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Bartleby Snopes



A Literary Magazine of Fiction

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

Editor's Note

Welcome to the third issue of *Bartleby Snopes*. The growth during the last six months has been astounding (and at times overwhelming). The magazine has appeared on several new literary web sites and blogs. We sponsored our first paid contest, with the winner receiving over \$400. We launched a Twitter page and wrangled in 300 followers. Our mailing list grew exponentially, and our submissions skyrocketed. Through it all, we've managed to keep the magazine contributor friendly, which has been the goal all along. With the help of Rick Taliaferro, we reformatted all of our archive into a more readable format. We continue to be one of the swiftest and most personable markets around. This issue we present 24 stories to you, including our five Dialogue Contest winners, our Story of the Month winners, several Pushcart and Best of the Net nominees, and some of our personal favorites. This is definitely our biggest and best issue yet, and with any luck, the magazine will continue to expand. We thoroughly enjoy working with our contributors, and multiple stories appearing in this issue are revisions of pieces originally rejected. Thank you to all who have helped make *Bartleby Snopes* a great magazine.

"Amanda, are you listening?"

"Sorry."

"You asked me to teach you this."

"I'm listening."

"Fine. While I'm cutting, you mix the sauce. A tablespoon each of soy sauce, oyster sauce and sherry."

"Oyster sauce?"

"Third from the left, back row."

"Got it. What's in this? Water, sugar, salt, oyster extractives? Yuck."

"Just mix it, okay?"

"Just kidding. What else?"

"A teaspoon each of cornstarch and brown sugar. I've seen better mushrooms."

"It's all they had."

"You should have checked other stores."

"Just for mushrooms?"

"A dish is only as good as its ingredients."

"Excuse me for not thinking. Notice anything different?"

"No."

"I cut my hair."

"I liked it better longer. Now add a teaspoon of sesame oil, a fourth cup chicken broth, and pepper."

"How much pepper?"

"To taste."

"How much? You always want it just right."

"Four turns of the pepper mill. Can you manage that?"

"You don't have to be like that."

"This was your idea."

"But you don't have to be like that. We never do things together any more. And we never talk."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Not like that. You're mad now."

"I'm not mad."

"Well, you're not having fun."

"No. I'm tired. I'm hungry. And I don't know what the hell is going on. First you want to learn to cook Chinese. Now you want to talk. Make up your mind. I've got things to do."

"Fine. Show me. We can eat and you can go do your things."

"You're sure."

"Go ahead."

"Now you're the one who's mad."

"Just show me."

"Whatever. The key to cooking Chinese is organization and attention to details. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't tell."

"I'm listening. Details."

"Right. You line up the ingredients in the order they go in the wok: Garlic, beef, onions and peppers, mushrooms, sauce. Once you start, you won't have time to look for things. See?"

"I think I get it."

"You know what I mean."

"What's next?"

"Get the wok good and hot."

"This okay?"

"No, no, highest heat."

"I was thinking about getting a job."

"Why?"

"I don't know, something to do."

"What about your garden?"

"Something outside this place."

"I make good money so you don't have to do anything. "Here's how to do the oil."

"I'm bored here."

"Watch. You pour the oil around the top of the wok so it runs down and coats the sides. You do two rings around."

"I tried sleeping around, but that didn't help."

"Now you turn the wok like this to coat it evenly."

"I just wore out three good men."

"You're being silly."

"I just want something to do. You're never here."

"Here's something to do, add the garlic. You want a job, I'm sure McDonald's is hiring. Stir it--don't let it burn. There, now the beef."

"Ooh, isn't that too hot?"

"No. You want rice or noodles with this?"

"I don't care."

"You need to decide."

"Surprise me."

"Stir it. This is a stir-fry. Keep it moving. No, no. See, it's a tossing action; down the side, through the oil, and up the other side. If you want to keep it tender, you have to keep it moving."

"We certainly want to keep it tender."

"Here, add the veggies. And keep it moving. No, here!"

"I can't do it like you."

"You can learn."

"Look. I'm not some damned kid here. You said stir, I'm stirring. You want tossing, call it a freaking toss-fry. It's just a damned meat and vegetable dish."

"Here we go again."

"This was supposed to be fun. Do something together for a change. What's wrong with that? And, heaven forbid, maybe even talk to each other. I don't even like Chinese food."

"Of course you like it. You eat it all the time."

"Because you like it. Because you like to cook it. Have you ever asked me if I like it?"

"This is ridiculous. You know you like Chinese. Now let's finish this and eat."

"You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?"

"You asked me to teach you to cook Chinese."

"I'm making some major decisions here, in case you haven't noticed."

"You want to see this or not? You push the food up on the sides of the wok and leave room at the bottom for the sauce. You pour it in and stir it. Now watch. When it thickens and clears, like dark honey, it's done. See it?"

"Yes, it's becoming clear."

"There. It's done. Have you decided?"

"What?"

"Rice or noodles."

"Yes, I've decided."

Editor's Note

Cooking Chinese was the grand prize winner in our first-ever paid Dialogue Contest. A special thank you to guest judge j.a. tyler from mud luscious press. As j.a. said, "this one was able to get the most complex story out of a minimum of language, making the conversation resonate from within rather than filling itself with exposition/explanation. It also managed to feel natural and easy, the flow of a conversation as we are known to have them, us when we are not writing."

Lord of the Leaves by Robert Meade

Billy Gannon could already taste the beating that was waiting for him. It was salty, like a busted nose, and sharp as the metal fork he was pressing against his lip. Buzz and Arrowhead would beat him up today because that's what they did every Saturday. Billy knew what he would do about it.

Nothing.

Billy sat at one end of the kitchen table, and at the other end sat his dad. Morning washed through the window over the sink, splashing October sun onto the walls.

"The Sox clobbered the Yanks again," his dad said, his voice booming from behind the sports page. "Oughta fire that manager."

"Does he have any kids?" Billy asked.

"You don't send the runner in a situation like that," his dad continued. He rattled the paper. "Never bet on a road game."

Billy's fork snapped through the brittle underside of his breakfast. His dad had burned the pancakes again, but served them fluffy-side up.

"Early bird catches the worm," his dad announced, laying the paper flat. "Get out and rake those leaves today."

"Can't," Billy answered, choking down a wafer of pancake. His dad picked at a hole in his tee shirt.

"Can't?"

"Those guys'll beat me up." Billy studied his plate. He knew his dad was staring at him.

"How old are you, boy?"

"Eleven."

"Them?"

"Ten," Billy answered. "But there's two of them. I can't fight them both. I need help." He glanced at his dad, whose face was twisted into a frown. Billy looked back at his plate.

His dad snorted. "The Lord helps those who help themselves." He gathered up the paper and disappeared into the bathroom.

In the window, bony fingers of elm tree beckoned. Billy didn't want to look. But something about the leaves—the way they stuck to the branches, not letting go—made him happy. He turned back to his breakfast. His stomach was churning. He wasn't exactly sure why, but he knew it wasn't just the pancakes.

The air smelled like smoke and pine sap when Billy crept outside, rake in hand, an old blanket over his shoulder. He had on a blue jacket and his Yankees cap. And, of course, his running shoes.

Every leaf in the neighborhood had found its way into his yard. He had to rake them all to the road, fifty feet from his door, so the leaf truck could vacuum them up. Billy started raking the leaves into a line. When the line got thick and heavy, he raked the ends into the middle, then pushed the pile onto the blanket and dragged it to the curb. He raked facing the road.

Billy didn't know why Buzz and Arrowhead wanted to beat him up, unless it had something to do with Billy's dad calling Buzz a "momma's boy." One day they had all been friends, and then the next day they weren't.

"Kiddo!" Billy looked up. His dad stood in the driveway wearing a white turtleneck under his black leather coat. "Goin' to Jimmy's for a while," he said.

Billy nodded. His dad backed the station wagon into the street.

"And no leaves on that hydrant!" Billy waved. His dad rolled the window up, then sped off. The gash in the rear door was beginning to rust, Billy noticed. Last week, his dad turned too soon into the driveway, sideswiping the hydrant. He blamed the dark and the leaves, but Billy knew he'd stayed too long at Jimmy's Pub.

Billy bent to his raking. He was dumping another pile when Buzz and Arrowhead bore down on him, their bikes spraying leaves behind them. Too late to make it to the house. Billy dropped his rake and ran straight at them. They skidded past him in a sliding turn, then pedaled back furiously. He spun around and ran at them again, but Arrowhead rammed him at the hydrant, knocking him into the leaves. Buzz jumped off his bike, running. Billy tucked himself into a ball, taking most of the blows on his back.

It ended when Buzz planted a foot on Billy's shoulder, pinning him. Arrowhead glowered behind Buzz.

"Wee Willie Winky," Buzz snarled. "If I catch you here tomorrow, I'll run you over."

"If your mommy lets you," said Billy. Buzz pushed Billy on his back and stomped his chest. The stink of Buzz's dirty wool socks crawled up Billy's nose. Buzz grinned.

"I'll squash you," he said, "like a winky bug." Buzz laughed. Then he and Arrowhead were gone.

Billy fished through the leaves for his cap. He grabbed the rake and shrugged off the hurt. Gotta finish, he told himself, before dad gets back.

He raked madly for a minute. Then stopped and slumped cross-legged on the grass. Who was he kidding? His dad wouldn't care if the lawn was raked. He wouldn't care if ten lawns were raked, once he got back from Jimmy's. And tomorrow his dad would send him outside again. And tomorrow Buzz would run him over.

Billy lay in the sweet onion grass until his stomach stopped churning. It was peaceful, watching the leaves clown with the trees overhead. The branches reminded him of fingers folded in prayer.

His mother had taught him, whispering clearly. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...* He knelt beside her, repeating the words. Her red hair, flecked with gold, clung to the curve of her neck. It was after she died that his dad started going to Jimmy's and crashing into hydrants.

Billy sat up. An idea came to him, a plan that might save him from a beating. He laughed. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

The next morning, Billy tiptoed out of the house, past his snoring father, and took his position by the road. He wore his Sunday best. White shirt. Tie. Pants. Suit jacket. And black shoes. He wouldn't need his running shoes today.

He took the rake and gathered the leaves into a giant pile. He worked swiftly, carefully. He had to finish before Buzz and Arrowhead found him. They would know he



was here. Somehow, they always knew.

Billy stood behind the pile and waited. And soon they came, tearing along the road on their bikes, descending on him. Billy didn't move. Buzz rode straight for Billy, ready to run him down. Still, Billy didn't move.

Buzz exploded into the pile. Billy watched him sail through the air, unseated by the hydrant hidden

beneath the leaves. He landed in a crooked heap. Arrowhead crashed on top of him, knocking them both out. Their bikes lay in the road, warped and broken.

Billy stood over Buzz and Arrowhead. He should've been happy, but what he felt mostly was relief. Reddish gold leaves whispered from the trees. Billy grinned back.

Later in the day, he would give proper thanks for his deliverance. Right now, he wanted to go into the house to have breakfast with his dad. He would prepare the table and pour the orange juice until the cups overflowed. He would make the pancakes himself, and would be careful not to burn them on the bottom.

Editor's Note

Lord of the Leaves was originally published on the website in October 2009.

Photograph © Adelaide B. Shaw

Holograms by Phoebe Wilcox

It was about to rain and Mary was alone and had no plans for the weekend. As she passed by the little holographic couple that danced their endless jitterbug on a pedestal outside the science building she realized that this dancing couple made her happy, happy to be a college student without a date, with nothing to do but study on a Friday night, happy to await the needles of rain that sharpened themselves in the clouds. The nine-inch tall couple glowed in their bell jar, their bodies and clothing mostly gold with hints of orange and green that shifted around the edges. They were energetic and never ceased in their routine. He twirled her; her poodle-dog skirt flared and her pony tail swung out from her head. Mary, pausing for a minute to admire their dancing little feet, decided to name them. *Let's call him Butch*, she thought, *and let's call her Mary. Why not?* Mary smiled at the irony, adjusted her books on her hip, glanced up at the sky, and walked on to the dorms, making it in the main door just as the first few dart-like drops began to fall.

Carson, a boy whose father was a welder, sat on her roommate's bed reading a hot rod magazine. Katie, her roommate, was in the bathroom spraying a nimbus of hairspray down over a tight, docile head of hair. She came coughing out of the bathroom.

"See you later, Mary." Katie grabbed her purse to go.

"See you later."

"See ya." Carson laid the magazine down.

"Bye."

After they left Mary sat on her bed wondering what to do. Katie and Carson were going to the movies. She had planned on studying but now she no longer felt like it. She sat on her bed and admired her 70s-era Mick Jagger poster, especially his gypsy-bright clothing and the preternaturally elastic string of saliva that stretched across his singing mouth. Outside, the evening had taken on a dusky, windy, invigorating feel and tree branches scratched against the window like an animal that wanted in. Mary, in response to this night animal briefly reached over and traced a finger down the glass. She stared into the dark glare of the window, wishing she had a boyfriend and wondering what it would be like, all of that stuff. That first-love stuff. That getting-engaged stuff. That breaking-it-off-in-a-horrendous-fight stuff. That making-up-and-getting-sweetly-back-together stuff. Even though Katie told her all about it all the time, it was completely unfathomable to her.

She wondered if Butch and Mary were still dancing. She wondered if they danced in the rain and in the darkness. She believed that they did and this gave her comfort. Mary lay down on her bed and picked up Carson's hot rod magazine.

* * *

It was after midnight when Butch and Mary, the holographic couple, stopped dancing. They'd gotten tired of it and were curled up at the edge of their bell jar holding hands and nuzzling each other. Mary had thrown her legs up over Butch's lap, her hands laced around his neck. She'd just begun to kiss him a little in the vicinity of his ear. She loved it when the science building quieted down enough that she and Butch could do whatever they wanted.

"I want to have my way with you," he said, smiling brilliantly, goldly in the darkness.

"Okay!" she answered and squirmed obligingly beneath his nebulous, pressing hands. He felt like a sunbeam and his kisses tasted like ripe tangerines.

They accommodated each other in every possible way. At night they lost their inhibitions because there wasn't much to see outside of the bell jar. The world outside was just a streetlight with a few dozen whirling moths. They loved to watch the moths but the bland, gritty sidewalk below the pedestal, marked with a few dark, sporadic discs of chewing gum, had ceased to interest them long ago. They'd found other diversions. As fit and athletic as they were, their lovemaking would have been the awe of the campus if anyone had ever chanced to stroll fortuitously by the science building on a late night, but no one ever did. Oh, the riotous good times they'd have inspired as Mary's pony tail came undone and the poodle skirt twisted up with the jeans in a glistening gold pile off to the side. Their love had the singing of tiny stars in it and afterwards, as they fell asleep in each other's arms, they slipped into the current of a shared dream in which others were privileged with the same sort of love they had. A capacious wish for the happiness of all living things filled their insular little goldfish bowl. These were two sweet little people. They didn't remember where they had come from or where they might be going. They had no idea what their lives meant or when they might end. All they really knew was that they must dance an interminable dance as soon as the sun came up. Butch made it bearable for Mary. Mary made it bearable for Butch. And the night was their well and water.

* * *

The night air against her cheek was chill and moist but the rain had stopped and the moon was up. Mary didn't care that it was one in the morning and that her campus was located in a dangerous part of the city. She didn't care that it was dark and there was no one about. She felt protected, like she had a purpose on this earth and that dying young was no part of it. Her footsteps over the sidewalks were hollow and self-absorbed; they avoided puddles and admired reflections. There were moths whirling around streetlights and she felt a little like a moth herself. She wished she knew how to do things, even, for instance, welding. Most of all though, she wanted to know how to jitterbug. She'd never had the opportunity to learn the steps of that old dance but thought that whenever she did get a boyfriend, it would be nice to have something to teach him.

The science building was ivy-covered and adept at keeping secrets.

"Hello," she called out as she approached.

Moths whirled around the globe of the streetlight. The moon smiled like an artistic rendition of itself. The bell jar was glossy and inscrutable.

Mary reached out to touch the glass of the jar but dropped her hand and covered her mouth in surprise instead, for Butch and Mary were right in the middle of making love. Mary had never seen anyone making love before. She lowered her face to the glass and almost thought Butch spied her, as her large, curious nose was just about at the level of his eyes, but no, his eyes were closed and he was hard at work. Then, toward the end, she saw his teeth; he had teensy-weensy little teeth. And Mary had tiny yellow-green breasts like opalescent lemons. When they were done, the couple fell asleep, their limbs intertwined. Butch snored. Big Mary pressed her ear against the glass and thought she heard a sound like the trilling of a cricket. She was glad that Butch had moved apart from Mary so that she could see his entire body. Mary had grown up in a clan of women and had never even seen a picture of a naked man. It had also been a very long time since she'd been to an art museum and had had the opportunity to examine the genitalia of any classical hunk rendered in marble. So she'd gotten a little confused about male anatomic details. She knew that there was a penis and testicles but she wasn't sure if there were two testes in one sack or two testes in two sacks. Whenever she was in the library at school she was so absorbed in other class work that she always forgot to research the issue. Then, when she was lying in her dorm bed at night and remembered about it, she had no resources available to her, except Katie, and she wasn't *about* to ask Katie such a stupid question. Butch's genitalia cleared it all up for her, with the added bonus that they happened to look like a cluster of pretty little golden currants.

Mary decided to watch the couple in their repose. She leaned her upper body against the glass for support and rested her cheek on the arched glass at the top of the jar, one arm outstretched overhead, hanging in the air. At times she slipped into an uncomfortable vertical sort of sleep. Until Little Mary came awake to sleepily kiss Butch's lips and run her hands through the corn silk of his chest hair. Then Butch awoke and moved over her like a thunderstorm.

Hours later, dawn came like a blush-colored broom and swept the morning star away over the edge of the world. The holograms awoke and began to dress. Mary smoothed her tousled hair, and hungry, headed off in the direction of the college cafeteria. When she stopped once to look back, Butch and Mary were playing tug-of-war with a bobby sock. They laughed and laughed. To Mary it seemed like the impassioned chirping of birds going on silently behind that glass. She understood all about invisible actions and silent songs. In the end, it was only the glass that had to break.

Editor's Note

Holograms was first published on the website in September 2009.

Cowboys, Indians, and Brothels by Eric Miller

It was her eyes, those dark, flirtatious, come-hither eyes, that grabbed you by the throat and in the heart while silently saying "Hey, cowboy, you're my kind of guy; whatta ya say?" I said "Hop in beautiful; let's take a ride." She sat quietly, taking me in with one eye while looking out the window with the other.

Despite the rather garish bow in her hair and a perfume that was way too strong for my nose and reeking havoc with my genetic code for allergic reaction, there was no doubt that she was a very special damsel who evoked nobility like no other. I lowered the window on my side of the car to flush out the allergens, but as I continued to sneeze, I was forced to lower the window on her side of the car as well. As the wind blew through her hair, she looked even more beautiful than before, especially when she would look over at me with those seductive eyes.

I dropped her off at her house, and then I made my way home.

"Oh my, where have you been, or more precisely, with whom have you been? You smell like a French brothel," my wife of 40 years observed, playfully.

"Mon Dieu, ma chérie, but how would you, of all people, know what a French brothel smells like," I returned, glad that her first serve was in.

"A woman knows," she volleyed back. "I must confess that I am quite disappointed that my Eagle Scout husband would enter such a place. Do you have an itch?" she asked quizzically.

"An itch?" I repeated. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"You know, the guy thing: the seven year itch, wandering eyes, and old man dreams."

"I may be an old man, but I am still a man, and real men, with proper testosterone levels, appreciate beauty. Our eyes do not wander; they scan in wonder and appreciation," I replied, enjoying the sustained rally.

"Oh, pulleezee! I bet that you'll give me an equally colorful explanation for the hairs all over your clothes," my wife smashed back at me right on the baseline.

"Well, yes, I can explain that," I replied, out of breath as my run to her return fell short of the ball.

"I'm sure you can," my wife said, with more derision than I would have expected from the mother of our children. "So, tell me about LaLa, or Lulu, or Lola, or whatever her name is."

"The lady's name is Piper," I stated, curtly.

"Piper, what kind of name is that?"

"Shichon," I replied, smugly.

"She's a Native American, a Shoshoni Indian?" my wife asked, incredulously.

"No, she's a Shichon, not a Shoshoni," I corrected.

"Shichon, Shoshoni, whatever."

"Well," I cut in. "I don't think a Shoshoni Indian would take kindly to being called a Shichon."

"Why not?"

"Because a Shichon is a dog."

"I've never heard of a Shichon dog,"

"It's a cross between a Shih Tzu and a Bichon Frise."

"I've never heard of either one of them," she admitted. "So, you're trying to make me believe that your friend from the French brothel is a dog?"

"Au contraire, she is lovely, as well as being a dog."

"I give up," my wife exclaimed. "I'm listening. Tell me the story."

"You give up way too fast these days, ma chérie. Peut-être, it is you who are aging, pas moi. It is really a very simple tale. My secretary was in a bind and asked if I would pick up her dog, Piper, at the groomer and drop her off at her house on my way home. The poor creature was distraught being left at that horrid emporium, where they sheered her naked, wrapped her in god awful ribbon, and sprayed her with what you call 'Eau de French Brothel'. Piper couldn't stand all the loose hairs all over her naked body and kept shaking herself in my car, setting off an explosion of white hairs that not only settled all over the upholstery, but on my clothes as well."

"Point, game, set, match: Mr. Wonderful," my wife announced with a smile. "Great match, Darling, as usual, just like us." Her dark eyes glistened flirtatiously, with that come-hither look. She helped me off with my aromatic dog hair covered clothes, threw them in the hamper, took my hand, and led me to the boudoir.

"Woof, woof."

