

T H E

# oddtville press



W I N T E R 2 0 1 8

C O V E R   A R T

# Circus Cat

John McRandle

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## D I S C L A I M E R

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

Thanks for reading,  
The Management

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# The Viaduct

Michael Anthony

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JACK LAFFERTY STEERED THE TAXI down the exit ramp from the interstate wondering if anyone else had spent seventeen years planning something so personal, so important.

Meanwhile, six miles north on Route 94, his first passenger of the day sat on a bench just inside the locked door of The Hartley Center for Rehabilitative Studies. With no traffic, Jack should be there soon, which pleased him, because he aimed to be across the border by nightfall.

Jack fixed his eyes on the center line of the driveway that slithered up the hill like a great black serpent until the road widened into Hartley's oval parking area.

The Center had contracted with the Cloverdale Cab Company to transport its discharged residents. So, this had become a ritual for Jack. When he started as a driver six years earlier, he volunteered for the run nobody wanted; namely, the one between Hartley and the Dover train station. From there, discharged residents could catch a bus, a train to Hoboken, or simply walk across the street to Little Joe's Lounge. A good many did, having their first drink in years before disappearing into the crowd. Some stayed for a second, third, or fourth.

After edging the cab to the curb, Jack

stroked his full beard while waiting for the bell that announced the release of another Hartley resident. At precisely 10:15, the door opened and a lean six-footer carrying a small plastic bag approached the taxi and got in. Jack's hand slid inside his jacket where it found the cold blue steel of the snub nose.<sup>38</sup> he carried when he made this run.

"Seat belt on," Jack barked with the same authoritative ring as the Hartley staff. The passenger obliged. "Heater's broken." Jack held up his gloved hand to prove the point.

Jack pulled away while checking his passenger in the mirror. He wasn't antsy like some or belligerent like others. With his hands buried in his jacket pockets for warmth, the guy just stared out the window. Jack was glad this one wasn't talkative because he was in no mood for conversation, especially with a Hartley discharge.

The cab cut a hard left at the sign for Polkville. The smooth two-lane road gave way to a poorly maintained strip of asphalt barely wide enough to accommodate the taxi, let alone two cars traveling in opposite directions. The route was not a random choice, not with the name Kill Road and its proximity to the viaduct.

The passenger displayed no reaction to

the detour, even when the road led over an angled black steel bridge and began a steep upward climb. Just ahead, the massive concrete supports of a railroad viaduct towered some eighty feet above the tree line. More than a century old, the viaduct was a long forgotten architectural wonder in this remote, undeveloped part of the state. Its graceful arches were reminiscent of ancient Roman aqueducts that spanned Italy's Alpine valleys. A railroad bed smooth and flat once ran atop those stacked arches. But with steel rails long gone, it now played home to pot-smoking teenagers and was a massive canvas for graffiti artists. All around the base and inside each visible arch, Day-Glo red, orange, and green designs bled into one another.

Only when the road roughened enough to jostle the passenger did he ask, "Why you goin' this way?"

"Short cut around construction by exit four. Save a good half hour," Jack lied.

They followed Kill Road into the blue shadow of the viaduct, where Jack pressed the accelerator as the incline grew until only the hood and sky could be seen out the front windshield. The road was now nothing more than packed gravel bordered by a makeshift curb of felled telephone poles along the side that dropped off sharply to the headwaters of the Black River.

Hugging the side of this Kittatinny peak, the road curved around several old oaks clustered near a steep palisade. The back end of the cab swerved; its tires skidding in search of traction when the engine coughed and sputtered. Jack stomped the accelerator to the floor and the car shot forward before the engine struggled and choked again.

"Dammit!" Jack moaned.

"What?" came from the backseat.

"Damned guys at the garage don't listen.

I told them something wasn't right with the engine."

With his foot on the brake pedal Jack slammed the gearshift lever into park then engaged the emergency brake that strained to keep the four thousand pounds of steel from careening backwards down Kill Road; or worse, sailing off the side and into the river below.

"Hey!" the passenger said. "Hell'va place to stall."

"No kidding!" Jack shot back. "You want to get out?"

"Nah."

Jack cranked the ignition key, but the engine wouldn't start. "Ain't gonna work. I'll call the shop for a tow. Hope I get a signal out here." Rich in iron, the local mountains were often dead zones, especially on the north side where the two men sat on the isolated road that few outside the area knew of and even fewer had traveled.

"Want me to look at it?" the passenger offered.

"You?" Jack replied while staring into the rearview mirror.

"Yeah," the passenger said. "I worked in the maintenance garage at Hartley."

"Would you mind? I ain't good with that stuff. I only drive 'em."

The passenger stepped from the back seat and made his way to the front of the car telling Jack, "Pop the hood." While peering into the engine compartment, the guy said, "Don't touch anything 'til I tell you." The passenger unscrewed the air filter cover. "Try again."

Jack turned the key. Nothing!

"Again!" the passenger shouted, his breath misting in the cold air.

Still nothing. They could do this for the next week and that thing wouldn't turn over, not as long as Jack pressed that little red button

on the kill switch under the dashboard. Jack opened the glove compartment and retrieved what he had stowed there earlier that morning.

With the pistol still tucked in his waistband, Jack stood next to his passenger asking, "What's the problem?"

"Ain't gettin' gas."

Feigning ignorance, Jack said, "Where?"

As his passenger leaned deeper over the engine, pointing to the fuel injectors, Jack brought a steel angle iron down hard onto the back of the guy's skull. It landed with a gruesome thud, sending the guy's eyes rolling back under their lids. His face crashed hard against the manifold.

His legs sagged; then gave way as he slipped down the front grill to the gravel. Jack kicked him. No movement. He zip tied the guy's wrists and ankles, then slapped a piece of duct tape across his mouth. The man was completely at Jack's mercy, but Jack was feeling murderous, not merciful.

Jack shimmied under the car and then remerged. Using gravity as his ally, he dragged his unconscious captive back to the open door, where he lifted him onto the driver's seat. Jack started the car in a single attempt. The engine purred as though freshly tuned before he turned it off again.

Jack looped another zip tie through the one around the guy's wrists and fastened it to the lower part of the steering wheel, ensuring the guy could neither escape; free his hands; nor reach the gear shift arm. Once secured, he waited for the guy to regain consciousness. Some minutes later, Jack heard a groan. With his eyes half-open, the passenger instinctively tried to bring his hands to his head. When he realized he couldn't, the guy stiffened and turned to the open window and Jack.

"Hello, Roy," Jack sneered. "You're probably wondering why you're here."

The trussed up man moaned; his head throbbing; his wrists burning from the tight restraints.

"This should explain," Jack said while pulling a small tape recorder from his pocket and holding it close to Roy's ear. He pressed 'Play.' Though scratchy, the sound was audible. "My name is Maggie. I'll be seven in May and I'm getting a puppy for my birthday." Jack hit 'Stop.'

"Remember her, Roy? You told one of your fellow residents at Hartley she had skin like porcelain. Remember?" Jack shouted in the man's ear. A cloud of condensation swirled around Roy's pounding head.

With his mouth still taped, Roy sat motionless, refusing to acknowledge the voice, Jack, or even his tenuous predicament.

"Yeah," Jack said. "That's my daughter, a few months before she disappeared. Know anything about that, Roy?" Jack waited for a reaction. When he saw there wouldn't be one, he went on. "After Maggie disappeared, her mother was never the same again. What mother could be? And, when we finally learned the truth, she went into a psychiatric hospital. Listening, Roy?" Jack asked.

No reaction; no response.

"You know how the trial went and how your lawyer got you sent to Hartley instead of prison. When that happened, Maggie's mom couldn't handle it. She leapt off the roof of the hospital. So, Roy, now it's just me...and you. Want to say anything? Beg for your life? Like I'm sure Maggie did." Jack grabbed the end of the duct tape and said, "Don't even think about screaming." He dug the barrel of the thirty-eight into Roy's temple and ripped the tape off.

Roy grimaced in pain.

Jack noticed blood seeping out from under Roy's hair and soaking the collar of his jacket. It made him feel good.

Even though his head pounded and hadn't cleared fully, Roy Weidenmuller put the missing pieces in place.

"Guess you can figure out why we're here, right?" Jack taunted Roy in a seething hiss.

"Screw you!" Roy spat.

"No, Roy. You're the one about to get screwed," Jack spat back while pressing the thirty-eight against Roy's ear. "Put your feet on the brake. Go ahead, now!" Jack shouted, twisting the pistol until Roy complied. "Good."

With the gun still aimed at Roy's head, Jack turned the ignition switch to on and moved the shifter to reverse. The car inched backwards. "Press harder, Roy." Once the car stabilized, Jack rotated the ignition key to the off position and removed it. "Didn't think I could do that, huh? I modified the gear shift interlock. The steering wheel's locked and so is the shifter. All you can do is keep those feet on the brakes... until your muscles cramp."

Roy struggled, trying to break the zip ties, his feet pressing the brake pedal.

"Sorry, Roy. I used the ones cops do, not those cheap ones from the dollar store," Jack said. "So, here's how it's going to play out. I'm going to tell you a little story. Then, you're going to take a ride back down the hill. Maybe you'll live, maybe you won't. I really don't care. But, first you have an important choice to make."

"Oh, yeah. What's that?" Roy grunted.

"What should I do about Chloe?"

Roy convulsed as though a million volts of electricity shot through his body. He pulled at the steering wheel to no avail. The car slipped a few inches when he unintentionally eased off the brake pedal before stomping it again and halting the backward slide.

"Got your attention, huh?" Jack said, then waited for Roy to turn towards him. Their eyes dueled silently; Jack Lafferty's dead for

seventeen years; Roy Weidenmuller's frigid as glacial ice.

"Before you choose, I thought you should know how I prepared for this day. With my family destroyed, I moved down south where I laid out and researched the whole plan. After a few years, I created a new identity and got a commercial driver's license. Then, I returned to New Jersey using the new identity and got a job at the cab company in Dover, the one that transports discharges from Hartley. I spent six years driving all kinds of scum from that place to the train station. Every time I did, I wanted to strangle each one. But, I didn't. I was waiting for you, Roy. How are those legs doing?"

Roy Weidenmuller said nothing.

Jack continued, "We both know only one of us will leave here alive. But, here's the question. "What about Chloe...and her daughter?"

Roy thrashed again, then said, "She ain't got kids, asshole."

"Wrong!" Jack said in a chilling, flat voice. "She's going to be thirty-two come September and your granddaughter, Hannah, is three. Looks just like her mother."

Roy spun towards Jack and growled, "You're full of shit!"

Jack pulled a photograph from his shirt pocket. "Yeah? Then, who's this?" Jack held the photograph close enough for Roy to clearly see his grown daughter and a small child who bore a striking resemblance to her. Seated next to them was Jack Lafferty! "Gorgeous eyes, huh," Jack goaded his captive.

"You bastard," Roy barked. His legs began to shake.

"Watch your language, Roy," Jack said. "I know Chloe hasn't had any contact with you since the trial. By the way, I tracked her to Michigan where she started a family. As you can see, we've become friends. Her husband, Paul, even took the picture. Nice guy, but, like

Chloe, he doesn't know my real name. Chloe told him her father abandoned her years ago and died somewhere out near Sioux City. What would happen if he found out you were still alive and what you did? Probably wreck that perfect little marriage of theirs."

"You'll never get away with this," Roy shouted.

"You forget," Jack said. "They'll be looking for a bearded taxi driver named Jack Lafferty, not John Tedesco. Besides, Jack Lafferty is going to die along with you today."

Roy glared at his captor.

"That's right," Jack said while slicing the heel of his hand with a box cutter. His palm quickly filled with crimson that he wiped on the steering wheel, the visor, the driver's seat, Roy's shirt and jacket. "So, when they find the cab and your body, they'll also find blood that isn't yours."

"You're one sick bastard," Roy grumbled.

"Maybe," Jack said. "But, now you need to decide." Then added, "How are the legs?"

Roy tensed, again trying to break the zip ties while practically standing on the brake pedal. He could feel his leg muscles starting to knot. Jack wrapped a red handkerchief around his hand to stanch the blood.

"So, here are your choices. First, I can shoot you as you sit there now." Jack waved the thirty-eight at Roy. "Or, you can let go of the brakes and take your chances going over the embankment. By the way, I disabled the parking brake while you were out cold, so don't count on using it. Or, I free your hands and feet; and, you sit right here with your feet on the brake while I cross that viaduct. Then, in exactly one hour, if you can hold out that long, you send the cab over the edge; walk down that hill; and, tell the police you killed me. With your record, you'll probably get life." Jack waited to let it all sink in. "What'll it

be, Roy?" A bullet now? A wild ride? Or," Jack laughed, "confess to a murder you actually didn't commit? Just remember, only the last option keeps Chloe and Hannah alive."

No response.

Jack held out the photo again. "Wouldn't want them ending up like Maggie."

"You better hope I die," Roy threatened. "Because if I don't, I'll hunt you down."

"We both know you won't," Jack mocked his captive.

The next minute passed as though it was an hour. Finally, Roy muttered, "I'll confess."

"Good choice," Jack said, then lifted a mobile phone. "And, just in case you think about doing anything stupid after I leave, look at this." He showed Roy a photo on his phone. "See that house? It's Chloe's. The picture was sent by someone who's sitting right across the street, waiting for me to text a plus or a minus sign within the next twenty-four hours. I think you understand what that means." Jack leaned close to Roy and growled, "This is what happens when you have nothing to lose and seventeen years to plan. Remember, I'm giving you the chance you never gave me. Don't gamble with that little girl's life."

Jack opened the side door and held the barrel of the pistol to Roy's temple as he sliced the zip ties from his feet. After closing the door, he leaned through the open window and cut the ones on Roy's wrists. Once done, Jack lowered the pistol and reminded Roy to sit tight for that hour.

Roy craned his neck to watch Jack Lafferty's silhouette cross the viaduct and disappear into the trees at the far end. The pain in his legs was unbearable.

