

THRICE

FICTION™

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THRICE FICTION™

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RW Spryszak, Editor
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L'appel du large by Francis Denis

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

Thrice 9 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

We've said it before and will bloviate it further; we don't like the term "experimental." Call it "new" or "uncategorized" or whatever, but don't call it "experimental." "Experimental" makes it sound like you don't know what you'll end up with when it's over. You have a theory and maybe it's alright so let's toss it all together and throw it out there and see what happens. This can't be right. The point is that a writer ought to be beyond the trial stage by the time work is submitted anywhere for publication, is what I've always said.

This may be honing a fine point too sharply, or cutting an edge too distinctly, but it's a bone of contention with me and, obviously, the subject always releases a whirlwind of clichés from me whenever it is broached, no?

The point is that you can look at writers and artists who are known to have broken new ground in their work and, if you search diligently enough, you will find that they were first grounded in the traditional — and understand it too — before they flew off into the wild tangents that they are known for. Picasso's early work embraced the traditional, before he flew off the handle. Even Joyce, to some degree, herded hogs on the ranch before he wandered off from it and did *Finnegans Wake*, for example. And there is a sense that calling something "experimental" before mastering — or at least understanding — the more traditional seems and sounds a little like just being frustrated with punctuation and grammar and "to hell with it, here you go." In a larger sense, I believe, you can't forge ahead with a new thing before you at least have the old thing in your pocket. The observer/reader can see right through it, is my point.

No single idea encapsulates what Thrice is trying to do more than this sentiment. Traditional forms of fiction may seem mundane to some people, but good writing is still good writing. And non-traditional forms of fiction may be challenging for some, but they come off with real gravitas when it's obvious the writer knows what a semicolon is for, whether he or she actually uses one or not.

So here's the December issue, with all of the above combined in one presentation in order to make the point.

It is also a point of pride with us that every writer in this issue — whether they have been published before this or this is their first appearance anywhere — appears on our particular pages for the first time.

Sleet

Andrew Hogan

Sleet pelted the picture window of the Creekside Pub. Each viscous droplet hung momentarily on the glass, slowly oozing downward, fighting to remain solid against the warmth on the other side, then plunging, combining with other droplets to splash onto the window sill, dripping onto the frozen ground, and re-solidifying into ice.

"Herb, switch the Weather Channel back on during the commercial," Joe said.

A chorus of groans spilled across the bar. A peanut hit Joe in the ear. He turned toward Steve, the probable hurler, and grimaced.

"I'll turn on the weather during half time," Herb said. "Otherwise, go outside to the parking lot if you want to check on the snow."

The herd around the bar snorted and grunted its approval.

"What snow?" Joe said. "All I see is sleet. A couple of fucking degrees colder, and we could have six inches on the ground by sunrise."

A guttural chorus of disapproval rose from around the bar.

"Hey," Pete said. He had to stand up and shout because he was sitting at the end of the bar. "I gotta drive to Waterbury tomorrow for Thanksgiving dinner with the in-laws. I don't need a god-damned blizzard to drive in."

"Thanksgiving," Joe said, slapping his hand on the bar. "Triple over-time." He held up his empty glass as if to make a toast, but only a single drop fell on his tongue. "You should be praying for snow, you hate your in-laws."

"Maybe, but they put on a nice spread," Pete said. "We're mostly eating macaroni and cheese since the plant cut my hours. The family is definitely up for a good meal. So, no snow."

"Sorry, Pete, but yesterday I got the mortgage default notice from the bank. Twelve hours of triple overtime, and I can send them five-hundred bucks and stop the foreclosure process."

Half-time started and Herb switched to the Weather Channel. Current temperature, thirty-three degrees. Damn. Forecast low, twenty-nine degrees. Yes.

"Herb, pour me another shot of Wild Turkey. I got a couple of hours before I start plowing."

Joe was feeling lucky, so he put down a hundred on the Celtics, they were behind ten points, but Joe knew they were always stronger in the second half.

The fourth quarter rolled around, the Celtics were up by seven, but Pierce had four fouls and he was doing most of the scoring. Outside the window, Joe saw a parade of little angelic snowflakes hitting the window. It was going to be his lucky night.

"Gotta take a piss, save my seat," Joe said to his bar-mate. From the men's room Joe heard shouting. "What happened?"

"Bronson pushed the ref, he's out."

The Laker's player sunk both foul shots, and the Celtics turned over the ball. It was a three point game, when the TV started beeping. A red line streamed across the bottom of the picture tube: An ice storm was slowing moving into northern Fairfield County. Numerous power outages were expected due to fallen trees. Drivers were urged to avoid travel.

Damn, no plowing, just sanding and salting. Joe'd be lucky to get eight hours overtime, that's if it didn't start to thaw early. A mixture of moan and cheers from the bar.

"Pay up," Sam said.

"What?"

"Your team blew it on the last shot. Pay up."

"I ain't got it. Here's fifty. I'll owe you the rest."

Outside, a zombie had fallen on the ice covered steps leading to the parking lot, the dust from his desiccated brain providing traction on the ice.

"Thanks," Joe said to the dead undead.

Joe started his pickup truck and turned on the headlights. Two vampires making love in the snow in front of the truck snarled at him.

"Fucking vampires," he said.

Joe put the truck in reverse and gunned it, running down the alien standing behind the truck holding a metal probe in his tentacle.

"Fucking aliens," Joe said, as he gunned the truck forward, thumping over the alien. A stream of green glowing ooze spread across the parking lot as Joe pulled out into the street and headed to his empty house, his wife and daughter having moved in with her parents anticipating the impending foreclosure. 🏠



ANDREW HOGAN received his doctorate in development studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Before retirement, he was a faculty member at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, where he taught medical ethics, health policy and the social organization of medicine in the College of Human Medicine. Dr. Hogan published more than five-dozen professional articles on health services research and health policy. He has published twenty-one works of fiction in the *OASIS Journal*, *Hobo Pancakes*, *Twisted Dreams*, *Thick Jam*, *Grim Corps*, *Long Story Short*, *Defenestration*, *The Blue Guitar Magazine*, *Fabula Argentea*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *SANDSCRIPT*, and the *Copperfield Review*.



Corner Store Love Story

Rena Rossner

Sarah remembered him from the corner store. Ezra. She was a child then, buying white rolls speckled with sesame seeds and chocolate milk in cold soft bags. It was his hands she remembered, the way they'd feel the fruits and vegetable for firmness, the fingerprints they'd leave on sweating cartons of milk.

Now she watched his hands as they dug the pool pit in her backyard, the same freckles and curly black hairs, the muscles harder, more defined. His nails were dirty, she noticed, as she sipped lemonade from her balcony, and twirled the sprig of mint with her straw, upsetting ice.

She went back inside to pick up a paperback and check on sleeping Micah. She saw Ezra's eyes drift up, watching her watch him through the window.

It embarrassed Sarah, her need for water, in a country that charged for every drop. But she was giving him a job. She contented herself with that thought. She was paying him for more than just chocolate milk and bread.

Sarah went downstairs to the kitchen and opened the freezer. She took out two cubes of ice and turned to drop them into her glass. And he was there, suddenly, in her kitchen. The ice cubes fell. He bent down to pick them up.

When he stood up he dropped them in her glass, his cold fingers touching hers. She stared at his hands.

"A drink," he said, "some water or coke?"

"Of course. I'm sorry. I forgot..." She blushed.

Flustered, she opened the fridge and took out two bottles. Water and coke. She'd bought them for the workers earlier that morning, from the corner store.

He clucked his tongue, and shrugged. "No problem. Thank you." The Hebrew heavy on his tongue.

She handed him one bottle. His fingers brushed her own, again. He reached to take the other bottle and she took his hand and placed it on her face. She closed her eyes. It was something she'd wanted to feel all her life, but didn't know it until then.

She opened her eyes and looked at him, expecting something. He smiled and took his hand from her cheek. His teeth were yellow, she noticed. Coffee stained.

He bowed his head and turned to go, one bottle in each hand, his thumbs leaving fingerprints in the condensation.



RENA ROSSNER is a graduate of the Writing Seminars program at The Johns Hopkins University, Trinity College Dublin and McGill University. She works as a Foreign Rights and Literary Agent at The Deborah Harris Agency in Jerusalem, Israel. Her poetry and short fiction has been published or is forthcoming from *The Dr. T.J. Eckleburg Review*, *Poetica Magazine*, *MiPoesias*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *The 22 Magazine*, *Fade Poetry Journal*, *Exterminating Angel Press*, *Full of Crow* and *The Prague Revue*, among others. Her cookbook *Eating the Bible* is forthcoming from Skyhorse Publishing. Her first novel is out on submission.



Is This the Promised End?

Nina Kotyantz

Morris Brandson in his beige raincoat – the one he inherited from Arthur Miller's Willy — trots along the damp grounds of his forsaken city, fighting the ruthless blows of the raindrops in the wind. His makeup smeared, he is barely able to pull behind him his black-turned-grey suitcase, heavy with costumes and props he accumulated from more roles than he can actually recall. A sword sticking out of the front pocket, a crown tied with a rope to the top handle that dangles along the way, and a piece of green velvet peering out from the side of the suitcase where the zipper tries to meet its end. He pulls and pulls at this suitcase, one moment with his right hand, another moment bringing his left hand into aid, as he switches the roughened leather binder full of papers from under one arm to under the other arm. The last of the dried and discolored leaves left on the ground from this deep autumnal day, whirl in the wind and desperately try to stick to the suitcase, to his overcoat, to him. Life, they seek; escape, they scheme from this city, overflowed with crouched shadows of its inhabitants.

The rain drops mix with the tears on his cheeks as he moans — and moans with him the suitcase — while he combats the reluctance of his feet to move toward the ambiguous destination he calls home. The rope, holding his crown, unties in this struggle and sends the crown rolling down the very middle of the street. Morris, enraged, stops

to look at it for a few anguished seconds, then quickly turns away and continues to walk as fast as his frail body can bear. And in the fury of the wind he misses an awkward structure of the pavement at a corner of a building he passes... and stumbles, reluctantly falling on the ground.

"SHIT!"

His palm is bleeding, muddled with the wet dust of the street. The other palm is securely protecting the leather binder. For a short minute Morris is frozen (thinking the thoughts that pass through the mind of the fallen) and a moment later his eyes glaze with a maddening spark of anger as he throws the binder up in the air, as far away from him as he can manage. "One line I forget! One line!" he shouts, "and they already define me... the all-too-powerful dementia!"

The binder lands on the wet asphalt of the street not too far from him. Papers fly out of it, fluttering in the air like white linens would in a gentle breeze of an early fall. Morris picks himself up from the floor, his knee hurt, he limps toward his suitcase and wearily sits on it. Tears desperately roll down the crevasses left behind the smeared makeup of none other than King Lear. A paper flies and lands in front of Morris's feet. On it, the lines he forgot less than an hour ago, paralyzing him in the middle of the stage for what seemed to be forever:

"You see me here, you gods, a poor old man, / As full of grief as age; wretched in both!"



NINA KOTYANTZ is a writer, photographer and occasionally an actor. Born into a drama theatre family, she grew up with immense fascination for the depths of the human psyche. She holds a Master's Degree from Harvard University, with expertise in existential anthropology and psychology of the human condition. She has published several creative non-fiction pieces at *The Wick*—Harvard Literary Journal under her legal name – Heghine Kotoyan. She lives in Brooklyn, and is currently working on her first novella. Some of her work can be found at ninakotyantz.com



Charlie's Angel

Vica Miller

Despite his father's misgivings, Charles had never developed apprehensions about his height or his abilities to achieve greatness because of it. At five feet four inches, or 165 cm, and 31 years of age, he published his first novel, married a six-foot-tall model, and got her pregnant. It was a boy, they told them.

He looked back at his classmates from high school, tall, sturdy and slightly dim by his own standards, who went to college on football scholarships, married at graduation to become divorced drunks (or drunk divorcees) today, and smiled a sorrowful smile. They were good guys, those boys turned men, but why did they have to put so much emphasis on appearances, as if they were girls brainwashed by "How to..." sex articles in *Cosmo* and *Self*? What happened to true aspirations, he wondered? Greatness didn't depend on height — Napoleon must have known it, and so did

Charles. That conviction utterly puzzled his father who could never get over his own meager height of 5'6", and who divorced Charles's mother at the insistence that she'd had an affair with a taller man. His mother despaired for a year, her innocence offended as much as her heart broken, and married a six-foot-two real estate agent just to spite her ex-husband. She said he was great in bed. Charles didn't believe her.

No, he had no reservations about his height. He loved being short. He said it gave him a better perception on life, for his head was not far from the Earth, which kept him grounded, confident, and on his toes.

Charles met Veronica at a reading. She sat in the first row and blocked everyone else's view. He loved her insolence, for he could tell she didn't have reservations about her awesome height the same way he didn't have about his. When the last writer had left the podium, Charles asked the curator if she

knew the lady.

"Veronica. Sharp as a nail, outrageous, too. Former model turned clown. Strange story."

"Can you please introduce us?"

"Watch out what you wish for," said the curator, a slim 40-year old in tight black pants and red V-neck T-shirt, cocking her head. "She eats men alive."

"Sounds great."

Charles said his name and kissed her hand, and she smiled an open, genuine smile, like Christmas tree lighting up in the dark, and they didn't have to speak. He looked at her and she knew. Charles still remembers that moment as the most profound of his life, as if he had entered a buzzing electric circuit and become part of it. She set him in motion, and he was grateful and happy, even now, when she was no longer around.

They loved walking in TriBeCa, dressed in Prada, Kawakubo or Sander, holding hands. Their first brunch at Bubbo's, first dinner at Cercle Rouge. She always wore Roger Vivier shoes, even in a drizzle. Some people turned to look at them, the woman towering over a man, like a lighthouse over a small boat approaching the shore. Happy goose bumps ran down his back at those moments, for he knew he had found his marina. He'd get hard then. Veronica would look down at Charles, nod appreciatively, and lean over to French-kiss him, for the added benefit of the onlookers. They could talk about anything: books, dogs, mobile apps, bondage, exotic travel, physics — never bored, always laughing.

Their City Hall marriage ceremony, attended by Charlie's mother and her husband, and by Veronica's best friend Elizabeth, with whom she's had an affair for three years, lasted exactly three minutes. Veronica's parents didn't attend because they were dead. "A car crash. That's how I have all the money," she'd said once and never returned to the subject.

He admired her lanky legs draped in a red skirt, and her small breasts peaking at him through a sheer white top. She never wore a bra. She didn't have to. The minister woman didn't look at them once while mumbling the words from the podium. She did notice them at the end, after they said their "I do's" and her face took a human expression for a moment, perhaps for the first time in months, that of delight and curiosity. Charles raised himself on tiptoes, Veronica leaned forward, and he cupped her breasts for their first married kiss.

They soon discovered each other's fantasies, and hardly a night went without play. Sometimes neighbors looked at them with disdain, for they kept the windows open at night, but Charles turned them around with highly cultured talk

on the latest trends in British literature and invitations to brunch at their loft. A year after their wedding, the entire tenant body of their four-story building on Wooster Street was convinced of their privilege to know Charles and Veronica Gladstone, the next big thing in literature and entertainment, respectively. They felt justified when Charles's first novel won a literary prize, and Veronica's solo show was aired on PBS.

Charles loved her even more when he first held their son, Otto, in his arms. The boy had his mother's lanky legs, his father's brown eyes and bushy black hair. He kissed the baby's palm, then his wife's hand, and cried, for the first time in his adult life.

