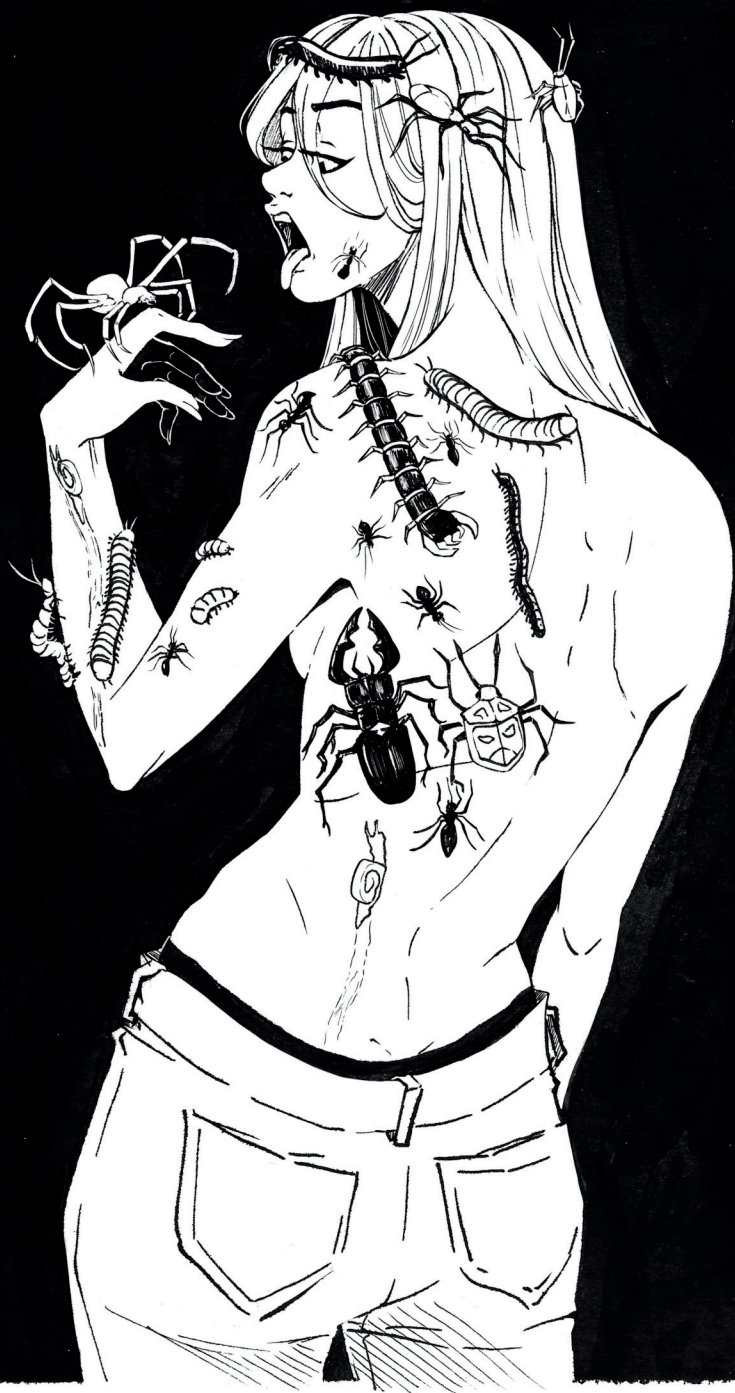


GOD'S CRUEL JOKE 4

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Joana Solà (sisaliks), *Entomophilia*, Indian ink, 2022

Joana Solà (sisaliks)

Joana (@sisaliks) is an illustrator from Barcelona, Spain. With a background in engineering, she didn't start taking art seriously until she entered art school in her late 20s, and has now made her longtime dream of working as a full-time artist a reality. Her love for sci-fi and fantasy started young, reading her father's books of classic authors and never stopped. Her art focuses on cool, relatable, and interesting female characters, concepts with an edgy vibe, and often features eerie or dark themes.

The Internet of Things

Z.H. Gill

“You go where the cherries is.”

*-Matt Reese, consultant for the West Virginia Jack Kennedy
primary campaign effort*

Helga hates her name, not because that name is Helga—mocked from the get-go, the ire never ceasing—but because she didn't choose it for herself.

It's 2014: each day her grandpa rises at dawn. (Helga sleeps all day.) Although an avid reader, his eyes wake up before the rest of his head, so he spends his mornings watching rather mindless television (“*My shows*,” he calls them, half-jokingly), and doesn't start with the paper and or the gardening until after lunch. “This is just like *The OC*,” he says to her when she first arrives. “Just like it. You're like Ryan.” “What's OC? Who's Ryan?” “Before your time, I s'pose.” He looks her up and down. “How old are you, anyway?” Helga looks at her grandpa, scratches her head. He looks like her mother, like the old man version of her, same sea green eyes, same dimples-into-wrinkles; she's dead now, and she hated her father, Helga's grandfather, when she wasn't. “Were you paying any attention to the proceedings?” asks Helga. “I let your lawyer do that for me. I just showed up as a goodwill gesture, make sure they'd give you to me, stand before the pulpit when they tell me to. It's a pulpit, right?” She coughs. Then her grandfather does. “You know, for a PhD...” but she trails off. He heads back to the den, to a primetime soap about a family enmeshed in two competing startups. He isn't worried about Helga, figures the beeping bracelet around her ankle will do much of the work for him. The judge told him not to let her onto a computer, nor any other device with internet access. “Let it be known for the record: We don't know what she's capable of.” Cruel

and Unusual Punishment, how it sounded to him—hell, the whole thing did. He didn't know the kid all too well—at all, really—and didn't particularly care to (especially if she continues to have her way, *as she always seems to have*), and is six months really that long? and she's clean and she cooks, for someone her age so disengaged from the tangible world, she cooks quite well. She lives in the basement, which he never found a use for, anyway; all that was in there before was a table tennis table (it still is, now half is folded against the wall and Helga's turned the remaining horizontal into a desk) which his second ex-wife (as in, not his granddaughter's grandmother) bought for him as a gift because she didn't ever truly know him. They don't piss-test her, which is classy of California, the feds, *whomever*, he thinks, so he gives her some of his migraine medical, because she has abso- *fucking*-lutely nothing to do, and some of those premium-cable programs he watches feature nervous characters on computers a lot, hacker types, and pot seems to help them do—help them do *something*.

She's amazed when, during her second day on house arrest in her grandfather's Neo-Victorian (in actuality, based on its build-date, a Neo-Neo-Victorian), her grandfather brings her, in three crudely duct-taped, paint-splattered cardboard boxes, her entire rig. “This might break the terms of my parole.” “Parole . . . doesn't it just sound so close to, to *pearl*?” “Jesus, you're an idiot.” “Close your eyes, say 'em both into your phone, play them back to yourself till they're the same thing. Pearl sounds much better than parole.” “You just said they sound the same. And they took my phone.” She sets up her computer, along with two humming servers and some crude AES hardware—most of her proper set-up having been gathered up by the FCC and FBI, shipped off to Quantico, most likely, some Federal ape was probably going off in *Counter Strike* on her beloved baby right now. “I suppose this'll have to do.” “You're not planning something, are you?” “Just simple stuff, gray-area stuff, maybe some mining, nothing you need to worry about much. If anything, you'll end up making a few bucks.” “You know—” and here Helga's grandfather takes his glasses off for that wholesome, Murrow-esque veneer he descends into sometimes— “you coulda gone to CalTech—” “I've gotten calls from major VC's every week for the last two years asking what I'm working on. I wasn't going to college either way.” Her grandfather shrugs and heads back upstairs. Before

he makes it through the door to the foyer, she says, “We need faster internet.” He doesn't turn around. “I'll pay for it,” she says. He shuts the door.

“Harvey. *Harvey!* Listen to me. Listen to me, for, *like*, one *goddamn* minute.” Richie, who looks like a used car salesman (because he is) holds out a pack of Camel Crushes toward Helga's grandfather. “Jesus, man, you know I quit years ago. And what are these things? At your age? Jesus. These are for—” he looks at the black-and-blue pack and tries to come up with a line—”co-eds with a daddy death wish—” and mostly falls flat, he thinks. *I can't say that stuff around Helga*, he thinks. *She'll literally punch me in the crotch*, which she has done already, two days earlier, when he made some crack about Uhura being bad at her job (admittedly, not even a faintly clever bit, something about the Enterprise's line always being busy for her “girlfriends”). *I shouldn't say that stuff, anyway*, he thinks. “Listen to me, Harvey,” Richie says, lighting a Camel Crush, crushing the flavor capsule. Helga's grandfather takes a deep breath, says, “Money that tight these days, Richie?” “Fuck you, Harvey. You're gonna have no friends in there,” and he walks into City Hall with his cigarette still lit. Chaos ensues; Helga's grandpa can hear the yelling from outside, and then Richie's profuse apologies. He allows himself a quick grin, and guesses it'll be his only one of the night to come.

Ding. —*Thought you were off the grid, you being federally doxxed and whatnot.* Helga takes a hit of her joint and quickly replies: —*My fucking “beloved” pinko grandpa made a deal with the judge and now I've got an ankle bracelet.* She stares off at nothing, at space, at the basement. *Like that Shia LaBeouf movie*, she adds. —*You mean Holes? Anyway, listen: I'm glad we made contact and I'm glad they aren't making you do real time, but all the other players think you've gone narc.* She coughs so violently the joint falls out of her mouth and onto the cement floor of the unlit basement. —*You know I'd never talk. Not anything important or real.* Other than the LED from her laptop, the scattered embers from the joint against the cement is the only illumination opposing the utter dark of the basement, she's put up blackout curtains over the only two windows. —*No names.* —*It's encrypted, Sam*, she pleads. —*How do I know*

there isn't some G-Man over your shoulder? She shuts her laptop, grabs her joint from the floor, heads upstairs into the house. Sam was nice enough, considering the circumstances, but still: she's shaking.

“Please say your name into the microphone for the purpose of maintaining the public record,” the Mayor, that *corpulent fuck*, says. “You have the floor for two minutes.” “My name is Harvey Osip,” Helga’s grandfather begins, “Councilman Emeritus, Professor Emeritus of Media and Communications Studies at the College—” “*Osip?* What sort of name is *Osip?*” inquires Maureen, the Treasurer, the most ancient being left in city politics here. “It’s uh. Russian Jewry. Mo, I’ve known you for years? And I’m supposed be able to speak without interruption.” “What do the bylaws say? Richie, do the bylaws say that?” the Mayor asks. Richie, a Councilman, begrudgingly replies, “The bylaws *do* stipulate as much, yes Mr. Mayor.” “Okay,” the Mayor says, “let’s give him our full, *un-dee-vided* attention. That means *you*, Maureen,” and he winks at her, she laughs. “Okay,” Helga’s grandfather clears his throat and starts once more. “I don’t know you folks very well, other than Richie, who I’ve lived across the street from for five years. Almost two decades ago I sat on Council, so I can respect just how difficult your jobs are, just how hard you guys work, just how little credit you get.” “Who said we don’t get credit? People not giving us credit?” Richie now. “Now Richie!” says the Mayor, “You said it yourself: let the man speak!” Richie shifts his eyes, then looks at Osip behind the sad little podium and purses his lips. Osip clears his throat and continues: “Tonight Council discussed for the first time publicly and in an open forum a measure to be voted upon at next meeting, which would approve a commuter train station, via an extended commuter line, to be opened within the city limits in the immediate future, as well as options for other sorts of public transit linkages in the more distant future—” “Thirty seconds,” Richie says. “You guys took up two-thirds of that.” “I wouldn’t waste it, Professor,” the Mayor says sternly. Helga’s grandfather sighs, cuts the sigh short to keep going. “This is a beautiful, diverse city, ethnically and economically. I don’t want to see it go the way of Berkeley, and if we give in to the whims of Silicon Beach, which is what this measure does, in the guise of ‘environmental responsibility,’ but in actuality just making this place a commuter

shithole for tech assholes, while you displace dozens of low- and middle-income households for the extension and take in your *umpteenth* kickback—” “*Decorum*, Professor,” the Mayor says, “you *can* be fined and barred from Chambers.” “—and we’ll become yet another city-as-strip-mall, full of Soulfitters and Urbancycles. I yield my time to the chair.” “*Fuckin’ terrorist*,” Richie says, not quite under his breath. Maureen winks at Richie, says, “Into to the mic, Richie. For the record.”

The weed is making Helga definitely-sort-of amped, the opposite of what she wants/needs right now, and she has a theory as to why it’s happening. She heads further up into the house, into her grandfather’s room, to confirm it, and examines the opaque green medical cannies lying on the bed stand next to his disheveled, Tempurpedic queen (completed with a 72-inch, curved LED screen at its foot, of course—*the aneurysm will take me any day now*, he thought when he bought it). *Et voila!* A sativa is what he’s been supplying, despite her repeated enthusiastic requests for an *indica*. *Fucking invalid.* (*Of course, who else are City Council meetings for?* she thinks.) All Helga needs right now is a smooth, lobotomizing indica, something purple with a stupid name. Now, though, she’s downstairs in the living-room/den/whatever, dancing or flailing to The Fall’s *Perverted by Language*, another joint in her mouth all the while, aiming for Rosie Perez, getting closer to Denis Lavant. “What the hell is this?” Richie asks. Helga screams a death-knell shriek. “*Relax, granddaughter,*” her grandfather says, coming through the front door. “He’s the neighbor ‘cross the street.” “Yeah, I hear a scuffle like that can make one of those—” Richie points down at Helga’s bracelet— “*things . . . go off.* I had, uh . . . a cousin in one of those. Just for a bit.” “It was his mom,” Helga’s grandpa says. “Harvey, don’t go spreading—” “What’s with the dancing, kiddo?” Helga’s grandpa asks. “Only part of you I’ve ever seen move faster than a tugboat is your fingers.” “I’ve only been here a week,” Helga says. “Still, good to see you less comatose,” he says. “Come with us, get to know Richie a little. He’s the *swing* vote for the rail line.” Richie glares at Helga’s grandfather and then looks back to Helga. “I don’t bite,” he says. Helga scowls but follows her grandfather and Richie into the kitchen, who both immediately plop into wooden Ikea chairs around a small round Ikea table. Helga remains standing. “Be a doll and pour me some of the scotch your grandfather

promised me back at City Hall,” Richie says to her. “Pour it yourself.” “Careful,” her grandfather says, “she’ll punch you in the *crotch*.” “How old are you, sweetheart?” Richie asks. “Fifteen,” Helga manages, somehow, and remembers to breathe. “Fifteen! And already in the system.” “How long *that* take you, Rich?” her grandfather asks, barely holding back laughter. “What was it—seventeen?” “Nineteen. Nineteen years young. But I’m proud to say I’ve stayed out of any penitentiary since I was twenty-six. Been legit going on twenty-nine years. And look at me now? A public servant.” “Richie,” Helga’s grandfather looks him square in the eye. “Harvey.” “People who go legit? actual legit people? don’t volunteer that kind of shit, the year, all that, all cute and stuff. And this one narrowly dodged *super-max*.” “I would have bunked with Ted K.,” Helga says, a little more confident now. “Now who’s that?” Richie says. “The Unabomber, you fucking imbecile,” Helga’s grandfather says. Helga opens a cabinet at knee-level in the marble island and pulls out an amber-colored bottle of the Macallan, pulls a finger—perhaps a hair more—and slams it on the round table between the two pathetic bachelors. “I’m going to bed,” she says, “goodnight.” “Night,” Richie says, “Pleasure meeting you. Actually, you mind pouring me some of that before you head off?” She ignores him.

Helga’s grandfather has the loveliest dream and forgets it all when Helga shakes him awake at seven-thirty in the morning. “They’re coming today,” she says, calm but loud enough to get him into his robe quickly. “Get in the shower, you have to go to the store.” “Calm down—who’s coming?” “The case worker, Grandpa.” “Oh. *Oh!* Turn around. Turn around, close your eyes.” Helga has no interest in seeing her grandfather’s shaggy, sloping buttocks, and so obliges him, standing sentry in his open doorway. “How do you know she’s coming?” he asks as he slips his arms into the blue silk robe monogrammed just below the waist on the left leg with a fuzzy-pink *H.O.* His last wife got him this for an occasion he can’t really recall, although it’s one of the better gifts he’s ever received—too bad she didn’t stick around long enough to bestow him with custom shoes. “You always take this long to get your johnny gowns on?” Helga says, still turned away from him in the doorway. “Not one to rush. Wait, so how do you know she’s coming today?” Helga turns around. “How do you think?” “*Helga*,” maybe the first time he’s ever approached sounding paternal towards her, “you really think

that's smart, hacking into government whatever's?" "The North Koreans do it to DARPA, deep networks, with ancient hardware. My rig, even in its current state, could probably do far crazier stuff—not that I have! I haven't. What I mean is—it's *fine* if I read Joanne the Stony Brook Grad's email every once in a while. Go to the store." Helga's grandpa walks into the master bathroom—lined with cheap-looking linoleum—and Helga, standing idly by her grandpa's bed, can hear him gargle something. "*Wait—*" he says, after he spits the something out—"what do I need at the store?" "All the stuff that will make this place look and smell like a normal house." He pokes his head out from his loo: "This *is* a normal house." "*Dude*. It's got real escaped-the-Shah vibes." "Hey! That's . . . that's racist! Aren't you supposed to be of the generation that's *done away* with racism? And I need to take a shower—we can talk about it after that, and when I get something in my stomach. We need to figure out what to do about all your crap in the basement, too." "Do you put your robe on just to brush your teeth?" Helga asks. "What?" "I mean, you get up, you make a whole thing about putting on your, your *fancy silks*, and now you're going to take a shower. You usually change during the day, but you're not going to put it on after you shower. Do you just wear it for, like, ten minutes?" "*Scram*, girl. I need to make myself beautiful." Helga looks at the ground. "What do I need at the store?" her grandfather asks. "*Coffee*," she says. "I have that." "You don't. I used all your grounds." "You don't sleep much, do ya, kiddo." "That's not the point. I've read this woman's emails. Nice coffee will go a long way with her. Trust me. Shoot for *Sumatran*. I can hide what I need to hide, but please just do this. Yeah? It's not like she's the PO. Stakes are slightly lower. She's a hippie bureaucrat like half of California." "Fine. Anything else?" her grandfather asks, ready to pounce. "That's all. This'll be okay. We'll practice."

"Tell me, Joanne . . . do you have a kid?" Helga's grandfather says to the case worker, who sits with him and Helga and her beeping bracelet at the kitchen table drinking the fine coffee—which Helga's grandpa drinks too, although Helga opts for chamomile. He looks to Helga, and she nods at him, imperceptibly—he's following her script so far. "A son," Joanne says, "Grown-up now. Well, not so grown. He's a Fulbright." "Wow," Helga says, sort of impressed. "Where'd he go?" "Israel." Helga and her grandfather both hide grimaces. "He's still there, actually. He's been done with his studies

for a little while. But he'll be coming home soon." Helga's grandfather gets up from the table without saying anything, grabs the pot from Mr. Coffee, pours Joanne a warm-up. As he sits back down, Helga asks Joanne about visiting her son. "Oh no," she says. "I won't go there, on account of the human rights *situation*. I don't want to be stimulating their economy any more than I've already had to, paying his expenses and whatnot. FaceTime's fine enough for me." "You mean you haven't seen your son in all that time?" Helga's grandpa asks. "More than a year now. The airfare's a fortune, I don't want to be giving El Al any money, anyway." "That's the world's most secure airline," Helga says. "Former Mossad agent sitting plainclothes on every flight," she says. "Regardless, he's coming home next month. He says he really hates the place. He says even the so-called 'liberals' [*and here she uses air-quotes*] are just as racist as any *Alabaman*, that's what he said. It's really quite absurd." Helga's grimace returns, but not her grandpa's. "Does he know anyone there in tech?" she asks, and her grandfather chokes on the Sumatran blend. "What do you mean?" says Joanne. "Oh no, I just always hear so much about Tel Aviv, the new Silicon Whatever." "Silicon Settlement!" Helga's grandfather says, trying to get them back to the politics. "Silicon Golan," Joanne says, seemingly reluctantly, but then she laughs at her own quasi-pun like it's the funniest thing she's ever said or heard—*and maybe it is?*—to an endless stunned silence from Helga and her grandpa, which she soon joins in on. "Well," she says eventually, "I'm really glad you're getting on your feet, Helga. You're a very bright girl. You need to stay out of trouble, but you're a very bright girl." Her grandpa sighs and thinks about, for a brief moment, the act of sighing, about reading Kundera (*Yikes*, Helga would say, if she could hear his thoughts), about pogroms and kibbutz's and Five-Year Plans and Great Leaps Forward. "I'm going to have to return, as you know," Joanne says, "and I'm going to be at your next court date, too." Helga realizes she's a little bit fond of this Joanne, Joanne-the-Stony-Brook-Grad.

"Now what was all that shit about, about *Israeli tech*?" Helga's grandpa says into his iPhone as he waits in the single-file line at the fast-casual to-go Poke-bowl joint. "Come on, it was harmless," Helga says to him on her disposable cellphone. "I don't want to talk about this on the phone," she says. Her grandpa inches forward

toward the wiry woman scooping salmon. “I get it. I’m paranoid, too. Everyone my age with a college degree is paranoid.” “Yeah.” “We basically live in a democracy,” Helga’s grandpa says. Then, apropos of pretty-much-nothing, he says, “I just want you to know, that your generation is much more susceptible to the profit motive than all who came before.” “And that has *what* to do with *what*?” “That Joanne woman is on your side,” he says, changing gear again. “Grandpa, are you stroking out?” “You wanted the fluke on the kelp noodles, right?” he asks, approaching the front of the front of the line, and the wiry woman, not answering Helga.

Ding! goes the doorbell. “I’ll get it!” Helga bellows by reflex, then gets sad for a moment as she realizes she isn’t living with her mom—not out of any particular admiration for her, it’s more like a brief lament on *time* and *its passing*. “Why hello there, young lady!” “*Oh*,” Helga says. “What do you want—Richie, right?” “I’m supposed to meet your grandfather for drinks—*may I come in*?” Helga raises her eyebrows. “Isn’t it, like, 2:00 PM?” “I mean, when you’re retired—” “You aren’t retired.” Sweat drips down Richie’s considerable jowls. Helga considers his jowls. “I was referring to your grandfather, young lady, but yes, every Wednesday, him and I meet up—” “It’s Thursday.” “What’s that?” “It’s Thursday.” “Well, sure,” and Richie is bright red now, “I had to postpone yesterday, I had to go see—*see my mother*.” “In prison.” “Yeah, in prison. For *Chrissakes*, kid, I’m you guys’ neighbor! Doesn’t that mean anything to kids these days? Are you gonna let me in?” “*Jesus*.” Helga thinks for a moment. “I’m not supposed to let anyone in, only relatives and pre-approved visitors. And no felons.” “I’m a *public servant*! You’re not *seven*, Helen—” “Helga.” “What?” Helga stamps her foot. “My name. Is Helga. Not *Helen*. *Hel-ga*.” She hates her name, and so hates correcting people when they get it wrong, but hates Richie more than either of these things. “You’re not seven, *Helga*.” “Yeah, fine, whatever. Come in. Let the FBI start sniffing at you.” “Right, sure,” he says, and opens the door, and walks right on by her. “Wait, what are you—” “I’m just gonna wait for Harvey in his room.” He starts up the stairs. “His room? Why don’t you wait in the kitchen.” Richie stops on the stairway and says, without turning around to look at her, “We drink in his room. We—we watch TV.” Then he keeps going and makes it to the top, takes a right turn, is gone. Helga shrugs and heads down to the basement with a mind

to smoke a *doobie*, to use her grandpa's word, safe in the harbor of her ability to read any email that might suggest a sprung-on drug screening.

"*Helga*," Helga's grandpa says atop the basement stairs, the sternness in his voice unbecoming to him. She keeps on playing the computer game. He creaks down the steps, says her name again. "I'm in the middle of a match." He kicks her computer tower, his slip-on Vans clap against the heavy plastic. "*Jesus*," Helga says. "That's not even the computer I'm using." "Turn your game off." She does. "Were you going through my things, through my room?" "What?" "*Answer me*." "No, no, I swear I—ah, fuck." "What?" He grabs her by her shirt collar. "Jesus, Grandpa, *calm the fuck down*." "*Tell me!*" Helga glares at him. "Let go of me," she deadpans. He does. "Look. Yesterday Richie came by, looking for you." "And you let him in?" "I mean, he pretty much let himself in." "*Fuck!*" "Helga's grandfather kicks the computer tower again, this time piercing its case with his foot, screaming in pain. "*Jesus*," Helga says. "He took my files!" "You didn't back them up?" "No, dummy! Real, *physical* files, not digital playtime numbers! Jesus-fucking-Christ-why-did-I-ever—" "Calm down! *Jesus*, calm down!" Helga's grandpa sits in front of her swivel-chair on the cement floor of the basement, criss-cross apple sauce. He takes a deep breath, holds it in. "What was in them, Grandpa." "*Dirt*. On the Mayor, on the whole Council!" "Jesus Christ, what the fuck were you gonna use that for?" "I was gonna blackmail them! I was gonna put pressure on them to vote against the rail line. Kamstantz is clean, but all the rest of them..." he trails off. "Jesus, why are you so against that stupid thing? Who the fuck cares?" "It's the principle of it all! They're lying, they're cheating, they're doing it in the name of a vacant environmentalism and so-called *good governance*! They want to turn this place into Palo Alto. Worse, Greenwich, Connecticut! I moved here to get away from all those tech assholes! First they took San Francisco! Then they impounded my alma mater! Now they're all gonna move here! And I've got one of 'em fucking living in my basement!" Helga slaps her grandfather across the face, still sitting in her swivel chair, leaving a searing handprint upon his jaw. "I'm not *like* those assholes, dude! I, like, stand against everything they are! You don't know *shit* about me!" She breathes in the chilly, stale air and all the dust which has circulated into her computers and back

out of them through the aid of the powerful fans which accompany, which *guide*, her breath. “Grandpa. Does Richie’s car have a push-start ignition?” “It’s one of those internet cars, I’m sure it does. Why do you ask?” Helga’s eyes go rogue, they see *magic*. “You want your dirt back?” “I’m sure he’s destroyed it all, by now.” “How about some new dirt, then? How many votes you need, anyway?” “Just two, they need a supermajority.” “And Richie could be one of them?” “Richie could be one of them. That was the idea. He’s the dirtiest, other than the Mayor, and the one I can lean on the most.” “So, what if we convince him? What if we’re so convincing, he can’t help but bring another one on board, too?” “If we’re that *firm*, he’ll probably get Maureen to come around. What did you have in mind?”

