

# ***GOD'S CRUEL JOKE 3***

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## Flushed

by Jimmy Lis

Tim gawks in disbelief before the assembled cadre: John Boston, the overpaid Vice President of the eponymous Boston Tax Party, Inc., whose only notable contribution was adding the slogan, “Representation for your taxation” (a slam dunk if there ever was one); Bob, the “Procurement Specialist,” who struggles to match the buttons of his shirt with the corresponding holes, yet is tasked with the crucial ordering of supplies; and Janice, the head of HR, who is shadowed by a new intern training in the art of baseless accusations and crushing company morale.

“The nerve to accuse me of stealing! What happened, *Bob*? Didn’t prepare for that taco truck on ‘Fiesta De Impuestos’? Congratulations on hitting quarterly goals everyone! Don’t get beans on the side, Bob forgot to reorder TP!”

“I saw you walk to your car with five rolls,” Bob says.

“I had a spill in my car, okay?” Tim says.

“So, you took several rolls of the least absorbent material on Earth to mop it up and didn’t bring any back . . . in the middle of a global toilet paper shortage?” John says, leaning back in his espresso-brown leather chair.

“What about all the extra work I’ve taken home while the company was posting record profits? I don’t recall any meetings about that,” Tim says.

“Tim, this paper simply states that you will not take home any office supplies without authorization, and that you

will not park in any restricted or handicap spaces in the future. We just need your signature,” Janice says coolly.

As he stares at the paper on John’s desk, Tim recalls the last group meeting to which he was summoned—all staff gathered in the lobby for the announcement of Laura’s promotion to partner. She had been there only two years, though the news surprised no one except Tim.

“No,” he says, and then again, “No,” more firmly, so all can hear. Each repetition stronger than the last. And each time he speaks the mantra, “No,” he visits a past image of his thirteen years at the company: showing Laura how to use the lustrous new cappuccino machine her first week; the all-nighter when he lifted his head off the desk in the morning, wiped the drool off the plastic cover of the Gibbs report, and handed it in right on deadline; the day he boxed up his possessions from the enclosed office and moved into “the bullpen,” their contrived euphemism for the hive of cubicles.

“No,” he says one last time. “I won’t sign this.”

Tim springs up from his folding plastic chair, more fitting for the garage seating at a graduation party than for John’s lush office. “I quit!”

He inches backwards, arms fully extended in front of him, double birds flying. Sweeping his upright middle fingers in all directions—like the wandering spotlights of grand openings—he shines his message on each individual. And with a choppy moonwalk, he exits through the open door.

Continuing in reverse, Tim’s eyes are fixed on the managerial lynch mob through the doorframe when he collides with something unseen on his right. There is a shrill chirp, and a damp heat spreads suddenly across his chest.

Tim’s backside has knocked down Laura. She lies sprawled on the floor, her “World’s Okayest Boss” mug on

the ground sideways, oozing the last few drops of coffee that isn't already soaking into the heart of Tim's white Oxford. The paper contents of a manila file folder have cascaded onto the floor, just out of Laura's noodle-arm reach. Her eyes and mouth are scrunched in pain.

Of course, it has to be Laura—Laura, who approves Tim's expenses without question; Laura, who offered to split the last bagel with him on Friday, when every other vulture in the building would have taken it for himself without hesitation; Laura, who would never accuse him of stealing toilet paper.

"Laura, I'm so sorry," Tim says with the same sincerity as two weeks ago when he snagged the last cruller as she arrived in the kitchen. "I'll get help."

Loping down the hall to the lobby, Tim finds Kerry on the phone at the reception desk, sitting tall and smiling. Her porcelain doll eyes look right through him. He pauses, only for a second or two. Then he turns, exhales a deep breath into the otherwise empty lobby and walks into the guest bathroom on the opposite end.

Tim quickly unspools a nest of toilet paper from the metal niche in the wall and presses it against his shirt at the sternum. The coffee stain, now cold against his skin, radiates from the center of his chest like the tendrils of a carnivorous ivy reaching out to consume him whole. And the wad of toilet paper in hand seeps up the darkness.

"Least absorbent, my ass," he mutters, as he pulls the two rolls of toilet paper from the wall and stacks up three more from the cupboard below the sink. This is where they keep the good stuff. One-ply in the employee bathrooms, two-ply in the lobby for visitors, and, Tim imagines, an unfathomable many ply for John's private bathroom stock.

Tim walks out of the bathroom and through the lobby to the parking lot, arms full of toilet paper rolls.

For a moment, he thinks to turn around. To check on Laura or collect some of his things.

But those notions are forgotten; Tim sees an empty parking space where his car should be, and, at the far end of the lot, his gray Mercury Sable winks at him from the back of a tow truck pulling away.

He stands frozen in the parking spot. One of the toilet paper rolls heaped in his arms falls to the ground and tumbles forward, unspooling itself, striking a white line through the image of a blue wheelchair painted under Tim's feet. The toilet paper continues its helpless path across the blacktop as two security guards approach Tim from behind.



## **Jimmy Lis**

A sugar salesman on sabbatical, Jimmy lives with his loving family in Grand Rapids, MI, where he spends his days reading, writing, or subjecting his children to his latest board game prototype. His work can be found in publications such as Bright Flash Literary Review, Spank the Carp, Apocalypse Confidential, The Avalon Literary Review, A Thin Slice of Anxiety, and The Other Journal.

# In the Wake of Børgman

by Arthur Seefahrt

## I.

Some believed he was still active. That he was still making films in far flung places, desolate places. Vast. Open. All scree and wind and sky. Hints leaked in from the internet, deep web stuff, various twitter accounts from areas with travel bans, Central Asia, sightings littered throughout the - istans, all commingled with general whisper-down-the-lane confusions.

This was not a deterrent. I needed to find him. Not as in I was given a task so I could advance my career, or because I was paid some great sum of money. It was a primal need. It was purpose that drove me. *I must find him, I will find Børgman.* No one understood this.

When my parents were on their way to visit last September, they disintegrated. A tractor trailer jack-knifed and lit a three-quarter mile stretch of interstate ablaze. A spark-lit crude slick. Mile marker 439, downhill. It was 4 pm. The belch of black smoke blotted out the sun, and the blaze continued unbridled until nearly midnight. I saw all of this on the local news. Helicopter shots mostly, as the flames burned too hot for on-scene reporters, and the American news audience would have found the up-close carnage unsavory. There was nothing left of them. Ashes.

So I came into a bit of money. And the university gave me time to grieve. A generous stretch of time in fact. I set up a projector, started smoking in my apartment, and watched Børgman films. They are perfect. Black and white, desolate as the landscapes in which they are set. And no special effects. That's the masterful part of it. No fancy editing, no digital post-production. Real film. Real meaning.

They say he still shoots everything on Super8, Kodak TXR464. Where in world's high reaches he develops his reels is anyone's guess. But after watching his entire filmography, stopping scenes and staring at stills for days at a time, moving frame by frame through the perfect grey scale, the world laid bare, every film, every frame; the Swedish actress Karen Østergaard's face, in tears, in joy, in anguish; the rooms — barns, offices, farmhouses, boats run aground, all empty of extraneous objects, all filled with perfect light and shadow; and the fire, candle flames, oil lamps, boats and houses and churches all consumed — light so white, so clean and intense it seemed like the wall onto which I had projected these images would curl apart and lavish me with its cleansing flame; after that, it happened. In the apartment the ashes had piled up around me. I had been given my mission. My purpose. Find Børgman.

## II.

I started constructing an itinerary, pinning stills of landscape shots to the wall over the massive world map I had printed at the campus printshop. I think the woman at the desk, Irene, who had been printing the mild alterations in my supplemental course readers for years, must have just

assumed the map was meant for some legitimate purpose on campus. I had shaved that day, an attempt to conceal the mad impulse which had taken hold of my sleepless chain-smoking self.

Back on my wall. A slow collage. A rainbow gradient of pushpins to color code productions. A long bleed of red yarn following Børgman's known path. The weird geometry of his journey. The tracing and retracing of Børgman's vectors.

I had gotten very into yogurt at this time. Plain, Greek style, whole fat. No bits of fruit. I was stockpiling energy, storing fat, consuming cities of teeming creatures existing in a culture of perfect milkness. Also you don't have to chew yogurt. I could duck-swallow pints at a time without wasting energy and attention chewing, all the while tracking the cypher-logic across my Børgman map.

Eventually I began eating butter and toast. Copious amounts of butter; cold, melted, in that liminal state of tallow yellow gloss. I put on weight, puffing steadily at about sixty cigarettes a day. I began to pack.

### III.

Some devotees theorized that Børgman was dead. By all rights he ought to have been. There is only one extant photo of the man. 1978, Beckett-esque but with better skin. Turtlenecked in all black with a three-day beard and a glower through his thick black square-framed glasses. A glower that says *How dare you?* as if he had been caught unaware until just before the aperture blinked open and closed on the light

of his image. It is a predator's stare, like a snow leopard's reverse apotheosis. A legend made flesh. By this point he must have been in his mid-eighties.

There also existed a theory that the photo is just a grumpy middle-aged Swedish man. Purportedly a neighbor of one of the clandestine cadre of Swedish filmmakers who worked secretly together constructing the myth of Børgman.

But I had studied the work, had learned these theories and I disregarded them as bunk. The vision was too consistent, the voice of capture too unique to be the result of even the carefulest of collaborations. And I needed to believe in Børgman. I had a holy purpose. He must exist so that I could find him, and that was enough.

#### IV.

What happened next felt fated. A new short was leaked onto the internet. An unknown Swedish actress, her blonde hair a shock of white blast furnace flame in the perfect over-exposure of the night scene.

The piece was a four minute and thirty-nine second conversation. A pondering argument about God. She speaks to a bearded man, both are clad in black tunics which link their bodies with the star sparse night. He asserts love is God, and to truly love is the most divine act of all. She laughs, saying love is a manifestation of desire and conditioning; a potent epigenetic memory coded into the bones of us. Love is no more than a spider's desire to weave its web.

Then out of the night behind them, a barn, or a livery, which had been cloaked in their same blackness, rushes into

flame. The window belching smoke blacker than the night. The seams between the boards lit like so many pinstripes on a dark suit. A single horse, dragging the bar it was haltered to flaming behind it, bursts through the door, and screaming its awful horse scream of pure moon-eyed terror bolts out of frame trailing smoke from the singed remnants of its mane and tail.

During this episode an object is illuminated on the table at which the speakers sit — a white porcelain tea-pot. No cups. No saucers.

Within hours the cult of Børgman had watched and rewatched, basking in the revelry of this new rite. The forums were abuzz with theory. Theory of meaning, intent, composition, allusion. The only thing I was concerned with was the tea-pot. It was peculiar, definitely home craft, ethnic, rare. Deep in the comments section of a forum on the movement of light in Børgman films called *Exposuresé*, I found the information I sought. The tea-pot was home craft, a design specific to a small, largely unheard of tribal region of central Asia: Radzhakastan.

I packed some, I believed suitable clothes, a briefcase bulging with cigarettes, and set off for the airport at once.

## V.

There are not now, nor have there ever been direct flights to Radzhakastan. In fact, the region lacks an airport entirely. The journey I had begun was to be a lengthy and protean one.

During my layover in Frankfurt I managed to find some information about Radzhakstan's history. No longer an autonomous region, Radzhakstan was absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1973. A high altitude pamir wedged between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it had remained largely unnoticed until large deposits of rare heavy elements had been discovered there by a Soviet geological survey. The caliphate of the autonomous region then colluded with the Soviets to press the nomadic peoples into service to mine these veins, triggering a mass exodus apparently involving some manner of miraculous events. The tribesmen of the nomadic horse people who remained have been in continuous conflict with a rotating cast of pillage-and-plunder governments since. The area is said to be remote, beautiful (where it remains unspoilt by the mining operations), and brutally violent; ideal Børgman material.

From Germany I flew into Turkey and made my way by bus to the eastern border. I traveled with bearded men, vetted hired drivers, in inexpensive inconspicuous cars through Armenia and Azerbaijan. I made sure all of them would let me smoke in the car. None of them had heard of Børgman.

I chartered a bunk on a frigate crossing the Caspian Sea and landed in Turkmenistan. I spoke little, used cash for nearly everything, and was flabbergasted at the strange beauty of Turkmenistan. I hired another driver and headed to the far eastern border. We drove on roads which led us out of lengthy unadulterated wasteland into glittering cities of white stone and steel and glass, uncannily litter-free; past skyscrapers from an unimaginable unwestern future, past colossal two-hundred-foot-tall monuments of horses and other strange eastern symbols unknown to me, things only the bold empires of antiquity dared, past all these things

Børgman himself would have seen, then back into the wastes, into the mountains.

Finally, I made arrangements to meet representatives of the nomadic horse people of Radzhakstan, who were to smuggle me across their war-torn border and into the hidden recesses of their mountain land. I was close to something. I could feel it. I was approaching Børgman.

## VI.

My Turkmen driver left me at the edge of the wide gravel path which the road had devolved into. We shared a cigarette. He drove off as night began to creep over the mountains in the east. I was to wait.

At first I had been relieved to get out of the successive cars after each leg of my journey, like stepping dewy and newborn-in-sweat onto the streets of foreign cities where my countrymen and myself were less than welcome visitors was a kind of relief. The cars made me squirm, I don't know why. But now standing alone, on the far side of the world, in an oversized parka, chainsmoking a briefcase full of cigarettes in the windlashed mountain dark, I felt unnerved.

How was I to know these men when they came? Would I even see them, or would they cut my throat and disappointedly search through my bag stuffed with smokes and dirty socks? And most important of all, where was Børgman?

“Børgman!” I erupted into the night, giving two extra syllables to the ‘ørg’.



They appeared from behind rocks and scrub trees all about. Turbaned men in long tunics, faces covered with cloth, all bandoliered with ammunition and carrying the requisite Kalashnikovs. My eyes bulged. My heart sounded like approaching horses. I lit another cigarette in case it was to be my last.

It was not. Neither was this sound my heart, but the actual approach of horses, enough for each man, six, and a seventh for myself. They motioned for me to mount, then instructed me with language I could not decipher. When they grew tired of my feeble staring and lack of compliance, I was hooded, and we rode on into the night, mine now a vision of total blackness.

## VII.

We rode on for hours. Then slept. We rose and ate, then rode on again, I clutching the bridle of my horse, and clutching my sphincter in utter fear. We did not speak. This pattern continued. I longed for another smoke.

After a timeless eternity under the hood, certainly more than a day, it could have been a week, a month, the odd hours at which we traveled impossible to gauge in darkness, after this one of my guides relieved me of my blind. We rode on.

We had achieved great altitude. The horses we rode were strange, short-legged large-headed mounts with a wildness in their eyes. This was a far cry from glittering Turkmenistan. Everything was formed by the constant wind into bizarre shapes of clutching. The trees grew low, all of their collective branches stretching leeward.

We passed small encampments littered here and there by rough quick built wooden structures. Every so often one of these sheds, or barns, would be completely scorched. The char left of fire a crawling virus of blackness on the boards. As we pushed further into the mountains some of these structures we rode by would be smoldering still, sending up a wispy toxic smoke swiftly devoured by the wind. Old women and children wept outside a few of these. Beyond one I could see three men digging many holes.

On the third day after the removal of my hood I saw it. There was the barn from the last leaked Børgman clip. The roof completely gone, the pinstripe board gaps eaten open by flame. It hulked there in nearly the same frame as Børgman's from the approaching path we rode. As we rode past my head swam with questions. Through the gape of the door I could see the skeletal remains of horses strewn within.

We had ridden another night and half the day when we came around a rocky outcropping that cut across the narrow trail and suddenly, after a few steep meters of scree, we were birthed onto the high pamir. It is an untouched grassland, bordered by the world's steepest mountains, and completely remote from the rest of the cultures which drink from the many great rivers whose genesis is this hidden vale. The clouds rushed overhead faster than jets. The sky seemed so blue as to be nearly white and yellow and black all at once. It was as though the veil of earth's atmosphere was so thin I could see day stars. I felt if we climbed a few more feet up the steep surrounding precipices we'd be able to leap into the heavens.

There were a few strange yurts blending into the line of scrub trees in a gulch about a thousand yards away. Their

faded flags catching tattering pushes of wind. We stopped and dismounted. I looked bewildered at my guides.

“Børgman?” I asked.

They muttered among themselves in their musical and yet rugged tongue. Then the lead rider stepped forward and removed the cloth from his face. I recognized him immediately. It was the man from the last clip. The one who sat and spoke with the blonde woman.

“I have difficult English,” he said.

I stared.

“In the camp, the house of your God’s voice,” he said and motioned toward the large central yurt. He nodded and turned back to the other riders. I nervously lit another smoke. I was running low on cigarettes at this point and I wondered how I’d ever get home. I approached the large central yurt, pinched out my short and pocketed its charred remainder to save for the return journey.

Here I was at last. Only a felt tent flap separated me from being face to face with Børgman. I hesitated holding my breath before the hanging curtain of a door. The riders had apparently grown impatient. Their leader walked swiftly up behind me and in one deft motion clasped my arm and ducked my head like a well-trained policeman. I found myself on my knees inside the yurt before I could utter anything more than an astonished gasp.

“Do not delay to go in the wake of Børgman,” he commanded, then exited and fastened the flap behind him. I could see his boots as the wind lifted the tattered flap bottom. It seemed to me he had no intention of moving.

My eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness within the yurt. My heart was still pounding with surprise like the night when the horses arrived to bare me here. Looking around in the

dim I could see no one else. In fact, there was no furniture other than rings of carpets which radiated out from a pedestal at the center. On the pedestal sat the tea-pot.

The sight of it filled me with dread. Plain as it was, no pattern, no design flourish, it seemed to have something uncanny about its geometry; as though something about it were impossible. It sat with menace in this tent of bronze shadow. The hole at the spout, its weirdly voracious aspect, seemed darker than black.

Beyond it in the dim inner light of the yurt was a figure; robed, hooded, bent over, nearly crumpled in half.

“I will tell you a story.”

A voice reached me faintly. A close voice, strangely familiar yet I could not place it. I looked about the darkened yurt and was shaken at the utter emptiness of the place and the nearness of the voice. Quaking with fear I could not rise from my knees.

“Hello?,” I managed, “Børgman?”

“Let’s not talk about the filmmakers,” the voice replied, this time it arose from nowhere, from the gap between the loaves of my brain. It seemed a bit exasperated, this speaking pile of rags.

“I’m weary,” it added.

Then it came to me, the way you can recall the lyrics of a song not heard since childhood. This was the voice of Manfred van Slydow, the principal actor Børgman cast opposite Karen Østergaard. An unmistakable voice. The Swedish accent. The air of *världsledighet*. I recalled having seen him as a kid, interviewed by Dick Cavett. He had seemed so wise, so tired.

All I could think was *What is he doing here?*

“What are you doing here?” I mumbled.

The ragged hood shifted from within. From the blackness of its folds an enormous brown spider had extended its front two sets of legs. Eyes bejeweling its hairy cephalothorax glinted in the darkness.

“What’s happening to me?” I whispered aloud, addled by the scene I had stumbled upon inside this fraying tent.

I stared at the rags in horror. Van Slydow didn’t seem at all bothered by the hideously large spider slowly making its way down into his lap. He proceeded to tell me a story. I only half listened. I was transfixed by the spider’s slow creep. It moved measuredly, like an animal control worker approaching a terror-stricken stray.

The story Van Slydow told was about a well. Across the top a spiderweb. In it a spider. Something about mayflies hatching from the dark water.

While he told this, the spider sat on the carpet before him and shifting its weight, bent the articulated knees of its right four legs, cocking it into an approximation of an expectant stare.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I blurted when Van Slydow had finished his fable, my eyes still fixed on the mammoth arachnid.

The spider slowly crept across the carpet toward the teapot, eyeing me with an aura of already knowing the answer.

“What?” I said weakly, tears brimming hot in my eyes.

I burst into deep sobs. I pounded the carpet with my fists in a tearblind rage.

“Where is he? Where is Børgman? Wh—”

The pile of rags seemed to crumple further. The spider had made its slow hairy climb atop the tea-pot, its kiwi-sized carapace held just over the lid.

Twiddling its spinnerets impatiently, and rocking its abdomen in a slow alien rhythm, the huge brown spider crept toward the spout of the tea-pot.

“Is Børg—“

The pile of rags I had believed was Manfred van Slydow collapsed entirely, unraveling as it did so. No figure sat wrapped within. The hollow form collapsed.

From atop the tea-pot the spider eyed me with understanding and pity. The spout hole gaped. I caught through my tears the spider’s hind four articulated claws slipping into the tea-pot’s void.

I rushed to the pedestal, my legs still quivering from awe and my long prostration. In panic, and thinking back now likely in sacrilege, I lifted the lid of the tea-pot and peered inside. It seemed to me to open into the expanse of space sown with pale stars. Thrusting my hand in I found there only a thick carpet of ash. The jewels I’d mistaken for stars, bits of hard black charcoaled bone glinting in the dim of the yurt.

I hid my face in my hands in shame, sobbing and coughing, antiquing myself with ash. My face streaked with tears and ash, I unfastened the entrance and stepped out of the inner darkness. It was night. My parents were still dead. In the middle distance sparks whirled upward from the fire in the center of my companions encampment blending with the pins of light in the star-spattered void.

I stumbled my way toward the small gathering, lit my short on a small ember at the edge of the fire and dragged on it with desperate intensity. I sat down with the others cross legged. A woman appeared out of the solid night behind me and draped a woolen blanket over my shoulders. The man to

my left handed me a hat similar in shape to a tea-cosy which I pulled woodenly down over my sweat greased hair.

One man began a song. The low-throated drone was taken up one by one around, quavering and tremulant as distant thunder. I felt the top of my head expanding into the night. I felt the cold hard earth stripped from beneath me in a slow quake. We orbited a single point of warmth in the wind riven night. And it was simple. There was only the fire and the night and the people and the song. And we rolled on singing in imperfect blackness.

## **Arthur Seefahrt**

Arthur Seefahrt's work has appeared in floorplan journal, Bodega Magazine, Strangeways Magazine, and College Green, as well as in translation in the Leipzig based Fettliebe, and Word for Word/Wort für Wort journal. He currently resides in Dublin, Ireland. More of his works and contact details can be found at [arthurseefahrt.net](http://arthurseefahrt.net).



## **piss poem**

by Camden Hunt

even regular clock tick slipping  
thin metal rods in and out of your urethra.  
the leather case in the yellow bag under the  
bed holds around ten  
increasing in size by small increments and each  
side of the rod has a slight size difference so  
you can make your way up in the same  
way one might gauge their ears or force something  
else open

the water in the toilet is gatorade orange  
i limp to it when the slow trickle builds to a point where  
the bed is wet  
the fleece i wear in the summer at night rubs my skin  
raw when i toss and turn  
i watch my penis float placidly  
in lukewarm bath water

and you continue forcing yourself wider  
until you hang gaping and smiling a toothy smile of a  
child delirious with a nosebleed  
little hairy bloody stinky baby boy—

i think of your hands pulling my earlobes downward  
and the way the blood vessels in my lips pop

and the way a cock hangs soft between two legs  
like a trophy of inadequacy  
useless cock  
useless mouth  
useless hands  
blood stains on white sheets like  
petrol  
a music box stuck so it plays  
two notes

## **Camden Hunt**

Camden Hunt is a poet from Newport News, Virginia, currently living in Bar Harbor, Maine. He is interested in emasculation and the division (or lack thereof) between the personal and political self.

