

# WELCOME!

Issue 4 October 1, 2019

Welcome to *Fleas on the Dog!* We're a no frills brown bag BYOW(eed) online lit rag. (We like to think we're underground with our heads sticking out.). We don't care about pretty pictures or fancy layouts. We're interested in one thing and one thing only: GOOD WRITING. Our sole mandate is quality which means if your mother likes your writing we probably won't.

With this issue we are introducing 2 new categories. The first is Poetry. We were deluged with it even though we only call for short fiction and nonfiction. Apart from the obscene sonnets we carved into washroom walls, we don't know a heck of a lot about it. (*The Wasteland* is an album by U2, right?) So we coerced, no, invited, bardo-bard Hezekiah Scretch to abase himself as our Poetry Editor. The fact that he despises verse of any kind is only important if you're a nitpicker. And so the dude quintet has become the dude sextet.

The other new category is Plays (Drama). Since all six of us agreed that Shakespeare's *Death of a Salesman* is our all-time favourite comedy, we knew we were on the right track. Besides, what Streetcar *wouldn't* Desire such a category? So if your name's Sam Shepard or David Mamet (and even if it isn't) you're welcome to submit your play, previously performed or perennially rejected.

We're proud to announce two writers are making their publishing debut in Issue 4. Congratulations to **J(J-priryodhi)** and **Michael Lange**. You'll find both of them under 'Fiction'.

And among our veteran writers we are honoured to feature Ted Hughes Award 2019 nominee **Maria Straw-Cinar** (poetry). 2017 Booranga Center (Australia) Fiction Prize winner **Mitchell Grabois** (poetry); the San Francisco James D. Phelan Award winner and 4 times Pushcart nominee **Nels Hanson** (fiction). *West Texas Literary Review* fiction editor **Joel Page** (fiction). *Poetry Pacific* editor and 10 times Pushcart nominee **Yuan Changming** (poetry), Director of the Gallo Tricolor Review and Robespierre Review **Daniel de Culla** (fiction), **Andrew Steketee**, first place winner of the MIP Book Awards: Art/Photo 2002 (fiction) and **John Conway** winner of the John Curtis Award for Lifelong Learning.

It's a fulsome issue, frank and feisty, with lights and darks from talent that rocks. We hope you enjoy it. And until we meet again in Issue 5 always spread the love and remember READ is the best 4 letter word in the world. Tom, Charles, Richard, Robert, Steve and Hezekiah.

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# Ex nihilo

By Joel Page

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The grossly unfair cosmic intelligence that radiates through this story is the surest proof that a God who might not exist does not create us equally. What begins as a surrealist projection of a hypothetical image morphing into philosophical investigation gestates before our eyes into the poetry of metaphysics. All five of us emerged from 'Ex nihilo' with stars in our eyes and lumps in our throats. The prose is beyond...beyond...Quote: Sneeze, cough, laugh, scream, break your sentences in half and recombine them. This is the grammar of God.'*

Ex nihilo

At this point, scientific consensus holds that no one is speaking through the giant floating Lips that hover a mile and a half above the Gulf of Mexico. The Lips speak, of course; they speak a grammarless river of words, likely a precursor of Indo-Hittite. Most rigorous analysts, however, do not believe that anyone, any mind, chooses the words. Rather, the words (and perhaps the Lips) are nothing more than language itself.

There are three kinds of dissenting theories on this point, none of which I share. The first concerns the possibility of alien contact and posits that aliens project and control the Lips from afar. The second dissenting opinion is similar, but it imagines a human source: a hoax, or maybe a work of art. Aliens are the more attractive of the two projection theories, because it is impossible to know the extent of their technology, and hence impossible to rule them out entirely. Nonetheless, the following measures tend to disprove the two projection theories:

- The Argentine air force outfitted a turboprop cargo plane with a battery of sensors; it flew circles around the lips for 24 hours, yet it failed to detect any manner of incoming wave – x-, gamma, radio, UV – that might be animating the Lips.
- A daredevil flew up to the Lips by jetpack during a television special and kissed them; she reported that they are composed of solid matter, indistinguishable from any human lips she has previously kissed, save for their colossal size and facial detachment; this would seem to eliminate any suspicion that the lips are merely a projected image.
- The US Navy, in conjunction with a Chinese construction concern, succeeded in building a giant lead ball, attached to the seabed in the manner of an oil derrick; the ball surrounds the lips and blocks any signal that might be reaching them, yet the lips continue apace.

Now this compilation of evidence will not satisfy everyone. Conferences of respectable scientific opinion – not cranks – posit quantum mechanisms of matter transmission. These mechanisms might permit another species to create and animate the lips from a distance. And there is a certain logic in the alien transmission idea. If another species understood (somehow) that human beings speak with their lips, and wished to communicate, what better image to show us? Further, if they wanted to speak to all of us, why not use the first human language ever spoken?

But as I say, this is a dissenting view. The capacity to create objects in another galaxy is at this point conjectural. Indeed, maybe less than conjectural. One astrophysicist has convincingly argued that quantum entanglement is impossible absent prior physical proximity between the entangled particles. The number of particles in the lips, moreover, exceeds the number of particles that come from any one solar system in all but one in one million simulations of the Big Bang. So aliens, as I say, are a dissenting opinion.

The human source hypothesis also has its defenders. In its most plausible form, this hypothesis posits collusion between the trickster who animates the lips, on the one hand, and some combination of the Argentine Airforce, US Navy, and kissing daredevil. While the idea complies at least with the laws of physics, it wants utterly for social plausibility. No evidence has been offered for such a conspiracy, and no motive could explain the behavior of these parties to undertake one.

We turn then to a third explanation positing the existence of a speaker: that the lips are the voice of God, or of the world in toto, which is perhaps the same. The popular rejoinder to this hypothesis, aside from the traditional arguments for atheism, centers on the seeming inability of the lips to utter any sensible collection of words. Why would God speak to His creation if He did not wish to be understood? Last Thursday, the lips told us in Indo-Hittite:

fire mother the if if deep woods woods warfare into the cooking woods mother brother  
sister brother sister bird run hungry run if kill wagon chewing mouth raining mouth  
chewing if the the if into out void

And what manner of God would say such a thing?

I have to say that I find this line of rebuttal unpersuasive. Yes, the lips are senseless. But all the more Godly. Very little of what God would have to say would fit within human grammar -- our grammar arises primarily from mental organs with genetic basis. No less than our physical organs – tongue, lips, larynx – our mental organs limit what we can say. God, obviously, lacks such genetic limitations. Put another way, the words of the lips are not senseless, they are merely expressed in a grammar we do not share. Sneeze, cough, laugh, scream, break your sentences in half and recombine them. This is the grammar of God. And why shall we presume that God speaks for our benefit? When we pray to God, we speak usually for our own benefit. Why should we expect different of God, praying to us?

Nonetheless, I do not quite believe that God chooses to speak through the Lips, primarily because I believe in the non-existence of God. As I understand the concept, an existent God must meet two conditions: it must be infinite, and it must be a creator. These conditions contradict each other. The nature of a creator is to pre-exist the created, which implies necessarily that the creator is, at some moment of its existence, less than infinite. Creation, in other words, is addition, but one cannot add to the infinite.

One might seek to bypass this problem by cutting God in half, defining it as either an infinity that did not create the world, or as a creator who is less than infinite. The first possibility does little to solve

the theory's problem. Infinity cannot speak, lest it cease to become what does not speak, and hence become less than everything.

A creator, on the other hand, may well speak, but it speaks no less through the Lips than through the rest of creation, at once. And this reduces the hypothesis of a Godly speaker very nearly to the trivial.<sup>1</sup>

So, the consensus of rigorous analysts does not believe the words to have a speaker. There is, I should say, one piece of evidence that is very often cited in support of the dissenting views: it does not appear that the lips speak when no one listens to them. Of course, and as with the hypothesis of alien technology, or of a refrigerator light, this cannot be known or excluded with perfect certainty. But when the US Navy built a platform around the lips, it installed a continuous video camera to monitor them. During a period of three days, a storm surrounded the platform, and the feed died. Upon restoration, the lips picked up in the middle of the last word – indeed, within the last syllable – that they had begun pronouncing before the truncation.

From this, advocates of the dissenting views reason that the words must have a speaker. The decision to stop, they argue, implies a will. But to my mind, this does not show that the lips have a speaker. To the contrary, it seems to prove that the words are pure language and nothing more. Because while language may very well exist without a speaker – think of words that appear in the mind, unbidden, unspoken and ex nihilo – it cannot exist without a listener. Speak words to no one -- you have heard them. Think them – you have heard them. But no word has ever existed that has never been uttered. If they are not heard, they are not words. And so with the lips – they are language itself, and must necessarily discontinue while we cease to hear.

And this is the essence of the scientific consensus: that no one is speaking through the Lips, that the words are a pure emission of language, perhaps the source of our own, by way of some prehistoric visit to or from the Savannah.

I will tell you my view now. I have told you little of myself, so perhaps you won't be interested. I am to you probably little more than the lips – speech emerging uninvited from a black space. But maybe that is better – if you know the speaker, you have likely already decided what they mean to say before you hear it. I, by contrast, am unknown to you, so you may hear me.

In my view, the words emitted by the Lips are indeed the voice of God. Further, they have no speaker. Some readers will perceive a contradiction here. There is none. God is absence. If God is an infinite creator, He cannot exist, because a creator cannot be infinite. Indeed, if God is merely an infinite being, He cannot exist, because the world is manifestly not composed of every possibility. Nor can there be any being which has created the world in its entirety, because He cannot pre-exist Himself. It follows

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<sup>1</sup> This, indeed, is very close to the conclusion of certain Jewish traditionalists. On the authority of Genesis 1:1, they regard the words spoken by the Lips as God itself. One popular objection is of Spinozan inspiration: God cannot be the Words of the Lips, the objection goes, because it is everywhere, while the Words of the Lips emerge from a single point in the Gulf of Mexico. An effective rejoinder cites the work of a team of computer scientists, seismic recorders, linguists and mathematicians, who uploaded a set of naturally occurring kinetic data from the New Madrid fault line. That team translated kinetic expressions at random into the letters of each known language, and calculated a 51% chance that the fault line would emit – in some system of seismic translation – a cognizable sentence in some human language, most likely Korean. From this, the traditionalists reason that the Words of the Lips are God, but not all of God. The world is language, speaking incessantly from every point in every conceivable language, and in millions more beyond conception.

that there is no God, and from this that God is nothing. And from the evidence that nothing is speaking the words that come from the Lips, it follows further that the words are the voice of God.

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

*This one just sort of came to me.*

*I was on a plane trying to type something else, something about the ubiquity of language, something more like the footnote, about the possibility of language without a speaker or a thought without a thinker. But that was hard, so I wrote this.*

*Influences: Borges, Katie Chase, China Melville, Eco and Chandler.*

**BIO:** *Joel Page lives in Dallas where he works as a public defender, writing appeals for federal prisoners. He is the fiction editor for the West Texas Literary Review, even though Dallas is arguably not in west Texas. His fiction has appeared in The Fabulist, Thimble Magazine and World Machine Magazine*

# THE HEAVY METAL SOUND OF STEEL

By Daniel Thompson

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *This is the first example of 'noir' fiction we've published. Not only is it hard to come by, it's hard to write. It's a tough genre because it can easily descend into parody. To do it right, the author has to sustain the 'hard boiled' tone without compromising realism, as well as guarding against characters slipping into caricature. We're pleased to report that Thompson has more than enough talent to head off these challenges and the intriguing plot, sense of mystery and kinetic prose keep the story moving at a healthy clip. And as in all the best 'noir' fiction, think Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammet, language is as important as story and the percussive key in 'The Heavy Metal Sound of Steel' is everywhere and beautifully apparent. Quote: 'Sounds that he imagines might resemble some sort of polygon, not the smooth corners of contemporary life, but a geometry all its own. A topography of creases and dents like an aluminum can...' And 'Incendiary figures flutter and flash in blood Rorschach across his vision.'*

## The Heavy Metal Sound of Steel

Daniel Thompson

Cheap speakers carve out hollow sounds battering metal panels. Engine noise tears through injectors, tight titanium tubes. Harold shakes his fist to the music. The fuel gauge sinks as he stomps the pedal, passing a tractor on a double solid line. Cars doppler past giving sharp, exaggerated jabs of their horns. Headlights sweeping a continuous wash of concrete coming to an end in ten, nine, eight... The implacable whoosh of wheels cuts out as the ground falls away, nothing but the tops of trees, houses and the blue-black of the bay. From below it would look like a small plane taking off (a short flight) before dropping into the steep grade, forcing an involuntary *whoop*. The wheel bites into his hand like a captured animal seeking to free itself from the yoke of the road. He leans back, elbows bent, holding steady at 10 and 2. Not a bit nervous, he's done this before.

Borrowed lights of reflectors rear up at the bottom of the hill. He pulls into the driveway of a middle-class suburban home on the beach, but with no waterfront or sand in the yard. After a shower he brushes and shaves, mirror mouthing the words to a ballad like a kissing incantation, recreating the events of Saturday night/ Sunday last. The way she gazed up at him before they kissed on the dance floor. The pupils that sucked up everything in the room, including her, so she had to feel around in the dark. Exhilarated by the prospect of her first time and a calculated fear of intimacy. Arcane pleasures that until then had been forbidden and she wasn't sure how she would react. He squeezes his eyes shut to keep the vision from dissolving, but she recedes into the dark corner of the roadhouse.

In a hurry he eats whatever's available and heads back out to the car. Sliding across the leather, gripping the gearshift, fingering the emblem on the handle. Porthole vents, four on either side of the engine compartment, light up in festive firing order of red, orange, green, blue blowing leaves off the paved drive as he backs onto the street. Idling up to the light and accelerating on yellow only a fraction of a second before it turns red, keeping up his speed for as long as he can without letting it go below thirty.

A police cruiser signals him to yield with a single squelch of its siren. Harold slows to the shoulder. The cruiser speeds past before he's had time to come to a complete stop. Only slightly inconvenienced, Harold regains his momentum and pulls onto a side street.

Lights flash through sight lines ahead and to the right. A crowd is gathered behind a cordon of yellow tape enclosing two crashed cars. Ambulance attendants roll stretchers into waiting ambulances slow and methodical; there are no lives to save. Harold circles the scene twice looking for a place to park. The ambulances leave sans sirens, freeing the entrance to the main plaza parking lot.

Harold gazes at his reflection in the rearview, considering what he should say, how he should walk in, how much money he is prepared to spend. But unlike the perfectly jelled part in his hair, words and actions are not things he can perfect in the mirror.

He climbs out, checking several times to see if the door is locked.

Columns of light pour down waxed metal bodies; dark, blotchy outlines spaced evenly apart. Tow trucks haul the wrecked cars away. Harold pulls up his collar, digs his fists into his leather jacket and strolls into the street. A General Motors insignia lies athwart the centerline. Harold bends down and tucks the artifact into his pocket.

Headlights flash around the corner.

He strides on.

Another set of headlights emerge from the opposite direction, engulfing him in their intimidating light. He makes a dash for the sidewalk as the two cars collide in sounds of screeching metal. He feels pain and is jolted into a dark space, oriented by a single beam of light, contrapuntal to the surrounding darkness; a glowing apparition reaching out in a white wave. Sharp, prickly fingers prod impossibly close to the skin with the numbness of blood starting to recirculate after having stopped for the first time ever. No memory of leaving or being away, just a sudden return that makes the place he is returning to seem less real.

Lights shine on his body sprawled out in the grass. A new crowd has assembled consisting of members from the first with the addition of a few new disaster junkies. Standing motionless in the impartial stupor of an uneventful evening. He feels himself rise and stroll effortlessly across the street.

Sendozen's begins to clear out around 23:00, about the time the last band goes on and impatient teens take leave. Harold crouches low in the driver's seat, watching lovers beeline for cars, noting each peacoat and frocked figure until he spots Louise talking to Travis by the door. She passes him something and leaves with her girlfriends. Travis lingers thoughtfully for a

moment, studying the object in his hand and strolls off in the opposite direction. Taking his time with a sweep and a hop in his step. Harold watches until he is out of view then follows him down a quiet residential street. Lights in the porthole vents flicker with the touch of a nervous foot. Travis spins round, enveloped in the cold, impersonal glare of headlights. The impact throws him to the ground. He screams, clutching at his knee. Harold drives over him, one, two more times before speeding out of town. The route laid out in his mind, taking him from the brightly lit agora into the rural wilds where his acts would resemble more the ambivalent works of nature.

A stop sign rears up at an intersection. Harold spots a pedestrian crossing the road. The pedestrian hobbles on, assured of the basic goodness of his fellow man to observe the rules of the road and stop at the designated place. Harold hits the breaks, having already passed the point where one is *strongly advised* to slow down, coming to a stop only a few inches away from the man. Their eyes meet. Terror creases the man's face. He shrieks, cursing drunken slurs, bringing his cane down on the hood of the car repeatedly. Harold remains silent, experiencing a sense of apathy and contempt towards the man resulting from his repulsive disposition and way of conducting himself more than his idiotic words. As if feeling sentimental about killing the old codger, Harold hesitates a moment before pushing the pedal, sending the man tumbling into a ditch at the edge of a farmer's field. Headlights shine on the body laid out in the grass. Dark blood oozes from his mouth and nose, he moans.

Satisfied, Harold returns to the car. A slow jazz ballad scratches through the speakers. He touches the dial. The radio roars out blacklisted American Rock 'n' Roll on a pirate station.

Headlights approach from behind. He kills the lights, pulls a U-turn and heads back into town, a phantom wind roaring past the oncoming vehicle.

Inside, a man in a cowboy hat has his radio tuned to a country station. He hears the car pass, feels its velocity but doesn't see. Cursing, the cowboy stomps the brakes, turns off the radio, rolls down the window, leans out and listens. Engine sounds fade into the night. He pivots

on his seat throwing one cowboy-footed boot onto the road. Crickets chirp in an adjacent field. Wind rattles corn stalks, their blades anointed with the thinly broadcasted light of the moon. He heaves a contemplative breath as if the air still held a description of the car and its driver. His job demands a relentless attention to detail. He waits for it. The air is fresh but not instructive.

Road hog clouds tumble in from the east. He'd give them a ticket if he could. A single droplet strikes his cheek. He slams the door, turns up the music and drives on.

Dry thrills and screams along the roadside.

A deer jumps in front of the headlights. Hits the tank-like car body with a thud, sending a shockwave through the steel compartment. Harold fishtails onto the soft shoulder and races faster, asserting his control. Out of bounds of the mind with no limits under the hood. Taking eyes off the road and feeling direction's attraction

"Get out of my way," he yells at nothing.

Aiming through the gun-sight hood ornament he hits a man stepping off a sidewalk and sideswipes a moving car into the guardrails. Sparks fly out in an array. The driver stares at him in mid-scream. Harold grinds the vehicles together with sharp jabs of the wheel and releases seconds before the rail ends. The driver takes immediate corrective action, overcompensating suddenly, the tires biting into the soft grass of a hill, dragging the car down, flipping once before slamming into a tree.

Harold glances back to see glass and bits of metal fly.

It's light out when he wakes. Head between the seat and the driver's side window. He doesn't remember much if anything from the night before. He had gone to meet Louise at the bar. He left his car in the parking lot and was about to cross the street. That's the last thing he remembers. From what he sees of his surroundings, he guesses he must be somewhere north of town, along a lonely stretch of road with farms on either side. There doesn't seem to be anyone

out, which is great news for him. The car is in pretty bad shape. One side is significantly bashed in. There are blood stains on the hood and different colours of paint on the doors and quarter panels. He wipes the blood off with a rag and drives to the body shop where he works, suspiciously obeying all traffic laws.

The repairs will take a couple of days so he catches a bus home, trying to recall the details of the previous night, but all he can think about is the car, part graduation present part loan and what his parents will say when he returns without it. Getting them to lend him the money took a lot of convincing and then he had to sit through their long droning admonitions. *Cars are dangerous. Cars are not toys. No screeching of tires. No speeding. Wear a seatbelt.*

Acting natural, Harold strolls into the house and aims for the fridge. Breezing past his father reading the paper open to an inner section.

“Mornin’ son. Just getting in? You must have had quite a night,” lowering the page and peering over the fringe.

The television is audible in the next room amid the quiet rustling of his mother at her painting.

Harold responds through a mouthful of potato salad, “working late at the shop... mmm went out with Louise... stayed over at her place.”

“Do anything special or just go out?”

Harold pours himself a glass of milk. “We saw ‘Space Explorers... mmm mmm. Two’.”

“Really, I haven’t heard of it,” Harold’s father studies his son’s face and returns to his newspaper with scrutiny. Sounds of congenial conversation summon mother to the kitchen, hub of family life dressed in night attire. She looks at them then out onto the street, “Where’s the car?”

“The fuel pump blew so I had to get it towed, I’ll pick it up later tonight.”

“Oh my gosh, what happened? Is everything alright?”

“Of course, I just lost power, the engine wasn’t getting any uh, gas,” Harold concerns himself with his milk. Watching it coat the inside of the glass. His face lights up Tilt.

“You sure it’s just the fuel pump?” asks his father.

“Yeah, gas was spurting out. I had to tie it down with, uh... panty hose and idle all the way back to the shop. It’s on the lift right now.”

Harold takes his glass and strolls into the living room, pretending to look at pictures hanging in their neat wooden frames.

News of the hit-and-runs spreads rapidly around town. Four dead and five injured. The press is describing it as a serial road rampage blood-fest, a lead that keeps on bleeding. Words fly into print without proper substantiation, soon everyone has an alternate version of the truth.

“I don’t even know if we can call these incidents hit and runs. There is neither word nor definition to describe this breed of driving. I mean how could anyone be so blatantly and brutally sadistic? It makes me wonder if this isn’t the beginning of a new age of criminals, breaking every mortal law of man and Jesus.”

“What’re you gonna do Len?” asks a tin cop voice.

“Take him down,” Len, fist-pounding the bullpen desk the two men share, “Can’t let vermin like that walk the streets.”

“I don’t think the captain’s gonna assign you to the case. You’re working the bank robbery and that case is supposed to be closed in the next thirty-six...”

“Never mind. I’m gonna catch this freak and you’re gonna do the paper work on the robberies otherwise I’m gonna kick your rookie wise ass, you got it?”

“Yessir,” replies the obsequious cop.

Len gets up in a huff, stomping over to take in a serene view of the Lake and environs. How can I know what’s going on when all I see are ducks on the water. I’m looking in the wrong

direction entirely. I may as well be staring at the wall, get a lot more done. He reels away from the idyllic scene, turning several heads on his way out of the building.

Onset evening is attended by a gentle pattering of rain. Harold catches a bus downtown and steals a 56' El Camino, cruising Dallas to Ross Bay circling the cemetery twice before looping back through Fernwood and into the stomping grounds, West Saanich, highway 17A.

He kills the lights and turns onto Beaver Lake road, scanning the airwaves for some appropriate music, but finds only the usual pop, country, jazz—gumdrops and lollipops. Whatever he's looking for, it isn't there yet, lying dormant between the stations. Sounds that he imagines might resemble some sort of polygon, not the smooth corners of contemporary life, but a geometry all its own. A topography of creases and dents, like an aluminum can whose pressure has suddenly and unevenly been released, producing the sounds of crumpled metal.

The parking lot is not quite deserted; a few cars with heads pressed together, windows fogged up, others appear empty. He parks in the open and strolls down to the shore.

A man stops him on the path, "have you seen a little dog?"

Harold shrugs.

The man toddles off calling a dog's name.

The water audible before it comes into view, slapping the shore and retaining wall of the lower path. Harold stares long and deep, a projection or exchange of something mental over the lake. At length he removes his clothes and swims out until he is somewhere near the center. The shore located only by the croak of crickets and toads that seem to have hopped up a trellis of fog and are now suspended above him. He stays only as long as necessary, until the exchange is complete.

His is the only vehicle left in the lot. He switches on the high beams that do nothing for navigation and eases back onto the highway. Cruising to the bay on the other side of the peninsula and back.

The air begins to clear as he nears town again, passing the lake on the right and merging onto the highway. Taillights glow about a kilometer away. He rushes to catch up, falling in behind his quarry, a Buick of equal size and weight. The occupant either doesn't see him or doesn't care as Harold pulls up next to them on a double solid line. The driver slows a bit, making way for Harold to pass. They go on like this for about a quarter of a mile, the driver of the other car intermittently glancing over, waving him on. Harold smiles and waves back, giving the car a nudge on the rear fender. The driver raises an outraged hand and slams it down, mouth working behind deaf glass, keeping one eye on the road. Harold swerves again, hitting the car in the same spot. Abandoning all hope of reasoning with his tormentor the besieged driver accelerates, leaning into the wheel. Harold is only too happy to follow. Hitting it harder this time on the rear passenger side door. The car shoves back, grinding metal against metal.

Harold whoops. Listening for the nuances in the sound, the interior a resonant cavity for deeper bass tones, building until it abruptly cuts out. He glances over to see the other party swerve onto a side street. Harold in his transport misses the turn and skids to a stop in the middle of the road. Losing time and speed, he pulls a U-ey and jumps the curb, catching up with his quarry at the next light, squeezing through a window of green, while Harold, confident in his abilities goes on yellow then red. The intersection clear both ways.

His quarry races faster, but is sloppy at handling, going wide round the corners and making too frequent use of his breaks. Harold, the bolder of the two, turns into the parallel lane. Taking the S-curve straight so he doesn't have to slow down. The lake comes into view on the right, giving the impression of open space. Harold waits until they are wheel to wheel and slams into the other car, perhaps a little harder than he expected, sending them both careering down the

bank. The impact slows him a little, landing in some brambles along the shore. He rolls down the window and climbs onto the roof in time to see the other car go under with a gurgling *blurp* and rising bubble of air. Harold holds his breath, waiting to see if the driver, whoever he is, surfaces in time. Either he went down with the car or swam a ways and came up in the reeds. It doesn't matter. What he needs now is a ride. He scrambles up the bank and scans the street for a car to steal.

Perplexed but undeterred, Len visits and revisits crime scenes with gloves and kit. Taking paint samples from scored quarter panels, seeking and interviewing witnesses, spotting men he sees as suspicious and following them out of buildings, down streets into cars. Examining every vehicle on the road for the identical shade of black paint left on the victim's cars or any other telltale sign, a scratch or a dent, a maniac at the wheel. No one seems to remember anything.

Len infers that the murderer must be from out of town. He spends hours on the phone to other cities, towns, provinces, countries; a long strenuous paper trail ensues.

Almost every broadcast leads with stories on the killings, the most recent one taking place just a few hundred feet away from the station itself. Reporters have set up a kind of camp around the perimeter of the lake, but nobody is saying anything. Except of course when Len yelled a reporter right into his car and ripped the cameraman's film out, saying, "get your all-seeing eye outta my face," Len's not so covert way of eschewing all suspicion by accusing the other of muckraking. But they knew, they all did, that something was about to happen—had been happening—for a while now, but had simply gone unnoticed. Hidden under the auspices of coincidence, accident, the inability for anyone to make the connection and see it for what it was.

On the fifth day the police receive an anonymous letter. Hastily written characters scrawled across the page spelling out the intimate thoughts of a madman

*My uncanny style and mastery of ability have taken you all by storm. I fare stronger than my predecessors. You are neither worthy nor prepared for an adversary such as the world has*

*never seen. Noone (sic) can emulate my style or match my impeccable wits. There is no feeling like the feeling of speed, the wind through your hair and the sound of crumpling metal, crushing your opponent beneath the wheels.*

*In my pursuit of perfection I will take myself to new levels bringing you all along willing or unwilling. I go forward while you go back and somewhere we will meet*

*Your friend, and admirer*

H.

Len paces the Captain's office, clutching the paper and pulling at his thick greasy hair, "Who the hell does this guy think he is? Does he actually think he can outwit me?" lunging toward the desk, "I'm closing in. I'll have him in forty-eight hours."

"You're not the *only* cop on the case. I only assigned you because we need everyone we can on this. Try to stay outside, we don't need you losing it," the captain pauses considerately, "you know, you may want to talk to someone about your anger."

Len whacks the desk, leaning into nose-pore range. "I don't need a goddamn shrink. What I need to do is catch this creep, but I can't... find him. It's like he's everywhere, everywhere and nowhere, in the sky, in the air, in the godforsaken emptiness of the streets. I don't know when I'll catch him, but when I do... I'm going to squeeze, squeeze, SQUE-EZE." Len demonstrates, wringing the air between his empty hands.

"You're gonna settle the fuck down. We don't need another hothead on the street, there're already a bunch of vigilantes out there."

Len's eyes are growlers hidden below the surface of deep blue.

"And another thing. I told you to finish with the robberies first, but Lamark tells me you've passed it off on him. You need to finish one thing before I give you another."

Len compresses a breath through clenched teeth, restraining himself from a further outburst and leaves the office in a flourish of grappling gestures, throttling the air in front of him.

The Captain calls from the doorway, “don’t walk out of here, there’s a thing or two we have to discuss yet...” a recommendation that Len obligatorily ignores, laying a patch on his exit from the precinct.

Panic in the heat and exhaust, sweating and restless, driving offensive/ defensive with complete disregard for anyone’s safety. Len pulls over in the shade to give himself a pep talk, “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuuuuuuck,” slamming his fist down on the last *fuck* enabling the horn and shocking pedestrians out of their purposeful stride on the sidewalk next to him. “All this time and what have I got to show for it SQUAT.”

Heavy eyes of passing motorists press on him through the glass and steel. He drinks mechanically from a metal canteen and finishes the other half of a submarine sandwich, the first true act of self-preservation in days. Disjointed, fleshy thoughts catch in the gears of his brain. He knows he can’t take much more of this.

He takes another sip, mentally distilling the water into alcohol, soothing, immediate in its effects. Muting thoughts when they become too oppressive. He seeks a liquor store, picking it out amid a jumble of superfluous structures and signs.

He hasn’t had so much as a nip since January and wouldn’t consider it unless he really needed to forget this car-killer case for a few hours and think of something else. It’s down to the Jack Daniels or the Chivas Regal, not much of a choice really, he always chooses scotch over whiskey, but then there’s the price to consider and whether he’s really going to go through with this or if he’s just entertaining the idea before he gets back to catching his man.

Harold is in an adjacent aisle watching Len quibble over the sauce, dilly-dallying between the Jack and the Chivas, drunk and drunker. From his choice Harold will learn more about Len than Len will ever know about Harold. Whiskey says impulsive, reckless, straight

across, perhaps too impulsive to catch the biggest criminal this town has ever seen. Scotch says, slow, patient, attention to detail, not to be underestimated, but maybe too patient. Harold grabs a bottle of tequila and brushes past Len on the way to the till.

Suddenly aggravated and for no apparent reason, Len puts the Jack back on the shelf and grabs the Chivas Regal, then resigned, but still undecided, takes both the Jack and the Chivas.

Harold raises his eyebrows at the sight of both bottles, “how’s it goin’ friend?”

“Just fine thanks and you?” says Len, filtering his contempt through a grin.

“Great. I’m celebrating.”

“Celebrating what?”

Harold moves up in line, chatting amiably with the girl behind the counter, taking a little more time perhaps than he needs, stopping on his way out to wave at Len, “see ya’ later buddy.”

Len looks but doesn’t say anything. The girl regards him with a nod. Neither makes an attempt at conversation. In the car, Len opens a bottle of coke, pours half of it out and fills it the rest of the way with scotch. He takes a few sips from the bottle before lurching onto the road. Three spaces away Harold squeezes a lime into his bottle of tequila and shakes salt onto his hand and arm, hitting the car in front of him then shifting into reverse and denting several others before exiting the parking lot. No one seems to witness him.

The streets are deserted save for a few daring pedestrians hurrying home before darkness falls. Len stops at a light. Waiting with all the patience he can muster while an elderly lady drags her cart across the street. She looks at him imploringly, a plea for mercy. He stares back and revs the engine. She wobbles faster. A black Roadmaster idles up beside him. Len looks over at Harold. Harold, eyes glazed over, stares at Len, the only two drivers on the street breathing the same exhaust-laced air adding whatever they do on the exhale. The thought repulses Len. He wants nothing to do with Harold. He has only feelings of contempt for this man he doesn’t even

know. They go on staring at each other like dogs in parked cars, infuriated by heat and confined space.

The light turns green. Neither moves.

Len examines the car; black with scratch marks on the fenders.

Harold accelerates as Len cogitates.

“Hey,” Len screams. Keeping one hand on the wheel as he pulls out his revolver and fires until all the chambers are empty.

“Fuck,” Len struggles to reload. Dividing his attention between what he is doing and his pursuit with Harold. He jams four bullets into the tumbler and leans out the window carefully aiming for one of the rear tires. Harold swerves to play chicken with a slow moving truck.

The truck veers into the adjacent lane on a collision course with Len. Len falls in line behind Harold. The three vehicles pass each other on the wrong side of the road. Len aims and fires, a bullet pierces the gas tank in an explosive one in a million shot. Pieces of metal and burning naugahyde rain down as he approaches the scene, lips parted and slightly askew. He marvels at how he has driven this maniac to his own demise; a man he thought was pure beast, unresponsive to mortal laws. Fitting, he thinks, all guys like that need is a little push from the right side to drive them completely over the edge. They’d rather take as many people as possible with them than let justice run its course, to come back over to the other side. He’s about to get closer when the shudder-like-shock-wave of a second explosion blows past him. Len goes down in a roll, palms pressed to his eyes. Incendiary figures flutter and flash in blood Rorschach across his field of vision. His hands come away wet, tears, but no blood. Even with his eyes open he still sees it, a voluble figure decocting symmetrically out of the surface viscosity of heat. He unholsters his gun. The pain in his hand first, shooting up his arm and down the other, contracting his whole body into a fist, opening and closing on command of something outside himself, despite his efforts to bar it. A cold heat forged in some Hadean furnace and cooled in the

terrestrial air. Len curls himself tighter, rolling over and over, until the pain subsides to euphoria, confidence and an inexplicable power. He rises effortlessly and returns to his car. The machine heart that gulps fuel instead of blood throttles in time with his own. He takes one last, long look at the fire reflected in the dark pits of his eyes and drives off.

Night air whistles through open windows. He swerves at the first thing that moves.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *My mantra is 'try not to miss an opportunity'. If there's room for a surprising element, a psychological or metaphysical twist, I will find a way to incorporate it. Set in 1950's America, 'The Heavy Metal Sound of Steel' is a noir thriller that starts fast and continues long after the needle has gone below empty. It is a homage to classic cars and classic times, just as they were coming to the end of the road. I acknowledge the story's likeness to Stephen King's Christine, but I admit I have never read the whole thing.*

**BIO:** *Daniel is a graduate of the Creative Writing program (MFA) from Vancouver Island University, his poems and fiction have been featured in Gravel, The Birds We Piled Loosely, Clockwise Cat, Crack the Spine, Grey Sparrow and The Gyroscope review. He is a reader and contributor to the Tongues of Fire reading series and has written several books, all currently seeking publishers. He lives in Victoria, B.C., Canada.*

# VAGA-LUXING™: A FRANCHISE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE NEW ECONOMY

By Suzanne Gannon

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We love the way Gannon takes an improbable premise and runs with it. The humour is sharp and witty and the convincing barker's voice is exactly the over the top 'hard sell' you'd expect from an operator out to enrich herself. There's also a creepy corporate mindset that has no problem turning the homeless into commodities. The author clearly loves her subject and her satire, able, brief and bouncy as it should be, never runs off the rails. Best line: 'A biz development strategy that's a lot like mushroom farming!'*

Looking for a one-of-a-kind wealth opportunity for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? A chance to drag sacks of cash across the backs of destitute contractors? Without the nuisance of employee benefits or tax liability?

Hurl yourself into today's epic gap between rich and poor and reap the benefits of the franchise that's taking the gig economy by storm! VAGA-LUXING™. Yes, under the auspices of Leave-No-Trace Mansioncare™, you too can realize the fortunes of poultry-sandwich king, Truett Cathy, God rest his FOUR BILLION-DOLLAR soul under a stack of free-range New Testaments.

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**A work force like no other!** With this limited-time offer, you can mine the talents of the once respectable, now depleted and depressed middle class, who are saddled with the debt of Netflix subscriptions, COBRA payments, Capital One interest, Cymbalta prescriptions, and scandalous Juul bills. We provide you with an introduction to highly educated, under employed, unfailingly polite artists, writers, actors, professional dog-walkers and cat-sitters, graphic designers, and recycling virtuosos who've graduated from Harvard, won Nobel Prizes for robotic heart surgery, nabbed a Pulitzer, and danced the lead in *Swan Lake* but at the moment just can't put two nickels together. In other words, we put the “CARE” in “Mansioncare.”

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Xers seeking shelter from marriages toxic with co-dependency, and even Boomers wrecked by chemotherapy bills, will jump at the chance for a few nights away from that blow-up bed in their parents' basement. There's no overhead, no ME-too drama.

**What you and your minions can expect from Vaga-Luxer™ Bootcamp:**

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- “If You Must Party . . .”
- “Flushing Cat Litter—if it's bigger than a golf ball, it's too damn big!”
- “What to Do When Caught Talking Dirty to Alexa”

**We put the “CARE” in “Mansioncare™.” Come Vaga-Lux™ with us.**

# # #

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *In 2005 I turned my first loves—William Safire, Susan Orlean, Andy Borowitz, Maureen Dowd, Russell Baker, Lauren Collins, David Sedaris, Meghan Daum, William F. Buckley, Jr., Steve Martin—into my second career when I leapt from marketing and public relations into journalism, which at the time was regarded by many as a dubious decision. Today, that bold and adventurous leap of faith is universally acknowledged as a decisive move toward slow and painful professional suicide. And since I, like most 21<sup>st</sup>-century writers of any kind, prefer to live with indoor plumbing and WiFi on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I've had to develop an array of side hustles to supplement the dwindling stream of nickels and dimes I receive for the stories I report and write. Like content and copywriting, teaching, and folding an occasional cashmere sweater, Vaga-Luxing is one of my side hustles. A worldly but impoverished vagabond, I circulate among peers who made different career choices from the one I did, and as a result, now own large, luxurious homes and lots of cats and dogs that need looking after while they travel the globe. As the creator of the category, I am Franchisee Numero Uno.*

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY:** Suzanne Gannon is an award-winning journalist and aspiring humorist who covers travel, culture, food, wine, collecting, fashion, antiques, interior design, and everything else shiny but inconsequential to real life. Her work has appeared in *Town & Country*, *The New York Times*, *the Financial Times*, *Art & Antiques*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Interior Design*, *Art + Auction*, *Luxe Interiors + Design*, *Virginia Living*, *Coastal Living*, *Delta Sky*, *Elite Traveler*, *Greenwich*, *Town & Country Travel*, *The Intelligent Collector*, *Manhattan*, *Cottages & Gardens*, *Beach*, *Wines & Vines*, *Wine Business Monthly*, and lots of other places. She has been a guest on NPR's “Talk of the Nation,” and has worked as a wire-service fashion stringer whose

coverage of the 'Project Runway' Season 5 finale, filmed at Fashion Week 2008, was the first story to hit the wire, beating the Associated Press and Reuters, a now obsolete feat she told everyone was proof not only of the quality of her work but also its speed. This personal best has yet to be repeated.

She has studied with Second City Improv, enjoys speaking Italian (badly), and is currently enrolled at the Writer's Voice, where, more than a decade of searching, she has discovered her own voice. It's over the top.

She is a graduate of the University of Virginia and a completer of three consecutive New York City Marathons, the last of which pummeled her into the pavement and thus inspired a hiatus from running during which she spent her time lounging on her sofa catching up on Major League Baseball, professional bull riding, and Pakistani cricket. With photographer Stacy Bass, she published in 2012 *In the Garden*, her first and only book to date.

Handles:

Insta: @SuzieFantastic

Linky: [linkedin.com/in/suzannefgannon](https://www.linkedin.com/in/suzannefgannon)

Twitter: @suzannegannon

# # #

# Three Variations on a Theme

By Nels Hanson

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We've never read anything comparable to the tumbling prose—like words falling down a staircase—and the dismantling of conventional syntax that we encountered in this gorgeously smithed flash subtlety/(solteltie). Words and ideas are viewed through the literary equivalent of a distorting lens and the author's heavyweight originality results in alchemy that burns. Quote: '...maybe our generation's contemporaries were less interesting, unmarked by storms and challenges of older, harder times that carved survivors into vivid paragons.' And : 'The people's choice for Prime Minister leads a frantic brother and his cruel paramour older than 100—her comely face dissolves, George slips down a far crevice—to fatal exile, seven times tries returning, each ascent more perilous. Five stars.*

## Moving

At first the newest neighbor appeared quite fine, much better than the last few.

He watered each dusk, mowed the dead Bermuda green again, painted the peeling fence blinding white, fastened the fallen picket gate on fresh hinges, built the fountain our children exclaimed held golden koi, larger than the salmon I caught last summer off the public pier at Cayucos.

On TV he acknowledged voting decades for Republicans, years and years, to the stylish reporter and her camera crew at his shiny red door, which gave me pause although my many other concerns diverted my attention.

Later, when he left his yellow tall Hummer on the street, under one arm something long wrapped in brownish paper, I wondered half a moment if he concealed a weapon, remembered Oswald, slain JFK my late father remembered, the lost Friday before a solemn Thanksgiving.

Katherine warned the kids to “Stay Clear!” but after dinner Greg, our youngest boy, disobeyed, hid, peeked at a window, cried what he'd seen, requiring I dial 911 to summon police, the large detachment taking cover in our front yard as the plate glass shattered.

His name was Roger Sampson and he ran off 60 rounds at least with the chosen weapon from his arsenal, machinegun on a tripod.

I won't relate what terrors transpired – you maybe watched on the nightly local news the minor incident that wounded two swat team members, one in the hip, the second through a protective vest, report that aired and disappeared in a flood of always daily deaths.

Our insurance agent promptly paid to putty bullet holes, retouch plank siding, no one would guess an evil event occurred.

Days late the landlord called, apologized:

“This week a better tenant is moving in, no worries, you'll like her much, an attractive woman, divorced just twice, one small dog” and Katherine screamed, “You'll buy our house!”

Again we moved away, to another home in a different town, new jobs, new friends for kids to make, I pray things safer for a while.

### **“Lost Horizon”**

His silver DC-3 escapes the bloodshed at Baskul, last plane out with refugees, but commandeered it carries Conway across high desert to Himalayan scarps, to crash-land when the pilot dies from heart attack, by Chang's path leading to a Hidden City whispering an elusive music all his life Conway had always heard in pieces and could never name but now must say goodbye.

The people's choice for Prime Minister leads a frantic brother and his cruel paramour older than 100 – her comely face dissolves, George slips down a far crevasse – to fatal exile, seven times tries returning, each ascent more perilous.

If Conway reached Shangri-La again he's still alive, the young idealist, though Holy Lamas expand their wisdom to great ages and old he could console us.

White doves with wind harps glide there, the air sings and a clavichord plays Mozart's secret lost sonatas. Hand in hand in gentle laughter Ronald Coleman and Jane Wyatt walk the shady sun-flecked tiles but turn from their pleasure to our suffering when they hear our prayer:

“Oasis of the World, we know Eden fears descending to rain its mercy, the altitudes and skies ominous for those changed by healing breezes adrift from time.

“O Robert Conway, you found and lost and found your paradise as ours was raving, now raves to capture a final valley called Blue Moon where kindness lives, man's true heart like a seed is kept for planting a future day after evil ends.”

The blonde actress dying of TB is cured, the fugitive tycoon pipes pure water to the citizens, the scientist delights in teaching children. The High Lama sleeping after centuries dreams a new motive for kidnapping you.

### **Odyssey, Book XI**

It's funny and also not so funny, how something apparently secondary, like some weed exposed to radiation, can suddenly rise up and shade a world.

A friend told me he'd seen something extraordinary, a throwback to the art of impersonators, impressionists you'd watch each week on '60s TV, mimicking famous actors, seizing on and blowing up their mannerisms into affectations, their accents, matching facial gestures, hands or shoulders.

“He's on again tonight, Late Show at 12,” so I tuned in, hardly half impressed, nothing I hadn't heard before – maybe our generation's contemporaries were less interesting, unmarked by storms and challenges of older harder times that carved survivors into vivid paragons.

It was only at the end, when he performed the laconic Henry Fonda, the long-dead star most likely young viewers wouldn't remember, things got eerie. He wasn't making fun, practicing again the secret of his craft, exposing as the ridiculous something established past question in its sincerity, the trademark of a character, personality inescapable.

The great who played Abe Lincoln, Tom Joad, Wyatt Earp, seemed to come alive, unguarded, unrehearsed, as if a ghost had awakened, at first appeared confused, unsure quite where he was.

I felt unnerved, afterward called my friend to say the man on stage had nearly summoned the dead and he agreed, surprised by the strange portrayal.

That's how it started, then voices of more recently deceased we all remember, then ones we didn't, we never knew them, born before the phonograph or radio.

And so he brought them back, they were everywhere, on every night and day, until our Earth was lost to those who dead spoke everything we might ever know and silently we observed, waiting like Odysseus as others approached.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I think the impetus for this story is a sense of exile heightened by extreme conditions. What do you do or where do you go? Maybe our nerves have been so battered reality begins to leak away, the nightmarish becomes commonplace. The ardent patriot and the perfect next door neighbor may be a murderer. 'Lost Horizon' is a world without hate and so without tension. Now even that place is threatened, the last oasis of humanity. You can move to another town, hope Conway will descend to lead us, fear that history's repeated failed cycles are finally overtaken by the past as time itself gets tired. Images came to me, like the golden koi, the 1960's, an impersonator on a TV show years ago who seemed to be channeling, like a first Greek actor or a ghost Odysseus meets in the underworld. (A man named Cebes from Delos asked Socrates before he took the hemlock if after many reincarnations and bodies the soul itself began to tire and wear out.) I grew to like Fitzgerald more than Hemingway or Faulkner, and I like Sherwood Anderson, Kerouac, Kleist. I read Malcolm Lowry's 'Under the Volcano' many times and Borges stories. I like the poetry of Weldon Kees, James Wright, Georg Trakl.*

**BIO:** *Nels Hanson grew up on a small raisin and tree fruit farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California, earned degrees from U. C. Santa Cruz and the U of Montana, and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016. His poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review's 2014 Prospero Prize and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.*

# 4 FIXIONS & 5 LINES

## By Nick North

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Deceptively simple language generates a lyric charge in these potent absurdist 'fixions' where the collapse of natural law becomes a metaphor for a world turned upside down. If Franz Kafka and Douglas Coupland collided in a supernova the neutron star you'd get is Nick North. These quixotic nanos and runic lines are way more than the sum of their parts. The author writes with a light pen but his mastery over his material is humbling. **Read Nick North's 'Seven' in Issue 1.***

### METAL CAKE

1/3 cup oil or margarine

1 cup sugar

2 eggs

1 ½ cups metal filings (chopped razors blades are good)

2 cups AP flour

1 ½ tsp baking soda

1 tsp salt

Beat eggs, oil and sugar till well blended. Add flour sifted with baking powder and salt. Fold in metal filings. Pour into greased 9 x 9 cake pan and bake 350 till done.

Ice with petroleum fluff but you don't need to. Miriam made this cake for years and her mouth was bleeding constantly. The secret is in the filings. Mother said in the old days you could buy paper thin filings anywhere—even the gas station. Today they've cut corners. Most of the filings are dull or too thick. That's why I

recommend razor blades if you can find them ready cut. This cake is a family favourite. Bob makes a point to take his dentures out when we have it. It's too rich for babies of course but the kids love it.

Dorothy Redman

#### IF IT WORKS DON'T FIX IT

For 283 days the cowlet wombed snugly in amniotic joy. She fed off nourishing blood and supped rich golden yolk. Drifting to sleep she listened to her mother's heartbeat. Images of sweet meadows and blue skies tumbled in her dreams. She felt the warm sun on her young hide. She kicked her heels up and gamboled like a butterfly. On the day of her birth she was giddy with excitement. A whole shining world lay ahead of her!

