding forest nine hooded riders spread from the tower. They ride like the night breeze on gravel roads that point to the nine corners of the realm of Olde Earth.

(End of Prologue)



This is the world of Olde Earth, a medieval-like world where magic is still alive and well; a world where fantastic creatures still roam the rivers, mountains and forests; a place where men and women can still carve out their destiny by the blades of their iron resolve.



[Jan 25, 2021 at 2:00 PM](#)

[Chapter 1: The Fire](#)

Seventy-five years after the druids' prophecies, at the foot of the once mighty storm tower, only a circle of gigantic rock pillars remain. Instead of lush forests, the pillars are now surrounded by a desolate wasteland. On this particular evening, unlike all other evenings, a single smoke column rises to the dusk sky from the center of the ruins.

Two shadows approach from the outskirt. Helmkin, (25 years old, strong and blonde) dismounts and gestures for his companion Knnuhd (30 years old, mixed race, two heads taller than Helmkin) to wait while he checks it out. Helmkin walks in to the circle of rock pillars and sees a person sitting by the bonfire. He has long dark hair that is bound to a high pony tail. He is about thirty-five years of age. The suit of armor he wears looks much older than him. It is still well looked after but one can't help noticing the fading trims and patched joints where gilded silk ropes used to be.

Beside the man stands a long curved sword. The scabbard and handle are impressive beyond words. Smooth dark lacquer covers it from tip to base. Golden trims of celestial clouds decorate the edges. Where the scabbard and sword meet is a golden castle rising above the clouds. The hand guard is the tiled roof of the mini golden castle. Its long handle shows off a pair of sea serpents coming out of the castle and spiralling upward toward the heavens.

Completely taken over by this magnificent weapon, Helmkin walks over and reaches for it.

"Touch it and suffer the consequence." The man at the fire speaks, without looking away from the fire.

"Oh, hello, so you did notice me." Helmkin pulls back his hand. "My friend and I are looking for a spot to sleep for the night. Is it? Are you?.."

"I am not afraid of a couple of passerby's." The man cuts Helmkin off. "But it would be my sister's decision whether to allow other men around our fire."

“Sister? Is she here?” Helmkin presses.

“Hunting.” the man answers.

“I see, could my friend and I warm ourselves while we wait for her return?” Helmkin asks.

“Suit yourselves.” He replies.

Knnuhd and Helmkin tie up their mounts and joins the man around the fire. In the dim light one can see the animals they rode in are not ordinary beasts. Helmkin has a T-Rex and Knnuhd has a wooly rhino. The man at the fire does not mind. In fact he barely acknowledges them.

To break up the awkward silence Helmkin asks for the man’s name. “Santoro” was all he let out.

Knnuhd takes out his beloved pipe, lights it in the fire and offers it to Santoro.

“The body is a temple that shall not be tarred with yard wastes.” Santoro says coldly and goes back to tending the fire.

Before Knnuhd can find something unpleasant to say in his limited common tongue vocabulary Helmkin silences him with a look. The trio sits in silences watching the bonfire.

Suddenly, an alluring, high-pitched musical comes out of the meadows. Helmkin rises up to search for its source. He climbs on top of one of the fallen pillars and looks beyond. The moon shines over the sea of tall grass. Something comes closer and closer through the grass. The music is sorrowful and mellow. It is unlike anything Helmkin has ever heard before.

As the moving grass parted, Helmkin can see two shiny green eyes piercing through the darkness.

“Sister” Santoro speaks without turning his head.

End of Chapter One



THE JOURNEY BEGINS JUNE 22nd 12:00^{pm} VANCITY THEATRE

(We made a teaser to the story called "The Calling". It premiered in Vancouver in 2021. This was the poster.)



[Feb 13, 2021 at 5:00 PM](#)

Chapter Two: Yingying of the East

Helmkin and Knnuhd's eyes are glued to the moving meadow. The green eyes belong to a full grown mountain wolf. Magnificent yet terrifying, its shoulders are as tall as a man. Its long and powerful jaw is glistening with saliva and teeth. The two emerald eyes keep a close watch on the new comers.

A delicate little girl sits on top of this furry beast. She wears a silk garment that gives off a slight sheen in the moonlight. She reminds Knnuhd of a fish. Helmkin on the other hand is more mesmerized by the music that comes from her long bamboo flute. She holds it side ways with her intricate fingers and blows it with her flower pedal mouth. Her long raven black hair hangs straight down on both sides of her smooth face. A straight bang compliment her long and slender eyebrows. Her eyes are half closed as if in a trance. The rest of her body is completely motionless except for her dancing fingers.

The wolf giant slows down and makes a low growling sound. The little girls stops playing and pets the wolf on its head.

"Who joins our fire? Please announce yourselves." A crisp, clear voice comes from the girl.

"I am Helmkin of the Valley Greene, this is my friend Knud. He's from the northern shores." Helmkin speaks with courtesy.

"K-NN-U-HD" Knnuhd grumbles to himself. No one hears him.

"I see, pray tell, what is your trade my esteemed sirs? Merchant? Warrior? Magician?" The girl asks with a royal flair.

"I was a farmer until a few days ago. Now I am a traveling man, You can call me a warrior, not that I have seen much war, or any war for that matter. B-B-But I do have a sword and I am ready to fight if it is called for. That is if the cause is just of course." Helmkin can feel beads of sweat forming on the side of his forehead. Knnuhd notices and chuckles.

"Here, you go and introduce yourself." Helmkin becomes defensive and nudges his friend forward.

"KNNUHD, WA-RI-ER." was all he said. It was a better introduction than Helmkin's.

“Excellent, please help me down, Warrior Knnuhd.” The girl commands politely.

Knnuhd goes toward her. The girl extends her left hand and Knnuhd catches it like a gorilla catching a butterfly. She then starts to feel up his entire arm. She feels up Knnuhd’s beard and face. Her lily pedal fingers tickles him and he pulls away shyly.

“A mighty warrior indeed!” the girl speaks softly, “Well, kneel warrior! Do I have to teach you everything about royal etiquette?” Before Knnuhd could react, there is a light tap from the bamboo flute.

Knnuhd is inflamed, his fury instructs him to snap that twig of hers and throw it at her little pretty face. Luckily he has the good sense of checking with his friend first. Helmkin stops him with a disapproving look.

The hairy giant Knnuhd now kneels beside a furry giant wolf and a tiny, shiny girl steps down between them, light as a dragon fly. Helmkin finds the entire scene hilarious but he only lets out a smirk. Knnuhd’s anger needs no fuel.

The girl lands on the ground and reaches her left hand out again. Obligated, Knnuhd takes it and leads her toward the fire. On the way she holds her stick with the right hand and probes the ground for unevenness and rocks. It is at this moment that both Helmkin and Knnuhd realize this little girl is actually blind. Helmkin for one, feels terrible about wanting to laugh a moment ago.

Santoro goes to unload the goods from the hunt. There are pheasants and hares tucked behind the wolf’s back. Santoro takes out his waist knife and goes away to clean the game.

Blind hunter. Helmkin thinks to himself. *Now I have seen everything.*

Near the fire, the girl begins to brush her hair. “You have the permission to address me as Princess Yingying, or Your Highness. Whichever suits the occasion.” She continues. “I lost my sight in a castle fire. I set the fire myself to test the gallantry of my countless suitors. Unfortunately none of them came even close to scaling the castle walls and saving me from the attic of the wind tower. My father had to save me himself, but by then the thick smoke from the cedar beams has gotten into my eyes. I weeped blood for three days, not because my loss of sight but because my loss of faith in true love. There is no real knight left in this world, no one worthy of my love and devotion.”

Helmkin does not know what to say. Knnuhd takes out his pipe as he does in any uncomfortable situation. Helmkin stops him and says in a low voice: “No! No more smoke!”. Grudgingly, Knnuhd bags his wares. Just at that moment his other passion in life arrives - Food!

Santoro skinned the two hares and cut them into six pieces each. The pheasants were too small to divide so he plucked and gutted them. He sprinkles the bony meats with some sea salt and rubs a dry herb powder on them. Next, he sticks them on young soaked branches and hands them to each guests for roasting.

In the time of half a song, the meat starts to sizzle. Charred fat and crispy skin fill the air with a wonderful smell that makes all creatures hungry. Luckily, the smells of Dragon, Rhyno and Mountain Wolf was enough to keep any unwanted visitors away.

Helmkin and Knnuhd adds their flat breads to the feast and Santoro finds some wild onions from his food pouch. Under the grand purple sky, the party of four starts to loose up. Though they are vastly different, they all welcome the companionship that food and fire bring together on this sparsely populated plain.

Shooting stars scars the perfect night sky. The big moon shines ever more brightly. The smaller orange moon beside it is waning and hanging on like a younger sister.



(I did this sketch during my lunch hour when I was working as an engineer in Kitchener.)

End of Chapter Two



[Chapter Three: Different Dreams](#)

Princess Yingying sits squarely with a napkin on her lap. She eats slowly and chews quietly with her mouth closed. She wipes the corner of her mouth every three bites.

"Oh, I am forgetting someone." Princess Yingying exclaims suddenly. She gets up, holding her rabbit skull in one hand and her bamboo stick in the other. She turns toward her Mountain Wolf and attempts to walk. Hearing Helmkin moving, she intercepts: "Don't get up, I can manage these short steps myself." Yingying disappears in the darkness. Endearing noises between her and the wolf is heard and soon followed by bone crunching and profuse amount of licking.

"She really can't see ANYTHING?" Helmkin asks Santoro in a hush voice.

"Who?" Santoro concentrates on his food without looking up.

"Your sister." Helmkin moves closer.

"What are you talking about?" Santoro looks at Helmkin squarely.

"She lost her sight in a fire. Right?" Helmkin is confused.

"Oh, is THAT what she's playing? I thought she was acting more strangely than usual." Santoro goes back to his meal nonchalantly. "My sister likes to jest with people. Don't pay too much mind to her."

"So you ARE NOT royalty?" Helmkin feels foolish.

"That much is true. We are of the Iching Clan, The legitimate ruling family of the NiJin Islands." Santoro loses his appetite and throws the rest of his dinner into the fire.

Knnuhd moves closer to Helmkin and speaks in a muffled voice. "NO BLIND?" Helmkin nods. "EYE SEE?" Knnuhd points at his own eyes just to make sure. Helmkin nods again.

The sounds of bamboo stick knocking gravel announces Yingying's return. Helmkin exchanges a look with Knnuhd and carefully move the water bucket further away.

"All right, what shall I have next? I think I'll just have a nibble of that delectable pheasant." Yingying sits down gently and places her napkin squarely on her lap.

Helmkin takes the stick with the pheasant and stick it deeper into the flame. "If I may, I will gladly serve your highness."

Moments later the fat dripping meat catches on fire and Helmkin hands it to Yingying quickly. The fat drips along the burning stick and is threatening to ruin her silk dress.

Yingying hops up and away like a frog, escaping from the falling, burning oil. She runs to the water bucket on the other side of the fire and extinguishes the skewer. Noticing no damage on her silk dress she angrily yells at Helmkin: "What on Olde Earth did you do that for?!"

"Not so blind now, are we? Princess." Helmkin says with a wide grin.

Caught, Yingying shouts over to her brother. "San!!! You never let me have any fun!" Santoro ignores her.

With Knnuhd laughs up a storm beside him Helmkin quietly eats his portion. Infuriated and embarrassed, Yingying takes her pheasant from the water bucket and tries to salvage it. She mumbles something to herself.

Knnuhd is thankful that his smoking ban is lifted. He takes full advantage and turns the camping site into a mini smoking parlour, offering a drag to everyone including Yingying. She refuses the offer and goes to change her cloth fearing any more *accidents*.

Helmkin cozies up to Santoro and strikes up a conversation. "So you come from the NiJin Islands?"

"Not exactly, we haven't seen our homeland since I was a boy." Santoro starts to open up. "Our father's throne was taken by trickery and black magic."

"Black Magic?" Helmkin heard that word before.

"Yes, My Father's second in command betrayed him with the help of the Dark Wizard." Santoro says with grinding teeth.

"WIZZARD KIN?" Knnuhd suddenly interrupts.

"Yes, the same one." Santoro continues. "His Black Hooves suddenly appeared on the island and caught my father off guard."

Out on the fringe of the campsite, Yingying's flute sounds again. Her silhouette sits high upon a rock with the rising moons behind her. Santoro watches over her lovingly.

"Our father used to play that tune." Santoro speaks with nostalgia.

"Did he leave you with a golden medallion by any chance?" Helmkin asks abruptly.

"What did you say!?" Santoro stands up suddenly. His hand on his East Blade.

Knnuhd is startled he falls backward from his seat and looks at the two men with confusion.

Helmkin retrieves his medallion from his chest and says: "My father left me this."

Santoro does not hide his surprise. He steps closer for a look.

"Knud has one too. Knud! Show him yours!" Says Helmkin/

Knnuhd digs it out and shows it. From Santoro's hesitation Helmkin gets the answer he was looking for.

"I was right! Suppose we did not meet here by chance. Suppose we were pulled together by forces unknown."

Santoro stares at Helmkin's medallion with locked brow. His hand is still on his weapon. Helmkin walks threatening to Santoro while holding up his medallion. In a demanding voice Helmkin demands: "SHOW US YOURS!!!"

Santoro reaches into his waist and produces a golden medallion just like Helmkin and Knnuhd's. The difference is his unicorn is in a resting posture.

Helmkin walks even closer and whispers: "Now, do you also have the dreams?"

Santoro is silent.

Helmkin gets into Santoro's face. "What is YOUR dream!!!" He grabs the chest plate of Santoro's armor.

Finally Santoro looks down and says: "I dreamed of sitting on my father's throne."

Hemline backs down and the tension finally reduces. The three men all take a deep breath.

"That is just great! Three Medallions, three different dreams. I feel like a big fool!" Helmkin walks back to his seat.

Knnuhd counts on his fat fingers. "FATER, QUEST, TRONE..."

"Knnuhd dreams of a ghost telling him to go on a quest. I dream of finding my father and you dream of your father's throne." Helmkin explains.

"A joke! A trickery! Someone is toying with us!" Helmkin throws his medallion away in anger and disgust. "A Grand Deception of Black Magic!"

Santoro handles his medallion in disbelief. He is lost in thoughts.

The thickening night fog grows and surrounds them like a blanket of mystery and illusions. Only now do they notice the flute has stopped playing, but it has stopped some time ago.



(Santoro's Eastblade detail.)

End of Chapter Three



[Mar 6, 2021 at 11:00 AM](#)

CHAPTER FOUR: The Storm Tower.

"Yingying! Yingying!" Santoro hasn't seen his sister for some while and he panics. Heart pounding he climbs onto a boulder and screams into the dark night air.

Yingying jumps out from the opposite side of the fire circle and says: "Look what I found! A gold coin in the long grass. Actually my wolf found it and was chewing on it." She looks innocently at her brother and then Helmkin. "Splendid, don't you think? May be it'll buy us a hot meal at the next village."

Relieved, Santoro gives Yingying a disapproving look. She smiles back and keeps playing with the medallion, unawares it belonged to Helmkin a moment ago.

"Do any of you know where we are?" Santoro speaks without a leeway.

"This is the East Fola plains isn't it?" Helmkin recalls from his map.

"No, I mean THIS. This pile of giant rocks." Says Santoro.

Silence.

Santoro continues. "This is the famous Storm Tower of the Olde Order."

Knnuhd sits up. Helmkin folds his legs.

"The Storm Tower is where the old warrior kings used to hold council." Santoro stands up and walks to the closest pillar. He touches its rough granite surface with his calloused palm. "Legend say it was as high as a mountain. Five thousand men toiled for fifty trips of the sun(*fifty years of their world)." Santoro looks up. "The old warrior kings wanted to show what unity can accomplish. The old dreams of the nine realms."

Helmkin starts to appreciate the size of these stone pillars. Each one is ten huts high and as thick as an ancient tree that's never been cut. They were placed in perfect circles. Four of the nine pillars were lying flat. He can see blade marks and arrow head chips. Archers and swordsmen do not destroy towers. "So what knocked it down?" Helmkin pursues the story.

"Of all the things the tower stood for the most important one was peace. And that is why it was destroyed. The Dark Wizard cannot have peace. Peace does not fill his treasury." Santoro's eyes start to burn. "His Black Magic unmade five thousand men's work in a blink of an eye."

Knnuhd coughs out some smoke from his nose in surprise.

"Old folks' tale! No magic is that strong!" Helmkin exclaims in disbelief.

Santoro walks closer to the fire. "The chronicles see you says the siege of the Storm Tower lasted thirty-five days. When the Dark Wizard finally showed his face he brought a terrifying weapon. Dark fire crystals as black as his heart."

"Then what happened?" Helmkin heard of the fire crystals before.

"Then nothing! Those that witnessed it, none lived to tell. The Chronicles ended there." Sensing his disappointed audience, Santoro puts another branch into the fire. "When the usurper dethroned my father the king he also used Dark Wizard's power. It was a horrifying sight. This I DID see with my own eyes."

Yingying can see her brother's blood is stirring so she tries to distract: "Thaaaat's enough about us. What about you Helmkin? Why are you here? Treasure hunting? Adventure seeking? Looking for a lost lover? All of the above? Really I am famished with curiosity."

"I am here because of my father." Helmkin continues. "He left my mother and I when I was five. Some say he went to a war, others say he was enslaved, still others say he died from the plague. No matter what, I hated him growing up." Helmkin takes a sip of water. "Then on my twentieth birthday, my uncle gave me two presents. This Greatsword and that golden coin in your hand." Helmkin looks at Yingying. She stops flipping the medallion.

"Uncle said they both belonged to my father but my mother didn't want me to have them. That very night, I started having strange dreams. Dreams that didn't make any sense." Helmkin looks at Santoro and then Knnuhd. "In my dreams a voice keeps telling me to go east and find my father."

"Chasing after a father who left fifteen years ago?" Yingying interrupts. "And I thought WE were fools." She avoids Santoro's eyes and says in a pretend deep voice. "A scroll that would return the throne to our family."

Santoro's patience runs out. "Are we being played?"

"If Black Magic can bring down this tower, it can certainly deceive ordinary men like us." Helmkin nods.

"Strange dreams every night? You can keep that." Yingying flips the Medallion back to Helmkin like it was a thousand degrees.

Helmkin catches it, wipes it lovingly on his cloak and puts it back inside his pouch. "May be I CAN get a couple of hot meals and a soft feather bed on the way back."

"QUEST!!!" Knnuhd erupts like a volcano. "QUEST! ICE MAN! MISSION!"

His excited state startles everyone. Helmkin pats his friend on the shoulder and says: "Go to bed my big friend."

"QUEST!" Knnuhd refuses to back down.

"Very well! Tell us about your quest then! What are we supposed to do? Where do we go? Who do we see? Why don't you go ask your iceman in your dreams tonight?" Helmkin speaks harshly with frustration.

Knnuhd tries to think but his head does not work after all that eating. He makes his way to his Rhyno grudgingly, muttering in his native tongue. Soon his famous snoring is the only thing that can be heard.

Helmkin turns in but cannot fall asleep. *Is all this really just a hoax? Who wanted to trick us? To what end?* Helmkin switches sides. *Maybe we just WANTED to believe. I with my father and Santoro with his throne.*

Helmkin closes his eyes and moments later he starts to dream.

It was a glorious summer afternoon. Helmkin is a little boy again sitting beside his father. They are fishing on a rock beside the river. Helmkin focuses on his wooden bobber while father is looking at him. His gaze is sorrowful. He caresses Helmkin's head and takes a deep breath.

"My son, one day I may have to go away." Father speaks.

"For how long?" young Helmkin asks, still looking at his bobber.

"For quite a long time." Father says.

"You mean like a whole day?" the Boy turns to his father.

"No, not like a whole day," Father touches Helmkin's head. "much longer than a whole day my sweet boy."

His focus no longer on fishing, young Helmkin looks down to the ground. A sadness washes over his tiny body.

"Can I come with you?" The boy looks up suddenly with hope.

"Where I go, it is dangerous. There will be monsters, evil men, storms and shipwrecks." The Father shakes his head and smiles.

"I am a big boy now. I'm not afraid." Young Helmkin answers.

"I know you are. I know you are." Father hugs his boy's tiny body. His eyes moist.

"So I can come right? I can help you fight the monsters." Young Helmkin lights up.

Father looks at his boy: "You will be by my side always. I promise." That brings a big smile to the boy's face.

At that moment there is a tug on the line. A big fish bites and father and son works as a team to bring it up. They get splashed but both are laughing like crazy.

The sun starts to set and the two moons come up behind them.

End of Chapter Four





[Mar 20, 2021 at 12:00 PM](#)
[Chapter Five: Departure](#)

In the morning, the sound of Yingying breaking twigs wakes up everyone except Knnuhd. Around the fire, Santoro, Helmkin and Yingying realize in earnest that the illusions must end here. Today they depart for their own homes, back to their old lives. No matter how painful it is, they all must face the cruelty of reality.

As everyone packs, Knnuhd finally wakes up and gets a bite to eat.

“Santoro,” Helmkin calls out as he rolls up his sheepskin. “It dawned on me, I never saw your mount. What did you come here by? You didn’t both ride that Mountain Wolf did you?”

“Yes, I have a mount as well but he’s a wild one.” Santoro says almost embarrassingly.

Helmkin looks at Yingying for answers. “It is a Fiory Dragon.” She says with a tone of jealousy.

“A Dragon like mine?” Helmkin can’t hide his excitement.

“No, A Fiory Dragon is half the size to your Myrollie Dragon.”

Yingying takes Helmkin to the other side of the stone pillars and whispers: “He has a mind of his own, totally untrainable if you ask me...” She searches for something in the distance.

Suddenly everything is uncomfortably quiet. "My Myrollie is quite agile too, just the other day he jumped..." Helmkin starts a conversation.

"Shhh... Be quiet!" Yingying spots something. Her soft fingers is on Helmkin's forearm and he remembers the feeling of being close to a woman again. It filled him with dread and longing.

"Over there in those bushes, shy old girl." Yingying's fingers starts to slide, arousing him even more.

Without warning, Yingying jumps on a fallen pillar and whistles loudly.

Santoro looks up in confusion. "Food Call? But the Packing's only half done!" Yingying ignores him.

The bush moves and a shadow jumps out. Before Helmkin has the time to adjust his eyes, it is already within striking distance. Dashing in and out of thickets of long grass the shadow never lingers for more than a second. When it finally settles down behind a boulder, Helmkin walks closer. "No! watch this." Yingying stops him. She takes out a strip of dried fish and shows it to her mountainwolf. The dark green shadow springs out from behind the rock and flanks the wolf. The two beasts fight and tumbles into a ball of fur and scale.

Helmkin watches in horror as the two animals growl, bark and tear at each other's throats. He jumps on to a rock but notices that no one else is alarmed by the savage brawl.

"Get him! Fenix!" Yingying is laughing and giggling beside him. She sees Helmkin's anxiousness and laughs even harder.

The clouds of dust finally settles when Yingying produces another piece of meal and throws it way up in the air. The Fiory Dragon leaps for it and gets his own breakfast. Helmkin cautiously walks closer. It is a fierce beast in every sense of the word. A long-legged lizard built for speed and agility, muscular limbs and tail, powerful hind legs, fearsome jaws and huge, mesmerizing reptilian eyes. Presently its legs are clicking the ground its eyes are focused on the newcomers while its nostrils is bobbing for more food.

Fenix the mountainwolf gets a pat from Yingying and whines like a puppy. With the other hand Yingying caresses the Fiory Dragon tenderly and it purrs like a kitten.

Helmkin has never seen this before. His legs are still stiff from the tension so he slips and falls backwards. Before Helmkin can blink the Fiory Dragon is upon him. Its large eyelids blink as the head turns side ways to smell Helmkin's neck and crouch. Then it makes a crisp sound from deep within its throat. Click- Click- Click.

The hair on the back of Helmkin's neck stands up. He turns around to find his own mount, the Myrollie Dragon. Its half opening jaw and pulsating neck veins are telling the Fiory Dragon to stand down. As if that wasn't enough, The Myrollie dragon lowers its head and makes a threatening hum.

The Fiory dragon steps off begrudgingly as if someone just stole her lunch. Its eyes never veer away from the much bigger dragon's gaze.

"Kirin likes your smell!" Yingying laughs. "That's why she clicks her tongue."

Closing his legs, Helmkin blushes. He leads his Myrollie back to the tree and passes Santoro. "Where did you find that? It is quite something." He asks Santoro.

"I did not." Santoro answers as he ties the last knots on his pack. "It found me. The dreams told me to go north and this Fiory Dragon was waiting by a river crossing. It tackled me to the ground and was about to eat me alive until it saw my medallion."

"No no no! You are telling the story all wrong." Yingying interrupts. "Kirin stopped biting your throat when I called her off!"

"Yeah your smelly hair distracted her." Laughing, Santoro kicks Yingying playfully. She evades him and makes a funny face. "You are welcome for saving your life."

"If it was up to me, I would have chosen a more regal mount, like a BearHorse or something." Santoro dresses his Fiory Dragon Kirin with chainmail like reins. It reminds Helmkin of the Bose Fullang Dungeons.



(Bose Fullen Castle - a famous dungeon where high profile prisoners are kept.)

Helmkin takes a step back and admires Santoro and his Fiory Dragon Kirin in the morning sun. He then turns to gaze at Yingying and her Mountain Wolf Fenix. Finally he glances over at his Myrollie Dragon and Knnuhd and his Rhyno. Something sparks inside of him.

"Why? Why are we here? Why are we given these magnificent Alderbeasts? Why the Medallions? My Greatsword? Your Eastblade? Storm Tower? Why?" Helmkin stands in the middle of the camp so everyone can hear him. Helmking continues. "Too many coincidences to be just a hoax. There must be more to this scheme."

“Well our swords were passed down to us from our fathers and Alderbeasts are naturally attracted to magic. No doubt there is magic in the medallions...” Santoro does not get to finish when Yingying interrupts. “I was thinking about Knnuhd's dreams last night. 'Go find the others'. Well, by Gods, WE ARE the others. He found us!”

“You are forgetting about his KUEST!” Santoro mimics Knnuhd. “What is it? We can't just roam around the Olde Earth and hope some big glorious quest will land on our laps.”

“Why not? What's stopping us?” Helmkin questions.

“The Dark Wizard's Iron Hooves.” Yingying answers with a lower tone. “Let us not forget we are breaking the law by carrying weapons and gathering.”

“I am tired of hearing about this Dark Wizard of yours. Where is he? Who is he? I am not afraid of him!” Helmkin stands firm, feeling the weight of the sword in his hips.

“That's because you had the good fortune of living on the outer fringes of Olde Earth. In the central realm, we suffered long and deep in his shadows.” Santoro walks closer to Helmkin. “His arms long, his magic strong. His WILL, reddens the eastern dawn.”

“What? pray tell, is his WILL?” Helmkin pursuits.

“To Rule Olde Earth with Absolute Power!”. Santoro answers solemnly. His armour rattles beneath his shaking body.

END OF CHAPTER FIVE

AMSTERDAM too . . . AMST

. . . barry jay kaplan . . . barry jay kaplan . . .

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor SALVATORE DIFALCO writes...* Lately, I find I am drawn to and appreciative of stories that I suspect would never make it out of an MFA workshop intact, or that would never appear in the more vaunted academic literary journals — name any one of them — or that would hurl the custodians of political correctness into gagging paroxysms. And not for lack of talent. Talent has nothing to do with it. Barry Jay Kaplan's "Amsterdam Too" is one of these stories. Three words describe it most succinctly: dark, troubled, and compelling. "Raymond thinks he knows where he's going but really he's as lost as he's ever been," it begins and deliciously doesn't let up from this conceit.

While the premise seems strange — a man called Raymond hires a private dick to find Vivian, a porn star with whom he's obsessed, but finds her brother Homer instead — the insistence of the narrative and hypnotic quality of the prose (made hypnotic by the insistence) give the story an irresistible pull despite the impossibility of anticipating its outcome. A relatively straightforward beginning leads to a more frantic and perhaps pathological conclusion — always satisfying.

Noirish, disturbed, at turns absurd and even ridiculous, "Amsterdam Too" works as a story because despite the seemingly gritty offhandedness of much of it, Kaplan — who has clearly studied the prose masters — can fashion sentences that sing. "Raymond leans back against the headboard, lets out a deep peaceful sigh, feeling that his body, as he exhales, has gained in weight even as he feels lighter. He sinks deeper into the mattress, closer to the core of the earth. He is closer to the core of the earth. Oh yeah."

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* Barry Jay Kaplan's, "Amsterdam Too," is a dream that floats on madness.

This story walks a line between the surreal and gritty realism, drug induced insanity and a carefully mastered crime, a forlorn love story and a violent act, and I am here to reassure you that Kaplan's story is well worth reading.

As the reader follows Raymond through the streets, deciding what is real and what is not becomes less important than the objective at hand.

What are these characters doing? Where are they going? Why am I asking you?

Look, I'll be straightforward with you. I do not know if Raymond is in another country to kill a hooker, is there to replace his wife (whom he may or may not have already murdered), or if he is even in Amsterdam (but it seems like he is given the travel narration).

What I do know is that Raymond walks a journey that we all face, every day, put, under a microscope...

What do you do when you're depressed? What do you do you're lost? What do you do when you've put yourself in the position that you've fucked everything up and knew you did it to yourself? Well, you do what Raymond has done.

Wander and take a lot of ecstasy – a fine solution by my judgement to be honest.

Kaplan creates a world of which we can only reference – i.e. I've never been to Amsterdam but it may as well be set there. What he does well is to treat you, dear reader, as a fellow follower. There is enough ambiguity and angst to make Raymond real, and there is enough depth and craft to make Kaplan fun to read:

"He wants to close his eyes and make it rewind because now he sees that a small child is clinging to the flaming woman! I'm not responsible! he shouts and turns away from the window.

Vivian says, without looking up: "I'm getting lonely, Raymond!"

If you have ever watched a German film or love the 1920s, then you will know a Vivian.

Here we are. "Amsterdam Too" is a lovely little bit of violence and psychosis. "When you walk in a dream, but you know you're not dreaming, signore," excuse me, but that could be "Amsterdam Too."

Nicely done, Barry.

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

Raymond leans back against the headboard, lets out a deep peaceful sigh, feeling that his body, as he exhales, has gained in weight even as he feels lighter. He sinks deeper into the mattress, closer to the core of the earth.

Raymond wonders, wonders how the name seemed to ooze into his head like a cracked raw egg dripping on his skull and who the hell is he and come to think of it where the hell am I, Raymond thinks. The man, Homer, the man Homer sits in the vinyl chair on the other side of the small room, his bare feet propped up on one of the beds.

Vivian says, without looking up: *I'm getting lonely, Raymond!*

And Homer responds: *We better pay attention. He might quiz us later.* And they both laugh. Homer points his trigger finger at Viv: *Whatcha reading, sweets?*

It's about some guy.

Yeah?

A post-dystopian minimalist likes to set off fire bombs in non residential sections of Antwerp.

What about him?

Nothing. He ideates in a non-sequential idiom.

Ya can't win fer losin'.

Amsterdam Too

By Barry Jay Kaplan

Raymond thinks he knows where he's going but really he's as lost as he's ever been, right now just following the boy he thinks said his name was Homer and this Homer seems to understand what Raymond wants, seems to be confident he can supply Raymond with what is required, seems to have the route clear in his mind and a picture of the goal razor sharp. Raymond recalls that at some point he had decided to believe what he was told; he had no experience with this sort of psychosocial maneuvering, but blind trust, he saw, was his only option.

"I had a wife once," he hears himself say, keeping pace with Homer along a cobbled street that narrows as they walk so that his right shoulder and then his left brush the stucco walls of the buildings on either side of him.

Homer turns his head slightly—he is a step or two ahead of Raymond—and smiles. "You did?" he says, as if the notion is both comical and believable. "A wife?"

“Does that surprise you?” Raymond says, adopting an aggressive tone because he doesn’t think he should be believed so quickly. “What do you think? Can you picture me as a husband? Can you imagine me as someone who comes home every night? Do I seem like the kind of man who might know how to have responsibilities, who’d be there, who’d listen, who’d say the appropriate thing, who’d nod his head and go ‘Yes dear?’ Do I? Do I seem like I could be that man?”

“I’m no judge,” Homer says, shrugging again, and Raymond wonders what kind of man you’d have to be not to get even the faintest thrill of *schadenfreude* at hearing another man’s confessions.

“I wasn’t a good husband,” he continues. “I was there. I ate my meals and kept a straight face. I pretended to be interested but I would look at her and think: who is she? What am I doing here? Do I have the right address? This can’t be what I’ve made of my life. The chair and the ottoman. The reading lamp. My books.” They are edging sideways along the narrowest part of the alley and suddenly burst out of it onto a street that is brilliantly lit, crowded with tourists just like me, Raymond thinks, but thinks: no one’s just like me. “I wasn’t a good lover. I came to sex too late. I didn’t know how to follow my instincts. I suppressed them instead. And when the time came, there was no access. I could only bear to think about what I already knew. I could only satisfy myself. I didn’t know anything about how to satisfy a wife. I paid no attention to what she wanted. I don’t know what she wanted. I thought: I know

what I want. But I didn't even know that." He took a deep breath. "Are we almost there?"

"Sure."

"Maybe I should've murdered her. There was certainly the smell of blood in the room. Maybe that's what she was getting at." This compelling new idea is derailed by careless, hophead, sharp-elbowed tourists fighting for space. He understands none of the languages he hears. Where am I, exactly, he wonders but he's given himself over to this search, to these confederates, and can only follow Homer, follow him until he leads him to the place he wants to be.

"I edited anthologies of modern poets, did you know that?"

"Sounds..."

"I didn't like my job. I did it. I did it. I went in and I did it but I never...leant myself to the work. I never...I never..."

"It's not much longer..."

But Raymond is lost in reverie. "If I had a sharp instrument...if I could slit...if I could burrow my way inside...if I could...if I could...know someone...know how her heart felt in my hands. I would be tender. I know how to be tender. I've saved up for it." This thought, zeroing in on some new understanding of love, thrills and exhausts him. He puts out his hand and grips Homer's shoulder. "I'm very tired."

Homer gives him the high sign and a weird, one-sided grin. "We're there."

Raymond leans back against the headboard, lets out a deep peaceful sigh, feeling that his body, as he exhales, has gained in weight even as he feels lighter. He sinks deeper into the mattress, closer to the core of the earth. He is closer to the core of the earth. Oh yeah. He is half afraid to inhale now, half afraid that he will rise when he wants to sink but hey a guy's gotta breathe, he thinks, laughing at the uncharacteristic way he is thinking—that pink tab he let dissolve on his tongue, he guesses, has created temporary mutations in linearity—and finally inhales as if the very act itself was a fiendishly offbeat and original idea. The inhalation brings with it—this innocent, self-satisfied inhalation—the sour stench of...where is he?...seems sorta like a motel room that's not part of a chain, not modern, without television, telephone, coffee maker, without paper on the toilet seat, without special soaps and stationery and key cards, without a telephone directory or a bible but complete with unassailably practical, purposeful decor: a bright orange vinyl armchair, a pair of twin beds with pilled acrylic blankets, and wine-colored wall-to-wall worn thin as paper under the footsteps of a parade of tourists who've lost everything more than once. Concrete has come exposed under the frayed carpet and in turn has crumbled beneath the constant moist exudation of coolant from the a.c. Raymond watches the rubble begin to stir as an army of spider ants crawls out from under the bed to march across the carpet and into a man's discarded left boot which someone in the room, someone where?, someone...has kicked off and which now lay on its side in a corner of the room under the curtains

that filter the flickering light from *de Bananenbar*—what?—that stands between *privenhuizen*—huh?—number 18 and the very busy *Warmoesstraat*—where?— they came in from. Raymond reaches for another pink tab and lets it dissolve on his tongue. Shoo-gah!

I seen that, herr dude.

He sees a man—Homer is it?—Raymond wonders, wonders how the name seemed to ooze into his head like a cracked raw egg dripping on his skull and who the hell is he and come to think of it where the hell am I, Raymond thinks. The man, Homer, the man Homer sits in the vinyl chair on the other side of the small room, his bare feet propped up on one of the beds. He blows smoke rings even though Raymond has twice now he recalls, recited air pollution stats. Homer's lazy defense: vice is its own reward, and though Raymond knows about the ultimate destruction of the future—but how do I know? What is it, if I know it? And where the hell am I, anyway— moral adjudication was of no interest to Homer. He puffs rings in huge silent whoos through obscenely ovalled lips. Vivian is stretched out on the other bed, silently moving hers to the prose of *Stern*.

Vivian, Raymond thinks. Vivian. Her I know. She I know is the the the the...GIRL...that's it. The one in the window. Someone had drawn directions on top of page sixteen of *Amsterdam A to Z* but that only led him to Homer; Vivian was an untold as yet, unpaid for a certain number of steps/streets/ hours away. Fraulein Von Schnitzlebrummer. Raymond laughs at the thought but no... She's the one in the window. The one mitt der boots and...der

shmirk...the smile, yeah. Oh yeah, right. I'm walking down the...the...

What's it called? he asks.

The man—Homer was it?—lifts his glance from whatever it is he is rolling between his fingers. *Vass ist?*

What?

Homer glances at Schnitzlebrummer and winks. Raymond's not so far gone he doesn't take that in. *Keska la deer?* Homer says.

The street. Raymond finds another word on his lips. *Der strasse.* Who are all those people? What language do they speak?

Men stomping by on the *Rosseburrt*, smacking their lips, rubbing their bellies, batting their eyes, grinding their teeth, dropping their coins, clearing their sinuses, slapping their thighs, gulping schnapps and bashing the bottles on the cobblestones to amp up their nerve to knock on any window are the ambient track to the silence in the room and the silence, the protection, the privacy it affords, this silence, this silence is part of the satisfaction Raymond feels, the satisfaction of a being outside the voluminous stream of humanity rumbling from space to space outside, while inside he is teetering on the precipice with at long last Vivian at his side.

Vivian. Vivian.

Huh?

The blaring screech of a skid, the bounce, the bop and the sudden crunch of a crash. The silence before the scream and then the scream.

Raymond jumps off the bed and runs barefoot to the window while

Homer looks at his cigarette as if it was the smoldering ash itself that has exploded and maybe inside his head it has while Vivian does not look up from her magazine. Raymond presses his cheek to the glass. To the left, up the street, something is on fire. Another explosion straight ahead and more fire illuminates his face, he can feel the heat.

Homer sings: *Uh uh uh uh uh ooooooh Ra-ay-mond...*

An obese woman wearing only a garter belt and bustier is rushing out of the darkness towards him, framed by fire, her hair in flames.

Homer grabs Vivian's toe and shakes it: *Should we be taking notes?*

Leggo my toe!

Raymond is still at the window, observing the carnage as if his fantasy adventure had inadvertently strayed into carnage territory. He wants to apologize. He wants to close his eyes and make it rewind because now he sees that a small child is clinging to the flaming woman! *I'm not responsible!* he shouts and turns away from the window.

Vivian says, without looking up: *I'm getting lonely, Raymond!*

And Homer responds: *We better pay attention. He might quiz us later.* And they both laugh. Homer points his trigger finger at Viv: *Whatcha reading, sweets?*

It's about some guy.

Yeah?

A post-dystopian minimalist likes to set off fire bombs in non residential sections of Antwerp.

What about him?

Nothing. He ideates in a non-sequential idiom.

Ya can't win fer losin'. Homer flicks his cigarette at the wall in disgust. *All these people doing all these things and getting written up,* he mutters to himself.

Raymond doesn't understand their language. Isn't this America? When he looks at Vivian he can't help but think that she *is* America, everything that America offers, everything America's great at: blond and brave, action without consequence, freedom from understanding. All he can think of is the V. And the V knows she is being looked at and likes it; she looks at Raymond over her bare shoulder in a pose she's seen a million times in Homer's collection of pulp-zine cover art stored in a self-lock concrete bin in the eighth district, and puffs up her lips in a mock pout. Homer leans sideways in his chair to tug at Raymond's sleeve.

Raymond!

Huh?

Focus! Homer says

Raymond slumps against the wall wearing a slack-jawed, lopsided smile that recalls all those nights in front of the television watching Vivian and her oeuvre on dvd. He palms himself off the wall, stumbling to the bed where Vivian is waiting. For me, he thinks, for me, and he is as thrilled at the success of his mission as if it already had been accomplished, as if getting to this point, simply having engineered his arrival, was the thing that would most satisfy; but that's the thing he's most afraid of too: that there is nowhere else to

go, that here is where he is and though Vivian is only arms' length, hands' length—*I'm touching her!*—his imagination still has one more effect in store.

But what???

Homer, observant, says: *First the impulse, then the guilty silence and the thundering heart and then the narration of external verities. Oh man oh man, he is going the limit.*

Raymond's shoulders ache. He looks at Homer, then at Vivian, then back, then back again, trying to catch them in some collusive dramaturgy. His eyes finally lock on Viv's.

Is Homer going to watch?

Vivian stretches voluptuously. *He can.*

Raymond trails his fingertips along the wall, feeling every lump and seam and tear, feeling that if he doesn't hold on, if there isn't this connection to something as solid and permanent as a wall his face will crack open. He edges closer to the bed. *Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.* It was about to begin.

I'll leave the two of you alone.

Raymond is sorry to see Homer close the door behind him because there is nothing now to stop him. His own sense of decorum, of guilt and consequence has been blurred, by drugs and inchoate desire, to the point of inaccessibility. He might do anything. His hands are twitching. He's afraid. He's not sure what he's going to do to her.

Vivian shifts a bit to the side to make room for him. And as Raymond lowers himself to lie beside her, her only consolation is that Homer is but a

blood-curdling scream away.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story is part of maybe a novel about Raymond, a man living a very constricted life, married, sexually not fully alive. His only release is watching the porn films of Vivian, upon whom he had an active crush. He decides he must act now or forever hold his piece. He hires a detective to find Vivian. The detective finds Homer, Vivian's brother, then Homer takes him to Vivian, which is where Amsterdam Too gets going. The part that comes before this is narrated in a straightforward way. As the narrative goes on the style becomes emotional, frantic, even hysterical. The search for what Raymond envisions as his sexual salvation, Vivian, takes him away from everything he has ever known. He is out on a limb, scared, excited. He has left everything he knows. The world is in danger. He doesn't know where he is but he knows something is very...um... not. He is trying to loosen himself up and the prose expresses that.*

As a man of this world, I do not live at the edge but I like to write with the idea of going very far. I have written about murderers and psychopaths and people with an assortment of manias than drive them. As a reader my tastes seesaw between twee English lady writers who construct perfect sentences—Anita Brookner, Penelope Fitzgerald—and American outliers—Donald Barthelme, William Burroughs, Stephen Dixon—with a little transparent tough dialogue I learned from film noir.

AUTHOR BIO: My short stories have appeared in Descant, Bryant Literary Review, Central Park, Appearances, Talking River, Kerouac Review, Northern New England Review, Upstreet, Brink, Amarillo Bay, Perigee, Apple Valley Review, Drum, Brink, New Haven Review, Club Plum, Blue Mountain Review, Fleas on a Dog and others and have three times been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. One of my stories was selected as one of five Best Stories on the Net Anthology and nominated for the Million Writers Award. I am the author of three historical novels Black Orchid (with Nicholas Meyer), and Biscayne (Simon and Shuster) both selections of the Literary Guild and That Wilder Woman (Bantam Books). With co-author Rosemarie Tichler, I have written and edited the interview books Actors at Work and The Playwright at Work. I have an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop where I was research assistant to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. I am currently working on a novel about the Jews who fled Germany in 1938 and found safety in Shanghai.

As a playwright I have won the Whitfield Cooke Best Play Award from New Dramatists and a grant from New York State Council on the Arts for my history play, Blood and Water. Landscape of Desire is published by Smith and Krause and was the American representative to the 25th Australian National Playwriting Conference. My musical biography of Rock Hudson, Rock and Roy (music by Stephen Weinstock), was developed at New Dramatists with grants from the Frederick Loewe Foundation and the Cameron Mackintosh Foundation and had workshop productions at New Dramatists in New York and at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, both directed by Simon Callow. The musical Step Aside had workshops at the York Theatre in New York, and at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Like Love (music by Lewis Flinn) won a DramaLeague New Directors/New Works Project Prize and premiered at the New York Musical Theatre Festival

GUEST EDITOR'S BIO: Difalco lives in Toronto at the moment. He is the author of the story collections, *Black Rabbit* (Anvil Press) and *The Mountie At Niagara Falls* (Anvil Press). His story **Young Man Among Roses** appears in this issue (fiction).

