



THRICE

FICTION™

ISSUE No. 5
JULY 2012
FEATURING...

Darren Cormier
Janice D. Soderling,
Brian Michael Barbeito
Misti Rainwater-Lites
Justin J. Brouckaert
MaryAnne Kolton
Robert Vaughan
Gloria Mindock
Gessy Álvarez
Regina Clarke
Susan Tepper
Eddie Jeffrey
Marcus Speh
Howie Good
Fred Skolnik
and
Matt Salyer

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THRICE

FICTION™

Issue No. 5 • JULY 2012

RW Spryszak, Editor
David Simmer II, Art Director

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John M. Bennett

Based on Jim Leftwich's
Six Months Aint No Sentence, Book 18, 2012
and El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's
Comentarios reales de los Incas, segunda parte,
capítulo XI, 1616

A guide to art in this issue is on page 37.



Thrice 5 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

Micro Fiction, at its best, is supposed to infer the rest of the story. It's a prompt for the reader to fill in the rest. The best Micro Fiction is evocative and very cunning. The worst is dull and doesn't infer anything. We're showing some of the good stuff in this issue.

It would seem simple enough to do. One or two or maybe three sentences and off you go. But it has a degree of difficulty that is wholly its own. Try telling a story in eight seconds, and do it in such a way as the person receiving the story gets the whole thing. It isn't easy.

Some have called it the haiku of fiction. But since haiku turns my stomach sour I'd rather not indulge that. It's Micro Fiction. If you've never seen it before you're in for a treat...

...unless of course you are a traditionalist and probably won't like it no matter what all else is said. But we have work in this issue for you too. And that fulfills the mission of Thrice as we've come to form it. The blending of old and new under the idea that fiction is fiction and can come in many forms.

But let's get rid of the word "experimental" altogether. I'd say if what I'm reading is considered "experimental" then it would seem it isn't totally formed yet. Or the writer doesn't know what they're trying to get at. Writing where the writer doesn't know what they're trying to explain doesn't work. It's okay for a first draft, even a second and third one. But by the time something is ready for public viewing the experiments should be over and the fully formed idea should be standing there without any props or supports. So let's not think of things as "experimental" unless they are still in the writer's lab.

You're going to see traditional, flash, micro, multi-media and prose poem forms in this issue.

I view this as the reason there were over 5,000 independent downloads of our last issue.

So on with the show...



Casino

Susan Tepper

Monte Carlo's world famous Casino is right near our hotel. Each night after dinner we take a stroll around the Casino before going back to the room. It's large and glittery. Ornate.

In there he always holds my hand. I can tell he's proud of me. Men look at him and nod and he nods back. It's all this secret code thing men have. Rich men. I've not seen this before in men of more modest means. These rich men like pretty women around. Many are quite old yet the women are all young and lovely. It's the way of the world, the rich world.

He never gambles. He also doesn't drink alcohol or take drugs or smoke. He is deeply involved in the world of music where people drink a lot and do a lot of drugs and chain smoke.

I keep myself apart from all that, he has told me. I'm in

the business side of things. I can see he takes pride in that. Women are my one vice, he also has said.

I am supposed to accept this as a matter of course. I do. What can I do to change him or any man? Nothing. A woman who believes otherwise is an idiot or blinded by love.

Tonight I'm wearing what he calls my Park Avenue look. A white, heavy-silk blouse with long sleeves and straight black skirt with a deep back slit. Strappy black high heels. No jewelry other than my double diamond ring. Flat inset diamonds. Perfect blue-whites. A man's ring. Passed down from an uncle to an aunt of my former husband. Given to me by default. The one good piece of jewelry I still own. The one piece I haven't hocked or sold to the smelters in order to pay my rent.

I like your hair that way, he's saying.

I reach to touch it. It's twisted back in a loose knot.

We stop at the black-jack table. A particular one is of interest to him.

Actually it's the dealer. He's telling me to watch this dealer closely.

Why? I say.

Just watch and see what you notice, he says.

I watch a while but don't notice anything special. Are you going to tell me? I say. But he takes my hand and we move to the roulette table. I don't like gambling, it bores me. Besides I don't have the money to gamble even if I did enjoy it.

But I do like watching the roulette wheel spin under the heavy crystal chandeliers. In here everything sparkles brighter than real. It's the allure of Monte Carlo: everything brighter than reality. There is solace in that.

At roulette we watch people placing bets. A short stubby American guy keeps winning. There seems no end to it.

That guy's on a lucky streak, he tells me. He kisses my hair saying, Are you tired? If you're tired we'll go to the room.

A little tired, I say.

As I turn away from the table something grips my wrist. It's the guy with the lucky streak pressing my hand into the wide wooden table edge.

I'm stunned by this, can actually feel my pupils dilate.

You have to keep your hand there, honey, the winning

guy says.

My hand?

Yes, honey, it's been there all during my win.

It has? Honey?

I look over my shoulder for help. My eyes are saying to him: Is this winning guy insane? But he's nodding at the man. It's that secret nod thing again.

It's OK, he tells me. She'll keep it there a little while, he tells the winning guy.

I will? I say.

Just for a little bit, he murmurs winking at me. Gamblers are very suspicious, he believes you're his lucky charm.

Oh god, I'm thinking. All of a sudden feeling exhausted. My eyes continue probing his. Don't worry, he says softly, it can't last too much longer.

The man wins a few more times. I keep my hand on the table edge. The polished rounded mahogany feeling almost soft. Finally the man loses. OK, honey, you can let go now, he says. Then pushes some chips into my hand. I'm speechless and tired and confused.

When I don't say anything, he tells the winning man that it's a very generous gesture. Steering me away. That's five hundred francs, he says.

Are you serious?

He smiles running a hand through his beard. Now you've become the lucky one, he says. Go cash in your chips. ⌚



SUSAN TEPPER is the author of four published books. *From the Umberplatzen* (Wilderness House Press, 2012) is her most recent title. It's a quirky love story in linked-flash-fiction that's set in Germany. Teppar has published hundreds of stories, poems, interviews and essays worldwide. She can be found online at www.susantepper.com

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

—Steve Almond, author of *God Bless America*



Your Pain Will Set You Free

He sat in the car, waves crashing over the frozen railing.
If she was home, he didn't want to see her leave.
He'd drive permanently south.

Darren Cormier's bio appears on page 18



The Photographer

Susan Tepper

Our fourth day in Monte Carlo he says, There's a small bar, art deco, very nice. We'll go there after dinner.

What, no Casino, I'm thinking. This is a man of the ritual. Room service breakfast, rooftop pool till noon, Casino stroll after dinner. Somewhat surprised I say, OK, it sounds interesting.

We dine at Hotel de Paris, where the roof dome opens and swallows wing past. The room has deep rich paneling and waiters in black tie and tails.

Afterward, he holds my hand as we walk through narrow alley-streets over uneven cobblestones. The bar is steps down in a centuries old building. It's one of the more hilly parts. He shows a card at the door.

My friend! some French guy shouts in heavily accented English; rushing over and embracing him. Pats on the back, all that, a very male style hug. Once or twice while in bed he has suggested a three-some. I'll have to think about it was my answer. Actually I have no deep feelings about that one way or the other. It is kind of like: plain or almond croissant? They both can be good.

The French guy pulls out chairs for us at a tiny table away from the bar. He puts down napkins. Its marble surface is pock-marked. Coca Cola for you my friend correct? the French guy's saying.

He nods.

And for Mademoiselle?

I'll have a gin and tonic with lemon, I say. And lots of ice. Merci.

It's a muggy night and the little underground bar isn't air conditioned. I need something to cool me off.

What do you think? he says touching my arm across the table. Fabulous?

It is fabulous, I say. And it is. He knows all the best places. I can imagine Max Ernst and Coco Chanel here.

The French guy makes a production out of putting our drinks on the table.

Thank you, Gideon, he tells the guy who salutes him back.

I take a sip and it's icy cold. Delicious. I like watching you drink, he says.

It's refreshing. You should try one.

No. He puts up a hand as if to block the very idea. I'm wondering if he had some trouble in that area. He is so set against anything that will give a buzz.

I'm happy with my Coke, he says smiling.

A woman stops at our table. She's blonde and looks in her thirties. German-sounding as she gushes at him. I'm used to that. People wanting things from him. In New York and L.A. they shove music in his face on the street. Beg him to come hear their band. He has brought many bands to life. Yet strangely he hates hearing music during meals. Whenever it comes on he says it disturbs him.

The blonde woman continues to gush. Calling him by name. She has that ruddy roundness to her face yet still young enough to be attractive. A sleek professional style camera dangles near her cleavage.

Standing up he shakes her hand formally. This is Bergitta, he tells me. She's quite famous.

I stay seated but put out my hand. Bergitta holds it a little more than necessary. Then she turns back to him. How long has it been? Things like that pass between them. I'm wondering if he's ever taken her to bed and decide probably. There's a lot of warmth going back and forth.

I want to take your picture together, she says. You are so perfect. This young woman and you, she tells him.

I know, he says stroking his long beard. I look weird and she's a classic.

Bergitta suggests I sit on his knee with my one leg crossed. And hike up your skirt darling, she tells me.

Yes that would look very good, he says. Almost Nazi.

They both break out laughing.

Reluctantly I go along. But not before saying. Are you sure? I don't want to crease your suit.

He pats one knee of his linen suit. Wheat colored. Expensive. He's all in that shade except for his loafers of burnished brown leather. His pale tie is dry raw linen with flecks. His shirt ivory colored.

She is so striking, Bergitta is saying, such a richness to her tan. Her finger flicks my shoulder.

My white cotton blouse falls off the shoulders with two tiers of ruffles. It's paired with a black tafetta drop-waist skirt. Pink ballet flats he suggested because of the hilly streets. I am very dark from our mornings at the pool.

She's gorgeous, he says.

Bergitta is taking shot after shot. You are an actress? She's playing up to me.

No, I say. Nothing remotely that glamorous.

She is very glamorous, he says.

Obviously, says Bergitta continuing to shoot us from different angles. His arms circle my waist. He moves one hand to touch my breast a moment. Perfect, she says, grinning and bending closer for the shot.

Finally she's done. I am sending these out, she's saying. They're going to be incredible.

My ass feels sore from sitting on his knees.

I stand up glad to move back to my chair. The ice is melted in my drink. It looks dismal. I've begun to sweat from the heat and nerves. It's one thing to be assumed beautiful, and altogether another to send it out for proof to the world. ↻



Feminine Rage

Gessy Alvarez

It's like this. Say you're a woman in your early 40s. Educated, middle-class, home-owner, happily married with no children. You drink 2.5 cups of coffee before heading out the door every morning. Your job is a 25-minute drive from your suburban home.

Say today you have a meeting at nine. It's 8:45 when you get inside your car. The traffic is slow going for the first five miles of your commute. Then a break. The left lane opens up. You rev up and hold it at 75 MPH. Weaving in and out whenever you run into a slowpoke. You go from 75 to 80 MPH just for the adrenaline rush. You come within a few inches from hitting a braking car. With a quick shift to the right you avoid impact, but cut off a red BMW.

The Bimmer flashes his brights like you need him to remind you of your dick move. The toll plaza for the GWB is only a mile away, but the Bimmer is riding your tail the whole way. Once you pass the toll plaza, he reappears on your right, matching your speed. He accelerates a little faster but you can't let him beat you. You match his speed.

Traffic across the span is unusually light. For the next quarter of a mile it's just you and the Bimmer. You inch pass him and smile. He's finally giving up and is a car behind you, but then the freaking construction sign warns you to slow down and as you do the Bimmer speeds by you and you seethe and curse and punch your steering wheel in frustration.

This is feminine rage. Not to be confused with feminist rage.

Sometimes your rage is like Patti Smith. You're a lover of all things creative: the visual arts, dance, music, literature, poetry, performance. You love deeply. Practice adoration for those greater than you. Yearn to be accepted by the glamorous few. But as easily as you fall in love, you fall out of it. Retreat into a nest and wait for the next great passion to rescue you.

You're shameless, uninhibited, in constant pursuit of the perfect verse. You feel more than you see. Long live Rimbaud. Long live the romantic bohemian dream.

Sometimes your rage is like Lydia Lunch. Corrupt and unforgiving. Dirty, filthy like the New York City streets after the St. Patrick's Day parade. A connoisseur of sleaze, drugs, and cheap thrills. Scrappy enough to walk down a dark street looking for a fight with a broken bottle in your hand, but soft enough to know when to drop the tough-ass act and be sated, calm.

Rage equals passion which equals heart and grit. Ugly equals beauty unbound. 🌀



GESSY ALVAREZ received her MFA from Columbia University in 2010. Her fiction and poetry has appeared in *Letras Caseras*, *Pank*, *Spectrum*, and *The Rose and the Thorn*. New stories are forthcoming in *Lost In Thought* and *Apocrypha and Abstractions*. She was a runner-up for the 2012 Glass Woman Prize.

You can find more of her work on her page at Fictionaut (fictionaut.com/users/gessy-alvarez) and on her blog, *Digging Through the Fat* (gessyalvarez.wordpress.com).



ILUAAF

Janice D. Soderling

They are eating breakfast, sitting opposite each other at a table where they've eaten many breakfasts, though years have passed since the most recent one. "I used to think," the man says, buttering his toast, talking about his brilliant student, Zaza, "you had to take the bad with the good. But she and I are a perfect fit."

The woman nods as if he were still discoursing on the year's political unrest, or on the paper he's trying to publish, or his next speaking engagement.

"Isn't that against the ethics rules?"

"She's adult. She's a refugee. She's been through a lot, poor kid."

Last night the woman sat up sharply in the bed when his body failed to respond, despite the familiar touches and caresses they'd practiced so many years, she sat up and said with a pained laugh, "So you've finally become a faithful man, have you?"

In the darkness he turned away. "Body-speak," he said.

"The language of love," she said. "Christ, whodda thunk it!"

Last night, before the sitting up and the turning away, she sat on a stiff-backed chair watching him make himself at home. "New sofa." He tested the springs. "I liked the old one. Why did you get rid of it?"

"Change is part of life," she replied. "Isn't that what you told me?"

He lifted his glass in salute.

It was the same coffee table though, the one on which he'd belligerently put up his feet when she handed him the printout of the article she'd had accepted, her first. It was about democracy and would be printed in three installments. He read it, grunting now and then, finally tossing the pages on the table. "I can't believe they are willing to print this crap and they refuse all my articles. Maybe I should go up and flirt with the editor."

She said, "This is where I should gather up my things, stand up and go home, but I am already home so I can't."