## **your guddies are scrappers**

by Hailey O’Gorman

Ryan shaves his head, his pubes and his balls. All with the same electric razor, all over the same toilet. His shaved head looks awkward. All uncomfortable stubble, without the gentleness of a hair or the smoothness of skin. He asks me to look away when he replaces his dark green hoodie. He wears exclusively Vans. I saw him try to skate in his guddies. He didn’t like my watching. He did not like the learning. The skateboard is somewhere underneath his bed.

We leave his and head down the road to McDonald’s. It’s one of those autumn nights where you’re supposed to be inside, away from the wind and the rain and all I’m wearing is this slip and these heels. I don’t wear heels and my legs feel like they’re perspex glass. Ryan says he doesn’t get cold. He says the cold doesn’t get him ever. If I complain about the cold I know I’ll become the joke of the night.

He checks his phone while we walk. His shaved head emphasises the egg-like fattiness of his face. I see comfort in this, but I know his fatness remains an insecurity for him. I tried to tell him how I felt, outlining a softness, though he told me,

‘Fat people deserve to be made fun of, they made that choice,’

‘Dude. You are. Out of your mind. And that’s not what I’m saying,’

‘What are you trying to say?’

‘It doesn’t have to, y’know, be like that. Or this. Things can be temporary. They don’t have to be, like, personal,’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Forget about it, man.’

We get to McDonalds. Ryan goes straight to the machine. There is no queue at the counter, where the service lady waits. His finger jabs at the screen. He holds a nonplussed demeanour, the way deeply anxious, cisgender, heterosexual men are prone to do. He will be fine with his surroundings. The surroundings are trying to eat him. He does not have the words for himself. He will enact any discomfort internally, later.

He eats quick and tells me he has had McDonald’s for all three meals today.

‘Four if you include last night. Or yesterday morning. You know what I mean.’

I stack his food for him and bring it over to the bin. Another staff member comes over and says they’ll do it. I thank them.

‘You’re so nice to them,’ Ryan says.

‘Who?’

‘Them,’ He nods at the service desk. A woman packs a delivery order and passes it to an impatient biker.

We walk to the beach. He says he’s got his steps in on the way there. We meet his friend, Duncan. He wears white and red and black Jordans and asks how it’s going,

‘It’s going,’ says Ryan. Duncan gives me a nod. The sort of nod where he tilts his head up, if only for a second, enough to say hello without opening his mouth. Duncan’s with a girl of his own. They could be living together. He could be her father. I smile at her. She looks out to sea.

Duncan gives us a joint each and I thank him for the free weed. Ryan is already mumbling to Duncan’s accomplice.

She's blonde with a hardly-over-eighteen inflexibility as she smokes. She's wearing all black and mimicking Ryan smoking. They're mumbling to each other. I take my joint, take off my heels and head to the shore. It's dark down there. There is nothing before me.

When I come back, Ryan spews some shit. He goes off about how my attitude sucks and I'm leeching his free weed and always minesweeping drinks. Duncan looks on with a taste for the drama. Ryan's got this face lost between exhaustion and excitement. Opportunity cups his cheeks in cold hands. He beams,

'You're a bad influence. And you're pathetic. And you're such a bad influence,'

When we were sixteen we had to run to get the last bus home and underneath orange clouds and sunlight in my eyes I laughed, pretending that I was drunk, not spitting out wine, hoping nobody was looking. His converse had broke in the scramble and on the bus he said he would never speak to me again. He throws his body back against the seat and stares out the window. I know the sun is in his eyes. Beside him, I sit on the edge. My runners are fine. Tennis shoes from cross country at school. I can't remember why I stopped running.

I suppose, those days, the Duncan and Ryan days, I was on tour. This was not a revival, nothing great was going to come from my displacement. A survival tour. Something to keep the name alive. I found myself revisiting anybody who had sworn themselves to a life of living. On the beach, I ask him what the fuck he's talking about and he says he can't remember.

A few hours later, with the blonde's head resting on his lap, he tells us about how he checked out Grindr after I left last night. He says he got head from a guy who hasn't stopped messaging him. I ask him how he feels, and he says,

‘I kind of wish there was something there, but nah,’  
It is near midnight. Ryan is stoned. I am cold.

## Hailey O’Gorman

Hailey O’Gorman (they/she) is a writer from Belfast, living in Cornwall. They write fiction and creative non-fiction around the transsexual experience, the anthropocene and trading card games.

She has been previously published in /temz/ Review

<https://www.thetemzreview.com/ogorman.html>

miniskirt magazine

<https://miniskirtmagazine.com/issue-21-pride/hailey-ogorman-fiction-tabula-rasa-blues/>

and elsewhere. They are studying for a Masters degree in Professional Writing from Falmouth University, graduating with a BA in Creative Writing in 2022. You can find her @regret\_mech. As a living thing, Hailey is really good at yugioh.



## **Ode to Sasha Grey**

by Kai-Lilly Karpman

With her half-full bush of black hair  
standing up and snarling  
like a stray dog-

Sasha looks in the camera and says

*I don't care, and I'm nineteen!*

The men giggle like schoolboys  
sticking bubble gum on a seat.

I think of the zoo.

I once saw a man lift a steak  
in the air while everyone clapped,  
those khaki pants showing off  
his tight little ass. He went home,  
felt like a man, got a paycheck.

The lion took the steak,  
tender as a house cat.

I stayed at the zoo  
to watch that cocky lion sleep.  
Her lazy, deep breath, and the flies  
landing on her ear. On-screen,  
fifteen men cum at once  
and Sasha is a spoiled child in the snow.

The lion sleeps soundly knowing  
she can kill everyone,  
and I mean kill! Everyone!  
I'm talking human guts on the  
floor like a bug splattered!  
Arms bent back  
and scalps stuck like stickers  
upon sun-baked rocks!  
Skin and blood raining  
from the sky like a storm of sleet!  
But the lion also knows that if she so much as  
wrinkles her nose at the trainer,  
or exposes the sharp parts of her paw,  
someone is always standing nearby,  
loaded, cocked, and  
ready to shoot her.

## **Kai-Lilly Karpman**

Kai-Lilly Karpman is a poet, educator, and translator from Los Angeles, California. She has been previously published in *Plume*, *Image Magazine*, *Beyond Words*, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of the Columbia University 2022 teaching fellowship, the Columbia University Word for Word travel and research grant, the two-time winner of the John Curtis Memorial Prize in Poetry, and the recipient of the Barbara Sicherman Prize in English scholarship. Kai-Lilly values the marriage between literature's intuitive, unnamable power and the formal techniques that support its emergence. Her subject matter is almost always the effects of patriarchy.

## Spitting Days

by Emma Gabel

One of life's great pleasures is being gross as shit in public. Just being fuck-nasty and *embracing* it, not hiding from it or being embarrassed or nothing. You know what I mean? I'm telling you, the second I clock out, I'm a whole different person. I'm obscene.

Check this out: I'm walking down the street, right? I'm walking down the street and I'm eating a slice of pizza. But I'm not just *eating* it—I'm going to *town* on it. Flying the goddamn airplane into my gaping maw. Cheese all over my face. Grease running down my arm. Sauce pooling in the corners of my mouth. I'm picking up the fricking pepperonis off the ground and eating them. And people are looking at me, and I'm looking at them. But I don't care! You see? I'm doing all this shit, and I just don't care. It doesn't bother me.

Or how about this: it's my wedding day, right? My now-wife and I, we're running all over town trying to take care of some last minute things. We're having a night wedding, you understand; but that part's not important. What *is* important, is that I get to the dry cleaners to pick up my tux, and the guy behind the counter says it's not there.

I say What do you mean it's not there? It's my goddamn wedding day!

He says There must have been some kind of mix-up. I'm terribly sorry, sir.

Now I'm starting to panic. I have one of those panic disorders. I'm sweating out my ass. Pacing all around the

place, trying to calm myself down a bit. Trying to work things out in my mind. I say You got a lost and found?

He says No, but we got a dumpster.

You see where this is going. But hey! My wife and I have been together for five years now. Five happiest years of my life, believe me. Cause she's a freak too, she don't care. One time, I saw her go up to a man in broad daylight and spit in his face. He didn't do nothing about it, just looked all sheepish and went about his business.

I said Hey, what'd you go doing that for?

She said I saw him in the news. He's a goddamn fascist.

I said Oh, okay, well that's alright then.

But then—and this is where it gets funny—then this kid comes running up to us. We were right across from the playground, see, the one off Grand Concourse. This sweet little kid, she comes up to us and she says Hey! She says—Jesus Christ—she says Hey! No spitting! You're not allowed to spit on people! Mrs. Applebaum told me, No spitting!

You should've seen the looks on our faces. I mean, if anyone else had come up to us like that, we'd have said go fuck yourself. But this little girl, she didn't know any better. To her, a fascist is just *some guy*. And we didn't have the heart to tell her any different. We just said we were sorry, and that we wouldn't go doing it again.

And this little girl, you know what she said? She said, Good. I know how fun it is to spit on people, but it's not very nice.

That put an end to our spitting days.

## **Emma Gabel**

Emma Gabel (they/she) is a writer from Harford County, Maryland. She is a proud music listener, baseball fan, and transsexual. Her work has been featured in *Love & Squalor* and *the Tempo*.

## **The Laughing Baby**

by Kurt Newton

A person doesn't set out, in life, to end their life, but it happens all the time. We are unique, in that we're the only species in the animal kingdom that will choose to kill itself. No instinct for survival. No battle to the death. Just: That's it, I've reached the end... I'll be going now.

The Laughing Baby has made that choice much easier to make. Shall I play the video? Not yet? Okay.

When we're born there's a magical glow that surrounds us. An aura of hope and dreams and potential. That aura is the future. A mirror glass of all possible life paths emanating from one infant being. It's a miracle how two people can create another made from the substance of themselves that is both part of and yet independent from its hosts. An inexact replica. A new creature whose life will be dictated by the circumstances they are born into and the circumstances they eventually choose. It's unconscionable to think that all of us not only have the potential to do great things, but, at the same time, have the potential to do great harm. To others. Or to themselves.

The Laughing Baby brings this all home in an emotionally gut-wrenching way, exposing this truth with such a raw, naked power it is as if one has known it all along and yet has refused to believe it. And will act accordingly.

Now? No?

What makes an artist who channels death and destruction in their art different from a killer? What makes a business man or woman who buries their competition with ruthless

marketing different than a killer? What makes a politician who sends young soldiers off to war different than a killer?

Some of us will grow up to be artists, to be scholars, to be leaders, while some of us will grow up to be killers. Some of us rage toward goals and achievements, satisfying that rage with status, accolades and material things. Some of just rage at the injustice and wallow in defeat, while others will turn that rage outward and kill—sometimes killing the very parents who brought them into this world. And some of us will turn that anger inward and destroy the very vessel that contains that anger... crack the clay pot that carries the water of existence.

It is in each of us—that ruthlessness, that drive, that urge to destroy whatever it is that threatens us. We are each creators and destroyers, victims and vandals alike.

Why should the Laughing Baby be stopped? Banned from dissemination—even in this courtroom? This is about more than freedom of speech. More than freedom of expression. This is the very essence of the right to choose. Life or death. There should be no middle ground. No existence without purpose, or, at least, without a leaning toward intention. Those who have given up will see: better to give up wholly than to languish in that slow, constant downward spiral to the end. The Laughing Baby will provide the roadmap, a guide toward resolution, or, more nicely put, a portal to a better place. Some of us just need a fresh start. A do-over. Wouldn't it be wise to allow this decision to be made—by the very souls who are asking for it? Perhaps not in words, but in actions, or lack thereof?

I contend the Laughing Baby brings us back to that starting point, that origin where nothing else mattered but the moment—a moment of pure, unadulterated joy. The joy of life all-encompassing. In essence, that period before life becomes a series of learned behaviors. Crawl. Walk. Run. Do



this. Do that. Watch out. Be careful. Be quiet. Good. Bad. Happy. Sad. Slow. Fast. Go. Stop. Stop. STOP!

Enough.

The Laughing Baby will inform a person—on the deepest most elemental level—how to proceed. The Laughing Baby offers joy. Joy in its purest form. The Laughing Baby offers peace. The Laughing Baby provides the answer one has been searching for—even if one is unaware they are, in truth, searching.

Can we show the video now?

Too dangerous? Isn't that up for the jurors to decide? For you to decide, your honor?

Individually, then? Shall I go first? No, I haven't seen it. Odd as that may be: defending something without knowledge of its content and the impact of that content. I took this case on principle. And on the hundreds of testimonials from family members that claim the Laughing Baby saved their loved ones by ending their torment. By ending the daily misery life had inflicted upon them. I didn't need to see the video to know where I stand.

I will go first, then. What could be the harm? I will prove to you that watching this video will have no effect on those of us who live lives of meaning and purpose, and who fulfill the minimum requirement, put forth by my long, and shall I say, eloquent prologue of what it is to participate in this playground we call humanity.

Headphones. Blinders. No one else can see or hear? Okay, here we go. Push play.

[smiles... nods head]

Oh.

Oh, no.

But I thought...

[unintelligible]

[laughter... tears]

[removes audio-visual headset]

Your honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I must apologize. I withdraw my petition. This video should not be viewed, under any circumstances. It is now my opinion that it should be destroyed.

I am so sorry to have wasted your time. And mine.

I need to leave now. I don't know why, but I need to go home.

I'm not feeling well. Not well at all.

No, I'll be fine. Thank you.

I'll see myself out.

Good-bye.

## **Kurt Newton**

Kurt Newton writes stories and poems, and the occasional creative non-fiction. His words can be found scattered across the internet and in the pages of printed journals (such as God's Cruel Joke). Lately, his words have been sighted at Flash Fiction Online, Cafe Ireal, The Fabulist, Radon Journal, Graphic Violence, Mouthfeel, and Tower Magazine, Vol. 1.

# **The Edge of the Universe**

by Stephanie Bontorin

7 days before

The edge of the universe. A place that no one thinks much of. For a long time, it was common knowledge that space is ever-expanding. We tend not to worry about it here on our spinning oasis. We're told the human mind can't appreciate the vastness of it all, so most of us don't even try. They say it's an endless expanse of unknown possibilities, new worlds are being created, old stars are dying out.

Well, it turns out, space is actually shrinking. A great black wall of, well nothingness, approaches. Now, on a clear night, almost half of the sky is completely blacked out. It feels like you've gone blind if you stare up at it for too long.

Scientists aren't really calling it anything so far. A phenomenon is the most accurate name that they can give it. The best guess is that we have a week left until the looming shadow truly encroaches. Pluto has already succumbed and dematerialized from sight.

They hope that as soon as the Mars rover is enveloped, they'll be able to see on the other side. But they also assume that the radio signals will be cut off immediately, so either way we'll learn something about our future. One talking head on the last broadcasting news channel has theorized that the black wall must be some kind of electromagnetic net, making any satellites or radio signals completely dead even within 100 miles of it. So, not much of a future there.

Most of us on Earth are living like we just received a terminal prognosis. No one is working, transit has shut to a halt, crime...actually hasn't really spiked at all, surprisingly. Well not that we care about petty crimes right now. Stores are open, drugs are free flowing from behind the counters of pharmacies and dispensaries. My personal stash was apparently big enough to get me through the end of the universe. People need to distract themselves from reality now more than ever, even if we have no idea what that reality is.

Like most of the people that I can see from my window, I just need to continue living for now. Keep my dogs alive really. I've been to the grocery store a few times, it's been looted pretty badly, and the refrigeration system isn't running so the whole place reeks of rotting meat and dead fish. For the most part, daily life continues, people go for walks, they feed the birds, and play soccer with their kids in the park. I let my dogs run free through the woods next to my apartment and chase the squirrels until squirrels are banished from existence.

I suppose my brain capacity is just as small as scientists have assumed about the general population. If I can't comprehend the vastness of space, what makes them think that I can understand the smallness of it?

### 3 days before

A lot has changed in the last four days. My dogs and I only go out at night to avoid the screamers in the street. Unable to comprehend the ending of endlessness, people have begun proselytizing on the street, all types of theories about our coming end of days and the sins of mankind. It's impossible

to even walk one block without hearing a new bible passage or conspiracy theory from the tin hat committee. The noise pollution and poorly hand-crafted signs have made going outside abrasive and confrontational.

I have just enough food left to last a few days, and then, who knows really. But unfortunately, there's no way to know what will happen when the obsidian wall drives through us. Will the world implode as soon as the veil touches, or will it simply slip under a waterfall of thick oil.

The last few nights I've been staying awake looking through what few resources on the universe I have on my bookshelf. When I do sleep, I have dreams where I'm running away from a black tidal wave, constantly tripping and scraping my nail against fresh earth and grass to get away.

## 1 day before

Night and day have begun to merge into one. The sun is slowly disappearing, but it's spitting enormous solar blasts as it becomes enveloped, sending off cosmic flares that can scorch your eyes if you even glance at them.

Today, I feel immobile. My movements are slow and strange, and I don't feel like myself anymore. I keep my drapes drawn to avoid confronting the reality that doesn't feel like reality and the people who don't remind me of humanity anymore.

## Morning of

The sun is officially gone, it's darker than you could ever imagine. The blackest black. The air seems like it's absorbing the light in front of you. It's like looking into the back of your own brain.

My dogs seem to be calm as usual, shepherds napping after their early morning run and meal of yogurt and beef liver. But I feel electrified, my heart is pounding and I'm unable to move from a small blanket cave on the couch. Combusting into myself like the world outside.

I can't bear to look at it. If it's going to come, I'd rather it just come already.

The people screaming on the street haven't gone inside for days. They look grimy from the rain and rolling around in the dirt while speaking in tongues or falling on their knees and praying for salvation. They're blind and wandering aimlessly from being blinded by the sun's final explosion slipping into extinction. I'm simply going to sit here and listen to late 90's prog rock and take a rather strong hit of mushrooms. If I'm going to enter a new dimension I might as well go out, well, in another dimension.

I close my eyes and stare into the back of my brain.

## **Stephanie Bontorin**

Stephanie is a recent graduate (if you believe that time is not linear). She enjoys hiking with her dog in the lower mainland of B.C. and works freelance as an editor, writer, and researcher. She has contributed prose and personal essays to a series of zines based on the hardcore-punk scene in Vancouver.



## **Naked**

by M Palmer

“This is nice.”

She bends her knee upwards—bubbles popping statically in the steamy air—and then slowly extends her leg through the bath water until her foot touches his chest. Pressing her toes into him she causes oblongs of colorlessness to sprout within his flushed flesh; she then slides her foot down the front of him until it rests at his hip.

“Mmmm.”

Under the water he wraps his hand around her foot, squeezes. He has not opened his eyes since getting in and lying his head back against the rim of the tub, but now he does, meeting her own. And it feels new—the light in her almond eyes different, sharper, deeper—alarm and allurements flooding him as he recognizes that despite their seventeen years together she can completely surprise him. She changes, evolves. Layers to her are added and chipped away, a living sculpture of flesh and will being formed by an enigmatic chisel, and he does not know what will come to the surface tomorrow. What does she think? What does she feel? Can he ever truly know her?

It is just a moment, a glance, and then she closes her eyes and runs her slender hands over her face and through her hair, finally lying her cheek down upon her shoulder.

Perhaps it is the candlelight, the soft shimmer of the water, giving everything a peculiar incandescence like the aura of mystery surrounding every stranger.

They have lit four candles, one at each corner of their six foot garden tub. The week's dirty clothes snake along the bathroom floor covered in darkness. Deodorants and hand sanitizers, prescriptions and cologne bottles, a hair dryer and an electric toothbrush cast long, jumbled shadows across the vanity like the skyline of a modest city.

The darkness continues past the open door into their bedroom, where the sheets are twisted and gamey from various oils and lotions and their own circular secretions. Pillows heaped in odd places; twin cigarette stubs smoldering in a black ashtray. A splotch of lubricant hardens on the chestnut headboard; wine cooler caps dig into the plush carpet. The scents are pungent: cinnamon and smoke, sex and vanilla.

She is a wound, the water heals her. Her body still buzzes with that delicious ache of being filled and satiated, spent and released. Infected with that tumultuous, shuddering presence. The water soothes her exhausted muscles, her agitated nerve endings, those swollen, throbbing tissues filled with pleasure and blood. She feels herself dissolving into the water's heat like butter into boiling milk. But her dispersion is not passive; her essence, her flavor spreads boundless and electric through the bath, alive with charges of pleasure and pain until all of it is the same.

And she feels herself recombining, feeling whole and new and ready for more. She smiles. Death by immaculate sin.

“God, it's hot as hell in here.”

He wipes sweat from his face, his beard.

“Perfect.”

“Fucking sauna. We'll have lost ten pounds after all this.”

“Good. We could use it.”

“Ach. We’re not young anymore. Some padding is expected. Necessary. To cushion us.”

“Open a window.”

She nods above them. He stands, sending waves over her. The water settles low beneath her ribs.

He unlocks both windows above the tub, raises them, and sighs as the wind blows in against him. The candle flames whip and flicker like laundry on a summer line.

“Ah,” he says. “Grace.”

She watches him. He stands broad and red, very hairy in spots—his calves and forearms, his chest—some of it beginning to gray. His skin glistens at his more vulnerable places, occasional acne and bruises like bad spots in a meaty fruit. Many men aged well and he is one of them. Not as defined as he once was but solid. Solid and scarred. Wise. Like one of their oaks out front. Strong, steady, rough, weathered. She likes knowing he can snap her neck in the crook of his arm.

Even his penis, that ridiculous and awesome microcosm of all manhood, soft now and sodden, but thick, well-worn, full with slumbering potential. She understands, with some surprise and a small shudder, that she feels a distinct ownership towards it. She pets and provokes it and sometimes it repulses her as with all her most intimate, personal extensions.

As she stares at him she realizes he is, most likely, at his peak in body and mind: the years of experience and growth (most of which she has shared) has matured him into this man standing over her. For good or ill. She feels something beautiful and bare and the beginnings of bittersweetness for she knows that only a descent can follow the zenith.

Bittersweetness too, because she knows the fall is already happening, has been happening for some time; its causes found within every mundane day they live together, its effects seen in the vacancy of his face and the distance in his gray-green eyes.

She stands and wraps her arms around him from behind, needing to feel the weight of him. She presses her head into the middle of his back. The wind blows against them, cooling their flesh as water drips quietly from their limbs back into the bath.

Only a couple of weeks prior they had worn their jackets while planting white pines along the back of their property to create a proper wind break some ten or so years down the line. But since then summer has come pregnant with water-logged, ninety degree days. Only the nights have remained innocent with their clear skies and a youthful wind that screams free across miles of razor-flat bean fields.

