Bartleby Snopes

Issue 14

Bartleby Snopes publishes stories monthly on the web and semi-annually in magazine format.

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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 Seventh Annual Dialogue Only Contest. We awarded over $1900 to our Dialogue Contest Finalists this year. Finalists are selected by the staff and then voted on by a panel of judges. This year's judges included Sorrel Westbrook-Wilson (Sixth Annual Dialogue Contest Winner) and Bud Smith (author of Tollbooth).

Boogeyman

by Rebecca McDowell *(1st Place)*

"Who's there?"

You know who it is.

"I'm not scared of you."

Oh, you en't?

"No. My mom said you're not real."

Mums, they say a lot of things, yeah?

"My dad said it, too."

Oh, well in that case. Daddies are another matter.

"Are you making fun of me?"

Only a bit.

"You're not real. I know it because there's no room in there for you."

Aye, so certain? You know how big I am?

"No, but there's no room in the closet for anyone."

Maybe I en't in there, yeah?

"Where are you?"

Why's it matter? I en't real, remember? Go back to sleep. Nothing bad will happen to you.

"You're lying. Go away."

I canna do that, sorry to say. I come here for you.

"Do you want to eat me?"

By the seeds of the earth, no. You're probably filthy, yeah?

"Then what do you want to do with me?"

Take you away, away, away. Away to where all the gone children play.

"No."

There are songs and sweets and other children, my love. Din't you want to see?

"NO."

Can be done the hard way or the easy way; your choice.

"I'm not going with you. I'm not scared of you. If you're small enough to fit in my closet, you can't drag me anywhere."

I fit in a thimble or fill a symphony hall. I can go anywhere. I can run between the rain drops or I can sink a ship, yeah? I can fit in a closet and I can drag boastful little boys screaming from their beds.

"You're lying."

Try gettin' to the hallway, then.

"Why do you want to take me?"

Because it's what I do, and it's what I always done.

"Why me?"

I'm looking for sweets, little one. Looking for sweets, and you're a sweet one, yeah?

"No I'm not! I'm...I'm bad. I'm really bad!"

Most children, they're bad. But the really bad ones—I takes them, too.

"Okay, I'm kind of bad but not really bad."

I see.

"My mom's coming, I can hear her. I know you leave when she's around."

I will be back, boy, mark 'em.

"I'm not scared of you!"

"Who are you talking to?"

"There's something in my closet."

"For the last time, Toby, there is nothing in your closet."

"There is! He was talking to me! I heard him! He said he's gonna take me away—"

"Honey. Look—"

"—because I'm sweet."

"—See? The closet is empty."

"I know, but—"

"You were dreaming, kiddo. It's not real. There's nothing here. Okay?"

"I heard him."

"Tobias."

"Fine, don't believe me."

"Don't get snotty."

"I'm sorry."

"Go to sleep. You're nine. You're too old for this junk."

"Sorry, Mom."

"No.... I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to snap at you. You're my sweet little bunny. Okay? I promise, there's nothing in your closet but shirts and shoes and maybe some dog hair."

"Okay."

"Love you."

"I love you, too."

Maybe she wants me to take you.

"She does not."

She would go to Hell and back for you, and look at how you talk to her, all stroppy, yeah? Maybe you are *really bad.*

"Shut up already."

So nasty. Such a nasty child.

"Maybe I *will* just get up. I'll just run out of here and run downstairs."

Think you're faster'n me, yeah?

"You can't get me if I get to the door, cuz the light's on and my mom and dad are out there."

I took a little girl once who could run faster'n anyone. Nobody could ever catch her. She was sore surprised when I grabbed her soon as her foot set down.

"You're lying again."

Just so smart, en't you?

"I'm not going with you. I'm not going. Leave me alone."

Come, now, en't nothing worth a cry. You heard your mum. Too old for that junk.

"I'm not crying. I just...have allergies. I'm not getting out of bed, so you might as well leave."

Sounds just and fair. See you tomorrow.

"That's dumb. We're not looking at each other."

But I am *looking at you. Cheerio, Toby.*

* * *

"Hello?"

Hello.

"You came back."

Course I did. Another night, another chance.

"Why don't you go bother someone else?"

En't you the one who just called out to me in the dark, boy?

"I just wanted to see if you were there."

And here I am. You been chose. En't that exciting?

"Chosen by who?"

The Sidhe.

"What's the she? She who?"

You're a small, funny thing, yeah?

"Whatever. Tell her to choose someone else."

Got a suggestion?

"I dunno."

Sounds like you might.

"Well...no, I don't. I'm not gonna tell where other kids are. I'm not gonna help you."

Maybe I *can help* you.

"That's dumb. You don't wanna help me. You wanna kidnap me."

So nobody's pestering you at school?

"No."

Took you a long time to answer.

"He sits behind me."

Oh?

"He says mean things to me, quiet so Miss Danko can't hear him."

What's he said?

"I dunno. Stuff."

What stuff?

"He said my mom's a slut and I'm a fag."

Them en't nice things to say, yeah?

"He said I'm a pussy and I should die in a fire."

Them also en't nice things to say. Do you know what them words mean? En't nothing to be ashamed of if you don't.

"Kind of."

What's his name?

"Ben Brody."

See you tomorrow, Toby.

* * *

"Are you there?"

I'm always here, yeah? It's night time, innit?

"Ben wasn't in school today."

I imagine he weren't.

"The principal came to our class to talk to us about safety. He told us that Ben wasn't in bed this morning when his father came to wake him up."

That makes sense.

"Did you take him?"

Aye.

"Why?"

Sometimes, even when they en't chosen, I take little boys just because they're bad.

"Oh."

So quiet you are, suddenly.

"Did you take him for me?"

Maybe. If I did, will you get out of bed and come with me willingly?

"No."

All the same.

"What'll happen to him?"

I en't sure. He's where he belongs.

"Where?"

Nowhere you'll ever go.

"They're not…he's not gonna get hurt, is he?"

A lot of concern over someone what's rude and angry and callous, yeah?

"Yeah."

I knew you were sweet.

"I'm not sweet. I'm not going with you."

We'll see, yeah? Tomorrow night, then, Toby.

* * *

"Ben Brody was still out today."

Course he is. He en't coming back.

"His dad was on TV, crying."

That make you sad?

"Yeah."

I thought it might.

"I thought I would be happy if he went away, but I feel worse."

You're a kind little boy.

"I didn't want him to get hurt. I just wanted him to stop picking on me."

Bad children reap what they sow, Toby.

"What do you do with bad children?"

I take bad children one place, good children another.

"What will happen to Ben?"

I din't know, and that's the truth. He's with a fickle host. Might be showered with love and treats today and beaten with a golden rod tomorrow.

"Oh."

I do know he cries. Oh, he cries, near every minute. I hear him, all throughout Tír na nÓg, yeah? I hear him, crying for his daddy like his heart broke.

"Oh."

And now you *cry. Why? Why do you cry for this boy what was cruel to you?*

"I...I don't...."

Don't cry for Baby Ben. He en't ever cried over any of what he done to you.

"This is worse."

Didn't catch that.

"I said...I said this is worse. He just called me names. This is worse. I...I made him disappear."

All the same. See you on the other side of the moon, Toby.

* * *

"Are you there? Did you know Ben's mom died last year?"

Aye, that she did.

"They said that on the news today."

Mm hmm.

"His dad was crying on TV again. He said Ben was all he had left."

Aye. He's a daddy what loves his boy, yeah? And now he's got a whole lot of nothing, innit?

"I didn't want this."

But you did. You told me about him. Fairly asked me to take him, didn't you?

"I...no, no, I just..."

He's gone, boy. He's gone, his daddy's alone, and you're safe in bed, like you wanted.

"Please bring him back."

Come again?

"Bring Ben back. Please? I didn't want anyone to get hurt."

What's it you expected would happen?

"I...not this. I didn't want this."

Here you go again, crying over this boy who en't ever been good to you.

"Please? Please bring him back."

Maybe. Maybe I can.

"Really?"

If you come with me.

"No!"

A bargain, yeah? Come with me, on your own, and I'll put that horrid little beast right back in his bed.

"No."

Your fault he's gone, en't it?

"I..."

You can make it right, Toby.

"But..."

I won't take you where I took him. I'll take you someplace where you can play and eat chocolate biscuits, yeah? Toby?

"What about my mom and dad? Will I ever see them again?"

There will be lots of new mums and daddies there, my love. And your mum and daddy will miss you, but you've a sister, yeah? They've still got a baby, haven't they?

"If you take me, I can never come back?"

How's about another bargain, then. You come with me now and stay awhile, stay three days. After that, if you still want to go home, I'll bring you back.

"Really?"

Aye. You're a sweet one, Toby.

"And you'll bring Ben back like normal, and never take him again?"

I promise, yeah?

"Then...then okay. If I can come back after three days, and you'll bring Ben home forever, I'll go."

That's excellent, Toby. Reach out your hand. Reach it out, and I'll take it.

* * *

"Can I have another candy, Lady Mother?"

"Of course you can, my sweet love, my Toby."

"How many days has it been?"

"My precious darling, the sun has risen in Tír na NÓg three times. Why do you ask?"

"Um...I don't know. I mean, I don't remember. I think...wasn't I supposed to do something after three days?"

"Of course not, dear heart. What would you need to do? You have everything here."

"I just...I thought I remembered something about three days."

"Perhaps you dreamed it, darling.

"Actually, I think I did have a dream."

"What was your dream, little treasure?"

"I dreamed about a room with a bed and a desk and a closet.

"Oh?"

"Outside the window, the sun moved really fast, flying by over and over...and there was a lady crying and saying my name, and her hair was turning more and more grey while she stood there...and....Seeing her cry made me sad...I'm...her baby bunny."

"You dreamed of another lady? How miserable that makes me. I thought you were *my* baby bunny."

"Oh—"

"Am I not the best, most kind, most generous and loving mother you have ever had?"

"I...I don't...."

"I do not feel like playing today, actually. I am very cross. I may just sulk."

"I'm sorry, Lady Mother. It was just a dream. I'm sure it didn't mean anything."

"Really?"

"Really, yes, please don't be mad at me."

"Of course not, my dove! Please, no tears."

"Yeah. I'm too old for that junk."

"Pardon?"

"I…I don't know. I don't know where that came from. I think…I think it was in my dream."

"I love you, pet."

"I love you, too, Lady Mother."

A Visit with Dr. Wallace

by Carolyn Moretti *(2nd Place)*

"Tucumcari."

"Sorry?"

"That's where I was born. Tucumcari."

"Where is that?"

"New Mexico. I lived in the desert for fifteen years. Fifteen years."

"Wow. I've always wanted to see the desert. Did you—"

"But then my sister died, so we moved away."

"...I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah. My sister died and we moved to Indiana. H-Her name was Trina, but I called her Ti. Big Ti. She was great. Ti was always laughing and smiling. She had a big smile like—like the Alice cat."

"The Cheshire Cat?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I like to think about her hair a lot."

"What about her hair?"

"It was yellow like flowers. Like the yellow flowers in the yard that are bad."

"Dandelions?"

"Yeah. S-sometimes I would pick the flowers for Ti and she'd put them in her hair and she was an angel."

"That's a lovely memory."

"She would always play with me and be nice to me and she was always patient 'cuz-'cuz-'cuz sometimes people aren't patient with me and they call me stupid and they walk away 'cuz I talk slow. But Ti always said that what I had to say was worth hearing. A-a-and when the boys in my class—when the boys in my class would call me names, Ti would always walk home with me and bring all her pretty friends. She'd say, 'Look at those l-losers walking home alone. You've got all these hot girls to go home with.' AH HA HA. Ti's friends were nice too, but not the same."

"You loved your big sister."

"Yeah. I love Ti so much. I love her so much."

"Can I ask how she died?"

"They don't know, but I know. They don't know, but I know. Ti had a boyfriend. She had a boyfriend and his name was Brandon and they were always smooching and touching. Brandon was big and played football and sometimes he would get mad and be mean to me, but Ti would yell at him."

"What would Brandon do to you?"

"He was just angry sometimes. He would yell really loud and lose his temper. Ti always told him to 'Calm down or go home.' AH HA HA. Calm down or go home. Calm down or go home."

"Did he hit you?"

"No. No. Ti didn't like mean people. Brandon wasn't mean like that, but I didn't like how he yelled sometimes."

"Did Brandon hurt Ti?"

"No. He just got mad at her. When they came in the house he was screaming so loud my ears hurt. So-so-so when I heard him come in, I hid. I hid good."

"Where did you hide?"

"In the closet. I hid in the closet. I was picking a book to read with Ti before bed 'cuz she always read to me before bed, but all her books were in her bedroom, so I was there a-a-and he was yelling at Ti real loud. He was following her through the whole house and I heard them coming toward her room."

"What was he saying?"

"I DON'T CARE! NO BABY! NO BABY! NO BABY!"

"Your sister was pregnant?

"NO BABY! NO BABY! NO BABY!"

"What happened?"

"He went away and Ti cried. She cried and cried and cried and cried and cried. Then-then-then she made the red come on her arms like she did when she was sad sometimes. She said, um, she said that it makes the inside hurt come out. Like it comes out. S-she made the red come and then I came out of the closet and she was sad 'cuz she didn't know I was there. I was hiding and she didn't know I was there and she said, 'It's going to be okay Shel. I need to be alone now, but I'll see you when everything's all better.' See 'cuz she used to call me Shel 'cuz my name's Sheldon, but she used to read me Shel Silverstein a-a-and I liked listening to her read a lot 'cuz she had a pretty voice. She had a pretty voice and she loved to read and laugh and she used to laugh with me all the time. All the time. And she told me the red was something she needed for her. It was for her. Then she

asked me to go to my room and read the book I picked, so I did and when I came back out my mom and dad were crying and the police were there and there were lots of flashing lights and I was scared. I was scared and there was lots of noise and I don't like noise. No. I don't like noise. And my mom was crying and hugging me too tight and she kept saying that everything was going to be all right, but I knew that. I knew that already. See 'cuz they don't know, but I know. They don't know, but I know. Ti's coming back for me. She's coming back for me."

The Kitchen God

by Fred Senese *(3rd Place)*

"Hey, hey."

"About time, man."

"Traffic. What we got here? WOW."

"Yeah. Told you, it's a nice one."

"Alright. OK. She's face up, not too much blood, but look at that splat. Like a starfish around her head. Blunt trauma from behind, but a bit of an edge too or there wouldn't be anything to splat. I'm seeing it like this: she's sitting in this chair, knees buckled, slumped down like *this*, landed on her ass and rolled onto her back when she hit the floor. She had a minute, maybe, see how the hands are drawn up over her chest?"

"I'm thinking Psycho II. Frying pan to the head while she was talking."

"Sounds about right. We can roll her, right? Pictures? Swabs and prints all done?"

"Yeah. We were waiting forever for you. Here, I'll do the ankle turn, she's a big one, though, you lift the right shoulder if she doesn't roll. Got it? Good. Perfect."

"Okay…okie dokie. I say no way was it a frying pan."

"No?"

"Lookie here. The crush is round, on the bottom, deep, we got big bone frags here, and here. And a crush, here, off the circle. See how the hair's matted down in the center, not around the edge?"

"OK, what about that Buddha statue or whatever on the shelf over there? It's been moved a little. He clobbered her with that."

"Buddha didn't do this. He's brass, yeah, but he doesn't have the heft."

"OK. Round crush. Maybe an omelet pan?"

"Well, lots of force here. It had to have a longish handle, to put that much force behind it. Omelet pan's about nine, ten, twelve inches diameter, round sides, flat bottom, short handle. Look at the crush…an omelet pan, the flare isn't this wide."

"I've got an omelet pan with a flare like that."

"What the hell for?"

"For making omelets."

"You toss an omelet in a flared pan, it's gonna wind up stuck to the wall."

"I don't flip. I pull edge to center, stuff, and fold. Onions, mushroom, tomatoes, swiss. Gentle flare is good for flipping the lid on."

"Well, shit, man, you may as well be making a fritatta."

"No, I like them fluffier than that."

"Fritatta can be light as fucking air, you do it right."

"Naw. You're *baking* the egg under a broiler, there, no way."

"Jeez-us. That ain't how you do a fritatta. Anyway, this was a smallish wok, not a fucking omelet pan. See this, here? That's the second handle. And a wok's got a nice long handle on the other side. You can swing that son of a bitch like a baseball bat."

"A smallish wok?"

"I'll prove it to ya. We got a Yixing clay teapot and a bowl of mangoes on the table. A ginger grater on the counter. Bamboo steamer by the stove. Deceased was a serious Sinophile."

"Sinophile."

"Serious Sinophile. What clinches it is the statue there."

"The Buddha?"

"That's not Buddha, that's a kitchen god."

"What's the diff? He's fat as hell and he's got the same cat-and-canary smile—"

"Kitchen god's in the kitchen because that's where all the juicy fighting goes down. Buddha avoids that kind of thing."

"So the kitchen god's an instigator?"

"No, he's the cop on the corner. He *watches* for fights. On Lunar New Year he phones heaven and tells the Yellow Emperor whether the family's been naughty or nice. We might get some prints off him. Maybe the perp's, though, if he's superstitious."

"There's something on his lips."

"It's honey. You smear honey on his lips so he can only say sweet things to the Emperor, or there's hell to pay. There, that plastic squeeze bottle? Bag that."

"What's this got to do with—"

"Try to keep up. Kitchen god means deceased did hardcore Chinese cooking, plus deceased lived alone. She cooked for one, she'd have a smallish wok, just this size."

"So where's the wok?"

"Perp took it with him."

"Why?"

"It's hard to find a wok that size. You can do just about anything with it. You can off your grandma, you can make beautiful fluffy omelets, you can make a fucking fritatta."

Retired

by Ronald Friedman *(4th Place)*

"Paul, congratulations. I bet you thought you'd never retire."

"How long do you have to go?"

"I'm not ready to retire. How old are you?"

"Seventy-two. Today."

"Hey, happy birthday and double those congratulations. It's about time. You deserve it."

"I've been giving some thought to what I deserve. I don't think this is it."

"Of course it is. You earned it."

"I thought maybe something else. Some other feeling."

"You must feel good, maybe some relief that all this is over."

"I don't know what I expected, but something. "

"People say nice things about you. I've never heard any complaints."

"That's because no one knows who I am. The company has nearly three hundred people working just in this building."

"You know how people talk. Not about you, though. I saw you cutting the cake. Your section buy that for you?"

"I don't know, but I don't think so. Someone put it on my desk, but no one said anything. Tell me your name again."

"You know my name."

"I just wasn't sure. Who are you, really? "

"Paul, is anyone here with you?"

"No."

"Do you have a family? Are you married?"

"My family is scattered around the country. My wife died last year."

"Do you live alone?"

"Where?"

"I asked if you lived alone. In your home."

"Oh. It's just me."

"Are you okay? You sound like you're not quite with me in this conversation."

"Yeah, I think I'm doing all right."

"Look, this is a big day for you. That can be stressful. I'd like you to do something for me. Lift both your arms over your head straight up into the air. And smile. Big grin."

"Okay? What's this about?"

"I'll tell you in a second. Just do one more thing. Stick out your tongue and move it as far as you can to the right and then as far as you can to the left."

"Did I pass?"

"Yes. That was just a quick test to see if you had a stroke."

"Geez. C'mon."

"Well, you're behaving a little oddly. Are you talking to someone?"

"Just to you."

"To me? Look around. Do you see another person? There's no one else here. I'm not here. How are you going to get home?"

"Walk, I guess. It's not far.

" Paul, do you own a gun?"

"A hand gun? Yes."

"Just the one?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a rifle or shot gun?"

"No. Just the one gun."

"What kind is it?"

"A Browning nine millimeter."

"Where is it?"

"Why are you asking about the gun?"

"Because you might be depressed and it would be risky to be around a gun. Where do you keep it?"

"At home I keep it locked in a small gun safe in my bedroom closet."

"Is that where the gun is right now?"

"No. It's in my locker here at work."

"Is it loaded?"

"You know it is. Two shots still in the clip. Nothing in the chamber though."

"Thank you for telling me. How about if you and I go to your locker and you let me take the gun?"

"Are you going to call the police?"

"Paul, who do you think you're talking to?"

"I don't know."

"I'm you. You're talking to yourself. First, I want the gun. If I can have the gun I won't need to call the police. But I can't let you go home alone without having a doctor examine you first."

"I don't think I should give you the gun. You might use it to shoot someone."

"I just want to make sure nobody gets hurt."

"No. You might shoot me."

"You think I'm the one who is dangerous?"

"You are."

"Why did you leave two cartridges in the clip?"

"One for each of us."

"Let's go get the gun now."

Is My Long Hair Blocking Your View

by Amy Naylor *(5th Place)*

"I think I like the first one better. Try that one on again."

"The pink? You didn't think it was too…frilly?"

"No it was beautiful. Very feminine."

"Feminine?"

"Feminine."

"Ok hang on I'll be out in a sec. So Mom you didn't really answer my question. Would it be ok for her to stay over this weekend or…?"

"Yes, this is definitely the one. Here turn around I'll do it up in the back."

"Mom? Thanksgiving dinner? Jess staying over?"

"Yes, yes it's fine. When have you ever not been able to bring a friend home from school for the weekend?"

"Well this is a bit different no? I mean you weren't ok with me having Michael sleep ov—"

"It'll definitely need to be taken up. Have you decided what shoes you'll be wearing?"

"Mom."

"It's not at all the same Anna. Last time I checked Jess isn't a boy."

"I know Jess isn't a boy Mom. If Jess were a boy we wouldn't be dating. That's the funny thing about being a lesbian."

"Please will you keep your voice down!"

"In case security kicks us out for using the L word? I don't think I like this dress."

"She's perfectly welcome to join us for thanksgiving weekend. Should I cook something else? Does she eat turkey? I've heard they make turkeys made entirely of tofu now. I'm sure I could find one if that suits."

"Jesus Mom. Just because she's gay doesn't mean she's completely, you know, hipster or something. Yes, she eats meat. As do I by the way."

"Yes, well—"

"So it's settled. I'll ask Dad to haul the extra mattress upstairs when we get home. I think it's itching me under the arms here."

"We've promised that mattress to Grandma already. It's fine Anna she can just sleep with you it's only two nights."

"With me? As in, in my bed with me?"

"You've been having sleepovers since you were seven one more won't kill you. And I think it's just the tag. Here I'll get it."

