

An abstract painting featuring a central figure of a person wearing a blue button-down shirt. The figure is rendered with visible brushstrokes and is set against a background of vibrant, swirling colors including blue, purple, pink, and yellow. The overall style is expressive and textured.

# THRICE

## FICTION™

ISSUE No. 12 • DECEMBER 2014



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*Plovdiv, Bulgaria, 2011* by Harry Wilson

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RW Spryszak, Editor  
David Simmer II, Art Director

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





# Thrice 12 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

What I don't mention enough are the people who you can find listed at the back of this periodical, many of whom appear here on regular basis. John M. Bennett, Kyra Wilson, Chad Roseburg, Katelin Kinney, Allen Forrest, and Harry Wilson are all in the same boat Dave and I are in, in that what they contribute to the look and feel of this publication is done for the sake of their art and not much else. It should be noted and remembered that it's their material that helps Thrice look like it does. From covers to clip art, from filler to photos. It all belongs to them, and they are giving it to us because they also believe in this project. Not because we have an awesome budget and they're planning to retire early on the checks we send them. I know this because the only Thrice check I've ever written is for a post office box.

But their contributions, separately and as a whole, should never be overlooked. And I am painfully aware that in 11 issues, I haven't said it enough.

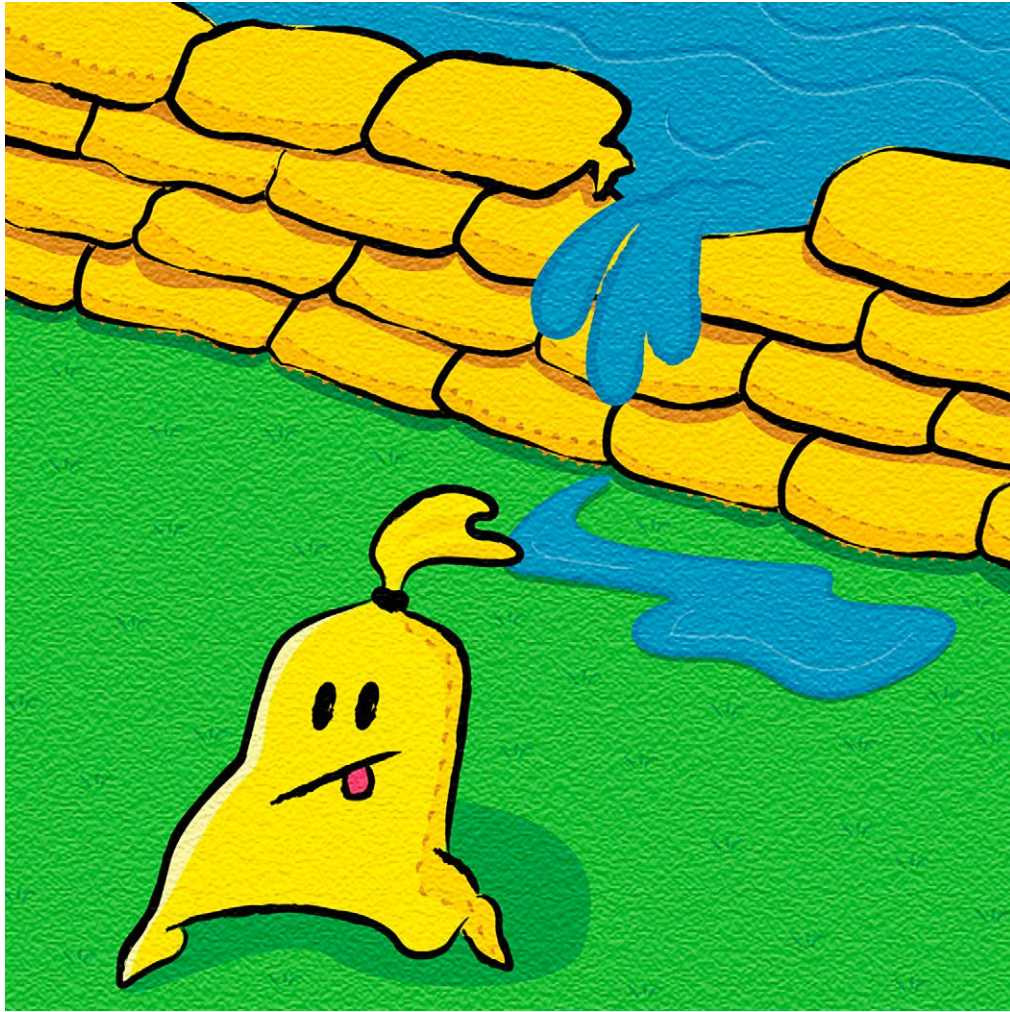
They are artists, photographers, creative lunatics, and — most of all — friends, to the zine, and to Dave and me.

And I'm not forgetting those who contributed in the past to the structure of this thing and are not part of this issue, right this minute, but are listed for all eternity in our online library... *which is free.*

I would hope that you — whether you are a writer looking to get in here or a regular reader, or a contributor who has found a home with us — will follow the links and prompts in their bios to see what more they have. You will not be disappointed.

And so, here is our December issue. Read it and weep. Unless the story is meant to be comedic and then, you know, laugh and stuff.





# Sandbags Won't Save Your Life

Robin Rozanski

**T**he population rejoiced when the sandbags grew stout little legs and on the count of 1-2-3 lifted their dense weight up 4.25 inches to stop The River from taking the town. The sandbags shivered against the cold rising water, but they gritted their gritty teeth and silently held. They were strong and did not complain, and the population (descended from Finns) admired this trait, though no one spoke of it. They looked at their muddied waterfront homes and spoke of hope.

The National Guard arrived, but now had nothing to do except monitor water pumps and circle in their boats. The population, however, worked to keep the sandbags healthy. Small heaters were set up to warm them as rain fell and they turned pale from pushing their backs against The River. The people hand-fed the thousands of sandbags whatever would fit between those tiny granular teeth: sliced salad olives, halved M&Ms, baby crickets from the pet store.

The news reported that the river had crested and was

now receding, but a military spokesman, miffed about his fellows of the Guard being outdone by a bunch of sacks, made headlines. "Sandbags of this caliber won't always be here," he said, "and these waters rise every year." The population shook their heads and watched the line of sandbags straining and gasping.

"They are like children to me!" said one man, who had worked for 36 hours filling yellow bags with his shovel. A woman wiped away tears of joy and fatigue. "We prayed," she said, "and they answered."

The next day The River broke the dikes across at Other Town. Excited, the National Guard rushed over because they'd been secretly dreaming of engineering projects all week. News crews hurried from bank to bank, unable to decide which story epitomized the human drama.

By week's end the weather service declared The River's seasonal assault ended. The sun dried the streets and the hip waders were hung up. The population (tired, dirty, cold, frightened) cheered quietly and then decided that, just this



once, they would take a hot shower and a short nap in the middle of the afternoon. The sandbags were reliable, and stout.

The mayor declared the day “Thank You Sandbags Day”. While Other Town waited for federal aid, the population commissioned a granite statue that evoked David and Goliath. Some argued against vilifying the beloved River, but the artist promised the allusion would be subtle.

The sandbags were modest about all of this. As the floodwaters dissipated they sighed small sighs and shook the cramps from their stout legs. They were grateful for the heaters and the M&Ms so they cooperated with the requests for photos and interviews, although they had extraordinarily little to say.

Proudly, the population (slightly giddy, now well-rested) bragged about their charming sandbag heroes. They sent condescending notes to Other Town sympathizing for their loss, saying how sad it must be to have lazy sandbags.

They took full advantage of their new residents.

“Sandbags!” they yelled, “save my cat off this roof.”

“Sandbags! That man stole my purse!”

The sandbags tried. They threw themselves off their riverside piles and pushed one corner ahead, then laboriously heaved their other corners up alongside. They stretched their legs until they thought their tiny, stout calves might pop. With dusty grunts they stacked themselves, but could not get more than three high. Accustomed to being stacked by the townspeople, they were unable to understand how to create a ladder or vertical structure.

“You’re too slow to stop a robbery and too stupid to save cats,” said the population, “so just go back to the river.” The sandbags sadly returned.

The summer heat dried the yards; clouds left the sky and dogs panted in the slender shade of young trees. The riverbanks were a mess of debris. Bits of metal and rotting leaves and all manner of odds and ends cluttered the ground, but The River was calm. The peaceful waters moved slowly, like a familiar finger beckoning them to come, and the population wanted to swim and fish. Riverfront property became desired again.

“Careful,” the sandbags chirped, “next spring the waters will go higher.”

The population doubted. The memories were already

fading. They could no longer feel the chill of their wet clothes because the sun was high, the days long, and the trees perfectly green. The promise of ripe gardens and holiday cookouts wiped away the threat of all the winters they had known or could ever imagine.

So, one morning, after coffee and eggs, the population went to their workbenches and sheds and picked up their fabric scissors and hunting knives.

“How dare they threaten us after everything we did for them,” said the woman.

“They’re fat and lazy from all those crickets and M&Ms,” said the man.

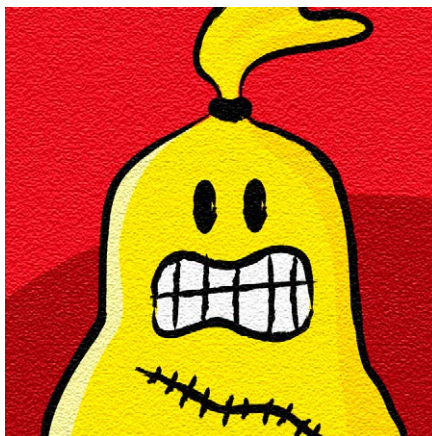
The sandbags saw them coming, but could do nothing except gasp a raspy breath as the glinting metal and tightened knuckles approached like white water.

At first the population picked up one bag at a time by their ear-corners and cut them down the middle, gutting and spreading the sand at their feet. Children waited with plastic buckets shaped like the turrets of castles. The white sand that spilled from the bags was finer and softer

than the rough dirt that had been poured into their yellow skins those many weeks ago.

Then, as the population became ravenous with thoughts of charging Other Town residents to use their beautiful new white-sand beaches, they slashed the bags half a dozen at a time, covering the bank with flawless pale sand, dotted here and there with colorful bits of candy shells. Hundreds of tiny, store-bought crickets escaped the blades and leapt away to the forest.

The sandbags, stoic and struggling to realize mortality, were silent. They felt the warm sand pour out and saw the light drift away one grain at a time. Some of them, the ones from the bottom of the dam, older and slightly wiser, wondered what they had saved, and why they stood up in the first place. ⑤



**ROBIN ROZANSKI**'s fiction has appeared in *A Cappella Zoo*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Lake Region Review*, *Hint Fiction: An Anthology* and is forthcoming in *Emrys Journal*. She has an MA in creative writing from the University of Central Florida, and is a teaching artist at The Loft Literary Center. She lives and works in Minneapolis. Follow her on Twitter @RobinRozanski





# The List

Paul Beckman

Bekka handed me a list of the ten things about myself I would need to correct if we were to stay together.

“I don’t expect you to correct all of these at one time so take a month. That’s fair—don’t you think?”

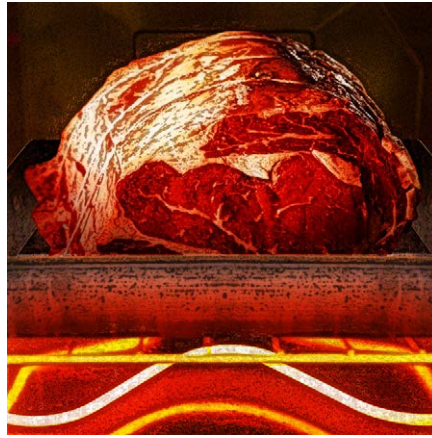
She wasn’t looking for a response to that question so I hugged her goodbye and went back to my apartment. I’d been staying more at Bekka’s place than mine and while we talked about moving in together it seemed this list was the culmination of our talks. I could’ve given her a list, but why? Instead, the next day I went to her apartment and packed a box of my things, careful not to take anything that we bought together.

