

THE

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Tantrum

C O V E R

David Shannon

David Shannon grew up in Spokane, WA and graduated with a BFA in illustration from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. In 1983 he moved to New York City and worked as a free-lance editorial illustrator. David's work appeared in many publications, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New York Times*, as well as numerous book jackets and posters. In 1988 he began illustrating children's books and has since written and/or illustrated over 35 picture books, including the bestsellers *A Bad Case Of Stripes*, *Duck On A Bike*, *Alice The Fairy* and the semi-autobiographical, *No, David!*, which received a Caldecott Honor in 1999. His latest book is *Mr. Nogginbody & the Childish Child* (Norton Young Readers, Aug. 2020) Currently, David has been concentrating on a series of expressionistic oil paintings. He lives in Burbank with his wife, Heidi, and their dog, Roy.

His work can be found at davidshannonart.com

the oddville press

Promoting today's geniuses
and tomorrow's giants.

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D I S C L A I M E R

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as “adult content”: it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren’t an actual grown-up then please don’t read the Oddville Press, or at least, don’t complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Apology

Thomas Bulen Jacobs

“I JUST NEED YOU TO TELL ME I’m crazy.”

Her brother, Ian, eldest of the six, had Marcel on his knee. Marcel leaned heavily against the tabletop, supported by one of his uncle’s hands. The other held an almond biscotti, on which the baby was gnawing.

“He doesn’t have a nut allergy?”

Ginnie shrugged. “He seems fine.”

They were having brunch on the back patio of a little breakfast place on Flatbush. Ian had deigned to “do the borough,” as he called it; in short, slum it, though he worked Brooklyn and Queens as much as the city, now that Lips was closed.

He was a “skinny old drag queen,” and famous, such as it was, in his circle. He was forty-something now, “congenitally unattached, darling,” the way she was thirty-something, married, now nearly a year since becoming a mother.

Ian allowed Marcel, still fiercely clutching the biscotti in his chubby little paws, to fall backwards against his chest. Ian gave his thigh a little pinch. Ginnie took quiet pleasure in his obvious delight with the baby. Ian used his free hand to signal the waitress for another cup of coffee.

She came by with a stainless-steel pot,

dressed like a one-episode girlfriend of Seinfeld’s, in bleach-wash denim and a floral print vest. The 90s, somehow, were back.

“Ma’am?”

Ginnie shook her head and smiled up at her. She had to block the sun with one hand. Over the waitress’ head, someone had criss-crossed a string or two of lights between the four corners of the patio. It had to have been some time ago. They were now sagging.

It wasn’t too long ago Ginnie had been the waitress. She hoped she had never called the young mothers “ma’am.” She probably had. Back then they had seemed other-worldly, not in some precious, cloying way—it was just that concepts like disposable income and the vicissitudes of stroller parking were equally unthinkable.

Ian sipped the coffee, careful to keep the hot mug from Marcel. Still, at that moment, the baby became frustrated with the biscotti and began to squabble. Ginnie took him, brushed the mash of biscotti from around his mouth, and discretely dropped the corner of her button-down to nurse. Marcel, even big for his age, nestled warmly, deliciously into her lap. Immediately his eyes began to flutter.

Ginnie glanced around. She had never

really noticed nursing mothers until she became one. The other diners seemed oblivious. She knew they weren't, really. They couldn't be. She was white, her husband, Eli, black, and so their baby was black, and when she nursed him in public—sometimes even when she was alone with him, pushing his stroller to Prospect Park or the library—she had seen more than once what she called “the process.” As in, people got a look on their faces that meant they were processing what it meant for her to be mother to this baby. Her baby.

Eli, when she had first pointed this out to him, had leaned back on the couch, suppressed a smile, and said: Imagine that!

Free of the baby, Ian, too, leaned back. In the late morning light, his head slightly tilted, Amelie Le Coq, his drag persona, seemed to shimmer momentarily under his skin.

“What you want is for me to disabuse you of this...”

“Daydream?” Ginnie wrinkled her nose in hyperbolic disgust. “I don’t know what to call it.”

“Let’s call it an Infatuation. With a capital I, like the Church would do.”

Ian had many modes. When he was feeling mischievous—“which, incidentally, is when I feel my most particularly gay, Mary Virginia”—he glided through the city a quintessence of detached haughtiness and wit. Since hurting his back two years ago, he had taken up yoga, and could ooze guru with the best of them. Other times he would lose himself in a book, sipping hours-old tea, stirred periodically with a finger to move the dregs about.

And he was Catholic. Stubbornly, unobtrusively, tenderly Catholic.

“Well, there’s the misogyny, of course. But you knew that.”

“I knew that.”

“The homophobia. An irony if ever there was one.”

“Also capitalized.”

He winked. “Yes. An Irony. Your husband will probably object.”

“Strenuously.”

“There’s the fact that you think it all so much non-sense.”

To that she had no quick retort. She glanced down at Marcel. He was fully asleep now, nursing in little bursts of activity. With a finger she unlatched him, pulling her shirt back into place. The baby kicked a leg emphatically in protest and re-settled in her arms.

Ginnie laid a finger against his perfect cheek.

“I don’t know what I believe.”

It had been so visceral—that was the surprise.

They were raised Catholic. Not just a little Catholic. They attended Mary Immaculate of Lourdes in Newton, their hometown, with its Tridentine mass and arch-conservative politics. All six of the kids had attended the same conservative private Catholic school, and all had gone on to Catholic colleges and universities.

She had participated dutifully the entire time, steeped so dearly in the culture of it all, the unswerving consistency of it. The way it had anchored her family after Ian left the house.

At no point had she been particularly pious. Part of why she had found it so painless to drift away was that it had always been a kind of cultural window dressing. Whatever mystery the church promised in the sounds of the old words, the scent of burning incense—the trappings that so many of the atheists she admired admitted had left tenterhooks in their sensibilities—none of it had found in her any resonance.

Why, then, when she was out for an early Sunday morning walk with Marcel, had she

found herself standing at the back of the church on Pacific Street on the verge of tears?

Ian insisted on paying the bill. Ginnie took the opportunity to strap Marcel into his Beco. They left the restaurant together and walked towards Grand Army Plaza, where he would catch a train back into the city.

He said nothing to further the conversation. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting. A full-throated apologia for Mother Church? She knew the contours of his faith would preclude it.

Still, there was the fact that he had managed to keep his faith alive. She had lost it. She suspected that their brothers, Tony and Eric, had lost it, too, though she was the only one who said so aloud, to their mother's anguish. Their sisters, Trish and Elizabeth, on the other hand, believed with a fervor that Ginnie had thought for the longest time must belie a fundamental un-faith, or at least some cognitive dissonance, but the attempt to bend their experience to her own no longer felt honest. She supposed it was possible to have religious fervor.

That was not what she wanted.

She wanted what Ian had, and that annoyed her. Sometimes she told herself it was only the age difference between them—ten years—and that what she longed for was the self-assurance of his maturity. But that wasn't really true.

No, what had happened was that in the light of her son's birth, the pieties that had replaced her weak faith had come to feel shabby, fleeting. The ideals that had moved her to go into social work in the New York City public schools felt naïve, even obscene in the face of the evidence of their insufficiency.

But wasn't this the greatest criticism of

the God nonsense? She knew its technical term: theodicy. The problem of evil in a world created by the God of Love. Her teachers in high school had done their best to equip them with the weapons to batten back theodicean arguments. The hypocrisy and, damn it, Jesuitical—she spat the word as her father would have—timbre of these conversations had done as much as anything to drive her away.

But they hadn't done for Ian. He knew better than anyone the hypocrisy, the grotesque failures of the church. And he was smart, and well-read. Thoughtful and considerate in ways that she was not. This rankled, but more than anything she was afraid that she was simply missing something, that she was either damaged or incapable of getting to where he was.

Even if it was all non-sense.

Ian kissed her on both cheeks. Gave Marcel a squeeze on one chubby thigh. He seemed to tremble with delight.

"Simply delish, darling. I don't know how you ever let him out of your sight. And yet I must. Au revoir!"

He started down the stairs, and Ginnie turned to head back to the house. He called to her a moment later and skipped back up the steps.

"I can't tell you what to do." This was her favorite of his aspects; there was a tenderness in his voice that felt most brotherly. "I'm not even sure I could say something that would make any difference.

"What I can say is that for me... for me—" He paused, unable to speak for so long, she thought for a moment that he might break down in tears right there at the entrance to the subway.

"I felt God's love for me even when I believed I was unlovable."

He nodded once or twice, then turned on his heels and began his descent in earnest.

What solidified was not faith, or even anything she thought faith might be like. What became unshakable was her desire to baptize Marcel in the Church. It became a kind of monomania, ever firmer the more she tried to shake it.

Ginnie had been reared on the stories of the saints. In so many of the stories, a woman went mad for the church. All too often they wound up martyred: murdered by fathers, husbands, Romans. Lucy was lucky: she only had to pluck out her eyes. For the newer saints, the Dorothy Days, the hard edge of death was tempered, and what was destroyed was love, relationships. A far more bitter pill to swallow, Ginnie thought.

And after all, she was not a saint.

She could not shake it. One Sunday morning, she left the baby with Eli and her sister, Elizabeth, who lived with them, and went alone to mass at the church on Pacific. She sat at the back and pointedly refused to participate.

The pews were about half full, and Ginnie was surprised to see how diverse the congregation was. There were Dominicans, Mexicans, Caribbean, Filipinos. Kids from infancy to bored adolescence. She thought she recognized one of the teachers from work—no, just another Brooklynite with a beard and dark glasses. A brother and sister from a large Black family, probably fifteen and sixteen, took up the gifts.

The homily, offered by a tall white-haired priest, complete with Irish accent, did not make her want to tear her face off.

The music, sung by a choir, was, she thought, quite pretty.

After, she drank a milky cup of bad coffee

from a Styrofoam cup and make chit-chat with the bearded fellow, who was older than he had looked from the pews, and who kept glancing down at her left hand. Yes, she wore a ring.

She asked Elizabeth, who lived in the finished apartment on the ground level, to sit with Marcel, so she and Eli could go out for a drink. The baby was already asleep. Elizabeth assented, happily. There was a monitor in the living room. She would read there until they came home.

Ginnie wore earrings. She hadn't since Marcel had started to reach for them when he nursed. Eli noticed and slipped on a jacket and a skinny blue tie. He hadn't shaved in a couple of days, and there was a hint of white in the stubble of his beard.

They walked to a kitschy bar off Nostrand that would have been at home in Miami. It glowed with neon. The vinyl booths sported pink flamingos and palm trees, and the tables inside shone with white lacquer.

Eli ordered cocktails. The waiter, it was clear, recognized him, but he didn't say anything, which Ginnie appreciated. Eli was a fairly well-known guitarist for Bread & Circus, an indie band that had a couple of mainstream hits. One of their songs was in a Toyota commercial, and another was in a Wes Anderson movie.

They talked of this and that while they waited for the cocktails to arrive. She had not had a drink since before the pregnancy. This was the first she'd had a taste for it. When it came, it smelled of lemon and ginger. Eli's, of course, was brown.

"There's something I want to talk to you about."

Eli took a sip of his drink. "I picked up on that."

"I don't want you to be mad at me."

"Is that why you brought me to a public place?" He deflected with a grin. "I'm not going to be angry."

"You might."

Eli stiffened. "I'm not going to make a scene."

"That's not why I wanted to come out. I needed to have a real conversation, and I needed not to have Marcel and Elizabeth around. This was the only way to do it."

"Okay." Eli took off his glasses. He set them, folded, on the table beside his phone. "What's up?"

"I want to baptize Marcel."

She could tell he was surprised. For half a minute she thought he had even misheard her. His eyebrows did that thing where they half-furrowed, half raised. She'd have laughed if she hadn't had butterflies.

"I said I want—"

"No, no, I heard you. I'm just, like—why?"

"That's the thing, I don't know. But I can't shake it. I've tried. And I can't."

"We talked about this."

"Well, not really."

"Yes, we did." His voice was calm, but his shoulders were pulled forward. "We agreed that we weren't going to raise our kids religious."

"No. What we said, before we got married, and before we had a kid, was that we weren't religious, and we both assumed that was the end of the story."

Eli shook his head. "You said you'd jump off a bridge before you'd raise a kid Catholic. Look what it did to your brother, you said."

"Well, I'm not going to be jumping off any goddamned bridges, am I?" Ginnie caught herself grinding her teeth. "Anyway, that was before."

"Before what, Marcel?"

"Yes. Before, it wasn't a real question for me. Now, it is."

Eli was quiet for a long time. So long the waiter came by to check on them. He ordered another drink. She'd barely had a sip of hers. She took a drink now to close the gap.

"I guess—let me put it this way: are you saying you want to raise him Catholic?"

Ginnie had run up against the question and found herself unable to answer.