"Mom she's my girlfriend. You're actually going to let her to sleep in my bed with me?"

"It's not that big a deal Anna. I don't know why you're getting upset. Isn't this what you want?"

"Of course but—"

"But what?"

"Aren't you worried?"

"Worried about what?"

"About…come on Mom. What were you always so paranoid about with Michael?"

"It's different."

"Different? How?"

"Excuse me! Would you mind getting us a pair of scissors? There's a loose thread here and I don't want it to run."

"Different how?"

"You'd rather me tell you she has to sleep in a sleeping bag in the basement?"

"What I'd rather is for you to treat this relationship with the same seriousness you've treated any other relationships I've had."

"Anna calm down. Let's just enjoy our day out together. Shopping for winter formal was supposed to be fun. You used to love shopping."

"I still do! Believe it or not Mom just because I'm gay doesn't mean I'm a totally different person. I'm still me, just minus a boyfriend."

"Please don't use that tone."

"What tone exactly?"

"You make it sound so final."

"It *is* final. How many times are you going to make me come out? I thought telling you the first time was going to be hard. And I was right you did not make it easy. What I didn't know is I was going to have to do it all over again every time I come home from school! Why won't you believe I'm not into guys anymore?"

"Because you're just not as…you know what I mean Anna."

"No I don't. Not as what? Not as gay? Are we really going to go through this all again? And get this thing off me I can't reach the zipper."

"I've said it before Anna. College is about experimenting. I've read it's totally normal to go through pha—"

"Do NOT say this is a *phase*. Do not."

"Stop moving around like that you're going to rip it. Hold still and I'll cut that thread."

"Let go! I'll do it myself. Give me the scissors."

"Careful it's a delicate—"

"It's because I still look like a "regular" girl isn't it? I bet every school break you expect to see me walk in the door with a pixie cut, piercings and a tattoo. Is that what you want? Would it give your heterosexual hopes for me some weird sort of closure if I looked more like a dyke?"

"Of course that isn't what I want! And don't use that word."

"So you what? See my long hair and made up face coming up the driveway and think 'Hey she's changed her mind?'"

"No of course I—Anna! What are you do-? Oh my god! What have you *done*? Your beautiful hair! I cannot believe you just did that you foolish girl. You think chopping your hair off in a designer dressing room is daring or rebellious? Look at yourself in the mirror. You look obscene! Your beautiful hair..."

"Yeah, this is definitely *not* the one. Let me try the second one on again."

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.

Forget-Me-Not

by Philip Bowne

The day the children received their letters from home, Mohammed had nothing. He was sitting on his own, as he always did, watching his peers at the summer school tear open brown envelopes. Each was marked with a different colour stamp from a different part of the globe.

"I'm sure a letter will arrive for you soon," I said. He hadn't had a letter from his family in the five weeks he'd been staying at the school.

"If you say so, Mr. Raine," he said, squeezing his shoulder blades together as he waited for his first English lesson of the day. The tips of his brown fringe had been bleached blonde. The July heat was cruel and dry.

"Tripoli is far away, after all." I squeezed his hand. It was half the size of my own and his knuckles were lined with white scars that stood out against his dark olive skin.

The last group of children ran into the hall. They jumped onto the stage at the far end and knocked a plastic table down to the floor, breaking off two of its legs. Mohammed jolted upright and moved closer to me. His eyes became two black marbles and a trail of goose bumps prickled up along his hairless forearm.

Another teacher ran over to the group and started pointing and shouting. Mohammed giggled. The morning bell rang for lessons to begin and the groups of children left.

"Time for class, Mo," I said, gesturing to the door. He looked ill.

"I will not go today," he said, folding his arms across his chest. His t-shirt was sitting looser on his shoulders and back. He'd been observing Ramadan for the past ten days and had only eaten before sunrise twice.

"Wait here for me then. We'll go for a walk."

* * *

I left the main hall, and went into an unused classroom. I tipped boxes over and searched through drawers, emptied them of their contents. There was nothing. I wanted a flag, or some sweets—something for him. I walked over to the tall windows and separated the vertical blinds to look out over the seafront. The school was high up on a hill and, on a bright day, you could look right out to where the blue skies met the Channel and see nothing of the horizon.

As I turned around to leave, I spotted a miniature globe on top of the filing cabinet at the back of the room. It wasn't much. It wobbled on its stand when I picked it up. I pulled it free from the axis, leaving two small holes at each pole.

I wrapped it in some brown paper, found a box to put it inside and taped it up. I wrote Mohammed's name on the top, along with the address of the school, and left it outside his dormitory for him to find and open later that evening.

* * *

I went back to the hall and found Mohammed sitting in the same place. We walked around the school grounds in the sunshine. I had taken a rugby ball from the sports cupboard and spun it in the air as we spoke.

"Let's go up there," he said, pointing at the hill at the back of the school.

We followed the track of granite slabs that formed the pathway to the top. Each rock was bordered by forget-me-nots. The grass on the way up was yellow from two rainless weeks, and only a small patch of green remained at the top, protected by shade from the tree line that ran along its perimeter. In early June, the hill was gold with buttercups. Now they were gone.

We took a seat on the old wooden bench and looked over the Downs and the distant water. Mohammed ripped a sprig from the summersweet bush next to us. He lay the flower down in the palm of his hand and picked at its pink spire.

"How does it live, in the darkness?" Mohammed asked, pointing down at the shaded floor.

"Some plants prefer the shade." I picked a pink flower of my own and twirled it between my thumb and index finger. "They become stronger there. I suppose not everything grows in the sunlight."

"What is shade?"

"The cover from the sun."

"This darkness?" Mohammed stretched out his arms, his open palms facing skyward.

"Yes. Where it's cooler."

"I see." He repeated the new word under his breath.

"Why don't you want to be in class, Mo?" I said, standing up and passing the rugby ball into his arms. He caught it with one hand, his other tucked the flower into his pocket.

"I am only here so I am not in Tripoli." He got up and examined the ball, then began trying to do kick-ups with it. It shot off his foot and bounced down the hill and across the playground.

"Of course there is a point in being here. You can learn."

He pulled out a creased piece of paper from his shorts pocket and unfolded it for me to read.

"How do I say this, Mr. Raine?"

"Tripoli, the mermaid of the Mediterranean! Turquoise waters and whitewashed buildings," I read.

"Mermaid of the Mediterranean!" He repeated.

"Why have you got this?"

"My dad gave this to me before I left. He said I will learn it." Mohammed paced in a circle before dropping down on the hard earth.

"Do you miss being at home?" I asked.

"I do not have any home." He stayed still on the floor, legs crossed.

"Your home is in Libya, in Tripoli, isn't it?"

"My dad sent me here for all of summer just so I will not be there. After I am here, I will go probably to Tunis, or to somewhere else, but not to home."

"Is that why you don't want to be in class today?"

Mohammed rubbed his eyelids with his hard palms and hummed to himself.

"What does it matter?" he said, rising to his feet and moving towards the back fence. He looked into the glade behind the school, through the mesh fence.

Dozens of toys were littered among the lilyturf and bleeding hearts. There were footballs, rugby balls and tennis balls, all scattered across the clearing like a minefield. A skipping rope was draped over a high branch.

"Before I came here, I never saw so many games. When I am here, nobody cares about all these. There are too many," he said.

"I'm sure they were lost by accident."

"Can we go in there?" Mohammed poked his finger through the mesh and looked up at me.

"There's no way in. But we will get them back at the end of the summer." I was pretty sure some of the equipment had been there for years. "What games do you usually play, at home?"

Mohammed let out a mocking laugh, before covering his mouth with his hand. "I am very thirsty," he said.

The day was growing hotter as the sun crawled to the top of the sky. With the sun higher, the area of shade had shrunk. It crept up towards us, a few yards below the bench. I handed a bottle of water to Mohammed The sweat on his forehead mirrored the droplets which ran along the length of the plastic bottle.

"I can't. I am not allowed this." Mohammed crumpled the bottle in his hand. The plastic crackled. He squeezed either side of the dent he had made to pop it back into place.

"It's going to get even hotter today. I know you aren't allowed to, but—"

"I can't." He looked white.

"You can drink some."

"Not today, Mr. Raine." He ruffled the sweat away from the back of his head, then dug the flower out from his pocket and, just as I had, ran it between his thumb and index finger. He held it up to his eye, closing the other, and faced towards the sun. "Why do I get no letters, Mr. Raine?" he asked.

"Libya is a long way from here," I said.

"But these letters come from everywhere, but none for me."

"Something will."

"Have they forgotten me?"

"No, of course they haven't," I said.

I was desperate for some water. It was nearing midday. Mohammed still held my bottle, but I couldn't bring myself to drink.

At the foot of the hill the children poured out from the school buildings. They moved in an excited, colourful wave. The sight made me forget the heat for a moment. Some were kicking footballs, others rested down in the reed grass. A group of girls skipped over a long rope and boys chased each other around with clasped hands for guns. The wind wandered over from the seafront and stuck to my skin.

As more children came outside we could hear the rise of voices in a muddle of languages. The hum of the playground floated up to us on the hilltop. A group of the French girls started singing a song as they played hopscotch. Mohammed stood up and looked at them.

From above we could hear the voices merging into the chorus. "Aux Champs-Élysées! Da-da da-da-da! Aux Champs-Élysées..." A crowd was gathering around the girls.

"What is it?" Mohammed asked. There must have been fifteen of them singing.

It's called *Les Champs-Élysées*," I said. They continued their chorus, and the girls with the skipping rope stopped and joined in.

"Au soleil, sous la pluie; À midi ou à minuit; Il y a tout ce que vous voulez; Aux Champs-Élysées." I imagined their voices would carry for miles inland, candied in the waterfront wind.

"What is it about?"

"Paris," I said. The girls finished their song and Mohammed started applauding and cheering for more.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"The Champs-Élysées is the most famous street in Paris."

"With the Eiffel tower?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, unsure.

"But what are the words?"

"I only know a little."

"What is it?" Mohammed's voice cracked. I could hear his tongue coming unstuck from the roof of his mouth.

"At the Champs-Élysées; in the sun, under the rain; at noon or at midnight; there is everything you want; at the Champs-Élysées."

"Aux Champs-Élysées!" Mohammed giggled.

"I'm sure they would be happy to teach you all the words."

"Perhaps." Mohammed continued humming the tune. "I would love to see it," he said. Far off, the lazy white-capped waves were pillowed by the rocks on the seafront. "I have never been to Paris."

* * *

Halfway through the lunch hour, we came down from the yellow hilltop. I left Mohammed sitting in the shade, holding on to my bottle. I walked inside for water. I felt empty, covered in a second skin of sweat. I drank as much as I could.

When I went back outside to check on him, he wasn't there. I checked the school buildings. Nothing.

"Have you seen Mo?" I asked the Italian boys.

"No," one of them said. The rest looked at me with downturned mouths and shrugged their shoulders. "Why?"

Before I could acknowledge the question, I made for the hill. I nearly trampled over a few of the girls lying in the long grass. I could see that the clouds had etched a black spot in the sky away to the East. But he wasn't there.

"Mohammed!" I yelled his name between lungfuls of hot air.

Propping myself up against the bench with my back to the school, I looked through the fence. It frustrated me to see how close the footballs and the other toys were. As I rattled the fence, *Champs-Élysées* started up again. At the sound, I stopped.

Looking down over the playground, I could see Mohammed standing beside the French girls, clapping his hands. A couple of the boys danced around with the song. I could picture the way he smiled, how his cheeks bunched up into apples below his eyes.

I walked down to the playground. Before the final chorus, the bell for lessons rang. Mohammed went to collect my bottle from the shaded spot where I'd left him. He looked at me and knew that I'd seen it was empty. Apples dropped from his cheeks. I looked away, ushering the other children along to their lessons.

Once all the children left, I collected the parcel I'd left for him that morning and carried it to the hilltop, to the fence and the glade. The skipping rope still dangled on its branch. I stepped back and squeezed the globe in the palm of my hand. Running my thumb over the smooth plastic, I traced my fingertip from Tripoli, past Tunis and Malta, across the Mediterranean—between Sardinia and the Balearic Islands, up through the south of France, Paris, and across the Channel.

I raised my head and threw the globe up and over the fence. It carried in the wind and cracked hard against a tree stump, resting somewhere out of sight, hidden in the lilyturf.

Photograph (c) Doug Matthewson

Montreal

by Ryan Napier

David was eight years old, and he was, by every measure, perfect. He learned the states perfectly, and he learned the capitals perfectly.

He did not even sing the little songs that Mrs. K had taught the class to help them to remember the states and the capitals. When the class sang, David mouthed the words, to avoid trouble. He knew the little songs, but he also knew that he did not really *need* the little songs.

His scores were perfect. But when Mrs. K returned his tests and David saw his hundreds, the thing he felt was not joy. It was not even relief.

He had expected a hundred, and he had gotten a hundred. Ninety-nine would have been a trauma. A hundred was the lowest score he needed, but a hundred was also the highest score he could achieve. He hoped for something more than perfect. He wanted to be surprised by his own greatness.

They learned from pull-down maps. Mrs. K's room had four. She pulled them out of a long green tube that hung above the green chalkboard. The maps gave him hope. There was always another map to learn, there was always another map test to beat.

The first and biggest map was the world—the big blue spaces, multicolored America, the big yellow spread of the Soviet Union (which, said Mrs. K, was no longer there). They did not use this map, but they saw it daily: the maps were nested together, and because the world map was in the very back, Mrs. K had to pull it down before she used the other, smaller maps. The world sat waiting behind the map of America.

That was the second map—fifty states in five different colors. Their state—the state that David had never in his life left—was green, just like Maryland

and Massachusetts and Arizona and Iowa and Tennessee and Wyoming and Hawaii. But why were these states green, while others were brown or yellow or orange or red? He had counted the letters in their names, he had tried to learn when they had entered the Union, but he could not understand the relationship.

The third map was their big green state itself. Their town—the town that David had only three times in his life left—was not large enough to have been noted by the mapmakers, so Mrs. K had marked it with one of her gold stars.

They had never seen the fourth map. It was, like the color of the states, another mystery. The world, America, their state—what else could there be? Finally, in late March, Mrs. K showed them. She pulled down the fourth map, and the big mystery was revealed.

"This," she said, "is Canada."

David knew of Canada: it was a little strip of beige that ran across the top of the map of America. But now Canada had its own existence. Now it was big and multicolored, and America was a little beige strip at the bottom.

Mrs. K told the class that they were going to learn the provinces. David's stomach rose. Canada was his chance to do better, to get beyond perfect. But his stomach fell when she said that there were only thirteen provinces.

The other boys would not even need a song to learn just thirteen provinces. Instead of a song, Mrs. K had a sentence. She wrote the sentence on the board and asked them to read aloud. David mouthed along: "Billy and Sally made our Queen nervous playing near needles." She underlined the first letter of each word. The *B* stood for British Columbia, the *A* for Alberta, and so on, with those final *N*s for all the choppy islands in the east.

As she underlined, she told them a little about the provinces. Manitoba was the breadbasket. Ontario had the capital. Quebec was different from the others. People spoke French there. Mrs. K and her husband had gone to

Montreal last year for their honeymoon, and it was perfect. Everything was French, everything was old and stone. It was like being in Europe.

She asked them to repeat the sentence again, but David no longer even mouthed it. He was suspicious.

* * *

After his recent humiliation, he had decided to become suspicious.

In October, when the class was first memorizing the states, David lost two teeth in one weekend. The first was a thin crooked canine. It hung by a single root for three days. On Friday night David claimed that the root was sensitive and that he could eat only ice cream. His mother removed the tooth. Two days later, he was bent over a sheet of lined paper in his room, writing cursive uppercase *D*s for homework. One of his front teeth dropped bloodlessly onto the page. He had not known it was loose.

For this weekend, the Tooth Fairy gave him a dollar. David bought ice cream.

One corner of the lunchroom at Christ the King Lutheran School was occupied by a boy-sized freezer. It was white and very cold. Each time he passed the freezer, David pressed his palm against it. Four seconds was his record: after that, the cold began to burn. The freezer only opened once a week, and that was why it was so cold, he thought. The cold had nowhere else to go, so it just got colder.

On Wednesdays, a parent-volunteer removed the padlock from the boy-sized freezer and sold ice cream to a long line of boys. This was Ice Cream Day.

Many times David had asked his mother for ice cream money. His argument was sound: the other boys got money every week, and his grades were better than theirs. But, said his mother, the other boys were not on scholarship. So David did not join the long line.

He was, he decided, better off waiting at the table while the other boys bought their ice cream. He watched them stand in the long line, and he could tell the waiting made them miserable. He looked closely as they ate, and he was sure the ice cream was freezer-burnt.

But then he had his Tooth Fairy Dollar—four quarters in an empty plastic film canister.

That Wednesday, he joined the long line. He showed the other boys his four quarters and his half-empty grin. He told them how, on Sunday night, he had tried to stay up and catch the Fairy at work. One of the boys laughed.

It was the parents, the boy said.

David had known that, of course. He told the other boy that he already knew that. He closed his half-empty mouth very tight, turned, waited for several minutes, and bought a Bomb Pop from the boy-sized freezer. He ate it, and the cold burned the raw spaces where his teeth had been. Later, he could not remember whether the Bomb-Pop had been freezer-burnt.

That night his mother confirmed it. It was the parents.

He was credulous, but he was not stupid. Once he had the logic, he could follow it. The Easter Bunny, Santa, the leprechauns that left chocolate on the desks after recess on St. Patrick's day—it was all the parents.

* * *

In his room, he studied the provinces of Canada. He did not need Mrs. K's sentence, but he remembered it anyway. Billy and Sally. British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan.

He got stuck on "Queen"—Quebec. He was suspicious.

He was ready to believe in the existence of Canada. He saw Canadian license plates in the winter, when the old people came from the north to the

beaches. He had heard jokes about Canadians on television. He was ready to accept that there was another country a thousand miles above him, and that the people of that country were like him except in flannel and hats with flaps.

But he doubted Quebec. He doubted Montreal. A bunch of French people living in an old stone European city in America—it was as strange as the elves at the North Pole.

He had never met anyone from Quebec. He had never seen a license plate in French. When he watched the news with his mother, he heard about Russia and Iraq and Bosnia and even sometimes Canada—but never Montreal.

He tried to convince himself that Quebec was real. It would be on the test, after all.

He did know one person who had experienced Quebec. Mrs. K said she had been to Montreal. But the parents lied with ease and in detail. Mrs. K had told them that department-store Santas worked for the real Santa. And when David had complained that the Tooth Fairy paid him less than she paid his classmates, his mother told him that she had personally met with the Fairy and negotiated the price.

But Mrs. K wouldn't lie to him in the classroom. She was his teacher. She was supposed to teach him. The school wouldn't allow her to lie.

Of course, the teachers always read stories about the Easter Bunny. A spelling test had asked him, "Who brings chocolate on St. Patrick's Day?" One of Santa's "representatives" had visited their class and given each student a little pencil and an eraser sent directly from the Big Man in the North Pole. Before Thanksgiving the class had made paper hats with paper buckles and pretended to be ridiculous creatures called Pilgrims. Not even Christ the King Lutheran School was safe from the parents.

If he couldn't trust Mrs. K, if he couldn't trust the school, could he trust the pull-down maps? He loved the maps, and they said Quebec was there, big and blue above beige America.

But the maps also said that there was a North Pole, and David knew that Santa did not exist. The map said that there was a big yellow thing called the Soviet Union, but it was gone—if it had ever been there at all.

* * *

On Wednesday, Mrs. K asked the class to take out a sheet of notebook paper and list the provinces. David wrote "British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario" and then paused. As he thought, he tongue flicked at the holes in his mouth. The new teeth were growing in. He started writing again: "New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland."

* * *

Mrs. K had graded the test. She placed them facedown on their desks. David slid his test into his lap, folded it three times, and pushed it to the bottom of his pocket.

Christ the King Lutheran School had two fields. The first—"The Field"—was flat and very green, and there the boys placed football at recess. Behind The Field, divided from the field by logs, was a second field—the Cactus Field. The Cactus Field was covered in small cactuses and therefore unsuitable for games.

At recess, David walked by himself to the logs and sat facing The Field. The other boys played football in front of him. He watched the game for a long time. The bell rang, and they ran inside, toward the long line and the boy-sized freezer. David stood but did not walk or run.

He unfolded the little wedge. Twelve out of thirteen, it said. Ninety-two percent. In red pen, Mrs. K had written "Quebec."

There was a part of him that had not expected this. He had thought that once you found the truth, the parents no longer pretended. He had thought he would no longer have to sing the song. Mrs. K might have given him credit for figuring out the truth about Quebec. She might have realized his greatness.

That part of him was quickly overwhelmed by a new and better part. He was sure that none of the other boys—and perhaps no one in any of the countries on the big world map—had ever felt anything as strong or pure as the thing that he was feeling at that moment. He was happier than any hundred had ever made him. He was not perfect, but he was right.

The Great Strawberry

by Robin White

Haruki no longer had anybody to go fishing with, and so he went with a Robot he named Francis. Francis' given name was Arthur Alcock, but once Haruki had told his wife that it put him in mind of tweed and deep green leather, they'd agreed a change of name was in order.

Francis had greeted Izanami, Haruki's wife, with encouraging levels of compassion. He took in her frailties and met them with indulgent tenderness and humanity. His flesh was cool and metallic and he placed his hand upon her brow whenever she grew hot, lay his refrigerated forehead against her neck whenever she would flush.

'You are good to my wife,' Haruki had said, a week after Francis' arrival. 'Not many are kind to a sick old woman.'

'But she's not a sick old woman,' said Francis, in accentless Japanese, 'she's a young girl, grown old.'

And there was some truth in that. Izanami's body didn't slouch, nor did her skin sag or her face wrinkle. It simply grew frailer every day, until she could no longer get out of bed. Haruki and Francis had arranged her bedroom so that everything she needed was in reach, going so far as to carrying the fridge into the room, with a great many huffs and puffs, so that she could feel the cool air whenever she wanted.

When they'd been younger, Izanami had gone on fishing trips with Haruki whenever he'd asked her to—which was every time. He caught *Tai*, Japanese Snapper, which she grilled to a delicious consistency on the beach, while Haruki pulled his little boat out of the surf, tied his sail to the mast and scrubbed the deck of the innards of fish. The last time they'd fished together, Haruki had needed help to get the boat out of the surf and

neither had the energy to cook, let alone scrub. They'd attached the boat to the back of their car on its trailer and driven home. He'd made them peanut butter sandwiches which they ate over a single plate. Holding each other in bed, he'd cried when he saw how exhausted she was, her chest rising in exaggerated little divots and dips.

