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Bartleby Snopes



A Literary Magazine of Fiction

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For more information about our contributors, please visit the Archive section of our website. If you would like to contact one of our authors, please let us know.

Editor's Note

This issue marks the beginning of a new era for *Bartleby Snopes*. No longer is this a one-person show. Please welcome Rick Taliaferro to our staff. His presence will continue to make this magazine one of the best around.

This issue is our shortest yet, but it's just as complete as any other we've published. The stories are tight and focused with a lot to say if you're willing to look. This doesn't mean we'll focus solely on flash fiction in the future. We've decided to open our doors to longer fiction in the coming months.

The magazine continues to thrive because of all the wonderful submissions we receive. It's a hard-fought battle at times to keep this thing going, but the words and images on these pages need to be seen.

A Life of Crime by Mark DeMoss

I stole the shopping cart, right out from under their noses. I bought the bread, dropped it into the basket, and rolled it right out of the market. The clerks didn't seem to think it was odd, pushing a shopping cart with nothing in it but one loaf of bread. Maybe lots of crazy old men roll that way.

I was nervous at first. I'd never stolen anything from a grocery store. My hands shook, and as I pushed through the sliding door and into the parking lot, I started humming loudly, intentionally making eye contact and smiling. It wasn't long before I saw that no one cared much about an old man and a shopping cart, no matter how far from the grocery they'd got themselves.

When I got to the edge of the parking lot, I just kept on rolling. Across Main Street at rush hour, drivers talking to themselves on their blue tooth phones. For fun, I tried to make eye contact but they never looked up. I guess their phones tell them when the light turns green.

Past the fire station, a bright red fire truck right outside like it was for sale by owner. One fireman outside, cleaning the wheels, making sure they turn when it's time to go. It's important for the wheels to turn. You don't go far without good wheels. If the wheels on the cart went out, I'd have to dump it.

Nobody in their yards asking questions about why I'm pushing a shopping cart down the street. People aren't curious about other people's business like they used to be. I figured not even anyone peering out their curtains at me.

At the park there's a lake, and there's a hedge behind that. It was hard to push the cart through the rough grass to the lake. Wheels want a smooth road to travel on, and the land around the lake is bumpy. The wheels tried to each go their own way, and the grass kept catching up in the wheel wells. It took me a long time to get to the lake.

Behind the hedge is the man who lives in the park, and he's the reason I took the cart. He looks about like you'd expect a man who lives in a park to look. There aren't any laundromats in a park. Maybe in a nicer park, but not in a park like this. No showers either. I took the cart because he asked for it. I figured not many people did for a man who lives in the park.

"I got your cart," I said. I figured on keeping things simple, sticking to the obvious. If I lived in a park, I wouldn't want some do-gooder poking around and trying to make me feel like less of a person. Or maybe spying, checking out my stash of stuff. The man needed a cart, and I had one for him. That's all it was.

"What's that inside it," the man wanted to know. I explained that it was bread because I couldn't take a cart without buying something. He said I must be some kind of chickenshit. I didn't say anything about how I thought he might like some bread.

"You can give that bread to the ducks," the man said.

"You don't want the bread?" I said, and he said he didn't need the bread, and there's a difference between the two.

I walked back up the embankment to the lake, and around to the other side, where ducks liked to gather, up by the water lilies. A loaf of bread is a good way to be popular with ducks. I didn't have more than one slice out of the bag before a dozen of those birds were all around me, squawking and demanding. They kept me pretty busy for the next half hour or so, tossing bread farther and farther away, to defend myself more than trying to help the ducks. When I'd thrown the last of the bread, like turning off a switch, the ducks swung around and slid back into the water, never even looking back. I'm not sure they as much as tasted all that bread, they only wanted it because it was there.

"The bread's gone," I said to the man, when I got back to his place behind the hedge. The man kind of grunted something.

"What'd you do with the shopping cart," I asked him, because when I came back, it was nowhere in sight. His blanket was there, like before, and his duffel. He wasn't one of those park-living men who cared a lot about material possessions, like some you see. I was kind of surprised, to tell truth, that he wanted a shopping cart in the first place.

The man kind of nodded his head over to the side, where, at the end of an open space, there was a line of trees.

"What's over there?" I asked.

"The carts," the man said.

"More than one," I said.

"Yep. A lot more. Maybe fifty."

"What you need with fifty carts?"

"Don't need 'em. I want 'em. There's a difference. Already told you that."

"What for you want fifty shopping carts?" I said, after sputtering around for a while.

"For the police."

"Huh?"

"Come back tomorrow and see, maybe the day after. There's gonna be a show when they come and break this thing up."

"A shopping cart theft ring?"

"Yeah, that's right. Flashing lights and sirens, I'm guessing four cars. It'll be great."

I didn't go back to the park for a while after that. My prints were all over that shopping cart, and maybe even a hair from my balding head. All it takes is one. I read the paper every week to find out if the man was busted but so far, there's been no word.

Editor's Note

A Life of Crime was originally published on the web in our January 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

An Interrogation by Matt Rowan

*D*ear Sir,

You are hereby remanded to the custody of the police force of this city, brave and free. Your presence is requested, by those individuals of our police force who are remanding you to custody, at the nineteenth district police headquarters on the next Tuesday of this month in this, another of the many, many years of our lord--it having been so very many years to this point is a fact we feel privileged to report.

Failure to comply will be met with another card, which you might expect to be possibly more unkindly stated, indicating our hurt feelings with your failure to comply initially and also that we would still very much like to see you on a rescheduled date in the future, a date TBA pending your compliance with our initial request, this card.

We look forward to seeing you soon if indeed you're able to visit with us!

*All the best,
Detectives Shoes and Campground*

I went as I'd been summoned to the police station the following Tuesday, at a time of my choosing, since the summons hadn't explicitly stated one, which combined with the leisurely tone of the summons made me feel brazen and sure I wouldn't be penalized.

After I arrived and was brought before the two detectives responsible for my being summoned, I found my casual attitude changed not very much at all. There was, it seemed, nothing to worry about.

"We're the police Mr. Wellesby, but we don't want that to alarm you. Does that alarm you? I know I'll want to cool it down if it does. You're comfortable? You don't need anything to drink, a glass of water, maybe a Sprite, a bag of Taco Bell Tacos or a Crunchwrap Supreme?"

"I guarantee you will not be disappointed if you have a Crunchwrap Supreme, unless you are a weird-o --but I'm sorry that's going too far. You are definitely not a weird-o, Mr. Wellesby. I'm so sorry for calling you a weird-o. So very sorry. Crunchwrap Supremes aren't necessarily everyone's tastes. So I'm sorry, so sorry."

I'd be lying if I said their conduct wasn't at once repelling. Even if it were that I enjoyed a Crunchwrap supreme (and it was, *it was!*) now and again at the Taco Bells nearest my home and place of business respectively, to say that the situation didn't call for its offering would be to say a profound understatement. Where were they getting all

these Crunchwraps, in the first place? And on whose dime, for another thing? Mine, as a taxpayer? They'd better hope not, I thought.

"Good call on the quick apology. That 'weird-o' comment was way out of line, Frank. Would you like a Crunchwrap Supreme or a Sprite maybe?"

"No, I'm fine. Thanks," I said. I looked around the room and decided it just the same as the movies, except more vivid since I was actually there, getting a physical sense of it all.

"Oh gosh, I've offended you, haven't I? We have Pepsi. I'm sorry I didn't mention that earlier. We have Pepsi. It was wrong of me not to say anything."

"You should have mentioned that earlier, Lamar."

"I know, oh gosh, I know. I feel so guilty, Frank. By the way, this is Detective Frank Shoes, Mr. Wellesby. And I'm Detective H. Lamar Campground. And I'm so sorry."

Detective Frank Shoes reminded me a lot of the character actor Dan Hedaya, only a lot younger and not quite aloof enough for my preference. Detective H. Lamar Campground wasn't a lot like any actor I remembered, certainly not James Earl Jones. No, and this was because I couldn't imagine a world in which I found James Earl Jones unbearable, but I found Detective Campground something close to that. A queer feeling, meeting James Earl Jones' antithesis.

"You should be interrogating us, Mr. Wellesby, honest. The whole system should be on trial. Not you. I've got a good feeling in my gut, way down deep in there, that you're a decent man. And I should know. I'm a big fan of decent people, after all."

"Detective Shoes loves good people, Herman. Oops! *Mr. Wellesby*. I meant to say Mr. Wellesby. Is it okay that I called you Herman, as long as I apologize for it now, Mr. Wellesby? Because *I am* sorry. Obviously you deserve an apology."

"I'm fine, honestly. You guys seem nice," and to that comment both detectives emphatically replied "thank you, thank you" repeatedly, until I made a motion that they should stop. "Could we maybe get on with things? Interrogate away, in other words. I'm an open book to be mercilessly, tortuously interrogated," because if they tortured me I'd possibly be rendered unconscious from a beating or boundless pain, and no longer forced to endure this tedium.

"Oh we shouldn't want you to think we're trying to interrogate you. I hope you don't think that. You shouldn't think that. What you should think is, how in the world is injustice allowed to perpetuate itself so aberrantly and often, as it has in your case, Mr. Wellesby, and countless others I dare not name. I wish I had the answer to that head-scratcher," Detective Shoes said, and doubled slightly, hands brought to his throat and mouth, seemingly rethinking launch of a salvo of a hacking cough that really, biologically, couldn't be restrained (and shouldn't be, certainly, for his health). But despite himself he let loose and hacked away, as was inevitable. Then a suffusion of red showed on his face, and he apologized for his hacking cough with as much profusion as anything yet. It was immediately clear he'd been trying to stifle his illness from the moment of my arrival.

"Detective Shoes, I don't know that you ought to be telling Mr. Wellesby what to think. How does that make you feel about that?" And then he added, nonchalantly, "Take care not to hack at Mr. Wellesby."

Shoes' suffusion burned brighter, but he quickly recovered and said, "I feel you're right, Detective Campground. I should not tell Mr. Wellesby what to think, and never will again. I swear it. How about this then, I am suggesting that Mr. Wellesby take what I am now calling 'advice,' and consider the injustice that perpetuates itself all across this country, in this day and age of all days and ages, but he's only to consider it if he wants to, which should go without saying. How do you feel about that, Mr. Wellesby?"

"If we're going to be here for a while longer, I think I'll have a bag of mixed nuts."

"Did you hear that, Detective Shoes? He'd like a bag of mixed nuts. I'll go get them and also a Pepsi, lest the mixed nuts should make a parched man out of our friend, Mr. Wellesby. I hope it's ok I consider you a good friend, Mr. Wellesby. I want to presume nothing. You'd tell me if it wasn't, wouldn't you?" I said that I certainly would and it was fine.