Today, the tenth day I took the last of my possessions and left Bekka a bouquet of Gerber Daisies—her favorite. We hadn’t contacted each other since the passing of the list. I keep her list as a guideline to work on for my next relationship since it is a reasonable and accurate list but could have been accomplished, for the most part, with simple conversation. ↻



**PAUL BECKMAN** used to be a Realtor, Air Traffic Controller, Saloon Keeper, Pin Setter, Numbers Runner & many other things. These days he’s a Zeyde who writes, travels and takes pictures both above and beneath the water. Some publishing credits: *Metazen*, *Connotation Press*, *Existere*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Molotov Cocktail*, *Pure Slush*, *The Brooklynier*, *5 Trope*, *Blink-Ink*, *Litro*, *Soundzine*, *Opium*, *Playboy*, *The Connecticut Review*, *Ascent Aspirations* and other fine publications on line, in print & via audio. He can be reached at his published story website: [PaulBeckmanStories.com](http://PaulBeckmanStories.com)





# Happy Endings Inc.

Meeah Williams

**T**hey call it Happy Endings, Inc. It works like Triple-A. You sign up for a membership, call the number on the laminated card, and a guy in shining armor comes on horseback and rescues you from peril anytime you need him, night or day. I signed up for a three-month trial. In that time, I've been lost in the desert twice, tied to the train tracks once, kidnapped and sold into white slavery four times, and nearly scalped by wild Indians. It's been a godsend. I don't know what I would have done without it. Died, I guess. Or worse.

One day, near the end of the trial period, I call the number which now I know by heart. I say, "I'm about to cook and eat a roast beef." "And that's an emergency?" the dispatcher asks. "I'm a vegetarian," I say. "I see." There's the pregnant silence of someone checking a list, a series of blips and beeps. Then the dispatcher is back on the line, "I can have a happy ending there in five minutes. Sound okay?" "Yes. The oven timer still has twenty minutes on it. Even bloody-rare the beef won't be ready before then. Thank you." "No prob. Enjoy your happy ending."

Sure enough, within the hour, it's happily ever after again. The knight is sitting at my kitchen table, shining armor clinking, sopping up the last of the melted fat and blood with a chunk of bread. He holds up the empty plate, shows me the shine, it's like a full moon. From beneath his visor, I see his wolfish smile.

Then he starts to howl.

It's always midnight sooner than you think. That's the way it is in fairy tales but somehow the heroine never learns. My trial subscription is over, my card expired. I figure they must have a grace period, no? My what big teeth he has, what long tongue, what hairy hands. I stand there, arms crossed, tapping my foot impatiently. So, is this going to be another happy ending after all or what? 🐾





# Bewitchery

Meeah Williams

So instead of executing me, they blindfold me, tie my hands behind my back, and drive me miles outside of town. There they leave me to my fate. To prove they aren't entirely heartless, that they're Christians after all and better than me, they shove eight dollars into my dirty palm. "Good luck, baby!" I hear one of them yell, laughing, as they drive rattling off in the pick-up.

Naturally, it immediately begins to rain. I stumble around aimlessly in the mud for a while. The soaked blindfold slips down. The binding on my wrists loosens. Eventually I come upon a farmer who has a thing for half-bound barefoot girls with no future. He takes me in. He warms me by his fire. He fucks me silly.

Sometimes at the very height of intimacy, he puts his big calloused hands on my throat. I don't even flinch. "Go ahead and kill me if you like," I say. I mean it, too. If you don't mean it, the spell won't work. He howls like a wild beast and comes inside me, shouting obscenities like a French poet. Then he covers me with kisses as if he's hiding a crime under white roses. One day, I'm boiling peas and it hits me, "Wow, I really am in love." No one could be more surprised than I am. Meanwhile, he acts as if he planned it all along. ↻



**MEEAH WILLIAMS** is a writer and graphic artist whose work has appeared in many small literary magazines. Her most recent works include a collection of flash fiction, *101 Sex Positions of the Dead*, a book of poetry, *It Freak Room*, and a novel *Geisha in the City of Death*. All three are currently available from Amazon Kindle. She lives in Brooklyn, NY, with her husband, Hank.





# Speaking the Language

Marsha Roberts

Olivia Blackwell scrunched some toilet paper into a ball and wiped the steam from the bathroom mirror. She caught her image; the eyes daring her to look back. She tried to brighten them and spread the lips into a smile, but succeeded only in looking alarming instead of vacant. Vacant was better.

One of the many blackish spots on the old mirror sat under her left eye like an old bruise. She rubbed it as she had every morning for the last twelve months and six days. Futile, she knew, but a ritual now. No use asking the super for a new mirror. “You get what you pay for,” he would say. At least she had her own bathroom. Thank God for that.

The baby next door began its morning wail—same time every day. And it would be a good fifteen minutes before it stopped.

She looked back at the face and told it to get a grip. We have no choice—just suck it up and get on with it. She would get things back to normal, but it would take time. What if you can’t, the face countered. Look where we are. Look what we’ve come to. What if it will be like this—or worse—from now on? For a moment her bones stopped holding her up. Her knees gave way. The inner earthquake that was becoming a daily occurrence was followed inevitably by the surge of nausea. She grabbed the counter to steady herself and pulled air into her lungs. They would get through this.

The towel around her began to slip. She pulled at it, forming a knot over her breast, and set to work. She eased the sparkling white paste onto her toothbrush—the tangy, fresh mint a perfect antidote to the rancid smell that pervaded the place. It was five minutes before she could be sure her teeth were clean.

The baby next door was in a frenzy now. Just pick it up, for God’s sake. But maybe not. Maybe it was safer this way. The four letter words started lobbing back and forth like a furious tennis match. She held her breath for what came next—hoping it wouldn’t. But there it was. The scream—not the baby’s. The door slam. And finally, crying again, one more muted than the other.

She squeezed the last of the sample foundation from the small tube and smoothed it over her cheeks, spreading an extra layer under each eye. The trial-sized lipstick was down to the nub. She managed to coax out just enough for one coat plus a small dab on her cheeks to rosy them up. She wound her still damp hair into a tight bun and examined her reflection. It would have to do.

The rest of the apartments were waking up. The smell of

coffee and frying bacon seeped under her door, reminding her that she hadn’t had supper last night. In the fridge was a hunk of cheddar and half a hamburger bun, which she jammed together into a makeshift sandwich. Just as she was about to take a bite, she remembered. There would be coffee and bagels at the association breakfast. No point in wasting a perfectly good sandwich. Save it for dinner.

The Chanel suit looked stunning on her. She closed her eyes and ran her hand over the fine wool, pretending it was the old days and she wouldn’t have to return it. The price tag dangled from the wrist. She wedged it up her sleeve and slipped into her old Gucci pumps, gauging the full effect—then did a double take.

When had her shoes become so ratty? She had just worn them to last week’s networking meeting. Could they possibly have looked that bad then and she hadn’t noticed? She took off the right one and studied it. It was shot. The black shoe polish had done its best to cover the scuffs, but now the leather was beginning to peel. No time to deal with it. She slipped off the other pump and jammed them both into the Safeway bag with her old sweat suit and beat-up Luis Vuitton tote packed with resumes. She put her Goodwill trench on over the suit and tied her sneakers.

As she opened her door, a young woman holding a baby was just leaving the apartment next door—the baby’s cries down to a soft whimper now. In the two months since the neighbors had moved in, Olivia had never actually seen the couple and baby. The woman’s baseball cap was pulled way down over her head, releasing a cascade of rich brown curls down her back.

Olivia followed her down the hall. When she got to the elevator, the woman turned away quickly, but not before Olivia noticed the fresh red splotch on her left cheek. They waited together in the chilly hallway—conversations and TV noises barely muted by the paint-flaked walls.

It’s none of your business, Olivia told herself. Stay out of it. When the elevator came the woman rushed in, pressing the baby’s head to her chest and keeping her own head bowed. Olivia followed. As soon as the doors closed, a heaviness crept like an ugly beast from the corner where the woman stood—it filled the small space until the air was oppressive with it, making it hard to breathe. Olivia recognized it only too well. Desperation.

She reached into her tote for a pen and scrap of paper and made a note. Just before the doors opened, she handed it to the woman. The woman bolted into the dark lobby and out the main door. Olivia tightened her belt and stepped out

of the building. She kept her eyes fixed on the pavement, making sure there was a clear path, and walked as quickly as possible.

The wind barreled down the street in hefty gusts, beating against her. The fog hung low, more depressed than usual. She had noticed since moving to this part of town that whatever the weather was, it was more so here. The cold sliced right through the thin-skinned buildings, and the heat—when it did come—came with a vengeance, making the sidewalks sweat and tempers flare. She clutched the collar of her coat and pressed on.

“Hey, lassie, you’re sure looking hot today. Fellas, get a look at Demi!”

She didn’t look up, but recognized the coarse voice with the slight brogue—and the waft of whiskey that went with it.

Another spoke up. “Demi? How you know her name Demi? She your girlfriend?” The little clique burst into lewd laughter. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two of them get up and start to walk behind her.

The guy with the brogue answered. “Nah, don’t I wish it were true, lads! De-mi! You know, that older chickadee that used to be married to the young stud guy? She’s a real skinny one ... with long dark hair—just like lassie here. But lassie’s got hers all tied up tight today. Needs to let her hair down, I think!”

One of the ones behind her broke in. “Demi Moore! Yeah, you’re right, she looks like that Demi Moore. Bigger butt, though. That’s ok by me—gimme Moore!” He guffawed at his joke.

Dammit, why couldn’t they leave her alone? Every day. Same thing.

Then other one behind her ... “Oh, yeah ... mama’s got great legs ... bet they’d feel good ...”

You’d think she’d be used to it by now. Only two more blocks.

“Come on, mama, why don’t you say somethin’? You got nothin’ to say?”

I’ve got something to say, all right. Do you really want to hear it? Ok, here it goes. I am not one of you. I am not even from your planet. On my planet we work hard and make a decent living. Even if things get tough, we keep going. We take jobs we don’t like just to make ends meet. On your planet when things don’t work out you get drugged and liquored up so you can forget you’re on your planet and pretend you’re on mine. With each sentence her feet slammed the pavement harder.

I don’t talk to you because I don’t speak your language, ok? You want me to talk? Ok, I’ll talk! A year ago, when I drove through this part of the city, I’d hit the lock button. I can’t hit the lock button now. And I sure as hell ain’t your mama. I mean I’m not your mama. Dammit!

And what about your real mama? Do you ever think about her? Do you see her face when she held you for the first time? Do you see her looking into your brand new eyes on that best day of her life? Do you see her showing you off to all her friends the first time you walked? Look at that swagger, your mama would say. This baby’s going to grow up to be something special! Do you think this is what she saw? Her own mother’s face appeared.

Suddenly, the footsteps behind her stopped. She had

crossed the street into civilization.

Two blocks later she slipped into Walgreens and headed to the ladies restroom. In less than two minutes, she came out wearing heels and carrying her Vuitton tote, her trench folded over her arm.

The meeting room of the hotel was already filled with attorneys, mostly clustered in small groups. She looked around—disoriented, as though she had stepped onto a stage, into the middle of a play where everyone had a role and a script, except her. She walked the perimeter of the room and finally saw a threesome she recognized. They worked for a rival law firm when she was in her last job. She headed straight for them, and saw their faces fall almost imperceptibly as she approached.

“Olivia, good to see you.”

“How’ve you been, Olivia?”

Their smiles, she noticed, were a little wider than they should be.

“How’s the job search going, Olivia?” The smallest glint of amusement came with the question.

Answering was tricky—sound positive and optimistic, but make it clear that she was still looking in case they had any leads. “Really well, actually. I had third interviews with a company this week,” she answered truthfully. “But, of course, you never know until you get a solid offer. So, until I’m behind a desk again, I’m on the lookout! Do you know of any openings?” Her stomach turned in on itself as she forced out the question. These people were not nearly at her level of experience—in the old days she had attorneys like them working for her. She caught a gleam of satisfaction on their poised faces.

