

# THE ODDVILLE PRESS

A BREAK FROM THE NORM

## FICTION

**Paul Elam**  
**Brian Gifford**  
**Joseph Carfugno**  
**Dylan CG Thomas**  
**Stuart Marshall**  
**Sherri Collins**  
**Connor McCann**  
**Exir Kamalabadi**  
**Jonathan Pinnock**  
**Mike Florian**  
**Barry Pomeroy**  
**David Alexander Mulis**  
**Kristin Fouquet**  
**Keith Huettenmoser**  
**Becky Hunt**  
**Roland Goity**

## POETRY

**Corey Melser**  
**M.J. Donohoe**

**ARTWORK**  
**CLARA NATOLI**

# The Oddville Press

***The Oddville Press is a downloadable electronic non-profit magazine dedicated to bringing high quality Fiction, Poetry and Artwork to the forefront.***

It's staffed by committed volunteers with high standards of excellence whose mission is to promote today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

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**Cover art by Clara Natoli**

Visit the artist at <http://claranatoli.blogspot.com/>.

Dear Readers,

Earlier today, I was thinking that a magazine is sort of like an all-you-can-eat buffet. First is the usual leafy, jiggly, fruit and soup stuff, followed closely by the meat and potatoes and dressing and gravy, and ending, of course, with the desserts. Ah, the desserts! But I digress. If you're anything like me, you habitually and purposely skip the front of a buffet entirely and go straight for the meat and potatoes and desserts—the good stuff. Just like I skip a magazine's introductions and thank-you's and go straight to the works. That said, I'll keep this letter as brief as possible. Heck, I may even repeat myself... yes, I think I will.

To the staff of The Oddville Press, who are the hardest working and most talented people I know. When something needs to be done, you do it with passion and pride; when life gets in the way, you support each other. To the authors and artists, who allow us to share your voices and have a small part in your dreams. And last but certainly not least, to you, Dear Reader, to whom this magazine is dedicated. Thank you all.

Right. I think I've kept you long enough, so please go ahead. The good stuff is ready and waiting. Enjoy!

Patricia Hurst

Managing Editor

### **The Oddville Staff**

#### **Managing Editor**

*Patricia Hurst* would like you to think she is a professional pudding wrestler. She would also like you to believe she makes movies with such actors as Harrison Ford, Russell Crowe, Robert Downey Jr. and Christopher Walken. But she doesn't. She's just a longtime writer and confirmed coffee/chocoholic. She also may or may not rob banks.

#### **Senior Fiction Editor**

*Robert Callaci* is a 55 year old sales professional who seeks to know what can be known. He has written over 300 poems for his own amusement and has been published in various e-zines. For the past three years has been busy writing an epic fantasy titled *The Tangled Tapestry*. He resides in New York with the two loves of his life, his wife and dog.

#### **Senior Copy Editor**

*S.D. McKeown* is a 25 year old plumber who writes action/adventure and techno-thrillers. He is currently pursuing a degree in humanities in his spare time. Twice a self-published author, S.D. has written four novels to date, and hopes to one day become a fully published author. Residing in South Armagh, Ireland, he has spent the last two years writing *Acts of Treason*, the fifth novel in a series of six.

#### **Copy Editors**

*Rachel Johnson* is a 29 year-old English graduate, and lives in Brighton, England, with her partner of four years, Robert. She works as a croupier, spending her nights meeting interesting characters and her days writing about them. She is currently working on her first novel.

*Rebecca Tester*: Despite the often depraved fiction she writes, Rebecca is an excellent neighbor who delights in baking brownies and walking her Rottweiler, but not her Beagle (who jerks her arms from their sockets). She writes when her two-and-a-half young children, home, dogs, ever-so-demanding fish and fabulous husband allow.

*Stephanie Kraner* is a twenty-two year old who, unfortunately, claims to be a professional freelancer. While she writes predominately nonfiction in the form of stupid articles about debt consolidation and golf balls, occasionally the muse descends and she spouts fiction out of her ears. To date, she still finds it more exciting to have short stories published for no pay than to get \$10 per article for nonfiction. However, she believes \$20 per article might change her mind.

### **Jr. Editors**

*Jim Stay* is a computer geek, technical writer, and one-time board member of Healthcare Informatics magazine. Retired to rural North Carolina, Jim writes short stories, and works with a wildlife sanctuary.

*Alison Baumgartner, 22*, is an English teacher living in Japan. A self-published author at seven –using the then industry standard of notebook and construction paper stapled together—Alison has not, as of yet, been able to recreate her earlier success.

*Jordan Bowling* is an 18 year old Kentuckian who likes a good mystery, but will read just about anything. She is currently attending college, working towards a degree in business accounting.

*Lindsay Dubler* lives in Olympia, Washington and has completed one YA novel, in the midst of writing two others, and has written a collection of short stories. She is passionate about writing that “makes you think” and is especially interested in edgy subject matter. She writes science fiction, young adult, and speculative fiction.

*Jim Ryals* graduated from Columbia College (New York) in 1982 and from Loyola Law School (Los Angeles) in 1987. He recently abandoned his twenty year day job as a lawyer to pursue fiction writing full time. A refugee from Arnold Schwarzenegger’s socialist utopia, he relocated to Mandeville, Louisiana in 2007.

*Michael Rigby, 18*, is one of those people who doesn't quite fit into the label of student. Although school takes up most of his time, he is currently completing his Private Pilot's license and trying to complete one of the many short stories he's thought up in the air. In his free time he likes to train for marathons and run road races. He hopes to one day be able to publish a collection of his science fiction stories and fly around a few other published authors for a living.

*Miles McCoy, 17*, is a full-time student, part-time writer, part-time musician and hails from Pennsylvania.

### **Poetry Editor**

*Ilasir Maroa*

### **Copy Editors**

*Orla O D* is a self employed mum of two young daughters, and surrogate mum to two dogs (one stupid, one clever). Based outside of Dublin on the isle of Ireland, she is a published writer in both fiction and poetry, Orla has been a student of the the 'university of life' for a number of years and will continue in the hope of attaining a MA in something or other.

*Olly Buckle* is a younger child of pacifist intellectuals, started life working in a library but rejected it and has worked in a huge variety of jobs, many manual. Now 64 years old, came late in life to computers and struggles with the simplest systems, but takes delight in the many uses and forms of the written and spoken word.

*Jess Walker*

### **Visual Editor**

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*Non Serviam*

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*Kristin Fouquet once worked for a year as a perfume sprayer, as in "Won't you try our fragrance?" to overcome her fear of rejection. She dated a drag queen briefly and wore men's vintage suits and sock garters to quiet her androgyny anxiety. She proudly passed all of her embalming classes at Delgado Community College in New Orleans, once and for all silencing her childhood trepidations of blood and veins. However, cockroaches still possess the power to scare her. She really doesn't want to become an exterminator but, these things must be managed. If you dare, visit her at Le Salon:  
<http://kristin.fouquet.cc>*

## **Boy in Waiting**

*by Kristin Fouquet*

It was a weekday afternoon, so Joey was waiting on the soft Corinthian-leathered front seat of his father's Chrysler. All year, he had spent roughly an hour after school sitting in a suburban driveway in his dad's car.

"Do your homework," he ordered before slamming the car door.

Joey sighed. He watched his dad use the key to enter the ranch-style brick house. He tried to imagine the interior. He hoped there was a big TV. He wished he could sneak out and look in the window.

Reluctantly, but obsessively, he checked his watch. This tic had started a little game that he'd play with himself. He'd take his notebook out and start recording the time his dad went into the house. Then he started speculating what time he would leave the house. Using the laws of probability along with some guesswork, he could accurately predict how long he would have to wait.

Today, he was tired of waiting. Joey knew he had about fifteen minutes before he would have to get back into the car. Nervously, he slunk up to the big picture window in front. He squirmed between the spindly boxwoods underneath and rose on tip-toes. It was a sunny day, so it took his eyes a few minutes to adjust. He did see a big TV but, it wasn't on.

Joey carefully lifted the metal lever on the chain linked gate to go into the backyard. It was good sized, perfect for a swing set and maybe a doghouse, but there was neither, just a big barren lawn. He heard some eerie noises and crept closely to the backside of the house. By the backdoor was a pair of orange rubber flip-flops. Joey stepped over them.

Fingertips holding onto the brick windowsill, he peered in. He had to blink several times before he focused on his father's large hairy back. Fascinated with the rhythm it made as it jerked back and forth, Joey moved his head in sympathetic tempo.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah," a scream came from within.

A pointed finger followed. At last, Joey saw the reason he had been sitting alone in the car for five hours a week for a year. The reason was a blonde woman and she was angry.

His first instinct was to duck, which he did. Scanning the open backyard, it now seemed larger and more barren. There was nowhere to hide.

"Get back in the car, you little bastard," his father shouted.

He heard the woman screech, "You're fuckin' son! You brought your fuckin' son?"

In his hasty retreat, Joey tripped over a flip-flop as he rushed by the backdoor, nearly falling onto the rough St. Augustine grass. Leaving the gate open behind him, he scurried to the car.

His half-dressed father was being chased by the blonde

brandishing a baseball bat. Her left tit fell out of her pink terrycloth robe and bobbed up and down as she ran. From behind the safety of the windshield, Joey watched the unexpected scene with excitement.

Excitement turned to terror as his father opened the car door and threatened, "I'm gonna kill you, you bastard!"

This was the first time Joey had ever feared for his life. As he sat perfectly still in his pressed khaki uniform, obediently seat-belted, his dad practically fell into the car. He threw his shirt, undershirt, socks, shoes, and necktie into Joey's lap.

The blonde, her tit, and the baseball bat came after them. Just as the car started, it took one swift blow to its driver's door for Joey's dad.

"You little bastard, why did you have to look in the window?" his father yelled as he put it in reverse.

"I-I-I-I," Joey stammered. His eyes darted from the street to the side mirror, where he could still see a distant reflection of the woman.

After they veered around the corner, his father let out a hearty chuckle, then a maniacal laugh. Joey finally had the nerve to look directly at him. Shirtless and sweaty, he flung his head back and laughed again. He turned his head, cackled, and patted Joey on the thigh.

"Don't ever tell your mother about this."

\*\*\*



*Barry Pomeroy has been an instructor in English literature at a variety of American colleges and Canadian universities, most recently the University of Winnipeg. He is responsible for the novel Naked in the Road, and his shorter work has been published in magazines such as Treeline, Freefall, Cosmetica, Bards and Sages, Insolent Rudder, Tart, and Word Catalyst.*

*"David and Goliath" is from the collection The Bloody History of the Fertile Crescent.*

## **David and Goliath**

*by Barry Pomeroy*

Somehow history has to explain how two men, entirely unlike in temperament and ability, social awareness and grace, were placed in a situation where they had to try and kill a total stranger. It began as a battle over land, inspired by scarcity of resources due to a bad summer such that both the Israelites and the Philistines were suffering. Out of desperation, the many sacrifices to their vengeful Gods not working, they turned their industry to a pre-historical arms race, swords made out of ploughshares, men taught to kill instead of grow. The university students warned them, and the women thought to teach their men by privation, but as fall drew closer, war seemed inevitable.

When the Israelites offered to parley, the Philistines agreed. Neither side wanted battle, times were tough and there was barely food to go around, let alone to support an army. A proposal was made and unanimously accepted that each side should choose a gallant for a duel. The Philistines wanted to use Solomon, the violent baby killer, or Elijah, the mad prophet with powerful connections, but Goliath volunteered to represent them.

Goliath was a great, still bear of a man, easily over six foot in a time of low ceilings and short beds. As well, Goliath was of unusually calm temperament. He held no real position of authority in the community, but everyone remembered his eager help, and people said the Philistine king crept to Goliath's hut at night for advice.

Some talked of trickery, but they were ignored, these were simpler times when lies would interrupt conversation and were a cause for dismay rather than celebration. The Philistines knew there were honourable people among the Israelites, and they need not fear deceit. On both sides the towns' meagre supplies were drawn together and, stalking past the naïve students and women who marched with placards in front of the palace, the men gravely went to what they believed gave meaning to their lives. The protestors called to them, prophesied doom for all humanity if they continued, and waved their slogans: "New Testament Now," and "He'll Never Come Back".

The older Israelites tried to volunteer but they were turned away in favour of younger men. Everyone knew Goliath's kindness might possibly be turned against him, but they feared, with reason, the swing of his mighty sword and his resolute dedication to a task. Some had been there to help when Goliath had built his barn and they passed on the story, observing with satisfaction the blanched faces and flinching. They had watched with the whole community when Goliath asked them to step away so they wouldn't be hurt and he levered the largest timbers into place himself, sweating and panting at a job that would have killed almost anyone. It was his barn he said, and he'd never be comfortable with another dying in his place.

When David stepped forward, he was greeted with a relieved hilarity. David was known to be a bit of a dandy, always with a tight shirt and carefully tied sandals, but his gravest offence was more difficult to define. David was very young and spoiled, but

more importantly for our story he had a resentment common to many short men. He'd been teased, and almost everyone in the village remembered something they'd said to David with shame, if not regret, but it was a teasing culture. David's thin skin had rendered him particularly unsuited to jokes, and he'd always overreacted. Once he thought a cat looked at him glancingly and he'd beat her to death. He let dogs alone, although he slung rocks from a safe distance, even for no offence. No one let him baby-sit and although people stopped teasing him, a party was a place of dread when he appeared.

David's proposal that he challenge Goliath was at first treated as a joke, but when a stone shattered against the wall, effectively cutting off whatever witticism a man had seen fit to whisper to his neighbour, David was taken more seriously.

The men ranged across the battlefield, feeling for the first time uneasy, realizing finally that battle meant death. Goliath, who'd been dreading this day ever since he'd volunteered, whose nightmares ran with images of attacking children with claws and teeth, struggled into his gear. Who would the Israelites send against him? He had ducked under every door except the king's, and there was made to bow, but the Israelites also had big men on their side.

When David walked onto the field, Goliath was ashamed. He could see in David's awkward stance the hours in front of the mirror, the cat calls in the locker room, the cruelty. He thought about cancelling the duel but people were counting on him and regardless of who won, lives would be saved.

David was secretly gleeful. What a great trick to play on the caveman, the lumbering giant, on all those who'd made fun of him. Finally he could strike a blow for the little guy. He rattled his stones with satisfaction. He'd carefully picked them, five grey pebbles, one for each letter in his name.

"Aren't you armed?" Goliath was incredulous. *How could they?*

"I have my faith," David's voice was shrill in that annoying shorebird kind of way and he kept his hands behind his back.

Goliath turned to his people but they had that football gleam in their eye. Ready for action, they didn't care what happened. He again lamented he'd not listened when his mother told him to study instead of exercising, instead of smashing beer mugs with his biceps. When you're big, your life is fixed.

David felt much the same. He'd always been clever and quick, good at school and sassy. His insults to adults kept them vaguely displeased, sour and admiring. Goliath unsheathed his sword and stopped five paces away from David in case he wanted to bolt. Goliath pretended to be busy with his shoe, giving David time to evaluate the situation.

Finally Goliath stood. "Can't you see boy? I'm twice your size and ten years older."

"Like the camel," David quipped, "I'll see your hump when you run." Both the Israelites and the Philistines roared, although for different reasons.

Goliath felt terrible but he advanced, keeping his sword lowered. David knew he had to shoot now, before Goliath came within reach. Even the most risky gambler wouldn't give much for David's chances against Goliath up close. He spun a pebble at Goliath, knocking a lock of hair aside on his temple; a rivulet of blood appeared on Goliath's cheek.

With a rush the unfairness of it came to Goliath, and he stopped to protest the use of illegal weapons. As he stood still, his mouth opening to speak, David's next stone caught his skull and he crashed to the ground, his protest still on his tongue.

A great cry went up from the Philistines: they'd been cheated. Goliath had been sent in good faith and the Israelites had many

on their side at least as worthy, some faster and others nearly as strong. The soldiers had hovered resentfully around David when he'd been picked, feeling the cheat, their respect for Philistine fairness more important than winning, respect for Goliath more important than supremacy. Also, they'd played with Goliath as kids and wanted to see him win. He talked slow and everyone thought he was stupid, but he always had a few bucks to lend, and at a party it was his accordian that drew the crowds, made the people clap and dance.

