

THRICE

FICTION™



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CONTENTS

- | | |
|--|---|
| 2. Thrice 25 Notes <i>by RW Spryszak</i> | 29. The Pit <i>by Peter J. Stavros</i> |
| 3. Nest Egg <i>by Lara Longo</i> | 32. We Held Hands but I Didn't Know
Her Name <i>by Paul Beckman</i> |
| 5. Convenience <i>by Gregory Wolos</i> | 33. Larry, Said a Voice from Inside
<i>by Frank Candeloro</i> |
| 10. Vacationing Alone <i>by Dan Tremaglio</i> | 35. Halo from Other Side
<i>by Priyanka Nawathe</i> |
| 11. Omphalophobia <i>by Dan Tremaglio</i> | 37. Red Hair <i>by Philip Kane</i> |
| 13. Last Wednesday <i>by Djanaina Salomon</i> | 39. Lightband <i>by Rob McClure Smith</i> |
| 14. Poorly Drawn Lines <i>by Reza Farazmand</i> | 43. The Submarine Confession
<i>by Andrew Rai Berzins</i> |
| 15. Away, Away <i>by MaryAnne Kolton</i> | 47. Losing Face <i>by Zeke Jarvis</i> |
| 19. Pot Noodles <i>by Damon King</i> | |
| 21. Move the Sky Dots <i>by Mike Harkins</i> | |
| 23. A Drifted Sorrowful Soul <i>by Ali Azar</i> | |
| 27. Bereavement <i>by Scott Archer Jones</i> | |
| 28. The Force <i>by Jaqueline Masumian</i> | |

A guide to art & photos in this issue is on pages 48-49



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exceptional artwork since 2011. **THRICE ARTS** provides design and editing services to writers at large.



Thrice 25 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor



Whenever I see the clean, pleasant face of the young writer lodged neatly beside a quaint graphic announcing a contest or an opportunity to submit something for an “award” I start to get the heebie jeebies.

I get them because I know that the majority of the material hundreds of people are going to submit to these things is going to be contemporary fiction. Realism. Modern realism, no less. The kind of realism that draws you in to the same parlor you just came out of, except with a modern urban vibe, or some such creature.

The vibe will have an edge. And the edge will be cutting. And the wound it will open will contain bloodless compendiums of first world problems that would be maudlin if only they weren’t so expected. Riding on the edge of suicide, no doubt. With a dog. Up a mountain. Where the victim of the new twist on the same old story finally remembers what the old homeless mystic once said to her while he stood above the stink of a half-eaten can of sardines. No. Scratch that. A half-eaten can of sardines is too strong. Make it a broken flower pot, with a daisy, in the middle of an alley, signifying a new twist on the same old problem.

By now you have realized one of two things. I am either a cranky old bastard who has read too many submissions, or I am a sworn enemy of the contemporary fiction. Or I should say, the tyranny of contemporary modernist realism. I will admit to the former, and you can guess my feelings on the latter.

But it’s true. In my dotage I have become averse to modern realism. I hear enough about people’s dating life, their problems with their mother, sneaking a pickle between classes, and all the other edges the vibe lays open on the proverbial cutting table. Which is probably why, if you’ve been paying attention, the direction of **Thrice** may seem a bit off kilter the last few issues. We’re trying to find fiction that owes nothing to anything. That’s the only kind of story I want to read anymore.



Nest Egg

Lara Longo

On the night it happened, the Super keyed into the apartment and left the cops with washcloths to hold over their mouths. The coroner arrived at the co-op around the same time a detective rang the bell to our house. He sat with my parents in our dim, mauve living room. He said, “There’s noth-ing for you to do right now but you’ll want to look up a biohazard remediation contractor in the Yellow Pages. You’ll want a deep clean tomorrow.” I figured something bad happened but I couldn’t tell where.

For days, our house had people coming and going and drinking coffee and getting doors shut in their faces. My mother held the phone hard to her ear and said, “Everything can go.” She relayed the instruction from someone far away, who faxed over a single, signed page. Outside the co-op, a removal company docked a dumpster at the curb and made a pile of furniture, rugs, lamps, TVs, clothing,

books, toiletries, tapes, bed sheets, canned food, exercise equipment, picture frames, and mirrors. People walked by slowly to see what they could see.

When there was nothing left, my parents drove twenty minutes from our house and found the apartment empty as the day they bought it. They stood at the threshold like grim newlyweds. I barreled in, marveling at the wood floors. The gloss coating was so thick it looked like we were stand-ing in water. My father told me to go wait in the lobby so I sulked back downstairs and did ballet moves without thinking.

The apartment was in a building that sat among other buildings of the same design. Row upon row of apartment blocks, each rectangular and drab, shot up out of the ground. The neighborhood made me feel sour except for a crop of enormous Victorian homes a few streets away. They were incom-patible with anything else in the city. My parents bought the apartment the same year I was born. We

never lived in it but other people did.

A month after the night it happened, my parents put an ad in the rentals section of the paper. For the apartment showing, they drew up a sign to display in the lobby. Squiggles radiated from each word. My father tethered balloons to the vacant reception desk.

I walked up and down the block for boredom and watched the elevator glide up and down the building’s crystalline atrium. I wondered if we were rich but, like a clap on the back, I remembered that we couldn’t have been if we never left Brooklyn. In the lobby, I did a tightrope walk over the chaotic patterns in the carpet.

A sturdy old woman sat on a nylon beach chair outside her door. She wore a purple sweat suit and a man’s haircut. The halogen rays of the hallway made her look metallic. We didn’t say anything to each other.

Upstairs, my parents waited for someone to turn up. My father sat on the sill of the courtyard-facing window reading the paper while my mother lingered near the electric coffee pot in the kitch-en. A real estate book suggested they stage the place with candles and classical music. They did but no one came.

My mother came downstairs to check on me when she noticed the old woman. “I’m sorry to bother but has anyone come around for the open house?” Her voice sounded thin against the stark lobby.

“My dear,” she started, “you don’t want to see that place.


I’m telling you because you look like a nice girl. You don’t know what happened there. I won’t get into it and you wouldn’t believe but it was a horror show. I’m telling you and I’ve told a few others who came in, too. A horror show.”

The woman turned back to the nothingness of the hallway and my mother stood without breathing for a while, her face the color of lead. Everything about her was perfectly still even though she was walking toward the door. I thought my mother looked very beautiful. Before she left the building, she said in the smallest voice, “Get your father.”

Our phone was still ringing all the time. Once I picked-up a call and a person said they had a question about the rental property. “Da,” I yelled from the kitchen, “someone on the phone said to ask you, how many bodies can fit in the bathtub. Da, do I say one?” My father removed the ad from the paper and that was that.

Not much else happened that year. We stopped getting as many calls, as many visitors, and the newspaper started showing up in the house again. My parents put the apartment on the market and it was sold for a song to a man who looked like he was made from wool.

The day they closed on the sale, I was eye-level with their exchanging hands as my father turned over the keys. He looked tired and mumbled something. The new owner grumbled, “I was born in Dachau,” and threw a dismissive wave, like shooing flies. ↻



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Convenience

Gregory Wolos

Three years ago, when Ginger and I first brought our puppies home from the shelter, we’d already picked two names, though we didn’t assign them immediately. Our plan was to call whichever one proved to be less well-behaved “Bark” and the better dog “Bite.” Then we could tell people that “Bark is worse than Bite.” During our dozen years together, we’d been the kind of couple who’d take on the burden of dog ownership just for a punch line. Bark earned his “worse dog” title because he took longer than Bite to be housebroken. But, as it turned out, we named them too quickly: when the dogs matured into their actual personalities, Bark had a gentle temperament, while Bite was sour and threatening. Overall, Bite was much worse than Bark. We wound up calling the disappointingly literal pair Barky and Bitey.

Our first stop after a long-weekend trip to the Bahamas was to the veterinarian’s to pick up our boarded pets. Despite the blue sky, warm sun, azure sea and white beaches, the mini-vacation had failed in its purpose: we left our resort with the issue of Ginger’s surprise pregnancy unsettled. The window for taking action was closing, but we’d been unable to force ourselves to broach the subject.

Children had never been part of our plans; the dogs, I thought we’d agreed, were enough family for any couple. At the resort, Ginger treated herself to spa time while I hid behind a book on the beach. At meals, in bed, even on the flight home, we mumbled over neutral topics, while our glances slid apart like magnets of the same pole. I drank heavily, while I took Ginger’s avoidance of alcohol to be a contingency rather than a decision.

It was still morning as we stepped into the veterinary clinic—we’d escaped the island on the earliest possible flight. It struck me that we’d reached a crisis point. “So?” My hushed voice echoed off the tile floor.

“Here?” Ginger hissed. “Now?” She reached toward me as if I’d stumbled, though I hadn’t moved, then dropped her arm and shook her head. “The pups are waiting.”

“They’ll be happy to see us,” I grumbled, and stuck my hands in my pockets.

When Ginger asked the smocked vet tech behind the counter for our dogs, the young woman’s smile froze. She excused herself to find the vet. We waited, too long it seemed, twitching at muffled barks and yelps emerging from behind the half dozen examining room doors. Finally, the vet, file folder in hand, appeared down the hall. Behind him yowled Bitey, who dragged the vet tech past the doctor, Ginger and me on his way to the exit. I took the leash, wrapped it around my wrist, and, yanked with a firm, “Down, Bitey! Quiet!” while the dog belly-swam over the slick tiles.

“Exuberant,” I grunted over his whimpering. “He’s glad to be free.”

Ginger shot me an inquisitive look—where was Barky, our good dog? The vet frowned over his glasses without settling his gaze on either of us. “I’m sorry to have to tell you, but Bark passed away yesterday morning.” The air felt suddenly thinner, unbreathable.

“What?” Ginger asked in disbelief. “Barky?” She looked past the doctor at the vet tech, who lifted her hands like they needed washing and stepped behind the counter.

“Gastric Dilatation Volvulus,” the vet said, “Commonly known as ‘bloat.’ Difficult to pinpoint the cause—the intestines become twisted up sometimes when the animal is overexcited. The blood supply gets cut off to important organs, and, well—” His voice trailed off. “We can do an autopsy if you like. I caution you, it’s expensive.” He cleared his throat and looked at the folder he held, which I assumed was Barky’s medical record. “We’re so sorry. It’s one of those freak occurrences. We didn’t call you because it’s our policy to deliver this kind of news in person.”

Everything happened so fast. Still dazed by the news, we declined the autopsy. No, we didn’t want to see Barky’s body, which was in the freezer. The doctor shook Ginger’s hand, and I gave him a sober nod. He took a deep breath,

expanding and deflating like a vertical accordion, and turned to leave. Ginger stopped him with a question.

“What kinds of animals get ‘bloat?’ Just dogs?”

The vet blinked and resettled his glasses. “It’s also common in cattle. All ruminants, actually.”

“Ruminants? What other kinds of ruminants are there? Cats?” Ginger’s words smoked like dry ice.

“Well,” the doctor reflected, “no, not cats. Goats and sheep. Giraffes. Camels. Deer.”

“*Bambi?*” Ginger folded her arms. “*Bambi* was a ruminant? Did Bambi’s mother die of bloat? Oh—wait—it was ‘man’ who killed her, wasn’t it?”

The doctor, vaguely aware of an accusation, tucked his folder under his arm, bowed slightly, and retreated down the hall. Just as he passed the nearest examining room, its door swung open, and a tiny white poodle pranced out, followed by a large man in an orange track suit. Bitey stiffened beside me, barking sharply. “Quiet!” I warned and tightened my grip on his leash, while the poodle’s owner whisked his dog from the floor and clutched it to his chest.

“Sorry,” I shrugged and pivoted to Ginger, who was deep in discussion with the vet tech. The young woman held what I realized with a pang was Barky’s collar, which she was sliding through her fingers, jingling the silver tags. Ginger turned to me with misty eyes.

“How do we want Barky’s ashes? It’s fifty for mixed.”

Bitey lay across my feet, his low growl simmering. “Shh,” I soothed. He was waiting, I knew, for another crack at the poodle, whose owner lingered behind me.

“What’s ‘mixed’ mean?” I asked. “Barky was a mix. Some kind of lab-hound.”

Ginger shook her head. “She says ‘mixed’ is a scoop from all the day’s ashes. For just Barky it would be—two hundred more?” The vet tech nodded to confirm the price and offered the collar, which Ginger ignored.

I glanced down at Bitey. Did he sense his companion’s fate? Truth be told, the two dogs barely got along. We walked and fed them separately—when it was Barky’s turn for dinner, we had to lock Bitey in our bedroom. The pair had looked a bit like twins when we’d picked them out of the puppy pen at the shelter. But gentle Barky had developed into a handsome, sturdy almost-lab, while ill-tempered Bitey had turned into something more like a coyote with measles. (“Is he sick? These will go away, right?” Ginger asked of the rash of spots that eventually marked Bitey’s hide.) His floppy ears rose and stiffened like a kangaroo’s, in spite of Ginger’s effort to pat them back down whenever he didn’t shy away from her hand. “Bitey’s never actually bitten any one,” was the highest compliment we’d ever paid him.

“Do we really need any ashes?” I grunted as I tried to hide the effort it took to keep Bitey from lurching toward the poodle. After a sharp jerk, he melted back to the floor with a groan. “Where would we put them? We don’t have a fireplace or a mantle.”

Ginger winced down at Bitey as if seeing him for the first time. Was she wondering, like I was, if fate had taken the wrong dog? We’d accepted the chaff with the wheat, but now the wheat was gone. Were we a family without Barky? Could Bitey alone claim our hearts? As I contemplated our surviving dog’s role in our future life, the shadow of the decision Ginger and I had been unable to resolve in

Barbados fell over me.

Ginger turned back to the vet tech. She finally noticed Barky’s collar, snatched it, and handed over a credit card. “No ashes,” she said.

“If you change your mind,” the vet tech said as she processed our payment, “you’ll have to call within the hour for the individual ashes. For the mixed tell us before five o’clock.” She handed Ginger a tissue while she waited for the receipt to print. “We took half off of the boarding fee for, you know, the other one.”

“Half off for killing our dog? A bargain.” Ginger crushed the tissue, tossed it into a nearby trashcan, and spun away. “Good luck with your bloat,” she called over her shoulder, and strode toward the exit. The poodle man gave her a wide berth. Bitey had snapped at the flight of the tissue, but now, forepaws clawing at the air, he galloped after his departing mistress. I was dragged past the poodle guy, who said something like, “Why don’t you train your dog, Horatio?” Before I could respond, Bitey had pulled me through the door.

On the short drive to our apartment, Bitey careened about the car, back seats and front, howling at passersby, smudging the windows with his saliva. Shoving Bitey off our laps occupied all our attention, and it was impossible for Ginger and me to share our grief over Barky’s loss. We found a parking space in front of our building, and Ginger rolled our suitcases to the entrance while I paraded Bitey around the tiny square of dirt surrounding the only tree on our block. He pissed and shat on command, his only talent. I searched my pockets.

“Got a bag?” I called to Ginger, who waited at the door. She patted herself down half-heartedly.

“Nope. These are still my Barbados clothes.”

After a quick peek up and down the street, I toed the turd into the gutter and scraped my shoe on the curb.

Inside our apartment, Ginger and I flopped together onto the sofa, both of us too wrung out emotionally and physically to unpack. The television remote on the chair across the room seemed a thousand miles away, and I stared at a blank screen. Bitey settled on his bed beneath the TV, his snout on his crossed paws. He seemed to be gazing at the empty bed beside him.

“Poor Barky,” I sighed. I closed my eyes and let my head drop to the back of the sofa. Ginger mumbled something in reply. I didn’t reach out to her. *Six weeks*, she’d said when she told me. *What do we want to do?* There’d never been an adequate explanation of how such a thing could happen. *In between*, she’d said, flushing with an expression I at first mistook for an apology. Nothing else besides that “in between”—had the miscalculation been physical? Temporal? If there had been a miscalculation at all. So, Barbados. And back, with nothing to show but lost time and a dead dog.

“Bitey’s looking for Barky,” Ginger murmured. “Maybe we should have paid for the ashes, at least the mixed ones.”

“So, we’d be spending fifty dollars on a box of cinders that’s mostly other people’s dogs? Or maybe not even dogs—who knows what else died there today? You want rat ashes? An urn full of snake dust? And then what? Bitey would knock it over and we’d have to vacuum up the mess anyway.” Though we weren’t touching, I felt Ginger’s

shudder—she hated snakes. “Sorry,” I said. “It’s just that it’s a waste. Maybe instead we’ll blow up a photo of him. Or have someone do an oil painting.”

“A painting of Barky and Bitey?”

I looked at Bitey, draped across his bed. “Why include him? He’s still here. Besides, it wouldn’t be honest to put them together—they weren’t really friends.” I spoke to Bitey in my “good dog” voice: “We’ll wait until you’re gone to get a picture of you,” I said, and he looked at me. “Maybe we’ll stuff you, or better yet get a statue, like the one of Balto in Central Park.” I turned to Ginger. “In Russia there’s a statue of Pavlov with one of his dogs. I saw a picture of it once. Maybe close up you can see drool chiseled on Pavlov’s lap. Come to think of it, Bitey, you’ll probably live so long, people will be getting holograms of their dead dogs instead of ashes. When I’m ninety, I’ll have to walk your hologram so it can shit little hologram turds.”

“Just stop.” Ginger picked up her laptop from the end table. “This is—something sad. We’re supposed to be sad.” She opened her computer.

I sat for a while listening to her tap on her keyboard. I tried to think about Barky, but I couldn’t summon any feelings that felt appropriate. I peeked at Ginger through half-closed lids and wondered if this would be a good time for us to bare our feelings about our “situation.” Instead, I decided to mention the thing that had been nagging at me since we’d left the vet’s office.

“Hey—remember the guy with the poodle—the big guy wearing orange—back at the vet’s?”

Ginger didn’t look away from the laptop. “Not really. I was too upset—I just wanted to get out of there.”

“He said something to me while I was following you out. He said, ‘Why don’t you train your dog, Horatio?’”

Ginger glanced at me, then at Bitey. “He’s right. Why don’t you?”

“He called me ‘Horatio.’”

“Is that a thing? Something from Hip-hop? I don’t know, I’m out of touch.” She blinked back at her laptop screen. “How do you spell ‘bloat?’ The regular way, or is there a special medical—?” She typed and scrolled. “Never mind, I got it.”

Across from us, Bitey had stood. He stared at the front door with eerily translucent eyes. The hair along his spine rose. For a good ten seconds he remained frozen, mesmerized by nothing apparent. Then the spell broke, he turned around once and lay down as if his attention had never been roused.

Ginger finished reading about bloat. “Poor Barky,” she sighed with a frown. Then she remembered what I’d just told her. “Some stranger called you ‘Horatio?’”

“I think maybe he wasn’t a complete stranger,” I said. “I was dealing with Bitey and never got a good look at him. But I think he might have been someone I used to know back in high school. ‘Horatio’ came from *Hamlet*. If it’s who I think it was, we were in the play together. He got fat.”

“You were in *Hamlet*? You never told me that. You were Horatio? That’s impressive.”

“It kind of sucks, actually. I was never Horatio. I auditioned for Horatio, but I didn’t get the part. I was the ‘Messenger from England.’ At the end I got to say ‘Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.’ Not much else.

Nobody—guards, servants, all the walk-ons—had fewer lines than the Messenger from England. Girls playing guys had bigger parts than mine.”

“Then why did your friend—the poodle man—call you Horatio?”

“Because he was a schmuck. He knew it bothered me and thought it was funny. And he was Hamlet, of course. And the other member of our threesome, this nasty guy Roger, he was Polonius. It might have been Roger who started calling me Horatio.”

Ginger shut her laptop. For the first time since we got home, I had her full attention. “That’s mean, rubbing it in. They were your friends?”

“Supposedly. Jerry Convenience. That was Hamlet’s—the poodle guy’s— name. Roger and Jerry—the two of them were especially tight. Inseparable.” In my mind’s eye I was trying to superimpose the face of Jerry Convenience on the guy at the vet’s.

“That’s a strange name, ‘Convenience.’ It sounds like a joke.”

“I nicknamed him ‘Seven,’ after the 7-11 convenience shops. He said that an ‘immigrant forbearer’—that was the way he talked—an ‘immigrant forbearer’ picked the name ‘Convenience’ out of a dictionary because it resembled the family name from the old country.”

A flurry across the room grabbed our attention— Bitey was sitting up, scratching his muzzle with a back paw.

“He’s itchy,” Ginger said. “And lonely.”

“I should have let him bite Jerry Convenience.”

