

Bartleby Snopes Issue 9



A Literary Magazine

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Submission Information

To submit for future issues, visit our website and click on the 'Submissions' tab.

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Dialogue Contest Finalists

The first five stories in this issue are the finalists from our Fourth Annual Dialogue Only Contest. Our Dialogue Contest Finalists are selected by the staff and then voted on by a panel of judges. This year's judges included Justis Mills (editor of First Stop Fiction) and Matthew Guerruckey (editor of Drunk Monkeys).

Open Me by Lee Stoops

Babe, you're not going to believe this.
Hold on, let me finish this page.
No. This is more important.
What?
Take it easy. I promise: This is worth the interruption.
Okay, what?
You know how I'm always saying I wish more crazy things would happen to us?
This doesn't sound more important yet.
Look what was in our mailbox today.
What is that? Stop waving it around.
You're not going to believe it.
You said that. What is it?
A ransom note.
A ransom note? For what?
Here, read it. Look what it says on the front.
Open me? Are these letters cut out of a magazine? Is this a joke?
Just read it!
We have your cat. If you want it back, leave \$50 on your porch in a garbage bag tonight. Do not call the police. We are watching you. What? And there's no address or postage? This was just in our mailbox? Someone actually put this in our mailbox?
Creepy, right?
But we don't have a cat.
I know.
Do any of our neighbors? I don't think I know anyone who has a cat.
I know! I mean, Betty had one, but I haven't seen it around in months.
Betty? Two houses down Betty?
Yeah. But that cat was really old. I doubt it's even still alive.
So, whose cat is this about?
I have no idea!
Why are you smiling?
Nothing like this ever happens in real life! Why are you *not* smiling? This is crazy!
No, this is messed up. Did you do this? Are you trying to scare me?
What? No! Why the hell would I do that?
It seems like something you would do.
Oh, come on! The first really weird thing to happen to us ever and you think I'm just making it up?
So you didn't do this?
No! No.
What if this is actually real?
It's a cat.

If it were my cat, I'd want to know someone was holding it for ransom.
You hate cats.
It's the principle of it!
Whatever. My point is we *do* know someone is holding it for ransom.
It's not our cat! Whoever was supposed to get this note doesn't know their cat's been kidnapped. And besides... Don't do that!
Don't do what?
You rolled your eyes! This is serious.
It's not.
It is! You can't argue me on this. Someone out there is looking for a missing cat.
No one knows the cat is missing except us and whoever wrote that note!
What if it's a kid?
You think a kid wrote that note? Whoa! I didn't even think about...
No! I mean, what if it's a kid's cat that's been stolen? There are those twin girls that live down the street.
Those little girls aren't going to have \$50.
God! Why do you have to be like this?
Like what?
This! Like you don't care!
I do care! But not about someone missing a cat. This was fun when it started. I shouldn't have shown you the note.
Well, you did, so now we have to do something about it.
Like what? What should we dooooo about this?
That's *not* what I sound like.
It is. You're using your the-world-needs-saving-good-thing-I'm-here voice.
What are you even talking about?
Oh come on. You know you get like this.
Like *this*? How do I get like *this*! Nothing *like this* has ever happened before!
No, I don't mean like *this* this. We could have some fun here. Why can't you just enjoy this?
What is there to enjoy? This isn't fun! Some little girl is missing her cat!
Why does it have to be a little girl?
Because that should matter to you!
I guess I'm heartless, then.
Fine. What if it was a little boy's cat?
If the note was about a puppy, maybe. A little boy isn't going to have a cat get stolen.
But he'd have a dog get stolen?
No. A little boy wouldn't get anything stolen. What's with you and making this about children?
Why do you refuse to believe this is about children?
What?
Nothing.

No, seriously. What do you mean?

Huh. Nothing. What are we going...

No. You don't get to do that. You always do that. What is this really about?

It's about a cat and a...

No, not that. This. *This*. What is *this* about?

I got my period.

Shit.

Yeah.

When? This morning?

Yeah.

Hoo. Wow. I'm...I don't know what I am.

How about sorry?

Of course I'm sorry. I just...I wasn't expecting that.

Well I'm sorry I couldn't make this more fun.

Hey, that's not fair.

No, you're right. Because this is about what's fair. Some princess out there lost her fucking cat and today, of all days, you wanna deal with that instead of dealing with this.

Whoa, hey, that's not what I meant.

Right. You meant it's not fair that I bring us both down. That I should have waited to tell you about this until after you'd finished with the fucking cat.

How was I supposed to know if you didn't tell me? You've had your head in that book all morning! You could have said something.

That's right. It's my fault. It should be easy by now, right?

No, that's not...

Don't touch me right now. The blood is mine, the eggs are mine, the miscarriages are mine. I need to take some fucking ownership of this, right?

They're not just yours.

Really? You're bleeding, too? You could have said something.

God! Stop this. The miscarriages were ours. I was a part of that. When you're like this, I'm a part of this. This isn't just you.

It doesn't feel like it.

Do you know what it feels like to watch you go through this every month? To not be able to take it away from you? Just because I can't doesn't mean I don't want to.

I'm glad to know you want this.

Will you stop twisting my words? Listen to me. You want to talk about fair? How fair is it that you get all the responsibility for this? How fair is it that when you get your period, you shut me out. How fair is it that when you don't get your period, you get to feel your body start to change? How fair is it that I have to sit by and watch and want to know what it feels like and never get to know? How fair is it that I don't get to feel any of the physical pain? Or, how it will feel when we get the one that makes it? How fair is any of that?

You don't have to suffer the way I do.

This isn't about suffering!

Then what? What *is* it about?

This is about what will eventually happen! This is about the children we *will* have.

There aren't going to be any children!

Yes, there will.

Be realistic. What if there aren't? What if we can't?

Then we'll cross that bridge when we get to it.

God that's cliché.

Well what do you want me to say?

I don't know. I don't know how much more of this I can take. I can't keep getting my hopes up each month. It's too hard. And if I have another miscarriage, I can't keep going.

Then we'll stop together. We'll figure it out. Neither of us can fix this.

I'm not asking you to fix this.

I know. But, just know I don't think this is broken. You're not broken. We're not broken.

We're kind of broken.

Yeah. But I wouldn't trade it.

What's with the clichés today?

Some days it's the only way.

Ha.

Yeah.

Fine. I'm sorry. And you're right. I don't want to trade it either.

Atta girl.

Stop. This thing: What do we do with this?

Keep trying until we can't?

No, I mean this cat thing.

The ransom note? I don't care anymore.

Time out. That's not fair. If you're going to be all about what's fair and what's not, then you need to be fair about this.

I honestly don't care anymore.

Well, you need to. This cat belongs to someone. What if it really is a little girl's?

Then she'll probably put up some signs or something.

What if it was your little girl?

Gah. Alright. Um, I guess we just pay it.

Pay it?

Yeah. Pay the ransom. Whoever took the time to make this note deserves the money.

So we're just going to put \$50 on the porch?

I guess.

But what if they actually return the cat?

Let's hope they do.

But, it's not our cat.

No, but it'd be easier to connect a cat to its owner than to go door to door with a ransom note after all this.

This doesn't seem fair. I don't even like cats.

I know. Me either.

Editor's Note

Open Me took first place in our *Fourth Annual Dialogue Contest*.



Photograph: *House of Cards* © Parker Fritz

On the Mountain by Ted Haynes

He's not moving.

We have to rappel down to him and see.

He's dead. That's a hundred foot straight fall onto a flat rock ledge.

We can't be sure he's dead. If it were you or me we'd want somebody to come down and check.

What if we can't climb back up? The rock is a sheer face.

I'll go down. You can belay me while I climb back up.

I can't haul you up if you don't find places to put your hands and feet on the rock. And my trying to get off this mountain and go for help by myself is risky. We might never get help and all three of us could die up here.

So what should we do?

Finish the climb.

Are you kidding? Shouldn't we get back down to a phone and tell someone?

All Search and Rescue can do is get his body. They're going to need a day to plan for it. Whether we go down now or finish the climb and tell them later won't make any difference.

You want people to know Chris died and we just went on with the climb?

Climbing is a dangerous sport. Everyone knows that. Things go wrong. You go on.

But climbers don't die every day. This is going to be in the news.

Chris would want us to go on. It's what he would have done if one of us was down there.

If I were down there I'd want you to come down and check on me.

You wouldn't really want anything. You'd be dead. Listen. The whole point of climbing is to test your nerve. When you're hanging out over thin air and you're holding on with your boot tips and fingernails, are you going to carefully and rationally think through

what your next move is or are you going to panic? That's the essence of the sport. If you wimp out you die. Or you get injured. Or you have to quit without making the top. I agree something bad has happened. But that's just the point. Can you suck it up and still make the climb?

If a storm comes in or someone gets injured you're supposed to get off the mountain and try it another day.

It's a clear day. You and I are fine.

We had a team of three. Two of you were experienced climbers. Now we're left with only two of us and I'm not as experienced as you.

Don't knock yourself because you're upset. You're a good climber. You and I have climbed pitches that were much tougher than anything we're going to see on this hill. Come on. Let's bag this peak and go home.

I thought Chris was your friend. Aren't you upset about this too?

We were climbing buddies, that's all. He knew the risks he was taking.

What the hell happened anyway? How did an experienced climber like Chris suddenly fall off the mountain like that? One minute he had you on belay. You were climbing up the pitch he'd climbed ahead of you. Then you slipped five feet and the next thing I knew he was sailing through the air.

He tied a bad anchor. He tied his anchor rope around a rock or to an old piton somebody drove into the ledge and left there. When I slipped all my weight went on the belay rope and it jerked him forward. That wouldn't have been a problem if he had been securely anchored. Either his anchor rope slipped off a rock or a piton pulled out. We'll see when we get up there.

Maybe the anchor rope broke.

No. I checked carefully before we started. It was a good rope.

I saw you slip but it happened so fast I didn't understand what was going on. I'm surprised he didn't yell or something.

He's a climber. He didn't panic. He was trying to think of a way to save himself. He did the only thing he could.

What was that?

He hung on to the belay rope. It was the only thing he had. But I was attached to the rope. He almost took me with him. Then you would have been up here by yourself with no rope at all.

I'm glad you're here. But how come he didn't pull you right off the rock?

I was lucky. When I slid I grabbed onto a piton. As soon as Chris started to fall I wrapped the rope around the piton. When the rope straightened out the piton took the strain instead of me. But Chris couldn't hang onto the rope. He was already going too fast.

I couldn't be sure what I saw.

Chris knew he would probably take me with him. But he hung on anyway. He made a mistake with the anchor rope and he almost killed me as a result. I don't think I owe him.

In a way I suppose you don't. I didn't realize what happened.

So are we climbing?

You are tough. I don't think I'm anywhere near as tough as that.

Now's the time to find out. I'll belay you from the top of the pitch. I'm already halfway up.

How are you going to anchor yourself when you get up there?

I'll use the sling I'm carrying my pitons on.

Is that strong enough?

Stronger than rope.

Wait a minute. Before you start up, I've got to think about this.

Take a minute. But not too long. Daylight won't wait.

I'm done. I am sorry but I am just flat not willing to climb any further. As rationally and as calmly as I can think it through, I see the risk as being too great. On top of that I'm still shaken by Chris's fall. I don't have the confidence I started out with. If Chris can make a mistake like that so can either of us. I want to climb but I have a lot of other things I want to do. I'm not willing to risk them.

Fair enough. I understand. I'll come down to where you're standing and we'll leave the mountain for another day. But we've learned something. If this is the way you react you're not cut out to be a serious climber. You don't want it enough. You don't want to test yourself to that point. Most people don't. It's okay.

Sorry.

No problem. I've just got to do a better job picking the people I climb with. I've got one guy who makes a fundamental mistake, kills himself, and nearly kills me. Then I've got another who I thought had the nerve for climbing but turns out not to.

Sorry.

Now do you still want to check on Chris? You can belay me and I'll go down.

We're still not sure either one of us can get back up once he's down there. That's not the way we came up.

If I can't get back up then I'll just have to wait until you get Search and Rescue.

You think I can get down off this mountain by myself?

If you want to badly enough you will.

You sure know how to make a guy nervous.

So the hell with Chris?

Well I don't want to say that.

It's your choice. I've even offered to go down there myself. Are we going to check on Chris or are we going to get off this mountain?

We're going to get off this mountain.

So the hell with Chris?

The hell with Chris.

Editor's Note

On the Mountain took second place in our Fourth Annual Dialogue Contest.



Props for Life by Gregory Marlow

"Who are you?"

"Wow, look at this place; it must have set you back quite a bit, huh? Especially with all these antiques. How much does a desk like that cost?"

"Excuse me, I asked you a question. How did you get in here?"

"Your secretary let me in."

"Why would she do that? We are closed."

"Because I asked nicely."

"Well you can't be in here, we..."

"Settle down, Waldo. I have a business proposition for you."

"It's Walter. How did you..."

"Is this old? It looks old."

"Please don't touch that. Who are you?"

"Why would you think I would answer that question the second time when I didn't answer it the first? It doesn't matter who I am. You should ask more pertinent questions, Waldo."

"Ok, well how about this for pertinent, would you like to be arrested for trespassing?"

"Wow, I am surprised you got this far in life by asking such stupid questions. No wonder you need me so much."

"What are you talking about; why are you here?"

"Ah finally, a question worth answering. Waldo, I am here to make a deal with you. I have some things you need."

"I seriously doubt that. Listen, I have a meeting with someone very important in a few hours so..."

"Here, first one is free."

"Oh...I see. You're a sales rep. I don't need an ink pen with your company's name on it, and I don't need..."

"That's not my company's name. And you most certainly do need it. Just put it in your pocket. It's a gift."

"Who are you? What are..."

"Put it in your pocket, Waldo. Just slip the pen into your pocket, and I will walk out the door."

"Ok fine. Here, how's that? You happy?"

"Yes, I am. Good-bye Waldo. I will be in touch."

- - -

"Mr. Levy, someone is here to see you. He says he has an appointment."

"Who is it?"

"He won't tell me his name sir."

"Ha! Ok, yes, let him in right away."

"Waldo! How are you?"

"Sit down, sit down Mr...I wish I knew what to call you."

"Waldo, the only reason you want to know my name is for pleasantries. And I will be honest; I don't care if you are pleasant to me or not. It is not your respect, or your honor, or your friendship that I want Waldo. I want your money."

"My money? What would you need with money when you can know the future like that?"

"Whoa, Waldo, you're making assumptions. I do not know the future. I can just recognize things that people might need."

"How is that different? Do you know what happened to me yesterday?"

"No, I don't. I just knew that some time in the near future you were going to come to a fork in the road, a choice. And I knew you were going to need a pen, that specific pen, to make that choice."

"Did I ever. You have no idea."

"Tell me then."

"Well...after you left I had a very important meeting. Very important. A group of investors from out west, big money. But I could tell from the moment they walked in that one of the guys, a younger fellow named Holtz, didn't care much for the deal."

"Yeah, so you stabbed him with the pen?"

"What, of course not. Wha... Do you see these symbols on this pen? Do you know what they are?"

"Yes, Waldo, I do. I am not stupid. They are Greek letters. It's a fraternity."

"Yes. About halfway through the meeting, I took out this pen to make some notes, and he saw it. Sigma Phi, his fraternity in college. He assumed I was a brother and from that point on the whole mood at the meeting changed. This pen will potentially make me and my company millions."

"Interesting, Waldo, truly. Now enough about you let's talk about me."

"Oh, ok."

"You see, Waldo; I need money. I'm not here to try to extort money out of you, nor do I even want a lot of money. I am a modest man who simply happens to be able to recognize things in this world that will help other people. Just some things to help you along the way. I have an eye for these things, Waldo. I have no idea how they will help you or even if the help is something that will benefit you. I simply know that in the future you will be presented with options. I will sell you tools for those options. Props for life."

"How much?"

"See Waldo, you are getting better at this questions game. Not much. Let's say \$3000 per item. That is not a lot of money for you, and it pays my rent and keeps me fed."

"Can you assure me that every one of them will be worth my money?"

"No, Waldo. I make no such assurances. That is why the first one was free. I will, however, ensure you that every single one of them, at some point, will be something you wish you had."

"What is the next one?"

"Do we have a deal?"

"Can I see the next one first?"

"No."

"Ok, fine. We have a deal. You will take a check?"

"Of course, Waldo."

"Ok, here. Now let's see it."

"Patience, Waldo, patience. Here we go."

"What? What is this? I don't smoke."

"Neither do I, Waldo."

"But why would I need a cigarette lighter?"

"Why would you need a pen? I'm confident you have one in the top drawer of your expensive desk. As I said, I don't know why you will want any of this stuff in the future. I just know you will."

"Fine. Give it to me. Are you sure you aren't a scam artist?"

"Waldo, you concern yourself with certainties too much. I have no idea if I am or not."

- - -

"Mr. Levy, he is back again. Mr. I-don't-have-a-name."

"Yes, Rachel. Send him in immediately."

"Yes Sir."

"Waldo! Good to see you again. Is this painting new?"

"Yes, it is"

"It's horrendous."

"Um...yes it...ok. You will never believe what happened this time."

"You would be surprised what I would believe."

"It was a woman."

"The lighter was a woman you say?"

"No, no. The lighter, it helped me meet the most wonderful, gorgeous, woman in the world. After you left, I started home. But I decided to stop at the lounge downstairs for a drink first. And at the bar, lovely, tall, amazing body...you would not believe it. She was looking for a light for her cigarette, and I had the lighter. We went to a hotel. Her name was Teresa, Teresa Woods. Amazing!"

"Interesting. Are you married, Waldo?"

"Wha...What are you the morality police now? That is none of your business."

"Ah, so you are married?"

"I don't have to answer to you."

"No, you don't. So she was good, huh?"

"Amazing! I'm seeing her again tonight."

"That's nice. I am very glad it worked out for you."

"Yes. So what else do you have for me? What's in the bag?"

"So impatient. Money first, Waldo."

"Ok, fine. Here. \$3000"

"And here is your package."

"It's heavy, what is it?"

"It's a gun."

"What?! Why?"

"There you go again with the stupid questions. I have no idea. Maybe you are going to rob a liquor store. I honestly don't care. Open it."

"No. What are you doing? You could get me arrested. You realize that guns are illegal in this building? Get it out of here."

"Waldo, I have not wronged you before, have I?"

"Where did you get it? What am I supposed to need a gun for?"

"I got it at a pawn shop. And I have told you before; I don't care what you will want it for. I just know that you will want it. Is there someone you want to kill?"

"What?! No! How... how do I know it hasn't been used in a murder already? Get it out of here."

"There are no refunds, Waldo."

"I don't care, just take it. Bring me something next time that can't be traced to a murder or something."

"Waldo, in all seriousness, I have never been wrong. You will want this gun."

"Well whatever it is I am supposed to do with it couldn't be good. I will just have to miss out on whatever opportunity this...this thing was going to provide me. If it takes using a gun to get it, then I probably shouldn't want it in the first place."

"Are you sure? I am giving you one more chance to open the package and take it."

"I am sure. I appreciate the sentiment. I really do. But... bring me back something next week that won't get me arrested. Ok?"

"Alright, Waldo. good-bye."

- - -

"Rachel, can you call me a cab? I am leaving in about ten minutes."

"Ok, sir. But your last appointment has just arrived."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"A man is here to see you. He said he has an appointment."

"Ah, our nameless friend is back?"

"No, sir. It is someone else to see you, Mr. Woods."

Editor's Note

Props for Life took third place in our Fourth Annual Dialogue Contest.

The Gig by Peter DeMarco

I want to steal Gig Young's Oscar.

Who's Gig Young?

He was an actor.

Never heard of him.

That's because your generation thinks anything made before 1995 is ancient.

I like some old movies.

Yeah, from the 80s.

When was this guy around?

The 50s, 60s, and some action movies in the 70s where he played unctuous bureaucrats. He also did a Twilight Zone.

The 50s? You've got to be a paleontologist to know about him. What's his story?

Alcoholic, many wives, suicide. Won an Oscar for They Shoot Horses, Don't They?, a supporting actor Oscar.

Weird title.

Based on a book. It's the book's last line. I love a story with a great last line.

What's it about?

It's set during a dance marathon during the Depression. He's the M.C. of the marathon.

So where the heck is this Oscar?

In Gig's sister's apartment.

How old is she?

Close to 100.

Wow. Why do you want this thing?

Why the hell did you collect Pokemon cards. I like movie memorabilia and an Oscar is the ultimate thing.

How do you even know about the sister?

I met this woman in a bar a few weeks ago, one of those martini bars. She was drinking something green and I asked her about it. A green apple martini. She let me taste it. Delicious.

She just let you taste her drink?

She was drunk, had just moved to the city from Iowa. She's a little young, but excited about being here, just got out of college. So I offered to show her around, you know, take her to Coney Island, ride the Cyclone, get a hot dog on the boardwalk.

Why Coney Island? That place is a dump.

My parents had their first date there. I always wanted to take a girl to an amusement park, you know, you go on a ride and they grab your arm and it gets things physical without looking like you're trying to make a move.

Sounds like a lot of strategy for a date.

We had our fortune told by a gypsy woman. She said she saw something gold in my future. I asked her if it looked like an Academy Award because that's always been my

dream, to win an Oscar. Then this girl tells me that she held an Oscar once, said her mother was Gig Young's second cousin or something once removed, I don't know how that lineage stuff works, but that Gig's sister lived in the city and had the Oscar on a mantle. I couldn't believe it.

Do you like this girl? I mean you're planning on stealing something from her cousin.

I kind of like her. She's got this mid-western wide-eyed thing going on. Gig's from Nebraska.

Why do all these famous people come from the Midwest. James Dean. Brando.

So you do know something about the oldies.

Those guys are icons right.

Yeah, well I guess if you grow up out there it can be kind of isolated, so it motivates you to get the hell out.

What are you gonna do with this thing? Put on little skits with yourself like DeNiro in The King of Comedy?

I just might.

What would you say?

I want to thank my mother who recognized a talent no one else saw or believed in. When I was a kid she said my hair was so fine it looked like Rumpelstiltskin had something to do with it. She said I could be a movie star with that hair. You see, dreams can come true.

What a cliché.

Being original is hard.

So what's your plan to steal this thing.

I made a date to go out to dinner with her, and then back to her aunt's apartment for dessert. I'll just stick it in my knapsack when I get the chance. Why don't you follow us and ring the bell at some point to create a diversion. Tell them you've got the wrong apartment.

Just like in the movies, right, a bad movie.

I want this thing.

You know what would be a great story, you've got Gig Young's Oscar and you marry this girl and then you turn into an alcoholic and kill yourself.

That is a good story. Like the Oscar was possessed. Why don't you write it.

I'm too lazy.

It's your generation.

At least I'm not trying to steal something. And what if the old lady catches you and gets a heart attack.

Everybody dies.

You're cruel.

I just quoted a famous last line of a movie with John Garfield. I told you I love last lines.

Why don't you write your own last line?

They Steal Oscars, Don't They.

Editor's Note

The Gig took fourth place in our Fourth Annual Dialogue Contest.



Photograph: *Sunrise* © Chris Fradkin

...I'm Sorry? by Joshua Browning

S_o...

So?

So...then that's it?

Well I think that the date is about done when we just start repeating each other, right?

Well, right.

—

I mean yeah, sure, you aren't wrong.

Right. So, what now?

Well, I don't know, I mean, I guess we leave.

Right. Well. Okay then.

Okay...

Right.

It's just strange, you know? This all started out fairly well, and that site said we were good matches. Like, 92 percent or something like that.

Right. But it is a website. And a free one. I don't know exactly what you were expecting but it was basically a blind date. A shot in the dark.

...well, I was expecting someone who was actually interested in dating, not just, I don't know, who wanted to have a few drinks and see if I caught all their little pseudo obscure pop culture references.

— There weren't that many.

There really were, it was like you sat through a sitcom marathon on shuffle, saving them up, waiting for them to have a place.

I didn't, I—What? And why wouldn't I be looking for someone to date.

You just...I don't know, don't seem interested in that sort of thing, which is cool, but it makes me wonder why you are on a site like that, you know?

Well I'm interested in dating.

No, I don't think so...I mean it's not a bad thing...but it seems like you are more interested in filling time or something.

Filling time. Because I have that much free time to fill.

Well, that's what I mean, you keep talking about work and how you work a lot, and how you like what you do, but you work a lot.

Right. I work. A lot. So why would I need to fill my time?

I guess...*because* you work a lot?

I—

It makes sense, really.

Oh it does.

Yeah, I think it does. I know I get bored of routine, doing the same thing...if I had a constant continual stream of stuff that was all along the same vein I know I'd get bored and look for something different to do.

And you think you'd be a good something different to do.

Well obviously not...

And what about you. You play music for a living.

Yep.

Sort of.

Well, not sort of. I do.

So you gig a few nights a week. You live off free bar beer and percentages of a cover charge. For some reason you have such a hard time meeting people in bars, where people meet people and go on dates, that you figured you'd give online dating a whirl because—

...

—?

I wanted to meet a different kind of person I guess.

And to do that you look for a high match percentage.

...

Right.

Well, yeah, but I mean you can tell a lot about someone by their profile too. It's in the way they write, not just what they right. And I don't want to date myself.

Because you don't like being around yourself?

...and *that's* from, Seinfeld I think.

—I don't know.

Yeah! The one with the Jeanine Garafolio or whatever, Jerry figures out he has been dating himself and realized he didn't want to be around himself so much or something.

And I'm the one with the pseudo obscure TV in my head.

You're the one who works too much, I'm the one without the real job and is home for the daily syndication run. Which actually explains why I was confused near the end of our conversation, really, because you must have been working through those new shows at the end, and I'm working during the newer shows.

Gigging.

I get paid for having fun at work, and at least I don't whine about working too much to meet anyone my own age.

I did not whine.

No, I guess you didn't, but you bring it up a hell of an awful lot so it doesn't seem like you are really that happy about it.

That isn't where the problem was anyway.

No, it...oh. Where was the problem?

I. Well. We were talking about music?

No, I don't think so, we agreed about Foo being better than Nirvana, and the debate of The Stones over The Beatles being ridiculous.

Because of the Redding of it all.

Right...

Then the city? The city.

