

Volume II, Issue II

# The Oddville Press

A break from the norm



[www.oddvillepress.com](http://www.oddvillepress.com)

## **Cover art: Big Empty**

by KEVIN N. COLEMAN

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## Disclaimer

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised.

The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as "adult content": it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature.

If you aren't an actual grown-up then please don't read the Oddville Press, or at least, don't complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading—The Management.

# Volume II, Issue II

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## Foreword: Where is Odd?

by LORRAINE SEARS

AS THE Managing Editor at Oddville, myself and my wonderful team of editors are privileged, every day to read the hundreds of different submissions we receive in our mailbox; such a diverse spectrum of stories, poetry and artwork. It never ceases to amaze me, the different perceptions of what people find "odd".

Just like beauty, odd is firmly in the eye of the beholder; in the eye, in the mind and a little bit folded up tight and tiny in a corner, at the back of the soul. But judging from our submissions many believe odd lies in the dark and sinister; in death, despair and fear. And maybe a little bit it is. After all odd, means different, not normal, unusual and perhaps even unknown. And it's human nature to harbour a fear of the unknown.

But let's look again—because odd is all around us, truly. For instance, a moment before I sat down to type this foreword a small spider descended from the ceiling on its silken web and alighted onto the desk beside me—how odd.

And when I was at the train station this morning there was a group of young men standing, waiting for their train to be called and I noticed one of them was wearing a long sparkly skirt and pink feather boa—how odd.

Now to the spider and the man in the skirt, they were probably doing something very normal or pre-empted, but to the uninformed, the passer-by, it's just odd.

Odd is all around us, you just have to look for it. It's in the way your bald neighbour combs his eight remaining hairs across his head. The way the girl in the powder room gapes open-mouthed at her reflection as she re-applies her mascara. Odd is in the opening of a flower, in the wings of a fly and the upside down reflection of the world, captured in a dew drop.

Odd is the jar of drier link your granny keeps atop the fridge and the way Uncle Barry reads the newspaper from back to front. Odd is the way your best friend pours golden syrup instead of milk on her cornflakes. And have you ever wondered how odd it is that when we drink a scalding hot cup of coffee, our insides—which are really just raw meat—don't cook?

In order to see more odd, all you have to do is look, open your eyes and look. Odd is everywhere and it's wonderful. This issue of The Oddville Press will help you get started. We've got a stunning plethora of works to show you, so you can see how in everyday life there is always a little bit of oddness to be found.

—Lorraine Sears, Managing Editor

# Running the Shale

by Lea Tassie

*Lea Tassie grew up in the Peace River district of northern BC. Due to six months of winter and two months poor sledding, she started reading books as soon as she could hang on to one. She has traveled and worked in many places, which may explain why she can't stick to one genre as an author. Her books include humor (about cats), romantic suspense, mainstream and lately, speculative fiction. When she discovered the temperate rainforest that stretches along 1200 miles of the Pacific Coast, from Oregon to Alaska, she quit traveling and settled in for good.*

## Running the Shale

WE WALKED SOUTH along the dirt road, the hot haze of July making the air shimmer. The birds were having a midday siesta, while the grasshoppers chirred in the oat fields and long grass. If heat could make a noise, I thought that's how it would sound.

Ray was walking on the other side of the road, his sneakers throwing up little spurts of dust. He hadn't said a word since we left the deserted Sunday streets.

"How come you're so quiet?" I said. "You and Velma have a fight?"

He kicked a pebble into the ditch. "She won't lay down for me." He glanced at me and hesitated, then said, "You putting out for Pete?"

"He won't. He's scared I'll get pregnant. We'd have to quit school."

Ray stopped and stared at me. "Jeez, Annie."

"I bought that new record from Elvis, Love Me Tender, for his birthday but all he did was tell me it's a nice song."

"That's tough." Ray kicked another pebble and we started off again. "I told Velma I'd use a rubber."

We walked in silence then and soon the road ended, butting into another that went east and west. Across this newer road lay a grassy meadow, and beyond that a wall of big, old poplars.

Ray said, "She says sometimes rubbers get holes in them."

"That's what I heard, too. Which way do we go now?"

"Straight ahead. The old road goes through the trees there. I guess nobody's used it for fifty years or better."

Ray jumped across the ditch. I picked up a couple of pebbles to play with and followed. I could see where wheels had worn ruts into the ground. Even overgrown with shrubs and grass, they made two straight, shallow depressions that disappeared into the poplars a quarter

mile away. "How far to the river from here?"

Ray pulled a grass stem and stuck the tender end in his mouth. "Less than a mile. Lots closer than taking the new road to the bridge. The hill is steep, but you gotta take some chances in life."

I didn't know if he was talking about rubbers or hills and didn't much care. I just wanted to get away from town and forget my summer job in the Co-op and especially forget about Pete and his mother. She didn't like me, not one bit. Pete hadn't said what excuse she used to keep us apart today, but he went along with it. Could have been church, could have been visitors. Could have been anything.

It was cooler under the poplars, but the young ones growing up crowded the old road so much we had to walk single file. I caught sight of a smooth grey mound on an old tree off to one side. A wasp's nest. I fired one of my pebbles at it and the nest shattered. Wasps buzzed around it.

Ray turned around and glared at me. "Jeez, Annie, are you nuts? We'll have the whole tribe down on us."

"Feeling a little reckless, that's all."

"Well, pick something else to be reckless about."

I wondered if he had something in mind, but if he did, he'd say so.

We stood still for a few minutes until the wasps settled down and then walked on. In a minute or two we came out on a bluff high above the Peace.

The gorge was a mile across, the river eight or nine hundred feet below us. It looked like a metallic gray-blue ribbon. I'd have white ribbons on my wedding dress. One more year to go before graduation and getting married. It felt like forever.

"That's a pretty view," Ray said.

To the west, the foothills of the Rockies looked like misty purple velvet. Above them were heaps of brilliant,

white cumulus clouds drifting through blue summer sky. To the east, hay meadows along the river were dotted with dull gold bales. South, across the river, a few spruce trees, so dark they were almost black, looked like exclamation marks against the light green of poplar and birch.

"Come on," Ray said.

"It's a long way down." I was thinking about having to climb back up. He didn't answer, just headed straight down the hill. I followed the old wagon road ruts laid out in switchbacks across the steep slopes, smelling the heat-baked brown grass and tweaking the heads of white yarrow. Overhead, crows were harassing a hawk. Their harsh cries punctuated the dialogue in my mind, all those things I wished I'd said to Pete and what he might have said back and how we made up.

Ray lay face down on a wide sandstone ledge, the river racing by a couple of feet below. He dangled his hand in the water for a few seconds. "Like ice. Even in July. Guess they're right when they say you wouldn't last more than two minutes if you fell in." "I wouldn't last that long. I can't swim."

"I don't think it matters about the swimming. It's just the water's so cold." Ray sat cross-legged on the warm sandstone and started fooling with a driftwood branch. "Looks like this stuff might be okay to smoke."

The wood was bleached and dry, the small branches about the right diameter for a cigarette. He broke off a piece and handed it to me, then put one in his mouth and held a lighter to the end, sucking to see if he could draw smoke through.

"Does it work?"

He coughed. "Hard as hell on the throat, though." He handed me his lighter.

The wood smoke smelled delicious and it burned my tongue. I didn't care. I wanted something sharp to clear my mind. We sat in the hot sun, blowing smoke into the air and watched the river rumble by. After a while I could feel my eyes wanting to close.

Ray jarred me loose. "Let's walk to the bridge and hitch a ride back."

I stood up and looked east. "I can't even see the bridge."

"It's just around that next bend."

We started walking and, for a while, the going was easy. Then the river curved in below a steep cliff and you could see where the current was undercutting it, gouging out soil and rocks.

"We'll have to climb to get around that," Ray said.

"We should have headed back by the old wagon road. It would have been quicker, even if it is a tough climb." Then I decided to hell with getting back quicker. Pete had said flatly he wouldn't see me today and I didn't answer in case we got into a fight and I lost him. Anyway, if I went home I'd just end up lying on my bed and brooding about why he wouldn't stand up to his mother once in a while.

On the far side of the cliff, we hiked back down a gully

toward the edge of the river and found a clump of Saskatoon bushes, loaded with plump purple-blue berries.

"Good thing the bears didn't find these," Ray said, grabbing a handful. "I'm starved."

"Me too." I picked berries one by one until a handful lay warm on my skin. I nipped the flower end off the first berry and spit it out, then bit down on the fruit. It was sweet and juicy.

"What did you do that for?" Ray asked.

"Do what?"

"Throw away half the berry."

"I didn't. That was just the end where the flower was."

"Why didn't you eat it?"

"It feels hard and scratchy when it goes down my throat."

"You're nuts!" he said. "That's just part of the berry. Chew it up real good and you'll never notice."

"Yes, Mom."

He stuck his tongue out at me. It was purple. Mine probably was, too. We ate more berries and walked on until we came to a steep shale slope that went straight down into the fast-running water.

"I'm not crossing that," Ray said.

"I am. It doesn't look so bad." I guessed it was only about fifty feet to the other side. "It would be kind of like racing the river."

"Suit yourself." He headed up the grassy slope.

I started out across the shale, testing each foothold to make sure it was solid. About half way across, one foot went out from under me and I dropped to my knees on the sharp, ragged shards of rock. I tried to hang on with my hands but slid a couple of feet toward the river before I managed to stop.

When I looked down, I got the shakes. The river was barely ten feet below me, the current boiling. If I fell in, I'd never get out. I'd drown. Freeze to death. Die with my lungs full of water.

There was another twenty or thirty feet to go. I looked over my shoulder, palms sweating. About the same distance to go back. I clamped my jaws and slowly stood up. Turning around wouldn't prove anything.

I made a run for it, my feet slipping and sliding, my breath harsh and loud in my ears above the noise of the river. I came off the shale only a foot above the roiling water and collapsed on the grass, spread-eagled up the slope, clinging to the grass and panting.

A couple of minutes later, Ray knelt beside me. "Jeez, Annie, you scared the shit outta me. I can't swim either, you know."

I rolled over and sat up. At my feet, the river ran, swift, inexorable. It was like time, never stopping, not for anything. I closed my eyes and remembered being on the shale, fear sucking the breath out of me, the racing water etched into my mind like a photograph. The water in my photograph would be miles away by now.

Ray gave me a hand to get up and we headed east again, climbing at an angle across the slope. "I could see

the bridge from the top of the hill," he said. "It's not far."

Around the next bend was a heavy stand of birch, the trees so uniform they looked like thick fur. I let my mind run with that. If the trees were fur covering the earth, soil must be the skin, the rocks underneath a skeleton, the boiling magma the earth's blood, hot and red. But what was the river?

It had to be time. For a moment there, I'd come close to having none left.

Past the birches lay an open meadow, thick with yarrow, daisies, and dandelions. In the center stood an old log cabin, fleurs-de-lis carved in the doorpost.

"Is this the old fort?" I asked.

"It's not big enough. Could have been the Hudson Bay trading post, maybe."

There was nothing inside, not even tools or bits of harness hanging on the walls. The floor was dirt underneath pale, scrawny grass. "Or a trapper's home," I said.

What would Ray do if I asked him to lie down with me? He'd take me up on it, for sure. I took a step toward him, thinking about his arms around me, about his voice gentle in my ear, about all the years we'd been buddies. I opened my mouth to speak.

Then stopped, the shale shifting beneath my feet.

Things would never be the same between us again. Between any of us.

I took a deep breath, walked to the doorway and looked at the river running by. There was still time, lots of it, for things to work out.

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## Simon Perchik

*Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in Partisan Review, The Nation, Poetry, The New Yorker, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is Almost Rain, published by River Otter Press (2013). For more information, free e-books and his essay titled "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities", please visit his website at [www.simonperchik.com](http://www.simonperchik.com).*

### Poem\*

by SIMON PERCHIK

And you still stutter  
 though between her lips  
 it's always night  
 or years from now  
 –the stars not yet alongside  
 have no seasons  
 brought this far  
 in the same darkness not even she  
 can remember wearing  
 as if it could fold back  
 by itself as mornings and waiting  
 –after all, how much more  
 can this dirt breathe in  
 before someone stops by  
 who's lost, has forgotten why  
 only now it's winter  
 that has something to do  
 with coming back and her arms.

### Poem\*\*

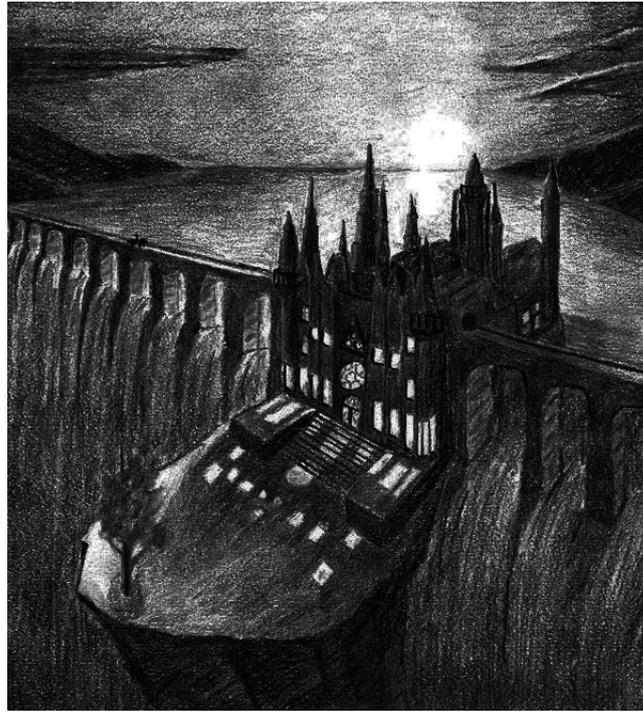
by SIMON PERCHIK

You piece one night into another  
 as if these constellations  
 would leave nothing to chance  
 and the sky you play it safe with  
 stay black waiting for air  
 but not counting, though this time  
 for flames that fit exactly  
 lock on the way letters from home  
 are saved in a metal box  
 to complete the picture—all night  
 under the kitchen table you shuffle cards  
 and some mindless jigsaw game unfolds  
 on the cold floor, trying to remember  
 those stars all together  
 their first morning and their last  
 though the Earth is covered  
 with this breeze still taking away  
 the only thing that matters.

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# Castle

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## by Susan Simone

*Susan is a writer and artist by day, a child and pet wrangler by night, and occasional crazy person on the weekends. She lives in a place where new hybrid cars, beat up farm trucks, and Amish horse and buggies meet in fast food parking lots for coffee.*

*Susan grew up in central Wisconsin, only to move to rural Ohio in adulthood. She's a country girl through and through with progressive and optimistic ideas of nation and society. A heathen by faith and major sci-fi fan she is an eclectic person and welcomes as much diversity into her life as she can to feed her fertile imagination. She lives by the motto, "Let your freak flag fly!"*

*Susan is the author of "Silent Heart", "Under A Twisted Moon", "Morning Song", and other titles forthcoming. Susan also has her one and only zombie short in the JEA anthology "All That Remains". In addition she has published articles on the Yahoo! Contributor Network in a wide variety of subjects such as the validity of deity in the American government and the use of easy to find herbs.*

*Susan is the Executive Editor with J. Ellington Ashton Press as well as a graphic design student at The Art Institute of Pittsburgh Online Division. She does a large portion of the cover art with JEA and has worked with businesses in the past for logo creation and event announcements. Her website is at <http://www.susansimone.weebly.com>.*

# The Art of Grieving

by Hailey Foglio

*Hailey Foglio hails from the nonexistent town of Salem, Wisconsin, where she spends an awful lot of time reading John Green novels. She is a pig enthusiast. She has previously been published in The Commonline Journal.*

## The Art of Grieving

**P**OUNDING. OR BANGING. Or bashing or hitting or knocking (loudly). Whatever you want to call it, that's what I woke up to on Saturday morning. Amber bottles and the butts of joints were scattered around the apartment, and at some point during the time that Friday night drifted into Saturday morning, an intense migraine and vague sense of nausea came to rest inside my body. So, short of someone on the other side of that door yelling "Police!" there was nothing that was going to make me get out of my bed. That was what I kept telling myself, anyway. Don't get up. Don't move, don't make noise. They'll go away. Do not get up, Hanna. It can wait. I look over at Lorenzo, his head tilted back, his mouth half open; a kind of sighing gasp escaping his lips. He was not going to be the one to answer the door, and the pounding continued on and on and on and became louder and more aggressive until I finally slipped out of bed; not because I cared about what was on the other side of the door, but because my head would likely explode if that pounding did not stop.

I didn't bother to get dressed. Whoever was responsible for the incessant six a.m. racket would have to deal with my nearly see-through, white tank top and neon orange underwear. I slid open the chain lock, switched the deadbolt and swung the door open, preparing myself for a neighbor's complaint about the smell of pot that had poisoned the hallway or the landlord's demand for more rent, though I told him I'd pay by the end of next week.

"What?" I nearly shouted. I immediately regretted it. The girl standing in my doorway was about my age, but shorter and thinner. She jumped at the sound of my voice.

"H-Hanna?"

"Yeah?"

"My name is Jess Calloway. I'm dating your brother...?"

I closed the door. As I secured the locks that I had previously opened, I explained myself through the safe-guard of the door. "I'm not interested. In any reunions

or family gatherings or whatever you guys have planned. Sorry you wasted your time."

I turned to get back in my bed, but the second I stepped away from the door, I heard her voice again: "Jack's missing."

My heart stuttered. And whether out of pure curiosity or my own private masochism, I slowly unlocked the door and eased it back open. She was crying now. Silently. She did not hiccup or shake or sniffle. The tears slid down her cheeks and she just stared at me, mouth half open. I thought maybe she didn't know she was crying. The rose color of her cheeks matched the rings around her eyes, and I thought that maybe that wasn't the first time she'd cried that day.

"He's been gone for a week. I haven't heard from him, not even a text. You have to help me."

I didn't know how I could help. Jack and I had barely spoken in almost exactly four years. I opened my mouth to explain this to her, and as I did, I realized that I knew where he was. That I was the only one who knew where he was.

"Do you know the date?" I asked.

"What?"

"The date, Jess. Do you know what it is?"

Jess' eyes squinted and her forehead creased, as though she was trying to remember some far distant memory. "The twelfth? November twelfth, I think?"

Relief spread through my chest and, again, I resented the feeling. "Jack's fine."

"What do you mean?" Jess peered into my apartment as though he had taken up residence there.

I sighed, suddenly annoyed that I was dealing with this, that Jack had not told her, that I had to calm down his grieving girlfriend. "I mean that Jack is fine. He'll be back soon."

"How do you know?" Jess stepped toward me.

"I just do."

Feeling as though I had completed my contribution to Jack's soap opera life, I began closing the door.

"I'm pregnant."

The admission seemed desperate and too easily spoken, like it wasn't the kind of thing that one should tell a complete stranger. In my mind, I questioned the truth of the statement, but it felt to me like one of those situations when you should assume that the person is honest. Even if it turns out to be a half-planned scheme from a terrified girl to find the man who had abandoned her.

"Does Jack know?"

Jess shook her head. "But he must have figured it out, right? Counted the days? And that's why he left?"

I sighed. Again. I glanced back at Lorenzo, hoping to find him asleep and oblivious to this entire conversation. He was. I realized then that Jess could see everything in my apartment. The unwashed clothes (both mine and his) strewn across the floor. The assortment of items that we had turned into ashtrays (magazines, cups, empty bottles). Lorenzo's madman paintings taped haphazardly to the walls. I shifted my body in an attempt to block more of Jess' view, and as I did, my eyes landed on the picture of my dad that sits on my bedside table. A photo taken during a camping trip we took one fall. It showed my dad, small but fierce, leaning over the fire that Jack and I had created in the pit. I remembered him laughing as he rearranged the burnt wood sculpture that we had created, explaining that the kindling needed to be more like a teepee so oxygen could get to the fire and help it to flourish.

"I know where Jack is," I said. Jess' eyes shot open, pleading, but I continued before she could interrupt. "Just, um...head home. Relax. Do whatever pregnant women do and he'll be back tomorrow."

Jess' face faltered. "Can't I come with you?"

I almost laughed. "Not to be rude, but definitely not." Her defeated expression was almost enough to make me reconsider, but I didn't.

Finally, she nodded. "Thanks, Hanna." I watched her shuffle down the hallway, absentmindedly clutching her stomach, and I thought to myself that yes, she really was pregnant. All the more reason to bring Jack back.

The drive to find Jack would be long and unpleasant, so I wanted to leave right away. I silently got dressed. I collected my purse and a blank sketch diary that I'd had for a while now. I opened the top drawer of my dresser and pulled out a handful of printed emails and opened letters that were never replied to. I flipped through the familiar words until I came across one of many that had a map inside. I put the map in my purse and silently left the apartment. I didn't wake Lorenzo.

