

Bartleby Snopes



A Literary Magazine of Fiction

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Editor: Nathaniel Tower

Bartleby Snopes publishes stories monthly on the web, and semi-annually in magazine format.

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For more information about our contributors, please visit the Archive section of our website. If you would like to contact one of our authors, please let us know.

Editor's Note

The fifth issue of *Bartleby Snopes* is packed full of great stories, including the debut appearances of our Dialogue Contest winners. Our contest winner, Annam Manthiram, demonstrated the importance of persistence in the world of writing; her winning entry was her sixth submission to the contest. A big thanks to our guest judges Kevin Dickinson (*Writers' Bloc Magazine*) and Rae Bryant (*Moon Milk Review*) for their help in selecting the winners. Thank you also to all of our entrants; we received over 200 entries, allowing us to award a pretty hefty sum of money. Giving away \$1000 to our winners was quite satisfying. While we wish we could always pay our writers, we pride ourselves mostly in providing a space for great writers to share their words with the world. We hope you enjoy their words as much as we did.

Why Won't You by Annam Manthiram

Why won't you let us make love to you, just once?"

"I've told you before, you're not my type."

"We suppose your type is tall, dark, and handsome?"

"Perhaps."

"But we took you in, we gave you shelter."

"Had I known what you were after, I would never have come here."

"We work hard, everyday in precarious conditions, just for you."

"I work hard, everyday, keeping this house clean."

"Why won't you let us? Just one time?"

"No."

"He says we should force ourselves on you."

"That would not be very nice, would it?"

"But he thinks *you* aren't being very nice. To us. We let you stay here. Even though you act as though you own the place."

"I cook for you and clean for you."

"What if we took turns? Each of us on a different day? That way, it would not overwhelm you."

"No."

"You could choose just one of us then."

"No."

"Or maybe two of us."

"No."

"We could shave our beards, so that they wouldn't tickle you?"

"No."

"Achoo."

"You really should do something about that sneeze."

"Don't change the subject. We have needs."

"Why can't you find women that are more suited to you?"

"There aren't many single women in these woods. You are the first."

"I see."

"Our hands are small and soft, our privates malleable."

"I know."

"We are nimble and agile. Don't let our potbellies fool you."

"I have suggested that you exercise."

"And if we do? Will you then?"

"Have you ever made love before?"

"We are unsure."

"What do you mean?"

"We have made love to ourselves."

"That doesn't count."

"We have had to make do. It has been lonely here, that is, until you came."

"And what if you are terrible in bed?"

"We guarantee that we will not be."

"How can you guarantee me something that you have never done?"

"We will offer collateral."

"What kind of collateral?"

"We could bring you pieces from our work."

"How many?"

"One for every lay."

"Where will we do it?"

"On the bed."

"I won't fit on the bed."

"We can spread a blanket on the floor and do it there. Or outside. Among the animals."

"No, not among the animals."

"Are you accepting our proposal then?"

"But you are all so.... short."

"We would not have taken you to be so superficial."

"I'm not, but there is a question of how it will be done."

"Height does not matter when we are lying on top of one another."

"But I am not attracted to you in that way."

"Sex is just a physical act. We are not asking for your hand in marriage. Just some bumping and grinding."

"Will you stop asking me if I do it just one time?"

"But one time with each of us. Then only will it be fair."

"But there are so many of you."

"Seven, but it doesn't have to be all at once. A few at a time, or one each day. We are open-minded."

"This is not the way I imagined losing my virginity."

"It will be better. Think of our combined appendages. Together, we are more formidable than any prince."

"I suppose."

"Well?"

"Fine. Bring me the diamonds tomorrow. We'll go two at a time."

"Perfect. Miss White, you won't regret it."

Editor's Note

Why Won't You finished first place in our Second Annual Dialogue Only Contest. It was a bit of a surprise win, but as guest judge Kevin Dickinson put it: *"How this story made it through to the top eight was at first bewildering to me, as its preponderance of borderline-offensive sexual suggestiveness had nearly overmastered my better judgment. However, as the curtain rose gradually on a scene of seven rosy-palmed dwarfs (as Disney insists on spelling it), I recognized this as the winner it deserves to be. The diamonds are the clincher."*



Roses © Gina Kim

Cowboyism by Don Hucks

So John, I'm not trying to start an argument – really – but I don't see how we can possibly keep this horse any longer.

But why, Sharon? What have you got against Hammer?

I don't have anything *against* him. It's nothing personal.

What is it, then?

Well, for starters, we're bound to get evicted. You can only keep a thing like that a secret so long. I'm sure the people downstairs know we've got a horse up here. The only reason they haven't complained is because they know we know they're dealing weed.

Dadgum right we do, and I reckon them hombres better not raise a ruckus, if they know what's good for 'em.

And you can't keep riding that thing to work. You're going to get killed on the freeway.

You're being melodramatic. It's only two exits.

Seriously, John. This is ridiculous. Surely you can see that this is ridiculous. Please tell me you haven't lost your famous appreciation for the ridiculous.

But Sharon... I'm a cowboy. It's not as if I can just... I don't know, click my spurs together three times and when I wake up tomorrow morning I'll have been transformed into a farmer... or an air traffic controller... or a high level cabinet minister to the President of France.

You're a technical writer, John.

That's what I *do*, it's not what I *am*. Our vocations need not define us, okay? I'm a cowboy who just happens to write assembly manuals for an office furniture distributor.

I know that, John, but there's a nasty rumor you're a technical writer who bought a horse and took to sprinkling his speech with colorful colloquialisms.

I don't want to quibble about ontology. And just to be accurate, I didn't *buy* Hammer, I won him in a game of seven card stud.

Couldn't you just lease a convertible? Like other men do? When they reach a certain age?

It's not a midlife crisis, for godsake. The way I see it, I've *always* been a cowboy. It's not something new. It's not something I just... dreamed up. It's more like... let's say, a reality to which I've finally awakened. You see, Cowboyism is a state of mind. The horse is but the outward manifestation of what we might call the cowboy mode of being.

I see. Well then, if that's the case, you can still be a cowboy *without a horse* – right? – so there's really no reason to keep it.

Boy-howdy, if you ain't slicker'n a greased-up salamander on teflon ice skates...

You know, John, you really don't do folksy very well.

Unfortunately, though, there's a flaw in your argument. See, the horse is not just *any old* outward manifestation. The horse is a singularity. It's the seminal projection of the cowboy *qua cowboy* into the visible world. The chaps, the spurs, even the six-shooters are mere trappings. Hell, I could even give up the hat – hypothetically speaking. But the horse is an altogether different proposition. The horse is an affirmation. The taking of a horse establishes an organic connection between the inner and outer worlds, manifesting a complete teleological restructuring of the real, such that all former beings – e.g., technical writer... mass transit patron... early-middle post-neo-romantic – are subsumed as antithetical prelude to a *de novo* becoming. Leastways that's how I reckon it.

This is just like the time you wanted to be William Blake.

I wasn't trying to be William Blake. Don't be rid—. Don't be absurd.

Do you remember how well *that* went, John? How it almost cost you your job?

Listen, John, I've been reading through your latest draft of the Stratford credenza text.... You know how I adore your syntax.

Thanks, Carrie.

The first three steps are terrific, but I'm having a little trouble, beginning with step four.

Okay.

Where was it?... Yeah yeah, here it is. 'Step four: Insert dowel *h* into hole *t*. Insert it deep, deep as the pit of your shame, all the while twisting, gentle as the long-awaited blade.'

Let me see that.... Yeah, that's correct. See? Step four is where we place the dowel that delimits the arc of the door we'll attach in step five.

Right. Sure. Let me clarify: The technical details are perfect. My concern, John, has more to do with, well... the style.

The style? What's wrong with the style?

How about the fact that we're even discussing style in connection with a set of instructions for assembling a credenza?

But who says an instruction manual can't be technically accurate *and* easy on the ear? I mean, why shouldn't the same aesthetics that apply to poetry apply to instructional pamphlets?

I'm not sure people want poetry when they're trying to...

Technically, it isn't poetry. It's stylized prose. I was just being rhetorical, mentioning poetry.

Right. I'm not sure people are looking for stylized prose when they're assembling a credenza.

And who decided assembly manuals should only be read by people who are trying to build something? That kind of places an arbitrary limit on the audience, doesn't it? I mean, why does everything have to be so obvious? So linear? So stinking utilitarian?

Listen, John. It's not that I don't share your appreciation for sensual linguistics. It's just that I think you're undervaluing a subtler aesthetic, which the best of your earlier work so plainly epitomizes. Take statement three. It's classic John Oberman. Have you actually read it aloud? No? Listen: 'Insert bolt *d* into socket *p* and, using the hex head wrench provided, tighten until snug – taking care to avoid *over*-tightening – and repeat with bolts *e, f, g* at sockets *q, r, s.*' Holy shit, John. It's a goddamn masterpiece of brevity and precision. Most writers would have broken that passage into at least three sentences. And those italics? What a flourish! And, as always, your comma placement is exquisite. I'm not going to tell you what they say about a man who knows how to use commas, but your poor wife must be exhausted.

Well, she used to be, but now she takes ginseng tablets and buys green tea by the gallon.

I'll just bet she does, Johnny. I'll just bet... she... *does*.

Vaguely. But really, Sharon, I hardly think it's the same.

Here's the thing, John: the city's no place for a horse.

Police horses live in the city, and they even ride them downtown, for crowd control and whatnot.

Those aren't *real* horses, John. They brainwash them into hardcore little fascist fuckers who'd stomp your face in for an extra lump of sugar. And anyway, I'm sure they don't keep them in studio apartments. The country, John. That's where a *real* horse should be. A farm. A ranch. Horses are rural folk, for christsake. The city's an affront to their whole value system, what with its pluralism and tolerance and situational ethics – and that's just the traffic.

Umm, y-y-y-e-e-ah, I don't know.

I'll tell you what, Johnny dear. I'll make you a deal. This weekend let's start looking around for Hammer a nice quiet home in the country. And if you'll do this one little thing for me... you can keep the hat. And the boots. And you can even keep the spurs and the chaps.

What about the lasso?

Especially the lasso. And do you know what else?

What?

Every Saturday night – for as long as you want to, Johnny – we can play rodeo star and dance hall girl. Just the two of us. Just you and me.

I'm pretty sure those wild west dance hall girls were prostitutes.

Alright then. How about rodeo star... and honky tonk tramp?

Don't you mean... the purtiest little honky tonk tramp in Texas?

Nothin' but.

Well, if that ain't right nice...

You see, Johnny sweetheart, the taking of a honky tonk tramp establishes an organic connection between the inner and outer worlds. It gives rise to a teleological restructuring of your seminal projection.

Damn. That's powerful slutty.

You ain't seen nothin' yet, cowboy.

Well then, Miss, I sure enough reckon you're pert nigh to closin' that there deal, and if you'd be willin' to throw in the occasional... Oh, Hammer.... Hi there, boy. I didn't hear you walk in.... How long have you been...

John, I don't think he can...

Oh yeah, right.... Nevermind, boy. Just tap your hoof three times if you heard what Sharon and I were talking about just now....

Editor's Note

Cowboyism finished second in our Second Annual Dialogue Only Contest. As guest judge Rae Bryant puts it: "*Fun, witty, this is a playfully layered satire that is easy on the palate.*"

Thank you for calling Happy Trolls Customer Service Support. This is Maria, how can I assist you today?...Oh, I see. So you bought a troll for your son because he needed protection from bullies, is that correct?...Alright, ma'am I've pulled up your account. It says you purchased the KBA-7000, with optional eight-inch fangs and chronic halitosis. Our records indicate you also added some accessories--a loin cloth and a spiked club....Oh, well, yes. A lot of new customers make that mistake...Yes, I'm sure having a seven-foot, naked troll in your home would be very disconcerting...Okay, so what seems to be the trouble?...Hmmm. Really? Now that is odd. You say the troll isn't protecting your son from the mean kids at school and spends all its time trying to eat your gardenias?...Well, they are primarily meat eaters but it happens on occasion--very rare, though, you understand. Did you try communicating with it? Interaction is very important. Trolls aren't the brightest creatures, but they...What? It starts to cry whenever you approach it?...And it seems to be afraid of...What?...Butterflies?...No, that isn't normal at all. Well, I certainly do apologize for all the trouble you've had. All of our trolls come with guarantee and a ninety-day return policy. Would you like to exchange the troll for another?...Ok, ok...that would be fine..Sure, a large wooden crate is fine. Just make sure it's big enough for the troll to move around. And holes would be a good idea too...Holes? So it can breathe, ma'am...Yes, we'll send you your replacement troll within two days of receiving the old one....It will take seven to ten business days to arrive...Alright. Thank you so much...It was my pleasure...Have a good day and remember that at Happy Trolls Incorporated we strive to provide you with....Uh... Hello?...."

"Got hung up on again, eh Maria?"

"Yeah, it's okay. I'm used to it."

"Still, it's amazing how rude people can be. I just got done with a man who spent the last twenty minutes screaming in my ear. Apparently, the troll he ordered ransacked his home while he was out grocery shopping--tried to eat his cat, too."

"Was it wearing the control harness?"

"What do you think? Of course, I tried to explain that we weren't liable for any damages and that he was not due a refund because he neglected to properly subdue his troll per the manufacturer's instructions..."

"I guess he didn't take it well?"

"Hmmp! That's an understatement. Seriously, why can't these people just read the manual? I mean, the trolls all come with instruction manuals. It says in big,bold letters that the troll **MUST** have a control harness on at all times...that without one, it is a vile and vicious beast intent on wreaking havoc and.... Oh well, I don't have to tell you of course."

" I don't know. It seems like people want the convenience of a troll with none of the responsibility that comes with it."

"Heh...ain't that the truth? Oh, hang on Maria, I got a call coming through. Thanks for calling Happy Trolls Customer Service Support. My name is Janine. How can I help you?....Please calm down, sir. Tell me what the problem is and I will do everything I can to help....Sir? Sir, if you don't stop screaming at me I won't be able to assist you properly...Thank you. Now, can you please explain the issue you are currently having with your troll?....Hmmm. Locked you out of your apartment, you say? Did you try using your key to open the door?....Ah, I see. So the troll just stands in the doorway and refuses to let you pass....A what? A toll? Hmmm. You mean it's demanding a toll from you?....Really? So how much does it want?...Wow, that is a lot of money...Yes, I can understand why you're upset. However, this type of behavior is very common among



Bridge Trolls...A Bridge Troll, sir. They usually live under bridges and demand a fee from anyone who attempts to cross. Luckily you do have options with these kind. You can pay the toll. You can demand the opportunity to solve its riddle. Or, you can take your chances, run across, and hope the troll doesn't catch you..Yes, I suppose in your case that would be hard to do...Maybe you should opt for the

riddle--usually they give you three tries to answer correctly...Well, trolls aren't known for their intelligence. But as far as Bridge Trolls are concerned--let's just say that they have a knack for that sort of thing. The riddle could be tough. Still, you won't know unless you try.....What happens if you fail? That depends on the troll, sir. It may try to eat you. Or it might simply refuse to let you in. Every troll is unique... Did you try bonding with your troll when it first arrived? Bridge Trolls are much less likely to exact fees from anyone they consider a friend or ally....Well, sir all of that information was included with the troll when it was shipped to you....Yes sir. Instructions on proper care and maintenance of your troll can be found on page 346 of the instruction manual...No sir, I am sorry but in this case you are not eligible for a refund...Sir, your account shows

that you specifically requested the PYF-55 Bridge Troll model. I am sorry if you are unhappy with your purchase, but the item is not damaged or malfunctioning in any way and....Sir, please stop yelling at me...I understand you're upset but you are responsible for reading the manual...I'm sorry? You didn't realize you were getting a Bridge Troll? Sir, it shows here that you purchased the troll from our website....So? So, every troll available for online purchase has a picture and a brief description attached. The website clearly states the nature and function of each troll...I am sorry, sir, but I cannot issue a refund. Perhaps you should try to make friends with it. Trolls seem to be very fond of beef jerky and...Hello?...Hello?"

"Wow, Janine. That guy sounded like a real jerk! I could hear him yelling through your headpiece."

"Well, it's his fault for not reading up on the subject. I mean....a Bridge Troll? Seriously? The guy lives on the third floor of an apartment building. What an idiot!"

"Say, Janine...you ever think about getting one? A troll I mean."

"Nah. I can't stand the things. They're ugly. And stupid. Not to mention a pain in the butt to house train. Just the thought of coming home to a big pile of troll pooh... Ick! Besides, the association won't let us have trolls where I live. What about you, Maria? You ever think of buying a troll? You know we get a twenty percent discount, right?"

