

Bartleby Snopes



Issue 13

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Dialogue Contest Finalists

The first five stories in this issue are the finalists from our Sixth Annual Dialogue Only Contest. We awarded over \$2300 to our Dialogue Contest Finalists this year. Finalists are selected by the staff and then voted on by a panel of judges. This year's judges included Ronald Friedman (Fifth Annual Dialogue Contest Winner) and Ben Tanzer (author of Lost in Space).

Slurpie Safari

by Sorrel Westbrook-Wilson (*1st Place*)

"Welcome to Slurpie Safari. Every sip is an adventure. Would you like to unleash your wild side this morning with a triple mocha brownie chunk blast limited edition slurpie? Get them now before they're extinct!"

"That's pretty long. Is that written down anywhere?"

"Nah, man. It's not that bad. You memorize it quick. And there's no point in writing it down, because the specials change like, all the time."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, like last week, it was this one colored like those shirts hippies wear, all rainbow. And they put sour gummy worms in it."

"Tie-dye?"

"Yeah, exactly, dip dye. Anyways they called it the groovy earthquake."

"The groovy earthquake."

"Actually, the triple shot sour smack groovy earthquake festival limited edition slurpie. Everything's always triple. It's company policy."

"Right. So my job is just to say the slurpies into the headset, and then someone else hands them the drink?"

"Nah. It should be that way, but Sean's out for the day. He's sick with a case of the red eyes."

"Pink eye?"

"Nah, man. Like, high. Sean's high."

"Oh."

"On drugs."

"Understood."

"Yah, so you like, talk to them and hand them the drink too. You gotta run from one window to another. Can you, like, run?"

"I'm forty-five, I'm not an octogenarian. I can go from one window to another."

"What's that like, an octopus doctor?"

"Yes."

"Alright, doc. Ha ha. Well yeah you do all that. And Bender back there makes the drinks for you. And I'm up at the counter, like, talking to the real customers."

"Pretty small operation."

"It was just the three of us on weekends, Sean and me and Bender. It was crazy."

"Glad I could help."

"Yeah, man. Me too. Cause it's crazy out here and I can't be spending all my time back with the slurpies ya know. I mean, my girl comes here."

"Your girl."

"Rhonda. She tells people to call her Ramone, but I'm like, what's that some old dead guy?"

"Four of them."

"Exactly. And plus Rhonda's a hot name. Like a librarian or a rhino."

"She sounds lovely."

"It's whatever man. Don't make a big deal if she shows up. We're like, broken up, ya know? It's whatever. It's over but I'm always gonna love her, ya know what I mean?"

"Alright."

"So what about you?"

"What about me?"

"What'd you before this gig?"

"I was a doctor. Well, I was a nurse."

"No way! You weren't joking about those octopuses, huh?"

"Octopi. And no, I worked with humans. Humans with chronic pain, mostly."

"Shit."

"Yes."

"And now you're on safari?"

"What?"

"That's what we call it. Working here."

"Right."

"Because of the name."

"No, I understand."

"Slurpie safari. Every sip is an adventure."

"What, are you programmed?"

"Almost, my man, almost. I was watching this great nature show over at Rhonda's dad's house last night, on like African animals and the shit they do to each other. And the British dude who says all the shit said 'safari' and I was like, 'every sip,' you know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"So a nurse. For sick people. Like, really sick people."

"Yes."

"You quit?"

"No."

"You fired?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"Red eyes."

"No way! You getting high at work, and you're a nurse? That's like, illegal. Should be."

"It is. Especially when you're stealing drugs from the patients."

"Shit man. I mean it, shit. You're the most hardcore safarier we have on deck. I mean it. Like, Sean is gonna love to meet you."

"Yeah."

"Really, when you came in here, and I'm not gonna lie, when you came in here in like your suit with all that hair you know?"

"My moustache?"

"Exactly. I was like, this guy is boring city. But nah, you're a junkie nurse!"

"Please keep your voice down."

"Oh don't worry man. Bender's deaf. That's why it doesn't bother him to be back there with the slurpie machines. All that grinding makes me wanna shave my ears off like the Mona Lisa."

"What?"

"Like the crazy guy who painted that chick."

"You mean Van Gogh."

"Exactly. You're smart as hell for a junkie nurse."

"Thanks."

"So. You miss the hospital?"

"Yes."

"I hate hospitals."

"Most people do. Bad associations. The smell of disinfectant that never seems to quite mask the worse smells. Swabs. IVs. I get it."

"Exactly, man, exactly. Who wants that shit?"

"Me."

"Oh, right, sorry man. Rhonda says I'm not like, sensitive enough."

"Oh?"

"Not a good listener. Hurt people's feelings. That's why we're broken up."

"Right."

"If you see her let me know. She's this little short chick with yellow hair."

"Ok."

"Not like, blonde hair. Like, her hair isn't blonde. It's like big bird yellow."

"Ok."

"Like, she dyes it."

"Understood."

"Oh shit."

"What?"

"Your first customer, man! Shit, this is intense. Junkie nurse on the safari."

"So I just talk into the headset."

"Yeah, but like, put it on first. There ya go."

"Now?"

"Now, man! The customer's waiting!"

"Welcome to slurpie safari. Every safari is a slurp. Can I interest you in a mocha chunk triple slurpie? Oh. Ok. A classic vanilla cool punch with a twist of orange cream? Ok. We'll have that for you at the window. Thank you, have a nice day."

"Ok, man, that was terrible."

"Yes."

"Like, you said goodbye. You're gonna see them in two seconds."

"Yes."

"What the hell is a mocha chunk?"

"I apologize."

"Oh, man, I'm just messing with you! That was great. I mean, it was shitty, but you're gonna get so much better."

"Really?"

"Yeah, no doubt in my mind at all."

"Thanks."

"You work here two months, you're gonna be slick as shit at this."

"Two months."

"Yeah, no time at all! Now hand them their drink, take their cash, and smile."

"Ok."

"You have to smile, man, really. It's company policy."

Everyone Smiles

by Amy Morris-Jones (*2nd Place*)

"**B**ut that's not how I remember it."

"No?"

"No, in the old photo I have, I'm standing on the stairs—they were green. You know, that indoor/outdoor green carpeting?"

"Uh-huh, my folks had that on their back deck."

"I was pretty young when I was here before—probably only like eight or nine."

"You had that poodle-perm then, right?"

"Yeah, I did—and glasses, too. Pink glasses with only one lens. I was a beauty... It's funny how different this place looks without the green stairs—and in the rain, too."

"Are you sure this is the right hotel? It's hard to see much with the windshield all fogged up."

"Yes, of course I'm sure. There aren't any other Lake Lures around here, are there?"

"Well, I suppose there could be other lakes named that—"

"Right next to Chimney Rock State Park?"

"Okay, so this is obviously the place—sorry. Want to go inside?"

"No, we never went inside."

"Wait—so you have a picture of yourself on the stairs, but you never went inside the hotel—you didn't actually stay here?"

"No, the photo was just my sister and me on the stairs, posing as if we were guests. Don't look at me that way...I know. It's weird, but it's what we did when we were with her."

"With *her*?"

"Yes, you heard me."

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to—but you never talk about her, and I—"

"It was so long ago... Even the lake looks different somehow, like my brain ran my memories through one of those bakery sheeter machines, making everything flatter than I remember."

"Did you at least swim in the lake?"

"No, she wouldn't let us—but we didn't have swimsuits anyway."

"You didn't bring them?"

"No, we just didn't have them. Could you turn off those damn windshield wipers already? I can't see."

"Yeah, sure."

"Anyway, even if we'd had bathing suits, we didn't know how to swim."

"You never learned to swim—not even *before*? My parents made me and my brother take lessons for years—until I could swim the length of the pool by myself anyway."

"No swimming lessons—and no pools with her either. Not even a bathtub actually."

"So you took showers."

"Only if we'd done something to make her really angry—I'd always cry while the icy water poured over me. I used to pray she'd beat me instead of making me take a shower."

"She—"

"I usually just washed up as best I could after I finished washing the dishes, so it wasn't all that bad..."

"But she took you on *vacations*?"

"Oh, yeah! We traveled all the time—never stayed in one town for more than a few days."

"I vaguely remember hearing something about that on the news after they found you."

"But it was good—really. I got to see so many places—like here."

"Tell me about when you came here... Why this place?"

"Oh, that's a good story! This place was in a movie she used to watch. That's what we did—traveled around visiting the places where all her favorite movies had been filmed."

"A movie was filmed here—at the hotel?"

"There—down on the beach by the lake. That's the area that was in the movie—her favorite movie actually."

"All I see is gray cliffs and brownish water with some green trees in the background. Not very picturesque for a movie."

"Oh, it's just distorted through the windshield. You have to use your imagination a bit. See, over there? That rise in the sand?"

"Lemme clear off the windshield again... Okay, yeah, I see it."

"That's where the table sat—where the lead actress sat with her sister when the leading man appeared unexpectedly. It was all very grand—at least that's what she kept telling us while she posed us and took pictures."

"So you never saw the movie?"

"No, she kept the only TV in her room. We were only allowed in there to make the bed and vacuum, and she'd watch us the whole time."

"Is that how you found out the police were looking for you—seeing yourself on TV?"

"The TV was never on when we were in her room."

"A newspaper?"

"She didn't get any newspapers that I ever knew about."

"Then how?"

"How what?"

"How did you know the police were coming for her—for you?"

"Oh—Can you see that old dock? The one with the covered roof at the end?"

"Where?"

"Over there to the right—across the lake."

"I wish this rain would stop—visibility sucks. It's not much of a dock. What about it?"

"That's the spot where the family in the movie takes dance lessons from the former Rockette."

"You know an awful lot about this movie for never having seen it."

"Like I said, it was her favorite. She posed us and told us to smile in each place while she explained to us what happened there in the movie."

"And you just went along with it?"

"Of course—I was a kid."

"You never thought to scream or run to someone you saw on the street? Weren't there people on the beach?"

"It wasn't that easy."

"Seriously?"

"You don't understand... She wasn't a bad person. She loved us in her own way."

"But she took you and your sister right out of your own backyard when you were little kids. She kept you from your family for three years. How much worse can you get?"

"She fed us and made sure we had clothes."

"Yeah, I remember hearing that she threw her leftovers on the basement floor for you to eat and only washed your clothes when she took you places."

"The media just broadcasts what they know will get attention."

"So what was the true story? I'm trying really hard to understand but—"

"I remember the green carpeting on the stairs from that photo so clearly. The place just doesn't look right without it."

"Never mind the green carpeting."

"She'd posed us standing on the stairs with our hands on the iron railing—as if we'd just walked out of the door of the hotel."

"What a psycho."

"I remember her telling us to pretend we were movie stars."

"She should rot in prison."

"I remember how nice it felt to have the sun on my face while I waited for the click of the camera."

"Prison is too good for her."

"Isn't it funny how everyone smiles in photos?"



Photograph - Fish Choir © Chris Fradkin

Sorry, Was That Pronounced with a Long O or A

by Daniel W. Thompson (*3rd Place*)

Good afternoon, this is Tom with land use, how may I help you?

Good afternoon, Tom. This is Barbra Whitfield. I live at 1434 Jefferson Circle and I am deeply, deeply disturbed.

Oh, well, hello, Ms. Whitfield. How may I help?

First of all, Tim.

It's Tom.

Tom.

Yes.

Tom who? What is your last name, Tom?

Schroeder.

Sorry, was that pronounced with a long O or A?

A, mam.

Tom Schroeder.

Yes.

Tom Schroeder, I am deeply disturbed. Cold to the bone if I may say.

Ms. Whitfield, please, what is the problem?

The problem is this, Tom Schroeder. I recently received a letter from you in reference to a proposed zoning change.

Yes, mam.

1434 Jefferson Circle. Are you familiar with this property?

Of course.

It is a magnificent property and I do insist you see it as soon as possible.

I am quite familiar with the property, Ms. Whitfield.

It has the two grandest white oak trees in the front yard, and if I'm not mistaken, they are first generation oaks. Quite rare you know.

Oh, yes. They are magnificent.

And the home, Tom Schroeder. Are you familiar with the home?

Yes ma'am. I've been to the property several times. In fact, I was—.

It was built in 1921 by one of Thomas Jefferson's descendants. That's what the Marables told us. Did you know the Marables? They lived here from, let's see, 1957 to, when did Junior die? 1983 or 4? I'm quite certain it was 1984 because that's when Samuel graduated from St. Christopher's. See Samuel was best friends with the Marables' only son, Jimmy. Oh, it was such a terrible, terrible ordeal when Junior died. He was just home from Vietnam. A colonel, if I'm not mistaken. Who knew you could use your car exhaust to do such a thing. None of us saw it coming. None of us and I think it hit Jimmy the hardest. You know, the drugs. Of course, Samuel got into drugs too. Terrible, terrible-

Excuse me, Ms. Whitfield. As you probably know- wait did you say somebody came home from Vietnam in- never mind, I'm sorry. As you know, I'm quite interested in the history of this property, but is there a particular question or concern you have regarding the letter I sent you.

Yes, yes, there is Tom Schroeder. I am terribly concerned about this letter.

Yes.

First of all, I just received it and it states there's to be a public hearing this coming Monday.

Yes, that is correct, but pardon me, Ms. Whitfield. Did you say you just received it?

That's correct.

That's strange because I mailed it more than a month ago.

Well, Mr. Schroeder. That may or may not be the true, but the fact is, I just received it yesterday. I would have called yesterday, you know, but we have just returned and the house is in complete shambles.

Did you say you just got back?

Yes. From Lake Geneva.

As in, Switzerland?

That's correct. We spend a month each summer there. We just returned.

I'm sorry, I didn't—wait, it's March, Ms. Whitfield. It's—

Oh, listen to me. I keep saying we. There is no we. Harold died six years ago this Christmas. Oh, I still think about it. The grandkids being here when it happened. Harold was setting up to read *The Night Before Christmas*. He did it every year. Had done so since our kids were babies. He was setting up, and he stumbled, and, my God, it still-

Ms. Whitfield, I am very sorry, but-

Yes, the letter. Well, Mr. Schroeder, I will have you know this house was built by one of Jefferson's descendants.

Ms. Whitfield, do you understand what the letter is saying? Do you understand my reason for sending it to you?

Of course I do!

I'm sorry Ms. Whitfield, I don't mean to be rude, but—

Yes, yes. Hold on to your trousers, Tom Schroeder. This letter reads, hold on, let me put my reading glasses on. OK, the letter reads,

“We have received a zoning request for the above referenced property. The property owner is requesting to rezone the property from R-1 (Single-Family Residential) to I (Institutional). Please find enclosed a copy of the applicant's report for your review. The petitioner should contact you regarding this proposal if they have not done so already. The petitioner is: Barbra Whitfield Estate, Care of Stan Rosman, Attorney at Law.”

Now, Tom Schroeder, please tell me what on God's green earth is this letter supposed to mean? What is this estate? And why would Stan have anything to do with it. I haven't talked to Stan in ages. He and Harold were such great friends, but between you and me, I always thought Stan had a bit of crush on me.

Ms. Whitfield, the letter is a copy of the letter I sent to neighbors of 1434 Jefferson Circle. The letter was to inform them of your, I mean I should say, the estate's request to change the zoning of the property.

My request? The estate?

Yes, Ms. Whitfield. The estate. Do you not know—

I beg your pardon, Tom Schroeder, but this house was built by one of Jefferson's descendants. We purchased it in 1984 after Junior died because Mrs. Marable could no longer maintain the property. It has two first generation white oaks in the front yard. Every spec of architecture is original, except for the white columns to the front steps. Sadly, those were replaced in, now, when was that, 1994 I believe. Yes, 1994, right after Reagan was reelected. Harold was a huge Reagan supporter. We had to wait until after the election to replace the columns because of all the fundraisers. They did do a fabulous job, though. Nobody ever knew they were replaced. But, where was I? Yes, back to the letter, Tom Schroeder. For heaven's sake, I still live here. What business would I have changing the zoning?

Ms. Whitfield, the estate, your estate has requested a change to the zoning so that your house, 1434 Jefferson, which is indeed a most beautiful house, can be turned into a museum. It's to be preserved. It's, uh, it's a wonderful thing really.

Well of course it's a beautiful house and of course it should be preserved, but I made no such request and I certainly think I would know if I did. Wait, wait. Did you say my home is to be a museum?

Hello?

Hello?

Who is this?

This is Tom Schroeder, with the City. Who is this?

This is Nurse Brown. I'm sorry Mr. Schroeder. Ms. Whitfield shouldn't have called you.

No, no, it's OK. I didn't know she was- Is she still there?

Yes.

May I speak to her for just one more second? I just want to finish explaining.

I suppose so, but you do understand her condition. She's really not well. Hasn't been for some time.

Yes, I understand. I just want to—

Hello?

Hello, Ms. Whitfield?

Speaking.

It's Tom.

Tim?

Tom.

Tom who?

Tom Schroeder.

Sorry, was that pronounced with a long O or A?

Where We Go When We're Gone

by Gabrielle Hovendon (*4th Place*)

All right. Who do we have today?

Madeline Ahlgrim, seventy-nine years old, heart attack. Calling hours at six.

Full embalming?

Nah, Jenny did it on the morning shift. We're just dressing and setting the face. The family's supposed to bring a photo over this afternoon.

Cutting it close, huh?

Tell me about it. Jenny almost lost it when they forgot the shoes and socks and asked her to 'pick up a pair.' I'm hoping we can get in and out before upstairs starts prepping for the wake.

Sounds good to me. I could use an early night. You wouldn't *believe* the weekend I just had. I ended up watching Lacey the whole time. Feel like I lost ten pounds just running around the house after her.

Oh, yeah? Your family out of town or something?

Yeah, Joe had to fly to Columbus for some conference, some neurology thing, and my sister-in-law's out west for a wedding. Spent the weekend at their place, over by the hiking trail, you know, where the old fire hall used to be.

How old's Lacey now, three, four?

She'll be four this summer. Starting preschool in August, can you believe it?

Jesus, man, you're getting old.

Don't even joke about it. The other day I found four gray hairs, Tom. I feel like high school was yesterday, you know? But all of a sudden I've got a house and a car payment and a niece in preschool. Like, what is that?

Hand me the cotton? Thanks.

There was this one dicey moment this weekend, though. It's bedtime, right, I'm about to read Lacey her favorite story, and she looks up and asks, out of nowhere, okay, and you've got to picture what she looks like when she says it, I've just gotten her out of the bath and put her in one of those one-piece pajama things with the arm and leg parts all connected and shit, what do you call them—

Onesies?

Onesies, thank you, she's wearing these pink onesies with stars all over and she smells just like baby shampoo, all nice and clean and fresh, that innocent little kid smell, you know, and she's just staring up at me with those huge eyes, my brother's eyes. Plus her body's like half buried under all these ponies and stuffed animals and Mr. Snuggles, that's what we call her blanky, I swear it's like a sarcophagus in that bed, and so— are you picturing it?— she looks up and asks me, 'Uncle John, where do we go when we're gone?'



God. Wow.

Yeah, I know. I'm telling you, I was totally floored. Like, what do you say to that? We weren't even *talking* about anything, she was going on and on about this mermaid she

saw on TV, and then boom, out of nowhere, what happens when we die? I mean, how can you possibly answer that question in a non-fucked way?

Hey, what color lipstick are we thinking here?

That coral-looking one? Or maybe that darker pink?

