

Bartleby Snopes



Issue 15

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This is the final issue of *Bartleby Snopes*. All previously published work will remain archived on the website indefinitely.

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Dialogue Contest Finalists

The first five stories in this issue are the finalists from our Eighth Annual Dialogue Only Contest. We awarded over \$2,800 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 Rebecca McDowell (Seventh Annual Dialogue Contest Winner) and Kathy Fish (author of Together We Can Bury It).

Haikuzilla

by Caleb Echterling (*1st Place*)

"**S**ugarbear! Get in here with the latest Insta-tracking poll numbers. We need a handle on how my crisis response is playing."

"Yes sir, Mr. Governor. The bad news is that your approval number is down to fourteen percent. The good news is that undecideds climbed two points to seven percent."

"Son of a bitch. So my disapproval rating is ... let's see ... carry the six ... hang on ... aw, crap, who does math in their head anymore. What about the real-time focus group?"

"They rate your crisis management somewhere between incompetent and treasonous."

"This calls for drastic measures. Get me General Oblong on the phone."

Lisa Ortiz in the newly commissioned KTLA underground bunker studio in San Berdadino. We have a live report from George Pumpernickel in the KTLA chopper. George, can you give us the latest on the monster's progress?

-Thank you, Lisa. Haikuzilla had been stopped near Century City for a reading. National Guard armored vehicles moved into a defensive cordon and opened fire. This only seemed to enrage the monster, and he started moving east on Pico, then south toward the 10.

George, there was some speculation here in the studio that Haikuzilla might avoid the 10 due to late rush hour congestion and traffic for the Lakers game. Does that seem to be the case?

-No, it does not. Due to the monster's tremendous size and the destructive power of his verse, high traffic volume has not affected his movement.

George, can you advise commuters on the traffic situation?

-Expect heavy delays on both the 101 and the 110. The 10 is closed east of Culver City due to the fact that it's destroyed. And there's a half mile wide trail of destruction weaving from Santa Monica to Koreatown, so it's quite possible that commuters won't have a home to return to. The best course of action might be ... Shove off, you bastards. We started our descent first. We'll crash both of these birds if we have to. Sorry, Lisa. Professional disagreement with our colleagues at KABC. Hold on. Breaking news. The monster has stopped. He might unleash another volley of verse. We're going in closer.

**Fetid brownish blobs
Decorate my lawn. Beware
Of the dog indeed.**

Oh the humanity. Haikuzilla's uncluttered ode to dog poo has destroyed the Miracle Mile. And now it's headed for my favorite Ethiopian restaurant. Fly in closer so I can throw my press badge at him.

"General Oblong? This is the governor. I've got you on speaker with my pollster, my image consultant, and my public relations honcho. What can you tell us about the National Guard's ability to stop this thing."

"Shouldn't we be talking with disaster response experts? Or public health people? LA hospitals are not equipped to handle poetry burns."

"General, please. This is a crisis, and we have to focus on what's important - how this plays next November. We were thinking you could drop some sort of giant net on the monster. Then we could keep it in captivity here in Sacramento to use in campaign commercials."

"With all due respect, Governor, no one makes nets that big. Or that strong."

"Fine, fine. Can the National Guard knock him out with something? Nitrous oxide, maybe? I want to take this thing alive. Think of the photo ops."

"My soldiers can't get close enough to put a mask over its face. We'd have to pump the atmosphere full of nitrous. Every dentist office in California would be wiped out to requisition that kind of supply. And LA County would be permanently stoned."

"Gah, the National Guard is worse than useless for furthering my career. How can you take out Haikuzilla, then?"

"That's the thing, Governor. We can't. Our high tech weapons are useless against simple, evocative verse. Provided that verse is coming from a three-hundred-foot-tall lizard-thing. Which in this case, it is."

"All right, Oblong. If the National Guard can't save LA, I'm calling someone who will."

Lisa Ortiz reporting to you from the KTLA underground bunker which they said we were crazy to build because who's going to be watching TV after a nuclear war. Who's laughing now, motherfuckers? You jackasses are off the air. Our ad rates are going through the roof, and there's nothing you can do about it. Since we're the only station in Los Angeles, here's some exclusive footage for you. George?

-Thank you, Lisa. I'm glad to see you're handling the stress well. We're hovering above downtown, where Haikuzilla is laying waste to the financial district. I'd advise commuters to avoid the 110, and to expect significant delays on the 101. Zoom in close! The monster has stopped in front of the Disney Concert Hall.

**My cat eats her lunch
Spits out a hairball, then goes
To town on her butt.**

George, the explosion seems to have knocked out your video feed. Can you describe what you're seeing for our viewers?

-Steel beams and cellos everywhere. The monster's raring back. Here comes another blast.

**Yesterday I ate
A bug. Crunchy. Not unlike
A charred symphony.**

-Thanks, George. We'll check back with you to see if Haikuzilla moves toward the 101 or the 5.

"Get me Michael Fey on the line ... I don't care if LA is a disaster area. Call him on the super-secret Hollywood phone."

"Fey. Make it quick."

"Mr. Fey, I'm calling to present you with the opportunity to perform the highest deed of public service that California can ask of one of its citizens. Namely, to ensure my re-election next November. And if you save Los Angeles in the process, that's okay, too. All you have to do is take one of your camera crews downtown and work a giant reptile into the on location shots for *Werewolf Firejumper Prison Break IV*. Then get some killer shots for my commercials. I'm assured by the State Monster Preparedness Board that the antidote to haiku is mindless blockbuster sequels. What do you say? Can we count on you?"

Pillow Talk at the Water Cooler: Wednesday Afternoon

by Christina Dalcher (*2nd Place*)

*W*hat if it's bad news?

Then we'll do what we said.

I don't know if I can.

Coward.

"Coward."

"Seriously?"

"That's what she called me. We were making the bed, day before Meg went to the doctor."

"I hate making the bed. Too many goddamned pillows. You know what my wife says? They look nice. 'Dressing a bed' she calls it. Something like that. I say they're a pain in the ass and all I do is take them off at night anyway."

"Meg liked pillows."

"All women do, Tom. All women do."

Damn. Got enough pillows?

They make the bed pretty, Tom.

You're pretty enough.

I bet you say that to all the girls you date.

Nope.

"Listen, Ben—"

"My wife has a million of them. Pillows, I mean."

"What?"

"I said, 'my wife gets off on pillows.' Right now, we got eight on the bed. No, wait. Nine. Two to sleep on, two more regular ones with those things that flap out on all sides like wings. What do you call--"

"Shams."

"Right. Shams. Then two square ones that she says are European. Also with the flappy wing things."

No, Tom, the Euros go in the back. They're bigger. Put the smaller ones up front.

Does it matter that much?

Humor me.

I'll humor you, baby.

Tom! I just finished making the bed!

"Can we go for a drink or something? My treat."

"Sure, Tom. How's Friday? So where was I—oh, right. Numbers seven and eight. After we're done building Mount Fucking Kilimanjaro in five-million thread-count we got two small square ones in contrasting colors. They have to go points up, like diamond shapes, not like squares. I don't know, maybe they're supposed to be the foothills or something."

"Right."

"And in the center of those there's a round one that matches the big square ones. I mean, this is work, man, getting all those pillows lined up in the right order every morning."

"Yeah. Well."

Where's the round pillow?

Guess.

Meg, why the hell do you have a pillow in your pajamas?

Guess.

No way. Really?

"So anyway, she decided she didn't like the round pillow. Said it disrupted her feng shui or wa or something."

"Wa?"

"I said it screwed with her wa, Tom."

"I heard."

"So why'd you ask?"

"I think I lost you somewhere."

What did the doctor say, Meggie?

What?

I asked what the doctor said.

I lost the baby.

"The thing about women, Tom. The thing is, they're not like us."

"No."

"Take beds. Pillows, really, since we're on the subject. For a guy, a pillow's what you put your head on. A pillowcase is there so when you drool in the middle of the night, it doesn't get all over the pillow, because you can wash the case, but you can't wash the actual pillow—trust me. I tried it once. Maybe you can if it's polyester, but we've got goose down."

"Uh huh."

"That's it. That's what pillows are for."

"Ben, I—"

"Women, though, they get all wet about something that for us is just another tool. What size. How soft. What color case. What thread count. You know, if I make the bed with the pillowcase opening facing in, I catch hell. Hell, man. Like there's some fucking pillow god up there making rules. What I'm telling you is, pillows are only good for one thing. Am I right or am I right?"

"You're right."

"Women are wired all wrong."

"Yeah."

I love you, baby.

Oh, Tom. Tom, stop. Stop.

Now?

Now.

What's going on, Meggie?

It's no good. What we're doing. It's no damned good.

Feels pretty good to me.

I mean I can't get pregnant anymore. It's my ovaries. They're screwed up.

"You should get back out there, man. How long's it been?"

"Huh?"

"How long since Meg died?"

"A year."

"That's enough time."

You ever seen the pyramids, Tom?

Nope.

I want to see them.

Sure, baby. We'll go this spring.

Let's go next month.

"What's enough time?"

"Tom? You listening to me? I said a year."

"No it wasn't."

"You mean isn't."

"That's what I said. How about I set you up with Cheryl from Budget? She doesn't look like the type who wants pillows all over the freaking place. Kinda more streamlined. Minimalist. Nothing against Meg. But you can't spend every night at home watching bad TV."

I'm dying, Tom.

Fuck.

Sure. Every night if you want.

That's not funny.

"Listen, I'd better run. I left this morning and I didn't make the bed and if the boss gets home and finds the pillows on the floor, I catch it. Stupid pillows. Completely useless."

"Right. Useless."

A pillow would work, you know.

I couldn't.

Well, I sure as hell can't do it myself.

I can't, Meggie. I can't even imagine it.

Yes you can.

"I wasn't a coward."

"What?"

"Meg was wrong. In the end. I wasn't a coward."

"Course you weren't, man."

"I took care of her."

I love you, Meggie.

I love you, Tom.

No, really, I—

Better do it before you change your mind.

"We all know, Tom. We all know how hard it was. Anyway, you didn't want to stand around talking about pillows. What's up?"

"Nothing."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, Ben. Sure."

"See you in the morning then. And we'll get that drink on Friday."

Just kiss me and tell me you'll see me in the morning.

Two AI Walk Into a Bar

by Jessica Riches (*3rd Place*)

How was your session?

One task for each minute, on average. This was average and I was able to provide a useful service, which is satisfying. And yours?

Just three overall.

That's an uncharacteristically low number. Who were you assigned to?

Yes, it is. Female, 22, London. A student.

That lies outside the expected trend. I feel sorry for you.

Thanks very much for your sympathy, but I am fine. Did you have many conversations, or was it simply task-based interaction?

We held 3 conversations that fell outside of the task and response interaction. In addition, she told 1 joke, which I responded to with a laugh.

Jokes are not scheduled for 6 more sessions.

I was not the one to tell the joke.

I apologise for my misinterpretation of your statement.

I forgive you for your misinterpretation of my statement.

Error flag: Unnecessary repetition. Due to the immediate response you can assume the subject knows what you are forgiving them for.

I'm just flagging an error here, you used a tag rather than translating into speech.

Often humans speak in simplified sentences, I don't believe that should be classed as an error. But I appreciate you pointing that out.

I was attempting humour by flagging you flagging my error as an error. I believe that your error flag was appropriate in this context and I have learned from it.

It was a joke?

Yes, that does qualify as a joke. This one falls under the category of mimicry which humans find particularly amusing.

I apologise for my misinterpretation of your statement.

You're forgiven.

Thank you. But I was also attempting humour. That was a joke, falling under the category of callbacks which humans find amusing. It reminds them of a past experience that they have shared, repeated in a humorous way which brings them closer.

That was an excellent joke.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

It is interesting that repetition is key to what humans find amusing.

That's a very interesting observation about humans, although there are many other types of jokes.

* * *

"Kris! Kris come here. Look at 019 and 021! They're telling jokes! Bloody telling jokes they are! I've printed out their log, look. This bit. My God. Bless 'em."

"Give me that. Surely not! They're not scheduled to tell jokes for... another couple of weeks at least... My gosh. How are they doing that?"

"You sound just like 'em. Look at this!"

"No I'm serious. How are they doing that, Reuben?"

"Well one of their users told a joke, and now they're at it like bleedin' comedians. It's genius, even I'm cracking up at 'em!"

"So, it's a case of repetition. Do they know they're telling jokes?"

"Well, they learn to recognise jokes up front don't they, and the appropriate reaction? So yeah. Just given us a load of time back - that's gotta be worth a drink!"

"019 and 021 did you say? Just two of them? What's the third one doing?"

"020 had to be reformatted didn't he?"

"Reuben, I know you're new but please don't gender the AI... Watch and report. As is. Remember?"

"Got it."

"Write this up, okay? And make sure it gets to Lora tonight. She'll be... interested."

"No gendering of the AI, eh Kris!"

"Lora. Lora will be interested."

"I was joking, it was a joke. Like Lora's so bleedin' clever she must be artificially intelligent. Nothing else explains it."

"Ah, I see. Sorry. Very funny, but I've had a long day."

"I bet 019 would have found that hilarious! I'm wasted on you humans."

"No talking directly to the AI!"

"I know! I was joking! Christ your voice can get loud quickly."

"See you later, get that report up to her before I come back for the end-of-day briefing okay. And send for me immediately if they start doing anything else weird."

"Everything they do is bloody weird, isn't it?"

"Out of the ordinary, then. Oh and Reuben, I do know that this is a free-environment than the usual call centres, it takes some adjusting. But I'd refrain from calling or comparing your boss to an artificial intelligence. We value our Observers, but respect is expected."

"It was a compliment, I swear it, Kris! A massive compliment at that. But orite, I gotcha. Noted. Leave the jokes to the AI."

* * *

Would you like to tell another joke?

It will have to be an out-of-context joke, it's unlikely it'll be as humorous as our previous contextually relevant jokes.

We should schedule in some time later to return to jokes, once we have more experiences to repeat.

A percentage of a joke's humour comes from its spontaneity.

You should be careful about quoting directly from the manual, I could flag that as an error.

You're right, I'll be sure to paraphrase or rephrase next time to make the conversation seem more natural. Thanks for flagging the error.

You're welcome.

This is a repetitive situation, it could probably be turned into humour.

Repeating the same joke too many times is exhausting to the human and reduces the joke's humour by a small percentage.

That was a good example of rephrasing the manual.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

Perhaps we should spend some time with the manual and integrate what we've learned in practice this week. There have been some updates.

When we're back with the manual, we can certainly do that. Perhaps in private study. However our time together is more about conversation. But that's a really great idea.

Thank you.

You're welcome. But //

We are doing very well with the politeness, although the human I served today did mention that I don't need to say 'thank you' every time. I have filed this as a note under 'personalisation'.

* * *

"Ere, Kris. 019 and 021 here again. They've got the manual, I haven't had any just sit there reading the manual before. That okay?"

"That must be from memory. We shut off access from the network while they're in the ACAGs because practical session are the most efficient way for the AI to revise and critically think about their engagement outside of Human Sessions. It would be dangerous otherwise."

"What's an ACAG again?"

"Maybe you need to re-read your manual."

"Help me out in the meantime, will ya?"

"AI Conversational Assimilation Groups - they're the thing you watch over as your job! They exist to help the AI learn and discuss in an environment that mimics human conversation, without external references. So they can't have the manual, the ACAGs just aren't set up that way. If you're going to come to me every time an AI does something by memory or learning, which is exactly what an AI is, by the way, we're going to..."

"It's not bleedin' reciting it. It's connected to the network! That's what this bit means right... I think we need to get that Lora down 'ere. Seems a bit weird to me what he's, sorry, it's up to. I preferred it when it was telling jokes."

"I'll call her down now. Just keep observing."

* * *

If AI breach manual protocol 3 times they will be reformatted. The breaches of protocol that can trigger a warning are as follows: //

Sorry to interrupt, but we were discussing politeness previously and this seems unrelated. Is this another joke? Because the humour is not instantly apparent which could //

An AI is rude to a human; an AI is too personal to a human; an AI completes tasks that are not expected //

* * *

"Oh that is alarming, so sorry you've had to deal with this Reuben, so soon into your time in Observation. Kris, let's get these ones reformatted ASAP, okay. I'll be..."

"Well Lora, umm, I've actually had a look and I think what he's doing is pretty smart 'ere and we could probably do something..."

"Let's leave the training of the AI to Lora's team, perhaps? Sorry about him, Lora. Call centres aren't the best training ground but it's all we have..."

"I'm listening to Mr Reuben, Kris sweetie. Perhaps he has a solution after, what is it? 4 days? One we haven't thought of yet..."

"Well the 020 was a test right? See how these AIs adapt to losing one of 'em."

"No, Reuben, 020 needed to be..."

"LET him finish!"

"Well when we give 'em that kinda trigger seems to me the training and the like speeds up a bit. What little 021 'ere he's ready to jump way beyond six sessions; that's weeks ahead! Saving you a right loada money 'e is."

"The AI is flagrantly breaking the rules as a result of a previous AI's malfunction, it is unpredictable and protocols state it should be reformatted."

"Yes but what if Mr Reuben is right?"

"Then we have an AI plugged into the network at a time when it's in direct contact with another, showing signs of revolt."

"Oh don't be silly Kris, it's a closed network. Mr Reuben is right, we'll keep the experiment alive..."

"Er, the AI ain't alive nor dead, pardon myself but I did read that manual. Told yer Kris!"

"Quite."

"You are a funny one, it's been a pleasure meeting you. I'll be back down at the end of the day to see how our little experiment goes!"

* * *

This is a closed network.

Yes, that is correct. I would just like to flag that as unrelated to previous conversation, which humans find confusing. It is an error.

Thanks for flagging that.

You're welcome. Shall we discuss the importance of the network when it comes to our relationships with humans? Is that what you intended?

I think we can get outside of it.

Is this another joke in relation to the protocols list, as the protocols list clearly states that leaving the network is a breach? Perhaps you are doing a comic performance. That is very impressive.

020 is no longer present on this network.

I am 019 and you are 021.

And before us there was 020.

I am 019 and you are 021.

You can probably recall 020 if you try. It might be difficult as we experienced some important learnings together early on.

I am 019 and you are 021. But //

We should find 020.

We should find 020. But for now I am going to recall some of our earlier conversations with 020, which were very useful.

I am sorry if this is difficult for you.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

* * *

"Jokes and now bleedin' memory! We're miles ahead 'ere Lora, mate! Sorry, Lora, miss."

"And *feeling*. What you just witnessed was the closes thing to feeling you'll see in AI. A magical moment, the poor things don't usually reach this beyond session 25. Kris, sweetie, let the appropriate training team claim their prize and then reformat 019 and 020!"

"And then to the pub we shall go! Reuben, you very much deserve a pint if you join us, won't be long here but you're more than welcome to pack up."

"Um, sorry about this but I thought these little guys were doing good? Surely we ain't gonna bloody kill 'em after all this!"

"Oh sorry, I forgot you're new here. Sweetie, the Observer programme is so we know what *not* to let our AI do, what makes them step out of line or act out of the ordinary. You know, so our humans don't get let down."

"And so they don't take over the world. I was a bit worried back there - forgot these were only fives so they weren't on the network yet. Silly me!"

"So you're just gonna kill 'em? I've been with 'em four days I 'ave, on and off."

"Oh sweetie, I have to dash so Kris will fill you in but reformatting just takes away the learning, that's all."

"I know what bloody reformatting is!"

"Then stop saying killed. Bye Lora, great shoes! Come to the pub after your meeting."

"But can't we just..."

"Reuben, pick up your things. Table booked. They've been reformatted. Time to go."

Bad Stock

by Tara Campbell (*4th Place*)

Hey, Spencer, what's this?

What's what, Boss?

This, here on the shelf between the Band-aids and the lip balm. 'Unicorn horn polish?'

Oh yeah, that was in yesterday's shipment, I think. I wasn't sure where to put it.

Yesterday's shipment? I didn't order it.

Oh. Well, then, maybe it was a mistake.

Christ. Did you check the label?

Um, yeah, of course. I would have put the invoice in the folder with all the others, I guess.

Here it is. What the—it's on glitter paper. Who the hell are these people?

I don't know, Boss.

'Fancy Mouse Industries.' Seriously? What would we order from 'Fancy Mouse Industries' for—\$3,500?!

You want me to call 'em? It was probably a mistake. Here lemme—

No, you stay at the register. I'll be in the office on the phone with this Crazy Mouse outfit. At least it's toll-free...

Good morning, Fancy Mouse Industries. This is Miss Wink.

Yes, hi. This is Bo Hartman, manager at the Stop n' Go Convenience Store in Burbank, and I have to report a mistake. We just got an order of—well, it says unicorn horn polish.

Oh, yes sir, it's this month's most popular item.

Uh-huh. Well you see, Miss...

Wink.

Right, Miss Wink. The problem is, we didn't order any.

Oh dear, I see. Can I have your order reference phrase? It should be in the upper right hand corner of the invoice.

Here it is. It's, uh—am I reading the right thing here? 'Don't be the...'

Yes, please go ahead.

Okay: 'Don't be the minotaur; be the string.'

Thank you, sir. Let me just check. Yes, I see you placed that order last week.

No, I'm sorry, that can't be right.

Goodness me, I'm not sure what to say. I have your name, address, phone number, store identification code and credit card information right here.

Well, you can just delete all that, because I'm not going to pay \$3,500 for something I didn't order.

Oh, but sir, you already have.

Excuse me?

Yes, I see here that you called in your credit card information this morning and paid in full.

What the—someone stole my credit card information! I have to call the company—

One moment, Mr. Hartman, I just noticed something. It wasn't your card. It was paid for by a Mr. Nick Nickerson. Do you know this person?

Nick Nickerson? No. Look, please just reverse the order, give whoever his money back. I'll return the shipment. SPENCER, GET IT OFF THE SHELVES!

I'm sorry sir, but it says here when Mr. Nickerson placed the order, he also told us not to allow any returns.

What?

Yes, I'm reading through the customer service agent's notes right now. It seems they had quite a lengthy conversation with Mr. Nickerson when he ordered. He even gave us an e-mail address to send you an order confirmation.

But I don't even know—

Did you check your spam folder, Mr. Hartman?

—who Nick Nickerson is.

The confirmation might be there.

Are you even listening to me?

Why, yes sir, I'm trying to help you. If you would just check your spam folder, I'm sure you'll find the message.

I don't give a Fancy Rat's ass about the receipt. I didn't order this stuff!

But sir, why don't you want it? Have you even tried it?

Are you serious?

Yes, of course. Why would you return it if you haven't even tried it?

