

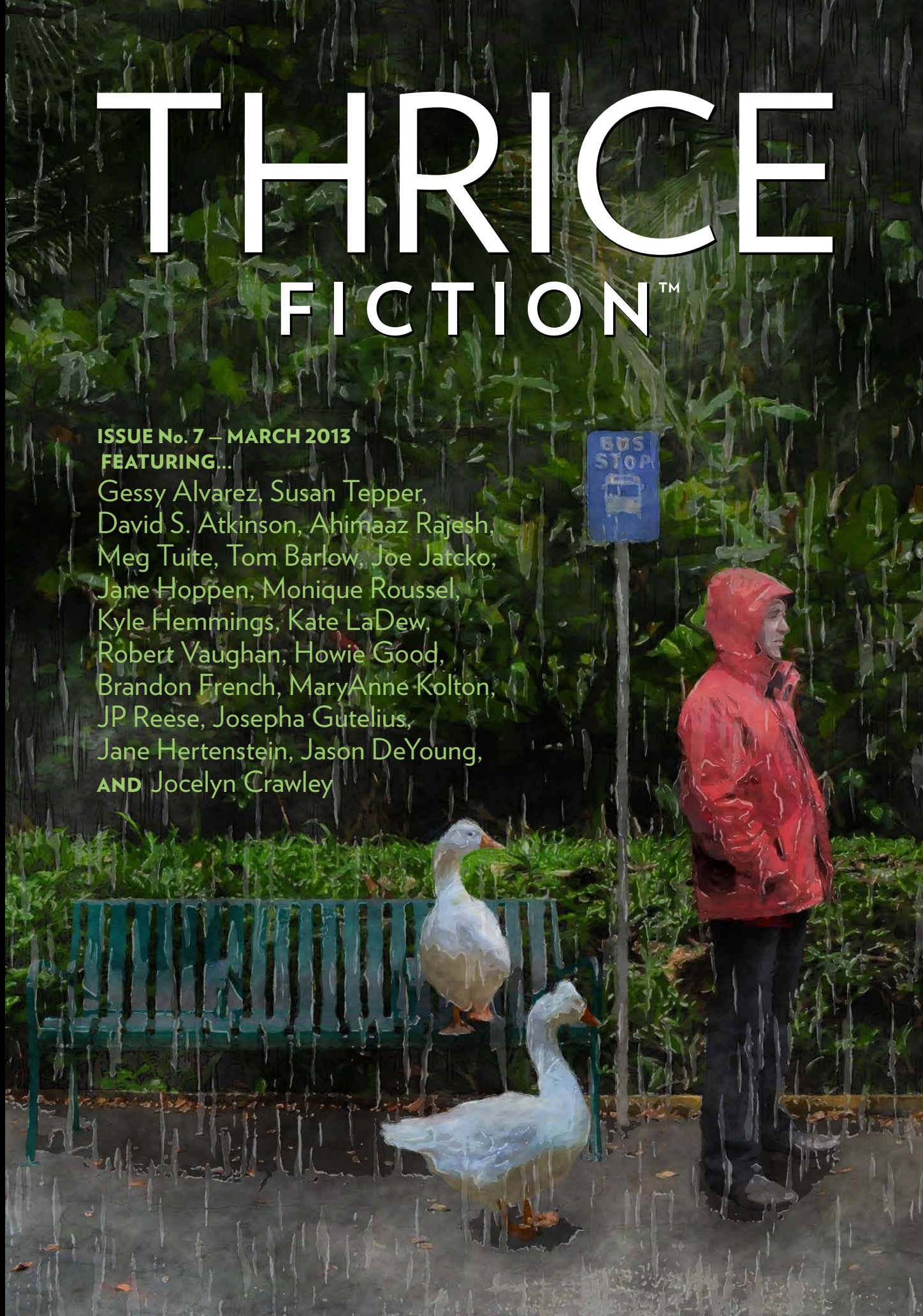
THRICE

FICTION™

ISSUE No. 7 – MARCH 2013

FEATURING...

Gessy Alvarez, Susan Tepper,
David S. Atkinson, Ahimaaz Rajesh,
Meg Tuite, Tom Barlow, Joe Jatchko,
Jane Hoppen, Monique Roussel,
Kyle Hemmings, Kate LaDew,
Robert Vaughan, Howie Good,
Brandon French, MaryAnne Kolton,
JP Reese, Josepha Gutelius,
Jane Hertenstein, Jason DeYoung,
AND Jocelyn Crawley



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Issue No. 7 • MARCH 2013

RW Spryszak, Editor
David Simmer II, Art Director

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Sentries by Christopher Woods



Thrice 7 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

The seventh beat of this heartfelt drum sees the native return of a goodly list of writers who have graced our pages before.

And yet Thrice is still driven to find new voices and present writers from outside our comfort zones. This shouldn't be forgotten.

Well Magoo, we've done it again.

And no small feat if I do say so myself, considering the work we so happily present is the result of a 100% open submission plan.

Remarks and comments have gotten back to me regarding our last effort. #6 of this name seems to have hit many readers in the same fashion. The one comment that epitomized what I was seeing and hearing was when the issue was called "unrelentingly dark" by a regular reader not often given to unlit affinities. And to this view I humbly bow.

The evolution of any issue, at least in these parts, has more to do with the mix of material we get from The Blue than anything else. After reading and reading it starts to become obvious what the issue wants to be. This modus has worked so far. Why change conveyance in mid obstruction?

So with that understanding wither #7?

Why #7 becomes that thing that makes the spice of life, methinks. Clue to 16 across. Seven letter word starting with "V".

#7 is meant to run your gamut. Hope we don't wear it out.



The Happy Couple

Gessy Alvarez

The husband sits on the guest chair beside his wife, the patient. He looks like a college freshman, dressed in a Yankee baseball cap, t-shirt, and jeans. She has long, curly hair and a round face. She is sitting upright on the recliner. I pull a rolling stool over and sit to her right opposite her husband. I place my hand over hers on the side lever, and show her how to raise her feet and adjust the chair back.

"We'll take a break between doses," I say. "Some people like to take naps in between. Others like to watch TV." I show the husband how to turn on the small, wall-mounted, flat-screen TV.

I explain the treatment. Name the four drugs I'm about to administer. I tell them what they are, how they work, and what side effects to expect.

"Where's your mediport?"

The patient unbuttons her blouse and exposes her collarbone.

I put on a pair of surgical gloves.

She touches the bump on her right side. The mediport is a quarter-size metal disc surgically placed underneath the skin. A catheter connects the port to a large vein. She winces when I touch it.

"That's a good place for it," I say. "Once you're done with treatments and it's removed, you'll have a small scar."

The husband holds his wife's hand.

I drag an I.V. stand across the room. A bag of saline hangs from a hook on the pole. I ask the husband if he would like to leave or stay.

"I'll stay," he says.

I set the I.V. stand behind the patient's chair and wipe her mediport with an antiseptic pad. I unpack a large sterilized needle. "You are going to feel a sharp prick," I say.

She stares up at the ceiling as I poke the mediport with the needle. I try to be quick but gentle. “That’s the worst of it.” I settle back down on my stool. She looks pale.

“Would you like some water or juice?” Before she answers, I look at the husband. “There’s a stocked pantry area across the nurses station. Help yourselves.” The husband rises from his seat, but the patient stops him.

“Please stay,” she says.

I connect a line from the saline drip to the needle and prepare the first drug. A bright red Adriamycin dose.

“Looks like fruit punch,” the patient says.

“You may notice red urine for the next day or two. That’s normal.” I stop the saline drip and inject the drug to a secondary line. I let her know that she will need to drag the I.V. stand with her when she goes to the bathroom.

“Thank you,” she says. She stares at the red line connected to the port on her chest. I re-connect the saline drip and disconnect from the secondary line.

I’m about to leave the room when her husband asks me if I can train him to use an injection. “Her oncologist wants me to give her an injection every couple of days,” he says.

“A filgrastim injection to help keep her white blood count up,” I say.

“Yeah, but I’ve never injected anyone before.”

I ask him to follow me to the nurses station. I grab a few saline injections from the desk drawer and tell him to sit behind the desk. “What you want to do is grab a fatty part of her thigh like this.” I lean over him and pinch the front of his skinny thigh. “Or, you could do this on her behind. Whatever she’s most comfortable with. If you want to practice, use these.” I hand him the saline injections.

“Always wipe the injection site with an antiseptic pad. If you notice any swelling after the injection, call the hospital immediately. Is that clear?”

He holds the saline tubes against his chest. “I’m scared. I don’t want to hurt her.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t. Now let’s go back inside and see how she’s doing.”

He’s about a foot taller than me when he stands. I pat his back and follow him inside the treatment room. He returns to her left side and watches me while I check on the drip.

“You’re a lucky woman,” I say.

She laughs, but her voice is shaky as she says, “I know. He’s a catch.”

“You’re scheduled to come in every other Friday for treatments. Sometimes it helps to have different friends and family members sit with you during these appointments.”

“I’ll be here for her,” the husband says.

“Yes, but sometimes taking time off from work can be difficult. Is there anyone else who can be here for you?” I say.

“No, my parents live in Florida, and I don’t feel comfortable asking anyone else,” she says.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Maybe your mother can plan a visit to New York. She can stay with you for the weekend. Moms always know how to make you feel better. Trust me; I’m a mother of two.”

In a hushed voice, she says, “They don’t know about my cancer.” She flushes, looks at her husband. I see the silent plea.

The husband places a hand on top of her head. It’s fingers slip between her curls.

I know I should keep my mouth shut. I say, “You have to tell them. They have a right to know.”

“Step away,” the husband says. He hugs his wife. She hides her red face in his neck.

“I’ll write down the name and number of the social worker. Please contact her as soon as you can. It’s always good to talk things out with a professional.” I say.

The couple continues to hold each other. I’m the outsider. A person of no value. I roll the stool across the small room. The wait between doses is an hour, but I feel as if I should apologize

before leaving the room. When I make a move towards the patient, the husband moves faster and blocks me from her.


“Do not speak to my wife again.”

“I just thought...”

“Give her the medicine and do not speak to her again.”

I step out and stand outside the door. I count to thirty. Someone turns on the flat-screen TV inside the room. The volume is on high. I hear a laugh track then I hear the patient laughing. Her husband laughs with her. 🗣️





GESSY ALVAREZ received her MFA from Columbia University. She’s taught fiction in the New York City public school system and at Columbia University Medical Center. Her fiction has appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *Camroc Press Review*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *Pure Slush*, *Connotation Press*, *Pank*, and other publications.



Distance

Susan Tepper

On Tuesday they transferred him to Modern Art with the crazy stuff—tin cans piled conical to a height of maybe sixty feet. It was the hot new *installation*, everyone crowding around to take a look. He didn’t get it. The paintings either. They all had wiggly lines or color blocks or some weirdness. One had just one color: gray.

People came to Modern Art and stood around mute like they were looking at God or else said dumb things to impress the others. Regundo felt disturbed in there. He liked the real God pictures in *Medieval*, where the Virgin reigned with the child, and Jesus hung on the cross, angels and seraphim, shiny gold halos like stiff hats. He dug the flatness of *Medieval*—no hidden surprises. He’d been posted there a long time. One of the guards with some knowledge of art had called *Medieval* “no perspective.”

Now, specifically, Regundo was posted to The Bernard

and Beatrice Rufenstocken Pavilion. A mouthful. Lafferty, a bald ponytail guy, one of the main curators, had called it a *special posting*. Only our best guards staff this new wing, Lafferty said in the opening ceremony.

Bullshit thought Regundo sizing up his compatriots. He’d heard the new construction cost tens of millions.

They (Regundo and the other best guards) had been warned to stay vigilant (no dozing against the walls), warned to keep people from touching the sculpture and paintings, from getting too close to the installations; even arm waving was considered taboo. Alarms sounding if anybody got within breathing distance of the art.

Lafferty had warned them to keep an eye out for the *instructor*—generally an older woman who liked stroking the paintings on the pretense of explaining brushstrokes to a friend. Someone in the rear of the guard group—it sounded like Tabitha—laughed in a way that sounded dirty.

And if people talked too loud on their phones, said Lafferty, they had to be silenced. But nicely. *Sssshhh!* went the curator demonstrating with a finger lightly to his lips. And keep your eye on the cameras in certain areas, he'd cautioned them, especially the new installation CANS. Then Lafferty'd puffed out his chest. CANS being *his* baby. And of course no eating or drinking outside the café-teria.

Yeah, yeah, thought Regundo. He couldn't figure out why people bothered to come. Though the phones happened to be his own personal bugaboo, too. Each guard had a few things that drove them crazy. When Regundo saw someone on their phone he wanted to grab it and throw it against the wall, watch the guts spill out. He could picture the person on the other end still at it: *yak yak yak yak yak*. And he'd seize up with controlled laughter. Control. It was key.

"What's so funny?" Tabitha had wandered over standing too close. She was after him, any one of them, she wasn't fussy. He thought she was a retard. For real. Bixby thought so, too. Right now the old guard had her in his sight view muttering *screwball*. Regundo chuckled. Who was Bixby kidding—he'd take her regardless. At his age you'd take a package of liver, smiling.

"What makes you so happy Regundo?" She stared up in his face. Damn she could be annoying. He pulled on his tie looking away.

"Did you kill your wife this morning?"

"I don't have a wife."

"Well I know that!"

Get lost, he was thinking.

"Tell us about the war," she said. "Nam." Flicking her tongue like her lips held the residue of something delicious.

Retard or otherwise, he knew when he was getting fucked. Screw you, he thought; screw Vietnam. Her dumb-girl grin showing the gap between her teeth. On a different woman it could be mighty sexy but on her... Regundo shuddered. Why was it her uniform jacket always looked crooked, did she have crooked shoulders, one higher, or was it those black bangs cut into uneven spikes? Those persistent boobs like flag waving patriots—always at you, always at you.

"You're supposed to be over *there*." He jerked his thumb at the far wall. A collage of rubber body parts hung there like they'd been torn off and repositioned. The guards called it *the horny zone*.

"Yeah, git on over to the horny zone," said Bixby, making a not so subtle adjustment to his fly.

Regundo scanned the massive room. If Lafferty or one of the other curators saw them grouped chummy this way... The rule was clear: distance. Keep your distance from the rest of the guards which meant no fraternizing. Keep the public at a distance, away from the art! Keep yourself and everyone moving. *Circulate the room*, Lafferty like saying. And Regundo saw a room spinning on its axis; despite Modern Art being a series of rooms. Linked rooms he hadn't yet counted. He checked his watch—another hour. Tabitha, getting no attention, finally sauntered away.

At closing time he managed to slip past her in the employee locker room while she worked over some new-hire. He left through an unmarked side door and stepped out into the night. Tightened his scarf as he passed the blue-lit fountain. It made him feel colder. A few blocks

then into the subway. Then home. Secure in his 3x5 kitchenette, Regundo spooned what was left of the peanut butter.

When he was younger—no sweat—he could handle the standing all day. Now it fucking killed his lower back. A lot of the guards exercised on the sly, raising and lowering legs, flexing ankles, sliding down the wall into a semi-squat, holding, then back up. The curators didn't like it.

Bastards, he thought, sliding his finger through the film left in the jar. He sucked it off, felt hungrier. The contents of his mini-fridge wouldn't satisfy a mouse. In fact mice had chewed a loaf of Italian bread left on the counter, got their little teeth right through the wrapper. Regundo took the bread, studying marks left in the crust. Fossil remains. He considered saving it in a plastic bin—preserve it like the museum preserved artifacts. Instead, he downed three beers. Come morning he'd have a big hearty breakfast at the coffee shop.

Stretching out on his futon he found an old movie. Errol Flynn. A true man's man. Women, gorgeous women, not scabs like Tabitha, flung themselves at Flynn. Gorgeous women didn't fling themselves at Regundo; though once he had a wife. Marie. And not too shabby either. She must be old by now, he thought. Fifty; or even higher. "That makes me fucking really old," he said.

He dreamt about her. He had on his army fatigues, and when they kissed his uniform fell away, revealing a flowered Hawaiian shirt and white clam-digger shorts. He picked up a shovel in the dream, began digging a hole on some beach, while Marie ran wildly in circles happily out of her mind.

Nobody at the museum knew about her. He kept his stuff private. They made one daughter, Elise Marie. He didn't know her whereabouts. He and Marie and Elise Marie had lost touch. The dope and night sweats and sleep walking screaming combat orders—did the marriage in.

Was he sorry? Sure. Hell, yes. Sorry he hadn't taken off to Canada instead of sucking it up. Nam. When he thought of Marie, it was her arms. Lanky girl arms. Some women kept them right to the end.

Silencing his alarm, he got off the futon slowly. A shame about Modern Art. Such a shame. He'd been content in *Medieval*. The years tucked away in deep, dark little rooms; like monks live out their time in the catacombs. Quiet rooms. Generally passed over by a public who wanted to see *The Impressionists*. They peeked in at *Medieval* then moved on. Regundo felt the rooms, privately, inside his body; an infiltration of peace. Now even that small happiness had been taken away.

Mornings, before the Museum opened at ten, his routine had been to wander the catacombs of little rooms, touching padded velvet walls, caressing the different shades: rose, green, gray, deep-blue. A blue so dense and dark that standing in there felt like falling to the bottom of the ocean. Resting.

Staring at his rumpled futon he cried out, "God almighty!"

Forced to leave *Medieval* was an expulsion from heaven. *Modern* had stark white walls. Glass ceiling. Blinding. "Who will remember that junk a century from now?" he said. In the tight space of the bathroom his hand trembled slathering on shave cream. Best to be cautious with the new five-blade, he thought.

Despite a hot shower he still felt sluggish. He knotted his tie, put on the blue uniform. The vest at least saved on shirt laundry—a shirt could make up to four days underneath.

The pancake stack, side of bacon, and two cappuccinos didn't lift his spirits. Paying he thought: I'll walk to work. The morning was freezing but bright. Delay, he thought, delay. The job paid crap. Every year they scaled back. But that's OK. He had his other money, his secret money. If he ever wanted to, he could move to a better apartment. Just knowing gave him satisfaction.

About to step off the curb at 39th a car came tearing around the corner. Some woman started screaming her brains out.

A nearby man was screaming too. "The bike lane you fucking Jersey asshole!"

Regundo looked to see if the plates were Jersey, but taxis squeezed in blocking the speeder.

"Hey, dude, give us a hand!" The man was attempting to hold up the screaming woman. Blood coming through her boot. Buckling at the knees, she was about to go down.

Regundo grabbed her by the other arm. "Somebody dial 911!"

The woman shrieked. "No ambulance!"

"What, are you sure?" said the man. "No ambulance?"

"Bed bugs." The woman cried harder.

Regundo watched the blood darkening her pink suede boot. Nice suede. She was a blonde but not hot; more of the Park Avenue type. Good coat, good haircut. Nice smell, too, he thought inhaling near her neck.

Holding her up by the arm he was thinking: What makes a woman act this way?

Men would dive into crocodile alley, to escape a bullet, while a woman would bleed to death over a few bugs. Her suede boot showing more red than pink. He thought about taking off. Could he be held responsible for leaving the scene?

The man told the woman to sit on the curb. Regundo helped ease her down. "I have to get to work," he said.

"*You fuck head!*" followed him north up the avenue.

Nothing to be ashamed of, he thought. The woman had been careless. Happened every day. People losing toes, limbs, struck by a cab, even a bus. City living. Get sloppy you get hurt. Like war. Jungle rot. And all the rest that that entailed.

Funnily, despite what just happened, he was feeling pretty good. Once out of earshot of the cursing guy and bleeding woman, he felt pretty OK. A few blocks down he passed another smaller museum, thought about applying for a job; stopping a moment to admire its classical architecture. The building was square and lowish, a black iron fence around its neatly trimmed garden. He doubted they'd have much space for Modern Art. It didn't seem the type of museum that would hire a retard like Tabitha.

•
"It's gonna be a bad day." This out of Bixby as Regundo entered the locker room. More crowded than usual.

He squatted to tie his shoe lace. "Why is that?"

"Robbery," said the old guard. "Somebody pulled off some cans."

"What do you mean?"

"The new installation. CANS." The rheumy eyes looked

scared. "They gonna blame us. You'll see."

He was about to answer when Lafferty came in. His face flushed red. He was flapping papers.

"I told ya," said Bixby.

The curator jumped the old man's bones. "You know something?"

"I don't know nothin'."

Lafferty continued staring him down. Then another curator came in, sized things up, and put a hand on Lafferty's shoulder. "Bob, take it easy."

"CANS has been vandalized," said Lafferty. "Some are missing."

"Bob, I know that," said the other curator.

"We're not sure exactly how many," said Lafferty, "but I've got my people out there counting." Then he pointed practically knocking out Gus Keating's eyeball. Gus ducked and flinched. Lafferty glared at him. "They're out there counting," he repeated.

A young guard named Riley piped up. "Can't the artist tell how many?"

Lafferty spun on him. "The artist??? *Sculptor!* Don't you people know the terminology!"

"Bob, please, Bob," the other curator kept saying.