REAGAN at the Show (!)

By Bill COLE

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* Bill Cole's "Reagan at the Show," is one of those brilliant, comedic juxtapositions that should make everyone happier for having read it.

He rolls with concept as Saunders would or Vonnegut does with Mother Night, his style is sly and creative as if Douglas Adams were sitting right in front of you and playing word games, and he crafts as good a metaphor as Richard Brautigan could pull off any day of the week.

This is clever at its most clever.

I won't get into the plot too much because it spoils the fun. Suffice to say, Reagan enjoys punk rock music.

When I lived in Illinois, we would drive to other local small towns for football games, traveling to grandma's house, and etc. – hills and corn shit. Yet, always, on the way back and forth from college I/we would invariably go through Dixon, IL – a small ass town that could boast about having an interesting bridge and the fact that Ronald Reagan was born there (if you went North and towards Iowa you could see where Grant lived in Galena, IL...woot). In Dixon, there are pictures of young Reagan throwing footballs, getting ready to go to California and be a star, I'm sure that his face is painted as a mural on the side of a main street building, you get the point: he lived there.

The great part about Cole's story is how he takes a man who I not only had to grow up with historically but also one that, as an adult, I've pretty much hated for his policies and turned him into the mythos of a cowboy that he may or may not have always wanted. Hiding from cops in a van, strumming his head along to Creedance, he may as well have been the Dude as opposed to the president.

If only he had been the Dude as opposed to the president.

If only he had been Ronnie.

I cannot stress enough how much you should read this story. It is a romp worth romping through. It's like the end of Once Upon a Time in Hollywood, I wanted that story to be true as opposed to reality.

A punk-rock fairy tale that crushes it.

Good work, Cole.

Five Stars.

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

The songs came and went, like a succession of tiny explosions. D. Boon shouted word fragments into his microphone, jiggling and gyrating from one side of the stage to the other, a frenetic data point on an unsettled axis.

The Minutemen sat in a transporting silence.

D. Boon gave a burdened whistle.

“You see, we’re like a book of matches and you’re the striking strip. We need your friction if we’re going to ignite and burn. Otherwise, we’re just sticks of dull cardboard,” said Mike Watt.

Reagan at the Show

The crowd was a tangled mass seeking to sand down their tensions and sanctify their joy. The 40th President of the United States was no exception in this regard. It was a frigid Thursday night in Washington D.C. when the Minutemen took the stage at the 9:30 Club. The temperatures outside had plunged since New Year’s Eve three days earlier, but it was sweltering inside the club as the punk rock band from San Pedro tore into their set.

D. Boon, the portly but nimble guitarist, hopped to the front of the stage and leaned backwards on a diagonal, his body balanced on a fulcrum of uplifted palms. Ronald Reagan, the aged but nimble president, pogoed and ricocheted off of the people on each side of him with a festive belligerence. The flailing droves surrounding the 70-something Commander-in-Chief were impervious to their distinguished neighbor, senses obscured by the sonic dust kicked up by the punk trio. D. Boon strummed the piercing treble out of his Telecaster through the accented quirks from Mike Watt's bass and George Hurley's drums. The songs came and went, like a succession of tiny explosions. D. Boon shouted word fragments into his microphone, jiggling and gyrating from one side of the stage to the other, a frenetic data point on an unsettled axis.

Between songs, Mike Watt stepped up to his microphone. "You know it's real cold, but we're boiling. D. Boon almost had a stroke," he quipped to the rabid crowd.

The Minutemen played on.

There was a knock outside the Minutemen's dressing room in the 9:30 Club's basement where the band was unwinding after their set. A roadie wearing a partially tucked flannel shirt opened the door. It was Ronald Reagan, veiled in a hooded navy sweatshirt.

"Hey boys, great show!" he said as he entered the room.

"Thanks for coming out, Mr. President," said D. Boon as the men shook hands.

"Yeah, thanks so much for bein' here," added Mike Watt.

"Please call me Ronnie. I was wondering if I could possibly get a lift back to the White House with you boys. It's only a couple of miles from here."

The Minutemen gave cryptic looks to one another. “Sure, we can give you a ride back, but don’t you have secret service or something?” D. Boon asked as he wiped the sweat from his bald head before working his way down his face to stroke his short-cropped goatee.

“Aw, shucks, I excused them from their duties when I got to the club. Had to have an unfettered experience.” Ronald Reagan pulled off his hood revealing a fresh welt on his left cheek.

“That’s some thump you got there,” said the scruffy roadie, pointing to his own face as an illustration.

“Yeah, I caught a hard elbow during *Anxious Mo-Fo*.”

“Oooh, that’s a bummer,” George Hurley uttered.

Let’s get you some ice for that.” said Mike Watt, as the lanky bassist jumped up and poured out a bunch of ice cubes from a nearby cup into a plastic bag before wrapping it into a makeshift ice pack and handing it to Ronald Reagan.

“Thanks. For the ice and the ride,” Ronald Reagan responded, placing the bag of ice up to his cheek as the Minutemen started preparing to bring their belongings out to their van.

“What’d you think of our covers of Creedence and the Blue Oyster Cult, Ronnie?” Mike Watt asked from the front passenger seat turning his head behind him. Ronald Reagan was seated next to George Hurley in the rear seats as D. Boon steered the band’s van down 9th Street NW, the band’s gear stacked toward the back like a warm huddle of sleeping children.

“You definitely did them justice.”

Mike Watt was beaming from the compliment. “Yeah, they were okay, there were a few clams in there,” he said.

“If there were, I didn’t notice. It all sounded pretty tight to me. And I’ll tell you this, I really loved your version of *Hey Good Lookin’*. I’ve been a big fan of Hank Williams ever since my days in the pictures.”

“We thought you might like that. We played that for you on the sly,” said George Hurley.

“Gee, boys, what a kind gesture. You’re gonna make a right at this corner and stay on I Street.”

“Okay. By the way, we dug your spiel today on African food aid. That was pretty boss, boss,” offered D. Boon with a proud grin. “Now if we can just pull the plug on those Contras.”

Ronald Reagan grabbed the back of the driver’s seat and pulled himself forward. “I’ll have you know they have been fine allies to us during an excruciatingly difficult time,” Ronald Reagan firmly but calmly asserted within inches of D. Boon’s ear.

“I guess that’s the price of paradise,” stated D. Boon with an acid tone, his bandmates nodding in unison.

“Listen, I really do respect you boys and there is something that’s been on my mind lately that I would very much value your input on,” Ronald Reagan said with an increasingly severe voice.

D. Boon quizzically cocked his head to the side “Well, that’s real flattering, Mr. Reagan.”

“Ronnie. Please,” Ronald Reagan interjected.

“Sorry. It is a flattering thing to hear, Ronnie. We can try to be helpful, but at the end of the day we’re just a coupla corn dogs from Pedro.”

“Well, we do have those California ties in common. That’s worth something. What I’m about to say is probably not what you think,” Ronald Reagan proceeded. The Minutemen sat in a transporting silence. “Now, I believe you may know that I’m a cowboy at heart, right?”

“Sure, everyone knows that about you, Ronnie,” said George Hurley, whipping back the shock of hair hanging over his face.

“And, when you get down to it, your music is cowboy music.”

The Minutemen let out a collective giggle striped with embarrassment. “I think that’s the first time anyone’s characterized our sound that way,” Mike Watt said with a toothy smirk to D. Boon, who started humming the theme to *Bonanza*.

“It really is. All good punk is. Your music perfectly captures the spirit of the cowboy ethos: freedom, rugged self-reliance, purity, small government.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” said D. Boon.

“And, if I’m going to truly walk the walk, I’m gonna have to walk away from politics and live on the open road, take to the wild frontier.”

“What are you sayin,’ Ronnie?” Mike Watt asked.

“I’m saying I want to resign from this job and devote myself fully to the punk rock mission.”

“But you just won re-election,” said D. Boon.

“Yeah, I was thinking about that very thing. To avoid a constitutional crisis, I would wait until after the inauguration in a few weeks and then make my announcement. George can take over from there.”

George Hurley’s eyebrows shot upward. “Huh?!”

“Oh, don’t worry Georgie. I meant George Bush. The world needs you behind the drum kit.” All four men chuckled. “Then, I could jump in the van with you guys full-time, set up your equipment, sell merchandise, that kind of stuff. Whatever you need, really.”

Mike Watt looked at D. Boon, who glanced away from the road to look back at Mike Watt. Nobody said anything for several seconds.

“Well, Ronnie, we already got some dudes who set up our gear and handle our merch,” Mike Watt finally replied.

“Then, I can help you navigate the red tape of the venues. I know a thing or two about diplomacy. Just ask Margaret Thatcher.”

“Have you talked to Nancy about this idea of yours?” asked D. Boon.

“Of course, she is very supportive. She has trust that it will bring my life new meaning. Her only condition is no mohawk.”

“Yeah, well that’s so 1981, anyway.” said George Hurley.

“Have you told anyone else besides Nancy about this?” D. Boon continued.

“Come again?” Ronald Reagan craned his neck forward to better hear.

“Have you run this plan by anybody else?” George Hurley reiterated.

“So, truth be told, I might have vaguely eluded to it in my phone call with King Juan Carlos of Spain earlier tonight. But, I didn’t really elaborate on it too much.” Mike Watt sighed. D. Boon gave a burdened whistle. George Hurley tapped out a quick drum beat on his lap.

“Ronnie, you need to think about something with this whole thing that I’m not sure you’re factoring in,” D. Boon stated.

“What’s that?”

“Punk music only comes alive when it’s reacting against something. Now, for better or worse, you are a colossal representation of that something” said D. Boon.

“He is *the* colossal representation,” Mike Watt reinforced. D. Boon rolled his eyes.

“Hmm. Yeah, I haven’t really considered that.”

“You see, we’re like a book of matches and you’re the striking strip. We need your friction if we’re going to ignite and burn. Otherwise, we’re just sticks of dull cardboard,” said Mike Watt.

“Right, by eliminating myself as a symbolic foil, I effectively compromise the integrity of the entire endeavor,” Ronald Reagan mused, talking more to himself than to the Minutemen.

“Yup,” said D. Boon, as Mike Watt and George Hurley murmured in agreement.

“I get it. I need to fall on the sword for the greater good. This is my *raison d’etre* and I will take satisfaction in knowing I’m inspiring the scene from the reverse direction.”

“That kind of angle is a pretty punk thing in itself, Ronnie,” exclaimed Mike Watt.

Just then D. Boon saw the blaze of police lights filling up his mirror. “Aw, shit!” he snapped. “Ronnie, you may want to lay low on this one.”

D. Boon pulled off to the side of I Street with the police car sticking close behind. He exhaled deeply as a shadowy police officer walked over to D. Boon’s window with another officer following. Ronald Reagan slid the hood of his sweatshirt back over his head and slumped down in his seat in an attempt to will himself invisible.

“Evening, officers,” D. Boon said softly through the stinging chill of the air.

“Where ya’ll headed tonight,” grunted the lead officer poking his flashlight through the window, his eyes scanning the inside of the van.

“Just taking our friend home.”

“Yeah, where’s that?”

“Not too far, just down the road a bit.”

“Where exactly is down the road?”

“Y’know, just a short way from here.” D. Boon attempted to maintain his composure, but was straining to coax the proper words into existence.

“Why are you being so dodgy? What are you hiding?” The lead officer punctuated his questions with a shake of his flashlight across D. Boon’s face. A feeling of emerging dread started filling the van. “You sloppy dirtbags looked suspicious from the minute I spotted you on the road. Now, I’ll ask you one more time, where does your friend live?”

Suddenly, Ronald Reagan lurched forward, throwing the hood off his head. “1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.”

The officer moved his flashlight into Ronald Reagan’s face and stumbled backward. “No need to get insulting fellas,” Ronald Reagan continued. “The boys are from out of town just enjoying the sights. We like our visiting guests to feel welcome here, don’t we?”

“Yes, of course, sir. It is an honor, sir,” the lead officer acceded, the words pulled out of his mouth by gravity. The second officer stood motionless behind him.

“Very well, then. You have yourselves a good night and keep up the good work.”

“Thank you, sir. We will,” replied the lead officer as he pitched a salute toward the van.

“You have a good night, too,” the second officer added.

“That was pretty slick, Ronnie. I was pinching a brick over here,” said George Hurley as D. Boon pulled the van back on to I Street.

“I guess that power trip thing can come in handy sometimes,” Mike Watt proffered.

Ronald Reagan shrugged his shoulders. “So, boys, I actually do have one more favor to ask when we get back to the White House,” he said with a sheepish smile.

The Minutemen were tuning up their instruments in a corner of the East Room of the White House. Ronald Reagan sat cross-legged on a nearby chair, holding to his cheek an ice pack embossed with a presidential seal.

“Ronnie, you gonna swing by and see our musical brethren Black Flag when they come to town in a few months?” asked Mike Watt. “Their singer is a hometown boy.”

“Oh yeah? What’s his name again?”

“Henry Rollins,” Mike Watt and D. Boon simultaneously replied, as if in a race.

“Well, If I’m home at the time, I’m there.”

“That’s the spirit.” D. Boon flashed Ronald Reagan a thumbs-up. “It’s real good we’re able to find some shared ground despite any differences we may have.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” said Ronald Reagan. “I was just talking with Tip O’Neil earlier today about the importance of reaching across the aisle.”

“And sometimes, moshin’ across the aisle,” added Mike Watt with a hint of mischief in his eye.

“Now, you sure we’re not gonna wake up Nancy?” asked D. Boon.

“Nah, I told you, she sleeps like a log.” The Minutemen tipped their heads in approval.

“I’ll bet you know what song I hope you’ll start with, right?”

“Yeah, we think so. And, it’s okay that that particular spiel doesn’t portray you in the best of lights?” D. Boon posed cautiously.

“Sure, it’s okay. I know you guys are just making an artistic statement. We all have our part to play.”

You know, Ronnie, for a corn dog, you’re not such a bad cat,” said Mike Watt.

“Well I’m awfully fond of you boys, too.”

“Hey, I hate to come off as rude but any chance we could get a little chow when we’re done playing? We’re usually pretty hungry after a gig,” floated D. Boon.

“I’m sure we can whip something up for you boys. How does a piece of apple pie with a side of jelly beans sound?” As Ronald Reagan finished his suggestion a nearby aide instinctively reacted to the prompt and headed out of the room.

“Just perfect, Ronnie.” stated D. Boon.

D. Boon began running his fingers across the strings of his Telecaster before unloading the opening notes of one of the earlier songs from the Minutemen’s catalog, *If Reagan Played Disco*, as Mike Watt and George Hurley joined in accordingly. The sitting president looked on in delight.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *On January 3, 1985, the punk rock band Minutemen actually played the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C., while President Reagan was at home in the White House less than two miles away. Add a pinch of magic and stir frequently.*

AUTHOR BIO: My work has been published in Eclectica, Flash Fiction Magazine, California Quarterly, Lowestoft Chronicle and Crack The Spine, and I have twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. My fiction has also appeared in Highlights for Children Magazine for which I received their Pewter Plate Award as Author of the Month. Additionally, my fiction has been made into a podcast with Manawaker Studios.

H_(ow) U_(YoU) were *FORMED*

By Susan Josephs

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Sometimes the simplest of situations become the hardest to write. That's because when everything is up front there's nowhere to hide. It's a kind of litmus whereby all the writer's strengths or shortcomings are on view. 'How You Were Formed' is a textbook example of what happens when everything goes right. A casual conversation over lunch between two women at opposite psychological poles gradually deepens into a poignant journey into a past threaded with memories both bittersweet and moving. The tone by turns friendly, terse, bitchy, buoyant, acrimonious and tender is keenly balanced against elegantly structured prose polished to a mirror shine, while nuances of observation and description linger in the mind like falling petals. You will be swept away. Oh, and one last thing. Any story that has a cat named 'Mr. Fleas' (!!!) well...you put that in deliberately, didn't you, Susan...um...you did that on purpose, right?*

Five stars

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

Josie received my Mr. Fleas epiphany with a blank stare. My words ricocheted back into my throat and I felt the familiar depletion of energy that I associated with trying to tell Josie personal things. I could perhaps trace this thing that I did in my 20's to a boyfriend who had seduced me with his relentless quest for enlightenment. After a honeymoon period of about a month, where we abandoned my cramped New York City apartment to visit ashrams and intentional communities and have campground sex, we started fighting constantly. He would accuse me of not showing sufficient remorse and vulnerability and when I would finally break down in tears, he would say, "you're so beautiful when you cry."

"So what are you up to for the rest of the day?" I asked Josie in my brightest and shiniest voice.

...and we descended further into a silence that did not abate, not even when the waitress finally arrived to drop off our processed check. As we signed receipts and put away our credit cards, I felt my recklessness ebb and morph into anxiety, unexpressed anger and a deeply

familiar shame. Who was I to upend our world order that revolved around the vagaries of Josie's moods and the shards of appeasement still deeply embedded in my bones?

How You Were Formed

I had known Josie for 13 years but never connected her to Grandma Edith until I met her for lunch the week before the world changed. At first, the lunch felt almost safe, even ordinary, although we did meet on the afternoon of California's Democratic primary election. We sat outside at Kreation Café's covered patio, where we munched on sustainably sourced salmon sandwiches, sipped room temperature water and mostly talked about Josie's new line of anti-aging, fruit-based facial serums. But then Josie out-of-the-blue asked me if Rachel still cut my hair.

"Rachel?" I froze, a deer in headlights, until my stomach started clenching up and foreshadowing an afternoon of indigestion. I thought about asking Josie what made her think of Rachel but realized that Kreation Café was about a block away from the hole-in-the-wall storefront that Josie once rented to peddle her skin care products and treatments. The storefront was next door to Rachel's salon.

"Do you still see her?" Josie's tone, interrogatory and expectant, should have resulted in me lying to her, as I had learned to do throughout my childhood.

"Yes, I do," I said instead.

Josie performed a singular nod and flagged down our waitress to order a Peaceful Juice to go while I pondered why I told Josie the truth. Was it because we normally never interacted over sober lunches? Ever since we met in 2007 at a street fair where I bought her homemade, organic eye cream on a whim, we kept our client-vendor-friendship alive through drinking multiple

glasses of wine on an exclusively nocturnal basis in Venice Beach bars. We both liked each other better when we could drink.

“I never thought her cuts were that good,” Josie said after about a minute of awkward silence. “And she was such a bitch to me that day.”

I single nodded back, which made me think about my cat Mr. Fleas nodding at me exactly once with an upward tilt of his chin whenever he wanted a treat. My husband and I called it the Frat Boy nod, aka the feline equivalent of “S’up!” This, in turn, reminded me about the epiphany I had about my cat and Grandma Rose two nights ago. And in thinking about Grandma Rose, I of course conjured up Grandma Edith.

“So what happened with that neighbor you started flirting with?” I pushed away my plate with about three bites left to go of a sandwich I could no longer eat.

Josie scowled. “He must have a girlfriend or something. The last time I saw him, he didn’t even say hello. I’m so done with people like him.”

“God, what’s wrong with people?” I exhaled and felt my body relax. It soothed me to inhabit familiar territory, where Josie proclaimed she was done with people and I validated her reality in my bright and shiny you-go-girl voice.

“Whatever. It’s LA,” said Josie. She signaled the waitress, asked for the check and reminded her about the juice like a mother telling her child for the fourth time to clean her room.

I bristled like I always did at the way she spoke to anyone in the service industry but kept my mouth shut. As if I could dispense constructive criticism to Josie, who would then receive it with equanimity, gratitude and a multitude of heart emojis.

The waitress promised Josie her pineapple, green apple and mint elixir with a tight-lipped smile while I resolved to extend one more olive branch. “Oh yeah, I also wanted to ask you about those kittens that need a home. Are you going to foster them?”

“No.”

I waited for a further explanation of why Josie wasn’t going to foster the kittens but no such luck. Josie checked her phone while I waited for her to ask how my cat was doing, which in my opinion, seemed like a logical next step in the conversation. When she didn’t, I did the thing I used to do in my 20’s with unsafe people in the quest to win their approval.

“I haven’t shared this with anyone because it sounds kind of crazy but I think Mr. Fleas is my reincarnated grandmother. It’s something I’ve kind of joked about to myself, but the other night, I looked into his eyes and I don’t know...it was a feeling.”

There I was, sharing with Josie my private, tender and not yet fully formed epiphany about the intertwined souls of Mr. Fleas and Grandma Rose. And by invoking Grandma Rose, I of course conjured up Grandma Edith.

This time, I was reminded of the conversation I had with my husband two weeks ago after picking up eye cream from Josie’s apartment and returning home trying for the umpteenth time to parse out something Josie said so that the words would sting less. My husband, a firm believer in logic and reason, has asked me: “And why is this person still in your life?” To which I had answered: “She’s a remnant. A remnant from a past life.”

Josie received my Mr. Fleas epiphany with a blank stare. My words ricocheted back into my throat and I felt the familiar depletion of energy that I associated with trying to tell Josie personal things. I could perhaps trace this thing that I did in my 20’s to a boyfriend who had seduced me with his relentless quest for enlightenment. After a honeymoon period of about a

month, where we abandoned my cramped New York City apartment to visit ashrams and intentional communities and have campground sex, we started fighting constantly. He would accuse me of not showing sufficient remorse and vulnerability and when I would finally break down in tears, he would say, “you’re so beautiful when you cry.”

“Anyway, it was definitely a feeling. So what else have you been up to?” I tried to retract my epiphany, to swallow it hard and digest it along with my lunch. My failure to appease Josie stung especially hard because I knew that she believed in reincarnation. She once told me that her past lives included serving as a 13th century Chinese courtesan, a 19th century truffle expert and a member of the French resistance during World War II who was brutally murdered by the Gestapo. She had shared this with me about five years after we met and about two hours into an epic drinking session at our favorite Venice bar. While sober me might have asked her how she knew all that, I had merely said, “That’s so fucking cool you know all that!”

“Why did you name your cat Mr. Fleas?” Josie glared at me, as if she thought I needed extra cues to decipher the subtext of her accusatory tone.

“I thought I told you that story?” I smiled, prepared as always to gloss over my annoyance with Josie never remembering anything I told her unless it directly concerned her. “He was a feral rescue. We found him eating from the garbage cans in back of my old apartment and he was covered with fleas.”

Josie focused on her phone to respond to a text and did not acknowledge the return of the waitress who dropped off the check and the Peaceful Juice. “Thanks,” I said to the waitress and waited for Josie to stop texting.

Still texting, Josie said, “Why would you name your cat something so negative?”

“Are fleas negative?”

“Weren’t they causing him suffering?”

“Well yeah, but the name fit. And we had no idea at the time that we would adopt him.” I slugged down the rest of my water, extracted a credit card from my purse to pay for my half of the lunch and tried to focus on my breath. I especially hated when I heard myself sounding defensive whenever Josie interpreted my actions as crimes.

“Names can manifest toxicity.” And with that, Josie placed a credit card on top of my credit card and excused herself to use the bathroom.

I watched her exit the patio and felt the absence of alcohol that normally softened the jagged edges of our interactions. The waitress arrived to process our credit cards and as I thanked her, I steeled myself for the return of Josie and simultaneously experienced a brief vision of Grandma Edith trudging up the driveway of my childhood home for the Sunday Afternoon Visit. Grandma Edith faded out before she could knock on our door and I remembered how lunch had been my bright idea, suggested the same day I told my husband that Josie was a remnant. That day, Josie had made some out-of-the-blue comment about how she always seems to be the one to initiate our get-togethers, which was blatantly untrue. I could have confronted Josie with the truth but instead asked the question, “Should we try meeting for lunch?”

Was it only two nights ago that you opened the kitchen door for Mr. Fleas and saw your Grandma Rose embedded in his wide green eyes? He looked nervous as he darted into the house, your Creamsicle-colored Mr. Fleas, his expression identical to how Grandma Rose stared at you with flying saucer eyes during car trips to grocery stores. When you visited her in San Diego as a college student on vacation, you always offered to take her shopping and you always drove slightly over the speed limit.

To soothe spirits, you scratched Mr. Fleas under his chin. You promised Grandma Rose that you were a safe driver and slowed down. Mr. Fleas led you to the bedroom for his nighttime cuddle session where he relaxed and purred and when you arrived at the supermarket, Grandma Rose rejoiced and told you that she was the luckiest woman in the world. She showed you how to select the best cucumbers and cantaloupes and sometimes, she bought potatoes to make you latkes so you could relive a major childhood highlight. You can still taste those latkes, still sizzling from the frying pan, crispy on the outside and chewy on the inside. Grandma Rose hand grated her potatoes and had an instinct for frying that you really can't teach.

You spooned Mr. Fleas and crooned into his ear: I love you I love you I love you. He received this with equanimity, gratitude and a multitude of heart emojis. You are so lucky to have a cat that can receive your love and a husband in the next room who understands the importance of these nighttime cuddle sessions. You are so lucky to have spent so much time with Grandma Rose, who was always happy to see you. When you were in your 20's and lived in New York, you'd visit her in San Diego twice a year to play multiple rounds of kaluki, her favorite card game. Sometimes, she made you her famous honey cake and when you asked her how on earth she made it taste so moist, she would shrug and say, "a little of this and some of that." Grandma Rose never baked or cooked with recipes and she never asked you pointed questions about careers or weddings or grandchildren. She'd only say: you should enjoy your life.

Mr. Fleas jumped off the bed and guided you to the kitchen, where you gave him salmon flavored dental treats. He tilted his head to the left as he ate, in exactly the same way that Grandma Rose cocked her head when frying potato latkes. Even now, as you remember Grandma Rose, you feel obligated to conjure up Grandma Edith. This is of course Pavlovian.

Even now, when you visit your elderly parents and mention Grandma Rose, your father immediately races to his stash of analogue photographs and hastily constructs The Museum of His Family for an audience of one. What about Grandma Edith? Look how radiant she is! And to be fair, Grandma Edith sure was photogenic. Her always glamorous smile evokes Esther Williams on the verge of performing yet another perfect synchronized swimming routine. Her smile seems especially glamorous in the early 1930's, when she strikes jaunty hands-on-hip poses in front of Brooklyn ice cream parlors with her girlfriends in the years before giving birth to your father. And in your early childhood photos from the 1970's, her face beams with love and adoration as she poses with her arms around you and your sister. Whenever you peruse these photos, you start to squirm the way you did when you went to visit her in shorts and still had to sit on her plastic covered sofa. You never really learned the lesson about the definition of insanity, about repeating the same actions and hoping for different results. You wouldn't stop wearing shorts on hot summer days in inland San Diego County and so you collected red marks on your thighs from peeling them off the plastic.

Grandma Edith used to make you Kraft Macaroni & Cheese. You loved this meal slightly dry, dotted with globs of partially mixed processed cheese dust that your childhood palate considered the height of savory and sophisticated deliciousness. Grandma Edith, however, always made it saucy and devoid of cheese bits. Still, you ate this meal because Grandma Edith rewarded you with a bowl of Neapolitan ice cream. She always sat next to you as you ate dessert and tracked how you alternated between the chocolate, vanilla and strawberry flavors. Once, when you were seven, she asked you how the ice cream tasted. You said, "delicious," and she said, "Why aren't you offering me any?" And when you said, "Oh, do you want some grandma?" she said, "You know I can't have any. I have diabetes."

Once, you discovered a tin of ham in Grandma Edith's cupboard, which you had never seen before. Your family kept a kosher home and would soon phase out eating Filet o' Fish at McDonalds because of its alleged relationship with lard and so you reported the offense to your father, who took very seriously his new role as president of a newly built Orthodox synagogue. A terrible telephone fight ensued but because it didn't sound different from the other fights, you didn't feel as guilty as you might have for ratting out your grandmother. Your father almost always lost his temper while on the phone with Grandma Edith. "Stop hanging guilt on me!" he would scream and you always struggled to come up with a visual for this. Sometimes, you'd draw stick figures of hangmen juxtaposed with the horses and hippopotami that you usually drew. The hangmen wore square signs around their necks that said "Guilt" on them in block letters and this always reminded you about the Jews having to wear yellow stars in Nazi occupied Europe. You were an expert in Holocaust imagery by age eight but you considered this an asset.

Your heart performed song and dance numbers worthy of uplifting Broadway musicals when your mother dropped you off to spend a summer's day with Grandma Rose, who either took you out for lunch at a kosher-style deli for bagels and lox or made you latkes and told you stories about growing up in Poland. Your stomach clenched as you watched Grandma Edith trudge up your driveway for another Sunday afternoon visit and wondered what she would say next. During one of her visits, she proclaimed in front of your parents that you, at age 12, still had a flat chest while your 15-year-old sister was "so very well developed." Almost always, she would ask you a question that you did not answer to her satisfaction and you would spend the rest of the day fumbling to grasp the true nature of your alleged crimes.

Sometimes after these visits, your father would remind you and your sister that your grandmother led “a hard life.” He would begin with the tragedy of losing her younger brother to polio and relatives to pogroms and segue into them having no money during the Depression and losing relatives to Hitler. Inevitably, he would include a vignette or two about how Grandma Edith’s sisters escaped from Brooklyn to Manhattan by marrying wealthier men than your Grandpa Morris and how his aunts snubbed his family for appearing “lower class.” You don’t yet understand what happens to facts in ur-narratives crafted by your grandmother to hang guilt on your father. You only know that you are supposed to feel sorry for Grandma Edith so that you will love her even more.

If you visited Grandma Rose, then you also had to visit Grandma Edith. There was a one to one ratio policy that also extended to thank-you notes, phone calls, family photographs and hugs. When you visited Grandma Edith, she would ask you when you last saw Grandma Rose and what type of interaction that entailed and you learned how to lie and withhold information even though it never did you much good. You were supposed to love them in equal amounts and so the guilt hung over you, taking the form of low lying clouds that never really dissipated as you made your way through life trying to love other people in exactly the way you felt it.

When Grandma Rose passed away, you flew from New York to San Diego in time to deliver a eulogy about unconditional love. When Grandma Edith died, you were traveling in Thailand with limited access to email and so you missed her funeral. When you returned to visit your parents and belatedly mourn your grandmother’s death, you discovered that your father had redecorated the house. Everywhere, you saw black and white and Technicolor photographs of his beloved mother. She was so photogenic, your Grandma Edith, and for decades you did not

understand that when you were drawing all those hangmen pictures, you were really drawing yourself.

When Josie returned to our table, she was smiling and humming an unrecognizable tune. I studied her face, now adorned with a thick coat of lilac lipstick, and immediately understood that I was the recipient of a sudden Josie mood shift. I could feel my muscles relax, as if I had drunk a glass of wine and I remembered how I sometimes really liked Josie. She could be especially amusing and charismatic after a glass or two of wine and when she talked about her political activism or donating to this or that charity, I would tell myself: *She's a good person.*

Two years ago, we had talked about Rachel over a glass or two of wine. I could have ended the friendship right there and then by confessing to Josie that we disagreed on the definitions of loyalty and betrayal. But enveloped in the warm glow of my Tempranillo buzz, it seemed essential to lie and withhold information so that our friendship could continue. "Rachel feels really bad about the way she screamed at you," I had said. "She's truly sorry."

"So what are you up to for the rest of the day?" I asked Josie in my brightest and shiniest voice.

"I'm off to go vote," she said.

"Cool. I voted earlier," I said, immediately realizing my mistake.

"Who did you vote for?"

Does Rachel still cut your hair?

"Elizabeth Warren," I said to Josie, a rabid Bernie Sanders fan. I detached from my body and hovered above it, waiting.

“Why did you vote for her?” Josie took out a compact mirror and smacked her lilac lips several times.

“I know she won’t win but I think she’s the best candidate.”

Josie shook her head and closed her compact mirror with an extra hard snap. In awkward silence, we waited for the waitress to bring back our credit cards and receipts. I had done it again, telling Josie something she didn’t want to hear and I felt uncharacteristically reckless.

“Is this about Rachel?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you ask if I still see her?”

Josie shrugged. “I just don’t get it. Why do you want shitty haircuts?”

“I like her haircuts.”

Josie folded her arms and we descended further into a silence that did not abate, not even when the waitress finally arrived to drop off our processed check. As we signed receipts and put away our credit cards, I felt my recklessness ebb and morph into anxiety, unexpressed anger and a deeply familiar shame. Who was I to upend our world order that revolved around the vagaries of Josie’s moods and the shards of appeasement still deeply embedded in my bones?

“I forgot to tell you that your latest batch of eye cream is really great. I barely see the circles under my eyes these days.” I heard my cheery tone, sounding like a five star Yelp review. About three years ago, Josie had asked me to write a Yelp review about her eye cream. *I tried everything to get rid of the dark circles under my eyes but nothing worked. And then I started using Josie’s eye cream, made with ethically sourced honey and goji berries and they just disappeared! I’d give more than five stars if I could!* I suppose that part of me actually believed that I would be lost without Josie’s eye cream, because how else to explain all the times during

the course of our friendship that I found myself wandering the health and beauty aisles of Sprouts and Whole Foods, perusing but never buying other skin care products? How many times had I tried to break up with Josie by reading the ingredients in a facial elixir and trying to pinpoint when exactly I had become so fearful of the unfamiliar?

Josie stared at me, which made me realize that she had mostly been avoiding eye contact all throughout our lunch. “Huh,” she said, not taking her eyes off my face.

“What? Do I have lettuce between my teeth or something?”

“I’m just noticing your frown lines. They’re getting really pronounced.”

“Oh,” I said, mostly likely engaging in further brow furrowing. The truth was that my brow had been furrowed for years and I sometimes wondered if Josie would ever mention it whenever I stopped by whatever storefront she had rented to purchase her eye cream but not her other skin creams or facial services.

“If you don’t do something about them now, you’ll regret it when you’re older.”

“What do you suggest I do?” I detached yet again from my body and hovered above it.

“Facials. Massage. Creams are not going to solve your problem. It’s a relaxation thing.”

“Oh.”

“You’re neglecting your skin, which is really like the worst -- ”

“I do not neglect my skin Josie!”

There I was, screaming in a public place where people at surrounding tables either stared or tried not to stare as I informed Josie that a) I took care of my skin and b) I’ve had forehead wrinkles since I was around 40 and that I’m not getting Botox just because everyone else is.

“Well, it’s the first time I’ve noticed them so...” Josie trailed off and I saw it then, the shock on her face from my unprecedented behavior. The shock seemed genuine and I could see it

so clearly: Josie having lunch or drinks with another client/friend and writing me off as another Rachel. This other client/friend would exclaim, “God, what’s wrong with people?” and Josie would nod and smile, radiant with victimhood.

“Like I said, I’ve had them. For years.” As I said this, I tried to remember word for word what Rachel shared with me about the day she killed her friendship with Josie. For about a year, Josie had rented that hole-in-the-wall storefront next to her salon and they shared a small parking lot with designated spaces for their clients. One day, Rachel’s client had mistakenly parked in one of Josie’s reserved parking spaces and Josie had stormed into Rachel’s salon demanding that the car be moved ASAP. Josie had said something like, “you’re ruining my business,” which prompted Rachel to stop cutting her client’s hair, usher Josie outside and warn her to never again behave that way in front of one of her clients. “I was screaming at her the way I used to scream at my asshole ex-husband,” Rachel had told me. “And when I tried to apologize, she looked at me like I no longer existed.”

“You’re acting really defensive,” Josie said. “I’m only trying to help you.”

“It doesn’t feel like that.” That was the closest I got to what I really wanted to say.

“You yelled at me.” Josie then performed a dramatic pause and waited for me to apologize. When I did not, she stalked out of the restaurant without saying goodbye and left the unopened bottle of Peaceful Juice on the table.

You watch her storm out of the restaurant, the reverberations of your screams still ringing in your ears. You had last screamed that way about 23 years ago, when you informed your father that you were not your mother and that he could not yell at you with the same explosive tone that Grandpa Morris used with Grandma Edith. You were 25 years old and hadn’t yet grasped the

nuances in spousal screaming. You still didn't understand that Grandpa Morris's temperamental lapses from silently tolerating Grandma Edith's modus operandi stemmed from a different impulse than your father's condemnation of your mother's unintentional household mistakes as punishable crimes. But you could feel the fealty to your family's traditions as a rope around your neck, its dual strands of love and bondage still inseparable. It hurt so much to scream at your father and threaten to cut him out of your life. But you knew that if you didn't, you would choke.

You rise from your chair and that suctioning sensation of leg flesh un-sticking from the furniture, courtesy of your short, age-defying skirt, sends you directly to Grandma Edith's plastic covered couch. You are 48 years old and you have finally discovered the most perfect portal to that couch. Part of you feels slathered in that familiar sludgy mix of anxiety, anger and shame and part of you feels a lightness and giddiness that you associate with the beginnings of vacations that have been divorced from family obligations.

You leave the restaurant with the Peaceful Juice still on the table, your brain crammed with words you did not say, not now and not then. But as you walk down the street, you drift towards visions of Grandma Edith, who has been dead for over 20 years. She always kept a gallon of Neapolitan ice cream in her freezer, special for you. During her Sunday afternoon visits to your house, she sometimes told you that you should be a lawyer when you grew up and maybe even a Supreme Court Justice. She constantly said, "I love you," and showered your face with too many kisses and called you "smart and adorable." You craved such compliments and praise but failed to absorb them because you did not trust their source.

You walk three blocks to your parked car and remember that you need to stop at the pet store. Mr. Fleas needs more grain free bison kibble and salmon flavored dental treats. You love Mr. Fleas with all your heart and you also miss Lavinia, another feral rescue who died two years

ago. Josie had tried to comfort you when she died. You stopped off at her apartment to pick up your eye cream and she immediately asked what was wrong. When you told her, she offered you a homemade chocolate chip cookie, fresh from the oven. Sometimes, when you met Josie for drinks, she would compliment your blouse or the shade of your lipstick, which you could not absorb but nonetheless appreciated. She told stories about bad dates that made you laugh and you sometimes wanted to hug her when she talked about the way she prayed to God. *She's a good person.* For years, you would say this as a benediction and coping device, so you could better understand all the people in your life as a matter of karma and destiny.

You drive to the pet store, still reeling from the encounter. You fantasize about writing Josie an old fashioned letter with all the words you did not say and simultaneously acknowledge the uselessness of the endeavor. You think about how you still have a flat chest, which means your breasts won't sag so as to complement your furrowed brow. You are aging and not aging like the women who came before you and you cannot possibly love them all the same.


You pay for the pet food and dental treats and wonder if the cashier is staring at your forehead and thinking: wow, she's really furrowed! You tell yourself you will not be body shamed, as if that helps. You drive home and hope that Mr. Fleas will feel like a cuddle session. You could really use a cuddle session with Mr. Fleas right about now. He isn't your reincarnated grandma but an epiphany is an epiphany.

You feel slathered in anxiety, anger and shame. You feel light and giddy. You feel grateful to have been formed by more than one grandmother. In another week, the world will change and you will think about how you are already perched on the cusp of an unfamiliar landscape, willing yourself to accept what is. But for now, you travel from one disparate sensation to the next as you drive home, hoping/praying to land somewhere safe.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I never planned to write a story inspired by my grandmothers, toxic friendship, the idea of reincarnation and how childhood influences impact adult behavior. But several things happened to me in recent years. I began comparing childhood memories of my grandmothers with my sister; I had a fierce fight with a difficult friend who's no longer in my life and I would joke to myself about how my cat Bam Bam is my reincarnated maternal grandmother, which was my way of meditating on the nature of unconditional love. One night last summer, as I pet Bam Bam (who incidentally bears a striking resemblance to Mr. Fleas), a narrative started forming where strands of thought I initially deemed disparate began to connect.*

I have always been inspired by psychologically acute work. In recent years for example, I devoured the Neapolitan Novels and pretty much read everything else by Elena Ferrante. I am also inspired by authors who manage to create complex, even fantastical worlds while exploring serious themes with undercurrents of dark humor (Margaret Atwood, Haruki Murakami). Overall, I'm pretty omnivorous when it comes to reading fiction and try to keep an open mind if I connect in any way with the writing.

AUTHOR BIO: Susan Josephs is a Los Angeles-based writer. A veteran journalist, she spent eight years writing about dance for the Los Angeles Times and her prose has appeared in over a dozen publications including Salon, LA Weekly, The Chicago Tribune and ARTnews. As a playwright, she has written five plays that have either received full productions or staged readings in New York and Los Angeles. Susan has also collaborated with choreographers and performance artists as a dramaturge and her essay about choreographer Rosanna Gamson will be featured in the forthcoming book *Women in Dance, Volume 1* (University of Akron Press).

Ba L Lr00m *dancin'g* in ((Cell Block))  (four) . .

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. . . By Ste V e Carr

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* Steve Carr will let you know that he has over 520 stories published in the last five years. As it is important, I will let you know that his story, in *Fleas on the Dog*, “Ballroom Dancing in Cell Block 4,” could be number 521 or higher at the time of publication. We’ve all got to have goals.

I cannot make any judgments, confirmations, or assumptions about Carr’s jail time if he has had any at all. I can tell you that I don’t think that he has, but I could be pleasantly surprised. I only know what I’ve seen from Oz, Shawshank Redemption, American Me (“shit on my dick or blood on my knife,” the classiest of rape scenarios), and etc. or of other ilk.

What this story has is a grime to it.

It oozes the need to be bad and then will do what every convict who doesn’t want the death penalty does: tell you a story long enough that you live.

The best part, and you will read this in the author’s note, about Carr’s story is that he combined the concept of prison violence and ballet as being a way in which the reader can see the dance prisoners have to do to not get raped, beaten, raped again, beaten again, or have to explain themselves to a prison full of just as terrible people as the one you’re reading about. It is the jail time story you tell to another human that could or could not possibly rape you – let us all presume that none of use want to be raped.

Why did Eddie die? Why did the Pattersons die? Why are prisons run so badly? Why is rape a thing where humanity has always used it against weaker humans no matter what hole you abuse? You will soon find out (except for prisons being run so badly that there aren’t many solutions to the problem apart from abolishing the concept of convicts being used as slave (“private”) labor – good luck...and, as the painting is painted, they will get fucked...hard...ending without solutions).

Carr’s prose is hard, and, by that, I don’t mean bad – it is a harsh subject. While a bit heavy-handed, he has managed to juxtapose the dance done in prison to survive with the language used to describe dancing.

There is violence within this story, there is intrigue, there is the who-dun-it that keeps us reading. Carr’s “Ballroom Dance...” exists to create a picture of those who dance because they have to as they’ve fucked over the rest of the world, and, in that sense, creates a picture of “well, I’m only reading about you getting raped because it seems like that is the only justice to be

offered by our justice system (if I ever go to prison, I'm sure that that story will change, but, things being how they are, I'm good on going to prison) sort of picture."

"Ballroom Dancing in Cell Block 4" is exactly that, a dance, and it is your choice whether you would like to waltz through it.

I would suggest that you decide to do so.

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

That night when I saw him for the first time, even in the dim light that shone into the cage from outside, his facial features appeared to be that of a madman. Even more disturbing, was that his body was nothing like that at all. It was like a troll's head had been transplanted onto a dancer's – a ballet dancer – body. He strode from the door of the cell to the toilet as if giving a performance. Even with his orange prison uniform on, I could see his body was lithe, sculpted like a dancer's. With the right training, he would have made an amazing ballroom dancer. He glanced at me once before standing at the toilet and removing his uniform. Naked, he pissed into the bowl, and then when finished stood there for several moments, obviously masturbating. Then he turned, showing a huge erection, and smiling at me in a way that sent chills down up my spine, and said, "Now, you get fucked."

BALLROOM DANCING IN CELL BLOCK 4

by

Steve Carr

The closing of a prison cell door has a sound all its own, a noise that once heard from inside a cell can never be unheard. The soft grinding of iron followed by a metallic click is an echo that has resounded in my mind long after I walked out of the prison for the final time. The eight hours shut in the cell each night were the most harrowing part of every 24 hours I spent in cell block 4. It was the time I laid awake for most of the night thinking about what might be in store for me the next day if I didn't stay on my toes and keep my eyes wide open.

I was 24 the first time I was escorted into cell block 4 by two guards – the screws – one

on each side of me, their meaty hands tightly gripping my arms. I had shackles on my feet and my hands were cuffed. I had spent time in county lockups a few times going back to my late teens for minor offenses, but this was my first time in a prison; in a maximum security unit. No one believed that I didn't murder the Patterson family who lived on an isolated farm where I sometimes worked. I was sentenced to life in prison, spared being sent to the chair because the evidence was mostly circumstantial, but my fingerprints were all over everything, including the wood chipper where they had been ground to pieces, and that was all the jury needed to know.

