

Bartleby Snopes



A Literary Magazine of Fiction

Bartleby Snopes Issue 7

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Dialogue Contest Finalists

The first six stories in this issue are the finalists from our Third Annual Dialogue Only Contest. Our Dialogue Contest Finalists are selected by the staff and then voted on by a panel of judges. This year's judges included Ben Loory (author of Stories for the Nighttime and Some for the Day) and Matt Rowan (editor of Untoward Magazine).

Poem About Writing a Poem by Mark Jordan Manner

Mark Jordan Manner.

Yeah?

That's the first line of your story.

It is.

Mark Jordan Manner. Brown hair and brown eyes and brown dirt caked on the toes of his brown boots. He tongues the small cut inside of his left cheek. It tastes sharp, metallic. He lights a cigarette.

I know how it goes. You don't have to read it to me.

You smoke cigarettes?

Not in real life.

But you do in the story?

Yeah.

Why?

Because I'm a writer in the story.

But you're a writer in real life too.

Not really. In the story I'm a different kind of writer. A real writer. The kind who smokes cigarettes.

I don't follow.

It's not important.

But it is important. You've got yourself smoking in practically every scene. There has to be a reason for it.

That's just who the character is. He's someone who smokes cigarettes. That's what he does. I don't know how else to explain it.

Fine. Fair enough. So talk to me about the violence.

What about it?

The knife had an orange grip and an eight-inch blade. It was a hunting knife. He used it to scalp the girl, carving the blonde tresses from her skull, leaving her bloody and bald. She screamed without making any noise. Mark Laughed. He stuck the girl's scalp onto his own head and started dancing around the room. Naked. "Look at me," he said. "I'm a pretty lady. Everybody look at me."

Ha.

Are you laughing at this?

Yes.

It's supposed to be funny then?

Yeah.

So is this your way of telling the world you've officially lost your fucking mind?

What do you mean?

Well, for starters, you wrote a story about yourself scalping girls with a hunting knife. It's not me though. It's another me. It's the me of the story, the writer version of me.

But you're a writer in real life, so you already are "the writer version" of you.

I'm not a writer though. I'm only aspiring to be one.

And you think this story is a step in the right direction?

I do.

May I tell you why I disagree?

Yeah. That's why I invited you over here.

You remember taking that poetry workshop freshman year?

I do.

Before each assignment, Bobby told us the same thing: "Avoid writing a poem about writing a poem. It's been done to death. It's buried. It's dead."

I remember.

Well that's your first problem. You write too much of the story about writing a story. Pages and pages of dialogue where nothing happens, just a couple of guys sitting around talking to each other about stories, and about writing them.

But my character is a writer, and that's what writers do.

But writers do other things as well; so maybe try focusing on these other things? Because the way it is right now doesn't work. It's boring, expected. It's all been done.

I'll think about it.

Good. Another thing. Your main character is you. Mark Jordan Manner. Yet another technique that's been done to death. No legitimate reason for it whatsoever. It's like you only stuck yourself in there to be arty and pretentious.

It's about a guy writing a story. I'm a guy who writes stories. Why wouldn't I just make myself be the guy? It seemed to make sense at the time.

The elderly man's name was Bernie. Mark bent him over his walker, then reached around the front to unbuckle Bernie's belt. Bernie was crying. Mark was hard. He spit into his right hand, making his palm moist and shiny.

Quit reading me portions. It's condescending.

You just told me the guy in the story is you. Well, the guy in the story rapes an old man. How do you explain that?

It's only a portion of me.

Mark. This isn't real writing. It's all for shock value. You think that sticking yourself in as the main character, having him rape and scalp everyone, will shock people, but so what? His actions don't hold any sort of weight.

Not true. There's a good reason for everything taking place. The raping. The scalping. It's all an allegory for global pollution.

What the hell? Is that a joke?

No.

I strongly doubt you even know what allegory means.

Fine. So what would your suggestion be then? Cut out the rape and the scalping and myself as main character?

And the writing about writing.
Without those things I've got nothing.
So start from scratch.
Who has time for that?
Make time.
What should I write about then?
Doesn't matter, so long as it's minimalist, ambiguous, no violence or sex or anything cheap and easy. Avoid everything you included in your original story.
Should I write about the time my grandfather performed a magic trick?
Magic trick?
He was supposed to make a tissue disappear, but I could see it bunched up inside of his sleeve. I was young. Maybe six or seven. I pretended to be amazed even though I knew where it was. That way he could continue to believe that kids have faith in magic.
Yes! Write about something along those lines! Perfect. Just remember what I said. Make it minimalist. Ambiguous. Write from a perspective that's detached, that's already lost its innocence. You could call it "The Magic Trick."
Okay.
Good. So you agree?
Sure.
I guess we're done here then. You mind if I steal a cigarette from you?
Sure.
Thanks, Mark.
No problem. Thanks for your help.
You got any ashtrays in here?
No. You can put it out on my arm once you're done though.
Your arm? Doesn't that hurt?
A little, but it's a good kind of hurt.

Editor's Note

Poem About Writing a Poem took first place in our Third Annual Dialogue Contest. Guest judge Matt Rowan says, "It is loaded, packed with great things but not overmuch. Comfortably loaded, my favorite kind of story. Filled with everything I like in a story and all in dialogue. A real accomplishment. It's a blur of violence, humor, philosophy, writing workshop, meta-metafiction, even a little gray area there, maybe best termed ennui."

Working It All Out by David Meuel

"Do you have a minute, Andy?"

"I promised Cody I'd help him build a space station with his Legos."

"He's playing with them in the family room now. He seems fine. This will just take a few minutes."

"All right."

"Let's sit in the living room."

"All right. What's this about?"

"Please sit down first."

"All right, I'm seated. You're seated. All God's chil'len are seated."

"Don't be flip, Andy."

"So, what's on your mind, Lisa?"

"I—I'm having trouble getting it out. I didn't think I would, but I am."

"You look pale. What's the matter?"

"I-I'm leaving you."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"What about Cody?"

"He'll stay with you for a while."

"But next Thursday's Thanksgiving."

"That's just it. I just can't go through the Holidays again the way we are. Our relationship isn't working for me. It hasn't for a long time."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll text you my new address. Don't worry about me. I've worked it all out."

"You already have a place?"

"It's all taken care of. Don't worry."

"What's going on, Lisa?"

"Nothing, really. I'm not having an affair, if that's what you mean."

"That's not what I mean. I just want to know what's going on. You act like everything's normal. We go about everything like we always have. When I ask you how you are, you say 'Everything's fine.' When you seem upset, you say that it's just work stress."

"And you believed that?"

"God, Lisa, we made love three days ago."

"I got an apartment. I got a good deal on the rent, too."

"Where is it?"

"In Cupertino. Two bedrooms."

"Is it furnished?"

"I've taken care of that."

"How? We can't afford to buy all the things you need for a new place—at least not now."

"Y—yes, we can."

"You need to explain this to me."

"Not if you get testy."

"Okay, I won't get testy. Just tell me."

"I've wanted to move out for six or seven months. But I wanted it to be smooth and quick, not like all those couples who spend months arguing over their things."

"So?"

"I started buying things for a new place bit by bit so you wouldn't notice. Just a few things every month. Furniture. Furnishings. Dishes and utensils. Pots and pans. Clothes too."

"Where did you put them?"

"I rented a mini storage locker. I got almost everything I needed. I even got a bedroom set for Cody so he'll be comfortable when he stays with me. Then I got the apartment, and yesterday I had movers take all my things over from the storage locker."

"Did you ever think to talk to me?"

"It's better this way. I can go. We can both live separately and start the divorce process from there. Cody can stay here until we work through the custody arrangement. He's closer to you, anyway. Believe me, it's better this—"

"Daddy, are you coming to help?"

"Daddy will be there in a few minutes, dear."

"Okay, Mommy."

"Now, I need to be going."

"But there's so much you need to tell me, Lisa. God, what are we going to tell the people we invited for Thanksgiving?"

"I really need to go. I'll tell Cody that I'll be away for a few days, give him a kiss, straighten his shirt like I always do, and go. Then you can play with him."

Editor's Note

Working It All Out finished second in this year's Dialogue Only Contest.

This Transfer's Only Good Until 6:28 by Don Hucks

Quick, woman, where's the Jack Daniel's?
My day was just fine, thanks, and yours?
You won't believe me, but I'm going to tell you anyway. But first things first.
I haven't touched it. Look on top of the fridge.
Ah-ha. Why is it always in the last place you left it?... You're going to want some of this, too.
No thanks. You know it gives me a headache.
Smells good. What is it?
Lamb.... So what happened?
Guess who I ran into on the bus. You'll never guess. But guess anyway. Take as many tries as you like.
Hmmm...
Go ahead, guess.
Jim Morrison.
Ha. Not even close. It was me. On the bus.
You? On the bus?
Only older. Seventy maybe. Ornery son-of-a-bitch. Pretty damn good-looking, though—for a man of his age. Perfect posture. Magnificent physique. Must be I finally get around to starting that exercise routine I've been talking about for the last—how long?
As long as I've known you.
Exactly. Forever.
So what happened? Did you talk to him?
I was a little intimidated at first. I mean –
Of course.
Just try to imagine. You know?
Yeah yeah, I can't even...
But after about fifteen or twenty blocks, I said screw it, he's in *my* corner of the space-time continuum, riding *my* bus. I mean, come on, he knows I catch the number 7 at 5:08 every day.
He was on your turf.
Exactly.
So what did you do?
I went up and sat down right next to him.
No.

He was in one of those side-facing seats in the front, which I don't really like to sit in—you know how they make me self-conscious, all those eyes pointed in my direction. He must have thought he'd be able to sneak glances at me without my noticing.

He should know you better than that.

You'd think so, right? So anyway, I just walked right over and took the empty seat beside him, and I stared right at him, and I flashed him this little grin, and I said, 'So what's new, Donny-boy?'

Shut... up.

No, it's true.

Okay, pour me just a drop—I mean it, a drop—in a big glass of ginger ale. And how about giving me a hand with a salad while we chat.

Sure, no problem.

There's spinach in the crisper.

Where's the big colander?

It's okay. It's ready-to-eat. It's triple-washed.... What?

You know triple-washed produce is the leading cause of salmonella, right? And the third leading cause of the clap?

Hmmm.

Honestly.

No no, I believe you. I'm just trying to figure out what the second leading cause could be.

Good question.... How about... let's say... international communism?

Nnnnn...

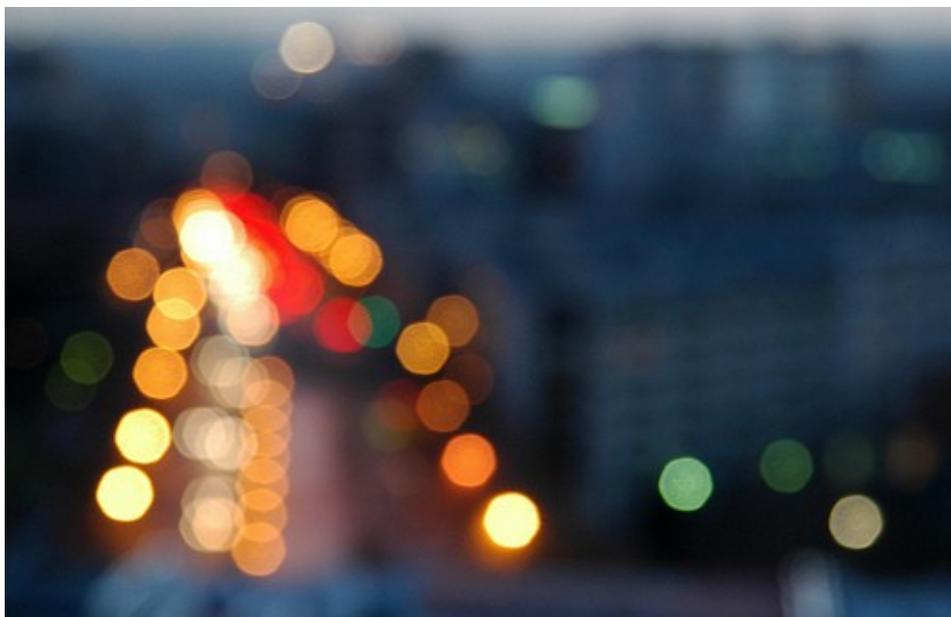
No?

It's a little...

A little what?

A little—I don't know—*walkman*.

A little *pong*?



A little *just say no*.

Oh oh, I've got it—it's those full-body scanners at the airport. People have been getting the clap off the things. It was in the *Huffington Post*.

There should be some yellow peppers and portobellos too.... Do you see them?

Got it.

So then what?

He's not even fazed. Says it took me long enough. Says he crossed the better part of three decades quicker than I crossed those three rows of seats, and he says, just by the way, in the future it's polite to offer a visitor something to drink.

Damn.

I know. Turns out I'm cool as *hell* as an old geezer. So anyway, we get off the bus and walk a couple of blocks looking for this little bar he recommends. Unfortunately, though, it turns out the place doesn't exist yet. He must have gotten his dates mixed up. In the present, there's just a gyro place in that spot. He said to keep an eye out for it, though. Place called Gatsby's. It's supposed to have affordable drinks, a great cheeseburger, live music six nights a week. Oh, and super-hot waitresses.... What? I'm sure it was just the Viagra talking. *Old man* is the new *teenage boy*, you know—even in the present, I mean. And given the accelerating rate of scientific progress...

Thanks for the warning.

Fortunately there's this dive on the corner, so we go in and I buy him a glass of wine. In the future, by the way, red wine is the only thing I'll drink. Part of that whole fitness kick, I'm sure.

Promotes cardiovascular health. Hey, how about mixing a vinaigrette while I finish brazing the chops.

Sure thing.

There should be some balsamic in the pantry.... So then what? What did the two of you talk about?

Well, he kind of played it casual at first, just the usual chatter. Finally he comes to the point. I mean, obviously you don't go to the trouble of time-travelling just to mooch a glass of wine. Plus, time travel's got to be a tad pricey. Like anything else, it's sure to come down eventually, but we're only talking thirty years in the future. It must be fresh out of the pack and right at the top of *everybody's* wish list.

Sure.

So anyway, he writes out a check for five hundred dollars and tells me to buy Consolidated Something-or-Other at two dollars a share. Says if I can do him this one little favor he can forgive me everything else.

Everything else what?

I didn't ask. I know when somebody's fishing for an invitation to dump on me, and I wasn't about to provide it. If he's got something to say, let him come out and say it, you know?

So what did you tell him?

I asked him what's in it for me?

Wow.

Hey, the kid's got a move or two of his own.

So what did he say to that?

Well, he asks what I've got in mind, and I say maybe a little sneak-peak at a big news flash. You know, something nice and juicy—the kind of thing people would kill to be first to know.

Good thinking. Toss a little garlic powder in that, okay? And some cracked pepper.... So then what?

He said sure, what did I want to know?

He didn't give you any mumbo-jumbo about parallel universes and paradoxes and all that?

Well, this whole stock market monkey business makes me think that, in the future, I don't spend as much time as you might imagine fussing over the philosophical nuances of my every move. But he did say I couldn't ask about domestic matters, or personal tragedies, or the Dallas Cowboys. Told me these subjects were strictly off limits. Said with some things you just have to hope for the best, then wait and see.

The wisdom of experience.

You said it. Anyway, I had to think about it a minute, so I got us another couple of refills, and I ended up asking about the right-on-red—you know, whether we finally succeed in getting it abolished.

Oh yeah, right. So what did he say?

He said we come close. Very close. But just when it looks like we've finally got the votes lined up, the revolution comes and mucks up the whole thing.

Oh, that's too bad.

Not that the revolution won't be sympathetic to our position. It's just that they'll have their hands full keeping down the counter-revolution.

Of course.

And I don't have to tell you the counter-revolution won't be satisfied with the status quo. The counter-revolution will demand the straight-ahead-on-red and the left-on-red too. It'll be all-out war on the red light if the counter-revolution prevails.

So, do they?

I don't know. He only allowed me the one question, and I'd already used it up.

I see.... So are you going to buy the stock or what?

I don't think it's a good idea. I'm sure they've got laws, in the future, about this sort of thing. If they've got fourth-dimensional tourism, you know they've thought about the implications for insider trading.

It does seem a little risky.

And let's face it: we don't really know the guy—this *me* from the future. How do we know we can trust him? I mean, sure, we can trust me now, but a person can take all kinds of crazy turns you'd never expect.

That's true.

Just think of all the fucked up shit I could point to in my past. How do we know the future isn't even worse? I mean, it's practically half a lifetime, you know?

Better, with some things, to wait and be surprised, like you said.

The more I think about it, it kind of gives me the creeps.... Think I might stay late at work the next couple of weeks and catch a later bus. You know, just in case he tries stalking me.

Okay, this looks about done. Help me set the table?

And just to be safe, maybe I'd better change my email address and eighty-six my facebook account too.

Editor's Note

This Transfer's Only Good Until 6:28 took third in our Dialogue Only Contest.

Photograph – Bokeh Traffic © Yelena Petrovic

The Little Gymnast by Eirik Gumeny

"Good job, honey! That was perfect!"

"Wow, your daughter is quite the little gymnast."

"Oh, thank you. Mariska practices almost every day. She just loves it."

"To be pulling off a flip like that, and at her age! Right off the monkey bars!"

"I know! We couldn't be more thrilled about it. Athletics have always been very important to us and to have a child so gifted..."

"I don't think it's too much to say you have the makings of a future Olympian right there."

"Oh, I certainly hope so. That's part of the reason we bought a Russian."

"I'm—I'm sorry?"

"Well, traditionally, Russians, especially those of Eastern bloc countries, are preternaturally skilled at gymnastics. A lot of it is due to an intensive training coupled with a mastery of ballet mechanics but, really, there's just such a precision inherent in their movements... You simply can't teach that."

"No, that part I got. I meant the buying your daughter. Is she adopted?"

"What? No. No, we bought her new from Babies 'R' Us a few years back."

"What?"

"Babies 'R' Us? The companion store to Toys 'R' Us? has a large, purple sign. Where you go to buy babies."

"Where you go to buy baby *things*. Not actual babies."

"Oh, no, they have actual babies. Granted, it's not an especially *large* inventory, but their selection is remarkably varied. And all under six months old! Obviously they don't just keep them on the shelves, though. That would be cruel and strange. They keep them in the back."

"In the back?"

"Well, I suppose it's probably more apt to say *around* back. They keep them in a van in the cargo-loading area."

"I don't—I don't think what you did was in anyway legal."

"Oh, come on. Why wouldn't it be? It was a completely legitimate transaction. I paid full price and they give me a receipt. And the man assured me she wasn't stolen."

"You... *asked* if she was stolen?"

"Well, no. That would have been rude. And awfully presumptuous, really. The man volunteered that information, all on his own. You see, I was walking through the store, looking at strollers and cribs and the like, when the man saw me and came up to me. He was asking why I was there alone, where my wife and baby were. And, well, I believe in being honest, even with strangers. So I explained that we didn't have a child, but we were thinking about one. And, quite frankly, I find it easier to visualize something when I have as many of the pieces in front of me as I can. A lack of imagination, if you will."

Anyway, I told the man all this and he simply smiled and told me it was my lucky day. If you can believe it, he said he had more babies than he knew what to do with! Right there and then! I couldn't believe it. So he led me through the store, saying the babies were outside, they had to be kept away from the rest of the inventory for safety and sanitation reasons, and then made several assertions that the babies were in no way stolen or kidnapped and everything was on the up and up."

"He told you all this on the way out of the store *to a van full of babies.*"

"Yes."

"And it never occurred to you that he might be lying?"

"Why would he be lying? The store is called Babies 'R' Us. It only makes sense that they'd have them."

"I don't think that man actually worked at the store."

"Oh, well, now I think you're just being racist."

"I'm—What?"

"Just because he was a middle-aged white man you assumed he couldn't possibly be qualified to be working retail."

"One, you never said he was white. Two, *the man had a van full of babies! BABIES DO NOT GET SOLD OUT OF VANS! THEY DO NOT GET SOLD AT ALL! THAT IS NOT HOW ADOPTION WORKS!*"

"I am well aware of how adoption works, thank you. And as I said before, we did not *adopt* Mariska, we got her new. She's ours and ours alone. We *thought* about adoption, yes, but we just couldn't imagine ourselves ever raising someone else's baby. Taking advantage of some poor family's misfortune for our own benefit. The whole process is just so... *sordid.*"

"Oh my God. This—Where's your wife? Does she know about this?"

"I'm not married."

"OK, then your girlfriend, or your boyfriend, or whoever the other part of 'we' is."

"Mr. Skittles? He's at home. He doesn't like coming to the playground. Too much stimulation for him. And far too much sand. He gets... well, confused, to be polite about it."

"Mr. Skittles?"

"Yes."

"Is that... Is Mr. Skittles your cat?"

"Mr. Skittles isn't *my* cat. No one owns him. He's his own cat."

"You're raising a stolen Russian child with a cat."

"Mariska is not *stolen*, thank you. And I'd like it very much if you'd stop insinuating that she is."

"I'm calling the police."

"Well, you're more than welcome to, if you really feel you must, but I warn you that you're going to look very foolish."

"How? How am I going to be the one looking foolish?"

"I told you, I still have the receipt. It was a one hundred percent legal exchange of goods. I have done nothing wrong."

"You need help."

"Help?! How dare you! Mr. Skittles and I are more than capable of raising Mariska ourselves! Just because you don't understand our way of life is no reason to threaten our family!"

"Your 'family' consists of a kidnapped little girl and a cat you think is a person!"

"*I never said Mr. Skittles was a person!* Haven't you been listening at all? It's like you're *trying* to make me look like a crazy person. Is this what you do? Is this how you get your kicks? By harassing strangers in the park?"

"911? Yes, I'd like to report a kidnapping."

"My God. The nerve of some people. I can't believe you would waste the time of the police like that."

"I'm at Henderson Park..."

"You're really going through with it? Unbelievable. I don't think I want to be here when they find out you prank called them. Mr. Skittles should have the casserole ready by now, anyway. It's time to go, Mariska!"

Editor's Note

The Little Gymnast finished fourth in this year's Dialogue Contest.

Clown Adoption by Chad Redden

My birthday will be here soon.

Almost three months, yeah, I guess that is soon.

So I was talking to Austin and you know what his parents got for his birthday?

Tell me.

They adopted a clown.

A clown?

Yeah, I saw it, it lives in his closet.

A clown? Like a stuffed toy or like from a circus?

Like from a circus.

He adopted a clown from a circus?

Yeah, where else would you adopt a clown? They have hundreds there.

Which circus? Barnum and Bailey?

I don't know, just the circus. You can adopt them.

I don't understand. Why would anyone adopt a clown?

They have too many old clowns, and new clowns are born every day from circus cannons. So when the clowns get too old, they slow down and aren't funny anymore, so they adopt them out to kids.

How old are these clowns?

Like sixty years old, too old to be funny and too slow to win at the clown races anymore.

So the circus continues to get newer, faster, funnier clowns for their clown races and the old ones they give out for adoption?