"I'm sorry," he said. "Congratulations. I guess. I'm happy for you. Though you have some serious errors."

"Like what?"

"It doesn't matter. Aw, I am sorry. It's just that I can't understand why the journals are refusing what I send."

Now he said, "I brought you a copy of my speech. I thought you'd want to read it."

"I was surprised to hear from you," she said.

"I was keynote speaker, did I tell you? When they solicited me, I thought of you at once."

They go to the restaurant where they used to go. Young Mario, no longer so young, uncorks the bottle at the table, says, "Just like bella, bella old times, eh, professore?"

"You should open a restaurant like this in New York," the man says.

"Too many there already." Mario pours and waits for the man to taste. "But no competition for you in the big apple, eh, professore. I see your name in the paper sometimes."

"It's a rat's race, all right," says the man and nods his head to approve the wine.

New intimacies and old. He borrows her reading glasses to study the menu. They sample each other's food with an elaborate exchange of forks. Twice he reaches for her hand and squeezes it, turning up his charm like turning up the radio full blast.

Now and then he peeks surreptitiously at his cell phone, his lips moving. He says, "The last train is at eleven forty-five. I'll take that one instead." He signals to Mario, another bottle of wine.

He looks at his cell phone again, leans toward the woman in tacit intimacy. "Is your new couch comfortable?"

"Why do you keep checking your phone?"

"If I miss the train, I'll have to sleep over."

The woman laughs. "Forget it."

The last train has departed. He is in declamation mode. "Something is growing in me," he says, looking earnestly at his wine glass. "Something which I suspect, hope, will erupt into a surge of writing. It's like a tremor of the earth

signifying an impending quake.”

“The sofa is too short for you.”

“Up to now,” he goes on, “I have gathered knowledge, I have developed ability, yes, but what have I achieved? Almost nothing, I have gotten almost nowhere.” He reflects, nods, waits for her to disagree, takes another sip of the wine. “Perhaps I’ve accomplished more than I realize. It is hard to judge the perspective of time in the dynamics of change.”

“Are you happy?”

“Perhaps my role is only to guide the young. To inspire the glow of confidence in the eyes of motivated youth. Sometimes I have been privileged to see it. I long to sing those slogans that beat in the hearts of the people like a common pulse.”

She said, “Well.”

Mario, a little stooped, a little tired, a little gray threading his hair, nevertheless beams when he brings the check. “Whose turn to pay tonight, professore?” They are the only guests, it is way past closing time.

“His,” she says quickly. They all laugh, as if cued.

It is warm for October. They shortcut through the park with only a stumble or two. She links her arm in his, a gesture of possessiveness he would not permit before, but they are friends now and there is no one to see so he squeezes her arm with his own. “We were a terrific couple, weren’t we?” he says. “Whoops! Watch your step,” and they detour elegantly, drunkenly, around a trashed bicycle blocking the cobbled walk. As the elevator rises, it seems for one brief moment he is leaning to kiss her, but he regains his balance and takes up his cell phone to frown at it.

They sit close, but not too close, on the newish, shortish sofa, talking about people they used to know, saying, “Remember when...”

And remember when we took that trip and you lost your return ticket? Remember Oscar who stole the money we collected for the refugees, you’ll never guess what he is doing now—time!—he’s doing time! They laugh uproariously. Remember that demonstration against the Soviet ambassador, did you know he later defected? No, I never see any of them now, I’ve lost touch completely. Mary? Oh, Mary is dead and Juan and Linda divorced years ago. Smiling, smiling even when the talk lightly, briefly, touches on death or divorce.

There are events and occasions no one cares to remember or be reminded of. A receiver banged down mid-sentence. Various lies, various truths.

There is a new bottle, already half empty. He refills their glasses. “I’m glad you let your hair grow long again. It suits you.” He lifts it from her neck.

When she comes from the bathroom, he is already in the

bed, checking his phone. His frown turns to a grin and he ducks under the covers, his feet showing, his voice muffled. “Just pretend I’m not here. I’ll even let you have the pillow.”

In bed as everyone knows, except when they are kidding themselves, one thing leads to another. Even between old friends. Though the bodies of old friends aren’t the bodies of young lovers. They finally manage a reunion of sorts, a parody of what they once did effortlessly.

She lies awake, listening to his breathing and irregular snoring. His elbow hits the wall, he shudders in his sleep and turns over. She hangs onto the edge of the bed as for dear life. Finally she goes to the living room to sleep on the couch.

At breakfast she asks, “What does she look like, this paragon student, this perfect fit?”

“Like you.”

“Like me?”

“Shorter than you.” He added, “Zaza’s more in control of herself than you ever were. She’s calmer.”

“I’m perfectly calm.”

“We’re compatible.” He puts down the butter knife. “I have a photo. Want to see it?”

“Do you want to show me? Yes, you’re dying to show me.”

Instead of answering, he gets up and goes out into the hallway. She hears the rattle of coat hangers as he rummages in his jacket pocket. He comes back with the cell phone in one hand, his wallet in the other, opened to a face smiling into the camera. He hands it to the woman without looking at her, frowning as he flips through the messages. The young face was confident; it wore the look that the man on the other side of the table used to wear. The woman now noticed he was showing his years, his face fleshy, florid from the previous night’s drinking, his wiry hair conspicuously thinner. The woman studied the photograph, the man studied his cell phone.

He grins. “God, it’s a whole new language. Listen to this.” He reads aloud, letter by letter. “C-U-2-N-Y-T. L-A-G-N-A-F. Half the time I don’t know what the hell she’s saying.”

The woman closes the wallet, hands it back. “Yes, she’s pretty. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“I’d better be going. I said I’d be home today.”

“Checks up on you, does she?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t call it checking up.”

“I had more pride than that.”

“Oh, Zaza has pride. She don’t take shit from nobody.” He thinks a minute. “C-Y. That means Calm Yourself.”

He picks up his bag. He says, “It was wonderful to see you again.” Before he closes the door, he leans in again and says, like a child learning the alphabet, “I-L-U-A-A-F.”



Long ago **Janice D. Soderling** signed on a tramp steamer bound for Europe to travel around the world, acquire wisdom, and write the great American novel. She never got beyond the first port of call where she’s lived for decades with downsized goals and three now full-sized progeny, making her living as a commercial writer and translator. She is very good at doing things the hard way. *Thrice Fiction* is her 100th unique English-language journal of publication; hundreds of her poems, fictions, translations can be read in print and online journals, most recently at *Flash: The International Short-Story Magazine*, *Mason’s Road*, *Ear Hustler*, *New Verse News*, *Rattle*, *J Journal*, *Dead Mule School*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Antiphon*, *Horizon Review*. She is a member of the Swedish Writers’ Union and assistant fiction editor at *Able Muse*.



Spilling Out

Eddie Jeffrey

In the shadow of Nui Ba Den, the Black Virgin Mountain, his mind crammed to sieving point with jargon and To Do and Not To Do lists, not to mention all the things he had to carry, and scared he'd die of the heat (he'd heard one of the Marines who'd landed at Da Nang in '65 had done just that, blood bubbles boiling on his brain or something) or malaria or snake bite almost as much as he was afraid of trunks full of explosives buried in the road that could cartwheel a thirteen ton armored personnel carrier through the air or of sappers slipping the wire at night with satchel charges strapped to their chests running into his hooch to blow him away or he'd wake up bleeding out, face-to-face with a grinning man in black pajamas who had just slit his throat or...or... or a thousand other things, PFC FNG Whelan, J.B. forgot he wasn't ever, under any circumstances, to walk on trails and landed knee deep in a punji pit with two of the water

buffalo dung-dipped stakes protruding through the top of his boot, the metal sole of which, the Army had told him, was supposed to keep just such a thing from happening. His disbelief in that moment was fantastic, astronomical. He had actually stepped in a punji pit. It was straight up Wile E. Coyote shit.

He passed out in the very same moment he realized the screaming was his.

When he came back around, he was lying across the trail staring through the canopy at specks of blue sky and the sun. He was no longer screaming, but that was only because someone was lying across his chest, crushing him. He couldn't breathe. His vision was going black at the edges.

--Sierra-Niner-Two! Sierra-Niner-Two! Do you read? Do you read?

Sgt. Eppes. It was Sgt. Eppes. Whelan could hear him shouting into the radio nearby, but couldn't tell where for

sure. He was calling for an air strike. Artillery. Anything.

An M60 was huffing double time close by, M16s capping off full automatic all around him. The crump crump crump of mortars everywhere at once. Yelling and hollering like a demonic tent revival.

He tried to call out for help, but whoever it was that was lying on his chest was heavy and wasn't moving. He couldn't get the words out.

--Off...me...Whelan hissed, his face going red as a blister with the effort. He had pins and needles in his eyes and ears.

He somehow managed to roll to his right and slide the body off of him. That's what it was, he realized. *A body.*

He noticed the hole in the back of the man's head and then the blood for the first time, and wondered why he hadn't noticed it before. There was so much of it. Whelan was soaked from the waist down. It was impossible to tell where his blood began and the other man's ended.

He had been hunting. He had killed ducks and deer before. This was different. This wasn't the same at all.

Dirt kicked up in his face. There it was again. It took a third time for Whelan to realize someone was shooting at him. Someone was trying to shoot him and kill him. *Him.* He rolled over onto his stomach and crawled toward a bamboo thicket the other side of the trail, gritting his teeth and whimpering with every move, feeling like a garbage bag with a rip in the corner being dragged across a bumpy old asphalt parking lot, spilling out. Someone somewhere was yelling for a medic, but it wasn't him. It was all he could do to breathe.

Then the sound of freight cars flying, rending the air overhead. Banshee screams. An earthquake.

--Danger close! Danger close! SHORT ROUND! Check your fire! Check your fire!

The earth disappeared. And then there was darkness.

On his back again, staring up through the trees. Night. The whole galaxy looking down on him.

Something was gnawing on him. He could hear it. He jerked away, a ball of fear. A tiger's got me, he thought. But there was nothing there. Except the pain. And the sound. It was still there, too.

Ants. He was covered in ants. They'd swarmed over him in the night, tearing him apart a thousand tiny mouthfuls at a time.

He rolled over and over on the ground, writhing, vehemently swatting at himself and in his blind terror got to his feet to take his clothes off and instantly fell back down.

There were no ants. He'd stepped in a punji pit. The pain was driving him insane.

He called out, abso-fucking-lutely forbidden--Rule Number One if you're lost in the woods in the dark in Vietnam, Republic Of--but there was nobody there to hear him and save and berate him or capture and kill him because they were all dead. All dead. He knew it. He must be, too. This must be hell. I'm in hell, he moaned.

But they don't have Candy Stripers and 32DOUBLEDEE-titted nurses in hell, do they?

Cotton vision. Like a Soap Opera dream. He just saw tits and smiles and the nurse leaned across him to fiddle with something out of his line of sight and those tits were so close, if he reached out with his lips he'd...he'd...

He'd been there he didn't know how long, but he was in a hospital. He knew that, at least, when he woke up the next time. A surgeon came around after a while with that nurse from before trailing behind him. When she bent down to pull back the sheet at the foot of his bed, he noticed she was less voluptuous than he remembered. Much less. And she wasn't smiling.

But, what she told the doctor didn't jibe with her sour expression.

--It's getting better, she said.

--Why the long face, then? Whelan said.

--Excuse us, will you, *nurse*, the doctor said.

She wanted to say something. Whelan could see that. Instead, she clammed up and choked whatever it was back down inside her. She folded the sheet back down over Whelan's feet, proper as you please, and said *Yes, sir!* right smartly before making her parade ground about face exit, the heels of her boots clicking like daggers down the tile of the ward room floor away from them.

--I hate pulling rank like that. I really do, the doctor said. Especially here. Especially now. Her type, he said, gesturing over his shoulder at the space the nurse had just occupied, just gets so worked up sometimes they lose sight of the overall picture. Do you understand me, son?

The doctor was easily old enough to be Whelan's old man, and he was even built like him. Wide. Tall. And cast a long shadow.

--No. I can't say that I do at all...Sir, Whelan added hastily.

--No. I guess you wouldn't at that. You see, you've put us in quite a spot here, son. We did our homework on you and, it's just, well, if you'd been drafted, perhaps we might have been able to do something for you. But, you volunteered.

--Sir?

--Don't interrupt me, Private, the doctor said. He sat on the edge of Whelan's bed and scooped over and leaned over him, forcing Whelan to shift and make room.

A sharp stab of pain shot up his leg from his foot with the effort. He winced.

--You, PFC Whelan, J.B., the doctor went on, your type, is what's wrong with this whole war. It's because of people like you that I'm up to my elbows in spleens and brains all day. Every day. And, so, if the war is to roll on, and it surely will, what better lubricant can there be to grease its mighty wheels than the gore of the righteous volunteer? If you'd been drafted, why, maybe you might have lost a couple of toes in surgery, eh? the doctor said suggestively. Something just debilitating enough to make you useless to the Army, but not so much as to make life back home altogether unpleasant. Do you understand me now, son? You are good and fucked. And you don't even know how hard.

--Sir, I, Whelan said, but the doctor raised his chart as if he were going to whack him over the head with it and Whelan flinched.

--Don't test me, son. You're hanging on by a thread as it is.

The doctor stood up and walked to the end of Whelan's bed. He raised the blanket and examined Whelan's foot.

--Normally, we wouldn't be having this conversation. In fact, I've never had to have this conversation. You see, borderline wounds like yours, draftees get the special

kind of treatment I alluded to a moment ago. They get coddled, maybe even get their pricks sucked by one of our pretty little nurses, and then they go home. We see to that. Enlistees, on the other hand, we patch them up much like a mechanic patches up a flat tire, and send them right back to their units. The problem with you, though, Private, is there is no unit to send you back to. That artillery barrage landed short, right on top of all your heads, and killed every last man in your platoon, excepting you, who wasn't dead already. So what am I to do with you? the doctor said. He let the sheet fall and looked Whelan right in the eye. If ever there was a time to speak up, son, it is now, the doctor said.

Whelan didn't know what to say. And his foot was starting to throb. He could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead.

--I see. You're thinking how nice a dollop of morphine would be right about now. Pathetic. All those boys...no, men, those fucking MEN died trying to save your gung-ho attitude of a life, and all you care about is easing off a little bit of pain? You should be thankful for every drop of sweat that falls from your brow and stains your pillow, son, for every gallon of blood that paid for it.

The doctor sat on Whelan's bed again. He produced a pack of cigarettes from a pocket of his coat and lit one up.