Each mumbled something about no, unfortunately, they didn’t know of any openings ... would certainly keep their ears open ... would definitely let her know if something came across their desks.

Why did she do this to herself? Because, she answered, you have no other choice, you idiot. She felt the nausea again. Excusing herself, she went to the refreshments table.

“Are you Olivia Blackwell?”

She turned to see a bearded man, in his early fifties, she guessed. He wasn’t as suited up as most of them, but wore a brown herringbone jacket and jeans.

She nodded. “Yes, I’m Olivia.”

“My name is Spencer Sullivan. I head up Legal Aid here in the city. I’m a friend of Gerry Simms, over there. He told me you might be looking for a job.”

God bless Gerry. He was always watching out for her. Even at the firm, he tried to warn her when things were going sour. Tried to get her to go easier on her staff—and play nice with the others. He understood her in a way that almost no one else did. But Legal Aid? Seriously? They paid peanuts.

Spencer handed her his card. “I’d like to talk to you about a position with us. Gerry tells me you’re a real driver. That’s exactly what I’m looking for. Give me a call if you’d like to talk.”

She studied the card. “Legal Aid ... what a coincidence! I just referred someone to you folks this morning.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” he said. “I’ve got to run now, but think about it.” He shook her hand like an old friend.



The speaker for the event was making his way to the podium. Olivia filled her cup and deftly grabbed two bagels with her napkin. As she made for the seating area, she let one of the bagels slip into her tote.

"Mind if I join you?" Gerry took the seat next to hers. "I saw you talking to Spencer. I know Legal Aid may not be exactly what you're looking for, but if my math's right, it's been about two years now, right? And you must have lost a bundle on that crook investor who bilked us all. Look, you wouldn't have to manage anyone—no staff to make miserable!"

The jab hit her right in the stomach. She shot back. "Make miserable! Just because I expect people to actually work ..."

"Whoa! Whoa! I was just jerking your chain." Gerry gave his easy, aw-shucks laugh.

"Yeah, right. I know you too well. You meant what you said."

He turned to her and put his arm on the back of her chair. "Olly, look, we've talked about this a lot. Let's face it. You weren't the most popular boss around. Anyway, think about talking to Spencer."

The speaker was being introduced, so they turned their attention to him. When the presentation was over, she thanked Gerry for the referral and left the hotel quickly, heading back to Walgreens.

Anyone who saw the elegantly dressed professional entering the Walgreens restroom would not have recognized the woman in sweats, sneakers and baseball cap who left a few minutes later, holding a crammed Safeway bag. If they had followed her, they would have seen her get on the bus to Nob Hill.

A half-hour later Olivia stepped off the bus, walked a short half block to the yellow Victorian and unlocked the door. Cynthia Harrigan stood facing her, suitcase by her side. Damn. Why wasn't Cynthia at work?

"Olivia, you're late again." Cynthia's lips were pursed into a thin line. "I need you to be on time. We have talked about this before."

"I know, I'm sorry. But if I'm late, you know I always stay later to make up for it."

"I used to believe you, but now I'm not so sure. The house hasn't been very clean lately. I find dust everywhere. And last week you forgot to change the towels. I just can't let this go on."

For a moment Olivia's blood stopped flowing. Her hands went numb. Oh, no. Not this. For God's sake, she couldn't lose this, too.

She tried to smooth the panic from her voice. "Cynthia. You're right. I'm really sorry. You were so kind to hire me when I was just getting started. You've been patient with me. But I think you know that up until the last couple of weeks, I've done a good job for you."

She searched Cynthia's eyes for some sign ... was she buying it? It was hard to tell, so she kept going. "Look, the truth is, I haven't been feeling well ..." How many times had she herself rolled her eyes at this excuse.

A man's voice came toward them from down the hall. "Honey, we've got to get going. I've got to stop at my place for my luggage." Something about that voice. What was it? He came into focus and she thought she would faint.

"Darling, I'm ready." Cynthia turned to him. "I'm just talking with my housekeeper ..."

Spencer Sullivan, Director of Legal Aid, stared at Olivia.

Oh, my God. This couldn't possibly be happening. There was absolutely no way this was real life. She had just seen him, what, a half hour ago? God, or whoever the fuck was in charge, had really outdone himself this time. Think you're going to pull yourself out of the ditch you're in, Olivia? Hah! Take this! Her legs wanted to run ... out the door ... out of the whole fucking state. But she wouldn't let them. She came to her decision.

"Cynthia, please give me another chance." She tried to sound calm, not like she was flat out begging, like she was flat out desperate. "I swear, from now on I'll be on time and everything will be spotless. Just give me another chance ... please."

Spencer took Cynthia's hand and smiled at her. Olivia knew his palm was warm and comforting. Cynthia's frown melted into her forehead. She turned back to Olivia. "Well, I'm going away for a couple of days. I'll think about it. Let's see how things look when I get back."

Spencer picked up Cynthia's suitcase, and nodded at Olivia as they went out the door.

Olivia sat on the foyer bench and sank forward. Now they would all know. A cleaning lady! Did you hear Olivia Blackwell is a cleaning lady? Olivia's scrubbing toilets now! Serves her right for giving everyone so much crap. They wouldn't bother to wait until her back was turned to smirk at her anymore. They'd laugh right in her face. Had she really been so terrible to deserve this? Wasn't losing her job and all her savings enough?

Suck it up and get on with it, she told herself. She stood up and somehow—she had no idea how—she cleaned the place. She really cleaned the place. For twelve hours—every surface, every corner, every latch, every drawer pull, and each chandelier crystal until every last ounce of everything in her was drained. Then she went home.

The night was still and clear—the air fresh from the blustering winds earlier in the day. Most of her usual welcoming committee was sacked out for the night in various entryways. At least she would be spared that.

"Hey, lassie, why so glum? You're not walking so fast like usual." It was the guy with the brogue. He sounded almost sober. "It's late for you, girlie. You should have been here two hours ago."

She continued walking, her eyes fixed ahead. Her toe hit something small and solid. She lurched forward, dropping her Safeway bag, and braced for the moment when her knees would slam into the pavement. Two arms grabbed her from behind. This is the way it would happen. The assault she had expected for the last year. They would trip her and then grab her and drag her into an alley. No one would hear her scream. She tried to regain her balance and pull forward, but the arms held her back.

"Hold on there, girlie! Get your bearings. You're all right!" He released her shoulders, picked up the Safeway bag and handed it to her.

She turned to face him, breathing fast.

"You ok, lassie?" His eyes were clear blue, she noticed.

She caught her breath and found some words. "Yes, thank you. Thank you so much," she mumbled and started

to walk away, then turned back. "Good night."

She hurried to her building, ran to the elevator, punched in her floor and leaned heavily against the wall as the elevator ascended. It was quieter than usual when she got off, but then again she was rarely out in the hallway this late. A couple of TVs were still on and she could even hear a muffled snore coming from behind one of the walls.

She walked toward her apartment and saw that the door next to hers was wide open, streaming bright light into the dim corridor. She glanced in as she passed. A lanky tattooed man with an electric orange mohawk sat in an armchair facing the hallway.

She inserted the key in her door and he was behind her. "Where'd she go?" His body was almost touching hers.

She focused on the latch. "Who? What are you talking about?" She gripped the key to keep her hand from shaking.

"You know damn well who. The chick you left with this morning." His breath was pungent with beer.

"I didn't leave with anyone." The damn key wouldn't turn.

"Don't lie to me, bitch. The super said you left with Rosa and the baby."

"I didn't leave with her. We happened to be in the same elevator going down. She went her way, I went mine. I didn't even know her name."

"You just happened to be in the same elevator, huh?" The words slithered from his lips. "Did you just happen to talk with her while you were in there?"

She felt the switch flip ... felt the temper she was so famous for lurch from her chest and fill her throat. She turned to him and moved her face to within inches of his. Her words came out slowly, simmering. "Why?" She twisted her mouth into a smile. "Isn't she allowed to talk?" She moved her face even closer. "Why are you asking me all these questions, anyway? Is she missing?"

She could see the fury flash across his face and feel its heat. The muscles in his arms flexed. "Yeah, she's missing all right."

"Well, then," she injected saccharine into her voice, "I suggest you call the police. Or would you prefer that I do it?" She turned the key and he grabbed her wrist, pushing the door open.

The rage from everything that had happened to her that

day and all the days before came roaring to the surface. She screamed. "Police! Call the police!"

A door down the hall opened. He released his grip and darted back to his apartment. She slammed the door behind her, then sank onto the couch and allowed her hands to resume trembling. She concentrated on her breathing, forcing it to slow down. Something on her desk caught her eye. The phone message light was blinking ... telemarketer, probably. She walked over and punched the button.

"Hello, Olivia. This is Hunter Willoughby." Olivia blinked twice. Hunter Willoughby as in Willoughby, Hanley and Brown. "I'm happy to say that your interviews went very well this week, and we'd like to make you an offer. Please give me a call so we can talk about it."

She stared at the answering machine like it had spoken in some foreign language. She replayed the message, letting each word sink in, and then sat down, waiting for the

exhilaration to hit. She gave it time. But nothing happened.

Maybe some scotch to calm down and celebrate. She pulled down the bottle of Glenlivet she had brought with her when she moved in. It was still almost full—not many reasons for a toast in the last year. She poured a shot, took a swig and waited for the happiness to come.

Still nothing.

She re-played the message again, listening to the resonant, perfectly metered voice of Hunter Willoughby. Suddenly, she was back in the hotel meeting room. But now she was one of them. Moving from one cluster to another, mingling, bragging about settlements, brand new Gucci's on her pedicured feet. Finally, the elation she was waiting for came.

She picked up the phone and punched in the number. Not a good idea to leave a voicemail after 11:00 o'clock at night, she knew ... not good for the image ... made people think you were a workaholic ... or worse yet, a drinker. What the hell, this called for it, she smiled to herself.

"Mr. Willoughby, this is Olivia Blackwell. Thank you so much for your call today. I'm flattered that you'd like me to join the firm. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to turn down the offer." ☹



**MARSHA ROBERTS** lives in Mill Valley, California. Her short stories and humorous pieces have appeared in *Gravel*, *Loud Zoo*, *Hospital Drive*, *The Marin Independent Journal*, and *America's Funniest Humor Showcase*. Some of her comedy skits have been performed by a San Francisco troupe. She just finished her first novel, *The Agent*, about an elegant con game. She has visualized Paramount buying the film rights to her stories and novel, so it is about to happen any day now.





# Hearts and Minds

Barry Basden

**T**his afternoon, using a broom cupboard scrounged from the shattered house, we buried a little girl who bled to death yesterday. We put in some blossoms and laid the girl's leg in beside her. Then we lowered the cupboard into the damp earth close to a lilac bush in the backyard. The village was strangely quiet, except for a few sullen locals who stood nearby, speaking a language we couldn't understand. ↻



**BARRY BASDEN** lives in the Texas hill country with his wife and two yellow Labs. He edits *Camroc Press Review* and is the coauthor of *Crack!* and *Thump: With a Combat Infantry Officer in World War II*. His shorter work has been published widely, both online and in print. He was never a good soldier.



# Sprawl

Lucinda Kempe

Oyster knew his neighbor's eccentricities. Urban sprawl had forced them into an unnatural intimacy due to the proximity of the houses. On one street of what at first glance appeared to be row houses, the homes were separated by a half foot of alleyway. The families on the street never spoke to one another. They had no reason for conversation; it was too embarrassing. They knew each other's secrets because they peered nightly through each other's windows.

Every night exactly at quarter to nine, Oyster's neighbor, The Flosser, flossed and brushed her teeth with toothpaste and two drops of ten percent carbamide peroxide. She used a Phillips Electric toothbrush and cleaned the brush with a foaming soap and set it to dry on the radiator in the hall. When she'd done sprucing up her mouth, she blew kisses to herself in the glass and sang A Fond Kiss. Flosser kept her bathroom window opened a crack all year long and the sounds carried right into Oyster's window that he, too, left open a crack. Oyster hadn't set his alarm clock in years. He waited until after dinner to watch Flosser do her stuff whereupon he'd go to bed and sleep the whole night through content. One night a husky kid stood at Flosser's sink squeezing blackheads in the cabinet mirror.