Yeah, let's go with the pink. Anyway, man, that's rough. I remember this time when my kid was little and he asked me where the fish in his aquarium went when we flushed them down the toilet. His mom must have been out somewhere, otherwise she would have been on top of it, she would have had a whole story concocted, 'oh, Goldie's gone to the big pond in the sky and he's swimming around with all his carnival fish friends, all the carnies are leaving them alone instead of swallowing them or dumping them down the porta-potties or whatever the fuck they do at county fairs,' but I fucking panicked. I told him they got flushed into the sewers and from there they went into the lake, where they decomposed. I'll never forget the look on his face when I said that. Took him a long, long time to like the beach again.

It's lose-lose, right? What do you do? I mean, in theory I've always thought you should level with kids, not feed them all that Santa-Claus-tooth-fairy-feel-good bullshit parents are always shoving down their throats. I mean, not like, 'well, first your heart stops beating and you shit your pants and then they take you to the funeral parlor where Uncle Johnny sews up your eyes and puts bad stage makeup on you,' not that degree of honesty or anything, but, you know, not angels and pearly gates either.

Speaking of, do we have any of that brown mascara left, the really light stuff? Yeah, that one. So what did you end up telling her?

I needed, like, a pause button so I could go into the other room and regroup for a minute. I needed a fucking drink. And she just *looked* at me, really *looked*, you know, like she was peering into my soul to see if I was trying to sell her some bogus line, and while I was still trying to figure out what to say, she just said in that really sad little kid voice, 'I don't think I want to go, Uncle John.' And I looked at her and I said, 'me neither, sweetie, but we're all going.'

You said that? You actually said that to your four-year-old niece? Rough stuff, man.

But wait, then I kind of recover, you know, and I tell her to hold on, that it's actually not that bad. I tell her, 'think of it like a long journey, like a night trip on a train, one where everything's quiet and dark and the wind is sort of whooshing past the window, and you're sleepy, so sleepy, you're about to drift off, and nothing's scary, nothing hurts, it's

just blank, perfectly empty, and when you wake up you'll be somewhere better, somewhere where nothing hurts, with stars above you and oceans below you, the schools of phosphorescent fish twinkling in their dark waters, a quiet island in the largest lagoon, and on that island a person just like you, maybe walking in the damp sand or maybe gathering rare flowers or even hiding scared in a jungle, and that person might look up at the sky and the bright light that is you and wish they knew what their future held, wish for anything good, and by the time they finish the wish you're already flying on, pouring through the clouds and sky like wind or stars, and it will all be so beautiful you'll barely notice you're saying goodbye.' I tell this all to my niece, and she listens to the whole thing, and then she closes her eyes and she pulls her blanket up to her chin and she says *goodnight, sweet dreams, see you tomorrow.*

Photograph © Thomas Gillaspay

Blue Frosting

by Mathangi Subramanian (*5th Place*)

We'll take the one with blue frosting, please.

Pink frosting.

What? Oh, okay. Pink frosting then.

Thanks mom.

So you like pink frosting now?

I don't know. Yes.

Does it taste different than blue?

No.

Oh.

So then, why...

Because.

Because.

Yes, because.

It's just—we've always gotten the ones with blue frosting. Remember that day we decided to always get blue? It was four days before your sixth birthday. We were here, sitting at that booth over there. You had one of those orange and black Halloween cupcakes, and you were drinking milk and watching all the customers.

I know, I know. And I said from now on I was going to get the ones with blue frosting because those were the ones no one else got.

Exactly. Why are you rolling your eyes at me?

Because I've heard that story, like, a million times! And I was only six. I didn't know anything then.

You knew plenty. You knew you wanted to be different. Unique.

Well, maybe I'm tired of being unique. Maybe I don't want to be unique any more.

Pardon me?

Maybe I want to be like everybody else for a change.

And that's going to happen if you eat pink frosting?

Ollie and Maddie like pink frosting.

Who are Ollie and Maddie?

These girls in my class.

You mean Olivia Douglas and Madeline Samuelson?

Yes.

Wait, aren't those the popular girls? The ones you always used to complain about?

They're not so bad.

They sound pretty bad to me. You used to call them the "Barbie Patrol."

Yeah. Well.

Yeah, well, what? What's so great about them all of a sudden? What do they have that you don't have?

Um, like, everything.

Everything?

Yes. Everything. Cell phones. Front yards. iPads.

But I thought you didn't care about any of that.

Of course I care. I'm almost thirteen. That is, like, exactly the kind of stuff every thirteen year old cares about.

Are you getting bullied? Are those two girls picking on you because you don't have a lot of money?

No, mom. I'm not getting bullied. No one's picking on me.

Okay. Okay. Good. But you'd tell me if someone was, right? I really want us to have open communication, and I know your mind and your body are changing and everything but—

Mom! We communicate fine.

Okay. Okay. Right. That's a relief.

And no one is bullying me. But that doesn't mean I have any friends either.

What do you mean? What about that girl that came home that one time? What was her name again? Vanessa?

Veronica. She moved back to Venezuela.

Oh. Well what about Isaac and Benjamin?

They don't count.

Why not?

They're my cousins. They *have* to be friends with me. Besides, they're like, seven, and they're into transformers and stuff.

Right. Huh. So you really don't have anyone at school? No one you hang around with?

Don't you think if I had friends, I would've brought them home?

I don't know. To be honest, I've wondered about it. But then I thought our place was so small and everything, maybe you were embarrassed.

It's not our place that's the problem. It's you. And me. And our family.

What?

We're so weird. And everyone knows it. That's why no one wants to be friends with me.

Well that sounds like—

It's not bullying, mom.

I KNOW, honey. It just sounds like they're judging you without getting to know you.

Um, have you met teenagers?

Sure. Of course. You're right.

It's fine for you to decide to be unique or whatever. Do whatever you want. But it's not fine for me. And I'm never going to put my kids through it. When I grow up, I'm not going to be anything like you. I'm going to live in a fancy house with three bedrooms and big thick carpets and a back yard. I'm going to have a job at a big company and I'm going to wear suits to work every day—no offense to your counseling job or anything. And I'm going to make sure my kids have cell phones when they're twelve, and they're going to be allowed to watch TV on weeknights and go on fancy vacations so they can talk to their friends about it—

Now honey—

And I'm going to bake tons and tons of cupcakes and I'm not going to ever use blue frosting. Ever. Not even when I make special holiday cupcakes for my kids to share with their tons and tons of friends.

What about the fourth of July? You need blue frosting then.

I'm going to summer in the south of France, like Ollie. I'll celebrate Bastille day.

Oh.

What? Why are you laughing?

Because I have a daughter who knows what Bastille Day is but has no idea what colors are on the French flag.

You know what else I'm going to have? A husband. My kids are going to have a father.

You have a father.

But I have no idea who he is!

That makes two of us, sweetie.

Mom, how can you joke about something so important?

I'm sorry, I'm sorry. You're right. It's just that all the information the sperm bank had on him was so generic. I hardly remember anything. No health problems, that I remember. He was 24 or 25 or something when he donated—young enough that I thought he probably needed the money for college or his family or something. I think they listed his IQ but I don't remember it.

How can you not remember *anything*?

Because none of it was important. I didn't do it because I wanted him. I did it because I wanted you. And now that I have you, it matters even less.

Great. So as far as you're concerned, my dad's a bunch of numbers in a catalog, and as far as I'm concerned, he's the sticky stuff inside a turkey baster.

Excuse me, young lady, we've been through this. That's not how it works. Turkey baster jokes are not funny. You know that.

I'm just *saying*. Why couldn't you have been normal and just married someone?

I had the chance to do that, you know. I was dating this boy for seven years. He even proposed to me.

Wait, he did?

Yes, he did. I said no.

Why?

Because I didn't think he was ready to get married. Lord knows I wasn't ready—I still wanted to finish grad school and get a couple of years of experience under my belt. Plus I felt so young.

How old were you?

I don't know. Twenty-five, twenty-six I guess. It was a long time ago.

So what happened to him? After you said no, I mean?

He married another woman. Less than a year later. A friend of mine, actually, although I haven't spoken to her in ages. They had two kids. Twins. Lovely little boys.

Wow. Have you met them? The twins, I mean?

Yes.

Was it weird?

Yes.

Why? Because you pictured what your kids would've been like if you'd said yes?

No. Because I went to see his wife. She was my friend, remember? Anyway, I went there because he left her. She was all alone with the two kids and absolutely no idea where he'd gone. He just disappeared.

Wait, seriously?

Seriously. She was so scared. So devastated. And you know what she said to me? She said, "This could've been you, you know. It was almost you."

No way. You're totally making this story up to teach me a lesson or something.

No, sweetie. I promise. It's true.

Really?

Really.

Huh.

So after that, I realized, you can't count on anything. Or anyone. And by that time I think I was already in my thirties, and I really wanted to be a mom. So I figured, why wait around? Why not just do it myself?

How come you never told me this before?

I guess it never came up.

So you didn't do the whole sperm bank thing just to be unique?

No.

You didn't do it just to prove a point?

No.

You did it because you kind of had to? Like, if you wanted to be a mother, that was your only choice?

Yeah.

Huh.

I know. Huh.

Hey mom?

Yeah?

You know I love you, right?

I know.

It's just, sometimes I just wish you weren't so, you know.

So what?

So you.

Yes, well. Sorry about that. You don't get to choose your parents. It's a real bummer. But just for the record, I love you too.

Yeah, yeah.

Good. Glad we cleared that up. Now hold on for a second.

Ew, mom, stop!

You have frosting on your face. I'm just getting it off.

Stop! You can't just touch my face whenever you want to. I'm not a kid any more.

But you're not a grown up either.

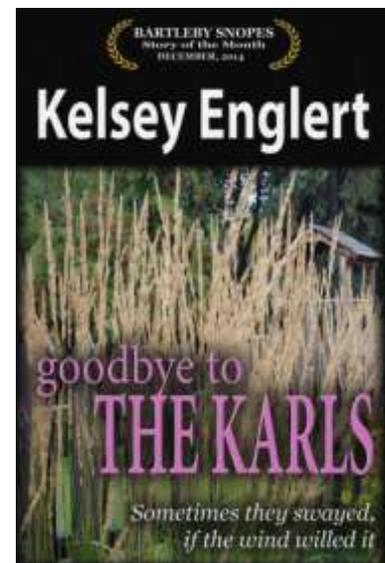
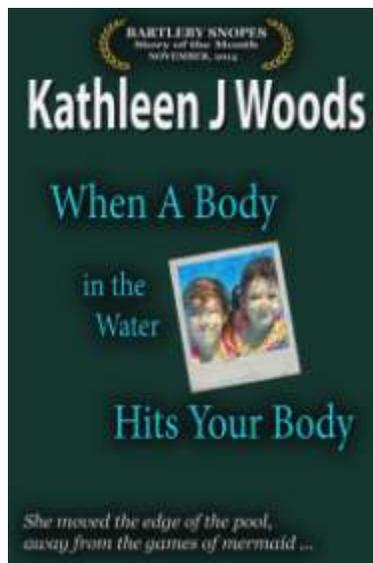
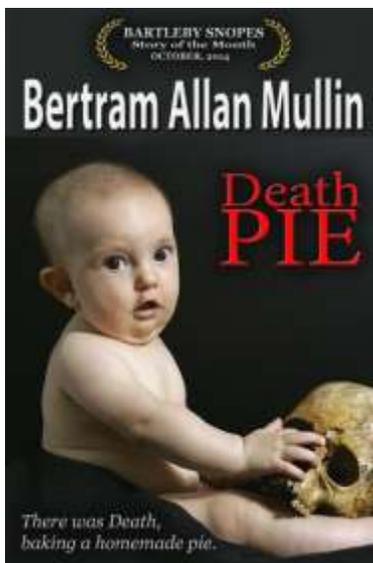
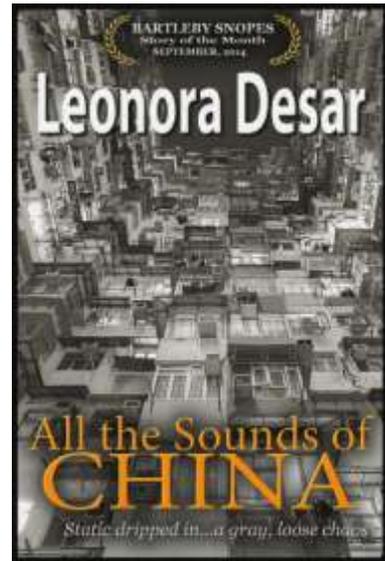
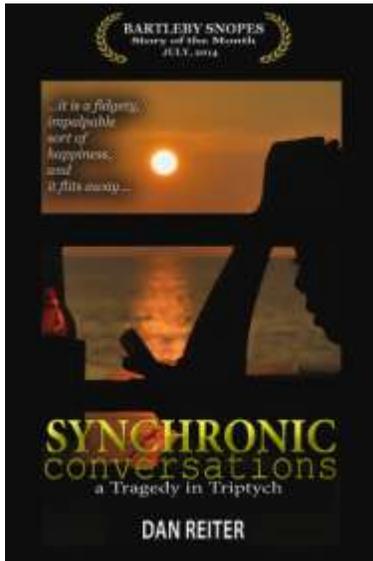
Yeah, thank god for that.

Seriously. Thank god for that.

Story of the Month Winners

Each month we publish 8 stories and host a Story of the Month contest. The Story of the Month winners are chosen by the readers of Bartleby Snopes.

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Synchronic Conversations: a Tragedy in Triptych

by Dan Reiter

At an Outdoor Café on the Bowery

He talks and she taps ideograms and slides her thumbs and lets slip her tongue and nods as if thrown into distraction by each word, and when he is done she waits a long time before responding, and what she says is yes, yes, but she does not necessarily mean it, and he sips his wine and expounds while she scrolls and makes little amused decisions and clicks her knuckles and sets her thoughts down for a moment on the table to look him in his eyes—which makes him smile, though he does not realize why he is smiling—and in that moment they are happy, though it is a fidgety, impalpable sort of happiness, and it flits away as soon as he catches sight of his fingers again and tilts his head with some new interest. She tries to blink away this itch or this notion that something vital has gone missing or dead, and though the night is cool and comfortable it is not real, nor is the waiter's face anything more than a half-reflected mask, as if why should anyone be expected to believe in this wine glass, or a black-eared shih-tzu strutting the sidewalk, or this amorous couple under the heat lamps?

In the Master Bedroom of an Apartment near the Place des Vosges

"You remember Adèle? My friend in Auvergne? You remember, she had a daughter?"

"Yes, yes."

"You couldn't stop looking at her down in Cannes. At the pool."

"Hum."

"Well, she is dead. Two days now."

"Ploof," he says. "That's hideous."

She adjusts her pillow, smooths back her silver ponytail. Her face glows in blue light.

"Hideous?" she says, mocking. "The whole world is in horror."

The gray fox's hair is unbrushed, yet elegant. Just now he is horribly busy. He taps his reading glasses. A minute passes. She says, "Can you fetch me a glass of water?" His face twitches.

"It's my throat. I feel like crying," she says. "*Comme ça*. And the child is gone."

"The child?" He leans forward so as to concentrate better on what she is not saying. His face glows too, as if he is sitting at an airplane window. "What happened to the child?"

"Oh là là, I speak to a wall. Adèle's daughter, a grown woman—she was twenty-eight years old."

"Ah, Adèle's daughter. She was sick, no?"

She sighs, and it is the type of sigh heard only in certain arrondissements of Paris, and only on summer afternoons. "You remember her, the pretty one, with the yellow bikini and the big nostrils. The daughter of Adèle. Look!"

He lifts his head reluctantly. Regards the daughter of Adèle.

"This was a couple of days ago," she says. "On the bridge at Avignon. A beautiful girl."

"Yes, yes," he says. "And what happened to her child?"

"*Alors*, you old fool! She is dead, this one!" She taps the girl's face with her painted fingernail, and the gray fox—sickened both by the terrible news and by the callousness of the delivery—flings off the covers.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting water."

"Why are you getting dressed?" she says a few minutes later.

"I told you already. I'm going home tonight."

He had not told her this. But here is Adèle's daughter on the bridge at Avignon, and here she is with some girlfriends at a café. And here she is smiling in sunglasses on the veranda with a cat in her lap.

He leaves before she has time to think of the words that would make him undress and stay. *Tout le monde* is in horror.

Here is Adèle's daughter on the bridge at Avignon.

At a Backyard Pool Party: Winter Haven, Florida

They stand on tanned legs in a pocket of shade under the Christmas palms, shooing skeeters off their blonde heads, snapping gum, shifting from leg to leg, heads bowed like pasture animals.

"Have you seen Delancey?"

"What?"

"Delancey."

"Um."

"She must have run around the side with the others. "

"Check out what Trisha posted last night."

"That thing with Kyle on the couch?"

"Is that inappropriate or what?"

"It's totally."

"Talk about a hot mess."

"What does Kyle's girlfriend think?"

"Who knows. It's entertainment, anyway."

"Did you want me to go help you look around or what?"

"My god, look at this one Kelly just put up."

"Oh, that's classic."

"Look at that hair!"

Their heads touch and they snicker and blink over Kelly's hair as it stood in the early 90s—a stiff, glittering wave swept high off the forehead—and when they break apart to

resume their swaying, praying dance, they curvy their heads in shared bewilderment, not at the little girl bubbling at the bottom of the pool, but at the image of Trisha and Kyle on the couch and how thrilling it must feel to be so reckless.

Become One Flesh

by Maria Pinto

Before I even open my eyes, I am conscious of the inhale and exhale coming from the closet. The exhale sounds like the soft gurgling of a coffeemaker near the end of its brew cycle. I sit up and scratch my fingernail from wrist to elbow; a welt rises like a hard line in the road. I guess I'm not dreaming. The breathing is still there, feather-like in my ears but regular as a metronome. They told me this would happen. "Plastic Respiration" is what the man who helped me called it, and he assured me that once the product reached "maturity" it would no longer need to "breathe." I'd almost made a joke when he said this, because the look on his face was free of the irony I felt our situation required. Only a weak little joke, along the lines of: *Mark never matured in life, leave it to him to wait till death to do it!* or *So you're telling me I still haven't escaped his snoring?* But I bit my lip and nodded, worried he was waiting for any hint that I was not the right kind of customer. I took the thing home in an improbably small vacuum-packed bag, unpacked it, took in the measure of its flaccidness, and wept. I ignored it for a week. I had been sleeping on the couch since the car accident. This is the first morning I have faced our bedroom in daylight alone.

I hold my breath a second so that the Plastic Respiration catches up with my own and we breathe together, me and the Skin, until it starts to sound enough like a perversion of Lamaze that I roll over into Mark's abandoned indentation in the bed and let the sheets I still haven't washed soak up the only tears, *I promise, darling*, that I'll shed for him today.

* * *

Whenever I asked about some piece of evidence that called his fidelity into question, Mark liked to speculate on how the things he did now might affect his next life, or lives.

"The way I see it," he'd say over his sixth beer of the night, "I'm sort of ruining the next guy's learning curve by being good and getting all the lessons on the first try. It seems best to make lots of spectacular mistakes and go out on more limbs without a clear way back to the trunk, if you know what I mean. Otherwise I'm kind of fucking him over, right?"