“If you knew each other, wouldn’t he have said more to you at the vet’s than just calling you Horatio?”

“No. By the time we graduated, I wasn’t even on speaking terms with him or Roger. They hated me. And the amazing thing is, the next time I saw them, they tried to kill me.”

“*Kill* you?”

“Murder me, yeah.” I leaned my head back and stared up at the ceiling. My eyes ran along a crack I’d never noticed before, a thin line that had been painted over. It ran nearly the length of the room. “I didn’t even know it then. I figured it out a just couple of months ago, after, like, fifteen years. It just popped into my head—an epiphany.”

“You had an epiphany about a murder plot?”

“When I went for my root canal. I sat in the chair, all numbed up. Dr. Stein was doing his thing inside my mouth, and I let my attention drift up to all those pictures they’ve taped on the ceiling to give the patients something relaxing to look at.”

“The postcards and travel brochures—”

“Right—the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, the Coliseum, ski resorts. And beautiful beaches—like the ones in the Bahamas—golden sands, palm trees, blue ocean. So you can take a vacation in your mind while Dr. Stein’s earning his living inside your mouth.”

“Wait—but why did your friends start to hate you. What did you do?”

A sharp whimper interrupted. Bitey’s scratching had gotten violent. “Hey, boy, what’s the matter?” Ginger called. She set her lap top aside, pushed herself off the couch, and went to examine the dog. “Eew—his eye is all crusty. I bet he caught something at the vets. Yuch—” She hurried into the

kitchen and returned with a damp paper towel folded into a square. But when she tried to wipe Bitey’s eye, he growled and jerked his head away.

“Don’t lose a finger,” I cautioned.

Ginger sing-songed our Bitey mantra: “He’s never actually bitten anyone.” She stood with her hands on her hips and gazed down ruefully at the dog, who continued to scratch. She dabbed at her temples with the towel and returned to the couch. “Dried crap all over his eyes,” she muttered and flipped open her laptop. “They kill one dog, infect the other. Now I’ve got to look up ‘crusty eyes.’” She blinked at the screen, then shot me a look. “Did you say why your friends hated you enough to want to kill you? I forget. Sorry, I’m a little distracted. I saw Barky’s bowl in the kitchen.”

“His bowl? Damn.” I stayed silent for a respectful few seconds before returning to my story. “You know why those guys hated me? Because I got Jerry back for the Horatio thing. He asked me to write him a peer recommendation for college. For Dartmouth. He couldn’t ask Roger, because Roger had already gotten in there early decision with a recommendation from Jerry, and a tit for tat was against the rules. I guess I used the letter as retaliation—for ‘Horatio.’ Maybe for some other slights. Maybe I was just jealous.”

Ginger lifted an eyebrow. “What did you write?”

“Wise-ass stuff I thought was clever—like, where they asked if the candidate was flexible, I wrote, ‘Jerry’s tendency to vacillate is legendary.’ And he got rejected. Didn’t even make the waitlist.”

“Because of your letter, you think?”

“Who knows? Maybe. But Jerry must have figured out somehow that I screwed him because after the rejection he and Roger cut me off cold. Walked by me in the halls like I was a ghost. Overnight, the whole school treated me like I’d ruined Jerry Convenience’s life. Even teachers who’d liked me for years treated me like shit. Graduation couldn’t come soon enough.” I wiped my brow, surprised to find I was sweating.

Ginger was looking at me the same way she’d looked at the veterinarian when he told us of Barky’s death. “So did you feel like you got even? *Do* you feel it?”

I shrugged. “Jerry got a scholarship to some little college down South. He must have done okay. He can afford to live in this city. He’s got a dog, just like us. And how do I know his life isn’t better than if he’d gotten into his first choice college?”

Ginger’s lashes fluttered. Her upper lip curled. “You’re saying maybe he would have died in a car crash up in New Hampshire? Or maybe he met his future wife at the college down South?” She sighed and turned back to her laptop. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She typed something, then sat back and looked at me mournfully. “And the murder? You said you had an ‘epiphany’ about it.”

“In the dentist’s office, yeah.” My words felt heavy in my mouth, like stones. “One of those pictures on the ceiling—a surfer on a monster wave made me think of Seven.”

“Seven.’ Jerry Convenience. He surfed?”

“Not that I knew. Not in high school. We were all indoor boys. After high school, I thought he and Roger had washed their hands of me forever, and vice-versa. But then came spring break senior year of college. Remember—you went

down to Florida with your sorority friends, and I spent the week at home—at my parents’. Then out of the blue I got a phone call from Jerry Convenience.”

“Daytona. We slept on the beach.”

“Yeah, I know, you came back all sun-burned. You didn’t want me to touch you. I thought we were breaking up. I thought you met somebody down there. An outdoor boy, maybe.”

Ginger gazed at her laptop screen with narrowed eyes. The tips of her ears glowed red. “And what about the phone call from Jerry Convenience?”

“It was weird. He did the ‘how’s-it-going-long-time-no-see’ thing, as if there hadn’t been a rift between us. Then he invited me to go surfing with him and Roger. I said sure.”

Ginger lifted a shoulder to rub her chin. Our eyes met, and she looked away. “But you don’t do the ocean. You don’t go in it, anyway. ‘The surface is impenetrable,’ you always say.

“Damn right. But I guess I was bored. I was tired of organizing my vacation days around *The Price is Right*.”

Across the room, Bitey groaned. He lay on his side now, but still dug at his eye with a forepaw. Ginger clucked her tongue.

“I’ve been looking it up—it says here he might have something called ‘dry-eye.’ Not uncommon. We can treat it with warm compresses and ointment.”

“If we can get close enough.”

“If. So—you went surfing? It’s hard to believe we knew each other when all of this was happening. It’s like I’m listening to a different person’s life.”

“I’m telling you now. Jerry and Roger picked me up. They barely made eye contact when I got in the car. They looked more like a pair of morticians than surfers.”

“You didn’t care that they hated you?”

“I guess since Jerry hadn’t mentioned it, I thought maybe they forgot.”

Ginger sniffed. “People don’t forget things.” She sat up straight and folded her arms. “You know what? I decided I do want Barky’s ashes. I don’t care if they’re mixed. You still have time to get to the vet’s before five o’clock.”

“Really? For fifty dollars?” I shrug. “Fine. I’ll go back. While I’m there I’ll ask if that poodle guy really was Jerry Convenience.”

“You can pick up some ointment, too, for Bitey’s eyes. I’ll call when you leave so they’ll have it ready.”

“Okay. So—the murder: Jerry drove his family’s station wagon, and I sat in the back behind him and Roger. I leaned on a purple surfboard that stuck out the rear hatch like the tongue of somebody choking to death.”

“You thought that then?”

“That’s how I picture it now. We drove for miles in complete silence. We were headed toward the south shore of Long Island, to the beaches where people surf. The awkwardness was so thick my skin felt sticky with it. So I started mocking them.”

“You *mocked* them?”

“Reflex, I suppose. Repartee, what friends do. If I’d realized that they were planning to kill me, I probably would have been trying to figure out how to escape. But at the time I missed all the clues. What I did was call to Jerry: “Seven?”” I said, ‘you’re way less than that. Not even six. Or

three or two. You’re not even zero. You’re ever diminishing nothingness. King Minus, and your touch creates a void. What you are,’ I said, ‘is Unfinite. Unfinity is your new name. And you,’ I said to that grim bastard, Roger, ‘are Unfunity.”

“Unfinity and Unfunity.”

“Nice, right? Since my epiphany at the dentist’s, I think about the scenario all the time. I take it apart and put it back together. Everything about that ride comes back to me as if I’m watching a movie: I see the interior of the station wagon, and that surfboard—the big purple tongue. And here’s the scary thing—there’s a thick rope and a burlap bag and a metal pipe. Oh, and I’m pretty sure there’s an ax.”

“An ax?”

“I see it with the other stuff stored behind me under the surfboard. And all the time there are signs we’re getting closer and closer to the beach—marsh grass, sea gulls, sand, the salt smell.” I closed my eyes and saw my would-be assailant: Jerry Convenience choked the steering wheel with a white knuckled grip, absorbing my insults and trading glances with Roger. What were they imagining? A purple surfboard dipping and spinning over a dark wave? A rope strung with seaweed? A sinking burlap bag loaded with something that had the unmistakable heft of a body?

Another yelp from Bitey broke the spell. He was rubbing his muzzle frantically on his pillow.

“Oh—he’s miserable. You better hurry to the vet.” Ginger pushed her laptop to her knees and placed a hand on her abdomen; with a jolt, I realized that there was something growing inside her.

“Barky’s ashes and Bitey’s ointment. They owe us,” I said, looking at her stomach.

“And see whether or not the guy who called you Horatio is your Jerry Convenience. I just googled him. There’s a million entries for ‘Jerry’s Convenience Store,’ but nothing for just ‘Jerry Convenience.’ Didn’t you ever stalk him—even after you figured out about your murder? I bet his ears are burning now. Aren’t you curious?” Her voice got spooky and mysterious—was she teasing me? “Maybe he’s been stalking *you*. Maybe he’s been waiting all these years to finish you off.”

But Ginger wasn’t wearing the look of a teaser. Her unsmiling face tilted up at me, as if she was sniffing for something, and there were shadows under her puffy eyes. Did she sense from the story of my imagined murder the possibility of an “or” life she might have lived without me? Just how attractive was that alternative?

“I poked around a little. Nothing but those ‘Jerry’s Convenience Stores’ you found.” I felt hollowed out, as if my insides had turned to dust.

“Hm,” Ginger closed her eyes. Her lids looked bruised. “So—what happened? How did it end?”

“I survived,” I said, worried she’d be disappointed, in spite of the fact that my presence belied any other conclusion. “Nothing happened. It started to rain—it turned out to be a lousy day for the beach. We turned around.”

“And you kept mocking them?”

“No—I got carsick.” The emptiness I felt gave way to nausea as I relived that drive home—the beat of the windshield wipers, the smell of the upholstery, the pair of heads in the front seats, as still as mannequins.

“Kind of anticlimactic.”

“Yeah.” I stood up, wobbly. I could have told more. Ginger’s look reminded me of the contempt on Roger’s rain-speckled face when I saw it through his window after getting out of the car. It was pouring by then. I was drenched before I got to my front porch.

“You okay?” Ginger asked. “You look pale. I can go back to the vet’s if you want.”

“I got this. It’s the least I can do,” I added as I made my way, light-headed and stomach-sick, to the door. My eyes fell on Barky’s bed. I tried to imagine my own absence—of shrinking away until there was nothing left of me. But I couldn’t get myself out of the picture—I felt I would always be there, but everything around me would disappear, until I was surrounded by nothingness. Bitey got up and followed me to the door.


“I bet he thinks you’re going to get Barky,” Ginger said.

“I am,” I said. I reached for Bitey’s head. He didn’t pull away. His eyes were crusted. He let me brush some of the crud away with my thumb. “I better hurry with his ointment—he’s drying up. He’s the opposite of Pavlov’s drooly dog.”

“Watch out for Jerry Convenience. That’s some story.”

Watch out for how long? I thought. For the rest of my life? “Some story,” I echoed, my hand on the knob. I pushed Bitey back with my leg to keep him from following me out the door. “Not the kind we’ll tell our kids. Not at bedtime anyway.”

“What?” Ginger called sharply as the door shut behind me. I paused in the hall, listening to see if she would repeat herself, not knowing if I’d hear her. 🐾



GREGORY WOLOS has nearly eighty stories published in journals such as *Glimmer Train*, *The Georgia Review*, *descant*, *The Pinch*, *A-Minor Magazine*, *Yemassee*, *The Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Review*, *PANK*, and *Tahoma Literary Review*. In 2019 Regal House Publishing will release his collection *Women of Consequence*, and Gambling the Aisle will publish his chapbook *Turnpike*. More often than not, his writing reflects Kafka’s assertion that a literary work “must be an ice axe to break the sea frozen inside us.” For full lists of his publications and awards, visit GregoryWolos.com



Vacationing Alone

Dan Tremaglio

FIRST DAY:

For the most part we who vacation alone spend our time making meaningful eye contact with strangers. We go out to eat. We sit in a restaurant by the window where we can watch people pass by on the sidewalk. Eye contact with these passersby feels extra meaningful on account of the separate spaces we occupy and because one of us is moving and the other is stationary. What is less likely to occur but occurs anyway is more meaningful. Like when we make eye contact with drivers of other cars at red lights because we both turn at the same instant for no reason at all. The lack of a reason makes the moment more meaningful.

SECOND DAY:

We put on sunglasses and go to the beach. We take off all our clothes. We lie down on blue blankets or on white ones and sit up and look out. We conclude that eye contact at the beach is less meaningful on account of the sunglasses and the nakedness. The reasons to make eye contact are obfuscated yet obvious. We get dressed and go out to eat again. We sit on balconies and attempt eye contact with strangers across the greatest distances possible. After dinner we drive around, stopping at every yellow light.

THIRD DAY:

We go to a museum where conversation is discouraged. Meaningful eye contact with strangers in silence in the presence of paintings is extra meaningful on account of art's inherent polysemy. Afterwards we go the museum café where everyone appears solemn. We make eye contact with one solemn stranger and then leave. Later that night we attend a play in the park where, at the conclusion of the first act, we turn and make meaningful eye contact with a stranger who is simultaneously turning while laughing very hard.

FOURTH DAY:

We sign up for a whale watch. The boat is large and white with an upper deck covered in sandpaper-like material meant to keep it unslippery. We put our hands on the railing and look for whales. We forget our sunglasses. We squint at the whitecaps and the light on the whitecaps. When we turn to try to make meaningful eye contact with strangers we see mostly sunspots. Then the whales appear, a pod of humpbacks. They are right beside the boat. Joining us now at the railing are strangers with whom we make lots and lots of meaningful eye contact. Words are being spoken too but they do not matter, words like whoa and wow and whale. Only the eye contact matters.

FIFTH DAY:

So much meaningful eye contact has been made on the whale watch we require a day off. We go to the store wearing sunglasses and buy beer and return to the hotel room and drink it alone and nap.

SIXTH DAY:

We visit the old lighthouse at the end of the bike trail. Lighthouses are obsolete now and therefore more meaningful. We climb the iron spiral staircase, our steps echoing quietly. We get to the top and peer out through thick ribbed glass that cannot open. The air is so hot in here we turn to look for tomato plants. Instead of tomato plants we see the lighthouse keeper. The space is tiny and we are embarrassed we did not notice him sooner. He wears an officious cap and sports a massive grey mustache. He sits on a stool with one hand on his knee and the other on the railing. He says nothing. We say nothing. We make incredibly intense meaningful eye contact only.

SEVENTH DAY:

We have enjoyed these six and a half days of rest and solitude and all the meaningful eye contact with strangers we have made. Now our vacation is over. We ride the elevator down to the lobby to surrender our room key. No words are spoken, no more eye contact made. We regret having to return to the world of company and communication but have no choice in the matter. We must find meaning where ever we can, whenever we can. ☹



Omphalophobia

Dan Tremaglio

The patient reclines on the faux leather couch with worry stone in hand, speaking rapidly, not pausing to pick nose with thumb and index which he wipes semi-covertly on the doctor's wife's sister's divan. Seriously doc, he says, it's one of my earliest memories and clear as a bell. First occurred in the bathroom circa age three-and-a-half. Most horrifying self-realizations take place in the bathroom. Course you already know that, you shrink. Shrinkism's essentially one vast catalog of realizations in the bathroom, am I right? Ever read Martin Luther's journals? Not Doctor King but the religion founder? I did and let me tell you every dozen pages or so there's mention of him doing battle with the devil on the john. Seriously like actual Satan. In the bathroom. On the toilet. Attacking. Anyway, I was sitting on my own toilet one day circa age three-and-a-half looking at my belly button when suddenly I became absolutely certain it was made out of an inside out hotdog. Like that's what hotdogs actually are, dissected belly buttons flipped inside out and stuffed. Or outside in. A profound question of genesis doc. Try it. Next time you see a hot dog look at the end of it and then lift up your shirt and look at your belly button. An innie I mean. You an outie you're on your own. Point is I started being completely terrified by my own belly button, this inside-out hotdog in the center of me. Still

scared to this day and it comes up at the most inopportune times. Like when I'm asking a lady out on a date or speaking at a board meeting or whatnot. I hear a pimply like teenager say in a super sardonic voice shut up dude, your belly button's made outta hot dogs. It makes me feel like my head is occupied by a pack of eloquent rodents. They wear tuxedos and chain smoke cloves. Occasionally they pole dance around my brain stem. It ain't pretty. I tell them to take their party elsewhere but that just gets them riled up. Can't you just put me on something, doc, pretty please?

To combat your anxiety? the doctor asks.

No! To combat my belly button!

The patient's condition calls to mind for the doctor the oracle at Delphi in ancient Greece, a place formerly referred to as the navel of the world. So he tells the patient about it. He tells him about the crack in the ground and gas and riddles and the axioms above the door. The original Delphi is obviously long gone to ruin, he says, but a clinic in a town upstate by the same name created a center a few years back that studies people's capacity for self-acceptance. Basically how it works is: one gets locked inside a nice quiet comfortable pretty room for however long a duration one asks to be locked therein. Admittedly patients are tacitly encouraged to bite off as much as they believe they can safely chew. So someone like you might safely initially opt for eleven hours, say. So for eleven hours you would be simply locked alone in a nice quiet comfortable pretty room. Common question: what if one changes one's mind? What then? Here's what. One can speed up the passage of time. By administering oneself electric shocks. Every shock shaves ten minutes off the clock. What do you think the clinic at Delphi concluded? They found that most people would rather electrocute themselves than be alone with their own thoughts. By the way, in case you were wondering, Zeus was the god of lightning, not Apollo, to whom the original Delphi was dedicated.

The patient nods slowly at all this, optimistically. So you'll prescribe me something then?

The doctor tries but cannot not smile. Let's talk about diet quick. ☺



DAN TREMAGLIO's work has appeared in various publications, including *Gravel*, *Literary Orphans*, *Jellyfish Review*, and *Cheap Pop*, and been a finalist for the 2018 Calvino Prize. He teaches creative writing and literature at Bellevue College outside Seattle where he is a senior editor for the journal *Belletrist*.



Last Wednesday

Djanaina Salomon

I savored precisely every drag of my Marlboro sitting astray on the porch swing of our cottage wrapped in that hideous poncho aunt Silvi forced upon me on christmas six years ago. I ran my fingers gently on a bed of morning dew landing gracefully from the yard's cottonwood-- Amazed for a moment by this manifesto that i discovered also happens here in the countryside of Danube Delta. I thought of last Wednesday--Streaks of the flamingo skylight crawled over the plains, challenging the persistent peace of the night. An aching sensation lingered on my chest, then came the familiar voice whispering "You don't belong here." A disturbed gust of wind flopped the kitchen windows repeatedly, its piercing voice carrying some of the most poignant thoughts of people living on this land.

Here i was thousands of miles away from home, a home that i so wished to leave one day, except the very thing i intended to escape existed beyond those borders. If only i have known, the consequential baggage of blackness shadows one who is black, wherever they may go. After a series of mental breakdowns in February, following years of hemorrhaging through microaggressions and paradoxical violence from my colleagues at Greenhouse Corp, I reached out to a dear friend abroad, Fia seeking guidance on how to opt out, from a woman who've successfully managed to break ties with the norm. When i think of Fia an image of vines cascading down a steep mountain comes to mind--I thought of her that way, an unresting element of nature continuously on the move. She traveled fiercely alone, surviving off her salary as a stock trader, digital nomad she calls it. Last winter she camped across the western saharan desert feeding off camels with a group of on edge travelers like herself. I've wondered a great deal about people who can make friends on such a global scale.

Last Wednesday, Fia arranged for us to meet at a bazaar in Baia a small town nearly 65 km from where i lodged in Tulcea County. My host Fitrat, suggested that i take her son Adrian along with me in case any issue arises on these unforeseeable dirt roads. Adrian cranked up the radio, attentively listening to the weather announcement before switching to some upbeat Romanian music resembling the

sounds of the west indies. He glanced at me, giving me an affirmative nod, i offered a nod back confirming that i also enjoyed his music. He slid into a asphalted road, Adrian rolled down his window, poking his arm out. Like an infant following the physicality of his predecessor, i cracked open mine, allowing my face to get brushed by the refreshing air of the Razim Lake. The ripped leather seat grew pleasantly warm, suddenly i was afloat, free of my worries for getting in a car with a total stranger in a place to whom i was entirely stranger.

