

# NONBINARY REVIEW

ISSUE #32



# EPIC FAIL

NonBinary Review #32  
Edited by Lise Quintana

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# NONBINARY REVIEW

Issue Thirty-Two

Epic Fail



Zoetic Press

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# NONBINARY REVIEW

**NonBinary Review**  
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# Escaping the Cult of Success

When I first envisioned this issue, I thought about what it means to fail. I've failed so many times in my life—sometimes because of my own choices, sometimes because of things outside of my control. I'd like to think that my failures have been small(ish) because I'm not too proud to say “that was a mistake” and change direction. Just ask my three ex-husbands. On the other hand, there's a feeling that I've come to know well. It's the feeling in the pit of your stomach just before the car spins out of control, just after you've hit “send” on an angry email, just as you get to your front door and realize your keys are not in your pocket. It's that certain knowledge that you have failed.

There's something called the “sunk cost fallacy,” which is the tendency to stick with an unsuccessful course of action just because you've invested a lot of time, money, or effort into it. We've all looked at a problem we've been sweating over and said “I've come this far—I can't just quit now!” The problem with the sunk cost fallacy is that most catastrophic failures happen incrementally, and the promise of success is always tantalizingly near. It's the basis of multi-level marketing scams, where victims are promised that they will start raking in the cash if they buy just one more round of products, or attend one more high-priced sales conference, or convince one more friend to join. And, like any pyramid scheme, when it inevitably comes crashing down, it's the kind of shitshow that people love to talk about, dissect, and gloat over.

In the US, we have an individualistic culture that encourages us to be blind to the cost of success. Americans have generated a ton of inspirational quotes that encourage us to always look forward toward success, rather than backward at the costs:

Failure is not an option. *Gene Kranz, chief flight director for NASA*

Second place is the first loser. *Dale Earnhardt, race car driver*

All our dreams can come true if we have the courage to pursue them. *Walt Disney, cartoonist and entrepreneur*

Energy and persistence conquer all things. *Benjamin Franklin, American colonial statesman*

Eyes on the prize. *Alice Wine, civil rights activist*

Even though many of these quotes came from real leaders in circumstances where lives or freedoms were at risk, they have been co-opted by advertising firms, who have used them to keep people buying more products to achieve success (or at least the accoutrements of success), rather than examining their failures.

It's the mentality that fosters our belief that success is just around the corner. It's the mentality that leads people to double down on their mistakes. It's the mentality that sets people up for epic failure, because epic failure is never just one bad decision—it's one bad decision that leads to another, and another, and another.

Personally, I love epic fail stories that fall into one of two categories: hilarious and tragic. (If there's another category, let me know.) Hilarious epic failures seem to be the basis of every television sitcom: Lucy wants help promote Ricky's show, so she puts on a disguise and passes herself off as visiting royalty. Aunt Bea wants to save some money, so she buys an entire side of beef. Rob wants Laura to stop opening his mail, so he writes a comedy sketch about her. (Can you tell I haven't watched any sitcom produced after I was born?) Each failure is so outrageous that you can't help but laugh, and the longer they go on, the funnier they are. But you know that if you were ever in the same situation, without the laugh track, without the “whomp whomp” background music, it wouldn't be funny at all.

Contrast this with tragic epic fail stories, or what I like to call “the bad judgement train.” Once the characters board the bad judgement train, there's no getting off until the spectacular, grisly train wreck. One of the best examples of this genre is the novel *House of Sand and Fog* by Andre Dubus III. It starts out with a woman who neglects to pay the tax bill on a house she has inherited. When the house is mistakenly sold, the desperate woman makes a series of increasingly awful decisions that ultimately end in death. The tragedy of these stories is their sense of “there, but for the grace of God, go I.” Any one of us could have made any one of

those decisions if we had been in the same circumstances. Tragic epic fail stories are the accidents we can't look away from because looking at them allows us to feel good about not being in that situation.

Epic failure stories are important not because they serve as object lessons, but because they enforce the notion of our shared humanity. There is not a single person among us who hasn't made a mistake—who hasn't experienced failure. We are imperfect beings, and we learn by making mistakes and then examining what led to those mistakes. None of us wants to think of ourselves as nothing but the sum of our failures, and yet how often do we label others by the mistakes they've made? If grudge holding was aerobic, most of us would be thinner than supermodels.

We invite you into this issue to examine some epic failures, and we challenge you to look beyond the comedy or tragedy to find the humanity.

A handwritten signature in dark blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'L' followed by a series of overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Lise Quintana  
Editor in Chief



We are all failures -  
at least the best of  
us are.

J. M. Barrie





# Mistakes were Made

Mia Dalia

I didn't mean to blow up the Moon. Of course, I didn't. I was aiming for the asteroid. *We* were aiming for the asteroid; I think it's important to remember that this was very much a team effort.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak, to be able to tell my story, to defend myself. I regret the occasion, and I do think a tribunal might be an overreaction, but alas, here we are.

I shall try to be brief out of respect for your time. I will say mistakes were made. That's what everyone says, don't they? However, I find myself in a unique opportunity to give those mistakes a historical context based on my extensive education as a historian. Did you not know this? Surely, this was in your records. I specialized in 21st-century history. I didn't get into science until later in life. The standards were so relaxed by then, I hardly required retraining. I would go so far as to say there wasn't adequate training/education provided. But let us focus on the more salient points of this endeavor.

It all began in the early 21st century, when a series of increasingly unfortunate political events and questionable choices gave rise to the Sci-De movement known then as science deniers. Does anyone remember this? Those among you of the younger generations have felt its effects without even knowing it. Your school-books, I assure you, were different than those of your predecessors. You probably don't remember when history began to be rewritten to streamline it to modern values. Well, after that, it began to be obliterated altogether; not so much rewritten as reimagined into something that made people more comfortable.

Science was the next victim of that mentality. Global warming dialectics were making people uncomfortable, so they did away with those. Everyone wanted to hold on to their planet-devastating yet oh so lucrative resources like coal and oil and so they did. The money talked and everyone listened.

Did it help that by then the money and the power were one and the same? You bet. The highest offices of power in the largest countries in the world were turning into dictator-for-life posts, and the narrative was shifting rapidly. People didn't notice or care or were too distracted by their phones and reality tv, but their lives were changing, the world around them was changing.

Their unfairly elected demagogues told them lies, and they bought it, hook, line, and sinker, because it was easy and the path of least resistance gleamed irresistibly—the yellow brick road of our time was paved with lies.

And the thing with lies isn't just that they change a fact or two here and there, it's that they become so prevalent that they change the very fabric of our reality, the very concept of truth, facts, knowledge.

The inconvenient was done away with and what is more inconvenient than science—the incontrovertible empirical procession of conclusions based on provable facts and data—that was telling people what they didn't want to hear, trying to restrict their rampant consumption, their ubiquitous wastefulness, their thoughtless ways.

I remember when schools began to drop it from their curriculums. It was a dark day indeed. The loss of funding for scientific agencies followed. NASA became a place that survived off the donations of supporters the way PBS used to do back in the day.

What's PBS, you ask? It's a viewer-sponsored tv station that used to feature intelligent programming. It went under decades ago.

SETI was shut down permanently. Many observatories dedicated specifically to detecting early extraterrestrial threats were closed or refurbished into luxury glamping hotels.

Science became a niche field. Underfunded, underappreciated, underrespected. I apologize, the latter might not be a real word, language studies were largely dropped from popular education after the English-or-bust campaign of the 2160s.

At any rate, as you can plainly see, the odds were stacked against us from the very start. The asteroid didn't get detected until much too late and only because Teddy Larson, a 12-year-old boy in Nebraska, detected it with his homemade telescope and his father, Teddy Larson Sr., was determined enough to contact everyone he could think of to raise alert. Did you know it took him months to just be put in contact with someone who would take him seriously? Crucial, crucial months we could have used.

By the time NASA learned of this threat and made it public, it was already almost too late. Not quite, but almost. Our fearless leader made fun of it calling it the Larsonator, remember that? It set the mood for the public perception and media coverage. It certainly didn't help with the funding. The mission was cobbled together only because the richest man in the world decided it would make for a good promotion for his business. As if the man needed further business—he already had a monopoly on so many things. But alas, gifted horse and all that.

He funded the mission, using, to his credit, mostly genuine scientists, and there we were. With one shot to save the world. From an asteroid threat most didn't believe in. Passing near the Moon that a not-insignificant percentage of the population nowadays think of as a giant wheel of cheese. With dated calculations equipment that was mere steps up from an abacus.

Why me? Well, the thing is, I was only selected to be the mission commander after the initial commander's—our sponsor's son's—tragic death. Turns out he had some incorrect beliefs about space and gravity. Not ideas—as his mentor, I taught him better than that—but *beliefs*.

And so, it was left up to me and I tried my best and I'm sorry I failed. But really, how much blame should I shoulder in this situation? And does it really matter anymore? Do you know what's going to happen to Earth now without Moon? Would you like to learn? No. Ok. Well...Sorry. Now what?

# The New Gods

Louis Faber

From their two-bedroom apartment  
on the outer edge of Cupertino,  
the Gods evicted from Olympus  
are creating their pulsating metahell.  
They know how easily we, lemmings  
enchanted by the sparkling void,  
offer ourselves up in sacrifice, always  
wanting still another gigabyte,  
entranced by the idea of the Deus  
ex machina, blind to our own truth.  
They promise us eternity, a heaven  
of a parallel binary universe,  
redemption for our electronic souls.  
We are afraid to enter, afraid  
to leave, wrapped in our digital stasis.  
We want things as they were,  
we want things as we imagine them,  
our virtual reality rendered real.  
The Gods laugh silently, knowing  
the knock on the door is coming,  
the eviction to happen yet again  
for non-payment of compassion,  
and they wait for the ultimate  
blue screen as the matrix collapses.

# The Paper Cut

Jeff Fleischer

Stupid paper cuts.

There aren't many things more infuriating than a deep paper cut. An infinitesimal fragment of a second earlier, your finger feels absolutely normal, and then there's that sudden, stinging, sharp pain that feels like it will never go away. The blood starts seeping out instantly. Before you even realize you've been cut, there's bright red fluid all over your finger, usually getting on the rest of your hand.

Most of the time, not much comes of it. You suck the blood off your finger for a couple seconds, throw on a bandage. No big deal.

Not this time.

In an example of remarkable dumb luck, the piece of paper Jason Rollins happened to accidentally slash across his finger also happened to contain an original ink landscape by Masaki Okajima, one of the seminal artists of imperial Japan. Okajima, along with most of his life's work, was forever lost during the Allied bombardment of Tokyo. That made this piece of paper irreplaceable, and therefore extremely valuable.

Less valuable than it was now that it had a long streak of Jason's blood on it, but no less irreplaceable.

The reality of what had happened dawned on Jason quickly, though that fragment of a second didn't let him react in time to stop it. Like the time he'd locked his car keys in the car, part of his brain saw it coming, but couldn't fire his synapses fast enough to do anything about it.

The situation was bad enough for Jason, but made worse by this being his first day as an assistant collections manager after five years as a docent, tour guide and curator. He couldn't think of a worse way to ingratiate himself with the collections chair, Charlotte Kincaid, than to destroy a priceless work on day one. Getting fired was a sure thing, and he couldn't very well get his old job back either. Just fired, if he was lucky. They could sue him too, take his house and his car and his bank account as partial compensation.

He'd been so careful with the exhibit, which made things more disappointing. He'd taken each piece from one frame to another with the utmost care, touching them gently at the edges to prevent sweat or prints getting on the artwork. Now he wished he'd used gloves instead.

Jason's brain ran through the stages of grief until he settled on reevaluation. He could hear Ms. Kincaid's high heels echoing through the mostly empty museum hallway, and knew she'd be in his workspace soon, not giving him much time for a solution or explanation.

He grabbed a rag from the eyeglass case in his pocket, and started dabbing the blood. This succeeded in removing some of it, but more was already dry and—Jason realized to his horror—while he'd kept the cut finger off the paper, blood had gotten onto the palm of his hand. Some had rubbed off onto the drawing, leaving a prominent red streak.

Already in for a pound, Jason quietly walked to the men's room, holding the ink drawing behind his body to make sure no passing docent could see what he was doing. Once inside, he checked each stall to make sure he was alone, used the trash can to block the door, and gingerly placed the drawing down so that it straddled two sinks. Looking at it, he saw the blood had spread down the page faster than he'd realized. He noticed that the artist's signature was in red characters, and hoped for a second that such a fact might prove useful. But the seventy-year-old ink maintained a more vibrant hue than did the minutes-old dry blood.

His next idea was to dampen a paper towel and try to wash off the blood. At first, the faucet released no water, so he turned the handle more, and was greeted with a sudden blast of cold water that splattered onto the paper. Jason attempted to wipe the droplets with a paper towel, but the water and the pressure from his hand

combined to make Okajima's ink run. The leaves of his trees now looked as if they were falling and blown by a mighty wind, but only in the most impressionist sense. The sun appeared to be melting, and the seawater looked too much like real water. Jason considered turning these explanations into his presentation, trying to pass them off as the artist's intent. Maybe Ms. Kincade didn't know the piece that well... Jason realized that was a stupid idea. This wasn't quite the Mona Lisa suddenly crying or David losing an arm, but it was still an obvious desecration of an iconic piece.

Jason considered making a run for it, just taking the drawing and getting out of there. That idea died quickly. He'd clocked in, so everyone knew he was in the building, and the drawing had some kind of sensor he didn't understand that protected it against theft.

As he wrapped a paper towel around his cut finger to try denying the wound any air, he realized he had no plan at all. He was stuck in the men's room with the carcass of one of the great works of the twentieth century. He looked at the drawing again. Now stained. Now water damaged. He could hear his boss's heels echoing again, getting louder as she entered the gallery he'd been assigned. She would know the drawing was missing in a matter of seconds.

Stupid paper cuts.

# Mask Gleaners

Donald Patten



Mask Gleaners. 2022. 18 x 24. Charcoal on Paper.

## Artist Statement:

Almost overnight, COVID-19 has changed the way people interact with each other, and with our own bodies. We live our lives in vulnerability during this historically significant time of disaster. Our lives may get better, or they may not. We don't know when this pandemic will end, and we're desperate for hope.

In the past, significant painters, the old masters, would depict historically significant disasters that happened to them as a way to cope. As an artist that is learning the techniques of these masters, I have the opportunity to create long-lasting visual information that depicts the trauma of this pandemic. I have always been optimistic and appreciative of humor, even more so now in this troubled time we live in. I get through each day by trying to laugh during these difficult times. I do not feel that I'm the only person that wishes to laugh right now.

I created a series of charcoal drawings that reference past master artworks and placed them in COVID related situations for comedic effect. This artwork, Mask Gleaners is based off the oil painting Gleaners by Jean-François Millet in 1857. This drawing depicts peasant workers collecting piles of disposable face masks, while the original depicts them gleaning piles of grain.



# The Dark Zone

Craig Crawford

The first reports surfaced in June after Covid started waning and the fights overseas reigned themselves in. We thought the world finally started to calm down.

Until the eastern border between France and Switzerland went dark.

My phone lit up with odd messages all day talking about a whiteout of communications in France. The Wi-Fi and all phone signals went dead in a ten mile radius along their borders. I didn't think much about it until I pulled into the driveway. Janey beat me home from the office, her SUV already parked in the garage. I walked in the door only to see Janey perched like a gargoyle on the edge of our cushy couch, her feet up on the cushion. She barely acknowledged me, her eyes centered on the TV. Her hands wrapped around the back of her head, her fingers clasped and nestled in the depths of her black, billowy hair.

"Where are the kids?" I asked, dropping my bag and losing my coat. Emma and Dani usually took over the living room after school, pretending to do school work while watching the latest cartoons.

"I made them go upstairs to do their homework," she answered without turning away. "You hear about any of this at work?"

I headed to the couch and plopped down next to her. The news channel Janey found showed a version of Google Maps, except a black spot hovered over part of France and Switzerland. The big red letters, "Breaking Newz!" littered the bottom of the screen. "I got updates from my phone. They have a big power outage?"

"Steven, they lost all communications a little before noon. Even the satellites can't pick anything up. See the black area?" She pointed at the screen. "The French military doesn't have any answers. They did a flyover and two jets crashed."

I frowned. "Someone shoot them down?"

"They don't think so. The last transmissions from the pilots said their gauges failed and they lost power." For the first time since walking through the door, Janey looked at me. "You know where that's at, don't you?"

I, in fact, did not. Running numbers and managing the books for a variety of small businesses around town, I honestly didn't pay much attention to the rest of the world aside from Covid. Janey was my perfect counterpart because she watched the news daily, tuning into things overseas as well as at home.

Shaking my head gave her the green light to fill me in. "It's where they built the Hadron Collider."

"Oh," I said, but it didn't explain anything for me.

"It's where they smash atoms and experiment with all kinds of particles."

"Is that what started this?" I asked.

Janey's eyebrows scrunched. "Nobody knows. They haven't sent anyone into the dark zone to find out."

"Could the collider thing cause a blackout like that?"

The scene on the television flipped and Janey ignored my question. A man on the screen sitting behind a desk in a dark suit eyed the cameras. "We've been informed the French military is sending platoons in to the Dark Zone. They're being accompanied by a science team to determine the cause. We will keep you updated as we receive additional information."

"You want me to make dinner?" I asked.

“This is serious stuff, Steven.”

“I get it, but we still have to eat. You watch. I’ll cook.”

I ran up and changed my clothes, checking in on our six and eight year old monsters. Calm and friendly most of the time, they had their limits. They quizzed me down about watching TV before dinner, but I told them Mom commandeered the screen until after. I received frowns in response, but told them they could help me with chicken and pasta.

It’s an easy evening go-to for everyone and the kids decided they could live with it.

I headed back down but Janey snapped her fingers at me. “The circumference of the dark zone has doubled since they first measured it.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means the communications blackout is almost twenty miles across now. Whatever’s happening is still going on.”

“What’s going on, Momma?” Dani asked.

“Oh, it’s okay, sweets,” Janes answered. “I’m just watching the news. Something . . . goofy is happening in France. I just want to watch to figure it out.”

“Can we watch too?” Emma asked.

“You go help your dad,” she said. “I’ll let you know if anything happens.”

“Yeah,” I intervened. “You can help me boil the water and cook the chicken. C’mon.”

I distracted the girls putting them to work. In twenty minutes I assembled a big bowl of pasta covered in butter and garlic, with filets of grilled chicken, and green peas to add some color. I forced Janey to join us at the table, turning down the volume down while we ate.

Janey kept peeking back at the television every few minutes.

Deciding she was hooked, I corralled the kids into helping clean up and then we did let them take over the TV. Janey headed upstairs and I knew I was on my own for the evening. Whatever was happening piqued her attention and I knew my wife well enough to know she wasn’t letting go until the media solved the mystery for her.

I helped with homework and bedtime rituals, content to play Dad for the evening. I love my one-on-one time with the girls and it wasn’t hard to read stories and get them settled for bed. Janey showed in the doorway to hand out hugs and kisses and chat a bit, freeing me to head back downstairs.

The TV had switched back to Janey’s favorite news channel.

“We’re confirming four platoons of soldiers and the research team marched into what the military is referring to as the Dark Zone an hour ago and have yet to be heard from,” the news anchor announced. “As was stated earlier, this Dark Zone is devoid of Wi-Fi or communication systems. Reports from the ground tell us there are no visible signs of what caused the blackout and no one from inside Cern has emerged to offer explanations.

“The U.S. has offered assistance and NATO is convening to offer support from nearby nations.”

Janey joined me downstairs. “They’re out,” she said. “Any word from the troops who went in?”

“No. Guess they’ve been in there for over an hour but since it’s a dead zone, they obviously can’t answer. Apparently it’s dark like night inside the circle. How does that work?”

She dropped down next to me on the couch and took my hand. “I don’t think anyone knows.”

“Hey, it’s going to be fine,” realizing Janey was completely freaked out. “Just some communications glitch. It doesn’t mean anything bad happened.”

She shrugged. “I know. It’s probably nothing, but I’ve heard all the conspiracies tied to Cern and the collider.”

“Conspiracies?”

“There’s been all kinds of talk about what they’re experimenting with in there. I’ve read articles about them possibly accidentally triggering something big enough to destroy the planet.”

“Seriously?”

“I don’t know, but there’s been talk about them trying to secretly open doors to other universes or other worlds.”

“Is this what has you all bunged up?” I asked.

“It . . . it just feels weird. With everything else that’s happened in the last few years, this doesn’t feel like a good thing. And it’s dark in there. What’s that tell you?”

We watched off and on for the next hour, me grabbing a book and only half paying attention. I managed to doze off after fifty pages.

Janey shook me awake. “Steven.”

I snapped up, my book thudding to the floor. I caught Janey’s eyes and saw raw concern behind them. “What is it? Are the kids okay?”

She gestured toward the TV. I yawned and eyed the clock on the wall. It told me I’d slept for over an hour and a half, assuring me I wouldn’t get to bed for a while. Turning to the TV I spied our news guy behind his desk.

“Reporting through our affiliates, we’re passing along what sounds incredible, but our sources have confirmed it. The Zone has expanded to forty miles from the epicenter of the black out. It’s been steadily expanding evenly in all directions since the start of the incident.”

The announcer cocked his head sideways. “I’m being told we’re linking to a live crew on the scene. Please stand by while we connect.”

“Steven,” Janey said, “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I said, starting to feel the anxiety building like Janey.

The screen stayed on the announcer for another minute and then the picture switched to a French newswoman standing in front of a camera. I’d taken French in high school but that had been over a decade ago. She spoke in a flurry of words and thankfully a translator scrolled at the bottom of the screen or I would have been lost. Janey and I both sat transfixed on the words as they rolled by.

“The military commanders won’t let us any closer,” translated at the bottom of the screen. “We’ve seen a squadron of Dassault Rafale fighter jets go overhead toward the Zone. They veered off before entering the area where earlier aircraft lost power. As you can see from over my shoulder the infected area is black like the sun won’t shine inside.”

Sure enough, a wall of blackness shown in the background. Janey and I entwined fingers. Obviously no one still had any answers even after several hours.

“Four hundred soldiers entered the area an hour ago but it’s been quiet since a series of gunfire and explosions. Two soldiers remerged but we don’t know what they discovered.” A young man ran into scene and whispered into the reporter’s ear. After a quick exchange he ducked out of the frame.

“I’ve just been told the military is going to launch missiles into the Zone, detonating them at the periphery edge before electronics can fail. We were instructed to retreat to a safe distance. Please stay with us while we reposition ourselves.”

