

THRICE

FICTION™



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Bad Small Cat by Reza Farazmand

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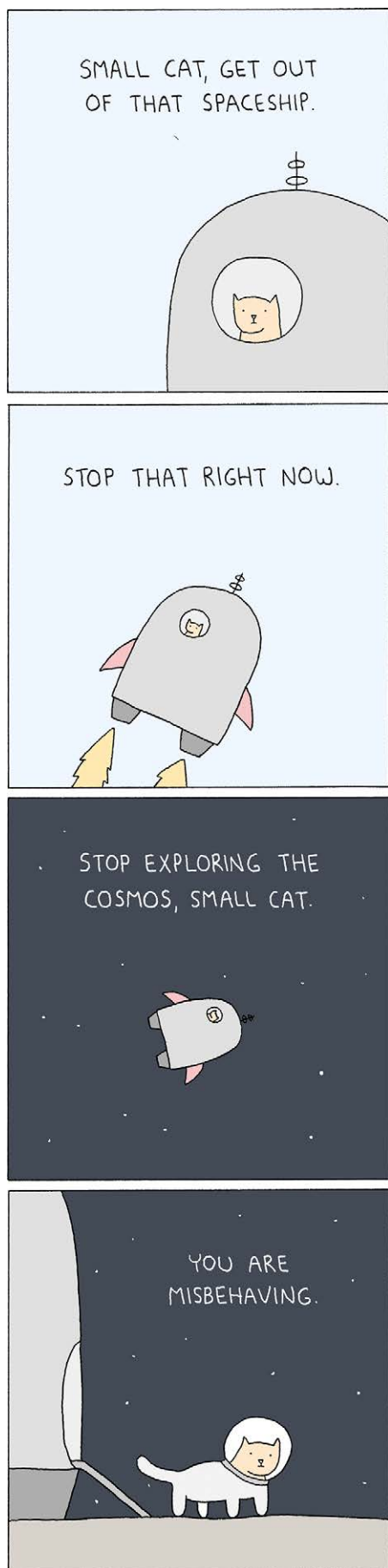
RW Spryszak, Editor
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THRICE PUBLISHING NFP, a private corporation registered in the state of Illinois, reaches outside the mainstream to publish the work of selected writers whose efforts, we feel, need to be seen. It's flagship publication, **THRICE** FICTION, has been a platform for presenting this work alongside exceptional artwork since 2011. **THRICE** ARTS provides design and editing services to writers at large.



Thrice 13 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

Of note to writers and readers alike is the fact that this year we begin the process of finding material good enough to stand alone in book form under the Thrice Publishing banner. We've gotten the word out to all our major contacts and announcement channels – the ones that matter – and we expect that by the time you are reading this we're but a month away from being buried by some really good stuff.

So is it true that the methods and procedures of the “major” publishing houses are forcing small presses to fill in the blanks? Is it some greater cabal on the part of editors and agents to accommodate friends and people they've met at parties or folks that came out of their alma mater over good, raw writing talent? And is this the reason smaller, independent presses have taken up the fallen flags that used to be waved by the powers that be?

I'm not so sure, really. That there must be commercial viability to the work is a given. But what does that mean exactly? Should it be readily adaptable into a movie franchise? And how many hipsters does it take to make something a “cult classic” whether it deserves it or not?

I'm not altogether sure the walls that surround “The Big Five” are so much who-you-know. I know enough agents who would kill to have a marketable first-time-work from a nobody-much-known, with or without a colleague's recommendation. What I'm saying is I don't really think it's as personal as people make it. It might just be what an agent can sell, or what a large publishing house is willing to take a chance on. They still take chances and agents still back things they love but can't find a home for.

So it comes down to marketability. And as onerous as that sounds it's only the facts of life. When we find the works we're going to publish and promote we will hope they sell. How do you get around that? We're going to institute a compensation regimen that will come up very favorable to the writer. It may be one of the best ever, based on percentage. This means we'd like to send checks out that mean something to the writer. I guess time will tell on that.

Maybe it's not the personal contacts, the “how-visible-are-you-on-the-internet” thing. Maybe it isn't what school you went to or who you know. Or who you sleep with. Or if you can hold your own in an all-nighter with three cynical editors who've seen so much they can't take another happy ending. Maybe it's just the marketplace.

Well, say it is. Let's say that's really all it is. Okay. Fair enough. But there is one thing, still, that separates, or can separate, the small press from the international ones. Maybe what it will come down to is how far the publishers are willing to back something they believe in even if, at first, it comes out a bit wobbly. Maybe what it is, is that the big publishing houses will nix the run where a small house will stay with it because they believe in it.

I know that's going to be the case for Thrice Publishing. So when the bell sounds send us something we can back up and believe in. Check out our website for the guidelines (ThricePublishing.com). For stand-alone titles there are restrictions and rules so we can do this fairly and efficiently.

But give us that One True Thing in your notebooks.



Words that are angry wipe a smile from your face

Samantha Memi

Samantha was in bed reading a book when *would* jumped off the page and smacked her in the face.

—Ow! she squealed. —What’d you do that for?

—Don’t call me static.

—I didn’t call you static.

—Yes you did. I’m conditional.

—I know you’re conditional.

—Well don’t you forget it.

And *would* jumped back on the page.

A bit shaken she resumed reading, thinking, I bet that wouldn’t happen with ebooks. She turned a page and just as she read, *before her 16th birthday she had had three boyfriends*, the *had* denoting possession leapt at her and clobbered her round the ear.

—Ow! Don’t hit me.

—Don’t think nasty things of my twin, snarled *had*.

—I don’t even know your twin.

—My past perfect twin.

—I didn’t think anything about him at all.

—Yes you did. You thought he was clumsy.

—Well, maybe a little.

The possessive *had* got close to her face.

—Don’t you dare think anything bad about my twin—okay?

—Okay, I won’t.

The past perfect *had* shouted from the page, —Don’t hurt her, lots of readers think I’m ugly. I’m used to it.

He started crying.

—Now look what you’ve done, said his twin.

—Me? said Samantha. —I didn’t do anything.

—You thought he was ugly.

—Only a little.

—How would you feel if we thought you were ugly?
—Well, I suppose I'd be upset, but I don't know if I'd cry.
The possessive *had* looked at the book. —See, the page is soaking wet with his tears.

—I'm sorry, said the past perfect.

—Don't worry, said Samantha. —It's only an old book.

The possessive *had* glared at her. —Only an old book! All these beautiful words created for your pleasure and we're just an old book!

Other words began to cry. Some started fighting. Conjunctions separated from their sentences and argued amongst each other. *And* and *but* got together to attack *although*. *Love* ran round in circles chasing *amorous*. Pages were in chaos. A revolution was afoot.

—No no, I didn't mean it like that. I like old books, especially tatty old paperbacks with broken spines.

An unspeakable wail issued from the book. Samantha found some tissues and tried to dry the pages as best she could.

—I'm so sorry, she said.

—You think some words are better than others, don't you, said the possessive *had*, still hovering in front of her face, ready to punch her in the eye.

—No no, she explained. —All words are equal.

A cacophony of jeers and boos rose from the pages.

—I'm not equal, shouted *box*. —I'm purebred Anglo-Saxon, not an import from some foreign part.

—If there weren't any foreign words, yelled *disposition*, —you wouldn't have a language at all.

Metamorphosis slid off the page, —I cannot associate with these barbarians. I shall return forthwith to Greece.

—Well clear off then, sneered *change*. —I'm just as good as you.

—You do not mean the same at all, clarified *metamorphosis*. —No scientist would use you.

And she slid off the bed and flounced across the floor. Soon other words followed. Phrasal verbs confronted their Latin synonyms. Relative clauses dispensed with their commas, leaving their nouns in confusion. *Happen* chased *occur* off the page in an argument over which had the most lasting effect.

—Now look what you've done, cried *had*, obviously flustered. —You've lost half the words in the book, and the ones that remain can't agree on where they're supposed to be.

Samantha closed the book quickly, hoping to stem the flow, and inadvertently trapped the possessive *had* on the wrong page.

—I just wanted to read a chapter before going to sleep, she said, wondering what had happened to the heroine in all the kerfuffle. Taking a deep breath she opened the book, Chapter 5, three pages in, she read, *minute for three breakfast do that too any mind get if heart ring she swooned butter*

She closed the book, wondering what *she swooned butter* meant. She got out of bed and made some chamomile tea to calm her nerves. Why did words want to ruin her story? Would she ever find out what happened to lovelorn Caroline in the arms of the handsome Sergeant Trew? She'd need hazard pay before she touched another book. Her reading days were over. She drank her chamomile, switched on her computer, and went online to download the film of the book. 🌀



SAMANTHA MEMI is the author of the chapbook *Kate Moss and Other Heroines*. Her story, *Words that are angry wipe a smile from your face*, in *Thrice Fiction 13* is the cover story for her new collection, *All in letters bound in string*.





Ants

Aleah Sterman Goldin

We sell ants in ziplock bags with air holes. Sometimes their legs peek out and get crushed. They go on the discount rack then, and kids who don't want to clean their rooms buy them. I've been experimenting with the air holes, so that happens less. We lose money when the ants go on the discount rack, and the shop is barely surviving as it is. If the stock market went green for a few months, folks would start lining up outside our front door. We're on the sixth floor of the Las Vegas Super Mall. It's the largest mall in the country, even though it's located in New Jersey not Las Vegas. When we first opened, the entire sixth floor was full of shops. Now there is only us and *Kandy Lingerie*. We share most of our customers.

Our customers always ask for fewer air holes instead of smaller ones. I think they're worried the more holes, the more potential for legs to get stuck in them on the way home. I understand their concern. We take pretty good care of the bags when they are in our shop, but folks who don't have training don't know how to handle the ants. They drop the bags in their shopping carts and hoist them under armpits when they run after their kids. By the time they get home, I suppose most of their ants are legless.

Since money is tight, I experiment with the number of air holes myself during "off-hours." I work in the living room when my girlfriend is visiting with friends. Just yesterday she went to a bridal shower, so I pulled out my supplies. I grabbed the ants from the closet, ziplock bags from our kitchen counter, and a safety pin from our sewing kit.

Then I varied the number of ants and the number of holes. I used a random number generator, since I heard that's how outside contractors do it. Three holes with a hundred sixty-two ants. Five holes and forty ants. I imagined I was getting paid for completing each bag and cha-chinged after I made the first set. Then I fixed myself a peanut butter and

jelly sandwich. The ants in all but two of the bags suffocated by the time I came back.

"Of course they died," Sanders said when she saw the bags. "If I locked you in the bathroom and sealed the space between the door and floor with superglue, you would die too." She has two new tubes of superglue in her sock drawer.

"Just help me bury them," I said.

She picked up six bags. "Fine." She was wearing heels thinner than icicles and a dress that would rip if she bent all the way down.

I hoisted the tub of holy dirt we get free from a local reverend every month. "Let's go."

The ants that weren't dead watched us as we crossed the room. I swear they hissed. Sanders didn't notice though, and I didn't mention the hissing because she'd blame it on the cat that lives on our fire escape without our permission, just like she does about everything. "Just kick the cat off," she'll respond, which to most people would mean find it a new home but to her means a solid boot kick.

We unzipped the bags of suffocated ants and laid their bodies in the dumpster on top of a Papa John's box that still had a slice of pizza inside. Although they were small, there were many of them, so they didn't fit side by side. We had to overlap their bodies, one on top of another. "It looks like a mass grave," Sanders whispered. She stroked one. Her hair was still pinned up from the bridal shower party, and the sunlight touched the back of her neck.

I thought about leaning over and kissing her. "You start this time."

"All right," she bowed her head. "May your life be as meaningful in the next world."

"You were loved," I added because I want Sanders to say that at my funeral.

I dribbled holy dirt on top of the ants, and Sanders lifted her hand, so her fingers wouldn't get sprinkled. Then I shut

the dumpster lid, went upstairs, and made myself another peanut butter sandwich as Sanders undressed. The ants stared at me when I crossed the living room. They stared at me when I tip toed back.

• • •

"Rhine," Sanders is closing the shop for the day. She is wearing one of our store t-shirts that reads, *The Vacuum of The Future: No AI Needed*. She waxed her eyebrows for her friend's bridal shower, and they are looking vertical.

"What?" I'm feeding the inventory.

"We need to talk."

"Ok. But I start." I'm worried that she's going to bring up the undressing part. I know she hates it when I stand in the door watching her unroll her stockings from her thighs while I eat my sandwich. I've done it once before, and she wouldn't let me in bed the next two nights. "That's all I am to you?" she yelled. "You think I'm just an object you can peek and snack and feel. Did I give you permission to watch?" After that, how do I explain that I'm only there to watch the beauty of her in-between states?

"Fine." She crosses her arms. "Talk."

"We-had-eight-customers-today," I say in one breath, so she doesn't have time to stop me.

"Four," she corrects. "We had four."

"Anyone who walks into the shop is a customer."

"Not a baby."

"Still a customer. Someday he might buy."

She draws in a breath and uncrosses her arms. "Rhine, do you think the ants are happy?"

I am so relieved that it's not about undressing that I don't register the words fully. I scoop in some more barbeque beef from the first-floor fast restaurant and watch the nearest ants swarm it. My favorite two ants are in this bag. One has a scar from a fight with a fellow worker; it's on its left antenna. The other is the fattest ant in our whole shop. It has the others bring it the food I drop in, since it's too obese to wander. "They love it here. They get fed twice a day, live with each other, and vacuum new places when they're sold."

Sanders runs her hand through her hair. "I guess." She says it like her gut tells her something's wrong. It's the same feeling she gets when she walks past *Kandy Lingerie*, even though I already told her that's because the owner peeks in on women in the dressing room. I've never told her he's also videotaping the women with his security camera and selling the footage online.

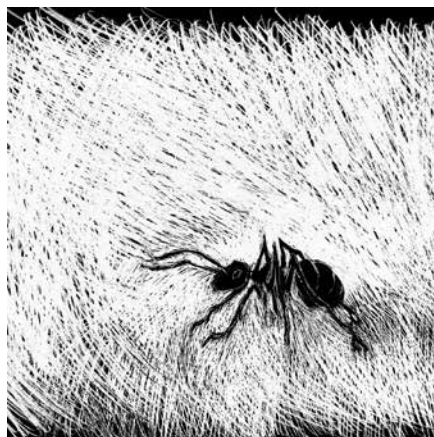
"Tell me how they aren't happy." I dish meat into another ant bag. I like to feed the ants slices of raw chicken or beef because it makes them stronger. But with funds as they are, it's not affordable. The ants have become sleepier as a result. I swear it's the barbeque sauce.

"I—I don't know."

"Is it the crushed legs? I'm trying to fix that."

"No."

"Then what? Their lives are nicer than ours." It's true. I sugar coat their bags before I drop them in, so each new



home tastes just as sweet as their last. That wasn't true of my current apartment or the ones before it. Most have been crummy. (For this last one, I had to call the exterminator to get the pigeons out of the ceiling pipes and then a handyman to plaster the holes back up.)

"Do you ever wonder if we're—"

"We're what?" I move to a new bag and ziplock it faster.

"If we're committing slavery?" she says it in the same voice she uses when she asks if my mom is visiting again.

I stop ziplocking. "We're not."

She was the one who came up with the idea. Browsing through infomercials on late night television, she realized that artificial intelligent vacuum cleaners must be profitable if they could afford the number of infomercials they had. That was back when she was still a computer scientist, and it should have been easy for her to make AI vacuums. But she was paranoid and would only work between the hours of 1:30 a.m. and 3:00 a.m., and I was tired of checking the front door for spies. It only took a few years for her to stop creating, and then a couple more for me to see a

plausible answer in a zoo fieldtrip.