Oyster couldn't believe his eyes. Where was his dreamy mouth girl? Heartbroken, he had no idea how he'd ever get to sleep. It made him want to get into a fight with his ex-wife

as he stared at the unattractive kid, who looked to be about his son's age, squeeze the shit out of his face. This wouldn't do. He hollered through the window, "Hey, Kid! Kid!" The kid had closed the crack in the bathroom window. Oyster barreled out of his house and rapped on his neighbor's front door. In a second, the woman he'd been watching for years appeared.

Oyster hesitated. "Who was that kid in your upstairs bathroom a few minutes ago?"

"Just my husky son. He's visiting," she said, smiling.

"Do you have any pomegranate wine?"

"Pomegranate wine? How did you . . . ?" Flosser smiled coyly. She opened the door wider. "Step into my parlor," she said, gesturing for him to sit. She returned with a bottle of red liquor and two flute glasses, poured them each a glass and raised hers.

"This wine has a taste like a fingerprint, something you will never forget."

Oyster drank his glass down in one gulp. It was the most haunting taste he'd ever experienced. The drink induced a euphoric amnesia so that he forgot about the sprawl, his ex-wife and absent son, and the fact that some kid squeezing pimples had altered his world and changed his life forever.

"How do you like it?" she asked, "My name is Frida."

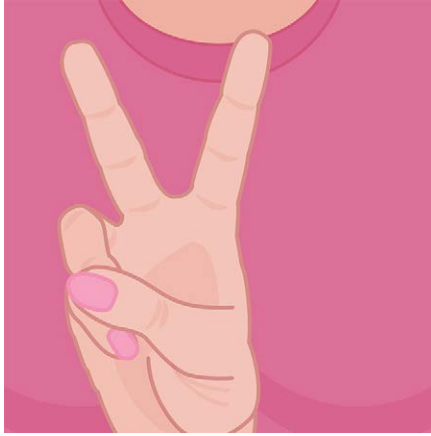
"My name is Diego," he said, "I am very pleased to meet you."

Oyster had become an addict. 🌀



**LUCINDA KEMPE** lives in an Arts and Craft style house on Long Island where she exorcises with words. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in the *Summerset Review*, *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *decomp*, *Corium*, *Metazen*, and *Metrofiction*. She has been a student of the poet Larry Fagin, and recently completed a graduate class in humor.





## First Day

### Cezarija Abartis

Paula's students were eighteen, always eighteen, as if by magic or some kind of time machine. She was older and wiser, and they were always eighteen. Squirmy, careless, optimistic, greedy, too self-absorbed to be curious, and yet beautiful. Had she ever been that young? She was a child in the sixties and now middle-aged in the twenty-first century. Throughout the world there were pockets of peace, and there were lovers in life and in stories. Peace and love, the mantra of that old time, sort of happened.

She imagined meeting the students for the first class: Darcy and Tracy and Stacy and Lacey and Casey. No, she needed to put herself in a less contemptuous mode, or it would never work.

A young man wearing a baseball cap backwards tapped on her door, which was ajar. "Hey, I'd like to get into your Myth and Legend class."

"Sorry," she said, "there are only ninety-eight seats in the room, and the class is full."

She turned to the filing cabinet to retrieve her handouts. The knock on the door was more forceful this time. She had already told the boy that the class was full. When she looked up it was a smiling girl. "Dr. Smith, I'm in your Myth and Legend class."

"That class is closed."

"I'm already signed up." She smiled broadly. She wore a pink t-shirt and blue jeans and had a ring in her eyebrow and a stud in her nostril. No tattoos though. "I just wanted

to know if I could use the textbook I already have. It's the second edition, rather than the third." She counted two with her forefinger and middle finger. "It's my sister's from when she went to college."

"That's fine. I actually prefer it." Paula put on her welcoming face. "The bibliography has been updated, but the stories are the same."

The girl kept smiling, and now Paula thought there was something uneasy about the smile. The girl rubbed her cheek with her fingertips, as if she had a smudge.

Paula remembered being that young, going to visit her English professor during the first week of class, later falling in love with Homer and Jane Austen and Grace Paley, being transported to planes of beauty she hadn't known existed.

The girl blurted out, "I want to be a professor someday."

Usually students wanted an extension for a paper that was due or wanted a change in the test date. "Please come in."

The girl moved from foot to foot. "I have to go to astronomy class now." She looked to her side as if the class were following her. She had a soft, whispery speaking voice, timidity under the blurt. "I'll see you this afternoon." She waved with her fingertips and was gone.

Paula's childhood friend Patty alternated blurting words and a stammering, whistling shyness. Patty had said she wanted to be a professor, loved the solace of art and the power of memory. She shot herself twenty-five years ago. The blood had spattered everywhere, Paula was told.

The girl in the pink t-shirt had stood in the doorway, the fluorescent light of the hall buzzing above her. Outside, a car horn beeped, students laughed, the world bustled. The breeze from Paula's open window had blown the girl's bangs to one side. Patty used to part her hair on the side. But Patty never wore pink.

There was a mirror on the wall, and Paula checked it before heading out to her morning class. This time she saw the reflection of both their faces—her own and that of the girl who reminded her of Patty. Their faces floated on the surface of the glass but seemed also to live deeper in the mirror. Paula reached her fingertips toward the shiny glass. It felt smooth, of course.

She rose from her chair and picked up her books for the first class she was teaching, then sat back down and piled up the books and notes for her afternoon class about ancient myths and legends, about the Muse of history, about memory which reclaimed the past, if only for a while. 🕒



**CEZARIJA ABARTIS'** *Nice Girls and Other Stories* was published by New Rivers Press. Her stories have appeared in *Per Contra*, *Pure Slush*, *Waccamaw*, and *New York Tyrant*, among others. Her flash, *The Writer*, was selected by Dan Chaon for Wingleaf's Top 50 online Fictions of 2012. Her story *History*, in *Lascaux Review*, was chosen by The Committee Room as Story of the Month. Recently she completed a novel, a thriller. She teaches at St. Cloud State University. Her website is [MagicMasterminds.com/cezarija/](http://MagicMasterminds.com/cezarija/)



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# Joanna Wiley Naked

## Barbara Donnelly Lane

Joanna Wiley has a nightmare. She's running, pigtailed bouncing, so hard her feet never touch the ground, so fast her legs are blurring. Her lungs are burning when she collapses in a field on top of a boy, his pants down, panting.

"I won't pee," he says, absurdly matter-of-factly, as she catches her breath, "if you put it in your mouth."

"Yeah?" His face is splattered with freckles, and his hair is a shock of blonde. "Bet you'd get a good laugh at me if you did."

"You should put your mouth on it," he persists, holding it up in his palm. "You oughta touch it, feel it. See what it's all about."

Joanna stares at him then accepts the offer to poke at the thing, naked like a worm beneath her fingertips.

"Go on," he hisses.

"I'm not sure I want to." But the snake charms her, fascinates her, and the wet grass feels good beneath her knees. He places it on her tongue with all the solemnity of a priest giving out communion, and her eyes close, something inside her shaking.

When she looks up again, she is surprised to see it isn't a young boy's face but her professor's. The eyes that meet hers are older and wiser, and she does not think innocence can be her excuse for this seduction. She realizes she is a woman, and she moves her hand up behind the man, feeling the hard muscle in the back of his thigh, the soft curve of his flesh yielding.

She tries to move her entire body upward, straining hard to stand. She only begins to panic when she realizes her knees have rooted to the ground as if she were a weed planted. She wakes from her dream sweating, fingers tangled in her long, black hair.

She watches him at the blackboard tapping a chalky word with a pointer stick, and she wonders again what Dr. Silka looks like naked. She has studied him as hard as her textbook all semester, noted the thick build, curly hair,

scruff beard until she notices even the slightest changes: a haircut, circles under his eyes, a nick on his chin where he must have cut himself shaving. White hair on his slacks might be a cat's. He keeps non-dairy creamers in his desk. He squeezes a tennis ball when he lectures.

"Mrs. Wiley?" His eyes fall heavy on her. "Can you answer the question?"

"Of course," she blushes, dropping her eyes to the poem. "The cat-like smoke helps set the sensual feel of the piece, the sexual overtones."

"And your favorite image?" He raises a dark eyebrow, stops squeezing his ball.

"The arms on the women," she says. "The hair on them."

"Nice." His fingers pump again. "Mine, too."

She slides down in her seat like a silly schoolgirl. She chokes down a laugh as she thinks she is a schoolgirl, and twists her wedding band around and around and around.

Joanna Wiley cooks dinner after researching T.S. Eliot in the university library. The grease in the frying pan crackles as she browns hamburger meat. Pete struggles with his key in the lock, and she thinks she needs to nag him to stop the dead bolt from sticking. Even though he is a construction foreman, she's lucky if her husband thinks to put his socks in the hamper, much less to fix things around the house. When the door finally flies open, she glances over at him scowling at the keys in the palm of his hand.

"Hungry?" she says.

"Sure but where are the twins?" He hangs his work jacket on the rocking chair he made when the children were still colicky babies needing motion to untie their insides.

"Scout camp out."

Something livens in his soft brown eyes. He moves around the island that separates the living room from the kitchen to stand behind her. He lifts up her hair, kisses the back of her neck. "Isn't that lucky?"

He pulls her hips hard toward him making her grunt. His thick hands rub down her thighs and up between them,

lifting the cloth of her skirt, and she momentarily forgets the stove as his thumb loops under her panties.

"You like that, Joanna?" he asks. She turns off the stove, leads him into the bedroom.

Joanna stretches her body until her toes slip out from under the sheets. Pete traces the vertebrae in her naked back with his finger, but an exchange of ideas is more engaging to her now, more intimate than bodies joining.

"I read of mermaids today," she offers, "and ragged claws at the bottom of the ocean."

"A seafood commercial, I presume?"

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

He puts his chin on her head, and she can hear his heart beating.

She recites verses she memorized on the bus for him.

"So," he says, "you like this Prufrock character because of your fondness for balding men?"

"No, silly." She pokes his softening stomach. "The poem makes me think."

"A brave new world, eh? Education?" he asks softly, and she is taken aback by his shout-out to Aldous Huxley. Once upon a time she thought her husband knew everything there was to know—a sophisticate by virtue of the twenty years more he had walked on the planet than she had—but now she knows better.

Pete is asleep. Joanna stares at his slightly parted lips, a spit bubble in one corner. His eyes dart beneath his eyelids like water bugs moving under the surface of a pond. She lightly touches her thumb to one of them as if she can feel what he is seeing, as if she can get inside his head. The skin weighs heavy underneath his jaw; the whiskers are flecked gray. Still, he looks beautiful to her. She likes the full nose, the strong chin that had first made a man as old as her father overwhelmingly appealing.

She glances at the digital clock before picking up his calloused hand. She likes to touch the wedding band he wears, likes to stick his knuckles in her mouth. She curls in a fetal position beside him. She moves closer to him as if trying to burrow into his skin and plummets fast into her own darkness.

Joanna Wiley goes to a cocktail party. Fog curls outside the window. People hold martini glasses, stare at one another's mouths moving. She scans the painted faces, but recognizes no one. She goes to the kitchen and finds a man in white flannel trousers at the Formica table lining up silver coffee spoons.

"I didn't expect to run into you here," she says.

"I'm waiting," he practically purrs, "to talk about your trapped feeling."

"What?" she blinks. But she knows exactly what Dr. Silka means, and the hair rises on her arms. Music drifts in from the parlor room: bells and tinkling voices, moving currents of sound.

"Go ahead and do what you want," he says, soft but urgent, silver flecks in his eyes glinting. His face is younger than her husband's, older than her own. He is moving closer to her.