Nine and a half hours later, Roy Weidenmuller sat in a State Police interrogation room, explaining how he fought with the cab driver and sent him, along with the taxi, over the cliff

into the Black River beneath the viaduct.

Apparently, Jack Lafferty's body had been washed away in the swirling river, never to be found.

At the same time, some four hundred miles away and with the cascading Niagara Falls outside his hotel room window, the clean shaven John Tedesco deleted from his phone

the photo of a house he found on a Michigan real estate website. Then, he smiled at the print of the picture he had downloaded from Chloe Weidenmuller's Facebook page. The one he had photoshopped himself next to the single mom and little girl living in Pensacola Florida, neither of whom he ever met, nor ever would.

---

*Michael Anthony is a writer and artist living in New Jersey. He has published fiction, poetry and illustrations in literary journals and commercial magazines. Most recently these include Second Hand Stories Podcast, Route 7 Review, The Write Place At The Write Time, Scarlet Leaf Review, and Bull & Cross. The American Labor Museum exhibited Michael's photojournalism essay on the waning of the textile industry.*



# Vitality and the Cyclone (version 1)

Squire Broel

---

*Squire Broel is a Walla Walla based artist whose practice includes sculpture, painting, drawing and performance. Broel received his BFA from Seattle Pacific University. He has exhibited nationally and internationally, including exhibitions in Canada, Vietnam, China and Indonesia. His work is in numerous collections including the Brooklyn Museum, Los Angeles County Museum, Whitman College and the City of Walla Walla.*

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# Marquette

Brandon Hansen

---

The rocks in this city  
are all flat granite,  
the angles of your ankles  
and knees as you  
zip them through the waves,  
over the ice,  
and, Jesus, I know  
I will never ask a thing  
without an  
uhm,

I  
will never  
get my tongue  
around the word  
February.

I'm young that way  
I guess, I let the wind  
whip the air from my lungs  
as I watch the slick edge  
of rock dig at your fingers,  
and I forget that in this city  
to breathe is a different sort of game.

---

*Brandon Hansen is from a village in northern Wisconsin named Long Lake. He can affirm that, indeed, the lake is long. He also writes.*

# Insomnia

Lawrence Syldan

---

Still up this late with the weather station,  
eyes starting to flame,  
you hear the little noises way off.

The ocean to the west  
dragging the rollers heaving and sighing  
to shore  
and back... and back.

Raining all over France.  
Children in the street  
down the way  
whooping it up: shouting screams.

Heat cycle in Bahamas.  
Cold front in this region.  
Now the news.

In the molten darkness a quick rushing of  
something through the shrubbery,  
a twig cracks.

Boxes of dishes and wardrobes impose  
insensate mass  
on this dwelling.  
Heavy.

We have been a long time,  
still the vapor stays aloft

That anonymous howl in this village  
is interrupted by breathing  
somewhere very near. Hands off.

Varoom of the furnace,

and vision: light is slight  
and numerous  
in shards in a field ...

Three strangers on a street corner  
at noon in that country  
have begun exploding.

The white noise of being is  
preempting silence.

Mind's fractured words and phrases  
incessant flitting.

Woe. Compassion of slumber!.

The cigarette glows in semidark.  
We have not slept in years.

---

*A retired instructor and counselor, Lawrence Syldan now devotes most of his hours to three grandchildren, the ocean and woods, and to writing concoctions sometimes called poems and vignettes. He has been about the poetry circus for many years and has felt it to be delightful and boring alternately. As he grows even older, whoa, the matter of style grows more and more salient for him.*



# Habitat

Julie Christian

---

*Julie Christian is a designer and artist living in Walla Walla, Washington. She relishes observing nature in her garden and surrounding Blue Mountains—and is fascinated by illustrations of nature that generations past have left us in the form of nature field guides and children's story books.*

# The Unicorn

Derek Frydel

---

HE DREAMED OF A UNICORN for as long as he remembered. He never guessed the significance of these dreams or their meaning. Very likely he understood them as the counterpart of reality, believing that everyone else dreamed of a unicorn at night. Every morning upon waking he would scan his room for the unicorn. Then, not finding it, he would turn toward the window and contemplate a yellow curtain swaying in the wind. Before long he would mumble, "Let's see what this day has in store for me." He would rise, give himself a thorough wash, jump into clean clothes, and shuffle to the kitchen to prepare his breakfast. Then all done and prepared, he would grab his sandwich, throw it in his bag, leave his hut. Walking down a winding forest path, he would reach the main factory gate.

Once in the factory, the bright artificial light dazzled him. In the locker room, he would change into a gray uniform, then, with goggles over his eyes, he would shuffle toward his machine. The comrades already at work would salute him, "Good day, comrade. Know that I care for you." "Good day, comrade," he would cheerlessly respond. Sometimes comrades would elaborate their salutations and add, "Production is good." To which he would respond, "It is the best thing that there is. It is

the Holy of Holies." Once at his machine, he would flip several switches, the machine would grunt, cough, choke, and he would start the blind and relentless process of production.

During work he would not conjure images of the unicorn, for he was warned against digressions on the first day of work: "They are silly and counterproductive." Then the statement was backed by charts and numbers that dazzled and stultified him, like the strong artificial light at the factory entrance. Later he would eat his lunch in a large and impersonal cafeteria, whose design and architecture was deliberately chosen to stifle individuality, spontaneity, and joy. Chewing on his delicious sandwich that he had made at home, he would briefly close his eyes and conjure an image of the unicorn.

After work, a comrade or another would come up to him and say, "Come, join us at the depressing factory tavern. We will stand around with a drink in hand and feel uncomfortable with each other and complete the destruction of our souls, for souls are counterproductive." He would politely decline their invitation and respond, "What a delightful idea! How come I haven't thought of it myself? Regretfully today I have other priorities to attend to in my cozy hut in the woods. But

don't forget to ask me again tomorrow." He would hardly be finished speaking when he would turn around and sprint through the factory gate, as if fleeing hell, and the next moment he would vanish into the woods. The comrades' confused eyes would follow the sprinting figure until it dissolved in dark woods. Then the comrades would turn away and look at one another, shrugging shoulders, but they would not comment, because they had some confounded notion that tolerance is a virtue, even if they were unable to justify their stance, and when asked about it, they would stomp their feet and scream, "Because! If you don't know you are stupid!"

Then one night he dreamed that the unicorn had taken ill, without showing prior symptoms. The whole episode passed rather quickly. The unicorn stretched out on a bright patch of grass, but instead of rubbing its back it released a long sad sigh, closed its eyes, and died. The dreamer woke up gasping for breath in his bed drenched in sweat. Looking through the window at the moonlit sky, he reflected on a possible meaning of that dream. Although at first perturbed, by the time the sun was rose he forgot all about the morbid experience.

The subsequent day at the factory was like any other. Production, lunch, then sprinting through the factory gate into the woods. That night he went to bed early. But when he woke the following morning he could not recall any dreams. Still he did not become alarmed. "It can happen sometimes, nothing to worry about. I'm certain others experienced similar difficulties at some point in their lives. It must an aspect of the human condition," he said with an uncertain voice. A week passed, but the dreams did not return. In spite of this, he continued with his life as if nothing had changed. But as one week became two and

two became three, he became unsettled. He showed up in the factory tired and moody. His hair was unkempt, shirts unbuttoned, shoes unlaced, and clothes unwashed. He became increasingly reserved, absentminded, and irritated. The feeble interest he had held for the world around him was now completely gone. He stopped responding to comrades' morning salutations, or inventing polite excuses to turn down their invitations for an afterwork drink at the depressing factory tavern. He merely barked, "No! Leave me alone." Some comrades came forward and said, "Comrade, you do not seem well. Has anything happened? Is the production not going well?" For they lacked sufficient imagination to conceive that something other than the production might cause unhappiness.

Then he made a confession in a tumultuous voice: "My dreams are gone, and I sleep like a dead man." To this the comrades responded with astonishment and indignation, "Don't we all?" And they gazed at him curiously. "What more does he want?" they discussed among themselves, while they hugged each other closely, forming a closed circle. "He possesses health, material security, and numberless comrades. Our world is stable and the future well defined. Can one possibly want more? And isn't it a little conceited to want more? Does he want to rise above us?" And all the comrades nodded, as if profound words had been uttered.

For the unicorn dreamer things continued on a downward spiral. He was coming to the factory late. After lunch he did not go back to his machine but was seen walking idly in the woods. He put less effort into making his sandwiches, which were once renowned for their taste, appearance, and imagination, and which were now thin, sloppy, and tasteless. In the end, he lunched on stale bread that he washed

down with sour milk.

His behavior was affecting production and therefore did not go unnoticed, for hurting production constituted a cardinal sin in a world where values and moral and aesthetic judgments derived from economic categories. "Let him dream all he wants," an angry voice proclaimed, "As long as this dreaming of his does not come into conflict with production!" All heads nodded, and the author of the words felt immensely wise and important, as if he were a holy apostle of truth, or even the Messiah himself. It even crossed his mind to grow long hair and adopt other external marks of a philosopher. He remembered Nietzsche's large mustache, Schopenhauer's sideburns, and thought of growing one or the other, or perhaps both, for he was sure to be their equal, if not already their superior. He then wished to add something more to his previous statement to solicit further praise from his comrades, who understood as much philosophy as him, but lacking any notion of how to evolve his thought, he repeated the same exact words, and the comrades nodded once again and thought the speaker exceedingly wise and accomplished.

One day the unicorn dreamer did not show up at the factory. He remained in bed all day, and his sole activity was to stare at the yellow curtain surfing on the lazy air. While his half-hallucinating mind wandered without aim, he recovered memories of an old friend. They used to be very close but for some inexplicable cause their proximity faded into neutrality. Then the friend disappeared without any parting words. He noticed the friend's disappearance with indifference, if not secret relief. While his eyes traced the sublime movements of the yellow curtain, he reflected with halfhearted interest on the fate of this distant friend. As the day unfolded and the soft

morning hues transformed into the vivid colors of noon and then faded into creamy hues, he recalled Descartes's wax and the transformations that preserve essence. "Are life's transformations an illusion?" It was still before the hour of sunset. The yellow curtain danced on the creamy air. Memories of the old friend and the questions without answer multiplied. Vaguely he began to sense the connection between his condition and the disappearance of the friend. The idea agitated him until he was too restless to remain in bed. He jumped to his feet, and pacing up and down the room, he contemplated how to find the old friend.

He left the hut at dusk and it was night by the time he reached the town. Only a handful of scattered houses still had light in them. Standing motionless below a tree, he watched the last lights go out, then walked along alleys and across dark lawns. At some point he noticed a solitary figure struggling against the strong wind to cross a small stone bridge over a stream. He called out the name of the old friend. The solitary walker froze, then slowly turned around. In the rough outlines of the figure, in the singular manner of the stranger's walk, he recognized the old friend. The friend was wrapped from head to foot, wearing an old, oversized coat. In his right hand, pressed against his breast, he held two volumes of Latin grammar, a book of abstract algebra, and a book on the sexual customs of Amazons. His left hand was stuffed into his coat pocket. They were now face to face, and he asked the old friend how his life had turned out to be. After a period of silence interrupted only by the whistling wind, the friend confessed that his life did not turn out well and was riddled with disappointments. Then, somewhat mysteriously, he declared that he had transformed, but left out an explanation. As if trying to find the answer on his own, the unicorn dreamer lowered his

gaze and his eyes stopped on the friend's concealed left hand. He realized quickly that this was not a hand but a claw, already overgrown with rough scales. He took a step backward before checking himself. Noticing this, the friend grimly said, "So you see..." Embarrassed at his behavior, he made a few small steps forward, but was unable to utter a single word, despite his best efforts. Feeling that any further conversation was impossible, the old friend nodded his head toward the moonlit tower clock, implying that the meeting was over. The short encounter made the old friend visibly tired. Feeling tired himself and perplexed, the unicorn dreamer set out back to his hut.

Upon reaching his hut, he reclined in the armchair and in dim, flickering candlelight contemplated the friend's fantastic transformation. But tired as he was after his long walk through the forest and the short but intense meeting, overwhelmed by perplexities that defied the logic of causality or any other categories of pure reason, he drifted into dreamless sleep. When he woke up late the next day, he discovered a sealed letter lying on the nightstand. Recognizing the friend's handwriting on the envelope, he broke the seal, took out the letter, unfolded the sheets of paper, and began to read.

"After our parting, I wandered aimlessly through the dark alleys of the town like a stray soul, as the pale moonlight illuminated my path. My aimless wandering brought me back to the bridge. Of course, you were no longer there and I did not expect you to be, although it did not prevent me from casting a couple of searching glances. I quickly understood it was by guidance and the will of the moon that I found myself again on the bridge, and I knew I must seek you out. I still vaguely remembered the way. After all, I used to come to your hut almost daily. Those were the happy days. But

why dwell on what is long gone and irrecoverable? I am sure you remember yourself with clarity the things that had once been. When I finally reached your hut, I found the door wide open and I went inside. You were deep in sleep and immersed in candlelight. But I did not wake you up. Instead I took a pen and paper from the desk drawer, where I knew I would find them. Sitting at your side, I began to compose the letter you are now reading. It was not an easy feat, for as you recall my left hand has undergone a transformation and at times I lose control over it. Sometimes without provocation it attacks my torso or attempts to strangle me, and we wrestle on the ground into the night until we exhaust ourselves to death. This is why you see my body covered with red spots, cuts, and bruises, and I walk around wrapped up in bandages. But sitting at your side, being washed by the timid moonlight, the transformed hand was strangely calm.

I must confess that I had expected your visit sooner. You may be surprised to hear but you are on the lips of every man, woman, and child of the town. You turned into a kind of antagonist, the butt of every joke. The town folks gossip about you in taverns. Even schoolchildren heard about you and invent games whereby they imitate you. They would lie down on the ground, curl up in little balls and pretend to be dreaming. "Look at me, I am dreaming, I close my eyes and I see strange new things, unsupported by statistics, mathematical models, or even common sense." And then they would burst into laughter. Not one among them, of course, has the slightest notion what dreams are, and how essential to existence they are, but nonetheless they would have a go at it until they are caught and rebuked by a passing adult.