The house is silent, their thoughts wordless. When they lie back down in the water they stay entwined. She's cradled between his legs, her back against his chest, her arms hanging lazily over his knees. She tells him a dirty joke about a man's beard she had heard at the diner. Otherwise, they talk little. The fizz of evaporating bubbles and the wind strumming the strings of the window screen.

“You didn't eat much.”

“I don't like seafood linguine.”

“You don't like oysters in seafood linguine. Lisa used clams. You were mad at me.”

“No.”

“It was something I said while we were all talking. Or earlier, something I did or didn't do.”

“Nope.”

“We didn’t speak in the car.”

“I didn’t have anything to say.”

“No, that’s when you turn on the radio or you make goofy sounds with your lips. It was total silence. You were thinking. Worrying.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Dale told Lisa that Callahan’s being a dick to you at work. Something about the inventory counts.”

“That’s nothing. I don’t think about work.”

“Do you ever think about being happy again?”

She feels his penis, flaccid, in the crack of her ass. She pumps her hips up and down a couple times. She gets no response.

“You’ve lost all the fight in you.”

She is both disappointed and relieved that she cannot see his face.

“You laugh like a donkey when we’re around other people and you’ve never learned your place. Also, your tits are sagging.”

“There you go.”

Time moves like a cloud. It lengthens, stays still, advances without notice. His eyes settle on a candle. The candle holder, shaped like a shallow champagne glass, throws a shadow up the corner of the wall. Like a bird, he thinks, the kind drawn quickly as a child, basically an elongated V. He stares at the candle until there is nothing left but the brightness of the flame and everything beyond is as black and empty as a winter wood at night. This is his present, his future. He cannot escape it. This is his forever.

He drinks from their water bottle, sucks an ice cube into his mouth. Her eyes are closed; she might be dozing. Her small breasts float on the surface of the water. He listens to her breathing, the steady necessity. In her hair he smells peonies and sweat, and fleetingly, buried deep, her own unnamable scent. Tilting the bottle, he lets some of the water dribble down on her. She squirms. He takes the ice from his mouth and places it behind her ear, slides it down her neck tracing the hard, prominent bones. Redness and goose bumps swell in the glistening trail. She breathes deeply, her lips part. He watches his hands moving over her familiar skin from a distance—outside, ineffectual, a ghost living through another's performance. He slides the ice down the middle of her chest to her belly, pale and quivering, and back up again, slowly outlines her breasts. She shudders.

Her shudder: slight, almost imperceptible, but seared into his memory like a scar. He sees it sometimes when he looks at her with her back turned, while they make love, when he is alone and forced to look inward.

Her nipples are already dark, erect, when he begins to circle her areola. She lifts her left knee and sighs just like he knew she would. He knows how the blood will rise in her cheeks and in her chest, the dance of her eyes behind their lids, the way she will slide her hands beneath her bottom.

She opens her legs and starts a series of short, quick thrusts. The porcelain groans. He rubs the ice over her left nipple first, then the right, switching in ten second intervals. The pattern is ingrained in him like his route to work, his mother's last words to him.

She reaches up, grabs the back of his neck, begins clutching at his hair. This, too, he had watched her do. He switches the ice cube to his left hand and slips his right between her legs. Her thrusts more desperate; the shadow bird, reflected in the water, begins to fly. As her hips rise out

of the water he bends his head down as far as it will go and takes her nipple in his mouth, between his teeth, and bites.

She moans loudly, but...

“You didn’t come.”

He releases her with a splash. The ice cube stops its descent at the mole on her stomach.

“What?”

Her voice strange, hormone drunk.

“You were supposed to come.”

She makes a sound between a chuckle and a grunt.

“Well, get back here!” She grabs his arm and pulls it back over her body. “Give me another minute or two.”

“No. You should have come. You should have pressed my hand to your mouth and come.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m saying I followed it precisely.”

She scream-laugh. Spins around and pushes back to the opposite end of the tub, knees folding up to her chin.

“Are we that dry? You know exactly to the second when I’ll get there? Am I so predictable? Are we?”

But he is gone looking out the window again into the darkness beyond. He will not look at her. She knows he will say no more. Like some electronic when its batteries suddenly and irrevocably die. He is as cold and fragile as that.

Outside he hears the wind and Peanut whining in her kennel. But there is also something beyond this, within it, beneath it, somehow deeper. Low-pitched but constant and strong, more substantial. It is a hum. He has never heard it

before. Or he has but could never recognize it. He listens to it now. Nothing around them except bean fields and a couple deteriorating farm houses; the road in front of their house is rarely traveled. It is not soulless, this hum, not industrial. A sound that always is but is never listened to, forgotten, like being permanently underwater. It is what remains, he thinks, when all the noise of the world is stripped away. The sound of breathing, being, not of an individual but of an entire land, an atmosphere. His hand trembles. He wants to close the window but needs to keep it open.

“You remember Rick Salazar.”

She looks at him but he keeps his gaze out the window. His eyes are liquid in the candlelight, the skin beneath them sagging and dark.

“Sure.”

His eyes crawl back to her. They look at one another. They are, to each other, both beautiful and cruel.

“I took him hunting with me one night. Around the time I got Peanut. It was one of my first nights out with her. It was all so random. I had stopped at the Certified on Main for beer. Got a sandwich and a bag of treats for Peanut. He—Salazar—came stumbling out of the Thirsty Ear. I told him I was going to break in Peanut and he asked if he could come along.

“I don’t think he’d ever been out before but he had always taken an interest in my stories at work. He’d ask about the dogs or my guns and when I planned on going out and so forth.

“I took us out to Indian Lake. We didn’t talk a lot. Most of the beer was gone by the time we got there. He was drunk. He snored a good chunk of the time.”



Their legs mingle like roots beneath the earth. As he speaks, she turns around and goes to him. She cannot stop him, but she feels the closer she is the less his words will hurt.

“He picked up a second wind when we got out into the woods. We ran Peanut for quite awhile, way past the lake. I let her lead us in pretty deep. But she was young and undisciplined—you remember. Loose-mouthed, backtracking, stuck on old scents. She treed a few; I shot at a couple. Ricky was having a good time. He’d be on Peanut’s heels yelling, carrying on, racing her to the coons when they fell. That was one thing about him—he was an exuberant guy. Even in the eleventh hour of a thirteen hour shift he’d be laughing, joking, fresh as a newbie. Full of life, I guess.

“It got really late, an hour or two before dawn. You could see our breath drifting up into the leaves. Peanut was scrambling at an oak and Salazar was right with her, howling and looking up. He had this Bud Light ball cap on backwards. He wanted me to let him shoot. It was his voice, his hands. I saw them on you. I heard him with you.

“I had to end it...I couldn’t let it continue on.”

A drop of water falls from the faucet into the bath. Another one begins to grow.

“When it was done everything was just real quiet, even Peanut. I wasn’t myself anymore. Then the crickets started back up and the bullfrogs, one after the other. Everything went on, you know.”

The bubbles are gone. Beneath a layer of oil and lotion scum that has gathered on the surface of the water, their flushed and pruned flesh lie against each other, exposed. They are not sure, so naked and numb and entangled, where one ends and the other begins.

“I knew you’d come home,” she says. “I wanted you to see us. I needed you to care again.”

She turns her cheeks to his chest. He strokes the hair over her ear.

They listen and they breathe.

## **M Palmer**

M. Palmer is a graduate of the Miami (Ohio) University writing program. His work has appeared in such places as Fantasy Magazine, Crossed Genres, and the anthology Tattered Souls. M. Palmer has been blessed with two strange but adorable children. His wife is a saint who has proven capable of keeping a secret or two.

## **Why White Women Love Dahmer**

by F Ffrench

Procession of Dahmer's lovers  
White women lined up to kiss his corpse  
Plant a big kiss on his bludgeoned face

Why do white women love Dahmer?  
It is said that white women love Dahmer because he was a  
stranger  
Because he was quiet  
They say white women love Dahmer  
Because they feel they hide grotesque secrets too

It is said that Bundy was charming  
It is also said that he was not charming  
Every husband waits at home with a fake limp  
And a tire iron behind his back  
It's nothing special because lovers kill each other every day  
But a stranger  
That's news

Lovers of Dahmer show me pictures of car crashes  
"This is real" they tell me

From my understanding of how pictures work  
Most pictures are in fact real

I think their favorite part  
Was how he committed to pain  
Poor poor Dahmer  
Stranger to his victims and himself  
His violence didn't even bring him joy  
The lovers of Dahmer surround his grave and pat him on  
the head  
He's a kitten to them  
Poor poor Dahmer

The reason white women love Dahmer is this  
He killed black boys instead of white girls  
He embodies a violence they adore in a form that can't hurt  
them  
He is their patron saint  
They sing his praise

## **F Ffrench**

F. Ffrench is a multimedia artist living in Chicago. She works in visual, writing, music, and film mediums. Her work usually centers on themes of trauma and queerness with a surreal or comedic approach. She has been published in multiple issues of the Chicago zine Messy Misfits Club. She is also an unofficial expert on teen movies.

## **Convenient Friend**

by Ken Anderson

You fuck  
as if you're  
on the way  
to meet each other. Then  
the lost momentum slows  
to a stop  
to let you out  
on a quiet corner  
where you hitch a ride  
to here, exactly  
where you started  
when the final sigh has drained  
from men  
together, but alone. The city fades  
from dark  
to dawn. He slips away, but fails  
to leave the name and number  
someone knows  
by heart. You strike a pose  
to be picked up  
without a place

to go. You go there once too often.  
Tricks, like cocaine, numb.  
But going nowhere kills the time  
and keeps you company. It looks more  
like a convenient friend  
the more  
you try it. After all, you've gone too far  
to turn back now.



## **Ken Anderson**

Ken Anderson's poetry books are *The Intense Lover* and *Permanent Gardens*. Recent publications include *Angel Rust*, *Beyond Queer Words*, *Flux* (Fifth Wheel Press), *Gay and Lesbian Review*, *The Heart of Pride* (Quillkeepers Press), *Impossible Archetype*, *Mollyhouse*, *Penumbra*, *Poetry from the Festival* (Saints & Sinners), *Prismatica*, *Queerlings*, *Querencia*, *Rabid Oak*, *RFD*, *Screen Door*, *Vagabonds*, *Warning Lines*, *Wicked Gay Ways*, and *Wussy Mag*.

# **A Night at the Moose Lake Inn**

by Jake Zawlacki

Warren Sellers stood naked on a chair with a rope in one hand and his dick in the other. He was more nervous than he thought he'd be, his palms and armpits sweating. He let go of himself and picked up his phone from the desk to verify the correct tying of a noose, a loose noose. He wedged the phone between the crook of his arm and fumbled with the knot until he tied it, then tossed the phone on the bed to regrip himself. He draped the noose over his neck and pulled backward hard against his throat feeling his breath catch against the rope. He ducked out of it, checking the slack for him to escape. This was his first time.

With the completed noose in hand, he tied it around the base of the fan mounted to the log ceiling. He tested its strength with three hard tugs and watched for movement and listened for squeaks but saw and heard none. He grabbed himself once more easing the tremors of expectation.

He felt the pulse of his heart inside his ears, inside his head, inside his hand. With his free hand, he test-fitted the noose over his neck once more, draping it beneath his chin and then pulling it over the crown of his head. He felt a shiver run from his neck to his left foot, his heartbeat quickening. He took it off.

Warren looked down at the chair he stood on, thinking. He jumped on it, leaned it side to side, and then stepped down. With his one free hand he tidied the room. He pulled the sheets of the bed taught, picked up his clothes from the floor, laid them on the desk, and walked to the bathroom.

Standing in the mirror, he saw his body flushed with excitement, his dick in his hand, his neck blotchy from the practice tugs, his bulging stomach with streaks of sweat dripping down it. Then he stopped. He released his grip and grabbed the bar of soap from the countertop.

He washed his hands thoroughly, scrubbing his nails into his palms, ensuring his fingers' cleanliness, and then splashed his face with water. He felt the water pool at the bottom of his chin and closed his eyes to calm him for what was to come.

Warren Sellers shivered in anticipation as he walked to the chair. Shaking, he stood on it, grabbed his dick in one hand and the noose in the other, and placed it over his head. With closed eyes he knelt into the pressure of the noose, feeling himself grow.

Warren Sellers bent his knees to sink into the noose. The rope dug into his throat as he grew. As he dropped further into the constriction, the noose slipped and tightened behind his neck, the slop in the ring now gone. In a reflex, he kicked his right foot out and toppled the chair. Warren's face purpled as he panicked, kicking his feet out for a touch of the chair's leg, his lungs unable to pull air, his erection hardening. He flailed in naked silence in the rented room of the Moose Lake Inn. Blackness blotted his vision.

Warren awoke on the floor, feeling as if breathing through a straw. He tore at his back for slack in the noose as he struggled to breathe, the rope like a choke collar on a dog. After breaking it loose, Warren gasped in a great wheeze, tasting the sweetness of air and rolled over to the ceiling fan next to him, its wires and screws drooping out of its base.

Warren closed his eyes and rubbed at his neck feeling for the rope no longer there. He scratched the front and back and sides of his throat until tears ran down his face. He scraped

at the dream rope and cried at the thought of almost losing everything, feelings of shame rushing through his body in ripples, the faces of Anna and Lila there just behind his eyelids.

In a panic, Warren opened his eyes and stood up, his body glistening red, his member diminishing in the swift flux of emotion. He gathered the rope from the floor and wound it into a loop. He set it into his small black leather suitcase and zipped it. He picked up the fallen chair and pushed it beneath the desk. He looked at the ceiling fan on the floor.

He knelt over the fan and looked for the fallen mounting screws. He grabbed two from beneath the bed and one from under the chair. He combed the carpet with his hands feeling for the rough grooves of the screw, but it was lost.

Warren put on his pants, shirt, shoes and ran his fingers through his hair to give it shape. He buttoned his collar up to the throat hoping it would cover the mark of the noose.

With a close of the door behind him, he walked through the dark and dingy hallway to the front desk. The place he had chosen for its lack of requirements and obscurity was now just a dirty hotel off the old highway. It wasn't the place of adventure Warren had first imagined, but his own personal Hell he'd created, one that he'd narrowly escaped. He felt the sweat slick over his body and the acrid smell of stress in his armpits as he leaned on the counter.

The old ravine-wrinkled proprietor who checked him in earlier stared at him with disinterest. They both waited for the other to speak.

“Uh, hi. I'm sorry for the odd request, but is there anyway you had a screwdriver I could borrow?”

The woman's brows slanted. “You break something?” she asked.

Warren raised his hands. “Oh, no no. I just needed to fix a, uh...suitcase.” He smiled. “A latch broke.” And then the woman looked at his neck.

“Ma’am?” he said, interrupting her stare. She looked up at him. “A screwdriver?”

She looked down at his neck once more before turning to the back office. Warren popped his collar and turned to the side to try and hide the marks. The proprietor returned with a screwdriver.

Warren held it. “Ah, I’m sorry. I need a Phillips head.”

The woman stared at him. Warren imagined the marks on his neck throbbing for her attention. She turned back to the office and returned with another.

“Thank you so much.”

“Mhmm,” she replied.

He took the screwdriver and turned away from her as he walked down the hall but felt her eyes on his neck, felt her understanding of what he was doing in the room. He was convinced she’d call someone to do something with him, to get rid of him, to tell his secret and perversion to his family, to his church, to his community. He passed a young woman walking towards the front, pulling the edges of her skirt down. Warren turned away as he passed her.

With screwdriver in hand, and ceiling fan in the other, Warren stood on the chair and clocked the ceiling fan to cover the four now useless holes. He turned the screws into new holes with a rhythmic grip of twisting. After a few minutes, Warren stepped down from the chair and felt the heat in his body lessen, a task completed.

Warren shuddered at the black leather suitcase still holding the noose. He felt his clothes constricting him, sticking to his sweat, and undressed. He exhaled for what felt

like the first time since waking on the floor and let his body go weak as he walked to the bathroom. The earlier memory of watching himself aroused stung as he scratched the red around his neck and ducked away from the sad fat middle-aged man staring at him. He turned the knobs above the bathtub.

As Warren entered the shower, he felt shame fill the void of his released panic. He felt every night of waiting for Anna to go to sleep as a pin prick on his flesh, every thought anticipating this moment a tack, every vulgar search term a stick of a needle. He wanted to wash these pains of his body, to drown the memories of his leading up to this moment, the internet scrolling, the lie to Anna, the goodbye hug to Lila, the driving, the parking, the checking in, the unpacking, and the doing. He felt stuck in the slickened skin of a different man.

Warren let the hot water run down him, rinsing his sweat and flushing his pale skin with the same red of his neck. He grabbed the small soap bar with cursive “Ambrosia” pressed into it and lathered his hands. He rubbed the bar on his skin, but then pressed harder and harder until his nails dug in from the force, his hands trying to scrape the sin from his body, to scrape those little pains away from his memory. He scraped and scraped until he cut his chest with a fingernail and small drops of blood pooled in the raw flesh. He stopped. Tears bubbled from his eyes as he sank to seated in the shower.

He let the water rain over him for five minutes, his mind swirling until it settled on a singular thought: resurrection. This is my resurrection, he thought. Warren understood his journey as a destructive trip to the reaches of Hell only to return redeemed. To return a better, purer, and redeemed man. He had to go home.

The blood coagulated on the streak across his chest and he finished washing. He dried himself, little flecks of red

from the torn skin of his body painting the towel, and emerged from the shower anew. He shaved, flossed, brushed his teeth, combed his hair, and sighed. He was reborn.

He dressed himself, walked back to the mirror, and winced as he saw how the red of his neck must have looked to the woman at the front desk. The collar was inches shy of the mark. He grabbed his jacket and buttoned the collar up to the top, his body warm from the unnecessary layer.

For the first time since checking into the hotel, Warren checked his phone.

“Good luck Dad,” Lila had texted in support of Warren’s lie of a weekend work conference. The memories of her sweetness rushed to him: Lila making him breakfast on a Saturday morning, her singing in her first choir, and her falling asleep in his arms on the couch as they watched a movie. Then he remembered picking her up and carrying her to her room so he could go back to the office and lock the door behind him.

Tears pushed against his eyelids, but he stopped himself. His decision to come here, to accidentally hang himself, and to be forgiven by God and provided a second chance weighed on Warren like the Earth. He held back his tears and felt the grace he had heard about all his life, but had never felt. His second life was undeserved and unmerited, but it was his.

He stood from the bed, grabbed his suitcase, checked the rooms for anything overlooked, and closed the door behind him. He waited at the counter for the woman to appear. She did.

“Need something else?” she said as she looked at his covered neck.

“Yes, uh. Thank you for the screwdriver.”

The woman looked back to his eyes. She nodded.

“It was a quick fix.” He looked around the small lobby. “I need to check out.”

“No refunds,” she said, her voice hostile and rough.

“I understand. I just need to check out.” Warren set a gold key with a “102” written in Sharpie on the counter. She picked it up and waited for him to say something else.

“Do I...need to do anything?”

“Cancellation fee.”

“Cancellation fee?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Okay. How much?”

“Twenty dollars.”

Warren grabbed his wallet and slid a twenty-dollar bill from it. He handed it to her. She stared at him as she placed it in her pocket. “Anything else?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Okay, well, thank you.”

“Uh huh,” she said.

Warren turned from the woman and walked out of the lobby. He passed a trashcan and thought to toss the suitcase in it. He looked back at the lobby to see the proprietor of the Moose Lake Inn staring at him through the window. He turned and walked to his car.

With the hotel far behind him, Warren drove in the dark to his wife and daughter. He waded through the darkness like an ocean, his only purpose to reach his home, to rid himself of the black suitcase on the seat next to him, and to live a life of the resurrected.



After an hour and a half of speeding through the night, he made it to his exit. With a check all around him for headlights, he rolled down the window and threw the suitcase in the creek running next to the road. He looked again through his windows and mirrors and saw nothing and no one. He was almost home.

As Warren cruised the twenty-five mile per hour suburban streets, he began to feel excited. He felt excited that the man returning to his family would be a different man than the one that had left. As he crossed beneath greenlit streetlights, Warren Sellers' heartbeat quickened. He gripped the steering wheel harder, his palms and body sweating, and felt a shiver go from his left foot to his neck. He felt the crotch of his pants tighten.

Warren parked his car outside of his clean beige suburban home and walked towards it. He left the jacket buttoned high to hide the redness, ran his fingers through his hair, and opened the door.

Anna sat on the couch watching T.V. and turned to face him with narrowed eyes from the dark. "Warren?" she asked. Her face shifted from surprise to worry as she stood from the couch. "Are you alright?" He blushed red with tears down his face seeing his wife for what felt like the first time in a decade. His heart pulsed heavy, his hands damp, his member growing.

The guilt and shame left his body as his wife approached him, her arms open for an embrace. As he closed his eyes and waited for her arms to encircle him, to relieve him of his nightmare, Warren felt a hard pull against his throat, now unable to swallow, unable to breathe. Blackness blotted his vision once more.

Warren Sellers gently swung from a ceiling fan in the Moose Lake Inn, his face purple, his body still, his dick as hard as bone.

## **Jake Zawlacki**

Jake Zawlacki is a writer, translator, and scholar. His critical work on comics and animation have appeared in ImageText and Folklorica. His translations of the Kazakh poet Akhmet Baitursynuly are forthcoming in Guernica and Asymptote. And his creative work has been published in The Saturday Evening Post, The Journal, Punt Volat, and The Citron Review.

## Inspiration Porn

by Martha Stallman

“Okay. OKAY! You goddamn reporters. Fine, just keep the drinks coming. I’ll tell you about it, but first I want to clarify a few things:

One, I don’t dance at Mike’s, okay? I dance at Stumpz. I’m not the top stump act at a straight joint - I’m the top stump act at a STUMP joint, and if you think that’s easy, you can kiss my ass. I’d say, ‘kiss my stump,’ but that costs twenty bucks, and I’m sure you need that money for...I don’t know, knit hats? Mustache wax? Whatever you asshole kids are into these days.

Sec-what? Oh, I stepped on a land mine while I was on patrol in Da Nang. What the fuck do you care how I lost it? Norms always act like basic goddamn courtesy doesn’t apply to us, like it’s perfectly cool to just go up to a gimp and demand their whole life-fucking-story. As if you have a right to know. Mind your own goddamn business! I had a leg and now I don’t. Satisfied? Now, don’t interrupt - that’s rude.

Second, we probably didn’t even kill that motherfucker. Not that I care. He’ll get it one way or another - assholes like that always piss off the wrong person eventually. But I’d be lying if I said I give a shit either way. As long as he stays out of town, I waste as much time remembering him as I do the dump I took this morning.

No, I take that back - it was a pretty memorable dump. Been eating a lot of cabbage lately.

Third - and this is the fucking most important, so you want to wipe that little smirk off your face before I wipe it

off for you, or I can just hobble the fuck off into the goddamn sunset, and you can take your free drinks and shove them up your narrow ass and write your goddamn feature on THAT 'local sensation' and-

That's better. 'Show respect if you value your teeth' - momma always told us that.