Right.

What do they do with the clowns no one wants to adopt?

They put them on a farm somewhere and they just wander around a field. But they get sad because they don't have any kids to entertain.

Obviously, it's their purpose.

So we should adopt a clown so it won't get sad, and I won't get sad thinking about it getting sad.

First of all, that's very empathetic, I give you props for your humanity. Second, I'm not so sure we have space for a clown. Think about this, how often are you at my place?

Every weekend.

Yes, every weekend but not every day. So guess who has to take care of the old, slow, not funny clown while you are your mom's house?

I don't know, they can kind of take care of themselves.

Me, I'd be the one who has to take care of the clown. Also, I'll have to take it outside to go to the bathroom, I'll have to take it on walks, and I've got to feed it. I mean it is a

clown, so it will eat as much as I eat. That seems really expensive. Plus, I would imagine it would have some other "problems" and I don't want to lock up my liquor.

Clowns don't have to go outside to go the bathroom, they can go in the sink, or the toilet if you train them. And they don't eat much. They sell clown food at Wal-Mart. All they need is a bowl of cotton candy and Kool-Aid and they are full!

Still, let's imagine that clown food is cheap and I don't have to go out into the snow to take them on walks or let them go to the bathroom. I still have to live with the thing. I mean, I'm pretty happy without a roommate and I feel a clown would be just like a roommate, but more dependent.

We could get a clown that just sleeps in the closet while I'm away.

We have one closet, my closet, where I keep all of my clothes. Do you know how freaky that would be when I'm trying to dress in the morning, opening my closet and seeing some old wrinkly clown asleep in my closet?

He can sleep on the bed with you like the cat.

That would be much worse.

We can train the clown to do all kinds of things. They create whipped cream pies from air.

Sounds like it'd ruin the carpet.

It wouldn't ruin the carpet.

Think of this, if we adopt a clown and it is sixty or so, we might have to take care of it for another twenty or thirty years. I do hope to try and date again in that time. I don't think a clown would necessarily impress the ladies. Plus, the make-up, do you know how much clown make-up will cost?

Clowns don't need make-up dad. They're born looking like that. They make clown make-up for us to look like clowns on Halloween or at parties.

I'm sorry, I don't want a clown.

But I'm old enough for one, what if we put it in my backpack and I took it to school with me.

How would it fit into your backpack?

Haven't you seen a clown before? They fit into all kinds of places like buckets.

No clowns. No. Not at all.

But they will be so sad.

They chose a career without security.

They're born clowns dad, they don't have a choice. All they can do is be a clown.

My answer is still no, but we can visit them at the circus or the clown farm.

Ok, but when you see one at the clown farm hanging on the fence while we feed it cotton candy, you'll say to yourself, "That clown is so sad, I need to give it a home."

Then, you will see my face which will also be sad and say to yourself "Now the clown and my son are both so sad, which makes me sad and I can't take anymore sadness in the

world. Why didn't I adopt a clown before now? All of this sadness makes me want to adopt every clown in the world!"

No. Pick something else for your birthday.

What about a tornado?

What are you even talking about?

A pet tornado, I've seen them.

Impossible.

You're impossible.

Editor's Note

Clown Adoption was the fifth place finisher in this year's contest.

Therapy by Steve Karas

"My parents think I'm addicted to tweeting."

"And by tweeting you mean...?"

"I mean, like, Twitter."

"Which is...in the same vein as crank, nose candy, Big H? Help me out, Jackson."

"Don't you specialize in addiction?"

"That I do."

"And you've never come across a Twitter addict?"

"Been doing this a long time, but no, no I haven't. Am I dating myself?"

"Twitter, doc. It's a social networking site where you post micro-messages. They're called tweets."

"I see. And what do you write in these...twits?"

"Tweets. Mostly just observations on life. Here, listen to this one—"The recession's so bad, CEOs are playing mini golf now. For realz!' Good one, huh?"

"Asking the wrong guy. People actually read this stuff?"

"Yeah people read this stuff. I've got three thousand, eight hundred twenty-four followers. Wait, twenty-five now. I'm shooting for seven million a la Ashton Kutcher."

"Ambitious. I'm going to have to ask you to put away your phone, though, Jackson. One of my ground rules."

"Three thousand, eight hundred twenty-six!"

"So, followers. People follow you? Why would they follow you? I'm not following."

"There's some strategy involved. Lots of hard work. Empires aren't built overnight. I bought several hundred followers too."

"What are you typing?"

"I'm just tweeting that I'm in a therapy session with an old dude who's never heard of Twitter."

"Not nice. And this tweeting, how does it make you feel?"

"It's a rush, doc. Getting followed, mentioned, retweeted, listed."

"I bet it is. Activation of the mesolimbic pathway. Classic."

"I'm always checking it, constantly. Can't go more than a few minutes."

"Here we go with the phone again. Any history of addiction in your family, Jackson? Your dad?"

"Cigarettes and coffee, that's about it."

"Mom?"

"Coupon clipping, maybe?"

"And you? Any other addictions, compulsions?"

"Facebook for a while, but the results weren't immediate enough for my liking, you know?"

"I can only imagine."

"Anyway, I'm more focused on my Twitter career now."

"Career?"

"Yeah, I want to become a Twitter mega star. A celebrity Twitterer, if you will."

"And what exactly does that mean, Jackson?"

"I want to become famous for my tweets."

"So not for any real talent, per se. Interesting."

"Do you have any idea what I could do with millions of followers, doc? How much money I could make?"

"Enlighten me."

"I could get paid to tweet ads for companies, create a business and market it, get popular enough to star on a reality TV show. The Apprentice. Celebrity Rehab, worst case."



"But you haven't done any of these things yet?"

"That's correct."

"And you're making zero income from Twitter at this point?"

"Right again."

"Sounds to me like a serious case of rationalization. A common defense mechanism."

"Okay, you're losing me with the psycho-babble."

"So this Twitter addiction that your parents are concerned about—you really don't see it as a problem do you, Jackson?"

"No. No I don't."

"Then what brings you in here?"

"I'm buying time for my career to blow up. My parents forced me to see you. They're threatening to kick me out of the house if I don't do something with myself, quit tweeting all the time."

"No job I take it?"
"I'm collecting unemployment."
"School?"
"Dropped out of juco last year. Couldn't concentrate in class."
"Girlfriend in your life?"
"Nope."
"Boyfriend?"
"No, doc, I'm into chicks."
"Had to ask."
"Do you at least pay rent to your parents?"
"Why would I do that?"
"Hmmm...I'm sorry, Jackson, but I don't think it's a good idea we continue meeting."
"Come on, three more sessions."
"Unfortunately, I can't. Code of conduct. Wouldn't be ethical of –. What are you typing now?"
"I'm just sending out a tweet."
"Time's up, Jackson. Let's go."
"Listen to this—'Best therapist in the Chicagoland area. The guy's a genius.' What's your phone number, doc?"
"Bribery, unbelievable."
"Three thousand, eight hundred twenty-six followers. Hold up, twenty-seven now."
"Still climbing. Fascinating. Next Saturday work for you?"

Editor's Note

Therapy finished sixth in this year's Dialogue Only Contest.

Photograph – *Hello, I'm Lost!* © Fabio Sassi

Story of the Month Winners

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

The Cord by Chip O'Brien

The doctor handed me the scissors to cut the umbilical cord. Anna began to sob, violently.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Don't," she said.

"Don't what?" I thought maybe I'd done something wrong.

"Would you like some time?" The doctor asked.

She nodded, unable to speak. She'd lost a kid before we'd met. So, this was her second and my first.

"I won't lose this one," she cried.

"Of course, you won't. Never. That's crazy talk. You ready?"

"Do not cut it," she said with pure conviction.

I looked at the doctor.

"It's her right," he said.

"Her right?" I said. "It's her right to have a baby or not have a baby. She doesn't have a right to not cut the damn cord."

"I won't lose this one," she said.

I figured with the drugs, the labor—she'd been at it almost ten hours—she was dog tired and a little loopy.

"He's a healthy baby boy, sweetheart. We've got to let these people do their jobs, weigh him, clean him up, all that."

"We can come back in a little bit," the nurse offered. "After she's had some time."

"Doesn't this have to be done now?"

The doctor's mother stood beside him, silent. It bothered me that she was there, as if the birth of my child was any damn business of hers.

"I can move the scale over here to the bed," the nurse offered.

"That should be fine," the doctor said. "The cord's long."

I stood back, scissors in hand, and watched as they did everything they do with newborns but with the umbilical cord still attached. When they finished they handed my son back to my wife.

"Is now a good time?" I asked.

They all looked at me, the doctor, the doctor's mother, the nurse, all except Anna. She brushed the baby's forehead with a thumb. "No," she said. "You cannot do it. You will never do it."

"Is it me?" I said, thinking this was some psycho husband-hating trip she was on after going through the hell of labor. "It's okay. I don't have to cut it. The doctor can do it." I held the scissors out to him but he wouldn't take them. "Or the nurse."

"No one will do it," Anna said.

I looked at the doctor. "Your move."

"It's up to her," he said.

"What's up to her?"

"Whether or not the cord is cut."

"You're kidding. Right?" I looked at *his* mother. The fact that she was there made me sick. It was pathetic. Their cord, the doctor's cord connecting him to his mother, was crusted over and ancient, a vile looking thing.

"Do you want him to end up like him?" I asked my wife. "He's pushing fifty, single. Still attached to his mother?" I turned to the doctor. "Kids?"

He shook his head. "It's not a bad life. No one messes with my things."

"Except your mother?"

"We have an understanding," he said and turned to her.

She nodded.

I moved to cut the cord and the doctor grabbed my wrist.

"He's my kid. I'm cutting the damn cord."

"Call security."

The doctor was strong and held my wrist until the security guard arrived.



"Please come with me, sir," the guard said, all business.

"Take him away," Anna said.

"Jesus, Anna, he's my son, too."

I looked around the room for support but found none.

"Okay, I'll go," I said. "But is this really fair to the baby?"

Anna's face changed. "I don't know," she said. Then, "I don't care if it is."

"Oh, come on, Anna. Of course you care. That's not love talking."

Anna breathed deeply.

"We could ask the baby," the doctor suggested.

I felt stupid for not thinking of the idea myself.

We waited for Anna's response. A change came over her entire body. Surrender.

I sat in the chair beside the bed, the one I'd been sitting in for most of Anna's labor.

"Hey there little guy," I said. His head seemed to bounce a bit, his blind eyes squinting and searching for the sound of my voice. "We need your help. Your mother refuses to cut the cord. I think we should cut it. So we're putting the ball in your court. The question is to cut or not to cut. What's it gonna be?"

"You might as well ask me to name myself," he said, his voice soft and small, like breath itself. "Or what brand of diaper I should wear, whether I should be breast fed or given formula, if I think mom should stay home with me or go back to work and put me in daycare, if you should send me to public or private school, if I should be spanked or put in time-out when I misbehave, if I should be allowed to drink sodas, when I should move from a crib to a bed, if I..." He fell silent.

Anna sobbed.

"Do your job," our baby said, and didn't speak again until the appropriate time.

Editor's Note

The Cord was our July Story of the Month.

Photograph – Little Poem © Yelena Petrovic

Runaway by Heather Luby

I knew her daddy would get the call. He was a volunteer fireman, he'd go. The grass was downright crisp being summer. It caught quickly, I didn't need to look back to know. It seemed like a good idea. He never left her in that house alone, not for a long time. Dropped her off, picked her up, like she was some prisoner on transport instead of daddy's little girl riding around in his pickup. She watched for me that day, her bedroom window open, the call of that fire siren in the distance. Her room was hot and damp even though she had some little box fan in her doorway. Her hands trembled on my belt buckle. I laid her down on the bed, stroked her hair like I had seen in a movie once. She winced when it caught in my watchband, but then we laughed. We laughed and then we were kissing—anxious and urgent—our hands traveling fabric and skin. I wondered if her yellow nightgown might have been her mother's. I promised her everything. Sirens wailed. She cried, but only a little, at first. She said she was happy, it felt good, really. I believed her. We were losing time and we were lost in time. The sirens died and twilight took hold. I pressed my nose into the hollow between her neck and ear and breathed her in. No one ever told how her body and my body would feel different, pressed together, after. A car came down the road, kicking gravel. She said my name. I pulled my pants on, grabbed my boots and ran. I let the screen door slap the frame. At the wood's edge I turned, saw a cop car in the driveway. Two cops got out. They took off their hats. She stood dressed, but stripped down in their headlights. She stared. The older cop said something I couldn't hear; her answer nothing but a scream. Somewhere in the dark of the woods a train whistled. I ran to it, I chased my only escape, but the lingering smoke followed.

Editor's Note

Runaway was our August Story of the Month.

Reunion by Merle Drown

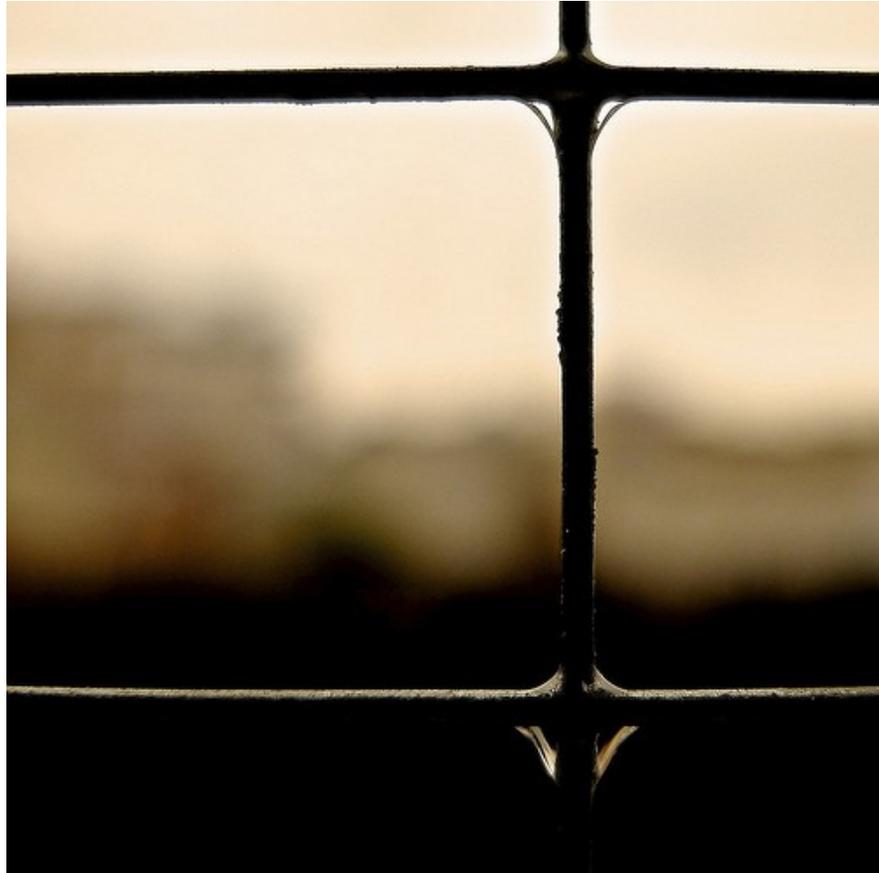
By eleven o'clock our prep school's class had shrunk to a dozen guys worshipping a long discarded nostalgia for friendship. The younger alums from the co-ed years said the reunion rocked. Not for us, all pushing sixty, half of us bald, none of us trim. Two guys, who'd brought their wives, went back to the local motel, one wife more than a little reluctantly. Given the sorry bunch she was leaving, you can imagine how little awe her husband inspired, though we were disappointed that she left.

Dale, a minor star on our football team, whose best sport had been the twelve ounce curl, announced he'd gone on the wagon.

"Doc told me it was my liquor or my liver," he said. "With you guys half-soused, the conversation's bored me for the past hour," he said as he left.

Over the five years between reunions we read of this alum serving on the country club board or that one retired to Florida, but our life's trinity—disgraces, debts, diseases—revealed themselves only at the end of a six-pack. If at all. Some guys didn't attend when their business was in Chapter 11 or their kids in rehab. Ten years ago, one guy brought the classic white Mercedes and blonde second wife with hypertension tits. Last reunion at midnight he told us her pill habit drove him to divorce her.

Before midnight we enjoyed baiting "Pimp," who still bore the deep acne scars of his miserable adolescence. In school, he'd falsely befriended the younger boys, then stolen loose change off their desks. Humorless and sanctimonious, he'd earned his living as an



IRS auditor, a clerk with a badge. As a sign of our dispirited nature, Pimp ended up as our class agent, calling twice a year for news. We despised him all the more for it.

Besides the revelations, we came to see Goldie, our class's one success. He had built a multimillion dollar corporation, raised two successful children, and traveled the world with his beautiful wife. He'd even pulled all his money out of the stock market before the internet bubble burst. (Some of us claimed to have done that too, but we lied.)

All evening he had spun stories of meeting movie stars, riding in a race car with Paul and hiking Kilimanjaro with Willem, all the while slipping in the wittiest digs at Pimp. So I was amazed in the gents'—just Goldie and me—when he sipped Scotch from a silver flask and told me his life was the shits. "Prostate cancer, for starters," he said. "Haven't gotten it up in a year. My wife's ditching me for another guy. My kid embezzled his company's pension fund, and it's cost me half my stash to bail him out."

Though drunk myself, I resisted any maudlin comradeship and said, "You had a good ride till you reached the manure pile."

"I'll be done in a minute," he said. "Don't tell the guys."

"Of course not," I said, a little smugly.

At our class table, Pimp, said, "I got to see a man about a horse," as if he'd invented the cliché, and went to the gents. Out he ran, screaming. In the can, I saw his oversized footprints in Goldie's blood.

Editor's Note

Reunion was our September Story of the Month.

Photograph – Soul © Yelena Petrovic

Darnell: Waiting on the Day by Beau Johnson

I watch from up high; me, the King of building nine. This is what I tell myself, wearing shorts I've yet to change. The rifle is beside me, like a pet whose silence is learned. In the lawn chair I sit, a man now forty-five. Bone thin, wiry, I eat Fritos until the bag is done. I chase the chips with a single Bud and then another because I can. Passing the fridge I see my unshaven face, look past my lying eyes. I think: why do you go on, but the thought is fleeting, gone and replaced faster than I can breathe. Things are easier this way, when delusion is at its peak.

Back on the balcony, back in my chair, I further my vigil still, somewhat giving what I got. Does that make sense? Not really. Do I care? Not one fucking bit. What intrigues me is the day; the journey it might provide. It gives me hope, as it always has, ever since this thing I do began. To the East the day begins, peaking, and then runs every way at once. Shadows stretch, traffic comes; with traffic, people, and people, bikes. Some run, most walk, but ever onwards each of them march. On and on they ride, unaware it's all a lie. Or perhaps they know the truth, and like me, wish for something more. Bullshit, really, but a flavour made popular by what passes for the times.

Across from me are apartments, more buildings, the hospital and church. Factories are in the background, history to the land. Here I watch a man openly drunk at a quarter past ten. I focus on him tight, the sight above my gun giving me a clear and present pose. Paper bag in hand, dressed in unkempt clothes and a red Fedora hat, he weaves in front of the Drug-Mart, happy as a lark. He is singing it seems, or quite possibly conversing with himself. Women walk by him, and men, patrons, each veering as if he were contagious. Perhaps he is, and the fear they have is justified. I would



question it however, believing the fear portrayed a shame. They know his look, his truth; that too easily the same could happen to them.

Last week, one block over, a man and woman fought behind their car where their drive and the sidewalk meet. He wore a muscle-t, she a too tight dress. Her hair was red and his shaved bald. Once he hit her, then twice, and she crumbled to the ground. He does a dance of some sort, like he's proud, and I fixate on his pants; that they hang too fucking low. Suddenly another man appeared; he who intervenes. He is black and wearing a blue bandana and is bigger than the man he confronts. They duel verbally, face-off, and then the shit gets real. Baldy pulls a knife and cuts Bandana deep. From my sight I see it bloom, his shirt a violent mess. But Bandana is not done, and to my surprise he kicks the first man's legs out from under him. As ground and Baldy meet I hear the sirens first faint, then loud, then watch as they approach. One car, two cops, and Bandana has his hands raised even before they are out of the black and white. Baldy is not as smart. The big cop takes him down, a Taser before his rights; a knee as well, there in the middle of his back as both officers applied the glinting cuffs. The man who intervened, he is the one I was meant to see; the reason I carry on.

The day continues, hot, and I forget about the fight. I concentrate on today; wonder if I'll be around come this time tonight. I change my view; then again, and then another time after that. I am looking, you see, watching, in anticipation of a glimpse.

To my left I see him, soft and dull and thick. His brown hair screams of murder, of the secret self within. A duffle bag is over his right shoulder, held by meaty mitts. The bag is big and black and I believe it contains a head. It's there in the way he walks, alive in the colour of his jeans. I follow him through my scope; let the nose of the gun rest upon the balcony's old and rusted rail. His step is brisk, his loafers light, and I hold the gun tighter than I ever have. One little squeeze, I tell myself—all it would take and the monster would cease to exist.

The air conditioner surges, gurgles, and I turn my head to look. The back of it drips as it has always done and I tell myself to die. Instead I stub my toe on the bottom of the barbeque as I go to get another beer and sleeve of white saltines. The crackers I eat at once, and only because I'm never full. Clean your plate. Mind your mom. Do what's told is right. These are the things that make me who I am. At least that's what I've been told. I don't know, though. It seems to me there is another man, a future self, and he is only tucked away. He is the man who screams inside our eyes when the world is beyond our grasp. He is dark, this man, but seldom is he heard. Seen, yes, and only because of what he sells. "I have paid my dues," I say aloud and resume the day that's come.

No longer gone, the woman from the corner of Park is clean and ready to work. She presents herself, finds a john, and I follow them as I can. In his car she gets to work and I envision Halle Barry; more specifically, one of the many characters she has played. The john is no Sam Jackson, the opposite in fact; white and fat and bald, pasty as an unpopped zit. She works him though, full bore, and soon the transaction is complete.

In front of the Drug-Mart, I check in on the drunk; that the man continues his dance. Cars drive in and cars drive out. Out loud I recite each of their license plates and then aim for every head. I get them all, every shot, and predict how it goes down. They stand as I shoot, the first shot locking them in place. A moment later a woman screams, her scream becoming the damn. Breaking, they run, each of them searching but unsecure. I pick them off as they go, as many as I can; one down, two, each in the back of the head. Panic reigns, faces explode, flotsam to the wind—

Brakes lock, lock hard, and the familiar screech begins. There is time however, and the driver, male, avoids what could have been a very costly mess. I sit back; lay the gun across my lap. It is fine wood, a stock barrel, and I caress it like a pet. A present from my father, I have never felt it spent. I dream of it happening, I do, on days quite like today. It never comes to pass. Not as I would like. This is where God comes in; where he goes and rights the day. They say to temper evil there must always come some good. He's good like that; at messing with my head. If ever there was a secret man.