"I know this isn't fair, but I just want to start by getting him baptized. And I won't pretend it's some meaningless gesture, that since we don't believe it's just... oil on a baby's head one morning. It's more than that, to me."

Eli leaned way back in his chair. He shook his head in genuine bewilderment.

"Help me to understand this change, Gin. Because, honestly, you were by far the most articulate person I've ever met on stuff like this. Why you didn't believe. I saw what it did to my mother, and it just filled me with this... rage. But you could talk about it so... eloquently. I mean, Ian; Elizabeth? I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but I thought we were on the same page. Religion just ruins lives. And for what? The hope that one day we'll magically live forever?"

Ginnie nodded and pushed back tears.

"I'm not saying I believe this... because I actually don't even know what I believe right now. But... I look at Ian and Elizabeth and I don't see the problems with the church as the end of the story. The church may have driven them away, but... but their faith gave them back to me."

"And I guess my conception of faith is bigger than what the church is. Ultimately."

Eli rolled his lower jaw back and forth. Took long slugs of his cocktail.

"If he grows up not to believe, that's fine. Or if it comes and goes, or he's ambivalent, or agnostic, or even hates us for the bullshit,

that's fine too. Because as much as anything, Eli, I want him to have something to push back against. My whole life was shaped by being brought up Catholic. I literally went into social work with a chip on my shoulder about being a better person without God than my family was with Him.

"But I guess when push comes to shove, if I'm brutally honest, I'm not sure believing what we say we believe in is actually any different than just bleak fucking... nihilism. And if that's the way the world works, then fine. Fuck me. It makes me sick to think I'm handing that off to this—" she almost couldn't speak, now, "—this precious child."

She took up the cocktail napkin from under her glass and dabbed at the tears that had begun to trickle down her cheeks.

"But if—if—our blasé lefty commitments are just a coping mechanism for all the bullshit that we pretend to rail against—capitalism, consumerism, Earth-rape, Republican hypocrisy— and there's really something there to give your soul something to cling to, some little bit of peace, who the hell are we to keep that from him?"

Eli moved his mouth as if to form words, but none came. Instead, he broke out into a smile.

"So, we have empty liberal commitments? Are we heading towards some kind of George and Kellyanne type of situation?"

Ginnie giggled. She took a deep breath, a centering breath she had learned in yoga. "I know this is a lot. It's a lot for me. And I know it's not fair to suddenly be like, 'Oh, everything we thought was important to us is basically a bunch of bullshit.' I know it must sound like a one-eighty. But it doesn't feel that way to me. I feel like I've been moving this way for a long time—and haven't been honest about it even to myself. I'm not trying to put words in your

or anyone else's mouth. I only know I have lost my faith in everything I thought could take its place. God's. What I thought God was."

Eli nodded.

"That's not true. I have faith in love. I guess I think love is the only true thing."

For just a moment, in having spoken it, there was peace in her heart.

"And God is love."

Now she laughed. "'You have said it.'"

"But you're the one who wants him baptized."

"Yes."

"And what if I do not assent? Because I do not assent."

There was a pinwheel of lemon rind on the rim of her glass. Ginnie pushed it with one finger into what remained of her drink.

"Can you then consent?"

Eli shook his head slowly from side to side, but his eyes were locked on hers and he was smiling. Not a joyful smile; a balky, nervous smile.

"I need to just walk through this. Like, I need to hear you tell me. Because the way this is going to work does not make sense to me. I know you. You haven't said it, but this doesn't end with the little water-dip thing. You're going to go whole hog. You want to do all of the Sunday morning stuff?"

"I will."

"And when he wants to stay home with dad, you'll do all the arguing—alone—about whether he has to go?"

"I will."

"And when he asks me why I don't go, and I tell him what I actually think, you'll be fine with that?"

"I will."

Eli leaned back in his chair. "Honestly? I am going to need time. I think it's crazy, and I don't know what to make of it. Okay? I have no idea

what to—I think you’re, frankly, processing all your family grief. Or something. Right now I’m working from, I guess, earned trust, Gin. I absolutely do not understand this and did not see it coming, but I don’t want to try to shut it down, because I don’t think you do anything stupidly, even if I think it’s...”

“Delusional?”

“Delusional. You’re like—like—who are those smart priests that everyone in Dostoevsky hates?”

“Jesuits.”

“Exactly. You’re a Jesuit.”

“If they ever let women in, we’ll have to call them Jesuettes.”

Eli laughed at that and called the waiter over for another drink. He indicated her glass with a cock of the head. She shook. She was loopy enough on the half finger of confectioner’s vodka she’d already had. And Eli would stop at three. He always did.

When they got home, they found Elizabeth asleep on the couch. They hushed themselves and Ginnie went to find a blanket in the linen closet while Eli wound his way through the downstairs turning off lights and double-checking the stove.

The noise of the linen closet clicking closed—or maybe just the psychic connection he seemed to have with her presence—awakened Marcel and he cried out for her.

Eli appeared at the bottom of the stairs, and Ginnie tossed him down the blanket.

“I’ve got him,” she said, and Eli raised two fingers to his lips and blew her a kiss.

She slipped Marcel from his crib, which sat between the windows in their bedroom, and snuck him into their bed to nurse. He latched and settled immediately, humming contentedly to himself. Ginnie propped herself up on one elbow and removed her earrings. She set them in a little jewelry dish on the bedside table.

Then the boozy lemon-ginger and the scent of Marcel’s sweaty little head and the endorphin rush from the nursing all came together. She nestled deep into the bed. Pulled her son’s feet up so that they pressed hard into her stomach.

In the semi-darkness, she traced his eyebrow. At the touch, Marcel unlatched and rolled unceremoniously away. Ginnie closed her eyes continued to pet him. She heard Eli tiptoe upstairs into the music room. The sound of his guitar, the classical, drifted, warm and brown, down the stairs.

Ginnie set her thumb upon Marcel’s forehead.

“You’re going to be baptized,” she whispered, and she pulled her thumb down and then across. “In the name of the—”

Her eyes prickled with tears.

“In the name of the brother, and the sister. The mother...”

There it was again. Peace in her heart.

Thomas Bulen Jacobs was raised overseas, mostly in South America, Turkey, and Spain. He is a graduate of St. John’s College in Annapolis, Md. and the New School in New York City. His work has appeared most recently in *Scribble Literary Journal*, *The Oddville Press*, and *Variant Literature Journal*, among others.

Forgiveness

Afrika Brown

i left
a package at his doorstep
a parcel
covered in blue soaked tissue paper
topped with a blue satin bow
i hoped
he would take it in his home
pull the satin bow loose
tear the tissue paper to find
all my atonements
admissions, pleas, and mea culpas
and he
would take those words
place them in his heart
and we
would heal and move forward
realizing the showers that covered us
were sun showers for a rainbow
was appearing over the horizon
i returned
the parcel was still on his doorstep
unopened
weathered by sun and rain
my heart
will remain an ocean
of unspoken words and dreams
that die with each sunset

Playwright, poet, screenwriter, and director Afrika Brown published “Sepia Sapphire,” a collection of poetry in 2006. In 2014, “The Outing,” Brown’s first play, was featured at Manhattan Repertory Summer Shorts Festival and The Strawberry Festival. In 2015, “Strange Fruit Redux” made its premiere at Manhattan Repertory Theatre’s 10th Anniversary Event. In 2016, “Strange Fruit Redux” played festivals in North Carolina and Michigan. Also, in 2016 Brown debuted “Slow Bullet, My Three Loves” at Manhattan Repertory Theatre. Along with the release of “Flame,” Brown is currently developing her latest stage play “THE FIGHT” to bring to theaters in spring 2022.



Ric Gendron

Walking With Giants

Ric Gendron's paintings bespeak a life lived within the contested narratives of the American West. "The songs, lyrics, stories and poetry of the downtrodden, homeless, poor, maimed, starving people have always played an important role in my work," he says. An enrolled member of the Arrow Lakes Band of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville, Gendron's unflinching, expressionistic work chronicles a life in full—experience, history, heritage, identity, memory—in ways both thought-provoking and unexpected. Gendron studied art at Cornish College in Seattle and Eastern Washington University; his work has shown in museums throughout the United States.

Divisions and Distinctions

Mary Ann Dimand

A knife is a tool of separation: of fruit from stem,
of cancer from flesh, of thorns from roses, seeds
from pumpkins, a new slip that might root
to make a plant, cord from too-long coil, splinters
from fingers that twitch toward deftness, head
from neck.

A spade is a knife to slice
the soil, make room for trees or ponds or stones
or space. A knife seldom taught to sever toes,
though sometimes to behead a snake. Knives learn.
Spades and shovels, they learn, and learn
that they are spoons as much as scalpels.

A friend's knife has somehow learned to love
her husband, and resents her touch. Nick. Sliver. It taught
her to be wary of its edge and that whole drawer. In Japan,
she knows, a shrine holds honored knives and keeps
them resting. It is far from here.

For here we like
our weapons, and people who are honed to lethal blades.
We like our boundaries sharp, and we will cut
the roots and breaths that breach their austere slice.

Mary Ann Dimand was born in Southern Illinois where Union North met Confederate South, and her work is shaped by kinships and conflicts: economics and theology, farming and feminism and history. Dimand holds an MA in economics from Carleton University, an MPhil from Yale University, and an MDiv from Iliff School of Theology. Some of her previous publication credits include: *The History of Game Theory Volume I: From the Beginnings to 1945*; *The Foundations of Game Theory*; and *Women of Value: Feminist Essays on the History of Women in Economics*, among others. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Agave Magazine*, *Apricity Magazine*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Bitterzoet Magazine*, *The Borfski Press*, *The Broken Plate*, *Chapter House Journal*, *Euphony Journal*, *Faultline*, *FRIgg Magazine*, *From Sac*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *The Hungry Chimera*, *Isacoustic*, *The MacGuffin*, *Mantis*, *Misfit Magazine*, *Mount Hope Magazine*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Penumbra*, *Plainsongs*, *RAW Journal of the Arts*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Slab*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *THINK: A Journal of Poetry, Fiction, and Essays*, *Tulane Review*, and *Visitant Lit*.

Monkey Bar

Richard C. Rutherford

THE PROBLEM WITH BEING A WAITRESS

in a monkey bar—well two problems actually—unless you also count never being able or have the time to make up your mind...ahhh... Oh yeah, the problem or problems, blah, blah, blah—is/are the fucking prehensile tails. Just try to carry a tray of fermented—well anything intoxicating—just for starters—through a pack of just-past-juvenile monkeys—the males are the worst—well, I take that back—the females can be obnoxious too—anyway, those fucking prehensile tails grabbing your legs, your arms, your tail, the drinks, your waist—it's like trying to drag branches backwards through a stand of saplings—and don't get me started on how everyone is without opposable thumbs—that's the second thing—or problem—whatever—I saw this documentary about some other primates and how they have opposable thumbs—just try counting out change!—and everybody here has all five digits on one side of the cup—the spillage!—the breakage—I mean broken cups everywhere—I'd love to wear shoes—but those fucking laces are impossible—where was—oh yeah, they screech and drop their cups—shards everywhere—and five seconds later they can't even remember—like—what just happened. And

there's always like a couple of old brachiators acting like trees were taller in the old days, trying to set me up—like I'd fall for some kind of zoo-stare or the old pine nut on the floor game, trying to run off the juveniles—as if ... Like, if I wanted a mature case of fleas, I'd move back in with my mom, and the manager is older than Jane Goodall, but he thinks he should still be nursing—and you can NOT let him get his tail around you—cause you might as well be wearing a backpack, he's got those yellow teeth, screeching like he's king of the jungle except when his mate comes knuckling across the floor ... and she has a serious set of canines ... just dripping ... and he's acting like it is your hips caught hold of his hands, and you are leaning away ... she's screeching everybody's ears out, reaching ... and you lean back too far, fall in a tumble, she bites his hand on her way to you, and you're getting away, but he's got that tail around your leg, and you don't mean it, but you bite her and then you bite him—on purpose—bite his filthy tail. You leap into the rafters, knocking over a nursing mother who manages to regain her balance by pushing two old relatives down to the tables. The breakage! The spillage! And the manager jumps for you, but his mate has his tail, then climbs up on his

back ... and buries those ugly teeth in him. And he's looking at you when he screams, and that can't be good—days of retribution will follow. And my friend, Knuckles—well who isn't named Knuckles? Unless it's like Harriett or Treesa, and I don't know where that one comes from—Treesea, I mean, not Harriett—Knuckles had a book that doesn't have hardly any pages left

anymore ... they get stuck together and once you get them just a little bit wet ... and they don't taste that good anyway ... the book? Oh, yeah, it was about reproduction—yeah right—and territory ... I swear, if that manager doesn't leave me alone ... I wish I belonged to one of those troops ... I'd leave ... I would ... I don't know whether to howl or pick fleas ...