Third, the story isn't even about that stupid motherfucker anyway. I can't even remember his name now, though I'm sure you've got it somewhere on your little notepad there. 'Robert Smulchek?' That's right - that must be Bobby. I never knew his last name, but I'm not surprised to hear that it's something that sounds so stupid.

Laugh if you want, but the story's about family. That's what we are to each other: family. Why not? Our own families never wanted us, bunch of gimps and queers and weirdos. I been on my own since I was sixteen. Jamie's dad used to give it to her with a wrench. All of us got stories, it's nothing special.

We look out for each other. When shit goes down, we're there for each other. We love each other. I know what people like you think of people like us, and I don't really blame you, the way we look and sound - we're from a different neighborhood, for sure. But we were babies just like you. We cried and needed food and got hurt, just like you did. It's just that nobody cared when it happened to us - that's the only difference. But we care. We care, whether people like you think we deserve to be cared about or not. We keep each other alive - that's what family is for. Thank you for not laughing.

So: I was just sitting on the back steps having a smoke before I started getting ready to go on shift...it was about 5:30 or so, then, I suppose. Jamie came—wait, should I give

her a different name? I don't want any of this coming back on anybody.

YOU will? Okay, good. So, all of a sudden, Jamie comes running up to me from the parking lot, and-

No, her hand. I think she was born that way.

And she's crying so hard and talking so fast I can't understand a fucking word. Her nose is all bloody and snotty from crying, but that was pretty normal, cause Bobby's a real piece of shit.

So, I sort of grab her and hug her and try to calm her down, and I'm going, 'Honey? Honey, it's okay, just breathe, breathe,' and she's blubbering and still trying to talk, and then she sucks in a huge breath and lets it out in a big rush, like whoooosh, and says, 'Dutch shot Bobby.'

I let her go and she steps back, and she's just pale as cheese, blood and snot all over her mouth, but she stopped crying, at least. I say, 'What?' Stupid. I just couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Dutch shot Bobby,' she says again. Nobody else was around, but you never know, so I put a finger over my lips and she nods, and I hustle her inside and we go to Andrew's office to talk.

Hmm? Why? Well, it's the most private place, for one, and soundproof or pretty damn near. You can't even hear the bass from the floor music in there, and they crank that shit. And I knew he'd want to know, anyway. He sort of handles all the girls' business, know what I mean?

Andrew? Oh Christ, I don't really know, honestly. He was there when I got hired, he'll be there when I'm too old and I have to quit. Shit, he'll probably be there when I'm dead.

So we—Kid, I told you, I don't know. Some girls think he owns the place. Some girls think the Russian mafia owns the place, and he's just their eyes and ears. And muscle. He's not a huge guy, but he's...

Listen, every girl there has a crush on him, right? He's a good looking guy, friendly, treats us all real well. Everybody hits on him at least once, but he's never picked up on any of the girls. And he's never nasty about it. Nobody ever gets pissed.

Nope, cause he never picks up any of the guys, either, and I know for a fact that at least a couple of the bouncers have hit on him, and he wasn't nasty to them either. He turns everybody down the same way, smiles and sort of shakes his head a little, like 'Tsk, tsk, you know better!' Like how people on TV scold little kids when they won't brush their teeth, right?

Except I've seen him break a man's hand with that same look on his face. He was just walking the floor, and he saw this one guy grabbing for Camille's stump arm for about the fifth fucking time after she told him to stop. Camille's a bitch because she's got TWO stumps, a hand and a foot on opposite sides, which is pretty rare, I'll admit, but she acts like she's the fucking Queen of Gimps and she can't even imagine why a pathetic little one-leg like me is the star, and I'm like, 'Bitch, if you could do more than just flop around like a dolphin having a seizure, then—'

You're right, you're right, I'm rambling, sorry. So, back to Andrew: So this drunk asshole was trying to touch Camille yet again, and I don't like her, but that's just not cool, period. Andrew was walking by, and he just reached out and pinned the guy's hand on the stage and slammed his elbow into the guy's hand a bunch of times real quick, like BAM BAM BAM, and just walked away, still with that little smile on his face, and the guy was screaming and crying and holding his

hand. His fingers were splayed in all different directions - anybody could see it was broke. He stumbled outside, crying. There were at least twenty people inside, everybody saw it. And the cops never even came by, not that night, not ever. The music never stopped. We never stopped dancing. Andrew was in his office the next day like nothing ever happened. And he threw in twenty bucks for Kayla's birthday cake. That's Andrew.

So we go into his office. Door's open, so we know it's ok. You don't go in if the door's closed, and you don't knock. You wait.

But the door's open and he's just sitting at his desk, typing on the computer. Me and Jamie go in and I close the door. We sit and I take my blade off - it's convenient for getting around, but it's damn itchy. Andrew looks up like he's been expecting us the whole time. 'My favorite girls!' he says, cause he says that to everybody. You can see why we love him.

So, Jamie tries to tell him, but she just starts hiccuping and crying again, and she can't get it out. Andrew opens a drawer in the desk and pulls out a box of tissues. He comes around the desk and kneels in front of her and puts the box in her lap. He pulls out a couple tissues and starts wiping off Jamie's face, real gently, while I rub her back. 'Rayanne?' he says to me.

'Dutch shot Bobby,' I tell him. 'That's all she could say.' Jamie's still hiccupy, but it's tapering off. She sits up straight. With all the shit off her face, she looks almost normal. But she's still so pale you'd think she was dead.

'Can you tell us what happened?' Andrew says, and you know what? Even with everything going on, I get a little shiver. 'Us.' It's embarrassing, how easy it is to win our hearts. We're like stray dogs - a touch and a kind word, we're



yours forever. I'm sorry, kid, I'm a sentimental drunk. What was I saying?

Oh yeah. So she gives us the details: She's at home with Dutch, the kids are all at their dad's for the weekend - I think only two are actually Rakim's, but he claims all three. I've met him, he's a real good guy.

Anyway, Jamie and Dutch are fooling around, and Bobby just shows up banging on the door. Jamie tells him to get lost, cause she had dumped him like two months before that, and she would have dumped him even sooner if he hadn't lied and told her he was a war vet and he was just lashing out because of PTSD, but he was getting treatment, and please don't abandon me, baby, and blah, blah, blah. Jamie's got a soft heart, and she put up with his shit until she's dancing one night and this friend of his comes in, and she's talking to him and goes, 'Oh yeah, you know Bobby from being in the army, right?' and the guy laughs and goes, 'THAT pussy? Fuck no, I know him from middle school. Bobby's never been in the army!' See, cause he didn't even know Bobby had told her he had, so they get to talking, and she finds out—

I'm sorry, kid, I'm rambling again. Jamie tells Bobby to get lost. Bobby says he wants a blow job. Dutch tells him to fuck off. Bobby says that if she won't, he'll tell CPS about all the weed she's growing in her garage and they'll take her kids away. Dutch takes a swing at him. Bobby pulls out his gun and starts waving it around, talking all big. Then Dutch pulls out HIS gun, but he doesn't talk, he just shoots Bobby in the gut. Bobby falls down and Jamie just grabs Dutch and they run. Didn't even check to see if he was still breathing. Just ran. Came right to Stumpz. Dutch didn't even know Bobby was a cop until Jamie told him on the ride over.

Oh yeah, of course WE all knew. It's the only reason we hadn't taken care of him ourselves already.

Oh sure, but there's a big difference between the police looking the other way when you roll some random drunk and them letting you get away with shooting one of their own, known piece of shit or not. We knew the cops would come around looking for him sooner or later, and that's the first thing I thought of when Jamie told me. Andrew, too.

'He'll be missed,' Andrew says once we get it all out, first thing. He'd listened to the whole thing without saying a word, just patting Jamie's knee from time to time. 'It's in our best interest he not be found.' He looks up at me and I can tell he's thinking the same thing I am.. 'Sweetie,' I say, stroking her back, 'where's Dutch now?'

Greyhound. She dropped him off on the way to Stumpz and told him not to tell her where he was going. He could call her from a burn phone when he got there.

'Good, he can come back once it's done,' says Andrew, and me and Jamie both let out a little breath, relieved. I mean, we knew he liked Dutch and wouldn't ever go trying to hurt him for no reason, but business is business. If Andrew thought Dutch had to go, he would. We were glad to know he didn't.

'Give me your keys,' Andrew says, so Jamie does. It's just a car key and a house key on the keyring, so he can tell right away which is which. 'You girls go ahead and get out there. It's nearly eight.' And me and Jamie both kind of jump, because we didn't realize how much time had passed. There aren't any clocks in Andrew's office, and he doesn't wear a watch, either.

Kid, if I knew, I'd just tell you. What can I say? He's a man of many talents.

So, he opens the door and we all file out, and who do we see but that hateful bitch Camille, hovering right outside the door just itching to tell Andrew that me and Jamie were no

call-no show. I can tell, because when she sees us, her mouth just falls open, like ‘Ooooooh, shit.’

‘Oh excellent, I’m so glad you’re here, Camille,’ Andrew says, and you can see her just melt. I think she’s got it the worst of all of us.

‘Do me a favor and walk onto the floor with Jamie and Rayanne,’ he says, and Camille does a pretty decent job of not looking like she wants to puke. Andrew sort of beckons her over and leans in and goes, ‘Maybe if customers see them with you, they’ll be more popular. But please just keep it between us.’ And he winks and she blushes all the way up to her one-inch roots.

Oh, that was so she’d think we’ve been in a disciplinary meeting, you see? Of course, she immediately told fucking EVERYBODY that Andrew had us in his office all afternoon, chewing us out for not making enough money and threatening to give Camille my spot. Just like he knew she would. So now everybody ‘knows’ me and Jamie have both been at the club all day. See?

Hey, kid, you thirsty? I am PARCHED.

Ahh...that’s better. Well, honestly, there’s not much more I can tell you. Me and Jamie went on shift just like usual, and Camille was a bitch just like usual. Jamie said her keys were in her locker at the end of the night just like usual. She went home and it was all totally normal. No Bobby, no blood, nothing. ‘Just like usual,’ you’re exactly right.

Hmmm? You know, I guess I DON’T really know any of the details, now that you mention it. I mean, I never saw Bobby get shot. I never saw Dutch leave town. I don’t even know Dutch’s real name! I probably couldn’t even pick him out of a crowd if I had to. I’m sorry, kid. The truth is, I’m not really that great a source, when it comes right down to it. I got to be honest, kid: I smoke an awful lot of weed.

Hey, thanks for the drinks, though! You're a real sweetheart. Oh, no, I'm sorry, kid, but I gotta go - my ride's here, I can see him over there at the end of the bar. I wish I had more to tell you. I hope I haven't wasted your time. Oh, yes: family.

My point, kid, is that family looks out for each other. Even the assholes. Even the ones you wish you weren't related to. No, it's not 'chosen family' any more than blood is. There's no choice - you belong to the people you belong to, that's all. You think that bitch Camille didn't figure things out eventually? She's a bitch, not an idiot. But she's never said shit, has she? I bet when you called, she turned you down cold, didn't she? Don't get embarrassed! It's not like we're going steady, kid - I don't need to be your first choice.

Thanks again for the drinks. Hey, I'm sorry, but I told you everything I know. Why don't you interview somebody else who was there? Look at your face! They ALL turned you down cold, I knew it! Oh, no? 'One more'? Oh, no, I'm sorry, I don't actually know his last name, but you don't need it anyway - you want to talk to Andrew, he's sitting right over there, end of the bar. He's my ride."

## **Martha Stallman**

Pushcart prize nominee Martha Stallman's work has appeared in *The James Joyce Quarterly*, *Joyce Studies Annual*, *The Offing*, *Electric Literature*, and *Playboy*. She lives and writes in Austin, Texas.

## In Lieu of Flowers Send Help

by Belle Stanfield

There's something heavy in your chest, something where your heart should be, something where your heart once was. It's not empty, that cavity is filled with... you didn't need to know, not *now* at least.

“I like you.” His tone is charming, or at least meant to charm. It makes that something in your chest swell to an uncomfortable point. “You're so agreeable.” Something itches at your collar. His agile fingers remove a cigarette from their silver case. He lights it, your entirety flinching. Tensed to the point of snapping fresh bone. Can you feel your bones now? “Oh I'm sorry. I didn't even bother to ask. Would you like one?” he holds out his lighter. You shake your head furiously. “That's very good of you. These things can kill, you know.” He sucks in a breath and breathes it out. The smoke sticks in places you didn't used to have. He smiles and your palms are wet, not with sweat, *something*. It feels grimy drying on your hands, like vinegar. The air reeks of tobacco and... you recall dissecting frogs in middle school. How you were the only one willing to actually cut into its flesh. How the others squealed. How the boys tossed the parts about, no respect for the dead. The man, the suited man, doesn't seem like the type to do such a thing. No, no he was the kid who chose to do it alone. The kid whose scalpel went missing. You feel odd, as though you are both watching yourself from beyond your body, and somehow, from within it as well. The smoke clings to your dampened hands, and you find yourself shaking them out, the smoke morphing the liquid into something akin to molasses. But molasses was sweet. Was this sweet? You try to wipe it off, but it's stuck

on whatever the space where your lungs once were is filled with. You pull away violently, and it feels as though you've plucked feathers from your flesh. Did you used to have feathers? You can't remember. Come to think of it, you can't remember much of anything before him. His eyes are intriguing, you find as a sticky hand reaches for him. His hair is slicked back like a lawyer's, or *the Devil's*, in whatever versions of him they make human. He sets his cigarette in an ashtray beside his chair and leans forward. "*Do you know what you are?*" he asks, voice is clipped now, odd, vaguely imperial in a way you can't quite define. You open your mouth and find it dry, your tongue plush and heavy. He leans further forward, and you're taken aback. A desperate breath is pulled through your nostrils, and your eyes widen as you sneeze violently. Were you allergic to hay...or straw? *Was it more than the hay...straw?* You glance down to your chest, and whatever was poking out of the incisions there, right down the sternum, sewn back together delicately, was certainly one or the other, you could never tell. There's an overpowering stench of flowers in the air, like walking into a florist's on Valentine's Day. This place, though, it doesn't seem fitting to be thinking about *Valentine's Day* here. When you finally manage to glance back up, the cigarette's just leaving his mouth again, trailed by smoke. "You know, I really shouldn't," he mutters with a sigh. "What, with the mercury and the formaldehyde, the risk is even worse, but..." he cocks his head, observing you with a sly grin before setting his cigarette aside and pulling at the *straw? hay?* sticking from your chest. That plucked feather feeling returns, and you yelp. "Apologies about this, there were so many of you after the crash. Can you believe we *ran out of newspaper?* Besides, it wouldn't be right for you anyway. What with you being on the front page and all. It's almost a bit cannibalistic, isn't it? To so fully consume your image, *burn* with it?" he asks, you flinch. "Still nervous about that bit, are you?" He finally bothers to stamp out the embers of

his cigarette. “Consider it practice.” You think he’s joking, morbidly, but you can’t tell.

It’s almost funny, isn’t it? To not know someone who knows *you* so *intimately*. That bit doesn’t bother you, no, it’s his *eyes*. They’re hungry, but not in an ambitious manner. Your jaw aches, sticking a bit, as you try to open it. “I don’t want anything from you, not anymore,” he interrupts your attempt. “You know, I knew it was fate, you and I. Just never thought it would be so fitting. This profession— This *life* is done more for the service it is to the public. It’s not very glamorous, not like you. They wanted an open casket, you know. I refused. You’re really not supposed to do that, but I worked much too hard to put you back together for *them* to see it— *you*.” Your eyes widen, and you want to retreat. Flee to anywhere, but your limbs will not move, matter not how desperate you are to escape. “Don’t worry, your mother insisted on cremation, if not a burial. You’ll rest...eventually. Now, though, well the incinerators are a bit busy with the others, so it’s just *us*.”

A scream does not escape you. It can’t.



## **Belle Stanfield**

Belle "Toast" Stanfield is a queer writer in Missouri exploring the intersection of horror and romance in their work. Their audio drama *The Voicemail Box Is Full*, a horror podcast told through voicemails left to the protagonist, is available wherever you find podcasts.



# **Body Without Organs**

written by Dia VanGuntén

illustrated by Beppi

# BODY WITHOUT ORGANS

STACY DIA VAN GUNTEN  
THE BEPPE

IN THE OILY SOIL BENEATH THE OVERPASS, GUTTERED WITH GLASS, & LITTERED WITH PLASTIC, TWO WILD DOGS SCRAP OVER YOUR HEART WHICH YOU MEANT TO BURY VERY DEEP IN CASE YOU WANTED TO GO BACK FOR IT,



BUT YOU WERE DISTRACTED BY THE MATHEMATIC-RACKET COMING OFF THE RIVER, WHICH YOU NEVER LIKED NUMBERS WHEN YOU WERE ALIVE BUT NOW THEY'RE EVERYWHERE & YOU REALIZE YOU MUST'VE BEEN WRONG WHEN YOU TOOK MRS. WHAT'S-HER-NAME THAT NUMBERS HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH NUTHIN, BUT ALSO IT WAS THE SMARTEST THING YOU EVER SAID, AS IT TURNS OUT, BECAUSE IT'S VERY HARD FOR NOTHING TO EXPRESS ITSELF WITHOUT NUMBERS PILED UP SO HIGH, A MOUNTAIN OF STINKING BODIES & THEN THE RIGHT OR WRONG NUMBER COMES ALONG & TO TIP THE WHOLE THING TO SHIT, SET IT AFIRE OR FEED IT TO YOU IN SOME WILD RITUAL OF CANNIBALISM



& ALL YOU CAN DO IS STAND ON THE BRIDGE, & PLACE BETS ON WHICH DOG WILL WIN THE MEAT THAT USED TO BEAT INSIDE YOUR CHEST. YOU CHEER AS THEY TEAR EACH OTHER TO SHREDS & BLEED INTO THAT OILY SOIL



HUMPRUMP HUMP  
RUMP HUMP RUMP  
HUMPHUMP HUMP HUMPHUMPHUMP  
HUMMITY HUMMITY  
NUMHUM RUM  
RUMP RUMP PUNK PUNK  
PUNK

OVER THE METAL GRATING & THEN THE DOG WITH THE MISSING EAR EATS YOUR AORTA & SUDDENLY IT'S BACK IN YOUR CHEST.

THERE TIMES NOW YOU'VE THROWN YOUR GALLBLADDER INTO THE DETROIT RIVER, FLOATING IN A POP BOTTLE WITH A CAP THAT COULD'VE WON SOMEONE \$10,000 IF THEY'D BOTHERED TO LOOK ON THE UNDERSIDE BEFORE TOSSING IT OUT THE WINDOW OF A SPEEDING CAR,

IT'S TOO LATE FOR YOU BECAUSE MONEY MEANS NOTHING TO THE DEAD SO YOU LIQUEFY YOURSELF FROM THE INSIDE & PEE YOUR GALLBLADDER INTO THE BOTTLE & YOU WHOOP AS IT'S SWEEPED INTO THE CURRENT, FLOWING AWAY FROM YOU, BUT YOU FIND YOURSELF DOWNRIVER WITH A SCARRED GALLBLADDER, BECAUSE THE CAT IS ALIVE OR NOT, NO ONE IS SURE UNTIL THEY OPEN THE BOX, BUT THE CAT COMES BACK, VERY NEXT DAY, SO YOU STRAP YOUR GALLBLADDER TO A CEMENT BLOCK & YOU PRACTICALLY COME WHEN IT SINKS INTO THE MUCK.

YOU'RE SURE HE'S A GONER BUT

THE CAT COMES BACK,

AS STINKING SLUDGE ON THE INSIDE OF A WASHED UP TIRE WHICH YOU ROLL DOWN THE ROAD FOR 3 MILES & THROW FROM A BRIDGE. BUT HE JUST CAN'T STAY AWAY, THE CAT KEEPS REMEMBERING ITSELF.

YOU'RE THE GUY NAILED TO THE ROCK, YOU GOT AN EAGLE THAT PECKS YOUR LIVER BUT SOON AS THE SUN RISES THE LIVER GROWS BACK FOR A NEW

PECK PECK PECK PECK  
WRECK WRECK PECK PECK  
PECK PUNK PUNK

OR MAYBE YOU'RE THE OTHER GUY WITH THE ROCK, ALL HE DOES IN LIFE IS PUSH THE ROCK UP A HILL BUT ALWAYS AT THE TOP, THAT ROCK ROLLS BACK, BOWLS HIM OVER, & HE'S FLAT LIKE WILE E. COYOTE ON THE ASPHALT BUT HE PEELS UP LIKE A COLORFORM & GETS BACK AT IT, ONE BREATH TO THE NEXT, TWO ROLLING BOULDERS.



IN THE OVEN

THE DOCTOR'S  
ENTERS  
TO THE NURSE,  
CALL WOUND  
CARE, FILE FOR  
EMERGENCY  
HOLD.

IT GETS VERY COMPLEX, A SACRED  
GEOMETRY, ENDLESS REPETITION OF  
CHERRIES & CRUST,  
NOSTRILS FLARE WHEN HE  
THE EXAM ROOM.

TO YOU, HELLO SANDRA,  
WE CAN SEE YOU,  
JUST SO YOU KNOW.

NO,  
YOU CAN'T

YOU'D THINK DEATH  
WOULD BE PEACEFUL

BUT IT'S WILD IN A WAY YOU COULD NEVER  
IMAGINE, EVEN IF WHATS-HER-NAME HAD  
ASSIGNED IT AS A SUBJECT, YEA, YOU COULD WRACK YOUR BRAIN & LET THE GOBLINS  
LOOSE TO REALLY RANSACK THE WHOLE SCENARIO & YOU'D PROBABLY COME UP WITH  
SOME WACKY SHIT IF YOU DUG DEEP INTO THE JUNGIAN STRATA, DOWN TO THE  
HYPEROBJECTS & THE FORMATIVE WEIRDNESS & THE SUPPRESSED MEMORIES &  
THE NIGHT TERRORS WHERE YOU LEFT YOUR BODY & FLOATED AROUND THE HOUSE  
ONLY TO SEE THINGS NO CHILD SHOULD EVER SEE

& IT'S YOU

ALL GROWN UP WITH A LIGHT  
BOX, A TV FOR YOUR LAP, & INSIDE, IT'S JUST PEOPLE RUTTING  
LIKE ANIMALS IN SCREAMING, CREAMING FITS OF ORGASTIC EXCESS, BUT THAT'S  
NOT ENOUGH FOR YOU, IT'S ALWAYS MORE MORE MORE, SO YOU TYPE IN HORSE TO SEE  
PEOPLE ON ALL FOURS WITH TAILS IN THEIR ASSES

THEN

YOU TAKE IT FURTHER,  
YOU GOTTA SEE A MAN GET REAMED BY A  
HORSE FOR REAL, THE ONE WHO DIED BECAUSE  
THE HORSE TORE HIM UP INSIDE, & THE FACT THAT  
HE'S DEAD MAKES IT HOTTER BUT YOU'RE  
ASHAMED WHEN YOUR WIFE CONFRONTS YOU SO  
YOU LET HER CHALK IT UP TO CHILDHOOD TRAUMA  
BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT THE KIND OF PERSON  
WHO WANTS A MAN TO DIE FROM  
INTERNAL HEMMORRAGE JUST FOR  
KICKS, YOU'RE THE DAMAGED SOUL WHO  
WANTS TO SEE A MAN DIE IN A HUMAN  
PUDDLE, BITS OF INTESTINES & BLOOD & STOOL, &  
EVERYBODY IN THE WORLD KNOWS THAT THE MAN DID  
THAT TO HIMSELF BECAUSE HIS DESIRE TO BE TAKEN  
OVER BY SOMETHING LARGER THAN HIMSELF WAS  
TURNING HIM INSIDE OUT LIKE THOSE RUBBER  
TUBE TOYS FROM CEDAR POINT, FLUID-FILLED SACS,  
SLIPPERY BASTARDS, ALWAYS SLIPPING INSIDE OF THEMSELVES  
& COMING OUT OF THEMSELVES & AS A CHILD YOU WON ONE FROM  
THE CARNIVAL BARKER WHO COULDN'T GUESS YOUR AGE  
BECAUSE YOU WERE STUNTED FROM ONLY EATING MASHED POTATOES & FRUIT LOOPS.

