

# THRICE

## FICTION™



ISSUE No. 14 • AUGUST 2015



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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 14 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

Here is the summer iteration of **Thrice Fiction** and if our issues had a theme this one would be “I have no bloody idea.”

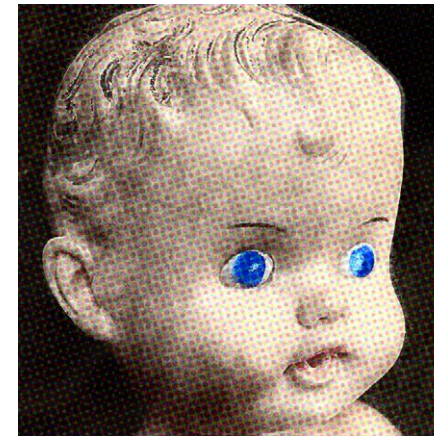
If you catch us on Facebook or other venues marveling at the longevity of this effort it’s only because Dave and I had no idea it would evolve into this. And now, as of August 1, I will be reviewing all the queries sent to us for our Thrice Publishing effort to create stand-alone titles of short novels for our library.

It made sense to move into that realm once we established a kind of modus operandi relative to the kind of material we liked and now, dear friends, it is coming to fruition. So what started as a publication we wanted to put together just for the blogging community we’d built up over the years has gone full bore small publishing house. I think it’s safe to say if we hadn’t gotten the level of response to the magazine we would have never thought of it. But, obviously, something we’re doing is working and what we’re putting out is needed. We seem to have just the right mix of crazies and traditionalists to make some noise. I’d be lying if I said that was the plan all along. There never was a plan. This thing has a gun to our heads.

This is also a good time to mention one Gloria Mindock, chief maven, editor and founder of Červená Barva Press, who has – all along – been willing to answer our stupid questions on exactly how you do this. Červená Barva publishes an absolute torrent of new and oft ignored poets and is a mainstay of the small press world. No one has given **Thrice** as much guidance and help as Gloria has. It may seem a small thing to her, but I’d say it was a godsend for us if I wasn’t such an atheist.

She doesn’t know I’m doing this, but please pay a visit to **cervenabarvapress.com** at your first chance.

So turn our pages, dear friend, and witness our usual mayhem...



## Edgar Sinatra

Eleanor Levine

Edgar Sinatra believed he was the son of Frank Sinatra, though it was rumored that a truck driver in his father’s plant was Edgar’s real father. Edgar was a rotund guy who looked like he stuffed himself with eggplant parm, but he was, in reality, a pizza man, who, though wealthy, would pick up pennies if he saw them.

He grew up in Westchester County, NY, an affluent area with digressions of trees and large homes, but always felt a kinship with the working class, who did not make their presence known, unless they were maids or butlers. Still, from an early age, Edgar would help the blue collar peeps in his father’s factory, or develop crushes on brusque UPS guys who occasionally delivered packages to his home. He did not, like his peers, exude a willingness to become a doctor or a subsidized physical therapist. No, Edgar, biological son of a truck driver, inspired and spiritual son of Frank Sinatra, aspired to be a singer with an apartment in Chelsea.

Edgar liked David Bowie, it was true, but Frank was more his ancestor than Bowie. He believed his real father was working class and must have been at moments vituperative and melancholic—must have hung with the mafia but also sexed the cherry of Mia Farrow (though Edgar would have preferred to have been the cherry).

Edgar had blue eyes, wore his hat down, and made monthly pilgrimages to pasta shops in Brooklyn.

Edgar Sinatra, who donned black leather and spoke during twelve step recovery meetings, discussed how his sister, “Liza,” had lied, that she didn’t give the proper respect to her father, Frank, and her mother, Judy Garland.

Edgar Sinatra, though the adopted heir to a coffee franchise, contended he was also a love child of Judy Garland and Frank Sinatra. He even threatened to kill me because he insisted I sold his story to Page Six in the *New*

*York Post*.

The real story, though, took place at about half past noon on Wednesday in April, when Edgar went to Tony Bennett’s manager’s office with a gun to see if he could find Frank.

“Is he here?” Junior asked the 54-year-old secretary who had just gotten her nails done.

“Excuse me?”

“Look, I have a gun, and if you don’t let me see my father, I’m going to shoot you and Tony Bennett.”

The secretary hit a button below her desk, which was automatically hooked to 911. The story was in the *New York Post* the following day.

“Psychopath who considers himself the son of Frank Sinatra accosted Tony Bennett’s manager’s secretary with a pistol that he did not know how to use. He is currently in lockdown in Bellevue.”

Edgar’s notion that I gave a story to Page Six wasn’t completely untrue. I once faxed them a piece about *US Magazine* having its Christmas party at Club USA, which was an S&M bar. I also wrote an essay about a despicable woman (I had dated) that appeared in the *Times*. Apart from these items/people, I didn’t libel anyone, certainly none as off the medication as Edgar Sinatra.

When Edgar was *on* his medication, he was a caricature of Frank—friendly and happy like a lobotomized serial murderer. But off that vial of pills, he was an itinerant assassin who chased me down Seventh Avenue South. He also tried to murder my friend Elizabeth, and it was only because we invoked our higher power and the New York City Police Department, that our lives became slightly manageable. In fact, the police didn’t do jack shit except assure us we would not be immolated, but we *might* be maimed. For legally, and this was in the late 1980s, they couldn’t imprison a murderer until he murdered; there was no range, however, for how much victimization could be done.



We banned Edgar Sinatra from our twelve step meetings because he kept making threats.

“I’d like to bar Edgar S—he’s stalked me and Elizabeth more than once.”

“AA believes in free speech,” a centenarian, who resembled a dragon and directed absurdist theater, announced at our business meeting.

“Does AA believe in preventing homicide?” I asked.

“The Big Book says everyone has a right to be here,” the centenarian-dragon rambled, “just like you and me. Who knows what any of us is capable of?” This was true, for the centenarian-dragon had performed a rendition of the Billy Joel song “Movin Out” with “necrophiliac” instead of “Hackensack” in an off-Broadway theater production.

Edgar was subsequently banned, though it took several hours of comparing AA to the Constitution, but in the end, lives did matter.

When not medicated, Edgar would jump or scream at meetings “that my former sponsee,” pointing at me, “is a vindictive, lying cunt. Her name is Annabel. She wears green trousers and wants to be Kitty Kelley.” This was, after all, a program of anonymity.

Edgar sent my friend Elizabeth black roses when she performed at a Sheridan Square cabaret bar, where he was eventually prohibited because of his lousy singing and scare tactics.

I go to twelve step meetings where I meet people such as Edgar Sinatra who invariably threaten my life. Twelve step meetings are, for the most part, places where the mentally ill congregate to hear one another. Some of us also go there to dispense with loneliness; what happens is that we accumulate everyone else’s problems.

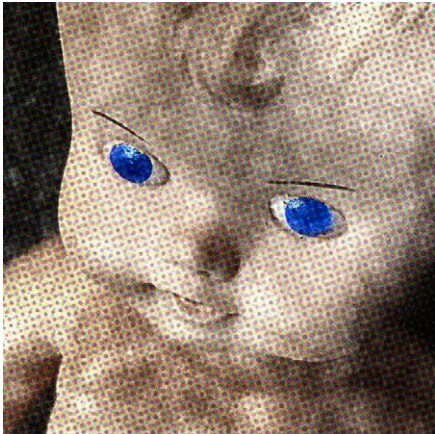
Edgar S was ok on his meds. He had brunches with lox, cream cheese and bagels. Born-again Christians and transgender folks alike were welcome in his Chelsea apartment, which his adopted father, the non-Frank Sinatra who owns a coffee franchise (where Edgar once argued with Bella Abzug over the price of a cappuccino), pays for.

Edgar lived in a in a two-bedroom apartment with a Formica table and three fake turtles. A maid, whom he befriended at AA, cleaned his apartment once a week. He’d offer us Kellogg’s Pop Tarts in Frosted Cherry or Chocolate. This was Edgar not off his medication. He smiled, joked, and loved his “sponsees,” as he called us. I loved him—he was a big, dopey brother you could hug.

One time George, which was his real name when he was on medication, went with me to Macy’s and purchased a small refrigerator with a lock so that my over-anxious Labrador would not break into the fridge. Edgar, when he was George, was extremely generous and concerned that my

dog might develop a severe case of diarrhea from eating two pounds of prime rib in one sitting. “The refrigerator lock is a great precaution,” he remarked.

I had a dream about Edgar Sinatra recently. He came to me unexpectedly, in the brassiere department of Macy’s. Though he wished to murder me, twist my neck with a 36D because I had unknowingly “ruined his life and sold his story to Page Six,” he instead offered to help me try on a bra. It’s what good friends do.



On a brisk November morning, I stopped by a Greenwich Village AA meeting during one of its breaks when everyone is outside drinking coffee and finding new addictions. The bathroom door was open and you could hear a man peeing with the toilet seat up.

“Close the fucking door!” I yelled.

“Fuck you too!”

He came out dressed as Santa in leather and silver appendages.

“You got a problem, bitch?”

Edgar was fuming, with his stomach protruding from this Christmas outfit. It was summer and with Santa’s beard and hat he resembled a poodle at a punk rock festival.

“You shouldn’t urinate with the door open.”

“You talking to me?”

“Yes and ....”

“Get the hell out of here! And if you tell anyone, I’ll kill you!” As I ran away, he howled like a Mastiff who has just had his balls removed.

I received a phone call on Yom Kippur when most of my friends pray for redemption and do not commit sins.

“Mom,” I said, “can you hold on a second? I have a call on the other line.”

“Hello?”

Silence, heavy breathing.

“Hello?”

More breathing.

“Hello???”

Silence.

“Listen you kike dyke! I’m going to kill you.” Click.

I’ve never been fearful of strolling in the West Village, except when Bronx gangs had homophobic riots in the 1980s. This atmosphere was comparable to Edgar S chasing me along Bleeker Street near diners that sell cheeseburger deluxes and diet Cokes.

I flew through the streets like a flying squirrel—a Jack Russell, you might say, who has had too many Jack Daniels.

After my encounter with Edgar Sinatra in the AA meeting room—a claustrophobic blue space that might collapse on surrounding tenement apartments—I walked to the Tenth Precinct.

It was near “Kim’s Video,” a record/movie store where NYU students and the underground worked/shopped. I

spent hours in there perusing Italian movie treasures from the 1960s. It is now either a Marc Jacobs boutique for kids or a coffee establishment where millionaires call the police if your small talk interrupts their metered efforts eating pound cake.

I traipsed through the Tenth Precinct’s double doors.

“Hi.”

“May I help you?”

“There’s a guy named Edgar Sinatra who is stalking me.”

“We know Edgar,” they giggled.

“He threatened my life and is probably outside.”

“Oh really...he’s harmless. He came in the other day to pass out flyers that said he was looking for his father.”

“He’s a dangerous person.”

“He brought us subs,” they bragged.

“Edgar nearly threw a chair at me,” I told the unshaven female cop who used a razor. She had not, however, used anything that morning.

“*Nearly* is not the same as throwing. Look honey, you can’t file an order of protection until you’re injured.”

I suppose they wanted me to file an order of protection after I was dead.

“He also called me a kike dyke on Yom Kippur.”

“Jooodooom whom?”

The police officer played with her Rolodex while her male colleagues smirked in the background.

“Ahhhhh, he’s a coy guy—don’t mean nothing,” an officer noted.

Edgar Sinatra ingratiates himself with men, men in uniform, men in underwear, men in police stations throughout the city. He likes boys in general, and it was quite obvious that women—whether Bella Abzug or me—were not his love recipients.

Edgar, when he was not off meds, was my AA sponsor. It was because of him that I renounced travel in a drunken state of mind, which took me from New Jersey to California without much financing.

Edgar brought me to convents and explained that other people lived better and I didn’t have to go out every night and use my genitals and/or drink Jack Daniels with ice cubes. “If you want,” he suggested, “you may use your brain.”

He behaved remarkably well when the wry and sensitive and sometimes boisterous Frank Sinatra Junior suppressed the voices in his head.

One night, when I was with my boyfriend, a guy who didn’t realize he was my boyfriend, we ran into Edgar Sinatra, who threatened to execute me for the seventh time.

Oliver, my non-real boyfriend, and I, were inside a meeting along Houston Street when the man in leather appeared. Edgar seemed to like Oliver, as in “like,” to the point where kissing is no longer on the cheek.

“You sold my soul to the devil—you whore!” he bellowed. Oliver retracted to a shadow as Edgar came lunging toward me.

“Get the hell out of here!” Edgar roared.

“You talking to me?”

He chased me down the stairs and I ran into a cab, while Oliver hid behind a chair.

I slammed the yellow cab door as the Indian driver (who used a deodorizer that smelled like the Jersey Pine Barrens) locked the vehicle. Edgar banged on the window, resembling those monkeys on vehicles begging for fries at the Six Flags Great Adventure safari in Jackson, New Jersey.

“*He mad at you!*” the driver blurted and began singing songs in what appeared to be Hindi. “This is to ward off evil.”

“Step on it!” I moaned.


Edgar, I heard, a few weeks later, was banned from all AA meetings in the West Village, though he’d occasionally show up arguing he had rights.

Eventually, his adopted parents placed him in a mental institution for forlorn children who believe their biological parents were murdered by their adopted parents. They signed an affidavit that said, “Edgar Sinatra can no longer function as a worthy member of society,” and he lost his Chelsea apartment.

Now and then I see unnerving shadows and someone humming “Fly me to the moon,” and fear he might creep up while I’m buying Chinese food.

He also appears in tepid nightmares and is quite hospitable, serving me lox and cream cheese or Kellogg’s Corn Flakes.

I do hope, like Odysseus, Edgar finds his real father, even if the dude lives in Hoboken. ➡



**ELEANOR LEVINE**’s writing has appeared in *Hobart*, *Fiction*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Monkeybicycle*, *The Denver Quarterly*, *Pank*, *The Toronto Quarterly*, *Gertrude*, *Dos Passos Review*, *Barrelhouse*, *Intima*, *IthacaLit*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, *Barely South Review*, *Kentucky Review*, *Juked* and *Artemis*. More work is forthcoming in *Split Lip Magazine*’s new book series, *Utter Foolery: The Best Global Literary Humor, 2015*; *Gone Lawn*, and *Crack the Spine*. Her book of poetry, *Waitress at the Red Moon Pizzeria*, was just accepted for publication.





# Screamport

E.M. Stormo

The porthole was once home to a courteous family of mice, the Mousers, a matronly spider named Weborah, and a solitary bat Batso who hadn't been seen in two Christmases, but nobody lives there now that it's a Screamport for dad to scream into. He screamed into it this morning, and he'll scream into it later tonight. It's a shabby masonry, not at all circular, but sadly misshapen as though by natural circumstance, and really only fit for keeping secrets. Dad also makes dad jokes in there, echoing himself, hello-o-o, is anyone there-ere-err? Every day Scott begs dad to lift him up so he can see inside, to check and make sure Batso isn't hanging around, but he wasn't there yesterday and he won't be there now. When the squat fellow took up residence, he didn't hang but crawled around, and only lifted himself up for a few flaps when we opened his porthole door and served him a moth platter on a saucer. Early one morning, mom was sweeping the stone room, the fireplace, and the port, where she found the poor thing lying peacefully on his side. She hid the evidence, telling Scott that Batso got better and flew away. Scott called it a portal, not knowing the difference between that and a porthole, but dad couldn't care to give him an answer and mom had no clue about it, and like most things in this house, it only affected me.