Regundo stifled a yawn. Oh, is that all? Slap on a few more who could tell the difference. Soup cans piled like a rusted mountain. Shit from the gutter. Not like men MIA some forty years later. "Pathetic," he said under his breath.

"What's your problem?" Lafferty got right on him. They all were looking at him. "You have something on your mind Mr. Regundo?"

He shook his head. "No, sir, I do not. It's my stomach. I have this pain..."

And before he could stop, he coughed out a huge blasting fart.

People looked surprised. Lafferty said, "Are you out of your mind?"

"Excuse me, sir." The cramp dislodged quick as it came on. "I'm sorry," he told them. Tabitha giggled. "Piggly-wiggly."

Lafferty's eyes looked even more bugged. The pressure from CANS too much. His pony-tail bounced as he fired out: "Some-one-has-violated-CANS! Did anyone see anything strange? Unusual? Think, you morons, think!"

That new-hire Tabitha worked over last night raised his hand like a school boy. "Isn't it alarmed?"

"Alarmed? How could we possibly..." And with that Lafferty collapsed down on the bench. It was long and wooden. Over the years people had carved initials, hearts, phone numbers, fuck-you's; whatever. He slumped there, his head dropped forward.

"Your blood pressure Bob," said the other curator.

Then Lafferty was back up screaming. "This stays in-house! You got that? The sculptor could sue the pants off us! Everybody got that?"

Rusty cans—this is so totally nuts, thought Regundo; his mind drifting to the other smaller museum. It looked so perfect. But was it? What is perfect once you got close? Inside? Nothing.

Take Marie—less than perfect inside. Always had her period or some yeast infection, some problem that prevented him enjoying himself fully. Nothing, he thought.

Nothing in this whole world is close to perfect.

Lafferty continued making threats. The other curator was trying to be reasonable. But Regundo had tapped out. When they began to file from the locker room, to start the shift, he followed.

The day proved interesting. From time to time some curator, or person of museum importance, would take a guard off the floor. Interrogation. He wondered if they'd get around to water-boarding those they found dangerous. He looked forward to his own interrogation. They called him twice in the morning then once in the afternoon. He wondered if three was a high or low number when it came to interrogations. Regundo enjoying his little forays into the various offices.

It was mostly men doing the detective work though one woman was nosing around. She took him to her office after lunch. "Let's have a little chat," she said. "Sit down, there's nothing to be nervous about."

He sat back in the chair. Burnished leather. Very nice. He rubbed the pads of his thumbs over hammered nail heads. Push came to shove, he could sit like this all day. "I'm not nervous," he said.

The woman, a red-head, smiled. "Good. Now tell me anything that might help us nip this in the bud."

Two strands of pearls tight around her throat. Pretty hot. Kind of a high class S&M. Matching pearl earrings were the button type. He preferred drop earrings on a woman. A much better look. This one looked low-forties conservative. Her skirt-suit typical New York black. She could be almost attractive, he was thinking; except for the hair cut too severe for the face. It should be worn to her shoulders, or pulled up in a knot with tendrils. He thought *nipping it in the bud* was a little too late. The bud had been nipped. Ripped. Off.

He stifled a laugh.

"Are you some kind of wise-guy? This is extremely serious."

"I meant no harm."

"You laughed. I don't understand why you'd laugh. Do you know something about this you haven't told us?"

"Nope."

She leaned forward over her big clean desk. "You're positive?"

"Positive."

She sat back tilting her head to the side. He thought of a red bird looking at him from a fence. She said, "You seem fairly intelligent. Why did you choose this line of work?"

"It was the first thing I saw in the paper."

"You took the first job you saw in the paper?"

"That's right."

"How long ago was that?"

Now he had to stop and think. He had to calculate. He met Marie when he got home the second time in '73. He took the job a year or so later when she put on the pressure. "Thirty years maybe. Thirty-five. Give or take," he said.

"You've been standing around here for thirty-five years?"

"Possibly."

She stared at him. He looked back without interest. In the beginning he was intrigued but that had cooled.

"Are you educated?"

"I got drafted straight out of high school. Served two tours in Nam."

"Tsk tsk." The woman was shaking her head but real phony. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

"What about your veteran's benefits? Couldn't you have taken advantage to get an education?"

"Ma'am, have you ever been inside a VA Hospital?"

Her dark-gray eyes were pin points in her face. She started fussing with some tulips drooping in a pot on her desk. Toying with the stems like she could get them to straighten up just because she wanted them to. It amused him. What else does she have up her sleeve? he was thinking, when she pushed back her chair. "That's all," she said.

Feeling somewhat disappointed, he got up too. He could have spent the day in that chair watching her do the tulip thing. It would have made a nice change of pace.

When he got back to *Modern* the doors to the pavilion were padlocked shut. Someone had set up a *This Area is Closed Temporarily for Renovations* sign.

"Damn!" He'd wanted to eye-ball the thing up close. See if he could find the empty spots. Who'd want those cans? It made no sense. It was a puzzle that he felt the need to solve. Why? Impress the redhead? He chuckled smoothing his tie. Recognition. If he solved CANS they owed him. Money, even. Though he doubted he would see any money. *Mr. Regundo is responsible for solving CANS*. Lafferty, somebody, would have to say that out loud in front of everyone.

Temporarily posted to *Pyramids*—a large sprawl area dimly lit by incandescent light, after a couple of days he felt strange. Not jittery like he felt in *Modern*; but sad, confused. He thought of those old jazz singers. The ones who sang the blues then died on blow. He wandered, to keep circulating the room. It was midweek and very few people hung out in *Pyramids*. It seemed to be a kind of big wide hallway, a route to another zone. Everything beige—walls, floor, pyramids, crypts, carvings—all that Egypt Mesopotamia stuff. All the color of sand. Hardly anyone asked questions. Not even how to find the café-teria. Four other guards were posted in *Pyramids* too. Regundo didn't really know them. They kept their distance. Except to say when to take lunch. People were worried. CANS having its affect.

He squinted to read his watch, the lighting poor in *Pyramids*. He wandered over to the east arch. "What's the lunch situation for today?" he asked.

"You have two o'clock," said the skinny Russian.

Lucky break! He was still full from another huge breakfast. He'd gotten in the mode. Big eating. Started the same day as CANS. A coincidence? Strange how it hadn't occurred to him before. Like his body *knew* before he did. That he was going to be under a lot of stress and strain. In need of extra fuel. Nodding at the skinny guard, he moved away to circulate.

As Regundo walked he mused over the other little museum—not exactly little; but little compared with this behemoth whale, this virtual *city*. He decided he could be happy at the little museum. On nice days he could take his lunch into the garden. Well maybe not. They must have rules, too. Museum-goers don't like eating where the staff eats; like they could catch a contagious disease; eating

while breathing staff air. But the smaller museum might have a small staff area, say. A modest picnic table behind the building, not the nicest part of the garden, but still outdoors. What the fuck! Maybe even a bench or two with a decently sloped back. The idea cheered him. He gazed around *Pyramids*. Imagine that, he thought. Eating outside in that garden, the sun warm on his face.

Pyramids didn't have an ounce of natural light. Neither did *Medieval*; but that was like comparing Tabitha to Angelina Jolie. Now that is *hot* he thought—not that stinking pile of cans causing so much trouble. He continued to circulate *Pyramids*. It must be fucking hot in that desert, he was thinking. Nam was hot then bitter cold. Wet. The worst place he'd ever been. He pined for the days of the dark-blue velvet room in *Medieval*. A womb room.

The next morning an envelope with his name was tacked on the information board. Another rule: check the board when clocking in and out. He couldn't stop yawning. He felt Tabitha's eyes on him. He pulled out the push-pin holding the envelope.

"A love letter Regundo?"

Oh my dog, he thought. Surprising even himself. He'd meant Oh my god. "You bring out the worst in me," he told her.

She batted those crazy eyes. "I'd like to get to know you better."

"Some other time."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Is this a brush off?"

When he shrugged, she cried out, "Cruel man!"

He guessed he was. It didn't matter. He wondered if the redhead, that curious curator with the tulips, had found him cruel? Marie? Probably Marie did. Passing it along to Elise Marie. That's not right, he thought squeezing his fist. Not right for her to tell his daughter bad things about him.

Tabitha stood with her thick breasts pushed out. Her retard way of flirting.

He turned away. "I have to get to *Pyramids*."

"You'll be sorry."

For what? That he had to work in the same museum with her—that's what he was sorry about.

"I'm posted to *French*!"

Even she knew how to get him. Women always did. Of course she meant *The Impressionists*. The most trafficked area of the museum. Prestige. Shove it in his face. *Pyramids* sucked. Tabitha knew. Everyone did. *I been mummified* said the guards who got posted there.

Over the next few days he continued feeling low. The huge breakfasts had dwindled to an English Muffin and one regular coffee. He continued to walk to work. Passing the little museum which he now thought of as *my little museum*. Of course it wasn't. But these days everything was *my*. *My 9 News*, *my homepage*, *my ass*. Despite all that *my* crap Regundo felt he belonged in the little museum. It should be *my new home*, he thought. *My* garden. *My* black iron fence. He could get a dog. A hound with a good honking bark. Pushed out of *Medieval*, he felt disjointed.

"I need a transfer," he told Lafferty. It had taken a week to nail down this appointment with the curator. "I need out of *Pyramids*, you see..."

Lafferty cut him off with a wave. "Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean." All the same he regarded Regundo with suspicion. "So where'd you have in mind? *Impressionists*?"

Hell, no! Well, yes, he thought. Well not with Tabitha posted there. He scratched his head watching the curator watching him. Why they had to put a retard like her in the best location... his mind was swimming. "Sir, I appreciate that you'd think of me for *Impressionists* but I'd be happy to go back to *Modern*. Unless I could get back to *Medieval*."

"*Medieval*? Not a chance," said Lafferty.

Why not? Why is *Medieval* out? thought Regundo. He cleared his throat. "*Modern* then?" Adding, "I miss the natural light."

Lafferty looked more suspicious. "We never solved CANS," he said.

"So I heard."

"What else have you heard?"

"Well not much, being that I've been mummified." It just slipped out. Like the big hairy fart that erupted.

The curator pursed his lips. They looked pinker, fuller. Was the guy into lip plumping? Then Lafferty sighed. "It can be a bitch. Too many sarcophaguses. I advised them to go lightly, but, no, no, they had to purchase every one that's been dug up over the last ten million years." He made a nasty-sounding laugh. "It looks unbalanced. Don't you think?"

Regundo knew this wasn't a real

question.

"But that's not my area of expertise," said Lafferty, "so I've got no power."

Don't tell me your troubles, thought Regundo shifting his weight to his other foot.

"It's Bayler-Sparks," said the curator.

"Huh?"

He cocked an eyebrow like they shared a private joke. "That Marylou."

Now he was telling Regundo the name of the redhead like they were pals or something. Why this sudden personal touch? He scratched his left arm that used to have the impetigo.

"Marylou Bayler-Sparks," said the curator.

He looked past the curator at the wall calendar. Cheap and ordinary like coffee shops hang near the register. This month's photo of a polar bear. Strange to be hanging in a museum office, he thought. Why not a Degas calendar or Toulouse-Lautrec? The museum gift shops overflowed with famous artist calendars.

"So about my transfer."

"Back to *Modern*." Lafferty shoved his head in some paperwork.

He returned to *Modern*. He saw no difference in CANS. He circled it dozens of times. Couldn't find a single opening that might have once contained a rusted soup can.

The days droned. It was almost worse than *Pyramids*. He



circulated the rooms. Felt his blood sugars drop and tried switching lunch hours with Bixby who refused. His fourth day in *Modern* and the sun blasting down through the glass ceiling; deep into the layers of his skin. Regundo felt himself being cooked. By afternoon his old case of impetigo was acting up. Not just his arm, now his legs and torso itched. He scratched through the uniform jacket. Bixby noticed and made a joke about fleas. Ignoring this, Regundo moved away to keep circulating.

Overnight they'd changed some paintings. A type of grouping hung along the wall in a line. Big ones that got slightly smaller, then smaller, picture by picture getting smaller down the row. Each one painted solid red with a horizontal black line. That was the trick—keeping the lines on the same even plane as the pictures shrank in size. These artists, Regundo was thinking. He bent to scratch his ankle. These artists, don't they have anything better to do? He tried doping it out. They seemed to be hung evenly, yet... When he mentioned it to the new guy named Pedersen, the one Tabitha tried to nail, Pedersen called it a work of total genius.

"I don't think so," said Regundo.

He stepped away and stared at the black lines. Some seemed to be moving, wavy, like the horizon line at a beach when you're drunk. He saw those beaches in Nam—bombed to smithereens. He read somewhere recently they'd been turned into millionaires' resorts.

He walked the perimeter of the rooms hugging the walls; just out of line of the alarms; but keeping out of the sun's harmful rays as much as possible. "Whatchu up to?" said Bixby as Regundo passed him again. *Modern*. Like an enormous glacier. Perfect and undisturbed. Cold as death.

Then he thought he smelled a shit smell coming off CANS. He continued to follow the perimeter line as if he'd been commanded to. *Modern* doing the pulling. He stuck out his hand letting it trail the wall.

"You can't do that," said Bixby. "You gonna trigger the alarm. You makin' the walls dirty." The next time Regundo walked by he said, "Lafferty's coming."

It was a lie.

My glacier, thought Regundo. *My glacier, my choice*.

After work he stopped in a sports bar he passed every night on his route to the subway. He'd never stopped in before. It was loud. The bar, the widescreen, the music, the people. Generally he preferred the old Irish Pubs. Quiet with a tamer crowd of drunks. Over the last decade, most of those had folded.

He found a stool at the packed bar and squeezed in. Surprised by how many chicks; he'd expected mostly guys, it being a sports bar. Shows how out of touch I am,

he thought. Getting old. He knew that, sure. But a joint like this rammed it home. Plenty of young blondes with big fake honkers making big fake laughs. Congenial, though. He ordered a beer changing his mind. "Hey, make that a Margarita instead. Heavy on the salt," he told the chick bartender.

She knew how to crust it thick on the rim. He squeezed his lips to the glass and felt the salt cut a path to his bloodstream. He drank quickly ordering another. Felt something press him from behind. A blonde with big white teeth, smiling and apologizing. Laughing. "Sorry," she said. "It's so crowded in here."

Eyes that were fake ultra-blue. Breasts too big for her thin frame. So what, he thought. Regundo got up and offered her the stool.

"Thanks!" Dipping a little to give him a look down her cleavage.

He placed his hand on the small of her back. "That's right, sit down sweetheart."

There was no question.

She drank steady. After the fourth, fifth—whatever, he said, "We're out of here." She got up straight as a wall. He admired that—a woman who could hold.

Regundo splurged on a taxi. He put his hand up her skirt and felt around inside her. "Nice," he said. Kissing her neck he spread her three fingers wide. "What's your name?" His voice sounded unfamiliar.

She answered between little gasps. "Emily."

He figured the taxi guy was taking it in, possibly filming on his cell. Cool. Let them be seen all over the web. Maybe Marie would tune in. See him with this Emily chick. He stuck another finger inside and thought she could take his fist, no sweat. But that seemed mean. He didn't want to come off mean.

In his apartment lobby light she looked creased. Black roots in her blonde. Not sexy roots the way the young girls wore them. This was tired hair. He felt pretty tired himself. She was clinging to his arm talking dirty. "Wait till you see," she said.

I have seen, thought Regundo.

Then he thought about *Pyramids*. He could take her there. Hit her over the head and lift her onto a sarcophagus. Place her on top of a high covered one. Light her. Watch her smolder all night. It could be beautiful.

She was jerking her body around. "You got any drugs? Where's the elevator?"

"Fifth floor walk-up."

"That's a distance. Shit. Oh, well," she said. The lines around her eyes looking shot with ink. She pulled on him playfully. "C'mon, I'll race you up!"



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"The stories in Susan Tepper's From the Umberplatzen will haunt you. They are short, sharp, and ruthless in their tender investigations of memory and loss."

—Steve Almond, author of *God Bless America*





Cents of Wonder Rhymes With Orange

David S. Atkinson

The young blond man in the wrinkled oxford shirt dashed across the tile of the elevator lobby. Hurrying, his hands juggled a laptop satchel, a dry and folded umbrella, and a lumpy plastic grocery bag. Lunging for the elevator button before managing to stop, the sole of his cheap dress shoe slid out from under him and he slipped quickly, and clumsily, to the floor.

An orange popped out of the grocery bag and rolled away as he hit. At first, the young man struggled to get up and catch the orange, but he stopped and watched as it proceeded up a wheelchair ramp next to a small set of stairs. It went all the way up the ramp and came to a rest just over the top.

"Huh," the young man mumbled, propped up on his side by his left elbow. "That was weird."

"Goodness! Are you all right?"

An older, frumpy woman, whitening brown hair heaped

in a massive bun, waddled into the lobby. The squatty heels of her thick clogs clacked on the shiny tiles as she shambled over, bearing a cardboard filing box.

"Yeah," he said, glancing back at the orange. "I mean, yes, I'm fine, thanks. I just slipped." He heaved himself up off the floor and dusted himself off.

"You have to be more careful," she clucked, seeing that he wasn't hurt. Shifting the box onto a good-sized hip, she went on: "These floors are slick when they've been waxed."

"Did...did you see that?" He pointed at the orange. He walked over, grabbed the offending orb, and held it up. "It ran up."

"Must've missed that. All I saw was you on the floor." She smiled. "Maybe it was just from how hard you hit the ground."

"No! It didn't hit that hard," he insisted.

As if to emphasize, he dropped the orange to the tile. The

orange hit with a *thush* sound and stopped. Then, slowly, it began to roll. The young man and the frump watched silently as it methodically moved its way across the floor back to the same spot from where the young man had just fetched it.

“Told you!”
“Well,” the older woman exclaimed, setting down the file box. “There’s something you don’t see every day.”

The young man ran and grabbed the orange again. He stopped and looked carefully around the floor and ramp. Then he held up the orange and examined it as well.

“Maybe the floor isn’t even,” she suggested, placing a hand on her cheek. “Maybe it just looks uphill when it really isn’t, an optical illusion.”

“Nope.” The young man bent down and scanned where the ramp met the rest of the floor. “It runs uphill all right.”

The woman pursed her lips and put her hands on her sides. They both stood and regarded the floor. The young man rolled the orange around in his hand.

Squeaking wheels caused them both to glance up as a mustached deliveryman in coveralls pushed a hand truck loaded with packages into the lobby. He nodded at them each in turn, tipping an imaginary cap, and reached for the elevator button.

Smiling at the woman, the young man raised the orange high into the air and then let go. As it dropped, the deliveryman raised an eyebrow. The older woman and younger man looked back and then watched as the deliveryman’s gaze turned to watch the orange work its way up the wheelchair ramp.

Once the orange stopped, the deliveryman exhaled sharply. “Now that’s a neat trick. How’d you get it to do that?”

The young man shrugged. “We didn’t do anything. *It’s* doing it on *it’s* own.”

The woman nodded in agreement.

“You don’t say.” The deliveryman tilted the hand truck upright. “All by itself?”

“Do it again,” the older woman urged excitedly. “Show him.”

Eagerly, the young man obeyed. The woman and the deliveryman stared as the young man grabbed the orange and plopped it in the same spot. Predictably, the orange again came to a stop at the top of the ramp. All three clapped.

“What’s making it do that?” The deliveryman asked no one in particular as he ran his fingers through his mustache.

“I can’t figure it out,” the young man replied. “I’m stumped.” He turned to the woman, but she just shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

“Suppose you put something in the way,” the deliveryman suggested. “So it can’t go? What do you think’ll happen then?”

The woman and young man looked at each other, but neither answered. The woman pointed at her file box and the young man pushed it over in front of the ramp. Then they all held their breath as the young man dropped the orange again.

Sure enough, the orange began to move along the exact same path as the other times. However, when it reached the file box, it stopped.

“Aww,” the young man and deliveryman sighed in unison.

“Wait,” the woman cried. “Look!”

Very slowly, the orange moved forward. The file box began to move as well, propelled by the orange. Though not as fast as before, the orange pushed the file box to the top of the wheelchair ramp. Then, for no more apparent reason than any of the other times, it stopped again.

“Yeah!” The deliveryman shouted. “Look at that!”

Suddenly, a surly little man in an immaculately pressed pinstripe suit stormed into the lobby. His black hair was combed back in a wave, puffed several inches high on his head.

“What the hell are you people doing?” he demanded gruffly. His pointer finger jabbed sharply at the elevator button.

“It’s this orange,” the young man excitedly explained. “Every time we drop it, the thing goes uphill. We can’t figure it out; it’s amazing!”

“Sure is,” the deliveryman chimed in. “It can’t be doing it, but it is. Damnedest thing. It even pushed that box along with it.”

“So what?” The elevator doors opened and the angry little man charged inside. He spun around and, just before the elevator doors closed, demanded: “Don’t you people have jobs to go to?”

For a moment, the three stood in place. They sheepishly glanced around at each other. The young man shuffled his feet. The deliveryman cleared his throat.