--Would you like one, Private?

Whelan shook his head no.

--Have one anyway.

The doctor pulled another cigarette from his pack. He placed it between Whelan's lips, then leaned forward, touching the glowing coal of his own cigarette to the nervously trembling tip of Whelan's until it, too, was aflame.

--You see, son, the doctor said, sitting back, I can't in

good conscience allow you to heal up and leave this place and get reassigned to some other unit knowing what I know about you. And that is that you are a dyed-in-the-wool black voodoo jinx Number Ten fuck-up. The Army's lousy with them, I know. But, it's not every day I have the opportunity to do something about it. And before you get bent out of shape about where this conversation is headed—you do know where this is headed, don't you? You can't possibly be as stupid as all that as to not to be able to grasp the ultimate resolution toward which our little talk here is headed, can you? Even so, and not out of any pity for you on my part, I assure you, just think of how you would be treated in your new unit. How long before they figured you out? At best, you'd be an outcast and assigned every shit detail imaginable for the duration. You'd never think such misery was possible. At worst, maybe they'd make you walk point or tail-end Charlie until your number came up, or failing that, you'd catch one—oh, so sorry—in the back of the head one day out on patrol or they'd frag your ass in the latrine. So, if you think about it, I mean really just analyze it all bit by bit, you'd see what a favor I was doing you.

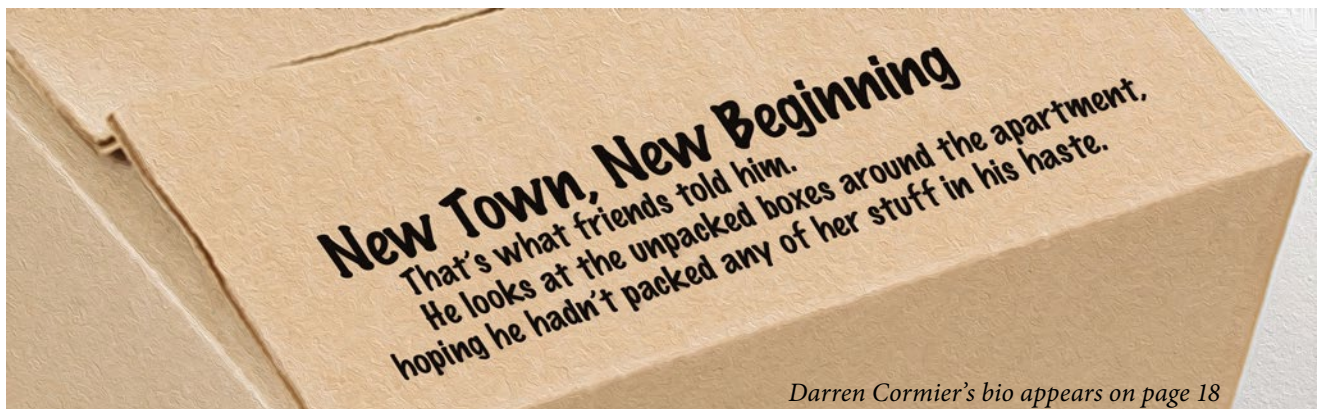
The long, dead snakeskin gray ash of Whelan's cigarette, which still clung uncertainly to his slack, parched lips, broke off and fell on his chest. He watched the delicate cylinder intently for a moment, as if everything hinged on it. When it failed to disintegrate, Whelan let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding in and laughed until he cried.

When he finally settled back down, he noticed that the ash had collapsed.

--Now, now, the doctor said, reaching over to brush it away, look at the mess you've made. 🕒



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Darren Cormier's bio appears on page 18

The Jitsu Mistu Jub Jub Ja

Brian Michael Barbeito

We rounded the corner. There were these people in bright orange and red jumpsuits and I said, "What the hell is up with this place?"

"I never liked this area, it is just too weird," the lady replied.

Then, inside the coffee shop, some old man started yelling, "Where is the court reporter? I am a judge, and I need to speak to the court reporter! We can't start without him..." And he turned and looked at me. I just shrugged, but tried to do so as respectfully as possible, as if to almost be saying that I too wondered at the absence of the presence or somehow better yet at the presence of the absence of the court reporter.

I turned to the lady, "I feel as though when we walk out the doors the steps in Battleship Potemkin are going to appear across the street. And then a person that I don't know but that knows me, or thinks they do, is going to approach me and ask me how things have been, whereupon instead of explaining like I always have, that I am not the person that other person thinks I am, I am going to simply say this time, 'Wassup? Things are pretty good, still keepin' on, same thing different day and all that. And you? Everything good and well? Shit I gotta go but nice ta see ya. Later.'"

"Battleship what?" she said.

I told her to never mind and that we should just book it outta there.

When we walked out, there were these two guys that looked rough to say the least. And they were about forty years old, but their hair was completely grey, and one of them was looking at me intently as they walked on past and up a concrete hill. Across the street we tried for some reason to go into a Mexican wholesale food store, but the hours were listed as only being open 4PM-8PM. I looked around, and an army tank was parked in a parking lot, right next to a trolley. I wanted to go on the trolley, but we had to go.

"I was just going to hop on the trolley. Just for a few seconds. To see what it was like," I said to the lady.

"It is not there for you to jump on. It's gassing up. Did you think it was on display?" And I looked again and realized that it was a gas station.

Loud sounds came from around the way, on the other side, and the people in the jumpsuits were singing and banging on drums in front of a television crew. "This is a strange place," I told the woman, "it is like a dream, but an uneasy nightmare, and there is no real warmth. These people are like dregs..."

A lady came bouncing down the street twitching and sweating, talking to the air. Behind her another set, arm in arm, of some strange unknown culture, were all dressed in fur coats and funny hats, and they came sort of dancing past. "Let's get outta here," and as I said that- the jumpsuits started to bang on the drums harder, and a man was speaking into a microphone loudly.

We rounded the corner again now, doubling back now to where we had come from, and drove off looking for the highway. Hopefully, we were thinking, if we floored it and made some fast time; we could shake the

jitsu mistu bad jub jub sort of curse that it felt that place had exuded upon us. So we did floor it, and the truck skipped a gear- and we waited eagerly to see something else, anything normal, along the way. ⌚



BRIAN MICHAEL BARBEITO is a resident of Ontario, Canada. He is the author of a compilation of short writings entitled *Vignettes*. A Pushcart Prize nominee, Brian has writing in or forthcoming at various venues such as *Glossolalia*, *character i*, *Kurungabaa*, and *NFTU (Notes from the Underground)* magazines.

Hot July Night

Regina Clarke

Ruth sat on her porch, the old rocking chair tapping away until she leaned forward to check something that might be happening out on the street. She never went far from the house any more, not even for a drive out into the redwoods she loved so much.

"No time," she'd tell her grandchildren, "things to do." But all anyone ever saw her do was sit in that chair on that porch. Summer had come and with it the tourists. A bed and breakfast just up the street was renowned and its guests were encouraged to walk through our old mission town. Plenty for Ruth to take notice of.

It was an early July evening when I went to visit her, knowing if anyone had seen anything, it'd be Ruth. In my childhood she'd been the source of stories about what the town used to be like, especially in the years of the "big" war, the rallies and all the pumped up joy of watching the young men on parade before they shipped out. My war was different when it came; we never talked about that one. She understood I didn't want to.

Her son Jamie had been my best friend and we'd get an ice cream from the vendor who came around every night after supper, his truck blaring a terrible rendition of "Home on the Range."

"Look at that," Ruth would say when she saw what we had bought. "When I was your age we got real ice cream, not that imitation stuff."

She'd usually sit out on the porch back then, too, the same way she did now, but only for a little while. During the day she managed her father's hardware store and at night she managed a house and three children on her own. She'd become a widow eight years into her marriage.

"Hello, Joe," she said to me when I stopped my patrol car in front of her house and walked up the steps. "You're coming 'bout that lady, aren't you." A statement, not a question.

"I'm afraid so, Ruth. Can't think of a better place to start."

"Spent most of last night next door at Annie's—she's had an attack of gout again."

I was disappointed. I'd counted on her more than I realized. In a small town there's always a lot of pressure to settle situations before things get out of hand. So far all I knew was that a woman had been staying at the bed and breakfast and gone for a walk in the early evening the night before, after the owner, Jason Little, had recommended she attend a band concert in the park. No one had seen her since. A tourist found a scarf lying near a tree at the concert with blood on it. According to Jason, the missing

woman had been wearing it. It was a nice turquoise color, except for the red-brown stain.

"Still," Ruth began, "there was that man."

I repressed a sigh. Ruth was sharp, but she told things, or not, in her own way.

"What man?" I asked, settling myself down on the top step, shifting my holster so I could be more comfortable. I never have liked wearing uniforms or carrying guns, yet I love my job. It's hard to explain.

Ruth sat forward then, peering at me, the rocking chair silent. There was nothing wrong with her eyesight, just a desire to make sure I was listening. The chair moved again, a sign she was satisfied.

"He came past here, right here. I was at Annie's front door—she's got no porch and I can't see why she won't get her son Morris to build her one. I was trying to fix the handle of the screen. It keeps jamming up. I looked out and there he was, walking by, heading toward the park, carrying this old suitcase."

"What time was this?"

"Near eight, maybe. Yes, I think so. Not dark yet, but starting. I could hear the band begin playing."

"A lot of people in town now," I said.

She got out of the chair. "How about a nice soft drink?" she asked.

"No time. Got to get going."

Ruth put a hand on my shoulder and patted it lightly.

"You just stay sitting there. Always time, Joe. In fact, I'd say you've got all the time in the world on this one."

In spite of myself I waited. She came back with her own concoction, lemonade with cranberry juice and mint leaves. Summer days from the past were in that old metal glass she handed me.

She sat down slowly in her chair and was quiet a while, rocking back and forth.

"It was Johnny Pace."

At her words I became alert.

"Pace? That's who you think you saw? Impossible, Ruth. He died in the war, my war. We both went to his funeral, remember?"

"Wasn't a real funeral, was it. They never sent back his body. His mother never got over grieving for him. I remember when he signed up, not waiting to be called. I expect the army seemed a lot better than living with his father. A lot easier. A lot safer."

"But--"

"It was him. I used to give him drinks on this porch, too. He'd always bring me some candy, knew I had a sweet tooth. It was him last night."



I got up, setting my glass on the railing.

"It's been what, thirty years? That's a long time."

"I know what I saw." Adamant.

"Okay. I'll check into it. As I remember, he spent most of high school getting suspended. If he's been somewhere else all this time, what would bring him back? His mother's already died, probably as you say of a broken heart."

I left her sitting there, the tapping of the chair steady behind me as I walked back to my car.

I'd come back myself in '73, and I knew what being in that place could do to a man. Maybe he'd had amnesia, I thought, or been a P.O.W. Maybe he got out when they thought he was dead somehow, and just didn't want to return to his old life right away. Ruth was right, there'd been no happiness in his home. But what would bring him back now?

When I got to the office my deputy stood up and waved a paper at me.

"Hey, we got reports some guy named Johnny Pace was seen in town last night. Seems everybody thought he was dead. And here, I got some interesting stuff on that woman's gone missing."

Dan has a lot of dedication to his job, even zealous sometimes. He'd made a real dent in drunk-driving incidents, lecturing teenagers in the high school and watching for them all over the place on Friday and Saturday nights. I'd made him a deputy two years before, and the only thing that annoyed me about him was his inclination for making things more dramatic than they had to be. Our worst scenarios were usually pretty small-time events. There hadn't been an unnatural death, outside of driving accidents, in the ten years I'd been sheriff. Maybe there wasn't now, either. After all, all we had was a scarf. It didn't mean much.

"Look at this. Her name was--"

"Is. Keep using the present tense, Dan. We don't know if anything's happened to her or not."

He looked at me with the surprise and tolerance of the young.

"Right. Anyway, she *is* from San Francisco. Her name's not Mary Soames, like she registered at Jason's. I found her driver's license in her suitcase. It's Ming Li. Chinese, but Jason'd already told us that, since he's the one who saw her. Got a sister there I just talked to, who said Ming Li had just gone on vacation for a few days, as far as she knew."

"Did you tell the sister anything?"

"Well, yes. I mean, we have to, right? She should know what's going on. Funny thing, though. When I said Ming Li'd been here and seemed to have disappeared without taking any of her belongings with her, she just started laughing, this real happy laugh. It was weird. I told her about the scarf and that didn't seem to upset her, either. When I asked her if she'd be coming here to check it out, let us talk to her, she said no, that wouldn't be necessary, just send her sister's things to her, instead. Really strange."

I sat down to think, putting the woman aside for a while. Johnny Pace. He'd lived outside of town, on a chicken farm. I knew no one was there any more. I turned to my deputy.

"I know we've got a picture of that Pace guy here somewhere. Look it up. Maybe everybody else has spotted

him, but I haven't."

Dan looked over at our file cabinets, seven drawers that had never been organized. With a sigh he moved in their direction.

"This connected?" he asked, reluctantly pulling out the first drawer, folders dropping out of it onto the floor.

"Who knows? We've got hundreds of tourists passing through out here. Pace was killed in the war a long time ago. At least that's what we thought. Now, I don't know. Anything else from the park?"

"No witnesses, no one who saw anything like a struggle. I mean the scarf was found way on the other side of the concert platform and the concessions, right? But you'd think someone would've noticed something."

He rummaged through the drawer haphazardly. "Another thing. I sent the scarf up to Eureka, thought you'd want me to. MacDowell called and said he couldn't do much in his lab here."

I felt irritated again. Dan should have consulted me. But it was what I'd have done, so I let it go.

The office door slammed open just then, letting in the bright July sun, and then Marly Pace stood there, shutting out most of the light with his bulk.

"Harrison, you got my boy?"

This was trouble. Pace was a giant of a man and the years hadn't made him any prettier than I remembered. He'd picked up and left and settled in Ukiah a few years back, and for me it had been good riddance. But this time he seemed different. As he came close and leaned over my desk I realized I couldn't smell any liquor on his breath. Still, it was an ugly face, showing the years of boozing and violence. But the man was sober. I didn't know if that was good or bad, since I'd never seen him that way before.

"We don't have him, Marly. Why should we? There've been reports he's around and Ruth says she saw him, but I've got no proof of that."

"What Ruth sees, generally it's the way things are." He sat down heavily in the chair in front of my desk. I knew what he said was true, but I was surprised he even knew who Ruth was.

"He's here, then I want to see him."