In the parking lot the car is moving much too fast. The girl is small, away from her mother's eye, and I see this all without my scope. The drunk does too, and as she walks down from the curb he is after her faster than I would have thought. In seconds the car will strike her, kill her, as I know it's supposed to do. It does not however, and the man's Fedora is given flight instead. Sacrifice they will say, and that the man had been a hero every single day. They will say this with pride and wear it like joy, each of them forgetting how they would come to stand clear of him not a week past from the day. This is human nature though, the beast who loves and attacks. For forty years I have known this, since my father gave me sight.

"Darnell?" She says, and I know at that moment that my day has come undone. Dead drunk or not, when Petra calls, I am there to answer.

I find her by the door, grocery bags in hand. "You just gonna stand there? C'mon, help a woman out." I do. I take the bags and put away my other self, the one from deep inside. It is time to form my face for her, the ones she needs to see.

"Something's going on outside, over at the 'Mart. Lots a screaming and carrying on as I drove by. You seen it, I suppose?"

"Looks like a man died." I say, and she stops so suddenly I think I've left my other self out for her to see.

"You don't got that gun out there again, do you?"

"Petra, dear; is that the type of man I am?"

"I don't know," she says, and lumbers towards the dining room table. She fits, barely, and I watch as her body forms to the shape of the chair. For better or worse, I said, on the very same day as she. "It's just when a man, when he starts to spend most of his days on a balcony with a gun, it tends to make a woman nervous." I smile softly as she says this, believing it conveys everything I wish to say. In the kitchen I find her treat

jar half full, at just below the line she never likes to see. I take it to her, remove the lid. Standing, I feed her peanut butter cups, one and then another. She accepts them gratefully, her breath now fuller than before. Upon her fifth she pulls me close. Tight, she holds me around the waist, whispers that all she does is worry. I tell her that there isn't need; that today has come and gone—but then I feel myself stir. Petra does too, and soon I am home within her face. She doesn't mind, and hasn't since the scale could no longer take her weight. Not that I do either, as her mouth is just as warm.

"I am only looking for a glimpse, Petra; all I've ever asked—that the evil of this world is being held at bay." I tell her this, knowing it is exactly what she needs; that for Petra it is more about right than it is about wrong. It is a fallacy, of course, but the blinders are the armour my wife has always had to wear. Nodding, she continues her pace; slow, but full, all in. She cares, she does, and the peanut butter smell is nice. What I don't explain is that the chamber is never empty and that tomorrow could very well be the day. Done, I take her chin in my hand and thank her for my gift. Shorts up, I give her the grin that she requires, the one that says I am who I should be, and then I go for the remote. "Come on!" I say. "I think Jeopardy might still be on."

Editor's Note

Darnell: Waiting on the Day was our October Story of the Month.

Photograph – Building © Yelena Petrovic

Superhero by Patrick Trotti

Caldwell was playing in the backyard with his best friend, Brian, on the day that he stopped believing in made up stuff. Until then he had lived much of his childhood through the pages of Superman comics. Caldwell loved him. In fact if it weren't for Superman having such perfectly combed hair in the comics, he would've never let his mother fuss over his hair in the mornings before school. Most of all, though, he envied Superman's powers. Caldwell hoped that maybe if he memorized every Superman comic that magically he'd be able to fly one day.

Caldwell liked Brian because he was tough and had stood up to another kid that tried to bully Caldwell on the playground at school. Brian was four years older than Caldwell. Rumor was that he had even had sex. Caldwell thought it was cool that an older boy from down the street wanted to hang out with him, and Brian's parents had much more money than his family, which meant that he had all the good toys. And every issue of Superman, which made him the coolest kid ever by Caldwell's standards.

Caldwell's mother didn't like Brian but she didn't say anything because she liked seeing her boy happy, and because Caldwell had no other friends, his mother probably figured that anything was better than him staying inside by himself. But Caldwell still couldn't understand why she spent so much time worrying about whom he was hanging out with. He was eight after all and could take care of himself, and others. Caldwell had been taking care of the family dog, Butch, since they got him. In fact, he was the only one that ever did anything for that dog and no one even had to remind him to. He'd gotten the dog from the shelter only a year before. He overheard the lady at the store tell his mother that no one wanted him. That's why Caldwell chose him. He was all alone at the shelter. Unpopular and misunderstood just like Caldwell.

They were playing hide and seek. Brian had told Caldwell when they first met that he was cool because he was the best at playing the game. Caldwell had heard what everyone at school said about Brian—that he was strange, quiet yet aggressive and was always getting in trouble—but that didn't matter to Caldwell. Brian had always been nice to him.

It was Brian's turn to hide. He usually hid behind the huge oak tree down by the stream that was on the edge of the property line. Caldwell's mom warned him not to go down there by himself. He decided that the woods were going to be his new hang out from that day forward because she only forbade him when it came to the really cool stuff like watching television and staying up past his bedtime.

After 20 minutes of looking, Caldwell couldn't find Brian and was ready to give up. Gnats were beginning to bite Caldwell's sweaty neck and it was starting to turn red from scratching. He knew Brian would make fun of him if he went inside, but it was hot, and he was tired of zigzagging around the yard under the hot sun.

Caldwell heard a faint chuckle coming from across the stream. It had to be Brian. Caldwell was cautious as he tiptoed across. The house on the other side of the stream belonged to a grumpy old man who had lost his mind long ago. Caldwell overheard his parents talking about how he was sent away for some time upstate. He didn't know what that meant but it couldn't have been a good thing because the only time he went upstate was to see his mother's father in a rest home. He hated those trips. Pop-Pop lost his hearing a while back forcing Caldwell to yell "I love you" so loud that it embarrassed him and he smelt like moth balls and smoke.

Caldwell noticed some of the bushes moving back and forth as he reached the old man's yard. He never took good care of his yard, because there were overgrown bushes as big as Caldwell, and the grass was knee-high. Caldwell had to hold in his laughter as the thick brush tickled his shins.

His amusement turned to shock as he made out Brian's figure in the distance. He was standing over a limp pile of what looked to be an animal. It was too big to be a cat but it looked too weird to be a dog; somehow more rugged and untamed. He immediately recognized the color of the fur but didn't register that it could be true. Even the screams coming from the body sounded familiar. Loud barks slowly turned into muffled moans.

Caldwell locked eyes with Brian. He had a mischievous grin on his face. Kids at school warned him of that look after they found out the two had been hanging out. A long, thick tree branch was dangling from Brian's bruised right hand. A dark red pattern was splattered across the front of his white t-shirt.

A slight whimpering noise was coming from Brian's feet. It sounded familiar to him but he was still too far away to make out the animal's face. As Caldwell came closer, he noticed that the animal's thick coat of white fur was stained with the same dark red that was all over Brian.

The animal's breathing was becoming more inconsistent. Heavy grasps for air were followed by sudden bursts of deep panting. Caldwell had no words to mute out the disturbing sounds.

A part of Caldwell was hoping that somehow this was all a big, cruel joke directed at him. Maybe Brian had staged this whole thing just to see what Caldwell would do. Caldwell shook these thoughts out of his head as he focused on the pile of fur at Brian's feet. This much he couldn't have staged. He'd stopped walking any closer by this point. The joke was no more; this was serious. Caldwell couldn't help wondering if this type of thing always happened back here. Maybe his mother knew that all along and wanted to shelter him from the woods.

He didn't have the time to think anymore. Caldwell knew he needed to do something. He thought of Superman, his favorite hero who always stood up and took a stand when something bad was happening. He wouldn't let this type of thing happen. Sure, it might be a close call but always, at the last second, he'd swoop in and save the

day. This was Caldwell's chance to do the same. He had to stand up to Brian. But Caldwell's mind and body were separate entities as the more his mind raced, the more paralyzed he became. Fear had overtaken him. There'd be no last minute heroics.

Without a word, Brian reached back with his right arm and brought it down towards the animal in one quick motion. The branch broke in two as it thumped against the animal's ribcage. The impact was so great that it lifted the animal from the ground for a second before hitting the ground with a dull thud. The animal was motionless and lay limp on its side.

Brian dropped the branch to his side, wiped saliva from the side of his mouth, and began walking towards Caldwell.

Tears formed in the corner of his eyes and his hands were trembling. He tried his best to stay calm. Muttering to himself that Superman never showed any signs of panic, Caldwell focused his efforts on watching every move Brian made.

Brian stopped for a moment as he came within arm's reach of Caldwell, simply looked him square in the eyes, and gave him a wink. He pushed past him and headed home. No comic-strip dialogue bubble. No great, intense hand-to-hand combat scene. Just second-guessing and silence. Even the birds around him seemed to stop making noise and the bugs ceased their attack on his neck.

Butch remained on his side until Caldwell took a deep breath and fought off his nerves enough to go over and take a closer look. Now he was dead. Bugs were already crawling through his bloody fur by the time Caldwell let out his first scream of sadness.

Caldwell felt helpless and, for the first time in his short life, he realized that he could never be a superhero like Superman.

He snuck back inside through the basement door and went to his room, leaving Butch out in the woods. He couldn't face going to his mother right now. She would've punished him for disobeying her. He had bigger things to worry about anyway.

He took all of his second-hand comic books and Superman posters and threw them out immediately. And even though he vowed to never read another Superman comic, he still wished that he could have special powers for that one moment and use his cape to fly into the air and not stop until he was somewhere very far away, somewhere where everything wasn't as screwed up.

Editor's Note

Superhero was our November Story of the Month.

My Father and Jackson Pollock by Wesley McMasters

Jackson Pollock had his can of paint. He and my father were not so different.

I was walking slowly. I like to pretend I'm carefree. I was late to dinner with my father. He has a tendency to be angry if people aren't on time. He also threatens to hit people with a two by four from time to time. I'm sure our conversation was a necessary one, something about money I spent and didn't have, but I was busy patting my pockets. Apparently I had locked my keys in my apartment. That meant I had to try to find an open window. My landlord isn't a very active man and seems very irritated when you make him move. I would do anything to avoid getting looks that were less than kind, and I knew asking for the spare key would merit such a glance. That's what was on my mind.

The Italian restaurant glowed. I knew it was too expensive for both of us but I didn't really feel too terrible. It was his choice, after all. I stood outside and dropped a cigarette to the sidewalk. I would hear that lecture, too. I knew life was too short. I've heard all of those things before. The chill air was perfect though. I couldn't differentiate the smoke from my breath, and the fog swallowed my movements. As perfect as the cold air was, the sky was miserable. Not a good grey miserable, but a black and hopeless one. The kind that makes you want to go home and put in some Adam Sandler movie and sit under a fleece blanket and drink soup until the sun comes up, and then do it all over again.

I walked into the restaurant, forgetting that my father and I had things to talk about. I saw the girl immediately, though. She was maybe sixteen. Maybe. Girls look so old now. I swear I used to be able to tell you how old every single girl I saw was. Not anymore. I start talking to some girl I think at least my age, and I find out she just made it into high school. I've been out of high school for five years. Something isn't right.

She was sitting in the corner, at the romantic two-seater that has no direct light above it, and is just out of the sight of the largest portion of the room. It was the corner in the back, where no one can hear the romantic couples, and no one can see the love glide between them over glasses of sparkling grape juice popping with each confession of pure loyalty that only exists at that table, lingering for a while and then disappearing like the snuffed out flame from the tall candle on the table at the end of the night.

The rolling waiter looked at my tight jeans and decided I wasn't worth his time. I love that. I could tell you a million different things that I heard in high school about how I can be myself and no one would care, but that has never been true. People stare, but then again, I know I would too. I'm a funny looking guy.

He wasn't very normal looking either, though. Grease in his hair, gross skin, mustache hair with grease. Even his shirt was stained with all kinds of different food. When he finally came to me to help me find "the rest of my party," I had been able to have my eyes drawn to the girl again three times. I wasn't staring, but that booth was so

romantic and designed for her, it made me twitch, thinking about how someone might have stood her up. I couldn't help looking her over.

What's worse is I found my father sitting at a booth along the wall opposite the corner, in the well-lit section of the restaurant. Perfectly placing her in my line of sight. I felt terrible the whole time. We were already going to be talking about how life isn't all rainbows and how I can't possibly eat without a real job. It was terrible.

She was what you could only call young and plain. Her brown hair caressed her pale cheeks while she wavered into a smile and then a frown, not sure if anyone noticed she was sitting alone in the corner, waiting on someone. I could see the sadness in her eyes, almost dripping into the coffee in front of her. Her dark red sweater was beginning to fade, and the sleeves were long enough for her to cover her hands with them as she cradled the coffee with slender arms lifting the black cup to her light red lips. When a girl that sweet looks that lonely, you can't help but want to cry. Every time I saw the eyes drip with sadness, I felt my eyes swelling up. Nothing like tears, it's worse. A girl can get mad and rage up and down for days on end, but nothing compares to a girl that's sad. I would rather have someone hit me between the eyes with a two by four than have a girl say that she's sad.

My father's balding head was facing me. When he looked down was when he got serious. He sighed and looked up at me, signaling that he was again ready to talk. I knew that our main conversation was over, as I could hear the small talk questions beginning. We chatted like the matters of money, living, spouses, credit, and so on had never existed. I hate that. Covering up what you came for with talking about school or work or writing or whatever it is you want to talk about. Forget it.

But when the rolling waiter brought the check, my father pointed at the girl in the corner with a slight lift of his calloused finger and said, "I'll take her check, too." She never looked up or looked over, with her tiny, shining eyes staring straight at the door, still waiting.

Jackson Pollock had his paint, but my father had a lot less to work with.

Editor's Note

My Father and Jackson Pollock was our December Story of the Month.

Staff Choice Selections

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

What Madison Sees by Nicole Monaghan

She wanted a best friend, but it was probably too late. She was seventeen. She'd had one before, once or twice, but things never worked out.

She let her white hair that people liked to call platinum, as if she were a hard and precious metal, float behind her in a silky wave and looked up at clouds in the shapes of dancers, diamonds, and loneliness. The sun was too bright on her peripheral vision so she changed position until the girls with girlfriends again were her focus. She watched them talking and tried to imagine how it might be to have someone know her that way at this exact point in her life when it felt there was so much inside of her to know. She thought of texting them silly messages about unimportant things and having private jokes and calling them *BFFs* and *Besties*. She watched the girls slather sunscreen on each other's backs and roll their eyes at each other and pretend not to care about the boys who were hanging around the pool's edge showing off for them. She watched them ignore each other and close their eyes while their different shades of brown and red and freckled skin got browner and redder and more freckled, all of them probably daydreaming about their night-time plans together and the boys.

After a long time, she saw them gather up their towels and bags, some forgetting to restore their lounge chairs to their original position. It looked as if they'd decided to leave without speaking or checking the clock, as if intuitively they all knew they were done. They slipped their feet into various colored flip-flops and walked toward the exit like a flock of birds in V pattern, a few of them laughing. Some were broken off into twos, the luckier ones. She heard their keys jingling. She noticed whose bodies were prettiest and wondered how they worked all that out, how they managed jealousies and the unfairness of who got what.

She thought about them driving together in cars, the girls in the passenger sides changing the radio station without asking, already knowing the drivers' feelings about particular songs. She saw them going to each other's houses to flop on beds together, borrowing things, complaining about their parents. She imagined them ordering pizza and figuring out how much everybody owed, someone forgetting their money and the others chipping in for her, knowing she'd buy them candy at the pool the next day. She thought maybe she'd call the one girl who was always nice to her.

She watched the clouds migrate together, ready to shield some other patch of sky over different girls.

She was afraid to call that girl. She knew about bonds between girls, how deep they could run and how tender. Sometimes her hair and her emotions got in the way. The girls who broke off into twos had been connected for years. She'd probably never catch up.

Editor's Note

What Madison Sees originally appeared on the web in our August 2011 issue.

While we were going out, Allison asked me: "Don't you find it strange that you're still friends with all your exes?"

I told her that it was symptomatic of a larger psychological issue. My relationships tend to blossom after a break-up, when the pressure is off.

"Obviously," she said, "there's a disconnect between what you crave emotionally and your actual behavior."

The next day, Allison suggested we split up. We are now quite close friends. She helped me get my current job, working the graveyard shift at the Johnson County Clean Living Facility. A couple of years after our break-up, she went through rehab for an alcohol-related driving infraction and was obliged by law to live at the facility for six months. During that time, she established a relationship with the facility's night supervisor, Harold Daffney, and when the previous night staff quit after a particularly tough week, Ally mentioned me as someone who was looking to get into harm reduction and recovery.

I have several unpleasant disciplinary responsibilities at the facility but they are straightforward: I enforce the nine p.m. curfew; I conduct room searches when suspicion arises; and whenever anyone violates house rules—there is a zero tolerance policy—I supervise the expulsion. Expulsion is always scheduled in the morning (when subjects are typically most compliant), and is the last responsibility of my shift. Understandably, many of the patients become resistant when they see the cop car, fearing that they are going back to jail (which they are). Sometimes I have to coax and cajole them to get in, as if they are apprehensive cats.

On rare occasions, the expulsion turns violent. That is when Harold Daffney—who'd previously gone through the program himself, for painkillers—springs into action. He wrestled in high school and is skilled in grappling techniques. Because the facility is supposed to be a safe space, I allow the cops into the house as a last resort only, but by the time they enter, Harold has usually subdued the individual with as much consideration for their comfort as possible. I don't know how good of a psychologist he is, but he is very effective at administering these holds. Once docile, the expulsant is gently led off by the cops.

All the staff members except the facility director share an office on the ground floor of the house, in a room converted from the den. The second floor of the house is the dormitory—there are enough beds for a dozen residents, two per room—with two common bathrooms. The ground floor contains the kitchen and the living room. Off the kitchen is an employee lounge with a couch for napping, an old computer for checking e-mail, and an even older shredding machine, grown dormant from lack of use, hulking in the corner.

During the night, I have the run of the downstairs. I can boil water on the stove, make tea, sit and contemplate the existence of man. The salary is reasonable, on the low end but commensurate with this freedom. And I get to work with an ever-changing cast of people and their predilections. In general, what recovering addicts need to hear most is that their people haven't lost faith in them. In the absence of friends and family, I try and provide that kind of support.

Harold and I share the last hour of my shift. He clocks in at five a.m. Our favorite topic of discussion is who, among the current eight residents, we think is going to make it. I'm picking Bingham and Vrosky—Harold doesn't disagree—both of them are doing well. But we tend to root for the hopeless, the ones who receive no visitors and no phone calls. We discuss who we've seen around town, how they looked and whether they appeared clean or not. I try to focus on the success stories. That ensures that I like my job more than Harold does. At six a.m., I clock out, eat breakfast in one of the diners along the High Road, and then go home and go to bed. By the nine p.m. curfew, I am back in the facility, checking attendance. At midnight, I hit the switch that kills the lights in the upstairs bedrooms, and it usually takes another half-hour for the house to finally settle.

* * *

On Tuesday afternoons, I have lunch with my mother. She is retired and suffers from shingles, for which she is on a twenty-four hour regimen of neuropathic pain pills. To see her medicine cabinet now is an obscene revelation for anyone working in the substance recovery field. But still, she is 63 and has always made reasonable decisions in the past, so I guess to some extent she has earned the benefit of the doubt. When we meet, she likes to update me on two things. The first is her medical status.

"I have limited motion in my right shoulder," she said today. "I think it's getting worse."

We were at Common Grounds dissecting our situations over coffee and cucumber sandwiches. She was telling me her doctor thought she might need another procedure, and also that I am too picky when it comes to relationships.

"I don't think that's it at all," I said doubtfully.

"How is Allison? Has she finished her Master's?"

"She's still working on it."

"I never liked her, you know. She was so careless. Always late for everything!"

She paused to eat a potato chip.

"So, mother, have you had any strange dreams lately?"

"Don't try and change the subject. But as a matter of fact, three nights ago, I dreamt I was back in high school..."

The second thing my mom likes to talk about is her dreams. She's been telling me about them since I turned eighteen, over ten years ago. When I was younger, I was

surprised by how often she dreamt about the distant past and people long dead. Then I began having more of these dreams myself and I understood that their frequency was just a function of age. We differ in our interpretations, but we both agree that they are the toughest dreams from which to wake up alone.

She took a bite of her sandwich.

"Nick," she said. "I wonder if you can do me a favor at work."

She looked very serious all of a sudden.

"What do you need?"

"Do you think you could pull someone's file for me?"

"Absolutely not," I said. "Whose file are you talking about?"

She wrote a name on the back of a business card and pushed it across the table.

"Arturo Chan," I read. "Never heard of him. Why do you want to see his file?"

"It's for the rental property. He's a prospective tenant, and the background check showed that he served part of a suspended sentence at the house in 1995. I want to rent to him—but I thought you could read it and make sure there aren't any red flags."

"Hmmm," I said.

"I'm sure there's been at least a person or two who's come through that house that you wouldn't want your mother to be landlord of."

"Why don't you just find someone else?"

"Because that would be prejudicial. Besides, he's the only person who has expressed any serious interest."

"I see."

"And I would've thought you'd want someone like him to get a chance."

Eventually, she piled on enough reasons, and I agreed—grudgingly—to perform the task. I slipped the business card into my pocket and she added that she told Arturo Chan she'd let him know about the apartment by tomorrow.

That night, after the house had been silent for a couple hours, I used the master key to let myself into the facility director's office, closing the door behind me. The file cabinets were locked but I jimmied them with a coat hanger from the staff closet. In the file drawer labeled "C-Da", I ran a thumb through the tabs until I came to "Chan, Arturo." I pulled the thin, black folder and sat in the guest chair at the facility director's desk, intending to make occasional notes on a legal pad while I read it. Any information I could pass on to mother.

But when I opened the file, the contents were meager: some medical forms, on which Arturo had checked off "No" to everything; results of a psychiatric battery that were well within normative bounds; randomized drug tests, clean. There wasn't anything to indicate that Arturo Chan wasn't perfectly bland, that he wouldn't be the ideal renter. After I finished looking through it, somewhat relieved that I hadn't found anything to disqualify him, I replaced the file in the drawer. I'd written nothing on the legal pad, but

didn't feel quite ready to leave just yet. Just because it was in the same drawer, I decided to pull Harold Daffney's file—I'd always been a little curious—and I read his as well. Admitted 4/17/97. Discharged 7/17/97. This time, there was more juice: a litany of misdemeanor arrests for narcotics possession dating back to the 1980s. It gave me a better idea of the harmful space Harold had come from, a place he hinted at only vaguely in our conversations: somewhere quite dark and grim. But still, a disturbing feeling was rising in me, and it became more acute when I pulled the next file, which was Allison's. We'd lived together for at least six weeks, and I thought I had a pretty good grasp of her, but I discovered that the person represented in her psychological evaluations was a complete mystery to me. The language was distant—"The subject perceives the most banal of daily responsibilities as profoundly taxing"—and did not (for me, at least) reflect any of the warmth or liveliness with which I'd always considered her. At first, I questioned myself. Was the level at which I normally knew people—even colleagues and exes—the level of a mere stranger?

I couldn't tell.