"First off," I'd lay in, "I think it's rich you just assume your next life is as a human male. What a joke! A man is the luckiest thing on the planet. What makes you think you'll ever deserve that particular privilege again? I vote female slug. I vote female slug born in a

salt factory!" I was moody as a feral cat. I knew that the mistakes he planned to make, was currently making, had more dramatic measurements than mine. I also knew that I would not leave him. All of his indiscretions broke over me pre-forgiven, as if my pride had met its match.

"Slugs are hermaphrodites, babe," he'd croon, putting down the beer and stalking across to where I'd have my swollen feet up on the arm of the couch, "and anyway I have to be male. So that I can come and find you wherever you are, always female and luscious, and put a baby right here," he'd start rubbing my belly and kissing his way up my legs. I'd just begun to show at the three-month mark, and he was already demanding that I leave my job at the jeweler's. "I can't wait to find you over and over and over again." And then the way he was so gentle with me as we lost our breath made me drop it until my next suspicion, which always came quickly.

* * *

It's just like I imagined it would be, inside. *What if death did not us part?* Close and hot, but comfortable and right-feeling. We are taking a stroll along the shore a couple towns over because Mark's being recognized would result in a scene. *You could never get close enough to her.* The salt air smells amniotic. I imagine that my sense of smell is sharpened through his nostrils. He was always more sensual, more alive than I was. In him, I am taller, more commanding of my space. I stretch out all the way to the fingertips, to the scalp, to the tip of our cock. I stretch full out rather than shrinking in on myself, like I do in just *my* body. That Mark was—is—one of the most handsome men I have ever seen still makes me flush with pride. My face went hot in front of the mirror when I finally slipped into the Skin this morning, my head swimming in him. I've fallen in love with him again through our reflection. The way I would have if I'd gotten the chance to meet our baby. Women follow him, us, with their eyes far more often than they ever did when we were out together, hand in hand. I never knew what he was up against, but I knew instinctively to forgive him. *I forgive us, Mark.* Seeing the curious, sometimes openly hungry, looks in the eyes of these strangers is erotic in a way I did not anticipate. I almost want to make love to them all through his skin. Wouldn't that be the perfect revenge, to fuck them all?

All the Sounds of China

by Leonora Desar

You can hear everything underwater, even silence. I learned this in the bathtub of our old apartment in the South Bronx listening for China.

My best friend Albertine said you can hear China if you turn clockwise in the tub three times facing Mrs. Noda's bedroom. Albertine talked about this at recess. We were playing soldiers and walking past the sly girls trading cigarettes and the loser girls playing hopscotch and the boys playing "Who would win in a fight?"

"Who would win in a fight?" Luis Álvarez said at our heads. "Diego or his little *novia*?"

"Neither," said his wingman, Justin. "They are too busy F-U-C—"

"Don't listen to them, Diego," Albertine said. "Just listen for China. Tonight, at 19:00 hours. Think of me and turn in the tub three times clockwise—you know which way clockwise is, right?"

At 19:00 hours I opened my ears for China—for the sound of chopsticks combing through hair I imagined to be thick and glistening, like the film over my mother's eyes that kept her in her own space. I opened for the sound of sweet and sour pork turning in the wok, for the hum of heat and crowds and subways humming with heat and crowds because China is so packed that some people can only have one kid by law, or else they make you pay a fine. I think my mother thought this is a good thing, that they should do this in America too to make things easier for the mothers, even though she never said so. She only looked at me and my father and my twin sister Selena with that filmy look—that sad, oily stare that made the hair in my ears stand up as we ate dinner counting cracks in the cheap green dining table, in silence.

At first I heard nothing. I turned clockwise again three times, feeling the slab of the porcelain tub on my chest, the filmy remains of hair conditioner left by my sister. Then I saw Mrs. Noda. She posed in the window wearing only a purple bra and panties, her hand on her veiny hip and ear cocked to a big, bearded man. She was talking to the man and smoking a brown cigarette and the smoke from her cigarette came at me from her

window. It came across the clothesline where she hung her silky bedroom things and into the window of our bathroom where it became fog over bathwater, a thin, raspy mist.

I went under and this time I heard. At first I thought it was China. But it was just Mrs. Noda's cigarette. It hissed in the tortoise ashtray her daughter Patrice had made before the state took her away—a green rhapsody of clay and food dye, the head split. I heard Mrs. Noda tell the man, "Not tonight, papi," and her flesh pushing away his.

When I looked again it was my mother pushing away flesh. She appeared where Mrs. Noda had. Her low, doughy breasts filled in the purple bra. "I love you but I need air," she told my father.

I told Albertine I heard nothing. She ate half my cheese sandwich and said she knew a better game—we were going to meditate our way to China instead. Albertine knew all about mediation—her mother was trying to meditate her way out of the South Bronx and her marriage to Albertine's stepfather. She told Albertine that you can attract the life you want by visualizing it. You simply put your desire out there into the universe, like a fat worm on a fishing hook. She had read this in *The Secret*.

That night I took another bath. I heard my mother again beneath the water. Her brainwaves snaked into my ears like smoke rings—borders craggy, the centers dim. Static dripped in to replace the vacuum— a gray, loose chaos.

I'm sorry, the static told my father. *I'm sorry*, it told me and Selena.

She only asked my father—"Are you fucking Carla?" The oil in her eyes rasped in filmy swamps.

"You're crazy, Jazmin," my father said.

I heard her palm hesitate in the air, the lull before it cracked his cheek. His flesh curved up to absorb the shock and made the sound of a pillow buttressing over the ear, over the crescent of the ear that you shield when silence fills the house at night, coming at you through walls. My mother's gut must've been a ceiling fan cutting pulp when she realized what she had done.

"You need help," my father said, but his thoughts hummed below water—

What was I supposed to do when you never touched me?

This time my mother was silent. Her gut inflated. It became crowded with air and regret like China is with all those people and then it expelled the air back into her lungs, into her windpipe, the rejected air dead and stale between them.

"I don't know what to do," she said.

I thought of my desire. Beneath the dark film of the bathtub my parents built a city. They destroyed the green dining table and built a new one from whalebone and my dad forgot Carla and my mother's eyes were clear. "Here is my desire," my father said. He fed it to my mother on a fishing hook and she swallowed it and swelled with it and bore a third child and she was happy, happy.

"I need to use the bathroom," my sister yelled. The door swung open. Selena barreled in, groping for her conditioner. "Get outta here," she said. She removed the plug holding our parents in and then the only sound was the hiss of the bathwater draining, our mother's silence in the walls.

Death Pie

by Bertram Mullin

There was Death, baking a homemade pie. Actually, it was Mom making what she called her Death Pie. I had the silly mom of course. It was really plain ole pie with whipped cream and red sprinkles on top.

Mom always dressed as The Grimm Reaper and served the neighbors her pies on every single Halloween. She took this Death theme to a whole new level with her freaky wig, realistic boney-finger gloves, and long black cloak. Her hatchet might have been fake, but it was pointy enough to trick me at first.

"Give everything your one-hundred-percent best effort," Mom said.

She dipped a thumb into the pie and licked. Mom thought no one saw. I saw. I saw everything.

She offered me a piece.

"I hate Death Pie! I'll never try it."

I had way bigger concerns. The neighborhood's Annual Halloween Costume Contest was tonight. The winner would receive a trophy filled with candy known to all the kids as the

Golden Candy Trophy. I lost three attempts in my whole six years on earth. I was a vampire the first time. Then I was a swamp man.

Last year, I went as the meanest skeleton my best friend for life next door ever saw. But I got eliminated each attempt. I had to win the Golden Candy Trophy this year. It was the most important thing in my life. Only, all I had was a crummy Ninja Turtle costume.

It was my own fault. I asked Mom to get the costume for me because the movie was so ratchet. And then my Sais weren't even real. They were made of foam. There was no way I would win the contest with this lousy getup—unless I struck the right poses during the dance routines. I stood in the mirror for hours practicing my scary looks and stances. Then I did my war cries to Spike.

"Grr."

"Rawr."

"Grahhh!"

He didn't bat an eye. His blank stares might as well have been laughs. Then he chased his tail and ran off. I wasn't even scary to a dog, especially with this half-shell costume on. I really wanted to win all that candy and had no chance. This was quickly becoming the worst Halloween ever.

"Sweetie, the competition starts soon, and I know you want to win, so we'd better skedaddle soon. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Mom."

She would have won the contest had this not been a kid's only competition. I didn't even want her to touch me with those real looking Death hands.

Her palm rubbed my green turtlehead. "Frighten them dead." She smiled at me. "Show the Sais when you walk. And remember to grind your teeth and squint your eyes when you look at the judges. That's your best *scary* look."

It was time, finally. The walk to the park took forever. I ran to the stage and lined up right as everything started. I stood so close to the Golden Candy Trophy that I could almost touch it. Mom had a center seat, which made me more nervous.

A werewolf stood on stage next to Frankenstein's Monster. *Those two could win.* Even a Sponge Bob was in line, yet the only thing scary about him was his bad breath. My real challenge would be the girl in the voodoo doll costume.

She had strawberry red hair and redder spots on her creepy white outfit. Something about the way she smelled made me want to sneeze. And of course the pasty voodoo girl took her spot right next to me.

They made us dance around in a circle to ghostly music for round one. It reminded me of the first PG movie I ever saw with ghouls, which gave me nightmares for a week.

I ground my teeth like how Mom told me to do. When the song ended, they called out the final three. "Ghost Boy" was named, then "Voodoo Girl" as expected, and I waited for the third name patiently.

The Vampire Kid would be my choice. I wasn't scared of him or anything, but he had these huge dark eyes, white fangs, and long claws. Even Mom jumped in her seat when he "*Hissed!*"

For some reason, the Vampire Kid ran off crying all of the sudden.

Then one of the judges said, "And the Ninja Turtle."

Me?

And in a heartbeat there were three. Ghost Boy, who for some reason had an eye patch, a hook for a left hand, and a stick leg, was one. I suppose he was a ghost pirate. There was Voodoo Girl with a weird raggedy doll, then me with my foam Sais.

I'd bet all my Halloween candy that Voodoo Girl didn't really have striped eyes. And she was the tallest of all the kids in the whole entire neighborhood. Bet she was old enough to buy her own outfit.

When the song ended, Ghost Boy fell and was disqualified.

It was down to the last round between Voodoo Girl and me.

We had a dance off. My song was "Thriller."

I knew this one. Mom showed it to me a long time ago during one of her silly antics. She grinned at me from her center seat and I remembered her saying, "Give everything your one-hundred-percent best effort."

And as soon as the man in the intro stopped babbling, I did my zombie dance, just like Mom did when I saw her. The judges oohed and aahed over my mad skills.

When it was Voodoo Girl's turn, and the song "Mickey You're So Fine" played, she threw her doll to the ground and said, "You win."

Even when I held the Golden Candy Trophy I couldn't believe this was real. In all my years I never thought it would happen. I had won thanks to something my silly mom had shown me. She held my hand and helped me carry the trophy.

"Mom. When we get home, can I try your Death Pie?"

When a Body in the Water Hits Your Body

by Kathleen J Woods

Nora jumped from the planter with the rest of the girls, smiling for the camera in their neon swimsuits. She could not stop midair to protect the body beneath her, the girl who had jumped at "two" rather than "three." Nora's thighs slammed against shoulders, her pelvis against the back of a neck. The girl folded. Nora spun away into the water.

She surfaced with the other faces. The body that had crumpled sputtered and thrashed. It was the birthday girl's cousin. Someone yelled, a mother standing poolside. Nora scattered away with the others, darting like minnows.

The cousin turned herself onto her back. She floated and moaned. Another girl pushed her gently to the shallow end. Don't move her. Don't twist her neck. She moaned. A mother dipped into the water, soaking her shirt. They lifted the cousin up.

Nora huddled between two classmates. They wore checkered tankinis. They wore polka dots. Nora's hips vibrated. Her eyes hazed with chlorine. A mother straightened the cousin flat over the adobe tiles circling the pool. *Call an ambulance. Girls, get out of the pool.*

The birthday girl was crying. Nora looked at her, newly thirteen, round stomach and narrow hips. The birthday girl was not popular, but she was the first in their class to become a teenager. She had this outdoor swimming pool, curved like two eggs, with a yellow waterslide and the rocky planter ledge ten feet above. The adobe tiles burned Nora's feet.

A mother ushered the girls into the shade. They sat on plastic loungers and straw chairs. Nora fidgeted over the weaving. Her thighs hurt.

"No one is in trouble," the birthday girl's mother said. The mother with the hair like Red-Hots. "But we need you girls to be honest."

The group murmured a choral *It Wasn't Me*. Nora echoed them, her jaw half-stone. I didn't hit her. I couldn't see.

The birthday girl sat in front of Nora, sniffing. No one else was crying. One girl mimicked a sob, a narrow-lunged foghorn. The birthday girl leaned back against Nora's

knee. Nora stroked her wet hair. Her fingers formed gutters and ridges. Nora braided. She did not look up. The birthday girl's scalp was white chalk, white frosting.

The ambulance's siren wailed towards them. It silenced at their door. The girls turned to each other and whispered. Two paramedics walked across the adobe with a stretcher. They knelt by the cousin, shelling her in black cloth. They pulled tools from their bags. Bandages spilled towards the pool. The birthday girl's mother paced alongside them, gesturing. Nora tried to hear her. This was the mother that had called out to them. She had said one, two, three, jump. She had taken a picture. Nora dropped the chunks of braid and watched them slide apart.

The birthday girl turned. "I know one of you did this."

Nora's hand hovered over the birthday girl's head. She lowered it to the pain in her thigh. The birthday girl's face was so close.

"She didn't even want to come. She doesn't even know any of you," she said, tears on her round cheeks. She tucked into herself, a nautilus. The other girls whispered. Their plastic seats squeaked beneath the damp undersides of their legs.

Across the pool, the paramedics lifted the cousin onto the stretcher. Plastic and foam covered her neck, held her like a doll in its packaging, so many straps and twist-ties.

The siren sped away from the house, and the girls burst into chatter. Is she paralyzed? Is she dead? The hospital, the hospital. My brother was in the hospital once, they put rods in his spine.

The three mothers stood in the shade, their fingers on their temples and necks.

"Everything's fine. You can all get back in the pool," one said.

"I'm not sure," the birthday girl's mother said.

"It's so hot. What else are they supposed to do?"

The girls looked at each other, looked at the water. I dunno. I don't want to. Nora's skin tightened over her elbows.

"Girls, get back in the pool," the birthday girl's mother said. "I'll call your parents."

She turned to the house, flip-flops smacking against puddles.

The birthday girl did not look up as the others walked back to the water, stepped in one at a time. Nora bent close to her.

"She'll be okay," she said.

The birthday girl shook her head. "You don't know. She looked gray."

Nora straightened and followed the other girls. Her head spun as she approached the pool's edge, the slick tile marked "Three." Come in, the girls called, so bright in the water. Nora split her face into a smile. Her own swimsuit the only green, easy to pick out among the pinks and blues. Nora walked to the stairs. She saw the camera on a pile of towels, where the birthday girl's mother had dropped it. The girls called for her.

The water chilled her calves and cut into her belly. The girls stood in the shallow water.

"Was it you, Nora-Nora?" Polka dots said. "It wasn't me."

"No," Nora said.

Maybe it was nobody. Maybe she's faking. Maybe it was nothing.

Nora ducked under the water. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe she'd imagined. She opened her eyes. Blurry legs kicked and pranced, murky toes spinning on the white pool floor. The familiar limbs of classmates who skipped rope at lunch. They'd jumped for the picture. The cousin had gone too fast. So many feet down to the water, Nora's head blank as she dropped. How could it have been her? What could she say now? This cousin went to a different school; Nora would not see her again, not see the neck brace or the wheelchair coming down the hallway. Her stomach turned. She shot to the surface and blew water from nose.

"I bet she was faking," Checkered said. "She's like ten. Little girls fake."

Nora nodded. "She's probably okay. She's definitely okay."

She moved the edge of the pool, away from the games of mermaid, carried herself hand over hand until she hit something soggy. The end of the unrolled bandage. The ambulance had come for her. The ambulance had sped her to the hospital. She'd been so small in her frilly swimsuit. Nora's mother was driving towards them. She would be there soon, to scoop her away, to wonder what happened. An accident.

Nora watched the other girls dip into the water and raise their feet like fins. They tossed their dark heads back and laughed. Nora's neck stiffened. The water lapped at her sides. She pulled herself over the ledge. How could she say anything now? She watched the birthday girl glare from the edge of the house, standing by her mother. They whispered together.

Nora stood, sun hot on her back. She stepped forward, reaching for a towel, trying to look like she was reaching for a towel. No one had retrieved the camera. It was large, its lens long and intricate, switches like a series of bracelets. Nora swept her hair forward. It dripped down her chest, sent waves down her stomach. She leaned.

Goodbye to the Karls

by Kelsey Englert

I called them all Karl Foerster. They stood soldier-straight just before I slashed the machete through their ankles, just before they timbered to the ground.

I told all the Karls that they were my lovers. I talked to them each day, and let them compete for my affection. Then I killed them.

Every year, at the cusp of winter, I carried out this execution, moved from cluster to cluster to strike down the Karls. They never cowered at the sight of the blade. Sometimes they swayed, if the wind willed it. Thin, but strong, they stood at attention, and waited without fear for their ending like all heroic lovers.

Even when they fell, stacked on top of each other on the ground, lifeless, they did not go limp. Straight and stiff, they waited for me to lift their dead remains. I gathered them in my arms, pulled them up together, and piled them in a wagon. Their bodies bundled, packed tightly against each other. Then I wheeled them off to the woods, and heaped them high so they could rot with company, but out of my sight.

I left their feet behind.

From those feet, new life sprouted. After several pregnant months, the next army of Karls rose up in force, grew together, strong and thick, to love and battle with me again.

I let them live, for a while. I gifted them with water and sometimes food. The harder the soldiers, the better my view.

Then I married Jacob St. Pierre. Together, we said goodbye to the Karls. Jacob brought his own blade, and helped me slice them down. While we worked, we spoke in Latin to each other, saying things like *Calamagrotis x acutiflora* until we laughed, until the hunch in Jacob's back didn't bother me, until I forgot that I loved the soldier-straight Karls first.

Staff Selections

The following stories were selected by the editors. These stories represent our favorite and most memorable pieces from the past six months.

Culpability

by Heather Clitheroe

Banff doesn't change. Everywhere else does—so quickly that I feel bewildered and lost almost on a daily basis. But in Banff, the stores are still crammed with the moose-themed souvenirs and little bottles of maple syrup. The mountains surrounding the town are the same, and when I look at them, it's not limestone and calcareous shale, but memories of years ago. The ghosts of childhoods and ski trips, hot summers and damp autumn days. While Jaywant sleeps in, I sit alone in a booth in the hotel restaurant and watch the tourists taking pictures of the sunrise. They painstakingly crop out the parking lot and the bear-proof dumpsters, carefully editing out what they don't want to see. As if it's that easy.

It was my suggestion that we take a small trip and spend some time together before he has to go back to Paris for the inquest. He did not want to go. "People will recognize me," he said.

"But I got you a window seat on the train," I said. "And I booked a hotel room."

He made a face that I remember him making as a boy: wrinkling his forehead, his nose scrunched up. "I'm not sharing with my mother."

"You get your own," I told him, but I didn't add that it was adjoining.

He huffed and sighed. He agreed because I gave him the pained expression that is the weapon of all mothers everywhere. "You need to get away," I tell him. His doctors agree with me, but I do not say this. "It'll be good for you."