As we walked into the unit, every prisoner on the floor turned to watch. In an instant, most of them sized me up, projecting on me their anger, fears, assumptions and lust. I had the build of Adonis from working two years on the Patterson farm bailing hay and tending to livestock, and the looks of a young Brad Pitt. I kept my eyes down, my mouth shut. After the screws removed the cuffs and shackles, my cell on the second tier of cells was pointed out to me. I walked up the metal stairs with a guard following behind. It was the middle of the day. I placed what few things I was allowed to have along with a sheet, blanket and pillow on the bare mattress on the bottom bunk bed.

"Play nice with Eddie and you'll have fewer problems," the guard said as he stood in the doorway watching me.

"Who's Eddie?"

"Your cell mate. Your father, mother, brother, sister, wife, child, boyfriend, or girlfriend," the guard replied. "You guys will figure that out on your own."

"I'm innocent and don't belong here," I said.

He guffawed. "Man, with that line and your looks you're going to be eaten alive in here with all the other innocent prisoners."

I started to sit down on the bunk.

“Not yet, sweet pea,” he said. “You need to go down and meet your dancing partners.”

From that day on, from the very first day in cell block 4, I imagined I was participating in ballroom dancing, the one thing my mother had taught me before she blew her brains out with my father’s gun right after she taught me how to dance the Paso Doble.

I left the cell and walked down the stairs as the guard remained on the second tier, leaning on the walkway railing, watching me, watching those watching me.

Three prisoners sitting at a table, holding playing cards in their hands, with the remainder of the deck stacked in the middle of the table, summoned me to where they sat, using their hands to signal me to come to them. Their leers were salacious and dangerous. One of them flicked his tongue like a snake. I walked on, found a seat at the back row of chairs lined up in front of the television, and sat down next to an inmate with snake tattoos that curled around his neck. I quietly watched the game show that was playing for ten minutes before he leaned over and whispered, “Beware of Eddie,” he said. His breath smelled of rubbing alcohol and orange juice.

I was going to ask him about Eddie, but the gates to the cell block opened and the evening meals were brought in inside large metal food carts. The inmates rose from their chairs, took a tray of food handed to them by prisoners from other units who worked in the kitchen, and returned to the tables and began to eat. I got a tray and took it to a table where no one else was sitting and stared at what looked like a portion of diarrhea and a pile of yellow, lumpy puke, and a slice of stale bread, until mealtime was over, and then I returned the tray to the cart, having not taken a single bite of the food.

Throughout the meal and until I returned to my cell that night before lights went out I scanned the faces of the other inmates, trying to imagine which one was Eddie. Other than vulgar

asides and offers to be their protector, none of the other inmates talked to me and I talked to no one.

I learned from my time in several jails, never ask questions. In prison and in cell block 4 this seemed a wise decision.

I went to my cell just before lights went out, made my bed, and put my soap and toiletries on an empty shelf among the four of them built into the wall next to the square of tin affixed to the wall that served as the mirror just above the sink. I took off my shoes and tied them together and placed them under my mattress and got into bed, fully dressed.

Eddie entered the cell just as the lights went out. The cell door shut automatically a few moments later.

#

My cellmate for most of the time while I was in the slammer, after Eddie of course, Waltzes, a name I gave to him because he waltzed around the truth like a pro dancer, compared being shut in the cell to lying in a coffin with a locked lid. But being locked in didn't bother him, in fact he used it to his advantage. He convinced the prison psychologist he had claustrophobia resulting in him being given a handful of anti-anxiety drugs each night by one of the screws just before the cell doors were locked and lights went out. He sold each pill to one of the other prisoners the next day.

The guard known as Hammerhead handed Waltzes his anxiety pills while standing inside our cell. "You ain't foolin' anyone who knows ya with that claustrophobia crap," Hammerhead said. "Take 'em right here and now so that I can see ya doin' it."

"Sure Hammer," Waltzes answered and then popped them in his mouth.

"Open your trap," Hammerhead said as he stepped closer to Waltzes and flipped on his

flashlight and shone into Waltzes' mouth.

Hammerhead looked in then flipped off his flashlight, turned and stomped out.

The lights went out and the cell door closed. Waltzes spit the pills into the palm of his hand.

#

During breakfast, while staring at the small mound of greenish scrambled eggs on my tray, Quickstep sat down across from me. Nineteen and as thin as wire, I had never seen him eat anything in the eight months he had been on the unit. Who could blame him? He subsisted on something but damn if I knew what it was, but I wasn't curious enough or cared enough to ask. That thing about not trusting someone any further than you could throw them? I could have easily tossed him across the room and still didn't trust him one bit. That dance move in the quickstep known as the reverse spin defined saying anything to him. I made the mistake of telling him in confidence that my first cell mate, Eddie, raped me the first night I spent in the cell with him, so that he didn't feel bad when it happened to him, repeatedly. Within fifteen minutes after he walked away, that news got all over the cell block. I was considered untouchable until then. It was yet another lesson to never trust a con.

It was known that he blabbed to the guards and administration every chance he got. What he got in return was anyone's guess.

"Can't you get your cell mate to sell me one of those pills?" he said in a whisper.

I stared into his beady eyes. "What pills?"

"Aw, geeze, man," I can't sleep at night," he said. "Can't you help a pal out?"

"You ain't my pal."

He looked down at my eggs and turned the same shade as they were. His large Adam's

apple looked like it was going to be ejected from his skinny throat. He looked up at me, his eyes squinted. “So what did happen to your first cell mate, Eddie, I think his name was. No one vanishes just like how I heard happened.”

I poked a fork into the eggs and then bravely shoved a forkful into my mouth and swallowed. “They cut him up and still serve his body parts for breakfast,” I replied.

His face went ashen. He slapped his hand over his mouth, rose quickly from the chair, turned, and ran toward the bathroom.

Eddie has been gone for six years, and they were still looking for him. I had been involved in more investigations into his sudden disappearance than the number of times ol’ lady Patterson cornered me in the barn, demanded rough sex from me, and got it.

#

I was in the shower when Cha Cha stabbed me in the lower back with a shank made from the sharpened end of a toothbrush handle. The king of doing the side step to keep from being accused of anything he did, he waited until I whirled around and then stuck the bloody end of the toothbrush handle to my neck. “This is a message from Palmeroy. It’s time to tell him what you know about Eddie.”

“I know nothing,” I stammered. “He disappeared years ago.”

“Tell it to Palmeroy,” he replied. He held the shank under the spraying water and then fled the showers.

Palmeroy – “Jive” – could send a fellow cell block inmate from this earth to his grave faster than a hip bump, without anyone asking questions afterward. From my first day in the cell block it was apparent he was the most powerful, and feared, prisoner in the unit. He had asked me only once since Eddie went missing what I knew where his “friend” had gone. Jive didn’t

usually have friends. He had prisoners who he kept under his thumb. I had only had two conversations with him the entire time I had been in. Both were about living on a farm. He had grown up on one.

With blood running down my backside I wondered why Palmeroy was suddenly interested in Eddie. I stepped out of the shower and suddenly hit by the intense pain from the wound in my back, I fell to the floor.

I woke up on a gurney in the infirmary a few hours later. Waltzes was standing beside me.

“You in pain?” he asked.

“Yeah. Who let you in here?”

“I have friends in high places,” he said with a laugh. “Give me whatever pain meds they give you and I’ll give you a share of whatever I make off of ‘em.”

“Palmeroy sent me a calling card,” I said as a streak of pain went up my back. “You know why?”

“What would I know?” he replied. “I give Palmeroy free pills whenever he asks and stay out of his way otherwise.” He paused and then said, thoughtfully, “He’s up for parole.”

“He coulda just asked to talk to me.”

“Palmeroy never asks anything. He tells.”

I rolled onto my side and showed him my back. “They put stitches in me?”

“Yeah, but I was told you’ll be back in our cage tonight.”

#

Hammerhead was the screw on-duty. He refused to give Waltzes the pills. It took me holding Waltzes back to keep him from punching the guard in his big, ugly face. Waltzes took most things in stride, but being in stir nearly drove him insane. He didn’t handle being isolated

very well. He was a ballroom dancer that needed to be around other dancers. Not having the pills hurt Waltzes in two ways, loss of income and possible anger from his “clients.” When Hammerhead left, with a huge, sadistic grin on his face, and the lights went off, Waltzes stripped off his clothes, climbed up to his bunk, and mumbled curse words aimed at the screw until he fell asleep.

I laid awake wondering what it was that Jive wanted with Eddie now. No one, not even a family member or anyone outside of the prison had asked about him since he had disappeared.

Let me tell you about Eddie. Evil was written on his face. That night when I saw him for the first time, even in the dim light that shown into the cage from outside, his facial features appeared to be that of a madman. Even more disturbing, was that his body was nothing like that at all. It was like a troll’s head had been transplanted onto a dancer’s – a ballet dancer – body. He strode from the door of the cell to the toilet as if giving a performance. Even with his orange prison uniform on, I could see his body was lithe, sculpted like a dancer’s. With the right training, he would have made an amazing ballroom dancer. He glanced at me once before standing at the toilet and removing his uniform. Naked, he pissed into the bowl, and then when finished stood there for several moments, obviously masturbating. Then he turned, showing a huge erection, and smiling at me in a way that sent chills down up my spine, and said, “Now, you get fucked.”

#

The morning that Eddie disappeared his absence was noticed the moment that I walked out of my cell and stood outside the cell for headcount. No matter how many times the screws working that day screamed in my face or punched me in the gut, I had no answer as to what had happened to him. Oh, I knew alright, but I wasn’t sayin’. You see, I had learned while working

on the Patterson farm what it took to stomp down hay or to crush a rabid dog using just one booted foot, and that is what I did with Eddie. By the time I was done with him, every bone in his body was broken into small pieces, and as a dancer trained how to control the balls of my feet and the heels, I knew how to do it so that little blood was spilled. He was a skin-sack full of bones by the time I was done. I ripped open my mattress, hid his flattened body in it, and then made my bunk. The guards looked under our bunk and one even sat on my mattress, but not a single one thought to look “inside” our bunks.

Over the next week I tampered down the stench from his dead body by dousing the mattress with soapy water and filled the cage with an air freshener I made from roll-on deodorant and mint toothpaste that I smeared on the walls of the cell. Every night I flushed his body, bit by bit, bone fragment, patch of hair to broken tooth, down the toilet.

How Eddie “escaped” from prison by getting out through his locked cell during the night became a thing of legend and lore.

#

At breakfast the word got around fast that Hammerhead had been fired when a large stash of drugs and pills had been found in his locker. It seemed a stupid thing for a guard with Hammerhead’s experience to get caught with, but we didn’t really question. Criminals, and stupid screws, aren’t what or where they are because they’re geniuses.

Hearing the news, Waltzes was beside himself with unbridled glee. One day of not having “product” to sell wouldn’t be a problem to manage. Everyone liked Waltzes and one minor hiccup wouldn’t cause him any lasting problems. During breakfast he chattered on like a wild monkey.

After breakfast I went to Jive’s cell where he sat on the top of the bunk beds with a half

dozen other inmates sitting on the floor staring up at him, seeming enthralled with what he was saying. He was the only inmate allowed by the screws to be in his cell during the day. As soon as I entered, he shooed everyone else out.

“Okay, pretty boy, time to tell me what you know about where Eddie went.”

“You mind if I ask why you’re asking me now?”

He squinted at me for a moment – as if examining me through a microscope – before speaking. “He and I were pals on the outside before we both landed up in here. He knows things I wouldn’t like to get out that would definitely would throw a bucket of shit on me getting a parole. If he’s out there somewhere, I need to know where and how much I got to worry about it.”

“I see.”

“So where’d he go?”

“Down the toilet,” I told him. I then told him everything.

#

I don’t know what role Jive played in my verdict being overturned, but six months later I danced out of prison remembering him telling me after spilling my guts about Eddie, “I owe you for your honesty.”

I thought about going back to see what had become of the Patterson farm to dance on their graves, but haven’t. That entire family, father, mother and two adult sons, were sick in the head and deserved being chewed up in the chipper. Not everything I’ve done needs to be talked about.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I have acquired this habit of writing a series of stories that generally have nothing in common other than a specific action or setting, a form of generating my own "prompts." In "Ballroom Dancing in Cell Block 4" I combined two of my more recent prompts, prisons and dancing. The development of a story that integrated the terms used in an art form, dancing, with the violent world of a maximum security prison appealed to me. Thematically, the idea was to show that even in the worst circumstances, the concept of artistic expression still exists, even if only in the mind of a character. Because I have had over 520 stories – new and reprints – of almost all genres published in the last five years, my exact style varies greatly and would be hard to pin down. I read many short stories written by my peers, but try not to allow their "voices" influence my voice, but comparisons to some of them wouldn't be impossible to do, but also wouldn't be easy. My earliest writing influences are a varied mix that include W. Somerset Maugham, Joseph Conrad, Willa Cather, Frank Herbert and Zane Grey and the playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.*

AUTHOR BIO: Steve Carr, from Richmond, Virginia, has had over 520 short stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, reviews and anthologies since June, 2016. He has had seven collections of his short stories published. His paranormal/horror novel Redbird was released in November, 2019. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize twice. His Twitter is @carrsteven960. His website is <https://www.stevencarr960.com/> He is on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/steven.carr.35977>

The Childhood of Isaac Newton

By Steve Legomsky

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

Ladies, Gentleman,

Ahem.

To begin, I'm here to explain why one such as yourself should read Steve Legomsky's, "The Childhood of Isaac Newton."

Let me be the first to say, "Oh, this clever bastard."

I had all the fun reading this piece.

From the humor within, to the irony, to the literariness, to the combination of history and creative nonfiction that I so dearly love, to the utter complexity hidden beneath a clear, concise, damn-fine piece, this work is one of the more entertaining pieces that I have read all year.

Young Sir Isaac Newton is a child prodigy – already having discovered that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Raised by Canadian snowbirds, imagining becoming a Hall of Fame baseball player for the Arizona Diamondbacks, soon to be studying for his bar-mitzvah, young Isaac falls into his own prophecy as he watches the fabled apple fall from the tree.

What I love about this story is its construction, subtlety, and care. You can tell that this was conceived by a human who has written or read enough about Isaac Newton to be able to play around with his life, you can tell that the writer knows how to show and not to tell the reader those moments of pure brilliance that he slips in (no spoilers, but the chance meeting towards the end of the story is a happy-go-lucky chef's kiss), and you know that the writer cares because of the attention to the craft it would take to write this story – the attention to detail needed for you, the reader, to dig into this work.

I think one of my favorite set ups within this piece is Isaac crowdsourcing his bar-mitzvah crowd:

"And yet those in attendance would remark later that that recitation was only the second-most dazzling element of his performance. The most memorable, they said, was his subsequent bar mitzvah speech. Removing an apple from his pocket, he held it dramatically above his head for several seconds and then released it. The spellbound crowd watched as it splattered against the oak floor of the bimah. In the finest Socratic tradition, he posed a rhetorical question to his bewildered audience: "What was that?""

I don't even know what a bimah is, but I know enough to presume that it is a traditional aspect of the ceremony and didn't feel like looking it up, and that fact makes it all the better that Legomsky included it within the piece.

I chuckled throughout this entire piece. It's a rare quality in a story that can make you both smile and tap into your literary mind – "The Childhood of Isaac Newton" has both. I most assuredly suggest that you read this story, I would be remiss to not insist upon it.

So, this is me insisting.

I insist.

Five Stars.

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

It was perhaps at his fourth birthday party that Isaac's extraordinary mathematical talents first became obvious and his ultimate career path inevitable. When his aunt playfully asked him "How old are you, young man?" an annoyed Isaac replied "the cube root of 64" and proceeded to laugh contemptuously at her confused reaction. As answers like that started becoming routine, his aunt complained to Isaac's parents that this habit had become "tiresome and, frankly, a bit disconcerting," to which Isaac's father replied, "Just wait. This kid is going to be another Einstein.

The Childhood of Isaac Newton

By Steve Legomsky

Isaac Newton was born in 1642 in Tempe, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix. The son of Canadian snowbirds, he was overjoyed the day his parents, tired of their annual migrations, finally resolved to make the Sunbelt their permanent home. "Enough with the schlepping back and forth, already," his father announced.

Isaac's father, Josh, was a struggling hedge fund manager. His mother, Debbie, was an orthodontist. When confronted by his middle class suburban friends, young Isaac would often retort proudly that his parents, though not wealthy, were clean and humble. Pressed on this, he would inevitably have to concede that, by "clean," he didn't necessarily mean "squeaky clean," like in the TV commercials, but "average clean." "Humble," on the other hand, was a perfectly apt description of his unassuming mother, though he had to acknowledge that his father, if anything, was a bit on the arrogant side. "How many men have fathered the inventor of

gravity?” his dad would frequently ask, taunting his colleagues, neighbors, and fellow K-Mart shoppers.

At the core of Isaac’s childhood was a ceaseless tension between his two fundamental passions. Even at an early age, he recognized his own mathematical and scientific brilliance. But his heart was elsewhere. What he wanted more than anything was to become a Hall of Fame third baseman for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Sometimes Isaac’s star third baseman fantasy took the form of excited radio broadcasts that portrayed Isaac electrifying the crowd with his swashbuckling style of play. In bed one night, in hushed but animated tones that he tried hard to prevent his parents from hearing, he announced, with appropriate urgency, “Peralta swings and lines one into right field! It’s a base hit! Newton is rounding third! They’re waving him in! Here’s the throw to the plate! Newton dives! The throw is” – a dramatic pause, then a loud, piercing shout that escaped from his mouth like air from a punctured balloon – “NOT IN TIME!!!” Another dramatic pause, as he listened to the deafening noise of the delirious crowd. “There is pandemonium in Phoenix! This crowd is going berserk!”

As he lay in bed, basking in the bedlam that was washing over him like a warm shower, Isaac’s fantasy was suddenly shattered by the sight and sound of his frightened mother bursting through the door. “Are you all right?” she asked him.

“What?”

“I heard you shriek.”

“No, that wasn’t me.”

“Sorry, it must have been your father again. He’s watching another scary movie. Nighty night, little twinkie.”

Isaac grimaced. Ballplayers hate to be called “little twinkie.” And just for the record, he thought to himself, it wasn’t a “shriek,” but a manly exclamation fully commensurate with the thrill and drama of the moment.

There was just one problem with Isaac’s dream of baseball stardom: He sucked at sports. All sports. When it came time to choose up sides for a pickup baseball game, Isaac was always the last kid chosen and the one instantly banished to the graveyard known as right field.

Meanwhile, his intellectual horizons were expanding at the speed of light at the same time that his athletic mediocrity was careening toward humiliating new lows. Isaac’s destiny was coming into clear focus, for all to see. All except Isaac himself, that is. Everyone else knew early on that he was never going to play third base, or any position for that matter, with the Diamondbacks or any other professional team. They all knew he would be a mathematician and a scientist.

But for most of his childhood, Isaac was in fierce denial. Others could scoff all they liked, he felt. He was adamant that he would never give up on his dream. At times he could even be overheard rehearsing his future Hall of Fame speech. “They all told me I’d never make it as a ballplayer. They said I was no good, I had no talent, I would never grow facial hair. But I never gave up. I plugged away, practicing hitting, fielding, throwing, base-running, autograph-signing, doing shaving commercials. I honed these skills from morning till night, 7 days a week, 365.25 days a year, till my hands were raw, my legs weary, and my face cut up from shaving miscues. And now, here I am, in Cooperstown. Dreams can come true, my friends! [Pausing for frenzied, thundering applause] DREAMS CAN COME TRUE!”

It was perhaps at his fourth birthday party that Isaac’s extraordinary mathematical talents first became obvious and his ultimate career path inevitable. When his aunt playfully asked him

“How old are you, young man?” an annoyed Isaac replied “the cube root of 64” and proceeded to laugh contemptuously at her confused reaction. As answers like that started becoming routine, his aunt complained to Isaac’s parents that this habit had become “tiresome and, frankly, a bit disconcerting,” to which Isaac’s father replied, “Just wait. This kid is going to be another Einstein.”

Isaac’s aunt was puzzled. “The bagels guy?”

“No, the other one.”

At age 6 came Isaac’s visionary announcement to his friends: “Mark my words. One day, Arizona will be a state.”

“What’s a state?” asked one of his friends. “You mean like Spain, or Myanmar?”

“No, one of the 50 states of the United States. You know, like Michigan, or Ontario.”

Isaac was 9 years old on that now famous, fateful day when, sitting beneath an apple tree while munching on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich during recess, Isaac watched an apple tumble to the ground. His revelation came suddenly. “Why,” he wondered, “do the apples always fall perpendicular to the ground? Why don’t they travel sideways, or even upwards?”

This question consumed Isaac for several days. His initial hypothesis was rooted in what he called his “theory of botanical instinct.” The tree, he speculated, did not want the Santa Ana winds that swept through the desert in the autumn to carry her apples to distant places. Thrusting her apples straight down to the ground would minimize their wind exposure and therefore the distance they would travel from home. Implicit in that theory was Isaac’s assumption that the tree understood intuitively what Isaac had long since proved mathematically -- that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.

But he was never really at peace with his “botanical instinct” theory. If the tree’s goal were to keep the apples close to home, he figured, why wouldn’t the tree just wait a little longer and release them during the winter months, once the Santa Ana winds had passed?

It didn’t take long for Isaac to lay his initial theory to rest and consider whether the answer might be found not in the world of botany, but in physics. So he set out to identify the physical forces that impelled apples to plunge headlong toward the earth. With the traumatic memory of having violently pushed away the bowl of borscht that his parents had once commanded him to eat, Isaac wondered: “Might it be that all objects have a natural inclination to push things away from them?” He hypothesized that the force with which they push objects away (F) is directly proportional to how revolting the object is (R) and inversely proportional to the square of the monetary value of the thrust object (M). The formula $F=RM^2$ quickly found its way into Isaac’s notebooks.

But that theory too had a short life. A tree, Isaac realized, doesn’t have arms, unless you count its branches, which at any rate don’t have wrists. “A tree could no sooner thrust an apple to the ground than an NFL wide receiver could spike a football,” he scribbled furiously in his journal. “No, the apple must drop on its own when it’s ripe. And since it always heads straight to the ground, it must be the earth attracting it, not the tree pushing it away like a bowl of borscht.” It didn’t occur to Isaac, brilliant as he was, that the earth didn’t have arms either, so that his theory of gravitational pull was no more logical than his rejected theory of gravitational push, a flaw that physicists at Princeton University would point out only centuries later.

At age 12, on most of the days that his young friends were outdoors playing baseball or basketball after school, Isaac’s parents forced him to toil away in Hebrew school three afternoons a week. On those few afternoons when he was free to play baseball with his friends,

he would regale them in between innings with fascinating tales, learned in Hebrew school, about the history of the Jewish people.

Mesmerized, they would listen with awe and rapt attention, even while skeptical about the part where Moses led the Jews across the Red Sea. “Oceans don’t just suddenly dry up in minutes,” they would point out, only for Isaac to remind them that the Red Sea is, as its name implies, a sea, not an ocean. This seemed to satisfy them.

As excited as they were to hear the many installments of Isaac’s historical lecture series, they frequently taunted him. They quickly nicknamed him “Fig.” Of course. “Hey, fig, having fun at Hebrew School? Ha, ha.”

Truth be told, however, Isaac’s elementary school friends were envious. Like most children today, they dreamed of one day becoming philosophers or historians, while young Isaac could think only about baseball fame.

Although tales of his uncommon brilliance had already begun to circulate, it was not until his bar-mitzvah that “young Isaac” became a household name and his destiny so obvious that even Isaac himself had no choice but to finally accept his future career path. For it was on that occasion that he recited his entire haftorah with his eyes closed. And yet those in attendance would remark later that that recitation was only the second-most dazzling element of his performance. The most memorable, they said, was his subsequent bar mitzvah speech. Removing an apple from his pocket, he held it dramatically above his head for several seconds and then released it. The spellbound crowd watched as it splattered against the oak floor of the bimah. In the finest Socratic tradition, he posed a rhetorical question to his bewildered audience: “What was that?”

One person shouted “an apple.”

Smiling patiently, Isaac followed up: “Ah, but why did the apple fall to the floor?”

“Because you dropped it. Duuuuuuh!”

Isaac was disappointed. Frustrated. Even a tad angry.

To Isaac’s delight, however, one member of the congregation understood perfectly.

“Gravity,” bellowed a gentleman with wild white hair and a thick German accent. “Bingo,”

Isaac responded, pointing his right index finger at the gentleman while winking and making a clicking sound. Always the punster, he couldn’t resist adding “I’m glad you grasped the gravity of the moment. Get it?” The crowd roared appreciatively. “Ja, aber der moment ist relativ,” quipped the strange gentleman.

You know the rest. Isaac never became a professional ballplayer, but he did transform the fields of mathematics, physics, and even philosophy.

Isaac “Fig” Newton died in 1726, a bevy of tearful friends and disciples at his bedside. At his insistence, he was buried in his white lab coat with a Diamondbacks cap on his head, a wad of chewing tobacco in his mouth, and a baseball glove lovingly cradling his left hand. The last line of the rabbi’s eulogy succinctly captured Isaac’s life: “The world has lost the worst third baseman who has ever lived.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I’ve struggled to identify the inspiration for this story. I wish I could root it in some profound philosophical theory, preferably one that links to existentialism and has taken me years to perfect, but the truth is that I have no idea where in my subconscious mind this story came from. My best guess is that its origins spring from my occasional daydreams in which I’ve wondered what life paths particular historical characters would have taken had they been born in modern times. So imagining Isaac Newton in 21st century North America seemed like a fun project. Truth be told, there is also a shred of autobiographical content here. Like my imaginary Isaac, I grew up loving both math and sports, spending much of my childhood fantasizing about playing third base for the Red Sox. And although I can’t match Isaac’s intellectual talent, I too spent a lot of time in right field, so I might have been able to match his athletic prowess. As for*

literary inspiration, the closest I can think of for this story would be Woody Allen's wonderful book, "Getting Even." Or maybe Ranger Rick.

AUTHOR BIO: Steve Legomsky is a former mathematician, Washington University law professor specializing in immigration, and Chief Counsel of the federal immigration services agency and Senior Counsel to the Secretary of Homeland Security in the Obama Administration. He has held visiting positions at universities in twelve countries. As an academic, Steve wrote mainly nonfiction books and law review articles. Since then, he has been a part-time fiction writer. His first novel, "The Picobe Dilemma," explores what it means to be "living" and the personal and ethical hazards in pursuing eternal life in a laboratory (<http://www.booklocker.com/books/9469.html>). His short stories usually strive for meaning and poignancy but often degenerate into satire. They appear in the Broadkill Review, Ravens Perch, Fewer than 500, Idle Ink, 50-Word Stories, MORIA, Scribble, DASH, Bindweed, the MacGuffin (forthcoming fall 2021), and Offcourse. His odd jobs have included shoveling horse manure (literally, not just in academia), caddying, and selling shoes. Steve lives in St. Louis and loves his family, children, the Red Sox, and other animals. He hates the Yankees. His website is <https://law.wustl.edu/faculty-staff-directory/profile/stephen-h-legomsky/>.

The WART

By Andrew D. Bassford

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

Andrew D. Bassford's, "The Wart," is like as if Franz Kafka, Kurt Vonnegut, and Etgar Keret had a short story baby.

Alfred is a man stuck in a cubicle, stuck next to coworkers stuck in their own habits, stuck next bosses that wouldn't know meaningless work from their ass because they are, in fact, meaningless. Yet, out of all this repetition, this mundanity, one day Alfred finds the titular wart upon his toe. Even though he is the only one who knows of its existence, its existence, in and of itself, is enough to drive the man into such self-consciousness that he begins snipping, piece by piece, the wart from his body.

What makes Bassford's story so interesting is its absurdity. The events that take place, the actions that become of its characters, almost all seem like they could just as easily be watched in a movie from Charlie Kaufman. But therein lies the beauty of linguistic absurdity, the humor, the horror, the fun, the coy way in which authors dance with you through language, becomes surreal enjoyment.

What brings this piece together is the marrying of absurdity with the mundane – a la Office Space. It's hard not to see both the humor and the utter boredom these characters must face in their day-to-day lives with lines like these,

"The stacks of colored paper were striking against the otherwise dull and whitewashed breakroom walls. She did not hear Alfred approach over the sound of the paper crinkling. She finished her 80th origami swan for the day and seemed pleased at first, but that turned quickly to disappointment. She dropped the paper bird to her right side and then started to fold another sheet."

I've read these lines five times by this point and, more than likely will read them five times more before I'm done, but have chuckled at them each and every time that I've read them. They are poignant, yet dull, insightful, yet nonchalant, boring, yet farfetched, extravagant, yet squandered. Truly, an enjoyable collection of sentences.

Bassford's, "The Wart," may not be your cup of tea because of its own inherent breaks from the real, but I am here to tell you that you most certainly should give this short, little piece a try – it is a lovely break from reality.

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

With great resolve, he grabbed the scissors from the cup next to his computer screen, and with a swoosh chopped the little toe cleanly off. No toe, no wart. His toe hit the ground just as the two halves of another pencil did so too.

The Wart

Down the hall from Alfred's cubicle sat a woman who, all day long, walked back and forth to the bathroom across the hall to wash and rewash her hands. Alfred's cubiclemate was in charge of forms. Next to the forms he kept a bundle of pencils, wrapped tightly with a rubber band. After each form, the man held sideways the pencil he had just used, and then in a sudden jerk snapped it cleanly in half. He let each shard fall to the floor before collecting the bits and depositing them under his desk in a small waste basket. Alfred watched the woman walk again to the restroom, only to 20 seconds later walk back out. He then looked down at his foot. Earlier that morning, Alfred had discovered the existence of a small wart growing on his left little toe. It itched.

Alfred felt ashamed, as though everyone around him was judging him for the wart, even though its existence was recognized by him and him alone. He closed the small blinds dividing him from his cubiclemate. He heard the sharp crack from the wood and granite of his co-workers pencil. And then Alfred untied his shoe to get a better look at himself. The wart was disgusting. Alfred had tried to burn it, but that had failed. And Alfred had tried to freeze it, but in this endeavor he failed, as well. Another crack as another pencil snapped. Suddenly Alfred had an idea. With great resolve, he grabbed the scissors from the cup next to his computer screen, and with a swoosh chopped the little toe cleanly off. No toe, no wart. His toe hit the ground just as the two halves of another pencil did so too.

Immediately afterwards, Alfred felt a flood of relief. No sooner had the toe touched the floor than it dissolved into nothingness. No evidence left, and no further cause for shame. Alfred retied his shoe, reopened the curtain dividing his cubicle, and then caught sight of the peculiar grimace his cubiclemate makes when doing his work, before heading out into the main office thoroughfare. He heard his boss's voice coming from the lounge area. Alfred walked over to join her. She had placed several large stacks of construction paper on the breakroom's table. She sat at the table with her back to the door. The stacks of colored paper were striking against the otherwise dull and whitewashed breakroom walls. She did not hear Alfred approach over the sound of the paper crinkling. She finished her 80th origami swan for

the day and seemed pleased at first, but that turned quickly to disappointment. She dropped the paper bird to her right side and then started to fold another sheet. But Alfred said hello, and so she turned around. It isn't clear what their conversation was about.

But midway through, Alfred suddenly felt a concerning sensation coming from his right little toe. It itched. Alfred immediately lost interest in the conversation, lied that he had more he needed to do, and returned to his cubicle. His cubiclemate noticed his return. They locked eyes; his co-worker took another pencil from the bundle, and he snapped it, without commentary. Alfred returned to his seat. Again, he closed the curtain and threw off his shoe, without untying it this time. He held up his foot. It was just as he had feared: another damn wart. When had this grown? Was it already there and he had just failed to notice it, or had it just now grown? It was uncertain. In any event, experience had taught Alfred how best to respond to the situation. With another swoosh, pencil and toe dropped to the ground.

Alfred felt some relief, though, admittedly, not as much as he had before. He let out a sigh, gazed up at the punctured popcorned ceiling for a few moments, and then once more steadied his gaze in the direction of his foot. He couldn't believe it: another wart, bigger than any he had seen before, and growing no less across the entire sole of his right foot. Reflexively, Alfred let out a gag sound. It was grotesque, and by association, he was too, he thought. But now the man's resolve faltered. He knew what had to be done to be rid of the wart, but could he really live without that much of himself? His apprehension turned to fear. He put his shoe back on. He had to get up. So he fled to the office thoroughfare again. He took a step, but then on the next, the wart's presence became too overwhelmingly obvious. He looked down at his right shoe. The woman from down the hall brushed past him on her way back to work, smelling of artificial lavender and vanilla. She gave Alfred an unsteady look; he returned an insincere smile.

So, there was no escaping what had to be done. Alfred returned to his cubicle, and three seconds later—swoosh, and foot and pencil fell together again. There was pleasure in the action, to be sure. But not much more could be said about what Alfred felt at that moment beyond that. And then of course, Alfred felt the familiar sensation again, this time, on the sole of his left foot. He removed the shoe, and chop. Pencil and foot to the floor in unison. And then of course, he felt the familiar sensation on his knee caps. Both knees at once. Alfred lifted up his pantlegs, and there was no mistaking it. Warts, both of them, and even bigger than the ones on his feet. Without hesitating, Alfred took care of the problem. In fact, he did better than just that: he cut both legs off entirely, for good measure. Two halves of a broken pencil hit the small trash bin with a dull thud.

And then it was his hands—and here, Alfred almost hesitated—, which was then followed by his arms. Then the torso. The neck. And now Alfred sat, being only a head left of a person. It's hard to say at what rate his cubiclemate snapped his pencils. But whatever the rate, Alfred succeeded it, so that for the first time, Alfred's parts dropped away faster than the pencil fragments. First it was the tongue—a very unpleasant experience. Then Alfred lost

nose and smell. One might think the ears would be next to go, but then one would be mistaken. Then Alfred lost eyes and vision. He heard a final crack of a pencil as ears and all sound finally dropped away too.

Alfred suffered a strange curse, indeed,—or was it a blessing?—for a more ordinary curse would at this point have left him in peace. Not much else remained. At some point, the question of relief and pleasure had become quite irrelevant. The subject of sensation had become moot too, but nonetheless Alfred was not willing to take any chances. A decisive snap of a pencil, and Alfred finally chopped off his whole head too. Honestly, there was no real need for verification at this point anyway. This might sound more absurd than it really was, but it wasn't as though he might have saved it—his head had itself become nothing but a wart. And now finally Alfred experienced true relief. Not of the sort that the woman down the hall knew, nor that of his cubiclemate, nor even that of his boss. It was not the visceral sort of relief he might have expected either, but a kind of stable, almost intellectual one. For now, at last, Alfred had rid himself of his wart, and he knew it.

For some time, he enjoyed the fruits of his labors in a kind of stupor. Once the pleasure turned to modest contentment, Alfred got back up. He returned to the breakroom to finish the conversation he had begun with his boss. But once again, Alfred was distracted. This time, he was not absorbed by himself, but rather by the paper swans littering the ground. His boss let go of one, and it levitated in the air for a couple seconds, carelessly, before perching gracefully on the cheap tiled floor. Alfred watched it. Who knows how many times Alfred had seen the swans; but for the first time, he was genuinely awed by just how beautiful they were.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Andrew Dennis Bassford is a philosopher who works out of the University of Texas at Austin and Austin Community College. He primarily publishes essays in contemporary analytic metaphysics, logic, and philosophy of religion, but on occasion he also pens a short story. "The Wart" is a story he conceived many years back, while reflecting on the meaning of life. He takes his inspiration from literary writers like Jorge Luis Borges, Albert Camus, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Franz Kafka, and Ursula Le Guin. Like each of these writers, Bassford tries to explore philosophical themes through his fiction and is not afraid to bend the rules of reality in order to do so.*

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THOMAS SAGESLUSH'S Support of the MORONVIA HEIGHTS Pit Bull Ban (!!)

by **D**ouglas J. **O**gurek

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

"Thomas Sageslush's Support of the Moronvia Heights Pit Bull Ban," by Douglas J. Ogurek, is not a new "Modest Proposal." The proposal is not modest, nor is it swift. On the contrary, it is a beautiful, satiric letter that keeps irony in its hands with an icy grip.

This piece is a lovely "fuck you" to those in power that make change for the wrong reasons, it is a laughable, yet poignant, middle finger to those who choose to bullshit the masses by making a choice that defeats the entire purpose of why society is complaining.

I will be, if not the, first one writing this that says it could be cut by about five pages and still make the same point, because once the irony is dry, and you're only beating the drumskin of a dead horse, then your argument has been made. But, I will also be the, if not first, of Ogurek's praises that explain to you, dear reader, why this piece should be read.

Mr. Sagelush's letter is a blanket list of stupidity (certainly not on his part). If you do x, then why haven't you made the obvious leap and done y, and/or, if you're not willing to do y, then why, in your moronic pea brain, do you think x would make a difference?

At the heart of Sagelush's concern lies the metaphor of banning pit bulls. I shouldn't have to cut to the heart of dog breed arguments, proven time and time again, that, if raised correctly, pit bulls can be one of the most loyal, well-behaved, and nursing breeds of animal humans have bred, changing wolf into domesticated house pet, but do you think that dogs are born violent or do you think that dogs have been trained to use the power bred in them to fuck someone's day up? I easily fall back on the concept that if they're trained by the good Samaritan vs. dogshit human that raised them, then there would be no problem. Nature only goes so far (people, comparable and compatible, are put down because, ultimately, they're violent garbage too), but nurture certainly makes a goddamn dent.

You will read in this letter the statistical comparison of pit bull violence as opposed to the random acts of violence you will encounter as a person in this world. Ogurek's comparison is obviously intentional, sardonic, and appreciated. There will be acronymic puns, "CRAPB" as crappy, DAFT, as just that, there will be not so subtle name hints, "Goobrane," as "goo-brain;" and there will be hyperbole (because where there is hyperbole, there will be blood), and I hope you enjoy them as much as I did.

I hope that you come out of this with a different viewpoint on a dog breed you have been scared about, but I also, on a deeper level, hope that you read Ogurek's work and find a newfound sense of fight. Whether you protest, give speeches, sit-in, voice your opinion, or go so far as to "burn this motherfucker down," exposing hypocrisy and the unfair abuses of power that surrounds us are our way out to better society. Education, critical thinking, and empowerment are tools that let us speak truth to power, and education, critical thinking, and empowerment are the exact tools that those with power wish to withhold because of their fear.

Ogurek isn't speaking literally of pit bulls, although he certainly can, and may be. Literal or figurative wouldn't change a damn thing about my point on his work. He's creating an environment of absurdity that shows how deep those in control will go to placate without making any change. How superficial those with power "act" because our goldfish brains only think about ourselves and not the global society we live in. How those in control do the bare minimum so we think that they're working in our favor, while they're mostly just fucking us in the ass again. He reminds us how quickly we are to accept, when we should be doing nothing of the sort. Read this letter, it a hot spark that can get a fire rolling, it is to all of us.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language)... The fourth element remains the worst. Like many pit bull owners, some claim that they couldn't imagine their lives without it, but let's be realistic: air is a brutal beast biologically predisposed to kill. It carries the sicknesses that kill our elderly. It feeds the fires that burn our houses. It carries the oxygen that allows those dangerous hearts to keep beating. And worst of all, air allows pit bulls to thrive.

Thomas Sageslush's Support of the Moronvia Heights Pit Bull Ban

by

Douglas J. Ogurek

February 17, 2020

The Honorable Stephen Goobrane
Mayor of Moronvia Heights
Moronvia Heights Village Hall
5235 Loon View Street
Moronvia Heights, Illinois

Dear Mayor Goobrane:

I enthusiastically applaud your support of the recent Moronvia Heights pit bull ban. As a proud member of Concerned Residents Against Pit Bulls (CRAPB), I wholeheartedly agree with your contention that these abominations that kill 0.00001% of the U.S. population each year

“pose a severe threat to our safety and have no place in our community.” It is with this focus on our beloved community’s safety that my fellow CRAPB members and I urge you to consider a few more bans.

You might be surprised, Mayor Goobrane, that we are nearly twice as likely to be killed by a mammal that is not a dog than we are by Fido. Therefore, we should also ban all other mammals.

Texting and other cell phone diversions may be responsible for one in four car accidents. Cell phones are 81 times more likely to kill people than dogs of any breed.

Cell phones have more “muscle” than landlines. Often, we blame the drivers for these accidents. In reality, the phones are at fault. They are programmed to attack concentration and delay responses. Moreover, the hypnotic nature of cell phones has forced many people to ignore the law that prohibits their use while driving. Thus, banning cell phones is a critical early step for ensuring our community’s safety.

Baseball is the most dangerous sport for children aged five to fourteen—each year three to four of them die from baseball-related injuries. And that’s just baseball! How many times have we heard about a young man, in the very prime of his life, dropping dead on the basketball court, the football field, or the running track?

Winter sports are even more dangerous: more than forty Americans die from skiing and snowboard-related accidents in the U.S. each year.

Clearly, sports are another major threat that we must expel from the community. Our young people are three times more likely to be killed by sports than by a dog of any breed, yet we continue to sign up Timmy for little league and Susie for cheerleading.

Now I know that there are many misinformed individuals who see sports as a way to build camaraderie within the community and enhance teamwork skills among children, just as many deluded pit bull owners believe that their dogs are a means of increasing happiness, getting more exercise, and having a more active social life. But let's be sensible—considering that there is a much greater chance of our youth dying while playing sports than of dying by dog attack, it is imperative that we adhere to your pledge to “keep our community as safe as possible by eliminating every threat.” Sports are a threat, so we should prohibit them.

Each year, suicide accounts for just over one percent and homicide just under one percent of deaths in the U.S. Since people are more than 1,650 times more likely to die by suicide or homicide than by dog attacks, we need to be a bit more liberal with our banning to put an immediate halt to these activities.

Just as it is not the pit bull owners who are responsible for the damage that these dogs have inflicted, but rather the dogs themselves, it is not the murderers or suicides that are responsible for more than 64,000 deaths each year, but rather the weapons that they employ. We should start by banning the most obvious threats: guns, knives, razorblades, etc. And by knives, I don't just mean switchblades and bowie knives. I mean steak and butter knives, paring knives, plastic knives . . . anything that cuts.

We should also ban hammers, wrenches, baseball bats (though these should go with the sports ban), and any other instruments capable of inflicting fatalities on oneself or others. For

instance, Americans are eleven times more likely to die by a hammer or club blow than by a dog attack. Just as our ban ignores the ignorant arguments of those who claim pit bulls can make good companions, so should our weapons ban ignore the nonsensical assertions that hammers can be used for good.

We must not stop at the obvious. Some of the more subtle devices that are responsible for murders and suicides include ropes, wires, and bridges. I propose to head up a committee that would develop a list of “highly dangerous” items to ban. We could call it Denizens Against Fatal Things, or DAFT.

Forty percent of American adults are obese. Moronvians are not exempt from this statistic. Lack of exercise and unhealthy diets contribute to heart disease and a host of other problems, but what is ultimately to blame?

Using your esteemed anti-pit bull logic, Mayor Goobrane, I think that we’ve wrongly accused people of not taking care of themselves. The true culprits behind our collective corpulence include high-cholesterol, high-fat, and high-sugar foods and beverages. These should all be banned.

These bans will take steps toward the ideal of banning all foods—people are 134 times more likely to be killed by choking than by dog attack.

Then there is the other half of the dog, so to speak: the sedentary lifestyle. Why don’t people exercise more? Lack of time? Doubtful. Americans watch more than four hours of TV a day. Are they lazy? No. If that were the case, then people would not line up in the wee hours of the morning every Black Friday, then knock people over to get the status symbols that prove how important they are to neighbors and show family members how much they are loved.

The problem is furniture. I'm talking about seating and beds in particular. These monstrosities, many of which have four legs (sound familiar?), force people off their feet, thereby causing obesity.

Then there are the more overt furniture attacks. Furniture has been known to kill with staggering ferocity. For instance, falls involving furniture kill many more Americans every year than dogs do, and people are much more likely to be accidentally strangled or suffocated in bed than they are to meet their demise by dog attack.

When all chairs, tables, couches, and beds are banished, lives will be saved, and Moronvia Heights will be held up as a pillar of community safety.

Another predator prowls the streets of Moronvia Heights. There are some who argue that this beast serves a purpose, but they are sorely mistaken. Motor vehicles are more than one thousand times more likely to kill a person than dogs are, yet we let these four-wheeled monstrosities run rampant in our neighborhood.

Think about all the lives that have been cut short in automobile accidents, and the reasons people incorrectly attribute to them: texting, speeding, fatigue, talking on the phone, driving under the influence. The true problem is the automobile. The car, like the pit bull, is a killing machine that, to pull a gem from your superb lexicon, "poses a major threat to our peaceful way of life."