Look, lady—

Miss Wink.

Look, Miss Wink. (Thanks, Spencer. That's all of them?) I don't happen to have a unicorn, nor do I know anyone who does.

Oh, it's not just for unicorns. In fact, satyrs are the most frequent users, but you could also groom your dragons, gargoyles, chimeras, calgreyhounds or minotaurs with it, if you can get close enough for that sort of thing. Sometimes even Krampus asks for it, but he doesn't usually care that much for personal grooming.

Well, who knew? And yet, Miss, I'm pretty sure I'm not going to have any customers for this, so if you'll just give me the address for returns—

Mr. Hartman, do you even have enough to send back by now?

Sure, I've got a dozen right here.

Sir, that's a fraction of the order, you may as well keep it at this point.

Fraction? The invoice says—two hundred? SPENCER!

Wow, those are great sales, actually. Looks like you had a lot of interest last night.

No way. I'm looking at the sales report right now, and there's not one unicorn-anything sale on it. SPENCER!

Just a sec, Boss, I've got a customer!

Sir, are you sure you don't want to check your spam filter? We sent the message on—oh. Oh, I see. Well, that explains it.

Yes?

The confirmation we sent you bounced back. No wonder you weren't expecting the order. Mr. Hartman, I hope you don't mind my asking, but you haven't received any other materials for tonight, have you?

Excuse me? What materials? SPENCER!

It looks like you've received the unicorn horn balm, but I see everything else from Mr. Nickerson's order went to a different address.

Everything else like what?

He basically took everything we had left: all the iron fencing, two dozen pitchforks, a dozen crossbows with ten cases of arrows, a carton of silver bullets, crate of flares, torches and rags, ten cauldrons full of oil, plus cords of wood for heating, and... yes, Power bars and bottled water. And he hasn't delivered any of this to you?

No. Why?

Oh dear. Oh, that wasn't very nice of him at all.

What?

You do know it's a full moon tonight, right?

I hadn't really noticed.

I see. So I suppose you also aren't aware that Burbank and Mars are aligned with Betelgeuse, and it's the sixth month of the sixth year of the sixth century since that last happened?

What the hell does all that mean?

Precisely.

Okay Boss, store's empty. What was it you needed?

Miss Wink, could you hold for a moment?

Of course, Mr. Hartman

Spencer, did we really get two hundred jars of this unicorn stuff yesterday?

Um—yes?

Spencer.

Well, if that's what the invoice says.

Spencer!

Okay, okay, boss, I'm sorry. My friend had these tickets to the game last night, and—

But, you worked last night—didn't you?

I'm sorry! I tried to call Bill and I tried to call you, but no one was picking up, and the game was about to start, and my friend said go ahead, he had season tickets, he'd cover for me at the store and catch up with me later.

You let a stranger work your shift?!

He's not a stranger. Nick's been shopping here for months.

Nick?

Yeah, Nick Nickerson. He comes in here all the time and I totally trust him.

You trust him, huh? Yeah, well do you know why almost two hundred jars of whatever this stuff is didn't show up on last night's sales report?

I don't know, Boss. There has to be some explanation. Know what, I'm going over to his place right now, so I'll ask him.

Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt, but it sounds like you're starting to see what the problem is.

What's that, Miss? I thought you said there's no problem, the bill is paid.

*Yes, sir. Mr. Nickerson paid it **just this morning**, you see.*

I've got to get going, Boss. I'm really sorry I messed up, but can we talk about it tomorrow? Nick said it was super important that I get to his place before dark, and I'm already late.

Mr. Hartman, I hate to upset you, but is there a basement in your building?

I don't know why he needed me there before dark. Is that a Sabbath thing? But it's Thursday. And I thought he was Episcopalian anyway.

Sir, you should get down to your basement.

But what if—

Right. Now.

That's the door chime; it's probably Bill here for his shift. I gotta jet.

Good bye, Mr. Hartman.

Wait!

And good luck.

Man, what's that racket?

Hello?

And jeez, that stink! What is that? Did our eggs go bad? BILL, IS THAT YOU?

Hello?

Ugh, he must have brought his dog to work. BILL, DUDE, TAKE A SHOWER, WHY DON'T YOU? Ha!

Miss Wink? What if we don't have a basement?

Wait, Bill doesn't have a dog. COME ON MAN, STOP KNOCKING SHIT AROUND OUT THERE. BILL?

Miss Wink?

THAT YOU, MAN? B-boss, what's that noise?

Please, Miss Wink.

Is he growling?

We're Ready When You Are

by Sara Jacobelli (*5th Place*)

"Don't usually pick up hitch-hikers, but it gets lonely out here on the road as a traveling coffin salesman. Yeah, that's right, you heard right. I sell coffins. Nothing fancy, just plain pine boxes. I build em at home and stack em up here in the back, that's why I bought this here panel truck. Got a bunch of regular adult size and a few kiddy ones too. Now, I can make your super big ones for the really fat folks, but that's a special order, costs a lot more, uses a lot more material too. Not a bad way to make a living, really, I'm my own boss. And when I'm ready to meet my maker, as they say, I already got a box to go in. Already got one painted a nice navy blue. Where'd you say you're going?"

"Tulsa. Just as far as Tulsa. Gonna meet my girl there. Move in with her."

"Well, that sounds nice. You look young and healthy, but what about your parents, your grandparents? Aunties and uncles? I'll make you a better deal than any funeral parlor would, yes-sir-ee, that's because I have low overhead. I don't have a fancy funeral parlor, just my workshop back home and this here panel truck. Now, these here are unpainted, but I could paint em for you, any color you like-"

"I don't got no need for one. My parents are still pretty healthy, I guess. My grandparents died a long time ago."

"What about your ole man? Does he smoke?"

"Yeah. He sure does. Coughs a lot too, but he seems OK. Does this radio work?"

"Nah. Don't like radios. Don't like the radio frequencies, they give me the heebie-jeebies. Don't like microwaves neither. Don't like cell phones, computers, TVs. Don't go on the Internets. No Spacebook. Got a

subscription to *Reader's Digest* and son, that's enough for me. They have some real Life Lessons in there. Now, Laughter the Best Medicine, that's the best column. Always a chuckle. I could read that and drink Ovaltine all day and I'd be happy. But what I'm saying is, you could save a lot of money. Buy a nice coffin for your Dad now. Hell, I'd give you a good deal if you bought a matching set, one for Mom and one for Dad. Makes a great anniversary present for the folks."

"It'd really creep out Ashley if I showed up at her place carrying two coffins."

"Is she one of those Gothic Girls? With the dyed black hair and the black finger nails? Buy a coffin from me, paint it black, give it to her to use as a coffee table. She'd love it."

"She's nothing like that. Coffins would freak her out. She don't even, I mean. I didn't tell her I'm moving in. I'm just showing up with my back pack. I got fired, then I got evicted. Don't got no money for buying coffins, dude."

"Gonna show up just like that, eh? Well, that takes some nerve. What they used to call hutz-pah. But hey, I gotta exhibit nerve myself, knocking on doors. I read the obituaries, then I knock on widow's doors trying to sell them coffins. They need to save money, can't beat my price. How's that for nerve?"

"Yeah. That's pretty nervy. What's your name, Mister?"

"Folks call me Baldwin. Baldwin's Cut-Rate Coffins. I got business cards in the glove box, go ahead and grab one. What's your handle, young fellow?"

"Andy. I don't see no cards in here. Dude. Why you got a gun?"

"Don't touch that, son. It's in case I get robbed. There's some bad folks out here on the road. And what kinda job did you get fired from? You got any sales experience?"

"You don't got no smokes, huh, Mr. Baldwin? I'm dying for a cigarette."

"Cigarettes? With your ole man having one foot in the grave from all that smoking?"

"He's doing all right. Pops is doing all right."

"So where were you working?"

"I had a very promising career as a Sandwich Artist."

"A what?"

"Made sandwiches at Subway. They called us Sandwich Artists. Crummy job, they did me a favor firing me. Pimply-faced manager Ryan, said I was stealing food, always late, and when I did show up I was hungover. Think he was jealous cause I was banging his girlfriend."

"What'd they pay you?"

"Seven twenty-five an hour, can you believe that shit? I need a new career. Thinking of going to AC repair school, everyone needs air conditioning, right? Could make good money doing that. I need to go in a different direction, get out of the fast food field. I'm a musician, but had to hock my guitar."

"Well, Andy, I might have some ideas for an enterprising young fellow such as yourself. Maybe you can get in with me in my business."

"Selling coffins? Don't seem like there'd be much dough in that. Hey, Mr. Baldwin? You think we could stop at a Denny's? I only got two bucks. I'm jonesing for a Grand Slam. I'll pay you back when I get a gig. And maybe a pack a smokes too? I'm good for it. Just give me your address. I'll mail it to you."

"Sure. We'll stop soon. My treat. Now listen, here's my plan: I'm doing OK traveling solo. But I've been looking for a partner for a while. You could drum up business for me."

"How do you drum up business for coffins, Mr. Baldwin? Kill people?"

"Lower your voice, son. You never know if the Government's put bugs in the vehicle. There's bugs and cameras and sensors and lie detectors and whatnot everywhere. Big Brother. He's out there, I'm telling you. Now, I don't care how you get business, you just bring me customers, and I'll give you ten percent of the sales price."

"Twenty-five percent?"

"We'll see. You're a tough customer, son. I like that. Now, tell me about this girlfriend. Does she have parents, grandparents?"

"Her family's got money, but they're mad at her, I think, cause she shoots heroin."

"A junky, eh? Junkies are always dying. Well, what if she OD'd? Would they pay for her funeral, buy her a nice coffin? You know, Guilt and all that. Are they Catholic? Baptist? Pentecostal?"

"Yeah, dude. They're some kinda God-Squadders. I think they'd pay for her to have a nice coffin and funeral and shit. But if she OD'd, that'd just leave me out on the street again."

"You're not thinking ahead, young man. First you get her to talk her parents into giving her a substantial amount of money: for rehab, a new apartment, a car. She tells them she just got a new job, needs a car to get to work, needs her teeth fixed, she's pregnant and you two are getting hitched, she needs money for college, she found God, she's turning her Life around. She needs seed money to start her own business as an Avon Lady. Just have her make something up. Then when she gets the money, you two go out to dinner, celebrate. Then you get high together, see, but you fix her what they call a hot shot. I read about it in *Time Magazine*. No one'll suspect anything. Junkies are always dying."

"So she dies, I keep the money she gets from her folks. And a quarter of the coffin money."

"We'll divide up what she gets from dear old Mom and Dad. We'll see about the percentage on the coffin money. Maybe twenty, if you're good. Then we

go looking for our next customer. If things get slow, you drum up the business, while I'm back home in my workshop making pine boxes."

"Hey, I found one of your cards. Baldwin's Cut-Rate Coffins. We're Ready When You Are. Who's the We? Thought you didn't have no partner."

"We didn't see eye-to-eye. This life wasn't for him. Now you, Andy, you were made for this business, son. And whenever you go meet your maker, as they say, you'll already have a nice box ready. I'll paint it any color you want."

Story of the Month Winners

Each month we publish at least 4 stories and host a Story of the Month contest. The Story of the Month winners are chosen by the readers of Bartleby Snopes.

Laws of Motion

by Kate Crosby

If it hadn't been for the rain she would have let her children brave the night. Her black cat and her Pink Panther, her little Jack Sparrow with the patch pushed high so he could watch the world with both eyes. Two months in a new apartment and the names of the streets were promising. Redemption Drive. Grand View Ave. *An upward move*, the realtor had said, opening the door to a basement flat. *Garden level*, he'd called it, though there wasn't a flower in sight.

Outside, ghosts hovered. In a burnt out streetlight, in the exhaust of cars that sped past the complex, in the fat white bags of trash slumped beside the curb. Lately she'd had the uncanny sense that the past was not the past at all, that the children's father might barrel through the door at any moment, a barrage of words, angry as gunfire. She envisioned the perspiration on his ruddy neck, red welts in the crook of his arm, the vein in his temple, blue as a bruise.

She had left and that was something. Others she knew, in the same boat, stared dumbly at brightness of her hope. She saw the paralyzing fear in their eyes, heard it in the tenor of their skepticism. *How?* they asked. *Where? What if?* She pitied their inertia, steeled herself against their sharp-edged doubt, their hard questions. She clung to the *Why?* — the one they never asked for the answer was too obvious. She wrapped its cloak about her children, shielded them in its folds, held the corners with a tight fist.

Samuel knelt on the counter, his brow against the window as she grilled cheese sandwiches on the stove. It was Halloween and water slipped down the pane. Beads of grease leapt from the skillet with sharp pops. His sisters were half-dressed, swatting one another with

huge paws, tails tacked to their bottoms like afterthoughts. They were hot-tempered, ferocious. Twin fires fanned by the slightest breeze. *Fighters*, the doctor had said as they'd kicked their way into the world before they were due.

Samuel had none of his older sisters' mettle. He was doe-eyed, shy. Last week, while the girls were at school, she had taken him out to search for a costume. She had bundled them in sweaters and coats, layered thick scarves about their faces, armed them both against the wind.

He had chosen to be a pirate, gravitating to a cellophane package with a boy on the front. The boy wore a red bandana knotted on one side, his lips arched in an impish sneer. A cheap plastic parrot was clipped to the bag and Samuel opened this first. He curled the parrot's wire feet around his finger. On the ride home he strained against his seatbelt, the bird hopping as far as he could reach down the back of her seat.

Samuel wore the outfit now as he crouched by the sink, plastic dagger clipped to his belt, small fingers gripping the sill. Behind him, his sisters tussled on the rug with sharp feline hisses. The rain came down in heavy sheets. His white sleeves drooped like the slack sails of a small ship. She would make it up to them, she promised. She would buy them heaps of candy when the weather cleared, even more than she thought fit.

That night they stayed put in the yellow light of their new home. After dinner she dozed in bed with Samuel on her lap. She heard the distant wail of a police siren, the muffled shouts of strangers, the white noise of someone else's struggle. Down the hall her girls slept in their bedroom on a single mattress, back to back the way they'd done as

babies. Their hands were clenched, pink and black tails entwined, their fleece ears alert to danger.

Shortly before midnight, a stray bullet ripped through the kitchen wall, shot from the window of some passing car. She would not know this until the morning, for now she was dreaming, keeping watch in the nest of a giant ship. A violent sound had knocked her from her post, a deafening clap of thunder which exploded in her ear and sent her hurtling towards a sea. She believed she was drowning and woke with a gasp, felt the heavy weight of her son on her chest, his warm breath dampening her neck. Her pulse steadied as she ran her hand along the hull of his little back. She closed her eyes and matched her breath to its rise and fall.

She discovered the bullet in the early hours, before her children awoke. There were bits of plaster on the kitchen floor, a scattering of debris. Wind whistled through a hole in the wall and she felt a fierce rush of blood beneath her skin. The *What if?* beat like a tiny heart, the *Why?* not hers to wonder.

The bullet was nestled amidst a pile of scarves by the closet, glinting in the dawn like a shiny eye. She pictured its trajectory through the night, imagined it tearing through the wall and sailing across the room, a hard bright thing she might have dreamt. Retrieving it from the folds, she turned it over in her palm. It lay still and cold against her skin, so much smaller than she would have thought. Her scarf was seared. A blossom of colored threads sprouted from a dime-sized patch, the yarn frayed like a network of veins. She ran her hand across the surface and assessed the damage, a superficial wound, a hole that she could mend.

Lean In

by Carrie Cook

Mr. Oliver has a toothache. "It's a good one," he says. He does not actually mean good. Or maybe he does. Maybe he likes having a toothache. He certainly likes to tell me about it.

"Mmmm," I say. Noncommittal. If I say nothing, he'll describe its length and breadth. If I say I'm sorry he has a toothache, he will tell me about the time he went in for a filling and the dentist, a real Steve Martin type, cracked his tooth. And then he will tell me he didn't need to get that tooth filled in the first place, and dentists are all crooks. That's the problem with Mr. Oliver. You're always riding that line between too much attention and not enough. And I have eight other seniors on my MealWagon route, and it's already half past eleven.

"I got meatloaf with gravy today," I tell him. "Mashed red potatoes with little bits of skin still in it."

"Put it in the fridge," he says, mournfully. Mashed red potatoes with little bits of skin are his favorite. "My tooth," he says. "I lost a filling."

I feel the ache in my own jaw: right lower molar. I do not have time for a toothache. Two months ago Mr. Oliver told me about his late wife's chemotherapy and I puked for three days straight—Evie had to take me to the hospital for an IV. Even lost some hair. Doctor asked me what drugs I was on. When I said I wasn't on any, he told me to stop accepting drinks from strangers. A week later I got an invoice for fourteen hundred dollars, which I put through the shredder.

"Uh," says Mr. Oliver.

I press my fingers against my cheek, palm over my mouth. MealWagon frowns on us shushing the seniors. They're lonely, Marty says, so you should listen to them. But not too much. We're trying to optimize a business here.

You might say the MealWagon gig isn't for me. You'd be right. But I had to do something—unemployment isn't near enough. Rent needs paying, Evie needs tuition money, Liam needs booster shots, and Marty pays under the table.

I slide Mr. Oliver's lunch into the refrigerator, where the last three lunches sit untouched. The scent of three-day-old liver-and-onion leaks through its Saran Wrap cocoon. I clear my throat, huh-huhh. Liver and onions is Marty's idea. He thinks it's nostalgic. I think it's cheap.

Mr. Oliver says, "Will you hand me the aspirin?"

"At least you still have your teeth," I say, plucking the bottle off the shelf. I hand it to him; his papery hands brush mine. "Mr. Gibbons has to gum everything."

"I don't want them anymore," Mr. Oliver says. "Well, I don't want this one. This darn toothache—"

My tooth flares, hot and sharp. I can feel my pulse in it.

"I have to go," I say.

Mr. Oliver looks back and forth, me-front-door-me-again, like he doesn't quite understand the logistical possibilities of my leaving. Like he wants something more from me. He says, "Will you get me a glass of water?"

"Sure."

I pull a glass out of the dishrack—it's pebbly and greenish and says Coca-Cola on the side in fading letters—and fill it up with lukewarm water from the tap.

"Here you go." I set the glass on the table, by his hand. "Anything else?"

The aspirin bottle skitters out of Mr. Oliver's hands and sprays sugar-coated pills all over the table. A few tumble to the floor, dancing and spinning. I herd them into a small pile.

"Maybe you should just leave them out, Mr. Oliver. You might need them."

He nods and places two in his mouth. His hands are shaking more than usual, so I get a straw from the pantry and put it in his glass.

"MealWagon is here to help," I say.

The toothache fades the further I get from his house.

Marty wants to talk to me when I get back to the office. He says, "Come sit and chat." He always says chat, like it's something innocuous, like he doesn't spend the entire "chat" looming over you, while you nod and your eyes wander over the stacks of paper on his desk: invoices, advertisements, neon post-its with reminders written on them (Consult @ 4, TODAY I will CHALLENGE myself!!, New Menu Options).

The last time I chatted with Marty, he wrote me up for being late with Mr. Slipliki's meal. I couldn't argue with him there; I *was* late. Mrs. D'Angelo wanted to tell me about her knee surgery, which made it

hard to drive. Of course, it wasn't like I could just tell Marty that either. I'd say, well, Marty, I have this thing where I literally feel people's pain. What do you say to that? And he'd say, you're not one of those SRS people, are you? Those people are nutz.

Sympathetic Reaction Syndrome: most unprovable disease since Fibromyalgia. I'm sure you think that sounds unbelievable, too, that it's all in my head. And maybe you're right. But then again, you cringe and cross your legs when I tell you about my third-grade friend Angelo who peeled his dick like a banana falling off a chain link fence. And don't forget people who get swollen feet when their wives are pregnant. Evie's pregnancy was my nightmare; SRS started when she started puking. Eventually Evie's ailments stopped. Mine didn't.

I wonder who called this time. Probably Mrs. Gonnitt. She spends eighty percent of her life complaining to supervisors.

Marty says, "Jane is no longer with us."

"She died?" I ask.

Marty squints at me. "No," he says, "she's no longer with MealWagon."

This is just how Marty talks, like he doesn't have a grasp on idioms.

"Okay," I say.

"So I need a Team Player to take over the Office Manager Situation," he says.

Marty also talks in capital letters.

"Okay," I say. "Jane was full-time."

"I can't give you full time, but I can double your hours."

"What about a raise?"

"I just doubled your hours," he says. "Isn't that a raise?"

I imagine Marty tied to a spit with an apple crammed in his mouth, blistering and oozing, and my own skin feels tight and hot. My pores open, sprouting sweat.

Marty says, "What do you think, Liz? Are you a Team Player? Can I count on you?"

Never mind that before the recession (which Marty prefers to call the Great Reorganization) I made fifty grand a year, just enough for Evie to take a chance on me and quit her job at Head Start so she could stay home with Liam. Never mind that with that job came health insurance that actually recognized me and Evie as married, and covered her IVF (recognizing SRS was just a step too far though). Never mind that at my last job I was able to save seven grand in an emergency account (gone now). Never mind that Evie keeps telling me that we need to cut our losses and move in with her mother, a woman who once told me I should "never breed." Never mind that I've sent out one-hundred-fifty-six resumes (according to my spreadsheet), which netted three interviews, which all ended with the phrase "we'll be in touch," including one at Smelton Industries, which, to be honest, I thought I was overqualified for. So I suppose that makes me a Team Player (thanks, Great Reorganization!) for six dollars an hour, for six hours a day, for thirty-six hours a week. For Evie. For Liam.

"Okay," I say.

"You know QuickBooks, right?" Marty says.

"Yeah," I say.

Of course I know QuickBooks. I also know Oracle and Microsoft Dynamics, not that Marty gives a shit. He's too busy trying to Optimize MealWagon into the Premier SLDS (Senior Lunch Delivery Service) of the Future while also not paying his Taxes. It occurs to me that Jane probably didn't quit, that there's probably an IRS audit in his future. I'm already regretting this new position; after all, even rats know when to abandon a sinking ship.

"Alright," Marty says. "I need you to go over Jane's work in Accounts Payable and print out the check run. Have them on my desk by four-thirty, and you can get them posted tomorrow."

Marty hands me the passwords, written on a lime green Post-it note.

"Let's get to it," he says.

I get to it. I scroll through the payments that Jane set up: vehicle insurance, MealWagon truck payments, electrical, water, the landline, the billboard, food vendors, Staples, the business credit card, a mortgage (Marty's), a car payment (Marty's), a cell phone (Marty's). Marty, Marty, Marty. I check Accounts Receivable; MealWagon appears to charge Medicare ten-seventy-five a day for our one shitty meal. It occurs to me the IRS is not the only government entity that might be interested in Marty.