David danced in delight, clapped his hands and demanded someone take a picture of him with one foot on Goliath's head. The Israelites were embarrassed of the trick now and wished they'd chosen another; if only he hadn't been a nephew of the king. Nepotism has limits though, and as David was pulled down and slapped, the Israelites found themselves facing an angry mob of Philistines. The more clearheaded people had David drug away and stifled his crowing, but the damage had been done.

The Israelites turned to the Philistine leaders who claimed Goliath had known. "He said this would happen. Goliath had a bad feeling you'd try a trick, but he insisted we play it honourably. Avoiding bloodshed was more important than winning."

"It was a fair fight . . ." the Israelites began, but the Philistines had already picked up Goliath's body and were walking back to town to pack and move.

The case was held up in court for years. Neither side trusted the other, one expecting revenge, the other tricks. Goliath's sacrifice notwithstanding, everyone knew war was inevitable.

*Michael is 23 and was born, bred and blighted in the fair ol' city of Dublin. Currently living in is Brussels - he whiles away the hours eating waffles, wondering where the sun has gone and dreaming of a beach hut in Guadeloupe.*

## **Glendalough**

*by M J Donohue*

You will have  
your cherished nights,  
that will live  
as you sit in silence  
barely noticing the present  
whirling around you.

Forgotten, in your armchair,  
rocking like  
an old hearse,  
inching towards a  
granite tombstone  
buried deep,  
in the Wicklow hills.

Ah! destiny again,  
what a beautiful  
thing,  
all our immortal  
heroes are dead.

*My name is Connor McCann, and I am an aspiring writer from San Francisco, California. I have been writing in some capacity for the majority of my life. For now, the majority of my work is in the crime and absurd/satirical genres of fiction. I am currently unpublished, and am in the process of editing my first novel. I have a series of short stories that I am attempting to get published, with the below being the first in the lot. It's titled "Stealing Shit", and as about fuel consumption in the not so distant future. Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy!*

## **Stealing Shit**

*by Connor McCann*

Jeff's place was, in fact, not Jeff's place at all. Originally, it was owned by man, a native of Detroit named Tab Grice. After Tab's subsequent retirement, he continued to own Jeff's place, but passed along managerial duties to a woman of dubious repute, named Mona. Mona's reign was a chaotic one, and just months later, she found herself jobless. An immigrant from Cape Verde, named Simon, took over where Mona left off, with much greater success.

Simon was still the manager, head bartender, janitor and security force on this particular night at Jeff's Place when a balding, frowning, rather rotund gentleman waddled into the bar. He pushed the stained, creaking door out of his way and approached the bar, where he found Simon holding court. Inside, there was only one other patron, a man of similar physique and temperament. With his head hung low, eyes fixated on his pint of beer, he didn't seem to acknowledge anything but the liquor before him. Precariously placing himself on a stool, the balding man took his seat two spots over from the other person.

Simon stood over the both of them, arms folded across his chest,

with a blank look on his face. He was a stocky six foot four, with veins bulging out of his neck. He didn't speak, move, or even motion in the newly arrived's direction. The giant gold crucifix on his neck stood still, and his lime green shirt blew slightly in the wind. This seemingly off-putting disposition didn't seem to hamper the patron's thirst for booze. Not in the least.

"Can I get a Whiskey Sour, please?" The man asked, with a twenty-dollar bill at the ready.

Simon didn't verbally reply, opting to nod his head and smile instead. He casually strolled towards of a bottle of whiskey, grabbing a glass along the way. With the whiskey, a top shelf selection, in hand, he dropped the glass down on the bar and liberally doused it with the caustic substance. He left only enough room for a tiny dash of lemon juice.

"Five dollars, friend," Simon said in his heavily accented English.

The man passed along his money, and promptly received his change. He left Simon two dollars to keep, which Simon swept away with his palm. The drink's preparation, especially the amount of liquor that went into it, left the other patron flabbergasted. Bracing himself, he watched on as the balding man took a sip. As if on cue, the man winced, and held his sour expression for a few moments.

"Huh! I hope you ain't doin' nothin' tomorrow, buddy!" The observer proclaimed, followed by a hearty laugh.

"Nothing but working. Why do you think I'm drinking?" The balding man replied as he took another sip.

The observer suddenly found his simple lager quite inadequate.

"Hey, pal, is that how you usually make 'em?"

"That's how I make them for Jim," Simon said, motioning towards the balding man with his hand.

"What--is he special or somethin'?"

"After my first couple of visits, Simon got the picture. Ever since then, he knows to make them strong and keep the things coming."

"Well, hell, let me get one too! Jack and Coke! One for you too, Simon!" The man said with enthusiasm, slamming a fist full of bills onto the bar.

"Thank you sir, but I don't drink. I appreciate it, though."

The patron gave Simon a confused look, but accepted his Jack and Coke just the same. Like Jim before him, he winced at the drink's strength, adding in a shiver and shake for good measure.

"It's no joke, eh? What are you out here for?" Jim asked.

"How'd you know I wasn't a local?"

"Because I happen to be a local myself. Born and raised."

"Oh, ok. I'm here for that conference that's in town—"

"The United Waste Systems conference?" Jim asked, interrupting.

"Yeah!"

"My company just happens to be hosting the thing."

"You work for Consolidated Systems Inc.?"

"That's right. Going on fifteen years now."

"Well, hot damn! Who would've thought? You said your name was Jim?"

"Yes, sir."

"Jim What?"

"Jim Bassey."

"Well, Jim, I'm Horace. Horace Minor from Texarkana."

"Good to meet you, Horace." Jim said with an outstretched hand.

Horace grasped Jim's lone hand with the both of his, giving it a thorough ten second pumping. It took Jim a few seconds to regain feeling. Happy to have his blood circulating again, Jim further carried on the conversation.

"So how long are you in town for, Horace?"

Horace put down his drink and gave himself a moment to recover from its sensory onslaught.

"Just a couple of days. Damn! That thing's an ass-kicker. He always makes 'em like that, huh?"

"If pressed, sure. Simon aims to please."

Horace took a look over at Simon. He was trying, in vain, to jimmy open a jar of pickles with a Bowie Knife. After no initial luck, he stabbed the jar's tin lid repeatedly, earning the results he desired.

"And you come here often?"

"As often as I feel it necessary. Lately, it's pretty dammed often. You know what the business is like."

"No kiddin'. If it's that often—"

"It is."

"Man, I'd hate to be your liver, buddy." Horace said, wiping his forehead with a napkin.

"I try not to think about it."

"What? Your liver?"

"Well, work, but that too."

"I hear ya', buddy. I've been in the game a lil' over a decade myself. Two surgeries and a wife later, it ain't got any easier." Horace said, shaking his head.

"What branch do you work for over at United?"

“Technological Development.” Horace stated grimly.

Jim’s eyebrows raised in unison as he took another, long sip from his drink. With this final gulp, he finished off the Whiskey Sour and motioned for another. Simon stepped in to fill the void left behind.

“I work in the Legal Department myself.”

“Are you a lawyer?”

“Something like that”

As Jim and Horace continued to talk, another customer walked into the establishment. Of below average height and possessing a meager frame, he was the polar opposite of the men he happened to be walking past. Taking a seat on the far end of the bar, he positioned himself well away from Horace and Jim.

“Hey Simon, what’s up?”

“Nothing much, Robby. The usual?”

“You know, I’m in the mood for something different. Give me two shots of Cognac and an Irish Coffee.”

“Do you need anything else?” Simon said with a straight face.

“Do you think you can turn on the T.V.?”

Simon grabbed a hold of the remote control, turning on the television. It was an older model, built sometime in the early 2010s. While, technically, it broadcasted in High Definition, its screen, coated in two-inch-thick dust, made sure the definition was anything but high. Robby didn’t seem to care much as he eyed a soccer match with interest. He downed his shots back to back, without as much as a quiver.

“This guy is just getting started. I’d be surprised if he chugged less than fifteen shots in the next couple of hours.” Jim stated, nodding towards Robby at the end of the bar.

“Wow. Poor kid, he must have some real forgettin’ to do.”

“I wouldn’t know. Aside from ordering his drinks, he doesn’t really talk. Can’t say as I blame him though. I’d do the same if I had the stomach for it.”

The soccer match on the television came to an abrupt end, resulting in an audible groan from Robby. As the Local news began to transmit, Robby got up from his stool and headed for the restroom.

“Hey, look! The conference is on the T.V.!” Horace exclaimed, pointing at the screen.

And, in fact, it was. The conference was the lead off story on the Omaha evening news that night. This was no surprise, as the conference was the biggest event to have been hosted in Omaha in quite some time. The anchors made their greetings and salutations, turning over to the reporter on the scene. At the same time, Robby came back from the restroom, looking over the receipt he held in his hand.

“Thank you, Terry and Joe. Yes, I am at the United Waste Systems Conference, at the Bob Daley Hall, in majestic downtown Omaha. There has been a lot of anticipation and excitement in the days building up to the conference, and today’s opening day did not disappoint. Keynote speeches, presentations, and a dinner devoted specifically to international networking were the highlights of today’s historic opening day.

“As we all remember, the global supply of oil drying up, and finally, evaporating in 2015 had drastic consequences, not only for the United States, but for the world as a whole. Rolling blackouts in some states, permanent blackouts in others. Riots in Seattle. Miles-long lines for inefficient ethanol fuel in Los Angeles. And, of course, civil war in Saudi Arabia, the successive overthrow of each and every Persian Gulf monarchy, and the spread of hyper-violent, ultra-extremist, fundamentalist Islam in seemingly

every country to have ever produced oil.

"But we turn back our attention stateside, as the problem found its solution in these beautiful United States. Late in 2016, United Waste Systems--"

"Hell yeah! Whooo!" An increasingly inebriated Horace hooted, topping off his enthusiasm with a rancid, garlicky belch.

--A company few, if any, had heard of devised this very remedy. Previously, United Waste Systems had confined their operations towards servicing the labyrinth of sewers and waste management plants throughout New Jersey. Almost, as if by accident, somebody somehow found that human waste, namely feces, could be harvested and converted into fuel. "

A brief video from 2016 played. The video, which had since become legendary in the viral video community, was an interview with the man who had made this amazing discovery. A very skinny, unkempt, jittery man adorning bifocals squirmed in place, smiling broadly, as he passionately described how he achieved his remarkable feat. The reporter chafed under the man's considerable enthusiasm for the subject and, with a little reading between the lines, soon found herself horribly uncomfortable.

"A great moment in history indeed. On that day in the winter of '16, Herbert Yancey's hunch would change the face of energy and energy consumption as we knew it. Immediately after the discovery, UWS began developing technology and infrastructure for Fecal Conversion. They instantly dominated the previously non-existent market, controlling a share that they have yet to forfeit. Herbert himself, due to a scandal a few months later, moved on from the UWS family, but the company carries on his sense of duty and spirit of innovation. I caught up with the energy powerhouse's CEO, CFO and CIO, Jonathan 'Johnny Boy' Pardema at the conference on behalf of Channel 5 news."

"The benefits have far exceeded our expectations," Johnny Boy stated, seated in a red velvet chair, surrounded by large, unsmiling men in dark suits and sunglasses.

"Some say your company promoted HFC, or Human Fecal Conversion, as a remedy for the country's energy woes, however, at least initially, the solution was a complete sham. Your detractors claim that your company had no real idea how to convert feces into fuel and the fact that you found a way is a complete and utter miracle." The reported said, unfazed by the presence of his bodyguards.

"Well, dearie, I'll let those jokers say what they want. I can't lose focus on my business over a bunch of hack clowns who couldn't figure it out first. "

"They also say that your company simply pounced upon an aching, desperate market, feeding off the turbulence of the era for profit."

"Are you asking if I was looking to make money?"

"Well..."

"Of course I was looking' to make money! If my family wanted to stay broke, we would have never left Palermo, right?"

"That wasn't my initial question--"

"Look, Christina" Johnny Boy said, interrupting. "HFC is the real deal. It's a proven fact, ha? And it saved this country. The same country my Pa' lost his foot for."

"Yes, HFC did 'save this country' as Johnny Boy Pardema so eloquently stated. America, for the first time in over a century, found itself completely self-reliant in terms of fuel supply. America's well earned reputation for obesity turned from a source of mockery and disdain, to a source of hope and inspiration across the globe. The rest of the world, largely trailing behind in the current wave of technology, now relies on Human Fuel Exports to

keep their grids, generators, plants and automobiles running.”

“Don’t worry folks, we got more than enough to spare!” Johnny Boy said, dressed in a tracksuit, giving the thumbs up in front of the Conference Center.

“That we do. Almost as unexpected as the source of fuel, the environmental benefits have caught most everyone completely off guard. Air and water purity have been raised to pre-Industrial Revolution levels. The previously dirty, inefficient and ineffective sewage systems have been revamped, making the country a much cleaner place in general. But some say not all is well with the HFC system—”

“Bunch of bastards. Do they remember what this place was like before HFC? It wasn’t that long ago.” Horace groaned while starting on a fresh drink.

“Some say that while the common many of this country produce most of the feces converted into fuel, only a select few see any of the profits. Legislation on profit sharing according to fecal quotas was struck down in the Senate last year, prompting widespread protests in the country. These protests were met with what many called a heavy handed police response, further making the issue a sore spot. But possible profit sharing isn’t the only hot item regarding US and HFC: many have questioned entrusting the lion’s share of America’s energy needs and concerns to a man who, just previous to 2016, was imprisoned on racketeering charges.”

“That was a different time and place, dearie. Different rules.” Johnny Boy reassured the viewers in a sound bite.

“Many in the industry and government Johnny Boy’s overlook alleged organized crime ties for a greater menace: Home Conversion Kits, developed and exported from China, are considered a threat to those in the HFC field.”

“Charlie Chan is sucking us dry. It ain’t fair!” Johnny Boy

bellowed, nearly spilling his drink upon his pristine white Track Jacket.

“Many agree with Johnny Boy, including President Rosales. The Rosales Administration found itself in a diplomatic row with Beijing earlier in the month on the very issue of Home Conversion Kits. This latest friction came on the heels of a shouting match the respective presidents had weeks prior over the rapid escalation of Chinese Human Fuel (CHF) exports into different markets. Markets, traditionally held since 2016 by the USA, were being ‘gobbled’ up, possibly by dubious means, claimed President Rosales. President Chan responded that in the spirit of competition, the company offering the highest quality of Human Waste should have the control of any market, anywhere on Earth.”

“Highest quality? Have you ever eaten Chinese Food?” Johnny boy asked Christina, awaiting a serious answer.

“Then why are the Chinese controlling more and more of the world’s markets for fuel, Mr. Pardema?”

“Because you got about 2 billion people copping a squat three times a day! Those god dammed kits don’t help neither.” Johnny Boy said, wagging a finger.

“Pouncing upon the failure of the Feces Quota Legislation, the Chinese began introducing HFC kits into the States. Rosales Administration estimates place the loss of revenue from these kits close to a billion dollars a year. The kits have raised a litany of other concerns as well. Faulty, knock-off kits appearing on the black market have acquired a dangerous reputation. Numerous ‘Cook Offs’, kit detonations, have resulted in the maiming and deaths of many.’

“Similarly disturbing has been the rise of crime surrounding the kits, both store bought and bootleg alike. This man, who refused to have his face shown, or even give Channel 5 news his name,

told us of a recent incident.”

“I had just gotten off from the job when I was waiting for the bus. I was minding my own business, reading the paper. I got approached by a man who asked me what time it was. I told him the time, but he didn’t leave. He just stood there and complimented me on my watch.” The man recounted, sitting in a dark room with his voice modified.

“Then what happened?”

“Out of the clear blue sky, the guy pulled a gun out on me. He said ‘No funny stuff! Give me all your shit!’ So I took off my watch, my wallet and even untied my shoes. The works. I’ve gotten robbed before. I know what they want. But he told me to stop and gave me a bag. He told me that he didn’t want my material shit, he wanted my actual shit. If he didn’t get ‘that brown’, his lights would turn off.”

“So what did you do?”

“I went in the bag.”

“With him standing right there?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t that hard. I almost soiled myself when he pulled the gun on me. So I gave him the bag, but told him it was more red than brown. I wanted to know if that was OK. He told me it was fine, but that I needed to get my kidneys checked out. He told me that red crap ain’t normal--”

“Turn it off. Please.” Jim pleaded with his head in his hands.