"Cause we never asked them about any of this."

"We don't speak ant."

"But if we did. Do you think they'd agree?"

"I don't know."

"But what do you think?" The field trip to the zoo had been part of my job. I was teaching underprivileged kids programming skills once a week in exchange for vacation days. Since nobody checked what we were doing, I took the kids to various parts of the city and bought them popsicles. The zoo popsicles dripped the most. I was cleaning the mess after the kids left, when I saw an ant on the bench vacuuming it up. That's when I knew I hit the jackpot. The ants. I quit the firm. Sanders designed our sales racks.

"I think it would be like—"

"—like living in our apartment with too many friends and no way to escape from them. Everyday the superglue beneath the door and floor is removed and replaced, and barbeque is thrown in to entertain us," Sanders says.

"I don't think it's *that* bad."

"Rhine, bad is bad." But bad is also changing your mind after six years of struggling to build a business with the stock market continually red. Bad is realizing that one of those *Kandy Lingerie* videos online is of your girlfriend naked and grabbing her stomach in the dressing room mirror. Bad is when you realize there are dozens more superglue tubes hidden around the apartment then the week before. This isn't bad.

• • •

In retrospect, Sanders and I shouldn't have met. She should have been in a different computer science class her freshman year, and I should have dropped out of the track long before. But we did meet, and she was wearing this shiny lip-gloss that the sun hit at twelve o'clock. The first time I saw it I knew this was a woman whose in-between states

were so beautiful that I would do anything to see them.

The year we met was the year she was designing robots that could think. Every day she inserted copper wires into electrically charged brain fluid and left them on her clothesline in the middle of the night. When they were dry, she'd put on her leather gloves, pick up her tools, and twist the wires into thumb-sized chips. Professor McMac failed her when she brought them in. He told her she had nice legs, wore some "hellacious heels," and should learn the binary code.

"Sanders," I left her a voicemail the next day, "What're you doing?"

"Sanders," I called her cell the day after. "Your project is great."

"Sanders," I called the day after, after. "I think you're more than heels and legs. I'm coming over." She was in the same dress she had been wearing three days before, and she was slumped against the wall. Her stockings were half rolled down, and surrounded by broken plates. She was in one of her in-between states, and I was in love. "Let's go out," I said.

"Leave me alone."

"Does tonight work?"

"Go away!"

"We can bury the chips in my backyard, and we take it from there."

She glanced up. "Are you free between 1:30 a.m. and 3:00 a.m.?"

"Yes."

"Do you have leather gloves?"

We've been together ever since.

• • •

Sanders is not in one of her in-between states right now, so I'm not in love. We've had the shop for six years, and on the day when we have eight customers (our highest number yet) she decides to close it? "Let's take a moment to think."

"I don't need to think. I know," Sanders announces. "This morning when I walked past the living room, the ants hissed at me."

"It was the cat," I say. "It was the cat on the fire escape. You should have just kicked it."

"I've never seen ants like that before. They were touching their antennae when I stepped in the room. Both bags of ants, antenna touching, and then they saw me. They turned their heads, all of them, and opened their jaws wide. Wider than I'd ever seen them open them before. It was like they wanted to eat me."

"They didn't."

"And then when I got close to them, they hissed deeper. It was a low hiss. It made my arms tingle, and my bones feel

sharp. It was like all their unhappiness was in a single tone. And then I started thinking about the dumpster burials and how often we have to get new holy dirt because we run out."

I don't remind her that the holy dirt comes in monthly shipments, and we don't run out because the tubs are so huge that hundreds of thousands of ants could die, and we'd still have enough. In fact, last summer, I planted our vegetable garden in holy dirt because we had so much left. The cucumbers were bigger than normal, and I gave them to Reverend Jane who supplies us (as a sign of proof that the dirt worked).

"Then there's the folks who buy the survivors. They don't even know how to treat them. Those ants probably get squashed once they're set to vacuum the floor—that's the only reason why we'd see so many repeat customers, which we do." Sanders is staring at the barbeque meat with a vacant expression. "I think the ants just want to be free."

"They'll probably get squashed if we set them free."

"Not if we stand in one place."

"The ones at home wanted to eat you." I am not reassured.

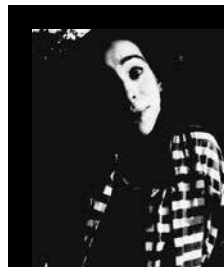
"They won't kill us." Sanders is rolling her sleeves to her elbow and taking out her leather gloves. "Besides we deserve it."

"We don't."

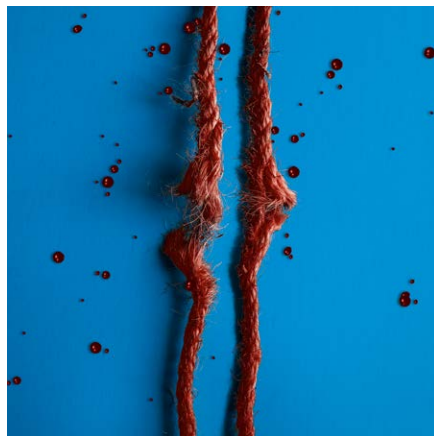
"And we could make that AI vacuum instead," Sanders responds. Working between the 1:30 a.m. and 3:00 a.m. does not sound wonderful. Neither does checking for spies at the door, which she will make me do if she starts engineering again. "No," I say. I shield the ant bags with body. "I will make their lives better. Don't free them."

Sanders puts her hand on my shoulder. "Rhine," she says, "we have to. You can close your eyes if you want." She says it in such a sweet way—with her lips shiny and sparkling—that I squeeze my eyes shut. I listen as her heel taps behind me. She unzips bag after bag. The ants have started their low hiss, and they swarm down the metal racks. I can feel them around my shoes, then up my socks. They sting, some of them, and I can feel them pinch my flesh. "Sanders?" I call. "They're pinching pretty hard."

When she doesn't answer, I know that she's in one of her in-between states with her eyes closed too. I am in love, and I try to turn to kiss her, but I can't move. "We deserve it, Rhine," she finally admits. The ants are stinging and stinging, and our legs are swelling larger than large. "We are more than heels and legs." I try to remember that. I do. 🕒



ALEAH STERMAN GOLDIN has been published in *Spork Press*, *Hobart* (web), *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*, *Gone Lawn*, *Gigantic*, *Zeek*, and *South Loop Review*. She is currently a MFA candidate at University of Alabama. If you would like to read more of her writing, you can visit her online at: <http://thedoctortjeckleburgreview.com/product/fiction-the-contract/>



Nested Story in Fallujah

Gloria Garfunkel

They crouched behind a thick mud wall in Fallujah as incendiary grenade launchers fired around them, lighting up the sky. The young boy nestled in his mother's arms.

Tell me a story, he said


Once when I was a little girl, I was hiding in my grandfather's grape arbor. He was looking for me and calling my name, calling and calling. I was hiding and giggling, thinking it funny that he couldn't find me when he was so close I could see his boots pass me by. Then, I saw him fall. He didn't move. I heard my grandmother scream. I still didn't move. He's dead. He's dead, she cried. I stayed there until dark. I thought it was my fault.

Was it? The boy asked.

Yes, she said.

The boy blinked. She looked far off.

He suddenly heard a noise so loud it made him deaf and all he could see was mangled red and white where his mother had been.

He would never tell his children this story. 



GLORIA GARFUNKEL has a Ph.D. in Psychology and Social Relations from Harvard University and was a psychotherapist for thirty years. She now writes fiction and memoir and has published in many journals.



How to Entertain the In-Laws

Melissa Ostrom

1. Push aside the lesser spirits. Reach deeper for the treasure. This is no time for wine. Locate *Fortaleza*, the superior tequila, *tahona*-crashed to stave agave's bitterness and impart a robust minerality.

2. Start drinking.

3. Uncover the dough. Shape the baguettes. Give them an hour to rest.

4. Pour more Blanco. Rest.

5. Preheat the oven to five hundred degrees. Chop garlic and sauté in olive oil until fragrant. Add crushed tomatoes, red pepper chili flakes, a little salt, a grind of pepper. Spare a hearty splash of vodka for the sauce. Let it simmer hard. Add cream. Set aside.

6. Pour more wonderfulness. Sip. Find the couch. Rest.

7. Wash and pat dry the scallops. Peel and devein the shrimp. Start the water for the pasta. Go outside. Pick basil. Raise glass to toast the mud-caked children who loll in the herb garden and shape turtles out of topsoil. Smile and say, "Grandma and Grandpa will be here soon. Don't forget to hug them."

8. Return to kitchen. Slash loaves. Bake.

9. Keep sipping.

10. Make salad and vinaigrette. Chop garlic. Boil pasta. Sauté seafood and garlic in olive oil. Reheat and finish sauce with torn basil. Rinse glass. Your husband has stopped setting the table. He has lifted his head. He's listening. He hears the tires on the driveway. Gravel crunches and spits, the sound of encroaching demons. He strides to the door to welcome his parents.

11. Quickly. Hide the bottle.

12. Then sigh in your embalmed mind, *Ah, my exquisite friend. Goodbye for now. I will find you later, after my small son's difficulty pronouncing Ss has been critiqued, after my daughter's resistance to wet kisses has been frowned over, after my lack of blood-relatedness again makes me the other, the lesser, a precious-son snatcher, the one-solely-responsible-for-grandchildren's-deficiencies. You have served me well, Tequila. I am numb, my feelings encased in individual fermenting vats. In-laws may storm my house. They may mutter innuendos. But the baguettes will startle them with their shattering crusts, with their interiors of blessed flesh. The tart salad will refresh them. And though they will swallow their praise, they will wonder what makes the sauce curling along the pasta and shellfish so delicious. Do you mind if I keep you to myself, Fortaleza? Tonight you are my weapon.* 🍷



MELISSA OSTROM lives in rural western New York with her husband and children. She serves as a curriculum consultant, teaches English at Genesee Community College, and writes whenever and however much her four-year-old and six-year-old let her. Her work has appeared in *decomp*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Oblong*, *Cleaver*, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, and elsewhere.



MechaniCat

Jackie Davis Martin

“Oh, wait—there’s a cricket,” my son says over the phone. “Let’s see if the MechaniCat goes for it.”

I wait, hoping it will work. I read about a robotic toy’s ability to fill the void of death and gave the MechaniCat to him a few nights before. He regarded me suspiciously then—not as though he thought the concept a hoax, but as though he’d wondered whether his mother was becoming unhinged.

We’re talking about adults here: 40 and 60, and each worried that something will happen to the other. Life has been tentative.

I hear nothing from that end. “Well?”

“It did it!” He laughs. He is laughing. It’s good to hear. “It chugged its tinny way over to the window, took a leap and pounced on the cricket. Ha ha ha.” He really sounds like that.

I try to picture this. Losing Shadow his cat was, I felt, the last straw. We’ve been trying to deal with the loss of his sister, then his job. I deliberated a mechanical Susan, but was told I’d have to program it, I might be able to reproduce her “Hello, Mom!” voice or her trill of laughter because both of these are still on my phone machine, but how to do her vexations and spontaneous outbursts? Besides, there’d be no cheek to kiss or arms to hug, anyway. I got the MechaniCat.

“What happened?” I ask now, “to the cricket?”

“Just a minute,” my son says. I hear him setting me—the phone—down.

I wait.

“I had to dispose of it, of course. I flushed it down the toilet. I left the MechaniCat near the toilet. Remember how Shadow always wanted to drink from the bowl and I had to keep the lid closed? Well, I left the lid open.” He chuckles that little ha ha ha again.

“Did you have a decent day?” I ask, my usual question. He has a new job, a good one, thank god, as he says.

Yes, he did have a good day. He fills me in on a meeting, what he contributed, how he went to the gym afterward, how—“Wait! Hey Mom, you won’t believe this—”

There is a pause brief enough for me to picture his walking from his desk back to the bathroom.

“That toy you gave me” (toy? it was to be a robotic replacement) “is lapping up toilet water. Listen.”

I wait again, and strain to hear, as though hearing the lap of water will establish something, a connection, the world going right again. And I hear it—a funny little sound like a baby’s patty-cake, like the doll my daughter had as a toddler that came with its own tub. She could wind up the doll and the doll would turn its smiling head and lift its hands up and down to smack at the water. Susan had clapped her hands and danced around the tub.

Now I can hear “spat-spat-spat-spat:” the MechaniCat at the toilet bowl.

The sound comes to a stop. My son is back on the line. “Well, it’s entertaining for a few minutes,” he says. “I wish I could program fur and softness.”

“And devotion,” I add, turning the pain into a game.

He agrees: that too.

I am silent a moment, thinking what to say next.

“Tomorrow I’ll see if it’ll race across the room,” he says.

“Can it make a sound?”

“Oh, yeah.” He sounds pleased to remember. “I’ll try that. Silly. Fun. I’m feeling weirder than I already am,” he says. “Maybe. Anyway, I have stuff I have to get done. I gotta go.”

“Right.” I know that; I know I must give him up, even temporarily. “Where will MechaniCat spend the night?”

“Mom. Right here on the table.”

Let’s pretend is over. “Okay,” I say, agreeing because I have to, and revert to our standard closing, made more standard since we lost a third of our three-person family: “Love you.”

“Love you,” he says in response.

I am resigned to conversation’s end, about to hang up the phone, when he adds, “Mom? MechaniCat loves you, too.” 📞



JACKIE DAVIS MARTIN has had stories and essays published in print and online journals including *Flash*, *Flashquake*, *Fastforward*, *34th Parallel*, and *Sleet*. Her most recent work is in *Enhance*, *Counterexample Poetics*, *Fractured West*, *Dogzplot*, *Bluestem*, and *Gravel*. A flash won the Spruce Mountain Press Awards. Two stories are anthologized in the current print *Modern Shorts* and about to be launched *Love on the Road*. A memoir, *Surviving Susan*, was published in 2013: all three of those are available on Amazon.com. Jackie teaches at City College of San Francisco.



Contentment

Scott Archer Jones

I, Joseph, am King of all I survey. The steam roils off the water and into the dry crisp air over the village, anointing my subjects like incense. I loll back, silver hair streaming from my temples. They always say that I look like Leonard Bernstein. The principal difference is that I am tone deaf, and he is dead.

It's been a perfect day for me, so far. My contentment stretches out before me. I turned sixty-eight last week and the proper number of people paid obeisance—this I remembered at the moment of awakening. The market opened up in New York, rendering life even easier. I arose at seven and shaved away all my body hair, taking due care with the razor. I then drove here to the gym. After the tanning bed, I visited with Becky of the Black Tights and attended a spin class, followed by the easy version of water aerobics. Now, here in the hot tub float three of my friends and a ravishing stranger. I recline in the hot water, sense the morning's strain of body maintenance melt into liquid magic and into camaraderie, flawed as it is. We all paid the

price, spent our hour or more panting and heaving. In that shaky, ragged feeling from the workouts, we'd retreated from the fitness center to our hot tub outside. To my regret, our stranger rises up, water cascading from her hair and body, and in the twenty-degree weather flip-flops for the door. She's quite young, about forty-five, and I undergo that stirring I call the Viagra Aftershock. I've felt it several times this morning.

Across from me sits my old friend, Carl. Besides being the best orthodontist in Taos, he is the original comb-over man. I've stared at that comb-over for twenty-five years. Now though, it has parted from his scalp and flies away as a crumpled up wing out over his left ear, angling off towards the Taos Mountain that looms above us. The Viagra and my hypertension medicine make a potent mix and they have improved my fantasy life—the drugs help me see his thoughts. A cartoon text balloon forms over Carl's head. It reads, 'Just this once.' Carl's voice comes through the steam. "Let's troop over to the Plaza Café after we shower. I want a

five-thousand-calorie salad and a Pinot Grigio.” The bubble flashes ‘Bacon, cheese—lots of cheese.’