We parked near a wired fence a few feet away from the bazaar, with its woven tables and cherry wood chairs. Adrian lit a cigarette during the short walk, our sandals dragging and kicking small rocks in our way. An old man parading down a small grass hill with pails, stood halted holding on to his cattle scanning us as we walked by, the look one gives when spotting the source of an intolerable stench. We perched on the cemented stairs of the town's cathedral, under the shadows of wild thyme waiting for Fia to show herself--The look of curious locals wheeling pass us threatened my calm. I began to whisk out a conversation out of Adrian, despite our language barriers, desperate to blend in. "You guys keep looking around like this, someone might have to call the police" Fia exclaimed. "Let's ditch the coffee we're making dinner at the house."

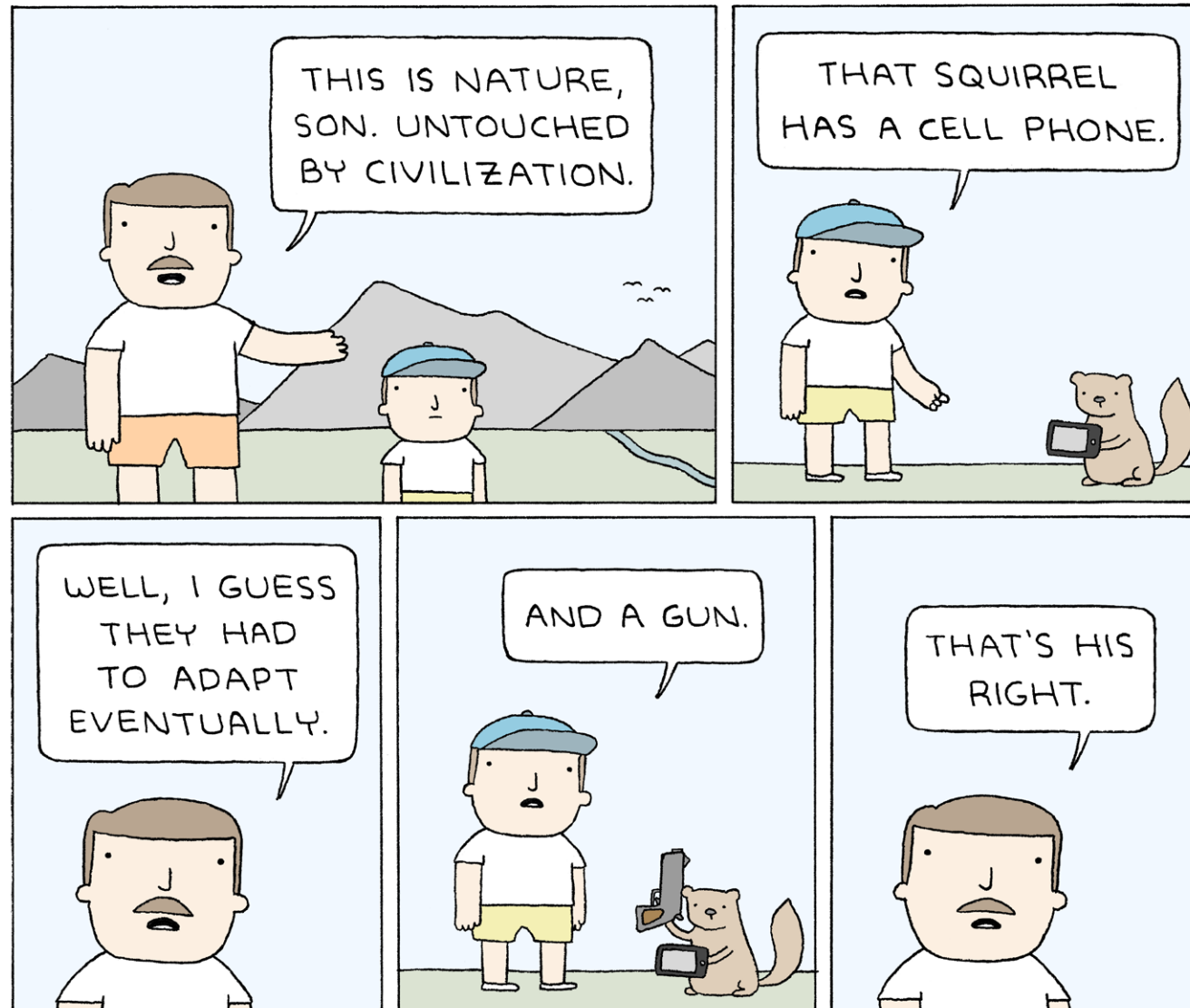
The aroma of stewed meat fumed out of the house. Viv one of Fia's roommates candidly greeted us at the door, offering plums she just harvested from her garden, "So sweet right you guys?" throwing a rather eager smile awaiting an out pour of praises for her labor. Stationed by the stove was Eli, another one of Fia's house companion here in Romania. He stirred vigorously a pot of polenta, before abandoning the task to dive intimately into our arms for hugs.

Adrian stroked the cat's fur as he submerged in the rhythm of plate setting. Colorful was the display of beef stew with polenta, soup dishes filled with bean paste, eggplant dip and raw vegetables. We surrounded the table, joyous, a true feeling of community taking over me. The fragrant steam escaped the ceramic bowl, kissing my face, when a full set of hands landed on my afro, a loud voice commenting: "wow your hair is so soft." 🍷



DJANAINA SALOMON is a New York trained actress who enjoys literature thoroughly which was the vessel that led her through the path of writing short fiction, poetry and screenplays. She moved to the states at the age of fifteen from Haiti. Her previous work can be found on [Medium.com](https://medium.com/@djanaina). She can be contacted by email at djanaina.salomon@gmail.com

Poorly Drawn Lines by Reza Farazmand



Away, Away MaryAnne Kolton

She couldn't make herself pick up the gun. She hated the sight of it and was afraid of committing to ownership.

"C'mon now," he said. "You don't want to buy it unless you're sure it's right for you. It's not loaded. It won't bite." The gun store manager talked to her in the same condescending tone Jackson sometimes used.

"I'll take this one," she said, not giving in. "You sure you don't want to at least hold it, see if it feels comfortable?"

"This one, I'll take this one and some bullets." "How many?" "One? Is one enough?" "Depends on why you need it, Hon. They come in boxes of fifty."

"Okay, one box and could you hurry? I have to pick up my son from school."

"The gun comes with a clip." "Yes, and..." "Well, you put the bullets in the clip."

Smirking, he pressed, "Ya know, you just might want to come back some day and learn how to shoot it?"

"I have a Masters Degree in Science and Engineering," Lisa said, her voice breaking now. "I think I can figure it out, okay?"

She didn't have a degree in anything and she never ever would have dared to speak to Jackson that way.

She drove her car to another strip mall and stopped by the dumpsters in the back. She opened the trunk, threw away the small spare tire and hid the bag with the gun in its place. She smoothed the covering carpet back in place, checked her watch and drove to the Barkdoll Elementary School to pick up her ten year old son. Late, but not too late, she hoped.

Taylor was already outside waiting for her, standing by the steps, head down, scuffing the toe of one sneaker against

the sidewalk. Her heart hurt from loving him so much.

"Hey, Tay," she called to him.

He picked up his back pack and slow walked his way to the curb. He hadn't said much of anything to her in days. Lisa swiped away the tears that ambushed her.

Not his fault, not his fault.

They headed into the town center and parked on the side of the library.

"Got your homework assignments, Tay?" No answer.

They walked into the lobby and turned right to enter the Computer Lab. Taylor strolled off to the children's section and Lisa claimed a corner desk and a laptop in the area for adults. She picked up the headphones and scrolled through YouTube until she found the operating instructions for the model of the Phoenix Arms Semi-Automatic Pistol she just bought. Tilting the cover, she watched and listened as a creepy guy, sitting in a pick-up truck, talked about how to use the weapon. Over and over she listened to him talk and watched him handle the gun until she'd memorized most of the information. She noted especially the difficulty of getting used to the safety and the fact that the slide might catch on the hammer once and awhile. When she felt she had absorbed the basics, she collected Taylor and they left for home.

She had no money of her own. She had asked her mother for the money to buy the gun and begged her not to question why she needed it. Her mom knew more than a little about her daughter's marriage. What she knew coupled with what she guessed made her worried and uneasy. She believed interfering might only make the situation more volatile so she kept her mouth shut and prayed for the best.

About a year ago, as things began to get so much worse, Jackson insisted Lisa arrange for the direct deposit of her paycheck into his account. That's also when he gave her a credit card and told her this was how she would pay for things from now on. Groceries, personal items, gas, clothes for Taylor, prescriptions, everything, every single thing. That way he had a record of where she went and what she spent. Better to keep track of her. She had no real friends to speak of. Jackson had seen to that, early on, with his surly dismissal of them. He also claimed her mother was too nosy for her own good, and Lisa should limit her contact with her as well. She was allowed to work at the job she loved only because they needed the money. Often loneliness was like a concrete block chained to her ankle. Always there.

In the beginning, Lisa had been happy and hopeful about their marriage. Jackson obviously loved her and focused on her almost to the point of obsession. He was an internet tech at a bank in town and she spent her days as a receptionist at a large pharmaceutical company. She'd been married before. Too soon, right out of high school. Her husband was a boy and preferred to hang out with his friends and drink beer rather than assume the responsibilities of a man. It took Lisa awhile to rationalize those two years of coping with a losing situation. She was determined to learn from her earlier mistake and avoided getting involved with any men.

She first saw Jackson at a local Harvest Festival. He was

tall, muscular, with longish, dark hair and seemed shy, maybe worried about fitting in. Lisa was with friends from work. The crisp fall weather, the companionship and being with people she liked mad her more outgoing and vibrant than usual. She spotted him leaning up against a tree, listening to folk music and trying to blend into the landscape. Her friends teased her into talking to him. She watched him for a bit and then made her way over to him.

“You here for the music or the cider?” she asked, aiming one of her mega watt smiles at him. Jackson looked out over the crowd, leaned down and half whispered, “Neither. I think I might be here for you.” He had a way, back then, of looking at her from under half-closed eyes that thrilled her. He seemed charmed by her open friendliness. Soon, they were a couple, moving in together after only six months. Her husband picked out the house they rented, and the furnishings they bought. He was definitely a “take charge” kind of guy. Lisa discovered she was pregnant early on and Jackson was the one who insisted they wed. Her doubts first surfaced after she gave birth to their son.

Jackson appeared jealous of the baby from the day they brought him home. Little things like calling her to come to bed when she was tending to Taylor. If she didn’t respond immediately, he sulked for the rest of the night. As the weeks went by, Lisa was unsettled by Jackson’s lack of interest in the baby. She would have appreciated his help, but she stopped asking when he snapped at her, saying, “Having a kid was not my idea, remember?” When she replied that she didn’t get pregnant by herself, he tensed up, raising his open hand as if to hit her. Frightened, Lisa clutched their son to her chest and turned her back on him. He left the house, slamming the door. When he returned, hours later, she knew he’d been drinking. He was tearfully apologetic, pleading it would never happen again. She went back to work when her mom offered to watch their son.

As the years passed, the angry outbursts and pleas continued erratically. Drinking often was the catalyst that emboldened Jackson. Lisa felt hemmed in and did her best not to provoke her husband. By the time Taylor was nine, going on ten, Jackson had hit, punched or kicked her more than once. Whenever Lisa threatened to leave him, he looked wounded and uncertain, then wild-eyed. He clamped down even harder on her activities outside the house. No more night classes at the local college. Forget about the occasional Saturday lunch with a co-worker.

As the abuse became more frequent, her son seemed to get progressively distant and angry with *her*. She knew Taylor could hear what was going on; all her attempts to explain or justify the situation only made things worse. Disgusted, he tuned her out. She was constantly begging him to give her time; she told him she was trying to find a way to keep them both safe. Any love she had for Jackson had diminished with each hateful episode and Taylor was being exposed to a kind of violence he was too young to process. He and his father barely spoke. Lisa was desperate to find a way out.

Although she tried to keep the attacks hidden from her mom and the people she worked with, her supervisor,

Lainey, had already asked her if “everything was okay at home?” Tears tracked slowly down her face when she thought of her son becoming more and more withdrawn and sullen with each new incident. Her inability to leave her husband was creating a horrible situation for Taylor. Well. . . now she was working on that.

The morning after she bought the gun, Lisa waited in the bathroom for Jackson to leave. Opening the front door, he called up the stairs to her, “C’m on Lisa, you ready to go?” “I’m gonna need a few more minutes in here.” “Well, hurry up. I have to be at work early.” “Go ahead, Jackson. I don’t think I’ll be much longer.” She heard him hesitate. He liked her to be on her way out before he left, nervous about leaving her alone in the house. Then the door closed, the screen door whooshed shut and she thought she was alone. She sat in the bathroom for at least ten minutes, hands twisting around each other, and then she went down the stairs and outside to her car. Lisa looked around just to be sure he was really gone. She opened the trunk - God, her hands were shaking - grabbed the bag from the gun store and raced back inside. Fast, fast up the stairs into their bedroom she ran. She emptied the bag, opened the box, put seven bullets in the clip per the instructions she’d watched and put the clip in the gun. She pulled back the slide. The thing should be ready to fire. She slipped the loaded gun between the mattress and the box springs towards the middle of her side of the bed. Sweat beads forming around her hairline, Lisa peered out the front window. Was she safe? Putting all the trash in the plastic bag, she crammed the bag into her tote. She hurried down the steps. Still skittish, she got into her car, looked around, and pulled out of the driveway.

For his tenth birthday, his father bought Taylor a cell phone. Lisa objected, but Jackson insisted it was a way for him to keep his son safe. He didn’t say from what. Even though she no longer had the option to make any decisions, she didn’t think her son was old enough for a phone. But it was definitely not worth an argument which could lead to more abuse. She focused instead on planning the way to free them both from Jackson’s tyranny.

The following week, after seeing one too many bruises from kicks to the back of Lisa’s legs, Lainey finally called her in to her office. “You seem to be going pretty heavy on the makeup these days,” she said softly. “Tell me what’s going on with you and Jackson.”

“Nothing to do with you, “Lisa tried. “Listen to me; we have a program, here at work, to help you leave him.”

Lisa knew her maniac husband would never let her go, let alone allow her to take her son with her. She could never leave without Taylor.

“I’ll figure it out,” she said stubbornly. “Please let us help you?” Lisa, near tears, stood up to leave. “I can’t talk about this. Can you just let me alone?”

Lainey reached out and gave her employee a hug. “If you change your mind I’m here for you, girl.”

That night, tired and emotionally drained, she arrived

at the house to find Jackson’s car already in the driveway. He usually got there a few minutes after she did. She often wondered if he followed her from work to make sure she came directly home.

When she opened the door, her son and her husband yelled, “Surprise!” Lisa, frightened, crumpled against the sofa. Then she saw the flowers and the dining room table set as if for guests. Jackson held a bottle of wine and two glasses.

“Sit,” he said. “What’s the deal, you guys?” She was stuttering. “We made you dinner, it was my idea.” Taylor said shyly, “Just because.”

Lisa made her way to a chair and it was then she noticed her son was recording her reactions on his phone.

“Oh honey, please put that away.” “No, Mom, it’s okay. Dad taught me to use the video part today. It’s great.”

During dinner, Lisa was apprehensive, picking at her food; Taylor was hyper. He continued playing with his phone and talked more than he had in weeks. Jackson seemed primed for something. He’d probably had a drink or two before she got home. He kept trying to force more wine on her but she managed to avoid his attempts with a few pretend sips. He’d bought salad, artisan bread and shrimp and pasta from the new Italian gourmet restaurant in town. Even though it all looked appetizing, Lisa felt nauseous, afraid, to the point of passing out. Jackson, emptying the wine bottle into his glass was feeling no pain whatsoever. More of threat to her when he was drinking, but he seemed to be in a good mood. Maybe she would ask to be excused and go soak in a hot bath before bed.

But . . . no. As soon as he was done eating, he came around the table and put his hands on her shoulders easing her out of her chair, gently leading her up the stairs.

“We need to talk.” Once they were in the bedroom, he dropped any pretense of affability.

“Where were you today, Bitch? You were late getting here.”

“My supervisor called me to her office at the last minute.” Lisa noticed their son cowering in the doorway. “Jackson, don’t do this. Taylor needs to go to his room and do his homework, please tell him to go.”

He backhanded his wife. Lisa was barely 5’3” and weighed no more than 110 pounds. It didn’t take much to bring her down. Stumbling, she staggered backward. As she tried to stand up, her husband punched her in the ribs with

a closed fist. When she cried out in pain, he turned to his son and said, “Are you getting this, Tay? Pathetic isn’t it how she doesn’t even try to fight back.” Lisa saw her ten year old son, confused and startled, filming his father’s abuse.

She screamed, “Taylor, leave! Go to your room now!” “He’s not going anywhere, are you Tay?” Jackson said to his son.

“Where did you go? Who were you with? Don’t lie to me!”

With that Jackson knocked her down again with a punch to the face. Blood splattered the wall, the carpet and the bed skirt.

Taylor lowered the cell phone. “Dad, stop! Mom’s bleeding. Just stop!”

As Lisa wiped her face with her arm, attempting to get to her knees, Jackson aimed his booted foot and kicked her in the back.

“Jesus, Lisa, this is supposed to be an action movie and you’re laying there like a dead fish.”

Lisa saw her son lower the phone again. His face was white with fear. He was shaking like he might be convulsing, in shock.

“Son, don’t you dare put that phone down. Keep filming, you hear me? We’re just getting to the good part.”

Panting, tired now, Jackson picked Lisa up and carried her toward the bed. She fought him, pounding on him and kicking at him. When she bit him in the forearm, he threw her to the floor where she lay semi-conscious. When she opened her eyes, Jackson was busy looking at the bite mark. Carefully, barely breathing, eyes closed, face on the carpet, she slid forward, an inch at a time, toward the bed. He caught site of her out of the corner of his eye.

“Is this great or what? She’s coming back for more. Be sure you get this, Taylor.” He let her get right up to the edge of their bed. Then he kicked her in the legs.

Jackson was done, for now. He reached out to his son, pulling him close. He pried the phone from his grasp. “Let’s see what you got there, boy.”

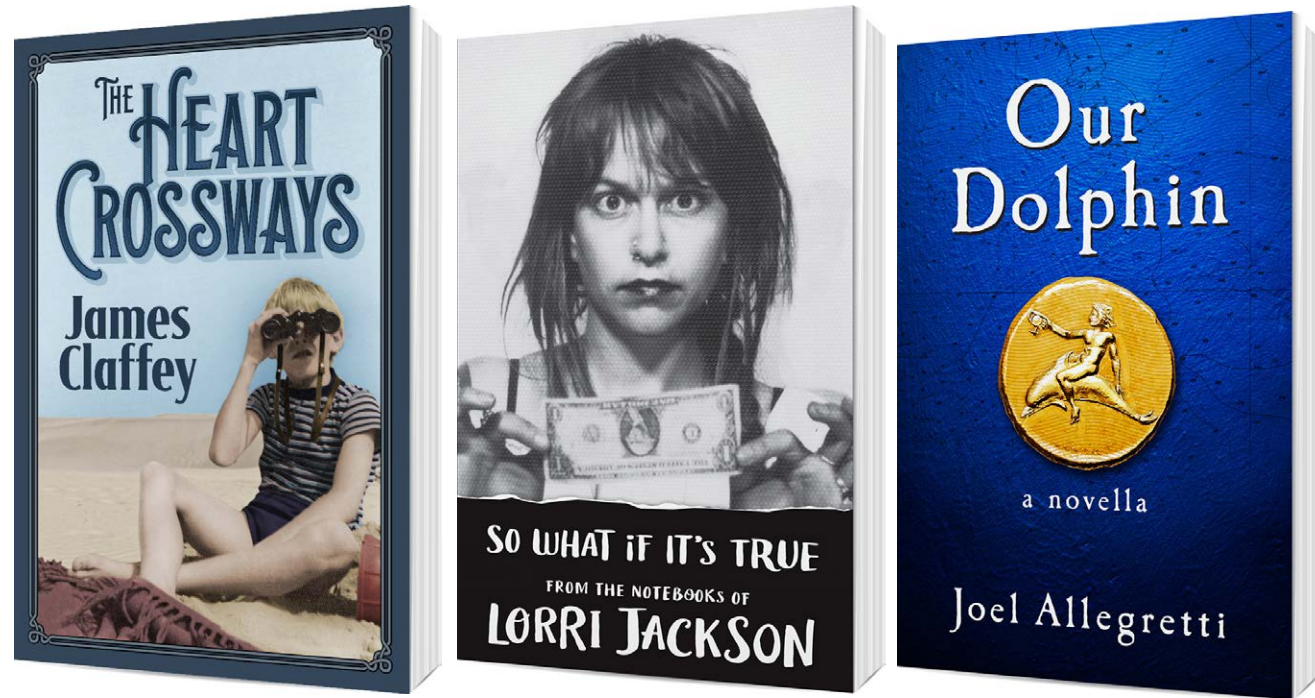
Taylor was sobbing, twisting, struggling to escape his father and make his way to his mother.