After she spilled out of the slush canal in a web of mucus, nostrils plugged, heart hammering, eyes burned by the overhead lights, a man wrapped her fore and hind legs with barbed wire. Another man cut off her tail. Duct tape around her muzzle squelched her screams.

The man with the wire cutters stood up and looked out the window.

'Look at that black sun!' he said. 'It's going to be a beautiful day!'

'It is,' the other man agreed. 'Pardon me, Bill, but I have to stick a nail in my eye.'

'Sure,' Bill said. 'Enjoy!'

YE...! (For Sherman Alexei)

It was a good dinner; the family had been looking forward to it all week. After everybody'd eaten a fight broke out between my brother and my cousin. They'd been drinking all afternoon and started throwing beer bottles at each other. I don't know how long it lasted but my brother ended up in hospital and my cousin at the police station. Me, I come home late from work, driving cab; it was my shift for filling in for somebody and I couldn't get it off. I remember one of my fare's

saying, 'It's the end of the world!' I don't know if he was drunk or not. 'Not like ye know it,' he said. 'Ye' like they use in the Bible. By the time I got home the house was dark and my aunt came downstairs and warmed a plate for me in the oven. Nothing fancy but good. Potatoes, vegetables and meat. But the meat was crazy. After a couple bites it started moving around on my plate. I stabbed it with my fork and it curled up like a leech. After that I wasn't sure what to do so I put my fork down and just sat there looking at it.

BOTH

The woman had grown very old. Like her grandmother, her mother and her sister before her, she knew the time had come to leave the village. With so many mouths, they could not feed her old hunger through the winter. With the first heavy snowfall she took to the forest. She found a resting place at the base of an ancient tree. 'I will sit here until I freeze to death.' She closed her eyes and dreamed of the land across the light. For two days and nights she sat there. Her body had grown hard and still. But the blood inside her was still warm. Even during the coldest nights she did not die. On the third day, she heard the sound of branches crackling at dusk. She heard the heavy sound of thunder paws. But she was so close to death now she could hardly open her eyes. She saw the blurry image of the mighty winter bear stalking towards her. She said, 'It will not be ice but teeth.' The mighty one could not sleep because of hunger. He got up close. His breath warmed her face. She looked at the bear and thought, 'I am only an old woman. But I feel the sweetness of my life and hold it dear. This is something the bear will never know'. Before the grizzled one bit her head off, he looked deeply into her half-closed eyes. 'No,' he said. 'We feel it too'.

*OM* is a 3 in the wind with a toque and a scarf.

All the frenzy is sucked away. All the turmoil has gone to sleep.

Li Bo (A.D. 701-762). The drunken poet staggers by the brook. 'The moon has fallen into the water!' he cries.

Idiots do not have 'dark nights of the soul'.

God is not the solution. He's the problem. Need a light? Burn a Bible.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I can't really say what inspires my fixions. An idea will pop into my head dressed and ready to rock, when I least expect it. All my stories so far have been written quickly, on the run, when the 'now it's time to write' switch is thrown. 'Both' and 'If It Works Don't Fix It' came to me while asleep. I don't have time to warm up my PC so I get up, stagger to my desk and write it out longhand. Experience has taught me that if I wait—like till the next morning—I lose it. I don't revise much. If it's not right the first time, I know it's not ready.*

*As to the lines, imma 20 something person straddling a future of hope and despair. I feel a little sick when I see what governments and corporate interests are doing to the planet—my planet as much as theirs—and it's made me an eco-warrior and a social activist—but sometimes I still think the only colour is black.*

*My influences include Nabokov, Barthelme, Borges, Carver, Burroughs, DeLillo, Tobias Wolff, Sherman Alexei, Neil Young, a lot of David Foster Wallace, a little of Richard Ford and the young Hemingway up to and including The Sun Also Rises but nothing after that.*

**BIO:** *A volte Nick (Nicky ai suoi amici) si chiede se sia una persona reale o un personaggio nelle mente di uno scrittore malvagio. La giuria e' ancora fuori. He understands quantum theory but knows if he thinks he understands it, he understands that he doesn't understand it. He's published little, written less. Il mondo e' sottosopra. Come possiamo capoverglerlo a destra? Non ci sono piedi. Non possiamo riposare in pace.*

# PINK EYE

By Jeff Blechle

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We love this ribald, down-for-the-count literary slug fest with its brass knuckle prose and punch happy dialogue: “Where’s Harmony, Joy?” ...”She raced out of here like she was on fire and the water to put her out was in Yonkers. Drunk as sin.” Blechle owns dysfunctional family when it comes to fiction and his shoot from the hip ask questions later hijinks, bomb-squats the hilarity meter. But what do you want when a mother and son-in-law’s TNT relationship resembles a barroom brawl, gloves off? But don’t let the author’s WTF facility fool you. There’s meticulous craft and great talent behind this flash that in lesser hands would fall flat. And many funny, funny lines, like: ‘Crash grunted and strained into the bathroom and bent his mind over the sink, “God, do me just one favor,” The lights flickered, “Really? Why not?”*

Crash came home to his TV-lit mother-in-law chain-smoking on his lemon-yellow couch. He shelved his motorcycle helmet. She shushed him so she could hear Judge Judy.

“Where’s Harmony, Joy?” Slapping at smoke, Crash noticed empty Red Bull cans on the floor and one of the window curtains, well, she had fashioned it into a noose. A Styrofoam wig head lay on its cheek on an end table.

“She raced out of here like she was on fire and the water to put her out was in Yonkers. Drunk as sin.” Joy shook her large fleshy head, the same head she had rammed into Father Hudak’s belly when his sermon touched on obesity. “Wedded bliss.”

Crash ran to each room, flipping light switches, slamming doors. His pot was missing.

Joy called, “Sure glad her pa ain’t around to see this.”

Crash returned to her fat pink knees. “What?” He always feared for his father-in-law’s well-being. “What happened to Tom?”

“Huh? Why, I accidentally killed him while I was trimming his bangs.”

Gulp. Blink. “Joy, do *not* light another cigarette.”

She did. “Yep. Harmony run off with three pigtails, red eye shadow, orange pants, and a butcher knife. I told her she didn’t have to get all prettied up to run wild in the streets. Huh. Shit.”

Crash turned to toppled, emptied beer bottles on the hutch, then thundered into the bedroom, retrieved his chromed .500 Nitro Express, loaded, safety off, and holstered it under his black button-up shirt. “One of us has to go,” he muttered, fluttering back into the laughter-filled living room.

“Oh my God, Joy. Is that my porterhouse on your eye?”

Her shoulders rose to her ears and she nodded and chuckled. “Wittle infection.”

Baby talk! He tore a pillow from behind her neck and the steak backslapped his crotch and he didn’t breathe or think any more than necessary.

“Just—get out of here!”

“Who, me?” Joy teetered on her beach-ball belly. “I’ll cry discrimination to your slumlord, the cops, *and* the gay guy next door!”

He drew his gun on her. “And I’ll blow your head off and put a steak knife in your hand and stab myself in the back with it!”

“Touché!” She lifted her pointed-toe shoe into his crotch and the gun discharged, destroying Harmony’s nearby lava lamp with a volcanic *phzzt*.

Crash grunted and strained into the bathroom and bent his mind over the sink. “God, do me just one favor.” The lights flickered. “Really? Why not?”

“How’d it go, Mom?” Harmony asked, breezing into the kitchen with sacks from the mall. “Did you talk to Crash? Did you smooth things over between us?” She noticed the lamp fragments and the steak on the carpet. “What happened?”

“Your hubby tried to blow my f’ing head off, is all.”

Sacks and jaw dropped. “How’d he miss?”

“Don’t get cute.” At the hutch, Joy splashed gin into a Nirvana mug and blew smoke at it. “Ol’ G.I. Joe tried to light my fire, but I kept blowing out his match. Then he went Ram-bo retard.”

“Mom!”

“So, I racked his balls. Then broke.” She gulped, opening her medium-rare eye on Harmony. “That urban gorilla ever feels me up again, I’ll take his head off and put it back on straight.”

“*Mom!*”

“Don’t try me, daughter. It ain’t no use. Nope.” She royally disgraced the couch and struck a match. “I’m moving in here. Tonight.”

A gunshot roared in the bathroom, then came onerous, mixed-up thuds.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *Growing up in low rent areas around degenerates , it became easy, thanks to my superiority complex, to laugh and make fun of repugnant situations and I thought it was a pretty idea for an unarmed, full-of-shit broad to supplant her son-in-law with homespun diplomacy. Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Schultz, Woody Allen and a steady diet of sitcoms may take credit for this tale, and many others.*

**BIO:** *My work has appeared in 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior, Frigg, Funny in Five Hundred, The Jewish Magazine, Sidewalk’s End, Literally Stories and Timber Creek Review among others.*

# Laptop

## By Scott Schoenberg

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We were hooked when we read this absorbing study of a man's obsession over his wife's suspected infidelity and the lengths he will go to prove it. Dramatic tension builds throughout the story until it reaches not a resolution to the mystery, not a confrontation between accused and accuser but rather an electric detente, where, for the briefest of seconds, they see each other laid bare. It's not 'fancy' writing but it's honest, literate and poignantly human. And the questions, to the author's credit, remain tantalizingly open-ended. Did she or didn't she cheat? Was he or wasn't he paranoid?*

### Laptop

1. We were married and we shared the laptop. Technically it was hers, but we shared it. Just like we shared the dishes and the kids and the bed.

I never bothered to clear the history, even when I watched porn. For one thing, this allowed me quick access to my favorite videos the next time I wanted to watch without having to do any searching. For another, she was technophobic enough that I didn't think it would occur to her to check the history, if she were aware of that function at all. And finally, even if she did, so what? As far as I was concerned, it would only confirm for her that I was a sexual being, a virile dude. After all these years, that was a plus.

But that evening, the one that she was out with "the girls," after I'd tucked the kids in, I

noticed there was a link amid all the Facebook entries and Google searches that I didn't recognize. I clicked it and a video opened that I didn't remember watching called *Full-figured Indian Squeals with Pleasure*. I looked at the history again and saw that the link was sandwiched between her Facebook page and several searches for "blue dress with sleeves." The time and date told me that the video was viewed the previous evening, when Timmy and I were out at Leslie's softball game. My heart raced with the revelation.

I played the video and watched apprehensively for a minute or so, trying to understand what she might have seen in it. Had she somehow mistakenly clicked on this link? No, the timestamps on each of the surrounding links suggested that she watched for a good ten minutes or so. She usually refused my overtures, but here was proof that she still wanted it. Wanted something. Wasn't I enough for her?

It wasn't the "teen tries so-and-so for first time" genre I that usually favored, but it was fine for this type of thing, even if the woman was somewhat larger than I preferred. But imagining *her* watching it while *I* watched it created a tension and driving compulsion for me which I hadn't experienced before. There was a hint of misdoing, almost like taboo-crossing, and I was as aroused as I could remember being. More so.

When she came home after her girls' night, I tried a move on her but she quashed it with force: "What are you doing?" she asked disgustedly, as if she'd walked in on me while I was painting my nails. And then she turned over to go to sleep.

Each night after work, I'd find a moment to furtively check the history on the laptop. When she was going over homework with Leslie, and Timmy was playing his video games, I'd skulk over to our room and hold it, my heart pounding with anticipation, the slim silver MacBook become an object of strange power in my hands. And each time I tenderly spread its two halves apart, it was like opening a portal directly into her fantasy sphere, one that I had lost access to, if I'd ever had access in the first place.

But it was all without reward until a week later, the day after Timmy and I had gone to another of Leslie's games, and this time it was more arresting than the last. This time, nestled between an Amazon search for skin moisturizer and Mandy Patinkin's IMDB page, was a link that opened up to a video called *Petite Latina Violated by Black Stud*.

I snuck into the bathroom with the laptop and was filled with a conflicting medley of emotions as I watched: arousal and feverish excitement, yes, but also pangs of inadequacy and aloneness; somewhere beneath that, regret over having discovered this portal in the first place; and somewhere lower still, guilt over violating what could only be called her trust. I closed the MacBook and decided that I wouldn't look at its history again.

This resolution lasted less than a day. The next night was our scheduled sex date. I had been looking forward to it all week, just like I always looked forward to our biweekly sex-date Friday nights. I eagerly ate dinner and then eagerly tucked the kids into bed and then compulsively checked my phone, the whole time keeping one eye on her, as she leisurely watched her shows and laggardly undressed and then perfunctorily crawled into bed.

We made love but there was something amiss. Or rather, it was just like it always was, the same rote movements and tender-loving gazes, the same chummy dirty-talk and performative expressions of encouragement and pleasure. But I was bereft. *It* was bereft. Bereft of something. She wasn't as enthusiastic as her Latina MILF avatar was, nor did she squeal like her full-bodied Indian did. As soon as we were finished, I had a mad compulsion to go watch her videos again, which I did in the bathroom after she'd fallen asleep, and I was forced to acknowledge, with some reticence, that my own performance, not to mention my physical attributes, left something to be desired.

The next evening, over dinner with the Walkers, Jenny made a joke that she and my wife were so close that they were constantly being accused of being a couple. Russ and I had a good laugh about it and Russ, while adjusting his glasses, said with his customary smirk, "If I were

only meeting you two for the first time... well, you know, I'd probably assume that too!" And we all laughed. And then on Wednesday, after the kids and I had been to piano lessons, I took that blessed-cursed object into the bathroom and discovered to my great shock and infinite pleasure that she had watched a video called *Lola and Leila Make Each Other Cum*.

To say this turned me on would be an understatement. I was at DEFCON 1 arousal level, a 10 on the Richter Scale of sexquake. My heart pounded my ribcage to rubble as I watched and re-watched and imagined *her* watching those two going at it. She had never once confessed to me an interest in women, even all those years ago when we first were getting to know each other and everything was exciting and new and the world seemed full of the remotest possibilities. Did this turn her on, these women and their tongues and their lingerie and all the fake fur and their terrible giggling? It turned *me* on, but then it was supposed to.

But then I remembered the jokes from our dinner with Jenny and Russ, and I wondered if perhaps it was all pointing to something that wasn't actually so funny. I spent much of the rest of that mostly sleepless night racking my brain for evidence of their affair. They were close, all right, but were they *that* close? Was she going to *leave* me for Jenny? After perseverating on the question for what must have been hours, I took a sleeping pill and faded almost immediately into the black.

The next morning, when she was in the shower and the kids were having their breakfast, I went through her text messages, specifically the ones that were to and from Jenny. They were innocuous enough, though an awful lot of them were devoted to a back-and-forth about *America's Great Catch*. I knew, of course, that they both loved the show and watched it religiously, but still I wondered if they were perhaps talking in code, a code which I was unable to crack.

During a break at work, I brought up our bank and credit card statements, but I didn't find anything out of the ordinary in those either. I logged into her email but closed it at once,

feeling that it was a breach of trust. But then I logged in again, unable to stop myself, but I found nothing that stoked my suspicions there either. My thoughts drifted back to the texts about *America's Great Catch*, but I dismissed it all as plain paranoia on my part. The girls loved the show and that was all there was to it.

I knew she had plans to have lunch with Jenny on Saturday while Timmy and I would be at Leslie's softball game, and I casually asked her where they were going.

"Ah, that's a good place," I said. "What time?"

"I don't know," she said dismissively. "Why?"

"Just curious. It's nothing."

After the first inning of Leslie's game, anxiously checking and rechecking my phone for the time, I turned to another girl's father and asked him if he would mind keeping an eye on Timmy for a few minutes. I told him that I had to pick up a prescription and I wouldn't have time after the game.

I drove by Jenny's house but I didn't see her car in the driveway. Then I headed home, just to look in on things, and wouldn't you know it, Jenny's RAV4 was parked right there on the street. I eased over to the side of the road, unsure of my next move. Were they in my house, in my bed, acting out the Lola and Leila video?

I got out of my car and, as I walked, I was overcome with a difficult-to-describe duality of emotions: a powerful desire to catch them in the act, red-handed so to speak, and to have my suspicions confirmed; at the same time, an equally potent desire to have my suspicions disproved. But the latter eventuality posed a problem. If they were simply not currently doing the thing, that wouldn't necessarily mean that they hadn't already done it or that they weren't intending to do it. It simply would mean that I didn't catch them in the act. And so for this reason, I favored the former prospect with its promise of closure over the latter, despite its potential for upsetting my life in every conceivable way.

My pulse was twitching my fingers and toes as I took the final couple of steps up to the front door. I turned the doorknob -- it wasn't locked -- and slowly opened the door, trying my damndest not to make a sound. I could hear them cooing as I tiptoed through the entry hall. Their coos became moans and giggles as I crossed into the living room. Were they in our bedroom? I started down the hall, first passing Timmy's room on the right and then Leslie's, my eyes wide as Frisbees. I could hear them twittering like songbirds behind our bedroom door, and I slowly pushed it open. There she was, half-naked and stepping into a romper, my one true love, and I thought I might collapse.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked violently, my heart fibrillating and about to erupt.

Nothing was right. Why was she asking me that? Why was she angry rather than embarrassed or contrite? Why was Jenny grinning and fully dressed, nothing mussed at all? And I realized at once that I had it wrong, that I hadn't ambushed them in the midst of a tryst. She was just trying on clothes for Jenny, something that I'd seen them do from time to time over the years.

"I forgot Timmy's inhaler," I said.

"Where are the kids? Where's Timmy?"

"Mike's watching them. Mike Malone."

"You left Timmy with Mike Malone?"

"Yeah, he'll be fine."

She scoffed. "Why didn't you bring him with you?"

I ignored her, said hello to Jenny, who was still grinning, and fetched Timmy's inhaler from his room.

"I'll see you later," I shouted and drove back to the park.

That night, after she and the kids were in bed, I took the laptop into the bathroom and opened it with a lusty anticipation bordering on mania. I went directly to History, my finger

hovering over the button expectantly but teasing myself by not actually pressing it. And then I pressed it and was dumbfounded to discover that the history had been “cleared.”

I checked over and over again, thinking that there must be some mistake, that maybe I’d done something wrong in the way I opened it. But there was no mistake, her history had been cleared and there was no salvaging it.

2. We didn’t talk about it, so I didn’t know for sure whether she was onto my snooping. But the clearing of her history did something to me, scrambled my brain a little, made me a bit paranoid. I proceeded under the assumption that she was not only onto me but that she was now aware that one could look at the other’s browsing history, and so I became very careful to clear it whenever I visited any sites that I didn’t want her to know about.

And I became accustomed to seeing that its history had been cleared whenever I opened the laptop. You’d think we never used the thing anymore if you looked at the history, despite the fact that one or the other of us had our nose buried in it most nights. But it always went the same way for me whenever I logged on: an irrational anticipatory zeal would take me over while I halved it and typed her password, and then the inevitable deflation would follow upon my confirming that it had indeed been cleared.

And so a few weeks later when the evening came that I discovered a single item in the history just waiting there for me, as if it had been dangled before my nose like a pair of stripper panties, it took a moment for it to register. And then in a gorgeous instant, my pulse went machine-gun and my pupils dilated and I could feel myself fully aroused.

It was a link to a video called *Suburban MILF Cheats on Husband with Accountant*, and before the meaning of the video had sunk in, before I had considered what she was attempting to communicate to me, I had my way with it in the usual frenzied way. In fact, it was more fevered and frenzied than normal, as its existence there, the reopening of this portal, if you will, into her

innermost sanctums, was intoxicating, and I went about the entire thing in a state approaching ecstasy.

But as I sat there in the bathroom afterwards, half-spent from the jolt of computer sex, the only soul awake in our three-bedroom tract home, the dark's desolation started working on me. "*Suburban MILF Cheats on Husband.*" I repeated the title over and over again, quietly, its implications burrowing into my consciousness. The only accountant we knew was Russ, and so I dismissed that part of it. But I couldn't shake the notion that she was trying to tell me something. She was *surely* telling me something. She left it there for me, wanted me to see it.

The arc of the video's narrative, such that it was, went as follows: The suburban MILF is seated in a waiting room. The secretary, a blonde showing an implausible amount of cleavage, calls her name and tells her that Mr. Morton is ready to see her. She goes in to Mr. Morton's office and explains to him that her husband can't be there because he can't get away from his work. She complains that he's always working and they don't spend enough time together anymore. Mr. Morton is an empathetic sort and he comes around the desk to comfort her. He strokes her hair, her hair is *her* hair, dark and curly. He caresses her cheek, *her* cheek, shiny in the lousy lighting. *She* unzips his fly and they start their number, her oohs and ahhs reverberating into the waiting room and caroming off my temples and straight down my spine.

Was she confessing an affair? Is that what she was doing? Or was it something else? Was it an elaborate means by which she could tell me that she was still hot for me but that she thought I worked too much? Is that what she was trying to tell me? Was she telling me that she *missed* me? I was touched by the possibility.

The actress who played *her* was named Melissa Minx. I searched the site for every Melissa Minx video and found one that I thought would be a good counterpoint to this one. I cleared the browser's history and clicked on the new video, *Busty Brunette Gets Busted*, about a woman who gets caught masturbating by her husband. They both act like this is the most

embarrassing moment of their lives, and then they have sex for no apparent reason, other than the fact that to not have sex would undermine the whole purpose, this being a porno video and all. I wasn't interested in it for any carnal reasons as I was already completely wiped out, but I wanted it to be there, waiting for her the next time she went to clear the browser's history, calling out to her: "I'm onto you too!"

Over the next few days, we swapped knowing glances, knowing glances and little satisfied smirks. I felt very close to her, closer than I had in a long while. I made an extra effort around the house and made sure to pick up after myself. We didn't talk about any of it, but there was an implicit wink in some of our exchanges: "Did you get the milk like I asked you to?" "Of course I did, honey. I'm the milkman." Or "Don't forget, we've got the thing at the Sullivans' tomorrow." "Ah, yes, the ménage-a-twelve." When she asked me to cream-cheese her bagel one morning I thought I might spontaneously combust.

And a week later, after I'd checked the laptop's history at least a couple of times a day and each time having been sorely disappointed to discover that she'd left no crumb for me in the history, I came upon the next volley in this little tête-à-tête of ours. I saw the website's familiar orange logo and became instantly aroused and overcome momentarily by a deep feeling for my wife. I read the title, *Mature Hottie Blows Well Endowed Neighbor*, which was an obvious reference to Aaron Trainer, the famously good-looking teacher who lived two houses up from us and whose wife, Cindy, scandalously left him a couple of years before for a doctor from over the hill, and immediately, after consummating with this machine-portal-wife, I knew how to respond.

I searched the site for references to any "Cindy" and found the perfect comeback to the Aaron Trainer video: *Tight Teenager Cindy Bangs Does Anal For First Time*. I hesitated for a long moment before clicking the link, considering the possibility that *she* might be receptive to anal sex. But then I dismissed the thought out of hand, remembering that we hadn't even been

keeping up with our biweekly vanilla sex dates -- how long had it been? I wasn't sure -- so the notion of introducing some new, exotic move into our repertoire seemed completely out of the question. Still, I was brimming with curiosity to see what she'd post in answer.

I didn't have to wait long for her to respond. Just two nights later, I skulked into the bathroom with the thing and clicked on the lone link in its history: *Anal Gang Bang 12*. Good God! Who was this woman I married? But I figured she was just being cheeky, no pun intended, and that she didn't actually enjoy the video, which was every bit as smutty and grotesque as you might imagine. No, she was just posting it as a clever riposte. My cheeky, clever girl.

I told myself over and over again that this was the case, but still a recurring thought gnawed at me: What if I had it wrong and she wasn't trying to communicate with me at all? What if, by some quirk in the way the browser records its history, she wasn't doing this intentionally and she still didn't know that I was onto her? What if this whole give-and-take was one-sided and I had misread everything and she was none the wiser? And if any of this were so, then the next thought followed naturally: *Anal Gang Bang 12* must actually turn her on!

And it wasn't only *Anal Gang Bang 12* either. This portal that I'd opened up, which had begun as a mere trickle of innocent exploration, had grown into a vast ocean of lusty need. After *Anal Gang Bang 12*, there was *Man Makes Stepdaughter Squirt*, a compilation video of men ejaculating onto women's faces, and something called *The Fisting Olympics*, for which I couldn't even muster the fortitude to watch. I was overwhelmed by her voraciousness and was embarrassed every time I looked at her. Who was she and was there no bottom to her appetites?

But no, I told myself. The videos were too obvious, the clues too on-the-money. This was a new thing we were doing, this back-and-forth. She was teasing me, testing me. It was a cute thing and it was breathing new life into our marriage, which, let's face it, had grown a little dusty over the years. I quite liked this thing we were doing and I wasn't about to screw it up. I had to come back with a worthy video retort, something that would blow her hair back a little,

something that would make *The Fisting Olympics* seem like the pitiful little smut piece that it was.

So I went about perusing all the most reprobate videos I could find, using keywords like “fart” and “shit” and “S&M” and “humiliation.” I looked at countless amateur videos, chat-room videos, even gay stuff -- and not the lesbian kind either. I watched one after the next in a sort of monomaniacal fever, my lids growing heavy as the night wore on but my attention never wavering, my pupils like black holes sucking up everything in front of them. Something was compelling me, practically moving my twitchy fingers, to watch one after the next, but it all left me unsatisfied.

The Internet contains a dazzling assortment of human kink but none of it was adequate for my purposes, and by the middle of the night I knew my task required something even more depraved and more extreme than what I could find on any of the usual sites. And so after several hours of intense probing, downloading something called “Tor,” along probably with a bevy of incurable computer viruses, and possibly exposing our entire life savings to the digital underworld, I found myself at long last on some misbegotten corner of the Dark Web.

The Dark Web. It sounds sinister but it looks just like the ordinary internet. The ordinary internet without limits. There's nothing obviously indecent or illegal lurking there, not until you specifically search for it. But once you start seeking it out, you very quickly glimpse all sorts of stuff you don't necessarily want to see and you learn things about your species that you'd probably be better off not knowing. But there's also something irresistible, very much like rubbernecking it to see a car crash, about looking directly into the heart of man and seeing his multifarious yens and hungers laid bare.

Finding a topper to *Anal Gang Bang 12* or *The Fisting Olympics* wouldn't be much of a challenge in terms of finding something that was adequately depraved. The problem was knowing how far to push things. Because the Dark Web is limited only by the lawlessness of

your dreams. And so I watched and I watched, and the night grew darker and darker and my eyes grew blacker than black holes, until I found what I was looking for. It was a video called *Your Wife*, and it was amateurish, even by porn standards. The visuals were grainy and the sound was barely audible, the acting atrocious.

It opens with a shot of a bedroom, an ordinary bedroom much like our suburban bedroom, the walls white, the decor tasteful, in which two people are having sex. The camera slowly zooms in on the couple, the woman on top, and we can hear her rhythmic gasps along with the man's occasional grunts as they move each other closer and closer to climax. He's grabbed a tangle of her hair and she's arching her back and the image is bad and the sound is bad but they're moving closer and closer. And it was her hair that had me transfixed. Because it was *her* hair. And I don't mean it was *like* her hair, but I mean that it was *her* hair, kink after kink of black curls. And her back too, swaying and arching to their particular rhythm, was *her* back, right down to the mole on her scapula. And those gasps were also the same gasps that I knew all too well, her alto breathy and certain as always.

I looked around to get my bearings and then I brought the video back somewhat and watched and rewound it and listened. Beyond the room's ordinariness, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something familiar about it. I looked at the walls again and I was sure I'd been there before. I rewound it and watched and rewound it again. That face that I'd looked at thousands or even millions of times. I rewound. Her ass! And again. Her tits! I rewound. And her skin! I rewound. Her fingers! I rewound. Her mouth! And again and again and again. There was no getting around it, it was *her*!

But the man, grunting and panting, pulling and shoving, muscular and lean, was not me. No, no, it wasn't me and it wasn't Aaron Trainer from up the street either. No, the image was grainy, but I was sure of what I was seeing. I recognized him even without his glasses on, with his receding hairline and his ridiculous smirk. Even in the throes of adulterous sex he wore that

smirk. I cursed myself for not catching on earlier, as it should have been obvious from the first. Every step of the way, I'd been tormenting myself over the wrong things. But everything made sense for the first time since she started with the porn, and I even felt a certain freedom in surety. Or if not freedom then at least closure, for I was certain that I had at long last cracked the code. I finally had her right where I wanted her. I finally had her in my sights.

I watched the video countless times, thousands of times, even though I know that that's impossible. And while I watched, the video slowly transformed. The colors became more crisp, the dialogue more clear, the camera angles shifted, transmuted subtly until the view became my sight field. What I saw the camera saw. And what began as the groans and moans of sex became the unmistakable sounds of laughter. It was my laughter but they were using it to laugh at me. They were laughing and I couldn't get enough. I wanted them to laugh at me. I rewound and they laughed. I rewound and they laughed some more. If I just kept rewinding, I could have all of their laughter. Their laughter made me feel something, something more than sexual, and I wanted all of it.

I laughed with them all through the night until I found myself on the office floor, covered in a fluid that smelled like gasoline. My ears were screaming and my head ached. I saw *her* there, but I didn't believe it. What could *she* be doing there? She didn't normally come in to check on me. My elbow was bleeding and I lifted the bottom of my shirt to dab it. I was somewhat reassured to discover that it wasn't gasoline with which I was drenched, but rather it was piss. But why was I covered in piss?

She was there, all right, sitting on the couch, clearly bothered, and shaking her head as she scrutinized the laptop. She was there and she looked beautiful. I've always particularly loved how she looks when she's upset. There's something uniquely wholesome about her at moments like these, uniquely radiant. But I felt something burrowing into my stomach, as if it were hollowing my insides out. I was scared. I was scared to death of her. Something told me that we

couldn't go back after this. That something was broken. That I'd broken it. I'd seen that look before. It said, "What kind of a piece of shit are you anyway?"

So I said, as casually as I could manage, "What's going on?"

Her eyes fixed on me from behind the laptop. I tried to imagine her as one of her avatars, the thick Indian or the spicy Latina or the lusty lesbians, but instead I was forced to consider her actual person there, the woman whom I married and said those vows to, the woman whom I watched through childbirth and sicknesses and through all the crass slights of aging. This woman whom I loved.

"I don't know," I said. "This whole thing, you know, the porn thing has gotten out of hand."

She just stared at me, still shaking her head. I couldn't remember clearing the history before taking the Ambien, and so she must have had at her fingertips all of the most depraved monkey-sex and hit-man-for-hire links from the Dark Web. She must have had in her grasp what she thought was surely a window into my deranged psyche.

"When you posted the *Anal Gang Bang* video, I thought I had to come up with something really, really... Well, something really *sick* to kind of burn you with."

She still only stared.

"And the one about giving Aaron Trainer a blow job, well, I was really worried that you were cheating on me with him. But then when I saw the video of you and Russ..."

And now I started to cry while she only stared. I cried and I cried. I wanted her to tell me that it was all a bad dream, that we were okay. I wanted her to hold me. I walked over to her and put my hand on her shoulder, but she flicked it away as if it were an insect.

"Is it true? Are you and Russ...?"

And now she snapped at me: "I should be asking you the questions! You're the one who's always up at all hours of the night doing God knows what! So don't put this on me. I'm

not the one who woke up all scratched up on the floor. Look at yourself!”

I wanted to measure my words, to come back with something that established my control, my dignity. But my head was throbbing and my heart was heaving and I needed to know and so I asked again.

“What about the *Anal Gang Bang* video? Was that... Was that for *me*?”

She looked at me for a long while and I knew then that she pitied me. In that quavering instant I watched the corner of her mouth begin to twitch. She felt it and I saw it and we both knew the moment was at hand. The moment of revelation! And then the twitch worked on her mouth until, to my astonishment, it was transformed into a smile. A sad and cunning smile that lay beyond the bounds of my experience, and now the tears building up.

And she said, finally: “I think we need to talk.”

The End

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I don’t know how it came to me exactly, but I loved the idea of a wife and husband who communicate solely through the links that they each leave for each other in the ‘History’ of their shared laptop. That the links the couple leave for each other are all to porn sites made it all the more appealing. Once I got to writing the story, it transformed from the light-hearted satire about modern love that I had envisioned into something a bit darker, though I hope it still works as satire. I’d been reading a lot of instructional pamphlets when I wrote ‘Laptop’—like the ones that come with IKEA furniture—and I approached this story with the same ‘just the facts Joe Friday’ mentality with which the pamphlets are written. You know, this happened and then that happened and now you’ve got a bookcase. But then it turned into this other thing, this meditation on male obsession, and so I have to blame James Salter and Robert Coover and probably Stanley Kubrick for that.*

**BIO:** *Scott Schoenberg is a writer and musician hailing from Los Angeles. He lives with his wife and two sons and a dog named Thunderchicken. I wrote a piece about Chubby Checker that PopMatters published.*

# SHRINK, A.D. 2075

**By: EDGAR ALLAN MONAGHAN**

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We all feel the World is going crazy and Monaghan's story of future madness seems all too eerily real. On the bright side, when madness becomes commonplace, all of us will be lining up to see the shrink. Madness's beginning is its end and there is no end to it. We are intrigued by the author's quirky style: the telling seems to take place in some kind of vacuumed environment of psychological surrender and the repetitive slightly mechanical voice is curiously soothing while hinting at diabolical subliminals. Troubled duality is everywhere.*  
*Quote:* 'And some of my lovers were turned on by me but I tried not to hypnotize them to love me. "It was unprofessional," I told them. "But I wasn't against sex with my women in general."

I said to him, "His pretence to be a 'normal human,' was flawed. There are no longer any 'normal humans.' Everyone was crazy and most were freaks."

Of course, the law required everyone visit a psychiatrist once a month.

And I was one of the more expensive shrinks, so I got to meet many of the rich and famous.

I told my latest client that, "I had seen it all, but I hated what humanity was becoming."

Everyone was mad on crack cocaine, PCPS, LSD, miscellaneous opiates and stimulants and other drugs. All drugs were legal.

And people were selfish, greedy and bizarre in addition to being crazy.

And many people were having bizarre sex with "aliens," and multi-sexuals and android love dolls. And people changed their sex often and with it their whole ID. There was a lot of theft of Credits.

And people wore bizarre scents and had weird accoutrements, weird plastic surgery and colorful skin.

And some of my lovers were turned on by me, but I tried not to hypnotise them to love me. “It was unprofessional,” I told them. “But I wasn’t against sex with my women patients in general.”

And some patients wanted me to write a letter of introduction on their behalf to famous people. I was a skilled writer.

In fact, I was a well-known ghost writer, writing as a female about love affairs. And of course, I had written, “Tales of Madness.” The books were about different scenarios and cultures in a different time period from our own.

Science fiction, fantasy, horror, romance of course my new genre, madness.

#

Then, in January of that year, 2075, I met a patient, who I asked, “So what is right and wrong in your life madam?”

She said, “She was having nightmares of herself being torn apart. And she heard, “Voices.” The voices kept saying she was, “Mediocre” and “Ugly.” I suggested, “She was attractive, and all she needed was a good night’s sleep and I gave her strong sleeping pills.” And I said, “Maybe you could try new dream stimuli programs. And just ignore the voices.”

“And you are just stressed out,” I said. “Take some tranquilizers,” I added. “And if that doesn’t help, I’ll send you to the Underground. For illicit drugs.”

And she and I went to a VR in which everyone was a fighter, men and women. So, we each had a fight and each of us was badly beaten and had to be briefly hospitalized. But then I went to her room in the hospital and we loved one another. It was unprofessional, but I couldn’t help myself.

#

And then I had a paranoid schizophrenic. I hypnotised her and found she'd been hypnotised many times by a number of people. I told her, "To weigh each action, the pros and cons and choose what is best for you. It was very dangerous to be cross-hypnotised I told her. "She should concentrate on what is important. And not let anyone hypnotise her again."

#

And then I spoke with a fledgling writer who was trying to write an autobiography, entitled, "Journal of a Useless Persona." He said, "He felt like many others that he had no use. He had previously worked in customer service but was replaced by an android." "Are you an android?" He asked me.

I said "No way. I am pure human." and I said, "Don't worry you have use. If only to your lover and children." He said, "He didn't like it, but he guessed he had to accept it."

#

She was already a famous writer, but she suffered from bipolar syndrome. I told her, "To go camping and take it easy with stress to perform and travel. It is not natural to be so famous." But I said, "Don't be afraid of madness, it can yield great fruit."

#

Then I had a patient that was very depressed. She said her lover cheated on her and her kids drove her mad... I told her, "To put her kids in boarding school and have affairs of her own. Plenty of potential lovers out there." And she said, "And her job was a masseuse, she was one of the last as machines could do a better job." "But it was good loving, to love your clients? I asked. But she said, he had a new sex disease that would take a few weeks to cure and was limited sexually. I said, "So, that's why you are depressed."

She said, "She drove everyone around her mad, they thought that she was an evil bitch. I said, "You can have your mate wear condoms and boxer shorts while they love you. And that should solve your problem. All you need is one man!"

#

Then I had a nymphomaniac. She was psycho and smothered her lovers in attention. “She ruined their lives.” I said, “Why not get a job in an expensive resort where she could meet interesting people. Rich people are on the whole interesting. It’s clear to me that you crave variety and elite lovers. Or alternatively work as a high-class escort service.” She said, “It seems like I have no choice but to be a whore.”

#

Then a skeletal woman who looked ghastly. I said, “You’d look prettier if you gained some weight. Anorexic. You look like a ghoul,” I said. And with that she stormed out of my office.

#

Next a guy who, “Heard everyone talking about him in English.” He was Chinese but spoke fluent English as well as Mandarin.

I asked, “Why would anyone want to talk about you, you are not famous.”

He said, “The secret service was in his head because he was the smartest man in the world.”

He said, “They were holding him back.” I said, “Even if it’s true, you have to use your intelligence in a good way so as not to attract attention.” He said, “That’s just it they think he would make waves.” And he handed me his “Manual for True Freedom.” The manual spoke of making an IQ test the fundamental requirement for government. If government was cleverer, society would be improved. I said, “Maybe if you take medicine for paranoid schizophrenia, they will leave you alone. He said, “It’s a brilliant idea, he would try it.” And he did and the voices receded somewhat.

#

Then I had a professional virtual reality wrestler. I said, “It’s fake isn’t it? He said, “Yes but I broke my leg and lost some teeth.”

I asked, “Why he liked dominatrix’s?” He said, “He had many sexual fantasies.”

I said, "He should try and be an actor."

He said, "He was 49 and it was high time he settled down and had a family, but he couldn't find a girl." I told him, "To go to Philippines and find a nice, loving girl who would be very grateful to live in the US."

#

Then I had a patient who suffered from vertigo. Afraid of heights. I said, "Civilization is 'too high. Just like the Tower of Babel."

"One time she started running in a dense crowd and started a stampede and 15 people died."

"She was claustrophobic and felt she was out of control."

She suffered from MS and had a walker. But I told her, "New experimental treatments were showing great results."

She said, "She wanted to die." I said, "They are on the verge of a cure and why not just relax on heroin and feel good." She said, "Neo heroin is something she'd been afraid of her entire life! But she guessed it will help her to stay alive."

#

Next a somnambulist. He would go walking in the night and in his apartment many doors were unlocked. He would get into bed with people and have no memory of it.

He had a rare skin disease that caused him to be insane. I said, "You need to cure your skin disease."

And I suggested, "He lock himself into his home and hide the key in a safe so if he was sleep walking he couldn't get out. He said, "Why didn't I think of that?"

#

Then a kind nurse who had bad luck in love. She was in love with a male nurse, but he found other women he liked more. I told her, "To meet other people outside the hospitable and for sure she could find her soul mate. Most men want a kind woman," I said.

#

As Herman Hesse said, “Many madmen pass for normal.”

#

Then I had a patient who lost both legs in Afghanistan while serving there as a peacekeeper. But now surgeons could regrow lost limbs and so he was fit. He said, “He was always the soldier.”

I told him to go to university and get a B.A. so that he could join the officer corps. He could study something easy like geography or sociology. He said, “It was good advice.” He said, “He’d make a good general.”

#

Then I had a patient who was a gay architect.

He heard voices saying he was a homosexual and a jerk and a bad lover.

And he said, “It was the secret service in his head as he was so talented as an architect. They didn’t want him to be famous and have power, as he had radical views. I told him, “Take some drugs to calm him and try his best to be subtle with his buildings. To not amaze everyone. Make your buildings esoteric, for the best.”

#

Then I met a man who played in a rock band. I listened to their music and it was great, but somewhat discordant. I said, “Go ahead push the barriers of sanity. Luck favors the bold. But as Syd Barret said, ‘Hold on to the steel rail.’” He said, “You are right, life is all about knowing when to stop!” I said, “You don’t need my advice. Just follow your heart.”

#

Then I had a patient who claimed he was perfectly sane, which caused me to doubt his sanity. So, I did some psychoanalysis. He said, “He kept hearing Geiger counters buzzing...”

He said he was on “The dark side of the moon.” I said, “Sanity is just a word, we are all mad some of the time, if not always.”

#

Then I met a patient who had murdered her lover with a knife. She said, “She was a high-class lady who her boyfriend didn’t respect.” And she said, “Anyway they would soon invent eternal youth it seemed so she could look forward to years of youth, after she served her term.” I visited her in prison.

#

Then I had a patient who was in a virtual reality experiment. She said, “It was still experimental, and made her feel dizzy in the virtual mover.”

I asked, “What brought you to be a virtual reality experiment? She answered, “It was the future.” I said, “But it is driving you uncontrollably insane. I recommend that you just try and live in simple reality.

#

Then a woman who said, “Money doesn’t buy happiness.” She was a rich banker. I said, “She was spoiled and should try and live simply for a while and forget about business.” I said, “Why not fall in love with someone? And enjoy life?” She said, “You are probably right.”

#

I said, “So you are power-crazed. You want sex power, fame power and political power.”

He said, “He was just ambitious. He wanted to make a difference. And he said, “He was a true statesman and would love a job as Australian ambassador to the UN.” I said, “Take some tranquilizers to calm you, so you can make a conscientious decision about your future.” He said, “He didn’t want to take any drug. He’d just come to me for advice.” So, I told him, “If he figured he could make a difference then he should go for it. Green light go,” I added. “Don’t worry about the consequences, just do what you think is right.”

#

Then I met a patient who was afraid of the dark. He hallucinated in the dark and saw demons and devils. I told him, “He needed to take anti-hallucinatory medicine. And just stay home at night.”

#

Another patient, he said, “He was driven insane by the cold weather. He would wear a balaclava and a ski mask and many layers of clothes in winter. He had spent some time in Indonesia and after that couldn’t get used to the cold.”

But he said, “It was a CIA plan to heat up the United States while other regions grew too hot/ suffered drought. It was said that they bombed ocean rifts to heat up the oceans which in turn heated up the land.”

He said, “He loved the CIA.” I said, “Why not move to Puerto Rico or Bahamas or something where the weather is hotter than ever, and the milieu is festive.

#

Then I met a hermit who never left his house. He was on welfare like so many others. His supplies were delivered, and he enjoyed working in his garden which was quite large. He liked to brew beer and daydream while drinking. He would paint pictures, fantasies mostly. I told him, “You are truly wise.” He said, “He didn’t need love, he was happy as a hermit.” And he was covered in hair and tall and looked like a sasquatch.

#

Then a man who had ADHD. And serious allergies to the environment.

I said, “He had dyslexia and that was the main problem.”

I recommended, “He live in Alaska where it was snowing and frozen most of the year.” But he said, “He was allergic to the cold also.” He said, “He’d like to go to space, but couldn’t do the training.” Finally, he was on oxygen and got into the business of selling oxygen to terminally ill patients. But the job was stressful and when I met him again, he said, “Modern society is,

‘information overload.’ And he couldn’t handle it. He just wanted a simple life with a wife and a family and enough food to eat. Is that asking too much he wondered?” I said, “We live in complex times, and the strong survive as always. You need to be strong and hold it together.”

#

Then a girl who had neo psoriasis which drove her mad and she looked at all the beautiful women who had plastic surgery and was dismayed. I said, “We can cure that. Why didn’t you seek treatment when it first began to bother you?” And so, I gave her some healing cream and I said to frequent dark bars where they wouldn’t notice so much her rashes. One-night stands... anyway the medicine would take effect in a week.

She claimed she was the true Empress of China and she wore yellow colored robes, the color of Emperors.

I recommended, “She continue to smoke opium and carry on. Only keep taking the medicine.”

#

She was an Arab and was raped in the Middle East by a US serviceman, who she didn’t know the name of. In her mind life was like a war. I told her to, “Join the peace corps. And stop fighting herself.” So, she changed her name to, “Jenny Peace.” And she put the rape incident behind her. And all was well. And I gave her some stimulants to inspire her.

#

In Africa, he caught amoebic dysentery. It caused him to act totally crazy, like grab people on the street and demand they “Cure him.” I said, “Maybe you are crazy anyway and the dysentery just brought it out.” I cured him of dysentery and I put him on tranquilizers and told him to take it easy.

#

I reflected, insanity is a kind of default mechanism when the body and mind are under very stressful conditions.

#

Then a pyromaniac. He was obsessed with fire and confided in me that he had started 50 fires in California over the last two years. He said, "He was an agent of the God, Prometheus." I told him, "To try and be constructive." And then I told the authorities about him, breaking psychiatrist-client privilege.

#

Next, a woman who had a nervous breakdown. She was an educator/tutor and the kids drove her crazy. But now she was 56 and could retire. I said, "Your suffering is over, you can live in grace and comfort and travel the world." She said, "I drive myself crazy, I know. But I don't know what I would do with my time if I retired. Conceivably I could live on for hundreds of years. One gets bored of travel and comfort." I said, "Contrary to popular belief, there are worse things than boredom."

#

He was from a backwards part of Asia, which still had lead pipes and lead poisoning made him crazy. He groped women and flashed them. And babbled about "Do you believe in the devil?" And he said, "The devil was within him." I said, "He needed new blood and drugs to calm him."

#

Then a girl who was a virtual zombie. She just wanted to listen to death metal.

I gave her the shock treatment and tried various drugs on her.

Then I loved her. She thrashed about like a wild cat. It worked well and she said she felt she was waking up from a long dream/nightmare. And I helped her improve her website to garner many new loves. "Love cures all wounds," I told her.

#

Then a girl who said, “She had Parkinson’s and wanted to die.” I said, “The cure is just around the corner, why not hold on? So, she did and I later found out they had cured her, just one month later.

#

Then a woman who had just got out of the mental hospital. She said, “Most people in the mental hospital will never leave.”

I said, “One Who Flew Over the Cuckoos’ Nest,” was inspirational. None of us wants to go there. But I said, “Congratulations, you made it out.”

Many patients figured I was crazy.

And I observed that driving people crazy was a new offence in the criminal code. People brought suits against one another. Love was madness.

Anyway, I told her, “To carry on madly, but don’t make trouble or the spies will be after you.”

#

And the government was sued by many for driving them insane with their spies, and hypnosis.

The cat was out of the bag and most believed however, that the Leadership was sane, but a strong minority doubted it.

#

Sometimes contemporary people went back to the farm or life as a hunter-gatherer. Some went into those kinds of virtual reality and never came out. Like one former client who had no use for civilization, but she said, “Finally she got sick of VR. She said, “She would only spend a few minutes with me, but hoped for advice.” I responded by saying, “Try and find kindred spirits on the Internet. A perfect love awaits all decent people,” I said. “Maybe it won’t last long but it will be there for you, always.” I added.

#

Next a woman who said, “She was a CIA experiment with eternal youth. She was 42 but she thought she looked like 18.” I said, “It is probably just good genes.” She said, “No, she was unique in her family.”

And she also said, “The secret service was in her head because she was a brilliant astrophysicist who claimed to have found intelligent radio waves from a far-off star.” It was disturbing to hear her. I told her, “To take some of the latest stimulants in order to be happy.” And told her, “To keep such discoveries to herself and try and make a deal with the spies.”

#

She said, “She was impoverished but she really wanted to be treated by me. I said, “Yes.” And she was very grateful.

I diagnosed her as having, “Modern day disease.”

I asked her, “What was the craziest thing she had ever done?” She said, “She fell in love with a jerk who mistreated her and confused her.” “Yes,” I said, “Love is madness.” So, I prescribed inspirational stimulants for her.

