

THRICE

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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 24 Notes – RW Spryszak, Editor



Can we please do away with “isms” now? Please. Let’s make a parade of things that follow no isms. Call them isn’ts.

If the world teaches anything to anyone who is listening long enough it’s that trying to make a concrete program or explanation for the conceits and prejudices held by a coterie of artificial wizards is a dangerous game. Same from either end of the political spectrum. Deceitful in language and intent. Stalin and Hitler two matching ends from different origins on the mobius strip of political thought. Thought. So-called.

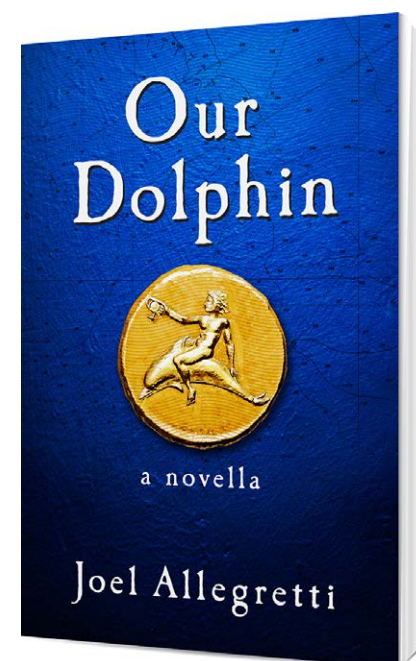
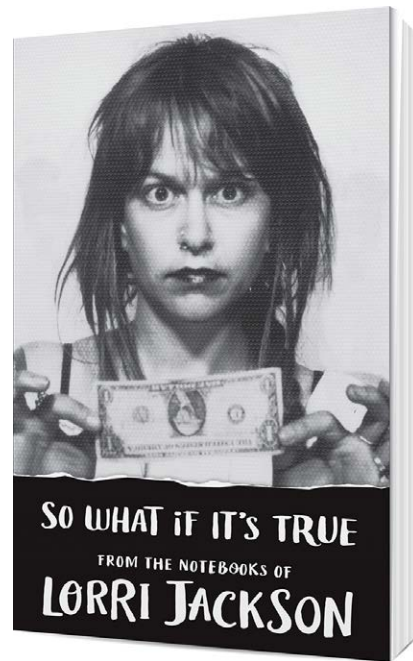
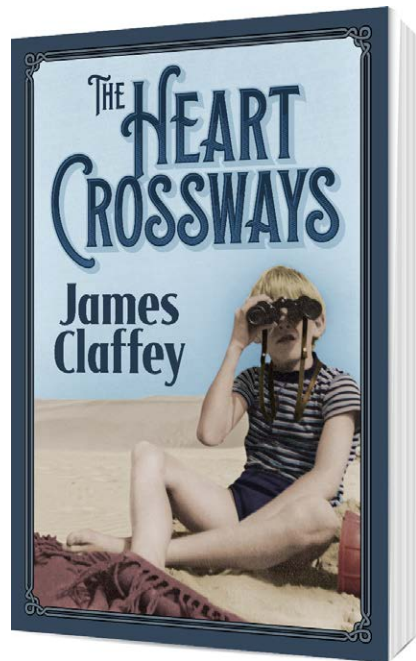
The basis of “isms” is power no matter which way you dissect it. And the definers of the ism hold all the cards. Adhere to the principles set forth by those in the know and you’ll be safe. Strive to be one of them and you’ll get a warm sense of satisfaction as the lower orders bow to the will of knowledge and the holders of all the cards. Vary your wind-up just a little and you can expect a torrent of vitriol and threat. Like gang leaders with secret signs. Stealth politicians who vote their raise the minute they are in office. Promises of utopia and understanding from liars and thieves. Hipster editors with an unintelligible dogma. Ismists and dogmatists and rats oh my.

So, we’ll let this issue fly. Find out who is reading and who isn’t. There are no rules. Take it as it comes.

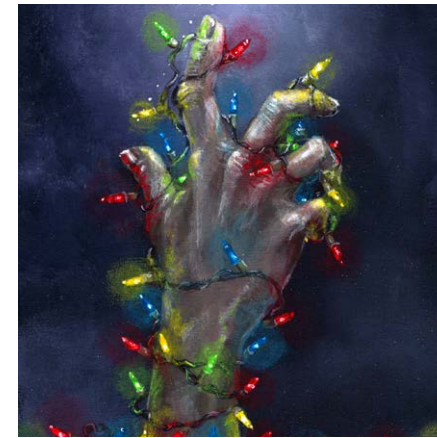
We no longer trust anything that ends in i-s-m. All hail nihilism.

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Christmas Rising

James Gabriel

Nothing stirred but something crept. Past ghosts came to bear, rising on the night of nights, with the jolly fat man riding sleigh and somewhere, someone ate the cane of Christmas past.

Ghosts rose never ascending from boxes carefully wrapped and tucked neatly away, hidden in corners overgrown with trees and weeds. Tied bows shook the dust from memories that writhe in the stink of must and decay. Knockers wailed names of those chosen to witness repercussions of unclean deeds, done in the stale silence and dead cold of ancient eves. Mice steeled themselves away in the glow of a nose that sought life for its own sake, ending the clank of monkey chimes and stopping the toots of trains as decorated bulbs quietly dim and fade to darkened colors of frozen glass.

The lights are off. No one is home. The house is dead.

Carolers do not sing songs having long departed deserted lanes. Footprint impressions fill with snow to cover jagged impressions with perfect sheets of white fluff, and hide the sharp edges in ice. Muddled prints tell tales of those passing on streets and footpaths leading to back doors locked and closed. Dwellings without lights of invitation are forced by the scavengers of Christmas present to aid the bells toll for occupants in residence, and release their last visage of frozen smoke into the air.

Grown out of fear on the eve, the crunching of boots signal danger and warns of an unfriendly approach.

It forces its way through locks and barriers of innocence once torn and left; now scarred and tarnished with the rot of a sacred trust betrayed. Faces rise, hidden behind wreaths of tinsel while the pine scratches away tears with needles that leave permanent lines.

It comes disguised and cloaked as memory both real and imagined, once upon a daydream vision of a nightmare happening. Splitting the frozen earth that trembles in the quake, it rises. It digs itself up with finger-nailed claws covered with the dirt and grime of the future gatherings, already contaminating past and present for all times.

And in the aura of its heat, children cry and bleed. ↻



JAMES GABRIEL is a true Creolian writer and performer who legend tells, lives, works and plays deep in the California wastelands. He is the author of ten novels and short story compilations of the odd and uncanny, a smidgen of which are available for you to download from Amazon. He is the creator and co-writer of the one person show “Heavy Like the Weight of a Flame,” Official Selection of the 2011 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Winner 2010 “Best Solo performance” NYC’s HOLA Awards, Winner NYC’s “The ONE Festival, Nominee 2010 LA Weekly Theater Awards for “Best Solo Performance.” He is currently working on a new novel and musical. Visit James online at www.lickablewallpaper.wordpress.com



Fixing Memory

Soramimi Hanarejima

After you watch me storm off, you remain seated on the park bench. There's one more thing you need to do here.

You uncap the little canister of memory fixative that you bring everywhere. Generously you spray fixative on your newly formed memory of the argument we just had, to lock all the details and emotions in place. So you'll be able to clearly remember the incisive points you made and exactly how prescient you've been about metaphor being the last cognitive bastion of humanity in a world awash with artificial intelligence. So you can mentally continue to build your case as well as attack mine, preparing a repertoire for our next round of verbal sparring.

But to your surprise, I relent. The next day, I tell you over the phone, "You're right. Complex literary metaphor isn't as algorithmically assailable as I had thought."

You grin at my concession, then again at the memory you've preserved. No longer needed to thwart my rhetoric, it can serve as a souvenir of triumphant argumentative prowess, like a debate tournament trophy.

The memory becomes, however, more a source of negativity than pride—a reminder of how horrible we were to each other. The fixative has preserved all that concentrated spite—mine in the form of shouted words, yours visceral as pounding heat across your face.

In the following days, you turn condescending and

self-righteous towards me. When we see each other in the office and have happy hour drinks with friends, you make snippy remarks about my personal life, disparaging my recent dates, food choices, spending habits and taste in art. No chitchat topic is safe from your sarcastic wit. It's uncomfortable, but no one calls you out on it; no one wants to make things amongst us more uncomfortable. I chalk it up to a moodiness you just need to get out of your system.

Your better self though knows exactly what's going on and is alarmed by how much the memory you've solidified has warped your behavior. She knows that this argument was an aberration—an unfortunate anomaly sparked by the touchy subject of strong AI, then fueled by character flaws forged in the hormonal crucible of adolescence: your need to be right, my inability to remain calm when emotional triggered, your tendency to retaliate against perceived disrespect. And now this one clash of our foibles has become the dominant force shaping our time together. She knows what you should: if it ever was, this memory is no longer useful.

So your better self moves the hardened memory to the back of your mind, where she gets to work chipping away at its petrified form. Once faults form, large chunks should crumble away, but if needed, she will break it apart fleck by fleck. So the argument can be forgotten; so you will no longer be anchored to the incidental episode of acrimony we unwittingly steered ourselves into; so we can unabashedly need each other in the future. ↻



SORAMIMI HANAREJIMA is the author of *Visits to the Confabulatorium*, a fanciful story collection that Jack Cheng said "captures moonlight in Ziploc bags." Soramimi's recent work has appeared in various literary magazines, including *STORGY Magazine*, *Pulp Literature* and *The Esthetic Apostle*.



The Conscious Giver

Madiha Khan

A cigarette while it rains in Detroit. The GM building looms like a sleeping pill on Sunday. The sky is gray and so are my hands. Alone, alone, this January I begin alone. A body in the process of decay, smelling like wet pavement, like a stunted seed that still manages to bloom in the gutter.

In the new year, I let the words seep into my soul like honey liqueur on my tongue.

Solitude tastes like salty wine.

Blushing in the wind, I collapse under the weight of the student loans.

Kafka would smile.

No order, there is no method here. I am letting the words drip off my mind because there is still an hour left before class and the law is a foul beast that drains my spirit away. Rules rules we are all composed of particulate rules, of phonemes and of ones of zeros. A computer inside a flesh prison. An operating system based on neuronal pathways. If I burn the bridges between the synapses that remember you, will I still I wake with the fragrance of your sleep buried in my mouth?

I am sorry that you could not swallow my sadness. It is what it is (I did love you, and I am not ashamed of it this morning).

I understand. My depression is hard for many people to swallow. It tastes like soggy wool and clings to your lungs like a sticky tar, coating all your breaths in spongy heaviness. I cannot support my own breath these days, so I do not fault you for leaving to find someone to support yours (the stinging is a numbing and the numbing is a gloaming now).

My mother tells me the only way out is to give away love. She is Allah's child, an eternal oasis of warm milk before bedtime and cardamom chai before sunrise (and one day I will make her proud). Mecca's messenger, moored on the southernmost corner of Canada with Urdu under her tongue and skin as brown and patient as her prayers. All my

words belong to her just like her words belong to her mother and her mother's words belong to my great-grandmother and so on and so forth. We carry our ancestors in our DNA and genetic codes are an inescapable rule of law so does it really surprise you that my words are not my own?

There are many things that I still have to learn before I die. That is what I tell myself every morning when I am nauseous with regret at waking up. There is so much language and snow and chocolate and cellos left for me to taste. I have yet to bow my head to the mountains in Kashmir and I still have a cousin Karachi whose smile I have yet to capture in adequate English words. These are today's reasons and even breathing just a little right now it okay because at least it is something.

•
There is a different taste to my aloneness this year. Last year, I flinched away from it. This year, I revel in it. I chain smoke on the steps outside the law library and let myself be. It is delicious to not fight it anymore. To accept that sometimes you have to protect your soul from other people because it feels like you will melt into a sadly nervous puddle before the conversation is through.

I try not to struggle with it anymore. I have let them all go, I let everyone leave with a smile and a shake of my head. I remind myself that everything changes and that now is not an accurate representation of not-now and that indulging in fantasies of back-thens and what-ifs are a drain on my breathing.


Above all, I try to support my own breath these days. On my tongue, there is the taste of sea salt and moonlight. Always, I am eating moonlight. I store it up in my cheeks every night and each day, I try to give away pieces of it to people that need the moonlight more than I do. On the corner of Jefferson and Larned, I give it away in the form of all my Marlboros to a man with diamond eyes and shaking hands. Later, while the professor is soliloquizing about limited liability partnerships, I think about sleeping on the

sidewalk in the middle of snowstorm and I want to cry.
I left my childhood house when I was 8 but at least I still have a home (my mother). There is moonlight in my mother and sunlight in my little brothers, and although my father’s depression consumes a billion lumens of light per day, there is always enough light left to get by.

Sometimes I think back to the person I was last week and I get dizzy with shock. How is it possible to change so much so fast and yet still stay the same?
How is it possible to be so sad and yet still feel the spirit inside me dancing?
(and let the spirit dance a while)

My mind is full of electricity and old dusty memories and half-full cups of grandma’s fragrant cardamom chai and the smell of old vetiver in the morning rain. My GABA levels are depleted so I take Russian powder help me feel alright. On Mondays, I take a pink pill, on Tuesdays it’s the Russian powder again, and the rest of the week consists of nights shrouded with heavy purple indica smoke.
Tingling and fizzing in my brain and pale sunlight that clings so softly to the winter trees.
Dead baby birds litter the ground.
The gutters are backed up from melted snow and rotten squirrel flesh. Brown blood in the cracks on the sidewalks and an abundance of darkness colouring the afternoon sky.
Even music sounds dim and that is the hardest thing to accept on the bad days.

I have spent more time in my life fighting against the current than flowing along with it. I was born with my head and feet switched, my sense of direction was swindled from me by defective neurotransmitters.
But what right do I have to complain? As far as I can tell, the history of my father’s family is a history of fighting upstream against a disease that never stops stalking you, like that prolific pedophile in our neighborhood back in Karachi. It ate away my grandfather’s body until he was nothing but a ragged man-doll shrouded in smoky white robes. Every day, I see it eat away morsels of my father’s soul so that he is left as dense and collapsed as a black hole. One day, my father will be ravaged so profoundly by this beast that there will be nothing but his shoes and his reading glasses left. I will find his empty shell slouched over his desk, still working away on his taxes, trying to chase away the unnamable disease with the infallibility of numbers.
I pray that I do not find him hanging from the ceiling.
And if he must, then let me be the one to reclaim his flesh and let Allah spare my mother from the burden of



MADIHA KHAN is a law student and writer from Windsor, Canada. Her work has previously appeared *Literary Orphans*, *BlazeVox*, *Broken Pencil Magazine*, and *Nepantla: An Anthology Dedicated to Queer Poets of Color*.

cleaning up after our ancestral grief yet again.

In Urdu, we do not have one word for depression. We have many.

Stoned night thought: children are like existential time bombs for hope.

The first seven years of a child’s life will profoundly affect the person they might become and what actions they will take over the next seventy years of their lives. You can plant a light seed and it might one day plant its own light seeds and they will one day plant their own light seeds and so on and so forth.

Children are the only non-violent and most obvious answer I can think of right now.

An Occam’s razor of biology.

Still, there is still so much suffering for my sisters to the east.

And too much still for my sisters to the west.
(pools of blood underneath her childhood bed and at night the windows would not stop shaking)
May Allah give them the strength to transverse their sharp, sharp lives.
(in a barren wasteland of torn wombs bloomed a seed that grew to be a mighty oak)

This reality is one of many.

There must be thousands of unlived life simulations waiting to unfold.

There must. Otherwise, I think I might die of unhope.

But still.
Even on the darkest days.
The more I give away, the lighter I feel.
Mashallah, there is always enough (moon) light.



Other Cities, Other Pillars

Anthony Acri

wc:4867.
REQUIUM FOR SHELLY.

2.

I have funded a smallish decent apartment to the magazines swells horrors, in Brooklyn, with ancient latin widow, in a rooming house easy from what I thought of as a boy was a great metropolis one of these heroic besting caped men in Dore Duvalls pulps, where men in Hercules airs and overarming capers flew about in Walter White’s comic genius, but I have come to see it as less of an oz and more of an unraveling Americana Baghdad. I got home, became naked, and went into the toilet, at a windshield sized Mirror and saw I was fatter than I liked to be, but all in all was a medieval prince at heart, that could intimidate the literatti and in laws of a rag like this that had somehow let me in, all because I caught the eye of that aging beauty queen, who was still petty, and yet to become as all older beauty queens do, become sad.