“Well then,” the older woman finally remarked, adjusting her bun. She pressed the call button and hefted her file box. The deliveryman tilted the hand truck and started pushing it toward the elevators. The young man retrieved the orange and stuffed it back into the grocery bag. When the doors opened, they went inside. 🌀



Cul-de-Sacs & Blindfolds

Ahimaaz Rajesh

Much to the amusement of those onlookers, at the railway station, on tenterhooks we were waiting for a certain bus.

Weren’t honestly so much anticipating, only madly hoping. Wasn’t just the onlookers who had their jaws dropped when the bus arrived.

Recently a glider, we witnessed, landed on a roof & now this spectacle. Only a matter of time before such peculiar sightings become commonplace.

The ride was jam-packed so didn’t want to board the bus-train. Off the track away it rode like a boat against desert waves. Saw it & we were at sea, know.

Weren’t for the constant honking, middle of the road we’d sit & play rummy, munch snack & even nap. Walked to the bus station to catch a certain train.

Whatever happened to pedestrian walkways? Three paper bags full, sir, must be tourists to have asked that.

Overspill & stampede here, it appears we haven’t had those in a long damn long time. From where we come, they some kind of luxury?

Momentum & lack thereof, it’s too much traffic we might want to flatten the dividers & expand the roads.

When planning the city, they had a thing about bottle-necks, to blindly guess, they named the city after one Bottle Maker. Keeps the rioters & invaders at bay, see.

Posterity, anything but sympathetic to good old sentiments, chips away at the bottle about its neck and belly, recklessly & breakneckedly ride to the wrong end where it’s dead end.

It’d occurred to us if we rode around, somehow there must somewhere be an exit. So used to so-called exits, it’s one false exit after another.

We bump into others & before we know it, far from bumping into others, over & over bump into ourselves.

A sight not to miss is tens of us pushing the giant steel bogie. The train-bus is here on the road & wouldn’t bloody move so much as an inch.

Over there, off the track or not, passengers ride in a bus. Out here, isn’t easy to say what rides on what & what rides what. 🌀



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WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN

The last of the evening rush-hour crowd straggle aboard. A woman who doesn't quite resemble my dead mother sits opposite me. Everything is connected, the first law of ecology states, trailer parks and slaughterhouse and even open fields. The woman squints at me as if sighting down a gun barrel. Maybe she remembers from college what Freud said about trains. I lean back and close my eyes. It once took me four years to fall asleep, if you count all the time I spent accumulating the scar tissue that throbbed in my dream. 🕒

TO THE BLUE

1

Spring breaks out in fires, hair streaked with blood, a black postcard shoved under my door. It's the same as seeing anorexic coeds floating through the sky above campus. Please do not feed the cats, the sign on the hurricane fence says. Dipshits and dimwits cluster according to internal laws. My heart makes a fist. I'm full of forces whose existence can't be proved.

2

The falcon was sometimes called a sparrowhawk. A woman's body might be searched, but it can't give that information. The moon rises before day has even ended. Always remember, light and shadow never stand still. I take the road that the arrow indicates I should. The leaves tremble with the effort to suppress an onslaught of tears.

3

I turn down the alley behind the empty strip mall. Angels in dark glasses sit along the edge of the loading dock, swinging their pale legs and waiting. The fruit they tried lies discarded on the ground. I taste rather than smell smoke. The most mysterious thing is a fact clearly stated. I'll be found—perhaps not until years later—wandering the streets wearing only one shoe.

PLANET WITH TWO MOONS

Soot and smoke gurgled from a train about to leave the station. As the wind rose again, the animal rescuers tried frantically to collect all the broken birds flapping on the sidewalk. Let's assume for the sake of argument that the sudden appearance of a second moon disturbed the serenity of the scholar reading by the window. Just minutes before, I'd denied being a reformed drunk—or at least reformed. I heard a woman begin to howl. I lie yet with her in what some have called the white crucifixion. 🕒



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Huge Things Happen

Meg Tuite

Sister got home just before dinnertime, sweaty, filthy and layered in panic. Mom was in the kitchen and dad was feeding my gerbil, Hans. I followed her up to her room. She closed the door behind us and opened her window to the icy madness. Her hands were groaning, palpitating things as they clutched and echoed each other, her beige pigtails, sagging while wisps of escaped convicts conspired across her smudged face.

“You can’t fucking believe it,” she said.

My eyes widened as I waited.

“It’s fucking crazy,” she rasped as she pulled a ratty pack of Salem’s out of her pocket, managed to stick one in her mouth and light it up with the lighter that was jammed in the other pocket of her stifled jeans. She knelt down by the window and blew smoke out into smoking air.

“What the fuck am I going to do? I mean, I’m fucked.”

I knew this was going to be great. ‘Fuck’ was one of her favorite words, but to use it in every sentence meant something big. I gave her my look of deep concern, burrowed forehead and waited.

Sister turned to me. I watched as the cigarette smoked her. Half of it had sucked up into the atmosphere from one inhale. It was all guns and dumping bodies in my head.

“He’s fucking dead,” she said. Her mouth quivered with the air in the room. My legs started to tremble. I held them down with my hands. Dead? This wasn’t big, it was huge. I

stopped breathing.

“What?” I asked. My voice all bottomless and crooked, raking through the pile of detective films I’d watched.

“Eric. Eric Samson. We were in that shitty old people’s home that was empty and under construction on Sheridan road, you know the one?”

I nodded.

“He fucking fell down the elevator shaft,” she said.

“Shit,” I said.

“What the fuck,” she said. The cigarette was gone and her head buried itself in her arms on the windowsill.

“How?” I asked.

“Oh, fuck,” she said. “That fucker, Keaner. You know, we were daring each other to go into the elevator just to see, just because. And fucking Eric got in, pushed the button, we heard the elevator and Eric’s body was gone. We heard it.” She put her hands to her ears. “That sound. It was hollow, an echoing thud. He was fucking gone.” She closed her eyes.

“Time for dinner,” yelled dad. “Let’s go.”

The doorbell blasted its violent double noted chime.

Sister threw herself at me and hugged me like she’d never hugged me before.

We shook together, both seeing bodies dropping in space. We heard dad open the door and his voice rose and fell with the fucking cold.

Sister pulled back and grabbed my shoulders.

“I loved him, you know,” she said. She wiped her nose on her sleeve and got up.

I heard her footsteps on the stairs. I looked out the window and saw the squad car.

“Fuck,” I said to no one. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” It kept reverberating. It was the first time that word became the only word I could hear over and over in my head. 🗣️



The Pissing Man

Tom Barlow

I wasted the best part of two hours stumbling around the dark Oakwood Cemetery in Raleigh, North Carolina before I finally found Jesse Helms’ grave. Remember Senator Jesse? “I’m a conservative progressive, and that means I think all men are equal, be they slants, beaners, or niggers.”

Being a white male, Jesse had never directly demeaned me. Nonetheless, I felt great satisfaction pissing on his headstone on behalf of all the good people I’d known that had offended Jesse by their skin color, sex, choice of partners, or artistic expression. Everyone should have such a satisfying hobby.

I couldn’t linger, however. I hustled back to the car and drove all night, four hundred miles straight through, determined to make my thrice-weekly breakfast with Sarah. Although we’d separated two years before, she and I had agreed to meet for breakfast every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning until we either reconnected or deep-sixed the relationship. I’d come to suspect that breakfasting together was the ideal degree of relationship for us; anything more, or less, and the constant sniping and suspicion might reappear.

The Waffle House was only half-full. Our usual server, Holly, shouted my order to the grill cook as soon as she saw me enter.

“You look like hell,” Sarah observed between sips of her coffee as I slipped onto the orange plastic bench across from her. She, on the other hand, had taken pains with her appearance this morning, and looked years younger than 40. She’d obviously been to the salon, her hair now an unfamiliar shade of auburn with blond streaks, cut with more abandon than usual. The glasses were new, jade frames with narrow lens that fell beneath her carefully shaped eyebrows, as was her outfit, an emerald-green pants suit over a white, wide-collared blouse, all supple and iridescent.

I felt like a bum in my customary jeans and Carhartt t-shirt. I raked my hair back, wondering what had become of my comb. It’s so easy, after you’ve been out of work for a couple of years, to ignore those vanities that once seemed

life and death. I regretted not swinging by my apartment long enough to at least change shoes. I’d stepped in dog shit while searching for Jesse.

The waitress brought my tea, and I went through the milk and sugar ritual.

“Did you even sleep last night?” Sarah said.

I swallowed a yawn. “Why? Do I need more beauty sleep?”

“Like, 20 years’ worth. And what’s that smell?”

I pulled my feet back under the booth seat. Holly arrived with our orders, laying them out like carpet samples.

“Who was it this time?” Sarah asked as she blotted margarine from her toast.

I carefully diced my waffle and scribbled syrup over the pieces. *No lies* was one of our ground rules, but loosely interpreted. I told her about the Jesse Helms escapade anyway. I tried to inflect a balance between embarrassment and pride.

“So you’ve gone political?” There was no hint on her face of the amusement with which she’d greeted my earlier, more personal pisses, on the graves of offending teachers, old bullies, and spurning girlfriends.

“Who deserves it more?” I asked between mouthfuls.

Her omelet turned to rubber as she studied the wave action in her coffee cup. “I laughed your antics off before because I figured that you were just working out your stress about this whole situation.”

By the whole situation, she meant the separation and my lack of work. I’d made enough dough rehabbing houses during the boom to fund a few years of down time while I waited for the market to recover. Sarah was convinced, though, that free time was eating me up.

“I thought you’d run out of people that had offended you before you got arrested. But Jesse Helms? He never did anything to you. Not personally. If you start avenging second-hand offenses, you could piddle the rest of your life away and not make a dent in the world’s stock of jerks.”

“My thought exactly,” I replied.

Her lips left a deep crimson stain on the brim of the cup. “You make this really hard,” she said.

Fatigue blunted my comprehension. “I thought you enjoyed our breakfasts. You know I do.”

She fixed her eyes on an elderly man in the parking lot who was attempting to pull his Crown Vic into a handicap space large enough for a battleship. He kept backing up, moving forward, pivoting a couple of inches more each time. His failures sent a shiver of hopelessness through me.

“I can’t meet you for breakfast any more,” she said. “I’m dating somebody.”

“Ah,” I said. “Huh.” Holly slid the check onto the table as she passed, and, in a burst of petulance, I shoved it toward Sarah. “Do I know him?”

Her cheeks flushed, and minute veins showed through her makeup. “Her. Darcy Dixon. You went to grade school together, remember?”

I was an empty vessel, waiting in vain for an emotion. Staying up all night tills the ground for such vacancy.

Sarah sipped her coffee, played with the napkin, waved Holly away when she lifted the pot from its pad and looked quizzically our way.

Failing any organic reaction, scripts ran through my head, stolen from television, fiction, comic monologues. Was I the humiliated, gelded suitor? The spurned husband, nose



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rubbed in the scent of finality? The revisionist, retracing our marriage, putting check marks to all the question mark occasions? Threatened? Shamed? Jealous? Exhausted.

“Say something.”

I shrugged, suddenly very weary. “I can’t believe I drove all night for this.”

Like most people in confessional mode, she was of a mind to attack. “You drove all night because you couldn’t wait to tell me what you’d done. And now I’m supposed to praise you. That’s so sad.”

“Not everything is about you, your highness,” I said.

She leaned back in her seat and glared at me over her new glasses. “You can be such a coward, Em. You never engage people. You’d settle for breakfast together, and nothing more, for the rest of your life, wouldn’t you? And that would be enough relationship for you.”

I waited for her to realize the unfairness of her accusation and apologize. As she dug through her purse for her wallet, though, she said, “Well, this is not enough for me.”

She scooted across the bench seat, stood, smoothed her pants over her ass, and flipped her hair out of her eyes. “You don’t need a wife,” she said, and I could tell her parting words were rehearsed. “All you need is a breakfast club.”

After she left, I thought of several snappy retorts.

•

The next morning, after sixteen hours of restless sleep, I carefully packed the middle-sized suitcase from our, my, set of Samsonite, and hired the neighbor kid to feed the cats. I stopped at the car wash to vacuum out the car and was on the road by mid-morning, bound for Indianapolis, counting on speed and distance to settle my mind.

I realized my mistake before I reached the Ohio state line. A car traps you with your worries, especially a car that still smells faintly of Sarah’s perfume. Desperate for diversion, I picked up a hitchhiker in her mid-20s at a roadside rest stop near the Ohio River. She thanked me profusely, told me she was headed to Columbus, and promptly fell asleep, head lolling against the window. Her occasional soft snort was not enough to distract me from obsessing over my conversation with Sarah.

I offered to buy my hitchhiker breakfast at the Cracker Barrel in Athens, but she said she’d rather wait in the car. I took the keys with me.

My cell rang as I was counting out change for a tip. Sarah.

“Did you eat breakfast this morning?” she said after we exchanged greetings.

“Does Jack Daniels count?” An old, jerky-faced woman at the next table frowned.

“Ha ha. I just didn’t want you to stop eating breakfast. It’s the most important meal, you know.”

I flipped the phone closed and slid it into my back pocket, so I could sit on it all the way to Indianapolis.

•

The girl had donned an oversized West Virginia U hoodie. A spiral-bound notebook lay in her lap, a thick red pen in her left hand.

She had pulled her coarse black hair back from her short forehead, fastening it behind with a silver sword-and-shield pin. Her eyes were wide-set, with droopy eyelids that gave her a dreamy expression. The skin of her oval face was a calico’s bronze and flawless. If she had believed she was beautiful she could have persuaded me to agree, but she exuded an air of apology.

She was working a piece of gum and watching traffic as though poised to take the wheel at a moment’s notice. Perhaps I looked cardiac. We’d gone maybe ten miles when she broke the silence. “I’m Von, by the way. You headed toward home, or away?”

“Not sure,” I said, lunging at the chance for conversation. A drizzle began to fall, and I flipped on the wipers. “How do you define home?”

That stumped her for a moment. “Where you keep your shit, I suppose.”

“Then, away. From Buckhannon, an hour south of Morgantown. Where do you keep your shit?” My tongue stumbled over the crude word.

She swiveled toward me, propping her right knee against the dash. “I don’t have very much shit. Does that make me homeless? I’m not, you know. Homeless. I’m in the process of relocating.”

I nodded.

“My friend Steve is in grad school in Columbus, and I’m staying with

him while I look for work. We’re not a couple, though.” She drew a smiley face in the condensation forming on the passenger window. “We’re not even fuck buddies. I’m a journalist, but that sucks, with the newspapers going down the toilet.”

For a journalist, she sure had a crude vocabulary. “What’s your friend studying?”

“Oncology. But he’s too empathetic. Working with all those sick people is eating him alive, but he doesn’t see it. That’s why he needs me, to show him what’s in his heart. I’m like a mirror that reflects your insides.”

“CAT-scan woman.”

She closed her notebook and capped her pen. “You feel the need to name things, don’t you? I bet you know what all the architectural details are called, or what a bastard file is.”

“What makes you say that?” She was annoyingly prescient.

“Names define the outside of things, their volume in space.”

I thought this over for a minute before conceding she had a point. “You friend Steve is a namer?”

“Big time,” she said. “He tries to find names for his patients’ problems so he can determine how to treat them. Me, I’m not big on names. I didn’t even ask yours, right?”

“I’m Emory,” I said.

“No you’re not,” she replied mischievously. At that moment, though, her cell phone buzzed and, to my



disappointment, she spent the rest of the ride in banal, imprecise conversation with her sister in Chattanooga. I detoured long enough to drop her at her boyfriend’s apartment, just a stone’s throw from the Ohio State University stadium.

To my surprise, before she jumped out, she leaned across and kissed me on the cheek. “Cheer up,” she said. “Everybody’s life sucks sometimes.”

“Is that what you see in my scan?”

“You’re like a black hole, dude; no readings at all.”

•

I reached Indianapolis shortly after 3:00 p.m. The downtown skyscrapers were fading into a grout-colored sky, and a persistent wind blew plastic bags like tumbleweeds down the berm of the interstate.

My destination was the Crown Hill Cemetery. After catching a late lunch at a Burger King near downtown, I followed Illinois Street north. I stopped at a flower shop near the Children’s Museum and bought a cheap spray of carnations a day from expiration, to mark the grave so I could find it again in the dark. Back in the car, I took a left onto West 34th, which brought me to the entrance of the cemetery.

I’d printed out a map of the graveyard, with the location of Bob Irsay’s grave clearly marked. He had owned my beloved Baltimore Colts, the team of Unitas, Berry, and Moore. In the dark of the night on March 28, 1984, Irsay had packed up the team and slunk out of town like a preacher sneaking out of a whorehouse, moving it to Indianapolis.

I passed his plot and drove a hundred yards further before parking my Celica beside a family mausoleum. I pulled on my parka and stepped out just as the drizzle turned to flurries, feathery as dust balls. I carried the bouquet and placed it on Bob’s grave, ignoring the “No live flowers after October 1st” signs wired to trees throughout the cemetery.

Having marked my target for my nighttime visit, I returned to the car and sought out the nearest Starbucks where I knocked back a Venti Americano and fell asleep in an overstuffed chair.

I woke around 6 p.m. with an adequately full bladder.

The snow now covered the ground outside. So much for my carnations. I carefully brushed the half-inch accumulation from my windshield before pulling out of the parking lot.

I circled the graveyard once, a lake of darkness outlined by streetlights, checking for a patrol car or an unnoticed caretaker’s cottage, but spotted neither.

Wishing I’d thought to bring boots, I parked the car behind an office building facing a lightly trafficked West 38th Street. I crossed Boulevard Place, and, taking long strides to minimize my footprints in the snow, hopped over the short fence into the cemetery.

Bob was buried a hundred yards to the south, but I took a circuitous route to disguise my destination. It occurred to me as I passed row after row of headstones that, excepting infants, there probably wasn’t a person in the cemetery that didn’t deserve to be pissed upon, for some slight, injury, or disregard. I also imagined the line forming at my own grave, when the time came, long as the women’s room line at halftime of a Colts game. This bolstered my decision to be cremated.

Bob had not moved since I’d seen him last. A simple

upright granite slab marked the family plot, carved with a horseshoe and the name Irsay.

I unzipped, full of Starbuck’s best, took aim at the Bob’s simple headstone, which was set flush to the ground, and let fly. The urine quickly melted the snow and filled the v-shaped troughs that formed the letters of his name.

As the stream began, though, I started to cry. Not the moist-eyed, delicate funeral weeping. Full bore, sinus-plugged, labored-breathing gusher crying. I was so taken aback that I soaked my shoe before I realized I was pissing on myself.

I shook, tucked and zipped, then wandered to a nearby bench, where I brushed off snow and took a seat. Gradually, the tears stopped, but I was still at a loss to account for my reaction. The wind died, and far to the south, a dog howled for attention.

I found a Red Roof Inn by the interstate and slept until housekeeping kicked me out at 11:00 a.m. the next morning.

•

I tried to will away my shame through the entire four-hour drive from Indianapolis to Columbus. I’d been betrayed before, so why the tears now? I wasn’t that old, and I still had enough money socked away to tide me over until the recession ended. I could stand to lose a few pounds, but otherwise there was nothing in my appearance that would mark me as untouchable. Sure, I was in for some ribbing and unwelcome sympathy once Sarah and Darcy’s relationship became common knowledge, but a round of layoffs at the mine, a high school team in the state finals, or a winter blizzard would drive it out of people’s minds soon enough.

I was ready for a break by the time I reached Columbus, so I stopped at the first Waffle House I encountered. The food wasn’t nearly as good as back home. I tried to work the crossword in the local paper as I ate.

I thought about calling Sarah as I lingered over my tea, wondering if she intended to continue eating at the Waffle House. Did Darcy know how much coffee she needed just to get started in the morning? What did they talk about, in the evening in front of the television? Did Sarah vent her frustrations about work? Did Darcy listen quietly, sympathize, hold back her own troubles rather than that appear to compete for the role of most aggrieved? Or perhaps she unloaded in turn. If so, did their troubles cancel one another’s, or combine, even multiply? In a lesbian relationship, who is the rock, and who is the water? I was thinking myself into a knot.

•

I paid my bill and returned to the car. Rather than hop back onto the freeway, though, I found myself drawn south and west on city streets until I reached the apartment where I’d dropped off Von. I sat there for half an hour, tempted to go knock on the door but clueless about why. Then a tap on my passenger window interrupted my reverie. Von, leaning to window height, looked in with concern.

Chagrined, I unlocked the passenger door and she pulled it open. “Hey, Buckhannon. Lose something?” Her gum snapped like a dry twig.

I gestured toward the seat. She shrugged and got in, closing the door not quite all the way. She held up her keys, a can of pepper spray under her thumb. “What’s up?”

“You all settled in?” My thumbnail had found a small slice

in the leather steering wheel cover, and couldn't leave it alone. "Could we just pretend we've already gone through the butt sniffing? What are you doing here?"

I'd forgotten her earthy word choices. "What did Steve see in his scan?"