I couldn't tell if the disconnect was with me or the language.

So I pulled the files of the eight current residents, people I fraternized with everyday, like Bingham and Vrosky, and read those. Again, I had the strong sense that the words on the page were not an accurate representation of the human beings that I knew, that they were more than just the confluence of stated symptoms. But I needed a larger sample size. Presently, I started over, at A with Aaronson, and began making my way through the drawers file-by-file, reading the evaluations of all the people with whom I'd come into contact during my tenure in the house.

Somewhere half-way through the first file cabinet, my thinking began to take shape. The failure of clinical language to express the humanity of the individual bothered me, left me feeling unsettled. I began to remove every page that I felt contained inaccuracies or misrepresentations, stacking them on the desk, to be shredded at the end of my shift. For the people that I knew well, I removed more of the pages. In their stead, I began to write on the legal pad my own description of the individual to include in the file. I tried to be as honest as possible and the words came with difficulty, like drops of blood from a pin-prick:

"Jerry Bingham told me he was broke."

"I think he is scared about what will happen after he leaves."

"I saw Hermann Vrosky at Buy-Mart the other day."

"He looked clean and healthy."

"He asked about his brother, and I said that Henry was doing just fine."

When I got back around to Allison's file the second time, every page in her folder ended up in the shredding stack, including several of my own attempts to describe her authentically. Finally, in frustration, I tore off a blank sheet of paper and drew on it a

very simple flower, which, as far as I know, to this day comprises the totality of her confidential file at the Johnson County Clean Living Facility.

It's only a matter of time before the facility director consults one of the files and discovers what's been done, what I've been doing in her office the past several nights. By then, the psychological evaluations that once filled them will be long-destroyed. When that happens, I will very likely be the next expulsant from the facility. Harold Daffney himself will escort me out the door. But until then, I'm growing accustomed to spending several hours a night in the quiet house, re-writing the histories in the file cabinet by hand. I am quite certainly getting better at it, albeit slowly and with great pain. As regards the shredding machine in the employee lounge, though, I've quickly become an expert.

Editor's Note

Two-Minute Histories originally appeared on the web in our September 2011 issue.

Raggedy Slipper by Cathy Eaton

On the day she buried her husband, she woke before dawn with no chores to do. Roger Wilson had insisted he come by to milk and feed the cows. She heard his truck crunching on the gravel. A mocking bird trilled and whistled. Samson crowed. Nature performed as usual, oblivious that this day was like no other. Becca untangled herself from the sheets, her feet thudded to the floor, and she faced the door. She couldn't bring herself to pass through it, to descend the stairs where in a few hours neighbors would gather, clutching casseroles and pasta salads as they mourned Henry's death. But she couldn't lie in bed either.

Henry's buzz saw snoring used to wake her, but now its absence kept her from sleeping. She knelt beside the bed and lifted the blue dust ruffle. Inhaling the odors of sweaty feet and tired leather, she tugged out a large slipper and cradled it to her chest. She poked her finger through the hole in the toe and caressed the matted lining.

"No point springing for a new pair when these are so comfy," Henry had told her the week before. "These will last me another few years."

The raggedy slipper, which she had threatened to dump in the trash, outlasted him. She slid her bare feet across the worn oak flooring. From the peg on the door, she unhooked his overalls, the hems still crusted with mud. Cold rain had rattled the tin roof the day she helped him mend the gap in the henhouse where the coyote had squeezed through and killed Aristotle, forever silencing the rooster. Becca rolled up the mud-splattered pants and cocooned Henry's slipper inside. She opened the cedar chest and inhaled the pungent mothball odor before she slipped the bundle beneath the wool blankets. The lid thumped shut, catching the lacy cuff of her nightgown sleeve and ripping it.

Roger slammed his truck door, drawing her to the window. He grabbed a pitchfork as the Jerseys, their gorged udders swinging and their plaintive voices mooing, lumbered from the pasture toward the barn. Their long time neighbor stooped to pet the ginger cat before he spanked the rump of the lead cow. He wore his Steelers hat backward, and his ears stuck out. He swiped his hand across his eyes. How could he bear the loss of his childhood friend? How could she bear the years ahead without hearing Henry's contagious chuckle, feeling his rough beard against her face, or strolling in the apple orchard, his arm draped over her shoulder?

A toilet flushed and water gurgled through the pipes. She hoped her son, who had flown in from Spain, would remember to jiggle the handle. Repairing the toilet had been on Henry's to-do list. Unlike his father, Seth wasn't handy. As a child he had preferred swim team to 4-H. As a teen, math club and track made him late for chores. Henry, swallowing his disappointment, had supported Seth's move from Pennsylvania to California to study finance.

In the early afternoon, Seth and she drove to the service at St. Christopher's. The minister, whom Henry had referred to as cheerleader for the goodness of God, sang

Henry's praises. At the gravesite, mourners tossed dirt on the coffin, each clump seeming to plug Becca's eyes, her throat, her heart until she felt like she might sink into the ground beside her husband. After the service, friends swarmed into the farmhouse and smothered her with affection. They recounted stories about Henry as a gutsy teen who jumped from sixty feet into the ravine, as a young man who fell off a bucking bull machine and broke his nose, and as a Boy Scout leader who snuck out to McDonald's when it was his troop's turn to cook.

After platters of food were consumed by their friends who had come to pay their last respects, Seth plucked out a tune on Henry's banjo, and Roger sang "Cripple Creek."

When the last neighbor finally departed, mother and son collapsed at the kitchen table, too tired to tackle the mounds of dishes and leftovers. Becca's unmanicured hands cupped a chipped mug of tea. A thick braid hung down her back. Her black suit lay crumpled on the closet floor, and she had slipped on jeans and a flannel shirt that Henry had stuffed in the laundry basket.

"I could move back," Seth said, "to help run the dairy."

"No," Becca answered.

"Maybe we could hire someone."

Becca nibbled on a Ritz cracker smeared with Velveeta. "We have to sell the dairy. It's our only option. Then I'm moving to Clairton, a stone's throw from Pittsburg."

Seth overfilled his wine glass, splashing the Chardonnay onto the tablecloth. He grabbed a linen napkin to blot the stain.

Becca set her hand over his fingers to stop his frantic scrubbing. "It's all right. There's an apartment I can rent as soon as we find buyers. Rita's boy is being transferred to Chicago in a few months, and he's offered to sublet to me."

"This is a big step. You don't want to rush into anything." He tugged at the knot of his tie and said they'd talk some more in the morning. "Wake me for milking," he said as he wrapped his arms around her and bid her good night.

On the morning after she buried her husband, Becca woke before dawn. She didn't knock at her son's door as she headed down to the barn. Instead of herding the lowing Jerseys to their slots and attaching the metal cups to their teats, she halted Millie, tied her to a stall, and washed her teats with warm water.

Rain had pattered on the roof the night she and Henry had watched Millie take her first wobbly steps and start suckling from her mother. Now Becca sat on a low stool and pressed her forehead against Millie's flank. She pulled the teats and warm streams of milk pinged against the pail.

Editor's Note

Raggedy Slipper originally appeared on the web in our August 2011 issue. It later appeared in *Fiction Daily* and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

My Sister Was an Only Child by Rebecca Clay Haynes

As soon as my little sister was born, our mother kicked my brother and me out of the house. I was four, he was two. My sister had blond curls and blue eyes and what they called a rosebud smile that lit up the room so brightly that our father would not have been able to find us right in front of his face if he tried. That was how bad things had become.

One day, Timmy and I tried to get back into the house and reclaim our filial rights. We were also hungry and thirsty. Morning dew and wild apples only went so far. We knocked on the door but no one came. We rang the doorbell, same result. Kicked the screen door so hard we dented the metal part below the screen. We threw pebbles at the windows. Shouted and begged and screamed and cried. Then we realized no one was home.

They had taken our sister to buy some new clothes or toys, we figured, even though she was much too young to appreciate them. That was something they used to do with us until we ceased to exist and Lydia took over. I told Timmy to "Wait here" and got a shovel out of the garage to pry open the bulkhead. That was the weird door that led to the basement. I told Timmy to hang off the end of the shovel handle and not let go. I sat on it to add weight but the bulkhead wouldn't budge. Our dad must have bolted it from the inside. He was like that. Said he didn't want any burglars getting any bright ideas. Or, we figured, his two other kids. The ones he'd forgotten he had.

I went next door to ask Mr. Murphy for something to eat but he and Mrs. Murphy weren't home either. That's when I noticed by accident that they had a quart of milk in their milk box. So I took the bottle and five minutes later Timmy and I were ready for anything. Especially after we sucked the cream off the top. That was always Timmy's favorite part.

We sat down for a while on the front steps and watched the road for our parents' blue Rambler. A lot of station wagons went by but not the one we wanted to see. It was getting to be about lunchtime and I was thinking a lot about peanut butter on white bread. I would even have taken some jelly in it, even though I usually hated when peanut butter and jelly touched each other. But the milk and even the cream were starting to wear off and Timmy and I hadn't done much with our burst of energy except wonder what it would take to climb onto the roof and slide down the chimney. When Timmy started to cry I told him he had to be strong for the two of us because it looked like this might take a while. We'd been on our own for so long you would have thought they'd have sent out the police to bring us back in by now. Or maybe the FBI or CIA. Or even Bruno, the old dog they had got before any of us were born and who was good for nothing except lying on the couch and snoring. I was surprised they hadn't kicked him out, too.

I went across the street to see if old Mrs. Bennett could spare a cookie or two. She always had cookies in a porcelain jar that had a gingerbread man on top. Well, part of a gingerbread man. Somebody had broken off his head and one of his arms a while back. And it wasn't me. Mrs. Bennett handed me two chocolate chip cookies through the back door and asked how my new little sister was doing. The big smile on her face made me



really mad. I told her I didn't know how my bratty little sister was doing since I hadn't seen her or my parents in a very long time. She patted me on the head and told me to be a good girl and closed the door. If I wasn't so hungry I would have thrown her dumb cookies onto her tulips and daffodils.

I woke Timmy up from his nap and

handed him the smaller one, which he stuffed into his mouth in half a second. I picked up all his crumbs and mashed them into another even smaller cookie and told him to open wide. That cookie was gone in half the time and he asked me for another one. When I told him that was it, he started to cry again and his crying got so loud that I hoped my mother would hear it wherever she was.

Sometime later, I decided to follow through on my plan to play Santa Claus. I walked around the house and figured that the spruce tree my parents had planted near the den would probably get me to where I could then shimmy up the drain pipes and climb onto the shingles. Timmy did as he was told and lay down on the grass to take another nap. I never saw anybody yawn as much as he did. It made me sleepy just to look at him.

The spruce was full of thin branches that made it hard to climb but I managed to get to where I could grab hold of the pipe and one of the window sills and use my knees to pull myself up and reach the edge of the gutter that slipped a little when I grabbed hold of it. I wondered if it would completely fall off and drop me to the ground but it didn't and I kept going until I got my Keds firmly onto the shingles and crawled up to the brick chimney. I took a moment to look around the neighborhood from this new perch. I had climbed a few trees in my life but never been this high. I could see as far as Bobby Spaulding's green house on one side and Patty Merchant's white one on the other side.

Everybody and everything looked so small. I liked the view from above and wished I lived in a tree house. You could see so much more of real life when you weren't right in the middle of it.

The only thing I couldn't see was my parents and that tiny, pink Lydia with the smelly diapers.

It was not like my parents ever used the fireplace, even at Christmas when the streets were covered with snow, but somehow the chimney's four walls were covered with black soot. I suddenly understood that chimney sweep song and dance in Mary Poppins as I slid my hands and feet into the thin openings between bricks and lowered myself first through the upstairs level then down toward the living room on the first floor. It was as dark as any dark I had ever seen and I couldn't even tilt my head back to see if the sky was still there. I searched around with my feet like I did when I went swimming too far out in the lake and was trying to find solid ground under water but they only touched what felt like a metal plate or door. When I put my weight on it, the thing creaked like it was on rusty hinges. This was not what I had expected. I saw a thin line of light that must have been around the edge of the metal square. After feeling around more with my feet, I realized this was probably as far as I could go. I jumped on the plate ten times and it felt like it moved but it wouldn't break open. It wouldn't let me in. Or out.

I reached up and along the walls for a cranny so I could climb back out but now everything felt smooth. Where was the place my toes had been? I couldn't find it. That was when I heard Timmy wailing at the top of his lungs. I screamed back but my mouth felt like it was full of thick powder. It was. I blew it out and spit it out but my voice stuck hard in my throat.

After a while, I couldn't hear Timmy anymore. I thought about him out there all by himself and hated our mother for forgetting us so easily when the new kid came. I didn't hate my father because everyone knew fathers didn't pay much attention to their children when they were little, even if they were good at pretending, but my mother should have known better. It was her job at least to make sure we had a hot dog and frozen peas and minute rice and chocolate pudding for dinner and were tucked into our beds at night. I hoped I would die in the chimney and my mother would find my skeleton someday and feel sorry for how she had treated me after my sister arrived. Then I realized that wasn't such a good idea because there were still a lot of things I wanted to do with my life. Like learn to ride a big bike and get into the sharks class at the lake. And read Dr. Seuss by myself and be a wicked witch for Halloween.

"Susie?"

I thought I heard my mother yell my name from somewhere inside the house.

"Timmy?"

It was definitely her voice and she did not sound happy. I couldn't figure out why she would be angry since she was the one who banished us from our own home. And I was just trying to get Timmy and me back in.

"This is not hide-and-go-seek!"

For a moment, I smiled to myself. She was right. This had to be the best hiding place in the whole world. If I wanted to, she would never find me in there.

"Mom!"

She did not answer and the house was so quiet I wondered if I had imagined the whole thing.

"You are going to get such a spanking!"

If she wanted me to reveal myself, she was going to have to resist threatening me with bodily harm.

"Stop playing games!"

"Mom?"

"Where the hell are you?"

"In the wall," I said in a small voice.

"What the hell do you mean you're in the wall?"

"In the chimney."

"Just wait till your father gets home."

"Mom?"

"What!"

"Can I come out now?"

My mother rattled something in the living room and below my feet and all of a sudden I fell smack down onto my bum into the fireplace. Clouds of soot and ash flew into the air and out onto the blue wall-to-wall carpet my mother loved more than anything. Maybe even more than she loved her new child.

That was when I jumped up and ran out the front door and across the street to Mrs. Bennett's backyard and around her bushes to Mr. White's house and over his pile of hoes and rakes to the next street and into the big woods and through the icy cold brook to the high flat rock where I climbed up to sit down and catch my breath and think about what to do next. But I didn't have any more ideas and soon it was getting dark. I heard both of my parents calling my name. Plus Mrs. Bennett and Mr. White and even Mr. and Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. Merchant and Mr. Spaulding. And Timmy's little voice saying "Oozie" like he always did. Nobody sounded angry, not even my mother. I hugged my knees to my chest. Maybe my baby sister wouldn't be an only child after all.

Editor's Note

My Sister Was an Only Child originally appeared on the web in our November 2011 issue.

Photograph © Rebecca Clay Haynes

Ant Eater by Nathan Blake

I do not take lightly my eating of ants. There is technique, an ethos. Don't dismiss me as merely gluttonous or obsessive. As a child I stalked the fat ones, picked ants off windows and wooden picnic-tables to hide later in a glass jar filled with crabgrass. I knew what it was I was doing. I even had to go to the hospital, you see. Ants had crawled into my eye and nested in my frontal lobe, inhibiting my ability to recognize future consequences based on current actions. Thus, I ate more ants. I brought ants to school folded up in a handkerchief, savoring them at recess in the hollow space between mouth and tongue. I dreamt of fistfuls, colonies even, entire species at the bottom of my lunch-sack, finding tuna-salad instead. Mom said I'd die if I kept at it. She conceded me to a specialist, a mustachioed man who sought to trap me in my predilections, to reveal to me my absurdity, asking why I hadn't tried spiders and wasps, various others. But I evaded his heartless logic. I knew that would be crazy, anything but ants. I wanted the ants, the squirming mess of them, that jolly pop of the gaster, the bulbous black eyes, the taste of the funiculus, which in Latin means slender rope, like a noose.

Editor's Note

Ant Eater originally appeared on the web in our July 2011 issue.

The Woman Who Lived Upstairs by John Grochalski

The painter woke up from another unsatisfactory sleep. The woman who lived upstairs already had her television set on. It was five o'clock in the morning and the painter had to paint before Work came along, with its yellow teeth and rotten breath, and snatched him away. The painter looked up at the ceiling. He listened to the woman's television and wondered what to do. He got out of bed. The painter started the coffee pot. He went into the bathroom to take his morning constitutional. The poor painter could still hear the woman's television. Christ, how he hated her.

"Oh, shit," the painter said, sitting on the commode. "How will I ever solve this problem?"

Just then the fly buzzed by his head.

"Where have you been hiding?" The painter asked.

"In the moldy folds of your shower curtain," the fly answered.

"That's no place for a fly."

The fly buzzed around the painter's head a second time. His morning constitutional was one of the fly's favorite moments of the day. "You look down."

"It's the woman upstairs again. I don't know what I'm going to do about her television. I can't paint."

The fly landed on the sink. "You need to paint. You need to do something before the sun rises and Work comes to claim you."

"What can I do?"

"Have you tried going up there?" the fly asked.

"She doesn't answer her doorbell."

"Have you tried pounding on the ceiling?"

"Doing so only antagonizes her. She turns the television set up louder."

"The landlord?" the fly asked. He buzzed around the bathroom and landed on the shower curtain.

"He's only good at cashing checks."

"How about swatting her?"

"I can't swat her," the painter said. "She's at least five feet tall."

The fly landed on the bathroom mirror. "This is bad news," he said.

"Please don't remind me."

The painter was finished with his morning constitutional. He flushed the toilet and washed his hands, as the fly buzzed around the bathroom. Then the painter went into the kitchen. The fly followed, buzzing around him as he poured himself some coffee. The painter sat at the kitchen table with his drink, hating the woman upstairs. The fly landed on the countertop and walked around eating pieces of spilled sugar. They were both silent. The morning was turning out to be a wash. The painter was certain that he wouldn't get a lick of painting done. It was then that the fly spotted a cockroach

scurrying along the kitchen floor, heading straight for a piece of cat food. Maybe the cockroach would know what to do.

"Hey," the fly said to the cockroach. The cockroach stopped dead in his tracks. "Do you think you could help us?"

"I don't see how," the cockroach said, looking at the piece of cat food. "But what seems to be the problem?"

"It's the young lady upstairs," the fly said. "She has her television on so loud that this gentleman can get no painting done."

The cockroach turned to the painter. "That is certainly a problem. For soon the sun will rise, and Work will come looking for you."

"I know," the painter said.

"Have you tried going up there?" The cockroach asked.

"Yes," both the painter and fly said.

"What about pounding on the ceiling?"

The painter and the fly nodded.

"Calling the landlord?"

The painter put his head into his hands. "He's tried everything," the fly said.

"This is bad news," the cockroach said. But then he grew excited. He began scurrying in circles. "What if you stepped on her?"

The painter removed his head from his hands and looked at the cockroach. "I can't step on that woman. She's at least five feet tall."

"Oh," the cockroach said. "Well, it usually works for my kind." He turned back toward the piece of cat food on the floor. "May I?"

"Finders keepers," the painter said.

The cockroach scurried over to the piece of cat food and then disappeared through a crack in the wall.

"He was no help," the painter said.

"Cockroaches never are," the fly said. "I don't know why I thought to ask him."

"There is nothing to be done."

They were silent a moment. The fly flew buzzed around the apartment for a few moments, finally landing on a corner of the refrigerator. "There is one other option."

"What?" The painter said. He looked at the clock in the foyer. Time was running out. Soon the sun would rise and Work, that hairy, merciless son-of-a-bitch, would come and collect him, as it did nearly every day. "I'll try anything."

"We could go and see the rat," the fly said.

The painter's face turned white. He rose from the kitchen table and began pacing. "Anything but that."

"It's the only other way. The rat is your only chance to silence the woman upstairs."

"He hates me. I've tried to hit him with a broom."

"The rat takes it all in stride."

The painter stopped pacing. "But I've never gone to him before. What do I do?"

The fly flew off of the refrigerator and landed on the painter's coffee mug. "It's not about what you do," he said. "It's about what you bring. In exchange for the rat's help you must present him with three gifts."

"Such as?"

"The first one is easy." The fly flew from the coffee mug over to the cabinet where the painter kept his small garbage can. "You give him trash."

"My garbage?" The painter walked over to the cabinet. The fly flew away but buzzed around his head. The painter opened the cabinet and then turned up his nose. The stench was horrid. It smelled like Work smelled. He pulled out the garbage can and then took out the trash bag and set it on the kitchen floor, untied.

"Oh," the fly said, swooning. He landed on the soft, white plastic of the bag.

"Stay focused," the painter said. "What else should I bring him?"

"Fruits and vegetables."

"Are you serious?"

"Very," the fly said, going deeper into the garbage bag.

The painter opened his refrigerator. He wasn't sure that he had any fruits and vegetables in there. He looked behind the scotch bottle. He found nothing. He looked behind the few remaining beers. He found nothing as well. The painter checked the crisper and found a black, soft lump that had once been a cucumber. He grabbed it and a bottle of apple sauce, and then closed the refrigerator door.

"Do you think he'd like this?" the painter asked, holding up the spoiled cucumber.

The fly came out of the garbage bag. "It's best that you put it in the bag, and let me examine it first."

"This?" The painter held up the jar of apple sauce. It had a yellow crust around the lid.

"For sure," the fly said.

The painter set the apple sauce on the floor next to the garbage bag. He put the cucumber into the trash, careful not to hurt the fly. "We still need one more gift."

"The rat will determine the final gift," the fly said, buzzing happily around the rotten cucumber.

"I don't think I like that idea," the painter said. "I don't trust the rat."

"Rats are as trustworthy as anything else," the fly said. "He flew away from the garbage and buzzed around the painter's head. "Follow me."

The two of them went back into the painter's bedroom. The sound of the woman's television still came through the ceiling. It sounded like a thousand muffled voices raining down. The painter thought about confronting the woman. He thought about how much he wished that he said something to her each time they walked by each other in the hallway. The woman upstairs looked like a rat, with her two buckteeth and matted, brown hair. The fly buzzed over by the bedroom window and the painter

followed. The sky was turning from a quiet midnight blue into a rich purple. Time was running out. Soon Work would arrive.

"There really is no other option," the fly said.

"I'll go and collect the gifts," the painter said.

The painter tied the garbage bag and put the apple sauce in a small, plastic bag from the wine store. Then they ventured out into the hallway of the apartment building. There was no one around. The only sounds were those of fans or air conditioners, the humming of the hallway lights. The painter still wasn't sure of this idea. It scared him to go and see the rat. But he needed to paint. He needed to paint as much as he needed to eat and sleep, and this upstairs woman was cutting into his whole life with her television.

The basement was dark. The superintendent of the building had put in motion lights, but they only half-worked. Some of them came on. Some of them didn't. It was a crapshoot whether or not you'd be able to see in the basement whenever you came down there to dispose of your trash or to do your laundry.