Janey and I watched as the news crew climbed into a boxy looking SUV and took off, the camera still rolling. She squeezed my hand. “I can’t take much more of this,” she said. “Between the pandemic, the shortages, Russia and everything else, I don’t need even one more mess.”

“I know,” I replied, squeezing back. “It’s going to be okay. They’ll figure this thing out too. We could watch something else,” I tried.

“Not until we see what happens. I’ll never sleep if we turn it off now.”

The SUV swung back for a handful of bumpy minutes before grinding to a halt. The reporter exited, the camera giving us a view over her shoulder. The dark wall seemed to spread across the field for miles. It rose up in the air almost like a dome, bending back toward the original center.

“What the heck?” I muttered.

The reporter cleared her throat, brushing her shoulder length hair out of her face. “I’m being told the missiles will launch in less than two minutes.”

We watched in anticipation, not speaking. All at once we heard the roar and rush of missiles. Two of them fire overhead, ripping across the sky. They seemed to reach the edge of the dark wall in no time and they exploded in a billow of fire just before entering the blackness.

For moments we only watched the smoke, debris filling the sky in a cloud.

We both jumped as a screech drowned out the sounds of the explosions. Long and echoing it bellowed, reverberating against the camera mic. My eyes widened.

In the distance, a giant, dark clawed arm reached from beyond the wall. It slammed down into the ground and a guttural wail followed. Higher up, taller than a four story building, something black passed through the wall. An eye as big as the largest weather balloon look down on everyone.

“What have they done?” Janey whispered.

I muttered obscenities. “I thought 2020 and 2021 were bad . . .”

# Of Biblical Proportions

Ian Tash

Latin women pray  
In harmony of purpose  
They pray for an end to the drought they face  
in California's deserts.  
An angel translates this  
Now kicking himself about  
how he slacked off in Spanish class  
only recognizing *agua*  
makes up the other words  
and hands his boss these butchered prayers.

He doesn't check it  
before the request's approved  
And no one's maintained the text of Noah's contract very well  
No Lock-Out-Tag-Out  
before the gate was opened  
and flooded the world sans ark.



# The Lights Are On In The Work Trailers

Lawrence Bridges

The lights are on in the work trailers this dark morning which spells crisis when the upstream dam is nearly finished. A failed moral obligation to warn the canyon people and the farmers below of an imminent deluge will guarantee a pariah's public life for years. I lift up the morning with my arms outstretched knowing I'm jammed up and can get nothing done here. The truth is I'd be dead by now by most statistics so this is a time unknown that can't be limned with silly formality. I know I don't fit in and my pants are ridiculous and tiny.

# Red Sea Holiday

Marco Etheridge

Patricia Banks's murder was not a pleasant sort of killing, nor was it completely unexpected. Her husband had threatened her murder many times, most often at breakfast. After forty-three years of passable married life, Mrs. Banks accepted Mr. Banks' threats as part of the give and take of any solid marriage.

Douglas Banks would glare across his plate of bacon and eggs and declare his strong desire to strangle Patricia, usually waving a triangle of buttered toast to emphasize his murderous intent. Mrs. Banks acknowledged her husband's dire utterances with a wry smile and a 'yes, dear' or 'please pass the jam, dear.'

Two decades of hearing of her impending death rendered Patricia immune to the possibility that Douglas could or would ever follow through. Frankly, she did not believe her mild-mannered husband had it in him.

In the months that led to her tragic demise, Mrs. Banks might have avoided her murder at the hands of Mr. Banks, but her insistence that they travel to Egypt proved fatal.

Patricia was fond of women's magazines and subscribed to several. She came across an article that extolled the virtues of travel as a means to broaden horizons and breathe new life into a stale marriage. Patricia brandished this particular article at breakfast, the quoting of which pleased Douglas Banks not at all. He declared quite firmly that his horizons were broad enough at present. She insisted, with greater firmness, that travel they would, travel they shall, and Egypt would be their destination.

Egypt itself is probably not to blame for Patricia's murder. Travel was not an unknown experience for the Bankses. Douglas and Patricia made a yearly trek to the seaside, always to the same resort. When available, Douglas preferred the same room. Despite the inevitable minor skirmishes, Patricia Banks returned home from these holidays very much alive. Having survived decades of seaside sojourns, she had no reason to suspect that a simple change of venue would prove fatal.

On a Tuesday morning, the couple set out on their adventure. Patricia bubbled with excitement, while Douglas simmered in a pool of resentment. They survived the flight to Hurghada on the Red Sea coast. They survived the taxi transfer to their Egyptian resort, although by a narrower margin.

Douglas Banks was appalled by the barren desert running right down to the shores of the Red Sea. He remained vocal on this point for the duration of the cab ride. Back home, one knew where the shrubbery ended and the beach began. Here in Egypt, the blasted desert collided with the bloody sea. How was a man to tell desert from beach?

Patricia claimed it was so simple a child could grasp the notion. The sandy area between the resort buildings and the sea was the beach. The larger bit outside the resort that ran to the far horizon was desert. She urged him to look towards the sea and all would be well.

Their first Egyptian dinner was not a happy affair. Patricia found it exotic. She could feel their horizons broadening there and then. Douglas, on the other hand, wished the horizon would shrink sufficiently that he would find himself back in his own land, the seaside at the Shady Manor, dining on familiar food and looking forward to the creaking door of good old room number eleven.

Douglas Banks might have avoided his role as an uxoricide had circumstances altered ever so slightly. If, for example, the heat had been less beastly, or the wind less blustery, his wife might be living still.

Proper sausage could have saved Patricia's life, not mystery meat pressed round a skewer and grilled black. And all the baksheesh in his pockets could not secure a pork chop. A hungry man is a desperate man, and desperation calls for action. The seed of Patricia's grisly murder had lain dormant for decades, but it germinated on the shore of the Red Sea.

While the heat and wind and dearth of edible food most certainly contributed to the impending tragedy, it was what happened after their meals that pushed Douglas to administer the coup de grâce.

Douglas Bank was a man who abhorred lavatory noises. Back home—blessed sanctuary!—there was a solid wall betwixt bathroom and bedroom. Likewise in room eleven at the Shady Manor. One's ears were spared the grunting and splashing that could drive a normally sedate man to rash actions. Not so at this twice-damned resort on the Egyptian coast.

The resort consisted of a semi-circle of white-washed stone cottages, each with a domed roof. Patricia gushed, calling the huts quaint and rustic. Douglas thought them tomb-like, bleached skeletal teeth protruding from the barren desert.

Inside their appointed cottage, a stone wall demarked bathroom from bedroom, but not completely. A gap yawned between the top of the wall and the domed roof, a segment of open air through which sound passed as easily as an Arabian wind.

Patricia Banks had always been a demonstrative defector. It was in her nature. Douglas knew this about her, but long years of stout walls shielded him from suffering confirmation of his wife's boisterousness. Now, here on this forsaken desert shore, the full brunt of her loo labors was brought home to him with striking audible clarity. It was more than a common man could bear.

In hindsight—if the dead are afforded hindsight—Patricia may have survived a holiday of seven days' duration. Alas, she booked the Egyptian seaside for ten, although she did not live to see the ninth.

The fateful morning dawned bright and desolate, just as the days preceding it had. Their breakfast that morning was as awful as the previous seven had been. Returning to the ridiculous stone cottage, Mrs. Banks ensconced herself in the lavatory. Mr. Banks threw himself into the single uncomfortable chair in the cramped bedroom. Then began the ordeal: a chorus of huffs, heavy exhalations, and satisfied groans.

The cacophony echoed off the tiles and flooded through the hateful gap between wall and dome. Douglas Banks plugged his ears, but his efforts were futile. The volume was simply too great to be silenced.

He thought of fleeing, but the barrenness that awaited him outside was fully as horrible as the noises within. He was trapped. His desperation was that of a wild animal with its hind leg pinioned between steel jaws. And just as a panicked creature will gnaw off a captured limb to free itself, Douglas Banks resorted to drastic measures to escape the writhing torment that engulfed him.

The last thread of his civilizing restraint snapped. A single heartbeat later, Douglas rose from his chair and stalked to the bathroom door. He did not hesitate. The knob turned under his hand and the door flew open, much to Patricia's wide-mouthed astonishment. Before she could screech in protest, her husband yanked the lingerie cord from its reel above the toilet.

Douglas Banks looped the thin cord around his wife's neck with enough speed and determination to make a Sicilian assassin proud. Any last words Patricia Banks had were choked off as the garrote cut into her fleshy throat. Douglas stood still as a statue while Patricia kicked her life away, her knickers around her knees.

When his wife's body was quite still, Douglas opened his hands and the deadly cord fell away. He examined his palms, noted the deep creases left by the garroting. Then he turned away and stepped from the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He left the cottage and walked away without a backward glance.

It was the chambermaid who discovered Patricia's corpse. The resort manager became aware of the gruesome discovery when the chambermaid ran screaming from the cottage. The poor woman was still screaming when she fell headlong into the swimming pool. The curious manager retraced the maid's steps until he, too, found himself staring at a goggle-eyed corpse sprawled astride the toilet. The manager was not pleased, but he did avoid the swimming pool as he ran for the telephone.

The Egyptian police found Mr. Banks at a local café in a nearby town. He was wearing a white gallibaya, the ubiquitous Egyptian men's uniform, and smoking a bubbling hookah. Four new friends shared his table. The five men sipped thick Turkish coffee in companionable silence. His Egyptian companions were surprised when the police led Douglas away. Douglas Banks was not.

The Bankses were shipped home separately, she in a coffin and he in handcuffs. Patricia Banks was interred following a swift and private funeral. Douglas Banks was incarcerated after an equally swift trial in which he offered no defense.

While his wife suffered the silence of the grave, Douglas Banks spent his remaining years listening to the echoes of many men defecating behind steel bars. When the explosive noise grew too deafening, Douglas retreated into his head, his fevered imagination bearing him away to a quiet, dirty café on the Red Sea coast.



# Wedding Bells

Amuri Morris



## Artist's Statement

Wedding Bells

16" x 20" inches, oil on canvas, 2021

The chaos of 2020 can be highlighted through many social, political, and health crises. I aim to distill this chaos by highlighting these events in painting during a time when media (visual and verbal) tends to negate the actuality or seriousness of these events. The systemically racist and inequitable roots of these events become evident as I create these paintings distinctly from my perspective as an African-American. Within this portfolio, I'm highlighting our interconnected, contemporary reality with these significant events.

One of my major themes is a rise to power and justice with the Black Lives Matter movement. These figures rise to reinvent a new world through the ashes of the racist old one. From these flames is a rebirth, which is symbolized by the blossoming marriage.

# The Little Boy

Elizabeth Wadsworth Ellis

The rescuers asked me where I'd seen him last and I pointed and they found him there.

His last words were, "C'mon in. The water's fine."

At the cabin when we crawled under the dining room table he had told me he loved me. He kissed me under the dining room table. At Christmas he had told his mother he wanted me to have a present.

I would've turned twelve that autumn; Ronnie turned 10 that spring. I wanted to be a pallbearer who accompanies the casket for Ronnie when he drowned. I was refused. I was a girl. My brothers acted put-upon; begrudged the privilege. I would've been honored.

After the funeral at a sleepover his sister handed me a pillow and said, "This was Ronnie's." His mother accused his dad that morning of the day that Ronnie drowned of "playing with his kid to get out of doing chores," playing catch with Ronnie. Ronnie loved baseball. She said Ronnie had been asking for new shoes. You don't need shoes in the casket. The night he drowned I heard a circle of his family's menfolk outside that night laughing and thought *How could they?* When she first saw Ronnie in the casket she crumpled to the floor. At the graveside his small-tyke twin brothers pointed at the airplane overhead. *They're too young*, people said.

The morning of the day that Ronnie drowned his sister taunted me to go swimming with her without permission. This was forbidden. She swam out, gutsy and fearless as ever, as always, always the first, the first to dye her hair, the first to wear makeup, to pierce her ears, to sneak out, to kiss boys or to smoke a cigarette. She knew how to take the covers off the couch cushions and put them in the washer when you got drunk and throw up on them. She even knew how to turn the odometer back on the family car so they wouldn't know how much she'd driven it without permission. Her dad put a governor on the accelerator to prevent speeding.

She swam out ahead of me and I swam out too, but the water was rough. When I could no longer touch bottom I panicked. I was still too spooked to go back in that afternoon, it scared me enough not to tell anyone what we did. That is why Ronnie said, "C'mon in. The water's fine." That afternoon I didn't drown, Ronnie did.

In a dream Ronnie said two words, but not in a voice you could hear "Don't worry."

# I Watched the Slaughter Film and Was Ejected From the Faith

Alejo Rovira Goldner

For the love of everything good  
do not watch the slaughter film  
like an old-master painting it reaches in and twists  
I fell into walls within walls  
hammers and pliers at my face  
a hundred pounds of eyeballs fell with me  
rolled into One  
one great Eye that judged  
my eighteen brothers fell with me  
through the castle chute their intestines dropped  
then slithered back to life, found each other  
latched onto my legs and chewed  
because I watched the slaughter film  
no more happy little world  
I dozed on the Judas Wheel  
and understood why God won't visit the Earth  
I lasted thirty-six years in the emperor's vault  
if I could wash my brain with a scouring pad and bleach  
if I could delete my eye history  
centurions said "We have a present for thee  
a cutout of Mary Poppins to abide with thee"  
centurions said "We bring thee Newcastle honey"  
they covered me with honey funneled it into me  
after thirty-six years I fried in sunshine  
they called out to the flying-things of the empire  
to partake of my sweetness  
a swarm rode to the castle turret  
my body became a thriving grey chain mail  
of ravenous flies and locusts  
for Mother Teresa's sake do not watch  
I came unprepared to the slaughter film  
because I was just eleven years old it will break you please  
when the swarm was sated and most of my flesh devoured  
the emperor set me free  
they put me on a galleon to the extreme ice coast  
where I preach against the slaughter film  
to this day disciples reach out to the hands of my ears  
to this day they hold samples of my bones

# A Personal History of the Cherry Bomb

bart plantenga

You and I cannot believe our eyes anymore. Observe: A man on a glimmering stretch of walk in a tight, shiny suit, the kind start-up guys wear, was jimmying the lock on my bike with what could have been a hunting knife.

“HEY!” Startled, he pivoted and dashed off. I gave chase because I’d been reassured by characters seen in crime dramas that chase scenes usually end with their man in cuffs.

He was young, so it surprised me to be gaining on him so quickly. Why? Was it the pace of the infirm or of someone lugging a rucksack filled with a history of entitlement, pedigree, ballast?

Suddenly he stopped, turned, lifted his arm as if to ward me off. Something was released from his raised fist and just as I was opening my mouth to yell “STOP BASTARD,” something entered my oral cavity—and exploded.

\* \* \*

When I awoke I was floating in a white room of white walls, sheets and blankets. The woman in white spoke in low, flat tones. I could not hear what she was saying as her lips floated silently away from her face, which some later said was due to the opium. There I lie, ensconced in a universe circumscribed by the thickness and length of a swath of bandages wrapped snugly around my face.

I tried to lift my head but could not. It was dead weight. When I tried to speak, the words seemed trapped somewhere between desire and expression. My name? Something with a “K.”

The nurse wrote on a chalkboard: YOUR HEARING WILL RETURN. She was parsimonious with information. Too much of it was probably unpleasant. And no one ever properly healed from hearing bad news.

Room 307 had no mirrors. There was probably a reason but my mind did not allow me to find one. I was left alone and managed to turn my body to find my warped reflection in the chrome cabinet to the side of my bed. I had the strongest feeling that I was no longer me. That is how I word it now.

I almost laughed at how the imperfect chrome reflection made it seem as if half of my bandaged face had caved in. I screamed but there was no scream. Is there a name for a screamless scream? I thought of that book I read in high school called *Johnny Got His Gun*. Last name? Something with a “G”?

I dreamed of where I might move to – the north of Scotland, Finland, Yukon with 1 person per 10 square kilometers, an ice floe, somewhere with few people and much darkness so as to never scare locals with the sight of my face.

I discovered later: 1 The guy had been caught; 2 his name is Weston Ellis; 3 an immigrant hero kept him pinned down with his knee on his chest [he refused to tell police his name perhaps fearing deportation]; 4 I was attended to by passersby, one who cradled my head; 5 the far right declared it an act of terror; 6 someone said I made the news; 7 my name is Kees Ge...

\* \* \*

When they finally replaced my bandages I had no idea what day, week or year it was. Time was so nutty and no longer fixed to mechanized clicks like they try to tell us it has always been. But science sometimes gets it wrong. They now acknowledge the existence of mind time, which is shaped by the subjective inner life.

I had time to kill so I looked things up on a borrowed phone: The 1-inch cherry bomb contained an est. 45 milligrams of flash powder. Once an ignition fuse is lit, it takes 3 to 4.5 seconds for the firework to explode ... banned in the US by federal Child Safety Act of 1966. Knowing this in no way helped my situation, however.

My senses slowly recovered. Although it could have been overnight. It was a miracle they said. But it did not involve religion, although some may have prayed for me without telling anyone. Even my voice returned. There was astonishment, some weeping. I was able to mutter my name: Kees Gesigtloos. I remember the nurse offering a warm smile.

I could now offer my opinions on the reconstructive looks I could choose from in a spiral binder. The nurse gently turned the laminated pages. It did not include my own face, however, so I narrowed my choices to visages that may have resembled Richard “John Boy” Thomas, a young Sam Sheperd, a 60s James Bond, and late-70s Bryan Ferry. Nobody said anything like: “Don’t get your hopes up.”

A visitor, maybe a friend, out of what he thought was earshot made a somewhat lighthearted reference to the Elephant Man. Perhaps to lighten the mood, believing the old saw that laughter is the best cure.

\* \* \*

Most surprising to myself, the staff and visitors: I suddenly woke one morning to music on a clock radio, WQXR, and I began to sing along. It was hard to believe I was singing at all, let alone with the voice of an opera singer. It came out of nowhere, out of thin air. Or was it me *on* the radio? I honestly don’t remember.

Was it the nurse who described me to visitors as “the guy with the angel voice”?

Someone with a background in music declared me a tenor, not an ordinary tenor, but an *Italian* tenor who could sing in perfect Italian. The condition is called “bilingual aphasia” and usually occurs while one is in a coma.

A woman who owned the FX Lab in Greenpoint donated a special temporary power-mesh, gel-10 silicone mask made in the image of—I thought—Richard Widmark. But maybe I was wrong. It suited me well.

I began to perform from behind my mask, which graciously hid the unspeakable horror. I looked pretty good. Almost believable. We can say that this is what polite society is all about.

Here are some other details: 1 I knew the lyrics to operas; 2 I knew how to sing my part perfectly; 3 I knew Italian but only while singing opera [I could not have a conversation in Italian]; 4 I became somewhat of an overnight sensation, but no one dared attribute it to the “freak show factor”; 5 my pitch, my delivery, my artistry all pointed to years upon years of training and, yet, I had *never* sung opera before, never liked opera, could not name any operas except for *Carmen*, and that only because of Malcolm McClaren’s version.

The unbelieving critics, curmudgeonly guardians of high culture, and the boards of operahouses of the world were, however, slowly won over. No doubt because I was selling out venues nightly. They marveled at my impressive coloratura, my “otherworldly” counter-tenor voice that was “capable of negotiating complicated passages of elaborate embellishments with great agility.” My vocal acrobatics were not infrequently compared to the guitar solos of John McLaughlin and James Blood Ulmer in the music press of the day. *People* compared my performance of the “Star Spangled Banner” in Washington to Jimi Hendrix’s unorthodox performance of it at Woodstock.

People grew more and more intrigued; women were captivated by the mysterious me behind the mask. After concerts they posed with me in photos, giggling nervously in lobbies lined with plush carpet. How bad could the damage be, they speculated. Sometimes they kissed me.

My performances made history, according to some. Reviewers called me heroic, inspiring, enigmatic, godly—and ungodly. I was offered a recording contract and exclusive engagements at great opera houses in great cities.

\* \* \*

Investigative journalist friend Millie Blythe presented salient details about the perpetrator: 1 he had been cast the victim by savvy lawyers hired by his dad; 2 was he addicted to viewing sporting events and consuming snacks as the defense had suggested? 3 the media ate it up because I was an alien, reportedly illegal; 4 although I was the victim, it soon became clear that the public prosecutor was losing control of the trial; 5 I was now suddenly being cast as the defendant, the perpetrator.

Although I was able to present my side of the story, I do not remember a single word of what I said. I wondered if my speaking voice was muffled to the point of incomprehensibility. Millie was being honest: “It was painful to hear; the trial was a joke. Mere mention of the defense team attorneys Stanley Shure and Daniel Schmied, made even the most hardened uncross their legs, blink unnaturally, hyperventilate, exhibit profuse sweating.”

Shure read aloud a litany of glowing character witness statements [including one from the former mayor], Ellis’s record of public service, his Wall Street employer. By the end you almost wanted to shake his hand and apologize for getting your face in the way of his cherry bomb.

The official defense consisted of NY Penal Code Section 35.15: someone may use physical force upon another person when he reasonably believes it necessary to defend himself and, part 2: Ellis suffered diminished capacity as a result of depression. The argument was that Ellis had once been a fitness fanatic who grew depressed after an acrimonious separation. He was shunned by mutual friends, quit his six-figure job, turned to massive consumption of sugar-laden junk food, sporting events, alcohol, and the use of a “self-consoling device.”

The employees at Peter Pan Donuts used to refer to him as the “Donut Monster,” because he’d sometimes down half a dozen donuts right there in the shop. This dramatic change in regimen and behavior was symptomatic of his underlying depression.\*

The public prosecutor, not the most able of attorneys, lurched for the moral high ground, calling Ellis “a yuckie, a delusionary, pampered, toxic yuppie who suffered from nothing more than acute affluenza.” It sounded good to me but, in hindsight, I think the jury found it all a bit shrill and overly judgmental.

The judge came around, believing the defense’s compelling argument and strongly urged the jury to pursue probation plus 120 hours of community service. The jury agreed.

More details from Millie: 1 Ellis served out his community service at Manhattan’s Teed Off Driving Range, with a view of the world from atop the ChokeKold Building; 2 where he was able to circulate among media, fashion, and finance celebs; 3 rumors of a Trump son connection persisted; 4 Ellis had investments in MaskMaker Studios, the place commissioned to supply me with my post-reconstructive surgically applied permanent mask using the latest 3-D hologram technology; 5 crowdfunding covered part of the \$248,000 cost. Irony and coincidence magnify the human tragedy. Thank you very much everyone!