Otto was too little to understand what happened, but old enough — at four — to know that he no longer had a mother. It happened quietly, one early morning at the kitchen table. Veronica's disease was a mystery, had no symptoms, but was the reason for her great height. She had warned him before the wedding that she might evaporate soon — that was the word she used, evaporate — but Charles didn't believe her. Or didn't want to believe her. He still didn't. She was his angel, and angels don't evaporate, even Otto knew that.

Charles knew that grief was a room with no doors, so he opened the windows, for his son. He took him around the world.

"We will plant a flower for Mom in every country we visit," he told Otto.

"A red one, her favorite," affirmed his son. "She'd like that."

They visited thirty-two countries, for each year of Veronica's life. When they came back a year later, Otto, a boy of five, stood in front of the mirror, and said, "I'll be tall, like Mom."

"She'd like that," answered Charles. 🕒



VICA MILLER is a native of St. Petersburg (Russia) and a New Yorker for over two decades. George Plimpton called her a writer, and she believed him. Vica is the founder and host of the Vica Miller Literary Salons, a chamber reading series held in select NYC art galleries. Her stories have appeared in *Vogue Russia*, *The Jet Fuel Review* and *Asymptote* literary journals, and she has published a collection of poems. She is at work on her second novel. Vica holds a Master's degree from ITP, Interactive Telecommunications Program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, and runs communications for DataArt, a global technology firm. She is an excellent swimmer, a beginner paraglider and a mother of two. Follow her on Twitter: @vica_miller



Vodka and a doctor's prayer

Mia Avramut

“Que voulez-vous, nous sommes ici aux portes de l'Orient, où tout est pris à la légère.” (“What do you expect, we are here at the gates of the Orient, where everything is easy-going.”)

—Raymond Poincaré, upon his visit to Bucharest

If it wasn't for the moon fragments spewed by the smoldering chimney, you couldn't even see the rectangular oak door with iron bands. But for a moment, silver bathes the wood and the white sign on it: two fused crosses painted there by quiet robed men in curved beak masks filled with camphor, laudanum and myrrh. This moon holds no power over them, but you know the miasma does. The sign looks as if it was drawn in chalk, but it sure wasn't, otherwise people in their reckless grief would erase them, so they don't feel doomed.

A Medico della Peste holds your fever in his gloved

hand, and blood lets. He records your death in a log book. His waxed canvas mantle brushes against your exposed thighs, when he jolts and gathers your damp nightshirt with the cane he uses to uncover the buboes. He tells you it's too late to worry, what a shame when women depart as virgins, and how the fumes of herbs in his beak, mingled with the smoke of public pyres, will mask the stench of that unsightly sign on your parted door. Then his dark leather hood with glass dome eyeholes rests on your ribs, heavy.

To awaken for the morning rounds, you do what you usually do, close your eyes and will it, will the dream away, heave and squirm in soundless grunt, possessed by bile and venom, and ultimately touch the cool edges of the iron bed in the on-call room. Your white coat hangs on the door, an uncertain white, just like the walls. Except for the hole in the sleeve, where an iron burn once was. You wear flat unmarking shoes that make no noise. On the ward,

you practice conscious, slow breathing. Nevermind that it lets the iodine and sweat odor assault mitral cells in your sensitive olfactory bulb. You head straight to your sick.

Mrs. I, mellow and motherly, endocarditis: take her temperature and blood pressure. She has a poet's last name, and comes from a village far away, where she teaches grade school. She finds your hand and squeezes it gently before you leave. You know she wants you to squeeze back, so you do. This will become the apex of your day. You scribble her vitals on a crisp sheet. She's on 100 mg and 50 mg. The 50 mg has to change.

Mr. II, loquacious, one-legged, wiry, Buerger's disease, also known as thromboangiitis obliterans: sit beside him and listen again. He was a young dandy during WWII. He studied Accounting and Theology, and mingled with the rich and mighty before the commies came. They're gone now, it seems, and neo-commies allow him to speak freely. It's why he tells you stories of taking up cigar smoking in a brothel, and of his friend, a wealthy landowner who blew up his brains at dawn after he lost his most valuable possessions, and his young wife, to the iron road baccarat. “Even my disease has a fat bourgeois name”, Mr II cackles. Heavy smoker, his blood vessels are inflamed, swollen, and constantly getting clogged. He keeps losing parts of his body due to this. Threatens to vanish. You roll up the striped pajama pant to expose his one calf, and lightly touch the aubergine patches. “God's tokens”, Mr. II mumbles. Only his foot is ulcerated, his toe bones exposed, but the gangrene cloud is creeping higher and higher, to the hungry tissues of the leg. Little wounds here and there never heal. Some stubborn arteries remain palpable. Now you think you catch a pulse behind the knee. You record his vitals on a well-worn chart and glance at the dosage: 100 mg, 50 mg, 25 mg, 100 mg. Stays this way until the second amputation.

You pause in the far right corner to say hello and bye to the dark patient. Not your sick, but he's very young, and nobody sits on his bed, or even gets close to it, because everybody knows he's crawling with fleas. He's on no milligrams, awaiting discharge. How the hole in his heart will heal is a mystery.

You pass by the jocular ruddy sick on your way out. The female Endocrinology resident in charge of dealing with his near-permanent erection sent him packing because he didn't wash his penis, as she requested. He came here, to Clinic II. The second chance clinic, they call it. You wonder if he washed it in the meantime.

You report to the attending about I and II, and your voice trembles only slightly, so you earn a harried praise. Then the Professor takes measured steps between the rows of metal beds. He gives his usual morning speech peppered with cultural and local history references, for the benefit of his uncultured staff. He looks through you all with large blue eyes, like watery hemispheres protruding from under the bushy eyebrows. Because of those eyes, you wonder about the status of his thyroid.

The attending signs out.

Until the Medical Semiotics course at noon, you're left to do as you please. Semiotics, or Semiology, is defined as the study of signs and symbols, and their use or interpretation. Semiotics is the accepted gospel, but to you it holds all the fascination of apocrypha. It helps unlearn the

spurious disorders, melts them in a black mass of miasma, and in the end bears the sick, the true forerunner, naked and blind. At the pulpit, the Professor's first lieutenant will read aloud the old man's notes for three hours. You doze off, usually, or read Harrison's Internal Medicine under the desk, in a foreign language, unless he brings in the sickness of the day — replete with glistening, crackling, clamoring, puffing, tumorous bloated signs of disease — and makes her walk and talk.

Outside, the lung-sick clear their passages and spit sweet-smelling green gobs of expectoration on the cobblestone, as they take in the corrupted air. The very sick and terminal-sick among them carry perfusion bags suspended on metal chrome crosses. Most of them smoke, to flagellate or celebrate. You've never stepped into the Church at the center of the courtyard. It's dedicated to St. Cosmas, as in Cosmas and Damian, doctors without silver. Why would you separate the two of them, who are inseparable? Would they accept pay when not in tandem? Mr. II is here, in his wheelchair, because he deserves just one more drag before surgery. It'll be hard for him to escape to the courtyard, for a while. He waves his cigarette at you, and this looks just like a sign of victory.

You fold the white coat carelessly, and toss it in a plastic bag. On the iron bench under a linden tree, in the farthest corner of the courtyard from the patients' chatter, you light up a Gauloise, let the cellophane encasing drop on your lap. Never wonder if the walking puffing sick can see this far, as you smoke your packet of herbs against pestilence, slumped over the closed Semiotics textbook, crossing and un-crossing your ankles.

The peasant woman in a lambskin vest embroidered with once colorful flowery garlands shouts through the spiky iron fence “Shameless, have you no shame, woman, have you nothing better to do than puff that hellish thing near the blessed church?” In her wicker basket she carries cheese and eggs to sell at the market nearby, or to bribe a doctor she sees. Her man pulls her away from the fence by the elbow, “leave her alone, don't you see she just a student”, and the woman crosses herself with fervor and spits in disgust.

If you only knew, grandma, how much worse than this it gets, how much worse, the worst. This ship never sets anchor in any port. It avoids the fog of life, as though it fears contamination.

Confused Michaelmas daisies, ring rainbow around the roses, around the church, shut their corollas long before dusk. Foolish. They need to be deadheaded, badly. No need is bad, though. “Je suis soumis au Chef du Signe de l'Automne”, “I submitted to the Chief of the Sign of Autumn”, “Partant j'aime les fruits je déteste les fleurs”, “Therefore I love fruit I detest flowers”, “Je regret chacun des baisers que je donne”, “I regret all the kisses I give.” The young Sicilian intern who first kissed you with tongue last year comes to mind and does not speak. He's pissed at your falling for him secretly, only every other day. Everyone said there must be something wrong with him, to want someone like you, from the wild East, but there was little wrong about him. You suspected a punishment from above when he became a Navy doctor and started sailing the Mediterranean on a ship named for the hot desert wind Scirocco, kissing women in every port.

You talk yourself into doing this. Hold something in your hand, and look ahead. Still got mercy in your eyes, or so you think, you free-falling Magdalene with alabaster jar. With a single thrust of the crooked straw, pierce a perfect hole in the palm-sized box of Stolichnaya, 150 ml, once a day. Double sip. It helps with the plague blues. It's colorless and does not smell.

The Professor's silhouette strolls by the fence, interrupted by iron spears. Yes, those are his big eyes, and tall hairy ears. "Such a pretty girl, you. Why do you need to sport those bell-bottoms? And, have you ever thought of the reason why women smoke? Huh? Because they've nothing to occupy their right hand with, that's why." His briefcase is bulging. A Kent cigarette carton sticks out like a limb. The smoking sick cease their banter and stare, cigarettes hanging from the corner of their mouth. With your neck exposed and chin high, you shake your head no. He is only celebrating, poor man, his survival, his own victory against pestilence. You do, too, today.

They're fireflies, you think, visible in daylight. Your Gauloises firefly flies and joins the other incandescent tips. It's where it belongs. You realize you would like to set, like your kin Vlad Dracul centuries ago, a wide fiery circle around the establishment, where only the doctors would be corralled, not the mad sick. Go ahead and blame the tartars, or the Ottoman Empire, for this corruption, while in truth you fear its source lies much deeper, and flares up more fearsome, than historical conjunctures. Your skin so burns with the ignited vapors of many thoughts, that it receives every minute drop of spittle from the old impudent's mouth,

as if it was a soothing cold needle. These are the Flügge droplets, the way disease often spreads.

Bent like a fetus on a new moon, you try to remember a prayer, any prayer. All you can come up with is another poem by Appolinaire, from "Alcools" you think. "Laissez-vous trembler longtemps toutes ces lampes, Priez priez pour moi". "Pray pray for me." Try as you might, to translate it in another language less known, you cannot think of surrogate words and you give up. You've never traveled out of this land, but you belong to countless idioms.

The Church bell tolls for one more service, and the signal reverberates through minds like a language without verbs. You wonder if it's for Monday's autopsy, the one dead before expelling her baby. They showed you the clots in her vessels, they said red -dark- and- shiny, not the cause of death. You can't picture the fetus still in there, in her safe delicate urn. The smoking sick shuffle through the tall door marked "Clinica II". It starts to rain. Rain with sunshine brings good luck. Nobody comes out of the vault. No longer between two pyres, it's time to believe that relief is the price of relief.

You mind no more the blue glass domes. In fact, you suspect you'll never see them again.

Stay open, stay awake, Michaelmas daisy!

Someone's forehead rests on the rusty bars of the bench, and you hear a giggle. It is contagious.

When you laugh, it sets the metal humming. Here, in the leafy shelter, convalesce all the signs you need. To unsettle them and make them ring true, you're about to forgive their acute, covetous meaning.



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N.E. Imported

Robert Steele

I can't imagine what N.E. Imported was like before Charlie Moore worked there. Even though he only started a few months before me, it felt like he had been there much longer. Maybe it was how everyone treated him.

Shit, he got a whole lot of slack, more than me, more than anyone in the place. You could tell when you saw him. His hair fell long and messy just onto the top of his shoulders. Dark scruff speckled his chin—though, not too scruffy. The guy never wore the mandatory tie, just crisp white shirts with the top two buttons popped open. He acted like he looked too. He took his own breaks, missed meetings, came late, left early. People around the office would shrug it off, "That's Charlie."

We all knew why too. We knew why our boss and owner, Andy Blackwell—the man with the wardrobe of khakis—let all of it go. Charlie was such a damn good salesman. He had

the gift of gab—sure, most of us probably did. But he also had moves that were impossible to replicate. We studied certain tricks at seminars—mirroring, matching, reading body language. Charlie never went to any of these clinics, of course. He never seemed to even use the techniques. When he got face to face with someone, he would make sure he never lost eye contact. And he wouldn't. The customer, which we called "the mark," would remain fixed until they opened their wallet, paying for some junk that they never wanted. I used to joke with Charlie and say his eyes shot tractor beams like some sort of super villain.

Other salesmen and women, ones much older than him, would ask how he got so good. He told us that as a kid he worked for the local church shucking bibles door to door for donation money. He'd say, "If you can sell people on something as immaterial as religion, you can sell them on anything." He'd smile out half of his mouth and you'd

wonder if the story was true, or if it was just something he liked to say to add to his myth.

I wouldn't doubt it. I also wouldn't doubt that he had no formal sales training whatsoever. Maybe it was true to the old adage, *salesmen are born, not made*.

At N.E. Imported we sold almost everything—electronics, appliances, sometimes even cars. Blackwell had different contracts with Chinese businessmen and the goods available would change from month to month. You had to learn everything about everything, which made the job difficult, but also rewarding.

I couldn't get away with winging it like Charlie did. He seemed to just find the gadget's best feature and exploit the hell out of it. It didn't matter; his sales figures were at the top no matter what we sold that month.

Every June was the annual sales contest. Mr. Blackwell would put together a barbeque bash at the park near the office. He'd flip burgers while wearing a "Kiss the Cook" apron. Everyone would drink, always too much, while the accounting department tallied the final sales figures. Then, after the food, after the sloppiness, Blackwell would stand up on a picnic table and announce the winners. All the sales people, with their jealousy and paranoia, already knew the results ahead of time, almost to the exact penny.

The real competition was to see who would finish second to Charlie. Runner-up would take home a decent prize—I once did well enough to win a weekend getaway to Cancun. Charlie won massive prize packages, which once included a blue Mustang GT. He rode it around for about a year until he wrapped it around a tree one drunken weekend.

I remember one year there were rumours of Charlie trailing a newbie, Jack Wells, by several thousand. Charlie just smiled and sat on the corner of his desk when people talked about the so-called "streak" coming to an end.

"It's a tough thing," Charlie said with a smile. "Jack's got a lot of talent. The kid has fire in his belly. I'm an old man at this point in my life." At the time he was only thirty.

On the day before the contest picnic, Charlie invited me to ride along with him. I didn't have any leads, and despite never being able to really learn from Charlie, it was always fun to watch him in action.

That month we had a contract for air conditioning units. We sold them well since that summer had its fair share of intense heat waves. Jack networked with a landlord who managed a development of row houses. He made a killing, putting him in the lead of everyone by a few thousand.

When Charlie and I rolled up to the small suburban home with the little pink door, we noticed a mess of a yard. Rusty old kid's toys scattered the thick, weedy, uncut grass. I vividly recall the barren look of a strip of dirt that may have once been a flourishing garden.

Steve Kipnis was the mark. A balding man in his late-forties. He wore a black tie and a dress shirt so thin you could see the coffee stained undershirt beneath it. He

opened the door with a meekness, looking down at his slipped feet as he said "hello" to Charlie and I.