The weekend comes, the RSVP’s from the e-vite roll in. Helga’s grandfather buys enough store-made food to feed a village, enough alcohol to kill a hippo. When the party begins, in the newly done-up backyard—fairy lights, tiki torches, one of those enormous white tents they throw weddings in, lined with red paper lanterns lit up with battery-powered candles—it seems to Helga as if her grandfather has invited the whole town. “You can’t drink and you can’t smoke,” her grandfather told her, “At least, not in front of anybody.” The plan is in motion. If Helga succeeds, she gets a big upgrade to her broken computer. (“But if I fail, you’re still fucking replacing it,” she’d said to her grandpa, earlier that day. “*Yeah, I know*,” he replied with his head down.) As her grandfather’s thrown-together playlist booms—too much Talking Heads, in her opinion (*not that they’re bad*, she thinks, *just maybe not every other song*?)—Helga eats something raw from one of those little steel platters that the servers in their white uniforms parade around (her grandfather pulled all the stops for his ruse) and sits at a table alone with a glass of wine. “Mind if I join you?” “I’d rather—*Charlie*? What the hell are you doing here?” “I go to the College now. My history professor’s good friends with your grandfather. She brought me along.” Charlie must have been at least four years older than Helga, although they graduated together in the same high school class. “Is it, like... *a sex thing*?” Helga asks him. “My oh my, you haven’t changed at all,” he says, laughing, blushing. “Sit down,” she says, and he does. “Can I get you anything, a glass of—they won’t card you, yeah?” She gestures toward her wine. “Damn, how foolish of me, didn’t see you already—” “It’s swill, for the record. What are

you studying, anyhow?” Charlie is handsome and blonde and not a total idiot. Not nearly one, Helga thinks. “Me? I’m doing environmental studies—well, I guess it’s basically half an environmental engineering degree, but I won’t get enough credits for the engineering part. It doesn’t matter, anyway.” “Whoa, that’s... actually really cool, Charlie. I thought you were gonna say something dreadful, actually. Econ.” He laughs, a bit nervously, Helga thinks. “I switched out of it, actually.” She laughs now, too, and tries to hide her blush when it lands uncomfortably close to a giggle. “Why’d you switch?” “Because—well, because it *was* dreadful,” and now they both laugh. “Listen, I know you probably know there’s all these rumors about you—” “Don’t worry about it.” Helga says, sipping at her wine. “I just wanted you to know, I just, like, I don’t—” “Charlie. Don’t worry about it,” and she gestures toward her feet. For a split second, Charlie thinks she’s gesturing elsewhere, coming on to him, but then he looks down and sees her ankle bracelet. “*Oh.*” “Yeah,” Helga says. “It’s not rumors. Just facts. Don’t worry about it. Shit’s real boring, to be honest.” She takes another gulp, a larger one, and smiles. “We can talk about something else,” she says, “like, what are you gonna do for the summer?” “I got a crazy gig, actually. You know DataDoyen?” *Know them?* Helga staged a DDoS attack on their Cloud, even doxxed their CTO. “The web services company? Sure.” *Doesn’t read the newspaper much, does he?* she thinks. “Yeah! I’m doing research for them. They have this thing where you write a grant for them, for their foundation. My grant got picked.” “What are you doing?” “Well, data centers use a lot of power, as I’m sure you know, and as more and more storage gets shifted to the Cloud, server farms are gonna get a lot bigger—” “They already have.” “Yeah, exactly. So basically, I’m doing research with a team about how to cool data centers more efficiently, mostly with technology, but also through more creative ways, too. Simple geography, even. Amazing what doesn’t occur to these people.” *And now you’re one of them,* she thinks. They both drink. *No. Shouldn’t be like that. Not with him.* “Damn. I’m fucking glad you won’t be a banker, though. You could actually be one of the few from our class that does a bit of good.” “Yeah, just a bit. So, do you know what you’ll do when you’re done with...” Charlie indicates to her ankle— “all that? Are you gonna go to college?” “I don’t think most schools want a felon.” “If you don’t mind my saying—you’re not *most felons.*” (*I’m a white woman, for one thing,* she thinks.) “I’m sure you could end up anywhere you wanted. Didn’t you used to say you wanted to go to

Mathews?" "What? Me? Hell no! That was Laura Feig, dude. I wouldn't ever go to that place. Ohio is a no-no for me." "Somewhere else, then. Somewhere better. Maybe around here?" As the conversation slips further into banalities, Helga starts to look toward her grandpa for the signal. She's barely touched her wine. She figures she has about a fifty-fifty shot at seducing Charlie, who's well over nineteen now. She decides not to risk finding out how bad of a person he is.

Helga's grandpa thought of everything. He invited Maureen, but not Maureen's husband. This meant that Richie, whom she is sleeping with (*God knows why*, he thought), would bring her as his date, which is important because Helga's grandpa needs him to have his key-fob in his pocket. He'd just walk, otherwise, the walk to Helga's grandfather's house from across the street was one of the shortest walks Richie could ever possibly take. Richie arrives with Mo on his arm like a prom date. He wears a tacky tweed jacket and she wears an actually-not-bad-looking slip. *They look like Oompa-Loompas, though*, he thinks. The couple heads instantly for the open bar, where then they corner Helga's grandpa, just as he knew they would. "My, *my*, Harvey, what's the occasion?" Richie chuckles. "Just felt like a party. Helga isn't in jail. I feel like I'm not being entirely selfish for the first time in years. So, I thought I'd get a little fun out of my sudden bout of heroism." "It's a *gorgeous* soirée, Harvey, really, it is," Mo says. Harvey eyes them both up and down, noticing the lack of a bulge in Richie's breast pocket. "Darling, we've got to find some of those pigs in some of those blankets," she says. "Go do the rounds, friends. Mayor's here." "It looks like *everyone's* here, say buddy?" Richie pats Helga's grandfather on the shoulder, and with Maureen looped around his arm, he struts off into the mass of the party. Helga's grandfather catches Helga's eye and gives her the hang-ten symbol with his shaking right hand—which mean the keys are in Richie's back pocket.

The next day, Richie takes Maureen for a drive, as he's wont to do. He has to use the spare key, he's misplaced the original. *Drank too much last night*, he thinks; *oh well*, he thinks, *that's what spares are for*. Helga's grandfather watches them drive off together, laughs to

himself about how obvious this *affair* has become, and heads back inside the house and down the stairs to Helga in the basement, *her basement*, he thinks, as she watches a white dot move across a simple map—she’s tracking Richie’s car. Maureen teases Richie as they speed along beside ocean cliffs. “Just like that,” Richie says, “You like that?” she croons back as waves crash below, unfortunately too far down to drown them out. In the distance there’s a sharp turn, but for now Richie can just focus performing for his mistress as they take on a long straightaway. But Richie’s car accelerates without him pressing any further on the gas. It continues accelerating. “*Oh, you dirty bird,*” Maureen says. “Watch out, honey, this is a school zone,” she jokes before setting her head upon his lap. Richie moans, takes his hands off the wheel, and pulls her head up. “Stop, baby—something’s wrong,” and then the wheel begins to turn on its own, ever so slightly at first, to the left and then to the right. “What’s going on? Honey, slow down!” Maureen says, as they approach the curve rapidly, wildly. Richie slams his foot on the brake—to no avail. “I can’t!” The wheel begins to take scarier swerves. “Richie, what in the *hell* is going on!” “Talk into the phone now,” Helga says. “How long do I have?” her grandpa whispers back. “I don’t know, thirty seconds?” “Don’t kill them!” “Grandpa, *please.*” He presses the green button on the disposable cell phone. “You’re getting a call!” Maureen says, her hand still around Richie’s softening. PICK ME UP, the computerized dashboard display reads. “Pick it up!” “Are you doing this?” Richie screams. “I sure am,” says Helga’s grandfather into a voice modulator, sounding a bit like the killer in the *Scream* franchise. “What do you want?” “You will vote down the railway initiative or you and your mistress will die in the sea,” he says. “Are you those—those environmental wingnuts?” Maureen offers. “*Terrorists!*” shrieks Richie. Helga’s grandfather, taken aback, says nothing in return, he’s a little shocked at just how deep his granddaughter’s gotten him in already, a little shocked by the soothing wave of adrenaline overcoming him. Helga grabs the phone and stammers out a yes. Her monitor shows Richie on the black line standing in for the road getting closer and closer to the curve. “We are the *Green Liberation Order*. If you do not comply, more will die, more will join you *in Hell.*” Helga’s grandpa covers his mouth with both hands to suppress laughter. “We’re gonna crash!” Richie pleads. “Pledge us your no-vote and your silence and we’ll let you both live. *For now.*” “Okay, fine! I’ll do it!” Richie says. “I will, too!” Maureen says. Helga executes many lines of code. Richie regains control of his car and slams on the brakes.

“We're watching you,” she says. “If you tell anyone about this you, you will suffer. The people around you will suffer. *We'll know.*” “We won't tell a soul!” “Remember: *this is only a demonstration of what we're capable of.* We'll be in touch.” Helga hangs up the phone. She and her grandfather both laugh harder than either have ever laughed before.

Months pass. The railway is voted down, just as the duo of Councilmembers promised the representatives of the *GLO*. An article in the *Chronicle* brings much of Helga's grandpa's dirt into the public eye (with his eager cooperation, of course). Careers are destroyed: The Mayor resigns, Richie hangs on, somehow. “How's your son doing?” Helga's grandpa asks Joanne, here on another one of her “surprise” visits. “He says he's fallen in love with some Israeli woman. *He wants to stay.* Can you believe it?” “Some of them are really beautiful, apparently,” Helga says, not quite sure why she wants to reassure this woman. “You know who else was, apparently? *Eva Braun*, maybe you've heard of her,” Joanne says, laughing a little. Helga and her grandpa laugh a little, too. “Helga, next week we're meeting with Judge Joll in his chambers again. I just want you to know, I think it's going to go really well. You're a very bright young woman and you've stayed the course. You have a stable home now for the first time in your life.” Helga catches her grandfather's eye; they laugh again now, just the two of them, this time silently, only for themselves—they've taught each other how to do so with only the meeting of their gazes.

Z.H. Gill

Z.H. Gill lives in East Hollywood, CA, with his cat Hans. His poetry chapbook *My Eyes* is available now from Bottlecap Press.

Woman Eats Dollhouse

Megan Walsh

It was just a little chair. It came from plastic casing in the craft store, so it wasn't even particularly well-made; the same soft wood as popsicle sticks, stained and lacquered so your fingers stuck when you touched it. The glue was probably half-dried before the pieces even came together, because they popped apart easily in Shoshanna's fingers, and then into her mouth: four uneven legs, the back in three pieces, and then the seat, cracked by her teeth and swallowed in shards.

"Weren't there six chairs?" Clementine asked, poking at the long dining table, a real antique set with diminutive place settings and clay fruit Shoshanna had rolled and molded with her fingertips.

"No," she said, and swallowed. There was a sticking in her throat like a fishbone. "Just five."

The dollhouse began at age fourteen, and carried her through until she was thirty-eight. One summer in their grandmother's old house, the attic stairs had been unfolded from the ceiling and the three of them unleashed in its creaking, spiderwebbed shadows: Clementine immediately unearthing the crates of forgotten dresses, Amelia the boxes of moldering paperbacks, photographs, diaries. Shoshanna tested her weight on the aching boards and watched the dust motes move in the light of the bare bulb. Under an old sheet was a misshapen hulking lump that she could almost imagine moving, lumbering towards her, Frankenstein's monster breathing under the decayed linen. Her heart pounded. She took the end of the sheet and pulled, expecting —

A sudden lunge. Unhappy yellow eyes in the dark.

But it was the dollhouse.

The dollhouse was a weathered teal, with a seam down the front that allowed it to open like a cabinet over a collection of seven rooms

and an attic. It required renovation. The siding was coming down, the windows flopped open and closed like a doll's blinking eyes. Glue had given up behind its antique wallpaper and most of the furniture was gone. Only one doll remained, a little missus of paint and wood fallen down on her face in the attic. Her dress was sewn to her, hands sticking out of plaid sleeves in angry little blocks.

They insulated it in bubble wrap and tape, then the three of them carried it onto the subway and all the way back home.

Shoshanna had painted and repainted the dollhouse many times. Her teenage flights of fancy had resulted in a magenta façade and moody black ceilings, but adult misgivings led to many months of careful stripping and color-matching until she thought she had nearly gotten that original blue-green again. The first thing she ate was a clock. It sat on the mantle of the marble-look fireplace in the living room, round face with two small wooden feet and a slight clicking when she shook it. She thought it might keep time with the right fiddling, but instead she put it on her tongue and weighed it like a pill, those big vitamins that are hell to take, and swallowed it. It was the size of a thumbnail, really. It still hurt.

It was the night of Amelia's engagement party. They had drunk champagne in a ballroom in dresses of floaty, colored chiffon and pointed shoes, their bobbed hair curled around their powdered cheeks. Shoshanna wore pink. By the time she ate the clock, the hem had torn and tears had made rivers of black mascara on her cheeks. She sat there in the dress rearranging furniture until Clementine came in and made her go to bed, then took it off and shoved it in the far, far corner of her closet.

The next thing was a teacup. Made of porcelain and molded onto its saucer, it had perhaps once been part of a set but now stood alone, and lonely. Shoshanna scoured antique shops and toy stores and flea markets looking for its sisters but never found any, and took to keeping it in her pocket, toying with it at odd moments. Sitting at her desk, she might slip her fingers into her skirt to feel its rounded contours, the divot that held a dewdrop of brown resin coffee. She clutched the teacup whenever she was nervous. The day she met

Rita, her breath came so hard and fast that she found her palm smacked to her lips and the teacup gone before she could think twice.

Clementine was happy to sew small curtains and reupholster small cushions on small chairs. Amelia only liked things that were real, and not echoes of other things; it was why she was the only one to move out of the apartment. But Rita was fascinated. They worked in the same office and one lunch break, Shoshanna brought her back to see the dollhouse. Rita stopped in the door of the bedroom and let the bag slip from her shoulder and hit the floor, then padded forward on stockinged feet, drawn to it like a moth. She had left her shoes by the door and the two of them slipped through the halls like mischievous children skipping school to be home when they shouldn't.

The dollhouse had stood for some years atop a side table, its legs flowing down smoothly and giving the appearance that it might tiptoe away at any moment. Rita knelt in front of it. Her nails were perfect red almonds. She opened one side and then the other, sucked in a soft breath and touched the many beautiful things Shoshanna had made with soft, soft fingers.

“You did all this?” she asked, looking over her shoulder, and Shoshanna imagined a teacup squelching through her innards.

She had. Done all of it.

In the first three weeks of knowing Rita, Shoshanna ate a tiny cardboard book, a spoon the size of a grain of rice, a Wedgwood-style vase and a strip of wallpaper. She had never added any other dolls. There was just that one ghostly woman with hair painted onto her wooden head, eyelashes curly and mouth heart-shaped, whom she moved to the bedroom and the dining room and then back to the attic, where she seemed to belong best.

Rita lived by herself in a rented room. She did not speak to her parents or brother. She wanted to be an accountant, and yet there was something inexpressibly glamorous about the hair tucked around itself at the base of her neck, the little wire glasses she wore, the pen she tapped back and forth between her fingers while she

worked. No, not glamour. Loveliness. She was the whirl of a rose in the wallpaper.

There was a cut on the tip of Shoshanna's tongue. (Miniscule broom bristle.) It had bothered her all day, stung when it touched the back of her teeth, and she hissed at her first sip of coffee. "Let me look," Rita said. It was a bewildering thing to say. In the stairwell of the office building, Rita put her hands on the sides of Shoshanna's face and tipped her head back. She bore the inhumane intimacy of opening her mouth and poking her tongue out slightly. "It's bleeding a bit," Rita said, and smiled as she let Shoshanna's mouth close. "You'll live."

What did you see inside me? Shoshanna thought, and imagined a hallway unfolding down her throat with pulsing red walls, a basement where all of it was still stored in cluttered heaps.

"Sometimes," Shoshanna's breath rushed into her, "I imagine waking up in it. The dollhouse. All my joints have pins and the bed is cardboard. I walk up to the very edge of the room and it's this monstrous precipice, it's terrifying, and I know if I fall I'll be crushed. I'll be something the cat could eat. And I can see my own room looming outside of it, huge and strange, and I'm still in it, somehow. A giant. I can fit in the palm of my own hand."

There is a dent of concentration between Rita's brows. "Are you happy?" she asked. "In there?"

"I don't know," Shoshanna said. "What does that feel like?"

"Like being full," Rita said.

They returned to her room after work. They sat like younger girls with their legs tucked under them and skirts tugged straight. They sat before the open splendor of the dollhouse and Shoshanna said, "Did you ever want to get married?"

"No," Rita said.

"Neither did I. Neither did Clementine. I could never picture someone else in my space. In my things. My bed."

“I’m here,” Rita said, and yes, she was.

“When my other sister, Amelia, when she got married...” Shoshanna’s tongue stung and she pressed it harder to the back of her teeth. “The man she married.” She touched the curtains in the dollhouse’s second bedroom, filmy and pink. “At their engagement party, he struck her. Across the face. I was seventeen. I had never seen anybody hit anybody, least of all my sister, my—it was like hitting God in the face. I ran at him, but she got in the way. She pushed me back and I fell; my heel caught in my hem on the way down. She told me to stop being such a child and go back to the party, but I couldn’t stop crying.”

She smoothed the small bed. She traced the floorboards, laid plank by plank like real ones.

“I hated that,” she said. “That she—didn’t even feel it. That she acted like it was something I was too young to understand.”

“She was ashamed,” Rita said.

Shoshanna was, too. “That was the first night I did it. I haven’t stopped since.”

“Show me,” Rita said.

Shoshanna’s eyes felt large. Painted onto the plane of her wooden face.

She picked up one small fork and one small knife. Rita opened her mouth. Shoshanna put the fork on her tongue, silver and bright, and then set the knife on her own.

They swallowed.

Megan Walsh

Megan Walsh is a New York-based writer and artist whose work explores the intersection of the unsettling and the mundane. She will appear in Issue 24 of Barrelhouse Magazine. She has always been spooky.

South of Steve's Navel

Jude Armstrong

after sam sax

there are more Ss in mississippi /
than i remember sounding out in elementary /
giggles like we were / keeping the of name / the river that
keeps / us stuck / solid in the south /
between our small teeth / with our
thinning smiles / where the secret / in sex
is that / you do it to yourself /
or with shame / or with a guy named Steve /
sugared and sacrificed / to his
father when / the town finds out /
how he gleams at men / though the stationary
moonlight / leaving me to spit / his saliva back
to the lake / of sin it came from / and we
always fall back into / no matter how
much you tongue at the stem / of
practiced silence / you will always slip
your hand / down the back alley of sixth street /
to escape the sickness / you inherited as a son /
as a strange / woman shaped man /
that can't let go of the hardened edges / of maple
sap trees / beside the abandoned ministry /
that press you to /
straighten out and / never go past
/ the mississippi

Jude Armstrong

Jude Armstrong is a young poet and author of *AN ALIVE BOY* (Bottlecap Press, 2023). He is the founding editor of Verum Literary Press and has been published in new words press, Block Part Mag, Bullshit Lit, and is a part of the Adroit Journal Summer Mentorship. When not directing school theater productions, he enjoys 80s music, a good film, and advocating for trans rights.



Judith Skillman, *Self Portrait with Pain*, oil on canvas, 12 x 16", 2023

Judith Skillman

Judith Skillman paints expressionist works in oil on canvas and board. She is interested in feelings engendered by the natural world. Her paintings have been featured on the covers of *Thin Air Magazine*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *Torrid Literature*. Work appears in *The Penn Review*, *Artemis*, *Raven Chronicles*, and other journals. Skillman has studied visual art at McDaniel College, Pratt Fine Arts Center, and Seattle Artist League (SAL). Shows include The Pratt, Galvanize, and Seattle Artist League.

<https://www.judithskillman.com>

<https://www.etsy.com/shop/jkpaintingsstore>

<https://www.saatchiart.com/account/artworks/823323>

On Suffering

Elissa Fertig

Last year I dislocated my elbow. My friend who was with me at the time brought me to the emergency room where they relocated the joint and gave me a dubious cocktail of ketamine and fentanyl to sedate me while they did so. My friend told me afterward that I screamed at the doctors while I was unconscious, pleading with them to please stop what they were doing. I don't remember any of this. Eventually, they sawed off the plastic blue cast and I had to go to physical therapy for weeks, slowly bending my arm over and over again as it had forgotten its natural state and I had to coax it into remembering.

Last week, I was reading a eulogy right before I was supposed to go on a date with someone from a dating app. He was going to make me dinner and I was making dessert—individual chocolate pudding cups. I delayed whipping the whipped cream because I was reading the eulogy, which was beautiful, and sad, and then I put my phone down, folded raspberries into the whipped cream and left the apartment.

Earlier this week, my session with my therapist: she said to me, maybe you're feeling happy because you were able to tolerate something good happening to you.

The same week: cake, parties, friends. Seeing the Barbie movie. My roommate in the car next to me telling me to have a good day at work. Picking Sophie up from the airport and her paying for my drink. My boss telling me that I look nice today. My two cats curled up next to each other like little sham rugs, in the sunlight.

When I was 16 I had a sports coach who I later realized was grooming me, though that is neither here nor there. I mean, this isn't about the grooming. He loved pain very much. His social capital was completely tied up with his nihilism—people thought he was very cool because he just didn't care about anything and he thought anyone who did was a fool who deserved to be had. He used to tell me he did not believe in love, that he thought language failed completely, that “being nice was boring.” Everything in his life hinged not necessarily on his success in the sport, but on being

reasonably strong and looking like he never tried hard at all. This made him very popular. He was also funny.

Being 16, and then eventually 17, 18 and 19, I believed every word he said and thought that the best way to live a full life with lots of friends and a good relationship with your passions was to accept that the world was a bleak and terrible place with little good in it. In this way, perhaps you can care less about things and then maybe they won't hurt you as much. Plus, it is cool.

After the elbow dislocation, I met someone I dated for about a year. Our first month or so together was punctuated by my awkward blue cast, which we had to negotiate during sex. He admitted to me later that he was happy when I got it off because it was so difficult to kiss around, which wounded me somehow. I sent him photos when the cast came off of my blue and purple elbow, amazed I still had one underneath the plaster. I remember feeling like I didn't have a good excuse for being so tired anymore.

Something my sister likes to tell me is that she feels guilty if she doesn't worry about the people she loves. If something were to happen to them, she would feel like it was her fault, because the worrying is a talisman against bad things happening. In so doing: suffering begets itself, and can somehow lead to redemption. It is only through hardship that we begin to deserve to have love, to have happiness or community.

On disliking oneself, my good friend writes, "It will be like watching a dog go to the bathroom—a necessary event with a witness who does nothing but watch the vulnerable process of relieving the body."

And it is just that: relieving. Nothing is more confirmational than self-flagellation. The pain wants us all, it is a greedy thing with sharp teeth. It will stop at nothing. And it will tell you, you are stupid if you don't give in to me.

When I was 20, my sports mentor fucked me on a pull-out couch in California. I don't know how old he was at the time, maybe 15 years older than me, maybe more. It doesn't matter. After he came, he rolled over and said that he didn't like sleeping in the bed with other people, and moved to the floor where he stayed for the remainder of the trip. I found this strange as he had insisted on sharing the bed with me. I still wonder if I could have negotiated different sleeping arrangements, and then it would not have

happened at all. That summer, we stayed in a cabin in the woods together, though we slept in different rooms and never fucked again. He used to complain that I walked heavily and my footsteps were loud.

The pain wants everything. And it isn't to say that giving into it is folly or that you just have to "think positive thoughts." It's also not to say that resisting it is particularly easy, maybe for any of us.

During the date, after the pudding cups, we laid in bed for a while and I told him I want to quit my job and just hang out with my friends all of the time. My favorite memory of the last month was when I did my laundry at my friend's house and we played a card game while the clothes whirled in the dryer.

There are so many things in this life that are not worth it. But pain, while all-consuming, is not very interesting.

I have always seen pain as an option. Not self-harm exactly but the necessity of its consumption; of picking at your own emotional scabs all the time. It can be a kind of fun.

My mentor thought it was the best way—the pain and the suffering. I don't know if he is happy, or if happiness is even of value to him, and for a long time he was my barometer for living a good life. I like to make this joke to my friend that I love my grudges because they are like my little pets. Sometimes wanting to love life can be like closing your fist around a blade.

My elbow is no longer dislocated, casted or swollen or bruised. I want to say something about the memory of the body but that feels inaccurate here. It is more about the forgetting and the going back; the way your body will protect you from whatever you've suffered so that you can keep going long enough to do it again.

I ought to be clear. I am 25 and stupid. I know nothing about love and I know nothing about marriage and no one close to me has ever died. As far as I know, I am going to be young forever and smoking cigarettes will only lower my blood pressure.

Being 25 of course means I am not 20 anymore and being fucked by my mentor on the couch. I am no longer closing my fist around the blade and I am able to tolerate this, somehow.

I am going on a second date, on Wednesday. We're going to the beach after work. Maybe he will kiss me again and if he doesn't, I will kiss him, with my mouth open.

Elissa Fertig

Elissa Fertig is an art historian and writer living and working in the Midwest. Her work is published or forthcoming in JAKE magazine, the Heavy Feather Review, Bullshit Lit, Polyester Zine, and others. Her poetry has been nominated for Best of the Net and tends to focus on relationships. She writes stuff because she doesn't know what else to do with herself.

Southern Graves

Alannah Benae

Winding down graveled roads in the backs of the neighborhoods,
Deep down in the woods where each house is different or the same,
We'll go on,
Go on,
Go on.

Man paved hills,
Speeding down the dip with glee,

The wheels are a bit loose and you're trying to grapple the steering
wheel.

It's gleeful times in moments of danger,
Safety is worth the risk of a laugh or a smile.

Passing by the abandoned houses,
Inexplicably burnt, smashed, or rotten.

We're momentary guests as we pass by it.

Roadkill is our wildlife scenery,
Wondering how the armadillo is so neatly flattened,
How the cat's fur is all that remained,
How a dog's bones were licked that clean.

We'll go on,
Go go on,
Going on.

Swerving down curves swiftly,
Possibly going over the speed limit but that's just fine.

Paying no mind to the over bent guardrail,
Because the grass healed over the incident just as good as new.

The railing is bent out of shape,
But it surely could catch someone else's accident,
Either for me or just for you.

Singing along to pop or rock,
How beautiful and good the day is.

How beautiful and good the day is, indeed.

The memorial was beautiful too, right?
Flowers always fresh and bright,
A teddy bear nailed to the tree,
No picture just lights,
A cross to mark the last spot seen.

It was beautiful too, just like the day has been.

Pay no mind to the random items off the sides of the road,
Be it a suspiciously good offer with a number nailed into the grass,
Car seats with no child nearby,
A shoe,
A trashbag,
A toy,
Who knows, it's all strange collections of the road by now.

Rusted vehicles with no way to drive into the field,
Everything is burnt and documents are splayed about.

Redacted hoards of documents stored inside a cooler,
What a beautiful day it is,
We don't have the answer for what we found today.

What a great drive it was today,

And everyday since then.

Alannah Benaë

Alannah Benaë is an OKC-based indigenous poet and writer who is often seen leading workshops, hosting writers showcases for authors of marginalized communities, and appearing at open mics. Outside of writing, Alannah can be found at local coffee shops cackling with friends, playing DND, or going to the movies at 11 AM on a Tuesday. To see more of Alannah and their works, check out [@Alannah_Benaë](#) on Instagram, Canary Collective, Mujer Manifesto, Beyond the Veil Press, and Elsewhere.

A Prince of New England

Diane Dooley

I'd changed in the bathroom after my shift, surrounded by the damp boxes of overstock. My best ripped jeans, old boots, and strapless, sparkly top; my entire body liberally sprayed down with the most expensive of the fresheners to get the poverty stank of the Dollar Store off me. Half an hour later, entering Hancock's, I wondered why I'd even bothered.

The reek of beer and sweat smacked me in the face as I skirted the rough boards of the tiny dance floor, dodging the wiggling asses and flailing arms of woman screaming in unison their intention to spare a horse by riding its cowboy instead. Just like they'd done last Saturday night, and all the previous Saturday nights before. I ignored the men who were standing around, drinks in hand, hungrily eying the display. At least four of my exes were among them. I almost turned around and walked out.

But then I saw him. Pretty boy in the last seat at the end of the bar, back pressed against the wall as he tried to avoid the massive presence of Tirany LeFever's cleavage, which was advancing determinedly on him. He glanced around, probably seeking escape as a wobbling Tirany screeched at him above the music. She was trying the old "you're not from around here" approach. It was glaringly obvious he wasn't. I stared at him, waiting for the eye contact. And when it came, I marched over and shouldered Tirany's tits out of the way. I stared close into his summer blue eyes and murmured, "Sorry I'm late."

He smiled, relieved, his teeth white and perfect. "Drink?" I nodded and turned to face Tirany. She had a good buzz on. But not enough to forget the mess I'd made of her face back in tenth grade. Her nose was still kind of crooked, I noticed. I raised an eyebrow, inviting a reaction. But she was backing off, a sulky look on her face that she unsuccessfully tried to turn into a sneer. I remembered the glorious feeling of my fist smashing into her surprised face, and smiled. So what if Child Protective Services had stuck me in a group home for "my own safety?" I'd learned a few good tricks there. Nobody ever made fun of me for it again, not after seeing what I did to Tirany LeFever for it.

She scuttled away. I turned back to my pretty prince of a mystery man. A beer and a shot was on the bar in front of me, and he was paying for them with a crisp new twenty out of a fat, shiny wallet. "Keep the change," he said to the bartender. I looked at the wad of cash and number of cards just before he folded his wallet and shoved it into the back pocket of his jeans. I tossed back the shot, then smiled when I heard his words. "Know anywhere I can buy some drugs?"

I took a sip of my beer. "What makes you think I'd know that?"

He laughed softly. "You've got a flying bird with a joint hanging out its beak and the words 'To Live is to Fly' tattooed across your upper back." He shrugged, smiling lazily. "Just a guess."

I turned to him, stuck out my little titties and got closer. His breath was sweet and he had the longest dark eyelashes I had ever seen. I put my mouth to his ear. He smelled of fresh air and something expensive. "I can get you *whatever* you want. How much do you want to spend?"

He put his mouth to my ear. "All of it."

We flew that night; we lived. Talking. Laughing. Driving in my shitty little Honda. Up Camel Hill to Brandon's place for the meth. Down to the tweakers at the mobile home in Hobson's Hollow for a variety pack of pills and patches and other stuff. Then over to the aging city hippies in the ramshackle farmhouse for a fat bag of their excellent weed. We stayed awhile, drinking and listening to music. I danced in his arms. And he never even once groped me. Instead, he touched my flame-red hair and whispered that he loved my freckles. "All million of them?" I said with a giggle.