I saw myself as readied to get into an older sort shower, and go to bed, and said aloud, Oh did you, dumb wop, did you think that you were actually going to trash the great Prairiea, the way they did with our own hated fathers race...? Did you, I said out loud, d as the water came drizzling in from a rusted nozzle, You, I said A dumb fucking wop, actually think that...? Shit...with that I neared the shower, again felt bigger than I should have been. I have been recalling when a large white nun who looked like a mother superior, you know, SHULTZUE! ANN B DAVIS, now sadly in a sewer of a show called the Clansey Clan or some such thing, about the step famiels all Jewish hacks like those named Sherwood wish, now straight off of I married Joan, or Harrigan’s island, wish to

always get into. She, the nun, who took an interest me as a future Jesuit sort, signed me of to go to young Jesuit hoe downs, like where id meet Dick Thornbergh, Jody Powell, Ham Jordan, Dick Caligeri, we weren't all Copula spear chuckers then, how I met HHH and Mondale and as a boy, Eugene McCarthy, as he came through town at the sons of Italia, both no longer there and these feral weeds that Daphne the queen has allowed much of his base to fall back to, and shook his hand noticing how he smelled of Brut or something like it and had bluer eyes than any polish girl I ever did ever knew. I was demeaned for saying then that in the age of it's a bird It's a plane it's Uberman!and That Girl! then juts on ABC, as things would get worse, he'd be the next president by some blond boy loving fatso teacher named Mr Bianco, who was as a good Democrat, meaning he was a Kennedy man and thus a company wop as pop called him, all the way, yeah good luck with that, old man I said, you really then should have left Nixon alone with the rites of your decency, it was already spreading on to me than, shouldn't have laid it so thick , if you thought that pig was getting in, which sued him to slap me in the face playfully, or not so much, yes, but now by 1972 the third brother was still nothing but a senator of ghosts, with the occasional rape thrown in. My father when heard this was quite upset ,but did nothing, certainly not as the boat lifters crowds constantly demanded things changed and re-changed in ways i guess seen only by Hispanics and Jews now, knowing that this Bianco was nothing more than a laborer actually under him at Alcoa, but did ask his aged old country friend, old Patsy, cousin of Manderino, to make sure that this fat blond boy wooer understood if he ever touched his uncles kid again, he'd be lost somewhere in the tin that was making a Greek in town a fortune, and which thus threw away demolished cars no never wondered what was in. ah America America, that Rome that never was, and will never be again, as that Imperial curriculum, a black Cadillac, and Father Dore said, ran out of gas...

See, again as the Auger, you destroy NIXON AND BELEIVE me you better go to Assisi to find the next praetor, cause outside of few crime families who see the for power like cartoons villains, nobody will take those ruins... but then, when a boy saw the liberals queens of the church saying after Nixon, that the democrats would be in power for thirty years and my father shaking his fedoraed Al Capone like head, and saying seeeesh in Italian, Are these queers in for it...

I THINK BACK TO THOSE IMPIRIAL GOLDEN AGE DAYS, already something seems so eerily backwards and lost, we are all roman clowns seated in the solarium, awaiting a long dark age, with make up on, and sweaty lives, we think of that lost Antonia, and how I couldn't do it...knowing the Barton the faerie sorts, and even Ovid loving studenti that were out there, i couldn't go through with it, disappointing my father, again, but not so much he made me not, or made me do anything, as knew when one's heart isn't in it, it isn't worth doing. I think of SISTER Matilda, from another school no less, made me sign up for these young shyster setups, where I'd meet Tribesmen and radical types, so believe me I've seen the apple polisher

before, and they were always hated, showing again what a hole Vietnam blew in the side of a side empire.

Seeing muscles more as fat, finally my fleshedness with no suit of cotton armor as a suit to chain me in, else, dark hair only on my torso and legs, all the sight of a leg breaker in one of those Glissando movies, the race has had to endure as somehow the view from the bridge ,as have every ugly Italian butcher lost its sweetness, and yet, intriguing to white girls in ways no brethren of mine are exempt for the proximity to THAT African dick they yearn for, and the needs they have for various minstrel shows. I'd be there in a Saturday morning, again somehow studiously allowed in as despite looking like a thug, the nuns thought me smart, and had no desire to go to any war games recreations against ninnies with four colored pens and sheet protectors and overhead projector slides, ala Jackie Vernon,...here we are the end of the golden age...as was loved by the Jesuits, and not in the sissy boy way that gets you on Nightbeats, or makes you lawyer up for a settlement suddenly from Rome, which were never there when it was just Italian boys they raptured. If had one of your stinking bible believing wops place a snide comment here, Jew-venal, and I'd be stuck there listening to this shit, until just had enough and said that day I refuse to some cunt in ovo telling us about when life begins, easier for the senate even then to do that then, like, legislate, lest name the planets again, and I said out loud I rrrrrrrffuuuusssse to demean myself by having to debate a girl. It's funny because it's true, like yur Sopranos so quickly going into the vault they keep various Premises.

This gits a laugh I believe from the essayist headmaster, as would just laugh at it sssssuooo when saw him try so hard to defeat, of all nudnicks, C. Thomas Durksin as basically said to the CBS screen, encoya as my ma would say. I knew then the boy senator from Delaware so soon after had that ambition that is a impervious fault as he shit down every attempt made by that coon and his women, these pigs in Simplicity patterns and flats, I knew Uncle Tom was destined for marble halls for life, and a son who feared losing power more than hell. So am glad to see the dumb wops my father disparaged and hated so, painted by he as company men, honorable men, with honorable lives who look more scared by the day as only Dore knew how many Jesuits can dance on the head of a subpoena amid where the spiders kept their nests. I am convinced, no one brings up Marcus Aurelius to the fats chicks on television who eat candy bars and the clowns of mars unless they don't have to, ...when the mulligans and the halo goes away, you go away, boy-chick of empire.

So, be bedraggled into this morass, one that alder boy emeritus Bill has been amazingly tardy too and even anywhere near, much like 3 am every night of his marriage, I am enjoying watching the hard sell ethics throwing the wops under their monorail at tomorrow land that never came, as they deserve it so. As instead of another afternoon of instead of a cartoons and a mod batman, a weekly shooting is joyously recorded by the vi-seers of a dying CBS, i watched a grainy Ironside, and one of the ones written by my cop show Virgil ED MCBAIN, and the great

chinnyheri to all fatos, raymond burr, a goon madehero soehowin cicrimspcethollywood asthe menedidinifthere ever understand, and his poetic sneers, again when wops were still para-human, before thirty years of constant diminishment as geraers and juvenale delinquents , which may not work, as again, parallel liens of not lives convene. As poor wops thought everyone would be laughing WITH THEM AS USUAL, NOT THSI TIME, but as the nuns and the brothers who warned me of you so long ago, not that sadly I could ever care, don't know why there's no god up in the sky...but see that cunt there Babs, as such a wise-ass wop, such a yenta, such a dago bitch that the nuns so hated, almost as much as they hated blond chicks, hooooo hooooooo!, again, Parallel liens, As recall when TV had people named Reginald Rose and Neil Simon and Gore Vidal, saw his brilliant Dark play with luminous E. MONTGOMERY, Mortimer Adler and Sam Peckinpah on it, as If I hated the Monstifaiscos and Martin Scoreasy why would I vote for the Kennedy's and the rest of the Borgias who, except I, aren't even that catholic about things, and whose blood wasn't even detergent...?...Like my brother, a gal told me my Romantic admiration for is a mistake,as he isn't that anything, which i said, is sad, as without his copy of Ovid, we are all really fucked. Hey I don't spend 30 years trashing my father's race or buzz the ruins that you barbarians left or anything that would get me on a bigger check long enough to apologize when told, I wasn't doing any mime pr minstrel shows, I was drawing Camilla, and Hercules, and i was reading Virgil.

So, at night make small snack for me and my mentally challenged sister, who as a guest, as company, I have brought with me, maybe as Paulette a payment back to a family, if not the music of the spheres, as made a oath would keep her safe in the new great Byzantium, and somehow was allowed to do this. As no one wept for her, i recall, none called it the this word or that word, when you were laughing at stupid retardo Gumbas did you...? As we recall the once glory days of the empire, as Ovidains do, and went to a cocktail party to introduce me to the chichi and the swells of this raggedy floppy called by Father Dore, the police gazette without the warmth, that has serialized real murders as well as anew found change in the fabric of America in which men write long dis-reputed letters and kiss their .44s as fat bloated newspaperman with the smell of Bourbon and farts making a true crime nonfiction novel nuncioed world around them, who make books about those wops who are so much more vulgar than say the sainted drunken Irish, and saw there, towards the end of that slog of a party run, as the queer jokes became more notchy and the pretty brunette Dixie had to wear an industrial strength push-up as give the suckers what they want ,...I saw the faggot Jerry helper made a Dore Duvall joke. Another Trope for the suite, everyone thinks like Jews do, god knows...

The man who wrote the Pillars of Hercules, Dore, and thus was blackballed by rags who know think they are the Cassius of now, again like with various editors always a check on the Yesiva boys, can laugh and say see Jesuit bitch i am, you can be Cassius, or Jack Paar boys, but seeing the

pink slips starting to fall like Orsons romantic 1871 prairie snow, you can't be both. So on a day that like so much was kept despite its Roman, pagan, roots, I decided after a season without chicken, will attune to a new lent and not eat a can of meat kept here but instead will eat some tuna, and start a new prayer vigil as recall that Turan was the Italian Venus, no not kidding, and the keeper of italic Valkyries, who carried the noble off to Parnassus, again like so much demeaned and degraded to jews in a senate and gunman wops more devoted to bribes THAN HE EVER WAS to anything in your Nobel past, as why would you be and break the chain...? As the pretty Brunette who played Chloe Kane in that musical version of Uberman on ABC lately as had a run on Broadway, when i was a lad would be seen by me here in the fall, as the mistress of aging Shelly, etc., and now seen as inferior to dead ghost Burton Spawn, the as in almost deified here, in that slop, but of curse, in Jew land, he had to with dying breathe have left her, for sexless cold water dishwater blond again monster mother Miranda played for laughs hag who puts on the smoky voice some affected ice-queen named Felicia, what else...? , as that's what they call in on the fly literature land, But not too anything, and certain not like me.

So,stated my career at Knickerbocker magazine, with the same Italic sensibility we alas had despite the smarmy little darkie Glissando who this rag adorers, and yet calls with its best demolition saved for from genuine wizards like Ovid Valentine, cool and detached, and almost agrarian , as a city Gods know, as saw him come in here, seated in the hall to confront some other lady who lunches, some hag, who out down some boxing movie made which didn't have the warmness of say, not only body and soul, from which it was stolen, plagiarism is their biggest swipe at any Italian despite their forefathers living in trees. He was a gypsy there, in a reverse shine, which sickened me stood there cooling his heels... Waiting towhat ...?.get a recantation...? I saw him strangely anti gleaming there in jesuitical black, away ward or laid or mislay-ed priest, whatever now making dead end kids films laced with slurs and swears so that over fed white women think him a genius and a like they looking in too an underworld like girdle wearing Dantes. I said Wop, disgustingly, under my breath but loud enough which made his black bitumen eyes glare up as he was shocked in what Machiavelli called that frozen moment of realization, but I, his enemy and his ante me all through school, bigger and smarter than he, said nothing, as he is a little snitch for a reason. I thought, passing the giant cover from 1922 blowup, or was it from '67, does it matter, a think many of the issues were burned when they were found pushing it here for no war in Peoria, and Bund rally speeches to not oppose Hitler or that Stalin was wonderful, or whatever it was, all those cartoons went up in flames that no one ever got, falling back to earth as confusing soot. I felt I have to save Dixie from these horrid people, and that proprietress at Emilio's too, from the dark manages that are here, left here, the wops, the without papers crowds so different than Continental Italians, which Sardinians to be more the Sicilians, and Sicilian are all that are seemingly here, Calabaian and Ionin and Lucan and umbrian in the hinterlands, they make fun of eagerly

where Italians have been seditious enough to buy homes in that terrain contactable America named for an Etruscan city as much as anything. I have to save the gal who the smart sophisticated Rowan saw walk away and gave her his number. I walked past the gumba emeritus to my desk and sat down.

After the heedfully dull cocktail party, in which my disdain, or at least worst than that my un-impressedness of the nest there was sensed by them, as they can sense everything as an insult, As I was the hallowed sainted hallways where light is a commodity as power like paper and ink costs money, as radicalism does have its incompetents, I walked past the unfunny drawings. I was there amid the painted, hated sometimes parodies, no Mud was this, too as left right us and sanctimonious for mere Roman satire, I stood there, as out of his office came Menschie Shelly, with always nervous tricky smile. He looked at me as if neutrally lost and then clutched his cut dick, no fooling, his dick, like was kicked there, as I stood back, wondering if his zipper had somehow turned against him. He groaned and fell to the grind in wincing pain. I went to get some help, meaning Dixie, as, she was all I really knew here. So, he seemed to, as he died there, to rather than die than go back to West-port and a dutiful, cold, blond wife, after he, a Jewish dream, had a mistress that was carried by Uberman, Herculean of the cold war, Samson of the nuke age. He couldn't, on some level, go back to Chesterton stop on the trains, and taillights, and game rooms, dead schools next to buzzing funeral homes, mobsters in Elbas whose crimes will be visited on children who wanted no part of them, as opposed to, like, the men who took Oklahoma, and Sucrets and leis, and eves, and Jewish wives as ewes, and interiors, and perturbing, preening, to be a Lateran, or tiring still to be into golf clubs, where he was irreparably as bad ass a wop like me. He crumbled, it seemed to me, as tried to held him up, as dixie, true to her Sardinian witch creed, that would appeaser those who read the cannon of a Penny dreadful writer held in Victorianism magazines and somehow thought of Ovid as a poet of empire, as she told me to keep his head up, and not let it fall backwards, lest he be dead, her using some sort of magic taught to Sardinians when Caesars tax men appeared at the sandstone gates.

I held him there, as was on my ass and knees and this older Jewish gentleman, for such is the short time I knew hum what he was, was lying back, in pain of some sort, but couldn't or wouldn't tell me what. I gazed into his office ,and there was the cover of a Roman book, blown-up, and made into a print, of generous renaissance figures, dedicated by Apollo, just as I had thought when saw Dixie at the restaurant remove her outer vestments peeled away, and with them, a dollop of in vino veritas as she out placed a Mediterranean fellow, but what interviews takes place at restaurants where Jews are allowed,...?.She came out of her office, as a perfect Della Figura, in dea upkeep had finery and carrying it off as well as a Caesar, with silent aplomb, the short haired brunette who made her flouncing hair into a black brown anti-halo was wearing a blue, classic, business suit, the kind with bows in the covered and yet shape hugging front, and her slightly chubby and delightful

Nymphet in the lake, legs where encased in Leggs nylons, and poured into expressible white leather hoes, made by the poor old lady's in Rivas for a slave owner still allowed, by name of Gucci. SHE WAS THE ESSCANE OF THE PRE CHRISTIAN, CERTALY PRE LUTHER, WOMAN, before the Romans dress of the women in that Print, that I'd need to ask his son Lenny if we could keep there, maybe, as she showed what was replaced by the unoriginal Hijab, the nun of Monza brown sackcloth habit. I held his had up as she summed to know what she was talking about from some N'gratti, the Sardinia mob, which has, more than anything been an italic people less willing to accommodating to invaders as say the more famous and cartoonish Sicily has been. She, strangely, for a swell, took out a rustic necklace, a peremptorily to the Rosaria of her grandmother, and Dixie prayed diligent for the soul of the Jewish man, who was dying here under ironically a carton of a Mew Amsterdam overly etiquette elite in the age of Ragtime.

She mumbled some prayer in Cataolian, to 'Michel ', though it wasn't to Shelly as much as to the only Catholic saint, Micheal, who was an aspect was Hercules enough to be superimposed in these Italian Angles. Even in this distraught state she was georgiois, and stylish and the essecane of the kind of woman that the redhead Gertrude beloved, and that the old biddies of English lit dispraised, and i wondered how she had gotten in, at all, as noted to where her dispatcher came, and too that print of the Roman salon on his wall. I held him up, we both sweaty now, a large Italian man behind and beneath this longer losing Jewish man, as we had become an American Pieta that old ladies who lunch would be against, even as late as new years' day, Romantically speaking, 1972. He couldn't go back to Westchester, west-port, West egg, wherever, he couldn't, as I saw looking past hem, befittingly, that print that fat women here would call kitsch, the cover of a copy of Martial, I think. He, almost pacifically, hit the rug dead, I just sensed, as Barton raced away, faggily, to be unseen the rest of the day, as some fags round here can sense they are in some crossbars, as it were, and with a dying utterance a tsk was heard by me as I tried to held up his head and calm him some, as if this gonnif at the end knew exactly what that sniggering little twit fairy was, all along, and ths just confirmed, as it were, it. And I thought it almost an indiscretion to see this be-speckled juttred Jewish man, would rather die, than be an in law yet-again, as he after the classic Girl reporter, he couldn't go back...who would...?