"Heya Steve, how are ya today?"

"I'm good guys, thank you."

"Looks like you got kids, Steve."

"Two, yeah."

"Oh yeah? I have two little ones myself," Charlie said. He had none. "The wife looking after them?"

"No, I'm widowed." For any of us at the office a line like this would rattle you senseless. It would fill you with such defeatism that you might not even bother pursuing the sale.

But not Charlie. He put one hand inside his pocket which somehow evoked an empathy. "My father raised me all by himself," Charlie said. This may have been the truth. "I can't imagine the difficulty of raising two little ones. People never say this to you, but I will. You're a hero, sir."

Kipnis looked up at him, the sagging below his eyes pulled wrinkles slack over his cheekbones. "Thank you," he said. "That's kind."

"I'm here to help you today. I can feel the heat just standing in the doorway here. And I know how kids are in the heat. They get cranky."

"We have a small pool out back. A little rubber thing. They play in it to cool off."

"Not at night though, do they?"

"No, you're right," Kipnis said, looking back down at his slippers for a moment, then back at Charlie's eyes. With that one concession, Charlie had him.

I do not recall the exact details of the rest of the sale. At some point

Kipnis invited us inside his dumpy place, Charlie made some measurements, put together some kind of bold estimate, and Kipnis signed a piece of paper.

The next day Charlie stood with Blackwell atop the picnic table having just won a two-week getaway to Napa Valley, and a new big screen TV to boot. Jack the newbie was lucky enough to take home a nice cherry-wood cabinet filled with fine china.

•

Almost a year later, I remember a client sporting a ball cap, coming into the office looking for Charlie. He poked his head around our little fish-bowl-styled plexi-glass cubicles. It didn't take long before our sales team swarmed around the man, offering to sell him everything including the socks on their own feet.

The man laughed. "I'm quite fine. I'm just looking for Charlie."

"Is he setting you up with our new line of golf clubs?" someone asked.

"Not at all. He sold me something awhile back. Then he came by this week and spoke with my wife." He waved at nothing in the air. "Anyway, I just wanted to take him for lunch. Has he gone already?"

Nobody knew. "You should speak with Ruth," someone said, referring to our receptionist.

When Charlie made his way to the office later in the day, I asked who the man in ball cap was.

"Just a former client," he said. I thought nothing of it until a couple hours later when Charlie was called into Blackwell's office with Ted Richards from our accounting department.

I think that day was the first in seven years where I heard Charlie yell in anger. Shit, first time I ever heard him lose his cool at all.

"You got a problem, then fuckin' fire me," he shouted at Blackwell. Everyone's shoulders tightened. Barely anyone spoke for the rest of the day.

The next day, before Charlie arrived, Blackwell wanted everyone's ass. "No gaddamn socializin'. You wanna chaddle, go chaddle with a customer."

I kept a close eye on Charlie those next few days. He was all of a sudden very focused. He pulled files for old sales, scanned them closely while running a ruler down the page. He made phone calls to old clients, looking to set-up meetings. At this time rumours swirled around the office that Charlie had lost his game.

"He's got a case of the yips," I remember Jack saying. "Steve Blass, ya know? It happens sometimes. Happens in ball; happens in sales."

For days I remember the absolute horror of thinking about a guy as good as Charlie suddenly losing his ability to sell. I worried about such a thing happening to myself. And after a few bad beats I went back to the office with my hands shaking, a turning in my stomach.

This changed at the end of the week when a few of us went out for drinks at The Box—an old Victorian house turned bar around the corner from the office. Richards in accounting, always known as a bit of a red-faced lush, dipped into some rye and gingers. We asked him about the day in Blackwell's office with Charlie. "I'm not supposed to say shit about it."

"Say it, say it," we cried.

"Well, I was just moving some money around for Charle. I didn't think it was a big deal. He is our money. Christ, I didn't know what he was doing with it. It's Charlie. I trust him."

"What *was* he doing with it?"

"He bought back a sale," Richards said, slurring his words so much that it required clarification.

"He what?"

"He called an old client, bought back an old sale."

"Why?"

"Guess is as good as mine."

I must admit that the next working day I did a bit of snooping. After hours, when only a few stragglers were pushing some papers, I made my way over to Charlie's desk. Most of his paperwork was locked away, but through a crack in one of the drawers, I saw the small corner of a yellow sticky note. I pulled it out, careful not to rip it. It was a small list:

Mark Tillman – ZS150K Motorcycle – Too old to ride - \$14,500

Sara Viciedo – Glass Cabinet – Poor quality - \$800

Helen Matuzak – Glass Cabinet – Poor quality - \$800
James McCown – Stereo System – Overpriced - \$2,600
Steve Kipnis – Air Conditioning Unit – Couldn't afford - \$8,000

The sonofabitch was buying back more. I didn't know if this was the whole list he made up, or if little sticky notes filled the entire drawer.

I must also admit that I followed Charlie into the suburbs after he left the office that next day. Sure enough, I saw him hand over a cheque at someone's door. The mark—if you can still call them that—looked bewildered at first, squinting her eyes at Charlie as if he were up to no good. After a good deal of explanation from Charlie, she was all smiles, and said goodbye by wrapping her arms around him in a tight embrace.

Back at the office Blackwell called Charlie in again. This time it was quiet, and I will never know what the conversation was behind that closed door. The only part I

heard was when Charlie was leaving, when Blackwell cupped his hands together and said to him, "I just want you to consider it." When Charlie kept walking, it looked like Blackwell was going to cry.

Charlie said nothing, but nodded politely and returned to his desk.

I had enough. I walked over pretending to just shoot the shit. "Heya, how goes? How are sales?"

Charlie blew some air out of his lungs. "Oh, not too bad."

"Moving a lot of these pots and pans?"

"Yeah fair bit. Not much of a

product."

"Up for some drinks later?" I asked.

"I've got some things to wrap up. Hit me up at the end of the week. Remind me, okay?" And with that he buried his face into his papers to end the conversation.

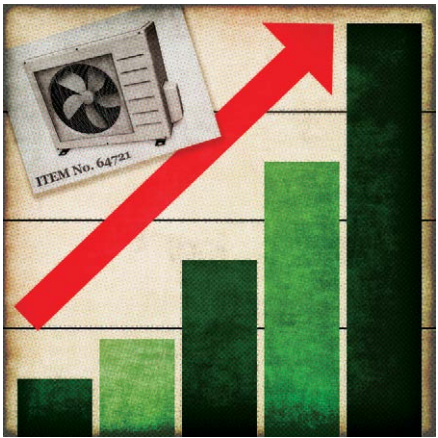
In the following days we saw a side of Blackwell that we never had before. He had always been a by-the-book businessman, trying to do anything to make as much profit as possible. And this was fair, it being his baby, with the profits and losses having a direct impact on his wallet. Now though, he held meetings and set unrealistic targets that needed to be reached or else. Who knew for certain what the "else" was, but we could all sure as shit guess. We all knew why, we knew it was all to make up for lost revenue from Charlie's end. You could read this on everyone's face as we sat around the big oak table in the meeting room. Not one person had the balls to say it.

Some people tried to dance around the topic. "Why the sudden dip in numbers?"

Blackwell would hike up those tan pants and fix his golf shirt. "This has been a long time coming. No one has hit their targets in quite a while. It's attrition."

Someone else would put their delicate hand to the center of the table. "Are we getting some new products in that will help us to sell?"

"No, you'll work within the current confines. Everyone will just have to just work a little harder."



And someone would fold their arms and try to be firm with Blackwell. “This all seems very sudden.”

“It’s sudden, but necessary. This is your job. Remember that.”

No one wanted to mention the elephant in the room who, as usual, wasn’t even in the room.

Friday drinks with Charlie came and went, and I sat alone at The Box that night, everyone too bitter or too busy for any kind of socializing. The young bar girl happened to say to me, “You know who I haven’t seen in here in a while?” And before I could answer. “That cute guy Charlie. He still work with you?” I sat huddled over my beer wondering why he still did. Blackwell, for all his analytical thinking, still must have held onto a silly-hearted hope that Charlie would one day rise to greatness again.

Blackwell, that dick.

Yes, my sales figures were not in great shape at the time. Yes, I found difficulty with selling the cheap trinkets that we were pushing that month. I still maintain that I was not in any worse shape than five others who I could name off the top of my head. To be publicly humiliated by someone like Blackwell, to have that little Napoleon standing at the foot of my desk telling me that my numbers better improve, and making sure he said it loud enough so that the whole office could hear, that was uncalled for.

I went into work the next day, stewing with such intensity that I couldn’t bother pursuing any sales. Instead I waited patiently for Charlie to arrive. When he did, then I waited with even more patience as he did his routine of late, scanning his buy backs to tackle for the day.

When he left the office, I followed, tailing him so close that he pulled over in a run-down neighborhood and stepped out toward me.

“What the heck are you doing?”

I opened my car door and joined him on the sidewalk. “Me? What the hell are you doing?”

“None of your damn business,” he said.

“It is my business. Because sure as fuck you aren’t making any sales. No, no. Quite the opposite.”

“What’s it matter?” he asked.

“My livelihood.”

Charlie slumped. I hadn’t noticed until then, but his youth was gone. His hair tinged enough to lose some life to it. His eyes even had some crows feet. “I’m going about things differently,” he said.

“Why? You have done so well with the old way.”

“Nothing is real. Everything I own looks nice but it’s put together with cheap plastic or fabrics.” He didn’t want to add more to that, but I’m sure he felt the need to fill the silence. “I’m in my thirties and all I have is my own damn

myth.”

The shouts of children interrupted us. “This is mine,” a kid of about eight said, taking a bike from a lawn and riding away with it. Another child, slightly older, sat on the grass surrounded by a heap of toys with a not-too-bothered expression.

It was then that I recognized the property with its long void of dirt.

Charlie walked to the door and knocked. Kipnis, wearing the same slippers as all those years ago, but now just an undershirt, opened the door. He looked older than the years that had passed. He may have been near death if I had to guess. And yet, he pushed open the door with such a force that it knocked Charile backwards into me.

“I remember you both,” he said. “The air.”

“That’s right,” said Charlie with his big old smile. “Did you get any use of it?”

“I did.”

“Well, good. I’m here to offer you the money back for it.”

“What for?”

“No reason. I have the cheque right here for you.”

Charlie took the cheque from his back pocket and pulled it on the ends so that the number faced Kipnis.

“The full amount?”

“That’s absolutely right.”

“I can’t. Not for no reason.”

“It’s money.”

Kipnis looked into Charlie’s eyes. “I can’t.”

I’d never seen Charlie stammer like he did. “It’s... a recall. The manufacturer—“

“You told me it was for no reason. I don’t even have the thing anymore. It broke.”

“All the more reason to take it.”

“I can’t.”

Charlie pushed the cheque against Kipnis’s chest. “For me. Please just take it.”

“I can’t,” said Kipnis. He pushed away Charlie’s hand and shut the door.

Charlie opened the mail box and dumped the cheque inside. He shrugged his shoulders and rubbed the stubble on his chin.

We both looked over to see the child on the lawn. He now played with a metal truck, running it up and down along the grass. You could tell he was far too old for that toy. 🚗



The Smell of Stale Cigarettes

Marc Landas

Oscar waited for the chants of ‘Moleman!’ and ‘Let’s go Moleman!’ to subside before returning to the batter’s box. Words and voices were easy to ignore but the giggles less so. Undeterred, Oscar lifted his baseball bat and rested it on his right shoulder. He took a deep breath, counted three cars passing on the nearby highway then shuffled into the confines of the white chalk box.

Two strikes, champ.

Oscar did not need see the wide grin plastered on the umpire’s face behind him. He knew it was there in all its mocking glory.

Thanks for stating the obvious, Thomas.

Hey, just doing my job. No need to be so sensitive about it. I’m just the ump. Two strikes!

A fresh round of giggles and mole-whispers cascaded from the nearby bleachers behind first base. Chatter and chuckles leaked through the chain-link fence where on-lookers paused on their way out of the subway station. Sounds and baseballs carried better in the buoyant summer air.

Hoffman Park straddled the multi-lane junction where Queens Blvd and Woodhaven Blvd intersected. It took its physical cue from its surroundings — vast plains of cement broken up by isolated patches of weeds cracking through the pavement. Children dodged colonies of litter spinning in invisible vortices, skipping over wads of blood stained tissues like tumbleweed. Flattened McDonalds cups, discarded magazine pages, and tattered white plastic bags whirled skywards, hijacked by unseen cyclones of wind.

Oscar stepped out of the batter’s box. The crowd disrupted his mental rhythm and that was enough for him to reset his entire pre-batting ritual, prompting a fresh deluge of boos and hisses. He considered spinning around and jabbing his middle finger up for all to see. Fuck you, you illiterate twerps! He would flash them — the trashy teenage mothers, the cock-eyed ex-cons, the building janitors, the union garbage men, the obnoxious eighth-grade pests with nothing better to do — a middle finger for every horse-chuckle or hyena-giggle.

Then Oscar thought about the age difference. He had just turned forty-one. The oldest people in the crowd, excluding his thirty-two year old wife, were twenty-five year olds. A crude response would not only have been unbecoming, but also embarrassing. Adulthood did nothing to adjust his disposition and a stiff middle finger represented the only response that came to mind.

Boy, I never pegged you as the Drama Queen. The catcher, a golden-haired boy named Charlie, patted Oscar on the back with just enough heavy-handed force for his intentions to be clear.

A man needs his concentration, young blood. If the situation ain’t the way you want it, you take your time and wait till it is. You’ll learn that one day. Having said his piece, Oscar rested his bat on his shoulder, holding it steady with his right forearm, and spat in his left hand. He rubbed his palms together then gripped the bat by its narrow handle. He inspected it top to bottom to top. He turned his attention towards the outfield, spat towards his opponents and finally returned to the batter’s box.



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Johnny crouched behind Oscar and held his catcher's mitt in front of his face. So you gonna show us that power stroke you talk so highly about?

Like I told you, just waiting for the right moment.

Right moment? What was wrong with your other two at-bats?

Thomas leaned forward while he spoke so Oscar could hear him clearly. I'll tell you why. He was too busy watching strikes fly by that giant mole on his face. He can't see past it.

That true Oscar? Is it blocking your view of the baseball? Johnny snorted then punched his glove three consecutive times.

Oscar held up his hand – calling time – and exited the box. Once more the crowd voiced its sharp disapproval. The pitcher joined the chorus.

Hey fuck-face, whatcha doin'? You tryna be funny or somethin'?

Far from it, Mario. I'm just trying to gather up what's left of my concentration. With Johnny and Thomas flapping their gums behind me, it's making it hard to zone your pitches.

C'mon Oscar, you know dats a loada crap. You said da same thing your two udder times up and you struck out swingin' each time.

Wasn't even close, Johnny chuckled.

It was true. Both of Oscar's earlier at bats amounted to nothing more than a series of half-hearted hacks at the air. Strike one strike two strike three yer out! Strike one strike two strike three yer out! (Again.) Now, he was down to his last strike. It was the most important of them all. One look at the scoreboard told him that. Bottom of the eighth, two out, his team down by two runs, he needed a hit. Just like that, he could start a rally that might tie the game, or even better, take the lead. Oscar the Hero. Player of the game. Most valuable player. No more Moleman, only chants of Oscar, Oscar, Oscar! But beyond all the glory and adulation he savored the opportunity to do one thing –

Prove those fuckers wrong.