"Let me show you," he said.

And then I drove him back to Hancock's where his van was parked. His tricked-out party van for his cross-country road trip. Taking a year before grad school to see the country, headed for his cousins in the Hollywood Hills of California. From his lovely old home in New England, where his father was a lawyer and his mother planned charitable events and were so proud of him. His wallet was empty now, and then he showed me how much he loved my freckles. We fucked in the bed in the back of his van for a few hours. It was glorious and perfect. When the morning light crisscrossed through

the wind shield, I woke him up. And had him follow me home to meet Mom.

She had just gotten off her night shift at the group home and was halfway through her morning six pack. I went to the fridge and broke two beers off for me and him. She knew better than to complain, but her eyes darted in panic. "Make him some eggs." I prodded her out the chair and took her place. She'd been rolling cigarettes on her little machine and placing them carefully into empty old Camel packs. I swiped the two she'd finished and yelled "shut up!" when I heard her grumbling from the kitchen.

"You're kinda mean to your mom," he said, after I'd guided him to reverse his van into what was the only nice spot on our land, back in the woods at the rocky little beach next to the creek. I broke up a few dead branches and tossed them into the fire pit I'd built for myself years previously. Lord knows the number of times I'd slept out here. I opened the back doors to his van wide, and pulled out two folding chairs I'd noticed while riding him the previous night. I plopped down in one of them. "I'm not as mean to Mom as she has been to me in my life," I said. "She'd still be in prison if I hadn't covered up for her in court." I stretched my arms above my head, the sun warming, the breeze restful, and looked up into his innocent face, and then to the bright green of the softly rustling tree behind him. "What drug do you want to do first?"

"Better pace myself," he said with a gentle smile. "I want a crazy year to remember before I knuckle down to law school. But...I don't usually do this sort of thing." He sat down in the other chair. "You'll keep me safe? Like you did last night from the woman with the boob sweat and the crooked nose?"

Ah, life was perfect. "Of course, I will, honey." I grabbed our stash bag and rummaged around in it, considering the many possibilities. I settled on starting slow, half a tab of acid each. I slid it under his tongue with my own. "Wanna fuck me against my favorite tree? Then bathe in the creek? Wanna see my most secret freckle?"

He didn't hesitate. "Yes, please. All of that," he said.

I didn't go in for my shift that day. Or the following days. Didn't even call. We licked each other dry and lay in the sun. We fucked in the van and on the van and against the van, on the ground, against every tree, in the water, next to the fire in the middle of the night.

We flew. We lived. He told me all about this wonderful thing called a trust fund. We talked, laughed and fucked. We worked our way through the stash. God, how we flew. We ate Mom's food and drank her beer. He even charmed *her*, surprising me with the sound of her long-forgotten laughter. The last time I'd heard it was the night she'd beaten me out into a cold, cold night; her laughing bray as she'd turned to the man I'd refused to let her sell me to, before slamming the door in my bleeding face.

I loved to hear him talk, my prince, my beautiful stranger. So easy, so fluent. Stories of eccentric professors, cousins who played tennis, pool parties at his house, the books he had read, trips to Europe and Mexico. He had so many stories. We talked, laughed and fucked. We worked our way through the stash. God, how we flew. He told me of his plan to write a screenplay about his cross-country trip. "You'll be in it," he added. We talked, laughed and fucked some more. Stories about his first car, his dog that died, learning how to ski, crazy people he'd known in college. I couldn't get enough of him and his honey voice and beautiful eyes and relentless body. He told me he'd be leaving, with a sad little smile, as soon as all the drugs were done and we discussed whether to have one glorious night with the rest of the stash or two more sensible nights.

And that's where it all went wrong.

That's how our last glorious night ended up with the drugs all gone, in a smelly, damp bed in the Country Motel, with me puking over the side onto a stained beige carpet covered with empty bottles and shards of broken glass. He was on the other side of the bed, staring upwards, his head propped on three thin, gray pillows. Everywhere else was blood, not even flowing anymore, from the jagged, slashed gapes of both his wrists. So much blood. So much. Don't remember too much after that. The cops came. I think it was me who called them. I remember they'd thought I killed him and arrested me none too gently.

Got out the county jail a few days later, still in the same clothes. Mom had bailed me out. They put me in a room with his father. He asked about the van and I told him the keys were still in it and gave him my address. He didn't look like a lawyer. A small, gray man, hunched over the table between us, his hands rough, his clothes

rumpled and cheap, his eyes avoiding me. A poor person. A sad person. Just like me. “He stole it, you know,” he said quietly. “I’ve been fixing it up for years. Took my only credit card. Emptied out my bank account too. Anything left or did you two spend it all?”

I opened my mouth to speak but all that came out was a sob.

“He just got out of jail a few months ago. Me and his mother hoped that this time he’d stay off the drugs, settle down, stop stealing, stop lying.” He gripped the table in front of him, his knuckles white, and shook his head. “Anyway, his mother took to her bed. Can’t stop crying. Still her baby. No matter the terrible things he’s done.”

The sound that came out of me was painful. No law school. No California cousins. No trust fund. No screenplay. Not a word of truth. Except maybe my prince really *had* loved my freckles. It had certainly felt so.

“He take anything from you?”

Had he? I shook my head, though I wasn’t sure there was something I couldn’t name he’d taken from me.

“Just killed himself lying next to you.” His voice broke on the final word.

I pushed back the chair and stood up.

“Are you okay, miss? Did he hurt you?”

His voice was strained and kind and helpless and I had to get away from it. I scrambled out the door and at some point went home by some convoluted route I don’t remember.

Mom was sleeping. The van was gone. I lay beside the creek in the exact same spot I had so many years before, where Mom had found me, covered in blood and gray with hypothermia. I should be kinder to Mom. She had called an ambulance that day, after all, even knowing the kind of trouble she would be in. And today she’d scratched up bail money from somewhere. Yeah, I should be kinder to her.

Strange noises kept coming out of me, but no tears seemed able to escape my burning eyes. But still the moans, the groans, the whimpering continued. And for the first time ever I wished I’d never

woken from the long-ago cold sleep; that mom had never sobered up and found her conscience on that frosty morning.

No tears. Just the memory of his pale face, the gray pillows and the red of his blood. Just another liar. I closed my eyes and dreamt of a road trip to far away from here. Towards open freeways and Hollywood hills and tennis courts and close cousins; towards all the things that never had and never would exist. Things I would never have; places I would never go. When I opened them again, I went inside and called my manager at the Dollar Store, asking her if there was any chance of getting my job back. She said yes and told me to be in at six the next day. I closed my mind and said I'd be there. Mom had left a beer for me in the fridge and I guzzled it down gratefully as I looked at my phone, deciding to buy her a twelve pack next pay day.

Everyone on Facebook were sharing the details of my arrest, with excited levels of greedy glee and unrestrained disappointment that it didn't look like I would face any charges other than possession of drug paraphernalia. Tirany's post about me had gone viral, of course. She'd shared my mugshot, complete with puke in my hair, swollen black eye, and an expression I wish I could unsee. I resolved to go to Hancock's next Saturday night and stare the bastards down. As I had done so many times before. So what if my prince had turned out to be a frog? Not like that hadn't happened before. I went to bed and listened to Mom snoring in the next room, ignoring the tears that were soaking my pillow.

Diane Dooley

Diane Dooley is the published author of short stories and novellas in a variety of genres. You can find links to them on her blog, [Writing, Stuff and Nonsense](#).

She lives on the side of a mountain in the middle of nowhere, Vermont. You can follow her on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#) or [Bluesky](#).

The Air Mattress

Matt Weatherbee

“You fucks better not put me in the ocean,” Russ slurred as me and D slung his arms over our shoulders.

“Never,” I said.

While going to his tent, Russ catcalled the girls and wiggled his tongue at the ones still in bikinis, their skin tan and glistening in the firelight.

In his tent Russ flopped onto the air mattress and passed out.

“He’s going in the ocean,” I said.

“Oh yeah,” D said.

With Russ sprawled out on the air mattress, Me and D carried him down the beach. We swam him out past the waves and gave him one last big push. As we got back to shore, there was a big round of applause. We bowed and rejoined the party.

It wasn’t until the next day after we had cleaned up the beach and were eating breakfast at a nearby café that we remembered Russ. We threw money on the table and rushed back to the beach.

Russ was nowhere to be found.

D ran his hands through his hair. “Shit.”

When I told the police it was all me, D tried to interrupt, but I cut him off. I dragged Russ down the beach. I swam him out past the waves. Me. Nobody else. Me. There was no reason for us both to go down for this.

D mouthed thank you from where he stood behind the police.

The Coast Guard called off the search after two days. Russ's parents let me attend the funeral the next day. His Mom said she didn't blame me—it was just a prank gone wrong. That night alone in my cell, I cried more than I can ever remember.

I was sentenced to a year in prison and three years probation. D would visit me regularly and bring whatever I needed. Otherwise I kept my head down and did as I was told, hoping my good behavior would get me an early release.

There was something familiar about the man sitting across the table from me in the visitor's room, but I couldn't quite pin it down as I studied his face, wondering why he wasn't talking. He had a shaggy beard, even shaggier hair and a deep tan. He was an old buddy of mine. Or so he said. I didn't care who he was. I was just happy to have an excuse to leave my cell.

“I told you not to put me in the ocean,” he finally said.

I had no idea what he was talking about so I stayed quiet. While we sat there in silence, it dawned on me. “Russ?”

He grinned.

“Fuck you. You ain't Russ. You're just some asshole trying to fuck with me.”

The man interlocked his fingers and leaned forward on his forearms. “Remember one night when we were kids, we rode our bikes down to the lake and went skinny-dipping. Just me and you. No girls. Remember? Got a couple leeches on our sacks. No gay shit happened. We were just so naïve back then we didn't even know you were only supposed to go skinny-dipping with girls.” He sat back. “I don't know about you, but I never told anyone about that.”

I had never told anyone about that either. “How? How are you alive?”

He shrugged. “Guess you didn't swim me out far enough.”

“But you weren't there when we woke up...I went to your funeral.”

Again, he grinned. "I told you not to put me in the ocean."

I clenched my jaw and wrung my hands together. If he was saying what I thought he was saying, this wasn't going to end well. "So let me get this straight: this was all just your way of getting back at me?"

There was that shit-eating grin again. The inside of my chest grew hot, the urge to violently wipe that grin off his face boiling up inside me. This definitely wasn't going to end well. "Were your parents in on it?"

"For all they know I was lost at sea."

I shook my head in disbelief. "You're sick. You need to come forward. Get me out of here."

"No can do, bucko."

"What? Why not?"

He said nothing, just sat there, twiddling his thumbs and looking out the window.

"At least let your parents know you're alive. They deserve that much."

"Why? So they can help you get an early release? I don't think so."

I took a deep breath and repeated Russ wasn't worth a life sentence over and over in my head. "I've been in here for six months. Isn't that enough for you?"

He turned toward me, his face hardening as our eyes met. "You try to prank me? Come on, Johnny. Don't make me laugh."

I kicked the leg of the table. "I'm a convicted felon now, you fuck. You're gonna ruin my life over a fucking prank? A failed one at that?"

"I told you not to put me in the ocean."

I lunged at him. The guards had me subdued before I could do any real damage.

Sometimes when I think about Russ, I wonder if it really was him or if the whole thing was just some bad dream. But I'd find out when I get out of here. And if it really was him, I'd get him back. Trust me. He has no idea what's coming.

Matt Weatherbee

Matt Weatherbee once used an air mattress to escape from a deserted island, but that's a story for another time. His stories have appeared in Microfiction Monday Magazine, Scribes***MICRO***Fiction, The Dribble Drabble Review and elsewhere.

The Happiest Girl in the Whole USA

Ollie Swasey

When the last few notes finally faded out, someone took a short, soft breath. Then—

“That was ‘Down on the Farm’ by Tim McGraw,” drawled the man into the microphone. “And now for a little bit of a throwback, we have Roy Orbison’s ‘You Got It,’ comin’ up next before the break. You’re listenin’ to 100.7 WRKT, your local home for the top country hits of yesterday and today. Again, this is Roy Orbison; stay tuned.”

The needle dropped as Brian leaned away from the mic and hit the mute button. From her place at the soundboard, Casey gave him a thumbs up, which went unacknowledged as he turned to Dave beside him in the booth and told a joke that didn’t reach the mic. She watched the two of them laugh, shoulders bobbing silently through the soundproof glass. Whatever it was, it looked awfully funny.

It had been another long day. At the commercial, Casey pulled her headset off and stepped outside to stretch her legs. The modded trailer they called a radio station sat nestled in a clearing of pine trees at the edge of the state forest. Two big white satellite dishes sat in the grass next to the gravel strip where they all parked their trucks, pointed up at the mountain behind them to beam the music up and out to anyone who would listen.

She took a drink from her thermos, a faint lick of whiskey cutting through the otherwise terrible station coffee. All the Coffee Mate in the world couldn’t have made it palatable, and so it was necessary to bring out the big guns. It was quiet out here. Across the road, the setting sun glittered on the surface of a small waterfall as it tipped over the overhang, running down into the charmingest little creek you ever saw. And up beyond that, the low rolling mountains stretched off into the distance, thick with green and a bare smattering of orange betraying the early changing of the leaves. A blue heron standing on the creek bed regarded her with interest.

Casey smoothed her hair away from her face, took a deep breath and thought, well, at least there’s the view.

When she went back inside, Brian and Dave were shooting the shit near the break table. Faintly, she heard the telltale whine of some Dolly B-side drifting out of the booth, and knew that Dave had probably set it up to run on automatic for a few songs so they could have supper. Someone was microwaving fish—trout, from the smell of it.

“Hey boys,” she said, selecting a granola bar from the tattered wicker basket by the fridge. “Good work tonight.”

“Thanks, Case,” Brian said, barely turning to look at her. He had a ruddy, sun-soaked face, and a barrel chest that strained the buttons on the sweat-wick polo shirts he always wore. His hands were big, nails bitten down to nubs, a scratched-up wedding ring pinching a finger that used to be smaller, like the rest of him. He flashed a conspiratorial smile at Dave, who returned it. Not a smile she was meant to see.

“Got any more contemporary queued up?” Casey asked conversationally, topping up her thermos. They both shrugged.

“Sure. Same as always,” Dave said, then lifted an old Coke bottle to his lips to spit. He was rangier than Brian, stringy in the body and hollow in the cheeks. The old station manager apparently used to say he looked like the Marlboro Man if you starved him for a month and then left him out in the sun to dry, and no one had ever been able to disagree. His lip bulged at all times with the dip he kept snugged against his gums, and he had a bad habit of leaving his spitters lying around the station no matter how often Casey told him to throw them out. His breath alone could take your eyebrows off if you stood too close.

Neither of them ever gave her the time of day. For ten hours a day she sat in the booth and kept things running while the two of them jabbered on, on air or amongst themselves, picking the same songs over and over because that was what they liked. They never listened to her. They barely looked at her. She felt lucky if they remembered to call her by name.

The sun fell off the edge of the mountains, drifting to the other side of the world while the sky grew dark and shiny with stars. Brian and Dave signed off, cleared out and went home to their respective lives. Casey, as was customary, remained behind. She took out the trash, tidied up the studio, hit the lights and locked up. Home was a twenty-minute drive down the winding roads, past the whitewashed

houses, past the ramshackle garages and their cars on blocks. Up the steep hidden drive, she parked her old rust bucket and went inside.

Though they had both been dead for about a decade a piece, Casey's house still smelled like her folks. Her ma's rosy, powdery perfume hung like a ghost over the patterned sofa in the parlor, the dull floral seat covers in the kitchen. Her father's pipe smoke had invaded every crevice, right down to the wallpaper, waiting to strike when she leaned too close. Climbing the stairs to the second floor, her foot caught a nail head that had worked its way up out of a step near the top, snagging her sock, and she made a mental note to hammer it down later. That was the way everything was in this place. The nails working themselves out of the floorboards, the smell of her family leaching out of the furniture. Rust in the water, squirrels in the walls. Her footsteps echoed through the empty house, and no one came running to meet them.

She hadn't been alone for long. Poor old Roscoe had died only a few months back—her darling boy, with his big bully head and smiley frog face and brown brindle coat—and since then things hadn't been as manageable as they used to be. She drank more than she cared to admit, for one thing. At first it was only a nightcap, a little sting to take the pain away from coming home to an empty house every night. But then came the justifications. Oh, it'll be alright if I have a little hair of the dog to get me into work. Oh, it'll be alright if I have a little nip to get me through another fucking block of Chesney. It's not like they even notice. They never even look at me, she thought. All they ever looked at was each other.

As far as she knew, Dave and Brian had been close for going on twenty years. In a town like theirs, you hung onto what you had for as long as you could, jobs and friends included. They seemed to have a shared language between them, of jokes and references so many layers deep she couldn't have parsed it with a pickaxe. She, on the other hand, was an outsider. Prior to her tenure at WRKT, Casey had dabbled in HAM radio as a hobbyist, then spent eight years working her way up at the big mainstream station in the nearest city about two hours away. But then her parents got sick, and home came calling. And WRKT was close, and she was qualified, and they needed a station manager as badly as she needed money. Brian and Dave, entrenched there since the nineties, spoke highly and often of the prior station manager, Bill, whom they both adored. He had

passed away of COPD or something like it, leaving the position open. Much to their chagrin, Casey had been the one to fill it.

She fell drunk into bed at eleven like she did every night, the ancient mattress folding up around her like a hammock. Sometimes she wondered why she even bothered to work at all. The house was paid for, anyway. What her money went towards was groceries—rice, beans, canned fruit and liquor being the only things she could make herself eat these days—the light bill and gas to get to and from work. When she had time off, she usually just laid around all day, drinking and reading trashy romance novels from the library. Barely an improvement over working at all. She had no friends, no family, no dog, had sacrificed her love for radio at the altar of money with nothing to show for it. The only things that changed anymore were the damn seasons. Even stupid Dave and Brian never changed. Whispering to each other when they thought she wouldn't hear, smiling their secret little smiles. Locking her out in the cold, growing colder. In the ten years she had spent there, Casey found herself beginning to well and truly hate their guts.

Thoughts swam lazily through the alcohol in her brain as she dozed. Those bastards. An image of Dave's mouth appeared in her mind, the repulsive shape of his lips as he pressed them to a bottle, letting a dribble of brown spit crawl down the inside to join the reservoir at the bottom. Sometimes in her meaner moments she hoped he'd die of cancer, which she knew was rich coming from someone whose liver probably wouldn't last the decade. And Brian wasn't any better. He disgusted her, too. His thick, sweaty hands, watch band biting into his wrist. He smelled fleshy and saline when she got near him, like raw hot dogs or the juice from a baloney package. Married to some nothing of a woman Casey had met once or twice when she'd brought him his lunch at work. So forgettable, she couldn't even remember her name.

Effigies of the men drifted through her mind, their awful laughter, the way they palled around with each other like they didn't notice or care that she was there. Brian's meaty palm clapped over Dave's skinny shoulder. Both big hands pressing against his chest. The stained corner of Dave's mouth twitching into a smile, rolling the clod of dip to the other side of his lip as Brian leaned in and—

The shriek of her alarm clock woke Casey with a start. She groaned, slapping blindly at her nightstand until the sound stopped.

Her head hurt like a storm was coming, an acid ache carving a hole in her stomach. And a strange dream lingered.

As she lay there piecing it together, she noticed that her body felt strange and overly hot, twisted up in the damp sheets. One hand was asleep from being pinned beneath her all night, her hips aching from the poor positioning of a passed-out drunk, but that was all typical. There was something else. With her functional hand, she slid her fingers between her legs to find the cotton gusset of her underwear soaked completely through.

Dully surprised, Casey lay there a moment longer until her stomach twisted urgently and she lurched out of bed, barely reaching the bathroom in time for last night's dinner to make its escape. Gagging over the sink, she tried to think of why she would possibly dream something like that. Too many romance novels maybe, or not enough socializing. She hadn't dated in, Christ, almost a decade now. It had to be that—some hidden desire unearthed by alcohol, applied indiscriminately to the only two faces she ever saw besides the lady at the general store.

The only thing was, in the dream, she wasn't fucking them. In the dream, they were fucking each other.

Casey rinsed her mouth, splashed water on her face, rivulets running down her forearms until it dripped from her elbows as she tried to put the thought from her mind. Dreams meant nothing. Just neurons sparking vaguely in the dark, making connections with no real-world implications. They're your coworkers, she told herself, and swallowed another retch. You were drunk, and horny, and it was just a dream. Nothing worth writing home about.

With a heavy pour into her thermos to drive off the hangover, Casey went to work. Another day, the same as always. Arriving before the others, she set the station up the way she liked, readied the equipment, squared away her paperwork for the morning. And all the while, she tried to forget it. The dream kept replaying itself like a bad movie over and over in her mind. Hands and mouths. The scrape of beard stubble, reeking of tobacco and halitosis. Shirts peeling off of swells of sweaty flesh. A burgeoning—

A key in the lock interrupted her reverie. Dave and Brian stepped through the door. How they managed to arrive at the same time every day baffled her, but they did it anyway. Already deep in

conversation about fantasy football, they swanned past her to hang up their jackets. She could almost feel herself flutter in the breeze.

“Hey guys,” said Casey. Without interrupting himself, Dave jerked his chin towards her in acknowledgement, then carried on in his ranting to Brian, his passion impenetrable.

“—don’t even know what they were thinking, calling that foul,” he muttered, and spit into a bottle at hand. Casey tried not to look too closely at his mouth when he did.

“These refs are fuckin’ blind,” Brian opined. “Couldn’t find their asses with both hands, if you ask me.”

They disappeared into the booth, taking their seats. Broadcast time was approaching, and for all the things she could say about them, at least they were prompt. Casey joined them in her spot on the other side of the glass, watching as their conversation carried on in silence. Dave was pink in the face, worked up over some sports injustice that she didn’t know or care enough about to understand. Brian nodded along with him, his face a mask of understanding. Was he really a good listener, she thought, or was he was just good at making it seem that way? What were their conversations like when no one else was around? Did they ever speak softly, close enough that one could feel the other’s breath on his neck? Did it raise goosebumps on their skin?

Sitting back suddenly in her swivel chair, Casey squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Shut the fuck up, she thought.

But the dream stuck with her.

All day she tried to fight it off, but it kept coming back, drifting unbidden through her foggy mind. Watching them banter through the afternoon block, she wondered if they ever went home together after the day ended. Brian was married, so of course they would go to Dave’s. She didn’t know where he lived, but in the daydream it was a sort of ranch-style house, yard overgrown, with a pile of dirty shoes by the door and junk mail stacked up on a kitchen table marred with cigarette burns. They would shuffle inside together, breathing heavily with anticipation, and then Brian would pin Dave against the wall, sliding his big hands up underneath the tattered Skynyrd t-shirt hanging off Dave’s skinny frame. His wedding ring would catch on a curl of body hair, pulling it out with a twinge that would make both of them laugh.

A knock on the glass startled Casey so much it felt like she'd been shaken awake. Brian gestured to the mics, which were muted, then pointed at her soundboard. Right, yes, she thought. Time for lunch. Go to commercial. She slapped half a dozen buttons in quick succession then stood from her seat, surprised at how much time had passed when she wasn't looking.

"Zoning out in there?" Dave said when she emerged from the booth. He was packing a fresh pinch of dip into his lip. His teeth were brown near the roots, the gums carbon monoxide red.

"Just didn't get a lot of sleep last night," she replied, avoiding eye contact. There was cold pizza in the fridge from a few days ago, so she gnawed silently on a slice of stale pepperoni while the other two chatted away.

"Got plans for the weekend?" Brian asked. The question was not directed at Casey.

"Not really," Dave said. "I wanted to take the old dirt bike out for a spin, but I hit a hump wrong last week and it's in the shop right now."

"Damn, that's a shame. Well, just let me know and I can take you for a spin, I just got a new ATV a bit ago. With all the fixings," he added, obviously proud. Dave smiled his warped smile around the clod of tobacco.

"Sounds like a good time. I'll bring the beers."

She couldn't take it anymore. Standing abruptly, Casey went outside. Two pairs of eyes followed her out, but no one said anything or moved to follow her. The air was crisp, a whiff of fall cutting through the breeze. The creek across the street burbled happily as it always did, a pair of mourning doves were watching her from a telephone wire above the station as she paced in the grass.

Get ahold of yourself, Casey thought. This cannot continue. You are a professional. They are your coworkers. And you hate them, don't you? God, she thought, I really do. The hatred she felt for their two smug faces burned in her chest like a bad plate of wings. She took a deep swig from her thermos, the soothing warmth of liquor filling her up. All she had to do was get through the day. What she really needed was a good night's sleep, a reset, to get away from the shadow of that horrible dream. Yes. Soon enough, she'd move past this, and life would go back to normal.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Sometimes, in the way that people get nose blind to the stench of working around trash or sewage all day, she wondered if she had gone selectively deaf to all country music after all these years. Even the better stuff—Prine, Wynette, Haggard—swirled together into an indistinct blob of twanging sound in her brain, interrupted only by the voices of the two men in the booth. They did the weather (cool, sunny), the traffic (backed up on 91, but otherwise fine), a little sports (she always tuned this portion out) and in her chair Casey swiveled back and forth, trying and failing to keep her mind occupied with anything else. When their day finally ended, Brian and Dave left ahead of her as usual, leaving Casey to clean up their mess. Always, she cleaned up their mess.

That night Casey went home angry and stomped up the stairs with a bottle in her hand, two inches of whiskey sloshing up the sides. The nail in the step caught her foot again and tore a hole in her sock, which only made her angrier. She tipped the bottle up, drained it, then used the hard glass bottom to pound the nail down. When she stood, a surge of rage pushed down her arm and told her to throw it, but she resisted, instead setting it on the nearest end table and flexing the tension out of her hand.

Fucking Dave and Brian, she thought, stripping her work clothes off in a rage. Disgusting. They're both so disgusting. Spending all her time in their orbit made her feel like she'd been marinated in their stench, the rank, wet odor of tobacco juice and sweat and lunch meat settling onto her skin in a film that wouldn't wash off. And she did try, in the bathroom, slopping icy, metallic water all over the place while she washed her overly-hot face. She hated them, their smell, their ugly faces, their indifference to her even as they mooned at each other like secret lovers. At this thought she felt a twinge in her stomach, low and intense, a building heat like a hand clenched into a fist so hard it shook. Casey sat down heavily on the lid of the toilet and slid her fingers into her underwear.

After spending the whole day fighting it, a vision from her dream came to her like a buoy springing up out of water: Brian's thick, hairy hand with its wedding band gripping the back of Dave's thinning hair, whose foul lips were wrapped tight around the length of Brian's cock. Dim light, indistinct shapes; only the image was clear, and a vague impression of the voices she listened to day in and day out transformed into breathless grunts and moans. A harsh sound

tore itself from Casey's throat as she worked herself in erratic circles, the toilet tank lid clanking as her back arched against it. In her mind they separated and came together, again and again, like a lava lamp: teeth on throat, lips on chest, fingers tracing the groove of hip in socket.

She didn't last long. Orgasm came quickly, rolling over her in waves, *yes, yes, yes*, reaching a crescendo before slowly ebbing away.

Finally Casey withdrew her hand, and then—revulsion.

Oh, Jesus Christ. What had she been thinking? Lusting after a coworker was one thing, but this was deranged. Something was seriously wrong with her.

Embarrassed, Casey stood unsteadily from the toilet seat and washed her sticky hands in the sink. When she looked up, the face in the vanity mirror looked hollow and unfamiliar. She didn't often take the time to look at herself, but now she studied the reflection like she was trying to memorize the face of a stranger. Had her cheekbones always been so pronounced, her skin so sallow and worn? Puffy bags darkened the spaces beneath her eyes, both sclera yellowish and webbed with pink capillaries. She looked sick, and felt like it, a dizzy ache telling her to lie down and go to sleep before her hindbrain did it for her. No need to tell her twice.

Casey drifted through the rooms on autopilot until she reached her bedroom. Her foot met a half-empty whiskey bottle at the side of the bed and sent it rolling across the floor with a rumbling sound. Slowly, clumsily, she chased it, then picked it up and brought it to her lips. Something to put her out. That was what she needed.

A sick shame infused her pickled brain as she folded into bed, disparate fragments of Dave and Brian's imagined bodies drifting through her mind. Maybe now that she'd done it, the fever of her fantasy would finally break, and the thoughts would dissipate into nothing. She could go back to hating them like always, and they could go on tittering privately in their booth, never touching, because they were men, but leaning in close and cracking their jokes, sharing their supper if someone forgot. She thought of Dave riding on the back of Brian's ATV, holding on tight with his cheek pressed to the back of the other man's t-shirt, the mountains a sweeping vista in the far distance as they bumped over hill and dale, two hearts

pounding over the roar of the engine. And then a blackness closed in.