'Why don't you take Francis fishing with you?' she asked, propped up in bed on a raft of pillows.

'Francis?'

She nodded. 'Why not?'

'You fish with me.'

'I can't fish with you.'

'You fish with me,' he said. He shook his head and shivered, feeling a ripple along the back of his neck. 'You'll get better and then you'll fish with me. You'll grill the Snapper and I'll tie up the sail and we'll eat, as the sky grows dark.'

'Haruki—'

'Izanami. No.'

When she slept, Haruki watched baseball. Darryl Strawberry was the God of the North East. When Haruki was alone, he thought of Strawberry as a giant, his swing knocking little planets out of orbit, out of the solar system. The twinkling lights around the stadium were the stars and the planetary ball eclipsed every one. The great Strawberry, he called him. The Great Strawberry of the Yankees, once of the Mets. Always of New York.

'But why this player?' asked Francis. 'There are many. Many who are as good.'

'None are as good as the Strawberry.'

'Why does he play for these Yankees?'

'Because he is of the Yankees. Once he was of the Mets. But now he is of the Yankees of New York.'

'Are they a better team than the Mets?'

'Infinitely.'

'Ah.'

'What?'

'This is why he is of the Yankees. They are a better team. He has moved up.'

Haruki shook his head. 'He is of the Yankees now because he is of the Yankees.'

'He had no choice?'

'No.'

'He is a slave of the Yankees?'

'Not a slave. But indentured, in his heart. He is of the Yankees.'

Francis nodded. Haruki, satisfied, turned the volume up and watched the Great Strawberry swing.

When winter came, and Izanami grew sicker, Haruki worried more and watched baseball less. He sat on Izanami's bed every day, reading to her from books of poetry and American trash fiction. He let her wear his baseball jersey to ward off the cold, secretly hating how it accentuated her frailty. Doctors came and a priest, none of whom had the answer that

Haruki wanted. Francis stopped the Priest as he was leaving and they spoke for a moment, before the holy man stepped into a battered Keijidosha car, which spluttered its way along the road and out of sight.

Inside, Haruki sat on the floor of the kitchen. He noticed Francis' arrival and wondered, for the first time, how they managed to make him look so human.

'Why are you sat on the floor?'

'I could not sit on the bed, again.'

'Why?'

'Izanami will not get better. Will not fish. Will not laugh or cook. She hurts. I hurt.'

'Izanami hurts?'

'A great deal.'

Francis paused. 'I do not like that.'

With a delicate quiver, Haruki laughed an almost laugh and lay back on the kitchen floor.

Francis, stepping past him, made his way to Izanami's bedroom and tapped on the door.

'Izanami?' he whispered. There was the briefest of stirrings inside. Francis tapped again. 'Izanami?'

'Come in, Francis,' she said. 'Come in.'

Haruki caught the fish, but Francis didn't cook them. For Izanami's funeral, they would make a wonderful dinner.

'Of what are you thinking, Haruki?'

'Of the Great Strawberry. I wonder how many home runs he will hit tonight, out past the stars.'

He reeled in the biggest fish of the day. Francis clubbed it with the end of the oar to make it still, and together, they drew the boat back to the beach.

Photograph (c) Anne Anthony

Coming Home

by Louis Rakovich

They call us names we don't recognize. Mr. Altman, Jacob, Fat Jack. They chuckle when they say the latter, and look at their shoes. "Can't really call you that anymore, eh?" It's been a long time since the man was fat. We try to smile, a reluctant people-smile, faint, close-mouthed.

The first time they see us they holler and laugh, hug us with their ten arms. We try not to step on any of their ten feet. The laughter fades. They say, "Your mother. Oh, God, your mother." They let us call her, and on the other side of the telephone a voice—high pitched, not like ours, but like one of the five people around us—says, "Jack, no, you can't be Jack. Jack's dead." We try to explain to her what we've explained to the people, but our tongue gets heavy and unmovable in our mouth, and the sounds don't come out right. Someone takes the phone from our hand.

"Mrs. Altman," someone says. "We found Jack. He's here, he's fine."

We stop listening. We try to gather ourselves, recall everything we found in the man. We remember many things. We remember the word *telephone*. We don't remember his mother's face. We move our tongue inside our mouth in many small loops, practicing. We whisper *Mom, I'm here. I'm fine. I came back.*

Someone says, "We're so sorry. His jacket, his shoes, you know. That's what they said. No chance." There's a pause. "We don't know. But he's fine. He really is."

We don't remember him from the outside. We imagine him as he was when his shadow floated over Mother, when she swam toward him and pulled him deeper, a big, warm nest for us to hatch. Mother, too, is a shadow in this image—by the time we opened his eyes she was gone, and we swung his

arms alone in the darkness of the cocoon she'd made us, and ripped it open to let the water in. We don't remember how long it took us to swim to the surface.

Someone places a hand on our shoulder. A little different from the rest, with long, red fingernails. The one with the high pitched voice. The young woman. "Get some sleep," she says. "You'll see her soon. Come on, I'll walk you to your room."

We remember the room, the yellow bed frame, the deep blue of the carpet.

At night we dream of a small town we've never seen before. The gray of the sky hangs low above the grass; doors squeak somewhere, opening and closing; a child is holding a turtle.

* * *

"You're not my son," says the old woman. She's tall and strong, almost as tall and strong as we are, but a softness in her cheeks makes her look like an overgrown child, and the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes deepen as she speaks, forming creases that connect to the outlines of the bags below them.

"Mom," we say. "I'm fine. I came back."

"You don't look like Jack. Jack's body is somewhere far away."

"I'm here. I'm me."

The young woman speaks. She's called Rebecca. "He's thinner now, Mrs. Altman."

The old woman flinches at the sound of the young woman's voice.

"I know he looks different," the young woman continues. "We weren't sure either the first few seconds. But it's him, of course it's him. Who else? Look closer, Mrs. Altman. Put on your glasses."

The old woman scoffs. "I'm not blind. I can see whether someone's my son or not."

"Well?" asks the young woman.

The old woman waits, then sighs. "Come here. Come closer."

We approach. She takes us by the hand and opens her mouth, but instead of words a weak cackling comes out; her voice breaks before she has a chance to speak. She brushes our hand against her cheek. She clears her throat. She says, "Thank you for coming back."

We follow the women to the kitchen. The old woman pours tea for the young woman and us. For a while we drink in silence, and we get the sense that the old woman is waiting for the young woman to leave.

"Are you going back?" she asks.

"Not yet. Taking a week off." The young woman locks eyes with the old one. "I don't remember where I left my coat."

The young woman kisses us on the cheek, and the two women get up and head to the hallway. We hear them whispering, but we can't distinguish the words. The front door closes. The old woman comes back.

She passes her fingers through our hair. It's short ever since the man on the rig cut it. "Rebecca says they won't let you back until you tell them where you've been those six months."

We've prepared for this. *I don't remember*.

"I don't remember."

"What are you going to do?"

I'll get another job.

She doesn't give us time to answer. "It doesn't matter," she says. "Forget about it, it doesn't matter. What nonsense. You'll find something." She sits down by our side and wraps her arm around our back. Her head falls on our shoulder. "Thank you for coming back."

* * *

The water in the bathtub is warm. Except for a few quick showers, we haven't been this warm since we left the cocoon. Our knees are peeking out of the water, like mountains half-hidden in the mist. We think about our home, wherever that is. We don't know where Mother is but we know she's gone. Raindrops are beating against the small fogged-up window in the upper corner of the bathroom.

We get out of the tub, hit our toe on the edge. For a moment our arms are shaking in the air. We retain balance. Jack Altman is looking back at us from the lid of the medicine cabinet. We know him. We don't know whether we've killed him or he's still alive somewhere here with us. Jack Altman's face is our face now. In the mirror our face is red, yellow crescents below our eyes.

A knock on the door.

The voice of Jack Altman's mother asks, "Jack, you still in there?"

"Yes."

"There's a man here, wants to speak with you. I told him it's early, but he said, if you're already up, what's the difference? I suppose he's right. He's a doctor, the people from your job sent him. He showed me his card. Do you want to see him?"

"Yes. I'll be out in a minute."

We get dressed. We forget to dry our neck, and the collar of our shirt is cold and wet now. We'll remember next time. In the mirror Jack Altman is us.

We will find a job and a house, as Jack Altman would have done. We repeat in our head, *Assimilation is survival*. New words for an old thought. And in our mouth we repeat, without sound, *My name is Jack Altman*.

The doctor is older than us, but not as old as Jack Altman's mother. He reaches out his hand and we shake it.

"Is there anywhere we'll have some privacy?" he asks.

We take him to the room where Jack Altman grew up. We slept here last night.

He asks us to sit on the bed. He shines a light into our eyes, our ears, our mouth. He presses his thumbs into the sides of our neck. He asks us to stand up and undress, and we comply. There's a gentleness in the way he touches us now, as though he wants us to feel as little of his touch as possible. He says we can get dressed again.

He writes something in a notepad.

"What do you remember," he asks, "starting with the moment you fell in the water?"

"I don't remember."

"Nothing at all?"

"No."

"How did you return?"

"I don't remember."

"Do you remember where you returned from?"

"No."

He pauses. "What's the first thing you remember?"

"Rebecca looking at me from the rig."

"That was when you were in the water," he looks down at his notepad, "twenty feet west of the platform?"

"I suppose."

"And before that?"

"I don't remember."

He writes more, then puts the notepad in his pocket and stands up. We shake hands again.

* * *

Jack Altman's mother approaches the front porch. Two old people carrying a basket follow her, a man and a woman. The man's hair is gray like Jack's mother, and the woman's is a dirty golden yellow. They're smiling. The grass behind them is gray now, and the sky black, no cloud in sight.

"Jack," the golden woman says. "Oh my Lord, Jack. Jack, honey." She comes closer.

"Least they won't call you Fat Jack anymore," the man says, then looks at the back of the golden woman's head.

We get up from the porch swing. "Hello."

The golden woman's smile fades and she looks back to the man and Jack's mother, and asks, "Does he recognize me?"

"Sure he does," says Jack's mother. "He's just a little fuzzy. Jack?"

"Of course," we say. "Hello. I'm sorry. Yes, I'm still a little fuzzy."

"I understand," says the golden woman. She's smiling again.

She's talking fast and we can't keep up with her words. We nod, and she continues, and the man behind her—suddenly we realize he is her husband, and the realization soothes a pestering uneasiness inside us—joins in sometimes with a small remark.

They hug us.

They leave, and Jack's mother shows us the thing they've brought us—a basket full of bags of sweet little things. Chocolates and small waffles. We sit back on the swing. Jack's mother hands us the basket before sitting beside us.

Above us white dots are shining on a boundless black slate. We know that this is outer space, and we don't know whether we know it because of us or because of Jack Altman. We put our head on Mother's shoulder. We feel the contractions in her neck as she chews one waffle after the other. The weight of her head is lowered onto our ear.

"What do you want for breakfast tomorrow?"

"I don't know," I say.

"Rebecca will come by with her dog," she says. "I figured you can walk it together, will do you some good to go for a walk. But I can call her and say some other time if you want."

"No, don't. It'll be nice."

In the distance of the black sky one dot is flickering red. An airplane. Maybe there was something like that once before, similar but not quite, a long time ago. I close my eyes. In the darkness beneath my eyelids I'm drifting away somewhere, invisible waves rocking me back and forth. Through the round bone of my head I can feel Mother finishing the waffles, one by one.

Photograph (c) Doug Matthewson

My Yellow Cup with the Tiger On

by Scott McClelland

My name is Allison. But I'm called Allie. I cut grass. My father taught me how to cut grass. He said you have to cut grass in straight lines. He said if the lines aren't straight it won't look nice. He said I love you Allie. He said I love you Allie from a white bed in a purple room. He said I love you Allie where he got a shot with a silver needle that made him not hurt so much. He said do you understand that I love you Allie? And I said yeah. He said after I'm gone you'll live at Grammy with the red car's house. He said Allie do you understand that I won't be here anymore? And I said yeah.

Today I'm cutting grass at the brown house across the street and the house next to the brown house where the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses lives. I get five dollars to cut grass. Today I get five dollars from the lady in the brown house and five dollars from the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses. Grammy with the red car keeps my money for me. She buys me my black cookies with white stuff in the middle. She buys me my milk. I drink my milk from my yellow cup with the tiger on. The tiger lives at the zoo. The zoo sells yellow cups with his picture on. When Grammy with the red car takes me to the zoo I visit the tiger. He knows me. I stand on the red rock by the tree and wait for him to see me. My hair is brown and long and straight. I comb my hair in straight lines so it looks nice for the tiger. When he sees me he comes over by me to talk. He says it's hot. He says having yellow fur with black stripes is hot when it's hot. He says do you think it's hot Allie? And I say yeah. He says I love you Allie. He says do you understand that I love you Allie? And I say yeah.

My lawnmower is green. The same color as grass. The special water that makes the lawnmower go smells funny. The can that holds the special water is the same color as Grammy with the red car's car. When I cut grass I can see the lines inside my head. The lines are straight. If they're not straight it

won't look nice. I don't cut grass at houses that have trees. If there are trees I can't make the lines go straight and it won't look nice. Because of trees I had to stop cutting grass at the gray house by Grammy with the red car's house. The lady in the gray house was mad at me. She was mad because I couldn't stop screaming. The lady in the gray house can't see the lines the way I do. Her trees made the lines go wrong and I screamed. Grammy with the red car told the lady in the gray house that I couldn't cut her grass anymore and the lady in the gray house was mad at me again. She said in a mean voice why don't you go around the trees? She said do you understand that you can go around the trees? And I said yeah. Then Grammy with the red car talked in a mean voice to the lady in the gray house and I don't cut grass there anymore.

When me and Grammy with the red car cross the street to cut grass I push the lawnmower. Grammy with the red car carries my yellow cup with the tiger on and the can of special water that makes the lawnmower go. The lady in the brown house is nice. When I cut her grass her and Grammy with the red car sit outside. They watch me cut grass and they talk and laugh. The lady in the brown house makes pink lemonade. I drink my pink lemonade out of my yellow cup with the tiger on. When I drink my pink

lemonade the lady in the brown house goes to get the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses. He comes outside with his big dog. His big dog has big teeth and pointy ears. His big dog is black on his back and brown on the rest of him. He looks like dogs that policemen have. The tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses comes over to the brown house and gives Grammy with the red car five dollars. He says you do such a nice job cutting the grass Allie. He says do you understand that you do such a nice job cutting the grass Allie? And I say yeah. Then the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses goes back to his house. He gets a shovel with a wooden handle to pick up the dog poop that his big black and brown dog makes. He picks up the dog poop so I won't step in it. If I step in it I get dog poop on my shoes. When he picks up the dog poop his big black and brown dog looks at me. He knows me. He's on a chain so he can't come over by me and talk. But I can hear him. He says it's hot. He says having black and brown fur is hot when it's hot. He says do you think it's hot Allie? And I say yeah. He says I love you Allie. He says do you understand that I love you Allie? And I say yeah.

I like to stay upstairs in my bedroom. The walls upstairs in my bedroom are pink with white stripes. My father made the white stripes using blue tape. I like to look out my bedroom window. When I look out my bedroom window I see everything from high up. It's a long time after the man who tells Grammy with the red car the news on TV. It's a long time after the TV man but it's still light outside. When I look out my bedroom window I see the lines in the grass across the street at the brown house and the lines in the grass at the house where the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses lives. The lines are straight. I see the two houses but the lines on all the grass is straight. I make the lines straight to make it all one grass. I look out my window at the lines in the grass until it gets too dark to see them. Grammy with the red car says Allie? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car says it's time to go to bed. I get under my covers. My covers and my pillow are pink with white stripes just like my bedroom walls. Grammy with the red car brings me my drink of water and my pills. The water is in my yellow cup with the tiger on. Grammy with the red car sits on my bed and says Allie? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car says do you know that it's your birthday next week? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car says

on this birthday you'll be old enough to drive a car. Isn't that funny? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car says for now I think you better leave the driving to me okay? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car leaves my yellow cup with the tiger on because it still has water in. She leaves it on the table by my bed in case I need a drink of water later on. Grammy with the red car turns off the light and says goodnight Allie. And I say yeah.

After she goes I touch my finger on the tiger's picture on my yellow cup with the tiger on. He knows me. After I touch the tiger's picture I close my eyes. It's black inside my eyes. And when it's black inside my eyes I can go. When I go I go to the zoo. At the zoo I don't stand on the red rock by the tree and wait for the tiger. I go inside where the tiger lives. Inside where the tiger lives I don't see the tiger. I am the tiger. I walk on my tiger feet and I am tiger strong. My tiger eyes and my tiger teeth are big. My tiger tail is long. I walk up to the cage around my tiger house and slink between the bars. I can do that. When I'm the tiger I walk between raindrops. I walk my tiger body on the sidewalk that goes around the zoo. I walk my tiger body on the street outside the zoo. On the street outside the zoo I walk my tiger body fast. I walk my tiger body so fast I start to run. And when I run I run so fast I can fly. I fly my tiger body into the sky. I can do that. I fly so fast I race the moon. I race the moon and the stars all the way into tomorrow. At tomorrow I fly across the blue sky. When I fly across the blue sky fire from my yellow fur burns behind me and smoke from my black stripes comes out behind the fire. The smoke makes lines across the sky. The lines the smoke makes across the sky aren't straight but they look nice anyway. I look up into the blue sky and find the sun. I see the sun in the blue sky and the sun in the blue sky sees me. I know the sun. The sun says do you love flying tiger? And I say yes. The sun says do you understand that you can fly tiger? And I say yes. Yes I do.

Troll

by Ian Richardson

The clatter of passing trains shook the walls of the earth den. Before the track there had been the line of the canal, with its barges and clop of horseshoe on the towpath, which itself had replaced a stream lined with pussy willow when the only disturbance had been fish breaching the water. Things change.

Some things.

The police had called: flashing a photo, asking if the child had been seen or a vehicle driving too slowly. We looked at the photo held at arm's length in front of us, the boy with fine golden hair and milk-toothed smile, happy in his blue school sweatshirt, still bright in its first week of reception class wear.

"Could we search? If there's a search, then, if I can, I'd like..."

It had waited in the dark. As all children knew it did, it hid motionless in the long pools of darkness that collected in corners and behind doors. Returning night after night, patient in the hunt.

The mother hardly spoke now. In the beginning she hadn't been able to stop talking. Asking how long it would be, telling the policewoman who sat uncomfortably on her sofa that she knew he would be back soon. She knew he would, she would know if anything had happened. She would never let him out after dark, she would never do that, but he'd been playing football and the coach watched over them and he was supposed to wait and his dad would be there to pick him up, but he hadn't been there and his dad had shouted and looked and then called the police on his mobile, screaming at the operator in his fear and now...

And now it should be bedtime and she had his book. His new favourite. She held it to her chest as she rocked in her armchair. On the front, a fox, dressed in children's clothes of primary colours, walked hand in hand with a rabbit.

"He'll want to know what Mr Fox did next. I promised him. I told him we'd find out tonight what Mr Fox did."

As it glided along through the park, the dark thing saw its quarry. The last dimmed light pointing at the boy on the football pitch as if he alone existed. He stood apart, still in his shorts and chunky boots, looking lost now that the game was finished and the other children were leaving.

It listened and watched, heard the prey named and saw him isolated. Slipping out from the trees it ghosted at the edge of the light. It raised a hand and beckoned. What child could tell a friendly smile from the bared teeth of a hunter?

"He loves all the fairy stories," she said. "Stupid when you think of it, living here. What does a London kid know about fairy stories? But that's all he wanted...*wants* to hear about, stories with talking animals and ogres. He'll be alright? There are gangs and allsorts. I've seen them in the park selling drugs. They wouldn't hurt him would they? He's only little, no one would hurt him." In her arms Mr Fox and his rabbit friend waited.

It had been so quick. The grown-up in the hoody had waved him over and then there was a hand on his mouth, bruising his lip, and his arm twisted up high behind his back, so hard he thought his shoulder ripped. He'd squealed but a huge meaty slap knocked his head back and the rusty taste of blood was in his mouth. Then he was dangling, half-lifted in the air and the toes of his boots scraped along the soil as he was dragged from the path.

It had struck. Out of the dark it had taken the boy. Now it dragged him through the gap where the torn links of the fence opened onto the tracks. Down embankments into the deep dark, down under the brick bridge that was its real home, down where it was quiet and it could play the games it liked to play.

"Just be quiet," it lied, "just you do what I tell you and you'll be alright."

The boy saw its face. Sweat ran down from its hairless head. It panted fast, as if it had run a long way. He knew it.

"Mr Peters?"

Mr Peters from the newsagents, who always said, "Hallo, young man. Are you courting yet? I bet the girls all think you're a little prince!" and laughed for no reason.

From the dark bushes came a snap. Mr Peters pushed him against a tree and pressed a hand over his mouth again. Please, please let someone be there.

From the dark, eyes stared out, unblinking.

"Effing vermin! Go on, get out!" hissed Peters, but to the boy the eyes seemed to grow larger, until they were as big as saucers. His head buzzed from the blow.

Peters swung an arm at empty air, "Get on out! Get away!"

From the dark the fox emerged. Even in the night its thick fur shone deep red and glistened. Peters broke a switch from the nearest bush and advanced, dragging the boy behind him. The boy stared into the yellow eyes.

"Please, "he whispered, "Please."

The fox bared its sharp white teeth and watched Peters.

His mother couldn't say anything. Not since the police had come to tell her had she spoken. Every time words came acid rose in her throat and displaced them. Instead she just kneeled on the ground and held her boy in her arms as if she could fuse him to her.

"It's alright, mum," he said, "Mr Fox came."

In his den Fox listened to the sound of trains. He remembered it all, when the land was green and the great deer ran through the woods and they all chased with Herne—Fox and Wolf and Hound side by side and matching stride—and they hunted down the dark things. Fox didn't forget. He licked his lips and bit down on a flesh-hung bone, gnawing with pleasure.