I drive a 1978 Chevy Suburban. His name is Raymond. He is elderly and parts of his undercarriage rattle when I press the gas, but he is sturdy and reliable.

My first stop, however, was a coffee and biscotti shop called Java Mama, where I spent most mornings filling orders for ornery men and demanding women in power suits. My boss, Gretchen, makes the biscotti herself, yet no one seems to order it. Mostly they just want the coffee. I suggested once that we have muffins or bagels or

something that people like and are more familiar with. She just smiled at me and said that the biscotti are what set Java Mama apart from all of the other coffee chains. I didn't have the heart to tell her that they sell biscotti at Starbucks for half the price.

That morning, Gretchen was particularly perky. Intense perkiness was a permanent state of being for Gretchen, but that day it was worse.

"Hi, Hanna!" she screeched as I entered the building. Java Mama was at its usual level of popularity, by which I mean there was a single patron in the lobby and no one in the drive-thru. Maybe it was the upchuck-colored wallpaper that turned people away. Gretchen claims the color is called "pistachio," but either way, pistachios and coffee are completely unrelated. "How are you? Your shift doesn't start for four more hours!"

"Yeah, hi Gretchen." I tried and failed to match her excitement. "I actually had something come up. I don't think I'll be able to work today."

"Oh no!" Gretchen's face went from Barbie doll ecstatic to funeral-worthy bummed. "Is everything okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah. It's just like...a family thing." The words tasted bad in my mouth.

Gretchen flipped back to her chipper persona. "Well, I understand! We'll miss you here later!"

As Gretchen turned back to her work, I checked the matching upchucked-pistachio-colored clock on the wall and realized that I really needed to get on the road if I wanted to make it to Jack and back before dark. Raymond was outside, tank full and ready to go. The map was spread out in the passenger seat, routes highlighted to guide me to my destination. And yet, my feet didn't move. Not an inch. I glanced back at the single coffee drinker in the lobby; an overweight, middle-aged woman who, at the moment, was nodding off in her arm chair, the newspaper in her hands dipping lower and lower as she drifted to sleep.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Am I sure what?" Gretchen's grin stretched taut across her teeth.

"That you don't need me later?"

Gretchen flicked her hand in the air, waving me away as she would a pestering fruit fly. "Yeah, of course!"

"I mean, I know it gets pretty busy in here."

I watched Gretchen glance briefly at the woman in the lobby. I watched her smile falter slightly. I watched the corners of her eyes get tense. "Oh, we can manage!" she yelped.

And I knew I should have left. Just gone then. But my feet weren't ready or my mind wasn't ready or my heart wasn't ready. I wasn't ready.

"I mean," I continued, ignoring the newfound rigidity in Gretchen's movements. "I don't have to go. Right? If I have to work, that's that, you know?"

Gretchen dropped a tray of biscotti on the counter, the clanging of the metal ricocheting in my ears and waking the sleeper in the lobby, who almost looked ashamed as

she picked up her newspaper from the floor. "Well, consider yourself off the schedule." She smiled at me, her features relocating to afford the size of her mouth.

I forfeited. "Can I just have a large vanilla latte?"

Gretchen went to work. "One Giant Nilla Mama coming up!" The names didn't even make sense.

When I got out to my car, coffee in tow, I checked my phone. I had missed a text from Lorenzo.

*Hey. What happened to you? Everything all right? Call me.*

I didn't reply.

Two hours after leaving Java Mama, it seemed that all remnants of gleaming skyscrapers and cramped office buildings had fallen away, replaced by dense forests and tall trees. The impatient scream of car horns was replaced by the curious, delighted chirps of birds. It's difficult to say at exactly what point the city stopped and nature began, but I had always felt, as I felt that day, that the further you are from the some bustling metropolis, the closer you are to the rest of the world.

Soon after finding that I had made it past the city limits, I stopped at a gas station. The gas station itself was fairly unimpressive (and the bathroom was unsanitary, to put it lightly), but there was no one else there besides me and the nearly toothless cashier, so there was no one to judge or report me when I slipped out back to toke up.

I leaned against the wall of the building next to a rusted, green dumpster. I pinched the joint between two fingers, lit up, and breathed deep. I considered again whether I should be making the drive. I knew Jack was fine. I could just let him do his thing and avoid Jess until he came back. But she really thought that he had left her (and their baby), and that he wouldn't be returning. It would be cruel to leave her in that kind of limbo for another week. So why had Jack?

I exhaled.

By the time that the little boy approached me, I was already feeling the effects of the weed. Calm. Relaxed. He was carrying a baby doll, the kind with a soft, cotton-filled body and hard, plastic head and hands. The freckles on his face were dark against the extreme pale of his skin. Shaggy brown hair kept flopping into his eyes with each step he took, though he tried tirelessly to push it away.

He marched right up to me and craned his neck back, squinting into the sun, so he could see me.

"Hi!"

"Hi there," I squatted down to eye level.

"What's your name?"

"Hanna. What's yours?"

"I'm William." His free hand shot out from his side, nearly colliding with my cheek. I took his hand and gently shook it.

"Well it's very nice to meet you, William."

"Are you going on a trip?" Before I could answer, he continued, "Because we're going on a trip."

I laughed. "Where are you going?"

"To the cemetery."

"Why are you going to the cemetery?" I was surprised that such a young boy would have much to do at a cemetery.

"To see my sister, Abby. She died when she was just a little, little baby." He held up his thumb and forefinger, demonstrating to me how small she had been.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Do you have any sisters?"

I shook my head. "I don't. But I do have a big brother." The words were for him, yes, but they were also for me. A reminder of sorts..

"You do?" He was suddenly very excited, so I nodded at his exclamation. "Cool! Hey, do you think Abby will like this? Would you like one of these from your big brother?" He held the doll out to me, his arm moving slowly, his feet gingerly taking a couple steps closer, as though the doll might shatter if she was dropped or handled too carelessly. "I picked it out myself."

I examined the doll. A mess of blonde curls matted to the doll's head. Painted blue eyes that were slightly asymmetrical. Too red lips and cheeks. "Yes," I replied to his original question. "I think she'll like this very much. You're a very good big brother," I returned the doll.

William beamed. "Thanks."

In the distance, we heard the patient, far away voice of William's mother, calling him back to the car so they could continue on their journey.

"Gotta go," William said. "Bye, Hanna!" He ran toward the direction of his mom's voice, his arm aimlessly flapping around behind him, waving.

"Bye, William."

I made my way back to my car and, once inside, I opened my sketch diary. The pages were blank, had been blank since I got the book, but I wasn't looking to draw. I opened the front cover and there, written in permanent, black ink, was an inscription.

*Hanna,*

*I am so fucking proud of you. So is dad. Even if he can't say it himself, I know that's what he would say if he could. I hope you can use this diary to continue your art (the woman at the store recommended it). But if not, maybe you can just make something for my office. Congratulations on the art show. Give 'em hell.*

*Love, Jackie*

I gripped the pages, not really sure how to feel. My heart was telling me to laugh or cry or go home or all of the above. But my mind only created a foggy after image of those feelings, tainted by the drug in my system. I checked my phone to find that I was up to four missed texts and two missed calls. All from Lorenzo.

I decided to keep driving.

By the time I saw the turn off for the campsite, I had been driving for six and a half hours. I eased Raymond onto a narrow, unpaved road off of the main highway and within minutes, I spotted Jack's slate gray Mustang. I pulled Raymond up behind the Mustang. I collected my purse, water bottle and sketch diary and exited the car.

The forest was larger than I remembered it being. The trees leapt out of the ground, their warped trunks bending under the weight of themselves, hovering, while the branches jutted out in every direction. When our dad used to bring Jack and me here as kids, I always found myself pretending that the trees in the forest were really alive; that their legs were trapped underground and the bones of their arms had broken as they were growing, splintering off haphazardly. But now, the imaginings that I had so welcomed as a child were the very things causing me to panic every time I heard the distant shifting of leaves or snapping of twigs.

I walked for half an hour before things started to seem familiar. An iron fire pit with the initials R. L. carved into the side. A tree that had once been struck by lightning that now lay split open; its insides splayed, but healing. A metal picnic table that had become overgrown with weeds and moss.

"Jack!" I couldn't remember exactly how to get back to the site, but I knew I was close. I called out a few times for Jack. At first he didn't answer.

"Jess?" His voice echoed through the branches and for a second, I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. "Jess?" he called again.

I forced my legs to walk, told my lungs to do their fucking job. "Jack, it's me!" I still couldn't tell exactly where he was, so I followed the sound of his shouts.

"Jess?" He was moving now. I could hear nature being crushed under the weight of his hiking boots.

I followed the sound until I found the campsite. The one that dad had started taking us to after mom left. We went every year until dad passed. Even as teenagers, we welcomed the excursion. But when I came into the clearing and Jack peered up at me, something about him was different. Strange. He had lost a significant amount of weight. His hair had grown, but not in a natural pattern. Some segments were cut much shorter than the longest pieces that brushed his jaw line. I almost wouldn't have thought that that man was Jack, except for his eyes. They were the same as mine.

He was midway through stepping out of his tent when he saw me. "Hanna?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Hi." I could tell that he was searching his mind for more to say, but appeared to come up empty.

"Hi."

"What are you doing here?" He rubbed the palm of his hand against the back of his head, and something inside of me ached because I had often seen our father do that exact thing, open his hand in the same way, curve his back in the same arc. Somewhere along the line, Jack must have adopted the habit.

"A girl named Jess Calloway came to my apartment at six this morning, claiming that you were missing," I tried to sound irritated, angry, or spiteful. But the truth was that I wasn't.

His shoulders dropped slightly, disappointed that I

hadn't come here on my own after four years and several dozen letters explaining that he wanted to keep the tradition alive and to please talk to him. "Sorry about that."

"No big." I shrugged. "But why didn't you just tell her you were here?"

Jack made his way to one of the camping chairs he bought. The fabric barely expanded under the weight of him. Beside him were two more chairs. Dad's. And mine.

"I don't know." He shrugged one shoulder. "This is our thing."

I nodded because he was right. It was our thing. And he had kept it alive, kept it protected, while I was off pouring sugar-free lattes and burning biscotti.

"How's your art?" he asked, and suddenly that anger that was missing flared up.

"I haven't done anything since dad."

"Nothing at all?" The look on his face was a mixture of sadness and pity. I didn't want any of it.

"Nothing at all."

For a few moments, no one said anything. It was after noon, but the sun was barely visible through the overlapping branches of trees.

He was the first to break the silence. "Have you gotten my letters?"

"Yeah." I suddenly wondered if I was wasting my time. "Well, I should probably head--"

"Hanna." He rose to his feet. "I'm sorry."

I didn't know what to say. Or do. I wasn't even really sure what he was apologizing for.

"When dad died, it was my responsibility to take care of you." He walked toward me. "I don't know what happened, I mean..." His voice became too caught in his throat to speak, his eyes red and desperate and wet. And I understood. I didn't know either. Not really.

I looked at the hunched curve of his shoulders and the way that his head fell into his hands when the tears began, and all I could think was that it didn't matter. The years of phone calls that faded into emails into letters into nothing; none of that mattered. He was sorry and I was sorry and too much time had passed without us being here, being together, being us. So I let go. I let it go. And it was easy. So much easier than I thought it would be.

"Okay," I said.

Jack looked up at me from behind his fingers. "What?"

"I said okay."

"Yeah?" He looked simultaneously hopeful that things were finally getting better and fearful that I was playing some kind of joke.

I smiled. "Yeah."

Jack quickly crossed the distance between us and wrapped his arms around me. He was still shaking in rhythm with his sobs, but I held him as he had held me after our mother had abandoned us, as we should have held each other after our father died.

"Will you stay for a while?" he asked.

"Do you have s'mores?"

He laughed. And just like that the pain was gone. Yes, we both missed our father. Yes, even four years later, we were still in mourning. But we had spent that time not only mourning the man that we both loved so dearly, but also mourning each other. And now we would miss him together.

Throughout the night, Jack and I drank beer and smoked. When we shared s'mores, he devoured them with such intensity that I wondered if maybe he had been waiting for me to come here, to roast marshmallows with him, to cover our faces in chocolate, before he would eat anything. Maybe that was where his weight had gone, lost with all of the other pieces of our lives that had been swept away without our knowledge or consent.

We talked about everything. Work. Friends. Life. I told him about Lorenzo and as I did, I felt something stirring inside of me. I told him about how Lorenzo was a street artist and how he painted me the first time he saw me. I told him about the way that even though we slept together and were happy together, that I couldn't bring myself to take the next step with him. Eventually, I stopped talking and just listened to the sound of Lorenzo's voice in my mind, the gentle lilt of his slight Spanish accent. I thought about the way that his rough, tan skin seemed to always be warm and welcoming.

"It's okay to want to be with him," Jack told me. "I know things have been hard since dad died. And I know that what happened with us didn't help. But you're allowed to be happy, Hanna. You're allowed to have relationships and connect with people."

"What if he leaves?" I had been thinking those words since I first met Lorenzo. What if he stops wanting me?

Jack shrugged, smiling. "It's the risk you take."

I nodded, and I knew that it was time to come clean. "I have something to tell you, Jackie."

Jack laughed. "Oh God."

I continued on, knowing that if I didn't tell him then, I never would. "And I don't know if I should or if it's my place or whatever, but, um...Jess is pregnant."

Jack's turned to look at me, his expression so confused that his eyebrows nearly touched. "What did you say?"

"Jess is pregnant. That's why she came to see me. That's why I came looking for you."

"She told you this?"

I nodded.

Jack sighed again and leaned back in his chair. He was quiet. After awhile, he smiled and shook his head. "Alright. Well, hey. Maybe if we get married, you can bring Lorenzo to the wedding."

We laughed. I shrugged. "Maybe."

I spent the night with Jack. He planned to cut his trip short due to Jess' pregnancy, but we both agreed that one more night away wouldn't hurt. We never bothered to retire into our tents. We never bothered to sleep. We stayed up, sometimes speaking, sometime basking in the echo of the other's voice. And it was just as it had been, four years before, only brighter and even more peaceful. The next

morning, I helped him pack up the tent and chairs, and we headed home early. Before I left, I texted Lorenzo.

Hey. Can you meet me at Java Mama? Around two?

His response came within seconds.

Yeah.

The drive home was not as difficult as the drive out. I followed Jack nearly the entire way until the time came for us to turn to our opposite sides of town. As we peeled away from each other, he stuck his hand out the window, gave a short wave, and brought it back in. I followed suit.

When I got to Java Mama that afternoon, Lorenzo was already waiting. He stood and hugged me when I came through the door, and the heat from his body was familiar and honest. There was a tension to it that I didn't recognize, but that I knew I had caused. I ordered my coffee (sans biscotti) and sat down across from him.

"Where were you?" he asked, refusing to look at me, but instead analyzing the dents in the table that we sat at.

I cleared my throat. "I was with Jack."

Still he didn't look. "Jack who?"

"My brother."

Lorenzo took a moment to process this. Once he had, he sat back slightly, his shoulders relaxing. Finally, he looked. "Oh."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Not just for disappearing yesterday. For being confusing. For being frustrating."

He stared at me for a long moment before taking my hand. He gave me a one-shouldered shrug. "It's okay."

"It's really not."

Lorenzo said nothing, but simply began drawing pictures in my palms with the tips of his fingers.

And even though I was nervous, and I was convinced that my heart would slam through my chest at any moment, I said, "I was thinking...Jack's girlfriend, Jess, is pregnant. He's thinking about marrying her. Would you maybe want to go with me? To the wedding?"

He looked up at me, clearly surprised by the suggestion. "As your boyfriend? Or as the guy you sometimes sleep with and then abandon in the morning?"

I deserved that. "The first one."

His face didn't change at first, and I was left to wonder if it was really the end, if he was really over the half-commitments I made, if Jack was wrong and he really was going to leave. Finally, he smiled. "I would love to."

Jack called me later that day to make sure I'd gotten home safe. In the background, I could hear Jess laughing at some TV show, and behind me, Lorenzo was setting up his easel next to mine, which currently held a large canvas frame and the infantile beginnings of a larger picture.

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to come find you," I said, once the small talk had ceased.

Jack was quiet for a moment. And then: "Do you guys want to come over for dinner?"

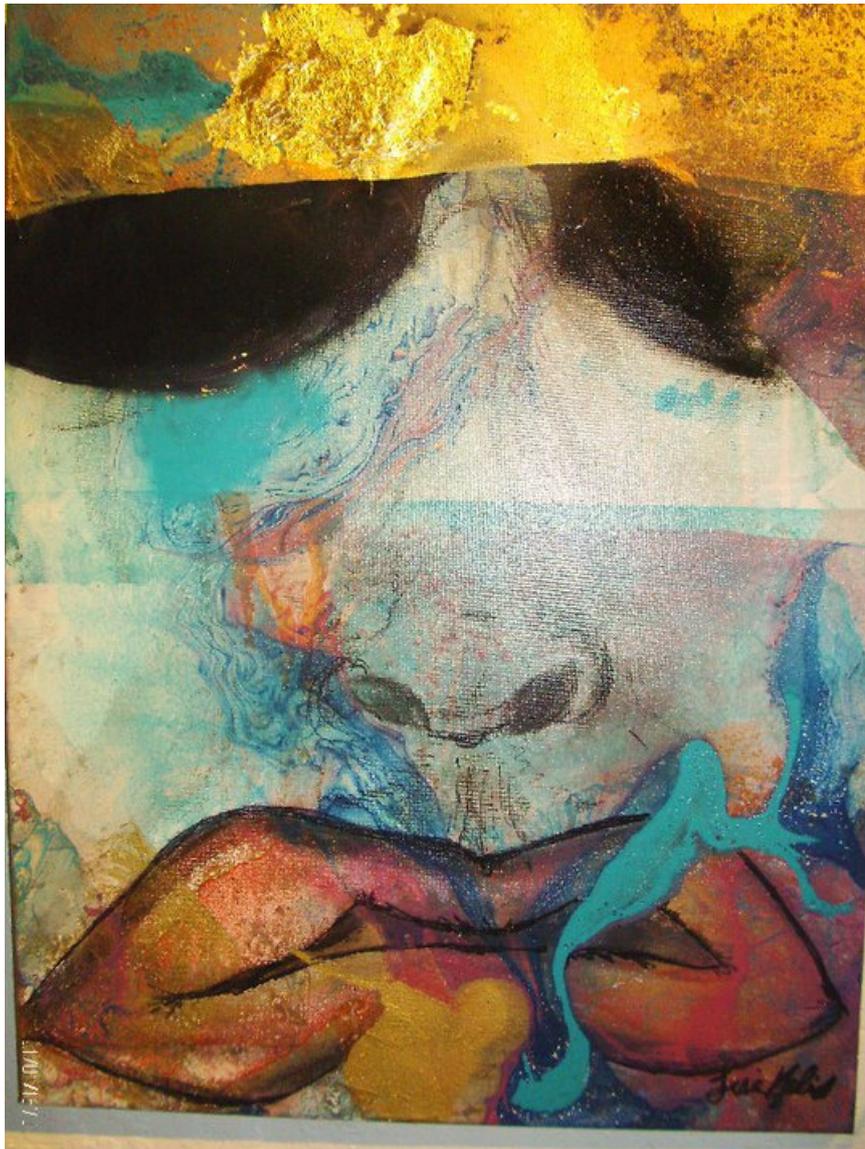
I peeked back at a shirtless Lorenzo who was mixing his paints. He noticed and shot me a one-sided grin.

And even though Jack couldn't see me, I nodded and smiled. "Yeah."

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# Mick Jaggered

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**by Lisa Marie Meli**

*Lisa Marie Meli is an artist from Southern California, currently residing in Arizona. She enjoys creating pieces that challenge the viewer, and considers her work abstract but tangible. Her works are many but to name two: Horse of a different color, And then the King stopped laughing, but mostly she has done private contract editions and murals.*

# Complex is the New Simple

by Eve M. Kerrigan

*Eve M. Kerrigan is a writer of fiction, personal essays and screenplays. Her work has appeared in the online magazine, "Sociology of Style," pop culture blog "The Narcissistic Anthropologist," and on her personal blog "Tumsen.wordpress.com." She is a mother-to-be and a caretaker of small animals and she has recently moved back to Southern New England after a long absence.*

## Complex is the New Simple

She DIDN'T KNOW what they were talking about. When she was younger, Sarah had fancied herself knowledgeable about cars. She knew, for example, that Jeep parts were compatible with old Willy's delivery vans. She knew the sound of an axle dangerously close to snapping. She knew how to check her oil, how to change a tire, how to jumpstart a dead battery.

But this was different from all of that. This was a computer problem. And it had to do with the ABS (whatever that was). And it didn't absolutely *need* to be fixed, but it was better if it was (whatever that meant). It was all so vague.

It used to be, when something went wrong, you found the broken piece and you replaced it. Problem solved, simple as that. Now, there were computers and complicated electrical symbols to contend with and what seemed like one thing might actually be something else... It was enough to make you go vote Republican.