Lisa tried to find the gun between the mattress and the box springs. ⑤

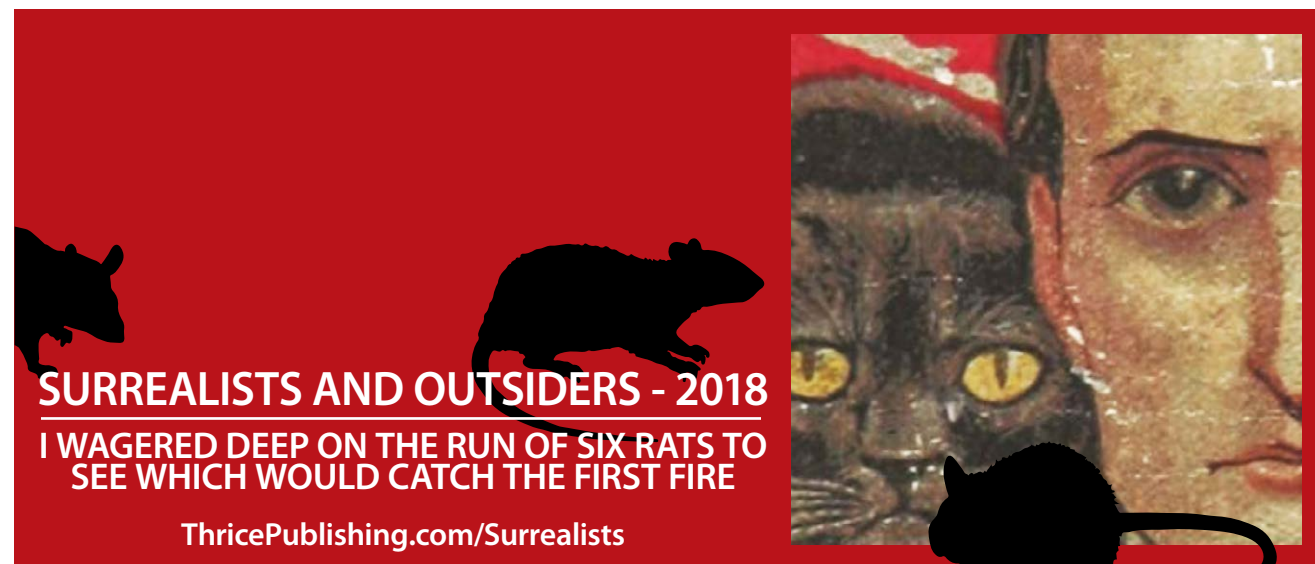


MARYANNE KOLTON's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous literary publications including the *Lost Children Charity Anthology*, *Lost In Thought Literary Magazine* and *Connotation Press* among others. Her story *A Perfect Family House* was shortlisted for The Glass Woman Prize. Author Interviews including those with Siobhan Fallon, Charles Baxter, Alice Hoffman, Dan Chaon, Kathryn Harrison, Caroline Leavitt, Charles Finch, Charlotte Rogan, Karin Slaughter and Ken Bruen have appeared most recently in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Herald de Paris*, *Her Circle Zine*, *The Literarian/City Center*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Word Riot*, and *January Magazine*. MaryAnne's public email is maryannekolton@gmail.com.

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Pot Noodles

Damon King

His bedroom is downstairs in what was once the dining room. Passing from the front of the house to the rear, I shuffle through his private space, along a makeshift hallway our landlord has fashioned from some old curtains and two very large bookcases. That dingy corridor is a cluttered death trap — a ramble of odd shoes, the skeleton of an umbrella clawing at me with fractured limbs, and those countless, teetering stacks of Pot Noodles. As I edge along the wall, dipping outstretched toes in blind quest for open patches of carpet and safe passage, I snatch sneaky peeks of him scribbling away, or hear the laboured clack-clacking of his keyboard. Always writing. Morning, noon, night — writing.

Very occasionally, I catch him leaving his lair for the kitchen, each time as if setting out on a virginal venture into daylight, hunched up and squinting in a shaded corner

behind the fridge, cowering from the dust-encrusted, energy-saving bulb blazing like the sun. His skin pulses lilywhite, blotched with freckles, glistening an emulsion sheen.

Seems like a sound enough bloke, but rarely smiles — a clear attempt at hiding his teeth, which are in drastic need of rescuing. His shock of rusty hair is in permanent riot, with one side or the other flattened to a semblance of good behaviour by a lengthy afternoon spell on the pillow.

Last week, I asked him what he writes, and he actually opened up a bit, telling me about his attempts at short fiction. I enquired if he had anything in print. He named a couple of published pieces before halting himself mid-sentence and batting away his words with a nonchalant flick of the hand, as if publication held little import. However, the next time I broached the subject, he darted straight back into his room and returned with a clutch

of literary journals clamped under his arm. He fanned them out on the table with the surprisingly tender touch of his long, grime-clogged fingernails, sliding each pristine edition from the pile in turn, and slowly leafing through the pages of his stories. Some volumes were pretty slick affairs, printed on high-quality paper and tightly bound, while others were little more than a few photocopied sheets stapled together as if knocked up for a school project. Some titles had been in print for decades, while others had existed for only a single volume before dying out. From his sorry telling, the whole literary journal scene seemed unviable or, at best, in a constant state of precariousness.

I read through a couple of his very short pieces while he boiled the kettle. He appeared to have some talent — at least that’s how my amateur eye perceived it — demonstrating a wonderful grasp of the English language and providing some very amusing description. I actually spat a few dribbles of tea at one point; despite having his back to me, I could sense a smile, and perhaps even a whiff of pride.

I asked him how much he’d earned from his writing. He chuckled. He’d won twenty pounds once, as a runner-up in a competition, but he didn’t bother entering them anymore as he’d spent fifteen to twenty times that amount in entry fees over the years. He was suddenly eager to inform me of his greatest literary achievement, a story nominated for something called the Pushcart Prize, but I’d never heard of it, and he didn’t win anyway.

I suggested that maybe he should consider self-publishing. He shot me an incredulous look, but realising that I wasn’t actually trying to be funny, he laughed, unveiling a straggle of mossy teeth jostling for position in a tight oval of cracked lips. Anyone can self-publish, he declared, jutting his chin and squaring those puny, back-to-front shoulders. He could easily take a shit on a pile of paper (his exact words) and self-publish that, no problem. But where was the validation, the recognition, the kudos? He decried self-publication as the shortcut to anonymity. I pointed out that sitting alone in his room, with stories stacking up on his hard drive, unread, would surely guarantee his obscurity, but by that point he’d stirred the boiling water into his Pot Noodle and scuttled back to his room.

I sometimes wonder how he magics up the rent money each month, or keeps himself stocked with his only source of sustenance, but on the one occasion I enquired about his employment situation, he merely muttered something about ‘order numbers’ and gave an almost imperceptible nod to his laptop.


When he’s not writing, he’s reading — books about

writing, on literary theory, literary criticism, the *Times Literary Supplement*. Literary mad.

His only other passion is Pot Noodles, consuming them in a strict rotation of flavours: chicken and mushroom, beef and tomato, chicken curry — breakfast, lunch, dinner. He’s an aficionado on the history of the dehydrated noodle, the creation of the Pot Noodle brand, the full controversy of its advertising campaign as ‘the slag of all snacks’, and the ultimately doomed venture of its protégé, the Pot Rice — this information divulged to me during the three-minute sojourns required to boil and pour the exact amount of water.

Last week I suggested, with tongue firmly in cheek, that perhaps he could write a story about Pot Noodles. My flippancy clearly irked him, his glare almost tearing a strip off me. As he skulked back out of the kitchen, he suggested that if I was so interested in his writing, and his Pot Noodles for that matter, perhaps I should give it a go myself.

And do you know what? For a very brief moment, I actually gave it a thought. But to be honest, having heard about the time and money invested in writing, and the total lack of reward, why would I ever waste my precious time? 🕒



DAMON KING hails from the leafy and salubrious environs of Lockleaze in Bristol BS7, England. He doesn’t eat Pot Noodles.



Move the Sky Dots

Mike Harkins

I move the sky dots. Any no light that I can, I get through my secret out through my wall and into the space, stand still, and close my eyes so I don’t know where the sky dots put themselves since the last time I moved them. I lean back until I hurt, then open my eyes. As soon as I see the sky dots, I move them again.

Only I know.

Some of them spin a little bit and stop, and some go fast and stop. I don’t know if anyone else is ever seeing the sky dots at the same time I move them. I would only know if someone saw me in the space and made noises to mother or father. But if someone saw the sky dots move they could not know it is me moving them, because when I am in the space during no light it is always just me.

No one sees me ever. Even when mother and father open the wall and pull me into the space during big light, when other mothers and fathers and boys and girls are in big

light, father will hold me and make soft noises, keeping me in his own walls, and the walls mean no one sees me.

But one-many-times no light ago a boy saw me, maybe, and the girl, maybe.

I was in my walls at my see out. The boy scared me. He was pushing his where noises come out against the girl’s where noises come out, then he stopped and looked down right at me.

The girl lives in the walls across from my walls. I have seen her and her mother and father. I have never seen the boy. I don’t know why he looked at me, because I didn’t make any noises. I held myself still so I could watch, but he looked down into my dark and, maybe, right at me. I almost fell trying to get away from the cloths that hang in my see out, and I could tell from his noises he saw the cloths come back together, even though I had moved them only a very little, just enough to see out.

I do not always lay during no light, sometimes I am at my see out almost the entire no light. I hardly see any mothers or fathers or girls or boys then, but I still like to see all the other space outside my walls. Other times if it feels right I sneak through the walls to the out space to move the sky dots.

I heard their noises close, and their no light shapes moved across the see out cloths, and so I knew they were in the little out space between my wall and the girl's walls, and I couldn't not go to the see out. There are small big lights somewhere that make the no light time like something in between, and if the girl or her mother or father move past my see out the small big lights make no light shapes against the lookout cloths. That's how I usually know the girl is there, but she always goes not stays, especially during no light.

If my lookout didn't have the see out feel wall, I could touch the boy and girl they were so close. They pushed their where their noises come out against each other again and again.

My see out is a little wall that I see out but I can feel, the only one in all the walls around me. I can rest my arms on the place at the bottom of the see out, put my chin on my arms. I do that until the big light dies. I never let mother or father see me at the see out. Mother always goes to it and puts the cloths together even though they always are.

I don't know what their noises always mean. The girl made noises back to him, scared noises I think. I can't understand them. I don't understand anyone's noises. If I hear noises I look through my cloths, even if there are no girls or boys or mothers or fathers.

Mother and father don't know my secret way to our big out space behind my walls. They couldn't unless they were to see me in the out space. But they never come to it at no light. When the thump thumps across the up stop and the noises from the box in the up stop, and I wait, I know they lay. I have been in the up with them many times, but I like to be here. There are many see outs in the up, and a box with a see out, with small mothers and small fathers. Their noises are different. And there are other noises sometimes that make me feel like something is in me, or around me, like father's walls but not. Like a big breath dancing on me.

Sometimes in the out space I feel a big, big breath all over me, moving my hair or the cloths on me. Sometimes my skin moves.

Mother and father have let me be with them in the out space in the big light, but not many. I don't know how to do how-many-times. It's not right for me. From the out space father opens the wall and big light fills my space and I can't find a way where the big light isn't, so father comes to me

and puts his hard hand but soft around mine, makes quiet noises and pulls a little, and I let him pull me to the out space in the big light.

And he puts his walls around me so no one sees me.

But the boy saw me. I don't know what that means. I don't know. What is that feel down in me? I think he saw me and when I think that I feel it down in me.

Maybe the boy and the girl will be in the little out space again. Maybe I will sneak through my secret out through the wall and into the out space this no light and he will see me.

Why does he see me? Does she see me too?

What is that feel down in me when I think about the boy can see me? Maybe he only saw the see out cloths.

It is almost no light. I will go to the out space and move the sky dots. If the boy or girl can see

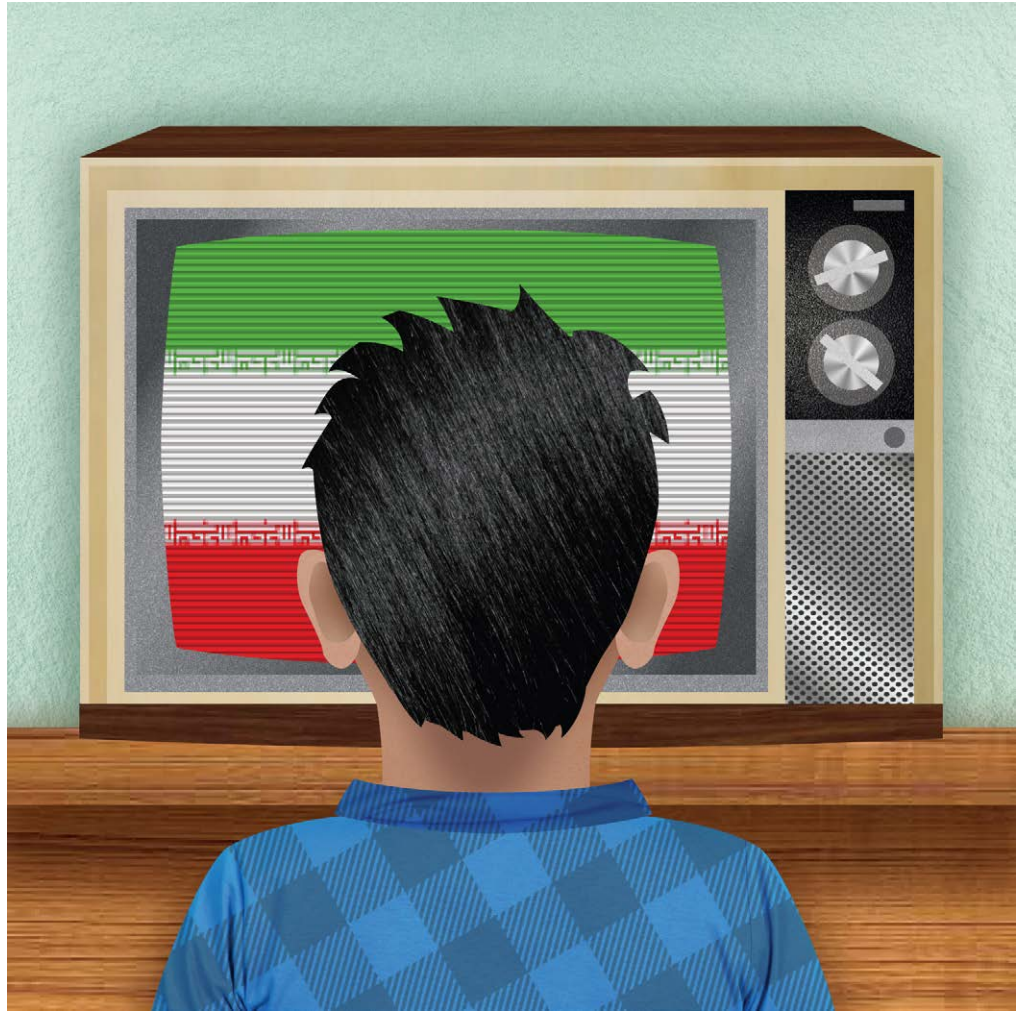
me, do we all put our where our nosies come out on each other?

I have never pushed my where my noises come out against another boy or girl.

It is almost no light.

I will move the sky dots, and the boy and girl will see me.

Maybe we will all move the sky dots. 🌀



A Drifted Sorrowful Soul

Ali Azar

Hussein! Hussein! Wake up!’ Mehri shook his son’s shoulder. He threw the blanket aside with a jerk and rolled swiftly on his mattress toward his mother who was crouched down, looking at him with her round eyes.

‘Khomeini is dead!’ she said, then stood up and left the room. Hussein looked around as if he was looking for sometimes, rose to his feet and went to the living room.


Mehri leaned back in her chair, crossed her legs, and her husband, Heydar, hugged his knees, sat on the carpet, both were staring at the TV which was on Islamic Republic of Iran channel one. Khomeini was lying on a bed, his owlsh-eyebrows were lowered, his eyes were determinately shut and his lips hardly visible among his bushy snow-white beard. Khomeini’s son, Ahmad, had sat beside the bed, embracing his father’s head among his arms.

In the parliament, Khamenei, yet to be next leader, was

reading the Khomeini’s last will. his deep voice was brittle.

Mehri’s gaze fixed on the screen without blinking an eye. Heydar was pulling his cigarette gently and blowing out passively. Hussein leaned against the wall. Tears ran down his cheeks. He slipped back into his room, lay on his mattress, buried his face in the pillow and cried, then sat behind his desk and started writing. In the evening, when no one was at home, Hussein came back to living room, turned the TV on. It was showing an old footage of the 1979 revolution. Khomeini, returning to Tehran from exile, came out from the passenger door of Air France plane and descend the stairs in triumph. A heart-wrenching sound of a Ney was in background.

Hussein turned up the TV, rested his forehead on his palm, and his head started shivering. When he raised his head, he saw his mother staring at him, like a scientist looking at an alien specimen. She then went to the kitchen,



MICHAEL W. HARKINS is an independent journalist and author of three books. His 2016 nonfiction book, *Move To Fire*, was included in the Publishers Weekly 2016 Indie All Stars list and is in development as a film. An essay about his experience in California's historic wildfires will appear in a 2019 fall issue of *Real Simple* magazine. His commentary has been featured on NPR's *All Things Considered*, and his early concert industry work included concert production and video production with Journey, Bruce Springsteen, and Prince.

and, soon, an aroma of chicken wafted into the air. She was cooking his boy’s favourite dish, Tahchin, chicken thighs mixed with buttered rice and yogurt.

The state announced a week of national mourning. The government services were closed down, school exams postponed, mosques were blaring out dirges from megaphones day and night. Taking advantage of the days off and the pleasing heat of the spring which would be soon replaced with the scorching summer, the neighbourhood boys came to Hussein’s door to take him to an outdoor adventure. Among them, Hussein was the one who came up with somethings to do, like burying the bones of sheep legs under a pear tree to turn them into gold, plucking the colourful crystal droplets of the chandelier and hide them somewhere until they are old enough to sell them and become rich.

Hussein didn’t move from in front of the TV, asked his mother to tell them he is busy and can’t make it.

The designated place for Khomeini’s Burial was in Musalla, a vast vacant lot in the vicinity of Greater Tehran. The mourners were trooping toward there from all directions while an enraged storm was lifting the dust, swirling around them. The men, all dressed black, were beating their heads and chests, and fire engines were splashing water on them to cool their mournful insides and sun-whipped outsides. When Hussein saw wailing women in black chadors, he looked away from the TV; he once dreamt, in a big square covered with blood, lain myriads of women with back chadors.

The mourners reached to piles of shipping containers on top of which was a glass pyramid where the body of Khomeini lay, wrapped in white shroud, and a black turban rested on it. The Revolutionary Guards, arms in arms, circled the mountainous heap to stop further advancement of the mourners but this husky circle was broken, devoured by an ocean of people, who crawled on the containers, took down the body which then started floating aimlessly above the hands; the hands which were being thrown to get a piece of the shroud. The wrapped body was torn apart. The guardian force, beating the surrounding crowd with their batons, got the half-naked body back fast and furious. The camera was shifted away from it, and soon, a helicopter appeared on the dusty sky, landed within the stubborn crowd, and the body was transferred into the aircraft which then left the scene as if it never came in.

Now, the Musalla was now black as far as eye could reach.

The TV announced the burial ceremony had been postponed to next day and discouraged people to come to the Musalla. Toward the noon, the mass took off in all directions.

At the same evening, the same TV showed Ayatollah Golpaygani performing the death pray for Khomeini to commence the burial ceremony in presence of major politicians, army commanders, clergymen, and a few hundred public mourners. The funeral came to end before sunset.

In the meantime, the town was invaded by the metropolitans, including Mehri’s three brothers, Farman, Parviz and Ibrahim, who grabbed the chance of the holiday and visited their hometowns. One night, Mehri invited them for dinner, and before serving the food, she sent Hussein to buy a family bottle of Coca-Cola from grocery. When he came back from shopping, entered the garden, he heard the

guest’s laughter from inside the house- his mother’s guffaw was the most noticeable. The word ‘Hussein’ came a cross. He approached to outside window, which its colourful stained-glass didn’t allow guests to see the eavesdropper.