Detective Campground

hastily exited the room, leaving me alone with Detective Shoes, whose expression changed mightily once his partner had gone.

"What an officious prick," Detective shoes acidly pronounced. "There is something that I simply cannot place that makes me loathe that man with every fiber of my being. What is it that makes me hate him so? I cannot say. But there is one issue on which I stand firm: his son is never to marry my daughter. She is a charming little thing, delicate and graceful. A great aura of purity surrounds her. I've sensed it. Detective Campground's son is bestial and I do not use words like that one lightly. I hope none of this offends you, and if it does I am sorry. Should I be sorry, though, for how I feel?"

Detective Shoes' expression changed again, to one of deep sorrow, and through his sad eyes I believe he was trying to channel his uncertainty into me, hoping I could



relieve him of the great weight he felt. I of course had no clue how to ameliorate anything weight-wise, so he sat in his chair looking at me sadly in almost total silence. It was an awkward thing.

The door creaked open and Detective Shoes reverted to his original posture. He smiled eagerly, with every ivory tooth denuded of lips and polished. Detective Campground, too, was smiling a polished smile as he set a can of Pepsi on the table.

At that he smacked his head, "Oh gosh! I forgot the mixed nuts, didn't I? You said that's what you wanted, and here I was so focused on getting you the can of Pepsi that I forgot what was most important of all. It's silly to think of the whole mess now."

"These things happen," Detective Shoes said. "How about this, I'll go and get the mixed nuts and you stay with our good friend Mr. Wellesby, how would that be?"

"No, please forget it," I said, not wanting to be alone with either of them after having listened to Detective Shoes' bizarrely racist confession. Neither detective made any indication that they had heard me, thus belaboring inanity, insanity, the whole bit.

"That's very nice of you, Detective Shoes. I owe you one. I do."

"Oh don't mention it. Take care of Mr. Wellesby until I return. Take care of yourself. Good-bye for now," and Detective Shoes was out the door.

Detective Campground slumped and looked immediately angry about something.

"He won't allow my son and his daughter to be wed. Not that I mind, his daughter's a bitch. Tells my son, 'Edgar, you need to make a life for yourself I can believe in. This life of yours I can't and I don't want to, anyway.' My son's an apprentice auto mechanic, but he's sheepish and he's not moving along in his career fast enough. He's stupid too, don't misunderstand me, and lazy as hell, but so's she, she just don't see it in herself. I think that's the real problem, how goddamn stupid the youth is. By the by, I'm betting our friend Shoes is out there having racist thoughts about how stupid I am that I forgot the thing I went to go get--that's your mixed nuts, a course. But I didn't forget. I just like to see the honkey actually do something instead of saying he's gonna like he always does, like some slave driver passes the buck end of the whip on to us uppity negroes so-called. It's all so much talk all the time. None of us ever want to take responsibility. I sure as hell don't. Not for this mess. Fact is the only thing Shoes and I really agree on is that our children should not be wed. I'm not afraid to say I hate him, too. And tell you it's been so long before he ever hated me, as far as I know. Hate him for no good reason, though I wouldn't say it to his face."

Returned was Detective Shoes who said smilingly, "Someone's got a bag of mixed nuts," which he shook in his hand.

It was increasingly obvious neither detective had much to say about anything except with regard to the complicated nature of each man's forced relationship with his partner, the other. Detective Shoes was a bigot, but didn't want to believe that about himself. He wanted to believe his dislike of Detective Campground's son, Edgar, was justified by reasons more nuanced than perception of the flawed content of the boy's character, which would at best be described as stereotypical and at worst show a

pronounced belief in the caricature of black males as brutes. Which is never a good thing to do, if I may editorialize on race for a moment.

Detective Campground, for his part, seemed angry and dismissive, as dismissive and angry as a brutish animal looking to charge in any direction, at any target. Reacting without consideration. Actually they both were. Clannish and unkind. But maybe they had got the right idea. I'll add that caricatures of people and behaving like animals are a lot of what we've got to show for ourselves. Someone long ago compelled us to be who we are, to react to outsiders with reservation or outright contempt, to establish and reject the other, fit-to-be-tied. Or no one did any of that and we're all just a bunch of jerks without any good reason that I can think of.

Irrespective of the detectives' ignorance, or if I'm to be judicious, call them "points of disagreement," I wished to make leave because of my grave discomfort, and without any further snack-related delay.

But the tandem stared back at me with odd, expectant eyes, Shoes stifling his cough, and it seemed this thing would probably take a while longer yet.

Editor's Note

An Interrogation originally appeared on the web in our March 2011 issue and was voted Story of the Month.

Photograph: *Sunbathed Scratched* © Frank Cademartori

Jonathan Belkin had roughly 14 minutes left to live and that was fine by him. He was a believer in just two things. The first was that all things being equal, they aren't. The second hardly mattered after that. Still, he knew he had to do something so he started to make a sandwich. The refrigerator was a sleek stainless-steel number made somewhere in South Korea that klaxoned like it was armed with a live nuke anytime you left the freezer door open longer than 30 seconds. It was a behemoth and wondrously stocked.

Bread: he wanted Wonder bread. Desperately. He remembered the somewhat gooey texture of his childhood with fondness. The perfect golden brown that his mother would coax into either side of a sizzling grilled cheese sandwich cooking in the pan. She would cut them in triangles and as he drew the two halves apart, watching the cheese dangle as it stretched into thin tendrils, he would know that he was loved. Sandra had been on a health kick for about a year now. Yoga. Spinning. Multi-grain. That was all there was for bread.

Mayonnaise: no, just Miracle Whip. For a moment he thought about beating a fresh batch of his own but 14 minutes, no, now 12, didn't really allow for such luxuries. And besides, somehow, there wasn't an egg in sight. He pulled out the slightly crusty jar, slipped off the lid, and slid a silver knife into the soft, squelching spread. There was no resistance.

Ham: organic. Lovingly sliced from the hindquarters of some lucky free-range pig. He knew because the package told him so. It was like this more and more. The contradictions were everywhere, perhaps they had always been there, but now he saw them as a programmer scans code and sees the bugs that you or I would have to stumble upon playing. The game was ruined. He saw that too.

It wasn't a perfect sandwich but Belkin ate with slow relish.

With the last bite, his attention was suddenly caught between two things. The first was a newspaper, scattered across the kitchen counter, discarded without even one headline read. He chewed one now: "The Aral Sea Disappears in a Single Generation". He tried to think of where the Aral Sea had been. How can you miss something you never knew existed in the first place? It lingered in his mind as his attention shifted fully to the second sight unfolding before his wary eyes: the slow turn of the lock on his front door.

Sandy Belkin walked through the door with her typical air of disaffected grace. She took in the sight of the floor with a gasp. It was strewn with sudsy bubbles. She looked at the dishwasher and the liquid dish soap lurking on the counter. He had erringly thought it a fine substitute for the absconded detergent--she'd switched brands, he hadn't recognized the unmarked, organic substitute made by displaced subsistence farmers in Mexico--that usually scoured their dishes.

"Jonathan Belkin," she screamed at her husband, "*You* are a dead man."

Editor's Note

Matters was originally published on the web in our May 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.



Photograph: *Lone Astronaut* © Frank Cademartori

The trail was as shrouded as her heart. Amanda skirted a slug on its way to the sea and ducked beneath cedar boughs that stretched like green webbing over her head, but today she did not revel in the beauty. Tears seared her eyelids and quickened her pace. She could think better with waves lapping her feet.

How could a doctor throw this at a woman and ask *her* to decide? Her toe caught an exposed root, then her knee slammed into a mossy stone and dirt cut her palms as she sprawled across the path.

A baby was supposed to be a wondrous thing. There wasn't supposed to be any anguish.

Downe's Syndrome.

How could that happen to her? She was relatively healthy. She didn't drink. Or do drugs.

There were options, her doctor said.

Bile rose in her mouth; not the bile she fought for sixty-three mornings. This was different. Sicker. Hateful.

She shoved from the moist earth and slapped dirty hands against her thighs. Already she glimpsed the bay. Silver light beckoned through young leaves.

She tromped down stone stairs onto pebbles tumbled with seaweed. They crunched beneath her runners, and the bay glistened before her. The waves were lulling; the sound as soothing as fine strings. Her riled thoughts crystallized within her. The nursery awaiting her baby obscured all else: Teddy-bear wallpaper. Flannel blankets. Yellow curtains which she had sewn herself..

She plunked onto a sea-kissed boulder and murdered tide pools with her feet. Then something in the ocean froth caught her eyes. She shaded them against the glare. It was a baby seal. Incoming tide played with it, bouncing it against rocky knees and tossing it back to sea. It had something--like a red and white Safeway bag--tied to it.

Now who would do that? Amanda dropped her purse and charged into the tidewater.

Soulful black eyes watched her approach.

"There, there. I'll get you free." She soothed as her skirts tangled her legs and waves slapped her backwards. She reached for that bag, then her fingers jumped back.

It was venous.

The seal bobbed in the rough. She saw a cord connecting the placenta. His silver spotted head cocked her way as the tide pulled him from her.

She scanned the shoreline for his mother. Tugboats and crab-traps. Even a kayak. But not another bobbing seal head. She waited. They stayed under a long time. She loved watching them.

A minute. Two. Three.

"She abandoned you, eh?"

The baby just watched her.

She pulled out her cell. Someone should know. It would die. What number? Ocean and Fisheries? The vet? The vet would know. She waited while the directory connected her.

"Dr. Boyd's. May I help you?"

"I hope so, I have an abandoned baby seal here. The placenta's still attached. I need to know who to contact for help."

"Lemme see." She sounded far too calm. The helpless creature floated further down shore.

"Ma'am? I have an animal control number here, shall I give it to you?"

What did she think? "Please."

Amanda re-dialed.

"Hello. You have reach--"

Finally. "Yes. I found a newborn seal here. Abandoned. Placenta still attached. I need someone to --"

"Ma'am, don't touch it."

"I won't."

The line crackled.

"OK. Listen: the baby's all right. Its mama will be back. We get so many calls. Don't worry. They do this. She leaves right after giving birth, hunting spree. Could be days. She won't return until the placenta dissolves. It feeds the pup in the meantime."

Amanda frowned. The floating bag and head scraped jagged rocks. She waded forward. "The cord's all tied around it. I think it might strangle...now if I could just unwind--"

"Don't."

Amanda paused.

"She won't go near it if she smells you. Just leave it alone, ma'am."

"She'd abandon it?"

"One whiff of you: yes."

"That's terrible."

"That's nature. Just leave it be, OK?"

Amanda nodded--though the woman couldn't see her--and flipped closed her cell. The seal bounced in the rough. That's nature. One thought that her baby was damaged and the mother would abandon it.