Editor's Note

Cowboys, Indians, and Brothels was first published on the website in October 2009 and won the October Story of the Month Contest.

Going Green by Kevin Dickinson

It was a curious little thing—a small wooden box, about a foot in any direction, unvarnished and imperfect, with a couple of knots in the grain. It was filled with dirt, the deep black kind with white dots of fertilizer, and out of the top there sprouted a profuse tuft of bright grass. On one of the sides, next to a couple of nails, and in crooked red stenciling, were the words ‘PERSONAL LAWN.’

Mom had placed it in the middle of the kitchen table, where she had previously kept her great-grandmother’s pewter candelabra on permanent display. The ancient heirloom was deported to the china cabinet to make room for an evanescent plant. I made sure not to tell Mom it was just a plant, though, because she’d grown quite fond of it and would correct me. ‘It’s a hundred plants, all in that little box. Isn’t it just *amazing?*’

What is amazing to me is that a single square foot of the most abundant plant of the civilized world—manicured suburban carpet—can produce enough of a stimulus on anybody to excite them. I suppose television is to blame: for six months they played nothing but blue-screen infomercials for the Personal Lawn. Duck hats were just waning out of vogue and people needed the next greatest thing, so some guy named Greg Paul came up with a box full of grass. He slicked his hair back and threw on a polo shirt and went on television, telling people that the Personal Lawn wasn’t just a box of grass, and that it was the future. It required no maintenance, just sunlight, because Vermont Emerald had been developed by scientists to absorb moisture in the air. The best part was that anyone could have their very own box of grass, which otherwise would require a trip outside, for only nine ninety-nine plus shipping and handling.

Dad was a toaster salesman. The next-door neighbor, Mr. Offendorf, was a refrigerator salesman. Dad had purchased a fridge from Mr. Offendorf, but the Offendorfs already had a toaster from France. The Offendorfs were richer than us and were always the first ones on the block to have something new. One day Mrs. Offendorf showed Mom her Personal Lawn, and two weeks later the candelabra was missing. My parents are lemmings. They’re doomed if the Offendorfs ever buy an invisible bungee cord.

When Mom had Mrs. Offendorf over for Bundt cake, she made sure to accidentally mention her new Personal Lawn, but to pretend as if she had purchased it independently of her envy—as something she had never heard of before the infomercial. ‘Isn’t it just *amazing?*’ I heard her exclaim. ‘It’s a hundred plants, all in that little box.’

Mrs. Offendorf chimed in: ‘Oh, so I guess you—’

‘Yes,’ Mom interrupted, ‘I saw it on TV, and I absolutely *had* to have it. Isn’t it adorable?’

‘Charming.’

Mrs. Offendorf was so, so busy for about three months after that. Mom tried calling her nearly every day, but gave up when Mrs. Offendorf claimed her deceased grandmother was in the hospital with pneumonia. Dad said he was getting the mail one day when he saw Mr. Offendorf peer at him through the blinds with expensive binoculars.

A few weeks later, I came home from school and went up to my room to drop off my backpack. There was a Personal Lawn on my windowsill. It was not the one from the kitchen.

‘Mom—what’s this?’

‘It’s a Personal Lawn. I thought I’d get one for each of us. Danielle’s has flowers.’

Around that time, Greg Paul had decided to diversify his monochromatic product line to include the Personal Garden and Personal Weed Patch. I don’t get that last one, but people actually bought it. The Personal Garden, though, was basically just a Personal Lawn with two or three daffodils.

I decided to ignore Mom’s decision to spend an additional fifty dollars plus shipping on something that would cost close to nothing to make, and which was probably the stupidest product since duck hats. Fortunately, mine was just a box of Vermont



Emerald, so it was never thirsty, because I wouldn’t have taken the time to water it. After a while it faded from my peripheral vision. I actually didn’t notice it again until it was gone.

That night at dinner, there were six wooden boxes on the table, three of which had flowers. ‘I decided we should put our Personal Lawns together and

have sort of a family garden,’ Mom said. ‘There’s the original, plus we each have one, which makes six.’

‘I don’t have any room to eat,’ Adriana said.

‘Put your plate on your lap,’ Dad said. ‘Mom wants to have a garden.’

Halfway through dinner Danielle tried to pass me a roll but it got lost among the plants.

‘Forget about it,’ I said. ‘May I please be excused?’

Now Greg Paul specifically advertised that the Personal Lawn does not grow taller than six inches. But infomercial miracles usually turn out to be substandard junk. Each week it was becoming more difficult to communicate at the dinner table, and eventually we had to part the grass if we wanted to make eye contact. I suggested we cut it, but Mom said that would kill it. I think it was a front for her war on Mrs. Offendorf, who, the last time Mom heard, had up to ten Personal Lawns. ‘People don’t cut grass in the wild,’ Mom would say.

To compromise, I decided to move the family garden somewhere that would not inhibit dinner. Whether this was fortune or fate, I can only guess—but the ledge below the bay windows in the kitchen was exactly six feet long and one foot wide.

‘Oh, how nice! Why didn’t *I* think of that?’ Mom said.

Two weeks later we had six more to replace the ones from the kitchen table.

One day, not long after our garden expansion arrived, Mom finally coaxed Mrs. Offendorf out of hibernation to have some homemade raspberry pie. The reason for the invitation became obvious when the two of them sat opposite one another at the kitchen table. At the time I was fixing myself a sandwich from the Offendorf fridge.

Mrs. Offendorf strained to see to the other side. ‘I can’t really see you, Joyce.’

‘Doesn’t that add to the fun? You never know who’s on the other side!’

‘It’s not a mystery, Joyce. You invited me over for pie.’

‘Well, I was thinking of moving my Personal Garden, but you know, it just looks so beautiful where it is, and besides, I already put another section on the window ledge, so there’s not really anywhere else to put it. Pie?’

‘Sure,’ Mrs. Offendorf said. ‘I, uh—there’s a bug! Get it off!’

‘Where?’ Mom screamed, and dropped the slice of pie in the garden. A ladybug flitted around in the air and hid behind the breadbox. ‘Looks like I’m growing raspberry pie now!’

Mrs. Offendorf said she was disgusted with Mom’s stupid garden, and she stormed out sans dessert. Mom looked distraught, but I know she wanted to let out a malicious laugh. Everything had gone exactly as she had hoped it would.

That little ladybug had disappeared when I went to capture it. It would have been the least of my concerns had I not spotted a dozen more bugs circling the window ledge garden. I grabbed the Raid and asked them if they had any last words.

‘Don’t do that! You’ll kill the garden!’ Mom said from the doorway. ‘Bugs are a completely natural part of this ecosystem.’

‘Since when is this an ecosystem? I thought it was just boxed plants?’

‘No, it’s an entire ecosystem. The sun feeds the plants, and the plants feed the bugs.’

‘Who gets rid of the bugs?’ I asked.

‘Hmm...’

Mom walked off pondering my question.

Two weeks later there was a Personal Venus Flytrap on the kitchen counter. ‘A Venus flytrap gets rid of the bugs,’ she said. ‘Hey, how do you think that guy, Greg Paul, invents all these things? He’s like Leonardo DaVinci.’

‘Definitely. He’s like the DaVinci of our time.’

Mom said to me one day that Mrs. Offendorf was out to get her. ‘Dolores has about forty Personal Lawns by now,’ she told me with all possible confidence. I asked her how she knew, because she hadn’t been to the neighbors’ since before we owned any patches of Vermont Emerald. ‘It’s my motherly instinct,’ she told me.

I think that Mrs. Offendorf probably only ever had one Personal Lawn. But I don’t really know for sure because I’ve never been over there. Mom wasn’t convinced, though, so she ordered a whole bunch more.

‘For the family room,’ she said. ‘You know, on the coffee table. And above the fireplace, maybe.’

Sure enough, I came home from school about two weeks after that and the family room was greener than it had ever been before. Mom was on the phone with somebody. ‘Why yes, Nancy! I myself only have a couple of them. I’m thinking about getting more, though. They’re all the rage these days! Uh-huh. Well... oh, okay. Well, then, is Sunday afternoon good for tea? Great. I mean, I don’t have many to show you here, but they’re in the finest shape. Yes, I take good—what? Oh, yes, I know they don’t need any kind of—well, okay, I’ll see you on Sunday.’

‘Hi Mom,’ I said.

‘Hi honey,’ she said. ‘Do you like what I’ve done with the family room?’

‘Um, sure. Hey, what’s that sound?’

‘What sound?’

‘There it is again,’ I said. ‘You know when someone runs their fingernail down a guitar string really fast?’

‘No, I’m not quite sure how that—’

Before Mom could finish her thought, there was some sort of low rumbling sound, which quickly became a loud, steady roar.

‘WHERE IS THAT COMING FROM?’ I yelled. Mom made that gesture that says, ‘I can’t hear you.’

I ventured through the kitchen and into the dining room, where I found Dad pushing a lawnmower across the floor. There was no carpet anymore—just sod. Dad didn’t see me at first. Nor could he hear me through the industrial earmuffs on his head. When he arrived at a wall, he spun the mower around to cut a new row of grass. The mower slammed into the leg of the dining room table and it collapsed onto the ground, taking several chairs with it.

‘HI, SON!’ Dad screamed, unaware that the lawnmower had shut off.

‘TAKE OFF YOUR EARMUFFS!’ I yelled, cupping my own ears as a hint. He removed them and set them on the slanted table. They slid onto the grass.

‘Nothing quite like that freshly mown dining room smell, huh?’ he asked me.

‘What is this?’

‘We decided it’s time to go green,’ he said. ‘Everyone’s doing it now. It’s good for the environment.’

‘I don’t think that’s what they—’

‘We’re doing your room on Thursday. Then Danielle’s, then Adriana’s, then ours. What do you think about the bathrooms?’

Trying to argue with someone who’s being irrational is impossible. I tried to stop them from replacing my area rug with fresh grass, but Dad said I was wasting electricity and killing the planet. Mom told me the Offendorfs were doing the same thing, and that they even had green ceilings. So yes, my bedroom now has a lush blanket of Vermont Emerald, which I wouldn’t mind so much if it weren’t for the earthworms.

I made emergency arrangements soon after to room with my friend John from college, whose previous roommate had been expelled for doing acid in a lecture hall. College is nice because your parents aren’t there, and there is carpet.

Last night, John was clipping his toenails. At least I thought so. I heard some scissors. ‘You clip your toenails with scissors?’ I asked.

‘No, man. It’s this thing called the Personal Lawn. I’m pruning it so it stays healthy. And the best part is, you don’t need to water it. It’s this, like, synthetic grass or something called Vermont Emerald. You should get one.’

‘Wow,’ I said. ‘It’s like a hundred little plants, all in that one box.’

‘I know, right?’ he said. ‘It’s *amazing*.’

Editor’s Note

Going Green was first published on the website in September 2009.

Photograph © Scott D. Johnson

The Second Coming by Townsend Walker

Jesus Christ did not rise at 7:20 on the evening of May 23, 1928 as the Reverend Herbert Barnes had foretold. The hundred people assembled around James Smith's cellar door began to drift away after thirty minutes of inaction. The preacher continued to exhort before the dwindling numbers, "Lord, our Savior, we implore thee, come to us poor sinners, come, that we may hear thy words: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live . . .'" An hour later, only Charity Smith and the Graham spinsters were kneeling with him.

A pleasing and precocious girl, Charity had just turned seventeen. Tonight, in honor of the impending second coming of the Lord, and not coincidentally to impress prospective beaux assembled around the cellar, she was wearing her new white sun dress. Reverend Barnes was in black serge. Long white hair flowed to his shoulders and a prophet's beard covered the front of his frock coat. He turned to Charity, tiny black eyes glinting under a top hat. "You should go into the house now, my child. I will be in momentarily. I must see to the cellar," he mumbled, as he went down the steps. "I fear foul play."

Peering into the darkness, Reverend Barnes whispered, "Sam, where the hell are you?"

Back in the corner, among some wooden kegs, he spied the splayed out figure of the un-resurrected Christ. The white robe was dirty, his long blond hair disheveled, and the beard had drifted off his chin.

"Sam, what in God's name happened?"

"We was down here getting ready, me and Charity, and was looking for somewhere I could sit until the time," Sam said. "That's when I saw these kegs here."

"I can smell the liquor on you," the Reverend said. "This resurrection was going to carry us into Lubbock and every town in West Texas. Now we'll have to go 500 miles before we find anyone who hasn't heard of this debacle."

He reached down to pull Sam to his feet. "Get up you simpering fool."

"Think we could take a keg with us?" Sam said. "It's powerful good."

That did it. The preacher left Sam where he was sprawled. "Christs are a dime a dozen. I'm getting me a new one. Give me that wig and beard. You can rot here."

As he was leaving, Charity poked her head down into the cellar. "What are you doing down here? What happened to that fellow was with you? Pa's upstairs wondering he's going to get paid."

The Reverend took her by the arm and led her toward the barn. "Charity, a young woman like you, in a small town like this, it doesn't seem to offer much. I've thought about a new way to bring people to the Lord, and Charity, you're part of that, a big part. Come with me, on a mission, on the Lord's mission."

From the time she was seven and learned about a world outside Levelland, Texas, Charity knew her future was anywhere but this flat brown land interrupted by nothing higher than cotton bolls. This preacher might be her ticket. “I’d have to talk to my folks. Besides, the money you owe Pa?”

He tugged on his beard. “The way I see it: your father and his illegal liquor caused Our Lord and Savior to stay in his tomb tonight. And now that I am acquainted with your Pa’s ways, I might easily have a word with the sheriff.”

The Reverend looked back toward the faded white clapboard house and saw Mrs. Smith peering out from behind the lace curtains. He steered Charity so the barn was between them and the house, then put his arm around her, and pulled her toward him.



“Reverend Barnes, what are you doing?”

“The love of God is flowing through me, sister, and directing me to show you that special love He has for you.”

He was looking into cornflower blue eyes set among fair features and couldn’t resist. Lips poked out of his snowy face and moved towards Charity’s pink ones. The sweetness he’d hoped to taste was soured by the sharp stab between his legs. He curled up on the ground and closed his eyes.

The Reverend slowly, and painfully, uncoiled himself, and looked up at Charity, standing there. “Herbert, the way I see it is this: you could have made a small fortune

out there tonight; you talk real good, but you're sloppy," she said. "So, I'm going with you; we'll do the Lord's mission and all that stuff, but I'm calling shots from here out."

Herbert struggled to get his feet under him. A mixture of hope and trepidation trickled through him.

"Number one: no hick towns; we're going to Austin where real money is," she said. "And you're getting rid of that pathetic costume and hair."

"Yes, Sister Charity."

"Number two: touch me again, and you'd better hope the border is only an hour away, and you got yourself a fast car."

"Yes, Sister Charity."

"Three: I'll take charge of the fifty bucks you owe Pa, plus whatever else you got; get us set up."

Reluctantly, the Reverend handed her \$100, hiding a twenty.

They arrived in Austin late the next afternoon. Driving down Brazos Street, Charity asked the Reverend to stop the car. She hopped out, valise in hand, and ran off down the street.

"Sister Charity, stop, where are you going?" he called.

She turned, lifting her arms heavenward and crooned, "And now abideth Faith, Hope and Charity; these three, and the greatest of these is Charity," then, "But don't depend on Charity!"

Editor's Note

The Second Coming was first published on the website in September 2009 and won the September Story of the Month Contest.

Photograph © Tanaya Winder

Bringing the War Back Home by Jac Cattaneo

My twin brother Luke was trouble when we were kids. Hell, there was that time he dropped an open penknife on his foot and told Mom it was me, his tomboy sister, stabbing him. Or the day he tied me to a post at the river station and left me there till a night fisherman set me free. Last summer we turned eighteen and I asked for books for college. Luke sweet-talked Mom into persuading Pa to buy him a drum kit.

Just what that house didn't need, the clatter of drums. Before Pa got back from Vietnam the loudest sound we ever heard was the crash of the thunder in the fall when the storms rolled in off the ocean. Mom wouldn't let us watch TV, she said it upset her seeing those soldiers and what they had to go through. I said it's more like what the Vietnamese have to go through, but she said she weren't having no Commie talk in her house, with Pa away, fighting for his country. When she said that I could see she wanted to cry, so I didn't say what I really thought about it.

When Pa got home in the spring with his arm cut off at the elbow, all that changed. Everybody started saying what they felt, first him and then my brother and then we all joined in. Mom doesn't usually like fighting, but when Pa shouted at her she yelled right back. One evening she threw the whole load of kitchen stuff at him, plates and glasses, things that would break. Then she slammed the door and Pa hollered at Luke to fetch him a beer and he turned on the news, volume right up, so that Mom could hear the sound of machinegun fire and explosions all the time that she was crying in her bedroom.

Pa was proud of my brother, I could tell by the way he looked at him sideways when he thought Luke wasn't looking. On the morning of my birthday I went onto the porch and saw them all standing around these big maroon drums. Pa had his hand on Luke's shoulder, patting it.

'You're a man now, son,' he said, all gruff-like, 'make some noise.'

Boy, he sure did. If you think the sound of slamming doors and shouting is bad you ain't never heard my brother playing the drums. That summer he slept in most mornings but by noon he was off, a-hammering and pounding, no rhythm as far as I could see, just different kinds of crashing like he was trying to break down the world into little pieces of noise. My friends stopped visiting our house, even Anna who always used to hang around Luke at school. When I asked her to come over, she pulled a face.

'My brother'll be there,' I said, trying to persuade her.

'He's mighty fine, Jess, I just don't know about them drums. You can hear that racket from the other side of the river. Can't imagine it up close, like.'

Then Luke told us he was going to form a band.

'You gonna take those stupid drums someplace else?' I asked him.

'Hell, no,' Pa said. 'That ain't necessary. You can practice here, boy. Shake the place up.'

It was shaking fine without a band as far as I could see. That night as I lay in bed listening to my folks yelling at each other, I thought about messing up Luke's drums so he wouldn't keep on spoiling my vacation.

I waited till the house was silent as the moon after the astronauts went home. Then I went out onto the porch. There was a big piece of plastic over Luke's kit and I yanked it at the bottom so it slid onto the ground, leaving the drums bare and shiny in the dark. The moon was off sulking behind a cloud somewhere, so I struck a match while I thought about what could be done. Fire was way too dangerous, given that our house was wood. Where could I find a knife? I was thinking these things when I heard a sound inside, on the other side of the door.

I ducked down behind the biggest drum just as Pa stepped out onto the porch. He had his guitar. He sat down on the steps and looked out towards the river, except you couldn't see it on account of there being no moon. I was surprised, because I had clean forgotten that my pa ever had a guitar. Guess he took it with him when he went away to fight.

He put it on his knees and kind of wedged it under his half arm. He started to strum, but he couldn't make proper music on account of only having one hand. I felt bad because I couldn't remember if he was right or left handed. It was his right hand that had gone. Seeing him sitting there trying to play made the tears well up in my eyes. He was making a sniffing noise, so perhaps he was weeping too.

I didn't do nothing to Luke's drums that night, but I wanted them broken more than ever. When the day for band practice came round, I still hadn't come up with a plan. I went down the river to fish, on my own, because most of my friends avoided me now.

People in the shops gave me funny looks too, like they were sorry for me or something. It seemed a lot of commotion over a set of drums.

But the fishing was no good because it started to rain, churning the water up muddy and brown. I went home and Luke was sat on the porch next to his drums, holding a green glass beer bottle. There was an empty one next to his feet.

'You ain't allowed to drink!' I said, but Luke just smiled and went

'Courtesy of Pa,' so there wasn't anything more I could say.

I went into our bedroom and slammed the door, ornery-like, though it was the usual way of shutting things that summer. I hadn't made my bed yet and I laid myself down on the crumpled sheets and beat the pillow with my fists. I was so busy giving it a good thrashing that I didn't notice the door open and Luke come in.

'JJ's comin' round for band practice,' he said. 'His guitar's gotta busted string. D'ya know where that old one is?'

'That's Pa's guitar! You can't have that without asking him!' My fist was still clenched from hitting the pillow and I thought about whopping Luke.

'You know he ain't here to ask. Mom's drivin' him to the doctor's in Savannah - they won't be home for ages now. C'mon Jess, give it up. Don't be such a goody-two-shoes.'

I raised my hand and went to hit him, but he caught my arm, taunting me:

‘Goody-goody, but still scrapping like a boy.’

He backed out the door still holding my wrist, pulling me with him into our folks’ bedroom. I jerked my arm free and watched while he opened the closet and poked about. In the end he found the guitar under the bed.

‘That’s important to Pa,’ I told him. ‘You can’t just take it.’

Luke turned and sneered. ‘They may not have told you, but you need two hands to play guitar.’

‘You gotta ask first,’ I pleaded. Maybe Pa pulled his fingers over the strings every night out there on the porch. But I couldn’t tell Luke, it was our secret, Pa’s and mine. My brother shrugged, picked up the guitar, walked out and left me there.

I sat on the bed and listened to the sound of him tuning the strings. What would Pa say when he got home? Then I heard the sound of the car pulling up behind the house and ran to the porch.

‘They’re coming Luke, - stop playing!’

My brother slid the guitar off of his shoulder and stood it behind his drums. The neck still stuck out, like it wanted to be seen. Then he grabbed the bottles off the floor and held them out to me.

‘Thought you said Pa let you have those beers?’ I asked. He told me to shut up and hide the bottles, quick.

‘Why should I?’ I said, but he just put them in my hands and pushed me towards the steps. I stood my ground. ‘You took Pa’s guitar without asking. Why should I do anything you say?’