I count nods of assent all around. I announce, “And so it shall be.” Beside me, my Egyptian beauty Noha stirs, irritated by my patronizing tone. Her thought balloon reads, ‘Really, Joseph. Shut up.’ She perches upon my right hand as I drape my arm around behind her. Her delicious bottom presses up against my palm. She is a full and charming woman, with beautiful skin and black hair, long and luxurious. Her eyes are huge and brown. I feel her weight shift as she leans forward and her thigh presses into mine. Noha is our cougar. We hear of all of her encounters, real and imagined, with the young men that she—well—hunts.

“Philip was my trainer this morning. We did lunges on the half ball. Each time, as I moved from the floor onto the ball, you know,” and she glances over at me and flares her eyes. They are enchanting eyes, like fireworks. “He’d steady me on each lunge. At first he gripped my waist, but then he moved to my knee, to keep me from drifting. At least, he started at my knee. By the end, his hands had moved up my leg—just below, nearly there. I became all flushed. He’s so strong.”

I say, “Noha, they are always strong, or you wouldn’t be interested.” She squirms just that little bit and my loins tingle. I have had that ample plump dessert—and I would go back for more.

“Yes, Joseph. You’re not jealous of youth, are you?” Her bubble indicates, ‘Time for another face lift, my friend.’

“Unlikely, sweetheart. They have stamina, but I have guile. They have a certain charm—not to mention supple and unwrinkled skin. But I have a true appreciation and understanding of women.”

Mara, the fourth friend in the hot tub, interrupts us, once again about her mother. She and Carl are burdened by family, unlike Noha and I. Instead of flying free, they drag their aged parents along behind.

Mara is Irish-fair, and as we say, beat-all-to-hell. Even for seventy, she would be rough and hard—and she’s sixty. She had plaited her hair, really iron gray but dyed to its original red, up onto her head, but it has begun to fall in the steam. The balloon over her reads ‘I’m twisted off!’ She leans over to Noha and touches her knee under the bubbling water. I believe Mara must have been a lesbian, before she gave up sex for bitterness.

“Noha,” she says. I watch the bubble spell out, ‘My angel.’ Mara pauses, a claim for our attention. “Your Mother and Dad are dead, aren’t they?”

“Yes, Mara. You know I flew home to Egypt two years ago when my mother passed on.”

“That’s right. Lucky you.”

Noha shakes her head, a furrow chasing sadness across her forehead. “Mara, that’s cruel. I loved my mother. I miss her every day.”

Mara’s thought balloon reads, ‘Typical.’ She snorts, an ugly sound of mockery. “Be glad you got out when you were young. I remember the old joke about life begins when you’re forty sleeping with twenty.”

We all chuckle for her, but she doesn’t want a laugh—she wants a tirade. “I always thought life began when your parents died.”

“But Mara,” I say. “Your mom lives in a home in Kansas.

Surely she can’t be ruining your life from there?”

“She expects a call most every day. And I have to visit, every couple of months.”

Carl’s bubble displays, ‘My turn! My turn!’ Carl stutters when he’s in a hurry. “My mo mo mom lives over in Arroyo Seco and it’s a lot of work, taking care of the details she can’t handle anymore. WhWhWho would have believed I’d be babysitting when I turned sixty-three?”

Mara’s bubble reads, ‘Who gives a shit, Carl.’ She ratchets back up. “Mom will live to a hundred and ten. She looks like it already.”

Noha tries to defuse the so-unpleasant rant, “It’s only natural, Mara. They took care of us. So we take care of them.”

“No, it’s unnatural. Old people should croak in their late seventies, not hang on-and-on ruining our glory times. All those drugs and treatments, they drag it all out. It’s just pathetic, that’s what it is, a horror.” Mara’s cartoon bubble shows, ‘I could kill the old bitch.’

I think, who wouldn’t hold on to the last bitter second? A bed you’re dying in is better than the casket on the other side. I say, “Mara, it’s not that much of your time. You have a great life here with us and I don’t think you miss much. With a butched-up body like yours, you’ll outlast us all, much less your mother. Don’t worry so much about it.”

She says with raised eyebrows, “Why thank you, Joseph. That makes me feel all better.” The balloon reads, ‘Screw you, you old lecher.’

“You’ll see, darling,” says our delectable Noha. “This weekend will be our usual round, as Joseph says, of parties and laughter. I promise you at least a good meal and lots of wine.” I see her bubble waver up over her head, half-formed, murmuring, ‘A long afternoon with my trainer. A private workout.’

Carl heaves himself up by grasping my hand and jerking. Water cascades from his meager shoulders and off his pendulous belly. His balloon reads, ‘You’ll be dead in a month.’ My mouth drops. He shakes his head over me, dripping down into my iconic face.

He sloshes to the tub edge, grabs his towel. “Mara, I promise you a drink right now. Come with me to the Café and we’ll eat spinach salad with fried cheese croutons, with sliced egg and hot bacon dressing. We can even split an order of truffle fries. That and a margarita will hold the Living Dead at bay.”

I stand, turn for my towel. The wind at twenty degrees cuts through me. I shiver like the damned.

It starts slow, a perception of fullness, a distension of the belly. I get so the wine doesn’t work—I experience nausea after, and sugary desserts give me intense diarrhea. My back hurts. She hovers across from me, my Doctor. She wears a new perfume—its high-dollar scent wafting towards me. But I don’t care. Not today. “Okay, Joan, I can take it. Is it a brain tumor?” My ancient joke.

She flashes me that beautiful smile, the one so nice to wake up to. “Joseph, you wouldn’t be peeking down my lab coat and blouse if it were a brain tumor. However, it’s definitely something. I don’t like your weight loss—I know you think you worked off those love handles by yourself, but your legs and arms look, well, spindly to me. Far too thin.”

A cartoon forms over her head, 'You look like shit.'

"Then I shall return to lifting weights and guzzling growth inducers, dear. I shall bulk up enough to please you."

She ducks her head to the paperwork. "And your blood work isn't right. You're hyperglycemic, with some ketone buildup in your urine. I'd swear you were diabetic if you had any history of smoking and obesity. Then there's that back pain."

"Admit it, Joannie. You're puzzled. A beautiful mind in a beautiful body, but once again I baffle you."

She chuckles, but she does it for show. "I'll write you a referral. I want you to see an old classmate of mine in Santa Fe—he's the best. He'll order the workup, and we'll find out what we're dealing with. I'll call ahead—I want you in quick." Her bubble pops up, 'Cancer. It's always cancer.'

I am bloody cold lying here in this hospital bed. Off and on for two weeks they have scanned me, probed my orifices, inquired about the health of my sphincters. They have whittled all of my dignity away. Now they have thrust a hollow sword into my back, through my intestine and into a mass the CAT scan detected and the MRI paints like a bird's nest in violet hues. I have a foreign body lodged within me, a frightening plague of my own cells.

Mara sits beside me. She has driven down from Taos, a two-hour journey, by herself. She actually appears to care. At least she has all the right behaviors. My cartoon bubbles have failed me, so I don't know what she really thinks. Probably ruined by the extra drugs.

She hitches forward in her chair. Now I will have to suffer through the explanations. "How big's the mass, Joseph?" She appears distraught—amusing.

"Oh, the size of an orange. Perhaps a grapefruit by today. Of course, it is not a simple round thing. Rather messy, tangled up with my pancreas. And gut."

Her eyebrows arch and her pupils dilate. "Pancreas!" The bitch already knows, from Noha, but we must pretend.

"Yes, Mara, we all know about pancreatic cancer. That's why they thrust that huge, painful needle into me." I hold up my hands, eighteen inches apart. "A monster."

Ridiculous, playing the role, she nods. "Biopsy. You're taking it okay."

I know different. I am a little man inside my godlike head, screaming away. My smart phone delivered the web-page news days ago. Only a one-in-four chance to live a year. I summon a smile—it feels plastic on my face. I work harder, try for sincerity. "I am less worried than you think. I've always had luck on my side."

She leans forward to take my hand. "I'm sure it'll all work out. How long before they get the results?" Her red hair floats forward across my arm. Ghostly.

Her kindness makes me want to smash at her, and I would too, if I were not so tired. At least with unkind words. "It's about a week. But they will peer at it through

the microscope before it goes off to the lab. That should tell them something."

"And then you'll know."

I try on the condescending grin. Silly woman. "Oh, no. They won't tell me. If they were wrong and it's not malignant, they would have to explain later. And I would sue for mental anguish."

"Surely not. They'll tell you."

My turn to pat her hand. I know the conventions. "I have become a cog in the machine, Mara." The little screaming man is louder now—I think he wants out.

She slips her hand out from under mine. "So it's a week. Do you stay here?"

"Oh God no, not here. But I have a room at the Residence Inn. The drive back and forth to Taos, it's too much."

She frowns. Her lips have those vertical trench-marks of a woman who doesn't care what she looks like. "Joseph, you should have told us. We could drive you."

"Hah. You think that I drive myself? No, Carl chauffeurs me. But speaking of back and forth . . ."

"Yes, sweetie?"

"They'll check me out in a couple of hours. Can you give me a lift to the hotel? Drive me back to my modest suite, tuck me into bed for the night?"

I watch her grin, the first genuine thing today. "Why, I believe you are trying to get me in the sack, you old fart."

I can feel the burning in my eyes. Tears want to form. I hate it when she is right. I ache for a woman's coddling, even a burned-out grizzled lesbo's. At least a distraction.

No chemo, no radiation, no surgery. Oh, to be Mara's parent, lying in a Kansas nursing home, waiting for my centennial so many years away! Instead I lie in this unimagined terrain—hospice. A morphine-infused wait for the cancer to explode out of my abdomen and vomit across the room. A wait for blood to cascade out of my rectum and float me off the sheets and onto the floor. I hear a skritch in my ears, like dog's claws on the linoleum. It is my anger.

Her head eases round the door, hesitant. Noha is still the most beautiful woman I have ever taken to bed. But now, when I see her, I see what I will lose.

"Are you awake?"

She among all still deserves a smile from me. "Come in, come in. You'll relieve this continuous tedium."

She leans across the bed, touches her lips to my forehead. I had imagined they would be hot, like her blood, but they are cool and dry. She asks, "Why are you all the way down here in Albuquerque?"

"No one at home, Noha, no one to shuffle my bedpans or stick morphine patches on me. Carl took my cats over to his mother, and the house sits empty."

"Can I watch the place for you, water plants?"

I nod. "That would be lovely, dear. Or better yet, throw them all in the trunk and take them to your place. You can have them."



She tosses both hands up in protest. "Oh, but you'll be coming home."

"Noha, you saw the sign on the building. I'll not be coming home."

Her face collapses like a melting milk chocolate. She didn't have to confront the imminence of death as long as it went unsaid. I have spoiled it.

She dabs at her eyes with a pink Kleenex. "How are they treating you here?"

I see no need to swamp her with complaints about the service, service that cannot matter compared to my Big Event. "They're quite kind. Sit beside me, beloved."

Not in the chair. She perches on the edge of the bed, bundles my hand up in both of hers. She presses her tush up against my side and my glance flickers there before proceeding up past her breasts. She gazes down into my face. "We've had happier times, Joseph."

I clear my throat. "This morning I was thinking about our trip to Florida, five years ago."

She has the sweetest smile. "All that lovely sand and the sun."

I chuckle, for her benefit. "You didn't want to spoil your complexion. Instead you lay under the cabana."

"And you burned bright pink, racing around in the sun."

"But the pain of sunburn did not inhibit my performance."

Now her face flares pink, beneath that luscious Egyptian chocolate. "Just at dusk, lying together, the sides of the cabana hanging down to give us privacy."

I remember that the fabric fluttered like wings as the evening breeze drifted in from the ocean, showing me flashes of the hotel, of the beach, of the lights at dusk. As I poised above her. "Dearest Noha."

She is pleased by the memory. She smiles, her full lips open slightly to show white teeth gleaming. "Yes, Joseph. It was so lovely."

"Noha, would you do me a favor? The smallest of favors?"

"What is it, Joseph?"

"Perhaps one last time. Could you . . ."

Her eyes open as wide as they can. She stares at me from head to toe. My hair, no doubt sticky and matted, the beard stubble-gray across my cheeks. The gown wrinkled, and perhaps odiferous. Crumpled sheets. The squalor of sickness.

I gaze up into her face. "No, not the full shebang. Just a little manipulation. For old times sakes."

Her forehead crinkles, then clears in a beautiful smoothness. She hops down, whirls to the door, and locks it. Back by my side, she fishes the sheets down, raises the gown. "No catheter? Thank God."

"I should allow a man to thrust a tube up my penis? Not until the very last, my dear."

Using the lotion on the overbed table, she straightens me, rubs in the lubrication, begins her motions. "How wicked you are, Joseph."

I stare at her, the part in her hair, her head dropped, concentrating on me, on this thing we share again. "That is so very nice. It's like we are teenagers, in the back of a car."

She raises her face, a grin appearing at the corner of her mouth. "I grew up in Egypt. Father had a chauffeur and we dared not use the backseat."

"Oh, oh, ah." My body contracts, three times. I curl up in the final shudder, and she hesitates, then strokes me a few times more. She catches all of it in her other hand—it pools up and looks like lemon curd. Nothing. I feel nothing, though my body performed the oldest dance. I have ejaculated without an orgasm.

She kisses my forehead again, fishes a tissue out of the box and wipes her palm. "You scandalous old man. Promise me you won't do this with anyone but me."

"I promise." My voice gags in my throat. I promise to let it go, cast it away from me, not to think about it.

"I can't wait to tell Mara. Or perhaps it should be our secret." She reaches up, strokes my face with the hand that brought me to my sticky end.

I want, I need, a moment by myself. "Noha love. Can you fetch me a cup of ice? My mouth is so dry these days. The nurses station on the hall will tell you where."

She is so pleased, her face soft and adoring. Some domestic task, after having done the dirty. Taking a Styrofoam cup, she unlocks the door, slips out like a courtesan leaving the chambers of the king.

I stare about the room. Institutional, florescent light eradicating all shadow. A giant TV hung from the ceiling, a black vacant slab. The side table and the overbed table filled with bedsore ointments, tissues, a box of alcohol swabs, bedpan and urinal, moisturizing wicks for cracked lips, abandoned Styrofoam cups. A litany of objects, my final possessions.

It's been a perfect day for me, so far. My contentment stretches out before me. Unlike Mara, I am not dragged down by paternal constraint. Unlike Carl, no gluttony gnaws at me. Unlike Noha, the need for sexual congress has disappeared. The air conditioning blows down upon me. I feel a cold wind. 🌀



SCOTT ARCHER JONES is currently living and working on his sixth novel in northern New Mexico, after stints in the Netherlands, Scotland and Norway plus less exotic locations. He's worked for a power company, grocers, a lumberyard, an energy company (for a very long time), and a winery. Now he's on the masthead of the *Prague Revue*, and launched a novel last year with Southern Yellow Pine, *Jupiter and Gilgamesh, a Novel of Sumeria and Texas*. Scott cuts all his own firewood, lives a mile from his nearest neighbor and writes grant applications for the community. He is the Treasurer of Shuter Library of Angel Fire, a private 501.C3, and desperately needs your money to keep the doors open. www.scottarcherjones.com





Like Heroin

Kirk Boys

“**Y**ou’re different,” She said leaning in toward him.