Editor's Note

Mother Nature was originally published on the web in our April 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Leopold Zarkoski's Sonic Trauma and Water Therapy by N God Savage

I had to soundproof the garage after the neighbours complained, and the police turned up, and the sight of me hosing down this half-naked librarian called Gina whilst Mussorgsky's *A Night on the Bare Mountain* thundered out of giant speakers at a volume that could strip the skin off a cow didn't create the kind of impression you'd really want local law enforcement to have of you. But once I explained the situation, calmed everybody down, produced Gina's signed consent form in triplicate, along with my PhD certificate and photocopies of my most recent academic articles, the cops agreed to let me off with a warning. On the condition, of course, that I soundproof the garage.

I got this company based out by the airport to do the work. A guy called Steve with bouffant hair and this weird tic that made it look like he was winking at me came out to do the quote. He asked a lot of questions about what I was doing in my garage that required soundproofing and giant speakers and a leather dentist's chair with arm straps. I answered him honestly, because I have nothing to hide about my work. I'm proud of what I do. I've helped a lot of people over the years.

"I call it Leopold Zarkoski's Sonic Trauma and Water Therapy," I told him, staring confidently, daring him to ask me to elaborate.

"And what exactly is that?" said Steve, after a pause and a wink.

I realised I had been holding my breath while waiting for him to speak. I exhaled, heavily and wetly, like steam leaking from a kettle.

"Well, Steve," I said. "You've got to understand that many people are very unhappy in this world." I noticed a hair on my lapel and brushed it away. "They feel at a loss, they feel confused." I reached out and touched Steve's shoulder. "They feel as if they don't fit in," I said, staring at him intently. I wanted him to feel uncomfortable for some reason, but he seemed unfazed, meeting my gaze and winking casually. "Anyway," I said, lifting my hand and turning towards the other end of the room. "These people are in some way degenerate...it can't be explained any more deeply than that. They are deficient."

I could sense Steve venturing to object, probably the usual line--don't these people deserve some compassion and understanding, don't they need to be nurtured and listened to?--the usual crap. "Steve," I said sharply, spinning round to cut off this potential interjection. "It's scientifically proven that madness is due to physiological deficiencies. They ain't right up here," I said, tapping the side of my skull to indicate that it was there, in the head, that these people were deficient.

"So...you try to reset the brain or something?" said Steve.

I whipped my hand forward and pointed directly at him. "Yes!" I shouted, and he winked again, which immediately destroyed my composure. "Yes," I repeated softly, retracting the hand to instead stroke my chin. I couldn't bear to look at him now. I was losing confidence. "That's what I do, Steve. I reset the brain."

"So it's like electroconvulsive therapy?" said Steve, and I winced because I'd heard this so many times before.

"No Steve, it's not. It's not ECT." I was losing interest in the whole conversation now. Why was I wasting my time trying to explain my work to this idiot? He looked at me dumbly, winked again, scratched his forearm noisily. "ECT is too invasive a therapy," I said. "I discovered long ago that one can achieve exactly the same results simply by overloading the senses. At a certain intensity of qualia, the brain resets itself, Steve." My voice was lethargic and low now. Steve was leaning in to catch my words. He winked again, and I felt as if I might vomit.

"So what?" he said. "You play loud music at them?"

I sighed and put my hands on my hips. I was aware that I was slumping, my head sinking down between my shoulders. "Yeah," I said. "And I hose them down with iced water, too."

Steve's eyebrows raised. He suddenly looked suspicious. Even his wink now suggested incredulity. "You do what?"

"You heard," I snapped, shooing him away with my hand. "Why don't you take off, Steve? Surely you've got enough measurements by now?"

"Sure," he said. "But it'll take a while to work out the quote."

"Never mind that," I said. "Can't you just fax it to me?" Steve winked again, this time at my right hand. I looked down and saw it was shaking, so I clasped it together with the left to steady them both. Steve looked up, his forehead wrinkled, his expression sympathetic – which made me feel disgusted.

"Please," I said feebly, looking at the floor. "Just fax it to me."

When he left I tore off my clothes and grabbed up the hose. I turned the tap on full and stood, shivering and blue, under the icy water for hours. I held the hose aloft with both hands, stretching my head up, my eyes closed, pushing myself into the hard jet, the liquid mixing with my tears and plummeting over my body in a fast, cleansing stream.

Wash it all away, I whispered, the airy words fizzing through the water as it babbled over my cheeks and chin.

Wash it all away.

Editor's Note

Leopold Zarkoski's *Sonic Trauma and Water Therapy* was originally published on the web in our April 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

The Squirrel Hunter by CS DeWildt

He followed Everett through the hills and hollers, down steep limestone embankments of clacking rocks that served as the path for the heavy rain that would spill out into the flood plains below. He followed the man through patches of paw-paws and young birch, past old hollow oaks that vibrated with huddled bats in wait of dusk, up the next rise where their heavy breath flattened the land again, leading them among primordial ferns and moss-pillowed stone.

Everett carried the twenty-two rifle in his giant mitts. Breath came like smoke and the man chewed the end of his home-rolled cigar. Billy watched him and the man seemed to him like a silver haired bear. The man would often stop and talk of the plants, to Billy, but also to the air itself, spilling the words for the forest to gather unto itself, as if educating the very place on its true nature.

"These are wild onions," he said squatting, knees popping like the rocks. He pulled up the thin scallion and chewed the bulbous root. Billy did the same and sucked the flavor from the green fiber. He chewed the sprout, letting it dangle from his lips like Everett's cigar.

"These berries are edible," Everett said. "I don't care for them myself, bitter. But in a pinch." And he plucked two from the small bush and popped them as if to prove the point. Billy did the same and yes, they were bitter, but they complimented the onion flavor and Billy memorized the look of the bush, the stubborn give of the berry's skin between his molars.

It was cold and the ground spouted forth smoky steam from the pockets and caverns below. Billy pointed out each breathing hole he saw and Everett marked its location on the topomap.

"Most of these are connected. Or will be." Everett said. "Might just open up into some great chamber. A place untouched."

Billy noted the marks on the map, simple red exes laid out over the paper landscape, each one a ghost of the vents poking the land around them.



Everett paused and Billy knew he'd spotted a squirrel by the change of his breathing, a feeling in the air as if the man had sucked up all the oxygen in some great ecological communication as master of the world. Billy massaged the canvas bag between his fingers, wanting the moment to remain with him in all its manifestations, tactile and olfactory. He smelled the cigar on the onion on the berry on the cold morning. He saw the man take a knee, another pop of the joint, a click of the safety next to the trigger, the pop and soft echo from thick greenery. It fell from the tree, hobbled, bounced and flopped, became a gray mass.

Billy came upon it first, went to his knees and spread the frosted ferns that wet his fingers numb. The squirrel did not appear. Billy cocked his head like a robin searching out the slow crawl of a worm and in doing so the gray mass popped from the rocky background, burning itself upon his retinas. He felt the squirrel, the warm radiating death soothed his cold fingers. The tick, a young instar was slightly swollen behind the squirrel's ear. Billy plucked it free, a small tag of flesh still in its mouthparts. He rolled it in his fingers before crushing it, slicing it in two between his thumbnail and the hardened bed of his index finger. It bled squirrel blood and fell to the ground, left to new purpose among the miraculous and unseen perpetuators of the cycle.

The squirrel moved, barely, and Billy thought it still alive. There was a hole in its midsection and Billy realized the pulsing was not due to the animal's blood flow or breath, but to squirming life within its womb. The bullet had opened up the placenta and among the messy potpourri of innards and fluids, a small wet pup was exposed to the world prematurely. Billy watched it move and take life upon itself the best it was able, the cold invasive air, light and sound. It searched for the comfort that had been stripped away with the layers of tissue.

He felt Everett over his shoulder, smelled the cigar and felt his breath. It warmed his neck and Billy said, "Will it live?"

"No," Everett said. "It won't."

Billy took the squirrel by the bush of its tail and dropped it into the bag among the others. Everett marked the map with another double stroke of red and Billy scanned the landscape, searching for the place his father had just created.

Editor's Note

The Squirrel Hunter originally appeared on the web in our May 2011 issue and was voted Story of the Month.

Photograph: *Fall Leaves* © Michael Monson

Feeding the Homeless by Tim Frank

You open your front door and a bundle of stench and hairy bones flops onto your brogues. You drag it across the threshold and sit it at your dining room table, double checking the shine on the silver candelabra you like to hang from your belt. The homeless man rests his head on your fine black cotton table cloth and a bubble grows from his nose, until--pop.

You hang your burgundy and off-rouge serving cloth over your left arm, evenly.

'Today sir, for entrees, I shall be presenting a starter of honey glazed rocket with crumbled dilettante, lightly browned croutons with a lemon and reduced port-coolie topped off with a thin triangle of freshly chilled pineapple.'

You wait for a reaction, but only hear the glug of a blocked toilet.

'For main,' you continue assuredly, 'I will roast a side of duck and gripe some pork bellies, flash fry them in a chilli and mead tarpaulin being careful to keep the poultry brittle and the swine edgy, then place them on Her Majesty's rotating show plates, fanned with a centrepiece of sheered broccoli and a ferment of goats cheese in Ohio Nit vinegar.'

'For desert, we have a mango sorbet bruschetta with a vile of mask and a distilled volley of uncrimped devil glutes. I shall loosen a barrage of reed rinds and re-condense them in a wall pan at right-angles, making sure to lay down a worthy residue of sterilised peas with a panicky caramel lattice.'

You wait for the poor decomposing man's jaw to drop. And it does. And your heart beats that much faster.

'Now,' you whisper conspiratorially, 'we have a variety of options for the nosh snubbers, wheat pokers, nut whiners, seafood dodgers, lactose spitters and those with a callous disregard for the lentil. Sir, I cater for all tastes. What shall it be?'

Fart. A drizzle of warm blood relaxes down the dirty man's nose and he smears it across his cheek like a burnt cranberry jus.

'Today's mis-en-scene will be grilled negativity and a sprinkle of Soviet gristle to lighten the mood. The colour, monsieur, is yellow,' you say, raising your arms and wiggling your fingers as if playing the grand piano. 'I thank you.'

Before progressing into white napkins of light pastry despair, you give a forthright lecture about the need to attend the right parties. You preach the right party will always serve cross shaped vol-au-vents blowtorched for that 'in bread' upper crust burnt skin crackle, and the magisterial, multi-levelled importance of attending black-tie events.

You get to work. You chop and pin, slice and thread, smooth and russet, tangle and weave, deconstruct, build and form, pile and scatter, pray to the great god of fondue to get that damn *consistency*, and drip your sweat into an egg cup. Every now and then you shout, 'Shallots!' but you don't know why.

The smelly man begins to stir, blood dried, nostrils aquiver, lifts his head from the table, groaning like a tranquilised pigeon in an air-conditioned frying pan.