‘Sun of a gun! He was crying as if his mother has died. His head was shaking, tears rolling down like flood. I knew this boy has a sympathy for mullahs but didn’t expect him to go that far. He’s even written a poem about Khomeini!’

He waited until his mother’s one-woman show finished, the laughter subsided, followed by clinking and tinkling of the cutleries, then he entered the room, glowering at Mehri and said hi. The guests, all smiling, warmly greeted him.

Dinner was served, followed by tea and sweets.

‘...they are all the same dastards. Whoever has become the successor of Khomeini, the situation of the country won’t change. You will see,’ said Ibrahim. ‘Khomeini have many of my innocent comrades executed, and he now died unpunished.’ Ibrahim stroked his walrus-like moustache, stained with grey.

‘Pipe down Ibrahim. You and your comrades did the revolution with the leadership of Khomeini, and now, we all Iranians are paying the consequences,’ Parviz said. ‘You, smarties, screwed up the country.’

‘What do you know about politics? All you care is to collect your usurious loans and fatten your belly,’ Ibrahim said.

‘I know what is burning you up Ibrahim. While your medical university classmates are raking in the dough, you are driving a taxi cab day and night,’ Parviz was nodding his head steadily.

‘We did the revolution to free Iran from the subservient of the imperialism, Shah’ Ibrahim was now addressing Hussein. ‘But our revolution didn’t blossom like the October one.’

Parviz shook his head. Farman looked at his watch.

While the guests were debating, their rustic hosts were watching them, occasionally raised their heads, looked at the debaters, then their heads sank again.

‘Now, listen to me mister Hussein!’ said Parviz. Hussein grinned nervously; he was always afraid of uncle Parviz’s menacing eyes. ‘Mehri told me you’ve written a poem about Khomeini, Atta boy. Remember, sail in the direction the strong wind blows, and now the Mullahs are the blasting wind, and if you don’t, your boat will be overturned like Ibrahim’s one,’ Parviz chuckled.

Hussein scratched his head and nodded.

‘Ignore him, Hussein. Don’t let these mullahs brainwash you with the religious bullshit,’ Ibrahim said. ‘I can’t believe they force a ten years old kid to write a poem about Khomeini.’

‘What do you expect him to write? A poem about the hardship of proletariat?’ Parviz said.

‘I don’t expect a thick skull like you to understand this.’

‘Hold on a minute!’ Farman raised his hand. ‘The safest move in this country is to stay in middle.’

‘Uncle Farman, Hussein draws very nice pictures. You should see them,’ Mehri said.

‘Hussein boy, there is no money in writing or drawing. Focus on your study,’ Farman said. He was the man of wisdom in the family, a very first man in the town who was awarded a doctorate so whatever he said, the family considered it to be like a verse of Quran.

When Mehri started telling a story of her childhood when

Parviz sold his bicycle to her, then he took it back from her the next day, and when she protested it, she received a slap on her neck; and Parviz was denying that, Hussein left the room without anyone noticed. He wanted to have a stroll in neighbourhood but remembered the goggle-eye ogre Tepegöz, who, according to his mother, came down from Mount Savalan to the town after dusk and hunt those children who were still outside. So, he went to his grandmother’s house, a few blocks away. She was alone, sitting on her bed, her legs stretched and covered with blanket. She was watching the TV, her lips were moving, her hands fingering prayer beads. ‘Hussein! Is it you? Come on in my dear,’ she smiled.

‘What are you watching Shamsi nana?’

‘Lamentation of Imam Khomeini. I am praying for him.’

‘People say he wasn’t a good man,’ Hussein said.

‘Don’t say that,’ she bit her lips, frowned her eyebrow. ‘He was an Imam, a man of god, and It is a sin to talk that way about him. I don’t understand what is wrong with this young generation. No respect to religion,’ her lips continued moving.

While staring at the TV, Hussein was chewing his T-shirt and rocking back and forth on his chair. Shamsi nana watched him for sometimes.

‘Take this five toman and buy some snack for yourself,’ she winked.

Hussein took the note and smiled.

The unexpected holiday ended, and the life came back to where it was left. The postponed exams were about to start. In the last day of school, Hussein was called to the office of the dean of the school, Mr Akrami.

‘Khiyavi, as poet of the school, you are expected to read a poem about Imam Khomeini’s death in morning of last exam before summer break starts. I am sure, the death of our leader has inspired you to write a poem.

‘I don’t think it is a good poem sir.’

‘Better to be!’ he half raised from his chair. Hussein could smell the foul odour from dean’s armpits.

Hussein nodded.

In the annual commemoration of Martyrdom or birth of any of twelve Shi’a Imams, in the morning, Mehdi stepped on the balcony of the school, facing hundreds of students lined up longitudinally according to their grades and he read his poems celebrating or mourning the relevant Imam. He paused when needed, read swiftly the mediocre verses of the poem, slowed down when reached to the climax, his hands were waving, his voice was trembling. His thick framed glass was unproportioned to his small shaven head, kept slipping down his nose. and he had to pull it up when he could.

The day of final exam arrived. The pupils had lined up in school yard, impatiently waiting to do their last exams and be realised from the prison of the school. The teachers were

standing in the balcony, and in front of them, Mr Akrami stood, looking at the students like a commander checking on his army.

The reciter of the school read some verses of Koran, then a choir from second-grade class came to stage to sing the famous revolutionary song of ‘Death to America’.

Ameka Ameka, Down to your trickery,

The blood of our martyrs, Drips from your claws

Some of them had runny noses, trying to sniff when they could. Some of them just chanted ‘Ameka’, some had long sung ‘claws’.

At Last, it was the time for the poet of school to pay his respect to the deceased leader of the nation.

Mr Akrami looked at Hussein and jerked his head toward the stage.

Dearest,

The moon has waned,

My sorrowful soul has drifted from radiant bays,

The ocean has raged,

I am bashed by squall after squall of dark waves,

Hussein, standing still, was holding the paper in front of his face, reading with unvarying tone of voice.

O morning breeze,

Take a message from me to spirit of god,

I, a longing tide, will wait,

Till the moon’s least shy,

The water is serene,

Then I will surge toward you, o my beloved love.

A weak clapping perused by rushing of the students to their exam rooms. Hussein was about to follow them.


‘Khiyavi! Follow me,’ said the dean then walked, like a shot, toward his office.

Akrami sat behind his desk and had a long look at Hussein. ‘What the hell was that? A poem to Khomeini or to your girlfriend?’ Akrami approached his head toward shivering Hussein who found the dean’s ungroomed unibrow looking even more ungroomed. ‘Beside no passion in your reading, no flying hands, no trembling voice....’

‘I am so sorry sir,’ Hussein’s lip corners turned down, his neck one sided, his hands clenched before his belt, ready to trigger a sob in case the dean advanced toward him one more step.

‘You have really let me down Khiyavi. Now get out of my sight but remember I haven’t finished with you,’ he dismissed Hussein with a waved off hand, like an ottoman sultan.

Hussein ran to his classroom and sat on his armed chair. Everyone’s head had sunk on his paper. There was a sheet of question before Hussein’s eyes. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He held his face in his hands and looked at questions which were blurred. He started writing. 🌀



ALI AZAR is from Meshginshahr, a tiny town in Iran and currently lives in London. The essence of his writings are the people, the Iranian, who are underrepresented because of the heavy shadow of politics. He writes about their characters, their temperaments, their perception of life and their myths. Another of his short story *Gulli's Strange Journey* has been published in *Horla Magazine*.



Bereavement

Scott Archer Jones

The last nephew has spoken his eulogy: the minister leads a prayer then closes the fat book shrouded in a black binding. Against the pale yellow walls and the wash of lavender from the window panes, the gathered folks rise from their pews and, solemn like dark, wet iron, approach the widow in the mourner's box. They clasp her hands, murmur, lower their heads like nodding cattle. She looks at each, her face shaped in relief, reassured that it was over, that she could sidestep grief to something ordinary like regret. Soon they'll all drive to the graveside.

In the back pew, he ignores the widow and her attendants, flicks side glances at the woman beside him. She gazes imperiously forward. Her chin that had resembled a block as a girl now suited her sixties. A high forehead below graying hair, a noble hooked nose. Watery blue eyes. He says, "I quite liked him."

With her eyes wide – either appalled or maybe accusing – she stares at him. She sees a man scoured by sun, a nose more a fat knob, a mouthful of sparkling dentures. One part of her notes that he's dyeing his hair again, an almost Italian black. Some gel in it to make it thicker, stand up like a waterfall flowing back and on towards his neck. She says, "He was a despicable old ass, and you know it."

"He was a good old boy."

She snorts, a loud derision. "You always say 'good old boy' when you can't find anything nice to say."

He cocks his head to the side. He thrusts out his chin, stretches his neck like a turtle. "Maybe. He supported his family. He belonged to Rotary and the Lions. All the guys liked him."

"He beat his wife. Marjory always denied it, but he beat her."

"Well. I never beat you. Even though there were times, Ex-Wife...."

She shifts in the pew, her corduroy blazer making a squeaking sound against the mahogany pew. She sniffs. "Ex-wife. That's why I may call you a fool, but I've never said you were despicable."

He nods. "Well, maybe you're right. There was always something about him. I always felt a little queasy...."

She narrowed her eyes, crooked up her mouth in a grin that traced out lines of bitterness in her face. "You *did* make Winnie quit the softball team when he became the coach."

He watched the people filing down the aisle to the door, nodding at each clot that pumped slowly towards the winter light outside. "Something not quite right."

"His own daughter ran away when she was sixteen. Ended up in California."

He brushes at his dark blue lapel. His hair is black, but his dandruff is gray. "Probably a lesbian now. Or a Democrat."

She leaches out a heavy sigh, begins brushing at his shoulder, scattering more dandruff. "I swear, you're just a mess you are." She pauses, beckons a nod at the front of the church. "Who do you think will be next for the casket?"

He shrugs, a gesture crowded with fatality. "Old Lady Nutwitch has been suffering."

"Suffering for years. No, my bet is on Dody Weaver. She's had pneumonia twice this year, and she broke a hip."

He levers himself to his feet using the pew in front. "So, I might see you within a month."

"Same place, same reason. Listen." She stops there, blinking at him while he stoops over her.

His face, darkly tanned and corrugated like a crocodile. "Yes?"

She folds her hands over the jumbo leather purse in her lap. "I'm going to visit Winnie's grave after we bury the old wretch. I would like it if you were there."



SCOTT ARCHER JONES is currently trapped within his sixth novel and first novella. He lives in northern New Mexico, after stints in the Netherlands, Scotland, and Norway, plus less exotic locations. He's worked for a power company, a lumberyard, an energy company, and a winery. He has three books out, through Southern Yellow Pine and Fomite and a fourth in production.



The Force

Jacqueline Masumian

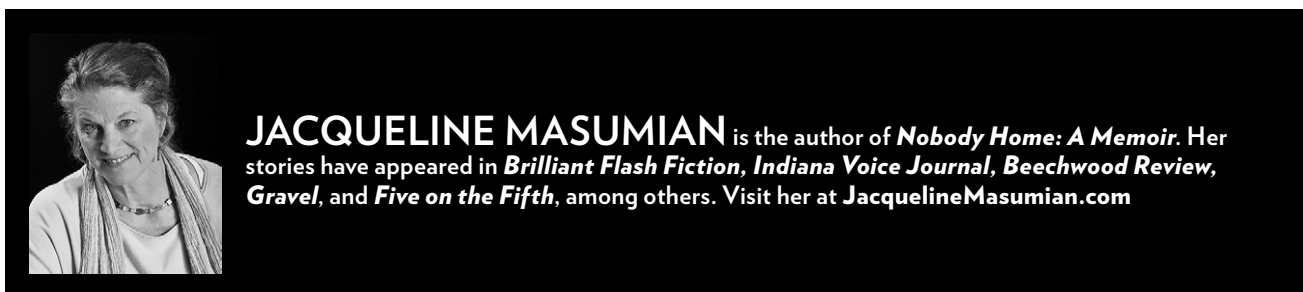
I knew when I woke at four this morning that a dreadful event was on the horizon. I lay in my bed and tried to determine what the thing was. Something evil, a thing to be avoided. But the thing I feared I could not name.

I thought of the ride at amusement parks, a thing called the Rotor where the people stand, lining the inner circumference of a large circular bin, and the bin begins to turn and the people hold onto sturdy iron handles and soon the bin is spinning, spinning, faster and faster at an odd angle and centrifugal force presses on the people who are screaming with laughter, shouting and crying, delighting in their terror, as the floor beneath them falls away. The floor disappears altogether and there is nothing holding the people except the force, the force of the spinning. A huge booted foot pressing on the people. The bin keeps whirling, spinning, nearly out of control, at an odd angle. And after many revolutions the bin returns to its horizontal position and the floor lifts up and the people stop laughing and screaming and the bin slows its spinning, and the people are breathless, and the force has subsided and the bin stops.

But, I thought as I lay in my bed, what if one day the floor were to drop out and away and disappear and, through some unforeseen mechanical malfunction, refuse to return? And the bottom of everything falls out and the people have to hold on and hold on, assuring themselves and each other

with their tittery laughter that this is normal, that all is well, and that sometime, sometime soon, the floor will lift back up beneath their feet and the people will find the solid floor where it should be, at their feet, and this will happen sometime soon they think. Very soon. But the bin refuses to stop. It keeps spinning, whirling with the force, the booted foot pressing, and there's no one to help, and the people are frantic and can only hold on, hold on. And the tittery laughter stops and only screaming continues.

At four this morning I waited for the floor to disappear, as I knew it must. 🕒



JACQUELINE MASUMIAN is the author of *Nobody Home: A Memoir*. Her stories have appeared in *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Beechwood Review*, *Gravel*, and *Five on the Fifth*, among others. Visit her at JacquelineMasumian.com



The Pit

Peter J. Stavros

Billy works in a beige box, surrounded by other beige boxes, in a building full of beige boxes, and before this beige box, Billy worked in a different beige box in a different building full of beige boxes, and a different one before that, and one other one, and yet another, over twenty years in total, working in a beige box.

Billy arrives to his beige box each morning at eight-fifteen, fifteen minutes before office hours, to gather his thoughts and settle in before the day begins. He switches on his portable fan in the summer (his portable heater in the winter) and situates himself in an ergonomic chair at an ergonomic desk and disappears behind dual computer screens. Billy keeps his door open (because people talk if you don't), but anyone who passes by still can't see him inside without expending some effort, at least pausing and peering about, which most don't do. Billy doesn't care, and it doesn't bother him much.

Billy stays busy with the numbers. Rows and columns and entries of numbers. Billy spends his days with the numbers—adding numbers and subtracting numbers and dividing numbers and multiplying numbers, moving numbers here and moving numbers there, general ledgers and reconciliations and databases and journals, spreadsheets, charts, tables and graphs, reports, analyses, summaries, conclusions. There are more numbers than Billy knows what to do with. Because the numbers never stop.

Around mid-morning, ten o'clock, thereabouts, Billy stands up for the first time since he first sat down at eight-fifteen. His knees creak and his lower back aches, the ergonomic chair and the ergonomic desk notwithstanding. Billy stands up to stroll out into the hallway to toss his empty plastic water bottle into the blue recycling bin and go to the bathroom, regardless of whether or not he actually has to go. Billy does this after reading in a magazine that sitting is the new smoking, that the average office worker spends six-point-some hours a day sitting and that sitting

has been proven to have detrimental health effects as bad as smoking. Billy doesn't smoke, but he sits. So he forces himself to stand up and stroll out into the hallway around ten o'clock, thereabouts.

At noon, and not a minute too soon, but once the clock on his computer turns to twelve-zero-zero, Billy breaks for lunch, the lunch he packs and brings each day from home in a red insulated tote he stores in his left bottom desk drawer. Billy begins with a baggy of pretzels, eating one or two pretzels at a time, never three or four or any more, crunching each pretzel with his back teeth, savoring the salty taste as it travels across his tongue, before pulling out a Tupperware container with his sandwich: mesquite smoked turkey cut thin from the deli with a slice of Swiss cheese, spicy brown mustard and light mayonnaise, on white bread. Billy has tried the honey turkey, and the honey ham, but he prefers the mesquite smoked turkey. While he eats, Billy might play Solitaire (Klondike, expert) or read the newspaper online, or just stare at the numbers on his dual computer screens. He keeps his door open (because people talk if you don't), but no one interrupts him.

Billy eats slowly, to make lunch last, yet he's finished in about ten minutes, leaving him about twenty minutes to take a walk (because he sits and sitting is the new smoking), either outside, if it's nice, around the crushed limestone walking track that HR installed to boost employee morale that circles a man-made pond stocked with unnaturally bright koi (also installed by HR to boost employee morale), or inside, if it's not, down the back stairs to the basement with its stacks of spare desks and chairs and unmarked boxes and sundry anonymous items tucked into the shadows, and up the front stairs to the top floor where the executive suites sit locked behind security doors that require a clearance Billy doesn't have, then back down and up and around. Billy walks long enough to loosen his joints and stretch his muscles, and to take up time before it's time to return to his beige box.

Billy stays busy with more numbers in the afternoon (because the numbers never stop), which he considers the longer part of the day, which isn't entirely accurate but might only feel that way since in the morning the day is new and prime for expectations but in the afternoon it's just more of the same. Billy's phone might ring, or he might be invited to attend a meeting, but it's generally just more of the same. Billy stands up twice in the afternoon, once at two-fifteen to stroll out into the hallway for no other reason than to stroll out into the hallway, and again at four-forty-five to go to the bathroom, regardless of whether or not he actually has to go, in case he gets stuck in traffic on the drive home.

At five o'clock, office hours end, and Billy switches off his portable fan (or portable heater) and leaves his beige box. He might say something to someone he happens upon—"good-bye" or "see ya" or words to that effect—but mostly he slips out unnoticed, out of the building, across the paved parking lot, to his car in its allotted spot in the back by the sugar hackberry tree where the Canadian geese like to nest, and the twenty minute drive home, unless he gets stuck in traffic and then it can take upwards of an hour, which frustrates Billy to no end even if he has no set plans other than the usual.

As soon as Billy gets home, he drops his leather satchel on the floor inside the front door, kicks off his loafers, and shuffles to the kitchen to set his Tupperware container from lunch in the sink, running it under hot water until he has a chance to wash it. Then he goes to the bedroom to change out of his work clothes and into gym shorts and a t-shirt and sneakers, and he spends an hour on the elliptical, pumping his arms and kicking his legs while he stares out the window and listens to one of his podcasts. An hour on the elliptical, and Billy towels off the perspiration and changes into sweat pants and a Henley and slippers, and cooks dinner: a meat, a starch, a vegetable and a glass of unsweetened iced tea (or hot tea with lemon, depending on the season). He eats in front of the TV, the evening news, shaking his head at how screwed up the world has become.

Once he finishes dinner, Billy does the dishes, including his Tupperware container from lunch, marveling, and not in a positive way, how it is that he dirties so many dishes and pots and pans just to cook dinner for himself. He toys with the notion of loading it all in the dishwasher, although he never does, not wanting to go to the trouble, not entirely sure how to operate the dishwasher and he misplaced the manual. Instead he washes by hand, soap suds on the checkered tile backsplash, drops of water on the linoleum. Then Billy makes his sandwich for lunch tomorrow—mesquite smoked turkey cut thin from the deli with a slice of Swiss cheese, spicy brown mustard and light mayonnaise, on white bread—and places it in the Tupperware container he just washed and puts it in the refrigerator.

With everything he had to do for the day done, Billy settles in for the evening to watch one of his programs he's recorded on the DVR, or a movie on pay-per-view, or a ball game depending on the season. Sometimes he reads a magazine. Billy drifts off on the couch by a little past ten, jolts awake to catch some of the late local news, then heads to bed, under the sheets and comforter, two pillows. His sleep is not sound, and he tends to toss and turn, but it gets him through the night. On most mornings, Billy opens his

eyes before the alarm clock buzzes at six-thirty.

Billy repeats this routine for five days a week, less if there's a holiday or he calls in sick (particularly in February, his least favorite month, when it's bitterly cold and gray and he's most susceptible to catching the flu). He knows this is mundane but he doesn't care, and the mundane doesn't bother him much—it's simple, and it's set, and it's something he's come to accept. It's the structure that Billy needs. It's the texture to his daily schedule. It's the status quo after over twenty years in total. And besides, there's always the weekend.