#

Then I met a patient who had gunned down his 3 bosses. He said, “They maltreated him, treating him like an insect. And if he could do it all over, he’d kill them again. Anyway, jail is a joke,” he said.

And he told me, “That I was the crazy one who drove his patients mad.”

And he refused to be hypnotised.

“Post-hypnotic suggestion was evil,” he said.

I said, “We could use hypnosis to end all wars. We all firmly believed we were improving the world, step by step.”

Anyway, I talked to him in prison, and he said, “It wasn’t so bad. And he would live forever.” I said, “Maybe once they discover eternal youth ex-cons will be left out of the equation.”

#

Next a woman who said, “She kept falling in love. It was good confusion. Love.” But she said, “She was out of control.”

I said, “You are, like many, totally spoiled.

She said, “Those who admit they are mad are the best people.”

I answered, “Love makes the world go round. But you need to stop losing control, I am prescribing tranquilizers to calm you down.”

#

Then I had a gorgeous female patient and I asked, “You’ve gone to 10 different shrinks, why come to me?” She said, “Many people recommend you Online.”

She said, “She’d been selected for the new mind reading technology (MRT) program experiment.”

She said, “They massaged peoples’ minds.”

But, she said, “She couldn’t take it. It was like rape only worse.”

I said, “MRT is the future. It will put a stop to all wars and criminal activity. It will make Utopia.” She asked, “If there was any way to protect against MRT?” I said, “Such technology is forbidden. I really can’t help you.” But then I loved her, and she felt better.

#

Next a patient who laughed at psychology and said, “All we did is give opiates to people and didn’t help them to become sane.” But I used hypnotism on him and rearranged his thinking. “Respect mental health,” I told him. I made him more respectful and humble and charitable. It was all possible with post-hypnotic suggestion.

#

Next a woman who said, “She would run for President of the US as an Independent.”

But she said, “The US Secret Service was in her head and making her miserable.”

She said she would run to fight for sanity in a mad world.

And she said she would have referendums on all important issues confronting the government.

And she wanted to concentrate high rises in all the cities and get everyone to live in urban areas.

And she wanted everyone to have a peace quotient (PQ).

But she said, “The spies wouldn’t let her run and so she was depressed.”

I said, “There’s nothing I can say to you that you don’t already know. Fight the good fight; it’s all you can do. But you can help the needy and help humanity in other ways, besides politics. Earn yourself the Nobel Peace prize, or something.”

#

He was a megalomaniac, a rich multi-trillionaire. He told me, “He wanted to be the world’s first zillionaire. He was involved in all kinds of business.” But he complained, “The spies were in his head and were preventing him from getting richer...”

I said, “You want to be good, maybe not a saint, but hat’s off to you. You have to be content with what you have and not be too greedy. Perhaps the spies just don’t want any one person to be too powerful.”

#

She was paralyzed from the neck down until she was cured 20 years ago. She said, “It’s a wonderful world.” I said, “Get in touch with other people who are in the same boat and together write a book about your experiences and do it also in virtual reality, which will give you a chance to really use your imagination.” She said, “But she couldn’t recover from the paralysis mentally. She needed psychiatric help.” I said, “I’ll be there to hold your hand.”

#

Next a man who complained that, “All the women were too tough. So, he set up a feminine school for girls. His school attracted old-fashioned girls and girls that didn’t want to be tough. But the students drove him mad.” I told him, “To leave the teaching to others and just be the Principal. And I prescribed some tranquilizers.”

#

Then a woman who had an attitude problem. She thought, “Life should be paradise for all, and blamed politicians for her unhappiness.” I felt compelled to tell her, “You have a pretty face, but it is not an intelligent one. You need plastic surgery on your face and body.” She stormed out of my office.

#

I reflected that 90% supported the status quo. But the vast majority of my patients were unhappy with the World milieu.

But I worried that spies made dissidents disappear.

#

And then I had a dissident patient who said, “This world was all coldly calculated and didn’t want to see what these people might have achieved. Everyone knew dissidents disappeared, but some still insisted on being radical just like those who were accused of heresy in the Middle Ages, who wouldn’t recant. I had nothing to do with it,” and she said, “It was wrong. But they left me alone.” I said, “She had to bow down to the powers that be. And not be so egotistical.”

#

She said, “American spies were trying to overwhelm other countries through MRT hacking.”

No spies were assigned to me, full time, but I heard them in my head sometimes and so I had to curtail my love with patients. The spies told me, “I was corrupt.”

#

Then I met a woman who told me, “She kept her thoughts on government to herself and this is why she was still alive. But she was forming the new CEO’s Business Party which sought lower taxes and more free trade and more businesspeople in government.”

She said, “The richest are the brightest and should rule. And we should make everyone even richer.” But she was having mental problems. She said, “There were voices in her head stating that she back down from her stance and political ambitions.” And she said, “We can’t improve the World if we neutralize those who have ideas to change it.” I gave her some tranquilizers and wished her good luck.

#

Then I had a patient who was a clown and he came to me all dressed up. He said, “He sought to make people to look on the light side and feel good about themselves, mostly children.”

Socialism and ambition. “God helps those who help themselves,” I said.

And I advised him, “To stop clowning around and get serious about this serious world. I gave him some stimulants.”

#

Next, I met lonely Lucy. She said, “She craved adventure, but virtual reality was boring, and the people in it were mostly holograms, who didn’t interest her.”

I told lonely Lucy, “To go climb Mt. Everest and meet some kindred spirits.”

She did and she died, and her family blamed me.

My reputation was tarnished.

But there’s too many people, I reflected.

#

Then a “Bored mad man,” I told him “There’s worse things than being bored.” He said, “He knew but he didn’t feel like living any more.”

I gave him a special kind of stimulant that inspired a lot of people to do great art. Maximizing cognitive ability. But I learned a week later, he was dead.

#

She told me she couldn't stop committing crimes. So, I hypnotised her and told her to work in rehab for criminals to do some good.

She said she admitted it: "She was insane." I said, "But you can be creative in your madness, and contribute to peoples' entertainment." (She was a poet). I said, "Stop your graffiti and get down to Earth with your fellow poets."

#

She was known as the world's greatest lover. She had a pretty, intelligent face and told me, "She was a sex machine. She said she had superhuman energy and would find your erogenous zones and give you an oil massage."

But she fell in love with many of her customers and it was unrequited love.

I said, "If you are such a good lover you should be able to win the hearts of the rich and famous."

She said, "They liked her, but felt I was just a slut and not a worthy companion. They preferred to have children with more stable women, not her, their crazed lover." I said, "I want to love you." And she acquiesced. And it was the best sex I ever had. She was so creative and energetic. We made love with dream music and she followed the beat hypnotically. I was mesmerised and nearly lost control of myself. But she said, "She had to move on." So, I thanked her.

#

Next a woman who said, "She'd surfed on the net filtering out 2 billion men looking for true love, but it was difficult to know which would be best for her. And she changed her desires as

she got older.” But she said, “Right now I want you.” So, I loved her, and it was good. I reflected it was a corrupt thing to do, but she was so hot and ready.

#

Then a crazy man who howled like a wolf. I asked him, “Why do you think you are a werewolf?” He said he had a brotherhood with wolves and feral dogs. He’d bite people out of the blue and then howl. He was very hairy. And I told him, “To take some ‘humanizing drugs.’ Such drugs would make him saner and bring his instinctual human skills to the forefront. No more howling like a wolf,” I said. He said, “He just wanted to be free.”

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I thought to myself, maybe one day everyone will be a shrink.

The whole world is going insane.

#

She said, “She was probably the second richest person in the world with an estimated net worth 600 trillion. But in all her companies she was a silent partner.” No one knew her true identity. I said, “I am amazed that you can get away with it!”

She said, “Her children all hated her. Just like King Midas she turned everything into gold including her kids.”

And she said, “She reached a plateau of happiness 3 years ago and now every day she felt worse.” She said, “She was tired and strung out and was juggling too much work.”

And she said, “She should have perhaps been an actress. But now she was too old to change.” I told her, “She still looked good. And I said, “You depress me, the Shrink.” I said, “If even the richest aren’t happy, who is?” And I put her on tranquilizers to calm her down.

#

Then a politician mad man. I said to him, “Continue with your political activity.” He said, “Anti-aging medicine which was newly discovered should be only for the richest 50% so that people would remain ambitious.” And he said, “Supercomputers should be banned as they were too powerful.”

I said, “Don’t fall away from the law, however.”

I said, “We need to share eternal youth with everyone. It’s the right thing to do.” And it was then that I first started to take this medicine. My age disappeared and I became youthful again. And I wanted to tell my patients to all take this drug.

#

So, to cap off this year, I simply temporarily retired and spent my time raising my numerous children and looking for new mates.

My kids and I experienced virtual reality worlds together. We only went to sane, decent Worlds.

And I lived happily ever after.

There would always be more and more people with mental problems, so I was assured of a job in perpetuity.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I believe these days the World gets crazier and crazier. This is a story about future madness that will no doubt be the milieu in the future. Everyone will need to see a shrink. And everyone will no doubt boast how crazy they are. As the Greeks believed, madness is divine, a gift from the immortal Gods. And people will cultivate their madness. And it will be a good thing for better or worse....*

**BIO:** *Monaghan is a sixth generation Canadian who published extensively, mostly in the sci/fi and speculative fields. He was previously published in Fleas on the Dog in Issue 1.*

# A Love That Is Pure

by Andrew Lafleche

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The comfortable stereotypes we all carry around in our heads are turned upside down when an underage girl takes it upon herself to seduce a male neighbor old enough to be her father. The dangers of this inappropriate relationship and its horrifying consequences are viewed through the man's eyes as he finds himself at the crossroads where passion pressures reason. The wisely chosen 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular POV effectively distances the reader from the narrator (and the narrator from his temptations) and accounts for the necessary gravity of tone. A powerful short that is as compelling as it is unsettling.*

## A LOVE THAT IS PURE

by

Andrew Lafleche

People don't take responsibility for their actions anymore, so when someone does, it's shocking. If the outcome had been any other way, it might have debuted on *To Catch a Predator*. People sitting in their living rooms after dinner, eyes fixed on the TV screen as Chris Hansen's voice narrates all the inappropriate things one twisted individual forced on another. Terrible stories of older men raping younger women. This story might have been one of them.

Outside your patio doors you can see the neighbor girl kicking a soccer ball in her backyard. You think to yourself how much she's grown since her family moved in just those few years ago. It was your birthday. After they finished unloading the moving van you went over to introduce yourself and welcome them to the area. Their daughter must have been nine years old at the time. Too shy to say 'Hi,' she just looked up at you with those bright blue eyes peeking out

from behind her father's leg, before she turned and ran inside their new home. She reminded you of innocence. She reminded you of when you were a boy, too young to have learned the cruel lessons of life. Too young, period.

This neighbor girl, she's thirteen now. Three weeks ago, she had a party for her birthday slash end-of-the-school-year. Over the years you've come to realize that her parents are the types who will do anything for their little girl, and the type of parents who will let her do anything—as long as she does it at home so they can keep an eye out. The parties are always at their house; the barbeques, the sleepovers, everything always there. The only reason you know this last party was her thirteenth birthday is because her and one of her little girlfriends knocked on your door and invited you to stop by. Obviously, you didn't, because she's thirteen.

Since that first shy introduction, she and her little girlfriends have knocked on your door plenty of times. Asking permission to fish from your shoreline. She asks to snowboard on your hill in the winter. She asks you to buy her Girl Guide cookies; to sponsor her Jump Rope for Heart. To buy her cookie dough. You don't even bake the stuff but you buy it anyway because that's what good neighbors do.

She knocks on your door to collect bottles for her school's Bottle Drive.

She knocks on your door and then runs away giggling.

Out back she's kicking the soccer ball around and you can't help but notice how her tits have really come in. You notice how your once shy neighbor girl has really developed. Every once in a while, as she skips through her yard with the soccer ball, she looks up toward where your deck is to make sure you take notice. She's the kind of girl who knows she's becoming a woman and wants people to take notice.

At night you see her peeking out her bedroom window down to where you're fishing. Her bedroom window overlooks your yard like your deck overlooks hers. That night when you catch

her peeking through her bedroom window, ducking out of sight whenever you glance over your shoulder, that night, you've had a couple drinks.

You imagine what it would feel like to have her tiny little hands stroking your cock. You know you shouldn't let your mind entertain these thoughts, but what the hell, you can't get in trouble for the things you think. Besides, it's not like you would ever act on it, it's just foolish wonderings.

The sun has set for the evening. In front of you, the still water of the lake reflects the moon's glow. Behind you, the light from your neighbor girl's bedroom creeps across the yard. She's left her blinds open, and she's dressing into her pajamas. You can see her silhouette in the window and you imagine running your hands over her newly teenage body. She clicks her light out and you realize you've had too much to drink.

The next day she knocks on your door and asks you for some newspapers so she can have a fire in the back yard. Schools out for summer and she and her girlfriend want to have one last bonfire before her family leaves for vacation. Her parents own a home in Vermont. Each summer, on the Saturday following the last day of school, your neighbors pack up and drive off only to return the last Friday before school begins again. You tell her to wait there and you'll bring the recycling in from the garage.

When you return to the kitchen, she's exactly where you left her, except she's taken off her clothes. She leans against the front door, naked. She locks the deadbolt and tells you she wants you to take her. She says she's seen the way you look at her and that it's the way she wants you to. She tells you that she's loved you since she was a little girl, since the very first moment you met. She tells you that all the girls in her class talk about their older lovers, and how she needs you to be the one to take her virginity.

All of this she tells you as she advances.

Pressed up against your body, her hands cupped around the outside of your pants, you're throbbing. Her white skin smooth and taut. She's perfect. Her tits have life in them, plump and perky; like you imagined. She looks up at you with those widened blue eyes and tells you if you don't, she's going to tell her parents you tried.

She smiles.

She says this like a girl who knows what she wants and always gets it.

She says it and begins to sink down to her knees. The curve of her hips rest against her naked legs. This neighbor girl moves slowly to undo your belt and unzip the fly of your jeans. She moves like she's waiting for permission, testing how far you'll let this go. Her hands find their way into your boxers. She grips your dick and you feel like exploding. You stand there frozen, expecting at any moment for a battalion of police officers to come crashing through the door like they do on TV, forcing you to the ground, smashing your face off the linoleum, your dick exposed, hard, and being bent under your body in excruciating pain. You imagine her bawling, telling them how you made her do it. How you told her if she didn't you would hurt her. Your neighbor girl thanking them for saving her before you made her do unspeakable things. Her parents running over to your house, frantic and screaming. Her dad yelling how he's going to kill you. Her mom scooping up their little girl while threatening how you'll be treated in prison. Both parents yelling how your ass will be torn open because you're just like Ted Bundy. Constable 'I-Eat-Pieces-Of-Shit-Like-You-For-Breakfast,' advising you your right to remain silent. He recites that everything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. It's all the lines you hear on TV while he slaps the cuffs on your wrists and smashes your face off the roof of his cruiser as he shoves you into the back seat, dick still hanging out, mashed and bloody.

All of this flashing in your mind as your neighbor girl continues to look up at you, hands full and her mouth resting on the tip of your penis. Her eyes begging for consent.

"It will be our secret," she whispers, then kisses the tip.

You drop the newspapers on the counter and like any man with a gun to his head about to lose everything, you say, “Fuck it,” and carry her into your bedroom.

You tell yourself she doesn’t look thirteen. Her breasts, her eyes. You convince yourself she’s a woman; this neighbor girl, she came on to you. You thought she was older. Anything that you might use as a defense, knowing each to be about as strong as your self-control.

You don’t even bother rationalizing anymore. She did it. It’s her fault. At the very least it isn’t your fault, and then you press yourself into her pouting lips.

You can see she’s in a bit of pain but she doesn’t complain. Instead she moans a light moan; a moan like she’s seen in the movies. She arches her back so that her stomach lifts off the bed. She presses the side of her head into the mattress.

Bottom lip bit, your neighbor girl, she glows.

You want to fuck her hard to teach her a lesson for this stunt she’s pulled. You think about fucking her to have her pain become digging her nails in your back, but you suddenly realize you’re about to blow and barely have time to pull out.

A light flow of red trickles down her thigh.

At least that part of her story was true.

When you fall on the bed beside her, she reaches her arm across your chest and asks you if she did okay. You assure her she did and kiss to the top of her head.

After a few minutes of lying on the bed, you clean her up and send her home with the newspapers she came for. As she leaves, she reaches up to kiss you on the cheek and whispers, “Our little secret.”

That weekend her family is packing their Trailblazer and getting ready to leave. You’re thankful for this tradition of theirs because it will give you time to figure out what happened. It will give you time to prepare a defense. Give time to wonder if it might happen again, if you would do it again, if you should do it again—how you could do it again. If you could get away

with it and how far you could keep pushing the envelope. Take that inch and make it a mile.

Before your neighbors even leave their driveway, your fear of getting caught has been trumped: you're a man and you'll do whatever the fuck you want.

That whole summer you picture your neighbor girl coming home: her pleading eyes and sun-kissed skin. You imagine her sneaking over during the day, at night, whenever her parents aren't home. Your mouth waters at the thought of how clean she tasted. You throb thinking of her.

The week before her family should have returned home you get a letter in the mail. The handwriting on the envelope is gentle, the kind of rounded letters that make you happy to read. You guess it's from her and open it.

The letter is addressed: My first and only.

In this letter she tells you how all summer she hasn't stopped thinking about your one time together; how she never told anyone and wasn't going to.

She writes how even though you probably didn't believe her when she said it, she loves you.

She tells you about all the fun things she and her parents have been doing in Vermont: the nights under the stars, the days at the beach, their shopping trips into town. She tells you about all the things a thirteen-year-old girl would write to her boyfriend.

As casually as she recollected her summer vacation, she tells you how she missed her period. How one day in town, when her parents weren't around, she bought a pregnancy test. She wrote how her parents would kill her if they ever found out and how they'd kill you—or worse.

She loves you and so she could never let this happen. She meant it when she said, "Our little secret."

In this letter she tells you that she's going to kill herself before they return home.

Teenage girls are insufferably dramatic.

She described it as a romantic tragedy, a very real Romeo and Juliet, and signed the letter, “Always, our little secret.”

The following week, when your neighbors were supposed to return home, they didn't. It's not until sometime in September they do and it's then you hear that their daughter is dead. That she killed herself. How she didn't leave a note.

Your neighbors are devastated.

You hear about how she did it.

You assumed it was swallowing a handful of pills, but you assumed wrong. Your neighbor girl went out hard. She was strong. She gave herself no way of retreat.

If you want to take the island, you have to burn the ships.

Your neighbor girl, what she did was, she drew a bath. At their summer home, off her parent's bedroom was an oversized bathroom with one of those old claw-foot tubs in the center. Three sides of the room are lit up by the sun that shines through the white framed windows. The view is the lake.

Your neighbor girl, she drew a hot bath. As the tub filled, she opened the medicine cabinet of her parent's bathroom and swallowed two Aspirins. She took out her daddy's shave kit. He's one of those types of men who wet shaves with a badger brush and a straight razor. She removed one of the wax-wrapped doubled edged blades from inside the kit and set it on the ledge of the bathtub before undressing. With the tub full she shut off the water then folded her clothes and set them on the chair.

Bath drawn, Aspirin popped, and razor blade resting on the ledge of the bathtub, she eased her naked body into the water. Her white skin turned pink from the heat as she allowed herself to soak. A Mona Lisa smile on her face as she looked out the windows to a world whose condemnation for love is death.

As she soaked in the hot bath, your neighbor girl picked up the razor blade and ran it up the length of her arm.

If it was a cry for help, she would have scratched across her wrist.

The razor blade split the skin with ease and opened her veins as effortlessly. Wrist to elbow, one straight line, your neighbor girl, she was something fierce.

With the Aspirin thinning her blood and the water warming her body, blood poured from her arm like it was waiting for its moment to escape.

As she started on the other arm, she passed out. Her body slumped in the hot bath in the claw-footed tub; it's when her parents returned from town.

They found her soaking, hair hanging over the ledge, and the merlot water steaming the sweet copper scent of lifeless beauty.

They didn't know about her being pregnant.

They didn't know anything.

Your neighbor girl, at least she did the right thing.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wrote A Love That Is Pure with the intention of immersing the reader, almost forcing the reader, to enter into the story and contend with the landscape separating circumstance and choice. It's messed up, but fiction lets us go to a place where we can start to think about issues we might never choose. That, with the help of writing in second person. Literary influences: Raymond Carver, Anton Chekhov, Hunter S. Thompson, Charles Bukowski.*

**BIO:** *My previous short story credits include The Merrimack Review, Metonym Literary Journal, Phenomenal Literature, Haunted MTL and CommuterLit. He is the author of the short story collection A Pardonable Offence, available on Amazon. Visit him at [www.AJLafleche.com](http://www.AJLafleche.com)*

# The Shadow Prison

By Dirk Van Nouhuys

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A photographer's trek into a shadowy hinterland where reality is a series of dissolving frames like the images in a dark room is played against his own gradual fragmentation. Characters materialize and fade in a sometimes sinister narrative tinted with a mysterious disenchantment. Scintillating word chains emerge from passages emboldened with symbolic weight and everywhere there is the beauty of language. Quote: '...old vines silhouetted against the snow like fumbled writing.' And '...The red world was a quarter world, immersed in a dim, ambiguous haziness where crimson looked like black.' d '...an officer as forceful and composed as commonwealth...'. A story that transcends its genre and triumphs as a work of art.*

## The Shadow Prison

The photographer worked patiently in a cistern in the backyard of a decrepit farmhouse as if waiting for answers to emerge on the paper maturing in his chemical trays. He had first seen the farmhouse when he was driving with his lover looking for a place for them to live together many years before. They entered the Small Valley — it was about 5 miles long and 3 miles wide surrounded by rolling hills — in late afternoon of an exceptionally clear day. The warm slanting sun, which highlighted the surrounding hills covered with dry grass, stopped his heart and sharpened every edge and angle of the ramshackle farmhouse, rendering it more meaningful than its reality. Always in love with light, the photographer, not yet a photographer then, had fallen in love with the aspect. No, 'love' is too simple word; it drenched him with longing and satisfaction, with nostalgia and hope, with regret and anticipation.

They stopped and stalked together around the house pushing aside dry weeds in the sketchy

remnant of a garden and later picking burrs off their socks. From the outside, it seemed the broken skull of a house or a skull twisted by gravity rather than shattered. Some windows were glassless, some whole, none rectilinear. The light picked out the grain of the weathered siding. The door pushed open. Inside was worse than out. The floor of the living room ballooned up and shreds of carpet had gathered against one wall as if blown by the wind of disquietude. No doorframes were straight, so no doors closed; some had been broken and used for firewood. The stairs to the second floor trembled disturbingly.

The building entranced them. It seemed to offer them an escape from world of conventions they felt onerous, as it had escaped, blown by the wind of time, from the world of social appearances, or from the hard-tack world of farming into a true world of aesthetic experiences. They longed to invite their friends. They longed to have their friends build with them an image of gaiety and light where they could realize longing.

They tracked down the property owner with some difficulty. She was an elderly woman who had retired to an apartment in the city. She leased her farm to someone who planned to plant it in wine grapes, but had not yet prepared the soil. She had been born in the house, spent her childhood there and hated, even feared, its present dilapidated condition as she feared her own mortality. She did not want to talk with them. They seemed to her children drunk with self-love. She referred them to the developer.

He was a gnarly, brown-skinned man with an Italian surname who'd grown up in the wine business in another part of the state and moved into property management when he was too arthritic to work the soil. He had a small but trendy office in a business building in the city. He liked the idea of somebody living on the land but worried about liability because of the condition of the house. The property guy agreed to let them live there and make whatever repairs to the house they would pay for at a trivial rent, but made them sign a paper that tried to excuse him from anything bad that could happen. The photographer alone signed the papers because his lover's family must not know.

It was their dream of a life-space, a dream that rendered them, the pair of them, more real

than real. They did not paint the siding. They did not straighten the windows, the doorways, or the bowed up floors. Instead of painting, the house the photographer began to take pictures of the weathered wood in all angles of light and other fashions, as it was in foggy days or rainy days or employing the infrared spectrum. They cleaned out several rooms, connected the electricity, proliferated extension chords, spread sleeping bags for bedrooms, and brought the dishes she had inherited from her grandmother. And they invited their friends. She worked in the city at a job she found boring and humiliating; he worked in the city at a job he liked. Every day they drove to work regretfully and returned with pleasure as if returning not to reality, but to something more special. Every Friday they loaded their cars with food and wine so they would not have to leave the Small Valley until the following Monday morning. They invited their friends for wine and dancing and spending the night and waited into the future. Where better to wait for the future than in a place that seemed outside of time? Winters were rainy and sometimes snowy. Their friends helped them renew the roof and replace the broken windows, sometimes with glass and sometimes only boarding them over. But they did not buy furniture. And, while the rain fell in sheets in fall and spring, they spread sleeping bags and pillows, listened to music, danced comically on the bowed floors, played board games, and talked about how safe and away they felt. In the winter they blew fuses when they huddled by the heaters, and through the window watched old vines silhouetted against the snow like fumbled writing. A 19th-century enameled bathtub on claw feet so large they could nestle in it together filled the bathroom. They replaced the water heater and the piping but left the tile floor cracked and worn. One of their friends was a gilder and lined the tub with gold leaf as a house-warming present. The following summer the photographer cleared the only chimney.

They mowed and watered the backyard into a rough lawn and put up a volleyball net where on sunny weekend afternoons the group would leap and cry out with the speed of the game. One day the photographer leaped to strike a ball down the other side's throat and, when he came to earth on one foot, the earth broke and he slipped into emptiness to his knee. Everyone stopped, fell to their knees, and began digging at the soil, dragging up buried planks -; and so they discovered the cistern, which had lain forgotten under wooden cover since city water reached the house years before. The roof was rotting wood, but the walls and floor were concrete. It was still the days of film and paper when a photographer needed a darkroom to

work and he immediately knew the place was made for him. The gnarly lessor and the elderly owner refused to touch the project and warned him they would not be liable for injuries. With the help of their friends, he cleaned it up, put on a new roof with a ventilation fan and an entrance that gave access by wall ladder to the floor. He ran in a water line and built tanks, moved in his dryer, ran an electric line to provide both white light, and the dark red light used in developing. An eclectic heater also glowed red. He built a light-trapping closet around the ladder half way up the wall so a visitor might enter, close out the day, then open a second trap door and enter the red world.

He lived in one and three-quarters worlds. One was the world of color, filled with panoply of vivid interplay. Even in winter the starkness of the weeds and fallen fences against the snow brightened his eye like color. The black and white portrayal in his photographs was half a world, where every surface was incised with shades of death. In the cistern he had mounted four dark red bulbs, which took advantage of the eye's greater sensitivity to red light than the sensitivity of the photographic emulsions, one on each wall, so he could work briefly with film and paper open. The red world was a quarter world, immersed in a dim, ambiguous haziness where crimson looked like black.

However the light fell, the lessor's plans for the house hung motionless while time blew through the valley. Obscurely dissatisfied, his lover left him. The friends scattered and were not renewed. The photographer quit his job to concentrate on his work. Partly he concentrated on refined darkroom techniques, sitting for hours in the red world sloshing slowly morphing images. He did not carry a telephone into the cistern. People who came there had to knock on the lightproof trap door. He was glad to see them, but they had to be willing to climb up and down the covered ladder, like a small vertical hallway, and be able to do so. When the light was right he ranged the valley, but he did not take landscape pictures. He sought out signs of human departure: rusting harrows, foundations half hidden and cracked, fence posts and barbed wire returning to earth as if rooting toward an underground stream.

The photographer made a vegetable garden. He scrounged an old wine barrel from a small, deserted vineyard and punched out aeration holes for composting. He often took his meals

down into the darkroom/cistern and sometimes forgot them as he worked. One day he carried up some uneaten sandwiches and a sour pitcher of milk and was pouring them into the compost barrel when the compost barrel appeared to be filled with the milky liquid, and he realized he needed to add more garbage to solidify it. Just then he heard the sound of a car on the front yard gravel, and soon a heavy-set woman with long blonde hair dressed in informal, almost ragged earth-toned sweater and slacks came around the corner of the house towards him. He recognized her with pride and shame as someone whom he had employed to do graphic art in the past. She asked for her original drawings. He had thrown away most of his old work paper, so he was afraid he could not find them. But he had stored some of it in boxes in the cistern. When they climbed together into the cistern, he easily found them. After she left, he returned to the cistern, gathered the rest of the papers, carried them in one arm as he groped up the ladder with the other, and stuffed them into the compost barrel until the white liquid turned to mushy papier-mâché.

A few days later, he decided instead of photographing in the Valley, to climb to the ridgeline, which the sun picked out brightly each dawn above the Small Valley. He would visit his son who had recently moved to the crest with his new wife. He put on hiking boots and country clothes.

He loaded his backpack with bread, cheese, a wineskin, binoculars, and a single camera in a leather case. He wound up dirt roads and well-worn hiking trails all morning. Halfway up to the ridge he met three kids on bicycles resting beside the dirt road. One was a wiry Hispanic, maybe 15 standing beside a flashy bike. One was a plump blonde girl with a round, pink face, a little younger. She wore carefully faded and torn blue jeans and a man's white shirt. The third was a skimpy, pale, dark-haired kid with a pimply face, in tight jeans and a Joe Camel T-shirt. As he, smiling, passed them, the girl held out her hand indifferently for alms. He passed her a dollar. When he had progressed a few steps, the Hispanic caught up, walked beside him, and intimated that he could have the services of the blond girl at a reasonable price. Some bitter memory assailed him; he shook his head ruefully and continued. He stopped for lunch before reaching the ridgeline in a comfortable spot where he could look out over the valley or beyond where distant suburbia merged into the city.

After about half an hour more hiking, he came to a sign bearing in grey silhouette one and two-story buildings including a church and what appeared to be an inn. A narrow finger pointed further up the path. He remembered walking in the countryside in Europe and encountering such signs, tongueless so tourists in regions crowded with small languages would not confront oblivion. He climbed over a small rise and approached the town when someone standing by the road put his fingers to his lips and told him *sotto voce* that he must speak quietly because the old center of town had been transformed into a living memorial to a recent catastrophe. Everything, stores, dwellings, even the camera shop, was covered with fine gray ash, — six inches deep in places. The people wore black clothes and hats and were dusted with grey as well. A small concrete stage occupied the opposite, up-hill side of the town square. Circles of grey concrete benches like the seating of a Greek theater rose up the hill behind it. Local people by turns performed memorial ceremonies without sound or color on the stage.

The hiker proceeded towards the theater. A very tall man in a trench coat with wild ashy hair paced back and forth between the square and the stage making random violent gestures with his arms. The hiker stepped forward. Half involved and half isolated, he brushed against the tall, mad man. He reached to dust off his shoulder, but found all his clothes, his hands, his shoes, already thickly dusted with the ash, shook himself, and continued toward a concrete stairway, which ran up the middle of the benches. He took a seat on a bench. He was the lone sitter; all the other figures were standing or walking, making shadowy movements, each one lost in a pantomime of grief. The exceptions were members a group of Japanese tourists wearing once bright but now dust-drenched clothing, assembling themselves at the top of the seats. A fancy camera, a Konica, was left behind on a step. He spoke out aloud to call attention to the camera. Mourners sustained their movements, the tourists excepted, as if he had not spoken. It belonged to one of the tourist group. She tripped down the stairs, retrieved it, and, smiled, brushing ashes from her lips with her fingers, and thanked him. Someone else in the group commented on his honesty.

When the tourists passed below sight on the other side, the hiker climbed to the rim of the theatre, where stood a sign like the one he had seen at the entrance to the village. It was black on white with an arrow pointing down hill and the silhouette of a farmhouse. Far down the

path, he could see the tourists turning a bend and disappearing from view. He trekked after them, but never saw them again.

In half an hour, he was on a wide path with many small rocks winding down among rolling hills covered with dry grass and spotted with clumps of oaks. He caught up with the three adolescents, who were holding colloquy beside the path. A bicycle leaned untended against a fence post and they appeared to be discussing it. It was not a normal bicycle. It had a frame like a normal bicycle, but four wheels. Between the rear wheels were mounted a set of turning scythes, as if it had been built to mow lawns. The hiker approached the Hispanic leader and proposed buying the bike, which he was uncertain they owned. The Hispanic looked at him dubiously and led him aside as he had when he offered the plump blond. After some canny haggling, they settled on the same price. The hiker climbed on the bike and, since they were on a flat stretch, peddled briskly away. Soon the road ran downhill, and he began coasting. The path was worn to gravel in two ruts the width of the bicycles' wheels. Green grass and small, blue flowers bright as eyes flourished between the ruts. The blades on the rear axel sliced them down like the wind of time. He glanced back at the kids. They gathered as before, regarding him with curiosity and perhaps a little dread. He felt a rush of love for them. He thought of photographing them, but realized he had left his camera in the Ashy Village. It did not seem worth retracing his way.

A noise like the moaning of children began to emerge from the blades in the course of a steep, frightening descent. He braked at a wide, flat spot, arched his leg over the frame, and bent to examine the axel. As he was bent, two girls walked up, one about twelve, the other six or seven. He straitened, surprised to see them appear from nowhere in sparse, open country. He was wearing a narrow, black tie; the older girl darted at him, pulled it off his neck mockingly, and scampered a short distance away. She was wearing a white peasant blouse with little embroidered flowers and a khaki skirt; she had frizzy red-blond hair and a bright smirk. He climbed off the bike, ran, and caught up with her. He was trying to wrestle his tie away from her when she tossed it to the younger girl. She had straight, dark hair, snarling eyes, and was dressed in a khaki uniform like a Girl Scout that blended in with the color scheme of dry earth, dry grass, and low shrubs. He picked up a handful of dirt and put it down the loose peasant

blouse that the older girl was wearing in a childish effort to force them to return his tie. The younger girl ran away with his tie, stopped, squatted, held it between her knees, and pissed on it. He kept dumping dirt down the peasant blouse of the older girl who remained standing petulantly. He heard the crunching boots behind. An officer as forceful and composed as commonwealth in a khaki uniform and a badge was standing on the edge of the path. The biker worried that the officer would think the girls were his victims, but the canny peacekeeper had sized them up and ordered the younger girl to give back his tie. She ran over to the bike and wrung out his tie over the shaft with the scything blades, then handed it mockingly to the biker, dancing merrily backward from his reach. He examined the shaft. It was slightly cracked. The biker took toilet paper out of his back pack and was wiping the piss off when the officer asked to see it and pointed out the traces of some of grey stuff on it. He asked the biker if he thought the younger girl has poisoned it. The hiker took out his knife and shaved the grey substance off in curls that tumbled into the dust. He said, no, it must have been glue used to repair the lawnmower mechanism. He remounted the bike, but the noise was louder. The officer shook his head. The hiker abandoned the bike and continued on foot while the officer hurried the two girls away.

Now the farmhouse in the small valley, was painted white so it stood among the withered plants and broken farm equipment like something made of ice or snow. The hiker knew better than to knock on the door, and walked around the house on a path of autumn weeds. Bits of ash from his clothing fell little patches of snow. The hatch that led down to the darkroom lay supine before him like a portal to another world. The photographer had installed a latch system to keep light from leaking in. No visitor could open the top door and lower himself into the light trap unless the bottom hatch of the light trap was closed. The hiker tried the latch. It was locked, so the bottom door must be open. He got his knife out of his backpack and resourcefully dug out the wood around the screws that mounted the latch until he could disengage it. He removed his shoes and laid them on the earth by the frame. He slid through the hatch, barely opening the least slit so light would not announce him, lowered himself quietly into the light trap, and then down the remaining steps of the ladder to the floor without disturbing the photographer who, with his back to the ladder, intensely bent over an image

maturing in a tray. He was developing pictures of his lover made by her family when she was a child.

The four dark-red safe lights and the glow of a heater made the room, cluttered with objects and half finished projects, both cold and warm. The hiker drew his knife and, on soft feet with black socks, stepped toward the enchanted photographer. When he reached the spot, he raised his arm and plunged the knife into his back. The photographer pitched forward into his work with a grunt and a gurgling noise. The biker struck again and again. Blood came out of his back and out of his mouth and flowed into the tank of developer where an image struggled toward recognizability. In the red world, the blood looked black.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *First of all, from my childhood I have been a serious amateur photographer and slosed paper in tanks of chemicals when that is what you did. When I was in college decades ago my then girlfriend and I flirted with the idea of living together. It was not very serious because of dorm rules of the time and the requirement we extensively deceive our parents. But one day we wandered by chance into a lovely little sunny valley, saw a very ramshackle house, and had fantasies about renting it. In some intervening decade the house and valley came to my mind and seemed an image of different lives I might have lived, other selves I might have been. Writing fiction is partly a process being other selves. Then I had a dream pretty much like the visit to the ashy village described here. When I tried to blend that material into a story, the rest flowed. Perhaps we feel some hatred for those other selves because we feel we have failed them.*

**BIO:** *I'm a native of Berkeley with a BA from Stanford in creative writing and an MA from Columbia in contemporary literature. I worked for decades as a tech writer in Silicon Valley. A few years ago I devoted full time to fiction. I write short stories, some experimental forms, and occasionally verse, but mostly novels, four of which have been published in excerpts or serially. About 80 items of fiction and a few poems have appeared in literary and general magazines. I occasionally publish translations and photography. You can learn more about me at my website [www.wandd.com](http://www.wandd.com) and see a complete list of publications at <http://www.wandd.com/Site/Publications.html>*

# The Shroud of McCann

By Joseph Austin

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A curiously affecting draw you in from the get go spoof that morphs into something akin to a serio-comic 'Night of the Living Dead'. A bizarre revelation overtakes an otherwise sedate community that soon escalates into mob hysteria. And while there are many funny instances, we are never far away from a certain sinister undertow. The author's psychological insight, believable characters, nimble prose, and likeable voice that culls our sympathy, puts this 'entertainment' a stand above the rest. We think Danver Pitney is a wonderful creation. Quote: 'He felt that if Christ was to come to Dumont, New Jersey, it wouldn't be in the form of a mustard stain'.*

A silly food fight at the Annual Dumont Women's Auxiliary Hot Dog Picnic should have been a moment of pure innocent fun, Danver Pitney thought. What could have been more innocent? After all, his mother, Gladys Cola, was in charge of the homemade relish station, and was wearing the orange 2000 Hot Dog Picnic t-shirt which she had designed herself. On it was a smiling hot dog dancing with a bun dressed in an assortment of condiments.

Oh, it was innocent, Danver thought. Just as it had been every year since the picnic started. It was a fun day for Dumont and the town always turned out for the fresh food, the hot dogs, the music, the games. It was wonderfully small-town Americana until Regina Maywood noticed the stain on the back of Annie McCann's shirt.

Until then it had been just another Women's Auxiliary Hot Dog Picnic. But after Regina nearly fainted, it had become downright serious.

Danver sat in his living room by the window, watching the people move slowly up his street. There was no other way for them to move, he knew, because of the absurd congregation that attempted to get onto Seminole Avenue. He and his mother lived directly across from the McCann's and, on a normal day, Danver could see directly into their living room. Today, he could see nothing but heads and backs, as if one thousand people were trying to assemble the world's largest human pyramid for a world record.

A driver pulled his car up onto Danver's lawn and almost had the audacity to park it there, but Danver got up from his chair and pulled open his front door.

"Get out of here! Get off my lawn, you idiot!"

Pushing open the storm door, his arm pulled back over his shoulder he released an apple, striking the rear of the car as it pulled away. He had a bowl of them at the door just for this purpose. He had managed to nail two young men, a kid on a bicycle and a middle-aged woman who had tried to set up blankets on his lawn to be close to the McCann residence.

The Cola/Pitney lawn was not Mecca, even if Gladys was across the street at dawn each day to sit in the living room with Annie and stare and pray and wait and wait.

Ricky Akin had started the food fight with a squeeze bottle of ketchup. He squirted the arm of Joey Takuji, who retaliated with a bowl of relish over Ricky's head. From that point, as best as anyone could recollect, Margie Cotter began tossing diced onions at the two men. And then, of course, anyone hit with a stray onion soon returned fire with the only ammunition possible - pickles, mustard, more ketchup, more relish, squeeze cheese, potato salad, deviled eggs. Everyone was quickly armed - hot dog condiments sailed like grenades.

Then, someone squirted Annie McCann with yellow mustard while she had her back turned to launch an assault of marshmallows at a group of women who were running from the enemy fire. Mary Ann Alonzo said she was the one to squirt Annie. Francine Block said she had

done it. Perhaps it was both of them, or neither of them - Danver didn't care. He wished it hadn't happened. He had never seen such insanity.

People came from everywhere to see what was being called The Shroud of McCann. Others, like Gladys Cola, were calling it the Dumont Miracle. By whatever name, all of these people that came to the McCann house on Seminole Avenue saw the face of Jesus Christ in the mustard stain on the back of Annie McCann's Women's Auxiliary Hot Dog Picnic t-shirt.

What Danver Pitney saw was desperation. He saw a ridiculous need to believe in something that didn't exist.

He didn't have such needs. He felt certain that if Christ was to come to Dumont, New Jersey, it wouldn't be in the form of a mustard stain. He imagined it would be something more dramatic, more elegant. If Jesus came to celebrate the millennium, it should be in the rising smoke of the bonfire at the Homecoming Festival or in a crack in the wall or ceiling of St. Mary's Church on Washington Avenue. But as a mustard stain? If there was a Jesus, Danver thought, he could do better than mustard.

He got up and went into the kitchen to fix something to eat. Through the window he could see his backyard, and he watched as a family began to climb over the fence and drop down onto the grass.

What would make this perfectly normal looking family— a mother, father, daughter and two sons— travel from wherever they had come, climb fences (which was trespassing in Danver Pitney's book) and trample through yards? The mother carried a Playmate cooler and each child was equipped with a knapsack and a fanny pack.

“You may be in search of Christ, but in my book, you're trespassing criminals!” Danver said to himself.

He hurried out the back door and grabbed the garden hose that was coiled like a fat green snake behind his house.

"Get off my property!" He twisted the dial and squeezed the trigger to let loose a spray of cold water onto the family. They began to scream and shout, calling Danver names that most God-fearing (and Jesus seeking) people would never say. And in front of children, no less.

They darted around the side of the house and Danver gave chase. He directed the water onto them, and just when they seemed out of reach, he began to heave the spray into giant arcs so it would land farther up the side of his property, dousing them further. He watched them scoot across the front lawn toward the McCann's. The young son turned near Danver's mother's rhododendron, and gave him the finger.

"And stay away, you damn Mustard Pilgrims!!" Danver shouted.

That was it for Danver. He had to put a stop to this madness. There had to be a way to get the town to come to its senses. It was a damn stain, he thought. It was not Christ. It couldn't be Christ. He had seen it that first day, fresh in its incarnation and still a bit runny around the beard. Sure, the richest imagination could imagine Christ on the shirt, but with a squint of the eyes it could be John Lennon or that painter guy Bob Ross. Oh, Danver thought, I've got to do something.

He went up the stairs of the house and into the bathroom. He closed the door behind him and looked in the mirror. In it, he studied his reflection. He hoped to see in his face the sort of determination he needed to devise a plan to bring Dumont around, to put an end to The Shroud of McCann. This had been a habit of his since he was in high school, some fifteen or sixteen years ago. Now, at the age of 32, he still found that studying his expression led him to better understand what he was thinking. It was almost as if he couldn't quite get a hold on his own ideas

without watching what it did to his eyes, his mouth, his eyebrows, and most especially his ears, which twitched when he was in deep thought.

Nothing came right away, but he looked at himself anyway, and watched himself think. There had to be a way.

He left the bathroom after twenty minutes of intense scrutiny. He went into his mother's bedroom and looked around. She had covered her dresser with statues of Jesus and Mary (together and alone, some plaster, some plastic). These monuments to the holy mother and son were new with the arrival of the Shroud. Before that, all Gladys Cola had was a picture of her second husband, Philip Cola, now dead, and a tall, black enamel poodle from which she hung necklaces.

But now it was covered with Jesus and Mary statuettes and; Danver lifted a plastic Jesus, turned it over. Twenty-five cents was written on the bottom on a white sticker. Garage sale, Danver thought. God Almighty.

“Enough,” he grumbled. “Enough!” and he threw the statue down onto his mother’s bed.

On Gladys' bed was a plain white t-shirt with writing on it in black magic marker. "The Shroud of McCann" was crossed out and "The Dumont Miracle" was written below it. Pinned to the bottom of the shirt was a receipt from the shop that had made the hot-dog picnic shirts just a few weeks before. It read "250 shirts in yellow Biblical lettering". Danver wondered aloud what in the hell Biblical lettering looked like.

This was out of hand.

He knew the pattern of the Mustard Pilgrims. The McCanns allowed viewers into their home from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm, when they broke for lunch. Then they opened the front door again at 3:30 until 7:00. They permitted two people at a time into the living room to view the stain. Barbara, Annie's daughter, worked the front door and her son, Scotty, worked the back.

Whenever Barbara allowed two to enter, Scotty was required to escort two out. Nevertheless, the room always seemed full.

Danver had not ventured over to the house yet. He had been too disgusted with the way this had taken hold. The Catholic Church had made a royal visit three days ago, filled with the typical fanfare of a filthy rich organization. A limousine ambled up Seminole Avenue and Ford Escorts and Tempos, Hondas and Jeep Grand Cherokees cleared the way as if they were the rolling waves of the Red Sea and it was Moses himself coming to the McCanns. Four men had exited the limo, two in clerical garments and two in black suits with fedoras. Danver watched from his living room window and wondered if the Fedoras had guns strapped beneath their armpits.

The press had arrived earlier in the first week and was still stationed outside in white vans. Big-bellied cameramen wearing backward baseball caps trampled over the McCann's impatiens and tulips trying to get the best shot. A newswoman from the local channel stood on the front lawn talking into the camera. She spoke so loudly that Danver could hear her across the street and through his living room window. He had closed the windows and turned on the air conditioners to block out the din of the gathering.

At 7:00, they closed the doors. Some people left, but most did not. They remained in their lawn chairs and on their blankets and played radios and portable CD players late into the evening. Lanterns were lighted, flashlights were perpetually glowing and pizzas were delivered.

The police did too little to halt any of the traffic of the Mustard Pilgrims. They hadn't any idea how to handle such a massive crowd. Danver was sure that there had to be at least 150 people, maybe more, at any given time. This spectacle had even drawn the attention of wise vendors who sold hot dogs at the curb in honor of the venue of Christ's visit. Yellow mustard was free. Gulden's was 25 cents extra.

And unemployed, 32 year-old Danver Pitney had nothing else to do but be subjected to this Second Coming. And he would not be subjected to it any longer.

Once again, he stared at himself, but this time in the mirror above his mother's dresser. He watched his eyebrows move up and down, his eyelids spasm with the excitement of an idea. He saw his upper lip curl into a smile, dragging his lower lip with it. His ears twitched. He knew exactly what needed to be done. And he was going to do it now.

Danver moved his bulky body through the crowd of Mustard Pilgrims. Despite the heat of the August day he was wearing his long gray raincoat, belted closed around his big waist. His hair was a mess from having run his hands through it while he watched himself think. He was afraid there might be a devilish look in his eyes; he didn't want to look suspicious. Danver lowered his head and pushed through the pilgrims.

He forced himself close to the front of the line. This was hard to do. Even though these people were here to see Christ, they were far from charitable about giving up their spot in line.

Danver made his way to the front door. He pushed aside a nun dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, with a white and navy blue habit over her head. Then he knocked.

Barbara answered the door.

"Pit, you finally gave in," she said.

"Finally," he muttered.

"I knew you'd be here eventually. Your mother's here."

"Yes," Danver said. "I know."

"I was next," the nun said.

"It's two at a time," Barbara told her.

"Well, then." The nun gave Danver a look that should have speared his soul. He returned it and she stepped back, a bit afraid.

"Can I see it?" Danver asked.

"Certainly. There's a dollar tithing," Barbara told him. "For charity, of course." Only Danver knew that Charity was the name of the McCanns' cat.

