

Volume II, Issue IV

The Oddville Press

A break from the norm



www.oddvillepress.com

Cover art: Dana

by ALLEN FORREST – GRAPHIC ARTIST / PAINTER

Bio

Born in Canada and bred in the U.S., Allen Forrest works in many mediums: oil painting, computer graphics, theater, digital music, film, and video. Allen studied acting at Columbia Pictures in Los Angeles, digital media in art and design at Bellevue College, receiving degrees in Web Multimedia Authoring and Digital Video Production.

Forrest has created cover art and illustrations for literary publications: New Plains Review, Pilgrimage Press, The MacGuffin, Blotterature, and Under the Gum Tree. His paintings have been commissioned and are on display in the Bellevue College Foundation's permanent art collection. Forrest's expressive drawing and painting style is a mix of avant-garde expressionism and post-Impressionist elements reminiscent of van Gogh creating emotion on canvas.

Artist Statement

Painting is a cross between a crap shoot, finding your way out of the woods, and performing a magic act. Each time I begin to paint I feel like I am walking a tightrope—sometimes scary, sometimes exciting, sometimes very quiet, and always, always surprising; leading me where I never expected to go. Doing art makes me lose all sense of time and place and go inside one long moment of creating. Whenever I feel a painting in my gut, I know this is why I paint. The colors are the message, I feel them before my mind has a chance to get involved. Color is the most agile and dynamic medium to create joy. And if you can find joy in your art, then you've found something worth holding on to.

Art website

Twitter account

Published works

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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 IV

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Foreword

by LORRAINE SEARS

WELCOME TO The Oddville Press, issue 4, volume II. This milestone edition marks the end of a fantastic first year for the rebirth of Oddville, during which we've brought you some amazing fiction, poetry and some mind-blowing art.

Getting one magazine out is easy, but continuing to work forward and make it a regular thing, that's where the real skill lies. You may have noticed that while we aim for quarterly delivery, we don't always meet the mark.

Any magazine is only as good as its content, and we want to be the best. We've come to realise it takes time to

attract the genius we're looking for, in fact sometimes, it's so elusive, we have to go and seek it out. So that just like in every issue before and every issue yet to come, you have page after page after page of oddity, odyssey and delight.

That said, we don't like being late, so please help us on our ongoing journey into another year and encourage every writer, poet and artist you know to seek out Oddville and submit. And make sure you share every glorious issue with everyone you know.

Happy New Year

—Lorraine Sears, Managing Editor

Stoma Hole

by Brian Dunn

Brian Dunn is a writer and humorist living in Phoenix, Arizona. His humor writing has been published by McSweeney's Internet Tendency. He has a piece awaiting publication in the Buddhism print magazine Shambhala Sun. His website is www.briandunn.com.

Stoma Hole

THE FIRST TIME I jammed the revolver in my mouth upside down and shot a .22 round through my laryngectomy stoma, I almost shot my damn foot off. But I'm getting ahead of things already. I became the proud owner of this quarter-sized hole in my neck when my voice box was removed. Yeah, it was cancer that did it. No, I wasn't surprised. When you smoke almost non-stop for thirty years—half of those spent enjoying shorties—you forfeit your right to shock when the test comes back positive. The news proved devastating to The Great Armando, my carnival-act, sword-swallowing alter ego. Hilarious, since he's the reason I took up cigarettes in the first place. He and my mentor, Freddy.

Freddy was better known by his stage name, The Great Frederico. For his entire adult life, he swallowed swords and blew fireballs so big they could be seen from space. When I was growing up, the carnival he worked for came through my home town twice a year. My parents took me and my younger brother there when I was twelve. Mom, rest her soul, thought a sword swallower was too much for impressionable young boys. Dad irked her by marching the two of us to the front row, where we watched The Great Frederico do his thing—and his thing pretty much messed me up for life. He picked me to join him on stage at the beginning of the show to verify that his swords were real, that he wasn't duping the crowd. When I saw those shiny blades up close for the first time, the gravity of what he was about to do hit me in the gut, and I had to concentrate on not decorating the stage with my vomit. When Frederico asked me if they were real, I could only manage a feeble thumbs up to the crowd before scurrying back to my seat. As Frederico made them disappear down his throat, until only the handles stuck out, my focus in life was fixed on becoming a sword swallower and bathing in the applause that only comes from cheating death in front of a crowd of people.

On the car ride back home, my brother kept asking me why I was smiling. "You'll know someday," I said. I lied. He never did find his calling and only ever worked one shit job after another. The same way I would've ended up if my old man hadn't been in a mood to rile up my mother that night.

The biggest problem I faced when I woke up the next morning to pursue my new career was a lack of tools. It's tough to acquire bona fide swords to swallow when you're a kid. I practiced with whatever I scrounged up around the house—pencils, drinking straws, a blunt pair of scissors, that kind of thing. It was good enough practice, I guess, but it got me into trouble when my old man walked in on me in the bathroom, forcing a ruler halfway down my throat. I told him I was practicing my craft. He took 'craft' to mean sucking off the entire high school football team. It took some quick talking to convince him I was straight as an arrow, that I was going to be a professional sword swallower. He threw up his hands and told me to never bring it up again and that he wouldn't tell my mother. Then he added that carney life was for dead-end men and I wouldn't be going to the carnival when it rolled around next time.

When I turned seventeen my old man, always the benefactor, kicked me out of the house. Said it was family tradition for the men to make their own way when they reached that age. Never mind that his version of making it was day drinking and collecting disability. I started crashing on my buddy Juan's couch. Juan was my effeminate friend, so he existed on the edge of my social circle. I was pretty sure he had a crush on me. He did anything I asked, like letting me crash on his couch. But I stopped short of asking if he wanted to go the carnival, which was in town again. Instead, I went solo with money borrowed from Juan and caught Frederico doing his thing. His hair had finally grayed—or maybe he'd finally stopped dying it—and a slight paunch now rested lightly above his gaudy blue and gold belt, but damn if the guy didn't still have

it. He'd even added a new wrinkle to the act by juggling three flaming torches with a three-foot sword in full swallow position. Later Freddy would tell that when he first saw me waiting for him outside his tent that night, he thought I was a queer. We laughed about that. Instead, I told him I wanted him to teach me everything he knew.

"Better hurry up," he said. "I'm retiring any day now."

"Sounds like enough time," I said.

Freddy looked at me with a smirk on his face and told me to come back to his tent the next morning at seven sharp. Said he woke up early to do his exercise every day. If I was there on time, he'd start my training.

I showed up at six thirty and stood outside his tent for a half hour before walking in. The Great Frederico was sleeping in stained pajamas and black t-shirt with no blanket or sheet pulled over him, hung over from a night of heavy boozing.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked. I sat down and told him I wasn't leaving until he showed me how he did his act. Freddy looked me over for a good minute until he saw that I wasn't leaving. Then he dragged himself out of bed, and a drawn-out sigh escaped his lips. "I'm goin' outside to throw up," he announced. Moments later, I heard his stomach contents being emptied. When he returned, Freddy looked like a new man. "No time like the now, 'eh kid?" he said.

Freddy showed me what he called his yogi yoga. Mainly they strengthened throat muscles and helped eliminate the gag reflex. Claimed he learned them from an Indian mystic who was with the carnival for a while. Told me the guy knew all sorts of crazy shit, like how to see out his third eye. Freddy said you could pull a card out of a deck and show it to the guy with his eyes closed, and he would tell you what it was. Before Freddy could learn the good stuff like that, the mystic split and went back to his homeland, declaring Westerners a scourge on the civilized world.

I went back every day for the week that the carnival was there. We worked on the basics: posture, breathing, getting a feel for what was normal pressure versus things about to go horribly wrong. Freddy loved telling stories between exercises. He'd traveled all over the world after joining the Navy-getting drunk and visiting the brothels in every port of call. He said they used to play a game called "smiles" where they'd all sit around a table and pay a whore ten dollars American to crawl under. She'd pick a sailor, reach into his pants, and start blowing him while he tried to not let on it was happening. If you were on the receiving end and got called out on it by your buddies, the next round of drinks was on you. After Freddy finished a yarn, I'd see that wistful look in his eyes and almost feel bad about refocusing him on my training. But I needed to know his secrets, which included smoking cigarettes to toughen up my mouth and throat. After learning that, I started in on my first pack of Lucky Strikes and started sucking on those things left and right.

The Luckies toughened up my insides in a hurry. I couldn't understand why someone would choose anything else than shorties. Having a filter on your cigarette meant you might as well be puffing on the candy version, I thought at the time. More than that, though, was the way lighting up a Lucky made me feel; less like a punk kid and more like someone who had a right to be walking on this earth just as much as anybody else.

The day the carnival was packing up to leave after their week in town was up, Freddy gave me notes for a six-month training routine that'd last me until they came back around. If I mastered everything written in his back-leaning scrawl on that yellow legal pad, I'd be able to do about seventy five percent of his act. "Everything but the super heavy shit," he said. He also sent me away with one of his practice swords and told me that he wanted me to impress him when we saw each other again. For the next half year, I didn't work at anything else and eventually could perform everything he'd written down.

When Freddy rolled into town again, I was scuffling. I'd just been kicked off of Juan's couch by his mother who thought my being in the house was turning her son gay. I couldn't tell her that particular horse had left the corral years before. I had zero money and was living hand to mouth. "Show me what you learned," he said. When I did, a smile crossed his lips and he told me there was a man we needed to see right then.

We marched into the tent at the far end of the dusty lot where Freddy told James, the carnival manager, that I was his long-lost son, Armando. He told James that we'd finally reunited and, would you know it, the kid had the same talent as his old man and should be added to the act, pronto. James didn't believe the father/son bullshit for a second, but when I gave him a preview of this new wrinkle to Freddy's act, he said, "Let's get you eating some fire soon too. Crowds love pyrotechnics, kid." And like that, I joined The Great Frederico on stage, impersonating the latest in a line of sword swallows thrilling regional audiences all through the Southwest United States and Northern Mexico.

Frederico seemed to relish the new energy I brought to the act, and whenever he introduced me as his son, Armando, who he'd trained since I was a boy, his face betrayed the delight he took in continuing the great carnival tradition of bullshitting the audience. He told me once that the carney business relied on equal parts misleading the public and the public wanting to be misled. A symbiotic relationship, he called it. Whatever it was, it worked for the new father/son act that we were doing. Crowds loved the idea of Frederico passing the torch to me, which he actually started doing once he taught me how easy it was to eat fire. Soon, I could do almost everything he could in the act, with a little less polish and a lot less showmanship. But I was a quick learner, and we were really getting the act dialed in.

Freddy'd planned to wait at least six months before selling the act to me and retiring, but I guess he caught a

wicked case of short-timer's disease because he left after only three months into it. He'd already talked to James and said I was ready to go solo, even though that was a lie. He told me this in his tent while packing up everything he owned into two suitcases. We hadn't even talked about money.

"Send me fifty bucks every month," Freddy said, scribbling the address in Mexico where I should send the check.

"How long?" I asked.

Freddy studied me like he did that first morning I showed up at his tent. "You think you'll be doing this a while?"

"For the rest of my life, probably," I said.

"Send me fifty dollars a month for three years," Freddy said, "and we'll call it good." Before he could reconsider, I shot my hand out. Freddy shook it, and that was the deal.

I never saw Freddy again, but each month I sent him that fifty bucks- even when it meant going without coffee and Luckies for a week or two. A couple years in, the rumor was Freddy had died, but I still sent the money each month, figuring whoever he'd left behind could use it. I almost wrote a letter with the last payment, but I didn't.

Sometimes after a show, people who'd seen Freddy would ask me how my old man was doing. I'd always say, "He's happily retired in Juarez, drinking beer." They seemed to like the idea of the sword swallower treating his pipes to a cold cerveza instead of tearing them up, so that was the story I stuck with. Keep the customer satisfied, right? I never made a boatload of cash, but except for the greedy promoters and owners, no one ever does. That's not why I got into it. I knew that I'd never be able to stay in one place for long. It was bad enough as a kid to sleep under the same roof each night and trudge to the same school every day. The thought of doing the adult version of that routine always made me sick to my stomach. But waking up in a new town, even if it's one that I've seen a thousand times already, makes me feel like I'm steering my own ship. Plus, I had more than my share of sex with women. Some were real lookers, too. Thelma first saw me perform ten years ago when her husband was still alive. The next time she came, she left her husband behind. We had sex in my tent, and that started a regular routine of going spurs to saddle whenever I passed through. Thelma was just a wisp of a thing, no bigger than a minute. But she had a lifetime of tough work behind her, and those tiny arms of hers were like taut bundles of steel wire, and they could put you on your ass if their owner so chose. I liked her an awful lot, but not enough to think about going back on a promise to always remain a bachelor.

For thirty years I did my thing. Some nights I was great, and I played the crowd just about as well as a performer can. I took an assistant early on-pretty young thing who gave all the teenage boys in the front row boners-but she only lasted a few seasons. The split was

for the better because I hated sharing the money. Afternoon shows were tough. I eventually learned to accept the need for 'em, but I never liked 'em. Not having night as a backdrop for death-defying acts makes them look way less dangerous, like something anyone with enough beers in him can pull off. I needed that nocturnal energy to help me zero in on what I was doing, and the heat of the day just zapped it. But even during those shows, and there were plenty, I never hated what I was doing.

Up until two years ago, James still ran the carnival. We'd been through so much that there wasn't anything I wouldn't confide in him or him in me. Then he had a heart attack and left and never came back. They replaced him with Steve, a real young up-and-comer with new ideas on how to do everything. He's the kind of guy who brags about anything that can be bragged about- women he's screwed, men he's fought, poker games he's won. I don't mind adding a little extra to make a good story, but he was always trying to pass off bullshit as fact. I couldn't call him on it, with him being the boss and all, so I just stopped listening. When I went to him the first time to talk about my annual pay bump, he actually produced a balance sheet to prove why he couldn't do it that year. I called him a monkey fucker. From then on, our relationship was frosty, but I didn't care.

One afternoon in the late summer, he came to my tent between shows. The place was Albuquerque, and it was hot as all hell. I was sitting on the edge of my bed, smoking a filtered Camel, when he walked right in without knocking and sat down in my folding chair. I fixed my gaze on a thread coming loose in the fabric of the tent just behind his head so I wouldn't have to look at him.

"Help you with something?" I asked.

Steve was tapping both of his shoes on the desert floor, he was so excited. "I've seen the future of your act," he said. "You're gonna flip out when you hear it."

"That so?"

"Yeah," he said. "There's this kid out of West Texas. He does the sword swallowing thing you do, but he takes the whole thing to the next level. This kid actually suspends cinder blocks from his nipples. Swings the things around like fucking airplane propellers or something!"

I stubbed my cigarette out on the ground. "How's he do that?"

Steve looked puzzled. "I don't know what kind of training the kid does or anything."

"No, I mean how does he suspend them?"

"I told you, from his nipples," Steve said.

I sighed. "I know, but how are they attached to his nipples? Crazy glue?"

Steve laughed. "Jesus, old man. How do ya think? Kid's nipples are pierced! Runs big rubber bands through the rings and loops 'em through the blocks."