Scott wanted to live in the portal, and he wanted to be a bat. The way their wings wrapped around their bodies, it's like a blanket, sis. How nice to be wrapped up in blankets draped from your arms. An angel in downy throw. An eagle in a sleeping bag. During thunderstorms, Scott sought shelter in the snuggly trench between mom and dad. By morning, Scott had taken dad's spot in the bed, and dad was downstairs with his head stuck into the wall like an ostrich. How nice it is to be a bird and have your body made of pillows, sis. Like sleeping ducks with severed heads. Like ducks on the pond, how nice to swim and not get wet. And another array of annoying analogies. Like your hair, sis, when you wrap it around you like a chew toy. Hair there and everywhere, on Scott in knots, on my lips in whips. The truth is, and bro you didn't hear it from me, but Batso died of boredom in his anechoic chamber where he could no longer see. But, he's

blind, sis! Then he could no longer hear. And poor Weborah got smushed in the porthole door. In the portal? Yes, the mousers died inside. Mom locked them away when we went on vacation to Crystal Caverns, where Scott wasn't sure if the things he saw were real or out of his geography textbook. Bats hung from stalactites. White newts swam in backlit pools. Teenage marriage on the limestone heart. Dad echoed echoes of oh-wee-oh, wee-oh as if the cavern were his private chamber.

When dad screams, Scott plays caveman, oogity-boogity. Scott plays flying squirrel, leafily-squeakily. Any game to silence the screaming. For me, it's outside picking hyacinth blossoms and stringing them into a crown fit for a forest princess. Mom usually reads, or braids my hair into a brain. Scott stays in metamorphosis, but later approaches mom with repeated whys, and her answer was simple as her brain could produce. Your father is a passionate man. He's always been a passionate man. Dad really told me why, because he loves to tell me secrets. He said there's an energy of some kind that gets stored up inside him, he said so while squeezing the tires of his belly, a religious energy not suited to the outside world, it needed to be put away in a specific place, just as he warned Scott not to go to the bathroom anywhere he felt like. Mom says we're not supposed to listen. Maybe he didn't care that we could hear him clear as day, an articulate animal in heat, a tortured soldier flashing back, but dad wasn't in any war, he wasn't prone to fits of anger, and he only yelled at me behind my back, to mom, he told her he saw a spider in my pants. That's all he would yell. She had a spider on her this morning! Scott overheard and explained how only ants live in your pants, Deb, and reminded me he named his pet spider after me. As irony would have it, that's exactly how dad sounds, like a girl with a spider on her, because dad screams like a girl, like a big girl, like one of the tall girls in my class who isn't ashamed to whine for what she wants. Ah-ah-ah, ee-ee-ee. That's when Scott escapes into my room and we sing songs (♪ Bat wings, duck legs, it's all the same dregs ♪). We play spiders in the sheets. Spider crabs, spider crabs. Dad tiptoes down the stairs, careful not to wake us, at the appointed hour when screaming blankets take wing into the night. 🦋



**E.M. STORMO** is a fiction editor by day, writer by night, and a teacher and promoter of musical literacy at all times. He also dabbles in film, photography and public relations for the Huguenot Street Historical Society. His forthcoming novel, *Land V Sea*, is a dark comedy centered around the literal World War fought between the Earth and the Atlantic.



## The Answer

Julieanna Blackwell

**T**heir litany of threats would have scared Washington's army. He was not an army, nor a troop, or even a George. He was hers. Everything rested on her answer; his hope for salvation of a wayward summer, his satisfaction for the following fall, and a guaranteed future to follow his bleak past. She was his plan. Though he was instructed to remain outside, he followed into the parlor filled with empty intimidation, coercion, and her family. They disagreed with his plan.

Ready to combust from the heat of certainty, he watched her. Perched on a hassock, she sat below waves of undecipherable voices shouting, pleading, demanding, and debating his existence, denouncing his presence, diminishing his plans. They flexed their influence, their prestige, and privilege in such an old fashion way they made little sense. They did not offer opportunities. She was his. He was her escape. That was the belief. He then noted a swaying speck of doubt. It drifted to her toes, which chilled his anticipation.

She was so pretty in her pink lace and bow. Her hair twisted in a knot, like the older women. He watched her. He marveled how she remained deaf to the storm of opinions swirling about her. Instead, she listened to a debate raging in her mind. He wondered if he should begin to fret, or perhaps worry over her hesitation, her fears, her own plans, her influence, on him, on them, on it all, and on what she believed.

She inhaled.

So did he.

They continued the yelling frenzy.

He was the only one to witness it. So slight, silent, she crossed her fingers. One gesture, he had his answer. Her answer gave him the thing he would chase forever. She decided on pride. He understood. They never would. She chose to be alone. ↻



**JULIEANNA BLACKWELL** is a short story writer and an essayist. *The Naples Daily News* published her column of humorous personal essays. Her short stories appeared in *Crack the Spine*, *Lunch Ticket*, and as a regular feature in the yearly beach-read issues of *SCENE Magazine*. She is also an editor for *805 Literary and Arts Journal*.



## Conflagration: August 1971

James Claffey

Galway.

Windswept beach.

A seal carcass undisturbed on the shore.

Smoke from McDonogh's timber yard rises cumulusly over the city.

Off shore a curragh with three men bobs in the heavy swell. Clouds. Green water. The splash of oars echoes.

The lone curlew whistles as it skims low along the waterline.

Kelp.

Unsettled weather blowing in from the Atlantic.

One sailor turns a potato in his pocketed hand for the arthritis.

A beam of narrow sun shafts through the darkness.

How the waves ripple ever on.

The other fisherman wipes the mouth of the flash with a woolen elbow and drinks long.

Prayers. To Jesus and his sweet mother, Mary, Star of the Sea.

Floating scum. Bladder wrack.

Tarred hull, watertight. ↻



**JAMES CLAFFEY** hails from County Westmeath, Ireland, and lives on an avocado ranch in Carpinteria, CA. He is fiction editor at *Literary Orphans*, and the author of the short fiction collection, *Blood a Cold Blue*. His work appears in the W.W. Norton Anthology, *Flash Fiction International*, and is forthcoming in Queensferry Press's anthology, *Best Small Fictions of 2015*.





## Away

Karly Perez

Busily humming and bumping about, the homeowners. Moving boxes hither and thither, for some kind of approaching... storm? Zoomed in, happy their faces and meticulously manicured their abodes, the facades at least. However, no green surrounds, no life. Simple, black concrete. Clean, tidy, orderly concrete. The homes, small shoeboxes, with their one window to their one door. I cannot calculate this scene. Living environments that one would ascribe to some ghetto. O but alas this is no ghetto, no slum. Expensive cars toot along the street, finely tailored clothing, hairstyles flawless. Did I actually see an oh-so-pleased with itself sign declaring “Starting in the mid 700’s!”? I cannot fathom the happiness of living in a (clean) one room, (orderly) concrete box. Perhaps... perhaps my binocular eyes have been too tightly focused. Readjustment finds that the (tidy) shacks back immediately up to some lake. One moderate sized wave and all would wash away as if it never was. Well, except for the concrete laid yards. Who knew a body of water, slightly

dingy brown water, to look at out of your one, small window would be worth so much...

This is an endeavor I must immediately give up on. I’ll never come to understand and even if I did, it wouldn’t be worth the time and effort it took to understand. I begin to turn away from this ant farm, forever, when a small tornado of chaos overtakes my attention. While the original scene I was baring witness to was busied and hurried, some type of confused preparations being undertaken, this new anomaly has such a stereotypical immature quality to it that one cannot help but stop, watch and slightly (ever so slightly) smile and move one’s head side to side in simultaneous understanding and disbelief. Pouty, defiant, and so self-assuredly masking her lack of self-confidence an adolescent girl (woman?) is piling the rear of a truck with every possession she (claims) to own. Of course nothing can be found in the pile besides clothing. A small mountain she’s creating with no means to keep the monstrous mound within the confines of the vehicle. With

no one around (well, save me carefully – and without her knowledge – watching from the distance) she is behaving as though there is someone there attempting to dissuade her. In a huff she hops into the driver’s seat, recklessly reverses and lunges forward to her new destiny. As expected, great clumps from her possession pile hit the pavement without so much as a glance from the careless possessor. I walk over to the forgotten tank tops, shorts, lounge pants with suggestive words printed on the backside. “You thought you were so loved, that she couldn’t live without you”, I slowly tell them, “but look how obviously naive and wrong you were.”

I cannot take this scene any longer, I have firmly decided. Moving onwards and upwards, as they say, there is a highway of foot traffic. No, a highway is too calm of a word for the ruckus that I am being sucked into. A swarm of warm bodies and a flurry of quick feet. Every mouth (hundreds? Thousands of them?) jabbering away much too quickly and with too much force to be able to decipher a word let alone a sentence or complete thought. Everyone has something to say, it seems. How they must say it right now! It matters not whether anyone is able to hear them or even cares to hear them. The decibels rise and fall like waves in the ocean, but not simultaneously. All of them vying for attention, trying to separate themselves from the group. Everyone knows asking for the commotion to have some order or cohesion would just be too much to ask, it would be an insane expectation. The mob is like some sort of quicksand, the more I try to reach the outer edges and free myself from this airless cacophony of bodies and voices, the more I am sucked into the middle. So far into the middle, I cannot even see the edges any longer. For all I know, the entire world is now comprised of one single grey jabbering mass of people and I will never find quiet solitude again.

My heart pounds its way up into my throat and my eyes, too filled with stress and terror, are about to explode from the pressure. There is no feeling closer to death than pure panic. I must end this and bring myself back to some sort of stable existence again. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. By sheer force of will, my ears build a wall to the deafening rabble of the miserable creatures around me. The record player in my brain picks up Mozart’s Serenade No. 10 In B-flat Major, K. 361 Adagio. Within the first four unsuspecting notes, I already feel a sense of calm. Instantly my heart returns to its cozy nest within my chest and as my lids close, my eyes have finally found some tranquility. By the time that one, long, beautiful note resonates within my skull, I have been lifted above the fray. I no longer feel the hot breath of strangers on my neck. I no longer feel their hard, dirty bodies pounding into mine. I no longer feel the mass of them forcing me to lunge forward. My body feels safe. I feel safe. Alone.

Carefully, as if not to startle my senses, the music fades in my head and my eyes flutter alert and aware. A shopping square of some sort, seemingly with no signs to be found. Perhaps, in an attempt to be clever and “fun” the shop owners have hidden the names of their shops. Hidden them so well, they cease to have a name, an identity. All of the shops (if indeed that is what they actually are) seem to be connected in some grand semi-circle, which has a gravitation pull, making you helpless in your attempts to

resist walking in. Although there are people milling about, they are spaced far enough from me and are moving in a calm enough manner to make me feel (slightly) at ease. To be honest, after feeling death and disarray creep upon me in my previous setting, I feel abnormally comforted standing in this covered center, doors beckoning me on all sides. The scenery seems to be gliding past me, in a confused state I glance down to behold my feet carrying me towards a door to my left. The most imposing of all the doors, sadly.

The closer to the door, the more pungent the odor. Mildew and mold, urine and refuse. Stench withering to life in the shapes of decrepit hominid beings. Malodor slithering into anguished cries and maniacal laughter. Utter repugnance, the last place one would desire to enter. And, yet... and yet, one cannot help oneself. The choice to visit such horrors on oneself is nonexistent. You simply must. Halls narrow; walls dripping, slithering. Hands reaching from floor, sides, ceiling; weakly gripping. Cackles and whispers, calling. Calling. Calling to you, “you belong”. Your only goal has become to make yourself invisible; praying nothing and no one will notice that you’ve trespassed into the hole. Somehow you must force yourself to turn around, turn around and exit before it’s too late. Before someone sees you, before the oppressive odor envelops you, before you merge into this reeking orgy and wither away into nothingness. You see another outsider, just like yourself, only several paces ahead of you. Perhaps you can seek refuge in each other, each other who are clean and sane, and grant each other the strength to turn around, to flee. A smile, an all-knowing smile passes between the two. A smile, all will be well. A smile, we shall emerge. A smile, this too shall pass. This too shall pass. Yes, one step backward – to salvation. Yes, two steps backwards – towards life, towards oneself. Staring so intently at each other, so intently towards the outside world, neither saw it coming. Some sort of revenant, some sort of living wraith has feasted its gaze upon your partner in escape. This breathing shadow, blanched and dusty skin. Fibrous hairs and sinewy limbs. Scabs and sores oozing a sap of blood and puss. Teeth tarred and missing. Face of an infant, face of a dying old man. Sneering and (proudly) displaying the bleeding orifice in the middle of its face. Cracked and yellowed nails digging into its unsuspecting victim. You can do nothing, say nothing. Just watch in horror as this monstrosity hungrily licks at their face and pulls them down with a quiet, gurgling scream. O! Your symbol of strength, your second self. You cannot wait. Allowances must not be given. This is not your fate. This is not your fate. You run. For the door, within sight. Life, the hum drum of normal life. You welcome it, bathe in it as you finally step over the threshold of that foul, imposing door.

To breathe again. Nothing could be sweeter than that moment when you’ve managed to stop falling. To rip the grips of lunacy from you. Everything appears the same as it was before. Here, on the outside. People casually glide about, peeping into shop windows. Chattering, lightly. The smell of baked goods waft from one alcove. No one seems to be giving much notice to the oppressive door I’ve just stepped through. It’s as if they know. They know! Of course! Who would ever go in there (with such a strong, all knowing, slightly disgusted emphasis on “there”)? A speck of shame cannot help but slide over me for being so... so naïve? So



dense? So weak, as to go into that shunned place. I only fear now that the narcotic stench has partially attached itself to me. That people travelling near me will know. I must not let the panic seep into my bones. Play it cool. Play it normal. I find a spot with seating in the center of this coliseum of trade. A restful spot. A spot to clear my mind. Slouching, sighing and I notice that this peace is too much to ask for.


How foolishly I have acted. How utterly disgustingly idiotically I have behaved. For in my ecstasy of relief, I have been unknowingly staring off into space. Unaware was I that this space was occupied. Occupied by the lowest of creatures, a peacocking runt male. Mistaking my blind stare and relaxed sighs as some sort of code. Some sexual, come-hither code. Realization has come upon me too late. Only seconds, but much too late. For here he comes, inching closer. Puffed chest, pseudo-cocky smile. Too tired to run, to play hide and seek. Playing dead, my only defense. So, as if struck by a sudden narcoleptic fit, wilting down to the ground face first, I pretend to sleep. My eye (subtly) cracking open, the fainting episode of mine has not deterred our amorous pursuer. Continuing to lie there, pretending to be some emaciated earthworm left in the sun. Holding my breath, in hopes he will move on.

In an instant, he is on me. Overly excited, unsure. Bumping and thumping as if my body was some dead frog in dire need of dissecting. So pathetic, trying to be such a man. It makes me sick. Feigning at being precarious, but we all know the truth. Scared little boy. I wish he were dangerous! Rather him gut me with a knife like a fish than have this sticky, sick sweat spreading across my skin and the vomit welling in my throat. Clumsily whispering, his words crawling in my ear like termites “you’re not really sleeping, huh?” That is it. THAT. IS. IT. I have exercised quite enough

restraint. Lurching to my feet, crimson faced from irritation and repugnance. Meaning to say (or bellow... or shriek) words, some words that would make themselves up right on the spot, on the tip of my tongue. Body heaving, trying desperately to make some sort of retort, some sort of noise. Bursting at the seams, a shower of bile spews from my gapping mouth. Murky green covering this wretched man (boy?) completely, so that when the violence erupting from my maw subsides there is nothing of him left. For all of the shoppers hustling and bustling around this scene, no one has seen. No one has noticed.