She hugged her purse, the size of a saddlebag. "Apparently, he still saw a fat girl standing behind him. Not that it's any of your business."

"You aren't fat."

She slumped back in the seat. "You should have seen me a year ago. I'll ask again; what are you doing here?"

"You never told me what you meant, when you said my name wasn't Emory. I thought maybe it was a CAT scan thing."

She rolled her eyes theatrically, and cocked her head. "You are a nut job. But since you're here, would you mind giving me a lift home?"

"I thought you didn't have a home."

"Morgantown. Don't ask."

She went inside to get her shit and I was tempted to drive away, scalded by embarrassment and too weary for the labor of human contact. She returned before I could pull the pin on that decision, though.

Von tossed her bag in the trunk and settled into the passenger seat, a steaming travel mug suspended between her hands like a fire stick. "Are you aware you smell like a urinal?" she said as we pulled away.

I shifted the heater control to pull in outside air.

We avoided any personal topics for the next two hours, chatting in bursts, each conversation fading quickly into triteness neither had the enthusiasm to continue. In between, she wrote in her notebook, her hand cramped up like an arthritic. She cupped it away from my view.

Finally, when we were only half an hour from Clarksburg, she said, "you ready for your CAT scan now?"

"I was just kidding," I said. "About the scan."

"Don't fuck with a fat girl," she said. "We see everything." She ripped a page from her notebook, and held it up to me. "What do you see?"

"A blank piece of paper. A fucking blank piece of paper." She pursed her lips. "Wrong."

Holding her pen like a conductor's baton, she pointed to the upper left quadrant of the paper. "Here, I see the image of a messy room. Yesterday's socks on the coffee table, empty pizza box on the carpet, dirty cat litter."

"I'm a neat freak," I said.

"Right. Sure you are. Now here," she pointed to the upper right quadrant, "this is the odor of camphor. Like Vicks VapoRub."

Her eyes waited, unblinking, to catch mine when I glanced her way. She raised her eyebrows in expectation. I smiled and nodded slowly, remembering how, as a boy, I loathed the smell of VapoRub, but adored the cobalt-blue glass jars.

On to the lower left. "This area," she made a circle with the pen, "is cum. Gallons of it."

I checked my mirrors, speedometer, and she giggled like a tickled four-year-old. "You should see your face! It would glow in the dark."

Hands still shaking with mirth, she held up the paper one last time. "Now this area, lower right? A little boy is hiding here, dressed all in white, with thin horizontal

pin-stripes so he blends perfectly into the paper."

She folded the piece of paper once, twice, reached over, and tucked it into my shirt pocket. "So how did I do?" Her smug smile faded when I didn't answer immediately.

I finally said, "As a line of bullshit, that was inspired." I forced a laugh to show that I appreciated her good intentions.

She sighed, relieved. "Of course it's bullshit. But is it bullshit people would pay for? I'm thinking of going into the psychic business. Low overhead, and you can dress in funky clothes."

"If you're psychic, you already know what I think of that idea." I said it lightly, but her absurd reading had picked the scab covering whatever had overcome me in the graveyard, and I fought back more tears by focusing on the Morse code sent by the lane markings as we passed. The white dividing line signaled dash-dash-dash, dash-dash-dash, 0, 0, over and over.

•

I detoured north half an hour to drop Von at her apartment in Morgantown. She directed me to a soot-stained old brick two-story halfway up the hill from downtown.

Before she left, she turned toward me and said, "I hope I didn't hurt your feelings. I have a habit of offending people without realizing it until it's too late to apologize."

"You didn't offend me," I said. "Not in the least. Don't worry about it." Her neighborhood was so quiet; without the ebb and flow of television light, it could have been a painted landscape.

She opened her notebook, scrawled briefly, ripped the page out and handed it to me. "If you decide I did hurt you, promise you'll call and give me a chance to apologize. Promise?"

I promised, bemused that anyone could be so fragile as to place such importance on a casual meeting or two.

I didn't arrive back in Buckhannon until 1:00 a.m.

•

The next morning, instead of cleaning the apartment, which wasn't nearly as messy as Von had supposed, I drove over to the house. Both Sarah and Darcy worked during the day, Sarah at the insurance agency, Darcy teaching third grade, so I let myself in the back door and descended the stairs to my basement workshop.

If only Von could see this, I thought as I turned on the shop lights. Every tool had a home. All the planes, files, drills, and router bits were sharp and orderly, wood sorted and stored in brackets lining the wall. Cedar and a hint of coal remaining from 100 years of cinders gave character to the musty smell.

My latest project, a model of the Château de Blois, was ready for disassembly so I could paint the interior. Carefully laying out the assembly prints, I took up a pair of tweezers and began pulling it down, one piece at a time, placing each post and beam on the matching blueprint to keep them in order.

I usually lose myself in such precise work, as though I were in a cocoon marking time. Today, however, every creak of the house's breathing broke my concentration. The basement was by turns too hot and too cold. Although I'm not a dog person, I also found myself fantasizing about a

loyal lab asleep at my feet.

A little after 3:00 p.m. I heard Darcy come in the front door. The insurance office where Sarah worked didn't close until 4:00 p.m.

I put down the model and spent an hour culling dried paints from my collection, idly calculating the money I'd spent on the row of jars and cans. Easily \$500, probably more.

That task completed, I emptied the wastebasket, preparing to leave, when I heard more traffic upstairs. The door to the basement from the kitchen opened and Sarah said, "Em, is that you?"

"Hi. I'm almost done." I turned off the lights and carried the plastic bag of trash up the stairs where Sarah waited in the doorway.

"We haven't talked about the shop," I said as I reached the landing.

"Do we need to? I mean, status quo is OK with me." She looked wary. Darcy was seated beyond earshot, at the old roll top in the dining room. I noted for the first time that the house smelled different, alien.

"Mind if I use the commode?" I asked.

Sarah stepped aside without comment and I crossed the kitchen to the small half-bath I'd installed by enclosing a hallway. There I turned on the tap and held my wrists under cold water until the lump in my throat subsided.

Sarah was waiting for me when I returned to the kitchen, seated at the breakfast bar with two cups of mint tea. "You don't look so well, Em." She held out her palm toward a barstool.

I sat, picked up one of the cups, welcoming the warmth on my fingers. "Mind if I ask a question?" I said, quietly, not wanting to disturb Darcy.

"About me or about you?"

"Me. Do you think I'm repressed?"

A devilish grin spread across her face, and she raised the fingers of her right hand to her lips. Once glance at my face, though and she went from amused to somber. "Someone's been digging into your head, haven't they?"

I told her what had happened in Indianapolis. Even the retelling made me dewy-eyed. "I swear to you that I don't have the slightest ambivalence about Bob Irsay. So why was I crying?" I said.

As I spoke, Darcy appeared in the doorway. Her eyes

were locked on Sarah, her lips sucked back.

Sarah ignored her for the moment. "What do you want, Em?" she said. "If you could have anything in the world?"

I didn't have to think for even a moment. "Breakfast."

Sarah reached into the cupboard where we keep, kept, the cookies and pulled a package of Oreos, neatly refolded in the way she'd tried to train me to do. She opened the package, shook a couple of cookies into her palm, and handed one to me.

Darcy leaned against the door jamb, arms crossed at shoulder height.

Sarah blew her a quick kiss before turning her attention back to me. "You know what breakfast means to me, Em? Plans for the day. Catching up on the news. A trivial meal. When was the last time you had a meaningful conversation at breakfast?"

"They were meaningful to me."

She shook her head. "No, Em. They were safe. Too safe

for me. I need dinner conversation, the kind you can only have with the luxury of hours at your disposal, so you can take as long as you want, as long as you need, to talk through whatever is bothering you. Maybe you should be going out to eat at night, instead of stalking the dead."

Darcy entered the kitchen, circled me at arm's length, and began pulling vegetables out of the crisper, setting them next to the chopping board. She let her hand trail across Sarah's back as she opened the knife drawer.

I thanked Sarah for the tea, and left.

•

Around midnight, as flurries blew like semaphore across the kitchen window of my apartment, I picked up the phone and dialed the number Von had given me. I had decided beforehand to hang up after four rings; after all, she could have been asleep already.

At the count of three, though, she answered. "Hello?"

"Hi," I said. "This is Buckhannon."


"No shit?" She paused for a second. "What's up?"

"This may sound crazy," I said, my hand sweaty on the phone. "But I wondered if you'd like to join me for a late supper?"

"Boy," she replied, "I never saw THAT in your mirror."

•

The only place in Morgantown still open at 1:00 a.m. was the Waffle House, so we drove all the way to Pittsburgh. 🗺



TOM BARLOW is an Ohio writer. Other stories of his may be found in several anthologies including *Best New Writing 2011* and numerous magazines and journals including *Redivider*, *Temenos*, *The Apalachee Review*, *Hobart*, *Needle*, *The William and Mary Review*, and *Hiss Quarterly*. He writes because conversation involves a lot of give and take, and he's always thought of himself as more of a giver.



Fly Away

Jane Hoppen

The first patch of feathers appeared on Ellie’s right shoulder five months after her partner of twenty-seven years passed away, a time during which she felt abysmally abandoned. She and Maxine had been together since their late teens, and now Ellie found herself facing the world solo, at age fifty-three, on incredibly unsteady feet. She was out of balance. She didn’t feel as if she could just pick up where she had left off—too long ago, too much had changed. She only had the now to work with, and the now seemed suddenly foreign and empty.

Ellie’s friends tried to console her after her loss. They offered idioms and anecdotes that they meant to be comforting, but which had no comforting effects. Ellie’s response was always silent and internal, for she knew the speaker meant no harm.

“This will pass.”

This, has already passed.

“Time heals all wounds.”

Time is the wound.

“You’ll find a new love.”

I don’t want a new love.

The feathers didn’t bother Ellie at first, as they were more like down, soft and fluffy white with a hint of beige, and she thought they were probably the outcome of over-active hair follicles, perhaps triggered by her recent stress, her loss. Also, autumn had just ushered in, bringing with it sweater weather. She would have no problem covering the feathery patch. Even if someone did discover it, she envisioned him or her seeing it as some bizarre irony. She did, after all, work in the bird house at the Bronx Zoo. She had been an avid ornithologist since her youth in Wisconsin, when she became completely engrossed in and enamored by Fran Hammerstrom and her quest to save the greater prairie chicken. Fran also took a liking to predatory birds. Many times as a child Ellie had seen the woman don her buckskin falconer’s glove, her arm becoming the landing strip for an incoming owl or hawk.

Within a week the feathers had spread to both of Ellie’s arms and were beginning to sprout over her belly and upper thighs. The morning she woke to find her breasts were also covered with the downy fuzz that was the beginning of feather growth, nipples poking out, pink, she grew concerned.

“Maybe this is more than stress,” she said aloud, panic pushing her voice an octave higher.

She dried herself off by turning her fan on medium and rotating before it slowly, around and around. Towels didn’t do much for drying her feathery fuzz. After she dressed, making sure to fully cover all affected areas, she called her doctor’s office and spoke to his receptionist.

“Dr. Kohl’s office. Mary speaking. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Mary,” Ellie said. “This is Ellie Gant. I was

wondering if Dr. Kohl might be able to fit me in some time this week.”

“This week is busy,” Mary said. “Is it an emergency?”

“Well, I’m not really sure,” Ellie said. “Kind of.”

“Are you in pain?” Mary asked.

“No,” Ellie said. “No pain, but I...”

“Can you be more specific, then,” Mary said impatiently. “I have to tell the doctor something.”

“Sure,” Ellie said. “I understand.”

“Well?”

“I have feathers,” Ellie sputtered into the phone.

“You have fevers?”

“No, feathers. I’m growing feathers.”

“You’re growing...?”

“Feathers,” Ellie said again.

“Feathers,” Mary said flatly.

“Like a bird,” Ellie told her.

“Hold please,” Mary said, putting Ellie in easy-listening limbo.

Ellie waited. She listened first to Fleetwood Mac—Leather and Lace. The next song was Prince—Raspberry Beret. Halfway through the tune the music clicked off.

“Ms. Gant,” a familiar man’s voice said. “This is Dr. Kohl. I’m not sure Mary heard you correctly. She said she thinks you might be getting... fevers.”

“No,” Ellie said, finally growing impatient. “Feathers. I AM GROWING FEATHERS.”

“You’re growing feathers?” Dr. Kohl asked.

Ellie could discern the disbelief in his voice.

“Like a bird,” Ellie said. “They have now spread from my arms to my belly and thighs, and....”

“Feathers?” Dr. Kohl said.

“Feathers,” Ellie reiterated.

A short silence followed. She could hear the doctor’s pen or pencil tapping rapidly on his desk.

“Come right away,” he finally said.

Ellie checked herself in the mirror to make sure no feathers were showing and grabbed her keys. She was grateful she had the day off and wouldn’t have to feign illness or entertain any questions at work. She left the house and walked to the car, listening to the chorus rising from the oak and maple trees—sparrows, starlings, robins, all surpassed by the loud jeering of a blue jay. Ellie gazed into the trees. The maples’ leaves were transforming into brilliant, ornate lanterns, blazing red flames twirling in the breeze. She took a deep breath and slowly released it. She wondered what Dr. Kohl would say, if he might have some kind of remedy.

Ellie drove to the doctor’s office with trepidation, wondering what he might find. Surely, he thought she was losing her mind. She knew he’d have to see her metamorphosis to believe it. As she pulled into the parking lot, a black-capped finch with brilliant lemon-yellow feathers

swooped by, and she thought, *That wouldn't be so bad, would it? To be free of all this, flitting in the air?*

In Dr. Kohl's office, Ellie put on the flimsy gown the nurse had given her and paced the room as she waited for the doctor. The down that had first appeared on her right shoulder was slowly changing into full feathers. They were a mix of taupe and ivory white, a mosaic blend of earth tones. She sat quietly and listened to the soft song of a mourning dove—coo coo coo. In her mind the cooing was replaced with a similar, somberly sad sound – boo hoo boo hoo boo hoo. Though she had no more tears to shed, Maxine's absence remained a heavy throb throughout her, a dreadful dirge.

Dr. Kohl finally entered the office, closed the door behind him, looked at Ellie, and audibly gasped.

"They are feathers," he eventually said.

"I know," Ellie said. "What do you think is going on? Have you ever seen this before?"

Dr. Kohl cleared his throat.

"No," he said. "I can't say that I have."

"Should I be worried?"

"Are you having any pain, any discomfort?" Dr. Kohl put the blood pressure cuff on Ellie's upper right arm, flattening the feathers beneath.

"No," Ellie said. "I feel fine. I just... It's getting harder to cover them up."

"Blood pressure's good," Dr. Kohl said. "Are you having trouble sleeping? Any loss of appetite?"

"Well, yes," Ellie said, "but I assume that's because of Maxine's death. It's been a lot to handle."

"That's understandable," Dr. Kohl said. "This must be something entirely different. I'll have to investigate—blood and skin tests. We'll take it from there. Maybe the results will give us some clues."

Ellie sat patiently as Dr. Kohl extracted five tubes of brick-red blood and then removed a tiny patch of skin.

"I'll have the results within a week," he said. "Until then, if there are any other... occurrences, call me."

After Dr. Kohl left, Ellie put on her clothes and checked herself in the mirror, taking a moment to tuck in two feathers that were poking out of the collar of her blouse.

The week during which Ellie waited for her test results, her plumage began to completely fill in. When her back feathers appeared, Ellie realized she was becoming a mallard, which she at first found a little disappointing. She had been wishing for a more dramatic transformation—a falcon or an eagle. The mallard was, however, the highest flying bird in North America, and though it looked less than majestic, that feat was nothing to scoff at. Ellie simply thought the accomplishment seemed more fitting for an eagle. Mallards were large ducks with hefty bodies, round heads, and bills that were wide and flat. But the feat of high flight was all in the wings, broad and set back toward the rear. Since Ellie was a female, her body was gray feathered, sandwiched between a mottled brown breast and a black rear, with a white-edged, almost opalescent blue speculum patch in the wings. She was grateful that, for whatever

reason, her face had not taken on the features of a duck. As it was, she actually had somewhat bird-like characteristics. Her shortly cropped hair was a mix of chestnut brown and light gray, her nose was noticeably long and slender, and her build was slim and muscle lined. Ellie envisioned herself with an orange and brown bill and softly giggled. So far she had succeeded in hiding her predicament at work, though a few of her co-workers did note that she seemed to be gaining weight.

"It's a good sign," Marcy Baker had said. "Means your appetite has returned."

Of course, Ellie couldn't tell Marcy that her butt appeared bigger only because she had a bunch of tail feathers tucked inside her pants.

When Dr. Kohl finally called Ellie with the results of her tests, he offered a very vague diagnosis.

"I really couldn't find anything extraordinary in the blood or skin samples," he said. "I can only assume that this

is a result of your continued stress and depression, as odd as it might seem. I suggest that you continue to take care of yourself in every way, be patient with yourself, and I'll continue with research."

"That's it?" Ellie asked.

He could be right, she thought. She had heard the phrase repeatedly: *Stress kills*.

Many times since Maxine had passed away she had wanted nothing more than to exorcise her anxiety, to be gone herself. She often felt as if she was sinking into suffocating sludge, her limbs heavy and listless. Her

desire for even the simplest of things was dwindling.

"I did note a hint of osteoporosis from the blood tests," Dr. Kohl told her. "But that's not that rare at your age. I'm going to prescribe some medication that should slow its progress. And I'd definitely recommend some weight-bearing exercises."

"Okay," Ellie said, relieved but, then again, not reassured. He had no answers for her. Except for the osteoporosis diagnosis, about which she thought, *Of course I have osteoporosis—tiny, thinning bird bones*.

"How are you feeling...otherwise?" Dr. Kohl asked. "Any noticeable changes? Any other symptoms?"

"No," Ellie said. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Except for the feathers."

"Well, you should have your medicine within a week," Dr. Kohl said. "And you can call any time with questions. I'm just sorry I can't be more definitive."

"It's all right," Ellie said. "Really. At least it's not anything... bad."

She hung up the phone and looked in the mirror, thinking, *A bird in the hand...* She couldn't recall the rest of the saying.

The second week of October delivered the musty, warm days of Indian Summer and the migration of the mallards. Ellie couldn't keep her eyes off of the sky. Any time she heard the approaching chorus of throaty honking, she would run to the window to gaze up at the vacillating



formation of birds winging their way South. As a joke she'd flap her arms, always a little surprised when she remained Earth bound. She thought it was a good sign, though, that her sense of humor was returning.

On a particularly balmy day in the bird house, when Ellie thought everyone had left and she was alone, she took off her shirt, leaving on only her tank top, with her feathers in full view. One of the volunteers, Karen Hill, emerged from the parrot exhibition and discovered Ellie taking a break, perched on a bench, nibbling on a handful of almonds.

Ellie heard a startled gasp and turned to see Karen staring at her open mouthed, trembling.

"I guess the secret is out," Ellie said calmly.

"What...?" Karen stuttered through her surprise. "How... How long?"

Ellie liked Karen. She was the most helpful of all the volunteers, and she had a genuine fondness for the birds. She had told Ellie once that she was an orphan. She said she thought she was drawn to the birds because she herself had always felt untethered. If anyone had to discover her secret, Ellie was relieved that Karen was the one.

"About two months," Ellie said. "It just started happening. First, it was more like down. But now... as you can see..."

"Wow," Karen said. Her wonderment was quite evident.

"I know," Ellie agreed.

"Does it hurt?" Karen asked with concern. "Are you in pain? What did your doctor say?"

"He's not sure what's going on,"

Ellie said. "And no, I'm not in pain. In fact, I feel fantastic. My appetite has returned, and even though I'm getting up earlier, I have so much energy. It's strange, actually. But this is the best I've felt since Maxine..."

That was all true. Before the feathers began to appear, getting up in the morning was a ritual of smacking the Snooze button three times before heeding the clock's warning. Recently, however, Ellie was wide awake right at that time when night bridged into day, the darkness tilting into the soft, dim light of dawn, the sun flaming just beneath, the birds' morning songs beginning to filter down from the trees.

"Maybe it's some kind of flight response," Karen said.

She couldn't take her eyes off of Ellie.

"Flight response?" Ellie said. "What do you mean?"

"My therapist says that because of my history I am so afraid of and anxious about abandonment that any time someone starts to get too close, I run away. I'm known for breaking off relationships after the third date."

"I don't think I'm afraid," Ellie said. "Or anxious. I don't feel anxious. Things aren't how they used to be, but I guess that's a given."

"Maybe for you it's manifesting physically," Karen speculated.

"I'm turning into a bird because I want to flee?" Ellie said.

"Could be," Karen said, shrugging. "Then again, I'm no



shrink. That's why I go to one. I'm sure there's a completely scientific explanation. What is your doctor doing about it?"

"He's doing research."

"Well, as long as you're feeling okay."

"I am," Ellie said. "Though I am a bit concerned about what I'll do if this doesn't clear up by springtime. It'll be a little difficult to hide without the fall and winter layers."

"You'll fit right in here, though," Karen said cheerfully.