"Oh." My face and neck turned hot. "Listen, I have a show to get ready for."

"I haven't told you the best part," Steve said. "He does this regurgitation thing. Swallows a light bulb whole,

turns it over in his gut and then brings it back up the other way. It's fucking incredible. The crowd goes nuts for it, especially the kids."

I stood up, but my legs sort of buckled when I did. "Gotta get ready for the show," I said.

Steve popped out of his chair, beaming. "Let it sink in, Armando, but know this is the future. We'll chat about it later." He pushed my tent flap open, and followed me out into the sun.

That show was a shitty one because I had what Freddy once called monkey mind, when you swing from thought to thought like they were vines. There was this girl, ribbons in her hair, sitting up front with her mother. I'm usually great with kids in the crowd but couldn't convince her to come up on stage and look at the swords to save her life. The entire time I was doing my act, she looked petrified. The rest of the crowd was a morgue, and nothing I did could rouse them. When I got back to my tent, I felt like sending Freddy fifty bucks for letting him down. I bounced back the next show and then got on a little roll that had me feeling better about things, no matter what some punk-ass kid from Texas was swinging from his nipples. Then I woke up one morning and started coughing up blood.

My diagnosis came before the off season in November, and I smoked right up to the day they removed my voice box, leaving me with a hole dead center in my neck. It looks as hideous as it sounds, and for a brief moment, I wondered how scared that girl with the ribbons would be of me now. The carnival covered twenty percent of the treatment, leaving me to foot a hefty bill. I'd never entertained the thought of retirement, and I sure wasn't gonna be able to start. When I told Steve not to replace me, that I'd be back when the season began in February, he looked doubtful. Then when I said I'd started working on something new and better, something that the kids would like, he got a grin on his face that said sure thing, old man. I would've smacked that look right off him if I hadn't needed the job when I got back.

I had the surgery in Tucson so I could recover with Thelma at her place outside the city. Her husband had died, and she'd inherited his pension from the post office. She was decent enough to clean my stoma and change the dressing, something I couldn't bring myself to do for the first week. I was too embarrassed to practice plugging my stoma for talking in front of her, so I waited until she went off to work and then rehearsed until I felt sorry for myself.

One day I was on the sofa watching tv when Thelma came in and let me have it. "Shoulda stopped smoking your goddamn cigarettes long before this came to pass," she said. I tried to answer but forgot to plug my stoma, so my voice got trapped in my chest where it evaporated. Thelma shook her head at the sight. "I'm looking at a damn fool." I couldn't disagree with her, so I shut up for the rest of the night. But that was the only time she had anything cross to say. The rest of it, she made my meals,

kept me comfortable, and helped me sleep the days away with some of her pain medicine mixed with mine. When I needed a chaser, she'd go to her pantry and bring me a Dimple Pinch whisky.

After a few weeks of her Florence Nightingale routine, I felt okay enough to start ironing out the new act. I waited for Thelma to go back to work, after checking in on me during her lunch hour, before taking out the .22 handgun I'd stowed away in my luggage. I snuck into the garage where her husband kept an incredibly clean and organized workshop that always touched off a pang of jealousy in me when I saw it. The crown jewel was a full-size table saw that appeared completely new. Poor bastard never got a chance to use the thing. I started with a vice clamp he'd mounted on a workbench and used it to hold down the Smith & Wesson while I used a metal file to smooth down her front sight. It was tougher work than I thought it would be, and I took a break halfway through, but I succeeded in getting that thing down to a little nub at the end of the barrel. Then I took it into the kitchen where I smeared her with vegetable oil-spilling some on the orange linoleum flooring-and jammed the thing down my throat, wrong side up. I was still sore from the operation and it took some doing to angle the thing just right, but I kept at it. Finally, I heard a satisfying 'pop' when it cleared my stoma and peeked out, just like a baby breeching. The picture of me standing there in Thelma's kitchen proved too absurd, and I had to laugh. It shook my body, but I couldn't make any noise with the damn gun gumming up the works, so I silently rocked back and forth like a crazy person. I knew the whole thing was going to work, so when I finally dislodged the gun without breaking any teeth, I got drunk on Dimple Pinch and passed out on her couch that smelled like so much sweat and ass.

I came to when Thelma slammed the front door, announcing her arrival. She'd picked me up what she called man basics from the convenience store, like razor blades and orange juice and a girlie magazine and a lotto ticket that never paid out. When she put the plastic bag on the kitchen table, she saw the glistening gun and looked at me with pity. "If you're gonna do yourself in with that thing, don't be messy about it," she said. "And put me in your will first."

A few days later I got good enough to unveil the new act to her. She shook her head, but I saw resignation in it instead of condemnation. I kept working on it and got to the point where I could shoot the thing with good accuracy out of my stoma hole at a distance of thirty feet. When I went into rapid fire mode, the smoke from the barrel would swirl around my face in a nice pyrotechnic touch.

Steve had gone ahead and hired a replacement sword swallower, but when I showed him what I could do, he thought the thing had potential. Dubbed me the Throat Gunner and said we'd do it on a trial basis. I wasn't crazy about the name but didn't have any say in the matter and

didn't care enough to make a fuss. My first show back, I was nervous but did alright with a series of trick shots I'd worked up. The crowd dug it, and Steve liked what he saw. It didn't take me long to add the finale of standing on my head and knocking full Dr. Pepper glass bottles off a tiny ledge at fifteen feet. I dunno if it meant Steve was right or not, but the young people got more of a rise out of it than their parents. Whatever. If I could work and sell tickets, I was happy enough.

And that's the way it went for a good three years before I got diagnosed with colon cancer and was fitted for a colostomy bag. I found myself naked in Thelma's kitchen again, trying to figure out how to jam my trusty .22 through that hole and out my ass so I could fire at some targets. You know, the Ass Assassin has a nice ring to it. I bet the kids are gonna love it.

Dementia Untouched

by J. MUMMEY

J. Mummey, originally from Bellefontaine, Ohio, is a computer programmer, avid volunteer, and budding writer living in Raleigh, North Carolina. Her passion is writing and she draws inspiration from the wonderful and sometimes frightening world around her. She is currently working on her first novel.

In a shower,
Walls caked in dried vomit,
She steps.

Very slow as not to fall.
Does not want to fall.
Careful not to fall.

In a shower,
Tile graffitied with wild strokes of rust,
She stands.

Water cold on her back.
Wishing for warmth.

In a shower,
Drain full of matted white hair,
She weeps.

Again,
Afraid of today.

Poetry

by YUAN CHANGMING

Yuan Changming, an 8-time Pushcart nominee, is the most widely published poetry author who speaks Mandarin but writes English. Tutoring and co-editing Poetry Pacific with Allen Qing Yuan in Vancouver, Changming has poetry appearing in 909 literary publications across 30 countries, including Best Canadian Poetry (2009,12,14), BestNew-PoemsOnline and Threepenny Review.

History Reviewed: The Secret of the Inca Empire

The whole empire was tied
Together with a colored rope,
A line where the sun's children
Hung their simple metaphors side
By side with their wordless poetry.

Letting the Cat Out of the Bag: Most Popular English Idioms

Yes, Elvis has left the building,
And you may be glad to see the back of
A hot potato
Jumping on the bandwagon.
But once in a blue moon
You will hear it through the grapevine
Rather than straight from the horse's mouth,
Which is a far cry
From the best thing since sliced bread,
Something you can see eye to eye
While cutting the mustard
By drawing all the best of both worlds
To make a long story short.
Now if you feel a bit under the weather
Do not burn the midnight oil
Or sit on the fence,
But just give it the benefit of the doubt
And then hit the sack,
Even in the heat of the moment.

The Classics



by Allen Forrest

Allen Forrest is this issue's cover artist, and you can read more about him on the inside front cover of this volume.

Early Retirement

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 sledging, she started reading books as soon as she could hang onto 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.

Early Retirement

ONE JANUARY MORNING, I arrived on the Windsong walkway at dawn. In the distance, downtown city towers rose like small black boxes against a pale yellow sky. The brighter yellow street lamps and flashing headlights marked the network of streets. For a change, no breeze blew and the rigging on the boats in the marina was silent. Even the water was smooth and shone slickly gold below the boardwalk where I stood.

Heavy rain the week before washed out a leaning arbutus, which had fallen across the walkway and broken three planks. The new lumber looked raw against the old, weathered, rain-soaked cedar. The arbutus lay in the water, tied with ropes to keep it from floating out into the harbor and fouling seaplanes and boats. The bark was still smooth and red, the leaves still glossy green and I wondered how long it would take the tree to die. It looked odd lying in the water, as though sky and water had flipped and the world was now upside down.

As I walked around a tiny, shallow cove past the big Garry oak tree which spread gnarled grey branches over the water like an enormous umbrella, Cassie came galloping down the hill to meet me. She's a mutt with brown and black fur and, surprisingly, bright blue eyes. Gayle, her owner, raised a hand in greeting.

"Hey, Beautiful Blue Eyes!" I rubbed the dog's head and she butted my knee, then danced away, coaxing me to chase her. We'd been playing tag ever since the summer.

A deep male voice spoke behind me. "Beautiful Blue Eyes! What a delightful name! Come, will you play with me, too?" The voice had a slight accent which I couldn't identify.

I turned to see a large, chunky man and a small, slim, blonde woman. Cassie sniffed them both and gave a ten-

tative wag of her tail. We stood around admiring the dog and making comments about the weather. The couple chatted easily and gave their names as Wendell and Suzanne. Suzanne had an accent, too. European, probably, but I couldn't pinpoint the country. After a few minutes, Gayle said she had to leave or be late for work. She and the dog loped down the hill and disappeared around the bend.

Wendell and Suzanne walked ahead of me along the narrow, twisting path and stopped at one of my favorite spots, a bench where I sometimes sat and looked at the harbor through the trees clinging to the steep rocky slope below. Suzanne clambered down to the shore and dumped the contents of a plastic shopping bag on a flat granite outcropping.

"That is where she puts meat scraps for the crows," Wendell said. "If she forgets, the crows follow us for hundreds of yards, scolding."

I had once watched two crows battle on that rock. One crow lay on its back and, like a cat, used its claws to rake the belly of the second crow. The second crow jabbed the supine crow with its beak. They were vocal and quick, and the fight lasted barely three seconds before they rose into the air, one chasing the other into the trees.

"They do not recognize me," Wendell said, "only Suzanne, for it is she who gives them food. When I am alone, they do not bother with me."

Suzanne climbed back up to the path, using tree branches as hand holds, and the three of us watched the noisy crows claim their morning treat. "Come, we must hurry," she said. "You know I promised to be at work early this morning."

I fell in behind them. Wendell lumbered like a bear but Suzanne put her feet down soundlessly and with pre-

cision, like a stalking cat. They were obviously familiar with the walkway. "I take it you usually come here later in the morning."

"That is correct," Wendell said. "I have retired early because of my health, but I take Suzanne part way to work. Then she runs the rest of the way, which I cannot do."

We had reached Delancey Street, which dead-ends at the walkway, when a voice hailed me. "Hey, Sandy! Coffee's on."

It was Hal, my buddy from the cribbage club, standing on his back porch in sock feet. I waved goodbye to Wendell and Suzanne and sat in Hal's kitchen for an hour, shooting the breeze. When we were through, I decided to go on home rather than walk to town and back.

I caught up to Wendell near the marina. My surprise at seeing him must have shown on my face. He said, "It takes me a long time to finish the walk; I have to often sit down and rest."

I felt a bit sorry for him. "Have you been doing this walk for a long time?"

"Just the last few months, since I retired. But Suzanne has been walking this waterfront for close to thirty years. She has worked for the government a long time."

Wendell went on. "I love to travel, but it is becoming difficult because of my health. I have a bad back, and I am one hundred pounds overweight. It is unfortunate that my wife likes so much to work. If she would retire, we could travel and sightsee and it would be easy for me to lose some weight."

"Have you tried dieting?" I asked.

"When Suzanne is home on the weekends, she makes me exercise and eat properly," Wendell laughed and waved his hand dismissively. "I tell her I allow her to do this. But I would rather walk around museums and art galleries than cut back on food."

We were now back at the bench near the Garry oak. Wendell said, "Let's sit down. I am winded. I weigh three hundred pounds, you know, and I must lose some of that and get back into shape. But I am too fat to exercise, and I cannot stop myself from eating."

"How do you keep yourself busy now that you're retired?" I asked.

"I think about my interesting life," he said. "I would like to write a book about it."

Lots of people say that. None of them seem to get beyond just saying it. I count myself lucky that I've always liked to work with my hands, to build things.

"It is very hard to get old," he said. "I am sixty now and unable to do many things that I used to do."

"I'm older than you are. By six years, in fact."

He looked startled, then gave me a petulant glance. I doubted he would ever write his book or do anything about his weight either. Like my mother just before she died, he felt sorry for himself and blamed the rest of the world for his problems.

Wendell looked down at the outcropping where Suzanne had left meat for the crows. The rock was clean, the crows gone. "I think she is silly to feed those birds," he said. "Some of that meat could have gone in a stew for me."

"Let's walk on," I said. "It's too cold to sit for long."

"With all this fat on me, I don't feel the cold." He heaved himself to his feet. "I have three herniated disks. When I went to the doctor, all he did was give me Tylenol. I ate it like candy and then suffered a bleeding stomach and much pain. The pills didn't do anything for my back."

"Didn't you try another doctor?" I asked.

"I insisted on seeing a physiotherapist, and she fixed me in one moment."

I wondered why he wasn't still seeing a physiotherapist. Perhaps he preferred complaining.

Wendell was panting. "You walk too fast."

I walked even faster and said over my shoulder, "I'll freeze to death if I don't keep moving." Which was true enough; the temperature was still below zero and a biting wind had come up. Also, I don't have an insulating layer of fat on my bones.

As I drove home, I decided I'd been rude. I could have excused my rush to get away from him by saying I had an appointment.

Next time I saw the couple, I did that. I used the excuse too much, in fact, because about the fifth time, Wendell said, "For someone who is retired, you lead a very busy life." I mumbled about massage appointments and friends who needed carpentry work done. After that, I often took a different route back to the parking lot, annoyed that Wendell's recitation of his woes had interfered with my early morning rambles.

Then one Friday morning in March, after being away for a week, I was shocked to see yellow police tape around the bench and winding through the trees down to the sea. I stood staring at the yellow rectangle, wondering what could have happened since I'd been here the week before.

"Hi, Sandy." Gayle and Cassie were coming back from their walk. Gayle led the dog around behind the bench to avoid crossing the ribbon and stopped beside me. Beautiful Blue Eyes shoved her head under my hand for a pat.

"What's going on, do you know?"

"There was a cop here first thing," Gayle said. "He told me there'd been an accident, that a man fell down on those rocks and hit his head. He was dead when they found him."

The thought of someone dying on this beautiful path gave me the creeps. "Did he say when it happened?"

"Yesterday morning. He wouldn't give me a name but he said the man had a shopping bag of meat scraps with him so I think it must have been Wendell."