Simon, as quick as he could, switched channels to a Mexican soap opera. Robby looked upon the television with a renewed interest as Simon passed Jim a drink, free of charge.

“It’s a rough game, Jim.” Horace said, somberly.

“You’re telling me. I knew the whole thing was a little shady when I got into the business. Over the years I’ve realized that its way

more shady than I imagined. Yeah, Tech Development sucks--”

“Yes, yes it does.” Horace said, raising his glass in agreement.

“But at least you don’t have to defend these people.”

“I hear ya’, buddy. I would hate to be in your position.”

“I mean, damn Horace, how much lower can folks possibly go? What’s next? Kidnap people, maybe even kids, for their turds?”

Horace pondered the question at hand before giving any sort of answer.

“... Well, what about adoption?”

“What?”

“Think about it, Jim! Kids are virtual tear and crap factories. We don’t really need the tears, but hey, you take the good with the bad. The possibilities are endless. Hell, we can even adopt the kids from China. Use their people against them. Those Chinese kids are tiny too! You can probably fit like two or three hundred of them on a single factory floor. Just box ‘em up, hook ‘em up to some kind of feeding contraption, sit back and collect the goods!”

“What, like veal?” Jim asked in horror.

“Exactly. Except we wouldn’t kill them off! Everybody wins! You, Jim Basse, are a goddamned genius! I’ll get on the horn with Johnny Boy himself and pitch him the idea. He’ll love it!” Horace said, springing from his seat, rushing outside with his phone in hand.

“No! Get back here, you bastard!” Jim said, giving pursuit.

The two businessmen departed the establishment in varying emotional states. Looking up from the assortment of glasses before him, Robby stared out the open door.

“Man, Simon, people are messed up, eh?”

*Stuart Marshall lives in Hertfordshire, UK with his wife and son. He has been writing seriously since 2005, and has published over 300,000 words of non-fiction material in print and nearly twice that in e-book form, but this is his first foray into fiction.*

## **John's Cockup**

*by Stuart Marshall*

Sam Plumber left school at sixteen to work in a company that made cardboard boxes. Not just any old cardboard box, though—Sam learned to make original, innovative, and attractive packaging displays out of bits of stiff paper. For example, he designed a dodecahedral stand for little miniature figurines of the villains in the latest science fiction film, and won the Runciman Award for Ergonomic Design for it.

Once Sam had done that, he rose very rapidly in the company. He produced other designs, startling for their low cost and their sturdiness as well as their attractive, eye-catching style, and by the time he was twenty, Sam found his clients were bypassing the sales department, phoning him on his direct line and asking for him by name when they wanted something. His manager recommended him for pay-rise after pay-rise, and the directors decided to go one better, granting Sam a profit share and a generous annual bonus as well.

Sam kept working for the company until he was twenty-seven, but the end was inevitable: he decided to set up his own design company using all the money he'd made. And of course, his clients went with him.

For the first year, Sam worked by himself and made a fantastic amount of money. The process was simple. The client phoned him with a brief, Sam designed something, he brought back a mock-

up to show them a few days later, and gave them a very reasonable price. Most of the time, they would sign Sam's contract within a week or so.

In the second year, with his order-book growing and the beginning of a nasty backlog starting to appear, Sam employed John as a junior designer and Mary as a business manager. Mary handled the invoicing and chased the payments and paid the suppliers and dealt with the accountants; Sam saw the clients and did the important design work; and John helped out how he could.

At first, John made the tea and did the filing and the washing up. But he watched Sam carefully, learning what he did, and he began to pick up the hundreds of little tricks and techniques Sam used. John was a reasonably competent designer, but he and Sam agreed he'd never be a brilliant one.

But as everyone does, John Prentice had his own individual talent. He was a consummate salesman. Somehow, John could look at a client and see what made them tick. One afternoon, Sam watched John meet a client, ask three questions, smile in a *particular* way and then mention a breathtakingly huge price for a trivial job. The client signed the contract without so much as raising an eyebrow, and all of a sudden John had made the company enough money to pay his salary for the next three years.

So Sam promoted John to Head of Sales and made him a partner. Plumber and Prentice rented larger premises, bought extra machines, and began to make really serious amounts of money. Two years later, P&P had thirteen employees and an eye-popping profit margin.

Which was when John made his cockup.

P&P apologised and paid substantial compensation to the client, of course, and everything was smoothed over. But it was all very embarrassing, and Mary said to John and Sam: "We have to make sure this can never happen again."

"Absolutely," said John.

"Definitely," said Sam.

So Mary devised a procedure. From now on, John would not promise *anything* to the client without checking with Sam that it was (a) physically possible, given the structural capacity of cardboard, and (b) deliverable within a reasonable amount of time. Mary invented a form that John would fill in, with a box on it for Sam to sign to say he'd reviewed it, and John swore never to promise anything to a client without Sam's signature.

P&P carried on along their corporate road, and shortly afterwards, there was the Thing Jenny Did. The accountants were called in, and at least some of the money was traced, but the fact was that when all was said and done, Jenny had absconded with almost all the profits from the second quarter that year.

And John said to Mary and Sam: "We have to make sure this can never happen again."

"You're so right," said Mary.

"I couldn't agree more," said Sam. "Mary, please could you devise a procedure?"

And Mary devised a procedure. From now on, nobody could take any money out of the company account unless a partner had signed an approval; and for good measure, Mary bought a top-of-the-range fireproof safe for keeping money on the premises.

P&P made some more money that year, and the next year, there was the Cardboard Delivery Incident.

And Sam said to Mary and John: "We have to make sure this can never happen again."

"Totally," said Mary.

"Mary, please could you devise a procedure?" said Sam.

And Mary devised a procedure. From now on, cardboard was only to be stored in a special watertight box where it couldn't *possibly* get waterlogged. Mary bought several appropriate boxes and sent round a sternly-worded memo (because P&P was so large now that she couldn't talk to all the employees individually). And the individual department managers were made personally responsible for compliance.

"I'd better organise all these procedures a bit better," said Mary.

"Good idea," said Sam.

So Mary spent the summer writing a policy document, and she linked all the procedures back to the policy, so it all made coherent, logical sense. In the process, Mary added some more checks and balances she'd thought of so as to stop other things going wrong, together with a complete set of flowcharts.

P&P made a little money that year, and at the annual review, John and Sam and Mary agreed that profitability was definitely going down.

"What's happening down there in the workshops?" asked Mary. "It's so easy to make money in this business—I don't understand at all."

"We need to keep an eye on them," said John.

"Let's get them all to write down what they do with their time," said Sam. "That won't take them five minutes at the end of the day. Mary, could you devise a form?"

And Mary devised a form and collected responses from all the staff. It revealed that staff were spending 40% of the time doing their jobs, 30% filling in forms and paperwork, and 30% waiting for responses from other people who hadn't filled in their forms and paperwork.

"No wonder profitability's down," said Mary. "We'd better hire

some extra administrators to speed up the procedures."

"I agree," said John.

"Me too," said Sam.

So Mary hired some more administrators, and bought some more land so as to be able to enlarge the company car park.

The year after that, Plumber and Prentice went bust. The accountants were at a loss to explain why costs had spiralled quite so high, driving profitability under. Sam and Mary sought other employment. Mary did quite well for herself, got married, had three children and died at fifty from a heart attack. John got a job in a fast food joint and worked there for fifteen years. They gave him his own T-shirt, baseball cap and complete set of collectible novelty promotional toys when he retired, and John specified in his will that "Would you like fries with that?" should be printed on his gravestone. And Sam lived in a cardboard box under a bridge until he was murdered in a dispute over an ounce-pack of tobacco.

But at least it was one of *his* cardboard boxes.

## **Girl**

*by M J Donohue*

Stories, stories,  
what did I say of stories.  
It was the 13th of May,  
and I never sent her flowers,  
there she sat,  
through all of that sunless day  
thinking of the boy,  
who promised her a  
perfectly formed world,  
but never sent her flowers.

Twenty-two  
and all alone  
with her terrible head.  
How do such things come to pass.

*I spent nearly twenty years counseling alcoholics and drug addicts. Domestic violence was a regular issue in the families I worked with. Sometimes the stories were not as predictable or stereotypical as what people usually hear about. This is one of them.*

## **Anger Management**

by Paul Elam

Tobi Pitts leaned forward in her seat, clasping her hands together with forearms resting on her knees. She looked at Howard with tired green eyes that were sunken into a patchwork of premature wrinkles and thin make-up. Her hair was a mass of bleached, neglected curls that hung to the sides like twists of tattered rope.

"I can't make you say a word, Mr. Franks," she said. "But the court did order you to come here, and I do think it's in your best interest to talk about why that happened."

Howard scanned the room. There were eight other men in the circle, some watching him, others with eyes to the floor. All of them silent, waiting. He looked back at Tobi and found her unblinking gaze still on him, patient as alabaster.

"I see," he said. "My best interest." And the room sank into silence again. Tobi remained fixed.

A man three seats down to Howard's left cleared his throat and adjusted his tie. He had the meticulous look of a newscaster, complete with handsome profile. His hair was a highly styled crown of silver-gray perfection. He regarded Howard with deep azure eyes resting behind glasses that sparkled as though hand polished by a personal assistant.

"Howard," he said, in the practiced tone of an announcer, "Tom Watson here, and believe you me I feel for you. I didn't want to talk when I got here either. But once I got over that I learned a

great deal. Tonight's my last night."

Tom glanced over to Tobi to see if she was watching and was disappointed to find her still looking at Howard.

"Anyway. I don't mind telling you I used to be a real bastard. I gave my wife so many beatings I couldn't even begin to count them. In here I learned where it was coming from. Power, man, and I am just flat addicted to it. It gave me a rush--a sick rush--to do what I did to her. I'll bet you can identify with that a little."

Howard studied the other men in the group. He noted some smirks and the look of disgust on the faces of others that seemed to deepen the more Tom spoke. Suddenly, he had to steady himself against a wrenching wave of grief that rose through his gut toward his chest.

"So I hope you open up a little, buddy. Remember, we're all the same here," Tom concluded. He then pointed at Howard with his hand formed into a mock pistol, winked and clicked his tongue.

"Forget that asshole," said a heavysset man. He had a cheerless face, shadows of stubble cast across the cheeks like a dark mood. "If you don't talk they will keep you here longer, and they'll use it against you in court."

Howard pondered that for a moment and finally spoke again. "They?" he asked, "Don't you mean, *she*?" And he tilted his head in Tobi's direction.

The large man grinned without diminishing the sadness in his eyes even a little. "It's all the same." he said.

"No, it's not," Tobi interjected. "Mr. Franks, I am a therapist, not a judge. I don't tell the court anything you say in here. That's held in confidence. All I do is report whether you have attended and whether you are cooperative. Whether you believe it or not, I am here to help you."

"And what is cooperative, Ms Pitts?" Howard asked. "Am I uncooperative if I don't spill my guts to you, perhaps put on a little dog and pony show?" he said, cocking a thumb back at Tom, who furrowed his brow and did his best to look indignant.

Tobi swallowed. Her fingers, once woven loosely together tightened and began a slight tremble. A rose hue painted itself across the skin of her face and her eyes hardened. Howard looked at the big man, whose expression now simply pled caution. Silence again filled the room – a silence as taut and bloodless as Tobi's fingers.

Howard raised his hand and bowed his head pensively. The pain locked in his gut unleashed itself and twisted its way up through his chest like a mass of writhing snakes. He choked it all back down and spoke.

"Six weeks ago, I was a happily married man. Sixteen years with the same woman, Kate, and two beautiful daughters. I had a good business, a decent enough business partner and everything to look forward to." Howard lifted his head and made direct eye contact with Tobi.

"Then my father died. It was not unexpected, he'd been fighting cancer for three years. My wife convinced me that it wouldn't be best to pull the kids out of school and fly them to Baltimore for the funeral. I agreed and went on my own."

Howard didn't know it, but at this point none of the other men were looking at the floor. Each of them leaned forward as they listened.

"When I got back, I stopped on the way home to buy some flowers for Kate. Just something for carrying the weight while I was gone. But my credit card was declined. I called the bank and was informed that all my accounts were closed. All the money was gone."

Tom interrupted. "Oh man, here come the excuses. I can see it already."

"Shut the fuck up!" the big man boomed, and Tom shrank back in his chair.

Howard shook it off and continued. "I went home and nobody was there. I found the kids with her mother. And her, she was..." Howard raked his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath. "She was with my business partner. They had taken it all. The money, the business, all gone. Everything."

"I caught up to them at his place. She came to the door wearing a silk robe I gave her last Christmas. I just stood there dumbfounded for, I dunno, what seemed like forever. When I could finally make myself speak, all I could do was as her why. Why had she done this? She told me it was because I was a loser. She told me she was a woman with needs and that I never, from the day we were married, met them. She told me the kids would be better off without me and that any more contact with her or them would have to be through a lawyer."

"Then she told me something else."

Howard closed his eyes and seemed to drift for a moment in the vacuum of the silent room. He opened them again and found the group transfixed, as though teetering toward his next words. "She told me that she would kiss me goodbye but she didn't think I'd like the taste of another man's cock on her lips."

A single tear slid from Howard's eye and tracked down his cheek.

"I lost it," he said, clinching his hand into a fist and beating it against his knee. "I punched her in the face and broke her nose. Of course I went to jail and that's how I ended up here, as your new assignment, Ms. Pitts. Another statistic of domestic violence." Tobi saw her opening and took it. She spoke in a soft, rehearsed whisper, beaconing Howard to consider her question.

"Are you saying she deserved a broken nose, Howard?"

Howard seemed to think for a moment and then replied.

"No, Ms. Pitts. I am saying she deserved the ass-kicking of a lifetime." The entire room took on life as the men shifted around in their chairs. One of them muttered "Fucking A, right," under his breath but it was heard by all.

Tobi started to speak but Howard cut her off. "I'm not done." he said, His tone was final and unyielding. "You wanted me to talk and I am talking. You just listen." He settled himself for a moment, and then said, "Please."

Tobi gently bit her lower lip, then gave Howard a reluctant, almost unperceivable nod.

"You'd think this was the worst of it, but it's not. After doing flips for weeks to try to see my daughters, last week I was allowed to talk to my oldest, Lisa, on the telephone. I was thinking the whole time that as bad as things were that I could live with it, that I could manage a way to move forward if I could just be with my children. I was so happy to have Lisa on the phone. I couldn't wait to tell her how much I missed her and that I couldn't wait to see her."

"But you know what she said when I told her that? She said," And then whatever composure Howard had failed, taking his will and strength with it. The tears poured forth like two rivers and his breathing came in great heaving hitches as he cupped his hands over his face and sobbed. He had to force out every word, one at a time, to finish his story.

"She said, 'I can't see you until you're better, Daddy. Mommy said you're sick.'"

## **Camel's Afternoon with Poem (Almost)**

*By Corey Mesler*

Camel sat with paper in his lap.  
A poem was stuck inside his pen.  
He looked for a time at the workaday  
world weltering past his window.  
He looked for a time inward, his  
soul filled with air like a sail.  
Then the postman arrived with letters  
from old friends, almost forgotten.  
The poem would have to wait.  
In the kitchen Camel's lover put water  
on to make some tea. The world  
outside the window began to fade like  
an old t-shirt. Camel rose and spoke  
softly to his lover, I have letters from  
old friends to read. And, later, perhaps,  
I need to shake the poem from my pen.

*Sherri Collins practices law by day and writes short fiction by night. She enjoys the quiet life with her husband and pets and is nowhere near her 40th birthday. As far as you know.*

## **Overdue**

*by Sherri Collins*

11:43

I am going to die at 11:46 p.m. tonight. Fourteen more minutes, and it would have been my birthday. I'm disappointed about that--the matching dates would have been cool on my headstone. Years later, as people meandered through the cemetery and looked at inscriptions, they could have gossiped about the significance. Did she kill herself on her 40th birthday because the prospect of losing her youth was more than she could bear? Or was she happy about turning forty but had one too many drinks at the pub with all her friends and tried to drive home?

11:44

Neither is true. I don't care about being forty, and I don't drink. Had it been any other birthday, I would have had brunch with my stepmother, Veronica. We have brunch every other month, though, so I don't think that counts. Otherwise, I probably would have received a card from my co-workers in which eleven people would have written "Have a great day!" and someone would have cleverly labeled all of the cartoonish characters with the names of the co-workers. Ha ha--Mr. Wallace as the bug-eyed giraffe. How fun.