She looked even better after eight years if that were possible. “Different? I’m not sure how to take that?” He smiled and poured a sleeve of sugar into his espresso, watching as the white grains slowly sunk into the dark liquid and then disappeared with a swirl of his spoon. “Well you’re even more beautiful.”

“You’re still full of shit, but thanks anyway,” she said, giving him just enough smile to send a vague signal.

Eight years since he called it off. She had seen him once. With his wife and daughter from a distance on the street,

they had Bloomingdale bags. They were all smiles. She almost waved, but then hated herself for contemplating it.

He had said yes when she called. “It’s the holidays, a coffee so we can catch-up,” she told him.

No doubt he was curious, especially that desirous part of him. Besides, he was in control. Seeing her again had only added to her allure though. It was not lost on him how lucky he had been extricating himself when he did. And it hadn’t come back on him. The wife pregnant, a crucial point in his career, it could have all come unraveled. His heart was pounding. It all came rushing back, the passion, the sex and drama. He had sworn he would never take a

chance like that for some side pussy. That was eight years ago though. And here she was as lovely and enticing as ever. Hard to resist.

"You're a little thicker." She raised an eyebrow. "It looks good on you." She smiled, then turned away and watched the line of customers, rain dripping off their coats and umbrellas. It was ugly outside and the coffee shop was packed, the air heavy and damp. "Things good at home?" she asked.

"Yes, good," it was the last thing he wanted to talk about. What did she expect him to say? "Why did you call?" He was getting mixed signals. He hadn't been with another woman since the business conference in Belize, an anonymous Brazilian woman. Risk free.

"Still running?" She couldn't resist baiting him like that. Such an egotist, he had always needed to be stroked. Running had been his excuse to meet her. He had run a lot back then.

"A few marathons, I hired a personal trainer. I'm thinking about an iron-man competition. It's on my bucket list."

They were in a part of town he never visited. It was where the alternative types congregated, artists, musicians, writers, block after block filled with bars, clubs, coffee shops and trendy restaurants. A younger crowd than the suburbs where strip malls, fast food and big box stores dominated the landscape. It felt good being in the midst of things again. People here dispensed with the bullshit, they went with the flow, did what felt good. An attractive couple kissed as they waited in line for coffee as if they wanted everyone to know they had just crawled out of bed.

Wind pressed a drenching rain against the window. They sat quietly for a minute and drank their coffee taking in the scene, pondering what was happening. He was married when they started. She had no idea his wife was six months along. He'd told her the marriage was on the rocks. He'd made a mistake. That he felt lost. He was so helpful and kind to her. And the sex, he'd known exactly what to do and when to do it. He drove her crazy. She'd done things she would never tell anyone about, crazy stuff, too exciting to resist.

It had gone on for weeks. Hiding it, acting like strangers in the office, then stealing away to her place for a "run".

"So what about you?" he finally asked.

"It's what you make of it. Right?" she said.

"What's that mean?" He asked.

"I'm a single mom. We get by." People were jostling for tables as space closed in around them. "Quite a day," she said leaning to one side as two Hipster types bumped roughly past her. She glared after them.

She had on a sheer, silk blouse and a tight skirt and heels. He loved her long legs. You should have been a ballerina he used to tell her in the afterglow.

"What are we doing here?" He asked.

"I wanted..." She took a sip of coffee holding the cup with both hands, keeping her eyes locked on him. "I wanted you to see. I don't know, I guess I wasn't sure you'd show up?" She reached into her purse and took out her cell.

He felt a knot in his throat. He realized he wasn't in control.

She pushed through some screens and turned the phone toward him. There was a picture of a boy, standing by himself in a park. He was smiling. "My son."

"Cute." He could feel things

closing in on him.

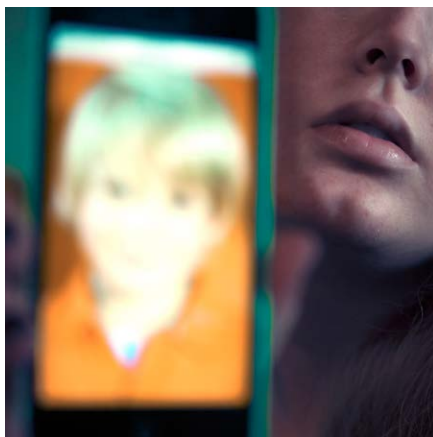
"He's seven," she said, her eyes boring into him. "He loves dinosaurs and soccer so far. He's shy, but he has a big appetite. He reminds me of you." She put the phone on the table and leaned back. "Excuse me a moment, I need to use the ladies room."

He nodded. His eyes glued to the picture. His shoulders slumped in, defeated.

She knew what he would do.

As she turned the corner he grabbed his coat and pushed his way through the crowd to the exit. He did not look back, his mind spinning with the idea he had a son. She had seduced him into coming and dropped this bomb. She was like fucking heroin. Try it once and you're hooked and nothing good ever came of it.

She would have to thank her friend for the picture. It was scary how much the kid looked like him. ↻



KIRK BOYS is a writer living outside Seattle. He helps wrangle four grandkids under the age of five along with an extraordinarily tiny dog he claims was inherited. His work has appeared in *Storie-all write #57/58* and *Storie.it*. He was a finalist in Glimmer Train's new writers competition 2014 and can be found in *Gravel*, *Per Contra* and *Bio-stories* in 2015. He has a certificate in Advanced Literary Fiction from the University of Washington and is a volunteer and member of Hugo House in Seattle.



Longing

Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz

Mattress shifts. Lips against your ear; a whisper (but the explosive power of an assault rifle to your heart.): Hey, Baby, I gotta go. In minutes, he'll be in their bed. You've been having sex since early evening, longing for exhaustion. Somehow he always has the energy for goodbye. ↻



GWENDOLYN JOYCE MINTZ is a writer and photographer. Her work has appeared in various journals online and in print as well as in 30 anthologies; most recently, the 12-volume series **2014 - A Year in Stories** available from Pure Slush (which can be found online at pureslush.webs.com/2014.htm). She makes teddy bears by hand and gardens when she can.



was boiling
tape your flush

file, hill

double, t
faits de n
instant une
cités, des souve
petits faits qui ne
de la mémoire

Mary



North Platte: Postcard from the Big Rig

Stephanie Dickinson

Route 2

SAND HILLS. All night, I lay in a field beside the highway listening to it breathe until my sleep rushed with adrenaline and the power of stopping an eighteen-wheeler with my thumb. Morning pulled me up by ropy arms, and by noon I was as far from the farm as Mars.

In a red halter and jean cutoffs, shouldering a Boy Scout backpack, the first rig let me out between North Loup and Dismal River—the towns not already scraped away had headed west for Denver. Midafternoon skittered across Route 2. Grey sage waving as the empty highway drove by. The dirt hissed 90 degrees through the soles of my buckskin

feet. I mourned the dead jackrabbit—lumpy and spread-eagled—its stiff yellow face staring at the vanished sky. I'd wanted to escape, to run headlong into the wind, but here I was alone with the magpies throwing angry glances. My nose picking up far-off dust and CB radio chatter. The heat licked me with a splintery tongue.

Forsaken

Hours that felt like centuries I stood stock still in my cutoffs and buckskin boots, thirsty, sipping from the soda can for bits of liquid, smoking rollies, clutching a map, singing out the names of abandoned towns to the buttes

and layers of rock. Not a blade of grass, not a leaf. No flies, no ants. It felt like it hadn't rained ever. The shooting and a semester of college behind me. How do I explain that after being maimed, I had to run, hitchhike, prove I could still thumb? The limp arm, the wired jaw, the scars—the story now for the rest of my days. I wished I was cold-hearted, I'd chew myself free of my shamed body, I'd tear and tear.

Diesel Dusk

The sun—Christ hanging by his hands, forsaken by the Father, loincloth falling—thorns circling his head. Nothing else bothered the cinder sky. Then my heart raced at the downshifting of an 18-wheeler, the aluminum beast flashing, skull and crossbones on the tireflaps, FLAMABLE. I ran to the tires revolving like planets, the aluminum shell shivering with a week's worth of sunsets, a load of refined oil like the blood orange's exquisite nectar. The cab's passenger door popped open. "Hurry, run," the man leaning out shouted. High high but I climbed, grabbing the ladder, trying to wedge my dead left arm between rungs, I raised my right arm and the dark-haired man, lifted me in. He smiled, a space between his two front teeth, and brushed back longish hair parted on the side. His dark eyes drifted over me, fishing at the same time.

The burly youngish trucker at the wheel, took a peek at me. His hair so blonde it shone almost white, a kinked sheep fleece against his scalp, was more a street preacher's incantations. "We can't let the insurance boys see. Get in back." His mouth like a throttle. A thick bone jutted from his forehead. The fields were black following the highway—drought like fire had etched its way through the furrows. Borders blurred in rushes of green signs. A buzzard threw its shadow over the elk's cracked head, over its belly full of pebbles.

Fog World

The Dexedrine they gave me, black beauty so good it was awful melted the Kansas highway into a river until I floated, a cloud in a fog world, a split-tail antelope sprinting from the ditch into headlights, the tangerine felt in my ass flashing then vanishing. I didn't object. In the sleeper I pushed the shadows with my fist, pulling at the fire with my nails. The

bunk bed was a ribcage (with my fingers I counted every bone, keel). People fall in love with strangers whose names they'll never remember. His mouth taking on the shape of bruises. His sweat, gasoline. Lay your head there. Be safe. There were signs and wonders on the road. Cream brulle thickened with steel-wool. "What happened to your arm?" the blonde asked. "Born that way?" I tried not to laugh. "I was shot." I said, flatly but feeling the 12-gauge, how the pellets had canine teeth. The pellets were flies. Thick, they

stuck to every branch of me like wild black fruit. They penetrated. I had loved a boy; he was with me in the bathroom when the shooting happened. His friend carried the shotgun.

Snow Asparagus

"Take vultures," said the blond trucker. "There's not enough carrion on the road these days. It was down by Glenrio we saw black vultures attack that cow. So many trucks crammed filled with day laborers, undercutting even the buzzards feeding off the highway. No one can hit roof nails better than illegals. Just watch 'em

pound blue sparks into a red sky." The two of them thought they'd seen everything but lately all of creation was on the move. Civet cats and moose heading above the 55 parallel, rattlesnakes scuttling down from high country into the green valleys too dry even for reptiles. Every kind of animal thrown into confusion. They'd heard polar bear mothers were eating their young. Nothing worse.

Root Beer

NORTH PLATTE. They threw me out in North Platte, Nebraska. Seven hours in a red paten booth in a barbecue rib joint nursing a root beer float. The freezer burnt ice cream chilled the cracks in my lips and cuts in my tongue. On the juke box Hank Williams crooned, Did you ever hear a whippoorwill? My nose bleeding from where the blond trucker punched me sang along. After midnight I called my mother. She cried, Get on a bus and come home. I forgive you. I believed her. Instead of feeling dark and dull inside I was luminous. I had traveled and come back. 🕒



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LUNATIC STAGES DOLL'S MURDER

Rebecca Bell-Gurwitz

Once I saw a dead body. The thing about this body was that it wasn't really dead.

Our college campus is concrete. There's only one courtyard and the grass tufts out of the cracks in sad attempts at freedom. Sometimes I walk along the yard in square steps, around and around, but forcing myself to stop at each of the four corners. And do you know what I do when I get to those corners? I find those tufts of grass and I pull them out.

"This is uncalled for," says the Director into his microphone. The Director is my name for the president of our college.

Students gather, gazing. On good days the students are beautiful, with their graveled coughs and their elbows dark in the crease, lightening in tone when they hold their arms up to speak. Once, during a Religion seminar, a boy stood up and said God was a cow, but he voiced his arguments in the middle of the lesson so that the boy's words alternated with the professor's. God is a Cow. Jesus was a fisherman from Nazareth. God is a cow. Jesus taught his disciples. GOD IS A COW.

Most of the time, the students are ugly as sin. Especially the girls that I sleep with. Faces cold like my dead frog, the one I buried in my mother's flowerpot years ago. I wonder; has she found it yet?

The Director draws a line of chalk around the body.

Nothing smells. Plastic flesh, so clean, although the fake blood leaves a bit of a mess. An oversight, perhaps. But no metallic scent. When I buried the frog under my mother's potted rosebuds, it smelled for days. It smelled forever until one day, nothing. I was drinking milk straight out of the bowl, and choked because the absence of the smell became overpowering.

Chalk like silk fresh from the worm. There's something about concrete that absorbs all beauty and spits it out again, this time, reborn. The girl next to me is giggling. I ask her what's wrong. She gives me a strange look and shrugs, "I don't get why the president is going through all this trouble."

Her face is ugly. Coldest I've seen yet. I want to scream. But I don't.

I just cough and move closer to the front of the crowd where the Director's gray head drips and melts onto the ground.

Dali would have loved the plasticene qualities of this campus.

It's hot out. Peering down I can see how the fake blood coagulates on the concrete, absorbing better than the real stuff.

White licks of paint slough off the victim's face, which makes me hungry again. I have a thing for birthday cakes. There's nothing better than sliding your tongue against each flake of sugar, grainy and too sweet to be real. Fruit comes from a tree the same way a baby is born, smelling of blood

and covered in pasty substance clinging to hairy arms and legs. My least favorite thing is a fresh peach, because against my tongue it feels like a girl's cheek, fuzzy and newborn.

Once I found the dead body of a doll. She had the face of most other dolls, impassive and smiling as if she had been stilled in a moment of bliss. The pictures of murdered girls in the newspapers look nothing like this. As time passes, the doll's face stays the same and I want to get down on the ground, right there in front of everyone, and lie with her. I watch for so long I think about her breathing, even though she had never been alive. Limbs contorted in the worst positions, except nobody grimaces like they should. No bones, they are thinking. She has no bones. If I scalped into her right now, there would be no glorious organs with their rhythmic muck, no cessation of blood's vibration in her fake veins. I wonder if they ever make dolls with veins running through the hollow plastic of an arm or leg. Innervating not with blood, but something more vital—emptiness, like the air we breathe out and suck back in.

People are getting freaked out. Days go by and the Director recruits a detective team from a willing pool of students. I volunteer myself to be a part of the investigation.

It's a shame this dead girl never got to be alive.

Once I found the body of a doll, warm on the concrete. She was supposed to be cold, except the sun came up and touched her.

"Signs of psychopathy," the Director says, melting. His hands are dirty and they look so large when he feels the victim's neck for a pulse.

Dead doll sightings become frequent across college campuses. A week after the first discovery, a baby doll is fished out of the swimming pool. The policeman first attributes it to the carelessness of girls. When these dolls no longer satisfy a girl's needs, does she lose her instinct for motherhood? Little girls fling their dolls into piles of mud, letting the rain wash away painted lips, soaking clear through clothing once gingerly pulled over a plastic arm or leg. "She's not real," my sister said after our mother found a doll's head separated from its stubby neck in the backyard. My sweet sister told us this act hadn't been malicious. But then again, she had only shrugged at its decapitation.

Girls no longer satisfied by an impending sense of motherhood. The officials scribble this statement across their notepads when they first hold the little doll up with their forefingers, bleeding red and soaked in chlorine. But then they find several more floating about our campus pool, the water dyed red with a bottle of grocery store food coloring. The students respond gleefully because The Director postpones finals in order to track down the perpetrator. The Director holds another meeting, ashamed. Why this concrete campus above all others?

It's midnight. After I eat three sandwiches for dinner, I walk towards the chalk outline drawn in the middle of the Quad. The body has been removed and the ground scrubbed clean. I find something curious just then: a note

that says "GOD IS A COW".