As a boy, Richard C. Rutherford learned storytelling from coon hunters who whittled and spit, recalling moon phase, moisture, and wind (dry as a popcorn fart), black-and-tan cold-trailers, rattle-headed pups, and blue-tick tree dogs who could set down under an old oak and just go to preaching. He has daughters, so he's a feminist. His stories can be found in *Hypertext*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Red Fez*, *Catamaran*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Stone Coast Review*, *Visitant*, and *Cardinal Sins*, among others. He has a large collection of stories.

Alex and Kyle

Rebecca Burns

ONE MORNING a girl called Alex and a boy call Kyle wake up in bed next to each other. Their bodies are warm and have the elastic feel that comes with exertion, and there is a pleasing ache within a tucked away part of them both that brings knowledge that certain things happened the night before that neither had planned and might, in their own way, turn out to be marvellous or exquisitely embarrassing.

Alex lies on her back. Bars, last night, lots of bars. Heeled boots on cobbles near the castle, a man's hand in the small of her back. She swallows dryly, tasting Red Bull and remembers a hurry to get out of her clothes. Two pair of hands fumbling with her jeans, her hand on a belt, prising it open. She is too close to sleep to know if she feels empowered or mortified. There is a poster on the wall, a Klimt—a bronze woman with spirals on her skin reclining on an orange chaise-lounge—and Alex thinks she stood in front of it the night before, for a long time.

Kyle lies on his side facing her. He has thick black hair that half-covers his eyes and, in the summer, he ties it back in an elastic band. Sometimes he goes a couple of days without washing it, for shampoo makes it frizz up like a tennis ball and his friends call him Pube-Head.

This morning his hair falls like heavy coils on his scalp.

He feels a momentary desire to wrap the duvet like a chrysalis around his body. It takes drink to let a woman see him naked. It isn't the right way to go about it, he knows, and it's not as if he's bad-looking. Still. There are reasons why he needs vodka or gin or Bacardi to be able to undress in front of someone. Never beer, though—beer turns his bladder into a sieve and he pisses like a racehorse. The idea of having to climb off a woman so he can use the bathroom makes him white-hot with shame.

He's slept with three people. Each person has broken his heart a little—not because he loves them, more that the transaction of the event leaves a little yellow bruise. Another piece of himself given away.

He senses something different happened last night, unlike the frantic, please-forgive-how-crap-I-am-at-this exchange of past times. He wears a thin gold chain and it slips into the hollow of his throat as he moves, and he remembers lips there the night before that made him sigh and shudder.

Sun streams in through a gap in the curtains. They are in Kyle's room. Slats of light pick out shapes in the dark—mounds of

clothes, spilling from a chair. A bra tumbles from a computer screen. A cloud somewhere in the Edinburgh sky and shards of brightness momentarily disappear. Alex thinks of Tetris, the game her brother plays endlessly in a flickering box in his bedroom.

It could be seven in the morning or five in the afternoon. Alex has no clue. She might have missed all her lectures. A little clench in her stomach—maybe she's missed that bloody tutorial. A mark will be put on her file. She imagines a thick cross written in black felt-tip. She feels her wrist but she isn't wearing her watch. She doesn't know what to make of this.

She realises the taste in her mouth isn't Red Bull after all. It's lemony. An image of limoncello over ice in a dark bar. A man's hot

hand on her knee, burning through her jeans. She passes a shaky hand over her eyes. She thinks there were cocktails.

Kyle rolls onto his back as well. He stares at the crack in the ceiling and the damp circle on the paint, the colour of his Nan's tea. He senses a slight change in the girl next to him. He wishes he can remember her name. A clipped, blunt name, not one that can be shortened. Anna? Jo? He doesn't like the fact that he can't remember, for he remembers other things and, despite the ripple of embarrassment that weaves up his spine, they were good things.

Someone shouts in the corridor. The world creeps in under the door. Alex and Kyle lie like pieces amber in the yellowing room, gathering themselves, waiting for the other to speak.

Rebecca Burns is a novelist and short-story writer. Her two short story collections, *Catching the Barramundi* and *The Settling Earth*, were longlisted for the Edge Hill Short Story Prize, the UK's only award for short story collections. Published by Odyssey Books and Next Chapter, her novels *The Bishop's Girl* and *Beyond the Bay* are available for purchase online. *Quilq*, her latest book, was published by Next Chapter in July 2020.

Still the Tao

Paul Lojeski

He despised his own
body: the failing flesh,

disintegrating organs,
withered muscles

and bones as weak
as a baby's. He wanted

the damn thing kidnapped,
carted away in the trunk

of a beat-up, 'Chevy,
held prisoner in some

invisible gulag, unreachable,
forever forgotten.
,

Then he'd be free, mind
and spirit left to roam,

wild with the 10,000 things.

Paul Lojeski was born and raised in Lakewood, Ohio. His poetry has appeared online and in print. He lives in Port Jefferson, NY.

Reality Show

Haneko Takayama | Translated by Toshiya Kamei

PULSING VERTICAL COLUMNS of mist rise some distance off the coast. After a few moments' delay, the ground vibrates and shakes sideways. After a lull falls over the island, rain will follow.

The dark green rain turns into a downpour, increasing its force day by day. Yet nobody puts up umbrellas. Clouds of smoke escape from various cracks in the mountain, not just from the peak, and pillars of fire rip through them. In other words, a typical view of our island.

Cy has been grumpy of late. If I grumble even a little or crack a joke, he hurls an empty bottle at me, yelling "Don't be cheeky, you little rascal!"

He was born with a bad temper, but he's getting worse these days. His wife, who is a lot older than Cy, has another bun in the oven.

"Gimme a break," he grimaces. "My old lady's no spring chicken, you know."

"It's your fault, too!" I chime in.

Cy says nothing, but he flings three bottles at me. Even so, I'm too easy on him. To be frank, it's *entirely* his fault.

Cy's wife is so-called "water/fish/skin." In short, she's one of the islanders suffering from a rare ailment, making her a recipient of cash assistance. Cash is really hard to come by around here. Only the water/fish/skin people,

who are few among us, can get their hands on cash. They're the only islanders who've got any purchasing power.

That's why Cy doesn't even lift a finger. Instead, he's busy addling his brain with "liquor" sold purportedly for medicinal purposes. He says that's the only way he can face reality. Even so, most grown-ups keep away from booze and stay sober, so it's entirely his own doing. Every time he wakes up from a drunken stupor, he finds his old lady knocked up.

"Hell"—that's the word a visitor named "Searcher" taught me. In his language, it refers to a place that doesn't really exist. According to him, this island's landscape and inhabitants are reminiscent of a place called hell.

Even though such a place is entirely make-believe, I thought.

Searcher also told me that our mountain was manmade. "It's an artificial hell," he explained.

The island consists of the dark mountains shrouded in flame. We actually live on a pile of waste other countries have dumped. The wrong combinations of substances in the waste spark chemical reactions, causing fire.

Countries around the world came to

dump garbage in the middle of the sea that belonged to nobody in particular. When the pile of garbage formed an island large enough according to international law, everybody claimed ownership over it. When they realized that the island was actually floating, they were kind enough to anchor it to a concrete embankment to prevent it from wandering away. Those who had been oblivious to the island came forward, claiming that they dumped more garbage than anyone else. Sure, I can tell letters are printed on empty detergent bottles lying around, but no matter how long I stare at them, I can't figure out how the letters from one country differ from those from another country. They all look like a jumble of scratches that just happen to be shaped like letters, and they're insignificant enough that it doesn't matter if I can't make sense out of them.

"Hey, can you read?" Cy asks, while I stare at the letters on the garbage.

"No way. Neither can you. What do you expect?" I answer.

He throws an empty can at me. The surface of the can features letters that look like patterns and a picture of a sea creature. It's a fish, a snake, or an octopus. You can't really tell whether the creature has scales or suckers, just by looking at the small, cute drawing. Besides, the mere thought of non-islanders eating a canned sea creature makes me sick. If you don't grill a fish and eat it as soon as you catch it, it will go bad and give you diarrhea.

"Lately, things have gotten worse," Cy sighs. "Not only fish but rain water goes bad really fast."

That's only to be expected, because we live on a pile of garbage. But almost everything is rotten beneath our feet, so we hardly notice the stink even as we sniff at it.

It never occurred to us that our island was made of garbage until non-islanders began to

make a fuss about us. To begin with, it made no difference to us whether or not what's below us was someone else's waste. Now the same people who dumped their garbage are drooling over the island. In other words, garbage can turn into treasure, depending on which way the wind blows.

Those who lust after this island visit us one after another. Every visitor claims that the problems facing this island concern them greatly, even though we the islanders don't know what exactly the problems are.

Someone of them say this island houses some imaginary being. They climb our mountain, sing, cry, and dance. They have dubbed the mountain "Zion" or something like that. They say Zion doesn't really exist, but our island reminds them of the place. When I say it aloud, it sounds as strange as "Hell." Zion and Hell are both imaginary places that only exist in the non-islanders' heads.

Cy used to be a fisherman, a surprisingly good one. But these days it doesn't make sense to catch large amounts because fish go rotten as soon as they're out of the water. Thanks to his water/fish/skinned wife's cash, he doesn't have to work now. Long ago, many grown-ups like Cy went out to sea and caught large creatures. Just one catch produced enough meat for them to live on for a while. Also, the bones and hides were put to good use.

Those non-islanders who want to possess this island send us various gifts. If you save currencies from various countries, you can be rich in no time. Even though you can buy only limited items with money on this island, rich people enjoy their privilege. The water/fish/skin disease isn't treatable. Even if doctors find a cure, not only the patients but also their families may find themselves in a financial bind.

Searcher came here to participate in some kind of contest. I still remember well the day

he arrived. Most visitors want to possess this boring island. Some come to climb our mountain to look for their loved ones, who aren't supposed to be here. Others come to ponder nonexistent problems. So the Searcher's visit was a rare occasion.

Blindfolded and guided by a petite interpreter, the man took wobbly tiptoeing steps down the ladder of a propeller plane. A tall man with a camera and a chubby man follow. Visitors from various countries often bring video cameras to this island. Even so, I have no idea how they use their cameras. The tall man's camera was similar, yet small in size.

Searcher slowly removed his blindfold. His scared look provoked pity. The interpreter and the tall man exchanged glances. They sneered at Searcher, handed him a camera small enough to fit in the palm of your hand, and left him behind.

When he was alone, Searcher sobbed for a while and groaned. Making a pitiful grimace, he held the camera with his arm extended and pointed it at himself. After a while, he turned off the camera and placed it on top of a steel drum. He stepped away and crouched, burying his head in his arms. Although I watched him carefully, the rules of this game remained a mystery to me. He seemed to be doing his best to appear pathetic instead of trying to win.

The man called himself "Searcher," but I've got no idea if it was his name or his profession. He took part in a contest called "Search/Island/Alone," so it was probably his nickname. He explained to me what he was looking for, but I didn't quite understand him. It seemed more complicated than what met the eye.

That day, Searcher appeared scared of everything on the island and disappointed in an exaggerated manner. He roamed around the island, cowered, screamed, and groaned while he ate inedible fruit and drank rain water. He threw up, writhed in agony, and thrashed about

on the ground, kicking up dust everywhere.

Searcher was particularly afraid of Cy's wife and her kind. Their characteristically peculiar features may scare you if you're not used to seeing them. Some say it's a curse on families engaging in large-scale fishing, but the disease is apparently not hereditary or contagious. Even so, thanks to financial aid, water/fish/skinned patients are wealthy, so there's no reason to ostracize them. Still, Searcher seemed to believe he could catch the disease, and he stayed away from the patients.

"If you could get infected with the water fish skin," Cy said, "everybody would pay for it." He laughed at Searcher's idiosyncratic behavior.

Only a few of us get to have water fish skin. It's out of reach for most of us.

The island is heavily cracked across its surface. Yet you can hardly spot the cracks while you walk. Even if you find them, you can't take your eyes off them. So from time to time islanders fall into the cracks and disappear. Searcher feared disappearing.

"Hell! Hell!" he groaned loudly, keeping his camera aimed toward himself. Perhaps back home, he didn't have to worry about meeting an untimely death under unreasonable circumstances. Maybe he never got into battle against an automobile, an airplane, a rocky place, or someone who stared back at him.

When night fell, Searcher stopped recording himself out of exhaustion or boredom—or a combination of both. He picked garbage off the ground, stared at the written words on the front and the back, picked up another piece of garbage, and repeated the whole thing. He seemed to be reading the labels written in various languages. As he appeared to understand everything he read, I became envious, I stepped closer to him and observed him. Then he taught me some words and their meanings.

“It’s not that I can read everything,” Searcher said. “But if you understand a few words even vaguely, you can increase your knowledge of that language by finding similar phrases. Reading an unknown language is like a puzzle.”