3 hours later you return sheepishly to the dining room.

'Sir,' you say, with thick yellow stains crawling down your apron. 'I'm afraid I cannot serve you the food this afternoon. There have been some unforeseen problems. I am truly sorry.'



The homeless man stares like a dog searching for an un-thrown stick. He sobers quicker than an aubergine en-huit.

'Please, I need food. ANYTHING.'

'I have to be honest with you, sir. I am ashamed and mortified. Sir, the spinach has wilted. There I said it. The croutons are frighteningly illiterate. There is

more, but I cannot, no, dare not say. I simply could not have served that wretched microwave dinner.'

The squelchy man is on his feet, sniffing and prowling.

'What are you doing, monsieur?' you say.

The man ignores you and rushes into the kitchen.

'Where is it?!' he barks. 'Oh Christ, where is it!?'

'In the bin, sir, where it belongs,' you say, massaging your temples.

The homeless man finds the tall black bin and plunges his head deep inside.

Dismayed, you grab him by the hips and pull him out. He has your lemon Times New Roman reduction sauce splattered on his beard and crispy chapped lips. He tries to dive in to the bin again. You yank him back, and you both collapse onto the kitchen floor, Le dejeuner coating you both.

A slither of cork and a letter of frappe slips into your mouth and a terrible thought occurs to you – about where you went wrong... Meanwhile the homeless man is in a fever, he is shaky and sweaty, red and pale simultaneously. He sees a piece of soft, hairy duck fat on your hand. He leaps at it and bites deep into one of your bulbous arteries. Blood sprays and you think,

'Shallots!'

Editor's Note

Feeding the Homeless was originally published on the web in our March 2011 issue.

The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Photograph: *Night Vendor* © Frank Cademartori

Adverse Reaction by Faith Gardner

It took Hector seven phlegm-filled days, days he missed work at the department store's cologne counter, before he figured out he was allergic to his own child.

"I see," Cherry said, holding their newborn baby who slept, pink and eyelashless, wrapped in a yellow blanket. "You never wanted him so now you're pulling *this*."

He tried to tell her it was real, but she threw a rattle at his foot.

"Prove it," she said. "Find a doctor who agrees."

But Hector couldn't. Even the allergy specialist simply blamed the spring, the spores, the mites and mold. It didn't matter when it started, when it worsened. They referred him to a hypnotist-friend who Hector distrusted and quickly quit. Hector went back to work, red-eyed, pockets stuffed with handkerchiefs, and spritzed himself with multiple colognes he could not afford to buy in full. That was the first month. The second month the rashes started.

"What do you mean you can't hold him? That's not why you have rashes on your hands," Cherry said, whispering, for the baby slept in its crib.

He bought creams and ointments, salves and lotions. Slathered, applied, soaked, rinsed, patted dry. Nothing worked. He resorted to borrowing a pair of leather gloves he could not afford to buy from the Men's Accessories department during work hours to hide the hives and flaking skin. He wore mittens at home. Soon his face broke out as well.

"Coward," Cherry cried as she watched him packing his gym bag with his single suit and tie, his toothbrush, various topical creams and allergy medications. "Don't leave us. You say you have to see but you know you're making excuses. These rashes are just excuses."

He unpacked his gym bag and lay next to Cherry. He ran a hand down Cherry's arm and she sighed and let him. She told him to wait, got up and brought the baby to the bed. The three of them lay together in silence beneath a blanket.

"See?" she said. "Not so bad."

That morning the sun rose and caught light on the spare change and the upside down DVDs on the dresser and cast rainbows on the walls. Hector awoke and clutched his unshaven throat.

"What is it?" asked Cherry. "Is it your airpipe?"

He gasped, croaked, got up, stumbled to the bathroom, splashed water on his face, drank from the faucet, squeezed his neck, but no air, no air, no air until it seemed --yes--he was dying. He could hear Cherry's voice as he slumped crookedly against the shower curtain and fell into the dry tub. Hector, Hector, Cherry said. His ears rang, darkness descended on his vision, and then he felt liquid--cold, icy water--being poured on his head from above. A pinhole seemed to open up in his throat and he gasped again,

and the world grew light, and his wife was standing over him in her nightrobe with swollen eyes, dripping detachable shower head in hand, shaking her curls.

According to the ear, nose and throat doctor Hector was not asthmatic. According to the psychiatrist, Hector had something very serious-sounding: a psychosomatic illness. He explained this to Cherry and she almost threw formula in his face. She looked weathered: bags under eyes, mis-buttoned flannel nightgown.

"That's a crock if I ever heard one," she said, and mock-gasped. "I have an idea: why don't you take a placebo and make it better?"

He wished it was that simple, he told her, but psychosomatic illness was a mysterious disease.

"You are a mysterious disease," she said, and wept into her hands. "Listen to me, I'm like a five year old. I haven't slept for more than four consecutive hours in weeks. What am I supposed to do?"

At first, when he told her his solution, she silently took the liberty of packing his gym bag for him. But he convinced her to wait for the package to arrive in the mail. Two business days later it did, cardboard torn open, Styrofoam peanuts aflutter, and he put on the plastic astronaut suit and held his baby in his arms for the first time in months; bottle-fed him; pressed his glass helmet against his son's blond wisps of hair, ran an airtight glove across his chubby cheeks, and declared no hives or constricted airways resulted. Cherry emptied the gym bag and returned it to the closet. She stood at the sliding glass window, either star-gazing or reflection-gazing, arms across her chest.

"Change is never what you think," she said.

He spoke, and although it was unintelligible due to the helmet, she seemed to understand. She nodded and crossed to him and kissed the foggy glass covering his mouth. "Oh, Hector," was all she said.

Back in their bed, they silently reconciled. Hector's plastic was cold and it chafed her, but no matter. Heaven to be held tight and to sleep through the night.

Editor's Note

Adverse Reaction was originally published on the web in our March 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

A Little Taste of Heaven by Jen Knox

The last time I saw Michael he was incarcerated, only visible behind stained, cloudy Plexiglas; his features had begun to harden after only a month's time. I wore a tight, pink shirt under my cardigan so that I could casually undress, if only a little, to provoke him. I knew that I looked irresistible that day, and this mattered to me more than anything on the outside.

It's been almost a year since the day I last saw Michael. He's thirty now. I'm twenty-two, and I'm staring at a sizable box of orthopedic shoes that I bought on the advice of a co-worker, wondering if I spent too much, when he calls to say he wants to stop by. I don't think twice. Michael is a handsome, thuggish guy; always dressed in a plain t-shirt and jeans. Always in shape, showing off his half-sleeve tattoo, an image of his brother's face with RIP scrolled below it. The image bothered me the first time we made love because Michael rested his arm on the pillow beside my head to hold himself up as he thrust--he knew how to move with me, how not to try too hard like most men--and his brother would be there, on the peak of a bicep, staring at me if I opened my eyes.

I'm not surprised when he's late. He's always late. An hour passes before I even call to see where he is, and when he doesn't answer, I can't lie, my heart hurts a little. I took the day off, even though Sundays mean good money at IHOP, the best shift, in fact. Now that I think about all that money I gave up, trading my shift for a Tuesday afternoon, I think I might just kick his ass. I call again. He doesn't answer.

I give up on Michael and throw away the shoe box and open a bottle of Boones Farm wine, strawberry flavor, which has been collecting dust on my kitchen counter. The wine bites just enough to balance out the syrupy sweetness. I call again. He answers--he's on his way, got caught up in something or somewhere. His voice is nice, smooth and deep, and I sink into my chair, allowing it to encase me like a thick blanket. I ask him how far away he is, and he laughs. There's a knock at my door.

Let it be known, please, that I am not the type of girl to get all wrapped up in some man, but I feel downright weak when I see Michael today. There's no cloudy wall between us. He stands a full six feet, muscular and handsome, wears a plain black t-shirt and dark jeans that are a little too big. His eyebrows are thick and dark, and he's due for a shave, which turns me on. I'm the star of my own seedy little romance novel in this moment, and I want to be ravaged by him. He looks at me with that sly grin and then pulls me in, a tight hug. "I'm finally here, beautiful girl," he whispers.

I think about schlepping greasy eggs and potatoes to unappreciative customers, some of which are still drunk at eight in the morning; I think about how a sixty dollar shift ends with tightness around my temples and sore, swollen feet. I think about how different things could be if only Michael were someone else. He sells crack, and there's no way to make a thing like that sound glamorous. Michael is in the business of selling poison to people who only want a break from life--a little taste of heaven; people who never found it in a man like him. If only he were born somewhere else, to different

parents, maybe he'd be selling for a drug company, selling the legal way and we'd be married, have a big house in Cleveland or Akron. Maybe he'd wear suits and travel on a company card, and sometimes the drugs would be good, do good, and so this would balance the effects of the addictive ones. He doesn't want to sell crack. He's told me this in letters, but it's what he knows, and he can't do what he doesn't know. How can anyone?

Our lips touch and lock, fitting together like puzzle pieces, and there's no going back. There's no going forward either, though, and I know this. I suppose I've known it for some time.

"You look upset," he says, sensing my hesitation. He grabs my shoulders and pulls back, examining my face. I try to smile but can't. I think about my sore feet, which I have stuffed into spiky heels just for him. I think about work, bills, every ordinary thing in my life; everything that keeps my days moving forward. The pink bottle is almost drained, sitting on the floor next to my chair. My orthopedic shoes, which cost me two days of tip money, are lined up beneath my apron which is hanging on the wall tree beside the door. I think about how hard I work every day and begin to cry. I cry like a mad woman, and before I know it, I'm yelling at Michael to get out and never come back. He says I'm a crazy bitch, and I tell him that's all the more reason to get the fuck out of my apartment. I never want to see him again, I yell. He slams the door.

I don't answer his calls until the next day. When he asks me if I'm OK, I tell him, no. "I want my own taste of heaven," I say. He says he's confused, but I don't care. All I can think about are my sore-ass feet, and how they better move me forward.

Editor's Note

A Little Taste of Heaven originally appeared on the web in our January 2011 issue and was voted Story of the Month.

Rainfall and a God Who Looks Like Bowie by

Joshua Young

When I prayed to ask God to stop all the raining, I didn't really think he was listening. I did it because that's what you do when you're desperate. You pray and hope that there's someone up there, or out there, who listens and can help.

Truth is, I like rain. Always have. I like the way it sounds outside the window at night, that constant spatter and the dripping gutters. I love the way it smashes on car windows. I love the mud it leaves to run through, dive into, and so on.

My mom doesn't though. She hates rain. She comes from a place where there's sunshine 300 days a year, where rain comes and goes so fast, that twenty minutes after rain there isn't evidence of it. When she moved to Seattle, she thought that the whole rain stigma was an exaggeration. Boy was she wrong.