‘Go now!’ shouted Luke, but it was too late. Pa came out through the porch door and saw me standing there holding the empty bottles and said ‘what ya doin’, Jessie?’ and I dropped the bottles and they smashed on the steps, green glass flying everywhere and cutting red grooves into my bare ankles. Mom was behind Pa trying to see what was happening and Luke was staring at me, asking me with his eyes not to say anything.

For a moment everything was still.

‘Jessica! Tell me where you got them bottles,’ Pa yelled.

I looked at Luke who was shaking his head. The guitar neck was poking out right next to Pa’s leg, almost touching him.

‘Luke stole your beer,’ I said. The words felt thick, like I was talking through sawdust, but I didn’t care. ‘He took your guitar from under your bed and he was playin’ it an’ all.’ I pointed.

Pa reached down to pick up the guitar. As he turned his back, Luke drew a finger across his throat. Mom pushed through, saw the blood on my feet and ankles and started to scream.

It was like all the sounds in the world happened then. Pa lifted the guitar and smashed it down on Luke’s bass drum. The strings let out a twanging cry as the wood splintered through the drum, making it boom like thunder, dying. Luke shouted out and tried to grab Pa, but Pa turned and knocked him backwards, hitting him across the chest

with the broken guitar. Mom started to sob, like something was breaking inside of her. I didn't move. I was sure that there was glass under my skin.

There's no money for college now Pa has gone. Mom's not sure where he's living now. I see her watching for the postman every day. Luke left soon after Pa did, on the day his draft letter came. He said he'd run away rather than go to the army, to have bits of him blown off. We hear from him sometimes, collect calls in the middle of the night from places like Caracas or Acapulco. The house is quiet. Mom hates the TV and I don't listen to music anymore. The war will be over soon, they say.



Editor's Note

Bringing the War Back Home was first published on the website in September 2009.

Photograph © Matthias Krug

Hunt the Mailman by Carolyn Kegel

She ought to have the letter by now.

She stared down at the stove, down at the unbearable number. Her left eye twitched. It was a new habit, one that had developed over several weeks of waiting under the spell of a promise - a force so mighty a simple mouse-like woman of twenty-nine could not sustain the weight all by herself without doubt and fear creeping in and causing her to shudder. Without leaving blue and brown shadows in the half-moons under her vigorous eyes.

She ought to have held it and read it and gotten back on track, on with the day. Instead she was suspended in uncertainty, dangling from its hook, circling the kitchen, drying an inconsequential dish. The whole matter was in the hands of the mailman.

The room was quiet. She had flipped off the radio ten long minutes earlier. She had wanted to create an appropriate amount of silence for the reading of the letter. In the living room she had arranged fluffy pillows on the sofa so that when she was seated she could comfortably extend her arm, allowing for a certain grace that comes with peace, a grace that exceeds even the blow of justice. She expected that.

The information would enter her home in a direct flood-lit path from envelope to ink into words and sentences which would then deliver their mysterious and wondrous message. She was afraid she might be overcome by the information, that she would require silence, and so there was silence.

But if the news was not good.

Then.

She paused, dragging a wet finger over the countertop. Then she would console herself with the orderliness of her possessions. The control she had over her belongings was comforting. The bookcase was arranged in descending height of hardbound then softbound fiction on the top shelf, moving aesthetically below to history. History was nearly fiction. She had only a few of these volumes and a few philosophy textbooks she had purchased second-hand at the university. She was a graduate. She had finished in the top tenth in her class of six thousand. That was an accomplishment she attributed to an outstanding ability to memorize. She could scribble out anything that could then be divided onto the flip sides of index cards, visualize the scribbles and commit it all into her short-term memory. She had no other real talent and she was not a *personality*, someone like the select few who *shined* at parties. They were only a select few and she reminded herself that she was by far in the majority of solid people who would never have to experience the sadness of seeing their limelight fade. She was asked to parties if only to fill an obligatory chair, to provide a backdrop on which to reflect the glow of others. Someone had to listen to their stories.

Her coffee table was dusted, spritzed this morning with Lemon Scented Pledge. That was one of the small things she could do to distract herself. And she had set out a handful of M&M's in a wooden palm leaf, just in case she might need them later.

Her eye twitched. She was disturbed by the silence.

What do you do with yourself when the very things you rely upon fall apart?

She flipped the radio back on and listened to every word of a commercial. She relied too heavily on the mailman, too heavily on the assurance that he would do his job.

She would give him fifteen more minutes. Surely that was enough time to plod up the street, to wheel the rickety mail cart around a corner. Perhaps at this moment he was heaving the enormous bag over his shoulder, hiking it further around his back as he opened a door. How much time did it take a person to unlock a row of boxes? It should only require the briefest of moments to remove the stack of letters, to pull off the rubber band. Perhaps he let it slip and fall and was delayed by stooping his awkward, inflexible back to pick it up.

She lowered her body onto the sofa. She wanted to review how she would open the letter. What was the proper procedure? Should she use her fingernail and rip the envelope, match the process with her expectations? Or should she preserve the moment taking care, take something fine, a sterling butter knife and slit it neatly for posterity. A letter opener.

She didn't have one. A swift, terrifying thought passed through her mind that this was precisely the reason she had never received mail of this caliber. She had not and would not receive letters of excellence because she was not prepared. Excellence is erected stone by stone, each rock smoothed and measured and lifted and laid out for the gods until the final, culminating piece is lowered by an obelisk of patient, steady hands. It is never, ever, dropped willy-nilly from the sky by chance. By an inefficient mailman.

No. No, she said. She had not received quality mail because the mailman was not doing his job. He was dawdling, taking his time as he strolled up sidewalks looking at birds and saying hello to strangers. He hated his job. He had no respect for people.

She picked up her sweater, dropped her keychain into her pants pocket and ran downstairs.

From the landing she determined that no one was in the foyer. This was confirmed when the mailboxes were in sight. It was the usual blond-wood lacquered case, the usual glass face staring out among the others in the deserted foyer. They were all lined up like empty coffins waiting out the morning at the morgue. Was it possible he had come and gone? Her key was a thin silver colored trinket the size of a thumb nail. Her box read simply "M. Sanders. 409." She opened it. Even blind she could feel from the weight as it swung freely there was nothing. She flipped it closed, twisted the key, checked her watch. This was uncalled for. People have a right to their mail.

Trudging upstairs she tried to convince herself she didn't have to think about the mailman. There were other things she could do to take her mind off letters. What are letters anyway but things that come and go? She opened the door to the flooding sounds from her radio. The reception faltered. She fiddled with the knob and found a loud raucous station. She would even go so far as to take off her shoes. She lay back among the

pillows on the sofa, sighing, aimlessly picking at the M&M's. She devised a scheme to eat them in alphabetical order according to color. Blue, brown, green, orange, red, yellow.

Music filled the room splashing jabs of raucous sound. She threw back the last yellow candies, jumped up without thinking and went into the kitchen to have a look at the butter knife.

It was slightly wet and glistened in the sunlight dancing over the drying rack. The blade paled in comparison to the radiant length of the steak knife. She did not want to touch it.

This was all such classic behavior. This traipsing about her home, wasting time puzzling over matters that did not matter, squandering time when all she really had in the world was time. Quite simply, she did not have the strength of character to receive such a letter. She was a weak, weak person. She belonged under the indifferent authority of the mailman. She grabbed at the dishtowel. It was speckled with a variety of ducks and their scientific classifications, Mallards, Heron, etcetera. She dabbed it around the butter knife, patting at drops of water, then tucked it in her pocket.

Armed, she put on her shoes, then a jacket over her sweater and descended again down the four flights to the ground floor where she burst out into the city.

The coolness shocked and startled her. She made an instant declaration: *I will walk until I find him.*

She looked left and right. The mailman's route delivered sent him first to the building on the left. She went up to the door.

No sign.

She began walking faster, only glancing inside other buildings,

swinging her arms. She had to cross the street. People walked by her oblivious of the expedition, oblivious to the importance of delayed mail. She walked all the way up Houghton to James Street and then she stopped, confused. What is his area? Does he come from up there or does he continue from Taylor? Isn't that a different zip code?

She was standing still for a confused moment, weighing the vast possibilities when she saw a blue uniform across the block on Penn. It was definitely her mailman. He must be her mailman. She walked boldly out into the street. She had not looked for cars and now



they were honking at her, drivers were shouting at her, but she didn't care, she hardly heard a word.

He was wheeling around a large cart at a painfully slow clip so it was easy to catch up. But he cruised right on by an apartment building. He did not even bother to stop and distribute the mail. Then everything became numbingly, shockingly clear. He entered the Golden Oven restaurant.

He must think he is going to have lunch.

She was appalled. It would be hours now.

She followed him inside. She was in no mood to return home with this distasteful knowledge. He sat next to the window. She took a table towards the rear where she might surreptitiously watch his progress. A smiling waitress handed over a menu to her. Her name badge said, Sue.

She thought about finances. She had some money but not enough to waste on a restaurant.

Sue was speaking to the mailman. They appeared to know each other.

Sue took out a pad of paper. No, she would not write. They were talking. She moved her hand to write. Poised her pen. Stopped. She did not need to write. They were not even talking about food.

Has he changed his mind? His order was so trivial it did not require writing down.

Didn't Sue know the danger she was unleashing by not writing anything down, the world of mistakes, of hesitation. of having to go back and retrace her thoughts without the words, without the facts on paper?

They laughed.

No one respects the importance of their job.

Sue rotated. She regarded M. Sanders watching blandly at her folded menu. A shrug. "Ready?" Sue said.

She was certainly not wasting a moment with M. Sanders who returned her attention to the menu, obliquely considering sandwiches. It would be a grave mistake to order something which required preparation if the mailman was only having coffee.

"Yes," she said making the word seem like a lot of food. "Coffee. With low-fat milk."

Sue waited. She rolled her eyes over the width of the four-person table and up over her head at the ceiling.

A gaze towards God.

"Something to eat?"

All she could think about was that Sue had not yet returned to the kitchen to place the mailman's order. "All right. Scrambled eggs."

"Toast?"

"No. I don't even want eggs."

Sue balanced her weight on one hip, "It comes with it."

"Fine."

"Wheat, white or rye?"

"White."

She went off to the kitchen.

M. Sanders stared at the mailman. She had never seen this particular mailman. He was in his early thirties, red-haired, a long, pocked face. He fiddled with the salt and pepper shakers and M. Sanders would have guessed by his incompetence that he was new at this job except for a few things that checked differently. His uniform was faded. The shoulders slouched with an inept fatigue, the kind of sleepiness that comes with too much sleep. He knew the waitress. He had walked in the restaurant at a premeditated pace. This collective data confirmed the worst, she had found her mailman.

Sue buoyantly reappeared slinging cups and a coffee pot. The lightness of her footsteps made a mockery of the work ethic.

She went straight to the table by the window and served the mailman. They smiled at each other. Then she returned to M. Sander's table and set down a cup of black coffee.

"Creamer's by your hand," she said before M. Sanders could say a word.

She looked up incredulously, and Sue said, "Eggs take a minute."

Rapidly, she stirred the coffee hoping her action would inspire action in others. She sipped and glanced at the mailman's progress. He turned his head coincidentally catching her eyes which were fixed on his face. He blinked. Sipped. Swallowed. He put down his cup. Looked directly away and out the window at his parked mail cart and patted his selfish, smug mouth with a napkin.

She hardly noticed Sue return with the eggs. The coffee had gone to her head. She was more jittery than ever. She felt the knife aside her waist and she was almost astounded by her memory of the letter.

Then there were the eggs. Once again she could not accept the weakness in her personality that had allowed her to be persuaded by other insignificant people into doing something she did not wish to do.

She stood up. She left an entire ten dollar bill on the table and brushed past the mailman to wait outdoors. That was ample money to cover any confusion her leaving might create.

She was leaning against the outside wall of the restaurant waiting. It was important to do only what she set out to do. To live according to plan. To have a plan. Distraction was the culprit of a wide variety of mistakes. She recounted them all easily. She waited, thinking clearly about the man eating lunch.

Minutes went by. A corner of ducks hung over the flap of her coat pocket. She began to hum. Through the window she watched the mailman pay his bill. Certain knowledge was moments away. Yes, his hand pushed open the door. It was gloved. The delicate wheels of the mail cart made a tinkling sound on the sidewalk. He walked by her.

"Uh," she cried, but her voice was like the muffled cry of a cry in a dream where she was unable to actually cry out for help.

He did not stop.

"Sir!"

He was moving out into the intersection and she was racing to keep up with him.
"Excuse me!"

She ran to make the light, but he stopped to lift the wheels up over the curb. She bent down to help him.

"Hey!" He jerked away the cart and stood upright and looked wickedly at her.

This man is no civil servant.

Her face went flush and she was out of breath and at the same moment on the verge of trying again to cry for help.

"You got a problem?" he said.

Even his gestures were lazy, fraught with indifference.

"Yes! You're late!"

"I get a lunch hour," he said with factual superiority.

"That was forty-one minutes, what's forty-one minutes?"

"Look lady," he started to say. Then, as if changing his mind, he waved her off with a dismissive wave and wheeled the cart up the block.

Her head went dizzy, blank with blackness and then the pinpricks of spiraling light filled her vision. Who was he? He didn't know anything. Didn't he know that she was someone about to receive a superior piece of mail?

She didn't know where to turn, to go back or to move forward. It was impossible. She trailed up behind him and he was mumbling, "You do your job, let me worry about mine."

She reached his sleeve and tugged on that awful, faded jacket. His face, close up, was lined with strains of worry along his forehead. Bulging pimples dotted his jowl. He had scars everywhere. His green, average eyes jerked across her face.

Casually, easily, he turned away.

She took two more impossible steps to keep up with him, but he was gone.

Her legs went weak again. What strength would be required now to stand up straight, to walk forward towards him?

She cried out, "Sir!" this time loudly, freely with the full fortitude required to save him from his mediocrity, to help him know how important he was to the world, what power he held in his hands. She could do that for one person, surely, she could reach one person, save one person from this maddening inescapable chaos.

"Sir!" she cried out into the street.

He would not look back.

Editor's Note

Hunt the Mailman was first published on the website in August 2009.

Photograph © Matthias Krug

The Boy Who Knew the Mountain by Kathy Lerner

Once, in the valley of the red rock, there lived a boy who knew the mountain. Each night he would escape from the houses to the edge of the valley, and here he would sit and have great conversations with his friend. He talked and he listened. He prayed and he danced. He laughed and he wept, with the mountain. Nobody knew where the boy travelled in the night. He was the only one in his village who heard the mountain's voice, and he told no one.

The voice that everyone did hear belonged to the man in the moon. When his home was crescent, people would say the man was fishing over the edge. When it was full, they would say he shouted while dancing around the rim. But however the boy listened, he could not catch a note of the moon man's song. He tried making his breath quiet. He tried shutting his eyes and concentrating. And he tried starting off a hundred songs to see if the man would follow. Still, the boy could not hear the voice of the man in the moon. This too he told no one.

Before long, the boy began to feel lonely. His village gathered in the evenings when the moon appeared, to ask the man questions, and make bargains with him, and sing him all the songs that they knew. But the boy was still the only soul who could not hear him answer. One summer night such as this, the boy could not bear it any longer. While the people's faces were turned upwards towards the sky, he slipped from the fringe of the crowd, darted behind houses and dry bush, and finally rested by the foot of the mountain.

With troubled eyes and aching legs, the boy sat down on a flat rock, still warm from the summer heat. He drew his knees to his chin as he gazed up to the glowing crescent moon. He thought it looked so very far away. As curious lizards scuttled by his feet, the boy closed his eyes and listened with all his might. He listened for the voice of the moon man, for the song which all the others heard him sing while he waited for nightfish. He listened, but did not hear a sound.

Just as the last star was flickering to life in the deep blue over his head, the boy began to feel a familiar rumble in the ground. The still-warm rocks around him seemed to quake, and the sound of loose pebbles crashing down the hillside reached his ears. He turned and looked up to see the great mountain waking behind him. She stretched and shook off the dust that had settled on her, and she opened her vast stone eyes to the boy at her feet.

"What is troubling you, my son?"

"Oh mother, what will I do?" the boy cried. "Everybody in the village can see and hear the man who lives in the moon. Even the young children say they have heard him singing when they go to sleep."

"And you have not?"

"I have never heard, nor seen him – not once! What is wrong with me?"

The mountain's voice was firm but soft. "Why should anything be wrong with you, my son? Is the man of the moon the only one there is to know?"

"Everyone hears him, mother! Every last babe! They ask him questions, and make their bargains with him, and sing to him! But he won't answer me. I can only watch the others. How will they accept me like this? I will be worth nothing to them."

"My son," the mountain spoke, "you have many gifts. They are not the gifts of every person, but they are yours."

But the boy was too impatient to listen to her counsel. He was already pacing back and forth, back and forth, kicking up the red earth beneath him. Suddenly, he turned his back to the mountain and walked a few paces away.

"If the moon man will not speak to me, then I will force him out from his hiding place! I *will* find him, even if I must lasso the moon and pull it to the valley!"

The mountain behind him was silent. The boy thought for a moment that he felt her growing sad. As he turned back to look at her, however, his eyes strayed over her shoulder and up to the shining moon. He remembered his dilemma, and he strode briskly back to the foot of the mountain. Climbing once more on the large, flat rock, which had by then grown cold, he turned out towards the valley and began his declaration,

"May every rock and every brush hear my words! May every star in the skies, and every speck of dirt on the land remember what I say. Tonight, I say to the man who lives on the moon that you can no longer hide from me. Whatever it takes, I will make you show yourself! I will make you answer me!"

And so the boy leapt from the flat rock and faced the houses that were now filled and peaceful. He puffed out his chest, balled his fists at his sides, and stalked back to the edge of the village. His face would have frightened away a wolf. And though the boy did not once stop to look back at the mountain, the mountain watched him walk all the way home.

The next night, just as the boy had sworn, he travelled back out to the end of the valley, this time with a bow in hand and a satchel full of arrows at his back.

"Man of the moon, won't you speak?" the boy called in his loudest voice up to the cream colored sliver of light.

He waited one second...then two...and not a sound came from the sky.

"If you will not speak, then take an arrow in your side!"

And the boy drew from the satchel behind him, and pulled the string of his bow taut across the thin wooden arrow. Closing one eye and aiming towards the bottom curve, where he imagined the man might be sitting to hang his fishing pole, he snapped his fingers away from the silver bowstring. The arrow took flight into the dark night sky, fire colored ribbons streaming out behind where he had tied them.

Smaller and smaller did the sharp rod seem to become, so that the boy thought it must have struck the moon's toe. He held his breath as he waited – one second...then two...and as moments passed, nothing.

And so the boy took out his second arrow. Then, he took out his third. Finally, he stretched his bowstring and sent his last arrow soaring up into the deep night. But the sky remained silent around him.

“You have hidden yourself from me tonight, moon man,” the boy called, “but tomorrow I *will* find you!”

As the boy stomped homewards across the dusty land, just before he came to the houses, he stopped to gaze back out over the valley. His eye caught the mountain, still and quiet in the distance. But he could not make out her face from where he stood.

And so the next night the boy took stones, and pitched them high into the air. The night after that, he tried tossing a rope, with a prickly branch tied to one end. He danced and prayed one night, and he sang and shouted curses the next. He even tried eating the special medicine plant, thinking that might help him to see the man. Days grew into weeks, until the moon became full and close to the land, lighting up the valley. After resting near a rock to drop his empty satchel, the tired boy walked out into the open land. He lifted his eyes to the glowing disc in a sea of blue night.

“I have nothing else to bring here, moon man,” the boy called. “There is no other way I know to make you come out from your hiding. I can only ask you, beg you, once more to show yourself to me. Man of the moon, won't you speak?”

The boy watched for the slightest shadow to appear. He listened for the smallest noise to reach his ears. He waited one second...then two...and still not a sound could be heard in the valley.

Lowering his sight to the warm, dried land, the boy turned and walked towards the foot of the great mountain. He sat and drew his knees to his chin, gathering himself up tight. His eyes closed and he hid his face in his knees, while hot tears rolled down his dusty cheeks.

As the boy only cried, and forgot the world, the faintest of sounds came whispering through the valley. It started with a distant hum of vibration, quickly followed by the screeching echo of rocks scraping against one another. Soon, streams of loose pebbles could be heard tumbling down the hillside. And beneath his seat, the boy, still clutching his knees, began to feel that familiar rumble in the ground.

He snapped his head up and twisted himself around to look up the steep rock face. Dust fell away as the mountain opened her eyes to gaze gently down upon him.

“What is troubling you my son?”

“Oh mother, what will I do?” the boy cried. “I have failed to make the moon man show himself to me. What will the people say? I have listened and listened, but I can't hear him.”

The mountain was silent for a few moments, and the boy at her feet waited – one second...then two...and she closed her eyes and began to hum softly. She sang and played a strange melody, while the boy sat still and quiet. Once the song had ended, she slowly opened her eyes again and bent herself low around him.

“My son,” the mountain spoke, “can you not hear me?”

That night, the boy again became a child of the mountain. He knelt at her foot and promised to listen for her voice in each day. There at the edge of the valley, until the morning sun burst over the rocky peaks and chased the moon from the sky, the boy danced and prayed. He sang and he shouted. He laughed and wept.

And even now, as he has grown old with many days and many months, he still tells the people there this first story of the mountain he knows.

Editor's Note

The Boy Who Knew the Mountain was first published on the website in July 2009.

Other Side of the Moon by Matthias Krug

In space, a man stands up from his bed, which is situated smack-bang on the moon. He has set up camp in one of those craters you see if you have a good pair of strong binoculars. They teach you in school that humans can't live on the moon. But here is the man in space. He gets up from his bed on the moon and stretches his arms out to either side. There is only moon-space all around him. Not a soul in sight.