Oscar ran through each step of his ritual before taking a tentative step towards the box. A searing pain rippled from his left check to the rest of his head until his balance spilled from his toes and prevented another step. He fought the urge to wince and clenched his jaw until the discomfort transferred to his back teeth, providing just enough respite to allow him to resume his march into the batter's box. The mole was reminding him that he was watching.

About time, Oscar. I was beginning to wonder whether you'd ever return. Johnny squatted, punched his mitt, then held it out in front of his chest. He flashed a sign.

Fastball.

Mario nodded and smiled and went into his wind-up. His body twisted and curled. As he uncoiled, he snapped his wrist, released the ball, and urged it to its destination with a long and elaborate follow through.

Oscar cocked his bat back. He timed his swing to coincide with the moment the baseball left Mario's finger tips. As his

Louisville Slugger sliced through the air, Oscar's eyes rolled to the clouds. A bone-jarring jolt twisted the bat in his hands. He never even heard the ball make contact.

When Oscar Eugene Vargas was ten years old, he received an encouraging word and a bit of advice from one of his many uncles at a family picnic. Clutching a white Styrofoam plate piled with rice, chicken adobo, and slender slabs of barbecued beef in one hand and an empty bottle of San Miguel beer in the other, the hulking, slurring, and unsteady figure sat down across from the third grader at the table.

You. Oscar. You're getting older. Are you in school?

Yes.

Do you get good grades?

Yes.

You must study.

I do.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Dunno.

Listen to me.

Oscar nodded and shoveled a spoonful of rice into his mouth. His uncle pointed at him with his plastic knife.

You are a smart boy. Very smart. Whatever you do in life, you must never be satisfied. You must always want more. Only then, you will do great things. Do you understand?

Yes.

Do you know who said that?

No.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur. A great man.

He would know.

Oscar's uncle grunted then rose from his seat and swayed, allowing his momentum to carry him to the nearest blue and white igloo cooler. That was the end of the conversation because one beer later, uncle whats-his-name collapsed face down in the grass.

When the picnic finished and Oscar and his parents were stacking their folding chairs and tables into their orange Volkswagen hatchback, he stopped his mother.

Ma.

Yes.

Am I smart?

Of course you are.

Oscar nodded. Then the rest must be true too, he thought.

As the car weaved through the park's winding dirt roads towards Francis Lews Boulevard, a fuzzy feeling swept over the young boy's body. He kept hearing his uncles words and his mother's reassurance. It made sense. He was fortunate to understand the world at such a young age.

Oscar's life consisted of a never-ending cycle of disappointments smattered with occasional successes. An inexplicable yearning, something he liked to call his 'appetite', drove him to strive even when his body begged for a break. Regardless of his efforts, he never achieved anything better than an adequate mediocrity.

While in the sixth grade, Mr. Horowitz, the history teacher, held a model-making contest. Oscar's Viking ship crafted with a balsa wood frame, 12 ply-wood oars, a cotton sail emblazoned with a thick-lined red circle, all painted in a historically accurate fashion based on a picture he found in the Encyclopedia Britannica beat out the all of the competition – coliseums, castles, caves, and catapults – except one. Amy Lin's absurdly elaborate recreation of a 16th century Spanish galleon – gold bullion, looted booty, slaves, and all. Still worse, Amy managed her achievement in just under four hours of work while Oscar toiled for three industrious weeks.

During his first year of high school, Oscar scored so well on his entrance exam that the school administration placed him on the honors track. For the next four years, he languished taking harder classes and never earning more than a B-. Then, when it came time to apply to top level schools, his A+ counterparts in the non-honors classes gained admission when he 'just didn't have the GPA.'

Similarly, Oscar demonstrated sufficient skill to make the Varsity baseball team junior and senior years, yet was never good enough to play more than a few innings a year. When he did play, the team was either winning or losing by double digits rendering playing time all but meaningless. And even then, he was the last person to be called.

In college, Oscar's limitations overtook his expectations when he had no choice but to attend a state school and majored in business administration. During his freshman year, his exuberance and determination to transfer into a better school led him to overload on course work. At the year's end, he was on academic probation and struggling to stay in school. With his confidence shattered, Oscar devoted just enough time to his studies to pass. When he graduated, he did not even bother to stand when his section was called.

That summer, he worked at his father's locksmith hut in the center of an A&P supermarket parking lot like he did every summer since he was in high school. The only difference was that year, he ran it alone. Mr. Vargas, the old locksmith, never returned to his wooden stool when the summer ended and the autumn breeze rattled the keys on their hooks. Oscar took over the family business for his tired father. He only made one change. He replaced the old wooden stool with a metal one with a cushioned seat.

The sole success of Oscar's post-high school years was his marriage to Maggie Phillips. Men across the Tri-State area declared their love for her, yet by some miracle - no less than divine intervention – she directed her affections and her long-lashed gaze towards a parking lot locksmith. To his credit, Oscar never entertained the thought that she might be unattainable. Lesser men might have been discouraged at the thought of pursuing her. No, Oscar still believed he deserved the best, and in his mind, anything less was settling. They married under the gazebo at Douglaston Manor after a six-month courtship. As the priest pronounced them man

and wife, a small chip of white paint fell on Oscar's head.

Where's your wife, Oscar?

Erm, I'm not sure. She might've gone to the ladies room.

Don't think she's there, Oscar.

Then she must be out back smoking a cigarette.

Spends a lot of time smoking cigarettes lately, doesn't she?

Yeah, well, no more smoking in bars. It's New York law, you know.

If that's the case, then I think you should start smoking too.

No thanks, can't stand the bitter taste.

Right. So no smoking for you.

That's correct.

Then let me buy you a drink. It's on the house.

That's very kind of you.

Well, sometimes those cigarettes can burn pretty slow.

You might as well have a drink to keep you company till she gets back... There you go. Jack and coke.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're trying to get me drunk.

Never dream of it.

Better not. I've got a doctor's appointment first thing in the morning.

Oh yeah? What for?

My mole. It's really hurting. It throbs in sync with my heart.

It's definitely gotten bigger over the last few months.

Hope it's not cancer.

If you ask me, it's nothing. Doctor'll probably lance it off on the

spot.

I'll tell you, getting old is no fun.

Sure isn't Oscar... Your wife, how old's she?

Gonna be 32 next week.

She sure likes hanging around the younger kids when they come in, especially that baseball bunch.

Between you and me, I think it makes her feel younger. Those boys are always showering her with attention.

Cigarettes too... You sure you don't want one? Maybe join your wife and them boys outside? Your drink'll be here when you get back.

If I did that, she'd think I was checking up on her or something silly.

Nothing wrong with that, Oscar. She's your wife, not theirs.

Just the same, I think I'll wait for her here. It's better that way.

Suit yourself... How long's you two been married?

Six years in June.

She's quite a catch. Ever wonder –

Why she chose me? Everyday.

And you two... You're happy?

As can be.

Glad to hear that... She's been smoking that cigarette for a long time. Sure you don't want to find her? Mighta got lost out back.

I hate the smell of stale cigarettes.



In that case, let me pour you another. You're all out.

•

The baseball bounded past the outstretched gloves of the first and second basemen and did not bounce until well into the outfield. By the time the right fielder had taken a step, the ball smacked against the outfield chain-link fence. Oscar watched in amazement.

Run! A familiar female voice urged him. It was the second time. He did not hear the first.

Oscar did more than that. He sprinted towards first base. His confidence, desire, ambition, and self-esteem grew with every stride. Reaching first base suddenly meant more than proving the young men wrong. He wanted to prove that he was still the man his wife married. Oscar the Provider. Oscar the Protector. Oscar the Prince. All he needed to do was reach second base.

The first five feet towards the white square base, Oscar's legs propelled him with a combination of grace and speed he had not experienced since high school. Then, like a paper bag filled with groceries whose bottom suddenly splits, Oscar's energy level plummeted. His knees buckled and he lurched forward from lack of balance. The only thing holding him upright was his desire to be young again, to run the bases like he once did.

Mario slammed his fist into his glove and shouted at a crow passing overhead. Thomas and Johnny stood up straight with their hands on their hips, unsure how the old man managed to make contact. Even the spectators watched in bewilderment as the outfielder tracked down the baseball. Nobody paid any attention to the man limping up the first base line. Nobody except Margot. She stood on her bleacher seat, in full view, and clapped and jumped and screamed:

Run, Oscar, run!

He heard her and his eyes drifted to his wife hopping up and down with a horizon of white clouds at her back. His legs carried him in her direction, inspired by the sight of his cheering wife drawing nearer. Rather than winding down as he closed in on first base, Oscar inhaled, tucked his chin to his chest, and invoked the cooperation of every cell in his body. Give me all your energy. I'm going for second base. As he rounded first, without pause, the entire baseball diamond and the naysayers in the stands gasped. Then there was silence.

The outfielder fumbled the ball as he picked it out of the dirt, giving Oscar three extra steps towards his goal. Once he regained control, he hurled the baseball towards second base. It bounced early and rolled the remainder of the way.

Oscar screamed again as he pushed towards second and with it, his body released the reservoir of energy he had asked for. His legs strengthened, his stride doubled, his

arms pumped like pistons. Oscar's body became weightless, defying gravity and friction and time. The jeering crowd, the players on the field, the Long Island Expressway, the children riding the swings dozens of yards away all vanished under the urgency of his mission. As Oscar hurtled toward the bag, his sole regret was that he no longer had his wife in view because now his back faced the stands. By continuing past first base, he was now running away from her.

Three quarters of the way to the white pad, Oscar realized that the baseball was equidistant from the second baseman's outstretched glove. Fortunately, the power in his legs continued to increase and in one perfectly timed motion, he launched his body into the air, cutting through space and time with outstretched arms like a javelin, and sailed into a headfirst slide for the base.

Dry, pebble-filled dirt clouded the air as Oscar's body glided over the ground like a hovercraft. The friction made his stomach, chest, and torso burn. Grains of infield filled his nostrils, coated his lips and clogged his ears. For protection, he shut his eyes tight. All the while, he kept his arms extended, waiting to make contact with the base.

As his body drew to a stand still, Oscar wondered whether the impact of his slide distracted his brain from feeling the base like when he hit the ball.

He opened his eyes.

The remainder of air in his lungs leaked through his lips.

Oscar's hands were a full foot away from the bag.

The second baseman stood over Oscar with the baseball nestled in his mitt. He smiled as he looked down on Oscar's prostrate body. With the casualness of a man teasing an infant, he bent over, smacked Oscar on the head with the glove, and laughed.

Not quite, old man.

Oscar lay motionless as the opposing team ran off the mound. He did not turn towards the crowd. Instead, he closed his eyes. He wanted to hold onto the image of his wife standing and clapping with the clouds to her back for a few seconds longer. 🌀



Getting Lost With a Giddy-Go-Round

Zoltán Komor

The dentist always slipped the drawn teeth into his lab coat pocket. According to the rumours, he had a small garden where the good old doctor planted the teeth like they were seeds. Plastic horses grown from these earned good money at the funfairs.

I saw how the children scudded by on the back of these painted steeds. Their small teeth begin to rot with every round. They chewed bloody cotton-wools from a stick, while their parents laughed sideways to the sky, so storybook winged angels can slip into their children's dreams.

Dad never let the old doctor grow beautiful horses from my small teeth. By his command, I always had to carry home my hollow tooth, so he could slip it into his dirty jacket pocket. At the pub on the corner, he got hard drinks for one – then he'd burp sideways to the night sky and slipped into his shaggy dreams.

But, once he got lost – and accidentally slid into my dreams. There he was put in the dentist's chair straightaway, and the pincers started to work on him. The doctor with a sweaty forehead dropped an uprooted molar with a hole in it into my small hand.

"Go and buy yourself some candy-floss, kid!" he winked at me.

But, I didn't. Instead, I planted it in my garden. A wounded horse grow from it. A pole —like some kind of spear— pierced through it's body. I dressed the wound with pages torn out from my storybook. I combed it's dark mane, while the animal craned it's long neck, with gaping mouth, like it was trying to bite out a piece from the clouds. 🌀



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Steven and the Swan

Mark Legacy

I know the difference between real life and reel life yet have absolutely no trouble suspending my disbelief. Plus, even with today's technology, it's pretty hard to fake a cum. And those money shots get me almost every time.

I used to lounge on our bed often, exploring my sexuality through the computer screen. I'd explore Lora too, of course, but found that monogamy placed severe limitations on my ability to discover. Sometimes, I'd try to be a swan for a while but it never lasted long. I'd think of Marco Polo and what a shame it would have been if he had never left Venice.

Normally, my expeditions were successful. However, one particularly foggy afternoon, after just having raised the mast and collected the seamen for my voyage, I unexpectedly found Lora on deck. I was fully ready to set sail; my headphones were on, the laptop was fired up, and Lora wasn't supposed to be home for another couple of hours. But there she was, standing in the room, screaming something I couldn't hear over the moaning in my ears. I ripped off the headphones as something was being thrown at me. A stuffed rabbit. Lora was yelling: "Fuck, Steve! What the fuck!?" She screamed for a while, yelled things about me being an asshole and a pervert. I'd never seen her so pissed. Her face was contorted and I was afraid that she was going to become violent. Suddenly, though, her rage turned to tears, and she fled the apartment.

Tyres screeched in the parking lot bellow, causing my heart to reverberate in my ears like a base drum. I lay immobile for a while, contemplating the rhythm, but my little head, possessing the ability to quickly move on, convinced my big head that doing so was a good idea. Glancing back at the screen, I couldn't help but be enthralled by the three performers. An oral-wheel involving a backbend. I'd never seen anything like it. Praise Shiva for yoga in the West.

After I finished, my little head plunged back to the shadows, and I began to reflect more clearly on what had happened with Lora. The gravity of the situation struck me. Lora was a swan through and through. It would take a lot for her to get over this. In fact, she might not. Seven years potentially down the drain. I thought I'd better go see George; something similar had happened between him and a girlfriend once. Besides, he'd know how to make me laugh.

The door was never locked at George's and friends knew not to knock. Occasionally, this resulted in an awkward situation but the instances were surprisingly few and far between. This time, I walked into George sprawled across

a couch in his living room, a couch that I had helped him carry from a back-alley several blocks away. Not much had changed since I'd last been over. Carmen Electra, dressed as a warrior-princess, was still pinned crookedly to one wall and she continued to stare at a poster of *The Last Supper* led by Ronald McDonald. I did notice, however, the addition of a few Laughing Buddhas on top of his bookshelf.

"Steven!", George scolded, feigning shock. "Where have you been? You don't call; you don't write. I've been worried sick!"

"Hey. How's it going?"

"Well, good now that I know you're safe and sound." He switched his tone to something less motherly and continued, "Oh well. You're right on time anyway. I was just about to pack the bong. Come pop a squat."

I took a seat beside him on the alley-couch. He loaded the bong a number of times, and we sat there for a while, passing it back and forth, taking bubbly rip after bubbly rip.

"So, what's up for the rest of the day?", I asked after exhaling a contribution to the surrounding haze.

"Exploring the inner reaches of outer space, my friend. And maybe a little laundry if I feel particularly motivated. Yeah, I actually gotta get some laundry done today." He stared out into space for a while and then turned to me abruptly and asked, "Why? What are you doing?"

"Nothing. I don't know. Probably just go home but shit's sorta fucked with Lora, so I dunno."

"Why? What happened? Did you forget to put down the toilet seat again?"

I laughed. "No," I said, "She kinda caught me at the computer with my pants down."

George nodded slowly. "So what'd she do?"

"Well, she flipped, threw Molly at me, and left the apartment."

"Molly?"

"Oh, it's this stuffed bunny she's had since she was a baby."