This began as my life at the Knickerbocker, where copy boy fags bite and mean, and editors feel their eve veils coming apart, as no one ever asked or made the me a management striver, did they. A city of Trimalcio's exists here, a Satyricon with gas stations signs reading Esso in halo-ween colors instead of statues of Minerva, where Apollos are pictures of Namath on walls, where the sky as seen in renaissance paintings is a predicable gray, as between hating Romans, the Moma opens up weeks devoted to an centurion's found chariot, and in a painting made with black inks, the only Roman girl in all ways is the shining pink skinned Sardinian gal, and in comes the pretty dago maid as in the musical doing a revival on

Broadway, holding a silver dish as a Roman reference made alive amid the Grecian gray daily news photographed world. AS I WAS AFFABLE WITH SHELLY, and he saw me as a fellow ethnic amid the white trash who thought they were so shirtsleeve literate when telling us all what cowboy books they'd burn this week but leave the true crime shelf they helped create alone as they do books on the mafia, codes all, I was invited to his funeral, even as a low level staffer. So, perhaps this was due to my laird Angel, Dixie, who I said, sat there in a Synagogue so reformist it might's well been a Chautauqua tent, I saw the equally stunning Mistress enter, a scene pithy of the painted figures of that cover, causing the old biddy blond and her gay son to Kqvell, as she'd say with her picking up Yiddish as spoken by a Brahman's mouth. I was stoned to see the Mistress come on, but then, that cover of Marital wasn't by accident. How do I explain the sight is a whether in a Synagogue SO BEFREIT of Judaica, it might as well been are civic center, as poor Shelly was Charon-ed across the muddy old man Lathe riverboat by a man named "Rabbi Denny"...? I saw her come in, under exploited orders from Shelley as the Wasp cycle wife's eyes glared with anger at this, and not he'd that and not that her husband was dead, at all. She looked out with eyes begetting the queen of ice people and was blown away by the sight. How do I explain her ...? the mistress and believed I have been taken of the older man that through mere guile tunneled his sway into the colony of the middlebrows. She was irresistibly sharp, a living Vargas I upstart as she, here, I watched her, she in not necessary black clothing, as that would be too UN-hip and too mob funeral for the perfect thighs of Shelley's little chickadee. To explain her well, as am told I am more metric and poetic by some, at this stuff than they would have thought, or frailty liked as all Times and other rags try to teethe pure at the forth fade level, yu see, my weekly reader and Hemingway touchstones, when one has to pay a cent a word, as they call everyone an idiot and a goy fool, but then, that self-delusion has been at work since Marcus Agrippa, the first and saddest of Jewish in laws, showing it never works. She was an image of teal and a nuanced, to barrow a word often used in Plautus, as a Circe, in a suit now perhaps more expensive than anything that the wife had, why she married a Jew, I'm sure her kin will never understand, as he was a chancre and a bounder, and found a pedigreed mistress, who in fact was from a retailer and more socially meaningful family, as her being in things like "it's a bird, it's a plane, its Uberman!," as a perfected new Phyllis Coats, as Chloe Kane, or 2 rms Rv vw with Pauley Provolone, was a sincere lark ,as she came from a family to whom the blond hag and her handsome son, the fairy

,Leonard, were riff raff. She eclipsed the part of mistress with one stance, as she looked like a starlet around now, a woman prettier than most of the hags that Hollywood puts out there, god knows, a character actress, meaning she can actually act, who looked much like her named Kim Hunter, who was the gal we all adored in the ragged swimsuit with Heston in the planet that went ape. She was that pretty, a Wonderlass amazon sort, and know I knew what made Shel will himself across the styx, rather than return to the impure rooms and the sub urbae located death, where that her lover is with either dead or retired to his wife, dutifully as a geisha husband must. Poor gone Shelly, I thought, perhaps, I'd give that lovely brunette, shining to that older hag's distress, a few pews and some self-imposed caste system rungs away from me, as she glimmered in a fox stole and a hat worthy of MGM in its heyday. Bless your soul, Shell, I said half aloud, Himmmm, that you couldn't go back to the ruins of new Rochelle and the quiet blood sport there, a Jew to the end, there was one last Jew in Westchester, and I think he was the better for it. He had to disavow, as his sort must, so, I'd give pretty Leslie Ann-Kim here, a call and see if she's alright, and I'm not sure a Romans satirist is what a magazine this in love with itself was ok-ing for me to come here to be, without crossing any Trojan bridges. ☹

Written on 21-27 April 2018, on Kingsoft Word Processor.



ANTHONY ACRI is a Cartoonist and writer who lives in the suburbs of Pittsburgh Pa. His idea of art and life changed completely due to his exposure to two Italian masterworks, the collected drawings of Leonardo, and the pictures of Patrica Fairinelli, Playboys last great brunette bunny, miss January 1981. Visit him online at antoniusradiocomix.blogspot.com



Children of Survivors

Miriam Sagan

Tamara lay naked on her stomach on Chaim's futon. Late November Boston light came through a second story window.

"What happened exactly?"

He was half turned away from her, pale skin, curly black hair. They'd broken up over a month ago but were still fucking each other, with the aid of half a gram of coke wrapped in tin foil, a present to Chaim from his current girlfriend.

"What happened," he said at last, "is that at Thanksgiving dinner I asked my aunt and uncle how they'd met, and everyone went berserk."

"The aunt who was in Auschwitz? With your mother? The younger one? With nerve damage in her feet who can't walk very well?"

"Neither of them can walk very well," he said. "But my aunt bolted from the table, locked herself in the bathroom, and started screaming. Then my mother went in after her, more screaming, then silence, then a sound like...someone hitting their head against the wall."

"Fuck. But why?"

"They must have killed someone."

"Excuse me?"

"How they met. They kill a dying inmate for half an apple, or steal a blanket, or smother a baby...Tamara, I don't know."

"Maybe they killed a guard."

"Two unarmed teen-agers? I doubt it. Anyway, the meal is ruined, my father gets drunk, my uncle puts his head on the table."

"So the three of them knew each other before, before your father."

"They met him in a relocation camp. He was with the partisans but lied and said he was in a small camp in Poland so he could come to the U.S."

They both looked at the digital clock--getting late. Chaim was pulling on his pants, Tamara her shirt, picking up her flute case.

"I've got rehearsal," she said. Then what she shouldn't

say: "When will I see you again?"

"Close your eyes."

She did.

"Open them."

She did.

"So, you see me again."

She dressed and left, carrying the flute down the wide winding staircase with its smooth banister and velvet tread. Coming up was the new girlfriend, really no prettier than Tamara, maybe a little thinner, with a gold cross around her neck.

The two women passed in silence. Tamara paused at the threshold of the door of the apartment building. She had no idea of her future, or that life would actually be kind to her. She would some day be first flutist and have a man who loved her and a child and a beautiful black woolen coat to keep her warm in the cities she played in.

She had no idea that she would rarely think of Chaim except for one odd time decades later when she was in the audience of a Phil Glass piano recital and suddenly was transported back in time.

Afterward, the woman behind her--dark, elderly, with a thick Spanish accent--asked, as if a fortune teller: "What were you thinking about? You looked so...not romantic... what is the word...nostalgic."

There seemed no answer but the truth: "I was thinking about betrayal," Tamara said. "about people who might be happy but are not. I was thinking about the children of survivors."

"Are you one?"

"No."

"I wad a child in the Basque country during the civil war," the woman said, turned and vanished as if she had not been real at all.

This was yet to come. For the moment, she shivered and stepped out into the Boston dark, the approaching winter night. ☾

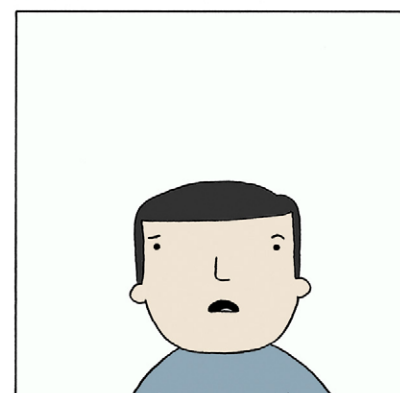
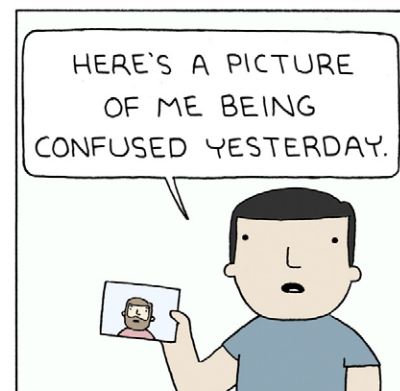


MIRIAM SAGAN is the author of 30 published books, including the novel *Black Rainbow* (Sherman Asher, 2015) and *Geographic: A Memoir of Time and Space* (Casa de Snapdragon), which won the 2016 Arizona/New Mexico Book Award in Poetry She founded and headed the creative writing program at Santa Fe Community College until her retirement in 2016.

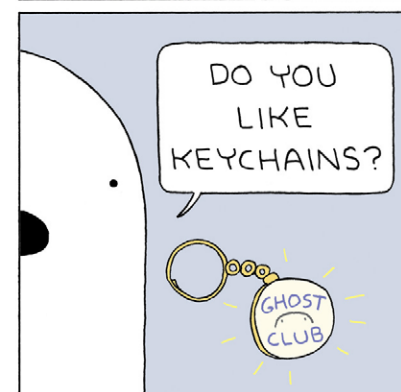
Poorly Drawn Lines

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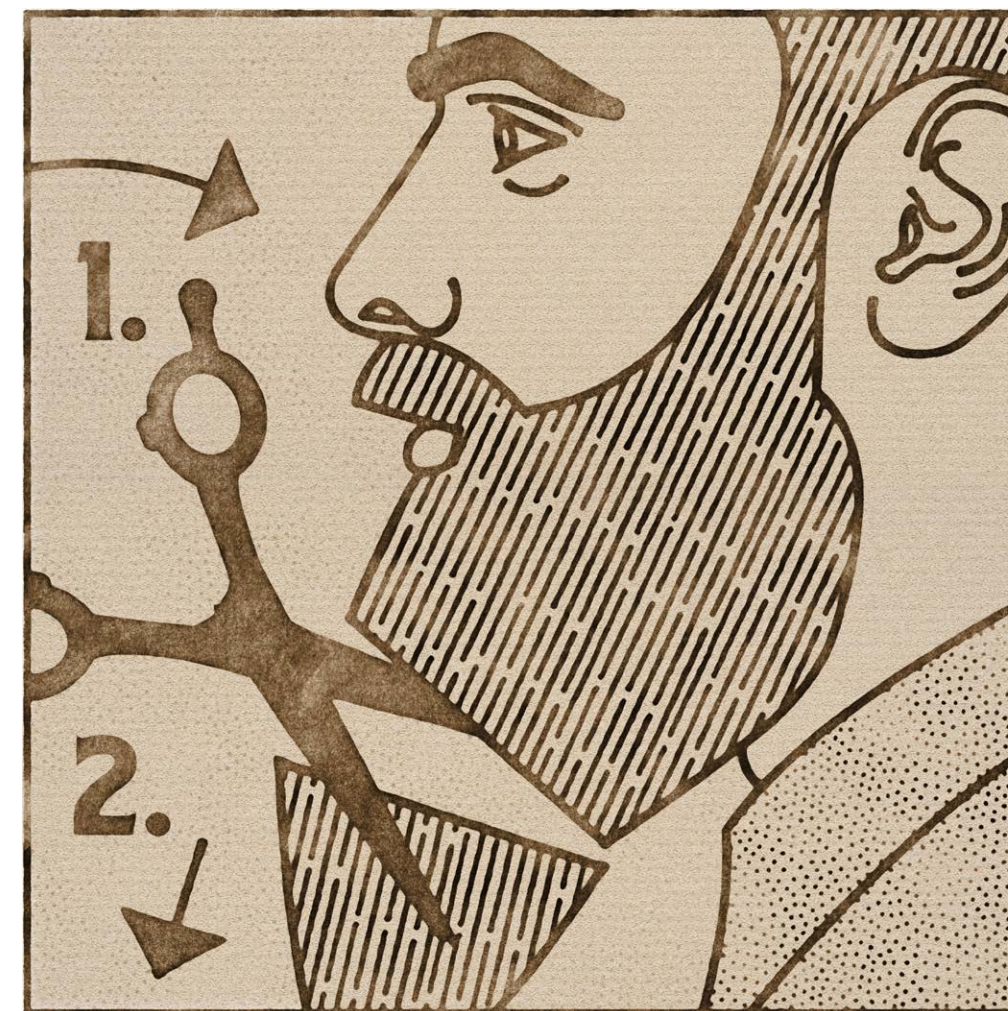
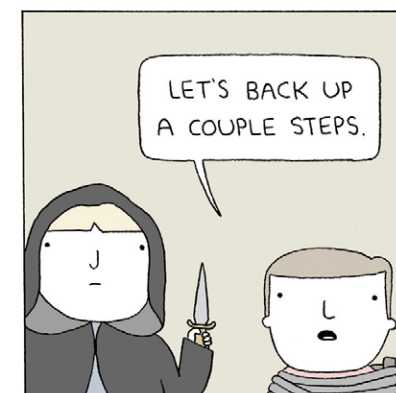
CONFUSED



GHOST CLUB



GOOD WITH PEOPLE



Loneliness for taste

dNeQ

He woke up from the alarm buzzing. He took out alarm clock and turned it off. He got out of bed and began to make it. After, he came to the closet and took his suit. He looked strangely at the suit and laid it on the bed. Then he went to the bathroom where he washed himself. When he looked in the mirror he saw that he was not shaved. Touching to his beard he wanted to shave but changed his mind. Turning off the water, he returned to the suit. He put on the suit and the last time looked in the mirror. The suit on it sat as well as then. He looked at himself for a long time in the mirror, suddenly he turned around, went to the door, stopped, looked at the apartment and went out closing the door with the key.

He went to the dining room where gave delicious food. Opening the door went inside, where nearly all places were free. He sat down in the corner.

- As always? - asked the waiter.
- Yes, but with red wine, please, - he answered.

It was still early. There were a couple of people in the dining room. The waiter brought food and wine. After he put the money on the table and left.

There were no visitors in the hairdressing salon, there were only hairdressers, who were talking about something. When he came in they stopped talking. One of the hairdressers got up.

- Please, sit down here, - said the hairdresser. He sat down where he showed the hairdresser.

- What to do? - said the hairdresser.

- Just if you can cut my hair, - he answered.

The barber nodded without saying anything. He looked himself in the mirror.

- You can also shave my beard, - he said.

- Of course, - answered the hairdresser.

While the hairdresser was preparing a shaving foam, a young man came to the barbershop. The young man was tall, thin with long hair and strangely dressed. He held a strange thing in his hands. His attention from a young man was distorted by the hairdresser who wanted to apply foam to his face. A young man asked another hairdresser.

- Can I sit here? - asked young man.

He sat down at the table without waiting for an answer. He looked through the mirror towards the young man. The young man took out a tablet from his bag and began to do something. He continued to look attentively at the young man. Suddenly the young man lifted his sleeve and he saw that the hand was all in tattoos. The hairdresser did not foam his face for the second time and another hairdresser approached the young man. The hairdresser of a young man gathered his hair and he saw that the young man in the ear has an earring. The hairdresser of a young man cut his hair a little and added some liquids to his hair.

- Finished, - said hairdresser.

The hairdresser took off his “tablecloth “. He got up from his chair, thanked the hairdresser, gave the money and left the barbershop. The hairdresser who had already shaved began to cut his hair, but he did not pay attention to it, he continued to look through the glass onto the street where the young man was standing. Suddenly the car approached and stopped in front of the young man. The car was black and with dark glasses. He continued to look. There was an alarm. The driver’s glass opened slightly. The anxiety on his face became more, but the alarm decreased when he saw that the back door of the car opened and a young girl ran to the young one. The young man put the tablet in his bag and hugged the girl. He hugged and raised her.

Hairdresser finished cutting his hair. He saw through the glass that a woman came out of the car. She kissed the young man and the girl. All three of us got into the car, the woman got behind the wheel of the car. The car joined the traffic and vanished.

The hairdresser finished cutting it. He got up from the table and took out money from his pocket and gave it to the barber.

- Thank you, - he said.

He put on the top of his suit. He wanted to say good-bye, but someone entered the barbershop and he silently left. Stood for a while on the street, looked at the cars that were rushing somewhere. He stood still a little bit and walked.

He stood with flowers in front of the grave. He could have stood for so long, but his attention was distracted by the car, that passed by. He put the flowers in a vase and sat on a bench. He looked at the picture on the stone and tears

went from the eyes. He sat like that for a couple of minutes, tears themselves stopped.

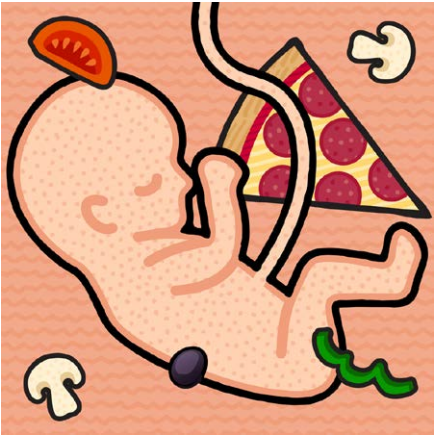
- Hi, happy birthday to you, - he said out loud. He paused for a few minutes and spoke again.

- You know, today I saw a nonsense and I want to share with you. I was at a hairdresser and there saw a young person, who dressed strangely, he had an earring in his ear, and on his nose, and on his arm were tattoos. He was holding a strange thing in his hands. He had a wife and a child. You know, the world has changed a lot. Yes, it has changed a lot. People say that the youth has changed a lot. Everything is lost. You know, now women drive cars. You know, what I understood today, no matter how the world has changed, youth, while they know that in this world the main is family. Nothing was lost.

He again said nothing. He got to his feet and said.

- It’s hard for me to sit here alone. I’ll come to you in a week, can come forever.

He approached the drawing of his wife and kissed her. Again, tears went. He left her alone, turned his back on her and left. 🌀



Mountain High Pizza Pie

Matthew Dexter

Adam’s carving a bong for Bubblegum Swamp Kush and Pineapple Rhino out of a two-liter Sprite bottle. It’s his Saturday night ritual since severing his middle finger chopping frozen hunks of pepperoni. Blue Öyster Cult oozes through the brick oven as fresh boogers melt from scorched mortar. A sticky OPEN sign sways on fingerprinted glass ‘til monotony is muffled by cowbell and four frat boys swagger into the pizza parlor. Two minutes before midnight. They moon me, commandeering the back booth beneath rusty rabbit ears. The television is a dinosaur—collages of coagulated crushed red pepper fossilized between orbits of ancient grease. I smother a smorgasbord of obscenities under garlic breath, swollen tonsils bouncing with beauty of worn punching bags.