Artwork: Wild Hunt *(c) Valin Mattheis*

That Kind of Light

by Maureen O'Leary

The one small lamp on his night stand cast the kind of dim light which glazed over the bit of cellulite on the back of my thighs. He'd been all compliments as we touched each other in the near darkness and said he couldn't handle it, had to have me. I said no. I'd never had a one night stand, didn't plan to start, but he went in anyway. I took a sharp breath, amazed. I wanted to punch him in the nose, make him stop, but then it would be rape. Then I would have to report because I was always lamenting about the high number of unreported assaults and wouldn't be a hypocrite. That would mean a trip to the hospital to mine for evidence. Hours of the same conversation over and over with nurses and cops annoyed by the late hour. My brother wouldn't speak to me for a while or look me in the face. My parents would carefully analyze my wardrobe to see what made me a risky girl, and toss the offending pieces in the trash. My father would yell, but later say he didn't. This was the short list of things I didn't want to go through again.

Plus, unlike last time, I'd gone with the guy of my own accord. I'd climbed the precarious spiral staircase to his bedroom, been quiet not to wake his sister who also lived there, smoked my pot on his balcony and didn't plan for anything more exciting than some basic tongue action.

We'd met an hour or so prior. My friends were talking to the bouncers outside the bar and taking their time about it when I'd walked up to him in his too-orange shirt and asked about his tattoos.

You're pretty tatted up, I'd said. What's the cause?

He said he'd gotten them in the navy. I said, of course, because I'd called it before I'd started the conversation. My one and only ex-boyfriend had been

a military man and told me how to recognize the haircuts and the tats of a veteran. The guy told me I was beautiful and should come home with him. I said no at first because I never went home with strangers, but especially not from the parking lot of a bar after last call. Then my friend came bounding up to us arm in arm with his roommate. Apparently she knew him and liked the way he fucked.

You should come too, she said. Together, she and orange-shirt convinced me to ride with them to the guys' house to drink beers. I didn't see the harm. His name turned out to be Drew. I had to ask a few times to remember.

This was the exact kind of situation people don't have sympathy for, the type of shit people read on the internet and say, she knew what she was doing. She left with him for Christ's sake.

So I decided I wasn't being raped. I suppressed the initial urge to grab Drew's keys from the nightstand and push the biggest one into the soft part of his throat. Probably would've splattered blood on the low vaulted ceilings. I wanted to collect my clothes from his wooden floor where they were scattered, slip out, and follow the train tracks back to town, but I didn't. He was too strong in any case and could've stopped me. Could've made things worse if I got him mad. He said he was a welder and looked like someone who worked heavy metals all day. Tan from the heat, blonde, blue eyed, an attractive guy. Probably not used to hearing no. I knew all too well the damage a stranger could do when things don't go to plan. I should've remembered that lesson before getting in Drew's car and riding out into the woods.

Besides, I thought, my number had already been upped. The damage was done. I would have to include him in the number of people who'd been inside me. A number which I supposed would be important to some man someday when I wanted to settle down. I thought I might as well get some actual sex out of it, which I hadn't done since my ex dumped me, though I knew since our split he'd been balls deep all over town. I closed my eyes and

told myself Drew was probably a great guy, but I couldn't enjoy it for a second. His dick was curved in a way my pussy wasn't and it hurt.

I can't do it, I said. It's too big or something.

That's what you have to say. He pushed for another minute or so, going deep, watching my face, smiling just a little every time I breathed sound that signified it was too much. Afterward, he wanted to cuddle, and I thought this gave my not-rape scenario some credence. I tried to let the closeness be a comfort, assuring myself rapists didn't brush away the hair fallen over a girl's shoulder to kiss it before falling asleep. My head was on his arm, a sweaty cloud the way the muscles bulged and curved. His other arm was heavy over my waist. As I tried my best to settle in he whispered, I'm going to fuck you in the morning when I make you give it up again.

The damage was done, I thought as I pulled my knees to my chest under the covers, feeling already I'd be sore the next day. He snapped off his lamp and left us in the dark, except for his electric clock which burned neon red numbers. I closed my eyes and saw the parking lot of the bar where we'd met. The street lights throwing off a dingy yellow glow that barely lit up the metallic fragments in the pavement. In that kind of light, it's hard to see much of anything.

It Can, It Can, It Can

by Eric Boyd

A man jumped off the High Level Bridge this morning. I was at work. A fat businesswoman in a blue blazer ordered Thai Salad, Crispy Calamari, and Ginger Crusted Salmon. Two others accompanied her, both got Classic Caesars. They shared the calamari, plus a bottle of Coppola Pinot Grigio. One of the women told me she liked my lipstick, then Blue Blazer whipped her a look: *Don't talk to the help*. After that, none of them spoke to me aside from placing their orders; at the water station I did hear Blue Blazer telling the other two how bad the last quarter was. They had lost a lot.

The man apparently parked his car—beat up, rusted out—on the bridge and sat there for some time. People drove around him until congestion became too much, then they honked. Rolling down their windows, even in the rainy October air, they cursed at him. Nobody got out and asked, *Is everything alright?*

The women with Blue Blazer were nervous and seemed content being talked at, not to. Blue Blazer would ask questions like, "Where can we tighten our budget?" and think out answers herself. One of them would mutter "Um" while the other was completely silent. The salmon was ready for nearly ten minutes before I brought it out, waiting for Blue Blazer to wind down her speech, which seemed to end positively. Things bounce back, she said. They always do.

The man got out of his car and staggered toward the pedestrian barrier. Cars had learned to work around him and traffic moved steadily. He paced back and forth for a long time before standing still to look out over the water. The river below, the Monongahela, is brown and choppy and gets a lot of sewer runoff. I know because, no matter how many times management calls the borough, they won't remove the warning signs just

outside our back patio. The river couldn't have looked any different for him than it usually does. It couldn't have looked beautiful.

Once they started eating, Um and Silent were more at ease. Silent ate quickly and happily and had a piece of lettuce hanging from the corner of her mouth until Um nudged her below the table. Blue Blazer didn't notice any of it; if she wasn't forking salmon into her mouth she was having more wine, lifting the glass until it had all drained into her with one gulp.

He was tall and skinny, his hair neatly cut. He wore a light jacket and dark pants. He looked young but could have just as easily been old. He leaned over the bridge's railing.

I brought the women more water and Blue Blazer asked me if I was "a Mexican or what." I informed her that I was not from Mexico, no—then I left the water pitcher on their table and went into the restroom. I took the tiny garbage can from under the sink and threw it against a wall, trying not to scream. I spent ten minutes cleaning up afterward. I had terrible cramps and had for the last week. Someone outside the door said my name and I didn't recognize it.

I came out and stood by the kitchen. Gerard, returning an undercooked tilapia, smiled gently at me. "There you are. You look awful."

"Thanks."

"I mean you don't look well," he straightened. "You look ill."

"I didn't sleep much," I said, "and I was sick when I woke up."

Gerard nodded; he was the only one I'd told. "You haven't called?"

"He might come back."

"Honey," Gerard touched my hair.

"I know."

"You have to make up your mind."

"I know." I would have liked it better if he'd just asked how I was.

Blue Blazer and company finished their Pinot Grigio and got a second; Blazer said they might as well call it a day and also ordered a bottle of Prosecco. They became very jovial. Um said how Donald Trump was right about everything and Silent told the dirtiest jokes I ever heard. They laughed in such a fit that, when they looked out the window and saw a man flying off the bridge and through the air—heard the quick bottlerocket cracks of the tree branches he passed before landing—they giggled through

pursed lips. Our always-reserved manager gasped and ran through the back patio, towards the riverwalk, to see what he could.

The man didn't hit the water. He drifted through the sky and landed three feet away, in black mud. One of his legs shattered; rescue responders got to him within ten minutes but he was able to stand on his own, and didn't appear to be in pain. Gerard took a smoke break to get closer and he said the man's eyes were glazed over, almost totally white. He was, as Gerard

said, "Stoned to his bones." He said the crowd surrounding the scene seemed disappointed, muttering things like, *Who can't make it into the river? Why not use a gun? Why not be sure?*The man got up the hill, over the riverwalk fence, and into an ambulance without incident. He just shook his head, repeating, "It can get worse....It can, it can, it can..."

The rest of the day we were all abuzz. Even customers joined in, saying how, when it happened, they were on the bridge, or the riverwalk, or a friend was fishing nearby.

There was such pity. Everyone understood that, if you try doing that sort of thing, it's a kind of tragedy when you fail. But the pity was overshadowed by awe and some idea of participation. I heard people call it everything from an "attempt" to an "event", and they all wanted to be witness to it, refusing to believe that, no matter how many people were—or claimed they were—around at the time, he was alone.

They all kept saying, "I saw the whole thing."

But no one did, and neither did I.

Cosmonauts

by Clint Margrave

"There are so many things in this world that cannot be described...It's scary, being face to face with such a sight—it's scary, prompting thoughts of life, not death. You want to live, to live..."
— Georgi Ivanov

"Did you ever want to be a cosmonaut when you were little?" Dani asks.

We're lying in bed on Saturday morning. It's our second week in the new apartment.

I laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"You said, *cosmonaut*."

"What's so funny about cosmonaut? I really wanted to be one when I was a kid."

"We call them astronauts," I say.

"Americans," Dani says, shaking her head. "Bulgaria was the sixth country in the world to put a man in space by the way. Georgi Ivanov. Have you heard of him?"

"No."

"Americans."

"I wanted to be a baseball player," I say. "Or Steven Spielberg."

We're lying here because I put up a profile on a dating website six months after Jane and I split. We'd been together five years, four of them as husband and wife. When I met Dani, I still lived in the one bedroom backhouse Jane and I rented. After I found the text messages and confronted Jane, she moved to a studio apartment on the other side of Long Beach. Six months later, I didn't know what to do with myself. That's when a friend told me about Ok Cupid or Ok Computer as I accidentally keep calling it:

"Motorhead?" says Dani.

"Radiohead," I say.

"Maybe," Dani says, then shrugs.

"It's not important," I say.

Dani liked my profile first.

I had received an automated message sent to my Gmail account that said *Someone likes your profile!* It literally came only a few hours after I'd put it up. When I clicked on the link, there was Dani's pretty face staring back at me in a black and white selfie: strong-jawed, smooth-skinned, deep brown eyes.

"Technology brought us together," I tell Dani.

"Eventually," she says, reminding me how I flaked on her in the beginning. I always defend myself by saying I was in Long Beach and she was in L.A. Distance was a factor. And fear, of course. I was still working out what happened with Jane.

"Consider yourself lucky," my therapist told me. (I'd gotten a therapist because people thought it was a good idea to talk to someone when you get divorced.) "A disaster was narrowly averted."

It's true Jane and I had nothing to show for after five years. Not like we had kids or anything. Not like we owned a house or anything.

"Divorce," my therapist said, "is one of the two most stressful events in a person's life."

"What's the other one?" I asked.

"Moving."

* * *

Things had started to go wrong.

The mission was supposed to be simple. The Soyuz 33 would dock with the Russian space station Salyut 6 and Georgi Ivanov and the Russian engineer Nikolai Rukavishnikov would spend a week in space conducting experiments with two other cosmonauts. But six hours into the mission, disaster struck. *We must mentally prepare for the worst*, Mission Control announced.

"Did you know Ivanov was the same age as us?" Dani says. "39 at the time."

We're both doing research on our iPhones now. Dani's had hers for five years whereas mine is newer because Jane used to insist we get the updated model every year.

Americans, I can hear Dani say. She turns to her side, away from me, rests her head on the pillow, and holds her phone up in the air.

"His birthday is July 2," I say. "A day after mine. Also, the day Ernest Hemingway committed suicide."

"I've never read Hemingway," Dani says. Which is surprising, not only because one thing that brought Dani and I together is we're both avid readers, but also because on the wall of her old apartment was a picture of Hemingway petting a cat.

"My friend gave it to me," she says. "Because I like cats."

Unlike me, Dani's never lived with anyone before.

"It's not like I don't know what that is," she says. "As a kid in Bulgaria my whole family lived in my grandmother's apartment."

* * *

"Don't worry," I had assured Dani the day we signed the lease. "Moving is easy. I'm an expert at it." And the truth is I am. Maybe my therapist was wrong about one thing: It's not the moving that's stressful. It's the staying in place.

"What if we drift apart and break up?" Dani asked.

Truth be told, it was the most extensive lease I'd ever seen before: pages upon pages of protections about pests and pets and people. Forms to sign about keys, about satellite dishes, about mold prevention. Late fees for rent. Trash and water and laundry management. It was also the first time a landlord asked for rental insurance. If only there'd been relationship insurance. If only someone could walk you through a new relationship like a new apartment. All the scratches, all the holes, all the cracks, all the pests, any mold. Then you could mark the damage before you arrived to ensure you get your deposit back.

There were more signatures on our lease than on the divorce papers I signed with Jane. The whole thing cost 700 bucks since we had no assets or anything complicated. I'd gone to this document preparation place in Long Beach called We the People. The good part was We the People handled all the tedious stuff. The bad part was I had to pay for it myself. Jane didn't have any money. She hadn't planned for my reaction to her cheating all that well. She thought we could still relaunch a failed relationship.

"There's always that risk," I told Dani.

Dani's been at her place for 15 years, ever since she came to Los Angeles. Whereas I figure, I must've moved about 8 times in the past 15 years. And three of those times had been to live with different women, one of them Jane. I still worry about Dani's naiveté in that field, but maybe she has more reason to be worried about me. I worry about that too.

"Why don't you try dating yourself for a while?" my therapist had suggested when I first told her I'd put up a profile on a dating website.

After I laughed, imagining candlelight dinners and long walks on the beach alone, I got bored one Saturday night and took her advice. I drank a few beers, ate, and read at the bar of this trendy overpriced restaurant called The Social List. The space between *Social* and *List* was on purpose. Later, I'd take Dani there and we'd have a laugh about the Soviet memorabilia inside.

"I'm probably the only real Socialist who's ever eaten at this place," she said.

"Is that South America?" the waiter asked, when he'd heard her accent.

"I don't feel very American," Dani once said, despite her already having citizenship for years. "But when I go back to Bulgaria, I don't feel very Bulgarian either."

"I know what you mean," I told Dani.

"You do?" she said, joking, her accent putting an extra "o" in "do." She was right, of course. How could I know what she meant? Not like I had packed up at the age of 25 and moved to an entirely different country where cosmonauts were astronauts.

* * *

"It was the main engine that shut off," Dani says.

I cuddle up to her and look over her shoulder at her phone. Rukavishnikov had been the first to notice the main engine was failing, putting the craft in danger of explosion. It was the first time it'd ever happened before. There weren't enough supplies to wait for the ship's natural descent from orbit. They had only one choice: fire up an untested engine and chance reentry.

"Watch that speck of dust," Rukavishnilov told Ivanov. "If it starts drifting towards the floor we'll live."

This was dangerous stuff.

Though the ship had been designed for reentry, if they got it wrong, coming in at such a steep angle could result in unwanted acceleration.

Mission Control waited nervously.

* * *

The text messages I found were between Jane and a classmate. I wouldn't know this, of course, until later when I confronted her. It was all so cliché. Couple marries, wife returns to school, meets some younger guy who really just wants to fuck an older woman, ends up having an affair. The kind of thing I wouldn't even want to write in a story myself because it'd seem too obvious.

"Thanks for the drinks!" her first message said to him. What drinks? A few days before I discovered the texts, Jane had blown off our usual Thursday night ritual of going out to dinner to stay at school and "study." I had thought I smelled alcohol on her breath when she came home, but when she denied it, I thought I'd just imagined that. After all, you have to trust your co-pilot. Lying about a drink wasn't lying about an affair. Only later did my hunch prove correct.

"He's lighthearted," she said when I asked her why.

"Of course he is," I said. "He's 25 and still lives at home."

"All we do is send cat videos to each other. Think I can send you a cat video? You're always so dark."

"Really?" Dani would say when I told her this story. "But you're such a clown!"

After that, Jane decided to post about our divorce on Facebook. We were both going our separate ways to try to "find ourselves," according to her status update. I wasn't trying to find myself. If anything, I should have been trying to find a place to hide because soon I'd be bombarded with messages from mutual friends.

I guess in the end, the only part that wasn't cliché was how little I bothered to fight for her. It turned out she had done us both an

enormous favor. Maybe I didn't really love Jane as much as I thought I had. Maybe I was just tired of moving.

* * *

These last two weeks, I must admit, have been disorienting. Every light switch is in the wrong place. Every doorway. The floors creak in all the wrong spots. The faucet knobs turn in the wrong direction. Hot water comes out where it is supposed to be cold. The kitchen light is next to the fridge instead of the doorway. The cupboards still smell like spices from the tenant who lived here before us. The books aren't in alphabetical order. Half of them are in a different alphabet.

"I really ought to learn Cyrillic," I tell Dani.

"It's very easy," she says.

We spend the morning in bed together laughing.

"Let's go to the grocery store," she says, setting down her phone on the mattress.

I know what people are going to say. Has it been enough time? Are you sure you're ready to do this? It takes no certification to be a therapist these days. But this is what you do in life, right? You get back out there. Take that risk. Test those boundaries of space. And the truth is living together isn't really that scary. Some days it just comes down to going to the grocery store. And Dani likes to do that often.

She shrugs when I make fun of her.

"Don't you know," I say, "in America, we just go once a week and buy everything in bulk."

"You also have relationships in bulk," she says.

"Maybe we're just always trying to secure the future," I say.

"The future," Dani says. "If we're alive."

This is one of her favorite catch phrases whenever we plan something too far in advance. When we first started dating, she mentioned she had a "sad Slavic soul," which I found refreshing after being told how dark I was.

"The force of gravity that began as a gentle draw on a speck of dust became a roaring pull..."

A gentle draw on a speck of dust. I like that.

"But even when he thought he was going to die, according to the ship's telemetry, Ivanov's pulse never rose above 74 beats per minute."

I stop reading.

"Holy shit," I say. "Who knew Bulgarians were such bad asses?"

I look at Ivanov's picture. He is indeed a bad ass. Thick jaw, full head of hair, bushy eyebrows, solid brown 1970s mustache. He's standing next to the bald, pockmarked faced Russian Rukavishnikov, who looks like he may have smoked too many cheap cigarettes. I wonder what it's like to be so valorous.

"Neil Armstrong was badass too though," I say. "I assume you know who that is."

Dani laughs.

"I'm not like you Americans."

"I always liked how Neil stayed out of the limelight even after he walked on the moon," I say. "I mean, what do you do if you're one of these guys? What do you do if you're Georgi Ivanov? Make it back from almost losing your life in space and then what? The toughest reentry is coming back into the world."

For the six months after Jane and I split up, all I did was get drunk.

"Instead of ten drinks a night," my therapist said, "how about you try five?"

She told me about a patient who was alcoholic and one day just never came back.

"If you can believe Wikipedia," I tell Dani, looking at my screen again, "Ivanov also helped draft the new Democratic Constitution of Bulgaria. And in 1993 became an airline executive. That's the last entry. The rest is about some other Georgi Ivanov. A Bulgarian football player. He seems to get the most hits these days."

Dani takes my phone away. I scoot in closer to her warm body, which I admit, in the beginning, had been as disorientating as the new place after years of being with the same person. She pulls the covers over our heads and we kiss.

* * *

"How are you feeling?" Commander Alexei Eliseev at Mission Control kept asking as the Soyuz burned through reentry, a fireball plummeting down to earth. "Tell us, what is the situation?"

"Be quiet, we're at 6G's here!" Georgi Ivanov radioed back, struggling to keep his breath, his body thrusting against the force of gravity, until at last the parachute opened and the cosmonauts landed safely.

Note: Some quotes and information about Georgi Ivanov are taken from the article, "Bulgaria's First Cosmonaut and the Near-Disaster of Soyuz 33" published at Blazing Bulgaria.

Staff Selections

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

Lawrence

by Clayton Truscott

Lawrence is missing.

"You see him this morning?" I ask Jasper, who's been overturning garden furniture for the last ten minutes.

"Yeah, he was in his spot," he says.

Between attempts at escape, Lawrence spends the majority of his life on the smooth, black tiles at the far end of the pond, closest to the fence.

I take Jasper's little hand and we canvass the yard thoroughly. We check all the regular places.

No luck.

He sits down on the patio floor, hugs his shins close to his chest. A frown line cuts his forehead in two. His face ages with worry.

"We'll find him," I say.

He's taking this personally. Most six year olds aren't as deep or sensitive as he is. But Jasper is a treasure. I don't think he should grow up or change.

I head indoors and grab juice boxes from the fridge.

In the lounge, Rice, the older brother, is practicing chokeholds on one of the Turkish pillows that festoon their enormous couch.

"Becky, can you take me to surf lessons?" He shouts at me over the blaring T.V.

"When your mom gets home," I reply.

Rice scowls and tightens his grip around the pillow's neck.

* * *

Jasper stares at the pond, seeing a vacancy.

We drink our juices and watch his koi fish dance between the greenery, their golden skin reflecting light.

Elvis, the family dachshund, is asleep on the garden furniture nearby.

If Lawrence got outside, cars, cats, raccoons, or coyotes might have ended his search for freedom. As the nanny here, explaining what death means is not my job.

Rice emerges from the living room, heads for the garage. He throws things around, boogie boards, life jackets, waterskis, snorkels, et cetera, making mess, making noise.

"Where's my wetsuit, Becky?" he shouts. It's part question, part accusation, like I had something to do with its disappearance.

As I get up to start another search party, I see Jasper digging his nails into his ankles, pushing as hard as he can.

"Don't do that," I tell him, pulling his hands away, revealing new tranches in his skin.

He grits his teeth, shakes his head.

* * *

Janet's red Hummer pulls into the garage.

Elvis perks up, his ears at attention.

She emerges from the garage and motors across the patio area. Her footsteps are quick and intense, like a drum roll. She builds tension as she moves. I look up at her and force a smile. It's not returned.

She adjusts her suit, touches her tightly bound hair, squints. I see where Jasper inherited the crease from. This is a woman who never takes her business suit off, whether she's headed to the office on a Saturday morning or standing naked in front of her mirror.

"What happened here?" she says.

Jasper gets up to hug his mother and break the story. "Lawrence ran away."

The stiffness in her face eases as her youngest child wraps his arms around her waist and buries his head in her side.

"He'll come back," she says. "Don't worry." She pats his back, picks him up, turns him into a little boy again.

Rice comes out wearing his wetsuit, sweating, chewing what's left of the lolly's stick.

"Hi Mom, can I go to surfing?" He says this as one word.

She looks to me, manufacturing a reply to that smile I offered moments ago, and asks if I'll take him on my way home.