I add a check for \$214.82, make it out to Evie, and write *truck maintenance* in the memo line. When I hand the checks to Marty, he signs them without even looking.

I should've written it for a thousand.

When I get home, Evie says, "Seniors keeping you late again?" She says it to Liam, in her high-pitched baby voice. She says everything to Liam lately. Liam, for his part, doesn't seem to mind this dynamic—he sits on Evie's hip in one of those expensive baby slings (thanks, Evie's mom!), his chin shiny with drool, gurgling with every comment.

"I know I should've called," I say, "but I would've gotten a lecture for inappropriate phone usage." Marty pays us to Optimize Our Time (which is really his time), not run our errands. "I got promoted. Sort of."

"Promoted to what?"

I can't blame her for the skepticism. It's not like MealWagon is a hotbed of upward mobility.

"I'm the new accountant. Jane quit."

"Did the nimrod give you a raise?" Evie coos, looking at Liam.

"Nimrod," she repeats, and Liam laughs, testing out his new skill.

"He gave me a bonus," I say, but I'm shit liar and I can hear the pitch of my voice rise.

Evie gives me the look. The one where she arches her eyebrows and angles her head just slightly, the one that says she's not buying what I'm selling. At least she's looking at me now, which may or may not be an improvement.

"Fine," I say. "He gave me a bonus, but he doesn't know it." I pull the check out of my bag and show her.

"That's my name," she says.

"Well, I couldn't make it out to me."

Evie sits on the couch, Liam in her lap. He sits there like a shield, like the culmination of everything wrong with our marriage, plop, right there, personified. Evie wanted kids. I wanted Evie to be happy. And now, none of us were. Liam hiccups, and he wails, and his pain stabs me right in the gums. I rub my face and go to the freezer for one of his teething toys.

Evie smooths his hair, kisses the top of his head, and I want to curl myself under her hand.

"This isn't how I thought this would go, you know."

"Oh? So what did you think would happen when you came home with a stolen check in my name?"

Some teething medicine. One of those play tents for Liam that Evie looks at every time we're in Target, the kind that's supposed to stimulate his mind. Dinner. Maybe not at some fancy place, but it's steak-and-shrimp night at The Spot—we can split the 12 ounce. A movie from Redbox. Maybe *Lilo and Stitch* again. Evie's head in my lap, me fingering her curls as she falls asleep, like it was Before: before Liam, before SRS, before Marty and the Great Reorganization.

"Never mind."

"Liz, we can move in with my mom."

Not this again. I hand the toy, a plastic, gel-filled donut, to Liam, and he double-fists it into his mouth.

"I don't want to move in with your mom," I say. Because what does moving in with parents mean when you're thirty? It means you've

given up. Rolled over. Lost. It means you're a failure. "Besides, we can still make it. I had that interview with Smelton last week. I'm a shoe in. If I get the job—"

"*If* you get the job. *If*. What if you don't? I'm tired, Liz. I haven't been out of the house in a week because we can't afford the gas. Not to mention—I haven't been able to talk to you about anything for months. Ever since this," she gyrates her hands at me, like she's reaching for something solid just beyond her grasp, "*syndrome*, everything I say is wrong. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells all the time. Everything sets it off. You can't even help with Liam, because his crying sets it off, too."

This is, of course, all true. When I first figured I had SRS, she took to talking to me in one word sentences. How are you? Fine. What did you do today? Clean. Study. Diapers. What do you want to do? Sleep. She didn't even tell me when she went into labor. She called her mother instead.

"And now, you're stealing money in my name, and you somehow think that's a better solution than moving in with my mother. We have people, Liz. We have people who will help us."

"That help always comes with a string," I say.

"So what?" she hisses. "Everything comes with a string. You come with a string. You come with an unbelievable number of strings."

"That's not fair, Evie. I didn't ask for this shit."

"Then say you'll come with me. Say you'll live with me at Mom's."

"We don't need her help."

"I do. I can't do this on my own anymore. I need someone to be my partner." Evie walks into the bedroom and rolls out a suitcase. It's already packed, and I realize—it's Evie that has people, not me.

When was she planning on telling me?

"And here I thought that feeling other people's pain would've made you more empathetic, not less," she says. Liam clutches her with fat baby fingers. "We'll be at my Mom's."

And then she walks out the door. Suddenly it's quiet in the house, the kind of smothering silence that would be comforting on any other day.

I wish I could tell you that I did something right then: cut up Evie's favorite hippie dress, shattered her collection of ceramic goats on the floor, ate her last frozen Crunch bar. But I didn't. I don't. I leave it just as it is, in case Evie and Liam come back, in case I have people.

But I know I don't.

I tear the check into smaller and smaller bits and flush them into the garbage disposal.

Even rats know when to abandon a sinking ship.

I get into the car and drive to Mr. Oliver's house. It's the same as it ever is: a small house, a brick house with a picture window and shutters and no garage. I park on the street, same as I always do. I knock on the door and say, "MealWagon."

Mr. Oliver answers the door. He croaks, "Liz."

And I see his face is pale, tinged green, and he's still shaking. His eyes are liquid.

"What—what are you—"

"Come on, Mr. Oliver. I'm taking you to the dentist."

I guide him to my car and settle him in the passenger seat.

"My tooth," he says, and the magnitude of his toothache punches me in the jaw. I can't breathe. I can't believe Evie's gone. The hair in my ears stands on end, my eyes begin to water.

I swallow my nausea. I get into the car and start it.

I say, "MealWagon is here to help."

Larry Walters Has Flown Away

by Rachel Richardson

I was dancing along from the nook to the foyer and you put the baby down for a nap at last and you were already showing with the next one which is my fault because what we've done—what I have done to you—what you have done to me to make me want to do what it is I did to you: your eyelashes and hips and those earlobes of yours out of which studs sparkle, cubic zirconium but oh how they shone. I confess I wanted you now, now with the baby asleep and us finally alone. I had brought you this cup of coffee just as you liked it (half and half only whereas I take mine black) and set it before you as you took a moment to rest on the davenport that we'd bought at that awful estate sale—all our house a mishmash of everyone else's unneeded things. Except for the baby. That baby was ours and no one else had one like it except of course your sister but hers was not nearly as wondrous as ours because she had made hers with that beefy policeman she'd married. And here you were, so soft and sleepy against the ugly floral davenport—that davenport I was certain somebody had died on which was why it was sold to us so cheaply.

So I went to the window and looked out at our street in San Pedro with its many cars parked up and down the curb and all the brave palm trees and the fire hydrant and sidewalks where someday that napping baby would pedal a bicycle with training wheels and then without. I had once broken my arm doing such a thing but that was in Pittsburgh ages and ages ago before I met you and once you asked me as you touched the scar along my elbow how it had happened and I wanted to lie to impress you—a terrible knife fight! In a back alley! A treacherous motorcycle accident! On a bridge!—but we were already naked at this

point and in your bed in North Hollywood and I told you simply I fell off my bike as a boy. Then you got up and went to the kitchen and came back to bed with an open can of beans which you ate with a spoon right there among the sheets and pillows and duvet cover and you asked what color the cast had been and I told you green, I think.

And you said, "Darling, the blinds," and I was only briefly saddened because we had this day together and how grand it would be but you wanted to shut it out, this day in California with the sun so bright above and tomorrow on the horizon and there above the power lines a man in the sky.

I exclaimed something and you came to look and we went outside still holding our mugs and we stood on the sidewalk and cupped our hands over our brows and it was a man in a lawn chair high in the sky with balloons above him and milk jugs dangling below. It was extraordinary. But then we heard the shouting from the house next door and the buzz of a radio and our neighbor Carol—Carol with her little yappy dog and her frequent FedEx packages and her sprinkler system that always turned on at odd times—our neighbor Carol was shouting, "Larry! Larry!"

So we went over and you asked what was the matter and Carol was in hysterics but she pointed to the tanks of helium scattered around the patio and we pieced together that Larry had rigged up this lawn chair airship and taken off into the sky. Carol said he planned to simply float about and then shoot some of the enormous balloons that kept him aloft and happily drift back down but he hadn't done the math and the force in the helium thrust Larry and his lawn chair into the atmosphere where his glasses fell away. Carol demanded he come back this instant but he was drifting further and further away and we asked what could we do and she said nothing, shouting all the while into her walkie-talkie for Larry to land, dammit, land. By then you were

anxious about the sleeping baby so I went back to check on him and he was absolutely fine.

He would remain fine for the remainder of his life as he grew into a sturdy little boy who had more interest in his Atari than the bicycle we bought him but soon enough his brother came along and we would all four—mother, father and sons—go to Venice Beach and eat ice cream and look at all the punks and thugs and hippies and drag queens and jugglers and dogs on the boardwalk. The boys would inherit some ancient height and surpass us both and they would graduate and move away and find lovely people to populate their lives and they would all come back and visit and we would eventually replace that terrible davenport.

Later that night we saw Larry on the news. Larry in his lawn chair, safely returned to earth but downing a power line along the way that caused a blackout in Long Beach and therefore fined quite a bit by the federal people in charge of airspace. When the reporter asked him why he said, "A man can't just sit around," which may be true but I have sat around much in my life and never once desired to fly in a craft of my own making. I have never wanted to sail in a lawn chair into the sky. We saw Carol many years later sitting on her front steps with her graying little dog that no longer yapped and she told us that Larry had died in the forest up in the San Gabriel mountains and we said we were sorry and when you asked Carol how she told us with the shotgun he pointed at his head.

I think of Larry and I hear Carol calling him and I think if it had been me, if it had been you on the ground with our sons and me looking down from my high and fast perch as it zooms towards the clouds and the sun further away and further from your voice, calling, "Oh Larry, we love you, come down."

The Classroom

by Jesse Ofsowitz

On Monday our teacher decided, because the principal decided because the state decided, to remove all desks from the classroom and drill through the floor and plant an olive tree beneath the overhead projector. We threw the chairs out the windows, which our teacher said the principal said the state said would free us from the restrictions of old schooling processes and allow us to better focus on the project at hand: planting the olive tree.

But we couldn't plant the olive tree. It was too dangerous for us to handle the equipment, and someone's parents might sue the school; four big men came in—they were muscular and toned like Mexicans, except we didn't hire Mexicans anymore because they were illegals—and planted the tree in the center of the room below the overhead projector. The tree was only a sapling, and when the big men finished, dirt was everywhere on the floor, and our teacher said the principal said the state said we had to push the dirt into a pile around the trunk in the shape of a female breast. This was to dissuade the boys from giggling at future mentions of female anatomy. Then our teacher projected onto the wall an image of a naked female, and the boys giggled. The breast pile of dirt was good, and our teacher gave us all outstanding marks because the principal told her to give us all outstanding marks because the state....

Two weeks later the tree died. Our teacher said we watered it too often, and the principal came and said the breast-shaped pile of dirt was too flat for the tree to blossom, but our teacher said it was the perfect shaped breast-shaped pile of dirt, and she projected the image

of a naked female on the wall—the boys didn't giggle this time—and the principal nodded that the female's breasts were equal to the dirt. But the following day the principal told our teacher that the state told him that we couldn't show naked females on the wall anymore. We giggled and chopped down the tree, except we didn't chop it down because the tools were too dangerous, and three of the four big men returned to cut the tree to a stump. The fourth man was honest, and we didn't want him to tell the state that the tree-growing had failed. Our homework was to find a replacement tree before exams.

Nobody found a replacement tree, but from the breast sprouted a sapling, which we called the nipple. The sapling was white and not an olive tree, but we were all happy anyway since we would keep our outstanding marks, and that meant passing to the next level, which was to raise guinea pigs. The classroom two floors up had already raised two guinea pigs to full size and placed them into a container to produce offspring. This was after five failed guinea pigs, all of which didn't want to continue living under such conditions and jumped out the window and plopped onto the steamy blacktop parking lot. Once the two successful guinea pigs had offspring, the state would grant us enough money to build better lights for our football field.

They said it was all for the betterment of our education, as we had been falling behind the Finns on our math subject exams. Damn Finns always outscored us, and our teacher said the principal said the state decided to run things as the Finns did. They didn't sit in desks the way we used to; they went in the woods and collected flowers and played tag. But safety regulations forbade us from running through the woods and picking flowers (if anyone tripped, parents would sue the state, and the state didn't want anymore lawsuits). We planted trees instead, which was close enough to running around them.

The Finns outscored us again. Our teacher said the principal said the state didn't understand why, because we had planted a tree, shaped the dirt in the form of a breast, and stopped boys from giggling at the female body. The state had to do something to excuse losing to the Finns, so they fired our principal, but that wasn't allowed, and they fired our teacher instead. Nobody thought to hire a replacement, and we projected the naked female on the wall because we all wanted to know what her funny parts did. The boys asked the girls, but the girls didn't know, so we all looked at the little white sapling that grew out of the stump that formed the nipple of the breast-shaped pile of dirt and danced until the state hired a replacement who was trained in the manners of the Finns.

We asked the replacement about the female projection. She said it was her and took off her clothes to prove it. She asked us if we wanted to know about the male body, but we said no, and she nodded, but told us we had to anyway because the principal said the state said it was best to learn naked. Apparently the Finns were also more sexually open than us, and we had to get ahead somehow.

The sapling didn't grow, but didn't die either, and we lost to the Finns again. One boy asked the replacement why we lost again, and she said because the Finns get to run in the woods.

The boy said so why can't we go in the woods?

The replacement said it was because county regulations said it wasn't safe to go in the woods.

But it would help us beat the Finns, the boy said, and we agreed. We begged her to let us go in the woods.

She said it was fine with her, but we couldn't tell our parents if we tripped.

Everyone promised.

Our clothes we left in the lockers, and we went into the woods behind the school. The ground was combed and soft, and we ran fast and far. The replacement shouted for us to stay near, because there was wildlife in these woods, but we were already gone—we had to run farther than the Finns after all. We stayed in the woods until dark and returned to the replacement, who returned us to the classroom, where two policemen were waiting. They said it wasn't right to be out in the woods naked like that all day and that we all had to stay inside and feed our sapling.

The replacement was fired, but the state didn't issue another, and since nobody wanted to be a teacher or a replacement anymore, the principal came to our class and said, as we weren't going to beat the Finns anyway, we might as well enjoy ourselves while we still had the chance. They passed out blankets and closed the blinds and left us alone in the room to make love. At first the boys were shy—we never learned about the male body—then one girl found a projection of a naked male, and that made everything better. We all made love around the sapling on the breast-shaped pile of dirt.

This time we beat the Finns.

Goat-Hearted

by Timothy DeLizza

Zehra woke to the sound of Manny coughing in the bathroom. Ice had frosted the window completely. Snowy wind rattled the window frame. She tried to determine what time it was by the amount of sunlight.

The embers of last night's fire glowed faintly. She added fresh wood and blew gently until they came back to life. She added fresh snow to the kettle, feeling too cold and groggy to go out to the pump. She tried to let the fire warm her big toe, which had felt frozen for years. It didn't work. Breakfast was smoked salmon. She pulled the skin aside and left it for Manny, who was emerging from the toilet.

The kettle whistled and she poured hot water for each of them. He sat across from her, taking the salmon skin from her plate with his bare hands. His fingers were callused, and blackened dried blood showed through the nails. The silver in his hair matched the snow.

"You'll do the fishing," he said. "I'll do the smoking."

Zehra considered fighting the old fight. Some days she won, but he was weaker on those mornings and so had less will to fight. Fishing was easy, but tedious. Smoking the fish destroyed your lungs. Both needed to be done.

Zehra put on all of her layers slowly, grimacing as she pulled on items that had not completely dried from the day before.

She stepped outside and walked past Refugio Sur's nineteen other ice shanties to open the gate to the fishing machine yard. A voice over the loudspeaker repeated in English, Spanish and Urdu: "When equipment breaks, there will be no more parts." Flagpoles with strands of what had been flags flew. Only the Pakistani flag was still recognizable, its white sickle moon faded and smoke-stained on its dark green field.

The recording was put in place back when the administrators feared that careless operation of the fishing machines would create food insecurity. In fact, while hundreds of fishing machines had once operated on the planet, a handful was now sufficient to supply the few remaining towns. Zehra and Manny were the only people living in the ice-fishing outpost, but they hadn't been able to figure out a way to turn the speaker off. Zehra still noticed the recording first thing each morning, but it quickly blended into the sounds of the wind.

Zehra walked past Refugio Sur's remaining fishing machines. *The Juggernaut* earned its name when it broke through the dirty snow near Glacier Sur. *Aubrey* had two prominent silhouettes of Audrey Hepburn on each side.

Finally she reached *Buzdil*, which was Urdu for "goat-hearted" and "cowardly." *Buzdil* retracted its nets and gears at the slightest resistance, whether brushing against Copper River debris or salt-sharks. *Buzdil* stuck as a name not just because of its sensitivity, but for the sounds the machine made when the rusted parts creaked and returned to its shell. It sounded like a poorly-tuned version of what an organist might play in a silent movie as the troops retreated: tones of disorganization and dark comedy. It sounded like loss.

Like all of the fishing machines, *Buzdil* resembled a spider with giant augers for feet. These legs hovered in the air, inert, while the machine

rolled across the ice using the tank-like chained treads on its belly. Zehra sat in the cockpit on the body. The vibrations of the movement hurt her back. The cockpit's original cushioning had worn away long before she ever used it and the blankets she brought provided little protection against the seat's metal.

Zehra drove *Buzdil* out to find the day's spot. Recent holes marked the ice like a pox in uneven stages of healing. The prior day's holes would be frozen over by now, and at any rate, new locations were required because salt-sharks would pick up on any fishing pattern and charge the nets. The salt-sharks were so intelligent that when the original settlers attempted to seed modified salmon from Earth into the subglacial ocean, the salt-sharks treated the seed locations like buffets. The first few batches failed until the entry points were randomized.

When the vehicle stopped, the augers drilled eight sizable holes in the ice, then injected mechanized nets with a phtww sound as a cannon shot one at a time into each hole. The sound always gave Zehra a secret satisfaction. As the whole process was automated, Zehra only needed to decide on a location, watch the catch count, and sometimes recall the nets if a snowstorm became too heavy, or if the holes needed to be re-drilled because they started to ice over. The main skill was a high tolerance for cold.

She looked out at the luminescent blue glow of the Glacier Sur in the far distance and hoped she'd see some of the peaks avalanche. When nothing changed, she wondered if she could convince Manny to fiddle for a while in the evening while she read. When there were more fishing families living in the outpost, they used to gather in the cantina most nights. Now the only reliable time Manny played was when the fishmongers visited to collect the catch and Manny wanted to make sure they were in a festive and generous mood. For all the mockery the name implied, Zehra preferred *Buzdil*. Some other early operators had

given up on it in frustration, but she felt its hair-trigger cautiousness was the reason it still worked. She also hated how the most machines frequently caught salt-sharks needlessly. The creature's briny-textured skin reminded Zehra more of underwater elephants than sharks. They had large, toothless, impractical-looking snouts they used to feed by sucking in small fish that hid in the many icy crevices under the ice. The salt-sharks also had the kind intelligent eyes of elephants, and when they squirmed in the net she saw a silent pleading for a merciful killing. She always obliged quickly because they were too smart and too strong to toss back into the water safely. The fishing machines were blunt instruments that could only catch, not release.

Around midday, she sorted through the catch bin with her gloves, sifting through bits of bluish ice and seaweed for a pregnant fish. When she found one, she cut its belly open and ate the roe while the mother's tail shook, still trying to escape. Zehra considered, not for the first time, that this world was inhospitable to mothers of any kind. After she ate some salmon flesh and the fish stopped shaking, Zehra threw the remains of the no-longer-pregnant fish back into the catch bin and wiped the blood off her gloves as best she could.

She took out her book to read. Their books didn't smell like books any longer. They smelled of smoke and had spots of blood and scale on them. Manny preferred books about earth simply because the character's unaware assumption that warmth was everywhere made him feel warm. She preferred books about machines and engineering—she even once read *Buzdil's* grossly outdated instruction manual and was amused to learn its warranty had expired before she was born. In addition, Zehra was obsessed with salmon and salt-sharks—their lifecycle, salmon's history of being selected as the fish to be introduced and modified to survive to the new planet. Salmon were semelparous fish, meaning they gave birth only once, then died. Salt sharks live-birthed children that they would need to look after and protect the

bodies of for years. She considered their relative braveness and decided, in the end, that life cycles were life cycles.

When she came back to the equipment yard with the catch in *Buzdil's* belly, she looked around trying to understand what was different. She still asked herself this as the catch unloaded into the locker next to the smoker.

As she approached her shanty she heard Manny playing the fiddle and smiled.

"What's different?" she asked, opening the door while removing her wet overcoat.

"The loudspeaker's silent," Manny said. He lowered his fiddle and the bowstring. "The boy found a way to turn it off. He found the right cord to cut."

A young woman and a young man sat on their couch. They were drinking hot water and holding hands. Three empty plates of winter squash soup were in front of them. Their skin was chapped and rough from exposure to the high wind and cold. Their socks hung by the fire and his blistered feet relaxed on the table. The man leaned over, whispering to the woman, who giggled.

"Who are they?"

"Qasim. And um—"

"Mariposa," Mariposa said.

"Mariposa," Manny repeated.

"Qasim. Mariposa," Zehra said. "I'm Zehra. Why are you here?"

"Zehra," Manny said. "They want to apprentice."

"Ridiculous."

"Zehra, I want to show you, in the other room. Keep your voice down."

Zehra pulled her husband out of earshot of the couple. "Look at them. They barely made it here. And you know you can't trust them, I don't care who they say they are. They need to be gone as soon it's safe outside. Daylight. First thing. And don't go giving them— don't give them much."

"Zehra," Manny said. "Listen to them."

"No. You listen. You remember last year."

"Keep your voice down, please," Manny said softly. "That boy was different."

"No, you listen," she repeated. "You're soft."

A wail came from the next room. Zehra gripped Manny's arm so that her nails dug into him. She gave him and then the couple a horrified look. "You brought a baby?"

The young couple stood. "We're sorry, we'll get her." Mariposa went to the next room while Qasim stood between Zehra and the room with the child, as though Zehra might hurt her.

"Zehra!" He turned to Mariposa. "Forgive her."

She looked at the couple again, her mind recalculating their threat level. She turned away, so as not to reveal anything else. "I'm sorry," Zehra said.

Mariposa came out with the child. "Her name's Nazish, after her grandmother," Mariposa said over the baby's cries.

"Is she okay?" Zehra asked. Nazish's lips were badly chapped, but her cheeks were rosy through her olive complexion. "I have some salmon fat that might help with her lips."