\* \* \*

Millie also came to possess a very strange object: documents show that Ellis had in the spring purchased an antique lacquered Italian Mestre Pastille Box for \$1993 at a Christie’s auction in Westchester. Don’t bother to ask *how* she managed to acquire this curio; she’ll simply smirk, and leave it at that.

One day she laid the box out for me on the lacquered table. It contained 6 warped “marbles” that, when gently shaken in the box—she demonstrated—rolled around to create a racket as made by a certain 18<sup>th</sup>-century percussion instrument no longer in fashion.

The box also came with a certificate of provenance rolled tightly and bound with a yellow ribbon. The document verified its source and origin and provided a detailed background history of its contents.

Irony and coincidence stirred our imagination beyond the tepid everyday because these were no ordinary ancient marbles, like those Roman ones made of clay. Actually not marbles at all. Blythe: “They were ... [silence to roll out her punchline] ... marble-sized *testicles*, dried, withered, gruesome even ...”

More coincidences: the testicles were from renowned castrati, one of whom I had been compared to in an *Opera News* review. Furthermore, according to Blythe, Ellis had developed a seemingly perfect circular economic model: he had co-invested, with his father, in Bramlett Farm a rural Tennessee illegal fireworks factory that specialized in the Pipe Smoke, M-80s and Cherry Blossoms [small bombs], including the very one that had injured me, which—it gets sicker—brought me to MaskMaker Studios and to TLC Physiotherapy & Rehabilitative Science, both businesses he had stakes in. If I were put together differently I might see it all as a cynical, localized variant of disaster capitalism. Blythe never minced words: “Sowing disaster to reap profits. He’s probably invested in operahouses too.”

Millie, despite tight deadlines, sat on the edge of my bed to read me the reviews: “He reminds one of the last great castrato, Alessandro Moscio, who acquired an almost pornographic level of ‘appreciation’ in the Vatican as he satisfied the taste for ever-more extreme falsetto voices. His tenor talent is most on display in Verdi’s opera, *La maledizione* (The Curse).”

She read excerpts from the certificate of provenance booklet:

Castrati first arrived from Spain with its tradition of Moorish harem eunuchs serving as bodyguards. ... Cutting off the sexual parts of a male teen to prevent their pure soprano voices from being “ruined” by manhood, thus maintaining an aesthetically pleasing, celestial falsetto much desired by Catholic choirs.

These gelded men sang like boys with manly lungs, enchanting popes, dignitaries, and the rabble alike, distracting one and all from the horrors of the surgical and painful procedure. Pope Pius IX, in 1854, not only defended slavery but called castration “a necessary evil for the Divine Good.” ...

The boy was placed in a warm bath to sooth him. The practice of pressing the jugular vein until the boy was unconscious proved dangerous and was replaced by ample doses of opium, leaving him unconscious of the operation that had just robbed him of “those Parts which Nature took so great a care to form.”

The preferred method involved cuplike tongs, heated in an open fire until the metal glowed hot so when the scrotum was cupped, cauterization was “instantly” achieved and the reliquary-ready testicles could be preserved. ... Post-mortem studies documented the small dimensions of the larynx and vocal cords, consistent with those of a female high soprano.

Contents:

- Two testicles of Alessandro Moscio (1866-1920): the only castrato to ever be recorded. His unique “way of approaching a head note with an upward ornamented acciacatura, a curious leap over an upward interval from the medium into the head voice of more than an octave, had a degenerate ornamental quality often associated with a yodel.”
- Two testicles of Domennico Frastuono (1835-1893): Italian soprano castrato singer of popular operas was castrated when bitten by a pig. The father and brother wrestled the pig until it coughed up the distended and mutilated testicles. Many believed his singing was the result of a divine miracle. Frastuono mastered trills and coloraturas like no other.
- Two testicles of Francesco Sgualdrina (1854–1896): Left on the steps of a Frosinone orphanage by his parents to be castrated by Lithotomist Antonio Coltella. A crude serrated knife severed the entire

scrotum in less than 3 minutes, nearly costing him his life. He grew up to be a plump, but very stylish, castrato of immense fame. He had a voice some described as angelic. Others noted his “unearthly disembodied D6 soprano voice” as that of a “quail being strangled by a strumpet.”

Millie punctuated the completion of each paragraph with a deep sigh.

Will it ruin the story if I tell you that after my face was reconstructed I lost my operatic voice and could not remember a word of Italian—except castrato and pizza?

One night we ran into Weston Ellis in FoolsGold, a 60s Vegas Casino-themed bar at Humboldt and Driggs. Millie recognized him and nodded, peering at him with heavy-lidded aim-sight eyes. He seemed to be celebrating with a gaggle of loose-tie, post-work lads and lassies, doing serial cluster bomb shots.

Millie, with no known inhibitions, sashayed over to Ellis almost cinematically, smiled and whispered something in his ear. He looked perplexed just as she lifted her knee and shoved it with great force into his groin. He curled up into a crumpled, moany heap, mouth stuck in an aghast grimace as his mates burst into boisterous hootie guffaws. But then suddenly a few of them came to and wanted to take it out onto the street with Millie. But the husky bartender intervened, defusing the tension.

“What did you say to him?”

“I said ‘now it’s your turn to show us your falsetto, bastard. And remember, every feminist is trained in the art of surgical AND NONsurgical castration.’”

I laughed and laughed, ignoring the advice of my doctors.\*\*

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\* The “Twinkie defense” is a form of diminished capacity defense.

\*\* Excessive laughter may lead to postoperative wound dehiscence: when a surgically sutured wound tears open, resulting in rehospitalization, extra medical costs and sometimes even death.



# Losing My Finger

Kae Chatman

The circulation boss screamed for the pressmen  
To stop operation of the bindery equipment  
Slapping plastic ties around bundles  
Of the Thursday paper, thick with coupons  
For cheap meat, Lucky Charms, and lawn chairs,  
Dumped on the dock for rural carriers.

Twenty nights in the rehab, I learned to discern  
Prayers that dripped down the throat  
Of a double amputee from the rail yards.  
Watched tears explode like bottle rockets  
In the eyes of a woman with cancer,  
Who had worked assembly at a battery factory,  
Lighting candles on a cake for her thirty-third birthday.

Months on, I learned to hold a pen again,  
To address superiors with the utmost respect,  
To direct visitors to subscribe or place a classified.  
Not shaking hands. Never waving goodbye  
Nor beckoning anyone closer.

# The Chalupa Gangsta

Matt McGee

I agreed to go with Matt to look at a used car. We'd just finished a ridiculously long drive out to a place even coyotes wouldn't bother with and stopped in front of a building that looked suspiciously like a wrecking yard. I looked around, mouth slightly unhinged.

Matt reached beneath the seat of his rented SUV, swung his arm like a crane in one of those claw games, and dropped the prize in my lap with a thud.

"You know how to use one of those the right way?"

The revolver was buttoned in its sheath the way my old Jansport backpack did. It didn't weigh much but my hands suddenly did; sometimes instinct just tells you *stay perfectly still*, because there's no way you're gonna leave your fingerprints behind.

"The *hell*?"

I pushed at the bridge of my glasses. They hadn't slipped down, it's just a habit, and I needed something to touch besides the gun.

*Bring a hoodie* he'd texted. It'd been hot as hell last week and, despite every AC unit in the city cranked up to eleven, my core temperature was still hovering around max. I'd reached in the back of my closet, grabbed the gray hoodie I kept for walks home from Taco Bell on chilly nights. Now it was bundled in my lap, a .38 plopped in its folds.

"I said I'd come with you to look at a car. I didn't say I'd be Bonnie to your Clyde."

"You don't know who's going to come out of there."

He had a point. The building wasn't some used car lot on a well-lit boulevard. You know, the safe kind where the salesmen will be there next week if your radiator cracks or the electric window motor starts smoking when you're stopped at a red light, trying to impress the cute person stopped next to you.

Matt had insisted on wanting a car with a manual transmission. No one drives a stick in L.A. traffic. He drives mostly at night though, when the roads are open and he can indulge his love for speedy manuals. He also says it's a built-in theft device.

Months of fruitless searches brought us here, fifteen miles into a remote land where bodies likely get dumped and high tension power lines stretch from huge, ambitious solar farms back to L.A. Long, brown grassy canyons had curved and flowed outside our windows like a woman's long hips, reaching further than the eye could see, hovering over us as we'd driven along. The roads belonged to double-trailer gravel trucks, their undercarriages stained with the dust and silt of three local quarries.

Then we rounded a corner, and up popped this place. I looked around. All I had seen up until this point was, in a canyon a few miles back, a towering piece of concrete that looked strikingly like a set of stairs. Only the stairs didn't go anywhere, and the land all around it was barren and wide open for almost a full mile in every direction.

Nothing out here made any sense to me.

Starlight Motors has a genuinely modern, four hundred square foot cinderblock office. There's wifi, a satellite dish on the roof, glossy black walls and freshly tinted windows. From the lot, it looks OK.

But the building is just the head of a bloated tick leaching off the automotive industry. Behind the modern-ish office is a hundred acres of cars, fenced by chain link and topped with razor wire that stretches into

the horizon. What they sell is stored with all the love and care of a sun-baked junkyard on the edge of California's low desert, where land is cheap and history doesn't seem to exist to the untrained eye.

I started dreaming of the safe, cool drive-thru I usually would've been working in.

"We can go back to Oak Tree for an hour," Matt said. "You know the place?"

I nodded. I'd been to the gun range with my cousin. "I don't need practice."

"Right on, gangsta. Need a minute?"

I looked back at the bloated tick-head office. "What am I doing here? I work a drive-thru. Chalupas and extra sauce packets are my thing."

"Not today. Today, you're the Chalupa Gangsta. Just keep that hoodie up, keep your head down, and look badass."

I gripped the gun and its sheath. "I *am* badass."

Matt reached under the seat again. My heart leapt, wondering what else might come out. *Bazooka? Flame thrower? IUD?* He set a manila envelope on the rented SUV's dash.

"There's a cashier's check for forty-six hundred dollars, should I buy the car. I'm going in there," he pointed. "Keep your head down like you're napping. Just don't nap."

"Don't nap," I nodded along.

"Keep your eyes peeled. Engine's running. AC's on. Don't unlock those doors for anyone except me. Any sign of trouble you got *that*," he pointed, "to bail you out."

I sighed. "Can I go home now?"

"No." He opened his door. "Everything works out we'll be gone in half an hour. You'll be driving this lovely SUV back to town and I'll be in my brand-new-to-me Mazda3."

"Or?"

He shrugged and smiled. "Or we shoot a few bad guys."

I shuddered.

"And you go back to the night shift at the Bell."

*Like nothing happened* I mumbled.

He reopened the door. "What?"

"I said *go get em tiger!*" and threw in an 'aw-shucks' fist swing.

He tapped a knuckle on a glass pane of the office door. It opened. A hand stuck out. He shook it and disappeared inside.

I lowered my head, eyes fixed on the bloated tick door. If I had laser eyes I could cut the place in half. Like those memes. *Yeah, if I had laser eyes I could zap bad guys, cut open the fence like—*

Someone tapped the glass beside me. I bounced.

The gun, still in its sheath, weighed down the front pocket of the hoodie. I lowered the window a crack, didn't tilt my eyes at the guy.

"Hey little lady, you looking for someone?"

“I’m good.”

I rolled the window back up, bowed my head monk-style. *Damn you, non-laser eyes.*

He tapped again. I shouted at the sealed glass. “*WHAT?!?*”

He held up his hands and stepped away. Where’d that come from? Natural badassery, that’s where. Chalupa Gangsta, bitch.

The guy typed in a code and went in the office. A few minutes later Matt returned and tapped his knuckle on my window. I lowered it a few more inches than with the other guy.

“They’re bringing the car out so I can test drive it. How you doing?”

“Chalupa thug life, yo!”

Matt nodded. “Glad you’re enjoying your day out. Look. I’m gonna take the car down Sand Canyon, put it through the paces. While I’m gone, same rules. Unlock for *no* one. *Don’t* make friends.”

“No problem there.”

He looked off toward where the road curved around a sloping, grassy hillside. “Did you happen to notice that big concrete and steel structure out in the middle of nowhere?”

“The stair-looking thing? Yeah.”

“Well, it wasn’t stairs,” he said.

I scrunched up my nose. “What was it?”

“Well, while you’re sittin,” he pointed toward my cell, “Google up ‘Fillmore Dam Break.’ Read up on a little history.”

Gravel crunched under his lugged Columbia shoes as he stepped away. I rolled up the window. A gate soon slid open, its silver castors clattering on along metal tracks like a levy. Matt stood aside while a gray Mazda sedan rolled out.

The thing needed a paint job. Bad. I guess stick buyers can’t be choosers. The guy who’d knocked on my window stepped out of the car, held the door for Matt and watched him drive away. Matt shifted and steered away like a pro. The guy watched him go, then slid back behind the gate. It closed soon after that.

I pulled out my cell. I jumped on the dealer’s wifi, went to YouTube and watched that scene from *Pulp Fiction* where John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson ditch their Nova in a junkyard run by whatshername, the cute one from SNL. I read the comments. *Julia Sweeney, right!* They end up in a diner that gets robbed.

I looked down the empty road where Matt had gone, into the endless, rolling brown hills. What had he said? I Googled *Fillmore Dam Break*.

Amazing what you can live right on top of and never know about. All around us in LA is what we call the LA River, a series of concrete-walled floodways. The guy responsible for it all, William Mulholland, also built a thing called the St. Francis Dam. On a typical night in 1928, just two years after it opened, the dam broke in the middle of the night, just a few miles from the junkyard. According to Wikipedia, huge chunks of it are still lying around.

I looked around. Nothing I could see. I scrolled for more pictures. There was the staircase, still reaching toward heaven, stranded almost two full miles from where the dam had been. The force of the rushing water had moved it all the way down the canyon.

I turned my head just in time to see Matt and the Mazda come around the corner like an F1 outta hell. I imagined it moving through the canyon like a ten-story wall of water once had, or that blood from the elevator in *The Shining*.

I was about to step out to meet him, the way Bogie or Bacall might've once done at a train depot. But just as I reached for the door handle, the guy who'd delivered the car slid back through the rolling fence. Behind his back, in his right hand, I could see the small Glock.

Oh, sweet mother of cinnamon twists.

I knew what he was up to. Matt had backed the Mazda in and the guy approached from a blind spot. I leapt from the SUV, ducked behind its bumper with the gun pointed like that lady on *SVU*.

“DROP IT ASSMUNCH!”

I don't know if that's what Mariska Hargitay would've said but the guy stopped and turned. Matt looked at me, too.

“I thought I told you—”

Then he saw it. I saw it too.

I ripped away the sheath and threw it aside. I waved the gun like I was serious now. Seeing the guy I was covering, Matt pulled a .22 from his waistband.

“Do what the nice lady says,” he said, “and she won't need to send you to the big drive-thru in the sky.”

“*CHALUPA STYLE, BITCH!!*”

Pretty sure Mariska Hargitay wouldn't've said that. The guy set the gun on the Mazda's trunk, lifted his hands and stepped back. Matt retrieved the gun, checked the safety and put it in his own waistband.

“Well,” he nodded, “I'd say we've earned ourselves a nice little discount, wouldn't you agree?”

“*Abso-fucking-lutely!*”

Matt looked at me. He'd actually been talking to the guy. I lowered the gun and got back in the truck. I set the gun in my lap and lowered my head.

I missed my drive-thru.

\* \* \*

I was driving the SUV, following the faded Mazda. Matt called and I put him on speakerphone.

“Nice work back there, Chalupa Style.”

“Let's not make that my new nickname. I gotta admit, I've never had to do that at the Bell. Ever. Mostly all I get is just the smell of beans and hot sauce up my nose. Doesn't leave until like two hours after work's over, and even then I—”

“Anyway,” he interrupted, “we'll go straight to the DMV and register the car. Then we'll go eat.”

I squirmed. My work is right next to the DMV.

“Ummm,” I said.

“Don't worry. We're not going all cheesy roll-ups tonight. I'd say we earned P&L Burger.”

“French toast!” I raised both fists off the wheel. And wouldn't you know, that was the same moment I had to slam on the brakes. Traffic had stopped. I missed the Mazda's faded bumper by inches.

“Sorry,” I shouted at the phone. It had bounced onto the floor somewhere.

“I’ve had that rental eight weeks at fifty bucks a day,” he said.

“Fifty bucks! A day?” I picked the cell up off the floor.

“And I just got this. Try not to wreck it before it’s registered, gangsta.”

“I was just excited about breakfast.”

Traffic moved again. Matt and his new Mazda rolled away. “You always get this excited about food?”

He had no idea. The day that Mexican Pizzas came back I clocked in four hours early just to be part of the scene. And it had been a scene. We’d had a banner and everything.

\* \* \*

We returned the rental. The newly registered, heavily faded and stick-equipped Mazda stood outside P&L Burger. The French toast was soft and gooey like it always is. Deliciousness in your face. *With* syrup.

“Did you see how I drew on that guy!”

“Once you got the cover off the gun yeah, you did good. We’re just lucky he didn’t have a friend come around and flank you.”

I crunched my brow. “Is that, like, how you cook a steak?”

“No,” he wove his hand around his drink, “it’s when someone sneaks up on you.”

I waved a dismissive hand. “No one’s gonna flank me. I’m the chalupa queen!”

“Yes, I saw.”

A moment passed. He sipped his drink.

“I read about the dam,” I said. “Pretty scary how you can be wiped off the face of the Earth in the middle of the night without any say.”

“Do we ever have a say?”

I looked side to side. “I hope so. I’d like to think I won’t get washed away in the middle of the night, that my life is going to end up meaning something to someone.”

“I’m sure it will. But then again, maybe it won’t,” he waved a piece of toast. “Maybe we should just get our kicks in now before the whole thing goes up in flames.”

“I’m—”

Suddenly the guy in the next booth jumped up on the bench seat. He waved a gun around the room.

*“EVERYBODY BE COOL THIS IS A ROBBERY!”*

I turned to Matt. He kept eating his pancakes.

“Oh my God, it’s just like the movie.”

He kept his voice down. “Which movie.”

*“Pulp Fiction!”*

Matt shook his head. “He doesn’t have Tim Roth’s accent.”

The guy swung the gun at Matt. “You have something to say?”

Matt waved his fork around. “I hate to burst your bubble but this ain’t the first time today I’ve had a gun in my face.”

“*Just like the movie,*” I mumbled, “*and I’m Julia Sweeney.*”

The gun swung my way. “You say something, pretty lady?”

“I’m not that pretty.”

“Not the first gun she’s seen today, either,” Matt interjected. “She’s the Chalupa Gangsta.”

The robber looked confused. He stepped away.

He took everyone’s wallets, emptied the register and sprinted across the lot, past the faded Mazda, around the side of the Taco Bell where I’d usually be handing bags out the window.

Matt leapt up, yanked the yard guy’s .22 out of his waistband and sprinted at NFL speed after the guy. I jumped up and followed.

Gotta earn that nickname.

Two hundred feet later I slumped sideways, huffing and puffing beside Taco Bell’s dumpster corral. I don’t know why they call them corrals. It never smells like horses and hay, just rotting sauce and Baja Blast cooking in the sun. I put the gun away so no one inside would see.

I’m not made for gangsta stuff. I looked up at the doors of the Bell, the purple booths inside, the A/C that would feel so, so good.

Maybe they’d let me come in early.

# Post-Apocalypse

Janis Butler Holm





# King Peroz and His Pearl

Matias Travieso-Diaz and Reza Zarghamee

For several years now, Sasanid King Peroz of Persia had tended to be in particularly bad humor around the sacred festival of Nowruz. It was then that his tribute to the Hephthalites, or White Huns, was due. For a monarch whose name meant “victory,” it was a sad irony that he had twice been defeated by his eastern neighbors and had only escaped death by promising to pay a burdensome annual fee in gold coins and goods, and to send one of his sons to the Hephthalite king’s court as a hostage. In addition, his country was racked by a seven-year long famine, which had stretched his subjects’ loyalty to its breaking point. He was aware of the murmurs among his subjects that he lacked the *Farr*, the intangible Fortune, which brought success to kings and heroes. As all Persians knew, the *Farr* was only bestowed by the gods, who could withdraw it from a ruler who lost their favor. A ruler who lacked the *Farr* deserved no allegiance.

Peroz’s spirits were unexpectedly lifted just before the celebration of the twenty-fifth Nowruz of his reign by a message from the Satrap of Kerman. A fisherman plying his trade on the island of Hengam had swam into a cave that was submerged except during low tide. There, on a rock shelf, he had spotted a huge open clam displaying a pearl of incomparable size and beauty. The fisherman had not dared attempt retrieving the pearl because the cave showed signs of also being the lair of a tiger shark, common in those waters.

Peroz’s mind began to race. Since youth, the Magi had taught him that the *Farr* could manifest itself in the form of a pearl, and that the gods used menacing sharks to protect the mystical creations that they hid in the sea. Peroz convinced himself that this pearl was, in fact, supernatural, and that if he could only possess it, the famine would end and he would emerge triumphant in any future war of revenge against the Huns. Peroz sent the messenger back to the Satrap with an order to direct the fisherman to fetch the pearl. He further promised that, if the fisherman should die trying, his family would be remunerated and allowed to reside as perennial guests of the king in his court.

\* \* \*

Several weeks later, a small party, including the fisherman, three soldiers from Peroz’s royal guard, and the Satrap, gathered near sunset at the Persian Gulf shore. The other members of the party watched as the fisherman plunged into the frigid waters and swam towards the cave, the entrance to which barely protruded above the surface.

After a few minutes, the fisherman re-emerged, desperately attempting to distance himself from a fast-moving shadow in the water. The spectators witnessed the end of the chase: the shark bit deeply into the fisherman’s thigh, drawing a massive cloud of blood. The fisherman screamed in agony. He advanced only a couple more strokes before the shark pulled him underwater. Just before disappearing, however, he heaved an object towards the shore.

The projectile sank to the sandy bottom of the beach but was quickly retrieved by one of the guards. All members of the party then watched the pearl in awe. The size of a large walnut, the pearl was a perfectly round orb, lustrous white with silver overtones. In the sunset light, it radiated a pink glow that illuminated the face of the soldier holding it.

\* \* \*

Accompanied by the fisherman’s survivors, the guards brought the pearl to the king at Ctesiphon. Peroz held his breath as he took in his acquisition. This was the most beautiful pearl ever created. He resolved to wear it as an oversized earring, in war and peace, as a symbol of the *Farr* and the might of the Sasanid Empire.