"But Wendell doesn't feed the crows," I said. "He told me it's always Suzanne who takes the meat down to the shore."

"Maybe she was late for work and asked him to do it."

Cassie butted me with her head, wanting to play. I hushed her. "I can't see Wendell trying to climb down that rock bluff. Maybe he had a heart attack." I hoped so. It would have been a quick death, not like the arbutus tied to the dock.

"That wouldn't surprise me. He was way overweight."

Another possibility occurred to me and I shoved it to the back of my mind. I didn't want to think about it, let alone voice it.

I threw a stick for Cassie a few times. When she sat down, out of breath, I said goodbye and went back to the yellow tape. There was nobody down at the shore or around the rocks. The cops must be satisfied that they knew the whole story.

I carried on to the far end of the walk, trying to shake the feeling of tragedy. At least Wendell's body had been taken away, and the yellow ribbon would be gone in a day or two. The dying arbutus might still be tied to the dock months from now.

A few weeks later, I saw Suzanne again. She was climbing up the rocks to the path, and I could see the crows already attacking her contribution of food.

"I was sorry to hear about Wendell," I said.

"Thank you. It has been a difficult time for me. I am lucky to have my job, even luckier to be so busy just now."

"I'll walk you as far as the blue bridge if you like."

She smiled. "Not unless you are willing to run. I always run from here to the office." She sprinted away, moving easily. Her lithe movements spoke of a body glad to be free, glad to be on the wing.

Prose Poems

by MITCHELL GRABOIS

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois' poems and fictions have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad, including The Oddville Press. He is a regular contributor to The Prague Revue, and has been thrice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. 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.

Four Corners, Three Jews

1.

When he is four months old, the boy has become the four corners of his family's corn field. When the girl is three months old, she is the three stones of the hearth.

I give the boy a machete, though it will be a while before he can use it. I put it in a special closet and nail the door shut with a square-headed nail, to keep it safe until then. I give the girl a pestle and a pot. She can play with

the pot until the day comes when she will use it, but the boy cannot play with the machete.

We do not want his young blood spilled. There is plenty of time for him to anoint the four corners of his corn field, plenty of time to give himself to the land, and plenty of time for his rain to fall, for crops to grow.

Now I have done my small part. They are prepared for the future. The Virgin's robe is blue with gold stars, and the Earth is fertile. Life and death continues.

2.

Three Jews sit at the woman's bedside to ease the transition from this life to the next. Three Jews, men in dark suits, dark in their helplessness. Her soul spins like a gyroscope and does not stop. Her soul plays out like fishing line, like an endless reel of movie previews. Every fine thing she ever did is magnified, like the light of Oppenheimer's bomb radiating the night.

Why did melanoma invade her face like a malevolent alien craft, wonders her husband. Why did her once beautiful face look like a landing field?

The questions on the one side of death are of a certain type, he knows, and the questions on the other side of death are of another. His mind can't grasp mystery, so he sticks to unfairness and grievance.

My Concetta

1.

My Concetta doesn't mind looking like her aunts. They're five feet tall, two-hundred fifty pounds, Tia Rosa, Tia Maria. Their old eyeballs are fresh Mozzarella, their elbows and knees focaccia. They stand at the refrigerator at midnight and snack on cold spleen. When they offer some to me, I hide my disgust. Eating organs is like eating poison.

My Concetta comes out in her robe, her hair all mussed, takes a piece of spleen in her hand and eats it as if it were a chocolate donut. Later we'll get in bed and she'll kiss me with her spleen mouth, her tongue deep in mine.

2.

I feel forty percent human today. That's alright, honey, that's twice as good as twenty. She understands me. She's faithful. Guys who think she's from their tribe hit on her, but she shuts 'em down. She's never asked why I left the university to work in a redwood sawmill, to pull lumber all day, stack it on metal carts, and yank the cord that sounds the whistle for the fork lift driver to come. She marvels that I only weigh a hundred and thirty pounds. She thinks I'm a chubby chaser, but I'm not. All my other girlfriends have been slender, nearly anorexic. I've told her that, but she doesn't believe me. She needs constant reassurance that she's special. We all do.

Screwtape



by Michael Morris

A recent transplant from the winterlands of Michigan to the Walla Walla Valley of Washington State, and a believer in the power of chocolate and Sunday afternoon naps.

I am an artist who great enjoyment taking the practices I have picked up in both the fine and graphic arts and molding them into some new and unique kind of artistic alchemy. That, of course, is when I can find the time amid raising my three infinitely energetic children with my beautiful wife. That and sleep and books. Those are great too.

Ashes

by Josh Rank

Josh is a graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and has been published in The Feathertale Review. For more of Josh's ramblings visit his blog at www.joshrank.blogspot.com

Ashes

OUR CLASS WAS small. Maybe twenty people if too many didn't skip. So of course I had seen him. He was the only guy in the whole class. But I had learned not to pay college guys too much attention. Most of them just wanted to take you to the bar with cheap pitchers and hope you got drunk enough to sleep with them. But I can't really hold it against them because that's what our society teaches men to desire. Or at least that's what my cultural history of feminism class said.

And that's the class he was in. One day we finally sat next to each other. Not by choice. Pure coincidence. I thought about talking to him, but what would I say? And then he leaned over and did me a favor:

"I think my socks are wet. Or, at least, I hope my socks are wet," he said as the teacher opened a folder before the lecture.

"Um, what?"

"My feet feel wet. If they're not, I might be having a stroke or something. So even though I really don't like having wet feet I'd prefer it to having a stroke. By a lot."

The teacher cleared her throat.

I nodded. His hair wasn't shaggy like the rest of the guys around campus. Even combed. His clothes mimicked his hair in that they were cleaner and better groomed than most others, but not to the point of being one of those guys that wears a full suit to class. Not weirdly clean, just-nice. Eventually the class ended.

"I'm Alex," I said as everyone around us shoved notebooks into backpacks. We stayed seated. Facing each other.

"Adam." He stuck his hand out and I took it, but we didn't shake. It was more of a light squeeze.

A few moments later, Adam and I were the only ones left in the room. I still had my notebook in front of me.

"Not even a doodle?" Adam asked. He now stood next to my desk with a hand on the strap crossing his chest like a seat belt. His bag hung off his right hip.

I looked at the empty paper in front of me and shrugged. I tried to come up with something witty, funny, interesting, provocative, but I simply followed up the first shrug with another.

"Do you like juice?" he asked. Of course I liked juice. Everybody likes juice.

I continued sitting as he hovered over me. As cliché as it sounds, I could hear birds chirping outside of the one window of the classroom.

I looked down at the blank paper in front of me and said, "You know, if you're not having a stroke, or like continue not to have a stroke, we could go get juice or something like that sometime." I looked up.

He smiled, bent over, grabbed the pen sitting next to the blank paper, and wrote his phone number.

I texted him a couple days later but didn't receive a response. Not even a hello. Could the number be wrong? Maybe it really was a stroke? Maybe he actually hated me and was sitting on the couch with his beautiful super-model, scientist girlfriend and they were laughing at me while pouring the most delicious and luxuriant juice the world had ever seen into each other's mouths. Finally, a week passed. It was time for our class.

I got there early and watched the other students filter in. Adam didn't show up. The professor came in and started talking. For a second week in a row, I didn't listen to a word she said.

As the lecture wrapped up, my phone went off. The teacher cracked some lame joke and I walked out of the room. I would pick up my bag when class was over.

The hallway was empty and my footsteps echoed. It was a text message. And, my chest seized when I realized this, it was from Adam.

Hey sorry, I've been busy. Hope I didn't miss much this week.

He even capitalized and used punctuation in his texts. I wanted to hug my phone.

No biggie. I can show you my notes. I texted back. I forgot I hadn't taken any notes.

It took a couple of minutes, but my phone went off again.

Sorry about the texts. Let's meet tomorrow and I'll make it up to you.

So he wasn't lounging with a supermodel scientist! We made plans to meet the next afternoon. I squeezed my phone between my hands, forgetting my backpack and empty notebook in the classroom.

Two o'clock, outside of my apartment, I stood on the curb next to the couch our neighbors had either ruined or decided to free. And just as he promised, Adam pulled up in an old car. The kind with a big bench seat in the front that could probably withstand a missile strike.

I climbed in. "Nice car."

"Thanks. I just got it. It was my dad's."

The interior was spotless. Fresh brown leather seats that looked like they could cook a steak if given enough direct sunlight. The dash was completely free of scuffs and blemishes. It looked like it had never been used.

"Oh nice. Was it a birthday gift or something?"

"No, it was more of a bequeathing."

He started driving and the radio played quietly. Did I hear him right? What the hell is a bequeathing?

"What the hell is a bequeathing?"

He turned towards me for a moment before returning his gaze to the road. He looked happy. Not quite a smile, but a little more than a smirk. "Hmm?" he said. "Oh, he left it to me."

"That's, nice of him?" I wasn't exactly following.

He chuckled and the smirk became a smile. "Yeah it was." He turned his head a little. "Hey, thanks Dad!"

I turned my head and saw something in the backseat buckled into the seat belt. It looked like a vase but it had a lid. I tried to figure it out and Adam must have seen my confusion.

"I know this is our first date but Alex, meet my father."

It took another minute to set in.

"Wait, when you said you were busy last week—"

"Funerals are pretty difficult to plan. There's a lot you have to take into consideration. First there's the wishes of the deceased, then there's the general cost of everything, the visitations, letting family members know—"

Oh my god. What in the holy hell was going on? His dad dies and he not only picks me up in his dead dad's car but his dead dad is strapped into a seat belt in the back seat? Why was he smiling? Did he kill his dad? Did he kill him and take his beautiful old car so he could pick up a college girl, kill her too, and combine their ashes in the weird vase thing to sprinkle around his garden so he can create ghost vegetables? Is that what's happening?

"I was very close with my dad," he said. He glanced at me and smiled. It wasn't a scary about-to-chop-your-head-off smile. I started to relax, but I wasn't calm. "He meant everything to me and he left me this car, but only if I would spread his ashes. It was in his will."

"So we're not going to get juice?"

He smiled again. "Sure we can do that. After this." He made another turn but I didn't know where we were going.

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to a bar."

Of course we were. I started to curse my decision to go to this school and then I started cursing the whole education system in general.

We hit a highway and went another few stops before pulling off, rounding some corners, and stopping outside of a place that should have been empty in the middle of the day. But it wasn't.

"This is it." Adam parked the car in the gravel parking lot. The building looked like you could punch a hole through the wall. There was a sign near the road that advertised a happy hour which started at noon and the crowd smoking outside of the front door evidenced its efficacy. Adam reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

"We gotta take the urn to three places. That's all. Shouldn't be too bad."

The smokers watched us closely. They were all in what looked like their fifties and none of them looked happy to see us.

"This is where my mom and dad met," he explained after reading from the paper. "It was always one of his favorite places." He stepped out of the car and reached into the backseat for the urn. I followed him as he started walking towards the smokers.

We reached a patch of grass about ten feet away from the front door and Adam opened the lid.

"What the hell are you doing?" one of the smokers yelled.

Adam turned around and smiled. "I'm just dropping off my dad." He looked back at me. "This thing is heavier than you think."

"Hold on. Hold on now." This man wasn't smoking. In fact, he was much cleaner than the other men. "You can't just go throwing your trash in my parking lot."

"It's not trash. It's my father. Bill Wychinski? He used to come here all the time."

"Wait, did you say that's your father?" The man stared at the urn in Adam's hands and figured it out. "Oh hell no. You aren't dumping human remains in my parking lot!"

I eased myself away from the situation. I didn't know what was going to happen so I retreated to the tank that Adam called a car.

"This'll only take a second." Adam reached into the urn with what looked like a tiny shovel and the man grabbed his arm. There was a poof of smoke and the man took a couple steps back. The front of his blue, denim-like shirt was covered in grey dust and he started screaming.

"Oh shit! Oh shit you threw ashes at me! Dead ashes!"

I doubt Adam heard a word since he was already running back to the car while trying to secure the lid at the same time. He hopped in the driver's seat and fired up

the engine. The man covered in ashes regained his composure and started running.

"Go go go!" I yelled as beer bottles began flying at us.

Adam put the transmission in drive and spun the tires in the gravel as we spit more dust towards the man in the blue shirt.

"I mean, technically the ashes were spread on the property of the bar. So, that counts, right?" He smiled as we hit the pavement of the street and left the bar behind us.

We pulled into a gas station and he pulled out the piece of paper.

"Adam, I don't know about this. I thought, y'know, juice and—"

"These are our stops." He spread the paper on the huge dashboard in front of us. "There's only two left."

"I mean what is this? You take me to spread ashes on our first date? Most people go out for frozen yogurt or something and we're tossing ashes at strangers at a bar in the afternoon and—"

"I don't believe in love at first sight," he said.

I tried to respond, but nothing came out.

"I don't think that's a thing that actually happens. Which means anyone you meet at any point of the day could end up being the person you love for the rest of your life. You can't predict the future, but you can't count it out either. This is an opportunity for you to meet someone that's really important to me. Sure, there's a chance we'll never speak again after today, but there's an equal chance we'll grow old together. It either happens or it doesn't. Fifty-fifty."

Grow old together? Love at first sight?

"And what if we do get together? You're going to have missed meeting my father. And even though you can't speak to him right now, you can get a sense of him. This is the closest you'll ever get to knowing him and it's an opportunity that can only happen today. Why waste it?"

If I had tried to explain it to my friends, they would have slapped me and told me I needed a vacation. But at that moment, I understood. I still wasn't completely comfortable with the charred remains of his dead father sitting on the seat between us, but I was willing to take the first step towards understanding. I had been creeped out from pretty much the time he picked me up to just then, but that slowly started to fade.

"So where's the next place?"

Adam looked over the paper. "Apparently it's a parking lot outside of Best Buy."

"You didn't look this over beforehand?"

"I thought we could experience it together," he said as he smiled again.

We drove fifteen minutes to the Best Buy out by the mall. The sun was still out and people were starting to get off of work. Traffic had picked up and the parking lot was about half-full.

"So why Best Buy?"

Adam pulled out the piece of paper. "Let's see. It says: Adam, I wanted the dispersal to not only teach you about your father, but also your humble beginnings."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not exactly sure."

I glanced around the parking lot. Nothing but stray shopping carts, cars, and litter. What could possibly happen here? Even with the traffic it feels like there's nobody around. All alone. I couldn't imagine what the place would be like after the store closed. It would be a deserted wasteland where you could slowly murder someone for hours and nobody would hear the screams.

"Oh, ew," I said.

"What?"

"He couldn't mean this is where you were conceived, could he?"

Adam thought it over for a minute, started to laugh, quickly shook it away in disgust, and ended up laughing in spite of himself. "That sadistic bastard."

"God, I'd be puking my eyeballs out if I were you. Aren't you grossed out?" I asked him as we walked along the rows of cars. He held the urn in his arms like a baby.

"I mean, it's not a surprise that I was conceived at some point." He looked around the parking lot. "Although, it's a little unnerving knowing the backdrop of the scene. It makes it easier to picture, which is why he was probably laughing his ass off when he wrote that."