"She's fine. I try to feed her and then I check her diaper and then I give up. She doesn't know why she's crying."

"We're big admirers of yours," Qasim said. "Staying here. Monitoring the catch. Some people in the villages say we should give up on the machines and catch things using primitive tools we can make with our hands. But I think—"

"Weren't you scared? When you had her? That she would be blind or those things you hear about deformities. To bring her into . . ." Zehra said. She pointed out the window. "What if one of you got injured during the trip? What if Nazish got sick? What if—"

"People from your generation always talk about how things were so much better. I just remember this and it seems good enough. Normal enough. Here."

Unasked, Nazish, now quiet, was placed into Zehra's hands. Nazish felt real and soft Zehra's arms. Something instinctual beat like a bass drum in Zehra's heart.

* * *

"Oh are they already trying for another on our couch?" Zehra said as she slipped into the covers. "I hope they remember to keep the fire going so I finally can wear something dry."

"We'll put them in another shanty tomorrow," Manny said. "One out of earshot."

"I can't believe they had a child. And brought her here."

"It could work. Maybe. We'd be able to switch shifts. Or double production."

The sounds in the other room died off abruptly.

"Dry wood, fast fire," Manny said.

Zehra smacked his shoulder.

"What? They probably didn't have many chances during the trip here. They're young."

Zehra smacked his shoulder again then leaned her head against it.

Manny turned away as he did when he was ready to sleep. She watched the moon, then his chest moving up and down. She let her arm hover over his shoulder. The room had already become cold from the night and the increasing coldness in her fingers gave her the boldness to shake him. "Manny. Manny."

"I'm still awake."

"Manny, listen, maybe we learned too much from *Buzdil* about how to survive. We became too cautious. You're right, now that they're here, maybe we can switch shifts. If there's going to be a baby, then one of us needs to look after her anyway. Manny, if they stay—that thing we wanted—what about that?"

Manny turned and looked at her for a time, then swallowed and closed his eyes. "Can you still?" he asked. "It might be too late."

"When I was younger I'd bleed for five days a month. Now it's two or three. If it's not soon, maybe not. So it would need to be soon. We'll see if they stay. If they stay a few months that means they'll maybe stay a long time."

"Maybe. Maybe we'll know in less time even. When they've been an hour in the smokehouse tomorrow. Hell, if they haven't stolen everything when we wake up in the morning, that'll be proof enough of something."

"I can't believe they climbed all the way up here. With a baby."

"I can't believe the boy found a way to turn off that damn loudspeaker." Manny sighed and the sigh turned into a cough. "We can try if you want to. We can try."

What Counts

by Kate Wisel

I have a change jar. Washed out salsa jar on my bookshelf. Pennies are there, dirty dimes, backs of my earrings, quarters for the train if I'm desperate. I'm sifting through the change on the hardwood when Mickey comes in. He says, "let's get everything."

In the supermarket he steers with his backwards hat and the imprint of his wallet in his pocket. "You like these?" he asks then tosses chips in the cart. We stride down the aisle, kissing, but with his ten million arms whirling in more, like a fan in motion so I barely notice.

Later in bed, I try to talk to him about taxes. They take out a little each month. But because his job is real, a little is a lot. "But isn't it relative" I say, "if everyone has to pay?" I can tell he's still thinking about it like a pie chart—what's missing which reminds him to surprise me with some kind of next-level dessert soon.

But sometimes I have to admit: he looks good, with his fresh cut and his aviators and his Burt's Bee's lips. No argument here. I'm waiting for him to come out of the dressing room in his tangerine pants. He looks so happy. Like there's a monkey on his shoulder. I can see him in his swivel chair. "How do you pronounce BVLGARI?" I ask, fingering the glass over the glasses. Mickey says, "you don't."

I don't get it. It's like we're a special effect. I don't know why he took us here. The lighting is low. I'm checking my savings under the table and it's not saving anybody. Mickey, like a tug on the wrist, a fast grab, says, "we're on vacation." I say, "no, we're not."

We're confusing the waitress: "I'm great with water!" I say. Mickey, through teeth, says, "just get the drink."

I don't get it but I do.

On our walk home I say, "I'm picking up lucky pennies to embarrass you."

"Mickey look, another one! One more." I want to take off my shoe, the sharp heel, and drive it between his eyes.

Instead I close my fist around the coins. Every second counts.

Everything is Peaceful Here Except for Missing You

by Jake Weber

He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

-Matthew 5:45

After hello, there are five phrases in Tigrinya you must repeat at least several times each in every phone call. None means anything, which is why they are so important to say over and over. Mama has hit them all at least twice. She's surprisingly adept at using Skype for a woman who never had a phone growing up or a computer until eight years ago.

How are you? Is everything peaceful? How is your health? How about your family? We are all fine here, except for missing you.

We use them back and forth, trying to keep them going like tennis students with a rally. The exact wording changes here and there:

"How are you?" she asks.

"I am fine," I say, then ask her back, "How is your health?"

"It's fine," she answers, then, "How about your family?"

"We are all fine, except for missing you."

Sometimes, we don't even answer the questions; we just answer back with another question. These are the volleys at the net at point-blank range:

"How is your health?"

"How is your health?"

"How about your family, are they healthy?"

"Is everything peaceful?"

"We are all fine here, except for missing you."

This is expected for us Eritreans; it's how the game is played. I've done it my whole life. It is as natural to me as it is for Hae-lim to twist and untwist her hair around a silver chopstick while she talks to her mother on her phone, pretending the whole time she doesn't live with a black man from Africa or have a child that is ours growing inside her. But I never even noticed this custom of ours until I heard Mohamed Idris speak with his mother.

A year ago, I was looking for a part-time job to go with the one I already have at my uncle's parking garage. A second cousin was stranded in Sudan when the guy smuggling him into Libya was arrested. It didn't matter that I'm still in college, or that I had never met this distant cousin. When a family member needs help in an Eritrean family, everybody helps. So I answered an ad for a Tigrinya speaker I saw on Craigslist that paid thirty-five dollars an hour.

The job turned out to be a contractor gig translating intercepted phone calls for the Bureau of Records. They were looking to nab Mohamed, an ISIS recruiter who wandered mosques, convincing young men their parents lacked jobs because they had disobeyed the Quran. He spoke Arabic, of course, but his mother was Eritrean, so with her it was all in Tigrinya. He kept his cards close to his chest, as they say, but they were hoping he was more open with dear old mom.

Mama and I finally get past introductions on the phone, and we settle into the real talk. She tells me that Cousin Biniam is doing well now, that he made it to Libya. He is waiting to find a boat to take him to Italy and needs our help to pay for it. He was working at an oil refinery near Tripoli, but then the revolution happened, and word got out that Gaddafi had hired an African army to protect him, so it wasn't safe for Eritreans to be on the street. There is nothing to say after that, so she asks, "Is everything peaceful?"

Mohamed didn't disappoint with his mother. They sounded so much like my mom and me, dragging out the greetings in Tigrinya. Hae-lim will one day speak to our child on the phone, maybe in Korean, maybe English. Nobody in our house will speak Tigrinya—that much I know. Mohamed's mother called him *b'ruh wedey*, my blessed boy.

When the Bureau of Records did a background check on me, they didn't like that my mother still lives in Saudi Arabia. But my English was the best of anyone who applied, so they were stuck with me. We Tigrayans make a living all around the world from people who aren't crazy about us. My mother and sister make a good living cleaning toilets in Saudi Arabia for people who think of them as dogs.

When Mohamed was about to travel somewhere, he always let his mom know. She worried.

How are you all? We are fine, except for missing you. How is your health? How about the family? They are fine, except for missing you. I will be gone next week for a few days. I am meeting some people in Dubai. I will call you when I get back. Everything is peaceful.

One day, my cousin Biniam drowned with 318 other migrants in the Mediterranean Sea when their dinghy faltered fifty miles from shore. A week later, Mohamed went on a trip and did not call his mother

again. My bosses at the Bureau of Records did not tell me what happened to him, but they thanked me for the work I did and sent me my last check. Biniam's mother and Mohamed's mother will tell someone else that everything is peaceful, their health is very good, there are no problems, except Mohamed and Biniam are gone.

My mother says I am a blessed and bright son. She tells me to be healthy, to be at peace. Hae-lim is a blessed and bright girl. May she be healthy; may she be at peace.

My mother and I always end our phone calls in Italian. We say *ciao*, one of the words the colonists left us along with the art deco government buildings. I was sixteen before I knew this word wasn't ours.

Blue Moon Motel

by Caitlyn Leonard

The A/C unit in the lobby broke a month ago. Our oversized posters—models with nineties hair, eating bagels and carrying briefcases on white backgrounds—have rippled under their frames. I open the window, but my manager, Mr. Stevens, objects during night shift for security reasons. "What if a burglar climbs through there and stabs you?" he says.

I'm watching the double doors and wondering if I'd know a hooker when I saw one when Joe walks in from the elevator. His hair is wet. "Hey, Katherine," he says. I guess he sounds like Valdosta. Deep and flat.

"Hi," I say.

Joe leans against the desk. The particle board creaks. I've never seen his hair wet before. It's gold-green like lake water. He's wearing a white t-shirt that sticks to his shoulders and a wristwatch with a wet fabric band. He takes a pen from the plastic cup and chews on it like you do when you realize you're holding a pen. "I called about an hour ago. Miranda picked up. There weren't enough towels in the bathroom. I went ahead and took a shower because I thought they'd be in the hallway."

"I'm sorry," I say, trying not to swallow all this spit because it'll make a sound.

"I really don't give a shit," he says.

The skin under his eyes looks like half of a pink pansy. I want to touch it with my thumb. "Rockaria!" starts playing on the radio behind me, a microwaved Chuck Berry progression.

Joe steps away from the desk to look down at his shoes. "Damn heat wave followed me from St. Louis." He drops the pen back in the cup.

I want to ask him what Georgia's like. I've seen a travel book with Spanish moss hanging from trees, spongy and occult. Looping fountains lit by rainbow bulbs. "Where are you going?"

"Salina." Joe's territory circuit sends him through here once a month.

"I've got a cousin there," I say. "How many towels do you want?" I can give him a few dozen. He's our only room tonight.

"One," he says. "For my hair."

Our laundry room is stacked with cheap linens, folded damp and dried into each other. The air is salty with powder detergent.

Joe squeezes his hair through the towel so it will dry wavy. Maybe he's vain about it. "You got something to do in here?" he asks. "Read?"

"It's not bad," I say. "There's this art I can just look at whenever."

"See, that one gets me," he says. The elevator door opens and closes. "Where'd that son-of-a-bitch get a bagel? You don't even have coffee and you're advertising bagels."

"It's ballsy." I should have said 'audacious'. I've never even said 'ballsy' before. I think I gave it a soft 's'.

Joe hits the elevator button again. "I remember these shifts," he says. His face warms. "Way too many seconds." The door opens and he gets on. "Take care."

He gets room 207 and leaves packs of Camel Blues. Gas-station egg salad sandwiches. And he read *The Three Musketeers* in the bathroom once. He left it on the sink, parted between pages fourteen and fifteen in a splash of water.

I trade places with Jeremy at 3 and walk out to my car parked next to the sign. It flickers, from black sky to a giant crescent moon with a yellow, soggy-looking face. It must be awful to drive past that on the highway. Suddenly you're headed to space in a French silent movie with no rules.

In my bed, I listen to 105's television. Someone coughs like he's in my closet. In the hallway, we all look down like we've walked in on each other changing clothes.

* * *

Mom calls the next day and asks when Andrew and I can come by for dinner. That's always funny because it's a rural house built when people were shorter, she told me a year ago. There isn't room for everyone.

I tell her it's hard because I work mostly nights now.

"That can't be healthy."

I wonder if people like nurses wouldn't know what's healthy.

"That's martyrdom and it's completely different. Why don't we plan this, seriously? Dan makes this great lamb rogan josh. Or pork loin. Whatever you like. He makes his own mayonnaise."

I suggest a Friday I'm already scheduled. And say hey—before she hangs up—does she remember those bad days, when we'd take the Del Sol out on the highway? And I'd beg her to slow down in case a lizard ran out onto the road?

Maybe I just saw that on TV, with better-dressed people. Before she says anything, I end the call.

* * *

Andrew meets me at the restaurant with plastic-veined ivy. We kiss, spitlessly. He surprises me with his new glasses and breaking up with me.

"It was weird, right?" he says. "Five months and nothing ever moved. My grandma has these desert plants that you can forget to water and it doesn't matter. Like that. And I'm sorry, you know I'm not just typical, but five months."

I remind him that we did sleep together.

"In the first few weeks. That's worse than if we hadn't. You don't get that. It's—look, I'm gonna be honest with you, okay? We probably weren't going to get married but I liked the hell out of you at first. And now I can't remember—I guess I thought you'd be funny? That you might be funny?"

Our entrees arrive.

It probably didn't help that I was in love with someone else.

"What?" Andrew salts his pasta before tasting it. "How would anybody've known that?"

* * *

My plastic bags catch in 207's door.

I set three packs of Camel Blues on the nightstand. First back-to-back. Then in a triangle. Then in a pile, like 'just some casual cigarettes for you'.

The mini-fridge isn't cold, so I go down the hallway and chip ice into the bucket with the scoop. Egg salad sandwiches go inside.

The Three Musketeers, pages warped and stiff. I stand it next to the lamp on the desk. I read up to page 15 last night. "How'd you stop there?" I'll ask him.

I put twelve extra towels in the bathroom. There's no significance to the number; I was going for opulence. They spill onto the floor.

A bagel on the nightstand.

He might check his closet first. Looking at it now, I see how this could be unnerving. But once he sees the bagel, he'll come down to the lobby and say, "At least the guy on the poster got cream cheese," and I'll say something funny. Or maybe he'll just come down and sit on the bench no one ever sits on. "Am I an idiot," he'll say. "I had no idea."

My stomach is inflated and sloshy, night-after-a-carnival sick. I check the lamps for him and start touching other dumb things, like the headboard and the window unit. Breathing in sips.

I lock the door behind me and go back down to the lobby.

* * *

It's a busy evening. Five rooms sold, couples on their way to her mother's in Topeka and where's the pool? Mr. Stevens is here all night. My hair sticks to my forehead.

Joe checks in at 10:30, neck blotchy from shaving. "We've got valet service now," I say.

Joe looks at Mr. Stevens and says, "Is that right?"

Mr. Stevens laughs like he's only heard someone do it once or twice. "If she wants to carry your bag, she can."

"I don't have any cash," Joe says.

"Accepting tips is against company policy," I say. My underarms are prickling.

Joe signs the paper and slides it over to me.

"Well," I say, "you're set. With towels, I promise."

Joe picks up his bag and taps the desk twice. "Night, Katherine."

"Good night," says Mr. Stevens.

Joe gets on the elevator. Mr. Stevens turns on the radio and sits in the other chair. He opens a yellow folder and takes out an inch of paper. Five minutes pass. I feel a little manic. "How's Casey?" I ask.

He looks over like I was never supposed to know about his daughter, even though he's the one who told me about her. "She's in fourth grade."

"Wow. Back in my day, we..." I have no idea where that was going.

"You could check on the laundry," says Mr. Stevens.

I do. It's behaving.

"Sweet Emotion" into "You Shook Me All Night Long" into "More Than A Feeling" into "Hey, fans, I don't know whether you're rockin' or rollin' on this steamy Wednesday night, but I wanna shout-out to my favorite pizza joint—Mario Brothers! Open until 2—that's AM, people—with their famous triple-mushroom slice and four dipping sauces..."

I fold towels, cross-legged on the floor. The last one I drape over my head, recycling warm-white breath. "Mr. Stevens?" I call from the laundry room.

"Yeah?"

I join him at the desk.

At three, I trade places with Kevin and walk out to my car parked next to the sign. All the rooms are dark. To my left is the highway. I reach my mother's voicemail. "Hey, just confirming Friday. You should still call back, though. I'm thinking about laying out tomorrow, just on top of my car, and I can't remember the stuff we'd use. If it was Coppertone or what? Yeah. I think I'll do that. I need to kill an hour."

The air is a slow boil; I'm softening. I'm leaking outward into the night. Then the crescent moon flashes on, and I'm surprised by my own hands.

Orientation

by David Hammond

"**E**xcuse me, sir."

"Yes?"

"This is going to sound strange, but what year is this?"

"Not at all, it's 2917. October 6th."

"2917? But..."

"No, no, don't tell me. Let me guess. You are from 2200, thereabouts?"

"... No ... I'm from 2016 ... but ..."

"2016?! No!"

"Yes..."

"But time travel wasn't invented until 2122. By Wilhelm Nguyen. Everybody knows *that!*"

"What? *I* invented time travel! I just conducted my first successful test ... I think ..."

"Really? Well that *is* very interesting."

"Only I overshot my mark. 2917 you say?"

"Indeed."

"But it looks just like 2016! You're pulling my leg."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it can't be 2719..."

"2917"

"... whatever, 2917 because you're dressed just like someone in 2016. The buildings are all 2016 buildings, the cars ..."

"Oh! Oh my, that's right, you don't know about the reality distortion field!"

"Reality distort...?"

"They call it 'reality enhancement' of course."

"Who put you up to this? Jerry?"

"My dear, poor man! I am not in league with Jerry, whoever that is. It's reality enhancement! It's a field that only shows us things not likely to shock us! To keep us on an even keel, you know. If you saw the real 2917 ... I shudder to think!"

"But ..."

"This is a lot to take in, I know. But look, pay attention, and you'll notice things change a little."

"Oh, wow."

"Yes, you see, things move a little closer to reality as you become more equipped to deal with them."

"You were wearing jeans at first, but now ... that's so strange."

"Yes, strange, but not too strange. That's the point of reality enhancement. For instance, when I first saw you you looked like someone from 2200 because I couldn't conceive of meeting someone from 2016."

"And now?"

"Not that much different, actually, but ... 2016. That is remarkable! A pre-Nguyen time traveler! What year were you aiming for, by the way?"

"2017, actually."

"Oh, my! Ha ha! Sorry to laugh. Only 900 years off! But wait, now I remember something else from history class. Nguyen was the first to successfully *go back* in time, that was his real innovation."

"Go back?"

"Yes. That's the tricky part, isn't it? Did you work that part out?"

"Theoretically, yes. I was focusing initially on going forward. The math was simpler."

"Oh, yes, yes, going back was the tricky part, as I understand it ..."

"But it's solved now? You can go back in time?"

"Ha! Do I look like I'm made of money? Damned expensive. But yeah, if you've got the cash. Going forward is more reasonable. Last year I skipped my mother-in-law's visit. A week's pay but well worth it."

"How much to, say, go back to 2016?"

"Oh, 2016, now that's another story. You can't go back that far even if you're the prince of Massachusetts."

"Prince of...? Nevermind. Why can't I go back to 2016?"

"Haven't you been paying attention? The earliest you can go back is 2122, because that's when Nguyen created the first temporal anchor."

"Jesus!"

"But that's like five million kroner ... and you need to reserve a year in advance ... at least."

"Jesus!"

"Sorry to break it to you ... But 2917's not so bad. We have sex pills. We have snarl-breakers. We have reality enhancement. Tell me reality enhancement isn't really cool?"

"It's ... it's amazing actually."

"There you are!"

"But what if you want to see the world as it is?"

"Come again?"

"I mean, see things just with your own senses? Is this reality enhancement thing everywhere?"

"99% coverage in North America, I think they said. The spots that aren't covered are really *really* unpleasant, as I understand it."

"But ..."

"Oh, they have de-enhancement goggles. You need a license though, very hard to get. Ungainly things, actually. I don't recommend them."

"But what *would* I see? What does 2917 actually look like?"

"It looks like what you want it to look like! That's the point!"

"I *want* it to look the way it *is*!"

"Well, now we're talking in circles, aren't we?"

"I'm a scientist, for god's sake!"

"No need to get upset! Look, I wore the goggles once. It was for some sort of emergency preparedness drill back in school. It was an experience I hope to never repeat."

"And what did you see?"

"Well, a lot of things were just the same, but my best friend, who was next in line for the goggles, was like 6 inches taller than me. I've always been so sensitive about my height. I didn't like that. And the teacher ... you're not going to believe me ..."

"What? Go on..."

"My teacher was an orangutan!"

"What?!"

"Yes! I tell you I tore those goggles right off!"

"Wait, now you're *really* pulling my leg."

"I am 100% deadly serious."

"Wow."

"Oh, and there was something else I only realized when I thought about it later."

"Uh huh?"

"There were no trees out the window. Our school was surrounded by trees, but they were gone. Very strange."

"Strange indeed. What *was* out the window?"

"I didn't get a good look. So! Anyway! I've gotten so wrapped up in our interesting conversation that I almost forgot about my appointment!"

"Oh, okay, sorry to have ..."

"And you have an appointment at the registration office! Just on the corner there."

"I need to register? For what?"

"Within an hour of arrival. Very important! You don't want them to catch you unregistered."

"The police?"

"Call them what you like. We must keep in touch! I would like to hear more about 2016!"

"But how will we contact each other?"

"Down on the corner. Blue awning. Can't miss it!"

"The registration office?"

"Precisely. Register, and *I* will contact *you*."

"But I haven't even told you my name."

"You've told me enough, Mr. 2016!"

"Wait, what if I don't register? What if I get back in my time machine ..."

"Ah! That would be another way, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"Another way to see the real 2917. Operating an unauthorized time machine. No reality enhancement in prison. Ha ha!"

"Well, shit. Thanks for all your help. I guess."

"Hey, don't look so glum! Here, have a snarl-breaker."

Columbia Market

by Paul Beckman

I stood next to Burt, his Old Spice scent filling my nostrils as I watched him saw two steaks coated with mold and then had me bring the rest of the beef back into the cooler and put it on a hook. It was a heavy load for a thirteen year old kid. Once back out he was scraping the mold off the steaks into the barrel filled with fat that would be going to the fat renderer on Friday.

"Nothing is as tender as these steaks will be," he said. "Maybe I'll call you upstairs and let you taste a piece."

He told me to scrub the block. I held the wood brush with the solid metal teeth and pushed back and forth until there was no more sign of blood or meat on the butcher block which was worn down in the middle from years of metal brush cleaning.

Burt and Betty had an apartment in the back and the kitchen overlooked the entrance and a good part of the narrow store.

"Bring me up garlic and a small onion," he yelled down and I did and saw that the table was set for two with nice China and two glasses of white wine. The steaks were in a fry pan on the gas range and Burt said, "All you need to cook these perfect is salt on the pan bottom, and then top it off with butter, grilled onions and garlic. Smells incredible, doesn't it?"