As far back as I can remember, I’ve always wanted to learn to read. I’ve never wanted to make myself useful to the world. Nor have I ever desired to live long. On this island, you don’t have to read. Everybody around me can’t read. Nobody I know has died from their inability to read. As nobody can read, I don’t know if anyone who can read will live longer than the rest of us.

I was curious about what lay beneath my feet. What was it made of? Until visitors pointed it out to me, it had never occurred to me that we lived on a pile of garbage. I was also interested in what people in other countries threw away. Even without an interpreter, Searcher talked to me in a leisurely manner, combining gestures and words. Detergent bottles. Motor oil leftovers. He showed me a children’s toy with wooden square blocks. Letters were engraved on their tops. This toy came in handy when he taught me some letters. Many people consumed many things. Yet they discarded them when they deemed them unnecessary.

As a small token of my thanks, I decided to bring Searcher some gift. I snatched the most expensive-looking bottle of liquor stashed in Cy’s cabinet and took it to Searcher. If Cy found out, I would be in big trouble.

As Searcher sipped Cy’s liquor, he began to act in a strange manner. In addition, he had read too many letters that something inside him snapped. I felt dizzy. As he taught me new letters, he seemed to fall into a panic. His mind was preoccupied with being on the island. His surroundings scared him senseless. We islanders

never fear our landscapes. He was afraid because he found himself in an unfamiliar place.

A while ago, he gazed at the letters with dull eyes. I was taken aback by the sudden change in his demeanor. As a certain combination of substances found in wastes causes smoke and fire, maybe his volatile mood had been triggered by a similar chemical reaction. Maybe a lethal combination of letters written on garbage caused the fire to kindle inside the man, like flames emerging around the island. Perhaps he had seen what was beneath a crack in the ground.

Even though the camera was off, Searcher crouched, leaped up, and screamed. As I was near him, he struck me in the face with his clenched fist. He had broken my nose, and my mouth was bleeding. I rolled over the ground. The man ripped my clothes off, grabbed my face, and forced me to lick him. To be honest, he was more unsightly than anyone on the island. Also, he stank, but I didn’t want him to hit me again, so I complied. I’d seen what Cy and his wife do, so I thought I knew more or less what Searcher would do to me, but it was quite different from what I had expected. He cut me with a broken shard of bottle glass so that he could have me. He eventually convulsed briefly and became quiet again.

The following morning, Cy found out about it and beat Searcher to death. His corpse went rotten a half day later and dissolved into a shapeless heap a few days after that.

A week later, those who came with the man returned in a propeller plane. By that time, the man had turned into a gooey mess. I expected them to make a fuss over the man’s demise. Yet they simply sneered like last time, took pictures of the dissolving corpse, sniffed at it, and poked at it with a stick.

The interpreter told us that the man had voluntarily took part in this contest. After

reading a multiple-page document, he agreed that he wouldn't complain even if something bad happened to him. He wouldn't hide if he saw something amiss. He wrote his name on the document, blindfolded himself, and pretended to be brought here against his will. While on the island, he didn't look for anything. He merely cowered in fear.

"Conflict/play," the interpreter said.

Your whole purpose is to search, but you will go crazy once you actually find what you're looking for. You may even die because of it. If you don't look for it, you can live in peace. Yet you can't seek the truth in order to win the contest. You have trouble making up your mind as to which to choose. This is what's called a dilemma, apparently. But if you manage find what you're looking for and survive, you'll be rewarded with incredible wealth.

To my surprise, these contestants use their cameras to share their sufferings with as many people as possible and entertain them. Their cameras make people who live far away feel as if they were visiting the island themselves. Those who come here with their cameras pretend that our problems are actually theirs.

"Of course, many have become rich through contests," the interpreter continued. "But they're not necessarily happy. But there's no life without a contest for them. It's impossible to tell if they would have been better off if they hadn't participated."

I asked the interpreter about the word Searcher mumbled repeatedly.

"Maybe it's a dog's name. The one that went to outer space," she said after a long

pause. Even so, there was no way to find out whether or not it was true.

Those who came back for Searcher pointed their cameras to what was left of him and the columns of mist in the distance. They picked up the camera Searcher had left on the drum and left the island.

"What he did to you was horrible," Cy said. "He was totally out of whack. Somebody like that deserves to die."

Even so, he may well have been upset only because Searcher stole his precious liquor. Besides, he treats his wife pretty much the same way, but he doesn't seem to think there's anything wrong with it. I wanted to ask him if he would manhandle me when I grow up. But I better keep my mouth shut because I don't want him to throw garbage at me.

I would love to blindfold myself, grab a camera, and become a searcher myself. Maybe I will win some contest, become richer than the water/fish/skinned people, and go to another country, away from the waste.

But I can't read the contest rules written on a multiple-page document, let alone write my own name. I don't even have a name. On this island, you only get a name when you give it to yourself. Not many people live long enough to do that. In other countries, even dogs have names and are allowed to travel long distances.

My face and body hurt. I need to ask Cy's wife for the ointment she purchased from overseas. Otherwise, various parts of my body may go rotten in the afternoon.

"Hell"—that has become one of my favorite words.

Haneko Takayama is an award-winning Japanese writer. In 2009, her short story *Udon, Kitsune tsuki no* was a runner-up for the Sogen SF Short Story Award. Her story collection of the same name was a finalist for the Nihon SF Taisho Award in 2014. In 2020, her novel *Shuri no uma* won the Akutagawa Prize.



Deluge

David Shannon

25

Lacrimosa

James King

I thought you were dead.

How long had it been since you
or anyone else set foot in my room—
the one you call, ironically, living?

There used to be a girl, right?

I could tell from her touch that her visits
were obligatory. She was cute and dutiful
and oh so consistent: When thirty minutes
were up, I'd feel a puff of cool air chase
a happy diminuendo of footsteps.

There was a boy, too.

His first visits were painful, but I endured
because he was intrigued. We started
talking and eventually, wonderfully, we began
to sing together. He knew how to treat me.
Where did he go? What did you do?

And you?

So determined at first to make us work. Years
of the same conversations. And then, the grand
hiatus. Only recently have you started visiting
again, but the pauses are long. I feel your touch
but I sense a longing for that nocturne
you used to play. Badly.

Me?

I need you. But, please, try a jaunty invention.
And you do know, don't you, that Bach
wrote more than one prelude? You might consider
a peppy sonatina or bagatelle. Let's keep our distance
from jazz, shall we? It was never in your wheelhouse.
And whatever you do, nothing in the key of E minor.
That's when you grow silent, and I get the feeling
that at any moment, the front door will bust
open and two burly men will enter, armed
with a dolly.

James King is the author of the novel, *Bill Warrington's Last Chance* (Viking/Penguin), Grand Prize Winner of the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. His non-fiction work has been published in a wide variety of magazines and newspapers, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *New York Daily News*. King is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame and has an M.A. in Writing from Manhattanville College. He lives in Connecticut.



Better Days

Ric Gendron

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The State of Education

Mark J. Mitchell

In Texas, teachers are writing their wills,
covering their foreheads with cool chalk dust.
Desks are haunted by ghostly coffee spills.
In Texas, teachers are writing. Their will
is tested by deaths-head lesson plans, and still
children gather to bestow the gift of trust
on Texas teachers. Writing notes, they will
cover faces for the promised chalk dust.

Mark J. Mitchell was born in Chicago and grew up in southern California. His latest poetry collection, *Roshi San Francisco*, was just published by Norfolk Publishing. *Starting from Tu Fu* was recently published by Encircle Publications. He is very fond of baseball, Louis Aragon, Miles Davis, Kafka and Dante. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, the activist and documentarian, Joan Juster where he made his marginal living pointing out pretty things. Now, like everyone else, he's unemployed. He has published 2 novels and three chapbooks and two full length collections so far. Titles on request. A meager online presence can be found on Facebook at [@MarkJMitchellwriter](#), on twitter [@Mark J Mitchell_Writer](#), and on his [website at mark-j-mitchell.square.site](#)

Something Sweet

Karin Barbee

JACKIE AND BRENDA are thrifting again. Jackie is tapping the tan skin just above the crucifix nestled between her breasts. “And then to make things worse he stuck his gum on me. Right here.” Her Passionate Pink nails mark the spot. “Took it out while we were doing it and stuck it on me.”

“Oh my God,” Brenda says, cupping a hand to her mouth. “A GUN?”

“No! Jesus, Bren!” Jackie shakes her head, her long blond hair rocks stiffly. “You never listen. Gum! He stuck GUM on me.”

Brenda sighs, “Oh,” then crinkles up her nose. “That’s gross.”

“Yeah, it’s gross, and it’s not classy either.”

The thrift store is nearly empty. Brenda sees an old man in the glassware section wearing a corduroy suit and a red baseball cap. He is filling his basket with mismatched plates and bowls. A young woman flips through men’s sweatshirts and screams at two young boys gnawing on ropes of black licorice and hiding between clothes racks. Jackie, a tall, tan woman in tight jeans and a black sweater, scans a section of dresses, occasionally pulling one out and throwing it over her shoulder. Brenda, a stocky woman, follows behind, carrying both

of their purses. Her body swells into a yellow sweatshirt and black leggings.

“So, you remember Don, don’t you?” Jackie says, not looking up. “The guy with the black Mustang.”

“No, not really,” she responds and re-adjusts the purses on her shoulder. Unlike Jackie, Brenda has no interest in cars.

“Oh, come on, Bren,” Jackie says, pulling another dress from the rack, eyeing it for a few seconds then returning it. “You know, The Gummy Bear Guy.”

In addition to being best friends and roommates, Brenda and Jackie both work at Griff’s Candy House, a candy and card shop. It isn’t the best paying job but between the two of them they make enough to pay the bills and still have a little fun money left over. Brenda likes working at Griff’s. The manager is nice and the job is easy. But Jackie complains a lot, mostly about the pink shirt and matching headband they have to wear. She doesn’t leave though, partly because she has no real skills and partly because she knows it’s a great way to meet men, men like The Gummy Bear Guy.

“Oh, yeah, he seemed sweet.” Brenda says while digging in her pockets for a mint, “He’s taking you out?”

"Yep. Let's hope he's not too sweet."

Brenda has heard this before, "Hope he isn't too sweet." Every time Jackie says it Brenda wishes she hadn't. When she finishes looking through all of the black dresses, Jackie makes her way to the back corner of the store and begins to undress in front of a smudged floor length mirror. Brenda looks around nervously. On the other side of the store the two boys are laughing and bobbing up and down and the old man is some forty feet away digging through a bin of silverware. There's an old piano bench covered in winter coats. Brenda clears them off and takes a seat. The beige tile floor is dusty so Jackie carefully slips each pant leg off and then stands on her shoes, hanging her jeans on an empty clothes hook. Her body is thin but not muscular and when she strips off her sweater a tiny half roll of fat is visible, sagging over the top of her underwear. Brenda focuses on the roll as Jackie begins to pull on the first dress.

"So, why did he do it?" Brenda crosses her legs and picks at the chewed up ends of her fingernails.

"Do what?" Jackie checks the first dress in the mirror, it is too long in the sleeves and it puckers at the butt; she quickly pulls it off, tossing it on the floor.

"Stick his gum on you."

Jackie slides the next dress off the hanger and struggles into it. It's a short clingy dress that has gauzy almost transparent sections running the length of each side and a high neckline except for a diamond cut out just above the breasts.

"Cause he's an asshole!" She stands up on her tiptoes and checks the back of the dress in the mirror. "I told him I didn't like him smacking at it while we're doing it, and kissing and stuff. So he took it out and stuck it on me."

"Wow," Brenda says softly. "What a jerk."

"What an asshole you mean."

"Yeah, what an asshole." Brenda says louder. She means it too. She knows better than anyone how hard Jackie has it. It isn't easy being so beautiful. Brenda has watched her many times, at bars and even at work Jackie always has to be prepared. Even while she's talking to her, Jackie always seems to be looking around, seeing who was out there, things Brenda never really had to worry about. Yeah, she thinks, that guy was an asshole. But then again, Brenda thinks the gum thing sounded kind of nice. Not so much the sticking it on her part, but the sloppy mint kisses sounded good to her. She can't help but think that if it were her with Jeff last night, she'd have let him keep the gum in.

"What do you think?" Jackie asks, throwing her arms out and swiveling her lips toward Brenda. "Is it crazy sexy?"

"Oh yeah, Jackie," Brenda gives her the thumbs up. "Crazy sexy."

Brenda and Jackie have been coming to Mean Mr. Mustard's since they were seventeen. Back then they got in on fake IDs and lies to their parents. Now Jackie just gives the doorman a nod. The girls get comfortable on two barstools in the back. The bartender slides a Coors Lite in front of Jackie and an amaretto sour in front of Brenda.

"How's it going Marco?" Jackie gives the bartender a wink and takes a swig of her beer.

"Not bad Jackie," Marco says and ducks under the bar, reappearing with a box of cocktail napkins.