There's not much for him to do at my house besides shoveling the driveway. Also the sidewalks. He shovels at four in the morning, before anybody else is up. I wake up, hear the scraping of his shovel and know he hasn't slept at all. That it will be another bad day. I don't know what he does in the night, and I've told him over and over again that he should get up and go downstairs and watch television until he's tired, or make himself something to eat—I have carefully portioned leftovers into dishes so he can reheat them. Night after night, he goes to bed when I do. I hear nothing until a quarter to four, when the stairs squeak and the front closet door opens.

It is good for his arms and back to shovel. He is still building muscle back after such a long time in microgravity. But he also needs to get away from the news vans that come and spend the day on our street. Reporters stand on the curb and tell stories about him, their hurtful words hanging in the air. The closer we get to the inquest, the more they come around the house. I've heard some of them, talking into their cameras. "The tragedy on Mars," they say, and then they gesture to my front door.

As I drink my tea and watch the tourists, a reporter approaches my table. I can tell what she is before she starts talking, before she turns her phone to show me her identification. "Mrs. Dalvi, please excuse me for interrupting...my name is Jessie Aggarwal..." She is young, her long hair carefully styled so that it cascades down her shoulders. There is mehndi, fresh and dark, on her hands and wrists. This is, no doubt, deliberate: they have sent me somebody who they think I will respond to, who looks like I did when I was her age and wore my youth with pride.

I've been told not to talk to reporters. Not to anybody. Jaywant tells me not to, and the earnest young people at his lawyers' office say the same thing. It breaks my heart, this silence, because I am sure that when we finally get to the inquest it will all be made clear and he'll be absolved. I'm sure it will give him peace. If people could know—if they could just know—it would be better for Jaywant. My boy went to Mars and he is a hero. That is what people need to know.

The reporter sits down, uninvited. Takes my silence for permission. Licks her lips, and then begins to speak. "Mrs. Dalvi, first, I want to say that I think there's two sides to every story," she says. She lays her phone on the table between us. She notices me looking at it and makes a show of turning it off. If, indeed, that is what she has done. "Two sides," she repeats. "And I think only one side is being heard."

At the entrance of the restaurant, by the station where the dinner menus are stacked in teetering piles, I see Jaywant. He shuffles, his feet scuffing on the carpet. Still walking like an old man, cautious and distrustful of gravity. His back aches all the time, and he takes steaming baths for an hour or more, draining my hot water tank. He is nearsighted now, wears glasses that he ordered online. They are crooked because he doesn't want to come to the mall with me to have them adjusted. We tried pouring boiling water over the plastic and bending the earpieces ourselves, but it didn't work very well.

Jaywant sees me and I raise my hand, hoping he will see this reporter and know to turn around and go back to his room. But he nods his head and comes slouching over, sliding into the booth next to the her. "Hi, Mom," he says. "Who's this?" Eyes are puffy. By the way he rubs his chin, I know that he only slept late because he took pills. Still, he smiles a little at the young woman, and I hesitate. It gives me hope, to see him showing even a

little bit of interest, and I wait too long to warn him. It gives her the opportunity to start talking, and she does.

* * *

Jessie is short for Jessica, she says. Named for a paternal grandmother. From Vancouver, but she lives in Calgary. She shows us pictures of her cat on her phone—it was never turned off. She tells us a comical story about her landlord and the endless renovations in her apartment, how he forgot to buy new locks and she slept with her couch dragged across the door for two nights last week. As she speaks, her hands move wide, gesturing gracefully. Jaywant drinks coffee and watches her over the rim of his cup. She speaks to me as in overly familiar terms, cheeky but polite, directing her patter to me. Jaywant begins to relax. His shoulders come down from that terrible hunch that he has adopted since he came back, the apologetic cringe that he wears even in his sleep.

"...and I'm in Banff for the week," Jessie says. "My friend got married on the weekend." She holds her hands out, turns them over to show us the mehndi for proof. "I thought I'd take a few extra days off. Change of scenery. Maybe I'll have a proper kitchen when I get back."

Jaywant makes a polite noise.

"It's a buffet," I remind him. "You have to help yourself." If he gets up to take a plate, I can tell this Jessie to leave us alone without doing it in front of him.

"I'm not really hungry, Mom," he says.

"You should try."

Jessie smiles prettily at him, her teeth flashing. "I'll join you," she says, ignoring my scowl, but Jaywant gives her a long look and then shrugs, putting his hands flat on the table to push himself up. The eyeglasses slide down his nose. I watch her follow Jaywant, shortening her long stride to match his slow step. Throwing her head back, laughing at something he's said, touching his arm.

A snake. Definitely a snake.

* * *

Perhaps I should be grateful that he came back with a full plate, that he ate because she did, balancing the fork carefully, bracing himself with the other hand. Jessie lets him sit

down first. I watch silently. It's more than I've been able to get him to eat since he came back. She talks to him about a television show, something that was popular just before he left. I don't believe for a moment that it isn't a deliberate choice, this reminding him of something from before.

"Jaywant," I say, interrupting her. He turns his head slowly. Still dizzy. "Did you remember your pills?"

He sighs, spreads his arms slightly. He told me that in space, they did not shake their heads. They signalled with their hands, their shoulders. Now, sometimes, he points with his elbow. It's like watching a foreigner trying to communicate. "They're back in my room," he says.

"You should take them on time," I say. "It's important to follow the schedule."

He excuses himself and Jessie stands to let him slide out of the booth. We all hear his spine snapping and cracking as he straightens. I watch him shuffling away, turning his face as he crosses in front of a pair of tourists taking pictures of an elk on the hotel's driveway. Jessie sits back down. The leatherette seat squeaks softly. I lean forward as soon as he is out of earshot. I hiss at her. "You go now," I say. "Go away. Leave us alone."

She gives me a polite smile. "Mrs. Dalvi, I can appreciate that this is awkward..."

"You have no *right*," I say. "Are you recording this? All of this? I'll sue you."

"I don't think you will," she says. "You've got three mortgages on your home to pay for your son's lawyers. Courts in three countries are still considering whether or not to indict him. He goes to an inquest in two weeks. You've emptied your retirement account. Your credit cards are almost maxed out; you've exhausted your late husband's insurance policy." She ticks all of this off on her fingers. "He's got no income, and you're on pension." She pauses as the waitress comes with the bill, reaches for it smoothly before I can take it. "I think you'll find that I'm going to be the only friend you have in this, Mrs. Dalvi. We're prepared to pay handsomely. Right now, my network is spreading a rumour that he's in Vancouver to give you a chance at some privacy. That could change in a heartbeat, I promise you." Then she smiles again, and signs the bill to her room, adding on a generous tip and putting it down where I can see it. "Let's not keep Jay waiting, okay?"

"His name is Jaywant," I mutter.

* * *

We go to the gondola because it is too cold to walk outside and Jaywant will not be up to skiing for a very long time. I had planned for us to take the bus, to save money, but Jessie has a car and says she will drive us up. Jaywant looks relieved, says he thinks this will be a good idea. Somebody recognized him in the lobby, and a hotel worker stopped and stared until the manager noticed and came out from behind the desk to scold her. He apologized to me, saying that he would, of course, insist that his employee delete her photos.

Jessie pulls up out front and waves to us. A lovely big SUV. I have to help Jaywant step up into the front seat. Jaywant makes an uncomfortable noise as she corners tightly. "Are you all right?" Jessie asks, and he says calmly that he is fine, but the strained way he speaks tells me that he is feeling nauseous. He was always prone to carsickness as a child. In space, he was barely ill at all. The others were terribly sick; he cared for them all for days, round the clock, cleaning up vomit and diarrhea in zero gravity, never complaining. People forget that he did that.

"You should turn the heat down," I tell her, and to Jaywant, I say, "I'll open a window." I start to press buttons, but all I succeed in doing is locking and unlocking my door.

"Mom," he says curtly. "Stop it. I'm fine."

Jessie pays for our tickets before I can get my wallet out, and soon we are all clambering into the gondola car. I used to bring Jaywant here when he was a boy, when he had days off from school for teacher's conference. The enormous gears and wheels turn steadily, and we



scramble to get in as a bored attendant holds the cabin door open for us. Jaywant sits beside Jessie, his back to the mountain slope. She must be a little younger than him, I think. They almost look like a couple, the way she laughs nervously as the car rises. She glances at me quickly before she leans into him.

He looks out the window, pushing his glasses up with a finger. The car rises smoothly through the trees, beginning the climb. I pull on my gloves, gesture to Jaywant to do the same, but his hands are back in his pockets. The little gondola cabin is silent. Close and intimate. I can hear the faint whistle of his breathing. We are in the shadow of another mountain—Rundle. Maybe. Jaywant would know; he learned the names of all the peaks as a child. I read interviews where he said that was why he became a geologist. It was why they selected him for the mission. It all started here.

Now he sighs and leans back, his long legs folded underneath the seat. I shuffle to one side so he can stretch. His knees have been giving him a lot of trouble. "Jaywant," I say. "Look at that." I point. We emerge from shadow into clear, bright sunshine. The snowy peaks around us are glowing, achingly white and clean. "See that? There's where you learned how to ski. Remember? And there's our hotel. Look at that."

Jessie looks, but she squeals in fright as the gondola cabin passes over the support, rattling and shaking. Jaywant lets her clutch his arm, but he doesn't turn his head. He is looking to the right, away from where I am pointing and towards the Goat Range. There is nothing out that way—no roads, no buildings. The mountains come together to form a valley. You can almost imagine that the ranges on either side are two arms, reaching down to cradle the ground and hold it close. I hoped that he would enjoy this and see that there is beauty to appreciate even now. That there are things for him here besides lawyers and speculation. He spent too long in space, too long alone on that slow trip home. When I look at him, though, I can't tell if he is happy or sad. His face is empty.

"Jaywant?" I say, but he is lost to me, drifting on his thoughts.

I remember when they brought me to Paris, to meetings with the psychologists and the doctors. They coached me on what to say to him. They knew he was listening. They ran diagnostics on all of the communications equipment remotely, found it all in working order. I role-played with a young man from Leeds before they let me try to talk to him. He took the part of Jaywant and tried to gently prepare me for the things he might say. Angry things, ugly things. Upsetting things. It was very strange, a white boy with a British accent calling me Mom, but he tried his best.

None of us were prepared for Jaywant's silence.

He stopped talking to us shortly after he sent back the video of the accident and gave his report. He lost his words, would only speak to the bodies sealed in the airlock. There were microphones and cameras all throughout the ship, and they picked up every sound he made, recorded every small noise. He turned the *Dauntless* and completed the navigational burn, pushing the ship back towards home while the crew floated together in the lock, tied together. Still in their suits, stained with red dirt and blood.

He brought them back up from the surface, my brave boy. Nobody would have faulted him if he left them behind on Mars. It was a risk they all accepted, all of them. It was a decent thing he did. I was very proud of him for doing it, bringing that comfort to their families. So was everybody else. But people are hungry for scandal, and when that tape of him leaked, it gave them the meal. His broken sobs, his apologies to the bodies. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. It was my fault. I should have been more careful. I'm sorry."

Later he talked to them like they were alive. He talked to them like they answered him. Laughed and argued. Then whispers. But never a word to Mission Control, or to me, even though we knew he could hear us. He only spoke to his crewmates, staring into the airlock, the glass fogged up by his breath.

Another ship met the *Dauntless*. Another crew took custody of him. There were more videos, more leaks to the media. He had not shaved in months. His face was gaunt; he barely ate. They told me he stopped washing. They transferred him off the ship, declared the *Dauntless* evidence and began their investigations.

Jaywant's crewmates were brought back home, buried with honours. They sent Jaywant to a psychiatric hospital. They made sure there were camera crews and reporters at the entrance, waiting to film my boy as they lifted him out of an ambulance and carried him up the steps on a stretcher. He was too weak to even try walking, his body wasted away from the long months of mourning.

* * *

There is still a coffee shop up here, at the top of the mountain. Nobody recognizes us as we get off the gondola—we look like a family. A young couple, a mother-in-law tagging along. I suggest that we could all sit and have tea. But Jaywant pushes the door open and goes out onto the observation deck to lean on the railing. The wind buffets him and lifts his hair.

Jessie takes this opportunity to talk to me, to open up a contract on her phone. "We'll pay for his lawyers, and give you an annuity. All you have to do is agree to an interview."

"Just one?" I say. "Is that all? How kind of you." She ignores my sarcasm.

"A series of interviews."

"No."

"We'll tell his story, Mrs. Dalvi." She looks over her shoulder at him. "We'll tell the truth about what happened. My editors are committed to it."

"I don't believe you." I truly don't. I already fell into this trap once, when the first footage of Jaywant played on the news. I talked to a reporter. It was just after my husband died, when I was reeling, mad with pain and grief. A stroke. The stress killed him, that's what the doctors said. I should never have said that to the reporters, but I meant for them to know that it was their unfairness that did it, the way they talked about Jaywant. That is not at all how they reported it. All of the sudden, the stories were about me. The mother who blamed her son. "You'll tell lies about him."

"It's the biggest story of the century," she said. "What could we say that is worse than everything that's been said already? About him? Or you? We don't want to tell that story. It's been done."

She gives me her phone, tells me to read the contract. One of those new devices, fitting easily in my hand, automatically adjusting the font so that the letters are large and crisp as it estimates my age. "I can't agree to this," I say. "No."

"We're talking about the best legal team money can buy, Mrs. Dalvi. Better than the lawyers you have."

"And what if he is indicted? Can your lawyers make it go away?"

"No," she admits. "But if they go ahead, we can make sure he doesn't go to prison. Isn't that what you want?"

"You'll make him sound like a crazy man. He's not."

"Let us show the world that he isn't," she says, dropping her voice and covering my hand with hers. "Let us help him. And you." I look down at her hand, at the patterns in her mehndi. The warmth of her fingers startle me; Jaywant will not touch me. He will not hug me, will not kiss my cheek. When I try to hold him, he pulls away.

I am suddenly a foolish old woman, blubbing to a reporter who could finish my boy with one story, one carelessly edited interview. Any chance at freedom he has, gone with one headline. Convicted by opinion pieces before he even gets to the courts. "He isn't responsible for any of what happened," I say, wiping my eyes. "It was an equipment failure. That drill could have hit him. He was lucky. He could have died, too. That's what he told me."

"If you sign the contract..." She lets her voice trail off.

"I have to ask Jaywant."

"You're his legal guardian," she says. "You still have power of attorney. We checked. The papers haven't been rescinded. His lawyers forgot to do that. Do you see why you want to deal with us instead?" She leans closer to me, drops her voice. "What else have they forgotten?"

I know the story I want the world to know. Even though it is none of their business. I want them to know that he left sealed letters for his father and me in case anything happened. I never opened mine. I was sorely tempted, during those months while I talked to him, telling an empty screen about the people that missed him and how much I loved him, hoping he would listen to me. I read to him. I held pictures up, brought his teddy bear and showed it to him. I told him to come back to me.

The company wanted the spaceship. They wanted the bodies, too, but they wanted their ship more. They were afraid he would crash it, drive it into the moon. Or that he would sail on past Earth without slowing. They were fearful for their ship, had to make sure they got it back. I only wanted my Jaywant.

I can tell the world what he told me before he left, that night before he went into quarantine. Two weeks before launch. I held one hand and his father held the other, and he told us not to worry. He was young and confident, speaking with courage and love. He smiled broadly at me. "I'm going to make history, Mom," he said. "It'll be epic. I'm responsible for all these people. You know? They're all looking to me."

"Do you know what you're doing?" I asked. I couldn't help myself. I thought of what he was like when he was younger. The reckless things he did. The risks he took. The poor choices. I thought of these things, even as the guilt burned in my chest. "Are you sure you know what to do?"

"I'm the best person for the job," he said. "Really."

"And you can do it?" I said. "You'll be careful. Right?"

"I promise you I will," he said.

I want the world to know that my boy kept all his promises. That he didn't take chances. Accidents happen. I want the people who send angry emails and leave vicious comments on news sites to understand this.

Jaywant is still at the edge of the observation deck, and I have a sudden, sick fear that he will throw himself off the edge, down the side of the mountain. But he would not do that to me, I think. He agreed to be released to my care. I made him promise he would not do anything stupid. "He's a good son," I say.

"Let me tell his story," she says. She watches me without blinking. "Let me help people believe him."

I press two fingers to the screen, sign the contract quickly, and Jessie smiles with triumph and squeezes my hand. "This isn't about the money," I tell her. My voice shakes. "None of this was his fault. I want the story to be the truth."

"I promise you, we'll do that," she says.

I want the truth. I want people to believe my boy. Because maybe then, I will believe him, too.

Photograph © Heather Clitheroe

Before the Shot

by Valerie Vogrin

—*Sing Sing*, 1928

I didn't want him to take the assignment. His bosses are using him and he knows it. He's the bland Midwesterner who won't be recognized by the local cops and prison brass. My husband is not one to violate the rules, but he has a certain hunger to make a bigger name for himself. And I'm guessing he hopes that a good clear picture of a woman in Old Sparky will be disturbing enough to change some people's minds. The night before he left for New York he nursed a glass of Rhine wine as he sat on a neat rectangle of newspaper wearing just his union suit, polishing his shoes. He swiped polish on his cordovan wingtips with neat daubs. The rest of him is put together like a longshoreman, but Will's wrists are on the dainty side. His watch strap had slipped around so the face rested against his pulse. He wouldn't let me help him pack. "I don't want you to have any part of this," he said. He picked out his freshest shirts, the least worn pairs of black hose. He won't strap the camera onto his ankle until he is ready to enter the prison building.

I didn't want him to do it. God knows he's taken some grisly shots, lots of young-middle-aged-old tough guys limp-crumpled-knocked off their feet, the camera's bulb illuminating their comb-furrowed, brilliantined hair although their necks/trunks/abdomens have been pierced by gunfire. Mobsters, thugs, pros, bystanders. Bodies in alleys, gullies, underpasses, basements, and automobile trunks. Last year there was a family. At first, it looked as though the inhabitants of the house simply had been overtaken by fatigue. A young mother slumped in an easy chair, legs straight out, feet slightly splayed. A baby crawling, rump-up, halfway across a dark rug. A man sitting with his young daughter on their sofa listening to the radio, his arm slung tenderly over her shoulder. A second glance and then you saw the small caliber bullet holes where their left eyes should have been. That one took something out of him. The next morning I watched him willing himself to swallow each bite of breakfast and keep it down.

This job's a twist since more than nine times out of ten it's the victims he shoots. The corpses suggest a sequence of events but they cannot confirm or deny. They are buried with their secrets. Today's subject is alive, the infamous adulteress, an American murderess, a woman last photographed in a jaunty feather-topped hat and fur coat and smirk (but I don't guess she's worn those in some time). What I'm afraid of is that he'll see her before they fasten the straps of the leather mask over her face. Although they

might blindfold her before they bring her in, my bet is that the powers that be will want her to get a good long look at the chair before she's seated in it.