We finally came upon a corner surrounded by a curb with a small tree growing out of a patch of dirt inside. He took a couple scoops and laid it gently by the base of the tree.

"Okay." He took a deep breath. "One more."

We drove to the last stop. A grocery store that looked to be closed but was simply in the beginning stages of disrepair.

"Why the grocery store?" I asked. We stood near the bike racks by the main entrance.

"I don't really know." He flipped the paper over. "This way."

We walked along the wall, turned left, walked, and turned left again. We were behind the store by the delivery entrance and dumpsters. It was dirty back there, but the back of every building is dirty. I had thought about wearing nice shoes and thanked myself for avoiding it. The ground looked like it could stain an oil slick. I watched as Adam walked up to the dumpster next to the loading dock.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He held the paper in front of himself and read, "This is it. I want you to open the lid of the dumpster and empty the urn. Then go pawn it. Use the money to take a girl out or something." He paused and looked me. He winked which was somehow sweet and not creepy. "This is the end. You already know that, but this will illustrate it better. You are not allowed to cry, you are not allowed to visit this place ever again. Do not look at it as the final resting place of your father or anything cheesy like

that. This is simply a dumpster and you are taking out the trash.

Adam breathed deep and crumbled the piece of paper. He popped it into the top of the urn before using his free hand to lift the lid of the dumpster. He tipped the urn into the open lid and the paper, along with the rest of the ashes, cascaded onto the plastic bags and whatever else was piled inside. When he finished, he let the lid slam.

Nothing was said for a full minute. He was instructed not to cry and there was only a moment I thought he would break his dad's will. I stood motionless and tried to pretend I didn't exist.

Finally, Adam shook his head and smiled. "Let's go get some juice money," he said.

We found a pawn shop near the highway and sold the urn without a haggle. Adam got fifty bucks and we got back into the tank car from the past.

Sure, we didn't laugh a ton on our first date and he didn't spread a jacket over a puddle like in the old movies, but he shared something with me that I could only describe to my friends as physical poetry. There was more going on than what was immediately visible and it grew a deep connection between us. Like he said in the parking lot at the gas station, who knows what will happen between the two of us? We could stop talking in a week and that could be the end of our story but there's an equal chance we will fall in love and get married and have kids and co-sign a mortgage and discuss our monthly budget. And if that's the case, I have an understanding and connection with him that wouldn't have been possible if he didn't creep the absolute hell out of me the first time we hung out by letting his dead father's ashes ride in the backseat when he came to pick me up.

Practically Alive

by JANET VEIL

Janet Veil is a Pennsylvania novelist, poet, and visual artist. She has recently completed the book-length project, Saint Agnes of South Street, and is in the early stages of a collection of essays on New York City dance culture. To learn more about her ongoing projects visit www.janetveil.com

Ripping apart

Suturing back together

Blood fresh

Always fresh

The wound worsens, everyday

It eats away at her flesh

Building the skin and the meat

Into a ball, lifted off the body

Asking, reaching for help

The heat is too much

She is alive but smells of the dead

Life circles around her

And watches her closely

How to find and compare

To be a part of this world

In this way, watching

And waiting

Lucy and Eustace



by Michael Morris

Still Hunting for Ghosts



by Stephanie Wiemer

Stefanie Wiemer is a self-taught artist, living in Germany. She has been interested in painting and photography since she was a young child. Wiemer is inspired by dreams and questioning the nature of reality. She creates images that are surreal and abstract, breaking down the borders of reality and fantasy.

Hoodoo

by Beau Johnson

Beau Johnson is the scion of two old Virginia families, raised in heaping helpings of the old south. He moved north to escape, then moved back south to raise his son. Beau has been a carpenter, clerk, cabinetmaker, Coast Guardsman, architect, commercial pilot, college instructor, and consultant. He now lives in Georgia with his wife and too many cats.

Hoodoo

MARCH 15, 1947.

"Reverend, I think we have a problem." The Sheriff stood in the parsonage kitchen with the look of someone trying to save the life of a drowning dog that had just bitten him. He sat down at the kitchen table, making the chair groan under his bulk, some of which poked between his shirt buttons.

"It seems a number of the boys coming back from the war are finding that their wives have had a bit too much spiritual counseling. One of them is expecting the Holy Spirit itself about six months from now," the Sheriff said.

He paused, watching the preacher and his wife. Then he continued, "And it must be, cause Billy Ray just got back three weeks ago. His wife's confessed that maybe you had a hand in it."

The Sheriff watched panic build on the preacher's face and fire smoldering in his wife's eyes. "Him and six or seven other boys got to talking. Seems all of them are thinking their wives been getting help on some earthly matters while they were overseas. There's a bunch on the way over here now. I just came to warn you, that it might behoove you to leave town. Sure as hell save me the paper work of filing reports and investigatin' your murder."

The preacher's wife stood at the stove. Her temper looked about as hot as the frying pan in front of her. "Thomas, you bastard. You promised you'd change. Swore up and down you wouldn't do this again if we got another church." Tears welled in her eyes.

"Sheriff, this is false, I tell you, it's bearing false witness. The Lord knows I'm innocent," the preacher said.

"Well, Reverend, the Lord may know you're innocent, I reckon you can take that up with Him. But if you want that to happen later rather than this afternoon, you'd better git. Don't worry about your job none, because me and the rest of the Deacons agree, you ain't got a job here no more."

The preacher's wife picked up the small frying pan from the stove and threw it at her husband. The pan missed the Reverend's head by a quarter of an inch and landed on the floor, skidding, leaving a hot butter trail.

"It's not true," the preacher said.

"That's what you said the last two times, you weasel." She yelled, "Get out of my house. You adulterous, fornicating bastard!"

Reverend Thomas Vaughn wasn't a fool. He could see his minutes in the community were numbered about the same as his fingers. He grabbed his preaching coat and went through the back door. The screen door slammed behind him with finality.

He took the Model A, which came with the job, as did the parsonage, and headed away from town. Stopping for gas two miles down the road, the news of his problems hadn't reached them yet, and the attendants were happy to charge it to the church as they usually did. With a full tank of gas, the preacher headed south.

Two months later, the preacher hadn't heard anything from the church, his wife, or his kids. Nor did he contact them. He'd traded the car and his name in Milledgeville the day after he'd left town. He found work at odd jobs on the way south, but never stayed longer than a week, and sometimes only overnight if anyone started asking too many questions.

In a small town where he'd stopped to get gas and a sandwich, he overheard two men taking about a preacher that had just died so he joined the conversation. A day later, Reverend Tim Vader pulled up to the newly named Richardson Methodist Chapel in his battered, but well-running Chevrolet. He's traded the church's Model A in Milledgeville on the way south.

The Reverend Vader was to preach a trial sermon and lead the Sunday services. This was a circuit preaching job, only the first and third Sundays. The pay was barely enough to live on, but there was a small house that would

serve as a parsonage, as well as twenty-two acres of good farm land that came with the job. He'd had enough rough living since that unpleasantness north of Atlanta. He was fully repented and forgiven by his Lord, he was sure.

When Reverend Vader walked into the tiny church, the Deacons stood to greet him. They shook hands all around, then sat to talk.

"We're very happy you've agreed to preach for us. We've felt like a ship without a rudder since Pastor Richardson was called home to Jesus this past spring," one of the Deacons said.

"I'm happy to help out in any way I can," the Reverend said.

"Reverend Tim, can you tell my friends here a bit about yourself?" Frank said.

Frank Coleman was the head Deacon and the owner of a nearby farm Tim had worked on. Frank filled in preaching most Sundays since Pastor Richardson passed away. The other Deacons also picked up the ministering needs of the community.

"I'm working on my Doctor of Divinity at the University of Georgia," Reverend Tim began. He had attended two semesters at UGA, but was put on academic probation and never returned.

"I've been preaching at May's Chapel in North Augusta until they had to close," Reverend Tim said. This part was true. He failed to mention the churches between May's Chapel and here. "I'd rather let my preaching speak for itself. Then we can see how that works out."

The congregation was beginning to gather. They expected a full house today since word had gotten around there was the possibility of a new preacher. Mr. Frank and Tim shared the dais. Mr. Frank led the service, making the announcements and other opening bits of the service. He introduced Tim.

No matter what else, Tim was an excellent preacher. He captured fire, and empathized with the congregation. Today, he began with a humorous story to put everyone at ease. The congregation chuckled, although it seemed that half of them didn't get the joke.

"Today, I'd like to take my sermon from Luke 13: 1-5; Mark 6:12; and Acts 3:19. Let us talk about bending to modern times and how that can lead us astray. How should we repent?" Tim's voice resonated through the small chapel. He stood tall behind the pulpit. His hair was black, with no grey showing, but he parted it low on the left side, keeping it long there, and combed over the increasing bald spot. His favorite pomade, Brylcreem kept it in place. His suit, including the vest, was a dark grey.

Afterwards, Tim shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with the congregation on the way out. The Deacons hung back and were the last to leave.

Mr. Frank said, "Reverend, we'd like to have you stay."

"I'd be honored, Mr. Frank."

Frank's brother, Luke added, "I have a few minutes while Bessy goes home to get dinner ready. We could take

a look at the house you'll be staying in. You're welcome to join us for dinner."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Luke. I'd like that." Tim held his stomach in an attempt to stifle a growl. He hadn't eaten since yesterday morning.

Luke shut the church doors and locked them.

"I reckon you'll need these." He handed Tim the keys. "The key to the house is on that ring also. Pastor Richardson lived in town so he rented it. There's a colored family down the road that you can get to clean for you. They clean the church when we can afford it."

Luke opened the door to the house. Four rooms: a living room and bedroom in the front of the house, dining room and kitchen in the back. The back porch had a table and a bowl for washing. The kitchen had a wood stove and a sink under the pump. In the dining room there was a small table, with four chairs around it. The living room had a desk and chair and two arm chairs. There was a wood stove against the corner for heat. The bedroom had a double bed and a dresser with a mirror.

"When the power company gets the wires strung down this road you'll have electricity for lights and a water pump," Luke said.

A knock on the door interrupted them. Luke opened the door. "Come in, Selena."

"Pleased to meet you, Reverend," Selena said.

Tim smiled. "I'm happy to meet you, too."

"Selena, could you give the Reverend a hand getting this house cleaned up? It's been sitting a while, and I reckon it could use a pretty good scrubbing all over."

Selena looked around. "Mr. Luke, it sure is a mess. I'm busy as I can be with Mr. Charles and his house, but my daughter here, Sally, she could get to it. Look like it might take three or four days, what with washing and scrubbing."

Selena ran her hand over the wall and held her fingers out to show the dirt on them.

"Come here, Sally, say hello to the new Reverend," Selena said. Sally had remained outside on the back porch while her mother went in. She now entered the house and stood behind Selena. She kept head down and didn't look at the men.

"Hello. Nice to meet you, Reverend."

"Sally, can you clean up this mess for the Reverend? Whole house needs a good scrubbing"

"Yes, ma'am, I can do that good."

"Okay, then it's all set. She'll be here tomorrow morning at eight. Is that alright with y'all?"

"That's fine with me," Tim said. He took a long look at Sally, trying not to be obvious. Her skin was the color of coffee with cream in it, not coal black like her mother's. Her face was unblemished, and there seemed to be no visible pores. The girl's hair was medium length and formed a halo around her head. She was dressed in a simple cotton dress of bright yellow, and her figure was that of a well grown woman. They had probably just come

from church, and this was the best thing Sally owned, no doubt.

After Selena and Sally left, Luke said, "You can follow me to the house and we'll have a nice dinner. Don't need to lock up, nothing worth stealing in here, and ain't nobody around here to steal it."

Tim woke up just before six according to his Big Ben alarm clock. He'd wound it and set it, guessing at the time based on when he had left Luke Coleman's house last night. The sun had more to do with daily living than clocks.

Tim put on his blue chambray shirt and his coveralls. He put on his other pair of socks, then walked out to the kitchen.

Mrs Coleman had wrapped up some last night's dinner for him. He retrieved two rolls from the warming cabinet above the stove. He sat down at the table to eat. The rolls were still fresh, and she'd taken the time to stick a pat of butter in each. He wanted a cup of coffee, but didn't have kindling or firewood ready to build a fire in the stove to make it.

He finished eating and took his work boots to the porch, sitting on the top step to put them on. After lacing the boots, Tim stopped to look around and marveled at the world. His firm belief that God had created this for him to enjoy always filled him at times like these. The sun was above the horizon but still behind the trees, leaving vast shadows on the dirt surrounding the house. From where he sat he could just see the church—his new church—through the narrow patch of woods separating the two pieces of land. Tim marveled at the sprawling oak tree that rooted beside the church, covering an area three times the size of the church.

There were signs of what might have been a woodpile beside a shed attached to the small barn, so Tim got up and walked over. The door was ajar. He pushed on the door to let in some light. He checked inside under the sill and over the door for snakes and, not seeing any, he stepped in. He saw a few splits of wood, a box of kindling and, in the corner, left or forgotten, an axe, a maul, and a wedge. He didn't see a crosscut saw, but the wood looked to be stove-length already. He picked up four pieces of wood and a handful of kindling, and headed back to the house, setting the wood next to the stove. After finding some old newspaper, he lit a fire and watched it catch. He could finally make coffee. He filled a kettle and placed it on the stove.

There was a knock on the door. "Reverend?" a girl's voice asked.

"Yes, I'm here, come on in." Tim struggled to remember the cleaning girl's name. "Good morning. I'm glad you could make it, I need help badly from the look of this place."

"Yes, Sir. I can see that, for sure. I reckon I should start with the kitchen and give it a quick once over so you can eat in here. Then give your bedroom a real good

going over. Air the bedding and all, and make sure there ain't nothing living in there that shouldn't be."

"That sounds like a real good idea, Susan."

"It's Sally, Reverend."

"Oh, yes, sorry."

Sally headed for the bedroom. As she walked past the Reverend, he had a chance to study her carefully for the first time. Her hair was tied in a red scarf. Her shoes were low, thin-soled, and cheap. She wore a pair of dungarees that were obviously for a man, but fit her snugly through the hips. Her hips were not large, but well shaped. Her blouse was light cotton and just a little small for her body, with a bit of a pucker between the buttons over her breasts. Tim felt the familiar tug in his pants.

"I'm going to run these sheets up to the house and wash them, Reverend." Sally stuffed the sheets in the pillow case. "You got any other washing needs doing?"

Tim went to his suitcase and handed her two more shirts, a pair of work pants, and two sets of underwear. "If you would please. I haven't had a chance to do any washing in quite a while," he said.

Sally held the pillow case open for the clothes. She said nothing about the odor that the Reverend gave off; she was used to men who were less than well scrubbed. "Sure thing. I'll be back in about an hour."

Tim watched her walk to the road. He admired the way she walked with a purpose and a swing in her step. He then went to the outhouse to relieve himself. His relief took two forms. When he was finished, he prayed, like he always did. "Lord, forgive me for spilling my seed on the ground."

The house cleaning continued for the week, except for Wednesday afternoon when Sally went with her mother to clean the church for the evening service. On Saturday morning, the women did the same thing for the Sunday service.