She tuned out the rest of what the mechanic had to say and nodded her head. Then she called James to come and get her.

He arrived at the garage in the midst of a torrential downpour. She ran through the rain and plopped into the passenger seat, soaked through. The car's air conditioning felt sharp on her skin after the warm summer rain. She instinctively moved the vents away from her and pointed them at her husband.

James was distracted and looking at his phone as he said hello. For some reason, looking at him then reminded her of a dream she had the night before.

She had been floating in a pool in a bright, sunlit atrium. An enormous crocodile was swimming towards her and she knew it would eat her. She struggled with it in the water as James sat on the apron of the pool and shouted encouraging words. She finally subdued the crocodile, rolling it over by its impossibly tiny forelegs.

When she got out of the pool, she realized her beloved

cat Willow was in the room along with some other small, vulnerable animals. She would have to get them all out, quickly, or the crocodile would wake up and eat them.

She managed to usher the little beasts out of the atrium (frying pan?), and into a large field—which was, of course, filled with tigers (fire?). She had just managed to secure the atrium doors when she turned to see her cat approaching the crocodile who had somehow escaped into the field. She snatched Willow up and tried to fly away, but the crocodile grabbed Sarah by the leg and weighed her down, and down, and down, and she couldn't fly.

She lost Willow to the crocodile. The crocodile turned into a young, black-haired child. Sarah woke up crying.

James put his phone down and ruffled her wet hair and kissed her. She noticed a hole in his shirt as he raised his arm. The shirt was one she had given him. The hole he had gotten elsewhere. The shirt still looked nice. James still looked nice.

He was handsome. She saw women look at him all the time. She didn't care. She didn't get jealous. She couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing. She did smart, though, when people ignored her. Sometimes when they went to parties, she would try to speak. She would try to get a word in, but she couldn't. Nobody was listening.

"Do you want to get lunch?"

"Yes."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Wherever."

Wherever. When had this impotent phrase entered her vocabulary? It was a cousin to 'whatever.' Whatever was usually found hanging around the vocabularies of sullen teens and ironic hipster twenty-somethings. It was the offspring of irony and apathy.

Whatever. Wherever.

These terrible non-answers, non-opinions, should automatically be met with harsh consequences, she thought. Wherever? Ok. How about lunch in a bombed-out build-

ing in a war-torn Middle Eastern country, the corpses of innocents littering the landscape? Whatever? Great. Then, we will dine on rotting fish and an assortment of live insects on a bed of frisée. Sarah really hated frisée. Well, there, she thought. At least that was a strong feeling about something, even if it was only lettuce that resembled pubic hair. She vowed to banish wherever and whatever to the language graveyard to be buried beside such mealy-mouthed terms as "nonplussed" and...

She suggested, "Why don't we go to the diner?"

James thought for a minute and said "Well, I was heading for the cafe. I didn't think you cared, so... Besides, the cafe is a little closer."

"Yeah. That's true," she said. "Alright." And so they went to the cafe. Sarah noted as she sat in the banquette that the Specials Menu offered a \$10.00 frisée salad. She began to look over the menu but was distracted by James' fidgeting. "Something wrong?" she asked. James looked uncomfortable. He glanced from side to side.

"I don't know... I don't know if I can sit here," he said. Sarah sighed. They had been through this many times. It was not unusual for them to change tables at a restaurant three times before James felt comfortable. What was unusual was for Sarah to take the banquette seat. She'd learned a long time ago that, even though she herself preferred it, it was just easier to give that seat to James. It often made the difference between settling in and moving. But today...she supposed she had forgotten.

"Do you want to switch seats?" she asked, a little more sharply than she had intended. James' face grew tight, his voice defensive.

"I'll be fine."

She knew this was not so. But, she decided not to press it, and to look at the menu instead. A waitress brought water as Sarah tried to decide between the quiche, a salad, and the turkey chili. She could feel James shifting across from her. He moved all of the items from the table—the salt, pepper and hot sauce, an advertisement for a brunch special—onto the booth beside Sarah. She tried to ignore him but she knew how this would go. She was faced with a dilemma—like holding onto a rising balloon. If she continued to ignore him now, to prove a point or in the hopes he would relax, it was more than likely he would grow increasingly uncomfortable. The waitress would come. They would place their orders. James would become more pronouncedly agitated and then, just after the food arrived and as Sarah was beginning to eat, James would insist they should move. He would say he had tried his best and would apologize, but would relocate their entire feast somewhere across the dining room where he felt the seating had better feng shui or (as was so often the case) where he was not in view of another diner he found off-putting.

Once they had moved in the middle of a meal because a man seated next to James— and out of Sarah's view entirely—was "energetically repugnant" to James. To be fair, once Sarah saw him and took in his bad skin and

poor manners, she found him to be literally repugnant.

Sarah found it so much more embarrassing when they moved after the food had been delivered. She also disliked being interrupted once she had begun eating. She just wanted to relax with her meal. She sighed again. She needed to nip this in the bud.

"James. Just take my seat. It's fine." James began to protest but she insisted, again, a little more sharply than she had intended. James became sharp in return and she realized she had the start of a fight on her hands. She labored to control her tone and soothed James, telling him she was just hungry and that, of course, they should switch seats.

She got up, letting James have the banquette seat, and oriented herself in the chair with her back to the room. Truthfully, Sarah hated sitting with her back to the room. Her father used to tell her she had been Wild Bill Hickok in another life and told her to watch out for the "Dead Man's Hand"—aces and eights.

But because James was so much more intense in his dislike, since they had been together, she had reconditioned herself to accept and ignore the discomfort of the seat. It was a choice. Ever the pragmatist, when faced with the dilemma of two people being uncomfortable versus one or two people suffering two different types of discomfort, she opted for the least impactful option. And now she barely noticed the awkward feeling of having her back to the room.

It was because she had her back to the window that Sarah didn't see it, but only felt a shift when everything darkened. Then she heard the sirens like everyone else.

Tornado sirens sounded different from emergency vehicle sirens or house alarms. She hadn't heard them in a really long time, but she got right away what they were. The manager of the cafe, a heavyset man who looked about forty-five but was probably closer to thirty-five, came into the dining room. He wiped his hands nervously on his apron. "Everyone! Please stay calm..." He didn't look calm. "The tornado sirens are sounding and we are asking everyone to please observe the usual safety practices. If you would each please take your positions under the tables. Your wait staff will make the rounds to collect all glass and sharp objects for safe storage."

Safe storage.

And what was this about "usual safety practices?" It wasn't as if they had attended the local cafe safety drill where it had been addressed in a humdrum manner that in the event of impending natural disaster, the obvious thing to do should be to crawl bodily beneath the dining table.

Sarah looked with wide eyes at James. He stared back. The manager droned on, still wringing his hands in his apron. Sarah said, "They're serious." She turned to look out the plate glass window at ominous skies. Nobody in the restaurant moved. She finally said, "Well. Let's get to it." She only knew she didn't want to have her back to a tornado. Sarah stood up and took her jacket

and placed it under the table. She sat on it on the floor under the table and James joined her there, their backs to the banquette. Other people started to follow suit and crawl beneath their respective tables. Servers and busboys quickly collected knives and water glasses in bus tubs and disappeared into the kitchen. Sarah and James interlaced their fingers. Sarah looked at the underside of the table she sat beneath and fixed her gaze on a particular piece of off-white gum someone had stuck there. It was the color of a nicotine stain or an old undershirt. She squeezed James' hand and thought about when they met.

She was an artist adrift in a sea of misfits and wannabes in Brooklyn, NY in the early 2000s. He was different from every other guy she knew. He seemed so normal, uptight even. Not that he was a geek or anything. He was conventionally good looking with longish blonde hair and green eyes. But that was just it. He wasn't trying to fit in by being different. He wasn't trying to capitalize on his idiosyncrasies. He was too much in his head for that. Some might have argued that it was pretentious the way he always had his face in a philosophy book at the bars, but Sarah knew that was just who he was. He had dropped out of grad school to move to NY and play drums in a jazz band. He was on a quest for truth. He had ideas, beyond how his hair looked and what band was bleeding edge or whether Damien Hirst was a real artist. He was, despite his lack of employment and self-indulgent habits, a man. Or at least, that was how he had seemed to Sarah, who had had her fill of wimpy hipsters posturing as modern sophisticates with their insouciant haircuts and longboards.

Now, 10 years later, she was sitting under a table with him, staring at a piece of gum. Had it been true? Was James the man she believed him to be? Or, a better question might be, was she the woman she wanted to be? Just then James squeezed her hand and she heard a lady's squeal over the monotonous blare of the tornado siren. She looked up and saw it: a twister right out of *The Wizard of Oz*, all gray and angry swirling chaos. It was coming toward them. But Sarah didn't feel scared. She just felt a cool and alert sense of awe. She turned to James and smiled. He met her smile with one of his own and she was so glad, in that moment, they were there together.

It was several hours before the siren stopped. The lights were out. The cafe had grown oddly warm. You never realized how air conditioned businesses are until the air goes off. Without the AC unit or the exhaust fans running, Sarah could smell all the food and organic matter mingling with the chemical odors of bleach and cleansers. The effect was cloying. The sky—which had earlier been a magnificent roiling showcase of pewters, charcoal, and pearl—was now just yellowish and drab. The rain continued to drive, but without the passion it had earlier. Now it felt like drudgery. Like it was raining because it had to. Sarah's back was stiff and her neck didn't feel too hot either. She sat up and bumped her head on the underside of the table. She felt like she had

been on an airplane for too long. Or like she was stranded in an elevator. Or trapped in a restaurant. Under a table. During a cyclone.

The cafe manager, whose name she now knew was Nishon, perked up slightly when the sirens stopped. All the customers followed his lead, peeking their heads out from under the tables they were using for shelter. They looked like prairie dogs, standing on their hind legs to allow their heads to pop up out of holes into the landscape, emerging to see whether what awaited them was food, opportunity, or death from above.

Everyone made their way out of their hiding places, stretching and smoothing rumped clothes. The women mostly looked ashen, the men disgruntled. Sarah just wanted to get outside. Even as a child she had loved to be out doors when a storm hit. The pressure drop, the shift in the temperature, the humidity, the electrical charge in the air. All of these things excited her, made her feel alive.

She picked up her things and tugged James toward the door, thanking their unintentional host, saying goodbye to their comrades in disaster.

As they exited the cafe, Sarah immediately understood they had been spared. The devastation was intense. There were the usual trees down all over. There were the branches, leaves, and trash that followed a large storm with heavy winds. But the trees lay on top of cars and homes. A church nearby had no roof. A fire hydrant was upended by a small car which had dropped on it. A geyser of water sprayed through and around the car.

"Whoa," said James. He pointed at a trailer that must have come from the trailer park five blocks over. It had come to rest, on its side, in the middle of the road, perpendicular to the flow of any traffic that may have come by.

Sarah and James stood in front of the spot where they had parked the car in silence. James' car, a recent model hybrid he had purchased under 6 months ago, was just gone. What would they tell the insurance company? It was one thing to say the car was totaled or stolen, but what happened in the case of the weather stealing your car?

Of course, looking around, she knew this was the least of their worries.

Sarah dug in the pocket of her coat. She had the receipt for the work being done on her car. She looked at James and they started walking. She was glad, after all, that they had come to the cafe—James' restaurant choice—since it was so much closer to the mechanic than the other place. They were very careful as they picked their way along the wet road, not to step in puddles that might have been electrified by fallen power lines, not to tread near errant tree branches that might be tangled with live wires. The rain had stopped and the temperature was bearable. After a mile and a half or so, they arrived at the mechanic and lube shop that had taken Sarah's car. It was dark there. At first it seemed abandoned, as though

everyone who worked there had headed home before the storm ever hit. But then Sarah saw a flashlight move and a voice called out, "Do you need help?"

Once they got Sarah's car, they drove toward home. When they got there, there was no home. Their house was gone. James parked the car in front of what used to be their cottage and Sarah jumped out before the car even fully came to a stop. It wasn't the house she was worried about.

"Willow!" She yelled, over and over. Oh my God, where was the cat? She kicked rubble over and jerked her head around aimlessly, helplessly. There was an old desk. She looked under it. Nothing. She saw an uprooted bush; she approached it, calling her cat's name. James joined her in the search and they scoured the strangely empty lot that had, hours earlier, been their home. Sarah sat on a cement step that used to lead to her front door. She remembered her dream the night before. The crocodile. The tigers. Willow, all those little animals, how she couldn't save them. She started to cry. And then she heard a familiar little trill.

She lifted her face out of her hands to see her tabby cat looking at her. Willow seemed entirely unfazed. The sound she made sounded like a question and matched the question mark her tail formed as her green eyes searched Sarah's face for the source of her trouble. "Willow!" Sarah picked the cat up and cradled her over her shoulder like a baby. The cat hung there happily as Sarah looked for James. "James! I've got her!" She found James staring at a broken piano. He was pressing keys and every other one made a sound, forming an odd, disjointed song. He saw Sarah and Willow and he rushed toward them wrapping his arms around them both. The cat made a bitchy little squeak at the added pressure of his embrace, but she didn't move.

"Well. Where to now?" James asked.

An hour later, the three of them were sitting in their one remaining car, which was now also their home, overlooking a peaceful lake. The cat had curled up on the back dash and was sleeping peacefully. Sarah and James contemplated their predicament in silence for a bit and then, for the first time in months, Sarah felt a strong desire to feel James' hands on her, his mouth on hers. She climbed into the driver's seat and kissed him. He kissed back.

They didn't know it yet, but as they slept in Sarah's old car, making the best of the leather seats and the stars, they weren't just homeless, they were pregnant too. One might say the accidental pregnancy had emerged out of a perfect storm of disaster, near death, loss and a perennial sense of human loneliness.

It used to be when something went wrong, you found the broken piece and you replaced it. In this case, the system was too complex to break down into parts. There was no mechanic who could fix this one. And was it the kind of broken that needed to be fixed? Sometimes some-

thing broken gets repurposed into something else useful or beautiful. Like a bathtub becoming a planter or a broken coffee mug holding pencils or an old car becoming a work of art.

## Paris

by JAMES R. ADAMS

*James R. Adams was born and raised in the mountain west of North America by a peculiar people, even by their own admission. He was educated at various institutions, but is basically an autodidact. When he is not writing, he is banging his head metaphorically against a wall because he is not writing. He like the arts, good food, a sound sleep, and pretty women, not necessarily in that order.*

Paris

Isle city of myriad million luminance.  
Seine serpent circling you,  
Caressing you with its dirty touch.  
I came in you, Paris,  
By heights unbound,  
Of shores you once did honor.

Paris

A dream who calls the Bohème!  
A flame flickering for Europa!  
A cheese for ravens, rabid rats!  
A flighty fashion for fickle fancy!  
A revolution for the art fed class!  
A Paris for all the lost to heed!

Paris

I meander your backlit ruelles.  
I smell your sweetened stench.  
There towers Eiffel majestic  
In his phallic might he reigns.  
I peer behind your gossamer veil.  
I feel, Paris, where he has pierced you.

Paris

Ancient lady, steeped dark in history,  
Clothed in bright, gay, nouveau hubris,  
She sirens and whispers her promise?  
Name me your own Paris, fair I am won,  
And I shall give you of my golden lux,  
But I reft your heart into my ground.

Paris

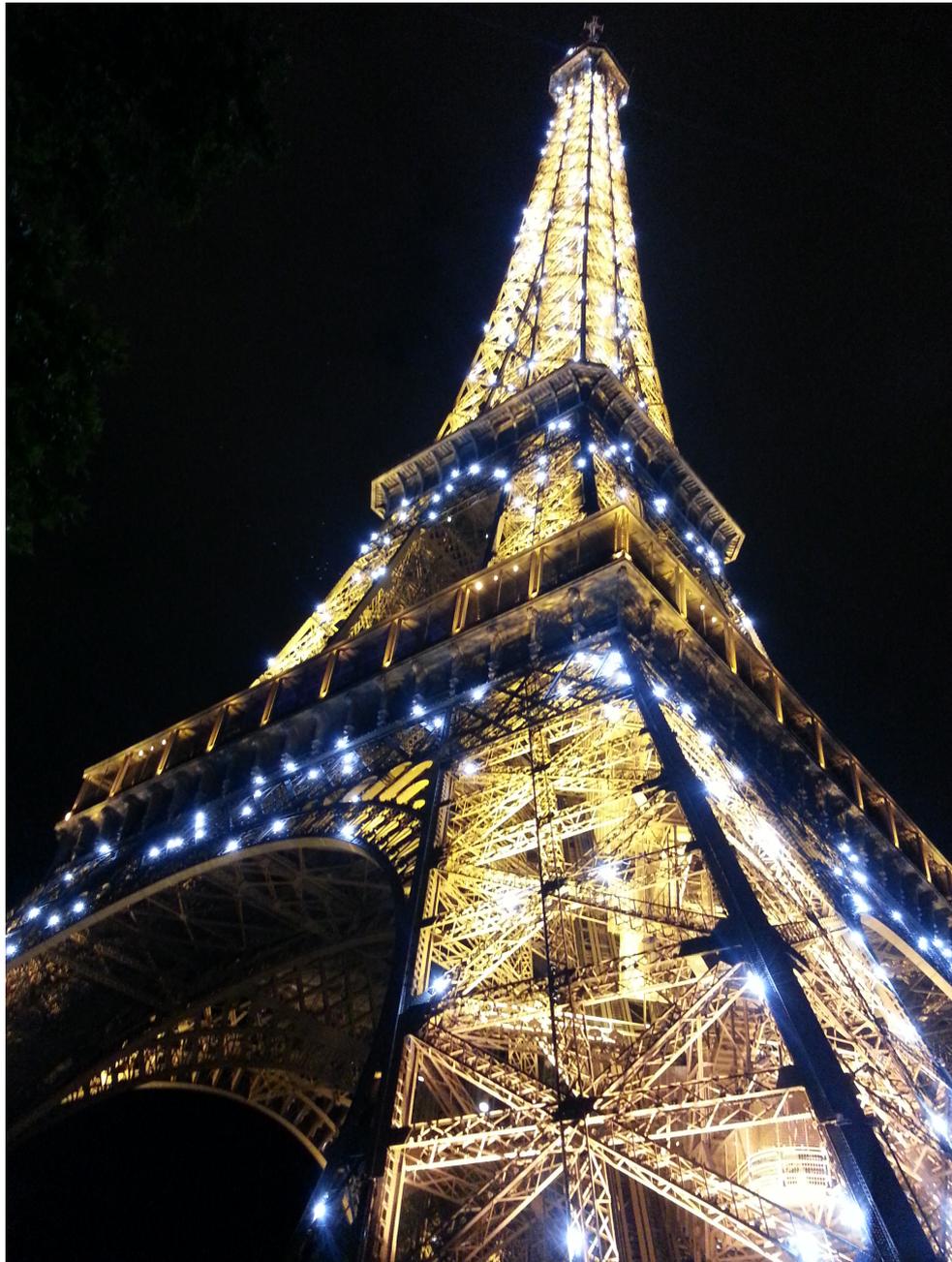
More vision than real.  
Long pigments of rays  
Only felt by immersion.  
Please, Paris, come not by  
A soul fiercely, but strain  
Your soft touch but light.

Paris!