"Marly, even if we do find out it's Johnny, which seems to me unlikely, if he doesn't want to see you we can't force him. You know that." It was odd, carrying on a two-way conversation with him. Usually it had been just listening to him go off the deep end, waving some weapon or other, and locking the handcuffs on him for a night's stay in the jail.

To my surprise he continued to sit there studying his hands, long gnarled fingers and calloused palms. After a minute of that he raised his head and I felt I was looking at a man I'd never met before.

"Look. Forget it. Okay. You find my boy, you tell me he's okay. That's fine. That'll do." Marly got up then and moved slowly to the door. As he walked out he turned back to me.

"You find him, you tell him I'm glad he made it back." Then he was gone.

I didn't look over at Dan, who I knew had digested the whole thing with intense curiosity.

"Find me that picture," I repeated, and he turned back to the folders.

I called the sister, getting a response not unlike the one

Dan had, with an added request that I just let go of it. When I pushed her on that she swore that she had nothing to tell me I didn't already know, just that she knew Ming could take care of herself. It meant I probably had to go visit San Francisco to find out more, but I decided to check on a few other things first. It was strange, just the way Dan said.

At the end of the day I went out to the park again, to where the scarf had been found. The lab in Eureka confirmed it had human blood on it. For a while I'd wondered if the whole thing was a hoax and we'd find it was pig's blood or something like that.

That section of the park was almost deserted. The lake was on the other side of the band shell, along with most of the picnic benches. The band shell itself was empty, chairs set up for the next performance. I sat down on a flat rock and looked around. There was nothing to see besides the dry grass and dirt paths, nothing to hear except a few bird calls. It felt peaceful and I found my thoughts wandering away from what I should be paying attention to, thinking instead about Kate. Somehow since her death I never found time, never wanted time, to think too hard. Fifty-five is too soon to be alone, too soon to be without her.

We'd spent a lot of time in this park, she and I did. We'd stroll through the fair on hot July nights, buying cotton candy, watching a game of baseball. It was here I'd carved her initials with mine on the large, old oak tree near the wildflower garden, or almost did, at the senior class picnic. I was half done when we went off to eat and I left my jackknife near the spot, planning to come back later and finish. When I did, the knife was gone. I'd always thought it was Johnny Pace who'd taken it because he'd been nearby when I was working on the tree, Kate sitting beside me. He hadn't come to the park to be part of things, just sort of hovered around a while, but he watched me with a fierce look, not angry, but intense.

Sitting on the rock I could see that day so clearly in my mind. How fast memory comes. How hard that it does. I never finished the carving.

The tourist who'd found the scarf was a father exploring the flower garden with his two young daughters. One of the girls had picked up the scarf to use as a makeshift costume, but he'd seen the stain and grabbed it before she could. It had been lying under the large oak, not far from where I was sitting. I stared at the spot, thinking of my wife, when I realized suddenly that I was looking at the same tree, the one where I'd left the jackknife.

Going over to it I bent down and there, about two feet off the ground, was the half-drawn circle and Kate's and my initials, hers almost done, but not quite. The lines were faded and the letters looked more like a scar that had healed badly.

Then I saw the second circle, a foot above my own. It had been carved into the tree recently, vivid in the wood. A wavy line went through it and on either side of that were a set of initials. I bent in close and saw the new letters more

clearly. Something clicked in my mind. I didn't believe in coincidence.

I straightened up and looked over at the lake in the distance, where an early evening mist was starting to form. The scarf was still a mystery, hell, all of it was still a mystery, but now I was pretty sure Ruth had been right. I had all the time in the world.

Back in the office I went to the folders Dan had finally collected: six of them, recording the life and times of Johnny Pace. It was the last one I wanted, made up just before he shipped out.

His picture was there, a young face already filled with a lot of pain disguised as hate. The arrest had allegedly been for beating up two men in a brawl, though he looked as though he might have gotten as good as he was given. Two days later, the charges being dropped, he'd enlisted.

A small newspaper clipping was at the end of the file, dated seven months later, with a better photo, Johnny in fatigues smiling into the camera. The paper reported that he had been killed by a sniper somewhere in the central highlands, a death witnessed by his best friend, Saul Winfield of South Weymouth, Massachusetts.

I sat back, wondering how far I wanted to take this thing. Johnny had received a posthumous commendation for valor. Now here he was, or could be, wandering around town thirty years later. Maybe it was just curiosity. Maybe it was Marly. Maybe it was Kate. I just felt I wanted to know more.

I picked up the phone and called information for Massachusetts. Saul Winfield was listed. The voice that answered on the first ring was boisterous and welcoming, and that didn't change even after I'd identified myself and why I was calling.

"Well," Winfield said, "talk about rocks falling out of the sky. That's a

long time ago, Sheriff."

"Yes, I know it is. But if there is any way he might have, that is--"

"Survived? Don't see how. I was the one who dragged him back to our encampment. The medics took him and if we hadn't had a mortar blast then, he'd have been shipped back home. But there was nothing left after that but me, our lieutenant and one of the PFC's. I don't see how it could be Johnny you got there."

"We can't actually find him. But he was identified by several people who say they're sure it was him. A woman is also missing, a possible homicide. I'm covering all the bases."

"No!" Winfield's voice was so loud I took the phone away from my ear. "You're looking for the wrong man, if you're thinking he's got something to do with any murder. If he's really there, I mean, though I still don't see how that could be. Johnny did things no one else would do. He'd say he was scared, but he'd do them anyway. To protect us all. That's what drove him. He wasn't a killer, not like that. He was a soldier. A good one."

"Men are different in real life than they are in war," I



responded.

"That was real life, mister."

"So he took chances."

"Got no reason to say no. And after his wife was captured he just didn't seem to care about himself. The things he'd do, like I said--"

"Wife? What wife? There's nothing in my files about him being married." I was listening hard.

"Well, no, probably not. It happened over there, so who'd know, especially after our unit was just about wiped out. I didn't see any reason to bring it up when I went to the funeral. Pretty country you live in, you know. I'd like to get back there someday. Not that I don't like it here."

"And who did he marry?" Even as I asked I was sure of the answer.

"A woman he met in Saigon. Chinese. At least, she was from Taiwan. Don't remember her name. She was a nurse for the Red Cross. He promised her one day he'd show her his hometown. I listened to them talk about that a lot whenever they were together. Like it was a dream they could share when the whole world around them was going to hell. We got a report that she got caught in the crossfire over in the delta, taken prisoner. I thought Johnny'd go crazy when he heard. He took more chances after that."

That was all he could tell me. I hung up the phone, thinking carefully. It didn't seem logical. Two people surviving something and not meeting again for thirty years and then maybe they meet right in our town, a place Johnny Pace had left in his mind and heart a long time ago, or so I thought. And there was Ming Li's sister who probably brought her over here, after she had somehow survived God knows what in the war, yet now the sister wasn't worried about where Ming was. I should go see the sister, I thought. If it weren't for the scarf, none of it would mean anything.

When I left the office it was past supper time but I didn't feel hungry. We had no real case, nothing to go on, just a missing woman no one had seen since her first night here and a missing soldier no one had seen since then, either. No evidential connection. I could take it a lot further, though. I knew that.

Instead, I found myself walking through town and finally standing in front of Ruth's small house, just as the moon was rising. It was a sultry night, one of those where it's almost too hot to think, yet small breezes come up that feel good half the time just because they're so brief. Ruth was there. I could see her vague outline and hear the tapping of the chair.

"Going to sit down a while, or you just thinking your way across town?" she called out to me. I walked up the stone path to her steps. I could hear the band playing in the distance.

I climbed the steps and leaned against the porch railing. Her white hair was silver in the moonlight, her eyes dark and steady on me.

"I expected I'd see you again soon enough," she said. "You still looking for that woman?"

"Not much to report, I'm afraid. Everything's a lot of smoke, I think, but still, I can't be sure. I don't have anything I can write up yet, though." I took out a cigarette, not lighting it, I'd promised myself that, but liking the feel of holding it.

"You know it's okay, don't you? Like I said in the beginning?" Ruth stopped rocking and bent forward to see me better.

I looked at her and knew I wouldn't go visit the sister. Whatever it was I couldn't explain or figure out, I was letting go of it, right there and then. I'd file a Missing Persons. Let it be.

"Yes. I know. Though I have to say it doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't have to, Joe Harrison. We're supposed to feel what we know, and listen to that. Just like you're doing now."

"It seems to me, when we do that, there's only pain," I answered, and I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice. Ruth bent over then and drew a small package out from under the side of her chair and held it out to me.

"Found this left on my porch. Got your name on it."

It was a large envelope, folded in half, with something bulky inside. I opened it. There was a small jackknife with one blade sticking out, dulled on one part of its surface with a stain that was black in the moonlight. I knew if I put it under analysis it'd be his—it'd be Johnny's blood. There was a note attached, a piece of paper torn from a wire notepad. I could see the words and read them in the bright moonlight.

"This has been through a lot of wars, Joe, different kinds. Time you got it back. I asked Ming to meet me here if we ever got separated. No matter how long it took. You know why by now, I'll bet. It's not a place where I can stay—too many ghosts—but I have my girl now, just like you."

There was no signature. I handed it over to Ruth, who just set it down and didn't bother to read it for herself.

"So?" Ruth rocked back and forth, a faint smile on her lips.

"So why here? Why make this all happen here?"

"You know about those initials."

I stared at her. I hadn't mentioned what I'd found to anyone, not even Dan.

"I know they're on that tree," she said. "Saw them: 'J.P. and M.L.' Went there myself, had Annie walk with me. Cut himself bad, I should think, using an old rusty thing like that. Her scarf must've stopped the bleeding, don't you think?"

If she'd walked all the way to the park, something she never did, then I knew Ruth hadn't really been sure at the beginning, after all. She read my look, everything being clear as day on that porch in the moonlight.

"I knew he wouldn't do anything bad. I just wasn't sure



what he'd come back for, at first."

"Why leave the scarf behind?" I asked.

"Maybe they just didn't need it anymore. Maybe they didn't think about it."

I felt irritated all of a sudden. I had the feeling I'd been danced on a string. She resumed her rocking and waited a while until she knew I'd calmed down.

"I told you," she began, "Johnny'd come talk to me on this porch, too, same as you. He felt so left out all the time, even though he knew he caused a lot of the reason why. He hated going home at night. More than once I put him up in the back room. Those were the times he got to school in a more regular way. It bothered his mother and drove his father crazy, but they never came near this house when I kept Johnny with me. She couldn't, poor thing. Couldn't even protect her own child, didn't even dare to try. And Johnny, well, you know that part. But he said one thing to me that I never forgot. You want to know what that was?"

I didn't want to say yes, still feeling annoyed. Yet I saw that for what it was, saw that somewhere in that warm moonlit night my feelings were wrapped up in memories of Kate. I didn't have any right to take it out on Ruth.

"Sure," I said, "go ahead." And I listened to the chair going back and forth while she remembered.

"He told me—this was maybe a week before he joined

up, you know. He'd come by just to talk, casual, he was. It was the last time I saw him before he left. He told me about all the school dances he'd missed, all the fairs and how he'd never had a date, didn't know how to talk to the girls without making them cry or run away home or snub him. And he said he dreamed of a time when he'd go to the fair in July, go into the park with all the people, his girl on his arm. How they'd listen to the band play and eat cotton candy and meet friends and laugh, and take a ride on the ferris wheel. Then he said he'd walk with her in the moonlight and tell her he loved her, and then he'd take out his pocketknife and carve their initials in that old oak tree near the wildflowers, proof forever that they belonged together. Then he'd know he'd lived a real life."

I studied Ruth's face and looked down at the small knife I held in my hands. I closed it up and laid it on Ruth's railing.

"He should've seen his dad. Things have changed," I said, thinking of how Marly looked the day before.

"Lots of things we should do, and don't. So we never know for sure."

"Yeah." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "See you, Ruth."

I walked back to the car and could feel her smiling behind me. Somehow I felt better than I had in a long time. ↻



REGINA CLARKE has written nonfiction in academia and for high tech. Her stories have been published in *Subtle Fiction*, *A Twist of Noir*, and *Halfway Down the Stairs*. A science fiction story was recently accepted by *Bewildering Stories*. She has also ghost-written an autobiography for an Indian preacher, published a book on environmental management, and created an online workbook on soul development. Her last, slow drive cross-country took her through a lot of small towns like the one she grew up in, and the one in her story.

FINGERS

Tap. Drum. Rub together. Entwine. Clench. Bite. Chew.

Wipe sweat off. Inside pockets. Sit on.

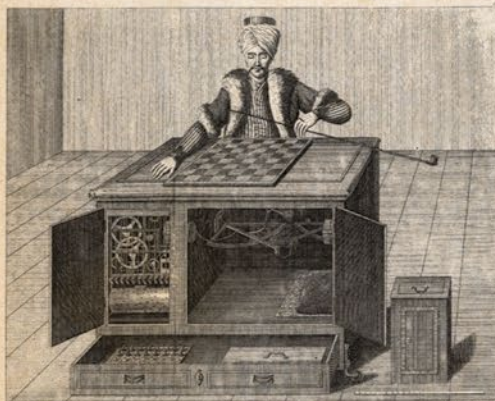
Tap. Drum.

His meeting starts soon.

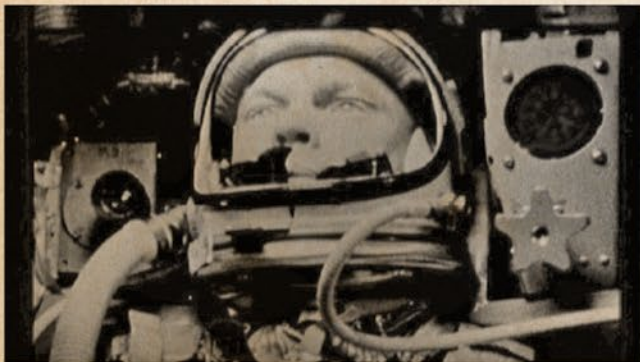
Darren Cormier's bio appears on page 18

ANDROID CLIPPINGS by Marcus Speh

1. «Chandra X-Ray flies around the Earth. For Chandra, day is night and night is day. It keeps picking at the skies. It harvests cherries and plums and sends them to Earth where scientists put them in pressure chambers, map them out on large walls, draw lines, analyze, speculate and fantasticulate until they are completely confused. Nobody thinks of just enjoying the fruit of the heavens while they're still fresh after their aeonic flight. But deep inside Chandra hides a small being of uncertain composition. It takes the pictures and patterns, the cherries, plums and the berries and turns them into texts. It feeds the stories to the onboard computer. The computer sends them to Earth using secret channels only known to double dead double agents. On Earth, the space fragments resurface as figments of writerly imagination. None of the people on the planet have any idea of any of this.» [From: Chandra's Blog, Harfard Univ./Smythsonian/NASO, 2002.]