Right, because I love it, have to live here to keep working and living the way that I love to live and work.

Gig.

Work. And how you work too much and love your job but want to slow down eventually and live in the middle of nowhere.

Somewhere. Where there is quiet, yes. And space to think.

But the space here is fluid and busy and moves all the time, gives you things to think about, living surrounds you here!

Until you can't move as fast as the surroundings and all that movement smothers you.

Eh, I don't think so.

Right. *You* don't think so.

Right...

So.

So?

I guess that's it then.

I guess so.

Editor's Note

...I'm Sorry? took fifth place in our Fourth Annual Dialogue Contest.

Story of the Month Winners

Each month we publish 8 stories and host a Story of the Month contest. The Story of the Month winners are chosen by the readers of Bartleby Snopes.

I was afraid he was a cop. Wouldn't that just be my luck? I'm sure he could find a reason to arrest me. Disturbing the peace or something. I shouldn't have screamed as loud as I did. But if he was a cop, he was off duty. His shirt was red and plaid, like a cowboy's, and his jeans were faded and frayed at the edges. I watched him in the rearview mirror as he approached my Honda. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, bare thick forearms covered in splotchy freckles. A line of sweat dripped down his temple and he wiped at it with the back of his hand. Did he think I was being murdered?

It took a while for him to trek the incline from his car to mine. Maybe he was really out of shape. You know how some men collect their fat in their stomachs, giving them the resemblance of pregnant bellies? That was the case here. His plaid red cowboy shirt stretched over his gut, straining at the buttons. He wiped at more sweat on his face. His blond hair was thin near the top of his head and thicker on the sides.

It seemed like guys in my generation were losing their hair faster. Wasn't that unfair? For anything else, there were always options. Work out if you wanted to lose weight. Get a pair of glasses if you wanted to look more bookish. But balding? Short of joining the Hair Club for Men, what could you do? You could accept it; that was it.

As he neared the car, I decided his name must be Doug. I'm not proud of how I came up with this, but here it is: there was a kid named Doug Porter in my third grade class. Everyone called him Pug Portly. He was a round kid with big cheeks and auburn hair. There was something so Doug Porter—so Pug Portly—about this grownup man: I decided he must be a reincarnation of the third grader I knew.

I worried about Doug. He sweated a lot and looked lonely. Maybe that was a projection. Maybe he was just tired from the walk, but I swear his eyes looked defeated. He looked like he had given up. Maybe he had a wife at home who made him feel like less than a man. Maybe he never had a wife. Maybe he was 44 and living alone with three cats.

I'm not one to judge. I was well on my way to becoming a single cat lady. The only problem: I hated cats. I planned, instead, on becoming a peacock lady. That felt more regal, more majestic. If I was going to be alone forever, I at least wanted something to show for myself.

Doug, I bet, was a groomsman in a lot of his friends' weddings after college. He probably wrote a lot of toasts about faith and fidelity, honesty and compassion. Maybe he even slept with a few bridesmaids. But now he's 44 and he goes home to this three cats: Romper, Sydney and Tasha.

Doug had fat fingers. He used them to tap on my driver's side window. I couldn't roll down the window without starting the car, so I opened the door instead, giving him a revealing view of the pile of candy wrappers and discarded sunflower seeds on my passenger seat. I caught a glance of myself in the mirror as I opened the door and saw

that my mascara was streaked down my cheeks. Was I crying already or did I start crying for Doug? I couldn't keep track of my tears anymore.

"Are you okay?" Doug looked beyond me to my passenger seat and backseat, scanning to determine if anyone else was in the car. He smelled like fresh sweat as his eyes darted all over, searching for the source of his fear.



"I'm fine," I said, rubbing at my face to try and conceal the streams of mascara.

My heart was breaking for Doug and his three cats. I wondered about his childhood. Did his father ever thwack him with a belt? Would he burrow his face into the folds of his mom's dress, hiding from his old man and seeking comfort from her? Was he always told he wasn't good enough? Was he cut from the football team in high school?

"Are you alone?" Doug said.

"I'm fine," I said again.

My car was perched high on a hill. From there, we could look down and see the entire city. A breeze picked up and I felt chilled, but Doug was still breathing hard

from his adrenaline walk, sweating through his shirt. The buildings lacked depth from this height and everything looked the same size. Church buildings, offices and houses all looked the same. They even seemed the same color, with little variation. The further I

looked, the further out into space the buildings stretched. There didn't seem to be an end.

"I could watch this forever," I said. Doug was starting to catch his breath. "Is that why you came up here?" he said, the doubt in his voice apparent.

I shivered. "Do you ever feel like you're so small and the world is so big that we don't even have a chance?" I said to Doug.

Doug bent down and touched his hands to his knees. He was either really trying to catch his breath or really exasperated from talking to me. Maybe both. Probably both.

"Look, lady, can you just tell me what's wrong with you?" he said.

I could see my high school from this vantage point. Every day at lunch I'd get in my car and drive to a Plaid Pantry five blocks from the school. I'd sit in the parking lot and eat my food alone. If anyone saw me, I'd duck my head and pretend to search for a CD on the floor.

"Do you want to sit down?" I said to Doug. He eyed my littered passenger seat and looked at me like I was crazy. "No, there's a place over there," I said, pointing.

Doug looked up at the bench. He looked down toward his car. He looked at the silvery watch on his broad wrist.

"Will you tell me why you were screaming if I do?"

I nodded and we walked to the bench, a slab of concrete dedicated to the memory of someone long gone. Richard Yullman, to be exact. Richard Yullman was dead years before Doug or I were born. Was he a polite man with a penchant for top hats? Or was he gruff? Did he gamble late into the evening? Did he cheat on his wife?

Doug and I sat next to each other, but he left a considerable space between us. Maybe he knew he reeked of B.O. Maybe he was still afraid of me. Maybe he just didn't think it was right to sit at the top of this hill on Richard Yullman's bench, a strange man and a woman who moments before had let out a blood-curdling scream.

"You must have strong lungs," Doug said. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Are you from around here?" I asked.

"No," Doug said. "I'm from the Midwest."

I always thought it should be called the Mideast. There's nothing western about the Midwest. Those states practically touch New York and Boston.

"How long have you been here?" I said to Doug.

"Less than a year," he said.

"I moved out the day after I graduated from high school," I said. "I wasn't planning on ever coming back. I went to college in Boston. I lived in Hawaii for a year. Georgia for nine months. I moved to Vermont for a while."

The wind picked up, snarling against branches in the trees hanging overhead. The temperature felt like it dropped twenty degrees in twenty seconds. I shivered again and Doug instinctively reached his arm out toward me, then stopped.

"But you came back," he said, putting his arm awkwardly back by his side.

"I came back," I said, now shivering uncontrollably.

"Do you need to go back to your car?"

I hugged my arms around myself. I brought my feet off the ground and tucked my knees into my chest. I rocked back and forth and told Doug I'd be fine.

"Why were you screaming?"

I wondered if my mascara was still smeared all over my face. I wondered if Doug would get bored and leave me soon. I wondered if I'd ever be able to retrieve any of the things I lost recently, or if they were gone to me forever.

"I thought I was alone," I said.

Doug nodded slowly, as if this answer would suffice. As if it made all the sense in the world.

"My name is John," he said.

"No it's not."

Doug scratched at the thin patch on the top of his head. "I think I know my own name," he said.

"It should be Doug. You seem like a Doug."

Doug thought about this for a moment. His fingers were tracing the outline of Richard Yullman's date of death.

"Fine," he said. "Then I get to name you too."

"My name is Colleen," I said.

"Your name is Katie."

We were so unoriginal. He could have been Lance or Mason and I could have been Geneva or Rashida. But there we sat, plain old Doug and Katie. Katie and Doug.

I didn't warn him it was going to happen but I guess he already knew. This time when I let out the guttural yell, he joined right in. We screamed like our lives depended on it, listening to our frantic cries fall onto the hillside below.

Editor's Note

Hair Club for Men... was our July Story of the Month.

Photograph: *Left Bank Looking Right* © Chris Fradkin

The Last Silver Button by Mandy Alyss Brown

My finger circles a button in my jacket pocket as I walk across the parking lot, biting my lip. I thought of Mom when I found it hidden away in a dusty jewelry box. I hadn't seen her in a while, and it seemed appropriate that I should find this button just in time to go see her. Even in my adulthood, she stuck to me like sticky paper to a fly.

"Shit, did I forget to pack your lunch again?" Mom asked as I walked through the front door.

"It's okay, Mom," I said. "Jana shared with me."

"That cripple kid?"

"What does 'cripple' mean?" I asked as I pulled out from the fridge and cabinets the things for my favorite snack as a kindergartener, peanut butter and jelly.

"Shit, did I say that out loud?" Mom asked toward her room. Matt stayed there anytime I was around. Mom said it was better that way.

"How are you today, Matt?" I yelled into Mom's bedroom as I jumped on the couch. The apartment smelled spicy again.

"He's fine, Sweetie," Mom said. "I have a headache."

"Mom," I asked tentatively. "How long is Dad's vacation going to be?"

Mom looked at the television set, though it wasn't on. She scratched the ridge of her nose, went to the kitchen, and pulled a bag of crystals out from under the sink. Then she went to her room. "I have a headache," she said again as she walked away. I crinkled my nose as she left. The apartment would start to smell like old cats soon, and then Mom would light her incense, but that usually made it worse. When spicy smoke stopped pluming from under her bedroom door, I knew she was asleep, and I could open the windows to let the cat smell out without waking her. I wondered if Matt liked the smoke too.

The old cat smell and Matt had visited more often now that Dad was on vacation, though I had no idea where Divorce was and why Dad would want to go there. I thought Divorce must be a close place because Dad would come visit me every other weekend or so. One day I checked out the atlas from the school library, and when Dad came for one of his weekend visits, I opened its large pages and asked him: "Dad, where is Divorce?"

"Do you want to go to the store?" Dad asked.

"Yes!"

We raced to the subway, and Dad took me to a beautiful Macy's with big red letters on the front. As I surveyed the collection of new, shiny boots and touched the silky fabric of the blouses hung along the aisles, I stopped at a mannequin of a little girl about my size and stood in awe of the display before me. Frozen in mid-skip, she wore a beautiful green coat with three silver buttons the size of quarters, and her father and mother stood on either side of her, holding her hands and smiling playfully.

My heart beat rapidly with envy. I wanted her coat. I wanted to wrap myself in its love. I wanted to rub the silver buttons like a genie lamp and make wishes like a princess trapped in a castle.

"Dad," I said timidly. "I want to have that coat."

He walked over to the display, picked up the tag, and furrowed his brow. "Not today, Sweetheart," he said.

I refused to hold Dad's hand on the walk to the subway or even look at him on the ride back. When we got home, I caved into Mom's arms. She stared suspiciously at Dad who shrugged and explained why my tears were folding into her blouse. He left, and Mom spent the rest of the evening stroking my hair and soothing me until I again asked her when Dad would come home from his vacation. She made me sit up, and then she stared into the empty television set. "I'm gonna go be with Matt now," she said after some time. She walked into her room and closed the door, but I could hear her as she began to argue. "I can't handle this. What did you do with it, Matt? I'm all out, and I know you took it," she said. "Get out," she screamed. "You're worthless. Piece of shit!" They fought through the night, but I don't know if Matt ever left.

The next morning Dad showed up with an oblong box tied neatly with yellow ribbon. Mom scowled as I eagerly reached for the box. She whispered harshly at him while I carefully tugged at the bow as I would to defuse a bomb. I tentatively pulled the tissue from the box to reveal the forest green coat with silver buttons.

"Thank you, Daddy!" I cried, racing to his knees and hugging them tightly. I ran into the bathroom to see how I looked in my newfound treasure. I pulled its sleeves on to my small arms and buttoned each hole with care, brushing my long hair out of the way. I turned in the mirror to see myself from every side. I skipped once, twice, and then stared intently at my reflection. I smiled, concluding I looked exactly like the little girl from the store.

I heard Mom and Dad arguing in the living room. Mom asked for money while Dad said he had none for her. Mom said something in a hushed tone I didn't catch, and Dad's voice became violent. I sank to the floor and wrapped myself tighter in my coat, rubbing the silver buttons. Mom and Dad said more things I couldn't make out. Then I heard the front door slam. Then the sound of Mom's door slamming, like an echo.

She didn't come out of her room when I left for school, but it didn't matter because my coat surrounded me like armor. The other kids didn't seem to notice my magical coat, but I didn't mind. When I thought of what had happened with Matt and Mom, I rubbed the genie buttons, sure that when I got home, all would be well.

I took off my coat only once that day because I didn't want it to get dirty. I hung it carefully on the fence around the school's playground so I could play with Jana while waiting for Mom to come and get me. I had learned a new word the day Jana and I had met: "Amputation," she had said, "because of cancer."

"I like your coat," she said, pointing to the fence with a nub lacking its hand.

"Thanks," I smiled.

"What does Matt look like?" Jana asked after a while.

"I don't know. Mom never tells me," I said.

We played through the afternoon, and Jana left. But when Mom came, my coat was gone. I frantically looked for it, climbing the trees and calling out for it as I would a lost puppy. Mom helped me look too.

After an hour of searching, I felt cold. Mom reached out for me. "Maybe a kid stole it," she said. I trudged to the car, slumped in the seat, and stared out the window as we drove home, hoping we would pass the thief.

When we got home, Mom called Dad. "I need you to watch her for a while. I have to go to the store. . . Well, I obviously got some didn't I? . . . Just tell me when you can get here." She slammed the receiver down with a plastic smack.

Dad came. Mom left. "Where's your new coat?" He asked. "I never saw you in it." Hanging my head, I told him. He frowned and reached out for me. "I'm sorry, Honey, but you have to be more careful in the future, okay?" I nodded, sucking up my tears, and we spent the rest of the evening watching the television and playing board games. I also told him about Jana's arm, and he frowned.

Mom came back late. She smelled spicy. Dad had me go to my room, and they started yelling. I searched about my room for comfort, finally fleeing to my closet. Dad yelled about Mom's smell. I yanked down my clothes, pulling everything off its hanger. Mom yelled back about money. I put every piece on, layering myself in warmth. Dad yelled about a coat, my coat. I pinched my eyes shut and reached for genie buttons, wincing when I didn't find them. My clothes weren't the same. They didn't have the magic to save me. I cried out. Dad's tone shifted into a hush, so I put my ear against the wall toward the living room.

"You did what?!" he said. "She's your daughter. She doesn't ask for much."

"We needed some more," She defended.

"You're unbelievable!"

"I had to have some. I was going to die," She insisted.

Dad punched the wall then, and feeling the vibration, I bounced away. There were more words, some angry and loud, others muffled and harshly quiet. But I didn't try to eavesdrop anymore. Longing for silver buttons, I curled up in bed still under six layers of clothing and wondered what my parents' words had meant as I fell asleep.

The next morning Dad came to pick me up. "I found your coat," he said.

"Thank you, Daddy!" I said, putting it on and hugging him tightly as he knelt down.

"Don't let your mother have it," he whispered softly in my ear. "She might try to take it back."

I had suspicions the coat's magic was tarnished. But upon putting it on and caressing the buttons, I began to feel its warmth again. However, as I sat in class, a dread started to grow in my stomach as if a weed had begun to sprout. I itched my neck restlessly. My fingers found a plastic tag. Funny, I thought. Hadn't I pulled that off yesterday? I wondered why Mom would take my coat back to the store and why she came home smelling of spices. I wanted to keep my enchanted coat, stop her from taking away my wishing buttons and ruining everything.

I rubbed the buttons anxiously, buffing inspiration out of their smooth surfaces until I knew what to do. I scrounged through my backpack, searching for scissors. When I didn't find any, I dropped my backpack and wrenched off my coat. Furiously, I pulled at the buttons, yanked at them determinedly, using my teeth to weaken the threads. I tore each one off, throwing them into the depths of my bag so no one would know where to find them.

At the end of the school day, I walked to the playground and carefully hung my coat on the fence. I played with Jana until Mom came to pick me up. "Oh, Honey, you lost your coat again," she observed. I shrugged and got in the car.

Dad again came to watch me that evening, though begrudgingly. Mom came home earlier than the night before. She dragged herself up the stairs and through the front door. Tossing my coat at me, she groaned, "Matt found your coat." Her arms were all scratched up and her face gleamed with sweat. She robotically walked into her room and shut the door.

Dad looked at the coat and then at me, puzzled. Examining it, he asked in a hushed tone, "Why didn't she take it back?"

"She can't. It doesn't have the magic anymore." I smiled proudly. When he didn't understand, I got my backpack and rummaged through, producing two silver buttons, green thread still looped in them. He stared at me in amazement. "Grandma can sew them back on," I concluded, grabbing his hand. "Let's go." I put on my coat, folding it over me with one arm, and we left together, hand in hand.

Quietly I thought about divorce as we walked away from the apartment. "You're not on vacation, are you?" I asked after a few moments of silence.

"No, Honey," he said. "Divorce is different."

"Is divorce like Jana's arm?"

"For me and your mom it is."

"Will I have to go back?" He shook his head no. "Good," I said.

I never smelled the spicy smoke or the old cat smell ever again.

But I did see Mom a few months later in a hospital.

"Mom's sick?" I asked as the elevator hummed. I polished the two silver buttons on my coat.

"Remember Matt," Dad explained.

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, adults aren't supposed to have imaginary friends," Dad said. "When they do, that means they're sick."

"Oh."

Mom sat in a chair with her neck craned toward the ceiling. Her eyes were grey, and she reminded me of a cocoon I had found once on the playground with Jana. I had been so excited to find the first butterfly of spring that I cracked it open. But nothing but spiders crawled out. I sat next to Mom hesitantly afraid spiders might crawl out of her.

"I found a job in Houston, and I want you to see her before we move away," Dad said to her. "I'm sorry you're not well. I wish things could have been different."

Mom cocked her head, mouth ajar. I watched her empty eyes follow the yellowing ceiling fan as it spun around lazily. A bulb flickered and finally fizzled out.

"He's taking her away, Matt," she whispered in a dry voice. Her skeleton fingers reached for a button on my coat. I flinched and so did Dad, but Mom didn't turn to look at me. She fingered the button carefully while staring at the dying ceiling fan.

"That's a beautiful coat," Mom said to me. "It looks magical. Can I have some magic too?"

"No," I said.

"What?" She looked at me, and her fingers tightened around the button. "You can't leave me without the magic."

Dad placed an arm between us. "Let her go. You're scaring her."

"Matt, he won't share," Mom growled.

"It's my magic," I said frantic.

"She's mine," she said. She grasped my coat and stood up, lifting me off the chair. "I'm her mother."

"I need help over here," Dad shouted. He stepped between us and grabbed her wrist. He yanked her hand away.

"No," she shouted. "I want her too! Matt, they won't share." Men in white coats stepped in to help Dad, and they took Mom away then. It wasn't until we got in the elevator that I noticed my coat only had one button left.

That was the last time in my childhood I saw my mother. Now I walk through the dried grass yard to the front doors of the home she's been put in by the state. It smells like old cat too, but that's because there are dozens of them living under the gray, crumbled building. I crinkle my nose as I walk through the gloomy the front door.

"Sign in," a nurse says without looking up.

I scratch my name with a pen that's running out of ink.

"I called ahead of time," I say timidly. "I'm here to see Louise Elmer. She's my mother."

The nurse points and says, "Down this hallway, forth door on your left."

"Thank you."

I walk down the hallway, fighting my instincts to run as I smell bleach in the walls. I notice the vomit orange of the carpet and cringe. I reach her door and feel for the button in my pocket. It's still there, silver chips of paint threatening to flee its surface with another polish. I knock. The door swings open lazily.

Mom sits in a chair, staring at the parking lot through her window. She doesn't turn to see who I am.

"Hi, Lula," I say, rattled by the sound of my own voice. I feel like I'm out of my own body, watching myself stand in the doorway. "Do you remember me?"

"Matt, you told me she would come someday," she says looking at the chair across from her.

"Matt shouldn't be here, Lula," I say cautiously.

"He's not," she says looking up at me. "He told me when I came here that you would find me if I stayed here. So I stayed. How is Jana?"

I look out the window at my car. "I don't want to talk about her," I say.

She shrugs.

"When I called, the nurse said that you aren't eating," I say.

"They poison the food," she replies frankly.

"Well, I brought you something that won't let the poison hurt you," I say. I walk up to her and place the worn button in her hand. "It's magic."

Mom stares at it in awe. "Thank you," she whispers. She brings the button up to her mouth and rubs the smooth surface against her chapped lips.

"You have to eat, or I won't be able to come on more visits."

"You're going to come again?" she asks, child-like tones in her voice.

"Maybe. But you have to eat," I say. My skin is starting to crawl. I can hear Jana whispering in my ear. "I have to go now. But I thought I would bring you some treats next time if you've eaten. What would you like?"

"Pictures."

"Pictures?"

"Yes, of you, of everything I missed. And a pint of ice cream."

For the first time, I smile. "Okay," I say. "As long as you eat and take your meds."

She nods. I have the awkward impression I should hug her, but I ignore it.

"See you later, Mom," I say.

I reach the car in a blur. My hands are shaking as I wipe a tear from the corner of my eye.

"It's okay," Jana says, reaching to hold my hand with a nub.

"You have to leave, Jana," I say, wishing for the taste of tar to leave my mouth. I had kept her in the car because I didn't want Mom to see me with her, didn't want the nurses to see me with her. "Adults aren't supposed to have imaginary friends."

Editor's Note

The Last Silver Button was our August Story of the Month. The story was also nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Honest Tom and His Dream:

In 1977, Tom Callaway had a (ten-year-old) dream that one day he would own a Ferris wheel, or at least some kind of carnival ride that he could set up in the back yard of his house and ride whenever he liked. He was an avid carnival-goer—a regular grind show freak—from an early age and could name every genus of carny simply by looking at their unattended booths.

Career Path, as Viewed by a Teenager:

When Tom turned the ripe age of fourteen, his father insisted he get a job. He preferred that his son work for the bank as a teller's assistant, or maybe for the mill yard as a go-over-there-and-get-me-some-coffee boy. Tom didn't like this, though, because all he would have thought about (had he gotten either of those jobs) was what the view looked like from the top of the Ferris wheel. So Tom decided to disregard his father's opinions and slyly apply to work under the tent-top, for which he was immediately considered due to his obvious love for all things carnificent.

Tom's Teenage Years, Summed Up in One Word:

Stapler.

Why Tom May Have Been Disappointed with His Job:

Imagine being a bird. Now imagine that, as a bird, you enjoy flying (very much so) but for some reason, you can't. From what you can remember (before you injured your wing?), you enjoyed flying so much that if there were some kind of ride, maybe made of metal and shaped like a giant wheel with seats on it, and if that ride gave you the feeling that you were flying—wind in your face and enormous, expansive open space between you and the earth—you would love that ride and you would ride that ride every day. Now imagine being a bird, still, and pretend that you started working for a company that happens to own that ride—pretend the company is in the business of hiring birds—but they told you no one that works for the company is allowed to ride it. Imagine that, as a bird, you were slated, instead, to hang up fliers around the company's premises, and the fliers that you would hang up (using a stapler, one that could accommodate a bird's wing) would feature high-resolution pictures of countless birds riding that very ride, all with ecstatic looks smattered across their faces. Imagine seagulls laughing as if time and illness and deterioration were non-existent, that everything was perfect and life was wholesome and complete once you took a seat on the ride. Imagine pigeons or orioles or

blue jays, all with the same overjoyed laughter, leaving only with an enchanting nostalgia for their time on the ride, which could be revisited at any point in which they desired, because none of them had to hang up fliers with a stapler. Imagine one bird in particular, maybe a sparrow or a dove, and pretend that he loved the ride so much that he asked you, the bird with the broken wing, to take a picture of him as he laughed and giggled and experienced ultimate happiness from the top of the ride. *How was it?* you would ask this little bird-boy, the collar of his shirt still wet from tears of joy. *It was everything I'd ever want from a ride and more*, he'd answer, shortly before his bird-mother beckoned him back over to the cotton candy stand.

Tom's Outrage, a.k.a. Reverting from the Bird Metaphor and Back to the Story:

Tom was outraged. He said as much to his father, which was ill-received, probably because his father told him originally that he should work for the bank or the mill yard. It was so ill-received that Tom's father may have never really respected Tom again, despite the fact that Tom would go on to live a very modest life, owning both a modest house against a treeline, and a modest store that sold modest office-supplies to its modest customers. If you asked Tom today, he might recall a particular moment when his father seemed most upset, an argument about mowing the lawn that ended in a shout: *I don't care if your fucking hands hurt from stapling fliers; you'll go mow the goddamn lawn, and you'll like it!*

Tom, Who Went to Mow the Goddamn Lawn, but Didn't Like It:

That day, Tom started up the gas lawnmower with a fervent jerk, jolting the pull cord so hard that his arm, had it not been attached to the socket of his shoulder, would have flown across the yard and landed somewhere in the woods. Had Tom been a bird, his wing would have snapped from the pull of the cord, wing-feathers flying out in different directions and landing scattered around the mower.

The Next Day Back at Work:

Even though he finished mowing the lawn like his father asked, Tom's foolish yank on the pull cord had left his arm deflated like a balloon animal that had popped in the greasy hands of a child. Tom tried to ignore the pain because thinking about it reminded him that his father made him mow the lawn, which reminded him that the lawn had grass on it, which reminded him that grass existed in life, which reminded him that the Ferris wheel was situated on a plot of yellowing grass, which reminded him that he wasn't allowed to ride the Ferris wheel, and that all he could do was watch it revolve, endlessly, children screaming and laughing and crying from laughing. Being reminded

of all of these things in short succession caused Tom to miss the mark when stapling a flier (one featuring a high-resolution child smiling like a jester on painkillers), stapling his thumb instead.

The Staple that Broke the Bird's Wing (Tom's Thumb):

Tom spent the next hour in the infirmary-tent with a bandage wrapped around his hand. The tent was red on the outside, but the inside tent-walls were white, which seemed almost red when the sun shined on them. Tom noticed that the blood on his bandage, which was localized to the area surrounding his thumb, was a similar color to the insides of the infirmary-tent, and this made him happy for some reason, though he didn't know why.