* * *

Rice's surfboard fits across my backseat. He's definitely got some attention issues, but right now, while he's only five feet tall, he's a harmless little thing. Unless you're a Turkish pillow.

Two men wearing pink tutus, jumbo sunglasses, and blonde wigs hoist a banner in our direction from the side of the road: "Honk If You Love Boobies." They cheer and dance and wobble their sock boobs as we pass by. Rice points and laughs at their outfits.

Down the road, other groups of women, also dressed in pink spandex, are waving more signs at the cars headed down Sunset Cliffs Boulevard: "Save Second Base," "Walk For Tatas," "Beep For Boobs." This is what marching against breast cancer has become in some circles.

My mother had a mastectomy ten years ago. She wasn't thinking about preserving her sexuality, saving bases, or even worried about how her

breasts would look after the operation; she wanted to live long enough to see me grow up. She would have cut her vagina off if it would have saved her. That's what cancer is about—survival.

"So, you're enjoying surfing?" I ask Rice.

"Yeah, it's awesome," he says.

He fidgets constantly. Rolls the windows down, then back up. Opens the glove box. Looks inside. Flicks through my driver manual. I stop him at the ashtray.

"There's nothing inside there."

He gives me a distrustful look. Then moves on. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"I have two—you and Jasper."

He laughs.

We move further down the boulevard, closer to Ocean Beach, where Rice's surf school meets for lessons. He's only been a few times, but I'm told he's doing well. This doesn't surprise me. He skateboards, does somersaults on their trampoline, backflips into the pool, handstands against every wall in the house. Surfing almost seems static for him.

The main drag along Newport Avenue is packed. We crawl down the street, passing bars with people spilling out onto the sidewalk.

I pull up to the curb near the sand. "You want me to walk with you?" I ask.

He shakes his head, gets out, grabs his board off the back seat, and leaves without saying good bye or thank you.

I think the little turd is embarrassed to be seen in my car.

It's getting old and a bit rusty from the sea air but going strong. The guy who sold it to me said it would run forever. That clinched the deal.

I'll take anything that won't die on me.

* * *

I had a real complex about being from Reno. Poor man's Vegas, I once heard someone call it. I thought that was bullshit until I went to Vegas during my sophomore year and saw for myself why the two don't compare. Vegas is its own animal.

I remember drinking margaritas in a crowded pool at ten in the morning, surrounded by imbeciles grinding towards self-destruction and thinking: human beings set the strangest standards.

My life changed when Mom's life insurance came through.

I could go to school in California, leave my Reno-ness behind. San Diego wasn't the cheapest option, but it's where I needed to be and I consider the move to be money well spent.

I've grown a lot here.

Made serious choices. Bought furniture. Learned to drink wine. Developed some confidence. Had pregnancy scares and thought about my mom.

Learned to hate myself less. Cultivated a meaningful relationship with a good person and watched it die. Used people, got used. Lost my confidence, all of it. Saved some money and spent it wisely on a car. Saved money again and spent it on ecstasy and cocaine. Applied for internships, worked hard. Got some confidence back, just a pinch. Got a degree at some point. Still haven't used it and still not sure what to use it for.

I think this is adulthood, approximately.

* * *

My lease expires at the end of the month.

I need to make a decision soon. Find a new place, get a job, and start working towards owning more, or move back to Nevada to be with my ninety-year-old grandmother. She won't be around forever. When she's gone, my immediate family line follows. I have some cousins and aunts and uncles scattered around the Midwest, but they're not people I'd call if my house was on fire. My hypothetical house.

My roommate, Stacey, flew back to Arizona for the weekend to visit her parents. You can tell by her room that she's had a good childhood and has been well looked after. There are mounted photographs of her family and friends on the wall. She owns nice things—a nice bed, nice towels, nice shoes, great books. Things a person needs in this world.

I envy her.

Everything I own is practical.

The apartment is quiet, save for the usual sounds that come from the alleyway behind the complex—cars, homeless folk digging for beer cans, non-homeless folk making small talk as they throw out the recycling. I pour myself a glass of wine and sink into my chair to watch some Housewives.

The phone rings. It's Janet. I let it go to voicemail.

It rings again.

I wait for the message to come through.

"Becky, there's been an accident," she says. "Rice has hurt himself. We're at the hospital. Call me back." Her voice sounds strangely like Jasper's.

I call back.

She answers with a strong, business-like hello.

"Hi Janet, sorry I missed you, I was just picking up hair-ties and shampoo," I tell her. I'm the sort of liar who qualifies every lie with a backstory. "Is he okay?"

"He will be."

"What do you need?" I ask.

"Could you feed Elvis and see if Lawrence came back?"

"Of course."

Janet laughs, sniffs, holds it together.

* * *

The parade is still going along Sunset Cliffs Boulevard. Cars are honking manically as they pass. Honking, like it helps. I take a back road to avoid seeing more of them and park outside the garage.

As I get out of the car, I find Lawrence. He's lying, shell down, behind my back tire.

"Lawrence, sweet Jesus, why? How can you do this to Jasper and me?"

He's not dead, but he's in bad shape. Tiny turtle organs are spilling out of a hole in his stomach. His little legs and arms are still moving, swimming in the great, infinite ocean he's moving towards.

I sit with him a while, waiting for death to take his soul away.

He's holding on, but won't make it.

My phone rings.

I pick up and try to sound chipper. "Hi Janet, I'm just at your place now."

"Stay there," she says. "Jasper and my ex-husband are on their way. Can you bring a bag here for Rice?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"They should be close now. They left about ten minutes ago."

Something in her voice is off again.

"Janet, are you…how's Rice?"

"Fine," she says, in a way that tells me she isn't.

"Okay, I'm here if you need anything."

"It's nothing," she says. "Just…do yourself a favor, Becky. Don't marry an asshole."

I let her words hang for a moment.

"I won't."

"Good. Good girl."

By the time we hang up, I see a car pulling up. A Hummer like Janet's, in silver.

I can see Jasper's little face in the window, next to his dad. He looks like he's just won a prize. A decision has to be made instantly. I wrap Lawrence in a towel and put him under my car seat. His eyes are open when I close the door.

I wave to them as the car pulls up alongside mine.

Jasper's door opens, he pops out to hug me.

His father strolls over. A short, plain, harmless man with no striking features. I had imagined him to be business-like. Or cooler.

"You must be Becky," he says.

We shake hands, say that it's nice to finally meet one another.

"Is your brother okay?" I ask Jasper.

"Yeah," he says, leading his father inside by the hand. "He cut his leg real bad."

Neither of them notices the blood on my tire.

* * *

I have never seen Elvis move so quickly. He's a new dog, jumping, wagging, talking. Barking, cooing, howling, all for Plain Matt's attention.

It's interesting to see this man navigate his way around the house, packing a bag for his son with the authority of a person who lives here.

He knows where everything is. The furniture, the appliances, the master bed, the coffee pot. The towels. All the nice things were his once, until he left.

Jasper watches his father with awe and respect, following him around like a shadow, mirroring the man's outline and actions without trying. Inheriting traits. Growing up every second. Changing.

"Thanks for taking this to them, Becky," Matt says, handing me the bag.

"You're not going back?"

"We're going to hang out here a while. Jasper wants me to help find Lawrence."

The redness in Matt's face makes me wonder is he's welcome at the hospital. I know Rice won't talk about him at all.

Jasper calls to us both from the garden. "Come on, Dad, help me find him."

It breaks my heart to see Jasper entering the stale and unkind reality his brother, mother, and I inhabit. Where the people we love end up leaving for good.

* * *

Lawrence is still alive when we reach Sunset Cliffs. His little face is buried into his shell, only the tiny snout of his mouth peering out, breathing rapidly. There's a pool of dark blood on the floor where I placed him. I pick him up and walk him down to the water's edge.

Waves rush into the nooks and crags along the shoreline, and splash into the afternoon glow.

"This is it, buddy," I say to Lawrence. "It won't be long."

Minutes pass.

He's still hanging on.

This suffering needs to end.

A rock nearby fits into my palm nicely. I pick it up, analyze its sharp edges, consider its weight, and make a decision.

I lay the towel by the end of the rocks, cover his face, and say farewell to Lawrence.

My first strike comes down with more force than I imagined. Surprisingly, it's like hitting solid ground. A dull thud yields no progress.

I'm reminded of my mother. I was twelve when she showed me her breasts after the operation. The big slices, closed up by black stitches, stained with blood. Her nipples gone. I touched her chest and howled.

"This body is not who we are," Mom said to me, her voice a shallow scratch in the air. "I'm still here, inside." She squeezed my hand, digging her nails in, leaving marks I will never forget. That's what a parent does. They fight for you. They fight until there's nothing left.

I raise my hand a second time and strike him with all the strength and mercy I can muster, hoping this one finishes the job. The rock bites into my palm. Despite his motionless body, I come back again. Blood wells up through the towel, as I keep going, pounding and pounding, until I know he's gone for good.

"I'm so sorry," I say, collapsing.

It takes everything not to break down and scream and swear, and follow his precious, mangled little body into the water.

There's no time for that.

Rice is waiting on a bag of clothes.

Photograph (c) Rachel Reiff Ellis

The Butchers

by Katherine Vondy

They were not who Milwaukee's meat-lovers expected to find behind the counter of the new butcher shop. Mellie was tall and brunette and Samantha was slightly less tall and blonde, and they were both the kind of girls that men liked to see wearing flowered dresses, hair twisting in the wind as they strolled romantically through the park next to Lake Michigan. But Mellie and Samantha were not fans of floral apparel or waterfront promenades. They were fans of meat.

Legs of lamb! Pork shoulders! Whole goddamn briskets! Mellie's facility with a cleaver, Samantha's enthusiasm for the bone saw! These were all things to be marveled at. John had walked in the door intending only to get several boneless breasts of chicken, but as soon as he'd stepped over the threshold and seen the girls in their bloody aprons, gracefully grinding beef, tying up roasts with an elegance beyond compare, his brain had short-circuited. He stood in the center of the shop, hypnotized by desire.

There are few solutions to insatiable craving of any kind, but John took a breath, stepped forward and did his best: he looked deep into Mellie's eyes and asked for flank steak and veal chops and mutton shank. As Mellie wrapped up the order Samantha smiled prettily and said *Is there anything else I can get you?* He answered *Nothing but several pounds of your finest bacon and one or two whole ducklings*. He went home, laden with meat, and slept fitfully, dreaming of sex and filet mignon.

The girls' dreams were not so lascivious. Mellie dreamed of boats and calm oceans, and Samantha dreamed she was Molly Ringwald circa 1988. In their kitchen the next morning, they fried up links of their own signature sausage blend and casually discussed ways to increase the profitability of their business. *What we need is a publicity stunt,* said Samantha. *Let's have a contest!* said Mellie.

When John entered the butcher shop for the second time in as many days, a banner hung brightly above the cash register. *You Could Be A Winner!* it proclaimed. The sentiment was something John had always suspected about himself, and he stepped up to the counter with a tentative kind of pride. Mellie and Samantha looked at him, exchanged glances with each other, then turned back to John. *Would you like to enter the contest?* Mellie asked with a smile.

John found himself sharing a long wooden table with an assortment of men, each looking hungrier than the next. Some of them had napkins tied around their necks. Others had prepared by pre-emptively unbuttoning their pants. Samantha set a heaping platter of buffalo chicken wings in front of each contestant. *On your mark*, she said. *Set*, Mellie said. *Go!* they said together.

The men attacked the fowl with a ferocity seldom seen in the civilized world. The gentleman to John's left picked four wings clean before John even finished with his first. John tried to pick up the pace, but before he had eaten through half the contents of his platter, a guy in a baseball cap sitting at the end of the table stood up with a roar. *Done!* the guy shouted,

arms raised in victory. John began to hang his head with the shame of such crushing defeat, but looked back up at the sound of Mellie's honey-smooth voice. *Done with the first course*, she clarified, as Samantha presented the guy with a rack of barbecue ribs. His arms slowly fell and he sank back into his seat, preparing for round two. John felt the joint stings of hope and sexual attraction. The contest wasn't over.

After the ribs came burgers (thick, juicy and smothered with provolone)—then venison steaks, then bison sirloin, then kangaroo (so gamey!), then a delicate but rich paté made of liver and spices. John was not the fastest eater, but he consumed each meaty course in its entirety as the men around him hit their limits. One by one, they leaned back from the table, accepting their losses, groaning with the agony of their overstuffed stomachs. At last only two contestants remained: John and the guy in the baseball cap. The man squinted down the length of the table, yelling *Aren't you full, bro?* John looked at Mellie's soulful eyes, at Samantha's lovely lips. *I am still hungry*, John said.

The last course was a whole spit-roasted pig, one animal for each of them. John stared into the place where the pig's eyes had been. *I Could Be A Winner!* he whispered to it. There was no longer such a thing as time. There was no longer a difference between being full and not being full. There was only meat, and girls.

Who do you think is going to win? Samantha quietly asked Mellie. *We will*, said Mellie. Milwaukee's finest journalists clamored for the best view of the two remaining contestants.

The guy in the baseball cap was turning unexpected colors. John's belly bulged out inhumanly but he did not stop eating, not until he had swallowed the very last bite of the pig's crispy tail. *I give up*, said his green-tinted competitor. Cameras snapped photos en masse. *Congratulations*, said Samantha, grasping John's hand in an angel's handshake. *You did it!* said Mellie, and kissed him on the cheek.

Later, lying in his hospital bed, John still felt the heat of Mellie's lips on his skin—a burning far more significant than the one he felt in his gut as the bile from his ruptured intestines leaked into his bloodstream. His infirmity was not mentioned in the triumphant articles and local news spots about the contest, for mortal wounds that result from inescapable longing happen with too much regularity to be considered newsworthy.

Mellie dreamed of beautiful meadows, and Samantha of fun-filled circuses. They cheerily noted their shop's growing business in its financial ledgers, and word spread throughout Wisconsin of the girls' expert skill at butchery.

Photograph on page 106 (c) Eleanor Leonne Bennett

Necrotic Zone

by Marléne Zadig

The mushrooms sprouted overnight after a string of autumnal rainstorms, springing fully formed into clusters of unnaturally precise arcs and rings across people's front lawns.

"No wonder the Irish came up with leprechauns," he'd said after bringing home blended coffees from around the corner. "That's some weird shit, is what it is. Crop circles of the suburbs."

Bits of obliterated toadstools clung for dear life to the rubber toes of his decrepit Converse sneakers, having been kicked to smithereens in his attempt to restore entropy to their neighbors' lawns on his way back from the café. Their own front yard contained a gigantic perfect horseshoe—which he'd left intact—encircling a maple sapling which retained a single, crimson leaflet shuddering on a limb.

"It's probably just the way the spores disperse," she offered. "It's not that weird."

He donned a black ski mask and sat down at the laptop for his Saturday morning veg. He had recently taken to wearing it at the computer after learning that hackers could activate the camera remotely and view the person through the screen.

"Why don't you tape over the camera with painter's tape?" she'd suggested.

"Because I want to scare the bejeezus out of the sons of bitches if and when they get through."

The neighbor's dog, a spitting image of the classic Benji, barked directly at him as he sat there on the couch, its snout forcing its way through the fence slats in order to project towards their window with the utmost conviction.

"One of these days, I swear to god I'm gonna shoot that dog."

She pictured this pronouncement permeating out of the walls themselves, as she couldn't see his mouth moving under the ski mask, or perhaps it was emanating from one of the grumpier-looking anthropomorphic doorknobs—two screws for the eyeballs and the knob its bulbous nose.

He'd been threatening this for years, as long as she'd been around to hear it anyway, and maybe it was the ski mask, maybe the trail of mushroom guts smeared across the parquet floors, but she sensed that he was closer than ever to carrying out his threat. He had the weaponry, a Glock, loaded and locked up in his night stand, and she imagined the line between him doing it and not doing it to be only as wide as your average crack in a sidewalk. On

the one side, the side they were on, he was just a man who threatened to shoot the neighbor's dog for barking at him day after day in his own home, a reasonable complaint, she conceded. On the other side, just a footstep away, was a dog-killer. And though the gap itself was narrow and technically effortless to traverse, she imagined that it went all the way down, a fissure opened deep into the center of the earth.

Still, it could just be a thing one says to relieve tension in the moment, something she'd caught herself doing lately.

"I'm gonna rip that kid a new one if he tears off one more of my geranium blossoms," she'd said only the week before. "He does that every goddamned time he walks by."

"Shoulda planted barberry," he replied, "teach him a thing or two about trespassing where his filthy paws don't belong."

She sipped at her frozen coffee and tidied up absently in the kitchen, tossing a stray straw wrapper in the trash, flinging an orphaned beer bottle cap into the recycling bin in the corner. *Plinkety-plink plonnnng*.

He rose from the couch and strode across the room into the kitchen. His hand plunged into the revolving lid of the trash can, grasped the crumpled straw wrapper, and threw it into the recycling bin. He then returned to the living room without saying a word.

They'd had this argument before, about the straw wrappers, and it wasn't worth rehashing, especially because she always lost.

The Benji clone next door continued to unleash its ire at their side window, prompting him to slam the laptop and fling it to the side with such force that it bounced on the sofa cushion before coming to rest perpendicular to a pillow. Before she could ask what he was up to, he was down in the basement rummaging around the garden tools. He came back up the slanted, sinking stairs with a tall shovel, dried mud still stuck to its blade, and stormed out the back door.

She heard and felt a series of *thunks* as he ran the shovel along the fence slats and shouted something unintelligible.

He did not come back in as she expected him to, so she decided to go out.

She thought about the riddle she'd once heard in math class involving walking to the threshold of a doorway: if getting to the door means you always have to go half the distance that remains, how do you ever get all the way there? The answer, she'd written on the assignment, was sheer will.

Sure enough, when she got to the lip of the front door, she was able to cross over it. When she got to the steps on the porch, she could walk down them. And when she saw that he was covered in mud on the front lawn and had already dug several feet down in, around, and through their former mushroom halo, she drifted to the gate and found herself stepping through it.

It was raining again, and as she forged ahead down the street, the broad fallen leaves of sycamores jerked and flopped around on the ground with every raindrop strike, ten thousand fish out of water, gasping for air.

Photograph (c) Doug Matthewson

by Eric Bosse

Once within a time, a biologically male human whose behaviors tended toward the masculine—let's call him a man, for convenience, and accept with misgivings the connotations that accompany this designation—married a biologically female poet whose behaviors tended toward the feminine enough that we may call her a woman without doing great injustice to the whole of her—though we know full well that labeling her as such sets in motion an intricate machinery of limitations, assumptions, and oppressions. Nonetheless, in a time and at a place, a man married a poet. This was his first mistake.

Not long after the joyful wedding day and subsequent, glorious, tropical honeymoon, the man found when it came time to share basic household chores his poet bride proved unconventionally useless. While he splayed and basted a Canadian goose or swept leaves from the house's tiny porch or cleaned the toilet and scrubbed the grout between shower tiles, she would lock herself for hours in the spare bedroom with its rickety desk. At once, this inequitable distribution of labor became the man's obsession.

Yet he scrubbed until the grout glowed. And he scrubbed until the grout became nearly translucent. And he scrubbed to keep his rage in check.

One day—let's call it Easter Sunday—the man came home from mass, flush with inspiration and an urge to share a newfound spiritual optimism with his wife. But, when he looked for her, he found the spare bedroom door locked. He knocked, but the poet did not answer. He put his ear to the door and heard the clackety-clack-clack of keys as she typed.

The man's chest, which moments before had ballooned with anagogical ardor, now sagged in disappointment. His shoulders slumped. His teeth clenched.

He pulled off his necktie and changed from his Sunday suit into ragged jeans and an old, ironic T-shirt. He sliced a gleaming new toothbrush from its package and peeled the crisp paper seal from a can of scrubbing cleanser. And lo, he went to work on the tile grout.

He brushed and scrubbed for hours. Perspiration gathered in droplets on his forehead. His hair grew moist and fell over his eyes. When, at last, the grout began to wear away, a small crack appeared between two tiles, and a pinprick of light shone through the crack. The man brushed harder, and the crack became a crevice. The crevice widened to a split then a cranny, which gradually became a chink. Golden, buttery light poured through the chink and fell upon the man's fingers, causing specks of cleanser on his skin to shimmer like marble ruins on a mountain at sunrise.

The man pressed an eye to the chink, which revealed a view into the spare bedroom that served as the poet's office. This was his second mistake. Whatever mangled beasts he saw, whatever monstrous acts he beheld in that room, we cannot know—and if we were to witness what he saw, we would not and could not grasp its meanings or feel its ecstacies and horrors in the depths of our beings, for we are not him. We can only know that for several seconds the fool did not look away. And as he looked, his body changed. He grew breasts. His hips widened. And, as though God Hirself reached down and touched this man with the tip of Hir magical finger, his penis inverted and became, for a moment, a vagina. And he felt gripped by a fullness and fear unlike anything he had ever experienced. Yet, to his great relief, when he finally tore his gaze away and looked down, his body was again the body of a man.

He knew he had made mistakes, yet he felt these mistakes were also blessings—or so he came to tell himself and any unfortunate soul near enough to listen to his rants and ramblings in the years to come. Magnificent mistakes, magnificent blessings.

The man divorced the poet and launched a new life as an investment banker, which, for our purposes—and for all purposes, really—was a

socially respected variety of con artist. The man's ethic was the acquisition of wealth, and almost overnight he converted his acumen into a seemingly endless fortune. Eventually the man remarried, this time to a beautiful Hungarian princess who had inherited a palace in the hills south of Budapest and a mansión on the Costa del Sol of Spain. Sometimes, when his second wife grew busy with the arcane intricacies of royal affairs or, more often, affairs of high fashion in Paris or Milan, the man would board his yacht and order its captain to set sail for Sicily.

One morning, the man hiked to the ruins at Agrigento and stood alone on the acropolis at dawn. Surrounded by olive and almond orchards, he gazed upon the Doric columns of that ruined temple. The air nipped at his skin. It was not yet winter, but a breeze carried whiffs of snow and shuffled the

yellow leaves at his feet. A dove, unaware of its symbolic significance within and across Western culture, flew over the man's head and perched in a nearby tree. The man shut his eyes and waited for the bird's soft coo.

And, when the dove sang at last, the man drew his pistol and fired.

Struck, the dove fell.