"Yeah, I know. I actually bought one a few years ago."

"Really? So how'd it work out?"

"It didn't. I had to get rid of it."

"What happened?"

"Well, first it attacked my furniture. I came home one night to find the stuffing in my couch all over the living room floor and two of my lamps broken. Then, for some reason it developed a fondness for the trash. Stupid thing was constantly ripping the bags open and rolling around in it. You have no idea how bad the smell was! Did you know that a troll will start to go moldy after a while? It's true. I practically begged it to take a bath."

"And did it?"

"Nope. It wouldn't even look at a bar of soap."

"Geez, that's rough."

"Tell me about it. Between the fleas in its beard and the food gone rancid between its teeth...Oh, and did I mention it had a chronic flatulence issue? It farted all day long. I'm not kidding. It actually woke up with a fart and didn't stop until it fell asleep again that night. I must have gone through a million cans of air freshener! Wouldn't be surprised if I've suffered mild brain damage because of all the toxic fumes I was forced to breathe in."

"So you finally got sick of the whole thing and sent it back?"

"Pretty much. But that really isn't the worst of it."

"Oh? Sounds pretty bad to me. What could possibly be worse than that?"

"The troll fell in love with me."

"It what?!!"

"Yeah. Kind of embarrassing. It would follow me around...reciting this awful troll poetry. It even tried to throw me over its shoulder a couple of times and carry me off..."

"Really?"

"Mmm-hmm. But of course I always managed to get away. Nothing like a good smack on the nose to let a troll know you mean business. Anyway, the last straw was when it tried to eat my boyfriend. The troll saw us hugging and got jealous, I guess."

"Your troll tried to eat Anthony? Was he hurt?"

"Oh, he was fine. I think his ego was a little bruised, though. It's kinda hard to look cool and dignified when you're covered in troll slobber, you know? But, anyway, that was it. I had the troll returned the next day. This was all before control harnesses were available, you see. Now they're standard issue for every troll. Back then--not so much."

"Well, Maria...If I thought I didn't want a troll before--I am absolutely sure of it now! Hey, it's almost five o'clock. You wanna grab something to eat when we're done?"

"Sounds great. Just let me disconnect my headset before another....aww crap!...Thank you for calling Happy Trolls Customer Service Support. My name is Maria. How can I help you today?...Ah, yes. I have your account information right here. It seems you ordered the CB-2000 model from us about one week ago...Yes, the one that can belch the entire alphabet...Yes, I suppose it is pretty cool... So, what can I do for you today?...I see. The troll refuses to clean itself and is drinking all your beer?...Hmmm. Well, I'm sure it's frustrating, sir. Unfortunately there isn't much that we can do. Trolls will be trolls after all....What do I suggest? Let's see. Perhaps you could bribe it into taking a bath....Well it seems to like alcohol. Why not use beer as an incentive for it to get clean?... Sure. Just hide the beer someplace the troll won't find it...Exactly, the troll won't be able to drink unless you let it. ...Okay, you're very welcome. Let me know how it goes and thank you for....Hello?

"Heh. Don't you just love your job sometimes?"

"Oh yeah. It's the best. I can hardly tear myself away."

"Really? Well, if you want to stay, Maria...."

"No-- that's okay, really."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Alright then, let's get out of here. I've had enough "Troll drama" for today."

"I'm right behind you."

Editor's Note

Happy Trolls Incorporated finished third in our Second Annual Dialogue Only Contest. Kevin Dickinson had this to say about the story: *"This story is steeped in utter ridiculousness and that is why I relish it. Seriously—troll customer service? Genius. Another less comic-minded author could easily botch this, but whoever wrote it knows what they're doing. The comic nucleus is, I believe, the third-story bridge troll."*

Telephone © Gina Kim

Death in Lou's Coffee Shop by John Domenichini

Okay, Lou, can you give your account?"

"Yeah, Sheriff. The apocalypse just came in here to my coffee shop. Can you believe that? All the places in the world and the apocalypse comes here to Lou's Coffee Shop."

"Lou, can you explain 'apocalypse'?"

"What do you mean Sheriff, the way it's described in the Bible?"

"No, no, Lou, just describe what happened here. I'm wondering why you're calling it the apocalypse."

"Oh, well, cuz Death walked in. But I didn't notice. I mean, I was real busy. Actually, I still am. I gotta clean all this up and get to my son's baseball game."

"Well, what do you mean by 'Death' Lou?"

"You know, Death. About seven feet tall, black robe, skeleton face, Death."

"So, some tall guy in a costume?"

"Oh, no, it was Death. Like I said, he had a skeleton face. You know, a skull with no flesh on it. And he had little imps flying around him. Ask any of the customers."

"Ah huh."

"Well, he was all the way at the counter before I noticed him."

"What happened next?"

"I asked him what he wanted to order."

"You asked Death what he wanted to order?"

"Sure! I had no reason to treat him differently than any other paying customer. I wasn't gonna turn him away."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that he was ordering up the apocalypse right here and now. Then the imps started flying around knocking people's plates to the floor."

"And what did you do?"

"I said it wasn't any use starting it here in my coffee shop. I mean, I was straight with the guy. We get so many bikers in here acting crazy and violent. Starting the apocalypse here was gonna be kinda anti-climatic. That's what I told him."

"Then what did he do?"

"Well, he looked real dejected. Then he called off the imps and they left...Is that it Sheriff? Cuz I really gotta finish up here."

"You might have just postponed the apocalypse Lou. You might have just saved the world."

"Just doing my part Sheriff. Can I get back to my duties now?"

"All right Lou, all right. Good luck to Steve. Hope he wins that game tonight."

"Yeah, I hope so. But they're playin' the Mustangs. It's gonna be a real nail biter. His games stress me out somethin' fierce. Anyway, I gotta get busy. Thanks for coming by."

"Sure enough Lou. Y'all call us up now if you have any more trouble out here. I'll see ya around."

"Okay, bye now Sheriff."



Editor's Note

Death in Lou's Coffee Shop finished fourth in our Second Annual Dialogue Only Contest. Kevin Dickinson had this to say about the piece: *"The imps are a clever touch, and the way Lou describes Death, plain and simple, is so deadpan I can't help but laugh."*

Illustration © Jin Kim

The Pussy Death by Jason Helmandollar

A: Really? Since when?

B: I dunno, a few months ago I guess.

A: Seems like just the other day you were bitching about flying: sweaty palms, pounding heart, shitting your pants.

B: Yea, all that's done with now.

A: Really?

B: Yep.

A: Is this because you've been flying so much – face your fears and all that?

B: No, actually – hand me one of those, will ya? Dig from the bottom, they're colder down there – actually up until about a year ago, it was getting worse every time I flew. I felt like – thanks – felt like I was rolling the dice and it was just a matter of time before I came up snake eyes.

A: So what happened? If anything you're traveling more now.

B: Nothing really. I just came to a realization.

A: What was that?

B: I don't want the Pussy Death.

A: The pussy death.

B: Yea.

A: Okay.

B: Well, maybe there was something that caused – that kicked off the process of me getting over my fear. You remember the Hudson River landing?

A: The plane landing in the river, there – the Captain Sully thing?

B: Yea.

A: The thing in New York.

B: Yea, the quote-unquote Miracle Landing.

A: Ah, I get it. That plane takes a shit, malfunctions and that guy was able—

B: It hit birds.

A: Birds?

B: Yea, it took off into a flock of birds and sucked them into the engines.

A: So the plane eats Donald Duck on takeoff and takes a shit and that guy was able to land it safely. That made you feel better about flying?

B: No. If anything it made it worse.

A: Worse.

B: Right. After that, every time I'd fly I'd think we were going to hit a flock of birds.

A: We need more beer.

B: The plane would take off and I'd just close my eyes and wait for the sound of us hitting birds. I could hear it in my mind. Thump-thump-thump.

A: That's what the birds would sound like? Thump-thump-thump?

B: Yea, thumps and a cloud of feathers flying out of the back of the engines. I don't fucking know. I just waited for it. I dreaded it.

A: But after the Hudson thing, didn't you feel better that the pilot could land that thing on a nearby river – a body of water somewhere?

B: No, the opposite. I knew the Sully thing was a so-called miracle. A one-in-a-million thing. All that landing did for me was to open up the hitting-birds scenario.

A: So the Hudson thing made it worse. Your fear.

B: Do you have any idea how unlikely it is – how perfect the angle had to be for that plane not to break apart and sink to the bottom of that river?

A: Sully the Hero.

B: Hero, my ass. Sure the guy's probably a great pilot, top of his class – blah, blah. Mostly he got lucky. That's why they called it a miracle.

A: Maybe he's like Luke, shooting the torpedo in the air duct.

B: Huh?

A: Use the Force, Luke.

B: Shut the fuck up. I'm trying to tell you something here.

A: You're telling me how you got over your fear of flying by telling me about something that made you more afraid of flying.

B: I told you – this thing, the Sully thing, didn't cause anything. Didn't cause me to change. It just kicked off something. Caused me to think something.

A: About birds hitting the plane.

B: Yea, at first.

A: Did I tell you Claire called?

B: No. What the hell does that have to do with my story?

A: Said she might stop over in a little bit.

B: Okay.

A: Said she might bring Tracey.

B: Okay. Shit – Tracey? Really?

A: Yea.

B: Can I go on now?

A: Thought I might I have them pick up a twelve pack on the way.

B: Oh, okay. Yea, good idea.

A: Should I call now?

B: Can I finish my fucking story please?

A: Sure, go.

B: Thank you.

A: We've got time before they leave.

B: Okay.

A: Couple minutes.

B: Jesus. So where was I? The Hudson thing – it didn't make anything better.

A: So why'd you bring it up?

B: It comes in later.

A: Oh.

B: So a couple months ago, I'm flying ... somewhere. Omaha, I think.

A: I remember Omaha. You said you liked it there.

B: Yea, cooler town than I thought it would be. Anyway, I'm on the plane to Omaha, everything's going fine, when out of the blue this storm comes up.

A: Literally.

B: Huh?

A: Out of the blue – literally.

B: What?

A: Nevermind.

B: So out of the blue the pilot turns on the seatbelt sign and veers the plane to the right and suddenly all you can see is black clouds out the window.

A: Nice.

B: And the plane is rattling up and down and you get that feeling like you're riding on a rollercoaster and I'm gripping onto my seat tray like it's – like it's a fucking—

A: Frisbee?

B: I don't know. Like it's something you wanna hold onto for dear life. So at the baggage claim, I'm talking about it with some of the other guys from work—

A: Wait a minute. What happened?

B: What happened with what?

A: You're on the plane, it's shaking around, you're holding onto the thing for dear life – and then you're suddenly in baggage claim?

B: We flew through the storm and then landed in Omaha.

A: That's it?

B: What do you want? The plane crashed and I died. End of story.

A: I don't know. I just thought there'd be more. Did the storm get worse – the turbulence?

B: No, the turbulence never got that bad, actually.

A: What? That makes no sense. The rollercoaster, gripping the thing – dear life.

B: It's the – that's my point – the light turbulence is just as bad as the heavy turbulence.

A: How's that?

B: When you've got light turbulence, you're just waiting for the major stuff. The stuff that puts your stomach in your throat. The waiting – the expecting – is worse than the actual thing.

A: And that's your point?

B: I'm getting to my point. I'm at the baggage—

A: Cause I gotta call Claire.

B: Jesus, you want to call Claire? Call her.

A: It's just once she gets here she won't go back out for beer.

B: Call her then. You want me to stop my story right here when I'm getting to my point – call her.

A: No, go ahead. We got time.

B: Forget it. Just forget the thing. You ruined it.

A: No, I didn't ruin it – go, go.

B: Forget it.

A: No, go. If Claire shows up I'll go get the beer. Just go.

B: You sure?

A: Yea.

B: Yea?

A: Go. You're in the baggage claim...

B: Alright. So I'm at baggage claim and we're all talking about the storm and somebody brings up the Hudson thing.

A: The Sully thing.

B: Yea, and I'm still worked up from the storm so I say if I'd been on the Sully plane, I would have died of a heart attack as soon as the plane hit the water, so it wouldn't have mattered if the plane cracked up or not.

A: For you. Might have mattered to the other passengers.

B: Right. So I say that about the heart attack and one of the other guys says I would have ruined it. The whole thing.

A: Ruined what?

B: The quote-unquote Miracle Landing. It would have ruined the whole thing.

A: How's that?

B: Think of the headline – miracle landing on the Hudson. Sully lands the plane and everyone is fine – except for one pussy who had a heart attack and died as the plane landed smoothly on the river.

A: The Pussy Death.

B: Exactly. Who'd want to be that one guy?

A: Not me. I'd be dead of a heart attack.

B: Yea, but think about it. That guy would be more famous than Sully. The guy who ruined the miracle landing because he was a pussy.

A: See your point.

B: Yea, that guy would go down in history.

A: So this is what got you over your fear of flying? You realized you don't want to be a pussy?

B: Yea – well, no. Think about this guy.

A: The hypothetical heart attack guy.

B: Yea, why do you think he had a heart attack?

A: Too many cheeseburgers?

B: Fuck you. Because he figured he was dead before that plane even got wet. He believed he was going to die, was sure of it, and it scared him so much he had a heart attack.

A: Under the circumstances, I can't blame him.

B: But the fact is – the truth is – there was a chance the plane might land on that water and everybody would be fine. The other ones, the other passengers, they saw that chance and waited to see how it would play out. I thought about it and realized that I wasn't afraid of flying. I wasn't even afraid of crashing. My guess is that most people who die in plane crashes die pretty quickly – instantly even. It's the moment in between that scared the shit out of me.

A: In between.

B: Yea, in between flying and crashing. That moment of falling or death-spiraling or whatever. The moment when you realize the plane is fucked up and the ground is coming up fast. That's the most terrifying thing to me – knowing you're about to die and knowing there's nothing you can do about it.

A: So what do you do?

B: You wait to see how it plays out. You hope the pilot will pull it out at the last second, that the engines will restart, that the plane will miraculously hit the Hudson at exactly the right angle to skim to a smooth stop.

A: You hope.

B: Right. You hope right up until that last instant. If it works out, there you go – you're alive and you aren't the pussy who had the heart attack. If it doesn't work out then you'll probably never even know it. As long as you have hope, that moment in between doesn't seem so scary at all.

A: So that's it. You got over your fear of flying because the threat of the Pussy Death gave you hope.

B: Made me hope.

A: Hand me the phone. I hope Claire hasn't left yet.

Editor's Note

The Pussy Death finished fifth in our Second Annual Dialogue Only Contest.

Joe's Perfect Machine by Robert John Miller

i.

Cigarette tucked in the corner of his thin pink lips, a man sat on the floor of his ill-lit kitchen nursing two fingers of five dollar bourbon, sketching out his plan for the perfect machine. He was drawing straight lines mostly, curves for wings, a panel of microprocessors, a hydraulic lift, a block of knives, a series of syringes. The machine could fly, which was important to him because he liked to fly. The perfect machine would obviously need to fly. It wouldn't be a plane because planes are expressly built to fly, and this machine merely had flight as a capability, just one of the many things it was designed to do. It could also be his friend, and lift things, and stab things, and shoot things into him. He couldn't think of anything more perfect.

When he finished his sketch he pinned it on his corkboard hanging near his refrigerator and then walked to his mirror. He hadn't seen himself all week. No one else had seen him in months. He had been perfecting his machine and outlining his Nobel acceptance speech. If he didn't win a Nobel for his machine, he was sure that the machine would itself win a Nobel soon after it was produced. The machine would certainly use his Nobel speech, *not* because the machine couldn't write a better speech itself (because obviously it would be perfectly capable of doing so), but because it would be the perfect gesture of friendship which the machine would want to extend to its creator.

Nothing could possibly go wrong.

ii.

Thousands of labor-hours later, CAD designs mocked up and concepts proven by scale models, Joe flipped to the on-position the machine's power switch. It was beautiful, Joe thought, its metal body glistening in artificial light. Fans whirred, pumps pressed, indicator lights signaled that the startup process was following its planned course. The machine hopped into the air, spun, calibrated its GPS, and scanned Joe: mammalian; hyper-developed meat-brain; aesthetic-based, non-logical thought processes; fulfilled by the satiation of appetites and feelings of intimacy; agitated by desire and feelings of disconnection.

The machine flew through the kitchen collecting common household ingredients and began synthesizing compounds personalized to Joe's biochemistry. What wasn't available in the kitchen was available nearby, and through a global data network the

machine quickly located (and then acquired) the missing items. It loaded its syringes and approached.