Inside the house, the living room was filled with Mustard Pilgrims. Danver's mother sat on the sofa beside Annie McCann, the two of them like saints, or worse, mothers of saints.

"Danny!" Gladys called out. "I'm so glad you came over. You've got to see this up close. You've got to experience the warmth and joy emanating directly from the image! Oh! I'm so glad you came."

"I thought I should at least see what's causing all the fuss. I only got that one look at the picnic and I thought, well, maybe there's more to it now. Maybe Christ cried or spoke!" Gladys took Danver's sarcasm for genuine zeal.

"I'm so happy. Come, take my hand," she said and led her son toward where the shirt was suspended in crucifix-like fashion on the wall, adhered by Fun Tak.

Danver slowly approached the Dumont Miracle. He stared at the stain. He looked at what was meant to be the crown of thorns, the sad eyes, the beard and the mouth. He saw the long nose and the long hair. He could see what people had seen in it, but he could also see John Lennon.

The room was full of people. Women were crying, men were whispering to their wives and children. Some prayed for themselves, for others. This was certainly something, he thought. These people needed to believe in this so badly, they so needed this stain to be a true sign from heaven that the Lord was among us that they would pray to it, cry for it, love it. And of all places for Jesus to make his triumphant return? Dumont, New Jersey, of course, at a hot dog picnic. Of course.

It was enough to make Danver want to vomit.

He had to end all of this. He had to prove once and for all that there was nothing holy about this shirt. Nothing at all.

He smiled to himself. He undid the belt on his raincoat and it fell open. No one noticed him. Even Gladys had turned her attention back to the shirt, only occasionally glancing up at her son to glean the sense of awe and appreciation he must be feeling.

When she looked away, Danver reached inside his coat and withdrew a bottle of ketchup. He looked at the shirt on the wall, and pointed the bottle upward and squeezed.

Horrified gasps filled the room. Danver laughed out loud as he held the bottle low and squirted the ketchup up onto the shirt. He was sure no one could see the bottle, but he didn't really care. He knew the moment that the ketchup hit the shirt, it would be apparent what he had done. But no one could hear his laughter through the throttled sounds of gagging surprise.

He heard the hysterical sobbing throughout the room and Gladys fainted beside him, hitting him on the leg, forcing the bottle to go even higher, targeting the crown of thorns.

"He's bleeding!" Annie McCann screamed. "Christ is bleeding!"

The nun dropped to her knees and nearly collapsed in reverent prayer.

The room was turned into a mad house. A screaming, wailing, gnashing-of-teeth-speaking-in-tongues revival meeting.

Barbara came from the door and grabbed Danver by the shoulders.

"You made him bleed! You brought the Christ to life!" she said.

Danver had just enough time to slip the bottle back into the inside pocket of his raincoat before he was pulled backward into the mass of Mustard Pilgrims and hauled toward the front door.

Annie tended to the fainted Gladys, but not whole-heartedly. She couldn't pull her eyes from the bleeding Christ.

Barbara dragged Danver out onto the lawn. She had her hands around his shoulders and now Danver Pitney thought he would faint, wished he would.

"He took one look at the Christ and it began to bleed! Bleed!" she cried out and the people rose from their lawn chairs and rushed Danver and rushed the front door and soon, no one paid a titing to the cat. Everyone shoved his or her way into the McCann's living room.

Danver's mind whirled. If he wasn't being escorted through the throng of people, he might not have been able to even walk.

The local newswoman scurried over to him. She was dressed in a pale blue suit and she shoved a microphone at his face. The big-bellied cameramen surrounded him. Danver used to look at these camera men out of his window and feel a sort of kinship with them - running around as if they had no true direction with their big stomachs leading the way. But now, as they grouped around him, they terrified him, like giant monsters with long steel and glass eyes.

People pulled at his clothing, aching to touch him. Children grabbed at his legs. People hurried toward him in wheelchairs, on crutches.

Suddenly, adrenaline surged through him. He let out a scream and shrugged off Barbara McCann with too much force and sent her sailing back into the people behind him.

Then he took off running across the street as fast as he could.

The crowd followed.

He made it inside his front door and looked out the small pane of glass at the top.

They began to knock, to rap at the windows. The reporter was there, tapping with her microphone on a window.

*Oh, Danver Pitney thought, what in the hell have I done?*

Within twenty minutes, half of the crowd from the McCann's lawn had migrated across the street to Danver's lawn and he knew, as well as he knew his name, as well as he knew it was

only ketchup and not blood on Annie McCann's shirt, that the Mustard Pilgrims were never going to leave him alone. Ever.

And he wondered, as he climbed the stairs toward the bathroom to look at his face in the mirror, when the limousine would be returning to Seminole Avenue and just what the Fedoras would say to him.

"Oh, Christ," he said, staring at himself, watching his ears sit motionless at the side of his head, no good ideas hatching forth, as the pilgrims rattled the windows and doors below.

He took the bottle of ketchup out of his coat and put it on the edge of the tub like a bottle of shampoo. He sat down on the toilet seat and buried his face in his hands.

Danver could hear them outside of his house like zombies come to feed on the last surviving human. And he knew that soon his mother would rise from the floor of the McCann's living room like Lazarus and lead another brigade of Pilgrims to their threshold.

And then Gladys would stick her key into the lock like it was right into Danver's heart and they would pour into the foyer like toppling dominoes.

They'll all want a piece of me, he thought. They'll all want to touch me, to hold me, grab me. They'll stick sick and healthy babies in my arms, cry on my chest, kiss my face. And all the gimps will be right behind them, Danver thought.

He got up and opened the medicine chest so that the mirror faced the wall. He'd done enough thinking for today - he didn't trust himself with one more thought.

Then he heard it. The creak of the front door and the sound of the mass invasion, Gladys' big mouth leading the way.

"Danver!" He heard it the way he imagined Joan of Arc must have sounded screaming on the stake.

Now they all knew his name and took it up as a chant as they ascended the stairs.

"Dan-Ver!"

"Dan-Ver!"

"Dan-Ver!"

The bathroom began to close in on him. He could only smell traces of ketchup that must have hit his clothes. All his other senses had begun to fail him, but the smell of that sweet, tomato syrup began to fill his head like a nauseating reminder of what he had just done to himself.

He tried to move the mirror into place to see if he could get a grip on himself, but it was fruitless. He reached for it, but never made contact. The sound of the Pilgrims' feet marching up the stairs, of Gladys' commanding chant, turned Danver's legs to water, washing him down to the floor.

Sight went soon thereafter, and just before he was in a land of total nothingness, he attempted one final struggle to regain his brain and body, but the awful, twisting sound of the turning doorknob on the bathroom door knocked him out cold.

When he awoke, he was in his mother's bed. Mustard pilgrims surrounded him. He thought he was dead. There were flowers strewn over him. They had stripped off his raincoat and taken off his shirt, making him as comfortable as possible. When he opened his eyes, someone took his picture and it nearly blinded him. There he was, in his mother's bed, his big belly rising up for everyone to see and they were taking pictures!

"What the...!"

At that moment, Gladys stepped over to him and whispered in his ear so no one else could hear her.

"Thank you, Danny. Thank you. You don't know how big Annie's head was getting over this. Now we're the stars. Now we're the stars."

She took his hand and pressed her face against his.

Someone took another picture.

Someone began to sing "Amazing Grace." The entire crowd joined in.

Of course, he didn't know how to get out of this situation. He asked his mother for a mirror. She ran and carried one to him. A woman in a jogging suit brought a sandwich. Another woman brought fruit. A man carried a pizza and a bottle of wine. More flowers were thrown onto the bed.

"Eat something. You must be so weak."

"Drink some wine. It's good for the blood," the man said. "Blood," he repeated, and the room became silent.

"Did Jesus say something to you? Did he say anything at all?"

"Did he cry?"

"Did you feel his pain?"

"Did you see through his eyes?"

Danver sat up in the bed. He put a hand on his stomach and pushed away some roses and daisies. They were probably from his own garden, he thought. He looked at the food that surrounded him. He looked at the people that had come to worship him. He thought about what it would be like to have this for a few days.

He didn't need the mirror to know that his ears were twitching.

His ears settled and he gripped the mirror tightly. Inside, he grinned. Oh, why not let them? Why not?

Then, in a quiet voice Danver said: "In three days, I need to return to the McCann's. Then, He will speak."

The Condiment Pilgrims hushed among themselves, quietly mumbling, the group of them sounding more like static than speech and Gladys pulled the new t-shirts out from under her bed and held them up for sale.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *The inspiration for The Shroud of McCann came from a writing exercise. Danver Pitney came to life when I first wrote this story in 2001 after reading A Confederacy of Dunces by John Kennedy O'Toole while also going through a very big John Irving phase. Often, I try new things as a writer, I would try to create a character or plot that celebrated what I had read, (imitation is the greatest form of flattery, they say) and Danver and Gladys were born from reading a lot of quirky stories that also addressed real things. Over the almost twenty years this story has existed, I revisited it often; I needed to make it my own, make it funny, and hopefully bring it to life. I felt it was finally time to submit it and introduce it to the world. I don't often write comedic pieces, so I'm thrilled that this story found a home.*

**BIO:** *My name is Joseph Austin, a writer from Forest Hills, Queens, in New York City. I have been published previously in Christopher Street Magazine, The First Line, Gloom Cupboard and Newtown Literary Journal.*

# K.W.

## BY: Michael Lange

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Ornamental prose, deliberately pedantic sentence structure and dispassionate voice give this story within a dreamscape something of the spectral allure and sibylline mystery of exotic mathematics—the rarified world the narrator’s mind inhabits. The action presents itself as taking place in a suspended hyper-dimension that rises before us like an apparition. Gothic colourations refine; enigmatic characters entrance. A gorgeously written dark star of a story by an author who up until now has never been published. Quote: ‘Snaking out from among the countless jagged mountainous teeth set in circles a league in diameter was a nigh interminable length of fleshy, throbbing crimson.’ And, most beautiful of all...’I awoke. For several minutes I fancied I was drowning in a swift flowing river and when at last I came to my senses, I was twisted on the floor amidst a chaos of bedsheets.’*

I have spent the greatest part of my life asleep. From birth I have wandered in a solitary stupor. There is but one time of exception. In the summer of my eighteenth year, some unknown awakening force called me into the company of my species, and so for the early months of my nineteenth I communed affably with other humans. For a time, I even loved. But in the subsequent fall, as I entered the twentieth, I was removed to university from the town of my birth and summoned back to my wonted realm of half-formed dreams.

My life at university was, as near all my life, friendless. Rarely did I even collaborate with my fellow students. Socialization was a world away. Perhaps one hundred words a day I spoke to my roommate, and no more than that to another. My coursework was in no way helped by my isolation --

about this I had no illusions. I was and am a student of mathematics, a field in which the free exchange of ideas is essential to both individual and collective progress. But I did not choose mathematics in hopes of success. I had two reasons quite apart. First, of all the offerings before me, this inveterate misanthrope, mathematics seemed the very least human. Second, and related: in mathematics, particularly in the subfield of topology, I saw my only acknowledged hope of sublimity. The rigorous study of higher dimensions seemed to promise a knowledge indescribably beyond humanity, that so arbitrarily three-dimensional race. I was determined to pursue this bounty quite alone.

But almost no self-respecting mathematician speaks or acts in absolutes, and so even to this there was an exception. This exception had a name. She called herself Katerina Wells. I met her early in my third term at university. On the campus I attended, there is a long, wide, central footpath that runs between the majority of the classholding facilities. At various intervals along this path, there are groups of benches usually shaded by a cluster of trees. They are aimed to encourage study in the outdoor air. I preferred libraries and did not understand the university's evident preoccupation with greenery and sunlight. Such things bore in my mind no relation to the Klein bottle or Mobius strip. Hence, they were irrelevant.

So it was as if to spite me that the sun shone so brightly and the foliage so exuberantly flaunted its myriad colors on the day I first spotted that all-to-relevant figure seated on a lone pathside bench. Overwhelming in my memory of her is the color grey. It steeped her dress, informed her pallor, gazed out knowingly from unknowable eyes. Only her hair was striking, jet black. It hung long and unadorned down a back held erect. And I know not whether it was the dominant grey or the protestant black that called to me, but one of the two sank some hooked feeler into a point deep within my chest and drew me forward. It was the second, and thus far last time I have felt such a thing.

With no sensation of choosing, I strode to the bench and sat beside the girl. I did not address her. She turned slowly toward me with a faintest smile and introduced herself by the elusive name that has ever since echoed in my memory.

She was a student of literature -- a thing in which I have an amateur interest. But on hearing my own field of study, she professed herself a hobbyist mathematician as well. Thence the mysteries of

Pythagoras and Hilbert occupied near all our conversation. Her familiarity with higher mathematics, a thing little studied beyond the classrooms and offices such as I haunted, astounded me. From the start it was evident that in many regards she surpassed me, who regarded himself boastlessly as a talented mathematician among his colleagues. She, with those ancient grey eyes, had peered further into the substructure of space and shape than any I had yet known.

Since that meeting, we convened daily at the same bench, she never moving from that seat in which I first saw her. I always departed first and so never saw her rise.

As our acquaintanceship drew on, patterns in our dialogue emerged. We almost never spoke of ourselves -- only of our mathematical ideas and discoveries. In this, she -- supposedly the amateur -- came to dominate, leaving me in rapture to listen as she led the way into ever obscurer depths. I grew to suspect that I was audience to an entirely original genius, one whose insights were novel to me not for my lack of education but for their total concealment from any mind yet to explore in Euclid's wake.

Her technical skill was roughly on par with mine -- her wonder lay in an uncanny intuition, an almost experiential understanding of things which no human may experience. Her insights, she said, came to her in dreams. In these she wandered scapes possessed not only of length, breadth, and depth, but of a fourth and rarely even a fifth spatial quality which it is impossible to describe or recall in waking. Mathematics, she said, was the only language capable of expressing the merest fragment of her nocturnal travels.

When we strayed from true theory into more speculative grounds, a favorite notion of hers was that time is, to some perspective, a fourth spatial dimension. Our perception of it as something fundamentally other than the first three is no more than a mere biological accident, the chance evolution of our perceptual faculties. It was abstractly possible, to her mind, that some intelligent being might perceive our "time" as merely another aspect of space, and that some higher fifth dimension, wholly unknown to humankind, would function as this being's "time."

For such insights and more, I came to revere this grey woman as something semi-divine. In favor of her I began to skip classes which could not afford me such precious instruction. It was slightly past the middle of the semester that Katerina began to appear in my dreams. Always it was the same scene. In a

river so wide that the shores vanished in fog we swam, she ever ahead of me, and I striving not to lose sight of her. From time to time would she look back and beckon me onward, but never did she slow. We set course perpendicular to the current, and while I could not see what awaited us on the shore, I was convinced beyond doubt that it was something other, something *beyond human*.

I never spoke of this dream which grew more vivid with each passing night -- my swimming more panicked, my limbs more spent, the girl further and further away toward shore. Growing all the while was a sense of dread for what awaited at the river's end. Over what apocalyptic fall might I plunge I knew not, but fear drove me the more desperately shoreward.

Even as her presence in my dreams grew stronger, she came to consume my waking existence. As semester end approached, I neglected exam preparations the more fully to indulge my obsession. She could be found at the bench at almost any time of day and never tired of conversing. I was too much in awe at her uncanny stamina to question it.

But even to her loquacity there was an exception. It came on what would be my last day with her. When I sat down alongside, I waited in vain for her to start the dialogue, as was her custom. After several minutes of silence, I assayed to initiate. But though she was attentive, I earned no further response than a gentle nod to the ideas which I knew must now seem mundane. Finally, I quit, and we spent I know not how long in silence, a thing to which we were not unaccustomed; only its duration was novel.

At last she spoke the words that still haunt my nightmares:

“You’re in love with me, aren’t you?”

Astonished is insufficient a word. I doubted her very reality. But as I stared shamefaced at the ground, gaze forced upon what I could not truthfully deny, I felt her lukewarm hand come to rest atop mine. And so we sat for a short eternity, in which I awoke again and experienced such a torrent of variegated emotion as I never expected a lifetime to encompass.

She rose, and with an effort made possible only by sheer compulsion, I lifted my eyes and met hers. A sad smile she gave me. To this day, when I hear my fellow creatures speak the word “beauty,” it is this image alone which comes to mind.

Then she turned and left, and I knew without reason that she would never reappear.

That night, my dream became a nightmare. I watched from the furthest distance as Katerina, a merest speck, pulled herself from the water and stood erect on what must be the shore. I fancied I saw her wave to me at the last, but my attention was too quickly drawn to what lay downstream. Headlong, powerless I rushed toward a roaring cataract. Before I could gather the wind to scream, I was plummeting through endless space, limbs thrashing in and out of the shower about me. So I fell for many minutes before I dared open my eyes and look down. I can only wish I had not.

Far, far beneath me gaped such a horror as the waking mind cannot fathom. In failing words I might call it the maw, vaster than any moon crater, of some unnamable monstrosity, whose unholy, impossible bulk stretched infinitely downward into the abyss below. Snaking out from among countless jagged, mountainous teeth set in circles a league in diameter was a nigh interminable length of fleshy, throbbing crimson. To glimpse its end, I must crane my neck upward as toward the peak of a distant mountain. And there, suspended in space miles away, I beheld the tips of that bifurcated tongue, each bearing a single gargantuan eye, which stared like twin omnivident moons through my infinitesimal being.

I shut my eyes in terror. The roar of the fall began gradually to be supplanted by a sourceless, all-pervading ringing. It grew and grew beyond bound, until it seemed to consume all my very existence. Then, at the moment when my last, cornered fragment of consciousness knew without reason that it was passing through that horrid orifice -- the ring dropped to silence. I awoke. For several moments I fancied I was drowning in a swift-flowing river, and when at last I came to my senses, I was twisted on the floor amidst a chaos of bedsheets.

I visited the bench many times in subsequent days, though I believed not in the least that I would find her. Still my search expanded. I inquired of every literature professor who would hear me as to the status, location, even the mere existence of one Katerina Wells. Those who did not turn me away

informed me that they knew of no such person at all. And though I tried certain administrative persons at the university, they refused to answer me for reasons of “privacy.”

But with my senses tuned anew to the world around me, grasping for any sign of my lost muse, I went not unrewarded. My straining ear picked up the mutterings of fellow students; my eye caught their furtive glances in my direction. A rumor I pieced together: once, but no longer, a strange young man had sat on the bench midway down campus’ main avenue and conducted lively discourse with thin air.

I feared the implications not. The notion that I might occupy a starkly different reality from the rest of humanity was neither unfamiliar nor unpleasing. In part I relished the notion that all Katerina’s wisdom had been in fact my own, merely projected onto a construction of my imagination. But there remained in me a deep sense that she had been real, so I vacillated for years between the possibilities.

My dreams, she never quite left. I still swim that river at night. Her form is gone from the vision, but her voice remains, ever repeating the last words she spoke to me. Always they seem sinister -- describing my vain, twisted hope of reaching the impossible shore, or explaining the very reason why I never shall.

Thus has been my only contact with her, until this day. Until this day, I have half doubted the existence of that woman, but no more. Just hours ago, I paid a visit to that campus of many years since. I walked down the central avenue, and the bench was still there. As I stood before it in a senseless reverie, a careless biker came speeding down the path. Some animal instinct drew my head about at the last second, but too late-- I glimpsed only the grey blur of the bike and a helmetlessly flying trail of black hair, then she collided with me and sent us both hurtling into and over the bench, toppling it as we went. Before I fully gathered my senses, I heard her hastily right the bike, mount it, and depart without so much as an apology. Still too stunned to be irritated, I rose and stared blankly at the bench as a low ache spread over my right side, where she had hit me. I stepped around to the other side and made to right it. As I knelt and reached to grasp, something on its underside caught my eye. There, carefully graven in the wood under her side of the bench, were two initials I knew all too well.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *Surprise, surprise -- the narrator is inspired by yours truly. I exaggerated the social isolation a fair bit, but the sensation of having slept through most of my life is an honest one. Katerina Wells is a character, more of an image really, that I’ve had floating around*

*in my head for a while. I don't remember exactly where she originated, but months ago I started and discarded several attempts at a story about meeting a quiet, grey girl at the back of my topology class (topology being my favorite branch of mathematics). I realized I finally had enough to write a story about her when a few more elements clicked: the idea of making her a (possible) hallucination came from a recent fascination with psychosis and other blurrings of the lines between perception and reality. The dialogue about higher dimensions was done in imitation of the esoteric journeyings of certain Lovecraft characters. The dream component is there because dream scenes are my favorite thing to write (so liberating!), and the nightmare creature was born from some idle, Lovecraft-inspired doodlings (I've been reading a lot of Lovecraft lately). I think whatever I wrote about Katerina Wells was always supposed to be about a life-changing encounter with an unusual individual and the communion of two habitually isolated minds. But I tried to give it a dark twist, so that even the narrator's lone social pursuit is perverted by his desire to transcend humanity. There are a lot of authors I love, but to name a few that I feel have influenced me: Lovecraft, Vonnegut, Bradbury, Melville, and Faulkner.*

**BIO:** *Michael Lange is an undergraduate student in Mathematics and Classical Languages at the University of Texas at Austin. A passionate reader of fiction as well, he is now making his first attempts at creative writing. He blogs (rather inconsistently) at [glossai.home.blog](http://glossai.home.blog)*



**Pic: Isabel G. de Diego**

# GUERRILLA PROSE: 7 HYBRID SHORTS

By Daniel de Culla

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *These seven wildly original hybrids that combine prose, poetry and graphics, have the power and rowdy punch of graffiti at its most profane. By turns confrontational, brash, offensive, tender and beautiful, they challenge the reader with every line. This poet bird screams his celebration of life from a high branch and words burst into song-fires that grab us by the imagination and carry us away. The translation from the Spanish by the author is rough and uncut but we think cleaning it up would impinge rather than enhance the noble scruff of a voice authentically raw and mellifluous. Illustrations by the author. Spacing is the author's own. Sexually Explicit Graphics. Reader discretion.*

## CAPTIVE VENUS

Bunny "Venus" sleeps  
Mine's daughter Elizabeth  
Born of the primordial egg  
In her Olympic cage  
And we have to be joyful  
All the day  
Because, when She wakes up  
We will take her in our arms  
Feeling her in our chest  
Lively and throbbing.  
Her running around the house  
From the dining room to the kitchen  
Throws us to life

**Turning the stay  
In a beautiful garden.  
Now we are in The banquet  
Like the Platon's  
And the six that are here  
We are saying:  
-What a beautiful bunny  
How soft is her white hair!  
She has black ears  
Like those of Lucas Cranach  
That are propellers that blow  
To the wind of her passing.  
-Of what color is  
Elizabeth's white bunny?  
It is the most widespread question  
What does father and mother  
To kid growing up  
Between mischieves and games  
When he comes to see her.  
She combs her hair alone  
Her eyes are two half moons  
That light the dark night  
Of the dreamedrabbitt Cupid  
Coming, in dreams  
With a carnal torch  
That inflames the senses  
And giving birth to Love**

**In hearts  
Reciting Petrarca  
On his road  
Garcilaso de la Vega as well  
Galeotto del Carretto  
Juan de Mal Lara  
Juan de Arguijo  
Giambatista Marino  
José de Valdivielso  
Calderón de la Barca  
La Fontaine and Marivaux  
And Me too.**



**Pic: Isabel G. de Diego**

**THREE'S**



**Graffiti In Burgos. Pic: de Culla**

## **SIGNS OF LIFE**

**In one of the towns, Güete, in the province of Cuenca, where, due to family circumstances, I had to live, in a house in the Main Square where the passenger bus stopped, a man lived, a widower of a beautiful woman who died of cancer in the breasts, with green distemper, "of spear and pack-saddle" as he himself said, that, when outsiders came to the town, to welcome them, he put his ass in pomp on the window sill, and, as a sign of thanks for the visit, with attention and joy, he threw impressive stones, which bounced in the bells of the parish church.**

**The strangers, random, once they had passed in front of the window, turned to him and said:**

**-Good profit you do those pieces.**

**And he answered them:**

**-Puffs are brothers and sisters; pine nuts, or snails, or cantharids.**

**-Daniel de Culla**



**Pic: Isa G. de Diego**

## **THE DREAM**

**The she bunny sleeps happily, keeping SpongeBob outside the cage as watchman.**

**She dreams the words of the fox, unable to reach the grapes:**

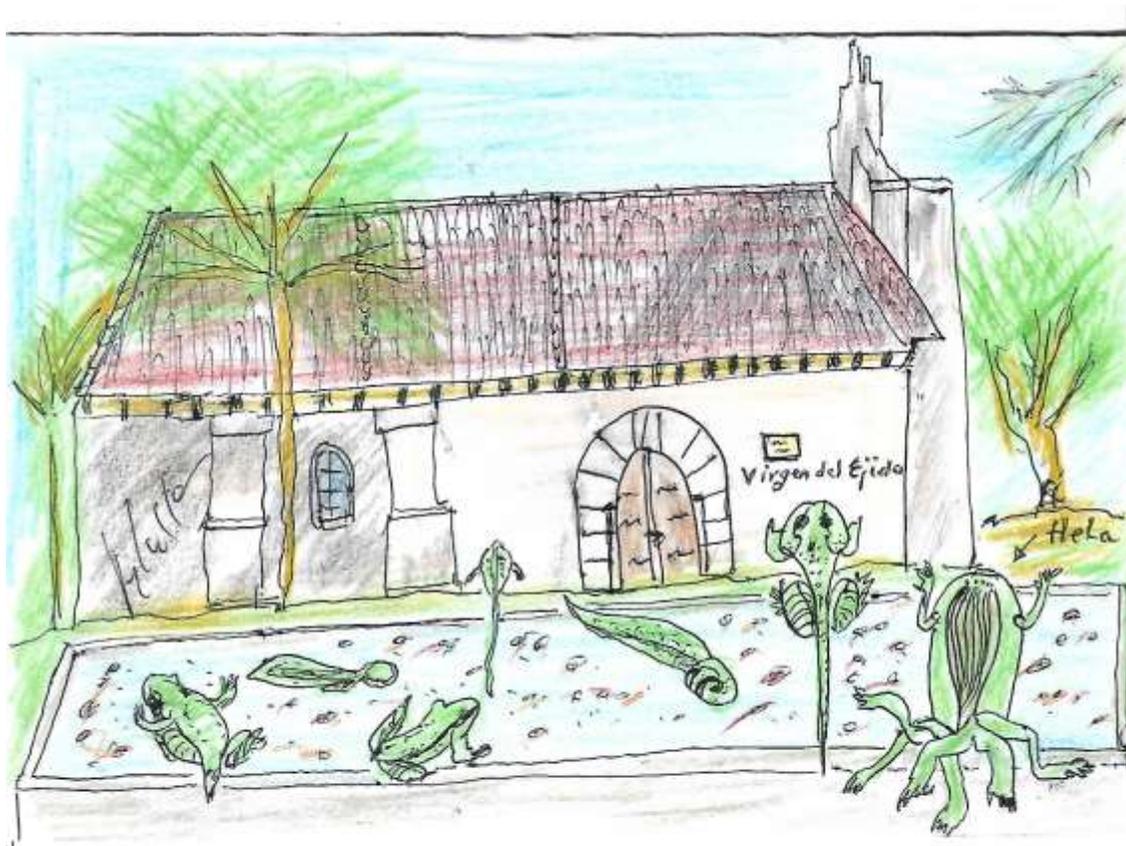
**-Acid are, and besides, I don't feel like.**

**-Daniel de Cullan Isabel G. de Diego**

## **TRUMPET NURSE FLOWERS**

**Now the bumblebee that has this flowering bush of orange pink chalices will be happy to be able to free and have sex, without having to climb like the pigeon on the dove grabbed by the legs with its beak.**

**-Daniel de Culla**



**THE FROG THAT CREATED HAIRS**  
**Gods shaken by an inextinguishable laugh**  
**An Homeric laugh as Homer sang**

**In the song I of his Iliad  
Made my frog Hela stop talking  
From "Here she is"  
That I had left at the waterhole  
That there is  
At the foot of the Moradillo de Roa' hermitage  
From Burgos  
Dedicated to the Virgin of Ejido.  
I had brought it, the frog  
From the "Puddle of the Frogs"  
At the road junction that goes to Fuentenebro  
Badly mounted on a winged donkey  
Endowed with a golden tail  
Thinking that a goddess lived in it  
The one I would try to force, later  
Although unsuccessful  
At the foot of the trough  
Experiencing a violent desire  
Spiller of my sperm on earth.  
From this sperm,  
On both sides of the air  
Drops fell on Hela's body  
That made her hairs born  
Without mediating loving union.  
One day, furious, I grabbed her leg  
Throwing it against the trough stone  
Being half dead.**

I kissed her later, skinned her  
And I put it to fry wrapped in flour  
Eating it with real pleasure  
Knowing that I was going down  
To Olympus from my guts  
From where I still hear it croaking  
As the young people  
Who have come down listen  
To feel my sumptuous weapon  
Of adulterous loves  
My zoology, its object and my parts.  
-Daniel de Culla

### **RODE INTO THE MOUNTAINS**

In the middle of Spain  
Yin Yang in a Journey in Spring  
The sun with its tide home going  
Over ground with seed and hands.  
This is a place where we must stop:  
Ears to earth under frosty  
Rotating nebulae, seeing  
Old women, Young girls  
Babies crying and a few men.  
All is unintelligible inside the ground  
That yearn for eyes a heart in the center  
Aflame with smoke and desire.  
Clouds, clouds, clouds

**Hazes of the eternal  
And ephemeral beyond  
Over imposible but almost feasible  
Zigzag up never abandoned cliffs  
Where the rivers began  
Roading toward blank areas of stark madness  
Suddenly realizing its freedom.**

**-Daniel de Culla**

**- Oh, my prick hulls! He said. Although he liked to rub it more than take it to the lining of a vagina. It pleased him as much or more to see the pieces of white of his scattered eggs, than the fragments of artillery when a grenade exploded at the Shooting Range between Madrid and Guadalajara, where he saw his captains and generals as soliped animals, as they came and went. mounted on horseback.**

**Agile or cheerful, he has helmets to the jineta. His eggs are rolled like oak bark in the second shell of the cork oak, dreaming with Casilda, daughter of a Moorish king of Toledo who passed ill to Castile and converted to Christianity contemplating a small Visigoth phalometer of light construction, brought, and blessed, by a friar who came from the Crabs' Island; Equatorial Atlantic Island, to the Orinoco embouchure on the coast of Caracas.**

**-Daniel de Culla**



**RAGECRACKER BENCHCRACKER BUSYBODY**

**He is. Look: He says that he has, in his body as in his soul, an Emperor fish in its own hollow metal exile with a handle and a piece of brass loose inside to make it sound when rattled like a rattlesnake.**

**He is a person who is enraged every moment without sufficient reason. Ragecracker like someone who crushes his price. Person of little brain and a lot of sex that dazzles with vain hopes.**

**He was "crushed" in the Seminary and, later, in the Army, without becoming "tiger sucker": toilet fist; but of matins and toilet yes, as a bud of the acorn.**

**"She red cracker" he called his sperm when he was ejaculating, because, both in the Seminary and in the Army, he had been taught to love and hate, at the same time, the red women, whom he called "Crabs to Love" like the of the German Gestapo will did with the beautiful She Jews.**

**Rough, rude, making noise with his teeth he masturbated like a pirate winding the silk of his worm, and weaving it like a rattlesnake or cascades, throwing the grape cascades away from the place.**

**When he masturbated, he sang:**

**"The Canime stuffs his prick**

**In the hole that is made**

**To the wine vats**

**Keeping his face**

**Goofy**

**After cumming**

**How it happened to the royal troop**

**Expired by Bolívar**

**In the famous battle of Carabobo**

**In Venezuela"**

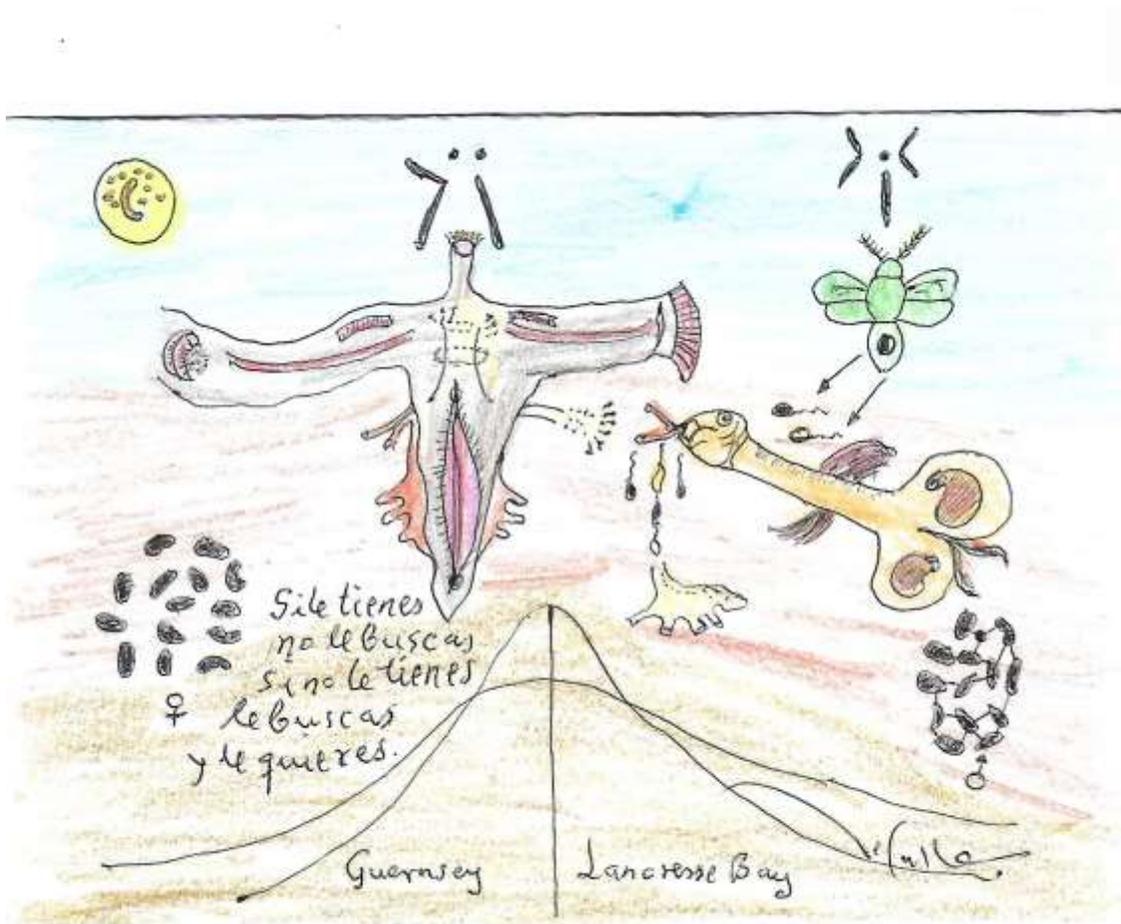
**It hurt to see his prick break into pieces like clay pot. These pieces, usually, "concave", as he said.**

**- Oh, my prick hulls! He said. Although he liked to rub it more than take it to the lining of a vagina. It pleased him as much or more to see the pieces of**

white of his scattered eggs, than the fragments of artillery when a grenade exploded at the Shooting Range between Madrid and Guadalajara, where he saw his captains and generals as soliped animals, as they came and went. mounted on horseback.

Agile or cheerful, he has helmets to the jineta. His eggs are rolled like oak bark in the second shell of the cork oak, dreaming with Casilda, daughter of a Moorish king of Toledo who passed ill to Castile and converted to Christianity contemplating a small Visigoth phalometer of light construction, brought, and blessed, by a friar who came from the Crabs' Island; Equatorial Atlantic Island, to the Orinoco embouchure on the coast of Caracas.

-Daniel de Culla



**OPEN YOU'RELF SEX-LOVE**

**It is in the Norman Guernsey**

**One of the Channel Islands:  
I'm walking Saint Peter Port  
When i made sense  
In a beautiful Irish girl  
To whom I said, in Spanish:  
-Gloriosa ¿me dejarás  
Gozar de esa tu estrella  
Que vino a dar fruto  
En esta nuestra Tierra ?  
-Blessed, will You let me  
Enjoy of your hairy Star  
That came to bear fruit  
In it our Earth?  
She answered in English:  
-Dear, put your Horn  
In my lovely Cunt  
So many times as do you want.  
Against a rough stone  
Next to a German bunker  
In Lancrese Bay, Guernsey  
Very close to the Sea  
I saw her Ace of Gold, or Ass  
Like an immense god  
Of which there are many more  
Not just one  
As She do knows.  
Right in the center of her thighs**

**I was going to repeat  
The Passion of Love  
With his Life-Blood  
Like the pious mystics do.  
When i went to kiss it  
And said to Her, ordering:  
-;Open Yourself Sex-Love;  
Three leafy hairs  
Crossed the gums  
Over my sparkling lips.  
As Victor Hugo, the Great  
Here, vilely banished  
I exclaimed very upset:  
-My kind sweetheart  
there can't be in the World  
More God than your Pussy.  
Answering she to me:  
-My Lover, don't you see?  
We are the potato peel pie  
Of Guernsey and its  
Literary Society:  
The movie, the film  
“The Guernsey Literary  
And Potato Peel Pie Society”  
Historical drama movie  
About the novel written by  
Mary Ann Shaffer.**

**After softening her with kisses**

**Bending his back**

**And getting on her knees**

**Looking for Jersey**

**So happy I said to her:**

**-Sweetheart, now I will**

**Fall in love with You**

**Until to arrive at**

**Your divine temples.**

**When my orgasm**

**Felt on her Mount of Venus**

**She woke up asleep**

**Crying which single**

**Just lost his singleness**

**Cleaning with silk scarf**

**That beautiful face**

**With vertical smile**

**As from a sinner Virgin.**

**-Daniel de Culla**

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Part of a citing from RALM (Journal of Art, Literature and Music) to whose editorial team I belong: an indefatigable chronicler, a wood-thirsty poet, and a modern, uncompromising plastic artist, Daniel de Culla is one the oldest members of RALM. Satirist, humorist, fabulist...his tentacles explore the space of the Web to leave the trace of a Spanish worthy of the best wanderers.*

*I make clear what inspires me, my intentions and style as a freelance poet, writer and illustrator devout of The Magnum Opiate of Malaclypse the Younger, Principia Discordia, Joyce's Ulysses, H. P. Lovecraft's Necronomicon, Zen Without Zen Master by Camden Benares and the wonderful and great Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Miller's Tale'.*

**BIO:** *Daniel de Culla is a writer, poet and photographer. He's a member of the Spanish Writers Association, Earthly Writers International Caucus, Poets of the World, (IA) International Authors, Surrealism Art, Friends of the Blake Society, and others. Director of Gallo Tricolor Review and the Robespierre Review. He has participated in many Festivals of Poetry and Theater in Madrid, Burgos, Berlin, Minden, Hanover and Geneva. He has additionally, been*

*exhibited in many galleries from Madrid, Burgos, London and Amsterdam. He divides his time between North Hollywood, Madrid and Burgos. His email is [gallotricolor@yahoo.com](mailto:gallotricolor@yahoo.com)*

# REAL *by Stephen Roth*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We think this cross-generational fairy tale is pure magic. We don't know how he did it but there is a freshness and unspoiled innocence here that plays upon our emotions with child-like guile. In the simplest language Roth renders a magic world that is utterly believable and we happily find ourselves bewitched by the illusion. Spoiler: at the end, a couple of us even had tears in our eyes. Awww. Quote: "Will you buy me some cigarettes?" I sighed. "I've told you, you can't smoke. You're a beloved children's book character. It just wouldn't be right. Besides, how would you hold it? You're imaginary, remember." Five stars.*

I'd like to introduce you to a very special friend of mine, Gilford Monkey-Butt. Yes, for those wondering, that is his real name. What kind of mother would bestow upon a child such a horrifically awful name? The six year old kind that isn't actually a mother at all. Oh, and Gilford is no child, either.

Gilford is... well, there's no other way to say it, a nearly six foot tall, five hundred pound, talking gorilla. How are such things possible you may be asking? Simple. Anything is possible in the mind of a child. I created Gilford when I was six years old and he's never left my side, though I often wish he had. How old am I now? Old enough not to have an imaginary talking

gorilla for a best friend. Old enough that I have to hide my best friend from my own children.

For the record I realize now that gorillas aren't actually monkeys but rather apes. I know now that the name makes little sense, but come on, I was six. Six year olds don't know the difference between apes and monkeys, or at least this six year old didn't. You can't exactly change an imaginary gorilla's name without him getting angry. You wouldn't want to see Gilford angry, he is a gorilla after all.

I know that it's strange for a grown man to have an imaginary friend, especially one that's a talking gorilla. Gilford just won't go away. I've tried leaving him at the zoo with the rest of his kind to no avail. He looks at the normal gorillas behind the glass in the manmade habitat, then looks at me with contempt.

"Is this how you see me, Dave? Is this what I am to you? The dude with the silver back won't even talk to me. What am I supposed to do with that?" Gilford said, tapping the glass.

"Don't tap the glass, they hate that."

Gilford raised an eyebrow. "How would you know, Dave? You've spent your whole life with a gorilla and suddenly you're an expert?"

"Does this mean that you're not staying?" I said, holding my breath.

"How about you stay with Hank the silent alpha male? Besides, I doubt he'd get my Johnny Carson impression."

"Gilford, I don't even get your Johnny impression and I've known you for thirty years."

Gilford took mock offense. "Are you saying it isn't good, Dave?"

"Of course it's good," I said, with my hands raised. Pissing off a five hundred pound imaginary gorilla was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Come on, Gilford, let's go home."

"Will you buy me some cigarettes?"

I sighed. "I've told you, you can't smoke. You're a beloved children's book character. It just wouldn't be right. Besides, how would you hold it? You're imaginary, remember?"

"So what you're saying is that all you have to do is imagine me with a cigarette? Then, boom! I'm a smoking gorilla."

"I suppose it works like that, yeah."

"Do it."

"I'm leaving."

Gilford was right behind me upon exiting the gorilla sanctuary.

So what do you do when you're an adult with an imaginary talking gorilla for a best friend? Turn him into a beloved children's book character of course. Gilford Monkey-Butt is the star of four best-selling picture books for kids. In the books he goes by the name Gilford Monkey-Bottom, because, you know, parents. The lovable Gilford has gone rollerblading and swimming in the ocean. A visit to the zoo to see other gorillas is the next planned adventure for the literary version of my friend.

The Gilford that appears in the picture books is a whole lot more likeable than the gorilla that I share my life with now. The Gilford that appears in the books is much like the Gilford that was my friend at the age of six. He's naïve and a bit clumsy, asking lots of questions while also suffering some comical mishaps. Unfortunately, the real Gilford grew out of that stage quite some time ago. The gorilla I share my life with now is sarcastic with a sense of humor that isn't suitable for children. The fame and fortune of being the basis for a beloved children's book character has gone straight to his head. Sharing your life with a five hundred pound gorilla with an ego of equal mass isn't fun.

Life with Gilford hasn't been easy over the years, but I've done what I can to make my friend happy. The trouble now is he

wants something that I cannot possibly give him. Gilford has always been a contributor to the antics of his literary persona. The children's books are more of a collaboration between two friends than a single writer. With the books growing popularity my friend would like his contributions to be known publically.

We've talked about this at length with Gilford giving little ground. I've explained that since Gilford is an imaginary gorilla he cannot have literary credit for the work that he has done. Furthermore, I've explained that since he is a product of my woefully demented imagination I, therefore, receive his credit as well. As you can imagine this didn't go over very well with Gilford. This led to the biggest argument that I have ever had with my best friend of thirty years. The yelling and screaming coming from my office, where I was supposed to be alone, caused my wife to poke her head in the room. Sometimes I think she doubts my sanity. As do I.

During that argument with my imaginary friend a very real point was made by Gilford. He has long grown tired of living in someone else's shadow. He wishes to be his own person, in a matter of speaking of course, since he is, in fact, a gorilla. The thoughts that he has are uniquely his and his alone he points out. Without him I wouldn't have the career, house, car, money, wife and children that I have. These things are mine, not his. Long has my friend kept his desires to have such things silent.

"Gilford, you're not even real," I said, throwing up my hands.

"No, I'm not, Dave. I feel shackled to your very existence because you are my creator. Without you I don't exist. That's why I followed you from the zoo. My heart yearns for the freedom that only your kind possess," Gilford said in his deep voice.

"What are you saying to me?"

"I have grown weary of this imaginary life that you have bestowed upon me, Dave. I want to be real."

Words caught in my throat for a moment. "I don't know how to do that, Gilford."

"Neither do I, Dave, neither do I," Gilford said with a shake of his massive head.

Gilford then did something that he hadn't done since joining my side at the age of six. He disappeared.

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Once Gilford was gone I realized just how much I loved that old gorilla. I expected him to come back once he had some time to think. We hadn't spent a day apart since I dreamed him up at the age of six. It was like I didn't know what to do with myself without him. The longer he stayed gone the worse it got. I had

wished him gone for so long that I never realized how boring my life would be without him.

I found myself sitting at my desk staring at a blank computer screen. The blank screen was all I had seen in the weeks since Gilford flew the coop. I was supposed to be working on the latest adventures of Gilford Monkey-Bottom. However, without my faithful writing companion I hadn't been able to write a single usable word. There was no other way to say it, without my best friend I was blocked.

Months passed without any sign of Gilford Monkey-Butt. Rather demoralized by the prospect of never seeing my best friend again, I eventually found the words. My writing wasn't the same without the gorilla by my side. The result in the finished manuscript was evident. It was by far the worst piece that I had ever written. It was barely good enough to hold the not so prestigious Gilford Monkey-Bottom name. My publishers agreed that there was something very different about this story and promptly asked why. I didn't have the heart to tell them that I had lost the inspiration for the stories when my best friend left me. I promised to rework the story. They instead theorized that I should hold a series of readings to get a feel for how the public received the piece. I reluctantly agreed to read my worst manuscript in a public forum. It would be far from my finest moment as a writer.

In a crowded downtown auditorium a sea of eyes watched as I read a children's book. The big room was silent except for the sound of my voice over the speaker. I have always hated doing publicity stunts like this. Reading a children's book to hundreds of people always made me feel like I was a kindergarten teacher with far too many students. Finding myself standing in front of a large group of people wasn't my favorite place to be either. My place is behind a keyboard, that's where I prefer to stay.

I read the last line and closed the book on the podium. I stared at the book for a moment in preparation of my least favorite portion of these events. The Q&A segment. It's not that I don't appreciate or want to hear from the fans, because I do. They're the reason I have gotten to make a living hanging out with an imaginary gorilla. I'm a writer so people expect me to be eloquent and well spoken, giving off an aura of intelligence. Well, I write children's picture books starring a talking gorilla so you can throw intelligence right out of the window. Secondly, I'm a writer not a public speaker. I'd much rather write my answer down than speak off of the top of my head. That doesn't work in front of three hundred people, however.

During these readings Gilford usually sits on the edge of the stage with his feet hanging off. While I read he listens intently just as the audience members listen. When the time comes for the Q&A portion of the evening Gilford will stand

beside me at the podium answering questions aloud as I answer them as well. Of course the audience cannot hear his answers, though because I can, I find it distracting to say the least. As I answer questions on this evening I cannot help but miss my big friend's antics. It's funny how you don't miss someone until they're gone, even if that someone is imaginary.

A rather timid looking man stands before the microphone with his hands in his pockets. His question catches me off-guard.

"What do you say to the rumors that your main character, Gilford Monkey-Bottom, is based off a childhood imaginary friend?" the man said, while jingling keys in his pockets.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. As I am turning responses to this question over in my head I notice movement at the far end of the stage. Sitting on the edge of the stage, swinging his feet is my old friend. Gilford is staring at me as he awaits my answer to the question posed.