"Good God," the fly said. "Look."

The painter looked up. All around them were dozens of brown fly strips, twisting like thick coils. On the strips were dead flies. There had to be hundreds of them. The painter put his head down. He set the garbage bag and the bag containing the apple sauce on the ground. He couldn't look the fly in its eyes.

"I knew so many of them," the fly said.

"Human beings are cruel."

There was a rustling over by a mound of blue recycling bags. The painter began walking over toward it but stopped when he heard the sound of dozens of feet scurrying. The painter stood stock still. The fly came over to him and buzzed around, until he got tired. Then he landed on the gift garbage bag. The painter looked at an open doorway at the end of the room. Soon a shadow appeared, and then standing before him was the largest rat that he'd ever seen. Its black eyes glowed like two marbles when it came into the light.

"Shouldn't you be painting," the rat said. The painter had never heard a rat speak before. Its voice was low and grave, a husky whisper.

"That's why I'm here. I can't work."

"Why not?"

"It's the woman upstairs from me, you see. She has her television on again, and the sound is blaring down into my bedroom."

"Why not change where you work?" the rat asked.

"It's the principle of the thing," the painter said. "I..."

"You know how artists are," the fly interrupted.

The rat nodded solemnly. "And what have you brought for me?"

"I've brought my trash for one," the painter said. He kneeled down and opened the garbage bag.

The rat waddled over toward it, raising his head and twitching his nose.

"Cucumber?"

"Yes."

"And what is this?" the rat asked, going over to the small wine bag.

"Apple sauce."

The rat stared at the painter until he leaned over and took the apple sauce out of the bag. The painter opened the jar and poured a small amount onto the basement floor. As the rat ate he continued to kneel, watching as the fly buzzed dangerously close to the dangling, sticky strips of fly tape, examining the dead. "Be careful," the painter said.

"So many gone," the fly said. "What a waste of life."

When the rat was finished eating he looked up, twitching his nose at the painter.

"What do you require of me?"

"I want you to make her stop. I want the noise to stop."

"That can be arranged," the rat said. "For a price."

"Name it," the painter said. The rat thought about it for quite some time. Through the cracks in the basement wall, the painter could tell that it was getting lighter and lighter outside. He could feel Work breathing its hot, rank breath down the back of his neck. "Name your price, rat, and I promise that you will get whatever it is that you desire."

"I have grown fond of your work," the rat finally said. "The canvases that you discard here in the basement, I treasure them. I can only imagine what the work that you keep looks like."

"Thank you," the painter said, humbled.

"And I despise the woman who lives above you. The very sound of her voice..."

"Makes you wish you were dead, right?"

"I will help you with your problem," the rat said.

"Excellent." The painter could already feel his creative juices flowing again.

"I will make the woman upstairs quiet. She'll be so quiet that it will seem as though she does not live above you. I will keep her quiet for as long as you wish."

"How about a year," the painter said. "A year...and a day. That's when my lease is up."

"So it shall be done," the rat said. Again the painter heard the scurrying of thousands of feet. The rat stood before him, his marble eyes closed, moving to the noise as if entranced. "There is no going back now."

"But what do you require of me?" the painter said.

"Why, I require that you paint," the rat said, simply. "Only, for the next year and a day you will paint nothing but portraits of the woman who lives upstairs."

"But..."

"And you will bring them all to me as an offering. The ones that I do not take, you will hang on your bedroom walls."

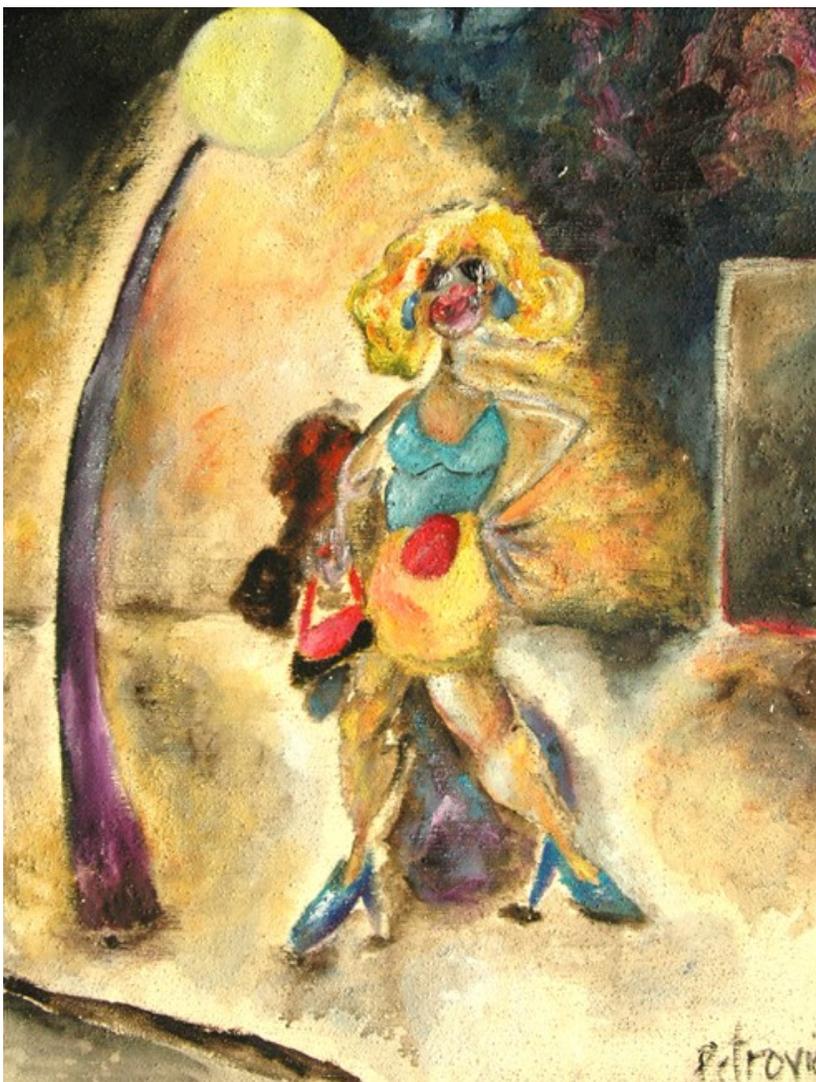
Before the painter could speak, the sound of the scurrying grew deafening. Then, out of the shadows, came a mass of rats in the shape of a pinwheel. They moved toward the one rat in a circular motion. The painter rose from his knees and backed away. The fly buzzed away from the fly paper and landed on his shoulders. They looked down at the mass of rodents that had taken over the basement. They were all tied at the tail, each rat bound to the other by a hardened mass of what looked like blood and fecal matter. They appeared to be of one mind, of one body, and of one soul. The stench was horrific. It was worse than Work. The painter felt as though he were going to be sick.

"It's the rat king," the fly said. The painter looked at him but could not speak. "I've never seen one before."

"This," the painter finally said, looking at the rat, at the mass of rats spinning in a circle. "This can't be. I can't allow this."

"It is too late," the rat said. "The woman in the apartment above you will be silent for a year and a day. And you will paint her portrait for the same duration of time. Any failure to do so, and you will suffer her very fate."

"What is her fate?" the painter asked.



The rat turned toward the rat king, and then he turned back. The painter was sure that the rat was smiling. "The less one knows the better off one is."

The painter raced back to his apartment. Once inside he bolted his door, and locked all of his windows. The fly buzzed around the apartment, full of nervous energy. The painter went into the bathroom and threw up into the toilet. He looked at his face in the mirror. It was red and sweaty. He could still hear the woman's television blaring from above. He made his way into the bedroom and sat on the bed. The fly joined him, landing on the top of the painter's easel. The television was so loud neither of them could think. The sky had turned periwinkle. Lights were probably coming in other homes, and people were outside walking their dogs and getting into their cars. The morning air smelled acrid. The painter could literally feel Work bearing down on him.

From above there came a loud crash and then the scurrying of thousands of feet. The woman's television shut off and she let out a blood curdling scream. Glass broke and her bed squeaked. The toilet flushed and more crashes were heard. The noise sounded like hundreds of books dropping to the floor. The woman's pleading to the rat king sickened the painter. She begged for her very life. He heard her body flailing and slamming against the floor. He looked over at his easel. Then he looked at the fly, but his old friend sat there as still as he could be. This was wrong, the painter thought. All wrong. But then the calamity stopped, and the woman fell silent. The scurrying of feet ended. The painter sat on his bed and listened for a sound, but there was nothing. It was a silence that he'd never known.

"What now?" the fly said.

"We paint," the painter said.

He rose from his bed. He went over to the window and looked outside. The sky was now a light blue-gray. The painter figured he had an hour, before Work came to claim him. He went over to a corner of his bedroom, and grabbed a large, prepared canvas from behind a bookshelf. He'd stretched it and gessoed it just days ago. It was the most that he could do with the noise coming from the woman's television. But the painter no longer had to worry about her now. By the time she made noise again, he'd be in a new apartment, in a new neighborhood, away from flies and cockroaches, and especially rats. Maybe he'd even leave this city. Go somewhere nice, like the country. The painter looked at his large canvas. He walked it over to the easel. He positioned it and then picked up a charcoal pencil to sketch the woman who lived upstairs. He started by drawing her teeth.

Editor's Note

The Woman Who Lived Upstairs originally appeared on the web in our November 2011 issue and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Artwork © Yelena Petrovic

Try a Little Tenderness by Joey R. Poole

Hi had done the math and was sure that he would never fall in love again. This wouldn't be a big deal at all, he thought, in fact he could be quite happy with it, if all the songs in the world weren't about some trumped-up notion of what men and women did to each other. But as he sat in the dark at the Spirits Lounge karaoke night watching a trio of drunk businesswoman half his age shrieking and giggling through "Sexual Healing," the whole thing was pretty depressing.

Again he did the math in his head. He was sixty-six years old; given a normal life span, he had ten or twelve years *at most*. He'd been lucky so far, but was worried that one day soon his dick was going to give out, so even if he had ten years of life left, he probably didn't have ten years of hard-ons. But they had medicine for that now, and he supposed that he was old enough that he ought to realize that real love didn't require a perpetual erection after all.

Still, it just wasn't likely. In his prime it had often taken him months, sometimes a year or more, to find even a new fling when one had ended. He liked to think that this was just because he was picky when it came to women, and he was probably at least partially right. Even with revised standards, he figured, the odds were stacked against old guys like himself, so it would take even longer, would be even more work than it had been in his younger days when he'd only *felt* old, and he generally figured it wasn't even worth the trouble. At any rate, it didn't look likely here at Spirits. Not tonight.

Sometimes Hi wished that he'd never left Gladys, who'd broken down in the middle of the Huddle House and cried about dying alone when he'd told her that they were probably having their last breakfast together. But then he thought about her taking her teeth out at night, the inevitable string of spittle from her lips, how sunken and how *old* she seemed when she came to bed without her teeth and he shuddered. It was shallow, it made him feel like a prick when he thought about it that way, but it was real. Every time she'd stopped by his house to surprise him, always with a cake or some banana bread in hand—the woman had seemed determined to put him on insulin—he hated her for being there, felt that she was cramping him somehow even if he was just going to watch the news and lay around all evening anyway.

He was, all in all, pretty miserable as he looked around at the freedom that he'd wrested back from Gladys, the same two Mexicans playing pool every night, the same drunks singing the same songs every week. The most thrilling thing about his evenings here was always the drive home, an adrenaline-soaked DUI gauntlet. He couldn't stop thinking about how it had finally ended with Gladys, how she'd called him every day for weeks, always wanting to know *why* and asking if maybe he just needed some time, which always struck him as an odd thing for an old woman to say. He just sat there on the phone and listened to her snuffle night after night until finally he lied to her and told

her that there was somebody new, a woman in Lumberton, and that he'd been sleeping with this other woman the whole time they'd been together. To his amazement, she'd wanted to know, through her sobs, what this other woman was like. It had scared him how exhilarating it was injuring Gladys, building for her a woman born from the weird science of his fantasies, younger than himself but not too much so, a woman who drank wine he could barely pronounce, a woman with flaming red hair and healthy breasts and a husky voice in which she whispered temptations into his ear even while Gladys rang the doorbell, leaving a cake on the door step. Finally Gladys had hung up on him for good.

Initially he'd liked the peace that he had when she stopped calling, but then he started feeling bad about it, how he could've hurt somebody he'd once loved or at least *liked* a lot so badly, and there had been a few times that he'd tried to tell her the truth, and once, when he was drunk, that he'd tried to win her back, but she wouldn't give him the time of day. He told himself he wasn't going to call her or sleep in his car in her yard no matter how many liquor drinks he had tonight.

He ordered another Crown Royal and waited for his turn to sing karaoke, trying to remember what song he'd put in. Was his memory going, he wondered, would he be one of those poor bastards who wandered off trying to find the shitter and ended up lost, devoured by fire ants in a ditch somewhere? Try as he might, he couldn't recall the song, but he told himself it didn't matter; whatever song it was, it had to be one he knew by heart.

Unlike most of the other karaoke regulars, Hi could sing, and he knew how to work the crowd. He'd even fronted a beach band for a while in his thirties and forties, playing shag dance nights at bars and weddings where drunk women line danced. He scanned the bar while the fat lady who sang "Eighteen Wheels and Dozen Roses" every goddamn week butchered "Don't Come Home Drinkin' With Lovin' on Your Mind." No need for her worry about that, Hi thought. It was a slow night, maybe fifteen people in the whole place. The only one he didn't know was the woman in the wheel chair who'd been sitting near the stage all night and was now at the bar, straining to reach the drink she'd just ordered.

"Let's have a great big hand for Cindy," the karaoke DJ said when the song was finally over. "Next up, Maria. Maria, come on up to the stage, girl."

Maria was the woman in the wheelchair. She was younger than he'd first thought, maybe young enough to be his daughter, even, with auburn hair—god, he loved redheads—falling all around her face and all of her teeth inside her smile. Hi watched as she rolled up from the bar with a Kaluha and Cream nestled in the folds of her skirt and parked her wheel chair by the karaoke machine. When the music started, she closed her eyes and sang "Dancing Queen." She sang the shit out of "Dancing Queen."

Hi nearly fell out of his chair, could not believe the voice coming out of this woman, how much of both longing and joy there was in it, how much life and how much sadness. She never once opened her eyes as she sang, her hands gesturing quietly in front of her, one foot working its way off its foot rest to dangle uselessly to the floor. He wanted to scoop her into his arms and dance her around the room, thought about how gentle he would be lifting her from her chair to his bed. When she was done, he was not embarrassed to find that he was the only one who'd been moved to give her a standing ovation, his heartfelt response clearly audible over the smattering of polite applause from the rest of the bar.

It was his turn to sing, and he tried again to remember the song he'd chosen as he made his way to the stage. It didn't matter; whatever it was, he would be singing it to her. He smiled at her as he walked past, bent down and put his hand on the armrest of her chair. "That was beautiful," he said. She'd only thanked him in response, but she'd let her hand fall lightly on his arm in what he thought might be a suggestive or at least a friendly way. He would not look at her and sing into her eyes. That was corny, no matter what the song turned out to be. But he would sing his song, and when he was done he would sit right down at her table and ask if she would let him buy her a drink, if perhaps she would do him the honor of a duet.

He stood on the stage, waiting for the title of the song to come up on the screen or to hear the first strains of the tune. Just then the door swung open at the front of the bar and in walked Gladys. She'd let her hair grow out, had perhaps even lost some weight, moved more comfortably than Hi remembered. There was a man with her, not nearly as tall as Hi, but probably not as fat, maybe even younger. He sat with Gladys at the bar, grinning like an idiot, and Hi hated him. Gladys turned to scan the room and caught Hi's eye for just a moment before she looked away without even flinching, turning to put her hand on her new friend's thigh.

He turned toward Maria. Perhaps he would look into her eyes as he sang after all, or at least in her general direction, away from Gladys and the new man. Maria smiled at him, he thought, but it was dark at this end of the bar. As he stood there waiting for the DJ to fiddle with the machine and call up his song, a rumped-looking woman sat down next to Maria. They leaned forward until their noses touched for an instant and kissed each other right on the lips. Maria's hand found the other woman's and they sat, fingers entwined, looking expectantly up at Hi, who'd forgotten the tune and couldn't make out the words as they scrolled across the screen, "These Arms of Mine" rolling by unsung.

Editor's Note

Try a Little Tenderness originally appeared on the web in our October 2011 issue.

Salvation by Elisha Wagman

For two decades, the mere hint of a thunderstorm made Creigh take refuge under the comforter that covered the bed he shared with his wife. The comforter, once white and soft had been a wedding gift from his mother-in-law. Today, it was pilled from too many washes and was more gray than white, much like the sky that had quickly changed from ash to pewter as Creigh raced home from the office.

He usually made it to the driveway before a flash of lightning split the sky but this afternoon he had noticed far too late that a spring storm was looming. It was his assistant, Maggie, who had caused him to miss the signs. He couldn't stand the way she nattered on about trivial things like when to schedule lunch during a faculty conference. Today, her incessant neediness had done more than annoy him, it had placed him in a precarious position. He was caught between his car and the comforter and what separated the two was the thing he feared most.

He considered remaining in the car until the storm passed. He was claustrophobic and even on normal days the compact car reminded him of a coffin and that was with the windows rolled down. He already found it difficult to breathe in the cramped, closed quarters. Besides, his wife had probably heard him pull into the driveway and was waiting for him. He could hear her admonishments delivered in the critical tone she used when he succumbed to childish phobias. And she was right. He was afraid, so much so that his pants were glued to his thighs with sweat. Not for the first time, Creigh wondered why he couldn't be like other people who perspired from their armpits. Instead, when he became nervous his thighs produced enough moisture to make dark stains on his trousers appearing as if he had wet himself. He looked down at his crotch and cringed. Surely Isabelle would not only notice the brownish blotch, she would poke fun at it with acerbic wit. The longer he waited the larger the stain would be. His only option was to run.

Creigh clutched the key ring and waited for the next bolt of lightning. He knew once it struck he had less than a minute to complete the sprint from the car to the porch. It was that kind of knowledge that had convinced his wife he required the assistance of a therapist. She found one, a man with a Finnish last name and a salt and pepper beard. After three sessions, the psychologist labeled Creigh's disorder as Keraunophobia. Only Creigh recognized the misdiagnosis. A phobia was an irrational fear and since he had good reason to steer clear of storms he knew the doctor was mistaken. But his wife seemed satisfied with the analysis. Every month, she filled a prescription for Xanax just like every month he flushed the pills down the toilet. It was a game they played, a game in which both players lost.

He watched lightning pitch from the yard to a baleful cloud hovering over the house and knew the return strokes belonged to a steeped-leader. His chance at escape had

arrived. He raced from the car to the porch, the key ring still clutched between his fingers. He sucked in air that smelled like damp dirt and felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand erect. He shoved a key into the lock, turned it and pushed, stumbling into the front foyer.

"Really Creigh, do you have to make such a mess?"

He looked at his wife through the foggy lenses of his glasses. "It is raining, Isabelle."

"I can see that but surely you don't have to bring buckets of it inside. And look what you've done to your pants."



Creigh pictured her nailed to the frame of an enormous kite fluttering in a storm. Around her neck hung a simple silver necklace and from it dangled a key. He smiled as lightning struck it. He wondered what Dr. Krauss would make of the vision and then decided against sharing it. He didn't want uxoricidal fantasies added to his file.

"You find this amusing?"

"Annoying," said Creigh.

"We have company." Isabelle gestured to the living room. It was true

that amber light spilled from the usually dark room but he hadn't seen any signs of a visitor. The foyer contained neither a coat nor an umbrella.

"Who is it?"

"Take a look and see."

The only person Creigh called friend was the graduate student who worked as his teaching assistant, and he had left him less than an hour before in the office they shared at the university. He hoped the visitor wasn't someone from the church his wife had insisted they join. They were always sending people to the house to solicit donations for

prayer books. Creigh wondered exactly how many bibles a church needed. At the rate the church asked for money, he guessed it had to be thousands.

"I'm not in the mood for guests."

"It's Ben."

A current surged through Creigh's chest causing air to leak from his lungs like a deflated balloon.

"Can't be."

"You could try being a little happier. It's his first visit in ages. For God's sake take one of your pills and then come say hello to your son."

The fishing trip was the last time Creigh had spent time with Ben. He remembered how the boy had leaned over the edge of a boat to pry a small mouthed bass from the hook lodged in its mouth. He yanked on the hook until the brown fish broke free.

Splish, splash.

"Look what you've done."

Creigh had dropped his umbrella and briefcase on the floor spilling the contents of the latter across the foyer. Double double coffee seeped from his travel mug, forming a pool on the floor.

"Sorry."

"It's not like I don't have better things to do." His wife stormed into the kitchen to grab a wad of paper towel.

"I said I was sorry."

"You're always sorry."

Creigh nodded. *I've been sorry for twenty years.*

Creigh watched the sky shift from turquoise to sapphire. He felt the air thicken and watched the wind whip up waves. "We should head in."

"I'm on a roll." said Ben.

Creigh scanned the sky for flickers of lightning. Dark cumulonimbus clouds hovered above. His skin became clammy. Two splotches appeared on the front of his shorts.

"A storm's coming."

Ben nodded but didn't budge. Creigh chewed the skin surrounding his thumbnail until it bled. When he spoke, the words tasted metallic. "We need to go." Ben sighed and reeled in his line. He started the boat's motor but it's snarl was barely audible over the rumbling thunder. As he navigated the boat through violent waves Creigh clutched and unclutched his left hand until his dull nails broke skin.

Creigh's breath slowed as the shore grew in size but as they floated the final few feet to the dock lightning balls burst in the sky. "Get out. I'll tie her up and meet you inside." Creigh eyed his son and then the miserable sky. "I'm fine," Ben said. "Just go."

He leaped from the boat to the dock and ran towards the bait shop. He barged through the door and doubled over, panting. Minutes passed before he could stand and look at the dock where Ben had moored the boat. The strike was swift. He watched the bolt toss Ben's smoldering body eight feet down shore. Creigh's throat seized suffocating a scream.

"Where is he?"

"I've already told you, he's in the living room," said Isabelle. "Maybe I should call the doctor."

"It's too late."

Creigh found Ben in the living room, waiting for him. He was dressed in the same clothes he had worn years before and Creigh noticed the rust droplets sprinkled across his chest. It was the blood that had dribbled from his fists to the boy's shirt as he had tried to pound him back to life.

"I thought you weren't coming," Creigh said.

"Just took a while, is all."

Creigh looked at Isabelle who was mopping up the mess in the front foyer. She was humming a tune he didn't recognize and a satisfied expression replaced the scowl she had worn minutes ago. She wouldn't miss him he realized, and the revelation made him feel lighter, almost weightless. For a moment he expected to float with Ben from the room but when Ben walked outside to stand on the lawn under a thundering sky Creigh followed on foot and for the first time in years didn't worry about the sweat seeping through his pants.