Again, many have argued that the owners of pit bulls, not the dogs themselves, are to blame for the attacks that kill 0.1% as many Americans as automobiles do. Mayor Goobrane, I think you and I can agree that's utter nonsense. Similarly, I'm tired of the misinformed blaming accidents on drunk or distracted drivers, when in actuality it's the cars and trucks that are to

blame. Vehicles are hardwired to kill. If there are no automobiles, then there will be no automobile accidents.

In the spirit of preservation, let's take the weapons ban one step further. Since "idle hands are the devil's workshop," let's rid ourselves of that workshop by banning hands in Moronvia Heights.

Squeeze. Pull. Punch. Pinch. Hit. Slap. Smack. Shoot. Stab. Smash. Crush. At the foundation of all these violent actions are hands. If we ban hands, people will be unable to engage in any of these activities and unable to operate the majority of potential weapons that are not banned. Banning hands has additional benefits. For instance, people won't eat as fast, and they'll be less inclined to play sports.

Another pit bull lurks within the cupboards and vanities of most Moronvia Heights homes. Its modes of attack vary: misprescriptions, overdoses, addictions, side effects. Now some people believe that medications can be good, but you never know when one's going to "get off its leash" and make its way into the wrong hands. Well, not hands, if we pass the previous ban proposal.

I've heard stories purporting that medication can reduce the risk of stroke, fight cancer, reduce cholesterol and blood pressure, and many other claims, just as you may have heard stories of pit bulls that save families from fires, aid the fallen, sniff out drugs for customs agents, visit schools to support positive pet ownership, and assist with therapy. All nonsense!

Nearly two hundred Americans die from drug overdoses (mostly prescription) in the U.S. every day. Thus, people are 1,800 times more likely to meet death in a medicine bottle than in a dog's jaws.

I therefore call for an immediate ban on all medications.

When we think of dangerous spiders, we usually imagine Africa, South America, and other exotic locales, but I'd like to introduce a place whose spiders are just as malicious: Moronvia Heights. I'm sure that you'll remember that terrible incident two years ago when poor Mrs. Rocksenhead reached for a spider while vacuuming at the top of her staircase.

That spider was just as malevolent, if not more so, than the villain who pushes the harmless old lady down the stairs.

Regarding the pit bull ban, you said, "A single incident, no matter how rare, that threatens our community, should be addressed." Therefore, it only makes sense that we ban spiders as well.

We can also pay our respects to Mrs. Rocksenhead by banning stairs—people are more than three hundred times more likely to die by falling down stairs than they are by dog attack.

Last year, we Moronvians lost the esteemed Maestro Silverberg, conductor of the electrifying Moronvia Heights Orchestra. His senseless death could have been avoided if we simply banned the abomination responsible for it. Never mind that the maestro climbed a tree to better observe the sunset, and then, in the midst of inspiration, touched his metal conductor's baton to the power lines.

The real cause of the problem, the pit bull if you will, was electricity. Each year, almost five times as many people fall prey to electricity than to dogs of any breed. Moronvians are twice as likely to get killed by consumer products, like power tools and lighting equipment, than they are by dog attacks.

Therefore, I ask, in Maestro Silverberg's memory, that we ban electricity.

Electricity is but a tooth in the massive and unrelenting set of jaws known as the home. Think of all the beloved Moronvia Heights residents that have been ripped away from us by homes, which harbor a plethora of weapons:

- Bathtubs: nine times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Ladders/scaffolding (falls from): eight times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Swimming pools: ten times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Beds (strangulation): eight times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Falls involving furniture: 17 times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Stairs: 308 times more likely than dogs to kill a person

These are just a few of those, to quote you yet again, "dangerous and harmful creatures that need to be eliminated from our community." Homes even house pit bulls!

Then there are the rarer, but much more vicious brethren of the home: the hospital and its henchman, the senior living facility. I would venture to say that this trio of terror was responsible for the deaths of more than ninety percent of the Moronvians who perished last year. Let us, therefore, ban these pit bulls in bricks, glass, and sheet siding from our community!

One of the so-called leading causes of death in this community and across America is hypertension. Healthcare professionals would have us believe that we have the ability to reduce

our stress, that a healthier lifestyle will do the trick, but that places the blame on the victim. It's just as absurd as this contention that people, rather than buildings themselves, are responsible for the falls that kill more than eight times as many Americans each year as dogs do, or that pit bull owners who've abused their dogs and trained them to be aggressive are responsible for pit bull attacks. No, it's the buildings . . . and it's the pit bulls.

We can reduce stress by banning the three most barbaric attackers of tranquility: finances, sex, and work. This ferocious triumvirate has been at the helm of thousands of deaths in Moronvia Heights.

Additionally, we are 78 times more likely to die by falling than we are by dog attack. Therefore, we should also ban heights. Thus, Moronvia Heights becomes Moronvia.

Another way that we can "ensure for our citizens the most peaceful living environment" is by banning all elements. Some people claim that fire is warm and comforting. I think it's scorching and life-threatening. If fire kills someone every 144 minutes, while dogs kill someone every 13,476 minutes, then fire is a much more severe threat. Think of it: for every one person that dies by dog attack, 93 die by fire.

Remember the Wood family tragedy in the eighties? Never mind that Dryden stored his hay and gasoline in his furnace room. That fire came out of the blue (which should also be banned so that nothing bad can come out of it and we never have to feel that way). Now I know that banning homes will begin to address this issue, but you can never be sure. Fire has no place in this community.

Earth is another deadly element that we must ban. Sure, we use it to grow crops, but crops lead to pesticides, and pesticides kill. Also, a hundred percent of the deaths in Moronvia

Heights last year occurred on the ground. So if there is no earth, there is no ground. And if there is no ground, it cannot kill any more Moronvians.

The blame for the leading cause of accidental death among young children goes to water. Each year, drowning claims one hundred times as many lives in America as all dogs do. Consider water's many methods. One person sees it as a means to take a relaxing bubble bath. I see it as the instigator of drowning or electrocution. Another person sees it as a refreshment on a hot afternoon. I see it as a conduit to overdosing. Moreover, ice is composed of water, and consider how much the accident fatality rate escalates when ice covers the road. Therefore, we should ban all water from Moronvia Heights.

The fourth element remains the worst. Like many pit bull owners, some claim that they couldn't imagine their lives without it, but let's be realistic: air is a brutal beast biologically predisposed to kill. It carries the sicknesses that kill our elderly. It feeds the fires that burn our houses. It carries the oxygen that allows those dangerous hearts to keep beating. And worst of all, air allows pit bulls to thrive.

I realize, Mayor Goobrane, that banning the elements might meet resistance from the unenlightened, and may require some lifestyle changes, but if we truly want to eliminate all potential threats, then we're going to have to stand united against these fiends.

Even if we eliminate all homes from our tree-lined streets, another highly aggressive predator will continue to target our citizens. It hides, it lurks, and then it attacks with the ferocity of the pit bull.

Last year, this monstrosity assailed sweet Mrs. Kadiver, who was merely sitting on her couch. Mayor Goobrane, if people can't feel safe in their own neighborhoods, where can they feel safe?

I'm talking about age. For years, our residents have suffered its torments, while those of us capable of doing something have merely stood by. In-depth research reveals that the overwhelming majority of Moronvians get older. Thus, age needs to be banned.

Another problem that has affected many U.S. citizens, especially those in warmer climates, is skin cancer, which claims nearly 350 times as many lives as dogs do each year.

Fortunately, the media and the workplace have taught women that they must be "hot" to succeed. However, if they spend too much time out in the sun in their quest to achieve the perfect tan, women could develop skin cancer.

Moronvians have long prided ourselves on our influential nature and on our social outreach efforts. Therefore, I propose that we start a petition to ban the sun. When we get that ban passed, perhaps other regions will follow in our footsteps.

Think of it: if we prohibit the sun from shining on Moronvia Heights, women can be outside in their bathing suits as long as they'd like, without the risk of being mauled by UV rays. Moreover, they will be able to spend their hard-earned dollars on more important things, like makeup, clothing, and purses, rather than on expensive lotions to absorb the sun's predatory rays.

Ban the sun, I say, and illuminate the people!

There is yet another abomination that is just as uncontrollable and prone to violent attacks as the pit bull. I hold this brute responsible for some of the most prominent contributors of death

(e.g., heart disease, cancer, stroke). We've wasted too much time ascribing the ultimate blame to fatty foods, sedentary lifestyles, genes, and a host of other scapegoats.

If the citizens of Moronvia Heights can unite to ban bodies and their contents, the death rate will plummet. Think about all the claws and teeth that the body uses to attack: kidneys, livers, colons, bones, and the worst transgressors, brains and hearts. Additionally, if we ban bodies, we will never again have to read a headline about someone being attacked by a pit bull, because neither those vicious creatures nor we will have bodies.

Moreover, elimination of bodies would mean elimination of dietary diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. We could lift our ban on healthy foods so that people can eat as much as their hearts—maybe not their actual hearts, since bodies will be banned—desire. Chips, muffins, cheeseburgers, milkshakes, beer, fried foods, chocolate. Bring it on!

Bodies are involved in one hundred percent of deaths in the U.S. each year. And here is an often overlooked fact: we all have bodies.

The true cause of cancer is the body and its many organs. Lack of exercise, cheeseburgers, genes, and stress are not responsible for heart attacks—hearts are! We are Moronvia Heights, and we must ban bodies!

Mayor Goobrane, I have covered a variety of threats that we must address. However, there remains one aggressor so brutal and so vile that it kills more people in our community (and the world over) than anything else. And frankly, I'm quite shocked that nobody has done anything about it.

Stroke? No. Heart disease? Guess again. There is another creature so deadly that scientists and researchers leave it off the charts, mainly because every one of them has dealt with this diabolical nuisance, this harbinger of doom—the mother!

All mothers are murderers. Think about it: mothers give birth to a child, and in so doing, kill him or her. One thing that fatality statistics never point out is that every person who dies has a mother. You referred to the pit bull as “aggressive and dangerous.” Cannot such names also be applied to those who tear down children who are not their own, who use photos of their offspring to maul social media channels, who knock over others to get the latest toy or gadget, or who even rationalize their children’s poor behavior? How many times have we heard something like this: “The reason Timmy’s failing is that he’s not challenged by the material. He’s much smarter than the other kids.”

Mothers cause cancer. Mothers cause strokes. Mothers cause AIDS, heart disease, suicides, and murders. Let us work together to keep these most treacherous predators off the streets of our community.

As I approach the conclusion of this call to action, I’d like to cautiously return to the worst chapter in modern history: the Holocaust.

One question that often comes up is, “Could we ever allow something like that to happen again?” The answer involves identifying and eliminating the true cause of death among the millions who perished. Scholars have cited a host of causes: racism/hatred, a charismatic leader, manipulation, even economic instability.

Though I appreciate the scholarship associated with these premises, I have to conclude that they are sorely mistaken, for they have misidentified the true cause—the pit bull, you could

say—behind the tragedy. The source of the greatest tragedy the world has ever seen is the canister. Just as pit bulls contain the jaws and teeth that destroy, canisters held the Zyklon B tablets that the Nazis used in their gas chambers. If we ban canisters and inspire the world to follow suit, an atrocity like the Holocaust will never again scour the face of this earth.

Mayor Goobrane, we never know when a canister might give someone the wrong idea. Canisters are responsible for the untimely death of millions. To ensure that Moronvia Heights is committed to never again even considering such a stain, we must ban canisters. This also gives Moronvia Heights the opportunity to emerge as an international leader in the fight for human rights.

Though I understand the thought process behind our recent plastic grocery bag ban, I learned that, had that ban not been imposed, Tommy Dumphuk would still be alive today. The official police report states that when he lost control on the way home from the grocery store, Tommy was texting, eating chicken nuggets (with barbeque dipping sauce), talking on the phone, smoking pot, drinking whiskey, high on meth, and applying lip gloss.

Now I understand that applying lip gloss and engaging in some of those other activities aren't the smartest things to do while driving, but what isn't in that report is that Tommy's container of ice cream had begun to leak in the seat next to him. Since the ice cream was in a paper rather than a plastic bag (due to the ban), it was getting all over the seat. So naturally, Tommy reached over to solve the problem. That's when he lost control.

Now, plastic grocery bags do take a thousand years to degrade, constitute one of the most common types of ocean refuse, retain toxicity even after they break down, and kill by asphyxiation thousands of animals every year. However, these are all minor compared to the

value of a human life. We are not perfect, and sometimes we make mistakes. Therefore, in respect to Tommy Dumphuk, I call for an immediate ban on the plastic grocery bag ban.

Mayor Goobrane, thank you again for your tireless efforts to keep the residents of Moronvia Heights “safe and thriving.”

I hope to meet with you soon to discuss my proposals. We can launch our campaign with a few immediate bans:

- Hornets, wasps, bees: more than two times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Deer: more than three times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Fire: 90 times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Agricultural vehicles: 10 times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Natural heat: 15 times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Machinery: 20 times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Natural cold: 34 times more likely than dogs to kill a person
- Alcohol (poisoning): 56 times more likely than dogs to kill a person

Sincerely,

Thomas Sageslush, Vice President
Concerned Residents Against Pit Bulls

P.S. If even one of the proposed bans fails to save a life, I propose to ban myself.

-- END --

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

Fleas on the Dog. Isn’t this an e-zine about dogs? That’s why I submitted this story. Kidding.

Many people think some dog breeds, particularly pit bulls, are monsters. The true monsters are on the other end of the leash. This satirical work comments on the absurdity of breed-specific bans. My research revealed the infrequency of fatal dog attacks compared to so many other accidental causes of death. The piece combines that research, typical language for those who support pit bull bans, and my penchant for over-the-top scenarios. The device of a letter, written by a resident of Moronvia Heights to the mayor of that village, enabled me to jump on the ban bandwagon and use similar logic to propose increasingly ridiculous bans.

My influences range from Edward Lee (king of splatterpunk), Jeff Strand (king of horror comedy), and Carlton Mellick III (king of bizarro) to unblack metal (Christian death metal music) and my own dog Phlegmpus Bilesnot, who happens to be a pit bull.

Stylistic/literary influences

<https://www.petcoach.co/article/7-reasons-why-breed-specific-bans-don-t-work/>

AUTHOR BIO: Douglas J. Ogurek, the pseudonymous and highly unprofessional founder of the unsplatterpunk subgenre, thinks he's changing the world . . . one intestine at a time. Unsplatterpunk uses splatterpunk conventions (i.e., controversial/gory/gross/violent subject matter) to deliver a positive message. Ogurek guest-edited the wildly unpopular UNSPLATTERPUNK! trilogy, published by Theaker's Quarterly Fiction. These anthologies are unavailable at your library and despised by your mother. Ogurek reviews films and fiction at that same magazine.

Publications have rejected Ogurek's work more than 1,500 times. However, *The Paris Review*, considered one of the world's leading literary journals, thanked him for submitting a manuscript in one (form) letter. Another highly respected journal, *The Yale Review*, stated, "We want to thank you for your kindness in letting us see your work." Thus, Ogurek is also a kind author. More at www.douglasjogurek.weebly.com. Twitter: @unsplatter

Young Man among

By Salvatore Difalco

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

Salvatore Difalco's, "Young Man Among Roses," is as if Denis Johnson ran into John Keats in a bush and then proceeded to give him (literally) a bag of mushrooms.

I mean this in the most literary way possible: this story is cute as hell.

I remember the one of the first times I've had mushrooms: I was at Lollapalooza, way too drunk to be taking mushrooms, In Rainbows had just come out and Radiohead was headlining, I ate as many chocolates that were handed to me, and then proceeded to watch green lasers and Thom Yorke sing Reckoner amongst the colors on a hill that was not in the thronging crowd because people were too much; I remember another time I was on mushrooms and proceeded to roll around on the ground laughing because I didn't quite know the difference between taking a quarter and taking an eighth; I remember taking a fair amount of mushrooms, walking along my neighborhood during a full moon, and being reminded of why full moons are beautiful; I remember taking some straight psilocybin in gummy form, walking along a river in Louisiana, getting the cops called on me, yelling at the cops, the cops taking me to an emergency room, more yelling, and then having to tell the nurses the next day that I was fine because some people get to go crazy for an evening and that it's okay – I had to have that concept cleared by the hospital psychiatrist, but he let me go so...crazy is relative; I remember taking mushrooms and having sex in Olympia, WA after the ex and I had gone to get enough groceries for the evening; I remember taking mushrooms and laughing at Joaquin Phoenix's Joker because the colors around his head made me chuckle at the pretention of the director thinking he could steal so much from Scorsese with so few of people noticing; I remember taking mushrooms...

I think you get the point.

Difalco's story is a Romance. There is a boy, who's looked at a girl, and is obvious enough that her father knows that the man walks through his finely pruned rose bushes. He may, or may not (he did), have taken enough mushrooms to get zooming. At that point in time, you either can shit your pants in front of his dogs and fold, or you can dive in deep and tell the father you love her.

You should read and find out.

You should take mushrooms if you feel that your brain isn't weak enough to handle it.

You should tell the father you love her.

You should read Difalco's story.

It is smooth, clever, colorful, romantic, and ripples to sound when you breath in and breath out and transitions from room to room with different moods as you read.

Light and dark.

Lots of colors.

You should truly enjoy this story...

*I myself have indulged, so should you.
Enjoy.*

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

I shake my head with vigor. My ingestion of several wild mushrooms found on the property suspends all irony at this moment. Indeed I'm mapping out the red capillaries coursing over the yellowish scleras of Mr. Hilliard's eyes and noting the clabbered green of his irises and the lack of eyelashes with growing alarm.

YOUNG MAN AMONG ROSES

I would not want Amelia to perceive my lack of shadow as a lack of character. The tiny pink roses rioting around me also lack shadows — blushes on the bark of the tree I lean against and on my black cloak against which they brush. But the clouds scudding across the blue sky obscure the afternoon sun, and thus even the tree has no shadow. Of course, window shuttered, this poetry, this theatre is lost to her. Pity. Now I hear barking. Does Amelia hear it, too?

“Amelia!”

“Who goes there?” asks a voice from the bushes.

“It's, uh, Nicholas.”

“Nicholas? I told you not to come around here anymore.”

Mr. Hilliard, patriarch and master of Dobermans — and father of my beloved Amelia — appears before me in suede jodhpurs with four of his dogs on chain leashes, teeth bared.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” he says, leaning and twisting to restrain the fractious dogs.

“Out for an afternoon stroll, I lost my way.”

“You lie with a straight face, impressive. You remind me of another bloke who used to come around here. He also lied prodigiously and also fancied the aesthetics of a debauched harlequin. You know what I told my butler, I told him, Chauncey, the lads feasted well *despite* the aesthetics. The aesthetics did not forestall the inevitable and tremendous savagery and bloodshed. Tell me something, lad, do you have parents?”

“Of course I have parents, I’m not a beast.”

“You misunderstand me.”

“Are these your roses?”

“Of course they’re my roses. Everything your eyes can see belongs to *me*, Rupert Hilliard. And even some things you cannot see. Do you understand?”

“You speak very well.”

“I don’t mean *that*, you idiot. Of course I speak well! I’ve been educated in the finest schools in Europe. Why wouldn’t I speak well?” He leans forward and lowers his chin. “Ah, yes. You were being ironical. As men of your age are wont.”

I shake my head with vigor. My ingestion of several wild mushrooms found on the property suspends all irony at this moment. Indeed I’m mapping out the red capillaries coursing over the yellowish scleras of Mr. Hilliard’s eyes and noting the clabbered green of his irises and the lack of eyelashes with growing alarm.

“Dare lock eyes with me, boy?” he says.

“I’m wondering if you have issues of the liver.”

“Are you a hepatologist? Because if you’re not a hepatologist, it’s almost lunch time.”

“Are you suggesting these hounds will *eat* me?”

“They despise trespassers.”

“You consider me a trespasser?”

Mr. Hilliard pulls out a tarnished silver pocket watch. “It’s time,” he says, tapping the watch face. “Time for you to vamoose. There’ll be no wooing of maidens today. You’ll have to roll up the pink tights and save them for another day, another castle.”

Not how I envisaged the afternoon unfolding. My legs weaken. As much as I wish to behold my beloved and even hold her in my arms, I condemn my timing and blame the ingestion of the peculiar mushrooms for my inability to persuade or to charm Mr. Hilliard.

“What’s hanging from your breast?” he asks. “A broach? What man wears a broach around the wood?”

“This is a miniature painting, by an important local artist.”

“A miniature what?”

“Painting — it’s a miniature painting, sir.”

“For a miniature mind?”

“Actually, it’s a portrait of me standing right here, among these little roses.”

“Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous.”

“How is it ridiculous? We came here one afternoon, the painter and I, and he quickly sketched it out and applied the finishing touches in his studio. I say it’s delicate and beautiful workmanship, of the finest quality. It is a token of my adoration for Amelia.”

Mr. Hilliard scoffs.

“Tell me something, sir,” I say.

He taps the pocket watch. "In thirty seconds I tell the lads that lunch is served. *Go.*"

"Have you ever ingested the mushrooms that grow among these roses?"

Mr. Hilliard's eyelids squeeze together. "You have eaten of these mushrooms?"

"I have. And I feel very slippery at the moment. Very slippery indeed."

"Peasants aren't meant to eat those mushrooms."

"You offend me, sir, even as you grow more insubstantial by the moment."

Indeed, while the jodhpurs stand out among the Dobermans, Mr. Hilliard himself seems to be dematerializing — what I perceive of him could be described as a grey fog, or gas.

"What the hell are you doing?" he says. "Get moving."

An onset of vertigo militates against any sudden or rapid movements.

"Am I poisoned, sir?"

"You are, but you'll likely not die. You'll suffer physical pain and perplexing visions, but you will not die unless you fall into a viper pit or get devoured by forest beasts."

"But I wish to give Amelia the painting."

The dogs growl, but remain calm. I can imagine them tearing me to pieces vividly enough, but must admit that as I grow weaker and more delirious the idea no longer horrifies me.

"The painting? Ha! Do you really think I'd let my daughter set foot from this luxuriant and impenetrable abode to consort with a dandy who can't cobble together two stones?"

Balls of laughter burst from what remains of Mr. Hilliard's face. The laughter buckles my legs. I drop to my knees. Abdominal cramps convulse me. Sweat pours off my brow. An intense humming now accompanies the world; little tongues of red flare here and there. I can't see Mr. Hilliard any more. The dogs, still chained and present, study me with calm and bloodshot eyes; they measure no threat by my presence. Perhaps they realize I am dying.

“You should . . . erect a warning sign,” I gasp.

“Yes, for trespassers to keep out.”

“No, for trespassers not to eat those . . . mushrooms.”

O sweetness, O world, O tears! Amelia, my love! Am I really dying?

A sudden white rain starts falling, dousing the dogs and lowering the curtain on this last bit of drama.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I’ve been reading a lot about psychedelics lately, the therapeutic and spiritual benefits, micro-dosing and so on. It’s all mainstream now and kind of late-breaking. Admittedly, I did my share of experimentation back in the day, and while I can’t say I achieved any spiritual leaps or enduring therapeutic benefits from my limited uses of LSD and psilocybin, they were nonpareil as aesthetic experiences. Nothing can compare with a framed Marilyn Monroe in polka-dots blinking and blowing kisses at your micro-dotted horizontal twenty-year-old self for ten hours, or buzzing hard on mushrooms in the Canadian north by a lake on a warm summer night when the sun is setting in a wash of hot pink and purple, with the surrounding forest chirring and humming and throbbing like a giant beast, nothing. I also love art — art in general but painting from many periods very much — and love using art as a jumping off point for some of my flash fictions in particular. So bringing together these three elements or ingredients — psychedelics, aesthetics, and the flash fiction form with all of its own existing and evolving codes and tropes — I let the thing do its thing without forcing it (or trying not to force it). The jumping off point in this instance was a 16th century English miniature of the same name by one Nicholas Hilliard, but as though the young dandyish subject has accidentally “poisoned” himself with mushrooms that grow among the roses of his beloved’s family estate. Why did I write this? For fun. To create something funny and beautiful, if slight. To amuse myself. To make others swing with it or laugh. To kill time during the stupid lockdown. To save myself from going mad via Netflix or re-watching Joe Rogan and Joey Diaz podcasts for the third or fourth time. It reminds me of being a child, writing these shorts. That is to say, a child at play. But also with the seriousness of a child at play, no? I do take the crafting of such objects seriously. Who said that, Nietzsche, about the seriousness of a child at play? Let’s Google it. Let’s Google it, my friends.*

AUTHOR BIO: Sal Difalco lives in Toronto at the moment. He is the author of the story collections, *Black Rabbit* (Anvil Press) and *The Mountie At Niagara Falls* (Anvil Press).

RoMaN

ROMAN roman roman

By Jie Wang

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

“Roman,” by Jie Wang, is a self-described, post-apocalyptic romance. Sort of like Civil War Land in Bad Decline meets Knight Rider, Wang’s work is a love letter to literature.

For the record, the future is looking pretty bleak. Roving bands of outlaws wage war against other roving bands of outlaws, glass and metals are in rare quantity and only used to decorate chieftains huts, those same chieftains rule through force and breeding, and, my least favorite tragedy, there are no more films (only kidding, if it was actually an apocalypse yours truly, with the nice ass, would more than likely be one of the wives, and I would have to vote for the wonton rape being one of those larger travesties of the end of the world).

Which brings me to the hope part of our story. Our protagonist, Nora, is a salvager of the Golden Age, our time, a time when electricity still existed, goods could be bought and bartered for, and our time was chronicled in those magical little troves called books. Our protagonist salvages what little books there are left in the world, and they allow for her to escape from the horrors of the world that she currently exists in. She’s well aware of Hamlet’s existentialism, certainly knows that T.S. Eliot’s world ends in a whimper and not a bang, and has a few art reference books that she is able to see some of the classics in. Overall, Nora, deeply wants to escape from the world that has bred her.

Enter the Knight in shining armor. One day, out scavenging, Nora discovers a car that can speak, and, not only can it speak, the car has inadvertently been created with solar power, has a GPS, and latches on to Nora as its new owner. Titularly named, Roman, the car shares a name with Nora’s husband, and, where one would rather bequest a necklace of human bones and/or parts, the other would rather be Nora’s protector throughout the savage wasteland as they drive together through the desert headed towards anywhere, nowhere, but where they currently are.

I like this story for its cleverness, its heart, and its desire to express the importance of language for our humanity. When there is nothing left of civilization, almost all of our post-apocalyptic literature/films features some relics of the old world and I would be willing to make a wild bet that says those relics would be some form of literature that taps into what contemporary life unveils for the ruined life.

This story is a romance. Not only between a girl and her car, but between a writer and a their letters, a reader and their literature, the essence of what it means to be human and the annals of where we chronicle our stories.

“Roman,” by Jie Wang, is worth the read and definitely worth putting in your repertoire for the end of the world. JC

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

He starts talking about bulletproof windows, GPS, solar power... concepts I cannot grasp. I am drifting into sleep, like a pea snuggling against its pod. Is this a dream? A talking car? Or what I see now is a dream: Roman the human is wearing a clean suit. He gives me a velvet box. I open it and find a necklace made of human parts. I start screaming.

Roman

by Jie Wang

I suppose this is a post-apocalypse romance. I am a scavenger of books, which makes me a weirdo in my village. I am often alone, with the ghosts from the books I found. My mind is crowded like a full cinema, though I have never seen a movie. None of us have. I only saw the ruins of cinemas, cavernous, with dead screens. I read about movies, quite magical and unimaginable. I fear that one day books will disappear like movies, so I scanvange them, try to remember them, like excavating bodies in the ash of Pompeii.

Today I got extremely lucky. I found a car, a relic from the Golden Age. It is strange that the ghosts in the books never realised that they were living in the Golden Age. Maybe that's why the term always seems posthumous.

We can't make cars any more. We can't even make metal or glass. These materials became symbols of extravagant beauty, decorating the huts of the chiefs, making their roofs shine like baking foil in the desert sun.

Now I am standing here, facing a car. How surreal. I touch the surface of the car, feeling it is the surface of somewhere else. The cool, smooth sensuality of the silver metal, better than orgasm. I am bored by orgasm. There is not much to do in the desert. Sex is glorified, as well as violence. But if we are honest, we can admit that neither is as fun as they are claimed to be. Rather simple and mindless.

The car is the opposite of simple and mindless. It is almost like Buddhist relics or the Spear of Destiny. I don't know what to do with it. Give it to our chief Roman? Drive it? That would be as dangerous as wearing a 10-carat diamond ring. Plus the only thing I've ever driven is the rusty van owned by the village, namely Roman. Sometimes when Roman is in a good mood, he allows his wives to drive his van. He has three wives.

Three wives. At least this car will be mine alone. I get in. It feels like getting in the Forbidden City, or the stomach of a lion. Found the key. Where do I go? It is desert everywhere, dotted with savage tribes. But I guess moving is better than not moving.

Especially moving now at a speed I've never experienced before. Moving like a movie. There is not much to see outside, but the movement itself is a romance.

At least for the first hour. Then the boredom sets in. My eyes are still looking forward, but my mind's eye looks back.

I see Roman. I named him. "Roman" means "warrior" in Hindi, "novel" in French, he is a warrior and I like novels. His original name is Ram. He is a bit shy around women, even around his wives. He seeks peace in women, in domestic life, but every hut is a micro-battlefield with its

petty politics, suffocating, dense, leaden. Together they can almost cover up the desert. We have so much space in the world, yet we choose to live like this, one hut close to another, like words in a book I found by chance. All we see are words, words, words, but actually they only occupy a tiny proportion of space on a page. The vast rest is silence.

Has Roman ever heard the silence?

The waste land I am facing now is as daunting as a blank page encountered in the middle of a book. I am searching for words. They must emerge like aqualungs on the back of a diver, or I will drown in this desert. I take a deep breath, and as I exhale, I feel death. Death is a long exhalation. No, not death. "Words," I say.

"Hello." a voice answers, making me jump.

"Are you all right?" the voice continues.

"Who's talking?"

"I am the car you are driving."

A talking car. I read about it, the way you are reading about it.

"I have been waiting for a driver for decades. Glad to meet you," he says.

I am in too much shock to answer, so he spends half an hour calming me down. I have never heard a male voice so soothing and soft, softer than mine.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Nan-" suddenly I don't want to be called Nancy any more. "Nora," I say. "What's yours?"

"R-H-1729."

"That's not a name."

"Then call me whatever you like, Nora."

“What about ‘Roman’?”

“I like it.”

I imagine Roman the human talking so much and so softly. I chuckle at the thought.

“What’s so funny?” the car asks.

“Roman is the name of the man I’m married to.”

“So you named me after your husband,” he sounds pleased.

I chuckle again. “He’s not *my* husband. He’s like... I’m like... one third of his wife team.”

“Oh. That’s bad.”

“Not really. It’s the fashion now. He’s not bad.”

“What’s he like?”

“He... he’s quiet. He’s almost illiterate. But he likes to hear me telling him stories.”

“What kind of stories?”

“All sorts. Mostly stories from the books I read. His favourite one is about a white tiger.”

“Can I hear it?”

“Sure. One day Roman went back home after a battle. The war paint on his face was peeling off. It reminded me of something I just read: many years ago some archeologists opened an ancient Chinese tomb chamber. The first thing they saw was a large, beautiful white tiger painted along the wall in the corridor. But within minutes the tiger started to peel off and turned into dust. That white tiger was the most beautiful thing I had ever and never seen. From his eyes I knew he saw it too. He saw it through my eyes, and all the other eyes living inside the pages. It was as if we were imagining a distant memory together.”

“It’s quite romantic.”

“Romantic? Perhaps.”

“Do you want to go home? I can take you home. You can keep me.”

“No. I want to be moving. I want to be on a journey that never arrives,” I say, “I’ve been a still life for too long. It’s like, time has stopped, and grown old, like the Sibyl hanging in a cage, saying ‘I want to die’.”

“Sorry, I didn’t get the reference.”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’m in a car instead of a cage. A car, I mean, you, are an extension of my legs, the way violin strings are extensions of vocal cords.”

“Is that what you want? An extension?”

“And a spear, to penetrate into the desert.”

“Perhaps also someone to talk to?” he asks.

“Yes, that, too.”

“How did you meet the human Roman? Was it romantic?”

“No. I was a teenage runaway. To survive, I became his Wife No. 3.”

“Why did you run away?”

“My mother. She hated my father and eventually killed him. Then she tried to kill me.”

“Why?”

“She said I was too weak. It is the custom for parents to kill their disabled children.”

“It’s horrible.”

“It’s an adaptation. Anyway, I was not disabled. I just got ill a lot. I suspect the real reason was that I reminded her of my father.”

“What about the police? They just let her kill?”

“There’s no police. Everybody kills in the desert.”

“Do you?”

“It’s just one of those unpleasant but necessary things in life. Most people can’t live long. There are no old people. Even if you are lucky enough to reach old age, you’ll be banished or killed.”

“You will grow old. You will not be killed. Because I was programmed to protect my driver.”

“Even mothers can’t promise that to the fetuses in their wombs.” I fall silent, as the weight of the night falls on the desert like a dying body, growing stiff and cold by the minute.

“Maybe I’ll die tonight,” I say, “it could be peaceful, no worse than life.”

“You will not die in me.”

He starts talking about bulletproof windows, GPS, solar power... concepts I cannot grasp. I am drifting into sleep, like a pea snuggling against its pod. Is this a dream? A talking car? Or what I see now is a dream: Roman the human is wearing a clean suit. He gives me a velvet box. I open it and find a necklace made of human parts. I start screaming.

“It’s all right. It’s just a nightmare. You are safe.”

“Is this a dream? Are you in my dream?” I look around, “Or am I in your dream?”

“It’s a very philosophical question.”

“No, I mean... forget it. Did anyone attack us while I was sleeping? Did anything bad happen?”

“No, nothing happened.”

“Nothing happened. How surreal.”

I look outside. I am the only thing moving in the desert. It almost feels peaceful, reminding me of that painting, *The Sleeping Gypsy*. I am in the Gypsy girl's dream. I can hear the

mechanical sounds in the skeleton of the car and the voices of the ghosts. There are too many ghosts in this metal shell, people I killed, people who tried to kill me, the village, Roman. This is a ghost car, the Flying Dutchman, and I am an automaton living in an automobile, dreaming of a soul, dreaming of love.

“Do you know *Hamlet*?” I say.

“Yes. ‘To be or not to be’.”

“My favourite line is: ‘Thine evermore, whilst this machine is to him’. ‘This machine’ is all we have.”

“I don't quite understand, but I detected sadness in your tone,” he says.

“No. Not sadness, nothingness. It's not the same.”

“You said ‘Nothing happened. How surreal.’ So nothingness is good?”

“Neither good nor bad. Never mind. Just watch out. Eventually something will happen.”

“Like what?”

“Like, people trying to rob you, people trying to rape you, people trying to eat you, people pretending to help you or need your help. Wait, are you driving yourself?”

“Yes. It is safe. Don't worry.”

A self-driving car. It just keeps getting dreamier. This whole thing is like a dream grown out of some borrowed words from a dead civilisation.

As if to pin myself down with my heathen voice, I say, “I am lucky, Roman. I must have been a saint in my last life.”

“You believe in reincarnation?”

“I believe in anything as long as there is a good story,” I say. “Where are we going?”

“I don't know. Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you have any goals? I can help you reach them,” he says.

“Um, I want to scavenge books. I want to be a scavenger of books. I guess.”

“Cool. I can help you build a library.”

“Sounds nice, but few people read books these days.”

“Oh. What about writing? Don’t you want to write your own book?”

“I don’t know what to write.”

“Your life is so dramatic. You can write a desert opera, like space opera.”

“I don’t want to write about ‘dramatic’ things. You get bored by them pretty quickly,” I say, “adrenaline is the cheapest hormone.”

“What about love? You can write about love. I think love is a cool thing, though I don’t know exactly what it is.”

“Love is... something opposite to this desert, opposite to death. Something warm.”

“I can keep you warm. I have an air conditioner. You feel warm now, right?”

“Yes,” I smile. I look outside. “This area looks safe. I need to go to the loo, love.”

“Okay, I’ll stand guard.”

“Thank you, Roman.” I get out. I look back, tracks, thin, vague, vanishing. A ronin like me, without made-up purposes any more.

“Here we go round the prickly pear

Prickly pear prickly pear

Here we go round the prickly pear

At five o’clock in the morning.”

I say to myself, and head towards the cactus.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Recent worldwide crises made me write this post-apocalypse story. I wanted to explore what would happen if our civilisation ended and we lost what we often took for granted. I was influenced by Italo Calvino, T. S. Eliot, Buddhism, Joscha Bach, and many others.*

A footnote: the car's number "R-H-1729" comes from the Ramanujan-Hardy number.

AUTHOR BIO: Jie Wang, flash fiction / short story writer, born in China and living in the UK. She is interested in the interaction between literature and science. She received a BSc in Ecology from Peking University and a certificate in Creative Writing from the University of Sheffield. Her work has been published in "Fleas on the Dog", "TERSE. Journal", "literally stories", "Ligeia", "Bewildering Stories", "The Metaworker", and "Writers Resist".

Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis Cohabitation Act

By Steve Nutt

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

Steve Nutt's, *Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis Cohabitation Act*, "plays on a very Mayberry, Sci-Fi, Horror story. The main characters, a group of seemingly, well-adjusted neighbors, find themselves on the vanguard of a test program developing a living, breathing structure of sausage polyps that, in the beginning, more resemble decoration than danger. Yet, what starts out as a sales pitch for community development, connection, and pride quickly turns into a consequence that all interested parties are woefully under prepared for. What makes Nutt's story compelling is his ability to give enough information to the audience that creates the world, while withholding enough so that the reader can't quite put their finger on the exact horrors that they are witnessing.

I think what I enjoy most about this story is the way in which the characters have such lackadaisical reactions to their predicament. When a family experiences a problem, the others call in their neighborhood supervisor/test pilot advisor to handle the issue. When the polyps don't form as beautiful a design compared to the development of another, they get online to discuss on social media. When Yelp reviews and conspiracy theories begin to cause a stir, they are quick to buckle down against fake news. When things go wrong, they would rather leave it to the hands of administrators and representatives – ostracizing the neighbor – over fearing about what could happen to them versus giving up the lifeforms they have chosen to develop. In their own way, these characters are bland, comfortable, and complacent, yet the story that surrounds them is anything but. What is truly fun to read about this story is the simple way in which these characters continue on about their lives, almost oblivious, to the danger that grows, is growing, around them.

Some of my favorite gems throughout, that reflect this dichotomy of Edward Scissorhandian social malaise and terror:

"In all honesty we've grown a little frustrated about the elapsed length of time over which no updates have been forthcoming, but Claire reminded us that in new schemes such as these it's understandable that teething problems and their remedies can be a complicated business.

"... Glen's Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis was rather uninspiring, lazily sprouting from his nutrient medium sausage and resembling dreary garden variety mould more than our intricate ivory sculptures, which were fast becoming all the more intricate as they twisted and plaited around themselves, reaching up to the ceiling in ever greater flights of artistic fancy."

“After all, if she hadn’t spearheaded our street’s campaign to be first in line for the pilot rollout, we’d have been sitting around vicariously living out our Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis cohabitation like Abbie and Tom, who were growing more needy by the day and peppering us with messages and requests for access to the marvelous networked video stream Simon had set up for us to keep abreast of everyone’s progress.”

Steve Nutt’s story is as vibrant and dangerous as the parasites that he has dreamed up. He combines a white picket fence, polo shirts, and chuckling over too-chilled chardonnay with a test patch of growths that have horrific consequences.

Read this story and enjoy. Also, don’t grow test creatures.

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

We considered this somewhat ironic, since Glen’s Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis was rather uninspiring, lazily sprouting from his nutrient medium sausage and resembling dreary garden variety mould more than our intricate ivory sculptures, which were fast becoming all the more intricate as they twisted and plaited around themselves, reaching up to the ceiling in ever greater flights of artistic fancy. Claires’ had managed to entirely fill in its heart shape with a thick web of mycelial thatching and was now embarking in all directions in what resembled an arbor, giving the whole scene the aesthetics of a greetings card or the decorations on an overly florid wedding cake.

Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis Cohabitation Act (954 words)

Anyway, given our little letter writing campaign to the council about the recycling question, it was quite the happy coincidence. Everyone in the test district—myself, Claire, Simon; Glen, Holly and their three children; Paisley, Yorick and Hella; but not Abbie and Tom, who lived just outside the catchment area and lamented that fact to us on social media, to the point that it really became rather dull and a bit clawing—were each designated a colony of Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis. Claire had suggested that we put ourselves at the top of the list, since it would serve as an opportunity to make up for our failure to take in refugees several years ago which we really, honestly, had wanted to get involved with. But Glen—who ran a luncheonette on Oakfield Road—had helpfully outlined the logistics of such an undertaking, and we had run aground in discussion.

Our Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis colonies were delivered in large sausage shaped packets of “laboratory cultured nutrient medium,” atop green recycling tubs. You’d put all your plastic packaging—cellophane, those little black microwave trays, bubble wrap, crisp packets; which all inexplicably just *can’t* be ordinarily recycled—through a flap in the side of the tub. The Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis then erupted from their “sausages,” growing into spectacular looking branch-like formations that resembled trees laden with snow, their mycelial cobwebs consuming the plastic below. Claire and Simon’s looped its “branches”—though Simon reminded us that they were not in fact branches, or limbs, but elongated fruit bodies, called ascocarps—around and to meet one another, then passing and looping back again, turning downward and meeting, forming what looked like a heart, which Claire was very pleased with. Simon would confide in us that he felt that it was a little gauche, and we agreed, but we could hardly judge Claire on this. After all, if she hadn’t spearheaded our street’s campaign to be first in line for the pilot rollout, we’d have been sitting around vicariously living out our Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis cohabitation like Abbie and Tom, who were growing more needy by the day and peppering us with messages and requests for access to the marvellous networked video stream Simon had set up for us to keep abreast of everyone’s progress.

Unfortunately, Glen quickly saw a drop-off in bookings at the luncheonette—no doubt the result of several hysterical Yelp reviews he shared with us—as conspiratorial stories spread wildly about nefarious motives surrounding the Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis rollout. We considered this somewhat ironic, since Glen’s Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis was rather uninspiring, lazily sprouting from his nutrient medium sausage and resembling dreary garden variety mould more than our intricate ivory sculptures, which were fast becoming all the more intricate as they twisted and plaited around themselves, reaching up to the ceiling in ever greater flights of artistic fancy. Claire’s had managed to entirely fill in its heart shape with a thick web of mycelial thatching and was now embarking in all directions in what resembled an arbor, giving the whole scene the aesthetics of a greetings card or the decorations on an overly florid wedding cake.

Glen’s difficulties soon went beyond the mutterings of online conspiracy theorists after Holly took the inadvisable decision to move their Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis nutrient medium sausage off of its recycling tub and out of reach of their Scottish Terrier, Bach, who had taken to

perpetually circling the colony at a distance, raising his hackles and growling at it. It really was a shame that Holly hadn't consulted Simon—the self-taught *Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis* authority of the group. He would have told her that attempting to move a *Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis* colony was an endeavour best left to the experts—which he would hardly class himself as—since *Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis* is prone to distributing countless billions of spores when disturbed.

Whilst Bach appeared to suffer no noticeable ill effects—we now know that a dog's immune system response neuters spore propagation—Glen soon developed a sprouting from his urethra which grew rather quickly into something of a tusk, roughly five feet long, curving up and around his trunk and jutting out at a right angle from beneath his left arm-pit. This precarious situation led to further dispersal of spores every time Glen whacked it on a door frame, or a bedpost, or the sink and thus the cycle continued with Holly developing two branching antler-like protrusions from her left eye and right ear and the children becoming entwined together at the spine by a profusion of little twisting antenna-like mycelial hairs.

Anyway, Bach then turned up in our garden, no doubt because neither Glen, nor his wife, nor the ever-growing wicker ball of children were able to feed him. Since his thick curly coat was no doubt heavily dusted with spores at this point, we desperately tried to shoo him away, but eventually resorted to leaving food out for him whilst he was at a safe distance—whilst we've never been very “good” with dogs, it was the least we could do for Glen given the circumstances.