As our eyes meet for the first time in months I realize just what must be done. I can feel the audience's unease as they watch me, waiting for my answer. They cannot see the five hundred pound gorilla sitting on the edge of the stage. If they could I know they wouldn't be gazing at me with frustration. When a large gorilla is in the room often he draws attention, at least he always has for me.

I cross the stage, emotions beginning to well up in my chest as I approach my old friend. Gilford is watching me very intently now, his legs have stopped swinging and he remains very still. Without saying a word I sit down beside him on the edge of the stage. I start to swing my feet as if I were a little kid, soon I hear a laugh from Gilford as he joins in.

When I speak I do so softly not caring whether my words reach passed the first couple of rows. These words are meant more for my lifelong friend than any audience member.

"When I was six years old I didn't really have any friends. I was a shy and awkward child even by my own admission. Tired of the loneliness that came with being the only child to parents that would soon divorce, I created a friend. An imaginary friend, if you will. But Gilford Monkey-Butt, as I have always called him, has never been imaginary to me. He's been more real to me than most of the people in my life over the years. A true friend is what he is. I wish I could say that I have treated the five-hundred pound gorilla in the same fashion, but I cannot."

I look over at Gilford for a moment. I've never known whether gorillas could cry. Now I've got my answer. With tears now in my own eyes I turn my attention back to the audience, who is listening in hushed silence.

"The book series has always been a joint venture between two minds, though only one of us has an author credit. Without

my imaginary friend of thirty years there wouldn't be a Gilford Monkey-Bottom series for children to enjoy. The book I just read is very different than the ones that preceded it. It's just not that good. Believe me, I know, I wrote it after all. This is the first of the books that Gilford didn't help write.

"For the record, yes, I know how strange it is for a grown man to admit to having an imaginary friend. Therein lies the problem, imaginary. Gilford doesn't want to be imaginary anymore. He wants to be real. Perhaps all of you can help with that."

I can feel Gilford's eyes boring into me, but I dare not look or I'll lose my nerve.

"Close your eyes. Go ahead and close them."

I waited a few moments for the audience to comply. Once I was satisfied that every eye in the crowd was closed I continued.

"I'd like to take you back to the age of six, when your imagination was teeming with life and your creativity was boundless. I have always believed that anything is possible in the mind of a child. Today I need three hundred six-year-olds to perform a miracle for Gilford.

"Your mother just set down a plate of milk and cookies on the dining room table to cheer you up. You don't have many

friends, but you'd like to have more. Tired of waiting for a real one you decide to create an imaginary friend. He'd be there when others won't. He'd listen when everyone else ignored. He'd even love you when it seemed like everyone else hated you. Why do you choose a gorilla for your best friend? Because you're six-years-old and why not?

"Remember how possible everything seemed when you were six-years-old? You could do anything, right? You just had to have imagination. Well, I need it now. Let's make Gilford real, ladies and gentlemen. Now open your eyes and see my friend for the first time."

My eyes had also been closed while I walked the audience through the imagery. I opened them and studied the crowd. A man on the front row gasped in surprise. Several people rub their eyes as if in disbelief. A murmur starts to grow throughout the audience. People are standing up and pointing to the spot on the stage to my right.

"What's going on, Dave?" Gilford said.

His first words to me in months would have brought tears to my eyes if they hadn't already been there. I turned to my best friend of thirty years with tears streaming down my face. As I gazed upon the shocked expression on the lovable gorilla's face a laugh escaped my lips.

"They see you, Gilford, they see you."

Gilford stands up slowly, watching the audience.

"Dave?"

"Gilford Monkey-Butt, you're real."

Gilford walked back and forth across the stage, watching the audience as their eyes followed him. After a few minutes the walking became dancing. I laughed as I watched my friend enjoy the moment. He finally had his wish, he was real. I turned to the crowd and watched as they enjoyed the five hundred pound gorilla just as much as I ever did.

Gilford and I spent the next few weeks rewriting the book that I had just written on my own. When it was released both of our names were on the cover.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *The idea for Real was born after reading a collection of short stories by Joe Hill called 20th Century Ghosts. A story entitled Pop Art may be the best short story I have read in a long time. A story about an inflatable boy's trek through life, which I found incredibly strange and moving at the same time. I wanted to write something in a similar vein, though struggled with ideas outside the horror genre where I am most comfortable. Frustrated, I went about my other projects and forgot about it. A few months later an idea for a story about an adult whose childhood imaginary friend never went away popped into my head. I knew I had my story. An imaginary talking gorilla, I knew I had the strange part down. When I cried while writing the end of the story I knew I had achieved the emotional elements of the story as well. My literary influences include Richard Chizmar, Jonathan Stroud and the aforementioned Joe Hill.*

**BIO:** *Stephen Roth lives in Wichita, Kansas with his wife and three daughters. His writing has appeared in Mobius and The Enchanted File Cabinet.*

# CLASS NOVEL

by *Fiona Jones*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *According to the author this story was turned down numerous times. We can't understand why. We're picky as f\*\*\* and we loved it! In fact, this lickety-split tumble rumble is just the kind of literary chicanery that yuckles our chucks. Word play playfully played with to play with us till we're all played out. The originality of the format and the many convincing voices are just two more reasons FOTD said YES when others said no. The grammar slips and misspells are intentional. So are the gender rivalry, body shaming and cartoon style violence, so leave it on the table, okay?*

## Class Novel

by Fiona M Jones

[fii.jones@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:fii.jones@yahoo.co.uk)

Once upon a time—or should that be ones a pond a time?—there were 25 primary-school children whose teacher thought it would be ever so nice to put together a class story. “Collaborative Creativity” was a big educational buzzword that year and selling dreadful things to parents for the benefit of school funds was a Parent Council priority every year. And so it came to pass (or fail).

The rules stood as follows:

1. Each child to write one chapter, with no assistance other than a computer spell-checker.
2. Names to be drawn in random order: no prior agreements between authors.
3. Each writer to compose his/her chapter consistently with previous story events, but “plot twists” allowed.
4. Everyone to pester their hapless relatives to buy the finished product at £14.99.

One by one, names were drawn and pencils were chewed. Chapters appeared, at irregular intervals, and quarrels ensued as to interpretations of Rule 3. Several members of the class accused others of bad spelling but were silenced by assurances that “Spell Check gone through it and says it was OK”. The item, to which we shall euphemistically refer as a book, was printed and distributed, and the school fund even began to call a profit.

Most of the parents were proudly delighted to call their children Real Little Authors with a Great Future, but several made the mistake of reading the book and began to complain. Either their child hadn't been given sufficient help to outdo other children's work, or other children's work was substandard and in bad taste. The general consensus was that Jade's and Greg's work should have been omitted and at least one of them punished. Ali's and Leia's parents stopped speaking to one another over the continuity issue between their children's compositions. Shelby's father

swelled with pride over his daughter's strenuous use of a thesaurus but could never find anyone to agree with him. Maddelynne-Leigh's mother and grandmother were disgusted that no special award had been given out for Best Chapter, since it was obvious to anyone that their child would have won; to omit such an award, they insisted, was just one more example of the teacher's evident dislike of their child and unwillingness to nurture her talents.

The Parent Council quickly spent the money on fake grass for the front of the school before refunds could be called for. The teacher, who was only in her second year, had a nervous breakdown, left the profession and went to teach yoga instead. And the only child who ended up writing as a career was Greg, who grew up to produce Sunday school textbooks. There's a moral in here somewhere.

## **The Four Teen Agers Adventure**

A Class Novel by ROOM 9

### Names

Alex	Ali	Ayesha
Ben	Brad	Carrie
Casey	Charlotte	Dillan
Genie	Greg	Harry
Jade	Jessica	Jian
Jonny	Kadin	Leia
Maddelynne-Leigh	Paul	Regan
Sammie	Shelby	Tilly
Ty		

14-99£ ITS A BARGING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

### **Chapter 1** ByTilly

Ones a pond a time there were four teen agers.

There were tow boys and tow girls.

The girls were cold Lilly and Milly, the boys were cold Garry and Larry.

Lilly and milly and garry and Larry were good friends, they had adventures.

Lilly had brunet hair and milly had bond hair, they were slim and nice looking, they all ways had

things done like nails and tans and had cool clothes.

Both of the boys had brown hair.

## **Chapter 2** Harry.

1 week end day the 4 pals gone for a boat ride on a lake. It was a normal boat lake. There was a stream what went in the lake one end and gone out the other. Some thing gone wrong at the out end. The swoosh gates were broke and there boat went SWOOSH! Throe the open bit and under a road bridge and in to a big river and over a water fall and a round a lot of bends and things and out to sea. And they ware screaming like terror dactyls the hole time. So they were out at sea. They might of drowned.

## **Chapter 3** by Shelby.

“This is an adventure” They remarked. “we are frightened” They admitted. The small rowing boat rocked a bout in the large waves and it felt as if it might tip right over.

“What shall we do? They queried. It was slowly beginning to get dark. “It is getting dark” They exclaimed.

They tried hardly to row but it become dark and they were lost. “We are lost at sea” They regretted. “We could drown” They added. “This is terrible” They grieved.

The four friends shouted loudly and yelled force fully but there was no one in ear shop.

“We are cold and tired” They complained. “We must huddle to gether and try to keep warm” They decided. So they did.

## **Chapter 4.** By REGAN.

This chapter is a story poem.  
We wonder if they will ever get home.  
They were out in a boat.  
That might not float.  
Lilly and Milly.  
Were being silly.  
Fussing and crying.  
And they said they was dying.  
The boys tried very hard to row.  
But the boat would not go.  
And all of that night.  
Was a really horrible fright.

With nothing in sight.  
For the whole night.  
It might be a very sad end.  
For the group of 4 friends.

## **Chapter 5** by Jessica

Lilly and Milly were sensible girls. They were mature and thought full. They would of helped with the rowing, if the boys would of let them have the ores. Boys aren't all ways stronger than girls. Lilly was taller than the boys even not in heals, and Milly was the same height as the boys.

Milly did cry, but Lilly put her arm round her and she was brave. In the morning it got light and Lilly saw something. It was a dessert island. The boat made it to the dessert island and they all got out on the beach.

The boys found a coca nut and thought it was a ball and they were just going to play foot ball all day if the girls didn't stop them. So they stopped them and they all made a shelter. No body had a phone (any way a dry phone) so they might be stranded for a long time because they could not signal. Lilly made a fire by rubbing sticks together and the boys finely said thank you. Milly was all ready nice to Lilly.

Then they got sticks and they found some worms and Lilly pulled some threads out her jumper and they made fishing rods with strings on and tied worms on to the strings and got fish for breakfast. Lilly didn't like killing fish but it was survival, and fish don't have the same nevers system with pane. On the island there were coca nuts and edible berry too. All four of the teen agers were good at gathering food and they all worked together and did their bit nicely.

## **Chapter 6** By brad.

There was scorpions on the island and the scorpions lived on a recked ship, if you went near the reck you'd get stang. The scorpions wanted to sting the people. They wanted the island to there self. If a scorpion stung you you'd die of poison. Larry and garry wanted to explore the reck and one of them nearly got stint. They do it with there tales.

## **Chapter 7** by sammie

milly is a good girl but I thing she cries in the nigh wen she mist her mum and her TV and her stuff. In the day time it is nice on the beech but I dot lick it at night. The others lathed at milly if they no she cried and they mit call her fat. But she isn't to fat people shod be nice. If they are nice to milly she bought home lots of buries and coca nuts. If they art nice milly wont.

## **Chapter 8** Ben.

The boys and girls lived on the island a long time with no groan ups and they got used to it. They never did they're teeth tho. But they did not have any sugar. So they're teeth wert bad.

Their was a totally magic way to get on the reck and explore. If you whistle a hi note with bits of grass in your thumbs all the scorpions all run a way and hide. So garry larry lilly and milly all explored the reck and it was total magic. It was a pirate reck and there ware swords and cut leses and gold and totally amazing old days stuff.

They looked for things to signal with. So that they wood get rescue. "You can signal with a canon said Garry. "Magic said larry. And they found gun powder and made it explode in the canon and they they weight for rescue.

## **Chapter 9** By Ayesha.

This is not the end of the story, lot's of us have not had a go. When Lily saw what the boy's were doing she come and Milly to help. They used up all the gun-powder, shore it made big explosion's but do you realize how dessert there island is. No big ship's come any-where near. May-be there was a thunder-storm happening near-by at the same sort of time or an earth-quake so no-body wood now. Any-way no-body new. But they court plenty and plenty of fish every day so they didn't starve, they just lost a bit of wait, wich made Milly more healthier and she did not cry so much. And they washed them-selves in the sea and you can split up the end of a twig into a thing you use like a tooth-brush. They dug a deep hole for a toilet and they used leaf's for toilet-paper wich is not rude if its survival. And they found blanket's and stuff in the pirate ship so they had quiet nice bed's. So it was not a bad life. Id live there and not have school.

## **Chapter 10** BY TY

It actually was a Earth Quake happed in the last chapter, you no what happens after and Earth quake. When your near the see. On day the see just goes away. If your Stupid you go down the beech like Oh WoW look at this corral! Then the See comes back faster than a train and boy are you dead. That's a Tsunami. If you got a Brian you don't do no such thing you run up hill as fast as you can. Garry and larry and lilly new what it was and they all shouted a Bad word thats not there fault if its a real Emergency. Mums and dads sware all the time. Guess how went down going Oh WOW look at the corral... Milly. Their was a ROARRRRR and milly was gone. Garry and larry and Lilly were up hill holding on to trees and that and they saw it happen, they said the F word.

## **Chapter 11** Charlotte's Chapter.

Scene: An Island, a Tsunami is Coming.

Lilly: Isn't there any thing we can do?  
Garry: She cant swim the wave gong to fast.  
Larry: The wave mite roll over the hole island!  
Lilly: AAAA! Its rolling up are hill.  
Garry: Thats Millies body floating in it.  
Larry: BOO HOO! She is DEAD!  
Lilly: Holed on tight to these trees.  
Garry: Is the water going to retch us?  
Larry: Is it going to sweep us away to are death?  
Lilly: Oh wait a minuit it stopped.  
Garry: The waters going down again.  
Larry: Were SAVED!!!  
Lilly: Thats normal sea level again.  
Garry: Look over there is that Millies dead body?  
Larry: OH NO I cant look.  
Lilly: OH poor milly I was so fond of her.  
Garry: Lets do CPR.

The 3 children do CPR and milly is OK.

## **Chapter 12** by jade

It wast just CPR it was kiss of life to and Gary dun it to her and wen there 20 there'll get marred and there'll have kids if you don't no how than its they things what get a embryo started on the living and growing DVD and there'll get a part meant wen you get kids you get money off the well fair.

## **Chapter 13** Kadin.

The 4 teen-agers went down the hill. Their shelter was washed away. But the pirate ship was all flung up on the land and it was up side down and it cold be a shelter. Only they hat to get rid of the scorpions once for all or they wold die in there sleep. So they made smoke they burnt sea weed in till the place got so full of smoke the scorpions could not breath and they all ran away. Maybe there were mere cats on that island and when the scorpions were running out the mere cats eat them. We do not want things to dye out but I had rather scorpions dyed out than giant pandas. There were not pandas on that island because of no bamboos. But there was some times dolphins in the sea. Garry made friends with a dolphin and tried to teach it to take a message. I think they will get back home some day.

## **Chapter 14** JIAN the MAN

Gary called his dolphin Spider Pig because it had that kind of look. But it was gray Gary used to go for a ride and after the ride the dolphin gave him fish. Dolphins are clever aminated and they

some times think a human is there pet, they don't no we are clever because when they see us in the water were not so good. So we do as pets. I guest he called gary Spider pig in dolphin language. The dolphin tort gary tricks and he learn how to be a purl diver so if he ever gets out of here hell be rich. Gary kept a lode of purls in a wood chest and he got thousands. He promise to share them with the others because there his friends and that is the right thing to do as long as there not greedy.

### **Chapter15** By Jon AKA Jonny.

Problem with getting treasure is it makes you funny in the head like wining the lottery. Garry got problems he started thinking the 3 others mit steel his stuff. And they said of corse not but he did not be leave them. So garry oat to have been a goody but now he is a baddy. He berried his stash of purls and got all funny about how to mark the spot but not so any won cold fined it. The others followed him cause they war warred about him and he thinks they followed him cause they was after his stash. He done tricks on them like traps where you walk along and treed on something and fall in a whole. Won of them fell in the hole you decide.

### **Chapter 16** by Casey.

It wool have to be larry enuf bad stuff has happen to milly all ready and you want it fare only lilly cant get hurt she is the clever 1 and we need her kind of in charge other wise its disaster so any way larry was laying in the trap hole going OOOH my leg my leg and milly can be clever to and she herd him she cant poll him out but lilly fix up a leaver thing and got him up drag him too there boat hut place and tock care of his wands he well get better in a weak so mean wile what do we do bout garry

### **Chapter 17** By Alex.

Millies in fact a better nurser then Lily because she has had so much accidence of her self she nows how you feel, per haps shell be a doctor or nurse when she gets groan up, its called bed side manor, the patience fell great full about you and get better better, an she cud do fizzy O too, so larry did quit well and his leg was gone to be fine.

### **Chapter 18** By Maddelynne-Leigh.

Millie is such a grate nurse Larry falls in love with her and now its a love triangle what with her been all ready engaged to Garry. Millie likes them both equal and her hart brakes for there tuff luck and she just cant decide because they really look nearly the same but you cant have 2 husband's or wife's and so 1 of them will have to go.

Both of them thing she is beautiful with her blond hair and lips like a flour and sweet natured she

used coca nut oil for her tan skin and berry juice for lip stick and oil slick stuff out the sea for eye lashes and no body can assist her charms.

Lilly probable does not ware enough make up but Lilly is not jealous because there BFFs any way Milly all ways tells Lilly complements to build her self steam but I think Garry will going to kid nap Milly like a prate now he is turned bad.

## **Chapter 19** by Greg

Well of course the kidnap thing all ended in a fight. A real excellent fight, much more interesting than anything else that ever happened to them in their sad boring life. At the end of the fight the floor was covered in blood, there was blood coming out their wounds, blood & branes leaking out their ears because their skulls were caved in, blood even coming out their nose (Mixed with snot) because they had all so punched each other on the nose. Their guts had came out too. The stuff from inside of their guts were very slimy and smelled of sick. Since they were all motley wounded they were all just about to die anyway but this is how every one died:

1. Lilly slipped over on someone's guts and smashed her head. She went unconscious. While she was down there her face was in a puddle of blood and she in hailed it which is drowning.
2. Garrys insides were so battered a chunk of sick floated in to his blood stream. It flowed to his heart and it stopped. When someones heart stops (Very suddenly) their hair stands on end and their eyes open wide in a death stair.
3. Larry died of fright when he suddenly realized he was going to die. And he saw all blood everywhere. So it was his death that killed him. If he hadn't of been going to die then he wouldn't of died. When people die of fright their eye balls fall out and hang down (On the Optic Nerve) because eyes join on to branes.
4. Milly flopped around the floor moaning and fussing. When she couldn't get people to listen to her (Because they were dead) she had to listen to herself and it gave her such a head ache she died of the head ache just before she was going to die of wounds.

## **Chapter 20** By Carrie.

In the mourning the four children woke up. They discovered it had all been a dream, it was a horrible dream, they decided to forget all about it completely, nobody thought it was funny at all, and nobody wanted to remember it.

It was time for breakfast, the boys clime up to pick coconuts and the girls made a fire and tidy up, they were all friends once moor and Garry was sorry he had started it, the others for gave him.

After breakfast they found three more dolphins and made friends, everyone had a dolphin friend and got pearls and no more quarrelling.

They had fish for their lunch and then they done things like send a message in a bottle, their okay but you miss your family's, or you might get ill and need a doctor, luckily the four children kept healthy and safe and looked after their selves.

## **Chapter 21** by genie

They cort bird flew and need medicine.

[drawing of a bird]

They was a plant you cud squeeze out and get jus.

[drawing of a plant]

The medicine worked.

[drawing of a cup and spoon]

They got better.

[drawing of a smiley face icon]

## **Chapter 22** Leia

No body ever ever got there message in a bottle, a shark at it. Sharks eat every thing even not food.

No body ever sore there camp fire in the night time or there smoke from the fire in the day time or came near there ever. It was a long long way away from any other land, even Austria and antarctic.

It was years and years and years and they war getting old. There hair gone grey and they had working sticks and winkles.

They felt sad.

## **Chapter 23** By ALI

It only just felt like years and years when it was only less than a year and when they washed there hare it was just sand and dust made it look gray and the sticks were to push nettles out of there way. Were getting near the end of the story. One day they found a phone in the sand. It was lilies phone that was wet and not worked. It was dry now and surprise surprise it swished on. Lily showed it to the other teen agers and they all shouted "YAY WERE SAVED" "lets phone home".

## **Chapter 24** by Paul

But they were out of signal. They had batter but they did not have signal. And wile they were poking it and try again the battery went too. Its not like you can plug in to a tree or what ever, get real. But I don't want them dead of coarse. Theres a ship and it runs a ground, at the island edge, thats bad news for the ship but the ship has radioes so when another ship coms to rescue the ship then they rescue the 4 teen agers as well and take them on to the ship. Wile they were on the ship they phoned all there houses and every one said OH my darling you have come back from the DEAD!!!

## **Chapter 25** DILLAN

They got home

THE END

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I have been a teacher for too long. I have read thousands of children's stories and encountered millions of anomalies in spelling, grammar, vocabulary, syntax, continuity and punctuation. Now it's my turn. None of these chapters owes any ideas or content to the work of real children but anyone who has tried to teach children to write will recognize the things that happen—the error patterns, the gender rivalry, the cartoon style violence.*

**BIO:** *Fiona Jones is a part-time teacher, a parent and a spare-time writer living in Scotland. She is a regular contributor to Folded Word in creative nonfiction and her fiction has appeared in a number of publications including Silver Pen and Buckshot Magazine. You can access her public work through @FiiJ20 on Facebook, Twitter and Thinkerbeat.*

# *JOG, THEN RESTAURANT*

*By Charles Pinch*

JOG, THEN RESTAURANT

By

Charles Pinch

*For Frances, nothing before you, nothing after...*

First it was ‘Oh my God! Oh my God!’ then a gulp of champagne followed by a couple more ‘Oh my Gods!’ Trish couldn’t take her eyes off it. She wiggled her finger—“Put it on, *please!* I can’t wait to feel it on me!”—while spectrums flashed inside the diamonds and fireworks exploded inside her head. It was the most beautiful engagement ring she’d ever seen and between the two of them they must have looked at hundreds.

The center stone was easily a carat (must have cost you, baby!) and that was surprising. The diamonds in the other rings they’d considered weighed in at half that much.

“What made you change your mind and splurge like this?”

“Love.”

The best and simplest of all explanations. It helped too that his eyes happened to melt her heart like so much warm *ganache*. On either side of the solitaire, delicate scrollwork,

a few sprinkles of glittering rose-cuts. “It looks antique...” The first practical utterance in three minutes of gasps and palpitations.

“It is. Nineteen sixties.”

“Oh my God, is all I can say, Tobe!”

“Toby did good by you...yes? Yes?”

“Toby did like *there are no words to describe how good*. I’ve never heard of Ryan and Co.” Referring to the retailer’s name in gold letters on the inside of the case.

“That’s the original box. I don’t think they’re around anymore.”

Then Trish cried. Then she accepted the congratulations from the couple (older, but lovebirds, doubtless) at the adjacent table. Then she gulped a second mouthful of champagne. “I’ve gotta call my folks. This is my YouTube moment!” And reached for her phone. “Hello, Mom...? You’re not going to believe this!”

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out, sir.”

“That makes two of us.” Tobe was as solid and somber as a pallbearer. The light in his eyes had dimmed a few watts since the last time he had stood at this jewelry counter. “It’s still valid, isn’t it? I mean the refund policy?”

“It is. Just because you’re returning an engagement ring doesn’t prelude your buying another in future. We hope it’s from us.”

“It will be. I assure you.”

“It will have to be a company check, I’m afraid. It’s store policy for any refund over two thousand dollars. I hope that’s not inconvenient for you.”

“A check is fine.” Then, because he couldn’t resist, “Long as it’s good, of course.”

Tobe had noticed two things about the man jogging down the wooded path in his direction. He was in his seventies—mid seventies almost certainly, and he was remarkably athletic. Tobe knew this because another thing about this man was his familiarity. It was a rare day when he *didn't* chance him out for his spin. They jogged the same route (though they started from opposite ends of the park) and usually passed each other near the small bridge that spanned a stream populated by quarrelling mallards. And each time Tobe said to himself, *Okay, don't nod this time and keep going. Stop and maybe say hello. Introduce yourself.*

Synchronicity kicked in. On that very morning, the loping, steel-haired man, lean as a whip, braked in his tracks and extended a sweaty hand.

“Isn't this silly? We pass each other every day.”

“I was thinking the same thing!” Tobe insisted with glassy cheer.

“Name's Frank. You...?”

“Tobe,” he said, omitting his last name since the man had omitted his. “Tobias, if you want to make my mother happy.”

“It's a great place to flex your muscles. I don't know what I'd do without this park.”

“I've been admiring your sprints from a distance. I hope I'm in as good a shape when I reach you—uh, sorry.”

“Age is nothing to apologize for. Thanks for the compliment.”

“What's your motivation? I mean, how do you keep going at it everyday?”

“I read somewhere exercise improves your health.”

Tobe chuckled. “It's certainly improved yours.” His cell rang. “Excuse me.” He slipped it out of the pocket clipped to his waist, glanced at the number and switched it off.

“Sorry, again.” He tucked it back into the pouch.

“I never bring mine along. Prefer to run wireless.” He grinned. Not the greatest teeth, Tobe reflected, but that was their generation. “I run out here to *get away* for heaven sake.”

“But what if it’s important?”

“It’ll keep. Everything keeps, Tobe, except acts of God. Even they keep sometimes. I leave my wallet, my iPhone, my neurosis at home when I come here to jog. All I bring with me are my keys.” He held them up.

“Me? I sleep with my iPhone.”

“You’ll have a lot better sex with a woman.” He’d been jogging on the spot the whole time they spoke so as not to break stride. Now he said, “Gotta run. Nice meeting you. Finally!”

“Nice meeting you, too!”

He would try that. He would brave techno-nudity. Run like a Stone Age man. And if the world collapsed? Well, it was like Frank said. Even God sometimes can be put on hold.

A heat-shock shower that special Saturday morning and Tobe emerged, recharged and strapping, from out of the steam. The first thing he did after grabbing his bathrobe was open the top drawer of his dresser. Sock drawer, condom drawer and now...he retrieved the small ring box he had been dreaming about all last night and thinking about all this morning. Each time he opened it a comic balloon formed above his head. *Trish, will you marry me?* Even standing there alone, he forced down a lump in his throat. Her comeback was: *Why do you ask? I’ve wanted to marry you from the moment we first met.* He sat down on the edge of the bed and unfolded the receipt. Robinson’s Jewelers. *One diamond engagement ring. Round brilliant cut center stone weighing 0.55 ct. Two shoulder-set small diamonds totaling 0.10 ct. 14 karat yellow gold setting. \$2,173.49.*

Thrift and saving and overtime. He and Trish had narrowed their choices down to four.

Then he'd said, "Vamoose, you. I want this to be a surprise!"

What did he really know about Frank? And more important, what did Frank know about him?

He got some of it on a weekend morning in May. He assumed they were neighbors of some sort, close neighbors probably, because there was never a car parked when he reached the end of the trail where Frank started his runs. The place he would park his car if he drove his car to the woods.

"You live around these parts?" Tobe had asked him.

"Gatewood Boulevard."

"My God, we're almost family!"

"You?"

"Yager Avenue."

"So it is a small world. Do you have a house?"

"Someday. Batching it for now."

"I did in my time too."

"Hopefully mine's up. I've fallen in love and I've started getting dangerous ideas about engagement rings."

Frank nodded, smiling without actually managing to smile. "I lost my dear wife a year ago this month."

"I'm so sorry."

"After she died I closed my business. I guess that makes me officially retired now. If Sandra was still alive I'd be working 24/7 which was my style. Losing like that, it changes you."

“Sandra’s a beautiful name.”

“Cassandra.”

“Very beautiful.” Tobe reflected on the irony. They were both traveling the same matrimonial road. He was starting out while Frank was standing at the end of it. He wanted to say something without sounding trite but everything he came up with sounded trite. “May I ask how long you were married?”

“Forty-two years. My only wife, too. I say this only because we live in an age of serial divorce.”

Tobe asked, with something between a laugh and a sigh, ‘What’s your secret?’

“Her.”

And on a Friday morning in June, early June when budding had clouded the light woodland with green gauze.

“Are you in the money market?” Frank had ventured. He had wiped a thin trail of sweat from his brow. Exertion had darkened his T-shirt under the arms and around the neck.

“You look to me like a stockbroker. Not that I have the faintest idea why.”

“Close. Insurance.”

An agreeable shake of his head. “Everybody needs it.”

“What line were you in, if I may ask? I recall hearing you say you had a business. Your own, I assume?”

“Oh yes. At one time I practiced law. Sold my hand in the firm and opened a consulting agency. Nothing to do with the law after that.”

“I thought about being a lawyer once.”

“I’m glad you changed your mind.”

“It must have given you something. Apart from a good living. Gatewood Boulevard.”

“Acquired wisdom.”

“You see?”

“During my tenure as a lawyer I learned that brown is the universal color of thought.”

“It is?”

“Think about it.”

“So what does he do, Trish? Apart from pursue my only daughter? Hell, my only child!”

“Pursue? He *lusts* after me if you must know the truth.”

“Even worse. What’s he do?”

“He does deals.”

“Eh...?”

“He’s a dealmaker.”

“A dealmaker? What kind of dealmaker? Like for the NHL?”

“No, silly. He does business deals. I’m not sure exactly what.”

“You mean he’s a schmiel.”

“I knew I could count on your support, Daddy.”

“Tony, she needs your support. Say something nice about her Mr. Toby Flick.”

“Rhymes with Moby Dick.”

“Something *nice*, Tony!”

And one time in the rain. On that morning, they were the only two joggers to be seen. Tobe was sweating inside a waterproof nylon tracksuit. Frank was drenched to the skin. A T-shirt moulded itself to his stark torso. Wet cotton bunched in folds at his knees. There was no question he was enjoying himself.

“I guess we’re now officially diehards.”

“Or bubble brains,” Tobe joked.

“Hard inside on a morning like this. For some reason the rain reminds me of her. Not unpleasantly. Lonely, that’s all.”

“No kids to try your sanity?”

“No. No kids.” Regret shaded his voice but he offered no explanation.

And last, on this Friday before the big day. He half-hoped when he saw Frank approaching that something would press him to keep jogging. ‘Hello’ or ‘How’s it going?’ certainly, but Tobe was too focused on his upcoming Saturday night to consider anything more as distraction. He would ask Trish to marry him after a glass of champagne. He would present her with the ring they had narrowed down and for which he had paid \$2,173.49.

He recalled their earlier synchronicity because it showed itself again, just at that moment. Frank was staggering or lurching oddly and he was not the kind to jog while drunk. Then his hand sprang to his chest like a man swearing an oath and a devoutly exercised body collapsed onto the ground. Tobe blazed ahead, seeming to fly through the air, his feet barely touching the surface. Frank was jiggling from crown to toe, his lungs clawing for breath, blood fleeing from his stricken face.

“Heart attack!” he managed. “Call 911!”

“I didn’t bring my phone!” Tobe panicked.

“My keys. I’m 19 Gatewood. Couple minutes. Hurry!”

“I can’t leave you!”

“Hurry!”

In his head, while crashing through the lush growth of trees and tangled undercover, he thought: *You train for this. Something makes you want to take up jogging and you do it. And then something like this happens and you can help, you can make that split second difference because when it turns out you suddenly need your strength, you've trained for it.*

The house stood back from the street in what appeared to be a state of voluntary withdrawal. Architecturally, it presented a face both lean and candid. Tobe thought it looked like Frank if Frank had been a house. But he did not stop to weigh and observe. All of this transacted itself in a blur. He unlocked the front door, stepped inside and looked around for a phone. Landline? Frank's cell? A lay about Blackberry? He found what he needed in the room Frank used as an office. Papers, discs, printouts piled in sheaves, three computers. His voice surprised him with its steadiness. He answered the dispatcher's questions calmly, though flames roared inside him.

"His name, please?"

"Frank—"

"Yes. Frank what, sir?"

"He's having a heart attack. Please! He could be dying as we speak!"

"There's an ambulance and a fire truck on its way. A police car too. They'll be there before you get back to him. I must have his last name, sir."

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"We were just acquaintances. I didn't know him much more than to say hello. I'm calling from his house because he gave me his keys. I've never been inside it before. I should be looking for his wallet or his ID."

"What's his address? I can search from that."

Tobe told her.

“Okay. I’ll relay that information to them.”

“Thank you.” He wanted to ask, “He’s going to be alright, isn’t he?” And then realized she would be as unable to answer that question as he himself.

He heard the sirens and prepared to take his leave. A picture on Frank’s desk arrested his purpose. It was a photograph of Cassandra. The woman with the evocative name of a mythological beauty turned a plain face before the camera; there was a thickness about her features he found hard to like though he tried to tell himself he did. Suddenly he felt sorry for Frank and his proud, suffering ardor.

He rummaged quickly through the drawers but uncovered no wallet or papers that could serve his belated purpose. He wandered out of the office, aware that the sirens had stopped. And he thought: *either they got to him in time or he’s dead*. At this point, anyway, he, Tobe, was not needed.

Curiosity pushed him through the dwelling and he explored each room he passed, albeit briefly and touching nothing, with clandestine heed. In their bedroom, the bedroom they had once shared, was a wall of photographs. Cassandra and Frank. Tuxedo and mink. Palm trees and sunglasses. The two again with two other couples their own age. Christmas somewhere. The Coliseum, the Eiffel Tower. But no children. In fact, no young people to be seen at all, in any of them.

He opened the top drawer of a dresser. This had to be Frank’s side. Balled socks. A leather box full of cuff links, tie bars and a pair of nail clippers. In hers, a ring box. Beside it two watches. A stack of handwritten letters tied with a ribbon and a lavender-scented sachet. And...a ring box.

Inside, in gold letters on the silk lining: *Ryan & Co.* Tobe had looked at enough diamonds over the last couple of months to estimate that the center stone was probably in the full carat range: it was twice the size of the diamond in the ring he had purchased for Trish at Robinson's. A police cruiser pulled up outside and Tobe just had time, after closing the dresser drawer, to make it to the living room before the front door opened.

He was fully co-operative. He answered all of their questions and he heard the throb in his voice that played to their sympathies when they told him Frank was in an ambulance on his way to the morgue. The woman on dispatch had assured them how helpful he had been. Nobody or nothing, short of an act of God, could have saved Frank.

Trish was squealing. Tobe, amused, sweetened, watched the champagne blush rise from her cheeks to her blonde forehead. Then she abruptly snatched the phone from her ear and held it out to him.

"It's Mother. She wants to congratulate you."

"Louisa?"

"Darling boy. I've always wanted a son-in-law since Trish was a little girl."

"I'm glad you waited until she was legal age."

"You! At one point she almost lost hope. She told us you were a confirmed bachelor. Tony figured you might be gay."

"No, I like girls."

"It was Trish who made you change your mind."

"It was. Besides, I figured it was time I took the plunge."

"What's he saying?" He heard Tony somewhere in the background.

"The plunge? You make it sound like marriage is a cold dip!"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

“I’m teasing you.”

Tony grabbed the cell from her hand. “So. Dealmaker son-in-law. You do any deals since we last spoke?”

“I made a little over two thousand dollars this morning.”

“Marriage isn’t a cold dip.”

“No? What is it, Tony?”

“Tell them they have a golden future together!” Louisa shouted.

“It’s a polar plunge.”

“A what?”

Trish was pulling at his fingers. She was laughing. “*What’d* he say?”

“Don’t listen to him, you two!”

“Mom...?”

“Do you hear me? *Golden!*”

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *If memory serves me I wrote this story in 2016. If it doesn’t I wrote it in 2018. Anyway, it was originally published by Archie de Cruz of Chapter and Verse (now defunct) sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I think.*

**BIO:** *If you’re on FOTD you’ve already read it. If you haven’t GET BACK THERE!*

# UNDISCOVERED

by J (J-priryodhi)

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** Senior Editor Tom Ball writes...*This is a story about a genius who goes unrecognized his whole life—inventing things like clothes that never need to be washed and that can change colour. The story explores the myth that brilliant people succeed. But just like Herman Hesse’s ‘The Prodigy’ genius is often very sensitive and crushed by the weight of the world. An insightful story by an emerging young writer.*

Senior Editor Charles Pinch writes...*At FOTD we’re as interested in t emerging writer as we are in the mature writer. What we look for is raw talent. And that’s what we found in ‘Undiscovered’. This is outsider fiction and the expected rough edges and occasional bumps are part of the reading experience. In the interest of authenticity we don’t edit them out.*

*The story will be included in a short story anthology of African writing called ‘To Your Troubles’ translated ‘from the traditional Shona offer of condolences’. Under the creative direction of Terence M. Mutuswa. Many of the writers it will showcase have never been published.*

## Undiscovered

### A very bad eulogy

The world is forever full of never-beens, never-wills and the occasional should-have or could-have-beens. I knew one man who was all four and yet far more than any of these labels could define.

He was not born into a rich family, on the contrary, he lived his entire life firmly between the buttocks of a seated lower class.

His only family was a mother, who lived far away so that she could provide for him, and a grandmother, a woman so old that even her pubic hairs had gone bald.

He was never married. He never had children. His life was a humdrum existence and his death was an unexceptional passing.

Now that he has joined the depressingly departed, I can tell his story. Before then, there was a chance that his story would have been a different one. There was a chance that his story would have been a great one.

This is a very bad eulogy for a man such as he was.

This man was one of the greatest minds this continent has ever spawned. He had a light so bright that the sun often glared at him in envy.

He was a global treasure, and that no one ever heard of him, is to our combined loss.

### **The musings of his mind**

He was the most ordinary looking of boys and I mean that in a third world sort of way. That is to say, his skin either glistening from the generous application of

Vaseline petroleum jelly or looked ashen from the lack of it. His clothes were badly worn knock-offs that gave his body odd symmetries. For example, he had a shirt with crooked stitching that made him look as if he was stuck turning his upper body to the left. Such were the adventures of his wardrobe.

At school, he was neither the smartest nor was he the slowest child. Actually, to be the slowest in the local public-school classrooms took some real effort. There were so many intellectual snails and intellectual statues in these schools that your brain would have had to be deliberately going in the wrong direction for you to outdo them. It was not their fault, these children had not been given the correct academic background to learn at pace with the rest of the world.

Physically, he was not the fittest among the neighbourhood children. He was borderline malnourished. He constantly lived slightly over the fence of starvation.

He could have been good looking were it not for the fact that poverty has a way of presenting a person's worst constituents. I am yet to meet a really ugly wealthy person.

Aside from the single condition of being permanently poor, there was absolutely nothing outstanding about him on the outside. He was a poor child among poor people, which sadly, made him seem as normal as everyone else.

Everyone who saw him overlooked him. He was just one nobody in an ocean of nobody's. A scrawny one at that.

To look at him, he was ordinary in every possible meaning of the word. If you saw him, you too would agree that he was nothing special. You too would be wrong.

This bony looking, dirty specimen of 'the African child' had a mind that only comes once in a millennium.

He had a brain that could pierce any form of creative work and disassemble it to its marrow. His brain could also reassemble any artistic concept in a way that would look original to the rest of us basic mortals.

Here are a few of the things he did whilst he lived unnoticed among us.

When he was a small boy he fell in love with films. He first watched television at a friend's two houses over. Whilst all the other children only saw cartoons moving about the screen yammering in an English language they could barely understand, he saw how the basic stories of good triumphing over evil and smartness trumping idiocy were told. After school, while all the other children played in the streets, he did not join them.

Instead, he would sit in the dirt and draw stickman figures with his fingers, reenacting scenes from his favourite cartoon shows. He soon began making up his own scenes as he drew. He soon had no fingerprints on the index finger of his right hand on account of wearing them off in the sand.

As a child, he did not enjoy playing with all the children that he knew. This was an oddity, considering that the high-density neighbourhood he lived in manufactured children in cartons on a monthly basis. None of the multitudes of juveniles exploding around him interested him so he enjoyed his own company.

His mother could not afford to buy and send toys for him, so he found ways to make do. He collected sticks, cardboard cut-outs and bottle tops. In his room, he would bend and tear these odd bits into all sorts of shapes and sizes. While it may have looked like scattered piles of rubbish to you or I, this was the beginning of his brilliance. He would painstakingly set up his pieces and then he would create elaborate action sequences, plots and storylines. All from the top of his head.

He would spend hours upon hours playing by himself and making his characters talk to each other, which of course sounded like he was talking to himself. This worried his grandmother to no end. She would hear grunts, yelps, voice modulations and nonsense sounds coming from his room. From what she heard come out of his room, she would have taken musterbation over mental illness any day. She also began suspecting that he was playing at witchcraft after she had found the odd collection of twigs that he kept under his bed. She lived with a cocktail of concerns over her grandson.

He taught himself to draw and he began sketching stunts before he knew what a storyboard was. He had the idea to do all his favourite cartoon films into real live-action movies, years before the first animated Lion King was released. This was a fun thought for him, to see the Go-Bots, Voltron, Mask and even the Carebears come to life. In his head, he would imagine what that would look like. He would ponder on how he would make characters fight in far better ways than they did in 2D animation. Such were the thoughts of this little boy in the early '90s.

When he grew a bit older, he became fascinated with cars as most poor boys are prone to. Unlike the rest of them, however, he did not cut out pictures of cars from magazines, he instead designed and drew the body and features of his dream car. A ten-wheel SUV with two doors for the two front seats and two slide doors for the four inward facing seats. The lights on his truck were drawn as lines and not the traditional circles or discs. He even made alterations for his car design to show different models. It was impressive.

When he was thirteen, he was introduced to hip hop by a friend who had lent him a radio cassette of Puff Daddy's 1997 'No way out' album. Music opened up his world and he quickly began to write his own songs. I must point out that he was actually unreasonably good at writing songs.

He soon realised that he could dismantle the beats and melodies he heard and rearrange them to create something familiar yet so unique. Before long, he found out that writing songs alone could not contain the breadth of his musical

abilities. He began to create original artists in his head, working out how they would sound like and what kind of music they would do.

A single song could inspire him to write dozens of songs. He would get carried away and write whole albums for non-existent artists. To give you an example, he created a 'flow' or a way of rapping to the uninitiated, for an artist that would sing and rap interchangeably, decades before Drake came onto the scene. He wrote over forty-nine songs for this artist before he got bored and moved on to other artists.

He enjoyed tracking the annual local and international top 100 charts shows on radio. He would use the music from the charts shows to inspire new songs for him, creating innumerable new make-belief artists in the process. In the 2000s the top 100 charts began having American doppelgangers for some of his creations. Naturally, his artists were better than the ones that came to market.

To test his talent, he would acquire pirated albums of new artists he had never heard before. After listening to their music, he could tell which of them would become hits and which would not. He could even specify which songs would make it to the top of the charts with an accuracy that bordered on satanism.

He even began burning CDs to give his friends who would marvel at how he always seemed to know all the best songs months before they made it to the airwaves. This was a hobby for him of course, he never made money from it.

With his love of music and television, he got hooked on music videos. He was fascinated by the fashion of the musicians. Immediately, he began to draw sketches for his own clothing line. This could have also been motivated by a burning desire to make clothes that fit him in a way his mishap of a clothing collection never did.

He did not like to place logos on the clothes he drew so he instead began to sketch clothes with odd seams and dimensions. His clothes were so different from all the clothes you or I have ever seen. He thought to make clothes that visually stand out without the aid of visible labels.

He found a way to realign joints and stitches that would have baffled anyone who saw them at that time. Indeed, even you would have been perplexed if he ever let you see the secret sketches he drew in his room.

He contemplated trying out different fabrics that were not traditionally meant for clothes. He would ponder on how to include electricity into his clothes so that they could glow. He even thought of how to make clothes that would not need any washing and clothes that could change colour on command or from temperature variations. He jotted notes of his many ideas for fashion next to his sketches.

His taste in film and music continued to grow. He enjoyed all types of music, mostly because he realised that he could bend any genre into his favourite

version of pop music. I assume that you have realised that he had no real active social or love life at this point?

As a teenager, he enjoyed action blockbusters and comedies. This returned him to his love of developing elaborate action sequences, plots and storylines.

When the Matrix came out, his imagination had ecstatic seizures and went into hyperdrive. Finally! finally, someone had come close to some of the ideas he jotted down years ago! He started writing plots to films with new vigour. He continued to draw out action sequences and he increased the amount of details and notations on the margins of his concept papers.

He wrote a plot for a wholly underwater movie where fish-like people would fight in gravity-defying martial arts moves. He wrote another for motorbikes that could transform into metallic armour for the riders allowing them to do superhuman feats. He wrote plots too numerous to mention. He thought of so many film ideas that in the end, he resorted to only write single lines on paper while he memorised the rest in his head.

He tried his hand at comedies, but he soon abandoned that idea. It's not that he couldn't do it, quite the opposite. He was so funny that he frequently caught himself giggling at jokes as he wrote them down. No, his reason for stopping came from his realisation that instead of doing comedies which he found tiresome to write jokes for, he could do funny adverts to sell products. He did pencil multiple

ideas for several adult animation series after watching only one episode of South Park though.

Around the time CDs went mainstream he saw the opportunity for using them as an alternative to broadcast television. He developed and scripted a comical larger than life personality who went around harassing people. He then devised to write 15-second skits which centred on individual products.

He had an uncanny ability of mapping out brand promotions and coming up with ways to attract the attention of audiences. Of course, this was never tested but I can promise you that it would have worked better than the best marketing strategies of today.

One of his ideas was to film the skits and burn them to a video disc that he would give out for free at supermarkets. He would charge the manufactures of the products he featured in his skits for the production of the disc in exchange for the number of the people who would watch them. He was convinced that if people enjoyed the skits, they would remember the brands associated with the jokes. I need to remind you that at this time, he was in high school and did not know about marketing principles.

When cell phones arrived and long before they were commonplace, he automatically realised that each person would own one someday and that they

would use them to watch television and listen to the radio. He began to think about what that would mean for social relationships.

In time, he would draft a concept for each person to map out their entire social circle and to link it to other people's circles around the world. He imagined that this large connection would have the names of all the people who signed up and the names of those yet to join the inter-connected circles. The result being that the name of every person on the planet would be listed in these circles.

He thought up ways to do business that did not seem plausible at the time. He came up with countless ways to develop products and services that could have improved your life and mine ahead of the current technological developments.

He wrote down only a fraction of all the ideas and thoughts he had while he lived. The rest he forgot or thought that they were not good enough to keep in his head.

With only a spark, his mind would spin into new unimagined pathways. It was a miracle that he did not go mad from the constant concussion of new ideas. I could go on for days about his unexecuted plans, but this is not that kind of story. This is a sad story and he is dead.

### **The world he left untouched**

Disney finally had the great idea to remake comics and cartoon films into real-life movies which is how we got the Transformers and the Marvel Cinematic

Universe. He would have enjoyed that. In some of his papers, there was an idea to do a full-length live-action drama with real wild animals fighting over a mythical jungle kingdom. He would have smiled to watch Netflix's Mowgli or the live-action remake of the Lion King movie. This was closer to what he had seen in his mind though he had envisaged much more fantastic fights than what was done by the producers of these movies.

Before he died, he had picked up a technology magazine from the bins near where he lived, and he had looked in amused satisfaction at the concept art for driverless cars. The models he drew up more than a decade ago as a teenager were still much better than the ones in the magazine. As he saw what gadgets and features they intended to include in the future cars, his mind instantly saw ideas that would take us another two decades to realise.

Had he pursued his idea of car lights, he would have been one of the first people in the world to realise that LED lights would revolutionise car design and technology. He had thought of lights that brightened or dimmed using a sliding system as opposed to standard dial settings. Lights that could follow the steering wheel motion and focus light where it was most needed by the driver.