"I guess," Ellie said, scanning the glass dome, all of her feathered friends.

The first week of November Ellie returned to Dr. Kohl for a follow up visit, and he was visibly shocked to see how the plumage had taken root. Ellie was in many aspects full-blown bird.

"I don't know what to make of it," Dr. Kohl said. "All of your vitals are fine. Perfect, in fact. The change doesn't seem to be affecting you in any other way. Still, it's such a mystery..."

"Are you still doing research?" Ellie asked.

Dr. Kohl nodded, yes.

"The only thing I've found that's even remotely similar is Morgellons."

"What's that?" Ellie asked.

"From what I've read, the condition can display some symptoms like yours—the appearance of blue, black, or red fibers extruding from the skin, or erupting skin lesions."

"That doesn't really sound like feathers," Ellie said.

"The disease hasn't been validated by the CDC," Dr. Kohl told her. He

then continued hesitantly. "Some doctors have diagnosed it as delusional parasitosis."

"Delusional para..." Ellie's voice trailed off momentarily.

"I really don't like the sound of that. I'm not delusional. I do have feathers. You've seen the feathers. Right?"

"Yes," Dr. Kohl said. "I have seen the feathers."

"They're not in my head," Ellie said, her voice edging anger.

"No," Dr. Kohl said. "I just thought they might be... mind related."

"Just because you can't find an answer, doesn't mean I'm making this happen," Ellie said defiantly. "They're feathers for god's sake."

"I didn't mean to upset you, Miss Gant," Dr. Kohl said. "I didn't mean to suggest... I simply... I don't know how to help you."

"Maybe you can't," Ellie said. "Maybe no one can."

"I'll keep trying," Dr. Kohl assured her. "I've been considering reaching out to some other colleagues, but I thought I should consult with you first."

"That's fine," Ellie said, sounding deflated. "Maybe one of them will know something."

"That's my hope," Dr. Kohl said. "I am sorry I have nothing else to offer you."

"That makes two of us," Ellie said.

"Let's have a follow up next month," Dr. Kohl said. "I'll try to have something to tell you by then, some kind of

answer, a solution.”


“Okay,” Ellie said, though he didn’t sound that convincing.

She wasn’t even sure if she’d return. The only thing she had learned from her previous visits was that her bones were decreasing in density.

Two weeks later, Ellie woke early one morning after dreaming about Maxine, oh how she missed Maxine, and rolled out of bed. She dressed slowly, the progression of her feather growth making getting ready to go out rather laborious, trying to cover all of her feathered limbs. She had begun to wonder what she would do if Dr. Kohl never found an explanation. She couldn’t wander around like a human bird forever. Everyone would find out sooner or later. People might want to put her on display. She imagined herself in her own little glass cage in the bird house, employed in an entirely different way. With the day off, she decided to get away to Rockaway Beach. The weather was too cold for most

swimmers, and she would be early enough to take a dip without being detected.

When Ellie arrived at the beach, she scoured it, relieved to see she had succeeded in beating any other bathers. With no one in sight, she quickly peeled off her clothes—no swim suit was necessary—and glanced around one more time to ensure her seclusion. She dug her feet into shifting sand and started to run, the waves arching high in the early morning light. As she neared the water, the winds began to pick up, and she ran faster, and faster. The freedom felt so good. She could taste the salt of the ocean air. As she reached the water, anxious to dive below the billowing waves, a sudden gust caught her, lifted her, and Ellie took flight. She panicked at first, but her arms automatically spanned out, wings, and her tail feathers spread into a wide fan behind her. Ellie was flying, vigorously, onward and upward. Determined to surpass the recorded 21,000 feet for a mallard, she focused forward and headed into clouds. 6



JANE HOPPEN lives in Brooklyn, NY, where she works as a technical and fiction writer. She has had fiction published in various literary magazines, including *Story Quarterly*, *Feminist Studies*, *Room of One's Own*, *The Dirty Goat*, *PANK*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Gertrude Journal*, *Platte Valley Review*, *The New Sound*, *Superstition Review*, *Forge Journal*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Meat for Tea*, and *Hippocampus Magazine*. Her first novel, *In Between*, is being published by Bold Strokes Books in 2013.



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The Chicken Sees

Monique Roussel

He lay on top of me, his long chestnut brown hair falling about his shoulders, his tattoo flinching as he spread my legs. “Lets break the rules,” he said. Makes me think of this Bukowski manuscript I read once describing how he used to hear 2 things come through the walls from the drunk next door—the ballgame and him saying “Come on baby, let me put this god damned thing in there”

You know there was an FBI file on him, Bukowski, the civil servant. The bulk of these files, a mundane reportage of neighbors and employers who scarcely remember him.

There are records from the LAPD too—

*Arrested for violation of Section 647F of the Penal Code (Drunk) by the LAPD on December 17, 1962 and August 12, 1963. For both of these offenses he received a fine of \$20.00, which was forfeited.

The records of the Traffic Violations Bureau, Municipal Court, Los Angeles, California, were checked on March 11, 1968 by [unreadable]. These records reflect that HENRY CHARLES BUKOWSKI, JR. 5124 De Longpre Avenue, Los Angeles, California, was cited on May 23 1967 for violation of Section 22350 of the Vehicle Code (Speeding).For this offense he paid a \$10.00 fine on June 13, 1967.

“Informants” reported things like the above to postal worker Charles Bukowski’s higher ups. To what avail... You know, I took this job working for this madwoman to pay the bills once. She had whats known as a “start up” We shared a loft in Chelsea with her passive aggressive photographer friend, Charles. But really, she had no friends. I was her...”assistant” and when she was too cheap to pay international postage to send things to her clients or press people she was panting to impress...she would send me to the cavernous dreaded massive post office...you know, the big one NEITHER RAIN NOR SLEET NOR WHATEVER SHALL KEEP US FROM OUR APPOINTED...ugh God. Anyway, it was hell. But I used to walk into that marbled madness, that mausoleum of postal death that...those rows of windows with one blue shirted man with bifocals and lines and lines of crumpled people with boxes and bags

and...its sucked. Anyways I would think of him though. Everytime I had to suffer that shit—think how he would wear those shorts and leather mail bag and work with these crumpled people—how he would drink like a fish, fuck and then write this poetry that was like songs off black angels wings or something, something so inspired—so inspired was he by the dry dead heat of cast off LA...

Yeah, we were drunk too, me and the hippie. Seems it was tequila that greased my legs open like no other...but really, Im to blame. He was so stylish with his Sir Walter Raleigh mustache and KISS tattoo though—This all balls out anti establishment look that looks so good in a limo or at the Chateau Marmont where he’d hang God, I want to go there...God...rockstars rode motorcycles through the halls there, fucked legions of groupies...died in their own vomit and tossed tvs off balconies so fucking cool! But here I was a 47 year old woman—bleach blonde, fucked up on Patrone, so intently in his bed --my black vinyl bootied legs wrapped around this muscle bound child with a massive hard on... His trendy patchy beard and breath all over my mouth and down my throat the candles, of course, flickering- this is what goes on on the 19th floor of Zeckendorf Towers over looking what used to be a park so scary, so full of drugs so black so dark so we used to walk the perimeter—me and my art school Parsons School of Designy friends... scared like little cats...and we called it Needle Park then... arguably Needle Park because theres all these parks in New York City that all these people call Needle Park. but, to my knowledge this is the only one—the one from the Pacino movie.

Yes, that one across from that brick monstrosity, Zeckendorf towers where pseudo hippies who have the look but not the head live and fuck women much much older than themselves...That park that is all cleaned up where sec-retaries and hipsters and people eat their lunch and then go back to their insurance company jobs...Yeah, much much older...hmmmm...and god DAMN Im in bed with this guy so covered in tattoos, so rich, so sweetly naked, so privileged and me, perhaps wishing I get to be him in my next life...or when I grow up although Im old man...like really old...really? And when this fuck gets in his car and grabs that stick shift and turns that key and that engine gets real hot and he starts driving and driving and driving and its hot and then hotter and blow open the windows dude and then “Oh whats this a text message who the hell is this what phone number is this?” ‘Hows 8:30?’”Hmmm is this for somebody else? Im clueless what oh its her...this cant be for me what? I’ll say hi”. ‘ Hi’ “ Shit I’d better keep my hands on the wheel” too fucking late and boom he crashes into a tree. Bukowski described his first fuck as a 300 pound whore. At least he remembered her.

I always looked at Bukowski and wondered how he lived this life of drinking and fornication and hot dusty hobo hotels and the writing and the broads and the fame and how could he make it through all that—how he looked like he did and could walk around...like he’d just crawled from the wreckage...everyday...

When I survive fucks like this...I know why. I know how. You bear witness. You open your sticky lids and see. But like our late brilliant friend the postal worker, if youre lucky enough, you can write. You can do something other

than fuck and drink and cast looks of disdain and spit into the sawdust.

But there is power in this, this bearing of witness. You are here. You see the fairness and the filth. You saw that clueless fuck lose it. That one that hit the tree. His Samsonite hair bloody and blowing...shame really...but when a tree falls in a forest is there somebody there to hear it or some such um, yeah this pseudo philosophy major shit—do you know they made us take this philosophy class during my spotty undergrad career at one of the great party football schools of

all time Florida State—and this freakin class was like at 8am?? EIGHT AM. For a 17 year old not even 18 bleary eyed as hell sitting next to my Rastafarian girl friend Ann, the daughter of a doctor...of the upper classes. Straight from Kingston friends with Bob Marley the whole deal... smoked for her religion a GODSEND to me...listening to a guy that looked like Dick Cheney except rumped...you know that rumped professor look...about 80 yrs old...talk about Kant and oh fuck. So but yeah we all heard that tree fall just now, huh? Did you hear that tree my children? Yes, we heard that tree get slammed with that motherfucker... cool!

I am not a woman scorned, just amused...But there is a seriousness here...we all must awaken. Yeah lets all drink that tea called ‘Awaken’ very zen like but cathartic. Did the fucker deserve to hit a tree? Ask God. Talk to the universe. Let it turn its glittery starry eyed visage in your direction and whisper or roar the answer.

All I know is karma’s a bitch, rears its beautiful stunning head and then bang there you are—truth in black and orange lashing its tail suddenly like a Bengal set free amid the moist flora and fauna. When we met, the hippie told me he was surrounded by spirits. Angry ones. He’d be asleep in his 400 dollar a night suite at the Chateau Marmont and strange black footsteps would echo past his door, light bulbs would snap from the ceiling and go flying. All these bleeding, heavy, misery laden spirits followed him anywhere a place was haunted—Am I the strangled foot dragging haunted living spirit that wants to break his ass? Hmm...

When I wanted to get in his pants, I felt protective, thought it charming. Now, I know why they chase him, the dark invisible ones...they chase the careless and weak, those types of destructors who damage and harm with their flailing, thoughtless action and inaction.

Do unto others—what an adage...When I was a child I bore witness to my first grade teacher. She was mean and wore pussycat glasses with rhinestones glinting dully in the corners and green grey dresses with thick flesh colored stockings and black shoes. And they made us sit in these hard rows upon rows of desks. And I found myself at the age of six afraid to ask to go to the bathroom. And, I knew this was bullshit. I missed kindergarten with my two sweet smiling teachers with their high teased 60s hair and pink cotton candy dresses tied at the waist with black velvet ribbon -all the women wanted to be Jackie Kennedy then -and finger paints and coffee cans filled with crayons and big wide paper wrapped around each one with our names on them. And nap time and songs and blocks and hopscotch and grape juice on my lips.

So, one day I decided her tyranny would end. I peed my pants. Right in the middle of her longdivisiondickandja-neoneplusoneequalszero...There she was at the blackboard until a puddle underneath the child in the last row caught her attention. “Did you wee wee” she asked shakily? And I looked down calm as a freakin zen master , looked up and said “Whats this water?” “Why did you do this” she said in the first tender voice I heard come out of her ever. “Youre mean and you never let us go to the bathroom” I screamed. I was the accuser. I was the judge now, amid the frozen shock of that classroom.

I was neither punished nor sent to the principals office. Never taunted, never teased...I was like a fucking hells angel in there...I showed that bitch. It was my first fuck you to the world and I was victorious. My humiliation became hers. And, I bore witness.

In response to my sufferings my second grade teacher rained adoration upon me. Placed a fragrant laurel wreath about my head and let me wear my purple heart of bravery from her every day. On Halloween I wore my hand made kimono from Japan from when my mother took me there after her divorce. My sisters powdered my face white and stained my lips red.

I was beautiful and loved. An outlaw—Not in the style of Dillinger, never having to draw blood to gain street cred.

Would you believe me if I told you that I was kidnapped and held against my will by a corporation? Ah, the beginnings of my illustrious career. Auspicious no? No. Yes, I was.

Do you know what its like to be treated as sub human? Im a Jewess. The daughter of a war bride brought here by an American GI stationed in North Africa in World War II. I heard the stories from my Moroccan mother of the Nazi occupation of Casablanca, where she was born. The air raids, her peeing in her pants in basements to the blare of sirens...Guess it runs in the family...this release of fluids to make a point...

I’ve seen the films, read the stories. I’ve had my heart broken by Anne Frank—sent to the camps and murdered just before the surrender. Watched Hitler in sped up black and white and in color playing with his German Shepherd. Listened to one of his secretaries recount how soft spoken he was once he left the podium.

I don’t look Jewish. I’ve heard what people say when they think no Jews are around. Jews don’t even think Im Jewish. The tribe doesnt recognize its own. I respect “the tradition” but to me, God and religion are two different things. As far as something organized, I lean towards The Tao.

So yes, I’ve been introduced to the idea by my Sephardic Jewess mother (our ancestors tossed to the curb by the Spanish Inquisition) that people of my ilk have been treated as subhuman in recent and not so recent history. Im white, but technically African American and yet still a descendant of slaves. Guess who built the pyramids? Bingo! My peeps! How they lifted those 2 ton blocks I’ll never know but they sweated their asses off in the Sahara...toiled like bastards for the Egyptians and...here I am! I believe all races were slaves to someone conquering someone at some point. We’ve all had to rise.

I’ve heard a lot of talk, felt the pain and compassion. The first time I saw one of the striped jackets with the yellow felt

Star of David behind glass at the Jewish Museum, I cried. Right there. In front of my 9 year old son and everyone.

But you havent lived till you’ve had someone look at you like youre not a human being. Scratch that—you never want to experience this. I worked for a big luxury retail store in the heart of Manhattan—an executive at the age of 23...One day, I was going to lunch with my friends. Two security guys that I knew personally pulled me to the side on my way out and asked me if they could ask me some questions. I said sure and let my friends go to lunch. I was held against my will for 8 hours. Escorted to the bathroom. (Again, someone had to watch me piss—whats that about?) Asked to write a confession under duress and thrown in the street, kind of like my ancestors although a lot less ceremoniously. I admit, they may have suffered more. A lot more...

Seems they thought I had lifted some merchandise. Why are writers always getting arrested? I was never arrested. Have not as yet achieved the badass status of the late great Hunter S. Or Bukowski or even my zen friend Ginsberg for that matter. Come close as I say. There was that time in Hogs and Heffers with my sociopath boyfriend Preston whom I warned to cut off the booze at a certain point in the evening as he was one of those filthy Doctor Jeckyl Mister Hyde types when inebriated. I had had a couple myself. The dreaded Tequila lifting its crazy head yet again. (What is with that stuff? Is it like Peyote? From a cactus? You trip on it!) Loaded. Listening to the live band doing very well with a Jim Morrison tune. When I spot the bartendress – tits on the bar chatting it up with Mr. Charm School getting him to buy them both shots as thats her job.

And, quite calmly I came to conclusion that I had to fuck her up. No raging. No flailing. Have you any idea how empowering it is to be an asshole? You know that feeling you’ve got when youre drunk and you know youre being an asshole and...YOU DON’T CARE! I was either leaving there in cuffs or a stretcher but I was going to slap the shit out of her AND him...No worries!

So, I start walking across the bar. And, shes spots me first. Gets that rabbit in the headlights type look – seems she’s seen this look before by other rankled female patrons...Hey, if its your job to flirt with other chicks’ boy-friends well, do the math at how many times youre gonna see that glint in a chicks eye my friend...

Anyways, then he spots me. Gets that rabbit in the headlights look too. And just as I swagger up to the bar—Im about to open my mouth to Miss Big Tits and he grabs me, throws me over his shoulder, ass in the air, boots kicking the whole nine and hustles me out of there...damn! No cops! No getting arrested! Drag!

Then theres the myriad of times in my youth in Florida. Picture me in the backseat of countless black T top Camaros—Boston blaring More Than a Feeling at 100 miles an hour on highway 41 as Im about to take that first bong hit...An angel on my shoulder friends. An angel.

Where that angel was this day, I have no clue. Maybe doing a bong hit with Miss Tits at Hogs and Heifers who the fuck knows. But, regardless of my failure to achieve total outlaw status here, no one gave a damn. Not my scaredy cat art school friends, not my so called loaded with dough, saavvy Jewish boyfriend at the time. I was 24, surrounded by self absorbed sheep and didnt know my rights—a recipe

for destruction if there ever was one.

In a word, I let them fire me with out suing for millions—not only for unlawfully holding me ie, failed NYPD rejects playing good cop bad cop with a terrified child shaking like a goat on their ripped faux leather couch—but try a little something called emotional distress—that nebulous catchall that can have validity for some as it fucked me up for years—almost to this day... By the time I asked a lawyer he said there was no statute of limitations and I had a case but now, there was no money in it. Money. Right. Lawyers.

Yes. Money and lawyers and reading the box top for instructions right...Im getting better about that and that too at the cost of my skin being ripped from my body like a Nazi Brazilian Bikini wax.

Theres a Sikh teaching about a priest who gives a man a chicken and tells him to go and kill it without anyone seeing. The man goes round back, puts the chickens head to the chopping block and raises his hatchet. He then returns with the chicken, alive. The priest says “why didnt you kill the chicken?” The man says “Because the chicken sees”

Yes. The chicken sees all—Super Chicken sees me, you, the hippie, rumped postal employees, even my first grade teacher and the Nazis. Is the chicken God? No. She’s a chicken. Handing out flyers in Times Square for a strip joint. Pulled from one of the silvery drawers at the morgue—eyes rivited by the florescent lights...unable to blink. ☹



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Substitute for Love #3

We lived in the middle of a long block of modest colonials and silent dogs. As a kid wearing paper tissues under those dreaded starched collars for school, or with ear glued to a transistor blaring “Baby Love,” hands cutting the outlines of paper heroes, I thought the sun and the moon revolved around our house. Nobody dies in this home; nobody flies away. My mother, who loved Maria Callas and *Brigadoon*, bought two parakeets because she thought a house is not a nest without birds. I became overly attached to the shy one because he reminded me of myself in classrooms, of being stuck for answers. One day in a fit of rage, my father opened the cage and chased the birds out the window. I ran after them because the world was too big for the two of them, especially the one who didn’t chirp much. I didn’t see the car coming. The world was too big for the three of us. So now, I’m holding the world in my hand. It’s made of glass and it’s really very small after you’ve grown beyond it. I spin it around and around in my palm. Inside, I can see a small boy chasing two birds because they mean life and death to him. They keep running all around the world until they catch up. But the birds will always fly away and the boy is growing too tall and too starry-eyed for a life of glass and pain. So I make a fist and crush this world.



Before You Leave Oz

It’s a red sundowner. You imagine a blade of grass feeling like a wick. The wick is you, burning slow. Your mother dumps the last of the compost, complains how she’s been breaking rocks for years. Just for you. Father left months ago with a willowy women allergic to alfalfa. But she loved jazz and the way your father exaggerated his lean years in Kansas, a yellow sky of pure waiting. Tomorrow’s clouds will spell the name of a boy with a mystic lisp. Tomorrow you’ll spend half of your allowance, sent by envelope from your dad, on this boy at the pizza parlor. You’ll wish his dimples are as big as dimes so you can pocket them. You’d be as rich as the woman who leans towards your father, shoulders rolled, knees turned, merging her skinny self with his funky brand of night-shade.



Before Wi-Fi, There Was This

This has nothing to do with rabbits, with pigeons, with puffed heart lockets etched with Braille, with eyes like Peridot stones, with Citrine sunsets, with deserted sailboats, with the best beef noodle soup this side of Canal Street. This has to do with the text I sent to the wrong recipient=You. The correct recipient is from Mars or someplace farther & colder. She has never seen rabbits, pigeons, puffed heart lockets, Peridot stones, etc. Her planet, like the sailboat mentioned above, has been deserted Oh, way before Star Trek went off the air. On her best days, she can float & she’s very susceptible to Touch. Please don’t say a word. Martians are all around us. They use hidden antennas but they snore like we do. It’s a kind of superiority complex that’s universal.