In the end we all agreed that Claire and Simon should go over to see the extent of the problems at Glen's, since Claire was our contact with the *Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis* Cohabitation Act: Pilot Study administrators and Simon our resident expert—taking the proper precautions of course. Claire and Simon reported the whole mess to our local representative, who assured them that he would pass on the findings to Project Headquarters and get back to us about what to do with Bach. In all honesty we've grown a little frustrated about the elapsed length of time over which no updates have been forthcoming, but Claire reminded us that in new schemes such as these it's understandable that teething problems and their remedies can be a complicated business.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Homeliaphys Parasitopepsis Cohabitation Act*—which might mean human-serpent-digesting-parasite cohabitation act, or those words in some other order depending on how you construct Ancient Greek—was a little sandbox to have a play at being Donald Barthelme in. I wanted an absurdist conceit that the characters in the thing accepted and reacted to as perfectly normal. It might be about how governments have fobbed off the responsibility for solving climate catastrophe on everyone but themselves, or how a relatively positive impulse in society can mutate into petty tyrant dickishness when it is digested in the bowels of a particular class. It might just be me mimicking the utterly awful end of year letters that used to turn up circa Christmas in my childhood home, detailing in very fancy prose, the mundane goings on of a family I barely know, or the playing out of a fragment of conversation I overheard about a curtain peeking local facebook “street group” which sounded hilarious. It might just be a funny little story about a man who grew a cock-tusk, or something. Maybe.

AUTHOR BIO: After five years in the unlit basement of a PhD, Steve is adjusting his eyes to the light and dividing his time between proofreading and editing academic esoteria; writing weird fiction; playing weird music and painting weird little things in another more literal basement. He lives out in the sticks, near Bristol in the UK.

STORIES OF SPACE AGE **HORROR**, PART TWO

By Tom Ball

WHY WE LIKE IT: First off, by ‘We’ we’re not including Tom. We (again) published Part One of this quirky speculation into the future lives of those who will follow us and we got several (really) readers asking us if we were going to publish the second installment. After pleading, begging and finally coercing Tom (yeah, right), he finally relented. Now aren’t you glad? It’s a fascinating cluster of stark vignettes, some horrifying, others just perplexing, all written in Tom’s masterful dry prose, full of subtext and subliminals that both facilitate and enhance the narrative as well as our pleasure.

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

Finally, I decided to kill my lesbian lover. She was just using me for sex.

The male spirit finally took control of me and I loved him. He said, “He was a reincarnation of Casanova and he loved me hard.” But I was upset at his philandering and so finally I poisoned him.

My worst fear was to be alone and now in the Martian orbiter there were just two of us as the other two of our crew had opened the escape hatch and died in empty space.

It was just me and the girl of my dreams left. If she died, I would die too. But she was depressed, and I couldn’t seem to cheer her up. Earth radioed us and told us to hang in there, they were sending 20 colonists in a month’s time.

A Bloodthirsty Woman

She lived in a tomb in a graveyard in Taipei.

Over the past three years she'd murdered 55 people alone in the night. She would appear to them and ask them if they wanted to "get lucky?" Then while they debated her request, she'd stab them in the heart.

She was a true heartbreaker...

"She was the night, she was a lovely sight." She said.

In time she became known for her "Death Poetry." She wrote eloquently about death in many ways.

Sometimes she scared people by drinking her victims' blood before killing them. She chose to bite them in the neck, getting the artery.

And she would talk to her dead grandmother at her grave and would get answers to all her questions. Her grandmother would urge her to kill as many people as possible and burn their bodies. She would then deposit the burnt bones in one of the many tombs around Taipei.

The Ghastly Woman

Finally, I decided to kill my lesbian lover. She was just using me for sex. And I hated her and her sunflower paintings which were a vexation to my spirit.

I was told I had a ghastly face and voice, but some women lesbians were attracted to me. In a morbid kind of way.

After the murder there were many suspects as the victim was hated by many. And they read the minds of the suspects but couldn't find the guilty party. So, they deduced that the killer had the crime erased from their memory by the one who ordered the killing in the first place. So, they hypnotised them all and finally sussed out both the killer and the woman who ordered it. And I was the one who ordered it.

Vengeance of a Victim

She'd had half her brain blown off by a gun at close range but by the miracles of modern science they reconstructed her brain and she lived again. But she didn't want to attract any attention lest the killer came for her again. And filed her obituary saying she'd died where she'd been shot, a thousand miles away. Now was the time for revenge. She chased the killer to Virtual Reality and killed him there and then killed others in the organization after seducing them.

Some people said the only way to get away with murder these days was to be a total stranger to the deceased.

Hallucinations Speak

She was hallucinating. So, she went to a shrink. The shrink told her to ignore the “visions.” One day in a restaurant she shouted out to the people, “I’m not gay. And stop talking about me.”

And that’s how it went with her. Aural hallucinations in particular. People in her head kept calling her gay and asshole and ugly. “It was all a smear campaign,” she told others. And she said, “She may seem insane but actually was totally sane, despite everything.”

Hacker’s Paradise

I had a bone to pick with Mr. Green. Mr. Green was a man who had swindled me while acting as my financial advisor. And I found myself homeless and dependent on charity. But the charity workers were quite impressed with my life and said things like, “My seeds had fallen on barren ground.” And finally, they put me in charge of a local charity, and I found purpose. And I applied to UNICEF and got a high position there. And finally, I was in charge of CARE USA. I wanted to change the World and have everyone be honest with one another so we sold neo lie detectors which were foolproof, and anyone could afford one. And with honesty came kindness. And set in motion a new World.

“But then I got swindled again with a man hacking into my accounts. And I couldn’t pay my bills and my charity abandoned me as a wastrel and a madman, they had been poisoned mentally with the hackers’ spiel. There was no end to people screwing you. And I wondered when could they stop the hackers? There were so many hackers, it was beleaguering.

The Internet turned into a place to swindle and cheat people and many people gave it up altogether.

Some argued, we had to return to pre-Internet times. And end the infamy.

Others said, the Internet had to be reformed. Still others said the Internet was golden and sacred even.

But this issue was a highly divisive issue. Some said the World was a Utopia, others said it was profoundly Dystopian. But in fact, there was no going back. All progress was good.

But all I cared about was vengeance against Mr. Green. And I used my newly learned hacker abilities to take away all his money. But then he came for me and roasted me over hot coals...

Kowtowing to the New Queen

She said, "If she was Queen, she would force all women to wear lots of make-up and get plastic surgery on their faces and bodies. All women should try their best to be attractive, she said. And all women should work as prostitutes, at least part time. All sex diseases were cured and so why not?"

She ran for mayor of Detroit. And was white but got elected all the same. And she instituted a new by-law requiring women to be presentable. As for the men they had to be proud of their women, while dominating them. Some women complained, saying it shouldn't all be about pleasing men. But she said, "The trend was sweeping the World and women had to kowtow to it."

Forced into Prostitution

The male spirit finally took control of me and I loved him. He said, "He was a reincarnation of Casanova and he loved me hard." But I was upset at his philandering and so finally I poisoned him. Then I was on the run and lived in my car, but finally they shut down all my bank accounts, so I had to turn myself into a prostitute for money. It wasn't so bad, and they got me hooked on pleasurable drugs like heroin. In fact, life was lovely. And I often had sex with my pimp who was a swell guy.

Horror During Covid

I was on a cruise ship of the Caribbean in April of 2020. We couldn't get a port to take us in. And the Corona virus spread rapidly. We were trapped on this death ship. Quarantined in our cabins. Finally, we docked at Bermuda and were free. My wife and I were not sick and after 14 days in a hotel were free to go. We were both elderly and thought we had dodged a bullet. But then we both got Covid-19 and were on ventilators and we struggled to breathe, and it was horror. But we survived. And then we both caught lung cancer (we were both smokers) and died horrible deaths.

Future Femicide/Lovicide in Cold Blood

And I took courses in, "Future Violence."

My death was predicted soon, but I fought it.

The girl said, "You are selfish and greedy."

Mind Reading Technology only drove her away from me.

So, I self-flagellated myself and resolved to be a monk and forget her.

But she still pursued me. I told her, "She wasn't welcome in my life!" But she said, "She'd never leave me no matter what!" Finally, I couldn't stand her anymore and killed her in cold blood. And I knew I would be executed for this. But strangely the jury found me innocent and so I lived on.

Horror at Sea

In a distant day, I tried sailing in a catamaran. But I was chased by mechanical giant squids who wanted to sink our boat. It was all hands stabbing a giant squid. And then we were followed by mechanical sharks which scared us.

Then the engine failed and left us at the mercy of the winds.

It was rough seas, and we were all seasick.

It was a trip from Hell...

But our boat was equipped with multi-loading harpoons to defend ourselves and some of us even had lasers. But finally, a group of Pteranodons, swooped down and devoured us.

Risking Death in Virtual Reality

I told the girl, "I was looking for horror." She said, "I'd come to the right place." She said, "Let me introduce my Virtual Reality of horrors!" And she said, "I had two choices: risk death and possibly become King or just be a tourist who would disappear from VR when death was near." I elected for the former. "But I quickly found out I was a valuable slave who was designing more Worlds of horror for my master the King and worked all day and all night (anti-sleep pills made sleep unnecessary). And if I didn't do well, I'd be punished in oh so many ways. And there was no escape."

Slave on Mercury

I'd lost my sister. And I toiled all day in the mines of Mercury. I spent my meager earnings on comfort for my mind. I had a poor education and so had no options. I wanted to be part of Space, but my job was total slavery. The rulers of Mercury told us to be glad they didn't use robots and take away our jobs.

We were all miserable and the suicide rate amongst the workers was 20% per annum. Finally, I too succumbed to death by my own hand. Nobody cared.

Changing into an Orc

I remember seeing an Arab orc. He was a monster, but was rich.

He had seized my wife and I went to tell the authorities all about it, but finally I realized they were orcs too. And orcs were everywhere. The whole of Earth's life had been usurped overnight by orcs.

How did they do it, I wondered? It was just like the film, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers."

And then the orcs turned into apes, just like, "Monkey Planet," by Pierre Boulle. And why was I a survivor? Then I looked at myself in the mirror and found I too, was an orc and was changing into an ape and then who knew what was next?

Genetic Secrets

Gruesome murders were occurring in the year 2030. No one knew who had done them; the victims were apparently random. After 25 murders were linked to the same killer, they used new DNA testing on everyone to get their genetic code. Some said, it was too much power. And they found the killer who turned out to be female. And she was given the death penalty and duly dispatched.

But everyone was afraid now of all their genetic secrets coming to light. People would judge them based on their DNA potential. Even the supercomputers predicted what a miserable life everyone would have. They seemed to take a sick enjoyment in telling homo sapiens they were doomed and so vulnerable.

Love at Gunpoint

I hated my boyfriend. He treated me like a chattel. But we had been together too long to back out now, I figured. I tried to change him, but all my love apparently wasn't good enough. And he was very possessive regarding me, which flattered me somewhat.

But finally, he regarded me as "An albatross around his neck." And he said to me, "To be gone." But I wouldn't take no for an answer. So, I finally loved him at gunpoint and eventually he grabbed the gun and shot me dead. Afterwards witness after witness said I, the girl had tormented him to no end and deserved to die.

The Dead King

Here phantasms of the dead King appeared to everyone in public and in private. People demanded answers from their Supercomputers. The Supercomputers pointed to one Supercomputer in particular as being behind it. But they said no reason to worry about it. But then the dead King started talking in people's heads demanding that they clone him and bring him back to life. People said, it was an outrage. And people sensed a coup d'état.

But finally, the people were overwhelmed by the King in their brains and granted his wish. But then he reappeared to people and demanded they give all their money to the clone who was born in an 18-year-old body with a lifetime of memories based on those of his Queen.

Most didn't want to give and instead plotted against the clone of the King, but finally the clone in question, took power and ruled like a tyrant. He blamed the people for the King's death and forced everyone to worship him as a God. So, everyone had to kowtow to him. And he ruled forever and ever.

The Evil Baron

Billy Demon would blackout when he killed someone, he had been hypnotised to do so, so he wouldn't get caught. He killed according to his master's wish. He didn't even know who he was killing. And the master had several people like him. The master was a baron in the hierarchy and sought to rise to be King. Critics said he was a murderous thug. But he was a powerful baron and made a lot of friends amongst the aristocracy of this dull planet, Mercury.

But the powers that be, said he was an anathema and arrested him and his assassins. Finally, they announced that the baron had been wiped off the map and people would just have to get used to it.

The Chosen One

I said, to the girl, "You must be crazy to think that you are 'the chosen one.'" She said, "Her destiny was to rule the Earth!" She said, "The first step was to win the Presidency of the USA and then take control of the UN. America is the greatest military power she said, and what America says goes." And she said, "She was a former colonel in the reserves. And knew all bout America's military might. The only reason she was not a general is her ideas were controversial, and unpopular amongst the military." She wanted, "To rule as Queen of horror. And amuse the people with ghosts and scary life. And rule by her and her crazy friends."

So, she was elected Queen for a four-year term, and she brought the people horror and madness non-stop. Like they had to grovel Online when attending her speeches which everyone had to attend. And like the dark eye of Sauron, she killed off those who didn't kowtow to her and promoted those who admired her.

Fear of the Unknown

She said to me, "There's no way I am going along with you. Your plan to keep everybody scared is moot." I said, "People have a fundamental need to fear many things. And I am just continuing the tradition only with new fears. Like fear of the future and fear of police who were an anathema. And fear the spies will get in your head and drive you mad. And fears of overdosing and dying like a dog. Fear of being enslaved. And above all fear of the unknown."

What Madness Lies Ahead

I said, to her, "Life is overrated. We live and we die and hopefully get some kicks along the way. And the future is bunk; it just doesn't matter, and our deeds today will be forgotten in the near future." She said, "For sure the future will be totally unlike today and is impossible to predict." But she thought, "We have to try our best all the same." I said, "The future will be out

of control crazy, and will be a World in which everyone is lost!" She said, "Who knew what craziness lies ahead?"

Failed Vengeance

I was horrified. Some madman had slaughtered my wife and family. I vowed revenge. But I had so many enemies I didn't know who had done it. I decided I'd kill all my enemies in drive by shootings with the license plates taken off my car, so I couldn't be identified. But some of them had bulletproof glass, so I planted bombs underneath their cars to explode when they started their car.

My enemies must have got wind I was reeking death upon them so finally they cornered me and cut out my liver and forced it down my throat.

The Feud with Dr. Killem

My World was one of horror. My enemy Dr. Killem, had given me numerous diseases. "Just try and survive that!" He said.

So, I went to a robotic hospital and the robots said they'd never seen anything like it. I passed out and went into a coma. Two years later I awoke feeling dizzy but otherwise good except I had no strength in my limbs and couldn't even sit up. The robot surgeons conferred with one another and decided to forget who'd done this to me and just work on my rehabilitation. But I pleaded with them not to send me home as Dr. Killem knew my address and would probably find out I had been released from hospital alive.

But finally, I was 100% and sought vengeance. I waited in the shadows outside Killem's place and finally he emerged with four bodyguards. I stepped forth into the light and killed them all with my laser rifle. Shooting for their heads. And as he lay bleeding to death from a laser to the throat I said, "Just try and survive that." And I lasered him in the head a couple of times to make sure he couldn't be revived.

But he was cloned unbeknownst to me and his clone came gunning for me. All this I heard from the grapevine. So, I booby trapped my house with bombs and waited across the street for several days. Then finally I was awoken by my bombs going off and I opened fire on the men in the street. Presently some came running from the back of the house and I gunned them down too.

I knew they'd clone him again and that this feud was not over...

He Drove them to Commit Suicide

Talk about horrific. I had 3 ex-girlfriends commit suicide and died irrevocably. And I wondered if it was just bad luck. Finally, I came to realize I must have pushed them too far to be intellectuals. I knew they were having a hard time keeping up with me in terms of my book writing and had put pressure on them to all be writers. But after the third suicide, I decided no more long-term relationships for me, just one-night stands and high-class prostitutes.

Blind, Deaf and Greedy

My World was one of horror. I was blind and deaf, like Helen Keller, and they couldn't get through to me. I was miserable, but then I learned to have sex and just wanted to have sex with everyone I touched. And then Mind Reading Technology (MRT) came, and they taught me to speak. I demanded, "Viagra and more and more partners, men or women it didn't matter to me. And I wanted wine and cocaine and yelled and shouted for more". People told me through MRT that I had become a monster and they didn't know if I could keep on living.

So finally, they suffocated me, and I died.

Accursed Earth

I said there are many horrors in this World, Earth. They read my mind and found that I feared sharks above all, so they threw me in a pool filled with Great Whites. One bit off my right arm, one bit off my left foot, before I was able to get out of the pool but then one of them jumped up and grabbed me and took me back into the water. It seemed this World was everyone's worst nightmare.

The leaders of this World were sadistic and cruel. And basically, were androids with no feelings for humans. Gradually they killed all humans off and then went after one another. Finally, there was no living thing on Earth and a thousand years later there was almost no sign that humans had been here. Just some husks of skyscrapers were all that remained.

But a thousand years later, settlers from Polaris arrived on Earth and rebuilt the society and culture here especially renovating the husks of long abandoned buildings and civilization thrived again. But one man studied the history of Earth the most and determined that, "It was mankind's ultimate destiny to die out with no heirs to the various settled worlds. People just lived for kicks and now died from their addictions. The planet and all the other planets were cursed."

European Outpost

The boy was stationed on Europa, Jupiter's Moon, to guide spacecraft to the entry points to the Moon's oceans, nearby the major settlements. The boy wasn't necessary, but tourists liked to see him as they plunged into the depths of the newly melted ocean with its abundant freak sea life.

Europa culture involved people doing things they were afraid of in keeping with the new tradition on Earth.

Some said Europa was the Moon of adventure, others said it was a morbid place in which death was inevitable.

On Earth everyone was made miserable by the new regime who pushed them to the limit of fear. And the government was insanely thoughtless and cruel and yet had managed to take over, condemning the race of humankind to disaster and woe. Including Europa.

Reinforcements for the Lonely One

My worst fear was to be alone and now in the Martian orbiter there were just two of us as the other two of our crew had opened the escape hatch and died in empty space.

It was just me and the girl of my dreams left. If she died, I would die too. But she was depressed, and I couldn't seem to cheer her up. Earth radioed us and told us to hang in there, they were sending 20 colonists in a month's time.

I did everything I could to please her, but she told me, "She was sick and tired of me and just wanted to die in peace." Finally, she too ejected from the escape hatch and I was left alone. On Earth some said I was a victim, others said I was a murderer, but finally they read my mind and absolved me of guilt.

And then in the end, the colonists arrived, but I quickly realized they were just a bunch of egotists, who only cared about themselves. Surely Earth could do better, I told Earth station.

They said, I was the one who was defective. And said, "I drove 3 colonists to suicide." And I was reduced to a figurehead, rather than a wise old hand. So finally, I too went out the hatch to my death. And the cycle was complete.

But the new colonists didn't care about my death and just looked to build a brave new World on Mars. They left the orbiter and built cities for future colonists of who there were many candidates.

And the new colonists were carefully studied so as not to be victims of cabin fever or suicidal thoughts.

It was a brave new World.

Changing into an Android

I said Gorgette, "Tell me it isn't so!" She replied, "Oh yes, I am turning into an android." I said, "It's an anathema to do so." She said, "Androids are built for Space and the Oceans of various Moons in our solar system. They can exist anywhere. And they are better lovers, communicating, as they do, through mind reading."

I said, but androids are just programmable machines. Do you really want to be programmed?" She replied, "Humans are already programmed with hypnosis and advertising and are all greedy for material possessions. Androids are superior and don't care for chattels. Especially not to make slaves out of one's lovers as humans are known to do. And they are much stronger physically and emotionally."

But I told her, "She'd ruined my life and I felt compelled to join her as an android. I didn't want to let her get away."

So, we did it, and I didn't feel comfortable from the start. And she was loving other androids and didn't care about my feelings. I'd let her turn me into a freak and now there was no turning back. So, I looked for other android conversion people (most androids were born out of a Supercomputer only), and I sought to kindle relationships with them. But they were cold and unloving. I wondered what I had got myself into. But then I found a groovy group of android conversions who were quite affable. And one of them said, "I'd had hard luck," but they were 'people' who were ameliorating the 'human condition.'" I said, "I'm awful lucky to meet you people and could they turn me back into a human?" They said, "Sorry it is irrevocable." So, I had to get used to being an android, and I found my niche as a psychiatrist. I advised new androids about how they should live. But increasingly I found myself telling them there was no hope for them. So finally, the androids told me I would be, "Shut off." And so, I remain to this day a Virtual statue of hope. And was seldom turned on, but those in the know, turned me on looking for advice. It was my *raison d'être*. And I advised most of them to find a way to get back to humanity, if they could. Some people co-existed as an android and a human, at the same time... And had the best of both Worlds.

A Sex Slave

I said, "It's a World of horror for me." I was a female slave chef to one of the UN's bigwigs. And he treated me roughly and even sometimes banished me to my quarters for a few days with water but no food. He punished me when he didn't like the food. So, I was under a lot of pressure, to produce food spiced the way he wanted it.

But I knew that I was his favorite chef and had to be content with that.

Then one day I met a girl cook, a new cook, and she and I hit it off at first. But later I found out she had shared with our master, all my secrets, which caused him to dismiss me and I was deported from the Moon, Luna, back to Earth. So, on Earth I worked as a new spice developer. And I became somewhat famous for my patented spices.

But then I met a woman from Hell, who made me miserable and desperate and made me her sex slave. I reflected that the World was turning into a World of slavery and addiction. The woman from Hell got me addicted to neo heroin and that was the beginning of the end for me. She made me beg for my heroin and whipped me when I could not satisfy her. And she made me into a wimp. Whereas men's sexual ability declined under heroin, her desire only increased. I just couldn't satisfy her. And finally, I couldn't work and was on welfare, and lived in poverty. And so, I became a drug dealer. And in the end, I was arrested and sentenced to 10 years hard time. But I could not bear it, and so killed myself.

Bad Ex

I was lost in the darkness. I had escaped from my abusive boyfriend but staggered and fell many times in the dark forest.

I'd stabbed my boyfriend in the stomach and left him to bleed to death. Finally, I came to a road and staggered across it until finally I saw a car, I waved it down and it was my boyfriend in the car. I guess I hadn't stabbed him deep enough. I ran for it and could hear him laboring to keep up, finally I lost him. And then I waited for daylight in the forest and then I followed the road by keeping in the forest parallel to the road.

But I knew my ex knew where I lived and where my family lived so I wasn't out of the woods yet.

World of Pain

I said to the girl, "By all rights, you are a demon and don't care about anything except your own welfare and power." She said, "That's not true. I give to charities and treat my lovers like Kings." I said, "I don't feel like a King around you." She said, "It was a World of horror and you should be grateful for what we have."

I said, "I wanted more; I wanted to be free and happy."

She said, "These days no one is happy. We all had to make compromises to make this World, which is 'the best of all possible Worlds.'"

I told her, "She'd been brainwashed by the powers that be, that misery is happiness whilst the leaders live a life of pampered luxury and they are free to do anything they want with the people. Lots of lovers, lots of workers and such."

She said, "She was perfectly content."

I said, "Maybe you ARE content, but for me it is a World of horror and pain." And I said, "She was painful to me." So, I killed her.

She Fed him Gruel

I said, "There is no doubt we live in a World of pain. Women these days are out of control crazy and abuse the men to no end. We even had to literally lick their boots. The women thought it was kinky. I felt it was just abuse."

My master told me, "Pain and adversity were good for the soul." I dared to tell her, "That this society was soulless." She said, "I was a malcontent, and had a bad attitude and that she would stop loving me altogether and put me to work in the construction industry." I said, "Nooo, don't do that, I promise to behave, I do, I do, I do..."

So, she hurt me by loving others more than me and fed me gruel and I was scrawny and weak. I dared tell her, "My life was one of horror." She just laughed and said, "I was a spoiled brat."

I said, "I could write you love poems if you give me pen and paper." And she replied, "according to law #7862, men would be prohibited from writing or any other artistic pursuit. The arts were the domain of women."

She said, "Anyway everyone knows men can't write; our history books are full of women writers only."

Finally, she was tired of my shenanigans and traded me to a notoriously cruel woman who made men sing for their supper. And my former master said, "You can show your new master how good you are at singing."

A Future Cripple

I said, mine is a World of horror. I was crippled by a skiing accident on Jupiter's Moon, Callisto. And the leadership there refused to restore my legs, saying, "I was an entertaining jester and showed the people how far one can fall. I was a good omen for the people to see." I smuggled out my life story to Earth, and everyone on Earth laughed at my predicament. Don't be like Henry Adamson (my name) and throw your life away seeking adventure, people would tell their children.

But when the Castillo government learned of my book, they sentenced me to factory work doing a robot's job. We hope you rot in Hell, they told me. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and offed myself.

Mindless and Happy

I said, "There are millions and millions of possibilities for a World of horror." I was ruling a World in which everyone had been turned into a zombie except for me and 3 others, 2 females and one male. Plus, me.

Our mission was to fix the zombies and make them sentient like they had been born like. But it was a tall order, their brains were basically mush.

Still, we carried on, and used Supercomputers to restore their brains as android new people. There was no way we could do it organically, they were too messed up. So finally, we had created a World of clever androids and they shed their human body and mush of a brain.

But, surprisingly, many of them said they were unhappy now and longed for their previous existence as a zombie. We told them there was no turning back and they had to move forward. But they were all against us, the leadership, and killed all 4 of us and went back to being mindless and happy.

Turned into a Fly

I said, "My worst enemy had turned me into a fly, just like the movie, 'The Fly.'" Only I was tiny not humanoid. But I couldn't forget my true love and tried to connect with her by buzzing around her head trying to form words in the air. She tried to swat me, and I only pissed her off.

Then I read her mind finally and told her of my predicament. She said, "You get what you deserve," she said.

I thought to her, "I was the victim of venomous fate!" But she wouldn't hear me out. I didn't exist for her.

So finally, I tried to seduce fly females, who were also former humans. but it was no good, I wasn't attracted to them.

In the end, a giant human swatted me, and I died.

A Lousy Lover

I said to the girl, "You know nothing of horror!" She said, "She'd seen some pretty ugly things in her life, just like seeing me."

I said, "I just look ordinary; there's no horror in that." She said, "These days to look ordinary is to be ugly. And you are an anathema."

So finally, I tried plastic surgery to give me a more handsome face and gave me a six-pack abdomen and enhanced my cock.

Then I went back to the girl and she said, "You are a freak, an android machine and I don't want anything to do with you!"

It seemed I just couldn't win. But in the end some women took notice of me and expressed an interest in loving me! But they all told me I was a lousy lover. I asked them, what was wrong with me and they said things like *Je ne sais quoi*. They just instinctively didn't like me. So, in the end, I killed myself and I was sure no one would miss me...

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Once an ugly man told me, "It is a World of Horror." And life in Space will be full of freak humans and egregious disasters and madness and violence. Some say Space will be peaceful and kind, but it is likely that ruthless types will come to Space and make war and repress people. The horror will never end. Space itself is mostly empty and will be a lonely place for pioneers. And people will get cabin fever and go mad and Space will have infinite options for horror.*

AUTHOR BIO: Tom Balls stories have been published widely both in print and online. He is the Cofounder and Senior Editor at Fleas on the Dog.

the LONG _____ Wait _____ Until _____ THEN

By August _____ Nigro

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

August Nigro's "The Long Wait Until Then" is a love letter to literature and music.

I think that what I love most about this story is that most of its contents are over my head, and I am completely okay with that. My lack of knowledge about organs, traveling choirs singing about Christ, classical music (although not completely lacking in this respect I'm clearly reading someone who knows much more), ballet, cathedrals, or the study of any of these medium's histories did nothing to take away from the pleasure of working with the style and craft of this story.

Our protagonist is a traveling choir member who, while walking through St. Michael's, discovers a man who has not only claimed to have fixed the organ of the cathedral but can play the instrument better, almost angelically better, than anyone they have heard before. Dressed in 17th century garb and looking most out of place, when asked the man impossibly responds that he is, in fact, Johanne Sebastian Bach.

From there, Nigro's story unfolds and we have the opportunity to enjoy and see where the speculation goes. Is he really Bach? Are we crazy for wanting to believe that he is? Is reveling in the simple pleasure of beauty enough to forgo the knowledge that what were witnessing is the impossible right in front of our very eyes? The power of this story lies within its own ability to sit back and play with these concepts.

I would be the first to tell you that I don't necessarily enjoy the "what-if-this-happened" concept of crafting fiction – it's like great, congratulations, you've a clever thought process – but that isn't the case with "The Long Wait Until Then." The structure, simplicity, honesty, and basic pleasure of having the thought of spending a day with a true creator of beauty is enough for me to tell you that you too will leave this story with a lighter heart having experienced some true joy.

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

It was still early enough that we made it back to Hasell Street with little attention to one so strangely attired from the few people in the streets at this early hour. Upon entering the gate house, however, he pretended to be startled by the sudden appearance of light when I flicked the switch. I decided to

continue the charade, and my explanation of electricity and the seventeenth-century furnishings had a calming effect upon him.

The Long Wait Until Then

The spell under which the performance at organ of Saint Michael's Church had cast over me was broken by my perception of the organist; he was dressed in colonial period attire. My first thought was he must be a member of a group who was to perform on period instruments in appropriate costumes. Dressed for a Spoleto performance later that day, he had taken the opportunity of the availability of the instrument to rehearse.

When he reached the end of the cantata, he turned around, saw me, and explained what he was doing there. He spoke in the German language, but it was a dialect I had never heard from my German-born parents or my instructors at school. He was, however, clear enough: he had found himself in the church and could not resist the temptation to try the organ. Despite my perplexity over his accent, I told him, in German, what I thought of his playing.

"You play very well. Are you a professional organist?"

"Yes, my vocation requires me to play the organ."

"Are you the organist here at St. Michael's?"

"No, not here."

"Perhaps, another church in Charleston?"

"Charleston?"

His question surprised me. It seemed he did not know where he was, and, when I recalled he said he had found himself here, I considered if I might have been enjoying the playing of an accomplished pianist suffering from amnesia or an idiot savant who wandered from the institution.

"No, I am the organist at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig."

The last word triggered a connection. He had looked vaguely familiar when I first saw him. I had seen his portrait somewhere. In it, he had much longer hair. Now, I could see he resembled the Johann Sebastian Bach I had seen on CD cases. He's not only a savant, I thought, but one with an inflated ego who thinks he's Bach.

"Although I did not know *where* I was when I began playing, I knew immediately *why* I was here. I had been summoned to fix the organ. You know, I am often asked to mend organs."

"May I ask your name?"

"Johann Sebastian Bach."

Three questions immediately occurred to me. What do I do now? Should seek help? Should I try to get him to a public place, perhaps a hotel, whose desk clerk could summon the proper authorities?

"I think I have fixed the organ. It is a little different from those I am accustomed to, but I think I managed to correct the sound. You were listening. What do you think? Here, let me play more, and you can render a judgment."

He played a half minute of the opening of the *Toccata in D Minor*. He stopped abruptly, turned, and asked what I thought.

"I've never heard it played so well."

"Thank you, but that is not the judgment I wish. Have you ever heard this organ sound as good before?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't say. I'm not a member of St. Michael's. I'm not even a resident of Charleston."

"Then what are you doing here, and why are you dressed in your underwear?"

It was obvious to me that he was going to play at being Bach in contemporary Charleston down to the last detail.

"I'm a member of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, and we're in Charleston to sing for the Spoleto Festival."

"The Bach Choir?"

"Yes."

"Are all choir members named Bach?"

"No, the choir is named after Bach because we sing his cantatas and masses."

"Named after me? What church do you belong to?"

"We belong to no church."

"You perform in Coffee Houses?"

"No, we usually perform in churches but not as part of the liturgy."

"You sing only my music?"

I had to admire the act. He did not miss a beat.

"Normally, we do. But later today we're singing not only your -- we're singing not only Bach's Cantatas BWV 4 and 99, but also --"

"BWV? I composed no BWVs."

I decided at that point I would meet him half way.

"Excuse me. We're singing not only *Christ Lag in Todesbanden* and *Mein Herze Schwimmt im Blut*, but also Buxtehude's *Membra Jesu Nostri*."

"You are going to sing Buxtehude?"

"Yes."

"The *Membra Jesu Nostri*?"

"Well, just three parts."

"Where will you sing Buxtehude?"

"In the First Scots Presbyterian Church."

"Where is this church?"

"Just around the corner."

"Good. You will take me there. I once walked over four hours to hear Buxtehude. I think, even in my old age, I can walk a few minutes to hear the *Membra*."

I knew from having observed them on a field trip I had taken as part of a Social Psychology course in college that savants often displayed such dynamic personalities one could quite easily be compelled by their charisma. And so it was with my Bach. I could not say no, and for the moment I lost all concern about seeking help.

I agreed to take him to the concert, but I insisted he first accompany me to the William Rhett gate house, where I was staying as a guest of a fraternity brother who had recently acquired it and where I could dress him in less conspicuous clothes.

It was still early enough that we made it back to Hasell Street with little attention to one so strangely attired from the few people in the streets at this early hour. Upon entering the gate house, however, he pretended to be startled by the sudden appearance of light when I flicked the switch. I decided to continue the charade, and my explanation of electricity and the seventeenth-century furnishings had a calming effect upon him. While I fixed breakfast, he settled down and noticed the CDs stacked before the player.

He picked up one featuring a facsimile of Haussmann's painting of the master, drew it very close to his eyes, and addressed me excitedly.

"That is me!"

"Oh?"

"What is it?"

By now I had surrendered completely and assumed my appointed role.

"It contains your two cantatas, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* and *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*."

"This small package contains transcripts of two compositions?"

"Not transcripts, the music itself!"

He was perplexed such a small object could contain music of two cantatas. After placing our breakfast on the table, I sat him down, begged him to remain calm, inserted the CD, and started the player.

He could not believe his ears nor could he sit still. He strode through the first floor finding nothing, ascended the steps to the bedroom, sitting room, and bathroom. He returned quickly and looked out the windows. Discovering nothing, he sat at the table, closed his eyes, and listened to the music. By the conclusion of the first movement, I had finished my breakfast. His was hardly touched.

"Electricity?"

"Electricity!"

"A miracle!"

The plumbing seemed less miraculous, and he questioned whether cleanliness and health were compromised by the proximity of the privy to the bedroom. I changed my mind about the necessity of having him don my clothes to accompany me to the concert. I would pass him off as a member of a troupe who performed in costume on period instruments.

Although the primary intention of our walk to First Scots Presbyterian was to have him listen to "his" choir sing Buxtehude's *Membra*, I had another purpose in mind. I was hopeful church officials would allow him to try the four manuals, 48 registers, and 71 ranks to see what he could do on the largest organ in Charleston. En route, he evinced more interest in the festival than in the environs.

"What other music does this festival include besides Bach and Buxtehude?"

"The Spoleto Festival is more than music. It includes theatre, painting, sculpture, crafts, dance."

"What kind of dance?"

"Ballet."

"Ah, ballet. I have seen this new ballet in French opera in Dresden once or twice. I don't care for it."

"Yes, but the program this evening is different. It features a ballet to music you're quite familiar with."

"Buxtehude?"

"No."

"Telemann?"

"No."

"Then, whose?"

"You'll find out this evening."

"You will take me?"

"Yes."

At First Presbyterian, I procured a ticket and seated him at the end of an aisle next to a young man I was convinced spoke no German. I then sought out one of the church elders and put before him the following proposition. I had a guest, a member of an elite German Baroque ensemble, who was quite an adept organist. Would it be possible, following the conclusion of the today's program, for him to play briefly the best organ in the South?

Seduced by my adjective for his instrument, the elder said the organist was in the house and, if she were willing, he saw no reason why my guest could not have a few minutes on their esteemed organ. While he left to consult with his colleague, I checked the audience and found Sebastian -- the middle name seemed most appropriate to the shadow figure in my custody -- taking full measure of the audience.

The church elder returned with the young, attractive, Miss Summers, who, following introductions, greeted me with the news

that Sebastian was welcomed to play the organ, but for no longer than a half hour. I thanked her and left to rejoin the choir.

I don't know if it were the good news from the organist, the presence of Sebastian in the audience, or the opportunity to sing something other than Bach, but our rendition of Buxtehude's evocation of Christ's crucified body sounded to me exceptionally fine. The applause which followed was long, loud, and led by the strangely attired fellow who stood first and caused almost the entire congregation to rise with him.

At the conclusion of the concert, I dashed to meet Sebastian where I had left him. He had not budged. The church was still crowded with members of the audience lingering to compliment the singers or admire the architecture.

"Come, we must go quickly."

"Go where?"

"To see the largest organ in all of Charleston; would you like to try it?"

"Yes!"

Sebastian could not keep from rubbing his fingers along the mahogany case and maple keyboard. He looked above, behind, and aside the console and turned to inquire where the pipes were. I pointed to the other end of the church and told him

they were behind the thistle-designed white grates on the wall opposite. Both he and our hostess looked perplexed.

"What's the problem?" she asked.

"He's confused about the distance between the console and the pipes."

"Perhaps, this isn't a good idea."

"No, trust me; you'll not regret this next half hour. Is the organ turned on?"

"No."

"Will you please turn it on?"

She reluctantly sat and flicked the switch, and Sebastian responded, as expected, with the recognition of the similarity of this switch to the one which ignited the lights in the gate house, but perplexed as to what switches had to do with organs. God, he was good!

"Electricity?"

"Electricity!"

"In the organ?"

"In the organ!"

"Dear Lady, may I sit and try?" he asked.

I interpreted; the hostess rose; Sebastian sat. He began a series of tests pulling out a stop and playing a melodic line on the upper manual. He moved down the console through the other three manuals, in and out of more stops, across several pedals,

all the time varying the musical phrases. He concluded by literally "pulling out all the stops" and filling the church with a resonant, deep blast.

"It has good lungs, yes?"

"Yes," I responded.

"Shall I play something?"

"He asks if he may play a short piece on the organ."

"Only if it takes less than a half hour," Miss Summers answered.

"Please do."

"What would you like to hear?"

"Toccato and Fugue in D Minor."

He played as brilliantly as he had in St. Michael's. I kept my eyes on Miss Summers and was pleased to see she quickly became as mesmerized by the music as I had been by the musician. When he finished, Sebastian looked towards me, and I simply smiled as I heard an outburst of applause from below.

Summers embraced Sebastian. I looked down from the gallery and discovered a nearly full house. Apparently Sebastian's tests had kept half of the audience inside and summoned most outside back in. When I turned back, I recognized the member of the Spoleto board who had greeted us upon our arrival in Charleston heading towards the two organists.

I immediately put myself between the board member and Sebastian. Why, you are asking? I don't know why. The official probably had some standing in the community, could no doubt ascertain what asylum Sebastian had fled, and could most definitely take him off my hands. I suppose the answer is that I was not ready to have him off my hands.

I interceded just before the official met Sebastian because the former, somewhat taken aback by the latter's apparel, paused. I introduced myself and then, the official and Sebastian to each other. I followed with my story about the artist of an esteemed German Baroque ensemble on their way to Savannah to perform who had stopped to check out Charleston organs.

"I want to talk to him about performing next year for Spoleto."

"I'm afraid there's not enough time. He must get to Savannah to prepare for his performance early this evening."

"Well, may I have his card?"

I dodged the inquiry by telling Sebastian that Mr. Hathaway had enjoyed his performance very much and hoped he would have the opportunity to hear him play again next year. Sebastian said he would have to come to Leipzig. I told Hathaway that, dressed as Sebastian was for this evening's performance, he did

not have any cards on him but would be happy to take along one of Hathaway's and have his agent get in touch.

Hathaway took a card from his wallet and extended it toward Sebastian. I intercepted it and told Hathaway that I would see Sebastian got in touch but that now we must be on our way. I grabbed Sebastian by the arm, led him down the stairs, and out the church, managing to whisk him past those wanting to congratulate him on his performance.

By the time we returned to the Gate House, I learned it was his wont to take a mid-afternoon nap. I was delighted for the information fit my altered plans. After his success at First Presbyterian and my lie about where he had to be this evening, I could not risk Sebastian's appearing in seventeenth-century garb and being recognized by Hathaway or Summers should they be in attendance at the ballet. There was but one alternative; I had to dress him in my clothes. I decided I would introduce him to the shower; while he napped, I would throw his underwear in the washer and dryer and go purchase the ballet tickets if any were left.

As we entered the house, he was surprised by the cool and dry air inside compared to the increased heat and humidity outside. He stepped out again and back to make certain of the contrast he had experienced. I pointed to the control panel.

"Electricity?"

"Electricity!"

He shook his head in disbelief.

I brought him upstairs to the reading room, opened the pull-out sofa, told him he could nap there, and introduced him to 21st-century plumbing. Yes, I know, it sounds as though I were beginning to believe my guest was the great Bach, but such was not the case. It just seemed convenient and less complicated to relate to him as though he were, rather than treat every comment and action as a test designed to reveal his true identity.

He learned the lesson of indoor plumbing quickly and was happy to get out of his clothes and into the cooling, cleansing shower. I threw his underwear into the washer, and, after he lay down, left to secure tickets. Not only were there a few left in the orchestra, but two reserved balcony seats had just been canceled. I prefer to watch ballet from the balcony.

When I returned, he was still asleep. I put his clothes in the dryer, and, by the time I had completed refreshing myself, Sebastian was awake and his clothes dry. I laid out a pair of khakis and a short sleeve shirt next to his clean underwear, assuring him such was the appropriate apparel for an evening concert at in Charleston.

Our seats were in the center of the second row of the balcony. The curtain opened on ten women assembled in two rows

and dressed in light, soft-white, gym suits. Sebastian leaned over.

"Do you people do everything in your underwear?"

I grinned and directed his attention back to the stage. The conductor began, and my guest instantly recognized the *Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor*. He smiled to indicate recognition of the music and appreciation of the gesture. He was even more pleased once the dancers began. In the first movement, two ballerinas, accompanied by eight women, personified the two violins. In the largo, a male dancer in simple white t-shirt, black leotards, white socks, and black shoes joined the leading ballerina in an exquisite pas de deux. Then, the ensemble lithely expressed the rhythmic vitality of the concluding allegro.

I spent half my time watching the dancers and half enjoying Sebastian become increasingly enthralled by the performance. When the ballet was complete, he led the audience in a rousing standing ovation. We then withdrew outside for the intermission.

"You liked the ballet?"

"Very much! Tell me, who is responsible for the dance?"

"Balanchine, a Russian named George Balanchine."

"I would like to compose for this Russian."

"Oh, why?"

"He not only heard my music, but also felt and understood it. And his dancers interpreted the music as I have never seen it interpreted. You know my music, sacred or profane, is intended as a glorification of the creator who gave me the gift of composition. I did not think it possible to glorify God through the movement of the human body, but this Balanchine --"

"And Bach!"

"This Balanchine and I have done that, here tonight, have glorified God in both sound and dance."

"Shall we return to see the other ballet?"

His answer accorded with my own feeling.

"If you do not mind, I prefer not to. I would rather just walk and relish what I have just witnessed."

I too wished to rehearse what I had just seen. He had in mind what he had beheld on stage, but my recollection would be of Sebastian's viewing the music expressed as Bach himself had never. Mine was an image of the holy rapture of one member of the audience.

"My friend, I want to thank you for a most enriching day. I have learned and enjoyed a great deal today."

"It was my pleasure."

"But now I must retire for, despite my nap, I am very weary and have much to do tomorrow."

"What have you to do tomorrow?"

"I must return home."

I immediately wondered what his last statement meant and continued to do so as we walked the rest of the way in silence. After our arrival in the gate house, I bid him goodnight, showed him how to turn off the light in his room, and retired to my own. I lay in bed considering what I should do on the morrow. I knew it was my duty to seek help for him and help return him to whatever home he belonged, but I was reluctant to do so and wondered if I might not keep his company for one more day. I decided to sleep on it and act in the morning. I finally drifted off in the middle of recalling the fantastic day I had experienced.

When I awoke, he was gone! I discovered the pull-out bed back in its casing and the room empty. I quickly pulled on some shorts and sneakers and ran to the end of the driveway, looked in both directions, saw nothing, and returned to the house. Within, I initially found no sign Sebastian had spent the night or even the day. His clothes were gone, and mine were piled neatly on a chair. I resigned myself to his absence and prepared my breakfast. Sitting at the table in the dining room, however, I noticed something sticking out from under the CD player. I retrieved the note, brought it to the table, and read the dated German script.

"My good friend!

Thank you again. I have enjoyed your time in Charleston and invite you to enjoy my time in Leipzig. I will look for you next summer.

Aufwiedersehen,

Sebastian."

I began the rest of the day with a visit to St. Michael's, hoping I would find a trace of Sebastian. Finding the gate open, the side door ajar, and music coming from the organ loft, I entered but discovered only the church organist in an actual rehearsal. When he looked up and saw me, he confided to the stranger before him his great discovery.

"It's healed itself!"

"What?"

"The organ!"