She used to sit in front of the window and watch it fall. She'd look back at us and say, "I'm really sick of all this rain business."

I came home one day and found her in the kitchen, crying, wiping her face with our floral oven mitt, snot all over her upper lip like a three year old. I took it off her hand and wiped the snot away.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"This," she said and pointed at out the window.

"The window?"

"The rain. It's too much. Where's the sun? I want to see the Goddamn sun."

That night I asked my dad about it. I asked if we could move. He just laughed and said, "She'll be fine. She just needs to get through this winter."

"But it rains too much," I said.

"It'll pass," he said.

"But she's so sad."

"She's an adult and you need to go to bed."

It was clear he would do nothing about it. He just went into his office and got on the computer, started clicking on the mouse. My mom sat in front of the TV, flipping through channels, till she ended up settling on a sit-com with fake laughing in the background. From my room, I could hear the TV, but my mom didn't laugh. Not once. So, that night I prayed.

I dreamt that night that I floated up to Heaven, up through the gray and rain, and onto a cloud with a golden gate and a silver podium with a big leather-ish book. I waited at

the gate for someone to show up. I didn't know what to expect, but I guess, I was waiting for God. After a while, the gates slid open and a figure started approaching. It was God. Only he looked a lot like David Bowie in the *Labyrinth*, with that bulge in his pants and weird haircut. Instead of tights he wore a mossy green dress. When I saw him, I heard an acoustic guitar playing and an electric guitar wailing in the distance.

He stopped in front of the podium, opened the book and said, "You're years and years and years early."

"I'm in a dream."

"Oh, that explains it," he said. "You shouldn't be dead yet. What can I do for you?"

"I need you to stop all the rain in Seattle."

"I can't do that. It's Seattle."

"Please."

God thought about it for a long time. The music still played, but it became quiet and smooth. He had his eyes closed for a long time. Then he opened them and said, "I could make it rain something other than water. Blood?"

"Not blood, that's gross."

"Frogs?"

"Haven't you done that before?"

"We should do something new. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Ash?"

"No, that'd be like snow or when Mt St. Helens eruption in 1980."

"Ah, yes. Good point. What about some type of food?"

"There's a book...and now a movie."

"Oh yeah? I don't think I've heard of it. Shouldn't be gross or harmful, and it can't be a repeat...what about feathers?"

I smiled. A guitar crooned.



In the morning, I found my mother by the window. I thought, it was just a dream, but when she turned around, she was smiling.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful."

"So," I said, "you changed your tune about rain, huh?"

"It's raining feathers! It's beautiful."

I ran to the window and looked.

Feathers as thick as a day's worth of snow covered everything. People were out in their yards staring up at the sky, scratching their heads, doing what people do when weird things happen. Some people were sweeping clean their driveways, and others were raking piles and filling garbage bags.

At school everyone talked about it. It was a miracle. It was unexplained. The news couldn't figure it out. No one could. There was no reason. Up in airplanes and helicopters, people just saw feathers falling from clouds. No contraptions. Nothing. Just clouds dumping feathers.

It was as though God had emptied his pillows of their contents. I imagined it at night, while I slept. He wore leather and danced on a big golden bed, shaking a pillow as it burst, everything in slow-motion that crooning guitar getting louder and louder. By the time the first rain stopped, the local home improvement stores had sold out of vacuums and brooms, people were obsessively trying to contain the building layers of feathers. My mom had stopped all her crying, but no one could get to work in the mess. And the city had to borrow snow-ploughs, but that barely helped; the feathers were kept drifting up in the breeze, and when the winds came, they made blizzards.

A good two months into this, after all news reports had died down, and the feathers had stopped--a dry spell--God brought me back up to heaven. I didn't have to wait for him. He was up on that podium waiting for me, his legs dangling from the side. An acoustic guitar played.

He shook his head and said, "Well kid, we got ourselves a problem. Everyone in Seattle, Christian and Atheist, has started praying. I like that. I like the attention. I like people talking to me. I like it because I don't have to talk back, I just listen. But it looks like you're the only one who has prayed for these feathers and everyone else wants the rain back, the real rain with water. I should answer their prayers. It's been too long without any results."

"But my mom's happy this way."

"Yeah, but everyone else is sad, some are angry."

"But my mom?"

He sprung off the podium and bent down to look me right in the eye, putting his hands on my shoulders. "I'm leaving it up to you."

When I woke in the morning it had started raining again, but it wasn't raining water. It was still raining feathers. Outside, my mom had her arms spread as she walked through it. I think she was singing, but I couldn't make it out. If I had to guess it was a Bowie song.

Editor's Note

Rainfall and a God Who Looks Like Bowie was originally published on the web in our February 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Photograph: *Sunset Lantern* © Frank Cademartori



Photograph: *Greenery* © Frank Cademartori

Into the Woods by Stephen V Ramey

Billy stood in the scrubland, shivering from the cold. He carried a backpack loaded with his favorite things, Teddy the Wonderbear, a book: *Oh the Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss--Billy wished Tiger hadn't shredded the cover, but he still liked the story fine--a peanut butter and tomato sandwich with the crust cut off. Ahead, twin tire tracks marked the ground, leading into a dense tangle of low trees. Beyond, the setting sun packed the horizon with shades of orange.

Daddy had driven his Jeep into the woods two days earlier. He hadn't come back. Since Mom refused to talk about it, Billy had decided to find out for himself where the road led and why Daddy had gotten lost. It certainly did look like the sort of forest a person would get lost in. Billy found himself wishing he'd saved pieces of crust to drop. That hadn't worked too well for Hansel, but was better than nothing.

A crow cawed; others answered until raucous laughter poured like darkness over the ground between Billy and the trees. Billy's gaze went to a tree taller than the others, its branch loaded with birds. The backpack dragged at his shoulder. He set it down and knelt to pray.

"Thank you for the food we eat. Thank you for the world so sweet. Thank you for the birds that sing. Thank you God for everything. Amen." He crossed himself quickly and started to stand, but thought better. "Please let me find Daddy," he whispered. Tears stung his eyes. "And don't let those birds get me."

Billy started walking. It seemed to take forever to cross the sandy soil. A crow launched and fell toward him. "Caw! Caw!" were the sounds in Billy's ear, "Go away!" the words he heard.

"I'm going to find my Dad!" Billy shouted. The bird flapped past his head and flew back to the tree. A shiver shook Billy, so strong it nearly dislodged the backpack. He clung tightly to the strap.

He couldn't see more than a few steps into the dark woods. He thought of the Mickey Mouse nightlight plugged by his bed. There was another in the hall in case he had to go to the bathroom. Daddy had told him he was big enough to do that on his own.

He didn't feel big enough now. He wanted to run back to the house and jump into Mom's fleshy arms. He wanted to hear her voice murmur in his ear. He couldn't do that. He had to rescue his dad. Daddy would never leave them alone. Something had happened.

He sniffed. The forest smelled of vegetation, a hint of pine sap. No trace of Daddy's Old Spice, or the Jeep's acrid exhaust. Biting his lip, Billy stepped into darkness. Cold air settled over him, dense like a blanket, only cold. He stepped again. The forest was too dark to see beyond the narrow path. As long as he stayed between the tire ruts he should be all right, but what if crows were not the only thing inhabiting the woods?

Fingers trembling, he unzipped the backpack and took out his sandwich. It was a sloppy mess, the bread soggy. He tore at one uneven edge. No. Scattering bread wouldn't work; the crows would eat it.

What about tomato? Some of the chill left him. He tore apart a tomato slice and dropped a piece at his feet. His fingers slimed with peanut butter. He licked them clean, relishing the sweet smell of Mom's pantry. The feeling that went through him was like opening his eyes to the nightlight after a bad dream. Emboldened, he took another step, dropped another tomato bit.

Sometime later, he held the final sliver of tomato in his palm. "Well, I can't give up now," he said. Hearing his own voice scared him a little. He fought down his fear. "I'm going to find my dad no matter what."

"Who?" an owl hooted. Eyes glistened.

"My dad," Billy said, puffing his chest. He dropped the tomato and continued.

It seemed like hours that he walked and, still, the woods went on. The sky dimmed, then darkened. He could barely see his feet now. At least the moon was almost full. It watched over him through the canopy of twisting branches.

The cold seeped into him, beginning at his toes and fingers. He stomped and flexed, but it did little good. Soon, the chill had seeped into his mind too, and even his heart shivered with every beat. In a way, it was good, though, because when something rustled beside the path, he was able to ignore it and keep walking. The only warmth inside him now came from the flame of his purpose. He *would* find Daddy, no matter what.

He barely noticed the sky brighten. All of a sudden when he looked up, the moon was gone and blue sky filled the voids between branches. He had walked all night. He should



eat breakfast. He opened the backpack and found the sandwich gone. Apparently he'd eaten it as he walked.

Weird. It felt sort of like he had lost something overnight. Something important. But maybe he had gained something too. He was no longer afraid of the woods, no longer afraid of the dark. A grin overtook him. Dad would say that was part of becoming a big boy. He could hardly wait to hear it from Dad's lips. His pace increased.

It was midmorning when he reached the forest's end. Adrenalin surged into his blood. The numbing cold released his body. He ripped the backpack from his shoulder and whipped it into the underbrush. He no longer needed it, was glad to be free of its clinging weight. He had done it! He stepped into sunshine, the warmth of it soaking into his skin.

The road continued as far as he could see. No jeep, no Dad, no sign of habitation. Another woods smudged the distance, another woods just like the one he had crossed.

It was too much. Fatigue flooded over him, knocking him to his knees.

"Daddy!" he screamed. "Daddy, where are you?" Tears boiled onto his cheeks. Snot ran from his nose. Sobbing, he brought his palms to his face and leaned into them.

Fingers gripped his shoulder. He shrieked.

The hand pulled him around until he looked up into Mom's sad brown eyes. In her other hand she held his backpack. It carried a few dead leaves, but was otherwise intact.

Billy took it. It felt heavier than he remembered.

"Daddy's gone," he said.

"I know, sweetie, I know." She drew him to his feet, pulled him to her waist. In the distance, a crow screamed, then another.

Without a word, Mom led him back along the tire track path, Billy clinging to her skirt. She smelled of apples and cinnamon, of buns rising behind the oven door glass. But there was something more complicated too, some hidden scent Billy could not grasp.

Editor's Note

Into the Woods was originally published on the web in our January 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Photograph © Susan Urbanek Linville

The Magician by Andrew Stancek

It is time, Jozi," his father said, giving a last tug to his bowtie, mussing up Jozi's hair, laughing. "We have to get our tickets by three or they will sell them. Sold out show."

His father never hurried. Leaving the father's place at the end of the weekend together, the boy would see the bus around the far curve, urge a little trot to get to the stop in time, and his father would chuckle and say, "We'll just make it, you'll see," and they always did.