Editor's Note

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Photograph – Wild Nature © Yelena Petrovic

Velvet Elvis by Paul Lamb

I knew I'd hit bottom when they put me by the toilets.

Sure, there were years when I owned the best spots: at the entrance where fair goers were fresh and flush; at the nexus where everyone had to pass to get anywhere; across from the food tables where folk sat on the rickety chairs devouring funnel cakes or undercooked brats and contemplated my paintings.

I was golden. The innovator of the moment. The one everybody copied, following the non sequitur that I must be doing something right if I was so successful. I was the Young Turk of the art fair circuit. I paint Victorian ladies, in flowing dresses with bunches of lace and impossibly large hats, clutching folding fans or nosegays, often swooning on plush settees amidst aspidistras and oil lamps and framed daguerreotypes.

My paintings evoke a golden age, far too distant for the shuffling fair goers to notice any errors in the details. What they see, instead, is a time before their grandmothers' time, when social roles were clear and clothing was beautiful, when leisure seemed commonplace and one might actually visit with lady friends for afternoon tea and genteel conversation. They see the people they wish they could be in my paintings.

And for a while they loved my illusions. They convinced themselves that if they hung one of my paintings in their living room, they might call it a parlor, or if in their bedroom, a boudoir. They imagined themselves furnishing a room to mimic one of my paintings, in the same thorough detail, somehow re-creating they didn't quite know what, but wouldn't it be nice? An atmosphere, perhaps, or a retreat, or maybe just a fantasy, but a good fantasy, one they could pretend to live in as they gazed at my painting on their wall.

And for a blessed, blessed while, I couldn't keep up. I'd sell out most of my inventory. Take commissions. Work late into the nights. Be interviewed by the local press. I won Best in Show one year. Got invited to some of the better fairs, where they have real artists. Other vendors queued up at my booth, as casually as they could make themselves appear, and, oh, offhandedly asked my opinion about this or that or ever-so-reluctantly allowed themselves to be photographed with me.

And then they would copy me. By the next season, Victorian ladies were appearing on slats of wood salvaged from weathered barns or were being sculpted in bronze. Victorian-seeming snuff boxes and wall calendars and hat pins and parasols and lace gloves abounded. Sepia-toned photographs in ornate frames became a rage, and a staggering, quite lucrative number of fair goers donned antique clothes to have their portraits taken. At the bottom was my innovation: my paintings had started the vogue.

Yes, it was a wonderful time for Turk, and I rode my Victorian tiger for as long as I could, but it didn't last. After only three short seasons, my vision fell out of fashion. The public had had enough of my paintings. My fellow exhibitors were already in quest of

the next new idea. I found my imitators fleeing, my sales suffering the vapors, and my booth position at fairs creeping closer to the fringe. I was not bitter; it was inevitable, though I wished it hadn't come so swiftly. The long-observed truth, though, is that we art fair artists are endlessly searching for *the* new icon, the one image that will resonate and endure and become ubiquitous. We each want to create the next Velvet Elvis, that *Mona Lisa* of the art fair universe, but since that was already done, we flop around, trying this and that. Copying if we can't create or abandoning if what we do create doesn't stick to the wall.

It's all kitsch. No one has any illusions. Most of us bank on it. We know our work will never hang in a gallery or be featured in *American Art Review*. Our art demands no more from a viewer than money. Sure, we call our work "accessible" and praise buyers for their egalitarian taste. But the goal, when we admit it, is to make a pile of cash and retire to our own Villa Velour and maybe then try to create some "real" art or maybe just spend our days sipping Piña Coladas.

Naively, I thought my Victorian ladies might carry me there. Where they carried me, however, was to the booth closest to the Porta-Potties. Now when fair goers pass, they are in haste, with modern plumbing in mind, not rose-colored images of an ultimately inconvenient era. Or they're already in art fair overload, and they jabber into their cell phones or tap away at the devices, barely glancing at my booth. Laptops in bags slung from their shoulders. Bawling babies in buggies before them.

Yes, I had hit bottom. After nearly two decades of struggle, of increasing sales, of cajoling juries, of progressively better fairs, of working till my fingers cramped and my eyesight blurred, I knew that my ride was about over. Too late to find a new vision, all I had hoped for any longer was to recoup expenses. And at nearly every fair someone came along who had never seen my ladies and bought a piece. A couple of those in a weekend made the trouble worthwhile.

But smelling portable toilets cooking in the sun does not.

The avenue leading to the toilets is where misfits go. Some are newbies, given the chance to display their stuff and see if the public shows interest. If so, if their sales are brisk and there is buzz about their art, they have a better chance of getting accepted at other fairs. A few on the avenue are hard to classify. One woman, several booths up, melts old wine bottles into impossible shapes then puts live goldfish in them. It's not sculpture, really. It's not glass art. Not kinetic art. The patrons, especially the kids, are showing some interest, but few are buying, and I think her goldfish are dying out in the sun like that.

The remainder on this avenue, however, are losers like me, our vision fading and our sales swooning. We've fallen out of favor and are mostly allowed in merely to fill empty slots so the public thinks the fair is bustling.

The guy next to me is a painter, too. His specialty is vaguely Amish-looking children with large, haunted eyes. He's technically accomplished but creatively bankrupt. The

Amish art genre peaked a decade ago, but he doesn't have anything else in his bag of tricks, so he keeps cranking it out, hoping to sell a couple and make the rent.

"What do you call the day after two days of rain?" he calls to me.

"Monday," I call back.

He drifts over occasionally. We commiserate about slow traffic and slower sales, unfair juries, exhibitors we envy and hate. I watch his booth when he trots off for a hot dog or to visit an old fair friend who hasn't yet slipped into our place in the hierarchy. It's bad to leave your booth untended. Patrons walk on by. Or worse, they walk off with your work.

"I had some paintings exhibited in a hotel once," he said the other day. "The manager called one morning to apologize. Someone had *stolen* one of my paintings. He was terribly sorry. I was flattered. Someone thought enough of my work to steal it!" I nodded my head, doubtful that he'd ever see that kind of flattery again.

This season the reigning queen is Amanda Zeller—A to Z Creations she calls her outfit. Bombastic, don't you think? She has the booth at the nexus. She has crowds and buzz. She has sales.

Her gimmick? Scented paintings. Unless she stole the idea from someone (they'll never find that body), her innovation was to infuse her paints with essential oils. Patrons stepping up to her paintings can actually smell the pine forest. Or the roses. Or the bowl of lemons. Or the mug of root beer. The first painting she sold this weekend was of cinnamon rolls. Of course she's not sharing exactly how she blends the scents with her paint, but if you peak behind her booth, as we all have, you'll see cans of air freshener lined up. Whatever her method, it's a novel idea, and the public is much taken with her paintings. She's been selling like crazy, and I heard she had to ask buyers to leave their purchases in her stall until the end of the fair so she'd have something left to show as the commissions rolled in.

Patrons crowd her booth. Her paintings let them imagine their living room really is a pine forest, that their bathroom is a rose garden. Never mind that this makes no sense. They want their fantasy, and A to Z Creations is the one providing it this year. Next year everyone will be copying her.

Patrons near my booth don't smell baked bread or gardenias. They smell portable toilets. I've often wondered if the Victorian ladies and gentlemen in those pre-air conditioning days wore so much clothing not because they had greater fortitude or because they were willing to endure discomfort to honor some standard of respectability but because everyone actually stank. If they had to boil their bathwater on the stove, it's no wonder they only bathed once a week. So they piled on layers of clothing to hide their unfortunate body odors. And, thus, when patrons see my Victorian ladies and smell the nearby Porta-Potties, perhaps they make some unconscious connection. Instead of giving them an avenue into an imaginary life, it reminds them of the rudeness of real life.

Had that been the end of the story, this might have been my last season on the circuit. A visit by Amanda Zeller herself, however, sparked a revelation in my weary head, and tables have turned.

Amanda strode up to my booth late in the afternoon, when the sun had sufficiently heated the toilet ovens, her fawning entourage wafting behind her like the scents of her paintings. She was talking earnestly into her phone. Making some deal or accepting some invitation or chatting up the adoring press. Or giving the impression anyway. Her imperious majesty was on tour, drawing attention to her new-found loftiness and humbling those of us who had fallen from such heights. It's possible that she had no glimmer of the likelihood she would be among us in a few years. The headiness of any success in our business is intoxicating, and she may have been oblivious to the ironic turn that will come.

Regardless, she was queen of the season, and she was wallowing in it.

"Turk?" she said, feigning surprise, but not very well. "Why, what in the world are you doing here by the toilets? You should be at the nexus, at my side."

She knew what in the world I was doing there by the toilets. I was about to be flushed down them. She had wandered by not merely to confirm my location and its implications but to contrast it oh-so-coincidentally with her own.

I was about to respond when her phone rang. She looked at it, then raised a finger and said, "Excuse me, Turk. I have to take this."

It's an old trick, and she can't believe I didn't know it. Get someone to phone a few moments into her visit so she has a convenient exit. She can stop by long enough to sniff her disdain, then leave without retort. More likely she did realize that I knew what she was doing, which would make it sting even more.

Amanda Zeller wandered off, cocooned within her phone conversation. I once wondered how we ever got any work done in the days before cell phones and email. Now I wonder how we ever get any work done *with* them.

Yet an idea blossomed in my head then, one that I'll never acknowledge was planted by A to Z Creations, but I think it was.

I looked at my Victorian ladies and found a suitable one. Then I grabbed my small toolkit of paints and brushes—I keep these for tinkering and for ambience. When patrons see the artist at work, they feel more involved in the art, welcomed into that special place that supposedly only creative people can enter. They linger when I'm dabbling; I look up with a pleased smile and we chat about technique and where I get my ideas, and sometimes this leads to a sale.

There would no chatting this time however, and not merely because so few patrons were passing. I was focused, transfixed with inspiration. I painted through the night, my canopy glowing in the early morning hours with the light of my spots and the burning intensity of my creative frenzy. I hadn't felt like this in years.

This morning, I was too excited to notice the exhaustion of my long night. I paced the empty fair grounds, impatiently stalking the aisles between the shut-up booths in the hours before the patrons arrived. A pair of crows that were picking around by the food tents floated away when I approached. I sniffed the air around Amanda Zeller's booth, a whiff of the contrivance that served her so well reaching me. We would see about that. I don't begrudge her one moment of her success, but we sit on precarious perches there at the top.

When the patrons started arriving, I was out in front of my booth, a big smile and a glad hand ready for the newcomers who didn't yet know we were the misfit aisle and who couldn't yet smell the toilets in their brief retreat after the cool night.

I made a quick sale for a thousand dollars, and word raced through the fair. Soon other exhibitors were clustered before my stall, elbowing with the patrons, all eager to see the new rage. I didn't have much ready for them, having only the dark hours of last night to work in, and I asked my purchaser to please leave her painting with me until the end of the fair.

They marveled and cooed. "Isn't that clever!" And "That's so perfect. It just comes upon you as a happy surprise." And "Turk, you old dog. I wish I had thought of that!" And, best of all, "Will you paint one for me?"

In loftier circles what I was doing might be called "participatory art." I called it raking in the bucks. I discussed options with buyers as they selected one of my paintings and imagined what might be done with it. I praised them for their suggestions. We dickered about price. I gave timelines and tapped email addresses into my laptop. My phone was ringing.

Presently, and exactly as I hoped, Amanda Zeller arrived with her posse. No diversionary phone calls this time. No opportune interruptions. The many people gathered before my booth sensed the import of her appearance for they parted and allowed her to walk directly to me.

"Turk, what's this I've been hearing about you all morning? You're suddenly the talk of the fair." She didn't say this with amazement or delight but with consternation, for I had dethroned the queen.

"Look for yourself," I said, sweeping a hand toward my thousand-dollar sale. "But you'll have to excuse me," I slipped in, having readied my exit words long before. "I need to discuss some sales with several insightful buyers."

I stepped away, but I kept an eye on her, waiting for the moment when she realized the ground had truly shifted beneath her.

She looked at the thousand-dollar painting. "I don't get it."

But then she did.

The changes I had made were subtle. And yet, they were revolutionary. My Victorian lady lay in a swoon on her plush settee, a hand held to her head, her gaze far away. Just as she had the day before. But not just as she had.

In the hand held to her head she also held a cell phone. Completely out of place. A thorough anachronism. Never mind that it made no sense; it captured the viewer's fancy. I could see Amanda Zeller's eyes as they traveled across the painting. There on the damask-covered wall below the ornate writing desk was an electrical outlet that shouldn't have been there. And from that came a cord leading to a closed laptop on the desk where the daguerreotypes were all painted away.

With only a quick glance you might miss these. But once you see them, they draw you in. They give you access to the work, a fresh, tangible avenue into the fantasy. You can more easily imagine yourself in the painting. And the people clamoring before my booth suddenly loved my paintings. They were waving fistfuls of cash at me.

Amanda Zeller completed her review. I could see in her eyes that she knew. In a few seasons, her scented paintings would be competing with toilet smells. She leaned toward me to whisper her judgment, though before she could, she turned and smiled as a photographer took our picture.

"It's specious and meretricious," she murmured through clenched teeth. "It won't last."

I thanked her graciously, letting those around us think she had just complimented me on my innovation. She did not like this.

"It's only a gimmick," she spat, and then she pushed through the crowd. Several of her retinue lingered, alliances now in flux.

Of course it's a gimmick. But it's *my* gimmick. It's my Velvet Elvis.

Editor's Note

Velvet Elvis originally appeared on the web in our December 2011 issue.

The Key Garden by Donna Cooper Ho

Caroline gazed out of the window of her empty new London flat. It would be several weeks before her belongings from the U.S. would catch up to her. Currently they were chugging along on a cargo ship somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. It was cheaper to ship all her furniture and personal belongings rather than buy everything new. To get by, she bought an air mattress and a cheap set of sheets. If anything, they'd come in handy when—and if—she ever had a guest. With nothing to unpack yet, and no cable or internet—she'd only arrived in the U.K. the day before—she simply watched people walk by, searching for any peculiarity that would remind her she was no longer staring down at the bustling streets of Brooklyn Heights. It wasn't hard. The trees were different. The birds were different. The shouts and hollers from delivery guys on the sidewalk below were different.

Across the street from her apartment was an eight-foot wall of greenery that enclosed a garden. When she looked at the pictures her real estate agent had sent her back in the states, she liked the idea of a garden close by. Kensington Garden and Hyde Park were not too far away, but having one just outside her building seemed quaint somehow. It was a key garden, her realtor informed, meaning the little park was just for the residents of the square and a key was necessary to get in.

"Privacy," the realtor remarked in her refined British accent.

Privacy wasn't high on Caroline's priority list, but with privacy usually comes peace and quiet. That definitely was on her list. Sure, she probably could have moved to another neighborhood, county or even a different state to escape the hubbub of the big city, but something else drew her across a vast cerulean ocean. A mugger—a filthy opportunist who had no purpose other than to steal from others—drove her out of New York. He killed Tom, her boyfriend, just off Fifth Avenue. The mugger had turned Caroline against the city. She met Tom in college while they both studied European history at the Ohio State University. Tom was a PhD candidate, Caroline an undergrad. They moved to New York so Tom could do his post-doctorate at the Met. She was wide-eyed and in love—with the city and with Tom. Bitterness now colored her vision of her once beloved New York.

Caroline walked downstairs to the main lobby. A young stringy-haired man sat behind the desk with a morose expression. He didn't look at Caroline as she approached. Instead he gazed out the front window. She tapped her knuckles on the counter and he slowly turned his head. She could see his nametag, now. Nigel.

"May I help you?" he said with a soggy British accent.

"Um, yes. Can you tell me—I just moved in—is there a key here for me?"

"A key for what?" he said.

"The garden," Caroline said. She pointed out the window to the wall of green vines across the street.

"Ain't no key."

"Then how do I get into the garden?"

"Dunno, do I?" Nigel gave her an impertinent look then turned his attention to the computer screen. His fixed expression told Caroline that was the end of the discussion.

She walked out of the building and down to the next intersection. Painted on the curb were instructions, LOOK RIGHT, with arrows pointing in that direction. Caroline looked up and realized what the warning was for. A car was coming from the wrong direction, at least to her. It would take a while to get used to things, she reminded herself.

Across the street, Caroline walked along the garden wall. The vines of whatever plant it was brushed against her shoulder. She took a step further away from the vines, but they still seemed to be reaching for her. The wrought iron gate appeared in a gap in the vines. Caroline looked for a handle, but found only a large keyhole that looked like only a big iron key would fit in. She shook the gate. It didn't open. She peered between the balusters to see if anyone could let her in. A giant bushy juniper tree obscured the whole of the garden. Nothing could be seen.

Each day Caroline walked past the garden, reached out and gave the gate a shake. Whether she was walking to the Bayswater station or to the Westbourne House, the first British pub she'd found, she made sure to pass by the garden gate to check. It always remained locked to her. No matter whom she asked, the response was always the same. A shrug and a shake of the head.

The only view of the garden she could see was from the window of her apartment. She leaned on the windowsill, sipping her hot tea. Looking down, she saw an array of flowers of every shade. Blues, yellows, purples and pinks. The trees towered over the garden, vibrantly green and billowing. In the center of the park was another tree. Caroline stared hard at it. It was strange. The leaves were black—at least that's the way they looked from her apartment window. Caroline looked at the small black box on her windowsill. She looked again at the tree. Not black, she thought. Deep purple. The leaves must be a really dark purple.

She paced her empty apartment. As she walked, she mapped out the placement of her belongings in her head. Her belongings. His belongings. Their belongings. They had spent the first three months in New York scouring every antique store that crossed their paths to decorate their first apartment together. Tom was particularly proud of an antique map of London he found. It was a steal, Tom said. It was her stuff now. All of it. Three years they found treasures and brought them home to each other. One always one-upping the other with their find. Caroline sighed as she thought of their life together sailing across the ocean to meet her. She almost wished she'd left it all behind.

That night, Caroline tossed and turned on the air mattress. Unable to get comfortable, she kicked the blankets aside and clambered up out of the half deflated

bed. She paced around her small apartment, waiting for the kettle to whistle. The moon was bright in her window, drawing Caroline over. She pushed aside the sheer curtain and opened it. Cool night air rushed into her apartment. The moon was full. It was larger than the moons she was used to back in the states.

Her gaze drifted down from the moon and landed on the garden. The moonlight blanketed the garden in a soft glow. Everything was a different shade of blue. And there was someone in the garden.

Caroline ran to the bathroom and grabbed her robe. It was almost midnight, but if she was ever going to get into that garden, it was her best shot. She ran out of her apartment building and up to the gate and stopped short. She reached out a hand and wrapped it around the cold iron. A loud groan filled the air as Caroline pushed the gate open.

She stepped inside and let the gate close with a clatter behind her. She walked around the juniper tree out into the garden. It was much darker under the canopy of the taller trees. At the far end there was a wrought iron bench. On it sat an old man. Caroline walked across the garden to the man.

"Excuse me," she said quietly. He was holding a newspaper and appeared to be reading. The man looked up. "I live in that building over there." Caroline pointed. "The super doesn't seem to know where the key to the garden is, and I saw you out and figured I'd see if I could make a copy of your key. I'd really like to visit—."

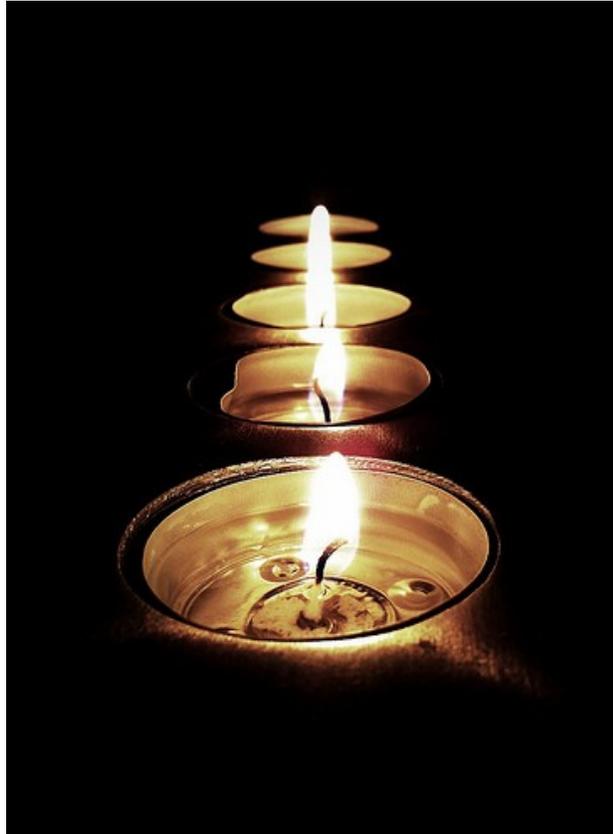
"Shhhh," the old man said, holding a finger to his lips. He continued in a whisper. "The clock strikes twelve and behold."

He waved his hand out in front of him. Caroline followed his gesture. Before her eyes, white orbs of light were appearing along the vined walls of the garden. Caroline watched in amazement as the garden lit up with hundreds of balls of light.

"What are they?" she asked, sitting on the bench next to the old man.

"Moon flowers."

"I've never heard of such a thing," she said in wonder. "It's magical."



"Indeed, it is."

Caroline looked at the old man. He was pale in the moonlight with thin oniony skin that was almost transparent, but his eyes were keen and blue. He turned those eyes on Caroline and examined her so deeply she thought he might have been decoding her DNA.

"You asked for the key to the garden?"

Caroline nodded.

"I'm afraid there is no key to this garden. It only opens when and to whom it wants to."

"To whom?" she said.

"You are a very lucky young lady," he said. "You see that tree in the middle of the garden?" Caroline nodded again. "That's a wishing tree. If you are granted entry, you are entitled to a wish."

Caroline smiled at the old man. Clearly, he'd lost his marbles, she thought. But, nevertheless, the tree, the old man and the moonlit garden intrigued her.

"And what would I wish for?" she said, wanting to humor the old man.

"Ah, that is not for us to decide," he said.

"So, how do you know this tree grants wishes?"

The old man smiled and said no more. He stood up and walked toward the tree, then beyond it. He disappeared behind the juniper tree. The newspaper he was reading was still lying on the bench. Caroline picked it up and ran after the man, but he was gone. She looked around the garden. She hadn't heard the gate open or close and wondered where he could have gone.

Outside the garden, she looked up and down the street. There was no sign of him. Maybe he lived nearby, she thought. She turned her back to enter the garden once more and found it locked. She gave it a frustrated shake then walked back across the street to her apartment. Feeling tired enough to attempt sleep again, she tossed the paper on the counter, glancing at the clock. It was just after one in the morning.

A buzzing woke Caroline the next morning. She slapped around the edge of the bed for something, but then she realized her alarm clock hadn't arrived yet and she sat up. The buzzing was her doorbell. She stumbled out of her room, robe still on, and to the door.

"Who is it?" she said, holding the button that was a two-way intercom.

"Nigel," he said drearily. "Movers are here, ma'am."