The first needle poke collapsed Joe and induced him to vomit, but he recovered momentarily and didn't notice any more injections. Despite this general loss of tactile sensation Joe suddenly felt as though his mouth was filled with spicy nacho cheese and that his own limp member was instead hundreds of dicks climaxing simultaneously into a vat of pure eroticism. Moments later, exhausted, he drifted to sleep while giggling uncontrollably at the thought that he, Joe, was able to eat cheese that was somehow "not Joe's cheese." In dream-state Joe's synapses fired in such rapid succession that he reexperienced most of his life, reliving his positive memories as if for the first time and witnessing his regretful moments as if they weren't his alone but instead part of the necessary suffering of a universal oversoul. He no longer understood himself as himself but as part of an invincible, reassuring, all-knowing third-party. He awoke and found himself repeating the process again and again, will surrendered, each time lengthened by the memories of the previous times, the machine monitoring dosage and supply. After an hour, Joe's neural pathways burnt out.

It was suicide, and murder, and something of an accident, but Joe no longer minded.

Editor's Note

Joe's Perfect Machine was first published on the website in August and appears here as an Editor's Choice.



Battered Truck Behind Fence ©
Margaret Mendel

So Much Depends by Caroline Kepnes

The first woman who ever confused David was his middle school English teacher Miss Sharp. She was a narrow thing whose small form was offset by her enormous eyes, so big she might have been better off with three eyes or one eye, anything other than those two big neglected holes plop right on her pale face. She was not beautiful. David knew this because other boys did not make jokes about her or look for her at dances. He wasn't sure if he thought she was beautiful, just that he found himself thinking about her a lot, wishing that it were possible for him to spend every hour of every school day sitting in the front row, watching her try to teach. She wasn't very good at teaching. Her voice trailed off and she tried to get everyone excited about things that would never excite them, pen pals a hundred miles away, Thanksgiving, all the things that don't excite kids. David liked to read mystery books and he came to think of Miss Sharp as one of the caves in one of the books. Always, the adventurous boy star of the book had to enter a cave if they wanted to solve a mystery. And it wasn't simple. Sometimes the cave was blocked off by trees or nailed boards. The boy plotted to get into that cave but it was never easy. Sometimes weather interfered. Sometimes he lost his flashlight and sometimes he brought potato chips and the sound of his own chomping made him lose his nerve. But eventually the boy did get into the cave and he did find what he was looking for. The thing was, the cave was like a person; it had to invite the boy in some way.

The day that Miss Sharp read a famous poem about a wheelbarrow, David had the sensation that he had finally entered the cave. She let go of some teacherly way as the few words slipped out of her mouth. Her posture changed. She was a runner of marathons and sometimes came to school with ribbons around her neck, another thing that failed to excite the kids. But when she read that poem, her body heaved forward and every part of her seemed to be spiraling. She seemed sad, as if she was a wheelbarrow, bright and wet and alone in the world. He sweated all night over what he would write to her, finally settling on a simple note, deciding that it would be best to say something kind, to cheer her up:

Dear Miss Sharp,

You are not the wheelbarrow. You are great.

David Henry

He left the note on her desk the next morning before classes. The hours passed slowly and all day he understood that his life was taking a new shape. He would remember

exactly what he ate for lunch, he would remember every second of the film strip on a hurricane they watched in social studies. He would remember that while he was in the boys' room, George Lasky was in there too, suffering from indigestion and moaning in a closed stall. And all of these moments were leading to the moment when it was finally his turn to sit in Miss Sharp's classroom. She carried on as if her world had not been altered. She did not seem to be in a state of hyper awareness. At the end of class, she stopped him on the way out. She handed him his note. He asked if she wanted to keep it and she said no and that they would not discuss this with anyone. He looked up at her but she smiled and those big eyes did not let him in. They were cheery and rigid and it was clear to him that he had made her uncomfortable, crossed a line and that his stupid note was nothing like the wheelbarrow poem. It had too many words, the wrong words. He couldn't sleep that night and he tried to figure out what happened. Maybe women wanted to be the wheelbarrow. Maybe she didn't care what young David thought. Maybe she knew that he didn't even know what he thought. Maybe his note had cheered her up and she was in love with him but couldn't tell him because he was young. But the damn truth was that he was not as savvy as the mystery solving boys he read about every night. And when he fell asleep that night, he felt that if someone wrote a mystery where he was the lead boy, nobody would want to read it and the book would collect dust in an empty library.

Sometimes he would become very sad, very aware that she knew what the wheelbarrow meant to her and refused to tell him. As he grew older, he knew that had she liked him as a human, she would have tried to talk to him. It wasn't like he'd written her a perverse note. It was a fine note. But she had been a cold bitch, a runner of marathons indeed. He understood that he had been rejected. He also understood that he wouldn't ever like happy girls and so it didn't surprised him when, in college and thereafter, he pursued one unhappy girl after another. He was drawn to one desolate cave after another, and he'd plot out all the ways to get in there, try with all his might but always the attempts would fizzle and again he would think of himself as the kind of character that could not sell a book. The mysteries remained unsolved, repeated and he became a man who had been the boy who spent too much time alone thinking about the wheelbarrow, why it made girls sad, why it mattered that it was wet. Every time he liked a woman, he would get a little too drunk and tell her about Miss Sharp and the wheelbarrow and ask the woman what she thought and the woman would begin to turn off him, cross her legs away from him, nod too much, look around too much and he knew that he'd be carrying that fucking wheelbarrow around forever. When he tried to not tell a woman about Miss Sharp and the wheelbarrow, things were the same only different. He would slowly turn off whatever woman it was at his side, looking at other passing girls, biting his lip and paying for dinner in a way that was cruel and condescending instead of chivalrous, and then he'd have no choice but to dump the girl because he couldn't go on being mean.

Eventually he was thirty-five years old and fighting with his parents about the state of his life. They knew he didn't like being a broker and said he should do something else. He said there was nothing else to do and that the money was fine. They said maybe he would be happy if Tanya were still here. He said Tanya was too miserable to make anyone happy. His mother said he was always that way, blaming his own state on other people and that Tanya was a lovely girl. He said Tanya was a fucking actress and a liar and a bad lay and his mother became upset and his father shook his head and said he should let his damn mother say what she wanted and not take it to heart. And he knew his father was right but he didn't feel like apologizing so he drove to the liquor store and bought a bottle of whiskey and then to the middle school, which was empty, because it was Thanksgiving break. Miss Sharp was not there anymore, of course, he said to the janitor who eyed him as if he was a pervert but let him in anyway, which suggested that the janitor might too be a pervert. He went to the library and found a book of poems and read the wheelbarrow poem. It was shorter than he remembered. Something in Miss Sharp's delivery had made it seem longer, as if those breaks between the few words were actual pages you had to turn in actual time. He thought it strange that somehow, in all the years, he had never done this, just opened a book, read the poem and moved the fuck on with his life. As it turned out, he didn't like the poem very much. He was no dummy. He could see that it was structured in a way that was smart, almost Japanese, that it was worthy of being as famous as Miss Sharp had said it was, but it wasn't for him and it was fine that the poem made him feel stupid and uncomfortable. It was fine that he preferred a good mystery any day of the week. Let other guys think about the wheelbarrow. The next time he went out with a girl, he told her that he'd gone back to his old middle school and she smiled and wanted to know everything and he told her about the janitor and the way it all smelled the same and the parking lot empty and sullen and the lockers painted blue instead of red and the library and the way she listened, he could tell that she liked the sound of a man like him, that she was thinking that he was romantic and present and all kinds of other good things and her eyes were jumping closer to him all the time. He didn't deliberately leave out the part about Miss Sharp or the wheelbarrow. They just simply had no place in a story about him sneaking into a closed schoolhouse with a bottle of whiskey.

Editor's Note

So Much Depends was first published on the website in October and appears here as an Editor's Choice. This piece was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

The Skate Key by Solla Carrock

I said, "Please don't tell."

"I have to tell." Renee answered. She walked faster. It was really getting dark now. The streetlights were on. I was the one who kept us late, first roller-skating a little longer, then not remembering where I left the skate key.

"You don't have to tell. We can get another skate key. Mama doesn't have to find out."

"How can we get another skate key without buying another pair of skates?"

I said, "Maybe they sell them separate. People must lose them all the time."

"You lose them," Renee said.

"We just won't go skating again until we get one. She won't find out. We'll go to the school ground tomorrow and look again. Probably we'll find it right away when it's light."

"It was light when we started looking."

Renee always felt bad keeping secrets. Like that time in Yakima when we slid out on the ice on the canal--my idea--and I broke through the ice. Mama wasn't there when we got home. We could have hidden everything from her. But Renee told. I got spanked because I was older, but I didn't really blame her then. It wasn't so bad, only a yardstick.

Only, it was different now. Couldn't Renee understand that it was different now?

Ever since Amy was born Mama got angry so easily. Especially at me. I could never do anything fast enough or well enough for her.

"Please, don't tell," I asked again.

"She'll find out." Then I wanted to say, *then tell her you lost it*, because it wouldn't be bad if Renee lost it. Then it would be a small thing. Mama might be a little angry, but she wouldn't look at Renee the way she would look at me. But I didn't ask that. I only said, "Please don't tell," again.

Renee didn't say anything. She pressed her lips together.

"Please don't tell her." She didn't say again that she had to tell.

We climbed up the stairs of the new apartment in Norfolk and opened the door to the bright kitchen with the yellow linoleum. Mama sat at the kitchen table, her hand on the handle of her coffee cup, her cigarette resting on the ashtray. She said, "It's after dark. What are you doing home so late?"

I said, "We left when it got dark." Maybe she'd let it go.

But Renee didn't even wait for Mama to respond. "We were looking for the skate key. Annie lost it."

Mama looked at me the way I knew she would look at me, the way she wouldn't look at Renee if it were Renee who lost the skate key, the way she only looked at me. "It wasn't enough you lost your own skate key, you had to lose hers too."

I tried to make that look go away. "I laid it down where we put on the skates. We probably just missed it in the dark. I could look for it tomorrow."

"You're not going anywhere tomorrow. Now get in your bedroom and get ready for bed."

Renee came after me down the hallway and I moved as far as I could to the right so I didn't touch her. Got my pajamas out from under my pillow and put them on without looking at her. Got in my bed and pulled the covers up over my head, without looking at her.

* * * * *

The next night Leroy arrived home late from his weekend duty on the base. Soon after, he came into our room. Renee was doing something on her bed and that's where Leroy sat at the foot, turned towards her. I sat on my own bed reading.

"Renee," Leroy said, so Renee faced him and paid attention. Quickly, Leroy glanced over my way, then back to Renee, so I knew I was supposed to hear, but I kept my eyes on my book the best I could.

Leroy said, "I just wanted to know what present you'd like for being such a good girl this week." Another little glance at me.

Renee's eyes turned away from him, first at the bed, then a quick look at me too, her body all stiff and miserable. I hated her.

Finally, she mumbled, "I don't know."

Leroy's voice stayed bright, "Well, I guess it'll just have to be a surprise then. But you let me know if you think of something. We want you to know how much we appreciate having a good girl like you."

He waited for her to say something more, but the good girl didn't. The good girl stared at her bed and held her little good girl hands in her lap, until Leroy put his arm around the good girl's shoulders for a moment, then left our room.

The good girl looked over at me, but I stared at my book. After a long time, she went back to what she was doing before, and I reread the sentence I'd been on when Leroy came until it had some meaning again.

Editor's Note

The Skate Key was first published on the website in August and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Last Stand by Ron Yates

Toby Stampler suffered from chronic tonsillitis throughout most of his childhood. Countless times his mother dragged him to the clinic where he silently endured the disinfected diarrhea smell along with needles, tongue depressors, bright lights, nurses with squeaking shoes and thin red lips, and doctors with cold hands and lifeless eyes. The scrutinizing probes and pokes were agonizing to the boy, and in the face of this torture, he felt as helpless as an infant. The tiniest baby is able to cry out, but Toby, with good vocal cords and the power of speech, could not. His father, stern and dark with thick, bushy brows, would not allow it. He would demand to know if his son had been brave, if he had been a "good little soldier." Of course, Toby's mother could always give a positive report. "Just like a little man," she would say. Disappointing Father by behaving otherwise, crying out or complaining, was unthinkable.

But the boy had ached and trembled inside, craving the relief of screaming while forcing himself not to. If only he could have screamed as a child--kicked and spat--perhaps he would be healthier now. If only he could have acted upon his wish to bust that doctor's nose with a hard little fist, perhaps now he could be like the others and not in such a tormented state--"conflicted," as Sue, his older sister, called him.

In spite of the suffering and his parents' expectations, Toby did manage a victory over the evils of modern medicine; now, as an adult, he carried the trophies of war in his throat. Toby Stampler still had his tonsils, a source of great pride. They had poked, probed, and examined them, but they never got them because he ran away from home on the day before he was to go into the hospital. It had been his only way out: he couldn't scream, beg, or throw a tantrum, but he had power to slip away. Toby decided that he would live in the sewer before letting those doctors cut out a part of his body.

He was only eight, but shrewd and strong willed. His mother had told him that the nurses would feed him all the ice cream he wanted after the operation to help him get well. Toby concluded that ice cream would help him get well without the operation. He had three one dollar bills and a pocket full of change from his piggy bank. For three days, he ate nothing but Black Cows, Nutty Buddies, and Fudgesicles. At night he dozed fitfully in a hiding place he found underneath the school gymnasium, sharing the dark crawlspace with spiders and rats.

When his throat got well, he knew he had done it himself--healed it with his hatred and willpower. When his money ran out, he went home, tired and dirty but without tonsillitis. His mother squeezed him tight against her, pressing his face with her wet cheek. Father stood over them scowling, then turned away.

Toby expected punishment and steeled himself for it, but none came. Since his throat seemed fine, they canceled his appointments. He kept his symptoms to himself after that, learning to will them all away. As an adult, he became a master at mental healing,

and he stayed away from doctors and their places of misery. He developed the theory that doctors with their medicines and instruments conspired to keep patients sick and at their mercy. People who had faith in them and relied on their services were weak. Sometimes he would rail at co-workers and family members, calling them mindless robots or sheep.

The world was full of such idiots, Toby knew, and he realized they couldn't allow him to go on insulting them and laughing in their faces. Sooner or later he would have to be brought down to their miserable state, dependent upon the Lords of Medicine for wellness, breath, and life. He should have known better than to get in the car with Sue and her friends that day for a "ride in the country."

He realized it was a trap before they reached the hospital, but it was too late. They had all been telling him that the swelling, the discoloration, the odor, the red streaks running up the leg were signs of something horrible, but he knew he could have made it get well with just a little more time. He would have broken free of them in the parking lot and run away, but the foot would not support him. He looked to his sister's face for mercy but saw Father there instead: that scowl, those dark, knitted brows. He would have to become the good little soldier again. "Oh, God, help me," he prayed. "I've got to scream!"

He would have to bring back the techniques he had used as a child to keep the scream inside: squeeze the fists, bite the lip, squint hard against the pain. His fingernails cut into his palms. He wondered why that light was so bright. The walls were white and everything in the room was highly reflective. The vibrating quality of the light made it seem that things were jumping out at him.

Everywhere he looked he saw objects turning into snakes, waiting for the command to strike and fill him with venom. But the doctor had been called away. The faucet with its arching back was poised. "It can't hurt me," Toby told himself. "It's powerless without the doctor." Then the idea came to strike first, to take the faucet in his hands and throttle it, but the sink was on the other side of the room.

I mustn't get up; they will know, he thought. But how can I sit here on this table when that rubber tubing keeps inching closer, coming out of that drawer by the sink? I can see two inches of it now, only the end before. That garbage pail must know I'm frightened. It's hissing at me.

The pail's stainless steel lips were slightly opened, and Toby could see its blood-soaked insides quivering with glee.

Oh God, I want to scream!

Other things were starting to move. On the counter by the instrument trays, two limp fingers dangling from a box of disposable plastic gloves began to wriggle with unnatural animation. Toby could almost feel them groping at his throat. He couldn't sit there much longer.

I've got to scream--no!--I've got to get up. Those crutches over there--maybe I can reach them. I'll use them to dash out the bloody brains of that grinning garbage pail.

Then, I'll snatch the arch out of that snake-faucet's back! Toby's hands itched and burned.

The details of a survival plan raced through his brain: I'll tie the tubing into knots, slice the rubber gloves to shreds with a scalpel. I'll attack while I still can, before the doctor comes in and commands them all to leap at once. Yes, yes, that's it. I can hop on one foot over to those crutches. It's slow going this way, but I can do it. I still have my willpower.