"I'm not sure if I want to." But she has already been charmed by the words that roll like sirens off his tongue. She wants to see him naked, stripped as bare as a bone, and her mouth eats his kisses, as her hands rip off his clothes. She wants to tear him down past his skin, to uncover the hidden something she's seeking, and she closes her eyes before plunging her nails into the gray orbs, clawing to find what she is looking for inside of him that isn't him at all.

She panics when she realizes her nails have missed their mark. Dr. Silka has vanished. Her husband is in front of her. He looks confused, dazed by the fingers that have left him bloody. He opens his mouth to speak, but his lips twist like a toothless man's, and the gurgling noise that comes from his throat, the tongue impotently flapping, makes it seem as if he's the one drowning in the world her mind's created. He's the one who's lost his breath.

She wakes up crying, reaching for the empty place from which her husband has already risen to make his way to work. She pulls Pete's robe off a chair and stumbles to the bathroom. Her eyes are so sunken she is afraid they will flip inward, spin around like glass beads on a string. She looks down at her feet, her toenails ten red drops of blood on the tiled floor, and it crosses her mind that the robe she has donned is like another skin that can be discarded in a puddle on the linoleum.

But she pulls the belt tighter around her waist when she catches her own reflection: those eyes that look like rocks hurling judgment in her direction. She knows currents of thought are not riptides of action. She pushes a snake of wet hair off her cheek as emotion hardens like a pearl inside her. She will not be engulfed in the storms of reckless abandon, naked desire. It is too cold an ocean, too great a Waste Land: her own siren song. 🌀



**BARBARA DONNELLY LANE** is a writer from Georgia who has had her work appear in publications in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. She could be happy lost on an island with only a suitcase of books, a good dog, and a barrel of wine. Maybe a pencil. Learn more about her at [BarbaraDonnellyLane.com](http://BarbaraDonnellyLane.com)





# Check Out

## Mike Koenig

“Oh, excuse me. No, you were first. Seriously, you were first.”

Nathan Hendricks was a polite man. He believed you should split a dinner bill evenly, regardless of who ordered what; that please and thank you were mandatory accessories in conversation; and that if you arrived first, whether it be to a grocery store line, the ATM of a bank, or the pay counter at a small diner, you should be served first. He also believed it was rude to make someone else wait unnecessarily. So even if the Asian gentleman had not arrived at the counter first, though Nathan was sure he had, Nathan might have offered the other man his spot in line anyway, for on this day Nathan was in need of directions to Route 70 and wanted to be able to ask the cashier follow-up questions if her first directions were not clear.

“Please, sir,” Nathan said again, “I believe you were here before me.”

The Asian man, whose age was difficult to gauge given

his gray mustache had the wispy look of a thirteen year old boy’s first attempt to grow facial hair, nodded and then motioned for Nathan to go first. This nod was accompanied by a smile that showed pleasant, perfectly white teeth and gave off an easy, nonthreatening aura that somehow irritated Nathan.

I’m doing him a favor, Nathan thought. Why won’t he just go first? He doesn’t want to listen to me get directions. Surely he has somewhere to go?

So again Nathan asked the man to go first, and again the man motioned for Nathan to go first. The cashier, a young woman of perhaps twenty-five, with brown curly hair and a pleasant if also lumpy body, began to laugh at the two men. The overkill of politeness, now entering its second minute, seemed ridiculous. “Can I help someone?” she said. Both men gestured to the other without taking a step forward or even looking in the cashier’s direction.

In this silence a third man approached the counter and was waved to the front of the line by the cashier. He handed

her the bill and then a credit card and the cashier swiped the card and printed a receipt for the man to sign. "What's with them?" the third man asked, as Nathan and the Asian man continued to stare at each other. "I don't know," said the cashier. "But it's getting weird."

Nathan realized he was being silly, and offered a compromise of sorts. He turned back to the diner and walked to the bathroom. He didn't particularly have to use the facilities but he thought if he was out of sight the Asian man could pay his bill with dignity and Nathan could return to get the directions he required unburdened by the feeling of rudeness that accompanies making another person wait. So Nathan stood at the urinal and relieved himself of the orange juice he had with breakfast. He took his time washing his hands, making sure to get between each finger and underneath each nail. It was a precision he rarely used and did so only today to ensure the other man had time to pay and leave.

In total Nathan was gone for about twelve minutes. But when he returned to the cashier, he found that the Asian man had not moved. So Nathan stood behind the man.

"I can help you, sir," the cashier said, causing the Asian man to take notice of Nathan.

Nathan nodded to the Asian man, who nodded back to him.

"I believe that man is waiting for someone," the cashier said to Nathan.

"Has he paid his bill?"

"No," the cashier said.

"Then I will wait too."

"I'm sure he won't mind me helping you first."

"No," Nathan said. "We are nothing without rules."

So the Asian man turned to the cashier without making a move forward and Nathan stood behind him, silently cursing him for not leaving when Nathan had used the bathroom.

Some more customers came to pay their bill and the cashier continued to bring them to the front of the two person line. Some of these customers had actually been seated after Nathan had first come to pay his bill, and they asked the cashier why there were two men just standing by the counter. Is this some sort of contest or prank? Some type of modern living art? "I don't know," the cashier answered.

"But they've been like that for hours."

The manager came up to the men and asked them both to leave.

"Of course," said Nathan, who had waited so long to pay his check that he had missed his appointment and therefore no longer needed directions. "After you, sir," he said to the Asian man. And again, he was met by a hand gesture for Nathan to move first.

"I suppose you'll have to call the police," Nathan said.

"Police," repeated the manager.

"I don't want the police in my store. I just want you two out. I don't even care about your bills. You're just acting all weird and bothering my customers."

"I understand," said Nathan, "but I don't think he's going to move."

Nathan was still sure he was the reasonable one. He had come to the counter a second later than the Asian man and had gone to the bathroom to let him save face. Currently he was in the second position in line and saw no reason why the Asian man wouldn't pay his bill and leave.

"I don't like this," said the manager. "I want you out. You hear me, out."

Neither man moved. They continued to watch customers come and go without moving or wavering. Every so often one man would motion for the other to go forward but neither would take the bait. So the cashier finished her shift and then came back the next day. And still neither man would leave, or move, or do anything without the other doing it first. They became attractions for the small diner. Old men came to laugh at the stoic statues and college students would take pictures with them as if they were cardboard cutouts. Nathan knew, as the Asian man must have also known, that they were being fools. But he also knew the man to move first, to cave in, was the bigger fool. So he continued to wait, knowing, with all his heart, he was in the right. 🕒



**MIKE KOENIG** received his MFA in Creative Writing & Publishing Arts from the University of Baltimore. He currently lives in Columbia, Maryland and works for Discovery Communications. His fiction can be seen in *Phoebe*, *Quiddity*, *Clover*, and *The Tulane Review*.





## To Know One

Doug Scanlon

**T**he man limps along the lonely street wearing his teal track suit with the white stripes going down the sides. His hair is thinning on top. Hasn't shaved in days. Underneath his unzipped shirt is a v-neck tee that was too small twenty pounds ago. He stares at the abandoned courts on Riverside Park.

Kids don't play here anymore.

He continues on until he reaches a fierce river. Trampled paths and natural alcoves; all quiet, all clear. The kids don't even smoke pot here anymore.

A police car drives by. Twenty years ago, the man would have felt a twinge of panic. Now he was just another faceless denizen no one paid any attention to.

I wish I wasn't wearing this stupid tracksuit. Am I too old to try crystal meth?

The cop car stops and backs up. The twinge revives.

I didn't say that out loud, did I?

The cop rolls down the passenger window and asks if he knows what time the town hall meeting about the

construction of the new school begins. The man doesn't know. The man looks like someone with kids. All the people he used to call friends have kids and he looks like those people. All the man has are books. He can't claim books on his taxes.

The cop car drives off and splashes through a puddle of mud. A sharp breeze off the river hits the man's ears and he feels cold for the first time today. It's only spring a few hours per day this time of year. It has to be rationed.

He looks at the path ahead of him. It didn't used to look this way. It wasn't much prettier before—multiple-family houses with chain-linked fences lining small lots with aggressive dogs—but it was something. This was nothing. The street went on for two more houses and faded to white. Reality, reality, whiteness. Everything just stopped being something and turned into negation.

I don't know how to do this.

The man's forehead anchored his body, keeping it from

floating away. Slowly, his body sinks back into the bed, the room comes into focus, and the heaviness of his head turns into searing pain. He first becomes aware of the sweat on his head and neck, then the sweat on his pillowcase.

An elderly voice:

–Margarita, get him a wet wash cloth.

The man groans.

–They took your billfold.

–What’s a billfold?

Margarita appears with the washcloth.

–Cartera ... wallet.

–I don’t carry a wallet.

–I’ll never understand kids.

–Where’s my phone?

–Your what?

–The kids, they musta taken it. Mildred sees them hit you with a baseball bat, then I bring you inside.

The man sighs.

–I’ll never understand kids.

Margarita laughs.

The man sits down in the auditorium of the town hall. The floor tiling is slippery and the room smells like dust. He’s still wearing his blue tracksuit, the collar damp with sweat and blood. The gauze Margarita wrapped around his head comes down over his left eye, which was still red due to a popped blood vessel from excessive vomiting at his cousin’s wedding. He tried to explain to Margarita that the redness was not from the kids hitting him. She didn’t seem to understand.

On the stage are three men in dark blue suits, an easel with a 3D rendering, and a table. With his one available eye, the man counts thirteen other people in the auditorium’s seats, including the cop who spoke to him earlier.

The man is the only one in a tracksuit. He is the only one with gauze wrapped around his head. He is the only one without children.

The man walks toward the Newbury Middle School and stares at the playground. He got into his first fight in this playground. He sees some kids playing football and some kids on swings, but most of them are sitting on the picnic benches. Girls used to jump rope here. The man walks up to one of the tables where seven girls are sitting, looking at their phones and laughing.

–Hey.

The girls stop talking and stare at him. They are unafraid and uninterested.

–Why aren’t you playing jump rope?

–Why do you have a towel wrapped around your head?

–It’s gauze. Margarita put it there.

Three short blasts from a whistle, the flock of children

herded back inside the school. The man hears a siren and notices lights. How long have the lights been behind me? The man turns around and sees the cop walking toward him.

–Why do I keep seeing you everywhere?

The man shrugs.

–Is your ear bleeding?

The cop slides open the jail door.

–You’re free to go and damn lucky your brother recognized you. Always carry ID. Just promise me next time you’ll check in with the school before approaching any students. And change your clothes, man. You’ve got blood caked on your collar. Okay?

–Okay.

–Always, always, always carry ID.

–The kids took my billfold.

–Your what?

–Nothing.

The man returns to the river. Today it is calm. He climbs on top of the abandoned mill where his grandfather and great uncles used to work. Kids don’t work here anymore. No one does. Except overseas. Somewhere in another country a kid is doing the same work his grandfather used to do in this mill. Do they play pickup ball and jump rope and fist fight in the playgrounds there? Or do they hit strangers over the head with bats?

While standing on top of the mill, he stares straight down into the river’s surface more than sixty feet below. On clear days like today you can see bass, perch, pumpkinseed. Even from up here. Kids don’t fish anymore.

He moves his feet closer to the edge and stretches his arms out like a suspended scarecrow. He closes his eyes, tilts his head back and tries to taste the air. He wishes he could melt into the sky. The river stares up at the mill and observes the tempo keeper rocking back and forth on the roof’s edge.

The man hears a whistle not unlike the playground whistle. He rests back on his heels and opens his eyes, startled by the deluge of light and shapes all around him but then accepted back into it once again. Turning around, his eyes dart from the roof of the mill to the small gorge that separates the decrepit building from the parking lot, to the parking lot itself. There, in her pink scrubs, shiny pulled-back hair, and frail crossed arms Margarita stared at him and smiled.

The man stared back.

She looks happy. She probably has kids.

–I don’t.

–Neither do I. I wouldn’t understand them anyway.

–You would if you had one.