"And how is Miss Brenda this evening?" Marco stuffs the napkins into a small plastic holder and gives Brenda a smile. "It's been a while."

"I know" Brenda grins and sips at her drink. "I'm doing good. Thanks for asking."

Marco had been around for years. Back then Marco would work the door, his chest rippling in muscle shirts, arms plump and hard like Popeye. He was in his forties now, still handsome but a bit overweight. Jackie always talked about what a shame it was that Marco didn't take care of himself. Brenda never said a word. After all, she'd put on a good forty pounds herself.

"So, Marco," Jackie leans forward on her stool. "Guess whose birthday it is?" she nods towards Brenda and then gives her a squeeze. "Thought I'd take her out on the town. Get her out of the house for a change."

Brenda blushes and shrugs her shoulders a bit.

"Well, Happy Birthday, Brenda," Marco slaps the bar. "Next one's on me."

Brenda watches as Marco fills a mixing glass with lime juice and soda, plucks a bottle of rum from the shelf behind the bar, mixes them and pours the concoction into a tall glass. A pretty young woman, simmering in a red leather jacket, thanks him and hands him a five.

"So this is cool, huh," Jackie holds her beer up as if to toast. "Night on the town, just the two of us." Brenda raises her glass and they clink.

"It's great Jackie, thanks," Brenda takes a sip. "We should do this more often." Jackie throws her head back and takes a long drink.

"Sure," she says running her fingers around her lips.

The bar is dark and smoky. It's Friday night and the place is starting to fill up.

"Hey, let's play some music," Jackie swivels off the stool, strides to the jukebox and slips four quarters into the slot. Brenda steps carefully off the stool and follows her. "It's your birthday. What'd ya say Bren?"

The girls hunch over and press their faces close to the glass. Jackie pushes a neon green

button and the CDs begin to flip. "Oooh here's a good one," Jackie squeals and points to a VanHalen disk. "Can I?" she opens her eyes wide and gives Brenda a pout.

"Sure Jackie," Brenda giggles. Jackie punches in B5 and then continues to flip through the rest of the CDs.

"How 'bout that," Brenda points to a Neil Diamond CD. "Play September Morn."

"Gawd, Bren," Jackie continues to flip through. "Nobody wants to hear Neil Diamond." Brenda looks over her shoulder at the crowd in jeans and leather then back at the jukebox. Jackie smiles at Brenda and gives her a little nudge with her hip. "Think Rock n' Roll."

Brenda straightens up and watches Jackie, her face golden in the yellow glow of the jukebox.

"Here," Jackie stops flipping and points at a George Thorogood disk. "You like him." Jackie punches in H1 - Bad to the Bone.

"Sure."

Back at the bar Jackie is chats with a man on the stool beside her. She laughs and tosses her hair behind her. Brenda looks at herself in the bar mirror and finishes her third drink.

"So what ya been up to?" Marco slides a napkin in front of Brenda and sits another Amaretto sour top of it.

"Thanks," Brenda blushes a bit. "Mostly working," she fishes a cherry out of the glass, pops it in her mouth, removes the stem and places it on the napkin. "And my crafts."

Marco nods and fills a mug with beer. A man throws down a few dollars and Marco slides the beer to him.

"Oh yeah," Marco crosses his arms and leans into the bar. "I remember you used to make those great Christmas ornaments, with glitter and little beads. Still making those?"

Brenda sips from the tiny straw in her glass and scrunches up her nose. "Oh that was so

long ago, Marco. I make all kinds of things now, wreathes, potpourri, candle holders.”

Marco raises his eyebrows and his eyes widen. “Wow,” he says and scratches his head.

Brenda leans towards him, “I’m working on a cross stitch now. It’s a summer scene with...”

“Are you talking about that cross stitch again?” Jackie slides her empty bottle towards Marco and steps off the barstool. “Don’t let her get started about the crafts or she’ll never stop.”

Marco gives Jackie a sideward glance then walks to the other end of the bar. “Hey, Bren,” Jackie says, then slips her coat off the back of the chair and pulls it on. “Brian here, you remember Brian?” Jackie motions towards a dark haired man who is struggling into a black jean jacket. He waves to Brenda and stuffs his hands in his pant pockets. “Well, Brian is leaving town next week and he wants to take me out for a drink.” Brenda stirs her drink, the ice swirls around and around.

“Aren’t you having a drink right now?”

Brenda says, not looking up.

“Bren,” Jackie puts her arm around Brenda. The fringe on her black leather coat hangs limp on Brenda’s shoulder. “I’ll be back early and we’ll watch TV.”

Brenda takes another drink and bites down on the ice. “Sure Jackie,” Brenda kicks at the brass bar at her feet.

“Thanks, Bren,” Jackie rubs Brenda’s back as she takes Brian’s hand and pulls him toward the door. “I’ll see you later.”

Brenda watches them leave. “Yeah, I’ll see you in the morning.”

The apartment is small but clean and except for Jackie’s room, which is not so much decorated as it is scattered with clothes. The whole apartment is designed around a pastel and cherub theme, fat ceramic angels hold candles

and lounge on tabletops and in the living room the peach and mint green couch is topped with matching pillows bordered in cream silk braids. There are bowls of potpourri in each room, and most doors feature a silk flower wreath – the products of Brenda’s Saturday craft-time.

As with most evenings, Brenda is home alone, picking up clothes and other miscellaneous debris Jackie leaves scattered around the bathroom and hallway as she dresses for a date. A crimping iron sits atop the toilet, still plugged in. A can of Aqua-net lies on the floor. Little flecks of black mascara are in the sink, and when Brenda tries to wipe it clean with a tissue little black smudges are left on the porcelain. The mirror is dirty too, covered in bits of toothpaste and a thin veil of hairspray. Brenda unplugs the iron and picks up the hairspray and piles them into Jackie’s drawer. She then sprays glass cleaner into the sink and onto the mirror, wiping them both with a paper towel. As she rubs the last splatter of toothpaste off the mirror Brenda notices the size of her pores, the slightly yellow tint of her teeth, and her wild thick eyebrows.

Jackie is a stickler for sculpted brows. Every Sunday evening she spends ten minutes or more plucking the thin blond hairs into a fine arc, and for weeks she has been trying to convince Brenda to do the same. Or at the very least let her try and, in Jackie’s words, “clean those bad boys up a bit.” Now, in the mirror Brenda can finally see what Jackie had been talking about — they are enormous and when she crinkles her forehead in an exaggerated scowl they seem to crouch over her eyes like two disheveled sewer rats. Brenda decides it is time to do something about them; a kind of makeover — a surprise for Jackie.

The first thing you have to do when plucking your eyebrows is decide what shape your brow naturally makes. Brenda remem-

bers this bit of information from a magazine clipping Jackie had once taped to the bathroom wall. The article gives examples of each brow shape; the straight across then gradual slope, the high arch in the inside followed by the slow curl out, or Brenda's favorite —the villain brow, with its sharp angular arch like Cruella Deville. The article explains that before you begin plucking you need to decide which shape most closely resembles your own so you will not destroy the natural structure of your brows. The process has always scared Brenda. The idea that she could accidentally give herself an unnatural brow is not worth the possible improvement. But tonight she feels confident and begins at the inside, plucking the thick brown hairs from the pale thin skin of her eyelid. She isn't completely sure but she thinks she is a half-moon brow —no real arch, just a smooth rounded curl over the eyes.

When she is finished Brenda stands back from the mirror. The skin is pink and puffy where she has plucked, and there seems to be a section on the right brow which is much thinner than the rest, a kind of bald spot. Brenda smoothes the remaining hairs over the spot making a kind of eyebrow comb-over.

It's after two when Brenda finally changes into her pajamas and settles onto the couch to watch an old episode of Starsky and Hutch. It is dark except for the TV and a scented candle flickering on the coffee table. She's comfortable on the couch and tired from a day of crafts and cleaning. By the time Hutch begins chasing a street thug, cornering him in the back of a butcher shop, Brenda is half asleep. There's a scuffle. The thug knows something —has information that Hutch needs. There is a moment when Brenda is drifting. She curls up into a tight ball and pulls her hands into her sleeves. There is Hutch again. He is roughing the thug up, determined to get what he needs.

Starsky is not around and Brenda finds this strange, perhaps that is why Hutch needs information from this skinny bell-bottom-wearing kid. She is trying to stay awake. It seems weird to Brenda that Starsky isn't around. She decides that he is being held somewhere and only Hutch can save him. Yes, only Hutch who is good looking and tough. Now Hutch is driving fast, taking corners on two wheels. He pulls a flashing light out from somewhere in his car and smacks it on top of the roof. Brenda thinks about Hutch, how he wears suede jackets and tight jeans, the way his blond hair glistens. She wonders if Hutch drinks cocoa, if he had any interest in decoupage. There is another scene but now she only hears it, there is a lot of yelling then gunfire. More words. More sounds. Now, Hutch is on the couch. He is settling in next to Brenda, his long legs hanging over the end. Brenda curls up to him, nuzzling her head into the nook of his neck. It is warm near Hutch and Brenda thinks he smells like vanilla and honey —maybe leather too. He rubs her back then reaches into the holster strapped around his ribs, pulling out his gun and putting it on the coffee table.

"Jackie will be home soon," she whispers into his ear.

He is kissing her now and when he stops he whispers back, "Who's Jackie."

"God I love Valentines," Jackie says, skipping out of the back room past the bins of pre-wrapped chocolates, her pink Griff's shirt open to the third button. Brenda busily digs through a box behind the counter then pops her head up.

"Yeah, look at all the new stuff we got in," she says, and holds up a stuffed St. Bernard with a tiny pink barrel of heart candies hanging from its neck.

"Aww, cute," Jackie squeals and comes over

to give it a squeeze.

It is three weeks before Valentine's Day, and Jackie and Brenda are supposed to spend the evening moving display cases around so the day girls can decorate the store, but it's late in the evening and they have yet to move three of the front cases.

"I've already cleared off the front racks," Brenda says, folding the lid down on the box of stuffed dogs. "Let me know when you want to move them."

"Sure," Jackie says, and hops up on the front counter. "Let me finish this first." She unwraps a cinnamon sucker and pops it into her mouth.

While Jackie eats her sucker Brenda is dusting around jars of stick candy and root beer barrels. Huge balls of dust roll off the shelves along with an occasional unwrapped piece of candy.

"So what are you doing tonight?" Jackie yells from the back room, then reappears without her pink headband.

Brenda notices the missing headband but continues to clean. Jackie was always taking her headband off.

"Probably work on my cross-stitch," Brenda responds, pushing the sugar-free butter rum disks to the back of the display.

"Jesus, Bren," Jackie bites into the sucker and throws the stick in the trash. "We need to get you a man."

It is a half hour to closing and while Brenda stacks bags of gumdrops into a basket, Jackie gets her duffle bag from behind the front counter and goes to the back. Most nights Jackie waits until after work to change but tonight Don is picking her up right at closing. This is their third date —Jackie and Don —and Brenda hopes it will work out between them. He had come in a few weeks earlier looking for gummy bears. Brenda was the one who helped

him. In fact, they hit it off pretty well. They had laughed about how ridiculous it was to paint a whole store pink, and he told her a story about the time he sucked pop rocks up his nose. It went so well that Brenda almost asked him if he might like to come over for dinner some time. But before she had a chance Jackie came back with burgers for dinner and, as it turned out, they hit it off, too.

Just after Jackie goes in back to change, the front door jingles, and a good looking man in a long leather coat steps in. He's tall but slightly plump and he is wearing his hair in a thin brown ponytail. Brenda likes him immediately. He reminds her of an action hero or maybe a bounty hunter.

"Can I help you?" she asks, smoothing down her shirt. "Are you looking for something special? Some confections of some kind?" Brenda immediately wishes she could start over. She knew not to say "confections" to the customers. Jackie had told her a million times it sounded stupid. Somehow it just slipped out.

The man walks to the fudge counter and looks inside. "Um," he scans the various lumps of chocolate. "I just need something sweet," his voice is slightly gruff and he keeps his hands in his jean pockets.

Brenda is excited, but she knows she needs to move fast. "Well," she nervously scampers behind the fudge case and opens the door, "If you'd like I can cut you a sample of our new mocha fudge."

"Sure," the man says. "That'd be cool."

Carefully Brenda cuts a thick rectangle off the end of the mocha fudge, lifting it out on the edge of the spatula and holding it out to the man. He takes it, bites off a bit and nods.

"Yeah, that's good. Give me a chunk of that."

Brenda is blushing. She feels her cheeks on fire as she cuts a small brick of fudge, weighs it,

and wraps it up. The man is wandering around the store and she watches as he bends down and picks up a stray root beer barrel that had fallen on the ground and places it carefully onto the counter. He is a good man, she thinks, a man who notices little things.