It has been suspected for a long time that you dream. You have betrayed your inner

existence with your delicious sandwiches, which were considered by the comrades as too elaborate, too expressive of an inner self, and unnecessarily too creative at the cost of productivity — the backbone and the idol of our culture. But in reality it was never the productivity that was at stake. This point must be clarified and elaborated. Productivity was only a mask, and under the mask was the face of fear that you are becoming different, or indeed that you have dared to be different. You took a different path and comrades suddenly felt threatened and began to tremble as they picked up the waft that what they have unquestionably stood for was nothing but an elaborate lie. They despise you because you have smitten them on a sore spot. You have devalued them, taking away the steady ground from under their feet and robbing them of their dignity. They cannot accommodate a shift in their worldview because they are incapable of transformation. They can only defend themselves by representing you as inadequate, as a fool or a clown.

Don't be offended if I say that I know you have stopped dreaming. I overheard a conversation between the factory comrades, who welcomed this change. Now I must make a confession. I stopped dreaming long before you did. This is the reason I disappeared from your life and from the view of the world. Now you understand. I could not bring myself to confess this to you, fearing that you would look down upon me, blame me, or mock me. I preferred to vanish without explanation, without facing you. I did not know what to do with myself. Dreading the dreamless nights, I made a pledge never to sleep again. This is why at night I wander through the town alleys, looking into people's houses, watching their dreamless faces as they sleep. Sometimes I would enter a house, and leaning over a sleeping body, I

would whisper a story in the ear, hoping to conjure up dreams. This strange ritual restored some old peace to my soul. At the same time I was not ready to reconcile with my new fate. Months, perhaps years have passed. Then one night I realized that my body was undergoing a transformation. You have seen my hand already. I have not shown you my torso, and you are only better for it. This is only the beginning. I do not know into what new form I will evolve. I can only wait, watch, and accept the outcome.

And now I come to the final and most important point. The moment I finish writing this present letter, I will set out on a long and dangerous voyage. A voyage similar to that undertaken by Columbus when he discovered the new world, the alternative world, the very possibility of difference. However, unlike Columbus I will not be coming back to report on my discoveries and adventures. I will not bring back a pineapple or coffee beans. The reason is simple enough. The return voyage is forbidden by the laws of quantum physics. I intend to undertake the voyage on a boat that I have built in the course of my sleepless nights. The boat will take me across a vast ocean to a distant and uncharted land that remains pure and uncorrupted. I have speculated the existence of this virgin land through careful reading and interpretation of ancient texts and customs. I planned to leave weeks ago, but I felt I must see you one more time, something I should have done a long time ago.

Now read carefully, this is important: I urge you to follow me. There is another, smaller boat, which I built as a backup in case my plans are discovered and foiled, and I cannot take more chances with this world. But primarily I built it with you in mind. The boat contains all that is needed to safely take you across the sea and bring you to the new

land. It contains a detailed map and provisions. The comrades do not know how to sail, so as soon as you are on the open sea you are safe. Also know this, that if you decide to stay, they will not, of course, crucify you, but they will destroy you by subtler means. In the end, however, it is your choice and you must make it alone. I can only advise as a friend.

There is, of course, infinitely more to say, but I fear I must stop here. Soon it will be sunrise and the transformed hand would likely fall into its customary rage and tear the letter into pieces. I dare not to take this risk. I am, therefore, scrambling in a great hurry these concluding words. It is my hope that you choose to follow me and one day we will be reunited in happier circumstances. It is possible that you will not recognize me at first, for after the transformation I will take on a different form. So if one day you are accosted by a friendly crocodile with a happy face, and you see the moonlight shining through its eyes, I urge you not to flee, for it will be me. I will always recognize you and come to greet you if ever I see you. Otherwise, if you choose to follow a different path, know that I will forever keep you in my memories (for no transformation can take that away) not only as a friend, but as an inspiration and hope."

He put down the letter, and while looking at the familiar yellow curtain surfing on the breeze, he thought about what he had just read. There was too much news and revelations given all at once. As he contemplated on the next course of action, he reproached himself for not attempting to contact the friend earlier, at least as soon as he had stopped dreaming. He thought about the voyage across the sea. Why would he ever abandon his cozy little hut that was so much like his inner self? Who would take care of it? It would quickly become overgrown with weeds and

deteriorate. And what for? For a distant and mysterious land whose dubious existence had been speculated about, and the way back was forbidden by the quantum laws that underlie reality? At the same time he was aware that the present world was hopeless and held nothing for him anymore.

Wandering about the house, he walked into the kitchen. Despite its small size, the kitchen was well equipped and possessed all imaginable utensils for preparing any meal in the world, or for handling the most extravagant recipe. He recalled the days when he would prepare his delicious sandwiches daily. Moved by the memories and shaken by the recent news, he set out to prepare sandwiches once again. He took out bread, meat, tomatoes, lettuce, and anything else he could find. He worked slowly and with precision, expecting never to make a single sandwich again. The sandwiches that emerged beneath his working hands were once again beautiful. When done, he grabbed a sandwich and bit into it. "Delicious," he exclaimed, then became pensive. Signs of change and resolution were painted on his face. He nearly ran into the attic room. From under his bed he pulled out an old and dusty travel bag, then going down to the kitchen, he stuffed the sandwiches he had just made into the bag. Next, he ran down to the cellar and took out some bottles of ale reserved for special moments and put them in the travel bag. There was more shuffling and running, and when all was done, he went outside, put the key into the lock, turned it, for a moment hesitated. Then he left the key in the lock, turned around, and started on his way.

He was on his way for some time, when suddenly a group of comrades blocked his way. "What a delightful surprise to find you, comrade, on your way to the factory!" someone said. Then someone else added, "We worried

ourselves pale that you are not well, and we were just on the way to your hut to check on you." Still another voice added, "Isn't it a bit lonely to live all by yourself in the woods and so far away from the factory tavern?" Another voice continued, "Wouldn't it be better for all of us if your little hut burned? Let's say, from an unfortunate accident?" And the speaker took a match box from his pocket and lit a match in front of his face. Still another voice said, "But lo and behold, you are well and happy, unless our eyes deceive us, or you deceive our eyes. Yet we believe there is no deception at play and all is as it seems." They trumpeted from every side. "How timely is your recovery, for your machine is growing rustier every day, and the productivity is weakening." They pushed him and burrowed their fingers between his ribs and into his spine as they spoke.

"Comrades, make way, allow me to pass — I am in a great hurry," he said. "I have an urgent business to attend to. I will get back to you when I am done. Wait for me in the depressing factory tavern. I will join you there." He tried to reason but at the same time became aware how hopeless his situation was. He feared that the comrades had discovered the boat and had already destroyed it. He tried to push through them, but they only laughed as they watched him fail. "We will accompany you to the factory. We are your true comrades," they said, and grabbed and twisted his arms. "It came to our attention that you have been holding nightly meetings with certain unapproved characters, and yet you cannot make it to the factory? It is highly inconsistent with your account of having been ill." Somehow at that moment he freed his arm, and as the comrades scrambled to grab him again, he swung his fists in the air, hitting someone's face. Seeing his chance, the unicorn dreamer pushed through the comrades and freeing

himself started to sprint toward the sea.

He ran without stopping, until he found himself on the white sanded beach. Not far from where he entered he saw a boat moored under the shadow of a palm tree and covered with broad palm leaves. The boat was small and cozy, with a little cabin on top that reminded him of his hut. He scrutinized the boat briefly and finding no faults, swung the travel bag onboard, kicked off his boots, and shoved the boat out into the sea. He was up to his knees in the water when he saw the comrades spill onto the beach. He pushed harder, and when the water was above his hips, the comrades were running in his direction. He climbed inside the boat and frantically searched for paddles. A few of the comrades were already in the water and wading toward the boat. Holding a paddle, he tried to row. He had barely splashed the paddle twice on the water when powerful hands grabbed him from behind and threw him down onto the deck. As he landed on his back, he experienced a sharp pain coming from somewhere inside his head. Looking toward the land, he saw rising smoke from the approximate location of his hut. He heard laughter all around him as more comrades gathered by the boat or climbed onto it. "Farewell, old friend," he mumbled. "We will not meet in the new world after all."

He had hardly said these words when there was an explosion of terrified screams followed by the sounds of struggle. He raised his head just enough to witness some kind of beast in the sea terrifying the comrades. After beating the sea water around the boat into white foam, the creature leapt up and plunged toward the sky. It was the unicorn. The comrades moaned, then scattered over the beach while some ran into the woods without looking back. After some time the world was calm again, the comrades were

nowhere to be seen, and the boat drifted toward the open sea. While still lying on his back, he watched the unicorn circle above the boat. "The unicorn had to die in dreams in order to be reborn in the world," he murmured before closing his eyes and then soon

drifting into sleep. It was no longer a dreamless sleep, though he did not dream of the unicorn. Instead he dreamt of a new strange land, of an infinite jungle and unexplored mountains, of friendly flying crocodiles, of sandwiches and of quantum laws.

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*Derek Frydel was born in Poland, and moved to the USA in 1991. In 2005 he graduated with the degree in Chemistry from the University of Chicago. After graduation, he worked around the world (Germany, Israel, Brazil, France, China, Chile). He started writing one day a little out of blue, and had very little idea about what he was doing and why. This was some five years ago. The present publication in Oddville is my first non-scientific publication. For this reason it is very special to him.*

# Me and My Heart Try to Bury the Body

Christine Hamm

---

In the cemetery I feel sleepy  
I am tired of kissing

so I climb the fence  
but keep falling down

people kill chickens at the gates  
to appease a different god

than the one you always imagined  
yourself to be –

---

*Christine Hamm has a PhD in American Poetics, and is an editor for Ping\*Pong Free Press. She is currently an MFA poetry student at Columbia University. Her poetry has been published in Orbis, Nat Brut, Painted Bride Quarterly, BODY, Poetry Midwest, Rattle, Dark Sky, and many others. She has been nominated five times for a Pushcart Prize, and she teaches English at Pace. She has three books out; the latest, Echo Park, was published by Blazevox. The New Orleans Review published Christine's chapbook, A is for Afterimage, and nominated her work for a Pushcart in 2014, and in 2017, Ghostbird Press is publishing an excerpt from her ongoing manuscript, Notes on Wolves and Ruin.*



# Green Totem

Squire Broel

# Drowning in Vermont

Rob Hunter

---

When water soaks into the bones,  
of the dead,  
so deep through seems  
in all those ancient coffins,  
in those forgotten weathered  
marble graveyards  
along country roads,

when the water table rises,  
and seeps through cracks of concrete,  
cellars pool sorely  
against their will,

This Spring's drenching rains  
feels like an old argument,  
that comes back in waves  
long after drenched words  
have puddled on the floor.

And looking outside at the rain  
I think of my friend Eddie  
drowning himself  
slowly on whiskey benders

over the weeks and years,  
washed out on Sunday afternoons.

Another front of pounding rain,  
woke us at 4 a.m.  
Slowly, saturated with sleep,  
we closed windows  
against the sideways windblown.  
Ebbing my way back to sleep  
I could still hear the overwhelming  
racket of deluge,  
each drop a stone,  
on the roof so close to our heads,  
ricocheting off the cars in the driveway,  
pelting the ground,

tossing, I dreamt  
of my friend Eddie  
standing soaked in that very downpour  
offering a tumbler  
of rainwater to me  
in the darkness before dawn.

---

*Hunter's collection of poems, September Swim, was published by Spoon River Poetry Press. His poems have Rob appeared in Poet Lore, Sleet, Wild Violet, Straight Forward Poetry, The Blue Line Anthology, and others. In 2013 he was a featured writer at Hartwick College's New American Writers Festival. In 2012 he was an editor of Birchsong, an Anthology of Vermont Poetry. He has also been a recipient of the Bread Loaf Poetry Prize. Since 1991 he has been teaching high school English, the last twenty-one years at Burr and Burton Academy in Manchester, Vermont.*

# In Retrospect

Sandra Kolankiewicz

---

Part of the beginning is thinking it  
has to last forever, some primal pledge  
in the night you felt for that first part of your  
life when your mother wasn't occupied  
unless she was busy. Perhaps at a  
younger age than most, you realized what all  
instinctively know: no matter how much  
there is, perfection is ever enough,  
ground beneath us called 'soil,' not 'dirt,' prey to  
wind and rain, barren is as fallow does.

---

*Sandra Kolankiewicz's poems have been accepted by London Magazine, New World Writing, Into the Void, Crannog, BlazeVox, Gargoyle, Prairie Schooner, Fifth Wednesday, and Per Contra. Turning Inside Out was released by Black Lawrence Press. Finishing Line Press has published The Way You Will Go and Lost in Transition. When I Fell, a novel with 76 color illustrations, is available at Web-e-Books.*

# Magnum Opus

Bob Beach

---

I WAS GROUNDED AGAIN. I forgot what for. My old man was always grounding me for something. Probably for not going to church—that was his hot button lately. Not that he ever went. Maybe he wanted me for a stand-in. Like God wouldn't notice when he took attendance that the David Abbott who showed up was just an eighth-grade kid and not the real thing.

No skin off my nose—the porch had good light and I went out there to draw all the time. I was doing colored pencil sketches of the neighborhood kids from their class pictures. They were really good. They could bring a quarter apiece if I caught their parents in the right mood.

My folks took the early bus to shop downtown and wouldn't be back until the 3:10, so I had most of the day to myself. I had to watch the Squid, my four-year-old brother, but I had him safely locked inside.

Our house sat at the end of Elder Drive where it came to a “T” at Woodrow Street, and I could see down the street in three directions. I caught a motion down the street to my left, and saw Dale Novatny turn the corner and head up Woodrow toward my house. Crap. Dale was about twice as big as me and played tackle on the high school football team.