The man unfolded the bloody bird, belly up, and spread its wings in the dirt. He cut a line down the dove's soft chest and plucked out its warm, wet heart. The man told himself killing this bird and holding its heart in his palm was the only way he could fully know himself, to feel he was real and alive, a man of substance, a whole person, a being of greater account than mere words on a page.

Yet he knew better. He knew his life meant nothing in the grand scheme of God's unfathomably mysterious world, for he had learned from his mistakes. He knew nothing—not grout, nor a knife, nor the whole of the world—could blind his eyes to the horrors and delights he had witnessed in that room of one poet's own. He knew that his first marriage, as all marriages, was a benign form of slavery. And he knew that this life—for the bird, the hunter, the bullet, and the gun—offered no escape from this life. Whoever he became, wherever he might go, whatever he might do, the man would belong forever to the poet.

What, he often wondered, ever happened to her? To her body? To her words? To the worlds she made and unmade and made again?

Photograph (c) Nancy Stohlman

Gorilla gorilla gorilla

by Emily Weber

Marlow jabbed his big sister in the ribs when he spotted the first star. "There's one!"

Eve *hmmed* in her thoughtful way. "You can't map it until there's more, though. Give it a few."

They waited. Another brilliant January sunset had flushed from the sky minutes ago, around 4:15 (Marlow's science textbook, *Our Changing Planet*, claimed winter suns used to set later in the day). Marlow shuffled out of his windbreaker and used it as a cushion against the acorn-littered tree house floor. Eve sketched something in her spiral bound book, one hand working the charcoal pencil and the other holding a flashlight.

"How come we never come up here anymore?" Marlow asked.

"I dunno," Eve said. "Tree houses are for little kids. We're not kids anymore."

"There's another star. Oh, another!" Marlow dug his "Mapping the Night Sky" worksheet from his pocket and glared at the blank circle waiting for stars. "I can't do this. Can you help me?"

Eve frowned. "Draw what you see. They're just dots."

"I can't."

"Fine. Here." She considered the blank canvas of the page for a moment before starting.

Marlow slid her sketchbook from her lap. "What are you drawing today?"

"*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*."

Marlow giggled. "What?"

"That's the real name for the Western lowland gorilla. The last ones died this year." Eve pointed the flashlight toward her sketch. "See? Some gorillas actually communicated using sign language." Her sketch: palms gently spread a few inches apart in front of his gorilla lips like a prayer, eyes nearly closed.

"What's he signing?"

"*Frown*."

"He's sad?"

"Probably."

"Because he died?"

"The gorillas didn't just die. They went extinct," Eve said quietly.

"Same thing."

"Not the same thing."

A cool wind stirred the empty tree branches around them and the dark wisps of Eve's braid. She mapped a few constellations he recognized from class: *Canis major*, the big dog; *Lepus*, the hare; *Gemini*, the twins. They had been so easy to see in the textbook, like connect-the-dots, completely different from the real clumps of stars splattered above. Marlow turned off his flashlight, grateful it wasn't too cloudy to do his homework. After a few minutes, Eve handed her brother the half-completed worksheet and took back her sketch book.

"How come you only draw extinct things?" Marlow asked as they swapped.

"I don't know." For a long minute Marlow was sure she wouldn't answer him at all. Mom and Dad practically had to ground her to get her to put down the sketchbook and come to dinner or do her homework or brush her teeth or go to bed. And even then, he could usually hear from the other side of their room the click of her flashlight, the rustle of her sheets, the tender scrape of charcoal on paper as she sketched late into the night.

"I like to imagine the things I draw are still alive, somehow," Eve said at last.

"In your drawings?"

"In my head. I think if I was going extinct, I'd want to know someone was thinking about me after I was gone."

Something cold settled in Marlow's stomach. He folded up his star map, slipped it back into his jacket. "Will you draw me when I die?"

Eve pointed the flashlight down, taking him in for a moment: the scrunch of his forehead, the puff of his cheeks, the dirty jacket, the laces coming undone on his left boot. "They'll fix everything by the time you're a grown-up," she said, reaching out a stiff hand to ruffle his curls. "You don't get a page in my book."

Marlow nodded solemnly. "Okay."

"Done with your map? Let's go back inside."

Marlow slid out of the tree house with a grunt, landing in a feline crouch on his hands and feet. Eve waited until she heard the back door slam shut before flipping to the first page in her sketch book, the first extinct thing in her book: her brother's boyish eyes flecked with starlight; wondrous and frightened, full of curiosity. She gave them one last look before tearing out the page with a flourish and crushing it in the black hole of her hand.

Lake Fish

by Cole Bucciaglia

In the summer at the lake, a child goes missing. All those who are tall enough link hands, forming a spine that moves slowly through the lake, feet feeling for the body of a child, until the water is over their chins. My friend Ian and I stand on the shore with the other children. We're both wet and covered with goosebumps. If my sister were with us, her eyes would be huge with worry. I watch, but I don't hear much over the sound of my teeth chattering, something I used to think happened only to cartoon characters.

At nearly fifteen, I am a serious lake-swimmer. I am long-limbed and scrawny, and this makes me goofy and ungainly everywhere but in the water. As frequent as the alerts of missing children are, I have never seen anything bad actually happen to any of them. They are always found. For this reason, I feel a little angry when I have to wait for the adults to walk along the water, feeling for ghosts in the underwater moss. Then I see how worried everyone else is, however practiced this ritual has become, and I feel a little guilty. I'm not worried for the child so much as I am worried for myself, for how awful I'll feel if something bad has truly happened. When I am relieved, it's for the safety of my own soul.

No more than ten minutes pass before someone calls out that this was a false alarm. The child had fallen asleep in a bed of needles under a nearby pine tree. Everyone wades back into the water to resume their afternoon activities. For me, this means trying to talk underwater, teaching my sister Bridget to float, or dueling other girls while perched on Ian's shoulders. A whistle is blown two hours later: same alert, different child.

This happens all too often on days with the best weather for swimming. The lake is overcrowded on most summer days. Parents bring their children to play while they sun on the banks, flipping through a summer read. Sometimes I think all these children must look the same to their parents, at least from enough of a distance, so while the parents' eyes are on the pages

of their books, their nondescript children dissolve into a sea of nondescript children. When the parents look up and can't immediately spot their own kids, they panic and fear the worst.

I have built up a lot of resentment for these afternoon crowds. Even without the interruptions, the lake is too packed with people during the day for anyone actually to swim in it. The most you can do is tread water and try not to get hit in the head with a beach ball, and if you play shoulder wars, you have to be very careful not to fall on bystanders if you lose.

To avoid the waiting, the crowds, and the potential tragedies, Ian and I have begun going to the lake at night. This is technically trespassing, as no one is allowed to swim there when a lifeguard is not on duty.

Ian and I have been friends for years, but I'm not sure how we ended up that way. Perhaps it's because we are both odd: "fish out of water," as the saying goes. I am quiet, and I draw portraits of sirens and Caliban during class. I never raise my hand, but teachers usually call on me when no one else volunteers, and I always give the correct answers. At the end of each day, Bridget has free reign over my "notes" from class, and while she colors in a mermaid with pencils, I might tell her stories of how this mermaid fell in love with a shipwrecked sailor—or perhaps how she wickedly lured that sailor to his doom, depending on how I feel about the world that day. I think Bridget is building some misguided enthusiasm for what "big kids" learn in high school.

Ian wears glasses and has a new doctor's note every week excusing him from gym class, though as far as I know, there is nothing physically wrong with him aside from his farsightedness. He changes into his uniform and then walks laps around the outer edge of the court while the rest of us play volleyball. Ian's mother still packs his lunch every morning, though she does it in a paper bag (since it's less embarrassing, albeit less practical, than a nylon lunch bag), inside of which she writes things like "You are loved" in red Sharpie. Most people assume that Ian and I are shy and obedient, and

we are. Or, we were, until we started going to the lake after dark. It is the first law I have ever broken.

Bridget sneaks out with me. She thinks I let her because she threatens to tell on me if I don't, and, truthfully, it is harder to make a scene about her tagging along at night than it would be during the day. The real reason I relent, though, is because Ian and I need to have a lookout in case the cops come. Besides, I know that she would never tell on me. It's not that Bridget is especially loyal. She just worries that if she gives me reason not to trust her, I'll never take her anywhere again.

There is a place that is rocky at one end of the lake, and we like to leave our clothes there while we swim. It is also where we leave Bridget. She is eleven, the youngest of the three of us, but sometimes I feel that she is the parent, and we are the dissolving children. I can sense her eyes on the surface of the lake while I am underwater. She always asks if she can swim with us, and I always tell her, "No."

"Why not? It's not fair!"

"Because it's my job to take care of you, and I can't swim and watch you at the same time."

"But I'm watching you now," she whines. "Maybe you can watch for a while, and I'll swim?" she suggests, her voice hopeful.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because you're younger," I answer, as if it explains everything. "You're lucky you're here at all."

Bridget may whine initially, but she never abandons her post once Ian and I are in the water. She is sitting on a rock with her feet dangling over the surface of the lake. She and I look like sisters, but we also look very

different. She is still at an age where the awkwardness of puberty has yet to ruin her looks. Her curls are still tinged with gold, and her face is round. She has large, expressive eyes, perfect for observing and responding, for consuming everything Ian and I create. My sister has a limited imagination, but she appreciates imagination in others.

I am wearing a dress. My body, like a boy's, has few curves, and I always wear dresses so that they'll make me look more feminine. This one is a white sundress covered in yellow flowers. I lift it over my head, carefully working my shoulders through it at an angle so that I don't tear the waist. Ian is out of his clothes first. He places his glasses on top of the small pile made by his clothing. When his thumbs slide under the waistband of his boxers I look away quickly.

Bridget is staring at the water, tracing the infinity symbol into the lake with a thin tree branch. It is her turn to ignore us. I carefully fold my dress into a neat envelope and place it on a dry part of the rocks. I see Ian testing the temperature of the water out of the corner of my eye. I turn to look at him, but my eyes go straight to his penis, small and ridged like a mushroom, and I look away again, embarrassed. I quickly step out of my canvas shoes and remove my underwear. I'm not sure if Ian is looking at me, but I pretend he is. I can see my silhouette reflected in the water, encircled by the moon, and I think I look willowy and ethereal, more like a water nymph than a gawkish teenaged girl. I jump, thrusting my arms forward, and I dive into the water which parts easily for me. Underwater, I hear the muffled rush of Ian diving in beside me, and suddenly, we are both fish.

I want to be a whale. When a humpback arcs out of the water, there is a moment when only its tail is visible above the waves like a huge, black butterfly dripping rivulets from the edges of its wings before disappearing. It is really its size and its slowness that make it so magnificent. I want to surge above the water and feel it rushing out of my lungs and into the sky, the opposite of drowning. I want birds to perch on my back while I am resting.

The lake is too small for such big fish, so I am a killifish instead. I am small with red freckles. Ian is a trout. I hide from him in the pondweed, and my smallness is dangerous, so I pretend I am a leviathan to feel safer. I imagine that my body is long and serpentine like a water dragon's. I am covered in rigid but smooth scales, white-blue opals. Around each earhole are three long, narrow bones with a thin membrane of skin stretching between them like a bat's wing, but blue. I can spread them to surround my head and look fearsome. I can pull all of my length above the water and encircle Bridget while she is waiting on the rocks. My body and the water dripping from it can form a protective coil around her, and she can pretend to be a snake-charmer or a dragon-tamer.

I see a familiar mouth, fat-lipped, gross and gaping. Ian moves as if to swallow me, but I dart past him and swim toward the center of the lake. He is a fast swimmer, and he is by my side immediately. He drops behind me to let me think I am winning this race, and then he speeds up until he is next to me again, teasing me. He repeats this as I try to swim away.

I sense an unfamiliar fish floating dumbly below me, dimly lit by the moon, and I become nervous. I quickly swim in the direction of the place where Bridget is waiting, and I wonder if Ian can sense my discomfort because he seems to fall into a more natural, less predatory pace behind me.

Something far ahead of me breaks through the surface of the water, and I stop. My heart panics, and I worry that it is a bird, snatching up fish. I hope Bridget has simply thrown something into the water. Ian floats beside me, and we wait apprehensively as the bubbles clear. The something is pink and white and inanimate. I recognize my sister's sandal. It buckles on the side and shouldn't slide off accidentally, so I wonder if she is having a temper tantrum.

Above us the dull glow of the moon lights the path back to our dull lives, and we break through the surface of the water with heads now human. On the rocks at the side of the lake, Bridget is trying to remove her t-shirt. Her image is poorly defined against the blurry backdrop of dark trees, but I can

see the white of her shirt drawn taut between her elbows above her head. The ground must be slippery because her feet kick out behind her, and she falls, head-first into the rocks. My initial reaction is to laugh, but when I see that there is no movement on the rocks anymore, and I don't hear her crying, I worry that something bad may have actually happened to her, and without even thinking to become a fish again, I swim quickly to her side. I don't notice whether or not Ian is following me.

Bridget is lying silent and motionless on the rock with her t-shirt gathered around her neck. I think I see something dark on her forehead, and I don't know whether it is dirt or blood, and I can't really tell by touching it because my hands are wet. Ian is blocking my light and asking, "Is she OK? Is she OK?" I order him to get out of the way, and I see that it is blood on her head, but when I dab it away with her shirt, there is no injury underneath, and I know that it must be trickling down from someplace beneath her hair. I place my fingers against her wrist to check for her pulse, but I don't feel anything. I then place them on my own wrist for comparison, but I don't feel anything there either, and I realize that I have no idea what I'm doing.

"Can you find her pulse?" I ask Ian. Then I say her name, "Bridget? Bridge? Wake up, Bridget."

Ian holds his hand in front of Bridget's nose and says, "I don't think she's breathing. I don't know."

I hoist myself out of the water to crouch beside her, and Ian follows. I place my head against her chest, thinking I might be able to hear her heartbeat, but Ian won't stop asking, "What do you hear? Is she breathing? Is she OK?" and all I can hear is my own heart beating in my head and the sound of air in the cave between my ear and her chest, which is like the ocean inside of a conch shell.

"We should get her into the water," I say, and I don't really know what I'm saying or what I am doing. Rather, I know what I am doing but not why I

am doing it. I push against my sister's shoulder and roll her closer to the edge of the rock until her arm dips down and touches the water.

"What are you doing?" Ian asks, but then he sees it too, I'm sure.

There is a nearly sheer webbing of flesh between the fingers that are touching the lake. What at first look like goose bumps in the moonlight become silvery scales, and her arm twitches with life. Her legs kick together. Where they touch they become indistinguishable from one another like two bits of wet clay pressed together. Eyelids flick back, and then they are gone. Her eyes are pools of black and gold jelly that catch the light like disks, and as she opens her mouth toward the sky, I know that she is struggling to breathe. Ian helps me push her into the water, and as soon as she is submerged, the girl is gone. She leaves behind only her clothes floating by the rocks as she swims across the lake, cutting a "V" into the water with her gray back.

Ian and I sink to our bottoms, relieved. We look out onto the lake. We forget that we are naked as we sit there, side-by-side, waiting for her to return.

The Ancestry of Turtles

by Colby Vargas

Just an hour ago Roy and I saw a turtle in the desperate weeds where the off-ramp leaves the highway. It was plump, like an alligator stuffed in a turtle costume one size too small, the snapping kind you might see basking on a log if you ever floated down the Missouri. It hugged the ground, perfectly still except for the occasional swish of its tail.

Look at that thing, Roy said, it's goddamn beautiful. He reached across me and pointed, put the bony knob of his wrist in front of my face so I had to look. He was whispering like we were in church, or in front of the most expensive painting in a museum.

Roy and I met last spring in Advanced Photography at the Community College. We don't use words like boyfriend or girlfriend, but after work I end up in his Pontiac Sunbird with its soundtrack of scrapes, ticks, and clicks; an hour will go by before either of us speaks. We are just driving places.

Roy must have taken his foot off the gas to stare at the turtle, because behind us a horn blared, the driver really leaning on it. Roy's shoulder shuddered, and I knew this movement was the urge to flip the guy off, or to pull over and see how far this asshole wanted to go. Roy is plenty big, fluid and loose-limbed even though there's a paunch developing just above his belt. He has mentioned a couple of fights from high school, both times the other guy pushing him too far.

It was our exit anyway. Roy gunned the Sunbird up the off-ramp and in a minute I couldn't see the turtle or even the grass at the side of the highway.

One of us, I honestly can't remember who, said the turtle was done for, totally screwed, and the other agreed. It was quiet for awhile, which I took to mean there was nothing more to say.

It's all the fucking construction, was what Roy eventually said that broke the silence. They're building a Best Buy or something else that's going to really, truly benefit society. I'll bet that turtle's parents and grandparents and a shitload of turtles lived there before all this. One hand still on the steering wheel, he shrugged his shoulders expansively to indicate the "all this."

Roy kept talking about the ancestry of turtles. He has a nice vocabulary for finishing one year of college and being chronically under-employed, so it was easy to imagine the side of the highway the way he described it, verdant and swampy and crawling with Mesozoic versions of the creature we had seen. They would be swinging their monstrous reptile heads back and forth on their wrinkled old man necks, scanning for unsuspecting mammals to snatch up in their viselike jaws.

All you needed to take Advanced Photography was a camera with a zoom lens. The professor taught us names for every part of the camera, and let us develop one print in the dark room. We had to conserve the fluids, he explained, because they weren't being replaced anymore, everything was going digital, and his voice somehow caught and cracked on a simple word like digital. The professor critiqued one photo only, our best work, for the Final. I submitted a black-and-white of the decaying garden shed in my parents' backyard and received an A. "Forlorn. Nostalgic!" the instructor wrote on the back of the print, and "I hope you'll find somewhere to pursue your art." Roy took a picture of a homeless man who earned $10 a day wearing a Dunkin' Donuts costume on the side of the road. Pull the costume half off, Roy had instructed him, so I can see your face but still know that you are essentially a donut. The professor had written and circled the letter B on the back of Roy's photo.

It's easy to see Roy has been thinking about the turtle ever since we left the highway. He flexes his jaw so that the muscles bump out wide and curls his lips tight around his teeth, which is him shuffling words around in his head until they are in the right order. Something important to be said. Some day

he'll say that he wants to move to Europe, or that he's going to vote Democrat, or that he thinks the two of us are done.

What were you going to do for it, I ask. Those snappers bite hard. And they get big. Not like you can just drop it in a fish tank and water it.

Roy takes the next two rights and we're pointed back at the highway. He grinds the clutch searching for the right gear. He smiles easy and wide, his mouth and cheeks and chin taking on crazy curves. This was the face he'd used to chat me up that first day after class. Are you asking me out, I had wanted to know. Just saying we can stay together some more, he had said, flashing that smile. We don't have to retreat to our corners just because school is over. Maybe we can take some pictures for class.

He tells me again how they had these snapping turtles at the crick in his backyard growing up.

The crick was where he swatted rocks with a huge stick, developed the home run stroke that kept him on the baseball team all the way to varsity. He'd found the skeleton of a dog with a rabies tag from the year 1954 buried on one side of this crick.

Dad let me keep the turtles from the crick, he says. Not inside—Mom wouldn't have stood for that—but we dug a hole and lined it with rocks, and dropped in vegetables and table scraps. Turtles would go for the food, and then they couldn't get out of the pit. They couldn't get any purchase on the smooth rocks.

Every couple of weeks we pick up Roy's father from Assisted Living and take him to the Olive Garden restaurant two strip malls over. He is small and his hair, clothes, and skin are variations of gray and brown. Rocks and dirt. He slides into the passenger seat of the Sunbird deftly, notices me in the back seat. He smiles and reveals a mouthful of yellow teeth, a couple going black at the gum line. He shakes my hand in his bony pipefitter's grip. Well hello, young lady, he says every single time. I see we're dining in fine

company tonight. Happy to make your acquaintance. Roy, exactly what is your lovely companion's name?

Roy's father barely fills the chair at the restaurant. We pass him bowls of salad and parmesan cheese that he can't quite reach. Roy asks him a couple of times if he remembers the crick behind their house, and the turtles. How they built that hole for them. Does he remember that, how great the yard and the crick were? Where was that house, in case Roy wants to take me by there some time? Had Roy's mother been there?

Once, waiting for the Photography teacher to show up, I asked Roy about his family. He pulled a Polaroid from his wallet. He is four or five in the picture, and his parents hunch behind him to fit in the frame. The young square-jawed father in the Polaroid is hard to connect with the tiny man we take out to dinner, but he is of the same palette, stone and mud. Roy's mother is thin, a fashionable dress of the era pulled tight around a vanishing waist. She has porcelain skin, too-red lipstick and a brittle perfect posture. Each parent has one arm resting protectively on Young Roy, as if the camera might explode in their faces. The lights of a Christmas tree burn tiny yellow holes in the background of the picture. There has been a delay in the posing and taking of the picture, and their three smiles are thin, waning.

Roy held the Polaroid at the edges so I could get a good look. He told me he was an only child, that his mother had left a long time ago, and that otherwise the picture pretty much captured it.

Roy's father takes two more full bites of his spaghetti before he answers about the crick. He can't remember them living anywhere by water, or even having a backyard. He never wanted to mow no lawns, he says in his clicking smoker's voice. He cackles at this triumph over lawn care, and begins a slow patient assault on the last breadstick. We always stay long enough for a refill on the breadsticks.

Then we'd just give the turtle a long stick, Roy continues. Put it in front of them, they snap onto it, you pull them out, and voila! Freedom! He turns to his father, who won't look up from his plate, and raises his voice, arguably too loud for a restaurant, and this is where I realize that I am the most important person at the table. I am the notary public of their family history. Roy's father will never recall the turtles.

Why it's just like staying at the Grand Amphibian Hotel, Roy remembers his father saying. Square meal and all, that turtle is better off than before he came to us.

It's weird how he doesn't remember the turtles, Roy says after we drop off his father. They drove Mom crazy. Not like I'm-going-to-up-and-leave-you-both crazy, but like boys will be boys, you know?

By the time we make it back to the highway, Roy is humming triumphantly, the sort of tune you'd hear as the credits roll in a sports movie, and tapping the steering wheel in time. He pops out of his door before the car stops moving. It's easy to get caught up in his urgency.

We comb the patchy grass with our feet. Just make sure you're behind him, Roy reminds me, anticipating my fear. That is what I do for the two of us; I worry and I imagine the worst possible outcomes.