Just as Brenda is placing the fudge in a Griff's bag, she hears the bathroom door open. "Gawd, that bathroom sucks!" Jackie growls. She is wearing the black dress with the see-through side panels and a pair of tall black pumps. Her long blond hair is teased and pulled back in sparkly black and silver banana clip. "The toilet's all plugged up again." She tugs at the bottom of the dress a bit and checks her reflection in the mirrored back wall.

Brenda knows what will happen. She has felt this before, this moment just before Jackie realizes the possibilities before her, just before she senses his presence. Brenda wants to motion to him, mouth the words to him, Meet me later. We can drive somewhere. Maybe get some ice-cream. But it is too late. Jackie has seen him and she is giving Brenda a sly grin and smacking her glossed lips.

"How much?" the man says, digging in his wallet.

Brenda slides the bag to him and rings it up. "Five dollars and fifty six cents, please." The man has nice hands and Brenda considers reaching across the counter and grabbing them. She can see Jackie's figure behind him but she will not look at her.

"How are you doin'?" Jackie asks, sauntering up to the man, leaning with one hand on the counter, one on her hip. "You must of slipped in while I was in the back."

"Uh," the man is surprised. He eyes Jackie quickly then hands Brenda ten dollars. "I'm doing ok, how 'bout yourself?" He turns to Jackie and casually leans his hip into the counter.

Jackie is smiling wide and toothy, and she is running the tips of her fingernails up and down the thin gauzy sides of her dress. "Pretty good," Jackie says.

For more than ten minutes Jackie and the man talk and laugh while Brenda pretends to check packing slips. "It's all about speed," Jackie once told her. "You need to get in there and get him." But Brenda knew even then it wasn't all about speed. Like she knows now that time has nothing to do with it. After a few more minutes Brenda goes to the front of the store. "Could we move these cases now?" she calls to Jackie.

Slowly the man walks to the front, Jackie following behind. He has a slip of paper in his hand. He folds it carefully and puts it in his pocket.

"Grab an end," he says to Brenda, and then wraps his hands around the corners of the glass case. Jackie stands off to the side glancing out the front window. The cases are heavy, Brenda and the man half lift and half scoot them to their new place against the wall. When they are finished all three of them scan the floor where the cases have left a rectangle shaped indentations on the carpet. Every few feet there is some kind of candy that had long since been lost under the huge metal and glass cases. There are mints, butter-scotch, and the occasional piece of licorice and taffy. But the piece everyone notices is a heart shaped chocolate that is covered in pink foil.

"Gawd, we should do this more often," Jackie says. "What is this, last year's Valentine's candy?" She flips the heart with the toe of her shoe. It somersaults then lands face up a few feet away. "Gross!"

It is almost closing time and Jackie gives the man a hug and sends him away. He is polite and says goodbye to Brenda, thanking her for her help. He is only gone a few minutes when Don's Mustang pulls up in front.

"Hey Bren," Jackie calls as she gathers her

things from the backroom. “You think you can finish up without me?”

Brenda is looking out the large plate glass window at the front of the store. She watches as Don clears things out of his passenger seat and checks his hair in the rear view mirror.

Jackie walks toward her, “I’ll make it up sometime,” she says, pulling her black leather coat on.

“Sure Jackie,” she responds.

As Jackie heads towards the door Brenda

reaches down and picks up the pink foil heart. It is shiny and the foil is still tightly stretched around the candy. She tucks her nails under the foil and starts to unwrap it.

“Don’t eat it!, Bren,” Jackie laughs, slinging her purse over her shoulder and walking out the door. “Jesus, Bren!” Jackie waves at a car somewhere in the parking lot.

Her fist clenching the foil and chocolate, Brenda watched her go. “I won’t, Jackie,” she whispers. “I’d never do that.”

Karin Barbee is a writer and painter living in Adrian, MI with her two kids. Her work has appeared in *Natural Bridge*, *Swerve*, *Fjords Review*, *Columbia Review*, *The Diagram*, *Whiskey Island*, *Found Poetry Review*, *Glass*, *Sugar House Review*, *The Rupture*, and others.

Indigo

Paul Rabinowitz

If I use
a phrase
like
bird enthusiast
with
blue eyes
gentle
voice

in the
first stanza
of my poem

will I need
anything
else
for the middle
or end

to explain
why you
grab
car keys
and exquisite
turquoise
necklace

and meet
a bird watcher

to view
a male
bunting

perched
atop
a cactus
singing
to stake
its claim

plumage
brilliant
and shiny

illuminated
under
indigo
sky

waiting
patiently
for nightfall
star patterns
to appear

for clues

to navigate
a vast
intoxicating
desert

while
half moon
in the distance
rises

Paul Rabinowitz is an author, photographer and founder of ARTS By The People, a non-profit arts organization based in New Jersey. Through all mediums of art Paul aims to capture real people, flaws and all. He focuses on details that reveal the true essence of a subject, whether they be an artist he's photographing or a fictional character he's bringing to life on the page.

Paul's photography, short fiction and poetry have appeared in many magazines and journals including *Long Exposure Magazine*, *Artists & Authors Anthology*, *Linden Avenue Literary Journal*, *Pif Magazine*, *Courtship of Winds*, *Burningword*, *Evening Street Press*, *The Metaworker Literary Magazine*, *Adirondack Review*, *Voices Israel*, *The Bangalore Review* and others, and a featured artist in *Nailed Magazine* in 2020. Paul is the author of *Limited Light*, a book of prose and portrait photography, and a novella, *The Clay Urn*, (Main Street Rag, 2020). Paul is working on his first novel *Confluence*, and a collection of prose poems called *Grand Street, Revisited*. His prose poems, *Little Gem Magnolia*, *Villa Dei Misteri* and *Poems in Morning Light with Cat* are the inspiration for 3 short films to be released in 2021.

Paul has produced mixed media performances and poetry films that have appeared on stages and in theaters in New York City, New Jersey, Tel Aviv and Paris. Paul is a written word performer and the founder of *The Platform*, a monthly literary series in New Jersey, and *Platform Review*, a journal of voices and visual art from around the world. Paul is preparing for a solo show and retrospective at CCM Gallery in New Jersey in October, 2021.



Madhouse

David Shannon

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The Chant

Michael Neis

IN THE EARLY SUMMER OF 1970, I heard something I never should have heard because my dad did something he never should have done. After years of tinkering with big block engines, doofing up countless opportunities at the starting tree, and blowing his ears out with unmuffled engines (he would be stone deaf by age 60), he had survived five single elimination rounds at Fontana's drag races and was paired off with old Carl Castenholtz on a Sunday morning.

Instead of going to St. Boniface, we went to St. Hedwig's because it had an early morning Mass that would accommodate Dad's championship round. True to our family's Irish heritage, my father went to church, and took me, his son, to escape the certain fires of hell.

The new parish had none of the gray and fortress-like bearing of St. Boniface. St. Hedwig's had creamy walls and coffee-colored beams crisscrossing a lofty ceiling. After I ran a first-timer's assessment of the place, I lowered my guard and slid into the sleepy automated routines of the faithful.

The musicians were not an adult choir, nor were they a folk-style group, exactly. A finger-picked guitar, woodwinds and bongo drums accompanied a tight knot of singers to the

right of the altar. I should have been surprised at the organ providing the foundation to their sound, but instead it seemed like the most logical instrumental mix a composer could ever use. That was when The Chant began to contort my life.

The singers did The Chant during the presentation of the gifts. They were strong and clear, and blended so well that I could not distinguish any dominant voice. They watched the guitarist who led by waving the neck of his instrument. Each verse was in unison, and then a slight man, memorable for his hanging moustache, soloed a short refrain by himself with a bravely imperfect voice, yet still competent. The choir repeated the refrain, splitting into dramatic, four-part harmony.

I had heard chants before in sixth grade religion class. Mr. Tanner, who gave out prayer cards and candy if we could memorize the "Hail Mary," introduced us to Gregorian chant on his cassette player one evening. The monk's monotone voices gave the Latin words a downy warmth, and the melody meandered like a small creak through a dark canyon. Gentle, free of tempo or any discernable pattern, the music slipped quickly from our consciousness into the greater depths of our young minds.

The Chant at St. Hedwig's had a charm the Gregorian chant did not, with the inviting sway of a slow waltz. The English lyrics easily sunk into my head, and phrases like "...O Body of Christ..." and "...refresh our souls..." pierced my early-morning somnolent stupor. The organ, guitar, flute, and bongos interweaved with the voices and gave The Chant a pulsing life, as powerful as it was gentle. Listening to The Chant felt like gazing at the ocean on a deserted beach; it was desolate, entrancing. The refrain ended with two beats of silence, and the lingering reverberation lobbed me from one verse to the next. I glided with the memory of their resonating harmonies. As The Chant entered my sleepy ears, it drifted into a secret place of mine that I hardly knew—a world of clear music, beautiful people, shining stars, and stories with glorious endings.

My dad nudged me to my feet. The celebrant had resumed. His hands were raised, and his eyes were focused on the lectionary before him. "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation..."

After Mass, the sunlight and the white courtyard blinded me as we walked out. I put my head down and focused on my dad's fake Wallabees. As I slid into the way back of our old station wagon, The Chant picked up in my head again. I had been thinking of it all along, really. In the peace of the car's interior, with its fuzzy upholstery that needed to be replaced and the soothing rumble of the engine, The Chant's volume grew in my head.

I did not go with Dad to the races at Fontana that day. Instead, I stayed home with Mom, who was miserable with a stomach flu. We did not want Mom to be by herself, but no one wanted Dad to miss his big opportunity. She was resting in the living room, a place that she kept formal, even sterile. The grooves from the previous day's vacuuming lay imbedded in the carpet.

Yet Mom herself was splayed out on the living room couch, like an unlaced boot, as Dad's camper pulled away, with the racer-laden trailer creaking and staggering from the driveway onto the street. I sat on the velvet wicker chair opposite the couch and watched her. Instead of her T-shirt and shorts, she wore a bathrobe only, her right breast peeping out from neglected folds. Her eyes were sunken and appeared as two dark "X"s, like a comic book character who has been knocked out. I took comfort in the rise and fall of her chest as she lay there. I could not discern whether she was awake or asleep. I got a surprise answer to my question.

"What's that?" she asked with her head fixed on the pillow, eyes cracked open in barely roused wonder.

"What's what?"

"That song you are humming. What is it?"

"Oh. It's something I heard in church."

"It's beautiful. Don't stop." She let her hand fall and her jaw drop as she began to snore.

I never went back to that 6:30 AM Mass. I never saw that group again, but The Chant remained, like a scar painlessly sliced into my skin. I hummed it in the morning when I rode my bike to school. I thought of it during English Literature class when Mrs. Clark spoke about how consumption and other diseases took the Brontës. I let it push other thoughts aside in the evening when I was supposed to be doing geometry. Late at night, when I had trouble getting to sleep, I let The Chant drive through my head like a car on a remote freeway.

During long summers in our pool I loved to let my body sink to the bottom. I let the air out of my lungs in a soothing rumble and gazed at my mother dog paddling from one side of the shallow end to the other. Besides some muffled

splashing and muted voices, it was quiet down there. The depths had reclusiveness, safety, and tranquility. The hinted blue and the water's dewy haze issued out a peacefulness, and The Chant danced within me like the bubbles laboring to reach the surface.

At fifteen, my parents bought a guitar for me, a blonde-colored Kent with strings that went "thud" when I played them. My dad tried to plink out the notes of "Smoke on the Water," but I had other goals in mind. I played simple three-chord songs like "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." Early on I figured out some of chords for The Chant—D, G, and A minor. About six months and thousands of tries later, I finally mastered F, which was a big help. But The Chant had one chord I could not figure out. It dangled before me, a frustrating mystery located in the middle of the refrain and at the end of the verse. I remembered that the guitarist did not strum The Chant. He finger-picked it, so I learned to finger pick too.

But that one last chord. My fingers contorted themselves all over the neck, trying to find the right configuration, only leading to more frustration. Sometimes I thought I had it right, but the next morning I knew I had nothing. The missing chord was an ache, a hole in my stomach.

On College Night at my high school we had representatives from trade schools and universities. I used one of my sessions to see a sparsely attended presentation for St. Jerome's, a small Catholic college in the Midwest. The presenter, a man in a pressed suit and flawlessly trimmed hair, paced back and forth in front of the classroom with his hands behind his back. He spoke of the personal attention and spirituality his school offered and The Chant sung gloriously in my head. I refrained from asking if it was reasonable to choose a college all because of a song.

Late in my senior year, Walter Grenoble had a party. I looked around and realized that almost everyone—my closest friends—were all in the drag racing crowd. It was a community I knew and trusted. Amidst the cans of Miller Genuine Draft and the pounding drive of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" I felt sad. The music, the friends were part of me, but the pull of The Chant was stronger, and there was nothing I could do.

