

Twisted Vine
Literary Arts Journal
Winter Issue



Cover Photo:

“Joshua Tree”

by John Zheng

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Masthead:

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Wilderness Jubilee

By Tom Darin Liskey

Ravens gather
In the bell tower
Of a ruined church.
There is no iron
In the campanile
To scatter them as before—
 No bell-ringers
 To summon
 The faithful
 To prayer.
The inhabitants
In the valley below
Shun this tabernacle now.
They no longer hunger
For the bread of reflection,
 Or thirst for the Spirit—
And why should they?
They are a people
Satiated and docile
 By convenience.
But in this land
Of sudden tempests
The old belfry
Provides shelter
For the winter-bound birds.
The ravens swoop in
With twigs, grass,
And hay in their beaks
Like dark supplicants
Bearing their Sabbath offering
To the God of this place.
And I cannot help but wonder—
Listening the cawing
And wild nest-making
If it were not God himself
Who called these cunning birds
To his lonesome tower
On a foreign hill
So that he too can hear music
Fill this place of worship once more.

Flux

By Marie-Andree Auclair

Pulsing wordless
emotions
my heart rushes
crimson vigor
through a maze
of vessels, arteries
grand boulevards,
narrow streets
and dead-ends
circuits a Monaco track
roars
until the wave
of the checkered flag.

Out of an infinite vastness
random possibilities
mesh into a web
I call fate.
I push it away in fear
as if it were not me,
not my heart beat
that resonates
on the cosmic drum.

Yet, my heart
small as a fist
beats a tattoo
against its cage
and holds me
in the flow
of kokoro.

Fairy Talk

By M. A. Schaffner

They all had shoes that sang, the little elves
who flitted through our garden in the snow
that followed them with fox prints while the mice
ensconced themselves indoors. I hear their feet
creaking through the castle's floors and ceilings
then back outside to finally disappear
to other time zones through windows open
for a few hours – some years a few hours more.

Children, listen – no one can make you age
beyond the age you choose, though time may drag
your body down to the busy bugs who
will always find a use for you. By then,
that may seem a gift like a friendly elf
waiting for you in the holly's shadow.

Autumns

By M. A. Schaffner

Foliage like we meant it to be, as dreamed
in the sauteed snail heat of August when
life swelled to extravagant tumors.

Now we stomp the gas, fast forward in hours
to the crisp of an ice age, to crystals
hanging from trees, prisms saturated

with the old ambient moisture, cleansing
the air like a north wind power wash, as light
grows brilliant for a dribble of minutes.

What felt like a waiting room brings the show
we clamored for through coming attractions
piled on through months. Now that it's finally here

we think, too short, like every decent show,
and every love and every life and all
the lunar transits missed for hours online.

What River Ceased to Flow

By Richard Weaver

when light darkened
when air rippled,
then hardened its heart?
When war paused
to acknowledge another life
gone, a spirit receding,
its flame now a fixed shadow?
The land endures & encloses
the river's constant
unfaithfulness, its meandering,
and the barren trees
accompany the song
within each bird's throat.
Hidden in the heart, hiding
behind the moon
soon to wake, a welcoming
dark kiss from the earth.

The Boat Life

By Paul Y.J. Kim

Being stranded in the middle of the sea was not how Jack had envisioned his cruise would go. After all the arduous studying and being worked like a mule, he had finally begun working as a psychiatrist, treating almost hundreds of patients in the span of fifteen years. He worked tirelessly, and only after fainting behind his driver's wheel after a long night of drinking after the finalization of the divorce with his wife — because he had caught her cheating with another man in their bed one afternoon when he had come home to surprise her — he had finally decided to take a rest for himself.

But an unexpected storm had hit during the voyage, while everyone was off in a dream-like state, swimming in the water park like pool, gambling and drinking at the casino, making love to strangers, or whatever else they were doing so absentmindedly away from their homes. Jack had been by the railings on one of the higher floors, where he had been trying to isolate himself from any type of company, enjoying the serenity which surrounded them; the peacefulness of the ocean and the gentleness of the skies above him.