Once, there was a manikin's body splayed out in front of my sister's dorm. When I visit her there, she is crying. When I ask her what's wrong she says that her boyfriend has broken up with her.

Afterwards, she looks cold like the frog I buried in mom's flowerpot. I tell her about the frog I buried. I say, did you know?

She nods and says, did you kill it?

I cough and shake my head. Have you ever done a science project?

When we step outside into the crowd of students, she slips in and out of bodies like she doesn't exist. Do you exist, I ask her.

What are you, stupid? She says back.

Manikins are for clothing, the Director says. That is their function. They are not meant for staging murders.

Someone yells, YOU ARE A COW.

The Director threatens to expel. My sister smiles. She's already forgotten her boyfriend. She drags me closer to the front of the crowd and when we link arms, it feels like I don't exist either. We peer at the body and I kneel down to touch the victim's shoulder.

What are you doing? The Director asks.

I'm helping with the investigation, I say.

The Director finds me lying on the ground by the chalk silhouette he drew earlier that day. It is two minutes to midnight. I've found so many clues, I say.

I think you're taking this too seriously, he says. He gives me his arm. I stand up. The sandwiches are heavy in my stomach.

I hand over the note. The Director slips his reading glasses on, taking a long time, stringing words together and tearing them apart.

I dream that my sister is cradling the doll's body. She is crying because her boyfriend broke up with her. She'd like to play the part of mother since she can't be a wife.

My sister and I blow out the birthday candles and tell the doll that it is alive. The doll comes to life and tells me to find the clue hidden in one of the cracks of the cement near the quad. Then my sister turns into a cow. I find her chewing cud, but instead of cud, she chews plastic arms and legs. The Director melts into the grass and my sister grazes.

When I wake up, the clock reads 4:35 AM.

The Director hands me a newspaper. I read a story about a doll being buried in a graveyard. According to this story, nothing happened.

You've got something on your lip, the Director says after I finish the story.

Oh really, I say.

I think it's cream cheese, he hands me a napkin from his desk.

No it's icing, I say, wiping my mouth.

The Director looks at me strangely and I explain to him that it was my sister's birthday last night, so I had leftover cake for breakfast.

He nods. The air conditioner blasts processed air, which feels better than the wind I'm used to. My chest doesn't

hurt as much as usual. The Director winks at me, his eyes glassy, but not with tears. This is the first time I've seen the Director solid. The air conditioner stops him from melting.

I string together sentences and tear them apart. When I was younger, I used to cut clippings out of the newspaper. I thought that I could change the stories, cut and paste, bring life back to the girl who died in the car accident so suddenly, so young. Cut and paste the word 'deceased', place it adjunct to the name of the man who took a shotgun and systematically killed all three of his children. Words made of ink, not blood. Words made of blood, not ink. My mother, the Reporter, hated the way I changed newspaper stories like that. She said I was creating fiction from truth. The first night she found me, I was sitting alone on the floor of our attic playroom, cocooned in a circle of my old toys. I snuck up to the attic so I could play, but instead became fascinated by the yellow newspapers stacked up in boxes by the window. Lit up by the moon, but only in slats where dust floated freely, the newspapers had a godly quality to them, the front-pages given completely to the light.

My sister had a box of paints, along with a small bottle of India ink used to outline silhouettes back when she was into that sort of thing. I picked up one of the newspapers, pointedly surprised that it did not crumble into old age when I touched it. I read an article about Hindu men being forced to eat pigs and cows. Then another about a little girl being beaten to death because she tried to run away. By then I had had enough, and I took my sister's India ink, turning it upside down over the box of newspapers. Black seeped everywhere, down through the cardboard and into the rugged beige carpet. I must have cried out because the Reporter came upstairs, concerned. When she saw what I had done, she began to yell. It turned out many of the ruined stories were hers. Words she had painstakingly strung together to describe the horrors of living. When the Reporter yelled at me she said, this is the truth and this is how we know the truth. I was too young to disagree, which is something disgusting about childhood.

When one family sat Shiva, the Reporter came to the house with a recorder and stuck it in their sad faces. But she had gotten the story, and now her daughter's India ink was all over everything. Words made of ink, not blood. She came so close to hitting me. Her hand was inches away from my face and I could see it shake with potential, a future red bloom in the skin of my cheek. Later on, I snuck back upstairs with the more recent newspapers, not yellow, but grayish white, and made sure the articles were not my mother's. Then I cut them up into pieces, like arms and legs and hearts and spleens. Then I took the pile of words and wrote my own story. Except this story would be something that had never happened before, because the combinations would be novel.

When I finally graduated high school, I found all the old clippings and realized how my mother had lied about the truth. Something had to be done. But spilling India ink over a newspaper was amateur. So maybe I would give the Reporter an article to write, except the story would be completely stupid and she would not think it worth her time. She would have to cover it regardless and waste her time mourning for someone who had never been alive.

Everything is deteriorating. I am a not-serial killer.

The present is everything, but the future is more, the Director says. Give yourself up. Give yourself up now.

What is a dream anymore? I've read in a newspaper article that scientists think DHT, the dream chemical, is released in large quantities when we die. Except later, I read that the reporters got it wrong, that they had completely misunderstood the results section of a scientific article.

In college they tell you how to read scientific articles. Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion. Sometimes the scientists skew data.

But everything is skewed, so its gotta balance out.

When my sister died in a car accident, the newspaper reported an incorrect time of death. They said the collision occurred at 1:00 post meridiem on a Friday. Really it was 2:05 post meridiem, but I think the EMTs said her time of death was ten minutes later. That's ten minutes of not knowing. That's an hour and five minutes the public missed. The newspaper said my sister died when really she was alive, driving away from the White Castle Drive-Thru, sucking up a chocolate shake with her boyfriend at the wheel. I know about the chocolate shake because her face was sticky with it when they extracted her with the Jaws of Life. The chocolate shake will fade from the story altogether. If I die too, no one will know of it.

My sister died a month before the doll appeared on campus. Is that purely coincidence? The Reporter doesn't believe two separate events can be driven by chaos. She believes everything happens for a reason.

The Director calls the Reporter on Monday. He asks her to drive up to the school, because I've found so many clues. "And maybe it's the reporter in your son, but I'm a little bit concerned about how immersed he is in the investigation. Especially, since—Well, I heard about your daughter. My condolences."

The Director calls my mother because, the night before, he found me kneeling down, inspecting the cracks in the pavement near the site of the crime. My sister lied to me. There was no clue after all.

My mother shakes me awake, "How long have you been dreaming?"

This is reality, I'm fairly sure it is reality. It used to be that when people talked their voices sounded as if they had been filtered through the ocean, as if I were the only one submerged and everyone was yelling at me from above, trying so hard to break surface tension, but failing all the same.

I ask my mother if she's written a story about the dolls.

She smiles and touches my cheek, "I love you."

I ask her if she had a favorite doll when she was young.

"There was this one," She starts, sitting on the edge of my bed, her legs smooth in their bareness, "I named her Rosalina— kind of a silly, but pretty name. The kind only a child could believe in." She strokes my cheek again and this time all of the peach hairs stand up. "I loved that doll, thought I couldn't love anything more. She had painted lips. When I was seven I cut off all her hair with a pair of scissors and I loved her just the same, even with her awful haircut."

I ask my mother what happened to this doll.

Her face gets tired, but still she smiles for me. “I have no idea what happened to her. I took her everywhere, but one day, I just forgot to bring her home.”

“And did you care?”

Her eyes crease and I focus in on the black liner smudged right below her lower lashes, “I tried.”

I ask my mother again if she’s written an article about the dolls. Instead of answering me, she tells me to get out of bed and show her the crime scene so she can investigate.

I fall asleep again. In my dream, my sister asks me what it feels like to be alive. I look at her and say, you already know.

In the quad, a generator is running. I can hear electricity flow in and out, the sound far too repetitive, regenerating before it disappears again into the morning air. The Reporter has her glasses on. I kneel down with my ear to the cement in an attempt to block out the drone. Now, just the hollow cupping sound of nothingness, like when I used to hold shells up to my ear, except there are no lulling waves here. An ant crawls from cracks in the cement, bearing up the mountain of a pebble. There are so many insects and sometimes we forget they exist. The Reporter looks concerned. It’s hot outside so she wears only a plum tank top and a pair of khaki shorts. Her shoulders are freckled from the sun, which makes her seem more like a woman and less like a reporter.

“The Director thinks you should take some time off school,” Her eyes water. There’s a lot of pollen in the air this time of year. When I hear my mother call the college president ‘Director’, I know this is all a dream.

My mother shakes me awake. “You keep falling asleep. You should get checked for mono or something.”

I ask her if she’s already told me the story of her doll Rosalind.

“Rosalina,” She corrects.

It’s raining outside, the streets are sprayed with slickness, the slight sound of water washing away makes us seem more tired than we really are. I think of the silhouette washing off into drainpipes. Even though it’s raining, it’s still hot out. Now everything is humid, melting, and slipping away. I think of the Director’s face dripping through the square slats of a street drain. My mother sits on the edge of the bed seeming concerned, “Why did you do this?”

For a moment, I can’t remember what it was I did. Then I remember. “Did you write the article?”

“I didn’t,” She picks up a pillow on my bed and squeezes it.

“Why not?”

“Because the article would have been about you.”

The forecast says it will be cold outside, so I wrap myself in a blanket from my dorm. The title of this concrete college is stitched into the wool. There is warmth in naming, after all. Before I go out, I make sure that I send my article to the editor of the school newspaper. It’s well written and believable. It’s about a girl who’s dead now. Then I drag the doll out behind me. Her body wilts the second I can no longer hold her up with both arms. She’s a swan with a broken neck. A dead swan is piteously beautiful. Maybe that should have been the title of my article, cheesy as it is. I wonder what my mother’s article will be called. Perhaps something along the lines of, LUNATIC STAGES DOLL’S MURDER. Then after she writes it, maybe I’ll tell her I am the lunatic and she’ll have an objective understanding of me, detached from the bias of motherhood. The doll is so heavy in my arms, but I don’t want to keep dragging her behind me. Her skin is roughed up by pebbles. She helps me remember what scrapes felt like as a child falling from a bicycle or rollerblading without kneepads. She helps me to remember. The night gets warmer and the blanket no longer feels like a comforting name, but a burden. I keep having dreams that seem so real, but in this moment, I can tell that I am awake. When I get to the quad, I hear an electric buzzing. It makes the night seem sadder and duller than I would have hoped. The weather is turning to summer. I splay the arms out. The doll’s elbow makes a backwards ‘L’ against the concrete. My chest hurts because when you mourn for someone you cry a lot. Sometimes crying feels like a heart attack, which is stupid because there is no defibrillator. The fake blood seeps from the middle of the doll’s chest. Pouring it reminds me of when I was little and I would spill my sister’s India ink all over everything. Now I can hear my sister yelling how I wasted her ink.

It takes awhile before everything is finished, mostly because I save some time to step back and watch the fake blood tadpole down plastic. I kneel down and scribble a note, tucking it by the crease of the doll’s elbow. The night is so hot; everyone must be melting in bed. I should go back to sleep now, but this time, without a blanket. ④



REBECCA BELL-GURWITZ is an aspiring psychologist and writer based in Queens, NY. She writes stories with a surrealist slant, prose that reads like poetry and poetry that reads more like fiction. Currently she is working on a “longer piece” masquerading as a novel about—what else—a dysfunctional family. If you read something you like here, be sure to check out her portfolio and blog, www.springironwritings.tumblr.com. Any questions or concerns should be directed to rbellgurwitz@gmail.com. No actual dolls were harmed in the making of this story.



Our Lawn Was Dying

Ron Burch

It was mostly brown with a few strands of green here and there and seemed like it happened over night. Mandy and I didn't know what to do. It was a rental that we shared. We left messages with the landlord but he didn't return any of our calls. Our house was a small and blue one story with a tiny brick chimney out front. The house you could walk by for a year and then suddenly realize it's there.

What're we going to do about the lawn? she asked.

I don't think we can let it die.

We went to the hardware store and bought a couple green hoses and those yellow sprinklers that swayed back and forth like they're dancing. We scattered them across the lawn and turned them on at dusk. We sat on the front step and watched the water rain down.

I hope this works, Mandy said. I nodded.

We let them go all night. And then during the next week but it didn't seem to get better. The brown increased.

What should we do next? she asked.

We consulted the Internet.

It mentioned aerating the lawn.

What does that mean?

Means punching holes in it so it can breathe or something, Mandy replied.

I took a screwdriver out to the front yard and jammed it into the ground, pulled it out, and jammed it in a few inches away. Mandy, a beer in her hand, watched from the step.

That'll take forever, she said.

You're telling me.

They have shoes.

I'm wearing shoes.

No, she replied, shoes with metal on the bottoms so you can do it that way.

I stopped sticking the screwdriver in the yard. That would look really stupid to the neighbors, I said.

I bet the hardware store has something.

At the hardware store, I bought this device that rolled and had spiked tips and supposedly punctured the ground.

I had doubts but Mandy thought it would work.

It didn't really. The holes weren't deep enough unless I really leaned into it. Together Mandy and I rolled it slowly across the yard. We waited a week but that wasn't working either. The sun just beat on the grass and the green evaporated more.

The neighbors next door came by. Older couple in their 50s. His name was Jim or John and I didn't even know his wife's name. We exchanged names once but I'd forgotten. At night, after their dinner, their son played his drums in his room for 20 minutes. It only bothered Mandy because their son wasn't that good but I didn't care. Mandy and I couldn't have kids so we never knew what our neighbors' son's name was.

Your lawn is dying, Jim or John said.

I nodded.

Something wrong with it, he said.

Jim or John kicked at it a few times. His wife was punching at her phone.

Your lawn is nice, I said. Jim or John's lawn was bright green, fresh, looking like it had just been put down and painted to make it shine.

Yeah, he replied, maybe you need some fertilizer.

Is that what you do?

Yeah, I guess, he replied. His wife tapped him on his arm and pointed at her phone.

Good luck, Jim or John said and they walked back to

their house.

We could try fertilizer, I said.

Mandy didn't say anything. She was looking at her shoe. What?

She scraped her shoe on the cement. I don't think it's going to work.

Why not? I asked.

I think it's already dead.

Not dead yet, I said.

She shrugged and went inside.

I went to the hardware store by myself and bought fertilizer. I followed the directions and sprinkled it on the lawn, not over doing it so it didn't burn the lawn. Mandy watched from the bedroom window and moved away, the curtain falling where she had been.

She didn't come outside. The TV set was on and I could hear TV laughter coming from inside.

I wanted her to come out here and sit with me. Help me figure out, the two of us together, figure out what was wrong with our dying lawn, but she silently sat in the house as the TV continued.

I laid down in the grass, and I knew that if I could just get Mandy out here, if we could sit together and search together, we could find an answer but all I got was the TV laughing from the house as the sharp, dead shards of the lawn scraped my legs and arms, leaving marks and eventually drawing blood that wouldn't help it ever grow. ⌚

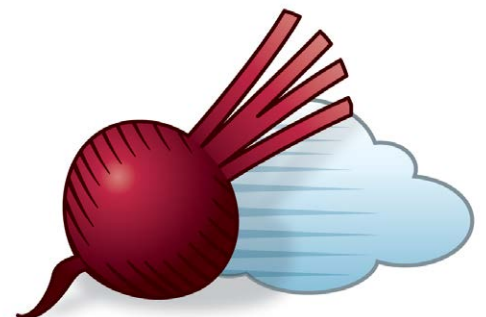


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the soul

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John M. Bennett 3.2.14





The Eleventh Finger

Shira Feder

There was a man who had an act. He named each one of his ten fingers. Each hand was a family. On the pad of each finger there was a tattoo of a squashed grinning face with unblinking eyes. There was Dad and Mom and Carmichael and Ashley and Joe and Mom and Dad and Jennifer and Goodwin and Monique. He bent his fingers at the knuckle when one of the family members was talking. He reminded people a lot of an octopus.