An Itemized List of What Tom Did Know:

- He was tired of working at the carnival.
- His father preferred his lawn be short.
- No place needed *that* many fliers, no matter how many screaming children inhabited it.
- He still loved Ferris wheels.
- His spirit animal might be a bird with clipped wings.
- He still had a stinging hatred for anything that needed stapling.

Tom's Next Course of Action:

After leaving the infirmary tent, Tom knew that he couldn't watch children enjoying the Ferris wheel from afar anymore, at least not without letting off some steam.

Tom's Guerilla-Flier Warfare:

The format was simple, yet decisively destructive. Preparatory Phase: wake up earlier than Father and drive to the fence that surrounds the perimeter of the carnival. Without catching your pant leg on the top wire of the chain-link, climb into the park and locate kiosk. Step One: remove previously stapled flier (with staple remover, so as not to leave behind tracks). Step Two: flip previously stapled flier upside down and place firmly back on board. Step Three: staple flier in all four corners, precisely over old staple marks. Repeat for every flier that currently exists inside the carnival compound.

Judgment Day, or Why Tom Was Asked to Leave the Carnival and Never Come Back:

Every flier-wall and kiosk in the park was now home to roughly twenty or thirty fliers, each one flipped upside down and stapled back on the board. The scene was almost mystical at first, crowds of folks standing around and staring at walls, heads tilted to the right or the left just enough so they could barely make out what the flipped over fliers were saying. Stagnant. The crowds, unmoving, staring in confusion, like packs of pigeons—necks craned—looking at loaves of bread locked behind display cases.

What Tom Imagined the Packs of Pigeons Might Be Thinking:

“Why are they all flipped upside down?”

“Who would do this?”

“Is this some sort of strange joke?”

“That’s a really bizarre marketing technique.”

“I’m actually pretty good at reading words upside down.”

“Fucking carnival people.”

His Father’s Outrage and the Ensuing Punishment:

To say that his father was outraged would be severely undercutting the tone of his voice when he yelled at his son. The dialogue, which Tom has attempted, from time to time, to reconstruct from memory, may have gone something like this:

Father: I told you to work for the fucking bank, and now you go and fuck up your job at a carnival.

Tom: But all I was doing was stapling paper—

Father: —even worse; how could you fuck up a job stapling paper?

Tom: I—

Father: No. To say that I am outraged would be severely undercutting the tone of my anger.

The ensuing punishment, which was fitting in the eyes of his outraged father, would have Tom stapling a stack of 200 fliers around local businesses in West Harmon.

What the Fliers had Written on Them:

Are you in need of hopeless amounts of document filing? Need stacks of paper collated and stapled? Need someone to brew your coffee or deliver your mail? Call Tom Callaway for all of your office assistant needs!
**minimum wage requested.

The Man Tom Worked for, and His Particular Tendency to Prefer Most Things Stapled:

If Tom's new employer were a bird, he would've likely been an albatross, or some other large, swooping bird with webbed feet and a slow demeanor. When they first met—Tom, slouching and clearly unhappy with his father's punishment—Mr. Lambert requested that Tom take off his shoes when he enter the den of his one-story townhouse, but suggested he wear shoes when walking through his kitchen, because his dog was old and didn't always make it outside before it had to urinate.

The Time that Tom became an Amateur Playwright:

Tom's deadline for the assignment was written on a note left by the refrigerator:
I need these 47 manuscripts stapled and shipped to the following addresses by 3 p.m.
 –Mr. Lambert

Tom never asked his employer what he did for a job, but figured he was some sort of playwright, since what he was stapling seemed to be a script for a play. Silently, while stapling each copy in the left-hand corner, he presumed that Mr. Lambert wasn't very good at his craft, and that most (if not all) of the documents he was mailing would inevitably be rejected. He even went as far as to add small "suggestive" changes to the lines he felt were unnecessary or gaudy. One change that he enjoyed in particular was a small edit to the main character's opinion of his father:

Sampson: (looking left, offstage) My father is an ~~honorable man~~. embarrassment to his community.

The Time that Tom became a Secret Agent:

After tiring of tweaking lines in Mr. Lambert's scripts, Tom wrote down the address of an art house and kept it in a drawer in his bedroom for safe keeping.

The Time that Tom became an Amateur Art Director:

Dear Mr. Lambert,

*We would like to inform you that we have thoroughly read over your script and, although we do not have space for it in our current company, we would like to formally commission a one-act play that will run in your town in roughly two months. You, of course, will have editorial rights over the entire production, but we would like to **strongly** suggest that the setting take place at a carnival downtown...*

A Note Left by Mr. Lambert, upon Receiving Acceptance:

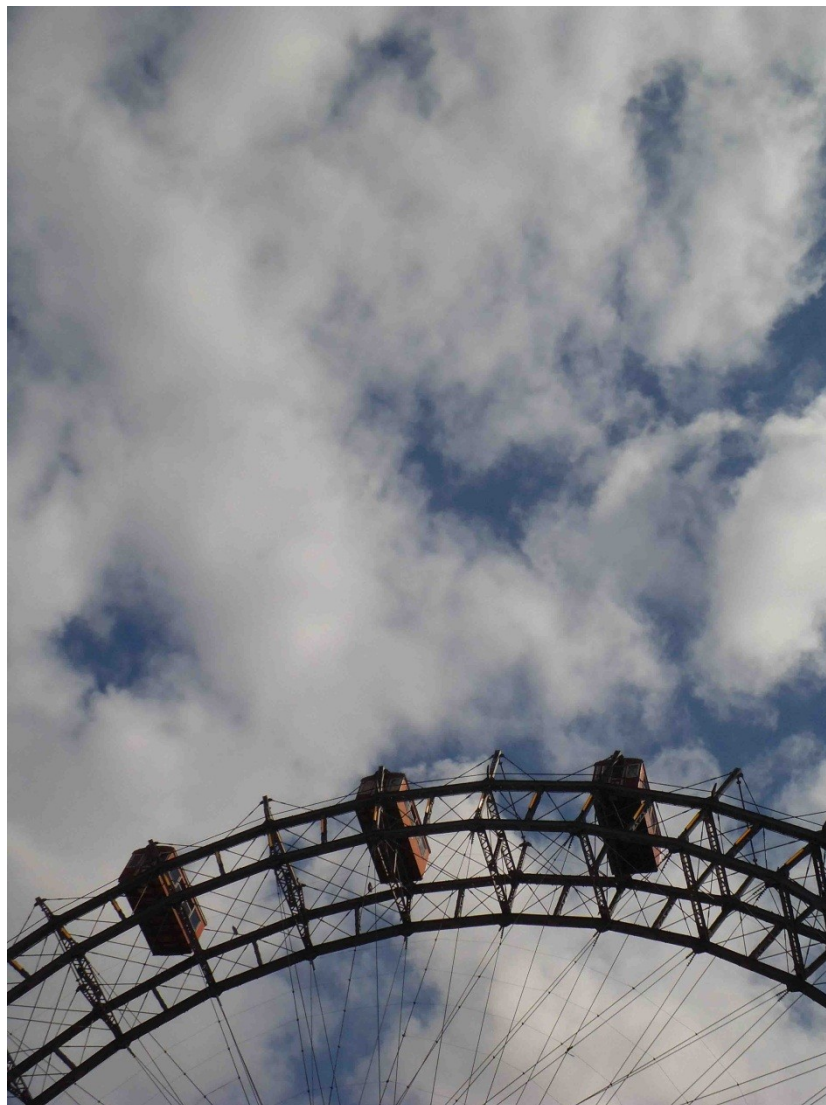
Tom,

A theatre company wants me to put on a one-act about a kid riding a Ferris wheel. I'm not exactly sure why, but they asked that the main character be a scrawny teenager. They used the word "bird-like."

Tomorrow you and I are going down to the carnival at the edge of town to scope out the scenery.

Why Tom May Have Been Ecstatic with the Chance to Star in a Play:

Imagine you are bird. Imagine, slowly (while being pensive and humming bluesy tunes), that you have been in a cage for years and that through the bars of the cage you can see the sunlight. Through those bars you can see sky and trees and other birds who are happily gliding from branch to telephone line to branch. Now, imagine that the hinges to the door of the cage have rusted almost all of the way through, and, with a swift push of your bird wing, the door will fall to the carpet.



Tom and His “Fear of Heights”:

Tom had finally returned to the carnival grounds. Mr. Lambert ordered him not only to stand next to the Ferris wheel (to see if his complexion and stature felt right when juxtaposed), but to get on it. To sit in one of its cradled seats and ride it, round and round, until he knew that Tom was *exactly* right for the part as the main character, in a play that would *define his role as an influential American playwright*. If asked today, Tom wouldn't be able to recall the exact dialogue between him and his employer because of the twanging pain of excitement that collected in his gut. If he had to guess, it may have gone something like this:

Mr. Lambert: I'm going to need you to get on the ride, Tom.

Tom: But, what if I'm afraid of heights?

Mr. Lambert: I don't care what you're afraid of.

Tom: but—

Mr. Lambert: —look, Tom, I need to make sure we do this perfectly; this play could very well define my role as an American playwright.

The Quiet Moment on the Ferris Wheel:

Tom sat, beaming in one of the blue cradled seats, and waited for the ride to start. He'd never noticed the fabric of the seats before—rough burlap with a paisley stitching—and thought about how they must be water-resistant to ward off rain drops. The metal bar that dropped from above his head clasped the lower half of his body in the seat at his waist. In moments, the ride began to move, Tom's feet shuffling anxiously around on the steel floor. Rising towards the sky, Tom's cart swung back-and-forth slightly. He thought about all of the times he'd watched from a distance as the carts made the same swaying motion. He could see Mr. Lambert down below, standing on the yellowing grass, looking back up at him as he climbed higher and higher into the sky—

The Still Moment on the Ferris Wheel:

—and then the ride stopped. Tom thought it was just a regular stop, the ride operator hitting the red button and letting a few passengers off, with new smiling children piling on in place. But he noticed a crowd of folks standing at the foot of the wheel, glancing up in what seemed like his direction, although he couldn't be sure. As he waited, Tom looked out across the sky, across the carnival grounds and across what he could see of his town. He could see crows perched on telephone lines, pigeons pecking at spilled popcorn next to a trash bin near the entrance.

The Man Yelling with a Megaphone:

Man with Megaphone: Son—can you hear me? (turning to his left)—is this thing on? How do you turn this on...

Tom, who redirected his gaze from the birds and the sky down to the crowd, could hear the man with the megaphone.

Tom: I can hear you.

Man: Okay—okay, that’s good. Are you alright? Everything is going to be fine; it’s important you know that everything will be fine.

Tom: I don’t know what you’re—

Man: —A bolt in your seat (holding up a large, metal bolt) has detached and fallen from the ride.

Tom: What do you mean a bolt has—

The Loud Moment on the Ferris Wheel:

It happened in seconds, at least from what Tom can remember, his cradled chair making a loud metal *creeeek* noise, and then a *clannnnnk* to accompany it. And then he was upside down, the metal squeaking, his cart swaying, hanging on by what seemed like one single bolt. The bar that clasped across Tom’s waist was the only thing keeping him from plummeting to the ground below. To say that his heart was racing (which Tom can remember telling his father later that day) would have been a gross exaggeration, if it weren’t entirely true. In the distance he could see the crows, upside down on the telephone line, the pigeons pecking strays of popcorn as the surface of the carnival grounds pretended to be sky for once.

The Moment Tom had (What He Would Later Call) an Epiphany:

While the crowd anxiously waited for Tom’s cart to tumble, haphazardly, to the yellowing grass below, he could just barely make out the face of a kiosk in the distance. On it, he could see various fliers of children riding the Ferris wheel, but one flier in particular stuck out as he hung upside down: A high-resolution photo of a giddy child with a cone of cotton candy in his hand. The picture, which Tom saw right-side-up, was one of the last few fliers he’d posted upside down from his days working for the carnival.

The Conclusion, Hidden behind a Framed Newspaper Clipping:

It took the firefighters 45 minutes to safely remove Tom from his cart, a sight that was caught by a freelance journalist who happened to be taking his son to the carnival that day. In the picture, Tom seemed calm, collected, something that was noted in the caption beneath the photo:

Local teenager, Tom Callaway, 16, pictured here as firemen released him from the broken, dangling seat of a Ferris wheel. When asked what was going through his head at the time of the accident, he answered: “Staplers—just staplers.”

Editor's Note

An Upside Down Flier... was our September Story of the Month.

Photograph: *Clouds* © Chris Fradkin

My Other House Is Cleaner by Michael Schrimper

Mary held up a long, tattered blue nightgown for her mother-in-law, Louise, to see. "Trash, or Community Closet?"

Louise pressed the fingers of her right hand to her lips. "Ooh, I like that." Her blue eyes glittered. "Keep."

Mary sighed at the old woman, who was sitting in bed with her left arm in a sling. The woman had fallen last week, tripped over a stuffed animal—a little polar bear with a Coke bottle in its paws—and here she was, refusing to let anything leave her overcrowded, junk-filled house. Mary balled up the nightgown and threw it into the pile for Community Closet donations.

"Look at that fabric; I'll use it in a quilt," Louise said, pointing frantically at the discarded garment. Her finger jabbed the air. "Pick that back up. Don't get rid of it."

Mary held up a blue tin box that said CHECKERS in black scrawl down the side. "This?"

Louise reached for it with her free hand. "Let me see."

Mary shook her head and leaned down to drop the tin in the donation pile.

"I mean it," Louise said sharply. "Let me see that."

"Keep isn't an option, Lou. This stuff has to go."

"Okay, all right," Louise said, rolling her eyes. "Just let me see the damn tin."

Mary handed it to Louise and the old woman gasped. "Oh...I played this in 1948 with my sister," she said. "When there was a polio quarantine."

"We were bored, so we laid a clothesline across the yard, you know, to show where our property ended and the neighbor boy's began. We thought it'd make it okay for us to play Checkers with him, with him on his side and we on ours. We put the picnic table right over the line."

Mary crossed her arms. She grunted softly.

"Oh, have a heart."

At this, Mary stepped away from the bed and spread her arms the width of the crowded room. "You can't hold onto all these things, Lou. It's not healthy." She pointed at Louise's arm in the sling. "Do you want that to happen again?"

"Oh, Christ, you'll hold my clumsiness against me?"

"You know what happened, Lou. You tripped and broke your shoulder, because your house is a mess."

"Not true. That is not true."

The old woman frowned and looked down at the tin in her hands. She turned it over and strained to pry it open. Mary watched. With a tinny belch, the tin exploded, and red and black plastic coins flew onto the quilt.

Mary left the room shaking her head, and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. She put a glass under the faucet and turned it on, filled up the glass and drank it all

while standing there. Then she filled another one and looked out the window into the yard. There was a crystal ball on a rusty iron spoke stabbed into the grass, leaning at an extreme angle, as though it had been thrown lawn-dart-style into the ground. Nearby, on the other side of a spiky yucca plant, was a twelve-foot alligator made of logs that were nailed together and spray-painted green.



What would happen when Louise died, and she and Allen, her husband, inherited all this? Where would they put all of this junk? Where would it all go?

She looked down and picked a black string off her gray T-shirt and dropped it into the sink. She was accustomed to leaving Louise's house speckled with dust or lint, the way a potter might leave his worksite splattered in clay. Today, her outfit for the ruining was the gray T-shirt, a pair of khaki pants, and brown suede hiking boots with orange laces. As usual, she'd put her brown hair back in a braid. It was long and held in place by a rectangular sterling silver clip.

A loud cough came from the bedroom and Mary turned and stepped away from the window.

"You all right, Lou?" she called.

"Fine," the old woman said gravely, two rooms over.

Mary walked slowly back toward the bedroom and when she entered, she noticed the room smelled of dirty socks and Vaseline.

The old woman coughed again and the wicker headboard rattled behind her. She shakily pulled a pill from her pocket and slung it into her mouth. Mary saw this and held out her own glass of water, but Louise shook her head and used her paper cup of Diet Coke to wash it down.

"Which pill was that?" Mary asked when the woman had finished.

"Hmm?" Louise said. "What did you say?"

"Which pill did you just take?"

"My three o'clock."

"What is the doctor's name for it, Lou?"

"Hell if I know."

Mary looked at Louise scoldingly. "You have to start organizing your life," she said. "You have to. What if you were looking for your pills in an emergency and couldn't find them?"

"I know where everything is in this house. It might look messy to you, but I know where everything is."

"I don't know about that, Lou."

"I know where everything is," the old woman said again.

Mary sighed and knelt onto the blue carpet and began sorting through a Tupperware container filled with magnets.

Mary had never known anyone who required as many pills as Louise required, and the woman refused help with her medicine—"If this isn't my business, I don't know what is," she'd say—and it drove Mary insane. She'd once bought Louise one of those SMTWTFS plastic pill holders, and Louise had removed her pills from it and put buttons in it instead.

The old woman was diabetic, had been all her life, and recently her doctor had put her on medication for hypertension. The target organs were her heart and kidney. Mary had tried to get Louise out walking with her once or twice a week, aware that exercise would only help, but then Louise had broken her shoulder. Mary wondered what the cost of Louise's stubbornness would be. Maybe they'd have to put her in a nursing home before too long. Maybe, she thought with sudden vertigo, all this junk would be her and Allen's responsibility in just a short while.

The magnets were cold and rubbery in her hands, and she exhaled a long breath and took a moment to look at them. One magnet was round, shaped like a red and white target. It read, "I miss my ex-husband. But my aim is improving."

She looked up at the old woman, who was now sitting against the headboard with her eyes closed. Her thin, liver-spotted hands were folded in her lap. Mary read another magnet. It was a glittery pink cupcake, and it said: "'Desserts' is 'stressed' spelled backwards." Mary felt a smile play across her lips.

She picked up a floppy brown magnet shaped like a log cabin with a porch. It said, in cursive black letters on top of the cabin: "My other house is cleaner."

One hour later, at four o' clock, Louise officially laid down for her nap. Mary verified that the old woman had her Diet Coke and pills on her bedside table. Then she went out front the door, crossed the yard and sat in her Subaru in the driveway.

She'd been doing this for one week now, coming to Louise's house in the afternoon to remove things from it. And each and every day, she'd left empty-handed. The woman refused to part with her belongings. Mary didn't understand it. Louise even kept the paper cups she'd get from her favorite lunch place, the Pine Bog Diner, whenever she asked for her Diet Coke "to go", which was every time. She then stacked the new cup on top of old cups, and would carry around a drink with five empty paper cups stacked under it.

Louise's compulsion had gone relatively unnoticed—or, at least, unworried about—for the better part of thirty years, up until she'd fallen. Then Mary had stepped in. She knew that Allen, Louise's son, yielded too easily to his mother and wouldn't force her to do something she didn't want to do. So Mary, a registered nurse and former river guide, had impartially recognized the hazard and was acting to dismantle it.

She looked out the window at the low, dark brown house fringed with black mulch flowerbeds. Maybe she could go inside when Louise wasn't home, and take things out. But Louise was basically bedridden now that her shoulder was broken. Maybe when Louise was asleep, Mary thought.

She was asleep now, wasn't she?

Mary pulled a big cardboard box from the backseat of the Subaru and carried it around the back of the house. Stealing from her mother-in-law, she thought. She shook her head. She was doing it for the woman's own good. It was like when a patient protested the needle that carried their vaccination. Of course they didn't *want* it to poke into their skin; but how else would they be protected?

She entered through the back door and left the box beside the door. Then she moved into the house, stepping swiftly and stealthily from room to room, grabbing things and carrying them back to the box. A brass kaleidoscope; a Raggedy Ann doll; a mobile with the birds of southern Indiana dangling from its twisted strings. A red basket; a bundle of wheat tied together with suede string; a stack of old *National Geographics*. All of it went inside the box.

She kept her selections scattered and random, thinking that if she nicked too many things from one room or of one type, Louise would notice they were missing.

In The Oriental Room, which was Louise's name for the guest bedroom, Mary nabbed three Chinese fans and a Great Wall-themed wall calendar that was ten years out-of-date; and in The Strawberry Bathroom, which was Louise's name for the guest bath, she collected a set of red towels from under the sink and a tiny wooden strawberry that reminded her of those egg-shaped Russian dolls that stacked inside each other. It rattled when she shook it.

The junk this woman had! Mary couldn't believe it.

When the box was full, she carried it out the back door and quickly crossed the yard to her car, nearly tripping on the log alligator as she went. "Jesus," she said, catching

herself. She stood upright and looked around at the neighbors' houses, and saw that all was quiet. Their doors were shut and their grassy yards were empty.

With fresh resolve, she reached down and grabbed a plaster goose by the neck and carried it with her.

Driving away, she looked back at Louise's, knowing the woman would soon wake and watch the six o' clock evening news in bed. She moved her eyes back to the road and turned on the radio, the shadows of trees rolling across the windshield, a grim expression planted on her face.

"Her things just...depress me," Mary said to Allen that night in bed. Her arms were folded across her chest as she lay supine. "That whole house depresses me."

"The Museum of the Empty Life," Allen murmured, his face buried in the pillow. "Open year-round."

They were in bed early; had each laid down an hour before with no intention of getting under the covers. But here they were.

Allen lifted his head. "We—you—are allowed to make jokes at her expense. You're saving her life."

Mary laughed. "I wouldn't go that far."

He rolled away, onto his side. "Well. You're helping her."

Mary nodded. She stared at the ceiling.

"Thank you for that," he said.

She lay there in silence, her eyes not leaving the drywall ceiling, and, after a minute, she noticed the tension in her body, as though she were having a revelation. She took a deep breath and let her shoulders ease onto the pillow. Allen wasn't aware of what she'd done today, and she had no intention of telling him. No, she would keep her surreptitious errand to herself. Silently she wondered if she'd have to do it again the next day. She sighed and looked over at Allen. He was breathing deeply and slowly, asleep at his usual inconceivable pace. She closed her eyes and then, after a minute, reached for Allen and pulled herself against him.

As she fell asleep, the magnets floated through her mind, all their sayings crisscrossing one another. "I like to cook with wine. Sometimes I even put it in the food." "I like my men like I like my chocolate: dark and rich." The slogans took on dry, mocking voices. Then, emerging above the others, she could hear her own voice, much raspier and older, speaking to her from the future. It wheezed. "My other house is cleaner."

The phone was like a brick through the window. Then it rang again. With a groan, she woke and reached for the receiver in the dark. "Hello?" she said, her voice hoarse, as if it had become the one in the dream.

"What have you done with my fans?"

Mary sat up in the bed. She rubbed her eyes. "Louise?"

"Mary, what have you done with my fans?"

Just then Allen stirred and rolled toward her. "Who is it?" he grumbled.

Mary patted his arm and climbed out of bed with the cordless receiver between her ear and shoulder. She exited the room and closed the door behind her.

"Hel-lo?" Louise hollered on the line.

"Hi, hi," Mary said. "I'm here."

"Well?"

"I donated them to Community Closet, Lou."

"You gave them away?"

Mary cleared her throat. "I did. You don't need them, Lou."

"You're stealing my things? You're stealing from me? What kind of nurse do you think you are?"

Mary padded down the dim hallway, away from the bedroom door. "I'm not stealing from you. You have to understand, Lou. If you can't help yourself; I'm going to step up and do it for you."

"Oh, for the love of God."

Mary could hear Louise's ragged breath on the line, could hear what sounded like cabinets opening and closing.

"What are you looking for, Lou?" Mary asked.

Louise grumbled. There were more slamming noises.

"Lou?"

"I can't find my damn nine o' clocks."

"Your pills, Lou?"

"You probably gave them away," Louise said sharply.

"Where are you looking?" Mary stopped and leaned against the wall at the end of the hallway. "Calm down. They're there somewhere, Lou."

"No..." Louise sounded far away, as if she'd put the phone on the floor. "No they...they aren't here." She picked up the phone again. Her voice was loud.

"Goddammit, Mary, did you throw out my pills?"

"Of course I didn't."

"You did. They're not here where I left them. They're not here."

"Take a deep breath, Lou. Do you want me to come help you find your pills?"

"No. No. I know you threw them out." Then the old woman said, "And my *towels*..."

Mary cringed. "I'll come over there, Lou. If need be, we can call your doctor and get you some more pills."

The old woman muttered imprecations.

"I'm hanging up now, Lou. I'll be over there in a few minutes."

Back in the bedroom, she hung up the phone furtively. She was pulling on her khakis in the dark when Allen rolled over to face her. "What's going on?"

"It's...your mother," she said, putting her waterproof Timex on her wrist. "She can't find her pills."

Allen sat up in the bed. "What? Should I go with you?"

"No. There's no need."

"What time is it? I'll go..."

"No; it's fine. I've got it. It's ten-thirty," she said, fixing the sheets on her side of the bed.

Allen eased back down. "I thought it was the middle of the night."

She walked around to the bottom of the bed. "I'm going," she said, squeezing his foot through the blanket. "I'll be back in half an hour."

She knocked on Louise's door and noticed how cold it was outside. She wasn't normally out at this time. She peered across the dark yard and could hear the dirty, maraca-like sound of cicadas and the susurrating splats of a lawn sprinkler. "Lou," she said loudly, pushing the doorbell with her finger. She heard it chime somewhere in the house. She pushed it again.

She raised her hand to the heavy brass knocker when the glass panels on either side of the door filled with light. She righted herself as Louise opened the door.

The old woman was silhouetted against the foyer light.

"What in the hell is wrong with you?"

"Hi, Louise," Mary said gently.

The woman only stared at her, and after a minute Mary said, "Are you all right?"

"No; I most certainly am not."

"Did you find your pills?"

Louise just shook her head.

Mary crossed her arms and, after a moment, looked down at her feet. She had never noticed the welcome mat before, this one that was now under her shoes. She ever-so-slightly adjusted her feet so she could read it. "The witch is in." She smiled into one cheek.

She lifted her head and saw Louise standing there rigidly. She said, "I'm—"

But Louise held up her hand.

Then, slowly, the old woman stepped aside and gestured into the foyer. "Just go find those goddamn pills," she said.

Mary nodded and stepped inside.

Editor's Note

My Other House Is Cleaner was our October Story of the Month.