“Told you to reverse that window sign,” I say.

“Throw on the gangsta rap,” Adam says.

Adam winks and ambles toward the brick oven. I should be sitting in my shitty Ford Focus puffing a canoeing spliff of Purple Urkle stuffed with chunks of hash.

“Machiavelli, Bobby Shmurda, Biggie,” Adam says.

“Airborne Toxic Event,” I say. “Iron Maiden, The National, Jimmy Buffet.”

Humongous assholes ooze bourbon, reefer, and vomit. I fear the reaper. How close I’ve come to reincarnation. A meathead, a young Drew Carey, waves a bag of cotton candy while his buddies surf fistfuls of fluorescent spun sugar. They survey my tits. I wipe crust crumbs and grated parmesan into my sweaty palm.

“Hi bros, I’m Christina. I’ll be your server tonight. Welcome to Mountain High Pizza Pie.”

I don’t tell them their brothers drugged and made me watch Bill Cosby specials last semester, or mention the fetus scooped from my uterus. The seed I never sought—the one

that looks like them.

“Hey Christina,” say the bros.

I hand them grimy menus. Though I’ve recited it a thousand times, I forget my spiel.

“Hey dudes,” I say.

Adam delivers the obligatory pitcher of Fat Tire. Cotton Candy Bro pours it into frosty pint glasses. Eight eyes in golden froth, eyelashes lost in lather. Adam’s apples bounce between guzzles. Cotton candy bro boasts about “bitches” and begs for another pitcher. Their fists enormous, four billion atoms bounce between “innocuous sexual acts” and “faggots” and “another dirty Sanchez.” Someone exposes a tattooed testicle. The pizza parlor comes to life—converting energy from every grunt—flourishing with the majesty of a ceaseless firefly orgy.

“Girl you look good, won’t you back that ass up?” asks Cotton Candy Bro.

I gaze into the bloodshot sclerae of a juvenile delinquent. Popping Molly and Quaaludes while sipping sizzurp from Styrofoam cups between skinned kneecaps—they’re shitfaced—my studio apartment is infested with roaches and bed bugs—Pepperoni has a humongous tumor on her liver. Poor, one-eyed Pepperoni: my heart and soul. Brothers own this mountain town. Ninety-nine fists full of vaginal discharge, blood, smegma, semen, and swagger. Corona bottles in my anus, flying saucers begging for mercy, golden-necked orbits eclipsing the inertial majesty of airborne pies possessed by the brick oven.

The frat boys stare at my face and fresh hickies in the shape of rabbits running wild. Through Fat Tire goggles, they grunt with satisfaction. My chin is a tic-tac-toe manifesto of zits and xylophones of sweat. Cotton Candy Bro checks my ass with the wisdom of a wild turkey caged. His nipple hairs hang from his tank top. Pancake makeup camouflaging my Siamese pimples crusted from the heat of the brick oven, my skin oily, and the dimly lit pizza parlor makes me into a hot mess.

Pepperoni means everything to me. I accepted this gig to pay for her medicine after giving Adam a hand-job in the walk-in. I couldn’t serve tables at Black Angus ‘til my tits bounced against my belly ring. My veterinarian swears there’s nothing more to do. Canine pain pills aren’t cheap. Neither is Ketamine. Someone needs to mash them into Pepperoni’s meals and rub her tumors as she sits in the shower and stares at the mildew. Pepperoni was there for me after the assault—when my parents and friends abandoned me. Pepperoni didn’t berate me for binge-eating Dominos ‘til I was dead broke. Pepperoni didn’t shun me for guzzling gas station suicides from the beverage fountain or gorging on stolen junk food from my granny panties. Pepperoni licked salt from my wounds when I passed out. Her tongue around my fingers and curled toes, nightmares danced from the frat basement, filling my futon with sweat.

The frat boys know what they want. They always do.

“A big juicy ass pie with everything! Double *all* the toppings! Extra layers of cheese. Another pitcher.”

I tell them this monster pie will cost extra and they smile—a quarter mile from their frat house built by the bootstraps of slaves and bedsprings of statutory rapists.

dN eQ

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Cotton Candy Bro boasts about how he pays more for condoms “weekly” than a sixty dollar pizza. He’s donning a Trojan t-shirt. Tupac grunts from speakers caked in mozzarella. The frat boys belch as I hand their order into the kitchen. A labyrinthine pizza the likes of which I’ve never imagined must be built. Adam smiles and flips the sign on the door.

“We’re closed,” Adam says.

Adam is seeing me naked for the first time. Even if I die now these goons will devour their pie. They’ll eat my pussy like a mother rat feasting on her children in a dilapidated subway tunnel. It takes ten minutes to garnish their monster pizza. The toppings are so obscure we hoard them in the back of the walk-in. I sniff to see if they’re fresh. My nose inside like the brothers who stood trial—lying to the court—buying their freedom with the best attorneys money could bribe.

“Johnny Cochran,” Adam says. “Robin Hood. Baskin-Robbins.”

Adam is donning an apron and Jared Fogle is grinning with the wisdom of an emaciated gremlin from his wife beater.

“Marcia Clark,” I say.

I dice onions, mushrooms, green peppers, artichoke hearts, avocados, pepperoni, sautéed chicken liver, olives, basil, garlic, jalapeños, anchovies, smoked salmon, bacon, sausages, sun-dried tomatoes, roasted eggplants, spinach, broccoli, yellow peppers, cherry tomatoes, zucchini, and a dozen other obscure toppings. The spatula bends as I struggle to hoist it into the oven. There is nothing between me and the frat basement which watches with wayward eyeballs. The brick oven fills with fireflies.

“You shave your balls, brah?” some moron asks.

“Not on the table,” someone says.

Adam winks. Adam is a world-class pervert. He gorges on ribs and does whip-its between bong rips. He’s the manager. I jog to my car to pull a hit of weed. What I see in the backseat is stomach-churning. I carry the extra ingredients inside and chop them.

During the trial, the frat boys wore Eddie the Head t-shirts beneath wrinkled suits. They broke four of my toes during the gang bang.

“Holy shit—that’s fat,” Adam says. “Like your ass.”

I need this job.

“Won’t you back that ass up?” asks the juvenile delinquent.

I listen through brick oven whispers, picking my nose, lullabies of gardens lost. My father hanged himself out of shame. He never looked me in the eyes after I entered that frat basement. Not even in the rear-view when he drove me home from the hospital. Mom found his body. She’s rotting in the psych ward. Swears she’s in the Garden of Eden. Don’t think Mom’s ever getting released. The frat boys got off.

“That smells amazing,” Adam says.

The jury heard everything.

“That pussy reeks of smoked marlin,” says one of the frat boys.

“Pepperoni pie,” says another bro.

The call themselves Band of Brothers, warriors, ultimate Frisbee champions, beer pong legends, defendants, goodfellas. Their attorney leered, jet-black hair in a

ponytail, winging subtle reminders about my personal life. My twin brother never looked me in the eyes. Their lawyer introduced evidence about the dorm debauchery video submitted to the website for the ten grand prize. We didn’t win that money. My body is banging. They played the video in court—blurring the explicit action. The audio was enough. Every objection and contempt only strengthened their case. The jury was instructed to strike those attacks on my promiscuity—but the ball was in their court—doom filled the deliberation—it only took three hours—less than the gang rape. All I see is gaping orifices, puckered lips, beer bongs, and pool cues. That judge and jury had no clues what it smelled like. I admitted to funneling thirteen Coronas and a dozen Jell-O shots. I don’t remember inserting anything in my rectum. I came into that frat house wearing my favorite butt plug. That’s nobody’s business, but mine. Definitely would have recalled putting plastic Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle action figures into my rectum. I have no recollection of the absinthe LSD pudding. I know those bastards slid something into my Corona bottle when I went to the bathroom. I’ll never forget Bill Cosby, and his stupid smirk. Why did they need me in the basement? To watch their stupid beer pong tournament?

The moon unfurls, broken chambers, Wu-Tang blasting.

“That pie is fucking huge, brah,” Cotton Candy Bro says.

He’s leaning into the kitchen, squinting into the brick oven. He’s hot but I know where he comes from, what goes on inside his head. I wonder if he was upstairs when they stuck seven knuckles inside. My twin brother got run over by a UPS truck after the verdict got delivered. Mom scooped his body from the pavement. His blood alcohol level was 3.14. That’s high. More than me in my piece of shit Ford Focus. More than the flakka the frat boys snorted off my tits.

“It’s burning,” Adam says.

Adam is snake-eyed and bloodshot. Dice tattooed on his neck. I grab the spatula and stick it beneath the monster. Adam pours another pitcher of Fat Tire and waddles over to the frat boys. Adam’s swagger is filthy. When his dad dies, Adam’s gonna own Mountain High Pizza Pie and pay me quadruple for the things we do in the walk-in. The cowbell bitches again as the frat boys shuffle outside to smoke butts. The juvenile delinquent peeks over the partition between the kitchen and register to take a look at my ass. He whistles. Band of Brothers lights up, smoke creeps into the pizza parlor through the open window.

“Damn those dudes are nuts,” Adam says.

Adam is triple-fisting empty pitchers.

“I need to take another shit,” Adam says as he dumps the pitchers into the sink.

Adam is no chump when it comes to clogging toilets.

“See ya in a few minutes,” Adam says.

Adam crop dusts across the kitchen in front of the brick oven, trying to evoke an obstinate flame to shoot from his apron strings. I push the spatula further beneath the monster pizza. I can see their faces in the mozzarella—vociferous frat boys raping me through rising crust. Doughy, filled with phlegm, tonsils sticky—I pry the pizza from the brick oven. It’s heavier than anything I’ve ever cooked. It seems to hover with the inertia of a magic carpet for a moment before I muster the will to thrust it toward the

counter. Without clammy hands and fingers and tongues and cocks and balls, I’d have tons of dough.

“You fucked her, brah?” asks Cotton Candy Bro.

There is no distinction between the pizza parlor and the frat basement. They’re talking so loud and egregious the glass does little to absorb their words. Nobody knows the melody of melting boogers. They bask in an eerie glow oozing from moth-infested streetlamps.

“She looks juicy,” says Cotton Candy Bro.

Oyster eyeballs all I see—spatula snaps and the monster pizza tumbles to the floor. I scoop it onto the tray with splintered spatula. The cowbell bitches and the frat boys enter. More cowbell as each one pushes the door wider. They don’t notice me brushing a million ingredients from m pizza is so enormous the fall didn’t destroy it. There was no order to begin with; nothing neat or symmetrical such as the dichotomy of pepperoni and sausage. No tidiness to their theory of creation and doggy style. This is the frat boys serpentine inside of me. This was me inside the frat boys. I vomit onto the pie. Adam scoops my monster off the floor onto a tray with the wisdom of a woman ripping a fetus from my uterus.

“Holy shit that’s hot,” Cotton Candy Bro says.

He’s sweating balls and I can smell them both in the booth on the same side where I extend my arm to lay the pizza. Adam helps me grip the tray. Adam wishes he could live like these bastards—glorious, rich, white-privileged rapists—but Adam was born to evangelical pizza makers. Delta Tau Delta would never accept a blue-collar brother.

“You guys need anything else?” I ask.

Mozzarella and a million melted, charred, steaming ingredients ooze down chins. They grunt, whispering words of wisdom, whiskers wet from Fat Tire froth and warm grease. They’re famished. Frat boy eyeballs stare from pepperoni, each ingredient a fetus.

“We’re good,” Cotton Candy Bro says.

“Let it be,” I say.

Adam has blue balls and excuses himself. He’ll flog his Molly in the restroom behind the walk-in. My lips are frozen, the frat boys’ noses glowing from cocaine and Ketamine.

“More pitchers please,” says the baby-faced frat boy.

“Three,” says the buffoon with hirsute wrists, eyeballs full of blood.

Without winking, they watch my boobs bouncing in unison with every bite. I taste them inside me. They know my flavors. They knew who I am. They came to smell my fear—mark their territory—feel my shrinking shadow gripping grungy wads of toilet paper on the cold cement floor in the corner of the Delta Tau Delta basement beside a

mattress propped by a bed of bricks—but that was too good for me. My tears washing into squalid ears, cheesy jokes, young men rise to the occasion, plant their seeds on my belly and between my eyes.

“Is everything good?” I ask when I return with their pitchers.

They help me with my glistening double-fisted treasure. They know the pleasures of digging for gold. They sniff. It’s the end of a double-shift.

“Absolutely,” Cotton Candy Bro says. “Smells like teen spirit.”

My deodorant wore off hours earlier. My Dove Invisible Dry Spray is in the backseat of my car next to Pepperoni’s leash. I listen to her barking through the slices in their mouths. Nothing remains but Mountain High Pizza Pie and the bones in the brick oven.

“Good,” I say.

They lick their lips. Cotton Candy Bro grabs his crotch. Babe Ruth Bro exposes a humongous testicle. I inhale Adam burning. It was cathartic to stab him in the jugular with the broken spatula, but the butcher’s knife to the carotid artery did the trick.

“You’re so vain,” says Cotton Candy Bro.

They mimic my orgasm face, foraging for minimum wage behind Black Angus to Mountain High Pizza Pie, echoes of “whore” in vocal fry chasing me around Kardashian country.

Intimacy is a winking ghost.

“Case closed,” Cotton Candy bro says.

“Case closed,” I say.

“Not guilty,” they say.

“Not guilty,” I say.

“What’s that smell?” asks the juvenile delinquent.

“Jesus Christ,” says Cotton Candy Bro.

They clutch their nostrils with greasy fists, eyeballs flying saucers. They dry-heave and vomit onto the half-eaten pizza. Pepperoni’s charred eyeball watches. Between salty lips and broken ancient clangs of bitching cowbell, the pizza parlor spins in labyrinthine gyres. I wield the spatula and stab jugulars, armpits, groins, lungs. The butcher’s knife comes next. The brothers don’t get on top of me this time. They swagger and sprint out the door. Two-liter Sprite bottle bong ballooning with blood, brick oven becomes a pendulum. I commandeer the kitchen, puffing Pineapple Rhino from Adam’s apple. 🍷



MATTHEW DEXTER is an American author living in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. His fiction has been published in hundreds of literary journals. Author of *The Ritalin Orgy* (Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing), his second novel, *Hero Custodian*, will be published in 2019. He’s the Lil Wayne of literature.



Her Love

Megan Gordon

Her love smells like lavender. It's the fabric softener she adds to the washing machine when I forget, the scent of her skin when I bury my face between her neck and collarbone, the oil she rubs on my temples when sleep escapes me. It is clean and pure, everything good that I have and that I am is because of it. She tells me I can, and I believe her. She smiles at me and I know I am better than I thought, better with her love. It envelops me when she sits in my lap as we make love, her breasts in my face, her arms around my head, pulling me to her as she comes.

Her laughter smells like red wine, which loosens the knots in her shoulders and softens her eyes. It radiates from her skin as she throws her head back with joy, her face glowing, teeth flashing. She is pretty, but when she laughs she is gorgeous, and in those moments, I am full and complete.

Her anger smells like cigarettes. The ones she sneaks when she's had too much to drink, which is more often than not now, the dirty ashtray into which she deposits her self-loathing and guilt. She storms out the door and lights up, chain smoking until she can bear to look at me again, and the clouds of smoke she blows at me like blame seep into the house through the gap in the back door. The odor clings to her hair, her clothes, her fingertips. It holds space between us until she decides to wash it away.

Her forgiveness smells like lemons. It lingers in the house after an early-morning cleaning binge, and it wafts from the kitchen, the zest in the pancakes she makes for me, both offers of peace. It is the color of her favorite nightgown as she slips back into our bed. It is sunrise, warm and bright, sweet and fresh.

Her betrayal smells like sex. It permeates the place, overwhelming and nauseating, after I've been away all day. It taunts me, winding its way through each room, and clinging in my nose for days; I take it with me wherever I go. It sticks to the sheets, mixed with lavender and someone else's sweat. She never washes them afterward; she wants me to know, dares me to acknowledge it. And I wait for the smell to fade, I let it overwhelm me and keep me up at night, a condemnation, a punishment for not being enough.

Her contrition smells like industrial carpet and bad coffee. And sometimes a jasmine candle the therapist lights to set the mood. It is artificial and burnt, layered with sensual promise. She is here and I am here, but we are not. She says the right things, but the words have a different sound, foreign and strange, a whole other language. I nod when I think I should and recite my script without knowing what the words mean. We sit in the waiting room, noses buried in paper cups full of bitterness, eyeing each other but not speaking. When we are called she walks ahead of me leaving sex and lavender in her wake. 🍋



MEGAN GORDON is a former copywriter who decided to chuck it all and run away with her first love, fiction. Her work has been featured in *Red Fez*, *Not Your Mother's Breast Milk*, and *The Flexible Persona*. She published her first anthology, *A Month of Sundays: Stories of Love and Loss*, in 2015. She lives in Dallas, Texas.



Call Me Kumiktuq (Scratch)

Tom Sheehan

In the whole of Riverside Cemetery this was the one stone that had slipped its mooring, leaned not forward into the new millennium, but backward, into the one passed by mere years ago, as if saying it was tired of all the holding on. In one instant the scribed name was home with me: Dumont Pulsifier, an old pal from my neighborhood, but everybody, including his mother and his dead father while he was here, had called him "Scratch."