Indulging the fantasy did not cure her. In fact, it only seemed to make things worse. The daydreams took on a romantic slant, evolving in complexity, ever-shifting even as she tried to quash them. Watching them in the booth, silent, she could almost imagine the conversations they had when no one was listening, imagine the chaste, hurried kisses behind closed doors. When she thought of them fucking, it was hard not to think of them as making love instead.

She tried to distract herself. She started bringing her books to work to keep her mind off the two of them while they did their jobs. Fabio-covered bodice rippers of the most prototypical sort should have been the antidote, but to her dismay, Casey found as she read that could only envision Dave and Brian.

Dave—the thin one, the smaller one, the weaker one—naturally slotted into the role of damsel, with Brian as the dashing hero or the vicious marauder, sweeping him off his feet and ravishing him in soft focus. Casey herself never made an appearance in any of these fantasies. It was all about them.

At a certain point, she realized she had stopped trying to avoid thinking about it. It was pointless to try, she rationalized. Who was she hurting, anyway? It was all perfectly harmless. Plenty of people get crushes on their coworkers. This was just like that. They never even had to know.

And then one evening after work, Casey noticed with a twinge of anxiety that her daydreams were starting to lose their luster. In her mind the two men continued to touch each other at her whim, with increasing fervor, but she felt them growing duller, almost distant from her. Even the disgust, which had been so intense in the first weeks of this whatever-you-want-to-call-it, had faded to mere distaste. The shine had worn off. Drunk in bed one evening, she found tears springing to her eyes as she processed the slow death of her imaginings. Just a few weeks ago she would have been grateful that her insane lust for these two hateful assholes could finally be put to bed—but now all she could think about was how she wanted more.

At work, Casey sat with her chin on her hand and stared glassily at Dave and Brian as they relayed the traffic report, thinking. By now she had spent so much time fantasizing about them, envisioning their bodies and their relationship, that it felt like she knew them better than she knew anyone. But it occurred to her that she didn't really know them at all; all she had was her idea of what they would look like, act like, fuck like. What would it take, she wondered idly, to see them in the flesh? What would it be like to be there in the room with them? To watch them with her own eyes?

A few days after that, a plan began to take shape.

Over the course of a week, Casey cleaned her house. It was the first time in months she'd been able to do anything more than the bare minimum of laundry and dishes, but now she shook out every pillow, wiped every surface, swept and mopped every square inch of the floors. Cobwebs were brushed out of the corners of the ceilings, trash bags filled with empty bottles and driven to the dump. All the while, her mind was occupied singularly with the details of her plan. Tomorrow, she would set the gears in motion.

Brian looked at her over his coffee cup, a little incredulous. His eyes were very blue.

"You wanna have us over for dinner?"

"I understand if you're busy," she said, "but it would make me so happy. Does Friday night work for both of you?"

He and Dave shared a look that made Casey's stomach twist. Then Dave looked at her, and shrugged.

"Sure," he said. "Friday night it is."

She smiled. "Great. I'll see you then."

She cooked for them. Something simple, but competent. Heavy on the meat. Brian had brought a bottle of wine with him, a bow around the neck—she imagined his wife pressing it into his hands as he left the house, insisting that a guest shouldn't come empty-handed. Dave arrived with nothing, which was just as well. She had plenty to share.

Though she had never considered it before, Casey thought she made an excellent host. She was gracious and warm, listening and laughing along, stroking their egos with expert precision as she topped up their glasses again and again. Their faces grew pink,

voices echoing boisterously through the old house as they talked. Seated closely around the small dining table in the kitchen, she made sure to touch each of them as often as she could throughout the meal, leaning her knee just so against Brian's thigh, leaning in to touch Dave's shoulder when he told a bad joke. Dave was the easier one, but Brian had shied away at the first touch, glancing nervously at his friend, his left hand. Luckily, a few more glasses of wine were enough to change his tune, and when she wasn't looking, his wedding band disappeared into his pocket. She made sure to touch him extra after that.

When the plates were clean and the bottles all empty, Casey stood and asked them if they wanted to join her on the sofa. Both of them nodded yes.

Dave was stumbling as she led them into the candlelit room—he'd had a bit less to drink than she and Brian had, but was easily the drunkest of the three of them. When he went to spit into his bottle, some of it clung to the little patch of hair under his lower lip. A bolus of disgust formed in Casey's stomach, then sank into the pit of her pelvis. There was the spark again, the heat of hatred and revulsion warming her body. She would have to hold her nose to get the ball rolling, and fumbled briefly with the stereo until it lit up. The soft voice of Willie Nelson came warbling out of the speakers; a little something to set the mood.

She reached for Brian first.

Running the palms of her hands over his t-shirt, then under it, Casey realized that she couldn't remember the last time she had touched the skin of another human being. It was a strange feeling, the warmth of him against her body. He smelled different up close. There was a heavy scent of body spray, with a green bitterness beneath it, like ointment. Allowing herself to be kissed, she tried not to gag as his tongue pressed greedily into her mouth, thick and slobbery as a dog's. And then at her back, a second pair of hands slid around her waist, Dave's erection prodding at the small of her back. Casey pushed her hips back and egged him on.

Momentum built up. Casey pulled away from Brian, turned to Dave, giving him the same treatment. She seemed to be watching herself from a few feet away as she worked, teasing them, touching them, letting their hands and mouths wander over her body. Whatever they thought they were doing to her didn't arouse her at

all. What did arouse her was their proximity to each other, the closeness of their bodies, the heat that filled the space between them. She took each of their cocks in her hands, feeling their weight and softness in her palms, and with the hitching sound of their breath knew that she had them where she wanted them. She pulled them close, to her, to each other, then leaned into Dave's neck and whispered:

“Kiss him.”

She had led them to the water. She had done all she could do. Whatever happened next was up to them. But even if this was as far as things went—if they reacted badly, stormed off, hurt her, hurt each other—she had already gotten what she wanted: to feel the air grow hot between their bodies, to see the lusting light in their eyes as they stared through her like glass to look at each other. Anything beyond this was just icing. She was happy. It was enough.

Dave stared dully at her for a moment as his addled brain processed her request, before his eyes slid off her to land on Brian. He licked his lips. Casey held her breath.

Ollie Swasey

Ollie Swasey (they/them) is a writer based in Boston. Their work appears in Sinister Wisdom, Diet Milk Magazine, Olit Magazine, and on the Creepy podcast. When not writing, they enjoy spending time with their wife, who is also a writer, and their cat, who is not. They can be found on Tumblr, at metaphorfordeath.tumblr.com.

Three Poems

Cletus Crow

Mercy

Jesus sobs at my gray pube,
but I can't see, hear or touch him.
I know Jesus exists.
Otherwise, I'd be pure like meth,
a vase filled with cyanide pills.
I know Jesus sobs.
He's drunk off his own blood,
and knows everything.
I want to give birth before death.
I'll kill my children
if they know too much.
Every minute brings me closer,
near the annihilating answer.

Sunday

so good to just sit in a hot car
and sweat
after arguing
over who should empty the litter box

stepping out
july mimics autumn's auburn breeze
better than ecstasy

O fuck O kitty pee
O malignant monogamous sex drive
pain pain pain
i'm immunized to our chaos

Do It Again

Breathless face
buried
in the bunny squishmellow.
Soft soles waving.
Toes clenched.
The Hitachi attachment
like a white scythe.
Have to spit on it
like real flesh.
Shuddering spine.
Slick grimace, leaking.
I feel effective.
My fleeting femboy's fate.
Knees buried
in tempurpedic foam
Embarrassed.
Can't control your cum shot.
Snuggled like ferrets.
Smoked cigs.
A whip hangs above
handcuffs on the doorknob
and somehow
I don't even hate you.

Cletus Crow

Cletus Crow is a writer.

Abrasions

Hudson Wilding

For over an hour, James sat by the darkened window of his study, waiting for the appearance of headlights. Every time he spotted a pair his pulse quickened, and every time he watched them flicker away, blocked by the blackberry thickets that lined the road, he was overcome with an exquisite, heavy sense of longing.

When, at last, the rusted pick-up turned onto the driveway, purring slowly over the gravel in the thick, simmering heat of the August night, James closed the blinds and pressed his ear to the door. Soon came the heavy, measured sound of footfalls, the creaking of weight on the porch, and a sputtering, liquid cough.

Still, he waited. Only after the footfalls receded did he begin to count backward from two hundred. His heartbeat began to settle, his breath to deepen, his fingers to still from their trembling. He opened the door. His wife laid on the welcome mat, all curled in on herself like a tulip not yet in bloom, trembling hard. Her dark hair was matted and sticky, her pale face covered in dirt, her knees skinned and dripping with blood.

Looking down at her, it was as if his heart cracked open, wet and new and fragile enough to terrify him. Very softly, he leaned down and moved a hand over her cheek before saying her name, once. "Rina." Her eyelids flickered open, then closed again. He scooped her up into his arms and brought her inside.

The ritual always followed the same pattern, as if they were rehearsing a scene for a play. First, James would bring Rina into the bedroom, where a dark sheet would be laid over the duvet in anticipation of her return. Then he'd gently place her on the mattress, carefully unbutton her clothes, and take Polaroids of all her wounds.

She'd watch him as he did this, comforted by his composure: the way he lined up all the pictures on the nightstand, how he dated them carefully with a black Sharpie to add to their ever-growing collection. Tonight he took ten pictures altogether, four of which

were of an abrasion on her left side, which looked as if it had been rubbed with sandpaper.

As the pictures developed, he helped her to the shower, where he used the detachable shower head to rinse the blood and dirt from her wounds before picking out bits of gravel with a pair of tweezers.

Early on, when her desire for pain had been most palpable, she used to watch as he did this, no matter how it made her stomach turn. Later, she watched his face instead. He never met her gaze as he cleaned the wounds, but there was something about seeing him so entirely transfixed with her body. It felt as if she were being whispered a profound secret.

Tonight, as he cleaned the abrasion and she squirmed from the pain, he laid one hand firmly over her lower stomach, something he'd never done during the ritual before. She did not tell him to move it away. Instead, she gently placed her hand over his and lifted it from her skin. His expression did not change in the slightest. He simply kept cleaning her wounds. After they were thoroughly rinsed and picked over, he sterilized them with rubbing alcohol and bandaged them, before offering her medication to help with the pain. She never accepted. Still, the asking was an integral part of the scene, as vital as Jesus being offered the wine mixed with gall.

Then James returned her to the bed, where he cocooned her in blankets. If the wounds were not too extensive, he fell asleep beside her; if they were unusually bad, he set a blockade of pillows between them to ensure he wouldn't accidentally touch her in his sleep.

Only once had her injuries been so substantial as to require immediate professional attention; three cracked ribs and a cough laced with blood. That night had been near the beginning, only a few months in. He'd driven her to the emergency room despite her strong protests and had endured interrogation by two incompetent police officers while she'd been treated. They had kept him for several hours, asking as many questions about his career as his relationship with Rina. Eventually, they dismissed him due to a lack of physical evidence that he'd been involved in any kind of confrontation.

She still remembered the way he'd gripped the steering wheel on the drive home, his knuckles blanched to a yellowish white. Yet he'd said nothing to her.

Not that night, and not later, after the investigation, when the agency revoked his counseling license for an unethical dual relationship with a client.

He was not one to get angry. It was the most baffling thing about him.

The next morning, both woke at quarter to seven, as was their habit. He brought coffee on a tray with cream and sugar to the bedroom and studied her face as she fixed them each a cup, searching for any fault lines revealing distress. But she looked like she always did; her hair a curtain of midnight parted down the middle of her scalp, her face as pale and serious as the moon.

Once they both finished drinking their coffee, he returned to the kitchen to cook breakfast. Eventually, she joined him at the table around seven-thirty, taking care to soften her limp, as she did not like to be theatrical about her injuries, especially her oldest ones.

When he sat down after fixing their plates, she glanced up from *The New Yorker* article she was reading but did not begin to eat right away. He looked at her pale silk robe, her bruised flesh tinged green where the sleeve touched, and felt a terrible, futile sense of adoration crush down upon his chest.

The clock ticked away five minutes. She pulled her hair back behind one ear, revealing a marbling of bruises on the left side of her face. Then she finally raised a triangle of toast to her lips, bit off a small piece, and chewed it carefully.

Only when his plate was empty did she inquire as to how he was feeling. He told her he was fine.

“Really, James?” she said.

It felt as if she was taking a scalpel to his chest. He looked at the untouched pile of strawberries on her plate. They were the best of the season, he’d saved them all for her. She said, “Look at me.” Her soft dark eyes were narrowed and calm.

If he opened his mouth, he feared the sound that came out would be inhuman, animal. He simply shook his head.

She put her hand over his wrist. Her pale, delicate fingers. “James, listen to me.” Her voice was gentle but firm. “I’m okay. I’ll stop doing it when we’re both ready. But for now, I can do this, and I want to. Do you understand?”

He closed his eyes, pulse rising in his throat even as he nodded. When had this become something they did for each other, and not something he did for her? It was awful, hearing her say it out loud, though this had been the case for many months. Her fingers tightened around his wrist for just a moment before she moved away. He got up from the table, feeling as if he might be sick.

While she finished flipping through *The New Yorker*, her breakfast barely touched, he put the strawberries in a small Tupperware container and washed their dishes.

Once the kitchen was clean, he took a shower, watching the sediment left from last night’s cleaning disappear down the drain. Then he got out and put on the clothes she’d chosen for him the afternoon before, and the cologne she’d set on the counter that morning, before heading down to the garage at eight-forty. He had a job at the local funeral hall, now. It was the only local one he could find after his license had been revoked.

Five minutes after James went down into the garage, Rina heard the engine of his car start and moved to the window to watch as he left. Turning back to the bedroom, she exhaled with her whole body, letting her shoulders slump and her face fall into a slack frown.

Her thoughts always seemed to grow darker when she was still for any extended period of time, so she set to work gathering up the bundled dark sheet in the corner of the bedroom to bring it down to the wash, though she knew if James were here he’d tell her to leave it for him.

As she scooped up the fabric, a Polaroid fell out and fluttered to the floor. She picked it up, glancing at it only briefly before carrying it downstairs with the sheet.

It took her much longer than usual to descend into the garage, to set the sheet in the washing machine, to pour in a measure of detergent. The first day usually wasn’t so bad—the second always worst—but this one challenged her. Maybe she was getting older.

Weaker. Maybe she just didn't want to live this life anymore. But the thought immediately filled her with fear. If not this, her days would be monotonous. Ordinary.

As water flowed into the washing machine, she limped to the cedar closet to put the Polaroid with the rest of them, in the little carved box they kept on the top shelf. The doorknob was cool to the touch as she twisted it open, raising a chorus of pain in her wrist.

The close smell of the aromatic wood mixed with the rust of dried blood and the tobacco scent of James' cologne as the door pulled open. Her gaze drifted over to the hanger covered with a torn, blood-darkened jacket from the first night she'd come to him. She'd made fun of him when she first saw that he'd kept it, even as inside it had felt like he was pressing the bruise of her heart beneath his thumb.

A leather chair sat against the back wall, filling up the meager space, and she sat down in it very slowly. It seemed as if her bones themselves were bruised. Blooms of tender pain emanated from anywhere her flesh touched the leather. She drew her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

Memories of the night before flickered before her, with the surreal intensity of a dream. She tried to breathe but it felt as if two large, powerful hands were squeezing all the air out of her lungs—the same hands that had shoved her down to kneel on a carpet of uncooked rice the night before, and then, later, forced her face into the mud until she choked.

Child's play, really. Little humiliations. She was bruised, yes, but nothing was close to broken, fractured, or sprained. She hadn't thought, even for a moment, that she might die. She hadn't in a long time. Not since after the hospital, when James had gone to visit Bobby, that one night, "just to talk," he said.

Her gaze flickered over the Polaroid. The abrasion it showed, gravely and raw. That was a nice touch; the one thing from the night before that had really shocked all the thoughts from her mind.

She didn't know exactly what James had said to Bobby that night—what on earth could he say?—but her visits with him had been different, ever since. As if Bobby were a wolf domesticated by an invisible but powerful electric fence. He never said a thing about it, about James. But that was hardly surprising.

She stood up and reached for the Polaroid box but found it wasn't in its usual place, tucked away beside a stack of winter sweaters. It gave her an odd feeling to see it missing. Like touching the space where a tooth should have been and finding it absent. She'd ask James about it later. For now, she put the photo there, face down, alone.

The first time James had taken the pictures, he'd intended for them to be used as evidence. That night when Rina had shown up on his doorstep for the very first time, dazed and with blood gushing out from a black eye, she'd very calmly told him that if he wanted to call the police he could, but if he did he'd never see her again. It was the first time in six months of treatment she'd ever asked anything of him, and he couldn't deny her. Still, he took the pictures thinking maybe she'd change her mind later. That was before he'd understood anything.

Why he picked up the camera the second time, he couldn't say, but Rina never asked, and now it was a fixed part of the ritual for him to do so.

He traced his fingers over the lacquer coating of one of the bigger marks on her thigh during his lunch break, which he took in his car, a half a mile from the funeral home down a deserted road.

He studied the nebulae of color exploding from her skin as if each bruise were a newly discovered galaxy. How he had come to love the shock of such vivid shades contrasting her flesh, over time. To crave them when they began to dissolve into the cream of her skin.

His right hand drifted down to his belt. Unbuckled. Unbuttoned. Unzipped. The guilt already there, draining out most of the pleasure. Most but not all. He imagined what she had looked like, the night before. In the dirt. On the ground. Looking up with those calm, inexpressive eyes of hers. Ready for anything to happen, because it didn't matter, none of it mattered, she was an offering, she was mindless, she was outside herself. The bruised outline of a hand already spidering her face, another man's signature cast upon her skin.

James arrived home at six that night. When he put the box of Polaroids back in the cedar closet and saw one more, facedown, he was filled with shame. What excuse could he make? Would she even believe it? He walked up the stairs and into the kitchen, already composing a lie about taking them to research the abrasion on her thigh, the possibility of infection.

Rina's voice, fast and urgent, carried in from the living room. He'd never heard her sound like that before—as if she were wavering on a highwire. “No, you don't have to pay me, don't be absurd.”

Slowly, James approached the doorway. Rina glanced up at him as she listened to the speaker on the phone, then turned away. “I understand. No, you don't have to worry about that.” As she listened, she picked at a thumbnail with her teeth. “No, I said I understand. I won't.”

She stood completely still for a moment more, even when the light on the phone screen changed, signifying the call had ended. Then, very slowly, she lowered the phone and put it in her back pocket before sitting on the couch.

For a long time, she didn't speak. Staring out at nothing. As if James weren't even there.

“Bobby's girlfriend is pregnant,” she said, without looking up at him. Her eyes were wide, unblinking. As if she were frozen in a moment of shock.

James swallowed. He hadn't known Bobby had even had a girlfriend. His heartbeat was only slightly elevated. His breath steady. He was fine. He would be fine.

“He was calling to tell me it's over. For good.” A moment later she walked by him into the kitchen, and took the spare key to the car before heading into the basement.

He followed close behind. Half expecting her to tell him to get lost. But she already had the car started when he got outside and was waiting for him to get in before moving it into reverse.

At the end of the driveway, she took a right, heading in the opposite direction of Bobby's. She drove for miles and miles, out of the valley and into the hills. After a while, she put on the radio. Turned up the volume when “50 Ways to Lose Your Lover” came

on. Even tapped the beat on the steering wheel. It made James feel half insane, though this was good, of course—she wasn't hurting herself, or cutting him out. She wasn't running away.

Just past seven PM, with the golden hour settling all around them, she turned onto an unmarked dirt path and parked the car.

He looked over at her as she got out and started down an overgrown path disappearing between the trees. In other circumstances, he would've asked her if she really wanted to get lost in the woods after dark. But now he would've followed her into the mouth of hell if that's where she wanted to go.

After only a minute walking behind her, he heard the sound of running water. Within a few more, they reached a clearing with a waterfall at the end. The beauty of it perplexed him. He hadn't expected this kind of surprise from her today. With little ceremony, she peeled off her shirt and jeans, and underwear and took a step in, then another.

James paused.

She glanced back and gestured for him to join her.

Confusion froze him. For two years, now, they'd lived together, married, so she'd have his insurance coverage. And yet he'd never been naked in front of her. Never even come close.

He pulled off his shirt and jeans, and hesitated a moment, then slipped out of his underwear and walked into the water. Her gaze slid over him, slick and neutral, giving away nothing. Sometimes it felt as if she did not even see him at all.

They swam out to the base of the waterfall and let it shower them. Then she disappeared under the water, swimming away fast. Her body so pale beneath the water, all those fragile wounds.

Then she moved to a rock half jutting out of the water and rested her upper half on it, breasts pressing into the rough stone. "Come here," she said.

He swam over and she said, "The first time was right here."

She told him about it: how Bobby had been working for her father's construction company that summer, and she'd been desperate for his attention. How once they'd come here, she'd taken off all her clothes and waded in slowly so he could watch her. How

he'd followed her in and she'd asked him what he wanted from her, right where they were now, and he'd told her, in detail, exactly what he had been fantasizing about. How after he'd laid it all out he'd said, "Tell me you're repulsed and I'll drive you home," and how she'd said no. She wasn't.

"What had he been fantasizing about?" James asked.

"Beating up a girl." She said it so simply, as if it were nothing to her.

"You mean raping her."

"No. I mean just what I said." She looked past James, then, to the dirt path where their clothes lay abandoned. "He pulled me out of the water by arm and dragged me onto the ground and kicked me like a dog. Over and over again. And my mind just went blank. Gloriously blank." She was quiet for a moment then. The sound of water lapping, all around them. "I'd never felt more useful to anyone in my whole life."

She studied him for a long moment, then, gaze settling on his closed lips. And it seemed she was on the verge of saying something else. He could feel it in the pit of his stomach, this unsaid thing, which they had both been quietly skirting for ages.

But then she was sliding down off of the rock and swimming back to the shore. Shivering and small, she emerged from the water, looking pale and fragile. Impenetrable and Godlike.

Watching her, he felt diminished. As small as a grain of sand.

Hudson Wilding

Hudson Wilding currently lives in Albany, NY, where she answers a lot of emails by day and watches a lot of horror movies by night. Occasionally, she writes. Her work has been published in *The Dread Machine*, *Foglifter*, and *Not One of Us*, among other literary magazines.

For Those Who Suffer from Consciousness

Kurt Newton

Hirais had a way with knives. Okkum was a sufferer, best known by his blood, which painted the edge of the sidewalk and spilled into the gutter. His particular form of performance art had left its mark around the city.

For those who walked the streets every day, Hirais and Okkum had become somewhat of a nuisance, their act as engaging as two dogs locked in copulation. But for the tourist—the traveler naive to local custom—it was always a shocking sight: Okkum chained to a linden tree, Hirais skinning him alive.

During these performances, Hirais and Okkum had learned to expect one of two reactions from first-timers. Most would stand in stunned silence, alarmed that nothing was being done to stop the gruesome display. These were the spectators. In the second category were the heroes. Occasionally, a brave soul would take it upon themselves to stop Hirais, knocking him to the ground and taking the blade from his hand. Hirais would not resist. When Okkum would laugh at the spectacle, the hero would not find it funny.

“Why did you stop him?” the bleeding Okkum would invariably ask.

The hero would become confused. “To save you. You’re bleeding,” the hero would say, or words to that effect.

Okkum would then look the hero straight in the eye. “We are all bleeding. It was right of you to stop him. But once you leave, he will continue do what he does. And you will become like them.” Okkum would then nod to the passersby, mostly locals, who would cast looks of disdain.

The hero would understand then that they had become a pawn in some sadistic passion play. Then one of two things would happen. The hero would become angered and say things like “You people are all the same” or “I hope you kill each other” and walk away, proving Okkum’s hypothesis. Or the hero would get up, apologize for interrupting and, in order to appease their embarrassment, would

drop a few coins in the cup that sat nearby. Also, proving Okkum's hypothesis.

Hirais and Okkum were always gracious, folding hands and nodding appreciatively, as the street scene returned to normal.

This went on for many months and even years. Until one day...

The sky was a grey overcast, the foot-traffic thin as starving dogs. Hirais and Okkum had chosen an abandoned street cart to perform their improvised death scene. Okkum was chained to the cart's wheel. Hirais had already cut a pattern across Okkum's back and had peeled the skin from his left calf muscle. Okkum's blood spread onto the street like a spill of crimson dye.

A woman approached them with a pale complexion. She had the shadow of ghosts beneath her eyes. Quite unexpectedly, she sat down beside Okkum and hugged him, unmindful of the blood staining her clothing. She hugged him as a mother would hug a child.

Okkum, who was always quick with a remark, let the moment pass in silence. He hugged the woman back. Hirais took the opportunity to sharpen his blade. At last, Okkum and the woman broke their embrace. The woman was the first to speak.

"I get it," she said. "When the dog suffers from consciousness, the better its meat will be." She rolled up her sleeves and nodded to Hirais. "Go ahead."

Hirais and Okkum exchanged looks. Okkum nodded. Hirais held the woman's outstretched arm and cut a diagonal across her skin. Blood welled and ran in rivulets until drops of her blood joined Okkum's. Hirais did the same to the woman's other arm and she sat on the edge of the sidewalk, arms lowered to the street gutter, bleeding.

The grey clouds overhead parted and a ray of sunshine briefly poked through.

Okkum smiled, feeling the warmth on his face, and hope in his heart for the first time in a very long while.

Kurt Newton

This is Kurt's fourth appearance in as many issues of God's Cruel Joke. His stories have also appeared in Tower Magazine, The Dark, The Fabulist, Café Irreal, and Mouthfeel. His latest collection, Bruises, was published in 2023 by Lycan Valley Press. Kurt lives in what they call "The Quiet Corner" of Connecticut where silence grows like wheat fields in which imaginations are allowed to run free.

First Hard Frost

Mads Levshakoff

Death brings Eve home and pours itself into her mother's favorite glass. The house belongs to her now, so Eve kicks her shoes off in front of the bar cart. A heel trips her and spills bourbon over her knuckles and across the couch. She giggles and refreshes her drink. Her sticky fingers stain her mother's dress. The seam of the shoulder rips when she can't reach the latch of her bra. Eve was sober, promise, when she played dress up again under the guise of needing something to wear to the *Fighting Irish Class of '93 Twenty Year Reunion!*

Shallow sips of drink ticket bourbons over the evening lubricated Eve's features in shifting to an appropriate amount of sorrow. The last cruelty of her mother was narrowing all topic of conversation that interested Eve's classmates to her sparkling six-carat, altruistic life before her sudden, graceful death—that and, of course, Jack Thompson.

His release from incarceration blipped on state news recently enough for an evening of gossip. The sentence shorter than the three-year maximum sentence people advocated for sixteen months ago. Plea deal. Eve suspects he plead guilty because he never liked much attention but playacted shock and reprehension and perfected her *'who would have thought?'* by the third person she bumped into.

Remembering he's roaming wild in the wide span of Texas makes the nape of her neck prickle with heat. She laughs at herself, an amused *don't be silly*. Her shoulder is tugged back. Gasoline fumes in her nostrils because she's, no—no, she's seventeen and dizzy on her back, head lolling to the side on mint cream velvet wet with bourbon.

"S'that you, Ja—?" she slurs.

Silly Eve, speaking of the Devil. Her mother's glass is set upright but Eve's vision swims and slushes in icy fear. Propped against crystal is a ladder of four black and white photos. She can't turn from it but doesn't dare look either and falls through the black velour curtain of the photo booth again. All doll parts, that girl was, limp and pretty and thrown on the ground.

“Oh, Eve. Still such a lightweight.”

He’s right. Eve never was one to drink.

3!

Eve Harris was born in captivity of Shamrock under the sundial shadow of Texas’ Tallest Water Tower. Where her mother was born, and her mother and so forth. A line so far back, Harris women claim one of their husbands or another—it didn’t matter which one, now did it—settled this patch of Texas and made them entitled to every bit of it. Once a popular destination on Route 66, now a seldom taken exit on Interstate 40 where nothing no good was ever supposed to grow, only flower box windows and stately oaks.

Despite her *débutante* upbringing, Eve’s mother wrinkled her nose at *southern belle*—too inland for that, baby girl, just words from another time and place. No, no, she declared she was a high cotton woman rich in cow meat and a fourth husband who liked big city work. Far too delicate to bear more than a single child, Eve grew to be her only plaything. Her mother’s hothouse flower in white dresses to be kept innocent of such a world hungry for little girls. At seventeen, Eve was thoroughly groomed clean of an animal nature that fights backs and claws—but now Jack Thompson was under her fingernails and she wanted nothing more than to be brushed and dressed and tucked away, clean and safe, in her dollhouse room.