If this is the future, if man has conquered space and more specifically the moon as a living area at the time of this story, where on earth are all the other people?

The man gets up now, and begins to take off his pyjamas. They have little teddy bears on them. He takes them off and the pyjamas begin to float away. Not that he is bothered. He scratches his balls in perfect man fashion. This seems to be no mutation. A very healthy male, reproductive organ very much intact, is now standing naked on the moon. There is some hair on his chest, his head, his cheeks and on his private parts. He looks very normal, nothing to write about.

But if this is a normal, perfectly able-bodied male human being, there surely needs to be a female around somewhere to engage in animalistic mating rituals with him. Right?

Maybe she is just waking up on the other side of the moon.

We do not find out because, all of a sudden, the man who does not seem to float and has a very healthy reproductive organ between his legs starts to talk to the moon. Just like that, as if it were normal to talk to the moon.

'Good morning, moon.'

'What do you mean, good morning? I am the princess of the night,' the moon answers, somewhat annoyed at the blemish on her tender crater-scarred face.

'Well, I need at least to imagine that there is a night and a day. Can I even see the sun from here?'

'The sun? Who is the sun?' the moon asks. The conversation comes to an end. There is nothing more to be said. The man sits down in a moon crater and looks down at the tiny blue earth below.

On the other side of the moon a woman stirs to life. She has been sleeping on the white, chalky face of the moon. She has no bed, only a little white blanket. She is perfectly naked and much too beautiful to be this alone. The moon is enchanted.

'Good morning moon,' she says, brushing some moon chalk off her slender back. The white little blanket floats away into space.

'Good morning,' the moon says.

'I say, is there no sun in this place, to get a little tanned?' the woman asks. She looks herself over and finds her body too white.

'Yes, the sun shines from over there,' the moon replies, pointing out a direction with her fragile eyes.

From this we must deduct two things:

- 1) It is perfectly possible for the moon to have two faces and to talk.
- 2) Human beings can remain naked on the moon without encountering any great problems and without floating off into space.

Now, though, the moon has encountered a problem. The man on the other side has heard it talk to the woman. At the sound of a female voice other than that of the moon, his reproductive organ stirs. It is the age-old call of mating. He begins to walk, across mounds of white chalk and over craters and under little bridges. He finds this walking very easy, almost a floating-walking, and quickly comes to the other side of the moon. There he sees her. She stands perfectly naked and looks at the man.

‘I thought I was alone here,’ the man says, and as he speaks the moon loses her face and becomes the beautiful immovable object we see every other night or so in the sky.

The woman looks at his hairy balls. Then she looks again at her own slender white body. It is beautiful but she does not know it.

‘So did I. What a relief. I thought I was talking to the moon.’

‘I thought the same thing.’

There is an awkward silence of the I like you type. The moon recedes further, but it cannot shake itself away from these two human beings who are inexplicably stranded on its face.

‘Do you have any idea how we came to be here?’ the naked woman asks.

‘A nuclear war, and we are the last two survivors?’ the naked man suggests, moving closer to her beautiful white body. The tender glow of the moon reflects from her nipples. Starlets glow nearby. It is, after all, space.

‘No, don’t be silly. Nuclear weapons were eliminated a long while ago. Don’t you remember?’

Something stirs in the man’s mind. Of course he remembers. They are there because they chose to be.

‘You can be anywhere you want, and we chose to be here,’ he tells her, and she too remembers now.

‘The freedom of choice, the freedom of being,’ she says, and they lie down together and suddenly, grotesque and tender all at once, they begin to love each other.

‘We are the last two human beings...’ he whispers in her moon-dust-filled ear.

‘...on the moon,’ she moans.

You should be able to see all this exciting copulation happening with a powerful telescope every night; only it is taking place on the other side of the moon.

Editor’s Note

Other Side of the Moon was first published on the website in July 2009.

Slow Motion Riders by Richard Osgood

Seated on a bench in front of Hill's Five-and-Dime at the corner of Mulberry and Main, Reis Gaffney peeled the wrapper from a purple Tootsie Pop and leaned into the bouquet of artificial flavor. His friend, Paul Herrin, sat down beside him and spread his short-sleeved arms along the top of the wooden backrest.

"You gonna eat that thing or have sex with it?" said Paul.

Reis ignored him and held the Pop at eye level, reflecting on its beauty, its inner meaning, its containment of the universe in one simple snack, as if a priest to a Communion wafer on Sunday morning. He lowered the Pop to his mouth and drew a single lick over the purple candy shell.

"One," said Reis.

He turned the Pop a quarter-revolution and dragged his tongue up the ridge.

"Two," he added.

Another quarter-revolution and another lick.

"Three."

"You've got to be shitting me," said Paul.

Reis was in cadence and could not be interrupted. One-Mississippi, quarter-revolution. Two-Mississippi, lick. Three-Mississippi, "Four." One-Mississippi, quarter-revolution. Two-Mississippi, lick. Three-Mississippi, "Five."

Three young boys on Stingray bikes pulled up to the Five-and-Dime and dismounted. Two boys went into the store while the third, sidetracked by the mechanical interplay of Reis and his Tootsie Pop, approached the bench.

"What'cha doin', Mister?"

"Don't bother him, kid," Paul grunted. "He's on a mission."

"Thirty-seven," said Reis.

The two boys emerged from the store and joined the third in front of the bench. They each removed from comic strip wrappers little pink bricks of bubble gum.

"What's he doin'?" said one to the other.

"Countin' the licks," the first boy replied.

"The licks to the center?"

"The licks to the center."

"He'll never do it," added the third.

"No shit," mumbled Paul to himself.

"Eighty-nine," said Reis.

Drawn by curiosity and the prospect of festivity, a crowd gathered around them. Businessmen, meter maids, workers in hard hats. Street sweepers, window washers, shoppers in high heels. Young mothers pushing strollers with rattling babies and old women pulling tag-a-longs with leafy green produce swelling from paper sacks. They all

came to share in spontaneous delight that was spilling through cracks in the shell of monotony.

A hot dog vendor wheeled his cart up the sidewalk and stopped at the gathering crowd. He chucked the wheels and hoisted a yellow-and-red umbrella. Steam from the cart enticed probing noses as a ratty brown dog with a broken tail, circled and hopped at the feet of the Hungarian in apron and paper cap.

"Hot dogs. Get your hot dogs here. Mustard. Relish. Onions and peppers."

Reis turned the pop another quarter revolution and licked.

"Two hundred and twenty-five," he said.



From the opposite direction came an ice-cream vendor, images of Good Humor plastered and crowded on either side of the cart. He pulled a string and jingled a bell and a chorus of jubilant children swarmed to the man in white suit and white cap.

A street mime snuck onto the scene from the north, with white face, white shirt, white gloves, red

pants, and red-and-black suspenders. He pretended to climb an invisible ladder then found himself caught in invisible rain. With a white-gloved hand he frantically cleaned an invisible window to the world.

"Four hundred and fifty-one," said Reis.

On the perch of a silver unicycle, rising above the head-line of the murmuring crowd, a juggler tossed upward and then caught downward a swirl of red clubs in astounding, cascading flamboyance. Down the sidewalk came a honking, red-nosed clown, with a posy of helium balloons in each hand. The children shouted favorite colors; red!—yellow!—blue!—green!, then weaved and danced among the sprightly crowd as the refrain of a familiar Chicago tune, through an open window above the Five-and-Dime, sang of Saturday parks on the Fourth of July.

"Six hundred and forty-one," said Reis.

Pencil and pad at the ready, a reporter approached the scene and forced his way through the crowd. He placed one foot on the bench and leaned his body forward, elbow on knee.

"Word on the street is you're close to discovering the answer to one of life's greatest mysteries. What have you to say about that?"

Reis paused and studied the Pop from every possible angle. It was mostly Tootsie, with a single leaf of purple curled against the chocolate center. He rose from the bench and handed the Pop to the kid.

"Here kid," he said, "throw this out for me, will 'ya?"

The kid looked at the Pop, then up at Reis, and finally back down at the Pop.

"But mister," said the boy, "you're not done yet. There's still some purple on top."

"That's as far as I go," said Reis. "If I go to the end, you know, count the last licks, there will never be reason to do this again."

The kid shrugged and tossed the chocolate remnant in the trash. He mounted his bike and the boys rode off to catch frogs or corral imaginary villains.

The crowd dispersed with a collective buzz of what-ifs and maybe-next-times. The juggler hopped down from his perch on the cycle and slipped the clubs into a pouch at his waist. The hot dog vendor folded the red-and-yellow umbrella and wheeled his cart up the street. Jingling faded as the Good Humor man followed the crowd back to daily routines. All that remained was the frantic mime, trapped on the wrong side of an invisible box.

Editor's Note

Slow Motion Riders was first published on the website in August 2009 and was the August Story of the Month winner.

Photograph © Cameron Cash

The Clown Who Stole Lady Chatterley's Lover

by Allen Kopp

“That dog has got a mouth in its brassiere.”

“A mouse?”

“That dog has got a brassiere in its mouth.”

“I don't see a brassiere.”

“I don't see a dog.”

“There isn't any dog.”

“Well, I have little specks that float over my eyeballs that sometimes look like dogs.”

“Maybe God is trying to tell you something by making you see dogs that aren't there.”

“What are we all doing sitting here talking about dogs that aren't there? Isn't there something constructive we could be doing?”

“No.”

“You're right. There is nothing. We're all dead, but nobody has bothered to tell us yet.”

“Did I tell you I went and planned my own funeral the other day? I'm going to be *fully* embalmed and I'm going to be wearing my white tie and tails. I bought a stainless steel casket and a two-ton concrete vault. My mortal remains are going to be in the ground for a long time. The undertaker said you could open me up seventy-five years after I've died and I wouldn't look one day older.”

“Yes, that's what we all strive for. Looking good seventy-five years after we're dead.”

“Who do you think will be seeing you after you've been dead that long?”

“You never know. Maybe they'll put me in a traveling show and people will pay money to look at me because I look so darned good for somebody that's been dead so long.”

“Yeah, but you won't get any of the money. You won't even know that people are looking at you.”

“That's right. I'll be sitting at the throne of the Lord.”

“So, what possible satisfaction could you get from looking good seventy-five years after you're dead?”

“It will mean that my body is well-preserved.”

“And why is that important?”

“Why don't you just have them put you in a pickling solution and store you in a glass jar? That makes a lot more sense to me and would be a lot cheaper.”

“That sounds like a good idea. I'll look into it.”

“Speaking of freaks in glass jars, I remember when I was a college student—“

“Wasn't that during the time of the Crusades?”

“When I was a college student, they had a pair of Siamese twins in a glass jar in the science department at the university.”

“Were they dead?”

“Well, of course they were dead if they were in a glass jar!”

“Maybe they were really alive and people just thought they were dead.”

“Do you know how idiotic that sounds?”

“What university was *that*?”

“Anyway, they were famous and everybody who came to the university wanted to see them.”

“And what happened to them? Did they sign a movie contract?”

“No, somebody stole them. I mean somebody stole the glass jar they were in. At first everybody thought it was a fraternity prank, but when the police investigated and searched all the fraternity houses, they never found any sign of the twins.”

“So, what’s the moral of your story?”

“I think they’re going to turn up someplace one of these days. Somebody has to have them right this minute. Any one of us might see them at any time.”

“If I see them, I’ll be sure and tell them you’re looking for them.”

“This place is not very lively, is it?”

“About as lively as King Tut’s tomb.”

“You know, I heard that King Tut was really a woman.”

“They cut off his dick and put it in a jar. That’s why they thought he was a woman.”

“He was the dickless wonder.”

“Queen Tut’ just doesn’t have quite the same ring to it.”

“Where’s that big nurse? That big Martha? I’m going to order a pitcher of martinis.”

“She won’t give you a pitcher of martinis. She’d be more likely to give you a sleeping pill to get you to shut up and leave her alone.”

“Or a smack up the side of the head.”

“Or an enema.”

“You know, I haven’t had an enema once since I’ve been here. With all the prunes they serve, who needs an enema?”

“I’ll bet I could get big Martha to unbutton a couple buttons on her uniform. Flash some tit.”

“They might not be real. There’s a rumor going around that she’s really a man.”

“The next time she comes in, I’ll ask her.”

“I heard there’s an ocean on one of the moons of Jupiter.”

“Does anybody give a shit?”

“I think I read it in the paper. Or maybe it came to me in a dream.”

“Hey, what’s on the menu tonight? I hope it’s not red beans and rice again.”

“Maybe it’s roasted Siamese twin. They’ll bring the twins in on a platter with an apple in each of their mouths.”

“Veal cutlets with apple sauce and pureed carrots.”

“They call it veal but I think it’s really dog food. They think that’s all we deserve and, besides that, it’s cheap. They could buy dog food by the case and put it in everything they serve up. Nobody here would ever know the difference. The next time you have something and you’re not quite sure what it is, it’s probably dog food.”

“Have you seen that new woman that just came in a couple days ago? Her name is Florence Lawrence. She looks like Mrs. Bela Lugosi. She’s about six-and-a-half feet tall and she wears long black dresses that go all the way to the floor.”

“I heard she’s got elephantiasis. That’s why the long dresses.”

“What’s elephantiasis?”

“She’s got the legs of an elephant.”

“Does she have a trunk?”

“I’d like to see those elephant legs.”

“Well, you’ll either have to hide in her room and catch or naked or lift up her dress. She keeps those elephant legs hidden.”

“She could probably charge people admission to see her legs. She could make a fortune. Does she eat peanuts? Does she have hooves?”

“I’m sure you’ll have a chance to get well-acquainted with her before you’re dead. Maybe you can sit next to her at dinner and find out what it’s like to be part elephant.”

“At the zoo back where I come from, they had a whole bunch of elephants. I used to love to go see the elephants when I was young. They just stood there calmly chewing, pretending you weren’t there. They wore sandals on their feet.”

“Why did they wear sandals?”

“Because spectator pumps would have been impractical.”

“I guess they wore them because their feet hurt.”

“I don’t think I ever saw an elephant wearing shoes. Was that on one of the moons of Jupiter?”

“Well, it might have been. Or maybe I just dreamed it.”

“Hey, I saw on the bulletin board they’re going to have a clown magician come and entertain us on Saturday.”

“What do they think we are? A bunch of five-year-olds?”

“That clown was here once before. He’s got pink hair and a mean look about him. I saw him pick up a book and put it down inside his baggy pants when he thought nobody was looking.”

“Maybe that was part of his act.”

“What was the book?”

“I think it was *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. It definitely was not *The Book of Common Prayer*.”

“If you saw him take the book, why didn’t you report him?”

“It wasn’t any of my affair. He can take *all* the books if he wants to. I don’t care what people do, as long as they leave me alone.”

“Are you sure he was a man clown and not really a woman clown?”

“In this place I’m not sure of anything.”

“You never can tell about clowns. I think some of them that pretend to be male clowns are really women.”

“Why is that?”

“I guess because female clowns are not funny.”

“I think they’re funny.”

“Hey, what was Lot’s wife’s name? I need it for a crossword.”

“Who’s Lot?”

“You know. In the Bible. His wife turned back and looked after she was told not to and turned into a pillar of salt.”

“Her name was Lotta.”

“Try ‘Mildred’ and see if that fits.”

“Can you imagine being turned into a pillar of salt? Why would anybody want to do such a thing?”

“I’ll bet she had it coming.”

“Remember that woman with the monkeys?”

“What woman was that?”

“A woman had a bunch of monkeys that she brought in for us to hold and play with. There were about eight of them. The girl monkeys were wearing little dresses with ruffles and little shoes and they had ribbons in their hair. The boy monkeys had on little pants and shirts with suspenders. One of them was wearing a sailor suit and another had on a little cowboy outfit with boots and a little pistol and everything. It was just about the cutest thing you ever saw.”

“That must have been before I came here.”

“I’ve been here a long time and I don’t remember anything like that.”

“Well, I’ve been here longer than anybody!”

“I wish I could have seen them monkeys.”

“It was better than any stupid clown doing lame card tricks and stealing books, however entertaining *that* might be. These little monkeys would sit on your lap and smile at you and let you pet them and smooch them. They would even go to sleep on your lap if you held them and rocked them.”

“You smooched a monkey?”

“Well, hell, yes, I smooched a monkey! You would have smooched a monkey, too. They’re so sweet and well-behaved you can’t resist. They’re like little human children, only better because they don’t scream or talk and they don’t ask for things. They’ve got these little hands like little human hands with little fingers covered with fur. It’s just the damnedest thing you ever saw.”

“I wish I could have seen that.”

“I’ve never held a monkey before in my life. I’d be afraid it would bite me.”

“They don’t bite! They’re just like well-behaved little children, only better.”

“Maybe they’ll have the monkey woman come back sometime.”

“Believe me, it’s better than any stupid clown.”

“I hate clowns. I think I’m just going to stay in my room on Saturday and not come out.”

“They won’t let you stay in your room. You’re supposed to be social.”

“I’ll tell them I’ve got a stomach ache.”

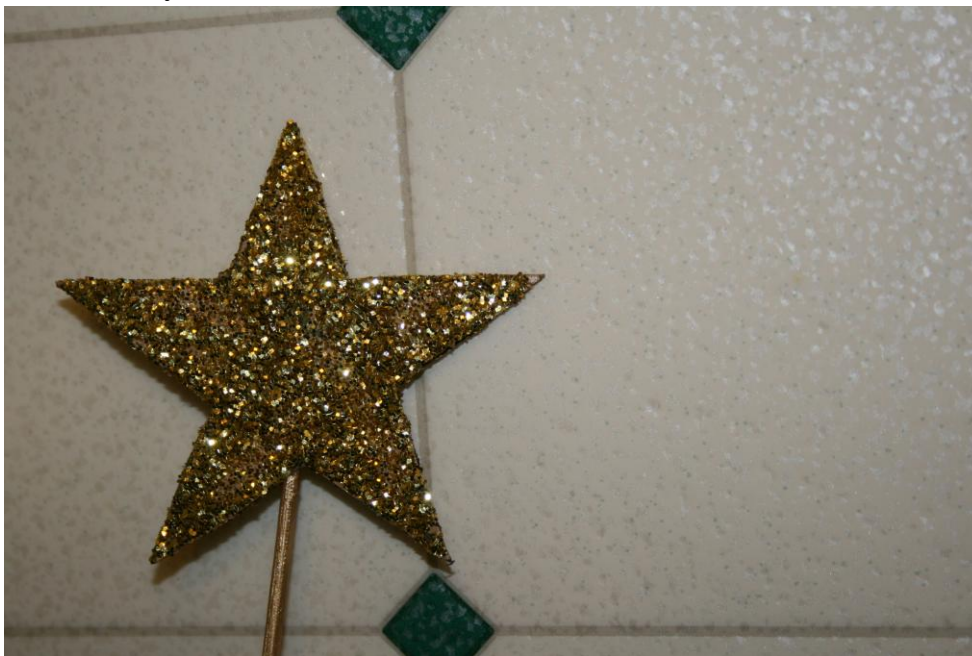
“I don’t hate clowns, but I don’t like them very much.”

“Well, the clown act will be some fun. We can heckle him and we can keep an eye on him and see if he steals anything.”

“At least a clown is something different. Maybe he’ll liven things up around here. But we’ll definitely try to get that monkey woman back.”

“Anybody know what’s on the menu for dinner?”

“I told you. Red beans and rice.”



“No, red beans and rice was last night. Tonight it’s veal cutlets with apple sauce and pureed carrots.”

“Makes me want to vomit just thinking about it.”

“The veal is suspiciously like dog food.”

“Yeah, made out of dead dogs.”

“Maybe we can go out later for a hamburger and a beer.”

“I’d like some

chop suey.”

“Do you expect to just rise up out of that wheelchair and waltz out the door and do whatever you want as if you wouldn’t have twenty doctors and nurses on your tail?”

“You think I can’t get up if I want to?”

“I don’t know. Can you?”

“One day I’m going to surprise everybody. I’m going to get out of this chair and walk out of this place for good and never come back. I’m going to find me a woman and get married, a young one this time so she can have my children.”

“Who would marry you?”

“Maybe that monkey woman is available. You could marry her, since you like her monkeys so much.”

“She’s already got a husband. She’s married to a monkey man.”

“How do you know that?”

“If you married Florence Lawrence, you’d be famous.”

“Why would I be famous?”

“You’d be married to a woman who is part elephant. People all over the world would want to know what that’s like. And besides that, you’d get to see those elephant legs and you’d get to see her eat peanuts and perform elephant tricks.”

“Do you know how idiotic that sounds?”

“There’s several women here you could marry.”

“Like who?”

“That woman in the end room with the purple hair and green fingernails.”

“She’s in a permanent coma.”

“Does that matter?”

“You can’t marry somebody who’s not conscious.”

“I don’t know why not. Stick a pin in her and see if she screams.”

“What?”

“Marry big Martha. I don’t think she’s got a husband and she’s fairly young. I don’t know if she would want to have your babies, though.”

“If she’s really a man, the question of babies will definitely be moot.”

“You could marry that woman who hears voices in her head and who thinks Boris Karloff is after her.”

“Why would I want to marry that decrepit old bat?”

“Getting married might be just the thing she needs.”

“No, I want a woman from the outside world. Once I leave this place, I’m going places. I don’t want some crazy old woman to have to take care of.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ve always liked California. I might go to Mexico or South America. Maybe even farther away than that.”

“Well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but if you go anywhere it’s going to be feet first. The next place you’ll be is Davis and Sons Funeral Parlor on State Street.”

“That’s where I’m going to be when my time comes. Did I tell you I went and planned my own funeral? I bought a stainless steel casket and a two-ton concrete vault. I even know what clothes I’m going to be wearing.”

“Yeah, that’s nice. You already told us all about that.”