We often wondered about his real name and how it came to be, with family history hanging on for the ride, but his nickname came right out of the locker room, so I bet you get the picture.

Momentary joy seized me as I thought of getting a scribing drill and putting "Scratch" right where it belonged: dead center on that stone, without dates to accompany it, a universal toast to one of the good guys. That moment of joy lasted longer than it should have, and hours later I was wondering who I could share it with. But most of my pals were gone too, which is mainly why I was in the cemetery in the first place, today and every day.

Scratch'd say things such as, "It's like the eye of the needle and the cockroach. You won't find them in your soup." He was so serious, we kept our mouths shut, thinking his observation was acute, touching on something we had trouble bringing up out of the mud in our minds, a fumble in a big game, a cupped breast making you inert for eternal moments, a tongue in your ear in the back seat of your father's car parked in the driveway, mouthing heaven-sent dialogue, or a petition from the devil's side.

Scratch had always been smarter than us, all the way through school, as far as he went with us, and he wasn't even letting go now. He knew algebra and trigonometry and calculus before we could spell them, and lines from books so great and so big and so famous we might never get to them. He'd drop a few of those lines at our feet too, every so often as if to keep us in check. We sat on the steps of the Pythian Building, our gathering spot for any evening, with

The Rathole, four pool tables and four bowling alleys, down on the ground floor beneath the street level, being weather shelter, money spot, high stakes stuff in the halcyon days... Eight Ball games at a nickel a piece. Sitting on the Pythian steps, Scratch would look across the street, see a bevy of passing beauties, bouncing in the way they were special at when all eyes are well-trained to find such goodies as may get noticed, and he'd say, "For all the chocolates we find in life, legs get there first, 'cause we know where they end up." We'd swallow that one, some of us for months before our heads came up out of the same kind of mud.

We were all fifteen years old, in the same grade, on the same teams, might have hungered for the same things in life. One rainy evening, most all our summer jobs done for the day, packing ice up flights of stairs since morning, mowing and trimming the grass on a dozen lawns, or even in the cemetery working for Al Powers, loading up the mushroom plant beds with horse manure that had been fertilized in a huge pile for Freddie Rippon up in West Peabody, we gathered around the first table for a special game of Eight-Ball. Scratch was not there. Everybody else was, but not Scratch. He didn't show up that night, or the next, or for weeks after. One of the guys asked his mother when he saw her at the paper store.

"He went away," she said.

"She looked real lonely, or sad," said the inquisitor, "like she didn't know where or why, but Scratch always had some strange parts working for him, didn't he?" He looked around for confirmation of his statement. Nobody said a word.

Mostly it grew from that night, the things Scratch had said and brought back in recall, the zany way he had of finding either perspective or dallying charm in his observations. He became a legend in absentia. It was Ziggy who said, "Member the night Scratch said if moles had eyes they'd've invented electricity. We couldn't put it together until he said it wasn't really the truth because what they

really needed was light bulbs, but then the little buggers’d need sleds to push the light bulbs around in their dinky tunnels but that would mean there was snow down there.” We laughed like hell at the look on Ziggy’s face because we were all caught up in something we had no answers for.

Anyway, Scratch was gone, and after a while, like it always happens, we went our separate ways. What got in our way of total dispersal was another war, which, in its odd separation, brings people together after a fashion.

Perhaps I had totally forgotten his given name; Dumont Pulsifier does not sit well on the tongue or in the mind, other than as an oddity, and soon disappears. In time Scratch disappeared from memory because it was talk or zany talk that always had brought him temporarily back from wherever he had gone. Someone said his mother ended up in a nursing home down by Lynn Beach and when she died her only daughter got married and went to California. She was never heard from again either. Their house on the next corner from mine went empty and then two or three families passed through its front steps and back yard and all the rooms and an identity was lost. Scratch’s father had died many years ago in a fishing accident out on Georges Banks; and Scratch had been gone all this time, like an apparition out of our past. I’d get those extreme problems of trying to picture what he looked like. He’d been tall for his age, had dark hair, dark eyes, thick eyebrows, a straight nose, and… none of it would come all together at one time. I’d see him in a blue sweater on a fall night or a red jacket on a winter night, or him just being taller than all of us… and then nothing, as my mind went blank. We never stopped long enough for pictures. I bet everybody out there can bring back some lost pal at the back of his mind, go scraping for him, find him for a second or two, and then lose him all over again. I bet that happens more than you know. That’s about as sad as you can get. Sometimes I thought he might have been a dream, that he was some company we had invented for humor or good feelings or the zaniness we all needed every once in a while, so we wouldn’t take ourselves too damned seriously.

That has room for thinking about.

When you don’t have contact or a sense of contact with someone, space happens, like space between stars or moons. Clouds of it. Rooms of it. Long narrow corridors of it. Room for other things crowds in and takes their places, and where you wanted to go in the first place, to some target of a person or a place or an event, loses out to what is freshest, or darkest, or more illuminating.

One day Scratch was gone. There was no explanation; not ever.

History moves in its tolerable way. My brother did his war. I did my war. Time and memory have their great merge. Before you know it, before I knew it, I was eighty years old and walking through the cemetery, saying hello here and there, and just as suddenly there was Scratch, back home from wherever. I had to find out where he had gone. The haunt for fulfillment began to grab me at all hours. His grave was almost thirty years old. I was fifty when he died and was buried, out and about the town, in tune with things, or so I thought. I had read nothing in the newspaper about him, no obit of an old pal, no homecoming word. Never heard a word from any of the guys either, for most

of them had gone on, finally sharing common ground or whatever with Scratch once more. I did not feel left out, but I was still quizzical.

One day, sitting at the computer my children and grandchildren had given me on a special day, I typed in Scratch’s real name. I searched all leads that came my way. There was nothing, but it was a 10-year old granddaughter Alexa, “who’s keen on the machine,” as her mother would say, who drew my attention to a small, unobtrusive notation she had found. I followed it up. There was Scratch, or other memories of him, in Alaska, just about as far away as you could get from The Rathole or the front steps of The Pythian Building. Dumont Scratch Pulsifier had been almost 39 years in Tobiak, Alaska and teaching most of the time. There had been some trouble when it came to proving he’d earned a degree, but that came up after he’d been teaching for over ten years. Probably started from a feud of sorts, a wrinkle in a personality, perhaps a love affair gone wrong or some other teacher passed over. There were no further explanations other than he continued on the job by acclamation of all previous students of his.

Scratch said on his application that he’d earned a degree from the University of Chicago. I checked with their graduate administration office and they could not come up with any proof that he had even enrolled there. I put the whole charade to bed, thinking Scratch had probably hoodwinked a small village out on an ice floe in Alaska, a piece of cake after taking a big university for a ride. Occasionally I’d walk by his stone, try to clean up around it within the minor limitations of an old man, and at least say hello. Again, as in the past, I thought the ghost had been about for a little while, then retreated to his wherever.

But three months later, after the contact with the university, I received a letter with a return address in Oak Park, Illinois, one of the suburban areas of Greater Chicago.

Dear Thomas, it said, and carried on in elegant script:

It took me some months to dare write this letter. It is most personal, but Dumont Pulsifier was important in my life and I am trying only to be true to his memory.

I work in the administration office of the university, as did my mother for a good number of years. I am the product of her short liaison with Dumont Pulsifier. They were lovers for a few months until he headed further west. I was born about 8 months after he left and he never knew he had fathered a child. But my mother heard from him later and was able to do as he requested, provide proof if it was ever asked that he had received a degree from the university. My mother, loving me, loved him forever and was never married. She gave me all that she had and just before she died, filled me in on the love of her life. She said he was the most informed man she had ever met, had more humor in him than any man known, and “could rock my cradle any time he wanted.” She wasn’t talking about me when she said that.

He told my mother that some great desire had filled him one day when he was young and he had to help a group of Eskimos who desperately needed help. He made it his life’s work. When he died, and I was still a child, she received a letter from Tobiak, Alaska, saying that he requested that his ashes be buried in his hometown of Saugus, MA. ‘I have missed that place all my life,’ he had said to his Eskimo

friend, ‘and have missed dear friends who also needed help but not as much as out here in the far north. If it is at all possible, when I die, please send me home when the ice goes out and spring comes. I will wait.’ He was only 54 when he died in a terrible hunting accident, but he had been loved by his students, had two wives out there and a few children, I am sure, none of whom outlived him. It sounds like a sad life but a most productive one.

The cost to send him home was collected by people he had taught, and my mother took care of local arrangements in your town.

You, as stated in your letter, were one of his youthful friends, and I hope this will settle any matters in your mind.

Please know that my mother loved him all her life, swearing that he got his great degree here, the last part speaking about me, I am positive.

In memory of a man I never met and have come to know quite well, my father, Dumont Pulsifier.

Carol Suprenant

I began to stop by every day to say hello, trying to remember all the strange quotes that Scratch had thrown our way, in jest or alertness. Little more came back, and though there was a modicum of closure, it still carried a hole begging to be filled. I went looking again.

I wrote to the school in Alaska where Scratch had spent the better part of his life. Perhaps, I thought, there’d be some minor reflection and information in response.

But Scratch, as it turned out, had left an impression in Tobiak.

Dear Sir,

I am the principal of the Tobiak School, and I am a former student of Dumont Pulsifier. We had a problem pronouncing his name, so he insisted we call him Kumiktuq. That was on the very first day in class and we laughed so hard at this outsider, because Kumiktuq means to scratch. When we had laughed ourselves silly, he began scratching his arm pits and then behind his ears and under his chin. We were all boys in the class and when he started to scratch his groin, we almost fell on the floor, each one of us. No matter the weather, as you might imagine it, it was always warm in Kumiktuq’s classroom. He was the sun on the darkest of days.

Without a doubt, those days were some of the happiest days in my life. He gave all he had, often his last meal when things were tight, his share of seal meat, oil for lamps to study by. Never was there in our midst a man more devoted to our village, our school, we students.

When he had a problem about his educational testament,

we stood as one body for his continuance as our teacher. There never was one dissenting word, except from whoever had questioned his education in the beginning; that person has never revealed himself, which speaks well for his good sense.

There is so much that has been forgotten about him, even from some of his former students that I have talked with these many months, but what remains foremost with me is the grand manner he had of opening our eyes to fact and fancy, as he might have called it. Kumiktuq had this extraordinary ability of locking our minds on a specific idea or thought, or a position he had taken on an argument. I vaguely remember him calling it “This other world of the mind.” He said, “When you can control both sides of the mind that you have, you have arrived at destination and departure at the same time.” I have been getting there and leaving ever since. I hope that you can understand that.

His death was a most tragic accident here and he is still to be remembered for what he brought to us.

Kumiktuq left a gift that we all share in Tobiak, whether we know it or not in the present state.

I can only assume, from your inquiry, that you are still on that journey with him.

John Urraqa

Tobiak School principal

I’d love to share this with some of the guys, but they’re all gone. I hope they all catch up some time, sit around and shoot the breeze, have those grand thoughts, think about what Scratch just said, like it was a special revelation he had found for us. Maybe they know a hell of a lot more now than I do right at this minute, and first hand from Scratch or Kumiktuq off in that other world of his. I’ll tell you, I think about that a lot. Even as it eases into you, it makes you sit up and pay attention. That’s probably all that Scratch wanted from the very beginning. 🕒



TOM SHEEHAN, in his 91st year, has published 36 books and multiple works in *Rosebud*, *Literally Stories*, *Linnet’s Wings*, *Serving House Journal*, *Copperfield Review*, *Literary Orphans*, *Eastlit*, *Frontier Tales*, *Western Online*, *Literary Yard*, *Rope & Wire*, *Western Magazine*, *Green Silk Journal*, *Faith-Hope-and-Fiction*, etc. He has received 33 Pushcart nominations and 5 Best of Net nominations with one winner, and other awards. Newest books are *Beside the Broken Trail*, *Between Mountain and River*, and *Catch a Wagon to the Stars* with 4 in publishers’ queues, including *Jock Poems for Proper Bostonians* and *Alone with the Good Graces* and *The Keating Script*.



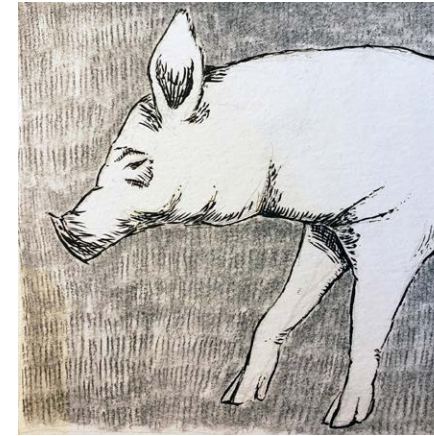
I'm the Cutest Piece of Trash in the City

Ralph Pennel

It's true. With this ass and these legs. Dogs would howl from their yards, from every borough, from the bottoms of every forgotten back lot Lower East Side dumpster to sniff me out, to lick me, to eat me, to shit me out in a hot puddling mess. They'd root their noses in me, flop on their backs and roll on me, hind legs writhing in the air with demonic ecstasy, their eyes lolling back into their heads, their tongues flailing like a hooked fish diving against the line as if somehow thrusting itself out into the air and heat of the sun will be the thing that saves it, working hardest at that moment against its own best interests. I'd be that hustler mag stuck against the cyclone fencing to some abandoned warehouse, that piece of gum stuck in the crevices of your tread, the plastic bag fluttering from the branch just above the branch you can't reach. Or the one caught in the updraft, like the one that asshole kid filmed in that shitty movie with Kevin Spacey about American ennui. I'd have fucked him. That's a story, not some virginalized lie, not some pure innocent ideology that gives us pause, makes us see ourselves clearly for a fraction of a second, like the moment right before the boulder escapes Sisyphus's grasp and roles back down the hill for another eternity, that moment when he realizes he's not defined by the task so it doesn't matter how many times he almost makes it to the top. Fuck that. I'd be my own mythology. I'd be that still burning cigarette butt on the restaurant floor, that flaming wire trash bin, that bird shit on your coat sleeve, that decomposing rat lying boldly on the street on the Upper East Side that bounced from the back of the garbage truck that the city worker nudged with his boot into the gutter. And you would want me more for it. You would want me for my horror, for the near-death experience of me, for the chance to risk your life just to be inside me, to hear me call your name, to tell you to fuck me, to scream God bless America and all the ships at sea over and over until you're ready to stand, pants still around your ankles, tie slung over your shoulder with your hand over your heart, eyes on some distant unseen flag you never knew you feared enough to worship until now. 🐾



RALPH PENNEL is the author of *A World Less Perfect for Dying In*, published by Cervena Barva Press. Ralph's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Iowa Review*, *Literary Orphans*, *F(r)iction*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *Reality Beach*, *Elm Leaves Journal*, *Rain Taxi Review of Books* and various other publications. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart, and he was twice a finalist for Somerville Poet Laureate. Ralph is on the board of the New England Poetry Club and teaches poetry and writing at Bentley University.



A Long Walk in the Dark

Vanessa Wang

Who would've thought that I, the only child of Kao Shun-Cheng and once heiress of the Kao Family Bakery, daughter of the most affluent house in my hometown, had legs strong enough to walk three hours in the dark of the night, crossing the South China Sea by a path that only appears during the low tide? I do this two or three nights a week now, crossing the strait to get to the Mainland, where I climb up a mountain to buy a pig for seven yen, and then go back to Xiamen carrying the pig on my back before the path vanishes into the sea. I head out at two in the morning and am back home by five. Me! A girl who grew up with two handmaids, who had her feet soaked in leftover milk and honey each night—to think that I could walk this way, with such speed, such stealth, such purpose.

The bottom of my pants are damp from seawater splashing against rocks along the path I take. I do not mind this anymore, not much, nor the pebbles that gather in my shoes, nor the darkness—the moonlight guides me. The coming hours are critical, as they determine whether my family of nine will eat or go hungry today. I try not to think about my journey back, with the added weight of a pig on my back, and my race against the rising tide as the first rays appear at the end of the horizon. I think instead of what I'll do once I'm home, the pig laid out on the one wooden table in our lopsided cabin. By six AM I will have chopped the pig into hundreds of pieces and wrapped them into individual packages small enough to fit into my third daughter's pockets, carefully sewn and hidden on the inside of her uniform. By eight o'clock my daughter will have delivered all of these small packages, the illicit meat secretly making its way into people's stew pots and onto their dining tables, and my daughter will have eleven yen in return, the profit enough to feed our family of nine for a few days. The sun will be shining by then, and my daughter will go to school, like any other kid.

I have reached the pig seller who lives in the mountain. The sky is a black tent, our only illumination an oil lamp by the pig pen. The old man, so bent over I cannot tell how tall he once was, scoops up a mid-sized pig with one hand and stabs a hole in its stomach with a knife in one swift movement. The pig screams and squirms in the vendor's arm as blood gushes out like a water faucet turned up all the way. The wound is a big one, and it takes only a while for the pig to fall limp against the vendor's embrace. But still the pig whimpers, so I stuff lime powder down the pig's throat to burn its vocal cord. The pig weeps silent, fat tears, and rubs its cheek against the vendor for comfort, but I need the pig alive till I get home. I made the mistake once of slitting the pig's throat out of pity; by the time I arrived home the corpse had already begun decomposing and attracting flies.

The pig is about 30 kilos; I haul it on my back, tying it in place with a sling I used to carry my babies in, and then cover the pig from view with a blanket I wear like a cape. I am only sorry that I do not have the strength to carry a fatter pig, a 40, 50, 100-kilo pig. If I could, then maybe my children would not be quite as hungry all the time, and maybe I would not have to make this three-hour trip so often.