"I had a dinosaur named Zolto."

"Lucky," I said. "I had a goat."

"Weird."

"So anyway, shit's fucked."

"Well, I guess you'll just have to face the music. She'll get over it eventually. Just tell her that you're sorry. Maybe even buy her some flowers or something. You can stay here as long as you want, though. Giving her a night to cool off might be a good thing."

"No, she'd be even more pissed if I didn't come home."

"Suit yourself."

I hung out with George for another hour or so before returning home. There was no sign of Lora when I arrived. The apartment was dark and cool and something unsettling still lingered in the air. I couldn't do much of anything. Each time I began a task, I imagined Lora opening the door and unleashing a ghastly tension. I was about to leave when I noticed the light flashing on the answering machine. One new message. My finger moved to the button slowly. I expected Lora's voice. Perhaps she had called to inform me that she'd be spending the night at a friend's.

It would have been a relief if she had. Instead, the tape played another women's voice: "Hi, it's Colleen calling from St. Christopher's Hospital. This message is for Steven Johnson. Steven, we have you down here as Lora Palmer's next-of-kin. Lora is here with us in Ward E. She's in critical..."

My eyes went wide and my heart froze. The woman on the answering machine continued with an inappropriate tranquility that I could no longer process. I knew immediately that I had to get to the hospital but had trouble deciding on a form of transportation. Lora had the car. Perhaps I acted a little too rashly when I hopped on my bike; St. Christopher's is downtown, forty-five minutes away of hard peddling.

I entered the hospital a sweaty mess and, like an ant in a strange hill, made my way to Ward E. Nurses and Doctors looked at me suspiciously. There is no doubt that I would have been groped had they had antennas.

When I reached the service desk, the receptionist refused to acknowledge my presence for five, maybe ten minutes. Finally, he begrudgingly shifted his gaze from the monitor and said, "Hi, what can I do for you?"

"Hi," I said. "I'm looking for Lora Palmer. I received a call from you guys saying she was here."

"Let me take a look," he said, turning back to the monitor. He typed something into the computer and sighed. "What did you say her name was?"

"Laura Palmer." He pressed the appropriate letters into the keyboard and clicked the mouse several times.

"And your name?"

"Steven Johnson."

He half-heartedly scanned the monitor. "Sorry," he said. "There doesn't appear to be a Steven Johnson on Laura's record. Do you have any documentation proving that you know Lora?"

"No. I'm her boyfriend. Someone named Coleen called me." I was beginning to get upset. "Look, can you just give me her room number? They said she was in critical condition."

"I'm sorry, sir. I can't disclose any information about our

patients."

"Are you serious?" His eyes were again glued to the monitor and I was on the verge of spewing forth a series of curses.

"Yes. Those are the rules, sir."

Having no more patience for unsympathetic numbskulls, I walked away. Making a left-hand turn placed me beyond the receptionist's view, and I began frantically searching every room in the vicinity. Fortunately, it did not take long to find Lora.

Seeing her tightened my throat and brought moisture to my eyes. There she was, laying on a cot in a hospital gown, surrounded by machines and tubes and bags on poles. Burns ran up her neck and fresh stitches zigzagged across her forehead. But, at least she was breathing, I thought. At least she was breathing.

Not well, though, I noticed as I made my way toward her and into a chair by her side. Wrapping both my hands about one of hers, I listened to her strained breaths as I examined her battered form. Almost instantly, I became extremely bothered, even offended, by a sweat-soaked strand of hair that had flattened itself across her face just beyond my reach. Eventually, it annoyed me enough that I stood up to fix it, but as I extended my arm to reposition the defiant hair, I bumped the bedside table and knocked over a vase of artificial lilies. The ceramic shattered and a piece flew upwards, chipping the glass covering a framed print of a blossoming orange tree above the bed. Perhaps it was the commotion that caused Lora to stir and open her eyes. At first she seemed confused, but, once her eyes found mine, she seemed to relax, even to become serene. Neither of us spoke. Maybe Lora couldn't. And, for a moment, I felt as though I was staring through her eyes at my own.

Then a machine began to beep and the peace in Lora's eyes turned to pain. She swooned and a female nurse appeared. Since I was between the nurse and the noise, I was politely pushed back into my chair. As she reached over my body to fiddle with the device, I couldn't help but notice that one of the buttons on her blouse was having trouble keeping her bust at bay. She moved slightly so that I could read her nametag; it identified her as Colleen.

As soon as the machine had been silenced, she turned on her heel and left the room. On her way out, she said, "Visiting hours are over in twenty minutes."

I remained by Lora's side for another forty.

I pushed off the pavement and began to peddle, staring reluctantly into the darkness before me. After all, I knew I'd be returning to the hospital first thing in the morning and the journey home was almost entirely uphill. 📖



Bear Among the Dogs

Scott Archer Jones

I used to work for the Bear when he was young and strong. It hurts me to see him old and half-lame. But he's still the Bear. I was there in Archie's last year when he took on the gringo.

I talk about those times with Bear to anyone who will listen, but some of it is *mierda*. My wife, she say, "Old days fade and turn into *mentiras*." Now I live behind these thick glasses and work in a hardware store in Raton, and the Bear... he never figured that age would catch him. He planned to be young forever. Nowadays a big bushy white beard hangs on his chest, and his hair is white too, and his back kills him most of the time. Bear, he is like the rest of us. He never saved a dime, so here he is at sixty-three still taking people from the city out to fish and sometimes to hunt. He lives in a single-wide he bought in 1972, lives there with his third wife Jennie, the only smart one he ever married. Or she married him.

That last time I saw him, before they took him away, I was in Archie's Beer Barn, like I said. Archie's real name is Celestino Archueleto and he runs this bar in a metal building out near Cimarron, mostly for us Latinos. Sometimes Bear would come by.


Bear, he's white and a guide in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Used to be one of the best. In the old days, we ranged all seasons and all country. We carried pale white men back into the mountains for their moment of glory, their *cuento de muerte*. Bear was part of the mountain – he knew where the animals would feed, where the fish would hide, where the turkeys, they would roost. He

acted like a bear too — you could never tell what he was thinking by looking at him.

That day in Archie's, Bear wore what he always wore, a big dirty coat made out of an Indian blanket, with jeans and boots. Pushed back on his head he had a sweated-out felt cowboy hat with a snakeskin band — a snake he killed himself, years ago. His big belly hung out and he shuffled along like his back hurt, but he had a wave and a hello for everyone. I had hunkered down with some of my friends in the corner, and Bear stopped to talk for a bit. He told us he was down to one truck and one tent.

En buenos tiempos, we kept a full camp, horses and a couple of jeeps. It was our job to pick the sportsmen up at the airport, set up their tents, feed them and pour liquor in them. It was our job to throw them up on the horses, take them to the animal, skin and slaughter the animal once it was dead. Nothing in this was a bad thing. Bear, he respected the animal and its death. Also, the kill by the sportsman — *en júbilo* for the hunter and good to see. Most of these rich white men, they wanted to be Bear's friend, so that was okay too. I was Bear's Mexican, there to cook and wrangle horses, but I'm pretty *agringado* myself, white enough to keep everyone comfortable. The big thing for me? I got to work in *la hermosa tierra de mundo*. Until Bear went broke.

Like an animal, Bear don't live in the past. So we visited about what he had coming up. Outside of coyotes near his casa, he hadn't shot anything in months — still, he thought he'd make an elk hunt in the Fall. He also thought he'd go



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fishing soon, and we made noises like we would go too. Then he clomped over to the bar to visit with Archie.

Archie's, it don't see many outsiders, but every once in a while, guys out on a road trip together pull up. They park their cars or their bikes or their RVs and they stroll in to soak up Archie's beer. This day, a bunch of Anglo guys out of Albuquerque had drove up in their Corvettes. They must have been in some kind of car club, a club based on how much they could spend on a toy with four big wheels and a cloth roof. They all chose tables way across the room from us and Archie waddled out from behind the bar to take their orders.

Things went fine for a while. There's always *un buen tipo* who can talk to anybody, and so it was this time. This nice guy in shorts and a big fat nose wanders over and we visit for a while. He was retired, but he used to be in the concrete business, so we talked about that, about pouring foundations in the winter, about how far you can truck a wet load. He visited with Archie too and spoke to Bear. His buddies and him, they milled around for about an hour sloshing down the beer.

But if there's a nice guy in a crowd, there's also someone ugly, who gets uglier when he drinks. These Corvette drivers had a loudmouth in a nylon jacket, dark hair slicked back from his face. He sat there waving his hands and talking up his opinions pretty *estridente*. It turns out he was *muncho importante*, and of course we wasn't. He had been in lots of great places, and this wasn't one of 'em. He drove a great car, and the folks around here, we drove rusty pieces of shit. He was right — we drive what we drive and we buy what we can afford — old men and old trucks.

So Mr. Slick Jacket trots up to the bar to order another round of beer and he talks to Bear while he's there. First he calls him Cowboy and then he calls him Old Man. Two other guys amble up and lean on the bar too, one beside Bear and the other near his friend, just to be close to *Hombre Muncho Importante*. Mr. Jacket, he asks Bear, "Do you know you look like Santa Claus with a ponytail?"

Bear takes all this real mild, just sits there on the bar stool. Then the stranger starts in on the White Thing. He says, "Do you actually drink with those dirty Mexicans in the corner?" Meaning *me en mi amigos*.

I thought Bear was an old man, past all this, but once an animal learns something, it must not forget. Bear jabbed out at this *pendejo*, fast like a snake — he slammed the heel

of his hand into the guy's nose. Then he grabbed him by the back of the neck and threw *la cabeza del hombre* down onto the bar, *uno, dos, tres*. Bam bam bam! The guy folded up like a pile of clothes on the floor at Bear's feet. The other two Anglos, they closed up quick on Bear and he jumped to his feet. He spun on his toes to face the one and then to face the other.

A long time ago I seen a pack of dogs corner a bear up against a cliff, and it looked just like this. Them hounds would charge in on the bear's back and he would spin around to try and catch them. This bear grabbed two or three *perros* and mauled them up quick. This was *casi lo mismo*, as Bear twisted from one to the other. He held them off with his *mal de ojo* and his stone face.

Archie had been caught sleeping, but he hustled out from behind the bar with a baseball bat in his hands. He sidled in between Bear and the other guys at the bar and waved that bat around saying, "Now — Now — Now." The whole crowd of Anglo guys all jerked up from their tables and come running over. The young ones turned all red-face-angry and the old ones grey-shook-up, but they added up to a pack. We Latinos, we nailed our *colillas* to the chair. Bear might have been my boss once, but brown skins don't have brawls with white skins and get away with it. I felt real bad about it, but I didn't do nothing dumb.

Archie stuck the bat out to let them know he'd handle things, not them. The friendly gringo we first talked to helped Mr. Jacket to his feet, got him a bar rag to hold on his face. We could all tell this loudmouth needed the medics — he had left a couple of his teeth stuck in the bar. If Mr. Jacket got hauled off to Emergency, there would be a police report. So Bear, he'd have to have a long talk with the Sheriff.

Bear stared at the bloody-faced man, and he smiled like the sun come up. He turns to Archie and says, "After you call the ambulance and the police, maybe I can call my wife? I bet you they send me to County for this one. Jennie will want to know where I am tonight."

That loudmouth, he got his *cuento del vergüenza*, beat up by an old man, and Bear got to feel young again. All of us in the corner, we was surprised. We had never known what Bear was thinking. All those years, him the Anglo and us the Mesicans. But somewhere in there he must have been thinking we Latinos were okay. Or at least we weren't the dogs. *Bueno*.




Suzi and the Porkchop

Chris Fradkin

She tossed it in the pan. She added garlic, salt, and cayenne. Her dinner-date was waiting on the couch. "A low heat for 10 minutes." She closed her eyes and prayed. He was the first man that she'd cooked for in some time. She mixed the vinaigrette. She peered around the corner—he's still there, she thought, sighing with relief. While singing softly to herself, she placed the porkchop on his plate. But when she hollered, "Dinner's ready," he was gone.

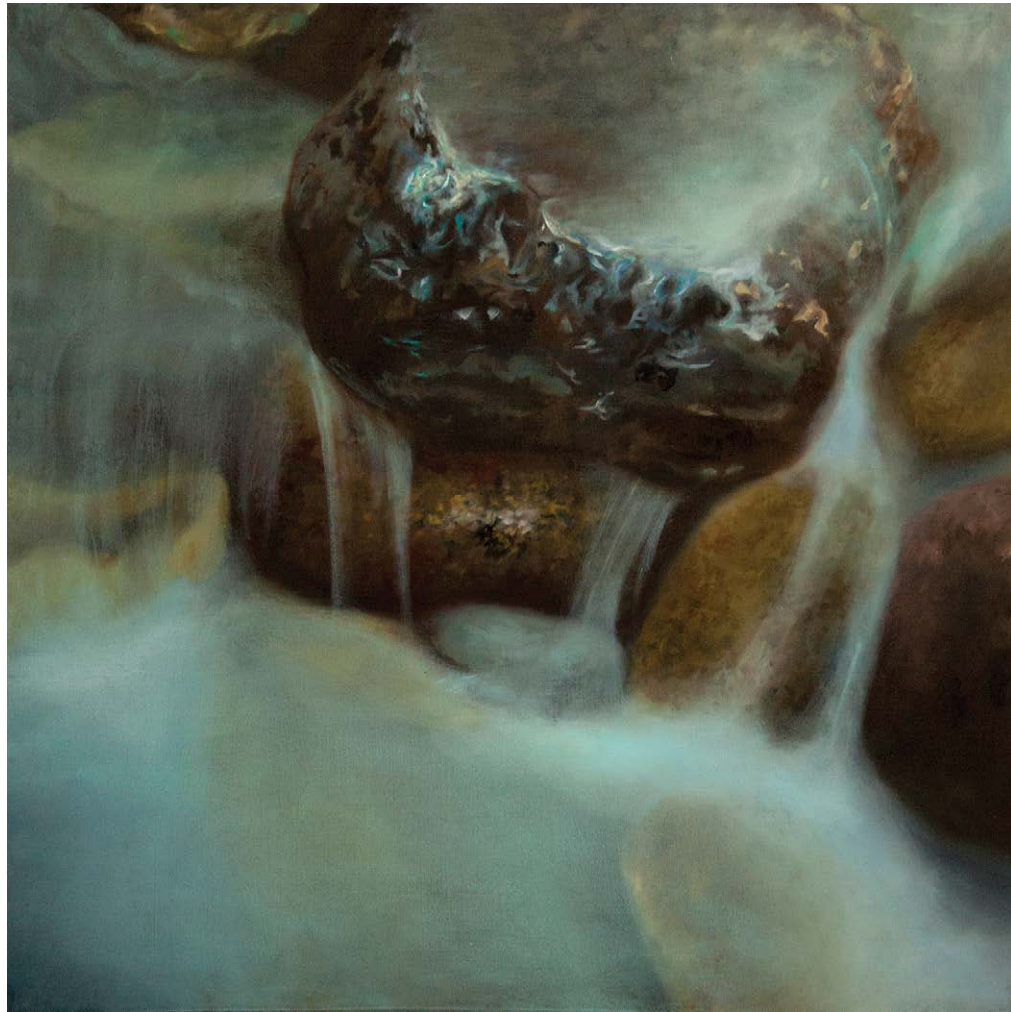


SCOTT ARCHER JONES is currently living and working on his fifth novel in northern New Mexico. He's published here and there but received enough rejection to achieve humbleness. He's on the masthead of the *Prague Revue*. Scott cuts all his own firewood, lives a mile from his nearest neighbor and writes grant applications for the community. He is the Treasurer of Shuter Library of Angel Fire, a private 501.C3, and desperately needs your money to keep the doors open.