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# Eiffel

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by James R. Adams

## M. Krockmalnik Grabois

*M. Krockmalnik Grabois' poems have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He is a regular contributor to The Prague Revue, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, most recently for his story "Purple Heart" published in The Examined Life in 2012, and for his poem. "Birds," published in The Blue Hour, 2013. His novel, "Two-Headed Dog," based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for 99 cents from Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition.*

### Wyoming

by M. KROCKMALNIK GRABOIS

The Marlboro Man  
 a cliché on a cliché horse  
 rides through the canyon  
 The gun is real  
 the bullet real  
 his depression real

Several generations ago  
 I came to Wyoming to kill myself  
 Well before I was born  
 I was destined to die by my own hand

I leave a custom guitar  
 built by my brother  
 bloody rosewood  
 shaped in his shop

Cottonwoods quarrel on the banks of the river  
 humans quarrel on downtown streets  
 in bars  
 in bedrooms  
 I leave a quarrelsome species

I rearrange my motley collection  
 of guitar picks  
 on top of my dresser  
 as if they were arrowheads  
 found in a field  
 My death was a glint in my great-grandfather's eye

My great-grandmother made a quilt  
 to keep her bones warm  
 She was always cold  
 a cold woman, said my grandpa  
 who had her for a mother

### Smoking

by M. KROCKMALNIK GRABOIS

Smoking damages the tissues in your penis  
 but Viagra makes it all right  
 like Jesus died for your sins

You can sin  
 and then repent  
 make it all right again  
 in God's eyes

You can take the little blue pill  
 you can bring a woman to orgasm  
 afterwards lay propped up in bed  
 enjoying a cigarette together

you'll never see her again  
 she'll never see you again

Smoking damages a lot of body parts  
 the airplane doesn't allow it  
 you can't disable the sensor in the toilet

The flight attendant watches you as if she knows  
 that smoking is your healthiest vice  
 She is fresh from martial arts training  
 knows how to control people in tight spaces  
 how to neutralize their bad intentions  
 She itches to try out her new skills  
 You live in a small space  
 in a large world

My rental car doesn't allow smoking  
 I open all the windows to the hot desert air  
 The tip of my cigarette is no hotter

For the first time in weeks I relax

# What the Bison Feel

by Mark Rigney

*Mark Rigney is the author of numerous plays, including Acts of God, Bears, and Ten Red Kings. In reviewing its off Broadway production, Theatre Mania called Bears "the best play of the year." His short fiction appears in The Beloit Fiction Journal, Unlikely Story, Black Gate, Witness, The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review, and Ascent, among over fifty other venues. "The Skates" and "Sleeping Bear", a pair of haunted novellas, are available from Samhain Publishing, and their sequel, the novel Check-Out Time, is forthcoming in fall, 2014. Two collections of his stories are available through Amazon, Flights of Fantasy, and Reality Checks. His website is [www.markrigney.net](http://www.markrigney.net).*

## What the Bison Feel

GROWING UP as I did in the semi-rural wilds of northern Franklin County, one could not help but stand in awe of the resident herd of elk and bison kept, stocked, and maintained by our local (sprawling) Anheuser-Busch plant. This particular A-B plant brewed only Busch Bavarian, the beer that later inspired that yawner of a slogan, "Head for the mountains." Mountains? In Central Ohio? Head for the ungulates, perhaps.

At the time, A-B had about twenty elk and maybe fifteen bison—or at least they did, until an overzealous poacher started picking them off, one by one, and the powers-that-were wisely spirited the remaining animals off to Busch Gardens in Florida. No one was ever prosecuted. That is to say, my father was never prosecuted—although he certainly should have been, since it was he who had taken cutters to the A-B fence and discharged his scope-equipped Remington into some five of the finest specimens he could lay his sights on. And, being a superior amateur taxidermist, he should also take full—if not public—responsibility for each of those lovely animal's eventual reappearance as stuffed and mounted heads decorating our humble farmhouse home. To this day, the large but still skittish elk surround the dining room on three sides, while the shaggy, brooding bison (which we stubbornly refer to as buffalo) have taken over the various too-small rooms, enjoying an endlessly shifting tour of the house, never quite fitting in but nonetheless spending quality time in stairwells, bedrooms, halls, closets, and even (for quite some years) the bathroom.

Imagine my visiting cousin Jeanie's surprise when, upon opening the shower curtain first thing on a dark winter's morning, she discovered a bison glowering down at her naked, chilly body—a bison head that had, owing

to its many travels and enforced time in the humid atmosphere of our unvented bathroom, become grisly with slime, molds, and a sticky, fur-drenching sheen.

Jeanie herself would make a good story, Jeanie who was naked far too often for her own good, frequently in all the wrong (if exciting) places. But, this is not Jeanie's tale. Nor, practically speaking, is it the story of my ongoing fascination with fetching cousin Jeanie, or even of the five mounted beasts that have amused us all thus far. This is, I believe, my father's story. My father the expert hunter and bulls-eye marksman, a man who never, ever forgot the once-in-a-lifetime thrill of poaching big game inside a metropolitan area. My father, beset by xenophobia and a penchant for the most simplistic of politics, who at the tender age of sixty-six has now taken it into his head to blow out the brains of any Arab he comes into contact with. And you thought this was going to be a comedy, didn't you? Arabs: unpatriotic, Anti-American, Freedom-Cursing Riff-Raff. And dangerous, too. So says my father, on supposedly good authority. It's nine in the morning, and my father has taken the truck (a very pampered F-150, midnight blue with a racing stripe, the sort of monolithic vehicle that I, radical wanna-be that I am, fervently hopes will be as extinct as a duck-billed hadrosaur in, say, five years' time). Where, I wonder, has my father gone? That he has taken a rifle from the living room display case is no surprise; that he has taken all of his rifles and at least four of his many handguns is something of a bewilderment. Even the elk, who stare at me from the adjacent dining room, appear perplexed. The farthest one, the one with whom I have the best line of sight, seems to be asking, "Is this really what results from a steady diet of pseudo talk-show news and the typeset badinage of knee-jerk Knight-Ridder columnists? Is this really how you humans think?"

"No," I reply, speaking aloud—since it seems no more ludicrous to speak to a dead elk than it does to consider how to track one's own father when said father is plotting an imminent rampage.

The university. That's the place where the most foreign nationals would congregate. But would my father, who doesn't much like to drive off our property, bother with taking his prized Ford all that way? It's six miles or more to Ohio State, with rush hour traffic everywhere you care to look.

No. (And "No" to the next nearest elk.) Father will be closer to home.

I consider the style of my father, the cut of his mental jib. Imitative, that's the descriptor that leaps to mind. Even his A-B wildlife spree came as a highly unoriginal afterthought, based entirely upon a magazine account of a similar raid by a highly excitable gas station attendant on a big game ranch somewhere in the thorn-twisted deserts of far southern Texas.

So...to kill the Hated Arab, Certain Islamist and Murderous Devil, my father will...?

Go to an overpass!

Not a very practical idea, but yes: that sounds convincing. In recent years, two different gun-men have taken over local highway overpasses and put bullets through unsuspecting innocents below. Both of these men made banner headlines in every direction, so yes, my father will surely have taken note of their methodology. Studied it, even—perhaps improved upon it. A brilliant thinker, my father? No. But clever. Wily like the proverbial hen-munching fox.

Our old farmhouse has been surrounded by developments of late—two-story brickwork, they shine like shopping malls by night—and our remaining few acres are hemmed and ringed by roads with evocative, lazy names like Pheasant Lane and Harvest Hill. Interstates zoom past in several adjacent directions; the overpass opportunities are many. I should call the police, but then they'd very likely raid the house and purloin the trophy heads. Which I'd rather they don't do, since I have a good mind to inherit all five. Well, four. The one bison is a truly horrid sight, and unrecognizable as a bison except by those who know already what nature intended her to be. Were Jeanie, or anyone, to see the beast now, unawares and without ample, brightly lit warning, heart attacks would ensue. Dire shrieking. Hospital bills of astounding size and egregious quantity would cap the experience. More coffee, methinks. And then, the police. Obviously. The lives of others are not going to be put at any serious risk on account of my wanting to inherit a coterie of plains-dwelling wall décor.

When I do pick up the phone, the officers on the far end of the line are cool and collected. They tell me to stay where I am. Everything, they assure me, is under control. "Actions," intones one, "have consequences."

Growing up in this house, where the evidence of past unpunished crimes literally stares from the walls, the no-

tion of consequences carries very little weight. But I do not explain this to the police. Instead, I immediately head for my car, parked in the dandelions and timothy at the side of our long gravel drive. I admit to owning a turbo Saab. I like the power. I like the fact that when you spell it backwards, it bleats like a flock of woolly sheep.

And then, with my key in the lock, my eyes and Ockham's Razor both come into startling focus. The simplest solution, therein the truth shall lie...so sayeth Ockham. Yes—and unless my eyes are playing tricks on me...yes, there. Parked just inside the barn (a staggering old collapse of a barn, not much use except as a sort of massive hunter's blind), I can just make out the F-150.

My mother died eight years ago, of cervical cancer. This detail would never even come into this story except that my father then hired a cleaning woman to pick up a few yards of household slack. Because this woman did her work quickly and well, with a thoroughness that in many ways improved upon my hectic, scattered mother, my father has had only the one cleaning woman for eight years straight. Her name is Nyala Albasti, she is Egyptian by birth, and if she actually practices her native religion, I have never seen the evidence. Quite the opposite, in fact; she does not even cover her head. But she is coming today, of that I have no doubt, because it is Tuesday, and on Tuesday mornings, the house will be cleaned without fail, Nyala-style. Unless, of course, she catches a bad case of very fast bullets.

"Dad!" I yell, already jogging towards the barn. "Are you doing what I think you're doing?"

My father emerges from the gloom just long enough to slam the barn's sliding doors, but because they no longer track, they resist his efforts. Frustrated, he clambers up into the tailgate (he's parked backwards with the quad-cab facing the mounds of abandoned farm machinery that pile, corpse-like, against the back wall), and he cackles as he raises the first rifle his hand contacts. "You stay outta this, Benjamin. This is between me and the terrorists!"

I would very much like to tell him that Nyala is not in any way a terrorist. She doesn't have time to be a terrorist. No full-time cleaning lady does. However, words fail me, because I am not accustomed to having a rifle pointed at my face, and the fact that it is my father doing the pointing makes it all the more unappealing, vivid and dangerous. Dad and I, we love each other in all the usual complex and history-laden ways, but we don't really get along. And it's true, I only came home this week to consign him to a retirement facility, and to get his obvious Alzheimer's well-diagnosed by outside parties. True, the remaining acreage would then change hands, from his to mine—but this would eventually have been the case no matter what. It's in the will.

Do I admit that the amount of money to be made from this last farmland bastion, standing as it does in such a sea of profitable suburban-blight housing, would be quite frankly mind-boggling?

Yes, I say, bride-like. I do.

Could these facts be what boggled my father's mind? A good question—but one I'd better wait on. My father suddenly fires his rifle. I duck instinctively, and the bullet sings past my ear with an insect squeal. That was awfully close to be a warning shot.

Perhaps it wasn't a warning shot?

I dive for cover, landing smack in the very same poison ivy patch that once got hold of my ninth-grade girlfriend (her thighs in particular) and made her hate me forever.

None of this is going as planned.

"Dad!" I yell, trying to be calm—and I can almost manage this, this calm yelling, since at present my father and his weapon are not in view of my damp, itchy ditch.

"Dad, you can't just go around shooting people! Not me for sure—and definitely not everyone in the world who you think might be an Arab!"

"Crap in a pile, son!" roars my father. "I don't want to kill all the Arabs! Do y'think I'm off my chair?"

He does sound very lucid. So, I take a breath, consider my reply, and stand, slowly, hands up in surrender.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"You're going to shoot Nyala?"

"Of course not! Have you tasted her stromboli?"

I have. It's excellent. And yes, I comprehend that both his logic and my reaction are storm-warning signs of serious character defects. But now is not the time.

"Dad, who are you trying to shoot?"

In the distance somewhere behind me—and everything suddenly seems quite far behind me now—a car turns off of pavement and begins to rumble up our pockmarked, gravel drive, one slow, tire-beaten rut at a time. Ever-punctual: Nyala.

"I never thought I raised a nitwit, Benjamin, but honestly. And with a job like this, I don't know why I should have to explain it."

"There's no job here, Dad. Except for maybe putting the guns back in the house."

My father steps clear of the barn, and his eyes gleam like a wolf's on a warm and gory scent. "I'm gonna shoot me some Arabs," he drawls, "but just so's you know, I'm gonna start with you."

"Oh, come off it—"

Nyala's old but serviceable Escort is very nearly at my back now. She toots the horn on spotting my father, a folksy habit of hers that makes me jump like a startled bunny.

My father raises the rifle. "Benjamin, I'm not near as sick as you think, so: this is for tryin' to stick me in a home and get hold of my house—and for tryin' to save a bunch of hate-mongering aliens who're doin' their damndest to undermine both our ways of life. Now, I got an overpass to get to. Hold still now, so's I can get your vitals." The punch of the bullet sends me sprawling. For a moment, my eyes clamp shut. When they re-open, I can just make out a thunderhead of malt-scented clouds boiling fast toward Heaven.

Gorgeous.

Back here on earth, in my kingdom of weedy grass, with Nyala screaming in the background and my father chasing after her at an ungainly, arthritic trot (he's using all his country charm to reassure her), a brand new empire of pain opens before me, ready to swallow me whole. Bullets. Lethality. Small-scale domestic dramas writ suddenly large. Is this what the bison thought on, when my father did this to them?

## Letting On

by C. B. DROEGE

*CB Droege is a fantasy author and poet. Recently his fiction was included in the sci-fi adventure anthology "First Contact Imminent". A selection of his poetry will appear in the upcoming "Drawn to Marvel" anthology. In 2010 he was awarded the annual R.M. Miller Award for Outstanding Fiction Writing. His first novel, "Zeta Disconnect" was released in May 2013. CB lives in Cincinnati, where he is also an Adjunct Instructor of English at Galen College. More about and from CB can be found at [cbdroege.com](http://cbdroege.com).*

THE WORLD LOST another great one when she flew. The lost little girl that we all knew and loved wasn't who we thought we all saw. She was daring and skilled and had everything, but on the inside she was weak and lost and already dead.

It's like my grandfather once told me when I was a kid: "Everyone is weak on the inside. Deep down, everyone is crying every minute of every day, only sometimes you can't tell. Sometimes they're good at not letting on."

She was one of those. She was good at not letting on. No one knew. She must have felt so alone; up in her tower, surrounded by friends and courtiers, yet all the time no one knowing that she was lost, that she was dead inside.

When she stood upon a merlon and leaped from the tower, we all were in the middle of a laugh. We were high on her. We loved her. We were all laughing and laughing because she said something funny, but we didn't see until later that it wasn't funny after all. It was never funny.

We were still laughing when she struck the earth. We were surprised, and when we saw that she was gone, we didn't stop laughing right away. The laughter died down slowly, and painfully. It crawled to a stop that left the world in silence, and for a long moment, there was nothing. Nothing in the world existed except the tower, the dead girl, and a swirling air that held the awkward echo of a thousand drowned chuckles; a million strangled guffaws.

We all looked down and said, "How sad. She must have been so very lonely with all of us pulling her so very, very close." And we were sorry to have been the ones to kill her.

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## Untitled (February Collage)

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**by Ira Joel Haber**

*Ira Joel Haber was born and lives in Brooklyn. He is a sculptor, painter, book dealer, photographer and teacher. His work has been seen in numerous group shows both in USA and Europe and he has had 9 one man shows including several retrospectives of his sculpture. His work is in the collections of The Whitney Museum Of American Art, New York University, The Guggenheim Museum, The Hirshhorn Museum & The Albright-Knox Art Gallery. His paintings, drawings, photographs and collages have been published in over 150 on line and print magazines.*

## Leila Einhorn

*Leila was published in the spring 2011 issue of Literary Laundry, where she received the Undergraduate Award of Distinction for her poem "In the Beginning". She is a former New Jersey Governor's School of the Arts scholar in Creative Writing, and has read her work at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. Her senior project at Brandeis University, a chapbook entitled An Asbestos of Stars, was the recipient of the 2012 Andrew Grossbardt Memorial Poetry Prize. Leila currently works as a bookseller in Boston, MA, and seeks to answer all the rhetorical questions in Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone".*

## Insomnia

by LEILA EINHORN

Must I divide myself  
again?

Lately, life comes as cast-off stills  
from a film noir I fell asleep to.  
All night the village glows angular, misty  
beneath a streetlight moon.

Here, a woman knelt to let her piss  
spread like blood on blotting paper.  
Now, moths roost upon a rotting apple.  
Then, the night's impossible secret.  
Tomorrow-rain.

And far away, a funeral.  
Its drums and palm wine laughter  
trail me as I walk home alone.

A cat chases a dancing shadow.  
When I approach, the animal recedes  
back to the rooting dark.  
A moth, the size of a bird,  
wings torn as a child's dress.  
They flit stop-motion,  
antennae bristle.  
Then, nothing.

A moth, the size of the moon.  
Must I divide myself in two?

## Still Life

by LEILA EINHORN

Moon ignites  
his freckled back.

This one has a wife,  
who lives only in photos  
he took during two  
doomed years in Japan.

Beside brittle fields  
and a bed too small  
to sleep in, he trapped her two-dimensional  
with the wonder of a sculptor  
watching bodies made of glass  
dive to sidewalks.

Her mouth  
is the round stone of a cherry.  
Her skin  
is the black forest floor.

I see them pass  
a bottle of sake  
back and forth  
in a brown paper bag  
as they walk to the dam—  
"The only place in the village,"  
he said,  
"where you could still  
feel alive."

There were spiders and trees  
but the lightning bugs  
had gone extinct,  
replaced by telephone wires,  
low roofs.

I am not his lover.  
I am just a witness  
to another's  
ineffable life.

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## Cold Frog

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**by Anji Marth**

*Anji Marth provides visual art from her nomadic background. A professional tattooist, she brings to flesh the imaginings of her clients. Living now in the Pacific Northwest, Anji finds inspiration in her surroundings, often adventuring in survival hiking. Material base for sculpture is found during walkabouts, while the northwest wildlife influences her paintings and photography. She is a traveler in temperament and as a necessity to discovery. Regular cross-country wanderings submerge Anji in the beauty and culture of the back roads of America.*

# The Background Artist

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by Sadie Miller

*Sadie says: I have had work previously published by Aurum Press, Gothic City Press with forthcoming work appearing in Prole Magazine and Snowbook Anthologies. I have also had poetry published by the Red Booth Review, Clockwise Cat and The Commonline Journal. I currently have an audio play in development with Audio Scribble for a Christmas 2014 release.*

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## The Background Artist

"ISN'T IT STRANGE, that we have the same birthday?" Alice stared up at the man she had imagined speaking to so many times from the cover of her *Picturegoer* magazine. Buddy Hunter. His face was tanned, coated in greasepaint, his robes draped over his shoulders, which were toned from hours of swimming in the pool at his Burbank mansion. The vast set sprawled out behind them, the Biblical scene with its thousands of extras burning under the high Californian sun.

"April nineteenth," Alice said breathlessly.

"April nineteenth," he said and winked at her. Someone behind him called out his name, and without turning around or tearing his eyes away from her, the man of Alice's dreams disappeared, as if he had been an apparition all along.

The blue velvet night was settling over the city as Alice drew up to the gates of Buddy's mansion. There were statues on the lawn, and every light in the house was on. Two gentlemen from the Studio were waiting, and once Alice gave them her name, the gates swung open, and she drove up the driveway. She parked the car and passed the keys over to the waiting valet.

The inside of the house was reminiscent of a French Chateau. Stars from every studio were there, not just MGM. His costar from the picture, Lana Spencer, was shadowed everywhere by her acting coach, Kasia, who was also handing her flutes of champagne. Her gown was floor length, and Alice could see the shape of her body clearly beneath the silk.

"Slave girl number four," Buddy purred behind her. Alice felt her skin zing under his words. She thought of when she had listening to his voice on the radio, lying on the floor so she could hear the sound of him breathing between phrases.

His skin was still tanned, even without the grease

paint, a Greek God. He took her hand, and led her into a side room.

"So, what brings you to the movies?" he asked her.

"I just love the movies. My brother was away a lot. After he died, I went even more."

Buddy watched her as she spoke. The way she rung her hands, the self-conscious way she rearranged her hair.

"I used to dream about escaping, seeing foreign lands and having adventures," she continued. "Silly really."

"I don't think it sounds silly at all," Buddy said smoothly. "That's what we all come here for. I came because I love the lights."

"The lights?"

Buddy closed his eyes. "I love the lights! All of them. I love the lights on set, the heat, the smoldering furnace that makes the sweat run into your eyes. I love each and every paparazzo, the lights from their cameras, taking your picture, immortalizing your face." He leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms over his head. "Most of all, I love the lights of the city. Sometimes I drive through it at night with the roof of my car down. The City of Angels. Her halo hangs over all our heads."

Alice watched him, transfixed.

"Did you always want to be a great actor?" she asked. Buddy chuckled.

"Every day is the greatest performance of my life."

Alice didn't know what to say to that, so she just smiled and rearranged her hair again. Her friend had tried to pin it up like the make up girls, but it still kept falling down.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house?" Buddy asked, smiling at her again. "Or how about I take you to dinner? I promise we can only order dessert."

He stood up, holding out his hand to her as if he was asking her to dance. Alice nodded, and took his hand in hers.

Buddy Hunter was the man Alice had always dreamt of marrying. Lying on the bed in her childhood room, she had looked out of the window and wished every night that one day he would be her husband. They had the same birthday after all; they were born under the same stars.

Now here she was, standing in a church surrounded by her family and people she had never met before. The lace sleeves of her dress danced down her arms, her veil covering her face discreetly.

Scott Erskine sat just within her line of vision, taking his place amongst some of the other Studio players. He was looking downwards, his eyes blank as if he were blind. His blond hair was brushed back, his suit a little too tight.

Alice remembered the first time she had seen Scott. He had been the double for Buddy on some of his earlier films, always in the background, just out of sight. Then she remembered the night she had noticed him. She had come home early with some exiting news for Buddy, her

hands around her belly, a star is born. But when she came home to the beautiful Burbank mansion, Scott wasn't in the background anymore. He was in the foreground, Buddy hovering just behind, their smooth golden bodies naked in the blue swimming pool water.