The storm had come so suddenly, that even Jack, as he was admiring the skies, had not noticed it. Dark clouds appeared seemingly out from nowhere and the winds quickly became turbulent. It had snuck up on them with a devastating force, and when the storm hit in its full throttle, no one was prepared for it. Its strength was unparalleled to anything that Jack had experienced or ever seen or heard of.

Everyone had fallen off as the potent waves tilted the ship over and by unknowing fortune he had fallen into a life boat, drifting around in the chaotic sea as it was dumped off from the fallen ship. Then by another unknowing fortune the boat had begun carrying itself away from

wreckage through the currents, away from the eye of the storm.

As the boat had sped away, he saw it all; the colossal chunk of metal sinking slowly, bit by bit, and the hundreds of people swimming towards him, asking for him to wait. They cried out to him, begging and pleading, some gave up and cursed him. Some were so profane he thought it had been quite unnecessary, even regarding the dire circumstances. The waves had pushed him away and he had pulled out an oar attached on the side to try row his way back to them. Not to be a hero, but he had not want to be stuck alone.

For thirty days he lived in the boat, eating emergency supplies, dry food that tasted bland and dull. There was no one to talk to, except to himself, and the sun was always blaring, with barely any clouds in the sky. It was strange, the lack of clouds above him.

What he gradually found to be the worst of it all was being alone. He had begun to notice his desire for company as he was afloat all alone. But thinking about his patients helped for some reason. Working as a psychiatrist, he met a lot of interesting people. He thought about the oversized man who considered himself a demi-god, above all humans, and cousin to Hercules; Jack lost track of the man's supposed ancestry, it was bad, but all of the man's bickering went in one ear and out through the other.

There was another man who thought a popular pop diva was helplessly in love with him, somehow, always crafting such elaborate stories that tied everything that she did to confessing her love to him, through song, picture, or whatever it was. Stranger thing was that he was sent to his office by his wife. Jack always wondered how the wife had enough patience and will to still stay with the man. He thought every man should meet a woman like that.

There was also a woman that he remembered. She was a particular case, at the age of sixty-three? Or was it sixty-five, somewhere around there. Her all grown children thought her mother's religious practices had finally reached the point of delusion. They had brought her to his office, explaining how she sometimes broke out into loud gibberish, shouting in her home nonsensically, and that she saw dark figures that walked about people in which she began screaming at, towards the empty space where the figures were, rebuking in the name of the lord. Jack had treated a few cases such as these, all from different forms of religions, but this particular case had been quite different.

The first session that they had, he remembered it vividly. He had gone out for a lunch break, but as he parked his car he had bumped into a car behind him. The lady in the car behind him had come, screaming as though her head was about to explode, immediately accusing him, saying she would sue him if he did not give her the cash. Tired and annoyed, he merely nodded, trying his best to not speak a word to her and gave her the money for the barely visible damage that he had made.

That had led him to be late to the first session with the old woman; he could not for some reason remember her name, so perhaps, he did not remember this meeting as clearly.

She had sat on the sofa, like the one everyone expects a therapist to have. Sitting up straight, she turned her head his way as he had come in and immediately, she said, "You're lonely, aren't you?"

"What did you say?" he had replied, confused.

"I feel it, you're so alone." She had risen to her feet as she said this, and walked slowly towards him.

He remembered feeling awkward, taking a step back, bumping into the door behind him. And she kept walking towards him, coming closer and closer until she was right in front of him. Then, unexpectedly, she wrapped her arms around his torso. “It’s okay to feel alone, but make sure not to deal with it by yourself, okay? The evil one takes special advantage over such situations,” she said as she looked up at him, then reaching over to his head she ruffled his hair, like one would do for a little boy when he was upset, to help him feel better. Then she took his hand and started pulling him back to the seating area, “All right then, why don’t we get this session started. I understand my children are paying a good amount of money for this.”