The magician had been the only subject of conversation in Jozi's class for weeks. The tickets were snapped up ages ago and his classmates were all envious of his good fortune, of his father's influence at the Slovak Ministry of Culture enabling him to get two prized seats.



The magician pulled a live bird with blue tail feathers out of a boy's nose. A squawking, flying bird. And the sawing in half! The picture on the posters around town showed the blonde beauty sawed right through, head and body in one box, legs in another.

"Maybe if you go," his friend Jano said, "he will saw you apart. Imagine if he puts you back together the wrong way, and you will have legs growing out of the top of your head!"

His mother rolled her eyes when he told her they were going this Saturday. "Just the sort of nonsense your father is good at. You tell him that I still have not received this month's cash. You need a new jacket for the winter." Jozi looked at her. She was now only interested in coats and cash, not in magic any more. Her eyes narrowed and little specks of spittle flew as she talked. "Your father! Magicians!" Years ago, he remembered, they were at the circus together. The three of them slurped the same foamy drink with straws and she brushed a piece of cotton candy off his father's face. Her piercing laughter made the old couple in front of them measure her up and down. He had not heard that laugh in a long time now.

Today, in front of the Zahradne Divadlo, throngs of kids and parents milled about. The air was filled with the aroma of roast chestnuts, sausages, sauerkraut. Jozi and his father walked hand in hand through the main entrance. The red lettered sign, taped crookedly to the glass of the box office, said SOLD OUT. His father walked up to it, knocked. The pretty cashier looked up, gave his father a dazzling smile of recognition. "Ah, I was just thinking of you and poof, here you are. Your boy is only ten and so big? You take after your old man, don't you?" The boy nodded, pleased. "Well, here are the tickets. Enjoy the show."

The throng was pushing. Jozi wondered if they would get to their seats in time yet his father parted the crowd; he knew everyone. Every other man slapped his back, shook his hand; the women wiggled their fingers, and his father kissed their cheeks. Everyone compared the boy to his father, "Oh, he will be a heart-breaker, won't he?"

Finally they were at their seats, second row centre. The magician wore a black tux, silver shiny shirt, bowtie, blood red cummerbund, top hat, cape. His eyes pierced holes, his expression grim. One after another, he performed his numbers, without the slightest acknowledgment of the cheers. A flock of doves circled the theatre after he pulled them out of his empty top hat. A volunteer from the front row gave him a hundred crown note; the magician cut it into shreds. His leggy black-stockinged assistant put the shreds into the magician's hand. A squeeze and the bill was intact again. The magician turned a ping-pong ball into a shiny box and pulled out of it a wriggling white mouse. He opened his mouth, filled with enormous white teeth and swallowed the mouse whole. His assistant tapped his stomach three times with a long wand and he pulled the mouse, now wearing a red ribbon, out of his left ear. Ooohs and aaaahs; the clapping was continuous. Jozi looked at his father, the familiar face in profile blurring with the magician's. His father grinned, teeth flashed.

"For the next number," the assistant proclaimed, "we need a brave young man, not afraid of danger, no more than ten years old." Along with every other boy in the theatre, Jozi wildly waved his hand. To groans of disappointment she pointed to him. His father slapped his back; Jozi ran up to the stage. "The following number requires the mental energy of all. Audience cooperation is required. We need absolute quiet." People still applauding quieted down; nervous coughs, throats cleared, then silence. Jozi, eyes bulging, nose runny, hands sweaty, stared at the magician, the statuesque assistant, down at his father. Perhaps, he thought, he was too quick to volunteer. His father gave him a wink and wave. The spotlight was scalding.

The assistant wheeled in a long black coffin and helped him climb on top. She told him to lie flat, side to the hushed audience. Through his thin shirt and pants he felt the chill of the cold dark wood. "Now," she announced, "we are calling upon powers beyond human imagining. The powers of the Great Anastase will overcome natural laws. If your concentration fails, the young man may burst into flame and die." Jozi could feel little flames licking his knees already. His toes, wriggling in his sneakers, were electric. He glanced sideways at his father, saw laughter. The magician paced around the coffin,

tapping it, muttering incomprehensible words. His icy eyes were strangely familiar to Jozi. The energy exuding out of Anastase was surrounding him; he was growing weary, eyes closing. Silence. Jozi heard the loud thump of his own heart. And then beneath him, where the cool wood of the coffin had been chilling his back, there was nothing. He was lifted, held by nothing. Anastase, gaze fixed upon him, kept up his imprecations, hands rigid above him as the boy lifted higher and higher. The assistant waved the wand in the growing space between the coffin and the elevating boy. The crowd began to cheer, others hushed them. Up and up he rose, a foot, two, three above the coffin, then stopped. After an eternity the magician's eyes began lowering him till Jozi once again felt the icy coffin surface below him. Anastase acknowledged the audience for the first time, giving a rigid half bow. Pandemonium erupted. Jozi continued to lie on the coffin in a daze. It had happened. Magic was real. He now knew the impossible to be possible. He felt it himself; his body had floated through the air. And if this, then anything. He looked at his father, his shiny ecstatic face. He wished.

Editor's Note

The Magician originally appeared on the web in our February 2011 issue and was voted Story of the Month.

Photograph provided by Andrew Stancek

A Kind of Bravery by Josh Orkin

Gran stood over the stove, tending to a boiling pot. She was a stout old woman, wearing a cooking apron and a warm, wrinkled face. The kitchen was quiet and the steam from the broth drifted up and around her like mist. She was singing under her breath as she stirred, "Que sera, sera..." The door to the living room swung open and a boy walked in.

"Hey Gran, where's PopPop?"

Gran gestured towards the basement. "He's down there messing around, tell him dinner's almost ready."

"Sure." The boy walked down the flight of wooden stairs to the unfinished basement. At the bottom step he stopped and stood quietly.

PopPop sat at a little desk with his eyes closed. The boy gazed in silence at his long white beard and mess of white hair. The old man's face was pretty well obscured by all the hair and the boy came closer, peering at it, wondering if the old man was sleeping. He leaned in and squinted.

The eyes snapped open, fixed on the boy. The boy froze, unconsciously holding his breath. They were a shocking color, blue as blue sky amidst the clouds of white. They flashed, then sparkled, then eased. The boy took a breath. "Gran says dinner's almost ready."

"Excellent, boy, excellent. Where's your brother?"

The boy frowned. "He's in his room, told me to fuck off."

"Did he now? What's eating him?"

"He won't say, but I heard Amy slept with someone. Now she wants him back."

The old man stretched his bony arms and yawned. "You know how many girls I've had, boy?" The boy shifted his weight from foot to foot before answering.

"I don't know."

"Guess."

"A hundred?"

PopPop stroked his beard. "That's a pretty good guess. What do you think about that?"

"I think Gran must not like it."

"Well, that's the thing. Sit boy, let me tell you a story." He slid an empty milk crate across the floor with his foot. The boy sat and clasped his hands in his lap. He liked stories.

"A long time ago there lived a soldier. He was skilled with a sword, but he was more than that; he was an educated man, a philosopher and a poet. After the fighting was over he would wander off somewhere to sit by himself and compose verses."

"What are verses?"

"Poems, boy, poems. Don't they teach you anything? Anyway, one day he stood at attention on the front line of a grand army. Their banners flew crisp in the wind and the war drums beat a steady cadence at their backs.

"What's--"

"Rhythm, child, it means rhythm. So their general went riding down the line on a big horse, and as he rode past their voices rose as one and they beat upon their shields. Across the field there stood another massive army, clothed in black and monstrous to behold. The horns sounded and these brave men flooded onwards towards their destiny."

Here the old man paused and opened a drawer in the desk. He pulled out a little whiskey bottle and took a nip. Then he wiped his mouth, winked at the boy, and continued.

"But our soldier turned and fled. He ran away. The next day the remnants of the army returned to camp and he was in his tent, writing a poem.

"Why did he run away? Didn't you say he was a good fighter? Wasn't he brave?"

"Of course. That's what the poem was about."

"Wasn't he embarrassed?"

"No, he wasn't embarrassed."

The boy sat thoughtfully. "Well, that doesn't sound too brave to me."

"No, it wouldn't. But your brother won't listen to my stories." He took another nip off the whiskey bottle, screwed on the cap and put it back in the drawer. "Now get on upstairs, I think I hear Gran calling." The boy stood and began to walk away. "Oh, and one more thing." The child paused. "Be nice to your brother. He's going to need it."

"Okay PopPop." He scurried up the stairs and was gone. The old man pulled out the whiskey and drank off the end of the bottle. He ran a hand through his white hair and down his white beard. Then he just sat there. He sat there until Gran came to get him.

Editor's Note

A Kind of Bravery originally appeared on the web in our April 2011 issue and was voted Story of the Month.

Days of Generally Typical Vacuity by Dave Early

The landscape is perfectly sculpted; a rich green tapestry caressing the even earth, protected by an unnaturally polished balustrade, the wrought iron blistered with authenticity. Japonica runs the length of the border, a proud display, assembled together in homely greeting for the untrained eye. The corners are marked by stooping birches, turrets of duty but softened by their sweeping boughs. And at the centre, crowned by a smattering of orange-tinged leaves towers a solid silver maple, profound in its majesty, yet not too intimidating, lest the scene be misinterpreted in its quixotic guise.

A lonely wooden bench, pale and loving, positioned at the far corner of the park catches the eye, distracting the viewer for a moment; tall unshaven grasses lick at the legs. He tramps into view. He passes the bench, ignores the majestic maple and the proud japonica flagged by the stooping birches, and crosses professionally to his mark. She has been waiting for him, though she is prudent enough to keep this concealed. But any casual observer could detect her longing.

He approaches. His eyes on hers. She bows her head, extends a long athletic leg and admires herself, as he quickens his step. Slowly he circles her, running his gaze along her rounded shoulders, her long slender neck, her smooth arcing back; inhaling her scent, her desire. She turns on the spot, crossing her legs one over the other, apprehensive of his intention, throwing her head wantonly over her left shoulder then her right, as he completes his circuit. The tension builds, the score lifts and then at the height of crescendo they are together, fused with passion; raw, frantic, natural...

Thomas paws at the remote. It has been a long day. Same old, same old. Same old journeys, same old meals, same old use of the few daylight hours granted him. He takes a drink, yawns and settles back on the settee. This is his relaxation time, the hours by which he is free to do as he pleases, no longer tethered to the desk, no longer forced to obey instruction, to jump through hoops. This is his time; his life.

The other channel explodes into a cacophony of whooping and howling. Surmounting two kitchen surfaces are two large bowls. One, the apparent victor, contains a limited portion of brown mush swimming in an amber coloured sauce. The camera shows no interest in the other bowl, though Thomas suspects its contents are of a similar standing. He stares blindly as the camera pans into the depths of the winning bowl. He licks his lips then strikes the remote again.