11:45

When I was nineteen, Madame Sephora told me the day and time that I would die. I set aside plans for graduate school--why

spend years of my life writing research papers if I wasn't going to benefit from the degree very long? I've spent every dime I ever made and eaten everything set in front of me. I have left no one to grieve for me; no close friends, no husband or children, not even pets. It's best that way, but I must admit that that has been the hardest part. Stan Stanger asked me out three times, and I said no each time. He was sure that I liked him and was playing hard to get, but I stayed strong, and he gave up. Veronica is the only one that keeps in touch, but only because she promised my father before he died. She will probably be relieved to remove our dates from her calendar.

11:46

I wonder how it will happen. I'm just sitting in my studio apartment, no dangers in sight. Perhaps it will be an internal force. My heart will stop or an undetected blood clot will come loose. Either way, I've already scheduled a pesticide spray with the apartment manager for tomorrow, so someone will find me quickly. This place is too nice to be ruined by the odor of my decaying body.

11:47

My clock is fast, I'm sure. I dial the number for time and temperature, but it confirms the clock's display in a monotone voice. I shift uncomfortably on the couch, dart my eyes around my one-room haven, and then get up. If I walk around, I might trip on something. It's not too late. Madame Sephora's clock might have been slow. I keep walking and watch the clock change numbers again and again.

12:03

Oh, hell.

*Magic Naturalist, Temporally Displaced Beat Poet and Rosicrucian Secret Agent, Dylan C G Thomas lives at an undisclosed University in Canada. He believes that genre is a trap and that true liberation can be found by working in as many genres as you can, preferably in the same story. He is currently working on a dystopia-romance-magic realist novel called *The Last Dance Revolution*, and a collection of short stories oddest bits of Americana he can find, currently under the title *Tales of the American Apocalypse or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Rapture*. This is his first publication. One day he will be famous.*

## **Cattle Man's Folly**

*by Dylan C. G. Thomas*

Well, it all began when Jed Junior Hancock got hisself the Internet. I personally don't see the use of the damn thing—get all my porn from the truck stop like any normal human bein', but my nephew says you can get yourself some good publicity using the Internet. He should know too; he works for one of dem big computer companies, got hisself a you-nee-verse-ity edumacation, and the Internet did sure bring business to Jed Hancock, business he wouldn't have otherwise got. 'Course, he lost it all because of said business, mind you, but that would be me getting ahead of myself now, wouldn't it?

Now, Jed Hancock was the best cattle rancher in the whole of Tin Creek County. All the land you see from God's Ass to Brixton belonged to Jed Hancock and his father and his father before him, and that land would have gone to Jed's children and their children after them if it weren't for these here events I'm about to tell y'all about. The cows down on Jed's ranch were the handsomest, finest cattle in the whole of Texas, which any idiot can tell you makes

them the best damn cows on God's Earth. Jed was also just about one of the kindest, warmest individuals y'all would want to meet. If you ever got into any trouble at all he'd be there with a warm smile and a helping hand. He had a beautiful wife named Darla Mae who was from down in God's Ass. Knock out woman despite being from God's Ass and you know what folks are like down that a-ways. Anyway, Darla Mae gave Jed Junior some of the finest children you'd ever want, names of Jackson, Dallas, Ronald Reagan, Jed Junior Jr., Mary Sue, Mary Jane, Susie Jane, Badger, Bristol and Lil Jackhammer. Yep, Jed Junior Hancock had it made in the shade like a glass of lemonade with a shot of whiskey in it.

Only problem with Jed (and this is me talkin' out loud) was that he was one of those born again Christian types. Now, I ain't bangin' the good Lord Jesus or nothin'; I go to church every Sunday in my finest suit just like any good American, but Jed was one of *those* Born Again Christians. You know the ones I mean, the ones who go on about God and fiery vengeance from on high if you don't follow dem the way they say it, and I ain't even talkin' 'bout a preacher here. Jed was an all right guy most of the time but he was like that sometimes and could be a real ass. But the guy's a Christian so what can you do?

Anyway, Jed thought he'd get hisself up on the Internet. Don't know much about cattle rancher's on the Internet, but my nephew said you can find just 'bout everything, and not just porn-type stuff either, so I guess you can find cattle ranchin' if you'd care to do it. It was 'bout a month after he got hisself on the Internet that I saw Jed grinnin' from ear to ear walkin' down to the local Roadhouse.

Jed said to me, "Well how 'bout this my friend. I got a commission straight from the Holy Land."

I turned to Jed and said, "What y'all talkin' bout, Jed?"

Jed looked at me, smiling his face off like a monkey with the keys

to the nut-house. "I have just been E-mailed by an Israeli Rabbi who wants me to breed him up some special cows."

"Israeli?" I asked. "Why I don't even think that Israel's in Texas, Jed. How'd you 'spect to get your cows to Israel? And with terrorists too?"

"That's the beauty of the whole thing," Jed said. "He don't want to have the cows shipped over, he just wants me to breed him a red heifer."

"Well, that's just stupid," I told Jed. "What's he need to have a red heifer that he can't even have?"

Jed looked at me awhile like I had a duck on my face. "Don't you read the Bible?" he asked me. "He wants to bring 'bout the Apocalypse?"

Well, that all but struck me out. "Apocalypse?" I asked. "What's a red cow got to do with the Apocalypse? I don't remember no red cow in Revelations."

"That's because it's not in Revelations," said Jed. "The Jews don't have Revelations because it's in the New Testament. They just have the Old Testament, and in there it says that before the Apocalypse comes about there's gonna be a red heifer."

"Well, what's a Jew want to bring 'bout the Rapture for if he's just gonna be left behind like in those books Darla Mae's always readin'?"

"How should I know," Jed told me. "All I know is that I'm gonna be paid somethin' awesome to get this pulled off, and help our Lord and Saviour bring about the Rapture for all good Christians."

I shrugged. "Just don't make no sense to me why a Jew would want to bring 'bout no Rapture. Are the Jew's even gonna go up with us?"

"I doubt it," Jed replied. "But if he wants to start the Rapture then

who am I to complain."

"How much you getting paid for this, anyways?" I asked.

Jed shrugged. "Don't know but it must be big."

Now, for you Godless pothead city slickers, a heifer is a young virgin lady cow, and Jed Junior took to breeding his Red Heifer with a religious zeal usually attributed to people who have been inspired by the Lord Hissself, or at least been given a good deal of money to do his work. Jed's herd was already mostly red, but that wouldn't satisfy our Rabbi. He wanted a heifer as red as blood. Jed took the reddest cows he had and bred them up good. But try as he might he couldn't get the proper shade of red. You could make one of dem little charts of shades of colors at the paint store—what are those things called? You know what I mean though—if you could get one of those little charts from the paint store and got every cow on Jed Junior's ranch you could see every shade of red available. That is, short of Apocalypse Blood Red.

It was a few months later when Jed came over to me in that same roadhouse to ask me where he could find some red dye immediately.

"Fuck you want red dye for Jed?" I asked.

"You know that Rabbi who wants me to breed a red heifer?" he asked.

"Remember you sayin' somethin' 'bout that."

"Well, he called me 'bout that red heifer, and I told him that I bred myself up one. So now he's comin' all the way from Television Eve to see it."

"Shit, Jed, what you go tell him you had a red heifer in the first place for?"

"Just shut up and tell me where I can get some red dye. I gots a sorta red heifer in the back of my truck and I needs to get it blood

red 'fore the Rabbi gets here."

"Oh, no," I said, turning my whole attention to my beer. "I'm not gettin' involved in your problem. You're on your own."

Jed swore at me and then marched out of the room. From what I was able to piece together this is what happened after I last saw him.

Jed drove down to the nearest odds and bobs store and picked hisself up a few dozen buckets of red dye. It was then he saw some teenager with junk on her face lookin' at a newspaper. On it were a picture of scientists with a red calf.

"What's that?" Jed asked the girl.

"Some scientists have gone done cloned a red cow down in Dallas," she replied, and lickety-split Jed Junior dropped his few dozen buckets of red dye, jumped in his pick-up, and drove off to the You-knee-verse-ity of Dallas. Why he did, no one can rightly say. Maybe he wanted to get the red heifer into good Christian hands. Who knows what kind of shit the scientists could do with a red heifer, legalize abortion or somethin' like that. Maybe he was just frustrated that some atheist sumbitches got to his job before he did. Maybe Jed just thought that stealing it from the scientists would be easier than dying the red heifer—after all, Rabbis don't become Rabbis for bein' stupid. They're a sharp bunch, and could probably tell a dyed heifer from a regular heifer, in which case Jed would probably up Shit Rapids without a paddle.

No one's quite clear how Jed got hisself past security; near as anyone can figure he just walked in and stole the cow from under everyone's nose. But he somehow got the red cow out of the You-knee-verse-ity of Dallas. So by 'round eight, Jed Junior came rolling home with a blood red heifer tied in his pick-up. He got it all the way to the barn when he eventually looked down, probably had to tie a shoelace or something, and realized that red as this cow may be it was no heifer. As I told you before, a red heifer is

generally female, right?. This cow, however, had it's sausage and potatoes hanging back between its legs. Jed nearly had a fit, and checked his watch. Damn, the Rabbi would be rolling in to check on his red heifer. As Jed saw it, he had no choice but to give the cow an impromptu sex change.

So Jed got hisself a knife and tied the red boy heifer on the floor. Seein' that knife so close to it's manhood, that cow's eyes bulged out like a bullfrog's. Must have begged Jed in every way conceivable to put the knife down, but as Jed couldn't speak cow it didn't do much good. Good thing for the cow Jed was an idiot when it came to cattle rustling, and the police burst in and arrested him for theft just as he had the knife over the cow's dingleberry.

As Jed Junior was being dragged out by the police, his wife screamin' and the children lookin' on, the Rabbi was dropped off in a cab outside the ranch. The Rabbi, who was an old fella, must not have seen anybody arrested before, because he looked shocked and surprised by all accounts.

"What is this?" asked the Rabbi. "Where's the red heifer?"

"The red cow belongs to the You-knee-verse-ity of Dallas," the police said.

"Screw you," Jed Junior shouted. "I got that cow fair and square. He'll tell you, the Rabbi will tell you he paid me for it."

"Paid you?" the Rabbi said. "This was purely for charity."

"Charity?" Jed shouted. "I want good money for that heifer."

"I wanted you to breed a red heifer, not steal one you schmuck. And I never said I'd pay you. I'm a man of God how much money do you think I have anyways? I had to get my nephew Sol to get to this country."

And with that Jed was dragged kicking and screaming to the

police station. Oh, he called the highest lawyers in the land and pulled out all the stops to sue said Rabbi, but somethin' musta fell through, like you can't sue non-Americans or clergymen. I never claimed I was a lawyer. Either way, Jed spent a year or so in the clink for theft and attempted mutilation of said cow. By the time he got out he was behind on his deal with the beef companies and owed the lawyers 'bout fifty thousand dollars worth of funds, and you know those weasels will fleece ya for more than that, sumbitches. Jed, though, he couldn't stand the shame of failing to speed about the Rapture, bringin' the Lord's Judgment down on California, as well as completely ruining his business and puttin' his family on welfare. Eventually, Jed Junior just packed up and left town in the middle of the night, wife and all ten children snug in their ol' minivan, rollin' off into some great big nowhere. We still call his old land the Hancock place, but it's divided up 'mongst three other ranchers. They call it Cattle Man's Folly, what Jed did. Not sure what that means, and nobody here is pretty clear what it is, but it's a pretty neat name isn't it? Cattle Man's Folly.

*COREY MESLER has published in numerous journals and anthologies. He has published two novels, *Talk: A Novel in Dialogue* (2002) and *We Are Billion-Year-Old Carbon* (2006). His first full length poetry collection, *Some Identity Problems* (2008), is out from Foothills Publishing and his book of short stories, *Listen: 29 Short Conversations*, will appear in March 2009. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize numerous times, and one of his poems was chosen for Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac*. He has two children, Toby, age 20, and Chloe, age 13. With his wife, he runs *Burke's Book Store*, one of the country's oldest (1875) and best independent bookstores. He also claims to have written "These Boots are Made for Walking." He can be found at [www.coreymesler.com](http://www.coreymesler.com).*

## Copperhead

*By Corey Mesler*

It was a word our parents used  
to tame our shadow sides.  
I dreamt of wriggling nestfuls,  
submerged, waiting.  
To swim in the cocoa waters of  
Lake Windemere  
was to tempt fate, invite  
the devil in for a sitting.  
Some days we were hellbent  
anyway and dove in from the  
asphalt roadway,  
still in our school clothes.  
I swam as if my life depended on  
it, gliding over my worst  
imaginings, tiring right before I fell  
on the other side onto a stranger's  
lawn. Then we had to swim back.  
Dear Copperhead, here I am  
forty years later, conjuring you  
like a fakir, again drawing upon  
your chthonic powers. Sometimes  
I still dream about you  
and, in that way, I am yours once  
more, in the dark of my life.

*Exir Kamalabadi is a fifteen-year-old student living in Shanghai, China. Born to Chinese-American and Iranian-American parents, he is thoroughly trilingual -- which is a fancy way of saying he sucks at all three languages to a similar extent, mind you. This is his very first published piece.*

## **Centipede**

*by Exir Kamalabadi*

The shadow grew longer by the minute; the crimson sun exceedingly feeble, a flicker here and there; the wind cold among the light, and colder still beneath the shade. And a girl shivered and hugged her knees tightly as she rocked back and forth.

She spoke softly to a centipede. "Oh, it must be cold under the shadow." She took some leaves and built it a house and she saw that it was nice and warm. But the wind came, and the leaves tumbled to the ground and then flew away, twirling with the gust.

She grabbed another handful of leaves, dug up some mud with her stick, and tried to plaster the leaves together. She pulled her hand away and for a moment the leaves stood on their own -- until the wind blew yet again, howling like the big bad wolf, and the leaves tumbled like the pigs' houses. But the centipede was no pig, and it didn't have a pig friend who had built a house with brick.

"I must find some help," the girl whispered to herself. She saw some boys; she couldn't tell how many. She saw them wrestling, limbs sticking out of a ball of flesh. She saw them trip to the ground, muffled thuds on the leaves.

"Look, a centipede! Here!" she cried out to them.

The boys immediately untangled themselves, and the girl could now see that there were three of them. She pointed to the centipede, all curled up. The shadow was touching her toes now.

"Wow," said a black-haired boy. He bent down and tried to scoop it into his hands, but the centipede slipped between his fingers and scurried away, its many legs rippling like waves.

"Don't!" said the girl. "You'll hurt him."

She tugged at the boy's heel, but he kicked her hand away, bent forwards, and grabbed the centipede between his thumb and finger.

"Put him back -- you'll squish him!"

The boy just shook his head and held the centipede to his friends. "Look, let's see what happens when we put it in water."

"No!" She looked from one person to another. A freckle-faced boy turned to fetch some water. She grabbed his hand and hung on to it, her feet dragging against the ground. He flicked her hand off as easily as he could pick and flick off a scab.

"We'll pour the water over here." The freckle-faced boy pointed to a pit in the ground.

The girl flung her body across the dent in the earth. "You will not."

"Alright then, there's another pit over there."

The girl watched the second pit with round eyes. Then the freckle-faced boy came with a water bottle and he poured the water into the hole. "Soak it up," the girl said over and over again, but the soil didn't do as she commanded. There it was, a little pond.

The third boy had round, knobby knees and thin legs. He said, "We'll let it float on a leaf."

"Good idea."

The girl tugged the boy's sleeve. "Don't do it... please... it'll drown."

"Go away."

"Please."

"Go away."

The centipede squirmed and wriggled on the leaf. The girl was hugging her knees to her chest again, rocking back and forth, pressing her shaking lips against her knees. She squeezed her eyelids tightly shut, so that they were almost wrinkling, but the tears didn't come. The shadow had crept over her back now, and she was completely surrounded.

The centipede suddenly slipped off the side of the leaf. It twisted and flopped and swung its tail from side to side under the water, before rolling over, its legs pointing to the sky.