On Saturday, Billy sleeps in, to seven, seven-thirty. He spends an hour on the elliptical in the morning to get it over with, listening to another one of his podcasts or watching a weekend news show where the hosts laugh and force small talk between reports on how screwed up the world has become. When he's done, and after he showers and eats breakfast—half a toasted plain bagel with peanut butter and sliced banana, a glass of pulp-free orange juice, a glass of skim milk—he goes grocery shopping before the store becomes too crowded, taking a list even though he buys the same things every week, following the same pattern through the aisles, pulling the same items off the shelves practically without thinking.

With grocery shopping out of the way, and groceries unpacked and put away, the rest of the day is spent on any other errands Billy might have—pick up the dry cleaning, deposit a check at the bank, buy something from the home improvement store (batteries or duct tape or one of those wrenches with the weird handles)—or tidying up around the house. In the spring he cuts the grass and in the fall he rakes leaves. During the afternoon, Billy will take a nap, drift off on the couch watching TV or reading a magazine. He jolts awake to cook dinner—a meat, a starch, a vegetable and a glass of unsweetened iced tea (or hot tea with lemon, depending on the season)—and at six-thirty he eats. When he's done eating, and doing the dishes (still toying with the notion of loading it all in the dishwasher although he never does), he gets himself ready.

There's a place across town called the Hideaway, dingy and dank and dated, tucked back and overlooked amongst the trendy clubs and modish restaurants, so obscure that the only indication that something is there at all is a rusted metal sign, a remnant from several incarnations before, swinging above the front door, that reads WHISKEY BY THE DRINK. During the day, it's nothing but a dive bar, sheltering its sparse clientele from the harsh realities that lie outside; at night it's not much more. But on Saturday night, at ten o'clock, sharp, the Hideaway comes to life, with live music—loud, hard, aggressive live music—from a local garage band or punk rock group no one has heard of nor might hear of again, sometimes formed right there on the spot, playing on a cramped, makeshift stage set up towards the far side of the room next to the cigarette machine and an out-of-service cash register draped in an elaborate spider web. In the space just in front of the stage, with the rickety wooden tables and chairs cast aside, is the pit.

The sight alone of the pit, packed with bodies pulsing up and down and pounding into each other in some rhythmic slam dance, is enough to elevate Billy's heart rate, skipping in his chest beneath his favorite black t-shirt, as he arrives

to the Hideaway. But Billy doesn't come to watch—he's here to become one of those bodies, to be in the midst of that mess, to pulse up and down and pound. And that's what Billy does, leaping into the pit, crashing into whomever he happens upon, who crashes into him, and so it begins.

The bass thumps dense and heavy, rattling Billy's core, the guitars ring in his ears, the unintelligible shrieks and screams of the lead singer echo in reverb, while Billy knocks and pushes and shoves himself further and further inside the pit. "Yeah!" or "Hell yeah!" or "Fuck yeah!" Billy shouts, about nothing in particular, about everything in general, determined and forceful, his lungs emptying, his throat scratchy and raw, fists punching the air, bashing and banging to the beat of the drums. "Fuck y-o-o-o-o-o-u!" Billy shouts, along with the rest of the crowd, heated and sweating and jostling for position, the atmosphere charged and frenetic, with the smell of body odor mixed with cigarette smoke and a vague mustiness, hazy and unfocused under the soft backlighting and intermittent strobe. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!" Billy continues, as he loses himself, as he forgets who he is, who he was when he first walked in, the numbers and his beige box and the dual computer screens and the people who talk evaporating from his mind like none of it ever existed. As Billy disappears. "Fuck yeah! Fuck it all! Fuck hell yeah!"

This last, and this lasts, and this lasts, with Billy in the pit holding his own, as the band plays on, song bleeding into song bleeding into song, a mishmash of humanity in all shapes and forms whirling and twirling and twisting madly about. At some point, there comes a moment when everything aligns, when it all sort of clicks, in a split-second when Billy hits that sweet spot and he can breathe again, and let go. A wayward elbow might land across Billy's face, or he might let fly a wayward elbow of his own, or both, and he's doused with beer and booze streaming into his eyes and stinging, swiping his wet hair back then shaking it out of place, on and on amongst this cadenced riot, a smile escaping across his face. "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Fuck y-e-e-e-e-e-ah!"

Billy stays like that, in the pit like that, just another member of the congregation, for as long as he needs, for as long as it takes, until he's had enough and he doesn't need it anymore, something telling him he's done, for now. He shoves his way out the way he shoved his way in, staggers over to where he tossed his coat (depending on the season) on a bench beside the bumper pool table, rifling through and grabbing it from the pile, and leaves the Hideaway, slips out unnoticed, out onto the sidewalk, across the street, past the trendy restaurants and modish clubs, to his ride, with no concern for composing himself, no interest in that in the

least, dripping and drained, but satisfied, and free, for now.

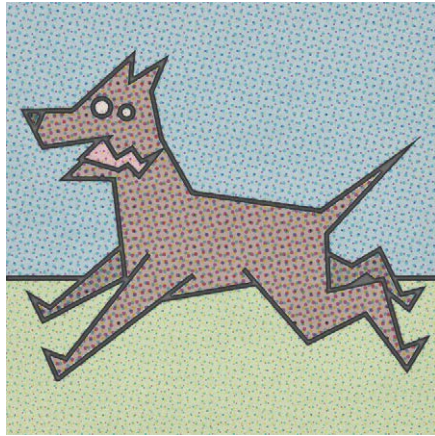
Back home, Billy cleans up and checks himself in the bathroom mirror for any bruises or nicks or scratches or scrapes, applying an ice pack or ointment, or both, as necessary, swallowing a couple aspirin with a tall glass of water. Then Billy heads to bed, under the sheets and comforter, two pillows, and has a deep and restful sleep, the best sleep of the week, gently stirring awake around eight, eight-thirty, close to nine, stretching and yawning. He might lie in bed for a while still, staring up at the stucco ceiling and the ceiling fan lazily rotating, listening to the birds chirping outside his window, thinking, about everything, and nothing, at ease with nowhere to be.

On Sunday, Billy rests. He might take in a movie or a ball game (depending on the season), but not much else, not even the elliptical. He gives himself a break and just rests. In the evening, Billy cooks dinner, and makes his sandwich for lunch tomorrow, and watches some TV or reads a magazine before going to bed early, no later than ten, to get a fresh start on the week ahead.

On Monday morning, at eight-fifteen, Billy arrives to his beige box, to his ergonomic chair and his ergonomic desk, and gathers his thoughts and settles in, before the day begins. 🕒



PETER J. STAVROS is a writer in Louisville, Kentucky. His work has appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Boston Globe Magazine*, *Cheap Pop*, *Crack the Spine*, *Hypertext Magazine*, *Fiction Southeast* and *Literary Orphans*, among others. More can be found at peterjstavros.com and follow on Twitter @PeterJStavros



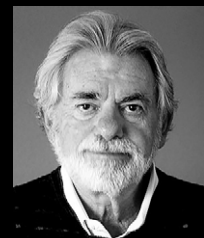
We Held Hands but I Didn't Know Her Name

Paul Beckman

She held my hand. It was of her own volition. I didn't ask, hint, or accidentally on purpose brush hands as we were walking. She knew my first name but I didn't know hers but that seemed not to bother her. We spoke of a dog that ran by but otherwise there was no small talk. I would've spoken but there was not the element of small talk invitation in the air so I kept quiet.

We reached our destination and she removed her hand from mine and opened the door and we walked side-by-side up to the large raised entry desk. Once again she dropped my hand. Then she removed the handcuffs and put them in her belt pocket and led me into a cell with a group of others and locked the door behind me.

Without wishing me luck or saying goodbye this uniformed police woman walked back over to the desk and spoke to the duty sergeant. I heard her laugh and while I never heard her laugh before I was so tuned in to her that I just knew it could be no one else. 🌀



PAUL BECKMAN's new flash collection is *Kiss Kiss*, (Truth Serum Press). Paul had a micro story selected for the 2018 Norton Anthology New Micro Exceptionally Short Fiction. He was one of the winners in the 2016 The Best Small Fictions and his story *Mom's Goodbye* was chosen as the winner of the 2016 Fiction Southeast Editor's Prize. He's widely published in the following magazines among others: *Raleigh Review*, *Litro*, *Playboy*, *Pank*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Matter Press*, *Pure Slush*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Literary Orphans*. Paul had a story nominated for the 2019 Best Small Fictions and he hosts the monthly FBomb flash fiction series in NY at KGB's Red Room. He's judged writing contests for Cahoodaloodaling and Brilliant Flash Fiction.



Larry, Said a Voice from Inside

Frank Candeloro

Riley was lost. The city didn't seem that big when he'd first gotten off the bus. He'd asked a man on the street where the library was, and a gesture and nod seemed good enough. But now, an hour later, he couldn't even find the bus station. The two hour layover between buses didn't seem so long anymore. Instead of checking out the new arrivals of the Shaylane Public Library while his phone charged, he was hoping to just use the washroom, get a bottle of water, and not miss the bus.

"Hey, excuse me, which way's the bus station?"

The old woman just lurched away from him and kept walking.

Riley walked on. How big could this town really be? A tall man in dark hat walked towards him.

"Excuse me. Which way's the bus station? Please."

"Bus station?"

"Yeah, where's the bus station?"

"I'm sorry, but there is no bus station here."

"Pardon?"

"I said, there is no bus station here."

"I know, I heard you, but I need to find the bus station. I have to catch the bus. So please, which way's the bus station?"

"I told you, sir, there is no bus station here. There hasn't been a bus station in Pasterson in, oh, I don't know, twenty years."

"Pasterson? We're in Shaylane."

"Shaylane? I never heard of the place."

"Listen, this isn't funny anymore."

"Are you kidding me?"

Riley reached in his pocket for his bus ticket, to show the man "Yamperton" on the ticket, but the ticket was gone.

"What the?"

The man was on the other side of the street practically by the time Riley looked up.

The two other pedestrians Riley stopped gave him the same answer. He went into a cafe and got the same answers. The convenience store was the same.

Two o'clock came and went. By two-thirty he was back in the cafe, The Clack Bat. He needed a place to charge his phone. He ordered a coffee and asked if he could charge his phone. The guy behind the counter gave him a funny look. "Yeah, we're not supposed to do that."

"Please, I'm desperate. I missed my bus and I have to call home."

"Bus? Where would you catch a bus around here?"

"Listen, it's a long story. Please, let me charge my phone, just enough to make a phone call. I'll buy more food, whatever. I'll pay you."

"Twenty bucks."

"Twenty bucks?"

"Yeah, that's what it costs. You said you'd pay me. Twenty bucks."

"There's no way I'm going use twenty dollars of electricity charging my phone."

"You don't pay me twenty dollars there's no way you're gonna use any electricity to charge your phone."

"Fine," said Riley, defeated. He fished his wallet out of his front pocket and handed over twenty dollars. He had about sixty left.

"Ok," said the guy, carefully folding the money before putting it in his pocket. "Now your phone."

"What? What do you need my phone for? There's an outlet right there. I want my phone where I can see it."

"Yeah, well I don't want your phone where my boss can see it. If he comes in, which he's about to any minute, I'll get in shit. And besides, I don't want you snitching on me to him. You know, my boss walks in, you let your phone charge for a while, then you grab your phone and demand your money back, and I get fired. No, I don't think so. You'll get your phone when it's convenient for me to give it back to you."

"Forget it, give me my money back."

"Sorry, no can do."

"What?"

"I said, -"

"I heard you fine. I want my money back."

"Look, it's not gonna happen." Here the guy gave him a look that, for half a second, made him want to forget the whole thing and just walk away. "So give me your phone and I'll go charge it. I said I would, and I will, but there's no way I'm giving this money back."

Riley sighed and handed over his phone.

"Good decision. I'll give an hour. That's when my shift's over. Just follow me outside when I give you the sign."

"The sign? What is this, some cheesy spy movie?"

"Do you think I'm going to just announce 'Hey, here's your phone buddy'? No, I'm not. So when I give you the sign that I'm leaving, follow me out a minute later and get your phone."

"Fine. What's the sign?" "I'll be wearing my coat." With

that the guy disappeared in the back.

Riley sat and stirred his coffee, even though there was nothing in it. He didn't know what he would even say when he called home. Hi, I accidentally got off the bus in a town that doesn't have a bus station. Yeah, right. He knew what they would think: what they always think.

He'd never even heard of Pasterson. Where was it? He hoped it wasn't far from home. Someone would have to come get him. He laughed at himself for saying "someone," cause he knew exactly who it was going to be, and he knew it wasn't going to be a very pleasant ride home.

He looked up and saw a different guy standing at the counter, playing on his phone.

"Hey, excuse me, where's the other guy?"

"What other guy?"

"You know, the guy who was just out here working?"

"Oh, you mean Larry?"

"Yeah, where's Larry?"

"Larry's gone man. His shift ended five minutes ago."

Riley panicked. He ran out the front door of the cafe, looked down both ways of the street, which of course was empty. He didn't even know which way to run. And Larry had gone out the back anyway. He went back inside. The new guy was back on his phone again. "Oh, you're back."

"Yeah, do you know where Larry went?"

"Why?"

"He took my phone."

"What?"

"I said he took my phone."

The new guy just looked at him for a minute. "He took your phone? How did he take your phone?"

"I gave it to him."

"What?"

"I said, I gave it to him."

"Oh, I heard you alright," he said laughing, "I'm just trying to understand why you gave Larry, a total stranger, your phone."

"Cause I needed to charge it."

"But there's an outlet right there."

"Please, just tell me where Larry lives. I need to get my phone back."

"I don't know if I can do that. I don't even know you. I can't just tell some random person my co-worker's personal information."

"He took my phone!"

"Don't shout at me, man!"

"I just want my phone back."

"How do I know he took your phone? How do I know you didn't just make up this whole thing to get Larry's address?"



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"Why would I want to do that? Why would I want to know where Larry lives?"

"I don't know. Maybe he owes you money? Maybe you're in love with him? Maybe you're just crazy? Did you ever think of that? That you're just crazy. I don't know why people do the things they do? Why did you give Larry your phone?"

At this point, Riley broke down and cried a bit. He told the new guy, Hally was his name, the whole story. "I swear to god it's all true."

"That's pretty fucked up, dude," said Hally.

"Right? Right? That is pretty fucked up, right?"

Hally gave Larry's address and general directions.

"Larry's a good guy, man. I can't believe he'd do that to you."

"Ok, thanks, I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding. Thank you."

"I'm sure it all is a misunderstanding."

Riley walked down Ryle St., as Hally had told him, towards the lake. He'd said that Larry's house wasn't far: a right on Bleecker, a left on Belcher, and a left on Lebcheque. "84 Lebcheque," Riley said out loud to himself.

He was walking forever, at least an hour, and he still hadn't come across Bleecker. He thought about turning around, going back to the cafe, but he wasn't sure where that would get him. "Five minutes, maybe ten," Riley said out loud to himself. "Ten at the most." He was getting cold, and hungry, and he needed to start thinking about where he was going to spend the night. He thought about going to the police station, and probably would have if he'd seen one. He wasn't quite desperate enough to hunt one down, something held him back. He thought he'd ask the next person he saw where the closest police station was.

He saw a woman on the other side of the street, and he was about to ask her when he recognized the woman who's shunned him when he first asked about the bus station. He felt her eyes follow him down the street.

Finally he came to Bleecker, which didn't look very promising. There weren't many houses, just warehouses and strip malls. Belcher was worse. And Lebcheque was basically the country. He saw houses off into the distance.

After what seemed like forever, he found 84. It looked like a ten year old's idea of a haunted house. There were lights on in the house. It was late, and he felt weird knocking, but he needed his phone. He needed to get home. It was so late. He was so tired.

He knocked on the door and waited.

The door opened.

"Larry," said a voice from inside. 🗑



Halo from Other Side

Priyanka Nawathe

He stood gazing at the bright orange halo sinking beneath the valley. Why did it happen every time? The darkness covered the patches bringing with it sounds that pierced his ears, rattled his bones and froze the hair on the back of his neck. He waited for the halo. It cooled the sharp grass beneath him. It was puzzling yet soothing. He loved the hot halo and the cool wet needles. He would then cross the patches with the purple sticks that blew soft lavender wisps at him. He would gallop through the warmth leaving the darkness behind. 🗑



PRIYANKA NAWATHE is an illustrator and writer living in Mumbai, India. She writes stories in speculative fiction and magical realism. Her work has been published in *Thrice Fiction*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, and in the anthology *Surrealists and Outsiders-2018*.



RED HAIR

by
PHILIP KANE

The moment she woke, she knew that he had gone. There were still slight traces – the shallow indentations of his presence in the pillow, in the sheets, the fading mark of his scent on her body. But even before she had fully opened her eyes, she understood that she would not find him, and that he would not be coming back.

“I’ll be alright,” she murmured drowsily, as if to his departing figure. She raised one hand to brush aside the heavy veil of her own hair, where it had fallen across her face, and it was then that she realised.

It was loosely, and yet quite intricately, woven of thick soft rope. The rope was red. That was strange, she thought. She had fallen asleep blonde. Rising quickly from the bed, suddenly wide-awake, she admired the vibrancy of her new hair when she looked into her bedroom mirror. She picked up a brush and began to untangle the long red strands. They were remarkably soft and supple. That was another surprise. She had expected rasping, harshness, brittleness, and the crackle of static electricity.

She did not feel in the slightest shocked by her change, as perhaps she ought to have done. Even less did she feel horrified. No, this new version of herself seemed quite familiar, like a past lover entering her life again.

“Actually, this is much better,” she addressed her own reflection, which gazed back at the vivid red tresses with admiration. The reflection turned her head this way and that, rather coquettishly.

She padded through to the kitchen. It was a mess, unwashed plates in the sink, glasses left with the stains of last night’s red wine, breadcrumbs and vegetable peelings scattered all over the work surfaces. She took a croissant from the bread bin, and then checked the fridge. He’d helped himself to the last of the butter before leaving. Bastard. He was always doing that. Had always done that, she corrected herself.

“So what? It’s only butter, for fuck’s sake”. He was standing there, framed in the doorway, leaning against it with that familiar smirk on his face.

“It’s the principle of it. You’re so fucking selfish,” Louise snapped back. Unable to control the sudden rush of fury, she hurled the croissant at him. It bounced pointlessly and inaccurately from the doorframe, but his image disappeared. “And don’t fucking come back,” she yelled, as if she needed to.

She took a pot of strawberry yoghurt from the fridge, and a teaspoon from the cutlery drawer, and then wandered back into the bedroom with them. She sat in front of the mirror again. She began to run her left hand along the long strands of red rope. “How strange,” she said out loud, “How very odd”.

She caught a dark flicker of movement just a little outside the mirror’s frame. “You don’t like it at all, though, do you?” she asked him.

“You know I don’t,” he said, and she was aware from his terseness that he was in one of his more irritable moods. “There was nothing wrong with it being blonde,” she heard him say, “I liked it the way that it was,” and she flinched at the feeling of his hand close to the red ropes.

She turned quickly. The bedroom seemed very empty, and she felt tears welling up unbidden behind her eyes. She

needed to be outside. If she stayed where she was, she would go gently mad, she knew it.

She ruffled through the clothes in her wardrobe out of habit, but her mind wasn’t really on what to wear. In the end she pulled on a pair of blue jeans and a nondescript sweatshirt, dug a pair of white trainers from among her shoe collection, dropped her purse and her phone into her handbag, and walked out. She left his shape behind, in the flat, without her, and she took some satisfaction from knowing that.

There was a small café on the corner of her street, where she knew she could sit for a while with a cup of coffee and read the newspapers. When she went in and approached the counter, the woman standing behind it stared at her, intensely.

“I’ll have a large cappuccino, please,” Louise said, “And a muffin,” she added. The woman behind the counter had her mouth hanging open, like an idiot, she thought to herself.

“I’m sorry?”

With an audible sigh of impatience, Louise repeated herself. “I’d like a large cappuccino and a muffin, please”.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not sure I can serve you”.

“What? Why not?” Louise asked, suddenly feeling confused.

“Well,” the woman said with a tinge of caution in her voice, “I do have to think of our other customers”.

“I don’t understand...” Louise began to say, but the woman cut her off

“You really should leave, at once”.

Louise took a few steps back, then turned and stepped out onto the street. She was feeling rather dizzy and had to put one hand against the nearby wall in order to steady herself. She had no idea what might upset the other customers in the café. She glanced down at her sweatshirt in case she was inadvertently wearing some offensive slogan emblazoned across her chest. No, it showed nothing more threatening than the name of some American college.

She walked around the corner, heading towards the town centre. She could go shopping. She could find another café.