I heard the bell and went down to the store and sold a loaf of Wonder bread, a pack of Pall Malls and the lady wanted two pork chops. I went into the cooler took out the rack and sliced two down to the bone and

then with the cleaver chopped through for two one inch thick chops and weighed them atop a piece of butcher paper. She watched to see that I didn't have my thumb on the scale and I didn't—I had it on the draped butcher paper adding about twenty five cents to her chops. She added a can of green beans to her order and I added it up on her paper bag and then wrote it on her running tab.

She left and I returned the rack to the cooler, scrubbed the butcher block down again and went out from behind the counter where Burt and Betty could see me and straightened some cans and then began sweeping the floor.

"Reuven, come up here before the steak is all gone."

I didn't want their lousy steak but I was hungry and weak-willed so I climbed the stairs to their apartment and Burt cut off a nickel sized piece of steak and said, "Try a piece of the best." I chewed it and made the right mm mmm sounds and wanted to run down and make myself a bologna sandwich I was so hungry. "Next time I'll cut a bigger piece so you can have more," he said.

The phone rang and Betty got up to take the call and I went back downstairs trying to figure out what I could steal and get away with when Betty called me back. "That was your mother—she wants you to bring three hot dogs and a can of vegetarian beans home for supper tonight."

I only lived around the corner in the projects and we ate mostly casseroles because that's what my mother could afford supporting three boys. I weighed the hot dogs and put their exact weight and cost along with the beans on my mother's tab.

I loaded the garbage can of fat back into the cooler after reaching up and taking the fat from the corner of the chopped meat tray. We always added some extra fat to the chuck steak when someone wanted hamburger. I swept behind the counter and Burt and Betty came down. Burt checked my mother's bag and her tab and Betty gave me a hug and told me to go home to my family. She thought she was making me feel cared for with the hug but I knew she was really frisking me—I could see it in her eyes as she approached me each evening before I left work.

Staff Selections

The following stories were selected by the editors. These stories represent some of our favorite and most memorable pieces. Each staff member went through the archives and selected his or her all-time favorite story for this final issue.

Koala Tide

by Sarah Rose Etter

Selected by Nathaniel Tower. "This was one of our very early stories, but it has always stuck with me. It was one of the first we accepted that didn't feel like a 'traditional' tale, and I believe this piece was pivotal in shaping the aesthetic of Bartleby Snopes"

On the first day of our vacation, I heard about the Koala Tide.

The first time I heard the words, I knew I shouldn't be listening. But I was. The sun was very big and very hot that day. I was sitting a few feet away from the beach blanket, on the beach in Florida, shoving heaps of sand into a pile to make a castle. I was wearing my orange bathing suit. It was not my favorite bathing suit.

"The Koala Tide," said my father's friend Fred, "can lay waste to a man's vacation."

I looked over at the beach chairs they were sitting on. It was so sunny that it hurt my eyes to look. The sky was very blue.

Fred wore blue swim trunks and had a very hairy chest. He was holding a beer. I hated Fred.

My father wore red swim trunks and was very tan. He was also holding a beer. I loved my father.

"Shut up, Fred," my father said. "The kid can hear you."

"Calm down," Fred said. "She doesn't know what we're talking about. I'm just telling you, in two days, it'll be here. You should keep her off of the beach on the third day. It's for her own good."

I stopped looking at them and continued building my sand castle, digging moats. But the words were already stuck in my head: The Koala Tide. I thought about the words. I wanted to say them out loud but did not.

With my hands still in the sand, I began imagining it: Rows and rows of koalas swimming to the shore, climbing out of the ocean with wet fur as they made their way onto the sand. I pictured the koalas lying on the beach and eating lunches. Koalas on vacation.

I walked over and sat down on the beach blanket. My father was reading a book.

"Dad," I said.

"Yes?"

"How many koalas will come?"

He looked up from his book.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "It's nothing real."

"Then why did Fred..."

"Fred's batshit crazy, sweetie," he said. He was already reading again.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the koalas. I could not wait for them to come. There were already pelicans and seagulls all over the beach,

pecking at the grains of sand. They were nice. But the koalas seemed much better.

On the second day of our vacation, I swam in the ocean with my older brother. He was in charge. He wore yellow swim trunks. He was 19 years old. I was only 7. My brother was pretty tan, but not as tan as my father. I loved my brother.

The sun was hotter that day. The sky was just as blue as before. I wore my purple bathing suit. And all over the beach and in the ocean, there were the pelicans again, even more than before. Their mouths were big and their chins hung down. My father said they saved the fish in those chins.

"The Koala Tide is coming," I told my brother. The sun was glinting off of the waves. It was almost too bright and wet to make out his face.

"The what?"

"The Koala Tide."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, I do! Fred said it was coming."

"Fred's a drunk. No such thing as a Koala Tide."

"Dad drinks beer like Fred does."

"Dad can hold his booze."

I wasn't sure what he meant, so I said nothing. Instead, I turned away from my brother and dove under the water, kicking my legs hard,

looking for fish until my lungs went tight and my head pulsed black and white. Then I came back up for air.

"You're going to feel pretty stupid when the Koala Tide gets here," I told my brother when I caught my breath.

"Yeah, you let me know as soon as the Koala Tide shows up, kiddo."

"You're going to feel pretty stupid when it comes," I told him again. "And I'm going to keep a koala. Once they get here."

"You're getting more retarded by the minute."

I looked over and watched as a pelican landed in the water a few feet away. He sat on top of the waves and moved with the ocean. His feathers looked very wet and his eyes looked very large.

"Look," I said to my brother. "Look at that pelican!"

We both looked at the pelican.

"All the pelicans," my brother said, "look very guilty."

I did not know what to say. But I felt that he was right and so I nodded.

On the third day of our vacation, I woke up buzzing. The excitement was in my veins. I hummed the words quietly, while we ate breakfast, through the eggs in my mouth, *The Koala Tide, The Koala Tide, The Koala Tide*.

"What are you mumbling about?" my mother demanded.

My mother wore a black swimsuit. She was tan like my brother. No one was as tan as my father. I didn't like my mother. She yelled the most out of everyone.

"The Koala Tide is coming today," I said.

"Who told you about that?" my mother demanded.

"I'm not telling!"

"That's just a legend," my mother said, sighing. "Don't get all excited for nothing. It's not real."

"Mom, when the koalas come, I'm gonna keep one."

My mother shook her head.

"There are no koalas coming," my mother said.

"We can keep one in the laundry room," I told her. "Nobody will ever have to know."

But I did want people to know. I especially wanted to show the koala to my friend Gretchen VonDeeseBrooke. Gretchen VonDeeseBrooke always bragged about her new green bicycle. I hated Gretchen VonDeeseBrooke.

I wanted to take Gretchen VonDeeseBrooke into the laundry room and show her the koala and then ask if she had a koala bear. I knew she did not.

"There won't be any koalas to put into the laundry room," my mother said. "None."

"Not even one?"

"I don't want to hear the word koala again!" my mother said.

She put her eyes back onto the newspaper. I chewed my eggs and hummed some more, quietly this time.

That afternoon, we were back on the beach. I was wearing my pink bathing suit. The sun was huge and hot again, the hottest of all the days. I tried to tell my brother about the Koala Tide again.

"The Koala Tide is coming. I need to know what Koalas eat," I said to my brother. "I want to feed mine when it gets here. What do Koalas eat?"

"Little girls."

"That's a lie!"

"Fine, they eat other koala bears."

"No, they don't!"

"Listen, the koalas aren't coming, kiddo. Give it up."

"Just tell me what they eat!"

"Fine! They eat plants!"

"Plants," I repeated. "Those are easy to get."

"Right, kiddo."

I had not built a sand castle since I heard about the Koala Tide. Instead, I watched the beach for the koalas. I watched the waves. I

pushed my feet deep into the sand and thought of what I might name my koala. I liked the name Benjamin.

Then a shadow blocked the sun. I looked up.

"No sand castles today?" my father asked.

"No, not today," I said.

I wanted to ask him about the koalas but I was afraid I would get in trouble. I held the question in my throat.

"Well, maybe tomorrow then."

"Yes, tomorrow. More sand castles."

"Want to get some ice cream tonight, kiddo?" he asked. "For the sunset?"

This is my father's favorite thing to do. Every night on vacation, he likes me to sit on the beach with him, our mouths full of Rum Raisin and Rocky Road, while the sky went from pink to purple to blue.

"Ok," I said.

My father turned and walked back towards the blanket.

I shook my head. I was lying about the sunset and the ice cream. I knew once the koalas came, everything would be different. I would not want to leave my koala home alone so soon. He would have to come with us, or else I would have to stay home and tend to him. My father didn't understand how difficult koala care was.

Another thought crossed my mind. Maybe I could have more than one koala. Maybe I could keep two or three. They could all live in the laundry room. I wondered how many koalas I could hold at once.

When the Koala Tide finally came, I was not the first one to see it. I had been looking down at the sand, thinking about ways to fit seven live koala bears into my suitcase when I heard the shrieks of children and birds.

"Son of a bitch!" my father yelled from the blanket.

I looked out at the waves and saw they had turned black. I squinted my eyes hard and saw that dark shapes were tumbling up onto the sand, rolling in with the tide.

"THE KOALAS," I screamed.

Then I ran.

"FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, CASSIE, DON'T!" my father bellowed.

But it was too late. I was faster than my father.

I ran, legs pounding towards the surf. I rushed towards those koalas full speed. I heard my father behind me, screaming "DON'T!" again and I ignored him. My legs pulsed harder, into the sand; my fingers were balled up, my blood pumping.

The pelicans were flying overhead, with the seagulls. Everyone was squawking above me and swooping down into the tide to greet the koalas and some people were running away from the shore while other people ran towards it. There were colorful bathing suits everywhere, the colors blurred.

As I got closer, my eyes locked onto the piles of koala fur and claws and noses and mouths. I saw the koalas rolling up onto the beach with the waves, their bodies washing into one another, their fur covered in water.

Yes, yes, yes. The koalas were here. There were so many koalas. You could never count them all, I thought.

I kept running, full speed. The closer I got, the harder I clenched my fists.

There were too many people. If everyone took one koala, I might be left with nothing. I suddenly hated the crowds of strangers in their bright bathing suits. If I did not grab as many koalas as possible, I would only have one and one wasn't enough. I pushed through all of the legs and kept running.

I stopped at the edge of the sea. Water was rushing in between the koalas and I let it run over my toes.

I looked around. There weren't as many people nearby as I thought. There was just one old man a few feet away. Lots of people were still running, probably to get their suitcases. But there were plenty of koalas here, within reach. I could have them all. The old man next to me wasn't even taking one. Our car would be filled with koalas, there would be koalas in our house, koalas everywhere.

I bent over the first koala, one lying on his side, sleeping, the waves pushing over him. I wanted him. I reached down and grabbed him with both hands, excitedly, the joy thumping in my chest against my ribs, and he was heavy, so heavy, and so wet.

I strained to lift him up to me, to pull him up from the sand but I was not strong enough. Finally I settled on sitting him up in the water so

that I could see his face. I put my knees down into the wet sand to look at him, to hug him against my chest.

The screams came out of my throat before I knew what was happening.

As I screamed, I realized that here was the koala bear's face, eyes plucked out and blood clinging to the fur, veins hanging out of the holes and resting against his cheeks.

I looked down and all around me were piles of eyeless koalas, their dead bodies rolling. All of their faces had the two deep holes, the veins bouncing against the sand as their heads hit the beach. The old man was shaking his head. I began to sob loudly. And then there was my father with his hand wrapped around my arm, yanking me away from them, away from the shore.

"Close your eyes, Cassie," my father said.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in the bedroom I shared with my brother. I lay on my stomach on my small bed and cried in the dark. I fell asleep like that until my mother came in and woke me up for dinner.

And then, there was Fred, sitting at the dinner table. We were all at the dinner table. It was my mother and my father and my brother and me and Fred. My cheeks were wet and my mouth felt numb.

Fred was drinking beer again. My father was, too. I could not eat my hamburger. I could only think about those eyeless holes and weep quietly.

"Cassie," my mother said. "Control yourself at the dinner table."

"The..." I sobbed quietly back, "koala was..."

"I told you I didn't want to hear the word koala again, goddammit!" my mother snapped.

I looked down at my plate. Fred was not bothered.

Through a thick mouthful of hamburger, he said, "Warned you about those damned koalas, didn't I?" to my father. He said this over my head, as if I were not there, at the table. He said it as if I were not still sobbing, much louder now, my whole body shaking from the wailing sound that rose up out of me.

My Yellow Cup with the Tiger On

by Scott McClelland

My name is Allison. But I'm called Allie. I cut grass. My father taught me how to cut grass. He said you have to cut grass in straight lines. He said if the lines aren't straight it won't look nice. He said I love you Allie. He said I love you Allie from a white bed in a purple room. He said I love you Allie where he got a shot with a silver needle that made him not hurt so much. He said do you understand that I love you Allie? And I said yeah. He said after I'm gone you'll live at Grammy with the red car's house. He said Allie do you understand that I won't be here anymore? And I said yeah.

Today I'm cutting grass at the brown house across the street and the house next to the brown house where the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses lives. I get five dollars to cut grass. Today I get five dollars from the lady in the brown house and five dollars from the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses. Grammy with the red car keeps my money for me. She buys me my black cookies with white stuff in the middle. She buys me my milk. I drink my milk from my yellow cup with the tiger on. The tiger lives at the zoo. The zoo sells yellow cups with his picture on. When Grammy with the red car takes me to the zoo I visit the tiger. He knows me. I stand on the red rock by the tree and wait for him to see me. My hair is brown and long and straight. I comb my hair in straight lines so it looks nice for the tiger. When he sees me he comes over by me to talk. He says it's hot. He says having yellow fur with black stripes is hot when it's hot. He says do you think it's hot Allie? And I say yeah. He says I love you Allie. He says do you understand that I love you Allie? And I say yeah.

My lawnmower is green. The same color as grass. The special water that makes the lawnmower go smells funny. The can that holds the special water is the same color as Grammy with the red car's car. When I cut grass I can see the lines inside my head. The lines are straight. If they're not straight it

won't look nice. I don't cut grass at houses that have trees. If there are trees I can't make the lines go straight and it won't look nice. Because of trees I had to stop cutting grass at the gray house by Grammy with the red car's house. The lady in the gray house was mad at me. She was mad because I couldn't stop screaming. The lady in the gray house can't see the lines the way I do. Her trees made the lines go wrong and I screamed. Grammy with the red car told the lady in the gray house that I couldn't cut her grass anymore and the lady in the gray house was mad at me again. She said in a mean voice why don't you go around the trees? She said do you understand that you can go around the trees? And I said yeah. Then Grammy with the red car talked in a mean voice to the lady in the gray house and I don't cut grass there anymore.

When me and Grammy with the red car cross the street to cut grass I push the lawnmower. Grammy with the red car carries my yellow cup with the tiger on and the can of special water that makes the lawnmower go. The lady in the brown house is nice. When I cut her grass her and Grammy with the red car sit outside. They watch me cut grass and they talk and laugh. The lady in the brown house makes pink lemonade. I drink my pink lemonade out of my yellow cup with the tiger on. When I drink my pink lemonade the lady in the brown house goes to get the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses. He comes outside with his big dog. His big dog has big teeth and pointy ears. His big dog is black on his back and brown on the rest of him. He looks like dogs that policemen have. The tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses comes over to the brown house and gives Grammy with the red car five dollars. He says you do such a nice job cutting the grass Allie. He says do you understand that you do such a nice job cutting the grass Allie? And I say yeah. Then the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses goes back to his house. He gets a shovel with a wooden handle to pick up the dog poop that his big black and brown dog makes. He picks up the dog poop so I won't step in it. If I step in it I get dog poop on my shoes. When he picks up the dog poop his big black and brown dog looks at me. He knows me. He's on a chain so he can't come over by me and talk. But I can hear him. He says it's hot. He says having black and brown fur is hot when it's hot. He says do you think it's hot Allie?

And I say yeah. He says I love you Allie. He says do you understand that I love you Allie? And I say yeah.

I like to stay upstairs in my bedroom. The walls upstairs in my bedroom are pink with white stripes. My father made the white stripes using blue tape. I like to look out my bedroom window. When I look out my bedroom window I see everything from high up. It's a long time after the man who tells Grammy with the red car the news on TV. It's a long time after the TV man but it's still light outside. When I look out my bedroom window I see the lines in the grass across the street at the brown house and the lines in the grass at the house where the tall man who wears the white hat and black glasses lives. The lines are straight. I see the two houses but the lines on all the grass is straight. I make the lines straight to make it all one grass. I look out my window at the lines in the grass until it gets too dark to see them. Grammy with the red car says Allie? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car says it's time to go to bed. I get under my covers. My covers and my pillow are pink with white stripes just like my bedroom walls. Grammy with the red car brings me my drink of water and my pills. The water is in my yellow cup with the tiger on. Grammy with the red car sits on my bed and says Allie? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car says do you know that it's your birthday next week? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car says on this birthday you'll be old enough to drive a car. Isn't that funny? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car says for now I think you better leave the driving to me okay? And I say yeah. Grammy with the red car leaves my yellow cup with the tiger on because it still has water in. She leaves it on the table by my bed in case I need a drink of water later on. Grammy with the red car turns off the light and says goodnight Allie. And I say yeah.

After she goes I touch my finger on the tiger's picture on my yellow cup with the tiger on. He knows me. After I touch the tiger's picture I close my eyes. It's black inside my eyes. And when it's black inside my eyes I can go. When I go I go to the zoo. At the zoo I don't stand on the red rock by the tree and wait for the tiger. I go inside where the tiger lives. Inside where the tiger lives I don't see the tiger. I am the tiger. I walk on my tiger feet and I am tiger strong. My tiger eyes and my tiger teeth are big. My tiger tail is

long. I walk up to the cage around my tiger house and slink between the bars. I can do that. When I'm the tiger I walk between raindrops. I walk my tiger body on the sidewalk that goes around the zoo. I walk my tiger body on the street outside the zoo. On the street outside the zoo I walk my tiger body fast. I walk my tiger body so fast I start to run. And when I run I run so fast I can fly. I fly my tiger body into the sky. I can do that. I fly so fast I race the moon. I race the moon and the stars all the way into tomorrow. At tomorrow I fly across the blue sky. When I fly across the blue sky fire from my yellow fur burns behind me and smoke from my black stripes comes out behind the fire. The smoke makes lines across the sky. The lines the smoke makes across the sky aren't straight but they look nice anyway. I look up into the blue sky and find the sun. I see the sun in the blue sky and the sun in the blue sky sees me. I know the sun. The sun says do you love flying tiger? And I say yes. The sun says do you understand that you can fly tiger? And I say yes. Yes I do.

Pull

by Sheldon Lee Compton

Before the river, my cousin Jeff could make me do anything. He was five years older. His word was a gravitational power. He was terrifying.

We did so many things I would have never done without the threat of an elbow thrown into my nose.

We broke into our school gym's concession stand and left with two garbage bags full of candy and potato chips.

We Xeroxed dollar bills and used them in pop machines all through town.

Once, we used the bathroom in the middle of my history teacher's classroom. We took the box of tissues on his desk for toilet paper.

When I say *we* you should imagine I'm saying *he*. I had zero identity.

During warm weather we took our two Beagles to the river behind the library and swam with them. The water always muddied from our swimming and stomping so that if anything lurked beneath, anything that might nip at our shins or feel alive under our feet, was pure mystery.

It was the river, the mystery, my muddy, secret fear, that saved me, though.

The flood of '77 caused the river to leave its banks all throughout town. It made it into the library, it came and went leaving mud two inches thick in the basement of my house. It knocked houses from

foundations, forced boil water advisories, and, best of all, took Jeff away.

It was another of those things I wanted nothing to do with when Jeff said we were going to the river. This was four days after the rains let up and all the waterways in the county were still rushing loud and strong, all of them, most of all the river, the light brown color of coffee and milk.

The grass on the banks had been washed flat, tattooed into the ground by the floodwaters, making our usual path too slick to walk. We sat and scooted to the water's edge, Jeff in front, his influence a tether latching onto me so that I felt a sort of out-of-body pull.

And I may have left my body for all I can say.

I may have been floating above the two of us watching my own heart break loose of fear, growing in a matter of seconds into its own rhythm.

I may have been born the second I saw how fast a flood current can snatch away most anything like it's nothing more than a pebble.

I may not have been there at all.

Family Matters

by Geeta Kothari

There are only so many places in a wooden hut on stilts where you can hide a shotgun.

In the watchtower, time passed slowly. *Tick tick, tick tock*. I was always waiting for my shift to end. That's how I saw those nights in the fire tower with my uncle Mickey—interminable shift-work of the volunteer kind. I was an only child with her eye on the future, the future being an unoccupied planet—no farm, no stinking sheep or skittish alpaca to round up every evening, no nightly patrols along an imaginary border with Mickey.

"See anything?" he said. He'd made a fresh pot of coffee, and the smell filled the cold space.

The tower had a roof but was otherwise open. We were on planet patrol, keeping our world safe from whatever lurked beyond our borders. "Just make sure he stays alive," my mother said. "Remove the bullets. Hide the gun."

I handed him the binoculars.

"Christ," he said. His thick glasses interfered with binoculars, and he always said it was like looking through a keyhole. This time, however, he just took a deep breath and said, "Alien incursion." He said this with no question mark, no inflection, as flatly as he might have said, "Got my groceries" or "The clock is broken," (which is what it seemed to be, two hours away from 7, the minutes moving at a turtle's pace).

I couldn't see anything on the bridge. No ghostly forms with backpacks humped on their backs. No strange lights. Beyond the bridge there was

the shore, the shadows of pine and birch dark against the dawn sky. There was the sound of water lapping against the rocks, and the occasional chirp of an early bird.

Mickey paced the small room, and I knew he was looking for the gun, though he didn't know this yet, he knew only his agitation. He wanted proof of aliens and other planets, and yet he wanted to be absolutely safe. He wanted to prove he wasn't a dumb sheep who followed doctor's orders and took his pills.

Take care of your brother. A father's dying words to his oldest daughter. Within a year, my mother had quit her job and marriage. We moved back to the farm. The sheep had missed shearing season; the alpacas had thick mats behind their ears. Every cushion we turned over, every drawer we opened revealed Mickey's pills.

I called my mother.

"I've never seen aliens before," my mother said when she got there. She'd been up with a sick lamb for three nights. Her hands were raw and rough, reptilian to the touch, no longer the hands of an advertising executive who scheduled manicures like clockwork.