"Take it out!" the black-haired boy shouted, and his friend grabbed it. But he pressed too hard and squished one end of the centipede.

The girl sprang to her feet. She pried the boy's fingers open and wrenched the centipede from the boy's hand. She dropped it on the ground and turned her face away, her teeth clenched. She covered her ears as if expecting a loud, tearing scream and lifted her foot.

It landed on the centipede.

"Awww, she *killed* it."

"What a spoil-sport."

"No fun at all."

There were some crunching leaves and then the footsteps and the voices were gone.

She stepped away, sat down, and buried her feet in a pile of dirt-covered leaves. The sun's last flicker slid beneath the horizon. There was no longer any wind among the light, for the whole place was a giant shadow now. The wind among the shade blew exceedingly cold, but the girl no longer hugged her knees. She no longer shivered, for there was no centipede to feel cold about anymore.

"I hope it didn't hurt."

*David would like to begin breaking more rules and getting arrested less. He carries screwdrivers on his person. He's selling his plasma, phoning his friends, and taking to girls. One of or more of these things will pay off eventually. He's almost sure of it.*

## **Animal Love**

by David Alexander Mulis

"Daddy?"

"Princess!"

"Daddy! Mommy! Oh, I'm so glad to see you!"

Kelly's father rises from the table, his arms extended, a big, goofy grin on his face.

"Oh, baby, we're glad to see you too. Come here and give your old man a hug!"

He wraps her up in his big, strong arms as she kisses him on the cheek. He picks her up and sets her down. He beams and so does she. He pulls out the chair for her and she takes her seat. He sits himself down and tells her:

"Sugar, it's so good to see you. Your mother and I are just ecstatic that you're back from college."

Father and daughter gaze lovingly into each others' eyes. Mother, distracted, stares straight ahead.

Daddy puts his daughter's petite hand in his big mitts.

*There she is, he thinks, my little girl. Back at last!*

"And I'm glad to be back! Oh, I've missed you both so very much."

"I know you have, pumpkin, I know. But hey! We're pretty excited to finally meet this Jerry character you've been telling us all about..."

"Oh, you're just going to love him, Daddy. He's a really sweet guy."

"Well, he'd better be if he's dating my daughter."

Daddy says it mock-seriously and crosses his arms. Kelly giggles. He doesn't really mean it...but he sort of does. Daddy is wonderful...

"Oh Daddy, he's going to love you."

He smiles. Kelly smiles back. And Mother jerks her head to the left, seemingly alarmed.

"Here he comes," cries Kelly.

Daddy swivels slowly to see. His eyes search the busy restaurant. They strain...

Puzzling. He doesn't see anyone, not anyone that could be Jerry anyway. There's an old woman and a young boy walking to their table – grandma and grandson probably. There are two middle aged women walking through the door. There's the maitre'd and several of the waiters chatting about one thing or another. There's a dog trotting up to the table. There's – *wait. What? A dog? Who let a dog into the restaurant?*

"JERRY! JERRY! Over here, Jerry!"

"Kelly, where's he at? I don't see him..."

Kelly stands up from her seat and whistles. The dog perks up his ears and opens his mouth to pant. He smiles and comes running – bounding – happily toward the table...toward Kelly. He sprints the last few feet and leaps into her arms, licking and kissing. Daddy smiles stupidly at the revolting scene as Kelly returns the

dog's – Jerry's – slobbery affection. Daddy's stomach flips like a flapjack and he understands at once.

My God....

"Oh, Jerry! Oh, Jerry!" Jerry licks Daddy's daughter's face again and again.

His tongue probes her mouth and muffles her words. "You're a bad boy, Jerry, yes you are! Yes you are, Jerry! Oh yes! Oh yes!"

She laughs whorishly the whole time. Cackles almost. Daddy feels faint. Only his rage keeps him conscious.

"Calm down, now. Calm down, Jerry, my parents are here...don't you want to make a good impression for my parents, Jerr?"

Daddy's jaw hits the floor. His eyes bulge impossibly. Mother is visibly appalled and actually trembling. Even Jerry seems to be momentarily disturbed – his canine sixth-sense picking up bad vibes in the air. Kelly alone is unaware of the dangerous tension...

She smiles shyly at Daddy and Mother. She says: "Daddy, this is Jerry. Jerry, this is Mom and Dad." She stifles her nervous giggling with both hands and watches wide-eyed to see what unfolds.

Jerry wags his tail politely. Daddy simply gapes.

"Well, Daddy, don't just sit there," Kelly coaxes, "Say something to Jerry."

"Hu – Hi, Jerry. How do you do?" Daddy extends his hand to shake. *He can shake, can't he?*

He cannot.

*This rude sonofabitch...*

Jerry pants a little and barks once. He wags his tail good-naturedly though.

"Aw, he likes you, Daddy."

"Mhm. Kelly, Jerry's a dog."

"Well, jeez, Dad. D'you think?" Kelly flashes an ironic smile at her old man.

"Guess that's why you're the veterinarian, huh?"

"And he's your boyfriend."

"No, Daddy. That's *another* guy named Jerry that I've been telling you about for the last five months. Of course he's my boyfriend, Silly!"

"But he's a GOD-DAMN DOG!"

The restaurant falls silent.

Kelly admonishes, "Daddy. Daddy, I don't like the way you say that."

Forks and knives clatter and scrape. Food is chewed. People resume what they were doing before, wary of the loud man and his strange family but no longer staring. It is their affair and not for public consumption. Best to look away. "How's your pork-chop, honey? Delicious. And your Caesar salad, Baby Doll? It's terrific, Pookums. That's great, Baby Doll. This sure beats Mickey D's, huh? You said it, babe. Say, I wonder what..."

Jerry whimpers.

"Oh don't worry, Jerry. Jerry, it's okay." Kelly rubs his head and he wags his tail nervously. "Some people still don't – "

"Kelly. Do you mean to tell me that you've been dating a *dog* for the last four months?"

"Well, yes. And it's been five months, actually. Jerry is a dog, Daddy. He's a dog now and he's been a dog and frankly I'm a little confused as to how you didn't pick up on this before. I *told*

you I met him while playing Ultimate Frisbee didn't I? Didn't I tell you about the walks we went on? The car rides?"

Jerry cocks his head at the suggestion.

"I thought he liked to travel..."

"Oh come on! Did you really need me to spell it out for you, Daddy? I told you about giving him baths, didn't I?"

"Well, you said you'd been intimate..."

Daddy blushes. He simmers. He's had about enough of –

"Baths with a garden hose, Daddy?"

Daddy explodes: "I THOUGHT HE WAS BLACK!"

Forks and knives scrape to a stop. Honey and Baby Doll spew their red wine onto the tablecloth. An old man puts a hand over his heart and takes a sip of water. Their waiter walks over and demands of Daddy, "Are you *quite* finished, sir?"

"Take a hike, Francine," says Daddy. "I'll be quite finished just as soon as you're quite finished getting your A-hole stretched out by your next door neighbor...or whoever the hell else plunks down ten bucks for the flowers and lube."

The waiter gasps and hurries back to the kitchen.

Kelly shakes her head and says, "Oh, Daddy."

Daddy cradles his head in his hands.

"I don't believe this," he mutters to himself. "I just don't believe this."

Kelly breaks in.

"Well believe it, Daddy. Jerry is my boyfriend; I'm his girlfriend, and yes, we've been intimate. He and I are in love, Daddy...and if you can't see that..." Her voice catches. Tears well in her eyes.

Daddy softens his tone, pained to see his little girl in such a state. Still, he must speak out against this, this...abomination.

"Kelly, Jerry's of a different species than you! He's a – he's an *animal*, sweetie."

"That's what they used to say about the Irish, Daddy! And the Chinese!"

"I know, baby, but that was racism...this is just – "

"Speciest, Daddy. It's speciest. And it's just as bad. You're one to talk! About racism... You, you're just like the racists... Just like the homophobes. Just like the cultural bigots and the religiously intolerant and every other hatemonger who's ever lived! You're just like them, Daddy! Just like them!"

A single teardrop falls down her radiant face. It mingles for a moment with the dried dog drool.

She pouts, "I thought you, of all people, would understand...but I guess I was wrong."

She shakes her head and looks sadly into Daddy's eyes.

"Come on Jerry," she whispers, "We're leaving this place."

She hurries off and Jerry stays where he is. He's looking at that tomato bisque on Daddy's plate.

He licks his muzzle.

*Where has that tongue been...oh my god!*

Daddy gags on the thought. He stares knives at Jerry's vacant, checked-out face. *Lick that snout again, you four-legged bastard...I swear to Christ, I'll –*

"Jerry! JERRY! Here, Jerry!" Kelly claps her hands three times. She whistles once. Jerry grumbles and turns his head. He licks his snout again and Daddy readies his knife. Jerry tongues his

own crotch and stares back at the bisque.

*I'll give you something to lick – your own wounds!*

Jerry stands up and stretches. He barks again at no one in particular and he turns and trots after Kelly.

*Kelly, who's walking away from you. From Mommy. From the life she knew. From the life she loved. She is gone. She is gone with Jerry...*

*Curse that dog.*

Daddy looks longingly after the place where she last stood. He shakes his head, slowly and deliberately. He cradles his skull once more. And for the first time in a long time, he feels very, very old.

After several minutes, he looks to his wife – that no-good, silent, sullen, say-nothing-do-nothing bitch. Does she even care that her daughter is humping a dog? A DOG??? She could at least have the decency to pretend to care.

"She gets it from you, ya know."

"Meow?"

"Yeah, just what I thought you'd say. Go on. Stuff your face with more salmon...fatty."

He glares at her furry face.

Expressionless. Emotionless. Typical.

Daddy hails Francine and orders two more bottles of wine. It's time to get drunk.



## **The Capstone**

by Joseph Carfagno

Irmelin Wentworth Wilson wiped the last of her egg yolk with the last of her toast, pushed the remains of the bacon and eggs away, and languorously reached for the melon. After the greasy heaviness of the eggs and bacon, the cantaloupe slice would cleanse her palate and ready her for the day ahead. She had requested honeydew but was told last night that, under the circumstances, it was unavailable. Irmelin looked out the picture window, stupefied. The snowstorm, which must have started shortly after midnight, was still raging. Today was supposed to be sunny – frigid but sunny. Well, that shouldn't matter, she thought, as she savored the last of the melon, people in Northern Minnesota know how to deal with these sudden January squalls. I'll still go out, drink, and have sex with a stranger – an unusually rewarding day, the capstone of my career.

She unscrewed the cap of the container and smiled at the inscription on the label, "Take with food." Many people thought it strange that suicide pills should be taken with food but, as was explained in the orientation, the pills could cause retching, dry heaves, or other gastrointestinal discomfort if taken on an empty stomach.

\* \* \*

"On your last day you should enjoy a good breakfast – pancakes, cereal, pizza, whatever you want!" the handsome young man conducting the orientation explained. The major side effect of the drug is intensification of sexual pleasure, but a secondary side effect is nausea. The young good-looking blue-polo-shirted people conducting the orientation spent most of the time evoking and describing the pleasure for both males and females. There were even films. Irmelin wondered how these young people knew so much: surely they couldn't have taken the pills themselves.

"I'll take that!" answered a stocky young man with curly black hair, bounding toward the microphone. Irmelin stared at the emblem of the Sex and Death Society, a stylized knife slicing a circle, sewn on the material covering his bulging chest as he explained, sniggering, that the instructors doubled as studs and sluts at the *Sex and Death Cafés* and thus were in a unique position to observe and feel the final raptures of their customers. "We fly all over the country," he said. "I'm in a different club every weekend." Indeed, the people conducting the orientation were, each in their own way, physically attractive people in different shapes and colors. The stocky stud answered another question from the floor, "Yes, we are all bisexual. It's part of our job description. All sizes, all shapes, all types – we aim to please." The moderator quickly took the microphone back. "Of course, you can spend your last days at the *Sex and Death Café* with your spouse or lover. You may even take the pill at home."

The pill's main effect, explained clearly on the label, is death, eight to ten hours after ingestion.

Irmelin remembered the bus ride home from the orientation, three or four months ago, gazing out the wide clear windows at the empty landscape and suddenly identifying with the road kill. She saw a squirrel, its body twisted and completely extended, mouth wide open, teeth exposed, blood caked on its jaw and neck. A few minutes later she saw a possum curled on the side of the road as though it placidly accepted its death. Irmelin decided to identify more with the plump acquiescence of the possum than with the ratcheted anguish of the squirrel. The possum's round body reminded Irmelin of a freshly baked loaf of bread; the squirrel reminded her of Saint Sebastian and of Peter Pawl, an old scrawny boyfriend. Immediately upon arriving home, she called him and proposed that they meet in the *Sex and Death Café* in January.

\* \* \*

Peter and Irmelin met in high school. They dated desultorily but managed to attend most, if not all, of the major high school events together. Irmelin loved Peter for his ungainliness, his thick eyeglasses, his thin unruly hair, and tender gawky manner. Peter, she felt, loved her for her expansiveness, her lack of height, her natural generosity. Claudine, Irmelin's mother, thought that Irmelin could do better. She saw no future in that moody ineffectual boy. The Pawls in turn disapproved of Irmelin, brought up as she was by a single mother. Irmelin and Peter attended different colleges. Peter graduated, moved to Minneapolis, married well, and had two lanky, ineffectual sons. They must be teenagers now. Irmelin went to a local college, floundered through her Art and Business classes, did not marry, and had, nine years ago, Christine. Peter made sporadic progress in his engineering career and lost some hair. Irmelin became, in the language of her performance appraisals, a solid performer in her profession who would never rise above a certain grade, a grade that would afford her a middle class living but no more. Irmelin and Peter remained fond of each other but knew that they could never build anything together. Irmelin thought of Peter as soon as she found out about her incurable disease. Even after making arrangements to see him, however, she always thought they would just talk – she'd rather spend her last minutes with the boy with the heaving chest or someone like him.

She always remembered Peter more as a talker than as a performer. They would spend entire afternoons sitting on the boulder behind the high school overlooking the gully talking about school, their separate futures, and politics. The Democrats and Republicans merged into the Pragmatic Party towards the end of their freshman year in high school. The science teachers taught of advances in pharmacology and the convergence of various molecular and nano technologies. Irmelin and Peter sat and talked of these momentous changes while keeping an eye on the machines in the gully waiting, patient as steel.

In their junior year, Marc Herbert opened one of the first *Sex and Death Cafés* sixty miles away from their town. Even though they often barely held hands on their walks back from the boulder, Irmelin and Peter planned to sneak away to spend a weekend there once they graduated. They went to the lake town in Peter's old compact car with Paul Piotr and Cynthia, one of Paul's curly headed girlfriends as Paul could not sustain a relationship more than a few months. When they got to the Café, they realized that they couldn't afford to stay there so they rented rooms in one of the budget motels nearby and went to the Café bar for drinks on Saturday night. The suicide pill was just beginning to catch on. They never discovered if anyone was going to die that night. The dance floor was so crowded that they spent most of the time in a booth drinking, joking, and talking about the legend of the masochist suicide. A woman had taken the suicide pill and asked to be bound to her bed. Her partner tied her up and left, agreeing to come back at five to free her and make love to her. While he was in the bar downstairs waiting for five, he was accosted by another suicide. They say that suicides have a glow and that their advances should never be refused. He went with her to her room. The sun was beginning to fall; he looked at his watch and hurried to the bound woman's room. Too late – she lay dead and frustrated. The story, never verified or disproved, stimulated and unsettled the teenagers.

Irmelin remembered leaving that town the next morning. They had breakfast in the Café diner. The diner, almost deserted, seemed shabby compared to the bar last night. Irmelin accompanied Peter when he stepped outside the back of the diner for a smoke. They watched a workman load an outgoing truck and wondered if someone's ashes were there. Depressed, Irmelin vowed on the ride back that if she ever had to commit suicide, it would not be in that horrid town.

\* \* \*

Love and Death in the *Sex and Death Café* was the phrase most often used to describe Irmelin's last day. Suicide pills and trips to the café were offered free of charge to good people with terminal illnesses. The Pragmatic Party encouraged the practice because it is cheaper for society to reward good citizens with a grand blastoff – every qualified American is entitled to a Viking funeral if he or she so chooses – than to care for them through doddering impecunious old age. Not everyone who went to the café was a suicide, of course. Most of the patrons came to drink, to dance, and especially to experience the *frisson* of partying with people on their last day. Most of the *Sex and Death Cafés* were located in remote vacation destinations. Herbert had long ago closed the café that Irmelin had visited more than twenty years ago. Irmelin, an unathletic Midwesterner, was not quite sure why she chose Northern Minnesota – certainly not for the skiing. She just wasn't very adventurous, she supposed, not even in death.