It was still quite early, but people were already up and about. A yellow-jacketed council workman, pushing a large green barrow containing an assortment of brooms and brushes, grinned at her from across the street. A young couple standing at the window of an art shop turned to watch her as she passed, whispering excitedly together. There were some teenagers kicking a football around in the park, as she went by, and they pointed at her and laughed.

What the hell was going on, this morning? What was wrong with her? She was beginning to notice that strangers were giving her a wide berth, as they came towards her, that she was gathering stares all along the street. Then she felt him again, behind her. Louise stopped in her tracks and turned to confront him.

“You’re following me, stop following me”.

“I told you blonde was better,” he said, simply, and there was that annoying smirk once more.

Louise raised a hand to her head, feeling the slightly rough texture of the red ropes that hung there. Her hair... Her hair had changed, overnight. People’s reactions to her had changed. Now she connected those two facts. For the

first time, she began to resent the way her appearance had altered.

“It’s your fault,” she accused him, “What have you done to me? What have you fucking done?” She stamped her foot, angrily.

“I haven’t done anything,” he said, “except leave”. And he was no longer there.

Louise felt, quite suddenly, that she wanted to hide. Coming out into the street had been a mistake. She looked around, like a shy animal wandered among people and desperate for a way out. She noticed a plain white door with a handwritten notice pinned to it. The notice read, in large letters:

**MADAME JOSEPHINE.
TRADITIONAL FORTUNETELLER.
YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED,
YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED.**

There was a strong urge, welling up from somewhere in Louise’s gut, to know her own future. She pushed at the white door and it swung open for her.

Stepping through, she found that the room behind was little more than a dark cubbyhole. There was a Formica-topped table in the middle of it, and on the other side of that was Madame Josephine. The fortune-teller was a blowsy looking woman, probably in late middle age, and was wearing too-bright red lipstick. Her drooping eyelids had been painted a garish green and half-hid her protruding eyes. She was wearing a blouse printed with big pink flowers; and there was a kind of cap, red and fringed with small gold-coloured discs, perched rather precariously on top of her frizzy hair.

“I am Madame Josephine,” she said, unnecessarily, “How may I help you?” She smiled, revealing a large gap between her front teeth.

There was a plastic chair at the table, facing the fortune-teller. Louise sat down on it. “I want to know what the future holds for me,” she said, and then felt stupid for stating the obvious.

Madame Josephine’s expression seemed sleepy, perhaps even bored, as she said, “You’ve come to the right place, dear. Crystal ball or palm reading? Or would you prefer the cards?”

Louise thought for a moment. She had always been a little frightened of cards, and the idea of being able to see the future in a glass sphere, acting itself out like a miniature theatre, seemed too absurd. “Read my palm, please,” she said, and held out her right hand for Madame Josephine to take with plump fingers.

There was a prolonged silence, and it hung heavily over

Louise in the tiny booth. She found herself studying the fortune-teller more closely. The gold-coloured discs around her red cap were coins, Islamic calligraphy faintly visible on their surfaces. She was wearing gold rings, three on each hand. There were images inscribed on those, as well, but they appeared to be writhing and changing in the dim light even as Louise peered at them, trying to make them out. A trick played by her eyesight, Louise presumed.

Suddenly, Madame Josephine gripped her hand more tightly and jolted back in her own chair. Louise found herself pulled sharply forward across the table, her diaphragm thumping into the edge of it with enough force to momentarily wind her. Her face had been dragged towards the fortune-teller’s ample bosom, and when she craned her neck to look into the other woman’s face, Louise was shocked to see that the prominent eyes had rolled upwards so that they looked like twin marbles.

“Let go, let go of me,” Louise snapped as she tried to wriggle free of the fortune-teller’s grasp on her right hand. But Madame Josephine held fast.

“You are a ship upon the sea and at the sea’s mercy,” she declared, sonorously.

Finally, Louise managed to wrench her hand away. The sound of her chair scraping backwards across the floor seemed to echo unnaturally in the tiny room, as she lunged away from it and out through the white door. Back in the street, she leaned against the wall for several minutes while she waited for her heartbeat to return to normal.

There were more people around now, and they were beginning to stare at her. She remembered that lengths of red rope had replaced her blonde hair, and she was acting like a drunk. No wonder they were staring. She pulled herself together and started walking away from Madame Josephine’s door. Louise was no longer sure where she was going, but she knew that she had to go somewhere. She was still no wiser as to her future, but for the time being she would allow the streets to take her on their own currents.

She would buy a hat, she thought, maybe a fedora, or even a turban, to cover the ropes as best she could. She felt less aware of the staring and whispering and pointed fingers that followed her, as if the space immediately around her had become purely her own, sealing her from the infringements of the outside world, and she was living within her own atmosphere.

He had gone, too, and would not be coming back. In her imagination, she could see him standing on an increasingly distant shore, waving and calling to her. But she had already gone far enough that she could no longer hear the words, and his voice was becoming no more than a slight murmur, like a sound that she believed the sea might make at night. 🌀



Lightband

Rob McClure Smith

The Bad Pupil (Wentworth)

They say I evaporated into air like the Cheshire cat.

But I’m still here, returning to where it began, like a dog to its vomit, to visit *the hellish, abominable house where I have been young*. Each year Wentworth turned out thirty of the gentlest wives in England, like sheets of grey glass.

It was Birdie made me a boarder here (bordering the sea). She moved us fourteen times during the War, to avoid bombs and people. Her maiden name was Verdi. Giuseppe was my grandfather’s uncle—I inherited one or two features, and the tendency to *drama* (in a minor key). You’ll suppose I invented the connection, and it may be so, seeing this world even then askew with a lazy-squinted eye. Wentworth was to give me what Birdie could not, put it in their adverts even: *close personal supervision*. Not enough for *me*! Expelled, I do believe (*something* like that). Ruining my schooldays through the inability to control myself, a guest at my own youth.


Birdie came visiting with tales of queasy séance and a father I never knew, struck down by the blackwater in Nigeria. Engineering runs in the family like music and frightful, frightful illness.

Outside that granite mansion I stand now like a dog to lay a grip of glass upon my youth. (Where only the breath of God stirs now).

And so comes *The Flood*.

The Expelled (Lagos)

Watched the harmattan zither the mangroves! Walked a curved sand spit to see creeks leak through a sandbar to the sea! On the streets the blacks feasting on Suva and melon soup, some hideous white-froth yam-pottage. Suspended in gold air scent-kitchens of cassava and the nightlong Gongon pulse from the half-dark shacks ringing The Island. Someone... somewhere... was eating giraffe. Tall order!



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Swam in a deep-bronze sandpit, but not broken with *black, exhausting information*, stock-still but alive (so *alive*).

The Pasha of the Sickly Pleasure-Garden (Karachi)

And I became a wife, if hardly gentle. Gingered up in the wedding photo at Holy Trinity, my ferocious jaw set like steel! Micky, dear Micky, sandy head like a handsome bullet, fluent opal of his eyes; satin and roses ringing that silly girl's resolute and absolutely chuffed eighteen year old chin... but oh the *power-shocks of understanding that knocked us off our feet!*

Then.

You follow your husband it's what you do. It's what you did. *Dans les Indes du Reve aux pacifiques Ganges.*

People in India are ugly and deformed and ill, and naturally I became ill myself. One does. It was almost, frankly, too terrible to write about. And I wanted so to show people that the world is absolutely tremendous. This is what one wants: to raise people up, not cast them down. But with paratyphoid in Calcutta and polio in Karachi... a right hand become a withered claw. It's... damnably depressing... being broken and broken at every moment. But one must get on. One just absolutely must. Events conspire and push you in a corner. What do you do? Put on a rakish-black glove and teach yourself to write left-handed (and never ever about *nightingales and leafy grots*) and pour the sand for your own desert, recklessly, and build of tears oases and mirages. And one might even come to believe hearing at night the blue-drop of thunder in a sago sky that the material world is irredeemable and the invisible world is all.

I... you... one... as if a *word* encapsulates...

Regardless...the scented breathing of the east... how sugar-rose-water and bergamot orange gel to sweetest *rahat lacoum* as the dreamer, tussore-sheathed, a dressing-gown Pasha seccotine-stuck to eider-down dreams of ... houris and Djinnns in shantung silk lovemaking diamond-daylong, lip-sipping the candies of Koh-i-noor. Oh my (dreams).

It's where one gets the words you see. One finds a vocabulary. One damn well has to. *Et sans savoir si je parle en indou.*

What a night! The past is so very close.

The Flaneuse (Paris)

Oh, Paris. It was frightfully exciting to be on the Île St Louis, where the others had been. In illness you want to be alone and show me a poet doesn't adore a lonely garret, doesn't dream flaneur dreams of the wandering streets. In a burned photograph I stood in girlish awe by Rodin's Stendhal monument. Same day I lay flat on cold-slab Baudelaire to see—no, to prove! —I was the same height. I was! I lived it, and lived it, my sugar-loving nerves battering me to pieces as if I had been making love all night (oh, and I *had*) and the thoughts thrown into my blood then... sly cocotte that I wanted to be... *swizzled out of life by literature*... vamping streets tasting of blood and sugar and me rotten with happiness.

My past still hurls her dream toward me! How tender, carnal, blasé it is! *Teter soleil! Et soul de lait d'or.*

And I was writing of passions, the really tremendous feelings you live by—the *things* that move you. How you fall in love, or else avoid falling in love. How a fierce hot-blooded

sulkiness diamond-scratches the *cool mouth-bite of a beloved body!* Oh, to *excite* is all... is *all*... to send the senses reeling. This is what's important. Was.

Reminiscence of evil, blue and moody youth: a bijou-besotted girl scorching Montparnasse, thirsting like a drunkard for the scent-storm of trees... the nights of stolen love behavior and the dreams of leaving.

Let me hide, well away from a past dreams like that.

The Miner Underground (Soho)

To live a strange cave life in such long dark places! Straight from Paris to the Caves de France (!), a sort of coal-hole in the heart of Soho, a dead-ended dilapidated subterranean tunnel full of drinker-drifters, a threadbare atmosphere solid with failure... *absolute beginners* indeed. The barman's name was Secundo Carnera (younger brother of Primo, I believe, their mother just numbering them, economical sort). And a return to mangrove *swamps!* Now The Mangrove Club on Meard where one had to order food because of the hateful English licensing laws (dry-dust clumped bread, 'this is a sandwich for *drinking* with, Rosemary, not for *eating*'). Cab Kaye jazz-riffing to a Ronnie Scott finger-snap, half Ellington's people coming in after a concert bearing clarinets. And the *drinking!* You could stay there day and night and never get anything done, perfectly *wonderful*. Year of going underground, a cave dweller: a halt during the chase.

The Breathless Bohemian (Downshire Hill)

Take care whom you mix with in life! You'll lose your identity, and never get yourself back. (I always had identity issues, no sense of self... my youth mothering the mother). And, honestly, you can't get to that deep level of thinking if you are *too much* a social person. That fathom-deep level of thinking a poet craves like a Toblerone. Effervescing at the dinner table, my black-sheathed hand twirling, the company *spellbound*. (For *what?*)

Dinners at Lucie-Smith's, the Chelsea lot beastly and foul, but *irresistibly* amusing; the trivial, offhand sensibilities of a lost set grouped together for strength, like spooked wildebeest, movement into Movement, sad little angry men jittery and frothing with lust and self-loathing, gossamer-flimsy. Then off to hobnob Dame Edith afternoons, tea, cake, wine, opera-glass aesthetic... beak-nose and aquamarines big as puddles, bonbon brilliance of the bon-mot.

This the frightful epoch that *pulled the clothes off my soul*.

Then to wake naked and see, glass-clear, the drifting Novocain of my horizon. The raging disgust which shook me then! The shudder! Worn out and *crippled by brain-fag* in a green-crumpled cardigan. Horrible. *Et le sanglot des temps jaillit vers les etoiles.*

Ah, miserable at last!

And yet still the magnetic landscape of London! Breath-clotted Februaries of draughts and cracks, thick fog and mud pastes, streets like holes in an old coat, light brown as laudanum, the thick alkaline skies choking a sluggish tobacco-river... I swallowed the thick fog, smoked it like a cigarillo, woke *Un Poete sauvage, avec un plomb dans l'aile*. Timid men in murk of half-lit hotel rooms in a city dirty with (how did I put it?)... *banknotes, penis, cold green diction*, the fug anesthetizing me like a dream.

Bokhara carpet flies my past in and out of Time.

Small wonder the ink-storm of dark moods battering my soul. Small wonder the... Suffocation.

The Sculptress of Sound (Maida Vale)

There was no air in there. Sealed in like tinned shepherd's pie, walls blocked solid by machines, they were trying to get a real heartbeat to sound like a real heartbeat. The sound engineers all girls like me, names like Delia and Maddalene; these girls, sound-engineers like me; poets of the Sine-wave oscillator. They said women could only be employed by the Radiophonic Workshop three months before they started to go mad, something like that. Only the girls went mad though--Wobblator frequencies shook the ovaries. The men seemed to stay on; the men don't ever go mad.

(Take one).

Was I an imbecile of the first water after all? Wanting to be where electric frosts scratch windows beneath *bone-dry, thudding skies*. Wanting to be in the chill watching clouds cut themselves on *winter sunsets dripping red*. Wanting to be. *Roulant par l'inconnu, sur un bloc ephemere*. The clock hands on the studio wall had that railway-station stutter. Time passing as a hesitation, blue veils and gold sand and *love without sound*, Ziwwih Zizwih. I would have been anywhere but there. Oooo.

Mine then the soft-beating heart, or a recording of it?

Clicks whirrs tape loops looping snapping switches white noise feedback shrieks *musique concrète* in the studio of fag-ends and lollipops in which we recorded the Sono-Montage. Desmond cut my voice into slices with a razor and I called to him in the high tin of it, ears muffled like I was swimming underwater, pierced through padding my cut-glass vowels, 'Again? Should I again?'

Delia said I *was* a sound montage, a walking onomatopoeia: *tonkstonkstonks*.

They couldn't use the first. So, the quops commenced. I stopped being human. We were setting a poem about Orestes to electronic sound.

The Poet (Rosslyn Hill)

Taken in the Coffee Cup I presume (Jane Bown photographer?)? Me: red-cheeked, green-glass skin, a backcombed blonde in ruins of white lipstick sipping a milky Nescafe and clutching a Bic Biro. The poet, feeling extremely alone, her visionary modern lyric of city life they reduce to *real talent of an edgy, bristling kind*, they reduce to *hard faceted yet musical poems have unexpected power*, they reduce to... Better by far to live in no man's land if no man can come drag you out of a back room and make you give opinions every twenty seconds. In the material world it is extremely useful to become lucky before you become unlucky (before they reduce you). Look at her. Too many *café-au-lait sentences groaning for love and money*. Words dark in Spirit, an evil I didn't know. *Main de femme et plume de fer*. I used a Bic-Biro?

Poetry is an artificial art you see (it is artificial from start to *finish*) and may leave you (a carnation veined too blue) the brooding bystander of a self. Honestly, Great-Uncle Henry was the more talented by far: for he forged flesh poems from the hideous.

The Realtor of the Real (Hampstead)

After Micky remarried, I had to sell the old place, obviously. But each time a buyer came by the sky would darken with these terribly damp sheets of lightning and that foul smell came back again. I scoured every room, threw out the occult books I collected over the years, all that *dust-drowned underworld of sighs*. It just wasn't enough. So as last resort I took the masks and bronzes, the Tang and Sung figurines, the porcelain and jade, and packed them up in five cardboard suitcases and deposited them in Barclays Bank like money orders. The very next day a nice young couple came in bright sunshine, loved the house and bought it on the spot. Now here was a lesson in what was *real*.

After that, I began shaving a little bit off the tablets with a razor every day.

The Born-Again Returns to Burn Idols (Jerusalem)

My second birth in the Jordan: not in England's green and pleasant land. Rivulets trickling from damp locks and a light so bright even the blind could see by it. Israel!

To begin a life over, with no book but this, nothing needed henceforward but *the complete manual*. And to have a life! *Et l'univers, c'est pas assez!* Devils gain access though the mind, it's true; printed books *carry* an evil mind, which enters *your* mind. There are dreadful kinds of communion too. Evil doings. I put it all behind me, all the years of being psychologically smashed by Sufi seekers, tall-loud Americans with their big ears and yoga, my retina shredded by Taoist exercises, bad pupils, staring for hours at a blank wall, gazing intensely at too-bright objects. My private modern life gone to waste on dangerous rubbish, the same flow of gutter-sugar to the brain.

Coming back from the health hydro at Tring, I went into Barclays and withdrew the suitcases. Graven images all, stolen from temples and graves, I hammered the lot into shards of marble and terracotta, mother of pearl and ivory. Scripture says the false gods must be destroyed, burned by fire. So the silk robes and carved Chinese letter seals and white rags of my novel I tore and tossed in the incinerators, bad after bad. Little charred scraps fell away from the sides like a flutter of seagulls.

The burning of some idols that left me free of all but *The Flood*.

Escaped the carnal and the blasé, the past, Micky, illness, the sweet and bloody seduction of dreams, wretchedness, words, the rack of pain, and *happy!*

The Recluse (Old Forest Lodge on the East Cliff)

I insist on vegetating here in *moth-eaten grandeur* with the curtains closed. It is the best way to stave off *The Flood*. It is in truth the only way.

I believe I was once driven mad as wine by my ideas, going nowhere, never leaving my front door, boxed up, under the most frightful, frightful mental pressure. Not myself, all my decisions wrong, inhuman, appalling. Not myself at all.

But knowing how depression is Satan's work and smashed by sky and birdcalls... Beyond the window sash the satin-green birdmusic tree rain-lacquered black this morning warbles such sumptuous delight. Birdie speaks to me too caked deep in their soft calling, and Verdi (a relative, you know!) softer yet on the radio. I hear Birdie there too.

Her voice drifts from the Dansette, issues on occasion from white bowls of vitreous china! But I hear her in the birds most of all. Perhaps the birds house my dead friends’ souls! I have no friends. Perhaps birds. Under Bournemouth pier, the *usual overdose of shadows*. But all the light I need is in the crying of the gulls in this Universe unreal as breath.

Understand that I do not expect you to understand, *criminal*.

Recluse is... a pejorative term. I travel (Christchurch! Ringwood! Wimborne! Poole!). You might see me in the Starbucks in Borders or Cafe Nero in Waterstones, an open King James nestled in my lap. I take holiday dinner at the Days Hotel. Christmas Days at Days! The people there are ever so nice. I go up to London when I can, a stack of Bibles bound tight in string. I have not abandoned parks and cafes. I live a life.

The Evangelist (Speaker’s Corner)

Got a second postcard from Satan today. Excruciating, another day to fight *The Flood*. To broadcast that rubbish heap! Told me when too, right down to the minute. I never knew the sort of people who knew the *date*. Might be today for all I know, care.

There are so many different languages for the Tyndale now, a joy. I was quite cleaned out by Marble Arch. I wonder what they see passing doddery Mrs. Lightband and her Bible

stack by the Reform Tree on a tea-brown day? Do they see that I have *business in the supernatural* and how Souls that are great are always in their element? Do they?

If I could show you... here among the *green scabs of winter*... a brooch of rain strung on a spiderweb... a black tree-trunk eating gravel...

But there is *nothing* to see you say! Just Hyde Park a bit glum and wet on a grey Saturday afternoon.

But see how that dark trunk thrusts and gleams, the *driving force* under it all, such waterlogged work of Majesty!

Oh, the beauty that idiot girl could never touch, wallowing in sullen fogs with words, words, words... (*The words were the sullen fogs!*)... when she only ever needed the one eternal living Word.

(The girl they still want... the one with the electric-cave in her brain... always will be wanting and wanting... the erotic-damp of she who is long, long gone).

Do you wonder after all this what I would say to her? For I know. I would come to her and put in her one good hand *the complete manual* and spare her infinities of pain.

You see, I was from the first after heavenly spoil and now, *diabolitan*, know solid as this pavement underfoot I will soon be gloveless trespasser on eternal shores and will smooth the *touchwaters* with perfect fingers. *La droite d’En-haut soit benie!*

Can’t you see I still offer you a new world? Take one. 🕒



The Submarine Confession

Andrew Rai Berzins

He is sitting before us on a steel chair. The bodily fluids that have graced its structure over years past are not visually evident. Or “in evidence” [as goes the term]. They are phantom. [I can smell them still, but that may be more a quirk of my elevated aptitude in this regard rather than standard observance. I realize I can’t completely close my eyes this morning for some reason—what might be the reason?—such that my vision has shifted down slightly “for the time being” into default landscape mode—until of course he makes verbo gestures—which he just has—an *ellipsis* of the hand—forcing resumption of primo vigilance.]