Photograph: *Outside Looking In* © Chris Fradkin

Stella of the Angels by Christopher DeWan

I lost focus so I went to a fortune teller. I picked the first one within walking distance who took credit cards. She asked me to hold out my hands, and as soon as she touched me, I got a hard-on. Within ten minutes we were fucking on the sofa. "You've got a really strong love line," she said.

I moved in that night. That was three years ago.

* * *

(Did she see it coming? I always wondered, and I never knew.)

* * *

Her name was Stella Luna, like the children's book. That's what it said on the sign in her parlor. Her real name was Stella DeAngelis, but she changed it. "I thought Luna sounded more mystical," she explained.

"More mystical than, 'From angels'?"



I asked if she came from a long line of psychics. "My daddy was a plumber," she answered. Then she laughed. "But he made a pretty good living at the track."

* * *

"You're going to struggle a while," Stella told me, as we lay naked on her sofa, she finally reading my palm,

"because you're a seeker."

"What do I seek?"

She ran her finger along my palm but didn't answer.

"What do I seek?"

"That which you don't have," she said.

"That's obvious. That's everyone. That's

tautological."

"I don't know what that word means."

She knew the future but she didn't know that certain truths follow from their atomic propositions.

"You're going to go home and pack a bag of things," she said, "and move in with me."

"Is that a prediction? Or just something you want?"

"It's your destiny."

* * *

I went home, packed a bag, and moved in with her, which was a shitty thing to do, because I'd lived with a woman at the time who often told me that she loved me.

"I'm moving out. It's my destiny."

I paid an extra month's rent and let her keep my share of the deposit, and since she was justified in saying all of those bad things about me, I never tried to stop her. I still think about her sometimes.

* * *

Stella and I took a trip to Vermont. We rented a car and took turns driving up the coast through the rain. Halfway through Connecticut, she said, "Pull over."

I stopped the car, and she unbuckled my pants and climbed on top of me, somehow squeezing into the space between me and the steering wheel.

Up ahead, a tractor-trailer jack-knifed and killed twenty-two people—the largest single auto accident in Connecticut history.

"Did you know?" I asked her.

"I just wanted to fuck," she answered.

* * *

"Do you believe in predestiny? Are our futures written?"

She looked at me like I'd questioned gravity. "Of course." She didn't understand why her answer put me in a three-day sulk. "Do you ever think of killing yourself?" I asked.

"That's stupid."

* * *

"What do they say?" I asked.

She looked at me impatiently.

"When I read your palm," she explained, "I am reading your palm."

"That's tautological."

"But when I read the cards, I am reading the cards. And the cards are reading you. Do you understand?"

"Not at all. Why does a random shuffle of cards offer meaning about my life?"

"Right? Why does a random shuffle of events, or a random shuffle of jobs, or a random shuffle of girlfriends, offer meaning about your life? Exactly."

"So what do the cards say?"

She looked at them quietly for a while. She didn't like telling my fortune. Or maybe she just didn't like my fortune.

"The cards are kind of hard to read tonight. I'll look at them again tomorrow."

"I want my money back," I told her.

"Then you should have paid me."

* * *

She held a bag in her hand and she told me she was leaving. She gave me an extra month's rent, and said I should keep her share of the deposit.

"I've loved you," she said. "I'll always love you."

"Did you see this coming?" I asked.

"Did you see this coming?" I asked. "Because I didn't see this coming."

But I was shouting at the door. She was already gone.

* * *

We were lying on the sofa, and she was kissing my hand. "What am I seeking?" I asked her. We were both so relaxed, the way lovers are. "I don't know," she answered.

"What are you seeking?"

"I don't know," I told her. "I don't know."

Editor's Note

Stella of the Angels was our November Story of the Month.

Photograph: *Shuffle* © Christopher DeWan

"So then I go, 'There's no way this is working out. You're like here, Kris,'" she says, her left palm one bookend, "and I'm like here," her right hand the opposing bracket.

"Miss Kim," the on-call manicurist gently chides. Kim relinquishes her left hand to the woman's care.

We're in Kim's dressing room, a staging area between the master bedroom and a gallery-sized closet. Wearing a silk nightgown that conforms to her many curves, Kim sits at a narrow mahogany table while the manicurist performs weekly maintenance. The Korean woman makes herself available to Kim twenty-four/seven.

I'm in a French Empire chair a few feet to Kim's side. Even though I've got my digital recorder, I furiously take notes, mostly to keep from laughing.

An electronic hum sends Kim's iPhone skating across the table. She lifts it to her face with her free hand. Reading the text message as her lips form the words, she shrieks, "Oh my God! Rob's totaled the Porsche. He'd only had it, like, a month!"

The manicurist coos sympathetically. I feel an all-too-rare surge of religious faith.

This is the state to which I've been reduced. I'm Kim's Boswell, she my Dr. Johnson. Most writers would kill for this. I may kill because of it. Whether the victim will be Kim or myself is TBD.

It's our first full session. I got the job after ghosting for Lindsay, but that project was scrapped because Lindsay was almost always ripped or incarcerated. This time, if Kim and her people like the result, I may get an 'as told to' credit. In this line of work, that's the *ne plus ultra*. I'll finally be able to kiss the last of my student loans goodbye, a free woman.

Kim presses a key with her thumb and sets the phone back on one of the in-laid ivory accents on the tabletop. I have to admit, she's got incredibly dexterous thumbs. The manicurist has finished the left hand and begins the rough work of shaping the nails on the right with a diamond-embedded file.

"So, where was I?" Kim asks, wrenching her gaze from the iPhone. She has the attention span of a gerbil with ADHD.

"Uh, you and Kris." I hold my hands wide apart to put her back in the moment.

"Right. I mean, I just don't get it. One minute, we're totally on the same page, the next, I don't even know him. That's what I said to him: 'I don't even know you.' He's like, 'what are talking about?' Then I go, 'If you have to ask, it just shows you're not here for me.' Can you believe it?"

I shake my head. "No, it's totally unbelievable. So tell me, how did it make you feel? Personally, I can see it both ways. Because it was over so quickly, it's no biggie." I want to slap myself, but I know I need the right language to draw Kim out. "Or, because the wedding was so...fantabulous...and things didn't work out, it was just tragic."

The manicurist is done sculpting and begins painting. I can't see the design from where I'm sitting, but I know it's probably floral and intricate. I imagine the woman in another time and place decorating Fabergé eggs.

"Oh, God, I felt so mixed up. Like, I was really glad I made such a huge decision. I mean, it takes a really big person to say 'my bad.' But then I'm also really sad because I've let so many people down. I wonder, will I have to return the Vera Wang? And what about all the swag? It's weird to keep them, but it's weird to give them back. What do I do?"

Problems I can't imagine. "So, what did you decide?"

"Well, I didn't. Like there's no rush."

I sense we've finished plumbing the depths of her failed marriage. Maybe another tack, something to frame the rest of the discussion. "Kim, how do you want people to remember you?"

Kim turns to look at me. Her chiseled brows form perfect Roman arches. Was I too abrupt? "Remember me?" Hey, it's not like I'm about to croak, Steph.

"Hands here, please," the manicurist clucks. Kim lays her fingers over a lacquered cylinder before a tiny electric fan. In some respects, she's really quite patient.

"Sure," I respond, "but suppose you look back on your legacy in a few years. What do you want people to say about you?" This is inevitably what Kim's people will focus on. If I get this right, the rest should be a breeze.

Kim closes her eyes. Creases line her normally pristine forehead. She purses her lips. "Well, like a bunch of stuff. That I'm totally cool, of course. That I'm really hot. Yeah, hot, even when I'm older. That I'm a really super friend. Course, I want people to say I'm really open. I mean, how many people would let the TV cameras into their lives?"

Who would be stupid enough to watch it? I look up from my notes. Kim is staring at me. Her brows and the crease between them underline her forehead. Could I have said that out loud?

"Eun, that's enough for today."

"But Miss Kim, your nails, they need another few minutes for drying."

"It's OK. Remember, I need you Friday before Oprah."

Eun nods and heads off through the bedroom. In about five minutes, she'll reach the front door.

Kim rises and moves to the Chesterfield sofa that lies beneath an arched window. She sits, then pats the cushion to her right while looking my way. I'm being summoned.

I obey. As soon as I sit, she says, "You think I can't read that look on your face?"

Blood fills my cheeks. *I need this gig.* "Look? What look?" I ask.

"Contempt."

"Oh no, Kim, that's not..." She raises her hand to stop me. The lie is hard enough without the interruption.

"You think I'm a ditzy bitch, don't you?"

Doesn't everyone! "The thought never occurred to me."

"Too bad. You know how hard I work to cultivate this role? It's exhausting." Her voice has lost its breathy quality and is half an octave lower.

"Role?" I ask.

"Role. Do you have any idea why I chose you for this?"

Frankly, I was surprised I got the job. Now I wouldn't be shocked if I lost it. "Um, there was the Lindsay thing I worked on. Plus we have the same birthday, right?"

She shakes her head slowly. "Yeah sure, the experience helps. But it's the Yale degree, the essays. I've read nearly everything you've published. It convinced me that you could keep the myth going as well as anyone."

Myth? "But I thought you were exactly the way you looked on TV."

She beams. "Good! Then you *do* buy the ditzy bitch thing. Look, your job is to fill in the backstory for the character. It's a chance to use those creative skills. Don't you see that?"

Is she on the level? "Sure, I guess. So you're not really the way you look. And act?"

She sighs loudly. Dramatically. "You think Johnny Depp's a pirate? You believe he's got scissors on his wrists? You need to wise up, girl. Picture yourself as a screenwriter. Reality TV is the toughest genre. Real life is tedious, even mine. Your job—*our* job—is to engage," she says, fist against her heart. "I am the *raison d'être* for my public. I give them someone to lust after, to envy, to despise. You've got to help me make it happen."

I slink back in the sofa. I feel not just plain next to Kim, but dwarfed.

Kim puts a hand on my arm. "What did you think, you're some kind of third-rate Boswell?"

I look at my feet and mutter, "Well, yes."

"Then get with it!" she says, gripping my arm tightly. "You're in the molten core of the creative world. You'll either melt or erupt in glory. Cheer up and get with the program!"

What was I thinking? How could I have been so naïve? I sit up straight in my chair and smile weakly. "I'm sorry, I guess I made certain assumptions."

"It's OK. It takes a while to get into character. But you can do this. After all, we're a team!" Now she's smiling broadly.

"Right." I say. My eyes begin to tear.

"You OK, honey?" she asks gently. She leans over and puts her arms around my shoulders, my head nestling in her prodigious bosom. She caresses my upper back. "You know, Boswell made up half the shit he wrote."

"Totally," I whisper.

Editor's Note

Kim was our December Story of the Month.

Staff Selections

The following stories were selected by the editors. These stories represent our favorite and most memorable pieces from the past six months.

Laundry under cover of darkness by Andrew Battershill

Out front: a sign stretching the length of the storefront; a picture of a washing machine with two large, crossed eyes and two gloved hands, one waving; in the front cover (or mouth) of the machine three stylized waves curling backwards with black above them; below the washer “LAUNDROMAT” in fire-truck red, rounded script; a large window; below the front step a discrete collection of three day old pizza vomit.

* * *

Arthur: pointy black boots that clack loudly against the floor (which he looks at through the blurry bottom of his vision where his glasses end); a Silver Jews tee-shirt with a stick drawing of a man floating towards the moon on it; a giant empty laundry bag; three tall-boy cans of dark, harsh, locally brewed beer digging into the exact spot where his ribs stop; thirty-six puns that would be relevant; a shaved head leading into a thick –gets compliments from strippers and also elderly men- beard; a wristwatch hidden in a large leather strap; general stress; worry specific to the need to bring beer with him to do the laundry; worry about the strange urge to do laundry only under cover of darkness; mild, somewhat distant and whimsical sex urges; on the bottom of his right boot three day old pizza vomit.

* * *

Inside: walls just one shade darker than lime green; three white plastic seats; pink and white linoleum floors in a checkerboard pattern, reflected in the metal of the washers; a row of three unused machines with their open doors lined up, the wall visible through the glass covers as if through a retractable looking glass; behind the dryers, a set of triangular metal racks, their points facing towards each other like dinosaurs a second away from kissing.

* * *

Out front and above: formerly the sky, now a thickening, unified storm cloud filled with rain and bits of lightning, and one long, thin strip of animate drafting paper with a moving image of giraffe repeatedly giving birth on it; a metallic taste and smell, as if from blood.

* * *

Sergei: tight brown pants; a deep and abiding love for and interest in dads of all kinds; in his left hand, Nicole's right hand; in his right hand, laundry; a goatee; a deep and abiding love of hamburgers; brown leather shoes; a smile; direct, focused, whimsical sex urges; on the bottom of his shoes, only dirt; a passion for talk radio; in his laundry bag, seven pairs of socks; in his laundry bag, a trapped clothes-moth waiting for death and dreaming of candles; in his left hand, Nicole's right hand.

* * *

A Gucci Mane lyric that nobody in the Laundromat ever heard:
I stay high like giraffe pussy.

* * *

Nicole: a knee length yellow dress with a repeated print of sun flowers on it; in her right hand, Sergei's left hand; on her left hand, a smudge of blue ink, from drawing; in her left hand, a purse; worry about a lack of female friends; worry about how much Sergei talks about dads; an inability to control the volume of her voice when excited; a slight, interested squint directed towards the lined up rows of washing machine doors; affection occasioned by Sergei's love of dads; in her purse, a disposable camera, just in case; mild aesthetic interest in the drooping of Arthur's shoulders; deep and abiding questions about the nature and make-up of capitalist society; a smile; occasional slight biting of her lower, upturned lip; on her right front tooth, a small amount of bright red lipstick; on the flat rubber bottom of her left shoe traces of pizza vomit; in her right hand, Sergei's left hand.

* * *

Inside and Arthur: one nod; worry about what strangers will think of the beers now resting on the floor and inside of him as his clothes spin and spin around the soapy, liquid universe of the washing machine; envy of the clothes, spinning so slowly and steadily.

* * *



Inside and Nicole and Sergei: curiosity about the sadness under Arthur's glasses; gratefulness at having a girlfriend; gratefulness at having a boyfriend; remembering kissing; remembering kissing.

* * *

Inside and Arthur: sadness under his glasses; the urge to kiss Nicole; the urge to kiss many things and people; pink and white linoleum floors in a checkerboard pattern, reflected in the smooth metal of the washers; being so fucking alone all the time.

* * *

Inside and Nicole: the vague desire not to make a scene in the Laundromat; the physical processes of making out; the knowledge that one and one's boyfriend are making a scene in the Laundromat.

* * *

Inside and Sergei: the knowledge that one and one's girlfriend are making a scene in the Laundromat; the physical processes of an ardent erection forming against the painful front zipper of his pants.

* * *

Inside and Arthur: feeling gross about watching Nicole and Sergei make out; the physical processes of a slight, creeping erection down his pant leg; the knowledge that one is a semi-erect man doing his laundry, alone with beers, and in that sense making a scene in the Laundromat; a stick drawing of a man floating towards the moon.

* * *

Inside and Nicole and Sergei: stopping kissing; apologizing to Arthur with her eyes and shoulders; foregoing apologizing to Arthur and instead angling his lower half so as to disguise his erection behind Nicole's leg; a set or triangular metal racks, their points facing towards each other like dinosaurs a second away from kissing.

* * *

Inside and Arthur: accepting Nicole’s apology with a slight tip of a beer can; feeling sad about the beer can; tipping; tipping; feeling sad that the beer can is empty; the physical processes of opening the second beer; hating all coin operated machines.

* * *

Inside and Sergei: the way Nicole dances when she’s tired; in his left hand, change for the machine; in the machine, clothes; the weight of the empty laundry bag; linoleum; rage about 3D movies; not understanding anything about the lines in Nicole’s palm; the physical processes of not wanting to; tight brown pants; a goatee; a slightly different smile; dads; dads.

* * *

A postcard Arthur never received: on the front, a picture of a castle; on the front, the sky dark blue and cloudless moving towards light blue with long, stretched out wisps of dark clouds over the ocean; on the front, in large, white Helvetica: “Lisbon”; on the back, following a tiny, handwritten list of activities completed and sights visited, the words: “you have made a genuine and positive impact on my life.”; on the back, the initials of a woman with a small but noticeable patch of fuzz behind her ears that feels soft and warm and friendly against the back of one’s hand; on the back, the most futile postage stamp in the universe.

* * *

Inside and Nicole: kicking the toe of one shoe with the heel of the other; loving the feel of rubber; an idiomatic expression related to rubber and glue; suddenly, Sergei’s right hand; the meaning of the lines of one’s palm; focus; appreciation of the pointiness of Arthur’s shoes; the physical processes of dropping Sergei’s hand; appreciation of the pointiness of things, in general; playfulness with scale; a squint; the physical processes of walking towards the back; Arthur’s other beers; not quite pity, but something; not quite pity, but something in general.

* * *

A picture that Nicole never took: *Cat with a chainsaw and a heartbeat*; two small, cone-shaped containers for fountain pen ink capsules sitting on a beige desktop; beside them a mostly clear marble, inside the marble three twisting shades of yellow through the middle; beside the marble, half-developed and underexposed, the tip of Sergei's finger, sticky with dandelion juice, beginning to curl; outside the frame three obese men, two small portions of lentil pot-pie, a table, and three chairs.

* * *

Inside and Arthur: the physical processes of heading to the bathroom; remembering shitting his pants in the middle of a lake while partnered with the cutest girl at canoe camp; deciding to bring the beer to the bathroom; two white doors; the wall visible through the glass covers as if through a retractable looking glass.

* * *

The bathroom: walls painted bright yellow; black and white tile floor; wooden stall; a urinal; a sink tucked between the stall and the wall; above the sink, a soap dispenser; above the soap dispenser, in bold, small print:

you look
fine

* * *

Out front and above: rain and bits of lightning; a no longer vague metallic smell; cars; people; cats; dogs; a slightly more diluted collection of three day old pizza vomit; billions of humans rolling leisurely through the fallow field of life's successes and regrets.

* * *

Inside and Sergei and Nicole: a joking argument about hamburgers; the way Sergei looks at Nicole's lips; the way Nicole looks at anything; the way one's chest is supposed to feel when one meets someone new; tight brown pants; a repeated print of flowers; the way their chests still feel.

* * *

A tattoo on Gucci Mane's face that nobody in the Laundromat ever saw: An ice cream cone outline in black; three scoops of ice cream with a small amount of light blue shading at the bottom corners; two red lightning bolts coming out from the top; below the ice cream scoops, inside a neat, rectangular label the word *brrrrrr*.

* * *

Arthur and the bathroom: the physical processes of urinating; the physical processes of drinking a beer while urinating; a mat in place of a urinal cake; four puns; black and white floor tiles; the physical processes of being alarmed by how many veins are visible in his hand; the physical processes of zipping up and walking to the sink; the physical processes of remembering how much he once loved canoeing; the physical processes of feeling his beard; above the sink, a soap dispenser; the emptiness of the beer can; remembering the time the brakes went on his car; remembering feeling so relieved and grateful and interested in the way the wind felt on his forehead; the physical processes of crying; knowing everything about page layout; in his pocket, an asthma inhaler; the physical processes of dropping his glasses onto the tile floor; the physical processes of twisting his palm just a bit too deep into his eye; above the soap dispenser, in bold, small print:

you look
fine

* * *

* * *

The bathroom and Arthur: dropping his head his chest; the physical processes of washing his face; the desire to remember the bathroom and the tiles and the shape of Nicole's slightly upturned and in the process of being bitten lip; the knowledge that he must leave the bathroom; the physical processes of picking up his glasses; the knowledge that all bathrooms must someday be forgotten.

* * *

Out front and above: rain falling, as if in a single overwhelming blanket; a long thin strip of animate drafting paper with an image of a giraffe repeatedly giving birth on it, falling; a metallic taste and smell, as if from a lot of blood; a discrete collection of three day old pizza vomit, sliding away; three stylized waves curling backwards.

Inside and Nicole: the desire to skip; the physical processes of skipping; the knowledge that it would be silly and bloody and scary to skip through a window; the physical processes of stopping before the window and the blood and the water and smell of the blood and Sergei crying for the first time since she's known him; a sudden interest in grates; a sudden interest in drainage, in general.

* * *

Inside and Sergei: a smile; the physical processes of watching Nicole skip across the floor, imagining the pink tiles as lava and the white tiles as safe pieces of rock; the desire to follow Nicole; love of dads; fear of snow; in his left pocket four house-keys; a desire for fewer housekeys; the physical processes of walking to the window; the physical processes of not standing right next to Nicole but rather at the other end of the window smiling knowledgably at her.

* * *

Out front and above: an animate strip of drafting paper with a repeated image of a giraffe giving birth on it landing on the ground, falling flat and bouncing back up and falling flat and bouncing up again, as if propelled by an endless series of exclamation commas.

* * *

Inside and Arthur: never really letting the drafting paper out of sight; wonder about giraffes; wonder about rain; the knowledge that his timer went off ages ago; the physical processes of forgetting the last beer; a row of three unused machines with their doors lined up; opening both hands; a medic alert bracelet, its chain dangling loosely from his wrist; the desire to have his hands held, as if by parents.

Inside and Arthur: the physical processes of leaving the bathroom; the strong desire to stand at the window; the strong desire not to interrupt Nicole and Sergei's eye-contact; a slight imbalance from drinking; the sound of his boots against the floor; the physical processes of standing between them; the physical processes of loving rain; the sound of his boots stopping against the floor; rain; windows; a strong metallic smell; rain; windows; the sound of his boots; stopping.

* * *

Inside and Sergei and Nicole: looking from the drafting paper to each other, over Arthur's head; looking at Arthur; looking at the drafting paper; the desire to approach Arthur; the physical processes of approaching Arthur; two smiles; the wall just one shade darker than lime green; how soft Nicole's skin is.

* * *

Inside and Nicole and Sergei: the desire to take Arthur's hands on either side like dads and moms; the physical processes of taking Arthur's hands on either side like a dad and a mom; the wall visible through the lined up washing machine covers, as if through a retractable looking glass.

* * *

Inside and Arthur and Nicole and Sergei: the physical processes of holding hands; three smiles; the physical processes of looking; a set of triangular metal racks, their points facing towards each other like dinosaurs a second away from kissing.

Editor's Note

Laundry Under the Cover of Darkness was featured in our Post-Experimental Issue.

The telephone is ringing, its insistent tone demanding a response. It's December 16 and I know what I'm going to hear as I pick up the receiver: A recording of Vladimir Horowitz playing Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. I listen, longing to hear his voice on the other end. He never speaks, never breathes into the receiver. Twice a year a call from him. Twice a year Rachmaninoff.

#

He was so beautiful back then, his not quite adult body showing lithe musculature. He was tanned year round. His face was an open book for anyone interested in reading his emotions. It made him a magnet to the women he met. I was his best friend. He was the first man who ever told me that he loved me. I took it for what it was at the time, but his saying "I love you" brought stirrings inside of me, for more.

I always dated his former lovers. Friends chuckled, gossiped at this repeated "coincidence." But what I was not willing to admit at the time is that I loved to listen to his ex-girlfriends pine away for him. It allowed me to hear someone else give voice to what I was not ready to admit. We double-dated often. I made love to his exes with the erotic realization that he had kissed the mouth I was kissing, caressed the breasts I was caressing. That he had held the body I was holding heightened the passion of our lovemaking.

#

A telephone call. *Grab your board and head to Black's Beach.* We were 18 and feared nothing. The rain that day was so fierce that I could barely see the lane reflectors on the freeway heading in to La Jolla. When I reached the beach the waves were corrupted. Surfing was impossible. It was dangerous to even approach the water. The fact that he was panting hard and holding a broken surfboard gave proof that he had already tried. But he was grinning. When he was sure I was watching, he dropped his board, ran towards the pier south of Black's, and started to climb. He was yelling for me. I followed. Off the end of the pier. A thirty foot drop into chaos.

We survived, barely. He was bleeding from his forehead, the blood mixing with the rain and the darkness to form a purple stream that meandered down and around his right eye and onto his cheek where the effluence was blown into the sand. My wetsuit had been shredded. The skin on my knees and hands had been scraped off as the waves bounced me along the rocky ocean bottom, trying to decide whether I should stay there forever. My wrist was purple and already beginning to swell. He laughed. He looked at me so tenderly and said "I love you." I couldn't respond, the shock of hearing the words turned me into a statue. The date was December 16.

#

He hated bullies and couldn't stand any type of injustice. He often reacted in ways others would not. We were sitting at a table outside a bar in Ocean Beach one Saturday evening drinking our first legal beers, enjoying the afterglow of a day of too much salt

and sun on the skin. Down the street a man and a woman started screaming at each other. She was the better screamer. Their altercation accelerated and the man slammed his fist across the side of the woman's head, knocking her to her knees. The woman sobbed and begged for help. No one else moved. He never said a word, simply put his beer down and stood up from the table. He walked behind the beater, grabbed his arm, pinning it behind the beater's back, and slowly lifted the forearm up until there was an audible "pop" from the beater's shoulder. Beater no more. We left in a hurry after that. It was a long time before I went back to Ocean Beach.

#

At 22, he went to New York, hoping to become an architect. I moved to L.A. hoping to find myself. For two years we did not see each other, though I thought of him often. We spoke on the telephone occasionally, but a separation was creeping into our relationship beyond that of distance. It scared me. I told him of my fears. He told me that he would always be there for me. How prescient he was. I told him that I felt I was growing in L.A., but I was not sure into what. I could feel his warmth when he said that he was sure I was growing into something special.

He told me that New York and the entire east coast sucked for surfing. He missed his beach and his friends. The people in the city had an extraordinary capacity for cruelty. He felt he was discovering that he, too, had an extraordinary capacity for cruelty. Trying to surf Long Island was a waste of time and that when he had tried, the sand actually had snow on it. He never mentioned architecture. He told me he missed me terribly.

#

My relationships with women seemed to have no point without their connections to him. Sex lost its appeal. Women lost their appeal other than for communication. Five years after I'd moved from Los Angeles, I found myself in a Mexican restaurant, relating my loss of sexual appetite with a group of acquaintances over margaritas and chips when one looked at me with a question on his face and asked when I was going to drop the façade and admit I was gay. I was stunned. He followed up by pointing out that I was sitting in a predominantly gay restaurant with three gay men. He pointed out that I had chosen to live in Silver Lake. That all of my friends were gay. He finished by stating that he didn't even think I even knew a straight man.