This particular Saturday morning, Luke Coleman's delivery truck arrived with a mimeograph machine and a typewriter. The Reverend, Mrs Mason, the church secretary, Selena, and Sally were there. Reverend Tim was surprised with the new office equipment.

"What are we going to do with that?" Mrs Mason asked.

Luke said, "Why, you can print the bulletin and the newsletter."

"But don't they have to be typed?" Mrs Mason asked.

"Why, sure, here's the typewriter."

"But I can't type." Mrs Mason looked distraught.

"I can." Sally said, then blushed at her outburst amidst the white people around.

"Where you learn to type? You're barely about to clean a church, yet." Mr. Coleman looked a bit shocked.

"We got typewriters at the school, and we got a mimeograph machine, too."

"I'll believe a colored girl can do that when I see it." Mrs Mason said.

"Well, let's see her type." Reverend Tim suggested.

Tim handed her his sermon for Sunday, handwritten in a notebook. Sally took a piece of paper and fed it into the typewriter, then set the margins and tabs. She typed thirty-five words a minute.

About halfway down the page, she stopped. "Reverend, isn't Ephesians spelled E - P - H - E - S - I - A - N - S?" she asked.

"Why, yes it is," the Reverend said.

"Thank you, I just couldn't quite make out you're writin' on that one. That's what you got here," Sally said, realizing her mistake in correcting him. She continued typing until the page was done, rolled the platen up, removed the paper, and handed it to Tim.

He read it over, then pronounced it perfect. He failed to notice several other spelling errors she had corrected.

"Looks like you've got yourself another job." The Reverend smiled at her.

Mr. Coleman cleared his throat. "Of course, Gloria will continue to be the secretary and to supervise the child. And take care of the offerings"

"Yes," Tim said. "Sally, do you think we can put together a bulletin for tomorrow's service?"

"I reckon we can, Reverend. If you know what you want to put in there."

Sally worked with Reverend Tim for another six weeks. One Saturday she arrived early at the church. When she walked into the office, Tim was in his chair with his pants off, masturbating. She was so stunned she didn't move.

It took Tim a few seconds to realize that his fantasy was standing before him. As Sally started to move away, Tim stood and grabbed her arm, twisting and forcing her to the floor. He pulled her cotton dress up to her waist and ripped off her underpants. He was between her legs and inside her before she'd managed to land a dozen blows on his face. Since he was already well on his way with his fantasy when she had arrived, he was finished in less than a minute.

Tim got up, went to his chair, and put on his pants. Sally recovered from her shock and began to get up and leave.

"Sally, ain't no call to be telling anyone about this. Nobody gonna believe the preacher had the colored girl, and nobody'd take your word over mine. You still want your job, don't you?" Tim said.

Sally thought of the family's food. With the pay she had been bringing home, they were no longer hungry. She realized he had a point about no one taking her word over his.

"Yes, Reverend, I need my job, but I think I deserve a raise."

Tim agreed, and Sally got a dollar more a week.

Sally kept quiet about the rape. A week after the first time, the Reverend Tim forced himself on her again. She fought less this time. Then he raped her several times a week and she learned to not resist, to just let him have his way. The rape never lasted long.

Six weeks after the first time, Sally felt the change in her body. She had missed her period. She was sick three mornings in a row. Her mother looked closely at her and knew. Selena confronted her, wanting to know which of the young bucks had been messing about with her. Sally said none of them. Her mother pressed, and Sally confessed the whole thing.

Sally's mother was silent for a few minutes, different expressions passing over her face. Then she went to the cupboard and got a small cup with a lid. She gave it to Sally with instructions on how to use it. Sally was repulsed by the idea, but agreed to do it. She placed the cup in her apron pocket.

Two days later, Tim called Sally into his office. She recognized the look. Before he could stand, she knelt down before him, unbuttoning his pants.

"You just sit there, Reverend, I going to show you a colored girl's trick."

Sally slipped the cup from her apron and held it between his legs, out of sight. She released him from his pants, knowing wouldn't take long to finish him off.

The Reverend's finish happened faster than it ever had before, probably because of the novelty of the act. Sally captured his seed and then bent between his legs and spit it in the cup. She slipped the cup into her apron.

The next night, Selena mixed the contents of the cup with several herbs and ground bones according to an ancient recipe. Just after midnight, she said the words over the mixture she'd learned in childhood that would summon the spirit. She took the mixture and walked through the moonlit field to the Reverend's car. With more words, she sprinkled the mixture in a semi-circle around the car. Then she went home. Her work was done.

Tim woke from a troubled sleep. The Big Ben alarm clock on the small table beside the bed read quarter to twelve, with its glow-in-the-dark hands. The ticking of the second hand was a comfort to Tim each night when he went to bed.

Something called to him from deep within, but made no outward sound. He thought perhaps he was finally getting his call from Jesus or the Angel. It was long overdue; he'd been a preacher for ten years and the Holy Spirit had never directly talked to him. He was excited. He rose out of bed, and left the house.

Tim noticed some black markings, like ash, surrounding his car. Two lines led from the front of the car toward the road. Tim got in the car and felt his calling. He sat in the driver's seat and held the wheel, stepped on the pedals, shifted the gears. But he had the feeling of being a passenger. Of his destination, he was still unsure. Only that he must go.

A full moon illuminated the road and surrounding fields. There was no need for headlights as the car moved down the dirt road between the fields of cotton, then onto the paved road toward the bridge over the Ogeechee River.

The light surrounded the car, the edges of the road glowed. Cotton bolls in the fields reflected the light, lit as if there was a bulb within each one. If someone had been standing beside the road as the car passed, they would have not heard anything. The car seemed to move in silence. The occupant looked straight ahead, never glancing to the side to see the light that carried the car along.

The road ran straight for the last half a mile to the bridge. Tim could see the edge of the road glowing all the way there. He sat trancelike behind the wheel. As the car slowed at the bridge, Tim was unaware of the glowing circle that surrounded the bridge

Floating above the road was a shape. Tim recognized the shape as Sally. There was a bright orb in her belly. *Figures, she gets herself knocked up. Just like all of them,* he thought. *No morals. No real belief in Jesus.*

Sally's apparition beckoned the Reverend to get out of the car and come closer. He did. The Holy Spirit had commanded him. He walked to the spirit floating above the bridge and, when the spirit pointed to the side, he didn't hesitate. He stepped to the edge and jumped. The water covered him and he felt baptized in his Lord. He knew he was going to sit at the right hand of God forever. There was a stinging sensation on his arm and two on his leg, but that didn't matter. He was free.

The Reverend's body was found in the morning, about two hundred yards downstream from where they found his car blocking the bridge. His cause of death was listed as snake bites from cottonmouth moccasins. No one knew why he'd gone swimming that night.

Poetry

by DANIEL DAVIS

Daniel Davis is the Nonfiction Editor for The Prompt Literary Magazine. His own work has appeared in numerous online and print journals. You can find him at www.dumpsterchickenmusic.blogspot.com, or on Facebook and Twitter.

A Dream of Kilimanjaro

A teardrop of whiskey hangs suspended from the table's edge,
Frozen in a moment of indecision.
In its briny depths, bubbles of creativity burst in micro-cosmic eruptions.
The air around it is infused with the smells of sweat and gunpowder,
Talc and aftershave.
Sunlight streams into the room through the eastern window,

Interrupted by blinds shut loosely against the outside world.

A floorboard creaks somewhere in the rear of the house,
A bird caws unceremoniously from outside,
And the teardrop succumbs to the pull of gravity, releasing its hold on the table,
Splashing silently onto the dry, dusty floor,
Absorbed and forgotten in a matter of moments.

Dissection of a Poet

They stood in a circle, the parts of me, and examined what remained unfinished.

"I'm not sure about the face," said my insecurity.
"It seems a little too broad."

"He's a ramrod," said my sexuality.
"A stud, a linebacker."

"You know nothing about football," said my athleticism.
"But then, neither does he."

"He's more into literature," said my intelligence.
"You know, words. On pages."

"Ah, just let him be into whatever he wants," said my free will.
"I hear it's more fun that way."

"Let's not be hasty," said my caution.
"He has to have parameters by which to live."

"He can have all the parameters he wants," said my greed.
"All the parameters there are."

"That's a lot of parameters," said my humor.
"I'm not sure how many people he can be."

"Where do I fit in?" whispered my humility.

"He is who he is," said my pride.
"See him there! Behold him there!"

"Silence," said my temper.
"None of that means a goddamn thing."

"It means everything," said my hindsight.
"The picture will form if we give it time."

"It had better," said my common sense.
"Because I, for one, am confused as hell."

Nightswimming



by Stephanie Weimer

Peach Boy

by Kate Richards

Kate Richards is a senior at South Eugene High School in Eugene, Oregon. She has been writing since she could hold a pencil, yet this is the first piece she's submitted to a literary magazine. She loves traveling and the outdoors, and Peach Boy was, in part, inspired by her time spent in upstate New York and San Francisco. Kate hopes to continue writing and submitting her work, for nothing gives her more pleasure than the written word.

Peach Boy

WHEN HE WAS young, he watched dragonflies flit around the surfaces of ponds; occasionally one wouldn't pull up fast enough and drowned. Sometimes he believed he could fly with them and jumped off logs, flapping his arms until the water engulfed him like the insects. "You can't fly," his brother would say while teaching him to swim. "Pick an insect that walks on the ground." So he looked at stag beetles. Fell in love with their oily black shells and tiny rhinoceros horns. Still, he wished he could teach dragonflies to swim; wished he could fly with them.

His brother left a looming shadow: captain of the swim team, professional swimmer. Olympics. So he joined the swim team in high school as well; why not? He was good at the backstroke—it allowed him to see the sky. Sometimes, when no one was watching, he pretended he was flying.

School was boring. They tested him on things that didn't matter. "Be a scientist," his teachers told him. They only said that because he got a 34 on the ACT. Because he was Japanese. Because he was supposed to go into a "smart" field. He didn't like chemistry or physics. He liked swimming and stag beetles and dragonflies.

He met a fragile, silver-haired boy who swam the breaststroke and fell in love. His parents kicked him out of the house—"We won't have a gay as our son," they spat.

So he moved across the country with his boyfriend, from the Finger Lakes of upstate New York to the hills of San Francisco. Lived in a Painted Lady. Found acceptance away from his family. He became a biologist and found a way to get paid for watching stag beetles. But once he realized they drowned in water just like the dragonflies he stopped enjoying the job.

Every day he stared at the Golden Gate, the worn red beams reaching higher than he could ever hope. Dragonflies went up there—the tiny blue ones with invisible wings that caressed the sky. "You can't fly up there," his husband would tell him late at night.

One day his husband stopped breathing. The doctors said it was a result of a pulmonary embolism that couldn't be cleared fast enough.

Grass grew over his grave, hiding the name like he never mattered. Life continued. But it shouldn't have, not now with the emptiness that consumed his heart.

Two months passed. He found himself standing on the edge of a lake. Dragonflies danced about, skimming the water, tempting death. No one was left to tell him he couldn't fly, so he believed he could, he really did, and joined the dragonflies on the surface of the water.

Nightmare VI



by Stephanie Weimer

Polar Opposites

by James Vachowski

James Vachowski works as a quality assurance technician for an independent traveling circus, where he strives to ensure that your next ride on the Cyclone is in full compliance with most, if not all, applicable state safety regulations. When he's not living his dream of seeing the great people of this great country from the parking lots of local shopping malls and Moose lodges, he writes fiction.

Polar Opposites

HE LAID HIS hand down solid on top of my shoulder, then gave me a firm squeeze. My dad always wore those stupid black leather gloves of his. They were ridiculously thick, and I squirmed at the awkward display of affection. Stepping around in front of me, he slowly eased his body down into the wooden rocker, pulling it even closer to the fireplace. I rolled my eyes and snuck a glance at my watch. It was almost time for me to leave, which meant that we were due for another one of our little talks—a serious one, probably eye-to-eye, real man-to-man stuff. After all, it would be almost another whole year before we'd see each other again.

Dad tilted his head back so he could gaze at me over his bifocals. The wire-frame glasses slid forward, barely hanging on to the tip of his bulbous nose. The thin lenses quivered ever so slightly, reflecting the spider webs of red veins that surrounded his nostrils.

"I can't believe it's time to go already, son. It seems as if you only just got here."

I had to check myself from rolling my eyes again. I had actually been at my dad's place for an entire week, ever since school let out for winter break. Seven. Whole. Fucking. Days. Believe me when I say, I had been marking off each hour as they passed painfully by.

Dad leaned forward so he could stare into the fire. "I'm sorry that we didn't get much of a chance to talk while you were here. But you know how it is. It's—"

I knew how it was, all right. I had heard the excuse so often in years past that I found myself mouthing the rest of the sentence along with him.

"—my busy season."

He glanced up at me then, waiting for some kind of response. I didn't really feel like saying much, so I just shrugged. "Mmm-hmm."

Dad inched his chair even closer to me. Our knees were nearly touching now. "You still getting along okay with your mom's new boyfriend—Murray?"

Damn it, his name is Michael! I bit my lip and looked away. "I guess."

"That's good, son." He reached out and gave my knee a few of those heavy, fatherly pats. "That's real good. You try to take it easy on that guy, okay? I know he can't compare to your dadster, right? But hey, I'm sure he's doing his best."

I gave him a quick nod, keeping my thoughts to myself. Michael is so good at managing hedge funds that he only has to work three days a week. He drives a Corvette and has a black belt in aikido. He can bench press three hundred pounds and he took me to a Knicks game last month. We sat courtside—right next to Spike Lee.

My dad went quiet for a moment. He reached for the iron kettle that was steaming over the fire. "Care for some hot chocolate?"

Here we go again with the hot chocolate, I thought. I fucking hate hot chocolate.

He filled a mug and held it out to me. I didn't want to take it, but I did anyway. At the very least, the hot ceramic mug helped warm my hands. They had been practically numb all week from the drafts of chilly air that seemed to creep in through the walls. Directly across from me, the huge picture window was already covered with a thick layer of frost. Outside, sheets of heavy snow were falling—again. I swear it had snowed every fucking day since I got there. I tried to drown my sorrows with a quick sip of hot chocolate, but the boiling liquid scalded my upper lip. Fighting the urge to cry out in pain, I lowered the mug slightly and held it just beneath my nose. At least the thick smell of chocolate helped to mask the rancid odor of my dad's place. Seriously, the entire fucking building smelled like a mix between an old barn and a sweatshop.

My dad had kept silent for nearly a full minute, so I knew all too well what was coming. He took a long, loud slurp from his own mug, then lowered the cup to his lap and held it with both hands. Funny, the liquid's temperature never seemed to bother him any. The steam warmed his face, making his red cheeks appear even rosier than normal. "You know, son—I've never really understood why things didn't work out between your mom and me. I guess it must've been a lack of chemistry or something—"

I couldn't hold back my groan entirely, but I did a decent job of keeping it pretty quiet. Things didn't work out because you never really wanted them to work out, I thought. Call it what it was, Dad: a one night stand between you and my mom, the same kind of affair that you had with hundreds of women all over the world. At that moment, a sickening image flashed through my mind. Come to think of it, you're probably still hooking up like that! Fucking gross!