“Isn’t it exciting?”

“Isn’t what exciting?”

“The thought of dying. One minute you’re alive and you have all kinds of problems and anxieties and hurts, and the next minute you’re dead. It’s all over just like that: *Poof!* It all turns out to be so simple after all.”

“Well, of all the things you can think about dying, I don’t think ‘exciting’ is one of them.”

“Don’t pay any attention to him. He’s likely to say anything. If he thinks death is exciting, then let him think it. Anyway, who knows what death is? Maybe it is exciting.”

“I’ve been on this earth for eighty-six years and I don’t know the first thing about death. I don’t know anymore about it now than I did when I was a baby.”

“We’re not supposed to know about it. It’s one of God’s secrets. We’re just supposed to do it when the time comes.”

“It’s really nothing to worry about. Think how many have gone before us.”

“I don’t worry about it. Do you?”

“I read about a cat that knew when somebody was going to die. He went and stayed beside a sick person until they died. He could sense it. He was trying to help them along, calm them down.”

“Animals know a lot of things we don’t know.”

“Yeah, animals are great.”

“Does anybody know what’s on TV tonight?”

“It’s all junk now. Television isn’t what it used to be.”

“There’s always movies.”

“Yeah, there’s always something to watch. If nothing else, we can turn on the news and talk about how the world is going to hell and how we would fix things if we only had the chance.”

“Yeah, we can always do that.”

“Does anybody know what’s for dinner?”

Editor’s Note

The Clown Who Stole Lady Chatterley’s Lover was an Honorable Mention in the Dialogue Contest.

Photograph © xTx

Visit xTx and view more photos at <http://www.notimetosayit.com/>

The Infirmary by Jessica Higgins

Before I even open my eyes, I know I am not where I am supposed to be.

To begin with, the bed beneath me is an actual mattress; springed coils support my back, my legs, the undersides of my arms, and a pillow cradles my neck and skull – the effect is strangely off-putting after so many months of sleeping on a rigid board with only a balled up coat as my pillow. With my fingertips, I trace the smooth softness of the sheet that blankets the mattress, and I inhale the unmistakable scent of death: stale urine mingling with the aroma of medicines and cleaning products. The attempt at sterility burns my nostrils.

I detect the faint beeps of machinery, the sound of running water in some distant room, and the squeak of someone's rubber-soled shoes on tile, but the prevailing sound is silence. In the distance, someone babbles incoherently, and closer still, someone cries out in anguish. I lie still with my eyes closed, dreading opening them to confirm what my other senses already knew: I am in the "infirmary."

Everyone knows that the infirmary is a place where you die, mostly because we have never known anyone who went there and returned. We see them leave the building, yes, but they are hauled out in wooden carts, the sort that people used to use to haul firewood or coal, but are now only familiar to us as the means to transport the dead; often, these bodies are nude and sometimes stacked upon others. Naked limbs lack the same neat precision that cut wood once had, but either way, it doesn't matter – they have the same purpose as coal or firewood and they are all headed for the same destination: The incinerators.

Only a few of us have ever been inside the buildings that house the ovens, those of us unlucky enough to have the job of loading, pushing, and unloading those dreadful carts, but we all work within the shadow of those smokestacks, so we needn't go inside to understand the hellish interior. Lying here in this bed, pressing my forearms and chest against the leather constraints that bind me to this hospital bed, I know that my own destination will ultimately be those ovens, and as I continue to lie with my eyes closed, I picture the yellow and orange flames that will lick the flesh off my body and turn my bones to dust. I am not panicked by this thought when I hear the rubber-soled shoes come to a stop nearby.

"Would you like a drink of water Mrs. Stein?"

I open my eyes and stare up at a young woman who can't be much older than me – I turned 17 last March, eight months ago now – and this young woman before me can't be much more than 20, maybe 21. She repeats her initial question, and even though my mouth is parched and my throat burns for the relief of water, I shake my head "no." I don't want whatever poison she has to offer. Even though no one has lived to report on the happenings within the infirmary, we are all familiar with the rumors, the tales of

torture, abuse, experimentation. I have no clear idea what they will do to me while I am here, but I understand that they will test the boundaries of my 17 year old body with needles, and drugs, and scalpels, and whatever other instruments of torture they will use in the name of science and medicine.

Then, my body will give out, the results neatly recorded by this young woman, and I will be carted out, naked, to the oven where I won't need water anymore.

The young woman frowns at my refusal of water, but then she reaches behind me to fluff the pillow and smooth the sheet. "Well," she says in a chipper voice, "if you need anything Mrs. Stein, please don't hesitate to call for me. I'll be in the hall or next door in Mrs. Greenberg's room." I nod silently and watch her disappear through the door and into the bright lights of the hallway.

Why does she call me 'Stein?' I wonder once she's left. I am no "Stein" and am certainly no one's missus. After a moment, I shrug the discrepancy away, and now that my eyes are open, I take in my surroundings. I lie with a thin, paper gown covering my body, and a lightweight sheet and blanket cover me to my chest. The leather straps I felt before, around my wrists and my chest, are visible only as outlines beneath this bedding, but again, I gently tug at the restraints, and it's clear that I am bound to the metal frame of this bed. I don't want to wear myself out by pulling at something that I know won't give; besides, I am weak from months of malnutrition and hard labor, so I save my strength and instead lift my head slightly off the pillow and try to observe as much as my hungry eyes can absorb.

The room is mostly white: white tiled floors, white walls, white baseboards, white countertops, white blinds cover a square window, and lastly, the ceiling overhead is white. I suppose that white makes the room more sanitary, but I wonder why they bother when everything else I have seen in this place is either gray or brown so that it matches the color of the winter sky and the smoke that often billows overhead. One would think that all this white, when one is used to so much darkness, would be refreshing, but instead, it feels like an assault on my eyes, and I close them again for a moment to rest. With my eyes shut, I drift back to the days that must have preceded this one and I try to recall what incident could have brought me inside, to the infirmary.

At first, my memory is fruitless in recalling anything of recent significance; this is no surprise since I squeeze my eyes shut most nights and try to forget where I am. Such willful amnesia is often helpful – I think of my life before, my family's home, my bedroom, my cat Sasha, school, my friends, the boy I had a crush on; I also think ahead to my life in front of me, I have decided that I will move to America, I will marry, I'll have 2 children, 1 boy and 1 girl, my husband will be a doctor, maybe we can have another cat – this escape into either the past or the future helps block out the unbearable weight of the present, and ultimately, it helps me sleep what little I can each night. But now, I must force myself to think of the here and now so I can understand how I have woken up in this place, how it is I have been stolen away from the barracks

with the wood-planked beds, my mother, my two sisters, the cold air and the warmth of their slight bodies against mine.

I was sick. Fever. Vomiting. Diarrhea. I had lost even more weight, and my ribs protruded through my papery skin. My mother looked at me with somber eyes, even though she tried to smile and help me walk to and from the labor we did in the yard. Dysentery. That's what they called it. That's what has brought me here. *Dysentery*. I silently sound out the word in my mind. Dysentery will not kill me, not while I'm in here; it's just the means that has brought me to this end.

Quietly, I feel a tear slide down my right cheek.

Not realizing that I have again fallen asleep, I wake with a start, feeling disoriented by the very things I took the time to familiarize myself with before. I open my eyes and confirm that I am in the same white room, with the same bedding, the same paper gown, the same acrid smell permeating my nostrils. Through the slats in the blinds, I can distinguish that it's still daytime, but how long did I sleep? An hour? A day? A week? Time has dissolved in this space. Again, I hear the squeak of rubber-soled shoes as they come walking down the hallway, but this time they are followed by another pair of shoes, a sharp clicking on the tile. Heels. A woman's heels.

They stop in the doorway just outside my room and I can hear their low whispers, but I can't distinguish their words. What I can distinguish is the hushed urgency of one voice and the plaintive plea of the other: They are arguing about something, but it's a restrained argument. Are they discussing me? Arguing about me? My questions go unanswered as I strain to listen amid the other sounds that drown out the tones of each speaker. Soon, their conversation comes to an abrupt halt as I hear another set of shoes approach. These shoes make hardly a whisper against the hard, white tile, but the weight of the walker is heavier than the other two, and I hear a low, masculine voice in the silence left by the wake of the other two women.

The doctor.

My heart seizes on me and panic grips my veins. I try to pull up against the restraints; this time, I pull with all the strength I have, I save nothing. There may not be a later. I wriggle my body back and forth and try to shake myself free of this bed, this place, this nightmare. Just then, all three disconnected pairs of shoes and their accompanying voices hurry into the room.

The young nurse who I saw earlier throws a clipboard down upon the counter nearby, and she places both hands on my upper arms and tries to still me. The doctor, in his white coat and stethoscope around his neck, hurries to my other side, and places the tips of his warm fingers against my temple. In the background, hovers another young woman, she looks to be older than the nurse, but isn't yet 30 by my own quick assessment. She has a paralyzed look of horror on her face and her hands are raised in front of her mouth to try and hide some of her shock. I can't fathom who she might be or what she might want, but any questions I may have about her, or the others, are soon

vanquished as the nurse pulls a syringe from her pocket and holds my arm down as she injects the needle's contents into my veins.

Darkness envelops me.

When I awake, groggy and disoriented, the young woman, who had previously remained in the background, now sits in a chair next to my bedside. I feel her hot fingers entwined in my own. Her eyes are sad as she watches mine open, but she smiles a weak smile at me. Who is this girl? Why does she hold my hand? She takes her free hand and gently smooths some stray hairs off my forehead, and no matter her reasons for being here, in that brief moment, I melt into the comfort of such a compassionate gesture.

"Nana?" She asks.

I just stare silently at her. I don't know who she's addressing.

She sighs, and I can smell the peppermint on her cool breath. She begins again, "Are you alright?"

I still don't know why she is addressing me so, but to please the young woman, I mutely nod my head in assent.

She smiles faintly. "I'm so sorry that you have to have these restraints. I argued with the nurse that you don't need them, but they say it's for your own safety. Apparently, you've been scratching at yourself in your sleep at night." As she says this, her warm fingers trace a groove in my left cheek and I am suddenly aware of a stinging there that I hadn't noticed before. She is quiet, contemplative for a moment, and then she turns to take the glass of water off the countertop, the same glass of water the nurse had previously offered me.

"Would you like a drink?"

I can no longer deny the burning in my throat, and so I again nod "yes" and the young woman lets go of my hand and gently lifts my head up as she presses the cool glass to my lips. I drink thirstily and the water tastes so good it almost hurts. I feel it slide down my raw throat and into the pit of my constantly aching stomach. It fills me. Satisfies me. I no longer care if it's poisoned; I don't want to be thirsty anymore.

She turns and sets the glass down, and at the same moment, I hear the soft shuffle of the doctor's leather shoes. He enters the room with hardly any noise, but still, I feel him



disturb the quiet air that had previously felt like a protective bubble around me and this unknown woman. He smiles at me, and seems to address me directly.

“Well, Mrs. Stein, that was quite an episode earlier, but I hope you’re feeling better now.”

I stare blankly at him and return his words with my own defiant silence. He shrugs slightly and maintains the same stiff smile that he entered the room with. Inside my chest, my heart beats wildly in anticipation. The doctor turns to face the young woman at my bedside.

“Ms. Blackburn, I’m sorry you had to witness that earlier. I know it may seem as though we’re treating her cruelly, but it’s really for her own safety, as well as our own.”

Seemingly adopting my example of muteness, she nods silently and he continues.

“See, we think that Mrs. Stein’s dementia has her believing that she is back in...”

He trails off, but I am listening raptly, still confused about whom they are discussing – their English is so fast that I think, perhaps, I am missing some key to the conversation.

The young woman says nothing; she just stares expectantly at the doctor.

He hesitates, then asks, “Is it possible for us to discuss this in the hallway?”

She pats my hand as she lets it resume its former place next to my side, and she stands, smooths her skirt and follows the doctor into the hallway. From my bed, I can only make out their low murmuring, no distinct words, but after a moment I do hear a sharp intake of breath, a gasp. A moment later, I hear the doctor’s soft leather shoes shuffling along the hard tile as he retreats down the hallway; the young woman pauses in the doorway of my room, her eyes wide with shock as she meets my own gaze. I can’t comprehend her anxiety, but I note her visibly straighten her spine and relax her shoulders in attempt to resume her former posture. She returns to the chair at my side and again enfolds my hand in her own.

I feel her soft palm press against my own. I look down at our interlaced fingers, and suddenly my own horror sets in: Her skin is taunt and olive-toned, her long fingers taper off into rounded fingernails painted a dark red; but entangled with her own youthful hands are the knobby, blue-veined hands of an elderly person. The nails are ragged, the skin nearly transparent.

I look up into her face, my mouth open in what must be an audible scream, but all I hear is a long, hollow silence.

Editor’s Note

The Infirmary was first published on the website in July 2009 and won the July Story of the Month Contest.

Photograph © Grant Palmer

Go On, Please by David Erlewine

When asked how he was doing, the old man, rotten with cancer, said, "Bring me one of Stanley Milgram's heirs. Then I'll be better."

The social worker, short and pimply, dialed her cell phone.

"He proved the Holocaust could happen anywhere. His obedience to authority experiments proved that two out of every three people — across class, gender, and ethnic lines — will murder when instructed." The words fell out of the old man's mouth. "I could also use some water."

The social worker laughed and said something into her cell phone, handing him a glass of water. After a few sips, he cleared his throat. "On December 20, 1984, I confronted 'Stan the Man.' I told him the experiments ruined my dad, how knowing he was a murderer made it hard for him to put on a tie, take out the trash, tell his ever fattening wife she looked fine."

The social worker said something into her phone, something the old man couldn't quite make out.

"Anyways, shoeless — house rules — I rubbed my feet against the carpet, building up some nice static electricity, and then with my middle finger tapped the fleshy overhang of his nose. He got all big-eyed, started clutching his chest." The old man shook his head. "I'd always planned to have a heart attack if assaulted, so I thought he was faking, even when he fell down. I kept looking down at him, holding out my hand, telling him to stop faking, that I was just messing around with him, that I wasn't there to hurt him."

The old man reached for the social worker's small hand but couldn't grab it. She laughed into the phone.

"Hey!"

She looked at him. "What? What do you need, sir?"

"If you want to help, if you want me to get some help, then get me some closure before they box me up, let his heirs know how and why he died. Let me —"

The old man's roommate, a real ninny named Saul, awoke from his own snores and screamed, "They're stealing from me!"

The social worker nodded at the old man. "Get some rest. I need to see some other folks."

"No," the old man said. "His heirs should know he wanted to prove the Holocaust could never happen here. At Yale, he wanted to set the standard, quickly show Americans would never keep shocking someone just because a lab-coated Milgram told them to. Then he planned to fly to Germany, show those lemmings would do whatever he said."

The old man sipped the last of his water. “Imagine how old Stanley felt testing those first 40 New Havenites, seeing 37 of them administer what they thought were 450



deadly volts of electricity to an innocent man.” He shook his head.

The social worker typed something on her phone, likely sending a text.

“You know what Milgram told them every time they objected or pleaded with him to let them stop shocking?”

The woman must have gotten a funny reply from her phone. She was laughing, punching more buttons.

The old man shrugged. “We must continue. Go on, please.”

Editor’s Note

Go On, Please was first published on the website in November 2009.

Photograph © *Grant Palmer*

You

You see the picture in the obituaries section on January second. You don't know why you are reading the obituaries section at the beginning of the year, but maybe it's because you live in Las Vegas, where multi-billion dollar resorts are built in a year. Somehow this implies that you could die soon, maybe tomorrow. You also think there's a high chance someone died in an entirely brainless way on New Year's, which would be both funny and sad. You like things that are funny and sad. They are efficient in their consumption of emotional energy. They will solve the crisis of global desensitization. They are the love child that unites the life force.

This obituary picture catches your eye because it is not the usual headshot of a man with puffy white hair, wearing a grey suit and tie, and smiling. It is an action shot. A string of firecrackers explode, and everyone in the picture jumps away from the sparks, except George Trevors, formerly of Elk Grove, Wisconsin, but recently of Summerlin, Nevada. He lies slumped against a slot machine. A casino waitress in the top right corner has dropped her tray. A woman in a purple kimono pushes against the crowd, trying to get through. A man in a brown suede jacket rubs his hands together in triumph as he watches the disturbance.

The Event

One twitch was the only sign given by George Trevors before he dropped heavily against the golden slot machine. His legs remained partially on the black, anchored stool, his large belly embraced the display in a sad farewell, and his face covered two of the three matching cherries that indicated his jackpot. For a while, no one noticed. Jangles of falling coins and whirrs from other machines covered the dull thump. In front of George's row, a performance artist had captured most of the gamblers' attention by throwing a string of lit firecrackers on the floor and burning a self-portrait of himself made out of Monopoly money. The pop-pop-bangs brought security running, and the artist was muscled out the back entrance, despite his protests and pushes.

The one person who would have paid attention to George's heart attack was Janice, his wife, but she was off buying another round of cocktails. When she returned, she shook his shoulder, slapped his face, set down the drinks, one whiskey sour and one stirred martini, called for help, and started crying. Because security was occupied, it took them a few minutes to get to George, and when they did, they started CPR, their unpracticed hands moving stiffly in uneven rhythm. The paramedics arrived minutes later, and tried a defibrillator before wheeling him out. Janice followed them. A young casino waitress tried to get Janice's attention, but when it was obvious that she wasn't coming back, the waitress started scooping quarters from George's machine into a bucket.

Wallace, Performance Artist

Wallace drove to Vegas at night because it helped him forget where he was going. The headlights pierced ahead on the slick road, occasionally splashing out on either side of the pickup's path. It was best when rain bathed the expanse of highway a few hours before the drive, leaving a dark stain of moisture to mix with the haze of sand and asphalt. The lines marking the lanes were worn away to faint suggestions. Who could tell, under such conditions, where the road would lead? He might not be going to Vegas to gamble and sleep his way out of whatever he made that week.

In contrast to the indistinct stretch of desert, the first casinos of Stateline rose like glowing dunes, and then another straightaway followed by the delirious, chatty lights of the Vegas strip. The dawn of New Year's Eve broke as he parked away from the strip to avoid traffic, and waited for a shuttle. Since his last girlfriend broke up with him two days before Christmas, probably because of the November Vegas trips, he wanted to get out of LA.

His pursuit could not be traced to one specific event, but rather grew out of a collection of coincidences—a penchant for online poker, his cousin's bachelor party at an Indian casino in Industry, a visit to the University of Nevada Las Vegas when he was considering graduate school, which ended in a wild student party at the Golden Nugget. No one held him responsible for anything in his weekend city, and if he lost all his money in one night, he could always sleep in his car.

This time he barely had enough money for gas and was set on reclaiming Vegas. He decided it was time for another piece—to show the casinos how they destroy people's lives. He pasted together a self-portrait from Monopoly money, using the pink fives for his face, the orange five hundreds for his hair, and the blue fifties for his eyes. In the end, it looked something like a child's imitation of a Warhol portrait. He planned to light it on fire in one of the rooms of the Bellagio. Art with a message and a conscience—a declaration to the world that he had conquered gambling.

When he walked in through the doors the casino was noisy and hot. People come to Vegas from all over, especially for New Year's. Some of them looked at the portrait, pointed and smiled, but most were too stuck to their machines to care. One or two of the bystanders took pictures. He waited until the carpet walkway was empty, then reached inside his coat and removed the firecracker string—his announcement, and just did it. The portrait burned, the firecrackers thundered, and Wallace bellowed. Of course those large security guards came right away to drag him out. He was trying to tell them that it was art—and not the pretentious kind they keep at the gallery in the hotel, either—but real. They wouldn't listen.

Then he saw the guy, slumped against a slot machine like his heart had just exploded. Wallace tried telling that to the guards, too, but they thought he was making it up to distract them. As they pushed him out into the alley, he wondered if the firecrackers had triggered the attack. Or maybe he had gone to Vegas to die. Who goes to Vegas to die?

For a second, Wallace's aesthetic attention was diverted. If he planned his own funeral, it would have been visually appealing—out in the desert. A performance of perfectly formal, dark suits and dresses standing under the blinding sun, combining with memory to force tears into submission. The disparity of patent leather sinking in sand.

But then he was out in the alley. He ran around to the front of the casino and tried to find out the name of the collapsed man, but no one knew. He sneaked inside and was thrown out again with a *once more and we will press charges*. He could see himself throwing down the firecrackers, so symbolically, could see the purgatory fire from the Monopoly money, could see inside the man's chest, could visualize the exact moment the man's heart stopped beating.

Sheila, Waitress

Never live in a place longer than it takes for people to get to know your flaws. She had lived by this mantra since college—moving down the coast, from Seattle to Portland to San Francisco to Santa Barbara to LA. She had left family, friends, a boyfriend. Everything needed to keep moving, moving faster. If it stopped, the thrill would be gone. Blurry was beautiful and important. If she could reach the speed of light, everyone would want to know her name.

In LA she first tried to break into acting, but the location of everything rubbed against her skin like sandpaper, removing her personality. Long days driving from the valley to Hollywood to South Orange County abraded her nerves until she had trouble feeling and didn't think she would be able to perceive even the largest of earthquakes. The clutching muck of traffic sucked on her ankles. Her breath felt like smog. She produced it like an assembly line, only she didn't know what she was manufacturing. For a while she considered continuing south—San Diego to Tijuana to Ensenada to Acapulco to a host of Central and South American stops, and eventually to a life of harmony with the Patagonian penguins. The problem was where to go after that.