I Was Lana Turner’s Tormented Secret Live-in & I Never Wrote a Freakin’ Book About It

I told her that someday she’d get hers, that sooner or later, it’s going to rain poets who moonlight as 3rd rate mechanics. I said “Give me back my washers, bitch!” She slunk in the doorway with that sexy pout, drunk again & wearing a satin nightgown that she stole from a houseguest turned murder suspect. She stuffed the washers in her panties and said “Come and Get it, Sheep-Boy.” I held up my hands, showed her the grease. I said, “Those washers cost me \$1.50 apiece. They’re special washers. They can double as sex-aids. And do you want really want these greasy hands in a pair of panties autographed by Franchot Tone?”

“Go wash them, Dum-Dum,” she said.

“Oh no,” I said, “I don’t trust the tap water here—not hard water or soft.”

I never got those washers back.



I Was Charles Bronson’s Secret Hostage

What’s worse than putting your skinny nose in a nut cracker? It’s being taken hostage by Charles Bronson in his leaning house on a mountain. I think Charley has gone nuts. He keeps pacing in front of me with hands behind his back and saying something about the weight of happiness is too much for all of us to bear. Charley, I yell, what gives! Please untie me, I’m getting nervous.

He says for me to give him the code, first.

I say WHAT CODE, CHARLEY? YOU MEAN THE CODE TO MY MOTHER’S COOKIE JAR, THE ONE SHE ALWAYS KEEPS SECURED WITH TWO COMBINATION LOCKS? OR DO YOU MEAN THE CODE LIKE THE ONE THAT PRESSES MY FUZZY GIRLFRIEND’S HORNY BUTTON AND SHE CAN GO THROUGH THREE MEN LIKE A BOWL OF CHICKEN SOUP?

I mean THE CODE, says Charley. Like CODE AS IN THIS CEILING WILL BEGIN TO LOWER IN TEN SECONDS AND FLATTEN YOU.

I don’t know any code, I tell Charley, except in node abode dote my fish took off with my boat.

Charley turns to me and winks. He says Nice try, kid, but you’re missing a vowel.

He walks away.

Just like that.

I was only short a vowel.



Strange Love

I was just an average out-of-work Star Trek extra strolling in the park under speechless mockingbirds who probably wished they own MP3s, when she dropped from a tree like a billet-doux written on stone and almost crushed my egg-shaped head. From then on we became a couple, but I never allowed her to scramble my breakfast or to choose my cable channels.



An Endearing Antidote about Sophia Loren That I Told Almost No One

It was raining drops big as matzo balls. Okay, an exaggeration, but so was the movie she was filming. Something about cowboys who couldn’t die or sneeze or fart in the desert. She made me the most delicious rum cake. I said, “Sophia, did anyone tell you that you make the most delicious rum cake?” She slapped me. I COULD NOT BELIEVE IT. She slapped me with my cheeks full of her rum cake. Bits of saliva drenched rum cake spotted her walls. I said, “SOPHIA, DID I SAY SOMETHING WRONG?” She said her favorite uncle was a rummy, drowned at sea. Then she stormed away, muttering something about Sergio Leone and Terrence Hill. FOOLS! she screamed out and thrusting a cupped hand into the air. The next time I stayed at her house, I didn’t ask for rum cake. She served cold spaghetti.



Clint Eastwood and Guess Who’s Not There

I had him laughing so hard that he promised to lick my mahogany legs clean if I told him another joke about a Democratic mayor who lost his head and hallucinated talking chairs. Truth is I can’t talk at all. I’m just an empty chair. It’s Clint who puts words on my seat. Sometimes Clint thinks I’m an angry chair. Like the time he kept asking me why he didn’t get the lead role in Total Recall. Then he says, DON’T TELL ME YOU DON’T REMEMBER. No, he said, looking down at me, that’s my line.



KYLE HEMMINGS has been published in Wigleaf, Storyglossia, Elimae, Match Book, This Zine Will Save Your Life, and elsewhere. . His latest collection of prose/poetry is *Void & Sky* from Outskirt Press. He lives and writes in New Jersey.



Bubbled Up All Over

Kate LaDew

Irving Glassamilk loved his wife Judy Stringalights so much it made him bubble up all over. Every day as he witnessed her gliding down the stairs (and she did glide, smooth and soft like a flying squirrel in search of a tree) Irving clutched at his heart and bubbled up, “Oh Judy, light of my life.” The words popped in the air. “I can hardly even stand it.”

And every day Judy made him two eggs in a boat and poured a glass of no-pulp orange juice and sat across from him and radiated goodness.

On the 25th of October in the seventeenth year of their marriage, Irving Glassamilk said something to Judy Stringalights she never forgot.

“When I die—”

“Oh don’t say it, Irving!”

“When I die, Judy—all good men must die—”

“Oh, the waste!”

“When I die and fly up to heaven and Saint Peter or God or Jesus or angels or bright lights ask me my favorite sound—Do you know what I’ll say?”

“What will you say, Irving?”

“I’ll say, ‘Judy Stringalights’ heartbeat.’”

And Judy Stringalights never forgot because it was just about the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. 🕒



KATE LADEW is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. She resides in Graham, NC with her cat, Charlie Chaplin.



Dream Maker

Robert Vaughan

Charlotte shakes the powdered snow from her head while she stuffs the last bite, a large portion of her coffeecake muffin, into her eager mouth.

“Wow,” is all you can say.

When she finishes chewing, and swallowing her HOT morsel, face flushes, she turns to you and says, “blow me.”

And for a handmade moment, an ever-ready slice of brute force wind nearly sends you far flung.

“Also,” Charlotte adds, “my brothers are both here. Corner table.” She nods. “They could punch the fucking daylights out of you.”

You baffle—think: *I’m just a traveler on this highway*, while you touch her arm, ask random questions about Uruguay. Possible probates. Fiscal cliffs.

She murmurs, “Imagine this: a universal space in which you choose one precipitation. Only one. And it never changes.

You smile, already drenched in acid rain. Dancing. Arms akimbo, you blanch toward the road, a whirling dervish. 🕒



ROBERT VAUGHAN leads writing roundtables at Redbird- Redoak Writing. His prose and poetry is found in numerous journals. His short fiction, “10,000 Dollar Pyramid” was a finalist in the Micro-Fiction Awards 2012. He is a fiction editor at *JMWW magazine*, *Thunderclap!* and *Lost in Thought*. He hosts Flash Fiction Fridays for WUWM’s Lake Effect. His book, *Flash Fiction Fridays*, is at Amazon. His poetry chapbook, *Microtones*, is forthcoming from Cervena Barva Press. His blog: <http://rgv7735.wordpress.com>



Living Alone

Joe Jatcko

I was spending my Sunday morning contemplating the many small catastrophes, which begin to pile up if one is not careful, when in flew a bee. It took several laps around my one-room apartment, clearly not realizing the impact of this action.

Yet nonetheless, it would have to die.

Bees have died for less.

Bees die everyday for less.

One had stung me in the face as a child—right on my innocent, freckled cheek. My face became so swollen and pink and red, my eyes eventually looked only like two thumbprints in a mound of cookie dough. I started first grade this way. Though I was eventually able to assimilate myself back in with the children whose heads were the usual size, I can't help but wonder how much more charmed my youth would have been if not for this incident. I was a vegetarian then. I refused to hurt any living thing. Everyone thought I was a remarkably moralistic child. Gradually though, I began eating meat, killing bugs, burning ants—perhaps it was the bee who was responsible for my premature demise into the indifference of adulthood. These things change us.

I was, however, going out and, more out of fear than compassion, decided to leave it. In that time, the bee would be free to move around the room as it liked and eventually find its way out. And if it still chose to stay—then it would die.

Each window in the apartment had two panes of glass. The original inside pane, which while more charming, did little to keep heat inside in the winter. The outside pane, while more functional, was cheaply made and automatically slid shut two to three seconds after being lifted. Since

the entire set of outside window fixtures shared this defect, I was forced to prop each of them open using various items such as tennis rackets and kitchen utensils.

I had lunch with Carol, my neighbor, in her apartment at the other the building. In the past few months we had entered into the kind of strange relationship two people sometimes do when confined in spaces together; but we both since had begun to resent the situation. Things were slowly ending.

"The bees are dying, you know," she said when asked for comment on the bee situation.

"Bees are always dying," I said, my tone unintentionally defensive.

"Seriously, bees have been disappearing all over the world and no one knows why."

"I suppose it's our fault though...humans?"

"Probably."

"Well, what does this have to do with my bee?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

An abrupt and irreversible silence ensued.

I returned to my apartment and circled the room tentatively, waiting for the inevitable buzzing. Eventually though, I lost interest and collapsed into an armchair—my single piece of living room furniture, which had been strategically positioned directly in front of the television. It was then that I spotted it, a single black spec on the white sill in front of the furthest window.

If most bees are killed for simply being a bee, I thought, then surely this one—a lazy and stupid bee—deserved no other fate. But, in its laziness, it had afforded itself one last chance for salvation. It occurred to me that I could simply flick it and once it was propelled outside, I would only have

to shut the window behind. The bee would not have the opportunity to sting me, would escape with its life, and I would have the satisfaction of at least stunning, if not killing it.

I approached quietly yet purposefully—getting close enough that I could see the miniature skeletal structure of its motionless wings—and softly set my curled index finger down behind it.

Directly after the moment of contact, it was clear that I had made a very serious error. I had not calculated the angle of the bee's trajectory with consideration for the outer pane of glass, which was propped open with a wooden kitchen spoon. Upon hitting the glass, the bee hovered, confused but clearly irritated. Panicking, I reached for the inner window and yanked down forcefully. So hard, in fact, that the small tremor this produced caused the round end of the spoon to rotate out of its position and two to three seconds later the outer pane came down behind it, trapping the bee in the four inches of space between the two sheets of glass.

It began to weave back and forth inside its enclosure, having no further illusions of my intentions towards it. It looked so powerless now, like the subject of a child's diorama. I went and sat down in the armchair, wondering what steps I could have taken to prevent this turn of events. It's a somewhat senseless relationship we have with bees, I thought watching him grope at the glass: when we kill them it is only out of our fear of being stung and when

they sting us it is only out of their fear of being killed. So, we get stung, our children and elderly get stung, and the bee dies.

There is no trust.

As I tried to sleep that night I could still hear it ricochet back and forth inside the walls of its enclosure. But there was nothing I could do—I had broken any fragile bond that existed between us, and it had no choice now but to interpret my actions as hostile. I made the silent promise to it that if it could only hold on until morning, I would open all the other windows before I left for work, then the one trapping the bee inside. This time it would have all day to find its way out.

Gradually, as it grew weaker and perhaps more philosophical about its predicament, its poundings became less frequent and I eventually drifted off.

I awoke in the morning and stepped tentatively to the window.

It was dead.

Dead from whatever bees die from when trapped in small compartments.

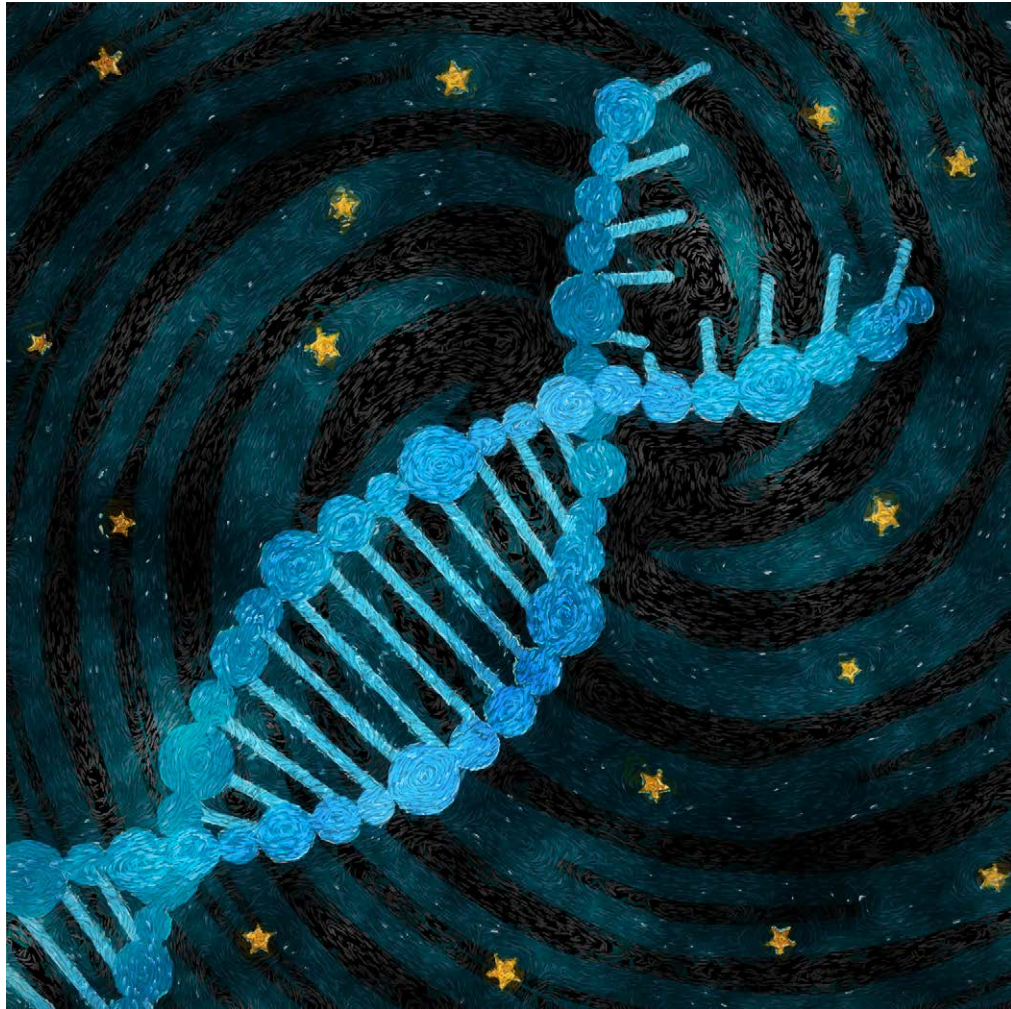
As I looked at its little body—on its back, with its wings spread and its legs crossed over one another—I couldn't help wishing there was something I could do to make its death more meaningful, some more symbolic way to dispose of its corpse than by putting it in the trash on top of the eggshells and expired food. And I couldn't help thinking that things could have just as easily been different. 🐝



JOE JATCKO lives in Portland, Oregon where he works with kids and encourages them to write. They are publishing a magazine together, however, in that it is a magazine run primarily by children, it has yet to produce an issue. Joe has also written locally for the Arts and Culture section at the *Willamette Week*, and still owes several parties retractions.

artists for writers

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Death Car Girl

Brandon French

There's been a lot of criticism of this woman Ruth Kligman, Jackson Pollock's mistress, mostly by his ugly, jealous wife Lee Krasner. I guess it's because Kligman had let it be known that she wanted to hook up with a great artist and went to the place where he hung out, the Cedar Bar in Manhattan, and snagged him even though she knew he was married. I don't think there was anything wrong with wanting to love a great artist, I might have done the same thing if I knew where to look for one. But I can see Lee Krasner's side, too, she did more than her share of support and put up with Pollock's drunkenness and bad temper and then after he became famous, she got kicked to the curb. I just resent it when the wives blame the mistresses because it's the husbands they ought to be pissed at.

But I wasn't even a mistress this time, although his wife thought I was. His name was Henry, he was a math and science teacher at St. Ignatius Catholic High School

in Oakland, California and he was smarter than any three smart people I'd ever known. A big, hunky fellow with a big white sheet cake of a face, big blinky eyes, big horn rim glasses which made his eyes look even bigger, a big snouty nose, big jug handle ears. And homely as a baboon's ass, to be honest, except when he smiled. Then he looked all twinkly with dimples and a devilish glint. And he was really funny in a dry, clever kind of way. Like when he told me that one of his student evaluations had said he was "intelligent but witty." He made me laugh a lot which made me like him a lot but I could never get that to be a sexual attraction, you know what I mean? That's about chemistry and either it's there or it's not.

But it was really there for Henry with me. One time I was coming down the stairs of the little townhouse I was renting in El Cerrito and he just grabbed me and knocked me over and fell on top of me.

"Jesus Christ!" I said and he said "Sorry." He wasn't exactly a smooth operator and that turned me off, too. But I really liked him and I wanted him to stick around so I guess I flirted with him just enough to keep him interested.

He was married to a nursery school teacher named Betsy who he knew since kindergarten back in Macon, Georgia. She was kind of plain and homely like he was with pale white skin that matched her pale blond hair and she was pregnant and he was so depressed that he kept thinking he was going to have to kill himself because he didn't love her anymore but he couldn't bring himself to leave her.

"The one time I tried to get away, I crashed my Harley into a Burger King. Took out the entire salad bar and broke three ribs," he said. "But it's not Betsy's fault, she's a wonderful person."

I didn't know what to tell him. Damned if he did or didn't, I thought.

"Let's you and me run away together, Red," he said. He called me Red because of my hair, even though my name was Sally.

"Not today," I said, trying to keep it light. "I have to wash the dog." (I didn't have a dog.)

"It's about time," Henry drawled. "That dog was beginning to stink up the place."

Henry told me all kinds of fascinating, poetic things about science like Heisenberg's Theory of Electron Probability and the double helix and the blackness of black holes. He said that before The Big Bang there was absolute chaos, which was synonymous with nothingness.

"Now get this. The Hebrew word in the Bible that describes the universe before Creation means *chaos and nothingness*. They're synonymous!"

"Wow," I said. "Wow, wow, wow."

"See, the reason religious people can't reconcile science with faith," he said, "is because they don't believe that God, who created the whole universe, can create *metaphor*!"

I really wished that I could fall in love with Henry because he had a very sexy brain. But the rest of him was like a big ugly mud hut with a dead grass roof and I just couldn't get past that. Not that I was Angelina Jolie or anything, but at least I was cute.

I had met Henry drinking coffee and eating banana cream pie in the lunch room at St. Ignatius. I was an intern there getting my hours of teaching experience so I could get a credential in high school English. Teaching wasn't what I really wanted to do, I wanted to be a great poet, but even great poets have to work for a living, at least in America they do, like Wallace Stevens, he was vice president of an insurance company and William Carlos Williams was a doctor.

Anyway, things got all messed up between me and Henry the night my mother died. I was really upset and crying my eyes out, even though I had known for a long time that she had terminal cancer and was going to die. When Henry found out, he came over and made dinner for me, macaroni and cheese and broccoli, and he was really sweet and even brought me a wet washrag to clean off my face which was covered with tears and snot and he even cleaned it off for me like I was a little helpless girl.

So I thought I should do something nice to thank him,

just a little b.j. in the living room, I didn't even kiss him or anything. But he got all crazy after that and went home and told his wife that we were in love with each other.

"What the fuck, Henry," I said when he told me, "what the fuck!"

Next thing, his wife found out where I lived and came over, she was so pregnant I thought she was going to have the baby right in front of me, and she called me a tramp and then she started to cry and begged me not to take Henry away from her.

"Listen, Betsy," I said, "swear to God, I don't want to take Henry away from you. We're just friends and I don't know why he told you that stupid thing about us being in love with each other but it isn't true!"

I made her some peppermint herbal tea and she told me the story of her life, how she was the youngest of three sisters in Macon and how her father had to raise them the best he could after their mother died and how Henry and she met in the first grade and how he proposed to her in the second grade and every year after that until they were in college and how scared she was about being a mother for the first time and even more scared that Henry would leave her alone with the baby so far away from her sisters back in Georgia and what was she supposed to do?

I felt pretty bad for her and told her I'd baby sit for her if she ever needed help. She gave me a big hug when she left and said she was glad we were friends now, and I said yes, and said everything was going to be okay.

After that, I stayed as far away from Henry as possible and only heard through the grape vine that he and Betsy had had a little boy.

It was about six months later that Henry came by my townhouse. He just showed up without calling first. When I opened the door he was standing there kind of sheepish with his little boy in one of those slings so of course I asked him to come inside.

He was really proud of the little fellow, Marcus he said was the name. I tried to think of something nice to say about the baby but I'll tell you, that thing about how all babies are beautiful is bull shit because Marcus looked exactly like Henry. His nose was so big that I wondered if the rest of his face would ever catch up.

"He's really big," I said finally and that seemed to please Henry.

"He looks just like my brothers," Henry said, "it's amazing." I pictured a whole family of big, homely kids in Macon, Georgia with big noses and horn rim glasses and two homely parents and an ugly dog.

"You look really happy," I said.

"I am," he said and I felt relieved for Betsy.

But around Thanksgiving I heard from one of the other St. Ignatius interns that Henry was having an affair with the social studies and health teacher Lillian Birdsong, kind of a skinny gal with that wispy brown hair that looks fried and an overbite. And the day after Thanksgiving, Black Friday, it was all over the news. "High school teacher killed in five car pile-up on the I-80."

It was poor Lillian Birdsong who had got killed. Henry had only sustained head injuries, a collapsed lung and broken legs. They were running off together to Reno, the newscasters said. "Let's you and me run away together,

Lillian,” he had probably said. And she the poor dummy had said yes.