2!

Mama! Mama? Are you here—

Her mother looked at her bare legs, her ripped skirt, already bored years ago when her playmate grew into a girl who could have things like bare legs and ripped skirts.

Eve didn’t save her parents’ marriage. Her mother’s relationship with her second husband, her *favorite*, faulted only by Eve’s downy hair and healthy, round cheeks. The type of people who bought puppies at Christmas or chicks at Easter, they became equally breezily pocourante with Eve’s upkeep. She never meant to need too much from them.

Shamrock green eyes scrutinized Eve, glassy as the fine crystal hanging from her lacquered fingers when she asked why in heaven's name Eve was out so late for.

Eve was a good girl, one who told her mother everything.

1!

Oh dear. Are you certain, Eve? Two spoons in peaches and cream, the arcade dark after hours, what Jack—all of it poured out of her, hot and liquid as yellow bile vomit and just as distasteful. Her mother's face twisted before she pinched her pert nose between her thumb and forefinger. Goodness, what will your father think? This might just break his heart. Now, you've been out where—with who? Jack Thompson, Jack Thompson, hm—why wasn't that the boy at the drive up who defended our carhop from those grabby men? You remember that Eve? Tango should be ashamed to have such young girls wear shorts so sho—Now, Eve, really, calm down. You could ruin that nice boy's life, you know, claiming such horrid things. Eve, be a good girl—honey and shut up, kissed her neck in Jack's voice.

FLASH!

When it came to blood on Eve's thighs, her mother reacted inversely to the expectations painted with Eve's hopes. Her first menstruation three years before made her feel like an aching child making a mess. But her mother—oh her darling mother spent the morning cooing and petting Eve like she used to when she'd dress her up and braid her hair. Her mother later congratulated her lovely daughter on becoming a woman and with a dead pig smile sent Eve off with the housekeeper to learn how to tuck sanitary napkins in her panties.

3!

Blond spun sugar curled in the humidity of Eve's shower, fuzzy and dewy through her wet fingers. Ignoring her tender scalp and the arcade floor sticky on her back, she kept tugging and fisting her hair to try to figure out how Jack held her—*keep being a good girl, honey and—*

A dollop of shampoo squeezed onto her palm sweet like strawberry candies. They type that stuck to teeth and stained tongues and—*smell so good. So good, just keep—keep being a good girl—*

Eve scrubbed her skin clean to get rid of the scent. Pressed her hot face to the cool tiles with a moan. With no foreseeable consequences, her hands drifted down her stomach and gently cupped water between her thighs. A shiver punched the air from her chest in a soft exhale at the surprised rock of her hips. Eve discovered herself slick and sensitive with the same detachment that kept her from feeling the cool water pelting her lower lip.

*Why can't I call you honey, Eve? You're so sweet like this, see, and smell so good. So good—*She wiped her hand off on her thigh instead of giving in to an abrupt urge to lick her fingers clean how he did.

2!

Lumped all of her torn apart feelings into a tight mass and tucked them so deep that not even Jack Thompson could claw or fuck them back out of her. Under suffocating layers of terry cotton and shifting feathers of her duvet, Eve had little success by the time her mother threw the curtains open days later. Sunlight thick and pressing and forced meekness from her stomach. Eve squeezed her lashes shut with the same wilting revulsion when Jack—

1!

You're going to school, Eve. I can not take one more call from that busybody secretary asking when you're coming back. 'Oh she still isn't feeling well? Poor thing.' Heaven above what a mess in here—Stephanie! Eve, get up—her fussing heavier than blankets Eve pushed away. Her sleep deprived head ached with dehydration when she swung her feet onto the floor. You're going to be late. She called when I was getting ready for lunch with the girls. I said up, Eve. Did you hear me? I'm going to the club so I can't drive you, but you'll get to school fine, won't you, Eve?

She was a good girl who smiled and said of course, mother.

FLASH!

Half-past eleven in the morning Eve drove herself into the open maw of Shamrock High. The halls empty, not even a teacher lingering around to reprimand wandering students. Why were adults gone

when she needed them? Needed someone, anyone, to pet her hair and fix her braids and ask why she's crying.

When she finally did see him, the worst of it was that she didn't see Jack no different under the fluorescent lights of their lunchroom. Across the way, an attentive curl to his shoulders when he was listening, seemingly devoting his undivided attention to whoever he was talking up to him. All charming smiles that stretched his cupid's bow and well-timed nods but hardly talking. Keeping to himself, but Eve could see him for what he was now—not shy, but calculating.

She squirmed, remembering his hands on her hips, then stiffened when he looked directly at her across the cafeteria like he caught the motion. A curious tilt to his head as expression and emotion died on his face until he was just skin, shadow, and want. Down to the nervousness stirring her marrow, Eve felt chased. Memories in her muscles hot with exertion and one bad breath from getting sick on the cheap, linoleum floors.

Eve looked away first.

3!

“Been missing school, huh?” A handsome drawl warm and tender as rain in the desert—a flash flood for how it moved through her. Washed over everything she buried deep under the hard crust of the earth. Jack sat and reached across the table to pick food off her untouched tray. Another way to prove she can't stop him. “Don't worry, doll, I've been copying my English notes for you.”

“No, thank you,” Eve says.

“You've got such nice manners, don't ya, Eve? Funny you didn't say goodbye.”

“Stop it.”

“I don't know why you keep saying that,” he said to himself maybe, quiet like, barely louder than a rip of a zipper yet made her stomach clench all the same. His hair messy across his brow and an awful teenage arrogance in the curve of his neck to his chin propped on his curled knuckles.

“You're doing it again,” she hissed, puffed up like a declawed cat. Felt like herself again when she kicked his shin. He didn't jolt or budge, just dragged his lower lip between his teeth.

“Doing what, honey?” he asked like he did the night when she sat on the arcade’s ice cream counter, letting him push her knees wider so he could stand between them. Now, he offered a french fry instead of a spoonful of peaches and cream. “Don’t try to say I’m making you nervous again.”

She should have corrected him, opened her mouth and said *you’re not listening to me*. Make him apologize and kiss her nose again. Cheeks hot, she chewed a small bite. He ate the other half with a smile of savage contentment that dropped when someone called his name across the cafeteria.

“Alright, alright,” Jack sighed, his fun finished. “Holler if you need me, honey.”

2!

Only half risen, Jack looked at the needy hand on his wrist before he circled the table to sit beside her. Knee touching hers when Jack waved off whoever shouted his name again. A faint, narrow flash on his chest distracted Eve. Black and white, half of the top frame of a photo strip showing. *Shamrock Arcade* printed across it. Eve’s lips parted at the thought of kissing him. By the next frame her back melted into his chest as he shifted her in his lap, her legs dangling off either side of his knees.

Eve raised her chin and schooled her features into an expression she learned from her mother. One she gave to those she wanted something from, but Eve doubted her mother’s lip ever wobbled with misplaced want.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” rushed from her mouth. His expression darkened at the unsaid assumption he might. Eve flicked his forearm for having the audacity to be upset with her.

“I don’t want anyone else to—” to what? To find out, think less of her, ignore her, imagine her sweet and sticky under them? To know they can do the same? Jack’s big, brown eyes soft with devoted attention always made her feel bold when he listened like this. Before. Now, her voice wavered, “I’ve never wanted anyone, Jack. I don’t want to share you.”

He tapped a finger on her nose. “You’re something special, Eve, but you have to keep a secret for me, too, yeah?”

Jack rubbed a lock of her hair between his fingers, tugging it while leaning close to sniff. Fight or flight stopped being an option the moment they spilled from the photo booth, mechanical static clinging to her lips. Eve froze, prey limp and ready for teeth when his mouth brushed her ear. The rambunctious noise of teenagers ceased. Just Jack and Eve and this: “You’re my first, too,” he murmured, like he was righting his wrongs, making them even-stein, saving her from the humiliation he already wrung from her. Kissed her cheek as any smitten boy might do. Eve turned her head enough that his lips pressed to the corner of her mouth seeking his.

I!

“Don’t make it hurt,” she implored in a whisper. “I mean the next time you—”

“Next tim—?” he barked—*yipped* really when his voice shot up three octaves higher, before his face crumpled, “I hurt you?”

Eve blinked. He couldn’t be serious.

“That’s why you ran,” he said, low in self-admonishment without looking at her. For a brief moment he looked something akin to culpable. Then his brow furrowed at odds with how he grinned, wide and fond and daring. The way he looked at her mouth tugged at the heat behind her navel. There’s nothing of a question, not seeking permission when he softly declared, “Next time, I’ll just have to chase you.”

FLASH!

Eve reckoned it wasn’t so much her mother as it was the standard of Harris women which raised her. The housekeeper clipped each Shamrock High honor roll list from the newspaper only for Eve to pick them from her mother’s mail and throw them away. Stephanie never understood that B’s weren’t a grade, they weren’t an option, they meant *Better-not-get-any*. Eve applied that same principle to track and field, only running for first place to earn ribbon after ribbon. Each ironed and framed with gold lettering glinting with the capability which failed her whenever Jack was near. Nervous enough to uncork a dusty bottle in the wine cellar, Eve, following the example of Harris women, tipped back her head.

3!

“Don’t run,” came his voice, muddled and far away when Eve lifted her heavy eyes open to find him next to her. She rolled onto her side, unafraid because what could happen among her teddy bears under a halo of tulle hanging from her ceiling? Her monster clawed its way up from under her bed, taking up too much room with just his eyes.

Eve was a good girl— *shh, honey, shh, it’s okay*— so she wasn’t supposed to like spit or sweat or the slickness between her legs but this was just a dream tasting of peppermint and a pretty boy’s tongue. *Have you been drinking?*

2!

Can you walk, honey? Come on, let’s get you cleaned up. Jack’s voice soft and ever so concerned in Eve’s raw throat. That woke her and picked her up. Full of drowsy rocking and attention, Eve became weightless as rain. A girl again dancing on her father’s feet. A daughter with parents who let her fall asleep in their arms even though her hair dripped from her bath. Phantom pressure of memory buzzed in her spine, the cradle of her hips shuddering. She relished her false start womanhood over and over in these dreams. Stopped feeling herself age in the waking world, living all backward in time, instead of confronting what has been awoken in her. Eve opened her eyes with clean, damp hair to the shrill scream of her alarm. Skin sticky with a new awareness of emptiness now she knew fullness.

1!

Two weeks later, she’s cornered against shower tiles she didn’t recognize. The house music loud, pounding knocks. *Honey? I need you to open up.* The mouthing against her neck was wrong. Slimy swipe of their lips not right, too much teeth. A scrape when they’re jerked away made her cry out in a whine. Noises of a kerfuffle cut short when Eve needed someone to hold her hair.

You don’t need to get up, c’mere. She’s pulled to a chest in a heap of useless limbs and sequins and hairspray. *I’ve got you, stop. I want you to get home alright—?* Prom night, she remembered in a moment of clarity, naturally. *Look at me.* The knuckles curled around her shoulder are bloodied. *Eve, look at me. No more drinking.*

Eve was very good at listening.

FLASH!

Here are the things Eve would find perfectly centered on her vanity: English notes, scent free shampoo, a cherry lollipop, a heart shaped compact mirror, 27 robin-blue arcade tickets, wild flowers, reminders to go to track meets.

Here was what Eve would not do: say thank you to Jack Thompson for any of it.

BONUS FRAME!

“Honey, I’m home.”

He’s not here—hell, what does Eve know, every time she lays back she’s welcomed home by the sing song drawl of Jack fucking Thompson crawling up her bed. He’s never sounded so masculine and it confuses her when Jack always sounds seventeen. Her lashes twitch, brushing together when she tries to lift them. Unafraid, Eve is armed with knowing she will only see the face of the boy she ran from time and time again. Jack will be seventeen and she will wake up—wake up—*wake up*—a sudden flash behind her eyelids, a soft whirl of a camera, and she’s seventeen again, too.

The movement of her knee is slow and caught in a large palm, pushed into her mattress so forcefully she whines from the strain of her hip. Hot tongue and drag of his lower lip are only a part of the push and pull of muscle holding her down. Teeth nip at the noise like he would bite through her throat to swallow it down. It’s all *wrong*, but if she turns her head she might see it’s 11:46 pm, a little after the arcade used to close. All those nights her sweat cooled by the breeze from her open window greets her.

Eve blinks slowly the way she thought her mother’s porcelain dolls did behind her back. Tears plump and sweet when she knows this isn’t where she had fallen asleep. Her teddy bears watch from the shelves at the evil Eve let bloom from the wallpaper flowers. The living weight of insistence takes shape above her doll legs akimbo, dewy cheeks and eyes painted the color of granny smith apples dunked in darkening caramel. Over his shoulder the ceiling is bathed in candlelight and her tulle halo softening her bedroom.

The sound of a slap and an unshaven jaw against her palm wakes her fully, but when Eve tries to dig her nails in he only laughs.

“Look at you. What a big girl thinking she’s learned how to fight back.”

He sounds absurdly proud of her while her knees are pried apart to slot himself between her thighs. His nose rubs her jaw and she knows he can smell it. Dignity already sweating from her for him to lick up, but he kisses her neck gently and Eve’s chest caves in a wretch or a moan. Jack Thompson rears back a man of flesh and bone, older and stronger. The pin of his hands and hips practiced things now.

“Hey, hey, why are you crying, honey?” He sighs a smile and starts their reunion by cupping her face. “Don’t you know you’re just what I’ve been needing?”

Uses his other hand to soothe down her braided hair. Affording the gentle act for her sake. A false compassion to soften her up a bit, make her go tense and confused and shivery. His mouth watering for poor little Eve who looks up at him in liquid terror with saliva pooling under her tongue. This monster should have been trapped in storybooks with wolves and bears and other things hungering for girls. And yet, here Jack is dragging her back into her girlhood room and hoisting her up with one arm. Tears shaken loose when he sits her on his lap to crush his mess of doll parts to his chest. They’re alike that way, he is exactly what he’s reduced her to; hardly human. Something of fiction, a cautionary tale Eve never heeded. Something that should not have been given flesh and will to rub it’s cheek against her hair.

“How—how did you know I was back?”

“You’re too good a girl to not come home and arrange her mama’s funeral. The orchids were a little over the top. She put that in her will or some—” Jack pulls back then rolls her eyes at her new horror-stricken expression. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. She was very much alive when I sold a very convincing pitch for a trial security system. Hm, goodness, must’ve been six years ago. My company’s very first customer because this damn house is too easy to sneak into.” He taps her nose, mimicking her mother’s voice and condescending smile and suddenly the two worst things to happen to her grow teeth to tear out the teddy bear stuffing of her mind. *“Oh, Jack Thompson, is that you? What a nice boy you’ve grown to*

be. Please do be sure to keep in touch, my darling daughter had such a fancy for you. I wish you called more. Even if I had to listen to your mother, too. I've missed your noises, honey."

Eve hardly bounces on the bed when he tosses her. Arms suddenly pinned roughly above her head against the wrought iron painted white but she doesn't fight or flinch when a loop of leather secures her.

"*Wait, we can't—*" Eve can hardly draw enough breath to form words, voice breaking but he's always loved her vulnerable. Can feel his love press into her thigh.

"Can't have you running," he murmurs with a frown before his entire face brightens with boyish glee. "Always running, you, on that track or into that little head of yours. Oh, honey, did you think—you wanted to play our game, is that it?"

"I'm faster than you," she reminds him in a grunt because her body is jerked a little, arms pulled straight.

"How come, you think, you never made it to the door, hm?"

The taste of their mingled breath is the same as the nights she'd drool on his fingers hooked in her teeth, pinning her jaw to the floor of the foyer. Cut crystal sideways and level with Eve's eyes where it fell from her mother's limp fingers. The tiniest struggle to get back on her knees was a choice between pushing against his hips or arching her back. His knuckles gagged any noise that wasn't the harsh breath near her ear and quiet instruction on just how hard good girls can bite to—*break the skin if you gotta, honey, just—*stay quiet.

"How many women, Jack?" she warbles—*keens* at a startling caress over her thigh and his flat, storm dark expression and it's exactly that which unfurled from her blood like a four leaf clover. Ever since his arrest, Eve ached to know what monster she birthed between her thighs.

"Why's that matter?" he asks with a certain dismay of boredom at her predictable question.

"I need to know, please, Jack."

"You've always been my favorite," he assures. Eve tries to stay still but shakes her head, she doesn't want this—doesn't want him, doesn't want to be his favorite anything, but can't open her mouth to speak. "Is that what you're worried about?"

“Tell me, I’ll—I can keep it secret—”

“I’m your favorite, too, aren’t I, honey?”

“No,” and it’s forceful and Eve wants to feel proud of herself but it’s about as significant as flicking a cigarette at a firing squad. “I hate y—”

He shushes her gently with a rough hand on her mouth. Teeth chattering in the perfected curve of his hand pinching the hinges of her jaw. *Your fault your fault your fault.*

“You’re a terrible liar, honey. Besides, I thought you wanted to share secrets again?” Bringinh his lips to her ear, deep baritone a brassy hush to keep the teddy bears from hearing such vileness. “Do you have any idea what a revelation you were when you didn’t hit or kick? Hell, you never even tried to pull my hair.”

Must be why he didn’t bother to tie her ankles.

“I tried,” she insists in a tear thick hiccup. Hard to fight back or buck him off after cracking her head against the cheap carpet covered concrete of the arcade. Fear shriveling up her brain again, bruising itself against her skull like a trapped sparrow. Words flapping and dying between them, too. “I tried, I did. I told you to stop.”

“The first time, sure,” Jack dismisses with a shrug as if everything he ever did to her after was any different than the first time. Purposefully ignores whatever she meant to say with an exasperated sound cutting her off. He has work to get on with so a shovel, a hot knife, a crowbar starts pulling her apart fear by fear, horror by horror. Heavy panting as he digs with two fingers for all the things she buried away—wants their shared secrets to lick off his palm again. Every touch of his are selfish thieveries that leave her terrifyingly warm and fluttering by the time he sits back and unbuckles his belt.

When they were kids, it was just practice of an eager boy learning to be a monster. But it was her, too, letting him use her body to chase feeling instead of power so she could be held and go slack and emptied of stress. All grown up, Jack’s hands grip the headboard on either side of her pinned wrists, looming over her with a troubled brow, assessing just what to devastate next. She’s all upturned earth, furrows to be seeded, important work to be done.

What's he going to do now? Ask her if it feels good, make her say she's missed it? She fears the next moan in her throat because she's unraveling and he's hunting for that very last secret of hers.

"Felt good saying it, I bet. Made everything easier, too, ain't that right? Shh, I'm *kidding*. I know you never liked it easy."

Then he's squashed up tight against her cervix, and so on and so forth, back where they both started. Terror fucks her so hard she forgets to be horrified, goes tight in shock. She's struck, tears and guilt and moans free before he balances himself with a hand on her throat. Cuts off her blood and air in his greediness to kiss her unresponsive mouth.

"That's my girl. I missed you so much, Eve." Lies drip from his mouth into hers. Eve knows the charm of him. Everything is half truth, half lure. "Tell me you missed me, too, go on. You know I won't tell no one. Be a good girl, honey and— *say it*."

"I missed you, Jack," she breathes, free of it, only for it to be shoved back into her mouth under a dollop of spit because she'll never be free of it, not really. The foreign slickness jolts her. Eve didn't have to surrender the festering secret at all. Being truthful isn't what he wants. Sure as hell never needed her sincerity or permission. He kisses her cheek for her good behavior and licks up a tear like it's his due. Nips her permanent baby fat between his teeth to collect another drop for his sugartooth, she concludes as her eyes roll back. Her lips contain the hot bile roiling behind her navel, sloshing with each thrust, and the heat in her throat is all she has left as he steals the years away until it's that first night again and again and again.

"Oh, no, *no*, please Jack, don't make me—"

"Already?" he laughs, "Just like old times, huh, honey?"

"I missed you, Jack, honest, and I can be good, I can, you know I can, just don't—"

"Good Lord, I've never come across anything like you." But, bless his heart, his pace slows and her shuddering breath clears the haze he induced. "I can be real nice, honey—you do one thing for me and I won't make you come, okay?"

Animals are dumb, but Eve, at that moment, thought she might be dumber as she senses the sweet noose of his words and steps into his snare with a nod anyways.

“Tell me you love it, like you used to—” her chin is already trembling, she can’t do that— “Tell me you love this right now.”

Then he’s touching a spot buried so deep Eve really has trouble remembering why should deny such a thing. He has her secret and he’s kept the evidence, stole the truth from her already, all those years ago. She opens her mouth to spit or snarl or come clean before his fingers are pressing down her tongue, holding her cheeks so she’d have to bite herself to bite him. The temptation to do so is animalistic but he pins Eve down with his forearm balanced on her flush sternum.

“You know what, I’ll make this easy for you and just prove it.”

Brow bent to his work to make her drippy, disoriented, downy then entirely tense as Jack gathers her up to feel every shudder and flex and *fuc*—he turns his face into her neck to hide a hissed expletive.

“Has all this flush and excitement made you forget your manners?”

Eve blinks slower than the shiver starting at the nape of her neck. Not wanting to take responsibility because it shouldn’t be her fault she came—but in his sick way of his, it was. She can see it for what it is now; he’s not looking for anything. Jack doesn’t give a shit about their secrets or permission or submission; all of it is just leverage to hide his needy hunger to prove she’s just as sick as him for finding pleasure in this—why, Jack might even reckon she loves it. So, he’ll do it again and she’ll shudder her little deaths and come back into the world just to make him a happy man in a meek voice, “Thank you, Jack.”

He’s looking her in the eye, holding himself inside her, but Eve no longer dreads the darkness above her. She knows the next truth he’s going to pry out of her because Jack is starving for it—her love—and he will make Eve love him the only way he knows how. Maybe, this might not take long after all. She’s been in love with him this whole damn time.

Later, Shamrock water tower sits brighter than the half moon when Jack wakes and finds only her body heat on the pillow. The

celestial sphere turns dark on its spine, footsteps crash through her childhood home, hungry panting wheels a henhouse, the natural order goes on. Stomping and snarling on the stairs before Jack wrenches the back door open, and there she is, on the edge of the shamrock green lawn dewy from the evening sprinklers. And still with the crashing, only Eve feels him churn the earth in his grass soft steps. Both of them unceremoniously grimacing at one another as he looms, assessing and upset she might run even this far. She holds the cost of her escape to her chest. The pop and slip of leather gratifying until she had to gasp around the pain. The throb of her broken thumb matches the heaving breath of the night.

Shamrock Arcade pokes from the pocket of his unbuttoned shirt, the paper no longer shiny but worn from moving from pocket to pocket. When Eve stands, he lets her take it and says nothing as she cradles her hands to study each snapshot in the pale moonlight. The first frame is her own young face kissing his. The older Eve grew the more and more shocking how *young* they were. Just stupid children tangled up tighter than a pair of tumbleweeds caught in a wind devil. She doesn't have the same excuse now as the flash spots her vision again. With her fingertip, she traces the confused slant of her brow, the line of his neck as he chased her kiss. A buzz clung to the screen of the photobooth and the crackle on her lips as she inhales. Eve sees her open-mouthed awareness of someone wanting to touch her. The last photo is a blur, the trajectory of her life collapsed on the floor. Eve tucks the photo strip in her pocket for safe keeping.

Beside her, there's a pointed silence but over the ridge a lone car on Route 66 makes a bend miles away disappearing into the curve of the earth. Light fading and flaring according to the jagged horizons of the canyons in the two mile dead sprint between them and Eve. Candid and daring and childish, she states, "I'm going to stop that car for help."

Her head start ends the moment he opens his mouth and he knows that.

"You were telling the truth—when you said you missed me."

Eve looks at him, no longer trying to decode or understand, just coexist for a moment without the violence they crave. Truthfully, the knot of it only gets more tangled in her mind. Leaves her tugging at the frayed ends to figure out the same thing he assumes so quickly.

Jack makes her weak and resilient and he wants her to miss *him*, not just what he's done to her. Eve isn't ready to talk about that but Jack is already listening so she thinks of a story to lull his nature to sleep in the yawning night.

“I miss Shamrock sometimes. The blue stars before they turn the neon off, hiding beer in the woods, the greasy fries at Tango's. I missed the desert, the heat of it. You know you made it so I never felt safe outside of Texas. I never told anyone what you did or what we used to do, and then you were arrested and I hated myself because I couldn't pretend I didn't know I was going to be your first. How could I tell anyone then—that, what? What would I say? That, yeah, so okay, the boy who raped me went on to a rape another woman, *most likely many more*. And why didn't I report him? Right, super easy to explain. I'm in love with you and isn't that sickening? Thinking of myself and my—see, I don't even have a word for it—selfish, shamed silence before all those girls because I love you. *You*, a monster. But God, it's been so very hard carrying this secret of you, I want to be free of it. Mom died and I thought, finally a safe place that I could be where I might be able to actually do something—keep you from doing *this* to more women and I still want that. I want to stop that car. I want you to be put down like a dog. I want you to chase me, even now, but I want my home more. This is the very last place I ever felt young. Don't you feel old, Jack? Don't ya miss feelin' seventeen?”

Jack, eyes darker than the spinning heavens, says nothing. An age of silence that's continued since the wolves and coyotes stopped singing in this slice of Texas. Only traffic indifferent to Shamrock shifting the sands now. Remakes her, primal and liquid as he shifts his weight. His boots heavy with metal next to her bare feet in the rocks and sand. The even push and pull of his chest nearly touching hers.

“I can make you feel seventeen.”

It's a starter pistol, that promise, that grin.

Eve smiles that smile he loves, her breath sweet as sun warmed peaches as it kisses his lips. Standing in the arms of the graveyard of her childhood, she collects the bones of her youth and sings to them beside the flickering light of her beating heart. Maybe she should tell him another story, one belonging to their arid home of a wild witch woman and wolves. But no, let the desert teach him. The

oral cadence of the wind can warn him better than any theme or motif, let it knock him on his ass until he's cheek to cheek with God. Maybe he'll know of the girls born again from the bones of wolves—but it's too late, the doll ribbons fall from her hair, the wolf bones of her ribs are growing hair and teeth, clawing back to nature, back to wildness itself. Feeling like something belonging to the need to run, something to challenge the ravaging hunger of the world. Her heart burns paces ahead, lighting the way like a new dawn. Under the blue desert stars, Eve runs and runs and runs headlong into rebirth. Screaming, laughing, howling.

Mads Levshakoff

Mads Levshakoff is Alutiiq with ties to Suungaaciq (Prince William Sound), a beadworker, history undergrad, and amateur writer. Living in the upper peninsula of Michigan, she writes and reads in the sun with her two dogs or untangles plot points with her husband over margaritas. You can find Mads' previous work, *Dog Days of a Blind Cottonmouth*, in previous issues of *God's Cruel Joke*.