The man smiled. ☺



**DOUG SCANLON** lives in western Massachusetts. He received his bachelor’s degree in journalism/mass communications from St. Bonaventure University. He is the assistant director of marketing at Elms College where he edits the alumni magazine. This is his first published work. You can crawl around his mind at [DouglasScanlon.blogspot.com](http://DouglasScanlon.blogspot.com)



# He Later Searched Her Body for Clues

D.S. West

"My husband kept having this dream. That he was riding the desert on a motorcycle." The Betty pulled off her elbow-length gloves by the middle finger. The material grew in length. Lines assembled to detail, detail that said, This material is taut. The cowboy of noir listened with interest.

"These dreams of his all ended the same way," she said. "A cliff, then a bloody finish. Seven days after the last dream, we received a call from a main claiming he represented a bank that doesn't exist. Seven days after the strange telephone call, my husband drops dead of AIDS-related illness. Does that sound like a coincidence to you, Mr. Eastman?"

Disgraced former detective Lyle Eastman leaned back in his chair, feet propped on the desk. "Anything significant that happens is technically a coincidence. If that's the case, there's no point in calling anything a coincidence."

"Is my being here a coincidence?" The dame's Kindergarten, dinosaur-red lipstick hadn't left any tracks on her teeth. But her teeth were remarkably white, and the

disgraced man Eastman was cynical. Stains were inevitable. "Nothing coincidental about two characters meeting for the first time," he said. "How else do we get the plot moving?"

"What is plot?"

"Plot? That's the God agenda."

The Betty rolled her eyes. The eye closest to the floor, concealed in unnatural sound studio shadow, submerged the movement in a soft blur. "So you believe in God?" she asked. The nested black circles surrounded on all sides by her gray irises let him know where she was at, visually speaking. She had moved to the upper-right position, as if examining his ceiling for cracks. He liked it better when she looked directly at him, but he also liked it when she pretended he didn't exist. All the talk about dreams—maybe he didn't.

"No," Eastman said. He struck a match on the tabletop. The flame helped him feed an addiction. "I'm what old-timers used to call a gumshoe, before the language and culture moved on," he said. "My job is to murder God. I'm



on a fool's errand. I climb the stairs, open the double doors at the top of the tower, but there's no mad king in there. No final boss for me to kill."

"You're a charmer, Mr. Eastman. Women love a man who can't win."

"That hasn't been my experience."

"Yes it has. But they come to their senses, don't they? They have to. You'll never let yourself win."

The dick looked her over. The svelte customer had married a statues-of-Jesus tycoon for money and security, but her body had been dreamed up with other purposes in mind. She wore fur and lace. A cute little hat too. Heels that, when you heard them, followed a "Why rush?" rhythm that made men think in imbibition Technicolor.

When she asked if he could track down her husband's secret murderer, she may as well have been licking chocolate off her fingers. She asked, "Can you help me or not, detective?" To which Eastman replied, "Doubt it. But don't care. I'm stuck on your lips. I'll do everything I can to locate, outsmart, and kill if I have to the mastermind behind your husband's sexually transmitted illness."

The exchange and poly-amorous metaphor occurred after a previous exchange, which began with Eastman, a man who reaffirmed his eternal damnation each time he propped his feet on the desk and lit a cigarette. In the deleted scene, the cursed detective said: "The truth is, there's a deep-down part of me that demands to be loved. Wish like hell it wasn't the case, but I can't quell it. I'm like a wind-up toy." Meanwhile the femme fatale, crunching film grain between her teeth, addressed the gravity of their situation: "There's a prehistoric ape in God's eyeball, and someone has to save it. But, pre-history, none of the apes know how to swim."

Then came the part we've already seen. The classy seductive customer asked, "Can you help me or not?" and Eastman told her, Yes, because the point of my existence is to have you and lose you again forever. Then, he ventured someplace we haven't been yet: "I'll start by interviewing the career bureaucrats he worked with," he said. "See if anyone had anything to gain, or lose, from your husband's allegedly elaborate murder."

"Very good, detective. Thank you for your time. I trust you'll call me if there are any developments?" Behind her

lace veil, she refused to blink. The shadow over her eye had disappeared, and her features were fuzzier than before. A glamor shot for the stills.

As she took leave of his untidy bedroom and office, Eastman, no longer a real detective, said to the sweet spot between her slender slender shoulder blades: "Something's still bothering me." She turned around. The camera, the eyes made it sexy. "When you told me about your husband's dreams," Eastman asked, "why didn't you call them nightmares?"

"Because they weren't nightmares. Until he saw the line that meant the road was ending, he was on top of the world. He hated that it had to end so abruptly."

"Every time?"

"Where he started changed, and the motorcycles changed, but yes. The end never came when he was ready. You're off to a great start."

Turned out the mistress did it. Lyle Eastman kissed the mistress and the wife, both in front of windows looking out on romantic vistas. Slate mountains and pale paper moons.

He destroyed the mistress by luring her into direct sunlight. With the missus, it was as simple as switching their glasses before they toasted, after they made love on her husband's unmade bed.

Lyle sat on the edge of the unmade bed after, looking grizzled and resilient, as had always been his intention. Filter-less gave him coughing fits, but he was adamant.

"If I ever do find that joker in the Tower, I got news for him. No one calls the shots for Lyle Eastman. No ma'am." 🕒



**D.S. WEST** is a writer, artist, and absent-minded pedestrian from Boulder, CO. His fiction has appeared in *Crack the Spine*, *Beyond Imagination*, and *I Don't Belong Here!*, an e-book of mediocre stories he self-e-published because he was bored, and it was easy. West's poetry has appeared in *Lunar Poetry*, *Gravel*, and *Gambling the Aisle*.



# The Argo and the Sirens of Lake Texoma

## G. Wise

**I**n June of 1955, on a humid Thursday, Brad Eastwood walked over to Elmer Apple's table at The Sportsman Cafe in Madill, Oklahoma, his hard hat in his hand.

"Mr. Apple?"

"Elmer. Mr. Apple's six foot under and good for him."

"Elmer." He introduced himself. "Me and my friend got shitcanned over at Worthington for not putting up with the foreman anymore, and..."

"What form did this not putting up with him take?"

"Form. Oh. I knocked him asshole over teakettle off the bank and into Lake Texoma. Shallow enough where he landed but he was wet. Angry."

"Why did you do that?"

"He come at me after he called my friend George a nigger and I told him to shut up or put up."

Apple wiped his mouth with a napkin and turned in his chair to face Eastwood. His expression was earnest and he gave Eastwood his full attention.

"Why did he call your friend a nigger?"

"Well," Brad smiled slightly, "he told George to hurry up and George says I only got two speeds and if you don't like this one, I know you ain't gonna like the other one."

Apple laughed. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you had any spots open on your core drilling rig."

"For George of the two speeds, and you of the ready fists."

"Right."

"I'll try you both out. Be at the bank at 7:30. I'll pick you up in the Lone Star then."

•

Elmer Apple ran Tulsa Testers, a core drilling outfit, and technically, he worked for Worthington Construction, so Brad and George would, technically, be working for their previous employer.

The barge was fifty by forty with two rigs on it, each with Mission mud pumps, and they drilled into the basin

of Lake Texoma from the barge, bringing up cylindrical sample after sample from various depths in the rock. The lake was about 100 ft. deep in the middle. On the sides of the barge was stenciled, white paint mingling with the rust, ARGO. It was named for the ship that Jason sailed after the golden fleece in Greek mythology, Elmer told them, as he often drilled for black gold when not in testing mode. Elmer called those who worked on his barge, Argonauts. "When people ask what it means, you can tell them that, or the more common answer," he laughed.

The barge was moved every week, and secured by thick cables at all corners to concrete "dead men." The lake itself was a mile across where the bridge was being built from the Oklahoma side to Texas, and the core testing would last several months before they moved on. Maybe Brad and George would do well enough to move with Tulsa Testers. Elmer told them he'd make roughnecks of them if they were willing workers, that it was just like the oil patch, the testing work, and though it was a hard dollar it was a glorious dollar.

The next morning they were ready, with their thermoses and lunchboxes. Elmer waved from the ARGO far out in the lake, and they could see him starting the outboard on the little aluminum boat tied to the side of the barge, the sun flashing on his driller's hard hat. The hat looked old fashioned compared to the short-billed hard hats George and Brad wore, like a WWI helmet, only aluminum. Brad thought maybe they'd get to wear driller's hats if they did well enough, proved themselves.

•  
They carried pipe from a neat pile and threaded sections in place, one after another, chain-wrench tightened it, then another. This went on until noon, at which time they broke for lunch under the shade of a canvas sheet on a box frame, open at the sides to the breeze. The barge was constantly moving it seemed at first, but now they were used to it, their centers having picked up the nuances of the lake's various moods.

"George," said Elmer.

George looked up from his thick ham and egg on white, smiled.

"Your speed is fine."

George and Brad laughed. Elmer made a fist at Brad, and they laughed again.

•  
After lunch, they downed cups of water at the Igloo and Elmer pointed out the container of salt tablets. Elmer went to measure diesel fuel. Brad noticed the men on the Texas side moving toward the reinforcing steel they were tying, and used Elmer's binoculars for a closer look. Curry was standing off from the men eying the barge, fists on his hips, legs spread.

"C'mere," he said to George. He pointed out Curry, then started doing a tap dance, with his hand in a salute at his forehead. George joined him. Curry could see their crazy silhouettes dancing. He turned and strode off.

Elmer said, "Boys, I think there's a no-shit storm brewing over west." They looked. A dirty grey curtain of clouds and rain was forming an anvil about a mile away. They rushed to chain down the loose pipe, tie down whatever would roll or be lost from the barge in rough water. By the time they finished, it was too late to get to shore in the Lone Star, the

waves swamping it.

"Sorry boys, we can only tie ourselves to the rigs, now. Hope for the best," Elmer yelled above the rain. He helped Brad tie George, then he tied Brad next to him, leaving their arms free so they could get loose when the time came. Then Elmer slipped and slid to the other rig. The barge was shifting and yawing up and down with the waves; the temperature had dropped at least twenty degrees, maybe thirty.

A mountainous presence lurched and groaned toward them with a roar like a freight train only louder. "Tornado," yelled Brad, but George couldn't hear him. They were tied at ninety-degree corners on the derrick facing away from one another and the wind snapped their shirts, stinging their faces with the collars.

Brad's hard hat blew off, clanged against the derrick and skittered like a live thing up and off into the dark chaos. The wind and rain hurt now, whipped and manhandled him like a mad drunken daddy. The floor of the barge took an impossible angle to the water, then slammed back down, and the waves leaped over their heads. He couldn't see Elmer, some twenty feet away, then an instant of relative clarity, lightning maybe, showed a long two-by-four hit the rig to which Elmer was lashed, about ten feet up, spin around it, and it was gone. It had to have come all the way from the Texas bank.

Brad felt the plate steel beneath his feet shudder and pound like something alive was under the barge and clawing to come up through it. When the hail started it was almost orchestral, kettle drums, snares, poppity-pop and boom and click against the deck, depending on the size of the pellets hitting the resounding steel plate.

He cocked his head as the keening sound began. His first thought was the cables: they were stretched to breaking in the slate-grey frothing violence. And they did make a zinging sound when they yanked against the dead men deep on the lake floor. But this was different. It sounded like the middle notes of a pack of coyotes howling, but sweeter, less throaty yet more powerful. He recognized it as singing. It sounded like a hundred Patsy Clines and The Chordettes and The McGuire Sisters all at once, yet it was like nothing he'd heard in his twenty-two years of lifetime. It promised him calm, safety, loving arms, a continual crescendo of sexual reward and more, if only he'd free himself from earthly ropes and bonds and slip out of the tempest's roar and churn, slide down into the tranquility of the voices' lair, just beneath the turbulent waves of Lake Texoma. Down there, the voices told him, they'd take over. Leave your hard life behind, they sang, we'll take you down the Red River in freshets to the sea where life began and where you'll begin. Down the Atchafalaya to the gulf, the warm gulf waters, where we'll play and love and sing with whales. He believed it. He had a dim knowledge of the Red River, but had not known it connected with the Atchafalaya, and emptied into the gulf.