Most of her days were spent with her mother and daughter, three generations of only women, soon to lose a generation. None of them had ever intended to form an all female household. Claudine never felt like getting married. Irmelin got pregnant because she was inexperienced and clumsy in love. She really couldn't blame Christine for her lack of career advancement. There was plenty of day care available and Claudine was always willing to help. Irmelin couldn't understand why she was thinking about her job now – on this of all days! She held up the picture she brought with her – a portrait of the three Wilson women, all of them blond or once blond. In the upper left was Claudine – gray, thin, wizened but self-possessed and smiling as if she knew some secret. (She didn't, thought Irmelin. The expression was a sham – she didn't know any secrets, there are no secrets to know. Claudine used that ruse to attract boyfriends.) Even though Claudine is in her sixties, she has more boyfriends than Irmelin does. They are better looking too. In the lower right was Christine, blond hair billowing on her pink dress, caught in mid-

squirm, odd for a child of such phlegmatic parents. In the center was Irmelin, graying, crow-footed, purse-lipped, pale blue eyes looking concerned. She was not then aware of the disease already inside her, a hard microscopic pit preparing to dissolve and spread. Irmelin admonished herself. She should be looking at her mother and child, left behind in Oslo, Ohio, never to be seen again, instead of fixating on herself. Perhaps that was the origin of her disease. The doctors said no: the cause was purely physical.

She lay the picture down on the desk and looked out the window at the still gathering snow. She flicked on the radio. The snow was expected to continue all day. She stretched and walked over to the window to watch the snowflakes – cold, isolate --fall upon the field outside. Each snowflake, unique but only by virtue of its position in space and time, would soon lose its precarious individuality by hitting the ground and melding into the others just as she, barely unique and certainly unoriginal, would soon lose her individuality by dying, getting cremated, and being mailed home in a packet. She trudged back to her desk and turned the picture of the family triad toward the wall. She suddenly noticed black smudges on the beige paint of the wall. The room was scheduled to be repainted in the spring, just a few months hence. Irmelin berated herself for not noticing the shabbiness of the room last night. She could have demanded a better one. She felt certain she would have gotten it, the hotel didn't look too crowded.

Elena, the maid, knocked on the door and entered. She smiled – how else? – awkwardly at Irmelin as she placed the small empty pill container on the breakfast tray. Elena was young, slim, prettier than Irmelin, but almost certainly not entitled to take the suicide pill when her time came. The radio announcer read off the list of cancelled events, mentioned the delays to be expected on the roads and with public transportation, and shouted "Go Vikings!" before breaking for a commercial.

\* \* \*

Peter liked football but didn't follow it that closely. He would much rather be with Irmelin during her last day than watch the football playoffs. He stood on the train station platform trying to dial Irmelin's number with his frozen fingers but he didn't seem able to get service. He had to tell her the trains were delayed, to put off taking the pill by a few hours if she could, he wasn't sure he could get there by late afternoon. If there were no snow, the high speed train would have taken him there to spend the afternoon with Irmelin and still get him home in time to prepare for work on Monday. He went back inside to try reaching her on a land line. He couldn't, the wires must be down. He tried calling home, failed at that too. He stamped his feet and walked over to the machine to get another black coffee. His empty stomach, now getting paunchy, growled but he needed to drink something hot to warm himself. Peter took his paperback out of his overcoat pocket but was too cold and distracted to concentrate. He was almost alone in the station.

\* \* \*

Elena gone, Irmelin turned off the radio and began to write a letter. One of the pill's side effects is a (false) sense of lucidity. The word *false* was not mentioned during the orientation. Irmelin felt it was important to write to her family, such as it was, on her last morning. The letter could accompany or precede her ashes. She wrote the word *Dear* in a florid hand, not like her usual barely legible penmanship. She crumpled the paper and threw it at the wastebasket. The paper hit the rim of the trash can and rolled on to the faded rug. Should she write to her mother, her daughter, a friend? She turned the radio back on. Those smudges still bothered her. Maybe she should have said something to Elena. Lucidity can't be false if it is turbid, she thought, not knowing why. She thought she might lie on the bed but was afraid to fall asleep on her last day. A walk might clear her mind but she remembered the blizzard. She never liked the cold anyway.

When was lunch, what had she asked for, would it be available?

\* \* \*

Before she knew it, lunch arrived, a grilled ham and cheese sandwich, a pickle, some potato chips, and a glass of Zinfandel. Irmelin swished the wine in her glass, tried to appreciate the bouquet. She never had developed an appreciation for wine. She must drink the wine slowly. Alcohol taken in small doses at regular intervals will maximize her pleasure, her final orgasm. As she swished the wine in her glass she thought of Paul Piotr, the possible father of her child. Paul never did get very tall. The flabby muscles under his pale skin and black greasy hair made him pitiable. Soon after Irmelin knew she was pregnant – some two and a half months after the fact, she did not want a baby, she denied the importance of her skipped periods – Paul died of an overdose. Irmelin discovered he was a heroin addict when she saw the track marks on his arm as he lay, panting, pumping, gasping over her, barely able to perform. He didn't want to talk about it. He hadn't had any girlfriends in years. When he came back to town and saw Irmelin, he thought he could change his life around. Irmelin wasn't so sure, she pitied him but could not love him. Perhaps she could not love anyone. Irmelin heard, and firmly believed, that he did not intend to kill himself. His regular dealer was in jail, he switched to a new one, who apparently sold a higher grade of heroin. Paul Piotr: he could not manage his supply chain.

\* \* \*

The best time to go to the bar is four o'clock. Lunch done, Irmelin had time to watch a movie or work on her letters. There didn't seem to be any movies worth watching. She didn't follow sports. She tried calling Peter but got no answer. Maybe I'll write a letter to Paul, she thought. No, she should write home – duty before perversity. But what to say, what to say?

At three o'clock, Irmelin was scanning the few patrons in the bar.

She had come in through the main entrance, brushing by the reproduction of the pink neon sculpture, "A Coming Screams Across the Sky" that was part of the décor of every *Sex and Death Café*. Intended to be phallic, the statue reminded Irmelin of a shark fin or a wilted Brancusi. She was sitting alone at the main bar watching the bartender mix a vodka-and-cranberry-juice. He was a short balding man with an unusually hairy back – the heat was turned up in the bar – and extremely long arms for a man of his height. When he turned, smiled, and gave Irmelin her drink, she noticed, shuddering, that his right hand had six fingers – six fingers with hairy knuckles and a signet ring depicting the Sex and Death Society emblem. The bartender turned and adjusted the volume on the television. Why was he turning it up? Irmelin didn't recognize anyone in the bar. Peter wasn't there, no one was wearing a shirt or blouse with the Sex and Death Society logo. But of course they would appear in mufti, she thought. Still, none of the men there were what Irmelin – or most other women – would call physically attractive. There was a small circular table in the center of the bar. Three or four men stood around it, sharing a pitcher of lite beer. A tall man with glasses, a pot belly, and a high forehead was refilling everyone's mug. Irmelin nicknamed him the Toppler. Upon finishing his duties, he turned and saluted Irmelin with his frothy mug. The light from the chandelier glinted off his glasses and his gold tooth. Another man with multiple dermoids on his face and – could it be? – his hands saluted her. Before Irmelin could think of a response, raise her glass or an eyebrow, a door from the outside opened.

A tall man in an elegant gray coat backed in from the outside. He shook his coat, off which a prodigious amount of snow fell, deliberately took off his brown fedora, and hung both on the coat rack, making sure the coat's folds hung straight and the hat would not topple. Clearly he was the class of the joint. "Leon," shouted the men, "over here! Kickoff is in fifteen minutes!" Leon

raised his large black right hand and greeted the men warmly. With his large muscular build just turning to fat and the hint of gray on the sides of his afro, he looked like an ex-linebacker. Irmelin eyed him coyly. Leon, who the banterers called Leon the Jack, did not notice her, intent as he was on his friends and the game. Irmelin had never engaged in miscegenation, never really thought about it in her segregated town. She pondered this. Maybe I'll learn something before I go, she thought. The pre-game show was interrupted by a news flash – airports and train stations were closed and will remain closed until Monday morning. The bartender ignored this warning. He worked in a hotel after all, and, as bartenders will do, wiped some glasses.

In death as in life, timing is everything. Irmelin believed she was rushing things. The men were getting excited about the football game. Irmelin ignored them, tried to nurse her drinks. She was almost done with her second. People on the suicide pill should, she knew, imbibe in moderation: one mustn't let the alcohol overwhelm the sensual agent in the pill. Smiling crookedly, against her will, she raised her hand, her signal to the bartender to put another drink on her tab. She was developing a relation with the barkeep who, she still felt, repulsed her. At a few minutes after four, the Vikings scored another touchdown to the high-fiving delight of the men at the round table. Another patron entered the bar. She was an old skinny wrinkled woman with dyed black hair and a white dress. The woman seemed to exude a glow. Irmelin nicknamed her the Sepulchral Woman. The woman shyly sat at the other end of the bar from Irmelin and ordered a white wine spritzer. The bartender honored her request before refilling Irmelin's glass. Odd that glow, why hadn't Irmelin and her friends noticed it twenty years ago when they visited that other defunct *Sex and Death Café*? The Sepulchral Woman sipped her drink, rummaged in her pocketbook. What on earth for? What disease could have made her waste away like that? Irmelin thought, laughing to herself, that the Toppler would be

the perfect mate for the Sepulchral Woman. The woman was applying bright red lipstick to her lips. She looked like a clown and yet she was also strangely attractive. If no one else came in, perhaps Irmelin would have sex with her. Irmelin had never had a lesbian experience, had only a hazy idea of what lesbians did. She looked in the mirror, wondering if she had a glow, if she was as strangely alluring as the other woman. It is difficult to judge oneself especially when one's judgment is clouded.

The halftime show was uninteresting. Towards the end, the announcer gave the weather report. The blizzard was getting worse, everyone should stay home. Irmelin looked around the nearly empty bar. There would be no stud in shining armor to transport her to transports she had only dreamed about. Irmelin eyed Leon lasciviously. The Vikings intercepted a pass and returned it for a touchdown. It looks like the Vikings are going to win in a rout, folks. The men at the table were ecstatic. The bartender brought another pitcher over, on the house. Leon excused himself, went to the men's room. Irmelin always appreciated a clean man. When he returned, he took only a sip of his beer, and walked towards the bar. Irmelin smiled slyly. Leon walked past her and told the Sepulchral Woman that his name was really Gregory. "But Gregory Jacklee – well, it just doesn't sound tough enough, if you know what I mean," he confided. The Sepulchral Woman extended her right hand. "I'm Louise," she half-croaked half-whispered in a voice that Irmelin thought was suggestive, almost coquettish. They left together, Leon's coat and hat remaining on the rack. Irmelin gulped. Suddenly she didn't feel too good. She slid off the barstool, ignoring the raised eyebrows of the Toppler, Dermoid Man, and the others, and went up to her room for a minute. She opened the door, turned. No one had followed her. She took her shoes off, curled up on her bed, and felt the pain ratcheting through her stomach, down to what she imagined were her intestines, and almost up to her esophagus.



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## **The Truth About Uncle Joe**

*by Jonathan Pinnock*

In the corridor outside the General Secretary's office, Ivan Kaletsky bumps into Vassily Trofimov, who is carrying a stash of papers and looking worried.

"Comrade Trofimov!" he exclaims. "How are you? It's been a while."

Trofimov looks around and then replies in a low voice, "Not too good, Comrade Kaletsky. I'm finding certain people..." he nods towards the General Secretary's door, "difficult to deal with."

"But that man is the saviour of our nation!" says Kaletsky, "The new five-year plan will make us the richest people on earth."

"I know, I shouldn't be saying this. But," his voice drops to a whisper "it's the tentacles! I saw them again today. I'm sure I did."

Ivan rolls his eyes, shakes his head, and bids Trofimov farewell. He knocks once and enters the General Secretary's office.

"Sir," he says, "I think you may need to keep an eye on Trofimov."

He suspects something."

"Don't worry, Comrade," says Stalin. "I am fully aware of his predilection for reactionary thought. He will be re-educated. Anyway, what news?"

"We have located the hyperspace drive cell. It's damaged, but we think we may be able to activate it once we get into orbit. Sir?"

Stalin seems lost in thought for a moment. Then he speaks: "It's almost twenty-five years since we came down in Tunguska. Twenty-five years in these stupid, puny, useless human bodies. I can scarcely believe that we will go home one day." Something slimy pokes out of his collar and slips back in again.

"Yes, sir," says Kaletsky. "There's only one problem. We need more manpower for the main rocket development. Without it, we're decades away from a launch."

Stalin shrugs. "Then we must implement phase two," he says. "Get me the files on the kulaks. The purge must begin at once."



## **The Woman in Black**

*by Mike Florian*

The eleven men were led towards the back of the white building. There, they were permitted to stop, sit, lean, wait up against the wall. The plaster was falling off in large flat sections, revealing old red bricks and white mortar. The glass was out of the windows. Puddles of rain collected from the drizzle. It was March.

Two of the prisoners sat in the mud, looking into their laps, one hand raised, tied tightly with heavy rope to the next man standing up. A woman in black stood silently watching from behind a cart. She was a hundred meters away. The horse stood unhitched, its rump against the wind, its tail waving. The woman tied the horse to the handle of an old well in the center of the village and walked towards the prisoners.

The ten soldiers of the winning side and their captain were as drenched as their prisoners. Their red uniforms were water-stained purple, dark like blood. Most had revolvers, hand guns, some only had rifles leaning against their sides. The captain had a yellow epaulet on his left shoulder, on the other it was torn, revealing bare skin and a gash. The woman in black approached him. She was alone.

The villagers had long ago left Rosdorf at the start of the shelling and fighting. The village consisted of about twenty small houses, a church with an orthodox cross and a small silver dome, the water well, muddy streets. No other woman was within a hundred kilometers. The captain had watched her over the days, keeping her distance, leading her horse and cart.

"Tovarich," she said as she approached. The captain looked at her. In her black coat and wide flat boots she was not pretty. Her feet protruded out of one boot showing blackened nails and

twisted toes. She shared one glove between her hands, warming her against the cold winter rains. Her head was covered with a rag. Her eyes, as black as her boots, were framed by deep circles.

"That one," she said, pointing, "doesn't belong here. I will take him home. I've brought the horse. He's no trouble."

The captain looked down at her feet and turned away. "Get ready to line up," he said to his soldiers.

"He doesn't belong," she said again. "He's not like the others. He's a Russian like me. My husband!"

The captain kept his back to her. He didn't acknowledge her. "Line up and each one of you aim at the head of one man," he said to his men.

"I've been following you for five days, he doesn't belong. He's a poet," she said in Russian.

The captain still kept his back to her. The men were lining up in single file. The routine of the troop alarmed the woman. She looked at her husband, second from one end of the roped line-up of men. He was standing, the only one not leaning. Both of his arms were pulled straight towards the earth by the others as they either lay or sat on the ground.

Some were sobbing, others were praying, a few like her husband were on their feet, silent.

With a sense of controlled urgency she spoke in Croatian, Hungarian, Austrian, Slovakian, Russian and Prague Czech. She thought she detected a movement when she said: "He doesn't belong to you," in Slovakian, so she continued.

"That man was helping both sides. He has no guns. He provided medicine and alcohol for treatment to both sides. He's a pacifist. He only got caught on the other side by you and your troop by

circumstance, by bad luck. He isn't the enemy, tovarich."

The captain continued sitting with his back to her. She dared not approach him. Not to touch him. She continued to talk: "He saved many on your side and also on the side of your enemy. He would run across the lines like the fool that he is with the alcohol and treat the wounded. When his horse was killed by a mine, he continued to run on his feet. I followed him over the mountains. He wanted to stop the killing and the dying, the fool. He's a poet not a soldier. Here, here are his poems," she said, and gently shuffled over to the side of the captain and placed down beside him, in the mud, a packet of paper with scribblings of words, streaked or washed away by tears or rain.