FOR A YEAR OR SO, AS A VERY SMALL, FERAL, HUNGRY, TREE CLIMBING KNEE SKINNED NUDIST-CLUB FOUNDER, POEM EATER, MASTURBATOR OF 8 YEARS, WELL YOU WERE WISE, BUT YOUR BRAIN WAS THE FIRST ORGAN YOU BURIED BECAUSE A GIRL IS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE SMART. SURE, SHE SHOULD GET GOOD GRADES & EARN SATIN RIBBONS & USE PUNCTUATION & DO HER LETTERS WITH CURLY CUES & YOU DO ALL OF THAT BUT, IN YOUR HEART, YOU KNOW THEY ARE WASTING YOUR TIME. THEY ARE MAKING YOU OUT & PASTE, THEY ARE SAYING IF YOU HAVE 67 HEARTS, HOW MANY DOGS WILL LOSE HOW MANY EARS OVER HOW MANY YEARS & HOW MANY TIMES WILL YOU BURY THE MUSHY ORGAN?



IT IS ENOUGH TO HOLD THAT ORGAN IN YOUR HAND, THAT PLASTIC TUBE THAT ATE ITSELF & SHIT ITSELF & SWALLOWED & SUCKED & FUCKED ITSELF & THAT'S ALL THE TOY DID BUT YOU COULDN'T PUT IT DOWN BECAUSE YOU KNEW IN YOUR SOUL THAT IT WAS THE VERY HEART OF THE MATTER, THE SECRET OF THE UNIVERSE.

SANDRA, THIS INFECTION AFFECTS YOUR PARIETAL LOBE WHICH IS THE PHYSICAL EXPLANATION FOR YOUR EXPERIENCE AS DEAD BUT TRUST US, YOU ARE ALIVE, NOW, IT'S NOT UNCOMMON WHEN A PATIENT IS EXPERIENCING NEGATION FOR THEM TO

IDENTIFY AS UNDEAD, AS A ZOMBIE OR A GHOST.

HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY?

THE SECOND DOCTOR SMILED - WE'VE EVEN MET A FEW VAMPIRES.

IN THE CORE OF YOUR BODY, THERE IS NOTHING, BUT THE THING NO ONE TELLS YOU ABOUT NOTHING IS HOW NOISY IT IS. THE SOUND IS SO MUCH THAT IT CAN ONLY BE SILENCE BECAUSE EVERYTHING IS NOTHING ONCE NUMBERS ARE UNTETHERED FROM DISCERNIBLE MATTER. THERE ARE SOUNDS YOU MISSED BEFORE, THAT RAVENOUS SLURPING, TREES PULLING SUNLIGHT INTO THEIR VEINS WITH THE SUCTION OF A BLACK HOLE WHO SWIRLS A STAR INTO ITS MAW, UNWINDING IT FROM ITSELF IN ONE UNCURLING THREAD.

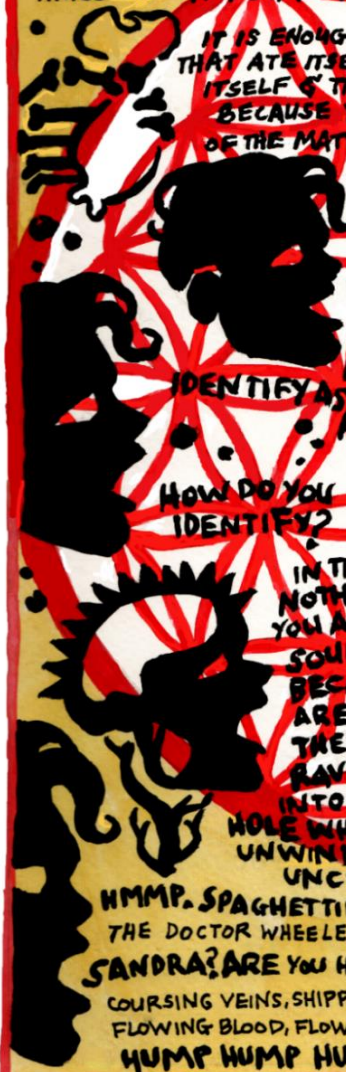
HMMP. SPAGHETTIFICATION, YES.

THE DOCTOR WHEELED CLOSER & LEANED IN TO WHISPER.

SANDRA? ARE YOU HEARING THE LOW LEVEL HISS OF PHOTOSYNTHESIS?

COURSING VEINS, SHIPPING LANES, FUNGAL PATHWAYS, NEURONAL NETWORKS, FLOWING BLOOD, FLOWING OIL, FLOWING DOLLARS..... LIGHT..... LIFE.....

HUMP HUMP HUMP PUNKITY PUNK PUNK.



6

YOU SCREAM:

SIR!  
YOU BITCH!  
YOU FILTHY  
BITCH!

YOUR WIFE  
SAYS:

WARNED  
YOU,  
SANDRA

THIS WOMAN WITH THE DIAMOND HITS YOU AGAIN, AN  
ARCHING SIZZLE, SATANIC TECHNOLOGY, & NOW THESE DOGS  
CATCHERS WITH THEIR NETS ARE CLOSING IN SO YOU FIGURE  
YOU MUST BE A FERAL DOG & YOU GO RABID, A FOAMING  
FOUNTAIN OF SNARLS, KICKING, LACES FLYING, THEN A SHOE,  
EXPOSING THAT ROTTEN FOOT, BIG TOE COOZING PUS & SWOLLEN  
UP LIKE A PEAR WHICH THE SMELL IS MORE POWERFUL THAN  
THE KICK SO YOU BREAK LOOSE & MAKE A RUN FOR IT BUT  
THAT PEAR TOE  
& MAGGOTS  
CRAWL OUT.

YOU HOLD  
UP YOUR HANDS -

POPS!  
OKAY, OKAY, I'LL GO. I TOLD YOU I'D GO.

THEY STRAP YOU INTO THE VAN & LOCK YOU DOWN WHICH  
FEELS GOOD FOR A MOMENT, RESTFUL, & YOU SLIP AWAY TO THE LIBRARY  
WHICH HAS BOOKS BUT NOBODY OPENS THEM, THEY JUST KNEEL BEFORE  
THE FOUNTAIN & ASK FOR PERMISSION TO DRINK & THE TREES CONSULT  
THE MUSHROOMS & SAY

WE WILL ALLOW THIS  
BUT NOT EVERYONE CAN  
WITHSTAND IT, SOME WILL BE  
EXPLODING PYTHONS

BUT THE KNEELERS KNOW THIS BECAUSE  
THEY'VE ALREADY EXPLODED 7000 TIMES.  
THEY STILL CUP THEIR HANDS & DRINK THE WATER  
THAT FLOWS DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN OF BOOKS.

IN A BACK ROOM THERE'S AN OPIUM DEN FOR  
THE MORE ADVANCED, WHERE YOU PLUG IN  
DIRECT, BUT YOU'RE NOT READY FOR THAT,  
YOU'RE SNIFFING THE NOOSPHERE LIKE  
GLUE, YOUR WIFE'S PANTIES AS THE RAG,  
THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE IS SHAPED LIKE A PENIS

BUT IT SMELLS LIKE PUSSY INSIDE,  
RIGHT AWAY YOU KNOW THE DEAL,  
YOU'RE NO DUMB DUM, THEY KNEW YOU  
WERE COMING & THEY ARE PUMPING  
THIS SCENT INTO YOUR BRAIN AS A METHOD  
TO REEL YOU BACK TO YOURSELF, IT COULD'VE BEEN  
CHERRY PIE, FOR OTHERS IT MIGHT BE, OR VANILLA  
COOKIES OR SUNDAY LASAGNA OR THE SCENT OF YOUR  
GRANDMOTHER IS PERFUME. THERE'S CHERRY PIE  
TOO, ACTUALLY, FROZEN CAUST, DAMPED CAN OF CHERRIES.



THE LUNGS HAVE TO GO, THOSE PHEGM FLECKED STONES, SO YOU TRAVEL BACK TO THE DESERTS OF PERSIA, BEFORE CHRIST, SINCE YOU'RE GETTING GOOD AT DEAD, & YOU MUST SURMISE THAT TIME IS ABSOLUTE UTTER NONSENSE, SO YOU WALK THE ANCIENT DESEAT UNTIL YOU COME UPON THE NYENIA, BUT BEFORE YOU CAN FEED THE ANIMAL YOUR LUNGS,

### FIRST,

YOU GOTTA EARN ITS TRUST BECAUSE THE BEAST IS SKITTISH & IT KNOWS ALL ABOUT MAGIC SO IT'S NOT FALLING FOR THE OLD LUNGS TRICK, IT'S NOT LOOKING TO BREATHE THE FUTURE, IT WOULD DIE OF SMOG RIGHT AWAY, OR WORSE IT WOULD BE INFECTED WITH A COMPUTER VIRUS, & YOU KNOW THIS BUT YOU DON'T CARE BECAUSE YOU'RE DESPERATE TO UNLOAD THESE LUNGS.

POOR HYENA HAS ENOUGH TROUBLE WITH THE GREEKS WHO WANNA SKIN HIM OR EAT HIS EYEBALLS OR TURN HIS ANUS INTO A POUCH FOR AMULETS BUT HE LIKES YOU, HYENA KNOWS A CORPSE WHEN HE SEES ONE SO HYENA COMES TO TRUST YA, ONCE YOU CLAW AT YOUR OWN DERMA & RIP AT YOUR RIBS & HAND FEED HIM THE MEAT, THOUGH YOU'VE BEEN WASTING, SO IT'S NOT MUCH, BUT IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS.

THE FUTURE IS HARD ON THE HYENA, YOU KNEW IT WOULD BE, BUT YOU WEREN'T EXPECTING IT TO BE SO GORY, THE HYENA'S SEIZING & RATTLING, WITH SUCH VELOCITY, SUCH TECHNOLOGY, THAT HIS BRAIN MELTS & DRIPS OUT OF HIS NOTRILS LIKE HOT LAVA, & THE HYENA IS VOMITING BLOOD & MICRO PLASTICS & A VALYRIAN SWORD ENGRAVED WITH GLITTERING GLYPHS & THE 16<sup>th</sup> SEASON OF GILMORE GIRLS & THE HYENA HAS ALPHABET NOW SO IT SCREAMS IN 700 LANGUAGES:

SIRI, ORDER THE DISH SOAP! SIRI, SIRI, HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME? IN RUSSIAN DOLL BOXES FROM AMAZON, OH GOD, SIRI, THAT FEELS GOOD, SIRI, SPIT IN MY MOUTH, SIT ON MY FACE, SIRI!

THE HYENA MOANS ECSTATICALLY, SWELLS, BULGES LIKE A PYTHON & EXPLODES IN A GOOFY QTY DUCKLINGS BORN OF MINED MOUNTAINS.  
WHO QUACK QUACK

IN ALGEBRAIC MADNESS, YOU GATHER BITS OF HYENA SKIN, EACH SHRED OF STRIPED FUR, AN AKASHIC RECORD, ONLY THE HYENA IS WHOLE AGAIN, BACK FOR MORE SUFFERING, ESOPHAGUS BLOCKED WITH A CROSSWAYS SHIP, A VIOLENT DEATH, ELECTRIC SPASMS.

**Dia VanGunten**

**and Beppi**

“Body Of Organs” is from The Undeads - a Collection of Pink Zombie Rose Comics, written by Dia and illustrated by Beppi. Known only as “Beppi” in the comicpedia, no last name needed, the artist has worked in comics, textiles, sculpture and fine arts. She explores culture and experiments with form. Dia does the same in her work. The author was a decade into Pink Zombie Rose when she realized she was writing a series of graphic novels. She went straight to Beppi.

To learn more about PZR,  
<https://www.instagram.com/pinkzombierose/>

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

To learn more about Beppi,  
<https://www.instagram.com/beppiisbert>

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

To learn more about Dia,  
[www.diavangunten.com](http://www.diavangunten.com)

(Dia is EIC of Cream Scene Carnival, @creamscenecarnival.  
Beppi is a curator for the magazine.)



## **HERBIE**

by Edward M Cohen

At the kitchen table, Bobby Bauman fixed a charm bracelet for his sister, freeing the delicate lock with eerie claws while Gloria and Herbie Levine stood silently by. Bobby chattered to Gloria as he fiddled with the tiny golden loops and Herbie grew so hypnotized that the fingernails lengthened before his eyes. They were as sharp and pointy as fangs, tinted pink by the strawberries on the oilcloth. Herbie had heard about a man who had killed a little girl by sticking his finger up her and now he understood how. Bobby's nail could push through the front, come out the back and the kid would be speared like shish kabob.

“C'mon Gloria,” Herbie whispered.

“Wait a minute, Herbie. I wanna see Bobby fix it.”

“It'll only take a sec, honey bunch.”

“We have to do our homework,” Herbie mumbled.

Gloria whirled on him angrily and cast her evil eye. She was a creepy looking kid – everybody in class said so – with wiry bangs, thick glasses, teeth latticed by shiny braces.

“If you're in such a hurry to do your homework, go home!”

“That's where homework's supposed to be done,” Bobby tittered.

“Nobody invited you anyway.”

“You've been here every day this week.”

“It’s Friday,” said Gloria. “I’ve got all weekend to do my homework.”

“She’ll probably get it done faster alone,” her brother concluded.

There was nobody in the world that Herbie hated more than Bobby Bauman. His voice was flutey. His lips were vividly pink. His hair was a carefully tended garden of curls. He was so skinny that his bony elbows cut scratches into the oilcloth, and he had a mysterious power over his sister so that, whenever Bobby was around, Gloria was transformed into a witch.

“It will take longer than a second and you know!” Herbie’s voice flew out octaves too high and trembled in air like a frightened bird.

“You’re a little bitch,” Bobby giggled to Gloria. “You shouldn’t treat what’s-his-name so mean.”

“Oh Bobby!”

“This little boy’s in love with you and you toss him over for a bracelet?”

“Oh Bobby! Not Herbie!”

Herbie felt tears bubble in his groin, causing a trembling of his hands, a quivering of his lips.

“You’re going to be a killer when you get older, honey bunch.”

“Oh Bobby!”

“Nobody has to teach you how to handle the fellas.”

“Oh Bobby!” Herbie screeched in mockery and Gloria kicked him in the shin.

“One thing you’ve got to remember about being a little girl, honey bunch.”

“What Bobby?” Gloria sucked on his words as if they were coated with chocolate.

“Little girl’s things are delicate and fragile and you’ve got to move delicate and fragile so you don’t get them as fucked up as this.”

“Oh Bobby!” Gloria screeched.

Disgusting pig. Herbie had heard all about little girl’s things being delicate and fragile and he knew exactly what Bobby meant. Herbie Levine was twelve years old and had written eff you see kay on the wall a couple of times and he had two or three stringy cock hairs, a skinny kid with a head so heavy with thoughts it looked like it would come tumbling right off his neck, but he pretended he hadn’t heard a word and kept his eyes glued to Bobby’s hands.

Gloria was doubled over with giggles, collapsed into a chair; legs sprawled before her so that anybody could see up her skirt. Now if Bobby were a real brother, Herbie thought, he’d smack her one. Instead he joined in her laughter, howling inanely over such a nothing that Herbie’s mouth grew dry with distaste and he had to turn away to gulp.

The bracelet had been tossed in the center of the table and Bobby wasn’t even trying to fix it. Slyly, Herbie reached for it, hoping to work magic with a flick of the finger while they were peeing in their pants, and by the time they got their eyes opened, he could have it around Gloria’s wrist and show her, once and for all, what a fairy Bobby was.

One thing Herbie knew for sure was that if you walked with your hips straight and carried your books under your arm instead of cupped in front of you like a girl, nobody could call you a fairy. Once his father had pointed out a mincing man in a shiny red toupee on the street, “Look Herbie, that’s a fairy,” and Herbie thought the same about Bobby.

“Don’t touch that bracelet!” Gloria shrieked, and suddenly both Baumans were silent, and Herbie was the only one laughing.

“I was going to fix it for you,” he snickered.

Gloria’s face was so tense that she barely moved her lips. For one startling moment Herbie thought the sound was coming from her crotch.

“Put it down this instant,” the wet slit growled.

“C’mon Glo. Cut it out. You sound like Dracula.”

“You can leave right now, fresh mouth, and don’t bother coming back.”

Maybe Bobby was a ventriloquist and this wasn’t Gloria at all, but a dummy. He had seen it in the movies.

“I’ve been meaning to get rid of you for months.”

“Gloria!” He didn’t want to giggle but fear stuck little pins in his balls and laughter was the only alternative to tears.

“If you think it’s so funny, I mean it. Get out!”

“Gloria!” His giggles were shredding into whimpers. “You’re my only friend. Where do you want me to go?”

Every afternoon, they did their homework together and traded movie star photos and sometimes they sneaked into her parents’ room where Gloria fooled around with her mother’s make-up and earrings, and once, just as a gag, they had both slipped into skirts and sweaters and paraded around the house like sisters.

“Gloria, you’re my only friend...” she mocked. “How do you like being made fun of, Dracula?”

“I’m sorry I made fun of you, Gloria. I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry.”

“You made fun of me in my own house. You touched things you weren’t supposed to. When I asked you to leave, you didn’t go. This is my house and Bobby’s house. This is not your house.”

He felt his world falling into tatters, as if she were stripping him before the class. He folded his hands over his fly and the bracelet dangled between his legs. He had forsaken everyone for Gloria. The boys did not want to play with him. The girls whispered as he passed.

“Just take your books and go, Herbie Levine.”

“Please Gloria,” he whimpered as he clamped his books under his arm. It was so uncomfortable that way. He wished he could cup them in front like she did.

“Drop the bracelet, Herbie. Don’t you dare try to steal it.”

**“I WAS GOING TO FIX IT AND PROVE WHAT A FAIRY BOBBY IS!”**

He knew as his lips framed the sentence, that he should not say it and there was one second while the sound was still mid-air, before it had reached Gloria’s ears, when he thought he could lunge after and gobble it down. Instead the statement hit with deadly aim and a purple patch of anger popped through her skin like a wound. She rushed at him in a whirlwind of arms and legs, hair, skirt, eyeballs flying, sailing across the room with a screech. He still had the bracelet dangling when her fingernails tore into his skin and streaks of blood, like the paths of two teardrops, formed on his cheeks.

Somehow he made it out into the hallway, but as soon as the door had slammed behind him, he let his books fall to the floor – papers, pencils, rubber bands floating – and pressed his flaming cheeks to the wall. Pain nibbled at his face like an army of bees and he was tempted to dig his fingers into



the cuts and rip the skin from his bones, but suddenly Gloria flung the door open.

“And don’t hang around the hallway! The neighbors will talk. Get your books off the floor and get out!”

SLAM.

When he looked down he saw that he had wet his pants, and what should have been tears had darkened his trouser leg and was dripping from his sock onto the polished floor. He gathered his books together and used a starched piece of notebook paper to wipe up the wetness, although the smell of it burned his eyes and his fingers got sticky and moist.

Gloria the bitch had turned on the radio in the apartment to let him know that she didn’t give a damn and he limped down the corridor, trying to keep his wet leg from contact with his wet pants, gingerly holding the wet paper between his wet fingers. She was sure to find out. She was sure to smell it. Someone would see him. The neighbors would talk. The whole school would know how Herbie Levine had peed in Gloria Bauman’s corridor.

He threw the paper down the hallway incinerator but could not go home with moisture oozing under his balls. Thank goodness, Gloria lived on the top floor and the roof landing offered privacy. He slithered into the stairway and crept up the steps. The unshielded overhead bulb blinded him. The machinery in the elevator room thumped like his heart. The icy banister burned his palm.

Only half a flight up, the dark door to the roof loomed above him like a cop, white squinting eyes flashing messages, “TRESPASSING ON THE ROOF ABSOLUTELY FORBIDDEN,” broken teeth grinning threats, “VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED.” The wide, flat belly was littered with tattoos: “H.L. loves B.F.” “The Blue Devils suck!” “Margaret Hawk is a good lay.” If

the cops found you on the roof, they took you to the precinct house, locked you in a barrel and fucked your ass without telling your mother where you were for days. But one twist of the doorknob and he would be flung into limitless sky. His smell would evaporate and he could breathe and be free from the pulsing of the elevator which jammed in his head like fingers fucking his ears.

He resisted, squeezing his body into the corner of the landing and sinking to the floor, dropping his books one by one as his hands grew limp. On the wall opposite him was a drawing which he first thought was somebody's illegible script, maybe a message about himself, and his eyes plucked at each line until it dawned on him that it was a picture of a cock and cunt.

Once, he had asked his mother what sex was all about.

"You tell me what you know," she had said, "and I'll tell you if it's right."

Well, he had told her he knew eff you see kay and his tongue had stuck to his palate.

"What's that?" she had asked, and he had made a gesture with his fingers, one hand a circle and the other a pointer and the pointer jammed into the circle.

"That's right," his mother had said.

He was well known at school because he wanted to be an actor and had the lead in all the plays and, whenever the boys wanted to know what the local movie was about, they consulted Herbie. He read all the reviews, could outline the stories, and they respected his judgement, but when he advised it and they decided to go, they made complicated plans to meet which never included him.

The only friend he had ever had was Gloria whose favorite actress was also June Allyson, who had never called

him names and didn't care whether he could hit a ball or not. When they had lain on her bed playing Wedding with their photos, they would marry June Allyson to Van Johnson and Gloria's skirt had sometimes hitched all the way up to her crotch, but Herbie had not blushed because he had felt so happy and safe.

That was all over since she had turned into Bette Davis and he would become famous and have her killed, keep her corpse in the cupboard until his Academy Awards party, serve her toes on toothpicks as hors d'oeuvres and her nipples in the martinis for olives.