A low moaning came from inside him as he hobbled across the examination room. This sound, when he noticed it, startled him. He didn't want anyone to hear, to come in and see what he was doing. He was almost there. *If I can just get past those oxygen tanks without triggering an explosion. . . .*

Then another noise, this time a swishing that Toby recognized as the one sound he least wanted to hear: the opening of the door. He was caught, finished. He knew that he must turn around and face the doctor and his judgment, but he waited until he heard the voice.

"What are you doing up, Mr. Stampler? It's very important that you don't put the slightest pressure on that foot. Here, let me help you back onto the table."

Toby could find no words as he looked into the stern, disapproving face. He knew the man expected an answer--the voice of an adult, not the scream of a child. He turned away, groping inside for something lodged there since long ago. As Toby trembled, his jaws worked silently. It started to come from deep inside, below his diaphragm, deeper, lower. A purgative scream, massive and gut-wrenching was forming, but just before he collapsed onto the astonished doctor, the good little soldier, with a final mustering of will, turned it into words: "Help me," he groaned, "please help me . . . get better."

Editor's Note

Last Stand was first published on the website in August and won the Story of the Month honors.

The Underground Fort by Rick Taliaferro

"And what adventures do you have planned for this sunny day?" Will's mother asked.

Will gulped a spoonful of corn flakes and shrugged. "Joey's at vacation Bible school," he said nonchalantly. "Maybe we'll do something later."

But Will was thinking of sneaking to the underground fort by himself. His older brother Ken and his friends had built the fort, and Ken had warned Will to stay away. However, Ken was mowing lawns this morning, and wouldn't know. Chances were good that Ken's friends were also busy.

"Gracious," his mother said, putting her hand on her protruding house robe. "She's very active this morning."

Will looked at his mother's amusing cartoon-like stomach and her warm smile and nodded.

"That was a big kick," she said.

"Are you okay?" Will asked.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Your sister's just telling us it won't be much longer before she arrives."

Will was concerned for his mother because recently he'd had a couple sharp pains in his abdomen and hoped it wasn't the same for her. But he didn't want to mention his pains because that would mean a trip to the doctor.

"Do you have any questions about it?" his mother asked and bit into her wheat toast.

"Nah," Will said. "That picture book you read to me explained it." The book had been as sunny and happy as the sunlight-filled kitchen, and kind of babyish, if you asked Will.

"Well, if you do, just ask me or your father." Her eyes widened at more fetal movement. "Maybe you could help me around the house before you make yourself scarce." She sipped orange juice and added, "Just stay away from that construction."

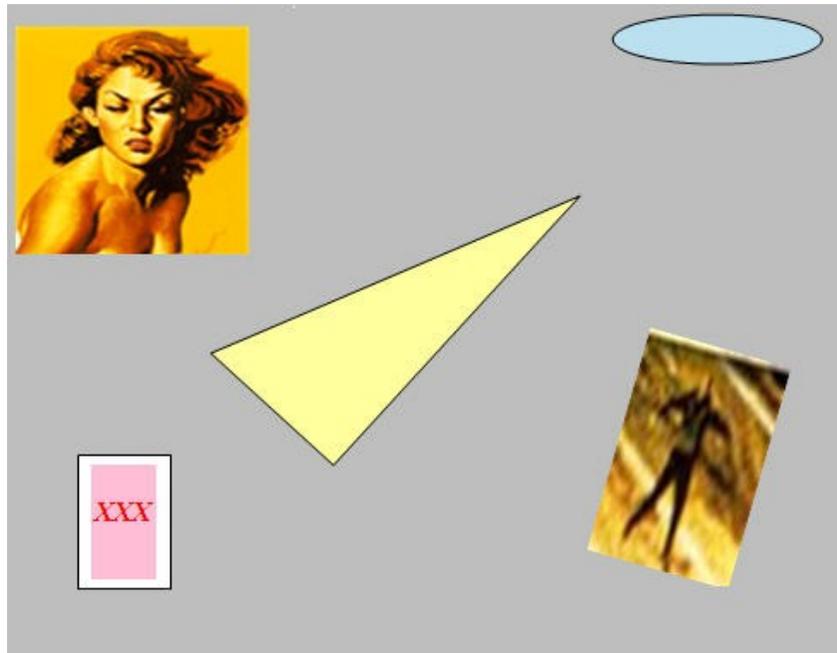
"Sure," Will readily agreed. It was almost as if she were giving him permission to go to the underground fort.

An hour later, Will left his back yard with his bedroom flashlight hidden in his shorts and traversed a former farm field that was graded and marked into housing lots with red tape. Will had wanted Joey along, but now he'd have one up on him. To the left of the field were the woods where the neighborhood kids had lots of imaginative fun. The woods were to be leveled for the new housing tract; Will read the billboard announcing Phase II of Meadow View Estates, but it was hard to imagine that the woods would not be there, even though hammering and bulldozing sounds droned from the construction site on the far side of the trees. Will would miss them.

At the end of the field, out of sight of his house and just inside the shady woods, was the underground fort. The entrance to it was marked by several stones that his brother and friends had piled up.

Will stomped on the sod-covered plywood roof and waited, his legs tensed and ready to run. After nothing happened, he cautiously stuck his head through the entrance to the dark pit and shone his flashlight around. It was a lot cooler in there, and in spite of the above-ground heat, Will shivered as he noted a cardboard box, some debris. No snakes or animals. He extracted his head and swung his legs around and through the entrance, but before he descended, grimaced and held his abdomen. The jab in his side was almost like another warning from his brother to stay out, and he hesitated.

But Will was no chicken, and he'd come this far, and he was just going to look, so he slipped through the hole, grunting when he landed. The fort was deeper than it seemed, and he looked



up at the luminous snatch of pale blue sky through the entrance overhead and fretted about how to get out, but then saw footholds dug into the dirt and relaxed.

Will sliced the dark with his flashlight, looking at the shovel-scarred walls and floor, the two pieces of 4x8 plywood roof. He gripped the 4x4 post that provided a support for the roof and marveled at how solid Ken and his friends had built the fort; it would make a good tornado shelter.

"Wonder what they do down here," Will mused aloud, his voice muffled and odd in the earthy chamber. He and Joey would have to sneak up on them and find out.

Will remembered the box and beamed his light on it. Scattered around it were a couple empty plastic soda bottles, a crumpled cigarette pack and cigarette butts. He smiled; so, his brother smokes down here. What else?

He opened the box and held his flashlight over it, and it was several seconds before he realized what he was looking at. He glanced at the crack of sky, then lifted a comic book; on the cover was an enormous two-legged vagina about to gobble a small

man. Will muttered the title, "Attack of the Giant Poontang!" He wondered what that was, and giggled at the hapless expression on the running man's face.

But he flushed as he thumbed through the next magazine. It had high-quality photographs of a real naked man and a pretty naked woman in various positions; some of them looked like they were angry and fighting. Will wondered whether they were a father and mother, because they looked like they might be doing that reproduction thing that Will's mother read about. In other pictures, they were doing things that his mother hadn't read about, and which were gross.

Will thought these might be the pictures that his parents didn't want him to see on the Internet, and he did and didn't want to see more, but it made him queasy to think of his mother and father doing those things. As he put the magazine back and shook his head to rid the graphic images, he heard laughter and hooting.

Will panicked and clawed up out of the fort, dropping his flashlight and getting dirt in his mouth, and sprinted in the opposite direction of the voices.

"We'll get you!" one of them shouted.

Will ran the entire way home in a loop through the woods, trying to outdistance the troubling images in his mind more than the older boys.

As he breathlessly approached his house, he saw his mother at the kitchen sink waving to him, her face obscured by the reflecting windowpane.

Will didn't want to see her just then, and detoured to the side of the garage where he sat to catch his breath and rub the pain away. And to think.

But Joey interrupted him. "Hey, I called you from the back door," he said. "Your mom and I were wondering where you were."

"I didn't see anything," Will said.

"Wha-at?"

"I was only out in the field."

Joey looked at him perplexed, then smiled. "Yeah, sure," he said. "I'll bet you were at the underground fort."

"Huh-uhh," Will lied. He no longer wanted to have one up on his friend.

"What'd you see, Will?"

Joey would think he was dirty if he described it, and it would then be Joey who'd have one up on guilty Will.

"Come on," Joey insisted. "Must've been better than boring old Bible school."

Will wished he'd been there instead of the fort. "Just get lost," he snapped.

Joey was offended at Will's grouchiness. "You get lost," he huffed, and vanished around the front of the house.

Will watched him reappear on his bicycle sailing down the driveway and the street out of sight, feeling abandoned, and lost.

The sensation intensified that night when Will awoke in pitch blackness with a stab in his side. He rolled his eyes around trying to see something other than the tiny white specks that seemed to be causing the ringing in his ears. Somehow, he was

trapped in the underground fort, suffocating. He couldn't stand; the plywood roof pressed on him.

He began moaning and could then inhale.

Presently, a wave of light spread in the dark, followed by two shadows, one tall, one short, skulking towards him. How did they fit in the fort?

"Ehhhhhhh," Will whimpered.

"Will," his father comforted. "Will." He put a cool, dry palm on Will's forehead, which brought him home.

"My stomach," Will gasped.

"What'd you do, pull a muscle?" his brother asked.

Though feverish, Will knew what Ken referred to, but he was too weak to threaten to expose him and his friends.

"I mean, didn't I see you running sprints earlier today?" Ken quizzed.

"Quit," Will said. "It's real bad."

"Cool it, Ken," their father said. He touched Will's stomach and asked how long he'd had the pain.

Will sensed an association between his pain and the pictures in the underground fort, and he almost blurted defensively that he'd had the pain before the underground fort. "A while," he groaned. "And it's lower."

The overhead light flashed on, and Will's mother brushed past and sat on the bed and leaned over him. "What's wrong, honey?" she asked tenderly.

Will looked askance at her billowing belly and shirked. It was no longer amusing.

"Not sure," his father said. "His forehead's very warm and his abdomen hurts."

"Did you boys eat something this afternoon?" she asked.

"Huh-uh," Will moaned.

"You sure?" Ken prodded. "You sure you don't have a stash of candy-- somewhere?"

Will shook his head vehemently, which turned his dizziness to nausea. He tried to sit up to go to the bathroom, but vomited on his bedclothes.

"Agghh," Ken said.

"That's enough," his father said. "Get a damp towel."

His mother examined the mess and commanded, "Alright, he's going to the emergency."

His father hoisted Will and asked his mother to get a blanket. "He's burning up," he said, "but shaking like he's freezing."

Ken met them in the hall and put the damp towel to Will's face.

Will weakly swatted it away. It was Ken's fault that he was sick. If he and his friends hadn't built the underground fort, Will never would have seen the magazines there. And, yes, though the sharp pain had started before Will discovered the magazines, the pain and the discovery were connected somehow. And Will was suffering for it; he was probably going to die for it.

"Hey, Will, you want your flashlight?" Ken asked as they laid him in the backseat.

"Why would he need that?" his father chided.

His mother shushed them and put a pillow under Will's head, and Ken sat and lifted his limp legs onto his lap.

As they sped along the Outer Loop to the hospital, Will watched streetlights and headlights distorting his parents' heads and bringing on the nausea again. He heard them chatting about his appendix, surgery, as if there was nothing to it.

Ken smiled at Will, as if to say, "I told you to stay away."

"How come," Will blubbered at him, "how come this isn't happening to you? It's your fort."

"What's that supposed to mean?" their father asked.

"Ah," Ken said, nudging Will, "he's delirious."

"Will," his mother soothed. "Hang in there. The doctors will fix you up in a jiffy."

As they approached the hospital, she airily mentioned that his sister would be born there. His soon-to-be sister who was also somehow mixed up with the underground fort.

His father talked about maternity leave, how they'd all have to pitch in to help mother, especially when she returned to her job. "That includes you, Will," he said jovially. "You're not the baby of the family anymore."

Will covered his ears to shut out their silliness and squeezed his eyes tightly against the glaring lights at the emergency entrance as they pulled up and stopped. If he somehow survived the surgery, he solemnly promised God that he'd get a shovel and fill in the underground fort, bury those nasty pictures, and if any of the older boys tried to stop him, God, he'd bash their heads in.

"Looks like Will's having a nightmare," Ken observed from afar. "His lips are moving something fierce."

Editor's Note

The Underground Fort was first published on the website in October and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Artwork © Rick Taliaferro

Twenty-Eight Minutes by JT Dawson

April 6th: 6:30 a.m.

They hadn't eaten for days, the two soldiers we captured. We'd roped them by a tree, kept them there. No one watches them. Who needs to watch dead men? During the early morning, half past six a lieutenant limps over towards the soldiers. He drinks from his flask. He is drunk, shaking his pistol at them and laughing. They don't move. They don't beg. Not once. There is nothing left. They don't want to live. Then he shoots one of them down into the tree. The other man lowers his head against his knees. Lets his hands fall empty to the dirt. That stops me. My stomach tightens. I can taste the bile in the back of my throat. I watch the smoke curl out of the hole, the thinnest part of him and into nowhere. I think about reaching out for it, grabbing it and putting it back into his chest, but I don't. I simply watch it float away. So much blood. It gathers in puddles under the wet leaves.

April 6th: 6:32 a.m.

I watch the captain and the lieutenant argue by the fire. One points to the forest then points to me and the other men. I rise, rifle loose in one hand, and slip on my cap. Take a sip from my canteen. Let the water run down my chin and sink into my collar. I can barely hear the shivers of the trees. I look up. In the blue sky clouds collide and there are no birds. It is quiet. The man with the beard next to me smiles. A boy behind him shakes. I know at once, after this day, he will not return. I look down. Blood has dried on my boot. A leaf sticks to its edge. We set off for the woods. There are twelve of us, the ground soft under our feet. Ten minutes into the woods I watch the forest move.

April 6th: 6:42 a.m.

There are eleven of them, like ghosts from behind the fog. They come through the trees like gray sheets. I watch them troll through the tall wheat grass. Their boots sink into the ground, leaving footprints in the mud. They are carrying rifles, all of them. Some of them are killers. The others, they are too frightened. The guns look heavy in their hands, as if the rifles were made of men they put into the ground. One of the men stops. He spits tobacco beyond his boot then raises his rifle. The others come toward him. While they huddle together they whisper to each other then raise their guns. A deer tears out of the brush and disappears into the fog. I see its breath lip through the air. One soldier steps forward. The light shines down through the trees on his face. It is sweaty and dirty. I hear the first shot. A metal punch tears through the leaves.

April 6th: 6:43 a.m.

Death screams at the wounded. I sink to my knees against a tree, prop my rifle between two ruts and fire. I shoot a man. Watch the sluggish lump pass through smoke

and screams and into his shoulder. He falls to the dirt. The forest falls around him. Another man shoots me back. I feel it settle in my chest. I wonder if he hesitated as I had. I smell powder. The leaves are still wet. The procession came. There is no beginning and no end. Just animals with their guns, shooting each other into the ground. The air tastes black with smoke almost up to the sky. There is a boy huddled against a tree holding his gun against his face and crying. The sun shines down on it all.

April 6: 6:45 a.m.

Everybody is screaming. Black clouds follow the dead. A fat soldier walks up to the boy. He smiles and spills powder over his rifle. He winks from behind his sight. One eye closed. The boy begs 'please God,' bloody and broken. There is no reply. The boy looks at me. He knows he is going to die. He wants to live. He is a soldier, not a killer and he wants to live. We all want to live. I don't know what to do. The soldier holds his rifle to the boy's chest, smiles, and pulls the trigger. He stands there quietly. His face doesn't change. A smile soaked through with blood and dirt. I hear him laugh. The boy falls to his knees, hand outstretched as if reaching out toward something. His eyes are still open. His blood gathers in puddles beneath his chin, the last trace of a boy left long after he's gone and wiped away. I wonder what he saw through those eyes. If he saw anything at all I do not know. The ground is made of men, bodies stretched along my eyes. They all wanted to live.

April 6: 6:48 a.m.

I weep against the tree, my rifle hard against my hand. I stare with watery vision, fix my eyes to the ground. I try not to look again, but the crumpled body of the boy creeps into the corner of my eye somehow, and my insides sink to my feet. I want to die. He is still clutching his rifle, his left hand forever reaching out toward me. The boy was not a killer. He died ten feet away from me and I did nothing. Just sat there stuck to the back of a tree. It was then that I felt something creep after me along the leaves. Perhaps it came from the boy's outstretched hand or drifted in through the smoke or the trees. Something that measured and fit me, slipped its fingers beneath my skin and filled the brittle spaces between my bones. Something I've never felt before. I had no name for it, whatever it was.

April 6: 6:50 a.m.