Armed with this supernatural pearl, Peroz addressed his subjects boldly. He declared that his and the empire’s fortunes had now changed. The *Farr* had returned to the House of Sasan, and no more tribute would be paid to the Huns.

True to his word, Peroz allowed the fisherman's wife and children to live at court and gave them an allowance from the royal treasury. Yet, he quickly came to disdain their rude habits and mandated that they be prohibited from participating in royal feasts and banquets. Later, he cast the family away, to spend the rest of their life in poverty. This left them to ponder whether the fisherman's self-sacrifice had been in vain. It was said that the fisherman's widow then laid a terrible curse on the pearl and whoever claimed it.

\* \* \*

By mid-summer, Peroz was on the warpath. Riding his black stallion, he led a great army towards the border with the Huns. Confident of victory, he made no attempt to conceal his march. The Huns became aware of his intentions and their chieftain ordered that a very deep trench be dug at the border, leaving undisturbed only a narrow strip of land that led into Hunnic territory.

The Hunnic forces were concealed from the Persian invaders, but as Peroz approached the border, the Huns sent forward a small detachment with instructions to allow themselves to be seen at a distance by the Persians and, once they had been spotted, to flee at full speed to the rear, carefully avoiding the trench. The members of this detachment arranged themselves into a narrow column that passed through the neck of land over the trench and lured the Persians to follow them.

The Persians gave chase at full speed across the plain. Nearly all of them fell into the pit, since they were unable to rein their steeds in time to avoid colliding with the riders ahead of them as they tumbled into the chasm. All who fell perished in a matter of minutes.

Among the dead was King Peroz. As he was about to plummet into the pit, Peroz tore the pearl earring violently from his ear and hurled it behind him, toward the mouth of the trench. Even in his final moments, Peroz believed that the pearl embodying the *Farr* should not fall into enemy hands. Alas, no Persian ever laid eyes on the pearl, and its whereabouts became a matter of whispered legends in Persia for centuries.

\* \* \*

The Persian war camp was in commotion at the news of the military debacle. The grand vizier, the Parthian prince Sokhra, took charge of matters and immediately sent envoys to the Huns to sue for peace. He offered to cede additional territory to them, increase the annual tribute, and send hostages to their king. In exchange, Sokhra requested that the Huns refrain from pillaging the battlefield until the Persians had retrieved the royal standards and the bodies of Peroz and other high-ranking nobles who had perished in the pit. The Huns agreed.

Sokhra recognized that, if he could recover Peroz's body and the royal paraphernalia, he could play the role of kingmaker. He therefore sent a detachment of troops to comb through the battlefield but did not place the troops under the command of a Persian but instead chose as their leader a Byzantine envoy to the Persian court named Eusebius. Sokhra did not wish to risk another high-ranking member of the Sasanid court taking possession of Peroz's corpse and the royal standards and gaining fame and power by bringing them to Ctesiphon. In addition, Sokhra feared that the Huns might renege on their agreement and assail the men entrusted with the retrieval duties. Perhaps the Huns would be deterred from doing this by having the Persians under the command of a leader from a third nation.

Eusebius had watched from the rearguard the destruction of Peroz's army with a mixture of astonishment and glee. The irony of having him lead the mission to salvage what could be saved of Sasanid pride was not lost on him, for Byzantines and Persians were age-old rivals.

Vultures and jackals had already begun circling the pit when Eusebius arrived with his detachment. He kept a wary eye on the Hunnic horsemen who had amassed on the far side of the ditch, eager to begin looting once Eusebius and his men had completed their task. The Persian soldiers had already loaded Peroz's body atop a bier when Eusebius caught a glimpse of a shiny object along the trench's edge. It was Peroz's earring, half-embedded in the dirt. Eusebius cautiously dismounted his horse and, as casually as possible, collected the object. Immediately recognizing it for what it was, he hid it under his cloak.

Back in the Persian camp, the grand vizier declared: “We will embalm his majesty’s body and arrange for its transport back to Persia. The war crown and the royal standards will travel under my protection. We will personally take them to Ctesiphon, to bequeath upon the new king once he is selected.”

“Now tell me, Lord Ambassador,” asked Sokhra, “did any of your men happen to find his majesty’s pearl earring? It was most precious to him and to our nation. It would be a great pity if the next king of the Persians did not receive this heirloom.”

Eusebius paused for a brief moment and declared, with an air of utmost innocence, “No, Grand Vizier. We looked everywhere but could not find it.”

After his audience with Sokhra, Eusebius asked one of his Persian friends at court about the earring’s significance. The Persian told him about the pearl it encased being the embodiment of the *Farr*, Fortune itself.

That night, in the privacy of his tent, Eusebius spent hours studying the pearl and considering his next steps. Would it not be a great feat for the Byzantines to lay claim to this cherished symbol of Persian power? Would not the Byzantine emperor Zeno handsomely reward whoever gave him this hallowed trophy? Upon further thought, however, Eusebius decided that this pearl was too precious to give away, even to his own sovereign. He would keep it for himself and, if it indeed was the emblem of good fortune, he would enjoy its possession even more.

To make sure that the Persians did not find it, Eusebius removed the pearl from the earring and hid it inside a heavy locket that he wore over his chest dangling from an iron chain.

Eusebius accompanied the remnant of Peroz’s army as it set out for Ctesiphon. On their way to the capital, Sokhra summoned him. “Lord Ambassador, you should return to Emperor Zeno and report on what has transpired in Persia. Depart in the morning. I will give you gifts for your master and guards to protect you on the rest of your voyage.”

Eusebius readily agreed to the change in plans. Little did he know that Sokhra had decided that Zeno must not receive a detailed account of the great disaster that had befallen the Persian army and its confused aftermath, and wanted to make sure Eusebius never arrived in Constantinople. He deliberately routed Eusebius to travel through Armenia, parts of which were being terrorized by Alan tribesmen who had been pushed south across the Caucasus Mountains by other nomads.

The Alan marauders overtook Eusebius’ train as it traveled through the mountains. The Persian guards presented to the Alan chieftain the gifts that Sokhra had sent for Zeno as their ransom and offered Eusebius as a captive.

That night, the Alans perpetuated the Scythian custom of beheading prominent prisoners of war before a makeshift altar, atop which they planted an iron sword, the symbol of their war god. As Eusebius’ decapitated head rolled to the side, the chieftain retrieved a locket drenched in Eusebius’ blood. A smile broke across his face as he opened the locket and saw the pearl. He stared briefly in the direction of the Daryal pass, beyond which lay his homeland. In that moment, the expatriated warlord felt that his fortunes had changed. Indeed, they had, for him and others who would follow through the years.

# The Day My Husband Died

Rachel Whitfield

the man they sent from NASA  
kept saying

“obvious”

“obvious disaster”

“obvious total loss”

as if

watching the shuttle explode

a dull firework in the sky

I'd known accepted

that my love

had been dropped

into the sea

his body to become

a habitat

for the life below

in fact

I didn't realize

at first

that the crew was gone

thought the blast

was simply the boosters

splitting off from the body

of the shuttle

I didn't believe him

until

I hugged Dick's clothes

and realized

that like me

they'd never again hold

his body

# Home. Less.

J S Carpenter

## Real Conversations

### Geordie: 2008

Geordie Boye isn't a nickname. He changed his name by deed poll, relieved to shuck off his old identity for what everyone calls him.

Everyone knows Geordie Boye and his little chestnut barrel of a dog Bruno. He's top dog on the streets—Geordie that is, not Bruno. There's a clear, if shifting, hierarchy on the streets, a bigger version of the school playground.

Geordie's been on the streets so many years no one, not even Geordie, knows how long. You can't imagine the streets without Geordie. He holds court, hangers-on and runners around him, sitting on the steps of the derelict theatre or the triangle of grass by the river.

The council have a legal duty to house "vulnerable" people and homelessness manager Matt is concerned. Geordie's always resisted all blandishments to get him off the streets. But he's 48. The average age at death for homeless men is 45. The heavy toll of daily drinking is becoming obvious, but he maintains his place at the top of the pecking order, getting one of his lackeys to thump upstarts back into place.

He let us get him a flat last winter. It wasn't a success. Despite our efforts, it became a drinking den: Tom buying cheap ersatz "cider" on his payday, tomorrow Jimmy's money buying the two-litre bottles. A hub of shouting, fights, threats to neighbours. (Anti)/social behaviour depending if you're (housed)/drinkers.

Geordie's back on the streets.

Always hoping, always believing, that's homelessness.

My quest, too.

### Home. Less. 1995

The people I define myself against daily—"at least I'm not..."—are endlessly told they're not like "us." Defined by what they've lost. Less than everyone else.

I have a secure home and grew up in a family that appeared solid. But even as a child you can measure what you've got against stories and classmates. It's homeless people who teach you most about what was missing.

For my hostel newsletter Question of the Week, I ask: Who is your hero? Half say: 'my mother.' I say nothing.

Mostly, I say nothing to my mother either. Although I did have some real conversations with her. Fewer than with Matt or Geordie.

Seven precisely.

An average of one for every 13 years of my mother's life.

Every 9.14 years of mine.

### **Conversation 1: 1961**

I'm five. Too young to censor what I say, too naïve to know I have to. Tucked under tight crisp sheets in my cosy little room, boiler purring comfortingly. My mother perches on the mattress, asks: 'What's the matter?'

'No-one will play with me.' Miserable slow tears as I go back to earlier, standing against the railings in the school playground, my feet curving uncomfortably down their round concrete base, the thick black-painted iron hard and heavy on my back stretching as far as I can see left and right.

My mother goes rigid as the railings. Instantly, I'm back in the now: I can never again make her feel like this.

'I didn't have many friends at school either. It won't matter when you're thirty,' she says. Tightens the sheet across my chest, tucks it hard under the mattress and leaves.

Except it did, of course.

### **Geordie: 2009**

Matt comes to find me.

'I'm worried about Geordie Boye. I'm not sure he'll survive another winter on the streets.'

'I don't know what to say, Matt. What can we do that we haven't tried already?'

We have this conversation a lot. Geordie doesn't care if he sleeps under a roof or not—the streets are his domain and his comfort zone—and he knows we worry an awful lot more about him dying on the streets than he does.

We give him a bed in the hostel again. He does something we deem unacceptable so we exclude him. We try again. He takes umbrage and walks out. We try again. Can't give up. Can't think of anything different to try.

### **Conversation 2: 1975**

Nineteen, pregnant. The sexual revolution liberated men: I let Simon have free rein over my life. A health freak, nothing foreign is going into his girlfriend's body, not the new pill, the old-fashioned coil, the messy cap. Our sex will be all natural. Naturally, youthful fertility triumphed.

'Ohmigod, don't tell my parents, they'll kick me out!' Like me, he lives at home.

I have to tell my parents because I need their help. The irony does not escape me, although it doesn't occur to Simon. His parents never find out.

I take a deep breath.

'I'm pregnant.'

Silence. My dad, shocked and hurt, looks to my mother, as always. She purses her lips.

'What are you going to do about it?'

I've already been to the nicely anonymous neat stuccoed Georgian house in town. A waiting room of girls my age staring at the carpet, sneaking glances at each other's shoes, trousers or skirts. The woman I see is professionally kind, lays out options. But for once, I know exactly what I want: I have no idea about babies; I'm going to uni. I get a date for the termination, the neutral term finely calculated to erase awkward emotions.

My mother's matter-of-factness is just right.

### **Homelessness: 1993**

Homelessness isn't always, or just, house-less-ness. You can be legally homeless with a roof over your head: domestic abuse; overcrowded; temporary; third floor if you're in a wheelchair. Only a small percentage are the visible face of homelessness, the people in doorways, in tents on roundabouts, bunking down in multi-storey car park stairwells.

I've never been homeless. But vividly etched is how I felt that day when I bobbed down on my heels to talk to a guy sitting on a scruffy blanket. Earnest do-gooder, eager to believe everything I was told, keen to help, bursting to problem-solve.

Instantly, the people walking by didn't look me in the eye. I felt disregarded. Not so much unnoticed—although I was—as erased. People didn't want to see homelessness. Didn't want to see a person behind their label.

Viscerally, immediately, I wanted to shout, “But me, I'm not homeless!”

Shame-faced at my own hypocrisy: wanting to stand alongside people, simultaneously wanting to separate myself from “unfortunates”—and there it comes, that distance.

You feel less, sitting on a pavement, looked down on literally and metaphorically.

One in twenty of you can expect to end up homeless sometime.

### **Conversation 3:1986**

Christmas. Off-guard in the usual slumped warm boozy overfed end-of-day way. Talking about my friend Annabel, a fellow single-parent who also chose a wildly unsuitable man as father of her child. I'm in awe of her vivacious beauty and insouciance in the face of poverty and men's idiocies. Upper-middle-class, not intimidated by anything or anyone. I'm a bit enthralled by her, a bit humbled she's friends with me.

I'm spooling anecdotes. How shocked I was when she stepped over the low metal border to march across a huge circle of pristine lawn. Her problems with her colonel father. A throwaway comment slips out, ‘...but everyone has something they don't like about their childhood, don't they?’

‘Oh really; what's yours?’

Never have I sobered up so quickly.

I cannot even hint at anything wrong about my mother to my mother. But everything was wrong with my mother. Annabel and I spend hours exploring how our childhoods warped us, sent us off in crazy directions, keep us running away.

My mother is staring at me. The fire crackles. Ice clinks in my dad's whisky and lemonade.

Couching it as neutrally as possible and deliberately not mentioning her, I say: ‘I didn't have many friends.’

‘You didn't WANT friends! We took you to places and you wouldn't PLAY with people!’

I knew it would be my fault. There are no win-win situations, everything has to be pinned on someone. And with the deflecting superpower of the fragile, she bounces everything back at us, her defences impenetrable.

### **Geordie: 2010**

It's Saturday night. I've never seen Geordie worried.

‘It’s Bruno. He needs the vet.’

We don’t accept dogs at the hostel—there’ve been nasty incidents involving fleas, faeces and bites – so a mate looks after Bruno overnight. Daytimes, Geordie and Bruno walk and sit on the pavements just like always. We’re only protecting him from the overnight cold; but that’s good enough.

The PDSA hospital is open. Geordie carries Bruno to my car and cocoons him on his lap for the ten-minute journey. In the waiting room, I’m annoyed at the visible prejudice—tutting, stares, moving away—that must be Geordie’s everyday. He’s stroking Bruno, telling him he’s loved him since he was a puppy, years ago. Exact time doesn’t exist in a drinker’s world.

The vet examines Bruno and with a sober face explains he’s very ill, it would be kinder to put him to sleep.

Geordie’s face crumples. ‘I love him so much, he’s my life.’

The vet and I wait. Geordie hugs Bruno’s panting body. He is crying. Geordie, cock of the streets, cope with anything, nothing bothers him.

‘I’ll have to do the best for him, won’t I? It’s the least I can do.’

There’s no question Geordie will stay while the vet gives the injection. He wants me to stay too.

Afterwards, the vet raises the question of Bruno’s body. One option is cremation and giving his ashes back to Geordie.

‘Yes! Definitely. I want him with me.’

The vet tells us the cost.

Geordie says the PDSA will have to do the necessary.

#### **Conversation 4: 1995**

‘Have you ever talked to your mother about how you feel?’

Of course not.

‘What do you think would happen if you did?’

Next Sunday, I indicate I’ve something important to say. My dad goes upstairs to listen on the extension. Carefully, impartially, I lay out my version of the trajectory of my life, try to untangle what shaped me, explain the reasons for the chaos after chaos they never understood. For the first time, I venture to implicate her, slightly, gently. Even a hundred miles away, circuitously, down the phone, it feels daring. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes later, I’m out of words, spent. They are silent. But I expect that, it’s a lot to take in.

All week, I’m on edge, anxious how she’ll respond.

On Sunday, on schedule, the phone rings.

‘It was the school fête yesterday. They were lucky, it was a beautiful sunny day. We like to go, it’s important to support the local community.’

As if my words never existed.

#### **Geordie: 2010**

I tell Matt about Bruno. Geordie has shrunk a bit from his usual bombast.

‘I wonder if 1180 would work,’ Matt says. It’s a dry house for people trying to stay off alcohol, run by Brett.



Astoundingly, Geordie manages almost two weeks before he goes back to drinking.

‘He couldn’t cope with what was in his head without the alcohol to drown it,’ Brett tells me. ‘You know he went back to the North-East for a funeral? The abuse he had from his family you wouldn’t believe. No wonder he never kept in touch with his brothers.’

### **Conversation 5: 2000**

In my forties I don’t blame her as much. I can see the thread of mental fragility down the motherline from behind my grandma, through her, into me.

‘Mummy was ill and went to the doctor, and he said if she didn’t work, she’d be more ill.’ I remember this response to a now-forgotten question word-for-word. I must have been young because of how it’s phrased. And it had to be mental illness; no bodily illness would be improved by working.

Maybe I can make a connection through our shared experiences.

Tentatively, I talk around motherhood and babies, how tough I found it as a new mother. What our different generations grappled with, her in the restrictive 1950s, me in the liberated 1970s. Reaching out. Tiptoeing through the minefield.

Then I step on a detonator.

Suddenly, her face is thrust forward, her neck tight and stringy, jaw jutting towards me. Her hands like talons on the arms of her wing chair propel her shoulders forward into the room at me. Face twisted into inescapable gorgon stare, she hisses, ‘IT wouldn’t take ANY milk from ANYone, IT wouldn’t stop crying for ANYone, IT wouldn’t....’. I shrink smaller down into my chair.

Apparently, I’d only take milk from my grandad, her father, hands down the kindest person in the family, and wouldn’t let anyone but him bath me. I can only imagine her hurt at the rejection.

Before bed, I have a shower. Turning the water off, I drape my bath sheet across my back, hunched against the shivering cold. The feeling of the towel on my face makes my eyes scrunch tight tight tight shut. My mouth a grimace, teeth set, cheeks pushed into fat teardrop shapes, feels like a clown face of garish, hard, chipped plaster. Sad echo of my mother’s visage.

My hands rub and rub, hard, compulsively.

An ur-memory, primitive throwback to the time before conscious recollection, a baby, my grandad bathing me, maybe.

But he was a gentle man. This feels rough. It must have been my mother drying me, viciously wishing she were elsewhere. Or I was.

### **Geordie: 2010**

We try more different variations of accommodation to see if anything will work.

As good as it gets is our motto.

### **Conversation 6: 2011**

Another question slips out. The balance of power’s tipped. She’s eighty-two, eight years widowed, still a powerhouse, still independent, but underneath there’s frailty. I’m fifty-five, more sure after a lifetime analysing and coming to terms with everything. And we’re on my turf. A year ago, she eyed up our garage. ‘That would make a lovely annexe,’ was how she asked if she could come and live with her only child.

We’ve invited her for a meal. I’m discoursing expansively, explaining how I’ve changed my thinking, grown and developed.

'Don't you ever feel the urge to try and make yourself better?' I ask, knowing the answer.

'No.' Instant. Clipped.

'Why not?' Mischievous, pushing.

'I like me as I am.'

I still don't know if she realises that she's spinning herself a yarn, weaving a web to contain her terrifying fear and disappointment.

## **Geordie: 2014**

We don't run the hostel anymore.

I hear Geordie's acquired an old wheelchair and commands his second lieutenant (who later takes over his money lending business) to push him round.

Eventually I hear he's died.

I think about Bruno's ashes.

## **Conversation 7: 2020**

My mother's only with us six months before a massive stroke takes her to a care home. Imperceptibly, eight years pass and you're walking down the familiar corridor for the weekly duty, breathing shallowly so as not to inhale the sweetish nauseous mixture of talc and E45 cream masking the sharp urine smell. At least it's the least rancid of the eighteen homes I checked.

Mick the handyman is doing health and safety checks. He leans on the wall under one of the series of identical pictures repeated down the corridor.

'Eyup.' He smiles, pleased to see someone he can have a conversation with. Although it's the same every time. Here we go.

'What's it all about? I don't know.' He shakes his head.

I play my part. 'No idea, Mick. If that were me, take me to Switzerland.' We both believe assisted dying is preferable to life in name only.

'Does she even know who she is?'

'I think so, Mick. Sadly.'

'Look at her. Just lying there day after day, can't even move her arm to scratch her nose. I don't know.'

I don't mention when I reached out to stroke her hand and she jerked away from me. I rally back, 'She can't even enjoy her food, all liquidised. And her drinks thickened, she must miss her whisky-and-lemonade.'

Mick wants to get on. Sometimes we go on for ages, shaking our heads in unison. Most days I see no staff.

I push open her door, the dressing table she's never sat at to do her hair—as far as I know—on my left. She hasn't left this room, this bed, for a couple of years. The carers long stopped pretending she speaks to them. They turn her religiously every two hours. Shrivelled, weighing less than five stone, she lies foetal-curved as though she's trying to disappear into herself.

Five minutes of falsely bright conversation. I can't look away from her almost mummified face and unblinking rictus stare. Somehow, even though she can hardly move a muscle, she still dominates and disarms me. Occasionally she raises her eyebrows or frowns.

Her eyelashes are crusty; watery trails running down her nose and cheek. Blocked tear ducts. I know what'll help—cotton wool squeezed out in piping hot water pressed into the corners of your eyes. But there's no cotton wool, the ensuite water isn't hot enough. Excuses; I can't bear to touch her. I ask the staff to sponge her eyes. I never check if they do.

In 2020, coronavirus stops visits. Already marginal, she fades further. On her birthday, ninety-one, she sees her beloved granddaughter and hears her toddler great-grandson sing happy birthday; lucky they're with me when the staff WhatsApp call me.

A month later the home rings again; she doesn't have long. In plastic apron and gloves, I hold her hand, stroke her, tell her family news, about the virus. Force awkward words to say we love her.

Then comes an unexpected generosity. I've long felt sorry for her in a dispassionate way. But now, just once, I feel kind-hearted. And I let her feel it.

Maybe this finally allows her to slip away. Maybe she never heard. She died shortly after I left.

A covid funeral, six people, but people across the country watching online. Hiding how few people there for her, unlike my dad's funeral in the ancient church, full of village folk, the funeral she'd wanted.

It was done. Laid to rest.

Up to a point.

She's still in my head.

# Daddy Drinks the Poison

Sherry Shahan



# Timepiece

J K Gibson

Theoretical physics was his occupation for forty-three years. As a boy, he had looked up at the night sky and wondered about the heavens full of stars. He had wondered at their beauty from the back yard of the rectory in Lincoln, Missouri. The son of a strict Lutheran minister, young Paul Wistead was forbidden from following his science calling. But he fought for it and finally gained his independence, although it was at the expense of his own family. Paul's life would evolve from a struggle against religious dogma to a steel-hard determination to discover the real secrets of creation. His faith was in the stars and the power that drove them.