Monty, Buddy's manager, sat in the front pew next to her own family. It was cold as the grave inside the church, but Alice could see him sweating. Her mother and father gleamed with pride, whilst her sister Dottie looked around her, eager to catch the eye of her very own movie star.

Alice stood at the altar, waiting for Buddy Hunter, the man she was meant to marry. Hadn't she dreamt it so many times? She closed her eyes and felt every inch of the lace and satin against her skin, the buttons on the bodice pressing hard into her back. This would be her greatest role yet. As the organ music swelled behind her, filling the church, and the vicar looked at her expectantly, Alice began her first line.

# The Toothbrush and the Lie

by C. L. Rozelle

*C. L. Rozelle is a Dallas, Texas native and the mother of four awesome kids. She began writing poetry as a child, and is now working on her third YA novel, The Tree Makers, which she will be self-publishing this summer. She enjoys fiction that shows the brilliance of light in the dark. You can follow her writing journey here: [clrozelle.wordpress.com](http://clrozelle.wordpress.com).*

## The Toothbrush and the Lie

WHEN I see Charlie's toothbrush on the sink as I brush my teeth, once again, I leave it alone. After twenty-seven years of sharing the same six-by-eight foot space, leaving each other's stuff alone, I suppose it's out of habit more than anything.

They came to clean his stuff out of our cell and I don't know what came over me. I told those bastards it was my hootch and I'd be the one to decide what to do with Charlie's stuff, now that he was gone. They could see blood in my eyes so they left me alone. And for the first time in twenty-seven years, I was alone in my cell, with plenty of time to reminisce....

You'd think people would have more sympathy for men who've fought for this country once they've gone crazy. People love you while you're away risking your life in guerilla warfare, but once you come back, all you get is a sea of cold shoulders. It's enough to make a man hate; especially the Chucks that were the reason for the whole thing.

It didn't take me long to lose Mary once I got back from my second tour. After you've murdered thousands of people—women, children—you're a changed man. I wasn't the same long-haired boy they drafted, that's for sure. I was angry, drunk, and abusive, and eventually, after a year of that, my wife finally put me out. I was on the street for two years before I got so hungry and desperate for booze that I robbed an ice-cream shop. I'll never understand why I chose that place. Whoever heard of an ice-cream shop owner with a sawed-off under the counter? He pinned me to the ground with the barrel digging into my neck and his foot pressed into my upper back, waiting for the cops.

In that moment, I experienced a sort of death. My life passed before my eyes in snapshots, faded gray and tattered by my constant cramming of them back down in my pocket of memories—the ones I couldn't bear to stare at for too long. And then, I wasn't there anymore; I was under attack. I flipped around and took the gook's gun and fired, blowing his head against the wall behind him.

And then, I woke up.

They gave me life with no parole. And to pour salt in the wound, they stuck me in a cell with a goddamn Charlie. I told them they were no good fucking cherries, and if they didn't get that Chuck son-of-a-bitch outta my cell, I'd kill him. Just like I killed his relatives back in Nam. I threatened the slanty-eyed bastard, and beat him within a splinter of his life for touching my toothbrush (which he never did again), and ended up in solitary for a week. Then, they threw me right back in there, with him reading his gook bible. And I knew I was stuck with him. For good.

Weeks turned into months and then years, and Charlie and I learned to work around each other. He never touched my stuff and I never touched his. And looking at his bed—the cold blankets pulled back, bible still lain open, its pages fanned and crumpled beneath it—I haven't been able to bring myself to touch his things, even now.

\*

Charlie comes to me in a dream and tells me he always considered me a friend, even though we never once spoke. Even after what I did to him. Even after I never once called him by his real name. He tells me he forgives me, and that I should forgive myself, too. He says he'll be waiting for me on the bright side.

I gasp myself awake and stumble to the stainless steel mirror by the sink. I splash cold water on my face and struggle to breathe. I grip the edge of the sink with trembling hands, accidentally knocking Hao's toothbrush onto the concrete floor. I stare at it for a second in disbelief. I had just thought of him as "Hao" for the first time. I bend down to pick up his toothbrush, but instead I fold up under the sink, cradling it and sobbing like a school-girl. Hao was never the enemy I made him out to be. He left me alone because it was my wish. He never hated me or my sins. He forgave me, respected me when there was no one else left that did. Hao was no enemy...

And he was never coming back.

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# Ferns

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**by Bettina Swynnerton**

*Bettina Swynnerton originates from Germany but now lives in rural Buckinghamshire, UK.  
With a hands on approach to life, Bettina finds joy in the complex simplicity of nature.*

# Peter's Glasses

by Andrew Davis

*Andrew Davis is a recent MFA graduate of Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, MA. He likes stories that stay in the brain longer than they should, and hopes to write fiction that moonlights as one of your many moods.*

## Peter's Glasses

PETER INHERITED HIS grandfather's glasses. The rims were squares made out of tortoise shell, and the lenses were thick and smudged.

He kept the glasses on him even though he didn't need them. People asked, "Why keep them, then?" "They've got value," he'd say. "How much?" "Money couldn't afford them."

They were surprised that a man, in this day and age, could be sentimental. But the glasses were portable luck. He'd been unemployed for a year after college, and only when he wore the glasses to an interview for a copywriting job was he recognized.

"There's something worldly about him," said a manager. "He's been everywhere and yet he's so humble."

Then, there was the time he wore them on a windy day, so he wouldn't have to squint. But he couldn't see where he was going, and he collided with a young woman who'd almost walked into traffic because of her unruly auburn hair. The glasses made him look mousey and he had this habit of wiggling his nostrils to make sure they were firmly planted on the bridge of his crooked nose. For some reason, this meant he could do no wrong in the partially blinded eyes of this woman. After dating for two years, never once removing his glasses, and being very calculating when it came to protecting them, Peter did what most men in this situation would do. He married her on a surprise trip to Las Vegas to show he could also be "spontaneous".

Throughout the trip, when she would pretend to reach for his glasses, he would protect them like a force field. She'd say, "You're cute."

Peter climbed the company ladder, and soon found himself Creative Director. His co-workers were amazed by his skill. "It's the glasses." "How do you know?" "Look at those glasses, man! His eyes look like the screen of a new iPhone."

Eventually, Peter's glasses replaced the logo of the

company and were featured on the covers of magazines across the world. His glasses were the real deal. Employees, clients and competitors, strangers, and even his wife—jokingly, of course—tried to steal his glasses. He spent more time alone. When his presence was required, he always sat in the farthest corner of the room, so no one could sneak up on him, so he could sensibly react if someone tried a frontal attack.

In his opinion, life remained good until Peter's eyes adjusted to the glasses. He made the mistake of taking them off once. He'd knocked them off his desk, and being somewhat of a klutz, stepped on them.

He took them to every eyewear specialist in the city, but none of them had the materials or skills to fix them. The media coverage was unbearable. Stocks plummeted.

He needed a new pair, so he chose some wire rimmed spectacles and kept the broken ones in his pockets. Life slightly improved. He had no right to complain. He still had his wife and baby. He was still a boss. But, sometimes, when he stared out of his office window, the size of the city made him feel like an eyeball floating in a jar of formaldehyde.

People used to stop him in the streets, his co-workers used to open their hearts and minds to him. But now he felt even his wife and baby looked at him as though it was their first time meeting. This was worse than being mistaken for someone else. He couldn't be placed. The drama in the office that he had once squashed now flourished, and his wife and baby decided to tour Europe.

He didn't have to protect his glasses anymore. One night, he was in his study pouring brandy into two snifters. One was for him, the other for the broken glasses across from him.

"I didn't mean for this," he told them. "I never thought I was taking you for granted. Maybe I should have shared you."

The glasses lay like a crooked frown.

"Don't look at me that way," he said. "How was I

supposed to know you liked attention? I've tried to fix you. I've gone everywhere, but no one has the answers. Doesn't that count for something?"

Peter took a sip of brandy and removed his new spectacles. "If it wasn't for these, I'd be blind." He squinted as he examined them. "Jealous yet?"

He bent the spectacles then stomped on them. "Are you happy", he asked his grandfather's glasses. And then he finished his drink and the drink he poured for the glasses. "Come here," he said, and he delicately held them to his eyes. "I'm all smiles."

He waited a minute, expecting something major to happen, but instead his wife walked in with the baby in her arms.

"I thought you were in Europe?" he asked. "We were," she said, "but I couldn't sleep at night. I thought it was the accommodations or the baby crying, but I realized I only woke up when I rolled over, reaching for you and you weren't there, so we came home."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and the baby grabbed the glasses from his loose grip, giggling as he threw them on the floor.

Peter's lip wobbled.

His wife said, "Isn't that cute?" She handed him the baby and picked up the glasses. Like father like son.

Peter tried to speak, but the baby was pulling on his lower lip.

"Don't look so defeated," his wife said. "Those glasses were beginning to make me feel too young." She slid the glasses into his shirt pocket and took the baby who began to cry.

"Is there such thing as being too young," said Peter.

"You're cute," she said. "But, yes. When it feels the same as getting the easiest question wrong in front of your entire class."

## On the Consequence of Broken Pendulums

by MADELEINE LEE

*Madeleine Lee is an up-and-coming writer from the suburbs of California. Her work has been published in local newspapers and literature anthologies. She also edits in her free time for Polyphony H.S., an international literary magazine for young adults. Through her writing, she hopes to provide a voice for the issues faced by her generation.*

In the world without time,  
the sun hangs like a  
broken pendulum.

The trees do not  
shed their leaves,  
the sky does not darken;

the birds sleep and wake  
in impassive sunshine.

The humans resent it,  
of course,  
but they were  
always petty creatures.

They grow white beards  
and die,  
and their babies grow old the same day—  
or has it been a century?

There is no clock to mark hours,  
no hours to fill days,  
no days to end  
and begin again.

You suffocate  
for time's absence  
and choke for its fingers,  
shoving down your throat.

It is everything  
bred by nothing.

Tell me the cleverest  
kind of punishment,  
and I will tell you—  
Place a man under  
a broken pendulum  
and watch him rot,  
watch him beg you  
to end him.

Watch as the children play  
and the men work the fields  
and the women weave  
and the brutal (beautiful) sunshine  
shines on and on and oh so  
wonderfully (miserably) on.

Watch as there grows  
a lovely louse of insanity  
in the pupils of their eyes;  
watch as their hands grow  
restless, as their mouths  
curse the blue sky,  
and they scream  
and they are feral  
and they are terrifying,  
and still the sun basks  
its golden warmth over all...

And then they are dead.  
And the children play.

Place them in this world,  
I say,  
both she who curses time  
and he who wants all the  
time in the world.

# A Prince of Fire

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by Arthur Davis

*Arthur Davis is a management consultant, has been quoted in The New York Times, Crain's New York Business, interviewed on New York TV News Channel 1, taught at the New School University, given testimony as an expert on best practices for the U.S. Senate and appeared as an expert witness on best practices before The New York State Commission on Corruption in Boxing. He has written 11 novels and over 130 short stories. Over 40 stories have been published online and in print.*

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## A Prince of Fire

GATES WAS certain of his sanity. He didn't need a physician or therapist to confirm that, absent though shifting, telltale symptoms; skin crawling with ants, preference for isolation or aggression, heightened suspicion, belief in conspiracies, or hellish nightmares pursuing him into daylight, he was sound of mind and body.

If he closed his eyes tightly, he could clearly identify the individual cells responsible for his robust superiority.

Five years out of college and surviving off a small annuity purchased for him by his grandparents, he'd never held a full-time job, which he understood, would have been a distraction anyway.

As a devil spotter, a self-acknowledged savant able to detect the slightest shift and movement, the telltale signs of possession, he was also certain of his own fate and saw his future in dreams, and in the distrust and apprehension he created in others.

He reexamined his eggs then, closed his eyes, and, in several well-orchestrated gulps, finished his breakfast.

Phil Cleary came into the restaurant. He was thirty-three years old, an ex-superintendent, stockroom manager, ditch digger, and handyman. He had been married twice to two different sisters and had a child by each. He was Gates' best friend and manifest accomplice.

"You don't look any crazier this morning," Cleary said, as they always greeted each other and then popped a cigarette into his mouth. It would sit there for hours until the paper filter became soggy.

"How can you tell?"

Cleary looked distractedly around the shop. Rolled the cigarette across his lips. "I just know these things."

"Yeah," said Gates, recognizing the attempt at knowingness in this stocky young man's unsophisticated, unre-

fined, dark eyes.

It was exactly 9:22am. Gates counted twenty-nine customers in the restaurant. He had already spotted one man with the grayish-red cast in his eyes; the shade of the devil. The man was with his wife. They were in their early sixties. Friendly and deliberate, with an understated appearance as though both were hiding the truth. Gates noted that many people with the shade of the devil were not young, but older, more reliable citizens, like his parents.

Nicholas, his waiter, leaned against a booth and wrote out a check. He was pressing seventy and worn through. He once admitted to varicose veins. Gates imagined thick, twining red snakes strangling the man's legs, cutting, severing muscles and tendons. Connie Brisco passed behind him. Gates decided that she should take over his booth. She usually served him. But two women took his regular booth just moments before he entered. It bothered him. As she passed him again, Nicholas said something to her. She thought a moment then nodded and moved away.

"You have any money?"

Considering his latest master plan needed more time to refine, to consider all the ramifications and nuances and the fact that if perfected, might alter the outcome of modern civilization, Gates also understood, though reluctantly, the importance of remaining connected to the present. He pulled out a handful of trick money. "What do you think?" He unrolled several thousand dollars of white, pink, orange, and blue notes in different denominations.

Cleary was neither amused nor surprised. "You don't think anyone is going to notice?"

Gates leaned over. "Some, but not everybody is going to be that smart. That's the beauty of it. Sooner or later

I'm going to buy something cool for free because some retarded clerk wasn't paying attention."

Cleary appraised the logic of the argument. He admired Gates. He liked how the boy baited and hooked the unsuspecting. "Who else knows about this?"

"Just the two of us." Gates had been testing his theory for a week. Not in his neighborhood, but when he went on long walks that brought him to strange stores on distant streets. He had been rejected each time. The owner of a stationery shop at Harding Plaza threatened to call the police. But Gates believed in his scheme. And belief was everything.

"Very impressive," Cleary said, though inwardly undecided.

The busboy removed the dishes from the table. Connie came up right behind him. "You want anything?" she asked Cleary.

Before Cleary could respond, Gates said with a cautious flurry, "A cup of coffee for my friend here, young lass."

Gates was constantly upset about the sleights people in power used against him. They never brought enough butter when he asked for it, never filled his cup to the brim with coffee, and usually brought toast to the table long after the heat had pissed away.

Cleary, no longer curious about Gates' money, counted out five spoons-full of sugar and topped off the mixture with a smidgen of skimmed milk. "Woman's definitely on the rag."

"She told you?"

"No, I can tell by the way they walk."

Gates knew instinctively that Connie might not wind up a part of his plan, and admitted to himself that even trying to accommodate her limited skills and value he had already wasted too much time on such a pointless exploration.

"A very shapely young girl," Cleary declared when she first appeared three months ago. Cleary was also fixated on women, and their unnatural attraction to him.

"Amazing," he offered, simply to stoke the squalor of Cleary's theory.

"Human nature, and quite exposed to the trained eye."

Gates didn't have a trained eye as far as women were concerned. His strengths lay elsewhere. But the idea, the crazed imagery of having a trained-eye brought him instant amusement. Having a trained eye, one that would do what you wished without question and with undying devotion, captivated him. "Here eye, go fetch it. Roll over eye. Play dead. Now, bring me my slippers and pipe, eye." The gigantic celluloid eye suddenly collapsed upon itself and dissolved into the background leaving the reality before it, as was the cartoon of life.

Cleary completed two hundred rotations with his spoon. Less would not adequately dissolve the sugar. More would quickly dissipate the sweetness.

Having had his fill of distractions, Gates focused on what he did best, solving the critical issues of mankind.

He had already worked through solutions to world famine, systemic political unrest, and overpopulation. He left his apartment this morning with a redoubled determination to crack the issue of how to reconstitute the ozone layer, which he estimated was going to cause worldwide genetic mutations within the next two decades. Gates searched about for a clean napkin. He wanted to list his latest assumptions on this issue.

Cleary looked surprised. He tapped the table in front of him to get Gates' attention, then caught Gates' sleeve.

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Jensen," Cleary nodded. "He's over at the counter."

"Yes. So?"

"He's not supposed to be here." Cleary looked about the restaurant like an animal sensing the approach of an intruder into his territory.

"I know. I know. He just doesn't understand." He was annoyed, and felt as imposed upon as Cleary. Gates hated when things didn't go as planned, or when people arrived before they were expected, or at all.

Cleary continued to scan the coffee shop. No one else was there that he knew should not be there.

Gates did not consider Jensen a bad sort and not a threat, as Cleary would have him believe. Simply, one whom he did not go out of his way to associate with. If it weren't for Cleary, Gates recognized, there would be no one in his life except the candor he shared with himself. "I heard his sister was committed."

"Murdered?"

"I'm positive that she was committed," Gates said, uncertain if Jensen even had a sister.

"No," Cleary countered, momentarily eager to compete for the baton of the idea. "She was committed then killed in her cell. No one really knows who did it."

"That makes more sense."

"The family doesn't care."

Jensen paid for his paper and walked up to the table. "I saw you two hiding from me."

"If we were hiding from you, how could you see us?" Cleary asked.

Jensen saw Gates was distracted by something. "Because you're not that good and I'm too smart."

"But are you too smart, too clever, too devious, too reasoned, and discerning for the walls of society to contain? Are you too insightful to be put off or blinded or mislead, and too skilled at what it took to steeplechase through the bends and forks and obstructions of insanity?"

Jensen didn't respond. He'd gone down that Socratic path with Gates before.

Gates remained undecided as to whether Jensen would be included in his master plan. Jensen was smart, yet unpredictable, had some reasonable critical thinking skills, but also a reputation for being shortsighted. Gates needed to assemble the perfect team for the perfect plan to address the issue of perfection, which was at the heart of his strategic genius.

Cleary noticed Jensen's belt buckle. It was a large, hand-turned silver Western buckle. It wasn't cinched. It bothered him. "At least we pay our own rent and don't sponge off our parents."

"Is it true what I heard about your family?" Gates asked, as though the question had been on everybody's mind.

"Which is?" Jensen returned defensively.

"That you're not their child."

"You know," Cleary started, "I heard he was no one's child."

Jensen folded his arms across his chest. "You think that's funnier than pretending you're crazy?"

"You know nothing about crazy," Cleary answered contemptuously.

"I had counseling before you two knew what neurosis or Valium or Librium or Xanax was. I was in therapy before it was fashionable!"

"He's talking about the turn of the century," Cleary said to Gates, who roared so loud the cashier turned.

Jensen was upset. He wanted to sit, but not with Cleary who was wearing a shirt and pants that looked as if they hadn't been changed in weeks. And sitting next to Gates meant he couldn't look him in the eye. You had to keep your eyes on Gates. Everybody knew that.

"You sitting or going? Going or sitting?" Cleary asked in his sometimes-singsong manner.

"Stopping, stalling, or stooping to serve?" Gates asked.

Jensen pushed himself into the booth. Cleary didn't give up territory without a retaliatory nudge.

Gates traced the lip of his cup with his fingertip. "If you think so poorly of us, why are you hanging around?"

"Because you amuse me."

Thom Jensen folded his fingers against the edges of his newspaper. He never read it. He never even opened it. He simply took it home and put it on the one he had brought home the day before. Which had been set on the one he had brought home the day before that. Sometimes he would purchase two or three newspapers, mostly international ones, if he felt especially buoyant. Walls covered to the ceiling of his apartment with stacks of faded, curled newspapers blocking out windows, air, and life.

The two hundred, seventy pound, twenty-eight year-old wandered the streets browsing through paper stands to pick up the days crop, only to return to his apartment, examine the piles, and wait for the next day to evolve.

Gates quietly solved the ozone problem. Like all his discoveries, his solution would change the world. It was cost effective, classic, and elegant. "I think we should go out and celebrate."

Cleary looked confused. "Celebrate what?"

"The fact that the world wasn't annihilated today by a comet," he said, knowing it was too soon to share the true reason for his ebullience, but just right enough to ridicule Jensen for sport.

Jensen wasn't amused. Poking fun at him was unsympathetic and vicious. But that was Harold Gates, mean

spirited, moody and indifferent.

"Well, I agree. I think we should all chip in and buy a car," Cleary decided. "Summer is coming. With a car we could go out every weekend and drive to the shore."

Jensen shook his head. "I don't like the shore."

"You can always sit in the car and read a newspaper," Gates suggested.

"Yeah, you can guard the car," Cleary added, knowing that Jensen's unsettled frame would never fit in a bathing suit.

"You put up the money," Gates said to Jensen, "and we'll drive you around. It doesn't have to be the shore if you don't want to swim. We can drive up to the mountains."