More applause. The camera pushes the runners round an oval track, flying up the posteriors of the leading pack. Thomas sits bolt upright. His eyes revolve, chasing the runners; it's touch and go, the front runner is in danger of being caught, the volume of the crowd rises and Thomas, in turn, twitches his leg. He reaches his neck toward the set, straining, tapping his feet against the arm rest, as the pack rounds the last bend.

They are on the final stretch. The dissonant crowd is drowned out by Thomas' own howling, willing the second runner to overtake; Thomas is making a racket, lost in earnest devotion for this second runner he has never seen before. He has to win. He has to win. He has to beat the leader. And he does! The pursuing runner pips the leader at the post. And Thomas' celebratory howls leave him exhausted; in fact he barely has enough energy to bark a string of insults at the losers. Satiated, Thomas slumps back down on the settee, nudging the cushion into place. He stretches, takes another drink and resumes his lethargic pose.

Flick

The park has been invaded by a third party. A rival. The lovers are caught.

Flick.

A marketplace fills the screen. The camera lens hones in on the selection of foods on display before the presenter's interest wanes and she moseys off to the next stall to nose through another collection of foodstuffs identical to the last. The pace of the program relaxes Thomas's breathing. The presenter moves on to another stall. Same again. Thomas licks his lips. Another stall. His eyelids droop. A few foods are pawed at but never removed, never eaten, and the presenter's tread begins to slow, and... Thomas rattles his head awake again, has something to drink, and...

Flick

Thomas is invited to inspect the inside of a room. It is very clean. The cabinets possess a virginal sheen, the carpet is young and buoyant; the bed, framed and untouched. A great deal of satisfaction, if not fun, lies ahead. But there will be time for that.

Flick

Food is being eaten by a plump old thing. He shakes his head to intonate an element of disapproval, but he continues to feed. Thomas licks his lips. More critical remarks from the plump presenter, before he shoves the bowl impertinently aside and ignores the rest of the food.

Flick

An atmospheric wind whistles through the park, throwing leaves up into the swirling air, adding to the whirlwind of violence as the two rivals tear chunks out of each other while the prize looks on. Thomas gazes listlessly at the fight. He scratches his side.

Flick

White walls, white drapes, and on a white table a sickly bunny rabbit lies, its breathing shallow. Thomas licks his lips.

Flick

Another whirlwind of action. The elaborate whining pricks Thomas' ears. He takes another drink, licks his lips and peers clandestinely at the explicit posturing and frenetic rutting. An exciting channel. The wrong channel. Quickly he hammers at the remote.

Bright lights, grandeur, outlandish posing and with rapturous acclaim a well-groomed specimen takes to the stage. Thomas' eyes fix on to the spectacle. Even the god-forsaken howling that shifts between audience and stage is not enough for him to haul himself away. Thomas sits up. He watches. He waits. And when the din has died down, he barks his own approval at the reproachful verdict of the judges.

Flick

The rivals are still embroiled in a deadly bout. The adulterous lover, preening herself on the sidelines, falls to the floor. A glorious shot of the open canopy.

Flick

The room has been changed. The walls have been sprayed, the carpet ripped up, the bed posts scuffed and the cabinets have lost their innocence. Much better. That lived-in look. There is even an abstract water feature in the corner.

Flick

A couple of Boxers are circling each other in the ring. Thomas flexes his limbs. One of the Boxers lunges forward. The other meets the challenge and the violence escalates within seconds. Thomas snarls. He kicks out a leg. His breathing quickens. The second Boxer is down, no, he is up again. And he is gunning for revenge. Blood spatters the filthy canvas. Teeth are bared. The gloves are off. Thomas is barking instructions at the fighters. The first Boxer wheels away. Thomas barks louder. The second Boxer is in pursuit; the job not finished. He's down! He stays down. The second Boxer has won. Thomas howls in delight, and licks the sweat from his upper lip.

Flick

A sneaked peek at the naughty channel. That bitch is still getting pounded as she claws the air theatrically, brandishing her pedicure. Thomas persists with the removal of sweat from his upper lip. She whines and howls and there is even a little biting going on. Thomas shifts his weight on the settee, poking his nose around the back to confirm his privacy.

Flick

More food. This time there is no pretence of preparation or critique. Just a vast array of edibles on display. Up for sale. Thomas dips into his drink again.

Flick

Thomas pants. That bitch is still taking it.

Flick

Another candidate for ridicule takes to the stage and the awful howling commences. Thomas joins in. The audience join in. Thomas approves. He hopes this one wins.

Click

Thomas scrambles around on the settee, in a non-specific panic. A door slams, sending the walls in the front room a-judder. Familiar sounds alert his ears; familiar smells ignite his olfactory sense. He flips the cushions to the floor, searching desperately

for the remote, which had seemingly disappeared the moment he heard the key in the lock. The door creaks open.

Flick

The lovers embrace, encased in a white orb which in turn with the music shrinks to the size of an atom. And the screen goes black.

Editor's Note

DOGTV was originally published on the web in our May 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.



Photograph: *Silver Light* © Frank Cademartori

From the top of the dirt pile he watched the search party disbanding. His older brother would have known where to look. To his right, recently constructed foundation framed a dead mouse. He licked olive oil off the inside of his wrist. The last of the rescuers vanished from sight. Too bad his older brother was gone. He turned his attention to the one remaining slice of pizza. It was too wide, funny wide. He pictured the perfect equilateral triangle if the crust side were stretched flat. He regretted not having packed more than one doughnut. He was too hungry to preserve the wide slice, so he found a stick and very carefully made three dark marks on the greased stained waxed paper, one at the point and the other two at the imagined stretched out corners. He planned to stay out another night but changed his mind and ran toward his house with the waxed paper carefully folded in his back pocket. He ran near the oak tree where the old skinny homeless man used to sit propped up, his crooked back leaning against the tree's knobby trunk. His brother said the man was once the school janitor but that he drank too much and then one day he was gone. There was always a golf ball sitting on a tee near the old man's left ankle when he sat under the tree. Everyone joked it was his "The Doctor Is In" sign. He'd take the ball with him when he rode his bicycle. Plastic bags, torn and knotted, filled with dirty clothes and newspapers hung from both sides of his bicycle, which leaned against the backside of the tree when the homeless man rested. A pinwheel was stuck in the rear wheel's spokes and an American flag in the front. All that remained of the old man now was a flattened area of brown grass at the base of the tall oak. From a distance, it appeared to be a shadow. Up close, it was as if police tape had been applied to the ground, forming a body. The boy had seen that many times on television. The old man would sit at the foot of the oak tree and count. Everything. Cars, passersby, ants, leaves, bicyclists, it didn't matter. The boy paused and remembered the old man and pretended that he was still there, golf ball at his ankle, sitting and counting. The boy smiled, thinking that he was the fastest runner the old man would have counted that day. He started up again. Nearing his house, he had forgotten why he was running. Ignoring the police, cameras, trucks, neighbors, friends, and family he hadn't seen in years, he barely noticed his mother or his father. His father was holding hands with a woman with lipstick. He'd seen her somewhere, maybe in school, maybe the math department. Radios cracked. In his bedroom he shouted, "I need a ruler!"

Editor's Note

Mathematical Expressions was originally published on the web in our June 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

The Noise in the Cocoon by Elaine Medline

Andrea had hoped for a flurry of glittering monarchs, turning the trees orange. She bought the house with cocoons attached. There were hundreds of them, cleverly spun in places of shelter-- underneath the front porch awning, below outdoor lamps, in the crook of a shovel. Her real estate agent had told her the butterflies would emerge about the time she would move in, and they'd be monarchs.

The wood siding on the house was moss green, so the butterflies would match nicely. What a great omen, Andrea told her husband Trevor. She could imagine the dusty insects crawling out to their freedom; she could already hear the wings beating; she could almost smell them carrying the perfume of the wildflowers in the meadow below. Andrea hadn't seen a monarch butterfly since she was a child, when one had landed on her nose and she had gone cross-eyed trying to take it all in. "We'll take photos of them landing on the baby's nose," she declared.

Trevor was less enthusiastic. His wife came home from doing groceries one day and spotted him on a stepladder, with a broom, sweeping down some of the cocoons.

"What the hell are you doing?" Andrea screamed, dropping the cloth bags and holding her belly.

"Sorry, hon," he replied sheepishly, climbing down the ladder to help her with the groceries. "These things creep me out. Sort of like caterpillars in a coma."

"No, they're beautiful. And they're not caterpillars anymore. They're between."

Trevor didn't admit it to Andrea, but all those stretched-out fibers covering parts of his house made him feel slightly nauseated. He could almost hear a grating sound from within--the noise of an impossible metamorphosis, of cells swapping positions, colors



developing, cramped wings growing. Trevor was nervous these days. Sure, the new house was bigger and his job was fine, but the baby. What did they know about the baby?

"Did the results come in yet?" he asked Andrea. She was busy collecting the swept-down cocoons and placing them in a flower pot for safe-keeping. She wondered if she could bring them into their own house, but would it be too warm for them? Would they somehow miss the cue to commit to the next stage of their lives? She wished she knew more about biology. She couldn't even name most of the trees in the woods.

"Not yet. Try not to worry, Trev," she advised. "We're in a holding pattern."

The couple had spent several years undergoing a number of in-vitro fertilization trials, and the fourth attempt was successful. Needles in the belly, vast amounts of savings spent, and repeated disappointments--all that was thankfully over. They knew they had been fortunate. But Andrea and Trevor were older than most mothers and fathers, and they had opted for a quad screen to detect any chromosomal abnormalities of the fetus.

Giving birth shouldn't be so full of decisions, Andrea thought. Babies should appear spontaneously. Yes, with pain, but with little mental effort. She envied those poor teenage girls who got pregnant so easily. "What were you thinking?" their parents would say, but they weren't thinking, nor were they supposed to. Theirs was a natural error.

Another day when she returned from work, Andrea noticed a hole in one of the cocoons near the front door. It was big enough for a butterfly to fit through. She scanned the other cocoons, which were still intact. Gazing around the yard, she noted no movement, just a couple of chickadees and crows. From now on, she'd need to be vigilant or she'd miss the entire show.

But Trevor was ahead of her in terms of an early warning system. In bed that night, he said, "I predict your winged pets will come out tomorrow."

"You do, do you? How do you know that, Trev?"

He didn't say he could hear the insects, getting busy, limbering up, digging their inevitable tunnels to adulthood, mating, and death.

In the morning, the phone rang. Andrea took the call on a cordless phone and padded over to the front window, breathing, listening. It was the nurse from the clinic calling with the results of the blood test. Andrea searched for a pen so she could accurately share the news with Trevor. She couldn't find one, and it didn't matter, because by then she had completely tuned out.