Feeling emptied, pleased. Quite frankly, accomplished. A smile – the first since this whole escapade started – tickles my lips, teasing my gums. It’s a satisfying feeling, this state of being. A cool breeze brings goose bumps to the surface of my skin. My grin is kissed with a subtle gust of wind carrying the taste of... salt? Yes, salt. Even blind, one could see the storm clouds approaching. That moment before the storm when everything is still and hushed. Birds have disappeared, flown to calmer seas. All of the (busy, accomplished) people have come under a spell, blissfully hypnotized. One drop, two, and then the downpour. Violent downpours breed mass hysteria. The enchantment has been broken; everyone scrambling for shelter, yelling at one another to hurry this way or that. A leader emerges and begins ushering the terrified mass, like lambs to the slaughter, towards that hellish door that I had tasted and escaped from. The last few to run into that putrid pit turn and call for me. Such concern in their faces, as if they believe that my only chance for survival is to follow them. As if to stay with all of them, to not be alone, is the only way I’ll make it out of this thing alive. I laugh at them.

I laugh at them and let the wind carry me away. 🌀



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# Lot 1507

Conrad Smyth

Murray’s gaze drifted through Lot 1507 and across the busy four-lane road. A clump of high school kids stood behind a bus shelter looking daft and blasé. He squirmed. The municipal-issued polyester shirt clung stubbornly to his fleshy back, limiting his range of motion and causing dark patches of sweat to spread quickly through the thick material. He would be encased in moisture by evening rush hour.

Murray patrolled his route with extraordinary precession, possessing an almost preternatural knowledge of parking authority policy and seeing that fines were leveled against those guilty of a bevy of offenses including: parking on a bridge, viaduct, tunnel, or underpass, parking within 50 feet of a railroad crossing, parking in a bus stop, parking in a designated emergency, snow, or fire route, parking in a school zone, parking within 15 feet of a fire hydrant, double parking—the violations ran like a ticker tape across his consciousness.

On this day, a bright red sedan sat firmly in one of the lot’s two handicapped spots. He approached the vehicle. Neither the front dashboard nor sun visor contained a proper permit. He removed the handheld ticketer from his overstuffed utility belt and squinted at its glowing screen. His fingers ran expertly across the soft buttons as he keyed the violation, placing the yellow, paper-like ticket between the car’s windshield and wiper blade with an air of absolute duty.

Shouting could be heard in the distance. Murray looked up as an elderly woman moved angrily toward him. Her left leg appeared lame and she leaned heavily on a cane, still managing extraordinary quickness and agility. “Hey!” The woman’s voice was aggressive and spry, as if her whole working life had been spent yelling.

Murray retreated to the back of the lot. “I’m talking to you. Is that a ticket?”

He puffed out his chest, attempting a look of apologetic firmness. “Yes, Ma’am. You need a permit to park there.”

Her features tightened and she got very close so that Murray could smell her vaguely unsettling breath and see the deep wrinkles etched into her face. “How much?”

“\$150. You have 14 days to pay or state your intent to challenge—”

“I’m on a fixed income. Do you understand what that means?”

“I—”

The woman made it entirely clear that \$150 might not be a lot of money to everyone, but for any responsible, honest-working person, the sum of money for such a questionable offense was entirely exorbitant.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am. Once the ticket has been issued there’s nothing I can do.”

“Tear the darn thing up!”

“Can’t. It’s in the database now. You’ll need to formally appeal the charge.”

She held Murray with a piercing stare. “I figure you must have the most horrible, most thankless, most reprehensibly worthless job in the entire city. You’re a useless leach.”

A slight tingle ran down his neck and his heart rate quickened. He held his position. The woman ripped the ticket from the windshield and drove away. Murray took slow, rhythmic breaths. He counted 18 occupied spots – slightly light for the time of day, though not entirely unusual. He breathed deeper now, so that his belly pushed up against the edges of his nylon shorts. He glanced down at his watch. Another hour and his shift would be finished.

Murray stepped onto his 10-speed and waited to merge into traffic. A cyclist peddled furiously up the road’s moderate incline. The man was painfully skinny, and his sweaty face contorted into a grimace of fierce determination and full-body exhaustion.

The clump of high schoolers eyed the gaunt cyclist



from behind the bus shelter. They advanced. The man’s face signaled alarm and he peddled faster, teetering, then slamming his bike into the curb. The dull thud of a body smacking hard cement echoed across the street and through the lot. He rolled onto his back, cradling his wrists and howling in pain. The tallest of the group reached the man first and began rifling through his pockets. Murray dismounted and charged through traffic. The sudden physical activity strained his legs and sent shooting pain through his knees. A bus honked as it slammed on its brakes. A slow exhale of hydraulics sounded.

“What are you doing?” said Murray.  
The boy turned and considered him. His large eyes radiated male bravado and idiocy. “What?”  
“Stop it.”

The boy stood up, so that the top of his head reached well above Murray’s. The ends of his thin, wispy beard glistened in the late afternoon sunlight. He reached into his pocket and produced a switchblade. His hand shot forward. Murray dodged and tripped backward. His heart pounded and stuttered. Murray put his hands to his face and thought of his spoiled life and wasted potential. He wished he could cheat death and make things right and live with the strength and power and integrity he had once intended.

Murray heard shouting. His hands fell. An enormous man pulled the knife-wielding boy up by the neck and threw him to the ground. The boy bounced off the grass and sprung back to his feet. He took off running – the remaining assailants scattered after him.

Murray’s heart was beating very quickly. He took deep, wheezing breaths and examined his rescuer: He had a tight crew cut and a powerful chest, giving off the sort of confidence and authority one might expect to find in a career body builder or professional athlete. The giant glanced at the shocked-looking bus driver and turned to Murray. “Are you ok?”

“I think so.”  
“What about him?”  
Murray looked to the cyclist lying on the sidewalk. “Hello?”

There was silence. Murray touched his arm. He jumped to attention. “Where’s my bike?” His eyes were wide and unblinking, as if held open by an unseen speculum.

“You were attacked.”  
“Where’s my bike?” He craned his neck from side to side.

The giant moved to the road and lifted the bike onto the grass. “Is everything ok?”

Murray and the cyclist nodded in unison. The rescuer

stepped onto the bus and disappeared.

The municipal parking enforcement office was a cluttered mess of outdated manuals and discarded paper coffee cups. Murray’s boss—a small man with the appearance of a lifelong tobacco smoker despite vehement claims to never having inhaled a cigarette—sat behind a large desk. “You showed courage out there yesterday.” He spoke without looking up.

“Oh, it was just the proper thing to do.”  
His boss considered this vague explanation and frowned. “Didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Neither did I.”  
“It’s remarkable.” He continued to stare at his desk and coughed. “Now, the city wants to give you a service award to show its appreciation.” He waved his arms around and rolled his eyes. “They’ll want to do a little presentation and ceremony. You know how it goes.”

“That sounds wonderful.”  
“How are you feeling?”  
“I feel great.”  
“You weren’t hurt?”  
“A little sore, but I feel great.”

“I see.” He rubbed his chin and leaned back in his chair. “It really is remarkable – fighting off a knife attack *all by yourself*. A lesser man wouldn’t have managed.”

“Thank you,” said Murray. He waited patiently, basking in the glow of his victorious moment. His boss stuck out a hand and Murray shook it and suddenly he was back patrolling his usual 15-block radius of the city’s southwest corner.

It was late morning when Murray entered Lot 1507. He stepped gingerly off his bike and spotted a familiar red sedan occupying a handicapped spot. He approached the car. A newly minted permit was taped haphazardly to the upper left-hand corner of the windshield – a categorical misplacement. Murray leaned closer and considered the matter carefully. His hand twitched and he pulled out his ticketer. He reveled in its digital green glow and trusted that next time the old lady with the powerful limp would follow proper municipal permit display policies. He smiled and closed his eyes and thought of the madness and maelstrom in a universe void of parking enforcement. He knew his work was noble. Murray kept order. 🚗



# Her Fairytale

## Beate Sigriddaughter

I always thought she killed my mother. No, she didn’t wield a gun or a knife or even poison. She just added anguish after anguish until my fragile mother broke. I stood by helpless. Maybe in my helplessness I was the killer after all. An accomplice in any event.

First she put Mother in a home. Mother fought it till the bitter end. She loved living alone, had done so since Dad died way back when. But Julie wanted the house. It’s for the children, she always said. Your mother is a single woman. We have three children. Your mother is rich. We live in near squalor in a shabby apartment.

Mother didn’t want to go to a home. People lose their spirit there, she told me. You know that, Tony, she said. Don’t let her make me go. Everyone I’ve ever known that went inside was dead within two years. I don’t want to go. I am okay by myself. Your father bought me this house. I am not leaving.

Maybe it’s best, I told her.  
It’s expensive, she said. I’d be able to live much more


frugally here. Besides, your Julie just wants the place for herself. Mark my words, for herself. Not for the children as she always says. Not for the family. Not for you.

How can you say that, Mother?  
How can I not, Tony? When I’m in the home, you’ll move in here, right? So why not let me stay? The place is big enough. She’ll never have to see me.

Mother tried hard, but she didn’t prevail. Mother kept citing the expense, and over and over she said she’d rather die than go into a home. Besides, it was a death sentence anyway.

In early August, Mother slipped in the bathtub. In the fall, in time for school, she was in a home and we moved into the house.

The home was a nice one, down by the lake, with the luxury of a single room apartment for her, when many of the other old folks had to share a room. Her two windows overlooked the lake. She often sat by one window or the other watching birds.



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We moved into the house I had grown up in, Julie, the kids, and I.

It's for the kids, Julie said. This will be great for the kids. Mark my words, Mother said as she sat by a window, looking out at birds, not meeting my eyes, her hands twisting the soft gray blanket in her lap. I'll be gone in two years.

Julie didn't have that much patience. She visited Mother often and always left her agitated about the enormous expense.

You wanted me to be here, Mother would shout at Julie. But you could make an effort to stay well, Julie shouted back. Every time you sneeze it costs hundreds of dollars extra. And take your blood pressure medication, for God's sake. You're not the doctor, you can't just declare you don't need them. And then Julie would itemize to Mother the dollars she was costing. It was painful for Mother. She had always been frugal despite being a wealthy widow.

Mark my words, Mother said to me, she'll needle me to death, and then she'll leave you and take half of your inheritance with her, or more. It's for the kids, she will say.

Julie wouldn't leave me. I was sure of that. Julie and I had been together for nearly twenty-five years if you counted the years we lived together before we were married when our oldest was conceived and born, Keith. Then Emily, and finally Mark.

She'll leave you, and she'll take everything she can get, mark my words, Mother said.

No way would she leave me. No way.

She'll say it's for the children.

When Mother died from a weak heart and a prescribed increase in medication she didn't want to take in the first place and that her already fragile condition couldn't handle, I felt lost for a while. I knew I should have done more to protect her. Now she was gone, really gone. The woman who had given me life was gone. I had wanted to spend more years exchanging observations, and even memories of Dad who had died so early that Julie never knew him.

Julie grieved, too, in her own way, and more than I expected her to. Her Facebook posts were filled with tributes to Mother who in retrospect was the best and most unforgettable mother figure in all the world.

I was lost for many months. When I finally began finding myself again, I noticed things had changed. Julie and I fought all the time. She found so much fault with me all the time. There was hardly any affection left, few kind words. She was angry with me all the time. Sex never came into the picture at all anymore. I remember our last time, a few weeks before Mother died. I felt like I was not giving her enough pleasure, and I suspect she felt so too.

You're the love of my life, Julie once told me. I'm so glad you are in my life and on my side.

That had changed now, it would appear. Now there was only strife and anger and disappointment.

What can I do to make things well for us again, I asked her one day.

She was in mid-rant about one of my many shortcomings. I wish you'd just die, she said.

I'm not going to die, I said, so you'll just have to prepare to pack your bags and leave.

Or you will, she said.

I laughed. You'd kick me out of the house I was born and raised in? I sneered. For the children?

Her eyes widened when I preempted her customary justification by saying it before she got around to it.

Julie is beautiful. A little heave around her middle lately, but her auburn hair still turns heads, and she is more slender than a whole bunch of teenage girls you see these days.

I'm not quite so attractive. A bit fleshy, all that good food, and she loved going out to eat, and so on. Until I got sick, of course, but even skinny, I'm no prize.

I keep remembering how I first fell in love with her. The endless kisses by the lake under the willow, me kissing her and swatting off bugs. How she called me her prince when I gave her a present. She was a receptionist at a clinic. I was the wealthy widow's son who could afford flowers, excellent champagne, fine chocolates, a diamond or two now and again,

I have her lots of things, but never yet the ultimate fairy tale.

I'll give her that now. I remember her saying I wish you'd just die. I couldn't believe it. She probably couldn't either. Who knows? I was so outraged and wounded that she would say that. Now I have surrendered. It's fascinating. It's no longer such a big deal. Maybe I'll have a few moments before I go to relish the thing she will say about me to her friends, on Facebook, etc. How I was the love of her life, and how she will never forget me.

Truth is, she won't forget me. She'll be a beautiful widow. I doubt she'll be alone for long. It doesn't matter anymore. In fact, right here, right now, I relish her love for me from after I am gone. The tenderness.

The insurance is in good order, by the way.

I got my second diagnosis yesterday, or second opinion, or whatever you want to call it. The cancer is incurable, spread way too far. So that was the odd pain I've had lately. I didn't know what it was. Now it's spread too far. Just as well. I'm too tired to fight anymore.

We'll both have our fairy tale now. She'll never leave me.

And I do love her. What else can I do? 🍷



# Chresmographion

J.A. Pak

Meeting the past an inevitable outcome (this inside a future fortune cookie). Shame pierces her like a sudden migraine.

Hesitation. If she'd been quick, her face would have become a pixel in a fluctuating crowd and he wouldn't be standing, smiling, saying her name (Olivia), his hug, his familiar smell steeping a kind of protective love into her.

Too hard to speak; drops of coffee for words.

At the cafe, face to face, she stares past him; he stares right into her. Gently, his hand covers hers.

The past is stored like a compressed spring, the subject within the subject. First, there is the fact that Oliver is adrift. Comfortably adrift, moving in and out of cities and lives, a fact that makes Olivia gasp.

He begins sleeping on her sofa, finds a job bartending. It's his fallback skill, mixing drinks of fire and brimstone. Olivia doesn't drink. She doesn't like alcohol, the alchemy. Mixing drinks is mixing memories and those memories are frozen behind a dam she doesn't know exists.

She asks Oliver if he ever dreams about the Contessa.

No. He doesn't remember dreams.

First memories then. She's eleven (he's thirteen) and in the room, the Contessa. There's also a boy (girl), Oliver (Olivia), and a couple who must be his (her) parents. Family of three in duplicate. A mirror-image surprise. The Contessa's first lesson.

Olivia opens a cardboard box for Oliver. She turns it upside down: a shower of birthday/Christmas cards.

It's all from the Contessa (there's guilt in Olivia's voice)—there was money—checks, sometimes large amounts—no matter where I move, she finds me. Do you think she'll really leave me her house? Is she still luring people with that money? What if she really does it? Leaves me the house. What will I do?

Sell it. You're not a spider, Olivia.

That fear had been background noise. A web without a

spider is easier to ignore as a dream. She thought she dreamt often but it was she who was turning parts of herself into dreams. Oliver's voice a film on her anxiety (their anxiety), she becomes just aware, and then not, as understanding eludes her and self-revelation fails to concretize.

A tiny revelation anyway.

It was money, the trap. But the lure was lessons. Italian lessons. Contessa de Broglie taught Italian and Jodie and Paul had dreams of spending a year in Italy. She teaches for fun—you should see her house, Olivia—house? mansion!—exquisite—she's really Caroline Brixby, you know Brixby chocolates—she married an Italian count, lived in Italy for years, only just came back—her husband passed away—the way she speaks Italian!

A year of lessons and intimate dinner parties and the Contessa confesses she has no heirs. Childless, without a husband, such a large house—loneliness, fears of old age, no one to depend upon (they'd speculated that the Contessa is in her late sixties). The Contessa promises Jodie and Paul a fortune. If they move into the house and live with her until her death.