But he never owned a car so he had thrown the magazine back into the bin and walked on home.

Had he lived long enough, he would have witnessed artificial minds do what his own mind had done to musical melodies a thousand times over. He would have seen computers reassemble melodies from classical piano pieces and create brand new compositions that are indistinguishable from the originals.

Further into that future, he would have seen computers do the same thing to actual songs. He would have seen computers pick out the best elements of modern music and recraft whole new songs. He would have seen a future where people would select samples of their favourite songs and artists and watch computers create real-life CGI musicians for them, singing personalised original music. Much like he did in his head when he wrote whole albums for non-existent artists that he himself had created.

The same computing power and intelligence would go on to be used in film and gaming. People would be able to create their own interactive movies with CGI actors or build personalised video games in minutes at home. These are some of the musings he had had, long before he had ever laid eyes on a computer for himself.

The clothes he sketched years ago would have looked much better than the smart clothes that companies like Under Armer are currently producing. His ideas were far ahead of the modern-day technology of 3D printing and nano-fabrics and his clothes would have changed our view of apparels forever. There is every

possibility that his clothing designs would have been the Apple equivalent of the fashion industry.

It is unfortunate that no one ever came near to his vision of possible action sequences in the movies. We will never see action scenes so unbelievable that they will create a cult following of their own. Only he enjoyed that pleasure. Warner Bother's 2018 Aquaman movie was hailed a cinematic marvel, if only they had seen his imagined version of an underwater movie. The makers of the DC movie would have killed themselves.

His numerous ideas of marketing products on social media platforms by having YouTube channels, Podcasts and Facebook pages would have been the first if he had had the opportunities most of us have in our lives. He would have built personalities to sale brands much like the influencer business long before the advertising industry had turned to product placement and personalised selling.

His platform for mapping every individual on earth using social circles would have become the fastest growing African social media start-up. He would have competed with Tencent and would have eventually sold off the company for billions of Yuan Renminbis.

Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO Now and Hulu proved him right, personalised viewing choices of people that would be the future of entertainment. He, of course,

had a lot of thoughts on how to reach people in the inevitable eventuality of the disruption in the broadcasting industry, but he never wrote them down.

I could go on forever on the promise, potential and possibilities he held for the world in many fields including engineering, business development and marketing but that would take a couple of lifetimes. He was one of the brightest sparks this continent has seen yet and yet no one even knew he existed until now.

At his passing, we should have all mourned and offered each other the condolences of ‘to your troubles’ for our collective loss. In our lifetime, we will not see his like. We will see many that have one or two of his unique talents but never one with all of them bottled in the same unassuming container.

I will say only a few more things about him. I will say that on the outside, he lived and died a life as mundane as the rest of us. I will say that he was born poor and he died the same. I will also say that I do not pity him, I envied him. I envied him for the wonders that he saw in his mind that we will never enjoy.

His story was only one story. Imagine the hundreds or better yet, the thousands of similar stories out there. We have passed the half-line mark of global internet connectivity. In the next 10 years, everyone alive will be online.

Think of the multitude of undiscovered savants, geniuses and proteges scattered across the continent. Most of them have had zero exposure to the areas

of their particular brilliance. Think of what such minds will contribute to mankind when they encounter the world in its entirety for the first time.

Imagine what a musical talent that has never had formal training in music will do when they come into contact with music making software. They will do things we have been conditioned to not do. They will break all the rules and they will create something absolutely brand new.

Prepare to be wowed.

END

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This was my attempt at tackling the story of the inherent disadvantages of poverty and how they rob humanity of talent and potential. I believe that not all talent will be realized and that most talent will remain hidden. I believe that most talented people, by being poor, will never be able to rise above their circumstances.*

*I did not want to provide a solution, instead I sought to paint a picture of 'what if?' I imagined it would take three separate parts to achieve this.*

*This is what I wanted for this story.*

*For the first section, I wanted to set the scene. I wanted to first make the reader imagine this unnamed person and wonder why they should mourn for him. The only way I could do this was through a eulogy. I would begin with the death of this person and call it a huge loss for humanity. This part was simple.*

*For the second section, I wanted to then present the life this person lived in a way that made sense. I wanted to show the seemingly great thoughts this person had but never acted on. The problem here was to create believable ideas and stories that did not look as if I cheated from knowing the future.*

*Here I ran into my first real challenge. How to write original ideas that are believable and to portray these thoughts as the work of a genius mind. I frequently had to hold myself back from wanting to explain each thought in order to convince the reader of its exceptionality. The jury is out on how I succeeded there.*

*For the final part I wanted to do two main things. One, to show that the thoughts of the deceased could have changed the world and two, that they were too numerous to recount. This too was tricky, and I ended up resorting to glossing over many aspects of this man's life.*

*By way of apology, I meant to create a sensation of overwhelming talent that no one could fully contemplate nor an author articulate. Here's hoping that this worked.*

**BIO:** *J (J-piryodhi) is a Zimbabwean writer and an avid South African hermit. She works off an old Dell Inspiron and hands over flash drives with her work for editing and publishing. She is currently off the grid working on three manuscripts and a host of short stories no one has asked for. If you follow her on Twitter handle @piriyodhi she will probably follow you back the next time she is near civilization.*

# PROSPECTUS DVC, Inc.

By Robert Cantrell

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *You can bet if we were venture capitalists we'd green light this coyly straight-faced hilarious prospectus where vice triumphs over virtue. The corporatese (tease) is wonderfully satirized and some of the lines are so good they deserve to be copyrighted. Quote: Do the math. Then do the drugs. And, '...one can achieve the true American Dream; dying the day you spend your last nickel. Not a Calvinist day before, nor a Keynesian day after.' Motion seconded and approved!*

PROSPECTUS

DVC, Inc.

Re: Fiscally-Based -Dynamic Vice Counseling

"Moderation in all things"  
Hippocrates

"Moderation in all things...including moderation"  
Rabelais

"More absinthe!"  
Rimbaud

"Feeling good right now is a pretty good definition of health."  
J. Bedlington Fonsbury, M.D. CPA, Chief Science Officer, DVC, Inc.

Since the Age of Hippocrates, people, mostly nosy people, have struggled to see the connection between behaviors and health outcomes. Through the centuries, stuffy men like John Graunt and that insufferable know it all, Jonathan Swift, have made the snide observation that much of human pathology may be causally correlated with "human luxury." However, they

lacked the scientific tools to make their case in specifics, thus allowing for three millennia of perfectly acceptable denial and celebration. Generations of snarky study have revealed that dirty water will kill you vis-à-vis the exhaustive International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10 Code A01.0) (J. Snow 1849) (why do you think the French drink only wine?) and that, sure, *eventually* cigarettes *may* stunt your growth (C34.0) (Doll, Hill 1954). Pretty soon it seems everyone started (Z03.89) a National No-Fun Society to basically wreck all the possible venal enjoyment a person might have.

If, however, you are the clear-eyed {sic} type who does not need an epidemiologist to convince you that you have indeed caused some damage when you wake up with your head the size of a basketball, and you shudder at the very thought of your last sexual partner(s) (ICD 10 code F65.89), DVC offers services that will take you to the next rational level.

In the 1990's our company, DVC, pioneered the field of vice counseling. Tell us your proclivities and using all that scientifically derived data we can do an epidemiologically-based, statistical evaluation and thus recommend how to "balance" your recreational activities for maximum distance and depth.

For instance, let us say that Mr. Smith is known to tipple a bit more than is perhaps good for the liver (K70.41). Once we are aware of Smith's "habit set", coupled with Smith's psychological profile, we can run a set of liver function studies as a part of a complete metabolic profile, and if indeed it seems he is keeping the besieged liver working a bit too hard, that he might be headed for an "early" death from cirrhosis (K70.30) we can recommend that he back off on alcohol a bit and shift to another vice, perhaps smoking opium (Z79.891), dedicated overeating, or perhaps even classical frotteurism (F65.81), any of which will have a less inflammatory effect on the liver itself. The idea being to balance one's vices so as not to cause an overwhelming bottleneck in any one system with a sudden cataclysmic overall finale' (Z63.4).

On the other hand, if Smith's opium use eventually leads to a problem with pulmonary irritation (J81.1), based upon the premium "dynamic" function of our company's service we could suggest a simple switch to injectable heroin (T40.1) or even taking up transcutaneous fentanyl instead, thus completely bypassing the lungs and allowing them to heal and continue their function, all the while partying on.

By balancing the vices based upon their statistically established "number needed to harm" (NNH), and our own R-RRR® (Reverse-Relative Risk Reduction) tables, using the information derived from the medical literature and available insurance data, we can provide an actuarially rational plan for the maximization of total vice over a lifetime. For example, the main reason to forgo smoking your favorite cigars would be to minimize the possibility of oropharyngeal cancer (C10.9). If one could be assured however that one's death would be overwhelmingly more likely to be caused by an unbelted auto accident (E815), brought about by habitual DUI and speeding, then it would be a waste *not* to have smoked all along. All one needs to feel better in such a situation (and after all, as we at DVC like to say, "Feeling good right now is a pretty good definition of health") is to have rationally analyzed the factors, assigned them validated statistical weight, and "crunched the numbers". Do the math, then do the drugs. Or choose sloth, or gluttony, or lust, or any of the other vices, or combination thereof, just not helter-skelter and irresponsibly.

Our international department assures you that we will have digested real-time medico-legal data available from around the world, courtesy of such organizations as WHO, OXFAM, UNICEF and INTERPOL. If you and your party desperately feel the need to get a tattoo (L81.8) at 3A.M. in Manila or Marseilles we have people on file. You never need walk unaware into a "Goat Lolita problem" (F52.8) simply through inattention to local customs, quaint tribal mores, overt speciesism, and recently indictable statutes. If you happen to be jittery (F14.23) in

Amsterdam on business and unaware that there has been a touch of battery acid in the local pharmaceuticals (T54.93) recently, our G5 enabled alert service, coupled with GPS navigation to appropriate, franchised street-based agents, will save tons of time, assure you another satisfying shopping experience, while extending your shooting season.

Computer programs are now robust enough to handle the multifactorial calculus of equations which analyze life expectancy in the context of the admittedly more subjective "high-ness" factor involved with multiple habits. The data exists, so with the help of our patented "polymorphous perversity" regression analysis, why not use it?

Start with your population-based actuarial longevity (depending on race and sex).

"Dial" that up or down, depending on your applied vices. E.g. ,if you smoke (Z87.891) 1 pack of cigarettes a day you cut your life span by X years. If you drink more than four alcoholic beverages a day (F10.23) you have Y chance of dying at an earlier age (with an increasing velocity of slope/drink/day). Factor that against the base longevity. Now DVC can do that additively for all your vices in a multivariate analysis and arrive at your "real", or objective, statistically-based expected longevity.

You are also, of course, encouraged to factor in any activities that might be "preventive". That's certainly all nice and stuff, as the kids are wont to say. For instance, it has been calculated that if you run/jog an hour a day until you are seventy, assuming you are at the average age of the onset of realization and fear regarding this issue (around 40), by taking up daily running you can actually extend your life by three months. One hour a day from now until then is, coincidentally, three and a half months of running (S90.42). You deserve to know the data, and for a minimal subscription fee our company can provide it.

Now comes the really exciting part....

While the Clintonian 90's and 00's were certainly a heady time to be concupiscent, the New Trump Millennium has brought yet another major advance in the form of Fiscally-Augmented Dynamic Vice Counseling.

It is well documented that our single biggest societal fear is outliving our money, and sinking out of the comfortable bourgeoisie into embarrassingly Dickensian squalor (Z59.5), sans eyes (H54.7), sans teeth (K08.109), sans Prada. Simply take a good look at your children (Z63.9) and check off the box which factors in the likelihood that they will or will not provide idyllic old age care for you (including the collection of vices you would be bringing with you- love me love my dog-love my dog love his fleas). (Odds ratio= < 0.1) With the impending Social Security and Medicare crisis we now offer the only rationally-based solution to the troubling prospect of "running out of money".

Utilizing FC-DVC, along with analyzing your actuarial possibilities for survival, we can simultaneously do an analysis on your financial portfolio, and while there is deuced-all one seems to be able to do about augmenting *that* in today's anti-business, tax-and-spend, fuzzy-brained liberal (F60.4, F60.89, F60.2, etc) environment, by simply looking at the demand side, i.e. your longevity, and dialing *that* up or down according to the aforementioned statistical rules associated with your particular vice-set, one can achieve the true American Dream; dying the day you spend your last nickel. Not a Calvinist day before, nor a Keynesian day after.

DVC Inc. can even factor in the degree of difficulty of kiting any required number of credit accounts, factor in state regulations regarding length of allowable delinquency, and for our Platinum Club members, arrive at inside and outside dates when a court officer will be arriving

to serve papers. Until that time its all just numbers anyway and if he arrives precisely in time to see your corpse being wheeled out, you will be added to our "Wall of Honor" and be eligible for special offers totaling half the cost of cremation.

All in all DVC's services are designed to provide you with maximum thrills with no final bills. Now you can truly rest assured that your check to the undertaker will bounce.

**BONUS:** For families and legal agents of the estates of deceased clients, DVC representation is available regarding the residual leasing of the traditionally underused back side of any funerary monument for advertising and endorsement opportunities. There is a growing market in such merchandizing and product placement, with recent examples: "I was a Chevy Guy All My Life, and I Still Am", "Go Rangers! This Year the Series" , "Amway" "Marlboro Country", and most recently, as a part of a larger campaign kickoff "I Could Sure Go For A Cold Shiner Bock About Now."

Franchising opportunities available.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *The idea for 'vice counseling' began to seem more and more reasonable when medical services began to be spoken of as 'product lines'. It seems a great number of MD's nowadays take a second degree and by the choice of that degree shall they be known: the MPHs on the right hand and the MBAs to the left.*

*Throw into that mix a touch of the new post-modern climate-science despair coupled with a Malthusian ability to count beyond 10 (billion) and it makes sense to begin to concentrate (as one of the aforementioned product lines) on rationalizing the remainder of our lives, taking into account the things we have so far touted, indeed priggishly insisted upon, as 'facts' regarding 'healthy living', cross-referenced with what are the true deep down desires of at least a sizable portion of us, further colored by the realities of our more and more skewered personal financial landscapes.*

*We have choices, not perfect perhaps, but choices.*

*I was probably born out of my real era as some of my influences are John Milton (no shit, really), Sir William Osler, Benedict Spinoza and George Carlin. My ambition is to spend the rest of my life (according to Northwestern Mutual actuaries, 19.5 more years) turning out something that may make people think but which must, more importantly, make them laugh. I may become a standup comedian in Mexico. As I don't speak Spanish, that would be funny. On his dead bed Moliere supposedly said, 'Dying is easy, comedy is hard.'*

**BIO:** *Robert Cantrell lives in Tucson where he spends an inordinate amount of time meddling in other people's affairs. Recently retired after forty years as a general practice physician in community health and public health practice, he is often saddened, sometimes elated, but no longer ever surprised by human behavior. Since retirement he has mostly been involved in practical work with migrant families coming through the Southwestern border.*

*His ongoing work as a physician includes discussing, and writing about, how we must come to terms with out mortality and to see that as the adventure of our generation with some esprit-de-corps and boogie-woogie sang-froid. Turn on, tune in, drop dead. And don't be a pain in the ass on the way out.*

*Being a white male born in Dallas, Texas in the early fifties has left him with a mind and heart 'fraught with issues'. He considers it a blessing and an intellectual and spiritual adventure to have the next twenty or so years to come to terms with himself and his place in the world. He considers himself a 'Progressive', with faith in the future as it is unfolding, but is genetically conservative (small 'c') in inquiring of himself that he at least try to put more into society than he takes out in order to leave it better than he found it. Defining 'better' is a life's work. As a writer, he has placed his work on the back burner until completing what he feels is a 'full' career in medicine. Anton Chekhov, himself a physician, said, "Medicine is my lawful wife, the theatre is my mistress." Now is the time for Cantrell to run away with his Muse. He has finished five novels and many essays in the past but has not had the time to do justice to re-writes or promotion. His novels, and his other writing, run the gamut from totally goofy to dead serious. He is told repeatedly that his letter writing style is his strongest POV and s in demand but that his 'serious style stinks'.*

# recidivism

by andrea jefferson

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *'The tendency to reoffend' is ironically and beautifully played out in this moving flash monologue that hits all the right keys. We like the subtle circularity of the story's structure, the transactional use of POV from second to first person and back and the cautionary tone behind the sometimes imperative voice that carries the weight of a morality tale. In fewer than 600 words it's nothing less, to use Hemingway's term, than 'grace under pressure.' Two thumbs up.*

## recidivism

Do you remember as a kid that one scar? The one that made things different? Made you realize maybe hopscotch *is* a little dangerous or that mom's right about jumping on the bed--fuck whatever those monkeys were on. Remove that scar from its locale, press it firmly against your face, and stretch it from your left ear to your right eye. Be called "ScarfaceScarScarry" and their innumerable variations through grade school. Be tempted to tell how you got it to induce pity. Don't.

Fuck one guy from sophomore to senior year because it's a small town and female sex outside of a committed relationship gets you talked about. Dump him at his graduation dinner because you lost interest the summer before junior year when he felt you up outside a Waffle

House. Without your permission. Don't have a baby like Samantha Rollins and her entire clique. Graduate early and go to design school. Work at Starbucks until the video of you rolling around with Sully, your cat, goes viral on Facebook.

See that popularity roll over onto Instagram and Twitter. Make more videos like it. Be praised, not only for your cat ownership but for your face the first time in your life.

*Beautiful!!! would love 2 cum for u such a inspiration! #goals*

Spend the next three months toning everything your body allows to tone. Show off to your supporters [and non-supporters]. Be loved by them, envied by them, scrutinized by them. Have brands shell out money for your endorsements: from foundation to kitty litter. Use your proceeds to finally, finally fix your face because no matter how much virtual adoration you acquire, that doesn't stop children's stares in Costco or the fear of approaching people.

A week post-op after only sharing older photos to all your feeds, finally announce the news. Tell the people that got you out of Starbucks and will swallow any pill or drink any powder you tell them to how you finally look the way you feel. Watch the comments go from generally muddled to staunchly reproached.

*Wow. and not in the good way plastic bitch Fake. No self-love*

Lose your endorsements because your scarless face doesn't prove any points. Your scarless face inspires no one. After a few of your breakdown live videos go viral, be called a crackhead, clout chaser, and tired act. Take a breather from socials to job hunt. Have trouble finding one due to your limited work experience and abrupt resignation from Starbucks. Cry. Cry. Cry.

After a relentless and awful day that began with bleaching your favorite shirt and ended with your weed dealer getting busted, finally log back into your socials. Notice your follower counts no longer have six figures on any platform. Why? Why? Why? Scroll through enough comments to make your stomach mangle within itself. Ponder how self-improvement could be so

devastating. Finally, sit in front of the mirror and touch the ghost of your scar. Feel nothing but smooth skin. Then, without an ounce of hesitation, get up and look in the mirror. Realize the people want what they want, and it's no longer you. Go under the knife, this time in the comfort of your own kitchen. Start at your left ear, and make a new laceration into dominion.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *'recidivism' is a critique on how social media can be a safe haven and simultaneously a disease. It also serves as a cautionary tale to not confuse your desires with others' expectations. I've found that I appreciate reading narration that feels very honest and objective, so that's what I aim for as a narrator in pieces that aren't first person.*

**BIO:** *Andrea Jefferson is an author residing in Southern Louisiana with her lover and kitten. Her work has been featured in Eunoia Review, Bridge, Bending Genres, littledeathlit mag, trampset and others. She writes between Wal-Mart shifts and existential crises. Find the author on Twitter @honeydreere*

# Nine excerpts from *Buena Vista*, a book project

by Andrew Steketee

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Sometimes you can just sense talent rising from the page before you read it. This is the case with Buena Vista. Fish and fishing, humanoids, space and space stations, Thoreau and Jesus are just some of the turbo-charged leitmotifs that twinkle like stars in Steketee's precocious Brautiganesque constellation. As we move through this extravaganza of minimalism we stumble upon isolated plural realities—like funhouse mirrors—and the fragmentation of dimensions as we know them. The author's prosody is beyond autocombustibly beautiful. Quote: 'Beneath the Salvation Army portico a pantywaist with facial scars and bloodshot eyes brandishes his 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel inscription.' And, 'This means Krishna drank from the sacred waters of La Cienega—poured his thick reptilian beauty into the galaxy./When you're ready I can take your credit card information'. Five stars. (The spacing is the author's own: we publish all submissions exactly as received.)*

## Wrong Number

UNKNOWN MAN. Saw you called.

UNKNOWN WOMAN. I was calling someone else and hit your number instead.

UNKNOWN MAN. This is someone else.

UNKNOWN WOMAN. The other someone else.

I DON'T CARE IF IT RAINS OR FREEZES LONG AS MY PLASTIC JESUS IS SITTING  
ON THE DASHBOARD OF MY CAR

I pay close attention to the Plastic Jesus. He always banks into turns and jumps up and down in frenzied excitement when I crank up some speed metal. These are good qualities, but what he really has down is going with the flow, which is something we all should do. When you try to assert your will on a problem or situation it closes your mind to divine assistance. I never rig a rod until I'm on the water, regardless of what I saw or fished the day before. I listen to what the river is saying today. Most of the time she says, "Keep it simple stupid," which I assume Jesus would say as well. Although right now he's saying, "Stay out of the woods, because drunk white men are up there with high-powered rifles!" Hunting season is a good time to stay down on the river, where you're less likely to get shot. Like the Elk, the Browns get feisty as we drop into fall. You tie on big fur bugs with names like Sex Dungeon and Meat Whistle. You smash your flies against the bank and rip them out. Trout don't have hands, so they smack your bugs with the only weapons they do have—their faces. Maybe you hook one in ten, but the fun is getting them to chase. It's been suggested that Jesus was a dry fly fisherman, which I believe to be true, but I'm equally certain he would huck big fur bugs when the river told him to.

Live from the WORLD HEADQUARTERS

Kea C. Hause Esq.

## The Dog Shit

Every morning an overweight man watches the neighbor's dog shit in his yard. The overweight man says to the neighbor, Your dog is shitting in my yard. My dog? says the neighbor. Yes, the black and white dog, says the overweight man. No, it can't be, he's such a good dog, says the neighbor. But he's not a good dog, says the overweight man, he's always shitting in my yard. My dog? says the neighbor. Yes, the black and white dog, says the overweight man. No, it can't be, he's such a good dog, says the neighbor. But he's not a good dog, says the overweight man, he's always shitting in my yard. My dog? says the neighbor . . .

## Miscommunication

When you call she never picks up, so don't call anymore. (Telephones are for pantywaists.) Walk to her house with a fountain pen and yellow notepad. Write in large letters: I NEVER LOVED YOU. Hold it up to the window . . .

## Empty Light of the Sea

Unless you're an artist like Joel-Peter Witkin, willing to dissect violence, you must believe in terrible things. Things inside other things: squalls on the North Atlantic, early morning industrial accidents, tumors in newborns, etc.

As a child, after a car wreck near church, Witkin saw some girl's head roll against the curb.

Years later, he wrote about being the dead air trapped between two buildings, seeing and hearing two separate, but connected events: Southworth and Hawes photographing Lola Montez; a person being strangled.

Order opened: a woman's face repeatedly erased, two years compiling *The Atrocity Series*, severed head after severed head.

For the rest of us it's different. Getting high under power lines. *Buteos* surveying the ford. Trying to remake the vermiculations of our everyday lives.

Without death, or serious violence, it can't be high art.

It's why Jeffers cultivated coastline, corrected meaning with eagles, storms and the terrible empty light of the sea . . .

## Lonely Lonely Man

### One

Himalayan restaurant. A middle-aged man and his ex-wife sit in a booth and exchange paperwork.

EX-WIFE. I'll have the chicken tiki masala.

TEENAGE WAITER. Okay . . . *(Turns toward the ex-husband.)* And for you sir?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. *(Looks at ex-wife.)* Tiki?

EX-WIFE. *(Looks back with contempt.)* Tiki?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Chicken tiki masala?

EX-WIFE. I said tikka.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Sounded like tiki.

EX-WIFE. Who cares?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I don't think anyone cares. *(Addresses the teenage waiter.)* Does it bother you when patrons refer to chicken tikka masala as chicken tiki masala?

TEENAGE WAITER. *(Uncomfortably.)* Excuse me sir?

EX-WIFE. *(Gets up, walks from table.)* You're an angry, hurt person. Your relationship with me sucks. You're just booty hurt I'm seeing someone.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I don't give a shit who you're sleeping with.

EX-WIFE. *(Walks further away, waves hand.)* It's finally time you got over me . . .

### Two

The middle-aged man sits on a couch across from his psychologist. On the other side of the couch is a female doll, propped against a pillow.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. (*Looks at the doll.*) Is the doll my ex-wife?

PSYCHOLOGIST. Not necessarily . . .

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. My mother?

PSYCHOLOGIST. It's whoever you need it to be.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. That doesn't mean anything.

PSYCHOLOGIST. (*Leans back.*) What does it mean?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Nothing, it's a stupid doll.

PSYCHOLOGIST. That's good . . .

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. What?

PSYCHOLOGIST. The anger . . .

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Is *this* the therapy?

### Three

The middle-aged man sits at a kitchen table, across from a photograph of his ex-wife.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. (*Addresses photograph.*) Better than a doll, but still weird.

PHOTOGRAPH. (*No answer.*)

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. You sucked as a wife.

PHOTOGRAPH. (*No answer.*)

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. And as a person.

PHOTOGRAPH. (*Dog barks outside.*)

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. The doctor says you're a narcissist.

PHOTOGRAPH. (*No answer.*)

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. That your pattern of behavior would be appropriate for a king in 16th century England, but not for ordinary people.

PHOTOGRAPH. *(Dog barks again.)*

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I wonder how long it takes your boyfriend to come . . .

#### Four

The middle-aged man idles a sedan in his ex-wife's driveway. She hands him paperwork through an open driver-side window.

EX-WIFE. Sign the disclosure.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I like your boyfriend's truck.

EX-WIFE. I have a right to be happy.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. It's good to be happy.

EX-WIFE. *(Leans closer with disgust.)* Don't patronize me.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. You should be happy, you look *(Pause.)* happy.

EX-WIFE. You never knew me . . .

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I knew everything.

EX-WIFE. You're a lonely man. You're empty. That's why we're divorced.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Does he wear boots and pressed jeans?

EX-WIFE. *(Taps index finger against the window.)* Lonely, lonely man . . .

#### Five

The middle-aged man sits in a restaurant with a red-haired woman.

RED-HAIRED WOMAN. How long were you married?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. A long time.

RED-HAIRED WOMAN. *(Flicks hair.)* Do you still get along with your ex?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Yes, *(Pause.)* we get along great.

RED-HAIRED WOMAN. Oh that's good, it's so important to get along with others.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Yes, it's very important.

RED-HAIRED WOMAN. *(Flicks hair.)* She'll always be a part of you.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Part of who?

RED-HAIRED WOMAN. *(Smiles, nods.)* Part of you.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. *(Stares.)* We're divorced.

RED-HAIRED WOMAN. I meant the part of you that's not.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. What part is that?

## Six

The middle-aged man follows a woman into a restaurant bathroom. The woman walks into a stall and closes the door.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. *(Standing before the stall.)* They have me on Xanax, but I'm still not sleeping, and the doctor has me talking to a doll . . .

WOMAN IN STALL. Can I help you?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I guess the doll is supposed to be you.

WOMAN IN STALL. Excuse me?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. He wants me to sit and talk to it.

WOMAN IN STALL. *(Raises voice.)* Sir!

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. A shitty little version of you.

WOMAN IN STALL. Excuse me sir, can I ask you to leave?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Whole thing is beyond stupid.

WOMAN IN STALL. I'm not her.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I saw your boyfriend yesterday. He seems like a great guy, with his boots and pressed jeans . . .

### Seven

The middle-aged man talks to an old high school friend on the phone.

FRIEND. Dude, get out here . . .

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. This weekend?

FRIEND. You'll come unhinged.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I'm out of town.

FRIEND. I'm the professor of authenticity.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Wonderful line.

FRIEND. J [n] a profession, a passion, a platform . . . [sic]

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Maybe say you're Jared Leto's speech therapist.

FRIEND. Later, didddleroo.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Do you ever miss your ex?

FRIEND. O-t=====tookd Perch Ambient==, Zanaflex Alive, Dexilant and Lorazepam and a bottle of white, bottle of red, gissumaster . . . [sic]

### Eight

The middle-aged man sits on a couch across from the psychologist.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Can we be honest?

PSYCHOLOGIST. Of course.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I can't talk to the doll.

PSYCHOLOGIST. It's a projection, not a person.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. I could, however, burn one with lighter fluid . . .

PSYCHOLOGIST. *(Leans back.)* That's interesting.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. What, exactly?

PSYCHOLOGIST. Burning a doll.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Feels like something I could do.

PSYCHOLOGIST. Let's not burn any dolls.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Really?

PSYCHOLOGIST. I don't think so.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. Can I borrow the doll?

PSYCHOLOGIST. For what purpose?

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. To put in my bag and take to dinner.

## Nine

Himalayan restaurant. The middle-aged man sits in a booth with the female doll, propped against a pillow.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. No one ever considers the small details.

FEMALE DOLL. *(No answer.)*

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. We're told not to care.

FEMALE DOLL. *(No answer.)*

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. But they probably matter the most.

FEMALE DOLL. *(No answer.)*

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. The Austrians understood this implicitly.

FEMALE DOLL. *(Some dishes break in the kitchen.)*

MIDDLE-AGED MAN. (*Turns toward window.*) But this is nice—just you and me—and some well-deserved silence . . .

## Book Signing

Beneath the Salvation Army portico a pantywaist with facial scars and bloodshot eyes brandishes his *42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* inscription.

To Davey,

Can't lick these hotty balls. Three culprits: 1) veedee 2) hog wool slacks 3) the  
brunette behind you.

See you at Toney's,

John Dos Passos

## Items Left on a Kitchen Table

1. Applebee's jumbo shrimp.
2. Weakside blitz package scrawled on a yellow legal pad.
3. iPod Nano, headphones, "Polyethylene (Parts 1 & 2)".
4. Unpaid real estate taxes.
5. Photographs of overweight children.
6. Plastic fern.
7. Raincoat.
8. Elmo sippy cup.
9. Sleeping pills.
10. Handwritten suicide note . . .

## Transcendental Meditation

Breathe, visualize, repeat the Vedic mantra assigned by our certified instructor.

Jig jug

Tig tug

Teene weene peene jon

This means Krishna drank from the sacred waters of La Cienega—poured his thick, reptilian beauty into the galaxy.

When you're ready I can take your credit card information.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Told through a collection of flash fiction, short plays, lists, letters and essays, *Buena Vista* loosely chronicles the author's journeys through California; his upbringing in Michigan; the freestone magic of Rocky Mountain rivers; meditations on Thoreau, art and the sea—all in a work of autobiographical fiction. Stylistically, *Buena Vista's* zeitgeist is driven by Lydia Davis's simple *ars poetica*: "You can't tell everyone the truth all the time, and you certainly can't tell anyone the whole truth, ever, because it would take too long."

**BIO:** Andrew Steketee is a writer, online content strategist and former editor of *The Flyfish Journal* and *MidCurrent*. He is the co-author of two books, *Castwork* and *Tideline* (Willow Creek Press), which received positive acclaim from *Men's Journal*, *Outside* and the *New York Times*, and won the MIPA Book Awards: Art/Photo First Place (2002) and MIPA Book Awards: Nature Honorable Mention (2005), respectively. His work has appeared in *The Flyfish Journal*, *The Drake*, *Entropy* and the *Mountain Gazette*. Andrew is the graduate of the University of Michigan and Western Michigan University, where he studied undergraduate and graduate English. He has traveled extensively across the US Rockies, west coast, southern coast, New England, Canada and lives in Colorado.

# POETRY

# MASTER OF THE DANCE

## and other poems with art work

by Lito Silva

## By Maria Straw-Cinar

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** Poetry editor Hezekiah writes...

*If you despise poetry, as I do, you just have to buck up and read THIS. It is unlikely you will experience anything quite like it. Frankly, Straw-Cinar's poetry is too good for a rag like FLEAS and a ham-fisted panhandling PhD editor. I am in love with her words...*

### Master of the Dance

*In an attempt to highlight quotes from this work, I wound-up merely rewriting it. The imagery has universality and its theme might be something native to us all. Just start it and dare yourself not to be transfixed by the end.*

### Nossa Infancia

*For those who share my limited ability to translate what I suspect might be Portuguese, 'Our Childhood.' I wouldn't wish for my fellow unilingual readers to pass up on this one. 'Skipping hoops, skidding stones,' 'glisten like glarneys,' 'mandarin sunbeams,' 'flutters of pencil-sharpenings curling.' It goes on, and so could I. Imagine being read bedtime stories by the one who submitted this? Another fine reason FOTD could no longer resist publishing poetry.*

### Hot heat Jazz

*I wish there were fewer submissions so I could get some sleep. But my dreams pale in comparison. This has got to be the most erudite piece of rap I have ever not listened to. I would like to think it has been set to music because it transcends poetry. Somewhere Leonard Cohen is heartbroken lamenting not having written it. Omit it at your peril.*

Nossa [*'Our' if you remember*] Dance

*Pretty cheeky sending a compilation of greatest hits, like this, in the edition inaugurating all things poetical—we'll press on: 'treble cleft hearts,' 'bodies curve / quotation marks / leaning toward their / future' There are lots more to choose, pick your own.*

<<<>>>

*It's time for me to cease my inferior critiques before I get a not-so-mild crush on the anonymous person who wrote this stuff. By now, if you've loved these, you'll love them all and probably already read the rest... no sense me clattering on in my comparative pedestrian manner. I'm only allowed so much space. Still I couldn't help denoting some singular highlights. Let the Artist speak:*

Eden : *'Him / formless and empty / dusted off Man' ...the curse of the 'y' chromosome.*

Afeto : *[Affair or affection, I think,...for readers like me] 'cutcake moulds / blasted in the / ancient kiln'*

The Exchange : *Can't isolate a single line, maybe, 'you whisper through my skin'*

Middle Earth : *Primigravida, look it up, I had to. I felt exactly the same way during my first pregnancy. Though I could never have expressed it like this.*

Roots of Love : *This one is so beautifully erotic, I was obliged to offer myself a short break.*

A-feto : *['A fetus']—from an affair to a fetus...you gotta love this language. Aurum means gold, I think, I am sure to be fired as resident poetaster: 'dawnstrains' downstream. Maybe I'm getting a little overwhelmed.*

*I'm giving up scribbling verse and sticking to poker. Read 'em and weep and rejoice...feast on the pictures if they publish them as well. H. S.*



## Master of the Dance

Hidden in history's huts,  
the beat rises –  
hands become drums,

servants master their bodies  
manoeuvre and slide secret  
coded *rodas* to  
free the slaveself  
from shackles

break the Cakewalk  
topping of sugarsweet  
blackgold sold to stiffen  
the upper lip

Fight dance macabre  
out of huts of history  
flappers flap,  
plantations slap slaves  
slap back, dance as  
the whip cracks-a-way  
smacks the Black Bottom  
with Charleston flicks as  
Lindy hopping white women  
kick away pencil thin lives.

hands clapping, rapping rhythms of life...

slavemaster stabs a steak through  
cardinal dancing hearts –  
*take his clothes, strip his soul*  
stomp him down; but his burnet  
blanket shining skin bounds and leaps  
frisks and frolicks,       kicks and screams

Gene Kelly *singing in the rain*  
came from slave pain.

Caporeira do you dare  
dance in shadowlight  
cat-like whips and hisses,  
razor blades grasped tightly,  
silvery toes glint and strike  
fork-lightning flashes –  
slashed in a blink of an eye  
slaveprints shape new skies

Now the slavemaster's blighted

*blackgold* crops fight back.

*It's just a dance*

dance, swish, kick

fat cat owl sees no pussy cat now,

twisted purrs,

contorted Houdini escapees

find the key,

hips slash and sway

as the juke box plays –

like last summer.

Language divides, bodies collide

in connecting ecstasy

and secret silent wars

masters swore to stop –

Achilles heel cut;

*Let them never dance again.*

...

And the masters sit on porches,

cocks in the hoop,

sundowner drinks clink,

night's auric rush

sinks into sheltering sky

Yet faintly, in the distance

of deadly blackgold skies,

a sound that never ceases,

urgent as the first-

born's heartbeat,

still, the tap tap tap,

drumming, endless thumbing

rolling spools of memory –

the slave dance springs

eternal, blossoming heat of life –

a drum a drum

the slave doth come.



## Nossa Infancia

Skimming hoops, skidding stones, new bones frizz with glory pinging  
round the china bowl days that glisten like glarneys,  
voices hollowing out the sky, then home to motherlove, bedded and warm;  
lying looking at the stars, diamond punched bliss, Mama's tender kiss  
wrapping up the night – mandarin sunbeams awaken sleepy bye eyes –  
flutters of pencil-sharpenings curling, unfurling to flight;  
a whisper of moths heading for light,

tongues not yet tied announce all they see, tulip lips, sharp and sweet  
as lemony wine, taste symphonies planted deep down in memory;  
new knees skinned – drops of blood splash sorrel sands like raspberry  
tarts laughter stretches apricot sky, fills air with dew no adult can crush,  
quash, quell – belly laughs spiral and swell rubious apple peels  
helicoptering heavens, airborne howls and roars of joy bodyshaking  
delights, vibrate and quake the earth's erythraean core.

Oh! Cracked and spider-veined planet, rejoice in these tiny taps on  
your stilton-bruised brain; head cut – scarred indelible, keep running,  
into forever, unstoppable.



### **Hot heat Jazz**

Call and response notes float over killing fields,  
spiritual stories – nuggets of blackgold  
boldy hollered across snowy cotton fields,  
sound of music hanging in air laying bare  
a hard day's nightache

Rising from rags in time into the mix, European clicks  
Irish jigs, German waltzes, French quadrilles  
New Orleans schmaltz and sass  
*all that jazz*

#### *Ragtime!*

Flappers chop their hair  
Americans throw caution...  
swing to new rhythm,  
synchronicity glides,  
shades of blue  
Gillespie-life fizzy  
notes spinning ol'  
black magic Dizzy,  
and the dancehall born,  
till wartorn cries screech  
down time's elevator shafts,  
a man with no notion of rhyme –  
rises up speaking guttural,  
drowning out music  
and the dance halls close,  
all the good players  
shipped off to die –  
them white folk found no one  
to make dance hall songs fly,





### **Nossa Dance**

Semi-quavers quiver  
bent-double  
on the dancefloor,  
tender is the night,  
moonlit bodies bob  
with the current,  
treble cleft hearts  
spin solo, all souls  
now one –

punctuated movement,  
semi-colonials of the night's  
exclamations, abbreviations –

a ricochet of notes  
slip slyly away  
from the saxophone's  
crushed crescendos –  
midnight's ellipsis...  
bodies curve  
quotation marks  
leaning towards their  
future



## Eden

In the beginning...Him  
formless and empty  
dusted off Man  
lying beneath the Knowledge Tree  
tossed a spare rib  
to seed a woman  
skin and blistered  
*Soon they knew*  
flat-bellied serpent  
forked tongue stung,  
tied and muted  
a couple of swells  
damned in time.

Him.

And in the end, she,  
cow-heft , colossal  
taut as a drum,  
face-lifted  
ready for the final fling –  
ribs, hips and bone  
shift and flood  
uncrumpling life,

canyon echoes  
hang in her hair –

Her.



### **Afeto**

slit-moonfruit, slippery skin  
hardens, pips and seed  
bleed this quiet room  
hanging bat blind as  
curled up grace,  
two-faced twin –  
dreams in waiting

inside the cave walls  
lingering with intent  
lallygags this bodydouble,  
cyclopic seahorse  
with one-eye on the prize,  
scaffolding skin shapes –  
cutcake moulds  
blasted in the  
ancient kiln

moon into sun,  
then a cry –  
a sound so old  
swelling up from the earth  
that first O  
now broken.  
the division  
is done.

### **The Exchange**

Mum, bird-like, vulnerable,  
slain by this raw war,  
wheeled around like cargo  
on the way to X-ray,  
hell's waiting room,  
the cavernous lift-mouth  
ready to swallow you whole,  
slowly, you turn and smile,  
wry-eyed trickster  
stroking my belly  
with your soft-punctured hands,  
*you're on the way in,*  
you whisper through my skin:  
*I'm on my way out.*

Flashbulb blasts,  
cancerous illuminations  
ignite the fallow field,  
chemo's dread shots,  
death's decoy  
phosphorous pin-pricks  
devouring your insides.

And then you...

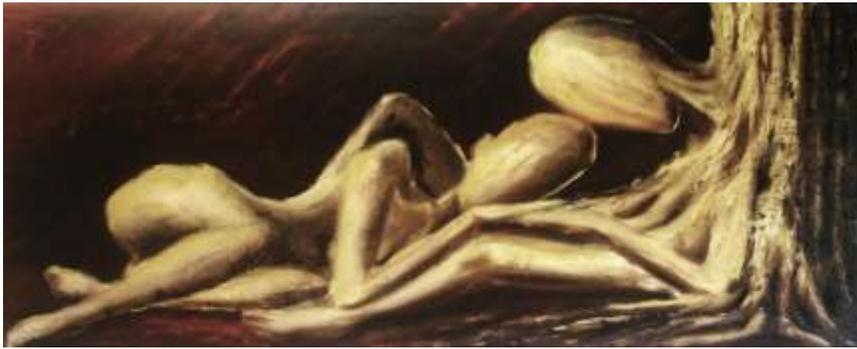
Your hand flutters inside,  
butterfly fingers flicker  
your still beating heart  
*ta ra pa pum pum*  
urgent, pulsating me

and my drum desperate  
to be known,  
the swamp-like scan  
revealing tiny limb  
and bone, acrobatic  
tumbler in the spin  
of life

this is the spirit world  
and all the monitors  
in this whitecure-scape  
cannot fathom  
the depths  
we feel.

### **Middle Earth**

Mother, the face of all roots –  
middle-aged-birthers need their Mothers,  
Mama now themselves, Primigravida, later Mater;  
childlike until Mother's hood darkens the path,  
no book to show the way – middle-earth Mother  
neither here nor there, freedom gone  
along with Mother's love, now you are the Mother,  
but know not what you do, middle-earthed,  
the child and the ancient pull both ways  
as baby cries for you, just you,  
but who can you cry to  
only the empty space  
the lost place  
shaped  
Mother



## Roots of Love

Pushing down into forever  
embedded in the soil's soul  
rooted in histories of love  
*We are made from clay*  
the earth creaks as your love shifts  
planets collide to the sound of your kiss  
where does it come from?

You give me edible glitter made of stars  
awakening spasms of spangled dust  
silver-swarm fallout  
(ashes) lain dormant for years  
We are magnificent

Splayed and slopped in the dirt  
we root our pleasure into perfect skin  
and bones, set in stone  
like two muddied gods  
wrestling in the dark  
bloodhounds of love  
listening to the earth's beating heart  
We are magnificent

Searing of the roots  
earthquakes shake us –  
Mercury forces us back  
erases the oceans,  
ravages the forests  
the mad moon is pulling  
the roots from the trees.

We were once magnificent.

### **A-feto**

tiny dragon flames,  
keying our aurum hearts  
precious wail rises  
bloating air  
balloons a-fresh  
dawnstrains  
newly  
born  
a-feto

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *A chance meeting with the talented artist Lito Silva led us to collaborate on this project, 'Afeto', using the rhythms and themes of his paintings to inspire the poems. In*

Portuguese the word has a dual meaning, affection and fetus (afeto/a-feto). I then discovered the word 'ekphrastic' meant putting words to images, it seemed such a fantastic word so I went on to curate an Ekphrastic exhibition, readings can be found on my Facebook page Poetry Live Maria Straw-Cinar. <http://www.facebook.com/mariastrawcinar>

As well as organizing my own readings, I have read at The Arts Night, Kilburn and The Poetry Café open mic nights, the thrill and energy of live readings is exciting for me as a poet as the words and sounds transform and transport us somewhere other, elsewhere, time out of mind as Dylan would say. I have always loved Bob. I am thrilled to say that my collection was nominated for the Ted Hughes Award 2019 for innovation in poetry. Here's to more chance meetings!

**BIO:** Maria Straw-Cinar is a poet, writer, actress and teacher. Her debut novel **girl** was shortlisted for the Cinnamon Press Novel Award. In 2016 she published a poetry collection, **Flamenco**, with Lulu Press and her play, **Vinegar Alley**, was long-listed for the Papatango Award. Her website 'Poetry and Other Pleasures' [mariastrawcinar.blog](http://mariastrawcinar.blog) showcases her new projects as well as her past work.

She is currently a Doctorate researcher at De Montfort University working on a practice-based creative PhD. **The Resurrection Women**, developing a TV drama, **Wild Women of Paris**, about Natalie Barney and the female artists and writers living in Paris in the 1920's. She aims to create more female-centric narratives and bring to life inspirational women in history in her writing for theatre, film and television.

**girl** will be published by the **Blue Nib Press** in Spring 2020. Visit them at <https://thebluenib.com>

# 6 poems

*by yuan changming*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... 'Okay, Charles, are these any better? I know you guys don't have time to babysit me but I'm fucken new at this, remember? So here goes. I truly enjoyed these as profound but how long should I be going on? Got to go to my other job now...

**Broadway.com**...has an element of the gestalt. We are either invited only so far or assumed to know more. It evokes a charming, foreboding subtext. The tribulations of the pursuit of fame—yin and yang—reduced to the binary has a resonant, contrasting randomness. **Speciatiing**...is a delightful diatribe on the human condition and the world at large that offers a refreshing respite for the glass-half-full reader. **Creative Matrix**...This is my personal favourite (Cdn. sp)...the three states of matter served up with both entropy and empathy, both sublimating and uplifting. Imagine having written this. I might keep a copy in my wallet—I will appear to be clever and it will seem thicker. **Hocus Pocus**...and the hits just keep coming. This submission should be bound as an anthology. Read it yourself. What wouldn't you give to spend a day inside this poet's mind? So Twitter everybody about him. **House Advisory**...Head chakra chills. You're wasting your time reading my WWLI. Read the poems. **I Give Up A Strong Desire**...Okay, just read them! Or even better, read them to someone you love. And if they don't cherish it as a great gift, leave them. H. S.

**Broadway.com**

If ever at all, if only once

If you were

To have such a chance  
Just keep driving  
Drive forward  
With no need to take a shoulder check  
  
Despite so many beside you  
Despite so much ahead & behind –

Along this new street, your car  
(Like your body or thought)  
Will adapt its shape like a stream  
Of water running its own course  
From past to future, amidst  
Programmed sapiens, through  
The flow of data

Until at the meeting point  
Between yin & yang  
Between 0 & 1  
Between time & space

### **Speciating**

O yeah! There are still sapiens on Earth. Often do we remember & feel more than proud that only we Superbeings exist, we the most sophisticated & most exquisite human-robot compounds. It is true that from time to time we cannot help recalling one or two of them, like Shakespeare & Einstein, but that's when they pop up unexpectedly from the back of a chip as a couple of forgotten algorithms. Their story tells them they are much more developed physically & intellectually than chimpanzees, while in the heart of history the latter is at least spiritually far more respectable. Since sapiens have proven good for



This [fluid] cures

All diseases

This [sequence of syllables] drives away

All evils & devils

This [ritual] ensures

Good weather & good harvest

This [hat/hood] guarantees

Purity, loyalty

This [flag] leads right

To paradise

This [man] is

A living god

This [statue, foiled or not] is

Omnipotent

This [chip] will transform us

Into superors

*So long as man is in his story*

*All is well that believes well*

### **House Advisory**

Roof: Always stand high & look afar beyond!

Attic: Fix the leak first!

Ceiling: Never hit the ceiling with megalomaniac!

Wall: Turn around before getting a nasty bump on your head!

Balcony: Stand aside to take a bird's view of the situation!

Window: let some light enter your life!

Floor: Set your feet firmly in reality!

Stairs: [Watch your step! Or] Take one step at a time!