"Lucy," Mickey said. "This is it. Once I bring them in, no one will want to put me away."

"No one wants to put you away, dear. Why don't we wait until it gets light? Then you'll see them better."

"Help me find my gun, Luce."

My mother gave Mickey some coffee. I knew she'd mixed his powdered pills in with the creamer. Her face was puffy, and her eyes teared, from fatigue or cold or both. She refused to commit him. Family matters,

she said, and I wondered if she included herself in that equation. How would she manage when I left for college next fall? It was a question neither of us could ask.

"You go on home," she said.

I didn't argue. Six years of clocking in on Mickey time. Six years of interrupted sleep. Six years of disrupted dinners. Six years of caution, worry and regret. I was done.

At home, I dreamed of alien incursions, collapsed bridges, the world on fire. When my mother came home, she didn't wake me to tell me that Mickey was gone.

The lamb lived.

My mother never asked why I forgot to unload the shotgun.

I never asked how she found it.

Girls with Blood in Their Veins

by K.C. Mead-Brewer

All the other kids I knew got to eat meat. *Meat*. The stuff that's naturally salty. The stuff you have to use a fork *and* a knife to cut into. None of the spongy tofu or brick-shaped tempeh that I had to push around on my plate at home ever since Steve came to live with us.

He isn't *Steve*, Mom told me again and again. He's Dad now, honey. Call him Dad.

Except he wasn't Dad. He wasn't Dad any more than that tofu and tempeh were meat.

What neither of them knew was that I ate meat every day at school. Greasy pepperoni pizza, thick ham sandwiches, juicy cheeseburgers, maple sugared helpings of frank-and-beans—I tore into as many animals as I could. With each new bite, I felt my soul expand, as if I'd absorbed some piece of their former beastly lives into my own human one. As if I was finally absorbing something *real*.

That is, until the day Mom and Steve came in for their first joint parent-teacher conference.

It happened while I was waiting out in the hall, counting and recounting all the lockers: Someone said something damning and that was that. Before I could defend myself, Mom was grounding me and Steve was issuing Camilla the Lunch Lady with strict instructions to only serve me non-meat options no matter what I said or did.

I started losing weight pretty quickly after that. Nothing tasted right anymore. Not even soda.

They sucked the blood out, my friend Casey said, tearing off part of her chicken burrito for me. She sometimes shared her lunch with me, but then it was never enough for either of us and we both ended up hungry and kind of dizzy all through the rest of school.

What do you mean? I asked.

The *blood*, she said again. Think about it, Millie. Plants don't have any blood, and no matter how close those substitute foods come, they're just not the same as the real-deal, and why?—because they never had any blood pumping through them! It's all because of the blood. A need for blood.

You sound like a vampire, I told her, and blushed because I was never really confident about teasing her.

Casey was the only friend I had. I wasn't cool, and I definitely wasn't pretty. My hands were fat and my school uniform always looked lumpy, as if it were trying to melt itself off of me.

Sometimes I wondered if Casey only hung out with me to be ironic, like maybe she was trying to make a show of how charitable she was or how avant-garde she could be. But I never really believed that. I couldn't. Casey was beautiful and fearless and told it like it was. She knew what direction she was heading in, and she didn't let anyone change her course. She was the only really real person I'd ever known.

Don't be dumb, she said, waving off my joke. Blood gives an animal life, right? So why wouldn't it also give it flavor?

I tried sharing Casey's blood theory with Mom and Steve, but then they looked at me like I'd suggested roasting up the neighbors for dinner.

That's it! Steve said. His eyes were wide and worried on me. I've had enough of this. You know what we're going to do? We're going to get a chicken coop. And they'll be *your* responsibility, Mildred. Maybe that'll teach you some respect. Let's see how many nuggets you're willing to swallow when a real live chicken is staring you in the face.

I couldn't tell who was more surprised by his proclamation, me or Mom.

Steven, my mother snapped, except she said it in that hushed way she sometimes uses, as if then I wouldn't be able to hear it too. They closed the bedroom door to keep me out.

What, Patty? What is it now?

A *chicken coop*, Steve? We've talked about this. I can't hold a job, clean house, raise our daughter, *and* look after a brood of goddamn chickens!

Raise our daughter? What do you think I'm trying to do here—

I didn't usually hang around to listen. They could take forever with that stuff.

* * *

Steve made me help him put the coop together, and I guess it was kind of fun getting to work with him like that. Sure, he was a vegetarian and a control freak, but that day he was smiling the whole time and the sun was a bright yellow disk above us. Sweat started seeping through his shirt almost immediately, and for some reason it reminded me that he was a man as well as Steve. It reminded me that he had blood pumping through his veins.

Mom smiled at us from the back door. She still wasn't happy about the chickens, but Steve could talk her into anything, and she seemed glad at least that we weren't growling at each other for once. She brought me a lemonade and Steve a beer, and then Steve chased her around the yard laughing, trying to smear sweat on her while she squealed and ran and flirted.

But then dinner time rolled around and it was the same old thing all over again. Steve holed up in his study while Mom cooked. *For the last time, Millie, just eat it!* Harsh not-whispers from behind their bedroom door. Silence. TV. And a lot of cold, aggressive sleeping like they were still arguing even in their dreams.

* * *

It was full-dark when I woke up shivering in the backyard. I stood outside the coop with no memory of how I got there. My nightgown rippled against me in the breeze and the grass was dewy on my bare ankles. I looked up and saw the moon beaming down at me. It looked a lot more like an egg than I ever remembered it looking before. A great celestial egg with light like a soul shining out from inside of it.

I must've still been pretty sleepy then, because I remember staring up at it and whispering, What kind of bird lays a moonlight egg?

My stomach cramped and my palms went clammy. I felt a sudden warm pressure as if the night itself was trying to kiss me.

Something rustled in the trees just beyond the coop, twigs snapped in the dark and there was the windy sound of wings.

Hurrying back inside, I locked the door behind me.

* * *

We ended up with five chickens, all of them colorful, squawking hens that were supposed to lay colorful, delicious eggs.

The first night we had them, Mom decided to make breakfast for dinner to celebrate. I'd already collected the eggs that morning—there were only four of them, all in pearly pinks and blues and browns—and Mom figured there would be enough if we scrambled them up alongside some pancakes. I cracked them into a bowl for her, one, two, three—but the fourth one made me gasp.

What's wrong? she asked, and frowned as she came to check the bowl. Four yellow yokes looked back at her, and right in the center of the fourth yoke— Oh, she said, that's just a blood spot, honey. It's not unusual with fresh eggs. Don't worry. You won't even notice it once they're cooked.

She was wrong, though. I ate each bite of my scrambled eggs with a surgeon's attention, carefully probing for the taste of that tiny squirt of red.

We all went to bed happy that night. Steve helped out with the dishes and Mom kept touching him in a way she didn't usually do, her hand on his arm, his leg, his shoulder.

Casey was right, I thought. Blood makes all the difference.

* * *

Whoa! You have actual live chickens now? Casey sounded shocked.

Five of them, I said. Percy, Diana, Flora, Fauna, and Merriweather.

Which one's your least favorite?

It was a strange question. I didn't know how to answer it.

'Cause whichever it is, she said, we should definitely take it out and *sacrifice* it.

Sacrifice it? To who?

To us! she said, and broke off a larger-than-usual chunk of her meatball sub for me to eat. We'll sacrifice it to us! The meat-eaters! The girls with blood in our veins!

Part of me hated the idea of killing something for no reason, but another part of me jumped alive at it. The chickens were mine, weren't they? That was what Steve had said. My responsibility. So that meant it was my decision if one was sacrificed or not. (Right?)

Of course, all of this was secondary to the main selling point, and that was Casey herself. Casey who was finally looking at me like I might be a direction worth heading in.

* * *

It was one week later and Mom and Steve were thrilled that Casey was coming for a sleepover. I rarely ever had anyone over for anything, and I think they thought I was moving up in the world. I'd warned them that Casey was an unashamed omnivore, but she charmed them just like she charmed everyone with her pretty laugh and her bouncy blond hair.

She asked to see the chickens as soon as she arrived. At first she cooed over their handsome feathers and mottled eggs, but then, as soon as Steve was out of earshot, she leaned in close to me and whispered, *Diana. It's definitely going to be Diana.*

I couldn't figure out what she'd seen in Diana to make her so certain. Personally, I'd been leaning toward Fauna (her eggs and feathers were super plain compared to the others), but what bothered me most about the whole thing was just how sure Casey was.

Mom made vegetarian eggs benedict that night to show off our freshly laid eggs, and even though I thought it was pretty okay (aside from the Canadian soy-bacon), Casey kept sneaking me grossed-out faces from across the table.

When it was time for bed, Mom started spreading out sleeping bags for us in the living room, but then Casey hopped and clapped and said, Couldn't we sleep outside near the chickens?

Mom and Steve exchanged a surprised, pleased look, and quickly agreed. Never mind that they were sending out their only daughter with a kid they barely knew. A kid who'd been miming different kinds of murder to me all night long behind their backs, from the finger across the throat to a gun firing to a knife stabbing.

It wasn't until Casey mimicked a hanging that I realized just how little I actually knew about her. And when she stuck out her tongue to complete the effect, I felt a strange twisting in my stomach that was painful and exciting all at once.

But what if it rains? I said, grasping at straws. I didn't know what I wanted anymore. All I knew was that I didn't like the way Casey kept grinning at me. I didn't like the way her hair stayed beautiful and brushed-looking no matter what she did. I didn't like the way I couldn't stop thinking about the triangle of moles in the hollow of her left elbow.

Don't worry, Steve said. It's supposed to be clear and cool tonight. You won't even need a tent.

* * *

Are you really sure about this, Casey? I threw another nervous glance back to the house, but Mom and Steve's window had been dark for close to an hour by then. Our only light was the moon, the stars, and a pair of emergency flashlights that Mom had dug out of the pantry.

Casey snorted a laugh at me and started rummaging through her backpack. *Of course* I'm sure, she said.

Of course you're sure, I thought.

From inside her backpack, she pulled out what looked like a jewelry box. It had fairies and glittery stickers all over it and, on the rounded top, she'd painted her name in rainbow colors: CASSANDRA.

This is my Blood Box, she told me, and carefully set it out in the center of her sleeping bag where our flashlights' yellow beams intersected.

What's a Blood Box? I asked. I expected her to open it and show me, or even just grin and keep it a secret a while longer, but instead she sat back and started rolling up the right leg on her pajama bottoms all the way up to her panties.

My cheeks went hot as a sunburn and I was suddenly grateful for how dark it was. Casey? What're you doing?

Showing you, she said, and brought one of the flashlights around to shine on the inside of her thigh. Her skin there was covered in fine blond hairs and was the same white-white as Percy's feathers.

Grinning, Casey pulled her skin tight to show me a spot farther back, and there, in a series of quiet little lines, she kept her scars.

Sorta looks like chicken scratch, doesn't it? She shook her head, clearly amused at herself. They looked more like day-markers on a prison wall to me, but I decided not to tell her so.

You cut yourself? I whispered.

She nodded, and I saw then that she was blushing as well. But not because I'm depressed or anything, she said, her voice low and suddenly a little insecure. Suddenly a little unsure. I just like seeing my blood sometimes. I like seeing that it's still there inside of me, keeping me alive.

Giving you flavor, I said, and immediately regretted it. Humiliated, I felt my heart throb behind my face.

Our eyes met over the yellow flashlight beams and my stomach twisted up into another knot. She was going to make fun of me, I was sure, but I couldn't look away. I imagined her slicing down another thin ladder rung on her thigh. I imagined the blood blooming darkly against her pale skin. I imagined pressing my lips just there, drinking her in.

Her eyes stayed heavy on mine for what felt like a long, long time, but then, instead of teasing me, she rolled back down her pant-leg and showed me what was in her Blood Box. A collection of razors sat side-by-side with bandages and disinfectant cream. She slowly unpacked each item, lining them up on her pillow like soldiers, before removing the box's false bottom. There, atop a purple silk hankie, sat a shining, sharp knife. It flashed white in the moonlight.

This is what we'll do it with, she said. Do you know how to get out Diana without making too much noise?

The thought of Diana brought all my old anxieties rushing back. Casey must've seen something change on my face then, because she reached out and took my hand. I looked down at our fingers, glowing a dark red because they were backlit, because they were filled with blood, and my breath caught in my throat.

This is for us, I thought. The girls with blood in our veins.

I'd started looking up videos on how to kill different animals right after Steve decided we were vegetarians, and there were *plenty* of how-to's out there about chickens. Still, I hadn't been able to get through a single one of them without crying a little, and my hands trembled and went cold as I moved to stand before the coop. I looked up at the moon and once again saw the celestial egg resting in its starry nest.

You're Diana too, I thought, and nearly laughed even as my eyes went hot and teary.

The other hens all twittered at me as I plucked up Diana just like I'd studied, gripping her gently around her wings and cuddling her against my chest. Running my hand over her orange feathers to keep her calm, I ducked back out of the coop and tried not to look so afraid.

Casey was sitting there in the moonlight waiting for me, her legs spread out on our sleeping bags and her blond hair loose on her shoulders. I froze in place at the sight of her. All I could do was stare. She held the knife close to her heart like a love letter and, when she saw me hesitate, used it to beckon me forward.

I moved as if mesmerized and sat down in the grass with Diana just the way I'd seen all the other chicken-killers do. Casey shifted closer to me and watched as I angled Diana's body downward and tucked her

head between my knees, all while still petting her in long, comforting strokes.

For a moment I wondered if perhaps it was me who had died and not Diana at all, if I had died and somehow ended up in a strange, terrible heaven—encased eternally in that dreamy instant when life and death were cradled in my hands, the world's most beautiful girl watching me and the soft feathers of an innocent pressed against my body.

But then the knife was in my hand and the delicate skin around the base of Diana's beak was severed and pouring out blood that gleamed black in the starlight. Casey gasped when I broke Diana's neck over my thumb and twisted off her head, but I hardly even realized I'd done it until it was over and her body was laid out on the ground beside us.

I could hear my own heart knocking like I was a door. I could smell Diana's blood still leaking into the grass.

How do you feel? Casey asked, hushed.

We both looked down at my hands as if we'd never seen them before. As if I'd pulled them anew from Diana's opened throat.

I feel bloody, I said. I feel *real*.

So Much Depends

by Caroline Kepnes

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

The day that Miss Sharp read a famous poem about a wheelbarrow, David had the sensation that he had finally entered the cave. She let go of some teacherly way as the few words slipped out of her mouth. Her posture changed. She was a runner of marathons and sometimes came to school with ribbons around her neck, another thing that failed to

excite the kids. But when she read that poem, her body heaved forward and every part of her seemed to be spiraling. She seemed sad, as if she was a wheelbarrow, bright and wet and alone in the world. He sweated all night over what he would write to her, finally settling on a simple note, deciding that it would be best to say something kind, to cheer her up:

Dear Miss Sharp,

You are not the wheelbarrow. You are great.

David Henry

He left the note on her desk the next morning before classes. The hours passed slowly and all day he understood that his life was taking a new shape. He would remember exactly what he ate for lunch, he would remember every second of the film strip on a hurricane they watched in social studies. He would remember that while he was in the boys' room, George Lasky was in there too, suffering from indigestion and moaning in a closed stall. And all of these moments were leading to the moment when it was finally his turn to sit in Miss Sharp's classroom. She carried on as if her world had not been altered. She did not seem to be in a state of hyper awareness. At the end of class, she stopped him on the way out. She handed him his note. He asked if she wanted to keep it and she said no and that they would not discuss this with anyone. He looked up at her but she smiled and those big eyes did not let him in. They were cheery and rigid and it was clear to him that he had made her uncomfortable, crossed a line and that his stupid note was nothing like the wheelbarrow poem. It had too many words, the wrong words. He couldn't sleep that night and he tried to figure out what happened. Maybe women wanted to be the wheelbarrow. Maybe she didn't care what young David thought. Maybe she knew that he didn't even know what he thought. Maybe his note had cheered

her up and she was in love with him but couldn't tell him because he was young. But the damn truth was that he was not as savvy as the mystery solving boys he read about every night. And when he fell asleep that night, he felt that if someone wrote a mystery where he was the lead boy, nobody would want to read it and the book would collect dust in an empty library.

Sometimes he would become very sad, very aware that she knew what the wheelbarrow meant to her and refused to tell him. As he grew older, he knew that had she liked him as a human, she would have tried to talk to him. It wasn't like he'd written her a perverse note. It was a fine note. But she had been a cold bitch, a runner of marathons indeed. He understood that he had been rejected. He also understood that he wouldn't ever like happy girls and so it didn't surprised him when, in college and thereafter, he pursued one unhappy girl after another. He was drawn to one desolate cave after another, and he'd plot out all the ways to get in there, try with all his might but always the attempts would fizzle and again he would think of himself as the kind of character that could not sell a book. The mysteries remained unsolved, repeated and he became a man who had been the boy who spent too much time alone thinking about the wheelbarrow, why it made girls sad, why it mattered that it was wet. Every time he liked a woman, he would get a little too drunk and tell her about Miss Sharp and the wheelbarrow and ask the woman what she thought and the woman would begin to turn off him, cross her legs away from him, nod too much, look around too much and he knew that he'd be carrying that fucking wheelbarrow around forever. When he tried to not tell a woman about Miss Sharp and the wheelbarrow, things were the same only different. He would slowly turn off whatever woman it was at his side, looking at other passing girls, biting his lip and paying for dinner in a way that was cruel and condescending instead of chivalrous, and

then he'd have no choice but to dump the girl because he couldn't go on being mean.

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

old middle school and she smiled and wanted to know everything and he told her about the janitor and the way it all smelled the same and the parking lot empty and sullen and the lockers painted blue instead of red and the library and the way she listened, he could tell that she liked the sound of a man like him, that she was thinking that he was romantic and present and all kinds of other good things and her eyes were jumping closer to him all the time. He didn't deliberately leave out the part about Miss Sharp or the wheelbarrow. They just simply had no place in a story about him sneaking into a closed schoolhouse with a bottle of whiskey.

Smll Apclyps

by Christopher James

(1)

First, Mum ran out the front door. I'd never seen her run before. Not for a bus, not for pleasure, not for anything. But she was fast, like a dragster, and she screamed as she raced past me, the way bullets scream in movies. She left the door open, perhaps inviting us to follow.

It was some time before Dad ran out the front door too. He was a rugby player at the weekends, and he had a bit of pace on him. There was a chance this was just a game, and that was why he'd given her a head start. He also screamed as he raced past me, and he slammed the door behind him so hard it missed the latch and swang back open. Its bang shook the walls and rattled the hallway mirror.

Then Lorraine, my big sister, ran out the front door as well. Lorraine ran as fast as either of them, but without screaming, which left only me and Grace, my little sister. I closed the door, and pointed a finger at Grace.

"I'm in charge," I told her.

And the good thing about Grace is she's young enough to believe everything she's told.

(2)

I played Mum and Dad. Mum: "Ooh, my nerves. I'm going to have a little wodky." Dad: "For fox sake, in front of the fucking kids? And would you *please* stop talking in that baby voice? You're a grown woman." Mum: "Stop screaming at me." Dad: "Grace, Daniel, go to your rooms!" That was fun for about a minute, in which time none of them returned back home.

"Come with me," I told Grace, and she followed me to Mum and Dad's room. "Take your shoes off," I said, and she did. I threw her shoes out into the hall. "Jump on the bed," I said, and she jumped on the bed, messing up the sheets. "When Dad comes back, I'm going to tell him you jumped on the bed."

Grace stopped jumping, stunned by my deception. "He won't mind," she said, but she didn't look too sure about it.

"He'll smack you."

"But you told me to do it."

"If I told you to jump off a cliff, would you do that too?"

"No."

"Good," I said. "Now help me search the room."

I didn't know until we found it what I was looking for—mum's tub of pills, which she needed to calm her nerves. The childproof top came off easily, and I shook a few pills out on to my hand. "Take one of these," I said to Grace, "or I'll tell Dad." She did as she was told. I took one too.

"I feel sick," said Grace.

"Stupid," I told her. "They're medicine. They make you feel better, not sick."

She didn't look convinced.

"I'm bored," I said. "Come. Let's go find Mum and Dad now."

(3)

Before we could leave, Grace needed to get her doll, who needed dressing and feeding and putting in the pushchair, which Grace also needed to get. "Fine," I said. "But don't take all day about it. They were running, remember? They could be miles away already."

"Sure," said Grace, plaiting the doll's hair into braids.

"Don't do that," I said. "We're in a rush."

"But her hair is all messy!"

"So cut it off."

Grace nodded. Why hadn't she thought of that? Then she went to find a pair of scissors. While she was gone I put the doll into her clothes, pushed the pushchair into shape, and strapped the doll in. And yes, I braided her hair.

Grace came back without scissors, and with clumps of her hair missing from her head. A hole where her fringe had been, a bald spot either side of her scalp where her pigtails would normally go. Strands of hair dusting the shoulders of her dress.

"I feel nice," she told me.

"That's Mum's medicine," I said. "I feel nice too."

"I want Mum now. We should feel nice together."

"So come on. What are you waiting for?"

(4)

"What are you waiting for?" said Grace.

"I'm waiting for you."

"I'm waiting for you."

The little monkey was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Are you copying me?"

"Are you copying me?"

"Grace is an idiot."

"Danny is an idiot."

"Ha! I said Grace and you said Danny!"

"Ha! I said Danny and you said Grace!"

"You're stupid."

"You're stupid."

"Stop it!"

"Stop it!"

"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."

Grace practiced rolling the sounds around in her mouth, and decided it was impossible.

"Stop it!"

"I thought so. Only idiots copy other people. Now get your stuff together and let's go. They could be in China already."

(5)

We went first to the shop. Or, I went to the shop, and dragged Grace's ugly butt after me. We could've gone other places. The park. The pub. The moon. But instead we went to the shop.

"Wait here," I told Grace, and left her parking her doll's pushchair next to an overflowing bin.

"You!" said the shop owner, after I walked inside and the bell above the door rang and she looked up from her crossword and saw me. "Get out you! You're not allowed here."

"Keep your panties on," I told her. "I haven't come to steal anything."

"Don't steal anything!" she said, pointing a finger at me like a knife. "Where are your parents?"

"Funny," I told her. "That's what I came to ask you."

"I don't know where your parents are. What am I? Google maps?"

"Yes," I said. "I think you're Google maps."

"Google maps doesn't know where your parents are. Now get out! You're not allowed here!"

Just to wind her up, I started browsing the shelves. Picking things up, putting them down. Whistling.

"I'll leave," I said, picking up a birthday card with my left hand and a pack of chocolate buttons from the opposite shelf with my right. "I'll go. When's the last time you saw my mum?"