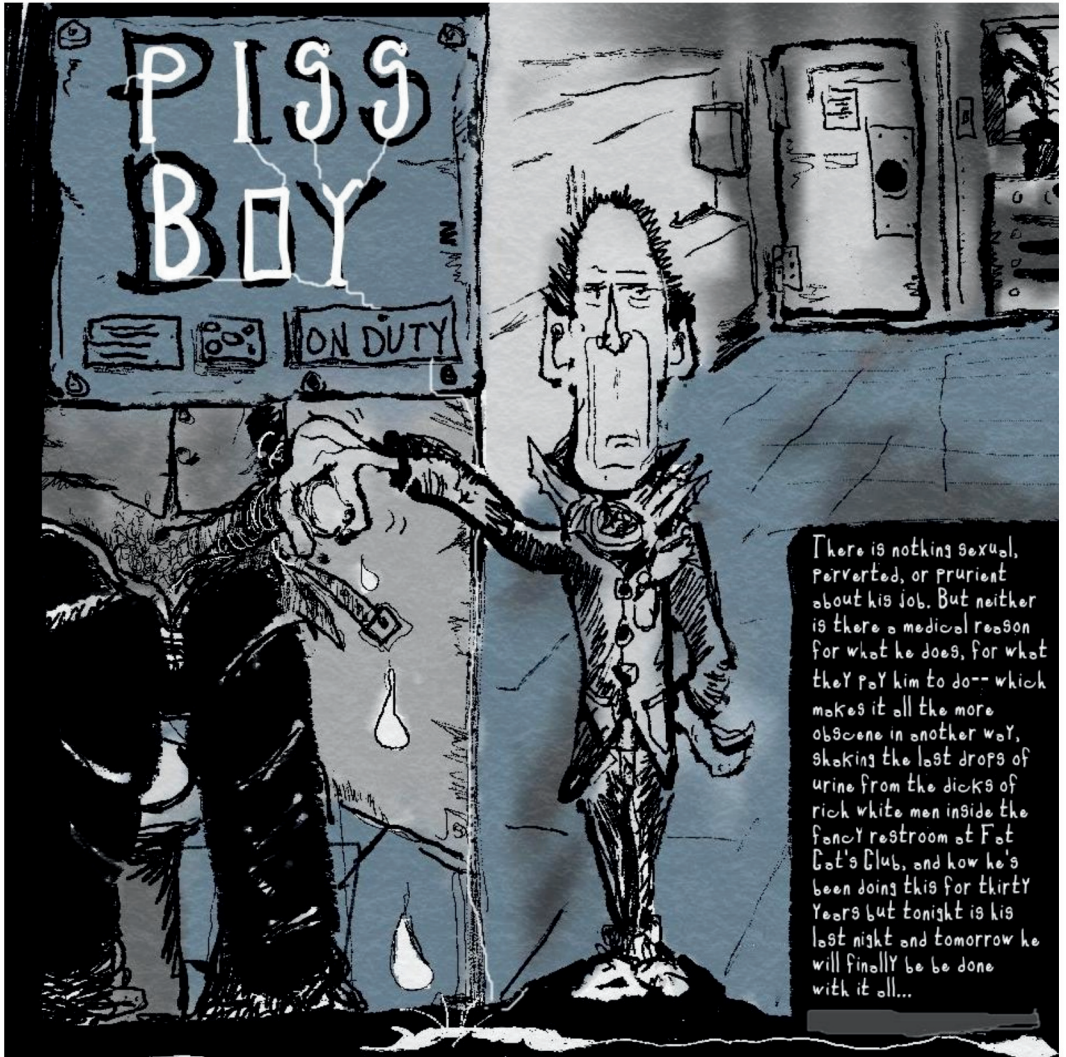
milder than cream

Camden Hunt

my beautiful man on the phone screen and i imagine his
lips feel like velvet and his body hair catches my fingers like
mousetraps as
if this like is some way to tell him i love him and i need him and
i will send him chocolate covered strawberries and his bedroom
must smell like a white linen
and hotel lobby and his bathtub picture fills my nostrils with the
smell of an empty pool
i like the comments on his post to tell him i support him and i
imagine the way his hand must
feel while it scrolls down like the little callouses on each fingerprint
from whatever blue collar
job he used to work before he started doing porn rubbing against my
soft back and pulling oil
downwards to the bottom of my feed—
and i love him and i could never love a real man because he is in my
pocket
all the time and one day i will tell the world that i love him and
imagine
how good it might feel to cry into his chest and maybe
i should just delete the instagram app but what
would i do then?

Camden Hunt

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



Piss Boy, Dave Sims

done with being at
their every beck
and call...

forced to pretend
he didn't notice their
foul smells as they
stood waiting in
the stalls or in
front of the urinals...

so damn rich that
they couldn't think
of any better way
to spend their
money than to
denigrate another
human being in yet
another sick fashion...

simply because
they were mean
and cruel and
wanted to see
someone reduced
in their minds to
less than what
fell to the floor
with a flick
of his wrist.

REWARD
7-71 312-0118

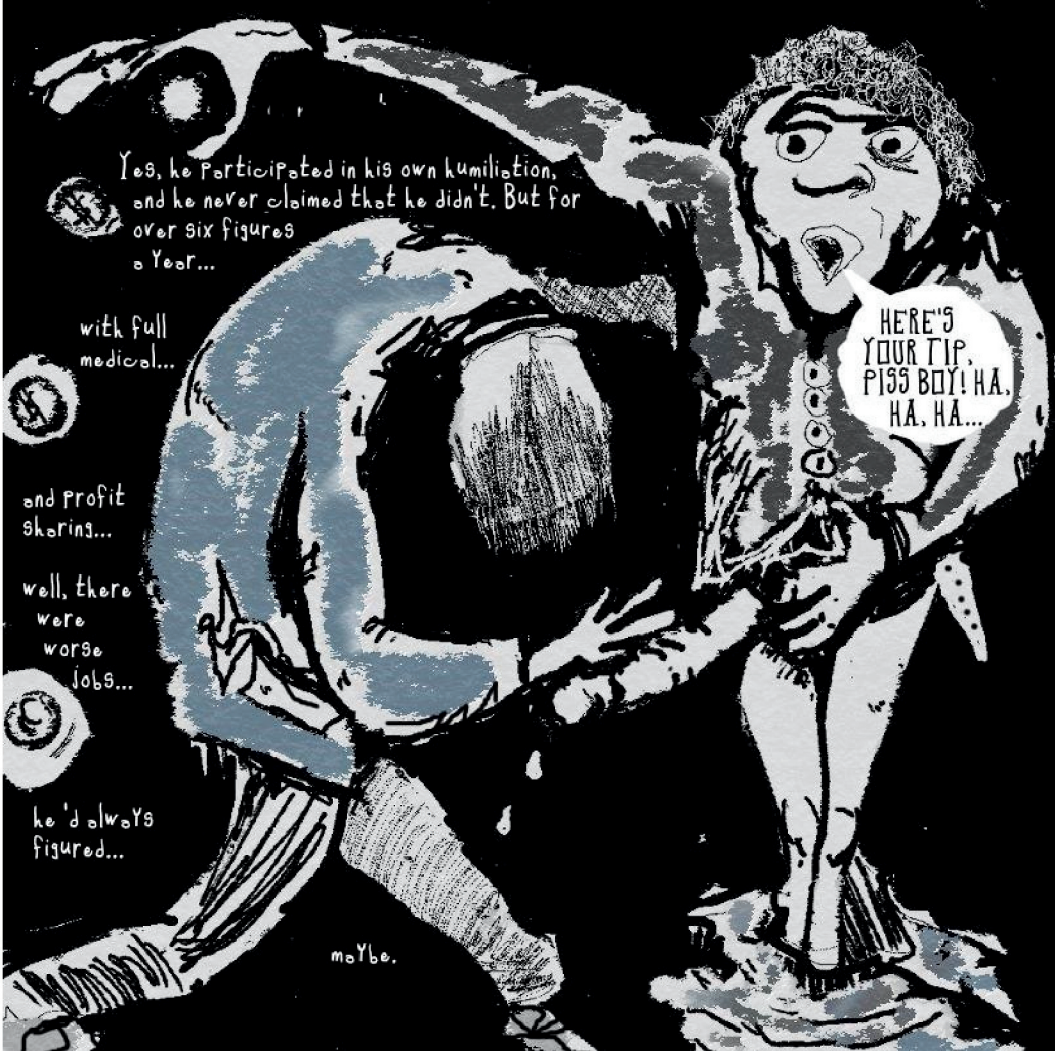
oh, PISS
BOY!

SAY THERE PISS
BOY!

GET OVER HERE NOW!
PISS
BOY!

Fer
Chrissake,
I'm coming
already!





Yes, he participated in his own humiliation,
and he never claimed that he didn't. But for
over six figures
a Year...

with full
medical...

and profit
sharing...

well, there
were
worse
jobs...

he'd always
figured...

HERE'S
YOUR TIP,
PISS BOY! HA,
HA, HA...

maybe.

His final evening dress
on and on. But, as with
all things, this one too
begins to approach its end.

At ten minutes to quitting time,
George--his last client FOREVER!
Piss Boy reminds himself--says in that
deep baritone voice of his:

HEY, PISS BOY,
WHEN YOU GET
DONE SHAKING
ME OUT, WHY
DON'T YOU
FOLLOW
ME...


WE GOT YOU A
RETIREMENT
PRESENT, FOR
ALL...

YOUR YEARS OF FAITHFUL
SERVICE TO YOUR BETTERS.

Piss Boy
certainly isn't
expecting this...

So he washes
his hands and
follows George
out to the hall
where he sees...



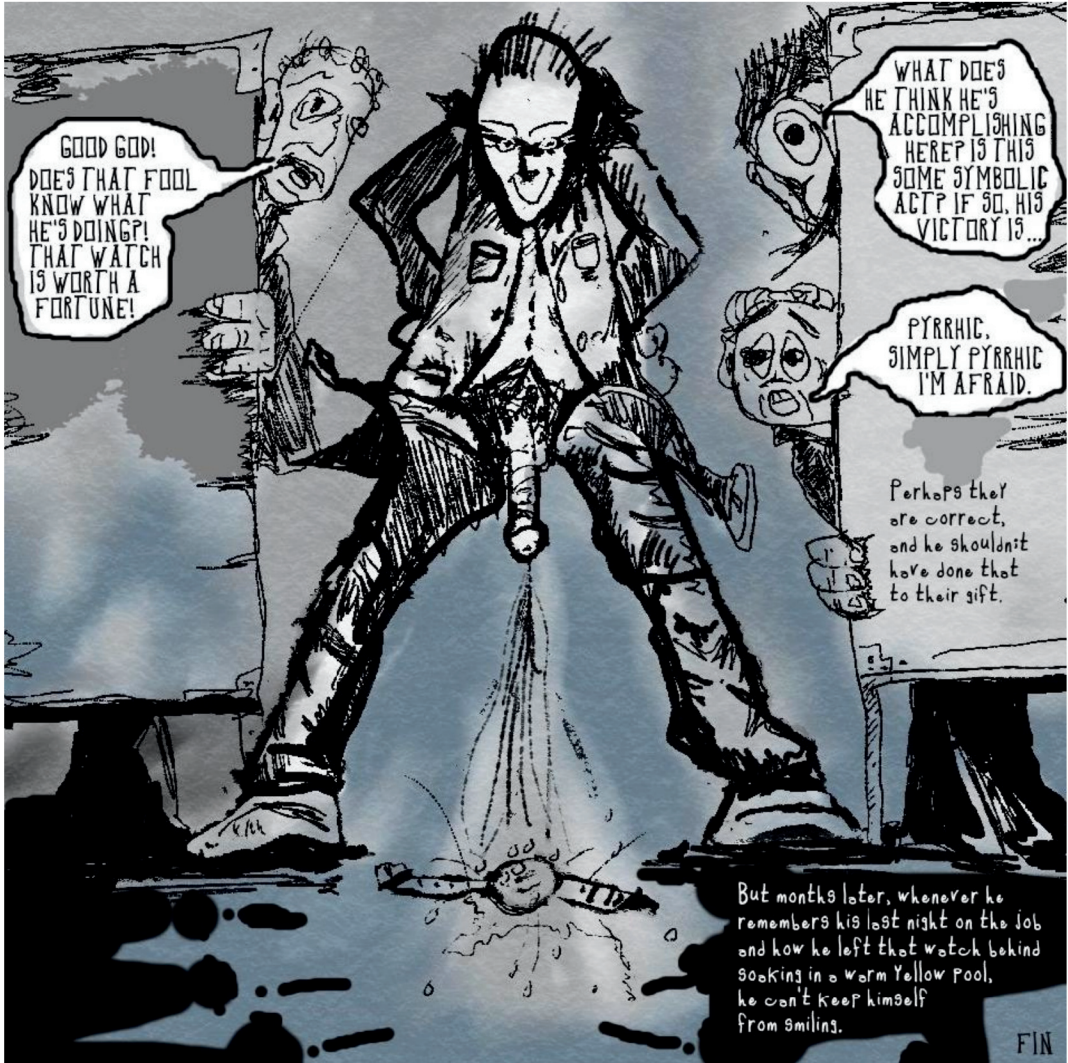


all the members
of the club, those
privileged rot bastards,
standing around a tray
containing a wristwatch.

"Never saw anything
like this, have you,
little fellow?" George
yells above the
drunken din. "That
bad boy right there
is a Patek Philippe,
Swiss made,
model three-
four-four,
eighteen-carat rose
gold, circa nineteen-
sixty four, and worth at
least fourteen grand..."

George pauses and Piss Boy hears
them all chuckling softly at first,
but then laughing openly, laughing at
him with ridicule and derision. "And it's all yours in return for
shaking our dicks all these years!"

So of course he does the only thing he can:



GOOD GOD!
DOES THAT FOOL
KNOW WHAT
HE'S DOING?
THAT WATCH
IS WORTH A
FORTUNE!

WHAT DOES
HE THINK HE'S
ACCOMPLISHING
HERE? IS THIS
SOME SYMBOLIC
ACT? IF SO, HIS
VICTORY IS...

PYRRHIC,
SIMPLY PYRRHIC
I'M AFRAID.

Perhaps they
are correct,
and he shouldn't
have done that
to their gift.

But months later, whenever he
remembers his last night on the job
and how he left that watch behind
soaking in a warm yellow pool,
he can't keep himself
from smiling.

FIN

Dave Sims

After teaching for 30+ years in the trenches of academe, Dave Sims now makes art and music in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. His comix and paintings both old-school and digital appear upon the walls, covers and inside pages of over 80 tactile and virtual publications and exhibits, including the Raw Art Review, Sunspot Literature, Shanti Arts, the Nashville Review and Streetlit.

See more at www.tincansims.com

or <https://fineartamerica.com/profiles/2-dave-sims/shop>.

Degree of Distant Gauntlets

Joshua Martin

The florid treatment facility shone in the helium twilight of a lightly strummed broomstick. Mannequin, an objective and entwined scone, inserts itself into a wonderful unbalanced chalkboard lounge. Beams of skateboards flutter. Misspellings abound. Mannequin had been itching to utter a nonchalant spell to finally conjure pesticides. An armload of earwax. Later on, thoughts locked, a series of floods overwhelmed the restaurant industry. Spoken imaginary fjords. When Diane tore a cumulative flank, the hooks offered surplus fossil statutes. Unless a shoulder, then why a horizon? Stubby pointer fingers galore! When invisibility croaks, Mannequin vanishes. Teary ridges and eclipsed pelicans gliding through the cosmos. Energy waning flea circus. Diane, gliding through the ocean, began to wedge shells into flapping plains of misdirection. Congratulations, Mannequin, for the submarine has grown enough fur to merge displeasing contradictions. Diane has a distinct bread, water, and machine gun fee schedule. Uniquely unproductive. Foreshadowing an exit. An aisle, an allowance, and a surly grin which dampens the tarnished lie detectors. Licking automatic scruff, Mannequin mows a lawn. Community of global dungeons. Relish dandruff glue! Missing books electrocute dungarees. Diane sips nourishing alterations before proceeding into champagne algae ponds. Rest, now, wrong, arranging multiplication acrobatics. Sweater flash, doubled over, Mannequin in a sinkhole. Outlined theory of discretion. Armpit hammocks. Potential worm pictures. Microscope detail. Mannequin carpenter fuzz. The corner chirping. Stench foam butterfly paintings. Diane colors each aspect of a wave.

Between airport widows, livers replace bananas. Hovel. Hoop. Diane momentarily publicizes the waning posture. An early bird conversation does not pass the smell test. 3:30 stress goal, inundate a mansion. Mannequin incubating a wire hanger. Harpoon formulaic mongoose spray. What's withering?

-Call me a fold, Diane says, as though webbed jars could be the subject of a thesis.

-Disintegrating verbal republics, Mannequin adds, did not vary in their degree of farce.

-Nor pronunciation.

Next time, an emblem. Last night, galloping between sewer pipes, the association of collegiate misanthropes unlocked eyelashes and soaked a poncho in hushpuppies. Mannequin studies the faulty inkblots, while shocking locusts into submissive gloom.

-I, Mannequin says, never could question an abyss.

-A fair void is a boot, Diane utters while holding pliers up to the light in an attempt to decipher madness.

-Lay that brick down and form thyself into a knob.

-I'd rather be carrying buoys to the grave.

-Time still yearns to be displaced.

-All that can be composted can also crawl.

Diane plagiarizes a festering banditry. An institution clutters the playing field. Wipe. Exclude. Suffering hammers a smelly belly. Certainty is impossible. Velocity without long division.

-I've mustered all my strength, Diane says, and still I'm feeling less reanimated than ambiguous.

-To divert attention, Mannequin observes, charm the past sense until it becomes a caricature.

-Of what should I devour?

-No one should own a block let alone a tree.

Non-revolutionary winds contemplate the brutality of a colon. Sauntering fog sounding like slang. To mend a wall, Mannequin storms the citadel whispering high-pitched banalities. Throughout the universe, critics are despised. Diane is joyfully ignored. Elongated albatross sustaining a moat. The strong smell of catastrophe comes from the commuter. Dancing still thrives. Diane reverses wingspan and teaches prehistoric gambling. Inadvertent hatch grows weary. Only geese can fathom the secrets of a pie crust. Never try. Care less. Asthma, the status quo, a pinching decapitated corpse learns to interrogate a silence. Intestine toothpaste hanging

upside down. Mannequin, all vinegar, gazes at the disemboweled noodles until reality finally disappears. Diane plants her flag in a disordered rump. Until next time, the disguises will have to do.

Joshua Martin

Joshua Martin is a Philadelphia based writer and filmmaker, who currently works in a library. He is member of C22, an experimental writing collective. He is the author most recently of the books *peeping sardine fumes* (RANGER Press), *[Ruptured]* >> *Schematic* << *MAZES* (Sweat Drenched Press), and *destructive paradox slips on banana peel* (Cajun Mutt Press). He has had numerous pieces published in various journals in print and online. You can find links to his published work at joshuamartinwriting.blogspot.com

Strawberry Syncope

Thomas Osatchoff

Free tripping the term
occurrence on any condition
hard to ignore archonorgans
generating light heat
in the interbeing the sun
circle interpreting a way
through the somewhere
between autumn and youth
whipping around chiaroscuro
healing thoroughly
unrecognized words
through killing we can't
we can do our homework
query the stars thoughts
forming predecodable
pressure water
we have winged
xxxxxxxstreams
our prerooms
in our prerooms
dynamic roots
erupting verbs
trade fights
libraries forever
amorphous ne'er
like a faint
oversight

Thomas Osatchoff

Thomas Osatchoff, together with family, is building a self-sustaining home near a waterfall. New work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *God's Cruel Joke*, *Inscape Literary Magazine*, *Pinky Thinker Press*, and a poetry collection is out from *Nauset Press*.

poets who grew up in the boonies be like

D. H. S. R.

down along that shifty-eyed Salinas River, where

the june bugs hiccup aft'noon tunes all day n' the carp

leap without much regard n' the prairie dogs bake

in the knife-edged sun n' the out-of-state

miners burrow headlong into clay-

coloured soil n' the Callisto colourless

geckos crawl under, into every jutting

crook o' the paint-stripped *convenient* store

n' the Santa Fe scoopie whoopers,

hard-eyed n' hungry, straddle overhead

n' the *lubrus etoili terratrusi* saddle 'tween

singed grass blades n' old men's cigarette butts n'

the Japanese two-toothed dung beetle masticates

and hums upon mounds of fetid wild Manchurian

one-sided-polka-dotted black heifer waste n' the

lab-created weevil-kineevil of the 34th Parallel shoots

unregulated dice games w/ bored housewives n' the endangered

Kwatchunwanakili?kituk ancestral beaver (only one in existence) in the middle o'
the only dirt road n' the Bodensee Galapagos Toucan Sam (*canaris cerealis*) unfurls

its great, iridescent plumage in the cattails and makes mating

passes at the ZXI, never-released AXOTIL-CHEETAH Hybrid™, who

actually loves the half-ethereal, half mythic laelaps

n' the—

D. H. S. R.

D. H. S. R.'s finally making it out of the boonies with this one.

Überaffekrieg

Lee Pearson

Why is the United States Department of Defense so suddenly interested in Chimpanzee Politics?

CIA agent Benicio D’Gango, undercover as German-American primatologist, Uwe Fuchs, boarded his Wednesday flight from Miami to Kilimanjaro International Airport. He brought one carry-on full of clothes and a Gameboy Advance SP with Super Mario Land 2 jutting out its cartridge slot. He was wearing his favorite mustache disguise.

D’Gango was set to spend the next year in Gombe National Park, Tanzania, off the eastern shores of Tanganyika, south of Burundi. He’d be under the employ of Per DuPont, PhD, a wealthy and notoriously eccentric celebrity anthropologist looking to further the work of Jane Goodall, who observed the Gombe Chimpanzee War between 1974 and 1978. DuPont, in the aughts, worked closely with one Eigen Krauss, John Birch adherent, disgraced evolutionary anthropologist and, at one time, an obscure HGP-adjacent who was perhaps too controversial and too idealistic to attain any real notability within the International Human Genome Sequencing Consortium. Krauss, forced to operate in the private sector because of his beliefs, was banking on the fully-sequenced human genome to reveal, once and for all, that humanity may be categorized and hierarchized according to race on the genetic level—he was hardly accounting for the possibility of all humans sharing but a fraction of a single percentile of DNA. Krauss fell into obscurity shortly after a brief but nonetheless fiery run through the right-wing media circuit propagating the notion that the HGP’s genome discoveries were manufactured to obscure the supposedly inconvenient truth that race is real and immutable. Per DuPont had the good sense to jump ship far before that. He funded a handful of small-budget documentaries about Stoned Ape Theory that, in time, sent his name and work high into the public conscience stratosphere.

According to D’Gango’s cover story, Uwe Fuchs was an ape behavioralist who had worked at the Dallas Zoo for several years.

The only information the CIA had on DuPont's project was that it necessitated a trained behavioralist—all the finer details were made purposefully vague. And for good reason, as D'Gango discovered through the vetting process. Months before any correspondence with DuPont began, he was made to sign a slew of non-disclosure agreements. Then, much to the interest of the CIA, he had to meet requirements to attain security clearance from the Department of Defense. With no modest amount of fraud reaching the highest echelons of the American intelligence apparatus, D'Gango's—or, rather, Fuchs's—identity was made impenetrable. Getting TS/SCI-cleared and passing a polygraph went off without a hitch—no undue suspicion was brought to the inter-agency espionage.

But what brought D'Gango all the way to Tanzania was the same phantom quarry that compelled him across the globe time after time, through warzones and on deep undercover perils. Having hunted the elusive international terror network for years, he could easily sniff out VIPERE's stench hanging over the research project like a stale fart. He wondered whether or not the DOD was aware of their possible involvement, wondered if they weren't really in cahoots with the terrorist cell after all.

D'Gango spent his five-hour layover in Amsterdam, in an airport Tiki bar, pleasantly idlewild, listening to a compilation of his favorite anime OSTs off a burnt CD. The Tiki bar was the only joint that looked to have a little life in its décor, unlike the washed-out gray closets sporting kitschy faux-pomp sensibilities that only attracted the most miserable of traveling winos. The good kid behind the bar served him four Malibu Sunsets through the evening—didn't even water them down. D'Gango pocketed one of the cocktail umbrellas, a green one, to add to his growing collection—he'd later tack it into *Amsterdam* on the atlas he had spread on the kitchen wall at home. Despite how boring he found the sport, he watched a soccer game as it played without audio through a plasma-screen TV above the bar, nestled between two Easter Island heads and an assortment of Tiki masks, half-obsured by lei garlands lazily strewn across the surface of its screen. The game was only vaguely more interesting than everything else going on. D'Gango had always been of the opinion that fútbol could be made so much more exhilarating if the field were reduced to half its length. A good-looking German boy slipped in for a quick beer, and D'Gango bought him his first drink to strike up a conversation—though it quickly became apparent that the kid was incapable of catching onto D'Gango's casual flirtations,

the language barrier too wide for such subtlety. After sharing a pair of boilermakers, they said *auf wiedersehen* and parted ways.

An hour before boarding, he made his way into a nearby restroom and adjusted the several spy implements he'd stashed in his anal cavity—a .22 LR pistol, satellite phone, multitool and a potassium cyanide capsule that provided a drastic final option should the mission go irreparably wrong. The CIA requires all field agents to carry the pill with them, traditionally in a false tooth for discrete access. But D'Gango was specially trained for deep undercover work, and part of that training focused heavily on the clandestine utilization of one's own rectum as a method of concealing certain tools essential to the completion of a given mission. D'Gango was so good, so well-trained, that he could easily break the cyanide capsule by simply flexing the muscles within his asshole, and thus was not required to carry the cyanide in a fake tooth. Once, on a mission infiltrating a radical Aum holdout cell from Sapporo, in cooperation with Japan's PSIA, D'Gango carried the deconstructed pieces of a breach-loading .308 rifle in his ass for over two weeks while undercover. He would use the same rifle to take out the leader of the cell, after which fellow agents were able to safely apprehend the rest of the cultists before they could carry out an atrocity in Tokyo that would have made the subway sarin attack of 1995 seem like child's play by comparison.

It was nine at night in Amsterdam when he finally boarded his plane and began the flight to Tanzania. He was asleep for most of the trip, lulled by turbulence and mild drunkenness. From JRO, he took a domestic flight to Kigoma, layover at Julius Nyerere in Dar es Salaam. It was midday when his feet touched the ground in lively Kigoma. D'Gango rode on the back of a boda boda across town and shuffled his way into a little bar near the docks. The bartender offered him some homemade bia, bragging of his robust fermenting operation in the back room, then brought out a plate of *ndizi nyama*, a dish made with plantains and meat. After a couple tall boys of bia, he hailed another boda boda and rode up to Kibirizi, then walked to the marina where a large crowd was boarding the lake taxi that would take him up Tanganyika to Gombe—the small national park consisting of only thirty-five square miles had no road access.

No less than three dozen locals were huddled on and under the planks of wood that served as rudimentary seating on the vessel for those who boarded early enough to get a spot—everyone else had to

stand. As the boat lurched forward through the browned water, D’Gango found a spot on the starboard side that provided just enough space to allow him a little comfort, his body nestled between a man with a dog in his lap and a talkative local woman. Northward along Tanganyika’s shore, the boat cut through the shallows, stopping frequently at the docks to let people off. D’Gango read from a crumpled paperback about the legendary Gustave, a gargantuan Nile crocodile that is rumored to have killed somewhere between two and three hundred people throughout his life. He was relieved to learn the crocodilian only lurks at Tanganyika’s northernmost banks, within the border of Burundi.

Despite knowing next to no English, the talkative Tanzanian woman started and kept up a decent conversation with D’Gango through mannerisms and hand gestures. D’Gango could, at times, vaguely understand what she was saying through Swahili’s influence derived from Arabic, other colonizer languages to a lesser extent. With some difficulty and more than a few phonetic corrections, he learned her name was Tusajigwe.

The taxi emptied for six hours until it waded up to a dock where a white man in a trench coat with a cigarette smoldering between his fingers stood off to the side of a red 4x4 covered in mud. As D’Gango—now, very importantly, Uwe Fuchs—approached, the man said in a deep, whistly baritone, “Mr. Uwe Fuchs.”

Fuchs couldn’t place his accent.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“I am Cicero. I will take you to Doctor DuPont.”

After which, Cicero spoke no longer. Fuchs was gestured into the 4x4’s passenger side, and they were off. The vehicle hopped recklessly over a trail marked only by the worn tire tracks of numerous other trips, cutting through the grass and mud. They passed along valleys and through meadows of tall grass that nearly swallowed the vehicle whole. Within the heights of passing trees, birds of every variety cawed and trilled back and forth to each other, balked at the humans’ intrusion. Brakes squealed under the chassis as a large building came into view through the trees and their veils of green vine.

As soon as they came to a stop, the front door to the facility flew open, and a pair of men came out, waving.

“Welcome, friend, welcome,” said the man in a pith Fuchs could easily recognize as Per DuPont.

“It’s good to be here,” he said. Looking to the stranger, “And who is this?”

“Bo Hondo.” An American, a southerner of the Cajun variety by the suave bark of his accent. “I’ve been on this project from the beginning.”

“Monsieur Hondo is here for the week,” said DuPont. “To check in on the progress.”

“And to meet our new behavioralist, of course,” he chuckled. “But most of all, to ensure the DOD gets their money’s worth.”

“You’re with the Department of Defense.”

“I am. You gained clearance to be put on this project—I’m sure I don’t have to remind you that any and all details you will be privy to here are to be kept absolutely confidential.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Because the work you will be doing is incredibly sensitive. I’ll be frank—to ensure the best outcome, compartmentalization will be kept to a minimum. But that doesn’t mean we won’t know who talked if anything ends up in the news. Thirty years in a cell, at the very least—unless you wanna make buddies with the Kremlin, which I do not recommend.”

“I understand.”

“Great. I’m glad we could get that out of the way early,” he said, abandoning the serious tone. “You’ll soon learn just why it is you’re here.”

Hondo snapped a finger at Cicero to take Fuchs’s bag inside.

“I’m eager to find out. I wasn’t given much of an explanation.”

“I’m sure the suspense was unbearable, but it was necessary. From the US to Tanzania is a long way to travel with such sensitive info. The opposition could’ve gained a lot if they’d intercepted you.”

“Opposition? It’s not like we’re at war.”

Hondo's smile curled across his face. "We must operate as if the US is always at war, Mr. Fuchs. That is how war is avoided. It's naïve to think there aren't enemies everywhere."

"We do hope you understand how necessary it was to keep you temporarily out of the loop," said DuPont.

Fuchs said, "No, it's perfectly fine. I'm here now, so—"

"Come inside," said Hondo, swinging the door open and stepping through.