There is no time for chit-chat with the pig seller. I pay him and nod my head, our only greeting. Behind me there are three other women in line for their pigs, shifting their feet as they wait in silence. I am worried about these women, doing what I am doing, copying my means of feeding my family. How did they find out about this pig seller? Who told them? Last month there were only two women waiting behind me, and before that, it was just me. They are copying my every action, bringing their own lime powder and cloth carriers to tie the pig on their backs. Who else have they spoken to about this? I wonder how long it'll be before we're all exposed, and I'll have to find a new way to make money.

I need to talk to the pig seller one of these days, ask him not to sell his pigs to all these people—I will pay him more if I must—but today is not the day. The sun will rise soon. There is never a minute to spare.

I am on my way again, the muscles on my calves tense. It is a long way back, and I must cross the strait before the tide closes up my path and traps me on this side of China. Sometimes while walking on the temporary patch of land that connects the island of Xiamen to the continent, a surge of fear runs through me that I will not make it to the other side on time, and I envision the water enclosing me from both sides, submerging me silently, effortlessly, as if I had never existed.

I walk the same route down the mountain, with the extra weight on my back. But it's not as bad going downhill. Soon, I will be home. Soon, the heaviness on my shoulder will become light pieces of paper money. I have five yen hidden in the crack of a broken wok, plus one yen sewn into the fabric of each child's pants. I have three yen buried under a rock by the olive tree. With today's profit I will have twenty yen. Every day money is worth less than the day before. My children's appetites are growing every day, but our congee only gets more and more watery, with nothing to thicken the pot except with seaweed the kids gather by the shore. As these thoughts race through my mind, my legs work faster to keep up.

Who could have known that I, Kao Lai Hao of the Kao Bakery, a girl who only wore clothes made from imported silk, would one day sell meat on the black market for a living? I do not remember walking for more than thirty minutes at a time before I married, before the war came and took my husband away, before the Japanese devils rationed our food so that my family is fed only one-eighteenth of what Japanese families receive each month.

The weight on my back is heavy, but it is not heavier than carrying twins in my womb for forty weeks only to see them die minutes after they were laid in my arms. Yes, that happened to me, too, but perhaps I cannot blame that on the Japanese dogs. That was probably just my bad fortune.

My feet are sore from walking all this distance—nine kilometers each way—the blisters raw and bloody, caked in dirt—but they aren't as sore as my third daughter's feet will be when she comes home tonight. She is only eight, but she is the one who rides from house to house on her red bicycle, selling illicit pieces of pork, transferring the small newspaper-wrapped packages from her pockets to book bags, tossing them into bamboo baskets, leaving them behind rocks. She is only eight but is the bravest among my four sons and four daughters. A grown woman like me draws too much attention in daylight, but a little girl—the shortest student in her class—who would suspect her?

Tonight, I will rub my third daughter's tired feet, and my third son, only six years old, will rub mine. He will soak my feet in hot water and cake my blisters in pig lard. As I fall into a death-like slumber, he will sing himself and his baby brother and sister to sleep. My eldest daughter, eighteen, is the mother figure when I'm away, but my six-year-old son is the only one who can put the babies to sleep. All nine of us, aged between three and forty, sleep spread out on the wooden floor, the only table in our house pushed to the wall to make space.

In the middle of the night, when the wind seeps through the broken wooden cracks of our tired shed, sounding like the angry wails of a woman, my six-year-old son will whisper, "You do not scare me, Ghost Woman. Go away Ghost Woman and let us sleep! Haunt us when the war is over!"

I taught him to say those words. They say that that a woman killed herself in our house after she was raped by her father-in-law. Everyone knows this story, knows that our house is haunted, which is why I was able to rent it for a third of what is charged for similar places. In these difficult times, when the Japanese devils are killing innocent babies and raping grandmothers and pregnant women, when the living are barely alive, who has time to worry about ghosts?

I am a quarter kilometer away from my home—the sky is still dark, but I can feel the imminence of dawn, hear the gradual quieting of chirping cicadas. I have walked eighteen kilometers before first light every other night or so, for eleven months. I have been left alone to feed eight children for two years, and I do not know if my husband will ever come home if he's dead or alive. No one should live like this. No one, but especially not me, Kao Lai-Hao of the Kao Family Bakery, raised for a life of ease and comfort. When I was growing up, my father told me I could walk in any direction for one hour and I would still be within our land property. What would my father say if he saw me like this now, carrying a pig on my back, the soles of my feet cracked? But underneath all the hardship, fear, and fatigue, I am proud of myself. I had imagined a life of languid summer days spread out endlessly, suitable for dreaming; instead, I have been thrown into all the seasons without warning, and here I am, still with color on my cheeks.

Too late I see the police officers, in their ship-shaped hats and gold buttons, swinging their batons, approaching me from the dark. I curse in my head but stay calm. There's a slight quiver in their walk, like children who cannot contain their excitement, despite the best efforts.

"Stop right there, *Okusan*. What are you doing outside, so late at night, un-chaperoned? Don't you know there is a curfew?" There are two of them, one fat, one short, shorter than me. Both look young, their uniforms crisp, the shirts tucked in without a single crease. It is the fat one that addresses me.

I straighten my spine and stand tall. I feel the pig slipping down my back but I do not let my fear show. I hope the cloth carrier will hold. I do not answer, but lift my chin.

"Do you understand Japanese, *Okusan*?" the fat one asks again.

"Yes, of course. I am Japanese," I answer. My accent is authentic and convincing. Unlike most people who only learned the language post-occupation, my father hired me a private tutor from Tokyo when I was young.

The policemen exchange a look. I can see their attitude softening, their shoulders dropping, as doubt lingers in the way they stand, one foot in front of the other. I could be lying, but I also could be telling the truth. I wonder if they've noticed the bottom of my pants, still dripping water, and my wet shoes, and I almost glance down. I picture them checking under the blanket and seeing the pig. I picture them calling me a *chankoro*, a liar, a worthless slave, and then throwing me in jail. In my mind I am on my knees, wailing, offering to do anything, anything, to return to my babies, and it is

as if they've separated us already and a huge lump swells in my throat. My eyes are sore from holding in tears. But still, I hold my gaze. This is like that childhood game in which you must stay absolutely still whenever the other person is looking at you, because if you so much as scratch an itch, or move a finger, or lose your balance and fall, you are sent back to the start line.

If I'm telling the truth and they arrest me, they stand the risk of accidentally offending a high-rank officer's wife, sister, or daughter. But on the other hand, if I'm lying and they let me go, they could be penalized.

"My baby wouldn't sleep, so I took her out for a walk," I gesture the carrier on my back. "I'm sorry to have caused trouble." I bow low the way my Japanese tutor taught me. *Don't look up until the other person speaks.*

I wait one second, two seconds, three. Finally, the shorter man speaks and I straighten my spine—but not too much, so that I appear smaller.

"It's dangerous to be walking out alone in the dark, *Okusan*. You don't know what the Chinese will do to a lady like you. A police officer may not always be nearby."

"Thank you for your protection and hard work, Officers. My husband is off fighting in the war." I am not lying. I do not say which side my husband is fighting for.

Before the policemen can say anything more, I bow my head and say, "Please excuse me officers, but I must get this

one on my back home and make breakfast."

I feel the heat of their stares on my back as I walk away. In the stillness of the night, seconds before daybreak, my heart pounding is the only thing I can hear. Perhaps they will call me back to question me further. Perhaps they will ask to see my identity papers. If they do, I must say I did not think to bring papers with me as I was only out for a short walk to calm my baby. I turn into an alleyway and hope they can no longer see me from where they stand.

When five minutes have passed and I do not hear any footsteps coming after me, I know that I am safe, but it isn't until I push the door open into my house and close it behind me that my heart slows down. My kids look at me with such hunger, such hope, such trust. My eldest daughter looks at me from her crouched position on the floor with my three littlest ones, reading my expression to gauge whether my journey had been smooth or a close-call. She sees that I am shaken, and looks away, an understanding passing between us without words. In three days she will be married and will go to another city. I fear she is rushing into marriage to lighten my burden, but perhaps she is only doing this because she cannot stand to live here any longer. I don't know, so I do not ask her.

I am home now. My children and I are safe for another day. 🐱



VANESSA WANG is from Taiwan. *A Long Walk In The Dark* was inspired by real events that happened to her great-grandmother, passed on in her family through story-telling. Her writing has appeared in *Cafe Irreal*, *Kweli*, *The Golden Key*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Kartika Review*, among others. Her short story *La Rambla* won the 2015 Bethesda Magazine Short Story Contest. You can read more of her work on wangvanessa.com

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Clown Town

Couri Johnson

Neither of us were happy with the neighborhood to begin with, but we were feeling cheap enough to settle for anything. The neighbors were nice enough, I thought, even if they seemed a little fake and their smiles—well, they made me uneasy. And they drove you absolutely nuts. But they were the least of our many worries. The pastel striped houses, the smell of popcorn, the way the grass felt like candy corn, none of it was especially pleasant to us. Especially at that time in our life. Sometimes I wonder if that’s what all tragedies really boil down to—bad timing.

But in the end, what broke you was the balloons. They were over the top, I’ll admit it. And if they were there when we were looking at the house, I doubt we would have ended up where we are now. It was about three weeks after we moved in, if I remember correctly. Mid-afternoon. All day the wind had been threatening to be vicious. We were unloading groceries from the car when you saw the shadow crawling across the street. I came out to find you standing in the yard, bag clutched to your chest like an infant.

In the sky, they were already rising—a plague of balloons. Candy colored. Like a Katy Perry video let loose to flood the real world. It took them minutes to blanket the sky and block out the sun. All the light came down filtered in technicolor. It played on your face in a way that made me nauseous.

“What’s going on,” you asked.

“Maybe there’s a party,” I said, shrugging.

There was a cackle from the sidewalk. A little girl was pedaling her trike down the street and had stopped to listen to us. We were a spectacle, I guess.

“You two are new, huh?” The girl said. I nodded and she sucked her teeth. Something about her seemed old as horse drawn carriages, but she was so small, I don’t think she could have been more than five. It must’ve been the pancake makeup. Or the balloon light. She was in a patch of blue that was positively corpse like. But that can’t explain the two-packs-a-day voice she had, I guess.

“It’s the rainy season,” she said. “You might want to buy some galoshes. It gets pretty bad.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

“No problem, doll.” She pedaled away, and you turned towards me, a yellow patch of light gliding across your eyes and over your mouth. I wanted to crack a joke. Maybe something about jaundice. Or the Simpsons. I was almost ready to, but then the paint started to fall. First just little splatters, then in long technicolor streaks.

We gave up on the groceries and ran inside.

That whole season was terrible. Everything became an abstraction.

“I hate modern art,” you told me. “It gives me a headache.” The helium had set in by then, and your voice was all Mickey Mouse. I laughed at you. What else could I do? I was laughing at everything, then. Great big guffaws that made my rib cage ache. But it was all so funny.

The balloons. The paint spackled streets. The way you’d come in covered head to toe in color, and how it stained our bathtub mud black when you washed it off. The little girl and her pancake makeup. How the taste of the air made my throat close. The sweetness of our helium voices hiding their little barbs. Cartoon arguments between Muppets—who could understand what we’re going on about? All it was was noise. The season wore on for months. Till all I ever did was laugh. Till it got so bad that I couldn’t breathe. Till it got so bad you just stopped talking.

I kept laughing.

Even when I woke up and found the tracks of your suitcase trailing off in the drying paint. I stood there laughing until the little girl pedaled past on her trike and stopped to watch.

“Is it drying up?” I asked her, casting my eyes up to the balloon spackled sky.

She looked from me to the sky. “Don’t know. Could just be the eye, I think. We’ll have to wait and see.”

I’m still waiting. I’m still laughing. There isn’t much else I can do. 🕒



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Honeymoon

Beate Sigriddaughter

He said, “come live with me on the mainland,” and she started packing. No furniture of course, and she downsized with respect to other things we well. Mere things were so unimportant compared to him. She thought of Rumi and his recommendation to give it all for a kiss.

From time to time she still feels a favorite CD she left behind vibrate in her memory, and that yellow dance dress with black rhinestones. All for a man? Yes, of course. He is worth it.

She doesn’t like to insist on her stuff with him around. She wanted to buy a bread pan yesterday to bake, of all things, stuffed trout. He didn’t think it would work. It would. She had done it in the past. It was delicious. Maybe once she has a job and doesn’t have to worry about her savings dwindling to nothing.

She has heard so many versions of “no, no, no” in less than a week. She misses her solitary dreams of him. Pots and pans have to be stainless steel. Most things have to be done twice. At least. Or so it seems.

She can’t burn the scented candle she bought. She cannot burn incense. He doesn’t like it, though he once burned incense on her balcony when he visited her in her island apartment. But that was outside, he explained. She feels strangled by vines of rules. She feels she is getting smaller. She doesn’t think she is going to be as happy as she had dreamed.

She wants to cook rice, but he has lent his rice cooker to someone and it isn’t back yet. He doesn’t think she should just cook it on the stove top, not when he owns this handy rice cooker. She wants to do laundry, but it is not a convenient time. She prefers liquid detergent. He prefers powder.

He tells her of a woman who showed him how to sensually wash feet—on the occasion of inviting him to sleep with her. She was working at the cafeteria when he returned his tray and asked him to wait for her. Her shift would be over in fifteen minutes. She doesn’t quite understand why he tells her this story or why he tells it to her now.

She asks if they could do things his way one week, then hers the next. He doesn’t say yes or no. He doesn’t want to commit to that, would rather keep things fuzzy.

She feels she is not civilized enough for him. She wants to run away. She knows she will not, at least not immediately.

She knows she will always love him. Even though everything is complicated and subject to endless negotiation. She doesn’t want to negotiate. She only wants to love and to please. She knows things about the world he will never know.

She trembles when he closes the door to his room, afraid she has done something wrong, and she doesn’t know what it is. She fears she must get tough. The doesn’t want to get tough. She misses the scent of her candles. He used to bring candles when he came to visit her. They were not scented, that’s true. He apologizes for the restrictions he places on her.

She doesn’t like jazz music, but he does.

He ties his shoelaces on the bumper of the car, but when she does it, he tells her to be careful not to scratch anything.

Her life lifts up and drifts away from her. Her laughter drifts away into the world. They are still squabbling over aluminum versus stainless steel, and her fears of pleasing or not pleasing. He pre-heats cups before filling them with coffee. Where does he come up with all the time for that sort of thing?

She came with the illusion that he loved her. Now she isn’t sure if she will ever be good enough company for any other human being. She came with such hopes, and now her candle scent is too strong.

They talk. They talk again. They do not stop talking.

Will it always be her lot to bend? Fortunately, she is very flexible.

She looks forward to when he has to go back to the office and she will go back out into the world to look for a job. 🕒



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Bog Swallows

Daniel Eli Dronsfield

In the dirty armpit of the rural freeway, rusted train tracks, and the slough, squats a low, brutish, piece of land.

Just up from the slag heaps, grist mills, the wrecking and reclamation yards, round from the state institution for the criminally insane, (closing it's self-locking doors in four months due to budget cuts to mental health programs), gazed upon by donkeys with dyspeptic dispositions and prematurely balding ponies, passed by wild-eyed itinerant workers crowded into train cars with t-shirts tied around their heads, dogs with barnacles on their bellies, pickup trucks with discolored doors and illegal loggers filling flatbeds with one-log loads, bringing the last wild places to heel.

Savaged by at least nine wet months each annum, where the sky shows no blue, but dirty-gutter-snow white, for weeks, months on end. Poorly drained, sloppily and

haphazardly maintained, populated by creaky dingy sub-trailers wallpapered with ancient nictines and the flatulence of ghosts.

Structures too spare to be called 'shacks' built in a hurry against the weather, leaning like junkies nodding in the predawn, floors crawled upon with natty knees and oily man hands, leaving remnants that look for all the world like the wood was walked and worked by enormous alcoholic raccoon mechanics with grime under their tired fingernails, the stains nibbled by a million moth's mouths and walked over by thousands of tiny feet, ants in the walls, mouse in the closet, owls in the eaves, and outside- despite the stench, lurk many other beasts, eyes glowing in the night, sinuous, and living in some gross symbiosis with the profanity of nature that this place has become.

Outbuildings that all look like unrepentant crime scenes, each dankness punctuated singularly with a fresh

splash of blue in the form of a new tarp, a stolen orange construction vest, a lean-to fashioned from a refrigerator door, a peal of smoke and the scent of some strange meat cooking, showing that despite the decay, these nooks are inhabited. Shadows of humanity spectrally skitter through the dappled light of the now springing sun as it worms into the primordial blackberry and scotch broom swards.

This is Bog Swallows.

The slough sludges stoically through, be-banked with diapers and evidence of poor decisions, cheeto and burrito wrappers, gas station ham sandwiches and mayonnaise jars, cheap beer vessels rusted and smashed in plentitude, walmart fashion hastily discarded, and cans and cans of beans and instant coffee. Directly upriver from the slough is a large RV manufacturing and sales facility and that adds enough oil and gas to the tepid creek to render it oft flammable.

The way that the petroleum mixes with the sludgy brown water creates rhapsodic rainbows that swirl and bubble cosmically. Each ripple contains multitudes, wherein if gazed upon with the right eyes, one can see all things past and present and certainly into whatever can be called the future as well -or so it would seem to the eyes of Mudfish as he sits slough-side huffing green surveyor's spray paint from a used fried chicken sack.