I saw him look up. Just go on past, please, please...

He turned and lumbered up the steps to the porch. Shit.

“Hey, jerkoff,” he said.

“Hey, asshole.”

“Dicked any dogs, lately?”

“Just your old lady.”

Greeting ritual over, he sat down with a huge thump in the other chair. Like he meant to stay awhile. I really, really hate to have anybody watch me while I draw. Who would have guessed this lunkhead liked art? Sometimes he'd stay like an hour, just watching. Or maybe it just seemed that long.

Wait—there was hope! A bright pink ball of fluff on a black stick had appeared at the other end of Elder, heading this way. If I could stall for another two minutes, I'd be free. I fussed around sharpening pencils and shuffling paper, but Dale was getting impatient. He wanted action.

“Hiiiiii, Daaaaale!” Finally.

Melinda Dawson rolled and swivelled and wiggled around the corner, waving and stretching her greeting into six syllables. She wore a huge fuzzy bright pink angora sweater and matching neck scarf with a tight charcoal skirt. Charcoal was pretty much like black except it

cost four bucks more. Charcoal and pink were the cool colors this year, but for Melinda it was always an angora sweater and matching scarf. Melinda had jugs as big as any other three girls in her class put together, and she didn't mind letting you know it. She was pretty, too, with short curly blonde hair. Everybody knew Melinda. And anybody that didn't, wanted to.

She didn't say hi to me.

Dale was off the chair and across the street quicker than I ever saw him move on the football field. Melinda Dawson I, art 0. They sauntered off toward Mel's Drive-In. Dale had one arm around her waist and seemed to be trying to stick his head down her sweater.

I worked on portraits until about two o'clock, about a buck and a half worth, when I heard Big Bill hollering from across the street.

"Hey, David! Leon's got your brother and says come on down and get him."

My heart stopped beating for a few very long seconds. "Whataya mean? The Squid's here in the house. I've got him locked up tight."

"Naw, I saw him. Leon and some of his buddies got him tied to a chair in the garage. You better go get him."

"No way—he's in the house!" I yelled. But I knew as I went tearing inside I wouldn't find him. I went right to the back door. Which was standing open. With the broomstick lying on the floor where the Squid used it to lift the hook off the screw eye. Shit! Shit! Shit!

Double disaster. One was my old man, who'd be back at 3:10. I looked at my watch—2:08. I was already in plenty hot water, and if he found out the Squid got away and I had to leave the house, he'd find another use for that broom handle.

The second problem was Leon. He'd been chasing me since that trick I played on

him in Mrs. Tatro's class. Not that he needed any special excuse to beat on me. But the minute I set foot in that garage they were going to pound me until I was just a stain on the concrete, then piss on the stain.

I had to see what I was up against. Leon lived in the last house on the other end of Elder. A driveway ran next to the house, with a garage and an alley in back.

In two minutes I was in the alley. Weeds and hollyhocks choked the scrap of ground behind the garage. But there was a small, dirty window.

I could hear Leon and somebody else laughing. I fought my way through the weeds to the window, but it was too high up for me to reach. I looked at my watch. 2:21. A pile of junk was stacked against the other side of the garage, and I pulled an old crate over and knelt on it. Slowly, I pushed my way up through the hollyhocks.

Hollyhocks are totally covered with fuzzy stuff. On the flowers, on the stems, on the leaves. Tiny, itchy stuff that sticks to your sweat and gets up your nose if you breathe and makes you sneeze. And I felt a sneeze coming on. I tried thinking about baseball, but it didn't work. I tried holding my breath. I held it until tears ran down my cheeks. I clamped my mouth shut with one hand and pinched my nose with the other and tried to choke it off. It came out anyway.

But it wasn't a regular sneeze. It came out in a loud, blubbery squeak. I think most of it came out my ears.

"Ssskkgrbbbruggghffttt!"

The talking stopped in the garage.

"Safeties!" yelled one of the kids inside.

"No, man, that wasn't me!"

"A fox smells his own hole first!"

"That was Jughead! That's what his sound like!"

Then a bunch of laughing, and they all ran out into the driveway.

I stood up and peeked in the window while I had the chance. There was the Squid, tied to a chair. He didn't look all that unhappy. He probably liked the attention. The bad news was that Leon, Jughead, Mick and Wesley were there. The worse news was that they were smoking. That meant Leon's folks weren't home. That screwed my plan of walking up to the front door, ringing the doorbell and asking Leon's mom if she would make Leon let the Squid go. I was in deep shit.

I eased off the crate and backed out through the weeds. It was 2:28.

---

I needed a strategy. The power structure of the neighborhood was pretty complicated, so there were always angles to play.

To start with, nearly all the kids belonged to gangs. Not official gangs—they didn't give out shirts or anything. Just guys who kind of hung out together because most of the time there's safety in numbers.

Leon had a gang. They were real assholes and liked to pick on the small fry. I had my own gang—the ones they liked to pick on.

But really, you didn't need a big gang. It didn't matter how many there were if you had one really tough kid. Nobody would challenge him—nobody wanted to have his clock cleaned in front of the whole neighborhood.

So I buttered up to the kids at the top of the food chain—kids like Larry Funk, Jimmy Powder and Harley Benton. The occasional free Coke or a half pack of my old man's Camels went a long way toward buying some insurance for the future. Like now.

But Leon, Jughead, Mick and Wesley were all pretty tough, and there were four of them. I had to come up with a real animal. I had

thirty-nine minutes left to do it.

---

Harley was in the hospital, but I might catch Larry Funk. The oldest of nine kids, he kept in practice by beating up all the others as often as he could. I started off at a run for his house. I banged on the front door. Dot opened the door and pressed her nose against the screen. She was the littlest Funk. She was three.

"Dot, is Larry home?" I asked.

She stared at me, unblinking.

"Dot. Is. Larry. Home?"

She stuck her finger up her nose and pulled something out, which she looked at closely for a long time.

"DOT!" I screamed. "GO GET YOUR MOTHER!"

She backed away and closed the door. Shit on a pancake!

I kept banging on the door. In another 30 seconds, the door opened again. It was Terrance. He was five.

"Terrance, is Larry home?"

"Why?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter. Is he home?"

"Is he in trouble?"

"NO! HE'S NOT IN TROUBLE! IS HE HOME?"

"Gerald's home," he said. "But he can't come out."

"I don't want Gerald. I want Larry! Is he home?"

"Maybe."

"Is your mother home?"

"Yes."

"Terrance, do you want a nickel?"

"OK."

"I'll give you a nickel if you'll go get your mother."

"Okay. Gimme the nickel."

"I'll give it to you when your mother

comes out.”

“I want it now.”

“No. Your mother.”

“I want it now.”

“ALL RIGHT, dammit, here’s your nickel! See?” I held a nickel out.

He opened the screen a crack and snatched the nickel. He jumped back and slammed the door. I looked at my watch. 2:35.

“David?” I jumped a foot. Mrs. Funk was standing behind me with a laundry basket of clothes. She had come around the side of the house from the back yard.

“Hi, Mrs. Funk. Is Larry home?”

“Yeah, he is. He’s in his room. He skipped mass this morning. Father Don called to tell me he missed him. You know, you try to bring a kid up right in the church, send him off every Saturday and Sunday morning—”

“Mrs. Funk?”

“Now Father Don and everybody at church think I’m a bad Catholic just because I can’t get my damn kids to—”

“MRS. FUNK!”

“What? What? Whaddaya want, David?”

“Can I talk to Larry, please?”

“No,” she said, scowling.

“No?”

“No!” She stamped her foot.

“Why not?”

“Because he’s in his room and that’s where he’s Goddam good and well gonna stay until maybe the cops—”

“Bye, Mrs. Funk. Thanks!”

I flew off the porch and headed back home. Larry and Gerald were out. Twenty-eight minutes to doomsday, and no time to try Jimmy Powder—he lived on the other side of Crossgate Park. I cut through Mrs. Hostetler’s side yard and into the alley.

Wait.

I came to a screeching, sliding, gravelly

stop. I turned around and ran back up the alley a couple of houses. To Connor’s house. Mr. Connor’s son, Tommy sat in the backyard. He had his back to me. Maybe he passed out. Nope, he just took a drag on a butt.

Could this work? Tommy was nineteen or twenty. An adult, just about. He’d already been busted a whole bunch of times and even went to jail. His old man walked past my house every night from work with a six-pack of empty beer bottles. I was pretty sure he drank them all on the way. He and Tommy had terrible, noisy fights. A couple of times the cops showed up.

I looked at my watch again. Jesus. 2:48. I had no choice. I turned and sprinted toward home. If I could pull this off, it would cost me. But did I have anything he’d want?

I burst in the front door and raced upstairs to my stash. Twenty-three Camel cigarettes. Four dollars and seventy-six cents. A half pouch of pipe tobacco and one of my old man’s pipes I rescued from the trash. Some good baseball cards. Nah—that was stupid. That seemed like a lot to me, but would it be anything to him? Jeez, this was like trying to guess what a man from Mars wanted. I could only think of one more thing. But, man, I hated to give that up!

I went to the back of my mom’s closet and pulled out an old roll of yellowed wall-paper, frayed around the edges. It was so grungy she’d never use it for anything. But this was the kind of thing she never threw out, either. From the cardboard core I carefully slipped out my prize. I unrolled it, took a look, sighed, and rolled it back up again. One thing I’d learned was that if I really needed to hide something from my parents, to never to put it anywhere in my own room. I’d put it right under their own noses. I learned that from a story by Edgar Allan Poe. He wrote mysteries and some pretty weird stories. He really knew

how to run an angle on people.

It was do or die, now.

I threw all my stuff in a paper bag and ran down the street to the Connors.' The house needed a coat of paint really bad. The front yard was tiny, and there was hardly any grass. I slowed down and walked up the side of the house to the back yard. How was I going to do this? I don't think he even knew my name. Maybe he wouldn't know me at all.

I leaned over the gate at the side of the house and peeked in. He was still sitting there smoking. He had his eyes closed. He wasn't nearly as big as his old man, but he was kind of square looking. I don't mean nerdy square, I mean rugged square. He was wearing jeans and an old T-shirt with a big rip across the front. You could see the hair on his stomach. He had a sock on one foot and an old sneaker on the other. His hair looked like he combed it with an eggbeater. He even needed a shave. He was perfect.

"Tommy?" I squeaked.

He opened his eyes.

"I'm David Abbott. I live down the street."

No answer. He just looked at me. I opened the gate and edged across the back yard to his chair. The yard was overgrown with weeds. I could see a massive pile of beer bottles against the side of the house, spreading out toward the garage.

"I've got a problem I think you can help me with."

He smiled. He took a drag. He closed his eyes.

"Okay, so you know Leon, down the street?" I asked. "The tough kid." At that he snorted.

"Anyway, he's got my brother tied to a chair and he won't let him go. I need you to help me get him loose." At that he actually laughed.

I opened the bag and started laying things out on the table. "I've got cigarettes..."

For the first time he seemed to focus his eyes. He looked at the smokes.

"Gotta be kiddin' me, right?" He held up his butt to me and took a long drag.

Holy shit! What was he smoking? That didn't look like a regular cigarette! It couldn't be. It hadda be! It was DOPE!

Was this cool or what! I still couldn't believe it. Dope, right here in my own backyard, almost. We had a movie in gym every year about smoking dope. They tried to scare you into thinking it ate your brain and sucked out your guts and turned you into a mindless, drooling zombie. From here, that looked about right.

I had to calm down and stick with the program. I had to get him moving. Okay, cigarettes were out.

"I've got almost five bucks..."

At that he started giggling. Like he couldn't stop. He rocked way back in his chair. I thought he might tip over backward, but he stayed balanced way back on two legs. After a minute he stopped giggling and took another drag.

Okay—only one thing left. I reached in the bag and pulled out my last resort. I unrolled it and held it up. It took a few seconds for him to focus again. But when he did, his chair came slamming back down. He leaned over and stuck his head up close. His eyes bugged out. He made a funny kind of grunting sound.

"Jzzuz Chris."

He dropped his joint.

"And there's more where this came from," I said.

It was 2:56.

---

I walked down the middle of the street, turned

in at Leon's house and marched back to the garage. The doors were open and the Squid was still tied to the chair. He was looking a bit more nervous. He probably had to pee.

"Well, well, look what we got here," said Jughead.

"Big brother to the rescue!" said Wesley.

"C'mon in, asshole, you're just in time for the party!" said Mick.

Leon took a step up to me and punched me in the chest, not really hard, but hard enough to show he meant business.

"You know I been looking forward to this, doncha?"

"I'm not here to fight, Leon, I'm just here to get my brother." I tried to sound confident but respectful. I didn't want them pissed and punching me out before I could spring the surprise.

"Just here to get your brother, huh? Well, we can't let him go just yet. We want him to watch the fun."

"I'm serious, Leon, he's not supposed to be out and I have to get him back home before my parents get back." I started to sweat—Tommy was willing, but by now he could be face down in the alley.

All four of them started wailing and moaning. "Ooooh, noooo! Mommy and Daddy are gonna come home! And poor little Davey's not gonna beeeee there! Him or his little brother."

"I'm going to take him, now, Leon. Just leave me alone."

"Just take him, huh? Just take him? Are you jerkin' me off? You and what army, Abbott?"

What a setup line.

He took another step and shoved his face in mine. "Close the doors, boys. It's party time!"

"Hey, Tommy," I called. I prayed. I held my breath. Please, please...

Tommy shambled around the corner. I finally exhaled. He'd made it down the alley and up along the side of the garage without passing out. Now he leaned against the door, eyelids drooping dangerously. The joint still hung out of the corner of his mouth. He'd found his other sneaker. I hoped he wouldn't fall over and spoil the effect.