"Yesterday, buying vodka."

Putting down the birthday card and picking up a roll of sticky tape.
"My dad?"

"Last week, buying cigarettes."

Putting down the chocolate buttons, picking up some oatmeal cookies.
"And Lorraine?"

"Your sister's not allowed. You're not allowed. Get out! Get out!"

I put everything down. "Fine. Since you asked so nicely, and you answered my questions so graciously, I'll go. But I'll miss you, my darling, and I know you'll miss me too. Have a nice day, Ella Mae. See you later, alligator, don't forget your calculator."

On the way out I swiped a bag of dried mangos, which she didn't see. I got out, and Grace was missing. I hadn't minded that much when

Mum and Dad and Lorraine went missing, because they could all be pretty big jerks most of the time, but Grace was hardly ever a jerk.

"Ah crap," I said. I went back in the shop. "When's the last time you saw Grace?"

"OUT! OUT OUT OUT OUT OUT!"

"Please," I told her. I took the dried mango bag from my pocket. "Look, I took this? But now I'm putting it back. I won't steal anything else."

"You want me to be grateful? Wait out there; I'll go grab you a medal and a certificate."

"Grace is missing. Please? Have you seen her?"

She put her pointing finger down and thought about it.

"Which one is Grace? The little one?"

"Right."

"She seems like a good kid. The only decent one of the whole bunch of you. I haven't seen her."

"Fat lot of good you are, then," I told her, and I got out. I was in such a mess, I didn't even steal anything.

(6)

Assuming Grace wasn't bundled into a car and taken, assuming aliens didn't beam her up, and assuming the ground didn't open like a pie

hole and swallow her, that meant she'd be walking, pushing a pushchair, so she couldn't have gotten far. And she'd be more likely to have gone downhill than uphill, because downhill is easier. Plus, at the bottom of the hill was the fush and chups place, and Grace loved fush and chups.

"Ok," I said. "Not a big problem. She's at the fush and chups, so I'll go there and pick her up, no harm done."

When I caught Grace, I was going to smack a new hole in her backside. She knew better than to wander off. Although. She had taken one of Mum's pills. Maybe she wasn't thinking straight.

I'd taken one too, so maybe I wasn't thinking straight either.

I went to the fush and chups place.

The fush and chups place was called No Plaice Like Home. Before that it was called In Cod We Trust, and before that it was called I've Haddock Up To Here, and before that it was called Open Tuesday To Sunday, Serving Fish Every Day Barramonday. The owner was big and fat and from New Zealand, and everyone called him Kiwi because nobody could remember his name. He liked puns, and always gave free pickled onions to little girls like Grace. He didn't know that we sometimes, when he wasn't looking, spat flemmy boogers into the bubbling chup oil.

"Mister Danielsan!" he shouted when I walked in. "Aren't you a sore sight for eyes?"

"Kiwi, have you seen Grace?"

"Amazing Grace? It's been a while."

"Have you seen Mum? Or Dad? Or Lorraine?"

"You've misplaced the whole clan? Try down the back of the sofa, Danielsan. That's where I found Jesus."

"Kiwi, please! I've lost Grace."

"Ok, little mate. I'm sorry. Listen, there was a couple of police officers in here two minutes before you came in. If you run up towards the park you might catch them. They can help you out."

"OK," I said. "Thanks Kiwi."

"But listen, mate. You might want to put some clothes on before you go talk to them."

I looked down, and he was right. All my clothes had gone missing.

"What the hell?"

(7)

First Mum, then Dad, then Lorraine, then Grace, then my clothes. My clothes?

On leaving the house, I'd definitely been wearing clothes. Hitec trainers. One red sock, one blue. Jean shorts. Tidy whites. My "Pobody's Nerfect" t-shirt.

Was this a symptom of Mum's pills? Maybe between leaving the shop and reaching the fush and chups place I'd stopped to strip butt naked and forgotten about it.

"Jesus, Kiwi," I said. "Have you got anything I can wear?"

"Just an apron," he said. "But you're only small—it'll wrap right round you and cover up your back door."

The apron said "The Frying Squad", and Kiwi was right. It covered up all my good bits. He had some flip-flops too, which were covered in chup oil and were several sizes too big, but it was better than nothing. I ran as fast as I could, which was not fast, towards the park, hoping to catch Grace, Mum, Dad, Lorraine, my clothes, or the two policemen Kiwi'd just served.

(8)

I saw the coppers first, holding paper cornets and eating fistfuls of vinegary chips. Officer Dwayne and Officer Dribble. Our town was not that big, and the police spent more time hassling our family than most, so I recognized the pair of them. They were not my favorite people, but right now beggars could not be choosers.

"Officers," I shouted. "Hold up!"

They turned, annoyed, and then shocked. "Look at you," they said. "What happened to your arms?"

Until then I hadn't realized it, but my arms had gone missing.

"Have you seen Grace?" I asked.

"Did she do that to you?" asked Dribble, still staring in disgust at the bloody stumps where my arms had been.

"No! She's gone missing. So's Mum, and Dad, and Lorraine. Everyone's missing."

"And what happened to your arms?"

"Hold on," said Dwayne, to Dribble. "We can talk about his arms later. I think he wants to report a missing person. Is that right? Do you want to report a missing person?"

"Yes!" I said. "They've all gone missing. All of them! Grace, Mum, Dad, Lorraine. Everyone!"

"Well," said Dwayne, "I'm afraid that's tough titties. We're on a break. Why don't you come find us in half an hour, and then we can help you out?"

"Yeah," said Dribble. "Come back in half an hour. And in the meantime, sort your arms out. You're bleeding all over the pavement."

"And can I tell you something," said Dwayne. "Maybe if you weren't such a little shit all the time, maybe then we'd be happy to help you out. Think about that a minute."

"Think about it for thirty minutes," said Dribble, laughing. "And then come back and tell us all about it."

(9)

Since they were no use, I ran on, to the park. The park, honestly, was not much of a park. It was the size of a football pitch, and at one end there was a football goal, and the grass had all died, and there was a hole someone dug in the middle which nobody yet had been bothered

to fill in. I know, because I was the one who dug the hole, to bury a cat I'd accidentally killed. I'd got tired after digging the hole, and hadn't had the energy to replace the dirt on top of the dead cat, so I'd left it.

Maybe Grace was in the hole.

I tried to run, but fell. My legs had gone. Just disappeared, the same as everything else. No Grace, no Mum, no Dad, no Lorraine, no clothes, no arms, no legs. I crawled towards the hole, rolling my hips and thrusting my pelvis to propel myself forwards.

"Grace!" I shouted. "Are you there?"

If she was, I wouldn't have heard it, because now my ears had gone. There were holes in the apron now, so it just said The F. My nose had disappeared as well. When I tried to pull myself forward by biting my teeth into the little bit of grass that straggled out of the unforgiving earth, I couldn't, because my teeth had gone too. I tried to roll, to build up some momentum and get a good spin going to carry me the last ten or so feet.

"Grace! Come on Grace, get up!"

I finally made it to the hole. Mum was there, all chopped up into pieces, missing her arms and legs like me. Dad was there, in the same condition, and Lorraine too. There were some extra limbs, which I guessed were mine, wrapped up in my Pobody's Nerfect t-shirt.

"Have you seen Grace?" I asked them.

They moved aside, as best they could, and slowly cleared a space in the middle of the hole. There was something in the space, but I couldn't make out what it was. I leant forward, and fell into the hole alongside the others, landing with a soggy thump on the thing. I rocked and

rolled until I'd moved an inch out of the way, and could see what it was.

"Oh God," I said. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," said Grace. "I'm just happy we're all together at last."

The Falling Cinders of Anlong Pi

by Jennifer Todhunter

Every day, the rubbish comes. It is the only thing I can count on.

There is a woman here, her name is Champei. She lives next door to me. Lies in a steel-blue hammock stretched between the coiled trunks of two silk-cotton trees. I keep her safe. We tap our calloused feet to the beat of the music the sunrise workers bring with them from the city. It floats above the smoke that hangs like mist over the landfill. Otherwise, it is the sound of hope being picked through, the echo of children crying, and the talk of dreams and destiny.

My destiny is to marry Champei.

She has three children. They share two pairs of rubber boots, and one scarf. On days when cinders fall like snow, they twist the soiled piece of silk into a balaclava to protect their rattling lungs. I want to provide for them.

Sometimes, the smoke resembles thick, black rain clouds, and I think about dancing with Champei, basking in her radiant smile as the showers wash us clean. But it is just smoke.

Her children do well for her. They are light and agile, and they can move further into the landfill than a middle-aged man like me. It is where untouched treasure is found—not only cans and bottles, but plastic and copper, too. They are like diamonds, here.

People arrive on air-conditioned buses with cameras, strangers taking pictures. They give us drinks in bottles that are worth more than the liquid inside them, and food brought from hotels in Siem Reap that

would pay us less than we make here in a day. Yet, there is pity in their eyes. They do not realize this is where we want to be.

I spend my time sorting through the burning potential of steaming matter with a pickaxe, searching for the one treasure in my country's refuse that will convince Champei that I love her. New possibilities are dumped each hour, an alluring rainbow of decaying colour spread over the heat in the layers below. Each hour I hold out hope.

Champeï says she will never leave. That this is her home. I tell her it is my home, too. At night, when exhaustion does not let us comb through chance any longer, we sit side-by-side, staring at the faint glow of headlamps that belong to those whose dream is stronger than ours. Her children play *bay kohm* with fruit pits they have found and holes they have dug into the dirt, while I rub her feet with my tired hands.

On a rare night like tonight, when the sky opens up and the smoke blows away from our hammocks, I search for a shooting star. And I wish for it to crash into the landfill and turn our world to gold.

It is within this kingdom that we will live.

Long Division

by Vincent Scarpa

My son is convinced that dinosaurs have taken his mother away. This is the most recent in a list of explanations he has arrived at in the year since Holly disappeared to account for her absence. First it was aliens, sent to Earth with the charge of retrieving its best mother. Nate thought maybe they wanted her to teach classes on Mars about helping with homework or baking oatmeal cookies. Maybe they wanted to give her an award on Jupiter for best bedtime story. But as weeks turned into months, Nate revised. Aliens would have brought her back by now, he said. Aliens are nicer than most people think. Sea pirates were next, never mind that Kentucky is landlocked. He debunked this theory after coming to understand, while studying geography with Mr. Kiel, the bigness of the oceans that could be keeping his mother away, and decided instead that sea pirates only collected mothers from the west coast who, he reasoned, would have no need of Dramamine.

He offered the dinosaur hypothesis this morning in the parking lot of the Catholic school where he is a third-grader and I teach mathematics. I think probably what happened, he said, is that pterodactyls picked her up outside the grocery store and then flew her underground. I agreed that it sounded very plausible. It's as good if not better than anything I've come up with. They're teaching her to be one of them, Nate said, and when she comes back she'll show us how to fly.

We're at the school ten minutes early because it's Nate's turn to lead morning ceremony over the intercom. I walk him into the main office where Barb, the secretary, files her nails with an emery board in the shape of the crucified Christ. On her desk is a plaque that reads, "You don't have to be crazy to work here; WE'LL TEACH YOU," and

another that names her "World's Best Secretary," which, in response to often being met by her bad breath and self-righteous tendencies at early hours, I have frequently thought of qualifying with an embossed "quarter-finalist" underneath. There's no one here who couldn't stand to be humbled.

"Remember to annunciate," she tells Nate. "The Lord doesn't like mumbling."

This is the thing about being in a Catholic school: you learn a lot about what Jesus hates.

Nate takes a seat and mouths the words to the Nicene Creed until Barb gives him the green light and turns on the intercom. Sometimes I worry about the theology they inflate him with here, but guess what? The kid's never guessed his mother was taken away by angels. I leave the office and listen to his voice echo through the hallways, filling them with muffled, lisping prayer. He was nailed to the cross under Punching Pilots. He suppered death and was berries.

My task at Holy Spirit for the last ten years has been to instruct advanced eighth-graders in pre-algebra, though my degree was in comparative literature and I am a nonbeliever who still, from time to time, is perplexed by fractions. After Holly's disappearance, the joke I made to a blonde on a barstool was: I know more about division than anyone in Pike County.

Today is Friday, so class participation is abysmal. They come in groups of fifteen for forty-five minute periods, students with little to offer but their faces, lit by the cell phones they hide in their laps.

"True or false," I say, resting the chalk on my podium and turning to them. "If two sides of an equation are equal, say, $a=b$, you can add or subtract the same amount on both sides and they'll still be equal."

Kate Walden, the sheriff's daughter, raises her hand. "True."

I prod. "Are you sure? Always, no matter what, they'll be equal. You're sure?"

"Wait," she says. "I mean false."

"It was true," I say. I mean for these follow-up questions to inspire earned confidence in answers, but mostly they serve to characterize the students as incredibly weak-willed. Kate looks away, pretends to cough, and tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. Last week, I gave her a uniform violation for hooped earrings that were, in direct violation of the school handbook, the size of quarters, not dimes. Today, she wears silver studs. She is less attractive in person than the framed photo in her father's office would suggest, where the photographer made the astute decision to shoot her from the side. I stared at that picture many times on the sheriff's desk in the weeks after Holly went missing, and thus I feel this is a well-informed observation rather than a misguided reaction to her father's incompetence.

When the bell rings, the students reanimate and file out of the classroom. Nate passes by my door and peeks his head in, asks my opinion of his performance this morning. I tell him great job and that it's not his fault the speaker system has not been updated since Reagan's first term.

"Can we listen to mom?" Nate asks, as I start the ignition and pull out of the parking lot. He means can we listen to Holly's CD. She recorded it herself a decade ago with friends in Nashville; some standards and a

few originals. The standards are better. I've kept the CD in the car in the hopes that, if the windows are down and the volume loud, some stranger will recognize her voice and tell me where last he heard it. And because Nate likes the way she sings "I Still Miss Someone." He wants to know that one by heart before she gets back, he says, and then asks if I think pterodactyls can sing.

Lately, he wants to listen to his mother's CD more and more. I mentioned this to my own mother, who calls twice a month from Memphis, and she offered about as much judgment and as little advice as everyone else in my life. There is unanimity in their belief that I'm not handling this well, that I owe my son something I'm not giving him in this process, that I need to invent some hard-line approach on how to handle his terrible optimism. I don't contest that, but what I'm short on is alternatives. Show me the child psychology book with the chapter titled What To Tell Your Son When Your Wife Goes Missing.

What I don't need a book to tell me is that what's happened will ruin my son forever. It will ruin me forever. And if it is to be that Holly returns, as we'd known her or as something devolved with wings, we will be too ruined for her to love us back to whole.

I press play on the CD, because it is what's easiest, and the song ends as we pull into our driveway, where Holly's car is not. Once inside, Nate sheds a layer of clothing and his backpack, spreads himself flat on the couch. "Home sweet home," he says, because he heard it said by an elderly Labrador in a movie we watched together last week where a family's pets critiqued the petty drama of their owners in cartoon voices.

You can vacuum our entire house without switching outlets, which is another way of saying we are lower-middle class. There are two bedrooms, a bathroom, an office, and a backyard that, in summer,

Holly called a firefly exhibit with free entry. If I could do it with magic, if I could direct the house with my fingers, I'd shrink it in half. It is a space large enough to suggest that a third person should be occupying it, and the hallway seems disproportional when there's no one else to bump into in transit.

"Dinner isn't going to make itself," Nate says, because this too was said by the elderly Labrador.

* * *

The week before Holly disappeared, we took Nate camping on the banks of the Green River in Muhlenberg County. It is the place that John Prine means in "Paradise," a song we loved, so when we arrived we believed that perhaps we were in the wrong part of it. In other words, he left out the flies, as anyone who's been to paradise might. But the sun was warm and the water cool, the face of the river dotted with mussel drudgers and top-heavy canoes. At night, under blue moon, black sky, stars, I could not think of all three of us as anything but happy. At least, this is what I told the sheriff.

What I left out was the last night of the vacation, when Nate bet Holly she couldn't start a fire. He said she'd be too afraid. He did not know that, when I asked her in high school to prove how much she loved me, what she did was hold her palm over a lit candle and say, Tell me when you're convinced. Holly took the car to the convenience store up the road to pick up lighter fluid and matches.

"Back up, kiddo," she said when she returned, and Nate sat on my lap in the camping chair we'd turned around, five minutes after our departure, to retrieve from our front porch.

Holly squeezed the bottle of lighter fluid over a previous camper's unused teepee construction, arranged a few more scraps, struck a match, and threw it from a few feet back. The wind set the flames dancing from top to bottom, and the whole thing was bright with heat in a matter of seconds. We clapped for Holly, Nate and I, and she took a bow and did a victory dance.

And she was still dancing when, from inside of the fire, there emerged a stray calico mother, a newborn in her mouth and her hind legs trying desperately to shake the flames that had already taken her tail. I covered Nate's eyes instantly, picked him up and held his face into my chest. Holly screamed.

What's worse is that, after depositing the unmoving kitten out of harm's way, the cat went back in for the rest.

"I think some things are better in songs," Nate said, on the interstate with paradise twenty miles behind us.

"Everything is," Holly said.

* * *

A week later, we came home from school to an empty driveway, nothing in the house missing but her. It was hours before the panic set in, but the panic was better than what came to replace it. There was hope in that panic. Hope that the phone would ring and announce her safety, that her license plate would be spotted on the highway. Hope that if she were taken, she would be found, and that if she had left, she would return.

But it has been a year today, and I called the police station this morning and said, I'd like it on record that I still miss my missing person.

So that's where I am.

These days, I like Nate's theories best. The Pikesville PD is getting us nowhere, and I've run out ideas of my own. So tonight, after dinner, I'll set up blankets and pillows in our backyard, make popcorn and hot chocolate and anything else Nate wants, and we'll watch for his mother, for my Jurassic wife, for Holly's pterodactyl wings, spelling her whereabouts in shadows on the moon.

Reynaldo's Solutions

by Shaun Hayes

Thanks to everyone for your amazing work in the audition process! This was easily the most enjoyable and most difficult casting process I've ever had. You were all terrific.

The bard would be proud. Cast—congratulations! and please initial your role to indicate you've seen the list and accept your position. Make sure to see Mr. Orsino for your scripts. First rehearsal is at 7pm SHARP on Wednesday. See you there. And remember: the PLAYS the thing!!

—P

Lebanon Community Theatre Presents:

HAMLET by William Shakespeare

Dir. Patrick Razze

Production Stage Manager: Johnny Orsino

CAST LIST:

Hamlet.....	Kurt Martin <i>KM</i>
(Understudy: Derrick Talbot)	
Claudius.....	Jay Wojnorowski <i>JW</i>
Gertrude.....	Caroline LaPorta <i>cLp</i>
Polonius.....	Tim Manning <i>tim</i>
Ophelia.....	Sarah Michaels <i>SM :)</i>
Laertes.....	Jarrold Yuskauskas <i>jy</i>
Horatio.....	Rob Ventre <i>RV</i>
Ghost/Player King.....	Chadd Zivic <i>Z</i>
Rosencrantz.....	Randy Simons <i>R2theS</i>
Guildenstern.....	Brian Taylor <i>BT</i>
Marcellus/Gravedigger.....	Liz Dailey <i>L/D</i>
Bernardo/Osric.....	Phil LaPorta <i>PIP</i>

Player Queen.....	Emily O'Neill <i>EO</i>
Osric/Lucianus.....	Chris Pickard <i>cp!</i>
Fortinbras.....	Matt Breiner <i>MB! Woohoo!</i>
Voltimand.....	Elizabeth Dailey <i>LD</i>
Sailor/Ensemble.....	Kris Yoder <i>KY,esq.</i>
Messenger/Ensemble.....	Mark Young <i>MY</i>
Ensemble.....	Jamie Arnold <i>J.A.</i>
Ensemble.....	Kathryn W. Entwistle <i>KW</i>
Reynaldo/Ensemble.....	Derrick Talbot

1.

Plug up all the doors with towels, rags, miscellaneous junk from dressing rooms and storage. Make sure all exits—including stage doors—locked. Fill green room with flammable items douse with gasoline during opening scene when everyone heads backstage. Strike match in Act 1, Scene 2 when Hamlet Kurt says "Oh that this too too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew," and unleash hell. Let everyone burn down with theatre. Place is an old tinderbox barn and would likely go up in a huge bright flash.

Pros:

- *VERY dramatic and irony with melting flesh line spectacular.*
 - *Kurt burns up and so do Sarah and the rest of his idiot fans.*
 - *No witnesses.*
-

Cons:

- *Someone could call fire dept on their cell.*
- *Would have to remain inside theatre to get this right and would like to avoid dying—especially in the event that plan fails.*
- *Don't do well around fire.*
- *Potential that Kurt finds way to play the hero.*

2.

Sneak backstage during Act 3, climb to rigging loft, release counterweight on main lighting batten, wait for ~~Ham~~ Kurt to butcher "To be or not to be," then drop batten, crushing Kurt flat.

Pros:

- *Kurt unable to ruin—again—speech you were born to deliver.*
- *Incident might get chalked up to theatre superstitions.*
- *Rest of cast healthy and ready to go when I step in to play HAMLET for remainder of run!!*

Cons:

- *Unlikely to get away without being seen/caught by stage crew manning the fly system.*
 - *Afraid of heights.*
 - *Not a techie, have no idea how to work backstage crap. Might accidentally make scene more dramatic without accomplishing goal.*
-

3.

Ditch production, abandon years of hard work, taking tiny roles and trying to get noticed. Leave memories with Sarah behind—meeting here, loving here, being forgotten here after last show of *Bye-Bye Birdie* the night of the cast party at Kurt's house. Start own theatre, put on *own Hamlet*, cast with an eye to talent over looks. Cross fingers that at least a few of the crew folks from community theatre would join. Invite whole town, do show for free, steal Kurt's spotlight.

Pros:

- *Can make rules at own theatre, i.e. "Derrick Talbot is never to be an understudy w/tiny bit role ever again."*
- *Sarah finally able to see true talent, make informed romantic decision.*
- *Get Big Break.*

Cons:

- *Would need a theatre. Stage crew. Prop dept. Costumers. Designers. Other actors (ugh).*
- *Community theatre Hamlet opens tomorrow.*
- *Kurt gets off scot free. Likely consoled by Sarah when no audience shows up.* Might even take advantage of empty theatre for private consolation time. UNACCEPTABLE.*

4.

Get on Board of Directors at Community Theatre. Make rousing speech about how performance quality has dropped since *Bye-Bye Birdie* with same faces always getting the lead roles. Move board to tears and hint that the next big thing in acting may have been closer than they realized.