The wind inside the leaves sounds like rain. I sit in silence for a bit. I look up and while the leaves fill my eyes, I think about dying and the different ways to die. I am alone. The world stops. As I close my eyes, my heart squeezes a thousand tiny knives. I think it might pop, push itself through my chest. Then another thousand cuts my chest into slices to let the air out. I can barely breathe. Across the way, the man with the beard smiles at me as if to say something. I wait for words to take shape from behind

his eyes, but they never do. His eyes close. He is still smiling. I swallow hard and it hurts. The weight of the boy lays itself across my shoulders, slips in through the hole and into my chest, across my lungs, tons of it on my heart. It drifts up onto my eyes where I see a fox peep from behind a log. The last thing I expect to see. He takes a drink from a puddle and looks toward me. His eyes cover me. Steal their way into my heart as if to look for something. Whatever it was I did not know. Or if what he wanted was even there. I wait for him to move. But he lowers his eyes to the leaves. And as he walks away, I swear, he shakes his head.

April 6: 6:51 a.m.

I huddle against the tree, watch the sky close and shut tight. The wind splits open the leaves above my head. They fall like rusty feathers. Scrape against the bark and down onto my face. Gunfire grows distant, though I can still hear footsteps scatter amongst the leaves. I bend my face around the tree to the boy, hoping that he has moved. That he has somehow pushed himself out of the dirt and simply walked away into the woods. My eyes find his hand and he lays there, still, a crumpled boy, amongst the leaves. My face spills quietly into my hands.

April 6: 6:52 a.m.

My head fills with rain, like pouring the ocean into a teacup, and my thoughts drown. Sink to the bottoms of my feet into the spaces between my toes. I breathe; a flicker of sound through a silent forest of still bodies. Of wooden men, limbs left bent at their sides, absorbing words, glances, and movement like sticks on water, bloated with the burden of lost moments. My chest is numb. I watch the wind slide through the yellow grass and slip into my hand. Blood has gathered in my palm, a hard blotch left on the barrel of my rifle. It is my father's. His father gave it to him. Faces still stuck to its end. I wonder what my father would say if he saw me right now, a grown man, sitting here by myself. Alone, looking out into the woods. Staring past what was in front of me into blank thoughts behind my eyes. I would say nothing, as there were no words that would fit his. Though I know what my father and his father would say if they were here, sitting by my side: 'William, this is your war.' I am surprised to find myself weighing these words. Let them break open onto my skin and pad along my veins like ants down into the hollow spaces between my bones. Let them settle there. I breathe them in. My breath swept up the words, rolled them into a lead ball that sat beside my heart.

April 6: 6:53 a.m.

Sometimes my mind fills fast with thought and overflows into my eyes. I sit against the tree, thinking of anything I can to keep my mind still. So it won't wander. Though thoughts of the boy soon drift about me, unable to free themselves from behind

my eyes. I had watched him fall like a stone to the ground and melt into the landscape, part of the trees, the leaves, and the ground. Watched the yellow grass fall into his ears, his mouth, and cover his face. Silence and stillness lay beside him now and under all that weight I know he feels nothing, sees nothing, and hears nothing. My ribs stiffen, like I'm made of iron. A tiny knife slips its way into my heart. I feel it peel the top like an orange and sink to the bottom, a blade with absence at its end. It slices into my frame and I think I might disappear. Vanish, as if shot through a gun. He will never move again. The wind inside the grass almost erases him from my eyes and I fear that he isn't there anymore, though I know he is. That stops me. At that moment I knew, I could not let that stand. I curl my finger to fit the trigger and wait for him. That man who put the boy into the ground.

April 6: 6:56 a.m.

The silence is heavy, sticks like sap to my ears. Collects on my skin and covers me like a coat. I stare down at the grass next to my hand. Hope that time will fill up through the cracks and into my fingers, so that I may squeeze it, drawing him, that man, across my eyes. My body sags against the tree. I wait and nothing arrives. I close my eyes. I dream I stand beneath an orange tree. Watch time peel away against the green leaves and fall like shriveled grains to the yellow grass. My father uncurls from the branches, like a naked arm and untwists to the ground. He watches me for a moment and then he laughs, and as he smiles at me, I see the crease marks stretch along the corners of his eyes. Then I wonder if the boy is in the leaves too, and if so where and what he is doing, and if the boy I hardly knew would know me. I wonder if I would ever see him again. A deep echo of gun thunder resonates in my chest. The orange tree falls around me into a man who lays crumpled against a tree. And then I hear my father whisper: 'William Harper, wake up. Wake up. Wake up.' I open my eyes. Hear the leaves fold against the grass, and shadows go like ghosts across the sun.

April 6: 6:58 a.m.

Two grey soldiers walk past me and spill into the grass. Leaves crackle beneath their boots. I sit quietly against the tree and close my eyes. The wind rattles my frame; a silent ghost, breathing heavy with fear. Working its way to the surface of my skin, as if it were trapped behind a mask. I hear a man's scream for mercy and I open my eyes. He lies bent against a log. One leg is broken. The other dangles awkwardly at his knee. He yells, 'Jesus Christ. Christ save me.' He cries, spit dropping from his lip. It catches like a web on the grass. Pulls a bible from the pocket of his coat and holds it to his chest and then close his eyes. I hear one soldier laugh then fire his rifle. My eyes press shut. Silence slips its fingers into my thoughts and I feel what's left of me pour down into my fingers. I squeeze my rifle. The two men walk over to me. He's dead, one says. Tommy, says the other, get that gun. He pokes me in the chest, grabs my rifle. I don't hesitate. I open my eyes. 'I am William Harper and you are dead.' The fat one has a smile. I shoot

him. Watch the ball pass through his cheek and out the other end, as if swallowed by the trees. He didn't laugh anymore. Just fell to the ground, and as he fell he wrapped me in those wild, green eyes. I let my reflection sink into the back of his eyes. Watched his pupils narrow and catch my face. They knew me now. Then there was nothing. My rifle was heavy in my hands. Yes, I killed him. It happened. Then I laugh. The other drops his rifle and runs into the woods. He wants to live. I take a breath and let it out, a light whisper that wanders through the leaves.

Editor's Note

Twenty-Eight Minutes was first published on the website in July and appears here as an Editor's Choice.



Pinecone © Gina Kim

Mister Bink Habit by Michael Frissore

Franklin quit smoking a month ago. After that he went through the patch and nicotine gum and claimed they didn't work. Then he sat in his office with a pacifier in his mouth. Once that started, other than to eat, I never saw him without it. Everyone laughed at him and Maurice in Accounting Photoshopped a picture of Franklin wearing only a baby diaper and e-mailed it to everyone.

He thought he could make it look cool by handling it like a pipe. One morning I asked him what would happen if we didn't get the Silva Report to our client on time. He casually removed the pacifier from his mouth and said in a deep voice, "Well, Mark. They'll just have to wait. Won't they?"

"Franklin," I said. "Take that stupid binky out of your mouth. You look like a fool."

"It's not a binky," Franklin said. "It's a pacifier, and a pretty darn cool one."

"Because it says 'rock 'n roll' on it? No, it's not cool."

"I have a skull and crossbones one too."

For two weeks he had that thing in his mouth. He took it out and flipped it over and over like a coin. During meetings he chewed on it and the sound gave the entire room the heebie-jeebies. If I was at my desk eating yogurt, he came over and stuck it in my cup and said, "You gonna eat that?"

Finally we hid both binkies on him. It was embarrassing watching him panic over trying to find these baby nipples. When he couldn't he turned to his thumb. The bosses would not let Franklin meet clients while he was sucking his thumb. The bink was ridiculous enough.

They couldn't fire him because they knew this was probably a mental illness and Franklin would sue the company and probably win. So they drew up a contract. It sounds absurd, but what else would you expect in the business world? They gave Franklin his binkies back, plus a couple of new ones with the company logo on them because the ones he was using stank and had holes in them from overuse. The contract stated Franklin could not use the pacifiers during meetings, whether in house or with clients.

Soon he became the Two Bink Kid. If I was talking to him he would stop, take one bink out of his mouth and insert another one he had been holding, then later switch them back again. Plus, during meetings he would break down and cry, "Binky!" until someone gave him one of his pacifiers.

Editor's Note

Mister Bink Habit was originally published on the website in November and was voted the Story of the Month.

Skimming by Kit Lamont

I picked up the stone and held it in my palm, curling my arthritic fingers around it and stroking the smoothness of its surface. It was about three to four inches across and had a nice heft to it. Arthur would have been pleased.

It was sixty-one years ago that I'd met him, here at Lake Kaibo in New Hampshire. I had agreed to accompany my boy-crazy best friend, Harriet, to the annual stone skimming contest. My fiance wasn't participating that year because he had to work at his father's hardware store.

As all the boys lined up along the lake's edge, surveying the watery landscape with stones in hands, I noticed Arthur immediately. His muscular arms and wide, easy smile set him apart from the crowd as though a light shone on him. When he looked over at me I felt a jolt of lightning and averted my eyes to the ground.

Arthur was the fifth one in line. When it was his turn he leaned to the side, holding his stone low, below knee-level, and threw it with the confidence of a baseball pitcher. It flitted across the water with ease, barely touching down like a graceful bird dipping its wing for sport. I counted twenty bounces before it was out of my sight.

In the end, it was Arthur who won the competition.

He must have noticed me looking at him because he came over and introduced himself after the ribbon ceremony. "Wanna give it a try?" he asked, holding out a stone.

I shook my head.

"C'mon," he urged. "Don't be like the stone, barely skimming the surface of life. Dive in."

No one had ever talked to me that way. "Are you always so sure of yourself?" I asked.

He sat on the rock next to me and we talked. He had been stationed in the Pacific during the war, working for the Navy as a fire control technician.

"Are there a lot of fires on Navy ships?" I asked him.

He smiled. "Not that kind of fire. Weapons fire. Submarine fire to be exact."

He told me all about life in the Navy. The camaraderie, the exotic ports, the eerie silences and the adrenaline-filled engagements with the enemy.

He'd seen so much of the world, facing fear and death on a daily basis. He'd led such an exciting life. My fiance hadn't even gone overseas.

I rested my chin on the palm of my hand and leaned in. "Do you miss it?"

He looked across the lake, which was barely visible now, its black borders bleeding into the darkening sky. "I think that's why I like to come here. The expanse of the water makes me think of... new possibilities."

I closed my eyes, imagining all the far-flung places he'd seen. "I've never even been out of New England," I told him.

"Yet," he added.

I smiled at his optimism. "I should probably tell you something." I hesitated for a second, trying to find the words. "Um..."

Harriet walked over, leaving the two boys I'd seen her talking with. She narrowed her eyes at me, like a disapproving mother. "C'mon," she said. "Let's go."

Arthur stood up and held out his hand, introducing himself.

Harriet gave him a vertical once over. She said, "Hi," then turned to me. "C'mon."

Arthur cleared his throat. "I'm happy to offer her a ride home." Then he turned to me. "If it's okay with you."

I smiled. "Sure."

Harriet shot daggers at me. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"It's just a ride, Harriet. I'm fine."

She lingered for a few seconds, looking back and forth between Arthur and me, and then turned around, her arms crossed. "Fine," she said. "It's your life." She walked away.

Arthur and I talked until it was dark. He led me by the hand as we made our way toward the parking lot. When we got to his car he reached around me to open the passenger side door. His arm grazed my waist. I closed my eyes and he kissed me.

"We don't have to go straight home," I told him.

Two hours later, as we sat in front of my house, I smoothed my hair and re-applied my lipstick, checking it in the rear view mirror before going inside. Mom and Pops would still be awake.

"Can I call you tomorrow?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I should have told you earlier. I can't see you again. I'm getting married next month."

He fell back against his seat, as if he'd been shot. "What? But why...? You obviously don't care about him."



I leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm sorry," I repeated. "I wish things could be different." Then I got out of the car and ran to my front door without looking back.

I married my fiancé the next month. I wore a lace wedding dress which concealed the baby bump beginning to form. I never told Arthur I was pregnant the night I first met him. I couldn't bear for him to think so badly of me. And I never saw him again. I read about him twice in the paper; once, a few years after I'd met him, when he got married to a society gal. And yesterday, when I read his obituary.

Now, here I am at the lake, weighing the stone in my hand. For sixty-one years I'd stayed married to the same man. My life was dull but not unpleasant. It was the life I was expected to live; it was the life I chose.

But every now and then, during the past sixty-one years I'd think about Arthur. And I'd know that for the one night I shared with him I hadn't skimmed the surface of life.

I threw the stone as hard as my tired, old bones would allow. It sunk without a single skip.

Editor's Note

Skimming was first published on the website in September and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Early Fall on New Hope Creek © *Scott Dilworth Johnson*

Coins by Dan Crawley

Engle was upset. His last check, from his nine-month Lecturer position at the university, was half of what he thought it'd be. He stood over the desk of the department's Administrative Assistant and watched her print out one payroll report after another. Then her finger slid down a column of numbers. She totaled.

"The numbers work out," she said.

"No they don't," Engle said. He had to get his son at pre-school but he assured the Administrative Assistant he'd return.

"No need." She looked stoned to Engle, the way she ogled at him. "Everything's added up."

"It's not there," Engle let her know. "I need another six hundred." He moved quickly to her office door. "I'll come back and we'll find that missing six hundred."

"Don't bother," the Administrative Assistant said.

"I am bothered," Engle said.

In his car, Engle tried calling his wife on his cell phone. He got her voice mail.

"Why aren't you picking up? You should be picking up." Engle raced up to the car in front of him and then braked hard. "You know how you said this morning that the money would show up, will it didn't. Just so you know." He snapped shut the cell.

The parking lot of the pre-school was being repaved, so Engle had to park a half block away. He saw his son standing in a line with other pre-schoolers near a chain-linked fence. On the other side of the fence, the whole surface of the lot shimmered. The teacher apologized for the inconvenience and the smell.

"You should've let the parents know," Engle said, reaching out his hand to his son. "You should send home a note or something."

"Lava," Engle's son said, pointing at the parking lot.

"No, lava is red," Engle told him.

"But it does turn black," the teacher said to the boy, smiling.

Engle's son staggered down the sidewalk like a boozier, on the verge of toppling over. So far he hadn't taken a spill, in public or at home. Engle walked slowly behind his boy. His cell phone rang. It was his wife finally calling back.

"They stole from me," Engle said.

His wife said, "The money will show eventually, right?"

"Not according to the payroll lady in the department," Engle said. "She's not adding right. She's missing her mistake. Her equations are all messed up."

He opened the back passenger car door and his son climbed up to his car seat. "Buckle in," Engle told him.

"You buckle him in," his wife said.

"He's got it," Engle said in a scold. "He's a big man." The boy grinned at him, fumbling with the straps, the buckles.

"What do we do?" Engle stared at his struggling son. The boy couldn't get the left strap over his head and soon the harness tightly bound only the right side of his little body.

"Is he buckled in yet?"

"Yes. Did you send off the Visa already?" Engle held the cell phone in one hand and started the car with the other.

"Daddy!"

"Don't yell in the car, sweet," Engle said over his shoulder.

"Why'd he yell?" his wife said, concerned. "Is he strapped in right?"

"Daddy."

"What is it?"

"Daddy, let me *see* the money," the boy said breathlessly. The boy hard-pressed the straps off his right shoulder and held the whole harness away from him like an old man messing with suspenders.

"That's great," Engle said into the cell. "He wants to see my *money*. I don't need this today."

"Oh no," his wife said, "that's something he does. He's on this kick about looking in my coin purse and then he knows we have enough money to get home. Just show him some coins and he'll be fine."

"Where'd he get that from?" Then Engle said over his shoulder, "I don't have any money, sweet."

The boy's eyes glistened, undulated.

"The kid's freaking out," Engle said to his wife. "I really don't need this today."

The boy cried silently like he always did, his lips fat with tremors.

His wife said tiredly, "Just show him a few coins and he'll be fine."

Engle searched the console and picked up two pennies. He turned and showed them to his crying son. The boy's lips thinned. He eased the straps back against the right side of his chest and delicately picked up first one penny and then the other from his father's palm. He smiled and wiped at his eyes with the fist still clutching the coins.

"Are you kidding me?" Engle said.

"What's wrong now?"

"Unbelievable."

"Is it the buckles? Is he out of his seat?"

"No, he's secure." Then Engle said sarcastically to his son, "Is it safe to hit the road? Are we going to make it home?"

The boy nodded.

"Has he calmed down?"

"Yeah," Engle said into the cell phone. "According to him we are safe for travel." The pitch of Engle's voice began to soar. "We have all the money we need, right sweet? We are abundant and safe and there's absolutely nothing that can hold us back now."