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Suzy and the Porkchop is from *The Saga of Suzi – A life and work in progress*.



Brittle Sisters

April Bradley

Clarey took a three-hour flight from New Haven to Nashville to attend her Uncle Halle's deathwatch and dwelled on a pinhole memory. Halle at thirty was an agile and well-knit man. He was clever in the way that meant good-hearted as well as quick-witted. He was as cunning as the rest of them, really, no matter how kind he could be. On the drive out to her folk's house in her rental, Clarey tried not to think about death.

The day Halle died Clarey rode to Vanderbilt to visit him with her mother and her Uncle Martin. Thirty-two years old and Clarey huddled in the backseat like a child. She pulled out a book and pretended to read while the two siblings chatted in the front seat. Martin mentioned Halle's wish to be cremated and his ashes scattered in the creek out by the old farm with a shot of bourbon. He had asked Martin to do this to commemorate their time together as children.

"Sounds nice, but I can't do it if I wanted to anyway. One drink and that's it. I just can't do it."

Clarey's mother shrugged, "Well, that's just like Halle to think only of himself." Clarey's mother lit a cigarette. "He always was like that."

Martin glanced at Clarey in the rear-view mirror. "Clarey, now I know you girls think Halle's wonderful, but what you all don't know is that Halle could be a real son-of-a-bitch." Martin's bitter laugh punctured the sorrow between them. Clarey looked away to watch the houses rush by in various stages of repair from the tornado that had tried to eradicate three counties earlier in the spring. A pageant of destruction swept by. Tarps covered roofs. A hemorrhage of trees, snapped off and jagged, had been sawed down to stumps and dust. Gigantic dollhouses loomed, cut clean through.

"Oh yeah," Clarey's mother chimed in, her mouth a line of seeping lipstick. "You wouldn't believe what he did to us when we were kids. You just can't imagine what he was capable of."

Clarey's mother flicked the ash off her cigarette out the

window and turned to Martin with a sudden, frenetic smile. "You know what, I like that desk of mom and dad's now that Halle won't be needing it."

"You'll be needing help moving it up to your place. It's solid oak. I think I'll take that bedroom suit."

Clarey interrupted. "I don't know what to say." She shut her book on her finger to mark her place. "I can't imagine feeling so conflicted about Imogen the way you do for Halle. This must be very difficult for you." Clarey opened her book and pretended to read again, disgusted with her disingenuous comment. She really could do better but couldn't be bothered.

"It is, Clarey. It is."

Martin agreed.

More ruin from the storms passed by.

After Halle died later that evening, Clarey sat with the others up at the house, a place of keening and anguish so vibrant she expected the bricks to weep and bleed. It turned out Halle was the lockbox to the family's precarious house of cards. Without him their structures collapsed along the stress lines and cracks: they each gave way to the resentments, cruelties, and yearnings in themselves and in their natures.

Imogen arrived the morning of the funeral looking composed, fresh. She found her younger sister in the study, sitting at the desk, rubbing her eyes. She leaned in the doorway. "Hey."

"Finally." Clarey stood up and stretched, her dress wrinkled, her hair a bird's nest. "The grief here is terrible." Unbearable, suffocating, she wanted to say. "You must be shattered from the red-eye."

"I slept on the plane. Catch me up."

Clarey paced in bare feet as she described the past two days, including the conversation in the car with Martin and their mother. "Halle chose cremation and he's being inurned near the family plot in town, but he wanted to be, what do you call it? poured? scattered? into the water out on the old place."

Imogen sighed, "Oh Lord." She threw herself into the desk chair and started to twirl, her long, shiny legs slowing down her revolutions. "Well then, I suppose we'll ferry Halle out to the creek," she said, thinking out loud as she sunk into curved spindles. "I'll pick up the bourbon." Imogen sprang out of the chair, galvanized with purpose, then turned to look at Clarey. "Get yourself together, girl. You're a wreck." She laughed a sweet, low trill and left.

Imogen decided she would be the one to creep into the columbarium recess and switch out Halle with the ashes of their past pets harvested from smaller repositories stored in the attic. Clarey would provide a diversion by tripping and

falling down. A pair of Imogen's very high heels lent some credence to the cock-eyed plan. Clarey seldom wore heels and was notorious for her clumsiness.

"The trick," Imogen insisted, "is to create the diversion near the funeral home director." So, at the right time, Clarey hobbled over with a clot of relatives to thank the director for a lovely service and launched herself at the man, leaving the heels of her borrowed shoes staked in the sod and knocked him down so completely, the grass stains never came out of her skirt. While Imogen managed the switch, Clarey suffered the assistance of relatives and friends to haul her up as she grasped the lapels of the director's suit to buy her sister more time. "Clarey can be an odd klutz sometimes," she heard her mother say. "Always falling down and getting bruised all to hell."

"Halle would have been proud," Imogen said.

"Maybe." He had been an inspiring hell-raiser in his youth, but what his nieces did may have crossed a line even for him. They changed their clothes in a ladies' room inside the funeral home. "Hurry up," Clarey growled as Imogen applied color to her lips. "This is no time to look pretty, Im. We need to move before someone figures out what we're up to. You think wanting furniture smacks of greed?"

Imogen thought Clarey was over-analyzing the moral implications, and frankly, the past week showed on her. "We aren't stealing him. We're fulfilling an obligation. Relax."

"I doubt anybody would see it that way."

"I'm not so sure about that. We've never really done anything wrong, and we've been careful."

"This is different."

"Not so different. This isn't selfish." Clarey wondered about that.

"Listen, don't you think it's strange we're not staying after?" Leaving straight away didn't seem right.

"The whole thing is strange, Clarey."

They carried Halle northeast out of Nashville about 30 miles along the Avery Trace, that elusive trail cut into the territory when the land was North Carolina. Clarey found the old mill foundations and parked on the side of the road. They hiked down to the creek with the sun descending behind them and the beech leaves burning for acres in the Tennessee autumn. Imogen opened up the bottle of Maker's and took a swig as Clarey poured Halle's ashes into the creek and let the paper bag go with them. Imogen passed the bottle to her sister. As bourbon flowed down Clarey's throat, they watched the ashes and the bag swirl away.

"I forgot to cry at the funeral. You think anyone noticed?"

Imogen looked at her sister and shook her head. "It don't matter if they did." ☹



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Carving a Memory

Amanda Nicole Corbin

It had started off small: cursive ink dates on paper cups or dry erase details on the fridge. Tossable, erasable, ignorable. When Orlando's mother would visit for tea, she would croon at his souvenirs from their get-togethers. Holding a dried rose from her birthday dinner, she would say, "I'm glad you care enough to remember."

The missing words were *unlike Sarah*, his younger sister who could never keep track of whose family she belonged to. On 09/06/2010, she moved away and didn't let anyone know where. On 09/06/2010, Orlando became the favorite.

On 02/18/2011, he forgot to pocket the receipt from a root beer bottle and his mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. On 02/18/2011, he learned that razor-digging dates into wood, which didn't bleed, would last longer than the scar tissue of his forearm. He had only tried once, but the scar still hadn't fully healed.

His bright work uniform hurt his eyes, but the days his customers joked with him were notable. June 2, a woman with a scar on her lip told him he had pretty eyes. That went into the plushy plastic of the fridge as 6/2/12 - *Scar Smile*. That Friday, he was chewing a tuna sandwich on his lunch break when a car screeching outside forced his gaze beyond the window. The sun stuck out between the soggy clouds, and he saw a rainbow. 6/6/12 - *Tuna Rainbow* on the plastic-wood leg of his Ikea dining table. Orlando called his mother that night to tell her. He had to explain what a rainbow was and why he was calling her.

He had tried 6/6/12 - *Define Rainbow* on the scratchy metal of his stove, but resorted to the sturdy cedar of his

bedroom door.

After 7/4/12 - *New Home* (side door), when his mother went away to an assisted living facility, Orlando wandered around a pet store asking the animals who liked him most. Histamines surged through his middle-aged body when he walked near the cats, and the 02/18/2011-shaped scar tissue itched. It was carved before he decided the two-digit year worked just fine. No one could forget the century they were a part of.

The super-smiley salesman told Orlando that fish can't hold memories and snakes won't learn to love you, so he bought a metal cage, jingly chimes, and ten pounds of bird seed. The salesman said the African grey parrot was probably a girl, and he was tempted to name it Sarah, but named it Raymond Babbit instead.

He had barely brought her home when he carved 7/4/12 - *Found Friend* onto the plastic strip surrounding the cage. Orlando spent the night researching the best methods to train a parrot (7/4/12 - *Say Raymond* into wallpaper and 7/4/12 - *Say Cracker* on another table leg) and made a three-page list of what to teach Raymond Babbit.

In order to save time, Orlando learned to live on meals he could cook from the gas station across the street, scrambling old eggs for breakfast or tossing them into 18-cent ramen for dinner. His free time was spent recalling dates and sculpting furniture into numbers, while singing or shouting or cooing those days to his bird. He finally made progress with 7/6/12 - *Say Good Morning* and carved it on his on his head board.

Once a week, he would visit his mother who would talk to him the way he talked to Raymond Babbit on the Fourth

of July.

The way he had spoken to Raymond Babbit when they first met.

The people at *Sunset Homes* said that Raymond Babbit sounded wonderful but that he couldn't bring "strange animals" in. He could, however, take his mother out.

The shaking of his hands made it hard for Orlando to unlock his door, leaving him to observe the red cedar as his mother stood beside him. The exterior looked foreign to him: smooth, dark wood, with sprinkles of damage from the outside, but no numbers, slashes, or letters. Forgettable.

Orlando's calloused hands warmed his mother's delicate ones as he led her into his house. Her eyes widened and scanned the kitchen, darting between the appliances and markings.

"Where am I?" She asked. 8/5/12 - *Faded Eyes* would have to go in the kitchen wall.

"My house, Mom. I've made it more memorable." He spun to the spot on the fridge where the rose hung. "Remember? You liked my rose." He handed it to her.

She took it in her hands, and Orlando winced, thinking

the thorns would cut into her loose skin. "What a lovely rose," she said.

Then, he pulled her from room to room, pointing out every date (5/24/12 - *First Sushi* scrawled on a drawer, 3/3/12 - *Work Tip* penned on a lampshade, 2/12/12 - *Power Outage* dug around the rim of a fan), scratching into them with his bitten-down nails, trying to define them as deeply as they could go, wanting to lace them with black, black ink or fluorescent, sun-flare light. "Here, this, here, see?"

After twenty minutes of trying to communicate, sweat laced his neck and spine, so he rolled up his sleeves. His mother's head turned slowly to his left forearm. She took her son's arm in her cold hands, with the flesh hanging off her bones folding around his.

Orlando watched as his mother traced her finger over his raised scar, as though reading Braille. "Sarah," he heard her mutter. "Orlando." Her eyes met his.

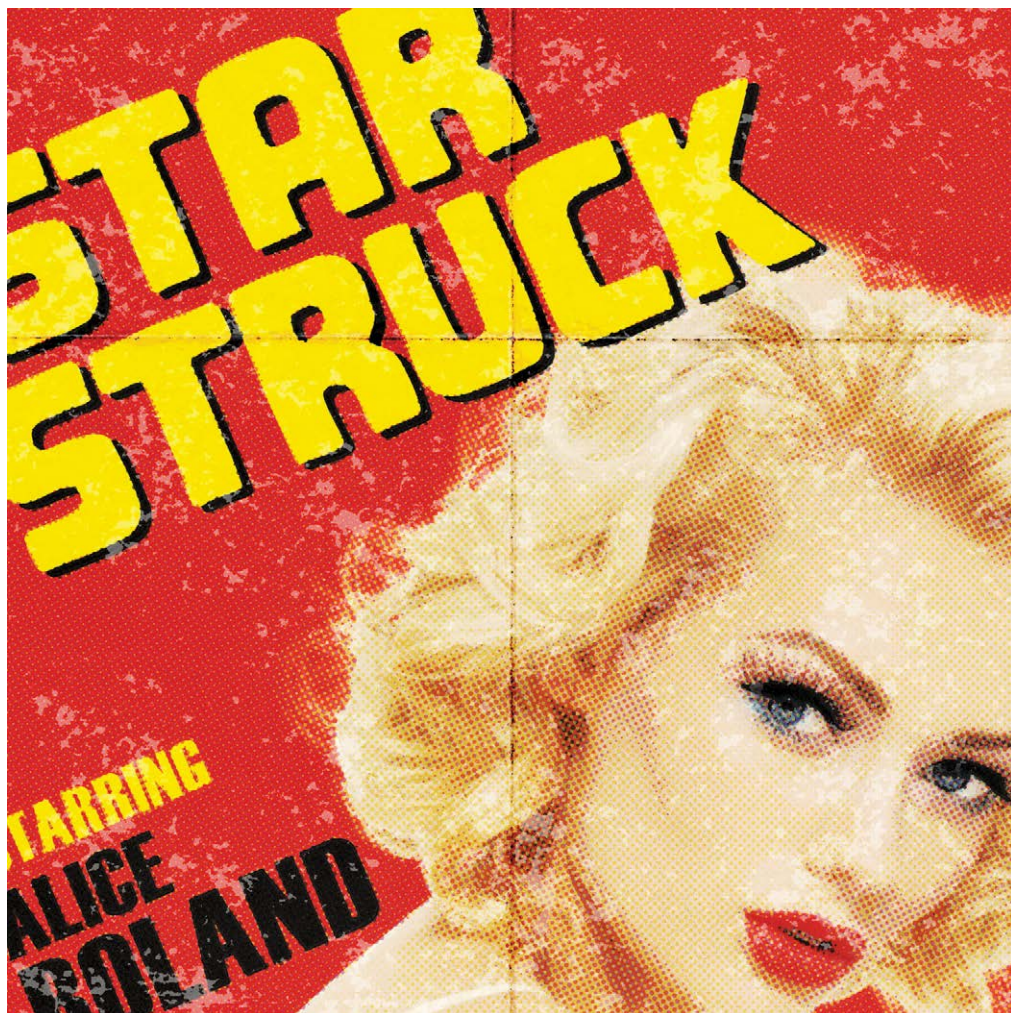
"My son," her voice croaked as she pulled him in for the strongest hug she could offer, "Eventually, we all forget."

Orlando didn't remember to carve 8/5/12 - *Time Gone* on his wrist until the next morning. ↻



AMANDA NICOLE CORBIN has had her short fiction published in journals such as *Ellipsis*, *The Vehicle*, *Boston Literary*, *Paper Nautilus*, *Superstition Review*, and others. She is editor and founder of *Pure Coincidence Magazine*, living in SLC with a chinchilla named Heisenberg.





The Accident

B.Z. Niditch

Alice Boland, shortened from Polaski, that ex-Hollywood super star, driven in her old Cadillac by her forty-year manager Pop Singer, is slightly injured by a sport car driver, Ted Kyros, an exchange student from Greece.

With her green alligator handbag falling out of the right window she begins to pout at Ted. “Young man, you almost killed me on this, the night of the re-release of my classic film, “Star Struck,” made after the war and shot around here.”

Pop Singer puts out his face and says in a Brooklyn accent, “Everyone looks shot around here.”

Ted looks a bit embarrassed and turns to Alice and Pop. “Sorry I didn’t see you.”