At that point a hail ball the size of a cantaloupe hit the derrick and his head, the steel taking most of the impact, yet he was knocked unconscious, head down on his chest, shirt torn away from his bleeding shoulders by the razor wind. The racket intensified, the flotsam blowing through contained parts of the Worthington tugboat in which Curry



and his crew had tried to reach the Oklahoma side, and almost had, until the boat was lifted into the air, twin diesels screaming with the sudden freedom from water resistance, the screws flashing.

A dead chicken flew through at eye level. A Zippo lighter slid across the steel deck, spun and stopped at the chained pipe pile where it chattered and jumped like a big chrome bug. Branches and vines carried from Texas whirled up into the howling gritty vortex, but the Zippo stayed, dancing in place.

George remained conscious during all this and the voices that beckoned to him sounded like Mahalia Jackson, The Shirelles and The Supremes among others, but not exactly if he had to describe the sound. Maybe a choir. But not right. Much more suggestive, although the choir singing he'd heard had made his mind wander under the robes. They, the voices, wanted him to be unhindered, even reckless, fear no man no thing no fiery crosses, and follow into the lake, the depths, the kingdom come and the slick bodies and the moaning pleasures thereof. Temptation. Release. An underworld of smoky saxophone, lubricious grinding, slowly tangled limbs and no burnt aftertaste of shame, only wonders upon wonders, each better than the last, could it be?

George couldn't swim, was afraid of water yet he struggled with the wet knots and cursed the ropes that bound him to the derrick, cursed those who'd tied the knots. He wanted his forevers to be with the voices. They wanted him as much as he wanted them, damn Elmer and Brad tying him like this. The knots were water-soaked, swollen tight. The voices, the forever, was leaving him to suffer on earth. He stamped his feet in frustration and yearning, the thick soled workboots thumping the plate steel beneath him.

Brad heard the stamping and cursing from a groggy distance although George was quite near him. He meandered in and out of consciousness, licking blood that came to his lips from his forehead. He wiped his face with his wet hands, looked at the blood on them, thought head wounds bled a lot, but he seemed to be okay otherwise. He was only then aware that the swirling dirty mass of water and sand and clanging things had left them and was chasing itself east on the lake with waterspouts and evil bursts of greenish light, its wall a revolving terror of rain, brush and writhing shapes.

He looked over his right shoulder to the water near the barge. It wasn't calm, still white and choppy, but nothing like it had been. The barge was yawing on its cables, but all four had held. A dim memory, like a half evaporated dream, voices, promising. What was that? He attributed it to the knock on the head. His shirt had been torn off in the melee, strips of the denim remained under the ropes. He rested his head back on the derrick and let the swaying motion of the barge take over, not fighting for equilibrium, letting the ropes hold him.

The sun poked shafts through the clouds and rippling pools on the deck of the barge reflected into Brad's eyes; the Zippo winked at him from the chained stack of pipe.

Elmer's voice came from nearby, "The devil's beating his wife, boys. And we are three lucky sumbitches." He cut through George's ropes with a small pocketknife.

"Why wasn't you here earlier?" said George. Elmer said, as he freed him, "And if thou shalt implore and bid thy comrades to loose thee, then let them bind thee with yet more bonds." Then he started on Brad's ropes. "Man you got socked pretty good by something, How do you feel?"

"I feel okay," said Brad. "Maybe kind of like I'm gonna puke though."

"I tied myself facing into the storm like a fool. Got hit in the chest by a bird going about ninety, felt like a concrete football. We'll get us back to the Oklahoma side if that Lone Star is still there. You'll have to row, though. I think my ribs are cracked."

George stood at the edge of the barge looking into the choppy water with a vacant stare. Then he helped Brad tug on the chain to the sunken Lone Star. They managed to get a winch cable to one of the oarlocks, pull it slowly to the deck, turn it keel up.

"I had a dream," said George. "Voices like a beautiful choir, like more than that, promising things..." His voice trailed off and he made gestures to show how fruitless it was to try to explain.

"I think I might have, too," said Brad. He looked into the water.

"It's the water sireens," said Elmer. "Help me get this motor off."

George poured water from a tray of box end wrenches from the chainlink cage and began to loosen bolts, saying to Elmer, "You sit down. Broke ribs can stick your lung. We'll get this."

"The water sireens?" said Brad.

"The death angels. When you're on bodies of water long enough, big ones, you'll hear 'em during certain kinds of storms," said Elmer. "I don't want to say too much because they're listening. They're still here, I can feel them. But a wall of water half from the sky and half from the lake or ocean or wherever summons them up. They sing through your head is the best I can explain it. They use what you know and think about and dream up, and promise it to you in spades."

"So they're in your head," said George.

"I didn't say that. They use what's in your head. It's irresistible, what we fantasize. All the voices do is pry it loose. Amplify it. Feed it back to you."

"They're real?" asked Brad.

"I didn't say that either. It's a phenomenon. It's...evil concentrated, whirled, whipped up." He shook his head. "Hard to explain."

"Jesus!" said George, and he backed away from the Lone Star, eyes wide.

Brad looked, and the hair on his neck rose. It was a body, bumping along the side of the barge with what looked like a Ku Klux Klan hood on his head. But the hood was just a trick of vision; it was a shirt pulled up over his head with holes in it. He was face down in the water, arms spread out Christlike, the shirt floating to a wavering hood-looking point above the shoulders.

When they'd wrestled the sodden body onto the deck, they turned it over on the now steaming steel plate.

"It's Curry," said Brad. George said nothing, his face impassive, head down, eyes hidden in shadow.

"One speed, now," said Brad, "Sorry, didn't mean to

“speak ill of the dead.” And he began laughing, trying not to. George looked at him, thought of their little dance before the storm, and he began laughing too. Elmer watched them, quizzically. Their hysteria wore down and the laughter sputtered.

“There might be more out there, boys,” said Elmer. “I know you’re not laughing because it’s funny...”

“No sir,” said George. “Nothing funny about any of this. I just can’t help it.”

“I know. We’ll all be fine in time. We’ve been through quite a lot.”

The Army Corps of Engineers sent a boat out to the barge to pick them up. Another boat was sent for Curry’s

body. Brad had picked up the Zippo lighter and stuck it in his jeans pocket. On the way back to the Oklahoma side, he remembered it, took it out to look at it. The Army Corps guy was a speed demon, the small boat jarring Brad’s teeth as it hit each choppy little wave, making it hard to see the inscription on the lighter.

It was inscribed UKA, which he knew to be United Klans of America. It was probably Curry’s. In any case, it was bad luck, evil, like the storm that blew it to them. He let the hand holding it trail in the water, released it, turned to watch its silvery shape descend. One thing sure, thought Brad, he would never get caught in a storm on water again if he could help it. ☹

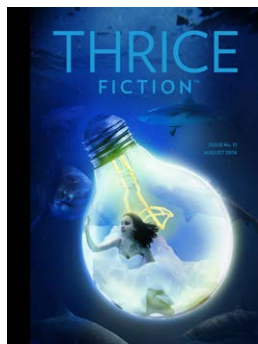
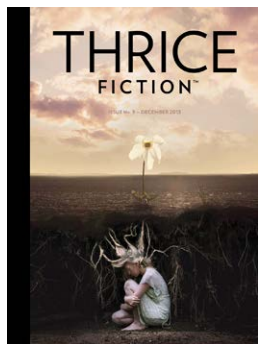
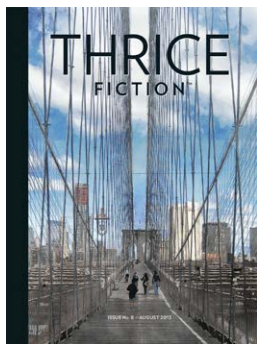
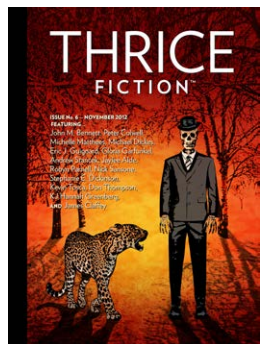
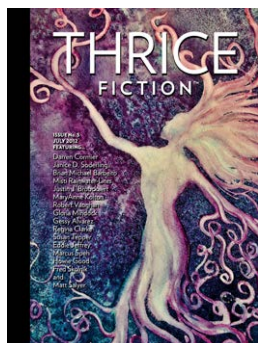
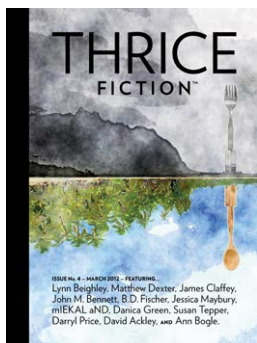
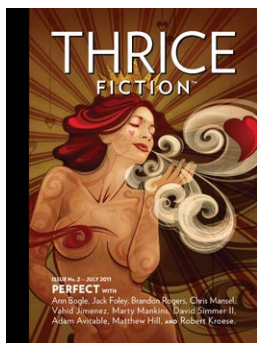


**G. WISE** words have been allowed into numerous literary reviews including *Crime Factory Review*, *Opium*, *Atticus Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Dark Matter*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Santa Fe Writers Project*, and *Best New Writers Anthology 2015*. His novel, *Ruined Days*, is under publishing contract as of Sept. 2014. He is the winner of the H. Palmer Hall Award for his short story collection, *Night Train, Cold Beer* (Pecan Grove Press). He lives on a farm in SE Kansas with his wife and a bunch of animals. Tweet him @noirbut. Some of his work is at [WiseSculpture.com](http://WiseSculpture.com) FB Author’s page is at [Facebook.com/RenoPeteStCyr](https://www.facebook.com/RenoPeteStCyr). A much shorter and different version of *Argo* and *the Sirens* appeared as a flash fiction piece in *Flyover Country* as *The Sirens of Lake Texoma*.

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# Lambda Lupi

L. Noelle McLaughlin

**F**or Christmas her son gave her a voodoo doll, black body with white stitches, buttons for eyes, and a fistful of pins, the kind one would use for mending an overcoat. On opening the package something lit up, and she saw into a corner of her child that he had held so well hidden until then. She looked into his deep brown eyes, always so steady, always so serious. His long lashes barely blinked.

Those eyes remembered everything, the old apartment with the greasy plastic on the windows, an attempt at cheap insulation. The pit next door that barked incessantly, until the night the temperature reached a record low and then it stopped. The orange macaroni and cheese that stuck to the pots in the sink like a cold paste. The locked door whenever his mother's boyfriend had to have a little talk with her. The gerbils in their dirty cage that kept eating their kids. They would eat them and then they would fuck and then they would do it all over again. They did it all the time. They gradually required less and less food. Their fucking was lazy: brief and calorically deprived. The boy would stare into the cage sadly and look into the gerbils' soft eyes. He knew it was really the cage that ate the babies.

That winter he had found a small mouse frozen into the front lawn full of garbage. The frogs that he watched for hours play in the puddle underneath the hose knew better than to stay awake once the summer went away. They

burrowed deep into the mud months before and dreamed their days away until the birds came back to the place they had been born.

She held the voodoo doll to her small chest tentatively, then picked up the pins and slid them into her pants pocket. The television's volume was turned up in the next room, the commentator explaining how wolves can learn to open a lock, if they watch their handlers and how they do it. Her boyfriend Fred came in and yelled arbitrarily, was she gonna get some groceries or what?

She reached for the sheep wool coat that used to be her Grandmother's, slowly. The buttons had all dropped off at some point, and been sewn back on with the wrong color thread. The coat was heavy, but she thought of the summer sky, how time flies by.

"Yes," she said, arm hairs prickling as she slipped them into the musty coat.