"Oh, excellent. Send them up."

"That's what I'm aimin' to do, innit?"

Caroline rolled her eyes and unlocked the door. She sighed with mixture of relief and doubt at finally having her personal belongings. Now, she thought, this place could feel more like home. She turned on the stove to heat up the kettle. The newspaper on the counter reminded her of the night before and the old man in the garden. For a

moment, she thought it had been a dream. She took the paper over to the window, opened up the window and unfolded the paper on the sill.

She stared at the masthead with a confused expression. It was a New York paper from six months ago. An uncomfortable feeling traveled from her throat down into her stomach. She flipped to the local news section. The movers came in and spoke to her. She barely listened as she read the article. It was about Tom's murder. The reporter thought it made a great news story, revealing to the world that what got Tom killed was the little blue bag he carried as he turned off of Fifth Avenue heading toward the 53rd Street station.

The cops had returned the package to Caroline after they caught Tom's attacker. She never even opened it. But she couldn't get rid of it either, just like everything else that was Tom's. It now sat beside her on the windowsill—minus the blue bag. She folded up the newspaper and set the box on top, shoving it away from her.

As the mover set down the last box, Caroline looked up from the window. He handed her a clipboard to sign for the delivery. She hesitated. The pen lingered above the paper as if she were debating. With a deliberate movement, she handed the pen and clipboard back to the man.

"Take it back out," she said.

"Pardon, miss?"

"Take it back," she said firmly. "I don't want it."

The man looked annoyed and bewildered, but did as she commanded. Caroline resumed her seat in front of the window and remained fixed, staring down at the purple-leaved wishing tree in the center of the garden. When the door slammed a few hours later, she turned to see the apartment empty again. She stared and stared until the sun began to set. Long after that, she remained as still as a statue. She finally turned her head to gaze, with bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks, at the clock on the stove. It was nearly midnight. She snatched up the newspaper and the black box.

Outside the gate, she paused. Her heart pounded inside her chest. She pushed on the gate and it opened as loudly as the night before. Right where she'd seen him the night before, the old man sat on the bench. No newspaper in hand. Caroline walked over and handed him the paper and sat down, holding the black box in her lap, her fingers wrapped tightly around it.

"You left that behind last night." Her voice was hoarse and rusty from not using it all day. "I figured you might want it back."

The old man didn't say anything. They both sat in silence. Caroline tried to string together sentences but couldn't get them out. She looked at the old man. His eyes sparkled. For the second night in a row the moonflowers spread their petals to catch the moonlight. The sight emptied Caroline's head of any meaningful thought. She watched the event in amazement. Once the blooms had all opened, Caroline felt more relaxed

and serene. She looked down at the box in her hands and held it up, showing it to the old man.

"He didn't even get a chance to ask," she said, staring only at the box. "I had no idea he was going to. It would have been the happiest day of my life."

"It still could be," the old man said. "If that is your heart's desire."

Caroline looked at him.

"You mean I could wish to bring him back?"

The old man nodded. "If that is your heart's desire."

Caroline fell silent again. She stared at the Wishing Tree. It wouldn't be the first time she'd entertained the thought, though she had never thought it was actually possible. She still wasn't entirely sure this old man was telling the truth. But the chance to see Tom again, to let him know she would have said yes, even though she hadn't even seen the ring yet.

Caroline lifted the lid of the box and pulled out the black velvet box inside. She cupped it in her trembling hands. A glistening tear trickled down her cheek. She opened the box. The moonlight flooded in and filled up the diamond ring. It glowed as if the light were coming from within. Flecks of color danced on the surface as she held it up in front of her. She stifled a sob.

"It's beautiful," she said. The old man remained silent.

The tears rolled down her cheeks as Caroline cried silently over the ring. Finally, she took a deep settling breath and wiped the tears away. She stood up and let both boxes fall to the ground, and walked over to the wishing tree.

There was a crevice in the middle of the tree where two main branches went their separate ways. Barely any light from the moon shined down through the tree's canopy. It was black and oppressive. Caroline inhaled deeply.

"The dead should stay dead," she breathed. She placed the ring in the crevice of the tree. "I wish to forget."

The moon seemed to disappear from the sky the moment she made her wish. Everything went black around her and the crevice closed around the ring. Then, as quickly as it had disappeared, the moon was back. Caroline turned away from the tree and walked back toward the old man. He smiled warmly as she approached.

"What a beautiful place," she said. "Is this your garden?"

Editor's Note

The Key Garden originally appeared on the web in our September 2011 issue. It was featured in our New Writer Showcase and was also nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Photograph – Candle © Yelena Petrovic

The Hangman by Arijit Sen

The hangman was very old when the letter arrived asking him to return to work. The letter was on very thin paper and printed in dark ink that bled through and there were a mass of official stamps and signatures blotting the page. The hangman had retired fifteen years previously when he felt a slight tremor in his right hand. He was the son of a hangman and the grandson of a hangman and in his retirement he tended a small patch of land that grew potatoes and okra and enough grass to feed two goats.

The hangman had hanged twenty-seven people in forty-two years. For each he required two interviews with the inmate and five weeks to prepare. After speaking with the accused he would spend a week in the hills to the north gathering his thoughts. When convinced of the inevitability he would return to Calcutta and begin preparations. He filled gunny bags with sand approximating the prisoner's weight to judge the length of the noose and the number of knots required; a process he practiced over and over again till he got it perfectly right. On the mornings of the executions he would bathe and pray and dress himself in a new, crisp white kurta. He would speak to the prisoner after the priest had and ask him for any final thoughts. When the prisoner was ready the hangman would make his way outside and prepare the noose. He would coat the rope in soap and oil before affixing it to the beam overhead. Once he had prepared the noose he would smash two bananas on it and wait for the prisoner to appear.

He had hanged twenty-six men and one woman. The woman has been found guilty of murdering her in-laws by poisoning them with kerosene, before stabbing her husband in his sleep. The men had raped and murdered and committed acts of terrorism and treason.

The hangman did not have nightmares or regrets. He did not worry about the eternal fate of his soul. He did not think his profession was a divine calling to rid the world of evil. He was the only licensed hangman in the state of West Bengal and one of only three in the country. When he had been younger he wanted his son to follow in his footsteps as all fathers do, but he had acquiesced when his son became a mathematics teacher. He had allowed his son to marry a social worker instead of the farmer's daughter he had found for him. He was old and retired and had joined a travelling theater troupe for whom he played the roles of the blind king Dhritarashtra, the deluded King Lear, and B.R. Ambedkar.

When he arrived at Alipur Central Jail the hangman was struck by the stench of stagnant water and dankness and by the rotting waterlogged asbestos and the cheap rice and lentils and flour the prisoners ate. He shuddered while walking to the prisoner's cell, his shuffling gait not agile enough to escape the cockroaches skittering in the darkness. The prisoner had been imprisoned for nine years and on death row for three while officials looked desperately for an able hangman. The prisoner was thirty-three

and had been a transport union worker. He had walked up behind an electoral competitor in a crowded tea-stall and chopped his head off with a machete. He had picked up the severed head by the hair and walked with it down the street to the police station where he had turned himself in.

The hangman was eighty-four and stooped over and his skin was a dark, deep brown. He had never been tall but had shrunken further with age. The prisoner was nearly six feet and fair-skinned and though thin from his stay in jail had broad shoulders and strong legs. The prison guard let the hangman in and waited outside the cell while the two met each other. The prisoner was huddled on the floor against the far corner, looking away from the hangman. The hangman squatted on his haunches and stared directly at the man he was going to kill. He waited for fifteen minutes but the prisoner never spoke. "How are you, my son?" he asked finally but the prisoner did not reply.

"My son is older than you," the hangman said after another long pause. "He is fifty-three. My grandson is nineteen. He is studying to be an accountant."

The prisoner groaned loudly and the prison guard turned to see if everything was alright. The hangman waved at him to stay. He continued looking at the prisoner for another forty minutes. Neither of the men said a word.

When an hour had passed the hangman stood up and looked at the prisoner kindly. "I will see you soon, my son," he said, then walked out, accompanied by the guard.

Outside the sun was fierce but in the distance, skulking over the Hooghly River, the hangman could see dark clouds. It was April and the summer was just beginning. "It's going to rain," the hangman said.

Editor's Note

The Hangman originally appeared on the web in our July 2011 issue and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Pity Befouleth April by Philip Walford

The bus has been idling outside Salisbury train station for a good twenty minutes, and my only companions are a small Asian couple afflicted with a weird skin condition that makes brightly coloured camera-filled fabric cysts erupt from their bodies. They've looked at me a couple of times as I adopt a sort of louche-but-not-aggressive supine posture on the bench seat at the back of the bus, with my feet propped up on the metal handrail of the seat in front, but they haven't made any attempt to communicate aside from a sort of hurried nod and smile as they settled themselves. I suppose I look pretty moody—my jacket is black, my sweater is grey and I think the t-shirt underneath it might be black too, but I don't check because of the way the back of the seat is tilting my head. The sky outside is pretty dark too, and through the tinted windows I can see the tops of trees mucked about by the wind, entwining and separating over and over again.

Eventually I feel the engine stutter beneath me and hear the hydraulic hiss of the concertina doors thwomping shut, and I slump back further in my seat. Surrendering to gravity gives me a little extra room to think, and I need to think pretty badly, as my decisions so far have been uncharacteristic to say the least. For example: I don't even know what time K's group are supposed to be arriving. I'm pretty sure that I have the correct day, and I'm pretty sure that I didn't inadvertently upset her, so I'm even pretty sure that her phone has just died or she's run out of credit instead of her being pissed at me or worse. I'm sure that if we miraculously do happen to collide on the South Downs, K will be pleased rather than freaked out that I've engineered the whole deal. But honestly, the odds of this happening are not good.

Before I left that morning I'd looked up how many visitors the place gets in a year, so I could work up a full understanding of the improbability of my plan. Something like 800000 people, all told, who spread evenly throughout the year (unlikely I know, but this is a valid thought experiment, trust me) and then evenly through open hours of the day would amount to about 250 people, every hour of every day. And how long does it take to circle a bunch of stones? So I guess maybe I'm slumped a little in hopelessness too, but I did have some sense of the romance of my journey too at the start of the day, so I don't think my feelings are entirely negative as we trundle through the centre of town—which looks time-locked around the stomped foot of the ancient Cathedral—and out onto the A roads and the tug-of-war of traffic. It doesn't take us too long to arrive.

Stonehenge is, in a word, a disappointment. The sky is a more bruising grey than the stones, which seem kind of fake in a way, like they are too famous to be real. I do find a configuration of pillars that makes me happy momentarily, but can't work up much enthusiasm for it, as I keep looking up at the layered clouds, which are angry and streaked with hints of rain. There don't seem to be many sages or druids around; just school parties braving the weather, and snaking gaggles of European teens with

matching backpacks who take pictures of each other every couple of steps, reconfiguring like a school photo ordered for age, then height, then gender before descending into obscure rules that might be based on democratic allegiance or shared allergies for all I know.

After a couple of circuits of the monolith and a speculative dash back to the visitor centre, I venture back through the underpass and settle on a stone bench that gives a good view of people arriving. The grass around my feet is flat and will probably take hours of rain and darkness to pick itself up off the floor, though not yet as there are still a couple of hours of trudge time for willing visitors. This is perhaps the biggest failing of my plan. If I'd gotten out of bed early enough, I suppose I could've ensured I was here at 9am and waited the entire day, increasing my chances by some factor I'm not actually smart enough to calculate. Instead I took a slightly more fatalistic approach and decided that if I was going to throw my lot in with chance, I might as well assume that chance approved of lie-ins.

With little else to do, I allow myself a daydream, and picture the still steady trickle of visitors thinning out as the rain intensifies until only a single person rounds the corner and comes into view. Obviously, it is K. I hope that if these circumstances were to arise I would look suitably devoted and disheveled, sitting on my bench, my hair tendrilled by the drizzle, my jacket woefully inadequate (I picture her in something bright and sensibly water-proofed), and maybe I'd look pretty fucking prescient about the whole thing (which I would be, of course) and K would smile, and any trepidation she felt about me being somewhere she was not expecting me to be would be forestalled for a while by the sheer magic of my appearing before her in such an (allegedly) magical place, like some convergence of ley lines or ancient wisdom had brought me there rather than a pretty shoddy study of probability and whim, like the stars were in uncommon alignment, like the moon was in a prodigious quarter, like runes had been cast, like fate had willed it.

Despite my daydream version of events, after about an hour, with the light ebbing in proportion to the homeward movement of a tame herd of clouds, I pretty much conclude that I have missed K. She was probably here in the morning, while I slept a couple of hours away. It was probably sunny while she was here too, which might have cast the monument in more profound light and made the experience seem greater than the one I am having (or might have made it seem even smaller now I think about it, the way the clarity of summer exposes everything as fleeting and silly on some level, even mountains and castles). I begin, to tell you the truth, to feel a bit stupid. I mean, she *had* said that this would be a romantic place for us to meet for the first time, and that her tour group was going to be there on Thursday (today), and I had agreed that, yes, it would be romantic, and that it was pretty close, and that I would go. But I think we had assumed that there would be a further conversation at some point, one that moved from the generalities of good intentions to the specifics of getting stuff done. I begin to

wonder what K would have done had the roles been reversed. I suspect she would have spent more time trying to reach my hotel and less time sitting on a bench.

Every so often the shriek of the motorway asserts itself as a particularly heavy truck shoots past like a hurled brick. Car-toothed jaws open either side of the mound, and as the crowds start to ebb to nothing, I start experimenting with different benches to see if it is possible to look at the stones without seeing high-sided lorries and coaches shuddering past in the distance. A solitary figure emerges from the underpass, immediately recognisable as a member of the site staff, miserable under a National Heritage branded wind-cheater. Checking his watch, he pays attention at each bench, as though they might provide somewhere to hide, and I get up and make my way back along the plastic non-slip walkway to the steps.

There is no real sunset. For a while, to the west, the roof of the great grey head of cloud shines silver in the thin atmosphere, and then it is gone.

Now I have no plans. Nor do I have a bus timetable. As I mooch out from under the thundering road back into the visitor centre, I don't bother stopping at the souvenir shop, nor do I peruse the racks of postcards (today would be an odd thing to have a keep-sake of). I don't even stop to check the bus times; instead I slip between haphazardly slotted coaches in the graveled pool of the car park, and vault over a crash barrier that separates the visitor area from a quiet service road, which I run across, hunched, as if it might stop anyone from seeing me. On the other side of the road is a field, and beyond it a stand of trees that stretches into the distance (you might think this looks majestic, but in fact until you get up close they look like miles and miles of broccoli).

The ground underfoot is saturated, and mingled with the broken stems of some crop or other so my feet squelch and slide about, and the resulting peaks of muck created by my sinking shoes resemble nothing so much as the shit of a diet high in fibre. It doesn't take me long to reach the trees, which are taller than I had anticipated, and seem to have a wet fog hanging around them, as if their canopy were holding all the water that had fallen on them over the preceding hours, and was only allowing it to descend as a cool diffused mist. In spite of this, the ground underfoot is more solid, covered in a dense marble of fallen leaves. No birds hoot or animals scurry that I can hear, though the dim growl of the road as it snakes west is still very much audible, as it probably is all night.

There is movement between the trees ahead; upright, legged movement. I see a flash of blue slipping between tessellated trunks and what might be a trail of breeze-meddled brown hair following behind. Being from the city, I am well-enough attuned to the movements of people that I think I recognise this as a girl, but within a step or two all I can see are colonnaded trunks and she's lost to me. I quicken my pace a little, though not much, as barreling through the woods in pursuit of a strange girl might be a rather difficult thing to explain, but I am still curious, and the sensation of slipping between trees on damp-cushioned feet does make me feel a bit more nimble and graceful than I

really am (the trees are more considerate partners for this particularly selfish dance than your average crowded street).

There is still no sign of the girl by the time I reach the edge of the wood (I couldn't say how long I've been pinballing between trunks now, it could be minutes, it could be hours, though there is still a tiny amount of light filtering through from above). On the other side is another brief stretch of muddy field, and beyond that a wall of buildings the colour of winter sand, behind which the red-tiled spire of a church stretches modestly into the twilight. As I look down to gauge exactly how much of the bottom of my jeans is now caked with mud, I notice green shoots have begun to emerge on this side of the trees in orderly rows, and so I shift my trajectory slightly to protect them as much as possible for my slip-sliding (I do take a few out despite this, but there are so many it's hard to feel guilty). At the far end of the field is a fence with a sprung gate, which I navigate without managing to lose a finger, despite it having the tension of a snare. It opens on to a wide tire-churned track that circles the village.

I follow the track a little way until it crosses a passage between buildings. There's no one around, and no tell-tale blue flicker (always blue) from the dark windows I pass to denote the presence of television viewers within. The road leads to a square in the centre of the village, with the church sat at one end and the other three sides occupied by closed shops, their awnings fixed like knitted brows. On the steps leading up to the church is a figure, dressed in blue jeans and a grey jacket, with long brown hair. As I walk towards her, she raises her head to look at me, and hugs her knees together against the cold. She smiles. It is K.

"Hello K," I say.

And the bus arrives, and I step on board and K evaporates, blown back on the breeze to wherever her American exchange group are sitting down for dinner. I settle back in my seat, and begin to list types of cuisine they might be about to enjoy, knocking off the least likely in my head.

Editor's Note

Pity Befouleth April originally appeared on the web in our November 2011 issue.

The Mona Lisa Sandwich by Justin Gershwin

A friend of mine found the meaning of life in a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich when we were in grade school. One day at lunch he reached into his lunch bag and took out a sandwich so beautiful it breathed the same dust and silence as the Mona Lisa.

"Christ," he said. "Look at this sandwich my mother made."

He held it up and we all stopped eating to admire it. The crusts were cut off as though Da Vinci had measured the angle and the peanut butter described a gold frame against the jelly. "This sandwich should be in the Louvre," he said. "It would be a crime to eat this sandwich."

I remember thinking it was a joke. There's nothing beautiful about a sandwich except for its taste. A sandwich has no place in the world's great museums and galleries—but I was wrong. John Thomas didn't take a single bite and when the bell rang, he carried the sandwich across the playground and into our classroom, where he carefully set it on a corner of his desk.

At first no one noticed. It's not uncommon to find a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on a child's desk and it merged with the half-light of all the sunsets we'd ever ignored. But the next morning, it was still there and I kept glancing at it. It bore a solitude strong enough to survive a year of camping at Walden Pond. "Aren't you going to eat that sandwich?" I said.

"It's not a sandwich, Sebastian."

"What is it, then?"

He ignored me. I spent all morning wondering about it when at last our teacher noticed and said, "John Thomas, why is there a sandwich on your desk?"

He settled back comfortably in his seat. "Actually it's a funny story," he said. "For the past four years, my mother has been fixing me sloppy peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch. They either have too much jelly, too much peanut butter or the crusts are messed up. But this one has a perfection I can't help but appreciate. I'm going to keep it on my desk for the remainder of the year."

"Throw it out," the teacher said.

There are, of course, millions of things in this world more beautiful than a well-made sandwich. How the tops of buildings disappear in the fog. A tree that turns gold except for a single pink leaf. A lake that doesn't appear on any maps. But the truth was simple. The sandwich was a masterpiece.

The teacher left it alone. She didn't mention the sandwich again. A hush worthy of a Greek temple fell over the classroom and when school got out, John Thomas covered the sandwich with a little paper sarcophagus, a note for the janitor:

I am the Mona Lisa of sandwiches.
Do not throw me away!!!

There was no one else in school more likely to find the Mona Lisa in his lunch bag than John Thomas. He created his own boundaries in life. He wore his socks on the outside of his pants in the style of old-fashioned baseball pitchers and combed his hair into a three-inch-high tidal wave that almost but never quite crashed onto his forehead. When he talked on the phone he used a fake British accent and said, "Delightful" when he hung up. He was the kind of oddball who had no qualms about leaving a sandwich on his desk for weeks at a time.

By day three the sandwich had molded. Its perfection was spotted by green patches and the teacher said, "Get that thing out of my classroom, John Thomas. It's attracting bugs."

"I don't see any bugs. You're the bug."

Incredibly, the teacher left it alone. Even the most revolting works of art command some respect and the rest of us didn't touch or mention it, either. There was something religious about the sandwich.

By day four the bread wore a fur coat and an ant had committed suicide by eating his way through the peanut butter. He didn't leave a note. By day five the sandwich had turned entirely black. It could have been a lump of coal or a shadow left behind and forgotten by the dawn. By day six the sandwich had caved in on itself, bending time and space to form a new reality.

"Isn't it time you throw that thing away?" I said.

"I can't," John Thomas said. "This sandwich is the only real thing that's ever happened to me. Until now everything I've known has been meaningless. This is the first time I've ever understood who I am and where I belong in the world."

When we arrived in class on day seven, the floor had changed overnight. A long black thread ran from the doorway all the way up the center aisle to John Thomas's desk. At first we thought someone's sweater had snagged and unraveled into nothingness. Then we looked closer and saw millions of crumbs gently bouncing at our feet.

The girl next to me held her face to keep it from collapsing under the force of the most piercing shriek I'd heard in my life.

"That's it," the teacher said. "Toss the sandwich, John Thomas."

"No."

"Fine. I'm calling the principal."

Five minutes later the principal arrived. As he entered the room he stepped on about 10,000 ants without realizing it. It was a massacre. If ants can talk, they almost certainly tell each new generation of ants about it and hold a tearful memorial every year to never forget the events of that day.

"Toss the sandwich, John Thomas."

"It's not a sandwich. It's the Mona Lisa."

"It's disrupting class. It's making people sick." He stepped back and killed an additional 30,000 ants while the others hurried off for cover. "Why don't you just take it home with you?"

"The beauty of the sandwich comes from its surroundings. The moment I take it out of this classroom it becomes irrelevant."

"For Christ's sake, it's covered in ants," he yelled suddenly, noticing the swarm of ants running up his legs.

They argued then, shooting back and forth for five minutes till at last there was a ceasefire. Someone had found a solution. It might have been the teacher or it might have been a student—all I remember is a voice saying, "Sell it."

John Thomas was silent. It was the silence of all the nights he would ever spend alone and he stared off into space through the walls of his own museum. I like to think that in those final moments he came to peace with the Mona Lisa sandwich. Some things simply don't belong in this world.

Someone handed him a plastic knife. He pulled the sandwich close for the first incision, hesitated, and quickly began. By the look on his face, he could have been cutting into his own arm. He cut thirty-two pieces, one per student and two more for the teacher and principal, then threw aside the knife.

"Everyone form a line," the principal said. "The price is one penny."

One by one, we each dug out a penny and handed it to John Thomas in exchange for a piece of his ruined sandwich. It took about a minute. When the last piece had been sold, a loud silence followed driven by the feel of an unwritten symphony and John Thomas began crying. The principal patted him on the shoulder and left.

As you might expect, no one could really focus much after that. The day passed and the teacher finally excused us three hours early. We all went home. What remained of the Mona Lisa sandwich scattered across town with the grace of a blown dandelion. Most of us threw our piece away. A few hid it. One boy ate his piece and had explosive diarrhea for the next three days.