It was scary, how life-like his show was. It made reviewers spill their coffee and caused little kids whose parents mistook the act for a puppet show to sob hysterically. At the end of every show, the man would theatrically select someone from the audience to come up on stage with him and choose which hand he wanted to shake. The handshake would be a firm, brisk pump and then the man would leave.

The families fought a lot, but fun fights, jokey tiffs, little discussions that deviated into arguments. Each member had a distinct personality. One dad was always wasted. One

daughter was always reading. Joe was always out of it.

You would go home and think, how does that man do it? How can he go home and sleep in a bed with his hands next to him? How do you maintain the care and keeping of ten individual fingers? Wherever he goes, they go. This man is never alone. Maybe in the beginning that was how he wanted it, maybe he needed to have some sidekicks, but now, now that he's making good money with this traveling show, that he has a bed and a refrigerator and a bookcase, maybe he wants them to leave so he could be by himself for a while but they can't because they are part of him. Maybe they don't want to be there either, living on a hand, clutching on the very fringes of existing temporarily, seeming real for forty-five minutes every week, with thinly sketched personalities and artificial dialogue. This poor guy, he couldn't even boss them around anymore, he was so tired. He just wanted to go back to the tattoo parlor five years ago and tell the guy to only do one hand. Or do the toes instead. How could he take care of people that he willed into existence? People that

made him want to burn his finger pads off like criminals do so they can't be traced. He just wanted to fold his arms without hearing comments, to jack off alone in his room, to hold something without feeling like he was hurting them...

I met this man. I shook his hand and it felt like ten mouths were trying to bite me. I knew him better than I want to admit here. He slapped me in the face once. He liked to be tied up during sex so his hands weren't involved. He ate mostly liquids instead of solids. He would drink through striped straws with the cup sitting on the table. I bought him a squiggly blue straw for his birthday and he looked at me with a paranoid look as if he was just realizing that I noticed things and wondering what else I had noticed.

That night ended in the bathroom. I crept up on him. He was furiously scrubbing away at his hands with bleach. His hands were scratched up and bleeding. His head was rested low and his eyes were closed. For a moment I thought he was dead. Everything seemed to be leaking out of him, leaving a bare skeleton behind. Bodily fluids, emotions, knowledge all seemed to be drifting away from him.

"Hey," I whispered, hugging him from behind. "What are you doing?"

That was when I was slapped so hard I fell into the bathtub. I would like to say I never saw him again but I went back a few times. I liked lying in the darkness of his living room floor with him and his ten fingers, feeling like part of a club, a secret society that had made room for me for reasons I didn't understand. I liked the way he licked my hands, from nails to knuckles to palms. I liked his oily black curls. I liked his shiny white teeth and the way he seemed to glow in the dark. I mostly just liked the fact that he liked me. He told me it was a birthday ritual, that every year he scrubbed his hands to death and took a month off performing. Telling me this was his way of apologizing. His hands now made me flinch like they did to everyone else. "I never thought you would come back," he told me. "Why did you come back?" Was that question rhetorical? Well, it was just as rhetorical as the question I just asked. It was open to interpretation, like everything else. I interpreted it as rhetorical. It had already ended, the brief détente, that dalliance between two unlikely creatures, that mess of stupidity I thought was love. I wasn't really back. Most of me was back in my apartment. I gave him the bare minimum, like an angry ghost, and

floated in and out of his bedroom, took my stuff with me and was gone.

It wasn't a hand fetish. It was the things people do to avoid being alone. He liked to rest his head on my shoulder while I was standing and making him dinner. I would have stayed there forever if he wanted me to. I was never scared of him but my love was corrupted by pity. I spit on his doorstep when I left for the last time. I was the oddity to him. I wiped my naked hand across my dripping mouth and wiped my other naked hand across my leaking, dripping

eyes. I squeezed my eyes shut and bowed my head and rested in that position for a time. I could see why he had slapped me. I would slap someone who interrupted me like this also. He was only human.

If I had friends they would have been shocked. If I had a fun mom that I shared a friendly rapport with she would have insisted on calling the police. If I had people tattooed on my hands they could have kept me some hollow company as I lay alone in my bed and tried to be my old self again. If I had a brother he would have killed this guy for me. If I had a

twin sister she would have hugged me as I cried and let me soak her pink angora sweater with snotty tears. If I had a cat, even just a stupid cat, it would have curled up in my lap and reminded me that life goes on. If I had a dog I would have let it sleep in my bed. All I had was some notebooks and a squiggly straw. Someone should have materialized. Someone should have wrapped their arms around me from behind and whispered, "Are you okay?" even though they already knew the answer. Someone should have been there. Instead I walked downstairs to the corner grocery and bought a carton of orange juice as the clerk glared at me for not having exact change, then sat down on the sidewalk and began to drink it with that straw. I looked like a bum. This was how people became bums. I wondered if I had it in me to get another job. I took my phone and dialed my mother's number. I still knew it by heart. ☹



SHIRA FEDER is a human woman, native New Yorker and second year Bar Ilan University English Lit student. She spent a lot of time trying to think of a witty thing to scribble here but she found herself at a loss.



Fish Tacos

Kelsey Goudie

Every time Jake and I wanted some more Adderall back in college we'd go down to the old fishing pier that sat next to our apartment and order fish tacos. Do you want them fried, grilled, or blackened, old Betty would say in her southern twang. And what that meant was 10 mg, 20 mg, or 30 mg? And we would always say blackened because that was 30 and we would take them and fly as high as those kites. You know, the ones you see the tourists fly down on Atlantic Avenue in the summer months? Yes, you must. So picture us, as high as those tourist's kites, hanging out in our rundown apartment, and in walks Constance, some chick Jake had been seeing. I told Jake early on to abort mission, but he liked her awkwardness and he said she was good in bed and I could tell he liked her. So she walked in, without knocking, and plopped down on the couch. She asked what we were doing and before either one of us could answer she immediately started talking about herself. I had to bite my tongue until it bled and then I started biting the sides of

my mouth because I wanted to talk so bad but I couldn't because she was talking about her roommate and her classes and her experience at Target earlier in the day. She wouldn't stop talking. Jesus, Jake, I said, did you give her one of our Adderall's? He said no and laughed and she laughed and said no and then she kept talking about Target.

So a couple hours after that Jake all of the sudden got really hammered—drunk. I'm not sure if he was really hammered or if it was the Adderall wearing off, but he started nodding his head and falling all over Constance. She would then laugh in that cutesy too-good-for-anyone laugh and push him off of her and onto the couch. After that happened twice I told her I was going for a walk and, of course, she wanted to come so I said okay.

When we got down to the sidewalk there was an old man walking his Jack Russell or maybe it was a lab puppy (it was dark). But anyway, we started walking past the old man and Constance didn't say a word and when I asked her if she thought the old man's dog was a Jack Russell or

a lab puppy she shrugged her shoulders so I didn't push it any farther. She walked next to me and kept up and after a while I started to notice that she was mimicking my foot movements. If I stepped with my right foot she would over-step to make sure her right foot would land on the pavement at the same time as mine. The same thing would happen with the left foot. I found myself starting to shuffle my feet more so she wouldn't know when I would put my foot down and she would have to just land her foot on the ground because if she didn't she would fall. We played this game for about five minutes before she asked me if I wanted to cross over the road and go sit on the beach and because I had nothing better to do I said okay.

The wind was honking from the northeast and it seemed like every place I turned my head the sand was swatting me in the face, but when I looked at Constance she seemed pretty content and she actually acted like the sand wasn't hitting her at all so I figured I should act like it didn't bother me either. We sat down in the dry sand surrounded by the same silence that had been following us all the way from the apartments. For a minute I thought she tried to reach for my hand but then I realized that she was only reaching to her side to pull the edge of her shorts down.

Her dark hair was being blown back by the wind and it seemed to wash away any kind of uncertainties she had. This made me want to kiss her. I didn't want to kiss her for any other reason but for the fact that she looked so perfect in that moment with the wind and all. So anyway, I turned away and she turned the opposite way. I only knew this because I could feel the wind redirect itself as she turned her body. We just sat there. Sat there with our backs to one another and probably both thinking about the fact that our backs were up against the other's. I felt the sand between

us move as she grabbed my right arm and squeezed it and asked me if I wanted to go swimming. Swimming, I asked, in this wind, I asked again, and she said yes so we went.

We both walked slowly out into the water as the waves crashed just at our ankles at first but then we kept walking. Further and further. Before I knew it we were neck deep and she slid her arms around my shoulders and straddled her legs around my hips. This was the first time I felt like a woman had ever needed me. She couldn't let go or she would slip away and I had to plant my feet firmly into the mud or I would let go of her. I was holding her and the friction between us was all we needed in that moment. I knew it was something that would only be able to happen there—in the ocean, and I think a part of me was trying to hold onto that moment for as long as I could make a moment last. We didn't kiss if you're wondering. I knew she could tell I was getting turned on by her body straddling me because every couple of seconds she would look me dead in the eyes and laugh in her cutesy too-good-for-anyone laugh and then I guess she got tired of me not kissing her so she removed herself from my body and started walking back towards the beach. When I called her name she didn't turn around and when I finally reached the beach she was nowhere to be found.

I walked, soaking wet, back to my apartment and took off all of my clothes except my bra and underwear. I sat down on my cold sheets. Through the loud plumbing and drunks upstairs I heard Constance and Jake having sex. The younger college kids were screaming fish names at the marina glass window because they had heard if they said a fish name they would get some Adderall. Constance's silhouette on the beach was burnt into my eyelids as I closed them and drifted off to sleep. ☹



KELSEY GOUDIE earned her M.A. in Writing from Coastal Carolina University in 2013, then decided to head back to the Washington, D.C. area to spend some quality time with her fiction. Kelsey is currently a first year MFA candidate at George Mason University where she spends her time writing and enjoying ridiculous puns.

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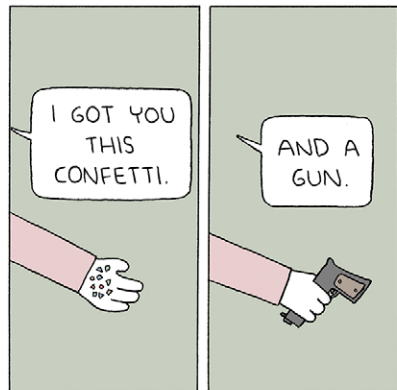
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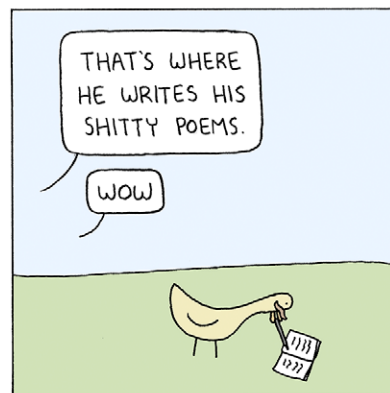
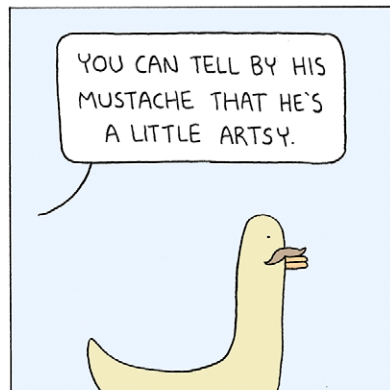
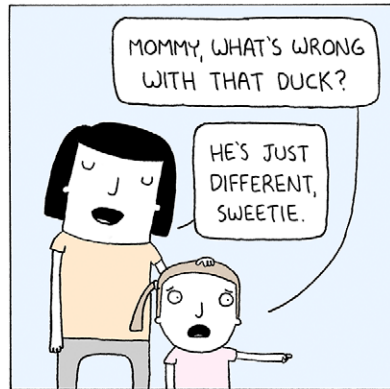
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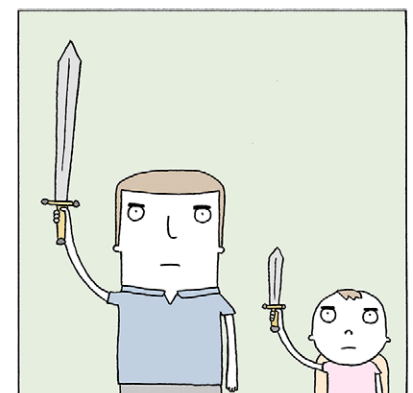
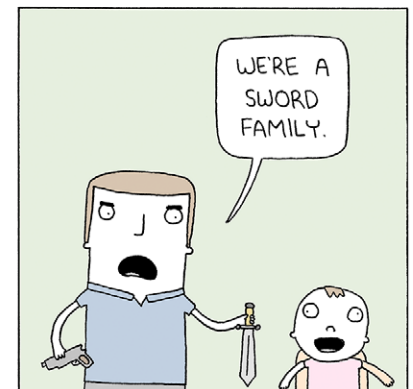
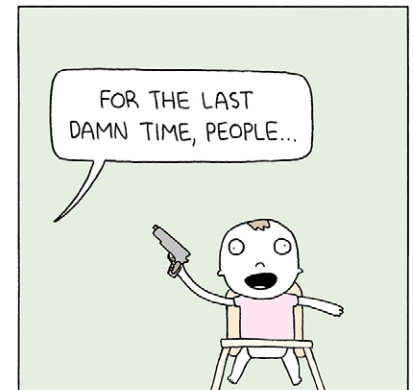
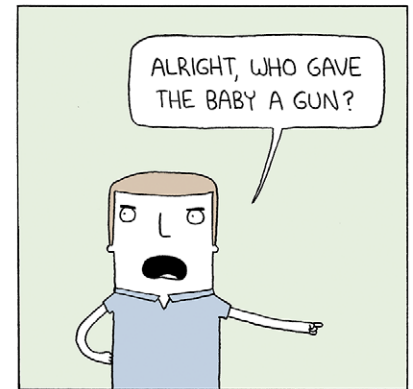
HOPE FOR THE BEST



ART DUCK



GUN BABY





The Fig Eater

Jacquelynn Gothard

You are sitting alone in a blue chair under a bright light. You have eaten all of the figs. Not just all of the figs from the bowl on the coffee table, but all of the figs from the drawer in the fridge and the tree in the back yard, and even all of the jars of preserves left on a shelf above the tool bench in your neighbor's garage, and now they'll call the police. You'll be doubled over and you will sweat, and the police will catch you huddled in a corner with your face all smeared. But the police won't understand. And you will be taken into a station and you will be charged with petty larceny. And trespassing. And a third thing. But you won't hear it through the throbbing in your ears.

I might be able to outrun them, you think. But they might shoot, and that would suck, but only because I'm so backed up; I don't care if they kill me, I just hope I can shit again. And just then a woman from the audience at a play about a woman who ate all of the figs steps onto the stage and slaps all of the fruit off the face of The Fig Eater. You and the woman note the audience, stunned and silent, and say to The Fig Eater: These are not things to be said out loud. But the player says, You know I am not The Fig Eater, that's just what is written, and that's just my job, to just say what is written. At this point you step forward through a swath of fog and say, I'm sorry, what is my role in this scene? And the player stands up, revealing his stilts, and you accuse him of impersonating a police officer; but this piece has already gone on too long.