She plumped herself down on the edge of the windowsill, mindlessly staring outside. The wind was blowing all the nameless leaves inside out. She noticed the air was full of flying things, and she sighed heavily in disappointment. These weren't the wings of monarch butterflies, but the wings of moths, grey, dirty and bland. Moths fluttered rather than soared. They were nothing special. She hadn't bought a house for moths! Moths get in the pantry and eat your flour. They sneak into your drawers and devour

your sweaters. The agent had lied. She could sue that agent. The agent had promised monarch butterflies.

"Are you alright?" the nurse asked.

Andrea gently placed the telephone down, and slowly walked out the front door into a swirl of moths. Her head felt dizzy. As she fell, Trevor caught her in his arms.

"Look, Andie!" he cried. "You were right. They're beautiful."

But they weren't beautiful; Trevor was so weird. A moth landed on her nose. She felt its little legs, and she crossed her eyes to observe it better. There were moss green eye-spots on its dusty wings.

"I got the results," she whispered.

Editor's Note

The Noise in the Cocoon was originally published on the web in our January 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Photograph: *Moth Caterpillar Question Mark* © Elaine Medline

Boys and Mice by Deirdre Erin Lockhart

As a mother of boys I am constantly learning. Take the issue of mice for example. To me a mouse is something for which you set a trap, plug your nose, and toss behind the barn. To Jake and Caleb--five and seven--a mouse is something that you *buy* and cuddle. Imagine spending three dollars to *import* a mouse into your home!

But they begged. And it was going to stay in their room. Under glass. And I couldn't say "no" to Jake when Caleb thrust him before me, pointed to his cherub face--artfully streaked with tears--and said, "But Mommy, Jake *loves* it."

Caleb's a bully.

So they got their mouse: Squeaky, a skinny thing with a long, twitching, hairless, pink tail. The tail bothered me the most. Right now it stuck out from Jake's hands and slapped his chubby fingers as they said their prayers. I looked away.

After all it made them happy. And it stayed in their room.

"Why don't you like Squeaky?" Jake asked me as I tucked him into his bed and ordered the mouse into its cage.

"I don't like mice, baby." I kissed his forehead.

"But *why*, Mommy? You never even look at him. He's so sweet."

"Perhaps." I reached for the light switch, and Jake popped out of bed again.

"Please look at him, Mommy." He shoved that creature into my face. The tail wrapped around his thumbs, the nose twitched, and six curious eyes wondered over my disgust.

"What's wrong with him, Mommy?"

"Nothing, baby. He's just a mouse. Go to bed."

"But he's *sweet*. You liked our gerbil."

The pink snaked around his forefinger and dangled, stiff, midair. "Francis didn't have that tail."

Jake's nose scrunched. He released the mouse to Caleb's insistent fingers, and as I closed the door, I heard Caleb hiss something about not pushing it. After all, I allowed them to keep the thing.

That was last night. It was morning now. A *long* Saturday morning. But the cartoons have not been on, nor I have glimpsed my boys. "Breakfast." I called. There were whispers and shuffles. They knew not to wake their Daddy. Caleb entered, beaming. Then Jake. Jake had something behind his back.

"Did you wash your hands?" I asked.

Nods.

"Mommy, do you like Squeaky now?" Jake thrust the mouse forward. It was quivering. He set it on the table. The tail was gone.

My heart stopped. "What did you do?"

"We cut it off, Mommy." Caleb bragged.

Something pink escaped his fist.

"Now do you love him, too?" Jake asked.

Theirs were the faces of angels. There was blood on Jake's place-mat, and Squeaky was motionless, not even attempting an escape into my kitchen.

My heart broke. "Oh, baby, yes I love him."

I reached for the cornstarch to stanch that blood and eyed my boys, both so proud of themselves, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Caleb toss that amputated tail into the trash.

Needless to say, Squeaky earned a place at my table. Even a tidbit now and then.

Editor's Note

Boys and Mice was originally published on the web in our June 2011 issue. The story appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Our Home, the Hive by Peter Kispert

That night, the bees came in walls. They had come before, but never with such unrepentant fervor and noise. Their thousands of bodies radiated an irritable frequency. Our mother could not sleep. Our roof had been saturated by them in the night. A neighbor called the police. She pointed to our home--it's crenellated tin roof--and all of us were outside then. It was not like flames. It was like millions of necklaces. Beads, really. And choking.

Our father was a palmist by craft, but even he said he didn't see it coming. He spent his evenings spinning cards in our attic, reading the palms of those pulled to his work, rubbing out the creases in his own hands as if something were always buried in them. When the bees came, he refused to leave. It took their full rage to drive him from his table, his place in our attic. One night we found him rolling himself into the lawn, unwrapping the bees folded around him in tight, needled blankets. He had tried to harvest their sap. They later filled his space with their honey. Some holes, we assumed, were meant to be filled.

After the initial infestation came the silence. And even that chattered between floorboards, under the basement stairs, into our tea. Our father could not hold hands after that. He said he couldn't even look at them.

Southern Florida had in its possession twenty thousand normal homes and our home, devoured as if built to be swallowed, taken apart in a nervous decomposition and reassembled as one enormous honeycomb, a testament to the monstrous sweetness in us all.

Editor's Note

Our Home, the Hive originally appeared on the web in our June 2011 issue and was voted Story of the Month.

Photograph: *Dragonfly* © Frank Cademartori



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Contributors

Authors

Mark DeMOSS writes from the tranquility of the Dallas exurbs, and helps manage the flash challenge site ShowMeYourLits.com. His stories have appeared in SmokeLong Quarterly and other publications.

CS DeWildt lives in Tucson Arizona. His stories have appeared in Word Riot, Mobius Magazine, The Bicycle Review, Foundling Review, and Writer's Bloc. His Novella "Candy and Cigarettes" will be published by Vagabondage Press in July 2011.

Dave Early is seldom smarter than the average bear.

Tim Frank is an up and coming writer of original, experimental short fiction and film. He has written and produced a number of short films that have been shown in international festivals, such as the Edinburgh Fringe film festival. He also has a column for satire magazine Home Defence UK.

Faith Gardner lives in Oakland and has stories in or forthcoming in Word Riot, McSweeney's Internet Tendency and PANK. She also plays and sings in the band Hooray for Everything and solo as Scarlett O'Hara. Evidence of these things can be found at faithgardner.com.

Bruce Harris is the author of **Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson: ABout Type**, published by The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box (www.batteredbox.com). He enjoys relaxing with a Marxman.

Peter Kispert is a student currently living in New Hampshire. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Catalonian Review*, *Mud Luscious Press*, *LITnIMAGE*, *Fractured West*, *Word Riot*, and others. He is the Editorial Assistant with *The Medulla Review*.

Jen Knox teaches creative writing at San Antonio College. She is the author of *To Begin Again* (2011 Next Generation Indie Book Award Winner, Short Fiction); her essays and stories have been published or are forthcoming in *Annalemma*, *Gargoyle #58*, *Narrative*, *Short Story America*, *Superstition Review* and elsewhere. She posts updates about her writing here: <http://www.jenknox.com>

Deirdre Erin Lockhart is a Canadian author with short stories regularly appearing in *Joyful! Magazine*.

Elaine Medline is the author of the young adult novel, *That Silent Summer*, published by Scholastic Canada in 1999 and by Gramedia in Indonesia (2008). Her flash fiction story, *Holy Liftoff*, was included in *Branded Words*, a collection of the best contributions to Short Story Library in 2009. Elaine was previously a medical reporter for the *Ottawa Citizen* daily newspaper. Her blog can be found at <http://memorizingnature.com>

Josh Orkin currently lives in Taipei, Taiwan, where he eats, drinks, and squanders his potential. His turn-ons include but are not limited to seeing his writing published. His turn-offs include but are not limited to third person bios. He thanks you for taking the time to read. Or skim. Or whatever it is you've just done.

Joseph A. W. Quintela wrote this bio between the lines of Virginia Woolf's Orlando with the hope he'd be transformed. He wasn't. There's just no magic left in the world. So he began to search. One night he closed his eyes and flung himself to sky and didn't open them again until his feet sank into alien soil. The first world was rocky. Barren. He left. The second was made from the tears of his father, shed alone in the night and spun into a planet. He took a breath. Dove into the briny water. Became a golden fish. (<http://www.josephquintela.com>)

Stephen V Ramey lives and writes in an 1870's Victorian house in New Castle, Pennsylvania, once the tin-plating capitol of the world. His fiction has appeared in various places, and he co-edits the annual Triangulation anthology. Look him up at www.tinyurl.com/TheNewCastle

Matt Rowan is co-founder and editor of the online-lit magazine Untoward (untowardmag.com), and blogs at Bob Einstein's Literary Equations (literaryequations.blogspot.com). Previous and forthcoming publications include Jersey Devil Press and Metazen. One day soon he hopes to be teaching high school English somewhere in his native Chicago(land), Illinois.

N God Savage lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where he is currently studying for a PhD in philosophy. He can be found online at ngodsavage.com

Andrew Stancek raised in Bratislava, now writes and dreams in southwestern Ontario. Some of his recent writing has appeared in Apollo's Lyre, Pure Slush, Negative Suck, Left Hand Waving, Istanbul Literary Review, Kaffe in Katmandu, Prime Number Magazine, The Linnet's Wings, and THIS Literary Magazine. A nine-part series starring Mirko appeared in 52/250 A Flash Year. Other installments are forthcoming and Mirko will eventually have a book to himself.

Joshua Young is the author of *When the Wolves Quit: A Play-in-Verse* forthcoming from Gold Wake Press (2012), as well as three chapbooks and two short novels. He holds an MA in English from Western Washington University and begins an MFA in Poetry at Columbia College Chicago in the fall (2011). He teaches English Composition and is moving to Chicago with this wife, son, and dog. For information about his films, writing, and other projects please visit <http://thestorythief.tumblr.com>

Photographers and Illustrators

Frank Cademartori lives in Seoul, South Korea. Originally from Chicago, Illinois, he now spends his time achieving amateur status at various activities. Previously unpublished, he is lacking the various facilities available to a person of charisma.

Susan Urbanek Linville has a PhD in Biology and worked at The Center for the Integrative Study of Animal Behavior, Indiana University before becoming a full-time writer. In the last several years she has published over a dozen short fiction pieces in magazines, anthologies and on-line venues in the U.S. and Canada. She has worked as a freelance writer for newspapers and has published articles in encyclopedias. She presently freelances scripts for Indiana University's NPR program, A Moment of Science. Her co-written book, *A School for My Village*, published by Viking-Penguin is available in book stores.

Michael Monson is a freelance photographer and an attorney. He is currently living in American Samoa where he is helping develop clean energy projects for the island and taking lots of photographs.