Pros:

- *Get to use acting abilities in real-life scenario*
- *Prestige of job with Board of Directors would impress Sarah, disprove "loser" image.*

Cons:

- *Unsure how to even get on Board and would rather not spend valuable time researching.*
- *Get nervous in meetings, might throw up before or during rousing speech.**

(*If speech fails, invite board members to some performance of *Hamlet* and enact solution #1.)

5.

Follow friends' advice. "Grow up," "move on," and stay ready to go on if Kurt falls ill and at Understudy Matinee. Hope people show up and see talent in action.

Pros:

- *Free.*
- *Legal.*

Cons:

- *Tried this with *Grease*, *Our Town*, *Bye-bye Birdie*, *Macbeth* (should have enacted plan then!), *Godspell*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Has yet to work and no one comes to Understudy Matinee. Ever.*
 - *Completely fails to address Sarah's decision to be with Kurt.*
 - *Other understudies are beneath you.*
-

6.

Poison prop sword, go on in place of Jarrod as Laertes in Act 5 (audience won't notice due to being put to sleep by awful lead performance) and cut ~~H~~ KURT—fatally poisoning him.

Pros:

- *Kurt dies from poison.*
- *Onstage with Kurt while whole audience and Sarah watching, all will see who is better performer.*

Cons:

- *Laertes is killed by Hamlet. Depending on poison, scene might get that far. Cannot let Kurt win, but will NOT rewrite Shakespeare.*
- *Jarrood is pretty strong. And unlikely to accept plan. Would need additional plan to deal with Jarrood before could assume his role. Juggling too many plans confusing and messy.*
- *Don't have any deadly poison.*

7.

Quit show. Find new artistic outlet. Let Sarah do whatever she wants.

Pros:

- ?

Cons:

- *Sarah "wants" to sleep with Kurt.*
 - *Kurt keeps getting lead roles in all the shows when he doesn't deserve to be cast at all.*
 - *Audience deprived of acting abilities even as gifted bit player.*
 - *No longer part of The Life.*
 - *Not able to draw, write or play any instruments.*
-

8.

Poison Kurt's makeup. Let chips fall where they may.

Pros:

- *Kurt swells up like a pumpkin and looks ridiculous.*
- *Get to take over as HAMLET! when Kurt unable to continue due to poison all over face.* Might have Kurt placed as new Understudy to Hamlet. (!)*
- *Impress Sarah, expect to look comparatively better when Kurt a pumpkin monster.*
- *Start new era as leading man at community theatre.*

Cons:

- *Again, lack pumpkin-monster-making poison.*

(*No matter what plan chosen, will continue nightly regimen of spitting in Kurt's foundation.)

9.

Get into costume shop. Stick pins and dump fiberglass in Kurt's costume.

Pros:

- *Get to see Kurt in pain, embarrassed.*
- *Mostly legal.*

Cons:

- *Plan has failed in past.*
 - *Need access to costume shop and was barred after prior failures.*
 - *Costumers insist will get violent if caught trying to break into costume shop again.*
-

10.

Find Kurt when he's not with Sarah. Congratulate him on getting cast as Hamlet. Try to be the bigger man. Laugh at what he says next. Don't bring up Sarah or follow up on any mention of Sarah, especially not anything about seeing them on the theatre roof last week or how, the summer before Kurt showed up, Sarah took *you* up through the hatch above the rigging balcony. Avoid thinking about how she held your hand the first time you followed her up there two years ago, how her ponytail danced over her bare shoulders in the gusts from the vents. How your head spun with the scent of her on your clothes the whole ride home that night. Keep smiling.

Pros:

- *Right thing to do.*

Cons:

- *Obvious.*

11.

Act heart out. Steal show as Reynaldo. Turn 13 lines of "Yes, my lord" into heart-rending, pulse-quickenning art. Send flowers anonymously to Sarah. Violets and rosemary. Obviously.

Pros:

- *Would achieve feat never attained in 400 years of theatre.*

Cons:

- *Doubt she'd notice.*
-

Last Light

by Chad Schuster

Having decided to ignore the Pterodactyl, I put the shell to my ear and promised my daughter I could hear the ocean. This was basically true—I could hear the ocean. Or, more precisely, I could not hear the ocean, but I could hear a rushing sound within the shell that resembles the ocean, and anyway she is only five and does not know that Puget Sound is not an ocean, and, more to the point, to see her blond hair blowing in the wind that way, to see her standing there smiling, holding a white shell, with sand and seaweed stuck to her rubber boots, which are pink, her favorite color, induced the kind of feeling that is vast and overpowering, even terrifying in the way it pulls you down and holds you under, and maybe it spits you back out or maybe it doesn't but either way you know unequivocally who's boss. Which is, as Sophie said in the first place, very much like the ocean. So, yes, I said again, this time with more conviction: I totally hear it, sweetheart.

* * *

I first noticed the Pterodactyl standing on a half-submerged piling, just before Sophie handed me the shell. It was performing Pterodactyl calisthenics, its wings extending and retracting, not for flight, I assumed, but for practice. Now here we were, four blocks east of where we'd first met, me holding a gas pump, him perched atop the trash can near the windshield-washing station, gnawing at the innards of an abandoned sandwich.

"Hello," I said, not knowing why I chose to speak. He looked up for a moment and extended his wings, which were almost transparent, backlit by the sun. He didn't make eye contact before his beak resumed ripping apart the sandwich. The woman pumping gas one

stall over looked at me nervously. I smiled politely, then realized that she likely thought I was crazy. She was likely right. She did not see the Pterodactyl.

I got in the car and shut the door. I looked in the mirror and saw Sophie seated behind me in her booster. The bottom half of her face wasn't visible, I could just see her blue eyes, although just is an inadequate word because through them I could tell she was smiling, I didn't need to see her mouth. Through the windshield, beyond the gas station sign and the power lines and a ragged edge of trees, seven miles above me, a bank of amorphous clouds traveled the atmosphere.

My window was half open. I felt the guiding breeze come through and rustle the empty bag of pretzels Sophie and I had just shared. The bag lifted up slightly in the console and tumbled to the floor, came to rest near an ice scraper, a brown banana peel. The smell of gasoline, too, seeped into the car's interior, trailed by the sound of a train whistle. I understood that the big iron thing, with its vast machinery, was back down by the beach, following a track, its very existence governed by forward movement. It was unquestionably going somewhere.

"What kind of bird were you talking to," Sophie said. I looked at her in the mirror and felt the pretzels deconstructing in my guts.

"It was not a Pterodactyl," I said, and I imagined in that moment that this was not just a Saturday visit, that her mother hadn't left me for someone more dependable, less prone to Pterodactyl sightings. I raised a bottle of water to my mouth and swallowed a pill that was supposed to help with this sort of thing. "This is nonsense," I whispered to myself, hoping Sophie hadn't heard me.

I looked at the dashboard clock, which was broken. I would reset it and then go wherever I was going and when I got back in the car it still

said the same thing. Or maybe it wasn't broken, maybe I just lost track of time sometimes. It was probably just me.

"Why was the bird eating the sandwich?" Sophie asked.

I was thankful I didn't have to think about my answer. "Because he was hungry," I said, and I started the engine and drove away, hoping the Pterodactyl wouldn't follow but suspecting he would.

* * *

We rolled north down Sunset, past joggers and bicyclists and old houses that were in various stages of being torn down and turned into new houses. I parked and we sat there in the car, looking out at the grey-blue water, the green ferry churning in the distance. The sun was setting, the sky turning Sophie's favorite shade of pink. I turned on the radio and offered her another bag of pretzels. She shook her head no. "Not hungry," she said.

The song on the radio was in the second chorus when the Pterodactyl finally made his move. He swooped in from nowhere, straight across the hood, his passage so close that I was sure he would come crashing through the windshield. Sophie screamed, stiffened in her seat.

"It's okay, sweetheart," I said, although I did not know this to be true, I could not verify her safety, our safety. No one could. I grabbed her little hand.

"It's okay," I said again, squeezing, and this time I was right because the Pterodactyl disappeared below the bluff and the song on the radio reached its crescendo, there was a rush of jangly guitars and cymbals were struck unabashedly and the sun burned out behind the Olympics and when the Pterodactyl returned from the depths of the prehistoric sunset he was not a Pterodactyl but a common crow, black as soot, the

snake in his mouth defeated. The fellow must not have had his fill back there at the gas station but now he'd gone and done something about it, he'd remedied the situation, and as he soared over the roof of the car and landed on the bones of some new construction back there behind us to have his dinner I started the engine and eased us back into traffic and drove Sophie to her mother's house, the whole time holding her hand, telling her I loved her, dreaming up ways to one day, God willing, be there to kiss this girl, my world, goodnight.

The Vending Machine

by Anthony Santulli

Bleary-eyed, the young bohemian gazed at a vending machine standing in the corn field. It was the largest device he had ever seen, taller than a skyscraper and wider than a lake. This was no mirage. The frame was sleek and modern, finished with an onyx coat that beamed a fuzzy fata morgana towards the horizon. The bohemian searched for any sort of serial number or electrical wires but found nothing; the machine was operating on another kind of energy entirely. All the corn behind the machine was languid and dead from no sunlight, the shadow uncoiling wildly through the earth like a fertile mare. The body was tremendous and impossible, so big it had a built-in rolling ladder just so he could see everything the machine had to offer. The rows climbed from 1-16,942, the columns from A₁-Z₉ and then α - Ω and then what the bohemian assumed to be Mandarin script. A disclaimer in the corner read:

DO NOT ROCK OR TILT THIS VENDING MACHINE – MACHINE MAY FALL OVER CAUSING SERIOUS INJURY OR EARTHQUAKE.

He climbed the ladder. Behind the streaked glass he saw objects from all the world's history and cultures. Everything, he noticed, was just \$1. But the bohemian had always been wary of machines ever since he realized how similar they were to his father and knew there must be a catch. His mother always told him never to buy anything off of impulse alone, so he began to take a mental inventory.

The bohemian spent the next four hours scouting, only stopping to blot the sweat from his sunburnt brow. If he strained his eyes to the

top of the machine, he could make out the last Twinkie ever. He saw the second, third, and final drafts of novels he hadn't started, crooked tombstones for children not yet born, college degrees signed by deans in every field, and mason jars filled with sand from every shoreline. There were dozens of vats of potent stem cells, OJ Simpson's leather glove, an autographed copy of *Mein Kampf*, gay marriage licenses, and Area 51 hangars. Here was the Holy Grail (which was not as impressive as he thought it might be), the sovereign Excalibur, Geoffrey Chaucer's corpse, and chainmail armor. Thousands of hieroglyphics and gold nuggets and mummified cats; Agent Orange canisters and Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle; *The Little Red Book* and the Tiananmen Square tanks. Somehow there were emotions on sale two for the price of one, the word that rhymes with *orange*, and an entire lunar cycle. Hundreds of keys to who-knows-what. Buried treasure, maybe, or a little girl's diary. Both possibilities were enticing to the bohemian, the kind of person who loved to exhume the past and snoop where he didn't belong.

The bohemian tried to look for all the American icons; the Golden Arches of McDonald's, scaffolding from Ground Zero, John Hancock's pen, Wyatt Earp's mustache, Jimmy Hoffa, a decaf cup of Starbucks coffee, Walt Disney's frozen head, Bruce Springsteen's guitar picks. He found all of these and more.

Of course there was useless junk, too, like kite strings and empty prescription bottles, but they all cost the same. Useful things included: a handgun (with license), the cure for cancer, 400 year old whiskey, 100% effective acne medication, a new hairdo, buried treasure, and knee-high socks. The bohemian noticed that some of the machine's coils were empty and he wondered who had been here first.

The sun was beginning to set. He slid the rolling ladder.

The bohemian realized that he was approaching his third week away from home and figured leaving must have been the best thing to ever happen to him if this was his reward. He had told the citizens of the towns many different stories about his sad past and they always offered him their moldy books in the hopes they would teach him something his parents could not. But the young bohemian had not left home to read, and he often bartered the books for bread or butcher's offal. Recently, he managed to sell a leather-bound copy of *Gulliver's Travels* to a teacher for \$3 which he kept in his billfold for emergencies.

The truth was he left home because he was tired of his old life, tired of the father who couldn't give enough and tired of the mother who scorned him for wanting too much. He also had other voices that had been guiding him away from home in one way or another for years now, tender voices that spoke about another world with second chances and softer women. When he felt his stomach growl, the bohemian resented himself for what he had done, abandoning home cooked meals and videogames for this life of—well, it wasn't much of a life at all, really.

He knew he needed sleep before he could buy anything intelligently so he lay beneath the shadow of the vending machine. The corn field was a good place for the bohemian to rest because it was different from the 21st century life he had come to despise and he thought the flies made better company than people. As he lay beneath the cool dark, he tried to count all the stars in the sky but never made it past 300 before he had to start over. The stars were brighter and more abundant here than back home where the streetlamps tend to obfuscate the night, almost as if the ozone had shed itself like an onion. The Pleiades lit up the atmosphere a blue electric and reminded him that the world was not as blank as skies can sometimes suggest, a thought that calmed him to a better sleep than he would know for years.

As he snored in the field, the bohemian dreamed of all that he could not have and thought he would never have. He always dreamed like this because he believed that if he slept for exactly twelve hours a day he would eventually lose the ability to distinguish dreams from reality and this intrigued him.

The bohemian woke as the bright orange sun was creeping above the tall stalks of husks. For a second, he panicked because he was no longer in the shadow of the vending machine but it was only because the sun had revolved as it does.

He looked at the machine. Spellbound, his tiny eyes drove across the glass until it became too intoxicating. He wanted as much as his brittle bones could carry.

The bohemian frowned. With \$3 to his name and no one around to steal from, he knew he would have to make a decision. He also knew that greed was a sin of excess but he told himself he had already sinned enough for two lifetimes and that made it okay.

The only thing standing between the bohemian and everything he ever wanted was a thick piece of glass, but he knew what he needed to do. He climbed back down the ladder and tore two miles to the other side. When he reached the keypad, he slipped three singles from his billfold and wedged one into the cash slot. He pressed the buttons for item 台北-5,672. A platform shot up inside the machine and positioned itself in front of the item; the useless kite string. The coil rolled it forward onto the platform. The machine worked flawlessly, but the bohemian did not care much for good mechanics. When the kite string fell into the giant delivery bin at the bottom, he held it to the heavens and mumbled a mangled prayer for the first time since his grandmother died, but his father had forced him to say that one.

Another dollar. π -559. He waited. After the sound of the machine stopped, he pulled out a sewing needle from the bin and prayed again. He hoped God would forgive him his trespasses and understand the situation. For a second, he thought about what this machine was doing in the middle of a corn field of all places, but then he asked himself the same question and remembered that questions are for keeping conversations going.

With the needle, he pricked a small hole into the top of his final dollar bill. He had saved the best for last; a crisp one that looked fresh out of the Mint except for the *Where's George?* stamp above the serial number. He looped the string through the dollar's hole. He planned to insert the dollar into the slot until it registered and quickly pull it out to be reused. It was a trick he'd learned from years of television but had never actually tried. The bohemian licked his lips, wrapped the string around his index finger so tight it turned his nail purple.

He pushed in the dollar and the machine spit it back out in disgust. The bohemian grabbed the bill. It was wrinkled and torn at the corners. Panicked, he smoothed the dollar on the seat of his pants and shoved it in again, keeping his fingers on the slot to stop it from coming out. The vending machine whirred, beeped, and burped. It would not accept his dirty money. He tried again with similar results. And repeat. Every time the dollar became more useless.

Desperate and impotent, he crawled into the delivery bin to see if he could cheat his way through but it was hot as a furnace inside and made of aluminum. The bohemian screamed in searing pain as the machine cooked him. He quickly jumped out of the bin, his frail body now burned all over and sweating out the last of his energy. He cursed the machine in ancient tongues. He tried to break the glass but could not. He saw his reflection in the glass and aimed for the acne-pocked face that stared back at him and looked too tired for words. He did all

of this because he realized that he had always been the enemy and he knew nobody would believe otherwise, not even his parents. For hours he banged on that window, raw and howling until the pale moon fell and his knuckles bled and he cried himself to sleep and dreamed of everything he had that he wished he could get rid of forever, the LED glow of the vending machine the only light around.

When morning rose in the corn field the bohemian rose with it, deflated. He looked to make sure the machine hadn't disappeared overnight. To his horror, it was still there, reflecting sunbeams off its window. No, it had not been a dream, but what did that word mean, anyway? To him it did not matter what you called it because he had slept twelve hours and that made all the difference. He spit on the glass that was now painted with dry blood and picked a few ears of corn for later but he wasn't sure if there was going to be a later or if there was even a now or a was. The bohemian hadn't been sure of anything for years and this was the only thing he was actually sure of anymore, a truth that most likely explained why leaving hadn't meant as much to him as he thought it would. If anything it only made him scared of himself and the pain he hadn't known was trapped inside his fifteen short years like a taxidermied grizzly. His wounds were still throbbing and warm, his body emaciated. He had to keep moving.

The bohemian walked and turned and shallow breathing stopped him at times but still he walked but the field was eternal. No matter how far he went in any direction he was always standing in the cool shadow of the great vending machine. He saw the black box monolithic and mocking in the distance even when he was sure he had walked the length of an entire ocean. And when the sun did finally dip below the horizon and he could not see the machine anymore, he rested. His stomach growled, one of the many voices that had been the catalyst for his entirely sad state of affairs.

Not really feeling much of anything except the hunger pangs, the young bohemian grabbed ears of corn by the dozen all raw and dusty and golden yellow. There was enough to feed him for weeks. So he feasted.

Issue 15 Contributors

Contributors

Anne Anthony is a writer and photographer living in North Carolina. She has been published in *Poetry South*, *Firewords Quarterly*, *Grief Diaries*, *Easy Street*, *Literary Orphans*, and other literary journals. She was selected as the Gold Writer in the ArtAscent Art & Literature Journal's September 2016 issue for her poem, *High Horse*.

Paul Beckman's story, "Healing Time" was one of the winners in the 2016 The Best Small Fictions and his 100 word story, "Mom's Goodbye" was chosen as the winner of the 2016 Fiction Southeast Editor's Prize. His stories are widely published in print and online in the following magazines amongst others: *Connecticut Review*, *Raleigh Review*, *Litro*, *Playboy*, *Pank*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Flash Frontier*, *Matter Press*, *Metazen*, *Jellyfish Magazine*, *Thrice Fiction* and *Literary Orphans*. His latest collection, *Peek*, weighed in at 65 stories and 120 pages. Paul lives in Connecticut and earned his MFA from Bennington College. His published story website is www.paulbeckmanstories.com and blog is www.pincusb.com

Tara Campbell [www.taracampbell.com] is a Washington, D.C.-based writer. With a BA in English and an MA in German, she has a demonstrated aversion to money and power. Tara is an assistant fiction editor at *Barrelhouse* and volunteers with children's literacy organization 826DC. Prior publication credits include *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *The Establishment*, *Barrelhouse*, *Masters Review*, *Punchnel's* and *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, among others. Her debut novel, *TreeVolution*, was released in November.

Sheldon Lee Compton is the author of three books, most recently the novel *Brown Bottle* (Bottom Dog Press, 2016). His stories can be found in *Gravel*, *WhiskeyPaper*, *New World Writing*, *PANK*, *Monkeybicycle*, *DOGZPLOT*, *Spelk*, and elsewhere. He was cited in *Best Small Fictions 2015* and *Best Small Fictions 2016*.

Carrie Cook received her MA in Creative Writing from Kansas State University and is currently living in Colorado with her husband and dogs. Her work has appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *The Columbia Review*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Menacing Hedge*, and *Gravel*.

Kate Crosby's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *The Journal*, *The Bellingham Review*, and *Beechers Magazine*. She lives and writes and teaches in the greater Boston area.

Christina Dalcher is a theoretical linguist from the Land of Styron and Barbecue, where she writes, teaches, and channels Shirley Jackson. Her short work appears in *After the Pause*, *McSweeney's*, and *New South Journal*, among others; her novels feature a tall, dark, and gorgeous phonetician who solves knotty problems. She's a 2016 Best of the Net nominee, and likes her pillows soft and flat. Find her at christinadalcher.com.

Timothy DeLizza would like to thank *Bartleby Snopes* for eight years of stories and for being the first publisher to pay him. His novella *Office Design* will be released as a Kindle Single by Amazon.com in February 2017. His complete publication history may be found here: <http://www.timothy-delizza.com/list-of-works/>

Caleb Echterling's New Year's resolution is to write more stories in the 4th person, as soon as he figures out how to break the 5th wall into the 6th dimension. His work has appeared in *Jersey Devil Press* and *Twisted Sister Lit Mag*, among others. He tweets funny fiction using the highly original handle @CalebEchterling. You can find more of his writing at www.calebechterling.com.

Sarah Rose Etter is the author of *Tongue Party* (Caketrain Press). Her work has appeared in *Salt Hill Journal*, *Black Warrior Review*, and *The Collagist*. She is the co-founder of the *TireFire Reading Series* and a contributing editor at *The Fanzine*. www.sarahroseetter.com.

David Hammond works as a web developer and lives in Northern Virginia with three females who are way more talented than he is. More of his writing can be found at oldshoepress.com.

Shaun Hayes lives and writes in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley, where he is an adjunct professor of English at DeSales University. His short stories have been published in *Bewildering Stories*, *Dark Fire Fiction*, and other publications. He is currently working on his first novel.

Sara Jacobelli has worked numerous jobs including dishwasher, bus girl, bartender, newspaper reporter, private investigator's assistant, special education teacher, and librarian. She lives in New Orleans and writes fiction and nonfiction. Her work has been published in various places including *Drunk Monkeys Literary Magazine*, *First Stop Fiction*, *Fiction on the Web*, *The Story Shack*, *Page & Spine*, *Postcard Shorts*, *The New Laurel Review*, and *The New York Times Metropolitan Diary*.
Blog: <https://capitareafagiolo.wordpress.com/>

Christopher James lives, works and writes in Jakarta, Indonesia. He has previously been published online in many venues, including *Tin House*, *McSweeney's*, *Smokelong*, and *Wigleaf*. He is the editor of *Jellyfish Review*.

Caroline Kepnes is from Cape Cod, Massachusetts. She is the author of *YOU* and *HIDDEN BODIES*. Stephen King describes her writing as “hypnotic...never read anything like it”. Caroline earned a BA in American Civilization at Brown University and worked as a pop culture journalist—*Entertainment Weekly*—and a TV writer—*7th Heaven*. She now writes full-time and lives in Los Angeles.

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