I zoned out for a few minutes, but tuned back in when I heard my dad's voice soften. The shift in tone signaled the end of his speech, which was my cue to start paying attention again. I really tried to look him in the eye, but I just couldn't make it past the big brown stain that had sunk into his beard. Even though it was just the two of us in the room, I still felt embarrassed. I swear, why would any man with ghost-white facial hair ever want to drink hot chocolate? Doesn't this asshole realize just how stupid he looks right now? I mean, would it be so hard to switch to a lighter-colored beverage? Green tea, maybe?

He set the mug down on the end table, then used both hands to adjust his broad leather belt. I shook my head in disgust again. Wake up, dude! Your clothes are like a train wreck of style! Everything in your closet went out of style in the seventies, and by that I mean the eighteen-seventies! And that stupid fur coat you always wear? With the hat to match? Jesus! Try turning up the thermostat once in a while, so you don't have to go around looking like an out-of-work pimp!

"—and I know we've talked about this before, son—but if you ever do change your mind and want to come live here with me—well, of course you know, you'd be more than welcome."

I bit my lip again. For the last time, the answer is no. Hell no. Stop asking.

The hallway door opened from outside before I had a chance to respond. It was just wide enough for my dad's

assistant to stick his tiny little head into the room. His beady eyes slid right past me as if I wasn't even there. Focusing on my dad, he said, "Sir, we're going to be late." The dude disappeared without even waiting for an answer, leaving the door open as a signal for us to follow. I could hear a huge buzz of activity coming from my dad's office down at the end of the hall. There was a building sense of excitement in the air, almost reaching a fever pitch.

"Come on," he grunted, rising to his feet just as slowly as he'd sat down. "I'll drop you off at your mom's place."

I stood up and followed him, making sure to stay just far enough back so he couldn't see my clenched fists as my thoughts descended into sheer rage. I swear I fucking hate my dad's ride! It's a complete piece of crap, and practically ancient! If any of my friends ever see me riding in it—

As we stepped through the door, a wave of cheers went up. Dad's employees swarmed forward in a mob. Waves of hands shot forward, each one struggling to shake his, or at least to get in a quick pat on the back. I felt my face go hot with embarrassment. Year after year, it was the same huge display. At first it had seemed like a genuine show of affection, but gradually I learned better. Their love was bought and paid for, simple as that. I think that handing out gifts must make my dad feel like a big man or something.

The eruption of noise continued as the crowd parted slightly, leaving just enough room for the two of us to move through. I slid into the passenger seat and hunched down, waiting for my dad to join me.

Finally, after milking his time in the spotlight for all it was worth, he hauled his huge frame up onto the bench seat. With a wide grin and a twinkle in his eye, he turned to me and whispered the same cheesy line that he says every year. "What about it, sport? You think you're finally ready to take the reins from your old man?"

I glanced out in front of the sleigh and locked eyes with Rudolph, up in his usual place at the front of the pack. He pawed the ground and snorted in protest, flashing that dumb red nose of his. It was his way of making his opinion known, and for once in my life I actually agreed with that dumb hunk of flying venison.

Over my dead body!

A Side of Ketchup

Dana K. Sato

Dana K. Sato is a self-proclaimed nerd, enjoying everything from reading and writing to science fiction and fantasy, to stuffing as many languages in her brain as she can. For the past several years, she has been passing on her love of writing, literature, and nerdiness to her students in Rockville, MD, where she teaches English, Television Production, Radio, and Theatre. Her love of reading and writing can only be matched by her love of live theatre and competitive swimming. She is owned by two cats who, when curled up together, resemble a Picasso-esque yin-yang. Dana has another short story, Moving On, upcoming in Vimfire magazine.

A Side of Ketchup

GUS WAS WHOLLY interested in how people ate their hot dogs, believing the way someone ate a hot dog could offer many insights into their soul. There was the conformist, who added a generous, but not overwhelming amount of ketchup and mustard. This person ate the whole thing—bun, dog, condiments. Then there was the self-conscious hot dog eater, who skipped the bun, claiming the benefits of omitting carbs and consuming the protein of leftover animal parts stuffed into a synthetic tube. Then there was the person who wanted to be self-conscious—they ate the whole thing except for the last, final bite of bun. And then, of course, there were the rebels, who just needed something different—relish, cheese, chili, dog-on-a-stick, corn dogs...

Gus's hot dogs were well known in New York City. He took great pride that they were homemade—no Oscar Meyer here. An eccentric man, whose life was his customers, he could always be found on the corner of East 55th Street and 3rd Avenue, between the hours of 11am and 6pm.

His cart could be seen a mile away on a sunny day, due to the shiny trinkets that glittered on it. He was a collector, taking what his customers considered junk as precious keepsakes to decorate his cart. But he didn't just collect their junk. He collected their orders and it only took a couple of visits for a customer to become a regular. If he saw you coming, he would have your order ready by the time you got to the front of the line.

But the customers that interested Gus the most were the ones who ordered the hot dog without the hot dog. Bun only. Load up the condiments—but no dog. Gus lived for these customers. This was, of course, how Gus chose his prizes. The people who would order the exact thing

that triggered Gus's need to satiate his own hunger, a hunger that kept him delicately searching for the perfect hot dog recipe. He was so close and he was sure that these people who ordered the bun only were the magical ingredient he was missing.

The people who ordered this elusive meal were rare, but today—today, Gus got three of them. They came together, a matching set of blonde triplets. Gus had never felt so lucky. Typically, when one imagines blonde triplets, images reminiscent of a frat boy's fantasies float to the surface. But make no mistake—these triplets were not of frat boy fantasy caliber. Unfortunately, each one was as identical as the other. Their noses were slightly too wide for their narrow faces and their eyes were just a little too close-set. Their eye color reminded Gus of New York City snow sludge. Their blonde hair was stringy and split. When they tried to close their lips around their larger-than-average front teeth, their mouths couldn't seem to line up properly.

But to Gus, they were beautiful, glittering prizes. Much like their matching necklaces—gold with simple three gemstones, perhaps topaz, strung together. Gus wondered briefly if they were November babies and the necklaces were their birthstones. His heart lifted when he heard the magical order from the triplets: "Can we have three buns, please? No hot dogs, but some ketchup on the side?" He grinned. Reaching into the hot dog cart, his hands located the bag of hot dog buns that he kept on special reserve for these kinds of orders. They were the best of his cache—freshly baked, light, fluffy.

Gus placed the buns on the grill to toast them slightly, letting the aroma of the cooking hot dogs seep into the bread. He prepared three side cups of ketchup carefully, including just a touch of highly illegal but very effective

liquid anesthetic and plucked the perfectly browned buns onto a plate. His grin grew wider as the girls thanked him and walked away, happily munching on their ketchup-dipped hot dog buns. He watched their path for several blocks until their stringy blonde hair was no longer distinguishable in the crowded New York City sidewalk.

As the evening rush wore down, Gus began packing up his cart for the day. He collected the uneaten dogs, placed them in buns and delivered them to the soup kitchen three blocks away. He doubled back to his regular corner before making the trek home. Gus was alert on the way, taking a different route than usual—the foot path of the triplets, of course. As he passed each street and alleyway, he consciously perked up his ears, listening for something that only he could be aware of and making the most of his superior peripheral vision. He was careful not to look suspicious, however, only forcing a full glance into a dark corner when he thought for sure he saw something.

It only took eight blocks for Gus to find what he was looking for. He went in eagerly, hungrily—not so different, really, than how his customers went after a fully loaded hot dog after a long day. There, his triplet prizes awaited him, sleeping peacefully, bellies full of ketchup and bun. He carefully loaded them into his now-empty cart, wary of any street traffic and wandering eyes.

* * *

"The usual, Gus," said Detective Jack Tauber. Gus nodded, immediately grabbed one of the more well-done dogs and dropped it into a toasted bun. He loaded on the relish and let the detective squirt out the ketchup. Detective Tauber stepped to the side to eat his hog dog while Gus prepared a meal for his next customer. Out of the corner of his eye, Gus saw the inevitable drop of ketchup fall onto the policeman's collar, who muttered, "Aw, shit," then shrugged it off, licking off the dollop from his collar.

With no other customers on the horizon, Gus turned his attention to the detective. Jack Tauber came by Gus's hot dog stand at least two or three times a week—Gus was never quite sure if it was because he really enjoyed the hot dogs, or if he just sometimes needed the opportunity to get out of the precinct. Either way, Gus looked forward to his visits. He always was happy to listen to his customers' stories and with regulars, it was like listening to a serial radio show. Gus never had to prompt Detective Tauber, either—he was happy to begin and finish every conversation on his own. Gus knew that Det. Tauber was devoted to his job and enjoyed his frequent visits. He never had to offer an opinion, but his friendship with the detective did provide him with a certain amount of information that allowed him to stay away from the precinct's radar. Tauber finished his hot dog, washed it down with a swallow of Pepsi, then turned back to Gus for another.

While Gus was preparing round two, Tauber shook his head and tapped on one of the trinkets that littered Gus's

cart. The amount of junk that Gus had accumulated on his cart was quite impressive. Tauber always described the hot dog stand as the best meal around that could double as a small antique museum.

"Where did you get this one from, Gus?" asked Tauber, starting off the conversation the way he always did. He always picked out another piece on the cart and asked about it before launching into his real topic.

"That one that you're looking at there—he was an Eagle Scout. Just earned it. Wasn't proud of it, though. He went on for a while about how his father expected him to do it and he just did what he was told, but it was more of his father's accomplishment. He was interesting: only ate his dog with ketchup, without the dog." Tauber raised an eyebrow. Gus chuckled to himself. "That's how I knew he was telling the truth. Boy scouts—they almost always have mustard or relish too. And the dog," he added. Tauber looked at the pendant a little closer. It was an eagle, wings outstretched, clearly taken from a man's necklace. Tauber could see the tarnished nickel poking out from the gold paint. Gus handed Tauber his second hot dog. He raised it to his mouth, then set it back down on the Dixie plate.

"Gus, I don't think I've ever asked you this, but why do you collect this junk?"

Gus had an answer prepared. He knew that this question was coming someday from the detail-oriented detective. "I like to hear people talk, and they like to have someone to listen to them. Sometimes they want to throw away what they think is junk and I offer to take it off of their hands. Sometimes they buy me something to remember them by. I think of it as a way to remember my customers. My customers are my life," he replied solemnly. Tauber nodded blankly, swirling the mustard around in his mouth, clearly contemplating something. Tauber's eyes darted to the newspaper on Gus' cart, with pictures of the missing triplets on the front cover.

"Gus, you've heard about these murders, right?" he blurted.

"Oh yes, officer," Gus replied, "Just awful." Gus knew that the detective had nothing to connect him to the string of murders in the city or the missing triplets.

"I can't get my finger on this case, Gus. I mean, you know—I can't go into details, but whoever this guy is... he's good. Smart." For some reason, he didn't keep going. Tauber fingered another bauble on the cart, a keychain with a cartoon turtle whose eyes were crossed. "What's the story with this one?"

Gus smiled to himself. "Oh, real nice lady. Lost, first time in the city. She went into the store across the way and bought that one for me as a thank you for giving her directions back to her hotel. Ordered a plain dog, but didn't eat the bun."

"Do you remember what all of your customers order, Gus?" asked Tauber.

"Oh, most of them, sir. My customers are my life," he repeated. "I wouldn't be able to live in this city without them. It pays to pay attention."

Tauber nodded. "Good business." He took the first bite of his second hot dog. Like clockwork, the ketchup dripped out and onto his collar. Without thinking, Tauber's tongue darted out and licked it up. "So what's the weirdest order you've ever gotten, Gus?"

"Oh, I don't think any of my customers' orders are weird. The customer is always right."

"Huh. Okay, fair enough. What's your favorite kind of order to get?"

Despite himself, Gus's face broke into a legitimate, ecstatic smile. Even his eyes smiled with a subdued fanaticism. Gus could almost feel his eyes sparkle as the memories flooded through his head. Gus could see those three blonde girls. He remembered the way they ordered, thanked him and walked away chewing on only the bread and ketchup. Gus remembered the Eagle Scout, in all of his sincerity and insecurity. Countless other faces floated to the surface. Amidst the memories, Gus vaguely remembered to answer the detective's question. He whispered his answer to the detective, his mind still inside that world of the elusive order.

"Bun only," the words hanging out of his mouth so delicately. He shook himself out of his reverie and turned to Tauber. "Bun only," he repeated.

"People do that?" Tauber asked incredulously, his mouth full of relish, dog, bun and ketchup.

"It's rare... but I get them every so often. It's a special person who orders bun only," Gus replied, his eyes glazing over again ever so slightly.

"Weird." Tauber finished his second dog. "Well... thanks again, Gus. I'll see you tomorrow probably. Maybe another hot dog lunch will help me get a break in this case." Tauber turned to start walking away, picking at a piece of hot dog stuck in his teeth.

"Good luck, detective," Gus called after Tauber absently, his mind still on those girls. He reached into his pocket and fingered the polished topaz necklaces.

Tauber stopped, then doubled back to the hot dog stand, reaching for a toothpick as Gus, not thinking, drew one piece of necklace out. Tauber finally dislodged the stuck piece of food. As he stared at it in his hand, Gus's stomach sank. Gus recognized the piece of fingernail, slightly covered in turquoise glitter. Tauber stared at the fingernail, confused, then looked at Gus's hand. Gus followed Tauber's eyes to the bauble he was holding. The two men made eye contact, each of them suddenly sick with dread.

This Town II



by Stephanie Weimer

It's Only a Date

Charlie Brown

Charlie Brown is a recent graduate of the University of Southern California's Masters of Professional Writing program. His fiction has appeared in Jersey Devil Press, The Menacing Hedge and Aethlon, and has been accepted by The Writing Disorder, and into the anthology The Portal In My Kitchen. His feature film Angels Die Slowly will be released next year.

It's only a Date

MARIE HAD SET us up, saying that the two of us would "get along great." I put that in quotes because I don't "get along great" with anybody. When I told her that, she said, "Thanh Thanh doesn't either, therefore."

"Therefore what?" Marie left these cliffs in her conversations all the time, to the point where I nicknamed her Dover.

"Therefore, you two are perfect for each other."

Here's the thing about Marie: she lies. Not in an insidious out-to-get-you way, because she had no ambitions beyond collecting her check and getting the hell home. No, this was just a game to amuse herself by catching someone else in enthusiasm. Marie doesn't do enthusiasm.

"That's a lot of expectations." I don't do expectations. I have them, but I don't want anyone expecting something of me in this world. Being disappointing is one of my strongest characteristics.

"It's only a date." Marie smiled at me. It was unnerving. "Relax, Skippy." She called everyone Skippy, especially when she put them in their place.

Well, it had been a long time since I'd been on a date, so I said yes and the requisite information passed.

When I say that it had been a long time, I don't mean sex. Well, I do mean sex, because the latest drought had been much longer than what's healthy, and would only add to the high-wire awkwardness of taking a female on a date, blind or otherwise.