Gloria was dead already, as far as he was concerned, sprawled before him on the playground cement, her legs torn from her body, her head smashed open and her brains oozing along the ground. They had been playing on the swings together, he imagined, and in an effort to outdo him, she had stood up to go high and, winking at Bobby who had been urging her on, she had screamed, "You can't beat this, fuckface Levine!" and a huge wind had swept her off the swing so she landed on the pavement with a thud; one eye popping straight out of her head and everyone had come running to see. Herbie could look right up her skirt at the dangling nerves and torn skin and he had laughed because the flying moment of terror had made her wet her pants.

He rested his head against the wall in an effort to breathe because the fantasy had given him a hard-on. He whispered to himself to relax but did not know where to look as his eyes bounced from corner to corner of the tiny cubicle, message to message, cock to cunt, floor to ceiling without finding a haven.

The walls surrounding him were pigeon-shit green, the floor was bathroom white tile. The landing itself was just about the size of one fat ass between the door and the metal steps with sharp ridges. Ciggie Moriello brought his girls

here to fuck and Herbie wondered how they did it without enough room to stretch out.

He tried shutting his eyes but there was Gloria, digging her heels into his eyeballs, only ass backwards like a photo negative, her skin black, bangs white, white-formerly black braces looking like jagged fangs.

“You made fun of me in my own house. You touched things you weren’t supposed to. When I asked you to leave, you didn’t go. This is my house and Bobby’s house. This is not your house.”

The bitch could be burned alive and he would touch whatever he wanted. He unzipped his pants and the reek of piss hit him like two wads of cotton being shoved up his nostrils.

“You can leave right now, fresh mouth. And don’t bother coming back.”

Nobody ever came up to the roof. You weren’t allowed. You’d have to be crazy to walk this far. Occasionally, he heard the stairway being used on the lower floors, from first to second, second to first, up and down, in and out, moving in rhythm to the elevator pump. He felt like he had a tommy gun in his hand as he moved it up and down, the crust of dried piss crackling on his skin.

He was safe up here at the top of the world, all emotion soaring into his prick. Up and down. In and out. The sudden icy touch of the zipper against the flame in his hand sent a shiver through his limbs. They said you could go blind and if that happened he’d have to stumble down the stairs in terrifying blackness, zipper open, shlang exposed, to knock on Gloria’s door.

“Herbie Levine, did you pee in my hallway?”

“Gloria, I’m blind. Help me. I’m blind.”

It was so private on the roof landing that you could unscrew the bulb from the socket if you wanted to steal it. Screw and unscrew, blinding light then blackness, nobody gave a damn. All noise was muffled by the clanging elevator, moaning like one of Ciggie's girls. After he fucked them, he made them suck. And after they sucked, he would never kiss them on the lips again. That was the code of the Blue Devils, who had once hired a redheaded whore for two dollars each and humped her one after the other, right here in the roof stairwell, the line stretching down to the eleventh floor.

Herbie had heard about it in the locker room at school, rushing into his jockstrap so that nobody could see his dipsy-doodle, but through the forest of his terror he had picked up the outline of the story which Morty Schwartz, running his hands through blond pubic hair, had been telling to Harold Klein.

Herbie had seen Ciggie on the street afterward, perpetual cigarette stuck behind his ear, and he had stared with such awe, so lost in the boy's arrogant body, that he had forgotten about the green traffic light and let it turn red again. Ciggie had tossed a hand over his crotch and yelled across the street, "Wanna suck?" and Herbie had dashed into the path of a car which had screeched in his ear, but not louder than Ciggie's laugh.

Herbie had avoided Ciggie from then on but stories of his exploits still scurried through the locker room, giving Herbie a double reason for hating gym, the undressing and the gossip, and he was forever bringing in notes because of sprained ankles, sore throats, stomach aches.

"Dear Mr. Singer: Please excuse Herbert Levine from gym today. He jerked off in Gloria Bauman's stairwell and now he is blind."

Herbie had asked his father at the beginning of the term whether a jockstrap was necessary. Couldn't he just wear jockey shorts?

“How could you be so stupid? Don't you know what a jockstrap is for?”

The wispy gray hairs had danced on his father's head and giggled like girls over Herbie's stupidity. The old fart had shoved his face into the newspaper to snicker in secret and Herbie's tongue had flipped backward and jammed in his throat. He had pretended to laugh but tears must have welled in his eyes because his mother had said not to worry, she would go to the drugstore and buy it for him. Size Small.

Such memories closed in on him in the roof stairwell and all the messages crept across the wall like roaches. His grip had rubbed through a piece of skin and his cock felt like it was caught in the zipper but no release was in sight. He scanned the floor for remnants of Ciggie – used scumbags, drippings of blood, torn panties – and grew suddenly frightened that he would get V.D. from sitting on the floor.

He hopped up and spread his legs wide, arched his back and pressed his pelvis forward, but his hand began to ache and it was useless, like always. You were supposed to end up with a white milky substance at the end of your piss. It happened to other boys who talked about it in the locker room, running their hands through blond public hair, but it had never happened to Herbie.

Every night, he twisted for hours, waiting for his parents to stop fighting and fall asleep, and finally, when his father's snores floated through the apartment, he would try until his cock got itchy and red. But nothing ever happened except that he ended up crying, which he could not do now because of the cuts on his face.

In burning agony, he pissed over the floor, hoping it would drip through, onto Gloria in her bed. He limped down all twelve flights, clutching the twirling banister, but the pain between his legs intensified as he descended, and on the seventh floor, it got so itchy that he had to stop and unzip his pants to see what was wrong.

He reached the lobby, dry though sticky. If he walked slowly, with his body slightly bent to lessen the pressure on his groin, he could make it home, armload of books and all, and if his mother was busy in the kitchen and did not question his mumbled greeting, he could slide past her and drop into bed. But he had two bloody scars on his cheeks which she was sure to notice and he would have to say that some kid had called him “kike” so he had been forced to fight, which would make his father proud.

The Levines, the Baumans and sixteen hundred other families lived in a city housing project called Manhattan Village and all the buildings surrounded a courtyard that looked like a Hollywood set. Quaint streetlamps and bird cages, narrow walks of cobblestone lined an elaborate garden which Herbie circled to get from the Baumans’ building to his own. In the movies, Gene Kelly would dance here, rosebuds would burst into ballerinas and birds would beat out rhythms with their beaks. But as Herbie waded through the hot summer air, his vision fogged by shame, he felt only the thirty two hundred eyes of sixteen hundred mothers upon him.

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Esther Levine was in the kitchen, cooking her Friday night chicken which would turn out shrunken in its greasy, pimply skin, yellow the color of her tiny hands. She was meant to be delicate, barely five feet tall with small fine features, but

excess weight bloated her and she looked like a swollen midget.

Age and worry had mildewed her coloring. Her complexion had coarsened and even the gray in her hair was sickly yellow. When she ladled the chicken onto the plate, Herbie would notice that its wrinkled skin was the same as his mother's hands and the picture would make him sick with grief. He would whine his Friday night lament. Why did she have to boil it? Fatty and slimy so that even after you peeled off the skin, white ooze coated the meat. She would bite her lip and shrug her eyebrows and plead that Daddy liked it that way because his mother had made it like that from year one.

Daddy came home late on Friday nights because the barber shop was open till ten and he gulped down the chicken so noisily that Herbie could hear the pimples pop in the next room. His mother stood in the archway watching Daddy eat, shoveling him seconds and leftovers. The meaty bones from Herbie's meal were sucked free by his father. The crusts of Herbie's bread were used to mop the fat from Daddy's plate, over and over round the smooth surface.

The radio was on and she was humming along.

*Happy talk, keep talking happy talk*

*Talk about things you'd like to do*

Thank goodness her back was to him and the music was so loud she hadn't heard him enter. Why did she wear that torn housedress, hem hanging loose, stockings rolled round her ankles, bunny shoes on? When Herbie was little – they had pictures of him in the album – golden blond, pretty as a girl, climbing a ladder naked, he had had a pair of bedroom slippers shaped like bunnies and the childish name had stuck even though his mother's were ratty terry cloth ones that flapped against her chicken skin heels.



They lived in an apartment with flowered covers on the chairs and the couch. On top of the rug, Mrs. Levine kept plastic runners. On top of the lampshades, cellophane. It was like living inside a huge scumbag. On top of the furniture covers, she kept doilies so people wouldn't get their oily heads on them but Mr. Levine was bald, Herbie had dry hair and she always sat on the edge of chairs and never put her head back.

Once Morty Schwarz, on a rare visit enforced by a school committee report, had dirtied the doily and she had made him sit up straight and Morty had said, "Goodbye Mrs. Levine. I'm sorry I got your doily oily," as he ran giggling from the house to tell the whole school.

*You've got to have a dream*

*If you don't have a dream*

*How you gonna have a dream come true?*

She was bending over the stove, lumpy ass outlined through the thin dress. She was only thirty seven, as old as Myrna Loy, and he begged her to wear high heels and nice clothes, to dye her hair and cover the yellow gray, but she always answered, "Herbie, I'm not a spring chicken." Golden, firm, crisp in contrast to the boiled chicken she was.

He tried to remember her as a young woman, walking with him down a tree-lined Bronx boulevard. He was very small and her handclasp was so reassuring that the trees seemed to arch over them as they passed. Her wedding photos were in the album, faded purple proofs stamped "Return to Photographer" and the final color portrait. Other pictures revealed her as a loving mother with lips pursed in a secret smile, her chestnut hair dotted with sparkles. She was thin then with only a shy girlish roundness to her breasts and a warm firmness to her arms.

He had no recollection of being nestled in those young arms, of being fondled by those carefully tended fingernails. He wished he could recall her feeding him, helping him to walk, teaching him to speak. In the Bronx, she had told him, she used to take him into bed every morning after his father had left for work and his body ached for a memory of her thighs.

She always said she had been happy in the Bronx before his selfish father had moved them to the Lower East Side to be closer to the barber shop. Manhattan Village had been built in the midst of slum – dirty, tense, ugly – and she had hated it from the start. The first day she had taken him to his new school in Manhattan, she had seen a dead rat in the garbage.

He wished she would look up from the stove and that she would be pretty again, the way she had been in the Bronx.

“Ma, I’m home,” he said as he turned to the window to hide his bloody scars.

“Oh my goodness, I didn’t hear you come in. I must be getting deaf. I had my head so far in, cleaning that damn oven. You know how important the oven is, compared with my son coming home. I don’t have to tell you, do I, Herbie?” She flicked off the radio, sat at the table and he could feel her expectant smile biting into his back. “Herbie, come talk.”

Each day, they dreamed together, shared their troubles, cursed out his father in muffled whispers. Hand in hand, while supper simmered, they consoled each other for the miseries of the present and plotted the glorious future. He would become a big star. She would leave Daddy and come live with him in Bel-Air. He would have his nose fixed, his teeth capped, change his name to Herbie Ellis. On the night of the Academy Awards, he would say, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I owe this great honor to only one person – my

mother.” He had practiced it for her a hundred times and they always ended up giggling, hugging and eventually crying.

“You’re home early. Supper isn’t going to be for hours. What time is it, anyway? I get so lost in this house, the days fly by and I don’t know the difference between morning and night. You’ll never last till supper, Herbie. You must be starved to come home this early. I’ll fix you chocolate milk. You must be famished. Herbie, are you famished? Come talk to me.” These hours when she was alone with her Herbie, he had heard it over and over, these were the most precious moments of her day. “Herbie, come talk.”

He touched the ugly cuts on his cheeks and his fingers curled with shame. A desire to confess heated his mouth but he slid out a lie that he knew would be like a sharp knife to her breast.

“I have to do my homework.”

“Sometimes, when I’m alone in the house, I hear everything. Too much. Too much is worse than nothing. I hear doors slamming, people walking in the hallway, the elevator running up and down. I try to block out the sounds so I shouldn’t be bothered and then something really happens like you come home early and I don’t hear the door slam.”

“I have to do my homework,” he blurted as he raced, face averted, to his own room.

“Somebody in this building has a dog. That’s not allowed, and if I was a big mouth, I’d report it. It’s got me coming and going so I try not to listen. Someday, there’ll be a fire and they’ll all scream up, “Mrs. Levine, Mrs. Levine! Jump from the window!” but I’ll be trying so hard to block out the crazy noises, I’ll end up a pile of ashes.”

She stood outside his door and scratched at the wood and he prayed for her to go away so he could change clothes without her barging in on him with his underpants about his

knees. She was always peeking into the bathroom while he was perched on the toilet. “You were so quiet, I got worried.” She came to look at his body in the tub to make sure he had scrubbed all over and he had to cover his cock with a washcloth.

“Maybe I should get myself a bird. I could tell it my troubles and teach it to talk. It would sing all day and call me “Mama” and I’d have something to listen to besides the crazy sounds.”

He tiptoed to the closet and withdrew his woolen robe, which was so old it reached only to his knees and was tight around the armpits but he loved it anyway. He wore it when he was sick so it smelled of tea and toast, daytime radio shows and sympathy. Sometimes, when he was alone, he made believe it was a dress. Did she, with her X-Ray vision, know that? Did she know that he wrapped his bed sheet around him, tight about the titties so that it fell to the floor, draped the sheer window curtain over his face and played Bride?

“The neighbors downstairs fight day and night. I never heard such cursing in my life. Children come and go, visitors, mah jongg clubs, husbands beat their wives. Other things too, you’d be surprised. Even a fight is better than silence, but the cursing makes my ears bleed. In the Bronx, I used to look out the window but here it makes me sick. Herbie, are you there?”

“I’m here, Ma.”

He slipped the robe over his clothes and, beneath its warm cover, pulled off his trousers and shorts. He fell onto the bed, primly closing the robe around him in case she should invade.

“In the winter, it’s bad enough with the garbage tossed on the snow, but now it’s nearly summer, they’re all sitting

on the fire escapes and you look on the streets and see nothing but legs hanging and naked arms and people so close together you never know what's going on."

"I don't know what going on, Ma."

"You're goddamn right," she answered.

He reached for the movie magazine on his end table and flipped through articles he had already memorized, fondling the slick faces of stars he liked, bending the pages this way and that, searching for a third dimension to see if he could look further into Ava Gardner's neckline, past the bottom limits of a shot of Burt Lancaster in the shower. Thank goodness, he heard her slippers flapping away from the door.

"I'm living in this neighborhood like a mummy. Who calls except my sister with her troubles to cheer me up? Maybe I should take up mah jongg, but I'm not like these other women. All day long under the dryer until it's time for the game, drinking like fish, spending like water. Maybe I'd be better off that way but my poor father would turn over in his grave. Some people are cut from finer cloth and you know what I'm talking, Herbie, because you're just like me and it breaks my heart to see you fighting with your father because you're silk and he's burlap but try talking to that man, just try it. Herbie, your milk is on the table. What are you doing in there?"

Mommy, I'm fucking Rita Hayworth. She's in a black dress with long gloves and Betty Grable and Harry James – Are They Really Hollywood's Happiest Couple?

"Will you please answer! Don't make things worse than they are, Herbie! Don't you want your milk?"

No, Ma. I'm having a beer at the outdoor barbeque for Tinseltown's young set at the new house Jane Powell just built for her parents. The gals, Janie and Judy Garland and just-married Janet Leigh, are gossiping over the grill and the

fellows, me and Janet's hubby, Tony Curtis, are throwing each other in the pool.

“What’s the matter, are you deaf? You want to give me cancer of the throat, standing here screaming like a maniac? I don’t have enough trouble, the neighbors should gossip I’m a shrew when I’m the only one on the block who really loves her son?”

I’m at the Stage Door Canteen, dunking doughnuts with Olivia de Havilland in coffee as black as liquid shit.

“How could anyone be so cruel? Herbie!” She had opened the door and was screeching in the archway and he got one flickering look at her as he pressed his face into the pillow. “You leave me standing without an answer like I was a complete stranger you wouldn’t let wipe the dirt off your feet?”

You are a stranger, a complete stranger, a battered heap in the doorway, breasts down to her navel. Once, giggling together at the beach, he had asked if she had breast-fed him and she had said no because she had been too small, but Susan Hayward insisted on breast feeding her twin boys because motherhood is more important to Susie than her career.

“I’m screaming my head off and I don’t even get the consideration of an answer. What am I wasting my life for? Do I worry day and night for my own health? Why don’t I put my head in the oven where it was before you came in and turn on the gas and have it over with?”

Now she was crying and, without looking, he knew that her eyes were disappearing beneath baggy skin. Her whimpers trembled through his body. He bit into the pillow to stop himself as she stumbled toward him, weeping aloud, but his heavy heart exploded in his ribcage, swamping his eyes with tears.

“Herbie!” She sat on the side of his bed and ran her fingers through his hair. “Herbie, my darling, what’s wrong?” She caressed the nape of his neck and turned him toward her gently,

“Herbie!” She clamped her palms on his face, gasping, he knew, at the scars on his cheeks which, for the moment, he could not remember how he had gotten. “Oh my god, Herbie. A gang attacked you?” She was hugging him tightly, pressing his face into her groin, dampening his hair with her tears. “I told him you would be slaughtered in this neighborhood and I was right. Because he was a gangster, he thinks every kid should be a gangster but you’re a lamb in the jungle. Filthy dirty bull with dirt under his fingernails, when he touches me I want to die. I complain. I cry my eyes out. God knows I didn’t want it this way. The first time he came to my house, he pushed the meat with his fingers and my poor father, may he rest in peace, says he’s a bum and I’m too dumb to listen. He could put me through the mill, I wouldn’t care but, what he’s doing to you, it breaks my heart.”

Happy talk, keep talking happy talk, Mommy. Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Taylor, Are They Really Hollywood’s Happiest Couple?

“Herbie darling, talk to me. Tell me what happened.”

She bent to kiss his hair, his eyes. She raised his head and wet his cheeks. The moment her chicken smelling lips neared his, he made up a story and spilled in into her mouth: how Ciggie Moriello pinned him to the wall with a switchblade in his belly and called him “kike” and then ordered Gloria Bauman to rip her fingernails into his skin.

## **Edward M Cohen**

Edward M. Cohen's story collection, "Before Stonewall," was published by Awst Press; his novel, "\$250,000," by G.P. Putnam's Sons; his novella, "A Visit to my Father with my Son," by Running Wild Press; his chapbook, "Grim Gay Tales," by Fjords Review. This story is an excerpt from his novella-in-progress, "A Dreadful Shame."



## **DICKS**

by Matt Bailey

The stoutest dildo  
in my drawer smells, I've discerned,  
like crayons and now  
my socks, suffused with the scent,  
solicit licentious thoughts

and recollections  
of dicks drawn and colored in  
lazy afterschool  
hours on green wide-ruled foolscap,  
savored and swiftly destroyed.

How droll, how comic  
this circularity, this  
constancy in my  
desire and how expected  
to keep it hidden away.

## **Matt Bailey**

Matt Bailey is a guy who lives in Minnesota and owns too many art books. His work most recently appears in the anthology *Responses to Untitled (eye with comet)* (c.1985) by Paul Thek from Pilot Press and in the anthology *Come Sail Away* from Fifth Wheel Press.

## **Followers**

by Gaby Harnish

There are people who go their whole lives without having their picture taken. That's what Molly-Sue tells me. She says there are people who live in the jungles of South America, or the hills of Appalachia that would look at you with dead, confused eyes if you presented them with a smartphone. My earliest memory is of my mom's iPhone - she was pointing it at me, the glow reflecting on her face. She has always been directing me to pose, or if she is making a video, to laugh, or do something cute. But these instances have diminished significantly. I turned twelve last week, and I can tell my star is waning. My little brothers and sisters are the cute ones now, and they get to be featured on Mom's page.

I always thought Instagram was a physical place, but Molly-Sue taught me that it is a tool, an "application," that Mom uses to keep up with her followers. She says she has brought a lot of people over to the lord that way. Molly-Sue has shown me Mom's Instagram page - there are videos of her picking vegetables in the garden, of her cooking and tending to us, her children. She often mentions her devotion to the lord in her posts. She looks effortlessly beautiful, but I know what's behind all of that. I know how much makeup goes into her "natural" look, how many hours she spends picking out what to wear and how to do her hair. And I know how she coaches each of us to look as perfect as possible - her children, her flock.

Lately I've been feeling poorly about myself. There aren't many other kids out on the compound, and Molly-Sue is my only real friend. She's a lot more worldly than I am -

she's got her own smartphone with a pink case that she covers in stickers. She's shown me Mom's posts, and I am always in the background. Sometimes she has edited them to blur my face out. I've got a smattering of pimples on my forehead now, and my gap-tooth smile isn't looking as cute as it did when I was younger. Molly-Sue's mom has a popular profile too, and she's still featured occasionally, but you can tell our mothers aren't too keen on our aging up.

I am busy sewing when Molly-Sue comes over, practically humming with excitement. She grabs my calloused and bloody hands. I wince at this unsanctified break, worried about how Mom will react. I can hear her in my head, chastising me, saying that the lord hates it when we are idle.

"There are new recruits!" Molly-Sue says, and my heart flutters. This is Mom's work, I know – her Instagram draws new followers like flies. "A couple," she says. She hugs me close. I fear that Mom will walk in on us like this. Children from different households are not supposed to touch each other – it can lead to other things, things that the lord does not abide. But I cannot help hugging Molly-Sue, squealing with anticipation.

The harvest is coming soon. The new recruits are just what we need.

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Mom enlisted Molly-Sue and I to help her bake a pie for the newcomers, made from cherries in our orchard. She is wearing her most beautiful dress. I beam with pride at Mom's dresses. Each of them is sewn by me and my little sisters. They've grown so popular on her Instagram that sometimes I spend all day sewing new dresses she sells online. Mom says the lord is proud of my talent and skill,

and that all the money we get for the dresses is helping to spread his word.

The new couple look to be a little younger than Mom and Daddy. They introduce themselves to me. The man is named Frederick. He has a dimpled smile and stubble. I rarely see men without beards, other than children, and I find his almost-bare face intriguing and incredibly handsome. His wife is named Tonya. She wears more obvious makeup than Mom does, and she has bright blonde hair. They both wear city clothes. Daddy would not approve – he says that clothing from stores is made overseas, by slaves, and that negative energy can be felt in the fibers. Daddy knows what he’s talking about – the lord speaks through him often.

Tonya wears a golden symbol on a chain around her neck. I squint at it, interrupting the conversation she is having with Mom. “Oh,” I say, “you must wear the ‘T’ around your neck because your name is Tonya!”

There is a palpable silence. Mom stares at me and I know I’m in trouble. I shouldn’t have spoken out of turn, but there’s something else I’ve done wrong. I don’t understand what. Tonya furrows her brow, glancing down at the symbol around her neck.

“No, honey,” she says, “this is a cross.”

Before I can say anything else, Mom intervenes. “She’s confused because we don’t believe in adornments here,” says Mom. Her eyes flash on me, and I can tell I’m supposed to keep my mouth shut, so I do. “We worship the lord in a different way.”

“Huh,” says Tonya. She changes the subject, asking questions about the guest house where they are staying, but I can tell that something has changed. I can tell there will be consequences.