"What a great idea," Cleary added excitedly. He and Gates had no money, but what they lacked in resources, they made up with enthusiastic manipulative creativity.

Jensen pulled nervously at the edge of his newspaper. A car. His father showed him how to drive once, then dissuaded him from getting a car, or for that matter, he felt, much of everything else that might liberate him from his parents' grasp.

"We have no right to tell Jensen here what to do with his money."

"The car would be in his name. It would belong to him. We would be his goddamn chauffeurs!" Gates barked at Cleary. "OK, then, we'll scrape up the money and he can drive us around."

Jensen was more uncomfortable with this. He didn't like being used and directed and, even if he remembered how to drive, he didn't believe he would fit behind a steering wheel.

"Either of you three big spenders want anything besides coffee?" Connie asked. The pretty blonde waitress actually liked the trio. They came in once or twice a day and provided some entertainment to her underpaid drudgery. They were all bright and quick and combative enough to be interesting. Gates was the quick-witted, ruthless ringleader. Cleary the unpredictable follower and Thom Jensen, the well-intended foil.

Gates liked her. "As a matter of fact, I used to be the Coffee Shop Critic for The New York Times."

"And I was the Pastry Critic, so why don't you tell Nick that he would be well served to provided us with his finest floury pastiche on the house," Cleary said, barely able to control his laughter.

Jensen looked up from his paper. "Do you think I should buy a car?"

"Absolutely," she said, delighted to being included in their maddening deliberations. "And drive the two of them to some other coffee shop," she added and dropped their check on the table and walked away.

"You shouldn't take her advice," Gates protested to Jensen as all three watched her move on to the next booth.

"She has no right to spend your money."

"Yeah, even if she likes you," Gates added. It was Tuesday. The solution to the ozone layer had taken him nearly a week. He estimated it would take another month, less if he was not distracted, to find the remedy to the newest strain of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

"What do you mean?"

Gates glanced quickly at an uncertain Cleary. "Sorry Jensen, it's none of my business. I should have kept my mouth shut."

"What a relief that would be," Cleary said.

Jensen felt he was being kept from the truth. "Hey, what are you two up to?"

"Let's not talk about it," Gates decided with an air of finality. "Not important."

"How are your parents doing?" Cleary asked Jensen. "God, I don't ever want to get old and have to move to Florida."

"You don't automatically move to Florida when you get old, you jackass," Gates admonished. "Look, Jensen, I apologize. Really. I just thought you knew about Connie. And anyway, who does she think she is telling you how to spend your money?"

"Unless—" Cleary began.

"What?" Jensen asked.

"Yeah, what," Gates chimed in.

"Maybe she wants you to get a car so you can take her out for long, romantic drives when you aren't hanging around with us," Cleary suggested with a studied finality.

"You think she would do it that way instead of just asking him outright?" Gates questioned.

Jensen let the question simmer. He didn't trust Cleary or Gates, especially Gates, whom he had known for years.

"I used to have the hots for her, but she wouldn't give me a toss."

Cleary wasn't certain if Gates cared for the twenty-four year-old waitress with the faint attitude and obvious wiggle. He guessed she'd been hit on by nearly every man, and possibly a few of the women customers. "And you know she never really talks to anybody."

"She talks to me," Jensen protested.

"How long has this been going on?" Gates demanded accusingly.

Jensen was flushed with the sensation of a rival's envy. A trophy you didn't want to share because it was too special for others to appreciate. It was the seed of boasts and conjecture and locker room bravado and something he had never experienced.

Finally, once he'd caught Gates' elusive attention. "It's none of your goddamn business."

Cleary took a drink. "Well, so much for the car."

"We still need to do something. Maybe something no one has ever done," Gates said expansively. He enjoyed bating them, though knew his work over the summer was critical to completing his master plan by the end of the year.

"Like what."

He looked at Cleary. "Like setting the world on fire."

Jensen sat up. His panic was instantaneous. His one fear, his one all-consuming dread, was that his collection of newspapers, that one thing he could do so well that could never be taken from him would somehow succumb to an errant conflagration. "Don't talk like that."

"Why not? You have to believe in your destiny."

"Which is?" Cleary asked.

"Well, I know what mine is. I've always known it. It's greatness. When I go it will be the beginning of a legend."

"Only greatness?" Cleary asked.

"You should never be afraid of your destiny, Mr. Cleary. Never. It's quite possible to set the world on fire. You should read some of the early scientific journals. Several noted German astrophysicists and a leading cosmologist in Russia in the mid- 70s and one from a prestigious Chinese physicist written in '83. It's been well documented."

Jensen saw Connie disappear into the kitchen. The idea of a sexy, pretty girl like Connie Brisco talking to him was so much of a stretch, setting the world on fire seemed considerably more plausible. And the fact that neither Gates nor Cleary was talking about her anymore gave their assertion that she liked him even more credibility.

"That's a lot of crap," Cleary announced.

"You big spenders want refills again?" Connie said making the rounds with a fresh pot.

"You think it's possible to set the world on fire my dear?" Gates asked, hovering his empty cup in front of her breasts.

"If you believe it, anything's possible." Her acting coach had said this. It instilled her with confidence, enough to let him take her back to his apartment.

"Wow. I'm really impressed," Gates said nodding his head submissively.

"I'll bet if you three put your minds to it, you could accomplish anything. Get anything you want. Make a name for yourselves instead of spending all your time in here arguing."

"To a woman of vision," Gates saluted with his coffee cup as she strode away.

"What a great piece of ass," Cleary said unable to take his eyes from her buttocks.

The comment irritated Jensen. "How?"

"How is she a piece of ass?" Cleary returned.

"He means how can we set the world on fire," Gates said, wondering what Connie would be like in bed. He'd only had two women in his life and one was so unpleasant he had to close his eyes when she undressed.

"You're afraid to buy a car, and you think you can set the world on fire?"

"What has one thing to do with the other?" Jensen said back at Cleary.

Gates interceded. "Actually, everything. One is an act of courage, and setting the world on fire is an act of infinite sacrifice. Both are hallmarks of leadership." He decided to ask Connie for her phone number.

Cleary put three tablespoons of sugar in his fresh coffee and began his ritual. "Let's get back to our waitress."

"No, I want to know more about how to set the world on fire," Jensen demanded.

Gates leaned across the table. "This is not funny, Thom."

Jensen was taken aback by Gates' rush of earnestness. "Don't you think I would understand?"

"Do you? Do you know what you're committing to? Do you know it hasn't been done because those committed to such an act would be the first to be consumed in the conflagration? They would be three of the greatest minds in the world, men unlike the world has ever seen."

Jensen saw himself standing by Gates' side, fathering the conflagration.

"You know what you would become?"

"No."

"A Prince of Fire."

Thom Jensen considered orange and red flames. Plumes of white-hot lightning danced in his head. There was no heat, but brightness everywhere, and at the center, with his hands raised toward heaven, stood Thom Jensen, master of the world.

He couldn't recall the last time he had been so excited. Even with Gates who was as untrustworthy as any man he had ever known, Jensen had heard the echo of truth. Who would have thought of such an idea? The Russians, of course, and the Chinese. Jensen had always held a special place for the mysticism and asceticism of the Orient, a land where truths were held sacred. A Prince of Fire? Any waitress would be impressed by that.

"You don't look well, Jensen," Cleary said.

The mountain of a man-child was considering his fate, his place on earth, and roiling consciousness. Jensen was in the process of fathering a decision. Not simply one which might affect his day or week or whether he asked Connie for a date or bought a car to get away from the city—an idea he instinctively liked. This decision was his greatest and would be his last. Was he willing to give up his life, to end the world as he knew it, to end everything and take his parents with him?

"If you're lying about this, I'll kill you," Jensen said to Gates.

A dish broke in the kitchen as Jensen offered his pledge. Gates was moved by the coincidence. It was an omen. He was as partial to coincidences as Cleary was fascinated by the mystery of girls. But girls were difficult to catch, rarely let you spend the night, and made impossible demands. They would not diminish madness but might, on occasion, exacerbate it. Or so he believed.

"You understand what you're saying here, Thom? Maybe you want to take a day or two? Look over the journals I've read?"

"I've made up my mind." The declaration felt good. It just seemed to fit, a natural extension of his present state of mind, and logical, visionary opportunity to prove himself.

"Maybe two will be enough." Gates shook Jensen's hand. It was firm and dry. Jensen expected it to be indifferent. Soaked in indecision. "Done and done."

The cigarette slipped from Phil Cleary's lips. How could Gates make a deal with this plump twit without discussing it with him first?

Jensen had never been one of their group, and never more than a fringe player. The thought of slipping his hand under Connie's short white skirt evaporated, replaced by the necessity to reaffirm his friendship with Gates and put Jensen in his place.

Setting the world on fire! And, before the Russians or Chinese! If they were involved, other nations and scientists were already plotting.

"You're going to leave me out of this?" Cleary asked, showing only a trace of interest.

"You want in too?" Jensen asked, as though he'd fathered the plan.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Jensen, I would like a few words in private with Mr. Gates here. We won't be long."

Jensen was hurt. He committed himself to the plan before Cleary. He was enthusiastic. He had recognized the beauty, the potential elegance of the idea first. "Sure," he said, exuding an unaccustomed confidence. "I'll be around, Gates."

"Good to have you aboard, Thom," Gates said enthusiastically. Recently the young man, simply out of the constancy of their meetings and even the exchange of barbs and insults, had become more credible in his estimation.

Jensen got up then decided to go over and ask Connie out for a date. She was at the cashier counting her tips. What a beautiful girl. If he could end the world, he could certainly ask her out for a date. If he could end the world, anything was possible.

Cleary waited for Jensen to get to the cashier and speak to Connie. Jensen must have said something that amused her. Whatever it was, it irritated Cleary. First Gates and now Connie.

"You really pulled this off cool."

"Did I?"

"He really fell for it."

Gates sipped his coffee. It was still warm. If he drank a dozen cups a day, it wouldn't have been enough. He had an addiction to caffeine, and designing grand plans that took courage and imagination, and a determination that few others could sustain. He believed—was empirically certain—that these two virtues might well stave off the effects of madness.

"This is the one I have been waiting for all my life."

"What the hell are you talking about, Harold?"

"I'm talking about knowing," Gates said.

"Knowing that Jensen is a bloated fool."

"Knowing the difference between probabilities and possibilities."

"The car was one thing but what's this shit about setting the world on fire? What comics have you been sniffing?"

Gates watched Connie turn towards Jensen. Thom stood up straighter. Not as if bearing would make an immediate difference but if you had character and substance, you stood erect for yourself, not to impress or convince. Jensen wasn't so bad. Best of all, he was a convert, a true believer. A cause like setting the world on fire needed committed acolytes, not cynical second-guessers.

"Thom is going to work out fine."

Cleary was now badly agitated. "You're crazy. Mad as a hatter."

A hatter? "You don't understand," Gates answered, offended and, for the first time, doubting the stability of his friend. Would such a friend joke about something that one day would consume them all?

"But apparently Jensen does?" he asked in a near shriek.

"I'm as surprised as you are."

"You've always said he was a joke."

"No man should ever be underestimated."

Cleary considered Gates a man of infinite of unpredictability. "You're fucking not kidding."

"About setting the planet on fire? You think I'd joke

about a thing like that?"

Cleary quickly chided himself for being a naysayer, for disbelieving the impossible. "Here," Cleary said, extending his hand. "I'm in."

Gates hesitated for a moment, and then shook it with equal enthusiasm. This trio wasn't perfect, but a fool-proof plan and the genius of their leader more than made up for what they lacked in courage and insight. "Now we can't fail."

"No doubt. No doubt at all," Cleary said, still not completely convinced, though more so than he ever imagined possible.

Gates leaned back in the booth. The Naugahyde was cold on his back. He had been pitched forward since advancing the idea to Jensen and Cleary. Jensen was filled with confidence. He had come of age. Cleary's resolve was heightened with the addition of competition.

The thrill of exploration was in the air, of adventure, of accomplishing what no man ever imagined. Of course, his master plan would have to wait. A reasonable sacrifice Gates admitted to himself, studying who had come into the coffee shop and who had left.

One could never be too careful.

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## Palestine

by DARREN STEIN

*Darren Stein was born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1973, and immigrated to Sydney, Australia in 1996. He teaches History and Comparative Religion in a college on Sydney's North Shore and publishes his art and poetry whenever someone gives him a chance. His most recent work has appeared in Poetica, Pearson Education, The Journal of Microliterature, HeadSpace Magazine and others.*

Like squabbling children after each attack  
They say, 'it all started when he hit me back!'

# Terminal Velocity

---

by Linton Robinson

*An American writer who always seems to live in other countries, Linton Robinson has been an award-winning writer for magazines and newspapers for longer than is really decent. In recent years he has turned to scripts and novels but has long been a fan of Borges and Calvino, perhaps shown by his entry here. His works can be toured at <http://linrobinson.com/>.*

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## Terminal Velocity

**M**Y DREAMS were fragmented and frightening; when I awoke I was falling. We all were.

It seemed unremarkable that we were falling, or perhaps there was just a reluctance to mention it. At any rate we were together, plummeting into the steady wind of our own motion. Had I been alone it would have frightened me, especially after the staccato insecurity of my dreams; but there was a comfort in company, a sense of normality in the sheer numbers involved. We all fell at the same speed.

We are supposed to fear falling by instinct, but since we were all moving in the same direction at the same rate there was no general fear. There may have been panic in the beginning, people trailing screams behind them, clutching at others who were falling just as precipitously as themselves, but we would no longer know about that. What we do is adapt. In that respect we're all equal.

Oh, there were ploys and techniques for varying the speed of descent. By flattening out as wide as possible, dishing the spread body like a leaf, it was possible to slow down a bit, to ascend through the ranks of falling humanity. Though perhaps I could have termed it "falling behind" as easily as "ascending".

Some people found ways to diminish the resistance and friction of the wind, and thus to fall faster. They were divers actually; streamlined, penetrating, and absorbed with the tiniest details of their profiles. It was actually possible to swim into or against the wind, to change one's neighbors and surroundings. For myself, I preferred the familiar, to be with people I knew well. I liked knowing that I could drift off to sleep and fall like a dark feather, waking to the sight of the same faces and furniture.

Of course there was furniture. We were not without our properties and other civilized artifacts. I wouldn't want you to think we live any different from you or your

friends. We weren't birds on the wing, you know; we were human beings and capable of accomplishing anything we could dream up. Even with no purchase beneath our feet we had need of a cupboard to shut up the dishes, after all. Our possessions fell right along with us. Which is only logical; had they not they would not have remained ours.

In the long run, objects were of less importance than people, of course. My main enjoyments were in others. Just waving to a friend, feathering my hand against the slipstream, was a joy. Or seeing a woman turn her head to let her hair stream away and show her smile. Physical love is itself a matter of objects, but it seemed less so in free fall—I couldn't have imagined a lover pinioned by gravity, or myself pinning her against unmoving, resistive objects. We were loose and lost, but we were free.

All and all, it was a fine life; breasting the brisk wind, flying without support, floating free and apparently weightless. I say "apparently" because the matter of weight was theoretical and, at least to me, not a little disturbing.

It was a matter for scientists, philosophers, and whatever other kinds of people draw conclusions from beyond what the normal person could personally verify. They concluded that weight was an intrinsic, though unprovable, property of all things; that without our weight we would lose our impulse to fall, would lose the very motion that kept us together. If a person were to become weightless he would suddenly pop out of the world, shooting up past us like a rocket. (Actually, the learned say, he would merely stand still while we shot by him. Like most relative concepts, it is hard for the average person to grasp.)

But it was not weight or weightless that bothered me, or even the loss of motion and the resulting loss of context. It was the idea that the fall itself might stop. And

what that would mean. There were those who professed eternity—that the falling would go on forever as it apparently always had. Others postulated a Bottom, an unmoving obstacle to further plunging. It didn't take much imagination to see what would happen to us at the Bottom. We would all be dashed to death, our leading parts crushed between the Bottom and our trailing parts, which would still be moving. The idea seemed quite horrible and, as I say, it bothered me.

The very concept of a Bottom is tricky, involving not only its nature and distance, but the very design of our existence. How long had we been falling? And, therefore, how large was the fall? There was the idea of Infinity, rejected as often by those who could not imagine it as it was grasped by those who merely preferred terminology to mechanism. There was a related idea—considered more parsimonious, or at least less wasteful of space—that we were falling in circles, eternally spinning around a central core, passing through the same space over and over. This could conceivably have been proven by an experimenter changing his speed relative to the rest of us. If the explorer had disappeared in one direction then reapared from the opposite, it would not only have established, but quantified the theory. As with the Bottom and Infinity, the endless circle raised more problems than it answered.

A logical chimera conceived by the Bottom was the idea of a Top, another absolute limit above (behind? before? past?) us. A Top from which we fall away seems to be a concept that lends itself better to poetic surmise than to everyday concern; it is neither imminent nor threatening. The idea of beginning or source is inspirational, but lacks the weight, threat, and practical properties of ending. Probably this is because we can more easily imagine being crushed to death than being created, but why that

should be is another matter.

For whatever reason, many people became quite obsessed by the Bottom, with the end of our long, separate fall. Others denied it so strenuously that it was obvious that their energy also stemmed from fixation. There are those who make plans against it, armor themselves with inventions and devices to survive or obtain advantage from contact. There were those who abandoned all pleasure and even hope of the world; lost in the contemplation of a future impasse or impact. Some became mute and without volition, tumbling in their flight as aimlessly as discarded dolls. It disturbed me immensely to believe that the informed imagination can be unwholesome, even lethal.

My own solution to this occasional malaise was not to think on it. I saw very little to gain by anticipating such a universal ending. It would have made more sense to anticipate and defend against my own death; an eventuality with much more proof to support it and with a much more imminent timetable. But what end would that have served? Intriguing concepts, but I saw no advantage (and little likelihood) in getting to the bottom of them.

I contented myself with merely falling day to day. With keeping abreast of my neighbors, with the essential human tasks of knowing, daring and loving. Occasionally I would take certain positions that allowed—or forced—me to look down (ahead? forward? yet to come?), to focus on the constant reeling of new space and depth, squinting into the eye of what is really my own personal, self-generated wind. It's not a sight that informs or sits easy. But it places me—all of us—into a perspective. I find plenty of things to worry about; falling is no longer one of them. What to make of my dreaming remains to be seen.

# The Comforts of Home

by Marcus Corder

*Marcus Corder writes mostly fiction and is both fascinated and stumped by the novella form. He is thinking of a number between 1 and 10. You may send a guess to between1and10@gmail.com; he may respond with a Surrealist poem.*

## The Comforts of Home

IN THE MORNING, the table had stopped needing a leg. There it was as she came down the stairs for coffee and breakfast: one table, three legs. Still, it was perfectly level and the vase of tulips was undisturbed; just one less leg to carry the weight. She pushed gently down on each corner of the table. She thought vaguely that her handyman ex-boyfriend would be able to fix it. Then she made her coffee with an extra scoop and an extra cup of water and decided that it wasn't so bad to have a table with three legs—maybe it could be the next big thing. She had always wanted to be known for something, and why not for changing up the way people sat down to dinner?

Her coffee smelled like hazelnuts and she liked it. If it weren't for the smell of hazelnut coffee in the morning she might just never get out of bed. But there was hazelnut coffee and she got out of bed. She could not actually picture what a hazelnut looked like.

That first morning she was worried about the table without one of its legs so she ate her puffed rice cereal and drank her hazelnut coffee on the couch in front of the television. She watched the show with the man and the woman who talk to each other and thought about the table. Three legs was just enough. Good things come in threes.

She watched the show with the sound off and pretended she was the man.

What a funny story! she said to the woman with the blonde hair and the eyebrows that didn't match. Now I have a story, and it is a doozy! Today, can you believe it, I woke up and my table had no legs!

The audience laughed and laughed and everybody thought it was just the grandest story and wasn't he still funny even after all these years. Or were they just being kind to an old man who had lost touch with the world? And how dare they judge her like that?

She got up and put her bowl in the sink.

There was still one pale, bloated rice grain doing laps around the leftover milk in the bowl, dodging this way

and that around the silver spoon. What a swimmer. You never saw such a swimmer.

\*

At dinnertime after work she made a bit of chicken and some broccoli and added salt until it was just salty enough. Before she knew it she was sitting at the table with a plate of broccoli and salted chicken and a glass of water and the table did not budge. She stood up and bumped it with her hip to see if it would teeter over and send her dishes sliding off the top like in some kind of a movie scene but the table was plenty firm. Solid as a rock. So she sat herself down in the chair with all four legs and ate away and when she was done she washed those dishes clean.

\*

The second morning, another leg was missing, from the corner opposite the first. Three legs had seemed fine—a new twist on an old idea—but two was hardly practical. She bent down and looked at where the legs should have been and saw the holes from the screws, three open, dark missing spots where just inside the wood was yellow and rough.

She had never had two legs go missing before.