But I did.

#

It was several months before I called him. Summer drifted in hot and blue without fog or clouds to mar the perfection. Beach weather. The waves were small, but well formed, full of promise.

My request to him was received exactly as I thought it would be. Money was tight, the cost of living in NYC sucked, but if it was important to me, he would leave the following day. He told me not to bother picking him up at LAX. He said that he would meet me at my apartment.

The doorbell rang and I ran to open it, to be greeted with – flowers. He said he wanted to bring wine, but had been in such a hurry to get here, that he just ran in to a local florist up the road to get something so as to not be empty handed.

I looked him over. New York hadn't been good to him. The tan was gone. The body, while still magnificent, seemed to have atrophied somehow. When I looked into his eyes, they seemed shuttered, hidden.

I asked him to open a bottle of champagne. He pulled from his jacket pocket CDs, classical music. Before New York, his idea of classical music had been old Eagles albums. Now he was pulling out the music that I had learned to love playing the piano. Holst, Greig, Tchaikovsky--and Rachmaninoff. My body started to hum as he put on Holst's The Planets.

We started to talk. I told him that I was gay. He asked me why it had taken me so long to realize it. He told me that he had been waiting for my self-acceptance. I was stunned. Did anyone other than me not know I was gay?

He told me that Rachmaninoff's third concerto was the most magnificent thing that he had ever heard. I put it into the player. I pressed the "repeat" button to make sure it went on indefinitely.

We began to discuss old times. We discussed surfing; we discussed the upcoming presidential elections. I told him that the scrublands around University City had become "La Jolla" condos. This upset him. He loved the manzanita and the open spaces almost as much as he loved the ocean. I edged closer to him, as close as I could without being discovered. I had engineered my first seduction. Or so I thought. After the third bottle of wine, he asked me if I had taken a lover.

I said no, not until now. And I kissed him. It was a long, lingering kiss, with passion on both sides. Our tongues darted to and fro between mouths for what seemed an eternity. It was the best kiss I had ever been a part of.

Then, he hit me hard on the mouth. His present to me. Scar tissue inside the lip that permanently warped my once serene smile into something close to ... a sneer. He seemed sober now, angry and indignant. He started yelling - how dare I corrupt our friendship?

Had there ever been a friendship? I screamed in anger how much I had always loved him. I told him he was as gay as I was. He called me a whacked out faggot. He told me I had poisoned our friendship beyond redemption.

I heard the door slam. It was 11:32 on June 5.

#

I flew to New York. I haunted the Columbia University campus, looking for him. I learned that at 25 he had abandoned architecture, had decided to study law and he was about to graduate.

I met him one day, striding towards the law school building on an overpass above Amsterdam Avenue. He looked at me as if I was a complete stranger. I fell to his feet and begged him to forgive me. He kicked me in the face. By the time I came to, it was too late

to follow him. A couple stopped to help me up, the man giving me a handkerchief to staunch the blood.

I found his address and went to his apartment only to discover that he had moved out. No one would give me a forwarding address. His telephone had been disconnected.

#

I flew back to Los Angeles and wrote letter after letter, trying to redeem myself in his eyes. With no other possibility open, I mailed my letters to his mother's house in University City. The letters never came back. But neither did a response.

Months passed.

Then one night I picked up the telephone in my apartment and was greeted by Rachmaninoff's Concerto number 3.

I screamed into the phone, but I received no answer, only the orchestra that swelled and crashed in response to the piano. The date was June 5.

On December 16 of the same year, as I was entering my apartment with a new friend I had met while drinking margaritas, the phone rang. I could hear the music spilling out from my receiver as I picked up the phone - Rachmaninoff. I hung up and I kicked my guest out.

#

At one point I tried to get the phone company to block the calls. But there were too few of them, they said. Twice a year? Pay your bill and go elsewhere those nights.

#

I watch him on the television being interviewed. His hair is brushed over the scar on his forehead he got surfing two decades ago. He is a famous attorney. He is rich. He has never married, though the tabloids occasionally link him to famous women. As he explains something to the reporter, I listen to his words, wishing to hear my name.

He still calls me twice a year.

Editor's Note

Disconnections first appeared in our July Issue.

Wilderness by Tawnysha Greene

After Daddy's job interview, he stays home, sleeps during the day, and Momma takes us to the park on these days where the playgrounds are empty, the kids still in school. My sister and I create obstacle courses through the playground, run across the moving bridge, hurl ourselves down the slide, swing across the monkey bars, and Momma times us on her watch, always tells us that we tied.

One day she doesn't watch us, sits alone on a picnic bench, her Bible open, hunched over the pages, a hand over her mouth, clenched in a fist. Her brows are furrowed, eyes full, and I know that Daddy didn't get the job.



We stay at the park for hours, until it's long past cold, and Momma's coat is dusty with snow, her hair speckled in white. She reads the Bible when she needs alone time, and we leave her be, play in the cold, a new game today, one in which we are in the wilderness, that we are lost, must forage for shelter, food. We call this game the end of the world.

We find fallen logs in the forest by the playground, long, smooth sticks covered in snow, drag them by the picnic benches, stack them big enough to hold Momma, my sister, me. The houses don't have doors, roofs, but the walls are strong.

When we're done, my sister and I lay in the snow, look up at the sky, watch as our breaths leaves our mouths, drift up past the trees, and I pray the way Momma does when she's scared, repeat the same words, so that God can hear me.

Editor's Note

Wilderness first appeared in our August Issue.

Photograph: *Spring Mirror* © Amanda Morris

Underwear and Leftovers by Brian Kayser

Sunday afternoon in November. Cold streaks of wind, ash-gray sky. Droplets of rain hit Lana's car. She slammed her trunk. She carried the last box to her apartment. The box was heavy, the weight not evenly distributed. Lana adjusted her hands around the edges, angled it against her stomach. She drew in a deep breath and walked towards the entrance of her small apartment complex, chipped paint exposing the old wood of the door. With her elbow she pressed the automatic door button.

The elevator creaked and shook as it ascended. Lana pictured her father on the couch, pipe out, a hazy cloud of smoke encircling him. Another talk she'd have to have.

"Is that everything?" Dad asked. He wasn't on the couch and he wasn't smoking, to Lana's surprise. He knelt on the floor, his thin arms stretched in front of him, and pulled contents from boxes. "You got any nails? I want to hang this." He held a picture of himself and his last girlfriend, Shonnie, or was it Bonnie? It was something like that. Lana could never remember.

"The complex doesn't like holes in the wall. I'd have to fix them when I move out."

"At least you'll move out one day," Dad said, his voice low and guttural. "I'll probably die here."

His words hung in the air, suspended. Lana didn't say anything. He had a weak heart, but his brain was working just fine. "Come here, Nancy," Dad yelled to the male nurse at the nursing home earlier in the day. He was giving Lana the Cliff Notes version of her father's health in the hallway. "See what I mean," the nurse said with a wink. "He's fine."

When Dad had called and said he wanted to leave the nursing home, that those jackasses didn't know what they were doing and how could he sleep on a mattress stuffed with rocks and eat sandwiches made of paste and cardboard, Lana sympathized. She didn't regret offering her place to him until the words escaped her mouth. Once he agreed, she tried to convince herself that he would have asked to come anyway, and it's not like she could have said no. It's Dad and it's my job, she told herself. She didn't want him to die here, but once she thought about that, she thought of the various ways she may discover her father - on the couch, pipe in mouth or slumped on the floor, a spoon in his hand, spilt cereal a sloppy outline for his fallen body. It's not like she wanted to stay in this apartment forever, stuck in the awkward post-college phase of apartments and temp jobs. His death would be her catalyst.

She didn't know her dad too well as a kid, most of his time spent on the road chasing quick fix solutions, and later, she'd find out, chasing women. With a thick build, dark, brooding eyes, and a '73 ice blue Corvette, the only woman that was ever a problem to him was his wife. He was a man of ambition who always saw himself as better than he was, and that made it very difficult for Lana to idolize him. There wasn't enough room.

Dad continued to pull things out of boxes. Old books sat on her coffee table, some Lana recognized from childhood.

"Are you hungry for some dinner?" Lana asked. "I have some leftovers in the fridge."

"Leftovers on the first night, huh? If I told anyone I'd have to sneak some food out of the nursing home, they'd have looked at me like I was crazy," Dad said. Lana assumed he was joking, but couldn't tell.

"You're not hungry then?"

"Shit, I'll eat," Dad said. He lit his pipe, small wafts of smoke swirled about his face. Lana saw her \$250 security deposit on her non-smoking apartment disappear. The stale, minty smell of the tobacco drifted to the kitchen.

"If it wasn't so cold you'd be on the patio right now," Lana said.

"You wouldn't do that to an old man."

"Watch me," Lana said, only half serious. She placed the two plates on her small kitchen table and sat down. Spaghetti is always better on the second day, she thought. Dad's plate steamed. He stayed on the couch, smoking. "I'm not gonna wait for you," Lana said. "Come and eat while it's hot."

"I'll get there," Dad said. Smoke filled the apartment. Lana tasted it in her nostrils when she breathed, it's burning, stinging sensation.

Lana told herself the first week would be the most difficult, and she hoped it were true. On the second day, she found Dad on the couch, head tilted back, in his underwear at five in the morning as she headed out for a jog. She put her ear to his mouth and listened for his shallow inhale and exhale before walking out. The fourth day, a Wednesday, was date night with Cody. Last Wednesday she went to Cody's apartment for Thai takeout and a dollar box movie. This time she made homemade pizza. Upon Cody's arrival, Dad engaged him in a long story about the Knicks and the democrats and why everyone was out to get them. Lana made the pizza while they talked, Cody's every motion to end the conversation met by her father's leaning even closer and smacking the coffee table for emphasis. At least he's wearing pants, Lana thought.

On Saturday, Eric, Lana's older brother, visited with his wife and their two young kids. Eric was a lawyer, Christie, a lawyer's wife. Eric lived a couple hours away and usually visited at least once a year. When Dad was in the nursing home, he'd ask Lana to visit Dad when he did so they could see everyone together. "It's easier with the kids," Eric would say.

"How's my lawyer doing?" Dad asked, his voice a growl. He stood up, teetered for a moment and embraced Eric, the hug stabilizing him. "And who's this beautiful princess?" he'd say, embracing Christie. Lana wanted to mouth the words as he said them, the same greeting he'd been giving since Eric brought her home pregnant. Lana made the mistake of asking what type of law Christie was studying, to which she replied she was probably going to major in English, but didn't have to decide until her sophomore year.

"Dad, you look great," Eric said. His two kids ran around the apartment.

"I look like shit," Dad said. "But you look great, and Christie, whoa, you always look great. The lawyer business keeping you busy?" Dad sat on the couch and smiled, the first Lana had seen all week.

"Yeah, yeah. Lots of work. Lana, hey, good to see you. Dad, you hear about the New York news anchor? The one that got fired for having porn on his computer? I'll probably be representing him. Meeting with him next week."

"I'll be in my room," Lana said.

"How 'bout that!" Dad said. He leaned forward and clapped his hands once. "Lana, can we get some drinks?"

Lana sighed. She had just settled on her bed. She put her book down and walked into the kitchen. She grabbed two bottles of water out of the fridge and walked over.

"Oh, can I have one too?" Christie asked.

"Do you have any iced tea? Or maybe a root beer?" Eric asked.

Lana walked back to the kitchen. Her lips clenched together, her steps heavy. There was a lone Snapple bottle on the side of the fridge. Lana grabbed it. Justin, or Jason, she wasn't sure which kid, barreled into her. Lana buried the iced tea behind the gallon of milk. "All out," she called from the kitchen.

"Lana, come here," Dad said. "Christie here, you know what she's doing? A half marathon. Can you believe that?"

"That's great," Lana said. She tried to force a smile, her lips pressed together.

"Lana, she runs too," Dad said. "Probably not as fast as you, though, hon," he said, tapping Christie's knee. Christie laughed.

"Still dating that teacher?" Eric asked.

"Cody? Yes, we're still dating." Lana's voice was sharp, tense.

"I got to meet the sucker," Dad said.

"So he does exist!" Eric said. Eric and Dad laughed. If Christie heard, she didn't show it, her face buried in her phone.

"Our reservation is in twenty minutes," Christie said. "We should probably get going."

"That's nice, you're taking Dad out to dinner?" Lana asked. She saw Dad's eyes perk.

"Oh, no. I'm meeting with an associate over a case. More business than pleasure, if you know what I mean," Eric said.

"Yeah, boring lawyer stuff," Christie said. "He wouldn't want to go."

Eric put his coat on. "Dad, great to see you. Lana, you too. You'll have to bring Cody around sometime. I'd love to meet the guy." Turning to Dad, "Now that we know he's real."

Lana hugged Eric. "Your jokes get funnier every time. They really do. Don't stop doing that."

"You know," Dad said. He cleared his throat. "It's kind of small here for one person. Imagine what it's like for two. I don't know how you guys are on space..."

Eric smiled a knowing smile, let out a chuckle. "We'd love to have you, Dad. We really would. It's just I'm really busy, the kids, you see how the kids are."

Dad nodded. "I know."

"We really should get going," Christie said.

They filed out of the apartment. Lana closed the door. She lowered her voice, tried to match her father's. "You know, it's really small in here for one person."

"I know, I know." Dad shrugged his shoulders. "It was a shot in the dark. I couldn't stand those kids though. If they didn't kill me, I'd probably kill them."

"I'm meeting Cody for pizza. Why don't you come with us?"

"As long as I don't have to eat cold spaghetti again."

Lana buttoned her jacket. She put her arm around her father's thin shoulder as they walked down the hall to the elevator.

Editor's Note

Underwear and Leftovers first appeared in our August Issue.

I examined the dropping. Even put my nose to it for a sniff.

"Oh yeah, that's feces all right."

"Are you sure?" Stella said.

"Honey, I know shit when I see it. And that's shit."

We'd moved from a downtown condo to our house in the 'burbs a year earlier. Our son, Mather, popped out within the month. I was a city guy. Maybe not quite a city slicker, but more city than country. Now here I was, inspecting wild shit on my living room carpet.

The dropping was three-quarters inch long, just under a half inch wide. I prodded it with a Q-tip. It was soft, I assumed fresh. Our little friend couldn't have gotten far.

"That damn chipmunk must've gotten into the house when we were bringing in the groceries," I said. "What else could it be?"

There was a chipmunk my wife and I often spotted darting through our garage or across the front porch. Stella always reminded me to keep the doors closed. I knew he'd sneak in eventually. We thought it was one chipmunk. Maybe there were more. Maybe there was a pack of them. Or was "colony" the appropriate term?

I googled "chipmunk droppings." "They're supposed to look like black beans, honey," I said. "Isn't that what that looks like? I told you it was from a chipmunk."

"It can't be. It wouldn't really run into the house, would it?"

"Well, it's either from a chipmunk or from Mather." I looked at the little man. "Did you poop on the carpet?"

He laughed. He liked the word "poop."

"I'm kidding, sweetheart. Of course it's the chipmunk's. If only Mather's poops were that tiny. Can you trust me on this?"

The dropping was too big to be from a mouse, I read. Perhaps a rat's? But in the 'burbs--doubtful. A squirrel was a possibility. "Wow, awfully similar to squirrel droppings," I said. I was beginning to feel like an outdoorsman. "Oh boy, read this."

"Bacteria and diseases can be transmitted through chipmunk droppings," Stella read, peering over my shoulder, "and several diseases are transmitted through inhalation of spores and particles in the air surrounding the feces."

"Great," I said. "Just great. You don't think I picked up some disease from sniffing the thing, do you?"

"You're fine."

"Just wonderful. I'm going to die from some rare chipmunk disease. My only child won't even remember me."

"Don't be dramatic."

I researched ways to catch a chipmunk. I could get a trap and bait it with peanut butter. It could take some time to lure him though. Maybe a couple weeks. Stella was

afraid to let the little man sleep in his crib with a wild animal on the loose. Not that I blamed her.

"This is ridiculous," she said. "Call Animal Control. We shouldn't be prisoners in our own home."

She was right. This was my house, my family. It was my duty to protect them. "I can take care of this, honey," I said. "I'll catch that little son of a bitch. Watch."



"Just call Animal Control already, will you?"

"Yes, dear."

I described the dropping to our local trapper over the phone. "Three quarters inch long," I said.

"Wow, that's gotta be from a fairly large animal."

"You don't think a chipmunk could leave that?"

"Maybe--a bigger one. Possibly a squirrel. Although you'd

likely hear it. It'd be skittish, knocking things over. Could be from a rat."

"Dear God," I said. "A rat wouldn't be in the suburbs though, would it?"

"I've seen crazier things."

"Ask him if we should sleep in here tonight?" Stella said.

"Would you sleep in here tonight?"

"Yeah. But then again, I'm a trapper. I'm on my way to lasso a raccoon once I get off the phone with you."

"Right, but if you were us."

"Hard to say. Let me come over and take a look."

Stella began packing our bags for the Hampton Inn. The trapper showed up soon after. He reeked of skunk. He was strange. Guess that could be expected from a trapper. He was old, but had long hair you'd imagine on a young rocker. His gaze alternated between pictures on our walls and Stella's breasts. "Let's see what we're working with," he said.

I led him to the dropping. He shined his flashlight on it. He picked it up, studied it. He touched it. Smelled it. I feared that even a veteran trapper like him wasn't aware of the bacteria such feces emitted. "Careful," I said. "You can get pretty sick just taking a whiff of that stuff." He didn't respond. He'd probably grown immune to the germs over the years.

"Well..." he said.

"What's the verdict? Chipmunk? Squirrel? 'Coon?"

"Folks, I'm afraid that's no animal dropping."

"What do you mean?" I said. "Are you positive?"

"One-hundred percent." The trapper pointed to Mather. "He knows who did it." The little man giggled.

"C'mon. You're shittin' me, right?"

"I'm not."

"Don't know how I could've missed that. Boy, am I embarrassed."

"How do you want to pay?"

The trapper never actually came out and said it was Mather's poop, seemingly to spare me embarrassment in front of my family. Guy code. I appreciated that.

Stella wasn't happy. She ignored me the rest of the night. Admittedly, she'd warned me about letting the little man run around in only his diaper. Okay, and sometimes even without that. "He's a boy!" I would say and she would shake her head. Well, at least our son isn't in any danger, I told her. That was the important thing, right? At least the family was safe. That was my job, after all. To protect them now that we lived out here in the wild.

Editor's Note

The Wild first appeared in our September Issue.

Photograph: *Fence* © Chris Fradkin

Moving Violations by Bob Kalkreuter

Harold Shaw sat in the passenger's seat of his son's new BMW, watching a heat mirage smoke on the distant asphalt.

"It's a nice place, Dad. Really. You'll have your own room, nobody to bother you. They'll fix your meals, even clean your room."

The car stopped, then accelerated past a stop sign, growling through the gears. Harold didn't move or blink. He wore a brown, floppy hat he'd purchased when Raymond was still a toddler. With a frayed brim and torn crown-seam, the hat looked as if it might have come out second best in a scrap with a lawnmower. Back when the hat was new, Harold had only worn it to go fishing with Jake and Red. But they were both dead, so now he wore it everywhere except to bed. Perhaps as a sign of rebellion against the inevitable march of time, or just a way to bring back the days when his thoughts mattered.

"You'll never have to cut grass again. Or cook either," said Raymond.

Harold frowned. Wiry gray hairs hung down from the brim. "I like to cut grass. Cook too."

"Making baloney sandwiches isn't cooking, Dad."

"It ain't my fault you don't like baloney."

"Baloney's not even food."

"You don't like baloney because you're already so full of it."

Raymond shifted in his seat. "You know, I'd like to move in there myself sometimes. Just to get away from Susan and the kids for a while. What's wrong with somebody fussing over you? Waiting on you. You won't have to lift a finger. Sounds great to me."

"Then you move in there and I'll drive around in your fancy car."

Raymond slowed for a left turn. "You lost your license the last time they picked you up for DUI, remember?"

"Lost it the first time too," said Harold. "But that don't mean I forgot how to drive."

"You could have killed somebody, you know that? You're lucky you're not in jail."

"Just not being in jail's lucky."

"Well, you should know about that. How many times did you lose your license?"

"Hell, I dunno. They was only moving violations." Harold eased up his right hip to pull a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

"Come on, Dad. You know you can't smoke in here."

"I need permission to breathe, too?" said Harold, staring at the crumpled pack of Camels in his hand. He sat slumped back and sighed.

Outside, the sun was high and hot, the sky abscess-white. A fine spring afternoon, throbbing with heat. Inside the car, cold air pumped through the vents, making Harold's joints ache. Especially his knee. "I got news for you," said Harold. "I ain't moving into no goddamn old folks home so they can track you around all day just to see if you done number one or number two."

"It's not an old folks home. It's an assisted living center."

"I got a place already. Case you don't remember where you grewed up," said Harold. He'd been living in the same drafty, loose-boarded house for the last 50 years, a house outside Bradenton, once on the edge of wild scrub, but now the bane of an upscale subdivision less than a mile down the road.

"I told you. I sold the house. That's how you can afford the assisted living center. It's expensive, you know."

"You can't sell my house when you don't own it," said Harold.

"I have the Power of Attorney you signed when you went into the hospital last month. I can sell anything I want. Anyway, it's for your own good."

Harold felt himself flush. "Is that what I paid for, putting you through college, so you can cheat me?"

"I'm not cheating you, Dad. I'm not taking a nickel."

Harold pulled himself upright and snorted.

"You've fallen too much lately. You can't stay by yourself any longer."

Harold let that sink in, frowning. "Bullshit," he said.

"Bullshit's not an answer. Only profanity."

A white van swung past them, roaring out a cloud of unburned smoke. Raymond glanced at the side window, distracted by the van. "It's the best thing for you," he mumbled.

Harold tilted his head. Only catching the gruff murmur of Raymond's voice, he waited, hoping Raymond wouldn't figure out how much hearing he'd lost the last few years. "Well you can turn off that damn cold air and put the windows down any time now," he said. Heat felt good. He could handle heat. But he'd never lived with air conditioning and he didn't want to start now.

Raymond scowled. "I told you. Too much dust gets in open windows. Ruins the equipment. Everything's computerized now." He slowed to turn down 9th Avenue, where the traffic brought them to a halt. "Damn, they must have a ball game this afternoon."

Harold was a small man, no more than 5'7", thin but wiry. A hodgepodge of pale scars covered his sunbrown knuckles, scars he'd earned in countless fights, as a young man and older. Fights he'd sometimes started, but usually finished, however they happened. "Let's go to the game," he said, craning his neck to see beyond the cars to the stadium up ahead.

"We've got an appointment at the center in 20 minutes," said Raymond, looking at his watch, then slamming his hand against the steering wheel. "All this traffic, for a stupid game..."

"You ain't never liked baseball. Hell, what **do** you like?"

"I..." said Raymond, as if he started to answer, then thought better of it, clamping his lips together.

"You ain't nothing like David, that's for sure."

Raymond glared at his father, then looked back at the road and hit the brakes to avoid rear-ending a red pick-up. They both lurched forward. "David?" said Raymond. "Why do you always have to bring up David?"

"He liked baseball," said Harold, enjoying Raymond's discomfort.

The line of cars began moving again, and Raymond started forward, slowly. "I know you wish it would have been me, instead of him."

"Well," said Harold, as if he were thinking about his answer. "At least he went and done his duty."

"Is that all you can say, he did his duty?"

Just ahead, the red pick-up pulled into a parking lot past a man in a Pittsburgh Pirates cap, wheeling his arm like a one-bladed windmill. "Finally," said Raymond, stepping on the gas.

Harold was still holding the pack of Camels and he looked at them intently. "Be nice to see a ball game again," he said. "Too bad David ain't here to see it with me."

"I'm glad Momma didn't have to see his funeral," said Raymond.

"David liked baseball," said Harold again. "He'd a-gone to the game with me."

"Is that what you think?" said Raymond, his voice rising. "That David wanted to be with you?"

"He wasn't a stick-in-the-mud like you. We liked the same things."

Without a word, Raymond jerked the steering wheel to the right and pulled the BMW into a service station. He slipped the gear into park and turned in his seat, the motor still running. "You think David loved you that much?" he said, his voice coming out harsh and clipped.

Harold waited, thinking, then said: "I caught a ball once, got Hank Aaron to sign it. Give it to David. You should of seen him." He hesitated. "Say, whatever happened to that old ball?" He shook his head. "Hell, you don't even know who Hank Aaron is."

"I know who he is."

"David and me used to go to games, sit in the bleachers over by first base."

Raymond squinted. "Yeah, you want to know what happened to that ball?"

"Took it with him to Vietnam, I reckon."

"Is that what you think?"

"I ain't seen it since... well, since he left for the army." Harold adjusted his floppy hat. "He'd never of left it behind."

Raymond's eyes blazed. "David threw it into Ware's Creek, the day after you went to jail for beating up Momma."

"He... Hell, you're dreaming. He'd of never." Harold squirmed, twisting the crumpled pack of Camels in his palm. "Him and me, we were this close." He held up a thumb and forefinger.

"Yeah. You were close all right," said Raymond. "Think about it. He wasn't drafted. He was still in college. He joined up before you got out of jail so he wouldn't have to kill you."

The old man was silent, his eyes straight ahead. Shadows from overhead power lines sliced across the hood of the BMW. "If we go now, we can get in by the end of the first inning," he said.

Editor's Note

Moving Violations first appeared in our September Issue.



Photograph: *Underpass* © Chris Fradkin

Stand of Trees by Katherine D. Stutzman

Still wearing her grey coat, she found a wide, shallow bowl in the cupboard, filled it with milk, and set it on the floor. The kittens ran to drink from it, all six of them, their heads nudging each other blindly around the rim of the bowl as they lapped.

"Oh my god," she said, laughing, "Why did this happen to us? What are we going to do with them?"

"I didn't know people still did shit like that. Maybe some guy on a farm a hundred years ago might get rid of cats that way, but now?" He fingered the sack that they had found, writhing and mewling, in a stand of trees near the road.