Instead she decided on Vegas—where theater productions were assembled routinely to keep up with all of the entertainment packages that every new casino had to offer to stay competitive. She got auditions, but no parts, so she landed at a casino. The hiring manager took one look at her, glanced at her numerous restaurant jobs, then asked her to complete a drug test and to get fitted for her revealing waitress uniform. In Vegas, assets up front was the best approach. Don't keep any cards under the table.

On New Year's Eve she was working the main floor of the Bellagio. It was a good night for tips and flirting to get bigger tips. A perturbed, unshaven and probably unwashed guy was carrying around a portrait made of Monopoly money. She saw the performer, obviously an attention whore, drop firecrackers on the floor—quickly attracting the interest of security and casino patrons.

She didn't see the other guy fall into his machine, though he must have. Even supposing that she had, it wouldn't have made a difference. She was no paramedic. The

casino would undoubtedly try and keep the money if it wasn't claimed. But, supposing that the guy was dead—it wouldn't be right to deny winnings from a widow. She convinced the floor manager that, under the circumstances, the money should go to the family. She would take it herself—a chance to finally be a good person. A person who you could get to know, and afterwards, like.

Janice, Wife

A life of small town real estate deals up and down Wisconsin gave George and Janice a comfortable two-story home on the shores of Silver Lake. He took road trips frequently around the state, while she handled most of the local deals. In some ways, she didn't mind being left at home—she loved watching the birds from the kitchen window as they flew over the lake. In summer, she put out a feeder for the robins, and she spotted two blue herons fishing in the shallows, their bills ducking under the silver morning water. They could always catch something, even when George couldn't. After they ate, their wings would spread—signaling to the air that they were prepared to glide along to the next lake and plumb its secrets, and the air would lift them. Some winters the lake would freeze, and Janice would walk out several yards, trying to find the heart of the freezing—the first place to harden. She would slide on the ice—a surface like the world, slippery but firm.

It was a property conference at the Stratosphere that first gave George the notion of relocating. A fast-talking man with a grey designer suit, barely out of college, stopped the couple in the observation deck of the tower. Opportunity of a lifetime, he'd said. Guaranteed profit if they ever decided to sell it. Vegas—the fastest growing city in the US. Free tickets to the show of their choice—Janice had never seen a musical. There, with all the lights of the strip spread out and shining below them, it was like being offered a second life. Three stoplight towns faded in the glamour and buzz of non-stop entertainment. They purchased a time-share just two miles from the strip, and after two years of spending two weeks a year under the bright Nevada sun and brighter neon moons, George urged Janice to move—an early retirement.

All of their houses in Wisconsin netted them just enough to purchase a condo in Summerlin, a Las Vegas suburb that felt smaller, but was just a few minutes from everything—the bars, the buffets, the shows, the gambling, the stars. Outside was not a sleepy midwestern grotto, but a world at play. They talked with the neighbors about how wonderful it all was. On weekdays they would laugh at the classifieds, send postcards to their friends and relatives back in Elk Grove, and eat at a new restaurant. The city was building them faster than they could try them out. On weekends they prowled bars, clubs, concerts, theaters, comedy shows. Everything.

After only three months of residency, and a Christmas spent visiting family, they went to the Bellagio for New Year's Eve—usually a good place for celebrity sightings. George always wanted to talk to them, while Janice just liked watching—savoring the awareness that she was at the same place, doing the same thing that they were. It was

still early, and Janice was thirsty, even after a margarita. When she came back to give George his whiskey he was slumped against the slot machine.

At the hospital, Janice ran her fingers through her brown-grey field mouse hair again and again, sitting in the waiting room. A doctor walked toward her, almost aimlessly, before telling her that George was dead. She spent the rest of New Year's calling relatives. The funeral was scheduled for the second—since it was cheaper to do it as soon as possible. Only George's parents were coming, and some neighbors. They would hold a celebration of life service later in Elk Grove.

She glanced out of the window of their condo on the fifteenth floor, hoping to glimpse a pigeon or a sparrow floating on an updraft. The closest she could make out was the pink neon flamingo of a casino sign. Instead of flying, it was standing on one leg, its second leg phantom, amputated. She wondered if neon flamingos could fly at all. Perhaps they stand interminably on one leg, trying not to fall. She didn't love anyone else.

Funeral, January 2nd

Of the seven people gathered for George Trevor's funeral, only five could claim to have known him. The light in the funeral parlor was that of a muted desert winter morning. Before the ceremony started, Sheila brought over the cash, close to a thousand dollars, conveniently in hundreds, and a bouquet and card from the casino.

"It's not much," Sheila said. "But I wanted to do something."

"Thank you," said Janice.

Sheila stayed for the ceremony, where Janice spoke of George's strong desire to move to Las Vegas, of how he acted like a child when it came to his fascination with the city, adding that *he would have wanted to die here*. His parents spoke of George as a child, and how he acted like an adult when it came to his business mind that always astounded them, adding that *he could sell anything*, including nearly dead grasshoppers, to the neighbors. He would tie strings to their legs to create toys better than yo-yos. They lasted for an hour or so, after which there were no refunds. Everyone mentioned his sense of humor and his compassion.

Sheila couldn't help thinking about what she and George had in common: they were never who they were supposed to be, always waiting to come true. The mourners gathered outside on the sidewalk for a final round of hugs, while the lights of the strip kept flashing, shining, burning.

Across the street from the funeral parlor a young woman stood outside of a wedding chapel, with pink and purple neon roses decorating the sign. She was wearing her bridal dress. Long auburn hair swayed as she walked away from the chapel. She was crying too.

Wallace wasn't at the funeral, because he couldn't find it. He spent most of the day turning pages of a local phonebook, calling mortuary after funeral home after chapel, trying to discover where the man might be. No one could tell him anything. He didn't want to go home without knowing if he had started the year by killing someone.

You, Again

You close the paper to go and eat an English muffin with raspberry jam. Except that you are out of raspberry and have to settle for orange marmalade. If there is one thing that you will do this year, it will be to make sure that you are never out of raspberry jam. Your life is pretty nice. Except that last night you didn't go out, even though it was New Year's Eve and you live in Las Vegas. Maybe it's because everyone comes to Las Vegas to party, and all you want to do is rest.

The obituary was not particularly funny and you feel somewhat disappointed. You only have so much emotional energy left. The life force remains disconnected. The desensitization crisis is real. You didn't even read the name of the photographer who took the snapshot. You stay inside, waiting, maybe to come true. But outside the city is breathing: flash, dark, flash, dark, flash, dark.

Editor's Note

Snapshot Resolutions was first published on the website in November 2009.

Cash and Coupons by Mel Bosworth

“Watch your feet, baby.”
“Do you like my hat?”
“I do. You look pretty.”
“Can we have that?”
“We already have enough. Next time.”
“But I like it now.”
“You’ll like it next time too. I promise.”
“Where’s Daddy?”
“...”
“Mommy?”
“Hush, baby. We’ll be home in time for cartoons.”
“Can we have that?”
“Not today, baby.”
“Do you like it here?”
“Why wouldn’t I? Do you like it here?”
“It smells like...Daddy’s feet!”
“Why do you say that?”
“Can we have that?”
“No.”
“Do you like my hat?”
“Of course I do. You already asked me once.”
“I’m sorry.”
“It’s okay. Watch your feet. You’ll bruise my thighs.”
“What are ties?”
“Thighs, you’ll bruise my *thighs*. It’s part of my leg. Right here.”
“Ahh! Mommy! That tickles!”
“Well, you wanted to know.”
“Mommy?”
“Yes, sweetie?”
“When’s Daddy coming home?”
“I’m not sure, baby. Are you okay?”
“I like my hat.”
“I’m glad you do. I like it too.”
“What’s that man doing?”
“He’s shopping.”
“What’s he getting?”
“I don’t know.”
“Is he getting candy for his baby?”

“I don’t know if he has a baby.”
“Mommy?”
“Yes?”
“Do you know?”
“Do I know what?”
“Do you know?”
“What?”
“I like my hat.”
“Okay.”
“Mommy?”
“Yes?”
“Can we get that?”
“I suppose.”
“Will Daddy have some too?”
“No.”
“But.”
“Listen, baby. Daddy isn’t coming home.”
“Not today?”
“No, baby. He’s not coming home.”
“Mommy?”
“...”
“Mommy?”
“Yeah?”
“Can we have that?”
“Okay.”
“Mommy?”
“Yes?”
“Is Daddy okay?”
“I hope so.”
“Mommy?”
“...”
“Hey, mister! Do you like my hat?”



Editor's Note

Cash and Coupons was the second place finisher in the Dialogue Only Contest.
Photograph © Sarah Ahmad

A Disagreement Divine by Eric V. Neagu

And God said, "So, come on, man. I've got this side bet going."

Job replied, "I appreciate your circumstance, but I've got bills to pay, kids in college, kine to feed. Do you know how much it costs to feed kine? Not cheap, that's how much."

God, eyes narrowed, teeth gritting, "I'm telling you, you will agree to this. I can sweeten the pot until you say the word 'go.' Right now, say 'yes' right now and I'll throw in an all expenses paid trip to wherever you want to go. You name the place."

"But I'll be going alone. My wife will be dead, remember?"

Job was right. God had to think quickly, "Tell you what I'll do. I'll get you a better one, a little lady with all the bells and whistles."

Shaking his head, Job declined, "I'm good with the one I have. We've been through a lot together. I know you won't believe me, but she makes the best blueberry pancakes, period. That's worth a lot to me."

God paused and mumbled, "Dios mio," to the sky. "Okay, listen, we both know I can taketh away, but I can giveth a lot better. I tell you right now that one," God gestured to a picture of Job's wife on the wall, "Ain't gonna age well. In ten, maybe even fewer, years you'll be looking around. Trust me. I'm almost always right about these things."

Furious, Job shot back, "That's it. End of conversation. I love my wife. I love my kids. I've been blessed with a great life." Job grabbed God by the shoulder and moved him toward the door. "Appreciate all you've done, I gave on Sunday," said Job.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," God jerked his robe away from Job. The veins in God's forearms popped as he rubbed his forehead in frustration. Then he glanced at Job beneath his hand, lifting an encouraging eyebrow, trying to provoke Job to reconsider. But Job simply shook his head, no. They had reached a tipping point. Someone had to give. Free will was free will.

God paced back and forth. Since Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche he had lost some serious impact. The whole scientific revolution did nothing to help his reputation, either. Then Satan comes up with this great plan to get him back on the map.

"Job carries some weight," says Satan. "You get his support, others will follow," he says.

At times like this God longed for the old days. Part a sea or two, send a plague on an enemy, make a flaming bush talk, these were the little things that might have convinced a guy like Job to play nice. But the world has changed, and God didn't think the old bag of tricks held much sway. God needed something motivating, inspiring, an idea that would move Job to action. These were hard times for religions, and God's response was neither motivational nor inspirational.

The best God could do was a whiney, "You know, I could smite you right here. I swear I could."

He wanted to be respectful. He really did, but Job could not help laughing. "'Smite'? No, seriously, 'smite'? Who talks like that? I'm not even sure what 'smite' means."

God thought about it and realized he wasn't entirely sure what it meant either. He needed to save face and save it fast. He went with the angry bit, "Plagues will fall on your house. Boils will develop near uncomfortable parts of your body. Your kine will be struck down by furious bolts of thunder."

That last threat mattered, seemed believable even, and Job folded his hands and sat on the couch. The year before Job lost a kine to lightening. It happened a week before 4H and the mess was not a pretty one. The dead animal laid there until evening and drew a coyote. The ranch never had coyotes. Now, nearly twelve months later, coyotes were yapping all over the place and Job was forever shooting at them with his 0.22.

Maybe a concession could work, thought Job. He had an idea about one of the kids. There's the new one. After all, they had six others--the Jobs were Catholic. Yes, God could take a child, the little one. College costs being what they are, if the little one were gone it would allow the Jobs to save a little something extra for retirement, too.

Just then, Mrs. Job walked in. She heard the men talking and could not sleep. When she realized it was God she did not, as she might have in times past, kneel before him. Instead, she spoke directly and plainly, "Do you have any idea what time it is? There are children sleeping."

God back stepped, "I apologize. I, there was this bet, and it's a long story, but Job has to play along. The payoff is worth it." He chucked Job on the shoulder as a sign of camaraderie.

"We have a baby in there," Mrs. Job pointed down the hall.

Still mulling over the dead kine issue, Job cringed, "It's not technically a baby. She's four now."

God smelled success. He thought Job might be coming around. There was a touch of nervousness in the man's voice. A door had opened slightly.

"I mean, we don't know the kid all that well is my point," said Job to his wife.

Mrs. Job's mouth dropped. Her hair was a wild jungle of sleep and barrettes. The kind of mess that Job thought must take effort. She was wearing a tank top and sweatpants. Job hated that outfit. The top had no support and her breasts looked far older than they were. With her mouth open and breasts sagging, he thought maybe God had a real point about her, too. Then Mrs. Job glared at him with a mixture of hatred and confidence. She only used that expression when she expected Job to act on her behalf. In the years they had been married, it had always worked.

Job came back to reality and assumed his husbandly role. Feeling a little guilt, he bellowed absentmindedly, "Absolutely not!" to both God and himself.

God looked at Mrs. Job. Mrs. Job looked at God. They both shrugged their shoulders and responded at the same time, "What are you talking about?"

Awkward silence followed. God's eyes moved between the two mortals. He knew whatever scrap of submission Job was willing to put on the table had just been taken off because of Mrs. Job. As a final effort, God stared at Job and with casual ease he motioned to the Mrs., bringing an index finger to the throat in a murderous slicing motion signaling her potential doom. Despite her unflattering outfit and what may have been her worst hair day, Job declined.

God was losing the battle, had lost it maybe. But he had a mountainous ego that would not give up. Trying to sound Godly, he announced to them both, "I will now perform a miracle that will make you both tremble at my power."

God raised his arms to the ceiling and lifted his head, exposing the unshaved weak beard beneath his chin. Nothing happened. Then a light flickered on and off. God glanced down at the couple, "That was me." Then a slow steady drip from the kitchen faucet sounded. "That one, too," said God, claiming rights to all of the house's deformities.

Mrs. Job chuckled, "I can't take anymore of this. Fools give me migraines. Job, when you show your guest out please join me in bed, where sane people are at this hour." She left the room



and both men heard the bedroom door almost slam shut.

"I did that," God said.

"Did what?"

"Gave her a headache. She was going to make coffee, but I showed you my power and gave her a subtle but deadly annoying headache. Do you see my power now? God's wrath is not a game!" bellowed God in a half-whisper. He was afraid of waking the baby, or worse, bringing Mrs. Job back.

"Ah, I think it's time to call it a night. I've given you my answer," Job motioned God toward the door.

God tried to convince Job that he had actually given Mrs. Job the headache. "Do the math. Lady walks in," said God, "Perfectly healthy, but, and this is a big 'but,' she walks out with a headache. Coincidence? Or sign of the almighty at work?"

Arms crossed, head nodding in disbelief, "Let me get this straight. You prove power by giving my wife, who just hopped out of bed at 4:30 on a Sunday..."

God interrupted, "Whoa, whoa, Sunday, it's Sunday? It's Saturday, right? It cannot be Sunday. Please tell me it's not Sunday."

Job placed his hands in the pockets of his robe. Motioning with his head toward a Mazatlan, Mexico calendar on the wall, he said, "See for yourself."

And see God did. His shoulders slouched and his lower lip pushed out. It was Sunday. Satan had duped him again. The whole bet had been a game, a deliberate distraction. These were not the good old days. "Bastard did it to me again," scoffed God.

From beneath a white robe, God withdrew a Blackberry. Job started coffee as God checked the little silver and gray contraption. "This just sucks," grumbled God. "I totally turned my ringer to silent instead of vibrate. I missed virtually every service in Europe. Do you have any idea how often I do that?"

Job offered God a cup of coffee. God took the cup and drank too fast, burning his mouth. In pain, exhausted from a futile night of work, and extremely upset with Satan for getting the upper hand, God finally walked to the door and opened it to the world. Birds sang in the bushes next to Job's front porch. The morning sun shot rays of orange and red across the horizon. Without saying goodbye, God climbed into his PT Cruiser and drove down the street and away from Job.

A week later, apropos of nothing, Job's house, a very clean and well kept home, developed an ant problem. Convinced it was no accident, Job and his family attended church each Sunday for the next year.

Editor's Note

A Disagreement Divine was first published on the website in September 2009.

Photograph © Sarah Ahmad

How Do Mermaids Pee? by Geri Silveira

Melissa turned seven on Saturday. She had a mermaid-themed birthday party in her backyard, which included swimming, mermaid decorations, and a six-layer chocolate cake topped with a “Little Mermaid” figurine up to her gills in blue and white frosting shaped like waves. Melissa’s father Jeff, a classically handsome personal injury attorney, and her mother Adrienne, a blonde, blue-eyed trophy wife who ran fundraising events, went the extra mile and surprised Melissa with the appearance of a “real” mermaid. Melissa was delighted when this diva from the depths came popping out of the pool and flopped around on the decking. The other girls laughed and ran around the fishy lady, feeling her tail fins and climbing all over her. Melissa wanted to talk to her. What was her real name? Did she have any brothers and sisters? How did she survive out of the water? But when she finally talked to the maid, the lady would only say: “I’m from the depths below, and I love all little children.” Eventually, Melissa gave up. She and the other girls played with her in the pool, but when they went to eat cake, Melissa’s mom threw the mermaid a towel, thanked her, and told her to pack up her fins and scales and leave. Later on, when the kids discovered the mermaid was gone, Adrienne explained she had gone back to the ocean. No one asked how, but Melissa wondered. She thought, perhaps, she had come in through the drain (although how she could swim through the tiny holes, she did not know), and had left the same way.

Melissa had seen the “Little Mermaid” film nine times and had imagined being one. Her fantasy made sense, because besides being pretty, she had waist-length red hair like the mermaid, long arms, and she loved to swim. When she went into the pool, Melissa swam underwater like the mermaid, her long hair swirling about her. She dived down in the deep end, where there was a colorfully painted plaster mermaid embedded in the bottom of the pool. It had a chip out of the tail, which bothered her, but the face was very like the mermaid who had come to her party.

Melissa’s room was decorated in a mermaid theme – there were posters, pillows and stuffed mermaids – plus she kept an aquarium with a plastic mermaid sitting upon a rock. At night, she watched the “Little Mermaid” video – or read the book version – and studied the mermaid. There were many things that bothered her about the mermaid, but she had settled on one thing she must know: How do mermaids pee? The fish part of the maid went up above her waist, and she did not think it possible that the maid could pee in the usual manner.

One evening, she took her “Little Mermaid” book to her mom, who was busy at her desk writing a report about some fundraiser or another, and showed her the pictures.

“Mom,” she said, “Look at the mermaid.” She’s so much like me, but very different, too.”

“Yes,” her mom said, not looking up, “You’ve shown me many pictures of her.”

Melissa kept staring at the picture, turning the book this way and that way. Her mom turned to look at her. Melissa's concentration was obvious. Her eyebrows were knit and she was wearing her most serious look. Such a strange child, she reflected silently, and so different from her brother.

Her brother Thomas was 12, of average height, with curly hair and bright brown eyes. He considered his younger sister a pest. Melissa did not understand why he didn't want to play with her. But that was okay; she had her mermaids.

"Mom," Melissa continued, "I don't understand." Melissa pointed to the mermaid's lower half. "How does she pee?"

Adrienne threw back her head and laughed. "Well, she said, "Mermaids don't have to pee."

"Then where does the water that they drink go?" asked Melissa.

Adrienne was stumped momentarily. "They don't drink water."

"But they must," insisted Melissa. "Sometimes when I'm swimming I swallow water, so the mermaid must swallow it, too."

Andrienne sighed and hugged her daughter: "Honestly dear," I think you should ask your father."

She immediately went to her father's home office where he was always reading very large stacks of paper. She knew that he did not like to be interrupted, but she also knew that if she waited patiently, he would notice her.

"What is it baby?" he said finally.

"Daddy," she asked, "Mom said you would know ..."

Jeff waited for the odd question that was sure to come.

"Yes?"

Melissa handed him the book with the picture of the mermaid. "How do mermaids pee?"

Jeff's suppressed a laugh. "Well," he said, "That is a serious question, isn't it?" He studied the picture.

"It appears that they can't," he concluded and handed the book back to her.

"That's what mom said, but they must. And they have to poop, too, but perhaps that's out the back like a fish."

Jeff took the hint and said, "That must be how they pee, too," and he turned back to his work.

But Melissa wasn't satisfied. "Do fishes pee?" she asked.

Jeff had reached the limit of his patience and said, "Melissa, ask your teacher." He turned back to his work, and Melissa knew the interview was over.

The next day at school Melissa took her father's advice. She liked her teacher, Mrs. Birchhoff, a blonde, slightly plump woman who smiled a lot. At recess, she stood by her teacher's desk with the mermaid book.

"Yes, Melissa," Mrs. Birchhoff said, turning away from her work, "What is it?"

"It's this," said Melissa, pointing to the mermaid. "Father said to ask you ..."

Mrs. Birchhoff's eyes narrowed.

"How do mermaids pee?" she inquired, putting the book on Mrs. Birchhoff's lap and pointing to the fish part of the mermaid.

"Hmmm," said Mrs. Birchhoff. A few seconds passed. Melissa waited.

"Well," she said at last. "That is a problem."

"Well," she repeated. "I'm not an expert on mermaids, but I think that they can take the fish tail off."

"Wouldn't that be difficult in the ocean?" said Melissa, leaning on the desk.

"They only pee when they come on land," said Mrs. Birchhoff triumphantly.

Fortunately for Mrs. Birchhoff, the recess bell rang. She shooed Melissa away.

Still, Melissa pondered the issue. As much as she admired her teacher, she did not think mermaids could take off their tails. That had never been mentioned in the movie or in the book. She decided to ask her brother, who thought he knew everything.