Leon stood there with his mouth open. The other three melted back into the wall. I walked over to the Squid and untied him. They did a pretty good job. His arms were red where the rope had been. I'd have to think of a good cover story for that.

"Squid," I said. "You are gonna get such a beating when you get home."

He looked up at me. It was the first time today I'd seen real worry on his face. I grabbed him by his shirt collar and marched him down to the sidewalk and up Elder toward home. I took one last look back. Leon and the goon squad hadn't moved a muscle between them. Tommy was still leaning on the door. Maybe he was asleep.

The best part of this was that Leon didn't know how tight Tommy and I were. And if he was part of my gang now, Leon couldn't take the chance of whacking me.

"Man, you are gonna get it when the old man gets home! You sneaked out when you weren't supposed to and on top of that, you made me go looking for you. That's TWO whippings you're gonna get!"

"No, no," he cried. "I don't wanna whipping! Don't tell, don't tell!"

"I probably can't do anything about it. You're just gonna have to face the music. Or face the belt, I should say!"

"NO NO NOT THE BELT PLEASE PLEASE!"

"Well, maybe I can talk him out of it," I said. "Just maybe."

"Please, please, talk him out of it. Please, Davy, I don't wanna whipping!"

"Well, it'll cost you. Give me a quarter and I won't tell. But you can't tell, either, 'cause if you do, it'll be the belt!"

"I won't tell, I won't tell," he said. "Please, please!"

"Okay. It's a deal. Okay? You won't say anything either?"

"No, no, I won't tell. Please, please!"

"Okay," I said. "Then shut up."

I breathed a little easier. It looked like I had my ass covered on that side. I looked at my watch. 3:08. Shit.

"Run! Run!" I hollered. "If the old man sees you out, it'll be the belt, no matter what I say!"

He took off like a scalded cat and disappeared into the house.

I hit the porch and dropped into my chair. Through Mr. Bond's chain link fence I could see the 3:10 bus slowing to a stop in front of the school. I dug into my pencil box looking for a flesh color.

---

I never saw Tommy again. About two months later, his old man stepped in front of a semi on the way home. I guess that'd be the way to go. He was probably so plowed he never knew what hit him. Right after that, Tommy disappeared. The house stayed empty for a long time.

Then one night at dinner, my mom said

a new family moved into the Connors' old house. She wondered what happened to Tommy.

"I heard he was in prison," said my old man. "Yeah, I think he's doing life. You should pay attention blah blah blah never blah blah blah happen to you blah blah blah church blah blah."

It was just more horseshit. Tommy was living in Findlay. After his old man got planted Tommy sobered up and got a decent job at the Whirlpool plant making washing machines. He still likes his weed, though. Every couple months I get a letter from him. Each time, he sends two bucks and a name—usually a sexy movie star. Anyway, it's not a bad way to make a little change on the side. And it's really good practice.

I've gotten a lot better. Now I'm using pastel pencils, which are kind of like dried paint in sticks. The color is real bright and you can blend in shadows easy. Still, my favorite of all time is that first one I gave to Tommy. I guess it was what you'd call a labor of love.

On that one, I started out with a copy of a really sexy naked woman, Olympia, by a French artist called Manet. It was in an art history book I found in the school library.

The crowning glory, of course, was the portrait of Melinda Dawson that I copied from her class photo for the face.

It was a masterpiece. Really.

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*Bob Beach has followed his muse as a graphic designer, film director, advertising copywriter, marketing consultant, web developer, painter and printmaker, university professor, and finally an author of fiction. He has won more than 50 local, regional and national awards. In addition to literary fiction, he has written science fiction, young adult and children's works. When he's not writing, he enjoys bicycle touring, tournament chess and collecting art. He holds BSc and MFA degrees from Bowling Green State University and currently resides in Toledo, Ohio with his wife. His website is [www.bobbeach.com](http://www.bobbeach.com).*



# The Itsy Bitsy Spider

Katherine Ace

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*Katherine Ace has an ongoing fascination with both figurative and still life painting. Her work posits, plays with and subverts realism, is deeply involved in contraries and opposites, and has a feminist orientation. She finds inspiration in art from ancient times to the present. Her influences are many and include: Arthur Dove, William Blake, Greek sculpture, Balthus, Da Vinci, Magritte, E. Vigeo Lebrun, Varo, Carrington, Fantin-Latour, Emily Carr, Asian Thangkas, Dutch flower painters, and too many contemporary artists to list. Ace is represented by the Woodside/Braseth Gallery in Seattle, and the Froelick Gallery in Portland. [www.katherineace.com](http://www.katherineace.com)*

# Ain't That How Mens Do?

Paul Lojeski

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News break: Yoko Ono  
gets song and music credit  
for the hit, Imagine.

48 years after its release,  
without ever being  
acknowledged or paid

a dime. John Lennon said,  
“But those days I was  
a bit more selfish, a bit

more macho and I sort  
of omitted to mention  
her contribution.” Sort

of? Ain't that how mens  
do? All ego, fist and balls.  
Imagine that.

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*Paul Lojeski was born and raised in Lakewood, Ohio. He attended Oberlin College, and his poetry has appeared online and in print. He lives in Port Jefferson, NY.*

# Sally And The Alley

John Hearn

---

THE CORNER, which is what we called the busy intersection where we stood every evening, became my home. When I wasn't in school or at work, I stood a block from the crest of the hill that climbed up from the Taunton River, on a line where the concrete sidewalk met an asphalt alley. Kenny was there most nights and so were George and Wayne and Neil and Jerry, who was what we called back then "retarded." On pleasant summer nights there might be eight or nine of us congregating, talking about things we knew very little about, smoking cigarettes like men we had seen in movies, drinking beer from frappe cups and whiskey from Seven Up bottles and wine from grape soda bottles. When the temperature dropped, the size of our group did too; when it was snowing or raining hard, only Jerry and I would be left, standing in the entryway of the cleaners if the business was closed, Jerry bouncing to generate body heat, the fringes on his suede coat jumping along with him. When it was considered unbearably cold, I was there alone. It was on one of those brutally frigid evenings, when the ocean wind whipped through Mount Hope Bay, along the Taunton, and straight up Walnut Street with its wall of wet air, and I was the only one on the corner – and prob-

ably one of the few people in the city out at all - when a young woman passed me and said hello. I had seen her before going to and coming from the variety store or the bakery, both at the far end of the block, always passing on the other side of the street, where, on her return trip, I would watch, intently, as she entered a house on the top of the hill, only a hundred yards from where I stood. That house, a triple-decker, was the first in what was called the "highlands," the part of the city where the rich people lived. On that particular night, a few minutes after saying hello, she exited the bakery and headed up the hill, but this time on the corner side – my side – of the street.

"It is so cold tonight, isn't it?" she asked with a smile.

"Wicked cold," I said as a gust of ocean-filled wind ripped through the summer jacket I always wore, an Anderson-Little knockoff of London Fog's popular Barracuda.

She reached into the white paper bag and held up a cupcake. "Want one?"

I accepted it and she removed another and we ate. I stepped back into the entryway of the dry cleaner's, away from the wind gusts, and invited her in. Sally was a year older than me and attended the Catholic high school

some twenty miles way. She had short dark hair, a tan complexion, and straight, very white teeth. Her father was an engineer. And she was beautiful. After a few minutes, she was on her way, but when the terrible weather continued and left me alone the next night, she returned, this time with a small blueberry pie and two forks. We ate sitting on the cold ground at the end of the entryway, leaning against the business' door.

She came only on the nights I was alone. If she walked by when my friends were with me, she kept to the other side of the street, but would look my way, smile and wave. If she was with me and we noticed one of the guys walking up the hill to take his place on the corner, she would leave. In time she confided that her initial visit, when she brought the cupcakes, was prompted by pity. She explained that she would see me from her bedroom window, the only window in her house from which the corner was clearly visible, and feel sorry for me, and on that specific very cold night she decided to keep me company.

On her fourth and virtually every subsequent visit, Sally brought a bottle of wine, which she took from what she described as her parents' considerable stock. I didn't want the reused, unwashed soda bottles the guys and I kept at the back end of the alley, tucked between a shed housing trash cans and a fence, to touch her lips, so she and I kept the wine in its brown paper bag and drank from that. We would stand in the entryway or the alleyway, a few feet back from the sidewalk, huddled together, bouncing a bit, like Jerry, occasionally brushing against each other, always cursing the frigid wind.

Over the course of several months I learned what I thought must have been everything about her. She wouldn't just tell me her age, but she'd specify the exact moment

she was born, the weather conditions on the days preceding her birth, the route her father took when driving his pregnant wife to the hospital, the comments made by the doctor to the new mother, the relatives who visited the next day and those who did not, the joy her parents experienced when learning that their new baby, the one who would be their last, their "accident," was their first daughter. She wouldn't simply mention that she had four much older brothers, but she would, as opportunity allowed, provide a detailed biography of each...and it still wasn't enough. I wanted to hear more. I yearned for detail so rich that I'd be able to see her life and feel it as she did. I wanted to protect her, and not just in the present and future, but in the past as well. I wished I had been in the schoolyard on the day of the fight, when she jumped on the back of the boy who was pummeling her brother; I would have punched him with the ferocity I had seen my father display. When I learned that she, at age ten, had ridden her bicycle five miles from home, despite her older brother's warnings, and got a flat, and had to push the bike all the way back, alone, as dusk descended, I wanted to comfort her and apologize for letting that happen.

But more than the talk I valued so highly, it was the pattern of our interaction, I now think, that bonded us so closely. Brushing up against her thick down parka, grazing her gloved hand with mine as we passed the bottle, touching jean-covered knees as we sat on the cold ground eating blueberry pie, feeling her warm breath on my exposed neck as she leaned toward me to make herself heard over the wind's throaty whistle – all of this electrified my existence, wiring it to hers. Our synchronized speech deepened my feeling of unity: I soon knew when a pause in her narrative was my cue to respond and not an opportunity to

collect her thoughts; she understood when a break in my speech, when it concerned my parents, was only a moment for me to collect myself, to shift my focus to a safer topic, before my voice cracked.

Our movement was synchronized too. We stood in the alleyway, at the spot where it met the sidewalk. Before one of us gulped from the bottle of wine, we shrank two steps back into the shadows, to better conceal ourselves from passing motorists. The other would step out onto the sidewalk, look down the hill, spin, look up the hill checking for an approaching police car or pedestrian. Once the wine was swallowed and the bottle again hung by the drinker's side, the other would maneuver back into the alleyway, accepting the beverage while doing so, passing the partner again, who was stepping out onto the walk, spinning and surveying. It was a waltz. It was a dance, the reeling and twirling, one that transformed us into something greater than two distinct individuals. I enjoyed listening to Sally's stories and was grateful knowing she entrusted me with her secrets, but it was this process, when our bodies and speech were regularly in synch, with our focus on the other, bathed in an emotional effervescence, that made me feel as though I were needed, and as though I belonged. The alley had become a church: we blessed ourselves before entering, genuflected before taking our places, drank wine when approaching something sacred; we rose and fell, rose and fell, stepped and slid, until we became one. Had Sally spoken only Latin during our evenings together, it would have hardly made a difference.

I had always felt insignificant when I was on the corner alone, as cars whizzed by taking family and friends to the shared events that constituted their lives. But when Sally was there, and we were standing shoulder to shoulder, the opposite happened. In a city of a hundred thousand, there were only two of us, where an alley met the sidewalk, but, still, I felt a part of something bigger and more important than myself. I felt centered, as though I were surrounded by...some force I welcomed but couldn't name.

The hard winter was turning, bringing the lost boys back out to the streets. The season's last gasp, a three day cold spell, sent me to the corner hopeful that I'd see her again, resolved to express my love for the first time, longing for time together in the promising climate of spring. I was hunched in the doorway, cupping my hands around a dangling cigarette, clicking the lever on the Bic lighter, when I noticed a note on the ground, held still with a rock.

*Dear Jack, My parents found out I've been spending time with a 'Corner Boy' and have sent me to live with my Aunt Mary up on Hazeltine Street until graduation. Then I go straight to South Bend to get ready for college. I am sorry. And I love you.*

Sally

I put the folded, lined notebook page in my pocket along with the cold rock. I glanced up at her darkened window as I zipped up the Barracuda.

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*John Hearn lives in Jamestown, New York. A sampling of his publications is at [johnhearn.org](http://johnhearn.org).*

# Cotton Candy

Ben P.

---

NAMBY PAMBY cotton candy. Pink and curly, poofy crystalline crust. A flake flecked off, wafered down onto her hand, clung to the creamy nook of her thumb like hair in the tub.

“You spilled a bit,” I said.

She looked at me.

“Right there.”

Somewhere a bell shrilly cooed, a bird of paradise in terrific neon with goldfish bags and teddy bears in its talons. Distant whoops of winning crashed all around like waves in a lagoon.

“What?” she said. She looked at me with her eyes. Somewhere, chartreuse drowned in burned amber.

“There.”

The gasping wight of smells suddenly found me. Crosswinds of corn dogs, corn fritters, corn rock candy, corn crème brûlées, corn formaldehyde collided in my senses. Aromas of apple pies, waffle fries, deep-fried piglet thighs, French-fried truffled waffle pies, Belgian-waffled truffle fries, waffle-fried Belgian Brown Betty pies, and deep-Frenched hens assaulted my nose. Three clowns hurled past, juggling caramel apples and butter-stick batons.

Slowly she followed the point of my finger with her eyes, like a tightrope were strung from my fingertip to her hand, which still held

the rosy puffs. When she found the stray shaving, she was quiet for a moment.

A stubbly, overalled farmer trudged by, leading two prize hogs in deep-fried T-shirts through the crowd. One shirt said, “Niña” and the other, “Pinta.” The hogs whinnied and barfed as their master steered them through the drooling throng.

“See?”

A meager gray cloud drifted by the sun, muting its light briefly. When it passed, everything became hot and yellow. I felt a circlet of sweat all around my head where the hair petered out. I felt the littlest hairs stand up, pickled. I felt circles and patches boiling.