2. «The return of Dr David Bowman, member of the crew of Discovery One, 100 years after its departure for Jupiter, will forever be remembered as a mile stone in human space exploration. Being asked upon his arrival what marked the turnaround in making contact with the civilization on Jupiter that has since changed the course of our development as a species, Dr Bowman said: "It was when I sang 'Daisy Bell' for them with tears in my eyes. They had no idea that carbon-based beings were capable of being moved by feelings." Dr Bowman, who retired to Florida and whose license plate says 'HAL 9000', is believed to be the world's oldest astronaut.» [From: Associated Press, 20 February 2101.]



3. «We must own up to the moth. It comes to us from times immemorial across the abyss created by whatever creates that abyss that separates us from the moth. It is

a clumsy thing, the moth. Where it dwells it stinks, though the smells associated with the insect are not of



its own making. The moth as such munches peacefully without giving off scent or sound. A criminal of the night, it favors crepuscular environments. It does not mean to harm us. Only a small fraction of moths have even encountered humans. They live in a galaxy different from ours.

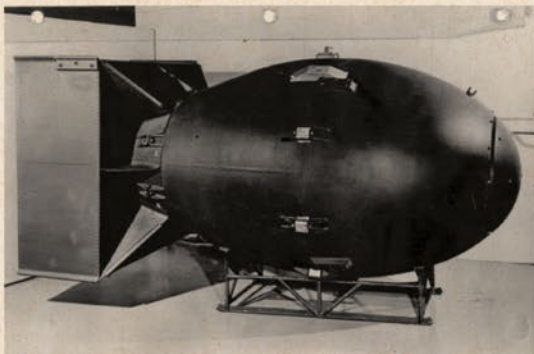
Reports of people who turned into a giant moths have been unmasked as bunk. Likewise, stories of moths turning into people are nonsense. If you close your eyes and change into one of them, you're sure to be dreaming. But before you wake up make sure you're in your home galaxy. Emerging as a human among moths is no picnic. The mating rituals of the moth are intricate and highly athletic.» [From: Mothpeople and Peoplemoths; Mummoth Press, Nova Mir, 1977]

4. «I dreamt the Russians were coming. A dream that comes more than 60 years too late. They wore exotic feathers on their heads, not helmets, and they marched in the fancy step of Salsa music. There were roosters everywhere (you know what that means) and I felt as if the whole scene was like a Potemkin village and might just be pulled away like a curtain only to reveal something or someone else entirely. Then the music stopped and I was in an interrogation room: nothing there but me on a chair, and a table. On top of the table stood a talking red Espresso cup. It says: "Are you a Byronic Hero or are you an android from the future?" Somehow, I didn't feel like committing to a cup of coffee and I just laughed, laughed so hard that I wake up, alas, because I am just beginning to have fun.» [From: The Tales Of Modern Mungo Park; Times Lower Education Supplement, February 9, 2044.]



5. «When the National Fat Camp Association (NFCA) decided to build the largest Fat Camp ever in Walton Creek, the townspeople were disturbed: what would the neighborhood of so many unbalanced, fat people, do to their children? What if the fat people were brilliant and would lure their youths away from Walton Creek. Could the town absorb so many freaks or would it in turn be absorbed by the Fat Camp? Would the fat people need more seats than the town could provide? There were

many open questions and nobody had an answer, not even the mayor or the town priest who usually had answers to everything.» [From: *Annals of Walton Creek*, (year unknown)]



6. «Moon City, 7 February 2089. Officials of the Marcus Speh Foundation welcome visitor no. 300,000,000. Speh shot to fame almost against his will after the De/Face virus attack of 2013 irreversibly destroyed all Facebook pages in the world except his. De/Face then left billions temporarily without a virtual home and lead to global riots. The jubilee visitor is the 127-year old lunar resident Darryl Price formerly of Loughborough Univ. Among other places, Mr Price's texts were published in the world's longest running online magazine, *Thrice Fiction*, the *Mousetrap* among the e-zines, which is bringing out its issue no. 231 this month.» [From: *Volkswagen Media & Entertainment*—reported by Amygdala Morgendorffer.]



reason to assume the latter because it is hard to imagine that the intimate distance between these people was considered decent and hygienic — even at a time such as this where body odors weren't yet industrially harvested.

It is regrettable that this is the only artifact of that lost world to have outlasted the millennia.» [From: *Encyclopedia Galactica*, alongside a lost photograph.]

8. «Dear Slawa, call me a tragic figure, or call me an idiot, but I don't actually believe in flash fiction as a literary art form. That makes me feel like a little mermaid on land. Shorts have a number of definite advantages for quick consumption; but plastic bags also have definite advantages over cloth bags (like when it rains) and still



they tend to break and they don't age well. Having said that, when I think about it, I have a similar prejudice against poetry so it really must be my problem: I just don't understand poetry properly, but neither do I understand flash. Both seem like a single glove of

a pair of gloves. They beg to be completed. Maybe poetry and flash must be sung or spoken to attain the same fullness as a novel. My resolve to write is in tatters. I will now take my madness with me into a hot bath and hopefully drown out these voices of right and wrong because they're so useless. Afterwards, I'll rub myself off with snow and I hope to cleanse myself in the process. If none of these thermodynamic measures should help, there's still the Vodka.» [Taken from: *RRRrrr—a Novel in Letters*; by D. Dzhugdzhur (Д. Джугджур), Irkutsk, Siberia, 1984.]

9. «Who needs your writing? I tell you who does: you. That's the beginning and the end of it all. If you don't need your own work more than anybody, there'll be no voice coming up from the void, no angel descending from up high, who asks you nicely. No demons will fly around your head pestering you to please believe in the value of your words. Drink to yourself if you must, make a moment of self-celebration count like a marathon runner's reaching for a cool drink when he knows this is only the start.» [Translated from: *The Serious Writer (Der ernsthafte Schriftsteller)*, Alexanderplatz-Verlag, Berlin, 2009.]




A bio for Marcus Speh is at the back can found on page 37.



Acceptance

Darren Cormier

I am so much more than my pain, she thought, and threw a rock through his car window. 



DARREN CORMIER lives and works in the Boston area. His work has previously appeared in numerous journals including *Amoskeag*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Opium Magazine*, and *one forty fiction*, among others. His first collection *A Little Soul: 140 Twitterstories* is currently available in most online catalogs. More of his work can be found at his website darrencormier.com



A Map of Reality

MaryAnne Kolton

Bethann Dean was huge, like the Goodyear blimp, only rounder. And only in front. If you were walking behind her, you wouldn't even know she was pregnant. She stood on the driveway, in the dark, next to the car, with her pink polka dot, overnight bag, looking ... determined? Impatient? Resigned? Hard to tell. Lloyd raced from room to room, making sure all the lights were off, throwing some salmon kibble at the cat dish and grabbing several energy bars.

"Lloyd, please!" she hollered. She had yelled these same two words, at exactly the same volume and with the identical tone of exigency, on the afternoon the blimp had been created. Lloyd's parents were on a cruise. The couple was on his bed, her legs wrapped tight around his lower back. He didn't have a condom and she wasn't on the pill. They had been dating for three months. He had graduated from high school three days before. Bethann had one more year to go.

Since both families were devout Christians, Bethann and Lloyd were married two months later. A tense, family-only, ceremony followed by cake and champagne for the grown-ups (sparkling grape juice for Bethann) at the Dean's mansion. Lloyd's football scholarship from Duke was forfeited like an expensive watch, pawned, never to be retrieved. Bethann would get her GED at some point.

The Deans were devastated by the news, but pretended – in public – to be pleased about having a grandchild to spoil. Lloyd was their only child. He would be the first male in four generations not to attend Duke and play for the Blue Devils. Each time his father, Richard, former linebacker "Dickie" Dean, thought about this, he had to press the fingers of his fisted hand against his mouth to keep the furious, disappointed words inside. His wife, Lenora Rose, accepted the insincere congratulations at the country club with a tight smile and murmured words of thanks. Since she had always

envisioned Lloyd married to a well-educated, young woman with impeccable manners, from another prominent family in their refined circle of friends, her life had become one weepy day after another.

Of course, there was the social divide to be considered.

Bethann's single, bartending mother was thrilled to bits. Her daughter had always been much in demand as a babysitter. Evie Butts had no doubt she'd be a wonderful mother. Her co-workers at the Slide Right Inn applauded and hugged her as if she'd won the Lottery. To think that the child they'd known since infancy was moving so far up in the world. Once Evie had announced the good news, she noticed that her regular customers looked at her with a newfound touch of deference. As if she, a potential member of the Dean family – if only by marriage – had gained a little more shine.

Richard and Lenora Rose rented a small, furnished apartment for the couple. It was decided that Lloyd would take courses at the local community college and work part-time for his father at one of the car dealerships on Dean's Auto Rodeo Road. Bethann would continue her summer job serving soft cones, sundaes and blizzards at the local DQ. Once the baby, Eva Rose, was born, Bethann's future was charted as a stay-at-home mom. Lloyd would eventually work full time for his father. The child's gender was the icing on the cake for Evie, and a mortal wound endured by Richard Dean.

The Deans supplied the necessary baby furniture, travel systems, swings, bouncing chairs and other equipment. Upon reviewing the credit card bills, Richard remarked he could easily fund a moderate-sized, company start-up with the payments. Evie hit garage sales like a soldier going into battle, until she had accumulated several onesies, much-read copies of *Pat the Bunny* and *Goodnight Moon*, and a barely soiled, handmade baby quilt. The pièce de résistance was purchased with saved tip money: a pink tee shirt with the words "Grandma's Little Angel" scripted in gold and silver glitter on the front.

Lloyd dutifully attended childbirth and parenting classes. As the anxiety-riddled, father-to-be, he assimilated all the information and took part in all the exercises. He repainted the apartment with environmentally safe, fume free paint. He took Bethann to her doctor's appointments, attended classes at Le Blanc Community College, prepped cars at his dad's Cadillac dealership, and tried not to appear as if he was being tasered every few hours. He forced himself to put one foot in front of another.

On the nights that Bethann came straight home from the Dairy Queen, instead of sitting at the Slide, getting pregnancy and parenting advice from aging alcoholics and other shady characters, Lloyd rubbed her swollen feet and legs. They talked about the last minute items they had yet to purchase: baby gates, plastic caps for the electrical outlets and locks for the cupboard doors. He tried to convince Bethann that they could wait a bit for those things, since the baby wouldn't come down the chute knowing how to crawl. But she was insistent that all security systems be in place before

they brought their baby girl home.

One night when he sat on the floor in front of the television, watching a basketball game and doing a report, his very pregnant, young wife said to him, "Lloyd, honey?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"I know this isn't what you wanted. How you planned your life to be. But you are happy about the baby, aren't you?"

Lloyd paused a minute. "Yeah," He said. "Sure."

"And you do love me just a little bit, don't you?" The tears were tracking down Bethann's plump cheeks.

"Uh, yeah, I love you. It'll all work out, Bethann. I promise." He felt like such a shit.

Sometimes they lay stretched out on the floor watching the reality shows that Bethann loved. One train wreck after another, that's how he saw them. Lloyd remarked on how dumb the shows were until he realized the cameras and crew might well show up on his doorstep at any moment.

On the few occasions that he had a moment alone, he felt disgusted with himself – angry and bullied by everybody else. He got headaches when he tried to focus his thoughts. His hands trembled for no reason. Cold sweats soaked the sheets at night and he muttered curse words at inappropriate times. One minute he was a big deal, high school football star and the next, a piece on a game board, pushed here, dragged there. He began to run several miles a day and found that running helped him breathe normally and think rationally. It was the one pleasurable activity he allowed himself.

Bethann was awash in a sea of hormones – pouting and blue one minute, euphoric the next. She saw her friends from school infrequently. She and Lloyd argued a lot and talked very little. Her heart told her that the birth of their little girl would cure everything. Or at least she hoped it would. She wasn't sure because, truth be told, she didn't really know Lloyd all that well.

Lloyd's best friend and most of the others guys were away at college, texting him daily about the booze, girls and full-on party weekends. He saw his life slipping away from him, like a hard-to-hold-onto bar of soap in the shower. He'd had his future all mapped out, much the same as a well-organized, cross-country trip. Somehow, well, no, not somehow – but because he was stupid, stupid, stupid – before he ever got to the first rest stop, he'd encountered a never-ending detour.

When he'd told his dad Bethann was pregnant, Richard looked at him as if he'd heard Lloyd say there was a large box full of writhing, cottonmouth snakes in the front entrance hall. Next he wanted to know if Lloyd was sure he was the father. Richard called Lenora Rose into the library. They both agreed that Lloyd had no choice but to do the responsible thing and marry the girl. He was never given a chance to share his thoughts before the verdict was read. His mother asked him later if he loved Bethann. It didn't feel right, under the circumstances, to tell her he didn't think so. Bethann was blonde, blue-eyed and hot. That was pretty much how he felt about her.

She was still blonde and had blue eyes, however, she had



gained almost fifty pounds during her pregnancy. Lloyd tried to be a good husband. It was a daunting task without an instruction manual. When the baby started to kick, Bethann was forever insisting he press on the enormous mound that had been her sleek stomach. He dutifully felt his daughter kicking, but he couldn't connect with the 'my daughter' part. He was floundering in the scrim of a future snatched from him by something with a maw so voracious, he dare not go after it. What life might hold for him in the months to come was a mystery. All he knew for sure was that the imminent responsibility for a wife and daughter was nipping at his heels.

He hurried out to the car, took Bethann's bag, tossed it in the back, and helped his wife into the passenger seat. She was on her cell phone, calling her mother. After they agreed to meet at the ER, she speed dialed Lloyd's parents and handed the phone to him. His dad answered and Lloyd told him Bethann's water had broken and they would be at the hospital in about ten minutes.

"Yeah, okay," Richard slurred, awakened from an unsettled, cocktails plus wine plus brandy induced sleep.

"So are you guys coming or not?"

"Probably 'or not'. Let me ask your mother." He planted the phone against a pillow while he discussed the matter with his wife.

"Call us back after the child is born."

Lloyd disconnected and handed the phone back to Bethann. "Not coming," he said. "Now there's a surprise."