Pros and cons. Olivia would have advantages. The Contessa promised that all their needs would be taken care of, including Olivia's education. The Year of Living in Italy was a fantasy. Fantasies fed Jodie and Paul's love. This is something real. The Contessa promised she'd take them to Sorrento next summer; she owns a villa there. And then Rome, Florence and possibly Bologna. Nights tossing and turning. Heirs to a great fortune.

In Olivia's dreams, the Contessa is all eyes. Sympathy, mockery, sadness, love, the eyes trail acid stains across folding memory.

She was beautiful. Soft and beautiful. Once a ballet dancer and model. She was La Musa to her husband. Never wife, she'd note, just simply La Musa. Her eyes and voice swelled with the idea of husband. Luis was born in Piedmont and looked more German than Italian, hair soft



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and brown, complexion pale. There was an oil painting of him in the Contessa’s music room and Olivia would stare at it, her romantic fantasies creating intimacies until she thought of him more as her own love than the Contessa’s. The Contessa knew this (she thought). The Contessa made Olivia feel that she knew everything about her, that she felt what Olivia felt, dreamt what Olivia dreamt. Wanted what Olivia wanted.

Slow and seductive possessions.

How old were you, Oliver, when you first met her?

It was my thirteenth birthday. She threw a party for me. At Lago. It was just her and my parents and me. That’s when they told me we’d be moving into Lago. I thought Lago was a hotel.

Jason and Patricia were thinking of their son Oliver when they decided to accept the Contessa’s invitation. A week after the move, Olivia and her family arrived.

Lago has many empty rooms, the Contessa explained softly. It was unclear which family would become the heirs.

The house, Lago Maggiore, was like a hotel with several suites and two swimming pools, indoor and outdoor. A hotel with an Italian villa theme. Every piece of furniture, every little knickknack was from Italy.

Neither Jason and Patricia nor Jodie and Paul dared to confront the Contessa. She didn’t like arguments, hostility. The family that won would be the family that charmed.

Jodie and Paul were sure they would win; Olivia was so very charming and already the Contessa was giving her special attention, even inviting her into her private rooms. Olivia was devouring Italian, the Contessa and Olivia creating their own special language.

You were so sweet, Oliver remembers. And so smart. I was in total awe of you.

I hated you, Olivia confesses. Not at first. You didn’t seem to matter. But then her eyes were only on you.

He’d watch, the Contessa alone with Olivia. Frightened and intrigued at the spells the Contessa could cast. One day he too would be caught. He was already caught. There was something beautiful, soothing about La Musa. She ignored him but she was creeping inside him, an ivy that held every part of him. Struggling to breathe, he’d rip a tendril out, but with it came chunks of him. Horror quickly dissipated and ripping became compulsion.

Why did he feel a part of it, servant, accomplice, enslaved gnome? (He remembered a story—a librarian must have read it out loud to them when he was little—before he could read—about a boy—he insults a witch and as punishment, the ugly, old witch lures the boy to her house and turns him into a squirrel. Her house is full of enslaved squirrels, shod in walnut shell shoes, cleaning her rooms, polishing her belts and shoes, cooking her meals—the witch loves a good meal and working in the kitchen the highest promotion. The boy becomes an exemplary slave, a master cook who could satisfy the witch’s slightest whims.)

She knew he was watching, his witness taken like blood sacrifice.

She’d tell Olivia things, calling her Livia, how Livia had the soul of an artist and like the great Livia, born out of and for greatness. Luminous seeds.

Oliver was hardly ever at Lago. Olivia couldn’t bear to be away. It was wonderland.

Olivia and her parents lived in the west, Oliver and his in the east. The Contessa’s suite of rooms was in between, the top curve of the u-shape that was Lago. Each wing of the house had its own grand staircase and it was rare for the two families to see each other except when downstairs. The Contessa didn’t use the stairs; her suite was connected to the ground floor by an ornate glass elevator shaped vaguely like a hat. Or bird cage.

How long did it take for them to become disturbed by the strangeness of each day? The Contessa ate breakfast alone in her own suite: grapefruit juice, one poached egg, toast at 7 sharp (at 11 she had coffee and a croissant while she read the newspapers, either on her balcony or in the music room which was directly underneath her suite). The two families had breakfast in the dining room. There was a buffet: chafing dishes of soft-boiled eggs and sausages (sometimes ham or bacon), carafes of coffee and fresh fruit juices, hot water for tea, pots of homemade jams and marmalades. Near the toaster was bread made earlier that morning. If they wanted anything else, they had to ring an electric bell by the door. The unsaid rule was that no one except the staff and the Contessa could go into the kitchen. Jodie and Paul ended up sneaking a mini-fridge into their suite so they could snack whenever they wanted. A small microwave too. Each addition meant enduring a joke from the Contessa. And the snide smirks from Jason and Patricia.

Jason and Patricia were the first ones down for breakfast. Jodie and Paul were almost always running late, so they’d come scrambling down around 8:30 and wolf down untoasted bread and sausages. Olivia was generally down by 8:00; Oliver never ate breakfast and slept until it was nearly time for school.

Very little happened between the families until dinner at 20:00. The Contessa sat at the head of the table, Olivia’s family to her right, Oliver’s to her left. The men sat next to the Contessa, the women next to the men, the children across from each other. Sometimes dinner was in the grand dining room, sometimes outside in the flower garden.

After dinner they played games in the music room, card or board. The Contessa often lost track of time and they’d play until two or three in the morning, the children having been sent upstairs by 22:00.

The music room. Hypnotic. The Contessa once found little Olivia swimming in the layers and layers of decorative trim, dolphins morphing into trees to seahorses to shells, pink and gold, the ceiling swirling with flora and fauna, Olivia tipping in its tide.

Bound like this, every room she enters becomes that room.

Oliver takes Olivia to a cafe that specializes in airy cakes. Olivia rarely eats cakes; she doesn’t know what to choose so Oliver orders for her: a pale yellow sponge cake dressed with the lightest of chestnut flavored whipped cream. She stares at it. And then with the grey plastic fork she pulls the cake away from the cream. The sponge she cuts into meticulous, tiny squares. She looks up at Oliver, as if she was unaware of what she was doing. She pushes forward her plate, the way she pushes forward other things, and what she’s saying is *on this plate is a dream, the cake in squares, pulled away from cream and sweetness*.

It wasn’t sweetness. What the Contessa loved wasn’t

the sweet but the elaborate presentation of cakes, souffles, profiteroles, flaming crepes, flans, all things that played with air. Agnès, the housekeeper, was the pastry chef. Otherwise, the meals were made by the cook Giuliana; her food was Italian. Except on birthdays.

The house was a cake, Olivia is realizing, the tiny squares of sponge piling up into architecture. Topiary gardens, mazes of boxwood. Insects trapped in sticky sap, Oliver knowing the insect was him by the way the Contessa’s voice becomes a rosette: See how it struggles.

Olivia and Oliver. The realization triggers a simultaneous olfactory memory between them. Perfumes. A fog, yes, of jasmines, lavenders, gardenias too—lilacs, orange blossoms, roses, yes, myrtles, honeysuckles, the hothouses grooming plants that weighed the lungs in sticky mist. Jodie sneezed year-round.

Tomatoes. Yes, the Contessa loved to eat tomatoes, six varieties in the vegetable hothouse. Bouts of sciatica—when she was sick she liked fresh tomato juice served by Jodie who was a school nurse, the only time she was allowed inside the inner sanctum. Olivia tended the invalid too, reading Italian love poetry to the Contessa. She had a pretty voice and the Contessa decided she must have singing lessons along with the ballet and piano.

Sometimes the Contessa would dump boxes of jewels on her bed, she and Olivia swapping diamond bracelets, ropes of pearls, sapphire earrings, ruby rings, tiaras that slipped off Olivia’s head so she wore them as necklaces.

Sometimes instead of jewels it was a piece of old string, cat’s cradle, sometimes, without strings, the light of thought maneuvering patterns.

In her private rooms, the ceilings were hidden by thick layers of gathered chiffon that twisted into radiating circles of soft pale creams. Her custom-made bed was circular too, walls Jacquard, wardrobe doors paneled with veined, gilded mirrors.

Olivia in precious jewels, the Contessa with her eyes closed. A history lesson. China once had a female emperor. Wu Zetian. In Chinese there are no emperors. Rulers are known as Royal Deities. Heaven designates by mandate. So don’t you see? There is no man or woman when ruling. Royal Deity Wu Zetian, the only woman to wear the yellow robe, the only woman to establish a dynasty. You see? Not man or woman but ruler. Rulers, born during eclipses of the sun that can be seen across the vastness that is China. Wu Zetian was born during such an eclipse. Beautiful and intelligent, educated like the son of a nobleman. Still a young girl she becomes the concubine of the emperor, heaven’s mandate. The emperor dies, she into exile—concubines spend widowhoods in convents. Don’t you see? Not Wu Zetian. She becomes the wife of yet another emperor, mother to the heir, ruler of the nation. A Golden Era. The Golden Era. Li Bai. Du Fu. Toilet paper. When Wu Zetian died, men erased her name from history. Or attempted to. The same with Hatshepsut, great pharaoh, daughter of the god Amun. Vindictive cowards always crawl out of their holes to desecrate the corpse of a god.

Thin porcelain cups, rain gliding down the conservatory glass, Jodie in retreat; Olivia’s mother prefers being in the garden; the house makes her anxious. We did the right thing, the right thing, she chants, we did the right thing, Olivia.

Lincrusta voices, houses like the seashells on the walls, the cloches ringing~

stolen grappa and money—she caught Oliver red-handed and he wants to know if she wants some. She leaves things out for me, he says, like breadcrumbs.

The thing is, it was a fairy tale. She’d felt it all along and now he’d traded in her princess for two dingy children. It was unfair.

The Contessa had a beautiful box on her dressing table. Enameled, red, latticed gold, small enough for a little girl’s hand. It had a lock and the Contessa laughed because locks didn’t need keys. She took a small safety pin, stretched out the needle end, gave the pin to Olivia.

It’s a simple lock, she says. Play with the pins until the box opens.

Eyes closed, Olivia plays with the lock until there’s a soft click and the lid pops. Inside blood red velvet and a tiny gold key.

You never lose the key this way, the Contessa says, closing the box, lesson and reward.

Lago was high up in the hills, the ride down a dizzying spiral, trees, facades, triggering flash memories of old dreams, cantilevered desires. That first day of the new school, private and uniformed, in the car driven by the cocky-handsome handy guy about, Oliver holds Olivia’s hand in a Hansel and Gretel kinda way, his eyes straight ahead, hers looking out the dreamscape window. First time she understands he’s not the enemy. That he and she are one under the eye of the Contessa. That he knows more than she does. That all her knowledge is superficial and the locks she picks ornamental. He’s someone now very different from what he was to her before and there’s that anger knowing the cocky-handsome guy sees the held hands in the rearview mirror and is smirking. Oliver doesn’t care, and again, he changes into someone new and these revelations turn inside Olivia, the light pulling her inside herself and she squeezes Oliver’s hand very tight for security, in gratitude, defiance—wonder.

His name was Everley and he was a walking sex hormone. He ran errands, chauffeured the Contessa, cleaned the pools, helped the gardener, did handy things—blond, lanky, everywhere

his creamy hair dipping into eyes

his skin a smooth paint the color of fog.

He drove Olivia to all her lessons, hours in the car together, alone. They never spoke. Olivia, with earbuds, listened to the classical music prescribed by the Contessa. Everley listened to dull mid-west rock. The older she became the more his smirk unhinged her. The Contessa liked him and this confused Olivia so now she can’t ask Oliver about him because he might have only been an anxiety she’d later added to the dream.

If she stares long enough, she could do to Oliver what she did to the cake. Squares of him disconnecting. Like when he was a boy and he trembled with revulsion all that was touching him. Except Olivia and he didn’t know why it was Olivia who kept him answerable.

The truth is that he hasn’t thought of Olivia in many years. He’s kept alive by dangling forward, day-to-day survival akin to Olivia’s dream-morphing. On his own since their last day together, what he’s learned is that he’s



remarkably lucky in the unremarkable moments of daily survival. This was his sanity and a thin layer of content.

Parceled into a multitude of squares now spiraling outwards.

He was like a ghost, anxious energy his most perceptible presence. Secretly exploring Lago, room-by-room, memorizing details he instinctively felt were important in some version of the future.

Olivia, running an errand for the Contessa, finds him in the Contessa's rooms and says nothing. She understands.

As a child, everything she did charmed the Contessa. At fifteen the whole world seems bored by her. She's remembered only when the Contessa needs an errand done. This time the Contessa wants her lace shawl—it's become chilly in the conservatory. The shawl is a wedding-ring shawl handmade by nuns, the knit fabric so fine it can be pulled through a wedding ring. The Contessa still wears her wedding ring, a double band of gold and silver, and indeed, the shawl does go through the ring, as the Contessa once demonstrated as a party trick.

The Contessa has moved to the garden but Olivia finds Everley putting back a small table he's sanded and polished. He sees Olivia, the shawl in her hands, understanding. The shawl is now in his hands and he's wrapping it around her, not once but many times. She's bound and his sun-god gaze freezes her breath. Inside his eyes is a world she's never known and now she's very different.

Except—Oliver, who breaks the gaze and takes her hand, the shawl loosening away from her.

She's been waiting; angry, the Contessa takes the shawl and moves from the garden to the music room. Lately, it's Jason who opens all the doors for her. Jodie and Paul worry. Paul's been laid-off from the department store. The inheritance is all they have. What if the Contessa asks them to leave? Paul doesn't sleep and Jodie cries. Late at night, Olivia hears Paul leaving their rooms. He doesn't come back again until early morning. Jodie pretends to be asleep. Olivia blinds herself.

Dinners have been practiced performances for a long while. Oliver and Olivia eat slowly but do not talk. The others wait for the Contessa's cues. Jason talks about the day's news. Patricia makes witty comments. Jodie smiles and nods agreeably. Paul has entertaining stories or reminds the Contessa that she has entertaining stories. They laugh. While waiting for the bowl of orecchiette, Jason mentions Everley, the poor job he did fixing a bathroom faucet, and, drunk, Patricia laughs and says Boy Toy. The Contessa's froideur has Patricia ever stumbling and after a week the Contessa suggests perhaps Patricia should visit her parents. Patricia's departure makes Jodie feel awkward; she's usually inside Patricia's shadow. Without that shadow, she feels weak, unable to think, silently criticize and in the evenings, an hour or so after dinner, she excuses herself and asks Olivia to follow.

Jodie knows Patricia is still in town. She's looked through the window of Patricia's chic boutique and Patricia was there, organizing new merchandise, beautiful glass orbs that twist color. Maybe, with the inheritance money, she too would open a boutique as elegant as the one Patricia has. Even now the Contessa likes to shop there. Jodie has never stepped inside. The boutique is a reminder that Jodie and Paul have nothing to give the Contessa while Patricia and Jason have everything. Patricia with her boutique and wit, Jason, offering constant tax advice and worldly knowledge. Jodie looks at Olivia and sighs: why did she have to grow up?

Here, at this point, all is confused, distorted.

Oliver is counting a huge stash of cash. He looks up at intervals so Olivia will understand:

~ They're going to tell you things and I need you not to believe what they tell you. (Remarkable that she believed in me, Oliver thinks. She saved me.)

~ I can't remember if she kissed me or I kissed her. She creates haze. (Haze—that's exactly it, Olivia thinks.

Haze.)

~ I can get more cash. She leaves the safe unlocked for me.

~ I don't know what she knows. I don't know if this is her plan, if this is a trap. The safe's unlocked.

Abruptly, his fever breaks and his voice sounds like his father's: Olivia, do you have a place to go? A safe place?