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I am locked in the sewing room. My hands are shaking and bloody, but Mom says I can't leave until I've finished forty dresses. She will let one of my sisters in, occasionally, to help a little, but only the very youngest and least helpful ones. There are no windows in this room. I don't know if it is day or night, or how long I have been stuck here. Eventually I finish my fortieth dress. It is not my best work, and when Mom sees it, she throws it to the ground.

“When you make a shoddy product, you are disrespecting the materials you have been given,” she tells me. “The labor that went into picking this cotton. The labor that went into procuring the dyes. Is that what you want to do, Delilah? Disrespect every person and plant and animal that gave a piece of themselves so that you could make a sub-par dress?” She does not raise her voice. She speaks every word in a soft, spitting whisper.

She grabs me by the wrist and brings me to the kitchen. There is a skillet on the oven. The burner is on. I know what is coming, and there is nothing I can do.

I squeeze my eyes shut. She takes my hand and places it on the hot surface of the skillet. My skin sizzles and burns. I recoil at the scent, like roasted pork. “What do we always tell you?” she says. I feel her hot breath on my ear. She must be right next to me, but I can't open my eyes. I can't see what she is doing to me. I cry out. “Say it,” she says. “What do we always tell you?”

“Don't speak to the recruits,” I say, tears streaming down my face.

“What else?” she says.

I can't feel my hand anymore. It is like I have gone to a place far away, where I am safe. I picture it in my head – a

tall building, thousands of miles away from the farmhouse, in the middle of a bustling city. I picture the pigeons roosting outside of my window. Dirty city birds. I picture all the people walking around in their city clothes.

“Don’t talk about the lord without permission,” I say. I don’t know how I have broken this rule, but somehow, I have. Mom releases my hand from the skillet. The pain is worse than before. She leads me to the kitchen sink and turns the faucet on, running cold water over my palm. I choke back my tears. I try to be strong for her.

“Okay, sweetie,” she says. The harshness is gone from her voice. Suddenly she is the woman from the Instagram page – the ethereal mother. She rubs aloe on my hand and bandages it. She has one of my sisters take a picture of her doing this. It will be a great post, I think – her followers will see her tending to her daughter. How many of the city people are out there, working their jobs, unable to help their children when they’re hurt? She gets her photos and then she leaves me alone.

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When Daddy gets home, he is furious.

“She’s our best seamstress and you ruined her hand?!” his voice thunders. Mom is chastened, and I can’t help but feel vindicated.

Daddy takes Mom into the other room, and I hear the familiar sound of his belt against her flesh. I know her face is shoved into a pillow, muffling her screams. I walked in on her punishment once. Daddy explained it to me afterward. The lord speaks through him, and sometimes Mom needs to be punished. But Daddy never punishes his children. He leaves that up to her.

When they finish, Mom limps back into the kitchen and serves us dinner. She has me take photos of the spread – freshly baked bread, a salad made from the vegetables in our garden, and an assortment of cheeses and jams. Everything on our table came from our own crops and animals. Mom limps over to her bed and starts working on the caption for her post as the rest of us eat.

\*\*\*

The next morning, I walk over to Molly-Sue’s house. I knock on the door, and her mother greets me. She is tall and redheaded, with an angular face and a plaintive frown. Molly-Sue told me she used to be a model before she joined the compound.

“Good morning, Mrs. Sanderson,” I say. “Can Molly-Sue come out and play?”

Mrs. Sanderson shakes her head at me, scowling. “You’re too old to be playing,” she says. “Molly-Sue doesn’t live here anymore. We sent her to the compound in Ohio. She’s getting married.”

My hand throbs, and my stomach sinks to the floor. Molly-Sue is fourteen. I knew her parents were talking about marrying her off, but I didn’t know it would happen so fast. Does that mean I only have two more years left before my parents do the same?

Mrs. Sanderson scoffs when I ask her this. “You?” she says. “You’re their money-ticket. No way they’ll marry you off, kiddo.”

She shuts the door in my face before I can say anything else. I walk back toward my house. The guest house is on the way, and I see the new couple sitting on their porch swing. I square my shoulders, hoping they won’t speak to me. I don’t



want to be hurt by Mom again, and I'm too afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Frederick and Tonya wave at me. I give them a small, polite wave back, but pick up my pace so they don't try to talk.

\*\*\*

I find myself overcome with curiosity about the couple. I know I can't speak to them outright, but there would be no harm in spying on them. I imagine what my conversation would be like with Molly-Sue – how the delight would swim in her eyes at the thought of us hiding in the bushes outside to watch the newcomers.

After lunch, I sneak my way over to the guest house. Frederick and Tonya are sitting at the table, eating a garden salad.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," says Frederick. He picks at his salad. "I would kill for a hamburger right now."

"Oh, shush," she says. "We know exactly what we're putting inside our bodies when we grow our own food. This is how people are *supposed* to live."

"I like the *idea* of that, sure," he says. "But this is going to be a lot of work, and for what kind of pay off?" He clears his throat and looks around the room. I duck my head, sure that he's seen me, but he continues. "Besides, this place is *weird*."

"It was kind of odd," says Tonya. "That girl didn't recognize my crucifix."

"We're in agreement then?" he says. "A couple days here and then back to Chicago?"

Chicago. I close my eyes and picture my dream life – the penthouse apartment up in the sky, looking out at the skyscrapers, wearing clothes I bought in a store and drinking coffee that was flown in from a foreign country.

I am vaguely aware that their conversation has turned into an argument. Tonya is upset about Frederick wanting to cut and run so quickly. She feels like he doesn't support her. Yes, I hear this, but I also hear people chatting outside a subway station. I feel the breeze from the train coming in. I sigh and, in my daydreaming, accidentally knock over a rake. The noise startles the couple. I duck under the window, hoping they don't see me.

I hear the front door open. I back up and find myself wedged with my back against a great oak tree. Frederick spots me before I can run. There is nothing threatening in his eyes – he looks relieved to see me. He beckons for me to walk over to him, and so I do.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Frederick says. He asks me my name, and I give it to him. His eye darts to my hand. “What happened there?”

“Burnt it,” I say. The words squeak out of me. I can feel my cheeks redden.

“How?” he asks.

“Stove.”

There is a moment of exquisite stillness. He looks at me and I feel seen, for the first time in my entire life. I would do anything to make this moment last forever, but Tonya calls out from inside the house, asking what the noise was, and we are both shaken out of our reverie. He makes up some lie about an animal, winks at me, and goes back into the house.

\*\*\*

I wake up thinking of Frederick. I go to sleep thinking of Frederick. When I think of him, I can feel something deep within me aching to get out. I know that the lord does not approve of these feelings, but I can't deny them.

On a day when I know Tonya is going to be gardening with Mom, I walk to the guest house. Frederick is sitting on the front porch. I join him on the stoop.

“Do you like living here, Delilah?” he asks me. A thrill runs through me. No one has ever thought to ask me such a question.

I take a moment to deliberate. “Yes,” I say, “I love the lord, and my family. Sometimes I wonder about what it would be like, though, somewhere else.”

Frederick stretches, the fabric of his shirt inching up so I can see a tiny trail of hair around his middle. It sends a shiver down my spine. “It can be awful out there,” he says. “I understand why Tonya wants out. But it's not all bad, and I find this place...a little extreme, no offense.” He sighs. “Ever since her dad died, she's been on this spiritual quest. She was never that religious before, but he was, and I think this is part of her grieving process. I'm trying to be supportive, but it's hard.” He turns to me. “You know, if your parents are hurting you, you can tell me.”

My mouth is dry. I open it to say something, anything, but I can only wheeze out a fake laugh. How could he tell?

A wicked side of me is pleased to hear his doubts. If he is the doubter, and Tonya is the true believer, then things should go my way during harvest.

\*\*\*

I am holding Mom's iPhone in my hand. She is teaching my youngest brother, Zeke, how to walk, and I have been chosen to record this. I try my hardest not to shake, but my hand is

still bandaged, and it itches terribly. I don't want Mom to punish me for ruining the video, so I will myself to keep still. Zeke is chubby and angelic – rosy cheeks with a big, gummy smile. Mom's followers are going to love this.

After, Mom checks the footage and beams. She kisses Zeke on the forehead and gives my shoulder a little squeeze. "Good job," she says, and I feel a rush of pride. "Harvest is tomorrow. Are you excited?"

I nod with vigor. Harvest is the best time of the year – the time when we see the lord in all his glory!

"Yeah, she's excited," says Mona, my sister closest to me in age. "She looooves Frederick."

I nudge her, embarrassed. "I just find him interesting," I say. Mom raises an eyebrow. For a moment I think I will be punished, but she goes back to her phone, posting the video of her and Zeke.

That night, I make a corn husk doll with Xs for eyes and twirl red twine around it. I leave it on the newcomers' porch for them to find.

\*\*\*

In the early morning hours of harvest day, I wake up. The sun is not out yet, but I can hear some birds chirping in the distance, and I know daylight will be coming soon. There are voices in the kitchen. I press my ear against the wall to listen, but I can't make out every word.

"Her fervor...true believer," Mom's voice says.

"Should provide bountiful... harvest," I hear Daddy say. "Frederick?"

My ears perk at his name and a sharp spike of adrenaline rushes through me.

“Doubt,” I hear Mom’s voice say, “Delilah likes him....marriage.”

I close my eyes and pull away from the wall. I can’t listen anymore for fear they will hear my beating heart. I picture myself in a bridal gown, flowers in my hair. I picture Frederick beside me, gripping my hands, telling me he loves me. We take a train away from the compound, away from the country and up to the city. We have an espresso machine in our loft, and a little white cat curled in the corner by the window, watching the pigeons outside.

The future I want is right there in my hand. I can feel it.

\*\*\*

It is harvest day, so breakfast is taken at the long table in the center of the compound. All the families are there, but the new couple is noticeably absent. Mom and Mrs. Sanderson walk to the guest house to check on them. I pile my toast with eggs and raspberry jam and nibble on it, avoiding Mona’s gaze. She pinches my leg under the table to get my attention, but I ignore her.

Mrs. Sanderson and Mom arrive with Tonya between them. Black streaks of mascara line her face. She has my corn husk doll in her hands.

“Who did this?” she shrieks, holding the doll out for all to see. “Who put this on our porch?” I feel a pit in my stomach. Mrs. Sanderson rubs Tonya’s back.

Daddy, sitting at the head of the table, stands up and walks over to Tonya. He puts his large hands on either one of her shoulders. “I’m sorry,” he says, “I know this must look strange to outsiders. Our children make corn husk dolls around harvest time every year. It’s a gift, Tonya. That’s all it is.”

Tonya looks at the doll, her brow furrowed. “Why does she look dead?”

“Dead?” says Daddy. He laughs a hearty laugh, so contagious that more than a few of us join him. “Oh lord, no. It’s not easy to make an eye on these things, so the kids just use an X instead. That’s all. It’s nothing, Tonya, just a harmless little knick-knack from one of the children.”

I bite my tongue. I do not want Tonya to have doubts about us. Frederick comes up from behind Tonya and puts an arm around her. His hair is tousled like he just got out of bed. “Come on, let’s eat,” he says. “They’ve gone to the trouble of making this breakfast.” They take their place at the table. By the end of the meal, Tonya is smiling, her worries forgotten.

\*\*\*

The chapel stands at the very end of the compound. It is a modest white clap-board building. The sun is setting, the sky tinged with pink and orange, making our skin glow in the light. I hold a lit candle in my right hand. I am wearing my best dress. It is robin’s-egg blue. There are no phones out today – this is our special day. This is harvest.

We sing a hymn together as we walk to the chapel. My voice is wavery and quiet. Mona is behind me. She was gifted with a beautiful voice, and she raises it high in praise of the lord. We march in single file and take our seats, lining up and kneeling in the chapel. When everyone is in, the door at the front of the chapel opens, and Tonya comes out. She is wearing a white gown. She looks at us, confused. Her hand clutches the gold symbol around her neck.

“What’s going on?” she says, and in that moment, she walks into the trap. Her foot is snared on the rope, and she is hanging upside down for all to see. Her gown covers her

face. Her arms claw at the fabric obscuring her from seeing us.

That is when the lord comes. The lord speaks through Daddy. He is wearing nothing but the boar's head mask, great tusks gleaming in the candlelight. Daddy's body is hirsute and muscular. He rips the gown off Tonya so she can see him. Tonya lets out a bloodcurdling scream. She holds the golden symbol in her right hand and whispers under her breath, reciting some kind of incantation.

"It is time for harvest," speaks the tusked lord, Moccus, our protector. The worshippers cheer. "The blood of the true believer will ensure another year of prosperity. Where is the horn?"

Two of my little sisters, around age six and five, hold the great horn in their hands. The crowd oohs and aahs at my younger siblings, who are all dimpled smiles and rosy cheeks. They struggle to hold up the horn between them, and there are giggles from the congregation as they pass the horn to Moccus. The lord bends over and stomps his feet like the boar-god that he is, and runs toward Tonya. She screams, an echo of "nonononononono" until he slits her throat with one of his sharpened tusks. Blood spurts from her wound, and he deftly raises the horn to collect the vital fluid. The parishioners raise their voices in ecstatic worship. My siblings jump up and down, squealing with delight. This will be a good harvest.

The horn is passed around among the parishioners. When it reaches me, I savor the taste of the true believer's blood. It fills me with a strength I haven't felt since last year's harvest. It is a surge of power coursing through my body, connecting me to the lord and to each member of the compound. I fall to my knees and praise the lord for this bounty. Praise him! Praise Moccus!

This is when I notice Frederick, bound and gagged, sitting by the hanging corpse of Tonya. I see the old familiar fear in his eyes. I know this look – whenever someone’s worldview is changed, it is hard for them to accept. The lord has shown this to us many times. That is why the doubters get a choice.

The lord Moccus collects the horn after the congregation has had their fill. He walks over to Frederick and falls on his knees, one meaty hand gripping his shoulder.

“Doubter,” he says, “your partner’s sacrifice has ensured that we will have another year of abundance. Now it is time for you to make your choice. Will you join her in sacrifice, or will you join us in worship?”

The lord uses a sharpened tusk to cut the bindings from the doubter’s mouth. He raises the horn to Frederick’s lips. If he refuses the drink, he will be killed. But Frederick swallows the blood. It trickles down his chin. He gasps when he finishes. His eyes dart around the room, bloodshot, and then they glaze over. He passes out, his head bobbing gently like a flower in a breeze. Everyone cheers.

\*\*\*

The next morning, I watch Frederick sleep alone in his bed in the guest house. He looks so peaceful. I tip-toe over to the bed and kiss him on the forehead. It feels like lightning strikes me. I convulse at the feel of his skin.

He wakes up with a start, and he pulls away from me. He yanks the sheets up around his body. “What are you doing here?” he asks. “What – what happened? Is Tonya really...”

I smile at him. I know it must be difficult, so I want to put him at ease. I nod gently. “Yes,” I tell him. “She was sacrificed for the harvest. And you made your choice. You’ve joined us!” I can’t help but break into a bigger grin, clasping



my hands together. “Oh, I’m so happy you made that choice. Now we can be together!”

He shakes his head, his brow knitted. “What? What are you talking about?” he says. “You’re a *child*, for Christ’s sake.”

I tilt my head. “Who’s Christ?” I ask.

He points to the door. His skin is pallid and his eyes, normally so clear and blue, are red and swollen. “Please, get out of here,” he says. “I need to be alone.”

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For the rest of the day, Frederick walks around in a confused haze. I want so badly to help him, but every time I try to get near him, he pulls away from me. When I go to Mom about this, she tuts at me and says I should leave him alone. It’s tough for doubters at first, when they’ve joined the flock. He needs to talk to some of the newer recruits so he can relate to them. This is painful for me – I felt like I almost had him in my sights, and now he is so far away, even when he’s mere feet away from me.

At dinner, Frederick sits beside Gina, the recruit from last summer. She has a large pregnant belly and big, brown eyes. She seems to put him at ease. I remember when she drank the horn of blood last harvest – she did it with no hesitation, barely glancing at her husband’s crumpled body on the floor beside her. When she drank from the horn, you could tell she felt the power of the lord.

\*\*\*

I am woken in the middle of the night by an ear-piercing shriek. It is coming from inside the house. I jump out of bed and run toward the sound, into my parents’ bedroom. Mom is the one screaming. Daddy is lying in bed, a knife sticking

out of his abdomen. He is shaking and convulsing, blood sputtering out his mouth. I gasp, clasp my hands over my chapped lips. I tell myself this is a bad dream, but the coppery smell of blood is thick in the air, and behind it, the smell of something burning. How could Moccus let this happen?

There is a glow coming from outside the window. I run out and see the chapel at the end of the compound is on fire, great flames flicking toward the sky. Sweat slicks down my back, the heat overwhelming. There is mayhem all around me – people running scared from their houses, collecting water from the well in buckets to douse out the fire. It seems to be catching on some of the other houses. There are children crying and mothers screaming, a cacophony of horror.

I run to the guest house to check on Frederick, but I find his bed empty, his belongings missing, as though he was never there. When I walk to the kitchen and see the knife block, one knife noticeably absent, I know in my heart what he has done. How could he betray us after we showed him the light? And how could he leave *me* when we are meant to be together?

This is my opportunity, I realize. I can take advantage of the chaos and leave this place behind me. I can go to the city. I can find him.

I run back to the house and stuff a bag full of essentials – food, money from Mom’s purse, and her iPhone. I don’t fully know how to use the applications, but I can find out. I slip away into the night, distancing myself from the screams.

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Here I am, on the train. Fields flash past me, giving way to suburban neighborhoods full of manicured lawns and houses

bigger than I've ever seen. Up ahead, I can just barely make out the skyscrapers. They look like tiny little mountains in the distance. I got some funny looks when I boarded the train. I've even gotten some compliments on the dress I wear – one of my own styles, with puffy sleeves and a floral print, that they likely recognized from Instagram. After an hour or so, I finally cracked Mom's cell phone password. It took me a little while to remember how to look something up on the Internet, but I found Frederick. There's a lot of cool stuff you can figure out online just from looking someone up. I even found his address! He's going to be so excited when he opens the door and sees me there – his future bride. I can't wait to surprise him.

## **Gaby Harnish**

Gaby Harnish received her BFA in Screenwriting at EICAR - The International Film School of Paris. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in HASH Journal, On the Run, Drunk Monkeys, BarBar, and Landing Zone Magazine. She works as a veterinary receptionist and lives in Sacramento with her husband and her little black dog, Britta.

## **Get the Blood Out By All Means**

by Trent Brown

Blood doesn't come out of anything, really. It clings to whatever it finds and it holds on. I like to imagine that the blood, once outside of your body and no longer alive - alive, right? - is clinging this hard to anything else because it immediately feels insecure about the lack of life around it and in it. I think it wants to make this new reality alive, just like the old one.

But I like to imagine a lot. It's the only way you get by in this job. What with the aforementioned blood. And I swear to you, even by the grace of hydrogen peroxide, gritty soap and bleach, it's still there deep down. It just loses its color.

On February 29 - a leap year - I learned this fact about the blood the hard way. I was new to the job. Very fresh, only a couple gigs in. I don't remember them very well, except for the first one, which was a vomit gig. A local zero gravity center had just opened and apparently the first ride was too bumpy. I had never seen that much bile in one place, and while I already had a strong stomach for these things, it was a tough way to start.

Four days earlier had been a special day in our city's history for all of the wrong reasons. The news was on every TV all day across the city. "The unspeakable has made its way to our city," one newscaster said on the screen hung up far too high to watch comfortably in the Taco Bell around the corner from my place. Later on, at the dry cleaners two stores down, another TV anchor called it "unthinkable." At home, a different one rephrased it "unimaginable." Eating my leftover Mexican pizza on the couch, I found myself

amazed by their ability to use every synonym in the book and it took my mind off the doom of the situation. All throughout the city you could hear the cop cars. It felt like the police department was birthing new ones every second.

Eventually, I switched the inputs on my television to my gaming console and took my mind further off the topic by playing Call of Duty. The irony was lost on me, to be as honest as possible.

And it worked, I forgot about what happened until days later, when it was February's extra day and I was handed the "shit end of the stick" as my coworker Roy called it.

"You ready to do this?" Roy asked, standing in front of me outside of the split-level home on Havers Blvd at 8:20 am. I could tell it was a pretty yard in the summer and fall.

"This family probably keeps good shape of the yard when the grass is growing," I said. Roy didn't reply and I looked up at him. He wasn't very pretty to look at, I realized. And he had a weird look on his not-so-recently-shaven, 40-something-year-old face.

"Kept. Sorry."

"Don't apologize to me," he said. "Oh well, let's just get it done."

We walked up to the door, in what felt like the slowest and longest walk of my life, and Roy paused at the top of their stoop. "Just tell me if you need a break. Okay?"

"Okay."

We put our respirators on and made sure our suits were zipped tight. Roy opened the door and it was dark inside. I watched him fumble around on the walls until he found a lightswitch, suddenly illuminating the maroon-stained room.

It was everywhere. The carpet. The couch. The kitchen table around the corner. Even the TV. All in different size splatterings. We walked through each room slowly, Roy taking mental notes out loud of each chemical that we'd need for each spot.

When we reached the master bedroom, Roy stopped in the doorway. He was a big guy, multiple inches taller and wider than me, so I couldn't see past him. He just stood there.

"Hey, what's up?"

"I, uh, alright. Just come on in, I guess. Mother Mary."

He moved in and to the left and I could see what he meant. There was blood all over the bedsheets and grey matter on the headboard. It looked like some kind of Play-Doh that used to be alive.

I'd seen a brain before, in school, and I knew it to be the folded up wrinkly egg that most people will only know it as. But there was no shape left to it except for the squiggles. It was hard to imagine that this stuff was ever capable of thought. It was even harder to think about what its last thought must have been.

"Is that—"

"Yep," Roy answered.

We both stood still and stared at it. Admittedly, a piece of me wanted to touch it.

"Brains?"

"Indeed."

"Have you seen brains before?"

"Yep."

We stood there quietly for a few more moments before Roy shook his head like a dog come in from rain. "Let's just

get on with it,” he said, heading back out of the room to go get our cleaning materials. When I didn’t move, he turned back. “It’s not gonna get any better to look at it, bud. I’ll clean it up. We’ll put you on the living room carpet while I go ahead and take care of it. Get it out of the way.”

I nodded and followed him out.

All things considered, it wasn’t much harder than a regular job. Harsh chemicals clean up blood about as well as piss or anything else. I didn’t see the brains again, Roy did it quickly. For the rest of the hour or two we worked independently in silence. I handled the TV with care, using just a damp rag, and made sure it still worked before I left it. But it made me wonder, who else would turn it on after me?

“You have to wonder. It at least makes me wonder,” Roy said from across the room.

“What’s that?”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Are you daft?”

“Um, no.”

“How about you try thinking about it for a second and get back to me.”

I did. Or at least, I gave it a guess.

“I don’t know why he did it.”

“Me either,” he said. “But it damn sure makes me sad.”

The kitchen table was my last piece to wipe down. Roy had gone outside for a smoke break while I finished up. Being alone in the house was spooky, in a way, but I felt that the thought of this was disrespectful so I shoved it back.



While I wiped down the wood, I found where a name had been scratched into the wood on one of the long edges.