By the time they pulled up to the Emergency Room entrance, Bethann was growling like a mad dog. Her mother was right behind them. Lloyd put the car in park and ran in to tell the nurse behind the glass wall that his wife was having a baby. She commandeered an orderly with a wheelchair and sent him outside with Lloyd. The couple and Evie were escorted to a spacious birthing suite.

Bethann was huffing and puffing like an old time locomotive when the labor "concierge" nurse, Amy, appeared. She told Bethann to slow down. It would be hours before her baby arrived. And it was. Ten hours later, Bethann was screaming like a banshee at every contraction.

"Did you forget the breathing exercises you learned in childbirth class? Let's you and I do them together," said Amy.

"Screw breathing," pronounced Evie. "If it makes you feel better, you just yell your head off, baby girl."

Lloyd was numb, useless. Traumatized by the screaming

and yelling and horror of it all, he said he was going out to get some fresh air and a Doctor Pepper. Could he bring anybody anything?

"Can you bring me something? Really?" shouted Bethann. "Don't you dare leave this room, Lloyd Richard Dean, unless it's to find someone who can get this baby out of me!"

Lloyd slipped out the door and into the quiet hallway. He walked toward the bank of elevators on the wall to his right. As he pressed the down arrow, the tears slipped from his eyes, tracked a path down his cheeks, around his nose and onto his Go Blue Devils tee shirt. He stumbled toward his car, lodged in the parking deck.

He sobbed for a long while after he slid behind the steering wheel. When he finally got himself under control, he started the car and headed out to the 7-Eleven on Ellsworth Road. He parked, got out, wiped his face on his shirt and looked around. He watched the traffic speed by for a few minutes.

Lloyd locked the car, walked out to the road and started to run on the shoulder. Soon he was running at a steady pace. The breeze soothed his swollen eyes. He reached in the pocket of his jeans, fumbling for his cell phone. He stared at it for a moment, then tossed it out into the middle of the road. He kept running, right on through the sunrise. He ran until he got a killer cramp in his right calf. Lloyd stopped and did some stretches on the sidewalk at an intersection. When that didn't help, he sat down on the grass and tried to massage his



throbbing leg.

A trucker, pulled up next to him and yelled out his window, "You okay, kid?" Lloyd nodded yes. "Where you runnin' to?" Lloyd pointed straight ahead.

"Haul yourself up here and I'll give you a lift."

Lloyd managed to open the door and get in the cab before the light turned green. The driver changed gears and the truck crawled forward at a snail's pace, trapped between cars in the morning traffic.

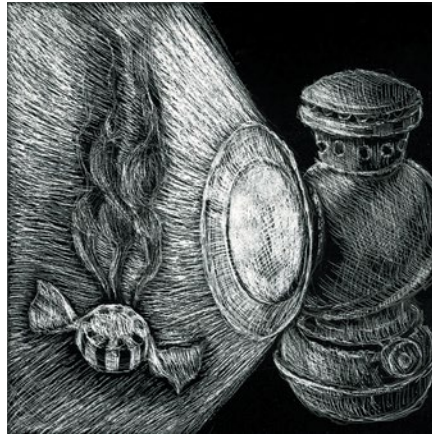
"Where exactly are you goin'?" asked the driver. Once again Lloyd motioned forward.

"Son, I'm hauling a load of flat screens to Juneau, Alaska," said the driver with a puzzled look at his passenger.

"Alaska," mumbled Lloyd. He nodded his head. He leaned against the window, fell asleep in about a minute, and slept soundly for the first time in months. 6



MARYANNE KOLTON's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous literary publications including the *Lost Children Charity Anthology*, *The Toucan Magazine*, *Lost In Thought Literary Magazine*, *Anatomy*, *Her Circle*, and *Connotation Press* among others. Her story "A Perfect Family House" was a runner-up for The 2011 Glass Woman Prize. Author interviews with Leah Hager Cohen, Siobhan Fallon, Charles Baxter, Alice Hoffman, Dan Chaon, Tupelo Hassman, Russell Banks, Kathryn Harrison and Charlotte Rogan have appeared most recently in *Her Circle*, *The Literarian/City Center*, and *January Magazine*.



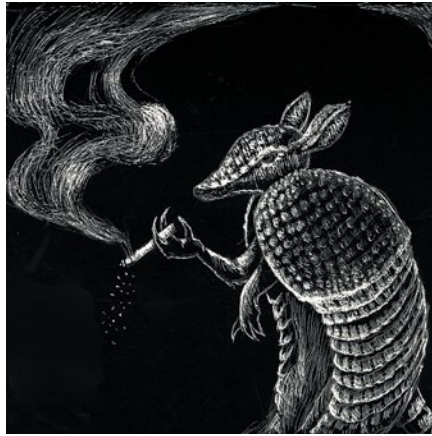
What is Hell, if not a Hard Candy

Justin J. Brouckaert

A mailman, a dentist and a coal miner were all drunk as hell. “Hell is a cold walk,” the mailman said, hiking up his shorts. He finished his whiskey and stuck the empty glass with a ten-cent stamp. “A cold walk across an asphalt parking lot that never ends. And you’ve got pneumonia, too.” The coal miner guffawed, as coal miners do, and black dust rained from the ceiling. An old man screamed from the jukebox. “Hell,” the coal miner said, “that ain’t hell.” The dentist wiped sweat from his glasses and sipped his gin and tonic. “I think hell is a hard candy,” he said, licking his teeth. “The kind you want to just bite straight through, but never can. And it never dissolves, either.” The coal miner erupted with laughter, coughing out gnats and smoke. The temperature rose. The mailman sent for the check. “Hell,” the coal miner said, “that ain’t hell.” The dentist prodded through his black bag for change and set a pile of tongue depressors on the bar. “What is hell, then,” he asked shyly, “if not a hard candy?” The coal miner downed his beer and showed the men a chipped set of moldy raisins. He slammed the empty mug on the bar, cleared his throat with a rattling snort and spit into the empty glass. The mailman and dentist craned their necks to watch the spit settle; it was pitch black, grainy, and slid down the glass like melting tar. “Hell,” the coal miner said with sparks on his tongue, “there ain’t no such thing.” Above him, the roof shuddered with the sound of splintering wood. The temperature rose, and the old man continued to scream. 6



JUSTIN J. BROUCKAERT is a creative writing senior at Saginaw Valley State University, is a fiction writer, journalist and occasional slam poet. He sometimes thinks out loud at jjbwrites.wordpress.com



Lonely

Gloria Mindock

He was headed for vacation, just south of the border of Mexico, some small village. I forgot the name he told me. He had one arm resting on the window, the other on the wheel, driving slowly...

that's when he saw it, an Armadillo with buck teeth smoking a cigarette. Now you may think I am making this story up and no man ever told me this story but he did. The Armadillo had beautiful teeth, not blackened by the tar of the cigarette. It puffed and puffed and blew smoke up into the air.

Then, laying down, it went to sleep. The man kept on driving, never telling anyone until he shared this with me. He drove and drove until he got farther south, now in the middle of Mexico. He could feel the rhythm of the country, a new world to him. The people were nice but seemed scared and a little empty like they were expecting something. He thought maybe this is imagination at its best. Then, it happened again, the Armadillo appeared, smoking again, asked him if he wanted a cigarette. They stood on the corner, both smoking. Not caring what it looked like. Just talking about dreams not reached. When they were done, the man sighed, let out a deep breath and said good-bye. Later, he knew, he would have to drive on. So he could experience another day and let his life spill over just one more time. 🕒



GLORIA MINDOCK is the author of *La Portile Raiului* (Ars Longa Press, 2010, Romania) translated into the Romanian by Flavia Cosma, *Nothing Divine Here* (U Šoku Štampa, 2010, Montenegro), and *Blood Soaked Dresses* (Ibbetson, 2007). She is editor of *Červená Barva Press* and the *Istanbul Literary Review*. Gloria's poetry has been translated into Romanian, Serbian, Spanish, and French. Widely published in the USA and abroad, her poetry recently appeared in *Levure Littéraire* (France), *Vatra Veche* (Romania) and in the anthology *Hildagards Daughters* (Belgium).



The Riverboat

Fred Skolnik

The houses were on the canal. Old Salazar got into the boat first with his peasant wife. He was wearing a tropical suit and a Panama hat and used a cane. His wife had a long, dark Picassoesque face with long lashes and big dots for eyes. She was wearing a flowing skirt with a top knotted behind the neck and her heavy breasts like melons in a sling. I got in after them. The black boatman used a long pole. He was wearing khaki shorts and was barefoot. The houses were on the right, the open fields on the left with the peasants bent over as in a nineteenth century painting. The houses were in disrepair, the paint peeling from the shutters and plaster crumbling everywhere. The boat glided over the water. Salazar said, "We'll pick up Randolph." I saw him waiting a few houses down. The boatman brought the boat up slowly and Randolph got in. We all shook hands. Farther on I could see people congregating in a vacant lot at the end of a row of houses. The boatman stopped the boat and a black woman got in. She was wearing a broad-brimmed hat and had Caucasian features. One of her parents must be white, I thought. She sat down next to Randolph and he squeezed her leg as though they were lovers. I stood near the front. Salazar and his wife had sat down too. The canal ran through a densely populated area with the houses on one side and the fields on the other as though at the edge of a city. There were people everywhere, mostly in the vacant lots but in front of the houses too. Everyone was busy but it wasn't clear what they were doing and I couldn't hear a word of what they were saying or even the undertone you hear in a crowd. No one looked at us. Randolph and his black woman were talking quietly but I couldn't make out what they were saying either and Salazar and his wife were sitting behind them. Salazar leaned forward, supported by his cane. "Look there," he said.

We turned to the right. We saw a woman waving from a window. "It's Bonita," Randolph said. "She wants to come."

The boat stopped again and Bonita came running out of the house with a big bag. She smiled at everyone and said hello and stood beside me in the front of the boat, putting her hand on my shoulder as if to steady herself. She was a friendly girl, I could see, and I was attracted to her. We were three couples now, in effect.

"We'll be in the river soon," Salazar said.

I thought about Salazar, trying to imagine his life. How had he met the peasant woman and what was their marriage like? She must have been his housekeeper, I thought. The black woman intrigued me too and I wondered how Randolph had

gotten together with her.

"How long have you been here?" Bonita said to me.

"For a while."

"At the hotel?"

"Yes."

"You must be the only guest they have."

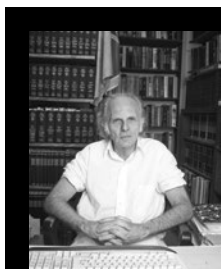
I imagined she was right. We stood side by side as the river came into view. It ran deep into the forest, toward the sea. We left the canal and entered it. The branches of the giant trees were reflected in the sluggish waters as the sun slanted through the leaves. We were alone on the river and it seemed endless. Everything was steeped in shadow.

"Isn't it peaceful," the black woman said.

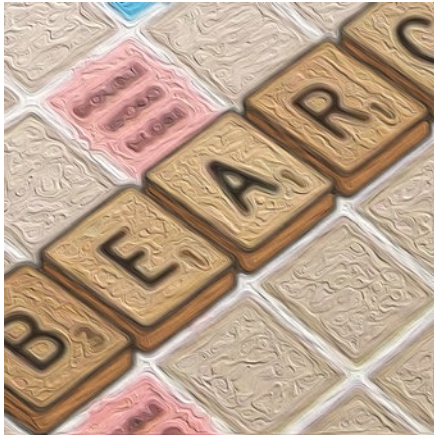
Randolph nodded. His hand was on her knee. Salazar's wife was staring at the water. She must have been in her forties but there wasn't a line in her face and she had the body of a young woman, heavy with catlike sensuality. Bonita, on the other hand, was small and lively. Now she took a shawl out of her bag and wrapped it around her shoulders. She probably took the bag wherever she went, I thought, filled with the things she might need as the day wore on. She gave me one of her smiles and we both looked out at the river. In the distance we saw some crocodiles on the bank. We could hear the cawing of the giant parrots under the forest canopy but otherwise everything was still. The river widened now and I had a strong sense of the distant sea. It might have been a hundred miles away but I could feel it near as we slowly drifted on. In truth, I would have liked to remain on the river forever, the two men and their mysterious women for company and Bonita by my side.

Bonita took out a little book and I thought she was praying. It might have been a special prayer for river journeys. I looked back to see if the other women were praying too but they weren't. Salazar's wife continued to look at the water and the black woman moved closer to Randolph and took his hand in hers affectionately. It occurred to me that she was well born and well educated, not at all like the other women we had seen at the canal, perhaps a teacher, perhaps a minister's daughter. Bonita, I imagined, would have worked in the cannery and Salazar's wife would have stayed at home.

The boat continued to glide through the water. All of us looked straight ahead as the boatman worked his pole. I couldn't say where we were going or why I had gotten into the boat or who these other people really were. We just happened to be there at a certain moment and anything seemed possible. ④



FRED SKOLNIK was born in New York City and has lived in Israel since 1963. He is best known as the editor in chief of the 22-volume second edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, winner of the 2007 Dartmouth Medal. He has published stories in *TriQuarterly*, *Gargoyle*, *The MacGuffin*, *Minnetonka Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Prism Review*, *Words & Images*, *Literary House Review*, *Underground Voices*, *Third Coast*, *Polluto*, etc.). His novel *The Other Shore* (Aqueous Books, 2011) is an epic work depicting Israeli society at a critical juncture in its recent history.



Bear Claw

Misti Rainwater-Lites

Outside Perry's bedroom window the ferrets were at it again, fucking their furry asses into the ground. Perry gritted his teeth, curled his toes, turned on the television. Wolfman Jack was eating a melting Fudgesicle. Desire. Fuck. There was no escaping it.

In his latest letter to Nathaniel Perry had written a sort of wish list, a kind of prayer. Companionship. Piano. Raspberry jam. Monsoon. Running car. Nathaniel's terse reply: Quit moping about and join a bowling league. Join a church. Buy a goddamn horse.

Life had always been so easy for Nathaniel, born in mild March to milder Episcopalian parents in New Hampshire. When you're from New Hampshire the world is your orchard. You walk around waiting for plums to fall.

Perry had been persecuted from the starting point, born in harsh July to a crazy Pentecostal mother and crazier Baptist father...in Oklahoma, no less. His mother's breast milk gave him a terrible rash and nightmares that would follow him into his third decade of life.