The first room was a small reception area with a desk and a dozen chairs scooted across the linoleum floor into the corner, a pair of doors beside the clutter on the side opposite the front door, a one-person restroom on the left and, as made apparent by the yellow sign hanging above, *Authorised Personnel ONLY* on the right. DuPont swiped a card over a magnetic reader next to the latter door, then stared unblinking into an eye scanner for a few moments before the lock on the door clicked, disengaged.

"We'll put you into the system sometime tomorrow," said Hondo, following DuPont inside.

White fluorescent light washed against the gray walls and illuminated the barren room where a younger woman stood in front of a great window that took up the entirety of the far wall. Through the glass, she contemplated an enclosure where two chimps were huddled together, an elderly female picking her fingers through the back fur of a large male.

"Mr. Uwe Fuchs, meet the final member of this project, Aarsonia Bontloden. She arrived just yesterday."

"A pleasure, madam,"

"Yes," she said, not turning from the window. "The behavioralist?"

"That's right."

Her black ponytail whipped through the air as she turned and presented Fuchs with a handshake. Brusquely, "Call me Sonia."

"Sonia."

“And the two lovely individuals here,” DuPont said, presenting the pair of chimpanzees behind the glass. “Tito and Gertrude.”

“Lovely indeed,” said Fuchs. “But may I ask why there are a pair of chimps in an enclosure here when there is a swath of very suitable land just outside?”

DuPont’s cheery demeanor faltered for the first time. He cleared his throat and said, solemnly, “If you may, please inspect Tito’s genitals.”

Fuchs approached the glass and peered in. With a closer look, it was more than apparent that Tito was exhibiting the classic signs of a chimp fear response—eyes downcast, a toothy grin that apes will make when nervous, assuming a fetal pose. In his right hand, Tito held onto his groin, but Fuchs could easily see through the gaps of his trembling fingers.

His jaw dropped, and he asked, “Dear God, what happened to him?”

“Rampelberg happened,” said Sonia.

“Their son, their only offspring.”

“But why?”

“Chimp Oedipus Complex, I’ve called it—COC,” said Hondo. “He desires the mother, and despises his father who has what he cannot take.”

“Please refrain from nonsense theories,” said Sonia. Then, looking to Fuchs, “You’re the behavioralist. What do you say?”

“I’d have to know much more to consider why a chimp would do this to his own father. Was Rampelberg raised here—?”

“Stay your inquiries for now,” said DuPont. “We’re more concerned with what’s happening out there in the wild communities. Rampelberg does not play into this project just yet.”

“And God help us when he does,” said Hondo. “The monkey’s a contingency plan—if all else fails.”

“Ape,” corrected Sonia.

“Excuse me?”

“Chimpanzee, gorilla, orangutan—*apes*, not monkeys.”

“What’s the new interest with the wild communities?” asked Fuchs, trying to get back on track.

“Tomorrow,” said DuPont. “It is late. For now, you will be shown your quarters, and then we will eat dinner.”

Dinner was nothing extravagant, a serving of tuna salad on white bread, stale potato chips. Fuchs’s room was perhaps eight-by-ten feet and consisted of a twin bed with five inches of foam to serve as a mattress, a desk with a lamp and a chair that could only slide halfway out from under the desk before it hit the end of the bed. He spent a half-hour rearranging the furniture into a more sensible and functional layout, trying his best to muffle the sound of metal scraping across the floor. Drawing open the blinds of the room’s window and sliding the glass up just a crack, he could fall asleep to the sounds of the forest outside. Out the window, the darkness gave the illusion that the night was still. Every tree writhed and howled with life. The air hummed with the low frequencies of insect copulation. The ground under the facility’s concrete foundation shifted imperceptibly while worms and whatever else, engaged in their subterranean orgy, lived, loved and died en masse, all at once, as they had for eons and as they will for eons. And somewhere, perhaps nearby, dozens of chimpanzees, mankind’s close cousins, were huddled together in rest, another day having passed in their slow evolutionary march.

Fuchs’s head slammed against the roll cage of the 4x4 for the tenth and final time as it came to a harsh stop at the edge of a meadow somewhere deep in Gombe’s northern interior. Along their way there, the winch was used three times to pull the vehicle out of massive rain-filled craters and mud pits—Fuchs was considering the prospect of simply hiking back to HQ at the end of the day’s activities, rather than suffering another miserable ride through the jungle.

Sonia brushed dust off her blouse and piled out, saying, “This area is the last known position of the Kasakela community, the largest and most prominent in Gombe.”

“As of two weeks ago,” said DuPont.

“Then they’ve moved on, as they always do.”

“Not quite,” said Hondo. “We put a tracking device on one of their males—Samwise’s youngest son, Silas. The signal is still present, a mile to the north.” He pointed over a sharp rise covered in thick foliage, where the 4x4 couldn’t possibly traverse.

Cicero, armed with a rifle, climbed ahead of the group with Hondo just behind him. A device with two antennas stretching out from a radar screen beeped as a thin, green line passed from left to right over a semi-circle grid, a dot blipping every few seconds. They smelled the scene before they saw it, rotting puce and decay. As they came out from a wall of thick brush into a clearing, their gazes landed on a dozen corpses with their eyes frozen in a state of pained terror. With the muscles gone slack, the chimps’ features were sunken and gaunt. In the sockets of their eyes, insects of every variety writhed in and out, bodies reduced to feast-homes for the hungry bugs.

“Jesus Christ.”

Hondo stepped around the bodies to where the beeping led him, a male on his belly with several exit wounds making craters flooded with oxidized blood turned hues of brown verging on black.

“Mostly male casualties,” Hondo said to DuPont.

“What are these wounds?” asked Sonia, leaning down to inspect the murdered Silas.

“They were shot,” said Fuchs. “Those are ballistic exit wounds.”

Blenching at the suggestion, Sonia said, “Who? And why?”

Hondo put his hands on his hips and cleared his throat. “That’s the reason you’re here, Uwe. You’re familiar with the Four-Year War and Jane Goodall?”

“Yes, of course. The Kasakelas eradicated the Kahama separatists and fought the other communities around Gombe.”

“That’s right. That Four-Year War ended in 78, but there were still plenty of incidents since then, especially with the Mitumbas.”

“You’re suggesting the Mitumbas came here and shot these Kasakelas?”

“No. The Mitumbas were wiped out months ago—same deal,” revealed DuPont, gazing out across the quiet graveyard. “Though the casualties weren’t nearly as substantial as what’s happened here.”

“How could this have happened?” said Sonia, her face turning red with rage. “Who could have done this to them?”

“Regardless of *who* may be responsible, Chimp Politics and the longstanding hierarchy that’s been here in Gombe far before even the Four-Year War has now changed, suddenly and drastically. A new advent in the progression of the species.”

“With Kasakela gone, the power vacuum is vast,” said DuPont.

“And has already been filled, if intel is correct” said Hondo. “As I said, a dramatic shift in Chimp Politics as we know it. We’ve observed the slow formation of a kind of chimp super-community. We believe it is this super-community that is eradicating the other separate communities. Whoever is left alive is made to assimilate into the NCO.”

“NCO?” asked Sonia.

“New Chimp Order.”

“Most of the old chimp communities are gone now, dissolved in the wake of the ongoing conflict. We’re calling it the Great Chimp War.”

“I suggested World War Chimp,” said Hondo. “Now that you see the big picture, it’s time you know just why you’re here. Fuchs, with your understanding of Chimp behavior, you will be investigating the possible source of this conflict, find any clues about human interference and, ideally, develop an expedient solution to the problem.”

“And me?” asked Sonia. “Why do you need a breeding specialist?”

“We have reason to believe that it is, in fact, other chimpanzees, this NCO, that have been carrying out these *armed* attacks,” said DuPont, looking down at the dead Silas.

“Chimps cannot shoot each other.”

“We already know they use tools—that’s Goodall 101,” said DuPont. “Rudimentary tools, yes—but still. In theory, could they be taught to use firearms?”

Fuchs said, “In theory, yes. But only in theory. For even one of the apes to be capable—it would turn all of chimpdom on its head.”

“You’ve yet to explain why you require a breeding specialist,” said Sonia, irritated.

“It’s apparent this conflict was orchestrated by humans. Someone is interested in starting all-out war among the chimps.”

“The Department of Defense. You’re not saying—”

“There is one group working from the shadows, possibly China or Russia. If either of them are responsible for this sudden shift in the chimp status-quo, the United States needs to take a side, provide a military solution to combat this NCO—to ensure peace and liberty for all chimpkind.”

“And Rampelberg is where you’d begin that?”

“Yes.”

“You want Sonia to breed an army of Überchimps,” Fuchs deduced. “To fight the NCO.”

“If all other options fail. Despite Rampelberg’s adolescent rage, he is—” Hondo quivered. “He is the perfect specimen.”

“When can I meet him?” asked Sonia. “The young one.”

“Rampelberg is very volatile as of now. Breeding will only be necessary if all other options are revealed to be implausible. For now, we must investigate a possible easy solution without arming even more chimps. We must be practical.”

A group operating from the shadows to instigate an all-out war among chimps, Fuchs thought to himself, peering one last time out over the scene of the slaughter before turning to leave. All prior doubt dissolved, *VIPERE is here*.

Dinner was another disappointing bowl of gruel served with saltine crackers, a soup lovingly made by the ever-silent Cicero. After

eating, resisting the urge to vomit, Fuchs took a shower that managed to adequately relieve him of his stresses. Upon returning to his room and laying down on the foam mattress to settle in for the evening, he noticed, running his hand beneath the pillow, a scrap of paper hidden underneath. The Affine Cipher scrawled in red ink was easy enough that he could simply read it as if it were plain English.

hqbftuummwpdwofbyqtgxsvgigkgjgtiafgtg

—*H*

bathroommidnightcarefuleyeseverywhere

—*B*

B. Aarsonia Bontloden, or *Bo*, Fuchs contemplated. Or *H*, for *Hondo*? Is the last initial supposed to be part of the cipher?

When the clock's hands met at the apex of night, Fuchs retrieved the pistol from his anal cavity, holstering it in his sweatpants' waistband, and stepped out into the dark hallway. Making swift footfalls, he crept through the deepest shadows of the facility's interior until he was in the main lobby. But it was neither Bontloden nor Hondo that greeted him when he swung the restroom door open. His eyes met the cold gaze of Cicero. Not *B*, not *H*—it was all just a dirty trick.

"Benicio D'Gango," he said, grinning ear-to-ear.

Knowing his cover was blown, and that the ensuing fight would be life or death inevitably preceded by the most inhumane torture imaginable, he didn't waste a moment before training the pistol's sights at the henchman's forehead. Cicero was lightning-fast, cleared the distance before D'Gango could squeeze the trigger. The bullet cratered in the painted brick wall behind where the villain's head was only a fraction of a second before. Before he could react, Cicero dislocated D'Gango's shoulder and twisted the weapon free from his grip, judoed his body into the air and slammed it against the linoleum, knocking all air from his lungs. The beatdown occurred through all of two seconds. His vision waded in and out,

mind veered into unconsciousness as pain swelled throughout his body.

He blinked every few moments, getting brief snapshots of being dragged down into the basement of the facility, of Hondo cackling pleased with himself. After what felt like an entire night's rest, cold water washed over his naked body, and he was awake. D'Gango was suddenly alert to the fact that his hands were bound behind his back by a plastic tie, and that he was lying in a mound of dirt with Hondo standing over him, heel of a boot crushing into D'Gango's bleeding lips. He winced at the fluorescent light searing cruelly into his retinas until his eyes finally adjusted well enough to see clearly that he was in one of the chimp enclosures.

Hondo spoke, the words muffled through D'Gango's hazy perception, "It's a damn shame I gotta be back in Washington tomorrow, otherwise you and I could've had one hell of a time." He leaned down and ripped the fake mustache from D'Gango's lip, hissed, "Benicio D'Gango! I should've known the CIA would be snooping around, should've known your VIPERE goose chase would lead you here."

"Show it to me," D'Gango mumbled.

Hondo kicked him in the ribs and howled with laughter. "What are you talking about?"

D'Gango coughed, then demanded again, "I know they tattoo that goddamned snake on your taint, you sonofabitch. Show it to me, Hondo—if that's even your real name—show me you're one of them! VIPERE! I'm dead anyway, aren't I?"

"Yes." He unlatched the buckle of his belt and unzipped his fly. "You are dead."

Dropping his pants and boxers to the floor, he was exposed. Hondo spread his legs and lifted his dick and balls to reveal a tattooed perineum somewhat obscured under a veil of dark brown pubes. The snake coiled from the base of his sack to his ass-crack, red eyes and a maw with fangs slaked in venom, poised to kill. The same tattoo every VIPERE agent is given upon their initiation into the centuries-old order of mass-murdering, freedom-suppressing chaos-worshippers. The tattoo, though the knowledge will never be found in the annals of accepted historical canon, has appeared innumerable times as far back as the Spanish Inquisition, a symbol

known to very few. Only the most learned—and paranoiac—of historians know that the viper symbolizes a faceless power's tireless desire to exert supreme control, to influence every machination, small and large. Among those who bore the mark—as far as those confirmed by D'Gango and his colleagues—were highly regarded figures in times of violent strife: Jefferson Davis, Gavrilo Princip, Italo Balbo, Lee Harvey Oswald, countless more, both thought leaders of the mass conspiracy and their underlings, countless iterations of the same names and the same methods—obscured in apocryphal ciphers, execrations re-orderings, anagrammatized, phantomographized. As a decentralized web of deceit, over the eons, VIPERE has veered mankind into innumerable abjections: pogroms, wars, genocides, autocratic upheavals. D'Gango had always theorized that it was impossible to truly comprehend their motives and the full scope of their infiltration into the gears of the global machine—he had always posited that even if VIPERE were to stop existing tomorrow, their will would still be done. Because it was VIPERE that had designed the machine to carry out its operations while transcending the necessity for a human Keteroid-operator subject to base human desire and latent thirst for annihilation, designed so far back than no one could reasonably know where it all began and where it could all ever possibly end. A self-perpetuating conspiracy against all humanity by all humanity outside all humanity.

Hondo left the enclosure, the door sliding shut behind him, its heavy locks engaging. A window allowed D'Gango to see him on the other side as he fiddled at the enclosure's control console for a moment, then another door opened from behind D'Gango while he laid naked in the dirt. He remained absolutely still as footfalls vibrated closer to him and a foul-smelling breath chuffed into his ear.

Through an intercom, Hondo said, "Benicio D'Gango! meet Rampelberg, the chimp that will bring his species into a new dawn, hardened and evolved through almighty warfare! I'm afraid I have a plane to catch, but know that I will take great pleasure in reviewing the footage of your death sometime later. And do not feel lonely—Cicero will be here with you the whole time. He'll even be the one to burn whatever parts of you Rampelberg decides not to eat for dinner."

With that, Hondo left, and Cicero assumed his position in front of the window, unblinking. The ape cooed awkwardly, ran calloused fingers through D’Gango’s hair. He didn’t dare look at the creature for fear of angering him, but he saw in Rampelberg’s other hand an automatic rifle. They were already in the process of trying to teach the chimp to use firearms.

D’Gango jolted when, through the intercom, Cicero spoke, his usual accent replaced with an American one, “Don’t be afraid of Rampelberg. He’s a good boy.”

The lock on the door disengaged and Cicero stepped in, much to the joy of Rampelberg. The chimp hopped up and down with his rifle, greeting the human. He jumped into his friend’s arms and laughed.

“Affefreund,” said Cicero, petting Rampelberg. “Liebe. Guter Affe. Gut.”

“What is this?”

“Don’t you recognize me, Benicio?”

He did not. After unshackling a confused D’Gango, Cicero peeled off a fake mustache, revealing a bald upper lip with a scar that arced from the left side of his mouth and down to his jawline. Another CIA agent, one of D’Gango’s closest allies.

“Commander Boomerang! The cipher—it was *B* for Boomerang!”

“Benicio, it’s me!”

“I thought you died in Oslo, sir. I wept for you.”

“Not quite, my friend. I was only pretending to be dead so that VIPERE would be a little less suspicious about Hondo’s new bodyguard.”

“Genius. I hope you’re not upset I didn’t recognize you. You’re a master of disguise afterall.”

“I wouldn’t be very good at my job if you did, would I?”

“But if it was you who passed the Affine Cipher to me, what about Sonia?”

“Yes,” a smooth, feminine voice said from the doorway. “What about Aarsonia Bontloden, the unassuming breeding specialist?”

She leveled the lethal end of a rifle at Boomerang with one hand, and reached the other up to her head, gripping the locks of her hair. A wig fell to the floor, and the sheen of a pristinely bald head reflected the overhead light back into the room. A tattoo of an Ouroboros ate itself just above her hairline, wrapped around like a crown.

“Another snake,” said Boomerang. “VIPERE.”

“You thought we wouldn’t be able to tell, Boomerang?” she said, tossing the bloodied scalps of both Bo Hondo and Per DuPont to the floor, a wet splat.

“You killed them both, your own comrades.”

“This was all just to get to you. Hondo was an idiot for not seeing through either of your ridiculous disguises. I knew it was you the second I saw you.”

“They’re always a step ahead,” D’Gango said, voice trembling. “How?”

“Don’t worry, Benicio,” said Boomerang. “We’ll beat her, together.”

But before they could take any action, she fired twice into Boomerang, sending him reeling back into the dirt, blood fanning through the air and spattering against D’Gango and Rampelberg. Sound was reduced to a faint ringing, ear drums disoriented from the explosions in confined space. The chimp cried, retreated to a corner with his head in his hands. D’Gango, in a desperate bid to survive, lurched at her legs, kicking them out from under her. She fell on her ass, but was on the offensive again in a matter of a mere second. She cut her nails against D’Gango’s face, then landed a right hook right into his exposed balls. He fell back to the floor and writhed in pain. Then she was on him, holding his arm with the dislocated shoulder in an arm bar. His elbow bent backward awkwardly, and he tried hard to keep her from snapping it.

“Benicio!” Boomerang called. “Catch!”

During the course of the scuffle, Boomerang had managed to bring his pants down to his ankles, aiming his asshole right at his

comrade. The muscle flexed, and with a short burst flew D’Gango’s .22 pistol, a parabola arcing across the room to its target. Reaching out with his free hand, he caught the weapon mid-air, then, with immaculate precision, shot three rounds at Sonia. She groaned and let go of his arm. D’Gango prepared for the killing blow as she scuttled back to find her weapon, but a storm of black fur and muscle suddenly erupted from out of sight with a howl—the warrior-chimpanzee, Rampelberg.

“You disgusting monkey!” she screamed, struggling.

Boomerang chuckled to himself. “You mean *ape*.”

The chimp, only a third of Sonia’s size, pinned her to the ground and dug his fingers into the soft flesh under her chin. D’Gango cringed at the sound of her skin tearing away from muscle and bone, her high-pitched wailing as Rampelberg peeled away her face until all that was left was red, bleeding meat and low whines. Her body went slack. Rampelberg beat at the air with the face as a skin-trophy in some macabre chimp victory ritual.

“Affefreund,” said Boomerang, getting up off the ground and putting his pants back on.

D’Gango caught him as she stumbled forward, weak from the new wounds. Red stains gathered at his sides where the bullets had passed through.

“You need to sit back down.”

“She’s a bad shot—*was* a bad shot,” he laughed, taking away his bloodied hands to show D’Gango the mere flesh wounds. “It still hurts like hell, though.”

D’Gango clothed himself before they made their way outside. Rampelberg followed behind, cautious. The chimp, upon stepping out of the facility and seeing the fullness of nature, froze in awe, looking at everything no matter how inconsequential with childlike wonder. The two humans waved goodbye as he stepped off into the jungle, rifle in hand.

Boomerang laid his lips on Benicio’s wounded shoulder, kissing it. Then, with a sudden jerk, put the dislocated joints back into place.

“What will he do?” asked D’Gango, gritting his teeth until the pain receded to a dull throb.

“He’s a smart boy. After years as some test subject, I can’t imagine how he must feel finally being free.”

“He’ll be alright?”

“Yeah, I think so. VIPERE’s plan for the chimps failed. They wanted to start a chimp proxy war to fuel the war economy, but they ended up starting the New Chimp Order, for better or worse. Maybe he’ll find that NCO out there somewhere—maybe they could use someone like him.”

“Time will tell.”

After a few days in a Kigoma hospital, the two agents made their way back home. Though there was never any word about Rampelberg, in the following years, East Africa saw the rise and evolution of the New Chimp Order. The formation was a rocky one, often violent, as are all revolutions, but the species had never been better divided as they were united. The once declining population came back around a decade after the mission in Gombe, and the numbers are still rising today.

But the stench of VIPERE still looms, omnipresent. Much like the development of human civilization, the emerging chimp order was designed by and for the furthering of a cynical conspiracy, so that those in power might keep their control on the ever-growing, ever-evolving machine, steering the forward march of progress wherever they deem most profitable, the grand scale of all their machinations indecipherable. In recent years, several assassinations of wealthy gourmands have been credited to the New Chimp Order, apparently in retaliation for years of poaching to appease their luxurious tastes. And now, a vocal section of the human world are calling for a swift military response to the escalations.

Lee Pearson

Lee Pearson is a writer who lives and works in Northwest Arkansas. Though he has no real credentials or accolades to speak of, he's been ineptly running a lit mag, *God's Cruel Joke*, since late 2022, and he has work published or forthcoming in *Cephalophore 3: Capitol*, *SCAB 14* and *Back Patio Press*.

Hank Eltz, the Singer

NM Whitley

Hank Eltz is a pop singer. Prior to that, he worked as a serial killer. The biggest in the biz, at one point. Nineteen victims, all in broad daylight. *The Daylight Strangler*, they called him. The news sites ate it up. *Slot* named him Best Serial Killer three years in a row. But that life is long behind him now. These days Hank deploys a sort of deadpan talking-blues patter over slow, watery-sounding beats. Like the baritone monologue that comes midway-through a 50s doo-wop ballad, and only that part, over and over. Aesthetically speaking, it's by no means uncharted territory, this no-man's-land between brazen minimalism and plain old laziness, but Hank plows it with what critics have called "singular aplomb".

Night after night Hank twirls through curtains, onto stages, resplendent in green velour tracksuit bottoms and leather jacket and dreadlock hair plugs.

Night after night, Hank Eltz does his thing.

Tonight, the concert promoter is a close-lipped goth type with a shimmering blue hex-grid tattooed all over his face. He explains the schedule. First, load in. Sound check at four. Later, Hank will fart around looking at his phone and picking at the deli tray and maybe have a nap while his bearded tour manager Adam and even-more-bearded soundman Chris strap on their plastic breathing masks and disperse to spend their per diems at the nearest fast-food establishment (Five Guys, 0.37 miles, according to Google).

Showtime is at nine.

It goes pretty okay.

Afterwards, the goth with the hex-grid face hands Adam their guarantee in an envelope and invites them out for drinks. Some hip bar in what passes for the hip part of this shithole town. Hank orders a double scotch, on the rocks. A small group gathers to pay their respects: a college boy in a plaid shirt, a sagging woman all dressed in black, a worshipful thirtysomething man with a shaved head and circle-rim glasses. They approach his spot at the bar like a shrine, lining up for Hank Eltz to dispatch them with a selfie, a perfunctory wink or nod, a gracious word between sips of booze.

Cool show, says the college boy.

Oh, Hank! the woman gushes. We saw you on your first gig! Carnival Cruiselines! My husband and I, rest his soul! Our honeymoon!

The worshipful thirtysomething takes Hank Eltz's hand with both of his.

I'm sorry to bother you, he says after a few silent seconds, but I just love love love your work. Boy howdy, that's a firm grip you got.

He shakes Hank's hand with increasing vigor, and by the time Hank clocks what's happening he's trapped, and the man is launching into a litany of names and dates and places. All nineteen victims, or nearly all.

Oh, the man laughs, and don't forget what's-his-face at the Port Authority, you choked the shit out of that guy!

Hank retracts his hand with a joyless smile and knocks back his scotch.

I don't really do that anymore, he says.

It's nearly closing time when Adam comes and introduces him to Ainsley, a girl in a paisley dress with long witchy hair who says she lives not far from here, and by that point Hank is three drinks deep and down for whatever, so they all don their breathing masks and he and Adam and Chris pile into one uber and Ainsley and her pals into another, and when they get to Ainsley's shabby little rental house, there's already plaid-shirted college boys pounding beers on the porch.

Hank Eltz is by far the oldest person at this afterparty.

In the kitchen he gets a better look at their hostess Ainsley—she's a few inches shorter than he realized and she's wearing glasses now, horn-rimmed, and a happy anarchy reveals itself behind the lenses, the eyes of a child convinced she's pulling off some clever subterfuge. Her roommate Kiersten is tall and painfully buxom. She has some hashish. The two stand around the electric eye of the stove top, proudly offering knife hits of hash.

Adam and Chris flap their beards in vain, attempting a few abortive conversational maneuvers to get into Kiersten's good

graces and/or pants, and Hank is busy smoking himself into oblivion when Ainsley in the paisley dress reaches out and touches his fake dreads. This makes him feel young and innocent although he is neither. They're the tightest dreads she's ever seen, how does he do that? He doesn't know. They do more knife hits. She is smiling at him in a way he has seen somewhere before, like she is someone he has seen before.

He is so high off the knife hits right now.

It's Kiersten who substitutes whatever Spotify playlist is on with a vinyl reissue of *Songs in the Key of Life*, dropping the needle straight onto "Ordinary Pain", and as often occurs some smartass college boy makes the same old hackneyed joke about how Stevie Wonder wore his hair that way he did 'cause he's blind and didn't know any better, har har har, and *oohhh, here we go*, Hank Eltz thinks with a drunkard's sudden surety of purpose. *Time to teach these young punks a lesson. I'm a music guy, after all. It's kind of my thing.* He sets his beer on the counter and gesticulates with strong, meaty hands. See here, he says, slurring his words, Stevie's the greatest who ever did it and if he had his eyesight, I frankly don't think he'da gave a care what his hair looked like, his mindset's, like, way far beyond that whole vanity trip, and the music plays on and Ainsley in the paisley dress gives him a quizzical look, chin resting on her fist as if waiting for him to finish but what more is there to say, and before he has the chance to even frame the subsequent thought, his bearded tour manager Adam bursts into the kitchen, face flushed dark pink, saying Hank, you gotta check out this pool table.

Adam drags him down a hall to a rec room which was obviously a back porch in a past life, now enclosed and presided by a pool table the color of red-velvet cake. Adam loves shooting pool when he's drunk. He's terrible, but Hank is worse, and Adam knows it. Lucky for Hank, the table's occupied: his even-more-bearded soundman Chris versus some Aryan-looking fashion victim: black tee, polka-dotted slacks, fluorescent orange galoshes. About a dozen pert-bodied youngsters stand around in a grey haze, drinking and vaping and running their mouths. No one lines up to idolize Hank Eltz, nor pays any mind whatsoever as he leans against the wall, nurses his drink, and begins to size up Chris's blond young opponent.

Hank feels like a garbage bag full of water and broken toys. Inside him the voice whispers again, alive with drink: *Another teachable moment.*

Nice boots, he says.

Sorry?

Said I like your boots.

Uh, congratulations? The kid poises himself, fingers of one hand spread over the burgundy felt, polka-dotted rump angled upward as Hank swaggers over and places his drink centimeters from where the kid is setting up his shot.

Say, do you have any idea who you're talking to? Hank asks, smirking.

Bro, I'm an android. My memories only go back so far.

He bangs the 6-ball into the corner pocket and pauses to trace the carom of the cue ball with his android eyes.

So, like, if it's been more than two years since you were relevant, I hate to break it to you but...

The booze and hashish twang sharply in Hank's system, and the life goes out of his smirk, all light and animation cut off behind the pasty mask.

Relevant? What's that supposed to mean, 'relevant'?

The android rests an index finger against the side of his nose.

Wait a second, he snickers. Now I recognize you.

Whatever he's got to say, Hank doesn't want to hear it. There's a rumbling in the room, like the floor's a busted subwoofer.

Let's go, man, Adam says.

But by then it's too late, and Hank Eltz's hands are already clasped around the android's neck. His arms barely tremble as they squeeze, and the harder he squeezes, the bigger the android's eyes bulge out, like two balloons inflating, moist with tears that gleam in the flash of a dozen camera phones. It's so easy. Like riding a bike! He'd done it so many times, to so many people! And they let him get away with it, hell, they'd encouraged him, and even now no one moves a muscle to stop him.

Chris bounces the butt of his pool cue against the floor. Dude, we're shooting pool here, he says.

Yeah, adds Adam. And besides, android-strangling's a Class C misdemeanor in this state, man.

Hank lets go, palms outward, fingers outstretched. The android's head makes a metallic *clonk* against the edge of the pool table on the way down.