But what I really mean is that it had been long time since I had taken someone out on an actual date, one of those get-dressed-in-your-best, make-reservations, pretend-you-know-something-about-wine-and-food outings that devolves into the worst combination of autobiography and job interview. I apply to be someone who you want to see over and over again, hopefully naked at some point in the future, because I have the following

qualifications: I have many likes and hobbies that you are somewhat interested in; I consume media you find entertaining; I am not too hung up on either of my parents; and I have not pissed off a former lover to the point of stalking and/or restraining order. This last one is a real concern because of the crucial part of the application: chosen career. I am a lawyer, regardless of whether I like it or not.

Maybe it's because I live in New Orleans, a place where casual gatherings and late night bar revelry means you meet people who are part of a group. A gathering pulls up to the bar and one of the herd (a maverick, perhaps, or maybe the stallion) breaks off to engage with a member of another herd. Maybe there is co-mingling, a move to the dance floor. The drinks flow easy and bartenders pour heavy, about two to three times more alcohol than you would find anywhere else. And then you find yourself in the back seat of a car in a dark place semi-nude and sweaty.

Don't make this out to be facile, because some of my longest relationships started just this way. You can find real love on this track, and I have. But this version of the mating dance doesn't always require that knock-on-the-door-here-I-am moment of a date. Sometimes you just skip right to a relationship and I am perfectly happy with that. This particular point, where I stood on the porch of Thanh Thanh's house, didn't particularly thrill me.

We talked earlier that week, one day after Marie had e-mailed me her number. She spoke in a halting way, the Saigon of her youth still clinging to her tongue despite twenty years of living here. She laughed at a few jokes about Marie and made a few of her own. It turns out that she loved food above all things, and we made plans to go to one of the many tapas restaurants that had sprouted on the scene in the last few years. She gave me her address out in Eastern New Orleans where many Vietnamese immigrants settled in the early 1980s.

"Don't worry if my mom answers the door," she had said, and then hung up. Yeah, don't think of an elephant, either.

The house wasn't like mine. Most of these developments out beyond the Ninth Ward came in the 60s and 70s and, instead of the classic New Orleans Victorians or Creole cottages, they threw up ranch houses because they were cheap and had a façade of sturdiness. Now all of them stooped with a shabbiness that comes with planned obsolescence. I looked in the curtained front window, making for a perfect mirror. Hair and tie straight, shirt tucked in, shoes shined.

This is the best I can do, I thought and rang the bell.

Thanh Thanh answered. I had seen a picture on Marie's phone and knew she was attractive. Her deep onyx hair hung to the middle of her back and she wore a simple navy blue dress with an empire waist that showed off her thin body. Before I could say anything, she looked at me from head to toe.

"Marie didn't say you're short." She was wearing three inch heels and still didn't come to my neck.

"I'm average height for a man." I instinctively drew myself out of my usual slouch that comes from carrying weight in the belly. I knew I wasn't six-foot, but I was close to double digits in the fives.

"Do you always settle for average?" She said it with a smile on her face, but I briefly entered a reverie. Waves of memories crashed on my consciousness as I heard those words in the same tone of voice of every teacher who said, "He doesn't apply himself." It echoed out like the school counselors who told me, "You should have at least three safety schools." And, of course, it was the sound of my mother when she proclaimed, "Right in the middle of your law school class? You could have done better."

But I shook it off and smiled. "You don't settle for your height. It's what you have in your genes. You don't look at a yellow rose and say, 'Really? Didn't you even try to be red?' That's what you're given. Case closed."

"Is this one of your comedy routines?" I took a sharp intake of breath. Marie had told her my secret, something I didn't share with the majority of my co-workers or even my family, that compulsion deep within me that I cannot cease. I spend my nights alone re-watching classic routines and HBO specials to find out what makes a joke work. I constantly hunt for one-liners and hone everything I say to five minutes, the average open mike time. I even look upon my oral arguments as a chance to practice timing. My name is David and I am addicted to comedy.

And so I turned to Thanh Thanh, opening my mouth and raising my finger. But she stopped me in the classic Daffy Duck pose, cutting me off.

"I'm hungry. Let's go." She walked past me to my car, no chance for riposte or clarification. Off to a quick start, the disappointment train left the station.

The drive from her house to the restaurant would take about 30 minutes. We were headed uptown to Magazine Street, which had evolved from a funky alternative

to swankier St. Charles Avenue to a sleek row of boutiques and bars catering to the striving middle class. Few neighborhoods see much change in this town, but Magazine had been completely reinvented since the mid-90s. I liked it because there were some great new restaurants, but many of my old hangouts from college were long gone.

As we hit the on-ramp for I-10, she turned to me with a questioning face. "What is this?" Her tone was flat, so she could have meant any number of existential conditions. Was this a post-modern examination of the courting process? Did she already feel disappointed with how I looked and wanted to turn back? Then she pointed to the radio. Ah!

Clinging to old technology, I had arranged my five CD changer to fuel the different stages of a date. The hardest part was the initial disc. Later on, you could have cool jazz to set a romantic tone, and maybe an Al Green or Isaac Hayes album as a just-in-case if you can achieve a make-out session. The middle would be an up-tempo rocker, a Springsteen or indie darling, depending on the person you're with. But that first impression froze me. After going back and forth between a Muddy Waters disc (possibly too obscure) and Gram Parsons' best-of collection (people who hate country really hate country), I settled on Little Feat. "Dixie Chicken" in particular. Rollicking, good time, sing-along blues rock is a great introduction to who I am.

So I told her, a bit let down that she didn't know the greatness that was Lowell George.

"I don't like music," she said, and looked out toward the road.

"You don't like this? I'll change it."

"No. I don't like music. I only listen to talk." I know I must have made a weird face because she laughed at me. "What's wrong?"

"What you said. You might as well have told me that you don't like air. That water is too wet for you. Heart beats should be outlawed because they make blood move too fast. Come on."

She laughed at this, a babbling brook giggle overwhelming the musical tones coming from the stereo.

"You're funny," she said, and ran both of her hands through her hair. Never before had I gotten such a laugh, and never before had I been so serious.

We managed to make it to the restaurant without me bearing any more of my soul for her eternal amusement. Parking was around the corner. The fetid summer air hadn't cooled enough for a table on the patio. Instead, we sat at a solid dark-stained oak table and the tile floor, combined with cranked air conditioning, helped cool my brow, moist from the two block walk.

When the waiter asked for our drink orders, I ordered a whiskey on the rocks. She got water. Flat water.

"Let me guess. You don't like bubbles."

"I drink soda," she said, laughing. "I don't like alcohol, except maybe a glass of wine sometimes. Champagne at a wedding."

I tried to think of a week in the past two years that didn't find me drunk at least two nights of the week. I failed. But I shrugged.

"You don't mind sharing, right?" I looked at her over the very tall menu. She shook her head no, but something about me had captured her attention. "What are you looking at?"

"Your hands. They're huge." It's true. I have big meaty palms flowering from my wrist. I can cover my face in embarrassment with one hand instead of the customary two. I have played catcher on every baseball or softball team I joined. She held out her own hand to make a comparison. "Come on, let me see."

This is usually a moment fraught with tension and tenderness. Touching someone for the first time outside of a handshake establishes an intimacy that could lead to something beautiful. But I could feel this leading to disaster. I opened up my palm to her and she flattened hers to mine. My addled brain exaggerated it, so that it felt like I was high-fiving a Barbie doll. Thanh Thanh looked me in the eyes and smiled.

"You can't touch me with those hands. Too scary." Well, there went that plan for the evening. I hoped the dining car on the Disappointment Express was good.

As the first plates came out, she still hadn't eased off the hands question.

"My hands aren't that small." She held them in front of her. "I bet I could choke you."

I was shocked as this smiling face said such words to me. I laughed like a cornered rat.

"What do you mean?"

"They're big enough to choke you. I bet I could do it."

"What are you? Some sort of ninja or something?"

"Silly. That's Japanese, not Vietnamese." She put some Serrano ham on a baguette slice.

"Yeah, the Vietnamese never killed anyone," I said, but I mumbled it and she didn't hear me.

I quickly changed the subject from cold-blooded murder to what exactly she did today. She told me about her younger brother's search for a new car. She went along, ever the accountant, to make sure he got the best deal. According to her, they went from lot to lot because none of the current vehicular offerings measured up, especially a sedan that was high on his list.

"It didn't have a trunk release." She said this in such a way that I should agree with her.

"Well, I guess it would be good to get the trunk open without the key." I felt like I was swimming in the deep end of the pool blindfolded, but I certainly have never had this conversation before in my life.

"No, the trunk had a remote open button. It didn't have a pull release from inside."

"A what now?"

"Cars today have a lever to pull on the inside if someone gets trapped in the trunk."

"And this one didn't." I said it matter-of-factly, even if I didn't have a goddamn clue what we were talking about.

"No, so I told my brother he shouldn't buy it."

"That's a key feature to the car he should buy?"

"No one should be trapped in there. Not when you can have the pull." It occurred to me that her life was either way more exciting than mine or, and here I might lay down a bet, her fantasy life was filled with rich, loamy soil. But I couldn't let it go at that.

"Did he want the car?"

"Oh, yeah. That was his first choice." She said this as if he were stupid.

"But you talked him out of it."

"I'm the oldest." Cultural differences come in many flavors, but car choice belonging to the oldest child struck me as odd.

"So what car is he going to buy?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet. It'll be something good for him." Tonight, I learned that cars can sometimes be like spinach.

I chose to let another topic fall away like autumn leaves. I was sure there were many other subjects to pursue where both parties could contribute equally. Or at least something that didn't seem out of a crime novel.

Those things amounted to a tally in which all of her family made poor choices and would be much happier if they only listened to her. While she was demanding and decisive, usually along rather odd criteria, she didn't seem angry or unhappy. In fact, she was quite pleasant, and we laughed about many things.

And, for someone who was highly opinionated, she actually listened to me. At some time during these kinds of nights, if I feel like I have nothing left to say, I will trot out my act. It's something I have memorized and can use quickly to keep any dullness out of the date. If I can't woo them, I will make them laugh.

But that didn't matter tonight. She kept her eyes on mine. She laughed appropriately, and even riffed out other jokes. She ate so many small plates past my own personal breaking point that I wondered where it all went.

She was absolutely different from anyone I had met. I was also convinced that she was completely insane, but I didn't let that get in the way of the fun.

I was going to suggest a bar for the after dinner, but she said she didn't drink. It was too late for coffee, and a music club seemed out. I put the rest of the night in her hands.

"I'm full. I think I should go home."

I admit to being disappointed, but I knew that was probably where we were headed. It was actually later than I thought, so I pointed the car east and was at her front porch in a quick fifteen minutes.

As we approached the exit, the old nervousness kicked in. My heartbeat filled my ears and cold sweat ran down

my arm pits, and beaded on my brow. There would obviously be no heavy action tonight. Not just because she feared my meaty paws, but she also lived with her parents. Still, when I parked in front of her house, I decided to walk her to the door.

There was a small step up from the sidewalk in front of the door. She lifted herself onto the bricks and turned to face me. I expected the usual platitudes. The "I had fun, but," the "You're so nice, however," or possibly the flat-out "Go away." Bracing for the inevitable rejection, she surprised me.

"Put those hands behind your back," she said, rotating her right hand. I followed her orders and instinctively we both bent at the waist. Our lips met, each pair of hands clasped in a parade rest and both bodies at an angle. She unbent herself first.

"You could call me again," she said, and closed the door.

Did I have a girlfriend? I didn't know. Did I have my next five minute routine? Probably the best of my very short career. But did I want to spoil it? No. Why not just enjoy it? I certainly wasn't disappointed.

Aftermath

by JOSHUA LINDENBAUM

Joshua Lindenbaum is an up-and-coming poet whose poetry has recently appeared in Blue Lake Review and 3Elements Review (2014). He's garnered a BFA in Creative Writing from SUNY New Paltz and a M. S. in English Education from CUNY Queens College. He works as an Adjunct Professor at SUNY FIT and the U. S. Merchant Marine Academy. The pen has been his companion for quite some time, but it's still waiting for him "to put a ring on it."

My teeth are so yellow
And the spaces
are as wide
as the expanse between the ground and a stiletto.

Grooming is blooming becoming all-consuming
Whereas before there was little care,
And now—
Heightened awareness highlights the smallest hairs:
Looking into a mirror is now a glare.

My stomach is drifting beyond the waist—
Looking as if my shirt were a pillow case.

Only one day has passed.
How can so much be different one may ask.
Well, yesterday, was my relationship's last.

Rejected!

Bertram Allan Mullin

Bertram Allan Mullin or BAM graduated with a degree in English. An excerpt from his novel "Diaries of Karma" was a finalist piece in the WLT Manuscript Competition, 2014. He's been a journalist, a columnist, and the co-head of a writers' workshop that was called: Writers' ReVision. His works are located in Writer's Ezine, Bartleby Snopes Literary Journal (and that one was voted story of the month for October, 2014), and his forthcoming works will be in Dialogual Magazine and Thought Collection, available this April. Here's his page for a list of other publications: www.bamwrites.com

Rejected!

"I WAS ROBBED, robbed of my dignity! Since my husband left and I got over the breakdown—writing poetry has become all that's kept me sane. My only solace."

"Uh-huh?"

"Want to hear a poem I wrote..."

"La, la, la

"I stop for the rain.

"It completes me.

"Vague will displease the soul of eternity.

"When the rats crawl within my spirit of virtue, I run.

"I gasp.

"What is the free that is trapped?

"I am a slug.

"Salt hurts."

"Random. But it's a'ight. Nice singing voice ya got there by the way. Reminds me of church choir my moms used to take me to on Sundays."

"For the past few days, no, no mark that weeks, fine... fine... the longest month of my entire life my time has been focused on getting a certain book of poems published—"

"Yah don' say? You seemed so carefree to me 'cause you hadn't mentioned that book seven times. Just six."

"—and out of all the phone calls, emails, and letters I sent I've gotten back one rejection after the other after the other after the other and the other! It's so exasperating, you know?"

"A month, eh? Not too long a wait. Keep tryin'. My momma was a writer. You'll get that acceptance letter,

like her. 'Just don't quit.' She'd tell herself that every day in the mirror along with, 'You got this, Robin.'"

"That's my name! Robin Otto from Omaha."

"I know. Ya said it ten times, and before you do it again, you've directed me to your social media page fourteen, count 'em fourteen times. I won't forget, Robin.org/Sprints for the rest of my life. Believe it. You know what though, I been listenin' to you this whole time, and gotta say at least they mailing you back. Right?"

"But what good are rejections? Some are so mean! One editor sent back just my query and wrote on it, 'No thanks.' That tyrant, that halfwit, that... that Satyr could not even *divulge* a piece of his own paper. I make elegant patchouli-oiled scented labels with the agency's name included on them. Right there, on the letterhead. The least he could have done was used his own paper—I'd like to tell him a thing or two."