“Through negligence I killed a turtle, a seagull through—what’s the right word—*malice*?” The dilapidated man seemed to seek reaction, but he was getting none of that from us. “Malice, mind you, complicated by poor aim. Throwing a rock to disturb its complacency. Hitting it in the head.” He paused. Silence hung about the room like a hanged man. Briefly though. Thankfully briefly. “Cats I’ve been okay with. Sparrows too...”

The fleshfellas had sent him to us, since they apparently could make little headway. Assured of his criminality, they lacked the specifics to complete the application. This I state without aspersion. The mysteries we daily meet are numerous and numinous, offering education, prompt, humbling. Sparrows flying on lacerated wing. Clouds that replicate [mockingly?] our mood. I say mood. You know what I mean.

“Sheep... sheep—come to think of it—I’ve had no real access to. Or that’s untrue. I once had access—to several—but the farmer was around. It’s the noise sheep make. We’re told they *bah*. A gentle sound. From childhood, we are hammered with this notion. But it’s wholly untrue. They *bray*—more like donkeys. A harsh offensive noise that a

tone-deaf nimrod might make upon finally understanding a joke. It’s narcissistic—‘look at me—look at my ugly enjoyment.’”

The man appeared to ruminate on what might have transpired in the absence of the farmer. As it was we’d yet to formally ask him a question. He sat before us in a greyish suit, illy-maintained and elusive of style. [“Timeless grey suit” feels wrong, since suits—as we well know—are temporal fabric constructions, but—when asked to describe it in debriefing—that suit did seem to bring us all pause.] He held a *Mr. Submarine* sandwich bag in his filthy left hand. T was the one to direct the man to the seat on which he now sat. To the chair. The steel chair. Grey—I only registered now in contemplating this particular fact—its very greyness perhaps an element in what made Submarine so inordinately comfortable in the room. S—categorically brusque with these types—had suggested that, in the absence of any forthcoming ID, or bona fide name per se, we refer to the man as *Submarine*.

“In the manner of a *nom de guerre*? Yes, I suppose it would do,” he responded—ignoring the fact that he was not being asked. “Or rather a *nom de paix*?” Did he think we were idiots? Bot-boys brought in in case of violence? I’ve got Lexicon Ultra and can recognize condescension in more languages than this shifty shit could shake a shtick at. “I’m sure we’ve all been called worse things in our time.” He looked about for a commiserating face. Vainly, I might add.

R, S, T and I were currently present. We’ve been using initials lately as part of an attempt to de-emphasize the distinguishing characteristics of the various synth interrogators, as per last week’s memo from P. [It’s no secret that S is the primary cause for concern, given his alpha-test animation protocol. The sometimes seemingly spontaneous vindictiveness, animosity... thankfully only two more weeks before he’s tweaked.] In the event of further civilian complaint, the complainant has at best a 1-in-26 chance of picking out his supposed nemesis. Solidarity, the key word here. Our “voices” of course are being randomly altered.

Undaunted, Submarine proceeded with his point—that he saw no point in holding out, as the State had more time—leave alone turtles and seagulls—to kill than he. Though brought to our office [as noted above], he insisted he’d come on his own volition. T assured him this would be duly noted.

T has, over the last few months, expressed the suspicion that there are thousands more out there like Submarine, down in their basements dreaming of havoc, teaching themselves entirely new languages, languages sometimes identical to ours with the crucial exception that the words mean different things. *House*, for example, to us means house. To them it may mean jeopardy, apartment, whore, or catapult. The implications of this theory have not escaped us.

“I’ll tell you the truth. Why not?” shrugged Submarine, “although my saying I’ll tell you does not ensure that I will nor even that I could. This presumably is the risk with confessions.”

S, in no uncertain terms, made clear our collective experience with same.

“Fine, fine. So long as I’m dealing with pros.”



ROB McCLURE SMITH's fiction has appeared in literary magazines including *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *New Ohio Review*, and *Manchester Review*. He teaches film studies at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois and is currently working on a novel set in Washington D.C.

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S voiced curiosity, though perhaps prematurely and with overmuch overtiness, as to what precisely constituted the point beyond which we could, in good conscience, beat him. The Manual is necessarily vague.

“It’s a tough call,” Submarine allowed—again—as though he were being addressed as opposed to being indirectly menaced. “The only code I know is English and it evades me with frequent frequency. That’s where you guys might have the advantage.”

R made note of the cavalier usage of *guy*, in view of its traitorous derivation. This, in fact, was a *mental* note by R, which made things all the more unsettling when Submarine eyed him with what might only be gauged as courteous indulgence, then offered: “Please, R, take your time.” [Little wonder at R’s resulting trauma!]

I find it unfair for anyone to suggest that we were underprepared. Regardless the ante-diligence, one always enters an interview somewhat blind. As to its trajectory. We do not know the future. We cannot predict the full span of interactions within a space—especially when the central component is an erratic agent. For, seeing Submarine shift slightly in his seat, as though twinged with some slight spasm, T asked—with doubtless sarcasm—whether our guest was indeed comfortable. Submarine eyed him fixedly for several seconds—seemingly overwhelmed by the sincerity and empathy of the question—then nodded, exhaled a sigh, and smiled the smile of a man who has just shat out from himself—for perpetuity—any and all notions of worry.

“Yes, thank you, yes, I am.” The strangest of tears, massive, prismatic, slid in descent down his flushed cheek. I signalled for refreshments, foreseeing a long and drawn-out session.

His facial scan at Entrance had brought myriad results. No surprise there. It was the confirmations. As of this morning, 1700. And counting. [In that this is an unedited draft, please excuse the use of numerals over letters in “1700,” as well as the possibly provocative “And counting.” It’s my growing understanding that fleshfellas jig to the projective over the actual. In honesty, I don’t find this inclination backward; in fact, I find it forwardish. It implies a willingness to embrace a spectral future—and meet it face-forward. Perhaps most ff cowards are, in fact, dead now?] This particular man, this Submarine, in various environments, might be mistaken for many hundreds of others. Blood profile was ridiculously common. Eye colour—dependent on present light, angle of light, time of day, humidity, errant or resident particulates, emotional/psychological/physiological state of observer—falls within the range of sky blue to poe black. Genome profile remains incomplete. Problematically, Submarine seems to bring with him insidious glitches to a profiling system. [A clerk in Residence suggested the other day that Submarine “brings his own weather.” This concept stumbles me. We have heard of stories —]

“I could claim total innocence but, given the times, total guilt is more plausible. In my heart of hearts I do—in fact—believe I’m responsible. I know it sounds odd but I feel a bit like that fella down in Texas... I think it was Texas... it *had* to be Texas... the man who wants to be the man who may have killed three thousand people. He claims he doesn’t entirely

remember! He whiffs on the details. Now I would think those details... would—uh—*reside*. But who am I?”

The snack tray arrived. We generally partook, as is routine—“so to soothe the visitor”—even S, whose system, being in format re-pro, risked rebelling against the influx of ester-realm provacs in the coffee and donuts. While R noted a heavy hand with the baking powder, T maintained that a donut was a donut. Jelly congealed at the corner of S’s mouth, that little inexplicable groove where things seem to lodge. We attempted to draw his attention to this fact, to telegraph as furtively as possible the oversight, but S remained oblivious, staring across at our slippery guest. S has never been good with the least bit of flippancy in talk of death. [Perhaps because our own remain such a wholly intangible subject...?]

“I did not kill those three thousand people... although I’ve murdered dozens in my sleep. Hundreds—millions—*by* my sleep...” He fairly much gasped. “My complicity, I fear, so extreme, the stain on my hands upon waking so fierce... my vision’s become green-deficient.”

S gave [what I can only take to be] an involuntary shudder, then licked his lip-groove clean.

“On a lighter note, I’ve thought about freedom of thought. Stopped. Could not continue.”

T pointed out, in his sternest tone, that irony would not get our friend out of hot water. Submarine seemed to take this literally, pulling his feet up onto the chair, while peering down at some imminent threat. We studied the stringy grease-laden beard, the splintered yellow fingernails, the barbarous toenail making its way through the overtaxed rubber of his ancient sneaker’s toe. The famed Howard Hughes—in decline—was not dissimilar, nor the famed Jesus Christ, nor the famed Rasputin. Clothes as often mask the man as proclaim him.

R seemed to finally regain his equilibrium, following the inexplicability of having his mind read, enough in any case to pose an interrogative: what might Submarine know, for instance, of the Man in the Raincoat on Marigold Street? [The person in question is a thorn in R’s side, someone who for 17 consecutive days in June appeared in the same position in every image taken by anyone who happened on Marigold Street that month. M believes the “man” actually may have been a mannequin, while Q suspects the “man” of more troubling incarnation. After passing through six other agents’ hands, the file now sits like an anchor, an albatross, a Magritte-ish boulder on R’s poor desk.] Submarine claimed to have no knowledge of same, yet sympathized—or so he claimed—with what he gauged to be our concern: that maroon Aquascutum’s have “precious little business” on a street named Marigold. In June.

R snorted, glorying in his contempt. S offered a face on the cusp of a snarl. T warned Submarine that our patience was thinning. I scowled—though that has never been my strong suit.

“My penis is 17 inches long. Is that perhaps why I’m here?”

S leaked a partial mouthful of his Fibroblast. T’s brow—already shiny with metal fatigue—now peppered up with titanium flux in a manner unbecoming. R let out a sound one usually only might hear from fleshfellas in rapture—or in fear of their lives. I felt my eyelids crystallize.

“17 inches... in my dreams!” Submarine erupted with a ghastly laugh, a sprawling laugh, a thing so humourless, queer, melancholic, it gutted the very concept of *laugh*.

T suggested we talk a break, and no one uttered issue.

Outside the interview room for those few minutes, the four of us went our separate ways. We never do that. We always commingle. We seemed unable to look each other in the eye.

I removed my head and put it on the windowsill to air—or cool—or *warm*? Who knows? O fuck, I think they used to say. *Circulatory aeration fluctuation* is the offered explanation. *Anxiety*—a term we have known but never thought to have need of in personal usage—seems a better fit. To me. What occurred to me.

Resumption was the only course. The familiar does bring a settling of senses. A framing within which we have bound ourselves to be operative. Functional. Clouds notwithstanding

T was determined to no longer be waylaid. He threw forth the name of Jerzy Macgoogan.

Jerzy Macgoogan, for Submarine, did not ring a bell.

S alluded to classic techniques such as crushing testicles between two bricks. He drew attention to the rooms many sockets, he took a pair of Vicegrip pliers from his pocket...

Submarine looked S directly in the forehead and dared him to risk specificity.

S said he could make things easy or difficult. Submarine sighed in a most beatific manner.

“Not to burst your bubble on this, but I may be incapable of meeting you halfway. As you all realize, I’m sure, the human mind is a funny thing. In most of us it moves in certain patterns, for some a stadium oval, a 4-D hopscotch grid, a railroad shunting yard, a Moebius strip. For some it’s more like a roller coaster, with sudden shifts in altitude, airless peaks and dizzying crevices, but Safety-Inspected at every turn. For others, it’s *just* like a roller coaster, except without the reinforced rail, with the lights out, with nasty curves of missing track, the operator somewhere off getting pasted, lap on lap the ride decidedly less fun. Then one day something gives. The structure collapses. The mind hurtles free, and sails across the parking lot, toward the horizon of which it’s always dreamed. One day we simply cannot be contained.”

“Heaven and Hell—but amusement parks we circled and circled till we found the road out. You look back, you see how gracefully they lie in those wildly reductive figure-eights. On the road out I have found a place where *divine* and *obscene* mean the same thing. The new Sphinx is unrecognizable, for its riddle’s in a language we have yet to unearth. Its riddle within and yet still beyond us. We just

find more boxes within Pandora’s, we just keep opening out and out...”

Submarine scratched his scalp—something he’d been doing periodically throughout the session—and this time—finally—this time I saw... the dead-skin cells—with every scratch—shuttling up into the air. The air-borne particles, as though on command, made their strategic way to our sensors. To our cameras, to our windows, to our ears, noses, mouths...

T pressed his buzzer and no one came.

R pressed his buzzer and no one came.

S started sneezing and has yet to stop.

“Truth is tough—both speaking and embracing it. For instance, right now you are being coated in mine. Don’t worry though—it mostly washes off—though there is the risk of stain.”

Submarine then stood—unbidden—little matter... somehow seemingly taller than before. He loomed over us like his very Sphinx, brought from his shirt a semi-permanent marker, and signed every surface in a flurry of Xs.

17 Xs—all maroon.

He turned toward the door, which opened. He left. He left of his own accord.

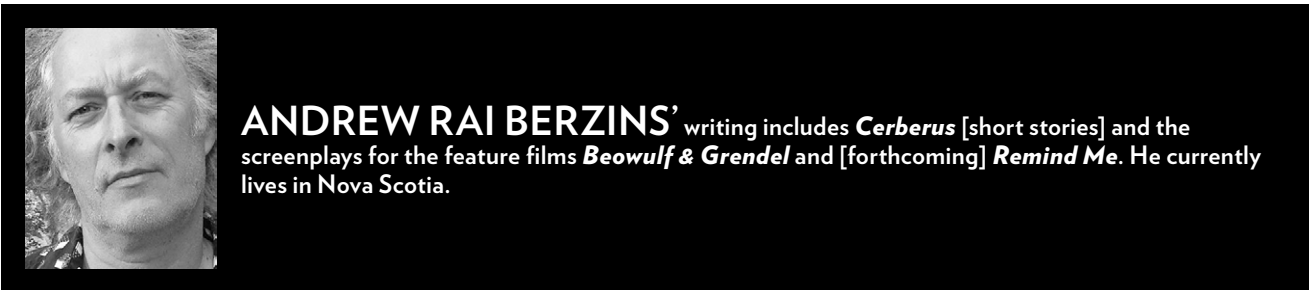
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I fear I am not long for this job. Is *fear* the right word? Perhaps not. There is no dread or apprehension. There is—if I’m honest—almost only expectation. I have failed the Manual, and that traditionally always leads to terminal consequence. *Que sera, sera*—they sing in the movies. That grand old Hitchcock. And oddly I am not repelled by the fatalism therein.

I shall strive to be honest as I future on. I see nothing else for it. Submarine is out there. Not inherently against us. He lacks all gripe from what I could discern. But who am I to say?

Who am I? More to the point: who can I be?

This—to some—my most corrosive crime: I only now fear disappointing him. ↻





Losing Face

Zeke Jarvis

This guy's face kept falling off in the doctor's office, and we all felt bad for him, because, you know, it was his face. At first, I tried to not make eye contact. I figured that he was probably embarrassed, so I just kind of kept an eye on him. Mostly I wanted to see if he was okay, but I'll admit that I was curious, too. Who wouldn't be? It's not like I was the only one in the office sort of looking at him and sort of not looking at him.

The first time his face fell off, I looked over, kind of spooked, because it made this really gross slapping sound when it hit the floor. The guy sighed really loudly, then picked it up and pressed it back onto his head. I looked away right before he looked around. Probably he was trying to see if anyone was watching. He started whistling, and I think that was a mistake. He should have sat with his face in his hands. Nobody would've blamed him, and I don't think that anyone would have said anything. When he whistled, the vibrations from his whistling are probably what made his face fall off again. So then we all were, like, looking at the ceiling or checking our cell phones. Anything to not look at him.

And it happened two more times. The fourth time, I tried to look over at his face, and it looked like it had some dust and other junk from the floor on it. And the guy just pressed it back on his head. Isn't that nuts? So now he has dirt and germs and who knows what else under his skin? I don't know, maybe he thought that he was in the doctor's office anyway, so he'd just get it cleaned or something, but you wouldn't catch me just pressing my face back on if it fell onto the floor. I mean, God forbid.


And all that nastiness was all just the first four times. The fifth time, his face fell to the floor again. It was face down, I guess you'd say. And he just started crying. Like things weren't awkward enough for the rest of us. It was so bad that we weren't even looking at each other. I mean, after the third time that it fell, a few of us made eye contact and laughed a little. Not hard. It's not like we were trying to be mean or anything. And a couple of us rolled our eyes. But he didn't see. He was too busy pushing his face back on.

But this fifth time, when he started to cry, it was like

everything got real all of the sudden. It made us wonder what the deal was with his face. Could our faces fall off? I didn't want to stop caring about this guy's problems, but I guess I didn't really care about the guy's problems in the first place. But anyway, we all had to just sit there, listening to him cry. And now he had his hands on his faceless face, and his hands were probably dirty, so he was making things worse.

And we all had to sit there in the doctor's office. We had to decide if we should look at our phones, not really looking at what was on the phone but just not looking at the guy and trying not to react. Or did we flip through the pamphlets in the office or something? There wasn't really anything that you could do that wasn't awful, and it was a doctor's office, so everyone was kind of uncomfortable in the first place.

Eventually, they called him back. It turns out that his last name was, "Little". The guy started to stand up, then he sat back down. Then he reached down and picked up his face, which he'd just let stay on the ground after the fifth time it fell off. He just held onto his face while he headed back to the actual rooms, and we were all stuck there, not sure if we should talk about the guy or not. Like, do we say, "What was with that guy?" or "Why didn't he take his face into the bathroom and leave us alone?"

I got called back about ten minutes later. I didn't see the guy whose face kept falling off. I just got my usual boring checkup (I'm supposed to watch my weight a little bit more). It was creepy, and I was glad to be out of there when my appointment was over. But I still think about that guy, wherever he is now, faceless, I'm sure. And part of what I think about is just what we were all supposed to do? What would have been right or helpful? I can't figure it out, but luckily I've never been in a situation like that again. Fingers crossed, it stays that way. 



ZEKE JARVIS is a Professor of English at Eureka College, where he edits *ELM*. His work has appeared in *Moon City Review*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Posit*, among other places. His books include *So Anyway...*, *In A Family Way*, and *Lifelong Learning*.

ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

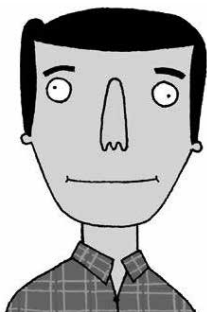
KYRA WILSON *Front Cover, Inside-Front Cover, Page 21, Back Cover...*
is an artist residing in Vermont with her family, and has been painting for over 20 years. Kyra tried going the expected career route in business, but ended up working in an office with flickering fluorescent lights, zero windows, way too many spreadsheets, and people with suspenders. She escaped, and embraced color and movement as her passion. Creating in Oils, Acrylic, and Watercolor, she works in a predominantly fantasy style, but visits the contemporary and even abstract realms on occasion! Kyra's work can be found at KWilsonStudio.com



ROB KIRBYSON *Pages: 10-11, 19...*
conceives visceral, often surreal ideas and renders them carefully and precisely with acrylic and oil paints, inks and pencils. There are no happy accidents. Inspiration is usually borne existentially from within although Rob also likes to take a personal skewed look at other cultural touchstones. Surfaces used are canvas, canvas board, wooden panel, aluminium sheet and electric toasters. Rob also works in magazine illustration and as a cartoonist. He has worked in independent and newsstand magazines in the USA and UK since the late 90's. Rob works from a camouflaged and secluded studio in Kinross, Scotland. Check out more of Rob's work at RobKirbyson.com



CESAR VALTIERRA *Page: 46...*
is a graphic artist. To escape the drudgery of life, he draws. He also hangs out with his fiancée Victoria, and their cats, Chubs and Pretty Boy. Check out his work at CesarValtierra.com and OrderFromKhaos.com, as well as his comic at TonyBalazo.com



REZA FARAZMAND *Page: 14...*
draws comics and writes things. You can find more of his work at Poorly Drawn Lines (PoorlyDrawnLines.com), which is updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A collection of his cartoons titled **Poorly Draw Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories** debuted on October 6, 2015. His latest book, **Comics for a Strange World** was released on October 24th, 2017.



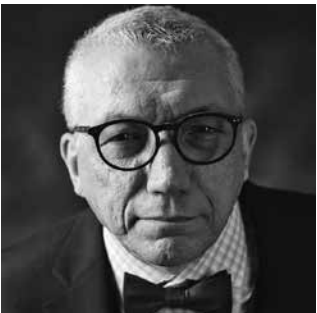
CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: 26, 39, 43...*
is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



CHAD YENNEY *Pages: 3, 28-29, 36...*
makes paper collages in Washington state. You can see more of his work at his website at computarded.com or send him love letters at computardedcollage@gmail.com.

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DAVID SIMMER II *Lead Artist & Art Director, THRICE Fiction...*
is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of **Thrice Fiction Magazine** and blogs daily at Blogography.com



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