While attempting to trap possums he came across the can secreted in a concreted part of the slough, and not one to miss an opportunity or believe in the sanctity of property rights, he took it and headed to his thinking spot and began to strategically restrict the amount of oxygen that would reach his brain.

He has a lot on his mind.

Bog Swallows was created as were the great cities of the world, that is to say, haphazardly. The area was always sparse in its population. Prone to flooding yet far from substantial river, earth so clay-thick that only rugged grasses and briny weeds will fight their way to life, currently huddled betwixt what amounts to an industrial waste ditch, the tracks of the train, and a free-way for the motor cars and thusly constantly thundered by unstopping metal motorized behemoths.

It sits between what were once two logging towns, but are now generally economically depressed rural white America, with closed or robotizing mills and factories leaving the adults fighting for jobs at the Dairy Queen, clutching proudly to nationalism and ignorance, draped in camouflage, limping from obesity, while constantly feeling the weight of food scarcity and potential foreclosure if the weather turns or if there is an influx of grass seed from China.

It is unclear how or if a deal was negotiated, one day he was just there. It started with one deer-leather tent pitched out there in the rainy mud. No one knew; no one *knows* where he came from. He came with a small tubercular donkey and heavy hand-hewn saddlebags. His name is Frank Bog. When he arrived, he looked to be around forty, but it was hard to gauge- he looked that way for the next forty years. To say that he didn't speak about his past is the

profoundest of understatements.

He made no acknowledgment of a time previous to Bog Swallows, and was quick with a blade when angered. He was entrepreneurial in the way of the olden times but cursed with the luck of a fools gold miner. He had one leg and one eye and wore the same clothes every day for years at a stretch. He slept on the hard ground to stay 'fortified', smoked a pipe constantly filled with some deathly stinky mixture of shwag, finger hash, and home grown black tobacco, drank 'donkey mash' all day each day that he mixed with much ceremony in a great steaming bathing tub once each month. He ate wild onions and noodled catfish and walked everywhere with his donkey. He was leaner in demeanor than a broken barbed wire.

He got to Bog Swallows, and in relation to wherever he had come from, it looked like paradise.

Daryl Wainscot is thirty-seven years old. His stands about five inches shy of six feet and spreads more than a couple hundred pounds pungently over that frame. He likes to watch televised sporting events and eat processed meat products. He has produced three offspring and he duly and dull-ly provides for them. He erects temporary signs on a freelance basis for various real estate and construction concerns.

This early morn he stands atop a ladder affixing a shiny new 'For Sale' sign onto the skyward part of two large poles.

The sign reads: "FOR SALE OR LEASE. 4.1 ACRES. ZONED INDUSTRIAL".

He scans the ground below him and sees twenty or so desiccated jet skis ensconced in a blackberry bush. He sees a Nutria walk by with what looks like a knife between it's teeth. He sees leopard-printed body-bags filling the skeleton of a rusted out Chevy Malibu. The ground is peppered with cooking and smelting fires and there is a layer of monochromatic dinge covering everything. In the distance there is something that seems more like a real house, or a biohazard cleanup site- it looks like it has tried to burn itself down a number of times. The smell of ill-used humanity rises up like the morning steam.

'I wonder what kind of 'Industry' folks do in these parts'. Daryl wonders to himself, as he begins to hammer the sign into place.

Residents of Bog Swallows keep their own schedules and are not known as early-risers. The hammering hits ears attuned to their own noises, and ever mindful of outsiders. Ears are angered in achy heads, and ropy arms lift potato-sack blankets from bleary eyes with glottal groans of bilious distaste. Growls and rustles begin to rise, like a symphony warming up, testing it's instruments, from the briar and bramble and burlap below.

Daryl Wainscot hammers heroically on.

Mudbug and Mudfish were technically cousins but everyone thought of them as brothers. They were as wild as the beasts that their names would suggest. At an early age, Mudbug took to eating coals from the fire out of sheer cussedness. They, as a pair, were well known to always steal anything they could steal- and they never had a thing. These boys, like all Bog Swallows, existed in a place beyond what is referred to in civilized parts as "The Economy".

They had no numbers to register them on any file, that had no placards with their pictures affixed, they pledged allegiance to no flag, they recognized no borders and they obeyed no laws. Before the journey precipitating their arrival at Bog Swallows it is questionable that they had ever before clocked eyes on an automobile.

In their teens they looked to be, when they appeared out of the sloppy night. They each wore one boot, on opposite feet. Feed sacking and signage for clothes. Extension cord belts. Mudbug had a blade fashioned from a hubcap and Mudfish had a sparking stone. They had a bindle full of dumpster bread (a strange delicacy to them, having rarely before encountered the luxuries of baking or dumpsters) and some fresh possum.

They were just planning on passing through, striking out, as they were, for the great beyond. The wild, wide-open places. Their provenance and pedigree was unexplained, un-queried, *unquestioned*, and so they stayed.

When the first projectile strikes, its consistency is so foreign that Daryl Wainscot cannot even cognitively muster a reasonable response. He stands agog atop his ladder. His agogness continues as more projectiles make their presence known. After a quick olfactory and physical assessment Sr. Wainscot finds these to be vegetables of the rotten varietal. Tomatoes and squashes in various molds, and long past their prime, shower him in a manner too aggressive to be executed simply by the hands of humans. His fear swells after realizing he is under attack, and swells further upon realizing that he is under attack by some type of catapult. At this point in his realization he turns to view his assailants and is hit full force in the face by a rotting pumpkin the exact size of his head. He dramatically falls from his ladder and splashes into the shallow muck rainbow of the slough.

It is unclear how they all got there, but over the years Frank Bog acquired quite of band of misanthropes out in his soggy fiefdom. None of them being known for affability in census taking, it is difficult to gauge the exact population of Bog Swallows on the day the sign man comes. It is more than a dozen and less than fifty. Daryl Wainscot was able to collect and re-comport his be-pumpkined self and flee, but he made clear his intentions to notify various law enforcement agencies of his treatment at the hands of the Bog Swallowers.

Frank is, as often, nowhere to be found. His presence is a spectral one, always looming but rarely seen. A war council of prominent Boggers meets to discuss the situation.

“For Sale? The fuck does that even mean?”

Marsh queries, whilst working a boil on his arm.

“Frank ain’t selling the place. Can’t imagine he owns it.”

Peach Tree punctuates this point by spitting some type of burgundy crawl juice against the wall of the lean-to they squat and sprawl just outside of.

“Bog ain’t got no currency in this world or the last.”

Says a ponderous Mudfish as he slowly spins his breakfast possum over the smoking coals of last nights fire.

“So, waz this mean? We gon’ be homeless?”

Phalangey asks with a more than a bit of learned desperation, scanning the small crowd with her hungry eyes for any possible positive response.

“Shit, I thought we already was homeless.”

Pendergrass points this out with no emotion. Mudfish continues to spin his possum slowly over the coals.

They all survey their surroundings and think their individual thoughts, eventually shuffling off to get their various vainglorious days started.

“We got a man over here says he was shot with some kind of catapult.”

“What? A catapult?”

“Like a trebuchet. Actually he was technically shot with a pumpkin.”

The police station is all florescent lights and tope walls. Glass with grimy fingerprints. Phones are ringing and copiers are printing and fax machines are anachronistically squawking like wounded seabirds. Various meaty white men discuss and decide how and when and which men to lock in cages, kill in the streets, or set free.

“It was out there at Bog Swallows.”

“I don’t want to hear that.”

“I don’t want to say it sir, but them’s the facts.”

Timothy Cheerheart is a Patrolman in the Eugene Police Department. He hails from the coast to the east, arriving out in these green hills for his collegiate education. He came due to a football scholarship and enjoyed much adulation for his first three years of college. Fleet of foot on the field, he maneuvered well between the behemoths that abound.

Eventually one of aforementioned behemoths smashed him and rendered his body no longer fit for football for at least two years. Two important years for him. He came to know Opioids in recovery, and Police work shortly thereafter, and now has what would amount to a \$300 a day habit (it would cost that much if he wasn’t able to ‘confiscate’ whatever he needs using his shiny badge). He does his thing as a cop, looking out for himself, enjoying the toxic masculinity in the atmosphere, spreading his shoulders wide.

“Use proper English when speaking to me Cheerheart.”

Captain Deadfall is tired. He is tired of his job. He is tired from lack of sleep and poor diet. He is tired of maintaining a fraught and occasionally violent relationship with his wife (and the burden of faking his heterosexuality, a self/societally-induced torture that he pushes around, Sisyphus-like, in addition to his hatred of his wife as a person). He is tired of this dopey frat boy underling of his in the form of Cheerheart. He is sick of the rain. He moved up here for the job from southern California 13 years ago and is counting the days until he can retire with his full pension (741 days).

“Of course. What I mean to say is; those are the facts. Who should I send out there?”

“Send Danders.”

“Danders? You know his wife just left him right? Took the kid. She is fucking his ex-brother-in-law. He is not in a good spot. Mentally, I mean. Might not be a good time to make him interact with those Bog people.”

“Are you saying he is incapable of performing the functions of his position? Would you like me to tell him that you said that?”

“No! I mean, no. Don’t say anything to Danders about me. I’m just saying he is a bit volatile, always, and right now... you know how those people out in the Bog can be...”

Deadfall is slowly reddening and he now looks almost sunburned.

“Orders are not to be questioned. Do as I say. What are you even doing here? Get out of my office.”

“Oh, I originally came because I need clearance to get in the evidence room.”

“Again?”

“Justice never sleeps.”

“You look pretty sleepy.”

Mudbug is a crop thief. He steals crops from fields and eats them, or trades his purloined proceeds for other paltry profits. He has been shot at a lot (based on his appearance, this is not unreasonable- most any cogent armed person would open fire upon the appalling sight of him) and has come to believe that he is impermeable to bullets. He is unschooled, unparented, and comes to his beliefs and skills in the way that cavemen did- through trial and error.

He maintains a small cave, clawed (literally) into a crude slouch of land down by the slough on the outskirts of Bog Swallows proper. He generally sets out weekly to pillage the surrounding scape for things unprotected. The day of the sign-raising he is returning from a four-day stint that was exceptionally lucrative. He saunters south through the sward, Bogward, his bindle filled with crude green corn ears. As the sun peaks through the clouds, hitting his two-tone eyes, he is filled with a giggling optimism, drunk off possibility and the missing weight of a half-drunk bottle of store-bought that he found near an abandoned campsite.

He ducks barbed wire and portages creeks naked, with his clothes tied into his bindle balanced atop his head, thinking fondly of his little cave, not knowing what upheaval awaits.

Peach Tree has been in the Bog since the early days. She wears her years of hard days in lines on her face and the gap in her grimace. Her body creaks like an old wooden Viking ship breaking loose in the spring ice. She is something of a matriarch to the clan, but venal and crooked as them all. She is often referred to with adjectives of the serpentine. Despite her landfill of a life, there is a light in her eyes, which, when polished by the correct serving of Donkey Mash, glints and shines in a way that bespeaks of a beauty and grace never realized, never allowed. She has a great braying laugh when cheerful and a scorching shriek when displeased. There are few women in the Bog, and she mother hens new arrivals with the tenderness and counseling capabilities of a murderess. Ever untouchable in this den of wild hounds, she has been known to carry a razor blade in her mouth and apply it liberally and laceratively to unwelcome suitors.

In this camp of the dying, she is something of the healer, and performs this role with the exactitude and compassion of a Civil War surgeon. She pulls teeth, splints limbs, cauterizes wounds with steel made red-hot in the fire.

She has been here for more than two decades, and she is old for this life. Never really thought she would have to go anywhere else. She digs down into the dirt about two feet under her refrigerator lean-to and gets out the retirement meth that she had saved since the Mud Boys grand heist in the Autumn of ’07.

Amidst her life of desperation, in the face of confusion,

Peach Tree chooses celebration.

Danders. Sergeant Heathcliff Danders. Decorated veteran. Twice acquitted rapist. Danders is heavily armed and violently intoxicated as he waits for a small Pakistani woman to pump his gas. She reminds him of children that he killed in a foreign country for freedom. He reaches into his console and removes a small bindle of yayo. Displaces his keys from the ignition, dips their nose flamingo-like into the snow and snorts a pea-sized chunk of uncrushed. Some dribbles onto his uniform and much goes directly to his brain.

He thinks of his assignment, and he roils. He thinks of his life and he roils. He roils with a general madness, combined with the confidence of the cocaine, and he can’t help himself but start the engine of his cruiser and rev rev rev his engine in an overtly overly-compensatory fashion. The car is still being gassed, but Danders can wait no more, and he pulls away in a fury, pulling the anteater nose of the gas hose with him, ripping it from its fixture and spraying gasoline everywhere in his wake.

“Shot him with a catapult eh?” Frank asks this question, knowing the answer and exhibiting the closest thing he does to a smile. Despite the depravity of his existence Mr. Bog loves mischief as much as he rejects authority.

Mudfish recounts the tale once more to Frank and Mud Bug while they pass Donkey mash back and forth in a plastic milk jug. Mudfish takes his time and tells it well, culminating with the sign man’s shouted threats upon exiting.

“Well, I reckon we’re gonna see some lawdogs soon then. Surprised they ain’t here already.”

As Frank says this, the sound of a roaring engine grows upon the horizon.

Danders is coming in hot. He comes skidding around the corner, lights flashing. No siren, engine roaring like a biker gang. He catches air when he crosses the tracks and comes skidding to a dramatic halt right in the midst of where the men sit, spraying the fire and men with gravel and causing them all to recoil, jumping and running slightly back as the car heaves to a halt.

There is a moment of silence when Danders cuts the engine. He lets the lights continue to flash. He exits the car, pistol languidly lethal in hand.

“You mutherfuckers... I told you if I ever had to come back out here someone was going to die.”

Frank steps forward.

“I remember you saying that. You might be right.”

Peach Tree steps out of the shadows.

“You get the fuck out of here you pig rat shit dog. Leave us alone. This private property.”

“Private Property! You dumb whore. This is a fucking hobo camp and I would be doing the world a service if I burnt this rat nest to the ground with all of you still in it.

“You don’t have any rights to this land. You don’t have any rights at all. You fucking peasants don’t own anything and therefore you are fucking useless. You don’t pay for police protection. You are what I am here to protect people from.

“You think you can just shoot a hard working man with

a catapult? You think you can do whatever you want? You got it backwards bitch.

“I can do whatever the fuck *I* want. I am society, and you are wild animals. Nobody cares about wild animals. I am the *law*, you stupid cunt, and I could shoot you in the face right now if I wanted to.”

He raises his pistol, points it in Frank’s face.

“You make me ashamed, for all men. Your power... All power- is fleeting.”

Frank says this solemnly, unmoving.

Danders angry hand is wavering the pistol’s brutal nose between Frank and the Bug Boys, who move laterally, slowly, spreading themselves bodily from the arc of the pistols point, hands raised.

Danders rejoins, with darkness in his eyes.

“I have killed people that deserved to live a lot more than any of you.”

Peach Tree takes two steps towards Danders.

“I ain’t afraid of you.”

Danders looks as if to calm down for a moment. He gnaws at his cheek. He sighs deeply.

“Well, you should be.”

Upon saying this, he closes the distance between them in an instant and bashes her across the nose and cheek with the flat of his pistol, exploding blood from her face, crunching and exposing bone.

She goes down like a well-shot elk.

Danders stands, looking sick and hugely vicious over her small crumpled form. He pants wolfishly.

As Danders turns to look back at the men, Frank is upon him, and swiftly plunges a rusty machete into the thick of his stomach.

Mudbug brings down a jug of wine on his head.

Mudfish kicks him in the throat and sticks a deer’s antler into the heart meat under his armpit.

Frank twists the blade in his gut.

It happens very fast, without any shout or exclamation, just rustling and muted grunts. They stand over Danders as he gasps and bleeds out through the hole in his back.

“You shouldn’t have come here and acted like that.”

The men of the Bog hacksaw the corpse of Danders into eight pieces, cover those pieces in wet concrete, dry them into crude boulders, and bury them deep in the middle of eight different farmers fields.

Upon searching the patrol car they find a wealth of weapons and ammunition as well as morphine, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, and oxycontin. Thusly, Peach Tree’s extreme pain is at least slightly abetted by her attackers addiction and larceny.

They strip the cop car down to each element, so extensively that no one would ever realize that a car had existed, burning and recasting much of it in their crude smelting forge.

They remove the ‘For Sale’ sign.

By dawn, all is done, and everyone goes back about their business, such as it is.

“Danders didn’t come back last night.”

Cheerheart reports drearily, his eyelids crimson and rising slowly.

“So dock his pay.”

Deadfall is pure wrath each morning and it is currently 7:14 a.m.

“He was out at the Bog...”

Cheerheart half-hearts. Deadfall roils.

“You said he wasn’t fit for duty. Lost his wife. Probably just ran off with some hot young thing. These veterans are unstable, I wish we didn’t have hiring quotas. They are all fit for the nut house as far as I’m concerned.”

“Shouldn’t we at least investigate?”

“You wanna go out there and investigate? Be my guest. Do it on your own time. Here is an idea- why don’t you investigate how to get the fuck out of my office?”