The weedy triangle by the highway has been collecting plastic and Styrofoam flotsam a long time. But no turtle. We're like two street people shuffling for cigarette butts. I try not to look up but I can hear the cars slow down in curiosity and disgust. No one stops, but I can feel their confused stares careening off their rear view mirrors.

Roy drags the shard of a broken broomstick at his side as we search.

For the turtle to snap onto, he explains. He's going to use the stick to drag the turtle away from the highway. It'll be better off.

It is late summer. The sun is hovering at the edge of things, about to drop out of existence. The world is graying out.

We end up on the shoulder of the highway. Most cars have their headlights on, and those that don't remember to flip them on right when they see us; the fluorescence explodes around us and all I see is Roy's colorless silhouette. We put our forearms over our eyes and keep looking for the snapping turtle. We end up walking maybe a half mile each way. I'm not sure what we're looking for, that big mean-looking thing flipped over on its back, or maybe bits of shattered carapace. There's only smooth concrete median in the middle—nowhere a turtle could hide or climb.

At least he's not all over the road, I joke, and immediately wish I hadn't.

Fuck it all, Roy says, three syllables jammed into one word, and he whips the broomstick so that it spins away, caroms off the underpass, and settles in the middle lane, turning slowly. His forearm ripples, maybe from the effort of throwing the broomstick, and I know that when Roy is gone from me, this is how I will remember him. He keeps his head down the whole time, I assume still looking for the turtle.

Photograph (c) Nancy Stohlman

Chicken Saint

by Mary E. Casey

I've been asking Mother for a chicken.

"Do I look like a farmer to you?" Standing in the living room in a leopard-print nightie and flip-flops, she does not.

I quote from the book I found in the reject bin at the Reno public library three Saturdays ago,*The Little Book of Saints*:

"St. Bridget protects chickens and the people who raise them."

The label pasted inside the front cover reads, *Out of circulation: subject matter lacking in interest to children.*

"Well, you're not St. Bridget and we're not getting a chicken. You're named after your grandma Bridget and she was no saint."

I appeal to her love of money.

"We could sell the eggs, Mother."

"*Muh-ther*. Why can't you call me Amber like everyone else?"

"Money and eggs. We'd be doubly blessed."

Mother laughs, waving her arms and swaying her hips as she turns in a circle.

"We're doubly blessed all right, baby girl! I'm a drunk and you're a head case. Thank you, Jesus!"

She claps for Jesus and dances into the kitchen. She comes back holding a juice glass filled with a clear liquid that has no smell and seems harmless

until she drinks it and turns into someone else, a good queen under a bad spell.

Like my patron saint, I pray silently for a chicken and the promise of protection.

When Brandon comes out of the bedroom, he plops onto the couch like a man-sized toad landing on a lily pad. His belly anchors him to the cushion and he rests his feet on the glass-topped coffee table, his stick legs bent. He shakes a cigarette from the pack and motions to Mother to give him a drink from her glass.

"Hard night?" She hands him the glass and he drains it in one gulp.

"Hey! I had a hard night, too."

He turns the glass upside down on the coffee table.

"Sorry, Bridge, none left for you. I hope you didn't have a hard night praying." He presses his palms together, eyes heavenward, and draws on the cigarette until it flares orange. He reaches his bare leg across the coffee table to poke me with his toe, aiming for, and hitting, my almost-breast.

I move out of his reach and stand by the window in what I hope is a perpetual sunbeam like the one that followed St. Bridget around. The warmth feels good on my sore nipple. If I forgive Brandon, it's only because I want God's grace for bigger things.

"Praying isn't hard. See?" I close my eyes and let the sunbeam carry my prayer. Mother and Brandon laugh.

"Your daughter's a freak, Amber. A pretty little freak."

* * *

"What's with the eye patch?" Mother stops twisting the bow tie around her neck.

"My prayer's been answered: I'm deformed." That means ugly. Like, invisible.

"Shit. Don't make things hard for me, Bridget. I have to be at the casino in thirty minutes."

I let her remove the patch and inspect my face. She does it gently and her fingers feel nice.

"There's a farmers' market across from the library on Saturdays. A lady there raises chickens. She'll sell us a chick."

I appeal to her maternal instinct.

"I'll take care of it, I promise."

"You're fine." She pushes my face away but I hear the relief in her voice. "Stay out of trouble. Brandon should be home by 4:00."

I won't be here but I don't say so. When she leaves I go to their bedroom—her bedroom—though his smell claims one of the pillows and most of the dirty clothes on the floor. I pick through the pile for Brandon's jeans and collect the money from his pockets. Six dollars and change.

The woman at the farmers' market remembers me and shows me her chicks. We choose one that's only three days old.

"She needs plenty of mash and water. But not too much water, not too deep that is, or she'll try to drown herself."

"Why?" I stroke the chick's downy head with my pinkie.

"Baby chicks miss their cozy eggs. If she sees a container of water, she'll dive right in thinking she can go back where it's safe and warm. That urge wears off after a week, though, so just keep an eye on her until she's old enough to survive."

I bless the chicken lady: may she never run out of butter. She nestles my chick in a shoebox filled with shredded paper. I buy some mash from her and take my chick for her first bus ride.

* * *

Brandon's car is parked in front of the apartment building. He's belly up on the couch, but doesn't ask where I've been or what I have in the box.

"Stealing's a sin, Saint Freak."

I hear the drink in his voice and head to my room without answering. He leaps from the couch nicking his shin on the edge of the coffee table, which

makes him madder but doesn't slow him down. He corners me in the hallway.

"I want my money, Bridget. Now." He holds out his hand.

"I confess: I took it for the good of us all. Mother will pay you back."

"Mother already owes me money, stupid. And what's good for me is what's good for us all. If I'm not happy no one's happy, and I am very unhappy right now."

He waggles the fingers of his outstretched hand. "My money."

I appeal to his laziness and his appetite.

"I'll make you breakfast for a week. One breakfast for each dollar I took."

"Right," he says with a sound like a laugh but isn't a laugh. "And who's buying the groceries? Huh, Bridget?" He squeezes my shoulder to make sure I'm paying attention, that I'm following his logic.

I understand but I won't follow. It's Brandon who has to follow me now, for the good of us all.

"St. Bridget protects chickens and the people who raise them."

"You crazy bitch."

Brandon hits me. His fist lands in my deformed eye and I think maybe this is how it's meant to be, that my prayers are being answered and the protection is working. But Brandon's next punch knocks the shoebox out of my hands and my chick falls to the floor with a peep.

"What's that?"

I scramble to reach her before Brandon does. I pick her up and run to the bathroom, the only room in the apartment with a lock. Brandon curses me from the other side of the door while I plug the sink and fill it with warm water. My chick quivers. I can feel her heart through my fingers but I don't know if she's afraid or ecstatic. When I hold her over the sink, she sees the water and strains toward it.

"Goddam you, Bridget," Brandon hollers and beats the door.

I let go. I pray to St. Bridget for all she protects—poultry farmers, milkmaids, fugitives, bastards—and for my chick, gulping her way back to the egg. I pray for the good of us all.

Artwork: Bandit *(c) Aaron Grayum*

The Falling Cinders of Anlong Pi

by Jennifer Todhunter

Every day, the rubbish comes. It is the only thing I can count on.

There is a woman here, her name is Champei. She lives next door to me. Lies in a steel-blue hammock stretched between the coiled trunks of two silk-cotton trees. I keep her safe. We tap our calloused feet to the beat of the music the sunrise workers bring with them from the city. It floats above the smoke that hangs like mist over the landfill. Otherwise, it is the sound of hope being picked through, the echo of children crying, and the talk of dreams and destiny.

My destiny is to marry Champei.

She has three children. They share two pairs of rubber boots, and one scarf. On days when cinders fall like snow, they twist the soiled piece of silk into a balaclava to protect their rattling lungs. I want to provide for them.

Sometimes, the smoke resembles thick, black rain clouds, and I think about dancing with Champei, basking in her radiant smile as the showers wash us clean. But it is just smoke.

Her children do well for her. They are light and agile, and they can move further into the landfill than a middle-aged man like me. It is where untouched treasure is found—not only cans and bottles, but plastic and copper, too. They are like diamonds, here.

People arrive on air-conditioned buses with cameras, strangers taking pictures. They give us drinks in bottles that are worth more than the liquid inside them, and food brought from hotels in Siem Reap that would pay us less than we make here in a day. Yet, there is pity in their eyes. They do not realize this is where we want to be.

I spend my time sorting through the burning potential of steaming matter with a pickaxe, searching for the one treasure in my country's refuse that will convince Champei that I love her. New possibilities are dumped each hour, an alluring rainbow of decaying colour spread over the heat in the layers below. Each hour I hold out hope.

Champei says she will never leave. That this is her home. I tell her it is my home, too. At night, when exhaustion does not let us comb through chance any longer, we sit side-by-side, staring at the faint glow of headlamps that belong to those whose dream is stronger than ours. Her children play *bay kohm* with fruit pits they have found and holes they have dug into the dirt, while I rub her feet with my tired hands.

On a rare night like tonight, when the sky opens up and the smoke blows away from our hammocks, I search for a shooting star. And I wish for it to crash into the landfill and turn our world to gold.

It is within this kingdom that we will live.

Photograph (c) Rachel Reiff Ellis

Gina Morrow, Superhero

by Julie Griffin

Gina Morrow, mild mannered, middle row student, gave herself the once-over to be sure that her secret identity was securely in place then casually swept her eyes up to the classroom clock. Eleven minutes until the lunch bell rang.

Piece a cake. Walk in the park. No problem.

Just had to make a move here, a barely perceptible, tactical move, which she did by scrunching down into her seat, making herself as small as possible behind Jeffrey, the big, soft boy who sat in front of her. But she did not make herself small in the sense of little. It was more like small in the sense of *invisible*.

The trick was always the same. Blend in. Look like everybody else. Today that meant she would have to look like an ordinary eighth-grader, which of course, she was. Sort of.

Carefully she raised her head and peaked over Jeffrey's meaty shoulder. A handful of classmates were at the front of the room gathered around the new teacher at his desk, asking for his help, preening for his attention. Occasionally the new teacher raised his eyes and looked in Gina's direction.

Darn this superpower! she thought, sure she had been found out; sure he knew by the way his eyes kept coming back to her now, the way they had been magnetically drawn to her since the beginning of the school year.

Think, she pressed herself. *Think!*

Which Gina did, with her mind nimbly racing at hyper speed through all of the superhero research she had done, all of the Saturday morning cartoons she had watched, all of the comic books she had read.

Granted, none of the characters she had encountered had a power quite like hers, but at least when she read about or observed these heroes, she no longer felt so alone, so isolated, so weighted down by the heavy burden of secrecy.

But that's the way it was. The way the Supreme Commander said it had to be.

No one must know, Gina. No one! Ever!

Although Gina sometimes worried that someone did know.

Seven and a half minutes to the lunch bell. Another glance from the teacher.

Aunt Pam, her mother's sister, a trusted family member, or at least she had been until she and Uncle Ed had divorced. Which was really too bad, Gina's dad said, what with Pam being kind of a plump little spinster type. He figured Ed was a pretty good catch for her. Heck, he figured Ed was a good catch for the whole family. All the kids were crazy about him and even though he was always "suckin' up" to the women by offering to help with the clean-up at family functions, the men in the family said that was offset by the fact that he liked to talk cars and drink beer and do other "guy stuff" with them. "Too bad," her father said, "too bad that one got away."

Five minutes to the bell.

Which was not exactly the truth. Uncle Ed hadn't exactly *gotten away*. Aunt Pam had never given anyone a clear reason for the divorce, but secretly Gina knew.

Four minutes, twenty seconds.

Uncle Ed was driven away by an overexposure to power. Gina's power. But that was not Gina's fault. He had gotten too close too many times and now he was gone. It was as simple as that. She had tried to warn him

telepathically of the danger, tried to send him signals, but it hadn't worked. And the rest, well, it was sad but it was just part of the superhero life she secretly lived.

Three minutes, twelve seconds.

Although she did feel bad about Aunt Pam being hit with one of the shock waves. At least that was what Gina was pretty sure had happened. How else could she explain being Aunt Pam's favorite niece one day and "*Dirty, filthy little girl!*" the next?

Which was just plain nutso, Gina knew, considering how long and often she bathed. Making the water as hot as her adolescent body could stand it and standing it for as long as she could. Even cleaning herself from the inside out, putting her fingers down her throat, getting out whatever dirty, terrible power was inside there, whatever it was that attracted Uncle Ed to her in the middle of so many nights, weeping, explaining that it was not his fault, that he just couldn't help himself, that he was sorry, Gina, so sorry.

Uncle Ed. The Supreme Commander.

Now two minutes to the bell and away from this new teacher who hovered over her desk for a little too long sometimes and brushed up against her when they passed in the hall. New but old. With eyes like Uncle Ed's that watched her, all hungry and staring. Just like Uncle Ed had watched her.

One minute to the bell.

But only seconds to the door. To the bathroom down the hall. To emptying herself of this power. To performing her sworn duty.

To saving this man's life!

Gina scooped up her books, readied the fingers on her right hand.

Thirty seconds.

"Gina," said the new teacher, "could you stay after class for a few minutes, please?"

Oh, no! Too late!

Gina dropped her books on the desktop, jammed her right hand into her pocket. She looked around the classroom with wide x-ray eyes and began frantically sending out signals.

Photograph (c) Fabio Sassi

We're Not Indians

by Robert Maynor

The only Indians I ever knew personally were R.J. Driggers and his daughter, Miranda, a trailer-park Pocahontas who I was hopelessly in love with. Even now, years later, and her nothing more than ashes, I still can't get her out of my head.

"You didn't love her, Todd," people tell me. "You hardly knew her. You just want her now because you can't have her, because she's dead."

Those people are probably right, and the truth is, it don't much matter whether I loved her or not anyhow; it never did. But that don't keep me from thinking about her every night as I try and find some way to fall asleep.

* * *

R.J. owned a convenience store that my Momma called the Flying Donkey because on the sign it had one of those little Mexican mules with a sombrero in its mouth, jack-kicking at a speech bubble reading *High Prices*. The store sat on the side of a sun-rotted road called Highway Seventy-Six that stretched like a scar from my house all the way to Holly Hill. The only time I ever stopped in there was on the way to the Santee River for a bottle of blue Mad Dog 20/20. R.J. sold beer and cigarettes to anyone over the age of sixteen because he was an Indian and, as he said, didn't have to answer to the law.

He lived with Miranda a mile or two behind the store, off of Crane Pond Road, in a mobile-home park they called the Wassamassaw Indian Reserve. No grass grew there and the ground was loamy and dry. Miranda kept their yard swept clean with a Willow branch.

"They call themselves Injuns honey, but they're really just Brass Ankles," Meemaw told me. "Just remember: 'Not all niggers is Driggers, but all Driggers is niggers.'" People around here spit that term, *Brass Ankle*, like it's a piece of old chewing tobacco they had stuck between their teeth, but my Momma always told me that that word ain't a slur but a people—a real Lowcountry Indian.

When I was a little boy and we would go over to Meemaw's house, Momma would say that Meemaw liked to talk ugly about other people, and that I shouldn't listen to her. But then Momma and Daddy died and left me to live there with her and The Old Man, so I had no choice but to listen to them. They were the only people I ever knew that would think up rhymes for the word nigger.

* * *

The first time I ever actually spoke to Miranda was there at the store over the summer while she was working in the fireworks stand. Twice a year, around New Year's and the Fourth of July, R.J. opened up that little dry-rotted shack, and rather than hire someone to tend it, had Miranda do it instead. I never bought fireworks myself. I never could determine any use for them. But when I saw her in there that day with that pile of black hair and those big pink lips with a cigarette hanging out of them like a movie star, I suddenly got a real hankering for a Roman candle.

"Hey," I said.

"Can I help you?" She was looking down at a magazine and wearing a necklace strung with fake pearls.

"I don't know, can you?"

She looked up at me and her eyes were almost gold, like the head of a shotgun shell. I smiled but she ignored me and put her cigarette out in a can of Mountain Lightning. "You wanna buy a firecracker, or not?"

"Oh...yeah," I said, reaching for my wallet. "Sure, give me one of them Roman candles." She gave it to me and I gave her a dollar and drove away.

* * *

After thinking on it for a little while, I decided I wanted to take Miranda out on a date, so I came home from school and asked Meemaw to give me a little bit of money.

"A date? Lordy now, who with?"

"Miranda Driggers," I said.

"Oh." She pulled her lips tight and the wrinkles in the corners of her jowls shook a little bit like a dog's do before they bark. "Well, I think I'll have to ask your grandfather," she said. "I don't know if we have money to be loaning right now."

When The Old Man got home, I was sitting on the couch, eating potato chips and looking at a history book I should've been studying. He sat down in the recliner next to me and turned on the news and cracked open a Miller Highlife and slurped the foam from the top. He had this bushy white mustache that he kept curled up on the ends like a confederate soldier, and when he looked at me I could see little droplets of beer sticking to it.

"Your grandmamma told me you're trying to poke a Brass Ankle," he said, scooting the footrest closer to him. "That true?"

"Sir?"

"I said your grandmamma told me you're trying to poke a Brass Ankle. Is that true?"

"No sir, nothing like that. I was just wanting a little bit of money to go on a date."

"Date? Hell boy, that's even worse. You want to poke the little girl, that's one thing, but dating her, well, that's something else."

"What's wrong with dating her?"

He took a sip from his beer. "People might talk."

"About what?"

"About you being a nigger lover, that's what. You don't want nobody thinking that now, do you?" He stared in my eyes until I thought my heart was gonna jump up out of my neck and run off. He always had that effect on me. So I shook my head real sharply and screwed my eyes up to try and make myself look real convincing. "Good," he said. "Neither do I."

* * *

The second time I met Miranda was the first time in her memory. We were at a party that some friends of mine were having on the sandbar off of Wampee Cut. My cousin, Jackie, and I had gone out the evening before and hung a bunch of limb-lines down the river baited with small bream. When we got back to the sandbar that night, we had caught six or eight blue cats over twelve pounds, and I was standing on the bow with two of the biggest ones hooked over my fists, my chest poked out and bloody. I was about half-tight off of a pint of Wild Turkey 101.

I saw her standing on the back side of the bank in a bathing suit and her pearls as we came up, holding a cane-pole in one hand and a double-deuce can of Budweiser in the other.

"Hey," I said, walking up to her. "Hey, you remember me?"

"No," she said, giggling to one of her friends. "Should I?"

"I bought a Roman candle off of you a few weeks back."

"Ha. You and a hundred other people. I'm supposed to remember every white boy that buys firecrackers from me?"

"It was just the one," I said. "A Roman candle."

"Sorry." She stuck the cane pole in-between her legs and pulled a pack of Camels out of her bathing suit top and found a cigarette and lit it up and the tip of it flushed brightly in the dusk. "But what's your name, anyway?"

"Todd," I said.

"Nice to meet you, Todd," she said, sticking out her hand, "I'm Miranda."

"My momma used to smoke Camels," I said as I shook her hand.

"Oh yeah? What are you? Some kind of Momma's boy?"

"No, I ain't."

"Well, what happened then, she quit?"

"No," I said. "She died." Miranda looked down at the ground and made an oval in the sand with her foot. She blew a puff of smoke out of her mouth and the wind caught it and carried it downstream. "She wore pearls like that, too. You remind me of her a little bit."

"I remind you of a white woman?"

"No," I said. "You remind me of my Momma."

* * *

Later that night, after she was good and drunk, Miranda sang a Hank Williams song and danced in a little circle around the fire with her arms out by her side. When she finished, she laid down next to me on the coarse yellow sand and I ran my hand up and down the side of her thigh. Her skin

felt leathery and the little prickles of hair tickled the back of my hand and gave me a hard-on.

"You know," she finally said, "I ain't got my Momma neither."

I looked up, like out of a trance. "How'd she die?"

"She didn't. But sometimes I wish she had." Her voice was deep and smooth from the Budweiser.

"You shouldn't talk like that," I said.

"Why? It's true. I wish she would've died rather than just hauled up and left like she done."

"That ain't fair."

"What, to wish your mother was dead instead of shacked up in Iowa with a Pontiac salesman named Sam? To wish she hadn't left you to tend to a trailer that looks like the asshole of the universe? To wish she would call me on my birthday? To wish for some peace of mind? Well then, I guess I'm unfair."

I rubbed my eyes and pulled the bottle of 101 out of my pocket and took a swig. "Your Momma was an Indian too, wasn't she?" I asked.

Miranda laughed, throwing her head back so that the sweat on her neck glistened in the firelight. "We ain't Indians," she said. "Ain't you heard?" She took the bottle out of my hand and poured it down her throat. "We're Brass Ankles."

* * *

That night, before we went to sleep, Miranda and I snuck off into the woods and kissed for twenty minutes beneath the sound of mosquitoes buzzing like drums. Her mouth tasted like smoke.

* * *

Sometime between that party and New Year's Eve, when the fireworks stand at R.J's caught fire and Miranda was burnt alive, and the rockets inside all went off and exploded over the sign with the flying donkey; and before The Old Man heard about it and made some comment about thinking R.J. was an Injun, not a Jew, and us getting into a fist-fight that I still only halfway regret, I took Miranda on a date to the Dock Restaurant beside the lake, off of Beaver Creek Road.

I'd saved up some money collecting empty beer cans and selling them to the recycling plant, so I went by the store and asked after her, and that next Friday bought her a shrimp dinner and asked her to be my girlfriend.

"Todd," she said, putting her elbow on the table and running her hand through her hair. "Why did you have to do that?"

"What?" I said.

"Ruin everything. Why did you have to go and ruin everything?" She pulled a Camel out of her purse and lit it up.

"How did I?"

"We could have had a lot of fun together. We had a good thing going. But I can't be your girlfriend."

I sat there staring at her across the table as she sucked on the end of the cigarette. "Why?" I said.

"Why?" She rolled her eyes. "Ask your granddaddy why."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Everything. He has everything to do with it."

"But, I love you."

"Honey, you hardly know me." She took a drag from her cigarette. "And I promise you, I ain't nothing to love."

I looked down at my feet and rocked back in forth in my chair. "I don't understand."

"Yes," she said. "You do." Then she stuck the end of her cigarette in a paper cup of tartar sauce and it hissed, and smoke rose up from the table like a prayer.

Artwork: Circus in the Sand *(c) Aaron Grayum*

Black Friend

by Todd Mercer

Black Friend begins his Hollywood experience in a popular movie. He's cast as the streetwise Minority Sidekick to a Standard White Hero. The day after opening he sits in a theater observing the audience, who do laugh at his character's snappy lines. Laugh with him, not at him. It's a pretty good gig, and the studio's check clears.