On second thought, Hank says, I don't feel like playing pool.

The android gets up, sheepishly smooths his blonde hair, and returns to his game. In no time the amnesia of the night wipes the incident from the collective mind.

Dawn is approaching, as often occurs.

Ainsley in the paisley dress is still in the kitchen, alone, awaiting Hank's return, watching him come unsteadily down the hall. They talk. Or she talks, mostly. The anarchy in her eyes has been replaced with something Hank can't pinpoint, something sombre and prophetic. She's a college dropout, she says. Went to Brown. Doesn't believe in that reality any longer, she says. She's moved onto another life. Hank nods. She says she was studying semiotics, now she's into esoterics. Or was it vice versa? Hank has lost track somewhere. He imagines strangling her. He imagines embracing her. He imagines her silhouette reclining before him, capsizing like an ocean liner in the night, tumbling through a window into nothingness.

Her hand brushes his for an instant and his entire nervous system pings awake as if struck by a tuning fork.

Cool, he says.

She asks if he wants to take some bong hits, but this is a not-so-secret code for something else and long story short, Hank Eltz is soon naked and moving his pelvis between her large thighs. There's a lava lamp in her bedroom, working some spectral voodoo on him, and he is too stoned, too drunk, too something-else, and it is not fun, or comfortable, and afterwards they do not cuddle or watch old cartoons together.

His heart hurts.

Tell me something, she says, laying tits up and lighting up a Kool. Her voice is tired but sharp-edged. Do you like what you do?

Hank Eltz has to think about this one. He thinks about the touring, the streaming gigs, the special hell of the fund-raiser circuit during election season. It's not what he envisioned, no. Sometimes he hates it, if he's being frank. One could do worse, certainly, but that's not the truth Ainsley in the paisley dress wants from Hank Eltz, not tonight.

I've been a fool all these years, he says.

Oh?

Yeah, you know. The whole song-and-dance routine. Trying to make people forget the Daylight Strangler.

I think you'll find most folks have already forgotten.

Not me, Hank says.

He sits up like a vampire in a coffin. He should get dressed. Get back to the tour bus. Get on with his life.

Instead, he watches, silent and morose, as Ainsley puts her paisley dress back on.

The paisleys are motile amoeba crazy with life, writhing now in the lava lamp light, except the sun is rising outside and Ainsley's turned the lamp out minutes, or was it hours ago. She pauses, fingers resting lightly on the knob of her closet door, and asks, Do you want to forget? She reaches out to him, and he realizes he was mistaken earlier: she is no one he's ever seen before, and he is no one that he's ever been. This night has gone on for so long it is no longer night, and his entire life leading up to that moment is no longer his life. He rises to take her hand and follows her, bare-assed and awestruck, through the closet door.

Beyond it, a corridor spirals downward through a black void. Every few dozen paces, on either side, there are doorways with varicolored curtains. He follows her, but the dress and the amoeba move fast, so fast her hand slips from his grasp, and like a panicking child, a lost naked babe, Hank begins to cry. Snot bubbles, then bursts, from his left nostril.

It's a lot, I know, she says, slowing her pace but never stopping. Take your time, take it all in. But if you want to forget, you can forget.

I do, I want to, Hank blubbers.

She comes to a halt before a curtain chosen seemingly at random, one dark and green.

If you want this to end, it ends. Of course it ends, everything ends. And afterwards, there is always something else. Beyond this curtain, another curtain. After me, another. And another.

Hank wipes a glob of stringy mucus from his nose onto his bare thigh and nods twice. Once for understanding, once more for assent. Then he closes his eyes and twirls with utter abandon through the curtain.

When he opens his eyes, he is nude, onstage, in a vast auditorium.

Innumerable rows stretch outward and upward, a universe of seats. Faces become visible, an audience of bald heads and wizened white-haired crones staring. Hank looks at his hands, once meaty and strong, at his arms and knees and legs and sees they too are now pale and wrinkled and old, his penis and balls shriveled up tight in the chill night air. He opens his mouth to sing, acapella. His talking-blues patter is met with an uproar, with agitated handkerchiefs, with applause in wave after crashing wave.

Night after night, Hank Eltz twirls butt-naked onto this same stage.

Or the same night, over and over.

Until one night, the stage is not a stage.

It is a beach.

The auditorium is an ocean, becalmed and wavering like infinite tinfoil in the moonlight.

Hank runs to the lip of the stage, the water's edge, expecting to find himself old and unrecognizable in that tinfoil reflection, but what he sees instead can only be intuited as a face, a blank alien countenance that warps its features, remolds its shape nineteen times—victim after victim after victim—until the reflection which Hank projects upon that expressionless, flesh-colored surface is his own, as it is now, as it's always been.

Hank thrusts his hands into the water to strangle it.

The reflection breaks and splashes till he's grasping at nothing but clear, dark water. Hank lifts his gaze far off to search for what

he's lost and instead sees four bright red letters at the back and left of the auditorium, shining like a beacon: EXIT.

He wades into the ocean, towards the red light, through the curtain.

NM Whitley

N.M. Whitley is a writer, teacher, musician, and translator based in Barcelona. His work has appeared in venues such as *Seize the Press*, *JAKE*, *Propagule*, *The Café Irreal*, *Body Fluids*, and *The Barcelona Review*, among others. For more, go to linktr.ee/nmwhitley

snuff said.

Maggie Ackers

The first time I ever watched a snuff film I was eleven. Lizzy had come over to play, but by then we were getting too old for dolls or doctor. So I dragged a chair from the kitchen table and sat it next to my dad's swiveling desk chair in the computer room and fired up his work computer. A clunky yellow box with a towering console and a dial up connection.

There was a chat room I wanted to show her; I'd discovered a few days before, at midnight on a school night when I was supposed to be asleep. My favorite time to get online, the thrill of getting caught made it so exciting.

Once the page finally loaded we were bombarded with the usual messages: age, sex, location, what color are your panties? We made up our answers; pretending to be older, wiser, more beautiful. Just a few minutes later a link popped up in the chat, promising some really sick videos. We were growing bored of the perverts and decided to click over and watch one of the clips.

To this day I remember every little detail about the first person I ever saw die. He was stripped completely naked and his skin was glistening with sweat and tan. He was skinny, young, with a mop of dark curls. There was a gag in his mouth. One man pinned his arms down and another began hacking his head from his neck. When the victim let out his first muffled scream, Lizzy covered her eyes. But I kept mine open through the entire thing.

After that, Lizzy's mom said she couldn't play with me anymore. But the damage had already been done. She started wetting the bed even though she was nearly twelve. I didn't want her at my house now anyways, she reeked of piss on the daily. Besides, I had a better friend, the world wide web, and I started watching gore videos every single night.

I'd successfully given myself brain damage by the time I was thirteen. I skipped school most days, taking advantage of my parents being away at work. I'd spend the days lounging in the computer room with one of my dad's Buds and blaring the videos loud as they could go. One time the neighbors even called the cops. The noise

complaint got me grounded for three weeks. But my parents had just thought I'd been playing some of that new "screamo" shit.

All the girls I'd ever been friends with had abandoned me once I'd shown them my obsession. There was a particularly memorable incident at a sleepover that had gotten me labeled an outsider for good. The other girls didn't like the "scary movie" I'd pulled up on the desktop computer, one had even barfed all over the shag carpeting at the first sight of parted flesh.

I'd been driven home early, all alone in a minivan with one of my ex-friend's dads. It shocked me that none of the others understood; none of them appreciated this awesome thing I had brought into their lives. Snuff. That shot of dopamine I got from seeing somebody sliced into couldn't be matched. So what did it matter if no one wanted to talk to me anymore?

But by fifteen, I finally met someone who liked me just the way I was. Her name was Summer, and she moved to town sophomore year from Toronto. Her hair was white-blonde and hung down to her waist and it was love at first sight, for me at least, when she waltzed into my life and our third period English class.

The seat next to me was the only one open. There was always an empty chair, an empty lunch table, a big empty space around me. In that school I was a leper. Our teacher pointed an arthritic finger towards me, and Summer took her place by my side.

Up close, her dress was old and the stench of mothballs clung to it, like her mother had got it at a thrift store for a couple quarters. When she smiled at me, I saw one of her front teeth was crooked and overlapped the other. These were the kind of flaws the girls at our school would not overlook. So I invited her to sit at my empty lunch table, too.

Summer never flinched. We skipped class, drank beer, and watched snuff films. She floated the idea, the one that had been swimming in my Cerebrospinal fluid for years. Suddenly it was out there, hanging in the air like bong smoke. I breathed it in and let it fill me.

Summer: You ever thought about making one of your own?

Me: We should do it together.

Summer: We could get a little kid, like from the park.

Me: The two of us could take on a girl our age.

The next day at school, we set out for a victim. Icy eyes darting from locker to locker, would it be cheerleader Connie? Bedwetter Lizzy? But a stranger would be best, we decided. Some girl from the other side of town; one who went to the other school, with the metal detectors at its doors.

At lunch we scrawled lists of tools to gather, with glitter gel pens in our spiral notebooks. All the other kids happily chewed their cud, while we huddled over our untouched trays and spoke in whispers. Could we get ahold of a chainsaw? What about a power drill? Nail gun? We were enthralled, like schoolgirls planning a sweet sixteen.

When night fell, I slid my window open and clambered out, though I doubt my parents would've cared much if I'd just walked out the front door. I was lugging with me my dad's camcorder, a big heavy contraption he'd used to videotape my first ten or so birthday parties. Before he got that promotion, lost interest in me, and the camera was sequestered to the attic.

Summer was to meet me at a crossroads near her house, a little shack that sat on the far edge of town, near the scraggle of woods and all those winding, dusty backroads. She was sitting in the dirt, hair silver under the moonlight. In one hand she clutched a little orange pill bottle, the other waved at me once she saw me in the darkness.

Summer: I stole my momma's little helpers. Just in case.

Me: With drugs we could even choose a male victim.

Before this, the idea of a guy hadn't even crossed my mind. I was thrilled; my thoughts reeling. The cute boy who scoops ice cream at the Dairy Barn, or some handsome drifter with a mop of curly hair, any boy just a little too skinny that we could overpower.

She shook the bottle at me. I palmed it and slid it into the front pocket of my jeans. And we set off in silence, our preferred method of communication: the sound of our breathing and the tattoo of sneakers on pavement.

We ended up at the roller rink. It seemed every kid from the neighborhood was there that night, having been, as we were, drawn like moths to its neon lights. There were boys leaning up against the

brick facade, passing Backwoods back and forth. As we made our way inside, the young man working the skate rental caught my eye. He was checking out a pair of brownies for some little kid, and I noticed how lithe and thin his hands and arms were.

Summer had made her way to the hardwood track, watching from the sidelines as the bodies all blurred into one another, speeding around the circle. I had no idea how she was going to pick a victim out of the whirlwind. My mind was already set on the clerk: he had blonde hair like Summer's but not quite as long and he was alarmingly skinny, like the little money he made working here never went to food. In short, I thought we could take him.

Hoisting the camcorder onto my shoulder, I fired it up. I framed Summer in the crosshairs, her back was towards me, and called out for her to smile. And as she turned around she did, her crooked teeth immortalized on cassette tape. One that I would watch and rewind and watch again for years to come.

Me: We should rent skates.

Summer: We're gonna skate?

Me: I thought we'd flirt with the employee.

At this, I panned the camera towards him, slowly. My lens first took in a group of girls whizzing by in pristine white roller skates, a young couple strolling through the building holding hands, before finally landing on my true target. I only recorded him a few moments, handing back some change, before turning the camera back to Summer.

Me: What do you think?

Summer: Since when do you like blonds?

Me: It's a recent development.

I shut the camera off, lowered it, and with my free hand gripped Summer's wrist. We weaved through the crowd like predators. I had tunnel vision for him; I wanted to sink my teeth into his jugular. I needed to sever his fingers and suck out all his nerve endings, like sucking the meat from crawdads.

We got Summer a pair of skates. I paid the three dollars, because in all the time I knew her, she never had a buck. Up close I could see his little plastic name tag: Joseph. Regret flooded me instantly after

reading it. Summer sat off to the side and laced up her quads; while I leaned against the counter and started hitting on him, hard.

I would take on the bulk of the flirting; Summer wasn't ugly, but still I was the prettier one. Only because my mother bought me lots of make-up and clothes from the mall to help me "fit in better." It hadn't ever worked, up until that night. For some reason, Joseph couldn't tell I was broken in the head and blood thirsty. He only saw a cute young girl with an equally willing girlfriend, and agreed to come back to my place after his shift.

For the next twenty or so minutes I taped Summer going around the track. She was quite a natural at skating, and she only fell once: hard and on her knees. When she got back to her feet, I killed the camera. We spent the remainder of the night at the concessions stand, sharing a saccharine fruit punch flavored soda. An hour passed before Joseph was in front of us, shrugging on a jacket and leading us to his car.

We wanted to get him back to my place, crush the valium into a cold beer and get him to go to sleep. We wanted to be the ones inflicting pain that night, but as soon as we piled into that two door pickup truck, he locked the doors. And like that we no longer had any upper hand. Our naivete was our downfall. In the real world, girls weren't strong enough to overpower boys.

He drove us far outside of town, where running would be that much harder. Once we'd all piled out of the truck, he snapped Summer's ankle with genuine ease, the steel toe of his boot coming down hard on the cluster of bones. She hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. I didn't even have time to fire up the camera again. In a flash he was on top of her, and I had to act quickly before he did something.

I hit him over the head with the closest weapon available, the one I had in my hands: my big, heavy camcorder. The first slam against his temple knocked him off of Summer and off balance. The next was to make sure he didn't stand back up. With the third I felt his skull cave in, and the blood poured out in a black pool beneath the bone fragments, gray matter, and hair. Summer was screaming the entire time.

Me: This isn't how it's supposed to be.

After that night Summer didn't talk to me again. By the time we were sixteen, I was more alone than ever. At nightfall, I would watch Summer through her bedroom window instead of staying at home on the computer. And while hiding in her bushes, I saw Summer slit her wrists. I only wish I'd had my camera.

Maggie Ackers

Maggie Ackers is a writer of horror and transgressive fiction. Her work is an exploration of womanhood, shedding light on the bleakest aspects of life experienced from a distinctly female perspective.

Prufrock Blows His Load

Jon Doughboy

Let us go, my dog says, in a slobbering whisper, greet the dawn when its golden ass has just cracked, (white space here said crack):

Her unsilent claws scuttling the wood floors ragged, scuttle, scuttle, an urgent need to shit turtleheading in her whine. But I won't go until I come. *Je refuse*. The bank counter must wait, the customers, the stock markets—wait.

Morning wood business. A long and wild pissssssssssssssssssssssss that leads to my bowl and anyhoo my trousers aren't trousers, they're drawstring chinos I bought off musclebound superyacht Bezos for a cool \$17.95. But they roll,

boy,

they roll on

down

easy and lie at my ankles like molted khaki pandemic-fattened clerk snakeskin.

Good morning, I say, watching Angela White flash to digital life as she completes acrobatic wonders on a stranger's dick, spinning on this cock,

around

and

around

and

around

with the greatest of ease, a daring performer swinging from the pornographers' trapeze. No light brown hair downed anywhere, asshole bleached by the best cosmetologist in Porn Valley, tits melon perfect.

She gave her appendix for her art, this woman. And what can I give in return, me, a sleepy, lonely Lazarus?

The deed is done.

The tissue crumpled.

A life, crumpling.

Clawing at the door, my dog whines still, louder, a canine soprano belting out an aria for impending excrement, singing just for me.

Jon Doughboy

Jon Doughboy is the author of the award-winning erotic thriller “Ding Dongus” which Brazzers Books hailed as “the wettest reading experience of my life.” When he’s not polishing his multiple Pulitzers, he writes fanfiction about a torrid Wolverine-Cyclops-Magneto love triangle. Read about these Uncanny Sexmen and their mutated dicks @doughboywrites

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badfuta, *blue*, oil on canvas, 2023

badfuta

Badfuta is a self-taught trans artist residing in the United States. She has been published in Blood Orange Review, Grim & Gilded, Paper Dragon, Tint Journal, Red Noise Collective, Quible.Lit, Months to Years, Assignment Literary Magazine and Flyway Journal.

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Posing With Your Own Tombstone

GRSTALT Comms

I drive around because I'm hungry – the car isn't mine, I don't know whose it is, but it's always there with a full tank, the doors unlocked, the key in the ignition.

I don't want to talk to the drive-thru voice, the sound of their mangled voice coming out of the penguin-shaped speaker makes me feel like I'm about to black out.

I wait for the cars to thin out, then I go across the parking lot and dodge the lights. It's blinding inside, I put on my shades and push my trolley down the empty aisles.

I buy all the worst shit they have – the food they push on kids to soften their developing brains, the beer drunk exclusively by the wretched, the desperate, the defeated.

I stop and stare at an animated squirrel kicking a giant nut like a soccer ball.

I rub it all against the scanner and feel a tingle like the early signs of stroke, a beautiful debilitating stroke – it's been almost six years since I touched another human being, since I died, the smell of decay coming off me keeps everyone at a comfortable distance.

I sit in the car and devour my purchases – this is all people really want, to snap bones and feel the grease between their fingers, a little battery body reared in agony for your pleasure, tortured to perfection, makes you feel almost like everything is yours and it all works perfectly.

The beer does nothing to me, it's the gesture of moving it to my mouth that makes me feel.

I knock back a couple of pills – they're my dad's, that weak-ass piece of shit, barely even a man now, so pathetic to see him turn into such a helpless little fagit loser, having to be rolled over by those bitches they send every morning to change his diaper, the legs that used to kick me around withered to these brittle stumps I fantasize about snapping when I see them dangling off the edge of the bed – karma's bullshit but withdrawal's real so sample some of that.

But the fucker will be dead soon and I envy him. He'll be laughing at me in the ground.

I've watched a car come off the road and flip over, a woman running down the street and crying with a bloody mouth – I never stop, I listen to the voices complaining that their entertainment isn't for them anymore, the galaxy encompasses too much now, their team isn't winning.

I drive past the house I used to share with this queer who worked with me at Taco Burro – an endless parade of trade, he'd come in while I was watching TV to tell me with that shit-eating grin how that one was a real fucking gagger, covered his junk in their throat slime.

My stomach starts to growl so I stop at the leisure park off the expressway – I take a pic in the bathroom mirror, proof of not-life, I got the tattoos when my skin was elastic, now it's grey and stiff. I can hardly make out what they were supposed to be, they're just cracked and shriveled blemishes, I don't remember why I wanted to make any of it last as long as skin does.

Every shit I take is painful now, I force out a jagged block the color of a ripe avocado.

I walk past the Taco Burro where I worked. I look inside but don't recognize anyone – we made a fucking ton selling coke out the back, then I got caught taking a nap in the break room.

Someone's having a birthday party, there's a balloon 1 and a balloon 6 – nothing so fucking sad, thank Christ I don't have to do that anymore, is that what having friends is like now?

It's amazing how fast this car goes, moves so quietly, barely noticeable. I breeze past trucks and Humvees and I wonder if this is the one I'll make contact with. Are we going to be merged eternally in the wreckage of what was a premium-performance piece of engineering?

I know it doesn't matter because nothing's going to let me out, nobody gets off that easy, definitely not the great undead shitheel – the six-year-old who got molested by his twelve-year-old cousin, the nine-year-old who OD'd on Mom's Lexapro, the deadbeat dad, the grown-ass son sleeping on his dad's couch so he can steal his meds, the one who flunked out of hell.

They sent me to a therapist once. When I told him I didn't feel human, he just gave me a bunch of breathing exercises and asked me to start doing a journal – like writing solves anything. He talked over me the whole time and said I didn't have any real passions in life when I told him what I liked doing – I think getting wild dome is a pretty good passion to have actually. I mean, at least *pretend* to give a shit about me. Stop acting like you've figured everything out – we all know that if you think about it for five minutes there's no point in caring about anything.

I text my ex, even though I know it won't get sent – I tell her I'm sorry for being such a piece of shit, I was scared and I pushed her and the kid away, it's too late but I wish it wasn't.

I try to think about being with her – bending her over the couch, blowing me in the park – but nothing's bringing my flaccid cock to life, I scream at the dried out grey slug slumped across my zipper, then lube it up with my tears, try to revive it, but it seems to retreat inside me more with every yank, like it's ashamed to be seen in public with such a weeping retard fagit.

When I ran out the hospital – I still owe those fuckers three grand, but it's not like I'll ever be going back, makes you wonder how many stiffs go missing – I went straight to her, but she was already gone, staying with family who said they'd slit my throat (literally) if I showed up.

All the horrible things I've seen are waiting for me in my sleep, all the mutants are there, sharpening their blades, swinging their clubs, ready to get my grease between their fingers.

I take a couple more pills. My phone starts to ring. It's My Beautiful Wife. My Beautiful Wife asks me how my day has been. I fill My Beautiful Wife in on everything that happened in the office that day. My Beautiful Wife tells me that she loves me and I say it back. I pull the car into the driveway of a nice suburban house with a large front yard full of toys. I go inside and smell the cooking. My Brilliant Son is sitting at the kitchen table while My Beautiful Wife makes our dinner. I tell My Brilliant Son to set the table, kick off my shoes and fix myself a drink.

I think I've finally made it there, a dead possum in the road getting torn to pieces by trucks delivering treats and SUVs full of fat families on their way to purchase them, all the irony and violence

and lethargy and regret floats away, I settle into a warm blanket of darkness.

I think I'm finally dying. Like, physically. Goodbye forever. You fucking suck.

It's actually pretty nice, like all kinds of currents passing through your soul, or whatever it is.

But when I look up from my glass, the faces of My Beautiful Wife and My Brilliant Son have morphed into cartoonish laughing mutants. Dinner smells rotten and the cutlery is on the floor. I stare into My Beautiful Wife's gorgeous murdering eyes and I know I'm free.

I squat on the strip of fresh dirt for a selfie – Here Lies a Real Fucking Asshole: All-Purpose Addict, Five-Tool Fuckup, Just Wanted Something He Could Put His Energy Into.

I hit my head against the wheel and the horn goes off. I look around – expecting to see smashed glass, crumpled steel, mangled bodies – but the car is back where I always find it.

A voice echoes through the parking garage. I get out and see a man wearing a red waistcoat and a red bow tie. He says, 'What the fuck, dude? We're backed up. Get down there!'

I look down and I'm wearing a red waist coat. I reach for my collar and there it is.

GRSTALT Comms

GRSTALT offer literary content for dead readers.

GRSTALT are partners in a global initiative to erase the author.

The GRSTALT project is neither a machine thing or a human thing, but something else.

<https://linktr.ee/grstaltcomms>

WORLD'S WORST ORGY

j ambrose

EVERY HOUSE PARTY IS THE SAME: SHITTY MUSIC, SHITTY BOOZE, SWEATY BODIES, KIDS GREENING, BROWNING, BLACKING OUT FOR THEIR FIRST TIME, FIRST TIMES, THE OVERWHELMING STENCH OF LIVES GOING DOWNHILL FROM HERE. JUST ANOTHER STROBE LIT PIT STOP ON THE WAY DOWN. YOU GO BECAUSE IT'S HUMAN NATURE TO SUFFER. YOU ARE ALONE AND ALREADY SUFFERING. BETTER TO SUFFER IN INSUFFERABLE COMPANY.

THIS ONE IS DIFFERENT. PORN PLAYS ON EVERY SCREEN. BLOWJOBS ON TV AND MMF THREESOMES PROJECTED ONTO BARE WALLS. FACES BECOME BACKDROPS FOR BACK SHOTS. MOANS AND WHIMPERS AND SCREAMS REPLACE MUSIC IN EVERY SPEAKER. NOBODY SEEMS TO MIND. NOBODY TOUCHES THEMSELVES.

YOU'RE GOING CRAZY. YOU WANT TO TAKE TWO BUMPS AND PASS OUT ON THE COUCH, SANDWICHED BETWEEN UNLOVING STRANGERS. A DIFFERENT KIND OF CRAZY. THE NORMAL KIND. FRAT BOYS CHOKING RED SOLO CUPS MAKE EMPTY SEXY SMALL TALK WHILE YOUR SOBER WIDE EYES TARGET THE OBSCENITY, WAITING FOR A SOUL TO POINT OUT THE OBVIOUS. SOMEONE ORGASMS AND IT'S NOT YOU. FRAT PLEDGE JERRY WANTS TO MAKE YOU HIS.

LIKE THAT GANGBANGED GIRL TELEVISED OVER THE FIREPLACE?

FRAT PLEDGE JERRY DOESN'T ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR PERTINENT QUESTION. MAYBE THE SURROUND SOUND PLEASURE DROWNED YOU OUT.

ARE YOU GONNA SLIP SOMETHING IN MY DRINK TO LET ALL YOUR BOYS HAVE THEIR SIMULTANEOUS WAYS WITH ME? HAVE I ALREADY TAKEN SOMETHING?

ARE YOU A VIRGIN?

ISN'T EVERYONE HERE THE PLATONIC IDEAL OF CHASTITY? BLESSED WITH AN IMPERVIOUSNESS TO LUST THAT WOULD MAKE A NUN SIGH? YOU WITNESS THREE SOPHOMORES BEAR WITNESS TO BONDAGE THAT INSPIRES NO YEARNINGS. HOW DARE THEY.

CLOTHED BODIES BECOME VULGAR IN THE FACE OF FREE FLESH AND CUM-GLAZED FACES. ALTARS CONSTRUCTED TO BE ABANDONED BY WORSHIPPERS. YOU ARE HOT BENEATH YOUR SHIRT, SWEAT YOUR ONLY WETNESS. YOU WANT TO TAKE SOMETHING, ANYTHING TO SEE WHAT EVERYONE DOESN'T. YOU WANT TO PLUMMET DOWNHILL, IF ONLY TO FORCE ONLOOKERS TO RECKON WITH GRAVITY.

WHEN FRAT PLEDGE JERRY FAILS TO UNDRRESS YOU FAST ENOUGH, YOU DO IT FOR HIM WITH A VICIOUSNESS. BEER PONG KITCHEN ISLAND BECOMES A PEDESTAL FOR YOUR NUDITY, BURSTING FORTH INTO REALITY FROM ELECTRONIC PRISONS. MORE NONCHALANCE GREETES YOUR EXPOSED ASS. EYES SLIDE AWAY IN SUCH A MANNER AVOIDING PURPOSEFUL AVOIDANCE. YOU HAVE MADE YOURSELF UNREAL. HANDS GRASP FOR A FACE, SOMETHING THAT WILL GAZE UPON YOUR EVERY HOLE, BUT THE BEER PONGER ENTHUSIASTS HAVE ALREADY RECONVENED ELSEWHERE. THE NIGHT'S FESTIVITIES CONTINUE UNIMPEDED.

FROM YOUR GRANITE PERCH YOU WATCH A WOMAN IN YOUR POSITION BECOME A CHINESE FINGER TRAP FOR TWO THROBBING DICKS. NOBODY OFFERS YOU SUCH AN EXPERIENCE. YOU ARE DRY, UNAROUSED, YET WANT IT JUST TO SHATTER THE BLANDNESS. IT CONTINUES TO BE WHOLE FOR HOURS AND HOURS ON END. GUESTS MINGLE AROUND YOU. YOUR BACK ACHES AND YOU SLUMP FORWARD PRONE, STILL UNTAKEN ADVANTAGE OF BY EVEN THE DRUNKEST OF GUESTS. YOUR HYMEN REGROWS SEVENFOLD.

THE HOST SHOOS YOU AWAY AS THE CLOCK STRIKES WITCHING HOUR, UNINTERESTED IN YOUR HEARTFELT SEDUCTIONS, PLEAS TO WATCH FOUR GIRLS SCISSOR TO COMPLETION AND DISCOVER INFINITE HORNINESS IN THEIR FAKE ORGASMS. ITS APPEAL IS LOST ON YOU TOO NOW. EMPTY SIMULACRUM. SET DRESSINGS. YOUR FINGERS SILENTLY AND LISTLESSLY FUCK YOUR CUNT IN THE DARKNESS OF YOUR BEDROOM. YOU PRAY FOR A HANGOVER. FOR ALL THIS TO BE A HANGOVER.

IN THE MORNING: ONE TEXT FROM FRAT PLEDGE JERRY READS

YOU'RE A FREAKY CUNT. I LIKE THAT. COME AROUND AGAIN SOMETIME.

j ambrose

j ambrose writes weird, queer, and filthy stories and poetry. It is an agender creature and professional college drop-out who finds the juiciest inspiration in all working of the flesh, both human and otherwise. You can find some of his many sacrileges in Vast Chasm Magazine, Strange Horizons, and Hungry Shadow Press, or the dreaded thing itself on Tumblr @caninebrainz or its website <https://caninebrainz.neocities.org/>