"Are they okay? They don't seem to be hurt, do they?" She bent down and peered at the kittens. "Maybe that one—that orange guy, see him? He seems like he's not putting weight on one paw. What about the others?"

"I don't know. They look all right, I

guess. Do you think somebody threw them out of a car? Or just left them there? I mean, seriously, who does that?"

"Give it a week and maybe we'll do it." She swept her arm through the air above the mass of kittens. "'Okay, back in you go!' You know, after we've spent a fortune on cat food, and I'm on my inhaler every ten minutes, and they've thrown up under the couch for the fourth time in five days," she laughed and kept going. "And the landlord finds out, and the whole apartment smells like cat piss, and we have to move those little bodies out from underneath us every time we go to bed, and we're tired of feeling paws on our faces in the dark... It could be us!"

He laughed with her and thought of how they had been walking by the road, the rain just starting, and how they had seen the stand of trees from far off. He had thought she

looked pretty with her hair frizzing around her face in the damp, and they had kept walking. When they reached the trees the trunks were black with rain, and there was the sack. Sitting in the kitchen now, watching the kittens drink and hearing her talk of the shelter, of how many kittens they might be able to keep, of a friend who might take one or two, he knew that this was what life would be: always the stand of trees far off along the road, always the unknown thing to be brought into the home.

Editor's Note

Stand of Trees first appeared in our November Issue.

Photograph: *Summer Dawn* © Amanda Morris

Cutting Hair fo My Sister by Joseph Lambach

I asked my sister if it hurt.

Even though she was eight years older than me, she knew I would understand. I wasn't too young to not understand.

So, I asked Janet if it hurt when they cut all her hair off. Sixteen straight, black, shiny inches.

On a December Friday, she told me it never hurts to donate your hair to people who need it more than you. If you can make someone smile, then it never hurts, no matter what anyone says.

"It never hurts to help," covering one ear, whispering in the other, hiding under the bed. Only because Mom and Dad were louder than God. Sometimes.

Two weeks later, I asked Mom if it hurt.

"Did it hurt when Janet stopped breathing?" Breathing never really hurt me, but I had no idea about the rest. "I mean, Janet told me God wouldn't let it hurt, but I suspect you know more about Him than she does."

"No, baby," I always knew Mom was lying when she had to pause, pointer finger in her hair, always scratching the same spot. "It doesn't hurt."

She knew I would understand. Even if I was still her baby boy, I always understood what she wanted me to. I asked if Janet wouldn't mind if I cut off my hair to help someone else, since donating it would make everything not hurt.

She scratched sleep out of her eye, "No, baby, she wouldn't mind how you helped anyone else."

When I walked into Mom's room a few weeks later with a hand full of curly brown hair, she was sitting on a tattered stack of phone books, sewing a shemagh. I sat on the edge of the bed, on her torn up blanket. The worn out threads and burn marks special to me, knowing that it meant her and Dad spent most nights together, during the few weeks he was even home. Here in the States that is.

She just looked at me and cried, "Baby, I swear it doesn't hurt." Her tears splashed up on the brown table top. It didn't matter too much though, it seemed to match the brown, spotty walls and ceiling Mom never bothered to clean.

Mom always had white, styrofoam cups when she was sewing. She always told me her special juice tasted better that way. When she was sewing that is.

She looked at the brown thread, pretending to examine her stitches, "My little baby boy knows how to make a mother's heart warm is all."

"You promise?" I knew Mom was telling the truth when she didn't look at me. I knew she couldn't really lie when she was drinking her whiskey. When she was drinking her Tennessee special, in those words exactly.

She just looked at that weird scarf and then asked if I thought Dad would like this. Sure, I nodded. Dad would like it.

I asked Mom if she thought maybe I could donate my hair, since Janet said that made everything better. It made people not hurt too much if you help them out.

"Do you think we could give it to that same doctor, the one who helped Janet all the time?" I could feel all the little curls making my fingertips fast-food slippery. I liked seeing all the crooked-hanging pictures Mom kept on the wall. I could never tell which ones had glass in them still, most didn't.

I had seen the pictures Dad sent back to Mom. She sometimes showed me and Janet pictures Dad sent from wherever he happened to be that week, or that month. Mom would make up stories about all those little boys and girls. Kids with no hair, burnt to shit, in those words exactly.

Dad was over there, with a pistol strapped around his leg, holding a little girl about eight years younger than me, she wasn't smiling. Dad was. But she wasn't, but I think it was only because she didn't have any lips.

I told Mom that the doctor could send that little girl my hair, "Because if I donate her my hair it would make her happy."

The girl with no lips that is.

Before all that, before Janet cut her hair, before Mom sipped whiskey through a straw, before Dad came home for two weeks, I had to bury Floyd all by myself.

Out in the woods, behind the house, I had to dig Floyd a little grave and put him down there, all alone. Not even a square foot total, but Floyd deserved something.

Mom and Dad always said that I had to show them I was reliable enough to get a pup. So they said I had to start out small, learn responsibility in step. I could take care of Floyd while the Bears were on summer vacation.

They told me there were rules to taking care of him. Mom and Dad said I had to keep fresh water in his cage and feed him every day. As long as red and green feathers didn't cover my whole room, I could take care of handsome little Floyd.

Sometimes he would sing to me at night, after the lightning bugs were out and the crickets stopped chirping. Late at night, he would tell me about God. Stories and songs about Him.

Every night I fed Floyd, changed his paper, gave him millet seed, and listened to his God-stories. "Floyd, you're my ticket, you know. Don't worry, I love you. But when you go back home, Mom and Dad said I get a puppy."

Sometimes, I would even let him peck seeds out of my mouth, like we were family. Like he needed me to love him.

Some nights he would fly around the whole house, with me chasing the sound of some old Sunday school song. I knew Floyd was only playing a game with me, giving me something to do when it was just us two home.

When Mom and Dad were home, I needed to keep Floyd in my room. But sometimes it was easy to forget to close my door a little harder than normal, to get it to click in place. All the way. Sometimes it was hard to keep the door clicked though, there were only two hinges when there should have been a third at the top.

"Son, it just gives your door more character," Dad would say when I told him I thought I should start fixing up my room, door included. Sometimes, I got enough courage to talk to him, or even ask a question. Sometimes.

He didn't know me and Floyd were hiding under my bed when Dad slammed Mom into the door. For being a goddamn, self-righteous whore, in those words exactly.

Janet always told me about helping people, different ways to do good. Janet always told me that there were no riches on this earth, but in heaven. She always told me God would reward those who helped others. That He would protect His children and keep them safe. She said God always loved people who helped other people.

"Baby brother," she would always try to comb the curls out of my hair, never pulling any knots too hard, "don't worry about too much, just try to remember that there's no reason to ever be scared, to forget everything I've ever told you. "

I always nodded in agreement. I knew she was right.

"Just the same way you keep Floyd handsome, like you're his Daddy. Don't forget Mom and Daddy might need you that way too. To be like Daddy, you know, but here at home. Not gone all the time."

Sometimes, even when I didn't know what Janet was saying, I still liked to nod in agreement. So she would know I was listening.

When Dad walked in on the Friday nights he was home, he always brought us presents. He would even bring Floyd something every once and a while. Even though Janet was eight years older than me, and Floyd was eight years younger than me, Dad didn't know I knew it was only a bribe.

He didn't know I knew about his alcohol. He would bribe us to not notice. Well, he would try, that is.

Floyd was always polite about everything. He always squawked a "Thank you!" when I brought him Dad's special seeds from whatever place he visited that week.

Dad always came home with an empty holster strapped to his leg, telling me, "There's no reason to bring work home, son. No reason at all."

I always knew Dad was lying, his bribes giving it away. Dad was just scared of mixing alcohol with a gun. Around us, that is.

Some nights, me and Floyd liked to hide in the hallway closet, behind another door with only two hinges, on nights when Mom thought we were sleeping over at a friend's house. I would try to catch little ants and cockroaches as treats for Floyd. There was usually a good supply at any given time. Floyd never made a single noise when we were hunting.

When Dad thought me and Janet were gone, he would bring home work with him. Sometimes I could hear Mom stop moving, breathing quickly and coughing. She tried to tell me it was just a choking game her and Dad played.

They didn't know I knew it was really just his pistol slammed down her throat.

When the end of May came around, a Friday night, Floyd kept talking and talking and talking, telling me more God-stories. I could hear Janet practicing her violin when Mom came home a little late from her friend's house.

She didn't know I knew what pot smelled like, what gray condom wrappers in her purse looked like. She didn't know that Dad had told me about his special surgery. A vasectomy, in those words exactly.

She knew Dad never knew what time she got home or about all the men from church that would have just Mom over for Bible studies. Didn't know since he was somewhere on the other side of the world, with a pistol strapped to his leg, taking care of someone else's family. Farmers and growers, sheep and pot, and Dad to help take care of them, helping out with one thing or another.

He always liked to tell me and Janet about who he was helping, calling from something he called a sat phone. Dad told us every time, "I feel bad for all these helpless people, all these people who need protecting. All these little kids, same as you, but with no parents. No one to take care of them like we do for you."

Dad had always told me and Janet to take care and protect those who weren't as lucky as us. To make sure we tried to keep other people safe.

He always ended the static conversations saying, "Kiss your Mom son, and keep everything together."

And then a soft click and a repetitive beeping, always ending the call first. But never with an "I love you too."

It wasn't any different than any other July Friday night, but it was the Friday night that I remember the most.

Some guy named Bill called while Janet was playing her violin. Mom yelled at Janet, telling her to shut the fuck up, in those words exactly.

Me and Floyd just kept practicing catching seeds in the air, sunflowers and millet.

"Goddamn, I wish I had never bought that stupid fucking violin!" her right hand throwing a small bottle of eye drops at Janet's door. The drops were more out of habit than anything else.

Mom always yelled after a couple days without pot. No matter how dark it got, I knew to get out of the house and look for crickets in the woods. Or dig through the kudzu that covered some old car from before Mom and Dad had even met. No matter what, it was a cue to leave.

Mom knew I didn't know who Bill was or why he had called. I knew she thought some guy was calling to invite her to a new Bible study.

Mom would either forget people's names or mix them up. Sometimes telling us white-coat doctor Bill was Bible study Bill, when one or the other called. Me and Janet would just nod in agreement, pretending to understand.

The Bill who called was the doctor we had visited a couple weeks ago. Mom had told us on the way down there, "This is just your annual check-up with the VA. It's just the same routine bullshit, so please behave so we can get in and out."

She had been chain smoking cigarettes the whole time, quietly sipping black coffee and throwing a different cotton brown butt out every five minutes. She flicked her wrist

and told us, "They are useless, just a bigger pain in the ass than it's worth. They never get anything done that's worth a damn."

After Bill called, I noticed Mom had become a lot nicer towards Janet. She always apologized to her, and me, for everything. All the time. But more towards Janet than me.

Dad was somewhere else, with that pistol strapped to his leg, helping other people, and we were always going to the hospital every couple of weeks. Janet only cried once though. Even if she was the reason we were there all the time.

I didn't mind too much, the nurses always gave me candy, "You're such a handsome little boy. So strong, I don't think I've ever even heard you cry. Or complain." They always told me they liked my curly hair.

After we would get home from another doctor's visit, Janet would always sit me down in her room, covered in pink hearts and posters of people I had never heard of, she would tell me, "It's so the doctors can study my hair, you know, so other people can grow hair like mine, black and shiny."

"I think you can help people if you want," tossing her pink bouncy ball up and down in my hand. "You can grow up and be like all those doctors at the hospital." She tried to wipe away a loose tear she thought I didn't notice.

Janet knew I couldn't read the green words in front of the hospital yet. Mom and her never said Cancer Treatment Centers of America out loud.

December finally came, Mom and Janet had gone to the hospital again and left me home take care of the house. I found Floyd in his cage, no songs, and no God-stories. Floyd was lying at the bottom, beak first in his water bowl, coffin stiff. There was a little piece of plastic stuck between his beak.

One of the feed bags Dad had brought home a long time ago with pictures of mosques, he said was written in Arabic, was lying next to Floyd's cage. A dollar bill torn out of the corner.

Janet always told me about the sparrows in the Bible, told me the God-story about how He knows when even one little sparrow dies.

I sang Amazing Grace for Floyd on that December Friday night. I told him one last God-story before I covered him up.

I knew Mom didn't know.

I guess with Janet cutting off all her hair, and Mom smoking all that pot, and Dad helping all those kids, with a pistol strapped to his leg, I guess no one else knew I wasn't quite ready for that puppy yet.

After I got done burying Floyd, covering him up, and marking his grave, I went home. Janet was sitting on the couch, watching TV, some man in a coat and tie asking for God's money. Mom was eating orange puffs from a five gallon jar, spaced-out and baked, making pointer-finger swirls on Janet's dull, bald head. Where black, shinny, flat hair should have been.

Mom looked at me and said Dad would be on emergency leave soon and be home in the next couple of days. I just nodded, I didn't really know why.

Janet was happy, holding that black leather book full of God-stories in her lap, watching that man in a pin stripe jacket asking for money in exchange for a miracle, not in those words exactly. I counted, in my head, all the fives I had saved under my bed, starring at her bald, dull head.

Mom was too baked to notice that Floyd wasn't with me to make any noise. I looked at happy-Janet, eight years older than me, and asked, "Did it hurt? When they cut off all your hair?"

Editor's Note

Cutting Hair for My Sister first appeared in our October Issue.

#4

Eliot was not like other ghosts. Too scared of the living to be scary, he haunted his quiet attic in a house full of frozen clocks, hiding whenever the lady of the house would venture up to be alone with her dripping miseries, the calico atop her shoulder spotting him crushed between a rack of old suits but never betraying his secret. Because his favorite spot to sit and read was the antique rocking chair in front of the window, sunlight rarely touched the trunk of summer dresses which the lady for some reason no longer wore. It was a foggy Sunday morning that the calico visited Eliot to ask why it was he hid in this particular attic, of all attics. I don't know, Eliot considered, except that it feels like home to me. Why does the lady of the house grieve in darkness, always dressed in black? he posed the calico, who pawed the rack of old suits before slipping back downstairs without explanation. Inside the lining of the suits Eliot found his name had beelambacn sewn, and so he understood why it was the clocks never moved and knew what must be done. Gliding down from the attic, he bade the calico farewell, leaving the trunk open so that the sun might find the summer dresses once more, then stepping through the front door to an exquisite song of clocks stirring.

#5

Eliot was not like other robots. His maker, a miserly man, afforded him the cheapest parts scrounged from the scorched ruins of Old Earth. Among these parts a heart was not provided, for the heart is the most expensive of all moveable parts, and being quite rare artifacts ever since the war. All his life Eliot felt a malfunction in his machinery, never knowing the source of this invisible sadness. Each day though, entertaining robot children by the lunar tide, he could swear he felt the ghost of a ripple, like phantom fingers thumping faintly throughout his tin innards. The money he earned from a simple day's work he'd saved in a spent battery husk, for several years, in hopes of procuring a state-of-the-art heart. One day a robot child fell into excruciating disrepair on the beach, and Eliot took him to the local maker pleading with him to fix the child whatever the cost. Without new parts the child would surely die, the maker told him. So Eliot lay down on the salvaging table. Take whatever you need, he said. When everything that could be done was done the boy jostled awake, everything sparking in all the right places, and what remained of Eliot was placed in the spare parts pile. Among the many things that saved him--the maker made sure the boy knew--was a battery husk filled with the meager life savings of a clown robot and a shiny heart bequeathed from Eliot's own torso. Not a newer model, but a sturdy beating lump he never even knew he had, having grown in quietly over the years, proving a heart as rare and mysterious an artifact as ever though free of charge if only you'd use it.

#6

Eliot was not like other crows. Crippled in a windstorm, a lonely fisherman took mercy on his mangled mess of feathers, trying his best to mend two bent-back wings but without success. Though flight proved impossible, in time Eliot learned to hop alongside his master through the bustling market. Eliot enjoyed his simple life on land, and though occasionally he couldn't help but envy those cousins who lived along the sagging power lines above, eating their fill of rubbish, he was happy to have a friend like his fisherman. Together they relished watching the pinkish spikes of light which fell across the soft Tokyo afternoon at sea, in a boat just big enough for man and bird, the fisherman always pitching the last of his bait to his patiently awaiting first mate. There came in the night another storm - much bigger than any storm before--with not just wind and rain but waves too. When all was finally calm the city had been left not unlike Eliot's broken wings. Scattered were people from their families, wrecked were their homes, but for all crows in the land a feast of eternal debris. With Eliot lost from his master, he limped along the aisles of wreckage. Why so sad? a cousin asked. Eat! We are blessed! Your belly will never again be empty! At a nearby hospital, the fisherman woke to find his legs were broken, his ship destroyed. When he heard the tiny taps through the door, though he could not move to see beside his bed, he knew it was his friend the bird. I'm so sorry, the fisherman confessed fighting tears, but I do not know how I will feed us now. He then put his head in his hands and began to cry, until Eliot leapt up on the end of the bed and let fall a fish from his beak, and together they feasted, through the window watching the pinkish spikes of light which fell across the soft Tokyo afternoon.

Editor's Note

For Heather first appeared in our November Issue.

Part one of this series appears in [Jersey Devil Press 34](#).

Robbie by Anna Llewellyn

There ain't no worse sight than a sympathetic policeman. I swear, when an affectionate looking policeman shows up your door your heart just about falls all the way down to your toes and stays there for a while. I'm always looking out for that policeman when I'm out with Little Robbie now. I know he's supposed to be the good guy, and that he never did nothing wrong, but something about his face will always remind me of what happened to my Samuel. I never did see that policeman again. They said the man who pulled the cord to make the train jerk about and throw Samuel off was a dentist or a doctor or something like that. I never trusted doctors, ever since I was a little girl. Those doctors tried to get me to eat pills that would make me forget Samuel after he died, but I didn't want to forget him, not my sweet boy. I would pull out my hair, I would scream and moan until my throat was raw, but I would not eat those pills. I was terrified that one day I would forget that voice that could melt a mother's heart, and the way he looked at me with those wide eyes when he needed me. He never really needed me. He was a strong boy. It was me who had always needed him. I never realized how much I depended on that boy until he was gone. For a while there was nothing holding me to this earth except my own heartbeat, which I couldn't help much. I was trapped in my own mind, lost the whole time until Little Robbie was born. I know it's wrong, and I will be guilty about it for the rest of my life, but while I was pregnant sometimes I just couldn't help but hope that the baby would be like Samuel, my Samuel, exactly the same. That's probably why I was scared half to death when I looked down into those baby's eyes and saw Samuel's eyes staring right back at me. Exactly the same.

Robbie is seven now. He could have been Samuel's twin they look so alike. They're very different children though. Samuel was always sweet and curious. He was always jabbering away about some new discovery he had made. He would prefer to read or just talk than go and play with the other boys. He could talk to me for hours and hours and would never get tired. Now Robbie, he's completely different. Ever he was born we couldn't get him to sit still. He's always running about and knocking things down, always asking me to let him go out and play for a while. He fidgets more than he talks, and when he does decide to speak it's at a mile a minute. One smoky autumn afternoon we were having one of these rapid conversations.

"Say it one more time Robbie, but this time slower."

He slapped his arms down on his sides, sighing in frustration. "I *said* that I wanted to go outside and play. Can I?"

I looked out of the grease streaked window of the apartment. Fog was hovering over the grimy street. "It don't look very nice for playing today, Robbie," I had said, "Maybe you should just stay inside."

He blinked slowly at me, his eyelashes grazing the tops of his cheeks. His lips pushed out into that heartbreaking plea. That boy was only seven and he already knew how to take advantage of me.

"Alright then, go! Hurry on back before dinner though." He darted out of the door and thundered down the stairs before I could even tell him to tie his shoes. That boy, I thought, honestly.

It took him a while to make it all the way downstairs, and through the window I



watched him step outside. I cringed as he bounded across the street without looking for cars, even though our street is never really that busy anyway. He joined his friends on the other side of the street, and they got into that formation that all little boys do, all huddled together with their heads tilted to one another, with a look of adult – like seriousness on their faces.

I turned away from the window as Jack was shutting the door behind himself. He had come back from working with Mr. Dunnigan downstairs all day. After he had shrugged off his jacket he came and kissed the top of my head, and then rested his chin there as well.

"Sitting by the window again are we?" He asked, speaking down into my hair. My head whipped around the look out the window, silently cursing myself for being distracted by my husband. But it was too late. They were gone, all gone; nothing was on the streets except trash. I stood so suddenly that my chair toppled over, I had to find him, now. Jack was grabbing my wrists, his concerned voice muffled and inaudible underneath the panic bellowing in my head to get out, now. He stepped back, confused as I hit his shoulders, flying out of the room as soon as he let go. It's funny when a mother needs to protect her child. Well, not funny at all really.

But a Mother's son is always her top priority. She would beat her own husband if it meant protecting him. Life moves in flashes, not ticks, and one minute you're in your apartment with your husband the next you're standing alone, all alone on the road full of doubts.

You could swallow the fog it was so thick, thick enough to swallow a little boy whole. All I could see of the street was completely empty, not a soul in sight, not a sound except the ragged breaths rattling through my throat. My heart wasn't even in my toes this time. I had left it on the floor upstairs, still beating and all. I couldn't ask for help because I didn't trust anyone. Not the police, not the neighbors, not even my own husband could care for my boy like I could. Missing a child is not like losing a part of yourself. It's like losing the whole thing. You are gone, your past is gone, and your future too. The only thing making your body parts work and move is your need to find your love, to hold them tight, to protect them from anything and everything. If he was gone, I was gone.

I could hear them coming before I could see them. I heard their childish laughter, their voices rising and falling over one another's. I could hear Robbie, I could smell him, I could almost touch him, and my eyes strained to see him. I ran blindly, letting their voices pull me in closer until I could see all of them, moving in one squirming dark mass. I sprinted closer, I could see him, and he could see me. He stopped and stared at me, expressionless. His friends fell silent as well, but I didn't care one bit. I reached him, touched him, embraced him finally. Relief surged up my spine and burst out of my mouth in gasps and splutters, rocking me back on forth on my heels as I held him closer.

I didn't notice it then, but Robbie's arms were pressed tight to his sides, and he was tense in my arms. I leant back and took his face in my hands. "Don't...don't you ever disappear like that again. You hear?" I could barely talk; the shock of losing him and finding him was starting to catch up to me. I was starting to feel all giddy from the hyperventilating, and from the joy.

"Ava." My head snapped up, amazed at how strange my name sounded coming from his mouth. His voice chilled me to the bone, that hostile, raw that didn't belong to a child. Not my child. He started struggling, trying to get away from me, pummeling my arms to break free. He pushed, not very hard, but it was a push all the same. The sidewalk scraped away the flesh of my palms as I fell back, throbbing along with the anger that was gradually building up inside of me. Robbie loomed over me now, his dead eyes transformed into wild flames, boring down into my eyes with fierce passion and brutal hatred. Those weren't Samuel's eyes. I knew it then. He would never be my boy. Not my sweet boy.

Editor's Note

Robbie first appeared in our November Issue.

Photograph: *Stairway* © Parker Fritz

Things That Live and Seek by Will Kaufman

I had long suspected that the Earth was not so solid as some insisted. On a road-trip a handful of years ago I observed how the sun-beaten highway ahead seemed a sea that fled before our car, all shimmer and reflection. I pointed at a shadow that bobbed in that elusive ocean and said, "Look, a fishie."

"It's a car, not a fucking fish," said my father.

My mother turned to me and smiled, and said, "I see it, too."

"Christ," said my father.

As with any sea, strange beasts must lurk beneath the surface of the land, navigating those same currents upon which the continents drift, and must, at times, surface, and feed. Where else could my mother have gone than into the belly of some magma-blackened leviathan?

My father scoffed at me when I attempted to lay my suspicions out to him. "Get the fuck out the way of the teevee," quoth he, "nothing took her." But I knew him to be wrong, as my mother had left me *The Book*, and not, I believed, for no reason. "And get me a beer out the fridge," said my father, "a cold one, from the back."

A number of tear-stained days (tears stained my pillow first the night my mother failed to return, when I awoke from an unremembered nightmare that perhaps involved running or hiding and she failed to appear when I called out for her and the house echoed with my entreaties and my father's insistent snoring that sounded like the wash of waves against the hull of my desolation) after my mother was somewhere swallowed up, I heard the rustle of plastic trash-bags from my parents' bedroom, and I attended at the threshold to bear witness to my father stripping her clothes from the hangers in her closet, which rattled and clattered together like so many bones as they danced on the rod. And he hauled open drawers and shoveled out her undergarments as a whaleman, in his victory, scoops spermaceti from the cavernous skull of the great beast.

A package tumbled out from among her socks, wrapped in red paper with green Christmas trees, and my father took it up and furrowed his brow as he deciphered the tag affixed to the wrapping. Then he dropped the package at my feet.

"It's for you," he said. He said it without anger or invectives, without any of his usual dour humor, and I feared a storm so deep and brooding that it might be beyond sight or sound, so I snatched the gift and fled to my room, closing the door behind me as quietly as I could, turning the knob so that the latch would not click against the plate. I slipped into my bed with the flashlight my mother had given me the year before, to protect me should I ever awake frightened of the dark, which I assured her I was too old to do, yet I had accepted the gift, and thanked her, and kissed her cheek to make her smile.

There, protected doubly by my cotton wigwam and my closed door, I aimed a beam of light at the tag on the gift and saw that it was meant for my mother's son (me), on the occasion of his sixteenth birthday (as of the time of this writing, an event yet to occur),

that he might better understand the world (I believe I do), and accomplish great things (I promise). With love (gratefully accepted and offered tenfold in return), and hugs (O! to know that embrace once more), Mom.

I divested the contents of their wrapping with great care, so as to preserve every part of the parcel, the manner of its appearance and method of its delivery bespeaking the sort of finality that means a future of stranded memories, the clarity of which can only be earned with hyperconscientiousness. As I said, I unwrapped this final gift, and found therein The Book.

And I understand, Mother. Though, in fairness, I have only read the first third-part of the tome, yet its message is clear enough: the strong feel safe, and make safety. I will be a harpooneer for you, Mother. I will pull after the leviathan, and dart iron at its side. Mother, if I am unlimbed by your loss, I vow revenge. And if, by chance, like Jonah, you are kept safe in a midnight belly, I will be a Nineveh with blade in hand. I will dare God, and cut you free, and whatever ground you slip out upon, slick with the gore of the beast, I will call the promised shore.