"Babe...did you fight in a war or somethin'?" Staci had asked. Staci. Pert tits. Apple ass. Strawberry blonde hair, so much of it, all over. Coconut scented shampoo. Congenial stream of consciousness babble while they played Scrabble. Staci bested Perry with "bearclaw." Perry had insisted that "bearclaw" was not one word but two. Bear claw. But there was no dictionary within reaching distance and Perry was lazy so Staci had won the game. 🐾



Call From Ben Lomond

Misti Rainwater-Lites

This is night, June, Texas, 2010 and I am up beyond ache.

He calls from Ben Lomond, which is located in Santa Cruz County, California.

His voice is my drug beyond immunity. We talk for two hours, I try to keep up, he is smarter and bigger than I will ever be. Once he worked as a country singer in Japan.

This eludes my comprehension. My life has been such an easy

text, such a monosyllabic primer. Why does he call me? All I have to offer is genuine adoration.

Soon I will fly to him for one week of communion. I want kisses from his mouth and much more but I will settle for eye contact and drunken conversation over steak and eggs. He slays me and I rise like incense smoke. This has been the process for two or more years.

When we hang up I walk down the street with a bottle of cheap chardonnay, singing to the moon because I am drunk and too alone. If he were here now I wonder if he would carry me. 🍷



MISTI RAINWATER-LITES is the author of several poetry collections and two novels. Misti's second novel, *Bullshit Rodeo*, is available at smashwords, lulu and amazon. Misti's YouTube channel is *Xmas All Year Long* (youtube.com/user/roxixmas).



Life in Fragments

Howie Good

1

Squalid yellow light. An empty street. It's less a story than a situation. My clothes are old, but they're clean.

2

The season slowed in its turning to allow the sun to catch up. What I thought was thunder must have been the rumble of panic. A door opened into a big room where an exam was underway. There were one million monkeys with typewriters at long tables. Some of them could have used my help spelling "catastrophe."

3

Every day is somewhere we've never been before. We're like the ships of Odysseus, my Lit teacher said, always being blown off course. Or maybe I thought it, just above my right eye. [Insert shrug.] We've all lost things. We've all had things stolen. And not only things. Wash your hands. Germs are everywhere.

4

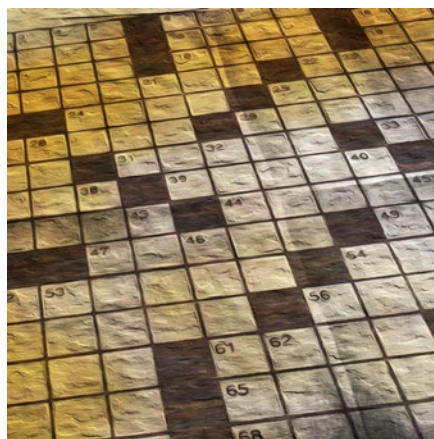
Birds whistled emphatically when you passed down the street. Wherever you went, a white attic room with one small window followed. The dimwits and dipshits knew your name, but only I knew your location, and that afterward we'd fall asleep, sometimes entwined.

5

The street was full of snow and the homeless. You joked that God must be living in another city under an assumed name. When we were little, the simple three-letter words on the blackboard, CAT RAT MAT HAT, seemed to me to make a song. Now there's suicide attacks and Zolof and the clock's audible heartbeat. I wish I was a wolf in the mountains. Wolves, the book said, don't wish to be found. 🐾



HOWIE GOOD, a journalism professor at SUNY New Paltz, is the author of the new poetry collection, ***Dreaming in Red***, from Right Hand Pointing. All proceeds from the sale of the book go to a crisis center, which you can read about here: <https://sites.google.com/site/rhplanding/howie-good-dreaming-in-red> He is also the author of numerous chapbooks, including most recently ***The Devil's Fuzzy Slippers*** from Flutter Press and ***Personal Myths*** from Writing Knights Press. He has two other chapbooks forthcoming, ***Fog Area*** from Dog on a Chain Press and ***The Death of Me*** from Pig Ear Press.



Bury the God

Matt Salyer

“Eumaeus, verily this is a great marvel, this hound lying here in the dung.” — The Odyssey, Book XVII

In the beginning, the world was black and the bitch lay blind in sounds and dust. She had littered six of them, pure pits, and they heaped against her belly, spilt like viscera. They had little blind eyes that quivered at sounds and runny red lids that shuttered them. They softened the crumpled newspaper beneath them with urine until it dried and shuttered to the shape of their bodies. They listened to the regular shudder of water in the copper pipes and the sudden *whoosh* of furnace air beaten against the plenum. It hushed them and they slept. Sometimes when they woke, they heard the basement stairs creaking over their heads and they felt fresh bedding under their haunches. In time, the creaking stopped altogether and the bitch lay still beneath them. Yellowed newsprint stuck to their hides, layered in scraps, until they looked like a pile of crossword puzzles. When they whimpered, they listened to the dust until it started to swirl in the plenum’s *whoosh*. The dust lived. It danced on their tongues and burrowed under their fur and it made the black world silly. They yipped and tumbled in sounds and bodies and dust while their mother’s teats dried in the black.

And then there was light.

The light brought a god in with it, and the god groped their bodies like the dust. He kept a boy in his shadow. When the runt woke, it was because the god had taken it into the palm of his hand for the boy to see. Thick veins shook across the god’s knuckles like pipes rattling through the joists. The runt could smell the blood in them. Its paws twitched and the god laughed. Its jowls carried the scent of god to its nose, and its nose twitched. It was a kind of prayer.

You can see its heart when it breathes, the boy said.

You can always see that, the god replied.

It’s a runt.

For now, the god said. But things don’t stay set like that.

Some things don’t, the boy thought. He had never liked the man with the dogs and he was glad that his father had finally gotten around to making things *set*. It was only right. It was *their* building, after all, just as it had been his grandfather’s, too, back in the old illuminated days when the Irish still lived on the Hill and valorous men carried lunch pails and fist-fought and crossed themselves when they passed funerals. He liked his grandfather’s stories and his father’s way of living them. And he liked how strong his father looked when he went to collect the rent. It made the noisy, ingratiating bravado of the man with the dogs look farcical. The boy tried to imagine him fist-fighting his grandfather. His grandfather always won. Usually, the man with the dogs would be waiting for them in the hall, complaining about mice and old windows and promising rent, saying *I gotcha I gotcha y’know I gotcha always been straight witchya*. This time was different, though. The man was gone. His father had made things *set like that*. This was just the part where you made a spectacle to prove it.

While the woman from 1A watched, his father went straight to 1B and jammed a flathead into the latch and struck it with his palm until the door swung open. He explained how the trick worked. *They always leave everything behind*, he reminded the boy. The boy already knew. He remembered from last time. After they looked for broken windows and holes in the drywall, they cut the man’s mattresses open. They flung dishes onto the linoleum until it looked like a beach littered with shells. They poured motor oil on boxes of clothes and shoeboxes

crammed with bent photos and born-again tracts and letters from a women's prison. It seemed so silly, but the boy didn't laugh. He tiptoed through the dish shards and shook his head in disgust. That, too, was part of the strange spectacle. It was like finding yourself justified in some terrible children's game where you messed up the loser's room and jumped on his bed. Later that day, his father would drag the man's things out to the curb, pile them high, and make a show of what they had done for *the street*. He was always fighting against the innumerable encroachments of *the street*. That, too, had something to do with remembering old days, the boy thought. And it had something to do with how his father was strong: he marked the borders of old days with violent signs like a pirate staking out buried treasure with skulls and bones.

It had taken them a while to get into the basement. The man with the dogs had screwed the door shut. *I guess it makes sense*, his father said as he guided the screw heads out between his thick burred knuckles. Someone might have stolen the dogs. They were bloodline fighters. Later, when the boy held the flashlight steady on the runt, he could still see the grooves from the screw threads on his father's thumbs.

It's not gonna make it, the boy said.

You don't know that.

I know it. Its mamma's dead.

I got her.

The boy knew what that meant. It was part of things being *set like that*. The litter would go to James or Robert whenever they showed up for work and then they could sell them or give them away to cousins and neighbors as they saw fit; everyone in the neighborhood was a cousin or nephew to James, it seemed; someone would want them. They would know to leave the bitch for his father. His father would carry the body upstairs in a sheet lay her across the pile of garbage on the curb. That way they'd see it on *the street*. They'd think that he killed it because he was *old school*, like a fist-fighter. The boy wondered if his father would lay him out like that, too, if he died. It would make a point. He told himself that he wouldn't mind. He liked getting to be a part of keeping things *set like that*.

It can stay with me a while, his father said.

A little while, the boy decided.

It's always just for a little while, his father said.

The runt curled in the god's palm and the god's fingers stuck to its fur like old bedding. It was the first time that the runt had seen light. The light hurt. It was good of the god to bring his smell with him and the comforting *whooshes* of blood in his pulse. It was good of the god to bring his hand. It hushed the light. It made an end to the first day.

The god was always making things: two and three-bedroom apartments in clapboard three-families, new front porches with dusky floor paint and bright cream trim, knee-high fences that ran between squat posts capped in copped. No one ever stole the copper. He served his own papers, pulled permits, wrote receipts, signed false names on the *Notice to Quit* forms, saved service fees. When he went through the courts, he made small talk with the marshals. When he didn't, he made the patrol cars

look the other way. The desk sergeant told them to leave him alone. He handled things *old school*. It made their jobs easier. And on the weekends, he made his son a big breakfast with eggs and sausage and rye toast, saying *this is the way your mother should feed you. Does your mother feed you?* and when they had finished eating, he took the boy back to *the street* to learn about the dozen clapboard houses where *the second floor's always late but she pays the whole in a money order so just leave it alone and these ones are on State so you cash their checks on the 1st or the 3rd or they'll pay the gas bill and stiff you*. It all exhausted him: the marshals, the papers, the endless spectacles of power that *the street* required. Sometimes he couldn't bear driving the habitual circuit of breaking houses where he was always less than family but more than guest. In the end, though, he always did. He marked the places where he had draped the carcasses of dogs across trash piles and the fences where he had pinned the bruised bodies of trespassers. He always counted the copper caps. No one ever stole the copper.

At the end of each day, the god rested. Wherever he was, the carnal hum of *the street* changed through the windows and he remembered that it was night. People stopped working at night and went to their homes. He wanted to be like that, too. He screwed the boards back over the windows, taking care not to split the grain of the trim beneath. He scraped a lather of compound back into the bucket and stomped the lid shut and scraped the flats of his blades against each other until they were rusty clean. Then he looked around to see that everything was good. The new doors shit with whispers. Smoke detectors blinked their green lights like fireflies. Fresh primer beaded and shimmered on the ceiling. His shadow rippled across it like a swimmer in a magic lake. In another week or two, he'd be finished with the unit. He'd move on to the next one. A few weeks after that, he'd move his brushes and rollers and buckets of tools up the last flight of stairs and start the third floor. Soon, they would all be rented out and he would have nowhere to go during the day. That was when he got nervous. He'd prowl around like a stray dog, sniffing out abandoned houses, taking them, owning them, getting them *set* the way they should be. It let him forget about the old building with the whispering doors and the magic lake. It would be someone else's home by then, a stranger's body cast across his magic lake. That was what was best about the new ones, the long-abandoned ones. They were broken and gutted and you could restore them. *And at times*, he thought, *they can almost restore you*. They were a kind of prayer.

He would always try to wait at least a month or so before he let the tenants bring him in to show him how the refrigerator leaked or prove that the bedroom outlets didn't work. He let the older ones make him coffee and tell him about their children's lives. He sat on their oversized couches and pretended to admire them through their clear plastic covers. He asked them about the people in their photos and their collections of different things. He knew the names of their saints and what each one interceded for. He even tolerated the wooden Indians and home altars and the Hand of Power. He liked the way that generation lived. When they died, though, he'd throw the wooden Indian

and the Seven African Powers out on the curb and cover them with old coats and mothballed dresses and broken china plates with pictures of Simon Bolivar painted on them. He'd bring in a priest to drive out Chango and the magic of the Orishas. It was *his* house, after all. In the darkness beneath the magic lake, he had ordered the world long before others came with their strange gods. He knew where *he* would have kept his father's desk. He knew what saints *he* would have prayed to. He knew what *he* would have kept in the refrigerator and whose pictures *he* would have hung on the wall. Sometimes beneath the magic lake, he had not abandoned the lonesome, sacramental body of his wife. Sometimes he had a girlfriend, a professional who worked in an office and folded the laundry with him. Sometimes his son was a grown man who called him for advice and told him about his grandchildren. Strangers and strange gods were always ruining the world. He was a patient god, though, and they always gave it back to him broken. That was the way he wanted it most. He could move his hand across the damp plaster that he had formed on the walls and make it smooth. He could move beneath the wet, shimmering ceilings like a spirit in a magic lake, waiting for the world to begin again. He would have made every day end in the magic lake.

When days didn't, he rested.

•

Long after the god had forgiven him, he carried the mark of what had happened between them. You could still see the pink hairless C six inches below the knee where the stitches had been but he hardly ever remembered anymore. When he did, it was because the girls from Towers liked to study him after they fucked. It was a way of talking. They'd run their forefingers along the arc of the scar and ask him about what happened. *We used to fight a lot*, he'd tell them, *me and my dad* and then *real fights y'know?* or *he's got this fucking dog he loves and he let it take off a piece of my leg*. Then they'd furrow their brows and mock horror. It seemed to make them feel justified in their own bodies. It seemed to justify his body lying next to theirs, too. Most of all, it let them forget in the end about justifying bodies at all. They'd start talking about finals or how his cum tasted different when he was off-season. They wanted to take him to the Vineyard. They wanted to know which of their friends had the best ass. They'd slap him on the chest when he told them and laugh *oh my god you're an ass* and nuzzle into his side. He'd drape his fingers along their ribs or rest the palm of his hand against little tattoos of suns or tortoises on the small of their backs, while they spilled their legs through his and he listened to their breath.

While they slept, he'd lay awake thinking: *he's got this fucking dog he loves and he let it take off a piece of my leg* but he knew that that wasn't exactly what happened; *we used to fight a lot me and my dad*, he remembered, but he couldn't remember why. It probably had something to do with his parents' divorce or trouble at school or something that his father had said about his mother's boyfriend. Maybe it was because of something *he* had said first. He couldn't remember. It was as though it had all happened a long time ago to somebody else, a doppelganger or a ghost who had long since vanished, leaving him with his calamitous wound. There was nothing he could do about it; only

the story of what had happened remained unfinished. It was easier, in any case, to let someone admire it or comfort him because of it. It was easier, in any case, to blame it on his father. Maybe *he* started it, though. He was so much like his father. Even his mother said so and she hardly knew him.