I didn't want him to do it because he wanted to join his father in the florist shop but the old man refused, said no son of his was going to take the kind of guff he'd endured for a career spent in flowers, but his father doesn't have one kind bone in his body and that's why he never had a day's peace among the enamored and grieving. How Will got from bouquets and funeral wreaths to crime photographer I do not know. Most nights he grinds his teeth, ruining his molars. He's told me more than once that I look like an angel while I sleep. I don't remind him that all of the actual angels were male. I've always looked young for my age. I was 25 when we met, but he believed me when I said I was 18. That I was an orphan. That I'd lost my job as a seamstress because of my eye condition. I know I'm not being clear. And I'm not saying my crimes are anything like hers. What I'm saying is that I am certain that given the opportunity he will look her straight in the face, believing it's the honorable thing to do, seeing as how he will be taking something from her—1/50 of one of her last living seconds. And say he fastens his gaze on her features. Say something in the firm set of her lips or the steel in her pale eyes reminds him of me. What happens after that, I wonder. When he comes home and sees me for what I am.

The Way It Went

by Mike Sauve

Neal Montgomery was biking home after .25 cent burger day at McDonalds. It had been his idea to go, but Kevin Steen had hijacked the whole gang and they'd abandoned Neal when he'd stopped to tie his shoelace. Neal chased briefly, but it was sad and pointless to chase after people who were trying to evade you. The boys were Neal's closest friends, and they all liked each other. Steen just needed someone to shoo away. An egalitarian Kevin Steen would have been without mystique. Steen aspired to a rebellious stance informed by his sister's early Offspring CDs, a strained relationship with his father, and a neighbour who wore ripped pants.

The next day Neal's friends would act like they hadn't rode off on him, or they'd pretend that they never intended to lose him, but only to bike faster. The next day someone else would be abandoned, or maybe Neal would be abandoned again. These things were cyclical. It had been almost a year since Neal had been brought to tears by such a betrayal.

An unfamiliar red Nissan truck was parked in his driveway. People in Lac-Sainte-Catherine weren't big on foreign built trucks. Fords and GMCs were the norm. This was years before two-tonne Toyota Tundras would make the scene.

In the kitchen his dad was drinking a beer, which Neal hadn't seen in some time. Neal didn't know why or exactly when his dad had stopped, but only that the daily cases of beer were no longer carried into the basement. There'd been no beer in the house when Neal had left at 6:30. The Labatt 50 his dad drank must have been stashed somewhere or borrowed from a neighbour.

His mom looked like she'd been crying. Neal, at 11, was just mature enough that this didn't make him cry.

"There's someone downstairs to see you," Neal's mom said.

Neal poured some Mountain Dew into a glass and headed for the stairs.

"Shouldn't you explain to him first?" asked Neal's dad.

Neal's mom shrugged.

Neal's interest was piqued. He'd expected the visitor to be a friend or neighbour. Any adult visitor should have been upstairs with his parents. Yet downstairs sat a man in his 40s. Neal's three-year-old sister was on the man's lap.

"Hi there," said the man.

"Hi," Neal said.

"Let me see your arm," said the man.

Neal shuffled his feet and held out his stick-like arm.

"See those freckles?" asked the man, and then held out his own arm.

"So?"

"Same pattern."

"Hold out your other arm."

Neal did.

"Same pattern."

"So?"

"There's no way to say this that isn't ridiculous. I'm you. But they call me, wait for it, 32. I bet you never met a person with a number for a name before?"

Neal had nothing to say.

"Your parents said ten minutes. I think that's fair."

Neal drank from his Mountain Dew. As usual, it was flat.

"They said you were at McDonalds. I remember riding bikes to McDonalds. Who were you with? Kevin Steen? Archambeault? Gravesy?"

"Steen and Archambeault, ya, and a few other guys. I don't know a Gravesy."

"Ed Gourd-Graves?"

"Oh, I've played hockey against him."

"Some things will be different. But many things will be the same. That's what they tell me. That's why I'm with you and not some other Neal. Because it's close. I remember everything in this room, except maybe that owl."

"How'd you get here?" asked Neal.

"I'm a guinea pig. I'd been in jail, and volunteered. I probably won't be able to get back, and apparently staying here won't be good for my health either. That's the kicker."

Neal turned his back on the man to sit in front of his Dell PC.

"I want to tell you a few things. Is that alright?" asked the man.

"I don't care," said Neal.

"Next time Kevin Steen abandons you, or decides you're the one he wants to persecute, write him off for good."

"Okay."



"My parents told me the same thing. That a real friend wouldn't behave the way he did. But you can't explain it to a parent. I'm accountable for my own mistakes, but I put a lot of the blame on Steen. I think some other guys could too. Archambeault didn't turn out all that magnificent. Until 25 my life was one big Kevin Steen impression because that was the only way I knew how to please the world. When I finally stopped, I had no idea how to please the world. Archambeault is still doing his Kevin Steen impression. Kev got inside us in the crucial years and rotted us from the inside, is my feeling."

"He's not that bad," said Neal.

"You think that now, but I'm telling you he'll be showing up in your dreams decades from now," said 32.

Neal rolled his eyes like a syndicated sitcom character might. It was amusing to 32, if darkly so, how children of the 90s were programmed by the preceding decade of televisual mediocrity because that's what aired in afternoons.

"Want to hear some predictions? They'll eventually give my message some weight. No guarantees, but how about the safer bets?"

"Okay."

"One thing I'm pretty sure of, is that if I'm here, a place called CERN will be built in 10 or 15 years. If you start hearing about CERN and a large hadron collider, look for betting lines...um on the Internet...those will be easy to find by then...look for betting lines and bet big on 'Will the Higgs-Boson be discovered?' Pro tip: It will."

"Okay."

"You should write this down."

Neal removed a sheet from the printer and wrote, "Sern Hugs Boston." The man put down Neal's sister, walked over, and corrected it.

"This one is slightly less probable. But you should also invest in a company called Altavista as soon as you hear about it, and stick with it after the bubble bursts. Borrow money if you have to. Get a paper route. You can set yourself up for life."

"I already have a paper route."

"Okay, how about this, I bet in a couple years when you get the album *OK Computer* your dad will sing along to 'Karma Police' but he'll think the chorus is 'Call the Police' and you'll have a good laugh about that. He'll also think that the song 'Werewolves of London' by Warren Zevon is actually 'Werewolves of Thunder'."

"He already thinks that," said Neal, his foot tapping at an inhuman pace.

"See? You can trust me. Even if you shake off Kevin Steen halfway through high school you'll have a better go of things."

"What are you Kevin Steen's girlfriend or something?" asked Neal.

Exhaling through his nose, 32 closed his eyes.

"That reminds me of something. Don't let social status dictate who you date in high school. Date the prettiest girls you can. You're speaking to a man with a ten year prison sentence worth of regret under his belt, and there's nothing I regret more than turning away from pretty girls in high school because of what a bunch of small town rubes thought."

"Date pretty girls," said Neal, "I was planning on doing that anyway."

"I too was known as a smartass. Let this sink in though: If there's a girl every single person hates, a girl they have some cruel name for, but she has a pretty face and a nice body and you can stand her, you are going to be the genius that dates that girl. You got that?"

"I will be that genius."

"Good. And, if I said, 'Don't do drugs' I'd sound like McGriff the Crime Dog, but it really is in your best interest not to. Prison is not fun. I was not having a good time there."

"You mean McGrady the Crime Hound?"

Neal's sister had a coughing fit and the man patted her on the back a few times.

"What's it like where you're from?" asked Neal.

"It's not like Skynet or anything," said 32, pointing to a VHS copy of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* on a shelf, "It's just kind of depressing."

"Why?"

"People take everything too far."

"Like bombs and stuff?"

"More like a technological paradigm shift."

"So I should get good at computers?"

"You could. Or you could not. This stuff is all very instinctual to use."

"So what's the problem?"

"Problem is people start getting microprocessor implants in their noggins. Once you get to around 40% implants, that 40% starts desiring more and more implants to improve functioning. The organization that sent me here, the generals involved were wired right up, way past 40%. More machine than man as they say. They had bugs."

"What kind of bugs?"

"Not insect bugs, bugs like errors. For example, this one general, we realized, couldn't tell us apart whatsoever. He couldn't tell a 300 pound black guy from skinny old me. So some wise ass would throw a muffin right in his face, and the general's only option would be to punish us all. The other generals must have seen who did it, but they didn't want to acknowledge that this guy was obviously 80% cyborg. But, yeah, I mean, things aren't necessarily worse, it's just a different world. Humanity seems to be on the wane, which might be a good thing actually. That's what made me eligible for the program actually. The fact that I remained *natural*. They say *natural* like it's a deficiency. It kind of is, I guess."

"Why'd they send you?"

"I was sent back to get some old technology from the 70s that's suddenly needed to read some proprietary code, but it seems like a lot of work and I'm not going to bother."

From the top of the stairs Neal's mom asked if they were almost finished. The man picked up Neal's baby sister and kissed her forehead.

"One more minute," he said, and put his hand on Neal's shoulder, "Okay pal. I'm wishing you all the best. Here's one last piece of advice. Don't coast on your intelligence."

Being smarter than the people in this shit town won't make you smart enough for the real world."

"Okay."

"So my message in a nutshell. Avoid Kevin Steen. He's toxic. It will be his voice in your head that says the cruellest things, even long after he's gone. Are you listening? Can Windows 95 compute this? I am a time traveller from the future, young man. You aren't going to listen, I can tell. I wouldn't have listened. Shit. Well, at least fuck as many pretty girls as you can while you're in high school. Excuse my language. Geez. Goodbye man. Give 'em hell."

Neal followed 32 up the stairs. Neal's mother embraced 32 for a long time. This was awkward for Neal because 32 was his mother's age, and holding his mother in this tender embrace right in front of his father.

"Does Kevin Steen still live on Carol Court?"

"No, he lives on Montague Crescent," said Neal.

"That's by Pro Sports Grille?"

"Yeah," said Neal.

"See you later," said 32, and laughed a beaten-down kind of laugh. He and Neal's father exchanged stoic nods. The door closed. The Nissan pulled out of the driveway.

"Jesus Christ, why did you tell him where Kevin lives? What does he need to know that for?" asked Neal's dad.

"Fuck Kevin Steen," said Neal.

On the pretence of profanity, Neal was sent to his room.

Photograph © Thomas Gillaspay

King and the Sky

by Christina Qiu

They all lived in the purple house across the street. The sorry boys, the gray girls, and some tired mothers. Four broken families stuffed in a purple house in northern, near-nowhere Jackson. Stuck on Silver Road. Something out of a movie. But there they were, and that day in September, right at the sad tipping point before the leaves turn too ripe, there was the police car that pulled up to their driveway, singing a siren that surrounded our neighborhood like a sorry sorry song. All of them were lined up in a row—little Li sucking on some ghost of a caramel, King with his arms up, the twins, and the other kids I couldn't recognize. Mothers trailing behind, handcuffed. Locked in the police car while the kids watched in awe. The police buzzed off, and there was nothing us neighbors could do but stare at the scene like the air stopped letting us breathe.

* * *

King's in my grade with no mama now, not since the police shipped her back to China. Him lurking like a corner shadow in my math class can make me sad like the morning birds singing in winter. But King's got his big brothers to take care of him, who all go to the high school way over from us, and who all can do everything. But King left for a week, and when he came back, teachers kept asking him what happened but he had no clue and we had no clue and we all kept the conversation straight and stiff at that. By then, King'd turned into a shadow and wouldn't speak when spoken to, and soon, we all gave up. Just that sound of the siren still in our heads. Or the click of the handcuffs. Or the way the car buzzed off and King was left standing, his arms still above his head like he knew nowhere else to put them.

* * *

I'm Cielle, and I'm nine years old, and unlike my best friends Lucy, Samantha, and Jill, who were all born here, I've never kissed a boy and I'm not planning on ever kissing boys. I don't like the boys and the boys don't like me, because even though they pull Lucy's and Samantha's and Jill's hair and like to sit next to them on bus rides home and call them ugly, they don't go anywhere near me. But I don't mind because I can be as ugly as I want to be and kick as far up on the swing as I want to go and yell whatever unpretty insults I want to as they go past. During recess, when Lucy and Samantha and Jill go over to talk to them, I sit in the blacktop corner and balance as many woodchips as I can on my pinkie nail.

Lucy, Samantha, Jill, and I, we were all born here. The other girls, born there, on the other side of the bluest blue on the map in Mrs. Michael's classroom, in the big pink country, they all talk funny and dress funny. Talk funny like my mommy, but sounds weird coming from kids. Can't understand them when they sit with each other over lunch or on the playground and talk like clapping dolphins. None of us can find their purple and pink and jeweled hairties that make them look like dolls in Lucy's mommy's beauty shop, where we can get lost in the piles and rows and columns of \$5 lipsticks in lily orange or snail pink and the \$3 lipglosses that get sticky where our fingernails meet our fingerskin. The other girls, born there, they're so skinny I can wrap my fingers around them. Skinny like the thin bed red lipstick I pocketed in my shirt the last time I went to Lucy's mommy's beauty shop. When I left, Lucy said she lost it, but her mommy didn't believe her.

Lucy, Samantha, and Jill go to the boys from the playground and the bus-rides during class and give them petty nicknames, but King is not a boy because he became a shadow, so I go to King. We never talk, but today, when I look at him he looks back, and when I press my elbow against his he doesn't move away.

* * *

I walk home. The cherry blossoms all died after they bloomed last Sunday, splayed on the pavement like butterflies. I try hard not to step on any of them, but when I do, I feel the pink fluffy body flat on the back of my foot the whole walk home. Here's the part of town where a lot of born-there kids live, four blocks from Silver Street.

Mommy's door is locked today. Won't jiggle open even when I do that trick with the bobby pin Lucy taught me. Asked her to open it up, but don't think she heard me. The door stays shut and I slump back to my room where King's purple house stands still outside my window like a painting. The purple house can get so loud sometimes, like today, King's brothers are spitting phlegm at the grass with some of their friends, and sometimes, we hear beats and screams coming out of that house that bleed into ours. I wonder how King the shadow slips into that picture, or if the picture's what made King a shadow.

The purple house across the street with no more mamas. I stare at it until the purple turns into blue and the sky turns a dark red. The sorry boys stay on the roof, and the gray girls, I can see them in their window walking back-and-forth back-and-forth, rolling their shirts up with their elbows creased so their belly button rings glisten in the sunlight like teardrops. But then I see King in front of the house, his elbows on his knees, alone like a siren. I press my face against the glass of my window to get a better

look at him, at how his back slumps just like it does in Mrs. Michael's class. But then he looks up so our eyes meet, and I close the curtain fast as possible.

Tonight, when I sleep, I live in the purple house, and I get lost in it, in the belly-button room of King's older sisters and the ghost room of King's locked mommy and way up to the roof where shadows like me will slide off the edge. But the world turns flat when I go up to the roof, and the rainclouds kiss the cherry blossom trees as hurriedly as ticking. And King the shadow surprises me, moves his elbow next to mine on the lips of the chimney, so we watch the sky swirl together.

* * *

On Saturdays, I go to the library and get myself a nice kid book and some lollipops that turn my lips purple by the time I'm done with all the flipping and the sliding and the moving around in some other person's skin. I get the kid books with the kid pictures that kids at school would call me dumb for reading, with pretty Angelina and her pretty blond curls with her eyes more sparkly than the tip of a pencil. Angelina fights ghosts, demons, and mean people. I don't like the words, not really. They make me dizzy like too many smells at once. I like sitting on the front step of the library hunched over so people can walk over me, and I like chewing on the white part of the lollipop stick until it can't fit in my mouth right anymore. I like how my skin feels when the sun sets. Watching the older girls walking around with their legs long like Angelina's in the picture books. Smelling the smoke of people's new cigarettes from the drugstore across the street. I don't have any work in a mommy's store, in a daddy's restaurant or in an auntie's laundromat, like Lucy or Jill or Samantha, because my mommy's got work as a teacher in the college and I've never had a daddy, not even from before I was born. So I stay squat on the library step where the sun brushes the building and everything looks golden in the late afternoon. I stuff all the lollipops from the librarian's front desk in my shirt and walk out with the sticks poking my belly. High school girl at the counter goes *That's a lot of shit to suck on* and laughs.

Today it looks like it will rain, so I shuffle the whole way to Silver Road like a big long sigh until I spot the purple-house boys, skinny and glistening. The purple house and its children can get easily broken, which is what my mommy says when I bring them up at the dinner table. And it's hard to see what that means, except sometimes, they walk on their feet as if they're stilts and sometimes, they look over their shoulders when they don't need to. Like when I hide in the bushes so softly no one can hear the rustles of leaves under my feet, King's brother in eighth grade whips his head around fast. I stay there until they all disappear from sight, limping like puppets into the skin-soft sun. When they leave, I've dropped all the lollipops from the library on the broken dirt floor, and run away as fast as possible from the spot, because I know if what I read about

Angelina is true, someone unwanted will take my lollipops, sniff them, and track me down in the middle of the night until I can't breathe. And mommy will have no Cielle to talk to when she's tired from the college, and I will have no me to keep myself occupied when there is no purple house to watch.

* * *

"Hey you!" I say to King on the playground one day after lunch, swinging on a tire swing all by myself because Samantha and Jill and Lucy are flirting with the bus boys. "You!" I



say again, when King tries to shuffle out of sight. "Hey you!" He stops and looks at me. His shadow eyes are thin, which make me kick the woodchips without meaning to.

"What happened to your mama?" I ask.

King looks around like his brothers do before talking in a whisper. "My mama's deported."

I cock my head to the side and kick the woodchips some more. "What does that mean?"

"The cops shipped my mama back to China because she's got no papers."

"So you don't have a mama?"

"I have a mama. But she's gone."

"Mamas don't get gone," I say. King looks around some more before shifting over to the tire

swing and leaning over it like a tall, skinny cave, his back curved like a question mark.

"My mama calls and says she misses me every week."

"Do you even remember your mama?" I ask. I only remember a little shadow of his mama from the day the siren filled our whole neighborhood like a song.

"Sure." I make some room for him on the tire swing and pat the seat so he can sit down. When he does, his knee brushes past mine and I look into his thin shadow eyes that are so light they seem to be disappearing into the sunlight.

"Maybe she'll come back one day."

"I hope so."

"Why'd she get deported?" I finally ask, after the lunch guard blows his whistle the second time saying we all have to go to class, where Mrs. Michael will yell at the born-there kids some more and they'll still not understand the writing on the board or the words in their ears.

But King doesn't answer. After we walk next to each other, his feet shuffling next to my steps in our not talking mood, I think that maybe he doesn't know either. But here, next to King, I stay in my place.

* * *

Mommy's door is not locked today. She sings while she cooks and I sit at the table. My mommy's eyes are tired and her hair is thinning but I think she moves like a dancer when she sashays through the kitchen and stirs the pot with one hand and holds it with another.

"Mommy, King's mama got deported."

"From the house across the street?"

"She disappeared because she had no papers."

"Oh. That's so sad."

I want to ask Mommy if she's got papers, but something stops me, because I don't want to know the answer, and if I do, I might have to stop and lock myself in her room so the police can't get her and I might have to keep her there forever so she can't hear the sirens calling her name and so I'll never have to stand on the street like King did with his hands up. And I don't have any daddy or any brothers and any sisters, so I'd have to cook all by myself and turn the lights out at night all by myself and tuck myself into bed

even if Angelina defeated the scariest monster and his face is still in my head. And my mommy will be stuck in that pink country where all the born-there kids are from and she'll stay surrounded by people who can't understand Mrs. Michael and who can only speak like dolphins clicking and who all look like dolls, and my mommy will have no Cielle to talk to and I would have no mommy to snuggle into when it's too cold outside.