The big sky on those western plains with none of the light pollution of the big city had shown him those galaxies of stars that twinkled out there like jewels on a giant black ocean. But it was in high school that the question of time travel had set its roots in him, and the light from those stars had become part of an equation he had cogitated ever since. The cogitations had developed and solidified into miles of strings of equations, and those private struggles with time, space, and mass had finally led him here to CERN, the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva, Switzerland.

Dr. Paul Wistead poured a Jack Daniels and Coke, and it tasted good.

“Here's to you , Harry Pike,” he said raising his plastic cup, “Rest in peace you simple bastard.”

His hand shook but it would stop shaking if he concentrated on it. Anyway, he deserved one because this was the big day. Project Timepiece was finally going to work. There had been too many setbacks and false starts, too many failed attempts and roadblocks to this final breakthrough. There was no room for error this time.

A nervous little man with shockingly white hair, his diminutive physical appearance belied the magnitude of his cerebral gift. His gift had led him, not into the bright lights and adoration of the scientific community, but rather, deeper and deeper into smaller and smaller enclaves of black-budget projects of the government. In fact, he went physically deeper and deeper underground as things progressed, until he now resided nearly a kilometer under the CERN complex where the time physics moles worked their magic. And he was head mole of a very small, very elite group.

The clock on his desk said 9:35am, so he still had twenty-five minutes until his meeting with Dr. Deloran Manzak, project director. There was no love lost here, and Paul's severe, driven attitude caused constant clashes with others, whom he felt inferior to him. Paul's drinking had become his crutch in dealing with lesser minds. It also had fueled his nights of inspiration that evolved into greatness. His failing liver was outpaced by a perfect mind.

He went through the events again that led him to this moment in time. So much stress and so many distractions that were beyond his control, government boondoggles and secretive meetings. The legality of Timepiece and the ethics of it never bothered him. It was a black project in a dangerous world and good or bad, these terms had no meaning because the outside world was really of no interest to him. He was single-minded with two super computers at his disposal.

What they were doing this morning was “not a big deal” according to Dr. Manzak. And the simple fact was that it was just going to take a few minutes. Just a few minutes indeed, but the outcome was off-the-scale huge. It was actually so huge that it dwarfed any scientific experiment in history to date if it finally succeeded. And that's why the controls were in place. Anything they wished for was provided. The depth and breadth of this project was beyond all measure. Ten years and hundreds of billions of dollars had been spent for a success or failure that would only take ten minutes. There could be no more failures. Serious earthquakes were the result of such failures, the most recent one striking neighboring Italy in 2016.

There would be a guinea pig. Wistead only knew his first name, Perry. He was a middle-aged man who was richly compensated to participate in the experiment. The funds had been deposited to an account of his choosing two days ago. Perry had no family and no one who would ask after him should he disappear off the grid.

The outside world marveled at a defining achievement in the discovery of a new particle which fitted neatly into equations and explained God. The Higgs boson was the largest leap in physics since Newton's apple. But in reality, it was only an offshoot of this grand experiment of which Paul Wistead had become the linchpin. The incredibly complex facilities at CERN which were shown to the world were merely the tip of the iceberg which sat atop a 1.3 trillion dollar machine, a technical behemoth which could warp time.

Wistead and Dr. Harold Pike had co-developed this project. But there were neverending clashes over the theory. Pike was adamant that Wistead's conclusions were corrupted. The very different personality issues between the two had led to actual physical altercations before the elder Dr. Pike had suffered a catastrophic stroke four years ago, never to return. Wistead had soldiered on alone.

Dr. Manzak was an appointee from on high who had the power and authority to move mountains if need be to achieve the ultimate goal. Dr. Wistead had been sequestered here for six years for that purpose. Those in high positions were watching and growing anxious as this moment approached, and Manzak was their conduit at CERN to complete their vision. The God particle was nothing to them.

It was now 9:55am and the glass was again empty. He was right about his hand. It had stopped shaking.

"Paul, my guy!" Dr. Manzak rose from his mahogany desk to motion him to take a seat in a plush leather chair. "Are you ready for this? This will henceforth formally be known as your ten minutes of fame!"

"I have to say that I'm nervous as hell. And why wouldn't I be?" Paul replied. "This project is nerve wracking." He hated how Manzak made light of things and the constant sarcasm mixed with phony appreciation.

"Come now Paul, I've told you before to just relax. Everything is going to roll out like we planned. Checked and double checked. Nothing left to chance. You got this ball rolling and now it's time to knock it out of the park." Manzak rose and came around the desk. "We're almost there, Paul," he said putting his hand on Wistead's shoulder. "Let's not fuck this up."

"It will go as planned." Wistead's insides went tight as he spoke those words.

"So is Perry. He's going to do fine and so are you. Your baby is about to be born. Paul, just think what you and Harold created. A twenty-seven kilometer worm hole machine that can take our friend Perry into the future."

The worm hole was the product of their relentless pursuit over those trying years and although the physics was there, the energy required had not been there...until now. The energy problem was eventually solved when they had harnessed the unfathomable power of this electromagnetic engine to open a mini black hole on one end of a cycle and close it on the other. The physics was all there. The black budget supercomputers had confirmed it worked. And it had worked more than once in the simulations. It was the world's best-kept secret that was in plain sight. CERN had built a time machine.

"Yes, but it should just take him ten minutes ahead in time. It will take us a lot longer and billions more to advance farther down that road." Paul sat uncomfortably on the front of the chair.

"That's for later, this is now. Right now there are no higher stakes than Timepiece. Everything is on the line and the light is green for go. I think we should go and find our man Perry."

Dr. Manzak rose to go. He was beyond tired of the ever-negative attitude on display and of the smell of alcohol that wafted across the room. It had already been decided from above that this would either be Dr. Wistead's hour of glory or his final flameout.

They went through the building to the private elevator which was at their sole disposal and prepared for the descent three-quarters of a kilometer underground. The ride took nine minutes, during which neither spoke. This was it: zero hour. When the door opened, they were met by a small cadre of tech specialists and headed to the waiting room. The size of this team did not reflect its importance but the “need to know” excluded everyone but the crucial few that ran this project called Timepiece. There were just three techies and two physicists who would gain access to this otherwise-inaccessible room deep in the bowels of the CERN complex. Literally hundreds of thousands of kilometers of shielded cable and synthetic fibers snaked through this technological wonder and the business end of things was down here, way below where the security passes ended. The “need to know” scientists were one half of a kilometer up above this hyper-sealed machine room where the air conditioning droned continuously.

Perry Cogswell looked up passively from his seat in the waiting room and put down the magazine he was reading as they came in through the locked door. He’d been mildly sedated by an additive to the soft drink he’d finished. An unopened bag of pretzels sat on the coffee table in front of him.

Dr. Manzak offered his hand and introduced the team to him before proceeding down the hallway once more to another small room. Perry seemed nonplussed by all the computer equipment which filled every nook and cranny, and he asked no questions. If he was nervous he didn’t show it.

“Here we are folks. This is where we spend a few minutes of our time and then solve all the problems of the universe,” Manzak said with a wave of his arm and a forced laugh.

They stood in front of a half-opened polished metallic door. It was made of thick molybdenum and contained a small window. The three techies went to their posts somewhere outside the room, while Perry was led inside by Dr. Manzak. Paul followed them in and walked over to the cushy easy chair which stood in the center of the cylindrical room which had no other furnishings except a clock on the facing wall. Paul had thought of the chair. Manzak had wanted one similar to a dentist’s chair but Paul had felt the comfy recliner would relax their subject more. Paul had also nixed the idea of the arm straps that Manzak had felt necessary in the event of a panicky subject. It was Paul’s idea to sedate him and try to make him comfortable. This wasn’t supposed to feel like the electric chair. After all, the room itself would not move. Energy would be passed through huge vertical flux conductors above and below the “tube” which began and ended there.

“Okay, you boys get comfy and I’ll check you out on the big screen TV,” Dr. Manzak said as he left the room.

The inside of the tube room was the light green color of a hospital ward, the kind of color that is supposed to induce calm. Paul was not calm but was trying his best to allay any fears that Perry could be feeling. A comfy chair, a nice sedative-induced high and a much larger bank account served that purpose for Perry. And if all went well, Perry would be a very rich man who would be ten minutes younger than everyone else on earth.

“Everything okay Perry? I’ll just be gone for about five minutes or so, then we’ll be back in to see you.” Paul’s hands were sweaty and his right hand had begun to tremble slightly.

“Okay, Doc, see you,” Perry said and looked up at the clock. “Hey, I remember this.”

“What did you say?” Paul asked suddenly in half turn. “What do you mean, you remember? What do you remember?”

“That clock at 10:45 and you saying what you just said. It’s like déjà vu or something.” Perry giggled a little to himself. “This is weird.”

Paul’s heartbeat quickened. He realized that he was also experiencing what could be a flashback of some kind. It was a kind of swoon like he’d felt before an alcoholic blackout. But he was far from being drunk. His mind raced as he assessed the situation, because something felt very wrong. And Perry couldn’t have remembered this room, unless...

He turned to look at the door. It was now closed. There were two faces peering through the door at him and one of them looked like Harold Pike. That was impossible. How could Pike be here? Why was the door closed? It locked on the other side. Paul quickly realized that Harold Pike was the only one who could carry on this project if he were to fail.

But nobody had failed yet.

Failure had been defined as either it didn't work at all or a loop might be created if an uncertainty would occur. A loop meant that the transfer through the ten minutes of time would be incomplete and the subject would leave the original timeframe but never arrive back at the base coordinate reality. The error parameters were so infinitesimally small, they were considered insignificant.

"My God, what if..." he gasped, as the déjà vu crystalized. What if one of his equation strings had been wrong? What if he's locked in here with Perry when the energy transfers and the worm hole opens? What if this ten minutes is all there is for him...trapped in a box, doomed to spend this ten minutes over and over in a glitch...for eternity.

"Hey, Doc. I remember something else really clear in this dream I had. You're yelling like hell and pounding on that door right there to get out." Perry closed his eyes and settled back again to relax.

Paul felt suddenly nauseous and screamed as he lunged towards the door.

As his ghost would do an infinite number of times, forever.



# The thieves

Ivan de Monbrison

the face is turned upside down  
hell is right outside the door  
you close your eyes and you cry  
a madman ran down the street after killing somebody  
you forget your own name  
she had said something horrible  
and you could never forgive her  
a madman just killed somebody  
and the corpse still lies split open  
all red on the sidewalk  
like an abandoned bag of bones  
in which the wind could blow  
a little bit to make it fly away  
it has been so cold last night  
the ground must be almost frozen  
and this morning the sky is white  
you lie down on your bed  
your head is cold  
but heart is burning  
you need to leave the door open  
so that the thieves can come in  
and can take whatever they want  
you keep a knife well hidden  
and an ax in the kitchen  
let them come in and take whatever they want  
you will give them for lunch  
their own finely chopped off hands  
loneliness is just tasteless  
and you never had any friends  
for you it's another meaningless word  
like these sentences said to hide a  
real ugly reality  
I've beheaded my memory  
and left it on a table  
I can watch it easily in the dark  
but with my eyes at the rear of my skull  
I need to lie on my belly  
wipe those stains of blood from your clothes  
as life is just a dead body  
left to decay on a sidewalk  
that a madman has just murdered  
you don't care about anything  
friends like all the others  
as you have left your door open  
in order to kill all the thieves.

# History

J. J. Steinfeld

When the tall man, without knocking or uttering a word, entered the two-bedroom apartment, the small woman inside tried to throw her arms around him. His face was pale and covered with perspiration; his coat was torn in the front and back. She had never seen him appear this frightened.

“Tell me, tell me,” the woman demanded, but the man moved silently away from her and went to the front room’s window. The heavy curtain was drawn, as he had instructed before he left the apartment in the morning. Dark, he wanted it dark when he came back, *if he came back*. When she held him this morning, she felt she was holding all the heroes of history.

The woman, in her late twenties like the man, had waited for him all day, occupying her time worrying and pacing around the cramped, dark apartment. Only when the man was at the opposite side of the room from her, did the woman notice the blood on his left hand.

With a long, soft moan, the man slumped down in the corner. His back was to the wall, his feet near an old dresser that held all his and the woman’s clothing. There was no closet in the apartment but many pieces of inexpensive furniture. On the badly scratched dresser top were the two volumes of the book they had discussed and analysed so many times. The second volume had come out ten months ago, in the middle of December, the first volume a year and a half before that. It was the first volume that convinced the man and woman and their friends that something had to be done about the author.

The man, his lips apart and tongue partially out of his mouth, looked ready to spit or gag. This morning she kissed those lips and that tongue until he pleaded with her to stop. “I have important work to do... I have to put my name into the school books,” he had said to her in bed after their lovemaking, and then he laughed happily.

“So you want to become a martyr?” she had teased in response.

“I have taken all possible precautions. Do martyrs take careful precautions?” he had answered her seriously, and rolled away from her embrace.

Now, late in the chill October afternoon, the woman moved toward the man. His posture and expression made her hold back her excitement. With a stiff courtesy she asked, “Should I make you some tea?”

When she reached him, stopping close to his body, the man still had not spoken. He peered up at the woman, his eyes reddened and opened much wider than usual. She could see his lips quivering, the indentations from having bitten them as evident as if painted on.

“Did you succeed?” she said, holding as tight to her emotions as possible. “Is he dead? I must know.”

“Nothing went right,” the man said and licked some of the blood from his left hand, not aware of what he was doing. He suddenly bit his lower lip and created more indentations.

“Tell me what happened...” The woman wanted to sink down to the floor, to hold and kiss the man, but she remained standing above him.

“We must change history,” she recalled him saying this morning. “History is malleable, always malleable for those with courage and vision...” It was not the first time he had spoken those words or talked about changing history. Now he looked at her knees, and felt his head swirl and throb. The man pressed his temples, inflicting more pain than stability; blood from his left hand smudged the side of his face.

“Has anyone been here?” the man asked, his attempt to remove the fear from his voice unsuccessful. He dropped his hands to his lap, and they rested there lifeless.

“No,” the woman said, still shocked by the change the man had undergone in the seven hours since she had last seen him, since they had last made love.

The man removed his pocket watch and studied it as though it were about to transform into something animate. It had blood on both the chain and crystal. The watch had been a gift from his father, ten years ago, when the son left for university.

“He had too many bodyguards,” the man explained and returned the watch to his pocket.

“We knew he would be protected,” the woman said, the first trace of sternness in her voice. The man thought she sounded like his father. He had not seen his father in a year, not since that vicious fight over politics. The man’s father worshipped the person he had gone off this morning to kill.

“More than we estimated for,” the man said after a long pause.

“Where are the others?” the woman asked sharply. “Did they not get into good positions to fire their guns?”

“After I shot, they ran.”

“No mistakes were to be made.” This was a stern accusation by the woman, almost pitiless.

“Too many bodyguards...a battalion of bodyguards,” the man said, an unsure schoolboy explaining his truancy to a school official.

“One bullet. It should have taken a single bullet to kill him,” the woman said, not moved by the school-boy’s excuses.

“I killed a bodyguard,” the man said with a nervous boastfulness.

“You were supposed to kill *him*...” The woman’s voice became harsh, sterner; it seemed impossible that she was talking to the man she loved, had made love to hundreds of times, in this room, in rooms throughout Europe.

As he pinched the side of his face, the man tried to issue an order but his tone was closer to supplication: “Make the tea. I want to have tea...”

With the caution and watchfulness of a sentry in enemy territory, the woman moved backward into the adjacent kitchen. She filled a darkened pot with water and put it on the stove. The stove was a relic; she hated using it for anything except making tea. The woman could see the man from where she was standing. The tiny kitchen was a third the size of the cramped front room.

The man, seeming to attempt to convince a large, sceptical audience, not merely the woman, said, “I know one of the bodyguards is dead. Possibly two... There was such confusion. Everything fell apart...like a balloon bursting. His protectors were everywhere.”

“What are you going to do now?” the woman asked from the kitchen, watching the man intently, her mistrust growing.

“Disappear...” Again the man removed his pocket watch. He scratched at the dried blood on the crystal and then returned the watch to a different coat pocket.

“Where will you go? You will be identified.”

“It is easy to discard a name,” said the man, lifting his right hand in a confident gesture.

“And a past?” challenged the woman.

“A past is even easier to do away with. I will alter my face and leave the country. Today...tomorrow at the latest.”

“Where will I go?”

“You will stay here.”

“I don’t want to remain in this country any longer.”

“You must stay. This is where you’re needed.”

“The police will come here eventually.”

“Tell them you haven’t slept with me in a month. I never bathed, so you got rid of me.” The man laughed at his own words, at the same time also rubbing the skin under his eyes and kicking lightly at the base of the dresser.

“They won’t believe me. I won’t be able to alter my face...”

The man removed a folded piece of paper from his inside coat pocket—the same pocket containing the watch. He held the piece of paper without looking at it in his right hand.

“What’s that you have?” the woman asked as she stood by the stove and felt its weak warmth.

“My document. The one my mother valued and showed to all our visitors. She touched it to her face the moment before she died,” the man said and bowed his head for several seconds, an act of respect for the dead.

The woman moved back into the cramped front room and looked down at the piece of paper the man held. He unfolded the piece of paper and stared at it.

“*Your school report,*” the woman said in bewilderment. “What are you doing with your old school report?”

“I like to remember what a brilliant student I was.”

“They would have known who you were,” she scolded the man.

“I want to return to university. I would like to become a professor.”

“Concentrate on remaining alive.”

“University is where I should be.”

“You were expelled!”

“I will enroll in a different university in another country, of course. I will be a new man with a new face.”

“Do you have the money and train tickets?”

The man did not answer the woman. He lifted the school report close to his eyes, and seemed to be smelling as much as reading the piece of paper.

“Show me the train tickets...”

When the man failed to respond, the woman grabbed the school report from his right hand. “What are you doing with this? We need train tickets and money. For both of us.”

The man extended his left hand for the return of his school report and offered a fully formed smile that further confused the woman. She clasped his injured hand and asked unsympathetically, “How did you do this?”

“I was shot,” he immediately responded.

“This is not a bullet wound. You have a deep cut,” the woman said, and squeezed the man’s injured hand.

He withdrew his left hand in pain and hid it behind his back. The woman threw the school report to the floor. Using his uninjured right hand, the man quickly picked up the school report. As though to counteract what the man was doing, the woman lifted from the dresser one of the books—the book that had been published first—and angrily slammed it down on the surface.

“The water is boiling. My tea,” the man said, and brought his injured left hand forward. He inspected the hand, pleased by the increased bleeding.

“Tell me exactly what happened. Where are the others?” the woman interrogated. The man thought he heard his father’s bullying voice.

“I told you, they ran away,” the man said nervously, studying his interrogator.

“All of them?”

“They ran faster than deer.”

“Are you certain you killed a bodyguard?”

“Not completely certain.”

“You said before that you killed one.”

“I shot twice and ran...ran for my life.”

“You swore to me and to God that you would kill him, even if you were killed.”

Turning his eyes to the floor, the man said, “It was a stupid idea.”

The woman wanted to strike the man, to kick him in the face. The water from the pot continued to boil, to bubble in cryptic warning, but the woman did not move away from the man.

“It had to be done,” she said firmly, her dark eyes and tense features conveying much stronger emotions than her words.

“It did not,” he contradicted her, not raising his voice.

“I can’t believe what you’re saying... Stand up and give me the truth. On your mother’s grave, give me the truth...” The woman glanced at the two books on the dresser. In her mind she could hear the man reading from the books, stopping after every few sentences and declaring that the author had to be killed for the sake of history.

The man took a long look at his school report and said, “I cheated in mathematics. I hated that subject. I should have gotten an unsatisfactory mark.”

“You are not being rational.”

“School was wasted time when I was young. I was too immature.”

“You didn’t try to kill him, did you?” the woman said, her suspicion turning into certainty.

“I shot at him. A bodyguard as big as a bear was in the way.”

“Where is your gun?”

“I threw it away...into a field.”

“How did you rip your coat?...” When the seated man refused to answer, the woman once more grabbed the school report from him, but this time she ripped it into quarters before throwing the pieces to the floor. The man, hurt by the woman’s action, squinted at her and made a groaning noise of displeasure.

After he had picked up the torn pieces of the school report and put them into a coat pocket, the man said, "Someone else will kill him." There was no defiance in his words.

"It had to be done today... Today!" the woman shouted and pounded her fist on the dresser top. The man trembled, as if he had been struck directly in the face. The woman opened the first volume and looked at a page. She saw the man's messy underlining of the parts that were particularly malicious in the poisonous book. "We are justified in killing him... We are compelled to kill him," the man had said when the woman first questioned his plan. Originally she had been against the idea of an assassination; later she became its strongest supporter.

"Today!" the woman repeated, a violent shout this time.

"It will be done soon," said the man, regaining some of his control just when the woman thought he would lose all control.

"When? Explain to me how."

"He has many enemies."

"You became scared," accused the woman, barely restraining the urge to hurl the books with his underlining at the man.

"I am never scared," said the man, making circular designs with his right thumb in the blood of his injured left hand.

The woman returned to the kitchen and removed the pot from the stove. Half the water had boiled dry. Holding the darkened pot by its discoloured handle, the woman walked back to the man.

"My tea. I want my tea," the man said, becoming like a domineering husband demanding his customary service. His mother had always made tea for his father, right up to the day she died.

"You became scared, admit it..." The woman stood still and held the pot not far from the man's head. He turned his face, afraid she was about to scald him.

"You bastard coward," said the woman.

"Too many people. I shot at him."

"You never went near him..."

There was a light knock at the door. The man shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Police do not knock like that," the woman said scornfully. "Open your eyes, coward."

The man opened his eyes and said, "They're here for me."

"For what? For doing nothing?"

There was another knock at the door, this time harder. The woman took a step toward the door, but stopped and turned to look at the seated man. "I should pour this water in your cowardly face... Stand up!"

The woman resumed walking toward the door. The man stood and blindly searched for somewhere to hide in the cramped, dark apartment.

"Don't bother trying to disappear in here," the woman said, before opening the door.

"He is nothing but a crank... a loud-mouthed rabble-rouser. He will stumble over his own crazed schemes," said the man, forcing his words to sound confident, and going back to his place by the dresser.

The woman opened the door in one bold motion, and two men entered, the first man very tall, taller than her lover, and the second man the woman's small height.