Used up paragraphs ago and weary now, resting. So the stilts stay standing, and the woman stays standing, and The Fig Eater too, all standing next to this blue chair. 🌀



JACQUELYNN GOTHARD was born and raised in Sacramento, California. She loves the world and everything in it and is generally happy with her lot. Currently, Gothard is living in Oakland and working on her M.F.A at Mills College.



38

Mitchell Grabois

1.

The president thinks he can keep the oceans from rising, that he can stem the tide of violence, but every time there's a hint of change, ten million rabid morons rush out to stock up on assault rifles, and millions of children do their homework, go to school, and think they're safe.

The world will end any day now, as the Bible says, or as the Mayans predicted, or as aliens telegraphed.

2.

After I retired, I married a thirty-eight year old. She's sexually insatiable, wears me out. I nap a lot. I figure on an average day, I sleep twelve, thirteen hours.

While she's at work, I shop at the nearby King Sooper, prepare simple dinners, tidy up the place. I spend the rest of my time on Facebook. I've acquired thousands of friends. On Facebook, I pretend to be a quadriplegic, paralyzed in the process of saving children from a crazed gunman in a McDonald's. I tackled him and my head hit the corner of a booth. My spine snapped. In the meantime, other men subdued the gunman, tied him up with belts and bootlaces.

I once had a quadriplegic friend. We sat in his kitchen with his smelly Airedale and drank vodka. He married a former ballet dancer. On their van was a handicapped sticker and a Capezio bumper-sticker that read: I'd rather be dancing. I learned a lot from him about being quadriplegic, about how being disabled isn't as bad as you might think if you have the right attitude, a loving wife, and good friend with whom you can drink vodka. ↻



MITCHELL KROCKMALNIK GRABOIS has had over six hundred of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for work published in 2012, 2013, and 2014. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition. He lives in Denver.



Jill, Perhaps Not

Matthew Brister

Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water. On the way up, Jill noticed a dog, a mangy little mutt, and forgot all about her brother and the well and the water and the sloshing and all of a sudden, none of those things existed anymore. In fact, there wasn't even a hill, there was just Jill and the mutt and a ball in her hand that hadn't been there before, but she didn't dare question it. Her mind wouldn't let her question it, because if she did, then maybe half the hill would come back, and maybe the lower half of her brother, and that just wouldn't do at all because what good is a human who only has a lower half? So she didn't question the ball, but merely threw it, hoping the dog would race down the hill, but not in the least bit surprised when he crossed the street in order to retrieve it.

Bark. Bark. He barks, the sound slightly muffled by the little fronds of the tennis ball sitting comfortably in his mouth. He's happy, at least he looks happy, but you can never know with a dog that doesn't speak a human language. But then again, you can never know with a human who speaks a human language. So maybe Jill was happy when the mutt brought the ball back, maybe she wasn't, but all anyone really knows is that she smiled and the rain stopped and the sun came back out. Bright yellow sun with no clouds and maybe a pimple or two because, let's face it, the sun is growing older and that happens to everyone when they grow older. Jill laughs at the sentiment, or maybe the dog, and throws the ball again, little strings of saliva still clinging to her fingertips as the ball sails through the air.

Where did the dog go? One moment it was running after the ball, the next it was kicking its hind legs with her brother, who surely didn't exist anymore, or if he did exist, he was a raindrop or a blade of grass or maybe the west wind blowing, rattling the wind chimes and making them sing. Opera, Jill thought, they sounded like as they called out the wind's arrival. Such a peculiar sound that nothing really did make sense when they stopped and the world was silent.

Silence was something Jill disliked very much. She enjoyed laughing, or at least she assumed she did, because when she laughed she felt her heart flutter. Oh, there her heart goes, soaring off into the distance and now Jill is kicking her feet with her brother, and perhaps she doesn't exist either. Or

if she does exist, she's a tennis ball sailing through the air, being caught by a mangy mutt, and being ran back to the girl who threw it. Jill pets the dog's head, happy that it is happy, and happy that it likes barking and catching the ball and bringing it back, so obediently. Obedience is nice, it is the gift that keeps giving, and not having to train a dog is one of the greatest, most elusive gifts that mankind has been racing after. And how fortuitous that someone like Jill should be able to find that gift and utilize it for her own good. Maybe one more throw of the ball, she thinks.

She decides against it, opting instead to change the channel and see if anything else is on. The program with the girl and the dog and the ball is getting old, and, frankly, boring, and she needs a bit more of a thrill in her life. She sighs and pets the head of the dog sitting next to the easy chair, a gaudy thing with blue velvet and an enormous pillow colored the distinctive tint of stained piss. How long ago was that channel? She attempts to go back down, to surf in reverse, but any good surfer will tell you that surfing in reverse is impossible, and the waves will surely eat you up like a good bran muffin. Waves are unrelenting like that, whether they be water waves or TV waves. And Jill sighs, suddenly realizing she misses the channel but deciding to go on anyway.

Maybe the stupid TV needs to be repaired. She calls her mother, but her mother doesn't answer. Maybe her mother doesn't exist either, just like her brother who never existed doesn't exist anymore, or maybe they both exist, but the upper half of her mother is situated on the lower half of her brother, and the image is so absurd it causes Jill to laugh. Uncomfortably? The dog perks his head up and drops the ball at Jill's feet, and she throws it again, smiling now, and wondering why she hears the sound of waves far off in the distance. She never planned on going to the beach today, but maybe she should, maybe she should get in her car and just drive. But she doesn't want to remember that the roads exist, or else she'll have to get in that car and drive them when she could just stay and play with the dog and have a good time.

Somewhere, a microwave goes off. ⑥



MATTHEW BRISTER is a junior in the creative writing program at Western Washington University, overlooking the bay and marina. When they aren't writing fiction or poetry, they enjoy coming up with far too many novel fragments in their head, voice acting, and continuing to convert all the blood in their body to pure soda.



Boricua City

Melissa Castillo-Garsow

If you had told me six months ago my life was gonna end up like this, in witness protection out in bum fuck middle of nowhere surrounded by a bunch of crackers, I would've laughed my big fat Boricua ass off and said *así tú estás loco papi* but here I am, stuck in a city I never heard of where the cable package doesn't even offer univisión and the people at the grocery store look at me like I'm Mexican when I ask where the platanos are. They're like regular bananas, but green. So when my case manager Julie asks me how come I lost another job, I just tell her straight up—they crackers ain't never met a *chica* from the ghetto and they scared. So anytime I say something like trying to relate and shit like how I understand losing a grandma cuz my family is all locked up or dead they look at me like I'm gonna hit them, or rob them, or try and sell them drugs. And *then* my case worker reminds me that I was a drug dealer and I say I know that but it doesn't mean they got to look at me that way. I mean even if they haven't seen a Puerto Rican before, haven't they at least seen a J-lo video? Everyone knows J-lo. And she went out with Puff Daddy and was at a shooting and no one looks at her like a criminal. I mean I grew up on the 6 too. So then my case worker says that maybe they're reacting to my attitude and I say what FUCKING attitude, the street attitude that kept me alive or the attitude that made me strong enough to take down the drug dealer that sold my lil bro the bad coke that made him overdose at 15 and landed me in this program so I could make their federal case. So then she just sighs and says I wish you would just leave the ghetto behind and why aren't I happy to be outta the ghetto? And I just get up and walk away. *Bitch*. How can I be happy about leaving the ghetto? It's my home. It's who I am.

Pero first things first. My name is Yris Colón Romero and I grew up on 114th and 2nd Ave. That's what the white people call Spanish Harlem or East Harlem. Yeah, where the spics are, not the niggers. *Nosotros*, well we just call

it El Barrio and it's everything you probably think it is—littered sidewalks, rundown buildings, fried food spots, bodegas, street venders, drug dealers, welfare, and public housing. But it's more. It's *cultura*. When I was growing up, you could eat the best boricua food up in el Barrio—pollo rostizado, mofongo, pasteles—it felt as if my family had never left the island. Not that I've ever been to the island, but that's what my mami always said. See my mami got knocked up and ran away with my papi, and never looked back. *Por qué?* It's not like abuelito was every gonna talk to her again, apparently his grudges were legendary and the mofongo here was almost as good as abuelas, or at least that's what she told herself. So as far as my brother and me knew growing up everything Boricua here was just like the island, but better—think *West Side Story* I like to live in America, landia of opportunity mentality.

Now the neighborhood's changed a bit, new people coming in, some of the old timers leaving but I don't really mind. I am definitely not Mexican, but the tamales la Señora sells on 116th. She gets me every time and she knows it. I can still see her chuckling every time I came back a second time in one day - wrapped up in her bright rebozo, a kaleidoscope of oranges, yellows, pinks and greens, her little cart steaming from the tamales and atole, her wrinkled hand fumbling around in her pockets for change. *Te lo dije que regresaras para lo dulce*. She knew I would come back for the sweet pineapple kind. Some days I just give in to la dieta T—Tacos, tamales, tortas—those damn Mexicans. But *cultura* is more than food you know. My mother still wakes up and plays Tito Puente, Willie Colon and Celia (*nunca puedes olvidar la reina* she sings), as if she was still going to the Copacabana on Saturday nights with my father. She would take her broom out and slide across the floor like all the other middle aged women in the towers who have lost their husbands to drugs, jail or just to having kids like my father who one day just packed up and walked away. *Nunca quería todo esto, esta responsabilidad*.

As if she had wanted two children before the age of 21. Yeah that's right, she followed my no good father pregnant at 16.

Up in El Barrio, we got two kinds of men. We got the men who come home every night and kiss their wives and play with their kids and we got the men who hang out in the streets. For them la calle is everything. I know this first hand, cuz my baby bro, Luciano, we used to call him Luce for short was one of those homeboys that became a street man and I couldn't do nothing to stop it. Nada. I didn't even know it happened. All I know is I was 20 and I'd finally moved away from home, yeah it was just two blocks up but it didn't matter I was still on my own and I was so wrapped up in my first semester, you see somehow this ghetto sister got into Pratt for my drawings. I'd been doing them since I was a kid, but I'd never thought they'd take me anywhere until Mrs. Stevens in the 11th grade told me I had talent. Even then I didn't listen to her but later on, after I'd been barely making ends meet working in one clothing store or the next I stopped by my old school, Park East over on 105th. Art class with Mrs. Stevens was the same as always—see Art class was hoochie central. All the girls there were pregnant, delinquent or other and took that class because they knew Mrs. Stevens was a softie and would pass them all cuz art is subjective. That means they can't tell you it's bad, even if it's a stick figure. So anyways I roll up and the class is going crazy cuz there's a new cutie up in there and they all trying to have his baby and Mrs. Stevens is a mess, her dark brown hair tangled and dry and in need of my girl Thalia's magic split-end conditioner and she's trying to clean some paint off her dress, another in a long line of floral print dresses I swear my abuelita used to mass produce in some sweatshop. The entire time I'm just laughing to myself, but funny thing is she looks happy to see me, even though I wasn't much better than these hoes.

Yris! She says it's so good to see you. And I say it's good to see you too, Mrs. Stevens and then we're quiet. And then I ask her if it's really true that you can go to college to draw and she says yes you can, that's what she went to school for. And so I say could I go to college to draw and she smiles so big I think she's the one who's applying to college and she says she thinks I could. And then I say but I don't want to be an Art teacher. And she says that's ok. If Mrs. Stevens knew how I didn't even finish my first year after she spent a whole year trying to help me get into Pratt, I don't know if she'll ever take a chance on a hood rat again, much less a Boricua hood rat. I think the word is that I went to jail for dealing, or died. But you can still check me out if you're around El Barrio. I got that mural on 117th and 2nd—the big one with la virgen surrounded by every color you could imagine and the word esperanza. Yeah I had hope then. And I also drew the girls on 122nd and Pleasant. What a sucka I was. All those little girls of different colors holding hands and playing peacefully in the hood. Not a care in the world, like I used to be before Luce.

That one took us two months to sketch and then paint at night. Yeah, Luce was always my assistant growing up, handing me my brushes, mixing the paint and keeping look out for the five-o. But even outside painting, it never bothered me to have my baby brother follow me around. We didn't have familia or primos or any one else to form a group with so we formed our own. Me, Luce and my

girl Thalia. How funny was that though when he started crushing on her? I think that lasted ni un minuto before she slapped him upside the head for pendejo. But anyways you better believe we watched out for each other, like the time when Luce stepped in to protect me from Johnny Rivera cuz I didn't want to go out with his ghetto, low life gang banging ass. Everyone knew he had sex with girls and then passed 'em on to his friends like a used pipa.

What you gonna do bout it school boy, Johnny said, pushing Luce back. I was so scared then cuz I was only 16 and Luce was 11 and barely over 100 pounds trying to man up to three boys each twice his size. Leave him alone! I screamed and Johnny comes back to me and grabs my wrist. And then Luce whips out a can of spray paint and catches Johnny in the eye, who drops my wrist before we book it over to the Laundromat where my mom worked a few blocks away.

Damn Luce. Even then you were quick on your feet and wise beyond your years. The man of the house and half the Colón Squad. I swear most of the graffiti you see around the hood was us beautifying our surroundings. Coño Luce! You're the one who told me I should pursue art, that Mrs. Stevens wasn't crazy when she said I could go to college that I had to ignore mami when she said it was a waste of time. Coño, we were in it together.

Pero eso se acabó. You see, it went down like this. I'm at school—Pratt, not the hoe class - in figure drawing. But wait, can I just tell you how crazy them crackers is again? They actually pay someone to stand there naked so we can draw them. Damn, if I had that kinda money to spare... Ni te puedes imaginar... Bueno, probablemente lo puedes imaginar—BBQ y baile y cervezas all the way! But listen, I'm sketching and my phone blares up Wisin and Yandel and it's my mami and I know it's gotta be important because she never even used the cell phone I gave her before. When I would try and show her how to use it she'd just say aye mija porque desperdicias tu dinero en estas cosas. And I try and tell her it's not a waste what if she has an emergency, but she just says that's why she has Luce with her. But Luce isn't there anymore and neither am I so I hope she finally learned how to use it. Just in case. Hazme caso mami, una vez, hazme caso. When I saw my mom's number on my phone my heart stopped beating cuz I'd been paying for the family plan for six months and she'd never used it, I didn't even care that the entire class was looking at me like crazy and my teacher was starting me down. I would have put the stuck up bicha in her place, but I didn't have time. I just answered the phone, right then and there. Mami que pasó. Silence. Mami que paso dime que pasó. Es tu hermano. Está en el hospital. Pero que pasó mami? No sé, Yris. No entiendo. La enfermera me dijo que fue un sobredosis. An overdose? Mami, voy p'allá. Just stay there. By then, everyone's really looking at me and I turn and scream mind your own fucking business! I left my easel, supplies, everything and ran out of the room. That was the last time I ever went to art class too. I grabbed a cab but by the time I got to 120th they were pulling a sheet over his head and my mom was still asking me what a sobredosis was. I told her I didn't know, because I didn't know how my 15 year old baby brother got such a fucked up mix of heroin and coke that his heart gave out. My little brother who'd never

been in trouble once, who always minded my mother, who always went to school. He was one of the home men. The good ones. Uno de los buenos.

• • •

I always knew when summer was here because memorial day mami would pack us up with her car that we only really used to go to Orchard and drives us up past south Bronx, beyond Pellam parkway and the end of the six, to where the Bronx is beautiful landscaped parks and greenery just like central park pero more inviting. It would take her an hour just to park and Luce would sit there pouting because he hated going, but I always loved it. I would sit in the front and Luce in the back reading with our overflow from the lawn chairs, umbrella, cooler with cerveza for mami and Kool aid for us, pollo rostizado, ensalada de papa, potato chips and sandia. We would take blankets and towels, mami always took a change of clothes, and two pairs of chancletas—one for the beach and one for dancing later. And the boom box. We could never go to the beach without the boom box and mami's CD case over flowing with Hector Lavoe, Celia, Fania All-Stars, Elvis Crespo y more. From Memorial Day on every Sunday was Orchard Beach—Luce staying pale in the shade reading and mami and I becoming golden brown and then café con leche brown and then morena brown, her flirting with the single fathers and divorcees, me with the boys from my school who were there every weekend with their families anyway.