Table, she said, what are you doing missing two legs? A table ought to keep better track of its legs, she thought, otherwise what good is it? This would not be a good thing to be known for. Nobody wants a table with two legs, she said. It was ruining her good name, she said. The table did not blush.

She made the rounds of the little house and checked all the furniture for missing legs but found every one of them. Every nightstand, chair, sofa, coffee table, desk, armoire, and ottoman had all of its legs accounted for. The pedestals of all the toilets, too. She called her neighbor and then her sister and her friend who worked at the restaurant with all of the pictures on the walls: No. All our legs are here. Maybe you should have an aspirin?

She ate her puffed rice cereal and the table did not wobble even a little.

\*

The third day she had even more room to move her chair around under the table. It was vaguely freeing in the way that going without underwear is freeing, but just like the underwear it's only freeing until there's a bit of a breeze or you start to sweat a little. She swiped her legs where the table's legs should have been but they had not simply gone invisible. She leaned forward on the end opposite from the last remaining leg and put all her weight on her elbows but the tulips stayed right where they were. The water did not even ripple.

\*

The fourth day she was ready. She had gone to the hardware store in the town and bought herself four brand new table legs and some wood stain and some screws and those little felt pads with the sticky backs that you put on furniture to keep it from scratching up the hardwood floors. A table could not possibly stand without any legs at all and she was ready to fix it up when it could not support its own weight without legs.

And it didn't.

The fourth leg was on the same corner of the table as it had been the day before, straight and a lovely blackish tan that contrasted perfectly with the burnt orange drapes. She went back upstairs for a moment but it was there when she came down the stairs again. She went back to bed for half an hour. No dice. She called in sick to work and watched television for hours and had three babies, two divorces, one near-death experience, and a rather embarrassingly large handful of affairs on the muted soap operas. She did a respectable job of not peeking in on the table leg, giving it the privacy it needed to sneak off through the back door or whatever the others had done. When it was still there as the sun was setting, she had had just about enough of it and called her former lover who was also a handyman. It is so upsetting when things don't go the way you plan them.

Not much I can do, he said when he had taken a good look at the table, measuring the length of the remaining leg, poking screwdrivers in the holes where the legs used to be attached, and all the other things that handymen do. Should have called me sooner.

He was especially tall and dark and even handsome bent over poking at the table leg with all the blood rushing to his face. It made his little chin hairs stand out. Hi-yah, they seemed to say, keeping their distance from each other. Take that!

But I didn't know what would happen sooner, she said, and it was quite true. She didn't know about much until it was later. Things go like that for most everybody—knowing what would have been handy to know sooner only when it is later.

The handyman ex-lover shrugged his shoulders and took his tools out with him. He had a big pickup truck.

\*

She had dinner at the table again that night and spread all of her plates around so that the entire top was covered except the spot for the tulips. She dished a meal onto each plate so that all the portions were equal and tidy without the chow mein squiggling into the mashed potatoes or the fried rice roughing up the quiche. She had never taken to tablecloths and it was a good thing because when you make a nice dinner who can see it anyway? She ate a bite at each plate before moving on to the next, and nobody was around to tell her to finish her dinner or clean her plate but she did anyway and put all the leftovers in a big mixing bowl and set it in the fridge beside the grapefruit juice.

\*

In the grocery store a few days later she ran into the handyman.

Hello, they say.

How's that leg holding up? asks the handyman.

Just fine, thanks.

I see you have some artichokes there.

I am trying to eat lighter, she says. Ever since the table. That's wise, the handyman says. One cannot be too careful.

Not too much at all, she says. Having only one leg on your table sure does make you appreciate the stability. What if it just got up and left?

The handyman shakes his head and says, Isn't that always the way? and thinks about maybe getting himself some cabbage or other leafy thing.

They part ways and the handyman goes home to his lovely new wife who works at a bank. He looks her up and down and thinks what a good choice he made, and how his table has got plenty of legs. All four of them, solid as a rock. Maybe a few too many for some but he thinks it's just right. He never got into all that minimalist nonsense and besides he's going to have himself a right hearty meal in a little while and that table had better muster its strength. Maybe he will put a few more screws and a brace on the underside of that table tonight. Just in case.

Meanwhile, our woman has called in sick all week and taken to sleeping in the dining room under the table so she can be there when the last leg goes. She would like to be there when the other three come back if that should happen, of course, she has nothing against the other three legs coming back, but she is much more interested in what exactly happens to a tabletop when all of its legs are gone. Is it still a table? Will she be able to get out from underneath it? And what of her tulips?

\*

Finally the receptionist stopped picking up when she recognized our woman's phone number and the paychecks stopped showing up in the mailman's bag. So now in the mornings she gets up later than usual and crawls out from under the table and looks at it in the pinkish sunlight through the kitchen curtains and thinks it sure has held up well for something without hardly any base at all to stand on. How it should have fallen over a month ago. It is in these times, in the morning, with her puffed rice cereal and hazelnut smelling coffee, that she sure wishes she'd taken more boat rides when she was younger or maybe had a baby that she could teach to say things like Lone Ranger and Handyman.

\*

It is in the park when she sees the bench that has grown a few extra limbs. They are all shapes and sizes and some are made of metal that is a little rusty with a texture like old paint on concrete but some are plastic and most are wood. There are little nubby ones that must have come off a tiny toy desk and enormous twisting ones twice as long as the bench itself that must be from a table nobody is tall enough to sit at. Growing out of the back are three wooden legs that just might be from her dining table, except that they're crackling and orange from the rain and cold, and the bottoms don't have those felt pads. They're about the right size, and she sticks her leg out like

a ballerina trying to get her buttocks stretched out at the barre and measures their length against her thigh. The little boy sitting on one of them stretches his legs out in front of himself, too.

I can touch my toes, he says.

They might just be right, she thinks, but her tulips have been fully supported for quite some time and besides can you imagine the clutter of having three extra legs around? She decides to share her former legs with the world at large, or at least the ones who come to this park and sit on the benches or the legs. She thinks to bring the felt pads with her next time.

\*

At home she calls her neighbor and her sister and her friend at the restaurant that serves miniature hamburgers and miniature hot dogs and tells them all that she's found her lost legs but doesn't need them anymore. Okay. Have an aspirin, they say. Take two.

That's the problem with legs, she thought—they don't always hold up what you think they should, and that's when it's best to watch an old western with the sound off and pretend you're the gunslinger, to pretend you have one moment where you're free not to have to choose; you've got the holster and everything, and maybe a drawl.

# The Man in My Nostril

by Matthew Hanlon

*Matthew Hanlon is a graduate from the infamous Worcester County Young Writers' Conference ('92) and has written about his fictional experience fighting a yak in New York City and a heck of a lot about baseball. His main motivation for writing is that someday the Boston Red Sox will draft him as a starting pitcher. Logic was never his strong suit.*

## The Man in My Nostril

MY SINUSES HAD been killing me. So much so that I remarked on it to my wife, "I feel like there's someone inside my face with a hammer."

"Is it like childbirth?" She said this with our one month old son sleeping in her arms.

Normal painkillers weren't helping, or, if they were, it may have been like childbirth, I would never know.

\*

The next time I was in the grocery store, picking up diapers, wipes, and a new mop, I stopped by the pharmacy shelf and added a nasal rinse kit to my cart.

That night I stared at myself in the mirror, hands on the sink. In the light from the fluorescent tube overhead I looked sickly, green.

I checked the lock one more time.

I placed the nozzle to my right nostril and breathed deeply.

The water shocked me, like jumping off the 30 foot board at Tatassit when I was a kid, only if I'd held shut every orifice but half my nose. It was cold, far too cold, but I kept the bottle secure like a plug, pumped about half the water up my nose; it gushed around in there and then out.

Chunks of what looked like brain erupted into the sink, some... not quite into the sink, which I tracked, with one eye, for cleaning purposes. When there he came. With a godawful POP and bit of pressure, out shot a tiny, glistening man with a beard, a miner's hat, a pick axe, and overalls, but no undershirt.

The undershirt slogged out of my left nostril as I gaped. The soggy wet sleeve of it slapped my top lip like it was high-fiving it on the way down.

"Wha... Wer... Wha!" he spluttered.

I didn't say anything. Nothing seemed appropriate to say to someone who'd just come out of your nose.

The little man recovered for a moment and said, "Your nose is bleeding," pointing up at it with his pickaxe.

I grabbed a tissue from the box atop the toilet tank and staunched the flow. Bright red splotches dispersed amongst the tissue's threads.

The little man continued to point up at my nose with his pickaxe. But his attitude was much less of pointing anything out than it was measuring. He squinted, using the axe's head as a sight.

With a sudden spasm of his body he reared back and heaved the implement into the air, towards my face. The common impulse, when you find a tiny pickaxe arcing towards the middle of your face is to bat it away. I tell you this purely for informational purposes. If you, too, find yourself in this circumstance someday.

The tool spun out and away over the edge of the sink, clinking against the porcelain. The tiny little man gave me a look for a beat before hauling on the rope he had fastened to his wrist, until the coil of it lay at his feet in a heap and he held the axe again.

I held out my hands, one of which was still holding the bloody tissue. "Whoa."

"Whoa what? Lemme back up."

I shook my head, gingerly, after I felt the first few drops of blood shake loose.

The man put his axe down and his hands on his hips.

"Look," I said, "I can't have you living up there. Not *in my nose*."

He said nothing.

"It's not sanitary. For one thing."

"Well all my stuff is up there," he said, stomping his foot a little.

"Well," I dabbed my nose with a non-bloody part of the tissue, "how much stuff is up there?"

"My TV, barcalounger. Pith helmet. Toiletries, coal-burning stove, kettle. My cat, maybe. She's gone missing, you see."

"How on Earth... How did you get all that stuff up

there? Wait," I held out a hand to the little man, which he slapped.

A faint residue, probably of semi-dried snot, marked the spot he had hit.

"There's a *cat* wandering my nasal passages?"

"Maybe. He might have gotten out."

I shook my head, slowly, for fear I would feel a cat slide loose and into some canal or another. I itched at my nostril, wiping the tissue over it, feeling a phantom fur ball there.

"He's not there."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"Do you," I leaned down close to him to toss the bloody tissue in the waste basket beneath the sink. "Do you want a drink?"

The little man eyed me suspiciously. He squinted one beady, glistening eye at me.

"I mean it. What'll you drink?"

"Just the last time someone said that to me they turned on the tap and tried to flush me away."

"Oh. I meant, like, beer, or something."

"Sure, I'll have a beer."

\*

That night I set the little man up in a house made out of some stale bread. That lasted a week before I had to throw it out, by which time I'd bought a dollhouse play set, ostensibly for our child. It came complete with TV, kettle, barcalounger, ottoman, and pet cat. The man moved in and I would occasionally find cobbler's nails in my running shoes. Or there would be a pile of pennies and other small change on the table, presumably from the couch. Or once there was a batch of semi-edible cookies which surprised my wife, who had come downstairs first that morning. I found out when she thanked me for the effort.

If I left out a glass or plate or two, they would be clean and sparkling the next morning by the sink.

The little man and I would share a late night beer every few weeks, sitting in one lonely pool of light from the hood over the cooktop and drink mostly in silence. Once someone's been up your nose there's lots of room for comfortable silences. This is what it must be like for plastic surgeons.

The little man never did find his cat. Nor did he ever lose that slight sheen.

# How to Cut Open Your Unicorn

by Jacquelyn M. Stolos

*Jacquelyn M. Stolos is a New England native living and writing in Los Angeles. She has a BA in English Literature from Georgetown University. Her fiction has previously appeared in The Anthem and 20 Minute Tales.*

## How to Cut Open Your Unicorn

THE NIGHT of the abduction began with Jane and I sprawled over cardboard moving boxes in our underwear, misting water on ourselves from spray bottles we'd found beneath the kitchen sink. The power had been out since mid-afternoon when the heat had broken record highs and all of Boston had turned their window units up to full blast. Darkness had come hours before, bringing only minimal relief.

I unscrewed the nozzle from my spray bottle, tilted my head back and poured. The now luke-warm water spread through my knotted curls.

"I feel like that's cheating," Jane said. She pulled the trigger of her own spray bottle rapidly, dampening her fan of glossy hair and the box underneath. My sister had arranged a half-dozen boxes into a chaise lounge. I'd teased her for her orderliness, pointing out the irony of being so deliberate with something so temporary, then kicked a nearby cluster of boxes into an uneven tabletop.

Jane handed me a double bottle of red and I pushed down the cork. We drank from tiny paper cups, the kind that neat people put in their bathrooms for guests. The cups were shot-glass sized, which prompted me to toss back my head and let each serving of wine slide down my throat.

I crumpled a cup and threw it across the room. "I'm not going to clean that up until tomorrow," I said.

"Our apartment, our rules," said Jane. "Let's throw a party right now."

"And let's only invite men," I said. "No, let's only invite men and really undesirable women."

"And we can have a jacuzzi in the kitchen."

"And we can hang donuts from the ceiling."

"That sounds kind of messy."

"Let's get a fucking unicorn," I said. "All I want is a unicorn."

"Okay," said Jane, "but can we get a cat, too?"

The night of the abduction, Jane fell asleep with her

forehead pressed against my passenger's side window. A quarter of the way down the first bottle of wine, we'd joked that Gimper should be ours—the tag on the basket under the tree had our names, not Mom's. This idea gained momentum as the wine stained our lips red. Abducting the family cat would be our inaugural shenanigan. It would mark the beginning of our new lives as adventurous, big-city twins. It would be one of our famous stories once we were old and settled down—just one of the tales that survived our wild, free-spirited years.

By the time the second bottle was empty we'd each pulled on some clothes. Jane wore only an oversized t-shirt and my shorts were on inside out. My keys scraped against the Formica as I grabbed them from the kitchen counter.

We drove past the unlit tenements lining the Mystic, past the pristine-hedged suburbs of Medford and Stoneham and Saugus before there was any light besides the moon and my headlights. Once over the border into New Hampshire, we were surrounded by empty forest. The highway was dark again.

Jane woke up as we passed exit five.

"Have you ever given road head?"

I hadn't.

"Yeah," I said. "What am I, a prude?"

Our house, Mom's house, was a lavender split-level, two hours up 93. The gravel crunched beneath my tires as I pulled into the driveway. A single garment hung from the hexagonal clothesline out front. It was shapeless, heavy in the heat.

Gimper greeted us at the back door, a willing abductee rubbing limpy figure-eights between our legs. "Gimpity gimp gimp gimp," Jane sang as she picked the cat up and cradled him in her arms. His placed his front, left paw on her cheek while the thinly-furred nub where his right paw should have been twitched with delight. "I love you, baby boy."

Gimper waited in the car as we stumbled around the

dark house, stubbing our toes and looking for plunder. I grabbed the kibble, the kitty litter, a framed picture of Jane and me wearing matching dresses and bows. Until we were six, Jane and I were the best of friends. Then came school, different groups of friends, and for twelve years classmates asked if we were cousins or if it was just a coincidence that we had the same last name. In this apartment in the city, we would be connected. Like how twins are supposed to be.

"Do we need a blender?" said Jane. "What kitchen supplies are we missing?" She dragged a chair across the kitchen floor to reach the cabinet above the fridge.

"We'll figure it out," I said. "We don't need to worry about it right now."

"But if we worried about it right now, we could just take this blender," Jane said. She pulled the blender out of the cabinet. She tossed it to me and I put it on the counter next to the kitty litter and kibble.

Jane wrote a ransom note in large, uneven handwriting and we each woke up in the morning to the same text from Mom. That's so not fair, girls.

Jane and I fell into a rhythm. We sleepwalked through workweeks, always glancing at our watches. Jane was a dental assistant who bought themed scrubs for holidays and I used my degree in interior design to rearrange the throw pillows in the house where I nannied.

On Friday nights we would pick up Indian food and a bottle of wine for each of us, letting the cat lick the curry sauce from our fingers. We'd go to bars and men would buy us beers followed by girly drinks followed by more beers followed by tequila shots because they thought it was sexy that we were twins and that we'd moved to the city together. She'd take the one with the thick chest and I'd take the wiry one with the thick wallet and we'd lose track of each other on the dance floor. On Saturday mornings, I would bring coffee into her room. The cat would roll around on the bed between us, begging for our attention as we swapped stories.

Jane never slept out. She always preferred to steal home just before sunrise, when she could only be spotted in her high heels and long legs by those sweeping the sidewalks or training for the marathon. Jane would slide out of bed as soon as the night's Romeo slipped into sleep, gathering her lace blouse, her silk underwear, and her scuffed heels into a bundle before tiptoeing into the bathroom. My sister would splash her face with cold water and squeeze back into her clothes without turning on the lights. Jane had once laughed and told me that turning on the lights always ruined the illusion. That seeing his pimply ass sticking out of the sheets, letting herself become aware of his toothpaste-caked sink, took all the romance out of it. Plus, she had too much shit to do the next day to stick around.

Thinking of Jane walking the pre-dawn streets of Boston alone was a fist clenched on my stomach. She was the small twin, the fragile twin. It had always been my job to protect her.

Neither the city nor whoever I ended up with at last call ever enchanted me. Unlike Jane, I'd sleep long and heavy in the bed of my night's pick, wiping the dried spit off my mouth hours after he'd risen and showered. I'd choke back vomit as I noticed the mildew spotting his ceiling and the sludge dripping down his shower walls, holding my throbbing head as I peed. I would walk briskly through his living room, where he'd be in his boxers, getting stoned and staring at the screen of his laptop, and stumble out of his apartment into the late-morning light of the city. The sunlight mocked my blinking, makeup-caked eyes. What had looked dark and sexy the previous night was smudged and pathetic as I'd hailed a cab that I couldn't afford.

On a Saturday morning in November, I shouldered open the door to Jane's bedroom to find the Gimper stretched out in the sunlight on Jane's empty bed. I sat down on the bed, using my foot to clear a spot on the floor for the two mugs of coffee that were burning my hands.

"Where's Jane, big guy?"

Gimper yawned and rolled onto his back. I rubbed his stomach then capped my hand over the scar tissue on his front nub.

I scrolled through my phone. The last text I'd received from Jane had been sent at 2:45a.m. This dude has a Tempur- Pedic. I called my sister and was sent to voice-mail without a single ring.

The sunlight crept across the bed and the cat moved with it. By the time it slanted onto the floor I had called Jane twenty-seven times. Gimper gave my arm a nudge with the side of his face, and then moved to his favorite window in the sunroom. I stood up, knocking a mug with my foot. Cold coffee spread over Jane's floor, seeping into the piles of clothes and paper.

I walked into the kitchen, sitting down then standing up, moving around dishes and opening cabinet doors to stare inside then walk away. I checked the time on my phone, and then looked at the segmented red numbers on the microwave to double check. I stood up, sat down, shook my hands through my hair, and then pressed my palms into my eyes. This was my fault. I shouldn't have let her out of my sight. I dialed 911, and then deleted it. I dialed Mom's number, and then deleted it. I pinched my mouth between my thumb and all my fingers, feeling the teeth beneath my lips.

And then Jane came home.

"I met someone last night." Jane dropped her sequin clutch and leaned against the wall.

"So did I," I said. "Where have you been? You scared the shit out of me."

"No, Bailey." Jane tilted her head back and ran her hands through her hair. She pulled hard from the roots. "Like, I met someone." She closed her eyes. "We couldn't stop talking the entire time. I've never had so much to talk about with anyone. He's picking me up in an hour for dinner."

Jane stretched her arms up over her head in a slow, satisfied yawn. I scanned her body, looking for signs of harm. Her hips were narrow, boy hips just like Mom's.

Forty-five minutes later, as he and I stood in the kitchen and listened to Jane blow-dry her hair, I learned that the someone Jane had met was a biochemical engineer who'd grown up in the Berkshires, had a one-bedroom in Charlestown, went to WPI though he had dreamed of MIT, and didn't care much for professional sports. His posture was tight; he looked like he was trying to compress his limbs into his torso, shrinking back from all four of our walls at once. I decided that it was a good sign that he was nervous, but couldn't locate the source of the thrill that he gave Jane.

The biochemical engineer glanced at the closed bathroom door, then back at me.

"I'm taking her to the North End," he said. "Pomodoro."

"She'll love that," I said.

"Okay good. I don't know why I was worried." He crossed then uncrossed his arms. "Yeah, of course she'll like it." He didn't seem to be talking to me anymore. "She's perfect."

The bathroom door opened and Jane came into the kitchen smelling of hairspray and perfume. She and the biochemical engineer smiled at each other and then shifted their eyes downward. I imagined the fast intoxication of a one-night-stand- turned-all-day-romance and wondered if the hour they'd spent apart had broken the spell. I could feel my pulse in my jaw— quick and heavy for my sister.

"You guys want a drink before you leave?" I said.

The biochemical engineer turned his wrist to look at his watch. "Actually," he said, "If we're going to make our reservation we ought to get going."