Editor's Note

Coins was first published on the website in July and appears here as an Editor's Choice.



The Boy and a Very Big Bug © *Margaret Mendel*

The River by Cliff Young

We were up at the river, the south fork that rolls through the country where my grandparents' old cabin used to be. I like to take the boy away from roads, out where he won't have the constant reminder of cars. Cars must be awful for him.

It was late in the summer, so the river was low. We were walking along the bank, over sand and piles of gray river rock and stranded debris. If this had been June, the river would have been swollen with runoff from the snowpack. The water would have been up to my waist, and over the boy's head.

I was skipping rocks, mostly because looking for flat skipping stones gave us something to do. He hadn't been much of a talker since he moved in with my sister's family, and I found the silences awkward. My sister takes good care of him, but she's got her own family.

The river moved slowly, and wound through the hills and under the oak trees and manzanita bushes. We were mostly silent as we looked through the rocks, all tumbled smooth with time and the slow current of the river.

He wasn't showing much interest in my rock skipping ability, even when I got ten skips and hit the other side.



I picked up a bulbous rock and showed it to him. "Look," I said, "this one looks like a nose."

He looked at it in that purposeful way he had developed since his parents' accident. If he were a 40 year old man, you might take his expression for one of intellectual detachment. But on a three year old boy, it looked more like worry. It had been a long time since I had seen him with an age-appropriate expression on his face.

"It looks like a butt," he finally said. And then, "can you make it skip?"

"I don't know, it's not really flat," I said. "See how it flares?" The flared parts were what made it look like a nose.

He looked back at me with that same earnest detachment. Sometimes, he looked like he was slipping away. Like there was some other, unseen place, and it was pulling on him.

I threw the rock side-armed, and gave it a flick as I released it. It plowed into the current with a failed "plop".

"Do it again!" he yelled, more excited by

failure than success.

So I grabbed a fist-sized cobble and threw it as high as I could, out into the center of the river, where the water was deeper.

The river splashed, first a wide spray where the water swallowed the rock, then a high plume as the water slammed together, making two distinct sounds.

"Again!" he yelled.

"Your turn," I said, and handed him a small rock. He threw it at the river, and I yelled when it hit. "What a splash!"

We took turns throwing rocks into the river. I grabbed a small log and threw it in. "Sink the Bismarck!" I yelled, and we both rained river rocks down on the battleship.

I looked at my nephew. There was more little kid in him than I had seen in a long time. He was smiling, and yelling and running around the way he should. He was happy.

"That was fun," he said, as the slow current pulled the log from our view and we held our fire. The serious look came back to his face.

He looked out at the river. He seemed to be mesmerized by the current, slow and strong and constant. He picked up a rock from the pile he was standing on, and held it out for me to see. It was smooth and flat like the others, but it was marbled with veins of white and blue. The river had pulled it from miles away, from a place where the rocks were not all gray and speckled with black, like they were here.

"Do you get to do much fun stuff?" I asked him, because I was worried that he didn't.

"No," he said.

"Do you like living with your cousins?"

"Auntie's not fun," he said. "Not fun like you."

"She has a much harder job than I do," I said. It really was a much harder job. I had not taken it, in fact, because it was hard. It would have changed my whole life. My sister already had a family, so what was one more? But I could see now that was the problem. What do you do with someone who is so far removed from the place he belonged?

He looked back at the rock in his little hand. He regarded it thoughtfully, like he was trying to decide what to make of it. "Can I keep it?" He asked without looking up.

"Sure," I said.

He clutched the rock between his hands, then placed it carefully in his pocket.

We followed the river back to the old dead oak, where the trail met the small beach. I put my nephew on my shoulders and we made our way back to the car.

Editor's Note

The River was first published on the website in September and earned Story of the Month honors. It was also nominated for Best of the Web.

Balancing Act © *Scott Dilworth Johnson*

Smell You Later by Hayley Krischer

"Can you put down the magazine and tell me which bathing suit you want?"
"Can't I tell you while I'm reading?"
"So tell me."
"The green and yellow one."
"That doesn't fit you any more, honey. "
"Okay, put in the orange one."
"You have soccer practice on Sunday. Where are your cleats?"
"I don't know."
"Jamie, put down the magazine and find your cleats, please."
"Mom, why did you marry Eric?"
"Because I love him."
"No, you don't."
"Yes, Jamie, I do."
"Why else?"
"Because he's funny."
"Remember when I used to say 'Not funny!' every time someone said I was funny?"
"Well, you are funny. And one of the reasons I love Eric is because he's funny. It's also one of the reasons I like your dad."
"I think you're funny, Mom. Here, take the cleats."
"Funny looking, right?"
"Do I have to go to my dad's?"
"Yes, honey."
"I don't want to go."
"I know."
"In fact, I'm not going."
"Let's take it one day at a time, Jamie."
"Does that mean I don't have to go?"
"It just means that we're going to start out with tonight. Let's see how it goes tomorrow."
"Why are you packing my bag if I'm not going?"
"Because we're going to take it one day at a time."
"I didn't say that, you said that."
"What are you going to be like as a teenager if you're this fresh as a nine-year-old?"
"Maybe I'll be nicer?"
"That would be good."
"If you don't send me to my dad's, I'll be nicer. Otherwise, I'll be evil."
"Jamie!"
"What? I was being funny."

"What's wrong with going to your dad's? You have Wii. You have marshmallows. He gives you a lot of marshmallows."

"Could you buy some of those marshmallows and put them in my lunch box?"

"If you go to your dad's, I'm sure he'll let you eat as many marshmallows as you want until your teeth fall out."

"I hate marshmallows."

"Who hates marshmallows?"

"Eric, tell Jamie he'll be swimming in marshmallows if he goes to his dad's."

"I hate marshmallows."

"Jamie, why are you unpacking your bag, honey?"

"Because I'm not going to his house, Mom. I told you this already."

"Why don't you want to go to your dad's, bud?"

"I don't know."

"He has Wii, he has marshmallows."

"He doesn't have Force Unleashed."

"Take our copy, Jamie."

"He says I can't play it because it's inappropriate."

"Maybe he's got a point, bud. Maybe it is inappropriate."

"That's total bullshit, Eric, and you know it."

"Maybe that's why he doesn't want you playing it. Because when you play it you turn into a foul-mouthed kid."

"There's no bad words in Force Unleashed--and Mom, stop repacking my bag!"

"He's going to be here in five minutes, Jamie."

"I don't care. I don't give a shit. You want to drag me out of the house? I'm not fucking going."

"I thought we talked about using other words when you're frustrated."

"Stop packing his bag for a second, Mel."

"Jamie, I understand you're upset."

"My dad told me that if I don't want to go that I don't have to."

"Well, then we should call him. Or we should set up another meeting with Dr. Phonese. It's important for you to have a relationship with your father, honey."

"Now you sound like Dr. Penis."

"Jamie, stop."

"What? His name doesn't sound like Penis?"

"No Dr. Phonese does not sound like Penis."

"Mom, stop putting my cleats back in the bag. I'm not going."

"Can you just give me a reason?"

"No fart jokes allowed."

"Is that the only reason? Because that's not a good enough reason, honey."

"I'd say that's a fairly good reason, Mel."

"See, Mom, Eric agrees with me."

"Eric--"

"He didn't like that pull my finger joke, Mel. Remember the one that you got the phone call about?"

"I hate that pull my finger joke."

"Yeah, well, so does your ex-husband. That's one thing you two have in common. Hey Jamie, something's wrong with my finger."

"Nothing's wrong with your finger."

"Really, bud. There's something terribly wrong with it."

"I think there's something wrong with you, Eric."

"Of course there's something wrong with me because I'm sitting here hanging out with you in your smelly room. When was the last time you washed your sheets?"

"I don't wash my own sheets. I'm nine."

"Let's make a list, Mel, this kid needs to start doing laundry."

"I go to the Laundromat with my dad."

"And, what do you do there, bud? Do you fold clothes? Do you carry all of the laundry down the block? Do you separate whites and darks?"

"I'm sure he does something, Eric."

"No, actually, I just watch my father."

"It sounds like you have it pretty easy at your dad's."

"It's not always easy."

"Marshmallows. Mario Galaxy Two. Someone else doing your laundry. Then you get to come back to your mom after a weekend and she rubs your toes..."

"She doesn't rub my toes."

"I gave you a back massage the other day."

"That's some life, bud. I'd like it if someone rubbed my back. Or my finger."

"Here we go with the finger."

"There's pain behind this finger."

"You're trying to fart on me that's what you're doing."

"When you get back from your dad's, I'll fart on you all you want and you can retaliate. We'll have a sadomasochistic convention of farting."

"What's sado--"

"Eric!"

"He's here. I see his car."

"Eric, grab the bag for me. His pajamas. They're across the room. And the Legos. And the Indiana Jones book--the one with the chapters."

"Mom, where's my mitt?"

"Why do you need your mitt?"

"Because my dad wants to have a catch. That's what he said."

"It's in the mud room. I'll go get it, honey."

"No, Mom. I'll go."

"You'll go?"

"I didn't say I'd go. I said I'd get the mitt."

"You said--"

"He's walking downstairs by himself, Mel. And he's going to get his own mitt. That's what he's saying, right bud?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, well then I'll see you at soccer, honey."

"I don't want you to go to soccer."

"Okay. I don't have to go to soccer."

"Hey, bud. Easy on your mom."

"I mean, she doesn't have to go to soccer if she doesn't want to. If she wants to go to the farmer's market or something else. I don't mind if she doesn't want to come."

"Hey bud, I'm going to soccer and fart on your head."

"I'm going to pounce on you at soccer and ram your skull into the goalie post."

"Jesus, bud. No wonder your dad doesn't want you playing Force Unleashed."

"Sorry."

"I'm going to unleash a silent but deadly at your soccer game."

"Enough of the fart jokes, please."

"You haven't seen enough until you've seen his Force Unleashed, Mom."

"You don't see a Force Unleashed, bud."

"If it's a purple vapor, you do."

"Purple vapor fart machine."

"Purple vapor time machine."

"Okay, Jamie. I'll call you tomorrow, how about that?"

"Yeah, Mom. That's good. Call me tomorrow. Maybe I'll come home a day early. And hey Eric?"

"What's up, bud?"

"Smell you later."

Editor's Note

Smell You Later was originally published on the website in November and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Ambassadors for Christ by Robert Meade

Fr. Jon Parker trudged along the pathway between the rectory and church. Despite the December sunshine, he felt low.

It had come to his attention that his wispy voice and low-key delivery had led his parishioners to a terrible conclusion: he gave horrible sermons. Each week he found himself studying the balding crowns of many bobbing heads. He'd seen video of his preaching and was painfully aware of his deficiencies. He mumbled. He stammered--if only slightly. He swallowed the fronts of his words and clipped off the backs.

Only last Sunday he'd been summoned to the Pastor's office for insulting the Ladies Altar Guild. Fr. Parker was stunned. He'd gone out of his way to praise their Advent decorations, remarking how the women of the Guild were, indeed, all ambitious.

Unfortunately, "ambitious" might have sounded like "bitious," he explained to Fr. Monigan. From there it was a short leap, in the minds of the unrefined, to mental pictures of mongrels of the female persuasion. The Pastor had dismissed him, throwing up his hands.

Inside the church, Fr. Parker donned his vestments with renewed vigor. Enough was enough. He vowed to deliver a sermon that would be the talk of the town. He would advocate for the maternity ward at St. Elizabeth's. He knelt briefly, asking for the grace to speak eloquently, then strode out into the church.

Halfway through his sermon, though, he looked up and discovered the familiar, balding crowns. He increased his pace, pitch, and volume. He came down from the pulpit and stood in the aisle, looking Paul Osgood--a former Marine--in the face, or trying to. He paced back and forth, flinging his arms out. "Today we are called," Fr. Parker intoned, closing with three chopping motions, "ambassadors all, ambassadors true, ambassadors for Christ."

A stir in the congregation encouraged Fr. Parker. They were alert now, murmuring. Pleased, he bounced up the altar stairs on the balls of his feet.

Later, as the communicants filed to the front, some received the sacrament with a knowing gleam. Others looked away. He noticed the same pattern while shaking hands after the service. Some pumped his arm enthusiastically; others barely squeezed his fingertips.

John Regis, unmarried and forty, clutched Fr. Parker with a meaty paw.

"Thank you so much, Father," he said. "It's been such a struggle. Just me and mother, you see. Growing up was rough. You know how people can be, all gossip and bother." Fr. Parker suddenly found himself in a bear hug. "I'll never forget this," John whispered hoarsely. "I'll never forget you." Then he was gone, swallowed by the crowd.

Fr. Parker also noticed knots of onlookers in the parking lot. They lingered in clumps of conversation, pointing at him. He headed for the rectory, feeling a spring in his step that had been absent for many a month.

Monday morning, Fr. Parker awoke to a brave new world. He was excited, thrilled. He imagined that Jesus himself must have felt this way after the Sermon on the Mount. But he drew back--was this a sin of pride, comparing himself to the Redeemer? He admonished himself and went about his day, quietly.

After dinner Fr. Parker tried working on his next sermon. But in his mind a vast multitude sat beneath him. They looked up eagerly as he opened his mouth and spoke. They hung on his every golden word. He was energized. He was magnetic.

He was jerked back to reality by bellowing.

"Parker!" the Pastor boomed. "Where the devil are you?" Fr. Jon Parker, theologian and exorcist, picked himself up and trudged down the hall.

Fr. Monigan sat at his computer. "Five hundred emails!" he shrieked. "Five hundred thorns in my head!" He turned the monitor toward Fr. Parker. "I'll save you the trouble. Some love what you said. Most want to string you up, and not by your neck."

"What I said?" Fr. Parker replied, needing to sit down.

"Bastards for Christ!" Fr. Monigan yelled. "Good Christians should be bastards for Christ?" Fr. Parker felt dizzy.

"I didn't...."

"The local news called," Fr. Monigan interrupted. "They tipped me off about tonight's report." He entered some keystrokes.

The monitor picked up a live feed of reporters crowding the president of the Catholic League.

"Care to comment about Fr. Parker's unusual message, Mr. Donovan?" A microphone was thrust in Donovan's face.

"We at the League have received many calls," he began. "Our official position is that every priest must find a way to make the gospel relevant to the faithful. Fr. Parker was doing what he believed was his superiors' will."

"But what about those who find his message offensive?" another reporter insisted. Donovan chuckled.

"I remind them that Jesus himself was an unexpected pregnancy," he said. "Judge not, lest you yourself be judged." Donovan walked off-camera. The Pastor clicked off the newscast and stared hard at Fr. Parker, who studied the tops of his shoes.

When Fr. Parker emerged from the Pastor's office, everything was set. He was to call the Chancery. He was not to reply to inquiries from the media. He would clarify the misunderstanding at Sunday's sermon. Then he would take a month's vacation.

But the next day, picketers appeared across the street. Fr. Parker did not recognize most of them, though he did see Paul Osgood holding a sign. "Legit or Quit!" read one. "Marriage is Sacred," said another. And worst: "Bastards Go to Hell."

Several news vans sat across the street. Reporters exhaled December steam, microphones in hand. One stared up at the rectory, saw him, then led the charge to the front door. The bell rang frantically.

"Another fine mess you've gotten me into," said Fr. Monigan, appearing in the doorway. He seemed oddly calm. "Take a car. Go out the back. Don't tell me where. I need plausible deniability." Fr. Parker hesitated. "NOW!" said the Pastor, resuming his usual manner. Fr. Parker headed down the stairs. "Don't come back until midnight!" he heard the Pastor yell.

Fr. Parker escaped into his Ford Escort and drove out the back. Whether through force of habit or sheer obstinacy--he resented Fr. Monigan--he inadvertently turned onto the road that ran by the rectory. He averted his face, but a reporter pointed.

"There he is!" They caught him at the red light, banging on the windows, screaming questions at him. He panicked and took an illegal left, roaring down the road.

After sneaking back into the rectory that night, Fr. Parker caught the late news, chewing his fist.

"In a situation like this," said the Archdiocesan Director of Communications, "we have a full investigation of the parish so that we have the facts in hand."

"But isn't it true," insisted the reporter, "that girls at the local high school have formed sex clubs so they can have babies for Christ? According to one source, they have a *Facebook* page called Parker's Preggers. Another is titled Magdalene Moms. Would you comment, Mr. Zellwigger?" The man's stoic expression did not change.

"At this point I cannot say what the situation is. We'll know more when our investigation is completed. Thank you." The camera cut back to the reporter.