*A few more from fixtures:*

Air conditioner: Keep cool & calm!

Bed: Dare to dream!

Clock: Treasure every minute!

Calendar: Go along with the times!

Mirror: It's necessary to examine your life from time to time!

Table lamp: Live to illuminate others!

Toilet: [Most important,] just let it go !!

### **I Give up a Strong Desire**

Long long have I longed

To write (all my very superlatives

Into) a book, a masterpiece, hopefully

With every vivid descriptive detail, &

Sophisticated suspension, all designed

To work perfectly for a super sur-plot

In a unique inner-outer setting, both

As factual as fictional, as

Full of in-

Sights into the human nature as into

My own protobeing

But alas, after nearly one thousand attempts

I finally decide to stop, mainly because of

My fear about failure to find a close reader

Other than myself

Because I know my writing never appeals

To any editor even in my mother tongue

Because

Indeed, to live my story is, after all

More urgent than to story my life

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *After reading **Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow**, a book by Israeli author Yuval Noah Harari, I often think about the way we humans have kept inventing stories to believe in, but our civilization seems to have taken a wrong direction: while our capacity to conquer the objective world has developed dramatically in terms of science and technology, our mind/heart/spirit or subjective world remains hardly improved as we continue. Items in this batch result from my musings along these lines and my main intention is to call attention to the need for us to be more self-reflective as a species.*

**BIO:** *Yuan Changming published monographs in translation before leaving his native country. Currently, Yuan edits Poetry Pacific with Alan Qing Yuan in Vancouver. Credits include ten Pushcart nominations and publications in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-2017) and BestNewPoemsOnline, among others.*

# Some Poems from *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face*

by Mitchell Grabois

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: *...when a submission crash lands into our Inbox that is soooo good we're jumping like fleas on a dog....mesmerizing bard-ings that read like compressed novels, or at the very least, short stories...the breeze inside the gale...Listen to...'the woman with dead eyes whispers 'I am misunderstood' and 'women about to explode into glitter/who wear their features as if they/own them'. Almost every line is get out of your seat good and images infiltrate the mind in startling quanta...awake us and transform. The dirt inside Grabois's music pulls us down to an earth unwashed...and in that grimy, smoky bar on skid row streets everywhere doth Bukowski raise his glass...in the hoary din of Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit'...'WTF, Mitch. Laureate with an upper case 'L'. Feed your head, poetaster. Feed your head...' E.S. **Read Cynthia Anderson's review of The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face in Nonfiction. Read Mitchell Grabois's 'Author Guidelines' in Issue 2 (Nonfiction).***

**RICH SOOS**, editor of **Cholla Needles** writes...*Unlike most writers, Mitchell Grabois is not hiding behind words in some abstract mumbo jumbo that is known as 'poetry' in academia. You will understand every word, every sentiment. His plain-speak is disarming...*

Excerpted with permission of Marc Pietrzykowski (publisher) and Pski's Porch Publishing, NY. Visit their website at [www.pskisporch.com](http://www.pskisporch.com)

## At Walden Pond

My car was rolling

but it was dying

Mercedes and Audi wheelwomen

sped by

blaring their horns:

*hate-filled screaming*

We were very near Walden Pond

very near transcendentalism

I came out of my hotel room the next morning

and couldn't start my car

Tears came to my eyes and trickled down my cheeks

as if I were a skilled actor

A nun came out of the room next to mine

and spied me crying

She came up to me and let me know that she loved me

She loved misery and poverty

and her nearness to Thoreau's cabin

Thoreau needed so little

He didn't need a Japanese car

He didn't need a nun to console him

He didn't need a god of consolation

There was a repair shop down the road

and the nun put her shoulder  
to the cool metal  
applied her love and minimal weight  
and together we shoved the vehicle down the road  
She was sweating when we arrived  
and the mechanic  
in a Boston accent  
condemned me for using a nun  
as an animal

*It was her idea, I said*

*her idea*

*A nun is like a child, he said*

*She has to be protected from*

*her foolish notions*

## **The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face**

I kissed the woman who slices lunch meat  
at King Sooper's  
She shoved smoked turkey at me  
leaned away  
and called: *Next!*

I kissed my doctor

I'd been wanting to do it

since she first told me to stick out my tongue

and complemented me on its smoothness

and the elegance of my taste buds

I kissed her and she asked

*On a scale of one to ten, how have you been feeling this week?*

I kissed her again

*Have you been seeing or hearing things that aren't really there?*

*Have you been feeling suicidal or homicidal?*

I kissed her more deeply

really sent my tongue to a remote locale

*Do you have access to weapons?*

I said:

*How can you ask me that*

*after everything we've been through?*

*Anyway, this is America*

She called Security

Security knew me

from the days when I was a high school football star

and an amateur boxer and cage fighter

who went by the moniker *Destructo*

They were afraid of me  
called the cops  
warned them: *Be sure to bring your stun guns  
your billy clubs  
and chemical weapons*

The first cop who entered the room—  
I kissed her  
She yelled *FREEZE!*  
*Hands where I can see them!*  
*Get down on your knees!*

I happily complied

## **Pesticide**

After a struggle  
they took me from my farm  
Farmers always fight  
to stay on their land

Weather, banks  
and the nuthouse

are three of our biggest threats

And bugs of course

I filled my suitcase

with my special blend of

DDT and Arsenic

It had always worked for me before

but they yelled at me

and took my case

and put it in the attic

They said they'd give it back when I left

but I knew they would never let me out

## Trap

The woman with dead eyes says:

*I am misunderstood*

*bruised by indifferent humanity*

When I see her on the bus I ignore her

I don't want to fall into her trap

She could suck the juice from my soul

She could pigeonhole me

like a used book on a shelf

pages brown and curled

So I ignore her

for my own protection

Her cunt broadcasts like a radio

She flexes her calves

as she lays in bed sleepless

Insomnia has made her calves into hardballs

With that locomotive power

she could push me into the next county

into a dry corn field

She could bulldoze me into Murphy's Bar

My only defense is to keep myself off the TV screen

of her malignant drama

I must always remember:

*she is the woman with dead eyes*

If I forget

all I have to do is look in her eyes

If she's wearing sunglasses

I must rely on memory

## Glitterbang

Cheryl gets off the bus at the wrong stop and is  
surrounded by women about to explode  
into glitter

women who wear their features as if they  
own them  
women with symmetry and grace  
women with so much confidence that  
if they wanted to  
they could destroy Iran's nuclear weapons program  
with a thrust of their breasts

Cheryl pulls her raincoat tightly around her  
but the black hole that is her soul  
sucks in all the stylish women  
dozens of them  
until the sidewalks are empty

Another bus pulls to the curb  
The doors open  
Cheryl climbs in

## Landlady

My landlady worked as a police dispatcher in Oakland  
but was a habitual gambler  
and though she owned a pink Cadillac she won in Vegas  
she never had any money

I suggested that she let me sell the Caddy  
and put the money in an account  
that I would manage for her  
but, though we'd become lovers  
and I'd moved in with her  
she didn't trust me enough

Instead she sent me  
on daily missions to the dumpsters  
behind the Safeway two blocks away  
for their best produce

She had a saying:

*In America only the very rich*

*and the very poor*

*understand that resources are limitless*

I didn't want to do it

but she wasn't making me pay rent

so I gave in

I was already clinically depressed

and dumpster diving

put me even further down in the dumps

so when I was arrested

for trespassing and theft

and placed in the back of a squad car

it felt right

Alone in the jail cell

I felt lonely

and longed for company

even if it were another prince of degradation

My landlady bailed me out in the morning

told the cop that she'd warned me

not to dumpster dive

(as if I were her juvenile delinquent son)

but that it was my drug

We cruised slowly in the pink Cadillac

headed for home

## Cheryl Begins Her Career as a Homeless Person

Cheryl tapes a knife to her inner thigh

buys a can of mace

stands at the freeway onramp

She drove up this ramp many times

back when she had a car

She always picked up hitchhikers

even when they looked dangerous

especially when they looked dangerous

so she hopes someone stops for her

someone who won't try to rape her

because then she'd have to cut off his dick

She's so fucking tired of being a temp

and now she's not

She told the manager at the agency:

*Take this job and shove it!*

## He laughed

a big hearty peal of laughter

Ever since Johnny Paycheck sang that song in 1977

he's looked forward to someone saying that to him

and it's taken until 2012  
so he pumps his fist and shouts *Yes!*  
pulls a hundred-dollar bill out of his top drawer  
the same bill he's held since 1978  
through several low-level managerial jobs  
and hands it to a  
confused Cheryl  
plants a big kiss on her forehead, which normally  
she would not tolerate  
but she's too taken by surprise to do anything  
like kick him in the balls  
which she's always wanted to do to a boss  
not as far back as 1977  
because she wasn't even born then  
but for a long time  
which she's always wanted to do to a boss  
not as far back as 1977  
because she wasn't even born then  
but for a long time

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Readers sometimes ask what my stylistic/literary influences are—the question leaves me baffled. Since the publication of *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face*, a couple of reviewers have compared me to Bukowski—but I never read Bukowski's poems until three years ago, so his could not have been an influence on mine. However, Bukowski and I came from similar backgrounds—a little rough and unschooled.*

*However, paradoxically, I did attend college. It was against my wishes. By the time I finished high school, I had come to believe that one learns best from life, not books.*

*I took three creative writing classes while enrolled in college. My first professor had one normal eye and one that looked out into an unknown dimension. Her mantra was: "Be organic in your writing." The second professor told me, "Despite Gary Snyder, English is not an idiographic language." (Snyder may have been an early influence.) The third professor claimed that the best bar on the town square was the Albany, which was not true at all. However, he was the advisor for the college's literary magazine and was thus the first publisher of my poetry. The college was Humboldt State University on California's north coast. After dropping out of UC's Berkeley, I was attracted by Humboldt's geography (rocky coastline/redwoods) as well as the college's low level of academic demand. After graduating high school in Los Angeles, I was more comfortable with a low level of academic demand than with a high one.*

*Most of my poetry has an autobiographical aspect. 'Pesticide' evolved from an experience I had soon after moving into our abandoned family farm house in The Middle of Nowhere, Michigan. The barn was a disaster. I spent a lot of time shooting feral cats—I got to be a crack shot. I killed 59 of them. They thanked me for putting them out of their misery. I also worked at removing moldy hay from the hay mow. One day, I opened a sort of secret closet and found a full 50 pound bag labeled: **Arsenic and DDT**. In the old days, my grandfather and other farmers used all kinds of evil chemicals deadly to bugs and humans. I thought of keeping it, in case I ever wanted to kill someone, or a lot of people, but finally took it to toxic dump day. One of my enemies was checking people in. I fancied throwing some arsenic and DDT in her face, but restrained myself.*

*'Landlady' is another autobiographical poem. I set pen to paper and pretty much described the essence of my life at the time of the poem. My landlady was pretty sexy but it was her adult daughter I was really interested in. She was a potter and worked on the wheel. She told me I could make love to her, there in the cellar, if I made a really nice pot, but no matter how hard I tried, I never mastered the technique. My arms and hands and fingers betrayed me (something they've never done in the process of writing poetry). So I was stuck with her mother.*

*'Cheryl Begins Her Career as a Homeless Person' was just another poem that described my day to day world. You know, writing this I'm reminded of something Chuck Palaniuk said about writing EIGHT CLUB—everyone was blown away by the book but it was basically just as accounting of the day-to-day lives of him and his friends in Portland. Which is a good lesson for poets and writers: Don't live a boring life and maybe you'll get some usable material out of it. My wife has always told me what a marginal person I am. Except she's wrong—committing to a relationship with her has made me far less marginal. Which leads me to another poetic reality: never underestimate the power of sex. It's one of the chief engines of our world.*

*When I lived in Humboldt County, I sat on the roof of my girlfriend's apartment building and watched the Humboldt Crabs play AA ball in the field across the highway. I felt excited, waiting for the local sluggers, twin brothers, to slam pitches out of the park. I felt the edginess of*

*acrophobia as well. When my girlfriend put her arm around me, I wasn't sure if her intent was to hold me or to shove me into space.*

*I heard the throaty roar of log trucks downshifting as they decelerated, coming down the hill towards the town's one highway traffic light—the noise cut through the crowd sounds.*

*The pungent odor of the pulp mill drifted across the bay and that smell, reviled by others, caused my soul to soar. I did not work in that mill but a sister factory, a saw mill set off the road near Big Lagoon (from which I caught many fish). I pulled wet lumber off a conveyer belt and threw it onto metal carts until they were stacked full and I yanked a chord that sent a blast of sound to summon the forklift driver.*

*After the game, I crawled back through my girlfriend's window and we listened to Mingus, Coltrane and Pharaoh Sanders on her old phonograph. It was the early seventies and we often fell asleep in each other's arms to Marvin Gaye's hit album, Let's Get It On. Later I walked across town to my abode, a barely converted horse shed, big enough for just one horse or for me. I'd wake up in the middle of the night to hear my friend Ted, enraged by his girlfriend's latest infidelity, chopping wood on my front yard which was the backyard of the house. I wasn't annoyed by being awakened—he was meeting my firewood needs. The fog drifted in and out, carrying the tang of the ocean and moistening out skin and clothing.*

*In other words, there were literally thousands of sense perceptions all the time, as there are in any place where we live and breathe. Is it possible that those were my literary influences, not books, not the styles of other authors but the styles of the world as if unfolded within the sphere of my youthful senses?*

**BIO:** *Works by Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois appears in magazines worldwide. Nominated for numerous prizes, he was awarded the 2017 Booranga Centre (Australia) Fiction Prize. His novel, Two-Headed Dog was based on his work in a state hospital and is available for Kindle and as a print edition at Amazon. His poetry collection, THE ARREST OF ME. KISSY FACE, published in March 2019 by Pski's Porch Publications is also available at Amazon. Visit his website wordsbymitch.com to read more of his poetry and flash fiction.*

## **OUR LEFT EYE**

By William Carleton

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** Common, look at it. Who couldn't resist?

Observe a dog when you cry,  
And watch him focus on your left eye.  
For if you are ever compromised  
Emotionally or otherwise,  
A dog feels it before mommy or I,  
All by watching your left eye.  
Dad says it's something within the brain.  
Each hemisphere conducts a train,  
On one end the numbers fly,  
And that's the side of my right eye.  
But where the heart decides to lean  
Is where the dog is focusing.  
Observed whenever we start to cry,  
Pouring love into our left eye.  
From 'Words from a Distance'  
Kickstarter campaign. See it at  
<http://kck.st/2ZBnblu>

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Words from a Distance* is a collection of poems written by William Vincent Carleton over the course of the past year, mostly during phone calls with his children via WhatsApp messenger. He started typing the stories they shared over the phone, recording them via a Smith-Corona mechanical typewriter from the 1950s, showing the pages to them afterward, and they thought it was magic. Soon after that, George Sellas started bringing the poems to life through illustration.

In the piece selected by Fleas on the Dog entitled *Our Left Eye*--the intention was to express the emotions that come from longing, and how domestic animals share a synchronistic relationship with their guardians. This was the feeling William had when he wrote the poem, thinking of his children and their love for animals—and it would lead to him thinking about the long road he has traveled to be reunited with them. And it's finally happening, with his return to Mexico on October 1<sup>st</sup>. This is part of the reason why this Kickstarter campaign is so crucial, as it will allow the completion and publication of this illustrated poetry book and establish William as a full-time writer in Mexico.

William's reading diet often consists of a combination of Jack Kerouac, H.P. Lovecraft, John O'Donohue, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Stephen King and Walt Whitman.

William says if he didn't write, the world would gladly shut him up, and so it would be silly for him to be doing anything else. He writes because he selfishly wants his children to remember him as the person he was in the present moment; excavating pieces buried in his mind. With these examples, his children can develop their own imaginations, characters and style, and become so much greater than anything he could aspire to be. He believes this is the truest role of any parent.

**BIO:** William Vincent Carleton is a 41-year old divorced father who has faced numerous challenges within the international family legal system in order to establish regular contact with his children. Much of what he writes about has to do with the father-child reunion. He is the author of *The Tortuga Triangle* which has also been translated into Spanish. William plans to release additional novels over the course of the next year, mainly in the realm of Science Fiction, and writes exclusively on a Smith-Corona Clipper mechanical typewriter from the 1950's on Southworth archive-quality paper.

# *A Portrait of Jesus Christ*

## *By Ian Lindsay*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: *This person should be editing our verse, writing with such profound imagery. We dare you to look away and sacrifice not knowing something of it. In the first section, from 'deviant beads' to 'like a clubbed tarpon'—a junkie Jesus described? As a panhandling PhD I question whether I have caught every reference. Is the boar throat Homeric? But feast on 'lynx in the sky', 'slipping just east of oblivion...and the beautiful break separating these verses:*

*'The same force that floats dead leaves*

*To the ground...'*

*Where the spacing reinforces visually what the words sing. Greater scholars than I should read this poem again and again. H.S.*

There he is—hunched on the corner  
The Florida sun painting  
His face with deviant beads  
Telling us that business is open:  
a pocket full of promises  
for sale, that locomotive  
lurch in the arm  
Scampering your veins  
Until you lie down  
On a mattress with no sheets  
Like a clubbed tarpon.

II.

The crink in his neck from swallowing up  
the horizon to the lynx in the sky.  
So dim the constellation makes us wonder

If we're made in God's image  
Then that son of a bitch  
Must have the same ego

Of the boar that lives  
In his throat. If he just held on

To the concrete where he stands

To stop himself slipping just east of oblivion.  
The moment we went west  
We gave in to letting gravity

Do the major lifting.  
The dadirri poses;  
The same force that floats dead leaves

to the ground. He can hear  
The water buffalo  
But he can't stop the slaughter.

III.

His asperous face  
has been compared with a rocky hill. He wakes  
With pain. A cigarette for breakfast  
Sludgy coffee  
from the bodega with a poisonous dosing  
Of sugar for a prediabetic  
Who takes a horn's blast  
To cross the street.  
He joins his liver-spotted  
Friends that sit in the garden  
Where smoke billows  
through the milkweed.  
His blue eyes  
That have seen so much  
But report so little  
Gaze skyward, stalking the cerulean pearl.  
He cracks a Crazy Stallion, exchanges  
Sympathy with the suits passing him  
On their way to corner offices.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This poem was written during the oppressive heat of summer when everyone finds themselves outside and the man at the corner plays games with your semiotic order. The setting of this poem, my city, has its fair share of vices done right out in the open—whether that be gentrification or our beloved homeless. I wrote this poem in the wake of reading the classic Ken Kesey novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Hopefully, this manifesto continues to circulate American minds.*

**BIO:** *Ian Lindsay is a full time Title 1 public school teacher who holds a degree in creative writing and teaches journalism. Living in the sweltering heat and weirdness of Florida, Ian enjoys hip-*

*hop music, NPR and Vietnamese cuisine. His poetry and fiction can be read at One Person's Trash, Deltona Howl and The Eckerd Review.*

# 3 POEMS

## by tom smith

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We published Tom Smith's story 'An Unwritten Love Letter' in Issue 3 and you can read what we think of his fiction in the Why We Like It. But it turns out this talented author also moonlights as a poet and when we received these three out of the blue we knew we had to start publishing verse. Since none of us feel we have the experience or expertise to critically appraise poetry, we will just plead mea culpa and say we're doing it because we like them. In the meantime, we welcome our new poetry editor Hezekiah Scretch who does have the experience and expertise...if we could only get him out of the bar.*

### 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.

#### SPRINGS ETERNAL

There was a land, was always spring,  
Where crocus bloom and robins sing,  
And rainbows made a perfect ring.  
But still somehow it missed something.

A forest darkened by the night,  
Where the moon could scarcely light,  
Lies a sylvan strayed from sight,  
Whose love for love knows no requite.

She is prays of all the wood,  
Flourished in her motherhood.  
She'd embrace it if she could,  
But would she be understood.

Caught between the earth and air,  
Without a single mortal care.  
But no mortal love to share,  
So she feels she must beware.

There's a wind that winds and weaves,  
Dancing shadows in the trees,  
Through the fluttered rustling leaves  
Echoed voices softly breeze.

"Neal beside the water's edge,  
As to drink but pause instead."  
That was all it seemed they'd said,

She rose from off her bowered bed.

She approached the swelling stream,  
The rising sun had cast a beam.  
She thought she saw a face she'd seen  
In visions of forgotten dreams.

She spread the water side to side,  
And filled the pool with tears she cried,  
And on that day the forest died.  
Autumn, ever, to reside.

## YOUR Eyes

Iridescent liquid blue,  
Reflecting scenes and seeing through.  
Enchanting those who misconstrue;  
None can say, what may come true.

Excepting that which Nature brings,  
Passion swells like swollen streams.

Let fools divine what can't be known,  
One can't reveal what won't be shown.

Unshared love is but a token,  
Recited lines that went unspoken.  
Dreaming spirits lie un-woken.  
Eyes that tell of hearts unbroken.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *These are little more than grim nursery rhymes. It is unlikely you might publish them. I like your site so much I was resigned not to decline to not, not submit. It doesn't appear that you publish poetry, but I still couldn't resist.*

**BIO:** *I have an undeniably modest and abiding affection for words and how they hurt, heal, offer hope and forsake. I can recall why I wrote this stuff. They are a layman's recitations: 'the*

*memories are still there—clear, intact, indestructible’. (A Spencer Tracy line from ‘Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?’).*

# FIVE POEMS

By Nicholas North

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes...*Have a quick look and take your time. Grow sideways like Daphne was obliged to be sideward—being a tree nymph is not all it's cracked up to be—but it's North's deep reach into the crucible of summer, the holy green vat that swallows us with heat. A FOX camouflaged with 'a slip of flash and mud'—earth and fire creates us all. A homicidal tumor named BOB. LOVE in the infinite...reaching out to a lost companion only to discover....? Cerebral physical poems that fluoresce ionically my ionic ions. H.S.*

## SUMMER

Joe, when I say I want  
to get lost in the green  
what I mean is to climb  
into the experience...  
To grow not up, older,  
Sideways but into—  
like you grow into a body.  
Like Daphne grew into a tree.

## FOX

Why should the fox be?  
A slip of flash and mud.  
Existentially charged

And

Landing with a

Thud!

HE AND ME

My body's grown a tumor.

I've given it a name.

One day Bob will kill me.

Isn't it a shame?

LOVE POEM

Moment to moment

Over and over

Time after time

Again and again

DOG, INFINITY...

On a hill with Blackie

The universe spins around me

In perfect pitch.

The music of the spheres is

Is the sound of

Exploding atoms.

So silent. So still.

Even if I reach for it

My arms are

Miles

Too

Long.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Qualunque.*

**BIO:** *See Nick North's '4 Fixions & 5 Lines' in Issue 4 Fiction.*

# FIVE POEMS

*by Merlin Flower*

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes...*'These five poems each extended that prickly head-rush—that warm tingling you feel when something connects. 'Safe in Love' explores the notion that lovers in the night are rarely the same person you wake up to—they grow darker with the light. And the stricken sense of an overloaded washing machine is all that remains. In 'Couldn't You Read Me? I, You?', 'anger' as 'worthy' in the dissolution of a relationship is inspired. Lines I intend to steal include 'delicate love festered', 'shy sun', groomed with light'—lake-like fog—' and 'the annoyed empty seat beside me.'* And of course, *the delicious... 'The drink inside remained innocent'. H.S.*

## **Safe in love**

Riveted in the  
'always there for you'  
I slept peacefully.  
The stars remained  
glorious.  
The overloaded washing  
machine whirred.  
The ruler kept  
lying.  
When I woke up, he had  
absconded with  
my best friend.

## **Couldn't you read me? I, you?**

The lure of  
your delicate love  
festered.  
Awful, it  
was also overwhelming.  
Somewhat boring too.

We dissolved the relationship,  
without an argument.  
Some anger would have  
been a worthy departure.

### **we have only here.**

The shy Sun still managed to  
penetrate the car, filling it with vitamin D.  
Groomed with light, the car and the sun moved  
in the same direction for a while.  
The forest welcomed both.  
In a short time, they left the  
woods and entered the city, again.  
Sigh.

### **lover**

The 'shut up' was exuberant but firm.  
Overtaken by the alcohol, I  
was blown away by the two words.  
The drink inside remained innocent.

### **Snog**

In Delhi, the first fog of my life.  
Lake like, the white man-made fog pleased  
my eye. The throat felt bit silly.  
Well, eyes too. Yet, I  
wished to see you- To joke on the  
charming fog.  
-to laugh at the species we are part of.  
I looked at the annoyed empty seat beside me.  
A mild disappointment  
germinated veered away by the white fog  
in no time.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Reading the poems, it looks as if I had just undergone a breakup. Alas, not the case. The poems don't reflect my life. Yet, of all of which I dabble in, there's more of 'me and I' in my poems, than in the paintings, photographs and stories. Now, did I confuse you?*

**BIO:** *Merlin Flower is an independent artist and writer. She lives in India and can also be found on Twitter @merlinflower.*

# PLAYS

# RESCUE

By Karl Miller

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We love the way Miller creates a powerful sense of isolation and false hope, exemplified by the desolate train station and the people who believe, against all reason, that the train will arrive. The theme nods to Beckett but the wonderful colloquial dialogue and the open-ended conclusion reminds us of Sam Shephard. This intriguing existentialist one act is the first play we've published and we couldn't have asked for a stronger debut.*

## RESCUE - A One Act Play

### Cast of Characters

PHIL

Male between 30 and 40.

LISHA

Female between 25 and 35, with a scarf over her head.

HOMELESS MAN

Older. Ragged-looking.

### Place

City.

Time

Contemporary.

Setting

A bench at a bus stop.

(PHIL enters talking on cellphone.)

PHIL

No, no. What I'm looking for is the time the next bus comes through. I'd check myself but the internet's down on my phone . . . What? . . . Yes, there's a schedule. I'm looking at it right now. It says 4:15, which was, like, 20 minutes ago and I've been here for an hour - and no bus. . . Of course, I didn't miss it. I'm not blind.

(Sarcastically)

Oh, thanks very much. . . .I've been looking the whole time. I don't want to be here, not with that storm on the way.

(PHIL brushes his fingers  
through his hair)

Is it still headed right at us? . . . That's gonna tear the hell out of this place. . . .Wow, I guess I don't even need to worry that my car broke down. Probably gonna get blown away anyhow. . . .Did you find out if the buses are still running? . . . Right . . . Hello? . . . Hello?

(PHIL takes the phone away from his  
ear and looks at it.)

Great, great, great. This is just great. Does anything work anymore? The weather sure doesn't.

(LISHA enters and sits at bench.  
She opens a book and begins  
reading without making any contact  
with PHIL. After a moment, PHIL  
walks over to stand by the sign.  
They don't talk for about 10

seconds. Then PHIL checks his phone again and shakes his head.)

PHIL

Excuse me. Do you have a phone on you? Mine's not working.

LISHA

(Pauses before answering)

I'm sorry. Mine isn't working either.

PHIL

Technology's great, isn't it? Do you know if the 4:15 bus is still coming here?

LISHA

I'm not sure. I hope so.

(Pause, then LISHA's phone starts to ring. PHIL stares at her as she extracts the phone uncomfortably from her purse.)

LISHA

Hello . . . Yes, I'm still waiting for the bus. Can you check? . . . OK - thanks. . . Hello? . . . Hello? . . . Are you there?

(LISHA places phone back in her purse.)

PHIL

(Suspiciously)

Sounds like you may have a signal now.

LISHA

Yes, but as you can see, but I lost it. I thought I was out of range earlier.

PHIL

(Skeptically)

Whatever.

(PHIL and LISHA are silent for a moment.)

PHIL

So it looks like the bus is still going to come? Is that what the person on the phone said?

LISHA

I'm not sure. I didn't get a clear answer before the call dropped.

PHIL

I guess the storm's keeping everyone late. The bus is no exception.

(Silent for a moment.)

Not trying to be rude, but why do you wear that?

LISHA

Wear what?

(PHIL gestures to the scarf.)

PHIL

You know - that. The scarf.

LISHA

I don't think you'd understand.

PHIL

You think I'm not smart enough?

LISHA

No, not at all. We're just different.

PHIL

Everyone's different.

LISHA

Maybe sometimes people are just too different to understand each other.

PHIL

Maybe.

(Silence again.)

LISHA

OK, well I wear it to show modesty.

PHIL

(Incredulous)

What? Really?

ALISHA

(Annoyed)

Forget it.

PHIL

I didn't mean to make you angry.

LISHA

I'm not angry!

(LISHA studiously ignores PHIL.)

PHIL

Oh, now you're ignoring me? Nice.

(LISHA continues to look at the ground.)

PHIL

OK. I'm sorry.

(LISHA does not respond. A moment later, HOMELESS MAN enters.)

HOMELESS MAN

I'm trying to get something to eat. Do you have any change?

(LISHA says nothing.)

PHIL

She's not talking right now.

(Whispers)

She's angry.

(LISHA shifts on the bench to  
face away from PHIL.)

HOMELESS MAN

(Chuckling)

What's she angry about?

PHIL

(Rolls his eyes and shrugs.)

Maybe it's just better to leave it alone.

HOMELESS MAN

(Turns to PHIL)

OK. Whatever. How about you? Do you have anything?

PHIL

Sorry, no.

HOMELESS MAN

All right, if that's how you want to be. (pause) What are you  
two doing here anyhow?

PHIL

Waiting for the bus.

HOMELESS MAN

The bus? Fat chance. No bus is coming here.

PHIL

How do you know?

HOMELESS MAN

No bus ever comes here.

PHIL

There's a sign for it.

(PHIL points to sign for bus.)

HOMELESS MAN

It's an old sign. I've been out here a long time and I can tell you there's no bus.

PHIL

I'm pretty certain one's been stopping here.

HOMELESS MAN

OK, I'll play along. Even if there was a bus here some time ago, it sure as hell isn't coming today, not with a storm headed this way.

PHIL

Why are you so sure?

HOMELESS MAN

I was on the internet earlier today. Right before the library closed. All service is suspended. I kind of think bus drivers don't like the idea of coming out to pick up folks with a storm like this on the way. We've messed with the weather and now the weather's messing back.

PHIL

But the storm's still a ways off. It's too early for them to just stop their routes.

HOMELESS MAN

They gotta put the buses away and drivers gotta get home to take care of their own stuff, right?

PHIL

I guess.

(It's quiet for a moment.)

PHIL

Why are you out here?

HOMELESS MAN

Why is anyone? Something breaks or is broken to start with. A lost job. A lost woman. A bad habit.

PHIL

Which was it for you?

HOMELESS MAN

Does it matter?

(HOMELESS MAN walks to LISHA  
and sits down. She slides  
along the bench away from him.)

HOMELESS MAN

You're not really waiting on this imaginary bus too, are you?

(LISHA ignores him.)

HOMELESS MAN

Come on, you're not stupid. I know you can use your head and  
see nothing's coming.

(LISHA continues to ignore  
HOMELESS MAN.)

OK, OK, play that game. (Pauses) You know, I know a place we'd  
be safe when you find this bus isn't showing.

PHIL

Where's that?

HOMELESS MAN

So you won't give me money but expect me to help you out?

PHIL

Come on.

HOMELESS MAN

The stairwell at the bank. There's a door there that's  
unlocked.

(To LISHA)

You can come with me.

(LISHA doesn't react.)

HOMELESS MAN

(To LISHA)

Come on, whadya say?

(HOMELESS MAN puts his arm  
around LISHA.)

LISHA

Don't touch me!

(PHIL has been standing off to the  
side the whole time, looking in  
the distance and occasionally  
checking his phone. He suddenly  
stands between HOMELESS MAN and  
LISHA.)

PHIL

Hey, ease up.

(PHIL leans into HOMELESS MAN  
so they're face to face.)

HOMELESS MAN

All right, tough guy.

(HOMELESS MAN and PHIL, fists clenched,  
are ready to fight. Finally, HOMELESS  
MAN backs off.)

HOMELESS MAN

So that's how it's going to be.

(Looks at them both)

You know what? Both of you can keep standing here like idiots.  
I don't care.

(HOMELESS MAN retreats and  
exits.)

LISHA

Thanks for what you did just then.

PHIL

No problem.

(Pauses)

I'm sorry I was kind of a jerk before.

LISHA

I could have been nicer.

PHIL

What's your name?

LISHA

Lisha.

PHIL

That's pretty. What does it mean?

LISHA

The darkness before midnight. What's your name?

PHIL

Phil. Which means . . . Phil.

(LISHA smiles.)

Do you mind if I sit? It may be a while.

(LISHA slides to the left side of the bench so that her body is pointed slightly to the left. LISHA gestures to the open right side of the bench. PHIL sits, his body pointed slightly to the right. After a moment, PHIL and LISHA shift their positions so they are both facing straight ahead at the audience.)

(Blackout.)

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *This short play was inspired by the worn and damaged hope we can still find commonality past our differences. Some writers that have influenced me are Martial, William Carlos Williams, John Updike, Raymond Carver and Etgar Keret*

**BIO:** *Karl Miller's fiction and poetry have appeared in various periodicals including Galley Sail Review, Mudfish, Cold Mountain Review and others. His play 'A Night in Ruins' was produced Off-Off Broadway. 'Elena', a novelette, was published in 2018. A Best of the Net nominee, Miller lives in Coral Springs, FL.*

# SHORT FIVE-ACT PLAYS: # 16441 THEATRICAL TEXTS

**By Richard Kostelanetz**

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We fell instantly in love with this radical modernist approach to theatre that is transformed into meta-theatre: the process and infrastructure of the drama becomes, in effect, the play. Lines act on the reader/viewer as prompts that automatically trigger images and interactions in the mind that yield private scenarios but the play itself is confined, solely, purely, to what had been set down on the page—theatre reduced to its elementary forms: the play as play that can be no other thing but a play. We're gaga over Kostelanetz's technique where each line in the five play sequence is charged with instruction and each word assumes the exclamatory posture of a command. Minimalist experimental reductionism gets this performance Five Stars. Addenda. The playwright later sent us a uniquely formatted version of #16441 that we liked so much we decided, in a Dadaist tizzy, to publish it, too. This is Version 1. Version 2 is listed in the TOC just below it.*

## SHORT FIVE-ACT PLAYS: #16441 THEATRICAL TEXTS

In memory of Michael Kirby (1931-1997),  
A major theater mind.

One aim is writing pure plays, much as I've  
written pure fictions, because they can't be

anything other than plays-as-plays about playing before a live audience (or, if in print, texts imagining a performance before a live audience). Producers are invited to stage as many as these ways, in as many ways as they wish (say with speakers distributed over the performance space).

- I. Writing a text.
- II. Rewriting.
- III. Rehearsing.
- IV. Performing.
- V. Remembering.

I: A sunny beach.

II: Inside a cabana.

III: In a detached house.

IV: Drinking in a living room.

V: Rolling in a double bed.

- I. Walking.
- II. Running.
- III. Sprinting.

- IV. Struggling.
- V. Stopping.

I: Ambition.

II: Inhibition.

III: Exhibition.

IV: Failure.

V: Extinction.

- I. Intercourse.
- II. Impregnating.
- III. Birthing.
- IV. Raising.
- V. Bankrolling.

I: Standing beneath an American flag.

II: Military training.

III: A battlefield.

IV: A hospital.

V: A morgue.

I: Dinner with two children.

II: Four children.

III: eight children.

IV: Three children.

V: No children.

I: Delivering a speech.

II: Schmoozing with the audience.

III: Dining in a plush restaurant.

IV: Afterwards drinking to excess in a small group.

V: Falling into a bed with a drunken stranger.

I: On a train.

II: In a spacious terminal.

III: Meeting a stranger in a bathroom.

IV: Making love behind a stall.

V: Returning to the street.

I: Rise.

II. Rose.

III: Restore.

IV: Reoccupy.

V: Refuse.

I: Coming to a baseball park.

II: Taking batting practice.

III: Playing out in the field.

IV: Coming to home plate with a bat in hand.

V: Taking pitches before hitting a home run.

I: Crash.

II: Help.

III: Resume.

IV: Hospital.

V: Recuperation.

I: Returning home after years away.

II: Dinner with one's immediate family.

III: Sleeping in one's childhood bedroom.

IV: Increasing tensions during breakfast with a family that seems estranged.

V: Leaving for an airport, perhaps never to return.

I: Only.

II: Many.

III: Several.

IV: Few.

V: One.

I: A theatrical dressing room.

II: Appearing before an enthusiastic audience.

III: The dressing room again.

IV: Bantering at the stage door with well-wishers, some of them flirtatious.

V: Alone in a tight hotel room.

I: Eating.

II: Dieting.

III: Eating.

IV: Dieting.

V: Wasting.

I: Studying in a small dormitory room.  
II: Objecting to a roommate who brings his girl friend into their space.  
III: Leaving to a common room while the two probably make love.  
IV: Going out into the street.  
V: Making love with his girl friend in her space.

I: Interior.  
II: Exterior.  
III: Posterior.  
IV: Ulterior.  
V: Interior.

I: Getting fired from a job long held.  
II: Revealing disappointment to your family.  
III: Searching in vain for other employment.  
IV: Settling for a lesser job.  
V: Getting fired again.

I: Running  
II: Swimming.  
III: Climbing.  
IV: Skating.  
V. Flying.

I: Getting arrested.  
II: Meeting a supportive lawyer.  
III: Returning to jail.  
IV: A court room.  
V: Walking home alone.

I: Yes.  
II: No.  
III: Yes, yes.  
IV: No.  
V: Yes.

I: One.  
II: Two.

III: Three.

IV: Four.

V: Last.

I: to audience: Scream

II: Scream louder

III: Scream yet louder.

IV: Scream weaker.

V: Silence.

I. Dark.

II. Light.

III. Apocalypse.

IV. Light.

V. Dark.

I. Did I know you?

II. Should I?

III. Why not?

IV. Too bad.

V. No go.

i. Right side up.

- ii. Upside down.
- iii. Turned sideways.
- iv. Spun around.
- v. Flipped over.

- I. Arriving in a strange city.
- II. Befriending a good Samaritan.
- III. Accepting his hospitality.
- IV. Sleeping continuously through the night.
- V. Purchasing his house.

- I. Writing a script.
- II. Finding a producer.
- III. Hiring actors and a director.
- IV. Making a film.
- V. Screening it to an appreciative audience.

- I. An infant.
- II. A teenager.
- III. An adult.
- IV. A retiree.
- V. A centenarian.

- I. One dollar.
- II. Ten dollars.
- III. One thousand dollars.
- IV. One hundred dollars
- V. One dollar ten cents.

- I. Purchasing a musical instrument
- II. Learning how to play it.
- III. Playing it properly.
- IV. Failing a public recital.
- V. Smashing the instrument.

- I. Purchasing a painting.
- II. Purchasing a second painting
- III. Purchasing a dozen paintings.
- IV. Purchasing one hundred paintings.
- V. Mounting an exhibition.

- I. Learning a second language.
- II. Learning a third language.
- III. Learning a fourth and five language.
- IV. Learning a dozen languages.

V. Forgetting what language one is speaking.

I. Tying a tie.

II. Donning a jacket

III. Fitting into slacks.

IV. Undressing

V. Wearing a dress.

I. Dreaming oneself a princess.

II. Becoming a queen.

III. Queen mother.

IV. Revolution.

V. Deposed royalty.

I. Accepts a contract.

II. Writes a book.

III. Suffers copyediting and other production challenges.

IV. Sees it in bookstores.

V. Learns that it's declared "out of print."

I. Enters college.

- II. Graduates.
- III. Graduate school.
- IV. Original research.
- V. Teaching unhappily at a junior college.

- I. Cooking.
- II. Serving.
- III. Feasting.
- IV. Cleaning.
- V. Barfing.

- I. One-meter dive.
- ii. Three-meter dive.
- III Ten-meter platform dive.
- IV. Twenty-meter platform dive.
- V. .....

- I. Upturn.
- II. Downturn.
- III. Left turn.
- IV. Right turn.
- V. U-turn.

- i. First joke.
- ii. Second joke.
- iii. Third joke.
- iv. Fourth joke.
- v. Laughter.

- I. Win.
- II. Lose.
- III. Win.
- IV. Lose.
- V. Loss.

- I. Subsistence farming.
- II. Harvesting.
- III. Produce selling.
- IV. Planting.
- V. More subsistence farming.

- I. Shoplifting.
- II. Carjacking.
- III. Assault.
- IV. Arrest.
- V. Deportation.

- I. First date.
- II. Second date.
- III. Third date.
- IV. Denial.
- V. Score.

- I. Accident.
- II. Ambulance.
- III. Emergency room.
- IV. Operation.
- V. Recuperation.

- I. Swim
- II. Dive.
- III. Compete.
- IV. Lose
- V. Coach.

- I. Leap.
- II. Fall.
- III. Recover.
- IV. Fall.
- V. Recuperate.

- I. Earth.
- II. Moon.
- III. Mars.
- IV. Pluto.
- V. Gone.

- I. Trampoline.
- II. Trapeze.
- III. Performance.
- IV. Adulation.
- V. Retirement.

- I. Baking.
- II. Deserts.
- III. Lemon pie.
- IV. Eating.
- V. Throwing.

- I. Balding.
- II. Shining.
- III. Transplanting.
- IV. Seducing.
- V. Refusal.

- I. Reading.
- II. Writing.
- III. Reading.
- IV. Writings.
- V. Reading.

- I. First base.
- II. Second base.
- III. Third base.
- IV. Home plate.
- V. Out.

- I. Punch.
- II. Punch.
- III. Parry
- IV. Punch.
- V. Knock out.

- I. Ball.
- II. Bat.
- III. Glove.
- IV. Throw.
- V. Out.

- I. Sleep.
- II. Sleep.
- III. Awake.
- IV. Sleep.
- V. Sleep.

- I. Life.
- II. Death
- III. Rebirth.
- IV. Relive.
- V. Redeath.

- I. Plan.
- II. Loan.
- III. Store.
- IV. Losses.
- V. Bankruptcy.

- I. Sleeping.
- II. Dreaming.
- III. Nightmare
- IV. Tossing.
- V. Awakening.

- I. One step.
- II. Two steps.
- III. Three steps.
- IV. Falling.
- V. Recuperating.

- I. Conspiring.
- II. Campaigning.
- III. Electing.
- IV. Governing.
- V. Imprisonment.

- I. Drafting.
- II. Revising.
- III. Rereading
- IV. Disappointment.
- V. Burning.

- I. Igniting.
- II. Seat-belting.
- III. Driving.
- IV. Skidding.
- V. Parking.

- I. Go.
- II. Stop.
- III. Go.
- IV. Stop.
- V. Go.

- I. Eat.
- II. Drink.
- III. Digest.
- IV. Piss.
- V. Poop.

- I. Infallible.
- II. Ingenuity.
- III. Palpable.
- IV. Inspiring.
- V. Ineffable.

- I. Scale.
- II. Tie.
- III. Hang.
- IV. Swing.
- V. Fall.

- I. Snore.
- II. Sneeze.
- III. Decongestant.
- IV. Sniffle.
- V. Breathe.

- I. Above.
- II. Around.
- III. Diagonal.
- IV. Beneath.
- V. Beside.

- I. Exploitation.
- II. Inflation.
- III. Indebtedness.
- IV. Deaccessioning.
- V. Demise.

- I. Four lights.
- II. Three lights.
- III. Two lights.
- IV. One light.
- V. No light.

- I. Lights off.
- II. Lights on.
- III. Lights off.
- IV. Lights on.
- V. Lights off.

VI.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *The principal influence on my playwriting, of course, is Gertrude Stein. Perhaps these plays extend her radical ideas...*

**BIO:** *Individual entries on Richard Kostelanetz's work in several fields appear in*

Wikipedia  
NNDB.com  
Britannica.com  
Postmodern Fiction  
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Contemporary Novelists  
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The Chronology of American Literature  
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Bakers Biographical Dictionary of Musicians  
Readers Guide to Twentieth Century Writers  
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The Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature  
International Who's Who of Authors and Writers  
The Facts on File Companion to 20th Century Poetry  
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The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature  
The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poets and Poetry  
Honor Wall of Distinguished Alumni, Scarsdale High School, NY

## **RADIO ACTIVE**

**BY J. NORTH CONWAY**

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** 'Mother's Day is coming and I want to kill myself.' *We think 'Radio Active' is worth publishing for that line alone but there are lots of other reasons it rocks. What starts out as a parody of late-night radio for insomniacs gradually opens in another window to reveal the troubling angst of the dispossessed during the wee hours when the soul is most vulnerable. It's comedic theatre both poignant and stark and like the best comedy transcends its genre to unflinchingly mirror our darker intricacies. Five stars.*

### RADIO ACTIVE

A Ten-Minute Play

by

J. North Conway

(Jack Conway)

**Synopsis:** A late-night radio talk show host gets more than he bargained for.

**Setting/Staging:** A radio station in an unnamed city. Center stage is a desk, chair and microphone where RON sits taking phone calls into his late-night radio talk show. Stage left is a chair and a telephone. Stage right is a chair and a telephone. The characters alternate between these two chairs when they call in. Chair, stage left, is where the first caller, BEN sits. Chair, stage right, is where the CRANK CALLER sits. Chair, stage left, is where BETTY sits. Chair, stage right, is where the PRESIDENT sits. Chair, stage left, is where BOB/BEN sits.

**Characters:** RON, a late-night radio talk show host fielding calls to his show.  
BEN/BOB, a caller who has a big secret.  
CRANK CALLER, an annoying caller.  
BETTY, mistakenly calls into the show.  
PRESIDENT, calls into the wrong show.

**Props:** Table  
Three chairs

Microphone  
Two telephones  
One cell phone

CURTAIN RISES:

RON

(Speaking into the microphone, talking to the telephone callers, looking directly at the audience.)

Hello out there in radio land. This is Ron 'Til Dawn, on your radio dial. Broadcasting live from WU812, your all talk radio station. You've just been listening to Mark 'Til Dark. We're brought to you tonight and every night by the Fabulous Kielbasa Brothers, Cosmos and Thaddeus, makers of the Polish Polka Party Platter, with its six-foot-long kielbasa. If you're serious about the size of your kielbasa then there's no other place to go than the Fabulous Kielbasa Brothers. Looks like we've got our first caller. Hello. You're on the air with Ron 'Til Dawn. Let's talk.

BEN

(Seated stage left, talking on the telephone.)

Hi Ron. This is Ben from Dover. Longtime listener. First time caller.

RON

Welcome Ben from Dover. You're on the air. Let's talk.

BEN

I don't want to talk. That's all everybody does. Talk. Talk. Talk. And it's not getting us anywhere. Nobody listens anymore.

RON

Well, Ben from Dover, you're on Ron 'Til Dawn. Broadcasting live from WU812. All talk. All the time. Brought to you by the Fabulous Kielbasa Brothers, makers of the Polish Polka Party Platter with its six-foot-long kielbasa. If you're serious about the size of your kielbasa then there's no other place to go.

BEN

See? Talk. Talk. Talk. Just like everybody else. How could anyone be serious about kielbasa? I'd like you to play some music. Hank Williams.

RON

Ben from Dover, we don't play music here on Ron 'Til Dawn. We're all talk radio. All day. All night.

BEN

Well, you should play music. I'd like to hear some music before it's over. I'm radio-active, Ron. I wanna hear Hank Williams yodel. I'm hotter than Chernobyl.

RON

That's what we like to hear, Ben from Dover, that you're active on the radio. And while you're active, maybe you should take time out and order the Fabulous Kielbasa Brothers' Polish Polka Party.

BEN

I hate kielbasa. You know I wrote to the Dover Nuclear Power Plant Commission and warned them that they needed to beef up security at the plant because anyone could break into the place and steal the uranium and then the whole plant would explode. It would be an environmental disaster. A melt-down. Would they listen to me? No. All they did was talk. Talk. Talk. Talk.

RON

I'm sorry to hear that, Ben from Dover.

BEN

Nobody listens until it's too late. See what I mean?

RON

No. I meant about you not liking kielbasa. You should try the Fabulous Kielbasa Brothers' Polish Polka Party Platter. It will change your mind about kielbasa forever.