The captain with the one epaulet stood up and as he walked away his boot pressed the poems into the mud. He walked up to the man, her poet, her lover, her fool, her life. He pulled his revolver out of its holster and shouted to the other ten men to do the same behind each prisoner. The woman in black watched as he barked the command to execute and saw the enemy soldiers fall. She only saw the captain and his gun and her husband.

When the blue smoke hung over the bloodied group, her man remained standing.

"Let's get out of here," said the commander to his men.

"What about him?" they asked.

"Leave him," he said.

The woman in black hitched her horse to the two-wheeled cart and walked to her man. He was kneeling when she came up to him. She cut the rope that bound his wrists and almost carried him towards her cart. Once there she helped him up and slid him onto its floor.

The soldiers were just disappearing over the hills, the dead men lay at the side of the clean white stucco wall of the house.

She climbed up into the cart and turned towards her husband and put her arms and legs around him and took in the smell of his urine and shit. They both cried, muffling the noise in each other's shoulders.

A few years after the war had ended, he died of pneumonia and she lived alone during her many remaining days.

**Ama try to write you love letter, but ama changin' into werewolv**

by Becky Hunt

This is so hard. I feel like an idiot already. God, God, God. And I feel itchy. But I'll pick up my pen and, yes, begin...

...Like the night sky has always loved the shining full moon, I've always been in love with you. *Bahhhh*. I've days spent thinking and aching, you in my mind like a wild white flame made of smooth thighs and shiny bouncy hair. I love your laugh. I stand around the art school canteen, hoping and dreading, craving in shame, waiting for you to walk in, my heart in tears. I'm so shy. Did I mention your laugh? I love it...

(Snorts, chokes; a gasp)

I love it! It's high-pitched. You have a feminine laugh, so maddeningly high-pitched, like a little bleating unicorn, *Hgggg*, which makesh me crazy like I can't tell you, and at this moment - angry.

(Grips head painfully)

I said angra! But I mean angra with romance. A so passhionate abou' you! *Hubububub*

(Retch)

Daysh shinking and aching! Sshame craving! *Yag-ak*. Why can't I speak to you? We're sort of friendsh, why can't I tell you how I feel? I wanna shpeak to ou! A ou! Shmooth thighs! *Arrrh*. Ma heart in tears!

(Small noise of shock, hands move disbelievingly to face)

Ama actually in real tearsh now because ma face hurtsh from the inside. Wha'? It feels like a boot heel ish forcing it out. *Hbbbbbr*.

(Face changing shape. Opens mouth, makes a soundless scream)

*Uuuuuh*. Just wanna talk a ou! Shmooth digestible thighs, shiny bouncshy mane! Daysh aching with craving and being sho shy. No! I want to rip away ma sshy embarrassment, just like these clothesh ama rip off ma...expanding...back. They rip off na! Na gone! *Arp!*

(Hands start growing, the palms lengthening)

*Arrrr*, look a ma handsh? They'resh shtretchin'. And my feelin'sh shtretcha fo' you. Over thish whole term at art college. Over eternity. Makes ma hungry. Hoping and shhaming and achingly hungra.

(Panting)

An' when a shee you face I grow sho tired a waitin', sho a decide a try write you letter. It'sh quite difficult. I feel very vulnerable.

(Ears start moving up the sides of head and develop points)

I mush tell a what I canna shpeak for fear a shcaring you 'way from ma, I mush! I canna hold in! I long a ou! *Rrrrrr-ow*. Whht...?

(Looks with wide bloodshot eyes as a stump rips through trousers and turns into a tail.)

*Haaar!* Ma tail!

(Trousers tear off completely and fall to the floor in rags as a pair of hairy hind legs finishes developing.)

*Yarp!* Ma trousersh wrecked up! Ma mum gonna be angra.

(Whine)

You ssho beautiful! I wanna give you everything. Ma heart, ma shoul, loving picturesh. Loving puncturesh. I write guitar song for ou...

(Picks up guitar with wolf hands and it crumbles like a biscuit)

Oh...

(Long fangs sprouting, body growing with agonising rubbery sound, fur everywhere)

You sho beautiful! *Yaoow!* Like guts-sh, like fresh guts-sh. Digeshitable! Ssshy! I mush touch you but a shcared! Dreading craving days! *Arf arf arf!* Ache! I wanna run a ou and hold your neck in ma loving mouth-sh. But wha' will you do? Reject ma? *Yip!* If you shcream a gonna react angra! Shhh! Let me give you shome kisses round the neck with ma teeth. Sssh, ama not angra. Shhh, let ma give you nice-sh powerful violent hug. Give in a ma, I begga ou! Freshh beautiful gut-sh! Shhh, a didna mean that!

(Howls)

I lova ou! *Bark!* Ou look sssho beautiful inna chunks onna floor. *Yarr-hooaw!* Ama gonna keep you head in a crate!

(Smashes through glass window into the night)

*B.L. Gifford's work has appeared in Diet Soap Online, The Copperfield Review, Boston Literary Magazine and Mississippi Crow, among other publications.*

## **Born from a Blood Red Rain**

*by B. L. Gifford*

Angus Porcine was hoisting a resident onto the nursing home's therapy horse when a police officer walked into the common room. Distracted, Angus dropped the resident face-first onto the saddle. The horse merely snorted, but the man, his head cut and already bruising, started screaming for help and calling Angus a jackass. Lori Sanguine, Angus's coworker and occasional paramour, hurried over from the other side of the room and helped the man down, agreeing with him as she did that Angus was a jerk. The officer asked to speak to Angus in private then followed him into the employee break room.

"That horse was not my idea," Angus said.

"I'm not here about the horse," the officer said. "Your father is in the hospital. We need a family member down there."

"My mother--"

"Isn't coming back after she heard what he did."

The authorities had come to his father's office to arrest him for the embezzlement his company had just uncovered. They had stopped the old man, passport to Scotland in hand, on the way out of his fifth floor office. He said he had to go to the restroom before they took him down to the station. While an officer waited by the door, his father had somehow escaped from the restroom through a window covered in wrought iron that should have been much too small for him. He plunged toward the pavement five stories below, blowing out his kneecaps and snapping both Achilles tendons with a sound like gunfire. Somehow he had

pulled himself down the sidewalk to the company parking lot, where the authorities caught up to him just as he was pulling himself into his car. Now, he was in the county hospital, delirious from the pain medication. Angus's mother, who was a nurse at the hospital but had the day off, hurried in as soon as they called, then left as soon as she heard what he had done.

Angus returned to the common room, where he found Lori tending to the saddle-whacked resident. He had just started his shift; she was just finishing hers. He asked her to cover for him.

"Fine," she said. "But you owe me."

"Just friends, though, right?" he said.

"Whatever," she said. "Someday you'll marry me. You'll see."

Not likely. He was twenty-nine but still lived with his parents. Not because he wanted to, but because his paychecks weren't big enough to pay for a decent place of his own. The manufacturers had fled their town, and the high tech jobs of the new economy had failed to arrive. Now, other than the meat packing company where his father worked as an accountant, the only businesses remaining were a couple of fast food joints and the nursing homes that humped the sick and elderly left-behinders for their last nickel. Angus had planned his life one year at a time, not five or ten years ahead like some did, and this was how it had turned out. His father would say he should get a real job and come work on the line as a meatpacker. But after watching his father all these years, Angus couldn't stomach the thought of working among the racks of raw meat.

For as long as he could remember, at least once a week his father would rant about how he was being unfairly punished. Then he would go to the fridge and take out the big packages of bloody beefsteaks he brought home from work. He would devour the meat then, still frantic, and disappear with Angus's mother into their bedroom, from which the rhythmic sounds of sex would soon

come. To drown out the awful noise Angus would go to his own room and crank the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Hours later his father would be there in his room, yelling at him to turn down the stereo, trying to explain about the ravenous pit that was his stomach, how it was like something approaching panic when he needed it, and how Angus would understand someday. In his nightmares his father became a crazed butcher, devouring the uncooked meat of his mother, his stomach pouring out over the white T-shirt he wore around his rail thin body like a butcher's bloody apron.

His mother wouldn't reappear until the next morning, and even then she would seem utterly exhausted, drained, pale, her body as white as the sheets on which she had been laid the night before. Like nursing-home Lori, his mother was pear-shaped, with thick ankles, heavy thighs and fleshy arms, but she had beautiful rosy skin and gorgeous brown eyes. And she was a saint for being so long-suffering and staying married to his dad.

As a young woman she had been a novice with the church and had been about to take her final vows when she deferred the commitment to make a soul-searching trip to Scotland, where she met up with a small group of the cloistered. After a while, though, she got diverted and then converted by the man who would become Angus's father. He was kind to her, she would later say, and instead of being nervous about her weight, which even the sisters said she needed to lose, he actually seemed to prefer it.

She gave up the dream of becoming a nun and married this man despite warnings from her friends that he was strange. There was just something so magnetic and compelling about him, she would say. Soon they had run-ins with their rural neighbors, who accused Angus's father of doing funny things with a satellite dish. He said he was searching the sky for radio signals from space. They said it caused their cows and sheep to wander off, never to

be seen again. The denouement came when someone asked his father who he thought he was.

"An intergalactic traveler born from a blood red rain," he had said.

Someone responded that they had never had a red rain in Scotland, to which his father said, "I'm not talking about in the last ten thousand years." After that, the farmers had a meeting, and a week later his parents moved back to the U.S, where his father was able to become a citizen by virtue of their marriage. Angus was born a year later.

His father was asleep when Angus arrived at the hospital. Angus called his mother.

"After all I gave him, just this morning in fact," she said. "Then he goes and does this behind my back with another woman." She was going to see an attorney about divorcing his father and selling the house, which was in her name only. She would move to a place where Angus's father would never find her. As a registered nurse, she would have no trouble finding a better paying job in another part of the country.

"He won't last a week without me and then he'll find out what it's really like to be hungry."

A nurse knocked at the door. Angus told his mother goodbye.

"The vampire is in," the nurse said, causing his father to startle. She looked at Angus and smiled. "Mrs. Porcine is a wonderful lady," the nurse said. "Are you the son?"

Angus had seen that look from women before. He might not have great financial prospects, but he was tall and good-looking, with dark, wavy hair and sparkling blue eyes. Angus said that he was the son.

"You're a good son, coming to take care of your father," she said.

"Hey you two, get a room," his father said, fully awake now and

waving his arms along with the tubes attached to them.

The nurse's cheeks flushed. "I just need to get a little something from you for your blood work, Mr. Porcine," she said to his father. "And then I'll be gone."

"Don't take too much," his father said.

After the nurse left Angus's father fell back to sleep. In a magazine he'd brought to pass the time Angus worked a crossword puzzle entitled "Demented."

Eight across, a fourteen-letter word for a massive loss of blood. Exsanguination.

A week later, his father's attorney rolled the banged-up old man into Angus's nursing home. He wasn't quite old enough for Medicare and hadn't purchased long-term care insurance because, he said, he never planned on needing it. According to the attorney, he was looking at five to ten years. Angus envied his father; he had a five to ten year plan now, and was going to be getting free room and board at the same time Angus's was coming to an end.

The nursing home put his father in a room with the man Angus had saddle whacked. The two old bastards became fast friends.

"We should let that horse take a bite out of Poor Swine here," his father said, pointing at Angus.

Angus stormed outside. His name had caused him a pile of heartache growing up. In sixth grade, some smart ass bully kid had discovered that Porcine meant "resembles swine" and "grotesquely fat." And together, his first and last names implied some sort of grotesque cattle-swine chimera. It didn't help that Angus was heavy for his age, either. The bully caught Angus at recess, pushed him to the ground and starting pulling his nipples hard, yelling "I'm milking the Poor Swine." After that, Angus started working out at the gym and studying the dictionary as

often as he could. No one would ever hold him down again. And no one would surprise him with the meaning of a word. In high school he aced the verbal portion of the scholastic aptitude test and enrolled in a community college two towns over. To pay for school he worked part-time at a combo Italian-Mexican restaurant but had to quit after his father started coming in every day to eat and embarrassing Angus with his gluttony and terrible table manners. Angus dropped out of school and took the job at the nursing home. And now here his father was, parked at the nursing home, busting Angus's chops again.

Over the next several days, his father's condition deteriorated. He only picked at the nursing home food. His skin had become gaunt and crispy, and the pinkish hue in it was draining away to reveal a bruised purple deep down below.

"I'm out of time," his father said. "I need your mother now, or I won't make it. Find her, tell her I'll do whatever it takes."

There was no way he would do that to his mother. She had made her escape, and bless her for it; go in peace dear woman.

"After how you treated her, expecting sex and everything else from her like she owed it to you, then going behind her back."

"A woman has hungers too. You should know the truth about--"

"Stop. You're a sick man. You--"

"We traded sex for blood," his father blurted out, his eyes bulging and crazed-looking. "There was a time when I got by on cow and sheep blood, but I have become dependent on the human variety."

"What the hell?" Angus said.

He would soon wish he hadn't asked.

"Come here." His father motioned for Angus to lean his ear down near his dry, stinking mouth. He spoke in a whisper now, but the

words were clear. Angus recoiled at what his father told him.

Ever since their wedding day Angus's mother had been keeping his father alive with her own blood, which she drew with a syringe and fed to him; he regularly drank her near the point of death; her medical training was the only thing that kept her alive.

"How did you become--"

"Didn't become, always have been," his father said carefully, deliberately, like a man convicted of murder working out his insanity defense. "For the last several thousand years I've been punished with exile for a crime I didn't commit. I was falsely accused."

You sick, sick man, Angus thought. He didn't know what to believe. His father must have sensed his doubt.

"I will prove it to you," the old man said.

His father transformed before his eyes into a green hummingbird sucking nectar from a bright red flower. "This is not what my kind really looks like," the hummingbird said. "But it captures my essence and, I hope, is enough proof for you."

It was.

"I don't blame your mother if she hates me," his father said, transforming back into his human form. "It's my fault, but at least I tried. I could have gone out into the streets to prey on the unwilling, like some of my kind do. Somehow your mother, such a good, kind-hearted woman, somehow her blood was compatible with my alien blood. I met her needs, she met mine. I got a job, we had you."

"Then why risk sending money to this other woman--"

"Because she is my wife."

"You intergalactic philanderer."

"She is from my home planet. She has come to prepare me for my return. I have served my sentence. They are coming for me, but only to the exact place they sent me those thousands of years ago, and only for one moment in time. And I'm not the only one they're coming for; hundreds of us were sentenced that day. If I'm not there when they come, then I'm lost forever. And if die before I get there, then I'm done."

During the next few days, Angus's first thought upon waking each morning was whether he would kill his father before he could die of whatever unnatural causes he was suffering, how he would do it, and whether doing it would be an act of mercy or of vengeance.

He fantasized about using the therapy horse.

The inscription on his father's tombstone would read:

Here lies John Porcine, who died aghast,  
when the last thing he saw was a horse's ass.

Never sit behind a horse they always said,  
But he ignored their advice, and now he is dead.

Thirty-nine down. Twelve letters. French word for blaming another for your problems. Ressentiment. Whatever.

He could try something more subtle. His father would, say, be sitting in his wheel chair, his head lolling and resting on Angus's shoulder. Close your eyes, he would say to his father, what do you hear? Hypnotize him with words. The stridulation of daytime crickets and the song of passeriform birds. Pretend to drift off to sleep, then let him drift sideways from where his head sat on his shoulder, allowing him to fall onto the concrete floor, cracking his skull.

Fifty-Six down. Seven Letters. Son of a vampire father and human mother; adept at killing vampires. Dhampir.

He decided on a frontal attack. He prepared the garlic concoction in the kitchen ahead of time. He took the white oak cross down from the chapel wall and shaved its bottom end to a sharp point. It was all so cliché, but it was the best he could come up with. His father was no longer eating. Angus waited until his father's roommate was out of the room at dinner with all the other residents. He splashed the garlic concoction into his father's face. He held the white oak cross up high then brought it down toward the center of his father's chest. Almost got him. But his father transformed into the hummingbird-flower and moved enough to make Angus miss. He tried turning his father back over to expose his chest but his father fought him off, transforming back and forth from symbiotic to human form.