When the woman had relocked the door, the small man said with disappointment and anger, "The meeting was carried on as scheduled." The tall man went over to the frightened man by the dresser and slapped him in the face. After a second slap, he began to punch the man in the stomach.

"I'll kill him later," the man said repeatedly during the attack, the words "kill him" coinciding with each punch to the stomach.

The woman and the small man next to her watched the attack but neither one told the other man to stop. The man being beaten became silent; even though he was battered and weakened, he managed to stay on his feet.

"You can't be trusted ever again," the woman said to her former lover.

The beaten man at last fell to the floor, to the same spot he had occupied earlier. "He's not important," the beaten man whined. The attacker, his fists still clenched but finished with the attack, stood over the man on the floor.

"We are in the worst danger now," the small man said.

"Nearly everyone has been caught," the other standing man added, even before the small man had finished his sentence.

"Only our courageous *thinker* is safe," the woman said, pointing with loathing to her former lover.

"That rabble-rouser is not important," the man on the floor argued.

"Tomorrow we must try again," the woman declared calmly.

"He left the city after his speech," the tall man told her.

"He is nothing," the man on the floor argued with more emphasis. "A loud-mouthed rabble-rouser."

"Maybe the fool is right," the small man said, giving a cold glare at the man on the floor.

"*This* was the time," the woman said and accidentally spilled some water from the pot onto the floor. She turned to the small man and said, "We have waited too long."

"I will kill him tomorrow," the man on the floor said.

"Are you deaf? He has left the city," the woman yelled at her former lover with a loudness that startled everyone present.

"There will be another chance to kill the rabble-rouser, I promise," the man on the floor said, and started to weep, his face pressed against his hands. More blood from his injured left hand smeared the man's face.

The others in the room gathered around the weeping man, the three of them considering whether or not they should execute this bungling coward. All four in the room had wanted the rabble-rouser dead long ago, before this year began, before he could do any more harm. When the second volume of his book came out in December of last year, the group became firmer in its determination to kill the author, but there were delays, lost opportunities. The ban on the author speaking in public was lifted in the spring, and this had alarmed the group more than anything. It was already the fall of 1927 and the rabble-rouser was still alive, still breathing his hatred and poison. They had all sworn a blood oath to stop the jackal screams of "*Heil! Heil!*" yet the screams were becoming louder and louder.

As the two standing men looked on, the woman poured the rest of the water from the pot onto the man on the floor, but the water was no longer hot.

# Bedlam

Nweke, Benard Okechukwu

*for Dr Chike Akunyili*

travelling places is freedom  
like birds perch from baobab to poplar  
    here it takes broken limbs to return to the family  
    & each morning we lounge at the threshold  
waiting for whose turn to spill tears at a funeral  
because in every eye hangs impatient tears  
    tears of pussyfooting in the face of terror  
    of fanning your fear into compliance  
surely blood & undone war follow us & the  
cemetery overflow oil spillage they say we have  
    sold sun & bought candlelight & i didn't know  
    what it means until this government until i ran into assassins into  
a bedlam where assassination looked like hollywood  
& wonder how i made available my hands raking  
    rupturing champ bowing to rifles grappling  
    to recreate breath & transform into tinctures  
& wonder whose epoch hearse be seen running  
to nowhere & not u-turn towing your remains  
    my remains to the morgue tell me what does  
    it take to cure national tumour?



# Stiletto

Greg Nooney

Every Wednesday, ever since Tom was little, her dad picked her up from school and took her to McDonald's before driving her to church for CCD class. She never liked the boy's toy in the kid's meal, but was too shy to ask for the girl's version.

She remembered one night, long ago, when her parents thought she was asleep and she heard him say to her mom, "I just can't connect with him. He would rather play with dolls than trucks."

"Don't worry," her mother had said, "he'll grow out of it. You'll see."

Today, she ordered a Big Mac, and she and her father sat in silence. When she got out of the car, he told her, "Tom, you be good and listen to the priest." She hated being called by her given name and wanted to finally tell him, to let him know she was a girl, but she didn't, and the moment passed. She looked back towards him one last time before walking up the steps of the Church. She was pretty sure he didn't notice her tears start to form.

At the end of the class last week, she lied to the priest, telling him she wouldn't be coming this week due to a family obligation, so she was sure she wouldn't be missed. The tricky part was to turn left instead of right at the top of the stairs and slip into the gym without being spotted by any of the other teens.

She accomplished this first challenge and hid in the corner of the gym until she heard the music seeping out of the classroom into the corridors, telling her the class had started. She shaved her legs the night before and filled her backpack with her carefully folded jet-black sequin dress, her heels, the small makeup bag she kept under her bed, the long black wig, and the rope. She snuck into the gym locker room, removed her sneakers, jeans, sweatshirt, and T-shirt. She caught herself smiling in the mirror as she slipped on the dress. She applied eye shadow and a bright red lip gloss, painted her nails fluorescent crimson, and sprayed on her favorite perfume. She adjusted her wig and completed her transformation by slipping into her shiny red five-inch heels. She took a long moment to gaze in the mirror at the classy woman she had become, then returned to the gymnasium.

The chairs were the uncomfortable folding kind, where it would be rude to complain of back or butt pain, where we must be thankful we can sit, and no longer have to kneel and cross ourselves. She recalled what the priest had told her many times. "You seem so restless, calm down." So, she was slow and careful when she stacked up the chairs, the newer sturdy ones on the bottom and the older rickety one on top.

Of course, she couldn't help but be restless when pretending to be the boy everyone thought she was. She tried as hard as she could to follow the unwritten rules for masculinity, as best she understood them—Stand up tall. Suck it in. Pretend you don't care—but no doubt her body movements weren't quite right. No matter what she did, she was always wrong. But, today, she knew she had to do this right.

It only took three tries to successfully sling the noose over the rafters, and she was sure the rope was strong enough to hold her weight. She slowed her breathing and climbed up slowly. The more unsteady the chairs were, the better. That way it would be easy to push the chairs aside, once the noose was tight around her neck.

The stilettos got in the way in the end. Her ankles twisted before she could slip into the noose, and she tumbled down, landing on the hard cement floor with a loud thud, her body lying in an awkward position. The shock of falling blocked out the pain at first, but when she tried to get up to try again, there was a throb in her left leg. She closed her eyes as fire-pain traveled up her leg, infiltrated through her back, and took up residence in her head, and she let out a scream.

The others in class must have heard her scream, and the priest was the first to arrive, to see her lying helpless on the floor. The look on his face was one of horror, not due to concern about her safety, she surmised,

but the travesty of who she was, her callous display of blacks and reds, her defiance of the Lord himself. He glanced back at his students, and she imagined his dilemma. Do I shield them from the horrible sight, or do I rush to help her? His compassion won out as he moved chairs out of the way to get to her. He started to reach out to touch her, to comfort her, but his hand recoiled and she saw a wave of disgust like a shadow fall over his eyes. He turned away and instructed one of his students to call 911.

Waiting for the help to arrive, in and out of consciousness, she shot glances at the other students, some laughing, some crying. The priest herded them away, trying to prevent them from holding up their phones, from recording her failure for all to see, but he couldn't stop all of them.

As she lay immobilized in the ambulance, she realized her secret was out. Perhaps they could move to another city, go to a new school, but the Internet was everywhere. There was no more hiding. She cursed her own stupidity. She should have planned better. She obviously needed more practice walking in the heels and wished she had taken that into consideration. One more failure to add to all the others. Now they would be watching her more closely, and opportunities would be limited to try again, but she would bide her time.



## **A Body Scrub Made of Dawn Dish Soap and Pulped Up Dreams**

Henry Kneiszel

Like they used on pelicans after that oil spill

Go off, self care queen

My comfort show is the OJ Simpson trial

My skincare routine is monetising youtube CPR tutorials

Activated charcoal baby formula NFTs for sale, get your activated charcoal baby formula NFTs to stop burnout and realign your energies

I can't believe the biggest takeaway from the most significant ecological crisis of my lifetime was "dawn dish soap sure does clean birds!"

We are so fucked

# Rig Explosion

Leslie Brown



## Artist's Statement

Deepwater Horizon, April 20, 2010, 11 workers killed, 17 injured.

BP's Deepwater Horizon oil well caused the biggest offshore explosion in US history. see report from the Guardian newspaper <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/apr/20/deepwater-horizon-key-questions-answered>

## The Disaster

Eleven rig workers were killed and seventeen were injured.

“Deepwater Horizon oil spill released 134 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico over a period of 87 days, fouling 1,300 miles of shoreline along five states. The scientists concluded that the Deepwater Horizon oil spill killed thousands of marine mammals and sea turtles, and contaminated their habitats.

“... exposure to the oil caused a wide range of adverse health effects such as reproductive failure and organ damage...” NOAA's National Ocean Service. Deepwater Horizon: DEEPWATER HORIZON. APRIL 20, 2017.

# Snap!

Matthew Scotney

On my mother's death bed, with my hands interlocked around her frail, bony fingers and her rosary binding us, she made me promise never to speak to Murphy O'Donnell ever again. Truth be told, I intended to keep my word. But my mother, real shame, left very little wealth to pass down. And, if my observations are to be believed, the state of the economy has killed more promises than the Devil himself. Debts pile up, and there's no way out. So, if my mother were watching from the fiery pits of Hell, she'd probably be happy she was dead.

"Got your gun, Sasquatch?" Murphy took a deep breath, hyping himself up. He's a scrawny guy, just hit twenty-eight. Ever since he got tall, he's looked like the exact intersection between Kurt Cobain and Uma Thurman. That shaggy blonde hair hides under a Yankees baseball cap. Murphy calls it a disguise since he's never been to New York in his life. Then he has a red bandana and sunglasses, convinced he's mimicking a wild west train robber. At least I don't have to look at his weaselly smile anymore. Unfortunately, he only got me a ski mask one size too small. But to give credit, Murphy has the wisdom not to say my name aloud.

"Sasquatch?" I will still smack him, though.

"Yeah, that's your nickname. Now tell me if you got your gun."

"If I went to this robbery without a gun—specifically, if I busted into Alessandro Costa's poker game uninvited without a gun—I would have brought my fucking obituary instead."

"Fair enough," Murphy scoffs.

The poker game is hosted on the second floor of the Seaside Springs Bed and Breakfast, a sincerely mediocre establishment according to word of mouth. Owned and operated by Lilianna Costa, Alessandro's daughter. For a cut of the house's winnings, she lets them host games in the empty rooms occasionally, with the only stipulation being they keep the noise down. Lilianna has a history with Murphy, dangerous history. He used to date her friend in high school while seeing her on the side. Then, he tried to add a third girl to the mix, and all hell broke loose. Despite the drama, that third girl, Zoe Esposito, was Lilianna's cousin who still has some stray feelings for Murphy. And poor Zoe has low respect for business secrets when drunk.

It's raining when we pull into the gas station's parking lot. Seaside Springs is waiting for us just across the street. Splashing through puddles, Murphy sprints across the asphalt. I'm forced to follow him, chasing him like a runaway dog. My mask goes on. There's an uneasy chill in the air. It's right after midnight. Near the front desk, I glance through the window. Lilianna is in her office, alongside Zoe, stuck in some argument. Shit. If they see us, no doubt they'll recognize Murphy. If he opens his mouth and says something stupid in front of them, then he sees God before he sees the dawn.

We take our time climbing the stairs, ducking around any more windows, and watching passing cars. Men have been coming in and out of the room for the past few hours. Those going in definitely looked happier than those leaving. But for the last forty-five minutes, things have been quiet. Thankfully, things stay quiet as we loom over the door to Room 207. Our guns are drawn, bags are ready to collect, and we got a real hunger to get some decent money for once.

"Count of three," I whisper. "One, two—"

"Three!" Murphy snags the countdown and kicks down the door, his scrawny leg barely able to splinter the wood. He goes in first, with me, once again, trailing behind. "Hands on the fucking table!" He cackles.

The stale smell of cigarettes infests the room, mixed with the scent of sweaty players in a room with the heat purposely kept on high. Six people are at the table: three in black suits, another in a blue blazer, a nurse still

wearing scrubs, and some shirtless guy playing the wrong type of poker. The guy with his tits out just won with a flush. His cheers die when Murphy shows him the inside of his gun.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” One of the suits, Costa, nearly spits on me.

“Shut up!” I smack Alessandro Costa on the back of the head. Other men have gotten killed for less.

“If you wanna buy in, it starts at fifteen,” the nurse smirks.

The motel room is far fancier than anything the common man could afford. A pool table waits in the back, beside beds with satin sheets. On one of the beds is someone’s girlfriend, playing on her phone, just catching up with the situation. All nine of her fingers have diamond rings. Each of them is worth more than my car.

Paintings of old castles, steam trains, and erotica cover the yellowed wallpaper. A jukebox waits for the next song, humming a low buzz in anticipation. Then there’s the turtle. A massive tank takes up too much space in the back corner, enough to hold a man inside. Its only residents are a forest of lakeweed and an alligator snapping turtle, which is definitely too small for its aquarium. Its claws scrape against the dirty glass. With a beady-eyed stare, the thing’s mouth hangs open, showing off bone-crushing jaws.

“You want the turtle or the cash, big guy?” The nurse cracks another joke.

“Do you want to go back to the ER?”

“Preferably not,” she says, still smiling.

Murphy’s shoveling cash in the bag, throwing a few chips and cigars in by accident. To really push it, he plucks a lit one from a suit’s mouth and tosses it in the pile. “Watches too, and those cuffs, they look nice.” He turns his pistol to the girl on the bed. “Rings, please, sunshine.”

“You take anything from her—you even look in her general direction again—you’ll be hunted down like dogs.” Costa growls, fingers clawing at the tabletop, red in the face. I keep my gun on him, eyes on everything else. Shirtless man has his fat fingers tapping the cards, still thinking he won.

“No one is getting hurt,” I stress, trying to hide my fear. I should have listened to my mother. I could have kept my promise without those outstanding debts, bad investments, and the divorce. But, instead, there’s a clanging in my head, someone ringing a bell too damn loud. Someone with my mom’s voice reminds me of the rumor that Alessandro Costa once sent six men to Hell with nothing but a brick. Already too deep in it now, though.

“Any more cash?” Murphy waves his gun around, nearly sticking it in someone’s eye. “Sorry,” he smirks. The jewelry jangles in his hand, barely able to hold them all. Enough gold chains there to stretch to the county line and back again. We did it. We’re rich. Now for the hard part.

“Want a glass of water?” The nurse opens her mouth again.

“I want the whole fucking ocean, miss.” Murphy doesn’t get the joke. I do. The nurse’s eyes trail down to the duffle bag. Fire gnaws its way through the canvas, spitting out smoke. The dumbass tossed a lit cigar on a pile of money. I watch Benjamin Franklin’s face twist into cinders a hundred times over. “Oh shit!” Murphy finally notices, stomping on the flames. Too late. Dancing on a bonfire, his pants are lit ablaze.

“Like Harry and Marv,” a suit grumbles.

Murphy rolls on the floor, trying to put out the fire. In the corner of my eye, I see Shirtless making a go for his gun. I stop him with two holes in his chest. It knocks him to the floor. He trips over Murphy, his head falling right into the bag of burning money. He doesn’t seem to mind the fire chewing on his beard. Old instincts come and go. I forgot how quick it was. Water starts spilling onto the floor, some shattered glass sliding with it. One

of the bullets went right through the fat and hit the aquarium. I feel like a robot, analyzing the chaos rather than being stuck in it. I'm the machine forced to shift gears to match the speed.

"Christ, you killed him!" The guy in the blue blazer spits, subdued and sweating.

The next thing I hear is a resounding crack. Costa's fist crashes into my face, throwing me to the floor. His steel-toed cowboy boot buries itself into my stomach, kicking me repeatedly. The pistol waves around, shooting up into the ceiling as I try to hit his head. I miss every shot. Then Costa pulls out his own. It's a bigger gun than mine, especially when I'm looking down the barrel. I smell the gunpowder, and I hear the angels sing. Right when I try to spit out my last words, Costa's screams join the choir. Locked around his ankle and absolutely refusing to let go is that snapping turtle, now free to bite whatever it pleases. The more Costa tries to kick it away, the harder it clamps down. Then, as I lie only an inch away from his leg, I hear the bone crack. To Costa, I no longer exist—his only enemy in this world is the turtle. Pulling myself off the ground, I reload my gun and tackle one of the suits on my way out. Murphy is on my heels, now wearing nothing below his waist and still clutching as much gold as possible.

"We lived! Goddamn, we lived!" He's absolutely ecstatic.

There's an equal chance I kill him or embrace him in my arms. Murphy wears a sheepish smile, holding the wad of gold chains to cover his balls. The two suits chase us as we jump down the stairs, barely dodging their bullets. Murphy's running at double the speed. I can't even keep up with him. With the streetlights looming over us, we sprint across the parking lot. Ducking behind a minivan, I take cover and count the rounds left in the magazine. Only ten left. Could afford just a handful of bullets in the first place—rent was due.

"You still got your gun, Sasquatch?" Murphy calls out, hiding under a truck.

A bullet whizzes past me, inches away from my head. "Yes, you fucking idiot, I do."

"Cool, I don't." It was in his pants.

Pinned down. The suits prowl through the parking lot, checking every corner. They look for a third stooge, just in case. However, they're close enough that if I shot one, the other would kill me before I got the chance to celebrate. So instead, a mildly stupid plan pops into my head. My pistol aims up at the streetlights. Besides the fire on the second floor and the neon sign out front, there isn't much else lighting up the world. The rain is still pouring down, dripping down my face as I pull the trigger. One, two, three, the lights go out. Of course, now the suits know precisely where I am. Quickly, I check the door of the minivan. Locked. There's no time for stealth or elegance. I smash the window and throw myself inside. A bullet shatters the windshield. I throw the car in neutral and release the parking brake. Slowly, the wagon rolls back as I duck my head and try not to die.

Car only gets about fifteen feet before it smacks into a Mercedes, awakening the alarm that immediately starts blaring. The whole plan was a game of making tonight even stupider than it already was. One of the suits gets close, and I waste one more bullet trying to put him down. The lead kisses the kevlar under his clothes. Fantastic. I got six rounds left, and unless more streetlights appear, I have little chance of killing anything else.

"You hit my car!" Hands drag me out of the driver's seat. I taste the gravel on my tongue when my head hits the ground. Another kick greets my guts right alongside the fresh bruises from Costa. I glare up and realize it isn't a coincidence. When our eyes meet, the she-devil Lilianna Costa swings a baseball bat into my ribcage. Like father, like daughter, she spits on me and throws another kick. My pistol flies from my grip. It slides across the ground, landing under Zoe Esposito's foot.

"Where's the other guy?" Zoe asks, shining a flashlight around the parking lot drenched in shadow.

Murphy O'Donnell left me. There's no doubt in my mind. I beg that the aluminum baseball in Lilliana's hands gives me a more merciful end than Alessandro. And secondly, I wish that I died next to a car with a little more style than a minivan. But nevertheless, a sincere sense of peace washes over me when I finally learn how

I'm going to die. The bat rises up, ready for the downward swing. There's no grace in Lilianna's movements, more a she-bear than anything else. Yet, I'm not really in the mood to judge. And when the bat comes crashing down, my tranquility gets ruined by Murphy smacking Lilianna with his handful of gold wrapped around his knuckles. Some of it goes flying—thousands of dollars lost in the darkness. Even more gets pried away as Zoe pushes Murphy to the floor, startled by the half-naked interruption. I catch the bastard and step to the side. I'm barely an inch away from Lilianna's next swing. I throw Murphy at her, and the two tumble to the ground. Zoe flings her flashlight at me and misses, sending us all into the dark. A pair of hands grab and pull me to the ground. I can't see who it is, and I hope it's not Murphy. I drive my fist into their gut, throwing all my strength into the punch.

“Sasquatch?” Murphy groans. I try to ignore it. Maybe he'll never know.

Something hard hits me on the back, probably the bat, knocking all the wind out of me and breaking a couple of ribs. A bright light blinds me when I expect to die, and I'm dragged away from death again. The petrifying glare from a sports car's high beams freezes us all in place as Medusa climbs out of the driver's seat. The nurse aims a rifle at my head, wearing the same coy smile. Her scrubs have a bit more blood on them than before. And there's definitely a different look in her eyes compared to before.

“Alice?” Zoe looks like her eyes are going to pop out of her skull.

“The one singular night things really needed to not fuck up.” Lilianna lowers her head.

A twinge of fear rushes down my spine. Alice Stacks was a name not thrown around lightly. No one knew what she did exactly, but the stories always ended with the town painted red. I want to ask if being a nurse is a cover or if she needed the scrubs for a different kind of job. I'm going to die anyways. Maybe she'll sate my curiosity.

“Sasquatch?” Murphy doesn't realize he needs to stay quiet. “Who is that?”

“A reminder I should have listened to my mother,” I snap back.

“What'd she say?”

“Never to speak to you again.”

“Why are you telling me that?” Murphy says, ignoring Alice Stacks as she stands over us, sticking the rifle in our faces.

There is a fatigue in how Alice Stacks looms over us, her shadow cast across the entire parking lot. I can barely see her face with the light behind her. She keeps her chin raised, looking down at us. “Get up, girls, straighten yourselves out.” Then, with the barrel of her rifle, she pokes at Murphy's face, knocking away the sunglasses and bandanas. And then she points at Zoe, then me, and my mask comes off too. “Not who I expected,” she says, disappointed.

“Oh, you fucking rat bastard.” Zoe spits on Murphy when she sees him.

“And who the hell are you?” Lilianna asks me.

Do I need to tell them? I'm going to greet the Devil soon anyways. So I abstain from the question, keeping my mouth shut.

The suits stand behind Alice, with their guns holstered at their sides. They're statues. Like robots, they don't move until their boss orders it. When she raises her hand, they walk in sync, silently told to collect the stolen gold. And after that? Our execution.

“Hey, Sasquatch?” Murphy reaches into his jacket. He still has his gun. Wait. It's my gun. Six bullets left. Murphy glares up at the suits, then at Zoe, and finally at Alice. “Sorry about your mom.” In the corner of my

eye, I see Alessandro Costa standing on the balcony, with the blue-blazer guy and the girl glaring down at us. Their clothes are a bit singed, and Costa stands on one foot. And then I hear the jangle of gold chains soaring through the air, splashing through raindrops and smacking one of the suits square in the face. “Run!” Murphy lets out a guttural scream as he fires, finally getting his cowboy moment. Lilianna and Zoe duck behind a suit right when he loses his eye. I start legging it. Alice gets tagged in the shoulder, then the stomach. Like a machine, she continues her work unphased. I hear the boom of the rifle and Murphy tumbling onto the asphalt. I hear more shots as the bastard hangs on by a thread. I hear the gun spit out bullets until it’s nothing but empty little clicks. I’m nearly away from Seaside Springs when the shouting goes silent. I take one last look back. Both Alessandro and Lilliana Costa are laughing. Zoe is screaming. Murphy’s dead. And his sacrifice is made stupid as I trip over a snapping turtle and twist my fucking ankle.