That afternoon, she found Thomas playing video games in his room. He did not pay any attention to her when she came in, so she tapped on his shoulder.

With a huge sigh of boredom, Thomas stopped playing, and said, "Well, what is it?"

Melissa went right to the point. "How do mermaids pee?"

Thomas scowled. "You ask the stupidest questions! How should I know? Why don't you ask a mermaid?" With that, he turned back to his computer.

Melissa was not insulted. Actually, she thought this was a very good idea. But where was she to find a mermaid? In the swimming pool, of course!

After dinner, Melissa went to her room and peered out her window that overlooked the pool. The only mermaid she had ever seen was in that very pool, and now she wondered when the mermaid would come back. For the next three days, she took up the vigil every day and as far into the night, staying awake as long as she could.

Finally, Melissa went to her mother. "Mom," she said, "Do you think the mermaid will come back?"

Adrienne, who was about to leave for a meeting, leaned down and hugged her. "I'm sure she will someday." Her mother kissed her goodbye quickly.

Late that night, Melissa put on her swimsuit and went down the long staircase, through the kitchen and around the laundry room to the pool. The pool light was on, and the concrete mermaid shimmered below. Had she gone home through the drain? If Mrs. Birchhoff was right, she could have walked in and out, but really, Melissa didn't think so. She slid into the pool, and dived to the bottom. She stroked the plaster mermaid with the chip on her tail. The maid's hair shimmered and flowed behind her like the real one who came to her birthday party.

The next morning, when Melissa did not come down for breakfast, Adrienne went looking for her. When she found her bed empty, she panicked. Jeff had already left for the office, so she woke up Thomas and told him to search. Thomas was unenthusiastic

about the task, but inside, he was afraid. He knew he wasn't nice to his sister, and a little regret permeated his usual lack of conscience.

But there was no need to worry. Melissa was lying on a chaise lounge by the side of the pool, asleep. Adrienne awakened her, and held her in her arms.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Melissa said, shivering a little.

"My God, I thought you'd drowned," she said, wiping a tear from her eye. Thomas ran up behind her, relieved, but not wanting to show it. "I knew she was doing something dumb," he said and walked away in disgust.

Melissa broke away from her mom and said, "He told me to ask a mermaid how she pees, so I was looking for the one who came here before." She pointed to the drain. "I thought she must have arrived through the drain. The plaster mermaid is the gatekeeper, but for some reason, she wouldn't let her in."

Adrienne sighed deeply; she knew the time had come to be a mother. She took her daughter's hand, and then looked her in the eyes. "Darling," she said, "There are no mermaids. They are a myth, a fairy tale."

Melissa looked down at her feet and did not answer. "But one was here at my party!" she whined, looking up her mom incredulously.

"She was an actress, dear, in a costume. I paid her to come to your party. She was a real girl, just like you and me. She walked in the front door, put on her costume, performed for you, and left the same way she came."

"Oh," said Melissa. "I see."

Adrienne stroked the child's hair and said, "I'm sorry."

Melissa shrugged. Adrienne took her hand and led her back into the house. Thomas was in the kitchen eating breakfast and snickered at her. "Stupid girl," he said under his breath, but feeling bad that his sister looked so sad.

Melissa ate breakfast in silence. Adrienne was a little worried about her, but when she dropped her off at school, Melissa seemed all right.

That evening after the family dinner, where no one mentioned mermaids, Melissa went to her room. One by one, she took all her mermaid things from the walls and bookcases and tossed them into the middle of the room, ready to be thrown out. Then she looked at herself in her full-length mirror. She shook her head from side to side, tossing her hair like waves in a storm. She walked to her dresser drawer and took out a pair of scissors. She studied them for a while and felt the edge to determine their sharpness. They would do. Then, without delay, she cut her hair and put the trimmings on top of the stack of discarded things.

Melissa changed into her nightgown and got into bed. With just the night-light on, her aquarium shimmered and the plastic mermaid on her rock smiled at her. Melissa had forgotten about that mermaid. She got up and walked over to the aquarium. She reached into it and carefully removed the figurine. Melissa took the mermaid into the bathroom, bid her goodbye, and dropped her into the toilet. With a determined flush, she sent her cascading into the maelstrom.



Editor's Note

How Do Mermaids Pee? was first published on the website in November 2009.

Photograph © Tanaya Winder

“Get up, Jakey.” The boy sat up in the bed. He smelled eggs. His breakfast. Five at five, every morning with a triple side of toast, no butter. The egg yolks stared back at him like yellow eyes. He stabbed the eyes with sharp toast corners and watched the goop flow. Jake inhaled the energy, ravenous with anticipation, not fear.

Dad put a large glass of water and a small glass of juice in front of him. Jake wiped up the last of the congealing yolk with his finger, and ate it.

“When we leaving?” Jake said.

“Soon as you’re done. Drink your water.”

“I know.” Jake lifted the glass and Dad stepped outside to smoke. He never smoked in the trailer because of the boy. He wanted nothing to harm him. That was one of the few truths he kept close.

Dad got out of prison when Jake was ten. He didn’t even know about the boy. Jake was the product of a conjugal visit. His mom managed to make it a pregnancy and then some before she saw Dad again. She told Dad the day before he was released. After she left, he sat alone in his cell, waiting for the doors to swing open the one last time. That was the longest day he’d spent there.

Jake washed his dishes by hand and put the dripping plate and cups into the drying rack next to the sink, next to the frying pan Dad had washed. At the door he pulled on his canvas sneakers. He ran a finger over the thin soles. They were worn smooth. Jake touched his face and felt the contrast of his scarred, left cheek. It was a vivid remnant of the dog attack. Jake was five and he’d lost two teeth in the mauling. Now, seeing the scar, he decided he’d grow a beard when he could.

The dog was a stranger that had wandered onto the land, probably born in a barn and certainly more feral than pet. It took a piece of Jake and would have taken more, but Jake had the presence of mind to stick it in the belly with his pocketknife. The knife was Dad’s, pearl handled, though Jake had no idea. Jake had found it in an old toolbox under the stairs. That dog lay to rot in front of the trailer until the bloat was gone and the stink was too much. With a patched up face and a bandana to block the dust and the stench, the boy dug a shallow grave and pushed the dog in with his foot. The dog’s remaining skin and fur writhed with the undercurrents of flesh beetles and maggots. Jake watched and cocked his head left. Dropped in the knife. Filled the hole.

Dad killed his cigarette as Jake came out of the trailer. The eastern sky was just a little blue over the horizon. In the west the sky was still black and star-filled. Jake looked over the yard. It was more of a field than a yard; there were no discernable boundaries, just brown dirt and rock and patches of overgrown mesquite. Old, waving saguaro cacti dotted the mountain foothills in the distance. There were no neighbors to speak of; there was the old man whose trailer could be seen as a tiny box a half-mile down the dirt road. There was no one to complain about the desert-dusted exercise

equipment in front of the tin roof singlewide. Jake ran a finger over the silver weights resting heavy above the padded bench. He wouldn't lift today. He wouldn't ride the ancient exercise bike and he wouldn't pound the brown turf in his size 8s.

"Ready," Dad said.

"Yep."

Father and son sat like mirrored twins on opposing sides of the cool vinyl seat as the '79 Oldsmobile ate up the blacktop, their heads back, arms out the window, hands gliding on the wind. They drove west with the sun creeping up their backs. Jake felt they were trying to outrun the plasma ball and the feeling didn't bother him. It was old, familiar, like the dream he came back to often. When he thought about it, the dream, he couldn't remember if it was new or just freshly backdated. He told himself he would write down the date, keep a log so he would know when he had last remembered thinking about the dream. He never did it so it played out the same as before, if it had happened before.

The news over the radio spoke of youth violence. Offenders were found to be getting younger with teen girls being the group with the fastest rate of growth. Dad turned off the radio leaving only the wind and the cacti to entertain them.

"It isn't as bad out there as they'd have you think," Dad said.

"I know," Jake said.

"Do you?" Dad was looking at him and Jake felt it as he stared off into the Catalina mountain range to the north. He turned his head south.

"Yeah."

"Violence goes back to the gods."

"I know."

"Good."

It was bright and there was no denying the heat when they pulled into the Shell gas station. There was a white and green border patrol SUV parked out front. Next to it a flatbed full of Indians drank water and grain alcohol. There was a dog, black and gray, a blue merle herding mix, laying left of the entrance, panting. Its eyes were as bright as its ribs were visible. Jake watched it, resting his head on the car door while Dad pumped gas behind him.

"Dad, can I go see that dog?"

Dad looked turned from the scrolling numbers of the pump display, surveyed the lot.

"Alright, careful. You should eat something."

Jake doubled back, leaned through the open window of the Olds. He opened the glove box and grabbed the sandwich.

The dog watched Jake approach, saw something in the boy's hand, saw the boy looking at him, showing smiling teeth. The dog smelled the sandwich and its tail slapped the concrete.

"Hey boy." The dog stood slowly and stepped forward to meet the boy. Jake pulled the plastic bag from his sandwich and bit into it. He scratched the dog's head. Jake

ripped away a piece of the sandwich. The dog took it gingerly, licking the tips of the boy's fingers.

"Good boy," Jake said. The dog smacked at the peanut butter stuck in its muzzle. They shared the rest of the sandwich equally.

"C'mon Jakey," Dad said exiting the store. Dad handed him a large bottle of water. Jake uncapped the bottle and poured a small stream, letting the dog lap at it. Jake took a long drink himself and then followed after Dad. He watched in the rearview mirror. The dog watched him go and then turned its attention to the evaporating wet patch of concrete next to the entrance.

They were sweating by afternoon and Jake climbed into the back of the car. He rolled down the back windows and climbed back into the front seat. He laid his head on the door, catching as much of the wind as he could.

"Stay hydrated," Dad said. Jake took a drink the water bottle. He lapped at the last falling drops and thought about the dog. He hoped it had a shady spot to sleep. Or a breeze.

Dad's ink was done in prison. He had a Nazi SS on his chest and a small swastika he kept covered with his wristwatch. One night, a while after Mom had left, there was a Nazi show on television.

"Do you hate Jewish people," Jake asked.

"No," Dad said.

"That's what your tattoos mean."

"I know."

Jake sat on the carpet of the trailer looking at his dad, waiting for an explanation. Dad drank the last of the warming beer from the can. "I'm gonna smoke," he said.

Jake sat alone in front of the TV in a mix of blue light from the screen and the yellow glow of the floor lamp next to Dad's chair. SS soldiers goose-stepped across the Sony Trinitron. With Dad gone the trailer felt big and the TV noise wasn't enough to calm the boy.

Jake stepped out of the trailer into the cool air. He sat down on the narrow trailer steps. Dad spoke to the night.

"Sometimes," he began, "you just do things because they're easier than fighting. Then they start to make sense because the rules aren't the same wherever you go. Whatever rules you got in your head, it don't always work that way. And to hell with making them understand."

Coyotes yelped and snarled out in the desert, miles away. Dad smoked one cigarette after another.

"Jakey," he said after a time. "You need to learn to fight."

The Olds burst a tire way out on Indian Road number 15. Jake stood by in the blazing noon sun sweating and watching his sweating dad, listening. There was nothing but open graze land in any direction, desert scrub for the cattle and donkeys and horses

that wandered the landscape. There was another range of mountains further west. Jake didn't know what they were. Dad did, but it never came up.

"Loosen the lugs before you jack it up," Dad said. "Otherwise it's a real pain in the ass."

"Cause the wheel will turn?"

"Right." Dad said. He manhandled the L-shaped lug wrench and loosened 4 of the 5 nuts with the relative ease, the more stubborn of those yielded to gravity as Dad bounced his weight on the end of the tool. Teetering on one foot, hands holding the hood for balance, the 5th nut would not give.

"God damn, that bitch is on there. Get me the spare, Jakey."

Jakey pulled the bulky full size spare from the trunk and rolled it through the dust to the front right quarter panel. The tire had been patched and plugged a million times and the tread was worn smooth as Jake's shoes. Dad lifted the tire and brought it down hard on the end of the lug wrench. The nut gave immediately.

"There we go," Dad said. Jake watched Dad jack up the car. There was the sound of an engine in the distance. Jake saw a vehicle, just a dot, come over the rise. It grew in size and volume quickly, roaring through the hot wavy air that glazed the road. The truck blazed by, kicking up dust. Jake turned his head from the stinging sand grains. He watched the truck shrink down again. It was the Indians from the Shell station. They shrank too.

"Think we got it. Put this in the trunk." Jake took the flat tire and pulled it to the back of the car. He heaved it into the trunk. Dad dropped the jack in next to it, slammed the trunk home.

"We late?" Jakey asked.

Dad wiped the grease and brake dust from his watch. "We're fine. Late doesn't apply to us, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess not."

As they drove away a fight-scarred coyote stepped onto the road and sniffed at the pair's fading scent. An automobile with working air conditioning would have left a condensation puddle behind. The coyote crossed the road and disappeared, blending into the landscape, searching on for sustenance.

Jake had not seen his mother since he was eight, when dad came home. Jake knew him from old photographs. His favorite was a Polaroid of Dad standing shirtless in front of an old chopper. The bike was electric blue with a long thin fork, white and blue flame decorated the gas tank. Dad was smiling, holding a Budweiser can.

Dad came through the door of the trailer holding a blue gift-wrapped box Jake hoped was his. Jake's mom had dressed him in a suit and the tag from the shirt made his neck itch.

"Hi Jakey," Dad said.

"Hi Dad."

After dinner, Dad gave Jake the gift. He opened it carefully, not wanting to ruin the shining blue paper. Jake peeled the tape from one end and slid a box out of the decorative sheath.

“Monopoly, thanks.”

“You ever play?” Dad asked.

“Yeah, but not on my own board. Will you play it with me?”

“Sure thing.”

Dad and Jake sat together on the floor while Mom washed the dinner dishes.

Jake tore the cellophane wrapper from the box with less care than he had shown the wrapping paper. He opened the box, pulling out the various pieces: property deeds, red hotels and green houses, the dice, the pewter statuettes and the board.

“There’s no money,” Jake said.

“What?” Dad moved closer, scanned the contents, looked into the empty box.

“Damn it, what a rip!”

“Did they forget?”

“I guess they did. Sorry Jakey. We can return it and get you a new one.”

The Monopoly game was set aside and eventually found its way to the top shelf of Jake’s closet. It never went back to the store. It was the kind of job for Mom, but she left in the night and neither had seen her since.

“Where’d she go?” Jake had said.

“Away,” Dad said.

“For how long?”

“Forever probably.” And that was the last they talked about her.

It was then the training started. Jake didn’t have time to think about or miss his mom. Dad kept him busy with calm, disciplined training. Everything was routine. The eggs, the run, the bike, the bags. It began again at lunch, and then at dinner. There was no such thing as a day off.

“Prison put me on to a path I never would have known otherwise,” Dad said sometimes as Jake sweat and panted. Jake listened intently because he never had a man tell him anything before.

The old farm was just off to the left before the road began to dissolve into a dirt two-track and then raw desert. There were about thirty or so cars and trucks lined up in the dirt. Behind the old blockhouse a large group of men gathered. Jake saw the Indians from the truck mixed in with the rest of the men. More than 100 eyes found the Olds and the air was abuzz with a mix of Espanol, English, and tribal speak. The air smelled of testosterone and whiskey.

“Need a minute?” Dad asked. Jake thought.

“No.”

Dad grabbed the black canvas bag from the back seat and set it between them. Jake unzipped it, pulled out the white tape. He peeled up an edge to get it started and handed it to Dad. Dad pulled a long piece of tape from the roll. Jake held out his right

hand. Dad applied the tape while Jake fished through the bag among petroleum jelly, bandages, instant ice packs, and suture. He blew the dust from his red plastic mouth guard. When dad finished with the right hand Jake gave him his left.

Dad took out a black marker and wrote “THE” on the taped right hand and “BULL” on his left.

The circular arrangement of the men at the old homestead was not of their own design. Jake approached, leading Dad, and the herd of men parted revealing the sectioned cattle gates. The metal gates were tied end-to-end with thick twine and arranged in a circle about thirty feet across. This is where someone had once worked their horses, breaking them and training them in the dust. At the far end of the circle stood a boy, maybe a bit older than Jake, bigger for sure. Jake looked at his own taped fists.

“El Toro,” someone said.

Jake removed his shirt and pulled his lean frame through the bars of the gate. There was little fanfare, a few claps and whistles, but they were for the event, not the contenders. The boy across the circular ring bounced and stared at Jake. Jake met his gaze, held it. A small pregnant Mexican girl entered the space, stood center ring, blocking the fighters’ view of one another. She held up a white board with the odds scribbled in red. Jake was the underdog at 13-1. Dad always put 100 dollars on Jakey, underdog or no. Jake looked at the Mexican girl, probably his age. Half of her face was fire-scarred and purple; the symmetry screamed intent. She turned in the ring and held the odds board high. Jake looked at her face as it rotated before him, one side flawless and beautiful, the other not so. She was partially bald and one ear was shriveled to a tiny lump of blackened cauliflower flesh. She exited the ring and the opponent was no longer staring, but talking to his corner, the lone man, probably the kid’s dad. The referee entered. He was a little and brown, old and twisted like hot bacon.

Dad stood behind the gate, towel in one hand, water bottle in the other. “What are you going to do?”

“Get inside.”



“When?”

“Immediately.”

“Then?”

“Counter whatever he throws.”

“And what’ll that do?”

“Make him afraid to hit me.”

“Right. Where’s he look weak?”

Jake studied his opponent. The boy was like a man with an adolescent’s head. His face was red with acne. He was well-muscled and his torso was decorated with green, home-inked tattoos. Praying hands lay across his chest; tombstones and significant dates were placed randomly, faces of fallen ancestors, and on his neck, a baby’s face and a single word beneath: AMORE.

“Nowhere.”

“Ha. Everybody’s weak somewhere. You find it and you keep on it.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t worry about the odds. They don’t know you. He’s riding on his size. They think he’s hard, but they don’t know hard. He don’t know hard. You’re goin’ to teach him hard. You hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“I’m hard. He’s not.”

“Good boy, Jakey. You keep on him.”

A Mexican man struck the top bar of the metal gate with an 18-inch section of rebar. The sound was muted and thick.

“Get off the fence you dumb bastards!” the man yelled. Three drunken men backed from the gate. The man struck the gate again sending the tinny vibrations in all directions. He nodded, satisfied with the sound of the makeshift bell.

“Fight!” the grizzled ref commanded.

Jake lowered his chin and moved forward, staring past his own raised fists. He measured his opponent’s reach and was ready for the jabs. Inside was Jake’s place, always inside. He would suffocate the green-trimmed man-child. The kid’s punches were crisp and snapped Jake’s head back. Jake pressed through the sting and kept on him. Another two quick jabs, pain, no noise anywhere. Jake continued to close the space. The size difference and the first few punches had the crowd counting their winnings.

“C’mon Jakey! Charge him! Charge him!” Dad said.

Jake didn’t hear the words. They landed somewhere in his subconscious, but he did what was ordered through a combination of muscle memory and experience. He knocked away a jab, kept his feet moving and began throwing body shots in a furious left-right flurry. The tattooed boy hunkered down and brought his arms to his side to protect the ribs. Jake twisted his hard knuckles into the boy’s arms at the end of each

strike, trying to drill through the bone. He continued slugging at the body until the rhythm nearly became predictable. The man-child's arms dropped when Jake pressed ahead, not when he punched. Jake worked the body through another flurry and added a well-placed right uppercut. The kid stumbled back bringing gasps and cheers from the men around the ring. The kid's eyes went glassy for just a second. Jake pressed his advantage but his opponent came back quickly, strong chinned and angry. A short exchange and a clinch. The ref pushed them apart and commanded they continue. The tattooed boy smiled at Jake, a show that he wasn't hurt, a sign that he had been. Jake went back to work, driving inside the kid's reach advantage. He continued to pound the body, taking more snapping jabs. Jake threw the uppercut several more times but couldn't land it cleanly, glancing it off of muscled shoulders or finding only empty space. He never stopped stalking. He took mean headshots and pressed forward landing hard shots of his own. The kid covered up his ribs. Jake threw a left hook that grazed the kid's chin. The kid stepped back, planted his feet and shot a straight right into Jake's solar plexus, right where the ribs opened up at the zyphoid process. The wind rushed out of Jake's body and his chest burned. He stepped back, slipping in the dirt. He stumbled, gasping. The tattooed boy stepped forward, pressed ahead.

"Get him! He's hurt!" someone said through the garbled rush of voices. Jake's eyes focused beyond the boy. He saw the boy's smiling father. He saw the smile forming words: "Kill him! Kill him!" The mass of tattoos became his focus again. The right arm was cocked back at the kid's side. Jake allowed the fist to release and leaned back. He felt the wind of the powerful hook. The bell ended the round.

Jake went to Dad. He found air, breathed deep and came back to life. Jake tilted his head back and Dad poured water into his open, panting hole. He resisted the desire to take in the water. He swished it between his cheeks. He felt the contrast between his cool mouth and his sweating body. The sun was dipping toward the horizon but the heat would not relent. Jake spat in the dirt.

"Good round, Jakey. Keep the pressure on! Did he hurt you?"

"Just took my wind. I slipped."

"Did you find it?"

"He telegraphs his right hook big time."

"Good boy, Jakey. Now you make him pay for that. Keep working the body. That left feel good?"

"Yes."

"You know what to do then?"

"Yes."

The bellman struck the gate with his rebar. Dad slapped his shoulder and Jake pressed ahead.

"Yer dead little boy," the tattooed boy said. His mouthpiece garbled the words, but his intent was clear, embedded in the tone.