Around one in the morning I heard crashing and yelling in the kitchen, and I rushed in to see what was going on. Walter's brother, Gary, was throwing stuff out the window above the sink: plates, pots, the toaster—anything he could grab. His eyes looked like cuts in his face. He blindly slashed at anything with no direction. I did not know whether to be afraid or to laugh. He looked so pathetic, swinging about in a fit of drunkenness. Since he was a couple years older than us and over six feet tall, no one was getting in his way.

My feet acted on their own. I walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Gary, man, what's up?" He whipped around and slammed a forearm into my chest. He finally pulled together enough coordination to grab my flannel shirt, pick me up, and shove me against the kitchen cabinets. "Fuck off, Sean, you pussy!" His eyes were red and pinched as if stuck through with pins. His hands were trembling and he was gasping. His breath smelled like pesticide. His face was two inches away from mine, but The Chant's peaceful melody was even closer to me. My arms and legs hung loose in the air as I gazed back at him. I spoke like someone asking about the weather. "Gary, man, what's going on?"

He huffed into my face, and then he relaxed his grip. His eyes slackened and he let me back down again. "Nothing, man. Nothing's

going on.” He walked out of the kitchen and went down the hall. Everyone was looking at me. The refrigerator hummed. Gary’s bedroom door slammed, and Leslie Kornacker dropped a fork. Its shimmering tinkle pierced the air.

Then Jerry Reinhart burst out laughing, and everyone started to chuckle with that kind of deliberation you use when stepping on a frozen pond you do not know. Jerry tilted his chair back on its rear legs. “Cheez, Sean, you are fucking made of ice.”

“Steady Sean” got to be my nickname after that.

I ultimately decided not to enroll in the drafting program at the Phoenix Institute of Technology as my dad had been advising me. Instead, I accepted an offer of admission to St. Jerome’s. I had no idea what I wanted to study. Although my dad did not show it, I knew my decision bewildered him to no end. It puzzled me too.

Attending St. Jerome’s was more than living in a place that was different. I became different. Cursing left me almost instantly, like a frog shedding its skin. As the months slipped by, I figured out that the other students were not trying to invade my space. My guard dropped lower and lower. I could relax. The Chant kept singing in my head, but it had a slower tempo and a deeper pitch.

I joined a guitar group that sung at the dormitory Masses. I had never sung in any kind of group before, but once I saw them play, I had to give it a try. The group had a couple of guitarists who were more experienced than me, and I started learning from them. They taught me bar chords and strumming methods. I listened to Bryan Abrams switching back and forth between major and minor chords one evening. He played a chord progression filled with random turns, but it flowed, nonetheless. I tried picking these chords out myself but could not get it right.

“How do you know which chords to play when you do that?” I asked.

“Certain major chords just go with certain minor chords,” Bryan said.

“But how do you know which ones?”

“My fingers just know—isn’t that right, George?”

George Newland started doing the same thing, rocking back and forth between the major and minor chords. “Well, there are patterns. The G goes with E minor, the C goes with A minor...” he said as he played. “And the D goes with B minor...”

My head jerked and my shoulders snapped down as if a jolt of electricity stung through me. I had latched onto the pattern of the sounds they were playing. My fingers went to my temples. My mind was spinning. “The D chord goes with B minor?”

George looked up from his guitar. “Yea, that’s right.”

I leapt to my feet. “Scuse me! Gotta go!” I grabbed my guitar case and ran to my room. I wanted to be alone. I started playing *The Chant*. As I approached the end of the first verse my heart pounded. This time I knew. I played a B minor at that part where I had not known the chord, and this time it sounded perfect. The memory of that Sunday morning Mass suddenly fit together, and *The Chant* flooded through me with renewed vigor. I skipped dinner and played it perfectly for hours into the night.

When walking to the dining hall after rehearsal, the other singers heard me hum *The Chant*. They asked me about it, and I told them where I had heard it. Like me, they lamented that I did not know what it was called, or where to find it.

On annual school retreats I stayed up late in the common room with my guitar and played *The Chant*. I hoped that someone

might be able to tell me something about it. A Catholic college ought to have expertise with that kind of music, but no one knew anything about The Chant.

Late in my senior year I took my guitar to the lake on a day so warm it invited suspicion. The air was moist, sultry, and thick. An entire winter's worth of melted snow was making the ground burst with life. I sat on a folded blanket and started playing The Chant as I hummed. I heard some voices and saw passing shadows. I anticipated people walking by me, but the slap of books getting dropped on the ground broke me from my reverie. I was about to say "Hey!" when three girls in shorts and halter tops sat around me. I thought I had seen them before on campus, but I had never met any of them.

"What's that song?" asked the one closest to me with no introduction.

"I don't know."

She looked at her two friends and then back at me. "That's the prettiest, loneliest song I've ever heard. Where's it from?"

I told them the story of The Chant.

"Play it again."

They introduced themselves, but I immediately forgot their names. Afterwards if I passed any of them on campus we would wave, but that was all I ever saw of them.

After graduation I joined a Catholic volunteer group. They sent me to Chicago, bitterly disappointing my mom who wanted me home. The volunteers lived in a large old house with thick sills and peeling blue paint. We lived close to the projects and taught children. After school we tutored, and I led them in songs with my guitar.

Once, after dinner, I took out my guitar and played The Chant. A guest, a middle-aged man in a brown robe, was talking to the center director by the door as he was getting ready to leave. Then he stopped, turned to me, and

spoke across the room.

"That Brother Leonard really knows how to compose, doesn't he?"

"Who?"

"Brother Leonard. He's the one who wrote that song."

My throat locked up. I flung my guitar somewhere off to my right. I heard it crash into a lamp stand. I jumped to my feet and stumbled across the room to block the man's path to the doorway. I placed both of my hands on his chest. "Don't go," I coughed out. My eyes jumped from one side of the room to the other. "Paper... pen..." I did not dare let go. Another volunteer produced something for me to write with.

The center director made introductions and got me to calm down. The man in the brown robe was Brother Willis, a Franciscan. He told me about The Chant's composer. "His name is Leonard Roland, a Cistercian monk. He lives in an abbey in Iowa. He wrote that, and many others. It's beautiful, isn't it?" I stammered out my agreement.

The following week I looked for anything having to do with Brother Leonard. I called publishing houses, music shops and Catholic bookstores. A few people had heard of him, but no one had any material or recording they could sell to me. After two hours of fruitlessly phoning publishers on a Friday afternoon, my hands were shaking.

I went to the library and found the abbey's number in a phone book. I called, but there was no answer. I called again later. Still, nothing.

I could not sleep that night. At four in the morning I left a note for the center director, saying I was taking a bus to the abbey in Iowa and would return by Sunday evening.

I arrived at the bus station at 4:45 and found a bus that would be leaving for Dubuque at 6:35 that morning.

The empty parking lots. The green gaps between the sidewalks and the streets. Space had no importance in Iowa. I breathed in its openness, so unlike California or Chicago. People in the town knew about the abbey, and they told me how to get there. No buses were going, so I walked on a strip of pavement where farmland was the prevailing mark of humanity's presence.

Back at that time in my life I did not ever wear a hat, which was a pity. The sky was laced with a thin veneer of clouds, diffusing the sunlight, and making an already bright day blinding. I focused my eyes on the gentle greens of the corn, soybeans, and alfalfa. Clouds of gnats grouped and danced in random locations. The Chant, march-like, trumpeted in my head as I walked, this time overlaid with men's monastic voices.

I got a ride in the back of a pickup for the final leg of the journey. When I arrived, I saw men in white and black robes making their way like bees to a long building with mortared stones and a high roof. A couple of them glanced at me, a stranger, standing alone in the parking lot. I walked in, sat towards the back, and listened. I was disappointed to hear chants which sounded more perfunctory than artistic, but what could I have expected? Recorded Hollywood music?

After the prayer service finished (I learned it was an "office" called "none") and all the monks had left, I walked to the gift shop. The monastery did not have many places for unexpected guests. A man in robes, gaunt and graying, was reading behind the counter. His silver hair was cut close to his head and his presence imposed a tranquility on the shop. Thin bony wrists, flecked with black hair, stuck out from ample sleeves.

"May I help you?" he asked. Perhaps he figured out I was not there for anything coming

from their organic garden.

"I hope so," I said. "Is Brother Leonard here?"

His eyes looked past me. "Oh, I'm sorry. He died some time ago."

My stomach dropped. "Oh, I see." I looked around and took deep breaths. Through an open window came chirping sounds and a soft breeze. Nothing moved. I allowed the stillness of the shop to quiet the desperation that had brought me there.

I turned back to the monk. "When did he die?"

His voice did not have pity or sorrow—either for his fellow monk or for me in failing to find him. "About two or three years ago."

I attempted to mimic the monk's dispassionate approach to death and took another deep breath. "I came here because of his music. This is the Brother Leonard who composed, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the monk. His eyes took on a new energy. "We do have his sheet music over here. We also have recordings." I watched the monk's sandals flop below his robes as I followed him to the far wall.

"What's the piece called?" he asked. He passed his fingers across folders organized on a folding table.

"I don't know. But I seem to remember the refrain had a lyric like 'O Body of Christ.'" I hummed *The Chant*.

"Hmm," said the monk as he sifted through papers in a battered milk crate. He pulled out a sheet of music. "Is this the one?"

The page had no title anywhere. The words were typed, and the notes and chords were all hand-written. Even the ledger lines showed signs of being made with a ruler and T-square, with stray marks poking out at the ends. This composition had gone through no publishing house. I inspected the notes and lyrics and recognized it

instantly. It was The Chant. I put a hand on top of my head because I was afraid it would separate from my neck and rise off my body. Then I bought all of Brother Leonard's works.

Finally having the music in my hands pulled a plug, took out a tension and set me back on the earth. An ache was gone, a mystery resolved. I felt like I had just landed after a long journey floating over a strange country in a hot air balloon. I had seen things I could never have anticipated in a marvelous adventure, but I was glad it was over. An ending, unexpected, had arrived, and I was not ready. My feet were getting used to the feel of a new world which lay before me. With the discovery of the divine offices, I was curious for more, but I was in no hurry. I had only recently graduated. I had time.

"How long are you thinking of staying?" asked the monk.

"I don't know," I said. "I came only for the music. I don't have to be back until Sunday evening."

"It's getting late in the day, and I don't seem to remember you in a car. You could stay with us tonight if you like." His suggestion felt as casual as overnighting with a best friend.

"Thanks. Maybe I'll come back sometime, but I think I should go home now." A feeling of invigorating detachment had filled me, and I did not want to risk throwing it away so soon. I shook the monk's hand, walked out of the gift shop and across the abbey grounds to the highway.

Coming to the end of a journey, I could not

help but remember its beginning. When Dad came back home from the races in Fontana, we celebrated his victory. We went to Bob's Big Boy with our friends and passed around the trophy, which soon took its place in the front of Dad's desk in his den.

Dad never won a championship again, but then, it no longer seemed to be that important to him. He became more involved in safety and inspections. The trophy eventually moved from the front of his desk to the credenza against the wall.

The sky was getting bluer and bluer as the sun descended in the west and my eyes savored the rippling waves of green in endless fields. The road stretched out before me like an open invitation.

I would be tutoring some high school juniors the following Monday. I had started to help them only a few weeks before and was astonished they did not understand such fundamental arithmetic as fractions and percentages. I struggled to hide my dismay when I was with them.

How could they have been left behind like that? I was trying to think of ways I could help. The problems of those children. Confronting a world filled with such aimless people squeezed the breath right out of me.

Then a breeze almost blew the page from my hand, so I clutched it with renewed caution. I dropped my worries, lifted the music for The Chant and sang out to the fields as I walked the lonely road.

Mike Neis lives in Orange County and works as a technical writer for a commercial laboratory. His work has appeared in *Amethyst Review*, *Euphemism* and elsewhere. Besides writing, his outside activities include church music, walking for health, and teaching English as a second language.

Shirtless

Paul Rabinowitz

It would be easy to explain
if I were shirtless,
covered in paint

atop a twelve
foot ladder
layers of drop cloth
underneath

Beethoven's concerto
number five blaring,

with brush in hand,
muscles flexed,
I lean into a canvas

applying final touches
around corners
of your mouth.

But instead, I sit alone
with small fingers
on plastic keys

conjuring stories
about a conflicted artist
who paints scenes of longing

in early dawn
waiting for drips of light,
to uncover his darkness



Day Tripper

Ric Gendron

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Uncle Used to Have Monkeys

Mark Jacobs

UNCLE USED TO HAVE MONKEYS. Not native, or Acacia didn't think so. He must have had them transported from somewhere even more exotic. When she was a girl and visited the Residence, Uncle strolled with her through the gardens and grounds and they tossed fruit to the monkeys in the trees. Mandarin oranges, bananas, small bunches of purple grapes. Their fur was brown except for their long black tails, and they knew in their cunning way that Uncle was God over everything that mattered. Sobrinita, he called her. She grew up thinking it was a title, and she deserved it. Because she was who she was, the ruler of the nation accepted her sticky hand in his massive damp mitt as if it were her due, such tenderness.