# Alice and Roses

Zary Fekete

Alice had no internet at home, so every morning at 10 she walked to the public library to check her email. Stephanie hadn't written yet.

Two weeks ago, when Alice wrote Stephanie to ask if they might move in together, it took her over an hour to compose the email. She labored over it. She thought Stephanie would be thrilled with the offer, but she suspected Stephanie might have certain natural worries about how exactly everything should proceed. Alice knew Stephanie was already comfortably living in her apartment across town, and there was the matter of their long-absent acquaintance with each other.

Alice had typed the email very carefully. She wrote that she was happy they hadn't tried to move into any serious relationship territory in college because they both had so much to learn. She wrote how thrilled she was that they had met again now, after they each had had time to experience the world on their own terms and had finally realized what they needed all along in life. Alice wrote she was happy for them to live in her apartment, or, should Stephanie prefer it, Alice could move in with her to the uptown loft where Stephanie currently lived. That was near the print shop where Alice ran into her last month.

After Alice talked with her at the print shop, she wrote her email address down on a piece of paper and gave it to Stephanie. Alice thought Stephanie must have been in a hurry, because she took the paper from Alice rather quickly, with an air of distraction, and then hurried out of the print shop. Alice finished her copies and, on her way out the door, she glanced down at the floor and saw Stephanie had dropped her business card in her haste. Alice picked it up and slowly traced her finger across Stephanie's name. She also passed her eyes along the contact information. She saw Stephanie's email address and smiled.

Alice looked up from her thoughts. There was a lock click on the library's front door. The custodian who opened the doors smiled at Alice in a somewhat bored manner and went back into the building. Alice followed him.

Alice found her regular computer in the front row, the third one down. She flicked on the power button and waited while the machine hummed itself awake. Alice quickly typed in her password, and the inbox hovered to life in front of her.

Her smile dimmed a bit. Stephanie hadn't written. Alice took a deep breath and gave a little shrug. This was rather like her, Alice thought. Hadn't she been like this in college? Cautious and somewhat coquettish? Alice smiled. Perhaps this was a little game Stephanie was playing.

Alice glanced over at the computer next to her. Odd. The computer screen was on. Usually they were switched off in the morning before the doors opened. A screensaver image of a flower slowly floated across the screen. Alice looked around. No one else was using the computers. Why was this one on? She stood up to leave, and, as she was standing, her leg bumped the table and caused the mouse next to the neighboring computer to jostle. The screensaver disappeared and she saw a familiar email screen. It was the same email service as Alice's.

Alice noticed there was an email from today which hadn't yet been opened. She didn't want to pry or anything, but it was impossible not also to notice that the email was addressed to someone named Peter and that it came from someone named Sylvia. She frowned a bit. This Peter must not be too careful, Alice thought. He must have changed his email settings to not require a password. Anybody could walk by and read the emails.

*Not right*, thought Alice. *Not proper behavior*. She reached forward and switched off *her* computer. She stood up and left the computer next to her as she had found it, with the email screen on and the Peter/Sylvia email yet unread and waiting.

When she got back up to her apartment the light on her telephone was flashing. She groaned silently. It would be from her mother. She walked over and pressed the message button on the phone. There was a moment of crackle and then her mother's voice began to speak.

"Hello, Alice," her mother's voice said. "I'm not sure where you are. I was wondering if you might be free for dinner tonight? It's been a few weeks since I saw you. I had a few questions about what Doctor Avery said..." Click. Alice pushed the delete button. The red light disappeared. She stared down at the phone for a few moments, feeling a tinge of anger pulsing in a vein in her temple.

Stephanie would write tomorrow. Alice felt sure.

\* \* \*

But tomorrow there was no response. Alice received a spam email from a hardware company and a reminder from her mother that Alice had not answered her email or her phone call from yesterday. Her mother was pestering her about the doctor again. Alice frowned as she ignored the spam and deleted her mother's email.

She glanced over at the computer next to her on the right, the one which hadn't been turned off yesterday. The screensaver flower drifted across the screen slowly. It must have stayed on through the night. Alice noticed there was no chair in front of the computer, and she realized that must be why no one had used the computer during the last day. Alice was curious. She looked around. No one was nearby. She reached over and nudged the neighboring mouse and the same email page appeared with the same unopened email for Peter from someone named Sylvia.

Alice glanced around her. The library was humming with the light quiet buzz of many people going about their business. Nobody was looking at Alice. She stood up quietly and slowly, and she picked up her chair to move it in front of the computer on the right. After one more look around, she sat down in front of the new computer.

The highlighted email, the one which hadn't been opened yet, was glowing near the top of the screen. She could see from the preview text what was written at the beginning of the email. It said, "*Peter, my sweet love...*" Alice couldn't help but smile. She didn't know this Sylvia, but something about her seemed quite fetching.

Alice cautiously leaned forward, and she let her hand waver for a moment in the air above the mouse. She dropped her hand down and curled it around the mouse on its soft pad. For a moment, she hovered the cursor over the highlighted email on the screen, and then she pressed the button to open the email.

It said,

*"Peter, my sweet love,*

*I have been ever so desperate to hear from you. It is really not right that you should make me wait so long. I only remind you because you yourself told me to write if you did not respond by Tuesday. Well, here it is, now Tuesday come and gone, and I certainly don't know what to do or what to think.*

*I spend all my days and every hour of them in a frightful twist. I've worn such a path in my rug with pacing, and all I can do is turn and fret with nowhere to go and nothing to do for fear that you might not have liked my proposal of Bermuda. I'm sure you know this, you fine specimen. Dearest, of course we don't HAVE to go, but Daddy's made the resort available for the whole week, and we'll never get another chance now that you've received your promotion.*

*Darling, if you could only just send me a short note then I would know that everything was fine. Until you do I shall be waiting with bated breath, and you must know that your dear anxious girl is desperate for your quick assurance...waits for your every beautiful word.*

*Love, Sylvia"*

Alice read the email twice and then she closed her eyes and pictured Sylvia. She imagined her as she must have looked, writing this email. How she must have agonized over it. And then, just for fun, Alice pictured herself as Peter.

They sat next to each other on the Bermuda plane. At the moment the plane took off into the air a slight bit of turbulence shuddered through the plane and Sylvia hid her face in Alice's shoulder. Alice lifted her hand and softly stroked Sylvia's hair. Her black hair.

Alice opened her eyes. She was smiling deeply. She slowly glanced around the library again. No one was watching.

She leaned forward and typed,

*"My dearest Sylvia, please forgive me. The thought that I have left you so stranded with your thoughts devastates me.*

*Let me risk offending you by asking whether you would allow me to deliver the news to you in person? Since we have already been apart for these many days perhaps a few more hours won't matter.*

*Would you consent to meet me tomorrow night?*

*Let me propose a new destination...I spied it out the other day on my morning walk. I pictured you as I walked, and I imagined where we might one day stroll together. I know it might seem to you a childish fancy, but I found a place for us to meet. Will you meet me tomorrow? I know the place.*

*The park on 6th street, by the main entrance. There is a promenade which crosses through the park gardens, filled on all sides with flowers.*

*We could walk through those flowers. Near the center of the garden is a rose bush. It is nestled down among the many other fronds, and I know not many people have seen it themselves. I like to think of this rose bush as our special collection of flowers. I mean to take one of those roses from that bush and place it, plucked clean of thorns, behind your ear.*

*Then, on the far side of the park, there is a koi pond with a man who rents boats. Perhaps we could continue our time together by floating under the perfect, star-filled sky with the stars all reflected around us on the water and, yes, reflected as well in the deep pools of your eyes.*

*This is how I am picturing us together. Dare I tell you...I will...I am picturing it now as I write these words, and my heart is aching that it must wait even one more day to see you again. But, surely, the words of the poet ring so true as all informed truth does: 'Absence makes the heart...' Well, you know the rest.*

*So, let me wait for you tomorrow at the park entrance. Please be there. And, as a way to fulfill my childish fancy would you consent to wear a red scarf? Red, after all, is the color of deepest passion.*

*Will you meet me so? Will you come at eight? I know that I will be there.*

*Yours, Peter."*

She sat back and reread the email in one go. Then, with a smile, she clicked the button and sent the email to Sylvia. She carefully moved the chair away so the computer would remain undisturbed.

\* \* \*

Alice awoke with a deep glow of pleasure on her face. She slowly curled herself out of bed. She spent some time at her window, looking down at the street below, watching the many cars moving this way and that seemed to play a merry tune of sorts in their dancing movement to and fro.

She dressed, choosing her one red dress from the back of the closet. Her mother had insisted on buying it for her, but she had never worn it before. She had never had need of it or occasion for it, until now.

As she was dressing the telephone rang. She thought about it, then decided and walked over to pick it up.

“Alice?” her mother said.

“Hello, mother,” she said.

“Oh, Alice, I’m so glad to hear your voice. I was worried. Didn’t you get my other message?”

“Yes, mother.”

Her mother continued speaking. “Well, you gave me a fright, not answering me. And I wrote to you as well. Did you read that? It’s about Doctor Avery. She had several thoughts and a good many suggestions, but I suppose the main thing is she wants you to switch what you’re currently taking...”

She walked back over to the telephone cradle and hung it up, cutting her mother off mid-sentence.

Alice left her apartment and walked to the library and was delighted to find a new email waiting on the undisturbed computer. She glanced around the library again, and then she moved the chair back in front of the computer and sat down. She grabbed the mouse and opened the email. It said,

*“Peter, darling,*

*You are a mischievous one, aren’t you? Yes, of course I’ll meet you. I’ll be there promptly at eight. And I do believe I could scare up a red scarf just for you.*

*Love,*

*Sylvia.”*

Once again, she reread the email carefully. She smiled softly to herself. She stood. But, as she was preparing to leave, she glanced back down at the third computer, the one she usually used.

She sat down and switched it on. The screen warmed itself and soon the familiar box of her own email was hovering before her again.

She stared at the screen, not quite believing it. There was a new email, and it was from Stephanie.

She grabbed the mouse and quickly clicked open the email. It said,

*“Hello, Alice,*

*I was very surprised by your email.*

*This is difficult to write, but I think you have misunderstood some things. I feel so sorry, but I cannot agree to your invitation.*

*I know this must be disappointing. You seemed very lonely when we spoke at the print shop. I feel you need someone to talk to, but I cannot be that person for you now.*

*Please take care of yourself.*

*Stephanie.”*

Alice frowned as she read through the email. There was so much Stephanie didn't understand, and Alice could see this from the awkward tone and confusing manner and obvious crudeness with which this email had been written. Alice could even imagine Stephanie typing it, haltingly and with awkward pecks.

Alice moved back over to the fourth computer and read through Sylvia's email again. She lingered thoughtfully over the final words, "*I'll be there promptly at eight. Thank you, dearest. Love, Sylvia.*"

After the library, Alice went back to her block and sat in her apartment to wait. The sun was dropping lower in the sky, and Alice glanced at her watch. It was just after seven thirty. Where was Sylvia now, she wondered? Surely, she was on her way to the park. Surely, she would be there soon.

The phone rang. Alice ignored it, stood up, and walked out the door.

She stole across Fifth street and walked quickly up Sixth until she reached the corner of the park which was nearly empty. There were just a few people walking in and out of the flower gardens within. Alice walked up to the main entrance of the park, looked around, and, satisfied, she moved across the street and sat down on the bench on the other side. From here she could see the entrance clearly, and she looked again at her watch. It was quarter to eight.

From where she was sitting she could see people coming and going through the main entrance of the park. Then, after a period, there was no one. Finally a bus stopped on the corner. A young woman got out, and she came walking up the sidewalk toward the park entrance. Alice followed her carefully with her eyes. As the young woman came closer Alice could see quite clearly. She was wearing a red scarf.

Alice stood from the bench. She watched Sylvia come closer until she reached the entrance. Sylvia looked up and down the street, but Alice stepped behind a tree so she could peer around it toward Sylvia, unseen. Sylvia kept nervously adjusting her blouse and flicking her fingers through her hair which was loose and flowing.

Alice continued to watch as Sylvia kept looking up and down the street. She was growing anxious. Once or twice she looked into the park, and finally, she looked up the street one last time and then turned and entered the park.

Alice moved out from behind the tree. She cautiously crossed the street. By the time she reached the park's entrance she could see Sylvia walking down through the park, past the rows of flowers in the flower garden. Alice quickly moved into the park and followed her.

Alice cut across several rows of flowers so that she could see Sylvia moving from the side. When Sylvia reached the center of the garden Alice saw her begin to hunt around among the various bushes. Then she stopped moving and stared. Alice knew Sylvia had found the rose bush.

Alice slowly walked toward Sylvia. Sylvia was standing with her back to her, looking out at the koi pond. Alice silently moved up behind her until she was just a foot from her back. Carefully, Alice reached down and plucked two roses. She put one of them behind her own ear. She could feel the thorn cut her and a drop of warm blood rolled down her cheek. Then she reached forward, and softly passed her hand through Sylvia's black hair.

Sylvia immediately turned.

"Hello, Sylvia," Alice said as she held up the second rose.

# Revenge

Serge Lecomte



# Seven Ships

Liam Hogan

Seven ships set sail into the starry skies.

The Earth was dying. It had been unwell for a while, truth be told, but now the malaise was obvious to even the most blinkered of its inhabitants and it was deemed terminal. Indeed there were those who said it was already dead, it just hadn't realised it yet. Each attempt to eco-engineer a solution seemed to only make things a thousand times worse, it was as if the Earth itself had given up.

With a last herculean effort and consuming much that was left to be consumed, seven mighty space-faring vessels were built with the desperate intent to launch these seven life boats towards seven stars around which seven near-Earths had been detected.

But what to fill these mighty space arks with?

Only the best would do: the finest wonders and most precious treasures that mankind had accumulated over the millennia. The most stunning art, the greatest literature, the noblest science.

And people? These ships, massive though they were, could still only carry a fraction of a fraction of the multitudes that teemed on the Earth's now barren surface. A scant one in a million was all that could be saved. Who was worthy of such an honour?

Earth was dying at mankind's cruel hand and it was imperative that only those who would never repeat that mistake were permitted to leave, to start anew. Only the healthiest bodies, the keenest of intellects, the most virtuous of souls, could pass the strict tests that were set. Although the tests were open to all, very few got through even the preliminary rounds.

Most failed to recognise exactly what was being tested.

Sure, there were written papers of knowledge and wisdom, physical tests of strength and agility, of reaction times and stamina, medical tests that scrutinised every part of the body right down to the DNA. A single blemish, the merest hint of an imperfection, was enough to rule you out.

But there was also an interview that you would be asked to wait for. And having been kept waiting for three hours, would you wait for another five? Or, if you passed this test and reached the final stages, would you turn down an offer of a million dollars, tax free, simply for letting someone else take your place?

Many fell at this final hurdle and left, clutching bundles of cash that the administrators of the exhaustive selection process were more than happy to pay out, knowing that they had preserved the moral fortitude of what was destined to become the new (and improved) human race.

Finally the candidates were ready. Finally they bid farewell to their not-quite-so-blue-as-it-had-once-been planet. Finally, seven gleaming teardrops rode seven towering columns of flame up out of the poisoned atmosphere, before unfurling sails the size of Luxemburg to catch the solar wind and help push the last best chance for mankind towards their distant destinations.

They never made it, of course.

The SS Chastity was probably the most successful, that ship did indeed reach its intended target of Kepler-186f, though by then there was no-one left to slam on the brakes. Faster-than-light travel—along with a carbon-neutral lifestyle and clean water for all—being the stuff of fairytales, these were Generation ships; taking multiple lifetimes to travel the vastness of space and, alas, the crew of the SS Chastity singularly failed to procreate their replacements. Perhaps some future alien race will find their desiccated skeletons and wonder why so many of them have their legs tightly crossed.

The SS Charity stopped to help the SS Diligence, whose captain had fallen asleep at the helm after a watch lasting 96 straight hours. Noble though this rescue attempt was, these Space Ships did not have enough fuel to change course and stop in this manner and they certainly did not have enough to start their epic journeys once again. Both ships now float powerless and lifeless out somewhere in the icy wastes of the Oort cloud, dancing a slow waltz around each other, occasionally disturbing the frozen comets that are their nearest neighbours.

The crew of the SS Temperance starved itself to death, the SS Patience never seemed to find the right moment to unfurl their sails and the SS Humility was... humbled by smacking straight into Pluto, which was mysteriously absent on their star charts, having somehow fallen between the cracks of classification as neither a planet nor a trans-Neptunian body.

As for the SS Kindness? We don't talk about the SS Kindness.

And the Earth they left behind? How did it fare?

Well, it was still dying. If anything, it was dying all the quicker. When the best that mankind had to offer ascended into the skies, those left behind responded in an unbridled orgy of sex and excessive consumption, thankfully free of anyone to tell them that such behaviour was in any way morally reprehensible. Oh, there were still priests, of course. Lots of them. But if they hadn't managed to secure a berth on one of the seven ships of the truly pious, just what sort of frauds were they to tell you what was right and what was wrong?

Food piles that had been expected to last another decade were consumed in week long contests of gluttony, held in museums emptied of their ancient splendours, or in echoing art galleries, their walls stripped bare.

Roaming tribes of the disenchanting, the disaffected, the seriously pissed off, rampaged through the massive complexes where they had been denied their rightful place amongst the stars, wrecking them in blind fury.

But most people did nothing. Nothing at all: just sat and watched the chaos unfold in glorious ultra high definition 3D TV.

Oddly enough, it was the reports from the Seven Ships that changed all of that. As, one by one, they failed, as their beamed status reports—meant to give hope, to promise some ethereal future for the race they were supposed to preserve—as these reports became bleaker and bleaker, the wrath and envy that had been felt towards these do-goody departees slowly diminished.

And when the last and final message dissipated into the solar static, mankind bucked itself up. Sure, their planet was doomed. Sure, the best and brightest among them had left long ago (though look where that had got them). Sure, lots of those left behind were so obese they would have had a heart attack if asked to leave their homes, never mind their planet, but hey, screw that. Can we fix it? Yes we can!

Well, they couldn't fix the Earth, not even by all dying off overnight. But they could still build spaceships. They weren't pretty, far from it, they differed as much from those seven lost ships of virtue as their occupants from the idealised demi-gods who had been the first to leave the planet. These ships were monstrosities born of necessity and whatever was closest to hand. Once you knew that there was nothing to come back to, you could put everything—every bridge, every car, every Canary Wharf—into building as many and as varied spacecraft as you could imagine. And there were lots of people with some seriously messed up imaginations; it comes from watching endless reruns of Battlestar Galactica, I shouldn't wonder.

Many of these ships never got out of the solar system. Many never even left the ground, except for parts of them, brightly coloured flaming parts screaming through the air. But you can't make an omelette... well, you haven't been able to make an omelette since the last chicken was smothered in ghost pepper sauce and used in the deciding bout of an extreme hot wings eating contest. (So, if you ever wanted to know what came last, the chicken or the egg? It was the chicken.)



Survival is a numbers game. Seven ships was never particularly good odds, not over interstellar distances, but how about seventy ships? How about seven hundred? How about seven hundred *thousand*, some no bigger than a VW Camper van. Some *were* VW camper vans, though they did have a rather unfortunate tendency to leak air like a sieve. When the last craft—constructed from the salvaged shell of the Sydney Opera house—blasted off, it left an Earth drained of its oceans, its forests denuded, its mountains replaced by steaming slag heaps. Not a single human soul remained behind. Well, nobody this story concerns itself with, anyway.

Of course, many of those seven hundred thousand ships were very poorly equipped. But you'd be surprised how quickly a bit of space piracy sorts the wolves from the lambs. And the lambs? Into the pot they would go, after all, protein *is* protein.

Mankind cheated, stole, murdered, and indeed, screwed their way across the Universe. Some are still doing that now. Others have settled, and perhaps, in a few tens of thousands of years or so, will need once again to flee the burnt embers of their resource-stripped planets.

But they'll keep doing it, keep despoiling their homes and seeking new ones, spreading like a virulent disease to every habitable body. And woe betide any sentient species whose path they cross, for this crusade carries with it seven devastating weapons: seven evolutionary survival strategies for every conceivable eventuality. Seven terrible vices that make them so *undeniably* human.

# Fearsome Critters

K.P. Connelly

“I’m telling you. It’s true!” Wayne used the back of his hand to wipe ketchup from his chin but smeared it up the side of his face. Spots of grease and melted cheese dotted the front of his khaki work shirt. He put down his chicken cheese steak and reached for his back pocket. The two men sitting on the other side of the table rolled their eyes. “My cousin’s wife’s uncle’s neighbor saw it face to face. It was tryin’ to get his chickens so he shot it but the buckshot bounced right off.” He took out his wallet and opened it with greasy fingers. Removing a laminated card, he held it in front of the men’s faces. “See this. It’s a scale from the Jersey Devil. Fell off when he shot it.”

Steve and Bobby examined the card. Both men shook their heads. “Not this again,” Steve rolled his eyes as he adjusted his ball cap and finished his beer. Bobby chuckled, “That’s no Jersey Devil scale. It’s from an alligator or a big fish or somethin’. There’s no such thing as the Jersey Devil.” Bobby lifted the near-empty 40-ouncer and finished his second beer.

“Yeah,” Steve belched. “Everybody knows that. The stories keep circulating to help tourism. How else can little hole-in-the-wall Pine Barren towns exist?”

Wayne shook his head as he looked around the Pine Barrens Liquors and Deli. There were more “I Partied with the Jersey Devil” t-shirts than bottles of alcohol for sale.

Wayne put the revered card back in his wallet. “Youse guys are wrong. People keep coming because they know it’s true. Same stories. Same description for hundreds of years. It ain’t of this world. I’m tellin’ ya.”

Steve cracked open his second 40-ounce Schlitz and guzzled eight ounces. He tried to contain his burp but the sour gas made his cheeks blow out like a pufferfish. “How dumb can you be to believe something can live for hundreds of years?”