Alice is in a nervous rage, a tiny wine glass falls from her handbag. “Good looking, don’t you know that I am Alice Boland, Hollywood’s forever young legend? I can hear by

the tone of your voice you are not a native.”

“I am Ted from Athens. My parents are exiles who left during the military coup and we stayed here; they teach at Berkeley”.

“Well Theodore, this is Pop Singer, my manager; came from Brooklyn, his father was from Germany. I live in Tulsa, where my last hubby was into oil.”

“You got soaked by it.” Pop Singer gets out of the car, smooths his grey hair and takes a pill for his heart condition. “What do you think of meeting Alice Boland in the flesh, now that you know who I am.”

“Everything is new every day out here.”

Alice tidies herself up in the now broken car mirror as she makes a grand bow. “Seeing you almost smashed into me, I’d like to ask a favor from you. I need an escort at the re-release of my film, “Star Struck.” It’s the least you could do, Teddy. Leave your car in the parking lot. Pop always comes

to my rescue and Teddy, you are now here to save the day.”

“Whatever you say... Alice.”

“Isn’t Teddy a love.”

Pop Singer in his Tarzan sweatshirt only laughs. Theodore, looking tanned under the hood of his car, does not mention his own acting career and takes his chance with Alice, though he thinks the whole episode rather American-bizarre.

Along the highway Alice puts on old blush she found in her garage. Gazing through the mirror at Ted she speaks loudly to Pop, “Can’t you just see the headlines, Pop? Alice Boland Seen With Handsome Greek Stud, and the story continues, son of professors and famous Greek exiles. You must run something up for me, it may even make *Variety*.”

“You haven’t been in *Variety* for twenty five years”.

“I was a million dollar star.”

“Until you squandered all the do re mi...like on that heart-shaped pool you bought on swampland.”

“You don’t remember Mr. Sadoff discovering me. How I dreamed and my wishes came true as Miss Oklahoma.”

“That’s all you ever made.”

“Shut up, Pop, keep driving. This is a miraculous day for my astrological chart. Ted you are a doll. What sign are you, honey?”

“Virgo.”

“I get it. I use to do charts at lunch at the defense plant and we all wanted to be stars. Pop if your dad did not come here you’d be in one of those concentration camps.”

“Alice, let me just concentrate on the road.”

“Pop, I’m sorry, you’ve always rescued me in so many of my life situations. I’m so excited to see Mr. Sadoff again at my reception with all the college boys and girls and to view the new print of my film.”

“Alice, I don’t feel that too well. Too long a ride for me.”

“That’s nothing new. It’s just that pace maker that gives you all the trouble.”

“I have a rapid heart beat.”

“You’re sweating in your Tarzan tee shirt. Please don’t go on me, not tonight.”

“I took a pill on the road but I still don’t feel good.”

“Stop the car. I’ll have Ted drive us. Maybe we can drive Pop somewhere, I don’t have the heart to leave him on the highway.”

“He needs a doctor Alice. He looks sick. He is out like a light. I will call up an ambulance.”

“I need help too, Teddy boy.”

Pop doesn’t think he can make it.

“Here is the ambulance, let Pop out, he is a survivor, he’s been in worse jams, Pop understands the show must go on. Remember his father lived in Hitler’s times.”

The couple drives away. Ted senses a raw coldness in Alice, but she warms up against him.

“I like a big man and a big car.”

“I’m not that big.”

“Not now. I don’t like men who talk a lot.”

“Forgive my English.”

“You’ll do fine. I lost my son Larry somewhere in Asia, he volunteered but he really ran away from me.”

“I don’t like Uncle Sam”

“I hope you’re no Commie.”

“We all feel like exiles some time.”

“You and Pop came over in the same boat. We’re all American now but I had to change my daddy’s name. It was Polaski. Who can remember? Sadoff pulled all the strings. Here is the building. Drive up in the front. There are the cameras and the paparazzi.”

Alice and Theodore arrive to speak to the students before the film showing and Ted recognizes Iris Sadoff who is in his acting seminar.

“This is Iris Sadoff, she’s in my class.”

“Looks like Saul. Here he is. Oh Saul. Thanks for the invitation. This is Ted, my escort.”

“Where is Pop Singer?”

“He’s indisposed.”

“I hope you are sober, tonight, Alice. How goes it?”

“Since my last husband died and then Larry... I wish you could give me a character part.”

“Actually I’m looking for a young actor to play opposite Iris. The film is on political intrigue in the Balkans. Ted, are you free this week to take a screen test?”

“I’m in Iris’ class at university.”

There are a few photographers taking pictures of Iris and Ted after a prompting from Saul Sadoff who walks on the platform and introduces Alice before the film.

“I am Alice Boland of “Star Struck”. Any questions?”

Iris and Ted are on the couch Ted will not respond to Alice who is inebriated and talking irrationally. “I need money for gas. Me, Alice Boland. Imagine!”

“But where is Pop Singer.”

“I will try to call him, Saul. Call me, Saul, about a future part. I brought some old photos for the film students.”

“They are no longer star struck.” 🕒



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Neptune's Choice

Michael Chaney

In squalls the size of Clydesdales twenty hands high, kicking white the topside wales, the women want to close the canvas hatches but Jack has all the battens hidden. His face beams splinters at the hematoma of the sky. *The storm will sink us*, his wife screams, but his head is a rusty cog in the wheelhouse. *What if you can't even save yourself?* his mother screams.

Jack doesn't hear. His map is many clicks past reason. There are proofs other than emotion and in the chrome sex tents of his mind everything is *res ipsa loquitur*—so true that the thing speaks for itself. And the *thing* wanting voice in Jack's life was a certain pertussis of the heart between mother and wife, which like all clichés had to be settled on rough water. Only high tide will clarify the crisis, a dingy astride the surge, the Oedipal bonbon that dissolves on Neptune's tongue.

Jack's blade pushes them into the skiff suspended like a portside knuckle along the jawbone of a rocket. His mother boards solemnly. His wife objects. *Get in the goddamned boat*, his mother screams. Jack's machete strokes the drop rope, turning them into a wooden spur dug deep in the haunch of waves that kick and snort, seeing red through rings that pierce wet faces. The women clutch one another. Jack flings his machete into the ocean with a roar. Spray gossamers their white dresses. It pulls their hair into plaits against cheek and chin, braid-framing clavicle and cleavage.

One of the women begins to laugh. Aft Jack looks to see what tickles her attention.

There it dances. His machete floats bloated on the waves, transformed by the storm into a plastic inflatable version of itself—a safety device for submerged infants, shameful, a buoy. Now both women are laughing, wet, clutching.

We'll see who laughs last, he foams, *Which one will I save when this boat goes down?* The women blink gull eyes at their inclement oracle, this son-husband mad with oceanic justice and imagined slights until the machete flotilla over his shoulder turns them into dolphins cackling, as the wave billows the skiff into planks cracking and the wife dives for swollen plastic cocking and the mother, croakingly reaches, *But Jack, you can't swim!* 🗑️



Lincoln's Ghosts

Crow Billings

The predators patrol the ground that fell. Protected by her negligee, a girl admitted everything the scarecrows did to her outside in the ovens of the field—maybe someone tells the clock that it's safe to stop counting, or when it's cold it's because the grasses hate each other.

"Hatred is felt even at the edges of the universe," someone says from the tunnels of a dying penny.

I teach my kettles how to collect the water left in the red pond. Sunlight gutted from a cattail ascends into the changing weather, the autumn woods where a drop of come dries on a leaf. My parents with too many words and no understanding of a raccoon's daylight accuse the chicken bone cats of a pagan half-sleep.

Someone gets up from the moon and walks toward the Earth.

He removes his beard to let the bones breathe.

They used to be called "clouds" during the era of celebrated blandness.

One of the most gifted women to have ever lived killed herself because she found, through a series of unending equations, that benevolence was mathematically impossible.

My father says I believe in too many things. "You're just one of those people," he says.

I tell him I don't believe everyone has the right to make a child.

"Yes, the life forms on this planet aren't well made at all," he says.

I watch drool fermenting in the weapons basement of the mirror: a late personal fascism where I blame the raccoon silence for revealing my eyes, my shadow-fed drones that destroy everything they see, and every unseen thing that looks back at them.

"When will you feed those hats with legs again?" he asks.

"They're raccoons," I tell him, not paying attention to his eyes when they leak, pretending to know everything about sadness.

"The clouds today remind me of Lincoln's ghosts," he says before leaving the room.

"They record everything," I say after he's gone. "They know everything about us."

I want to go outside for a walk, but beyond the window's television screen, the sound of last night's gunfire still clings to the shivering of the mulberry tree. 🗑️



MICHAEL CHANEY publishes morsels, shiny pebbles, and great tufts of furniture ticking. He likes flotsam not jetsam, the riff but not the raff. Judge for yourself by scanning his work (late and soon) in *apt*, *Hobart*, *Storm Cellar*, *NANO Fiction*, *Corvus*, and *Callaloo*. He blogs at michaelalexanderchaney.com



CROW BILLINGS is editor and publisher of Rain Mountain Press. Work has appeared in *Fence*, *Fjords*, *Stone Highway Review*, and *Skidrow Penthouse*.



Yeah But Like Why

Jane Liddle

Aliza pinned a postcard from Berlin of the Ramones Museum to the wall above her desk. Chrystalle had sent it to her during a spontaneous visit to a guy she met on the Internet, a guy who she described as a socialist free spirit with an intensity like an actor. On the blank side of the postcard Chrystalle had written, “They got me used to that clean white linen and fancy French cologne.” Aliza pinned the postcard so the note was facing outward.

Aliza sat at the desk next to the window in her one-room apartment, staring at nothing. The view outside her window was this: fish and their heads, dried fish, fish stink, other foods. Aliza lived in Chinatown. It was always crowded, except when it wasn’t, late at night.

She opened her laptop, turned it on, hummed the start-up sound along with it. Her screensaver was of a fashion spread, aspirational. There were mixed patterns, shiny accessories,

the model looking in the distance, smizing. Aliza looked outside, maybe smized.

Her gchat dinged immediately.

where u been gurl

Chrystalle. Solid. Decent. Unserious. Unprude. She was, easily, Aliza’s favorite person, and Aliza felt guilty for being out of touch. It bothered her more than inconveniencing her family or neglecting her cat or totally missing a deadline, creating more work for her already overproductive coworkers. Chrystalle could make herself ill with worry.

was in mental hospital lol

Aliza flinched as she clicked send, knowing she’d have to get used to expressing the facts of her absence to friends and

acquaintances, but feeling embarrassed about this fact, and the facts that led to it, which were only sort of facts, as much as unstable coveting and someone else’s hustle are facts.

wha?

The doctor and nurses and fellow patients told her that shame was a common feeling to feel and totally normal. The doctors and nurses and fellow patients also told her there was no reason she should feel shame, that there was no shame in needing and asking for help. These two sentiments seemed to Aliza to be in conflict, but the doctors and nurses did not acknowledge that. Sometimes the fellow patients did. So Aliza felt an overwhelming shame that was wrapped up in guilt and bound by manners about something so small as spiraling banking fees paired with a hard drive erasure that sent her spirit into disarray and skin into hives.

But, in the large scheme of things, of ranked worlds and problems, of privileges and opportunity and the circumstances of her birth, she had nothing to complain about, at least not to Chrystalle, who lost both parents in a plane crash two years ago, and then spent another year fighting bed bugs, ultimately winning that battle, though people still didn’t visit her apartment. Chrystalle had given up trying to throw dinner parties. Despite the crisis years, as she referred to that time with a smiling sigh, Chrystalle managed to work and play within normalcy and with cautious adventure that respected her delicate time upon this planet.

yea weird rite? haha im ok

What Aliza wanted to tell her, though, if it wasn’t for the aforementioned shame and guilt and manners, and also the medium of gchat paired with Aliza’s increasing inarticulateness under the thumb of creeping patronizing concern, was that her life had got away from her, buried under receipts for miraculous! BB cream and takeout menus, under the missing keyboard buttons and lotions that smelled like poison, stupid stupid normal normal little little things.

yeah but like why

Outside Aliza’s window, two men argued. The argument was about a parking space. Aliza looked out the window and in true Seinfeldian fashion, a man had tried to back into a space another man was trying to drive into. The two men were outside their cars gesturing with anger. A small crowd had gathered on the sidewalk, hovering as if not truly invested but also not straying too far from the scene. The men argued from the proximity of right outside their respective driver’s side doors, but then the argument turned personal when one man strangely brought up that he makes more money than the other, as if that bestowed upon him an authority on this and all situations. Now they met halfway between their cars, dancing just around each other’s personal space.

just wanted to sleep for a long time so i did lol

Aliza, before her dad broke down her door, before the dishes in the sink grew mold, along with the sink itself, before the phone died in the bathtub, Aliza had gone into her bed and felt a comfort that was solid, as if she had just lied down after taking a strenuous hike, the hike being a metaphor for deciding to stay home from work. The pillows embraced her and the blanket was a lover whispering in her ear not to leave, to never leave. So she didn’t.

haha u go gurl

One of the men outside slapped the hood of the other man’s car. Only at this point did a passerby try to intervene, though this may have more to do with the fact that traffic was backed up than with a desire to impart reason and compromise between two men succumbing to an untraceable idea of what it meant to be a real man.

had to wake up tho cuz people were starting 2 freak out

Aliza had cried on the drive to the hospital, lying down in the backseat of her parents’ car like a child visiting mean relatives out on Long Island. Her parents didn’t say much, their expressions a discomfiting cocktail of worry and agitation, incomprehension scratched between their eyebrows. Aliza knew they were holding back what they really felt—the absurdity, the confusion—but there were still signs of annoyance before the tears of light dawning.

Aliza’s parents had generously paid for Aliza’s hospital stay, replacing one burden with another, monetary with familial, responsibility with strings. The tightening of the hold constricted Aliza right in the heart like a bubble in the vein. This was not something she could tell Chrystalle, who she knew would rather have a contentious yet reliable relationship with her parents rather than no relationship at all. Aliza acknowledged this but not with renewed perspective, just deeper feelings of futility in the grappling of her own emotional inadequacy, an inadequacy compounded by itchiness.

glad yr ok. what was it like

Drivers went nuts on the horns. The noise drowned out the birds that had built a nest near Aliza’s fire escape and soon people were yelling outside their own windows for the cars to shut the fuck up. These yellings became another source of irritation, maybe even more so than the original honking. Aliza leaned her head out the window and yelled, “Give me some peace!” with a ferocious inelegance that surprised her, but it had no impact on the going-ons. She slammed her window down and the power behind the slam shattered her window. Aliza didn’t remember being that strong. She stood there, overcome with disbelief and yet total of-course belief. Then laughed, feeling the true ridicule of the universe, like that time she got a job after a long search to write about wines only to develop a reaction of migraines against it. It was a complete feeling.

The sound of glass breaking must have dislodged the stalemate on the street as Aliza heard dual car doors slam and the cessation of horns, and the normal symphony of

scuttling and haggling resumed.

was ok. peple were weird.
but I don't know how helfful
it was cuz I figured what
the thereapists wanted 2
hear so I just said that

Aliza swept up the broken glass. She looked around the apartment for something to board up the window until the landlord could come over to fix it. She settled on a collage an ex-boyfriend had made using ads for beauty products torn from 1950s *Life* magazines. He had blackened most of the women's eyes. On some he had drawn pinwheels. It was an ugly collage, but Aliza had kept it for sentimental reasons, if not quite nostalgic, since the relationship with this particular ex was terrible, both parties subjecting their insecurities onto each other, him with cruelty, her with jealousy. The collage was on thick cardboard and was the right size for the window, so it would be easy to put up, and it was. She placed it so the collage faced the street.