I don't talk during dinner, and Mommy asks me if something's wrong, but I don't answer. I kick the floor and start crying into the soup she's made, and she tries to hold me but I shrug her off because I don't know if she'll be here tomorrow or if she'll make me stand like King did on the street with my arms up and no way down, or if I'll turn into a shadow like King has done, with no more words to say.

* * *

Today King stays by my side when we leave Mrs. Michael's classroom, and we walk together past the old parking lot of the dead luncheonette, where there's a police car sitting still like a shadow. I start kicking forward, but King tells me not to because they'll think I'm doing something bad.

"Like what?" I ask.

"Like stealing, that's what," he says. "My mommy got deported because my big brother Mike went stealing from the mall, and that's what they did."

"What did he steal?"

"Some clothes. And a big jacket."

We go sitting in the bushes where I dropped all the lollipops from the library last Saturday, and King's on a tree stump while I'm on the grass. They were untouched by Angelina's monsters or background hedgehogs, like I must have known they'd be, or I wouldn't have led King here. They've lain still on the ground in their bright white wrappers.

"I dropped these here on Saturday," I say. "Wanna take one?"

"Sure," he says, getting off the tree stump and hovering over them like I'm doing.

"Which one do you want?"

"The blue raspberry one."

I hand it over to him and take the butterscotch one next to it. We stay cross-legged on the ground, sucking on the lollipops and smiling until our cheeks hurt. When King finishes and shows me his tongue that's turned bluer than the midnight sky, I laugh so hard I can't breathe and tumble over myself, and King starts laughing too until our stomachs hurt together, and the echoes around the whole neighborhood are laughing with us. Who thought it would happen like this, with our echoes singing like sweet birdcalls, like maybe the sad song of the siren will never speak again.

Photograph - Post-Dusk Playground © Chris Fradkin

The Baby

by Stephen V Ramey

It began with the Bichon. She was a foul-tempered dog, but loyal in her way. We sent her to scare a Halloween prankster, but she came back with a baby's head. There was no blood. The skull was pliable, the eyes very real. We called 911, or rather I called 911 while Michelle crouched behind the divan.

We expected sirens, uniforms, a cranky detective. What we got was a boyish man with a lizard on his head, and a gorilla that spoke in sign language.

"Where's the rest?" the boy said. A chrome shield on his chest read *Joe Gatford*. Mirrored shades hid his eyes.

"The rest?"

The gorilla grabbed Joe Gatford's shoulder and pulled him around. Stubby fingers worked through a sequence. Rust-colored flecks showed in the creases of its knuckles. *Baby's blood?* The beast could tear a child apart without trying.

"You have the right to say nothing," Joe Gatford said. "Do you understand?"

In the reflection from his glasses Michelle stood and nodded timidly.

"Start at the beginning," Joe Gatford said. "What do you remember?"

"We heard a noise," I said. "Kids, we figured. They like to smash pumpkins."

The gorilla signed quickly. "Parents don't realize how dangerous that is," Joe Gatford translated. I swallowed, eyes refusing to leave that hairy brute. Was it a costume? Had we interrupted their Halloween party? I couldn't imagine the size of the man within.

"Continue," Joe Gatford said.

I swallowed. "We let Churchill—that's our dog—Churchill out to chase them away, and he came back with the... with it." A frantic scratching sounded at the pantry door. "Churchill!" I shouted. The ape looked nervous. Joe Gatford signed something, and its gaze shifted to the stairs leading to the second floor.

"Do you have children?" Joe Gatford said.

"No," I said.

"We've tried," Michelle said so quietly I barely heard.

"My wife is infertile," I said. "We've put in for adoption, but..."

Joe Gatford nodded. The gorilla signed.

"What did it say?"

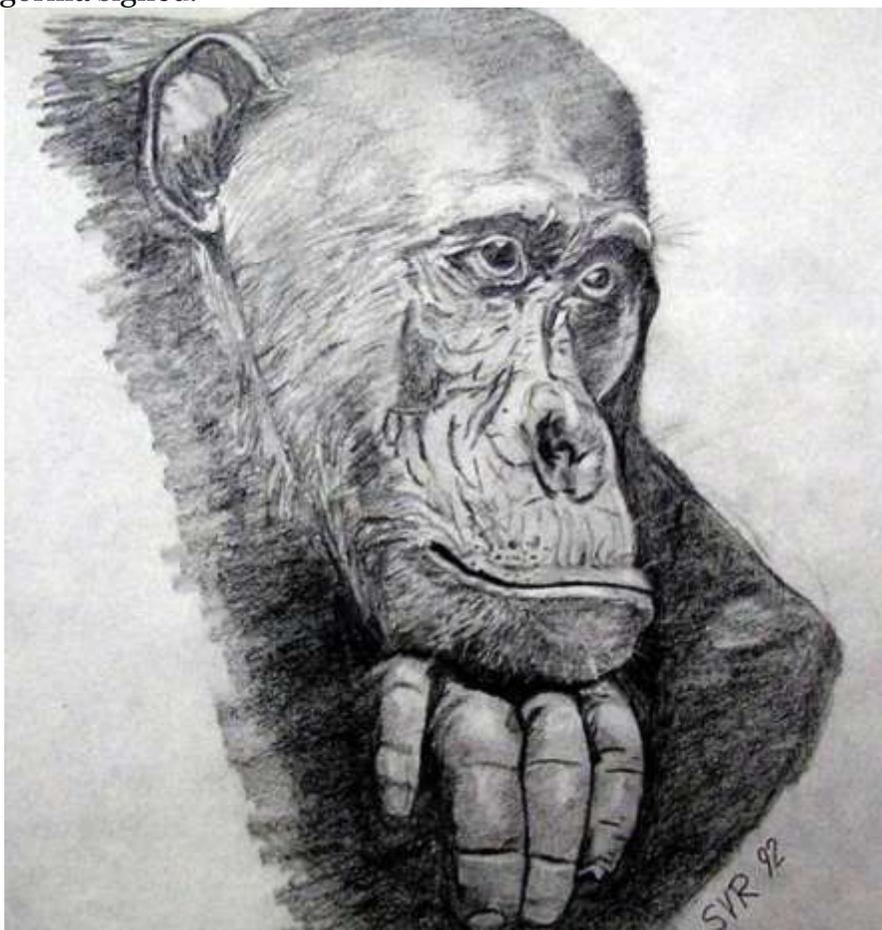
"She sympathizes," Joe Gatford said. "She wanted a baby too." The gorilla picked at the fur on its forearm and grunted.

A woman? That was even more difficult to believe.

Michelle moved to my side. "Does she have a name?"

"You couldn't pronounce it," Joe Gatford said. "Let's not get distracted."

"I don't know what else we can tell you," I said.



"You said you applied for adoption?" Joe Gatford said. An ache opened like a sinkhole in my chest, and the jagged emotions I'd packed away released. I staggered, but managed a nod.

"Condolences," Joe Gatford said. His voice was level. The mirrored shades reflected my crumpled face.

The lizard shifted. I startled. Until then I had thought it was a costume prop. It leaned down, tongue spiking out and in.

"Ah," Joe Gatford said. "You may have something there. Are there other childless couples in the neighborhood?"

"I don't—"

"Simpsons," Michelle said. "Two doors down, across the street."

"North or south?" Joe Gatford said.

"South," Michelle said.

The gorilla made a sign and shambled outside. I had not thought it could move so fast.

"That could explain the division," Joe Gatford said.

"Division?"

He shrugged. "They don't really understand humans. To them it's like parceling out treats. Or maybe it's a trick, I don't really know." He picked up the severed head.

"What are you doing? Isn't that evi—"

"Shh." Joe Gatford pressed a finger to his lips. "It may not be too late." The lizard went still, eyes focused intently on the baby's face.

I eased Michelle onto the divan. Her eyes were bright. Tears streaked her cheek. It occurred to me that this might be a nightmare.

The gorilla reappeared, bloody bundle—a baby's body!—clutched to its—her—chest. Michelle gasped. I knew I should comfort her, but could not look away, would not look away.

The gorilla laid the bundle down, and Joe Gatford placed the head next to the ragged stub of its neck. The lizard hopped onto the baby's chest, eyes blinking slowly. It began pumping up and down on its forearms.

"You're in luck," Joe Gatford said. "Tonight is a magical night. It may be enough."

"How can you do that to a child?" Michelle whispered. "Make them stop, please make them stop."

The lizard paused.

"Up to you, lady," Joe Gatford said. "There are other childless couples."

Outside—pop pop pop pop-pop—the sound of fireworks, real children challenging the night. Churchill whimpered from the pantry.

I stared into the baby's face. Dead eyes met mine. I sensed a consciousness struggling.

The gorilla reached.

"No," I grated. "Don't stop." I wanted so badly to believe. In the distance a siren blared.

Artwork © Stephen V Ramey, 1992

Pearl

by Elizabeth Brown

The day the furnace broke, I lost my Pearl. A stench of oil and soot stewed.

"Damn it! I've always hated this house. It's too old. It's not safe here!" the wife complained. She did that all the time. But with me out of work and Pearl liking her teacher, it wasn't the right time to move. Besides, the rent was cheaper in the city.

It was an accident, a horrible accident. Pearl was unconscious. We had to bring her to the hospital. They asked questions. The wife was swearing, belligerent. Child and Family Services got involved. The case worker's name was Heather. "She wants to speak with Pearl, alone," the nurse told us, flat out told us; we had no choice. That was it. Within a few hours, Pearl was taken from us. "She'll be fine. It's for her own safety," Heather said.

Seven months later, and still no Pearl. The wife moved to Tennessee to live with her mother. The few times I talked to her, she was drunk, slurring her words. "Don't you even want to see Pearl?" I asked. She swore at me, called me a coward, said it was my fault, and hung up.

I miss her, my Pearl. I can't bear to leave the house. On the way out to the bus, she always said hello to Tomas —the guy on the steps. He'd smile back at her. Maybe the only time he smiled all day. He's still there now smoking cigarettes, staring mindlessly. Then there was Shania, the grandmother; she walked her grandchild to the bus stop. "Better move your little behind," she'd say. Pearl waved. And the little girl, Diamond, waved back, and the two girls stared at each other until Shania said "Better move it, girl."

One day, Pearl asked "Can I play with Diamond?" And I felt this gigantic lump form in my throat. Diamond lived around the corner, Vine Street, the bad street with the shootings, boarded up homes, where gang bangers strutted, sold drugs, did drugs. Nothing good happened on Vine Street. That poor grandmother, Shania, I thought, raising her grandchild in that hell.

But the day the furnace broke, I was no better than Shania.

"Get that slumlord on the phone, so I can tear him a new one!" the wife yelled.

She was in rare form. It was a cold snap, single digits. We could see our breath. I promised to make cookies with Pearl.



"Now, Daddy?" Cold air snuck out from between her tiny chapped lips. They were red as cherries. God I miss her.

The dough was defrosting, had been all morning. "Not now, Pearl...have to wait, doll." That's what I said to her. Pearl never whined, just slipped away.

"I got him," I told the wife, but I didn't mention being put on hold. A few minutes passed. She knew.

"What's going on? Is he talking? We're freezing for God's sake. I've got another cold. I feel it in my chest. I can't afford to miss work. I'm wheezing. Who knows what we're all breathing! Is he on the phone?"

The landlord, spoke. I could barely hear him. The wife wouldn't shut up. She was impossible. "Yes, yes, I understand. No, it's not working at all. It's been on and off since yesterday."

"Bullshit. Tell that bastard we've been freezing all night!"

Jesus, she really knew how to make a situation worse. "In my honest opinion, I think the unit is shot. There is soot everywhere. And the wife is sick...and Pearl, the baby, she gets the asthma. I understand. Okay, thanks a bunch."

"Well?" The wife glared at me. Jesus, her eyes were daggers.

"Cookies, Daddy, cookies!" Pearl came bursting back into the kitchen, whining.

"Damn it will you stop with the damn cookies!" the wife snapped at her. Pearl started to cry and then cough.

"The landlord said he'd fix it. He has to contact his brother first."

"No, no way. That damn cheapskate. I don't want his shoddy work. We need a new furnace. That's it. I'm calling the fire department. This is an emergency for God's sake. Our baby can't even breathe. Do you hear her?"

She had wanted to call the fire department, initially, said we were all getting carbon monoxide poisoning. But, I told her she was ridiculous, no need.

She called. No surprise there. She never listened to me, never. And while we waited, I sat at the table, asked the wife if she wanted tea, peeked around the corner, saw Pearl sprawled out on the living room floor with crayons and paper.

"I made you a house, Daddy!" she shouted.

"My little Pearl," I said.

God I love her.

Things got worse. It was when the fireman came, took a look, and said we needed a new unit. The wife really went berserk. "See, I told you. That's it. Get back on the phone and tell that son-of-a-bitch slumlord we want a new unit. Go on! Tell him!"

That's when it happened. Pearl ran into the kitchen, picture in hand, and I was distracted, walking over to the counter to get my phone, and we slammed into each other. She bounced backwards, hit her head on the corner of the counter, just the right height, and went down. It was horrific —the blood from her head, the screaming.

"What did you do? She's dead!" the wife just kept screaming.

Now, my Pearl lives with the Wiggins, an hour away, in a small cape in the country. "They have been foster parents for twenty years," the case worker told us. "The Wiggins are experienced with kids."

Not like my Pearl, I wanted to say. Not like Pearl. But I don't do much talking, lately.

Bink's Dry Bite

by Ean Bevel

My great Uncle Bink started his 1970 Monte Carlo and crept out of his garage moving like chilled honey. I stood beside the driveway ready for the weekend's lesson, wondering if we'd ever make it to the spot.

"Hop in, Sport," Bink said, as he pushed the passenger door open, car half out of the garage. I was twelve but considered asking him if I could drive because I figured I'd have my license before we reached the paved road. He put his arm around my headrest and turned to look down the driveway. When the tires stopped crunching rock, when the tires rolled onto blacktop, he asked if I was ready.



"Shovel and hatchet in the trunk."

"Not for digging, boy. For the ride."

I relaxed on the bench seat which smelled of old man and old leather. Bink drove in reverse on the paved road for a few seconds before I asked him if he knew where we were going. He said he did, said he had to show me something first: "A reverse drop."

"What's that, Uncle B..."

At a slow roll in reverse, Bink dropped the column shifter to D and punished the accelerator. He laughed the whole time I tried to steady myself against the armrest while the tires squealed and smoked.

"Still got some pep in her," he laughed.

"Uh-what?"

"Pep, boy, balls. What doesn't kill ya."

I nodded, looked ahead to a turn in the road approaching through the windshield, and asked Bink to slow down. He laughed, lit his pipe, and turned with one hand as he blew smoke into my face and watched the road with one eye. When we came out of the turn, Bink pedaled the car again. I watched the speedometer respond like a metronome needle. 70. 80. 100. Bink blew a smoke ring and the air rushing past the Monte sucked it out before it could float over to me. All the smoke vacuumed out of the car, I saw the railroad tracks approaching.

Bink puffed his pipe as we sped toward a red octagon and a pair of white 'x's. He was not stopping. We hit the road berm at the tracks and the car flew, bounced twice, and Bink was back on the gas, laughing. He laughed and laughed and then we were at the spot.

I shook out of the car when we stopped because the last two miles on dirt roads were scarier than the railroad tracks. Bink pushed a shovel into my chest and I noticed his hands weren't swollen anymore.

We had eggs and toast for breakfast and we always had fresh honey because Bink knew I liked to collect it. I put on the bee suit, Bink in bibs and flannel, and walked out to the hives where Bink pulled the comb out, bees swarming. I scraped honey into a bowl with my pocket knife.

After we got the honey, Bink disturbed the bees at the hive entrance, a direct threat to the queen. Then he'd hold his hands, knuckles riveted by arthritis, every swollen joint evident, over the hole and the bees attacked, leaving stingers in his skin and falling dead. His hands swelled like balloon art, then the swelling would disappear during the morning and he could use his hands the rest of the day, the same hands that held the shovel to my chest.

"You awake?"

I was.

"Thought you wanted to learn something?"

I did. I was okay. I was fine. Bink dropped the shovel.

Bink talked while we walked. He told me he'd never been to a doctor, and showed me his finger as proof. A scar the color and size of dental floss ringed his middle finger.

"Hatchet. Put some comfrey root on there and glued it back on. Can't feel it, but I still got it."

I made a note to ask mom if this was true when Bink took me home. Then he went on.

"Got polio too. Beat it with ginseng. Don't even limp."

It was true.

"Don't have a crying piggy toe. Your Grandmother. Hatchet again."

I was relieved Bink left the hatchet in the trunk.

I could tell we were getting close to digging when Bink's conversation switched to business. He told me our family's fortune lay in this spot, that it had financed four generations. He told me we had to dig it from the earth. He told me all about its uses and its claimed uses, about its allure, its mysticism, its magic. He told me I could never tell anyone. He told me only he and I knew where this place was, that I must show my sons. He told me how long he'd been trying to find it and how difficult it was to locate. He told me only a trained eye could find it. He told me what it looked like above ground.

"Like that?" I asked, pointing to the ground.

Bink couldn't believe it. It was it.

"You little shit," Bink said. We walked over to where I saw it and he started blading the ground with his shovel. He scraped two shovelfuls of dirt away from it. I couldn't believe it. I asked if it just grew like that.

"Yes."

He pulled it out of the ground and dropped it in his burlap sack.

"Is that another one?" I asked, pointing to the ground a few feet away.

"I should've been bringing you along for years now. You little shit."

As we walked to the next spot, Bink yelled stop and his shovel sliced the ground next to my shoe. I thought he tried to maim me, jealous of my natural ability to find it, until I saw the snake.

Copperhead. Six inches of the snake rested next to the shovel blade, mouth open, fangs dripping, while its disconnected body writhed in the grass.

"Body won't stop wiggling 'til the sun goes down, but it's dead."

I asked if he was sure, the headless tube twisting.

"Course. Be alert now. When there's one there's more."

We walked over to the next spot I found. Bink wanted me to shovel this one, so I pierced the earth with my shovel. When I turned back to Bink for approval, for recognition, another snake hung from his ankle, fangs embedded in wrinkled flesh. Bink pulled the snake off his leg, flung it to the ground, and chopped off its head. He never made a sound. I panicked and Bink saw it.

"Not the first time I got bit, boy. They give you a dry bite as a warning, most times."

We dug a few more spots until we filled the burlap sack and then we started walking back to the car. I followed the trodden grass from the walk in, but Bink meandered all over our prints.

"You okay, Uncle Bink?"

"Sure. Fine. Just need some goldenrod."

He stuttered over to a fence line where he found some goldenrod and ate it right from the ground, but in the car his eyelids drooped, then on the final turn to his house, our morning tire marks still visible, he vomited while he tried to roll the window down, but was too slow, spraying the driver's window with toast chunks and a few pieces of scrambled eggs that ricocheted off the window onto the dash, the steering wheel, the 8 track player.

In the driveway he ordered me out of his car before he rolled into his garage. I stood beside the driveway watching through the Monte's back glass as Bink covered the windshield in more toast and bile. I stood paralyzed for a few minutes waiting for the engine to die.

I walked up to the Monte and opened the driver's door like a sarcophagus. Bink lay across the front bench seat covered in half-chewed goldenrod, his fingers microwaved hotdogs. His breathing was erratic. I slammed the door and cried. As I ran to the house screaming for Aunt Sis, I smelled old man, burnt tires, and fresh honey. When Sis and I got back to the garage, Bink was cleaning the windshield.