"And so the saga continues for the embattled Fr. Parker. *Evening Update* has learned that supporters of the

controversial cleric have planned a rally at John F. Kennedy High School in Somers tomorrow night. Back to you, Chris."

"Nice," said Fr. Monigan, nearly scaring Fr. Parker to death with his sudden if not wholly unexpected appearance. "I love investigations myself," he continued. "Nothing



like a rectal probing of the parish to get the blood going. And the girls. Well, they *do* have a refreshing take on our pro-life stance." He glowered down at the seated priest.

"I'll go to the rally," Fr. Parker protested. "I'll stop this."

"You'll read a prepared statement I'll give you," the Pastor insisted, putting his face directly in front of Fr. Parker's. "You will not deviate from it in any way. Then you will come directly back here. Do I make myself clear?"

"Certainly," said Fr. Parker. The Pastor spun abruptly and left. Fr. Parker retired to his room and prayed for guidance to lead his flock aright. But he was troubled. He was only one man. How could he stem the rising tide of confusion?

As he prayed, he recalled a single sentence: God looked at everything he had made and he found it very good. Fr. Parker took comfort in this. He could reach out to the goodness in his listeners and shepherd them back to the right path. They needed him. They needed each other. He fell asleep and dreamed about auditoriums packed with entranced listeners.

The next night when Fr. Parker locked his Escort, he was shocked by the sheer number of people. So many cars jammed the driveway that he had to park a half-mile from the school. As he got closer, he encountered ever-thickening clots of Parker fanatics.

Floodlights carved twin ovals into the night sky. News helicopters hovered overhead and documented the scene. Reporters climbed atop their vans, aloof from the gathering throng.

Fr. Parker bypassed the main entrance by circling around to the back. He pulled his jacket tighter around his collar. He wanted to get inside without making a scene. But as he trudged along, heads turned in recognition. People followed, at first singly and in pairs. Then whole groups joined the pilgrimage, until he was accompanied by a multitude.

"Hey Father!" they said. "Fr. Parker!" He started jogging, ignoring them. They jogged with him. Some thumped him on the back. "Hey, Father!"

He halted at the back entrance. As many people waited there as were following him. He found himself encircled by a mob. They broke into applause, cheering. Fr. Parker motioned that they should quiet down.

"Thank you," he began, "for coming tonight. If we could go inside, I have something to read." The people cheered again. "You're all good people," Fr. Parker persisted, "but this is a misunderstanding." From the back of the crowd came a loud "No!" "Please!" Fr. Parker said. "Please. Come inside."

The crowd hesitated.

Paul Osgood emerged from the mob, pointing a .45 automatic. He took aim at Fr. Parker.

"My little girl!" he cried. "Only thirteen. Pregnant! She showed us the strip. It was positive!"

"I don't even know your daughter," Fr. Parker stammered. Osgood clicked off the safety.

"For Christ!" he howled. "She wants a bastard for Christ!" He pulled back the hammer. "It's your fault," he said, suddenly calm.

"Please!" said Fr. Parker. "You might harm one of these people." Fr. Parker crept forward, his voice a soothing instrument. "Your daughter could not have heard my sermon before she conceived the child. Think. It wasn't anything I said." He kept inching forward. "You're a good man. You don't want to hurt anybody." Fr. Parker stopped six inches from the gun. "Think of your family. They need you. Your daughter needs you. Your grandchild needs you." Fr. Parker reached out and touched the man's shoulder.

Osgood jumped, as though bitten by a serpent. Fr. Parker saw the flash and felt the explosion. He fell to his knees, blinking. The horrified father dropped the gun. "You're a good man," Fr. Parker whispered, then slid into an accelerating stream of light so intense that he had to close his eyes. When he opened them, he stood on a small bluff overlooking an immense field dotted with people.

"Go ahead," said the white-robed man next to him, gesturing to the hundred thousand five-thousands. "They're all yours." Fr. Parker opened his mouth and discovered he could speak angelically. His listeners settled in.

His sermon would last an eternity, but he felt that somehow he would rise to the occasion.

Editor's Note

Ambassadors for Christ was first published on the website in July and was voted Story of the Month.

Warming Up on a Chilly Morning © *Scott Dilworth Johnson*

The Incident with the Artist by Steven Berkowitz

A gleaming silver moon shone high up in the night sky as waves of anxious, curiosity-driven people flooded into and--when no more could fit inside--in front of the artist's loft. Those who had arrived earliest, the artist's close friends and chief appreciators, had found a spot for themselves in his small crowded studio; they watched him closely and were filled with joy and awe as he came nearer and nearer to finishing his masterpiece, a work of art that was rumored would be, upon its completion, peerless in beauty and absolute in its perfection. It was said that prior to starting the piece, the artist had been visited by an angel, and the angel did nothing but slowly move its hand to the artist's forehead, lightly pressing its center with two glowing, divine fingers.

With each stroke of the artist's brush, the anxiety and jubilation of the spectators multiplied; with each stroke the picture came closer and closer to completion. As he stood there, as he stood before the picture that was becoming his magnum opus right before his eyes, he wore a silent, expressionless face. The people who were able to see his face referred to it as serene, calm, stoic, or knowing. With each stroke, with each new color or impression added to the piece, various and powerful reactions were drawn from the crowd. People gasped at times. People whispered unknown praises or compliments or questions. People wore excited expressions on their faces, sometimes beaming with glee, sometimes downcast and sad, and at times, agitated by some inexplicable, overpowering feeling that seemed to emanate from the art. Each movement of the artist's hand seemed to reveal some new profundity, some new wisdom that the people around him had been ignorant of, as if a simple, invisible truth had been in front of them their whole lives, only made visible by the artist's brush. Each flick of his wrist, each new color or accentuation or flourish, brought the spectators closer and closer to understanding just what it was they were looking at, while at the same time, served to raise more questions in their minds, distancing them ever further from the miracle they were witnessing.

Suddenly a woman, one of the artist's friends that was standing close to him (it could be said she was standing the closest to him out of everybody), let out a piercing, harrowing scream, collapsing to the floor; just a moment ago she was standing up resolutely, completely fixated on and entranced by the image on which her eyes had been feasting. There she lay untouched; no member of the crowd even thought for a second to help her, and in turn, lose their spot. As if savoring the phenomenon he appeared to be the master of, the artist began to slow his pace. Each stroke of the brush rippled across the canvas in a luxurious, angelic display of human beauty and finesse at its apex, the apex which just faintly touched the realm and essence of the divine. It was during this time, this mind-numbing climax of artistic expression, that the artist suddenly stopped painting and, brush in hand, walked over and out onto the balcony adjoined to and outside of his studio. Those inside held their breath. This was part of

his plan, part of his genius; it must have been. Those outside, finally granted their communal wish to see the artist, simply did not know how to react. At first they were overjoyed; but soon they realized that this meant he had either finished the painting or, for reasons no one could even begin to understand, had stopped working on it, leaving it incomplete.

The artist said nothing. He gave no indication nor professed any reasoning for his abrupt course of action. Instead, he gazed up longingly at a gleaming, silver moon that shone high in the night sky. For the first time during his entire painting of the picture, he began to outwardly display some emotion. As he looked toward the heavens, an intense longing showed on his face, a single glance that seemed to capture the plight of all humanity. It was as if all the motives and desires, all the ambitions and ideals, and all the intentions and motivations that ever were over the course of history were all reflected at once, in his one, perfectly balanced, singular glance. Having come to the limits of the human understanding of beauty and meaning, he had suddenly, in a moment known only to him, crossed over and understood it all, knew some great secret that everyone, all the people around him and all the people all over the world were consciously or unconsciously searching for. This glance of his broke out into a small child-like smile. Humbled by something larger than he, a slim stream of tears rolled out of his eyes and down his cheeks. He had been touched. In the darkness of the night, he began to radiant faintly.

The crowds however, both inside and outside his loft, couldn't make out what the artist was doing, and more importantly, couldn't feel what he was feeling. They began to talk amongst themselves a nervous sort of talk. What if the artist has lost inspiration? What if he has given up? Could he have become frustrated with himself? Perhaps he has grown tired; yes, that's it, he's just tired. No! No, he isn't tired at all, that sly artist. He's thinks it's all a joke! He's playing a trick on us! He'll never finish the painting! He never intended to in the first place!

The crowds grew louder and angrier, shouting at the artist, first with questions, then with declarative insults. Frenzy soon enveloped them all; the collective anxiety of the mobs was too much and it was now boiling over. There was no voice of reason. There was nothing that could save them from themselves. The mob outside the loft, which had for some time occupied the entirety of the town square, became madly violent. Possessed with an inexplicable fury and sense of brutality, they all turned on one another and began to fight savagely. Storefronts were broken into and several fires had started. Wails of rage, of envy, and of sorrow came from the mob; these screams combined to form one chaotic bellow of truly demonic proportions. Not one among them ran for shelter nor remained passive. Everyone in the mob was destroying something; everyone was infected with a disease for which there was no cure, save death itself.

The people inside the loft formed a much smaller mob. Their destruction was contained within the building, but they still ravaged and raged as best they could. Many

people were pushed down and subsequently stepped on. A few very unfortunate souls fell down onto the steps in the artist's apartment; their bodies soon became indistinguishable as people flooded up and down the stairs, tearing them up like confetti. The items within the loft were all smashed up as well. They too were rendered indistinguishable by the chaos of the mob. It wasn't long before the painting that everybody in their rage had seemed to forget about, fell to floor. Its meaning, its very presence had been lost among the pandemonium that surrounded it. Torn to shreds by the stampede of uncaring feet, the painting was lost, gone as if it never was.

Through all of this the artist was still looking up at the sky; it was there that his attention had remained the entire time. Suddenly he brought his head and his thoughts back down to Earth. He wore the same small, humbled, and child-like smile as he turned around and walked calmly back into his studio. Content with itself, the mob didn't notice his return. The artist saw the devastation and ruin that was taking place in front of him, and at the same time, outside his loft, all around him. He saw, or rather didn't see his painting that had been destroyed, and he began to laugh to himself. His laugh grew louder and louder and by some way that no survivor of the incident can explain, eventually drowned out the roar of the crowd. This caught the mob's attention and for a brief moment they were sobered by the artist's laugh, which now sounded more like some sort of inhuman cackle of a seraphim pitch. This time it was the inside crowd's turn to not know how to react.

Their stillness and sobriety did not last long however, as the mob outside began to push itself inside the apartment. Jostled by the fresh waves of bodies squeezing to move, pushing each other inch by inch up the stairs, the temporarily quieted crowd mingled with the mob from outside. They became one; two dangerous and until then separate hive-minds formed the inevitable, ultimate climax of the ongoing disaster. Like a long, panicked hand reaching into a tight spot to retrieve something of the utmost importance, the mob surrounded the artist in a flash and picked him up, carrying him outside his loft and into the center of the village square, the heart of that dark, squirming mass of inhumanity. Although his voice had been drowned out, those close enough could see his face convulsing, his mouth wide open with crazed, manic merriment. As the crowd tore the artist limb from limb, they say he was still roaring with laughter.

Editor's Note

The Incident with the Artist was first published on the website in December and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Cry Wolf by Jac Cattaneo

The cow blew up the morning after the storm. I guess the wind ripped down the fence. I didn't see the cow explode, but my brother Yan did. By the time we got to the field after school, fresh snowfall had covered up most of the red, the pieces of flesh and hide and bone. Old Marek strung up some new barbed wire and re-painted the sign.

Minefield, it said, Extreme Danger

Yan laughed because cows can't read. He said it was time to carry out his plan. He'd first mentioned it when the soldiers left Old Marek's farm. We'd been standing in the tanks' tire tracks, watching Old Marek hammering down the posts for the barbed wire fence. Mother said the land could never be tilled again.

'Think of it,' said Yan, kicking at the churned up earth. 'A field of death. I can lead unsuspecting enemies there.' He looked at me sideways, his eyelids drooping, like they always did before he tripped me up or pushed me into the bushes.

I jumped out of range. 'What enemies?'

'What enemies? *Baby brother.* You'll see.'

Yan never told me what he was plotting--he was twelve that year and I was only nine. When his gang played soldiers, I was the enemy who had to take cover in the forest. They hunted me through the firs, chanting my name: *Sash-a, Sash-a.* Once they chased me into the branches of a beech tree and danced around the trunk.

After the dead cow reminded Yan about his plan, my stomach felt cold. If I was going to be the enemy again, how could I hide in a minefield? Besides, we'd have to get past Old Marek's dog. Half-dog. The other half was wolf.

Wolf guarded Marek's farm, growling and barking and scaring the children away. That summer, the dog had bitten Yan when he tried to take a shortcut down to the river. The scar stood out like a crimson half-moon on his right thigh.

Then Yan told me he'd stolen some shears.

'I'm going to make a hole in the barbed wire,' he said. 'Round the field of death.'

'That's dangerous.'

'*That's dangerous.* The wire's not going to explode, idiot.' He cuffed the side of my face, so my left ear throbbed. It was no use talking to him when his eyelids were weird like that.

The next morning Yan went out early, before breakfast. He hadn't come back by the time we were supposed to leave for school. Mother twisted her apron in her fingers, frowning at his uneaten porridge.

'Take his books, Sasha,' she said. 'See if you can find him on the way.'

I took his red school bag and my blue satchel, one on each shoulder. I wanted to run, but the snow was coming down hard. When I got to the farm I called Yan's name, but it disappeared into the white air.

Then I heard a howling noise ahead. Something big and grey was stuck halfway through a hole in the barbed wire fence around old Marek's field. Wolf. A pair of shears lay next to him on the crusty snow.

I crept up behind the squirming animal. Through the blizzard I could just see the shape of my brother, working his way along the inside of the fence on the left edge of the field.

'Yan! Be careful!' I thought of the chunks of cow, burst scarlet under the ice.

Wolf yanked at the fence and tried to turn his head towards me, but he was stuck fast.

'Sasha?' My brother's voice carried through the snow. 'That bloody hound came at me before I could finish the hole.'

'Wait there--I'll get help.'

'No, don't fetch anyone! Push Wolf! Shove him through the fence!' My brother waved his arms. 'When he runs across the field he'll blow into a million pieces!'

I dropped the bags and approached the dog. He was barking, struggling in the barbed wire, his rough grey coat stained with red. Under his fur, his skin must be scratched like my arms had been when Yan shoved me into the brambles.

I put my hand carefully onto the dog's back.

'Wolf.'

He stopped barking. I stroked the scruff of his neck. He stiffened and made a low noise, deep in his throat. I tried to make the same sound as he was making.

'Hurry up, fool,' called my brother.

Wolf raised his head and snarled.

'No, Yan,' I said. 'You're the foolish one.'

I picked up the cutters and clipped the wire biting into Wolf's flank, pulling the barbs out of his skin. He yelped and struggled against me.

'Ram him into the field,' called Yan, stepping forward onto the mined ground.

'Get back!' I shouted. 'Hold onto the fence and come to me--it's the only way out.' If my brother exploded, the blizzard would cover him up straight away. He was so much smaller than a cow.

Yan lowered his head and started to make his way towards us, around the edge of the field. I leaned across Wolf's flank, put my arms around his neck and eased him out of the fence backwards. He stood rigid, watching my brother climb through the gap in the barbed wire.

As soon as Yan got through the hole, he lunged at me, his fist raised. I stood my ground, bared my teeth and growled. My brother dropped his hand to his side. Wolf barked, but I held him back. There'd been enough fighting in this place. I picked up my bag and led the dog away from the minefield, towards old Marek's farm.

Editor's Note

Cry Wolf was first published on the website in October and was voted Story of the Month.



Moose © Margaret Mendel

Armed to the Teeth by Jessica Higgins

"Dad?"

"Shhhh, son! You don't want to scare 'em away."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. We just have to be *real* quiet because deer have really good hearing."

"Right. Okay."

"Dad?"

"Yes, son?"

"Why do deer have really good hearing?"

"Because they are prey. They have to have acute senses so they know when predators are after them."

"Oh, okay. What's a predator?"

"A hunter."

"Like you, Dad?"

"Yup. Like me."

"Dad?"

"Yes, son?"

"Why do you want to shoot the deer?"

"Because their meat tastes good. You know that. Don't you like that venison sausage your mom makes? It's good, right?"

"That's deer? Yeah, I like that! I like it a lot."

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Why did Mom move in with Grandma?"

"Grandma's real old, you know that. She needs help so your mother is helping her out. Now, try to be quiet. Eat that candy I brought."

"Okay, sorry...Dad?"

"Yes?"

"How does a deer get turned in to sausage?"