Wayne saw the chance to convince his friends. “Cause he’s a *Devil*. The 13<sup>th</sup> child of Mother Leeds.” Wayne’s eyes widened. He wiped his mouth in preparation for his lecture. “The poor woman already had 12 starving kids when she found out she was pregnant again.” He leaned in and lowered his voice. “It was a dark and stormy night when Mother Leeds went into labor. Neighbor women folk were there to help, even though after 12 deliveries, another was gonna be easy. But she struggled, screaming in pain. Somethin’ was tearing her apart inside. Wind and rain pounded the shack and lightning cracked the sky. It was like Hell was rising from the sugar sand. Mother Leeds howled in pain, and cursed the child as it was born. The women folk went to swaddle the infant but raised their hands to their faces in horror. It changed right before their eyes.”

Bobby stopped chewing his sandwich and pushed the food into his cheeks. “Into what?”

Wayne’s expression of excitement didn’t falter. His wide-eyed stare didn’t leave their faces.

“A monster. His skin became scales, and bat wings unfolded from his back. He had the head of a horse with two horns rising from his skull. He leaped to his hoofed feet with a blood-curdling howl and whipped the women with his forked tail. Then he smiled a jagged tooth grin, and flew up the chimney, out into the stormy Pinelands. And he’s been living there ever since.” Wayne sat back with a degree of victory.

“You really believe this, don’t you?” asked Steve. “You’re not just blowin’ smoke up our ass because of the two 40 ouncers you drank.”

“I’ll drink two more and not change my story.” Wayne folded his hands and placed his arms on the table, ready for the cross-examination.

Bobby swallowed the last bite of his sandwich and said, “I call BS. Ain’t no woman giving birth to a devil monster that’s been living in the Pines for over 300 years.”

Wayne leaned forward again and pointed a finger. “Then how do you explain all the sightings? Real newspaper reports? Eyewitness sketches of the Jersey Devil? All exactly the same for hundreds of years.”

Steve wiped his fingers with what was left of his paper napkin. “Wayne, give it up. It’s been a long time since we believed in the Tooth Fairy and Easter Bunny, and they’re more believable than a Devil living in a million acres of sandy soil filled with pygmy pines, oak trees, and swamps. I’m more likely to believe the lie you tell about almost shooting a Jackalope than this cockamamie story.”

Wayne didn’t like being called a liar, ever since 3<sup>rd</sup> grade when he told the class his dog could talk and everyone laughed. “Yeah? Well, I bet I can prove he exists.”

Steve and Bobby laughed out loud; snorting and whooping so loud and obnoxiously, the few other customers in the store turned and stared at the drunken men with disdain.

Steve sneered. “Oh yeah? How ya gonna do that? Invite him for a chicken cheese steak?”

Wayne could feel his face tighten and his eyes narrow. “I’ll bet dinner here every Friday night for a year that I can prove he exists. I’ll take a picture of him tonight.”

Bobby stopped laughing. “Wait, you’re serious?”

Wayne sat back and crossed his arms over his beer belly. “Damn right I am. Heard some guys at work say it was heard near the Batsto Lookout Tower a couple of days ago.”

Steve smirked. “Alright, if you’re so confident, let’s up the ante. Dinner *and* all the beer we can drink.”

Wayne seconded the challenge. “OK smart ass. And if I take a picture of the Jersey Devil, you two pay my mortgage for a year.”

Bobby and Steve looked at each other and shrugged. Steve held out his hand. “Deal. That ol’ double-wide trailer of yours can’t be worth much.” The men shook to seal the deal.

Bobby clapped his hands once. “Ok, no time like the present. The sun’s about to set. Let’s go tonight while the moon is full. Devils probably like a full moon.”

Wayne grabbed his half-empty bottle of beer and said “Ok, pick me up at my place at 11. I need to get some things.”

\* \* \*

The men drove in Steve’s rusty squeaky pick-up, bouncing down rutted dirt roads, kicking up dust through the Pine Barrens. The truck bed held the essentials: a flashlight, night vision goggles, a point-n-shoot camera, a two-barrel shotgun, a case of beer, and a live chicken.

Steve parked the truck facing the lookout tower, and grinned at Wayne. “Good luck, chunk. Don’t let the devil get ya.”

Wayne ignored his friend’s ribbing and got out of the truck. “The only thing that’s gonna be gotten is the Jersey Devil himself.” He grabbed the gear from the back, tucking the shotgun in his armpit as he tried to control the chicken. The squawking and flappy of its wings called into the darkness. A call Wayne hoped would be answered.

Wayne began walking into the pitch pine forest when Bobby yelled out “Hey, you forgot something!” Wayne looked back and scrunched his face.

“You forgot to hand us a beer,” Bobby snorted.

Wayne shook his head. “Go on. Laugh all you want. You won’t be laughing the next time you see me.”

\* \* \*

A rainbow ring encircled the full moon through the thin grey clouds. The musty air carried the clean scent of pines, mixed with decaying forest undergrowth—the sweet smell of death and rebirth. A light mist covered the ground, swirling behind him as we walked down the thin path created by animals. The only sound was the clucking chicken, calling out to the Jersey Devil that dinner had arrived.

Wayne was weighed down by his gear. The sandy soil didn't make the trip any easier. The night vision goggles, strapped high on his sweaty forehead, kept sliding down. The point-n-shoot camera hung from his left wrist as his hand grasped the flashlight. Hiking deep into the Pine Barrens, he was sweaty and exhausted. His drunken greasy dinner didn't help. He wished he had grabbed a beer to bring along.

The uneven sandy path made walking in leather work boots difficult. He stumbled. The gun fell to the sand, and he fell sideways into a thicket of thorns. They grabbed and tore his thin khaki shirt and pressed into his skin, drawing drops of blood. The more he struggled to free himself, the more they scratched him and tore at his clothing. He yelled in frustration and pain, dropping the flashlight and chicken into the dense shrubbery to free himself. With some grunting and cursing, he finally stood with a torn shirt and bloody scratches along his arms, face, and chest.

He growled with frustration into the night. "I'm not gonna let those two win. I'll show 'em proof if it's the last thing I do."

\* \* \*

The chicken squawked in the tangle of thorns. Wayne reached in and pulled it free. He looked for his flashlight but it was off, lying somewhere deep inside the dark prickly snarl. No sense looking for it—he was on a mission.

He took a piece of string from his pocket and tied it to his wrist, then tied the other end to the chicken's foot. "You're not gettin' away again. Can't fish without bait and you're my ticket to success."

The chicken replied with frantic caws, pulling the string taut but getting nowhere. Above the senseless struggle came a subtle noise. The cracking of branches. The crunching of dried leaves. A guttural growl.

Wayne's breathing stopped. His heart raced.

He called into the night. "Mr. Leeds. Mr. Devil, I brought you food. Your favorite snack. I come in peace."

The sound seemed to bounce off the surrounding oak trees. Wayne whipped his head back and forth, frantically scanning the area, wishing he had his flashlight. A harsh exhale, like the air rushing from the mouth of a cave, arose behind a thicket. Wayne slid the night vision goggles down his sweaty, scratched forehead and turned them on. Shades of green filled his eyes. Something large moved behind the thicket. He could see a tail flicking, then bright green eyes staring at him. The Jersey Devil! He pushed back the goggles, which slid off his head and onto the ground, as he fumbled for the camera. The flash went off in his face. The last thing he saw was green eyes and pointed ears.

The chicken screeched and squawked, flapping desperately to get away. As Wayne's eyes readjusted to the darkness, he heard a low growl and the repetitive clip-clop of four feet walking across the dried pine needle floor. A large bobcat emerged from the darkness, baring his teeth, head low, stalking Wayne.

"No, no! I need this chicken. It's not for you!" He dropped the camera and reached for the shotgun. In his fumbling haste, the gun went off, shooting the moon. The last shot was in the direction of the bobcat, but a miss—it could be heard running off into the distance.

"Shit. I shoulda brought more shells."

He decided to head back towards the truck to reload. He knew he couldn't be unarmed when he came across the monster. It was only a matter of time.

\* \* \*

Wayne moved as if walking in a snow drift. The path alternated between shifting sand and low brush. It was slow strenuous walking, especially at night as he sobered up. Sweat dripped into his eyes and stung his scratches. The path narrowed in spots, with brush grabbing at his pant legs, trying to trip him. His exhaustion made him unsteady on his feet.

Mosquitos, drawn to his sweat and blood, swarmed around him; gnats flew into his eyes, nose, and ears. Holding the chicken's feet left only one hand free to swat them away. Just another obstacle Mother Nature threw at him to make him work for his reward. He opened his mouth and laughed, overtly mocking Mother Nature at her pathetic attempt to keep the Jersey Devil hidden.

A large beetle flew into his mouth, striking his tonsils. It clawed and scratched at his throat. Gagging and choking, Wayne stopped to cough up the bitter insect and spit it into the night. He shook his head in frustration, took a deep breath, and stepped forward. His boot landed on a craggy rock; his ankle twisted. His tired muscles were too weak to keep him upright and he fell off the path, striking his head on a rotting log.

"Damn it!" The earthy taste of moss and dirt filled his mouth, as sandy soil clung to his sweaty face. He would have laid there for a moment to regroup, but what he heard left him no other choice.

A high-pitched rattling arose right before him. He moved in slow motion like he was trying to leave the room of a sleeping infant. The full moon revealed a 4-foot timber rattlesnake coiled inches from his face, mouth open, fangs exposed, ready to strike. Wayne swallowed hard but his dry throat choked him. He pushed up on his hands, the muscles in his arms quivering, trying not to make any sudden moves.

The chicken had other plans. It pulled the string taut, and flapped furiously in a frantic failed getaway. The other end of the string jerked Wayne's wrist. His palm slid on the pine needle floor, unable to hold his weight.

The rattler met him in his fall, striking with a forceful punch, the fangs sinking into his cheek. Searing pain filled his face. Wayne reared back, pulling the attached snake along with him. It hung from his face, writhing on his chest. Screaming in pain and fear, Wayne grabbed it with his free hand and ripped it off his face. The snake had enough length to whip its head and strike again, injecting venom into his forearm.

Wayne used his chicken hand to grab the snake by the rattle and fling it into the pitch pines. Burning pain spread across his face and up his arm. His muscles twitched in defiance. Stumbling back to the path, he could feel the skin tightening on his face and arm. Swelling raised the level of pain, turning Wayne from a man with a mission to an animal trying to survive.

It became difficult to see with eyes swelling shut. His breathing became wheezy as his throat closed. He lurched down the path, struggling just as much to walk as breathe. He left everything behind in his effort to get back to the truck. Everything but the chicken still tied to his wrist.

He couldn't swallow his own spit. A trail of drool and sweat followed him, like bread crumbs leading to the area where he realized mocking Mother Nature was a mistake.

\* \* \*

Looking through slits for eyes, battling for each breath, Wayne had no idea how far he had to go. He thought he could see the top of the lookout tower in the distance, and he stopped to listen for the truck and his friends.

What he heard was a laughing *wha-a-a-a-ah* high above him. The demonic screech stopped his forward motion.

“No, not now.”

Wayne spun around, trying to scan his surroundings, certain the Jersey Devil was moving in, and he had no way to prove it or protect himself.

He yelled, “Go away! Leave me alone. I won’t hurt you.” He fumbled with the string on his wrist. “Here, take the chicken. It’s yours.”

But he couldn’t untie the taut knot.

Something hit him on the back of the head, knocking him to the ground. He pushed himself back up but was hit again. Trickle of warm blood ran down his neck and back. His only chance for survival was to make it to the truck.

Through sheer strength of will, he got up and stumbled towards the tower—his eyes swelled shut. He felt drunk again: his head spinning, his knees weak. A screech arose behind him right before he was struck again, the claws of a great horned owl tearing at his head. The razor-sharp nails sliced through Wayne’s thin hair and lifted his scalp, which flipped forward like a cheap toupee. The trickles of blood became streams, soaking his shirt. He was losing so much blood that his heart couldn’t beat fast enough to keep him from passing out. But he kept his forward motion, staggering. He knew it was his only chance at survival.

He could barely breathe, let alone yell for his friends. He was blindly knocked to the ground with another owl attack. He crawled along the sandy soil, feeling for anything to pull himself forward. The chicken was finally silent, as the string jerked his wrist.

The first rays of the sun pierced the windshield of the truck and struck Steve’s heavy eyelids. The crook in his neck did more to arouse him than the sunlight in his eyes. He straightened his head and rubbed his muscles. The odor of stale beer and sweaty men filled the cab. His bladder was on the verge of bursting. He opened the driver’s door and climbed out, oblivious to his surroundings. His movement roused Bobby awake.

As Steve stood stretching by the driver’s door, he noticed a mangled heap lying by the tower. He rubbed his bloodshot eyes to better focus. Was it the carcass of a deer? A pile of trash? Then he saw the tan work boots.

He banged the hood and shouted “Bobby! Wake up!”

Bobby opened his puffy eyes to the sight of Wayne lying in dark red sand. In a panic, he stumbled from the truck and met Steve at the tower.

The men stared open-mouthed at their friend’s pale, mangled corpse. He was partially scalped; flies buzzing and feeding on the clots on his skull. Dried blood trailed down his face and neck, where it soaked into his torn shirt.

Bobby turned and puked, heaving over and over again until streaks of blood and saliva were the only result.

Steve stared without blinking at the mangled remains of his friend. Wayne’s face was swollen and disfigured, worse than any sun-bloated road kill Steve had ever seen. He swallowed back the sour stomach contents trying to make their way out and wondered what could have caused this.

Then he followed the wrist string to splayed claws, up the bloody feathered leg; tendons and vessels trailing off where it had been ripped from the chicken’s body.

And he believed.

## Contributors

**Lawrence Bridges's** (The Lights Are On in the Work Trailers) poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and *The Tampa Review*. He has published three volumes of poetry: *Horses on Drums* (Red Hen Press, 2006), *Flip Days* (Red Hen Press, 2009), and *Brownwood* (Tupelo Press, 2016). You can find him on IG: @larrybridges

**Leslie Brown's** (Rig Explosion) published work appears in *Blue Nib*, *Rigorous*, *Ragazine*, *Great Lakes Review*. The failure event Leslie selected is the "2010 Deepwater Horizon Oil Rig Explosion in the Gulf of Mexico." The images in this submission are digitally modified. Leslie Brown.

**J S Carpenter** (Home. Less.) Identifying as neurodivergent and queer, she is chief horizon-gazer for a medium-sized homelessness enterprise she helped build. J S has had poetry and prose published in half a dozen publications including the 2022 *NeurodiVERSE* anthology, *Firewords 15* and *Queerlings*.  
"Home. Less." was the Alphanumeric selection for 31 May 2023.

**Kae Chatman** (Losing My Finger) holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Wichita State University, and an MA and PhD in Philosophy from Kansas University. Kae taught at Philander Smith College and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, among others. She still lives in Arkansas with her wife and beautiful dachshund.

**Kevin Connelly** (Fearsome Critters) is a writer and pediatric emergency medicine physician. He has worked as a writer and medical consultant for Amazon, several universities, startup companies, and national healthcare groups. The things he sees in the ER inspire him to write horror short stories and middle-grade fiction.

**Craig Crawford** (The Dark Zone) grew up reading constantly. After being wowed by so many great novels he wondered if he could do it too. Since 2020 he's published seventeen shorts with five more due out in 2023 plus a serial. He writes sci-fi, fantasy, horror, humor—whatever his imagination gives him.

**Mia Dalia** (Mistakes Were Made) is an internationally published author of dark speculative fiction. Her work's been featured in a variety of publications online and in print. Her novelettes (*Smile So Red*, *The Trunk*, and *Spindel*) are out on Amazon. Her debut novel, *Estate Sale*, was released by Black Ink Fiction in April of 2023.  
"Mistakes Were Made" was the Alphanumeric selection for 28 June 2023.

**Ivan de Monbrison** (The thieves) is a schizoid writer from France born in 1969 and affected by various types of mental disorders, he has published some poems in the past, he's mostly an autodidact.

**Delta N.A.** (California Blue) The artworks signed by the duo are present in numerous public and private collections and have been exhibited in solo and group shows across Europe, U.S.A. and Asia.

**Elizabeth Wadsworth Ellis** (The Little Boy) was an outside child, conceived outside marriage, wed outside her culture, served outside her country in Serbia, Sofia and Russia, and holds beliefs outside her upbringing. She has jumped outside airplanes.

**Marco Etheridge** (Red Sea Holiday) is a writer, occasional playwright, and part-time poet. He lives in Austria. His writing has been published around the globe. When not crafting stories, Marco is a contributing editor and layout grunt for a new 'Zine called *Hotch Potch*.

**Louis Faber's** (The New Gods) work has appeared in *Constellations*, *Alchemy Spoon*, *Arena Magazine*, *Dreich*, *Atlanta Review*, *The Poet*, *Glimpse*, *Defenestration*, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *North of Oxford*, and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His book *The Right to Depart* was published by Plain View Press.

**Zary Fekete** (Alice and Roses) has been featured in various publications including *NonBinary Review*, *Bag of Bones Press*, and *Mangoprism*, has a debut chapbook of short stories out from Alien Buddha Press and a novelette, *In the Beginning*, coming out in May 2023 from ELJ Publications.  
"Alice and Roses" was the Alphanumeric selection for 26 July 2023.

**Jeff Fleischer** (The Paper Cut) fiction has appeared in more than seventy publications including the Chicago Tribune's *Printers Row Journal*, *Shenandoah*, the *Saturday Evening Post* and *So It Goes* by the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library. His fiction collection, *Animal Husbandry*, is forthcoming from Running Wild Press. "The Paper Cut" was originally published in *Jet Fuel Review*.

**J K Gibson** (Timepiece) is a retired ad salesman whose life is filled with Greek history/mythology and sci-fi. When not adventure motorcycling around Greece he is pursuing his hobby of fantasizing on his laptop about science fiction. "Timepiece" was the *Alphanumeric* selection for 14 June 2023.

**Alejo Rovira Goldner** (I Watched the Slaughter Film and Was Ejected From the Faith) left Spain to settle in Southern California where he also publishes under the name "Alex M. Frankel." He's been nominated for a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize and his latest chapbook is *So Many Mouths at the End of All Beauty*. "I Watched the Slaughter Film and Was Ejected From the Faith" was the *Alphanumeric* selection for 21 June 2023.

**Liam Hogan** (Seven Ships) has stories in *Best of British Science Fiction* and in *Best of British Fantasy* (NewCon Press). He's been published by *Analog*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and Flame Tree Press, among others. He helps host live literary event Liars' League, and volunteers at the creative writing charity Ministry of Stories. "Seven Ships" was previously published in *Liars' League*, November 2014.

**Janis Butler Holm** (Post-Apocalypse) served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines.

**Henry Kneiszel** (A Body Scrub Made of Dawn Dish Soap and Pulped Up Dreams) is a non-binary writer from the wild midwest. You can find their poetry in *Star\*Line*, *Untenured*, and *Mutiny!* Henry is also a visual artist and one of the founding members of an experimental performance group called the Three Ring Goose Circus.

**Serge Lecomte** (Revenge) earned an MA and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. In 1988 he received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University of Alaska (1978-1997).

**Matt McGee** (The Chalupa Gangsta) writes in the Los Angeles area. In 2022 his work has appeared in *Gypsum Tales*, Sweetycat Press and *Red Penguin*. When not typing he drives around in rented cars and plays goalie in local hockey leagues. "The Chalupa Gangsta" was the *Alphanumeric* selection for 12 July 2023.

**Amuri Morris** (Wedding Bells) is an artist based in Richmond, Va. She recently graduated from painting/printmaking and business at Virginia Commonwealth University. Throughout the years she has acquired several artistic accolades. She aims to promote diversity in art canon, specifically focusing on the black experience.

**Greg Nooney** (Stiletto) worked as a therapist for over 35 years, and conducted numerous workshops. His book *Diagnosing and Treating Dissociative Identity Disorder: A Guide for Social Workers and all Frontline Staff* was published by NASW Press. He is working on a novel about a character with dissociative identity disorder.

**Nweke, Benard Okechukwu** (Bedlam) is the winner of the 2022 Neptune Prime Poetry prize. His works have appeared in the *Ballast Journal*, *Kalahari Review*, *World Voices Magazine*, *West Trade Review*, Querencia Press LLC 2022 anthology, Thresposs 2022 anthology, *Rogue Agent*, *Eboquils*, and elsewhere.

**Donald Patten** (Mask Gleaners) is an artist from Belfast, Maine. He is currently a senior in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at the University of Maine. As an artist, he produces oil paintings and graphic novels. Artworks of his have been exhibited in galleries across the Mid-Coast region of Maine.



**bart plantenga** (A Personal History of the Cherry Bomb) is the author of *Beer Mystic*, *Radio Activity Kills*, and *Ocean GroOve*, short story collection *Wiggling Wishbone* and novella *Spermatagonia: The Isle of Man* and wander memoirs *Paris Scratch* and *NY Sin Phoney in Face Flat Minor*.

**Matthew Scotney** (Snap!) is a freelance writer hailing from central Florida. Focused on nonfiction articles and creative prose, he wishes to build experience in both education through writing and making full use of his imagination, mainly in science fiction, fantasy, and crime stories.

**Sherry Shahan** (Daddy Drinks the Poison) is a teal-haired septuagenarian who grows potatoes in the cardboard box that delivered a stereo. Her art has appeared in *Rattle* (cover), *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Backpacker*, *Country Living* and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts.

**J. J. Steinfeld** (History) is the author of 24 books, including *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, 2019), *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Poetry, 2020), *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential* (Poetry, 2021), *Acting on the Island* (Stories, 2022), and *As You Continue to Wait* (Poetry, 2022). "History" was previously published in *Forms of Captivity and Escape*, (Stories, 1988).

**Ian Tash**'s (Of Biblical Proportions) poetry has appeared in *Haiku Journal* and *Orpheus*, and his writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Amendo*, *Sci Phi Journal*, and the anthology *Noncorporeal*. He enjoys crafting stories that play with spaces both sacred and secular. "Of Biblical Proportions" was the *Alphanumeric* selection for 7 June 2023.

**Matias Travieso-Diaz** (King Peroz and His Pearl) has over seventy of his short stories published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, *The Satchel and Other Terrors* was released in February 2023.

**Rachel Whitfield** (The Day My Husband Died) holds degrees in English and Marketing from the University of Oklahoma. They are fascinated by the intersection of visual art and poetry, and they enjoy using magazines and newspapers to create.

**Reza Zarghamee** (King Peroz and his Pearl) is a practicing environmental attorney who holds a PhD in Ancient History from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. His historical publications include a critically acclaimed biography of Cyrus the Great and numerous published articles on Persian history topics.