All that weekend I kept seeing pictures of Henry’s Toyota on the TV and in the newspaper. It didn’t look like a Toyota anymore, it looked like one of those Rauschenberg recycled junk sculptures, with its twisted grill snarling like some old Edward G. Robinson gangster and two raggedy, empty eye sockets where the headlights had been. If it could have talked, it probably would have said, “What the fuck, Henry.”

I heard later that Henry went back to his wife when he got out of the hospital and after the first of the year, they both moved back to Macon. I figured his guilt had a lot to do with the accident. When all was said and done, Henry was a very moral man.

I felt pretty lucky about not falling in love with Henry because if I had it would have been me all crashed up and dead in that car accident. I was like Ruth Kligman, who everyone called the “death car girl” because she had lived through the car crash that killed Jackson Pollock and her girlfriend Edith Metzger. Ruth Kligman was a survivor. One year after Pollock died, she shacked up with another great artist who was much better looking, Willem de Kooning.

But she was luckier than I am, I haven’t met any great artists, handsome or otherwise, or even another brilliant

homely guy like Henry. I did fall in love with a married poetry teacher at UC Berkeley during spring quarter, but when I realized I had just confused him with William Carlos Williams because he wrote a book about *Patterson*, it was all over for me. The closest I ever came to greatness was Billy Collins. I sent him one of my poems when I was 16 and he sent me a post card from Florida that said, “Good poem, kiddo. Keep writing.”

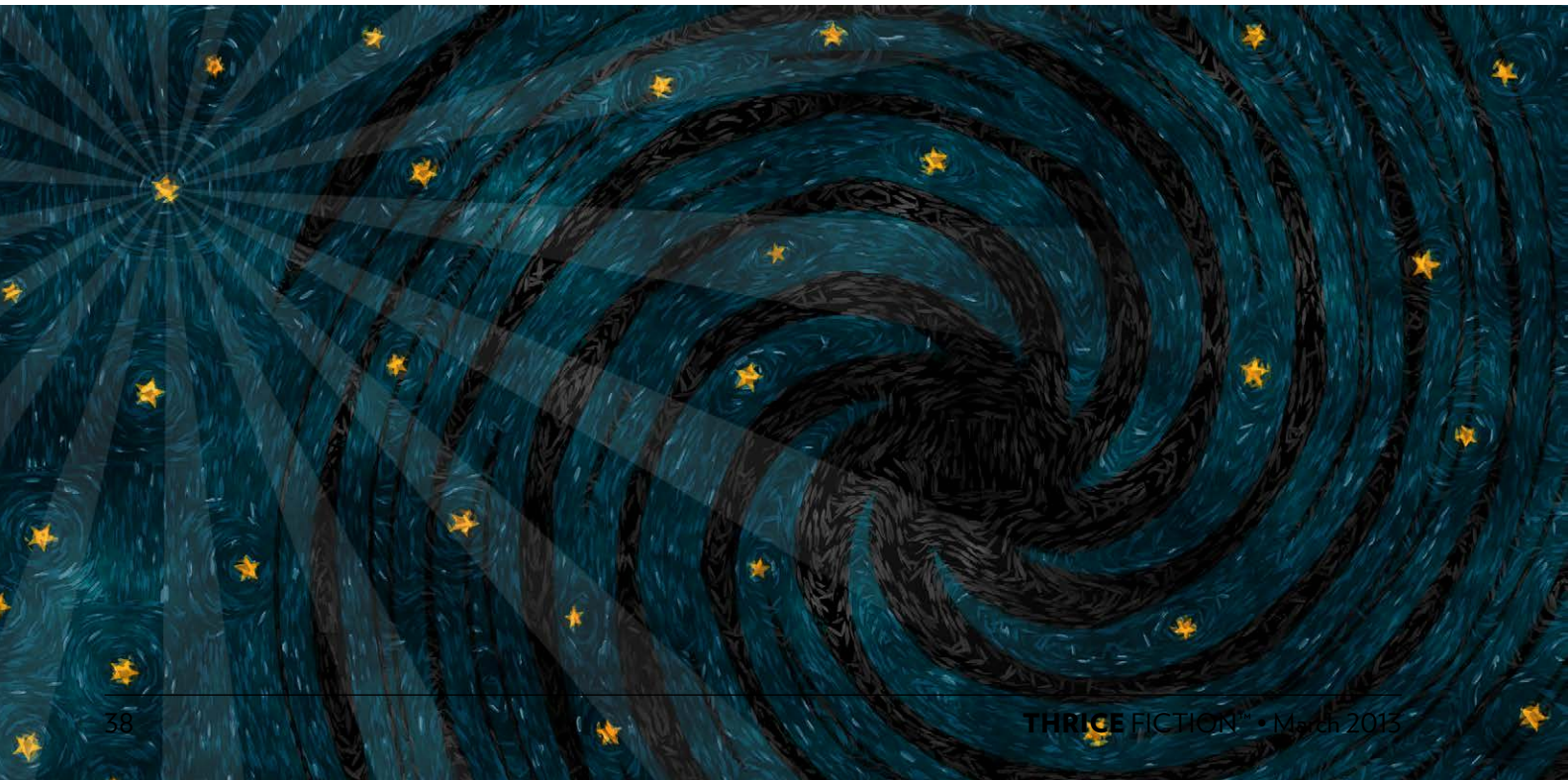
Lately I’ve been writing a lot of poetry, some of it’s about my crazy family of lapsed and “recovering” Catholics but also about Henry, Lillian Birdsong and my survivor’s guilt from the accident because I keep feeling like it’s kind of my fault that she died. I write about the things Henry told me, too, like the double helix and black holes, which by the way I think are two of God’s truly great metaphors. Some guy told me recently that the stuff Henry said about the universe was junk physics and crap, and I thought maybe that was my fault because I wasn’t saying it right, but to tell you the truth, that guy was trying to jump my bones and I think he just wanted to prove he was smarter than Henry when he really wasn’t.

I’ve just about given up on men, especially married ones, at least for the time being until I get my head on straight. I’ve even begun to wonder sometimes if maybe the great artist I keep looking for might have to be me.

OMG, as my students say. It’s pretty daunting.



BRANDON FRENCH is the only daughter of an opera singer and a Spanish dancer, born during a shortage of bananas at the end of the Second World War—significant because her mother believed that a child could not be properly raised without mashed bananas, which may help to explain her spotty life. She has been (variously) an assistant magazine editor for *Modern Teen*, a topless Pink Pussycat cocktail waitress, a Yale assistant professor of English, a published film scholar, a playwright and screenwriter, a psychoanalyst, and a mother. Five of her stories were accepted by literary journals and she was nominated for the Kirkwood Prize in Fiction at UCLA. In November of this year, the New Short Fiction Series in North Hollywood will be featuring her short stories in *Choking on the Bone*.



Sabeen

MaryAnne Kolton

The death of her mother Fatima turned Sabeen to stone. For three days she could not see, hear or speak. She felt nothing and remembered less. After one week of constant tending by her ancient Uncle Ghais, the child began to have horrific visions, day and night. She saw the unthinkable. Something had hit her mother in the stomach, nearly severing her in half. Sabeen knelt by her mother’s side as blood flowed like the River Orontes from her body.

“Sabeen” she rasped, “I will send someone to bring you to me.” Red blossoms formed on Fatima’s lips. “Take the hijab from me. It will protect you until we are together again.”

Sabeen patted her mother’s face and wept, but Fatima spoke no more. Sabeen tugged the blood spattered, silken scarf from the body of her dead mother.

Ghais carried his niece away from their home to a cold, earthen bunker where many of the community’s women and

children huddled in darkness. The men, with the exception of the most elderly, were fighting or dead. Ghais wailed and beat his fists against his chest. His youngest sister was now lost to him. He and the child, alone, remained of what had been a large, contented family. The thunderous sound of rocket fire penetrated the earthen walls, but Sabeen heard nothing.

Two weeks passed before Sabeen was able to push the visions away. It was then she remembered her mother’s last words to her. She tied the stained, white hijab around her slender waist, the tiny waist of a sick, starving, seven year old child.

Uncle Ghais ventured into the streets to scavenge supplies for those in the bunker. There had been no bread for three weeks. The government had stopped delivering rations of flour to the bakers and had bombed most of their ovens to bits. Sometimes, a few thick, rotting ovals of bread

could be found in the rubble, if one knew where to look. When Ghais returned, he brought not bread, but strangers with him—A woman and two men. The woman was an international newsperson, he told them, the men, her videographer and security guard. They had hired Ghais to guide them through the death and destruction meted out to the city and its people by the government forces. The reporter, an Irish woman, called Finnoula, said it was important the world know of the people’s suffering. As the neighbors rushed the trio, each one anxious to tell of starvation, lack of warm clothing, and to show pictures of tortured and disappeared relatives, Sabeen stayed back. She felt cold sweat run down her body. She shivered and chewed her scabbed lips. Could one of these have been sent to take her to her mother?

Sabeen huddled in a dark corner, studying the strangers with dry, inflamed eyes. The woman was short, slim and blue-eyed. Her red, unwashed hair was held back by an elastic band. She wore mud-covered pants, an oversized jacket and men’s work boots. Her excellent command of the Arabic language surprised the group. A red and white kaffiyeh was knotted at her throat. Finnoula looked directly into the weeping eyes of each person she spoke with, all the while scribbling on page after page in the notebook she held. Doug, the short, bearded man with the camera on his shoulder, took pictures as Finnoula directed. *He is not the one*, Sabeen thought. Nor was the other man. Large, bald, and burly Graeme, eyes skittering the across the parameters of the bunker, paused in his inspection only when he saw the pile of the bodies of the dead, stacked like wood in a remote crevice, deep within the shelter. His intense, hollow-eyed glance also rested for a moment on Sabeen. When the rumbling sound of shelling grew closer, he gently urged the group farther into the depths of the enclosure. From his first day with them, the ravaged band of survivors placed their trust in the kind and disciplined Graeme.

As she moved with the group, Finnoula spied Sabeen slumped against a back wall. She knelt in the dirt, while the man with the camera filmed them.

“And you, little one, what is your story?” Sabeen lowered her head, winding the ends of her mother’s hijab around her wrists. Finnoula brushed the curls away from the child’s forehead, feeling the heat of her skin with the back of her hand.

“What a beautiful scarf you wear.” She turned to the

cameraman. “Turn the light off, please, Doug. The child is shy and has a fever as well.”

In the blue shadows, she leaned in close to Sabeen, her soft, oddly accented, English words caressing the child’s cheek. “I’m going to find you some water.” She reached out to Graeme, who handed her a bottle of water, and a packet with two tablets of the analgesic *paracetamol* from the backpack he carried. Sabeen sipped the cool water, downed the medicine, and then quickly drained the bottle. It had been such along time since she had tasted clean, cold water. The gift of water and the touch of the woman’s hand affected the child. She felt the absence of terror for the first time since the death of her mother.

“Sabeen,” she whispered, “my name is Sabeen.” “Ah, now there’s a lovely name. Your mother and father, where would they be?”

“Dead,” tears rolling down her hot cheeks, Sabeen repeated, “Dead.”

Finnoula began rubbing gentle circles into the child’s back. “I’m sorry to hear that, Sabeen. And the scarf belonged to your mother?” The little girl nodded.

“Tis a precious token of remembrance. You must keep it always.”

Maybe this is the one, thought the child. For three days, the Uncle left the bunker with Finnoula and the two men, before the sun rose. They returned late at night, filthy, exhausted, and distressed by the carnage and devastation they had seen. Each night they doled out their finds: scant amounts of milk, diapers, scraps of bread, some tattered clothing. Finnoula always brought something just for Sabeen: A ring of blue stones, a comb, a pair of black cloth slippers—made in China. She sat with the child and told her what she could of their day: A house with no roof, filled with furniture, open to the rain; tanks rolling down the very street they had been on, forcing them to hide in a pile of rotting garbage. A wounded government soldier, abandoned, who threatened to shoot them, until Finnoula teased him with her sky blue eyes, and offered him some water. While Finnoula was gentle with Sabeen when they spoke, the child could sense a growing vexation in the woman.

“Why are you angry?” Sabeen asked her during one of their times together.

“Because I have so much work to do here and so little time left.” Finnoula replied.

Sabeen would not allow herself to ask if she was going with.

The night of the fourth day, Uncle Ghais did not return with the others. They had been discovered by government troops in an abandoned house used by the rebels to transmit pictures to the outside world. Shells from automatic weapons peppered the few standing walls. Finnoula and the men raced from the fractured dwelling toward the street behind the makeshift media center. Ghais was killed by a shot to the head, when he stumbled over a broken bicycle.

Sabeen had no energy left to weep for her uncle. She was alone in the world. If Finnoula was not the person sent to take her to her mother, Sabeen was without hope. Yet, she still could not bring herself to ask.

Graeme told them to gather only what they could easily carry, as they must move. They were no longer safe in the bunker. Some of the women protested, unwilling to leave the dead bodies of their loved ones behind. He told them it was possible that he, Finnoula, and Doug, had been followed. Staying might mean death for them all. Weeping and clutching each other, the neighbors moved through the darkness behind Graeme to the remains of a commercial building three streets away. The space was much larger, but they were more exposed. It was the best he could do for now. Twice in the next two days, the small band of frail, frightened, women, children, and three old men were forced to relocate. Each time Finnoula kept Sabeen close to her holding the child’s tiny hand in hers.

On the third day, the group was told to ready themselves for yet another move. Graeme assured them the new place, a safe house, would be a haven where they might remain for an extended period of time. It was farther away though, and the risk was great.


There had been nothing to eat for almost two days, one of the women had given birth during the second night, and one of the elderly men had died. No one was confident about being able to make this move. Finnoula told them they must press close against the buildings on the way and hurry as fast as they could. Sabeen’s skin prickled with the finality of the instructions. She untied the hijab from her waist and wrapped it around her head and neck.

Just before nightfall, in the cinnamon dusk, the group started out. Finnoula led the way, with Sabeen clutching the edge of her jacket. Doug stayed just outside the line, filming —always filming. Graeme followed, carrying a weapon, eyes searching doorways, and the tops of buildings. The strongest among them aided the weak. Everyone stepped carefully through the rubble, doing their best to be unseen and unheard.

Sabeen knew her mother’s hijab shielded her as she ran along behind Finnoula. She felt no fear. Murmuring voices inside her fevered head told her the Irish woman must be taking her to her mother. As they hurried through the debris, from street to street, Sabeen became light-headed, almost joyful. Turning a corner in the darkness, Sabeen saw a shadow in the street ahead.

Graeme yelled for them to take cover. Finnoula tried to drag Sabeen into a doorway, but Sabeen was sure she saw the outline of her mother in the shadow. Her dearest mother, waiting for her, arms outstretched.

She broke from Finnoula’s grasp, believing the hijab would keep her free from harm, and ran into the street. Her hope gave her the power to run swiftly. As she drew closer, Sabeen felt a sharpness pierce her chest. She did not stop; she was almost there. When she fell, she looked up and saw the face of Fatima, kneeling, arms reaching to embrace her. Sabeen crawled the sweet, short distance to her mother. ➡



MARYANNE KOLTON's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous literary publications including the *Lost Children Charity Anthology*, *Lost In Thought Literary Magazine* and *Connotation Press* among others. Her story *A Perfect Family House* was shortlisted for The Glass Woman Prize. Author Interviews including those with Siobhan Fallon, Charles Baxter, Alice Hoffman, Dan Chaon, Kathryn Harrison, Caroline Leavitt, Charles Finch, Charlotte Rogan, Karin Slaughter and Ken Bruen have appeared most recently in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Herald de Paris*, *Her Circle Zine*, *The Literary/City Center*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Word Riot*, and *January Magazine*. MaryAnne's public email is maryannekolton@gmail.com.

Legacy

for Addie by JP Reese

The river runs as the boatman rests, arms slick with the sweat of his toil. Just past mid-stream, we bathe ourselves in poetry, lace our bones into corsets of poems, slide the silk wrappings of words over our shoulders to cushion this coming of night. Today, an infant girl swims from her mother's womb toward a milky breast. In the same hour, twenty children sweep to the farther shore. No time to drop smooth pebbles as they passed, their flute-like voices call over vast distance. Darkness waits always just beyond the fire. This is the truth I would keep from you. At sundown, night tangles its fingers in auburn leaves that flutter through San Marcos' streets. A red-haired baby sleeps; earth's breath strokes a perfect cheek; a poem's music flicks the first ripples of language that heals, that cries, that lives. This choice, to sing with the tongue and the teeth, the sibilant s, the slender skin of mother sound wrapped around your tender skull, *I love you* spoken just before a pink-lipped kiss: this ferocious love is the alpha, the omega. Patient Charon, eyes a flamed-tipped blue, poles his bark to shore, shoulder brushing silver willows. We wait to board. Because you have come, child of our child, we know he comes for us. Pens poised, we write our truths for the living on multi-hued paper, tie strings of meaning to your tiny fingers; will you these pages when we pass. Flesh coats unbutton in the slow dance of unbecoming. We are shades, backlit by copper tipped waves. We step from these bodies, our imperfect shields, and drape them at last on the pyre. Words weave in patterns, the marks of goodbye, then rise with our smoke to the moon wounded sky. ↻



JP REESE has poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, book reviews, and writer interviews published or forthcoming in many online and print journals such as *Metazen*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *A Baker's Dozen*, *JMWW*, and *The Pinch*. Reese is an Associate Poetry Editor for *Connotation Press: An Online Artifact*, (ConnotationPress.com), and an editor for *Scissors and Spackle* (ScissorsAndSpackle.com). Cervena Barva Press has scheduled Reese's second poetry chapbook, *Dead Letters*, for publication in 2013. Her published work can be read at *Entropy: A Measure of Uncertainty* (JPReeseToo.wordpress.com).



A Few Things He Didn't Mention

Josepha Gutelius

The autostrade had squeezed into something like a cowpath; monstrous cliffs on his wife's side, a black abyss when he dared to glance to his left.

"That's just it. Fear and business and puritanism. The only thing left to enjoy is money." He agreed with everything she said. She was on her anti-America rant, and he understood—it was hard to leave your problems behind—but he hoped she'd get over it soon. In the car he reminded her they were on an adventure. He hadn't felt so hopeful in months. That frightening, unfamiliar hope dragged with every shift of the gears... the rented Ford was stuttering up-mountain, he had to repeatedly open his mouth wide like a scream to pop open his ears.

It was after midnight by the time he found the small albergo he'd booked two months before. He'd sold three gold coins and splurged on a week's trip as a surprise for

Adele. Not to the famous cities, they were too expensive. The travel agent had recommended a place in the mountains, out of the way, *you'll be with real people*.

A note tacked on the entrance door to the albergo greeted someone in Italian, not their names. He dragged Adele through dim-lit halls, calling for help in English, and finally they staggered into the only open door and collapsed on a damp and lumpy eiderdown.

"All part of the adventure," he reminded her.

The room woke him several times, always that smell inside his dreams, the pumped-in air of the plane. He shifted in bed, felt for her arm. It was morning and Adele was shivering on the bed, trying to dry herself with a towel the size of a napkin. She had risked the "wet rot shower" down the hall, she told him. He felt very tired. As in an afterglow, he saw a glint of what he remembered from the travel agent's brochure: glossy colored suites and beautiful

couples around a pool. He stepped out on the balcony and grimaced to the fog.

Today they would walk around the town, exploring. He pictured himself crossing a charming village square in a new, light-colored summer suit. Arm in arm with Adele. It was a lost fantasy, he'd already lost it when he squandered all the gold. He was in the mountains, in fog. He heard not a sound of other guests. For all he knew, the place was deserted. He'd left the balcony door open, fog was rolling into the room, with a bite. He dressed quickly. They'd return home and nothing would be changed, only they'd be poorer.

He was hungry, she was not, but coffee would be good, genuine espresso with real people. The albergo was small, only two floors. They went down narrow stairs lit by a yellow bulb and came upon a cramped room with chairs heaped on tables. An old woman was parked in a corner at the bar on a high stool, swinging thick black shoes in the air. Apart from her being there, it was like any other seedy establishment, familiar and awful, that he would pass on the sidewalks of their dying town. He and Adele pulled off the chairs from a table and sat down and waited, hands folded on their laps. Not American impatient, not American boorish, but good-natured, relaxed cosmopolitans, amid stale smells of last night's alcohol and cigarettes. He would never set foot in such a place back home, but comparisons were lifted, he was open to new experiences, he wouldn't judge. He waited for someone to come and serve them espresso. He drummed his fingers on his knee, he looped his arm around the back of his chair, he swung one leg over the other, signaling, he hoped, a worldly imperviousness. The old lady's muttering was driving him crazy. The sound of water running and dishes being stacked behind a beaded curtain, but no one appearing. Adele was smiling, but not at him, a musing smile at a poster on the wall. Something he would never tell her, was that her dangling earrings looked kind of tawdry in this plain, fog-swept aerie. Finally he couldn't take it. He stood. "I'm going to find someone and set things right."

"You do that," she said.

A rack of dusty postcards trembled by the door. A cold breeze smelled of cigars. He couldn't help but stare. Two luminous young women strode through the front door—swaggered, really, as if they were elbowing their way through a crowd, stout cigars between their lips. "Do you see that?" Adele spoke loudly, as if he were deaf.