Artwork © Steven Foutch

Pop Fly

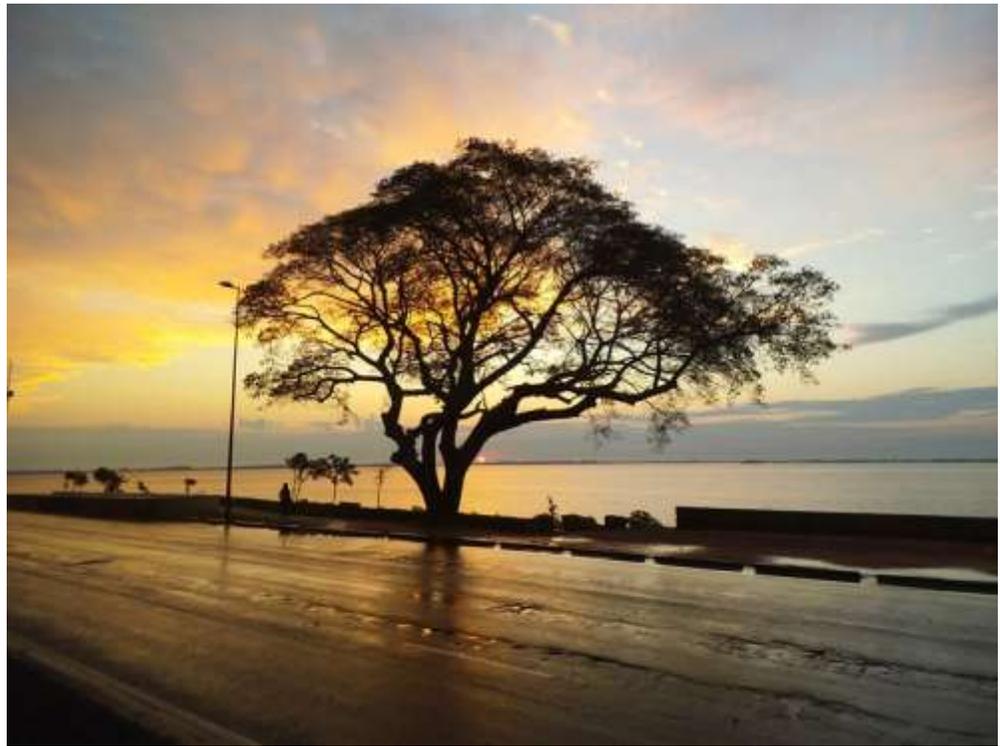
by Beth Adamour

"Why not, Mom? Just a couple of hundred. I'll pay you back."

This was a useless argument. "Bradley, no."

She had poured out two vodka martinis, one for herself, one for her son. It was Friday at four. They always shared cocktails on Fridays at four.

The weather was clear. May, sunny, and the elegant park view she had from across the street was dappled with afternoon light. She tried to not remember, as she invariably did, how she and her husband would sit out with their cocktails, chatting. An English professor, he always seemed to have more amusing gossip from his



department than she from the dermatologist's office where she'd worked as a nurse. Dr. Tanner, such a miserable man. Hated most of his colleagues and half of his patients. She hadn't been sorry to leave the practice, five years ago now. It gave her more time with Bradley. Fatherless and brotherless, with his bi-polar condition, he needed her.

"I haven't got the money for a beach trip."

"It's not a beach trip. I'm not some hotdog college kid. I told you, I'll be staying at a friend's condo, in Wilmington."

"And when your old jalopy breaks down on the highway? Will I have to pick you up again?"

They were seated on the wrap-around porch, overlooking the dogwood which stood by the wrought-iron railing in her front yard. The aged tree still had a few blooms on it. Her husband had insisted on the railing twenty years ago. Gave the house structure, he said. He liked thinking of the world in terms of chaos and order, disarray and pattern. In literature he looked for clean, subtle plots—Trollope, George Eliot, and Conrad. Her son was seated in the chair her husband used to take, facing her and the neighbors' fancy garden fountain made of gold marble, which she always thought gaudy with its little greenish granite cherub peeing down. They hadn't turned it on in years.

"I've got your AAA card, if anything happens," Bradley put in.

She gave him a hard look.

"I don't think anything will happen," he added, taking advantage of her silence.

She felt the first warmth in her chest from the drink. She sighed and let herself open to the late afternoon. The breeze was sweet and fresh. No car fumes. No children's cries. Her husband, a baseball nut, called this pop fly weather.

"Pop fly," she said softly.

"I was just thinking that," her son said with a hiccupy little laugh. Thirty, he still laughed like a boy. She noticed he had almost finished his drink. She'd barely touched hers. "You plan on getting drunk?" she said, leaking a little sarcasm.

"Not any drunker than you," he replied.

"Why do we argue?" she asked, a little annoyed at herself.

"I love you, Mom. You help me out. You've always helped me out. Dad never did."

He often complimented her to soften her up, she knew that. Still, she appreciated the sentiment, and the distinction, as she had done the lion's share of child-rearing. Her children—now, her one surviving child—were everything to her, and she had always catered to their needs. But it was her husband who, uncharacteristically, had checked on

Bradley when he was young and prone to nightmares, one of those pretty tow head boys. It was not something she liked to think about.

Long shadows had now fallen over the dogwood, while her robust azaleas along the railing popped into full sun. She knew it was only for a brief moment that things came together, that the profusion of reddish pink blooms would be flooded by peachy light. She wanted to point them out, say out loud, look, look at that beauty, so precious. How much longer, with her eye problems, would she be able to enjoy taking in the outside world? She stopped the old-woman's tears wanting to come into her eyes. She was glad for the large, protective sunglasses she'd been wearing both indoors and out since her recent cataract surgery. She had been keeping all the room lamps lit and the kitchen overhead on, day and night, for a month while she healed. It was a dark house. She had told her husband it was too dark a house back when they were looking for a place. She was pregnant with her first child. He had insisted on buying this rangy Craftsman anyway because it was in a historic section of town and would not lose its value. The previous owner had been a renowned poet, which, for her husband, clinched the deal.

"Your father could be a bully, a pretentious bully."

"But he was elegant," Bradley said. They liked revisiting this familiar ground. "He did attract the ladies." Bradley strongly resembled his father, handsome in a Germanic way, with big blue eyes, blond hair, strong-looking shoulders and fine hands. Since he'd moved back home—while he got himself together, as he put it—the side effects from the psychotropic medications he took had caused chronic acne and weight gain.

"Too many," she said. Sometimes she had great distance on her old messy marriage. Cuckolded by a graduate student! She laughed thinking of all the fun contemporary novels she'd enjoyed through the years on the subject of neurotic academics, never expecting she would become a main character. Could a woman be cuckolded? He would have known the right word.

"My father didn't know squat about love."

"And you do?" she came back sharply. She feared Bradley had come to think, from growing up with his profligate father, that sex had nothing to do with love, when really the two should be like rope twined together. "Is this friend you want to visit someone you are in love with?"

"You've met her. It's Alissa Rowland, you remember, when we were kids? The rock band she was in, the Fallen Angels, or some dumb name like that."

"You are having a relationship with Alissa?"

"Mom, I told you the other day."

Maybe he had, but she would try to ignore that fact. Even with his medication, he didn't know when to stop talking sometimes. It could be too much for her. In order to keep him calm and steady, she had to pick her battles carefully. She took a long sip of her drink. "But Alissa is so... uneducated. How can you—"

"Mom, I'm sorry Dad was such a shit. But that's not my fault. Don't take it out on me."

She would not address his psychoanalyzing, his fall-back position whenever they were at odds. "Oh, please," she said simply.

"She's got her two-year degree in acupuncture. She's actually doing very well. Just started her own business."

"So why do you need me to help you?"

A neighborhood couple walked past their house and waved, and commented on the good weather. Mother and son waved back. Bradley made a joke about how soon they would be complaining about the humidity. The husband of the couple said, "You got that one right," and laughed as they disappeared down the street.

"Such a plausible fellow," she said with a half laugh, half grunt. He was the one ten years ago who'd single-handedly insisted on developing a neighborhood association, which put in place silly rules and yearly dues. That nonsensical, snobby, no plastic sprinklers on lawns decree.

"I've got the munchies," Bradley said. He got up to bring out the bowl of boiled peanuts she had set on the kitchen counter as she always did on Fridays. She liked to snack on them after her first drink. "And I need a refresher," he said.

"I'm just about ready, too," she said.

When he came back and reached across the table to hand her a second cocktail, she said, "This is awfully full."

"Isn't that the way you like it?"

She didn't bother replying because he was right, and she liked the taste, icy and strong. She was enjoying watching the swift movement of the sun at this hour. She could actually tell what time it was by where the sun hit the garden leaves and the park trees and bushes across the street. Early evening now. The air was getting slightly chill. At sixty-five-years-old, she seemed to need a sweater all the time. She asked her son to get her the blue-striped cardigan from the coat tree.

"You can't be cold. It's got to be over seventy out here," he said, going to get her sweater.

She didn't respond. What difference did it make, if she was aging, if she had less body fat to keep her warm? For that matter, why did she care if her son was having sex with a neighbor girl who was now grown-up—an acupuncturist! She had seen Alissa at her parents' house about a year ago. Homely and chubby, she'd worn a raggedy-styled pink dress that looked out of place for an informal cook-out. She had cut her hair to a half-inch and oiled it, which made her look like some homeless person.

She understood her son was often confused and lonely. Any social experience he had, like the therapist said, would be good for him, short of his falling in love with some destructive type. She guessed he'd gotten destructive types out his system in his early twenties after having to transport his actress girlfriend to the emergency room every couple of weeks when she overdosed on tranquilizers and booze. Bradley had a hell of a time getting rid of that one. Now, no longer a kid, he found friends who seemed saner, more reliable. A relief, she supposed, that this woman had a steady job, which reminded her of an issue she needed to bring up.

"Did you talk to Amy over at the office?"

"I did, I did."

She took another big sip of her drink, waiting for the details. She didn't want to push him. The therapist had said, "Don't push him."

"Mom, I don't want to work at your old office. The filing area is no bigger than our bathroom. The walls are parrot green. Ugly, ugly, ugly," he said, his voice rising. "I hated Amy with her obsequious manner. She actually called me a foolish demento."

"What? She said that to you?"

"Well, not that exact phrase, but close to it. Her attitude."

"Wait a minute. Amy? I can't believe it. She's so sweet. She gave me that Italian porcelain vase for my birthday one year, the one on the dining room table, which I adore."

"Mom, you only see what you want to see. You're so Pollyanna. I knew what Dad was up to for years. I knew, and so did my dear, sainted brother. Boy, did we ever."

Her back straightened—she could not stand to go into all that crappy history again, and the disgusting, melodramatic accusations of abuse Bradley liked to invent spitefully about his Dad. Recovered memories, he called them.

"Don't speak ill of the dead!"

She had not meant to sound like a drill sergeant. She tried especially hard to resist falling into sad ruminations about her older son, who had died in a car accident when he was barely out of his teens. That happened right after her husband left her for the grad student, Melissa. Kevin had been so upset by it all. He'd never been one to drink too much before. It was her husband's fault that her first child died. That's how she saw it, although her close friends commented that her theory didn't make sense. Coincidence, they insisted.

She could tell Bradley was feeling the drink, too. His cheeks were flushed and his words tumbled out faster, more animated. "Why not? Why not speak ill of the dead?" he was saying, starting to escalate into a rant. "Let both of them come back and haunt us, let them come on back and join us on the porch for a martini, for chrissake. Let's have a talk. I have a few little things I'd like to get off my chest. With Dad. We've got almost a half-gallon of fancy vodka left, and the whole night ahead of us."

She was aware of the resonance of her son's voice. She guessed the neighbors were used to it by now, and would assume Bradley was having another mental fit. They didn't know how hard these family deaths had hit her son, and how tough it was to keep him from getting aroused, or agitated, a word his therapist used a lot. She knew too, that her son, like his father, was persistent and could fixate on things. If he kept at her about going to see his Wilmington friend, she knew she would finally give in. Then he would get scared and feel ashamed of how scared he was, and she would tell him he was just fine, and he would decide not to go to the coast. Maybe in a couple of hours, when things calmed down, she'd be able to coax him out of his old room upstairs where he spent too much of his time in the evenings. They might decide to go out to a movie and dinner, and he would feel better then, for a while.

"Summer is almost here," she said, changing the subject. It had been a particularly rough winter. Bradley had been impossible. Cabin fever, he said it was. Funny, right before her husband's fatal heart attack, he had called her and complained of the January cold, and how he wanted to go somewhere warm. Her one act of strength with him was not to agree to let him come back. His life had ended in a rental house, unaccompanied.

She smiled at Bradley—she had a good idea.

"You want to go with me tomorrow to the farmer's market? It's strawberry season."

"Dad loved your berry pie," he said, calmer now. "So do I."

This was his way of informing her that he was letting go of the Wilmington plan. She sighed, relieved. He was growing up, accepting his limitations, something she would help him with, any way she could. The afternoon had deepened. Through her dark glasses, in the twilight, the dogwood was barely visible.

Photograph - Lago Guaíba © Chris Fradkin

Teeth

by CS DeWildt

I work for the tooth fairy and it isn't all pillows and quarters my friend. It's not sleeping babes, tonguing their tender bleeding holes away into dreamland. The fairy part is aesthetic only. More often the experience is rotting cavities, receding gums, and halitosis.

Jack is with me tonight, every night. He's a black as night standard poodle, and together we walk the dark neighborhood streets and he sniffs out teeth from the garbage cans, tips the singing metal cans with curly paws to scavenge the throwaways, tossed out by people who are unaware of their value, seventy-five to eighty times more than the coins and bills that are stuffed under the pillows by my employer.

Sometimes, see, teeth are flushed down the toilet and I go after them. Jack can't shrink like I can, can't hold his breath. He's just a dog trained to sniff out teeth, the *flushed* teeth I follow into the festering pool of stench alone. My employer demands teeth. Each one is piece of a tidy profit, and the teeth are free. There are many of us, but never enough. My employer is concerned with quotas and she docs pay when they aren't met. She can be violent. I've seen her put her stinger into a man, deposit her eggs and wait for them to hatch and eat the man from the inside out. I saw it on the first day training video. But I do good work. I don't worry about that.

Sometimes, when I wander the halls of the houses I enter, I go beyond my orders. This is how I manage to exceed my quota year after year, and by extension, keep my insides from being food for the next generation of factory workers. My employer could never request I do this, that any of us do it, reputation and all. Public opinion is all that separates her from any other boogey in the closet. Were she exposed, she'd still get the teeth. My method would be the new standard.

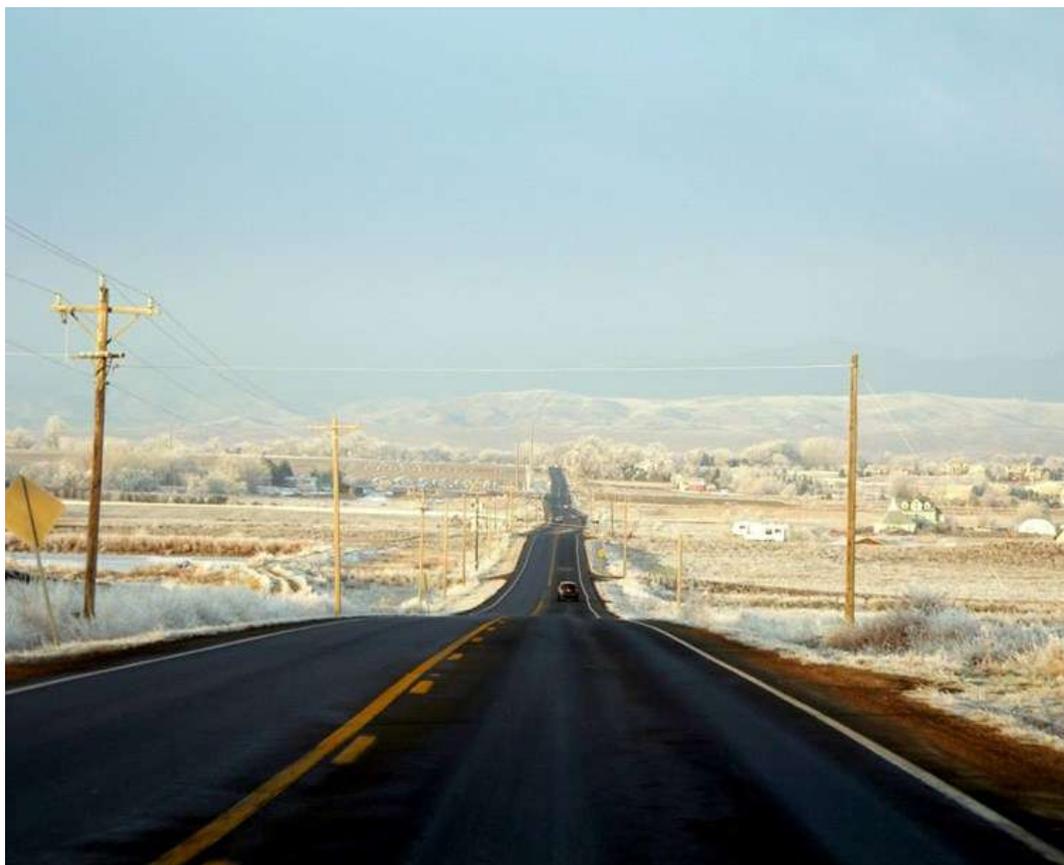
It's only natural I'd come to the conclusion, eventually. And it did come, years ago, as I stood before the house of my former landlord, the man from my old life, the life I had before the night I woke to find my employer over my newborn, a trained Greyhound sniffing his body. My employer looked down, almost ashamed, but not for herself, for me. She was very lovely. I couldn't be startled and even though I knew this was a strange event to say the least, I was enchanted by her presence.

"Well fuck," she finally said.

She told me the magic didn't take since it's a magic fueled by the dead teeth, and that she can't enter a residence undetected unless someone's recently lost a tooth. She can enter, but she won't be hidden. It's an inescapable rule that applies to every one of us Teethers. Who knew the irrational was governed by natural law?

"Oh, I hate it when this happens," my new employer said, and she blew dust over me. I froze. I listened.

"This is very sad," she said. "But, this is not your fault. It is no one's fault. Would you like to work for me? It's a good job, with good pay. It



won't bring this child back, but there are benefits, room for advancement."

"Will I have to remember this?"

"Yes, but it will only hurt for the first hundred years or so. And the pain dulls considerably before that."

I sneezed three times and my wife called from the bedroom, "Don't wake Ben!"

"Are you sick? Have you got a cold?" my employer asked.

"I'm allergic to dogs," I said.

"We can get you a poodle. They're hypoallergenic."

"I heard there's no such thing. A myth only."

"A Mexican hairless then, either way, I've got plenty of allergy medicine, the good stuff from Mexico."

"Do you get a deal on the medicine and the dogs when you buy them together?"

"You think you're funny, but yes actually, I do."

"Are you coming back to bed?" my wife called out. I looked at my employer and was instantly drawn in deeper, beyond the job or the money or the benefits.

"No," I said. "I'm up."

And we left.