Prayer Vigil

Howie Good


The old-time sailors just grabbed whatever they could – a Bible, a blanket – as their ship was battered apart, caught by monster waves in the longest hour of the night. Back on land, graves vomited up the dead. Any storm that terrible used to be given a woman’s name. Now, years later, outside a little church by the sea, a choir is singing while lighting candles, and I’m thinking to myself how much easier it is to start a war than it is to end one. Some people in the crowd can hear distinct words, but others, only sobs or sighs. This place will burn.




The Rain Side of the Rain-Snow Line

Howie Good

I felt sorry for everyone. For men, for roosters, for dogs. A person I hadn’t seen in years walked up and said, “Breathe, just breathe. We’re here. We exist.” And that sort of started it. I slept under bridges, on park benches, out in the woods. You can’t imagine it if you haven’t been there. Birds and humans got mixed up in my mind. This is the eye of a woman who participated. At first, I didn’t register what it could be. There was just one clue – a guard box with a soldier with a rifle on his shoulder.



DANIEL ELI DRONSFIELD is a American Artist. His written work has been published in *The Barcelona Review*, and his work as a filmmaker, photographer, and visual artist has screened and exhibited widely. He has worked in 31 countries, recently directing and photographing a feature length documentary film in Chongqing, China, entitled *Shadows of Memory*. Artistically, he is dedicated to seeking gnosis, adventure- of both the physical and mental varietal, and enjoying the tragedy of most beauty. He is currently seeking literary representation for a couple of completed novels and screenplays. You can see some of his video work on his youtube channel entitled “DED Media.” He can be contacted at salshakes@gmail.com



HOWIE GOOD, Ph.D., a journalism professor at SUNY New Paltz, is the author of *The Loser’s Guide to Street Fighting*, winner of the 2017 Lorien Prize from Thoughtcrime Press, and *Dangerous Acts Starring Unstable Elements*, winner of the 2015 Press Americana Prize for Poetry, among other books. He co-edits the literary journals *UnLost* and *Unbroken* with Dale Wisely.



The Woman Thinking of Nothing

Beth Shirley

The bartender reported the first real intelligence about the middle-aged woman sitting perfectly erect on her barstool at one end of the bar. She had been coming in each Thursday at about 3 p.m. for several weeks. Because the bar was not busy she stood out remarkably from the typical crowd in what everyone called “That Dive Bar on Central”. Tall with a medium build, she held her body as if it might fly apart, moving carefully to her stool and slowing hoisting herself like a crystal glass stem onto it. In a town where jeans were considered appropriate for every life event, her skirt and cardigan paired with an old-fashioned pearl necklace and earrings announced that she was not from this place.

She ordered a vodka martini, very dry with two olives. She ordered a basket of fries after the first drink and ate nearly half of them slowly while she drank a second martini. When she was finished, she used her cell phone to call for a ride. She paid her tab in cash, leaving a generous tip. She never spoke to anyone, other than to order and pay. She was very dignified, polite, and spoke softly. Ten years before, she might have been pretty. She wore her straight blondish-gray hair shoulder length, and she had astonishing deep blue eyes—clear and youthful, still. The bartender, a romantic, insisted that a man could fall into her eyes and drown in their sorrows. A manner of reserve held the air suspended and quiet around her. No customers approached her or spoke to her.

“Her husband is a chemistry professor,” the bartender announced that Thursday, nodding his head in the direction of the nearby university. “My girlfriend’s cousin saw them leaving the Chemistry building. She’s a nursing student.” At the two other men’s confusion, he added, “La prima, no la dama.” *The cousin, not the lady.* The men spoke softly from the other end of the bar, where the orders were placed. One server picked up an olive from the drink garnish tray and ate it, chewing thoughtfully, absorbing this new information. They spoke a mixture of English and Spanish when discussing life, not rudely, but for clarity.

The other, younger server thought he recognized the woman’s expression—grief mingled with desperation. He had recently returned home from the army. He had endured two deployments overseas—once to Afghanistan and once to Iraq, and like all soldiers he had seen many things that no one should ever see. He had also done things that woke him sweating, gasping for air like a trout introduced to the

earth, certain only that he did not belong where he was. He told the men that she had probably lost a son in one of the current mountainous or desert wars.

The older server argued that she looked as if she had come from a serious meeting, probably with the priest in the nearby Catholic Church. He knew her numb look from glimpsing his own face after pre-Cana counseling before his marriage eight years ago, when he was 18. “*Está tratando de no pensar en nada,*” he said. *She’s trying to not think about anything.* Like many men and women in this region, he knew early the heavy burdens of family responsibilities and many personal sorrows to endure alone, silently.

The bartender rubbed the same spot on the clean bar with a towel in a slow circle, thinking. Then he said, “Puede ser.” *Could be.* “But maybe she just needs a drink. A veces lo que uno necesita es solo un trago.” *Sometimes the only thing you need is a drink.* The bartender was older and respected by the younger men for his life wisdom. He had a wife and four children, ages 21 to 2. His baby boy’s pictures lined the mirror next to the cash register behind the bar next to his oldest daughter’s wedding picture. He had turned 40 last month.

The older server nodded, “Es difícil saber lo que piensa otra persona.” It’s hard to know what someone else is thinking. The three men nodded together. “Especialmente una mujer, una madre.” Especially a woman, a mother.

“Es verdad,” That’s true, they all agreed.

The woman finished her second drink and talked briefly into her cell phone. They watched her carefully place paper money on the bar for her bill. After a few minutes, she gathered her purse and swung her legs toward the floor gracefully. Her shoes caught her, as she straightened, hanging her purse on her shoulder. They admired her quiet manner, her tidy, upright figure, and they continued to watch her move straightly, like a tightrope walker, toward the lighted doorway. Without warning, one foot twisted, and she stumbled. All three men reached out instinctively to try to catch her though they were too far away. She did not fall, instead righting herself somehow with internal strength. They all sighed with relief.

One man whispered, “Es como mi mamá.” She’s like my mom. The three men nodded together once more. The door opened with a flash of light into the gloom, and she was gone. 🕒



BETH SHIRLEY lives in Albuquerque, NM with her husband and two dogs. When she doesn’t write or think about writing, she reads and thinks about reading. She also occasionally feeds and walks the dogs. Her work appears here in a national magazine for the first time, and she is currently working on a series of short stories about the main character of *The Woman Thinking of Nothing*.



A Hurried Exposé on Traditional Intestinal Theatre by Dionysus Destructo and His Pals

Steven Cline

My name is Dionysus Destructo. My parents were pencil-birthered inside the pan-els of a trashy '60s comic book series, and I received this rather awkward name thanks to them. I was just another unwanted byproduct of their failed shrink ray experiments, really. Later, during my university days, I succeeded in breaking the fourth wall, and I never looked back. After receiving my degree, I got hired on as a journalist for Entrails Monthly, which is why I sit here today, impatiently wait-ing for this play to start. My obnoxiously hardboiled, chest-hair-expectorating boss had handed me a sweat-stained flyer for a local performance of "Traditional Intestinal Theatre" last Thursday, and demanded the 2000-word write-up by Mon-day, in a gruff voice dripping with veiled job-security threats and masculine ecto-plasm. It's Saturday evening now, though, and the show is about to begin.

The performance takes place inside the walls of a repurposed old church. Tall ceilings, stained glass. It seems it's only used for musical performances these days. The pews have all been removed and replaced with rickety bleachers, like the kind you'd see in a high school gymnasium.

The lights soon go dim around us, and a deep silence descends in the room, ab-ruptly cutting out and dissolving our speech and active thoughts. Some sort of spiritual-surgical operation is being performed on us with

phantom-bloodied knives from hidden atmospheres, from high altitudes. The delightfully sweet feel-ing of drooping eyelids, of welcomed sleep. But with eyes wide, wide. And our spongy little minds have all become embarrassingly moist, have turned wide open and spectrally submissive, a fresh vessel for etheric penetration. The spotlight turns towards the stage, and a costumed figure dances out into the circle of brightness. He is male yet effeminate, face painted and movements jerky. Intense, alien eyes roll back and forth in quick progressions, thin fingers gesturing. His motions seem to embody a new physicality, a new way of being. The cosmic op-posites melt together in the alchemical-electrical microwave of his form. Five ir-rational connections looming inside sticky androgynous meatsack. A harbinger of the flesh to come? He begins to dance faster now, movements evolving to the hypnotic beats of the gamelan orchestra. His left kidney suddenly drops down from somewhere deep inside his elegant dress, hitting the stage with an unexpect-edly loud squishy-sloshy sound. Some people scream, a few giggle. The dancer's feet are now covered with sticky red fluid, and he looks very bashful. "Oops!" he says, apologizing to the crowd. He makes an unbearably long succession of awk-ward and comical shrugs, looking like some kind of long-lost Balinese Charley Chaplin. His face glows almost as red as the stained-glass windows surrounding us, and we start to feel embarrassed in his place. "Just get on with it!" I think. I really can't stand these kind of social mix-ups—it makes me nervous. After some hesitation, the gamelan orchestra starts back up again. He kicks the kidney off the stage and continues his dance. But this poor bastard is not even able to make one circle around the stage before a long string of pinkish intestines fall out, shameful-ly unravelling on the floor below him. He immediately trips over them, landing head first in that steamy gastrointestinal mass and releasing a dark, fecal explosion across the entire stage. He gets up again and brushes himself off, miming to us with exaggerated gestures that seem to be saying, "Well, shucks! Fiddlesticks! Oh well!" Is this some sort of physical comedy routine? He begins the aborted dance for us once more, but less than five seconds pass by before his entire skin suit sloughs right off his back. Just, wow! It happily slides itself across the blood- and shit-covered stage like an excited toddler on a makeshift backyard water slide. Good god, what a show this is! The dancer turns and faces the audience now, dead serious. He begins to remove the colorful clothes and elaborate headdress, movements slow and ritualistic, like a puppet. He soon stands completely naked, just a strange bodymass of twisting red musculature and that eternally smiling, uncanny mouth. He seems to grow and expand: a ballooning Gulliver-Deity born here today before our wide-open, trancing eyelids? His Holy Redness energetical-ly sprouts himself up and out through the old church ceiling like a magic bean-stalk. A vicious cascade of wood and stone soon fall down from the destroyed ceiling, and the ensuing flesh impacts push each and every audience member's left kidney onto the dirty floor. Such a cruel, tongue-in-cheek performance on his part. Or perhaps this is all a part of his cutting-edge new liturgy, a sacred, micro-cosmic pantomime of the newfangled red godhead? At any rate, he is a rather wrathful fellow, and is spending the rest

of his Saturday evening crushing entire colonies of identical toes and bedbug capitalists. Half for moral reasons, half just for the sport of it. All those scheming arachnid fuckers in suits are quickly caught in the sticky embrace of his blood-vein lasso and banished forever to the depravity of the dream guillotine.

(The above alternate timeline will be continued and expanded in my homuncu-lus double's account of the events, to be published next year by Perineum Press)

And yet the dancer is still down below us too, small and human sized. In anothe-r plane of thought. Another rail line. In any case, we see now that this is actually the fabled Viscous Man, that unnamable named one often seen manifesting him-self inside the wet dreams of sentient anatomy textbooks...

We also seem to all have become completely affixed to our seats by something. I'm not sure when it happened. Was the process so gradual that we didn't even notice? It seems to be spreading very rapidly, and to be fungal in nature. And very pretty. I don't think it's even medically possible now for me to remove myself from the fuzzy seat growths without leaving a few organs behind in the process. I guess I'll just have to learn to live with it? And what idiot let a damned mycelium colony in here, anyway?

We collectively blink, and Viscous Man turns into a bed of flowers—large, human-sized flowers, of every color. And it's not just those fabulous flower-things either. Bright congregations of beautifully succulent treekind grow up too, scattered amongst patches of erotic grass phalli dripping with pre-cum. With in-terest, we also notice a few groupings of sweet, giggling little beetle girls and wiggling balls of horny caterpillar hermaphrodites sensuously tickling at the over-sized flower petals and leaves, bringing plants to obscene climax. We watch as jets of unknown greenish fluids gush out from their stems, mixing with the shit and the blood in lurid new chemistry experiments. We even see a few naked fae-ries, but those are soon devoured by the floating Leyak monsters, wings and all. "When you can't find a baby, a faerie will do, a faerie will do, will do, it is true..." they sing, their echoing voices high pitched and strange, fangs dripping with moist streams of blood-cum... Oh Leyak, with your detached head and your naked organs obscenely bouncing in the open air for all to see...you are the black magic exhibitionist! I happen to like your lewd little "public indecencies," though.

In the corner of the stage I also notice that the forgotten gamelan orchestra plays on, having been unexplainably miniaturized to the size of an acorn during one of the play's earlier reality shifts. And yet they still impress, dazzling all with their unending stamina and tenacity. By god, it's

louder than any micro-orchestra has any right to be! They don't give up, do they? Bravo.

My attention turns back towards the center stage. So flavorful! Is this soil-sweet vision a Deep Divination of the SurrForest rising? Is it the undulating white worm on the sphincter-horizon of an anal black hole? A Toxoplasmosis Syzygy?

Yes, yes, and yes.

Everything which stands before us on the sacred stage is of unnatural size, is painted in irrational color. Everything is Marvelous. And I am in love with it all. Utterly in love—with this delicious, edible Garden of Eden, this bleeding utopia.

"Give me coitus or give me death!" I scream at the world (rather stupidly).

Of course, it's not just about the incredible sex, and it's not a passing puppy love. Much more than that, certainly. I'll show you what I mean—

Look closely and don't blink.

Understand it's circle-closing formation, it's desire.

Standing there so still—still yet eternally expanding.

Drinking itself to ruin, belly ready to burst.

Feeding itself on our blood offal dysuria & dreams

and even our gynecologists.

It seems undeniably bioluminescent today.

Comrades,

it is the flickering, hope-filled beacon of all cosmic pervers,

it is the lighthouse set ablaze.

It is also an unstoppable, incorporeal rhinoceros.

I wish to devour it with my toes, with my ear, with my gaping wounds. I wish to nibble at it with my anus. Because the mouth is sewn shut. 🙄



STEVEN CLINE currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to his writing he is also a collage artist, and helps to edit the surrealist journal and small press *Peculiar Mormyrid*. A collection of his short stories is forthcoming from Montag Press.

ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

SEIGAR *Pages: Front Cover, Inside Front Cover, Back Cover...*
is an English philologist, a highschool teacher, and a curious photographer. He is a fetishist for reflections, saturated colors, details and religious icons. He considers himself a travel and street photographer. His aim as an artist is to tell tales with his camera, to capture moments but trying to give them a new frame and perspective. Travelling is his inspiration. However, he tries to show more than mere postcards from his visits, creating a continuous conceptual line story from his trips. He has participated in several exhibitions, and his works have also been featured in international publications. He writes for The Cultural Magazine (Spain) about photography and for Memoir Mixtapes (LA) about music. He has collaborated with VICE Spain, WAG1 Magazine and also been featured in Vogue Italy. Instagram/Facebook: @jseigar



KYRA WILSON *Page 3...*
is an artist residing in Vermont with her family, and has been painting for over 20 years. Kyra tried going the expected career route in business, but ended up working in an office with flickering fluorescent lights, zero windows, way too many spreadsheets, and people with suspenders. She escaped, and embraced color and movement as her passion. Creating in Oils, Acrylic, and Watercolor, she works in a predominantly fantasy style, but visits the contemporary and even abstract realms on occasion! Kyra's work can be found at **KWilsonStudio.com**



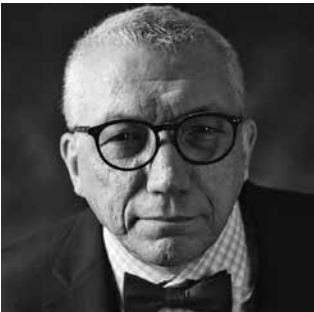
CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: 22-23, 38...*
is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



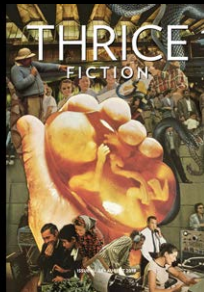
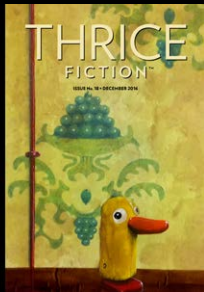
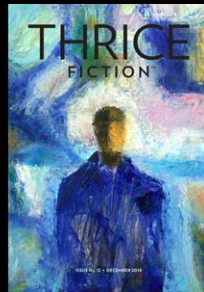
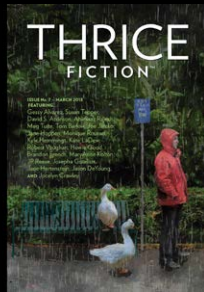
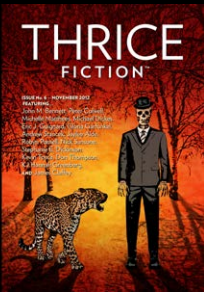
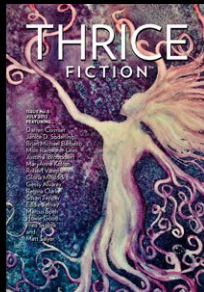
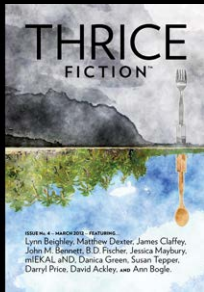
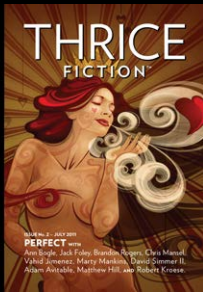
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