But I should not dwell on such Mab-touched hopes. One may as well expect to reclaim a leg, well digested, and sew it back. No, science tells us that stomachs are filled with all-consuming acid, and my mother is not a copper penny, to be passed whole.

Through my window I heard my father's

grunting, and the lid of the trashcan slam shut on the bags of my mother's clothes, and I am not too proud to admit I wept anew.

What then did I require? A boat, a crew, and an iron.

I knew what boats men employ to navigate the asphalt channels of this world, but their piloting was beyond me; my sixteenth birthday, as I have indicated, still some years in the offing. Perhaps my crew and ship could both be earned in one, careful

strike, in a manner indicated by The Book. I sought to prepare my harpoon first, so I should be ready, were my plan to succeed.

You may wonder where I might look to procure such a terrible instrument, me, a child of land bordered by mountains that are themselves land-locked, and that locking land further entrenched with furlongs of dirt. But hark ye, have ye not noted that your neighbors all defend their walkways and yards with barbed iron? Have ye not passed through black gates tipped with spearheads as ye seek entrance to the home of a friend? It seems to me a sign that our race, though refusing to acknowledge it, shares a presentiment that there may be more to the roads that make islands of our blocks of houses than simply lanes and crosswalks, that we should erect a warning so clearly aimed at striking terror into the heart of the only beast to have been so thoroughly chastised and persecuted, nigh to extinction, by such a shape, and the only beast man still pursues, in an industrial fashion, with such instruments: the whale.

My own home had a gate of this sort, hanging askew from a broken hinge, held upright by a tangle of weeds and a heavy rigging of cobwebs. A few solid tugs served to liberate the gate from its moorings, and I dragged into the driveway, in front of the perpetually half-open garage door, where I set about with a hammer attempting to separate a harpoon from the frame. The noise soon attracted my father's attention.

"Fuck are you doing?" he asked.

By this time I was panting with my exertion, and could not communicate myself as clearly as I would have liked. "Taking it apart," I said, "For Mom."

"Not the gate keeping Mom away," said my father.

"No," I said, "To hunt."

"What?"

"They're harpoons," I said, indicating the barbed tips, "See? So I can hunt the thing that took her."

My father opened his mouth but no sound followed. He stared at me for a moment, long enough to make me shuffle my feet, then he said, "You'll never get one loose with a hammer."

He entered the garage, the door grating on its rusty track as he lifted it fully open, and worked his way around the battered car, and through the piles of crates and miscellany. He took hold of a stained canvas, which I assumed covered still more detritus, and pulled, loosing a substantial cloud of dust, dust that choked us, made us cough, and rub at our eyes, and when we could look again the dissipating cloud revealed a tool-box, enameled blood-red, drawers glinting chrome, clean, bright in that drab room. He placed both hands on the box, rubbing it with his thumbs, and seemed entranced, as though our garage were the tabernacle and he had been given leave to touch the holy ark.

Opening then a particularly deep drawer, which, in contrast to all the rusted joints in the rest of our house, slid smoothly on its tracks, so smoothly those bearings must have been enchanted so they could not decay, no matter how many years of dusty disuse they

may have gathered, he produced a coil of orange extension cable and a blue-bodied tool with a rough wheel at one end.

"You need a grinder," he said, mating the cord with a plug that protruded from a metal box on the side of the garage. He flipped a switch on the grinder and, with a whir that made the roots of my teeth rattle and itch, the wheel sprung to life, spinning, spinning, its features all blurred, outline wobbling.

"Oh," said my father, and he turned off the machine and returned to his toolbox, from whence he drew a pair of plastic eye glasses. "Here," he said, offering them to me, "can't hunt if you're blind."

The glasses were too big for my face, the ear hooks sitting well behind my ears, and I found I had to hold them in place lest they slip from my nose. My father nodded, brought the machine to whistling life, and set the wheel against the metal.

That union gave birth to sparks, and sparks showered the driveway, skittering over the pavement as though possessed of frantic life and a vital desire to flee to the street, to quench their fire in the saltwater road, and any beast of the darkness that beheld those sharp and screeching lights dancing towards its leery eye must surely quail, and turn, and flee towards the deep, and the safety of the dark, and know that I was preparing, that we were preparing, my father and I, our revenge.

But I had to be sure he would be with me, would dare those jaws, and The Book had shown me how to make him mine, how to secure myself my pilot and my ship.

That night I brought him a beer without him asking, as I knew it a powerful tonic for inducing imperturbable sleep. He took it but did not open it; steadying it on his knee as he sat sunken in the couch cushions, he regarded the thing.

"Don't you want it?" I urged.

"What do I want?" he asked, addressing himself to the can. Then he squinted at me, and I saw something of the same glimmer as when he found me working at the gate with a hammer. I felt looked upon, and abruptly unsure, though unsure of what I still, to this day, cannot say.

"I never thought," quoth he, "I'd miss her." He opened the beer and took a short draught and a long swallow. "It's your bed-time, right?"

The question seemed genuine. I nodded.

"Brush your teeth, then. Go on."

I acquiesced, and then, ensconcing myself in my bunk, waited, being sure to keep my eyes open, despite the phantoms that danced before them in the dark, despite the shadows that stirred and slunk at the periphery of my vision, despite all ghosts and creatures that made the walls creak and the windows whisper and weighed the counterpane down on my chest as though to hold me there, still and helpless, and I waited for my father to snore.

He did, eventually, and I snuck from my bed, careful to avoid the floor where it creaked, to set my feet in quiet places, and to ease my weight up on the arm of the couch that I might not disturb him as he slept with that same can settled between his thighs, his head thrown back as though to howl, but only to breathe that rattling breath. I

positioned my nose over his open mouth, and I exhaled sharply, so that something might shoot from my dilated nostrils, and he might inhale it in his lungs.

He breathed in, coughed, and stirred, but did not wake. He was mine, my Satrbuck. The Book promised it. I returned to my bunk and closed my eyes, untroubled by the massless things that lurked, and slipped from the meager clay.

The morning greeted me with cursing and the sour smell of burnt eggs, and for a moment I feared something had gone terribly awry, that somehow I had poisoned or corrupted my father's essence, and he had become the opposite of tame. With trepidation dragging at my feet like iron manacles I entered our kitchen, and found my father scraping a ruined omelet into the sink.

"Thought I'd make breakfast," he said. "You want cereal? That shit doesn't burn, right?"

He poured me out a generous measure, and doused it with milk as though to ensure the grain would continue not to combust.

"Look," he said, "Maybe we should go somewhere. Get out of the house, what do you think?"

"Can we drive?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, "Of course we can drive. There somewhere you want to go?"

"We can just drive. Around. On the road."

"Get dressed," he said, "I'll pull the car out."

My heart and I raced, together, to dress and gather supplies. It had worked! Soon, soon, leviathan, shall I dart iron at your dusty flank, and pay you in kind for what you've taken! I took up The Book and my harpoon and dashed out of the house, where the car rumbled, ready, I thought, to roar, to give voice to the raging spirit of my vengeance.

For a moment it seemed my father might not allow the harpoon. "But I need it," I said.

"Fine," he said, "but put it on the floor so it don't poke you."

And we were off! Off on the sun-soaked road, the shimmering softness ahead, retreating just apace of our ship.

"Faster!" I cried, and my pilot obliged, and yet that nimble sea still escaped from us.

"Faster!"

And my father laughed, and the engine shouted, and the road signs were all blurs, and my harpoon was within reach, and I grasped The Book, my bookmark firmly set with the ship under sail and the crew rallied to their captain's cause, and I thought, surely, the ocean that flees must tire, and we must catch it, and plunge into it, and there I would find the beast, and drive my iron through its side, and punish it for all I had lost.

Editor's Note

Things That Live and Seek first appeared in our December Issue.

Photograph: *Whales* © Daniel J. Glendening

Lightning My Pilot by Samuel Snoek-Brown

In the car, my son asked me why the clouds were moving in different directions. He was finally old enough to sit in the front seat and he spent every trip to the store straining against the seatbelt and craning his neck to stare out the windshield. I twisted my head skyward, too. It was a weird weather day, the air stagnant and thick on the ground but way up in the clouds the wind was racing, and he was right, some clouds were drifting east while others veered north and some even raced backward toward us.

It was something meteorological, something to do with air pressure and the jet stream and frontal systems. I don't know what all, and he was that sort of kid: you tell him the truth and you'll spend the rest of the day answering questions, driving to the library to check out stacks of books, getting online at home and helping him navigate Wikipedia. So I said, "Oh, honey, those aren't clouds. They're ships that the gods sail around in."

He gazed at me, his eyes huge.

"Yep, it's a nice sunny day out today, and they all felt like taking a cruise."

"Like the sailboats out on the big lake?" he said.

"Like the sailboats and motorboats and everything. Even big, big ships."

"Like pirates?"

"Like pirates."

My son can't sleep during thunderstorms. Rain he loves, but the lightning and thunder terrify him. After I told him about the god-ships, we had a dry storm, sheet lightning sparking over the horizon and, when the system reached the radio towers, thick blue bolts arcing for long seconds. The air was hot and smelled like a car battery. My son usually cowers during these sorts of storms, hiding with a flashlight in a tent made from his blanket. But this time he knelt at the window, his elbows on the sill and his flashlight in his little fists like a scepter.

"Mom," he said. "Why are the god-ships fighting?"

I stared at him, clueless. I'd completely forgotten what he was talking about. My forehead hurt trying to figure out what to tell him. But he beat me to it:

"It's okay, Mom, I can handle it."

It's what he'd said when his father deployed. I looked out the dark window and saw the two of us reflected in the glass, and then we disappeared, replaced by a wide flashbulb of lightning. And then we were back. The glass shuddered with thunder. I knelt beside him.

"Honey, I don't know why the god-ships are at war. No one does. It's been going on for a long time."

"I know," he said. He laid his head sideways against the windowsill and sighed. Then he said, "Who's winning?"

"It's hard to say," I told him. "From underneath, all the god-ships look the same."

"Like you're underwater and looking up," he said. "Like at the pool, when you're in the big floatie raft and I'm underwater with my goggles."

Jesus, this kid.

"Exactly like that," I said.

"But I can always tell when it's you," he said.

"You must be smarter than me, then."

For a while the sky was clear, and sometimes my son would say he missed the god-ships but other times he would simply smile and tell me he was glad they'd stopped fighting. Then we had a rainstorm, a heavy downpour from a black sky, the gutters full and the street rushing. My son sat with me on the front porch; I drank coffee and I'd fixed him hot cocoa. He said, "If I went out and got wet, would the gods be sorry?"

"Don't go out in the rain, honey."

"I know, Mom. But it's like, I'm not in their war, but all this rain, it's like their blood, so if I got wet, it'd be like they got their blood on me. Would they feel sorry about that?"

I started to cry. I took his cocoa and set it next to my coffee on the porch railing and I crushed him to me. What had I done?

"It's okay, Mom!" he said. "I don't think they mean it. I don't think they even know we're down here."

What had I done?

He drew pictures of the god-ships, began making a book explaining how everything works. The cumulonimbus warships, the stratocumulus cruisers, the cirrus scouts. The high, cottony blankets of cirrocumulus were victory ceremonies. "Like the end of *Star Wars*." The low, heavy ceiling of an overcast day was mourning after a lost battle. "Like when Daddy's friend Mike came home." He meant in a casket draped with the flag.

Rainbows were peace treaties, but tornados were nuclear weapons. Hailstones were bullet casings and snow was just flotsam, exploded food sacks or shredded pillows from the berths. Hurricanes were whole armadas clashing, entire nations meeting in epic battles that would see flags fall and territory consumed. Fog was a sunken ship, fallen to our world and forgotten by the gods as their war raged on.

His teacher sent home notes praising his creativity, but she also sent home notes saying she was concerned by the violence of the conflict he described. "I know his father is overseas," she wrote one time, "but maybe there are happier subjects you could explore together at home."

I told him to keep drawing. I took his pictures off the refrigerator and framed them, started hanging them from nails I hammered into the walls. I took down all the old art in the living room, everything but the photo of my husband in his crisp uniform and his framed special forces patch, which I kept beside the light switch. With the walls otherwise bare, I made the living room into a gallery of the god-ships.

He never drew the gods. He only drew their ships. Once, I asked him why. He said, "From underneath, all you can see are the god-ships. Have you ever seen a god?"

I told him that I hadn't, but we would keep an eye out for one.

In the thick fog, my son grew quiet. He insisted on wearing all black on foggy days. "Like for Daddy's friend Mike," he said. I indulged him the first time, but the second time it was school photo day, and I told him he had to wear brighter colors. He refused. "Today is a funeral day, Mom!"

"But you don't even know the gods whose ship went down!" I was in his world now, completely.

"That's not the point. A ship sank. It's sad."

I couldn't argue with him anymore. While he was at school, I bought him six new outfits of all-black clothes, a whole week's worth if you counted what he wore to school that day. What else could I do?

One day, several weeks later, the fog was in again and we were at the playground. He was wearing the black shorts and t-shirt I'd bought him. The black sneakers. Black socks. I told him to stay close—I was going to lose him in the fog, in all that black—but he didn't want to play much anyway. "It's a sad day, not a play day."

We went for a walk together, leaving the play area and heading out along the park fence. He held my hand. Sometimes we would stop to look at the dew in a spider web or hold our hands in front of our faces to see how far we could see, but the fog was never that thick. Neither of us talked. We just walked the perimeter, side by side.

When we came upon the man lying on a park bench, his patchy beard and his tattered pants, his stained army jacket, my son squeezed my fist and pointed, and he whispered, "Mom, it's one of them!"

"Don't point, honey," I whispered, but he pulled me down to one knee and he kept on pointing.

"Look, look, one of them survived!"

"Survived?"

"The battle, Mom, that's why his clothes are torn. The sunken god-ship. That must be the god-captain—he went down with his ship."

"Oh, honey—" but he'd already pulled free of my hand and was running over to the bench. I dove after him so fast from my one knee that I fell over, scraped my palm in gravel and ripped my pants at the knee. "Wait!" I shouted. "Don't go over there!"

But he wasn't that far from me, the homeless man on the bench just a dozen feet away at the most, and I could still see and hear my son. The man sat up at the same time I climbed back to my feet, like we were rising in unison. He looked at me and smiled, kept his hands to himself. He looked at my son. My son looked at him, then back at me.

"I'm sorry you fell down," he said. He was talking to the homeless man, I'm pretty sure. The god-captain. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

"Son, so am I," the man said.

I was already by my son's side, a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry he's bothering you," I said.

"No bother," the man said. "But now that you're here, think you might spare a dollar?"

My son was looking up at me. I fought tears as I looked down at him. "I'm so sorry," I told the man. "I don't have my purse."

The man only nodded, but then my son was digging in his front pocket. "I have my allowance money," he said, and before I could stop him, he was handing a crumpled ball of a dollar bill to the man. The man looked up at me, and I sighed and nodded, and then he took the wadded bill from my son and stuffed it into the breast pocket of his tattered army jacket.

"God bless you, son."

"You're welcome, Captain."

The man cocked his head and chuckled. He said, "I ain't a captain, son. I'm a full-blown admiral."

My son said, "Wow," the vowel long and breathy, but I was already pulling him away, walking him back toward the play area, the parking lot, the car.

My son said, "Mom? Why would a god-admiral need a dollar?"

I pushed him into the front seat, squatted in the open car door to help him fasten his seat belt, and then stayed there, a hand on his little knee. He looked at me, waiting for me to explain it all to him.

I said, "Once a captain—or an admiral—goes down with his ship, he's free from the war but he's trapped here on the ground. If he gets enough money, he can buy his own ship, just a simple personal boat, and he can sail away, up above the sky, and escape the war forever."

"Like, into space?" my son said.

"Like, into the Milky Way, honey. Like, into the stars."

Editor's Note

Lightning My Pilots first appeared in our September Issue.

The Treehouse by CS DeWildt

Though all four of the young men had had a hand in building the tree house, it looked very alien to the three standing on the ground. And he, their confused friend thirty feet above, looked equally alien, staring down with humoring eyes, as if he were seeing them for what they truly were. They were his friends, but in their heart they felt betrayed, felt that he was belittling each of them by living this fantasy with the same conviction one gives a desperate truth.

The three on the ground had names: there was Marcus, the future veterinarian; Abe, the future MBA; and Scott, the future lawyer. Each of them stared up, up, up through the sycamores, squinting in the bright sunshine that backlit the tree house. They had come to retrieve Ernie.

He'd climbed up there the night of their high school graduation, eschewing the parties in preference of a new solitude. He had remained there for over three months and as far as anyone knew he had not come down, not once. He stayed all hours in the branches reading books, watching network television on a small black and white set, hunting squirrels, masturbating, and when an idea would come, writing. Ernie self-published his stories or poems in the form of a wadded paper ball or a folded airplane. To those around him--his mother, his father, the ineffectual police and fire departments, and now his three childhood friends come to rescue him from himself--the scribblings were the work of either a madman or an obstinate child.

Ernie, stood out on the front porch of the tree house, conversing in shouts and amplified gestures.

"Come down, Ernie." Marcus said. "This isn't healthy."

"What's not healthy?"

"This, what you're doing. What have you been eating?"

"Squirrels mostly. I have some tomatoes and peppers growing in pots on the roof."

"Water?"

"I filter the rain, but I have the garden hose up here as a backup."

It was as if he spoke it into existence at that moment, the three on the ground pulled the snaking green hose out of the background with their eyes, following it first from the base of the tree and up to the tree house and then back down again and out of the clearing, back to the house of his parents, a structure invisible save for the breeze that occasionally raised the veil of the minty willows that surrounded them.

"C'mon, Ernie, still." Marcus said. "You got something wrong with your head? You depressed?"

"No, maybe just-" he searched his personal lexicon for the proper term; he believed the word found in the thesaurus was never correct, "just dissatisfied, disillusioned, apathetic. I don't know, but that's got nothing to do with my being up here. I want to be up here. I just want to live in the tree house."

"You can't," Scott said. "Your folks want you to come down. It's their house. You should listen to them."

"Why?"

"Because it's their property for one. You can't just squat here your whole life. And if that doesn't stir you maybe an appeal to your emotions will: they're worried about you. We all are."

"There's nothing to worry about," Ernie said. "Everybody just needs to let it go. I know what I'm doing. I've been up here for three months. I'm fine. Never better!"

Abe retrieved and unfurled a wad of paper. He read out loud:

"...and he stood up and stabbed his mother in the face with her crochet needle, the unfinished winter scarf still attached and trailing out of the room after her like a gymnast's ribbon, a visual manifestation of her screams."

"It's a story. Like it?"

"Your mom crochets," Scott said.

"A lot of moms crochet," Ernie said. "Some dads too. Some people who never had any kids. It's a story!"

Abe crumpled the paper and let it fall back to the ground. "Look man, college? Don't you remember all the plans we made for college? We were all going to rush the same frats, room together all four years, get laid? How you going to get laid up there?"

"Any girl worth screwing will find her way up here."

"That's nuts," Abe said. "And what about money? Don't you want to join the real world and make some money?"

"I don't need money." Ernie climbed atop the railing and the three on the ground had the same thoughts: first that he was coming down, then that maybe he was going to jump, commit suicide or at least cripple himself. They saw the pellet gun slung over his shoulder as he walked the salvaged, scrap-pile two-by-four with dirty bare feet and hoisted himself up into the branches of the tall sycamore. He moved smoothly, like a monkey on the swaying, creaking branches, moving comfortably, smoothly, nearly gliding on dexterous feet. He climbed higher and roosted in the crotch of a large limb. He took aim and fired the rifle. Poot.

"Ha!" Ernie said. "Got him." Ernie climbed even higher and reached into a net of woven bark strips just below the empty space he'd sighted with the gun. He retrieved the twitching, injured squirrel from the net and broke its neck with a quick twist of his hands.

"I bait them with acorns," Ernie said. "I'm completely self-sufficient. Nearly." He lowered himself back to the porch of the tree house and tossed the squirrel through the open door. Again, reality was carved from a raw slab and the three young men saw the ground was littered with squirrel remains, skin and fur and bones in varying degrees of decay.

"Ernie," Marcus said, "you're sick! Really man! Sick!" Scott touched him on the shoulder to both comfort and quiet him, for Ernie's sake.

"You're not sick, Ernie." Scott said. "We just want you to come down and live life with us. Like it's supposed to be lived."

Ernie laughed. The sound was not the boy they'd grown up with, but the cackling chortle of an old man. "Why can't you just let me be? I don't come around and try to get you guys to do anything. Go to school, join the frat! Get laid and paid! I wish you the best! Just let me be!"

"But this isn't living!" Marcus said.

"Then I must be dead," Ernie said. He laughed again and went inside the tree house. The three listened as he banged around inside the retreat, still laughing. They looked to each other and were certain that their young friend had truly lost it. Ernie came back scribbling on a sheet of paper. He smiled on the words as a father does a child, a man soaked in the pride of creation. He folded the paper into a plane and released it into the world. The plane glided and circled, spiraling in the sunlight before nose-diving and landing at the feet of the three.

"Read it." Ernie said.

Scott picked up the plane, made it paper again and read:

"They come to right me. To live is to come down, down. Then I must be dead." He let the paper fall. "A poem?"

"A haiku. What do you think?"

"I think it's shit." Marcus said. Scott punched his shoulder hard.

"It's great, Ernie." Scott said. "Best I've ever read." He looked at Abe.

"Yeah," Abe said, "Yeah, it's, real deep, Ernie. You just came up with that right now?"

"Yeah." Ernie's face had fallen so low they could nearly touch it. "Marcus said it was shit though."

Scott and Abe looked at Marcus, waiting on him to retract his review.

Marcus didn't look at them. He stared at Ernie. "I did say that. Because it *is* shit." Scott and Abe tried to hush him, but he stepped closer to the tree, facing Ernie alone. "Let this crazy bastard live up in the trees if he wants to. What do we care?"

"C'mon," Abe said. "He's a friend."

"Ooh, high school friends. Big deal. Like any of us are going to be friends in four years anyway. If we are I'll fucking shoot myself!"

"Marcus," Scott said, "what the hell's the matter with you?"

"Screw you, man. I want to grow. I want to leave all of this in the past. This whole town. I don't want to think about it ever again. Rearview mirror, man." His hard eyes shifted between the two on the ground, stabbed Ernie in the tree. "Why won't you just come out of the tree you crazy bastard?"

"Why do you need me to so bad?" Ernie asked, chewing on some sundried squirrel jerky.

"Because that's what grown-ups do! You need all this attention! Like you're so special. 'Look at me! Look at me!' The world is the way it is, and it isn't about living in a god damn tree for your whole life killing squirrels! Deal with it!"

"I never asked you to come here! You showed up on your own. All of you!"

"So write a story about it asshole!" Marcus looked to Scott and Abe for approval. Neither spoke and then it suddenly began raining on Marcus alone.

"Sorry," Ernie said, "latrine's full." A soft piece of stool landed on Marcus' piss-drenched head. The soggy feces formed to his dome like a little hat.

Marcus tried to speak, but his rage reduced him to only piss spittle and tears. He ran from the clearing, away from the tree house and his friends.

Ernie and the two on the ground looked at one another. No one knew quite how to continue. And then Abe began to giggle.

"Did you see that shit? It stuck to his head!" Abe couldn't continue. The laughter grew until it had him fully. "Ernie," He choked, "you are nasty, man!"

"Ernie, you are one sick fool!" Scott said, trying to scold, but the laughter got him too. It was just like when they were twelve years old and Marcus, the go to butt of the joke, was sent home crying once again.

"That Marcus," Abe could barely speak, "he's su-, su- he's such shit head!" And the three friends laughed until they were crying.

"Oh, hilarious," Marcus said as he crashed back into the clearing. "A goddamn riot! I'll get that dumb bastard down." He was holding an ax. Ernie leaned over the railing.

"Don't you do it! Don't you do it! I'll kill you!"

"Come down and stop me!" Marcus said. He swung the ax, splintering wood flying about his madman grin, dirt and bark sticking in his teeth. He swung the tool again and again.

Scott touched his shoulder for a third time. "Easy man, c'mon!" Marcus turned and swung the ax hard, splitting Scott's face like a log. Scott fell and the ax came free from his face with the sound of a wet kiss. Marcus looked at Abe who was already making a run for it and then Marcus was after him, their feet crunching in the brush and debris. For a moment it was quiet. Ernie stared at the ground, listening to the wind, seeing nothing but Scott's corpse bleeding on top of all the paper and squirrel remains and latrine waste. Abe's screams broke the silence and then just as quickly, the quiet returned. Marcus appeared in the clearing, blood spattered and panting, looking demon strong with the ax in his hands, like that paper towel lumber jack in his blood beard and wet, red shirt. He began chopping at the tree again, painting the pulpy gash with blood from the ax blade.

"Marcus!" Ernie screamed down at him. "Marcus! Marcus! Don't you do it, Marcus! Don't you do it!" Marcus gave no indication of hearing the plea. He chopped. Ernie grabbed his paper and a pencil. He scribbled out a story in what little time he might have left. It was pretty good too.