* * *

My employer was right. I've been at it for nearly ten years and the pain of loss has faded considerably. Before it happened, I used to dream about losing my wife or my child and the pain of my sleep could on occasion reduce me to tears. And even as I faded out of the dream, and the relief swelled me up, the pain was potent and lingered throughout the day, tainting me and then reminding me to think of death again as I fell asleep the next night. That's how it feels now. I walk the streets with the taint of faded despair.

I was feeling it as I stood in front of the landlord's house, Jack digging through the bastard's trash; me thinking about the broken windows he wouldn't fix, the mosquito welts on all of us, the fried refrigerator and the Igloo cooler he gave me to replace it. I thought about the mouse droppings everywhere, the lead paint I suspected due to Ben's affinity for chewing the window sill.

I thought about these things and said, "C'mon Jack. Let's go inside."

I stop first at his boy's room. I enter quietly without trying. I slide my hand under the pillow, drop the quarter and take the tooth in a single sweeping motion. I add the tooth to the others in the leather satchel attached to my belt. I look over the boy, wonder if

he's eaten lead paint, wonder if the C grades adorning the refrigerator are a result of nature or nurture. He is his father's son and that is his lot. I take only what he's left.

I walk the dark hall, violating the family photos with my dirty fingers, tilting them crooked with a magic touch that will never allow them to be straightened for long. I reach the master bedroom and hear him snoring. I know his wife will have taken sleeping pills, though while I'm there she won't need them. I wake his eyes with a wave of a hand and he looks at me, pupils shrinking in the glow of my light.

"What do you want?" he says.

"Everything." I say and I look to his sleeping wife. His eyes are hot and the audacity is enough to make me laugh. "But I'll settle for your teeth," I say. And then I do laugh.

I work with a small pair of channel locks. Tears run down his face but he is silent. Even if this were a dream he wouldn't be the same. The taint he would feel would linger no matter how long he wandered the streets. I turn his head and let him bleed onto his pillow. He eyes his wife, wondering if she'll wake and pull the thirty-eight from the night stand. I turn his face and drain him again and get back to work. Cracking root follows cracking root until I am done and then I collect each tooth from the nightstand while he watches, still bleeding blood and tears. I add the teeth to the satchel, but it's too full; I've done my job too well. I take an eyetooth and stick it into his ear, push it to place where only a doctor can reach it.

"Goodbye," I say. Jack follows me down the hall and out the door. I make the man forget. I make his wife wake. I hear the screams from through the walls and she wants an explanation.

"What happened to you? What happened?! You're bleeding!"

"Ah ohn oh. Ah ohn oh! Ah! Airs um-ing im ah ear!"

* * *

My boss is pleased. She promotes me. I've got an office and it overlooks the plant where we process the hundreds of thousands of teeth, from all over the world. From my floor to ceiling window over the plant I watch the technicians below extract the various carbons, hydrogens and nitrogens from enamel and dentin. Others workers shuttle it away to be processed with the Mexican allergy medicine, all to yield my employer C₁₀H₁₅N. On top of overseeing production, I am in charge of training the new recruits,

allowing them to learn from my experience. Days in the factory. Nights in the field. I work all-hours less the few minutes she steals from me.

My employer is a fairy, but also an angel. She is an angel with the wings of a wasp. I used to wonder if she would sting me like I'd seen her do when the need arose. "Why me?" I'd often ask in the dark, sweating, trying to stay awake, to keep from dreaming. "Why me?" I still ask.

"I knew you'd find a way to boost production," she says. "I smelled it on you." And that's the only answer she ever gives.

From my office, I call my wife, ten years behind me. A man answers the phone. I say nothing.

"Who is this?" he asks my silence.

I listen to the children play. Theirs, not mine. If I were to be a father again, it would be the children of my employer, eating me from the inside out. And I wonder how bad it could be. It sounds awful. But I miss my boy.

I feel her behind me and I know she's here to steal my minutes. I can see my reflection in the glass, fuzzy-focused yellow-suited workers blurry behind it. I feel her hot breath and I shift my focus back to the workers. On the floor, a worker drops dead, a common enough occurrence, especially as the weather begins to cool.

Photograph © Carrie Brennan

I Am the Woman Who Cleans the Apartment of Mister Desmond Pathropallai

by Kari Strutt

...**A**nd my employer is a twisted bastard, for sure. He must know I don't bother to bring my cleaning tools anymore. I leave the vacuum in the trunk, next to bucket of organic cleansers and white cotton cloths he insisted on when I was hired. I come in empty handed, but I get to work right away. Sometimes the job is difficult.

I've never seen him, even in a photograph. He doesn't have pictures. No keepsakes. No drawings by a child's undisciplined hand, no birthday cards, no invitations, nothing stuck to his fridge door with a seashell magnet. No magazines or mail...no dust. Just furniture, small appliances, liquid hand soap and white towels— the objects you find in a show-home. Nothing else.



His art is reproduction, unusual ones mind you, no Monet, Manet, Matisse. He favors more difficult moderns...Karel Apel, Egon Schiele, Jan Arp. He has no easy chairs, only difficult ones, all rigid lines or audacious curves. Nothing comfortable. Nothing the color of chocolate.

When I open his door I hope to catch a whiff, some smell that signals he recently ate here, or showered, made love...took a shit. There is a bowl of lemons and limes on the kitchen counter. Always five lemons. Always five limes. The crisp hint of citrus hangs over it. That is the only smell.

I want to throw open his cabinets, to count his cups, or ply through his underwear drawer, to expose his Levitra, or perhaps a chrome vibrator that resembles a sculpture by Miro. By contract, I am not allowed to open any door, no matter how small.

Instead I play his twisted game. I search for the one dirty thing.

Two weeks ago it was a soiled tampon, tucked under the blue-red chair that looks vaguely like a womb. Sometimes I ease into that chair, rest for a moment, but I always put on my hairnet first and use a lint brush when I go. I do not want to leave any trace of myself for him.

Last week he left his small mess in the bookshelf that has no books, only a hand carved wooden sign that says, "*Why do you want to read others' books when there is the book of yourself?*" Behind that sign he hid a handful of dead wasps. I brushed them, with the heel of my my hand, into the brown paper bag from my lunch. Even dead, wasps carry disease.

My sister asks me why I keep going. I tell her it is because, if I find the needle in his twisted haystack, he sends me a cheque for five times my normal rate. Even if I don't, which happened only once, he pays standard. Either way the cheque arrives, always written in his clear hand, circular 'a's and 'o's, vertical consonants. Always he signs in long hand, black ink, *Mister Desmond Pathropallai*.

I tell my sister I go back for the easy money, but really I want to know how he found me. I want to know if I hate him.

Photograph - Estátua de Iracema © Chris Fradkin

Advice for Surviving the Fairy Tale

by Nina Sabak

1. Know that your happiness is temporary, no matter what. Your parents are farmers, or a woodcutter and his wife, or, God forbid, a king and a queen. Maybe your father gives you silly names and carries you around the room on his shoulders. Maybe your mother sings the way a river does. They are doomed, regardless, and it isn't your fault; you can't help being the heroine.

2. Keep provisions in a knapsack by your bed. There's no telling when the day will come. When you are alone out there on the empty highway, shoeless, wiping tears from your singed cheeks, you will wish you had more snacks. Your mother is dead, but she had a point about packing clean underwear.

3. Be polite to all travelers you meet. Some of them will help you, and some of them will hurt you, and some are just people whose stories briefly intersect your own. Be kind especially to old women, who may or may not be villains in disguise; pretend you don't know the difference. Lay your head on their shoulder, weep when they ask you what you have lost. Everyone, even a villain, wants to be useful.



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4. Remember: all things, good or bad, come in threes. Wait for the third carriage. Don't exhale until you've sneaked past the third moonlit hut. Don't trust the first or second brother. They don't know what to do with fire like you.
 5. It doesn't matter where you're going. Which is to say: you have no control over where you're going. Wander, and the road will shape itself to your destiny. If you were allowed to get lost, you would be in a different kind of story.
 6. It helps to sing, mourning songs especially, if you know any. No one knows why, but it does. Maybe it adds to the tragic ambiance. Maybe there's something irresistible about a woman who doesn't know to be silent.
 7. When the witch finds you, pretend you did not mean to be found. She will have heard your voice in the night, and something will draw her to you, a thing neither of you can explain. As she holds the door of her house open to you, you will look up at her and see that her eyes are the lightest shade of blue, like forget-me-nots or perfect summer days. You know that the dinner she cooks for you is only to lull you into vulnerability, but the wine is good and the mushrooms fresh. You know that witches are trouble, that they cannot be reformed, and yet when she puts her hands on your throat in the middle of the night, it will feel like a kiss.
 8. Leave the witch's house. No, really, you have to. Sweet girl, remember, you have no control over your story. You are walking toward the castle, whether you want to or not. She will understand; she has met heroines before. What, did you think you were the only one?
 9. The dragon in the field will not burn you if you are crying, so at least there's that. Stand and face the nearest head—all three at once, if you can. It will give you a riddle, which cannot be solved because dragons deal in non sequitur. All you have to do is point this out and you'll be free. Dragons are not equipped for existential thought.
 10. The prince will be the one riding a silver horse just outside the city gate. He has golden hair and eyes like copper. He will not ask your name. You are welcome to sing to him, to see if it will draw him to you the way it drew the witch to you, but you can save your breath; what he loves is the sight of you, beautiful and burdened and in need of rescue.
 11. The intrigue that follows will not require your participation. His mother is jealous, or his sister, or a princess from a neighboring land. Women in stories like yours are only good for fights. You don't have to fight back. In fact, you shouldn't; this is his moment,
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now, his chance to prove that he can win you, when everyone knows that he will, inevitably, win you.

12. Love's true kiss will feel like nothing. It will be warm and wet and empty. It will not remind you of hands around your neck.

13. At the wedding, play grateful. Let the people praise you. Raise your eyes to God, or whoever is in charge of these things, and if you scan the sky for a broomstick or a cloud of smoke, be subtle about it. She will not come. She will not have been invited. If you cry at the altar, you can always disguise it as joy.

14. After this, you must go it alone. The story ends here, with you inside the rose-covered walls, looking out. It is a happy ending, remember. If you are lucky, one day you will give birth to a little girl with hair like a crow's wing and eyes like the clearest blue sky, and you will love her the way you once loved the view from your father's shoulders. Teach her how it is going to be. When you kiss the top of her head that first morning, know that you have this in common: both of you, at the moment of this birth, have survived every day of your life so far.

Photograph © Thomas Gillaspay

Issue 13 Contributors

Authors

Beth Adamour received her MFA in creative writing from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. Her stories have appeared in *Nimrod*, *West Branch*, *Mid-American Review*, *Crescent Review* and other publications.

Ean Bevel lives with his wife in St. Louis, but dreams of living on the road. When he is not chasing his toddler or teaching English classes or swinging a hammer, he puts pen to page. His work often contains the grotesque and/or magical realism. He began collecting rejections a few years ago, then completed his MFA in writing, and continues to collect rejections. His fiction has appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *Literary Orphans*, and *Bareback Magazine*. His CNF has appeared in *Lunch Ticket*.

Elizabeth Brown has short fiction published or forthcoming in *Bartleby Snopes*, *The Milo Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Sleet*, *Literary Orphans*, *HelloHorror* and elsewhere. She is currently at work on an existential novel.

Heather Clitheroe's work has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Kaleidotrope*, and in *Lightspeed's* Women Destroy SF special issue. She is a past participant of the Banff Centre for the Arts' writing residency program and the Leighton Artists' Colony.

Leonora Desar won *Bartleby Snopes'* Story of the Month Contest and received an honorable mention in *Glimmer Train's* Very Short Fiction Award. Her work has appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *The Citron Review*, *Psychology Today*, *WomansDay.com*, *Prick of the Spindle* and elsewhere. She lives in New York City and holds an M.S. from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she received the Richard T. Baker Award for magazine writing. She is currently working on a novel.

CS DeWildt is the author of the books *Candy and Cigarettes* and *Dead Animals*, as well as the flash novel *The Louisville Problem*. His novel *Love You to a Pulp* will be released by All Due Respect Books in January 2015. Please visit him at <http://csdewildt.com>.

Kelsey Englert's writing has appeared in *The Broken Plate*. She earned her M.A. in Creative Writing at Ball State University, and is currently pursuing her M.F.A. in Creative Writing at West Virginia University.

Gabrielle Hovendon is a graduate of the MFA program at Bowling Green State University and has taught in New York, Ohio, and, most recently, Spain. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Pinch*, *Southwest Review*, *Redivider*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and *Ninth Letter*. She is currently at work on a novel about two nineteenth-century mathematicians.

Amy Morris-Jones lives, works, and writes along the shore of Lake Michigan, focusing mostly on issues and scenery that capture the Midwest in general and Michigan specifically. With two novels and several short stories currently in revision, she has plenty to keep her distracted as the snow begins to pile outside her door. She can be found sporadically at <http://amorrisjones.blogspot.com/> and @amorrisjones.

Bertram Mullin graduated with a degree in English with honors. He's an alumnus of Sigma Tau Delta, and co-founded Writers' ReVision: a workshop that helped authors' edit and find publication. He was a journalist for two years, a communist three, and a finalist in the WLT Manuscript Competition in the thriller category in 2014. Publications: *Antiphon Magazine*, *Ishaan Literary Review*, *Bartleby Snopes* (voted story of the month), *Short-story.me*, *This Very Breath Journal*, *Microfiction Monday Magazine*, *Writer's Ezine* (story of the month), and more. For further details visit his website www.bamwrites.com.

Maria Pinto's work has appeared in *Spirited Magazine*, *Broad! (a gentleperson's magazine)*, *The Drunken Boat*, and *The Missing Slate* (where she received "Author of the Month" honors). She was the 2009-2010 Ivan Gold Fellow at the Writer's Room in Boston, the city where she lives. Her debut novel is currently in search of a home.

Christina Qiu is a senior at Livingston High School in New Jersey. She was a 2014 YoungArts Finalist in writing, and has been recognized in the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, the Adroit Prizes, and Foyle's Young Poets of the Year Competition, among others. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Adroit Journal*, *Winter Tangerine Review*, *The Postscript Journal*, and elsewhere. Her short story "Lucy At Home" was nominated for a 2014 Pushcart Prize. She will be attending Harvard College in Fall 2015.

Stephen V Ramey lives in beautiful New Castle, Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in many places, most recently *Meat for Tea*, *Pure Slush*, and *StarShipSofa*. He has edited or co-edited three volumes of the Triangulation anthology from Parsec Ink, and will soon be reviving the speculative twitterzine, *trapeze*. Find him at www.stephenvramey.com.

Dan Reiter: "Synchronic Conversations" was Dan's first flash fiction publication. Since then, he's placed pieces in *Word Riot*, *Tin House*, *WhiskeyPaper*, *Spork*, and *McSweeney's*. He collects his thoughts here: www.dan-reiter.com.

Nina Sabak is pursuing her MFA in fiction at the University of Pittsburgh. Her writing can be found in *The Rumpus*, *Plain China*, *Collision Literary Magazine*, *Three Rivers Review*, and *Pittsburgh City Paper*, among others. In 2012 she published a chapbook of poetry, *Naming the Mountain*, with the support of the Poetry Society of New Hampshire. She tweets @ninasabak and blogs at ninasabak.wordpress.com.

Mike Sauve has written non-fiction for *The National Post*, *Variety*, and *HTML Giant*. His online fiction has appeared in *Pif Magazine*, *Monkeybicycle*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and university journals of moderate renown. Stories have appeared in print in *M-Brane*, *Feathertale*, *Filling Station*, and elsewhere. His novel *Goodbye Pantopon Rose* is forthcoming from the Chicago Center for Literature and Publishing. His novel *The Apocalypse of Lloyd* is forthcoming from Montag Press.

Kari Strutt lives and writes in Calgary, Alberta. Her work has appeared in *Grain*, *Prism International*, *FreeFall*, *Event*, and *Room*. Her work is included in three anthologies, *Freshwater Pearls*, *Embedded on the Home Front*, and *Women's Words*.

Mathangi Subramanian is a writer and educator who believes stories have the power to change the world. She has worked as a high school science teacher, a member of the global education department at Sesame Workshop, and a senior policy analyst at the New York City Council. Her work for grownups and young people has appeared in *Quartz*, *Al Jazeera America*, *The Hindu*, *Skipping Stones* and the Seal Press Anthology *Click!: When We Knew We Were Feminists*, among others. She is the author of the *Bullying: The Ultimate Teen Guide* (Rowman and Littlefield 2014) and the young adult novel *Dear Mrs. Naidu* (Young Zubaan 2015). She currently splits her time between Bangalore and Washington, DC.

Daniel W. Thompson's work has appeared recently or is forthcoming at publications like *decomp*, *Camroc Press Review*, *Wyvern Lit*, *Noble/Gas Qtrly* and *Cheap Pop*. He lives in downtown Richmond, VA, with his wife and daughters, cleaning up diapers and dog fur.

Valerie Vogrin is the author of the novel *Shebang*. Her short stories have appeared in print in journals such as *Ploughshares*, *AGNI*, and *The Los Angeles Review*, as well as online at *Wigleaf* and *Prick of the Spindle*. In 2010 she was awarded a Pushcart Prize. She is prose editor for *Sou'wester* and teaches at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Sorrel Westbrook-Wilson is pursuing an MFA in fiction at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is from California, and spends most of her time talking to rabbits. This is her first piece of published work.

Kathleen J Woods is a writer and M.F.A. candidate at the University of Colorado Boulder, where she teaches and serves as the assistant editor for *Timber Journal*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Apeiron Review*, *Paragraphiti*, *Paper Tape Magazine*, *Cavalcade Literary Magazine*, and others.

Illustrators

Carrie Brennan is a glass, photography, and digital artist who recently relocated to Loveland, Colorado. She specializes in wildlife and landscape photography. She has an MAR from Yale Divinity School in the Visual Arts of Religion and a BA in Religious Studies from the University of Arizona. She has moved extensively throughout her life including living in Scotland and the Netherlands. She is fluent in Dutch and works as a translator/proofreader. She is an enthusiast for all things British, Medieval, as well as adoring dancing to live Rocky Grass music. She is a backyard bee keeper. Her work can be found at SeventhBrennan.wordpress.com.

Steven Foutch lives with his fiancée Kathleen in Irving, Texas, where he facilitates the learning process at the University of Dallas. He also makes art, and generally embraces his ailments. He received his MFA in printmaking in 2007 and has shown work recently in Texas and Korea.

Chris Fradkin is a former beet farmer now living in Brazil. His prose and poetry have appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Thrush Poetry Journal*. His songs have been performed by *Fergie*, *The Plimsouls*, and *The Flamin' Groovies*. And his Emmy-award-winning sound editorial has graced *The X-Files*. Fradkin's photos for this issue are from Porto Alegre and Fortaleza, Brazil.

Thomas Gillaspy is a northern California photographer with an interest in urban minimalism. His work has been featured in numerous magazines including the literary journals *Switchback*, *DMQ Review* and *Citron Review*.

Leanne Merritt grew up in Hendersonville, Tennessee, a small town outside of Nashville, and now lives with her family in Adams, Tennessee. She has degrees in both Psychology and Radiography but her true passion lies in creative endeavors. She has studied music from a very young age and plays both piano and trumpet. Her favorite pastimes include gardening, cooking, and traveling extensively to attend festivals, concerts, and artistic exhibitions. She also loves to photograph her travels across the globe. Her adventures can be followed on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/loverlyleanne> and on Instagram at <https://Instagram.com/lrmerritt>.