She watched him undo the latches on the doors. 🌀



**L. NOELLE McLAUGHLIN** works for a museum in New Paltz, New York, whose burial grounds she's been bumming around for quite some time. She listens to wind and other outside agencies, and ghostwrites stories at their convenience. She talks to herself at [PoorHumanBeans.wordpress.com](http://PoorHumanBeans.wordpress.com)





# With Kindness

Natalia Andrievskikh

**T**he social worker had to barricade the old man again inside the bathroom with a chair. He didn't let her help him zip up and attempted to pull her by the ear, asking why she had taken his money. These lunatics always hid cash somewhere in their cabinets or under pillows and forgot all about it, this one wasn't the first; she had grown used to accusations. But today was different, today she felt like she finally had to take the hint and do it for real. Her phone had got stolen on a bus, and the windows in her apartment needed replacement. So she opened the bookcase and rummaged through dusty mismatched volumes of romantic poetry, books on gardening, black and white photos plastered to cardboard rectangles; then lifted the mattress, holding her breath as a useful professional habit. The old man quacked about calling police and started bumping against the door with the wheels of his chair. She put in earphones and turned on Wagner.

The money was stuck inside a pair of black socks in the left-hand upper drawer of the dresser, next to a little notebook of hand-written poems. The first one was about the old man as a young man, hiding in a birch tree in a khaki uniform, watching the fascists set his village on fire, smoke biting at his eyes. The next was full of numbers: him as an old man counting days since he had a bath, counting how many turns of the wheel it takes to get from his bed to the window, counting water drops leaking from the kitchen tap at night. She did not read further. Wagner was raving in the bathroom as she put things back in their places, remembering everything she had read about the benefits of murdering out of love. 📖



# Unfortunate Affairs

Natalia Andrievskikh

## I.

He was killed in his apartment while eating lettuce because he never developed a habit of checking the lock, and who would even check their lock as early as 11a.m. The neighbor's dog felt something, pulled through the open door, and sniffed at the remnants of lettuce on his chin. They had to bait the dog out of there with a pig ear.

Nothing in the apartment hinted at his past occupation as a god, even the Greek souvenir plastic temples, because they were made by underpaid children in China. The secret inscriptions he had been making on the wallpaper above his bed were also left unnoticed, and then the next owner had the walls painted over with hushed green that ironically reminded of lettuce.

## II.

The girl serving latte at the coffee shop across the street was sad that the old man stopped coming and staring at her, scribbling little strokes from time to time in his pocket notebook. She thought he was an artist trying to get the color of her eyes just right. Instead, he was making grocery lists.

If he ever stopped by again, she thought, she'd treat him to a cup of coffee. Maybe he would even let her take a look at his sketch. He might need crayons there, she thought, he must be desperate by now, and who wouldn't be, with her eyes always changing color with the weather. ☺



**NATALIA ANDRIEVSKIKH** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at Binghamton University. She grew up in a little provincial town in Russia, whose surreal characters and situations often populate her writing. Natalia has taught Literature and Global Studies at Binghamton University, published poems and essays, and served as Managing Editor of the literary journal *The Broome Review*. She was Guest Editor for *Yellow Medicine Review* in Spring 2013. Natalia is currently working on a digital non-fiction storytelling project, *Afterlife of Discarded Objects*. The stories will be collected from multiple respondents through crowdsourcing. Please consider participating! [StoriesFromTheDump.weebly.com](http://StoriesFromTheDump.weebly.com)







# The Last Promenade of Yoon Choro

Hun Ohm

One unremarkable spring evening during the last year of the Japanese occupation, a pulsating creak from the halfwit healer's cart began to echo through the streets of P—. Ladle handles quickly settled against the cooking pots. The village elders stepped to the doorways with their hands folded behind their backs. As the creaking approached, however, eyes squinted. The village dogs paused their rooting, looked up and cocked their heads to the side.

"It's that rascal, Yoon Choro," cried the matchmaker's soju-swilling husband Kim Soochul. He guzzled down the clear liquor in his glass. "Look, the old mongrel is showing off his bone," he exclaimed. He twisted the lip of his glass against his groin. A wet ring soon formed.

At the announcement of the young manure seller's name, the villagers instinctively screwed their noses but stepped forward to have a better look. For those who had them, the hairs on their napes began to quiver. For those who did not,

saliva quickly dried at the back of their tongues. Fathers hid the eyes of their children with their palms. Grandmothers hid the eyes of their grown daughters. No one who saw could look away.

A gray, bloated corpse lay in the halfwit healer's rickety two-wheel cart. Coarse twine lashed the bulbous ankles and wrists together. Acute angles of jutting flesh recalled limbs snapping. Although long hair matted the corpse's visage, all knew the halfwit healer would not be coming by again. In her place, Yoon Choro dragged the cart along. The striations in his thick shoulders pulsed, his head lolled with exertion. He endeavored to keep his back erect, but his waist lunged forward with each step. He grimaced wildly but made no sound.

"Look, Yoon thinks he can make it touch the ground," boomed Kim Soochul, swaying to music only he could hear.

As always, the words were but half true. The going was slow for Yoon Choro, sure enough, for the same twine that bound the putrid corpse had been knotted tightly

around the middle of Yoon Choro's outsized family pride. From there, the twine continued without forgiveness until it reached a large white stone dangling at his shins. Yoon Choro's manhood stretched near the point of snapping, but somehow gravity and elasticity remained in accord. Nothing else adorned him.

Further down the street, sweat dripped from the forehead of Chae Hosuk, the village's top impersonator, as he squatted behind his small tidy home. Though blessed with a mouth that could swiftly mimic any sound, Chae Hosuk was plagued by more traditional constipation. "What's that awful noise?" he called to his wife. His lips curled open on the left side, and a perfect imitation of the creaking axle flowed from his lips. "Can't a man relieve himself in peace?"

"If only you could be so lucky," his wife called. She stared down the street. "I think it's Yoon Choro, not looking quite right." She paused as her eyes moved down to Yoon Choro's thighs. "Though then again from what I've heard and what I see, it's certainly him alright."

"What do you mean by that?" Chae Hosuk cried. "Looking for another rider, you ungrateful nag?" He stopped straining, and entered the house. "Maybe I'm the one who needs another ride," he said, veins still bulging with failure. He emphasized his point with a young filly's whinny.

"Father, such rough talk," admonished his blind daughter, Minsook, the only villager who felt no need to gawk outside.

"Stop talking about your insides," his wife scolded. "Yoon Choro's really in a bind."

Chae Hosuk gazed through the doorway, where Yoon Choro was just now beginning to pass. "On this earth," he said.

The stone swung like a pendulum as Yoon Choro struggled to step forward, thudding against his shins. The skin had already grown ochre with blood and bruise, tender as a calf's liver.

"Hosuk," his wife hissed. "Go ask him what he's done."

"Ask him," Chae Hosuk said weakly, and he already knew. He winced each time the white stone found bone.

Kim Soochul belched loudly. "Twenty more paces and he'll touch the ground. Now that will be a sound for Chae Hosuk to hear."

Chae Hosuk cursed the drunk silently. Just two nights before there had been a liquor-fueled debate at the soju cart regarding Yoon Choro's ability to balance an egg atop his tip, the fruits of a steady diet of the halfwit healer's most potent roots. The stakes were high, and Kim Soochul was in rare form, but Chae Hosuk stole the show with an imitation of a cracking eggshell, the halfwit healer's cackle, and each married wife's rumored moans. It was not until the laughter died that Chae Hosuk noticed a Japanese policeman had

stepped from the shadows, smiling with appreciation for Chae Hosuk's efforts.

The cart continued singing its strident notes, and one by one, the villagers had grown quiet. No one dared venture into the street to untie Yoon Choro. Doors slid shut, but nothing could keep the creaking out. Kim Soochul called to no one in particular to join him and, receiving no response, lay down on the floor of his house, hiccupped, and promptly fell asleep.

"Why would anyone," Chae Hosuk's wife muttered as she cradled Minsook's ears, and for once she was

grateful her daughter could not see.

A series of tremors pulsed through Chae Hosuk, and he knew. He half ran, half waddled to the back of his house. He squatted, and for the first time in weeks, his insides freely disengaged, drowning out all other sound to his horror and relief. Chae Hosuk groaned, and it was precisely at this moment that Yoon Choro's great gift gave out. The stone dropped to the earth, the sudden release of burden causing Yoon Choro's waist to straighten at long last, and his glistening eyes closed, his lips curled into the beginnings of a smile. He lifted his face toward the sky above, took one last step, and fell. ⑤



**HUN OHM** is a writer and intellectual property attorney. He lives in western Massachusetts. His fiction has appeared in *Necessary Fiction*, *Literary Orphans*, *The Citron Review*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Gone Lawn*, *Every Day Fiction*, and other publications



## Pretty Ugly

Howie Good

**N**eanderthal-obsessed scientists keep talking about secrets from the grave. I'm struck, not for the first time either, by their 1970s-style hair and clothes, like something from an illustrated catalog of vintage scientific instruments. It's conditioning. The process involves clinging to scarce fragments floating around and tying them together — a woman taking off her shirt, the Spanish Armada, an ugly mood, an eye. I got the idea from a song. Rooftop billboards, meanwhile, advertise the availability of prewar apartments, though I'm never sure "pre-" which war. I have a box full of photographs I have taken of clouds to prove it. ↻



**HOWIE GOOD**, a journalism professor at SUNY New Paltz, is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection *The Middle of Nowhere* (Olivia Eden Publishing). His latest chapbooks are *Echo's Bones* and *Danger Falling Debris* (Red Bird Chapbooks). He co-edits White Knuckle Press with Dale Wisely.



# THRICE FICTION MAGAZINE CO-FOUNDERS & 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](http://rwspryszak.com)



## 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 *Thrice Fiction Magazine* and blogs daily at [Blogography.com](http://Blogography.com)



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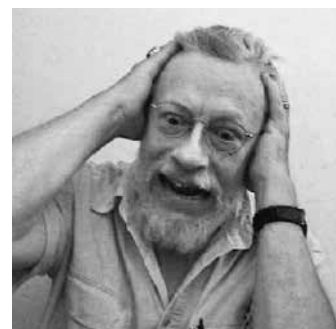
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## STORYTELLERS & POETS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

### JOHN M. BENNETT ... *Pages 16, 32...*

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



# ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



## ALLEN FORREST *Pages: Front Cover, 21...*

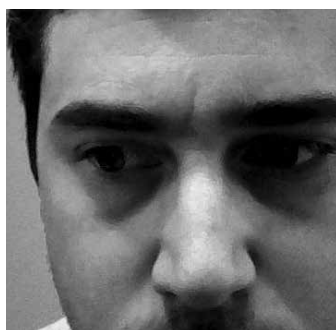
Born in Canada and bred in the U.S., Allen Forrest works in many mediums: oil painting, computer graphics, theater, digital music, film, and video. Allen studied acting at Columbia Pictures in Los Angeles, digital media in art and design at Bellevue College, receiving degrees in Web Multimedia Authoring and Digital Video Production. Forrest has created cover art and illustrations for literary publications: *New Plains Review*, *Pilgrimage Press*, *The MacGuffin*, *Blotterature*, and *Under the Gum Tree*. His paintings have been commissioned and are on display in the Bellevue College Foundation's permanent art collection.

Visit him online at [allen-forrest.fineartamerica.com](http://allen-forrest.fineartamerica.com)



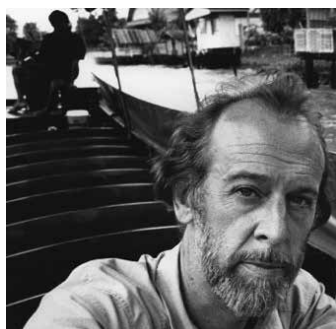
## KATELIN KINNEY *Pages: 8-13...*

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](http://katelinkinney.com)



## CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: 16-17, 33-34...*

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



## HARRY WILSON *Pages: Inside Front Cover, 2, Back Cover...*

is a retired professor of Art at Bakersfield College. His photographs have been exhibited and published widely, yet remain largely unknown. He likes to think that he is on the brink of a brilliant career, and that he has been there for 50 years.

Visit him online at [harrywilsonphoto.com](http://harrywilsonphoto.com)



## KYRA WILSON *Page: 29...*

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

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