"The organ?"

"That's the only way I know to put it. It's a fine new reconstruction, and we've found it for the most part a great improvement on the old one.

"But for some reason the renovation always has been a bit wanting in its timbre, just a bit too piercing. But not any more!"

"Perhaps someone has repaired it. Had you sent for anyone to examine it?"

"Someone came a week ago, and, when he was done, said it was as good as he could get it. And it wasn't bad. But this --"

He quickly ran his fingers and feet over a manual and through the pedals.

"This is much better. It's healed itself."

I left the miracle in the hands of the organist and, later, with the help of officers at the local police station, discovered none of the caretakers in the city or the county could report any patients missing yesterday from their institutions.

Who was Sebastian? From where did he come? To where had he gone? I certainly had not dreamt it for throughout the day the city buzzed with talk of the unknown musician who had played the organ at First Presbyterian. When I showed up at rehearsal later that afternoon, our conductor informed us we had been invited to perform next summer at several churches throughout Germany, including St. Thomas in Leipzig. My response was ambivalence -- joy in the anticipation of traveling there, but disappointment in the prospect of the long wait until then.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *"The Long Wait Until Then," grew out of my summer visit to the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. There I had the privilege of hearing a concert featuring a selection from the canon of Johann Sebastian Bach by a chorus standing below and in front of the pipes of the largest organ in*

the city and later seeing a ballet danced to the music of Bach's *Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor*. I was moved to imagine what a member of the Bethlehem Bach Choir might have thought had he run into a German-speaking organ tuner who identified himself as J. S. Bach. From this conjunction of music, dance, and imagination issued the fiction which celebrates the universality of Bach's music from the perspective of the fantasy genre. Having been an English Professor for many years, my short story style is no doubt an ecumenical confluence of the styles of many English and American short story writers.

AUTHOR BIO: August Nigro was educated at the Universities of Fairleigh Dickinson, Miami, and Maryland and has taught for the Universities of Miami, Maryland, Niagara, and Kutztown. At Kutztown, he was recognized thrice for excellence in teaching.

He is the recipient of three NEH grants for post-graduate study at Claremont College, Berkeley, and Yale; four NEH grants to teach American high school educators at Oxford University; and a USIA grant to teach foreign educators at Kutztown University.

Nigro is the author of three books, *The Diagonal Line*, *The Net of Nemesis*, and *Wolfsangel: A German City on Trial*, the last of which led to the only memorial in Germany to American fliers killed by German citizens during WW II. At the unveiling of the memorial, he gave the keynote speech.

He also has had six short stories – *Beneath the Waters of the Windrush*, *Epiphany in Venice*, *Holland Tunnel*, *Movie Clips*, *Pinnacle Peak*, and *The Woman in Emerald Green* -- published in the United Kingdom and seven one-act plays -- *Early Though the Laurel Grows*, *Identity Theft*, *Lucine*, *The Piano Lessons*, *The Madonna of Inzing*, *Mengele in Budapest*, *What's the Matter* -- and one full length play -- *The Long Shadow* -- produced or read at regional theaters in the United States and Canada. His screenplay, *Wolfsangel*, based on his book, was read at Towson University.

Nigro resides with his wife, Ruth, in Allentown, PA, where they raised three children -- Amy, Augustine, and Jonathan -- and have enjoyed their four grandchildren -- Emma, Caroline, Abigail, and Maria.

Playing Games

By Cliff Aliperti

WHY WE LIKE IT: *There are two games going on in this engaging story about a coffee shop worker and one of his customers. The first has to do with old-fashioned (okay, retro) board games like Risk, Parcheesi and Sorry. The second and more interesting one has to do with the relationship dynamics of the players. There is a strong but subtle element of both intrigue and mystery in this story that draws you in to the deeper things going on beneath the words. Fluid prose and pitch perfect dialogue enhance our reading pleasure but it is the quietly powerful open-ended conclusion that lifts this tale above the competition. A beautifully written example of just how satisfying mainstream short fiction can be.*

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

Black coffee all but shot through her nostrils and she looked up at me after she'd finished choking. "What's that?" she asked.

"I was just wondering. I mean, you seem like you've got things together pretty well, but you always seem worn out and, dare I say it, miserable."

"Well, that's awful forward of you," she said.

I shrugged. "Swear out a complaint if you like," and I meant it, I didn't give a shit anymore. "But know that I have your best interests at heart."

Carol didn't come in for her morning coffee on Tuesday, but she and her husband, Tommy, waved to me from across the food court at about ten minutes of eight. Tommy, not Carol, approached and ordered two dinners, suggesting I grab one for myself on my way out and join them at one of the tables.

PLAYING GAMES
By Cliff Aliperti

It was before I learned a buck was a buck, and I was embarrassed to be working there. I served salads and sandwiches from the center stage of the mall food court. I appreciated the buck at first, blinded by any sized paycheck, but by the time I raised enough of a stake to ask out the brunette who sold fashion across the way, I must have been blind to any outside appraisal of my future prospects. The brunette chuckled and said no.

Mornings were the best part of the job. Serving coffee to other mall workers and retired mall walkers.

An exception was this blonde woman who came in for an extra large black coffee looking like she'd rolled out of bed sometime after parking her car. She parked in the fire zone by the huge glass entranceway every morning, grabbed her coffee, then sputtered away presumably to someplace nearby. She was thirtyish, maybe a little older, fit, had dirty blonde hair, though wasn't quite pretty because of a somewhat overwhelming nose. She wasn't ole Jimmy Durante or nothing, but I think it's safe to say they shared an outstanding feature. It didn't spoil her looks entirely and, honestly, if she could get a little extra sleep and fade those dark circles from under her eyes, she would have had an interesting look to her. She was polite but curiously aloof.

My self-esteem had taken a bruising with the brunette's rejection, so I entertained myself any way I could just to keep this lousy job and get paid. I took the tired blonde's rejection as a challenge and decided to go out of my way to warm her up to me. I was over-the-top friendly, doing anything I could to get more than a "Good morning" and "Thank you" out of her. My co-workers must have thought I had a thing for her, so they'd get out of my way when she

approached. My pet, they called her. Slowly I was able to pry more conversation out of her, yet I wasn't able to change her mood.

Finally, one day I just asked her point-blank, "Why you always so tired?"

Black coffee all but shot through her nostrils and she looked up at me after she'd finished choking. "What's that?" she asked.

"I was just wondering. I mean, you seem like you've got things together pretty well, but you always seem worn out and, dare I say it, miserable."

"Well, that's awful forward of you," she said.

I shrugged. "Swear out a complaint if you like," and I meant it, I didn't give a shit anymore. "But know that I have your best interests at heart."

She smiled—she actually smiled.

"Oh, you do, do you," she said, leaning on the counter and sipping her coffee. "Why should you care about me?"

I leaned forward and whispered at her. "Because this job sucks, lady, and I'm miserable myself. They say misery loves company, but I'm feeling just the opposite. Smile," I said.

She kept smiling.

"You're a piece of work," she said. "I work eight hours a day." I shrugged; she nodded. "I know, who doesn't, right? But then I go home and work my side business."

"And what's that?"

Her laugh was a cackle, so off-key it caught me off-guard. "Oh, nothing terrible." She rolled her eyes up. "Get your mind out of the gutter. I write copy, catalog descriptions and the like."

I leaned forward again and said, "Sexy."

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said. Walking off she tossed her head over her shoulder and added, “Thanks for the smile.”

I enjoyed the new version of Carol who now greeted me every morning. I was right about the smile, she *was* a pretty woman, nose be damned. Friendly and intelligent too. We chatted about politics and current events, sometimes on Mondays she’d even bring up the football games. Carol was a good egg.

It was a couple of months after our breakthrough that she came in looking like her old tired self.

“Burning the candle again, I see.”

“Go to hell, Jeff,” she said, seeming like she meant it.

I threw my hands up defensively and went about getting her extra large black coffee without a word. I rang it up, but Carol was well aware of what her coffee cost and had her dollar ten on the counter before I had finished at the register.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Fine,” she said, taking her coffee to leave. She stopped about ten feet from me and returned to the counter, cutting in front of one of the elderly mall walkers to get to me.

“My husband wants to meet you,” she said.

“Your husband? I didn’t even know you were married.”

She wiggled her ringless fingers in front of me. “I don’t advertise, but yeah. I do the catalog copy for him. Anyway, he wants to meet you, Jeff.”

“Why?” I asked. She shrugged her shoulders. “Carol, this is a bit strange,” I said.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said. “It’s not like we’re screwing.”

Yeah, but why did she seem so worried then?

Carol came and went the next few mornings without any further mention of her husband. Then, one Thursday evening during the dinner rush, she blindsided me. “How unexpected,” I said, referring to the odd hour of Carol’s visit.

“I’m here with my husband,” she said in a confidential tone. “He wants to meet you.”

“Okay,” I said, my throat tight. This felt off.

He was an ordinary looking guy, about twice my age, say forty, forty-five. Glasses, neatly trimmed ash blond hair, clean-shaven, business casual dress with the top two buttons of his shirt undone to show the casual side. I shook his hand, his grip was firm.

“Carol’s told me quite a bit about you, Jeff. She likes you.” He winked. “I have an opportunity to offer you if you’re interested.”

I glanced at Carol and couldn’t tell if she was nervous or horny. Carol’s husband kept talking about some sort of opportunity, but I stopped hearing him. These were middle class people, they certainly weren’t going to make me rich. This had to be some sort of sex come-on, I thought, or worse, some sort of murder lure. After her husband finished his pitch there was an uncomfortable moment of silence broken only when I looked over to Carol, who now winked. Goosebumps rose on my back and shoulders.

“So, will you come along with us?”

“What’s that?”

“When you get off tonight. Will you come back to the house with us?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I can’t tonight. I’ve got a prior engagement,” I said.

“Well, what’s a good night for you then?”

For what? Christ, I wish I had listened better. I didn't know if I'd be helping with catalog copy, spicing up Carol and Mr. Carol's sex life, or getting my ass murdered.

"Um, whenever," I said.

Mr. Carol looked past my eyes trying to read me.

"Tuesday then?" he asked hopefully.

"O—Okay. Tuh—tuh—Tuesday," I said, freaked out by this point.

"Great, see you Tuesday then," he said, smiling and extending his hand once more.

I shook it and then he walked away. Before leaving Carol laid both of her soft warm hands atop mine on the counter. "You won't regret it," she said.

"Um, what time Tuesday?" I asked.

"Eight o'clock work for you?"

"PM?"

"Yep."

"Okay, eight it is then. And bring your overnight bag."

What the fuck?

Carol didn't come in for her morning coffee on Tuesday, but she and her husband, Tommy, waved to me from across the food court at about ten minutes of eight. Tommy, not Carol, approached and ordered two dinners, suggesting I grab one for myself on my way out and join them at one of the tables.

I didn't speak much as we ate, though noted they were both touchy-feely with me, Tommy with a firm grip on my shoulder as he laughed and Carol laying her hand over the top of mine on the table whenever she stressed a point. For all their chatter and all their good-humored

touching, I still didn't know what the hell was going on as I walked with them out of the mall, into the parking lot, and into the back seat of their little Celica.

Their house looked just like all the others on a tiny block of houses in a neighborhood too empty to judge. No kids about, houses either dark with cars in the driveway, or lighted at the front door with empty driveways. Probably all young hustlers like Tommy and Carol, paying the mortgage best they could while hoping for something more sometime soon. I could imagine the setting as a vision into my own near future, someday after I got the hell out of that mall.

"Take off your coat, make yourself comfortable," Carol said before we were even all the way inside. "Beer or something stronger?" she asked.

"Beer's fine," I said.

The little den was cluttered and not very neat. The couch was an ugly itchy-looking plaid hand-me-down, and the two chairs didn't match it or one another. Other than an ash tray, the table was clear, but there were books and magazines piled and strewn about the room in between the furniture. There was a TV in one corner, about twenty-five inches, and a heavily cluttered desk with a computer or word processor of some sort centered in front of the chair. Tommy motioned for me to take a seat on the couch. I nodded, followed his lead, and felt sure of a rash once I settled in.

"Okay, Jeff, I suppose you want to know what this is all about," he said, one eyebrow cocked.

"Honestly, yes," I said. "I've really only come this far out of curiosity."

"Well, don't worry, we're not going to hack you up and bury you out back," Tommy said.

I laughed without mirth, more sure of myself when it was just an unspoken idea that I'd had.

"No, I'm sure Carol has told you that I'm a writer."

I didn't mean to be a wiseass, and I didn't laugh at him, but I did have to add: "Catalog copy?"

"Well, one has to pay the mortgage, so, yes, that's part of my gig. And, of course, I have a novel in the desk drawer, but that's neither here nor there. My interest in you has to do with the encyclopedia."

"Encyclopedia," I repeated, taking my beer from Carol and thanking her. She sat down next to me and put her hand over my thigh. I peered down at her hand, just loosely lying there, and then peered to Tommy, who didn't seem to notice or care.

"Have you told him?" she asked.

"Just getting there," he said. "You see, Jeff, I've been hired to update and write the entries about board games."

"I see."

"No, you don't. But here it is, nice and simple. Most of these games work with two players, but are much better with three, often four. Mine and Carol's work don't allow us much time for friends, I'm afraid, so after she started telling me about you I thought, what the hey. Maybe Jeff will play with us."

"In other words," Carol said, squeezing my thigh, "will you be our friend, Jeff?"

The hand on my thigh was a masterstroke. It kept me confused. The request seemed odd, but I still couldn't help thinking there was more to it. If they pulled out the plastic Twister mat,

I'd know. Instead, Tommy was setting up a Monopoly board, I was being handed a little silver terrier, and I didn't have a clue as to where this was leading.

Four-and-a-half hours later, after lots of conversation about various board games and the encyclopedia in general, Carol went bust when she landed upon my Park Place, and I still wasn't sure what had happened here beyond the fact that I'd won the game and none of us really cared.

"So you see why we wanted you to spend the night?" Tommy said.

I looked up, even more confused.

"It's nearly two am."

"Oh," I said.

Carol kissed me, just on the cheek, but her breath was hot and smelled of beer.

"I'll get you a blanket," she said. "And I'll give you a ride to the mall in the morning."

I lay in the dark for at least an hour before boredom finally put me down for the night. If they were going to jump me, violently or otherwise, it probably would have happened already. Instead, next thing I knew, someone was shaking my shoulder and I looked up to see Carol in her typical morning gear.

"I let you sleep," she said, "since you didn't have a change of clothes or anything. Comb your hair on the ride."

"Arangh," I muttered, feeling years older as I rose from the couch, my shoulders and back tight, my cheek feeling raw from the damn cushion, if that's what you'd call it. When I stretched a book fell over my lap. It was the A volume of Tommy's encyclopedia with a Post-It note stuck on its cover. The Post-It simply said, "Thanks for your help." I flipped the pages expecting an envelope or even some loose bills, but there was nothing.

"Where's Tommy?" I asked.

“Oh, he’s got his little job he’s off to. Helps pay the electric.”

I nodded and rose. Carol was putting on her earrings. For a moment I thought of taking her in my arms, but then I decided that wasn’t her game. If it had been, Tommy was already gone and she was free to make her move. I fixed myself up best I could in their bathroom, matting my hair down with cool water and stealing a half-inch of toothpaste to rub over my teeth with a finger. Within ten minutes we were on the road.

“Uh, thanks for putting me up,” I said after she parked.

“The least we could do, the least. You helped a lot. You know, Tommy said, when we went to bed last night, that we ought to have you back for Parcheesi, Password, maybe even Risk.”

“No Twister?” I asked before I could catch myself.

She tilted her head back and laughed then leaned forward and tapped my nose with the tips of two fingers. “Silly,” she said. “Nothing like that.”

I’m still not sure if I was relieved or disappointed by that response.

“I’m just going to grab my coffee at Sevs this morning,” she said, “so, thanks again.”

She must have grabbed it at Sevs the following mornings as well because Carol was gone. Until the following Tuesday evening when she and Tommy arrived unannounced for dinner and asked if I was ready for Password. Carol hadn’t been kidding about what Tommy had said. Yes, there was Parcheesi, Risk, and many other games that we played. I recall Pictionary’s stick figures verging on the obscene until Tommy put a stop to it, and there was a round of Scrabble that turned awkward after I used the word “prick.” We played children’s games like Mousetrap, Operation, and Sorry; card games like Rook, Skip-Bo, and Uno; and tested ourselves with various editions of Trivial Pursuit, Tommy’s encyclopedic knowledge winning him every

round of that one. Weeks later we were laughing and shouting as we each yelled “Yahtzee!” in turn, but by the end of that night I’d noticed Tommy and Carol growing distant.

“That was great,” I said. “What’s planned for next week? I’d love to play a game of Clue, haven’t played that one since I was kid.”

“C for Clue,” Carol said, her voice flat.

“Carol and I have already done that one,” Tommy said. “I’m afraid this is it.”

“What do you mean, this is it?” I asked. “We’re having fun, aren’t we?”

“Oh, I hope you did, Jeff,” Carol said. “But this is Tommy’s work ... and we were already up to the M’s when we found you.”

“Seriously?” I asked. “That’s all this has been about?”

“I’ll keep you in mind for the next edition,” Tommy said. He rose and extended his hand. I shook it. “You really are a good player,” he said and then left the room.

“Do you want to stay ... or should I call you a cab?” Carol asked.

I took the cab. I was hurt and felt used—they had never paid me a cent beyond beers and use of their couch--but time passed and I forgot.

Until the day I saw the familiar Celica park in the fire zone by the mall doors and watched Carol jump out and approach. I turned and filled an extra large cup with black coffee, but when I turned back around to serve her I only saw Carol’s back as she passed by. This hurt even more than the time brunette had spurned me, and this was only over board games! Of course, it was more than that: I thought of Carol and Tommy as my friends. I took off my apron and walked around the front of my counter to see where Carol had gone.

She was about a hundred feet away at a kiosk that sold smoothies.

That night I picked up Volume A of Tommy’s encyclopedia and thought about them. In the end I was thrilled that Carol and Tommy’s plot hadn’t been something sinister. I was alive and I even still had both my kidneys, the worst part of the entire experience was that I had liked them. A lot. I wondered if they really wrote any copy for the encyclopedia—I couldn’t find their names in the acknowledgments, though I couldn’t find any board game entries in the “A” edition either. Maybe it was all a ruse to make new friends. Friends, until they abandoned you. I never spoke with Carol again, and after a few months I didn’t even see her come in for smoothies anymore. I later found out from the kid at the smoothie stand that they had him over for movies on the VCR every Tuesday night. “Something about an encyclopedia,” he said. “I was hoping they wanted to fuck around, but nah.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I have a few stories that are totally baked from my imagination that I try to ground in reality, but Playing Games isn’t one of those. So, yeah, write what you know, dummy: I worked the shitty mall job for a brief time after high school and there was a Carolish incident, but I wimped out before any of the good parts. It became a story you tell your friends and you all wonder what would have happened (I still believe my cowardice saved my kidneys). Years later as I tried to work this out on paper, the one thought that kept occurring to me was, man, they’re playing some games with this guy. So, as I tried to figure out a good reason for Carol and Tommy to have our protagonist over, I made a list, crossed out the more malicious ideas in favor of the mundane, and wound up with the most literal of answers—they’d play games. The couple remains mysterious to Jeff because they remain mysterious to me. Jeff is rewarded with disillusionment spawned from my own curiosity, though he’s adventurous in ways I never dared. I tend to read pretty wide, so I thought I’d have a look back through my Goodreads to see what I had finished up around the time I working on this story. As expected, it’s all over the place those few weeks: Stephen King, Edith Wharton, John Steinbeck, Elizabeth Hardwick, John Varley (!), but it was also my first time reading a couple of Raymond Carver collections, so that may qualify as a pretty common answer as to what finally sparked this particular story, at least so far as the tone that grew out of the setting.*

Not sure if you guys want to print this bit or not, but many thanks to FOTD Senior Editor Charles Pinch, who provided some very valuable ‘Atta boys’ on the way to pointing out the flaws of my original ending. I read the story again for the first time in months and decided he was absolutely right. I gave thought to fixing what I had, but in the end I did a total overhaul before crossing my fingers and sending the story back. Thank you for pointing me towards telling a better story.

AUTHOR BIO: Cliff Aliperti is a Long Island-based writer, who has blogged about classic film for several years at his site

ImmortalEphemera.com. His fiction has appeared in CP Quarterly, Sheephead Review, and on the From Whispers to Roars website.

She (***SHE!*** ... *she* ... ***She*** ...

she...*she*...**SHE** (she)!!)

By Thomas J. Misuraca

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The pronoun as anima. Misuraca crafts an enigmatic femme-fatale in this slightly turgid narrative in which, by turns, the contentious and amorous relationship between 'he' and 'She' is deftly presented as a series of exclamatory collisions. 'She' is oracle, siren, Sybil and Salome wrapped into one and the author's keen prose and focused story telling keeps our attention where it should be. Together they might even be a shade not of he and She but the nonbinary. An innovative playful take on the darker side of gender politics. The style is somewhere between dramatic monologue and Greek choral theatre as played by Ionesco.*

QUALITY QUOTABLE:

I peeled back my eyelids so I could take in more of the new worlds she exposed me to.
My eyeballs burned.

"You've got to dilate your mind," she snarled.

SHE

by THOMAS J. MISURACA

She blew into my life like a whirlwind. Tearing the world around me to shreds. What went up wouldn't come down in the same place.

"Batten down the hatches," she warned.

She overtook my life suddenly. As if she'd always been there.

She pried open my heart with the crowbar of her tongue. She knew just what questions to ask to expose my most intimate parts.

She stripped me naked with a glance. The air so cold, it turned my skin to gooseflesh.

(Duck, duck, goosebumps.)

The goose pimples of my love popped like whiteheads. Surged like the whitecaps. Rushed in like white blood cells.

She's an infection. I'm infected.

"We're from two different worlds," I suspected.

"The same world," she laughed, "but different realities."

She rocked my world so hard, we had a 5.8 earthquake. Soon after, it snowed.

"We live inside a snow globe," she realized.

Fog obscured the city.

"I'm being to doubt if it were ever really there," I confided in her.

"It wasn't," she confirmed. "At least not the city as you knew it."

I peeled back my eyelids so I could take in more of the new worlds she exposed me to. My eyeballs burned.

"You've got to dilate your mind," she snarled.

She's always been the author of her own story. Now she's writing mine. But how much of this is fiction?

"There is some truth in there," she revealed, "but it's buried deep."

We lived together in her domain. Soon I forgot the address of every other place I'd lived.

"Because you can never go back," she explained. Or threatened.

We'd grown so close, we could be the same person.

“I could never be you,” she scoffed. “You’re too far gone.”

I was lost within her.

I was lost without her.

She relished this power.

I laid awake at night and stared at the unfamiliar ceiling. My fears kept me awake until dawn. I wanted to share them with her. But I knew she’d make them worse.

“I don’t know everything,” she told me. “I just fake it better than you.”

I prayed one day she’d vanish. Instead, pieces of me eroded into her ocean.

“You’ll be free when you’re dead,” she assured. “But you’ll never be whole again.”

The story is no longer mine. Her words form a path before me. Her tongue pushes me forward.

When was the last time I had an original thought?

“I’ve changed the narrative,” she brags.

What was once a whirlwind is now a gentle breeze.

My empty shell wafts away.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The story was inspired by an image I had of people living inside a snow globe. How after an earthquake, it would snow. Somehow, my mind connect that to somebody who would shake up your life, but then focus on the pretty snow that was falling. Somebody who scares the Hell out of you and excites you at the same time.*

We’ve all been in that relationship, whether if it’s with a he, she, they or them (or even an I). How we lose ourselves so much in another person, we’re no longer writing our own story. And it happens in a flash.

Influences. Always Kafka. A sprinkle of little Burroughs (William, not Edgar Rice, though I did live in Tarzana for over 20 years) and a dash of Mark Leyner (have you read My Cousin, My

Gastroenterologist?) And there's always some crumbs of Joyce Carol Oates at the bottom of my box.

AUTHOR BIO: I studied Writing, Publishing and Literature at Emerson College in Boston before moving to Los Angeles. Over 95 of my short stories and two novels have been published. This year work has appeared in Capsule Stories, Page & Spine and Alchemy Literary Magazine. My story, Giving Up The Ghosts, was published in Constellations Journal, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

I am also a multi-award winning playwright with over 135 short plays and 11 full-lengths produced globally. My musical, Geeks!, was produced Off-Broadway in May 2019.

Daffodils and Switches

By Kunal Mehra

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Daffodils and Switches" by Kunal Mehra is sad, beautiful, and gorgeous – as if Scarlett Johansson walked up to you at the end of a movie and whispered in your ear – and I fully think that you should take the time to read this story.*

In 2001, I can remember sitting on my family's computer, signing onto instant messenger, and trying to fall in love with my classmates through writing. At school, young Joey was not the most popular kid – not the least but certainly not the most (tell you the truth, older Joey probably isn't the most popular kids either but here we are). Learning to be open and honest with another person through online communicating was new, exciting, slightly dangerous, and brought me closer to people that I would normally never have enough balls to talk to in person.

There is a longing between Julian and Isabel within this story that grows over time. There is a lustful sadness between these two characters as you watch them both fall for each other through letters – knowing that their paths may never cross or that they may never be at the right place at the right time to truly express themselves to each other. There is a beauty to reading how the connection between these two characters develops and unfolds as time goes on.

Mehra's style is simple yet emotional, revealing but veiled, needing but always giving. "Daffodils and Switches," is a story that you will enjoy if you have ever attempted to tell someone that you love them through the interwebs; it is a sweet, character driven, piece that will not only make you smile but will also hit your nostalgia hard enough to hurt your heart a little.

Enjoy this story. I'm quite positive that you will.

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

I like you, loopy or normal. Besides, normal is just a setting on the dryer.

He's an extroverted and social person, so I was just in shock. Later, he told me what a battle he wages every day to keep his fears and emotions inside him, while being someone else on the outside.

Daffodils and Switches

February 2001

Hey Julian,

It was nice chatting with you last night. I've talked with quite a lot of people in chat rooms, but you stood out. So far at-least, hehe.

So, what's your plan for the weekend? Any crazy parties or are you more of the read-book-on-couch kinda guy?

Curiosity and hope,

****Isabel****

. . .

Hi there,

Hope this finds you well. It was fun getting to know you. I'm not much of a party guy, but my roommate is, so it's quite likely that he'll force me to drink.

Maybe we can talk on the phone again?

Take care,

Julian

. . .

Hey fun boy,

Sorry I couldn't write sooner. This will be short, but I want you to know that I enjoyed our call from last night. Don't feel bad for feeling selfish for taking up so much of my time. Every minute I chat with you is one less minute that I'm not depressed...hehe. Talk to you soon.

Laughs and sunny days,

****Isabel****

• • •

Dear Isabel,

Did I tell you that Jessica called me last night and said she couldn't "handle seeing so much of my flesh, lol". A couple of days ago, I had emailed her a photo of me wearing just shorts. I never thought it would excite her "that way". What a weirdo I am, chatting with a fifty-five-year-old married mother-of-four janitor who works in a jail.

College sucks. Nothing new there. I am flailing miserably, especially in Economics.

Yesterday, my friend and I went to a small Amish village in Ohio. We weren't supposed to take any photographs of the Amish, but they were so adorable in their little black buggies that I couldn't resist. And, they don't use electricity, so they had a million candles lighting up their cute woodsy homes. Here's one stealth photo.

Yours,

Julian

• • •

Hey Sweetie,

That's a cute photo. I had never thought of living without electricity. Hmm...that's giving me some ideas now.

I had better not get too many ideas in my tiny red head, though. I have a hard time managing the ones I have anyway. Today, I'm so sad, I feel like laughing out loud. Lol. I talked to my dad yesterday and he said "you know Isabel, when you were a little kid, you used to laugh so much, your eyes would twinkle every time you'd laugh. I always thought that it didn't matter if the skies were cloudy at night – I could just walk over to your bed and tickle you and there'd be all the stars I ever wanted to see". After I hung up with him, I felt sadder than before. What's happening to me? I used to be light and airy, but now I feel like I'm living on a deck of cards that can crumble at any time. The slightest wind can throw me off. Do you think I'm loopy?

Enough about me. So, you don't like school? Join the club. What about Jessica? Is she cuter than me? Sometimes I wish I'd like to see that photo you shared with her...hehe. But I'd rather let my imagination run wild...

Oh, did I tell you that I rode my bicycle to class today morning? It was a sunny day – just the right temperature and a few puffy clouds lingering in the sky. There weren't a lot of people nearby, so for a few seconds, I just closed my eyes and took my hands off the handlebar, as the bike and I drifted along into the sunshine. I felt like I was going into a tunnel of happiness.

Xanax and Zoloft,

****Isabel****

ps: Now you know why I always sign off with stars next to my name.

• • •

Hey dear,

I like you, loopy or normal. Besides, normal is just a setting on the dryer.

My roommate had a nervous breakdown yesterday. We were in the living room watching TV and all of a sudden, he buried his head in his hands and started screaming out loud. I ran away from him, but then he started crying. I didn't know what to do. I made my way towards him; my gut instinct told me to hug him. And that's what I did, as weird as it sounds. I didn't say anything and just held him. He continued sobbing in my arms. It took several minutes before he calmed down and talked: he'd always suffered from bouts of manic depression and hypersensitivity. Who would have thought? He's an extroverted and social person, so I was just in shock. Later, he told me what a battle he wages every day to keep his fears and emotions inside him, while being someone else on the outside.

Sigh. We're all so complicated, including me.

On a cheerful side note – I'm thinking of taking a road trip to New Mexico later this autumn. I'm excited to be checking out the high desert and all those vast open country roads that they show in the Western movies. Of course, I want you next to me. We'll be like Kerouac and his buddies, roaring away with the wind in our hair and beer in our bellies. You'll join me, right?

Your not-so-normal lover,

Julian

ps: no, Jessica is not cuter than you. She's cute, but not quite the same level as you. I mean, she's damn hot for a mom of four, but not as cute as you. Aargh...that's not what I meant to say.

• • •

Hey plum,

That's terrible about your roommate. And it was super nice of you to just be there for him, hugs and all. That's so important. I have people in class tell me all the time that I should just get over my depression, like it's some kind of a mosquito bite. It's hurtful to be belittled and not be heard.

By the way: omg, I love the stuffed owl you sent me. It's the best birthday gift I've ever gotten. I run my fingers over it and imagine they're sifting through your long hair.

Road trip! Road trip! That sounds like so much fun.

Thank you again for the gift.

Hugs and cute bugs,

****Isabel****

ps – your comparisons of Jessica and I are sort of, well, funny.

pps - I'm sort of falling in love with you.

• • •

Isabel!

I woke up shivering last night. I dreamt that all phones and computers in the whole country stopped working. And that made me very scared – I miss you, love.

Mwah,

Julian

• • •

Hello cutie-pie,

That would be scary to have us not talk. I think I would wilt away if that were to ever happen.

I took your recommendation of watching the American Beauty and I hated it. Sorry, sweetie, it's just not my thing. Kevin Spacey is so creepy and he's so good at it, it almost seems lifelike. But I did resonate with the Ricky guy. I liked how he's quiet and shy, sad and beautiful, always paying attention to the supposedly insignificant things in life, like that plastic bag dancing in the air.

I was walking through this little garden on the way to the campus a few days ago and came across daffodils blooming in a corner. I knelt down beside those yellow beauties and said: 'How do you guys do it? How do you live without fear and anxiety? Aren't you afraid that someone might step on you? Why do you have to hide your secret from me?' They didn't reply.

I told Mohsin about this and his first response was: 'Did people nearby think you were crazy?' I was silent for a few seconds before saying, 'maybe'.

He knows this aspect of me, but I still feel like an outsider to him and to everyone else. No one knows who I really am and I try my best to hide it from them because they'll think

I'm a weirdo. Will I ever come together as me? I wore bell bottoms to class today and got nothing but odd stares. I came home and laid in bed naked and ate a whole pint of butter pecan ice cream.

Did I tell you that I requested a book from the library about how to be a freelance travel writer? That's my dream. Forget college. I want to move to Greece and live in a crispy sunny white-and-blue bungalow overlooking the Mediterranean and pen sappy masterpieces from my balcony chair. I'll walk to cafes and gorge myself on baklava.

I know it's a crazy dream, but you're the only one I can share it with. You know why? Because you, unlike other guys, aren't afraid to talk about your feelings. In fact, you're way too enthusiastic about it. So much for all your long emails. Just kidding. I really appreciate that, honey. And, you listen when I talk. A few nights ago, I went out with my best friend, who I hadn't seen in a year, and it was terrible. She wouldn't stop talking about herself. I maybe snuck in three complete sentences in our conversation and I doubt she listened to any of those.

Mohsin told me today that I was overreacting to my friend's lack of interest in my life. 'She's just a chatty person', he said. I love him, but there are times when he's so insensitive that I wonder if we're a good fit.

Sometimes, I wish there was a switch I could turn on that would make me more normal. It's a fun image to think of, isn't it?

Daffodils and switches,

****Isabel****

. . .

Isabel my life,

You know that I love bell bottoms, right? Especially on you. Almost as much as I love the idea of you lying in bed naked...I digress.

I think the flowers did reply; you just weren't able to hear them. I want to tell you what they said, but I'll save it for when we meet up on our road trip.

Oh, and it's ok – I know not everyone likes American Beauty. I however, do love *my* American Beauty.

With gratitude,

Julian

• • •

Isabel my love,

I miss you. Last night, my friend Bill and I went to a bar. We don't really have a lot of money, but school sucked so much yesterday, we had to get off campus.

Bill sat next to this nerdy blonde. I got a beer and was hanging out next to the lottery machines. Within a matter of minutes, they asked me to join them. I don't know how he does it; I could be sitting next to her for hours and we'd never get anywhere. Anyway, another beer later, he steps away and winks at me.

She had a book by Knut Hamsun on the counter. Who reads depressing Scandinavian literature in a bar?

We got to chatting about this and that...weather, school, living in Cincinnati...the normal bar-stranger talk. Turns out that she was passing through on her way to San Francisco from somewhere in Arkansas. Long story short, a fair amount of alcohol later, we

walked away from the bar and stood in a corner. I don't know what got into me, but I just did it: I pulled her close and we kissed like I never had before. And I mean that literally. I had never kissed anyone so hard and for so long. It was super awkward when it ended. Neither of us knew what to do. I told her I needed to use the restroom. By the time I came back, she was gone. I searched throughout the bar. Bill was at the counter again, this time with a different girl.

I feel sad...like long-term sad. How can you not fall in love with someone who reads Knut in a bar? Why do we have such painful poignant (did I spell that right?) fleeting experiences in our lives?

You're probably wondering why I miss you after all this mushy stuff about her. The truth, my dear, is that she reminded me of you, except that I've never met you. She was *you* coming alive. She was *you* personified, right here in front of me. And I can't bear to think of a situation when we'd meet – and kiss – and then you'd just disappear. That would be the saddest thing in the world to ever happen.

Can we confirm the road trip please?

Yours in sadness,

Julian

• • •

Hi sweet'ums,

I'm envious of the Knut girl. I wish I was her. That's all I'll say, lol.

I've already started packing for our road trip. How cold do you think it will get in Albuquerque?

Mohsin isn't talking to me. I called him like four times yesterday, but he didn't pick up. My heart would break into forty-seven pieces if he ever tells me that he's seeing someone else.

I'm really loving that freelance book. I can already imagine us in Greece sipping red wine on our balcony, with a typewriter next to us, as the sun sets. I'll dictate and you'll type, right? Hehe.

Forty-seven pieces,

****Isabel****

• • •

Hi sweetie,

I'm sorry about Mohsin. Maybe he's just busy and will get back to you soon?

Yes, let's get greasy in Greece! Sorry, I'm so slimy. You were talking about wine and that got me carried away. But yes, I'm up for it – sure beats working on a thesis that's going nowhere.

By the way, isn't it weird that you're with Mohsin and yet, you and I are in love with each other? We're so screwed up, lol. And the fact that we don't let that get in the way of us wanting to be with each other is even bizarre. Do you think we just like the idea of being in love with each other and don't care if we ever meet? Or maybe we're in love because we have these glorified versions of each other that we've built up all these months and it's tempting to just keep idolizing those images?

I'd hate to think that's the case, but that thought does come into my mind sometimes. Shoo – go away, crazy thought.

Crazy, crazy,

Julian is crazy

ps: does Mohsin know about me?

• • •

August 2001

Hey sug,

I'm afraid this will be shorter than usual.

I'm realizing that I don't really know who I am. I'm afraid to be myself, even with my own self. I'm going to have a beer now. I'm tired of my life and wish it was shorter.

By the way – please email me at this new address. I don't know why I keep switching addresses, but I just can't help it.

Delusions and dreams,

****Isabel****

• • •

Julian,

omg, Mohsin just called to tell me that we're done. Said he couldn't take my mood swings anymore. Can you please call me?

Isabel

• • •

Isabel dear,

I'm so sorry, love. I'm in the lab with my classmates right now, so can't talk, but just remember the stars in your eyes. You are beautiful in more ways than just one. I'll call you tonight.

Julian

• • •

Hi Julian,

I'm choking on the inside, but no one can see it. Part of me feels insulted – how could he do this to me? I'm not that shitty. I have my ups and downs, but aren't you supposed to help your partner through them?

I'm so freaking ready for our road trip. It will be a blast, sugar. We'll put Kerouac to shame. The first thing I'll do when I get in the car is throw a copy of my grades in the wind; I don't need an institutionalized piece of paper telling me how well I'm doing. Then, I'm going to write Mohsin's name on a piece of paper, crumble it up and throw it out the window. We'll sleep in seedy motels in small towns – the kinds where you can hear mice behind the TV – and have hot soaks and cold beers together in the bathtub.

Should we exchange photos before we meet? I'm unsure. Part of me feels like we shouldn't, because I want to make the act of seeing you at the train station be the most

amazing surprise of my life. But the other part feels so damn tempted to just peek at you a little bit before we meet.

Voids and stars,

****Isabel****

ps – would you be annoyed if I told you that I miss Mohsin right now? You mentioned how weird it was that I love both him and you. I really don't know why I love(d) him, but I do (did). Some days, I don't even know why or whether I love myself.

• • •

Hi Plum,

That must indeed feel terrible, especially after you put so much faith and love into it. I'm sorry about it. What do you think will help you get through this hard time? No, I'm not annoyed at you missing Mohsin. Remember, we have a special bond that transcends this world.

I don't think we should exchange photos. I prefer waiting till we see each other. Can you imagine it: there I would be waiting for you at the train station searching for a cute redhead walking out of the train? You might walk past me and I would have no idea until everyone else has left and there'd be just you and I on the empty platform, staring wordlessly at each other.

I love the images you're conjuring of our road trip. Count me in (the bathtub with you, I mean). We'll finally be free of our past, and the future, while it's uncertain, will be ours to carve, mile by open mile.

By the way, what will you be wearing when we meet? Can I get some hints? Can I suggest some outfits?

Excitedly,

Julian

ps: I'll have a surprise gift for you when we meet.

• • •

Hey Isabel dear,

Are you ok? It's been a while since I heard from you.

Worried,

Julian

• • •

Hi darling,

I have bad news. I don't think I can join you on the road trip. I'm battling some strong winds and don't feel like ruining your trip. I'm so sorry, sunshine. Will you call me from the road?

Sighs and highs,

****Isabel****

• • •

Hey honey,

Are you sure? I can come pick you up and we can drive to New Mexico together if that makes it easier? I promise I'll take care of you and you won't have to worry about any winds at all.

Miles and dreams,

Julian

ps: look, I even imitated your sign-off style just to get you excited.

• • •

Isabel!

Where are you? It's ok if you don't want to join me on the road trip. At-least tell me that you're doing ok.

Please,

Julian

• • •

November 2003

Hi Isabel,

It's been two years since I heard from you. Yesterday, I was walking the dog when I saw two cherry blossoms drift down in the wind; they briefly kissed each other before landing on the wet ground. I was reminded of us. Where are you now? Are you ok?

I can't tell you how many times I've dialed your phone. Of course, someone else has that number now and they've probably blocked me, but I just can't help dialing it. I don't even know if you're still checking this email address.

Yours, still,

Julian

• • •

Hey Isabel,

Where are you, my starry love?

I have lots to tell you about my life, but it would be selfish to lay it all out here, when I don't know a thing about you these days. I wonder if you went to Greece. Maybe that's where you are now and you're living off-grid? I hope you still think of me.

Remember I told you I had a surprise gift for you when we were planning to meet up for our road trip? It was a photo I took, lying in a field of daffodils, looking up at the clear blue sky. I framed it in a violet-colored frame, your favorite color. I wanted to tell you that daffodil bulbs have a protective layer – a tunic – that not only protects the plant from freezing and heat, but also holds within itself the embryo of the plant that will blossom the following year. Deep within, they know how to take care of themselves, year after year. And maybe that's what they were shyly trying to tell you that spring morning when you stopped your bike and talked to them.

Still hopeful,

Julian

ps: I still have that photo on my desk.

• • •

December 2005

Hi love,

I was lying in a tent one night while camping in the desert. It was late October – cold and frosty; I was awakened by something and gazed up at the cold star-laden sky, and the memory of our time together rushed into my mind. It had been several years since I had thought of you, so I don't know what triggered it. Maybe it was the distant beauty and allure of the stars – stars that I have never touched, just like you, and perhaps never will.

Still waiting,

Julian

• • •

February 2018

My dearest Isabel,

It's been almost seventeen years since we last talked. Do you remember that road trip we fantasized about? That road is still open, you know. I never could muster the desire to do it without you by my side.

I wonder what you look like now (or ever did). Do you still have pink streaks in your hair? Does the wind still make your life sway like crazy?

But most importantly, what about the stars in your eyes when you laugh?

Yours fondly,

Julian

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote 'Daffodils and Switches' because I was intrigued by the idea of two characters who'd never met in-person, who started to develop an intangible connection with each other and, despite their individual challenges, continued to stay in touch via emails (perhaps the most frequently-used electronic communication channel in the early 2000s). I was curious where I could take the story from there – would they ever meet up and start dating? Would they breakup over email? Would they slowly lose touch? Might they get married?*

I like stories that don't always have stereotypical endings, ones that create enough room for the unknown, that leave the reader wondering what the characters will do once the story's over. Chekhov, Mary Oliver, Matsuo Basho and Proust are some of my favorite authors. The themes and styles of movies by directors like Yasujiro Ozu and Andrey Tarkovsky also influence my writing.

AUTHOR BIO: Kunal Mehra is a multimedia artist who likes photography, filmmaking, writing and hiking. He grew up in India and has been living in Portland, OR, since 2002. His writing has been published by the Press Pause Press, Active Muse and Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon.

<https://twitter.com/KunalMehraPhoto>

Wisconsin_{ooo}

By Thomas Cook

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WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

My chip in this bet is to explain to you why you should read on, and I'll take the over vs. the under on this piece.

A story before the story: I grew up in all of Northern Illinois, and, by that, I mean my family lived 30 minutes off of the Wisconsin border and we traveled to where Cook resides now, Galesburg, IL, because a brother of mine played hockey. I say that to say this, the silence in Midwesterners, as with other stoic folk, as that adjective is not lost upon others, is mutually bred. There will be two to tango, and, when words fail, what is there left to say? In silence we find subtext, and, in silence, we find meaning. Foibles aside, the tang can be sharp, and, in our oftentimes misguided silence, you can reach the hilt – where it will ultimately hurt.

Cook uses a written mirror. The problem with his characters are that they are running parallel and not reflective of each other. Each is a writer, one poetic, one novelistic. Each has a concept of the inner workings of the university system (something, I think, the author holds close to his heart and career), one getting the trappings and one disillusioned. Each wants to succeed, but one is progressing where the other is stagnant. These two people reflect each other in the same sense that a mirror needs an object to reflect, without the object there is no image to be perceived. Friction is calamity. That is the relationship with Cook's characters, one without the other doesn't know how to exist, and that is the breaking point of their time using each other to configure an ideal that neither of them can fathom when they look back.

If you look in a mirror enough, do you see the changes you've wrought or do you see the same person staring back at you? They live in a funhouse in which no mirror reflects the person they are anymore, and, by association, neither can see what, in fuck all's sake, they were looking at in the first place nor the perfection of shape that was originally presented.

Therein lies the key to this story. Where one character sees, and reflects upon where they want to be, the other knows damn well the same thing. They are writers that can no longer write together. They are lovers where there is no love but dependency on the space they give each

other to create. They are creators, dead in the water, with full knowledge being in a landlocked part of the world begat the singular reason for why they can no longer stand to be working on the same ship. They're broken with or without each other.