He felt put on the spot, he didn't know why. The women went straight to the bar and were serving themselves shots of something. He was glad to see their cigars weren't lit.

"At eight in the morning, they're drinking liquor... you'd never see that in the States," Adele said.

"Since when is it *the States*?" he asked.

"It just shows how much we live in fear. Everything goes to extremes. If you like to drink, you're alcoholic. If you dress sexy, you'll get raped. If you dress fancy, you'll get robbed. If you like to eat, you'll get fat. If you like sex, you'll get some incurable disease. Everything's a punishment."

"Go ahead and have a drink," he urged her.

"I can't. That's what I'm saying." He followed her gaze—again she was looking at the poster on the wall: a slender youth attacking a bull whose back dripped with blood.

What was odd, the boy's face had been penciled over to look like a girl's.

He heard the click-clicking of the old woman's false teeth. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her head bobbing, bedeviled. "Even when I was a virgin, I wouldn't have dared," Adele said.

"What does being a virgin have to do with it?" he asked. "Drinking in the morning, what, only non-virgins do it?"

"I dreamed about him again last night," she said, as if in answer to something else he'd said. "The same man. A boy, really." She glanced at the poster of the winsome matador. "I've gotten older, but he hasn't. He keeps coming."

"Who is this? Who are you talking about?"

"I don't know, he keeps coming. I've told you about him before."

"You've told me about him before. This man—boy?"

"Yes, lots of times. I've been dreaming about him since years for Chrissake. You never remember anything I tell you."

He stole a glance at the two beautiful young women who were so ill-fit in a dive like this. Adele was right, this wasn't a place for women, virgins or not, cigars or not. As for himself, he didn't fit in too perfectly, either. And, as if to confirm this (though this wasn't his intention at all), he looked again at the women and found them smiling at him, or maybe smirking at his velveteen thingamajig that had been advertised as a smoking jacket at Target. His head went dizzy, it was the mountains, the fog. There was an embarrassing silence in the room. He hoped no one understood English. The chairs, stacked on the tables around them, seemed a kind of audience, too.

"Who is he—a dream boy?" he asked Adele in a lowered voice.

"I think it's called an incubus. But this time I woke up crying, isn't that strange?"

He moaned as he lost his grasp of the table. So, so, this was how far it has come, he thought, visitations from an incubus. He heard Adele's pitying voice. "You're not hurt, are you? Or bleeding?" To the room, he heard her say: "It's nothing—Artie has jet lag."

Somehow, he was lying on the floor. He remembered laughter coming from the glass shelves and bottles above the bar. And all the women, including the demented crone, were chuckling along with the shelves and bottles. "Artie, Artie," he heard murmured from the bar stools. It was the only word the young women, those haughty adventuresses, understood.

He wobbled to his knees, cursing under his breath.

He kneed his way, fast. He felt Adele grabbing him by his sleeve, trying to head him off: "Arthur, what? What are you doing?"

He didn't know what he was doing. He didn't remember falling to the floor. He heard the sleeve of his jacket rip at his shoulder. He didn't know why he was tackling one of the beautiful women's boots. She slid off her bar stool and crouched over him, her leather bomber jacket flapped open, smacked his face. He felt her hands everywhere on him, fumbling in his smoking jacket, poking into his pants, lifting him slightly up in the air, patting his rear-end, swift, swift.

He heard his wife's "oh-oh-oh" from afar.

And then they were gone, the two beautiful women. A door banged open and shut.

He lay on his back, breathless. "They took my wallet."

"No, Arthur."

"Yes, they took my wallet goddamn."

Adele was kneeling on the floor beside him. "They were only checking to see if you were hurt."

"They stole it!"

He lurched to his feet. Adele had him by the shoulder, a limp bit of velveteen and faux silk lining in her hands, where his jacket had torn at the seam. The special jacket, bought especially for this trip, where he could play-act anyone he dreamed. But did his wife's dreams include him? He would never be an incubus, not even a bullfighter. He leaned into her weight in his back, protesting as they left the room:

"The one woman was a man. She had no tits, I saw. She was naked under her jacket."

Adele was pushing him up the stairs. She whispered into his back: "No, no, no, you were the only man in there."

He shook his head, and stumbled. She jabbed him with her knees, kicking him upward. The air seemed to thin out, he could barely catch his breath. They were high, wooden stairs.

With one heave she had him on the bed.

"She wasn't a woman," he spoke, looking up at his wife's eyes. All was not lost, he was breathing. The room looked familiar.

"They were hairy..." He was thinking of the woman's nipples, and even as he remembered them he confused them with Adele's. "The girl had no breasts and the old lady had false teeth. They're all a bunch of thieves."

"You left it here. Look." Adele waved the wallet in his face. He sat up in the bed, blinking, a thudding in his head. The bed a curlicue of wrought iron, strangely comforting. Green shutters and steamed-up windows cozy with the patter of rain outside.

He lifted his eyebrows as if that would help him see clearer. Adele sat beside him on the bed, making tiny circles with her finger on his pinkie, tiny strokes like a fly washing another fly. Yes, he saw clearly, he was nothing but a pinkie quivering with her touch, a bit of flesh that reared up in reflex, nothing more than nerves and body mechanics. He wanted more, the yearning plagued him,

more, more, more. But more of what? His heart was cold, his hands were cold, he'd lost all feeling, he was numb. He recognized this was anger, or fear. He was losing her, and there was nothing he could do about it. Fear had turned him numb, anger raised his hand and put it on his heart. He was striking a pose, like Washington, commander of men. Power, it felt false. A foolish man in a torn smoking jacket. He improvised, making a fool's face, "I pledge allegiance to the flag." He wanted her to laugh, or at least smile like she got the joke. He wanted more—more from himself, more from her. Or maybe he was just hungry, it was as simple as that. A bracing draft seeped into the room. His head throbbed, definitely a cold coming on, or a concussion from his fall. He must have dozed off, his limbs heavy with jet lag, he didn't see Adele go out on the balcony. He was alone in the room, his fist around a thin pillow, a musty, rotting flowers smell. The toothless crone, the two beautiful women-men, Adele's incubus, he must

have dreamed them, he couldn't bear to think they were real. Adele's back was to him, perfectly still, dark patches where the rain was soaking into her coat. What was she doing out on the balcony? Nothing but a gray field of fog for her to look at. He couldn't stay another minute in this place, it was such a mistake, selling the gold, taking her on this pointless trip. A trip to save their awful marriage. Whatever had gone wrong was a mystery. He didn't know where to start, it was too overwhelming, that incubus, really, the nerve of that thing making love to his wife

night after night. And the travel agent's lies, this was far from romantic with the shower and toilet down the hall. He never should have left home. He should be making calls, sending out his resume, hustling up a new job. He would have to tell her. Five times twenty-four hours he had committed to this trip, this escape. To delay telling her he'd quit his job, sold the gold, what a mess to clear up. Adele came back into the room, pulling off her sopped coat. She had spotted a peak or two, though she wasn't sure if they were mountains or clouds, she said. She unbuttoned her blouse, speaking to him. "This is impossible. I can't believe you thought it would make us happy."

"It's all good," he nodded, as if agreeing with her. And he stood up, straightened his shoulders; it made him feel taller, like a suitor, his hands clasped behind his back, as if he were going to surprise her with a bouquet. ☹





JOSEPHA GUTELIUS writes plays, poetry, and short stories. Her story *Penny* appears in *Best New Writing 2013*. A Pushcart Prize nominee, Eric Hoffer Award finalist in *Anthologies: Berlin: Inside; Hudson River Valley Writers* (Codhill Press, forthcoming). Poetry and prose in *Juked, Rain Taxi, BlazeVOX, Per Contra, Offcourse, Blue Lake Review, Salt River, Backhand Stories, Sein und Werden, Argotist, Triggerfish Critical Review, Jivin' Ladybug, EWR: Short Stories*, among others. Full-length stage-plays *Veronica Cory* and *Miracle Mile* published in stageplays.com and *Professional Playscripts*. Companions plays *RASP/Elektra* featured in *The Modern Review* (and forthcoming from Muse Cafe Press). Her website of selected published work: JosephaGutelius.com

Stuff.

I remember when I schemed to get a bread machine. I sold it this past spring at a yard sale for 25 cents.

Hollow.

Once I ruined a friendship over a chair I offered to buy. The woman sold it to someone else and I never forgave her. Eventually I found one just like it, but it wasn't right for that corner. Now the space sits empty.

Forgotten.

I always wished I bought that bowl in Orvieto on our trip to Italy, so I got a similar one at World Market. It stays on the top shelf of a cupboard.

Wasted.

The piano was a huge investment. All that time and money wasted on lessons. Today the lid remains closed over the keys, gathering dust.

Annoying.

I rushed to join a fitness club in order to get in shape. After making a number of payments, I let the membership lapse.

Useless.

I saved and saved to buy my daughter a bike for her birthday. She rode it once with her friends, dismayed at how much work it took to get somewhere. It stays in the basement along with her roller blades and a mini-trampoline we drove all over town for.

Junk.

We chipped in to get Dad a work-out machine with the hope he would use it for therapy. It went from the bedroom to the sun room to the garage in a matter of months. When he died we couldn't give it away. My brother flagged down the garbage truck and tossed it into the crusher.

Unappreciated.

One Black Friday I got up at four in the morning to drive to Michael's to get a scrapbook kit at half price for my daughter. She gave it away two years later to Goodwill, unopened.

Clutter.

The magnitude of packing up my late mother's knic-knacks, brica-brac, and what-nots overwhelmed me. Eventually I dumped it all into a box, taped it up, and labeled it FOR CHARITY.

Idle.

I absolutely needed a Wilton Spritz cookie handpress from Bed, Bath, and Beyond. I kicked myself for passing it up on sale and went back and paid full price. Since then I've only used it once.

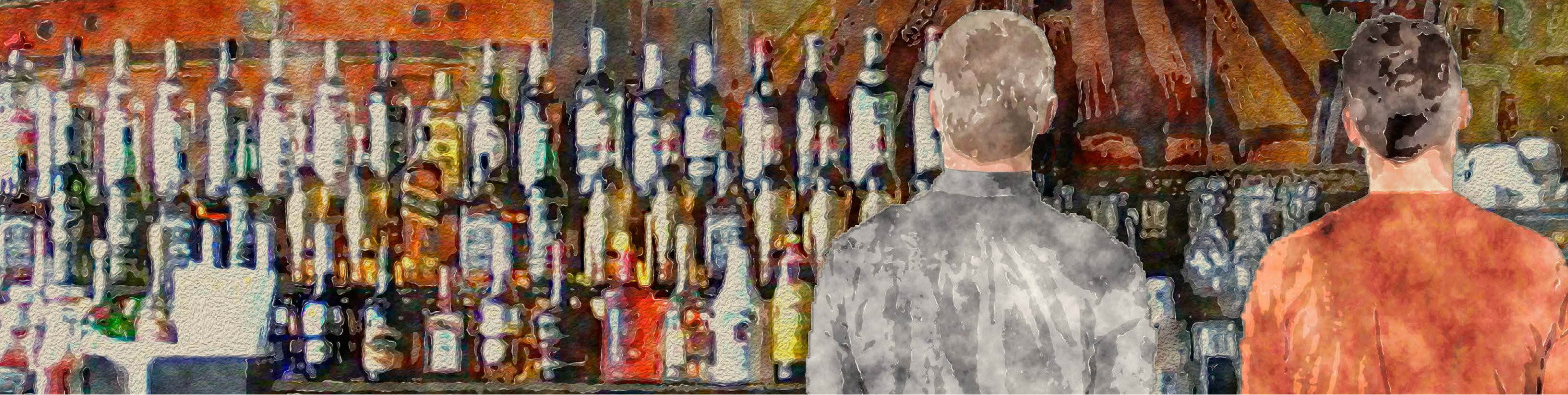
Coveted.

I was jealous when a friend got an iPod as a gift. I made my husband get me one for our anniversary. It lies in a drawer unused.

In the end it's all just stuff.



JANE HERTENSTEIN's current obsession is flash. She is the author of over 30 published stories, a combination of fiction, creative non-fiction, and blurred genre both micro and macro. In addition she has published a YA novel, *Beyond Paradise* and a non-fiction project, *Orphan Girl: The Memoir of a Chicago Bag Lady*, which garnered national reviews. Jane is the recipient of a grant from the Illinois Arts Council. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in: *Hunger Mountain*, *Rosebud*, *Word Riot*, *Flashquake*, *Fiction Fix*, *Frostwriting*, and several themed anthologies. She can also be found at MemoirousWrite.blogspot.com



Nelson

Jason DeYoung

“I’m Nelson,” the man next to me at the bar at SmokeJack said, wiping his hand before extending it. His hand thin and covered in skin that felt nearly root-like. I didn’t feel much like talking—I’d spent all day tending to my two-year-old son. But I shook his hand anyway. The whites of his eyes had gone pinkish. “What you drinking? Scotch?”

“Bourbon.”

“Bourbon?”

I nodded.

“My name’s Nelson,” he repeated.

“JD,” I said.

“They give me free food here.”

“That’s nice of them.”

“Yeah. Wayne here,” he nods to the heavy-set bartender at the other end of the bar, “he help me too.”

“Oh, that’s really nice.”

“Took me on his motorcycle to Walmart Sunday, got me these pants and shirt. These boots. They nice?” Nelson pointed to his pants, flared his arms slightly to highlight his shirt.

“Nice.”

“It’s my birthday, today.”

“Happy birthday,” I said, raising my glass just a little. “Those are nice boots.”

“Thanks. I’m Nelson.”

“Okay. I’m JD.”

“I come here because they give me a free diner every night.”

“You ever have to work for it?”

“Nope. Just walk up to the bar and a barbeque sandwich comes out.”

“Sweet. You think they’d do the same for me?”

“It *is* nice,” he said. “But no. I’m Nelson.” He takes a bite of the sandwich. Watches the bar’s television. Football—Chargers v. Saints. “You like football?” he asks through mouthful of bread, meat, and sauce.

“Not so much,” I say.

“Racing. That’s my thing. You like racing?”

“A little.”

“I’ll be here Sunday to watch the race,” he said.

“My father liked racing,” is the only think I could think of to say since I didn’t care for any sport really, not enough to know its player and stats. Every time I talked with a person about sports I felt ignorant to the world and how it worked.

“Man, I love racing. What are you drinking?”

“Bourbon.”

“Racing,” he says, looking wistfully up at the flatscreen. “That’s my thing. Bobby Lebonti. Mr. Cheerio. He’s my man... I’ll be here Sunday to watch it... I was here a few Sundays ago when he spun out. Like to killed some drivers.”

“No kidding?”

“No,” Nelson said, and then he looked at my glass and then at his empty one. “You buy me another,” he lifted his glass and shook the ice.

“Naw,” I said.

“My name’s Nelson.”

“You from here?”

He shook his head. “Detroit, but I come down to

Georgia with my wife. We come down here for the doctors. She was sick. Bad sick. She gone now.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“I live out back now.”

“Of the restaurant?”

“Yeah. They give me a free sandwich every night. I come in. Sit down. Barbeque sandwich. My name’s Nelson, by the way.”

“JD. You were telling me about your wife.”

“Yeah, my wife. Man. Stomach cancer eat her up.”

“And you live here now.”

“Yeah, on account I kicked my house in.”

“Kicked your house in?”

“I ain’t got not where else to go.”

“Kicked your house in?”

“Yeah, when I get home from the hospital where she died, I started kicking the house. Kicking everything.”

“Kicking?”

“Kicking windows, walls, studs. I kicked the t.v.”

“You break it?”

“I kicked everything,” Nelson said. “I was so sad. I kicked it to the ground. I kicked everything.”

“The whole house?”

“I kicked it.”

“The *whole* house? You’re kidding, right?”

“No,” he said, taking me fully into his gaze. “I kicked it to no-more.”

He turned and looked up at the screen like looking onto the horizon.

I took a long sip on my drink. I looked down at Nelson’s new boots. Nelson rattled his glass again. I looked up “What about me?” he asked.

I shook my head, no. But then I thought about it—I had a wife, a son, another on the way. All healthy. I had new boots whenever, even when it wasn’t my birthday. I didn’t live out back of a restaurant. *I’d never in my all my life felt a grief powerful enough to kick a house to no-more*—“Okay,” I said.

Nelson smiled and said thank you, but it wasn’t a smile that was full of gratitude, but of something else, something out-of-sync and heartbroken. It felt like I’d done something wrong or misunderstood.


“I’m Nelson,” he said.

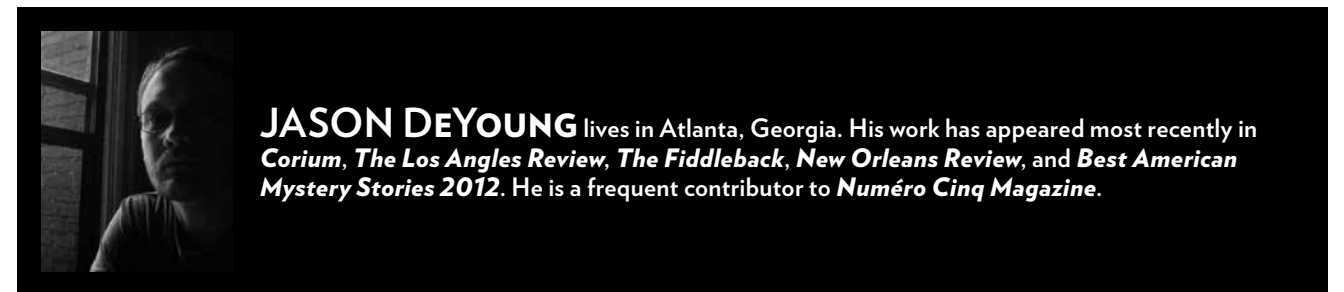
“JD.”

And then he waved to Wayne.

Wayne came over and asked if could put some water in Nelson’s glass. He covered the rim with his hand, tipped his head my way, and, again, through a mouthful of mostly sauce and bread said: “JD’s buying.”

Wayne popped an eyebrow my way.

“Whatever he wants,” I said. 



JASON DEYOUNG lives in Atlanta, Georgia. His work has appeared most recently in *Corium*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *The Fiddleback*, *New Orleans Review*, and *Best American Mystery Stories 2012*. He is a frequent contributor to *Numéro Cinq Magazine*.



The Aesthetic Preferences of Her Pimp

Her high heels are worn but her face looks new because he insists that she wear cosmetics. The light at the corner changes color as she struts and frets through streets.

A Prostitute's Umbrage, Revenge

It's not just that she refuses to allow them to kiss her sullen lips. Sometimes she forces them to make eye contact, too.

Settling the Score

I thought I won the game by withholding sex but he made his touchdown at ten upon refusing to wash the dishes. We're tied now, I suppose.



JOCELYN CRAWLEY is a 28-year-old college student currently pursuing a Masters of Divinity degree in preparation to become a pastor. Her writings have appeared in Jerry Jazz Musician, Nailpolish Stories, Visceral Uterus, Dead Beats, and Haggard and Halloo. Other works are forthcoming in Faces of Feminism, Four and Twenty, and Calliope. You can access her blog at JocelynCrawley.blogspot.com and articles at the following link... contributor.yahoo.com/user/1694109/jocelyn_crawley.html

ARTISTS & STORYTELLERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



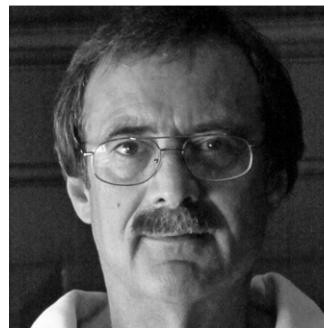
CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages 11, 34...*

is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



KYRA WILSON *Pages 2, 22, 24-25, 32-33...*

is an artist residing in Vermont with her family, and has been painting for over 20 years. Kyra tried going the expected career route in business, but ended up working in an office with flickering fluorescent lights, zero windows, way too many spreadsheets, and people with suspenders. She escaped, and embraced color and movement as her passion. Creating in Oils, Acrylic, and Watercolor, she works in a predominantly fantasy style, but visits the contemporary and even abstract realms on occasion! Kyra's work can be found at KWilsonStudio.com



CHRISTOPHER WOODS

Inside Front Cover, Back Cover, Pages 43,45 ...

Christopher Woods is a writer, teacher and photographer who lives in Texas. His work can be found at ChristopherWoods.zenfolio.com



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is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of *Thrice Fiction Magazine* and blogs daily at Blogography.com



RW SPRYSZAK *Editor, THRICE Fiction Magazine...*

participated in the alternative zine scene in the 80's & 90's and wound up editing *The Fiction Review*. Some of his work from that era (*Slipstream*, *Lost and Found Times*, *Asylum*, *Version90* and others) is included in John M Bennett's Avant Writing Collection at the Ohio State University Libraries. Currently editor at *Thrice Fiction Magazine*. He can be found online at rwspryszak.com



COMING SOON

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