“Well, looky there,” she replied.

I felt something sprout on the knuckles of my toes. I clenched my feet, puckered the soles of my shoes. Griddled my callouses and sizzled the threads of my socks. I stared into the creases of her eyebrows (and lost my mind). My nose gushed ferociously, but if I'm lucky she didn't notice.

She was looking at me. I looked at her. I looked at the saccharine fluff perched sweetly on her thumb. I looked at her. She lifted her hand to my mouth delicately, tendered her wrist to my lips. She didn't stop looking at me. The gates of my incisors rattled and clanked

apart. Cautiously, my tongue tiptoed out, reconnoitered left and right beyond the posts of my canines, glided out across the field to her sugary gift, and pressed it flat against her skin, wetly, creamy, already dissolving the treat

like a fly in a spider's web before lurching back, candy bubbling and half-digested on top, into its domain. The gates rattled shut.

She blinked, and turned her head toward the Port-a-Potties.

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*Ben was born and raised in Anchorage, Alaska. He currently travels around the country housesitting and writing.*

# Still Lingerin' Through the Veil of Bourbon

Mark Pennington

---

She was long gone.  
Perfume still ached,  
Sheets wore her sweat  
In the gleaming sunlight.  
High heels lay down  
Like obedient lovers,  
Fragrant, tamed plastic,  
A sleazy hell fish.

The prostitute mirror  
Shot like fervent drunks.  
Smoke colours sheen  
A polluted shade of viridian.  
Thoughts of church,  
Christ and prophetic union.  
Positioned in time  
Like blueprints in  
A slow iodine tank.

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*Mark Pennington's previous publications are under the name J. Rose in magazines such as Dear Sir, The Journal UK, Broken Wine, Clockwise Cat and others. Rose has also published a first book titled Lithium Clockwork.*

# The Grim Shopper

Michael A. Arnzen

---

That scary skeleton get-up  
isn't fooling a soul, Grimmy.  
Despite that swinging  
scythe between your legs,  
I can tell you are all woman  
in those hidden curves that shimmy  
as you walk and there is a lovely gleam  
in the sultry shadows of your hood.  
Your robe is such a dusty funeral dress  
and those sandals are yesterday's news;  
you clearly need someone like me  
to seriously make you over.

So let's go shopping, Ms. Death,  
and we'll build up your wardrobe  
so you can dress the part in leather  
or lace once in a while.  
No need to fool us with fear.  
Tart it up—I assure you that

more souls will come to you,  
eager to bare their necks to your blade.  
And let's sharpen that long fingernail  
while we're at it, shall we?  
Go glossy red with the blood.

Come on: let me be your guide  
to those shopping mall dummies  
who have no life anyway.  
You think fashion serves no purpose  
in the world of the dead?  
Every confined body begs to differ.  
They die in their Sunday best  
like flesh needs another flesh  
of fabric to preserve it.  
But not mine... I'll gladly hold  
your outfit while you try things on,  
unless you want to help me pick  
out something to die for.

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*Michael Arnzen teaches full-time in the MFA in Writing Popular Fiction program at Seton Hill University. His trophy case includes four Bram Stoker Awards from the Horror Writers Association, an International Horror Guild Award, a Tabloid Witch Award, and several layers of dust of questionable origin. His latest work includes the novella, Murrman: A Tale of Van Helsing, and appearances in anthologies like The Year's Best Hardcore Horror, Zombies: More Recent Dead, and The Beauty of Death II. You can learn more about what he's up to at [gorelets.com](http://gorelets.com).*

# Reigning Cats

Adam Matson

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WHEN HELEN POLASKI'S over-stuffed mailbox started raining catalogs down onto the sidewalk, neighbors suspected something was wrong. Mrs. Polaski was known as a shut-in, also referred to throughout the neighborhood as a "recluse," "cat lady," and "lunatic." Curious neighbors peered in through her curtained windows. After knocking on her front door for almost half an hour, they decided to call the police, reporting that 43 Hammond Court smelled worse than usual.

The Broward County Sheriff's Department dispatched a patrol car to Mrs. Polaski's address, and two deputies, Cameron Smith, a rookie, and Howard Crutchfield, a veteran, gingerly approached the front door. Knocking, shouting, and ringing the doorbell produced no response, though the deputies thought they heard an unusual high-pitched screeching sound within, like a distant flock of seagulls at the beach.

The Sheriff's Department summoned a locksmith, an elderly man who had performed his share of "breaches," and thus arrived wearing a protective face mask.

The whining, pulsing sound inside the house grew louder as the locksmith fiddled with the lock, prompting Deputy Smith's hand to hover over the holster of his gun.

They opened the door and for a moment there was a strange, euphoric peace on Hammond Court. Then the smell hit. Deputy Crutchfield would later describe it as: "like being hit in the face with a bucket of raw sewage." Deputy Smith leaned over the porch railing and vomited. The locksmith sprinted for his truck.

A biblical flood of cats poured from the house. Starved and mewling, the animals sprinted from 43 Hammond in a frenzy. They leapt upon Deputy Crutchfield and clawed his face. They ran crazed circles in the yard. Three darted headlong into the street and were squashed by the mail truck. Deputy Smith grabbed for his sidearm, and was only prevented from emptying his clip by the more experienced Crutchfield, who screamed: "Not in the neighborhood!"

Terrified, outnumbered, wounded, the deputies retreated to their patrol car. Crutchfield dabbed briefly at the bleeding scratches on his hands and face before picking up the radio and calling for backup. Smith, who had once been attacked by a raccoon and thus suffered from mild but highly-specific PTSD, grabbed the patrol car's Mossberg tactical shotgun and began pumping buckshot into the chamber.

Helen Polaski was found dead in her bathtub, her body having congealed—over a number of weeks, according to the county medical examiner—into something indescribable. The horrific and traumatizing story of the clean-up of 43 Hammond Court will mercifully be spared from this chronicle, except to say that city health inspectors found literally mountains of cat feces, in various stages of putrefaction. The house was condemned and razed.

It was impossible to estimate how many cats were living at 43 Hammond Court at the time of Mrs. Polaski's demise. Relatives had mostly lost track of Helen Polaski, many refusing to visit her on account of the terrifying squalor of her home. Her eldest daughter Simone, however, provided Animal Control with a few vague and disheartening details. Mrs. Polaski loved cats, and adopted them from a variety of sources. Mrs. Polaski was retired, lived on a fixed income, and did not have the money to spay, neuter, or vaccinate her animals. Mrs. Polaski was disabled, with obesity and gout, and never left her home, and also never allowed the cats to leave the home. These were the facts. Among many assumptions: the cats, unencumbered by reproductive prohibitions, mated and reproduced with reckless abandon.

Deputy Smith estimated that close to a thousand cats emerged from the house when he and Deputy Crutchfield opened the front door, but his conviction was most likely influenced by fear and a desire to impress others, especially women at Dinky's Bar. The real number of cats was probably closer to a hundred.

Among the horrors discovered inside the house were the rotting corpses of dozens of cats. All of the bodies had been cannibalized. Days—bleeding into weeks—of hunger had forced the strong to devour to weak; the

adults to consume the more vulnerable young. This after all of the shelves in the pantry, and all of the cupboards in the kitchen, and somehow even the refrigerator, had been ransacked for food.

Twenty-three live cats remained inside the house when Animal Control entered. Instinct, starvation, lunacy, or some combination thereof had conditioned these hangers-on to fear the outside world, and when Animal Control came in to retrieve them, many of the squatters did not leave without a fight. Eighteen were eventually captured using nets, snares, and a low-watt stun gun. Three decided to face the great unknown and ran outside. Two retreated to the basement, where Animal Control feared to tread, and their fate, much like the doomed settlers of Roanoke Island, became lost to history. Of the eighteen cats removed from the house by Animal Control, all were brought to the Animal Control Shelter. Six died within a few days from malnutrition, distemper, and other unknown causes. The rest were eventually euthanized.

The eighty or so cats that chose to flee 43 Hammond for the uncertainties of the wild met with a variety of colorful fates. Roughly half became homeless vagabonds, roaming the streets and alleys of the town, many making their way to the city, where they joined the countless legions of urban strays. Others took to the woods. Fifteen were dispatched by coyotes during their first week of freedom. A dozen or so died of starvation within a few days of their release, unfamiliar as they were with wilderness survival. Ten were bitten by other animals and contracted rabies, which they later spread exponentially to other animals, like ripples in a pond, exacerbating the general rabies epidemic. Several of the rabid Polaski cats went on to assault neighborhood

housecats, killing or infecting a number of beloved pets.

About two dozen Polaski Cats formed small, informal gangs which terrorized the neighborhood surrounding Hammond Court. Scores of dead birds, mice, voles, and squirrels littered the streets. The leader of this roaming feline menace was a fat Russian Blue named Spike, who had always been a trouble-maker at the Polaski home, and now, delivered from Helen's scolding and the checks and balances of the natural pecking order, was free to indulge his sociopathic and cannibalistic appetites whenever and however he pleased. Spike went on to murder more than thirty housecats and several small dogs, his crimes duly reported by many upset pet-owners, until one day Animal Control finally cornered the warlord in the branches of a maple tree on Sunset Lane. The sun set on Spike himself, who was shot by a young AC officer, Devon Trundell, who had signed up for the job hoping he would one day get to use a gun.

Three of Helen Polaski's more beloved females, Lucy, Mittens, and Tallulah Belle, had always maintained a special bond at the Polaski home. They were sisters. Actually, they were sisters several times over, due to the wanton inbreeding of the Polaski Cats. And together they carried their union out into the streets. Surviving by killing grackles and robins, they made their way more than twenty miles to the heart of the inner city, where the bonds of family and friendship were tested by the harsh realities of urban life. Lucy was a natural flirt, and never having been spayed by Helen Polaski, she quickly became a favorite mating partner for dozens of stray males. Over the remaining eight years of her life she gave birth to more than forty kittens, many of which died in the streets, but over half of which went on to produce litters of their own, some

being impregnated by the very males who had fathered them. Mittens remained loyal to Lucy for a period of time, even joining her in motherhood sporadically, before she developed a taste for the Chinese food that was routinely thrown out behind Wong's Happy Garden restaurant. Mittens' taste for Kung Pow chicken blossomed into a full-blown addiction, and she swelled in size to thirty-eighty pounds. Her obesity rendered her unable to defend herself against other vicious cats who vied for sustenance behind Wong's, and Mittens was eventually murdered by her own kind, orphaning her dozens of feral offspring. Tallulah Belle quickly discovered she did not particularly like urban life. There were too many noises and scary moving objects, including people, who often kicked at her when she ran crazed down the crowded sidewalks. She was run over by a CVS truck backing up to the receiving dock of the store at the corner of Cherry Avenue and 39th Street.

Buster, a resourceful Somali, had always been a bit of a loner, even within the overcrowded confines of 43 Hammond Court. As a young cat he clawed a hole in the screen of an upstairs window and spent his days sitting on the roof in the sun, watching birds and dreaming of killing and eating them. But regular feeding brought him a sense of comfort and he never ran away from Helen Polaski, which the old woman respected. She knew he climbed up onto the roof, but she could not prevent him from doing so due to her gout. Once freed, Buster quietly kept to himself, living on the fringes of the neighborhood, killing birds and mice for food, occasionally venturing into the yards of other families out of sheer curiosity. He never attacked other cats, but would often sit in the corner of a grassy yard, sunning himself. Home-owners tried to call to him, but he would always slink away, and in time every-

one eventually accepted him as the community cat. Bowls of milk and food were sometimes left on back porches for Buster, and he often indulged. He froze to death one winter during a heavy snowstorm. Nobody realized he was gone until summer came and the bowls of food remained untouched.

Over time Animal Control rounded up another couple dozen Polaski Cats. Such cats were often recognized by their lack of identification, lack of evidence of anti-reproductive surgeries, and frequent crazed demeanors. Most were eventually confined to cages in the local shelter, where they remained for a week or two, awaiting adoption, but when adoption failed to occur, they were euthanized.

A few were either luckier or more resourceful than those who met the AC officer's net. Pickles managed to live for over a year underneath the Thompsons' porch on Becker Circle, before he was bitten by another Polaski Cat that had contracted rabies from a fox. Pickles' corpse was discovered by six-year-old Kayla Thompson, who told her mommy there was a weird smell under the porch.

Dahlia showed up one morning in the driveway of Martin and Susan Holder, who decided to keep her. Dahlia had a pleasant demeanor, and immediately ingratiated herself with the Holders' other two cats. But the Holders were unaware of Dahlia's delicate condition. When she gave birth to a litter of squealing kittens some weeks later, the Holders found themselves with more responsibilities, and more puddles of cat piss, than they could handle, and they turned Dahlia and her offspring over to the SPCA. All were ultimately euthanized.

Rufus and his son, Rufus 2, were among the more playful of Helen Polaski's cats, and had both earned a special place in her heart and hierarchy, being allowed to sleep on her

bed at night with a dozen or so other selected favorites. The Rufuses were thus accustomed to people, and once rounded up by Animal Control, they proved "too friendly to be put down," as one officer recollected. Rufus the Younger was given to a local woman who advertised cats for adoption on the local access cable channel, through which he was soon adopted by a trio of grad students at a nearby university. Rufus the Elder was adopted by one of the Animal Control officers at the shelter, where he joined another house full of rescue cats. Officer Sheila Pletz owned more than 30 rescued cats, and when she died five years later from a combination of adult-onset diabetes and congestive heart failure, the fates of her pets became anyone's guess. Rufus the Younger lived happily with his grad students for two years, before each of the students earned a degree, graduated, and moved to a different city for work. Each came up with a different excuse why he couldn't keep Rufus, who had been renamed Chester. Chester was literally spared a call to the SPCA at the last moment by one of the students' ex-girlfriends, who used Chester's abandonment as ammunition against her boyfriend and adopted Chester herself, mostly out of spite.