They call it chocha beach. It is marked by landscaped flowers and filled with los boricuas y morenas de Nueva York. But these are not the Latinos of the age of Shakira, JLo or Ricky Martin before he was gay. Orchard Beach is cellulite, wrinkles and fat dimples. It is styrofoam cups, faded tattoos and beer bellies for men in their 40s and above who still huddle in posses around their boom boxes painted with the Puerto Rican flag and check out the passing women. It is women with knit dresses and tiny bikinis would never think to cover years of high fat diets and multiple pregnancies. This ain't South Beach baby.

Pero, como las camisas dicen Orchard is the "riviera del Bronx." Warring music, gold chains, fanny packs, fake nails and fried food is also on the Beach with New York's softest sand, most convenient concessions, and live salsa concerts. Spanglish, street speak and profanities float above the lap of gentle waves, the happy cries of children, and the hum of grills. Orchard is a place where families go—playgrounds for when you're little, basketball courts for the boys, conciertos y bebidas for the adults.

The first time we went there was with mi papi, the three of us, the familia that we were for those few short years before mami got pregnant again and papi decided two kids was too much responsabilidad. Papi decided to take us there for my fourth party. So mami made me pink frosted chocolate cupcakes that matched my pink polka dotted one-piece and we piled into the car, a red Nova that got stolen the year later and got replaced by a gray used Volkswagen that I always worried was gonna break down any minute. Papi en su "uniforme"—fitted jeans, a black tucked in black shirt and a gold chain—dragged our brand new cooler down the runway as him and mami already arguing fought over the best location to set up our chairs and umbrella. But I didn't care. We never did anything as

a family. I was always following after my papi, sure that the reason we were always in la calle was because my mami was always nagging him about this and that. I wasn't old enough to understand that all she wanted was money for groceries or that when the electricity went off it was because she had stayed quiet for once and he spent all the money meant for utilities.

Pero, that day we were happy. I ate three cupcakes and played in the water and my parents mellowed by hours in the sun and countless cervezas complimented my sand castle and attempts to draw in the arena. That evening was the last time I saw them dance together, but that memory—my mother glowing from exertion of the endless turns my father threw at her—is why I can never fault my mother for falling in love with a no good numbers runner.

"Cuanto años tiene?"

There are no more salsa concerts at Orchard Beach. The stage stands empty, a reminder of my childhood and the one day of happiness my family shared. So now I am at the other end of the beach, a DJ spins salsa now by lot 5.

"Viente-dos."

The man, a graying Moreno holding the beer looks me up and down. "Soy Tomás, dominicano de San Cristobal."

I nod and turn back to watch the dancing. My mami is center stage again, waist length hair swaying back and forth over her bright pink top, cut-off jeans and three inch platforms. Since she first got coaxed onto the dance floor over an hour ago, by a viejito with a Puerto Rican jersey shirt she hasn't been without a partner since. Two years ago I would've been out there even though most of jvenes hang out on the beach, but I'm mesmerized by my mami. She looks younger and happier than ever. She spins twice and her partner, a middle aged papi chulo covered just by army fatigue shorts and thirty years of tattoos drops to the floor for a push up before jumping up and re-partnering. I laugh, wave to Tomás and turn to walk down the boardwalk. This is no longer my scene.

I can't tell if Orchard Beach seems so different because I'm older or the beach has changed. It's been two years now since Luce's death, a year since I testified against the dealers that sold Luce the shit dope and a month since I've been back to New York.

I walk back to the beach and dig my feet into the sand. There are no more salsa concerts and Orchard Beach, and not all of the concession stands are open anymore, but it's the same soft sand I always used to love. The water is still fishy and stinky and littered with trash you have to dodge like coke bottles and pampers.

"I saved you," I hear and turn to see a woman in her 50s boom in a loud voice. She's wearing a black strapless bikini, her long pink nails holding a Coors Light. "I saved you, otherwise you would have a record. If your brother had listened to me he would have that felony right now.... Hell no, I told that bitch."

"Same Orchard," I whisper to myself.

I walk back to the entrance, where the barren stage lies and walk up the stairs. These are the stairs Luce and me used to wait for my mother on, complaining that we were tired and ready to go home, the parking lot where I learned how to drive. I take out my sketch pad, planning to sketch the shore line but instead my pencil outlines faces. Two

faces, Luce and I huddled in our towels, ready to head back to El Barrio.

"Hey,"

I look up, one eyebrow raised, ready to be hit on by another 40 something year old with children my age, but it's Chris. Chris not in a suit jacket or button down either, but in khaki shorts and a guyabera. I stand up and self consciously fix my sarong, not returning his big smile, his smile of big perfect white teeth and deep dimples.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to make sure you were ok, you know it was against recommendations to leave the program."

"Well as you can see I'm fine—I haven't been gunned down yet."

"So El Primo kept his word."

"Yes."

"And you don't think he'll change his mind?"

"He understands why I did what I did. I explained everything to him when I visited him in jail. You may not believe it, but he loved me."

"I believe it, but what about his associates, you testified against them. You need protection."

"To be an artist, I'll take my chances."

Chris nods and sits next to me.

"How did you know I would be here?" I say, desperately trying to change the subject. I didn't want to think about how I was still scared to go at night or nervous if I noticed any man walking along the same block.

"It's Sunday, no? You told me you and your mom always went to Orchard Beach on Sundays."

I nod, closing up my sketch book and standing up.

"I gotta get back to my mom."

"Yris," he says grabbing my hand, "I miss you."

I turn back and look out at the rows and rows of me gente and then close my eyes and listen to the sounds of reggaeton, hip hop, salsa, bomba y plena and cumbia overlapping. There was no place for him here.

I remove my hand from his grip and kiss him on the cheek.

"I miss when these stairs seemed like mountains, when I loved my papi more than anything, and when I used to drag Luce onto the floor and make him dance with me."

Chris is silent.

"When you knew me, I wasn't me. I wasn't around mi cultura, I wasn't with familia, I couldn't even draw. The Yris you knew wasn't real. Arizona Yris was a survival mode, not a life."

"I know Yris, that's why I came. Now you have your life back, and we can get to know each other again."

I realize I'm still holding his hand. It's soft and smooth

like that sand. In New York we have sand, not desert.

"No Chris. I don't have my life back. Everything's changed and what I need now is to figure out what that means, for me."

"So."

"So suerte con todo. I wish you the best."

Chris pulls me in and kisses me lightly on the lips and I think of Arizona and missing nothing.

"Mami," I call out but she doesn't hear me. She's singing along to "que locura enamorarme de ti" which is not at all ironic given our track records.

"Mami!" I repeat coming closer and tapping her shoulder.

"Mira, esta es mi hija, Yris" she says to an Asian looking man a good two inches shorter than her.

"Paolo Manolo, que placer concerte. Te ves igual a tu mama."

"Gracias," I say giving my mother a strange look as I pulled her to the side. "Es de Puerto Rico pero de papa filipino" she says. "Baila increíble y es abogado."

I smile unable to resist the hopeful look of my mom, but just maybe I think as I glance over a Paolo, standing politely to the side and looking intently at my mother.

"Ok, mami, me voy para la casa."

"Tan temprano?"

"Si mami, estoy cansada."

"Pero..."

"Don't worry mom, I'm just gonna take the bus. You stay."

She gives me a big hug and kisses me on both cheeks. "Bueno! Ten cuidado."

It's only 2 p.m. so when I board the Bx-12 back to the six train it's almost empty. I grab a seat out the window and watch as Orchard Beach turns into Pellam Bay parkway and then on the six as green turns back into high rises and projects. I walk past my mother's apartment on 114th. On 116th, la misma vejita is selling tamales, the cuchifritos place has a line out the window, and the Mr. Softie truck is lined with kids. At 117th I stop and stand in front of my mural. All I can think is that it's not enough. The design is too simple, the colors too bland, the one story size two small.

I rush home grab my sketch books and start going through the pictures. I take a picture of Luce and tape it to my wall, then one of Julissa and El Primo. I think of all the others, the kids I went to school with in prison or dead and sketch until my wall is covered with light pencil markings and torn out pages.

Four hours later I'm exhausted and lying on my bed. I'm gonna paint it on the towers, I decide. I'm gonna cover it all.



MELISSA CASTILLO-GARROW is a Mexican-American writer, journalist, and scholar pursuing a PhD in American Studies and African American Studies at Yale University. Her short stories, articles and poetry have been published or are forthcoming in numerous journals including *Acentos Review*, *Hispanic Culture Review*, *Off The Coast*, *El Diario/La Prensa*, and *The Bilingual Review*. Her first novel, *Pure Bronx*, was released by Augustus Publishing in Fall 2013. Current projects include a book of poetry, *Coatlícue Eats the Apple*, completion of a second novel tentatively titled *Boricua City*, and two edited volumes, one on hip-hop in Latin America and a second on Afro-Latino Poetry. To learn more visit melissacastillogarsow.com



Haying

Ed Higgins

It is not unusual for farmers to see the future before it's begun—but I am not speaking here only of the need to hope but more, maybe, of just how the breath of June and new mown hay drift over the farm way past midnight letting you know that unimaginable goodness does exist right here, under our very noses sometimes, or anyway in those cut blades of grass and light purple-to-white clover heads (despite the sometimes sadness of bees crushed into the packed bales with them) waiting to later honey-scent even winter with all this dense treasure of rain, soil, sun, green fields, and toil. Machine cut, raked, dried, turned, dried some more, all under the risk now of coming rain. Then, starting mid-morning, once the heavy overnight dew's off the windrows, steel-finger fed into my nearly antique John Deere baler's summer wakened, insatiable maw: thudding, packing, thudding, packing, tying twine through some mystery of mechanics I have never understood and fear one rain threatening day it will inevitably go wrong and I must fix it. But for now still thudding, packing into the bale chamber, the piston endlessly pushing formed bales out the narrow bale chute toward a birth of sorts—with the mechanical knotters doing their tireless midwifery of tying off the double knotted cords of sisal twine. Finally, the bales willfully ejected as fifty-five pound trussed green rectangles—assuming my adjustments just right. While too many acres later, past exhaustion's ability to take tally anymore, or pride even in fecundity's abstraction, I lift another heavy bale onto the hay trailer and into December's waiting. 🐄



ED HIGGINS' poems and short fiction have appeared in numerous print and online journals including: *Monkeybicycle*, *Tattoo Highway*, *Pen Pusher*, *Word Riot*, *qarrrsilun*, and *Blue Print Review*, among others. He and his wife live on a small organic farm where they raise a menagerie of animals including chickens, ducks, Jersey steers, pigs, Oberhasli milk goats, two whippets, a manx barn cat (who doesn't care for the whippets), a pair of Bourbon Red turkeys (King Strut and Nefra-Turkey), and an alpaca named Machu-Picchu. Ed teaches fiction writing and literature at George Fox University, where he is also Writer-in-Residence.



Hardscrabble

James Claffey

Daddy was a mosquito, crippled blind drowned in debt and riddled with a guilt that etched sorrow into his cowboy heart as surely as the mayflies zipped across the expanse of the river as he cast his line onto the water searching for the next big fish to replace the broken-hearted hole in his side where the faeries kidnapped his first love as the clouds rippled purplepink across the evening sky and the search went on as uselessly as a blind man trying to match socks in a laundry hamper with the lights out and the graffiti sprayed across the railway bridge where as a small boy my daddy rode his bicycle across the wooden ties and his Jack Russell trotted aimless as the train thundered steam and the Christ child approached the opening in the sky where years before the sun split rocks into granules and land gave way to sea and the ridicule of small children lived on as they progressed through fancy boarding schools to family businesses and then to disaster as the banks foreclosed and the gates shut for the last time and a car filled with small children and old ladies headed for the bright lights of the capital city and a lifetime of hardscrabble. ⑤



JAMES CLAFFEY hails from County Westmeath, Ireland, and lives on an avocado ranch in Carpinteria, CA. He is fiction editor at *Literary Orphans*, and the author of the short fiction collection, *Blood a Cold Blue*. His work is forthcoming in the W.W. Norton Anthology, *Flash Fiction International*.

THRICE FICTION MAGAZINE CO-FOUNDERS & STAFF

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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



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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



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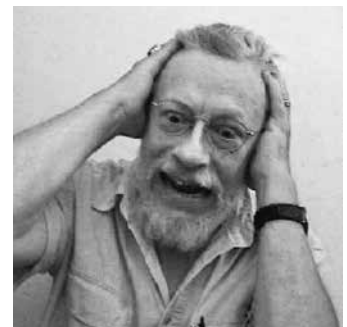
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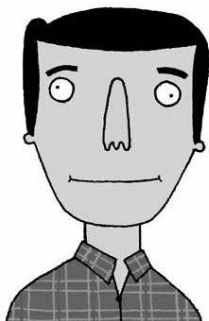
STORYTELLERS & POETS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

JOHN M. BENNETT ... *Pages 16, 20, 28...*

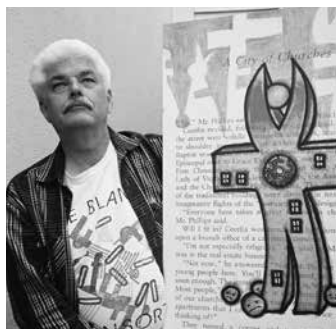
has published over 400 books and chapbooks of poetry and other materials. Among the most recent are *rolling COMbers* (Potes & Poets Press); *MAILER LEAVES HAM* (Pantograph Press); and *LOOSE WATCH* (Invisible Press). He has published, exhibited and performed his word art worldwide in thousands of publications and venues. He was editor and publisher of *Lost and Found Times* (1975-2005), and is Curator of the Avant Writing Collection at The Ohio State University Libraries. His work, publications, and papers are collected in several major institutions, including Washington University (St. Louis), SUNY Buffalo, The Ohio State University, The Museum of Modern Art, and other major libraries. His PhD (UCLA 1970) is in Latin American Literature. JohnMBennett.net



ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



REZA FARAZMAND *Pages: Front/Inside Front Cover, 2, 33...*
draws comics and writes things. You can find more of his work at Poorly Drawn Lines (PoorlyDrawnLines.com), which is updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.



Musicmaster aka **THOMAS M. CASSIDY** *Pages: 16, 20...*
has been an active participant in correspondence art since 1973 and his artworks and written pieces have appeared in publications, galleries and museums around the world. He is a regularly featured stand-up poet at local venues, art festivals, and colleges, and is currently on the boards of Cheap Theatre and Patrick's Cabaret. Both in Minneapolis.



KATELIN KINNEY *Pages: 8-9, 17-19, 23, 27...*
graduated from Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, IN with two BFA's in fine art painting and fine art photography. She uses these two methods together to create digital paintings where photos begin to morph into surreal worlds of fantasy and conceptual dramatizations. Visit her online at katelinkinney.com



CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: 5-6, 34-35...*
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: 29-30, 36, Back Cover...*
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

An artistic illustration of a woman with long, flowing red hair. She is looking slightly to the side with a contemplative expression. Her chest is adorned with intricate black tattoos, including a large starburst on her upper left and various swirling patterns. Her right hand is gently touching her hair. The background is a vibrant blue sky with soft, white clouds.

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