Jake answered the threat with a burst of right hands. The last one caught the boy's floating ribs and Jake felt the crack, heard the squeal, saw the wince. Jake continued working the spot until he was caught with a solid hook that made him see the familiar flash of white. He answered with his own powerful right cross and went back to the ribs before the kid's head could face him again. The kid began to circle; Jake stepped with him, cutting off the escape. The kid changed direction and Jake followed, slicing the ring further. He pressed on. The kid stepped forward and landed some hard body shots. Jake threw a straight right and found the empty space left by a tilt of the head. The boy landed a clean left to Jake's temple. The flash returned; Jake's legs gave. He went down to the dirt.

"...3...4...5," the ref counted. Jake felt the hot sand on his cheek. The men surrounding the ring were going ape shit crazy. Jake saw the tattooed boy at his corner, two of him. The boy's father was slapping his back, raising his arm.

"C'mon Jakey! Get up!"

"7...8" the ref shouted. Jake swayed as the world settled, six physical dimensions coalescing to three. The ref blocked his path, took his hands. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Look me in the eye," the ref ordered. Jake did it. He forced his swollen lids open and stared into the ref's face.

"I'm fine. I'm fine."

The ref nodded. He returned to a neutral space between the pugilists.

"Fight!"

Jake charged. He would never stop crowding the man-child. The kid met him, sensing an advantage. He launched a power shot that Jake dodged easily. Jake countered with a hard straight right that broke the boy's nose. Jake almost laughed at the crooked beak in front of him, until the red blood began to flow. The boy opened his mouth, unable to breath otherwise. His eyes watered and his chin hung loose below the hole. Jake watched the blood stream from the nose and drip off the chin, the drops slapping home in the dirty blood puddle. Jake felt the anger begin to creep in. He harnessed it, charged. Jake launched wild body shots, tucked his chin. He tightened his core. The straight right to the body came again and landed in the same spot it had in the first round. Jake kept his air, but stumbled back. The kid's fist was already cocked at his side as he stepped forward, bloody and angry.

Jake slid his left foot back into a southpaw stance and drew out the earth's power through his leg. The kid's father was screaming. "Watch the left!" the man yelled. The boy's right fist stayed low. He moved closer, shaking it, ready to unload. The kid's right side was completely unguarded, again.

Jake measured the distance and dug into the dirt with his feet. The energy flowed up his legs, through the twist of his hips, through his shoulder, his arm. The twisting fist landed hard underneath the kid's open chin, slamming his teeth together. He bit through his tongue and Jake punched through the boy. He imagined the kid's face

giving in, collapsing. Jake could feel the soft and hard tissues, hot and moist. He drove through brain matter and lifted the kid from the planet as his fist met the inside of the skull.

The man-child did not get up by his own power and the payouts were made. Jake and Dad cleared close to three grand from the purse and the bet. Dad put his arm around Jake and held him tight and close as they walked back to the Olds. Hard, stinging, congratulatory hands landed on Jake's back. "El Toro" became a mantra.

"Thank you," Jake said. "Thank you." Jake looked among the men for the burned girl. She was not there.

Dad drove through the dark. It was quiet except for the cool desert air rushing over the car and the rumble of the engine. Jake's body was tight and sore. His face was swollen. His head throbbed.

"You done good, kid," Dad said without looking from the road.

"I know," Jake said. Now Dad looked at him.

"Good," he said. "Your face hurt?"

"Not too bad."

"Well it's killing me."

The laugh shook his torso and Jake winced. He leaned against the car door and felt the cool glass on his hot, tender face. He closed his eyes.

Jake thought about the dog from the Shell station. He wondered what had become of it. He saw himself and the dog in the back of the Olds. The dog loved him; this boy who pried swollen red ticks from his flesh and dropped them out of the window into the night. After a time he could ignore the pain. He slept.

Editor's Note

The Bull was first published on the website in November 2009 and was the November Story of the Month winner.

Photograph © Josh Martin

Please visit Josh here: <http://www.verveimagery.com/>

A Lesson by Victoria Cho

When I went into my room, I smelled something like my mother's Wednesday night salmon dinners. I thought my funny-smelling brother went into my room again and was about to find him when I saw Madonna in her bowl. Something looked different. I went closer and saw my county fair prize goldfish was floating upside down. White foam was around her body and the black eyes that used to peer at the surface every time I came near were still and clouded. Her mouth was open, and I knew she must have been hoping for food even during the last second of her life.

I sat down on the carpet floor and began to cry because I knew what I was: a murderer.

Two days earlier:

"You're an idiot. You feed her three times a day," my brother said.

"Shut up. The lady said once every three days."

I balled my hands into fists and dug them into my knees. I stared at Madonna and focused all of my energy on her, praying she would move again because I wasn't really a murderer, I wasn't deaf, and when the time came, I was going to take great care of the puppy that my mother would get "only if this fish makes it." I waited for five minutes. Finally, I went to my desk and wrote a poem for the funeral ceremony.

You'll always be full in heaven.

I took the jar outside and yelled the poem across the pool because maybe the louder I said it, the more likely it was to come true. Then I emptied the bowl into our swimming pool, where I hoped Madonna would be happier. I thought about burying her but figured fish shouldn't be separated from water. I thought about the lake but didn't want another fish to eat her. I thought she could be safe in the pool. It was fall after all, and my mother was just about to put on the pool's cover.

Madonna floated over to the far side by the algae and leaves and the water bottle my brother tossed earlier this morning when my mother wasn't looking. Twenty minutes later, my mother found me lying on my bed in the dark. She turned on the light and said I should've put Madonna in the toilet. I said I didn't want Madonna to go where everyone's poop went and she replied, "Honey, oh. Someday we'll all end up there."

That night, I lay awake in bed thinking about living in a world of poop. Unlike my family and friends, I would be sent to a world of poop on fire, and fish would eat me alive, and I would be forced to write fish feeding instructions in the flaming excrement on the cave walls while suffering the endless bites of the frenzied, starving salmon, angel fish, trout, and bass. I deserved it.

Editor's Note

A Lesson was first published on the website in July 2009.

Post-Coital Conversation by R.F. Marazas

“Byron, let’s kill your wife.”

“Kill Felicia? Don’t be an ass.”

“I mean it. The lake has no bottom, we could take her out on your boat, and poof, she disappears. No one will ever find her.”

“And just how would we kill her?”

“Poison. I don’t want her to suffer. I’m not a sadist.”

“What are you, Clovis?”

“Your lover, darling. Don’t you want me here in your bed all the time, without your wife always ruining our plans?”

“That might be boring---oh for God’s sake, are you going to sulk now?”

“Not if you agree to kill her.”

“This is getting complicated. Just the other day Felicia and I finished making love---”

“Liar! You told me you haven’t been together since we first met two years ago.”

“Did you honestly believe that? Anyway, in the afterglow of lovemaking, Felicia suggested that we kill you. She knows about us, and she’s never really liked you since you moved next door after your divorce settlement.”

“Oh? And she’s willing to forgive you for your adultery?”

“What can I say? She’s convinced that you led me astray. What’s absolutely hilarious is that she has your exact plan. The boat, the lake, poison, as you said, poof.”

“Tell me, Byron, did you agree to her plan?”

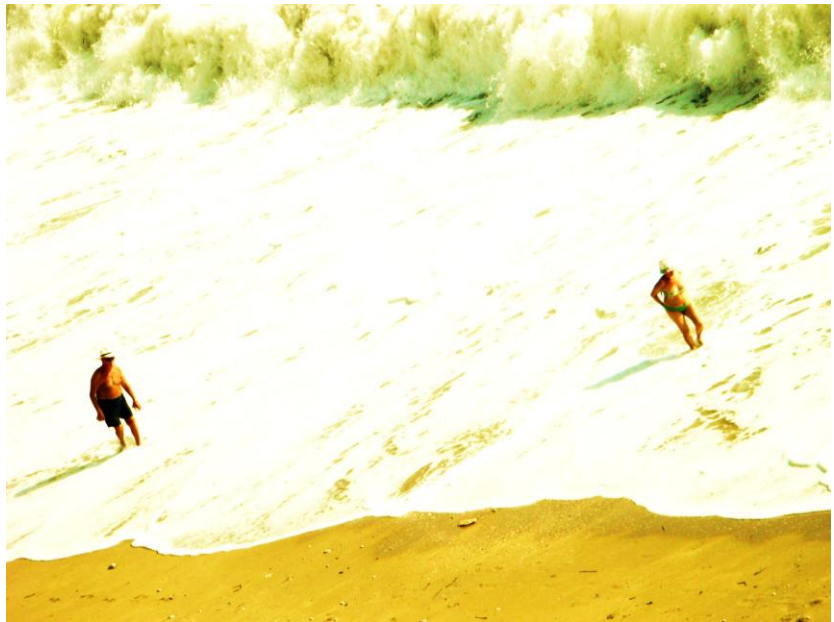
“I haven’t decided.”

“Liar again. You did agree. Felicia told me after we made love in my bed in my house yesterday.”

“Now who’s lying? You and Felicia together? Impossible.”

“Is it? We also decided that it’s you who has to be killed.”

“Liar!”



“By the way, how do you feel? You look a little pale.”

“Never mind how I look. Felicia bores me and you bore me. And you’re a liar to boot.”

“We’ll soon find out, darling. About ten minutes ago I slipped poison into your champagne.”

“What?”

“Poof.”

Editor’s Note

Post-Coital Conversation was an Honorable Mention winner in the Dialogue Contest.
Photographs © Matthias Krug



Baptized in the Holy Ghost by Eric Bennett

I'm the brother of the brother who says "*brother be good.*" So I accompany him to the white frame chapel with dogwoods in the churchyard and where rows of Tiffany windows turn the people inside faintly blue.

"*Here's the church; here's the steeple; open the doors and see all the people.*" I knew that when I was young, and then I forgot. But I remember it again this morning. This is holy ground where true-blue people do things they do nowhere else: name babies, bury the dead, and sing psalms.

The service starts and then grows as if members of the congregation are building a fire together, each of them adding something to the blaze so that the light and heat grows. And then the fire gets a little out of control.

Reverend Gunther steps out from the pulpit, off the platform, and palms my head with his broad hands, pressing hard and praying in tongues. He's sweating and booming over and over, "*deshikalamarata.*" I can't see his face, my head is bowed, but I'm watching him tip on his toes, heels hovering just above the powder blue carpet of the sanctuary. He smells like mothballs and brute Faberge. He has nice shoes.

A big-titted woman is behind me, hot hand between my shoulder blades. She's caught the Holy Ghost and is shaking and crying and singing soft, "*iyaiyaiyaiyaiyiya.*" Three deacons with white gloves gather round and agree with Reverend Gunther, "*More Lord, more.*" Standing in waves of the Spirit, we're swaying all together.

I'm the brother of the brother who stands by watching, tears running down his face. My legs are tired. My neck hurts. And all I can think is "*I have to pee.*" I'm not even close to speaking in tongues so I melt like ice-cream to the floor in front of the wooden pew. "*Praise the Lord,*" Reverend Gunther thunders, "*he's been slain in the Spirit.*" But all I do is wonder how long I have to lay here with this holy look on my face before I can get up and go to the bathroom.

After, we walk to the car. Without tiffany windows tinting them blue, people look pretty much the same. From the parking lot, everyone looks as ordinary as everything else. Our car doors snick shut and my brother asks, "*So, what did you think?*" Wide eyed and stunned I reply "*shundolashikamatoka.*"

Editor's Note

Baptized in the Holy Ghost was first published on the website in December 2009 and was the December Story of the Month winner.

A Wager Between Scientists by CS DeWildt

*I*s one worse? Here, hit this.

That's a question
worthy of severe
pondering.
I dunno.

Probably an old
person is worse.
They break easy.

How old though?

80?

And how young?

Kindergarten, 1st
grade. At least a
toddler.

Why not an infant?

Don't get too crazy.
Little babies just lay
there. It'd be like
pounding on a,
I dunno, a stump?
Or something similar?

A bag of garbage?

That works.

Infant or not
I guess I'd say an
old person would be
worse.

Evidenced by?

They were in wars and stuff, and the Great Depression? A little kid would probably bounce back pretty quickly. Old people, it might kill them or at least add to the misery of being old.

Interesting.

Which part?

Oh, I was talking about this commercial. There's a new toothpaste I want to try.

24 hours of protection?

I know, bold claim right?

The boldest.

Protection is good.

Protection is good.

People hate old people more than they hate kids.

So now you're saying a kid is worse?

Yeah. That's what I'm saying.

Despite my argument?

I think so. Kids have the whole innocence thing going for them. Yeah, that's my hypothesis.

You wanna bet?

Sure.

How much?

Five bones.

So, farmer's market or what?

Sounds right.

I see us knocking an 8 year old girl off her bike.

And dropkicking some old coot right into the Amish friendship bread.

End.

Editor's Note

A Wager Between Scientists was an Honorable Mention winner in the Dialogue Contest.

Homecoming by Catherine Zickgraf

Boot heels scrape the hallway. Christine enters my hospice room and lowers a basket of peach lilies and ivy on the bedside table. I roll my head toward my little sis whose ruddy fingertips clear bangs off my forehead. I haven't seen a mirror. My sallow cheeks must terrify her. My form has sunk into the mattress I spent the last month inhabiting. I nod at her as hard as I can. And as hard as she can, she feigns a smile.

Sis holds a shiny magazine up to my eyes then pulls it back toward her own. Her voice lifts then trails describing the cover, how it promises lessons on sorting old letters from one's ex—then a flash: the daily envelopes that auburn-haired boy mailed me the summer I diagrammed tide pools in Maine—how to organize my yellowed sheets of poetry, or how to file my Barbie birthday cards signed *Grandmom*. And I wonder, wrapped here in wires, how long after I'm gone Tom will keep my shoeboxes of childhood stacked on our closet shelf.

Grandmom inhabits all our closets. She lived just a few more months after my wedding. She wore that afternoon her pink tweed suit, daisy lapel pin, and plastic pearls. It was her last occasion to dress fancy before her own funeral. She is long buried now and lengthened in my memory to a heroine. Tom bought me her little house, her remainder at death. And then sometimes when our nightstand glowed *3:08 am*, her house-dressed form would near the bed and caress my hair down my back. When I'd lift my cheek from the pillow, she'd dissolve in the hall toward our bathroom light. But her soft eyes would reappear with the sunlit morning in the sky-and-cloud wallpaper of our baby's room. *You know you won't be able to go back home*, blurted my day nurse last week. Grandmom is at home, though, watching over my small family.

For my sickbed, Tom brought me the faded blankets she quilted decades ago. Every midnight, when the caretaker swept in my room to check my pressure, I prayed my husband was spread out in our bed and sleeping hard. It happened last night. After the nurse hurried out my gaping door, Mom emerged from the floating curtain around my bed. She reopened and unfolded over me the covers made from Grandmom's red and blue calico dresses, herringbone-stitched into fans, now fraying. I saw from my dark room ghosts surrounding the hallway halogens, waiting for me to fly away with them. I will soon return home, weaving my fingers through the vines on our kitchen walls.

Editor's Note

Homecoming was first published on the website in December 2009.

Authors

Eric Bennett lives in New York with his wife and four children. He loves fierce wounded things and beginning sentences with the word "and." His work appears or is forthcoming in several online literary and art journals including *Foundling Review*, *The Battered Suitcase*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *PANK*, and *LITnIMAGE*.

Mel Bosworth is the author of *When the Cats Razzed the Chickens* (Folded Word Press, 2009). Visit him at <http://eddiesocko.blogspot.com/>

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Victoria Cho is a Brooklyn based writer who recently returned from teaching English and studying Buddhism in Thailand. Born in Charlottesville, Virginia and a graduate of Boston University with a Bachelor's in Film, she worked in New York's independent film industry for 3 years before deciding to pursue writing full time. Find out more information about her at www.victoriacho.blogspot.com.

CS DeWildt lives and writes in Arizona; he loves the desert but misses dearly the rolling hills western Kentucky. CS recently finished a novella and is forever busy polishing his collection of shorts.

Kevin Dickinson graduated from Rutgers University in 2009 with a bachelor's in English and intends to apply to grad school very, very soon, as he has procrastinated for far too long. He rides a giant turtle everywhere and has the ability to turn water into wine by discarding the water and adding fermented grapes. He better live to be really old so he can finish all his books.

David Erlewine's work can be found at <http://www.whizbyfiction.blogspot.com/>. He edits flash fiction for JMWW.

Jessica Higgins is an Assistant Professor of English at Broward College in South Florida where she teaches composition and literature. She lives with her husband and daughter.

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Brent Krammes has an MFA (MPW) from the University of Southern California and is working on an MA from the University of Tennessee. He has been on staff at two literary journals, and his fiction has previously appeared in *Word Riot*.

Matthias Krug is a writer and photographer born amidst the flowing deserts of the Middle East and currently based in Madrid, where he is working on a novel. He has written and photographed for prestigious newspapers and publications across six continents, including literary magazines like *Bartleby Snopes* and *Danse Macabre*. For more of his work visit his website: www.krugwriting.com or contact him at mkrug@gmail.com

Kathy Lerner is a student at Fairhaven College in the Pacific Northwest. She hopes to work with children and youth from diverse backgrounds, using creative writing to encourage personal and community healing, empowerment, and transformation. Her poetry and fiction has appeared in *Word Catalyst Magazine*, *Triggerfish Critical Review*, and others. kathy1291@juno.com

R.F. Marazas won first place in the Dahlonga Literary Festival 2007 Novel Contest, for his novel *Dimensions In Ego*, and has published short fiction in five Anthologies and in on-line venues.

Robert Meade is a Boston native now transplanted in Mohegan Lake, in Westchester County, NY, with his wife and three children. He teaches at Loyola School in Manhattan. He won the Wordweaving Award for Excellence for his book, *Daily Bread: Seven Days to a Healthier Soul*. A published author of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, his recent work has appeared in *Angels on Earth* magazine and online at *Guideposts* and *Apollo's Lyre*.

Eric Miller is a retired dentist who has laid down his drill for a quill. His stories and poems number more than several mouths full of teeth and appear in many different publications.

Eric V. Neagu lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. His undergraduate degree is from Purdue University in civil engineering, which he uses to work toward revitalizing depressed communities. Eric also has a graduate degree from The University of Chicago, which he mostly uses to give driving directions to Barack Obama's house when people ask. Other work can be found on *The National Ledger*, *Bewildering Stories*, and *Hackwriters*. While not planning his upcoming wedding, he works on his first novel and refining several short stories.

Richard Osgood lives in a city on a river where the north meets the south. His fiction can be found in *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Hobart*, *Clockwise Cat*, *The First Line*, and forthcoming in *Lit Chaos* and *Mud Luscious*.

Geri Silveira is an experienced advertising writer and magazine editor currently working in the Communications Department of California State University, Fullerton. She was inspired by reading the short story anthology "A Teller of Tales" as a youth and by the stories of O. Henry in more recent years. Geri writes short stories to satisfy her inner-literary writer and to share ideas with other writers. She lives in San Dimas, California with her husband Frank, a retired psychology professor, and her dog Penny.

Townsend Walker lives in San Francisco. During a career in finance he published three books: foreign exchange, derivatives, and portfolio management. Four years ago he started writing fiction inspired by cemeteries, foreign lands, paintings, murders and strong women. His stories have been published in over two dozen literary journals, on-line and print.

Phoebe Wilcox lives in eastern Pennsylvania. Some of her favorite things are John Banville novels, sushi, salamanders (they have cute hands) and picking blueberries. Her novel, *Angels Carry the Sun* is pending publication with Lilly Press, and an excerpt from a second novel-in-progress has been published in *Wild Violet*. Recent and forthcoming experiments may be found in *The Chaffey Review*, *The Big Table*, *Shoots and Vines*, *The Battered Suitcase*, *The Linnet's Wings*, *Calliope Nerve*, *Bartleby-Snopés*, *The Black Boot* and others. Her story, "Carp with Water in Their Ears," published in *River Poets Journal* was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

David Williams is a writer and photographer living in Kansas City, Missouri. "Cooking Chinese" is his first published fiction. He is working on his first novel. Read his blog at <http://ajourneyreconsidered.blogspot.com>

Catherine Zickgraf quit law school to be a writer. Let's hope it pans out. You can find her blog at <myspace.com/czickgraf.com>. Her writing has appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Pank*, and *decomp*. She also has work forthcoming in *GUD Magazine* and *A Cappella Zoo*.

Photographers

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Matthias Krug is a writer and photographer born amidst the flowing deserts of the Middle East and currently based in Madrid, where he is working on a novel. He has written and photographed for prestigious newspapers and publications across six continents, including literary magazines like *Bartleby Snopes* and *Danse Macabre*. For more of his work visit his website: www.krugwriting.com or contact him at mkkrug@gmail.com

Scott D. Johnson grew up outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and lives in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. He has worked as a software developer for many years. When not writing code or taking photos, he might be hiking, running or working on a short story.

Grant Palmer is a photographer, writer, poet and engineer living in Southern California. He has lived, worked and created all over the world and continues to explore his art around the globe. His work may be viewed at www.grantpalmerphotography.com.

Adelaide B. Shaw writes fiction and Japanese poetic forms, such as haiku. Her poetry and stories have been published in many journals, including *Bartleby Snopes*. Her blog with her poetry and haiga, a Japanese form combining art and haiku, can be seen at www.adelaide-whitepetals.blogspot.com. She lives in Millbrook, NY with her husband.

Tanaya Winder is a MFA student in poetry at the University of New Mexico. She also writes in the genres of fiction and creative nonfiction and has an interest in photography. Her work explores how art/writing remains suspended between life and death, between searching and discovering. She currently lives and works in Colorado.