All he clearly remembered about the catastrophe was the aftermath. There had been some kind of a fight between the two of them. It was over something so trivial that he didn't even understand why they were fighting at the time. When he tried to parse it out later, he knew that whatever it was hadn't really mattered. He had wanted to fight. He struck his father and his father let him. He struck his father again. The second time, it was because he was furious at his father for letting him. The second time, *this fucking dog* didn't let him. His father had to nearly crush the runt's jaw with his heel to loosen its grip on his leg. Mostly, though, he remembered the aftermath because that was when he had to start telling stories about the catastrophe. The stories weren't quite right even then, but he had to tell them because he was different after that. He had to miss nearly half the season his junior year because of what everyone solemnly called *his injury* or *your accident*. He just sat around the cafeteria during practice getting fat, slow. He took to calling replacement quarterback a *little bitch*. Sometimes the sophomore girls came up to him saying *does it hurt? He's such a dick that's not right*. He let them touch it and shake their heads in commiseration. He learned to tell them about the dozen stitches. He learned that the story worked best if his inscrutable father was violent, distant, and *such a dick*.

It was only a story. If anything, he liked telling it because it made him feel guilty. The story was a lie, but he could style it and rehearse it and make it *his* lie. When they got to the ER, his mother was waiting for them. She didn't want him to back with his father, but he begged. His father promised to put the runt down but he begged him not to. It wouldn't have proven anything. He hadn't wanted to play that season, anyway. He liked the idea of having old days and old scars like his father and grandfather and the men who used to carry lunch pails to work at the mills. He wanted to sit and drink with them at Gahan's and know their stories and tell his. He wanted to sit with his father. Long afterwards, when they sat together, his father would push his drink across the bar toward him and slap him on the leg and say *all set*. Then he would talk and his father would breathe in through his teeth, curling and uncurling the fingers of his left hand until he exhaled. He would drink his father's drink and pretend not to notice when the old man put his hand to his chest. It was a kind of catastrophe, so he'd tell his father a story.

You'll be all right, he'd say.

Yeah. Just old. You get old.

You all right? he'd ask.

Yeah, I'm set. I just need to rest.

•

In the beginning, it had been a bar and then a luncheonette when the mills still needed both, and later it became a bodega, an auto glass shop, another bodega, a tattoo parlor, a check cashers, a botanica, and a store that sold plastic flowers and knickknacks called "attic

treasures.” Finally, it became a Pentecostal fellowship where the deacons and pastors gave prophesies over the microphone. One of the elders would be healed of throat cancer. Another would have a money blessing soon. The Holy Ghost would find them a bigger church where the roof didn’t leak. The Holy Ghost would speak to the judge’s heart and the judge would bang his gavel like an archangel reading the Last Judgment. The judge or the Holy Ghost would make the landlord forgive the back rent. The judge would arrest him for towing the elder’s car. The Holy Ghost would curse him for cursing the preacher. The god was happy when they left the place he had given them.

He remembered when it had been a luncheonette, back before his father bought it from Joe DeFabrio’s son. He wanted it to be a luncheonette again. He remembered the glass pie cases and red vinyl seat cushions and the speckled white Formica counters rimmed in chrome. The waitresses wore white aprons and the men fingered the brims of their hats. Sam Cooke tried to play Cupid between them. *Maybe I’ll open it up again*, he thought, *for the old timers. I can sit around here like a rock and do nothing all day*. His son could run it for him when he finished getting his degree. It was a business degree. He liked that. He could show his son how business worked on *the street*. No, he thought, *someone will rent it by then. Maybe they’ll make it a luncheonette again*. He knew better, though. He had taken down the paneling and you could see the old luncheonette colors faded beneath and splattered with patches of white plaster. The paneling nails stuck in little pocks of scratch-coat and horsehair and he pulled them out carefully one by one, like a surgeon removing stitches.

The nails fell bent and crumpled on beds of shed skim coat and wide, brittle strips of paint that had flaked into the broken, peninsular shapes of imaginary continents. At first the flakes were white and iron grey and mold black, but after a while they fell in red and orange and robin’s egg hues. The oldest ones were luncheonette yellow. They shed on the drab mess of continents until the floor looked like a brightly colored map of old empires. It was an accidental world, fallen from the god’s carelessness, and the runt followed behind him, pile to pile, world to world, lapping up nails and paint and licking the floor clean of plaster dust. The empires tasted sweet, euphoric. They smelled stranger and richer than the dull white and iron grey world beneath them. The old lead of the colors settled in the runt’s belly. Its sweetness sang in the runt’s blood. The god was lost in thought, busy with his work and his hidden design. He trampled the empires and the dry continents shifted and cracked and turned to dust beneath his feet while the runt hungered for shed worlds. The god was in the world and the world was euphoric. There was sweetness in doing the god’s work and a revelry in cleaning up his messes, making things *set* for him. It was a kind of prayer.

When the god died, there was no warning. He had

stopped to breathe, but he clenched and unclenched the grip of his free hand the way he always did when he stopped like that. His breath shook when he exhaled and his heart shuddered in his chest like heat beaten against a plenum. It always did that. He put his free hand against the wall and the panel nails snagged it. He didn’t notice, but he never noticed things like that. The runt watched as the god’s chest rose and fell, rose and fell. His hammer fell and it split one of the continents in two. Then the god fell and the world shook. Dust lived and danced where it had once been weighted by empires and hidden beneath the continents. It coated the runt’s fur until its body was as white as the god’s. Where the god died, blood flowed. When the dust died, the blood sopped it up, and soon there was only the blood. It saturated the white and iron grey of the fallen maps. It dyed the variegated colors of empire. And the body of god rested. The runt waited for the world to begin again.

I am not dead yet, the god thought. *I must be waiting for something*. It felt like one of those times when strangers gave him their homes back, broken and fresh. Or maybe it felt like the way that *he* would break something. He couldn’t remember. Maybe it had always been broken. He wasn’t sure what *it* was, though. He decided he must have meant the luncheonette. Maybe someone would rent it and make it work. He hoped so. It was still unfinished and he had a love of unfinished things. *I am an unfinished thing*, he thought, but he couldn’t remember why. He could only remember the luncheonette as it was in the old illuminated days when the mills still needed one. He remembered his father sitting across the speckled Formica from him. His father was fingering the brim of his hat and the waitress with the coffee seemed to know him in a strange



kind of longsuffering, forgiving, and slightly embarrassed way. Only now, remembering, did it seem obvious or clichéd. His father wouldn’t look at the girl in the apron. He looked at her reflection where it rippled across the surface of the window. When she poured the coffee, their hands brushed and his fingers recoiled like a sprung claws. When she left, he went back to explaining what it meant to do valorous things and make stories. He had only been out of prison a week and none of the men he knew carried lunch pails. They went to Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, but none of them crossed themselves or took the sacrament. They were finished things, his father explained, and he was a finished thing, too, so he knew how to keep them set in their place. He had only been out of prison a week. He had to make sure the finished men remembered him. He had to make things *set like that*.

I am leaving a mess, the god thought. He could see the plaster dust where it hid in the nail holes and patterned crannies of the tin ceiling. He could see the places where he had patched the rust holes with epoxy and tinfoil. They were obvious. They would stay *set like that*. Maybe no one would notice in a luncheonette. Suddenly, the god wanted

to be as small as the dust. *'Cause when you're done*, he remembered his father saying, *you don't get much that you bring to God. You just get the part that they have the Mass for and the wake for, the part the priests fuss over, y'know? But that's not the part that they bury and put in the papers. What's left is the rest of you and that's the part people cry over and it falls apart and goes back to the ground where people can get a piece of it again. They want the rest of you that wasn't ever yours to begin with, that was made from other people to begin with. Me, your mamma, all these other people that you carry around and that they carry around in them from before they made you, and it goes on and on like that until it could make you crazy thinking about it. And when you go, you go back into other people because they're really your fault, just like you're someone else's fault when you think about it, and they make themselves out of you for a little while. It's just how things are. And the part the priests fuss with, most likely you didn't want that part to begin with or else you didn't know it well enough to fuss. So you let God have it. And you stay in the world in the things you started. You let your family have the things you started. The pieces of you. The shit that really matters.* The god remembered why he was unfinished. He remembered that he was staring at the ceiling. He had taken out the drop ceiling and spackled the screw holes in the pressed tin beneath and he had hidden the rust spots with duct tape and tinfoil and painted it. The stains had bled through and he had painted it again. It had bled again that morning, and that afternoon, he had primed it right. The wet primer beaded and shimmered above him like a magic lake. He was drowning in a magic lake. It was an answer to a kind of prayer.

Each day that the god rested, the runt waited. It nudged the god but the god rested. His body grew harder among the continents and the pretty sweetness of their empires. The odor of god grew and spread throughout the world until it left no quarter for the fixed, innumerable scents of men that had layered between the joists and the plaster and panel sheets. Flies darted to life across the god's face, worshiping in the smell, and the runt knew that the world was about to begin anew. The god was driving the scents of men away, and his work was finally finished. He had made a world for the runt to live in and he had washed it in blood. The runt ate the flies that the god had brought him. He ate the iron grey and the luncheonette yellow and gloried in their sweetness. And when he was thirsty, he drank from the wound where the god fell.

When the god's son came back from around the side of the building, he got into the car and she studied him

like a stranger. He had started carrying himself differently. He still limped a little. It was almost imperceptible and she liked the fact that she saw it. It balanced out the fact that he had grown to look more and more like the old pictures of his father. She couldn't say exactly what it was that bothered her so much about that. It was just that sometimes he looked like a man she could be frightened of. And when he slept, he looked violent and isolate like his father and grandfather. Lately, she had begun to take control of the situation by worrying about his diet. At first, he didn't listen. Then she reminded him about his father's heart. She said it ran in his family and he hushed her. Then he listened. He always listened. It made her feel better to see that.

He started the car and craned his neck across her to stare at the building.

He wasn't there, he said.

His car's there.

And the dog.

You sure he's not there? He never goes anywhere without that monster.

Yeah, he said. I looked in through the back window.

He shook his head and started to laugh.

Fucking thing's in there gnawing on this huge bone.

I bet it's one of his tenants, she laughed.

Right? Or like a mastodon or something.

She scrunched up her face for a minute. He had brought a smell into the car. She hated the way that neighborhood smelled.

He should just give it a name already, she said. I hate just calling it *the dog*.

He didn't like naming things.

He named you.

He named me after himself. That's different.

You should give it a name.

It's not mine.

Fine, she said. *I'll* name it then.

A fly landed on her neck and she slapped it away. *It really does have a kind of grandeur*, she thought. The windows were covered with newspaper and sheets but through the transoms, she could see the bright white ceiling and the big crown molding strips. It was rare to find them intact like that anymore. The place just needed more work. She didn't tell *him* that, of course. It was better, she decided, to keep things just the way that they were. The old man saw the baby on the holidays. Her husband took the train up on the weekends. That would change soon enough. He had his *own* son to think about, now. It would really dawn on him one of these days. Then things could finally be *set*. They had to be. 🐛



MATT SALYER is a writer based in New Haven, CT. His stories and poems have appeared in *Long Poem Magazine*, *322 Review*, *The New Haven Review*, *Spilling Ink Review*, and other places. Sometimes he writes things for *The Nervous Breakdown* here: <http://www.thenervousbreakdown.com/msalyer/>
He likes *The Searchers* because he likes the desert. He likes the desert because it's clean.



There's more where this came from

Our first four issues are available for **FREE** download at **ThriceFiction.com**





There's No Place Like Home

Robert Vaughan

This place is a nuthouse. Mom travels for work. Boston one day, Montreal the next. And Dad, well, if you can call him that, he's still screwing Tonda, our pastor's daughter. She's only a year older than my oldest sister. That's gross. And then there's my brother. He won't leave me alone. Some nights I sleep on the garage roof just to get away from him. Even the dog is constantly horny, humping the closest leg around. So embarrassing. On the bus home, Craig Neff leers at my invisible breasts. It's the last day of school so I try to tell Debbie how nutty it all is while she signs my yearbook: Stay as sweet as UR! Big, loopy letters, she signs right across Mr. Stanford, our biology teacher's crotch. Then Debbie says you exaggerate. And maybe I do a little. ↻



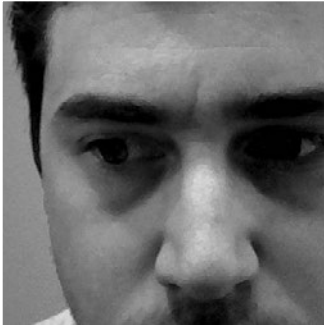
ROBERT VAUGHAN leads writing roundtables at Redbird- Redoak Writing. His prose and poetry is found in numerous journals. His short fiction, "10,000 Dollar Pyramid" was a finalist in the Micro-Fiction Awards 2012. He is a fiction editor at *JMWW magazine*, *Thunderclap!* and *Lost in Thought*. He hosts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

ARTISTS & STORYTELLERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



KYRA WILSON ... *Front & Back Cover, Pages 2, 6-7, 12-16 ...*

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



CHAD ROSEBURG ... *Pages 9, 24-25 ...*

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.



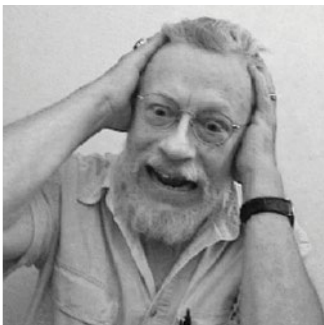
DAVID SIMMER II

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



MARCUS SPEH ... *Pages 18-19 ...*

is a German writer who lives in Berlin and blogs at marcusspeh.com. His short fiction collection *Thank You For Your Sperm* will be published by MadHat Press in 2012. Marcus' short fiction has been nominated for a Micro Award, two Pushcart Prizes, two Best of the Net awards, and two Million Writers Awards, and was long-listed for the Paris Literary Prize. He is a staunch supporter of shipwrecked penguins (<http://speh.tumblr.com>) and was maitre d' of the legendary Dada venue Kaffe in Katmandu.



JOHN M. BENNETT ... *Inside Front Cover, Back Cover ...*

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*, and is Curator of the Avant Writing Collection at The Ohio State University Libraries. His work has been collected in several major institutions, including Washington University (St. Louis), SUNY Buffalo, The Ohio State University, and The Museum of Modern Art. His PhD (UCLA 1970) is in Latin American Literature. He can be found online at JohnMBennett.net

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John M. Bennett 4-6-12