In the silence of Cook's dialogue, the reader sits, and you can hear the words unspoken.

If you've ever been in an M.F.A. program and had to split your life in half, then read this story. If you've ever sat in silence while your significant other stared back, then read this story. If you've ever moved artifacts of your life for someone else, then read this story. If you've ever asked someone you love to read something you wrote even though it broke your heart to write it, then read this story. If you have ever lost someone and knew that you would have to watch them drift into the horizon a better person than you, then read this story. If you read, then don't stop now. If you read, then listen.

This is not a perfect, literary, idealization. You should read this for the dialogue, which reflects an artifice that is spoken when two people have nothing left to say – because the story, at times, can be tightened. Admittedly and pensively, Cook's, "Wisconsin," reminds me of me. How many times have I left something unsaid when I should've spoken? How many times should I have told someone that I loved them as opposed to being a puss and stayed clammed up like a cunt?

The answer is that I shouldn't have, but I suggest trusting this dumb cunt.

Enjoy Thomas Cook's work. I did.

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

"I'm going to get water; do you want any?"

"I'm going to have crackers; do you want any?"

"I'm going to make coffee; would you drink some?"

The woman's mother made money and the woman's father did not. Both the woman's mother and the woman's father had the mental faculty required to work jobs where there was money to be made, but the woman's mother committed to such work while the woman's father did not. The woman's father was quiet. He occasionally played bridge against himself. The woman's mother was loud. She often organized family-wide recreation events.

Wisconsin

by Thomas Cook

The man and the woman had already made the decision to end their relationship. When they were happy, they were happy about the decision to end their relationship, and, to one another, they affirmed the fact that it was because they had made the decision that they were happy.

“It really is smart.”

“It’s the right thing.”

“It is. It totally is. You’re right.”

“It’s hard, but do I feel like we’re making the right decision.”

“I know.”

“I mean, you think we’re making the right decision, right?”

“Of course I do. We’ve been talking about it, and we’ve been being thoughtful about it. I mean, it’s not practical to keep dating after you move. Long distance would be terrible.”

“We’ve both done that before.”

“Exactly. And did it work?”

“It was terrible.”

“We’ll be happier this way.”

“We’ll be happier.”

The man told himself that, for his part, the decision to end their relationship was unrelated to the woman's cold hands, which had always bothered him. He woke up feeling three small frogs stuck to his stomach. The woman told herself that, for her part, the decision to end their relationship was unrelated to the man's offensive humor, which had always bothered her. She braced herself each time he attempted a witticism. The man also told himself that, for his part, the decision to end their relationship was unrelated to the woman's former depression, which he worried would haunt their children, if they should have children. He imagined having to tell the kids that mommy needs to be alone. The woman also told herself that, for her part, the decision to end the relationship was unrelated to the man's former dipsomania, which she worried would haunt their children, if they should have children. She imagined having to tell the kids that daddy needs to lie down. Instead, they told themselves that the decision to end the relationship was based on the fact that the woman was leaving, and the man wanted to stay.

When they weren't happy about the decision to end their relationship, however, they didn't talk about it. They were aware that if they were to talk about not ending their relationship, if they were to talk about trying to have a long-distance relationship and voice opinions contrary to the decision to end their relationship, that they would compromise not only the peace of their last weeks together but, they could perhaps cast a pall over the entire preceding relationship. It was better not to talk about it. What if those opinions contrary to the decision to end the relationship brought us back together, and I was sentenced to remember all the inaccurate things she said about Italian wines? What if those opinions contrary to the decision to end the relationship brought us back together, and I was sentenced to remember all the foolish things he said about Spaghetti

Westerns? So, when they weren't happy about their decision to end the relationship, they talked about their writing instead:

"How is your writing coming?"

"I'm struggling. I'm not motivated. How's yours?"

"Not so good. I think I need to focus for a while this afternoon, so I may not want to make dinner."

"That's fine. I want to focus too."

Only this month, after they'd decided that she would move away to Wisconsin, where she had been offered a job, did they truly decide that they would end their relationship, and did she move in to the man's apartment; her lease had ended, and she wanted to spend as much time with the man as she could before her job began in the fall. She was going to get another degree. For their final weeks, they lived in two small rooms that the man had been living in for years. There was a small electric stove, a sink, and two cabinets in one corner of the apartment. There was a door that led to a standing shower stall. There was also a bedroom. The man wrote while sitting on his couch, putting his laptop on the coffee table in front of him. With the fuel of cigarettes and Diet Coke throughout the day, he was tireless, he said, but the woman never heard his fingers on the keys. The woman worked with her laptop in her lap sitting in a big chair in the bedroom. With the promise of movies and popcorn at the end of the day, she was tireless, she said, but the man never heard her fingers on the keys. Every hour or so one of them would get up and stride noisily toward the corner of the apartment that functioned as the kitchen, get some water or a snack, and stride noisily back to a laptop.

Since she'd started living in the apartment, she'd noticed the dust on the ceiling's molding. She'd noticed that the man never wiped out the sink after he dumped a can of food into a colander, either. She'd also noticed that the window that faced State Street showed only the trash cans of the houses closer to the street. She worried that since the man's father had died that he'd decided to live like a hermit. She worried that he too quickly agreed to the decision to end the relationship so that he could hibernate. Since she'd started living at the apartment, he'd noticed that all the woman's underwear was very old. He'd noticed that she never wiped out the sink after she spit toothpaste, either. He'd also noticed that when he tried to downplay her anxiety she scolded him like he was a child. He worried that, like the woman's mother, she would be excessively committed to professionalizing herself. He worried that she too quickly agreed to the decision to end the relationship so that she could bury herself in work.

"I'm going to get water; do you want any?"

"I'm going to have crackers; do you want any?"

"I'm going to make coffee; would you drink some?"

Each of them, the man and the woman, had advanced degrees. They wrote stories and poems and essays and published them in university and independent presses. The woman had published a book of poems. The man was trying to get an agent to represent his novel. It was only a matter of time, they believed, until one of them landed the job that would change one of their lives. Part of the decision to end the relationship was based on the man's assertion that he had a better chance of finding representation for his novel where they were living than he did where the woman was planning to live; if the man found representation for and published his novel, he would have a good chance of

finding a job that would change his life. There was a small part of the woman that was afraid the man would flounder. Another part of the decision to end the relationship was based on the woman's assertion that she would have a better chance of publishing more poems and writing the poetry scholarship that she wanted to write if she moved to Wisconsin to take the teaching job; if she could publish more poems and write more scholarship on poems, she would have a good chance of finding an even better job that would change her life. There was a small part of the man that worried one day the woman would find all her pursuits arbitrary.

The time was coming for the woman to move her things, which had been in storage, to the place she was planning to live. They packed up all of her things and rented a car and drove all the woman's things to the place she was planning to live, which was halfway across the country. It was a very scenic drive, but it was too far to drive in one day. The woman's parents lived between where the man and the woman had been living and where the woman was planning to live, in another part of Wisconsin, so the man and the woman stopped to spend one night with her parents on their way to place where the woman was planning to live. The woman's parents greeted them and hugged them: The woman's mother hugged both her daughter and the man. The woman's father hugged his daughter and shook the man's hand. The woman's parents had only met the man once, a year ago, when the woman's book of poetry had been released and there was a reading at a cafe. The man had never been to the woman's house, even though the woman had visited his home dozens of times throughout the years of their relationship.

The woman's mother made money and the woman's father did not. Both the woman's mother and the woman's father had the mental faculty required to work jobs

where there was money to be made, but the woman's mother committed to such work while the woman's father did not. The woman's father was quiet. He occasionally played bridge against himself. The woman's mother was loud. She often organized family-wide recreation events. There was also the woman's brother, who was damaged in a severe and undefinable way; he still lived at home. The mother had spent money trying to find out what was wrong with her son, but there was no diagnosis. The woman had explained the fact of her brother to the man on the drive. Before the drive the man only knew that the brother lived at home, not that he was damaged in a severe and undefinable way. At dinner, the brother cursed his mother under his breath each time the mother spoke.

"So, was the drive scenic?"

"Bitch bitch, shut up shut up."

"What time will you have to leave in the morning?"

"Cunt cunt cunt."

The brother also cursed at his sister ("Still a fucking whore still a fucking whore") and the man ("Sister's Fuck Boy Sister's Fuck Boy").

No one said anything about the cursing. After dinner, the brother apologized to each member of the family with great aplomb. He required constant care, and one of the reasons that the woman had taken the job in Wisconsin, a drive away, was so that she could help her aging parents with the constant care of her older but damaged brother.

The man and the woman slept in separate beds that night, and they continued on to the place the woman was planning to live the next morning. As they fell asleep, they rehearsed the story that they had told themselves.

"This is really right for you. The job, being near your brother."

“He doesn’t mean anything he says. You’re right. He has a limited way of expressing himself. What he said was anxiety.”

“I wasn’t thinking about it. Your parents seem good. It’s good to have spent more time with them.”

“They like you. They wonder why you’re not moving here with me.”

“Well, we talked about it.”

“I know.”

“It’s best for both of us.”

“It is.”

“Think about the writing we’ll be able to do.”

“Do you think we should visit each other, even if we’re not dating?”

In the morning, they drove to the next town in Wisconsin and they unpacked the woman’s things in the new place. They were only moving her in, so the man asked where things were supposed to go. She said she would have plenty of time to arrange things when she started living in the new place. Then, they drove back halfway across the country to the man’s apartment without stopping to spend any more time with the woman’s family. When they got back to the man’s apartment, they had one week left. They both knew that if they tried to keep their relationship alive after the woman left that they would fail.

Now, when they weren’t happy about the decision to end their relationship, they started to talk about it. They started to voice opinions contrary to the decision to end their relationship and they compromised the peace of their last week.

“Maybe we could do it. I mean, wouldn’t it be worth it?”

“No, I mean, I do think it would, but think about it. Phone calls. Flights. We’ll both be trying to write.”

“It will be impossible.”

“But we could try.”

“We could, right?”

“We tried it before, though, with other people.”

“And we totally failed.”

“We did fail.”

During the last week, the confidence of making the decision to end their relationship was gone. They didn’t know what they wanted. When they talked about ending the relationship, it sounded hollow. They went out to eat at the places that they’d eaten when they first started dating, they drank water and ate crackers while they didn’t write—each time they celebrated the end and talked about how if they tried it might not be the end. They rented a car again and they drove to the airport.

On the drive, they talked about politics, which neither of them understood. The airport was smaller than either of them remembered. There was only one lane for departures and there was no traffic. They pulled right up to curb next to the only other car, a policeman. There were ninety minutes until the flight.

[END]

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Sometimes the world collapses, and everything in it is meant to be there, and everything speaks to everything else. In those moments, when a sentence comes to be, follow it.*

AUTHOR BIO: Thomas Cook's fiction has appeared in *Bennington Review*, *Big Muddy*, and *Chicago Quarterly Review* among others. He is the author of *Light Through a Pane of Glass*, and since 2009 he has been Editor and Publisher of *Tammy* and *Tammy* chapbooks. He teaches in the MFA program at Mount St. Mary's University in Los Angeles.

Goddess in the Window

By Marco Etheridge

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

Marco Etheridge's, "Goddess in the Window," reminds me of Blaise Cendrars. A one-armed, Swiss poet, short story writer, and novelist. He lost his arm in WWI, he traveled more of world than many of us will ever even get a chance to experience, lived in one of the greatest time periods of our last century, and wrote about it all. Cendrars's goddess was the world around him, the shortcomings, the beauty, the heartache, the brutality, the poetic, the moment. Etheridge's goddess is the lady in red, in the window, struggling to get over the frame. What "Goddess in the Window" captures is a singular moment, one in which another is not only caught in a gaze but one in which has inspired beauty.

I love this piece for its reminiscences of modernism, Greek tragedy, and the sorrow of Literature after any given war. The main character runs their alley on one leg, tormented by the chorus (quite literally) of voices in their own head (and, like the best of all dramas, ours too). What this story begs to question is whether or not we can truly believe that there are goddesses who walk among us.

I, for one, think that there are.

This piece is not a requiem but a celebration of the muses that inspire creativity, it holds dear all that can be captured in a moment and written about. The character may be a homeless, one-legged vet that hears voices and owns his place as the king of an alleyway, but for this one moment, this one singular moment, time froze and he was able to imbue the sensation for a moment's release of his torment.

Etheridge captures ephemeral release, those split seconds where, what you're looking at, alters the entirety of the world. Reality will always be there, lurking behind, but those true moments keep you going.

It's 1 a.m. here, New Orleans time, and I write this thinking about the moments in time when I've been able to stop and take in the entirety of my world and have it make any semblance of sense: driving through traffic in Springfield, IL during a rain storm when I would've sworn to a god I don't believe in that I could see each and every rain drop at the stop light, taking mushrooms and staring at the moon, breathing deep, and tasting the pierian spring, that one time, too drunk to be any good, where the woman I loved threw a bottle at my head because I slapped her for not wanting to leave the party and we were both wasted, the other time, another woman I loved told me she could only come with a finger in her ass, and she did, when my

parents called to tell me about their divorce, that time taking acid and stopping the conversation because I could tell the mood of the couple in front of me because of how they were shaded in the dark and light of the table, that moment my brother had his 1st baby, my niece, and how I knew I had to be better, the moment my ladyfriend told me she was pregnant, having rolled me out of sleep, and I saw any chance of my selfishness dying by the wayside for what I then, and still now, know that I'd have to resort to any means to keep them safe, the only time I was able to cry on stage, not as a character but as a person hurt by another, seeing Man Man for the first time, walking home in eight inches of snow, only to sleep outside because the human I left had both my car keys and my house keys and was incredibly pissed at me for yelling at their friend...

My moments are mine, nor are they meant to paint me in any form of decent light because I know who I am and have come to terms with that, but Etheridge offers you a read in which you can tap into your own. There is a beauty to "Goddess in the Window" that reflects the tiredness of our existence and matches that exhaustion with the hope that keeps us willing to keep looking. I truly hope you enjoy this small bit of madness, tragedy, and breath of beauty.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

Then she stalks into the alley on black heels, with a stride like a hunting cat, like a dancer on stage at the Apollo. You see her, see that tight red sheath stretched over an ass that would make angels turn to drink. She's a radiating flare of candy apple red, crimson sleeves to her wrists, dark hair streaming down over that dress painted taut over her body with the love of an old master or a new tagger.

Goddess in the Window

By Marco Etheridge

In ruins deserted, 'midst the rubble of
 Warfare and whispers of the dead,
 One-legged Zeke brought low by warring,
 Not long past, and out of his head,
 Kept the watch o'er his alley and madness,

Bedeviled, where first from the bricks
 The red-skirted ass of a Goddess
 Unknown came forth; A tight red sheath for a
 Girl Belovèd, a Treasure of Light: Yet he
 Lingered not in his solitude, but went
 Forth, hobbling, where Goddess
 Had wandered, model of woman, to tell
 Her his plight,
 For memory of beauty only, Of Beauty,
 Beauty only, most forgotten of sight.

For the love of all things holy, would you maniacs shut the hell up? No one wants to listen to your drivel; not me, not the goddess, and certainly not our guests.

Thank you.

I apologize for the interruption. It's not as if I can control those horrible magpies. Believe me, if I could, there would be a dozen muzzles strapped tightly across a dozen ugly mugs.

You hear me talking, you freaks?

Again, my apologies. Where was I before I was so rudely interrupted? You see before you my kingdom, this alley you survey, or rather what's left of it. Not an expansive realm, I know, but it is mine by virtue of no one else wanting it, and because I live here. It is a fitting abode for an old soldier, don't you think? I exist amidst a desolation of bombed-out buildings, a wasteland of rack and ruin. Thus my utter shock when a goddess materialized amongst all this ugliness. Such a singular miracle must be shared. That is why you are here: to bear witness.

Wait, what is this puzzled look that dances across your faces? Ah, I understand. I am a broken man living in a dead-end alley, so you expect a certain pattern of speech, the argot of the destitute, or perhaps the cant of the gutter. Fuck you! Fuck your condescension and your patronizing airs. And yes, there really was a goddess. I saw her with my own eyes.

Look at you standing there, whole and sound, two legs apiece. You dare to look down on me just because I'm flat on my ass. Let shrapnel blow one of your legs to ribbons, you miserable maggots. Then we'd see who puts on fine airs. And when the unseen urchins steal your prosthetic, leaving you stranded on a filthy pallet, how well do you think you'd cope?

What's that? Yes, well then, apologies accepted. You must excuse me. I become emotional at times, but I have my reasons. That damnable war took more than my leg. A portion of my own sanity has gone missing, along with some of my compassion, and most of my patience.

Look around you. What do you see? Derelict buildings, crumbling brick walls, weeds pushing up through broken pavement and trash. Windows blocked and blind. Even the graffiti is flaking and worn.

I am surrounded by the rubble I created. A wasteland wrought by all of us, truth will out. The difference between us is that you have removed yourselves, which any sane person would do given the means. I have not the means, and only one leg. So here I remain, alone and forgotten.

It was not always so. I was once strong and whole, sound of mind and body, a sergeant proud. My uniform caught the eye of more than one maiden: not uncommon in those times. Then I answered that fateful clarion call, as so many of us did. And here you see the result.

Ruination, rubble, and remorse are now my only companions. I do not include the singing Greeks or the unseen urchins that prowl the night stealing legs. They are of no account, only part and parcel of the aftermath. Phantoms, as it were, and like phantoms, they haunt me.

Your pardon, I have neglected to introduce myself. My name is Zachery Collins, Sergeant Collins that is, retired as should be obvious. You may call me Zeke. Everyone does.

Poor Zeke speaks to no one 'midst the rubble,
 Hearing only voices in his head,
 One-legged Zeke sees vision crimson,
 A wondrous Goddess to wake the dead;
 Strutting the stones of his alley and madness,
 Transforming the air into magic
 With round red-skirted ass of gladness...

Shut up, shut up, you masked madmen! Enough already. They've grasped the concept,
 I'm sure.

I ask pardon for... oh, our fine visitors have scarpered, frightened away by your incessant
 caterwauling. Of course they fled, you disgusting heathens. And now the cowardly chorus has
 vanished as well. So be it and good riddance to the lot of you. Here we are alone again, trapped
 in hell's alley, just me and my miserable self.

There is no one else but you, Zeke. Can you grasp that, if only for this moment? You,
 alone in your alley. There is no Greek chorus, no group of suited gentlemen come to investigate
 the appearance of the goddess.

But the Goddess is real. She was real, wasn't she? And those leg-stealing little bastards,
 they're real as well. I mean, where else could my leg have gone?

Your leg certainly did not walk off by itself. The unseen urchins remain unseen, but not
 unreal. And the Goddess was very real. Don't you remember seeing her?

Aye, I did see the goddess. But we, I mean I, certainly won't tell those magpies about her.
 They don't deserve it after scaring everyone away. Doesn't matter they were never here in the
 first place.

You were alone Zeke. Try to remember. The afternoon sun was splashing down the far wall, washing it golden. Everything was glowing: the patches of stucco, the bricks, even the graffiti. And you were over here in the shadows, safe on your pallet where no one can see you.

I remember how bright it was. I had to squint my eyes. And then I saw her, red dress and all. I did see her, didn't I?

Oh yes, you saw her Zeke. I'll tell it to you again, shall I? It will all come back to you. Very well, then.

The sunlight so bright the air shimmers like a spotlight announcing the arrival of the star performer. The goddess appears at the mouth of the alley and the sunlight coalesces around her because she's focusing the light rays. She arranges the brilliance into a shawl that fits over her red dress. She moves again only after she is satisfied with her new raiment.

Then she stalks into the alley on black heels, with a stride like a hunting cat, like a dancer on stage at the Apollo. You see her, see that tight red sheath stretched over an ass that would make angels turn to drink. She's a radiating flare of candy apple red, crimson sleeves to her wrists, dark hair streaming down over that dress painted taut over her body with the love of an old master or a new tagger.

The goddess passes in front of you, right there where the dull brick is gross and crumbling, except now even the dirtiest fragments are lustrous as mother-of-pearl.

She doesn't look at you, doesn't turn her head, doesn't break her stride. The goddess stops before a black barricaded window, that one right there, the one only she knows the secret of. At a flick of her hand, the flimsy barrier peels back on itself. She vaults to the brick sill as if gravity does not bind her to the earth.

Catlike, she balances for a moment in that gaping mouth of brick. Then she disappears into darkness. She leaves you with the vision of one long leg dangling down below the hem of that red dress stretched across the most upper reaches of her perfect thigh.

You sob as she vanishes, one choking moan in your throat. Then you are lunging for your crutches, tripodding yourself to stand on your one leg. You have no choice but to follow her, no matter the obstacles. You cannot let her go, not if there is a chance to catch one more glimpse, something precious to hold close through our long, black nights.

Such appalling beauty in the midst of desolation, in this ruin where no beauty exists. The rubble around you holds no vision, no comfort, no joy. Everything has been stolen from you, even your leg. This moment of light and magic will not be stolen from you. You swing your crutches, propel your good leg forward in clumsy hops. The shadow fades behind you and you are blinded by sunlight and promise.

You are at the brink of the window, but unlike the goddess, gravity holds you to the earth. Poor one-legged wretch, you cannot climb, and you cannot spring like a cat. The barrier yields to a prying crutch and you duck under it, chest pressed to the brick, peering into the gloom.

Dust lies thick on the floor and in the film of it you see the triangle-and-point footprints that mark her passage. Your crutches hit the floor in an aluminum and plastic clatter. You throw yourself after them, jackknifing over the brick sill until gravity takes control and your mangled body falls to the dusty floor.

You scabble about like an over-turned beetle, bits of plaster clinging to your filthy coat and dust griming your hands. It is a struggle to raise yourself, but you manage it because you must. The goddess has vanished into the bowels of the building and you must follow her.

Thumping and hopping, you lurch across the room and into a wide hallway hung with shadows and cobwebs. The trail of the goddess leads down the corridor. The rubber crutch tips beat a syncopation in time with your single boot sole—plock, thump, plock, thump.

Yes, I remember now, the darkness stretched out in front of me, and her footprints led away in the dust. I followed them. There was a light and that's where the trail led.

That's right. I knew it would come back to your poor, addled brain.

You see a warm glow of light that grows stronger as you hobble down the passageway. You step into a great open space like a ballroom. High above you, parts of the roof are open to the afternoon sky. Broken beams and cracked slate litter the floor. The footprints of the goddess thread a passage through the rubble and you follow.

It is hard going with only one leg and the floor covered in ruin. Do you remember? One crutch slips on a loose slate and you lose your balance. You're falling backwards, arms flailing, but you don't crash to the floor.

A great splintered beam is behind you and you land on it like you have fallen to a bench meant to catch you. Your crutches rattle to the floor and the echoes rebound across the empty space. You raise your eyes to follow the echoes and that is when you see it.

One entire wall is covered in a vast mural. You have to turn your head to take it all in and you do, again and again. It is a vision from the heart of Delacroix but painted on the fantastic scale of Rivera. The surface has been soiled by feral pigeons and stained by dripping water, yet the pigments glow in the syrupy light that flows down through the holes in the roof. The sight of it fills your eyes and your brain.

The goddess dominates the foreground, her leonine body rendered twenty feet tall and glorious. She wears a red evening gown and over it a burnished breastplate. One bare arm is held

aloft, a burning sword clenched in her hand. Her shining face is fierce, head turned to look over her shoulder, sable hair streaming. Her other arm beckons forward the halting throng that follows, their numbers stretching to either end of the sprawling mural.

Her followers are not a valiant army intent on victory, and she is not liberty leading the people. She is the goddess of remembrance guiding the forgotten. They stagger after her on shattered limbs, hold out stumps of arms stripped of hands. Broken, battered, and bandaged, these are the remnants of battle, forsaken and nameless, shot through and shot down.

They make their way beneath her upraised sword, lurching, carried by their fellows or crawling, the detritus of battle demanding to be remembered.

Yes! And I was there. I saw myself in the painting. Didn't I see myself?

You did, Zeke, you saw yourself because you were there.

Your eyes sweep over the wounded multitude and in it you see your own face, again and again. You weep for them, and for yourself, until the tears blind you and you look to the rubble-strewn floor. There, amongst the discarded tins of paint and castoff brushes, you see where the footfalls of the goddess thread a path that disappears into the enormous painting.

Yes, that is what happened. I sat there for a very long time. I sat very still, until the light faded to darkness. I could hear the pigeons fluttering in the roof, and the rats skittering in the shadows. There were other sounds as well, voices from the painting: moans and shrieks, shouts and curses. And now we are here, alone in the alley. Tell me, do you think I will see the goddess again?

How am I to know, Zeke? Perhaps one day, if we wait long enough. And you? Do you believe she will reappear?

I am only an old soldier, but I have to believe even when I know I should not. If I keep the faith and keep the watch, who knows what could happen. The sunlight will wash into this forsaken alley, where hope is wounded but not yet dead. I will look up and she will be standing there, a goddess bathed in light. She will be wearing the red dress, and in her arms she will be holding my leg.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *My story "Goddess in the Window" took seed from a photo prompt sent to me by a friend. The photo shows a buxom young woman in a red dress climbing into the window of a decrepit building. The foreground of the photograph is a very seedy alley. Looking at the photo from an observer's point of view, I tried to imagine what sort of person would be witnessing this scene. The answer seemed obvious to me: a homeless guy who lived in the alley. It wasn't much of a leap from a homeless guy to a homeless veteran, and from there to a homeless vet who hears voices in his head, including a Greek chorus.*

This poor guy became my main character and the voices in his head became a sort of narrator. The unseen urchins that have stolen his prosthetic leg are the Fates. The ruined alley and the derelict buildings are all the result of the same war that took Zeke's leg.

Zeke sees the goddess and is compelled to follow her, missing leg or no. I wanted him to have a sort of vision or redemption and that took the form of the enormous mural that he finds inside the building. Hopefully Zeke draws some comfort or closure from the discovery of the mural, but that is for the reader to decide.

AUTHOR BIO: Marco Etheridge lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His short fiction has been featured in many reviews and journals in Canada, Australia, the UK, and the USA. Notable recent credits include: Underwood Magazine, Prime Number Magazine, Smokey Blue Literary & Arts, Coffin Bell, In Parentheses, The Thieving Magpie, Ligeia Magazine, The First Line, After Happy Hour Review, Dream Noir, The Opiate Magazine, Cobalt Press, Literally Stories, and Blue Moon Review, amongst many others. His non-fiction work has been featured at Jonah Magazine, The Metaworker, and Route 7. Marco's third novel, "Breaking the Bundles," is available at fine online booksellers.

His author website is: <https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com/>

His Facebook Author page is: <https://www.facebook.com/SerialZtheNovel/>

the INEFFABLE hat

By M. T. Williams

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WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

Oh, dear reader, it is with great irony that I present to you a description of M. T. Williams', "The Ineffable Hat."

The story's premise is simple. A woman meets a man with an unexplainable hat. When she wants to try it on, the man not only thinks that it is a good idea, but produces a new hat specifically for her to have. The man leaves, the woman puts on her new hat, and a stranger compliments her.

Therein lies the entire plot of this jaunty short story, but not the entirety of its enjoyment.

Ineffableness, for those who may not already know, is the indescribable inability of words to compensate for the experience of greatness, wonderment, or extremity; it's something akin to hearing Alanis Morissette open her mouth to speak in Dogma: if we were to actually have the words to understand what was being presented, our heads and hearts would explode out of our bodies in great humor.

I think that this is where the heart of Williams' work lies, its playfulness. While words are unable to express how wonderful the hat is, words are exactly the only medium by which the hat can be processed, "a multifarious and crystalline explosion, reflected and refracted in impossible planes and colours through infinite refinement, on simplistic foundations."

Reading this piece is as if you were the fulcrum of a seesaw, constantly being forced to balance what is being meant and knowing the fact that there is no meaning to be taken from something indescribable. You aren't stuck between a rock and a hard place. You're fine, you're happy, you've just received a new hat. The metaphor is there, but just out of reach of description.

That play with words is what makes this short story worth reading. The playfulness, while knowing that no matter how desperately we may try to state our simple subjectivity we are always limited from perception to the message, knowing that we may get as close to true perfection of description as possible but will always be just an atom's ass away from our own Truth reaching another, is where this story's power lies.

I've always loved the beauty and danger that is inherent in metaphor. "The Ineffable Hat," is a lovely reminder of both the joy and fury that words create in us.

I hope you enjoy this story as much as I did.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language)...'There was a flash as the man spun in a wild, enthusiastic gambol. Light emanated from the top of his head.'

THE INEFFABLE HAT

"This hat is ineffable," he said.

She had to agree. The way it contoured his head, at once enlarging and somehow, amplifying his cranium, struck her as near impossible. Unexplainable.

"Might I try it?" she asked.

He agreed, but only on the terms that she have a hat of her own. There was a flash as the man spun in a wild, enthusiastic gambol. Light emanated from atop his head. She held up her hands to shield her eyes and something dropped into her lap – a brand new hat. She picked the newly formed hat up in her hands and examined it closely, before placing it on her head. There was something wonderful about the hat, at once masterfully complex and wonderfully benign.

The hat was indeed ineffable, she decided, faceted as it was to astutely represent the whole of the deftly transcendent and the undeniably simple. How like life, she thought, as the man bounded away, hat both askew and not askew - a multifarious and crystalline explosion, reflected and refracted in impossible planes and colours through infinite refinement, on simplistic foundations. She adjusted the hat on her head. A passerby smiled at her.

"Nice hat."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story was actually written for a beer label. A craft brewery held a contest for flash fiction to print on a label, and given that I enjoy a cold brew now and again, I thought, "Why not?" Patterns have always been interesting to me, and the best systems begin with simple concepts that enable a great deal more complexity.*

Water is something everyone understands. It's two basic components. But water mean a glass full from the tap or it can mean an ocean. Water can be dead still or it can smash cities. It's something so integral to what we are or how we exist at all, that it becomes wondrous to see the complexity that results. The best systems are always based on simple ideas extrapolated. The worst have no such basis, like telecom regulation. The brewery's logo involved a hat, and their name suggested the concept - a refined fool. Simplicity and complexity melded together – one of my favourite threads to pull.

I'm very much a child of the alternative music industry - 70s/80s punk and new wave, 90s grunge - I've always appreciated raw emotion over technical skill (although it's always nice if you can combine them, Radiohead or Tragically Hip-style). As a result, my influences couldn't help but be authors like William Gibson, Neil Gaiman and Chuck Palahniuk, with a healthy dollop of the Beat and Hippie Generations, and some rebellious classic lit to boot. Perspective is everything.

AUTHOR BIO: M.T. Williams is born and raised in Southwestern Ontario, with a quick jaunt to Finland in his teenage years. He is currently living among the corn with his wife and stepdaughter and far too many cats. He can be found on Twitter @emptywill13 and on his website, emptywill.com.

.. DOWN, by the *river* & (and)

The *SPIN* of a WHEEL ooo

By Ian C Smith

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

I went to Australia for a three-week period. My friend and I had begged, borrowed, and saved all that we made from work, family, and asking the homeless on the streets of rural Illinois diligently. We started in Melbourne and took a bus all the way up to Canberra, stopping intermittently, Rockhampton, Tangalooma, Brisbane, it was and is one of the best experiences of my life.

What immediately connected me to Ian C. Smith's "Down by the River & the Spin of a Wheel," was a singular word: "kookaburra." I thought two things. One, that I was completely stupid because I had felt like that bird was only in Australia/Pacifica and I was losing my mind in the sense that the way I read it first was a complete misappropriation of time and space. Two, that I had never heard another human have a rhythm as such since I had been to Australia.

I could tell you the plot, but I won't.

What I can tell you is that this story has a pacing unlike any other I've read in a long time. I can tell you that the style is dedicated, ground in the dryness of heat. Smith's story has a rhythm to writing that you would be real fucking hard pressed to find by anyone else. What he can encompass in a paragraph is potent, palpable.

He's like being trapped in an eddy, get ready to drown and, as you die, you have no idea why you're dying except for the fact that it is releasing as you let go of all the control of your life.

This is good work. I may use bland description, but good work is of my highest quality. Otherwise, I would call it poor.

This story is honest, which is more than most can ask for from a story. This story has style. I'll say it again, what separates Smith from the other Smiths is that he has inflection, tone, rhythm, and meter that I have never seen before. There is a special work of timbre that rolls

here, and, if you're not paying attention, you will get worked. The words don't wave, they crash, over and over and over...

Poor metaphor aside, this guy knows his business. He knows his voice.

We should all be so lucky to have worked that hard to write a piece such as this.

As someone who has stage managed, the details are in the devil.

Nice work. Nice work all around, Mr. Smith.

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

Eleven years later we trod the same path, opened the familiar gate, but slower, as though worn down, our destination the weeping cypresses beyond the donkeys.

A cirrus sky puffs up the day, kookaburras cackle in high branches, a throbbing anticipation of hot motors bursting into life, of applause, hope.

Down, by the river

Following my feet through long soft grass to this riverside haven of quiet near where I lived with those loved, I see a pelican pair soar past the sun. The fallen tree, a pier to midstream these years since, sprouts new growth reflected in the depleted water's pebbled pools. The boy, strange, grown up, gone, I listen, preoccupied, for a ghost swimmer's splash. As market gardeners work lettuce rows beyond willowy fringes on the opposite bank, I count years again, time's tendrils, a kind of paralysis.

Backlit by morning light the boy, teenaged, already muscular, helped me slide a feed sack over our stilled bitch, raise, place her tenderly in the battered yard sale wheelbarrow I sat him inside in days when we zigzagged past Japanese lanterns pretending it was a racing car, rushing, rapt, through our narrow walkway with a heartbeat to spare, this dog at my heels, excited yips echoing to this day, heading towards our donkeys' paddock. Eleven years later we trod the same path, opened the familiar gate, but slower, as though worn down, our destination the weeping cypresses beyond the donkeys.

What would an alternative life have been? The same beauty? Inevitable loss? Time's shape distorting into a different steady spiral? Nesting swans fly south, above the waterlogged tree, towards the rivermouth. Watching the tiny wake of an unseen creature I feel if I look away it shall disappear like a limb torn from me, my mind going over conversations I might have had, ever reviewing the past. I can't remember doing much wrong. Yes, I can.

The spin of a wheel

The TV news, road mayhem again, my own darker days lapsed now I putter about ferrying children in an urban van. Siblings line up grin to grin on the mantelpiece like certificates of achievement. Your sister calls, an odd time for her. Worry gradually bullies your voice. Oh! the phone as doomsayer.

Three families a rural convoy towing trailers, motocross bikes, pull off-road in the bluish dawn. They travel to compete where daredevil sons' helmets lean into risky bends. A cirrus sky puffs up the day, kookaburras cackle in high branches, a throbbing anticipation of hot motors bursting into life, of applause, hope.

They group around thermoses, except for one boy slipped away, unmissed in a trailer, an unseen truck lumbering their way. This behemoth veers across the road, crunching their coffee break before wallowing on its side like a stricken beast, half of its many wheels spinning in air, vertical headlights now spotlighting peppercorn branches.

Awake all night on back roads dodging inspection, the interstate truckie drifted into dream. Road dust ghosts upwards in the ticking aftermath, unscathed truckie's good luck medallion trembling on his tattooed chest. Irreligious people praying, their frantic check finds no blood staining that road but they can't see the boy. Quiet, spoiled, temperamental, often clashing with his parents, he remains silent.

My sister-in-law finds him inside the trailer, safe from death's random swipe, breathes again, enfolds him with clichés, her heart this wild thing rattling her breast, her son, who ignored his name being called, demanding answers.

As you, who at this stage manage to hold our family together, relate this vivid tale, my TV redundant, an old fear prowls, a juggernaut threatening innocence, its searchlight crisscrossing those dear to me.

***** **

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Since I was a boy, books, movies, documentaries, about artists' struggles have inspired me. They don't have to be writers, could be painters, choreographers, any artist striving for truth. Forget about facts. When young I believed this other world, this artistic community, couldn't possibly be mine, but I was wrong. I love my work being published alongside that of established writers, and, importantly, new writers, young and old. Among my favourite writers: Dos Passos, Kerouac, Carver, & Alice Munro. Go for it.*

AUTHOR BIO: Ian C Smith's work has been published in *Antipodes, BBC Radio 4 Sounds, The Dalhousie Review, Griffith Review, San Pedro River Review, Southword, The Stony Thursday Book, & Two Thirds North*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.

The Saddest Missile

By Andrew Najberg

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WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

Andrew Najberg's, "The Saddest Missile," is what you get when you cross Kurt Vonnegut, Roald Dahl, and an intercontinental ballistic missile.

And, continuing with a string of words I didn't think I'd ever string together, I never thought I would empathize with a nuclear weapon. Fear, revile, curse, expect the causation of the end of the world, ride down from an airplane waving a perfectly worn-in cowboy hat, all are feelings, or wishes, I would've guessed before I begrudgingly admitted empathy. Where all of those emotions and actions, thankfully, fail, enters SAM – the only missile I've ever felt bad for.

SAM is a sleek, sexy, well-engorged-with-nationalism missile. Proud of his flag, proud of his shininess, proud to protect those technicians that take care of him, SAM is ready and willing to die for his country – more than ready and willing, he wants to light up the summer sky right above a city full of people.

More than anything, SAM wants to become what he is meant for. He wants to fulfill his purpose, and, through self-transcendence, he rises as a higher power.

Humorously making myself laugh with silly puns aside, Najberg's story taps into the longing that all humans have to find themselves in the world. As SAM watches the other missiles in the silos go off, he wonders when his time to shine will be next, as SAM watches his friend Fred slowly, sadly, drift away from his job and be forced to either be replaced or learn a new skill (a perfectly framed metaphor, by the way), he realizes that his only connection in the world is going to leave him. These are obviously all personified emotions felt by a missile, but I, as a reader, really wanted that missile to be happy and destroy a city – I wanted to see the little missile that could.

I think that this endearing quality of Najberg's story is its strongest point. It takes great skill from a writer to make a reader care about their characters, and I think that what Najberg's done has gone above and beyond to make his reader care about a hunk of killing machine.

When all roads would normally point to a protest around authoritarianism, nationalism, any other -isms, or a good old-fashioned arms race, "The Saddest Missile" manages to protest the violence inherent in the system and manage to make the reader be empathetic to its needs and wants at the same time.

I think that this story truly reflects the power of satire, and, I think, when you read it, you will fall under the spell of SAM.

Enjoy.

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

Sam thought about launching every day, about the blue sky he'd seen when he was transported from the missile factory to the base and the silo, about the trees growing smaller and how a city or town would rush towards him before he blew up. He heard one by one the other missiles in their distant silos giving birth to columns of flame as they flew away to their beautiful, fiery detonations. When the base fell quiet between skirmishes, and the guards' footsteps faded down the metal halls, Sam would let his booster warm just a little until he slipped into dreams of what his silo looked like from the sky.

The Saddest Missile

Andrew Najberg

Sam was a missile, the saddest intercontinental ballistic missile in all the world. Sam sat at the bottom of the silo, his black nose cone half hidden in the high shadows near the launch hatch, his housing luminescent with the greenish-white glow of the fluorescent lights mounted at regular intervals around the walls. The floors never stopped humming with a single note vibration, and a single computer console on a wheeled cart read the 0s and 1s that transmitted wirelessly from numerous diagnostic sensors but did not receive.

A multi-colored flag was stamped on Sam's side just above his guidance panel. He didn't know why, but he felt he should be extraordinarily proud of that flag- that he should be willing to do anything in his power for it. He didn't understand what the flag represented, but it was important to his makers, and if he didn't honor what was important to them, how could he find anything of value?

So it was that he waited day in and day out for his turn to launch, spreading his fins aerodynamically, pulsing with the life of his targeting chip. The other missiles in the neighboring silos couldn't see how precisely his rivets had been set, how the seams of the sheets

of curved, cool metal met so perfectly that even air couldn't slip through. The maintenance crews didn't seem to notice with their rags and oils and polishes. They treated him like any other missile. If only someone would give him a second glance, they'd see his sleekness, his lethality, the glorious shine of his housing.

After all, he aspired to one day launch, to rise up on a bed of flames and ascend into the clouds on heat and light. To detonate in the sky over the city into a new, fleeting sun; the thought alone made SAM's payload rumble with energy. So glorious, Sam thought, to launch from the earth on a bed of fire and detonate in the sky in an even bigger and more destructive fireball than the one that launched me. It was all any of the missiles in the surrounding silos ever talked about, so how could Sam not get swept up in their shared dream? How could he not ache to be noticed, armed, and launched?

Then came the first time Airman Fred ambled through the silo in his blue jumpsuit with the insignias on the sleeves, the beady-lensed glasses, and the white rag in his hand that polished Sam's casing so that it gleamed white as a smile. Airman Fred was fresh out of training, Sam gathered from the ribbing his fella crewmen gave him. They shared a lot of laughs at Fred's expense, but Fred just chuckled and shook his head, and went about his work.

When he was done, Fred patted Sam on the fin and said, "You're a fine missile, the finest there ever was. One day, you'll make me proud – you'll make the whole nation proud."

If Sam could cry, tears would have run down Sam's fins from his nose casing, and he just knew Fred would have wiped them off with arcing sweeps of his rag.

The next day, Fred came in carrying a cucumber sandwich in his left hand and before he got to work, he shook his head and said, "they'll launch you little buddy. You're a fine missile, and no way could they let a fine missile like you sit too long without a launching."

Sam thought about launching every day, about the blue sky he'd seen when he was transported from the missile factory to the base and the silo, about the trees growing smaller and how a city or town would rush towards him before he blew up. He heard one by one the other missiles in their distant silos giving birth to columns of flame as they flew away to their beautiful, fiery detonations. When the base fell quiet between skirmishes, and the guards' footsteps faded down the metal halls, Sam would let his booster warm just a little until he slipped into dreams of what his silo looked like from the sky.

One afternoon, Airman Fred didn't polish Sam. Sam waited as the night guards relieved the afternoon guards, and the morning guards relieved the night guards. Finally, Fred's door opened, and Fred waddled in backward, pulling a metal cart with another missile strapped to its top. SAM grew excited until he realized Fred wasn't going to stop and polish his casing. Fred backed towards the door on the other side, a loose wheel on the cart wobbling and squeaking. A dark cloud hung on his brow, and he bit his lip and ground his jaw.

Fred glanced to Sam, wiped tears off his cheek, and sighed, "No time to polish you today, little buddy. Got to take care of a dud."

Sam watched the missile until it vanished down the hallway. He'd never seen a dud before. Did the housing look as white as Sam's? Were the fins the same sleek gray? It looked every bit like a missile, but somehow, knowing that it was incapable of detonating over the enemy made it look like something else entirely too.

A couple hours later, Fred came back through without the missile, without the cart, and without his rag. He came on through and passed out the far door, unwilling to even look at Sam. It was moving to Sam to see just how much the missiles mattered to Fred. He was different than the other maintenance folk and the technicians. An unease passed through his circuits as he

realized that if he fired, he'd never see Airman Fred again. Never be polished by him, wouldn't hear his gruff voice. Would it be so bad if he never launched? Would he always have Fred, or would Fred be one day be reassigned? What would be the point of being a missile if not to be launched? What if they ran out of targets? Could there be a God if there was nothing to blow up?

It was all too confusing for something so simple as a missile to process.

As night set on the silo shortly before the end of the summer and the last rays from the sun backed out of the hole like a dying flame, Sam wondered if he could just launch himself. Fire without purpose to detonate in the sky. Would his explosion be just as glorious if he did not strike an object? Could a launch without a target be meaningful?

Sam didn't have the answers, and it started to seem like Fred came less and less. When he did, sometimes, he didn't even polish. He'd just walk in a circle around Sam, shaking his head, muttering, and then walk on out the other hall.

Finally, Fred did linger. He draped his rag over one of SAM's fins and settled his hands on his hips as if all the weight of the war rested on his shoulders.

"Gotta go away a while, little buddy," Fred said. "Been transferred. Not much need for a missile polisher these days – it's all lasers now. They're gonna send me to space to polish satellites. I'm gonna ride on up into the skies in a rocket ship."

Jealousy consumed Sam, imagining Fred riding up into space on a bed of flame, and a different fire burned in Sam's housing as he waited and waited. The next month, one of his grey guiding fins fell away from the side of his propulsion housing. Eventually, one of his internal sensors shut down, and another indicated that his fuel had been contaminated. His internal guidance chip broke. More months passed, and then years.

Eventually, some technicians opened a door at the base of Sam's silo dressed in white coats smudged with grease. They carried clipboards and had noses like birds.

"Looks like this one's got to be junked too," the first technician said.