Many of the female Polaski Cats ultimately were rounded up, died of starvation, were murdered by dogs or coyotes, or were endlessly impregnated by male strays until they died of natural causes. One Animal Control officer, giving a presentation before the City Council's animal affairs subcommittee, estimated that the Polaski Cats, left free to roam and reproduce for many ensuing years, created over two thousand offspring. These thousands of cats were thus likely responsible for a) the killings of over ten thousand birds, b) the shrinking population of the area's various indigenous species, and c) the spread of

uncountable strains of rabies, distemper, and other animal illnesses.

But one female managed to avoid the pitfalls of the untamed world. Named Honey for her shimmering, caramel-colored coat, Honey was one of Helen Polaski's more introspective and thoughtful pets. Honey never quarreled for attention or fought over food. She took what was given and retreated gratefully to her perch on the headboard of Helen's bed, where she watched quietly and faithfully over her owner for all six years of her life until Helen's demise. When Animal Control burst into 43 Hammond, Honey was found sitting on the bathroom sink watching over Helen's corpse. She flicked her tail and mewed gently at the officers as if to say: "Here is my master. Please take care of her." Then she slipped out the back door before the nets and snares could capture her. She roamed the neighborhood for several days, ate mice, and inspected each

house along Hammond Court until she found one where a divorced woman, Julie Beale, lived alone with a gentle golden retriever named The Fonz. Honey had never seen a dog before, but she was instinctively interested and approached the dog one afternoon when he was lying out back in the sun. Julie Beale discovered the cat rubbing up against the docile dog, and she decided to take Honey inside the house and feed her. Honey proved just as quietly loyal to Julie as she had been to Helen, resting on a bookshelf beside Julie's bed, flicking her tail and mewling happily whenever she was served a meal. Julie renamed Honey Amber, took her to the vet for shots, bought her a collar, and ordered a fleece-lined cat bed off Amazon with Amber's name embroidered on it. Amber lived to be seventeen years old. Her favorite activities in later life included staring out the window, and lying outside in the sun with The Fonz.

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*Adam Matson's fiction has appeared internationally in over twenty magazines including Day One, Straylight, Soundings East, The Bryant Literary Review, The Berkeley Fiction Review, Morpheus Tales, Infernal Ink Magazine, Crack the Spine, and The Indiana Voice Journal. Matson has previously been published in England (Morpheus Tales). If Oddville was an actual town, Matson would probably live there, in his parents' basement.*

# Where Not to Read Naked Lunch

Matt Mason

---

In the Delhi train station,  
you will find the shabby copy  
of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and think,  
"Maybe I'll read this;"  
four days later, you will find yourself  
throwing up in the shared bathroom of a  
youth hostel where  
you have the room with no windows  
and no TV; in delirium,  
you will pull it out of your backpack,  
perhaps you will mutter, "Guess I have time  
now."

You will find that this is a terrible idea.

You can hardly  
walk, certainly not  
in a straight  
line,  
your thoughts  
already have  
holes  
burned through them,  
the book  
is not written  
for you;  
it

is there  
for people  
standing on  
level  
floors,  
not you  
tottering in open-  
eye nightmares  
come by  
naturally,  
already able  
to see the  
monsters  
and lizards  
who shake  
inside your walls.  
You

will pay more rupees,  
move to a room with windows, BBC, and  
your own toilet;  
when you depart,  
you will place the book  
on a bench

and walk  
away.

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*Matt Mason has a Pushcart Prize and two Nebraska Book Awards; was a Finalist for the position of Nebraska State Poet; and organizes and runs poetry programming for the State Department, working in Nepal, Romania, Botswana and Belarus. He has over 200 publications in magazines and anthologies, including Ted Kooser's American Life in Poetry and on Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac. His most recent book, The Baby That Ate Cincinnati, was released in 2013. Matt lives in Omaha with his wife, the poet Sarah McKinstry-Brown, and daughters Sophia and Lucia.*



# Yes, You

Katherine Ace

# Lou, Louie, Louise

Cody Spotanski

---

IT WAS HER IDEA to put the costume on that morning. To keep warm, she said. But I knew it was to flirt and a reason to stand and move around the trailer in front of me naked, hiding herself in it just for the sport of revealing herself again. She bounced uphill through the morning grass, bare-foot, bare-assed to her van parked on the dirt road to grab it. (We'd stopped wearing clothes almost immediately after she arrived.) She had bought it in some obscure costume shop outside of Phoenix. The onesie was an exact replica of the set that the boy in *A Christmas Story* wears on the landing of the stairwell: ashamed and queer. Louise liked wearing it to music festivals and in pictures in the desert.

"Have you ever been fucked in it?" I asked her.

"Hmmm," her head fell to the left in faked reminiscence and she puckered her lips. The foot-long pink ears flopped against the side of her head. She peered out the grimy plastic window of my pop-up camper like something caught her eye in the soft river running outside the door. Rabbits are naturally cagey animals, I remember thinking. "Not yet," she said finally in that academic tone of voice, depriving her words of not a single note or consonant. It is a timbre she rarely dropped, especially when high.

Standing, the crotch of the costume sagged halfway down her thighs. When on her back, feet flat on the mattress, her knees pulled that oversized crotch into a taut pink wall of faux rabbit hide with a butt flap square in the middle. Reaching in, there was a pocket of warm air between the crotch of the costume and the crotch of Louise. My forearm was too thick to slide easily in and out so there was a tug-and-pull effect on the fabric, the way your shoulders get snagged crawling through the opening of a tent. The groin was alive and throbbing and I was elbow deep, barely touching her.

I hadn't smoked weed for a while up to that point. I knew it was around, but the talkers of the small-town thought weed was a drug, and drugs put you in a class with the local band of meth cooks and opioid addicts that steal firewood from the church. I already had trouble finding carpentry work without rumors whirling about me. That strange boy and his dog down by the river, I haard he smokes marijuana too! So, when Louise and I got high that morning, I had the giggles and hid my grinning face behind her sweating pink knee.

"I'm not going be able to come with you laughing like that," she said. But, can you blame me? It looked like my whole hand was disap-

pearing into the ass of a giant moaning rabbit. The garish color was pushing and pulling with the motion of my forearm and it wanted to come open.

“Breathe, breathe,” I sort of whispered through my teeth. The fleecy material was drum-tight like the wall of a tepee while her legs shuddered and fought to separate. The hair on my arm was black and wet from the heat.

“Breathe.”

“What?” she said with her eyes closed, concentrating on whatever it is they concentrate on. We think it’s us. It probably isn’t.

“Breath, breath. Ready?” I said. “Push. Push. Push. Breathe! Here it comes!”

“What?”

I dropped my head onto the mattress before she lifted her bunny ears from the pillow to look down toward me. I removed my grip with an audible slurp and lifted two glistening fingers spread and bent in the shape of a lazy peace sign, doing their best bunny rabbit impression.

“It’s a boy!” I said. “Look, Louise. He’s got your ears.” I bounced my hand where she could see it between her knees, turning it left and right, making the puppet look around the room. After a long silent moment, giggling and drooling into the bare mattress, I popped my head up; fingers still raised, still glistening, looking for a reaction. Louie panted and his powerful tail thudded happily on the linoleum.

“Here, lover,” she said. She had found a cashew somewhere in the blankets because on one of the nights food was involved. With the nut dangling sweetly in her fingertips, she reached down toward her newborn puppet bunny mystery who was dry and purple and shivering now, and nourished it on that first crisp morning of life. He nibbled the cashew and gave thanks, nuzzling his nose into her

strong warm fingers.

That was on the sixth morning. No... yes...let’s get it straight:

...On the first night, she ran me over in her van. She ran over every detail of me with her eyes and fingers after she gave me the sit-down tour. This is how she cooks, this is what she reads, here are some half-finished paintings.

...On the second night, she fixed pancakes with cacao nibs and honey. My camping spatula dripped from her fingers as it hovered and poked. I followed the arc up her tattooed wrist with honey.

...On the third night, she lectured the wolves. They paid five-dollars-a-head to sit around her fire and she spoke about graphic art and the meatpacking industry and she held their paws and tugged their ears. With a cigarette gripped in my big toothy smile, I’d applaud her and roll my head back and moan softly, happily, distantly.

...On the fourth night, she beat me in Scrabble and the wind ripped through the duct taped walls of the camper and lifted our elementary words into a phantasmagorical whirl above the table, above the orange candle glow.

...And, and,

...On the fifth night, cashews were involved.

...On the sixth night, we went into town. It was on the sixth night that we went into town.

...

“Load up, Louie.” I said and tapped inside the truck bed. He leaped and curled himself into a denim jacket that was spread out on a spare tire. Louise said that she’d never seen a dog resemble its owner more so than Louie resembled me.

The drive to The Store was less than a

mile but conversation always bubbled between Louise and me, even when there wasn't time enough for it.

They call it a general store but it generally ain't got shit you're looking for. The owner mostly keeps things that tourists have requested over the years. They come to see the harshness of that territory because it is beautiful. But, it seems they never come back the next year to buy the things they say they need. These things, once on the shelf, get mixed in with things that the owner found in his garage, or in the sheds of other locals. Things of all uses and variety get tossed in with one another without reason. Thing next to thing. One shelf holds a stack of shotgun shells, only dove-load, only 20-gauge, next to eight different types of salsa, (no chips) next to pitching washers, next to baby bottles, only two, next to a stack of car batteries that needed to be dusted, next to a pyramid of Velveeta cheese bumper enough to feed the Russian Army, next to half a dozen toothbrushes, new but unpackaged standing in a plastic cup like a bouquet of childish color.

I liked picking through the corner which hid the trout eggs in small soiled mason jars, leads still in the packaging, plastic bobbers, and wooden lures from the sixties. All of this antique tackle sat in some old man's basement soaking in dry time until he died and his daughter donated boxes of it to The Store. When it comes to the fishing gear, if you want to know the price, you have to grab the owner by the arm and watch his eyes while he imagines a number. He might take the lure out of your hand and fiddle with it...feed you some bullshit about its rarity and vintage. This is just to give himself time to think up a price that falls between "fuck you" and "I got fucked."

The fishing tackle was packaged in faded blue and red. Some packaging had pictures of

boys in straw hats holding cane polls, barefoot with wet blue jean bottoms rolled above the ankle. Even in the sixties, nostalgia and the idea of "man outdoors" were simply tied. It's cute to wonder about the past sometimes. You wonder how fads could bloom and die in a pastime like sport fishing, but they inevitably do, I guess. Compare the old tackle at The Store to the gear you buy today, and you see how it's been improved on. Fishermen are just as susceptible to the promise of progress as any other group, no matter how pure they claim their pursuit is, and no matter that the fish haven't changed.

The Store also had a small bar, and Lou was an old regular with a long cartoonish face that would have been ugly if it were out from under a cowboy hat. Eyebrows drooped so hard down the sides of his forehead that they were almost vertical, and his red porous nose looked the size of a pear. He had lost \$100 in a drunken footrace around lunchtime earlier that day. A fifty-yard dash. Lou made it thirty-five, and had been trying to win back his money by rolling dice in the kitchen in a shallow cardboard box against two cowboys and a plumber. Louise and I teethed on our beer bottles and talked while we leaned against the sink, watching them gamble from a distance.

"Nine's the number, boys. Nine's the number," Lou said.

Six.

"Nope. Gotta come up. Nine's the number. Here comes nine...four. No good. Still gotta come up. Come on niner. Niner niner niner. Niner vagine-r."

"Ten against him," a cowboy drops a bill curved longways down the center, the way they get when they've been handled and traded all night, held in sweaty hands with a thumb pressing too tight. The plumber throws in his counter, a silent reply, without looking up

from the dice dancing in Lou's calloused paw. In the box, the bills looked like little landlocked canoes after a flood, facing all different directions.

"Come on niner. Niner vagine-r. Come on niner..." he hollered with his foggy eyes locked on an empty corner of the box. They roll. Seven.

"Fuck."

"Chingado," the plumber said. The cowboy picked up the bills and stacked them efficiently in his palm.

Louise said she was used to getting strange looks from folks...her hair the way it was, and tattoos. Her head was shaved on the sides and a mess of blonde dreadlocks fell down her back. A warrior of art, I think is the look she was going for. White people with dreadlocks are funny in their fascination with themselves. They're daring and cultured, at least until daring and cultured is no longer in vogue. Or until they tire of that particular brand of daring and cultured and start wearing kimonos. She's likely to catch a splinter hopping on and off all of those ethnic bandwagons. Her face was so homely, so refreshingly sweet, though. I couldn't deny her that. The white hairs on her shins looked like a child's when the light caught them crossways, and I loved it. The hairs reminded me of my kid sister back home before she was taught that her humanness was a burden.

We talked until Louise had to piss and I went out to smoke. I started rolling cigarettes years before in Galway, where tobacco taxes are high and the poets can only afford the roll-your-own. I fell in love with one of them once. A poet. She was ten years older than me and her short black hair was wet with Irish rain when she taught me to roll them loosely so the leaf could breathe when I breathed. With

her, I felt brave and satisfied using rare words in conversation. Though that isn't bravery, and if stories matter to you, you never feel wholly proud of the words you choose to fill them with.

"You trying to clip me for a two-dollar beer, Lou?" I heard the bartender say when I walked back inside. She snatched across the bar top for the bottle in front of him. He must have reached over the counter when she wasn't looking to steal it, but was too naturally dumb to hide it and too naturally drunk to swipe it up before she lunged. He just sat there on the stool open-mouthed with his shoulders hunched and his arms dangling between his knees on the sixth night of Louise's visit.

Now that I think, her stay went something like this:

...On the first night, we realized one another's spontaneity. Spontaneity is held in high regard among painters and travelers and trick-shot pool players. We congratulated one another on one another's commitment to spontaneity.

...On the second night, I told her that since I liked her so much, she was allowed to lie to me as long as she could convince me of the details. She told me she didn't need my permission to do that.

...On the third night, we talked about our parents. I could tell she was lying, then.