“Jimmy,” it read. That was the boy’s name. It made me clean faster. His handwriting, at least in carving, was sloppy; probably from years ago. I practically ran outside with my bucket of soap and rags hung on my shoulders.

Roy looked at me funny, squinting hard while he pulled on the cigarette, but he didn’t say anything. He let me put the things away in the van and sit in the passenger seat before he joined me.

“Management called,” he said. “They told me they’d tried to call you, but I see here the phone was in the van the whole time. Smart move in my opinion. Anyways, they need you to hop on another job. Which sucks to shit. But you’ll have another partner for that, so I’ll just drop you off at the scene and you can ride home with whoever you’ll have the pleasure of working that gig with. Sound good?”

“I guess.”

“Yeah. That’s an alright answer, I think. I should rephrase. I know it doesn’t sound good. But it’ll work.”

“Did they say what I’ll be doing?”

“Nope. Hope it’s better than that was.”

I nodded.

“But you know, I think you’ll be with that cute one they hired right before you joined on. What was her name?”

I pretended not to know. But the silence went on for too long.

“Lily?”

“Lily. Not a great deal you’re getting. But maybe not the worst with her there.” He grinned just slightly when he said this.

We drove in silence for a bit, Roy lightly tapping his right hand on the center console and driving the van with his left. He had an Abbey Road cd in the van. Maxwell’s Silver Hammer had just started and he stopped tapping.

“Oh, you hungry? I guess I should be courteous and stop somewhere for you, since you’re not off the hook.”

“Um, yeah, sure.”

I checked my phone and the only fast food choices between us and the spot of the next gig were a local spot named Anthony’s that gave my sister food poisoning once and a Taco Bell with a 1.8 star rating. As we pulled up to the Taco Bell, I asked if he could park because I had to piss.

At the register, I heard a familiar news anchor continue on about the record number of shootings. Apparently, there were three more the night before. The cops believe they were all gang related. I ordered the three crunchy tacos combo and had to wait 15 minutes for it.

“That stuff is gonna give you diabetes,” Roy said as I opened up my first taco in the van. I began eating in silence.

“What did you think?”

“Huh?” I asked, mouth full of ground beef.

“What did you think about that shit? The house.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what to say. “I guess I hadn’t really thought about it yet.”

“Huh,” he said. He did that squinty thing again. “How’s that?”

“What do you mean?”

“How the hell does anyone look at all that and not think about it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’d just rather not think about it. I wouldn’t say I’m not doing it on purpose.”

He looked from me to the road again and nodded his head slowly, the few hairs still on his head so short that they didn’t budge with the movement.

“I guess we all cope with it some way. Maybe yours is better anyways.”

By this time, Oh! Darling had begun and we’d made it to my second site. The state impound lot. I could see another of our company’s vans pulled up beside a blue sedan. Roy pulled up to the gate and let me out with a grunt.

“Hope you get it done quick. Don’t forget your trash,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said, grabbing my bag of greasy taco wrappings.

I got out and checked my watch, 11:42 am. I realized I was a bit hungry but that would have to wait. Walking up to the car, Lily’s head of long, straight brown hair, pulled into a ponytail that could only do so much to keep it from getting everywhere, popped out of the right backseat. She was just a year younger than me, making us the only two employees we knew of who were younger than 40, and she was much more attractive than me—in a number of ways. I didn’t understand, and hadn’t asked, why she wanted to do a job like this. I felt like she could do anything else. Maybe even be on TV.

“Hey, old chum,” she said. She seemed to be trying to lift her spirits, but her face still held a frown. The freckles on her cheeks were pinched between the struggle for a smile.

“Hey, Lily, another car vomit job?”

“I wish. This is going to take a bit. I’ve just been here looking at it for a half hour. I can’t muster up the strength to start.”

“What is it?”

“Just take a look yourself.”

I stepped up and she stepped away from the car. Inside was a microcosm of the house on Havers Blvd. There was blood on the floor, blood on the headrests, blood on the windows, blood on the front seats, blood on the back seats. There was what looked to be organs of some kind. Maybe lung. It didn’t smell like you’d expect stomach to smell.

And there were brains again. It was unmistakable now, I realized. The gray tone stood out against the blood, even against the grey cloth seats. Some of the pieces were bigger than that had been in the house, some even still held their form and showed off the folds that did so much for a person. Different ammo creates different results, I guessed.

I stepped back out and looked at her. She was just watching me.

“What do you think?” She asked. People kept asking that today, more than normal.

“Do you want me to just do it? I can handle it and you can go home.”

“What? No. I’m not going to leave you with this. Have you done a job like this before? What makes you so cavalier?”

“Well, I hadn’t before today.”

“Me either.”

We both got quiet and looked at the ground or the other cars around us. Eventually I suited up and she followed along.

And so, we began. Despite her earlier protest, I was the one to clean the brain matter while she waited patiently behind me, just out sight of the remains of the former thought maker. It was like a putty almost, but drier than expected from its time in the sun. I was thankful for Roy handling the earlier specimen, seeing as it had no sun to dry it out over its period stuck on the wall.

The first piece I picked up nearly made me vomit, but I hid it from Lily. It got gradually easier, until the last. I couldn't decide whether to count all of the littler pieces, so I gave a guesstimate of 37 pieces. I wrapped the clear plastic bag in a trash bag before turning around, for Lily's sake. And then the brains were no more.

We continued this game for the rest of the gig, me leading and her following my lead. I suggested we just try peroxide for the blood and see if that will work for the cloth seats. "Harsher chemicals might stain it in the opposite direction," I said.

"Sure."

But the peroxide didn't work. It barely did anything. We moved on to harsher pastures.

"Did they tell you anything? Any guidelines here? Are we cool staining it?"

"They?"

"Like the people who wanted us to clean the car."

"No, I was just told to come here and clean this car in particular. It was unlocked and I opened it and found what we're both looking at."

"Alright, then I guess we get the blood out by all means."

"Sounds good," she said. Then she paused. "I guess the 'they' here would be the police anyways. They don't give a

shit. They'll sell this to someone for cheap one day and make an infinity percent profit."

"Minus the cost for us and the bullets."

"Jesus, man. Was that a joke?"

I looked down. "Oh, uh, sorry. No."

"I'm joking," she said, smiling then. "Good one."

I smiled back at her and chuckled.

We scrubbed the blood with rags and sponges and new rags and new sponges. She on the driver side, myself on the passenger. Every once in a while, our hands touched. I pretended to not notice. The blood scraped off the seats like grease in a pan left out for a few days, slowly chipping.

After another hour or so, the car looked like a car again. Brainless and bloodless. Like no one with a road rage issue had ever driven it, at least no sign of their rage left to make you think so. Someday, someone would be driving this car after buying it in an auction. They might even give it to their teenager. That teenager might make out in the backseat where the brains were. My brain was spiraling, I realized, and Lily was staring at me after throwing away her gloves and toweling off her face.

"Whatcha thinking about now?"

"I don't know."

"That isn't true. You look like your head might explode if you think any harder. And please don't do that now. I've had enough of it."

"I was just thinking about how strange it is that we just erased the last evidence of a person's final seconds."

"Yeah. Maybe he shouldn't have been an asshole. Then he wouldn't be getting wiped clean."

“What did he do? I don’t think I really saw anything about it, what with the others being bigger.”

“He got mad about a car cutting him off on the freeway or something. I don’t know. Apparently he shot at their car and missed, but there was some gang members in a nearby car that started shooting too. Then a cop showed up. I’m foggy on the details. But he’s the only one who died, funny enough. I don’t even think anybody else got hit.”

“Some luck.”

“That’s a way to look at it.” Then, she started to take her cleaning suit off. Underneath was just a sports bra and gym shorts. The last of the day’s sun was shining off her skin, for the first time in hours. It seemed to accept the light with warmth back. I felt my head clearing from the brains and fogging with a new problem.

“Don’t stare forever,” she said.

Just then, I heard the work phone ring. It was distinct and shrill. I answered, Lily watching from behind.

“Hey, bud, how’s the day going?” asked our manager, Levi.

“It’s going alright now that it’s ended.”

“Rough one, huh? I bet. Sorry you’ve had to see all that, Roy told me about the, um, brains on the wall. And then the second gig too. Sheesh.”

“Yeah, I might need a day of-”

“Yeah, well hold on, bud. While we’ve got you and Lily out with the van, I’ve got one more request. You think you can do that for us? Overtime, obviously.”

By the light dimming in my eyes, Lily could tell what had just been asked.

“Fuck no, come on,” she grunted. “After this? Another one? I’m going home.”

“I hear Lily,” Levi said. “And I’m sure you’re thinking the same thing. I get it. But somebody’s got to handle it and it’s a pretty sizable contract. And we’re the best in the business, we get called first. We won’t get called first anymore if we don’t say yes to these things. Just hear me out, bud.”

“Yeah.”

“The mall. You can guess. I know what you’re going to say.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Big job. We’re sending Roy to meet you as well. He said he couldn’t stand for you two kids to do it on your own. And the guy eats, sleeps and breathes overtime. Anyways, head over there. Roy’s got the deets. And you know what happened.”

“Alright,” I said, defeatedly.

As I hang up, Lily got in the passenger seat and sighed deeply.

“Just go ahead,” she said. She looked at her phone the entire 15-minute drive to the mall. I snuck looks at her doing so through quick side glances. Her eyes squinted and widened at social media posts. I almost broke a smile, before remembering to keep my eyes on the road.

Roy met us at the front entrance to the mall. Two double doors planted between a big box store and another big box store.

“Hey, kids. Didn’t get enough already?” He chuckled.

“Why take the job if you don’t want to do it, I always say,” Lily replied. Her demeanor changed quickly from the



car. It made me curious, and I stared at her. Probably for too long.

“Well, it’s not going to do itself. Let’s get in there and assess the, uh, damage. We can make of it what we can. Big contract, so they’ll want it done well. But it’s an even bigger space, so little things missed might not cause any issues.”

“Have you done anything like this before, Roy?” I asked.

“No,” he said. He looked down at the asphalt. “There’s a first time for everything. And hopefully a last time too.”

The mall was dark when we walked in and a single man sat on a bench in the center of the main hall near a car that was there to collect emails and be raffled off. He had a wiry, feminine frame and wore a brand new white shirt, still a bit creased, and khaki pants. He was smiling at us, which I’m certain not just I felt odd about.

“Hi, you must be the cleaners,” he said.

“Unfortunately,” Lily replied. She was kind of scowling and the man frowned back.

“I get it. The space that needs cleaning is just down on your right. You can’t miss it. There is blood outside of the entrance and it’s the only one not locked up.”

“Okay,” Roy said. “Anything else we need to know?”

“I’m not sure,” he said, his eyes turned up at the ceiling like he was honestly pondering the question. “If you’ve heard about it, then you probably know enough. The store owner doesn’t care about the merchandise. Hell, you could probably take some of it home if you wanted.”

He chuckled and we just stared at him.

“But don’t do that, obviously. Okay, anyways, I’ll leave you to it. Please call if you need anything from us.”

With that, he scurried out behind us and away from whatever we were going to have to deal with. Lily and I turned and watched him go. She turned back and made a face at me, her eyes getting big but her mouth staying put. I mirrored back. Roy had already started walking towards the scene, so we sprinted to catch up.

It was hellish. That is how I described it, almost as if the words just spilled out my mouth when we turned and looked in the store.

“You got that goddamn right,” Roy said. Lily walked straight in ahead of us, as if she wanted a closer view.

It was a mattress shop. Apparently they’d been running a sale, so the room was full. From my understanding, the guy with the gun hadn’t even actually walked in. He’d just stood at the entrance and opened up with a small burst rifle. An off-duty cop was at the mall and got there quick enough to shoot him and end it, but it wasn’t quick enough to save many people. At our feet were the markings where he had stood when shot in the chest.

In front of us, the white mattresses and white linens and white floor tiles and white walls were covered. Everything was streaked and blotted with red. There was the familiar gray matter in some spots, but less than expected. But the blood was everywhere.

“I don’t think I want to take any of this home,” Lily said.

“No.”

When she turned around, her eyes looked lifeless except for the welling of a tear in the right one. She marched past us back out to the van. Roy and I didn’t say anything, but I guess we both figured she was right, there was no need to keep standing around and looking at it. I felt like I’d had that same thought a hundred times that day.

We got mops and sponges and buckets. It was most likely a simple job. The mattresses were to be thrown in the dumpster out back, along with everything else that was being sold but had been stained. Otherwise, we were to clean the walls and floor.

I helped Lily carry the heaviest items in and she thanked me. It was nice to hear. It could be a thankless job. While we scrubbed, it was mostly silent for a few minutes. Then Roy started humming.

“What are you humming?” Lily asked.

“Oh, sorry.”

“No. It’s fine. What are you humming?”

“Lucy in the Sky.”

“Good one. Hey, old chum, do you have your phone?”

I looked up from my scrubbing and started fumbling around to take my gloves off and get the zipper on my hazmat suit open.

“Take your time, bud,” she said. “Just put the song on. Might as well have a little entertainment.”

And I did as she said. We all hummed and sang along quietly to it and the first couple songs in the greatest hits playlist until eventually, Lily stood, grabbed a mop and started dancing while she moved it back and forth across the blood.

“Come on, you too,” she shouted over the music.

I looked at Roy and he looked at me. I saw a kindness in his eye that I wasn’t aware of before today. He stood up first and I followed. We joined her with our own mops. Roy started singing into his like it was a microphone. I played mine like a guitar. Lily was Paul, singing and playing mop bass.

When the song ended, there was a moment of quiet humiliation as we stopped and looked around. Then, a love ballad came on that I couldn't remember the name of. Lily walked over to me and grabbed my hand, pulling me into her. She smelled clean, like new rain bouncing off hot grass.

"Let's dance," she said, before turning her head back towards Roy. "You're next up!"

I danced along as best as I could, first looking up at the ceiling, then looking at Roy, then looking down at her. She had been staring up at me the whole time. When I caught her eye, I glanced away quickly and saw Roy wasn't even looking at us anymore. He was twirling around on his own, sponging off a spot of gray on the wall.

"Don't worry, you can look down here," Lily whispered. And I did as she said. We danced that way until the song ended and she decided that maybe we should just finish the job.

We finished the clean up within an hour. Roy and I walked the bloody mattresses out to the dumpster together while Lily took the supplies back to the van. He didn't say anything to me other than a short chuckle and a quick shake of the head when we walked outside and both saw Lily at the van. She was already back in her street clothes with a ball cap on by the time we got back. There was something in the space between us then that hadn't been there before. Enough for me to linger on, at least.

I went home and showered and sat in my bed all night and imagined that I had kissed her right there in the mattress store. The next morning I woke up and found a patch of dried blood in my hair. It made me think about her and I almost didn't wash it out.

## **Trent Brown**

Joshua Trent Brown is a fiction writer from Raleigh, North Carolina. He has been published in the Holon Project and has self-published multiple times, including a recent short story collection titled “Kill Me If You’re Going To Kill Me.” You can find some free, random short stories on his Substack page called “storis” and he’s on Twitter for 14 hours a day at @TrentBWrites.

## **Galvanized Tapered Steel Wire**

by Grant Price



Yeah, I'm a real doctor, can't you tell? What, because I don't have the coat? That's just something Hollywood invented. It ain't how things are in real life. Look, I ain't got a stethoscope either, does that bother you? Hey, I ain't the one being defensive. Alright, we can forget it. Makes no difference to me. My credentials? You realize where you are, right? This ain't the kind of place with certificates on the wall and ergo chairs and glossy magazines with names like SMILE! on the front. If that's what you want, you can just walk that pretty little face out the door right now and get yourself down to the nearest hospital. I ain't got time for dreamers. I came recommended, remember? You trusted them enough to come out here. So there's your credentials.

You're trembling. Yeah you are. Lemme just say: Don't start with that or we're gonna be here all night. Just relax. You want something to drink? I ain't got a cooler but I can fix you a glass of water. No? Fine. Trust me, there ain't anything to worry about. I'll be in and out and it'll be over before you even get thinking about having second thoughts. Die? Christ, why would you say a thing like that? What's wrong with you? Who said you were gonna die? I ain't lost a patient on my watch yet. Oh jeez, don't start crying. Wait. Here, take this tissue. Turn it over. It's clean on that side. Will you calm down? I've never seen a person get worked up so quickly. Blow your nose, honey. I can see it dribbling onto your lip. Ain't a good look.

How old are you, anyhow? You're kidding. I woulda said you're a handful of pennies older. Bet you get that all the time. Thought so.

What do you say we go into the other room? We can have everything sorted out in just a few minutes. Then you can get outta here and pick your life up where you left off. No, no, stop. I ain't a psychiatrist. I don't care about your overbearing mom or your asshole father who left you when you were a baby. The less you tell me about you, the better it is for both of us. Okay? Come on, follow me. Through here. Close the door behind you.

I wanna get one thing straight before we begin. If you start bleeding, I'm putting you in a taxi to the hospital. That's how it is. No negotiation. You tell them you're miscarrying and they'll do the rest. But it ain't going to come to that. I've done this a thousand times. The more you relax, the easier

it's going to be. Did I have to call a taxi before? Well, I ain't got it on speed dial, but yeah. A few times.

See that screen behind you? What I need you to do is go and strip off your jeans and your underwear. Just leave them there. Then we can get this show on the road.

Speedy Gonzales over here. Now jump up onto this table and lie down with your head on the pillow. What's this? It's a syringe. Lidocaine. It's going to go into your cervix. It'll sting a little, but trust me, you'll be thanking me later. I'll do it on the count of three. One, two. Oh, come on. That didn't hurt. Now we're just gonna let it do its thing while I prep my instruments.

Do you always ask this many questions? Yeah, it's sterile. I ain't a monster. You're paying me to do the job properly. A coat hanger! You make me laugh, kid. This ain't a coat hanger and we ain't in the 1950s. This is wire. Galvanized tapered steel wire. How many times I gotta tell you? Done it a thousand times. You can't feel anything down there now, can you? Good. Like magic. Now here comes the speculum. You see? Plastic. Single use. Sterile.

The next part is important. I need you not to move. Like I told you already, the wire is going in there and through your ostium. It's gonna open your bag of waters just enough to sort you out. Okay? Stay still and turn your head away. I have to apply the right amount of force. Please. Close your eyes or look at the ceiling. Not at me. I know, honey. It'll be over soon.



That'll do it. Nothing to worry about. You did great. Ease yourself down when you're ready and you can put your clothes back on. Now, what's gonna happen is that you're gonna feel a little odd for the next couple of days, so you need to take it easy. At some point you'll need to go to the bathroom. Could be today, could be tomorrow, could even be the day after that. Whatever comes out, just flush it away. Simple as that. You got someone you can be with? I dunno, a friend or relative? It's a good idea not to be alone. Remember, if you start bleeding, you get to the hospital, okay? There ain't any use coming back, because I won't be here. This was a one-time deal. Yeah, like the instruments.

Good luck, honey. You'll do fine. And if any of your friends find themselves in a similar situation, give them my number.

## **Grant Price**

I'm a science fiction author, mainly, with two published novels: *By the Feet of Men* (Cosmic Egg, 2019) and *Reality Testing* (Black Rose, 2022). I currently live in Berlin, where I'm slowly losing my mind due to the deluge of summer tourists.

## **Three Poems**

by Dmitra Gideon

# Philomela

I.

I follow him into the woods. I follow.

Open space. Drown of green. Cry  
of bird a wailing yawn. Low bark,  
throated. Underneath, drone  
of insect swells, breaks, recovers.

Webs like layered footprints,  
woven balconies over balconies.  
Spider body weighted  
to earth. Home the wet  
stick of her legs.

Purple pulse in the brush. When  
I reach for the berry, teeth. Pregnant  
seeds in cave of molars,  
half-chewed leaves, crack  
of brown.

I follow.

II.

Philomela, when I said  
my words meant nothing,  
I thought it was my idea.

### III.

The woods ash in  
my mouth. Every tree  
a tongue. They rip  
at the root.

Taste of iron in throat,  
taste of salt. My body  
his body. I wear his tongue  
between my cheeks.

I am not woman. I am  
not flesh. Skeleton soaked  
in sweat. Skin blooded  
by tongue. Breasts  
the shape of hands. I rip  
at the root.

### IV.

When I was fifteen  
I wrote a poem  
on a lined piece  
of paper. I gave it  
to my father, who read,  
laughed  
and unzipped

his jeans.

When he returned  
the paper, it was wet,  
sticky and white.  
He pressed it to my face,  
eyelashes glued,  
nostrils  
blocked. He told me

to lick. He told  
me to swallow. I ate  
my poem,  
salty and slick  
with my father's cum.

V.

I weave the tongue I weave I weave the tongue I weave spit  
swallow mouth full spit weave I swallow my tongue  
swallow I do not tell I do not tell I do not tell I spit the  
tongue weave the words smell swallow there is no tongue  
there is no story I am the story I do not tell I do not tell I do  
not tell I spit I swallow I weave the loom the tongue the  
loom my mouth the loom the story the loom the breath the  
loom my tongue the smell I weave spit swallow the story  
weave the story weave the tongue the tongue the story the  
story the story the story the story I swallow the story the  
smell my tongue I spit I spit I spit swallow I weave I weave  
I weave I weave

## Kronos Alone With His Infant Daughter

A long-building force drew me  
to her that first time, slid  
my fingers inside.

I was careful  
not to push too far,  
just enough to feel it;  
that soft place,  
the place that separates  
girl from man.

I was a god revered  
by none. I wanted  
one being formed  
by my power, one  
sculpted in my image,  
one who would kneel  
at my feet.

I wanted to birth her  
from my hips,  
my thoughts in her gut,  
my name on her lips, my fear  
in her chest. I drove  
deeper. My thumb  
and pinky inside  
her arms,  
one finger in her skull,  
brain matter pressed  
through her eyes. My hand

emerging  
from her mouth.

Maybe I saw  
what she would become,  
saw her at five, eleven,  
eighteen, what we would do,  
what I would teach her, lessons  
of the body. Or maybe I thought,  
*this is the first and last  
time.* Maybe I unhinged  
my jaw. Maybe  
I swallowed her  
whole.

I can find no soft place within me.



at the bowling alley

he pushed me against  
the wall held my neck held my crotch and  
kissed me  
kissed me he had to kneel of course i was only a few feet  
tall no one saw the tongue in my throat  
*you see* he told me

*nobody cares about you*

later in the bathroom dirty tiles on my skin as he as he  
and after he sat me on the toilet  
after I ate my own shit after  
he drilled a hole thighs  
to belly button

he washed me in the sink  
my brother and sister rolling balls down slickened wood  
crack of stone against white

## **Dmitra Gideon**

Dmitra Gideon is a writer, educator, and community organizer living in Pittsburgh, PA. A graduate of the Chatham University MFA Program, they currently serve as Director of Youth-Centered Programming and Community Collaboration for Write Pittsburgh and Disability Justice Advocate for the Abolitionist Law Center. Their work has appeared in PANK Magazine, Cold Mountain Review, Pink Panther Magazine, and The Fourth River, among others.