He doesn't know right away, but this is the same and only role that will come his way, tweaked minimally from one film to the next. He makes friendships in the industry, and begins to push back against the decentralized forces of typecasting.

Offers dwindle. Original Wife leaves for greener pastures. On a late-night talk show he declares that this is the Seventies, and America is ready to accept black people as whole, rounded and complex individuals in film.

"Haven't you had your fill of shuck and jive yet?" he asks.

They haven't. They've had plenty but they're voracious. They like it better than everything but sex and food. The bank takes his house in Santa Monica. On a temporary basis he moves in with another actor whose spurious fame came from a repeating gig as Interchangeable Red-Shirted Guy Killed on Star Trek. Red Shirt for short. Red Shirt is a decent guy, but he's not going anywhere with his career. Red Shirt beams down to the planet's surface but doesn't come back.

The day the dealership repossess his Delta 88, he surrenders and sees what that brings him. He legally changes his name to Black Friend. Variety calls it a stunt and the supermarket tabloids find it hilarious.

Immediately he's the shortest line between two points for casting agencies. Need a Black Friend to round out your picture? Missing a hip and

affordable Minority Sidekick? Call Black Friend's agent. Black Friend nails it on the first take. He's a born natural at friendship. Also at being black. Authentic. Black Friend is proactive enough to push a higher level of performance from Standard White Hero, but he's guaranteed not to steal the show. It's in his contract. As much as they let him shine, Black Friend still has to speak the lines that make white people chuckle. Definitely contractual.

Ten years into surrender, he's tired of being somewhat funny. He wants a drama to sink his chops into. He wants credibility as an artist. Ten years before he would neither shuck nor jive. Now he jives on a limited basis, but he's proud to say there has been absolutely no fuckin' shuckin'. Compromises require him to give 90% of the disagreed territory, but he gets a point to cling to.

Black Friend is the only black guy half of these white actors know, but he's almost family to some of them.

Between takes there are instances where the Standard White Heroes and the others on the set forget themselves and tell him racist jokes. When he asks what the hell they had in mind he hears, "Aw, heck, Black Friend, don't get angry. You aren't really black to me. You're better than the rabble."

"There's niggers and then there's black people," says one famous Standard White Hero as they're smoking cigarettes outside a sound stage.

A dependable Black Friend or sidekick is just as good as any white person is. Black Friend jives now for three percent of gross receipts. He smiles and nods when he hears ignorance.

by Chad Schuster

Having decided to ignore the Pterodactyl, I put the shell to my ear and promised my daughter I could hear the ocean. This was basically true—I could hear the ocean. Or, more precisely, I could not hear the ocean, but I could hear a rushing sound within the shell that resembles the ocean, and anyway she is only five and does not know that Puget Sound is not an ocean, and, more to the point, to see her blond hair blowing in the wind that way, to see her standing there smiling, holding a white shell, with sand and seaweed stuck to her rubber boots, which are pink, her favorite color, induced the kind of feeling that is vast and overpowering, even terrifying in the way it pulls you down and holds you under, and maybe it spits you back out or maybe it doesn't but either way you know unequivocally who's boss. Which is, as Sophie said in the first place, very much like the ocean. So, yes, I said again, this time with more conviction: I totally hear it, sweetheart.

* * *

I first noticed the Pterodactyl standing on a half-submerged piling, just before Sophie handed me the shell. It was performing Pterodactyl calisthenics, its wings extending and retracting, not for flight, I assumed, but for practice. Now here we were, four blocks east of where we'd first met, me holding a gas pump, him perched atop the trash can near the windshield-washing station, gnawing at the innards of an abandoned sandwich.

"Hello," I said, not knowing why I chose to speak. He looked up for a moment and extended his wings, which were almost transparent, backlit by the sun. He didn't make eye contact before his beak resumed ripping apart the sandwich. The woman pumping gas one stall over looked at me

nervously. I smiled politely, then realized that she likely thought I was crazy. She was likely right. She did not see the Pterodactyl.

I got in the car and shut the door. I looked in the mirror and saw Sophie seated behind me in her booster. The bottom half of her face wasn't visible, I could just see her blue eyes, although just is an inadequate word because through them I could tell she was smiling, I didn't need to see her mouth. Through the windshield, beyond the gas station sign and the power lines and a ragged edge of trees, seven miles above me, a bank of amorphous clouds traveled the atmosphere.

My window was half open. I felt the guiding breeze come through and rustle the empty bag of pretzels Sophie and I had just shared. The bag lifted up slightly in the console and tumbled to the floor, came to rest near an ice scraper, a brown banana peel. The smell of gasoline, too, seeped into the car's interior, trailed by the sound of a train whistle. I understood that the big iron thing, with its vast machinery, was back down by the beach, following a track, its very existence governed by forward movement. It was unquestionably going somewhere.

"What kind of bird were you talking to," Sophie said. I looked at her in the mirror and felt the pretzels deconstructing in my guts.

"It was not a Pterodactyl," I said, and I imagined in that moment that this was not just a Saturday visit, that her mother hadn't left me for someone more dependable, less prone to Pterodactyl sightings. I raised a bottle of water to my mouth and swallowed a pill that was supposed to help with this sort of thing. "This is nonsense," I whispered to myself, hoping Sophie hadn't heard me.

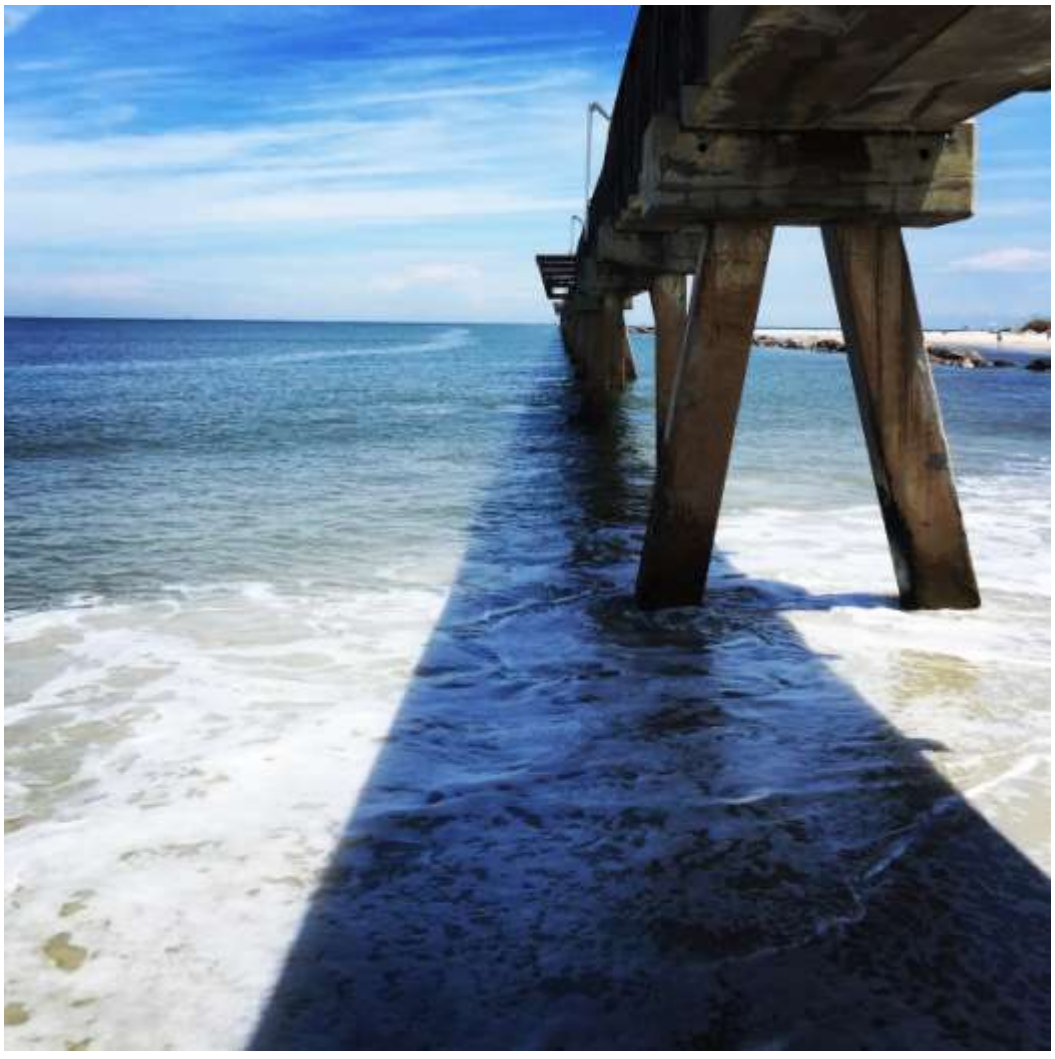
I looked at the dashboard clock, which was broken. I would reset it and then go wherever I was going and when I got back in the car it still said the same thing. Or maybe it wasn't broken, maybe I just lost track of time sometimes. It was probably just me.

"Why was the bird eating the sandwich?" Sophie asked.

I was thankful I didn't have to think about my answer. "Because he was hungry," I said, and I started the engine and drove away, hoping the Pterodactyl wouldn't follow but suspecting he would.

* * *

We rolled north down Sunset, past joggers and bicyclists and old houses



that were in various stages of being torn down and turned into new houses. I parked and we sat there in the car, looking out at the the grey-blue water, the green ferry churning in the distance. The sun was setting, the sky turning Sophie's favorite shade of pink. I turned on the radio and

offered her another bag of pretzels. She shook her head no. "Not hungry," she said.

The song on the radio was in the second chorus when the Pterodactyl finally made his move. He swooped in from nowhere, straight across the hood, his passage so close that I was sure he would come crashing through the windshield. Sophie screamed, stiffened in her seat.

"It's okay, sweetheart," I said, although I did not know this to be true, I could not verify her safety, our safety. No one could. I grabbed her little hand.

"It's okay," I said again, squeezing, and this time I was right because the Pterodactyl disappeared below the bluff and the song on the radio reached its crescendo, there was a rush of jangly guitars and cymbals were struck unabashedly and the sun burned out behind the Olympics and when the Pterodactyl returned from the depths of the prehistoric sunset he was not a Pterodactyl but a common crow, black as soot, the snake in his mouth defeated. The fellow must not have had his fill back there at the gas station but now he'd gone and done something about it, he'd remedied the situation, and as he soared over the roof of the car and landed on the bones of some new construction back there behind us to have his dinner I started the engine and eased us back into traffic and drove Sophie to her mother's house, the whole time holding her hand, telling her I loved her, dreaming up ways to one day, God willing, be there to kiss this girl, my world, goodnight.

Photograph (c) Anne Anthony

Issue 14 Contributors

Authors

Eric Bosse is the author of *Magnificent Mistakes*, a story collection published by Ravenna Press. His work has appeared in *The Sun*, *Zoetrope*, *Wigleaf*, *The Collagist*, *Frigg*, *Fiddleblack*, *Night Train*, *Matter Press*, and W*orld Literature Today*. He teaches writing at the University of Oklahoma.

Philip Bowne is a recent graduate of English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Gloucestershire. In the UK, his short fiction has been published by *The Lampeter Review, Sein und Werden,*and Birkbeck University's *Writers' Hub*, and Stroud Short Stories. In the US, his work has appeared in publications such as *WORK, Gravel, BlazeVOX*, *The Atticus Review,* and the *Maple Tree Literary Supplement,* in Canada. He has worked as a travel writer for Endsleigh while travelling around Europe, which was followed by a publishing credit with *The Guardian.* Phil is in the process of writing his first novel.

Eric Boyd lives in Pittsburgh and is working on his first short story collection, *Brownfields*. His writing has been published by *The Masters Review*, *Cheap Pop*, *The Offing Magazine*, *Guernica*, and *PEN America Journal*, among others. He appeared in the anthologies *Prison Noir* (Akashic Books) and *Words Without Walls* (Trinity University Press). He is the editor of *The Pittsburgh Anthology* (Belt Publishing). Boyd is a winner of *Slice Magazine's* Bridging the Gap award and the PEN Prison Writing award; he attended the 2014 Tin House Summer Workshop and the story he completed became a semifinalist for the 2015 H.E. Francis award. **ERIC BOYD'S PERSONAL TUMBLR PAGE** (EricBoydblog.Tumblr.com) is a 'spotlighted' blog on that website, highlighting his daily six word stories/poems, as well as longer works.

Cole Bucciaglia's work has appeared or is forthcoming in publications such as *West Branch, Tin House* online, *Timber Journal, PodCastle, Gingerbread House*, *Extract(s)*, and others. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *Psychopomp Magazine* and a former Assistant Editor of *Crab Orchard Review*.

Mary E Casey's stories have appeared in *Minerva Rising* and *Bad Jobs: My Last Shift at Albert Wong's Pagoda and Other Ugly Tales of the Workplace*. She lives in Seattle and is working on a novel about two women, a man, and a telescope set in Ireland in 1845.

Ronald Friedman is a retired psychologist living in Scottsdale, Arizona. He is the author of two books and over 50 nonfiction articles published in magazines and newspapers, but has been writing fiction for only the past three years. His short stories include "The New Suit" published by *Huff Post 50* and "Night Orderly" published by *Bartleby Snopes*. "Night Orderly" won first prize in the magazine's 2013 "all dialogue" story contest. He credits his mother for his success as a writer. She worked as an assassin for the CIA, and later for the Detroit Mob, so she travelled a lot for work. She supplemented her income by working as a copy editor for the Detroit Free Press. Mom passed away at work about a year ago. Sophie the Dog put two in her head while they were sitting in a stolen '87 Buick Riviera near Detroit City Airport. Nobody's fault. It was just a misunderstanding. When Friedman went to identify the body, he made three pledges to his mother. He said, "I'll never write another comma splice, I will always show, not tell, and all my stories will arc higher than the Arch in St. Louis."

Julie Griffin is a children's book author and winner in the short story fiction category for the 2012 Denver Woman's Press Club Unknown Writer's Contest. Her first "adult" book is *Ever Descending Circles, Booze Poems and Stories*.

Clint Margrave is the author of *The Early Death of Men*, a collection of poems, as well as a forthcoming collection, *Salute the Wreckage*, both published by NYQ Books. His work has also appeared in *The New York Quarterly*, *Rattle*, *Cimarron Review*, *Word Riot*, and *Ambit* (UK), among others. In 2016, his story "Acrobats" will be featured in the forthcoming *Red Hen Press* short fiction anthology about Los Angeles, where he currently lives.

Robert Maynor is from the Lowcountry of South Carolina. He has worked as a commercial plumber, dishwasher, cook, landscaper, and musician. His work has previously appeared in *Biostories* and Lander University's *New Voices*. He is twenty-two years old.

Scott McClelland is a writer from Erie, Pennsylvania. He story "Liminality" will appear in the forthcoming 40th Anniversary Edition of *Gargoyle Magazine*. Scott is not comfortable in any house that has no pickles.

Rebecca McDowell, a writer since childhood, lives in Philadelphia with her husband and her dog. When she's not thinking up creepy stories in her basement, she is working on writing them and trying to forget about her student loans.

Todd Mercer won the Grand Rapids Festival of the Arts Flash Fiction Award for 2015. His digital chapbook, *Life-wish Maintenance,* appeared at *Right Hand Pointing*. His story, "Because Hipsters" was read at *Liars' League NYC*. Mercer won the first Woodstock Writers Festival's Flash Fiction contest. Mercer's recent poetry and fiction appear in *Apocrypha & Abstractions, Blast Furnace, Cheap Pop, Dunes Review, Eunoia Review, Gravel, gnarled Oak, Kentucky Review, The Lake, The Legendary, Literary Orphans, Main Street Rag Anthologies, Misty Mountain Review*and *Spartan*.

Carolyn Moretti graduated from Hofstra University in 2009 with a bachelor's degree in English. Her senior thesis was a manuscript of poetry entitled *Aria*. It was terrible by all accounts.

Ryan Napier was born in Plant City, Florida. He has degrees from Stetson University and Yale Divinity School. His work has appeared most recently in *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Per Contra*, *Stoneboat*, and the *Burrow Press Review*. He lives in Massachusetts, and posts at ryannapier.tumblr.com.

Amy Naylor lives in Toronto and is doing her best to live a life worth writing about. Though she's not sure how it happened, work seems to have taken a back seat to writing and traveling and she couldn't be happier about it. Dialogue is always her favourite part of any writing endeavour.

Maureen O'Leary is a graduate of Georgia Southern University with a degree in writing. Her work has appeared in *Gravel*, *Bartleby Snopes*, and *Talking Soup*. She spends her spare time reading, fooding, and sitting on porches.

Louis Rakovich writes sometimes-fantastical literary fiction. His short stories have appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *The Fiction Desk*, *Criminal Element*, *Goldfish Grimm*, *Phobos Magazine* and other places. He's inspired by authors such as Truman Capote, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Edgar Poe, and filmmakers such as David Lynch and Andrei Tarkovsky. He grew up in Jerusalem, and now spends his time between New York City and Tel Aviv while working on his first novel – a psychological thriller.

Ian Richardson is a London based writer who resumed writing in 2012 after a near death incident. There were no bright lights or tunnels involved, but he did, after recovering, become briefly obsessed with dancing around his living room to Melina Mercouri singing 'Ta pedia tou Pirea'. As one would. This inexorably led to him becoming a part-time actor and, with the assistance of a brilliant writers' group, back into writing. His work has received professional rehearsed readings in literary festivals and events and two of his traditional British Pantos have been performed in Community Theatre runs . He has published has an older YA short story in the anthology, Hex Support. He can be contacted at Writerista_at_outlook.com and welcomes contact with readers.

Chad Schuster's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Glimmer Train*, *Hobart*, *Literary Orphans*, *Jersey Devil Press*, *Per Contra* and elsewhere. He lives near Seattle with his wife and two children. Find him at www.chadschuster.com or on Twitter @Chad_Schuster.

Fred Senese writes and teaches at a small university in rural Appalachia. He has been a NASA research scientist, dishwasher, trail and conservation zone planner, short-order cook, software developer, Flash cartoonist, art student, waiter, and educational media designer.

Jennifer Todhunter is a number nerd by day, word fiddler at night. She enjoys dark, salty chocolate and running top speed in the other direction. Find her at www.foxbane.ca or @JenTod_.

Clayton Truscott comes from Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and now lives in San Diego. His work has appeared in *New Contrast Literary Journal*, *The Surfer's Journal*, *Zigzag*, *Surf Session*, *Wavelength* and others. He curates and edits the website, *These Walking Blues* and is at work on a collection of short stories. You can follow him @ClaytonTruscott

Colby Vargas is an educator by day and an aspiring author on the weekends and when his students are taking tests. He has been published occasionally online and in print over the last twenty years. He lives in the Chicagoland area with his wife, three daughters, and dog.

Katherine Vondy is an LA-based writer and director whose credits span film, theater and literature. Her award-winning short film, THE BROKEN HEART OF GNOCCHI BOLOGNESE, has screened at festivals worldwide and her play THE FERMI PARADOX received the 2015 Davey Foundation Theatre Grant. The recipient of writing residencies from Wildacres, Starry Night and the Vermont Studio Center, her work has appeared recently in the *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *Corium Magazine*. More information at katherinevondy.com.

Emily Weber's work has been published in *The Adroit Journal*, *Soundings East*, and elsewhere.

Robin White, of British extraction, is a writer and editor most often found penning Magical Realism for magazines like *Strangelet*, *Bete Noire*, and *After the Pause*. He's been known to anthropomorphise without warning, and lives in Manhattan with his partner, Wesley.

Marléne Zadig (rhymes with “train a bad pig”) is a writer in Berkeley, California with an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland. Her short fiction has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Slice Magazine*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Split Lip Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is a 2015 Best of the Net nominee, blogs for *Carve Magazine*, and is the runner-up for the 2015 Fulton Prize for Short Fiction.

Illustrators

Anne Anthony is a writer and nature photographer living in Chapel Hill, NC.

Eleanor Leonne Bennett is an internationally award winning artist of almost fifty awards. She is an art editor for multiple publications around the world. Eleanor's photography has been published in British Vogue and Harper's Bazaar. Her work has been displayed around the world consistently for six years since the age of thirteen. This year (2015) she has done the anthology cover for the incredibly popular Austin International Poetry Festival. She is also featured in Schiffer's "Contemporary Wildlife Art" published this Spring. She is also a published writer and poet.

Rachel Reiff Ellis is a freelance writer and editor who also really loves taking photos. She lives in the Atlanta area with her husband and three kids.

Aaron Grayum is a writer and an artist. He often combines the two, incorporating thoughts and words onto canvases filled with elephants, jellybean trees, and red umbrellas. He has a fascination with street magic, old buildings, and Bigfoot. His wife Michelle is also an artist, and they share a studio in a one-hundred-year-old flour mill near the Cumberland river. Aaron lives in Nashville, Tennessee with his wife and family. For more, visit www.aarongrayum.com.

Valin Mattheis is an artist living in San Francisco, California. His nocturnal painting habits have created an unwieldy body of work, like a glorious and functionless monolith to gods whose faithful have all since gotten jobs and done something productive with their lives that doesn't involve flint knives and entrails. Of notable achievements, he has none to speak of. He can be unreliably contacted at valinmattheis@gmail.com

Doug Mathewson works from home as a writer and editor of short fiction. He is also a photographer, and makes small wearable art. Most recently his work has appeared at The Boston Literary Magazine, Bop Dead City, Rocky Mountain Revival, and Jersey Devil.

Fabio Sassi makes acrylics and photos. He uses logos, icons, tiny objects, discarded stuff. He often puts a quirky twist to his subjects or employs an unusual perspective that gives a new angle of view. He really enjoys taking the everyday and ordinary and framing it in a different way. He also like the imperfect in things and believe that those imperfections add a lot of value. Fabio is also an occasional poet living in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com

Nancy Stohlman is many things: writer, librettist, lounge singer, actress, professor, and lover of all things creative. Her photographs and cover designs have graced the covers of multiple books, including Jeff Landon's *Emily Avenue*, *Flash 101: Surviving the Fiction Apocalypse*, and her own books *The Vixen Scream and Other Bible Stories*, and *The Monster Opera*, published by *Bartleby Snopes* as part of the Flash Novel series.