...On the fourth night, we swam naked in the river. I held her and the water wrapped around our feet like ever-changing socks. The minnows kissed the moonlight bouncing off of our white asses.

...On the fifth night, cashews were involved.

...On the sixth night, we went into town.

...

In rural Texas, the men have harsh names that fling out of your mouth like darts and stick to the wall. Names like Zane, Slade, Blain, Victor, Rex, and they go to places like “town” and “Victor’s daddy’s house.” Lou had a soft name, though, like a one-note whistle.

In one of her lectures, Louise suggested I kept a journal of my travels because I don’t want to forget things, small things especially, and that our memories shift like the plates of the crust of the world, some hiding under others, reordering their original shape if that shape goes unstudied, allowing change without notice until their silent wrestling has redesigned the landscape of our own personal history, of the story we tell. Because:

...On the first night, we realized one another’s spontaneity. Spontaneity is held in high regard among painters and travelers and trick-shot pool players. We congratulated one another on one another’s commitment to spontaneity.

...On the second night, we traded sips of homemade prickly pear vodka brewed by a widow who lived on Enchanted Rock.

...On the third night, naked, she backed down a coyote with my old hatchet. Louie hid behind her legs and I sat by the fire with a cigarette in my big toothy smile, applauding her, rolling my head back and moaning softly, happily, distantly.

...On the fourth night, she beat me in Scrabble and the wind ripped through the duct tape walls of the camper and lifted our elementary words into a phantasmagorical whirl above the table, above the orange candle glow.

...On the fifth night, cashews were involved.

...On the sixth night, we went into town.

...

“This yo’ pick-‘em-up truck?” the old drunk asked me in front of The Store somewhere pushing midnight. Louise was watching me smoke.

“Yes, sir.”

“This’n yo’ mutt?” he asked. Louie raised an eyebrow at the insult, even though he was a mongrel.

“Yes, sir,” I said again.

“I had a dog like him once. Red, with stout haunches like that. Loved him more than air,” he said.

“He’s a good one,” I said half at him, half at the stars.

“Y’knowwuh? I’ll give you seventy dolla’ for that mutt.”

“He’s not for sale, Lou. Why don’t you get on?” I said.

“No. No. Eighty-five. Eighty-five because he look so much like my dead friend. See, I need a new friend, friend.”

Soggy black tobacco leaves spilled from of the butt end of my cigarette. It looked like a ponytail between my fingers. I kissed it to my mouth, then drew it away.

“You funny, Lou?” I asked.

“How you mean?” His chin rose and his milky alcoholic eyes slid over to meet mine for the first time, really.

“Do you know any jokes? I mean, can you tell ‘em in a way that makes folks laugh?”

“Guessin’ if it was the right crowd of folks, I could.”

“Well, Louie likes a joke. You make him laugh, I’ll hand him over to you.” The old drunk came back at me with some confusion and I reassured him. I’ve seen Louie laugh, but only if something real good happens. I asked Louise to demonstrate.

The Vanilla Amazon had been leaning with her back against the truck bed. She spun and faced the dog. "Come here, lover. I'll tell you a joke," she said. Louie unwound himself from the spare tire and walked to the edge of the bed. Louise grabbed his jowls in her palms, studying all sides of his head like it was a cube. She stepped back.

"A young man got an apartment in the city, and he was lonely," she didn't speak too loudly or too clearly. "So, to curb his loneliness he bought a parrot. This young man was a baseball fanatic, a Houston Astros fan actually," she flashed a knowing smile up at the small crowd of Texans that had begun gathering around my pick-up. "And he would record all of the day games on his VCR while he was at work. There was a problem though. When the guy got home every night, all he wanted to do was drink a beer and watch the game, but the parrot would always ruin it by squawking out the final score before he could watch the recording. The parrot would say 'Bwrock! Astros lose 4-1. Bwrock! 'stros win it in extras! Bwrock! Houston reliever blows it in the ninth!' and so on, every night." She acted out the scene.

She was so animated and the "Bwrock!s" in her story were so loud that the first one made a woman in a cowboy hat jump back from the truck. It got a giggle from one of the seven or eight smokers standing in the gravel parking lot. Louie panted and looked around but his glance quickly landed back on Louise. "So the guy grabs the parrot out of the cage and points and says, 'If you ruin one more game for me, Louie, I'm gonna throw you in the freezer!' See the parrot's name was Louie, too. Isn't that something, lover? And the parrot went, 'Bwrock! In the freezer! In the freezer! Bwrock! In the freezer!' So, the next day, the guy comes home from work and as soon as he steps foot in his apartment, Louie the Parrot

squawks, 'Bwrock! Houston beats St. Louis 3-1! Bwrock!'" Louie the Dog wagged his red tail.

"The guy runs over to the bird cage, grabs the parrot, runs to the kitchen and throws it in the freezer. He grabs a beer and sits on the couch to watch the spoiled recording. After about a half hour he gets up and opens the freezer door. 'Are you ready to come out now? Will you behave yourself?' he said. Now, the parrot was in bad shape. It was wrapping itself in its wings and shivering uncontrollably." Louise tucked her fists up under her armpits and shivered her wings. I thought I saw goose bumps on her arms. She said, "The parrot looked up at the man with a little white icicle dangling from its beak and said, 'Bwrock! What did the turkey do!?"

Louie rolled to his back and was kicking into the air. Upside down, his cheek flaps fell upward and it showed his smiling teeth. He twisted and rolled his head back and forth for a little while, panting and having a time. He popped back to his feet and shook the dust off from nose to tail. The drunk crowd cheered for him and his beautiful assistant, Louise.

Lou walked to the center, held the bed of the truck to steady himself and looked around at the small crowd, waiting for them to quiet down. "Ok, mutt, listen up. I got one," he said. . . "Why don't the Mexicans never have themselves a team when the Olympics come to town? Well, because all of 'em that can run, and jump and swim made it to Texas by now." One cowboy somewhere in the crowd gave a laugh, but for the most part the group was silent. So was Louie.

I reached a hand out and put it on Lou's shoulder. "I forgot to mention, partner. I found Louie as a puppy on the streets of Chihuahua City," I said. "He might have been a little offended by that one."

The gang of people in the parking lot were silent. “No, see that’s bullshit. It’s just a party trick. You taught the dog to roll over on turkey. It’s just a command. That joke’s tired anyway. Plus, what’s a dog know about a fucking VCR?”

“Louise?” I said.

“He’s right. It is an old one,” pursing her lips sarcastically.

“See. Bullshit. Let’s have one of these old timers tell a groaner and see what he does.” He looked around the truck. “Here, Glenn, you tell this dog a joke, see if you can get it to laugh,” he said.

“No, no, no,” I said. “The deal was you get one joke. If Louie ain’t a fan, there’s nothing to be done. Your old racist ass just ain’t very likable, Lou.”

“See, I didn’t know the mutt was a spic. That’s...How am I supposed to know that?” he said. The plumber giggled from the back of the crowd. “This Louie reminds me so much of my old mutt. You gotta let me have him. I’m gonna shoot my goddamn self, son. I have nothing in this whole goddamn world. I got no land and a broken pick-’em-up.” His voice tripped and slowed down. “My dog ran off a month after my old lady died. She was everything. Ask any of these old timers how I was when she was around. They’ll tell you I was a good man, a pure man, a fucking saint when she was alive. I loved her through anything and that dog couldn’t stand being around my crying ass when the Lord took her, so he left me too.” He dropped to his knees, and cried with his knuckles in the gravel. His words were bubbling slowly out of the sides of his mouth, now. “She couldn’t cook. She wasn’t pretty like Bowersox here, but I loved her through anything.”

He looked straight up and set his wet eyes on the same starry sky that every crying man in Texas was using that night to remember things

about their past. “Every evening she made this soup so rotten that I had to fight back from gagging. But I loved her so bad. Before we fell asleep at night she’d roll over and give me the lovingest kiss, but had that soup dried up in her mustache and the juice from the kiss would wetten up the stink and I’d get to gagging all over again. I miss her so much I wake up in the middle of the night dreaming with that taste on my lips.”

Louise, me, and the whole gang of stand-bys stood by in shock and confusion over that broken man. The story of Lou’s life hung in the dusty air like a long tragic fart. Then through the silence, a snort rumbled from the back of the truck. The dog was trying to hold back his laugh. Young Louie couldn’t help himself. He dropped to his back rolling in the bed of the truck panting and wheezing so violently it seemed like his body was inflating and deflating entirely. He was busting up harder than I’d ever seen. He was kicking so hard he put marks in the metal truck bed. He was convulsing wildly and for a long time, too. He finally stiffened, and a wail came out of him that was almost human, the most divine and clear sound of joy and relief, and when it was over the dog lied still with his eyes closed and mouth cracked open in a grin. We all stepped closer to the truck. Lou was still on his knees turning gravel into concrete.

Louie lied warm and heavy and I knew what had happened. I took the jacket from the spare tire and wrapped him in it as snug and gentle as I could. His joints bent meekly when I moved them into place. A lone tear rolled down the warrior’s cheek.

I gave her the keys and she drove while I held the dog across my lap. And now, thinking back, I remember the sour smell of that hot American river at midnight as I laid young Louie down on its banks. But that’s all that

comes back. The sour smell. Not the nakedness of the stars, not Louise's hand on my back, not the disgust I felt for the old drunk, or the grace I must have wished upon him either.

Louise is long gone now, living for effect, selling her art. And I left that river too, but

not before getting to know a place. And not before losing a friend. I still don't write things down because, like a joke, it's impossible to tell your story the same way twice: its details, its phrasing, its build, its turn. You have to start the thing fresh to tell it right. Only its consequence comes back to us in recollection.

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*Cody Spotanski is a traveler and writer. After graduating from the University of Missouri—St. Louis with a degree in English and certificate in creative writing he began living on the road. He can be found currently parked in his SUV somewhere on the streets of the United States of America. More of his poetry and travel writing can be found at his website: [SpotBrothersSportsmansJournal.com](http://SpotBrothersSportsmansJournal.com).*

# Power Broke

Martin Pedersen

---

The day the power of love overrules the love  
of power, the world will know peace.

Mahatma Gandhi

Crucifix-position Drug-Lord between  
two hookers  
a bottle of spirits  
stink of cigar  
sweating it will end.

So Hot Shot, you think you have power  
you have influence, money, obligations  
you don't have power  
you have chains.

If you really had power you'd never mention it  
never fight to keep it  
never even have to use it.

I will do anything you ask, she says  
is not power  
that's the double lie  
nobody survives.

Can you raise the dead, erase minds,  
turn yourself invisible?  
circus tricks.

Power everyone wants  
do you want to know a secret?  
give up – you can't get power  
you're not a superhero.

Freedom is power,  
nothing is freedom.

To become powerless by definition  
say 'yes' automatically  
never complain  
no itinerary, no smart clock  
let the river drive your canoe  
into a beautiful ocean of suffering.

# Brooklyn to Lesbos

Sugar Tobey

---

Sooner or later  
the striving will end  
your words float  
in magnificent fragments

meanwhile I'll croak  
like an admiring frog  
and continue to love  
from the farthest distance

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*Born in Coney Island, Brooklyn, Sugar Tobey received a degree from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan and now lives in NYC above a pizza parlor.*

# Night Letter

Lawrence Syldan

---

Science says nothing about what truly matters to people. Grand matrices of space squat low over this downtown apartment. Philosophers are lost, many of them laughing at the center of things. Please come to me. I can never explain... It is this dragon identity; and the funny creases in empty shoes. At times it is atremble—something out of the question. IT is a gift, you pronounced. Well, life is no gift, as no one gives being to no one. All of us share this peculiar neck of solitude. I hear only the clangor of an old ring of keys and the long ovation of traffic and some prime minister making peace noises. Yet these are small comfort now that the very walls begin to ascend to the next story. But where is the author? And please tell who is the audience for which this dream performs?

# Oregon

Kathryn Trattner

---

Oregon was beautiful; deserted windswept beaches and green lit mossy forests, long winding roads, and a full moon in a purple sky.

A tipping point from you to me and back, rushing water from your island to mine, our separate places tied together with a red thread.

Discover me in a different state.

Come, I said, and yes. Yes because those were the only words I spoke, like tidal wave tsunamis crashing, breaking, wearing away at the stone in my center until softness remained. I melted under your fingers, soft to touch and taste, your eyes going dark when you looked at me.

Me. Singular. Us. Plural.

The space between our thighs when you sat, your leg warm against mine even without touching, my hand itching to reach across an unbridgeable space. I loved you all along. Finding love when least expected, wondering when it came over me like fog and the knowing hit me like a meteor.

Yes, I said, and come. Because those three words were as good as I love you.

# The Penny Arcade of Edgar Allan Poe

(for Lindsey Buckingham)

Michael Arzen

---

tickets spit out  
like tongues from the coin slide  
on the ski ball  
after my baby skull sails off the jump  
and hits the bull's-eye  
splattering ocular jelly

I gently slide lips over  
the sick old tube, face high  
on the strangely ornate  
Lung Capacity Tester  
machine and squeeze the ribs  
of the body in my arms  
crushing it to ring the bell

I have no idea what those bony  
nuggets are that cascade against  
pins and plastic  
behind the glass  
of the coffin-sized  
pinball machine  
but the knocking around  
beneath the chip-painted field  
causes moans and yipes  
to emanate from the wood  
as I madly flipper

somewhere above  
in the dusty rafters  
my cackling glee is echoed  
by a deeper voice  
as my feet are pulled backwards  
by the ankles  
but I do not hit the floor  
like the rug had been tugged  
[line break]

instead I am up-ended  
craning up in rusty metal jaws  
pennies spilling from my pockets  
as I am swung around  
the room playfully painful  
as a mouse in a cat's jaws  
and I dizzily pray  
my feet will slip free  
from its gnashing teeth  
like they always do  
in these situations

as I rise high above  
the mad arcade  
spotting all the brown  
and white bones  
littered below