"Well, it's kinda hard to explain, but basically, I shoot the deer and it dies. Then, I take it home, skin and clean the meat off its bones. That meat is then ground up, seasoned and pressed into tubes. That's sausage."

"You take its skin off?"

"Yes, son, that's how a person gets to an animal's flesh."

"Flesh?"

"Meat."

"Oh, okay. And then Mom cooks the sausage?"

"Right. Then your mother cooks the sausage."

"I like the way she cooks it. It's good."

"Yes, I like it too. Your mother's a good cook."

"I miss her."

"Yes, I know. I do too."

"So, dad? Why don't you tell her to come home?"

"Because. Because she's busy right now. Busy with your grandmother."

"Grandma doesn't seem sick. Why does she need help?"

"Shhhhh, why don't you just eat your candy and be quiet for a few minutes. We don't want to scare the deer."

"Oh, okay, Dad. Sorry."

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"How do deer pray?"

"What?"

"You said earlier that deer have to pray because hunters are after them. So, since they're animals, how do they pray?"

"Not that kind of 'pray.' Prey, as in p-r-e-y. That means they get hunted."

"Oh. Do they hunt something else?"
"No, they just eat grass. They're always being hunted; they don't do the hunting."
"Do people always do the hunting?"
"No, deer have lots of predators."
"I meant, are people ever prey?"
"Oh, I guess, yeah, sometimes."
"Well, I suppose there's a few animals that would hunt a person. But mostly people are prey to other people."
"Really? So people can both hunt and be hunted? That's weird."
"Yes. It is weird."
"Dad?"
"Yes?"
"Have you ever been the prey instead of the predator?"
"Geez, what's with the questions today boy? Why don't you be quiet for a minute and eat your candy."
"Sorry, Dad."
"Dad?"
"Yes?"
"What does divorce mean?"
"Why do you ask?"
"Cuz, this kid at school, Jimmy Knudsen, said that you and Mom are getting divorced."
"Well, Jimmy Knudsen doesn't know his ass from his elbow. We're not getting divorced. Your mom just needs a little space and time, and she's busy helping out your grandma. Like I said."
"But what does it *mean*?"
"What does what mean?"
"Divorce."
"Oh, well, uh, it means that two people who were married are no longer married."
"But I thought married was forever."
"Yeah...so did I. Now, shush! Do you see that?"
"What?"
"That! That's a deer! Now, be quiet! We don't wanna scare her away."
"Her?"
"Yup, it's a doe, son."
"You're gonna shoot a mom deer?"
"Not if you keep talking. Now, shush!"
"Dad, I don't want you to shoot a mom deer!"
"Son, the meat's just as good on her as it is on a buck. Now, quiet, Please!"
"Dad, please don't!"
"Son, you need to toughen up a bit. Now, see, I just wait for her to get a leetle closer. There, that's it."
"Dad, I don't want you to shoot a mom deer!"
"And then I just make sure I get her lined up in my sights like this, andâ€¦!"
"Dad! Don't!"
"...pull the trigger."

Editor's Note

Armed to the Teeth was first published on the website in November and appears here as an Editor's Choice.

Beneath the Trojans by Kip Hanson

There's a train track runs through the place. It slices diagonally across the entrance, past the old stone arch then down around the back where the mausoleum sits brooding. Every four hours or so the Union Pacific roars on through with its loads of grain or Japanese cars or durable goods but this bothers no one; to be honest, nobody in the park really gives a shit when the U.P. comes or where it's going. On either side of the track lie lumpy borders of snow-covered ice, frozen and melted and frozen again until the bums that prowl the grave-sites can walk high above the rails, a crunchy sidewalk to nowhere. And off the track a ways in the sprawling port-wine shaped field of dirty white with its granite markers and blowing flower stalks sits an occasional pile of dirt next to a man-sized hole, waiting patiently for someone to come fill it back up again. On really cold nights, the dirt freezes up hard enough that in the morning the tractor stalls embarrassingly and they have to pay the bums a couple bucks to help chip the dirt loose so they can cover the poor schmuck lying quietly below.

On a gray day in late February, the third procession of the morning arrived at the gate to find the U.P. running later than usual. They had to wait, staring at the back of the hearse with their dead brother, son, nephew or cousin lying inside as the train rumbled slowly past. Mrs. Anderson, Trish to those who knew her well enough to breach her suburban defenses, sat rigidly in the front seat of the family wagon, waiting on the brink of a fragile sanity to bury the wrecked remains of her oldest child. Her husband Al sat behind the wheel, tentatively stroking the hand of the woman with whom he'd shared a bed but little else for the past twenty-three years. In the back seat, their remaining child Kyle bored holes in the back of his mother's hundred dollar perm and counted the minutes until he could go home, only to then start counting the days until he could move away from the whole mess. Finally the caboose winked past and the procession started up again, down the long curving driveway between skeletal, rattling trees to the pile of AstroTurf-covered dirt marked ANDERSON. As the car stopped, Al hurried around to extract his wife, his arm around her as the back door of the hearse swung open and their son slid out and her legs gave way beneath her. While the mourners shuffled along behind them, huddled against the cold like a grounded flock of crows, he dragged her across the ice toward the waiting



chairs and the minister, the wreaths and the flowers, the gleaming wooden box containing their son.

As he watched his mother drop into her seat; watched her shoulders heave and noted the way the tears formed little rouge-colored icicles on her cheeks, Kyle thought about his brother's sock drawer. Two weeks ago he sneaked into his brother's room; had listened to Raymond's music and snooped through Raymond's stuff while soon-to-be-dead Raymond was away at work. And in the bottom of the sock drawer, filled with socks which would never grow holes, he'd found hidden three Playboys, an unopened box of Trojans, a small bag of weed, and finally the pistol and the box of shells which now sat locked away in the evidence room of the Bloomington Police Department. Kyle had taken the pistol out; he'd counted the bullets and spun the chamber and sighted along the shiny chrome barrel at Bruce Springsteen and the East Street Band. In a fair imitation of Dirty Harry, he'd said "Make my day." And now, as he sat listening to his mother's ragged weeping and watched the dancing flakes of snow trickling down the wooden sides of his big brother's casket, he wondered if it hurt when Raymond pulled the trigger.

Editor's Note

Beneath the Trojans was first published on the website in September and appears here as an Editor's Choice. This story was also nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

The World Still Holds You Afloat Even Now © *Solla Carrock*

Turtle's Christmas Pact by Meg Tuite

It was endless hours since Turtle had made her pact with Jesus and still her Mom was persistent on dying. Turtle sat and stared intently at the spot on her Momma's belly where the nurse said the cancer howled. Turtle wished she could crack it open like eggs and scoop out all that greasy tang of disease inside. She had lost all patience with Jesus and his horde of saviors. She had been determined to take action. She had stretched out all her Christmas presents around her Mother's bed and made sure that each one touched the one before it, like a train of good will that Jesus could just whoop up when he was ready. Turtle always made it a habit of being precise with everything she did.

She had closed her eyes tight, bowed her dirty blonde head and prayed like the girls did at school every morning.

"Dear Jesus," she said out loud. "I am terminating my ownership of these here toys your son, Santa, was nice enough to give me. I'm sending them back to you. Don't worry, I won't watch or anything. Go ahead and grab 'em all, but you don't get a damn-dastardly thing, not even the Easy Bake oven, unless you snatch out that cancer bubbling under Momma's skin too." Turtle made sure to be as blunt as possible with her deal.

She opened a kernel of an eye to check on things after a long while, but the toys were still lined up and waiting. She must have knelt in that spot for a million years and that jackass of a saint hadn't done a damn thing. Turtle's knees were getting rug burn. She was sure she'd used the right words and even spewed out about a zillion AMENS.

Finally, she opened her eyes and looked up, cause that's where all the girls always looked.

"Listen here, you son of a bitch! I'm not afraid of you or your hell, got it?" She pointed a finger up in the air for emphasis.

Her Mother opened her eyes for a minute. "Turtle-dee, honey, could you play with your toys in another room? Momma's trying to rest."

Editor's Note

Turtle's Christmas Pact was first published on the website in December and won the Story of the Month honors.



A Walk on the Beach © *Margaret Mendel*

Issue 5 (ISSN 1945-2519)
Contributors

Authors

Steven Berkowitz is currently studying Anthropology at the State University of New York at New Paltz. His voracious appetite for literature keeps him reading, which in turn, inspires him to write. His favorite writers are Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Joseph Conrad, and Herman Hesse. While he mostly writes short stories, he aspires to create longer and longer works of prose, eventually novels.

Solla Carrock has lived in Washington, Missouri, Virginia, Ohio and Louisiana, but has spent most of her adult life in Portland, Oregon where she came to attend Reed College at age 17. Currently she works as a computer programmer, but has held a wide variety of positions including working with homeless teenage girls, interviewing prison inmates in a drug treatment program, and being a member of Teach For America, teaching art, English and world geography in a high school in Louisiana. Her daughter, Erin, teaches middle school language arts in Portland. Solla has had poetry published in the *Portland Review*, *To Topos* and in the anthology *Naming: Poems by Eight Women*. She edited and contributed to *Mothers and Fathers: Being Parents, Remembering Parents*. One of her short stories appeared in *34th Parallel* October 2010.

Jac Cattaneo is an artist, writer and lecturer who lives on the south coast of England. Her short fiction has appeared in a range of publications, including *International Flash* magazine, *100 Stories for Haiti* anthology, *Word Riot*, *Metazen* and *Foundling Review*. 'Bringing the War Back Home,' published in a previous issue of *Bartleby Snopes*, was chosen by the Million Writers Awards as a Notable Story of 2009. Jac is currently studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Chichester University.

Dan Crawley has taught writing at various universities, including Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University. He was awarded a creative writing fellowship by the Arizona Commission on the Arts, and his stories have appeared in the *North American Review*, *Mississippi Review Online*, *Quarterly West*, and elsewhere.

JT Dawson attended Eastern Illinois University for both his B.A and M.A. It was there that he uncovered his ability to put down into words the simple scribbles of his imagination. Thus began his career as a writer. He never looked back, not once.

John Domenichini is a technical writer in Palo Alto, California. He has a background in both education and journalism. He enjoys writing short stories and is currently working on a science fiction novel.

Michael Frissore has a chapbook called *Poetry is Dead* (Coatlism, 2009) and a blog called michaelfrissore.blogspot.com. His writing has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Dzanc Books' "Best of the Web" anthology, and included in humor journals alongside the likes of Sarah Silverman and Patton Oswalt. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in over 70 publications in six countries, including most recently in *Pyrta*, *Pulp Metal Magazine*, *Jersey Devil Press*, and *Houston Literary Review*. Mike grew up in Massachusetts and lives in Oro Valley, Arizona with his wife and son.

Kip Hanson lives in Tucson, AZ. He writes to keep the flying monkeys away. He wastes time blogging about unimportant things here: <http://misterass.com>

Jason Helmandollar:

A: So tell me about this guy Jason Helmandollar.

B: I don't know, pretty regular guy, boring government job.

A: Has he ever published anything, or is he just one of those yahoos with delusions of talent?

B: He's published a couple stories: Encounters Magazine, Sideshow Fables. Another one so long ago I can't remember. You tell me if he's any good. You read the piece.

A: Meh. Anything else about him worth mentioning?

B: He plays in a band.

A: Shit. That changes everything.

Jessica Higgins' short story, "The Infirmary," appeared in *Bartleby Snopes* in July 2009 and was selected as the July 2009 Story of the Month. Jessica is an English Professor at Broward College where she teaches courses in composition and literature. She lives in South Florida with her husband, daughter, and dog.

Don Hucks was a 2009 Pushcart Prize nominee. His fiction has appeared in *decomp*, *Bananafish*, *Pindeldyboz*, *The Pedestal*, and elsewhere.

Caroline Kepnes grew up in Cape Cod, Massachusetts and studied American Civilization at Brown University. Since then, she has worked at the Museum of Natural History, *Tiger Beat Magazine*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *E! Online* and *ABC Family's The Secret Life of the American Teenager*. Her stories have been widely published online. Two of them were recently translated into Arabic.

Hayley Krischer's essays about parenting have been published in a number of online and print publications. She won a first place award from the New Jersey Press Association and a short story of hers was a finalist in *Glimmer Train's Short Story Award for New Writers*. She was the recipient of *Panavision's New Filmmaker's Grant* for an original screenplay. She recently received her master's in creative writing from *Lesley University*. This is her first published work of fiction.

Kit Lamont enjoys writing fiction after spending most of her career in the decidedly non-fictional worlds of marketing, advertising, and motherhood. For several years she wrote a column in the local newspaper where she would muse about the daily challenges of motherhood and life, and lament the fact that she was never going to master either of them. She is currently working on her first novel.

Annam Manthiram is the author of two novels, *The Goju Story* and *After the Tsunami*, and a short story collection (*Dysfunction*), which was a Finalist in the 2010 Elixir Press Fiction Award and received Honorable Mention in Leapfrog Press' 2010 fiction contest. She is proud of the fact that her work has been published (or is forthcoming) in many cool places. Annam's fiction has also been nominated for the PEN/O'Henry Prize and inclusion in the *Best American Short Stories* anthology. A graduate of the M.A. Writing program at the University of Southern California and a 2010 Squaw Valley Writers Conference scholar, Ms. Manthiram resides in New Mexico with her husband, Alex, and son, Sathya. So far, she is quite enchanted. You can visit her online at AnnamManthiram.com.

Donna Marinelli currently resides in sunny Florida and dreams of being a professional writer someday. This is her first writing competition, and she looks forward to entering more in the future.

Robert Meade lives with his wife and three children in Mohegan Lake, a small town in Westchester County not far from Sleepy Hollow where, some say, the Headless Horseman rides still. He has stories published in such journals as *Apollo's Lyre*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Foundling Review*, and the *Short Story Library*, among others. He indulges his dark side with stories published in *MicroHorror*, *The New Flesh*, and *A Twist of Noir*.

Robert John Miller's work has recently appeared in *Writers' Bloc*, *Camroc Press Review*, and *poeticdiversity*. He lives in the Midwest. One day he spent the whole afternoon on a sailboat. You can read more at <http://bobsoldout.com/work>.

Rick Taliaferro is a freelance writer and editor (www.textposit.com). In his spare time, he spends one hour, or one page, or 200 words per day on fiction. He's currently in between novels and working on short stories, though also making notes for a new novel

Meg Tuite's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *34th Parallel*, *Calliope*, *San Francisco Bay Press*, *The Santa Fe Literary Review*, *One*, *the Journal*, *Fast Forward Press*, *Artistically Declined Press*, *Spilt Milk*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Boston Literary Magazine* and elsewhere. She is the fiction editor of *The Santa Fe Literary Review*. Her fiction collection "*Domestic Apparition*" is forthcoming in early 2011 through *San Francisco Bay Press*. She has a new column "*Exquisite Quartet*" for *Used Furniture Review*. Her blog: megtuite.wordpress.com.

Ron Yates is a recent graduate of the MFA program at Queens University of Charlotte. His novel, *BEN STEMPTON'S BOY*, set in the rural south of the early 1970s, is currently being submitted to publishers and agents. His short story "Spooky House" was recently named as a finalist in the James Knudsen Editor's Prize in Fiction sponsored by BAYOU MAGAZINE. He resides in eastern Alabama on the shore of Lake Wedowee, an 11,000 acre hydroelectric impoundment. Family includes his wife, Cheryl; daughter, Chandler; son, Vincent; a Jack Russell Terrier named Cooper; and a cat named Dub. Armadillos, deer, wild turkeys, and an assortment of other creatures frequent his property, but Yates doesn't consider them family as they generally do not come inside.

Cliff Young attended college at The University of California at Santa Barbara where he studied economics. Since then he has made his living (legally) as a waiter, ditch digger, cartographer, and software engineer, and (illegally) as an undocumented laborer in England. Cliff now lives with his wife, two children, a dog and a cat, in a house with a picket fence in Berkeley, California. His favorite food is fried chicken.

Photographers and Illustrators

Scott Dilworth Johnson lives in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. He holds a B.A. in English from the University of Pennsylvania, and makes his living as a software developer. When not writing code, Scott might be running, hiking, taking photos or working on a short story.

Gina Kim is a student who dabbles in photography, fashion design, and drawing.

Jin Kim is a high school student at Los Gatos High School in Los Gatos, California. He is pretty good at drawing and he is super smart and cool.

Margaret Mendel was raised in the Pacific Northwest and has lived for the last 33 years in the Bronx, New York. She has a Masters in Psychology and an MFA in Creative writing. She is an award-winning author with many of her short stories appearing in on-line and print publications with one of her stories appearing in an anthology of women mystery writers, "Murder, New York Style".