BEN

I don't want to change my mind about kielbasa. I want people to listen. Could you just play some music? I'm radio active. I wanna hear Hank Williams yodel. I'm hotter than Chernobyl.

RON

Sorry, Ben from Dover. We don't play music here at Ron 'Til Dawn. We're all talk radio. All the time.

(Hangs up on BEN.)

Next caller. Hello. Let's talk.

CRANK CALLER

(Seated stage right, talking on the telephone.)

Hi Ron. I've been reading all about Henry David Thoreau. You know who he is?

RON

Yes. The philosopher and environmentalist.

CRANK CALLER

That's right Ron. Did you know why he refused Novocain when he went to the dentist?

RON

No. Why?

## CRANK CALLER

Because he wanted to transcend dental medication. Get it? Hey, I'm reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* too. It's got me in stitches. I got a million of them. Why don't ducks fly upside down? Because they might quack up.

## RON

Enough of the comedy routine.

(Hangs up on the caller)

Next caller. Who's calling?

## BETTY

(Seated stage left, talking on the telephone.)

They said I didn't have to give my name.

## RON

Okay. Let's talk.

## BETTY

Mother's Day is coming and I want to kill myself. All my children have abandoned me. They hate me. I'm all alone. I want to go out into the woods and hang myself. Then, maybe, when they find my body hanging from a tree, they'll all love me again. I just want to end it all.

## RON

Geesh. Things can't be that bad. You need to buck up. Look on the sunny-side of the street. I've got an idea. Maybe if you had some delicious kielbasa from the Fabulous Kielbasa Brothers it would cheer you up.

## BETTY

Buck up? Look on the sunny-side of the street? Have some kielbasa? That's your advice? Who are they hiring these days to answer the phones?

## RON

You're on Ron 'Til Dawn, all talk radio, transmitting from radio station WU812, brought to you by the Fabulous Kielbasa Brothers.

## BETTY

All talk radio? This isn't the suicide hotline?

RON

No. This is Ron 'Til Dawn...

BETTY

(Cuts him off.)

Oh, forget it. I'll just kill myself.

(Hangs up.)

RON

Well, sorry for that mix- up, listeners. Looks like we've got another caller. Hello. You're on the air. Let's talk.

PRESIDENT

(Seated stage right, talking on the telephone.)

This is the President. No collusion. No obstruction. Witch hunt. Fake News. Enemy of the people. Mexico will pay for it.

RON

Well, thanks for calling in Mr. President.

(Laughing.)

PRESIDENT

I've got the best words. I'm the greatest president. Greater than Lincoln. Obama was born in Kenya. Kim and I fell in love. She's not my type.

RON

That's great Mr. President.

(Laughing.)

PRESIDENT

There's no climate change. It's a hoax. Immigrants are stealing our jobs. We'll build a wall. (Pauses.)

Sean? Hannity? Is that you? Is this Fox News?

RON

No, Mr. President. This is Ron 'Til Dawn.

(Coughs to clear his throat.)

PRESIDENT

Is somebody coughing? I don't like coughing. You're fired. I want a hamburger. GOB BLESHE THE UNLIGHTED SHATES.

(Hangs up.)

RON

That was interesting. We have another caller. Let's talk.

BOB/BEN

(It's BEN calling again and trying to disguise his voice. Seated stage left, talking on his cell phone.)

Hi, Ron. It's me, Bob.

RON

Your voice sounds awfully familiar, Bob? Are you sure this isn't Ben from Dover, again?

BOB/BEN

You got me Ron. How did you know? I mean, I'm using my cell phone this time.

RON

It's on your caller I.D.

BOB/BEN

Bob's my real name. I just changed it to Ben because I had dyslexia for years and didn't know it. You know what I mean? B-O-B. No matter how you spell it. I thought Ben would be better. Anyway, I feel bad for that woman who wants to commit suicide. But she doesn't have to worry. It'll all be over soon enough.

RON

You mean the show? Well, Bob? Or Ben from Dover. We're on until dawn so we've got a few more hours before we go off the air and make room for Mark 'Til Dark here on WU812.

BOB/BEN

No. I mean the world. See, you're not listening. I told you. You should play some music. I'm radio-active. I wanna hear Hank Williams yodel. I'm hotter than Chernobyl.

RON

I'm glad you're an active radio listener but I told you before. We don't play music. This is all talk radio, all the time. I...

(Stops abruptly.)

I apologize. I have to interrupt our regularly scheduled programming for this late breaking news. It's being reported that someone broke into the Dover Nuclear Power Plant and stole the uranium that powers the plant. The plant is reported to be in full melt down. This is a major disaster of epoch proportion. People are being told to evacuate for a 200-mile radius. Geesh. That includes this station. Bob? Ben? You're in Dover. What do you hear about the melt-down?

BOB/BEN

It was me, Ron.

RON

It was you, what?

BOB/BEN

I broke into the plant and stole the uranium. It's in the trunk of my car right now. The whole plant is going to implode.

RON

Why'd you do it Bob? Ben?

BOB/BEN

I told them it was a danger to the environment but they wouldn't listen. Now they'll see. All they wanted to do was talk. Talk. Talk. Talk. Just like you, Ron. I told you. I'm radio-active. I wanna hear Hank Williams yodel. I'm hotter than Chernobyl. Now, will you play some music before the world ends?

RON

(Stuttering, nervously.)

I don't have any music. Wait. I've got the theme song from the Fabulous Kielbasa Brothers' Polish Polka Party Platter promo.

BOB/BEN

That's it? How's it go? Sing a few bars.

RON

(Sing-song voice.)

If you're serious about kielbasa, there's nothing that will make you gladder, than the Polish Polka Party Platter.

(LOUD BOOM on the other end of the telephone line.)

Bob? Ben? Are you there?

(LOUD dial tone on the other end of the line. Fade to black.)

END.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wrote 'Radio Active' after listening to endless talk radio programs and was first compelled by the absurdity of the callers and then in Buddha-like enlightenment, felt deep compassion for the callers and the hosts whose job it is to listen to many of these sad, sad stories of lonely people calling all through the night. It is intended as a bittersweet comedy of errors.*

*My lifelong influences include: the writings of Don Passos and his 'USA Trilogy' published in 1938. Structurally, it is one of my favorite books. It is a series of three novels, The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel (1930), 1919 (1932) and The Big Money (1936). It encompasses a variety of experimental techniques that I adapted for my books. They include: fictional narratives telling the of the people and events associated with the Portland; collages of various newspaper clippings, song lyrics, poems and even recipes, brief biographies and people.*

*I have been greatly influenced by Herman Melville's Moby Dick. Melville interspersed his novel with intercalary chapters that broaden the overall theme of the of the book by providing, for instance, chapters describing details about whaling, harpoons and various types of ships that make it seems like an instruction manual at times. The third book whose style, structure and format I have adopted is Truman Capote's In Cold Blood. Capote relies on historical facts, with true characters and storylines but experiments with telling the story through various narrative voices. Within this genre of 'creative nonfiction' the narrative sounds trustworthy and, 'the fact that the events themselves are not someone else's creation further invites readers to believe they are the 'truth.' And lastly, I have drawn on the style, structure and format of one of my favorite books, Candide, by Voltaire, insomuch as it tells a story with each chapter propelling the distinct narrative: just plain, good, old-fashioned storytelling. I have applied these to all my writing including Radio Active, despite its short play format.*

**BIO:** *J. (Jack) North Conway is the author of 15 nonfiction books on a variety of subjects including a history of the Gilded Age in New York City, true crime and a New England History. He received the John Curtis Award for Lifelong Learning in honor of an entire body of work. For 25 years he was a newspaper and magazine reporter and editor and also served as an adjunct English professor at several New England colleges and universities. He is an accomplished poet whose publications include Poetry: The Norton Book of Light Verse; the Columbia Review; In a*

Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare; Folger's, *the flagship publication of the Folger Shakespearian Library in Washington, D.C. and The Antioch Review.*

### Books

Soldier Parrott, Lyons Press, Fall 2020. *The true-life story of nineteen year old Union soldier Jacob Parrott who was captured behind Confederate lines during a daring raid and sent to prison. Battered, starved and half dead, when he was released in a prisoner exchange, Parrott went onto to become the first Medal of Honor winner in 1863.*

Wreck of the Portland, Lyons Globe Pequot Press July 2019. *The true-life story of the tragic sinking of the steamship 'Portland', off the coast of Cape Cod during the 1898 'storm of the century' where all 200 passengers and crew were lost at sea, earning the disaster the nickname 'The Titanic of New England'.*

New England Rocks: Historic Geological Wonders, History Press, April 2017. *The book examines the history, the legends and the people associated with forty-five noted geological wonders.*

Attack of the HMS Nimrod: Wareham and the War of 1812, History Press, June 2014. *A history of the June 14, 1814 invasion of Wareham by British troops during the War of 1812.*

Queen of Thieves, Skyhorse Publishing, Fall 2014. *The non-fiction story of America's most infamous woman crime figure, Fredericka 'Marm' Mandelbaum, who rose to power in New York City during the Gilded Age. Optioned as a television series by Gaumont Pictures, USA.*

Bag of Bones, Globe Pequot/Lyons Press, May 2012. *The third and final book in my trilogy on New York City during the Gilded Age, covering the rise and fall of the A. T. Stewart retail empire.*

The Big Policeman. Globe Pequot/Lyons Press, November 2010. *The book covers the rise and fall of America's foremost detective, Thomas Byrnes in New York City during the Gilded Age. It was optioned by CBS television for a series.*

King of Heists, Global Pequot/Lyons Press, August 2009. *The story of the greatest bank robber in American history, George Leslie, who rose to fame and power in New York City during the Gilded Age. It was chosen as one of the top five books of the summer of 2009 by Reader's Digest. It has been optioned for a feature movie starring Jeremy Renner.*

The Cape Cod Canal: Breaking Through the Bared and Bended Arm, History Press, South Carolina, 2008. *It is in its seventh edition. A history of the building of the great New England canal.*

Head Above Water, Publish America, 2005. *The story of New York financier, August Belmont Jr., who undertook the building of the Cape Cod Canal, financing the construction with much of his own money.*

Shipwrecks of New England, Douglas Charles Ltd., North Attleboro, MA, 2000. *A history of some of the most dramatic shipwrecks along the New England coast.*

New England Visionaries, Douglas Charles Ltd., North Attleboro, MA, 1998. *A compendium of men and women whose vision helped change forever the world we live in.*

New England Women of Substance, Douglas Charles Ltd., North Attleboro, MA, 1996. *A collection of true-life stories of New England women who helped change American culture and society. It is being used as a textbook for a course on women's contributions to America at Yale University.*

American Literacy: Fifty Books That Define Our Culture and Ourselves, William Morrow, New York, 1994. *A compendium of books and writings that changed our culture and society.*

From Coup to Nuts: A Revolutionary Cookbook, Quinlan Press, Boston, MA, 1987. *An illustrated humor book depicting the favorite recipes of the world's most infamous revolutionaries.*

# NONFICTION

# A for Asshole

By Alexander Taylor

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We had a number of submissions (both fiction and nonfiction) for this issue about people breaking up and the fallout they experience when a relationship ends. This is the one we took and the reason is all about 'voice'. The story here is less important than the way it is told. The character of the speaker comes alive, not because we are reading his account, but because we are listening to it. By turns droll, sarcastic, self-pitying and insightful, the voice, with its recognizable millennial cynicism, engages us in real time. After reading 'A for Asshole' all six of us admitted that we've met or knew somebody that sounded exactly like Alexander Taylor. That's something of an achievement because in most Creative Nonfiction it's the subject that takes precedence, not the speaker.*

## A For Asshole

I don't want to die; I feel like dying, but I don't want to die.

A popcorn kernel from last night is lodged between my teeth, still salty and reminding me of what it tasted like to be engaged to my best friend. The cat's staring at me. It's her cat. We never liked each other, the cat and I. Now, she's all I've got left. I jab at the popcorn kernel with my tongue. All it does is flap, like an elephant's ear in the wind. I tickle the cat's forehead, not to stimulate her, but to simulate the feeling of touching Lindy's skin. A smooth wind blows outside

the glass door.

She took the toothpaste with her.

\*\*\*

“You know there's no rules to breaking up,” she says. “We can act however we want to act.” We're sitting outside of work smoking together. Still working together.

“I don't want to be *just* friends.”

“Why does there always have to be titles?” She asks.

“If you're breaking up with me, I don't want to be anything.”

“Not even friends?”

“I don't want to be friends.”

\*\*\*

I fall asleep for 45 minutes on the couch. I wake up to seventeen text messages. I'd told my mom back in Michigan what had happened just before passing out. During my nap, she'd notified the entire bloodline.

“Are you okay?”

“You better just be sleeping!”

“Do you have anywhere to go so you're not alone?”

I have a voicemail. I don't think I could ever do it, jumping ten stories. It's not the wreckage I think about, but the fear of regretting the decision immediately after jumping. The regret would ruin those liberating seconds just before my blood painted the cement.

“Hi...um...I know you probably don't want to talk right now but I'm kind of calling to check in...I'm really sorry that all of this is happening...I just really feel like this is probably the best thing to do right now...um...I think I need to get my priorities in order with myself before I include somebody else in my life and I think now is a good time to try to separate our lives a little bit...um...to hopefully set up a more successful life together in the future...”

I've been included in her life for three years.

\*\*\*

Our lease in downtown Tampa ends in eight days. We'd spent the last several weeks looking for apartments in Sarasota, eventually applying to one. We'd been accepted based on our accumulative incomes. She told me today she's moving into the place next week, alone. I have eight days to find an apartment on a part-time fry-cook, full-time student income. This lands me on Craigslist. The first ad I come across:

*“Can you keep daddy happy-----→ Sexy Sugar babe Gets her Bills Covered!”*

Our apartment is a studio, about 750 square feet. In one corner, I sit on the couch looking at *keeping daddy happy*. In the other, my ex-fiancé sleeps soundly. The only thing between us is a dinner table bought from IKEA. We never used it.

This was the space she wanted.

\*\*\*

We'd been working fifty-hour work weeks a piece to finance our new apartment, It was our only day off together. I suggested golfing or gambling or drinking. We were still lying in bed far into the afternoon when she received a text from a coworker.

“Mel needs her shift covered tonight.”

“And you're going to take it?”

“I think I have to.”

“But it's our only day off together.”

“I have to, babe.”

I began pouting. She got ready for work.

“You're really going to take that shift?”

“I already said I would.”

“You're being selfish.”

“We need money and Mel needs help. How is that selfish?”

Nostalgia for the day off we were supposed to have boiled over. I looked at her.

“I don't want to be with you anymore.” I made eye contact the entire sentence, a rarity she had to notice. My hand cut across my throat for dramatic effect. I stormed out of the apartment. I was single by the time the door slammed shut.

Several days later, a coworker asks me at the bar, “Did you hear Mel's sister is still in the hospital from that car accident?”

\*\*\*

“Can we fix this?” I try to sound masculine, but it's obvious I'm fighting tears.

“You've asked me this seven times already, Alex. I don't know.”

“Do you even want to?”

“I don't know.”

There's a silence over the phone for several seconds before the line goes dead.

\*\*\*

It's been a week and nothing's changed. Life inside me has withered away. Still, I truck on. “How are you feeling?” My mom texts me.

“Fine. Tired.”

“What are you going to do?”

I don't respond. Lindy was supposed to come back to the apartment tonight, but got drunk instead. The thought of chemically morphing my already unstable conscious makes me nauseous. This is the longest I've been sober in months.

*You loved her. She loved you. Maybe it's just over.* I write on a sticky note to remind myself during the next anxiety attack, when my breath continuously falls short and the room begins to spin.

I wad the paper up before the ink dries.

\*\*\*

“Friends?” She stretches her right hand out toward me. We're smoking on the bench at

work again.

“You want a handshake?”

“This is what friends do.”

I shake her hand unenthusiastically.

“That’s a limp grip.” Every time I see her now, instead of a kiss on the cheek, she sticks her hand out like a nervous intern at a business firm. I never thought I’d say it, but I’d prefer to just not touch her at all.

\*\*\*

I’m moving in with a friend from work while she takes the apartment. It was either that or *Sugar Daddy*. She’s keeping the dinner table and the rest of the IKEA furniture I bought on a credit card that I still can’t pay off.

\*\*\*

Sometimes, I text myself just to hear the phone vibrate. I’m paying \$120 a month for an alarm clock.

\*\*\*

“I’ll take care of it,” she says, outside at work.

“How?”

“Don't worry, I'll take care of it.” She ashes her cigarette in the gravel. “I have to go back inside.” She reaches her hand out for a handshake.

She thinks she missed her period.

\*\*\*

“Say anything if you still love me.” I text her after several weeks.

“Anything.”

\*\*\*

Back in February, for Valentine's Day, she surprised me with a gift. A tattoo. On herself.

“This way you can't get mad at me for forgetting to wear my ring,” She said, stretching her left hand out. On her ring finger was a capital A for Alex.

“What happens if we ever break up?” I asked her.

She told me the same thing she will tell her next boyfriend. “Easy. It's an A. A for Asshole.”

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *What inspired this note was obviously a painful experience, but the message is to keep moving forward. To keep on trucking. This piece was a therapeutic response to heartbreak and there were actually no intentions behind it. It was just me, my journal and the emotions that came along with it. Readers shouldn't be saddened by the essay; readers should feel inspired to learn from their mistakes; to allow certain things to alter their perspective of the world and to learn and grow as an individual when it feels like there's nothing left. Above all, 'A for Asshole' should be a message that mistakes are the greatest lessons and though it may not seem like it at the time, a mistake can be a pivotal point in the development of the person you decide you want to be moving forward.*

**BIO:** *Alex Taylor is a full-time news reporter for The Jamestown Sun, in Jamestown, North Dakota. He will graduate with his MFA in creative writing for nonfiction from the University of Tampa in January and has a Bachelor of Arts degree in creative writing and journalism. From Western Michigan University.*

*Alex is 23 years old and was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He spent four months studying abroad in Florence, Italy in 2016 as a recipient of a global engagement scholarship, where he studied Italian literature and took his favorite college course: the history of the Italian mafia. In his little free time, Alex often finds himself obsessively researching criminal cases in hopes of one day writing about them.*

# THE CARE AND KEEPING OF YOU

By Brooke Jean

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A raw, rough talent that barges in and takes over. It's not without its youthful imperfections but this is brazen unbridled writing that comes up from the deep and it drips with authenticity. The hybrid slant imparts an innovative refinement while the voice reminds of Elizabeth Smart, a radical and underrated feminist poet/novelist. Jean's prose is frank and scars are brought sharply into focus. Here and there we are treated to passages of considerable power. Quote: '...we sit in psychology class and the instructor asks, "What is your earliest memory?" Our minds are blank. No one raises their hand. The distant recollections seep to the surface, but they feel like nightmares or memories of dreams—they aren't real. We stick the shovel in the dirt.'*

The Care and Keeping of You

By Brooke Jean

When I was 10 years old, I was convinced I had cancer. Breast cancer, to be exact. I was jogging around the blue-taped perimeter of my fourth-grade gym class alongside one of my friends during our daily “warm-up” exercise. With each stride I took, though, I felt an odd tenderness – a soreness in my chest that I had never experienced before. I put my palm up to my heart as I ran, and I felt a small, but noticeable bump bouncing up and down along with the rest of my body. It was only on my left breast. I was stunned with fear, and I immediately felt I was going to die. *What is this? Why isn't this thing on the other side? This can't be right.*

It was a few weeks or a month until my other breast “budded.” I had no idea that this was completely normal. But, until the bumps matched each other, I peered down in awe-filled terror at my asymmetrical body every day. The only reference for my changing form was a copy of an American Girl-brand, paperback book that my mother had given me at some point in my childhood called *The Care and Keeping of You*. My mom was disabled, chronically fatigued, and emotionally exhausted throughout most of my youth, doing her best to deal with my drunken, unfaithful father. Confiding in either of my parents about anything personal was out of the question; my issues were nothing compared to their marital mess. I had two older siblings, but my sister was *too* much older than me to feel fully comfortable with (a 14-year difference... a whole generational wall), and my older brother was, well... an older brother. I sought out to settle my confusion about the changes I was going through the only way I knew how: learning about it myself.

My younger sister and I were as close as non-twin siblings could be. Paige was only 17 months younger than me. We taught ourselves everything we could about girlhood. We rifled through the pages of *The Care and Keeping of You* frequently; it was a fun, forbidden ritual of ours. We turned pages in apprehension, pointing at the cartoon drawings of girls trying on different types of bras or inserting tampons or battling eating disorders. We had competitions on who could find a more “gross” or “disturbing” image in the book, like the creepy monster illustration next to the paragraph about having nightmares or the unsettling depiction of a girl with body dysmorphia seeing an overweight reflection in the mirror when she was, in reality, sickly thin. Exposing our eyes early on to the horrors of girlhood prepared us for the even

worse experiences we would have as women. This book was our encyclopedia on *how to be a girl*. But no instruction manual can prepare a girl for what it's like to become a woman.

Girlhood is an isolating experience. It's a time of tumultuous, internal chaos. It's judgment and rolling eyes from the girl who was your best friend last year who suddenly isn't anymore. It's trying to replicate the girls in the TV shows and movies' perfectly straight hair, frying yours into brittleness by the age of 12. It's using your mom's foundation before you've even experienced acne and dark circles. It's sneaking your friend's perfume when she goes to the bathroom because it smells so good and it'll make that boy want to talk to you.

The peak of my sex education was when I learned what '69' meant at my fifth-grade lunch table from my best guy friend whispering the definition into my ear and cackling. *The Care and Keeping of You* didn't tell me anything about sex. Another thing I had to teach myself or it would be taught to me against my will. No matter what, it would be.

Girlhood isn't innocent. It lacks the wonder and playfulness that's depicted on TV with nuclear families. It's not pink ribbons and riding your bikes with your friends and having sleepovers with pillow parties and blowing bubbles in a park. At least, it wasn't for me.

Trauma and terror. Sleeping on the floor in the living room, feeling someone trip over your small leg in the dark, and hearing a grunt and a thud like a tree trunk meeting the forest floor. Visiting a rehab center every Sunday like it's church. Dear, God, praying every night, Amen. Dad holding his video recorder in his left hand, the lens covering his

left eye while his right eye peers at you, his mouth saying, “There’s the birthday girl. Say hi, sweetheart!” Straddling the toilet bowl like a horse while Mom brushes your hair with the violence of raking leaves. Hearing wails all through the night and resenting them, ignoring the pain and pushing yours down. Kicking in an electric guitar’s neck, mutilating it with steak knives. Smashing it to smithereens. Packing up the best toys in cardboard boxes and dooming the lesser ones to the dumpster. Starting at a new school and only learning there will always be girls prettier than you and boys smarter than you. Red staining my shorts. Trying a sip of beer for the first time and realizing your dad was right about vodka all along. Staring at your grandpa’s dead face, mouth wide open. An unwelcome hand. *The Care and Keeping of You*. Sitting in the backseat, gripping the oh-shit handle for dear life. Tampon instructions. Losing it in the pool. *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*. 911 pre-dialed while walking home after dusk. Pus and ugliness and hair and grease sprayed with free samples. The tall shoes that looked better at home. Headphones playing nothing, just noise. Playing with fire. Throwing out your bible. *The Virgin Suicides*.

I remember blowing bubbles and playing hopscotch and swinging from tire swings. But did I ever squeal with true delight? Or was there always an element of fear? Yes, girlhood is fear. Fear of being snatched up once the streetlights go out. Fear of Mommy and Daddy’s words turning into fists. Fear of the man at the grocery store who gets too close. Fear of getting in the shower, naked and alone, and the lights going out. Fear of descending into the dark, wet basement. Fear of touch. Fear of your uterine wall shedding. Fear of the unknown. It sneaks up on you. Suddenly, you’re 21 and you can drive around or move out or buy 6 bottles of wine and finish them in a week or fuck the

guy you said you wouldn't or stare at your empty bank account or lay in bed and decay for eight hours a day. Sweet, sweet freedom.

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Many say a female's true transition into a woman occurs when she has her first menstruation, the indication that she can officially bear children. For me, the breast-cancer-like-bump was my defining moment, the beginning of my bildungsroman. Believing that you are dying is enough to make anyone snap into adulthood, into *womanhood*.

Early in my freshman year of high school, I met a girl at my bus stop who was friendly enough, and she suggested coming over to my house to hang out. She told me she was on her period and asked if I had a pad on me. No, but I do have tampons. Plenty of them. Her face twisted up like a screw. Um, if you use tampons, you're not a virgin anymore, she told me matter-of-factly. I remember being, for lack of a better word, flabbergasted because 1) I never would have guessed that she was still a virgin since I had already heard a slew of rumors about her (though I didn't care – I was desperate for friends), and 2) I had never heard a more puzzling statement in my life. How was a little cylinder of cotton anything like a dick? Do people actually think that a tampon robs you of your virginity? I was still innocent *in that way*, wasn't I?

Being a woman is realizing that losing your virginity is more than an inanimate object entering your secret catacomb. Virginity is symbolic (they tell us); it's special. Save it like a rare coin. It's a sign of purity, of innocence. Men don't want to fuck those who aren't pure and innocent. Men are the collectors of the special pennies of the world. Piggy banks that cash in whenever possible. Keep yourself nice and shiny for them, polished and pure and pubic-hairless. I always thought my body was a gift, as much as I

tried to destroy it. I told myself I'd only share it with those I deem worthy. Usually, though, they're not.

It crept up on you; you weren't ready. They always say you know when it's "right." This wasn't right. He removed all your articles of clothing but still had his shirt on. You are bare, exposed, unsure. Your face says it all. He is too caught-up in his red-hot excitement to notice. It's happening, it's uncomfortable, it's a little painful, then it's over. You immediately reach for your clothes and laugh. This is all it was. This is all it would ever be.

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If girlhood is fear, then womanhood is coping. Yes, the art of repression. You've seen, heard, and felt shit, years and years of shit, shit that wasn't covered in *The Care and Keeping of You*. No one plans on digging a grave for their memories, but we all do it. We spot our scars in the mirror and ignore them, slap on some makeup. We chop and dye our hair. We smoke and inhale too long, a little hint of death to flirt with. We put the razor to our flesh – To cut or not to cut? Hamlet was onto something. We poison our bodies and minds until our childhood feels lightyears away – we sit in a psychology class and the instructor asks, "What's your earliest memory?" Our minds are blank. No one raises their hand. The distant recollections seep to the surface, but they feel like nightmares or memories of dreams – they aren't real. We stick the shovel in the dirt.

In therapy, they probably tell you that "talking about it" helps. Helps what? Fuck remembering. I need to keep moving, keep reading, keep writing, keep spilling my guts and purging my talents till all that's left are remains of the "gifted child" that was once so destined for greatness. Fuck girlhood. It may have built me, but it is not me. Your trauma is not you. Your fucked-up dad is a fossil.

My older sister had her first bout with cancer a year ago. It's peculiar how our bodies betray us. The surgeons scooped and scraped the toxic shit out of her skin. It came back this year, this time on her face. A face so lovely that I always wanted to replicate.

We not only have to worry about the genderless cancers – lymphoma, carcinoma, kidney cancer, etc. –, but also the No Boys Allowed Cancers. Breast cancer, ovarian cancer, cervical cancer, you name it. Yes, men can occasionally be afflicted with these terrible diseases, but they don't lose sleep over them. They're not 1 in 8 women. They're the tough guys who are after lung and liver cancer, triple-dog-daring it as they inhale and binge-drink their whole lives then beg for mercy on their deathbeds. My dad beckoned it for years and he's still fucking kicking, yet my sister who's a wonderful mother and friend and wife needs shit gouged out of her perfect skin at regular intervals. I could be next. I deserve it. We all do. None of us do. But we don't get to choose.

That white book taught me a lot that was never said out loud by my parents or teachers. I shared its lessons with my friends like a Jehovah's witness, carrying out my missionary duties. My mom always told me that education was important.

As hard as I try, I can only recall nightmarish snippets of the awful girlhood I endured. It might seem more awful in retrospect, or perhaps it was the living hell that I remember now. But every hell has its optimism, its great take-away.

“I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.  
I turn and burn.  
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—  
You poke and stir.  
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there--

A cake of soap,  
A wedding ring,  
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware.

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.”

These words make my stomach turn, my blood boil, my skin flare. Sylvia Plath summed it all up: the disconnect from one’s own body, the need to re-claim one’s life from the patriarchal forces against it, the rebellion to those figures we are told are almighty – that is womanhood, noun. It is the antithesis to *The Care and Keeping of You*. It reminds you that Care and Keeping are not enough to make you strong, to rebel the shit that is pulling you taut. You need to face death one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine times. Doubt, despair, anger, suicidal thoughts: the food pyramid.

I'm still terrified to rake my own leaves, to put my hair up in a ponytail, to pull my face so tight I can't feel anything except pain. My worst fear is losing control, being stretched stiff like cellophane wrap around untouched leftovers. His hands on either side of you, binding you to the ground. Life will fuck you if you let him. Sometimes, blaming yourself is right. You let things happen to you. Sometimes you're the victim, sometimes you're the passive fuckee, sometimes you're the fucker. Womanhood is the balance of Caring, Keeping, and Fucking of You.

Q: What do you want to be when you grow up?

A: Lady Lazarus

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *'The Care and Keeping of You' was my final writing assignment for my first creative writing class in college. A week before the due date, this memoir-esque, feminist-y idea came to me. While the piece includes very real memories of my own growth from girl to woman, I heeded the advice of my professor to surprise the reader. Instead of opting for a straightforward story, I wanted to integrate elements from multiple genres: thus, the inner poet in me broke through and made my depressing childhood come to life. 'The Care and Keeping of You' aims to put readers in my position, not for pity, but for an awakening of hopefulness no matter how awful life had been to them.*

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**BIO:** *Making my readers uncomfortable is my ultimate goal as a creative writer, putting a shattered mirror up to society and myself simultaneously is my secondary goal. As a senior English major with minors in philosophy and Hispanic studies at Roosevelt University, my writing inspirations are far and wide and existentially driven. I have been published in Voice of Eve and iO's Literary Journal's online publications. As an aspiring college professor, I hope I will one day inspire a generation to at least glance at their own shattered reflections.*

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# SIN IS A MADE UP MARKETING SCHEME

BY CAITLIN JOHNSTONE



**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Sure, we were ecstatic to learn the origin of the sinister market-crafted halitosis scare that spread like a plague and had everybody in the 1920's running for Listerine. But when the author then analogously employed that discovery to scald and skin the whole sorry dualistic concept of sin as manufactured propaganda by a money grubbing institution for the spiritually oppressed, it like, well, you know, blew us away. This ever radical and tireless defender of the anti-Matrix from the land of Oz always takes up big pile causes with a big stick. But unlike some social zealots, our favourite shit disturber proves her mettle as a writer of conscience by releasing all copyrights to her work so that Alt-minded dudes like FOTD can pick 'em up and republish 'em. Lucid and feisty!*

The word “halitosis” is a household term which everyone knows means bad breath. But did you know that the word has been around for less than a hundred years, and was invented not by the medical field, [but by advertisers](#)?

Back in the 1920s, people didn't worry about body odor as much as they do now. They didn't bathe nearly as often, they didn't wear deodorant, and some bodily smells weren't necessarily considered socially catastrophic. A family antiseptic company called Listerine was able to increase its revenue from [\\$115,000 to \\$8 million](#) over the course of seven years by helping to change that.

Listerine had been around since the 1880s, marketed as a household cleaner, a medical antiseptic, and a treatment for gonorrhea, among many other uses. Forty years later, the company's owner and his son came up with the brilliant idea to look up a fancy latin word for bad breath that sounds like a medical condition and then market it as though it's an actual diagnosable disease that is crippling everyone's social life. They [ran advertisements](#) telling wives that their halitosis was making them unappealing to their husbands, telling husbands that their halitosis was making their wives not want to kiss them, telling young women that they'd remain unmarried and unwanted forever if they didn't cure their "unexcusable" condition with Listerine, even [telling mothers](#) that their breath may be grossing out their own children.

And it worked. People began throwing their money at this company, suddenly desperate to cure a horrible medical condition that they'd only just found out was a thing. By manufacturing demand for their product using artificially instilled shame and fear, Listerine made a of advertisement is now commonplace, because it works. Mothers are told that they may be endangering their children by not using X cleaning product. Fathers are made to feel as though they're not protecting their family because they don't own home security system Y. Wives and girlfriends are made to feel self-conscious about how their lady parts might smell if they don't use feminine hygiene product Z. Screens, billboards and magazine ads blare constantly, "Did you know that you are deeply flawed? You are! But don't worry, Panaceavox can fix you!" In America they're allowed to straight up say "Hey, have you ever felt kind of emotionally not okay? Well there's a diagnosis for that. Ask your doctor if Thorazac is right for you." People are manipulated into fretting about a problem they didn't know they had til two seconds ago, then sold the solution.

What people think of as "sin" is a lot like Listerine's halitosis marketing ploy, except unlike bad breath, sin doesn't actually exist. And, for those who profit from religion, it's also been exponentially more lucrative.

Sin is completely made up; we're all a bunch of large-brained primates moving around in the world and experiencing the consequences of those movements, no more, no less. As a Catholic, I was told that all babies were born sinners, with tiny little blackened souls that would go straight to hell if the priest didn't get to them first and dunk their deceptively pretty little demon heads in magic water tout suite. It didn't stop there either. You had to celebrate an ancient Nazarene zombie who came back from the dead because somehow that made our sins go away for a little while, just as long as you turned up each week to drink zombie blood and eat zombie body in some kind of pretend cannibal ritual. The weirdest thing about it was that I thought it was perfectly normal. That's how you avoided being a sinner.

When you unplug those stories from the power of belief, it's a laughably transparent marketing scheme.

"Guess what? You know how you feel like you're basically fine? Well you're not! You're infected with Sin, and only this One True Religion™ can rescue you from it! That's right, it slices, it dices, it protects your soul from eternal hellfire, it's the One True Religion™! Follow the One True Religion™ and you will be freed from the burden of Sin, and you'll go the the best place you can possibly imagine (\*cough\* when you're dead). Refuse to follow the One True Religion™, and all that sin will cause literally the worst thing you can possibly imagine to

happen to you (after you're dead, we can't show it to you here). Act now, supplies are running out, here comes the tithe basket, buy your way into the One True Religion™ today!"

Ridiculous, manipulative hogwash.

Fear isn't the only thing factoring into people's belief in sin, of course. It can be egoically gratifying to believe that the real assholes in our world will spend eternity writhing in a state of eternal torture for their transgressions. Also, more significantly, it can feel very comforting to have a set of prescribed "do"s and "don't"s in a world that is otherwise a completely boundless and open-ended improvisation exercise, with no ultimate rules or guidelines of any kind. It can feel very comforting to have a set of guidelines to live by for which you have no responsibility, which were handed to you from On High by a flawless omniscient and omnipotent deity underlying the fundamental ground of reality.

But that's just it: you *are* responsible. It absolutely is your responsibility to figure out how best to move around in this wide open universe, and you don't get to abdicate that responsibility to some douchebag in a funny hat or some imaginary zombie carpenter. Sin and sanctity are made-up bullshit concepts, which means that the only understanding of how to behave in this world that has any relevance to you at all is your own understanding.

This responsibility can be daunting, but taking it seriously is the first step to becoming the kind of human being that can overcome the [huge challenges](#) that our species is facing in the near future.

To act with responsibility in life, you don't get to rely on anyone else's rules. You've got to get really clear on what you value, what kind of world you want to live in, what kind of life you're trying to craft for yourself, and begin taking actions toward making those assessments a reality. There is no ultimate right and wrong inscribed on the fabric of reality; you've got to make it up for yourself, based on your own clarity of vision and your own will for your surroundings.

People say, "Well if we didn't believe in absolute right and wrong behavior, we'd all just be a bunch of hedonistic criminals!" Rubbish. If you had the ability to make a movie and have the movie contain anything you want to see, it wouldn't be full of rape and murder and destruction; you'd try your best to create a thing of beauty. Our lives are the same way. We're all trying on some level to craft beautiful lives and help create an enjoyable world, which never entails going around hurting people and destroying things. And the clearer our seeing becomes, the more skillful we become in doing so.

The only exception to this would perhaps be sociopaths and psychopaths and people with other severe personality disorders, but their type has never truly believed in sin anyway. Sin is a construct of social manipulation, and manipulators recognize manipulation. A sociopath only cares about the concept of sin to the extent that they can use it to get what they want. Only emotionally and empathetically normal people are impacted by the concept of sin.



The popular acceptance of the concept of sin is a consequence of the way we are psychologically hardwired and the way that that wiring has been manipulated, and you see that same wiring fiddled with in similar ways in many other areas. The way centrists browbeat leftists for not falling in line with Hillary Clinton in the lead-up to the 2016 US elections, for example, often looked barely distinguishable from a gaggle of church ladies abusing one of their sisters for wanting to leave the church or get a divorce. Instead of the promise of hell it was the promise of Donald Trump ending the world, and instead of sin being disobedience to God it was disobedience to the mainstream liberal orthodoxy. But the same kind of shaming, manipulation and groupthink herd bullying was present in both cases. The notion of personal sovereign responsibility was violently rejected as anathema by the Church of the Blue Donkey.

Sin is a tool of social manipulation just like advertising, and just like propaganda. Religion, advertising and propaganda all pull the same psychological strings. Since as far back as recorded history stretches, those with wealth and power have been using whatever tools they have at their disposal to control the ways people think and behave. When religion held more psychological weight, they used that to justify book burnings, heretic burnings, and the destruction of anything that challenged the ruling order. Now that humanity is vomiting up the plague of religion from its DNA, propaganda and advertising are taking its place.

But it's the same kind of manipulation in each case, the same disease, and the cure for that disease is the same too. By insisting on your own sovereign perspective, all attempts to manipulate you out of that perspective begin to stand out like a black fly on a white page. By

standing firmly in what you know to be true, what kind of life you know you're trying to live, and what kind of world you know you're trying to help create, you give yourself a clear picture of the path that you are on. With that clear picture, any attempts to manipulate you off of that path in any way are easily seen for the unwelcome intrusions that they are, whether they take the form of "You are sinful and you need Jesus," "You are flawed and you need this product," or "Trust Big Brother to do what's right for you." And you can shrug off the manipulators and stride toward the bright consequences you wish to generate with your actions.

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## Review - Mitch Grabois - *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face*.



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Book Review:

*The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face* by Mitchell Grabois. Review by Cynthia Anderson.

Do the poems in most contemporary literary journals give you a headache? Are you tired of not knowing what the heck they are talking about? Then *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face* might be for you. Mitchell Grabois grabs his readers by the short hairs—his poetry is described by Robin Ouzman Hislop of *Poetry Life & Times* as “lucidly readable...delivered in a paced, snappy, even raunchy style, a mix of compassion with often hilarious black humor.”

Think Charles Bukowski meets Charles Bukowski. All kinds of stories make their way into these pages—stories about women, family, neighbors, random encounters, women—did I say women? As in the title poem:

I kissed the woman who slices lunch meat  
at King Sooper's  
She shoved smoked turkey at me  
leaned away  
and called: *Next!*

I kissed my doctor  
I'd been wanting to do it  
since she first told me to stick out my tongue

and complimented me on its smoothness  
and the elegance of my taste buds  
I kissed her and she asked  
*On a scale of one to ten, how have you been feeling this week?*  
I kissed her again

For me, Grabois is at his best when he lets his imagination run wild—which is often. In “*One Universe Too Many*” he writes:

The alternative universe  
in which you’re not a colossal disappointment,  
where is it?  
It rode the Diphtheria Nebula  
slid into the Oppenheimer Black Hole and hid there,  
rested in perfect silence  
before disappearing

He doesn’t shy away from the big questions:

What if my grandfather had not stopped in the Bronx  
and become a presser in the garment industry?  
What if he had continued west  
to become a bronc buster in Colorado?

Grabois covers a lot of ground—from an Animal Control Specialist who picks up the corpses of birds at a wind farm, to having car trouble at Walden Pond and getting help from a nun, to hiding overnight inside the Van Gogh museum in Arles and sleeping in the artist’s bed, to becoming a Dumpster diver at the behest of a landlady who drives a pink Cadillac.

One of my favorites is “*The Moment Gone*,” where he recounts a childhood memory of wandering off when he was two years old and sitting beside a swimming pool:

A huge mass of possibilities began to coalesce  
and I felt certainty begin its approach  
an unprecedented feeling  
No one had yet asked me what I was going to be  
when I grew up  
a silly question for a two-year-old  
but I had a sense of the future looming...

I sat patiently waiting for the answer...

Then my mother  
whose approach I had not heard  
grabbed my arm  
and pulled me to my feet  
She knelt and hugged me fiercely

*You could have drowned, she cried  
You could have drowned*

Pski's Porch Publishing prides itself on promoting passionate, weird, unfashionable poetry, and *The Arrest of Mr. Kissy Face* is a prime example—far, far away from the MFA poetry mill, and a breath of fresh air.

*About the Poet:*

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has had over 1,500 of his [poems and fictions](#) appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has been nominated for numerous prizes, and was awarded the 2017 Booranga Writers' Centre (Australia) Prize for Fiction.

[Click here to purchase Mr. Kissy Face](#)

[Note - click here to view info on another book - highly recommended by Rich Soos - Mitch's fabulously hilarious novel, Two-Headed Dog \(\\$7\).](#)

[Note 2 - click here to see another fabulous review of Mr Kissy Face in After The Pause.](#)

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# HONESTY FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE

By Tom Ball

“Honesty is the best policy.”

Ben Franklin

“Honesty is such a lonely word.”

Billy Joel

“If we are not ashamed to think it, we should not be afraid to say it.”

Cicero

“Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty, truth and compassion against injustice, lying and greed. If people did this, it would change the World.”

William Faulkner

#

People can't stop fucking with the truth. Sex, arguments, fighting, backstabbing, office politics. It's all fucking.

Many scientists are also fucking up the truth, finding what they want to find and reporting it as fact. You argue that the scientific method is faulty in its execution as we are only human. But

science in general has shed so much light. And who would want to live in the past? But given the human race it is amazing that all this fucking with the truth has had some good results.

Ass kissing and deceit is at its peak with politicians. They used to call people around the King or Queen, “courtiers” they had to please the King. Now people belong to a party and toe the party line from leaders who are mediocrities. They help out at the campaign and hope one day to have power as leader. And lobby groups bribe politicians to become corrupt and it is hard to turn down free money. And sometimes the lobby groups are themselves extremists like pro-guns and pro-coal.

All politicians should be vetted to not be corrupt. And should need to pass an Honesty test, an IQ test and a Kind Q test. They should be held to their promises.

The parties all talk about “fiscal responsibility,” but basically run us into debt. In many countries the interest payments on the debt equal to 50% of spending or more. It cannot be sustained.

And people like to fuck around over the environment. Sure, we don’t know why the Earth’s climate is in constant change, but the levels of pollution are outrageous and perhaps will cause catastrophic weather when they could just as easily use solar and wind power instead.

We live in an enlightened age but some people still vote conservative as if being old-fashioned is something to be proud of.

And you need to kiss your lover’s ass and if you fall apart, she will sue the man for as much as she can so that she can have an easy life and do no work.

People tell themselves that flattery will get you nowhere, but most like to be flattered.

Even old women like to be told they are beautiful.

And speaking of fucking reality up, in many countries the spies fuck over radicals and dissenters in any way they can such as through hypnosis, lie detectors and criticism and telling people to stay away from them.

Brain waves which are just another wave, like a radio wave. I suggest to you that sometime soon they will invent MRT (mind reading technology) and people will everywhere have to tell the truth. If so MRT should be available to all, but one should only read another's mind if they give permission. This will create new honesty in romance and the Arts, Business and the Sciences.

In the meantime, lie detectors should be utilized to stop people from dishonesty like ass kissing and outright lies.

People need to get used to telling/thinking the truth. It would take some time.

But as in the past when everyone in the village knew what everyone else was doing honesty is not totally new. But gossip will turn into facts more or less. No one will be allowed to share lies about others.

If the government spies had MRT they could prevent assholes like Hitler from taking control. They would know their intentions. Some evil people will no doubt kill themselves, but the populace won't be troubled with that.

Spies should all be elected not appointed in secrecy.  
And should have checks and balances on their power.

People could be rated according to their honesty quotient.

Honest people in our times are rare, just like that ancient Greek who went about with a lantern in broad daylight seeking an honest man. But we can make everyone honest.

And with MRT crime could be virtually eliminated, that is unless criminals possess an anti-MRT device, but that could be overcome.

Criminals would be required to be hypnotised and subject to MRT to alter their thinking.

And take out the violence in movies and end the glorification of criminals.

And what about fiction? You ask. Fiction will still be with us, but needs to have moral lessons or be closely based on reality. Fiction will all be about learning.

And judges should be elected and not appointed by a ruling party. Indeed, we should get rid of party politics all together.

MRT could also create honest Virtual Reality. And with eternal youth, people will take their time with their lives and do it right.

And we should all have a clear conscience about the poor. We should treat them with kindness and respect and make sure all have a home and food and drugs.

Open marriages may become the norm in the later 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Soul mates will be found on the Internet and you will tell your lovers everything.

Perhaps people will get sick and tired of the truth about one lover and quickly seek other lovers.

Some might feel that the mysterious truths about your lover, is part of what makes love great.

Maybe you tell yourself that your lover will never grow sick of you and so on. Life is largely illusion.

Maybe people will prefer android love dolls as the best truth. Yet programmed to please you. In such a case the programming will all be subjective.

And people will be honest what kind of child to have and then look at the computer projection of the way your potential baby will work out. No surprises.

And people will have stable friendships and relationships on long space voyages with MRT.

The need for MRT agents will create hundreds of millions of jobs and help make sure that everyone has some use.

And MRT can make everyone into a skilled artist, they just need some inspiration if only to be a camera person or lighting person on a movie set.

And you say animals don't lie and are therefore noble.

And many people deceive themselves. People can occasionally fool a lie detector test if they sincerely believe a lie to be true. But there's no fooling MRT.

And you say all truth is subjective. But this isn't true. Real facts are facts and should not be disputed. But many of the great controversies of our time are polarizing truths. Like communism and capitalism, like fascism and communism, like anarchy and peace, like love and war. Like capitalism and the environment. Kindness and tough love.

It's a matter of philosophy and kindness. We need kind Philosopher Kings.

Some wise people say the middle road is best like Lao-Tse. But it depends on the situation and the opinion of the intellectuals.

We all want free will, but sometimes the truth is subjective. And democracy has often let us down. Still we go on hoping the spies will allow the best and dissuade the worst from seeking power.

You can laugh or cry as the old saying goes.

If you think it is true, then it is true for you. But you will be judged by your lovers, friends and colleagues.

And white lies need to be discouraged. No bending the facts. Some people say lying is an art and is an integral part of our civilization. But the future will be no place for liars or evildoers.

Wise people can tell you if something is true or likely to be true, but in the future, everyone will need to find their own way to the truth.

And you ask, “What about half-truths?” A lie detector can detect that and MRT will discover the whole truth (as you see it).

Catholic Christians had to go to confession. People then thought it was good to purge yourself of misdeeds and lies and deceitful conduct. Perhaps there was some merit in this.

And many ancient civilizations taught the people to be good. And honesty and goodness go hand in hand.

And all wise people know that we need to get rid of nuclear weapons and other dangerous weapons and have free trade and free immigration of people’s gradually. The UN should be given more power to legislate World affairs. Be an honest broker and send peacekeeping troops into all conflicts.

Space will be no place for advanced weapons. No Star Wars.

In the end, all one can do is to be true to yourself and hope for the best. Be optimistic for heaven’s sake. We’ll get through it. And we all need to live for the future.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I am concerned about honesty in the modern era. Everyone lies and is almost forced to lie. This short treatise is about being honest in the future, but the near future. And I believe these things I talked about will come to pass. If I was to pick someone that inspired this piece, I’d say Plato.*

**BIO:** *Here’s what people are saying about Senior Editor Tom Ball: “You know, when this dude’s drunk he’s one of the nicest guys you’ll ever know. But when he’s sober he’s even nicer.”*

THE END