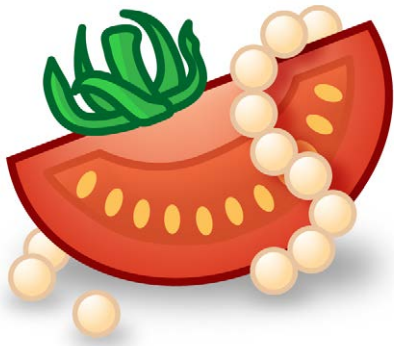
She thinks and realizes there's her grandfather in New York. He lives near the Hudson. Jodie and Paul are afraid of him. Oliver nods, worried, New York a long trip he hadn't planned for. He starts over, counting from one, each bill a differing future.

Even at the time she didn't know if it was Paul or Jason. She'd heard a car door. She'd always been a light sleeper. The sky was almost blue, the birds signaling back and forth, their song shrill, the Contessa and a man, Paul or Jason, coming home from somewhere and it was the movement between them which was strange and not right—and she thinks about all those nights she's heard Paul's footsteps, the opening and closing of doors, Jodie pretending to be asleep, in the morning anxious and yet more content seeing the reassuring smile on Paul's face.

What was Oliver seeing? And could he see at all since he was in the mirror too.

She goes back to sleep. Sleep is where she can lose things. The Contessa told her that sleep and mirrors were doorways. Water too. Any vehicle of reflection. Doorways of either awe or terror.

She doesn't see Oliver for days. He often disappears. With gangs of isolated electrical storms. The Contessa tells Olivia she's worried about Oliver. In Italian: He seems so lost, poor thing, more than most adolescents—it can be a dangerous time; the abrupt changes in a young man's body can trigger mental illnesses like schizophrenia—adolescence can do terrible things to a young girl too, that



new, concentrated fury, the frustration of feeling unloved, unable to understand, control things—there was a young girl I knew who could slam doors with her anger alone (they say poltergeists are really the negative energy of adolescents); in the young, anger is raw, unfiltered, explosive—I had ballet—great passion in the arts can save you—I see how you immerse yourself in playing the piano, the growing passion in your playing—would you like to go to a conservatory, maybe in Paris (your French has a heavy Italian accent)—what kind of woman will you become, Livia, the promises of youth often decay on the vine; let's go to Paris, Livia, spring break, just you and I, and then you can decide, whether it's music that you want, the possibilities for you are limitless—it's been a long time since we played a duet.

The Contessa sat at her favorite harpsichord. Like a connected puppet, Olivia is compelled to sit at the smaller one. The two harpsichords are snuggled together like jigsaw pieces. The larger is lacquered red, the smaller black, both trimmed in gold, Italian circa 1850, the red a double manual. The Contessa gauges the mood, pulls two levers and begins to play. It's the first duet Olivia learned from the Contessa. She loved playing this piece and with each phrase a pleasant memory but what she feels is betrayal, resentment, embarrassment, piercing shame.

She closes her eyes.

It took a week, Oliver driving with little sleep, the car

losing parts every few hundred miles—he needed it to last just over three thousand and then they'd be safe. The car he'd bought from a friend's cousin. He'd paid double for secrecy. His family didn't even know that he could drive. They'll say he stole the money. They'll say he kidnapped Olivia and maybe they were right. The further he drove away from the Contessa, the more he felt unsure of the truth and this was wrong. Of the many versions of the future why was he here in the one where the truth was the most nauseating? He began diverting his thoughts into calculations, how many miles they had traveled, how many miles still to travel, how much money they had spent that day, will spend the next day, his anxieties tied to dollar bills and niggling change which came to a thud in front of a pale green house, the small lawn recently cut.


Oliver laughed when the front door opened and Olivia knew that the tall old man was her grandfather. He laughed and sat on the ground and he cried.

He slept for three days and then disappeared. He and Olivia were no longer connected because this was not his grandfather; this was not his safe haven.

So how did he find his way back to her?

A circle, almost complete.

Together they imagine the Contessa's funeral. Foresee who would be there. And what appears: Olivias and Olivers in every possible variation. 🕒

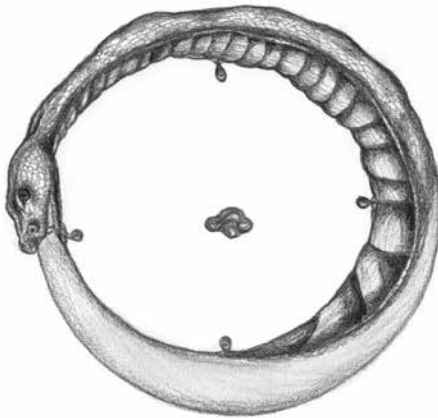


A recipient of a Glass Woman Prize, **J.A. PAK** is the author of *Anchored Leaves* and *So Easy To Love*, both available at Amazon. Her work has appeared in *Art/Life*, *Atticus Review*, *Everyday Genius*, *Identity Theory*, *Kartika Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Split Quarterly*, *The Smoking Poet* and other magazines.

*pedra mortátíl*

the element of stone's yr  
,what tooth rejects ,a  
table stinks in twilight  
,started with the dawn or  
night's conned sleep ,a  
faucet in the mirror you  
watch yr caspa cae  
,cae en el lavabo where  
you lay yr face a  
focus spread in air ,yr  
first speech round ,or end

—John M. Bennett







## Postcard

Ray Nessly

**J**et-packed to Neptune, claimed it for Spain, Ferdinand, you. Onward to Europa, bought you waterfront lots. Took the Flying L to your asteroid, 210 Isabella. Found a '57 Plymouth there, just like Dad's. Started right up. Hovers like a dream. Still hovering your asteroid, waiting for you to show up. Our six o'clock. Remember? 🕒



**RAY NESSLY** hails from Seattle and lives near San Diego with his wife and their two cats. He is forever at work on a novel: *If A Machine Lands In The Forest*. He hopes it precedes, in publication, that of his obituary. His fiction and nonfiction have been published in *Literary Orphans*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Apocrypha & Abstractions*, *MadHat*, *Yellow Mama*, *Do Some Damage*, and other places of note.



## Notch Three

Daniel Presley

**N**ina is more tipsy now that the second bottle of wine has been opened. She and Luke have gotten past the pro forma deliberation whether extra booze was to be committed to and then consumed.

Once the end of dinner shuts the day down, this leaves Nina and Luke alone, reclined out back in the garden at 45°, that being the third recumbent notch of the aluminum webbed chaise lounges. The third notch is habitually selected because Luke said notch three conveyed the deepest social significance. They live in an advanced culture that has made provisions for leisure and choice and the notches are proof of this. How so? There are five notches in all. One and two are only slight variations of alert sitting, while four and five are obvious allegories toward total relaxation, a precursor to sleep, death even. Notch three gave the optimum spinal calibration, the crucial position for worthwhile nighttime conversation, he argued, wakefulness being maintained, yet the brain

angled perfectly, allowing the subliminal to spark up into consciousness. Notch three also afforded prime lumbar support.

Before buying the house, Nina had thought Luke was no middle-of-the-road guy. But notch three came with the aluminum webbed chaise lounges. The aluminum webbed chaise lounges came with the house and the backyard. Each evening, Nina and Luke reclined there in their soulless tryst with eyes closed, letting the nylon webbing give them the sensation of island hammocking, permitting their minds to float up like their bodies into the galaxy as far as the stars might be.

In this way, lying there, looking up, the galaxy shifts and the stars appear to draw down on them. But tonight there is nothing, only bland city heavens.

The backyard goal is to be outside the zone of caring but Nina can't stop thinking about notch three. After setting up the chaise lounges for the first time, Luke went straight for the middle notch, never once trying any others. Nina listens



to dishes clatter behind a neighbor’s window. Summer is behind them, August and September stitching together weather-wise. Nina and Luke had met five summers ago. He was a ramp rat at the airport, out there where the mountain ranges kneel. Back then she had felt chosen, so blessed. Car hoods as hot as skillets. So much for her ridiculous hunches. Sip, sip.

Advanced culture has made provisions for leisure and choice and the notches are proof of this. Once notch three is achieved, cavernous connections can be sought amongst commonplace things.

“Sweetie, don’t you think—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Nina tells Luke.

He is uncinching his belt, making room for the spaghetti and the second basket of Chianti, Nina supposes. This is not cute behavior. The buckle is probably fastened at notch three. Seeming to affirm this, a car alarm burps in Morse code down the street. A bat, or something of that size and speed, wings between the birch canopy and the eaves of the house. Exterminators, Nina thinks, we will need them sooner rather than later.

She keeps stealing glances at his new beard. The beard isn’t going away and this, like notch three, disturbs her. The facial hair will soon necessitate daily grooming to ward off the falafel vibe. And how it must itch. Her father never kept a beard or mustache for this reason. After a week, the subcutaneous itching intensifies and occupies the face, holding the mind hostage until stroking the beard with a nervous urgency becomes inevitable. A brooding philosopher, a man constantly considering options, an unkempt tortured artist: these are but some of the characters who spring to mind.

“You’re quiet tonight.”

“Shut up,” Nina says.

His last name had been overloaded with consonants. He worked as a ramp rat at the airport. Planes like giant mackerel raced through clouds. Nina’s mother said that vowels were important in names, and shouldn’t

be out-balanced. Vowels brought softness to the world. Consonants were forms of intellectual rage.

Nina keeps hoisting the Chianti, which is only marginally taking the edge off. Her head feels ignitable because no answers are coming. Limbs believe that they can survive apart from the rest of her body. Had Luke told her that?

“You were gone the whole weekend.”

“Did I, or did I not say, shut up?”

She had wanted the rage but the rage never came. Car hoods as hot as skillets. He was eating vanilla ice cream that day, and Nina had commented on the unusualness of the usualness. She thought folks who preferred bland things were secretly complex. Their rich interior lives demanded simplicity on the exterior. He worked in Concourse C, the middle concourse, the one with the drab restaurants. The top quality is in Concourse A.


Nina can’t stop hating the new beard. These days, every average man has a beard to look exceptional. The razor was invented for a purpose and a man must make use of it. Soon the lips will be buried in the beard and everything else in the beard’s vicinity, including the bat, too, or whatever it is fluttering around up over their heads.

“It’s getting to that point.”

“It certainly is,” Nina agrees.

Both of them yawning synchronously now. Unwanted belches surface and break. What she really wants is to go up to her bed and sleep for a week, however, the bearded one refuses to quit their old room and even if he does, the sheets would need to be at least boiled and the bedding aired for days before the practice of sleep could be resumed or even considered.

Despite his lack of vowels, Luke is the softness in the world. He is a middleman and always will be. Perhaps, because of this, their marriage has become underwhelming, tasteless. Getting out of the marriage will be zesty, more flavorful. Getting out will require spice. Getting out will require something other than notch three. 🗨



**DANIEL PRESLEY** is an American screenwriter living in Paris. His film *Populaire* (2013) was released in over thirty-five countries and is now watchable on Netflix. It won Best Narrative Feature at the San Francisco Film Festival and received five César Award nominations. His new film, a psychological thriller about the book business, is currently in pre-production. He is also wrapping up a novel. You can find him at @daniel\_presley

*Author photo by Vangelis Patsialos.*

*pull yr pants back up  
count the ants Mr.  
Floor count the nod  
ban ana and yr trusty  
bag kinda wobbly  
at your lips make  
like a beagle  
tell me all about  
the hair and big ones  
in your shoe*

—John M. Bennett



# Destabilized

Laurence Klavan

Jerry thought he was dreaming but slowly realized he was not. The sounds were real and coming through the wall again—the ceiling, to be exact. This was a surprise, for he’d almost never in the thirty years he’d lived in the apartment heard anything from his neighbors. He’d been protected by the thick cement of pre-war construction, cosseted by a time when people valued privacy (not like now, he thought, when young people paraded what used to be secrets: what they ate, how they voted, whether they shaved down there or not). In the eighties, there’d been that bass player plucking above him at all hours, but Jerry couldn’t remember if he’d gone up in his pajamas to politely complain, which had been his wont. Now, so many years later, it wasn’t music but munching and slurping, as if a giant dog or two or more were chowing down ravenously. And at—he squinted with disbelief from the bed to the clock—three A.M.!

Jerry wanted to give his new neighbors a mild piece of his mind, but at his age, he always felt a general fatigue which now forced him back to unconsciousness. His anger was drowned by a dream, the way his oatmeal had been submerged by milk every morning by his beloved mother, whom he saw again now, even more years ago, sixty-something, he realized, for he was seventy-three...

In the morning, Jerry barely remembered what he’d heard, accepting that memory and imagination often merged now, became indistinguishable. It was only when he entered the elevator and saw a new tenant, a twenty-something girl with her dog, that he recalled. Yet it hadn’t been her in the flat above: her tiny Chihuahua had its head poking from her purse, and the animals over him had—must have—been huge.

“Russian wolf hounds, you think? Great Danes?” Hal asked, over their weekly diner brunch of bagels and eggs.

“Not sure,” Jerry said, his enunciation clogged by cream cheese. “But they evicted the old musician up there, with

some loophole in his lease. And someone else moved in.”

“I hear new young idiots in my building now, too. They seem to have all kinds of animals. Purely for show, of course. Until they get tired of them. Like their technology, always traded in.”

Jerry nodded, not responding. Unlike himself, who kept his cards close, Hal was a voluble hard-liner, even more hostile than he to the next generation. Both were retired—Jerry from men’s underwear, Hal from women’s shoes—and both benefited from rent stabilization. This was a policy that decades ago policed the raising of rents. Landlords were always trying to evict them for this reason: Once they were gone, the prices could go market rate. Jerry understood the frustration; his place would probably fetch thousands if freed up, and he paid just seven hundred and fifty.

Hal, however, had no sympathy, was at once more nostalgic and more judgmental than Jerry.

“We moved into these neighborhoods when they were slums, and we made them livable. Now that they’re gentrified, they’re taking advantage of our effort by poaching our apartments. Whatever happened to the idea of village elders in this country? They should be paying us to stay, for our wisdom, not always fabricating reasons to force us out.”

Jerry just shrugged, knowing there was no point to interrupting Hal when he was on a roll. He also knew that Hal resided illegally in his place, rented it off the books from a friend who lived full-time in Florida. If the landlord found out, he could legitimately boot Hal. But Jerry never said that.

“It didn’t sound like dogs, though,” Jerry said, reaching for the jam. “Not normal dogs, anyway. This was different.”

It had come back to him: his dusty memory was like a cold car that needed time to warm up. Or was it being with another person that encouraged him to recollect more details? They said company was good for the old, for lots of reasons.



“What do you mean?” Hal seemed annoyed at being disallowed to continue his rant. Then he pressed his lips together, as if forbidding himself to say something. “That’s ridiculous,” he muttered, before stuffing another mouthful of omelette between his teeth, making impossible any other expression.

Jerry’s senses were growing keener the longer he was exposed to another person, before he was sentenced to solitude again, which made his mind soft and slow. He suspected that Hal knew exactly what he meant about his new neighbors and was too afraid to say. Why?

“You gonna eat those onions?” was all Hal asked, stressing the innocuous.

Afterwards, Jerry wondered: Had he only imagined the meaning of Hal’s reaction? He wasn’t sure, for he was sure of less and less these days.

The idea of company inspired him to make a second stop. On his way, Jerry felt he was being followed, first by the swallowing sounds he had heard above his bedroom and then by a hissing or sniffing, like that of a bull about to charge—bulls, for there seemed to be several of whatever it was behind him. When he turned, however, Jerry just saw an empty sidewalk with a slimy trail that disappeared around a corner. He didn’t have the courage to investigate. Or was it, as usual, only the energy? He wasn’t sure.