Editor's Note

The Treehouse previously appeared in our Post-Experimental Issue and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Cumulo-Nimbus Tonight! by Uzodinma Okehi

1: (Hong Kong 1994)

-Friday December 31st 2:20 AM

Not just for dear life. Squeezing that bar, swinging on the outside of the railing. A little scream, scrabbling with my feet against the side of the building, flakes of rust digging into my palms. Funny how moments like this are pure sensation. Puke on my breath. The sweat in the armpits of my silk shirt. My asshole, puckering. I'm in fact, sweating bullets, and I feel, more than I really see the deserted, rock-hard sidewalk way down below. Even in the moment I can admit how lame it would be die this way, and I can imagine the postscript: *Unknown American falls eleven stories to his death. Girls at party remain unenthused.* Unknown because I'd left my passport, phone cards and money in my jacket, back in my room at the YMCA, which had been only the beginning of a bad night . . . And not that I was the most charismatic guy! I was no big champ, but it was almost unreal how this day had spiraled downhill and it was also funny how quickly you start to lose faith in yourself. First in the cab, those girls peppering me with questions, then losing interest, then stampeding with talk right through whatever I'd think to say. *Man, all that giggling.* All that racing around, down Bonham Road, from Wan Chai, the Mid-Levels, to Central then back again. Racing to meet other girls, all of them squealing and hugging each other while me and Dustin stood off to the side like two jerks. Most of those other girls couldn't even remember Dustin, didn't seem recognize him at all and this was the guy who was supposed to be my ticket. Like flailing, slipping down some dark hole. That girl Doris. Chinese Doris, with daggers, and of course she catches me looking in the rear-view of the cab, pouting and smearing scented lip-gloss around her mouth with the little wand. Standing in that café with Dustin and those girls, with Doris and her white friend, sipping iced chai tea while they talked about friendship beads and the other stuff they were all about in high school. More than that though, I'd been off my game for weeks. Like I was some weird, scorched leper, talking to girls. Some hooded pervert, cackling and limping around, at the Lost World, at bars, while everything I tried to say felt like a stumble.

But no, what I was holding onto, I guess, struggling with, was the idea there was still some point to this. I'd dropped out of school over a month ago in Iowa City. Booked a flight from an ad in the newspaper, *Experience Hong Kong*. An impulse move, but also a thing I'd jumped into with the idea of a grand purpose. I was gonna draw comics. But when I said that to people it didn't sound big enough. Aside from the fact I could barely draw! So I was going to teach myself, forget Iowa, but smack in the middle of a city that made me think about comics, that moved like comics, where the real action took place. Arriving in Hong Kong the first night though, I found I couldn't exactly say what that "real action" was, and from there even the few art supplies I needed turned into a saga. Even when I left the hotel to buy soap, or a hot meal, this too would usually mean the

beginning of some weird, spiraling adventure, and from there it was stepping outdoors, like zooming down, dropping through feathered clouds into those streets like canals, teeming with phosphorescent life. Exhausted by day then fumbling through vivid, wide-awake nights, including, but not limited to this thing on the balcony, that is, arriving in Hong Kong, skip the preliminaries, fast-forward right to me easing out that tiny window from the bathroom with shaking hands, sick, dizzily pushing the grate aside, gaping at the eleven-story drop then heaving myself across the gap, the two or three feet to scramble over the balcony railing and flop, gasping, onto the patio, lying on my back with sounds from the party inside nestling softly over me like a breeze.

2:

-Friday December 31st 12:40 AM

"Okay—but wait. Get what I'm saying."

"What are you saying?" Now she was annoyed. *"Dude, you're rambling. And it's no big deal. I get it. You're comparing comics to a language. You're trying to make it seem so complicated."*

"Jill, I don't mean to sound too smug. I don't know, let me say it another way." But I was backpedaling, also shivering, on the couch, and swaddled, the sequined green jacket thrown across my shoulders like a blanket. Which *was* kind of ludicrous. But also the way she was trying to write me off.

"Look. Whatever. You stay on your little mission over here, with your disco jacket, I'm gonna go-

"Hold on. Hey. Relax. And let's say—complicated—only in the sense these things can sometimes get that way. Right, Jill? Give me that much, and look, I'll admit, yeah, I'm trying to impress you. I mean, I wasn't really thinking about all this when I left Iowa, but here's what it's turned into. And it's not a comparison. Comics is a language. I couldn't teach a class on it, any more than I speak Chinese, but if I had a blackboard, we could break down three or four simple shapes, much like the few basic sounds that we can all make with our mouths. And that's no matter what language you're gonna speak. If you get me. And hold on, hold off before you rip me up. It's different because you said you've been speaking Chinese since you were five. Right? Cantonese, whatever. You're not Chinese, but you might as well be. So it doesn't seem complicated. You conjugate verbs, use different tenses, long chains of vocabulary, but think about the path of that process. And back to those shapes I mentioned. With drawing you've got, let's say, the sphere or ball, the cube, and the cylinder. I could tell you those three shapes comprise everything, but it's only simple once you don't have to think about it. Think of words not as tools, but vessels. A sound with the same shape for everyone, but what do you fill it with? Ludicrous, I know, and like I said, not to be smug about it. But Jill, that's a formless maze, years, and hours, and you've got to start at the very beginning and wade your way through."

A formless maze . . . Like a sweat-soaked towel tied round my head. Like talking, moving underwater, my stomach and bowels churning, bubbling—while she sat there glaring at me, and I could barely hold myself upright. There were ten or twelve other dudes, at least, besides me and Dustin, mostly white, a couple of Chinese cats, but like prep-school guys from a catalogue, all dressed nearly alike, laughing, opening beers and chattering, bouncing, milling around Doris and the other one, the other hyper-caffinated Chinese girl I was never introduced to, but both of them like turbines, driving this thing, flirting, laughing hysterically, about whatever, little spurts of dancing, for no one in particular, but all of us watching, and if there was any music it was drowned out by the shackled-down roar of the situation, *think about it*, look but don't look, that same old pressure as always, building . . . On the other hand, Jill was supposed to be best friends with Doris, and who knows what the deal was with that. Chinese Doris, the lycra skirt she had to keep tugging on, and all night she'd been preoccupied, with the phone in the kitchen, dialing then hanging up, then waiting, dialing then waiting. Every so often one of those guys would come over, maybe try rubbing her arms or a hand on the small of her back. This is what Jill was really watching while I was blathering about comics. They were friends, I suppose the way me and Dustin were pals, but I was also ticked off, about done with that guy, perched on the edge of the couch, a full beer in his hand, and holding it like a tricorder, talking to no one; flat, dull, barely trying, but sitting there as if to decipher from it some lost algorithmic code.

3:

-Friday December 31st 1:50 AM

Also that shirt! And from the beginning, meeting up with Doris and Jill, I guess knew the kind of night this was gonna be. Doris, in spike heels, strutting around, laughing too loud, and then Jill, uneasy about it, crossing, uncrossing her arms, but still in that skin tight, cap-sleeved t-shirt, **Hong Kong**, with those huge D-cup jets busting right through the logo, a kind of glitch-hop, post-post-disco MTV Asia, and there *must* have been music going because I'm following that other Chinese girl with my eyes, she's still dancing, jogging a circuit through the tiny living room, around the couch, the table littered with half-full plastic cups, whipping her hair around, weaving between bodies, and this bit of open-air swimming, watching her is enough to finally get me off the couch, down the hall to the bathroom where I throw up immediately, and neatly, into the toilet . . . *For instance, this girl dancing. You start with the torso. Through-line with a curve to it. Forget the details, you draw the gesture, long swoosh, two stretched cubes, rectangles, the arms—cylinders; loose, floating, her head a thrown back sphere, and so on . . .* Throw up then I sit, shitting, and it's all liquid, spraying the inside of the bowl. I light a cigarette. I'm trying to filter back through the whole conversation, layers of bullshit, layers and layers, and me drawing in the air with my finger—*was I doing that?*—and those glitterpuff letters buckling, stretched across her chest, everything loose

and distorted, the sequined jacket—thankfully I wasn't wearing it now, and if there was anything at all, anything sincere about comics I could go back out and say to her, then I was reaching for it, fumbling in the dark . . . *It wasn't the Alcohol! And why was I even talking about it? With her!* Now I'd become that guy, art-prick at the party, playing that card, because I'd been trying to claw my way into the game all night. Those girls hadn't seen Dustin since high school. Not only was that our ticket, it was his big chance to reinvent himself. Which had been my pep-talk, and somewhere in the scheme I'd also assumed I'd be able to get into conversation and loosen things up. Or not. Or rather, I'd spend the evening as dead weight, me and Dustin, trudging behind those girls while they laughed amongst themselves, stop after stop for Doris to use the pay phone, and maybe even a moment in the beginning, they were asking about Iowa City, but there also I fumbled around too much with words, withering under pressure, and that girl Jill seemed to like watching me choke out in slow motion . . . *Also think how much of human interaction is a kind of shell game, about subtext. Again, start with the torso, frame beneath the frame. You imagine the movement of what you can't see . . .*

All this back and forth, and in the midst of it a deep welling up within me. Reflex, my jaw locks open, I double over and throw up on the floor between my feet. Panting, dry-heaving. I sit there for a minute, staring at the mess before the situation starts to seep in. I stand up and wipe, using the last few sheets on the roll, hit the flush, which shudders then dies off, leaving the bowl full of puke and shit. *You gotta be kidding me.* Panic. Standing now, pants around my ankles. My mind racing, quickly doing the math. Everyone was in the living room and kitchen, which was set off from the bathroom by the hallway. It wasn't as if I could walk out and ask for a plunger. Or a mop. *Because I took a huge dump that won't go down, and by the way, I also puked all over your bathroom!* Then again I couldn't just waltz out like nothing. Or could I? The living room led out to a balcony. And if I remembered right the balcony was only a little more than arm's length from the bathroom window . . .

4:

-Friday December 31st 1:26 AM

"Yeah, no. But you're saying-

"You're being too melodramatic, that's what-

"Hold on," I said. "If I was one of your pals, talking about law school or something you know you'd—"

"I'd what? Agree the plan would be to move to another country? Self-teach yourself to become a lawyer?"

"Right. Ok. I'm—"

"In a sparkly, tuxedo jacket? Would I?"

"Ok, I'm a douchebag."

"I didn't say that."

Thrashing, twisting around, struggling. She was looking right past me, into the kitchen, and here I was invested, straining for something, if I could pull her back, as if it mattered, and the loose, chunky feeling in my stomach wasn't helping . . .

Then also, over there, the cloud of guys floating, waiting around Doris, who was still hovering by the phone on the countertop, still playing it cool, or trying to, and meanwhile there'd been a pecking order established. White kid, the piercing in his lower lip, with the triple-wide, neoprene skater pants, easing her away from the counter. He was moving in, soothing her and she's playing along, over-laughing, draping herself on his shoulder, a high-five he makes sure to end with clasped hands; *nice move*, I guess, though she's acting like she's strung out on something.

“ . . . like a language, with comics, with drawing, it's just like that, you could spend years in a classroom, wasting time.” Glitch-hop, fade in and that's me, still talking, and Jill's rolling her eyes.

“What do you mean, wasting time? Dude, I had a Cantonese tutor when I moved here. It's not some magic you pick up roaming the streets.”

“Isn't it? Think about—”

“And stop telling me what to think about. Do you try to game everyone like this?”

Blurt—pause, short lapse, chasm, she's looking around. I wanted to do something, smash a bottle, anything; to jump right up, out of my skin, whatever, something drastic. The other Chinese girl, now she was off in the corner, by herself, whipping her hair, dancing with abandon, and crazily, sloshing her drink on the floor. With that roomful of dudes, movie extras, milling around, or glued to the wall, watching. The whole thing, verging over. If I could wake up, gather myself. *Focus. If this bitch would crack a smile at least, if I could move her with something!* In fact, *not if*, no question, I was about to set this thing off, *T-minus, control the party, let's do this*, that is, if I could just get upright on the couch, untangle myself from my jacket. If I could somehow settle my stomach—and *uh-oh*, here comes smooth Chinese bro across the room, smiling . . .

“Lei cumman du tong n-go gong yet la?” she said, and that's what it sounded like, all vowels, and they're in a little stand-off, smiling at each other, until the guy lets up, laughing cheesily, then it's in for the kiss on the cheek.

“Go-geen jacket. Ogoo lei mm-jongeela, hi mai?” she said, then after a beat, *“This is Blue. He's into comic books.”* Ouch.

“Hey,” I said, taking the handshake.

“Hey man. Tony. You're a friend of Dustin's? Cool, man, cool jacket. Yeah, that's Josh over there.” He points to the guy in the skate pants wrapped up with Doris, who's also laughing cheesily, hysterically, as the guy salutes us with his middle finger from across the room.

“He's joking. And hey, sorry the place is so bare, we just moved in, like two days ago. The only thing we've bought so far is the stereo and this couch.”

The couch, beer in cups, the skate pants. I glanced around the smallish, suburban-style apartment, which I assumed in Hong Kong must take a fortune to rent. Not that I

was expecting an opium den, or whatever, but we could as well have been in Iowa City. And this guy with his claw-spiked hair, the chain around his neck and basketball shoes.

"Dusty. Long time, man. By the way, where's your brother?"

"Passed out somewhere, probably," snorted Jill.

"So, yeah," he said, nodding. Long gulp of beer. "For New Year's. You guys doing Lost World tonight, or what?"

5:

-Friday December 31st 2:30 AM

On the concrete, blinking, *the balcony . . . Right*. Stand up and I feel brittle, spinning inside, so I stay there with my back to the party holding the rail, call it meditation, that hot-night cityscape glowing from below, and I can pick out not words but voices, and not to existentialize it, the sound of people's mouths wide open, roaring, ludicrous, and maybe that's what I'm into, moreso than parties, the gearing up for it, and I'm already piecing together in my head another little cute sermon for Jill . . . *Hey, hi. It's me*. On the other hand, what was she so skeptical about? I try to remember what conversations at parties were supposed to sound like, to ignore my stomach, which was still churning uncomfortably. I imagine myself a wounded soldier, returning to throw myself into battle—or rather, returning the long way, staggering through that endless, illusory maze, echoing with laughter, pulling a sac of my own angrily bubbling entrails.

Rather, back to the party, *ease into it*, my shirt now soaked with sweat. I stop at the door to roll down my sleeves, button the cuffs. Walk into the room and right away I notice Jill hawking me over some guy's shoulder. Did she see me on the balcony? Could I get her number? What's that look? And Dustin. *This guy*, like a concierge, standing at the edge of a group, middle of the room, his cup of beer keeping him afloat. Yeah, I could imagine him in high school with these cats. And my thing was, you had to fight your way in, somehow, some way, fuck the rules, and some guys never would, all that bottled-up ache . . . Big, drunken smile on my face as I swim in the thick of it, laughing, pressing palms, clapping dudes on the back. Talking at the top of my lungs. A sort-of sideways glide, moving towards Jill, *look but don't look*, and meanwhile the tension had ebbed, drained from the room and what was left was a kind of pause, disbelief. *Keep moving*. Over by the counter, this guy Josh trying to get Doris to drink a glass of water, there's another guy with him, also a ton of gel in his hair and the looks of concern on their faces is almost too much. Doris on the phone again, dialing, the strained look on her face. I get to Jill, still with whatshisname, with Tony, she's laughing, talking into her beer like it's a microphone, and before I have chance to go too far a loud smack wakes us all up. Back to Doris, the cordless handset, she's shocked as the rest of us, staring at it as if waiting for some answer, then she rears back and bangs it again against the counter, then back again for another one before Josh and his buddy swoop in, *whoa, whoa . . .*

"Whoa," I say, and Jill's there next to me, incredulous, but Tony's rushing over. A few other dudes also, all night they've been statues but now's their chance. Like linebackers they've got Doris wrapped up, cradling her, holding her by the waist. Someone's got a towel under running water in the sink. They've taken the phone from her, but wait, now she's snatched it back. She's brawling now, flailing around, and of a sudden all the attention's too much. Bracelets ringing, fighting free and now what? She's at a loss. She wants to dance again, stumbling to the middle of the room and now there's definitely no music. The sound of her five-inch heels scratching the floor, she's still holding the phone. *Not yet*, but I'm already going for my jacket. Dustin, his beer, hand in his pocket, saying nothing, along with everyone else watching Doris in freefall. *Buddy, soak it in.* Another huge crash. Across the room, that other Chinese girl on the floor, out cold, the same team running over, clustered, kneeling around her, now someone's heading to get this or that from the bathroom(!) and, *whoa, buddy, time to go, my stomach's killing me and plus, those chicks were off on that apocalyptic-nimbus-cloud-old-testament-ish* ...

6:

-Friday December 30th 7:03 PM

To give you an idea, Nemo was always hunched over, leaning on something, smoking. Awake but squinting. Tall, but slouching. Same damp grey T-shirt, flipped inside out, untucked, or the brown one, but the hair was the thing. His hair was a kung-fu wig, dyed chestnut, blown back into spikes, and it was funny to imagine him throwing on dirty clothes, then spending an hour carefully pulling his hair with gel into those dozens of little points. The tattoo of a swooping bird with the one wing going onto his neck. And how could you explain it? Keep in mind that almost without exception you'd hear these girls laughing about him as a loser, dismissing it, but after a while you'd know what's what. After a while you realize he's fucked all of them, their friends too, or would eventually, and between guys that magic is space exploration, like tectonic plates, an incredible frontier. And not just any girls. You could pretend it was the same, that it didn't matter, but these were girls you dreamed about for months after, they made your chest hurt, Chinese girls with milk-white, shimmering skin, shades in the daytime, in velour, in silk shirts with epaulets, girls with soft, ultraviolet smiles, laughing, stalking behind the ropes in front of the Lost World club, where Nemo was a busboy, and in a way to see him and Dustin side by side, as brothers, it made sense, that weird calm, the same uninflected presence, one side flat, the other freighted and alive, with something. With electric nights. That ticklish, oscillating, warp-speed wonder, because you wonder about it, out the back way, punching through rear doors onto the street outside Lost World, that one night, one of many, and this guy's got yet another unbelievable girl leaned into a phone kiosk, skirt hiked on her thighs, and he's in there, not even kissing

her, just posing, both hands holding her face, and that line of spit on her cheek and I remember the way she looked, like complete surrender, mesmerized . . .

Dial that back, way back, reset, move a muscle, and it was the way all those nights began. From blues to black, and almost dark as we hit the street, the alley behind the McDonalds where I worked off the books. Fire at the horizon, glowing between buildings. Ethereal light. Purples and pinks. Neon Dragons, flickering to life . . . Nemo's teal truck, blinkers, door open, parked at the mouth of the alley. The clack-clash of spoons against those giant woks from the open back doors of the food stalls. And the thrill is like a third lung opening in my chest, *get after it, do anything*, and I'm putting on that jacket in super-cool slo-mo, half-turn, my fingers grazing the cuffs, the green, glittering sequins, and I'm clapping my hands Flamenco-style, no reason. Dustin, looking at the sky. Nemo wincing, checking his beeper, unlit cigarette behind his ear.

"Yeh, man. Crazy. That stuff turns up in the box every week. Yo, Jackets. Watches. Shoes sometimes." He gave me a once-over with the sequins. *"But you like that? Got a few more in the truck. Like a leather one, some kind of—"*

"Nah, it's right." I said. *"It's Perfect. Don't know if I can pull it off though. We'll see. But listen, with these girls tonight, what's the plan?"*

And on cue, his beeper erupts again angrily, buzzing, trembling on his belt. *"Man, these INT school girls. This one, back in ninth grade she was a duckling, but now she's fine, and she don't know what to do with herself. Yo, she's been buzzing me non-stop since this morning."* A snort, pointing at Dustin, who just stands there, his slight smile. *"Anyway, he knows, they were in the same grade together. They were little pen pals, trading poems and shit, for years. Like I said, she's alright, some cute friends, whatever, but I can't get that whole crew into the club tomorrow. Fuck that. Fuck those cats."*

"Whoa, wait, poetry?" I said, turning to Dustin. *"Like sonnets and shit? Let's talk about that for a second . . ."*

Editor's Note

Cumulo-Nimbus Tonight! previously appeared in our Post-Experimental Issue and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Rush had a black eye and a bucket of dirty water. Look, a baby turtle he said, like that explained everything. Yes, I did lack a turtle so thank you for disappearing for three months and returning with a goddamned turtle. His weird homecoming gift took my focus off him while he slipped back into my life. Last time he brought me a box of brass kaleidoscopes.

This was no aquarium slider but a giant sunflower seed with a large head and large flippers. He called it a leatherback. Google search: *Endangered sea turtle. Average adult size 850 pounds.* Exhaustion overcame me. I said I need a nap.

What about us he said as if I was the one who. I rose from the table. You're pregnant! His eye opened wide, just the one. The other was swelled shut and even darker when he went pale. For once I got to be the one to drop a bomb on him. If you could call it that considering. Still I said how do *you* like it. He said huh?

I woke to: This way, that way, over, and oh my god not that yes that. I had to get rid of him for good again. But his thick motion floated me on hot clouds screaming for mercy don't stop. He slammed the bed 'til the bolt popped, tipping that whole corner to the floor. The rest of the bed slanted ceilingward. He didn't stop.

The next time I woke angled, head down on the sweaty Rush-ravished sheets. He wanted to go to the beach. I grabbed the bucket and glared when he opened his mouth. Once freed, the hatchling struggled through the sand toward pink sunset and silver waves. A hawk circled above, pounced, soared. The oversized flippers swam in the air.

Someone played "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" over the surf's white noise. Our baby kicked. Rush watched a beach-ball colored kite sail the skies. Do you wish you were up there dear, do you want to fly? More than anything he said.

Editor's Note:

Rush was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Micro Award.

Issue 9 Contributors

Authors

Andrew Battershill is the co-editor of [Dragnet Magazine](#). He is currently completing his M.A in Creative Writing at the University of Toronto under the mentorship of Pasha Malla. He was the winner of the 2010 Irving Layton Award for Fiction, and the 2011 *On The Danforth* Postcard Story Contest.

Carly Berg lives between Houston and the deep blue sea. Her stories appear in a few dozen journals and anthologies, including *PANK*, *Word Riot*, and (woot!) *Bartleby Snopes*.

Mandy Alyss Brown earned a BA in English at Texas State University. She finished a creative honors thesis her last semester which she hopes to turn into a novel. Mandy currently works as a stay-at-home wife and mother in Central Texas and is a freelance proofreader and writing tutor in her spare time. She can be found at mandyalysbrown.weebly.com.

Joshua Browning: In addition to being a fiction writer, Josh Browning is a professional editor. He is a sucker for fiction from the 90s, enjoys taking up the occasional freelance job, and makes a great hollandaise. For the time being, Josh lives in San Antonio and often finds himself longing for the need to wear a jacket.

Matthew Burnside's work has appeared most recently or is forthcoming in *Ninth Letter*, *Kill Author*, *Gargoyle*, *PANK*, *Pear Noir!*, and *NAP*, among others. He is managing editor of *Mixed Fruit*, an online literary magazine, and an MFA fiction candidate at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Peter DeMarco teaches high school English and film in New York City. He was first published in *The New York Times* when he wrote about hanging out with his idol, writer Mickey Spillane. His short story "The Fireman" was nominated for a 2012 Pushcart Prize. Peter's novella "Background Noise" was recently published by Pangea Books. His short stories have appeared on-line in *Prime Number Magazine*, *decomp*, *Red Lightbulbs*, *Monkeybicycle*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Flashquake*, *Verbsap*, *The Boiler*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Hippocampus*, and *Dogzplot*. Peter lives in New Jersey with his wife Charmaine, and two boys.

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Jeremy Gluck has published in *Prick of the Spindle* and has a story forthcoming in *Monkeybicycle*. He holds a B.A. in Literature from U.C. Berkeley and, on a lark, a Ph.D. in Economics from Stanford. After a career on the Dark (Financial) Side, he has returned to his first love. He lives in Northern California and has never met Kim Kardashian.

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Ted Haynes is the author of a novel, *The Dot.Com Terrorist*, and of the non-fiction book *Vandevent – The Hundred Year History of a Central Oregon Ranch*. His Bartleby Snopes Dialogue Prize Winner, *On the Mountain*, is part of a collection of Ted's stories, all set in Central Oregon, that will be published in June 2013. In his younger days Ted climbed in Yosemite and reached the peak of Mt. Kenya in Africa. He has studied writing at Dartmouth College, UC Berkeley, and Stanford University. For the latest on Ted's writing see www.tedhaynes.com.

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Steve Karas lives in Chicago with his wife and daughter. His stories have previously appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Little Fiction*, *Whiskeypaper*, and elsewhere. He also writes reviews for *The Review Review*. You can visit his website at steve-karas.com and follow him on Twitter @Steve_Karas.

Will Kaufman's work has appeared most recently in *Metazen*, *Sundog*, and *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, with more coming soon from *Litro*, *3:AM*, and *Bourbon Penn*. He also provided the text for *UFOs and Their Spiritual Mission*, published by Social Malpractice Press. He has an MA in Creative Writing from UC Davis, and an MFA from the University of Utah. You can find a full list of his publications, with links, at willarium.wordpress.com.

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Joseph Lambach is married and the father of two. Besides his family, his biggest passion is reading and writing. He works a regular day job fixing avionic equipment on helicopters, and then writing at night whatever he can get out of his head and onto paper. He currently lives in Southern California and working on his first novel.

Anna Llewellyn is currently a senior at Scarsdale High School in New York. She has been studying and writing short stories in and out of school for many years. "Robbie" is her first published piece of writing, and she looks forward to using this landmark event as a great basis for continuing her passion for creative writing into university.

Gregory Marlow animates for money and writes for fun. He was raised in the mountains of East Tennessee but currently lives in Maryland where he works for a video game studio and watches sitcoms with his wife, Amanda. He is the author of two non-fiction digital media books in the "noob's Guide" series. His short fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *The Mockingbird 2002*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Suddenly Lost in Words*, *Kzine*, and *Stupefying Stories*.

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Samuel Snoek-Brown is a writing teacher, a fiction author, and production editor for Jersey Devil Press. He lives with his wife and their two cats in Portland, Oregon; online, he lives at snoekbrown.com. His work has appeared in *Ampersand Review*, *Fiction Circus*, *Fried Chicken and Coffee*, *Red Fez*, *Unshod Quills*, and others, and is forthcoming in *Deimos eZine* and *SOL: English Writing in Mexico*. An excerpt from his novel *Hagridden* appeared in a special issue of *Sententia*, and he is a recipient of a 2013 Oregon Literary Fellowship.

Lee Stoops grew up building forts, disappearing into wilderness, and telling stories around campfires. He holds an MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles and currently lives in the mountains of Idaho with his wife and children. His work has been published by *Writer's Digest*, *The Provo-Orem Word*, *Annotation Nation*, and others. He also edits fiction for *The Citron Review* and non-fiction for *Lunch Ticket*.

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Daniel J Glendening is an artist and writer living and working in Portland, OR. He has exhibited nationally, and publishes the arts criticism blog, *Justice League PDX*. You can find him at danieljglendening.com. He collects books and mystical shit.

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