I was in metal hosp when I was 16 hahaha

Aliza did not know this. The idea of it made her feel warm, which she then felt bad about since this was another struggle that her dear friend had had to endure. Chrystalle didn't deserve any of it. Life was so unfair.

didn't know that I

Aliza went to the fridge and grabbed a Tecate, opened it, poured it into a glass as a treat to herself for taking care of the window-breaking situation so quickly. Her parents had hired a cleaning service while she was away, and the sink shone like a church chalice. Aliza was determined to keep it that way, a little every day.

no biggie, it was long time ago

Twelve years, to be exact. But maybe the embarrassment never went away for Chrystalle, since this was the first time she ever mentioned it to Aliza, and she had plenty of opportunities to do so: during their vacation to Woodstock together, or their road trip to Dollywood, during the late-night planning sessions for their mutual friends' bridal showers and bachelorette parties and baby showers where after a bottle of white wine they'd abandon all semblance of planning and instead exchange embarrassing menstruation stories and fears about childlessness and fears about bearing

children and, after the second bottle, their past and current lovers' inadequacies and proclivities in the sack. None of those sessions produced confessions of institutions or psychological breaks. None of those moments gave way to revelations on how their souls had been chipped away by their own magazine-addled minds.

cool. it's so hott (c)

The "hott (c)" was an inside joke, the origins of which Aliza didn't remember anymore.

Aliza checked the weather, hoping rain would come soon to break the humidity, especially now that one of her windows was unopenable. While checking the weather she noticed the date. It was the anniversary of Chrystalle's parents' deaths. Aliza's reflex was to sign off gchat, to escape confronting the heaviness of Chrystalle's life, but that would only leave her with her own less-heavy but in-debt and maybe sometimes just-as-heavy life. Self-pity, basically.

I treated myself 2 new tv 2day

TV. The word in the message was like a bat signal for diversion. Aliza didn't have one. The hospital had one, but the channel choices were limited, and dependent on consensus. To be immersed in a story, any story, had a strong appeal to Aliza at that moment, to forget about the window and men fighting in the streets, disrupting everybody, disrupting peace, and to sit on a couch and comment on whatever. Her and Chrystalle first bonded over terrible reality TV in the dorm, *Paradise Hotel*, one of those early reality shows that involved getting the players drunk and in bikinis and forced to form alliances, which would then be undermined once the alliances resembled something true, the rules of the house subject to the producer's moods and whims.

whoa! can I come ovr 2 watch

Aliza changed into clothes that she wouldn't mind throwing out when she got home, bed-bug paranoia still strong. She put some Tecates in a tote along with a new book of sexy horoscopes that she didn't believe a word of but thought would provide a good laugh and silly hope.

really? yes! yay!

And Aliza felt it, felt the yay, as if she had just spent the day volunteering at a charity for kids' after-school programs, except Chrystalle wasn't charity. Chrystalle was her friend. ➡



Pulled Apart Pushed Pieces

H.L. Nelson

When he stopped choking me and I could breathe again, I lit a cigarette and sat outside on the steps rubbing the bruises for a long time. I left Jack passed out on the floor. I'd grabbed the syringe of ketamine I kept on hand and injected it into his neck. The angel dust, as he still insisted on calling it, had hit harder this time. He'd kept yelling "Dad!" while his hands were wrapped around my throat. I made my mind stray elsewhere as I strained my hand toward the syringe. I thought of that barbed wire fencing.

Someone had coiled it around a tree I saw once when my car stalled after a bad date. I was sitting on the side of the road and I remember thinking the tree looked like it was being strangled. I was pissed about my car and the asshole who'd just pushed me into screwing him, but afterward, said I needed to go home. So I hooked my fingers under the barbed wire and pulled back with all my weight, both feet staunch against the trunk. For a second, it seemed like it might give. But I slipped, sliced my palm, and fell on the sandy soil. I never gave up easily back then, so I tried a few more times. The barbed wire held. I slumped down and cried while my blood dripped onto the dirt. My friends Brad and Geoff showed up and pushed my car the half mile home.

Every day for a week I came back to that spot and tried again. Over and over. I didn't bring wire cutters because I didn't want to cheat. It was me against that barbed wire. I pulled and pulled, but it never budged. I just wasn't strong enough. As these things usually end up with me, I eventually forgot about it.

This time I don't call the police because we still have drugs in the closet. And I love Jack. This is what I tell myself, on repeat. *I love him, I love him.* I figure one day I may actually mean it. When I stub out my cigarette on the step, I see a line of ants hurrying across it, up onto the porch. I follow the pheromone-wafting insects to a dead moth lying on one of the wooden porch slats. I sit beside it and watch the ants pull it apart, bit by bit, then push the pieces toward their hill. I don't stop them. I'm too tired. It doesn't take long. Soon, the moth is a pile of soft powder. I wonder if Jack pulls and pushes at me enough, would just dust remain.

I go inside and he's rousing, already fingering a joint out of his pants pocket. "Hey, babe. Did I pass out?" he asks, all groggy.

"Yeah, something like that," I say, kneading my neck again.

He staggers up and flops onto the couch, the joint between his pursed lips. I feel like a joint would be damn nice right about now, so I perch on the edge next to him. He lights it, draws on it, and hands it to me.

I take a hit, pass it back.

He grabs at my arm with his free hand, pulls me to him. "You wanna do it? I'm fucking horny." Then blows smoke in my face.

I wrench my arm free. "Not now, Jack. I have my period."

I was lying. I hadn't gotten my period that month. But I didn't want to think about that. There was no way in hell I was going to screw him after he choked me. And it was clear he didn't remember anything. He'd barely looked at me since I came in. He hadn't seen the bruises.

"Fuck, Jenn. We haven't done it in weeks. I've been jerking it like crazy to that anal site. I was hoping you'd let me do that tonight." He fixes his gaze on me. Finally. "Come on, you've made me wait long enough."

I shake my head.

His hand encircles my wrist like barbed wire. "I'll be gentle."

Jack sniffs the drugs off my skin like he does every time. He always says he can only do them off his own angel, that my dust makes him strong. He lowers his head to my back to inhale another line, then unzips his pants. My heart flutters. I feel dead. I think of the moth, and wait for the push. ➡



JANE LIDDLE waited at school bus stops in Newburgh, NY, learned to drive on the north shore of Massachusetts, stayed up all night in Pittsburgh, and now reads and writes in Brooklyn. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Two Serious Ladies*, *WhiskeyPaper*, *alice blue*, *Wigleaf*, and elsewhere. You can find her at liddlejane.tumblr.com or on Twitter @janeriddle



H. L. NELSON is head of *Cease*, *Cows* and a former sidewalk mannequin. (Yes, that happened.) Pub credits: *PANK*, *Hobart*, *Connotation Press*, *Metazen*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Red Fez*, *Bartleby Snopes*, etc. She's working on an anthology, including stories by Bender, Gay, Hunter, and other fierce women writers. H.L.'s MFA is kicking her ass. Find her online at hlnelson.com



Storm Music

India McDonough

The embers in our cigarettes look like little rooms where people are together and warm. We're outside in the wind with the lightning in our eyes and the ash is blown away and an ember is again an ember, brighter when it becomes a part of us. The electricity in the air is chased by sound and makes all the hair on our bodies reach towards where we think it's coming from and it feels like a glass of champagne and the smoke mushrooms like a bomb and gets trapped in the air, makes itself invisible and it's free. The rain holds the light and pulls it tumbling to its death and the puddles are lighter than the sky. The drips from the eaves want to be together again and they follow each other and they're whole as countless parts become one but never as it was before. The ash as it forms flies in the wind and lives a whole life and tells a whole story before our eyes lose it and it's gone and we crush the lights out and the last smoke dances to its death and one last living ember burrows into your arm and you smile. At me and the storm and the drama in the clouds that roll as to crush but are too light to touch and that destroy themselves over our heads in a harmless deluge that makes you laugh and me reckless. We open our arms to the fury and everything else because we know we can flee and we've won and the wind makes me shake and I dance a disguise to trick my body into warmth. There are a million stars in the sky that we can't see and it doesn't matter

because we know they're there and when the storm's over they'll still be there and so will we. You talk and the wind steals your words but I smile because for you to talk is to say something that makes me smile and a ripping crack in the sky closes your mouth and widens your eyes and you don't need to say anything because I know. I turn to the door and am doubled in the glass before just one of me steps into light and sound, a record left spinning skips and jumps at your favourite part of your favourite song and you let it run and sing the jerking refrain, pleased that it brings something new to something old and when it corrects itself you sing in harmony from the floor you prefer to the couch, brushing errant ash from your jeans as the rain lashes the roof and we smile at its efforts, the storm pours over our heads and leaves us safe and dry as we pore over the puddles of records on the floor and savour the familiar patter that lies under each song and over the rain. The drum rolls of thunder drown out our songs at intervals and we're up and dancing like improvs at jazz clubs to the skaaaaat-tt-t-tt-t-tt-tt that slowly fades out as a new song swells up and we join our voices with the voice of the storm and the wail of the speakers and spin like red embers and swirl like smoke and you knock over your beer and mimic its foaming spread over the carpet with your hands and don't clean it up. You sing the lightning and I yell the thunder and we both dance the rain and the coffee table holds me but no coffee because

all we need is this moment to stay up forever. I trill like a mermaid with a mouth full of wine and when my glass is empty it falls to the floor and bounces to a tinkling halt against the record player and its music compliments ours. The light flickers and spasms and shudders and glows too bright for a second before inside may as well be out. In the silence and darkness you sing like a broken record and it feels like my eyes are closed until the darkness gradually grows lighter and your teeth and eyes glow and instead of being nowhere I am in the room again. The lightning is a strobe and it fuels us in our dancing and we move outside from darkness back into darkness because without light the house is just a roof and without sound the storm has gotten in and won, we acknowledge its triumph in the sheets of rain that change direction to push us further against the bricks we no longer care to hide behind until we give in to the chase and stretch as far into the night as we dare. The rain is a thick blanket of white that you cover yourself with like you're trying to get warm and I raise my face to the lashing water and bathe like I'm trying to get clean and the

symphony of the sky laughs at our efforts. Now we laugh with the storm and our voices are thunder and it doesn't matter what we say because the sky's not listening and neither are we and my throat is one thousand cigarettes chain smoked and although I laugh the rain thinks I cry and my face is wet and my hair is in my mouth. We dance a story but no one's written the end. Our bodies are too hot to feel cold and I feel like steam should be rising from us to become rain again and you rip a flower from its bed to give to the storm and the wind gives it to me instead and it sticks to my skin like a graft. We watch the pyrotechnics as the sky destroys itself in an opera of passion and death and we howl along with it because we know all the words and the plot is the drama of our lives, everything we have ever done seen felt tasted loved lost wanted hated and we laugh and cry for all the reasons in the world there are to laugh and cry. You're a series of photographs and negatives as the lights in the sky play with my eyes and you're in one spot then another and your twist and your twirl makes you ash in the wind and if I take my eyes off you you'll be gone. 🌀



INDIA McDONOUGH likes words. She likes the way they make you feel, strung together into pictures and stories. She picks words up from places in and around Sydney, Australia, and she puts them together into works of fiction because she has a hard time keeping facts straight, and she keeps it short because long pieces are dangerously close to exercise. She's had bits and pieces published here and there, and when she's not writing she's baking.

THRICE FICTION MAGAZINE EDITORIAL STAFF

RW SPRYSZAK *Editor, THRICE Fiction...*

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



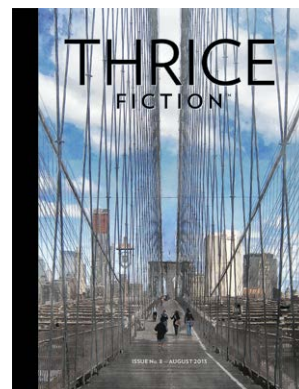
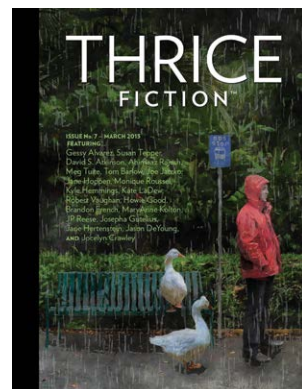
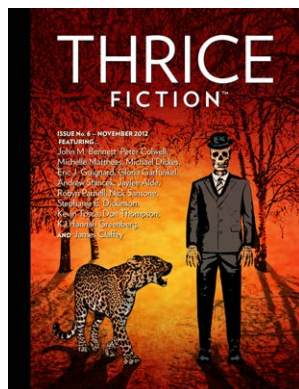
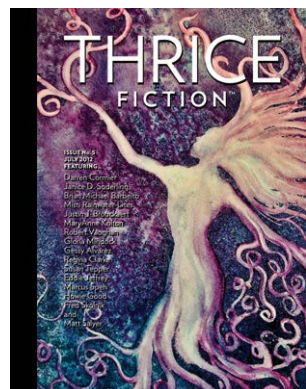
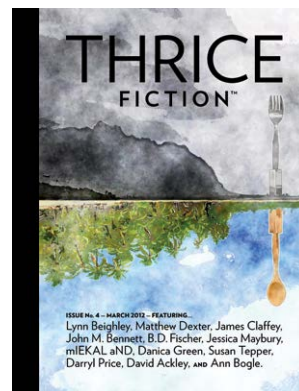
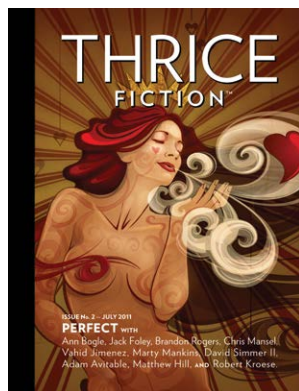
LINDA GOLDING *Editorial Assistant/Intern, THRICE Fiction...*

is a second year student of Creative Writing at Edge Hill University (UK) who hails from Merseyside, Liverpool. A budding novelist and poet, Linda also has a keen interest in the day-to-day function of literary magazines, and will assist in the selection process of works appearing in *Thrice Fiction*.



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ARTISTS & STORYTELLERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



FRANCIS DENIS *Pages: Inside Front Cover, 19, 37, Back Cover...*

is a semi-professional French painter. One reviewer states emphatically: "Francis' abstract figurative paintings evolve around the single theme of emotion. Everything in these mysterious works is centered around the humble and sad angst that the figures portray. How Francis does this is quite spectacular. Set on a single tone backdrop, an immediate mood is set by the colour of these bold platforms. The expressive brushwork uses contrasting tones and the white outline of his subjects creates an almost collage-like aesthetic. [His work] allows for a playful and engaging guessing game for the viewer." <http://fr.upside-art.com/artists/008462-francis-denis>



KATELIN KINNEY *Pages: Front Cover, 26, 34...*

graduated from Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, IN with two BFA's in fine art painting and fine art photography. She uses these two methods together to create digital paintings where photos begin to morph into surreal worlds of fantasy and conceptual dramatizations. Visit her online at katelinkinney.com

**CHAD ROSEBURG** *Pages: 8, 20, 32-33...*

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.

CHARMA RULAND *Original Photographs Used for Page 29...*

is a pinhole camera hobbyist and sometimes storyteller residing in one of the pretty bits of Appalachia. When not living in the past photographically, she's living in the present theoretically.



DAVID SIMMER II *Lead Artist & Art Director, THRICE Fiction...*

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 Thrive Fiction Magazine and blogs daily at **Blogography.com**

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