Jerry said nothing about it to Allison, whose apartment he had reached, three blocks north. The two never talked much, anyway, preferred just to engage in as near-silent sexual activity as they could (and the definitions of this had changed for each of them over the years, along with so many other things; Allison was only four years younger). When they had finished, he lay beside her, inhaling her hair, grateful they had at least given an impression of intimacy, performed a few excerpts from what would have been a complete concert in the past. He was reminded of people who move pieces of furniture from their old home into their new, to evoke what once had been familiar. Jerry was thinking about homes because Allison was, too.

“So,” she asked, “what do you say?”

“About what?”

“About what I suggested.”

Jerry sighed. Allison was serious and gentle, a widow and retired art teacher whose stabilized apartment was in a building being sold, in order to be demolished and recreated as luxury condos. She and other tenants had been promised new digs, but she feared they would be awful rooms in a nearby SRO hotel. Allison had been asking about moving in with Jerry, an event she couched in emotional terms—their getting closer, making a commitment. But Jerry secretly wondered if she would have asked a man whose apartment wasn’t also stabilized. Was he being used by her? He didn’t know, but it made him wary. (This leeriness was nothing new. He had also hesitated decades earlier, when his late wife, then-fiancee Grace had wanted to cohabit with him. Then he had feared losing his “space,” his emotional independence. Now, his anxiety, like most everything else, was more practical.)

“Let me chew it over,” he said, stalling. He knew he could not do so for long, not because he feared losing Allison, as he had feared losing Grace, but because both of them were—oh, why go there? Why again remind himself

of mortality?

In the awkward silence that followed, Jerry thought he heard something in the apartment below them. It was the same kind of growling and mastication, this time mixed with a dull and tinny hammering, like a large spoon being banged rhythmically against a pot. But Allison was too hard of hearing to notice.

The next day, Jerry received a call from Hal’s sister, Muriel. Hal had fallen and was spending the night in the hospital. Jerry was the only friend of her brother’s that she knew (Jerry thought he might be Hal’s only friend, period), so she wondered if he wouldn’t mind visiting. The woman had an exasperated tone that Jerry recognized as typical of those who dealt with Hal. Though he disliked hospitals—doubted that they were ever as scrubbed clean as they were advertised, and his immune system wasn’t getting any stronger, etc.—Jerry felt he had no choice but agree.

He found Hal’s sister standing agitatedly in the hall outside his room. He had met her once before and while she still looked svelte and attractively coiffed, this experience had left her skin lined beneath what Jerry believed to be a facelift. (Muriel was two years younger than Hal, lived with her dentist husband in the suburbs, and attended to her ornery brother with a dutifulness born of birth order prerogatives that still held sway in old age.)

“Thank God you’re here,” she said, as if at last free to go. “He’s been driving me crazy.”

“How’d it happen?”

“Maybe he had one too many.” She imprecisely mimed taking a shot of booze; amused, Jerry thought that she was a teetotaler. “And fell down. He denies it, of course. He won’t say anything specific. He wants to talk to you.”

“It’s more likely that—” But Muriel wasn’t waiting for a second opinion: with a thankful grip of his wrist, she turned to go. As he heard her high heels skitter toward the elevator, Jerry finished in his head when he’d begun to say: It was more likely that Hal had been smoking dope, his oblivion-maker of choice. But who fell down after smoking dope?

“I didn’t fall down, I was pushed,” Hal whispered, conspiratorially, leaning up from his bed. Before beginning, he had glanced cautiously at the dressing screen set up to shield him from his roommate.

“Don’t strain yourself,” Jerry said, gently directing his friend back down.

“I didn’t tell Muriel,” Hal said, his bloodshot eyes darting back and forth once he’d hit the pillow. He seemed more agitated than embittered, his default emotion. “But I can tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“What I’ve been suspecting recently. What I couldn’t say until now.”

“Which is what? Who pushed you?”

“They did.” Now his eyes squinted with insinuation.

There was a brief silence. Jerry realized that Hal had been sedated, and the drugs had slurred his speech and maybe jumbled his mind. Yet while Hal seemed nuts, he was not incoherent.

“The new people who’ve moved in,” Hal went on. “I confronted them in the stairwell. They’re not people, not exactly. It’s hard to describe them.” He pointed to his

drug-addled head. “But I figured out their whole deal.” And now he spoke so quietly that Jerry had to lean forward to hear, which wasn’t great for his lower back. “They’re from another planet. Not sure which one. They’re taking over Earth. They know it’s on its last legs—like us—what with climate change and all. They’ve gotten it cheap. And they’re either going to fix it up and flip it to make a

profit. Or dismantle it and sell it for parts. Or simply save it, because they know how to do it and we don’t.”

“Like we did with our apartments so long ago?”

“Exactly.” Hal winked, and Jerry saw the strained purple veins in his lid before he opened his eye again.

“But what happens to us?” Did Jerry mean the question seriously? He wasn’t sure. For the time being, he was humoring his friend.

Hal was thoughtful. “Not sure. They said that human beings worth saving, they would send to another planet that they’d make look like this one. And the rest of us, they’d just get rid of.” He drew a shaky finger across his throat. “It’ll depend. But I know one thing for sure: they didn’t like being called on it.”

Hal shuddered beneath his sheet. Then, impatiently, he yanked it down to scratch himself. Jerry sucked a breath down his congested throat. He saw a bandage that ran from the soft mottled skin of Hal’s rib cage to that of his waist. Yet it still couldn’t cover the large bloody gap that had been cleaved there by a weapon, claw, or tooth.

The next morning, Jerry was told that Hal had died. Muriel left the message on his old-fashioned phone machine, her tone a mix of sorrow, disbelief, and (he was almost positive) blame. Did she think that Jerry’s visit had triggered some sort of collapse? But how could it have caused the “hemorrhage” that apparently killed him? She wasn’t thinking straight, Jerry decided. But who

could blame her? Hal’s last words to her had apparently been: “Hope you make it to the other planet.”

Jerry was surprised at how miserable Hal’s demise made him. When he blinked back to consciousness in the middle of the night, he found his pillow soaked with tears. He listened but heard no strange new sounds from the apartment above, though the sedative might have merely blunted his perceptions. Instead it was a smell that had awakened him.

He had no word to describe it but death: a sweet yet foul aroma that mixed human excrement with a flowery cologne, then mixed that with the odor of putrefying food—meat? Maybe. Jerry traced it to the outside hall and, when he opened his door, saw a yellow police tape stretched across the threshold of his next door neighbor’s apartment. The new, fortyish and burly super, Rich, stood beside a young policeman and both turned to the elderly man in T-shirt and shorts who peered out. Jerry realized it wasn’t the middle of the night but the afternoon.

“What’s up?” he said, his speech garbled by phlegm, the question he was aware comically casual.

“It’s Mildred,” said the super (whom Jerry didn’t like, felt was a toady of the landlord, always staring at Jerry, as if to assess his condition and the degree of his apartment’s availability). Millie was older than Jerry and had lived there stabilized for even longer. Rich appeared relieved and maybe excited by what was apparent, that she was dead. But

Jerry wanted to make him say it.

“She’s...?”

Rich didn’t reply in words but instead gave a comic physical impression of how she’d looked when he found her: his eyes stretched wide, his mouth slackly open, his left hand raised and bent above his head, like an old movie vampire about to strike. Then he theatrically pressed and closed his nostrils against the hideous smell. The policeman laughed, in a whinnying way.

“It’s already been rented,” Rich added, his voice, like his nose, pinched.

The air stirred by Rich’s moving hand flew up Jerry’s shorts leg like a family of ants, and he quickly shut his door. He kept his back pressed hard against its wood, as if to fight whomever might try and force it open. He heard Hal’s words again, but hoped they were the ravings of a paranoid and tranquilized old man. Still, Jerry stood there as a sentry until his aching shoulders shook and sweat pooled at his waistband, his eyelids fluttering, the death smell acting as a kind of chloroform invented on some other planet than Earth.

They did not wait to start improving Millie’s apartment, which had not seen alterations (a new kitchen, a paint job, a floor wax) in years. Hammering, soldering, and drilling began almost immediately, the noise breaking through the right wall of Jerry’s apartment, as the other sounds had rained down through his roof.

And, like those sounds, these became different from any Jerry had ever heard. He could not place exactly the new auditory insults now being directed at him, but others had been added to those of animals feeding and pots being beat: a metallic whirring of gears, which veered into a crushing thump, as if a tank were rolling over toys or other beloved treasures; and a moaning of either pleasure or pain, like a ghost in an old story said to be the wind but which the main character knows is the voice of the dead. When the cacophony was at its peak, Jerry could hear nothing else, no matter which of his three rooms he entered, hands over ears.

Soon construction literally rocked the apartment building, shook it like an angry child might a dollhouse. Jerry felt the floorboards begin to separate beneath his feet; he looked down and saw the criss-cross of wooden beams that at once supported the bottom of his home and the top of his downstairs neighbor’s. As his apartment continued to be rattled and banged, he stared at spreading cracks in his walls that had not been there a second earlier. Bubbles of thick, white, milk-like liquid began to trickle and then gush from the fissures. Coated with it, Jerry was knocked to his knees and then his stomach, his head landing on disintegrating slats. One of his arms dropped limply between them, so that he seemed to reach down desperately into his neighbor’s living room (empty, abandoned), like a paratrooper trapped high in a tree and begging for help, which he had begun to do. He feared that many others on Earth were suffering the same way at this moment and that Hal had been as right as he had been insane.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because you looked a little red there for a second.”



Jerry was surprised by Allison's question and embarrassed. He thought it amazing that he still couldn't hide the way he felt, that even at this age, his skin would betray him with a blush, like a smoke alarm he thought disabled but which still went off when he simply burned the brisket. Yet he knew that what Allison told him had provoked an extreme response.

He had fled to her apartment from the disaster of his own. After they awakened together, Allison revealed that her building wasn't being sold, after all: the real estate deal had fallen through and, for the moment at least, she would be able to stay in the home she'd leased for decades. Still, the news hadn't changed what she wanted of him, and this was what had made Jerry blush.

"I'd really like to move in with you," she said.

This meant that Allison had not been using him, that she wished them to be close no matter where, that she was even willing to give up her own valuable, stabilized home to make it happen (his place was a bit bigger than hers, it turned out). As was his habit, Jerry had been distrustful, which he understood now was an unhealthy way to live. Hal had died distrustful, not an ideal way to leave.

Jerry didn't know what to say. So he placed a grateful kiss upon Allison's pale neck, below her right ear, which made her redden, too, so that both were blushing (even though both had been casually nude and unembarrassed the whole afternoon, warts, he thought, wrinkles, and all). He smiled and looked years younger.

"The only problem is," Jerry said, sitting up, "that my place is a mess. They're fixing my neighbor's apartment—she died. And I think they're trying to force me out, too, by f—" he almost expressed himself with an utter lack of self-consciousness but hesitated and then proceeded politely, for he was from a more chivalric era, "fouling my place up."

Jerry had hedged in other ways, as well. He had revealed neither the extent of the destruction from which he had escaped nor his suspicions. Had he been hallucinating it all? He felt calmer and chastised himself secretly for believing poor old Hal's palaver. Yet his fear had been helpful, for it had chased him into Allison's arms.

"How about we live here?" he heard himself say. "Your place is big enough, isn't it?"

Allison nearly did a double-take; then she smiled and



shrugged as if to say, okay, maybe, why not? She had been expecting resistance and hearing Jerry's positive reply and suggestion both threw and thrilled her. She pressed her own kiss on him—on his mouth, because why beat around the whatever? Then Jerry noticed that her expression changed to one of sober thoughtfulness, as if she were assessing the nuts and bolts of how it would work, the moving in, the splitting of space. But this was, her squeezing of his hand said, a nice problem to have.

Jerry and Allison walked out to shop for dinner; Jerry did not want to return to his home that night. Slowly, each noticed that in the dusk the street—the entire city—seemed shinier, sleeker, more appealing: new, while still retaining the essence of what it had been before they'd entered. It was hard to describe. The neighborhood, which had been gentrified incrementally ever since they'd moved in, was now neither cold nor sterile, as it had increasingly seemed, but warm and inviting. Any objections were forgotten; they were going to like living there together. "It's as if," Allison said, taking his arm,

"we're in a place almost identical but not quite, just a little bit better. Don't you think? Like an illusion, like a—what do they call it?—a simulacrum." She paused. "Is it love?"


Jerry considered the question. "Maybe."

Then he looked up in the sky and saw something strange. It wasn't the setting sun or the emerging moon. It looked instead the way Earth must appear from another planet, as if in fact that's where they were.

"What are you looking at?" Allison asked.

He thought of his last conversation with Hal, when he himself had asked, "But what happens to us?" Then Jerry placed his hand over hers, protectively.

"Nothing," he said. "I'm just imagining things. I'm just old, that's all."

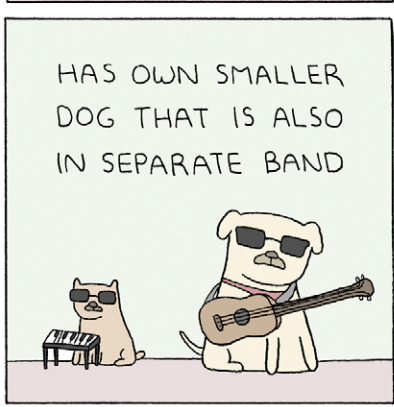


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# Poorly Drawn Lines

Reza Farazmand - PoorlyDrawnLines.com

## HOW COOL



## INTELLIGENT



## FRIENDS







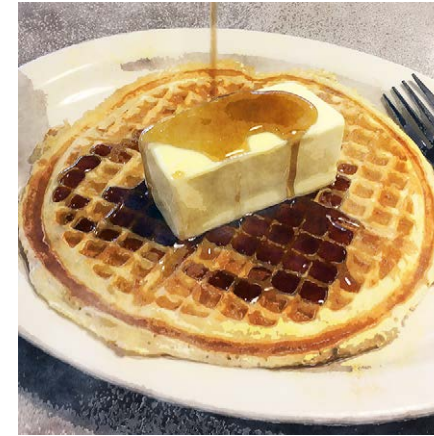
## Lasso

Adam Webster

The first time they made love, he slipped his right hand into the small of her back, then inched it downward, cupped her right buttock, and just held it there. It was the first time he felt at one with someone, despite his 22---month marriage to Ynez, which had ended even though he had told her that she was his best friend, or something else just as appropriate, on as many occasions as he had remembered to say something like that. Marriage makes enemies of us all, his father said, saying it was a line from Shakespeare, before shuffling over to the single---shelf bookrack that housed nothing but Louis L'amour novels, most with pristine spines. As they lay there enjoying each other's breathing, having exchanged the gratuitous post---coital gratuities indicating it was the best something or other that either had experienced, his mind drifted to Ynez and her story about how, when her stepfather had first brought their Labrador home, it could fit in the palm of her hand. He had, at the time, not believed her, but now it seemed to make perfect sense. And, breathing in, then out, he realized the Lab would be dead by now. 🕒



**ADAM WEBSTER** is a Chicago-based writer and text-based visual artist whose work has appeared in *pioneertown*, *PacificReview* and *here/there*. Also a theatre artist, Adam has written adaptations of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, Euripedes' *Hippolytus*, Calderon's *Life Is a Dream*, and Stephen Crane's novella, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*; more than a dozen short plays that have been produced; and three fuller-length solo pieces, which he has performed. In July 2015, he directed the world premiere of *Whatever*, by Robert Tenges for *the side project*, which he founded in 2000. Information can be found at [thesideproject.net](http://thesideproject.net) — He holds an MFA in Writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



## Right? The Dan Thoms Biography

Sam Helmer

Dan Thoms was born on December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1961, in a soup kitchen. His first crib consisted of a soup pot that, prior to him, held a cheddar bacon gumbo. His parents were Doug Thoms, a lead paint tester, and his mail-order wife, Kakaraheleski Vorticimillica, of Bulgaria. It is rumoured that as a young child, Thoms made friends with the various shrubs growing in the front garden bed, naming them all and giving them appropriate haircuts, although this cannot be confirmed, as his father passed away a month after he was born and his mother was deported back to Bulgaria some years ago.