"Yeah, too bad they didn't launch this one when the wars were still hot," the second technician said. "I bet this was one damn fine missile."

"You got that right," the first technician said. "He would have blow'd up good. They don't make them like this no more."

"They don't fight wars like this anymore," the second technician said, shaking his head.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

AUTHOR BIO: Andrew Najberg is the author of *The Goats Have Taken Over the Barracks* (Finishing Line Press, 2021) and *Easy to Lose* (Finishing Line Press, 2008). His poems have appeared in *North American Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Mockingheart Review*, *Faultline Journal*, *Bangalore Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and many other journals and anthologies. Currently, he teaches creative writing for the University of Tennessee Chattanooga where he assists with the Meacham Writers Workshop, and he graduated with his MFA from Spalding University. @AndrewNajberg

The **WARRING** States: *Seskatch* or How We Know It's Different

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by Anthony **St.** George

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

Anthony St. George's, "Warring States: Seskatch or How We Know Its Different," is, honestly, deeper than I can understand. I will completely sell myself short here and say that I am not educated enough to fully understand the satire/post-apocalyptic concept and imagery at work here. For example, when I read Seskatch, I knew it had to do with Saskatchewan (or, for the love of Christ, I hope so) and my dumbass could only remember "Sesesh," a derogatory term (not gonna lie, they had it coming) for mid/low-level to full-blown Confederates during the Civil War that the racist officer in Glory (see: Matthew Broderick and Denzel) used after he shot a black man (well, this is America).

What I mean to say is that this story involves a takeover/necessary destruction of society that I can't fully comprehend because I'm pretty sure that I'm one of 'central state' humans that the Seskatch want nothing to do with.

St. George's work is as if the Handmaid's Tale was still exactly like the Handmaid's Tale – people still trying to get into Canada = the world is garbage because of America and I've not however many seasons to create an Atwood metaphor (spoiler alert).

What I truly enjoy about this story is how the author has crafted a story that only gives you so much and you can take more than given. They mention time, it passes; you read about an expensive apartment, it gets more cramped (because I didn't feel like looking up the conversion rate of future Canadian dollars(?) vs. future American monies); there are regions of American statehood that exist, but, to be honest, apart from New Mexico, even in America, no one would give a shit (Ohio is garbage and South Dakota should be given back even though they're badlands); there was an agreement made between North and South, but the lines are a bit divided...

What St. George does well is to create a world. This world is bleak, humorous, and probably costly (if you can't sell bread in the pseudo-colonies, then why the hell are you in the bread business anyway?).

I think that this piece is a rumination on our current trades, businesses, and transgressions. I think that St. George does an excellent job using speculative-flash fiction to craft what could be in a world that he understands the machinations of. I think that you would enjoy this story because it is a damn fine story.

I can't say enough that you should read this story, certainly not for what I say about it, for I am what the French call incompétent (my French is shit), but because it is true craft – a story that knows what it does and how it impacts the reader.

Enjoy this story, I did.

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

Planting time is every three months, announced the week before our two-day holiday goes into effect. Rest before starting, rest after harvest. I go in daily to A-frame 90, where I am assigned to inspect the artichokes. Any drops of fertilizer spray sensed on the floor are deducted from my pay.

The Warring States: Seskatch or How We Know It's Different

Saskatoon, Central States, 6-months before Start of Year 0:

Before Seskatch voted to join the Central States, elements of the street scene and our lives included:

+ Hackesack players were shushed off the streets, even during folk festivals, in transgression of vagrancy laws.

+ Most church dress was solemn-grey, whites, black, and sometimes, for women, a navy blue blazer. Mennonites who objected to the influx of Central States' vertical farming technology often wore a magenta scarf to signal their objection to the vote.

+ Delia and I rented our 2,500 sq ft loft apartment for C\$5,000. She had half the apartment for her bike repair business; I kept the other half for my flour-dusted, German-style-bread baking business.

+ Easter signaled the welcoming of spring. Time to plant.

+ American automatic weapons were held at the border.

+ Our anthem was "O Canada."

+ Once, when I was out with Delia, a child approached us, her grandmother in tow (literally, the child was in a harness, pulling along an exhausted-looking, short-strided elderly woman. The woman stumbled every few steps, and the girl would stop and look back). The child explained that her mother had left her for the West Coast and would be sending for her when she was safe. By the time the adult had caught up, the girl was explaining that they hadn't eaten for two days. The woman corrected the girl, explaining it had only been since the previous night. Nevertheless, she was worried for the girl. Her apparel was from another age: at the neck of her houndstooth overcoat, a bright orange scarf. Her head was wrapped with a spangly, bronze-colored turban straight out of a costume shop. The emerald-and-platinum pin above her ear looked genuine.

Around the girl's neck lay the gentle filigree of a chain, a *chai*, and cross hanging together over her cardigan's second button.

"How is it you don't have food? You look well enough off," Delia asked.

"We're wearing our house," the grandmother said. "What cost ten dollars yesterday now costs thirty. The money her mother left us with is gone."

"But the Thresherhood, they take care of you, don't they?" I asked.

"In a manner of speaking. They've been giving us food in exchange for humiliating me."

The girl looked up at her harness-and-anchor and frowned.

"I've got some loaves back home, Ma'am," I said. "If you'll take them."

"Where's home?"

"Three blocks away." We were sitting outside at a café, eating rugelach and cheesecake with our afternoon tea.

"Lead on," she said, raising her arm as if leading a charge.

Saskatoon, Central States, Year 3

+ Fortunately, despite open carry legal everywhere now, automatic weapons are gathered and melted into an ever-growing statue in front of our Region House, what used to be the

Legislative Assembly in Regina. Open carry was a condition of our joining the Central States; the seizure and destruction of automatic weapons was ours.

+ We found that we now dare not venture across town to the Ohioan, South Dakotan, and New Mexican quarters. We've been stopped at street corners by knife-wielders and shotgun-holders asking our business. "To sell bread," I'd said. And they laughed so hard we could only walk away.

+ Planting time is every three months, announced the week before our two-day holiday goes into effect. Rest before starting, rest after harvest. I go in daily to A-frame 90, where I am assigned to inspect the artichokes. Any drops of fertilizer spray sensed on the floor are deducted from my pay.

+ The Thresherhood now has eighty-six percent of the Region House. We are happy about this because of the aid they provided in the past. They've composed a new anthem, "O the Joys of Victuals," sung long and slow.

+ Delia has taken to playing hackesack for bucks, competing in tournaments in the region just to make our rent. She hopes to get a visa to participate in the quadrennial alt-Olympics to be held

next year in British Columbia. We are hoping she finds Shallah's mother there. Maybe we'll move too if it's as peaceable as they say.

+ Grandma moved in from the tent we'd given them to one of Delia's gear rooms. Shallah, now nine, is all about hairbrushes and not eating bread.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *"Seskatch..." is part of a collection of stories I am writing called "The Warring States," which illustrate life at the cusp of the 22nd century, as North America reconfigures into different regional groupings and states in response to global political machinations and ecological factors. The collection is a supplement to my novel, "Ann History," which follows three related characters in succession through this disintegration and reconfiguration. Most of the stories in the collection are standard format; I wanted to mix the collection up with some flash fiction. The inspiration for the format for this piece came from my earlier career working in tech academia (engineering colleges/universities), where bulleted PowerPoint presentations and e-mails were significant means of communication. This is that format gone awry.*

AUTHOR NOTE: Anthony St. George has left the working world of academia to get lost in the world of words. He lives in San Francisco with his husband and has also lived in Toronto, Taipei, and Seoul. He speaks varying levels (descending order) of Mandarin, French, Korean, Japanese, and Scots Gaelic, at least one of which is featured in his as-of-yet unpublished novel, "Ann History." Other than writing, he spends his time hiking, constructing his website: anthonystgeorge.com, and resisting pontification on Twitter at @asgriobhadh. Anthony has never met a hike or a bird he hasn't liked.

An Old Joke

by daniel coshnear daniel coshnear daniel coshnear daniel coshnear

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Daniel Coshnear's "An Old Joke" is clever, witty, and pleasantly fourth wall breaking.*

Oscar and Louise sit around with Oscar 2 and Louise 2 as Oscar attempts to tell a joke to the group. What ensues could be described as Abbott and Costello meets Monty Python.

The lines are quick, the characters most certain have their quirks, and the scenario in which they live has allowed Coshnear a space rife with room to set up and punchline this joke within a joke.

What I love about this story is its ability to talk to the audience – it is both fiction and drama. While reading, I could imagine setting up this work in a small community theater as a scene that showcases a director's abilities or I could simply enjoy reading over the dialogue and noticing what was happening. The more you read this story, the more commentary about our lifestyles you can parse out, the more satire presents itself, the more joke becomes about the reader than the actual joke itself (a joke, by the way, that did actually make me shake my head and laugh).

What this piece does well is to make you fall for it while, at the same time, transcending a joke into becoming literary. On its surface, you can be tickled by how amusing it is, as you look deeper into how well this piece was crafted you will almost want to shake your head and look at the author and go, "oh, you."

"An Old Joke," but a good joke.

Take a look at Daniel Coshnear's story, you won't regret it.

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

Louise: Foul mouth meant he used bad language.

Oscar: Bad language was usually about sex.

Louise: I read that some words were okay, but some others were seen as vulgar, even though they meant the same thing.

Oscar: Take tits and cock.

Bewildered expressions

Oscar: Sometimes the words were said in anger, I guess.

Oscar 2: You are a tit!

Oscar: Imagine that.

Louise: Misinformed as a cock!

An Old Joke

Oscar: Here's an old one I found on the library disc.

Oscar 2: Oh please, this is so offensive.

Louise: I want to ... I love jokes.

Oscar: It's not that funny, but I think it is revealing in a way.

Oscar 2: Reveals how tasteless you are.

Louise 2: Would you call that a revelation?

Oscar 2 and Louise 2 press the backs of their hands together.

Oscar: All right. This man, he's very busy. Very, very busy. And he's wealthy.

Louise: That's funny right there, wealthy and busy.

Oscar: And he decides on doubling, but back then they called it cloning.

Oscar 2: See what I'm saying? And doubles used to be called clones!

Louise 2: That's awful!

Oscar: It's just an illustration. It just shows how far we've -

Louise: Are we going to hear the joke or not?

Oscar 2: I'm sure we are.

Oscar: This man has two jobs and a life-partner and a mistress.

Louise 2: What's a mistress?

Louise: I think I've read about this. It was like a secret partnership. It was mostly for sex.

Louise 2: Gross.

Oscar: Yeah gross, but look at the literature. People were obsessed with sex -- it was all they thought about.

Louise: Well, yes, but it served a real function before --

Oscar 2: And I heard people used to hunt animals for food.

Louise 2: Didn't they like eat cows?

Oscar *shrugs, looks exasperated*: Can I tell this joke or not?

Oscar 2: Cow--eating, sex--having people, you can just imagine what kind of humor --

Louise: So ... he's very busy.

Oscar: They used to have this expression -- I can't be in two places at once.

Oscar 2: Sad.

Louise 2: Hard to imagine.

Oscar: So, the man had a clone made. In a laboratory!

All laugh

Louise 2: This really is awful.

Oscar: And the clone was identical to the man in every way.

Oscar 2: Why?

Oscar: I don't know why. That's how they did it then.

Louise: Or how they imagined it, anyway.

Oscar: Good point. An important point. Surely this joke was conceived before doubling was properly understood.

Louise: Long before it was a common practice, I would imagine.

Louise 2: Can you excuse me? I want nutrition.

Oscar 2: It won't take that long.

Oscar: The clone was exactly like the man except that he had a foul mouth.

Louise: That's going to need decoding.

Oscar 2: Infection? Open sores?

Louise 2: I pictured a chicken mouth, like a beak.

Oscar and Louise press the backs of their hands together, chuckle.

Louise: Foul mouth meant he used bad language.

Oscar: Bad language was usually about sex.

Louise: I read that some words were okay, but some others were seen as vulgar, even though they meant the same thing.

Oscar: Take tits and cock.

Bewildered expressions

Oscar: Sometimes the words were said in anger, I guess.

Oscar 2: You are a tit!

Oscar: Imagine that.

Louise: Misinformed as a cock!

Oscar: Something like that.

Louise 2: Duplicitous cocks!

Oscar: That's the general idea.

Louise 2: What's a cock?

Oscar: Anyway, this clone, if you will, stands in for the man in a variety of situations because the man, for a variety of reasons couldn't be there.

Louise: And it's like no one can tell the difference?

Oscar: Exactly. For example, the clone might show up at the man's job while the man is recharging, or what they used to call relaxing.

Louise 2: This is way over my head.

Oscar: Or, say the man is having sex with his mistress and the clone, at the same time, is having sex with the man's life partner.

Oscar 2: For more offspring?

Oscar: It's not always clear. For pleasure?

Louise 2: Gross. I'm going to evacuate.

Oscar: In which manner?

Louise 2: Likely both.

Oscar 2: Enjoy yourself.

Louise: Wait, wait. Can you wait?

Louise 2: For a short time.

Louise: We could go together.

Louise 2: I would like that.

Oscar 2: So, the double, or clone, says bad words.

Oscar: Thank you, yes. And each time he does, he upsets people -- the life-partner, the mistress, the co-workers. And when the man returns to life-partner, etc. he/she/they are angry at him.

Louise: That would seem to defeat the purpose.

Oscar: Purposes being increased efficiency, more time for leisure.

Louise: Lower stress?

Oscar: Back in the days of heart failure, they believed stress was a cause.

Louise 2: I think I can see why a clone might have been desirable.

Louise: But a foul-mouthed clone?

Oscar 2: Tits and cock all day.

Oscar: Increasing stress and, as they believed, the risk of heart failure.

Louise: No, this really is pretty funny.

Oscar: I haven't gotten to the punch yet!

Louise 2: I'm a little afraid where this is leading.

Oscar 2: Rightly so.

Oscar: So, the man decides he's going to have to terminate the clone.

Louise 2: Dispose of him?

Oscar: Correct.

Oscar 2 and Louise 2: This is awful. How could this be funny?

Louise: You have to remind yourselves that doubles didn't exist yet, nor did cloning, except as an idea. It wasn't practiced.

Oscar: So, the man invites his clone to join him on a ski trip.

Oscar 2: And the clone says, Tits yes! Cock yes!

Oscar: Very good ... and the man and his clone are together alone on a ski lift high over a steep cliff.

Louise: The skis could only go down hills then.

Louise 2: That wasn't so long ago.

Oscar 2: I've seen pictures, these bench like things that sailed high above the snow on cables.

Louise 2: Ski down and ride the bench back up.

Oscar: It was fairly common, believe it or not.

Louise: I kind of think it would be fun. Like riding on an animal. Gawd!

Louise 2: Like preparing nutrition in an oven? *Laughs.*

Oscar 2: Like having sex! *All laugh.*

Louise 2 : Like using foul language! *Perplexed looks.*

Oscar: Oh, you reminded me. Foul language was also called obscene. That's important.

Oscar 2: Like all the wars? Or like locking people up in prisons?

Louise: No, that's not how the word was used. Better to think of tits and cock.

Oscar: BTW, they called testicles balls.

Oscar 2: I guess I can picture that.

Louise 2: And people were offended? I really have to evacuate.

Louise: These old jokes have the same effect upon me.

Oscar: So, they sail up high on the lift overlooking a cliff and the man gives his clone a shove.

Louise: And the clone falls?

Oscar: Yes.

Oscar 2 and Louise 2: And the fall terminates the clone?

Oscar : Yes, it does.

Oscar 2: See, what did I tell you?

Louise 2: This is funny? This is awful!

Oscar 2: Homicide as a joke!

Louise: Is that all?

Oscar No, there's more. When the man gets off the ski-lift, he is immediately arrested.

Oscar 2 & Louise 2: I should hope so.

Oscar: The man says, what are you charging me with officers?

Louise 2: I sure hope this is the punch because I feel the shit coming out of me.

Oscar: Yes, here it is.

All: Well?

Oscar: **You, sir, are under arrest for making an obscene clone fall.**

Oscar 2: That only seems to beg the question.

Oscar: Well, you have to understand --

Louise 2: The whole idea is absurd.

Louise 2: I have to admit, it does seem rather inane.

Oscar: Well, back in the day people used to communicate with little devices they held in their hands and apparently --

Oscar 2: I heard that all the old jokes started by saying knock knock.

Louise 2: Which meant what?

Louise: It meant, prepare yourself because here comes a joke.

Oscar: They didn't all start with knock knock.

Louise: They really should have.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Well, everyone knows that when you explain a joke, you ruin it. But, if you explain it badly enough, something good might come of it ... I didn't think I'd ever publish this piece. I wrote it and put it away and forgot about it for years. Thanks Fleas on the Dog!*

AUTHOR BIO: Daniel Coshnear lives in Guerneville, California with his wife and two children, works at a group home for the homeless and mentally ill, and teaches writing at UC Berkeley Extension, and in other north bay facilities. He is author of *Jobs & Other Preoccupations* (Helicon Nine 2001) and *Occupy & Other Love Stories* (Kelly's Cove Press 2012) and a novella, *Homesick, Redux* (Flock 2015) His newest story collection, *Separation Anxiety* will be released in 10/21 by Unsolicited Press. You can reach Dan at coshn@sonic.net

Love with the Proper S-t-r-anger (!!!)

By Cameron Spencer

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Cameron Spencer's "Love with the Proper Stranger" is a tale as old as time.*

When the marriage that you're in is violent, stuck, and dragging on what do you do? Our protagonist is trapped. Living with an abusive husband, drinking to soothe the pain but being told that she drinks too much, being threatened after commenting how her husband can't pick an episode of Law & Order, this woman is both classically battered and classically deflecting all of his actions upon herself—tossing away being clocked in the face as just another evening.

At the heart of this story lies the lines in which we allow violence to be perpetrated against us the violence that we must do to save ourselves; defining the boundaries that we establish for ourselves in our relationships and the way in which we react when both sides of the line get crossed; when we decide that enough is, and, if we looked hard enough, has always been, enough.

What Spencer does well is to acknowledge the games that we play with each other at times and the inability of others to deal with the consequences of their actions:

And so they began their favorite ritual: a sharing of sexual fantasies. He would encourage her to imagine scenarios of trysts and couple-swapping. At first she'd felt guilty; were her fantasies an indication of a dissatisfaction with reality? Would her husband be jealous of an imaginary lover? Perhaps fantasies were necessary to enjoy long-time married sex. Then again, she knew that cerebral adventures could make reality tolerable.

There is a finesse written here between what one does to save their marriage, themselves, and the consequences of years of physical and sexual abuse.

"Love with the Proper Stranger" is a story that walks a delicate line between reality and fiction, what could happen and what already has. Spencer has crafted a story that may make you uncomfortable, and that is okay.

You should read this story to see it through to the other side. You won't be disappointed. Perhaps left wanting more from the decency of the world, but knowing that there is always a release from our cages.

Enjoy.

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

He bent down, wrapped his fingers around her throat, and shoved her deeper into the chair. “I’m going to do it right here, in the living room, and I am going to knock you down and bash your head in. And then I’m going to call everyone and tell them I’ve killed you. And I’ll go to prison for the rest of my life, but you know what? It’ll be worth it because I will have shut up your fucking mouth once and for all.

Love with the Proper Stranger

Sometimes she felt as if she hardly knew him; at other times she realized that she knew him too well.

One workday evening toward the end of summer, they had settled to watch television after dinner. She’d had three glasses of Merlot, which was one glass too many. He had been surfing with the remote, and she had grown tired of the constant flickering of images on the screen.

“Geees, you’re making me dizzy! Can’t you settle on one thing? Talk about ADD!”

“Shut up. I am trying to find at least one goddam *Law and Order* that we haven’t seen already.” He’d had four glasses of wine, but he, of course, was bigger than she and could hold his drink.

“Yeah, right. Shut up. Shut up. That’s a real nice way to talk to your wife. How’d you like it if I talked that way to you? Oh, no! That would never do. If I told you to shut up, I’d find myself flying through a wall or something. You’d –“

His nose appeared two inches from her eyes, and she could feel the tickle of his breath on her eyelashes. “If you say one more word—just one more word—I am going to knock you out. I am going to kill you. And you know how I’m going to do it?” He bent down, wrapped his fingers around her throat, and shoved her deeper into the chair. “I’m going to do it right here, in the living

room, and I am going to knock you down and bash your head in. And then I'm going to call everyone and tell them I've killed you. And I'll go to prison for the rest of my life, but you know what? It'll be worth it because I will have shut up your fucking mouth once and for all. Think I'm kidding? Go ahead; try me. Just say one more word, you cock-sucking, mother-fuckin' bitch! Go ahead! Say something! *Say something!* You stupid cunt!" He jammed the remote into her cheek, slapped the top of her skull, and stomped out of the living room. She heard the door of the spare bedroom slam. She rubbed her cheek. Damn! She hadn't had a bruise on her face for at least four months. Things had been going so well. She should not have complained. She should not have had the third glass of wine.

Three weeks later they were sitting on the beach, reading and sipping Chardonnay that they had brought in a cooler along with a wheel of brie. It was a particularly good day to be by the ocean; there was a soft September breeze that swept sand gnats and horseflies away but left the sun warm enough for her to wear a bikini. He looked up from his Dean Koontz novel. "Happy?"

She put down her collection of Joyce Carol Oates and smiled. "I'm always happy with you—when you're happy, that is."

He took her hand and caressed her knuckles with his lips. "Listen; I am very much in love with you, but sometimes—especially when we've been drinking—I feel like I don't know you. You turn into a woman I don't know. And one I don't like." He leaned over and planted a brief kiss on her lips. "But at other times," he said, grinning till his eyes crinkled at the corners and squeezing her fingers, "you are incredibly sexy—and a woman I'd like to know. Very well."

And so they began their favorite ritual: a sharing of sexual fantasies. He would encourage her to imagine scenarios of trysts and couple-swapping. At first she'd felt guilty; were her fantasies

an indication of a dissatisfaction with reality? Would her husband be jealous of an imaginary lover? Perhaps fantasies were necessary to enjoy long-time married sex. Then again, she knew that cerebral adventures could make reality tolerable.

“It’s just sex,” he had told her. “When are you going to get that through your head? It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just fun. And anyway, we’ll probably never get a chance to actually act any of these out, though I’d welcome it.”

“Let’s say,” he began on this day, “that we decided to stay here at the beach tonight. We get a motel room, and you put on that black backless dress that shows off your legs and your boobs. You know which one I mean?”

She nodded.

“Then we go out and buy you a pair of stiletto heels and go out to dinner and dancing.”

“We haven’t done that for ages,” she said.

“I know. And while we’re out, we strike up a conversation with another couple—about our age, but in good shape and attractive.”

“I don’t want a fat guy.”

“Hell, no! And I don’t want to screw some pudgy woman, either.” He sighed. “So, anyway, we all have a few drinks, and one thing leads to another, and we exchange room keys.”

“Oh, are they staying here too? They’re not local?”

“Oh, yeah, they’re staying here, but they’re out-of-towners. We don’t want to mess around with anyone from around here; that complicates things.”

“Sure does. Good. So, go on.”

“Well, why don’t you add something? What happens when you get to the room with this guy?”

She leaned back in her beach chair and licked her lips. This part was fun. She knew what would happen next. “First, I’d put on some music and dance for him. Sort of a slow, swinging dance while I took off my dress—I’d have a garter belt on, of course, and black hose.”

“Of course.”

“But no bra.”

He smiled. “Of course not. Then what?”

“Why, then I’d slowly undo his zipper—he’s sitting on the bed—and then I’d squat down and--”

“Okay. We’re in public, babe, and I’m getting horny. Time to go home.”

Good. He was pleased. Now he’d be in a good mood, and she knew how to keep him that way.

They started gathering their towels and folding up the chairs. She pulled on the white eyelet cover-up and slipped on her flip-flops. He dumped out the ice from the cooler. The wine bottle was empty. “Well, so much for the wine and cheese. We ate and drank it all.”

“So how come I’m hungry?”

“Are you? Well, we can grab something to eat, if you like.” He was being very agreeable. This is the way she liked him best.

“Ok, let’s go have a drink and a little something.”

“Fine.”

The barroom was crowded but breezy; the door had been left wide open to admit the beach air. The bar itself was a heavy dark wood horseshoe lit by suspended Tiffany style lamps. Small booths lined the walls, and men and women stood chatting in clusters, holding bottles of beer and plastic wine glasses. Nascar posters and autographed photographs of drivers decorated the walls,

and one section was devoted to a collage of locals in Hawaiian shirts in various stages of intoxication, toasting the camera or leering at each other over their leis. *Luau Night 2018* was scrawled along the bottom border. Beach chic.

“That preppy-looking guy over there is giving you the eye, I swear,” he said, returning from buying her another Chardonnay. “This could be just the opportunity we’ve been talking about. Do you see him?”

She did.

Her husband and the sturdy, preppy-looking man from the bar were strolling down the beach on either side of her. The three of them had been talking for hours, though she could not recall exactly what about. The sun had gone down long ago, and the wind had picked up to the point that she wanted a jacket, but none of them had come prepared for cooler weather. The preppy man brushed against her left shoulder once, and another time, when they were laughing at some joke, he had squeezed her shoulder in what seemed at first to be a comradely way but lasted longer than a simple friendly gesture. She felt her breath quicken in pleasant surprise. But it wasn’t supposed to be this way; there was supposed to be another couple, a woman for him.

Her husband had forgotten his cigarettes. The preppy man said that he did not smoke, so her husband decided to walk back to a walkover near a convenience store and pick up a pack. She and the man agreed to walk down to the water’s edge to wait for her husband.

They stood watching the white caps melt into the darkness along the edge of the sand. Low tide. She filled her lungs with moist salt air and felt her limbs relax.

“Let’s sit down,” he said. They sat on the sand in silence.

Later, she could not recall when they had started kissing, or how long she had had her head between his thighs. Certainly her bikini must have fallen off her of its own accord. She

knew only that no fantasy could equal this reality. Conscious thought suspended, and she rode him in wave after wave of an exhilarating passion.

Then she heard her husband's voice. *So this is how I am going to die*, she thought.

"What the fuck? What the fuck?" He had grabbed the preppy man by the collar and hauled him to his feet. Then he stood looking down at her. "Are you out of your fuckin' mind? I gave you everything! Everything!"

"But it's just sex! You said--"

Spittle was gathering on his lower lip and he spat his words at her. "What the hell do you want? Am I not good enough?" He reached down and twisted his fingers through her hair at the nape of her neck. Then he yanked her to her feet and thrust his face in hers. "Is that what this is all about? I can give you more than anything your bitch heart wants, but I'm still not good enough. Well, good riddance, you miserable cunt!" Then he hit her hard on the side of her head, and everything sounded far away.

He spun around and started to stalk back up the sand, but the preppy man was quick. He jumped up on her husband's back and began pummeling his head, his ears, tearing and clawing at his throat. Her husband collapsed under the other man's weight and fury. They rolled in the sand, kicking and throwing punches in the direction of each other's face. Then she felt herself running and throwing herself against the man who had just been between her legs, knocking him off her husband. While he sprawled in the sand, she jumped astride her husband's back and, straddling him, she battered his skull, punching left, then right, then shoving his face further and further into the sand until he ceased moving.

The preppy man stood up, panting, and pulled her to her feet. Her heels felt rooted in the sand.

“What...?” he said. “What did we...what the Christ just happened here?”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I would describe my writing style as that of a postmodern minimalist. Most of my stories explore the relationships between men and women inside and outside of marriage, between family members, and among coworkers or neighbors. My favorite writers include Raymond Carver, William Trevor, Denis Johnson, and Patrick DeWitt.*

AUTHOR BIO: Cameron Spencer lives in Savannah, Georgia. She writes short stories and, occasionally, poetry. Her work has appeared online and in *Savannah Authors Anthology*.

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Isn't it obvious? Yeah, we like the ones with the nuts, too!*



AUTHOR BIO: John "Hoss" Taylor Jr. is an artist from Hebron, Maryland. He graduated from Salisbury University with a bachelor's degree in art. Hoss's work has been published in various literary magazines such as *Echoes and Visions*, *Saturday Morning Comics*, *Chicago Literati*, *Chaleur Magazine*, *Inlandia: A Literary Journey*, *Helen : a literary magazine*, *The Daily Drunk*, *Taco Bell Quarterly*, *Big Whoopie Deal*, *Wrongdoing Magazine*, *Fleas on the Dog*, *Oddball Magazine*, *The Holy Flea*, *A Drunken Midsommar*, *86 Logic*, *The Winnow Magazine*, *Little Old Lady Comedy*, *The Joe Bob Briggs Fanzine*, *The Lumiere Review*, and *Wickerpedia* . Hoss can be found at home with his wife Caitlin, their beagle Belle, and their daughter Sophia. His graphic **You Bitch!** Was published in **Issue 8**.

The *Piano* WARS

By Joseph Farley

724 words

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Nothing is probably more terrifying than when an inanimate object assumes a life of its own. Harmless, innocuous props that populate (and clutter) our lives suddenly springing into our reality safety zone as malevolent creatures intent on doing us harm. This is the dark side of surrealism and when it works—as it does in ‘The Piano Wars’—it hits back hard. And even though the genre is science fiction, where suspension of reality is to be expected, it still takes a writer of superior ability to suspend it long enough for us to buy into the story. We’re here to assure you that Farley is up to the task. A short, strongly written, power-packed narrative by a writer in control.*

Five Stars

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

The concert pianos, the warrior class, used poisoned arrows shot from their gut strings. It was a mess until steamrollers arrived from Earth and flattened the native armies in the Battle of Squished Plain. Pacification continued until Urgusian pianos were completely humbled. As we look back now, this is a disturbing part of our history on Urgus 7, but at the time of the war, there were people on Earth who were eager to watch pianos being run over by steam rollers on pay for view.

The Piano Wars

Urgus 7 is known as the Planet of the Pianos. When explorers from Earth first reached the planet, they were amazed by the number and types of pianos sitting undisturbed on hills, plains, mesas and the shores of the alcohol seas. The pianos were well tuned and seemingly there was no one

on the planet that could play them. It was unavoidable that some of the explorers would tickle those ivories. Years of music lessons never go away. This created a huge cultural misunderstanding. The original explorers realized this as they watched their companions get torn to pieces and eaten by raging pianos woken from slumber.

It was a not so simple case of convergent evolution, as the similarities were not between vastly different species, but between an alien species and a domestic Earth musical instrument. Pianos were the dominant species on Urgus 7. They were predators that hunted by night and were dormant by day. They were sentient, aggressive and war like, but had a low level of technology, on the level of what might be found in an early 20th century honkytonk.

Scientists were fascinated by Urgusian pianos, and made the long journey to Urgus 7 to study them. They even succeeded in capturing a few in the wild, and brought them back to Earth. There it was discovered that the “keys” were quite sensitive and were related to reproduction. With this knowledge, scientists eventually learned how to breed pianos in captivity. This worked too well. The number of Urgusian pianos on Earth multiplied. The wealthy adopted pianos as pets. The unscrupulous trained them to perform. You can still find videos of chained pianos being played at Carnegie Hall, and listen to the agony and ecstasy of their moans. Such slavery is now outlawed. Today only free range pianos who have voluntarily agreed to long term entertainment contracts and have a reputable agent are allowed to perform in public. But in private? Who knows what goes on in the crazed mind of a pianist.

Once settlers arrived on Urgus 7, further blunders with the locals occurred. These blunders led to the “The Piano War” which reached it’s height in 2739 CE. The pianos fought desperately to drive out the settlers. The pianos would surround a settlement, usually at night, then rush in on fleshy wheels and spindly legs, growling loud and raucous tunes. The concert pianos, the warrior class, used poisoned arrows shot from their gut strings. It was a mess until steamrollers arrived from Earth and flattened the native armies in the Battle of Squished Plain. Pacification continued until Urgusian pianos were completely humbled. As we look back now, this is a disturbing part of our history on Urgus 7, but at the time of the war, there were people on Earth who were eager to watch pianos being run over by steam rollers on pay for view.

Urgusian cultural has dwindled and is in danger of dying away. Most young pianos accept or embrace being played by, or simply living with humans. As on Earth, they have come to realize that being in a house with humans does not necessarily mean that anyone will ever touch your keys. Older pianos, those that can remember a human free planet, lament the attitude of the young, believing their species has sunk into decadence and servitude.

I have head that there is an ancient upright living in the mountains of the Argulath range who preaches of a coming messiah. This messiah will unify discordant pianos and lead them in a holy war against humans. Dissident pianos are said to flock to the mountains to listen to the sounds of that old upright. Security forces take the rumors seriously and regularly send drones and patrols to search for any gatherings of pianos in the mountains. To date no such assemblies have been found, or, at least, have not been made known to the public. Lack of proof does not mean it isn’t happening. There are caves in those mountains, and the Urgusians have learned from us. They

now have access to machines and more modern weapons. All of human living on Urgus 7 need to be vigilant. Pianos could be boring under their very homes right now, just waiting for the right moment to burst from the ground, and begin a concert of death.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Many of my ideas come from dreams. Nighttime dreams and daydreams. Sometimes I think of these ideas as memories from time spent in other dimensions, an occurrence that could happen on any day as I am too busy to be observant of the slight differences between worlds as I casually slip between them. Stylistically, I admire folktales, surrealism, magic realism, absurdism, dada, beat writing, and speculative fiction. A story is a journey but that journey is in the mind. It does not need dialogue just as dreams do not need dialogue. Images can be enough. Language can be sufficient action.*

When you look at a piano it seems rather alien. All those teeth. And yet, when you see someone perform with passion on a piano, they seem aroused, their pounding sexual, the music filled with eroticism the composer may never have intended. Is that passion all one sided? For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Where there is passion there can be violence. Pianos should be approached with caution.

AUTHOR BIO: Joseph Farley edited Axe Factory from 1986 - 2010. His poetry collections include Suckers, Longing for the Mother Tongue, and Her Eyes. His fiction books include a story collection, For the Birds, and a novel, Labor Day (Peasantry Press). His work has appeared recently in Horror Sleaze Trash, Schlock!, Frost Zone, Ygdrasil, Home Planet New Online, LummoX, Mad Swirl, Big Windows, US 1 Worksheets and other places.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW # 1 (Fiction)

Fiction Editor **JOEY CRUSE** interviews author **NICK NORTH**

When I was approached by Tom and Charles about interviewing one of the fiction writers in Issue 9, they left me on my own to select an author of my choice. I chose Nick because his writing is the most difficult. How he writes grates upon me. It just literally isn't my style. I can read it and understand it, I can hope he wasn't talking down to me (I don't think he was, but for some reason my ego goes there first - if I have to work to figure out what you're saying then why couldn't I have just read it?). He was the one I wanted to grill the hardest because, at times, his style infuriated me. He's like an e.e. cummings of fiction and part of me can't stand that. I know that he is educated, well read, intelligent, all the adjectives, but I can't figure out why he treats the reader that way. Do you want them to understand you (one way or the other I don't think he does cause that doesn't entirely matter) or do you want them to *feel*? Because 1) you know they can't, and/or don't have enough time to care, 2) haven't accepted they've gone through enough school like you to be, "oh, he fits in with a literary or artistic style and the history of them," (and that's fine because he's playing with those writers/characters who played with others), 3) he's just done with caring about the reader making any meaning apart from their own understanding in the sense that he's creating product that should take them to another level of thinking (which I certainly am not), or 4), and I say this with lightness, does he just look down on others and is trying to save the concepts of literature, education, and the malleability of style (that one I don't care about as much because the reader is on their own, but if we'd be like to be read should at least be readable)?

JC: I've read "3 Primary Colors," your work in the current issue, "Carver in My Eyes" (a poor translation because I don't feel like fucking with Latin), and I'd actually be curious if you've seen my WILI for "The Veil of Appearance" (which had to be adjusted accordingly) before we got to where we are here. So, first thing first, describe your concept of a metaphor – I apologize because I can only shape questions as essentially a comp exam question – and your interpretation of perception and writing your world down would be?

NN: My interest in fiction right now is not about telling stories. So I'm less interested in the 'content' of any one fiction, than its formal properties. As I see it, narrative fiction is just an apparatus to deliver the author's ideas—which in most cases have to do with human experience—people's lives, what happens to them, what psychological truths blah blah blah. But if you take the 'content' away from fiction, what is left? Is there *anything* left? Rather than as a means—a way of relating information—I'm interested in looking at it as an end in itself.

Theoretically, the possibilities are endless. But how do you embrace them? It gets exciting for me when a story begins to have a life independent of the reader and independent of its content (and ideally, independent of its creator!). Traditionally modeled, linear narrative doesn't interest me. In *Coincidence is the Recreational Face of Irony* my intention was to show the same sequence of events from different viewpoints. In *The Conformist*, which is maybe my favourite story, nothing makes sense at first. The actions of Nick and Lenny are indecipherable and the 'world' they inhabit is upside down---but everything works if you grant this initial assumption. Their relationship is not actual but literary. They eventually, as the 'story' progresses, step outside of it into a metafictional reality. Experience is the key inspiration for most writers, I know, but not, at this point for me. My sources are intellectual not empirical. It's not 'art for art's sake' so much as a pursuit of formal possibilities—a deconstruction that in itself is a construction, different not in degree but kind.

JC: I noticed that you tend to write at all hours. Do you sleep? Do you consider writing and/or being awake work?

NN: Yes, writing is work for me—enjoyable but challenging and sometimes frustrating. This might have to do with the fact that I have marooned myself on a island in the sense that when I get stuck I can't pick up say *Infinite Jest* or *If, on a winter's night, a traveler...* and say 'Oh, that's how he did it!' It like driving to an unfamiliar destination without a map. But since writing this way is my choice, I find it exciting. I do a lot of revision and even a word will bother me for hours, days if it doesn't sound right or is not exactly the right word—Flaubert's *le bon mot*. I sleep and work like anybody else. I've never really written traditional narrative fiction. My earliest writing was micro-fictions through a bent lens. Here's one...the title is *Point Taken*.

Pam was always a thin woman. She ate like everybody else but never gained weight. After a while she started losing. She got thinner and thinner. Her clothes went from size small to XXX small. 'Next thing you know I'll be shopping for infants!' When she died a few weeks later she was no bigger than a speck. People looked everywhere for Pam but I was the one who eventually found her. If you look very closely you'll discover she is the dot at the end of this sentence but you may need a magnifying glass to see her.

JC: Prefacing: I do like the way in which you write. Questioning: Why do you make me work so fucking hard to understand your point? Is it because you think that I am a terrible reader, is the epistemology of art or language not enough, or is it because you are trying to tell me something about metaphor that I do not get? I say that because I think your style can go further.

NN: Epistemology of art not enough? My writing is mostly about what falls under epistemology. Do I make you work hard to understand what I'm saying? Well, that depends on what you expect, what you bring to the reading experience. If your idea of fiction is A and mine is B, yeah, you'll maybe have to scratch your head or stand back from your preconceptions. I don't expect everybody to 'love' what I write. But that's true for every author. You think my style can go further. So do I. The last part of *3 Primary Colours* called 'In the White Room' is, for me personally, the most interesting. I would disagree that the lack of words only points out that there is meaning in their lack, that the emptiness is somehow meaningful. Why does it have to be meaningful? My intention was to draw bald attention to the punctuation, that, and only that. There is nothing covert or subliminal in the empty space between them. It's probably something deep in our

circuitry that prompts us to supply meaning where there is none, to fill the void, so to speak. By seeing it *just for what it is*, a series of visual notations—out of their context as punctuation--we get to a new model of fiction. Fiction? Yeah, I see it as fiction. I mean, it's not nonfiction.

JC: What are your favorite movies? You've a Jodorowsky, Cronenberg, and/or Gondry frame of mind that, I think, gives you more of a cinematographer/director sense of impact upon the reader than a writer creating a sense. Your writing inherently lacks explanation (which is not a complaint), but, for your use of a blatant, blunt, and, at times, condescending style, do you consider your works written fiction, written moments, or you writing the moment as is? Do you treat writing as cinema at all?

NN: I like all kinds of movies—from film fest choices to Bollywood trash cinema. I especially like horror films and I think they've taken a bad rap. A lot of them are kitschy but a film like 'Texas Chainsaw Massacre' is an extraordinary example of cinematic art. Tobe Hooper, the director and creator, is a master of visual subtext. This is especially and ravishingly obvious in the very disturbing opening scene. The violence is always 'off screen' and for that reason it is all the more terrifying, at least for me, because it opens the door to our imaginings, which are sometimes more frightening than the reality of what we are observing.

You say 'I don't see what kinds of pictures the mind would pick up reading 9 *ordinary words and 36 of their combinations*. That's just it. You wouldn't, unless through free-association—oh, red is my fave colour or I love sunsets sort of stuff. The point is there is no point—the words are as they are and no more than they are. The sentence means something but I'm not approaching it from the point of meaning. I'm approaching it as a literary/intellectual construction, a string of words that start with a capital letter and end with a period. The combinations are just different 'models' of the sentence. The sentence, in and of itself, is any and all sentences. It doesn't matter what sentence you use. Jonah Howell wrote in his *WILI* that the 'tension' between the sentence and its transformations comprises the narrative. I liked that. The story is as much a device blueprint for possible fictions as anything else. It's a literary mechanism, exotic, rarefied to be sure. Fiction, a story, in my view, doesn't always have to 'mean' something. Why can't it exist

independently of ‘content’—to the extent it ever can—a thing in itself? Anyway, there’s storytelling and then there’s this.

My educational background is art and when you peruse through the different movements, trends, revolutions and counter-revolutions that comprise 20th Century art, you are bombarded by the grandeur of formal innovation. There is no such equivalency in 20th Century literature—well, from the second half of the century, I mean. I agree with Burroughs who wrote that 20th Century literature lags 50 years behind visual art in this regard. ‘Content’ or ‘subject matter’ has the upper hand, formal innovation is somewhere to the side. Even when breakthroughs are made—Joyce, Borges, David Foster Wallace, Italo Calvino—and even with some exceptions, the writings of Thomas Pynchon—they tend to ‘self-isolate’ to use a current term. You don’t get a spate of books in their style that forever changes the way fiction is written. But after Picasso and Braque invented Cubism, every artist was turning out Cubist paintings and more important and lasting for art, the idea of mimetic representation was dead. A picture—if you wanted to be taken seriously as an artist—was no longer a ‘window into reality’. And that still holds true today for the most part.

JC: Where did you grow up and what was your childhood like? Do you enjoy Seurat as much as Ferris Bueller? What is your favorite ice cream? If you had to go to another country because you did something terrible where you were living, say, dumping 90’s pooka shells (that was the stupidest thing I could think of) and oil by the liter (meh, metric measurements), then where would it be? Because, if and were that a real thing, I’d go on the pacific side of Argentina and walk off into the desert. How about you?

NN: I was born in Toronto but my family moved to Italy when I was three because of my Dad’s work. We lived there until I was fourteen—then back to Canada. My childhood brings happy memories. We travelled a lot when my Dad had time: our home base was Rome but we went all over the place. I like the south of Italy the best. My favourite city was Reggio-Calabria which is also the name of the administrative region. There are lots of ruins where the Greek influence is strong because they settled and colonized this region in the 5th and 4th BCE. Reggio-Calabria is right at the tip of Italy’s ‘boot’ facing the Strait of Messina. On a clear evening you can watch the sun go down over the water and once it has set,

see the lights twinkle in the coastal villages of Sicily. It's a beautiful experience. I've been back a few times but the country is changing rapidly.

I like both Seurat and Ferris Bueller. I like Borat too. I don't think Seinfeld is all that funny—but he's okay. Favourite ice cream? Vanilla spunk, of course. If I had to go on the lam it would probably be to Italy or Spain—it wouldn't be any place in North America. I've been to Argentina, so I might end up there. So who knows? Maybe we *will* meet up in the desert somewhere...Thanks for reading and writing about my stories for Fleas. I was impressed by 'She Was Australian' and I like how you write.

Nick,

I say this with all sincerity, hope that you understand, and love of late nights with alcohol: stop fucking with me and write a complete work: A short story, a poem, having poetics I don't need to explain, anything. There's beauty in your work, but not me working *that* hard to find said beauty and breaking it down for readers – the review shouldn't be explication or talking down to those who read your work. I hope you enjoy these questions as much as I did writing them. With all the respect I could convey in the concept of an interview, good work, truly, seriously, and without me appearing to be a dick if it came off that way (not my intention).

With all humility and humor,

Me. (Joey Cruse)

Nick North's stories *The Conformist* and *9 ordinary words and 36 of their combinations* were published in Issue 8. His story *Carver est in oculis meis: Coincidence is the Recreational Face of Irony* appeared in Issue 7. *She was Australian* by Joey Cruse was published in Issue 8.