"I'm not sure ya using 'divulge' correctly. Maybe that's part of the issue? Talkin' is one story, but them editors want to see straight up professional, clean-cut stuff with the exact words you mean on paper and nothing in between. Ya hear me? Mom wrote with five dictionaries by her side, and all the style guidebooks throughout the house. She'd slap my hand when I'd try to use one. 'It's mine, Goethe, don't touch!' So I never had one to reference. Thing is, I've only heard your choice word in sentences such as, 'I won't divulge that info to you.' But, I'm no prodigy poet, like yous. Anyhow, I'm gonna ask this one more time, Ma'am, then I should hang up—will this be carryout or delivery?"

Golden Catharsis

Kimberly Chong

Kimberly Chong is a Malaysian born Chinese. She is 18 and currently resides in Brooklyn, New York. She was diagnosed with clinical depression at the age of fifteen and is now on her second gap year upon graduation from high school. Kimberly will soon be pursuing a BA in English Literature and Music at Cardiff University in the UK.

As much as depression is a relentless one-eyed cross of a bitch and a pit bull that she would not hesitate to stab any time of the day, Kimberly does believe in balance. And under the throes of depression, she has discovered her passion for art, in which she finds the perfect medium to placate her soul. Her passions include writing and reading, music, and chess. She would enjoy nothing more than a good book with the Beatles making love to her eardrums on a rainy day and a rusty old typewriter by the window.

She originally picked up the chessboard in a search for new hobbies and distractions alongside the Prozac, but her love for chess grew as her understanding and appreciation of the game developed, and now enjoys anything between a casual game with an old man in the park and competitive chess. She sings and plays the piano, guitar, and the ukulele. Her love for music and singing set root at a very young age and she now aspires to be a musician and a singer-songwriter. Her music can be found at <https://soundcloud.com/lewriter>.

Golden Catharsis

ONE FOOT OVER. Two feet over. One look down. Two tears. One decision.

Life is real,
A game of paradox
With nothing to lose
And nothing to gain
If Jesus asks if you wanna play
Say yes and shake your head
And the game will be over
It really isn't that hard

And life is scary

My hands lay themselves on the cool copper metal that the morning sun is unable to warm enough, while my fingers try to find a grasp that would be strong enough for myself today. As my hands brush against the rough red surface, I think about hands that belonged to other people that were there before me. Surely, their hands must have felt the same as mine did, warm flesh on cold metal. To whom did they belong? What were they thinking? Why were they there? How many of them were thinking about doing what I was about to do? Or were

they there just to take a picture? A few clicks, a few looks, their hair whipping along with the directions of the wind in the Sunday morning breeze as their heads turned? Were they young enough to have allowed themselves to be filled with the ignorant joy of insouciance and innocence? Should I envy them? Or should I be afraid for them of what was to come? Or do some people not get it at all?

I have been waiting for this moment for so long, but now that it is here, I'm not so sure anymore. Every night as I stared at the ceilings, before my eyes delivered the temporary oblivion that I crave, I just knew that I was born to kill myself. It is a sort of certainty that you're just not happy to be certain of. My fingers have found a firm iron grasp around the copper, reluctant to let go, knowing what would come next. One foot over. Two feet over. One look down. One decision. To jump, or not to jump? An elaborate plan that I am now unwilling to follow through, and a question which I have no real answer to. Even dying seems to be so much effort. Is there anything not hard enough in life?

My fingers tighten their grip, my shoulders hunch, my head bows, my breath struggles to perform in staccatos, and it begins...

One foot over

I remember the day we first met. There is no such thing as "love at first sight". This phrase exists only as platitudes in movies and bad books. An overused element in fiction. I know because I met him like I met everybody else. I remember the day not because I spilled coffee on his jacket at Starbucks on a Monday morning and he didn't hurl expletives at me with coffee breath or flip me the bird and tell me to go queef myself. It was much less dramatic than that. I remember that day because of what he's become to me in my life. I remember because it has become important. We all want to remember the beautiful days, the little things. Lord knows we don't get enough of them. So we remember. Live, store, relive. Repeat. Remember.

Being in love isn't enough, knowing that you are loved is.

His eyes, his nose, his lips, his cheeks, his jaws, his dimples, his ears, his hair, his scent, his breath after a midnight cigarette, his smile, his grin, his eyebrows that connect when curious, his pout when I finish his coffee, his touch, his hand on my hand, his lips on my forehead, his fingers in my hair, his eyes on mine when he told me he loved me, his chuckle when I call him an asshole and try to punch him but hurt my hand instead, his tenderness as he kisses the bruises on my hand, his walk, his shoulders that are hard but comforting when I need them, his habit of never leaving the bookmarks in the same pages I left them, his recurring yet sincere apologies, his perfection and imperfection that I adore, his love, *him*.

But you can't have the cake and eat it too. At best, you get to have a meager lick of the icing and spend the rest of your life living off the memory of it. That is life, at its least tolerable.

Dead people need to be remembered, even if it makes your soul flip three hundred and sixty-one degrees inside. But I've remembered too much, for too long. And I need to let it go. So I forget. Unlive, unstore, die. Once. Forget.

He is gone. One foot over.

Two feet over

Life is the inception of paradox. Love is an investment that is both certain and uncertain. It is certain because you feel it when it's there. It is uncertain because you feel it too when it's not. Only difference? One of the two sure doesn't feel pretty fucking good. But it is an investment we all have to make. Bad investments are hard to get out of. But it is easier to walk away with burnt fingers than a burnt soul. It's just not the same. You can get the money back, but the lines on charred souls remain. It's formulas and a dice roll with a die that has seven sides and twenty-eight dots.

My fingers mingle over the ivories of the piano and the strings of the guitar, there is no song left in me. My fingers close around the wooden grip of a pencil with a broken lead, there are no words left in me. My eyes re-

flect those of the people before me, there is no voice left in me. My feet touch solid ground, there is no walk left in me.

I am gone. Two feet over.

One look down

I am over the railing. I am one step away from forgetting and being forgotten. I look down.

The waters glisten in a mass of silver and grey beneath the yellow star, indifferent, as if it doesn't matter if I cause a ripple. It doesn't matter. It only seems to matter to me, because it is my life. Still, I half expected the waters to form the face of a God, preferably one that resembles that of George Clooney, with the words of Hemingway, and the voice of Morgan Freeman, saying something along the lines of "Calm the fuck down you stupid bitch, you'll get through this." *You'll get through this.* That is all I need to hear.

But of course, nothing happens. There is no savior, no guardian angel sent from above. It's not a wonderful life. You either live or die. It shouldn't feel "big". It's just what it is. People die every day. And nobody notices.

The waters slam against hard granite, recede. Doing what waters do. Casually emphasizing to me the conventional reality that is surrounding me, that will surround me for a very long time. The birds flutter by, oblivious and uncaring, flying. The morning zephyr caresses my face, edging me on. Nature remains cruel and indifferent, even in death. But nature never changes. It's always there. Cruel or beautiful, it never lets you down. The same beautiful tinge of orange and pink that I love in the setting sun. The subtle drops of water falling from above. People? They change all the time, and I don't know how to live with them anymore. I don't know how to live with myself anymore.

I hear the footsteps of people walking, the mindless natters on a Monday morning, coffee in one hand, newspaper in the other. They never stop. To them, it's just another day in the office, hours in front of a computer, a quick lunch with colleagues, more hours with the computer, a grab of the evening papers, a kiss on her cheek when he gets home as she removes his coat, dinner amongst the clanking of glass and a few laughs, more kisses under the blankets, a reach for the lamp, lights out. *Was it ever so simple? Or are those just scenes from a movie?*

I hear the cars moving behind me as the bridge rattles. A truck rumbles by. I think about accidents. About life's arbitrary nature. Of no meaning, and of no purpose. A man comes home from work, picks up the papers over roast beef and beer, reads about a car and a truck colliding. A man, two girls and a dog were in the car. They all died. The man sifts through more pages, throws the papers down, his fate unknowingly to him arrogant in the face of life, untouched. He chugs down the last of his beer, kisses his wife's neck as she does the dishes, tells his children to eat their vegetables. Somewhere else

in the city, beneath the same gloaming, a woman sits in the kitchen, pills and alcohol covering the stained dining table. Just four days ago, the table wasn't stained. And instead of bottles and pills, the table had been covered with dishes of broccoli, carrots, gravy, chicken, and glasses. Beer for the father, lemonade and milk in colored plastic cups for the mother and her daughters. Four days ago, there was her husband's voice asking what the girls did in school that day, laughter from her daughters, sound of metal against glass as her husband passes her the potatoes with his ringed hand, Lucy's bark and whimper as more broccoli is thrown on her plate, more laughter. Now, she sits alone, tears devoid, bottle in one hand, pills in another, descending into the pits of ersatz ecstasy and temporary relief, paralyzed, if not dead. *And what of life?*

The cries of a toddler tickle my eardrums, my senses sensitized. How did it feel, learning to walk for the first time? Our fresh grey matters helping our legs to find their place, to be ready for this world, soft and pink feet on solid ground. An innocent child under a watching parent, teaching his offspring the mechanics of legs, preparing her for life. I was that child once. We all were. Just how did it feel? I cannot remember. It all happened too fast. But I was there. And is that not enough? *Is that not enough?*

I look at the city before me, the buildings and the skyscrapers. I look up at the welkin that is vast and surrounding, where the birds were born to prevail, black embracing blue. Everywhere I look, there is life. But life is only livable through ignorance, and there is only so much one can ignore.

And no relief is absolute now, because the minute you start questioning your own existence, that's when you will never live life the same as before. And you have lost the ability to be cocky. Because you know, though you have nothing left to lose, you will still get hurt. You always will.

First heavy tear

My grips tighten on the ropes as my lungs struggle to keep up with my thoughts. The ropes dampen with the perspiration of my body and my soul. I let go with one hand, see the fibers cleaving onto the wetness of my palm, bring it close to my nose, inhale. The smell of tightly woven rope that has endured the weathers of a thousand months. I smile, because it is so beautiful. And I weep, because it is so mockingly beautiful. My hands move down the ropes, my body sliding down, the friction burning on my palms as I weep. I weep because I want to see more, I want to smell more, I want to taste more, I want to hear more, I want to touch more, I want to live. And I can't. You'd think with all the things to do and see in the world, you'd somehow make it through. But no one does, because we are all food for tease. And it's hard to do things when you don't believe anymore.

A mother's kiss, a father's arms, a friend's hug, a partner's hand, the touch of human skin, human against human, warmth against warmth, the touch and smell of yellow pages of a favorite worn novel, the smell of a piano as the lid goes up for the first time in many years, the sound of scratches of graphite on paper and fingers on a typewriter in a writer's room, the taste of flavors of chocolate and wine exploding in the mouth, the sound of plucked strings echoing from a guitarist, the touch of wood upon wood on a chessboard as men fight their battles, the touch of water droplets bouncing off your body under the falling rain, the sound of raindrops and wipers on a windshield, the sight of water droplets racing down a window, the sight of colors on the flowers on a grandmother's grave, the sight of her name on weathered stones, the sound of silence on some days, the sound of a crying baby and a weeping man, the sight of black and white on an unfinished canvas, the sight of a toddler tasting strawberry ice cream for the first time...

Love...

Indifference...

Oh Lord, let me live.

The lighter tear

I don't usually hear voices in my head, but there are always two sides constantly debating against each other, each trying to prevail the other to earn its place in my grey matters. Lately, it's been the Optimist and the Pessimist occupying the podium within my skull, threatening to cave in at any given second. I've dubbed them Oppy and Pessi.

P: What kind of a name is Pessi anyway? Only a wuss would come up with a name like that.

You are a property of my mind, I can name you whatever the fuck I want. Back the fuck off.

O: Yeah back the fuck off PussyPessi.

P: Shut the fuck up, you ignorant fuck.

O: Look who's talking, I'm Optimist, I'm brighter than you.

P: Visibly brighter, but not wiser. I'm a realist, you're a dreamer. I offer wisdom. You offer ignorance. So, who's brighter now?

O: With wisdom comes pain, no one wants your fucking pain. I offer bliss, I make life tolerable. Humanity would suggest you fuck off.

P: A life of ignorance is not worth living even if made tolerable, a life of wisdom is worth any pain.

Is it?

P: There is just no meaning in anything.

O: You talk about meaning, but how is anyone going to define himself without any struggle? You don't have a say in where you're at, but you do have a say in what you do and what you are. Now that is real control, power.

But people don't see it. Not because it's hardly noticeable, but because it is too conspicuously simple, and people simply dismiss it. And also because it's not a power that is fun to possess. It takes more effort than most can handle.

I snort and the ropes vibrate along with the rhythm of my laughter. *Yeah, so interesting that it drives humans into sticking knives into themselves, blowing their brains out, or hurling themselves off bridges.*

"How old are you, Kim?"

"Eighteen." As of today.

"You are young, you have all the time in the world to try to live! Just look at me! I'm still trying, but I've had some fun along the way. It might not have been much, but it makes life livable! You can do this Kim!"

I look up at his face, the white in his hair, the creases on his face, the years on his body, and still the hope in his eyes. And I wonder how he made it so far. I think about my parents, my grandparents, my uncles and my aunts, and wonder how they all made it so far.

O: No God with the face of Mr. Clooney will tell you anything, but He is telling you now that you'll get through this.

Where?

O: In that man's hair, in that man's face, in that man's body, in that man's eyes, in that man's words, and in your own question of how they all made it so far. They all did because they could, and you are no exception. God don't neglect his own children. If you let go of those ropes, you and all the others who have let go before you will be the children neglecting God. Don't jump unnoticed. Don't live a life of insignificance. Live with dignity and leave this world surrounded by people whom you love, whom love you. Live, because that's the honorable thing to do. Love and not hate, for hate exhausts the soul too much. Forgive and bear no anger, even if it's the hardest thing to do. Accept and not blame, for it is wise. And

know there will come a time when you will do what I said you wouldn't, but that is living, and you will do just that. You will feel joy, you will feel pain, you will suffer, you will cry, you will laugh, you will hurt, you will scream, you will release, you will heal, and you will do it all over again. For life is long, and life is short. And there is nothing to lose, but all the world to see, and everything to feel. Everything that you've been through and will go through will ride the stars to the dark hole when oblivion comes. And that will be your legacy.

"Besides, you have nothing to lose! There will be pain, but it won't last forever! Everybody dies, but today isn't the day for you, sweetheart! Trust me!" Whatever is trust? But I want to trust. I want to trust this man. I want to trust Oppy. I want to trust life.

P: Don't. Jump already, for fuck sake.

No.

P: Then why are you here?

"Give yourself some more time. I've gone fifty years and I haven't figured anything out more than you. Life is not for figuring, it's for living. And the world needs you, Kim. But it needs you alive, not in those waters. Just how much sense does it make for you to be brought into this world only for you to go like that? As much as life doesn't make sense, I believe it's sensible enough for you to have a purpose. You have a purpose, you just don't know it yet."

"Have you figured out yours yet?" I look up at him.

"I just did." He smiles, his skin folding on his cheeks.

"What is it?"

"Saving you." And he reaches down with his hand.

I take it.

Golden Gate Bridge



by Ryan J. Wilmot

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