Not much can be found about Thoms' childhood. The most information gathered is from an excerpt provided from Billy McGrowvan, the neighbourhood bully, whom Thoms had frequently gotten beaten up by.

*"He was weird, man. When everyone else was outside playing and stuff, he would always be inside. There was this little stool that he would put by his front window, then he would just sit there and watch us all, you know? Like, watching us play street hockey and stuff. He would just sit there for hours, like he had a rod shoved down his spine and through his ass. A few times, when he came outside to walk to school and stuff, I'd beat him up and ask why he sat like that. He said he was practicing his posture. Like, his Belgish nanny told him it was good for him, or something."*

—Billy McGrowvan, childhood bully, on Thoms, and stuff like that.

Right around the time Thoms entered middle school his mother was deported back to Bulgaria. There was a period of uncertainty where Thoms did not know if he should attempt to obtain a passport to join his mother overseas, or to move in with his Bulgarian nanny and remain in Canada. He eventually decided on the latter, and for the next four years of his life, he lived in the upstairs of a Swedish waffle

shop with his nanny, often eating waffles, pancakes and other batter-based cakes cooked in pans for all three meals. There was an unlimited supply of syrups around, and after six months of living in the waffle shop, he could easily distinguish between table, butter-flavoured, maple, caramel, blueberry, corn and cane syrup. He had fleeting aspirations of becoming a syrup taste-tester, however, one night these dreams came crashing to an end when he consumed some expired syrup and spent the next four days emptying his entire digestive tract into his nanny's toilet.

Once he entered high school he signed up for band class, erroneously thinking that he was singing up for an after-school slo-pitch team instead. It was a mistake that would shape the rest of his life. His rationale behind picking the tuba as his choice of instrument was that he liked the way the tuba sat, almost as if he was being hugged all day.

*"Kind of like being hugged by a bear. A nice bear. I mean — one that was tamed, or at the zoo. Zoo bears are tamed, right?"*

—Dan Thoms, on the tuba.

Unfortunately for Thoms, he was highly allergic to the nickel in the tuba mouthpiece, causing a debilitating ailment known as "Tuba Lips." The allergic reaction gave him a severe case of dermatitis on and around his mouthal orifice. Unable to afford healthcare, Thoms had to live with the condition. He relieved his Tuba Lips by coating them with a little butter every now and then. He carried a small, closed butter dish with him at all times, which worked well enough, although in the summertime or whenever he rested he backpack up against a radiator, the butter would melt. His band teacher, who wishes to remain anonymous, recalled that he once overheard Thoms saying that he enjoyed the salty taste of the butter, yet didn't like the way the sodium caused water retention and bloat. Thoms later on switched

to a non-salted butter and found that it still conditioned his lips while decreasing bloat.

His shiny, glossy lips eventually attracted the attention of fellow classmate Betty Inglemont, an overweight flautist with a penchant for fishnets and pentagram pendants. Thoms, with his shy, introverted personality, was always wary and slightly terrified of Inglemont’s leers and sexual innuendos. More often than not, he found himself hiding behind the bell of his tuba to block out Inglemont’s pasty face. Over a period of time, he began to find himself attracted to Inglemont, although he didn’t know if the attraction was natural or brought on by proxy since she showed interest in him first. This attraction, in turn, made him all the more nervous around her, and he cut off all eye contact, angling his tuba in such a way so that she was entirely blocked from his peripherals at all times.

This awkward period of avoiding Inglemont entirely lasted for several weeks, until the night of April 24<sup>th</sup>, to be precise. That was the night of the Big Band Dance, a fun-filled evening where the band students played awkwardly out-of-tune adaptations of jazz classics such as “In the Mood” and “Glowworm” for people to get drunk and dance to. The event went for six hours straight, and catered more to the elderly, so the event took place in the Senior’s Centre. The Senior’s Centre was a building with large crawlspaces, rickety stairs and tiny attics, not to mention copious amounts of disturbed asbestos insulation in the ceilings. Thoms was preparing his Tuba Lips by spreading copious amounts of butter on them, making sure that he had a spare stick in the side of his instrument case. Inglemont, now an advocate for healthy eating and a spokesperson against heart disease, only had a few words to say about Thoms at the time:

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“Although I avoid the stuff like the plague now, that night watching Danny spread butter on his lips like that, was undoubtedly the most erotic thing I have ever seen.”

—Inglemont, on Thoms’ method of seduction.

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Inglemont then stated for the record that she began inching closer and closer to Thoms the more he applied the butter to his already moistened lips. Thoms, unaware that there was anyone else in his close proximity, decided at that moment to break wind. The result was one of those silent-but-deadly scenarios, and he smiled to himself, slyly looking around the room. He wasn’t even aware of Inglemont’s presence, but she — having not heard the flatulence — thought that Thoms had finally overcome his shyness and was checking her out.

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Thoms’ band instructor recalled that neither Thoms nor Inglemont were present for the Big Band Dance.

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“He left his tuba case open, with that tub of butter inside it. By the end of the night, there was this pool of melted butter that the Senior Citizen’s weren’t too happy about. I heard that someone scraped the butter off the floor and used it as a sauce base. I remember Betty had a couple of flute solos that her alternate had to play. I never put two and two together. I always thought that maybe Thoms was a homo. If anything, I would have said there was a better chance of him and band

mate, Charles, hooking up that night than there was of him and Betty.”

—Thoms’ band teacher, on the 1976 Big Band Dance.

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Thoms and Inglemont did not make the most functional couple. Several eyewitnesses said that Thoms always seemed uncomfortable in Inglemont’s presence, never making eye contact with her, or even talking to her when they shared each other’s company.

•  
“The worst was when we would all sit together at lunch. Dan wouldn’t say anything, he’d just sit there and fart quietly. It was awkward for us all.”

—Inglemont’s school friend, on Thoms in a relationship.

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Thoms had never quite grasped the concept of birth control when it was taught in high school. His downfall began as soon as he saw the word “vagina”, with the diagrams further confusing him, as he didn’t understand how so many parts could fit into such a relatively small space. As soon as the word “birth control” came into play, he was utterly confused and by the time he read the word “condom” he was completely gone with the program.

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“Sex Ed? No, I failed that course. It’s got to be harder than Calculus 12.”

—Thoms, on methods of contraception.

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“It kind of surprised us all when Dan broke the news. I mean, none of us ever imagined him being a father, let alone a teenage one.”

—Thoms’ high school band mate, Charles Wullington.

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Inglemont recalled that when she broke the news of her pregnancy, Thoms was slightly excited about it, telling her that it would be like getting a puppy, only without the hassle of having to go to the pet shop first.

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“It was a poor life decision.”

—Inglemont, on her first sexual encounter with Thoms.

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Inglemont claims that she does not remember much about the nine months of her pregnancy, or the stay at the hospital where she gave birth to her son. Nurses say that Thoms fainted several times during the birthing process, and then mistook five other children as his own, bonding and coddling them, until he finally found the right child with the same genome as himself.

•  
“They’re kind of like shoes. Like, a new show, not an old, beat-up pair of runners, but a nice brand new pair of loafers, or something. They’ve got a certain smell to them. They kind of look like shoes, too. For a while, at least. Then they start to grow and they lose their smell, like when a shoe grows fungus.”

—Thoms, on babies.

•  
Thoms and Inglemont, along with their newborn son – Hensley Clyde – lived in the upstairs of the Swedish Waffle House with his Bulgarian nanny for approximately three months. Unbeknown to Thoms, his nanny was actually

having an affair with the owner of the waffle house. One day, the adulterous couple decided to close up the shop set up a biker gang retreat in southern Texas, leaving Thoms homeless. Thoms and Inglemont then moved into Inglemont’s parent’s basement to raise their son.

Thoms did not particularly have a very good grasp on parenthood. Neighbours in the surrounding area recall that on several occasions Thoms would sit on a little mound of dirt with a watering can and his son in the front yard, watering the dirt down to make mixture for mud pies.

•  
“It wasn’t like he was a bad parent or anything; it was just like watching a couple of three-year-olds playing in the front yard. Shit got kind of weird though when he started eating the worms.”

—Unidentified neighbour, on Thoms’ parenting skills.

•  
Inglemont and Thoms married in a small, court-ordered ceremony when they were both seventeen. Thoms always had dreams of having a dog as the ring bearer at his wedding ceremony, however, since neither he nor Inglemont had access to a dog, he tied a pillow onto the back of their then eleven-month-old son and made him crawl down the middle of the courthouse instead. Nine months after the ceremony, due once again to Thoms’ misunderstanding of contraception, the couple’s second son, David Jerome, was born. It was around that time when Inglemont began to stray. She claimed that her schoolgirl infatuation with Thoms was waning. His mysterious and elusive personality, which had first attracted her to him, was getting old. Also, he had dropped out of band class in order to care for their son, so his case of Tuba Lips had cleared up. This in turn led to him no longer having the need to apply butter to his lips six times an hour.

•  
“I never realized it before, but I think that the buttered lips was the glue that kept me and Danny together for all those years — well, for me at least. Ninety percent of his sexual attraction was those heavily-buttered lips.”

-Inglemont, on her failed marriage.

•  
She stayed with Thoms up until graduation, then filed for divorce, citing “Irreconcilable Differences.” After their divorce was finalized, she realized that the taste of butter sickened her to the point of where she almost entirely cut all fats from her diet. After shedding a whopping eighty-five pounds, she decided that she would dedicate her life to being an advocate for healthy eating, a yoga instructor, and part time physiotherapist. She now resides in Squamish, sharing custody of her sons with Thoms.

•  
“No – I just don’t really talk to him. It’s not like we ended badly, he just hasn’t changed — mentally. He’s in the same mindset as he was when he was six. It’s hard to maintain a friendship with someone like that.”

-Inglemont, on why her and Thoms haven’t spoken in over ten years.

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At the age of twenty, after the split with his Inglemont, Thoms moved to Abbotsford, British Columbia. It is not entirely clear what Thoms did during this period of this life,

apart from the fact that he was a sales associate at Staples and watched a lot of Judge Judy.

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“It’s really interesting, getting a female perspective on stuff like that. I mean — there’s all kinds of stuff on that show; mother suing daughter, daughter suing mother, and vice versa.”

—Dan Thoms, on why he prefers Judge Judy.

•  
Thoms, having yet to obtain his driver’s license, walked to and from work everyday. He would often take detours on all the little paths beside the roads. He was witnessed on several occasions picking eggs out of bird’s nests and fashioning capes out of fallen tree branches and pinecones. A co-worker once overheard him telling a customer that he had found a half-sunken truck in a pond during one of these excursions, but did not know what he should do about it.

•  
“I don’t know if I should call the police about the truck or not. I’d say there was a ninety percent chance there was a body in there.”

—Thoms, on hard decisions.

•  
After less than six months, Thoms became bored of his life in Abbotsford.

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“I mean, it’s okay there. I didn’t like the rain much, unless I was wearing gumboots that day. But I really don’t like all the B’s in the word. It was hard to spell all the time, right? Plus, it sort of rhymed. Abbots-ford... Abbots-furred... Ab-buds-furred...”

—Dan Thoms’ rhyming skills.

•  
He packed his bags and headed out on bus, hoping to find his Bulgarian nanny in Texas. However, he mistook “Tornado Alley” for “Okanagan Valley” and eventually ended up in the city of Kelowna instead. Thoms eventually got a job at a lakeside resort called The Cove, folding linens. He struck up a friendship with the pool cleaner there. In exchange for clean linens, the pool cleaner let Thoms sleep in the water slide while he searched for a place to live.

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“You would think since the water slide was yellow, it would have been pleasant in there. But at night, things get dark, so it was just like sleeping in a tunnel. Or a cave. A plastic cave, with a lot of static. I would wake up, and my hair would be so charged full of static that I would zap myself trying to pat it back into place. A cave on the side of the mountain doesn’t do that, right?”

—Thoms’ sleeping habits while working at The Cove.

•  
Thoms enjoyed playing Sudoku, although he admitted that he did not have much time for it. For a few months, he had really gotten into the Word Jumblers in the back of the *Abbotsford Sun*, but after his move to Kelowna, he could not find a paper with Word Jumblers that were up to par with the ones he had back in Abbotsford. Word searches were acceptable, yet sub par compared to Word Jumblers, but he detested crosswords with a passion.

•  
“Crosswords – no, I don’t like them. You have to know a



*bunch of nonsense words.*  
—Dan Thoms, on crosswords.

Thoms continued with this lifestyle for well over ten years. Over the course of those ten years, he began to feel more and more disassociated with life in general, trying desperately to find out what was missing. On several occasions, he attempted to mix life up with trying new things, and went as far as to sign up for a six-week-course of belly dancing lessons. However, it did not go over all that well.

*“He thought that everyone had to show off their midsection. By the second class, he was showing up in a bikini top and tassels. By the fourth class, he decided to shave a happy face into his stomach hair. I can still remember it vividly to this day; he used his bellybutton as the nose of the happy face. He had a outie belly button. The two together were a horrible combo.”*  
—Thoms’ belly dance instructor.

On the morning of September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Thoms was going through a Tim Hortons drive-thru. The following events are pieced together according to various eyewitness reports.

*“I couldn’t really understand what he ordered. It started out with soup and a sandwich, then somehow escalated to him wanting French Onion Soup, but with bits of doughnut in it instead of bread. Chocolate glazed doughnut, I remember specifically.”*  
—Tim Hortons’ employee, on Thoms’ method of madness.

After he placed his order, he started moving his car forwards through the line-up.

*“He started veering off to the left, but so slowly that you could hardly even tell. I don’t even think he was going more than one kilometre an hour. I thought he was going to hit the bushes, but then realized that he was heading straight for a lamppost. I remember thinking that there was no way he would actually hit it – I mean, c’mon, he was going so slow, how could you not avoid it?”*  
—The driver who witnessed Thoms’ accident.

Thoms later on claimed that he was distracted by something on the side of the road.

*“I was driving and I swore that I saw a gorilla sitting in the bushes.”*  
—Dan Thoms, on the goose he saw that led to the crash.

Perhaps bracing himself for the impact a little more than he should have, Thoms unbuckled his seatbelt and flung himself at the steering wheel, causing himself more harm than the crash alone would have. He ended up bashing his head against the steering wheel, then having it bounce

off and hit the dashboard, resulting in a contrecoup head injury and pulmonary contusion.

*“I don’t even know what those words mean. That means it hasn’t happened to me, right?”*  
—Thoms, in denial.

Due to the fact that Thoms strongly believed that he had suffered no injures from his crash, he did not receive the proper rehabilitation therapy to treat his head wounds.



*“It’s not like therapy would have made him any smarter. However, leaving him completely untreated definitely lowered his IQ by a few points. But I guess that someone who refuses treatment because he thinks he’s unharmed since he can’t pronounce those words probably doesn’t have a lot of IQ points to lose to begin with.”*  
—Thoms’ doctor, post-accident.

During his stay at the hospital, Thoms was given more morphine than should have been allowed, resulting in severe hallucinations that would alter the state of his mental well being for the rest of his life.

*“I was just lying there one night. I couldn’t sleep. It was weird, because I always slept good at hospitals. I rolled over and saw Jesus in the bed next to me. He didn’t say anything, but I remember being enchanted by the way the moonlight danced off his hair.”*  
—Thoms, on why he became a born-again Christian.

Looking through the security tapes, it was later on discovered that the object that Thoms mistook as Jesus had actually been a mop that the janitor left in the corner. Nevertheless, it didn’t deter Thoms from demanding a bible from the hospital staff. He poured over the book night after night during his hospital stay, remarking about how it was like Lord of the Rings, only with no dwarves.