The sanatorium had a garden, too. Nothing as lush as Uncle's official one had been, of course. Still, day after day, month after month—this was how you accumulated years, how they accumulated you—Acacia could not help going to the window, opening the blinds, scanning the trees for monkeys, or signs of monkeys. They were palms, so it was not unreasonable to expect monkeys in them. A climate that supported palm trees would surely tolerate simians in their uppermost branches.

Absence, she came to understand, was the

fraternal twin brother of loss.

Remembering everything wrong was the same, in its practical effect, as forgetting it all. That was today's lesson and would be tomorrow's.

Suddenly Mario was there with her morning pills. Mario was thin and brisk and very brown. He projected a caring attitude. Acacia longed to trust him but was not sure she ought to.

"Madame," he said, "you will not fight me this morning, will you?"

Acacia shook her head.

The orderly beamed. "Good, that's very good. The sun is shining, the air is fresh and mild, it would be a shame for us to fight on such a day."

He handed her the pills in a tiny paper cup. All those dazzling colors, the odd shapes; the doctors' clever snare for patients like her who knew better. She accepted the glass of water Mario gave her. The trick—she had learned it by patient practice—was to leave no lipstick trace on the rim of the glass when she drank. When they came to free her, as come they must, she would leave behind no clue to her presence. It would be as though she had never been interned in this infernal place.

Mario had a mustache. It was small and neatly trimmed and went with his personality. How was it possible she had not noticed it before? Was she slipping?

The gardens of the moon, that must have been where Uncle obtained the noisy, rambunctious creatures she remembered from her youth. Of course he had people to do the leg-work, securing the things he wanted, the things he needed.

Not everything could be properly forgotten. By properly she meant ruthlessly. She would testify to the impossibility in a court of law, should she be so required.

No one had expected Uncle to fall. To die, of course. In the ripest of ripe old ages he would slip into a well earned oblivion free of subversion. But that he would be betrayed by an ungraceful upstart? Such a thing had been unthinkable.

“Madame?”

“Yes, Mario?”

“You have not yet swallowed your pills. They rest under your tongue, I believe.”

She nodded. “When they come to rescue me, I shall speak kindly of you.”

“Thank you, Madame.”

She swallowed the pills.

When Uncle left the country on an Armed Forces airplane bound for Sao Paolo, there had been no time for any of them to prepare, to plan, scarcely to react. *He’s lucky he got away with his life.* That was one thing she remembered people going around saying. Then, like the faintest twisted echo, a distortion of the very same words, *Which is more than he deserves.*

The day after the airplane deposited Uncle in permanent exile, they had come for Acacia in a government car. Brusque men with pistols in holsters on their belts, except for the captain, who didn’t need one. They had

a verminous aspect and told her she was no longer Minister of Education. Veronica, her only child, was researching something scientific in Madrid so was spared the lash. Osvaldo, well, she never saw her husband again. His office at the Central Bank was emptied out, or so Acacia had gleaned from careless comments dropped by heartless observers. The picture frames remained, but without any pictures in them. She suspected that Osvaldo, too, had fled to Brazil, where he had girlfriends galore—all those wiggly asses, those batted lashes—and secret pots of money. Good riddance, Acacia thought, then and now. But of course it was torture, it was very sad, not seeing Veronica, who had never been one for staying in touch.

Before she surrendered the habit of putting one thought in front of another, Acacia came to the conclusion that they had brought her to the sanatorium because they didn’t know what else to do with her. Then they forgot her. At which point her dreams became her companions. Eventually, they made friends.

“Why are there no monkeys?” she asked Mario.

“Madame?”

“In the gardens. There no monkeys.”

“Ah,” he said with what sounded like genuine regret. “You’ve noticed.”

“I have.”

“Would you care to speak to the Director about it?”

She briefly entertained the suggestion but decided against it. “I prefer to send him a letter. That way there will be a record.”

“Very good, Madame. I shall bring you the writing materials. Right away.”

Here was why she did not quite trust Mario. He did not bring her the wherewithal with which to write her letter to the director of the sanatorium. However, the truth was, after he left the room, Acacia could not be entirely

sure that the conversation she recollected with the orderly was an accurate transcription of what passed between them. Perhaps there had been a misunderstanding. Perhaps, on the other hand, it was institutional chicanery, and he was in on it.

She sat in her chair, which was comfortable. All in all, she could not complain about the accommodations. The room was spacious and well appointed. The furniture was nothing to be ashamed of. There was no telephone, but then she really had no one to call. The walls were painted a restful pale yellow. Sometimes she felt as though she were slumbering inside an egg. She was incubating, incubating, incubating. One day she would be born.

Mario had a mustache.

Usually, in the mornings, after Mario or another orderly brought her breakfast and then her colorful pills, she dozed in the chair, which had a high back and comfortable upholstered cushions.

Her instincts were not totally atrophied, she was sure of that much. There had been something on Mario's mind, something he wanted to tell her but either thought he hadn't better or else had been ordered to withhold from her.

Before losing consciousness, she thought fondly about the monkeys in Uncle's gardens, but it was toucans that came into her dream. A forest, up by the confluence of the big rivers, the famous waterfalls. When she was a girl, Uncle had taken her on a visit. There was a park. For reasons of security they emptied out the hotel. Only members of Uncle's entourage were permitted to stay there, and precious few of those. Acacia had her own suite, with a talking parrot in a cage. She must have been ten, or possibly eleven. You must be on your best behavior, her mother had instructed her. Don't trouble your uncle with frivolous requests.

How little her mother knew, how little she understood. Frivolous requests were exactly what Uncle most looked forward to.

I don't understand what the parrot is saying, she had told him, and he explained that the parrot spoke only English. When they returned to the capital, he promised, he would make sure she learned the language. He would send a tutor to the house; he had just the right one in mind.

That afternoon, when Uncle came to her room and invited her to walk in the park, she took his proffered hand and went eagerly. Security men with long guns and black glasses trailed behind them at a prudent distance, and Uncle told her stories. She wished, now, that she could remember them. What she did remember, but only because they flew into her dream, were the toucans in the forest. Brilliant blazes of color winging their way from tree to tree, as though they were playing a game whose rules only they knew. She had seen nothing the equal of such birds. Never did again, for that matter. And here they were in the sheltered confines of her sleeping mind.

She woke from her nap in tears. They were tears of nostalgia, tears of lost love. Tears, in their way, of rage.

She went to the window. Mario had left the slats of the blinds half open, and the sunlight hurt her eyes.

In the garden, across the manicured green grounds, there were no monkeys. Her sense of desolation was complete.

Which had something to do with how quickly she understood Mario, the next morning, when he came to her room in poorly disguised distress.

"What is it, Mario?"

He shook his head. "Did you enjoy your breakfast?"

"What is it?"

"It's nothing, nothing at all."

The daily ritual proceeded as it always did. Pills as colorful as a toucan in a dream. A glass of water. A minute's hesitation as she secreted the pills under her tongue. Mario's gentle chiding, followed by her decision—as if there could be any doubt—to swallow. No lipstick on the rim of the glass; she checked before handing it back to him. He put it on the tray he carried and headed for the door.

A nap awaited Acacia.

But Mario stopped, hand on the door handle, and turned back to her.

"What's wrong?"

He returned to the center of the room and pointed her to her chair.

"Please to have a seat, Madame."

She sat. She folded her hands. Looked up at him. Foreknowledge came down on her like damp grace, trickling.

"They don't want me to tell you this," Mario said.

"But you will, won't you?"

He nodded. "You deserve to know."

He said it in simple words, simple sentences, drained of emotion. There had been a death. In Sao Paolo. Uncle was gone.

What he did not say or have to say was that nobody would be coming to rescue her.

He was worried, that was clear. He had disobeyed orders by telling her about Uncle's passing at ninety three behind high walls in a

city that neither loved nor understood him, a city that, when all was said and done, would scarcely remember him. Did Mario expect her to throw a tantrum, to roll on the floor in a fit of girlish grief? She hoped she had a little more self-control than that.

"Thank you, Mario," she said.

It had been a long time since she had dismissed anybody. She still had the knack. He went quietly.

A tactical decision: she would save her real tears.

This was not a day for a nap.

She remained sitting in her chair, brimming with memories, some of them altered, all of them strangely askew, as though somebody else had taken possession of her mind and set about rearranging the memories with an eye to some murky purpose.

At a certain point she stood. Walked to the window. The blinds were open. The light was a jury-rigged contrivance of bright ladders. With a supreme effort of will she obliged her eyes, shielded from the light by her hand, methodically to scan the palms. One by one, row by ragged row, as though her life depended on it. She gave the task the time it wanted. When she turned away from the window, finally, she knew to a certainty. There were no monkeys in the sanatorium garden. It was a point of honor, a point of principle: she would not pretend to see what wasn't there.

Mark Jacobs has published more than 160 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Hudson Review*. His five books include *A Handful of Kings*, published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy*, by Soho Press. His website can be found at markjacobsauthor.com.

Things To Do This Spring

Mary Ann Dimand

Trace the shine of the snail's trail, feel
the wind polish your cheeks
and crocus petals. Say the word
"tilth" to yourself as your hands
grow rough on a shovel's handle.
Smell how spring snow rouses
the essence of horse manure long dropped.

Scrape the damp clay
from your boots, then recognize
there's nothing to be done but
let them dry and crack them out. Wait—
no—put them back on. There's time
to fill the birdfeeders, to listen
to the clacks and whistles
of birds bidding for cloacal shiver.

Now go in: Have a cup of tea
or climb the stairs. There are bathtubs
waiting to be scrubbed, clothes to sort
and give away, the phone tutting
silently when you don't call
the plumber, the vacuum cleaner waiting
to suck up your life. Keep climbing.

Keep climbing, and flex your shoulders
against the ceiling. Feel it crack
to let you through. Don't stop
in the crawlspace. Sure, it's bare,
but it's dusty. Press on. Use
your legs. Let the roof erupt
around you as you fly to sniff the stars.

Not Every Lubricant Is Safe To Masturbate With

Corey Miller

LOTION, LIKE AN EX, is everyone's go-to when wanting a quick fix for release, although, both can absorb into your skin quickly and create friction later on, like remembering how meticulous Sheila was about setting the mood: lighting aromatic candles of fresh linen as if you're about to fall into a laundry machine that vibrates and humps in cycles, laying out a rose petal for each day you've been a couple, and having you shower every time beforehand with Almond scented

Castile Soap only has one job despite the task you're trying to accomplish and it doesn't care if it burns to clean, making microorganisms die like an all-out war between good versus evil or you versus Sheila and the battle of Who Said What which took place years ago with possible quotes shot from a rocket launcher shaped of your penis blasting an army of sperm to be killed in spermicide, because contrary to you, Sheila wants a

Baby oil sends mixed signals to your brain, thinking about making your genitalia as smooth as a baby's bottom or breastfeeding or Sheila breastfeeding or Sheila breastfeeding in outer space with fatty deposits floating without gravity and spewing sweet white milk to be consumed like thought bubbles saying "Cum Cum Cum in the infinite time," which Sheila would moan after cooking something healthy to keep your swimmers as active as trout flopping upstream to be caught barehanded and served with quinoa and asparagus all laced in

Coconut milk glides over the rough patches that happened on spring break in Florida, because dating over five years does not mean you have to get married and have kids when you're trying to establish yourself professionally and don't think the two of you would have enough time to commit and rather think you should enjoy your vacation with the large erect palm trees and Luau themed pig roasting on a

Spit smells like the last thing you ate and although garlic and oysters are suppose to be aphrodisiacs, it's only making you think how Sheila moved on and got knocked up by the very next

guy which makes you want a DNA test to check the time lapse because, no, it's not dumb to want something more in life other than just replacing yourself on this planet and, no, you're not getting any younger and, no, you're not losing your cognitive

Motor oil greases the thrusting piston so the engine doesn't lock up in the 2002 Ford Ranger you co-purchased with Sheila, making for a smooth performance, able to go 0 mph to 60 mph in 7.34 seconds to cruise from your hometown of Atlanta, GA to Springer Mountain for hiking just the tip of the Appalachian Trail then speeding to Slippery Rock, PA where you took your first romantic ski trip together and finally finishing the race in Louisville,

KY Jelly does the trick.

Corey Miller was a finalist for the F(r)iction Flash Fiction Contest ('20) and shortlisted for The Forge Flash Competition ('20). His writing has appeared in Booth, Pithead Chapel, Third Point Press, Hobart, and elsewhere. He reads for TriQuarterly, Longleaf Review, CRAFT, and Barren Magazine. When not working or writing in Cleveland, Corey likes to take the dogs for adventures. Follow him on Twitter @IronBrewer or at CoreyMillerWrites.com