Angus heard footsteps and the sound of rolling wheelchairs coming down the hall. Think quick. Angus leaned out the doorway of the room and reached for the fire alarm. Making sure no one was looking, he pulled it. The siren wailed, and the lights flashed. Angus ran back over to his father's bed.

"Accept your eternal rest," he said, brandishing the cross.

"God doesn't even get that," his father said. "For all of history it's a story of nearly unrelenting regret."

Lori was at the door now. Angus was thankful that his father was in his human state.

"Hurry," she said. "We've got to get the residents outside. I'll help you with your father."

"No," Angus said. "I've got him."

She looked at Angus suspiciously, then walked away. Angus closed the door.

His father was transforming through various life forms. Hummingbird and flower. A small marine fish cleaning the skin of another. Bacteria and other floral microbes in his father's gut. A

red fungus converting gas into food for a green plant. Lichen and green algae. He was deteriorating rapidly. He transformed back into human form, looking weaker than ever. Angus jerked his father out of bed and to the bathroom. He pushed him down onto the hard tile floor, then tried to dunk his head into the toilet. But even in his weakened state his father was too strong and was keeping his head out of the bowl.

Angus heard a sound behind them. In the bathroom mirror he could see Lori standing there, holding a video camera. Angus turned to face her.

"Angus Porcine," she said.

"Yes?"

"You are going to marry me."

Angus arched an eyebrow. "Or else?"

"Or else I take the video to the authorities."

Angus considered her needs, the needs of his father, and his own. Like his mother and father, they all could use a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship. And then it came to him.

"Just one thing," he said. "And you've got a deal."

He explained it to her. She was sympathetic and, it turned out, had a compatible blood type. Strengthened by her contribution, his father would help them all make their escape. They would honeymoon all over Europe, then make a new start in Scotland. Angus was happy to have another year-long plan.

Angus closed the door. Within minutes Lori was experiencing for the first time the special way in which she would be taking care of his father until they could get him back home.

*I'm a nineteen year old who has a second to none love for writing and classical literature, well second to my girlfriend of 7 years at least. Still, I hold a deep passion for the classics. Give me Dostoyevsky or Vonnegut, and that'll be a good day.*

## **Where Dreams End**

*by Keith Huettenmoser*

Hundred-foot waves crashed all around him, pushing him beneath the turbulent ocean surface. He plunged down deeper only to be pulled back to the surface by his own buoyancy. The intense wind and stinging rain barely allowed his vision to clear through the darkness of the thunderstorm that seemed to be brewing overhead. Even from the blinding lightning strikes he couldn't discern much, other than he was stranded with only an orange life preserver and that no land or boats were in sight. Not even the flotsam or ship debris that an accident might have caused could be found. The deafening sound of the waves as they continued their assault was only silenced by the oppressive roar of the thunder above.

David hugged the preserver with all his might as with each successive hit from a wave sent him plummeting deeper into the frigid depths of the ocean. He didn't know how much longer he could hold on. His grip was weakening with every passing second, and without it he was sure he wouldn't be returning from the ocean's floor after the next wave. Slowly his pruned fingers unlocked from one another and the preserver slipped from his grasp. His heart raced as he clawed for the preserver, but it was already lost amidst the torrid waves and carried off far from his reach. He looked to the sky, to the last glimpse of the world he'd known before a wave landed right over head and sent him beneath the black waves.

He sunk like a stone, deeper and deeper. Despite knowing his demise was in short sight, David couldn't help but notice how tranquil and serene the ocean was beneath its rough and turbulent exterior. It seemed as though everything was in a standstill, paralyzed, except for him as he continued his dismal descent. He felt his lungs begin to convulse and he opened his mouth, releasing a multitude of bubbles. His chest heaved in and out but it was no use, there was no air to breathe. His heart raced, his body shook, and in an instant it was over.

\* \* \* \* \*

His head shot up off his pillow and he struggled to regain his breath. He rubbed a clammy hand over his face and brushed away a few strands of curly brown hair from his dark eyes. It was just a dream, a nightmare really, but to him it seemed so real, so vivid. At least no dream prior had evoked such imagery of reality. It was as if he had just been plopped into the Atlantic Ocean. He had smelled the salty wisps from the ocean's waves and seen the harrowing darkness that is the ocean in the midst of a swell.

Relieved, he pulled both legs over the edge of his bed and tried to take in a deep breath. His heart pounded against his rib cage, so much so that when he looked down to his naked chest he could see the vibration with each pump that all so precious organ made. It had to be the worst nightmare that he could recall and yet he wasn't sure why he enjoyed it so much. It exhilarated him, to experience what it might feel like to die, the utter horror that pervades one mind when they know their life is almost over with only a few minutes remaining for them to realize they won't be able to see the sun again or anything the world has to offer. He didn't know why such a morbid dream would pique his curiosity but for the next few days, it was all David could think about.

Dreams often have an effect on people. They leave them wondering if there was a meaning or if they reflect something in their life. Perhaps it symbolized something in their own reality, or

maybe a sign for things to come. Whatever the case, dreams can often have a powerful impact. For David, all he wanted was to experience a dream like the previous one just once more. Every night before going to bed he would think of the most horrid incidents. Plane crashes, jumping off a building, car accidents, anything that might implant images of death so he could rejoice in the adrenaline that came with it. Yet this only complicated matters for David since he found it difficult to sleep. His mind couldn't drift away from consciousness, for it was too wrapped up in his macabre thoughts. He found himself yearning for that unequalled burst of exhilaration. Yet every night there was nothing but the boorish blackness of his own eyelids as he continued to be unable to find the sleep he needed.

He got out of bed one morning and dragged himself to the kitchen table where his mother had breakfast all set. She busied herself around the kitchen, flipping a few pancakes over the stove while she set out a cup of coffee for his father. She came over with a fresh batch of pancakes when she shrieked in horror and dropped the plate to the ground, sending pancakes and sausage scattering across the floor. Quickly she grabbed David's face with one hand and forced him to look her in the eye. Large black bags hung beneath his dried bloodshot eyes, though they were barely visible beneath their drooping lids.

"Are you on drugs?" she scolded.

"No, ma, I haven't been able to sleep for the past few days, maybe a few hours here or there," he replied through a lazy yawn.

Like any mother, upon seeing their child looking ill, she placed the back of her hand against his forehead.

"Well, you don't feel warm but I'm going to make an appointment with Dr. Green for today, just to get you checked out."

"Ma, I'm sixteen years old I think I know when I'm sick or not.

It's fine I just need to stay home from school and try and catch a few Zs," he said as he turned his attention to his syrupy pancakes.

"I don't think so. You and I are going to make a trip to the doctor's later. Maybe he'll prescribe a sleep aid to help you get some rest," she said with the finality that only a mother can muster.

"All right," David said in defeat while inside his mind raced.

A sleep aid could be just the medicine for his little sleeping dilemma, then not even a fog horn could wake him from his slumber. The morning dragged on, inching forward minute by minute while David wandered about his house aimlessly, the hardwood floors thumping beneath his feet. Anxiously he chewed at his fingernails, spitting the remnants to the ground. When the hour finally came around for him and his mother to make their way to the train station, his nails were down past his finger tips.

\* \* \* \* \*

The train whizzed by as David and his mother rushed to make it on time.

"We'll have to wait for the next one," she said before sitting down on one of the iron wrought benches that were scattered up and down the boarding platform.

This was the last thing David needed—more time before he could find solace in his dreams, in the intense experience he hoped he would engage in again. The individual strips of iron dug into his back as he tried to make himself comfortable.

"Here let me help," his mother said, removing her purple snow coat and placing it next to her so he could sit on it.

He reluctantly moved closer to his mother and nestled up against her. Surprisingly, he felt the familiarity of the steady fall of his eye lids as they seemed to get heavier and heavier until there

was nothing but darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

His eyes fluttered open to view the near vacant train station he fell asleep in except one thing was missing – his mother. He looked around but she was nowhere to be found, not even her purple snow coat he had used as makeshift bedding was present. It had happened; finally he had fallen asleep and was dreaming. Joy didn't suffice as the feeling that overcame David as he came to this realization. He looked around at his dream world, the place he had so longed to find after his brush with the ocean and it couldn't have been a more perfect scene.

His eyes looked about at the commuters standing about, drinking coffee, doing things that people do in real life. It looked so real, just as his ocean dream had. He remembered again the body shaking, heart pumping exhilaration he felt in his dream and how long he had been waiting for the opportunity to feel those bodily pleasures again. The sound of an engine chugging brought a coy smile to his face as he watched the train barrel down on his position with no stop in sight. With a maniacal laugh, he leapt from the loading platform in front of the oncoming train and was swept beneath its front and raked across the iron tracks with a sickening thud.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dull toll of a church bell broke the seemingly impenetrable silence that encompassed the small funeral procession as they exited the church, a casket at its head. Slowly the men and women all dressed in black got into their cars and followed the hearse to the cemetery. It was a polite service, considering the circumstances, with an eloquent speech conducted by friend who had known the deceased quite well. Tears were shed, though none more than the mother who stared absently as they lowered her son's casket. She had hoped for an open casket at the wake, but the damage done was too severe to repair, something she took harder than anyone else.

The after party, if one could call it that, was nearly held in silence. None that were present felt it particularly right to speak on such a somber occasion. Eventually people started to move around and talk amongst themselves, though the mother sat alone in a corner, a tall glass of wine in hand.

"Why doesn't she come over and talk with us. It helps the process," one mourner said to another.

"She was there when it happened, except she left him alone while she went to a hot dog vendor to pick up lunch for the two of them. When she got back they were scraping what was left of David off the front of the train and its tracks," the other replied.

"That's horrible. Do they know if he jumped or was pushed?"

"He jumped alright. All the witnesses said so, in fact they all said he was laughing when he did it," the other said.

"Wow that must be the creepiest thing I ever heard. If he was that crazy than I guess it's good he's gone," he said with a helpless shrug of his shoulders.

David's mother heard the last trails of their conversation before gulping down the rest of her wine. David wasn't crazy; no he was her angel, who she used to bring to the Zoo on weekends and to the library after school. No, he wasn't crazy at all, he just needed sleep, and as calming a thought she had had in the past few days, she knew he'd get all the sleep he wanted where he was now.

**Girl (II)**

*by M J Donohue*

So I took a train,  
and traveled for hours  
and walked a mile.  
knocked on her door,  
and delivered her  
hope.

What a hideous thing to do,  
but I was young  
I think,  
younger than you are now.  
I didn't realize with hope  
came expectation,  
came thoughts, ideas, plans,  
and certainties  
lies, and broken hearts.  
And no expectation.

I delivered hope  
wrapped in  
a bunch of flowers,  
and how she shook her head at  
my stupidity.  
She brought me inside,  
made love to me ? it wasn't a fuck,  
and I still see it a such ? she lay  
with me and dressed me  
when such time came.  
She made me breakfast  
then I walked a mile and  
traveled for hours.

Now I can only look fondly  
upon lovers in the  
morning haze.  
There lies love's truce,  
in skies not stained by the toll of day.  
In those pale skies  
we consider the hideous -  
hope.

Roland Goity lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. His stories appear in a number of print and Web magazines. He is fiction editor of the online journal LITnIMAGE.

## **Ernestine's Café: A Newcomer's Review**

by Roland Goity

### ***Cup of java, berry coffee cake—To Go!***

New in town, you make an early morning visit to Ernestine's Café, the diner a block away from your apartment. It's the only dining spot nearby. On leaving, you're scrutinized by fellows perched on counter stools, old men wearing ball caps and sour expressions. OK, so you're a stranger. That's just for now. No big deal.

*Re: the coffee cake.* Well, you've had better.

The java, however, deserves kudos. By lunchtime you've unpacked half your shit and assembled and cranked the stereo. Ernestine's coffee rocks nearly as much as Pavement's first album.

### ***French dip sandwich, fries, salad—To Go! ...Wait, add a beer and make it For Here!***

You're underage, only twenty. But, after paying for your upcoming supper, you order a lager on a whim and discover that Ernestine's doesn't card. And so you flop down on a ruby Naugahyde stool with bottle in hand. You ask someone on the wait staff to keep your takeout order warm, ask if they'd be so kind. Then you change your mind, and ask for a place setting so you can eat the meal right there at the counter.

You've decided to chow down and imbibe with the masses. The masses, all tattooed and gristled. You, all bright and shiny, and days away from keeping hours at the tutoring center. There you'll

pass along your commendable knowledge of algebraic equations to high school-age kids of the masses. Your fellow stool-sitters down brewskis and Bloody Marys with abandon. You ask them what's the special occasion, all friendly like. But they just glower.

Another beer you've ordered arrives as you sink your teeth into your sandwich, courtesy of Daisy (or is it Dolly?). But your upbeat mood plunges when you overhear a burly guy called Red (his locks are fiery; but his eyes, too, are like tiny volcanoes erupting) tell another how he KO'd someone at the dock that afternoon. The guy looked at him wrong, snickered inappropriately or something. Then Red, with those explosive eyes, gazes over his shoulder and down the counter at *you*, and you wonder what "look" you're revealing. So far, you've offered little, only your name: Elliot; your profession: geek instructor; your situation in life: new in town. The masses are rather tight lipped. They don't exactly blabber in tongues

So, you eat. But before cleaning your plate you accidentally knock the dipping sauce off the table and into your lap. Dismayed, you pound the remains of your beer, smile to the masses, and slide from your counter seat. The stares from earlier that morning were minor league stuff compared to the contemptuous glances that accompany your walk to the door. One old geezer with a harelip gives an unsettling smirk when he notices your crotch stained with sauce.

*Re: The meal.* Generous portions of tasty beef in the sandwich, but the fries (wedge-cut) prove too mealy. The salad lettuce was wilted, and a cherry tomato sprayed seeds in your eye when stabbed with your fork.

### ***Ernestine's specialty club sandwich, fruit salad, regular coke—For Here! Oh? To Go then, I guess...***

That morning you devour a pair of frosted pop tarts (strawberry

flavor with rainbow sprinkle flecks) leftover from a summer camping trip. Then, for lunch, despite well-earned misgivings, you decide to buck up and return to Ernestine's, where you plan to make nice with whoever's willing. You join five other customers at the counter, another dozen dine in booths with grooved aluminum tables. Red's not around, but two of his wannabe-buddies populate the area by the register.

The blonde with the beehive—it's Dolly (says on her nametag), who's become a pal of sorts—approaches. You close the menu and sigh comfortably, knowing full well what you want. You've always adored a good club sandwich, and Ernestine's claims theirs is "like no other."

It's odd, you think, how Dolly jots down the order without a smile, without looking at you. But then you notice that it's not your order she's writing up, but a stealthy note. "Club sandwich and fruit salad it is," she says. "Diet's out, regular Coke okay?"

"Sure, why not?" you say, as she slides you the piece of paper.

*RED'S AFTER YOU—SAID YOU TOUCHED HIS KID WRONG IN A TUTORING SESSION!*

"What? But I haven't even started working yet!" you tell Dolly. "Besides, I would never..."

She taps an index finger to her lips to shush you. When she returns with lunch, you notice a new note on the plate, tucked under the check that's weighted down by a dill pickle.

I BELIEVE YOU, BUT IT'S TOO LATE. PLEASE LEAVE FOR YOUR OWN GOOD.

Your throat is dry and scratchy, so you guzzle half the Coke. After only a few bites of the club and a smattering of the fruit salad, your appetite disappears. Then more coke and the rattling of ice cubes. The phone rings behind the counter and you watch Dolly answer. She scrunches her face as if she's smelled something

funny. *Hi Red*, she exclaims with emphasis, drawing looks from nearby patrons but kindly putting you on high alert. You pull a twenty from your wallet, put it beside your plate, and scam. It's the biggest tip you've ever left.

You zip back to your apartment on an adrenaline surge. It takes one hour and thirty-seven minutes to fill your pickup with essential wares and furniture and get the hell out of town.

*Re: The day's lunch.* While the fruit salad was a syrupy muck of grape seeds and watermelon skins, Ernestine's Club was indeed delicious, with thick slices of rich avocado, which you love, and featuring bacon instead of ham. Passing the city limits and a sign suggesting you *Come Back Soon!*, you dislodge a tiny piece of applewood bacon nestled between a pair of teeth. You're reminded of the sandwich and how awesome it was.

But you won't return to Ernestine's Café anytime soon. It's not *to die for*.