When John Thomas came to school the next morning he was smiling a flat little smile colored by a secret world of possibility, and he's been like that ever since.

Editor's Note

The Mona Lisa Sandwich originally appeared on the web in our September 2011 issue.

Reynaldo's Solutions by Shaun Hayes

Thanks to everyone for your amazing work in the audition process! This was easily the most enjoyable and most difficult casting process I've ever had. You were all terrific. The bard would be proud. Cast—congratulations! and please initial your role to indicate you've seen the list and accept your position. Make sure to see Mr. Orsino for your scripts. First rehearsal is at 7pm SHARP on Wednesday. See you there. And remember: the PLAYS the thing!!

—P

Lebanon Community Theatre Presents:

HAMLET by William Shakespeare

Dir. Patrick Razze

Production Stage Manager: Johnny Orsino

CAST LIST:

Hamlet.....Kurt Martin KM
 (Understudy: Derrick Talbot)

Claudius.....Jay Wojnorowski JW
 Gertrude.....Caroline LaPorta cLp
 Polonius.....Tim Manning tim
 Ophelia.....Sarah Michaels SM :)
 Laertes.....Jarrod Yuskauskas jy
 Horatio.....Rob Ventre RV.
 Ghost/Player King.....Chadd Zivic Z
 Rosencrantz.....Randy Simons R2theS
 Guildenstern.....Brian Taylor BT

Marcellus/Gravedigger.....Liz Dailey L/D
 Bernardo/Osric.....Phil LaPorta PLP

Player Queen.....Emily O'Neill *EO*
Osric/Lucianus.....Chris Pickard *cp!*
Fortinbras.....Matt Breiner *MB! Woohoo!*

Voltimand.....Elizabeth Dailey *LD*
Sailor/Ensemble.....Kris Yoder *KY, esq.*
Messenger/Ensemble.....Mark Young *MY*
Ensemble.....Jamie Arnold *J.A.*

Ensemble.....Kathryn W. Entwistle
KW

Reynaldo/Ensemble.....Derrick Talbot

1.

Plug up all the doors with towels, rags, miscellaneous junk from dressing rooms and storage. Make sure all exits—including stage doors—locked. Fill green room with flammable items douse with gasoline during opening scene when everyone heads backstage. Strike match in Act 1, Scene 2 when ~~Hamlet~~ Kurt says "Oh that this too too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew," and unleash hell. Let everyone burn down with theatre. Place is an old tinderbox barn and would likely go up in a huge bright flash.

Pros:

- *VERY dramatic and irony with melting flesh line spectacular.*
- *Kurt burns up and so do Sarah and the rest of his idiot fans.*
- *No witnesses.*

Cons:

- *Someone could call fire dept on their cell.*
- *Would have to remain inside theatre to get this right and would like to avoid dying—especially in the event that plan fails.*
- *Don't do well around fire.*
- *Potential that Kurt finds way to play the hero.*

2.

Sneak backstage during Act 3, climb to rigging loft, release counterweight on main lighting batten, wait for ~~Ham~~ Kurt to butcher "To be or not to be," then drop batten, crushing Kurt flat.

Pros:

- *Kurt unable to ruin—again—speech you were born to deliver.*
- *Incident might get chalked up to theatre superstitions.*
- *Rest of cast healthy and ready to go when I step in to play HAMLET for remainder of run!!*

Cons:

- *Unlikely to get away without being seen/caught by stage crew manning the fly system.*
- *Afraid of heights.*
- *Not a techie, have no idea how to work backstage crap. Might accidentally make scene more dramatic without accomplishing goal.*

3.

Ditch production, abandon years of hard work, taking tiny roles and trying to get noticed. Leave memories with Sarah behind—meeting here, loving here, being forgotten here after last show of *Bye-Bye Birdie* the night of the cast party at Kurt's house. Start own theatre, put on *own Hamlet*, cast with an eye to talent over looks. Cross fingers that at least a few of the crew folks from community theatre would join. Invite whole town, do show for free, steal Kurt's spotlight.

Pros:

- *Can make rules at own theatre, i.e. "Derrick Talbot is never to be an understudy w/tiny bit role ever again."*
- *Sarah finally able to see true talent, make informed romantic decision.*
- *Get Big Break.*

Cons:

- *Would need a theatre. Stage crew. Prop dept. Costumers. Designers. Other actors (ugh).*
- *Community theatre Hamlet opens tomorrow.*
- *Kurt gets off scot free. Likely consoled by Sarah when no audience shows up.* Might even take advantage of empty theatre for private consolation time. UNACCEPTABLE.*

4.

Get on Board of Directors at Community Theatre. Make rousing speech about how performance quality has dropped since *Bye-Bye Birdie* with same faces always getting the lead roles. Move board to tears and hint that the next big thing in acting may have been closer than they realized.

Pros:

- *Get to use acting abilities in real-life scenario*
- *Prestige of job with Board of Directors would impress Sarah, disprove "loser" image.*

Cons:

- *Unsure how to even get on Board and would rather not spend valuable time researching.*
- *Get nervous in meetings, might throw up before or during rousing speech.**

(*If speech fails, invite board members to some performance of *Hamlet* and enact solution #1.)

5.

Follow friends' advice. "Grow up," "move on," and stay ready to go on if Kurt falls ill and at Understudy Matinee. Hope people show up and see talent in action.

Pros:

- *Free.*
- *Legal.*

Cons:

- *Tried this with *Grease*, *Our Town*, *Bye-bye Birdie*, *Macbeth* (should have enacted plan then!), *Godspell*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Has yet to work and no one comes to Understudy Matinee. Ever.*
- *Completely fails to address Sarah's decision to be with Kurt.*
- *Other understudies are beneath you.*

6.

Poison prop sword, go on in place of Jarrod as Laertes in Act 5 (audience won't notice due to being put to sleep by awful lead performance) and cut ~~H~~ KURT—fatally poisoning him.

Pros:

- *Kurt dies from poison.*
- *Onstage with Kurt while whole audience and Sarah watching, all will see who is better performer.*

Cons:

- *Laertes is killed by Hamlet. Depending on poison, scene might get that far. Cannot let Kurt win, but will NOT rewrite Shakespeare.*
- *Jarrold is pretty strong. And unlikely to accept plan. Would need additional plan to deal with Jarrod before could assume his role. Juggling too many plans confusing and messy.*
- *Don't have any deadly poison.*

7.

Quit show. Find new artistic outlet. Let Sarah do whatever she wants.

Pros:

- ?

Cons:

- *Sarah "wants" to sleep with Kurt.*
- *Kurt keeps getting lead roles in all the shows when he doesn't deserve to be cast at all.*
- *Audience deprived of acting abilities even as gifted bit player.*
- *No longer part of The Life.*
- *Not able to draw, write or play any instruments.*

8.

Poison Kurt's makeup. Let chips fall where they may.

Pros:

- *Kurt swells up like a pumpkin and looks ridiculous.*
- *Get to take over as HAMLET! when Kurt unable to continue due to poison all over face.* Might have Kurt placed as new Understudy to Hamlet. (!)*
- *Impress Sarah, expect to look comparatively better when Kurt a pumpkin monster.*
- *Start new era as leading man at community theatre.*

Cons:

- *Again, lack pumpkin-monster-making poison.*

(*No matter what plan chosen, will continue nightly regimen of spitting in Kurt's foundation.)

9.

Get into costume shop. Stick pins and dump fiberglass in Kurt's costume.

Pros:

- *Get to see Kurt in pain, embarrassed.*
- *Mostly legal.*

Cons:

- *Plan has failed in past.*
- *Need access to costume shop and was barred after prior failures.*
- *Costumers insist will get violent if caught trying to break into costume shop again.*

10.

Find Kurt when he's not with Sarah. Congratulate him on getting cast as Hamlet. Try to be the bigger man. Laugh at what he says next. Don't bring up Sarah or follow up on any mention of Sarah, especially not anything about seeing them on the theatre roof last week or how, the summer before Kurt showed up, Sarah took *you* up through the hatch above the rigging balcony. Avoid thinking about how she held your hand the first time you followed her up there two years ago, how her ponytail danced over her bare shoulders in the gusts from the vents. How your head spun with the scent of her on your clothes the whole ride home that night. Keep smiling.

Pros:

- *Right thing to do.*

Cons:

- *Obvious.*

11.

Act heart out. Steal show as Reynaldo. Turn 13 lines of "Yes, my lord" into heart-rending, pulse-quickening art. Send flowers anonymously to Sarah. Violets and rosemary. Obviously.

Pros:

- *Would achieve feat never attained in 400 years of theatre.*

Cons:

- *Doubt she'd notice.*

Editor's Note

Reynaldo's Solutions originally appeared on the web in our December 2011 issue.

Through My Rifle Scope by Deirdre Erin Lockhart

Mom was crying in the bathroom again. Running water didn't muffle the sound. I tugged a blanket over my head and tried not to picture the bruises. I curled my knees against my chest and squeezed my eyes shut.

"Wake up." Dad jostled me.

I groaned. How had I fallen asleep?

"Hurry up. You're gonna make us late." He flung my blanket to the floor and hefted the 30-06 Winchester off my wall. "Don't make me leave without you."

His threat chased the sleepy cobwebs from my mind. My heartbeat hammered as I stomped into my runners and thudded downstairs after him.

Hunting season always began this way.

The porch screen slammed behind him as I entered the kitchen. He'd left my rifle by the door.

I poured black coffee into my thermos.

He revved the truck.

Coffee splashed over my hand.

I grabbed my 30-06—nicknamed "Bronco" for its ability to kick me on my backside—and ran after him.

We didn't talk as we drove. We never did.

The mountain was nearer than I remembered. Or I was nervous.

Dad pressed his foot heavy on the gas.

The Ford chewed up gravel roads. Low boughs, broken by others on the same quest, slapped our windshield, and muddy ruts jarred our passage.

Dad cut the engine.

The Ford rolled onto the side of the road, and we sat and listened to the woods. Once Dad said he could hear elk. Over the years I began to believe him.

We waited.

Just us and silence.

His flannel arm hung out the window and lifted now and again to bring smoke to his nostrils. Everything could smell him. Surely they knew to run. Then the pattern stopped. The cigarette hung limp in his fingers. "Hear it?"

'Course I didn't.

"He's a beauty." He crumpled the Players package and eased open the door.

I clutched Bronco. My heart never thumped louder. I glanced at Dad to see if he heard it.

He motioned me to the right.

I crept over crisp maple leaves, gleaming red in the morning light.

The ground ruptured.

I lurched backward.

A covey of quail took flight before my feet and landed like faded Christmas decorations in a nearby pine.

I swung my attention from them, toward a rocky outcropping. The perfect vantage-point.

This time not a sound whispered around me. I knew how to move silent. Dad took me every year. I had yet to disappoint him. I wondered if he'd be proud of me this year. I almost thought he would. I exhaled when I reached the rocks.

Spongy moss softened my step.

Cold fog curled through the glade.

I gripped my rifle. And waited.

Time's different on the mountain. It's measured in light, in the millimeters of shadows, not the ticks of a clock or flickers of a commercial. Sometimes it's so slow you fear you'll suffocate before your next breath.

Then I heard him.

I turned.

He stood maybe a hundred yard away. His breath swirled the air in crystal snorts. He stepped from the shadows on limbs as lithe as a dancer's, and carried his magnificent rack as if it were nothing more than a John Deere hat.

I snugged Bronco in the crook between my arm and chest, but pointed it over his shoulder.

One shot.

I wouldn't miss.

Dad wouldn't forgive me if I missed such a shot.

I scanned the leaves, unruffled by breezes, and waited. Any movement would be my clue. I was a good hunter. I wouldn't miss it.

There.

I sucked in my breath and took aim.

One shot.

One accident.

I squeezed.

The glade erupted with a single blast. The elk leapt away. Something fogged my scope, and I lowered Bronco.

A perfect shot.

I was too well trained to do otherwise.

I stared at where Dad lay. I felt nothing. I don't think I was numb. Just relieved. That's all.

In a rush, my heart started pumping, blood swooshed through my ears, and my lungs screamed for air.

I shoved through the brush to his side.

This was the part I dreaded.

I crouched beside him.

Dew seeped through my Levi's, and mossy ground wiggled beneath my knees.

I touched his neck. He was warm. I don't know why I expected otherwise. My stomach recoiled when I touched him. Still, I hefted him onto my shoulders. My legs buckled. He weighed more than I'd suspected. I locked my knees and tightened my grip.

It would be a long trek to the Ford.

I crumpled Dad's body into my seat, dug through his pockets for the keys, and slid behind the wheel.

The old engine only wheezed when I tried to turn it over, as if it knew mine weren't Dad's fingers coaxing it to life.

I closed my eyes and pictured him sitting there with his arms slack, his head tilted sideways, and the pink tip of his tongue snaking through his lips.

The engine whirred to life that time.

I spun the wheel. The truck lurched and every gear howled as we careened down the mountain. If I counted right, twenty minutes passed before I skidded the Ford into the barrier outside the Emergency Room.

I yanked Dad out the driver's side and burst through sliding doors.

"Someone help!" It was me screaming.

"Oh! Doctor! Here, honey, bring him this way."

"Doctor!"

"Let go, hon. We've got him now."

Lightning-white corridors blurred in my vision. A door swallowed Dad. Frantic voices mumbled through it. It swung open seconds later.

There was blood on the doc's blue tunic. It was thick. It didn't look red.

"He's dead?" I asked.

"I'm so sorry. There was nothing we could do. The shot killed him instantaneously."

I never let my prey suffer. Dad taught me that. Why he didn't apply such mercy to people, I never knew.

"We've had to call the sheriff. It's the law with a GSW –"

"GSW?"

"Gunshot wound. I'll need you to come with me." He tucked me beneath his arm and led me to a cold waiting room.

Tabloids littered the coffee tables and shouted of murderers caught or murders left unsolved.

I averted my eyes.

The doctor slunk down the hall.

There wasn't a sound but my breathing—which sounded irregular, even to me. I slowed it and eased into a vinyl chair.

It might have been an hour or ten minutes before that door reopened, but the face peering in at me was not threatening.

"I need to talk to you." Sheriff Johnson said, his expression distraught under his heaving mustache. I supposed he'd gone hunting with us enough to feel responsible. "Do you want coffee—something from the cafeteria?"

I shook my head and held his gaze. This was the hard part. This morning only

required a steady hand. This took a steady voice and eye, but I wouldn't falter. I rehearsed the part well, and the plot was cinch to remember.

"Well then, I guess you realize I need to know what happened, Jenny."



"He was flushing the animal to me. Up at Butte's Point. I saw movement and shot." I let myself shrug, just a helpless roll of my shoulders that looked good before the mirror.

"It just doesn't seem possible . . ."

I didn't let it worry me.

"I'll need to see your rifle."

"It's in the truck." Or was it? "I left it up there. By the rocks. His, too."

"I'll send Sam, he knows the place." Johnson still looked bewildered. I couldn't blame him. He hadn't expected this. "Marvin bragged you could hit whatever you chose. Not like you, Jen, to let a shot go wild. What were you thinking?"

There was so much I could tell him. Years of pretending I didn't hear. Years of helplessness. A year of planning. The perfect murder. The only way. The escape. *That* was what I was thinking.

I said nothing.

I'm sure I looked horrified.

His hand clamped my shoulder. I almost flinched, but when I looked up, his expression was sympathetic, not accusing. "Guns . . . to God I wish they'd never been invented."

He didn't mean it. He lived for the season, just like Dad, but what was he to tell a bereaved girl?

"I'll drive you home. You'll need help to tell your mother. "

That was all. It was as easy as I anticipated. And it was over.

Editor's Note

Through My Rifle Scope originally appeared on the web in our December 2011 issue.

Photograph © Deirdre Erin Lockhart

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Merle Drown is the author of stories, essays, plays, reviews, and two novels, *Plowing Up A Snake* (The Dial Press) and *The Suburbs Of Heaven* (Soho Press). Merle edited *Meteor in the Madhouse*, the posthumous novellas of Leon Forrest, (Northwestern University Press). Barnes and Noble chose *The Suburbs of Heaven* for its Discover Great New Writers series. Merle has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the NH Arts Council and teaches in Southern NH U's MFA program. Pieces from a collection-in-progress, *Shrunkn Heads*, miniature portraits of the famous among us, or *Balzac in a Nutshell* have appeared in *Amoskeag*, *Meetinghouse*, *Night Train*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Rumble*, *Sub-Lit*, *Word Riot*, *Bound Off*, *JMWW*, *Eclectica*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Foliate Oak*, *SN Review*, *Bartleby Snopes*, (Short) Fiction Collective, and *971 Menu*.

Cathy Eaton is a professor at NHTI Concord's Community College, where she teaches writing. Eaton returned to Bread Loaf School of English to study fiction writing 30 years after receiving her Masters in English there. It was a great kick off for the sabbatical she spent writing fiction in 2009. Eaton believes that conceiving a story and then living through its many transformations is like being pregnant, giving birth and raising a child: some days a joy, other days a heartache. Eaton's stories have appeared in *Jimston Journal*, *Literary Magic*, *Poor Mojo's Almanac*, *Word Gumbo*, *Writing Raw*, *The Write Place at the Write Time*, and *Zouch Magazine*. She is currently under contract with *The Chaffey Review*. In addition, she won the Raymond Short Story Prize and received honorable mention in both the (NH) Seacoast Fiction Contest and the *Atlantic Monthly* student competition. Eaton is currently working on a series of interviews in Nova Scotia, recording the stories of the villagers who worked behind the scenes at the Pugwash Conferences. In 1995 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded jointly to Joseph Rotblat and Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs "for their efforts to diminish the part played by nuclear arms in international politics and, in the longer run, to eliminate such arms." When not writing or teaching, Eaton can be found with a camera, cross-country skiing New Hampshire trails, or seeking peace through yoga and mindful meditation. She is married with two sons. Her young adult novel *Curse of the Pirate's Treasure* is available at <http://www.authorhouse.com/Bookstore/BookSearchResults.aspx?Search=Cathy%20Eaton>.

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Eirik Gumeny is the author of *Exponential Apocalypse*, co-author of *Screw the Universe*, and a folder of origami cranes. He was the founding editor of Jersey Devil Press and his work has been published online a lot, in print occasionally, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize at least once. His internet address is egumeny.blogspot.com.

Rebecca Clay Haynes' stories have appeared in *The Binnacle* and *Foliolate Oak Literary Magazine*, and she has work forthcoming in *The Zodiac Review* and *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*. Before turning to fiction, Rebecca was a freelance journalist and author of non-fiction children's books. In May, she set off on a multi-year literary journey, staying mostly at writer residencies around the world. At the moment, she's residing in Santa Fe.

Shaun Hayes is a student in the low-residency MFA Creative Writing program at Pacific University. His work appeared most recently in the Summer 2011 issue of *322 Review*. He lives in Fountain Hill, Pennsylvania with his patient wife, Katherine.

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Don Hucks is the author of a short story collection, *My Secret Life as a Ham and Gruyère on Rye (and other adventures in applied psychology)*. In 2009, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Beau Johnson lives in Canada with his Canadian wife. She is very understanding and allows him to write even though they have three small monsters she has bore unto him. Unfortunately, all three boys were born with hair like their father's—poor kids. It will now be a much tougher life. Other than the once, at the Carnegie Conservatory, Beau strives to be published again.

Steve Karas lives in Chicago with his wife and daughter. His short stories have recently appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *Xenith*, *ken*again*, and *Foliolate Oak*. You can visit his website at stevekaras.wordpress.com and follow him on Twitter at KarasSteve.

Paul Lamb lives in Kansas City, but he retreats to the Missouri Ozarks whenever he can steal the chance. He recently completed a novel about art versus mundane life and the strange demands that can result when they intersect. His work has appeared in *Danse Macabre*, *The Platte Valley Review*, *Midwest Literary Magazine*, *Present Magazine*, *Crossed Genres*, *Mirror Dance* (twice), *the Beacons of Tomorrow* second anthology, and *Wanderings*. His work is forthcoming in *The Adroit Journal* and *The Little Patuxent Review*. He scribbles a writing blog at *Lucky Rabbit's Foot*: <http://www.paullamb.wordpress.com/>. He rarely strays far from his laptop.

Deirdre Erin Lockhart is a Canadian author who spent too many years where the hunters wore orange instead of camouflage for fear of being shot, and everyone knew it was suicide to go hunting on the opening day of the Season. Apparently, she always wondered if someone could get away with murder in that chaos. This is her fourth appearance in *Bartleby-Snopceps*. She has twice before had the honor of appearing as Editor's Choice in *Bartleby-Snopceps* print edition. Other stories can regularly be found in *Joyful!* Magazine.

Heather Luby is really nothing more than a girl from the **Ozark** Mountains that grew up with dreams of writing stories. Her work has also appeared in *Word Riot*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *The Citron Review*, *Travel by the Books*, *Annotation Nation* and a few other little places too. She is Associate Editor of Fiction for *The Splinter Generation*. She holds an MFA from **Antioch University Los Angeles** and is currently feverishly revising her novel *Laws of Motion*. When not conversing with the characters of her imagination, she can found wrangling two willful and beautiful daughters around the suburbs of **St. Louis, MO**, and most certainly drinking strong coffee.

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Nicole Monaghan is founder and editor of *Nailpolish Stories*, *A Tiny And Colorful Literary Journal* and is editor of *Stripped*, a Collection of Anonymous Flash Fiction, forthcoming from PS Books in spring, 2012. Her recent work appears in *Used Furniture Review*, *Storyglossia*, *PANK*, and *Foundling Review*, among others. Nicole has earned several awards from both the 61st and 62nd Annual Philadelphia Writers' Conferences including three First Prizes in 2010 in the categories of Literary Short Story, Flash Fiction, and Creative Nonfiction. Visit her at www.writenic.wordpress.com.

Chip O'Brien is a writer, musician, and teacher. He has had stories published in *Barbaric Yawp*, *Words of Wisdom*, *Flash!* an anthology, and *SlugFest Ltd*. He lives on the East side of Nashville, Tennessee with his wife, Amanda, and their two sons, Gus and Patrick.

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Michael Shou-Yung Shum received his MFA from Oregon State University. His work appears or is forthcoming in Barrelhouse, Weave, The AWP Writer's Chronicle, and Defunct, among others, and he was a finalist for the 2011 Bellingham Review Annie Dillard Award. He currently resides in Corvallis, Oregon, with a senior cat.

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Philip Walford lives and writes in London. He is currently working on a novel, and has short fiction and poetry forthcoming in Foundling Review and Eunoia Review.

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Fabio Sassi has had several experiences in music, photography and writing. He has been a visual artist since 1990 making acrylics using the stenciling technique on canvas, board, old vinyl records and other media. Fabio uses logos, icons, tiny objects and shades to create weird perspectives. Many of his subjects are inspired by a paradox either real or imaginary and by the news. He lives in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at www.coroflot.com/fabiosassi