Jane bit her lower lip. The biochemical engineer exhaled. I tapped my heel on the floor, leg shaking.

"Hi," he said. "It's still me."

Jane laughed a soft, downward-angled laugh that I'd never heard before.

"Hi," she said. "I don't know if I can eat anything. My stomach's going nuts."

"Mine too," said the biochemical engineer. "But we can still order some entrees just to smell them."

After they left I got the perfect amount of stoned and lay down on our futon, laptop on my stomach. I flipped between Facebook and Netflix while whittling away at a block of store- brand cheddar. I decided that it was a good sign that I wasn't lonely. I decided that it takes a certain kind of person to enjoy time spent alone.

The next month, Jane surprised me with a unicorn. She had been seeing the biochemical engineer every day.

"His name is Sylvester," she said. "They were going to put him down at the shelter."

"What about the cat?" I said. "Will they get along?"

We stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the

living room, watching Sylvester chew a dried up house-warming cactus as Gimper batted at his swinging tail.

"I think they're friends," Jane said.

"It's mangy as shit," I said. "And way too big for this apartment." Sylvester's fur was thin and tinged sooty gray. His horn was the dull pink of polluted seashells. "This is not what I was imagining when I said unicorn."

"He's just old. The baby ones are like six thousand dollars," said Jane as she handed me a double bottle of red. Sylvester dropped the cactus then ripped off the cover off my Cosmo with his dull, yellowed teeth.

I pushed down the cork. Jane tilted her head back and I poured some wine into her open mouth. "I don't want this thing. It's almost dead. It's going to eat all our stuff. It will probably eat Gimper."

"Most people would say that a unicorn eating your junk is pretty cool." Jane walked over to Sylvester and lifted up his matted tail to reveal a butterfly-shaped hole. The skin inside looked like it might have once been rainbow-colored, though now the stripes were faded to shades of gray, plum and mauve.

"Wait, does this one shit butterflies?" I said. "That's so much cooler than the breed that turns everything it eats into a fairy. Fairies would be so creepy." I tapped on Jane's forehead. She dropped the tail and tilted her head back for more wine.

Sylvester finished the magazine and moved onto a pillow. He lifted his tail an inch and released a cloud of yellow-gray smoke. A dozen colorless, winged creatures fluttered out of the smoke. The room filled with the smell of sulfur.

"Oh my god," I said, "Those are moths. Our unicorn shits moths. Everything we own is going to be turned into a fucking moth."

Jane laughed, spraying droplets of deep red all over the futon and Sylvester's coat. "Jesus, Bailey," she said. "Remind me never to get you anything you say you want again."

Jane and the biochemical engineer fell into a rhythm. He took her away for dinner three times a week and they took over our kitchen the other four. I heard Jane whispering into the phone that she felt bad leaving me alone so often. That she'd thought the unicorn would be a good, distracting new thing for me, but it wasn't. I considered correcting her, and then thought better of it. I didn't think I could articulate how I felt about the situation without her confusing me for bitter.

At the stove, Jane and the biochemical engineer would stand tangled with arms reaching through elbows and around waists to stir and stroke. Watching them, I noticed that the kitchen table was sticky beneath my hands. Our apartment was dirty. Moth carcasses piled up in the corners and Gimper flung fish-scented cat food when he ate. I decided that this was a sign that we had better, more exciting things to do than clean. Our filth marked us as people living right.

The biochemical engineer had no filth. His apart-

ment, where I was often invited for dinners with his single friends, was the kind of clean that felt empty and unfinished, like a model home of beige carpets and wax fruit. I did not want to be suspicious of him. I did not know what exactly I suspected him of. Not everyone can be interesting.

In February, I sat with the biochemical engineer as Jane threw the few warm, athletic garments that we had between the two of us into a duffle bag. He was taking her to Conway. Jane had never skied before, but he promised he'd stay close and rent her all the right equipment.

"I think Bailey is such a great name," he said. "So different."

"It's a family name," I said. "Actually it's pretty interesting how I ended up Bailey and Jane ended up Jane."

Jane shouted from her room. She needed packing advice. The biochemical engineer stood up quickly. He smiled at me.

"You should tell me some time. The three of us should really get drinks or something," he said over his shoulder as he rushed into Jane's room.

After they were gone, I lay in my bed with my laptop and a bag of chocolate-covered peanut-butter filled pretzel bites. I rolled between sleep and wakefulness for a few hours before I got up to brush my teeth. Jane had always been the one with boyfriends. She was good at it. She made great cookies and liked to listen to people talk about themselves.

I brushed the crumbs off my lap and walked into the kitchen. I sat down, and then stood up. I opened the cabinet doors to stare inside, and then walked away. Being single was advantageous because it freed up hours. I could catch up on TV. I could read a book. I could roam the city. While Jane was playing grown-up tourist with the biochemical engineer, I would live the gritty, anti-suburban life we'd come here looking for.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and smoothed my hair with my hands. I would start tonight. I walked down to Sligo. The bar was dark, the doors locked. Standing back, I noticed that the streets around me were empty. I checked my watch—4 a.m. This is a funny story, I thought, walking home with my arms crossed tightly against the cold. Jane would get quite a kick out of this. It would be one of our famous ones once we were old and settled down. My teeth chattered and I blamed the February breeze.

In March it was Ft. Meyers to see his grandparents. After they left, I found a voucher for a wine-tasting class on my desk. "Thought you might enjoy this!" said a note in Jane's handwriting. "Love, Nathan and Jane."

I went out every night they were gone. I leaned against bars, posing with my drink in my hand. I was independence on display. I wore peep-toed heels although there was a foot of snow on the ground; my red toenails fiery flecks against the frozen white.

On Friday night, a man named Ari bought me a rum and coke. I felt desirable and laughed loudly at his jokes.

His dark hair curled at his cowlick and around his ears and at the nape of his neck and I invited him back to my apartment.

We made out on the futon. I took off my glasses and shook my hair back and forth. He applauded. He whipped off his belt and twirled it around. He kissed me hard with his hand on the back of my neck. He went into anaphylactic shock. The EMTs stabbed him in the chest with an EpiPen.

"Do you have a unicorn?" he asked from the stretcher. His eyes were swollen into slits and his ears were large and red. "I'm highly allergic to their dander."

I threw my glasses at Sylvester then carried Gimper to my bed.

On Saturday night I avoided the bars that I usually frequented—the ones with long lines and thirteen-dollar cocktails. I found a pub located a set of stairs below sidewalk level. Its lack of windows and lock-less bathrooms suited my mood. Just after last-call, a woman sat down next to me. She said hello.

We talked about the artificiality of friendship, the positive effect that the recession had on our artistic souls, and how we hated all the yuppies and posers that were moving into our neighborhood. I did not tell her I was new to Davis Square. She'd lived here for fifteen years.

The bar closed.

"I live right around the corner," I said.

"Let's make it a party," she said.

I dimmed the lights in my apartment. Her friends were all much older and I was self-conscious of my youth.

"You have a unicorn?" said one of the woman's friends. "What a statement." He pressed his cigarette into Sylvester's flank. My unicorn whinnied. His panicked eyes widened and his lips curled back.

The woman and her friends closed their eyes and nodded with consent. The man pulled his cigarette off Sylvester. I watched as he shifted his eyes quickly between each of his friends' faces, making sure they approved of his action while trying to avoid looking at the oozing red welt that was developing as a result of it. My fingernails broke the skin of my palms; I hated him. When his eyes landed on my face, I tried not to convey this. He looked away, then tapped the ash from his cigarette onto our stained, lacquer-thick hardwood floors.

When Jane came home she wanted to drink.

"I feel like we never go out anymore," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "We've gotten busy."

Jane handed me a double bottle of red and her new corkscrew. She stood on her toes to reach the pair of wine glasses that the biochemical engineer had brought over. I took a swig from the bottle and then filled them.

When the food arrived we ate with our fingers. I sat cross-legged on the living room floor and Jane lay on her back beside me. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth as I invented mixtures of naan and mango chutney and chana masala on her tongue.

Gimper stole a piece of curried chicken. I pried it from his teeth and picked him up. "You need to do a little better with this diet," I said, kissing him. "You're going to turn into a kitty sausage."

"What if I told you I was bored?" said Jane.

"Okay, brat. We can do something else," I said. "Sylvester put that down." I stood up and yanked a pillow from the unicorn's jaws. There was a semi-circle of slime where his mouth had been. "We need to give this thing away. It's destroying everything." The room filled with the smell of sulfur. An eclipse of moths shadowed the light for a moment and then fluttered into the kitchen.

"No," Jane said. "Like with skiing and Ft. Meyers. Stuff I should have fun doing."

"Wait, bored with the stuff that you guys are doing or with him?"

"I can't tell," said Jane.

A moth landed in the chutney. I closed my eyes, counted to ten, then pulled Sylvester to the sun porch by his horn and locked him there. I came back into the living room and stood over Jane.

"Jane, that's a big deal."

"I don't want it to be." Jane leaned her head back onto the warped hardwood and put her hands over her face. "Pretend I never said anything. He's so good to me."

It was Martha's Vineyard for the Fourth of July and Yellowstone in October. Jane cut her hair short and neat in November. She told me to stop asking, stop obsessing. It had just been a moment of doubt, really. It was normal. She was sure now that she was having so much fun.

On the morning of Christmas Eve the biochemical engineer met us at our place with a canvas grocery bag filled with gifts. They were wrapped in delicate layers of red and white tissue paper and tied with bows of gold silk.

"My car or his?" I said, sifting through my overnight bag to make sure I had a toothbrush. "Actually, let's take his. Jane, will you sit in the back with me and help write out some cards?"

They didn't answer. I looked up from my bag to see Jane glance over her shoulder at the biochemical engineer. She was biting her lip.

"I think we'd better take both cars," Jane said slowly. She took a few steps towards me and put a hand on my arm. "That way, Nathan and I can get to his parents' place tomorrow and you won't be stranded in Hamilton."

"What are you talking about?"

"We're doing Christmas Eve with our family and Christmas Day with his."

"Why didn't you tell me before right now?" I made myself laugh. "What's the big secret?"

Jane closed her eyes, nodding. She opened her eyes and gave me a hug.

She drove up with me despite my suggestion that she drive with the biochemical engineer, calm his nerves, and prepare him with interesting things to say to our family. She insisted.

"Are you okay with this? You're my first priority." Her boots were off and her woolen socked feet were curled under her on the passenger's seat.

"Am I okay with what?"

"Christmas."

"No. I want to celebrate Kwanza this year. And Festivus."

"Don't be like that," Jane said.

I made eye-contact with a girl pressing her nose against the back window of her parents' silver mid-sized sedan. I waved at her, smiling. The girl ducked out of view. I thought about remarking on the moment to Jane, asking her if she remembered the age that the threat of strangers had faded from our lives. I decided she would think that the question had some sort of hidden meaning and get mad at me. I pressed down on the accelerator and passed the sedan. We crossed the border into New Hampshire.

"Bailey?" Jane said. "Do you have a plan?"

"I'm going to Christmas with our family. I might drink tomorrow night with everybody in Hannah's basement since we'll all be home."

"I mean long-term."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, seriously. I don't know what you're doing. I'm worried about you."

"Well, don't be. I got it." Jane had turned in her seat to square her entire body to me. In my peripheral vision, her new short hair was stupid. I had known it would be. I passed a car on the right just to make her tense. "Actually, be worried. I haven't found a guy to use as a substitute for a long-term life plan. Can you please help me? I'm so lost and so much dumber than you."

"Wow," said Jane. "Wow, Bailey you've really figured me out."

At the house, I waited for Mom to pull Jane aside and ask her if she was sure about the biochemical engineer. In the last silent miles of our drive, I had imagined myself stroking Jane's hair as she sobbed into my shoulder. I would condemn the timing of Mom's harsh judgment of Jane's relationship with the biochemical engineer, but wouldn't refute it. I would kiss my sister on her wet cheek, and tell her that she didn't need to feel panicked, that her future wasn't going to slide away just because the first guy she'd fallen for wasn't the right one.

At the house, I waited for something to go wrong. We ate Chinese takeout; they laughed about old stories and new politics. Then everyone went to bed. Jane and the biochemical engineer left in the morning.

Jane was cold in January. She slept at his place, mostly. I left her notes, potted flowers, brownies baked with marshmallows and cashews just like how she likes.

"Stop apologizing," she said. "I'm not angry." She zipped her parka and pulled the fur-lined hood over her head. "I just can't deal with your judgment right now. It's not healthy."

"I'm not judging you," I said. "I'm trying to show you what's best for you. You're judging yourself."

"Fuck off," she said. She kissed the unicorn goodbye on the snout and left for his place.

I met new friends at bars and made sure that they were always around so that when Jane slipped in for a change of clothes she would hear our stories, our laughter. I believed that, after some time, Jane would see how much better things could be for her. It had always been my job to look out for her.

In March, the biochemical engineer wet a sponge and wiped the counter. "You never travel, Bailey," he said. "You should come with us."

He did not extend this invitation again in April. It was our birthday and she called from San Diego.

"He proposed in front of the pandas." Gimper was heavy on my lap. He was getting very fat. His front nub stuck out from his inflated body like the tied end of a balloon.

"I can't believe it," I said, and I couldn't. I listened hard for a hint of doubt in her voice. I took off my shoe and threw it at Sylvester, who had a pair of my underwear in his mouth.

When they got home from San Diego, Jane began to sleep at our apartment again. She set up dates with me. She cleaned often. She wasted hours staring at her hand.

The ring was new and mass-produced in the style of an antique, but it was too blank, too clean, to ever be mistaken for real vintage. It was a big diamond circled by small diamonds on a white-gold band—no twists or blemishes. Catching the light when Jane moved her hand, it reminded me of a face without a nose.

For the next few months, Jane wore her ring like a jacket. She put it on when she left the house in the morning only to take it off when we sat down at a coffee shop, placing it on top of the stack of napkins. She wore it after dinner every night when we would walk along the Charles, but placed it on a coaster as we settled down on the futon to watch TV. It felt strange, she told me; it was impossible for her to focus, to keep her long, busy fingers off the thing. Alien metal where there had always been just simple flesh.

I continued to invite my friends over. Jane would sit with us when we were in the apartment. She would smile at jokes and take a shot when it was expected, but would always stay behind when it was time to leave for the bars. I fantasized about the night when, finally, she would realize her mistake. I played it over in my head—how I would walk back to the apartment to gather her as soon as she texted, how we would stop at the liquor store and then in the park so that she would be drunk enough for the bar, how—between swigs—we would talk about how stupid it was to stay in and get a full eight hours when there were nights to be lived.

In August, Jane pulled all the cushions off the futon and dumped our drawer of silverware onto the kitchen floor.

"For God's sake, Bailey." Mom had driven down to the city for the crisis and was emptying our trashcan into the sink. "Break's over. Can you go back through that stack of mail?"

I sat at the table drinking a cup of tea. It was day two of the search.

"Bailey. I said get up and help." My tea tasted like soap.

The empty trashcan thudded to the floor and Mom moved on to the refrigerator. Sylvester put his head in the trashcan. His tongue scratched against the plastic.

Jane was in the bathroom now, sifting again through used tissues and tampons. "Ow—fuck," she yelled. She appeared in the kitchen holding a wad of reddening toilet paper to her finger. "There was a broken razor in the trash," she said. "I think I need stitches."

Mom grabbed her purse.

"Bailey will you keep looking while we're gone?" Jane asked.

"That's ridiculous. I'm coming," I said.

"Please."

I surveyed the garbage spilling out of the kitchen sink and onto the counter top, the mess of magazines, pictures, and knick-knacks thrown from our shelves and onto the floor. I looked towards Jane. Her eyes were swollen and a shiny stream of snot ran from her right nostril to her chin. I imagined myself holding her left hand as a nurse stitched up the right. She would cry and ask if this was something symbolic and I'd stroke the back of her hand, telling her, "Yes, probably," but we could worry about that once the bleeding had stopped.

But maybe Jane would turn against me. Say that I planted the idea in her head. Accuse me of hiding the ring and burying the razor in the trashcan and planting the biochemical engineer in her life just so that I could prove myself stronger, wiser.

"I'll stay if you really want me to, Jane."

Mom swept Jane out the door.

I brought my mug to the sink and tried to rinse it out without touching the garbage. I should have gone with them, I thought. The ring wasn't here.

I felt damp breath on my neck. I turned and grimaced at the yellow crust around Sylvester's eyes, the slime dripping from his slightly open mouth. He took a segment of my hair in his mouth and began to chew.

I yanked my hair away. Sylvester stared at me through the clouds in his eyes. He stretched his neck back towards me, taking my earring between his square, rotting teeth then swallowing it.

I pinched my soft, naked earlobe. I took a step back from the unicorn, squinting at his sagging stomach. I thought of the hours we'd spent searching the apartment, of all the rooms we'd sifted through two, three times, and it became burningly clear that Jane's engagement ring must be floating somewhere in the bowels of our unicorn. Maybe it had already been broken down and was on its way to becoming a one-and-a-half carat moth.

I found my computer beneath a pile of throw blankets. I googled "how to retrieve objects swallowed by a unicorn." I held my hand over my mouth as I scrolled through the results. I googled, "how to retrieve objects swallowed by a unicorn without killing the unicorn."

I called the vet. I drummed my fingers on the coffee table as the line rang.

"We don't perform the procedure," said the vet. "It's messy, dangerous, illegal."

I closed my eyes. "Thank you," I said, hanging up. I thought of the sweat that beaded Jane's panicked forehead during the search. I realized that I had to recover the ring before Jane returned home. She was going to marry the biochemical engineer. I would be their champion, and only then would she be able to lean on me once their marriage fell apart.

Sylvester stood in the doorway of Jane's room. He blinked at me. Gimper wound between his legs, purring.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

I eased Sylvester onto his side and bound his front legs together with a leather belt and his back legs with the terrycloth rope from my bathrobe. He did not struggle. I used a sharpie to copy lines from an online diagram onto his flank. I spread out some old towels beneath him, assembled a set of different-sized knives from the kitchen, and then washed my hands.

I knelt on the floor beside the unicorn, picked the smallest knife and pressed it to the line I'd labeled "incision #1." I dragged the knife three-inches down the pre-marked line. A trail of blood grew from the point of the blade.

Sylvester kicked and whinnied. I put the knife down and sat back off my knees. I covered my face with both hands, pressing my palms into my eyes.

I took my hands off my face. Sylvester had stopped kicking, but his entire body shook. Gimper stood at the unicorn's head, his meows loud and urgent.

"Oh my God," I said, untying the belt and the terrycloth rope. "I'm so sorry." Sylvester, though freed, did not stand. I put my finger in the incision. Less than half an inch. Not deep enough to kill him, I decided. He's probably just in shock, I told myself. I brought his bowl of water from the kitchen and covered him with a blanket. Gimper was limping in wild circles around the apartment, now. The high-pitched, continuous sound he was making did not seem to belong to a cat.

I thought about ambulances and the sewing needles in my closet and the first-aid kit Jane and I had been meaning to buy for a year now. Sylvester snorted and I began to cry. I wrapped my arms around his mangy neck, grabbing onto his polluted- seashell-colored horn. I kissed his crusty eyes and inhaled his feta-cheese fur, letting his drool matt into my hair because I figured that another warm body was the best I could do.

The front door of the apartment opened. Mom called,

"You're going to kill your sister. It was in her wallet, tucked behind her medical card." I knew that in seconds, Jane and Mom would be standing above Sylvester and me. I pictured what they'd see and wondered how I'd gotten so far. The blood was beginning to seep through the blanket.

## Divulging Secrets

by CHARLES RAMMELKAMP

*Charles Rammelkamp lives in Baltimore. His latest book, Fusen Bakudan ("Balloon Bombs" in Japanese), was published in 2012 by Time Being Books. It's a collection of monologues involving missionaries in a leper colony in Vietnam during the war. Charles edits an online literary journal called The Potomac – <http://thepotomacjournal.com/>*

At the dinner party,  
after a few glasses of wine,  
Karen, a high school librarian  
with a reputation for being strict,  
blurted out a youthful indiscretion.

"When I lived in Boston in the seventies,  
before I knew Joseph"  
–her husband across the table–  
"a friend and I went  
to see David Bowie at the Garden.

"We had seats on the main floor.  
We'd smoked some pot.  
Midway through the concert  
we danced in the aisles,  
lost in our glam-rock world.

"Bowie cycled through his hits.  
That unmistakable guitar riff opening  
'Rebel, Rebel' jangled the auditorium  
like a call to action.  
We high-fived.

"When Bowie sang,  
'Hot tramp, I love you so,'  
I jumped to my seat, tore off my t-shirt,  
ripped open my bra,  
waved my breasts like a stripper,  
dancing like a wildwoman,  
Cheryl blushing next to me.

Two security guards hustled me out of the auditorium:  
leave or I'd be prosecuted."

Joe looked weary  
amid the general titter–  
Karen always gushed her big secret  
at parties when she got tipsy.