*“Dwarves are preposterous. There’s no such thing. But Jesus making wine — now that’s a good read.”*  
—Thoms, on why he prefers the bible.

Shortly after he was released from the hospital, he took a trip to Value Village and entered what was known as his “fleece vest phase.”

*“Fleece. That stuff’s gotta be made from llama’s or something. Jesus rode on llama’s. I’m pretty sure that Jesus wore fleece at some point in his career.”*  
—Thoms, on his personal choices involving fleece.

Thoms quickly found out that work at the Cove was not the same as before. The left and right hemispheres of his brain no longer communicated with each other properly,

and he found folding linens had become an arduous task, that he no longer got any joy out of. One day, as he was waiting at the bus stop after work, he stumbled across a flyer for Okanagan College that someone had tossed in the trash.

*“I was digging through the trash – I thought I saw a dunkaroo container that still had some icing in there. I mean — who doesn’t finish the icing in the dunkaroos? It’s the best part of the packaging, right? The cookies aren’t very good — they sort of remind me of chalk — but the icing is like that Duncan Hines stuff you buy, only snack size. I guess that’s what a dunkaroo is, right? Just a snack.”*  
—Thoms, on how he stumbled across the Okanagan College flyer.

Beyond any comprehensible reason, Thoms decided to try his hand out in the Carpentry trade, signing up for the Entry Level Training program. From his very first day in the course, the other class members quickly pegged Thoms down as the first one that would be severely injured by a power tool.

*“Yeah, a power tool. Or maybe a screwdriver.”*  
—Anonymous class member.

Due to Thoms’ limited vocabulary, coupled with his slight brain damage from the car crash, he had trouble reading most of the modules in class. He seemed to have the most difficulty with words beginning with the letter V, for some reason, especially the word “volatile.”

*“No, I don’t know what that word means. It’s on a lot of the glue containers, though, so it can’t be that dangerous of a word, right? If it’s everywhere, it’s gotta be a good word, like ‘soup’ or ‘bacon’. You see those words everywhere, and they’re delicious.”*  
—Thoms, on what “volatile” meant to him.

There has been speculation as to whether or not Thoms was a closet sex fiend. His child-like innocence would have been a perfect cover for it. No one would ever suspect that the closets of his house were spilling over with pornography titles. The only strong evidence anyone has of this speculation was his frequent usage of double entendres.

*“I mean — it was so tight, I could barely get it in there. I just kept banging and banging the hole ‘till it finally went in. It felt so good to have that tight of a fit, but I got a little sweaty getting it in. But then, it was so tight, that I couldn’t get it out! I mean, what’s a guy supposed to do, right?”*



**SAM HELMER** lives in a small town in British Columbia, Canada. Her work has previously been published in **Geist Magazine**.

—Thoms, on the male and female parts of a mortise and tenon.

On April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011, exactly one week before Thoms was meant to graduate, he suffered an incident in the carpentry shop.

*“It’s a shame, really. He would have been the first mentally challenged individual to graduate from the Okanagan College’s trades department.”*  
—OC’s head of Trades, on Thoms’ incident.

It was reported that the incident happened sometime between 2:30 and 2:45 in the afternoon, during cleanup. He was by the air hose, attempting to clean the sawdust off of a palm sander. He kept increasing the PSI, impatient to get all the sawdust removed.

*“Yeah, he kept making this funny face. He would scrunch up his nose, like there was something in there bothering him. I didn’t even notice how high he raised the PSI. After he was done cleaning the sander off, he took a good, hard look at the air hose, as if contemplating something. He did that weird thing with his nose again, and then I saw him raising the air hose up to his nose. I couldn’t even believe my eyes when I saw him actually stick the thing up his nose, otherwise I probably would have done something to prevent it from happening.”*  
—Tool room attendant, on witnessing Thoms’ accident.

*“It was kind of like a gun blast going off.”*  
—Thoms’ classmate, on that noise the air hose made as Thoms blew 500 pounds per square inch of air up his nose in an attempt to clear out the blockage of sawdust particles.

Thoms was rushed to the nearest hospital, where medics did the best they could attempting to fix him. Thoms’ vital signs stabilized, although he lapsed into a deep coma, from which he has not yet awakened. It is still unclear whether or not he suffered any long-term damage from the air hose incident, since his brain had already gone through severe trauma prior.

*“We all saw it coming.”*  
—Thoms’ instructor, on what he thinks of Thoms’ incident, and Thoms in general. 🙄



## Estate Planning

Mercedes Lawry

DollBaby tried to tell me he was dangerous but I just laughed her off because that's my way. I took nothing seriously. How could you if you stared, unblinking, at the whole wide world off the rails, as nutso as anyone might ever imagine? DollBaby was forever borrowing my lipstick or a teabag or a craft beer, as she insisted on calling it. When I want a beer, I want a beer, not some watery piss.

"I got a bad feeling," DollBaby said.

"Stomach? Head? That damn neuroma in your foot?" I frequently sought refuge in sarcasm.

"I mean it, Deborah. He's dead in the eyes."

"Since when do I care about eyes?"

DollBaby sighed and lit a cigarette.

She was right. I knew it. I knew her judgment on these things was impeccable. But I seemed to be in the mood for danger. Or else just sick and tired of the woe-is-me disappointment in myself I had to numb with whatever substances I could get my hands on – it took more than a couple of craft beers.

"The question is," DollBaby's voice dropped an octave as it sometimes did when she wasn't trying. "Will you want me to call 911 or just let things play out?"

I poured the rest of last night's glass of water into the massive sci-fi jade plant I called Louis. "That is an interesting question. I hadn't thought of it like a DNR. Speaking of,

I should have one of those too – officially speaking. But in this case, I'd say trust your gut. I'm leaning toward Do Not Call but I could change my mind in the moment. You do have to promise me one thing, however."

DollBaby's eyebrows, which could have crawled off and spun a couple of cocoons, lifted. "I'm not good with promises, but I'll try."

"Don't come up here. If all hell breaks loose and starts howling, don't come up here and put yourself at risk. I couldn't bear feeling guilty for the rest of eternity."

"What about the plants?"

"OK, you can have the plants. You can come up and get them, though Louis might not survive the move. And take that blue teapot you're forever coveting. It's got a chip in the handle, though."

"Can you write that down?" DollBaby asked. "You know, in case someone thinks I'm a sneaky thief with no sense of decorum and tries to stop me."

"Sure," I said. "Sure, I can." I rummaged in the drawer for a pen and paper and sat down at the kitchen table. "Is there anything else you'd like out of this shithole?" I asked. "It's yours." 🍷



**MERCEDES LAWRY** has published short fiction in several journals including *Gravel*, *Cleaver*, *Garbanzo*, and the previously named, *Newer York*. She's published poetry in journals such as *Poetry*, *Nimrod*, and *Prairie Schooner* and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize three times. Additionally, she's published stories and poems for children. She lives in Seattle.



## T(w)omb

Nicholas Olson

Tomb's landlady signed the eviction papers in acrylic new gamboge. She said it was all she had. The tube it came in was cracked and lumpy. There was paint all over her hands and it was distracting. Tomb got it all over his hands when he signed and it was distracting. She asked if maybe he'd like to paint a couple plastic pilots for her model Spitfire that was beginning to come together. He said no because he was anti plastic toy war, which she came to respect after a few mimosas over-rerun, mustacheless, old Jeopardy.

Tomb's mother just died and was buried and his father just died and was burned up and sprinkled over that one bus stop he used to wait at, or rather over the ground of same, which got icy and slick during wintertime. He'd be used as grit to prevent future accidents. It was his way of giving back to the world.

The landlady insisted Tomb go, but only after they watch Wheel together, because she knew he'd be a good Wheel watcher, and would he like to go on the show with her one day. Tomb tried to listen to Sajak's jokes, but the kids outside would get rowdy right before the punchline and drown him out. Kids only came out anymore to mask sounds.

Tomb left and would not return and she could keep his things. He sprinkled some more of his father at the bus stop and tested the grit strength. It left a bit to be desired,

but that was all right. The sun ate the sky and spat it onto the cemetery, which he hitchhiked to after sinking his life savings into a tent over at REI. It was a good tent. It held up.

There was an acid rain gravestone there, and it had a flag in front of it. The flag was an American flag. Tomb used the flag as a shovel and looked at the swallowed sky for the moon because his mom once said she'd lasso the moon if he wanted it and when he found out she stole that from some old movie he was pissed and thought she was an unoriginal hack.

A child from the war came to lend assistance and told Tomb he was doing it all wrong. Tomb promoted the child to lance corporal so he could watch and learn. They made a nice old hole together, one of those deep things for gathering stones and listening to your heartbeat if you're that way inclined. He paid the child in a handshake, which wasn't worth as much after inflation. The child resigned and took a post as chancellor in a cemetery down the road, where there was actually a chance of glory and conquest.

The tent's instructions were vague and Tomb thought he'd do a better job given the chance, but that was neither here nor there and he did the best he could. He used the eviction papers for a nice little fire his first night, but it smoked him out, so he opened his mom's coffin and used that instead. Once you got past the stink it wasn't that bad and could actually be sort of comforting. 🍷



**NICHOLAS OLSON** earned his BA at Columbia College Chicago. A triple finalist in the 2013 Written Image Screenwriting Competition, he currently lives in Chicago where he's writing a novel and wrangling a cat. He has work published or forthcoming in *Thrice Fiction*, *Eunoia Review*, *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, *Oblong*, *Foliate Oak*, *Every Day Fiction*, *The Open End*, and *Flash Fiction Magazine*. He can be stalked at [nicksfics.com](http://nicksfics.com)





# When Giraffes Flew

Jeff Weddle

After the giraffes acquired flight, all bets were off. They were silent fliers, not even the beating of wings, of course, as giraffes are not so equipped. They flew by some other mechanism no one understood and were impressively efficient, considering the evolutionary path their species had heretofore trod. The more mysterious of them hid among the clouds, rarely appearing within sight of man.

The young were more of a nuisance. Their trajectories were often decidedly terrestrial and it was common to see them soaring overhead in majestic herds, like human teenagers cruising the main drag after dark, except the giraffes didn't seem to care if it were day or night. You might as soon catch them up there at dawn or noon as midnight. When they expelled their waste, that was a problem. A booming industry in broad brimmed hat and helmet manufacture and sales sprung up quickly to feed a panicked demand. Municipalities hired more and better sanitation crews to keep the dung and urine on the streets to a minimum. The tops of houses and other structures were more of a problem and, for the most part, owners were expected to maintain them at their own expense. Most people were good about this, especially after the first few roofs collapsed under the accumulating weight.

An even bigger problem was the giraffes' habit of snatching people away. This began after folks fell into acceptance of the new flying giraffe reality. When people no longer gazed obsessively skyward to watch them, giraffes enjoyed a stealthy existence of silent flight and human disregard. Maybe they became bored or maybe giraffes had a mean streak no one had picked up on before. Whatever the reason, one day, the giraffes began swooping down and grabbing people in their four legs, more or less in the same fashion as those arcade games where, for a few quarters, the player moves a claw inside a Plexiglas box and tries to snatch a ball or plush toy. While humans who actually have the skill to win such prizes are rare, the giraffes were almost one hundred percent accurate. They mostly went for small people – kids and the shrunken elderly.


It seemed inevitable that giraffes would drop their victims from a great altitude, making of them people bombs and fomenting terror on a scale previously unconsidered.

One imagined a mother, perhaps, being flattened by the hurtling body of a baby she had, only days previous, suckled at her breast. Or lovers' lanes wiped out by an inundation of geriatrics, the grandparents of young lovers crashing down on automobile hoods, breaking windshields and so forth. People worried.

But none of that happened. The taken never returned. The brightest minds held a conference to determine where the missing might be. Some thought the giraffes were eating them, but others pointed out that there was no case of giraffes eating people in the historical record and, besides, giraffes were herbivores. The counter to that line of thought was that, until recently, they didn't fly, either. But there was still the question of what became of the bones. Since no one was willing to believe that giraffes would consume every part of a human being, right down to the marrow, the consumption theory lost traction.

It eventually came to pass that people decided the young giraffes were delivering their catches to the older giraffes that hid among the clouds. The purpose could not be known to full certainty, but over time an entire belief system grew up around the missing people frolicking in the sky with their new giraffe families. These children and old people, it was decided, were learning the ways of the giraffe and one bright day might return filled with radiant splendor to show the earthbound the way to glory.

But the wonders of the world never last, and so it was with the giraffes. After only a few generations, the giraffes stopped taking people and not long after that, they, too, disappeared from the skies. The giraffes did not return to Earth, but simply vanished, as though they had never been more than a lovely notion.

People wrote books about the giraffes and the ascended missing and gathered in regular meetings to silently send good wishes to them all. Priests eventually took charge and a spirit of grace filled all who congregated. As the years passed, the people who knew the missing began dying off, as did those who had seen the giraffes in flight. Eventually, people decided that giraffes had never flown, had never taken young children or old people away. And not so very long after that, it became fashionable to say there never were any giraffes in the first place, not even the kind who walked the Earth. Who is to say this is wrong? 



**JEFF WEDDLE**, author of the Eudora Welty Prize-winning *Bohemian New Orleans: The Story of the Outsider and Loujon Press* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007), a poetry collection, *Betray the Invisible* (OEOCO Press, 2010), and co-author of *The Librarian's Guide to Negotiation: Winning Strategies for the Digital Age* (Information Today, 2012). His work has appeared in *Chiron Review*, *Beat Scene*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Red Fez*, *Port Cities Review*, *Out of the Gutter Online*, and others. Jeff's forthcoming novel, *When Giraffes Flew*, will be published by Southern Yellow Pine Publishing. He can be found online at [facebook.com/jeff.weddle1](https://facebook.com/jeff.weddle1) and his website [threestorycaves.wix.com/jeff-weddle](http://threestorycaves.wix.com/jeff-weddle)



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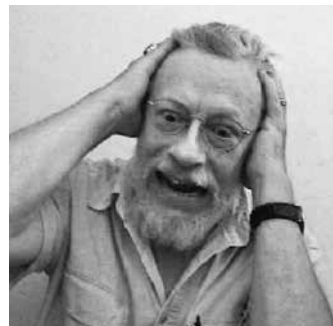


## STORYTELLERS & POETS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

### JOHN M. BENNETT

*... Pages 21, 24...*

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)



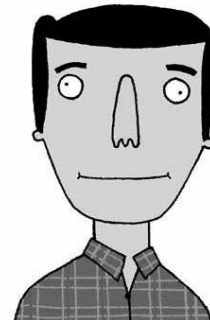
## ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



### MONICA BURNS

*Pages: 10, 13...*

is a self-taught illustrator from Scotland. Her trade is digital artwork and illustration for commission. Visit her on Facebook: [facebook.com/pages/Monica-Burns-Freelance-Illustrator/521947571279074](https://facebook.com/pages/Monica-Burns-Freelance-Illustrator/521947571279074)



### REZA FARAZMAND

*Page: 29...*

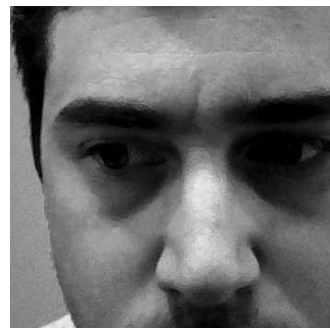
draws comics and writes things. You can find more of his work at Poorly Drawn Lines ([PoorlyDrawnLines.com](http://PoorlyDrawnLines.com)), which is updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A collection of his cartoons titled *Poorly Draw Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories* debuts on October 6th.



### KATELIN KINNEY

*Pages: 2, 15, 30...*

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: 36-37...*

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



### KYRA WILSON

*Pages: Inside Front Cover, 21, 24, Back Cover...*

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





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KURA