The boat drifted, slowly. Well he assumed it did but if he had to be honest he felt like he was stuck. There was no wind, not even a breeze and he swore the waters looked the same as they did just a moment ago — of course, ocean water looked the same all the time, but he swore it nonetheless. He checked and looked long and hard beneath the ocean as well, reaching in with his hands too, but saw and felt no life form.

It was day thirty-one. He had woken like any other day — during the tenth day or so he had gone through a very angry time, but now he was more relaxed perhaps due to his despondency, waking up indifferent each day. Luckily, there was still enough food, and rationing them well, he would probably not go hungry for another thirty days or so.

Then a few more hours passed and somehow he had fallen asleep again. He woke up again feeling drowsy. Lifting his head, he ran his hand through his hair to push them back and when he did, on the other side of the boat, he saw a fat cat. The fat cat was chunky in a sort of endearing way. Its base color was black with white strips randomly crossing here and there making it look like it was wearing a suit. The strange thing was that the cat was standing on its

two hind legs.

“Hey chump, come over here,” he heard a voice say to him, it was brusque and rough, like how he imagined a mobster would speak.

“What? Who’s there?” Jack asked, wondering who he was talking to. He looked around the boat, only to end up facing the cat again, seeing it walk towards him.

The cat lifted one of its paws towards him, pointing with its short finger. “I’m talking to you bub, and when I tell you to come over here, you come over here, get me?” The cat jumped up and pinched him by the ear, dragging him down to eye level.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch, all right, let me go first. Ouch.” He flailed his arms around, thinking how wrong it would actually be for him to smack this fat cat around, hurting a life form so much smaller than he was.

The fat cat sat in front of him, criss cross applesauce style. He urged Jack to do so as well, very eagerly, smacking his paw in front of him. This was one fussy fat cat. “Old sport, do you want me to get you out of here?”

“What are you supposed to be?”

The fat cat struck him across the face, thankfully with his claws drawn back. “I’m the one asking the questions now old sport, do you want to be off this boat?”

“I mean, of course. Why wouldn’t I,” Jack said, looking over the boat, only seeing water.

The fat cat smacked him again saying, “Your sass is not appreciated here, now, let me tell you something here. Why don’t you see that island?” The fat cat tried to wrap its short leg — one of the two that were being used like arms — around Jack’s shoulders, but it was too short. He compensated with hanging around Jack’s neck.

Jack looked up, and indeed there was an island in front of him. It was quite small, about the size to fit a school building. There was a village on top of it with wooden cabins littered around everywhere. He saw beautiful women waving towards him; he saw no men and he swore the women looked like all of his favorite actresses. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“C’mon old sport, I bought all of this! You come with me and I’ll give it all to you,” said the fat cat, and the boat began to gain speed without any wind to mobilize it. When the boat neared the island’s border the fat cat hopped off, landing in the sand as gracefully as any cat would despite how chunky he was. The ladies shrieked like fan girls, Jack could not see what they were so excited about. It was just a talking fat cat. “Hop on over Jack, this will be fun.”

Jack shook his head, took an oar, and then pushed himself away from the isle of women. “Bye fat cat.”

As he drifted back into the waters, all he heard was the fat cat belligerently, not to mention profanely, screeching about how he was just plump, not fat.

Jack fell asleep again and woke up to find himself in another awkward situation. He saw an angel sitting down across from him, exactly where the fat cat had been before. The angel was a blonde woman. She glowed, a celestial halo floating above her head. Her fingers were calling him over and he crawled on all fours until he was basked in all of her radiance.

“Jack, what are you doing here?” the angel asked him in a soft and whispery voice, much preferable than the fat cat’s.

“I’m stuck here, can you help me?” he asked, hoping she would take him to wherever she came from. If all angels were this beautiful, he would go to heaven willingly.

“I can read your thoughts, Jack. Would you like to go to heaven?”

He nodded without any hesitation, becoming more entranced by the second.

“Well, I’m sad to say, you can’t come to heaven,” she said without a hint of regret, insouciant. That snapped Jack back away from her. “Would you like to know why Jack? There are many reasons. Right off the bat, you’re nowhere as great as any of your brothers and sisters. David, he’s a neurosurgeon, Emily is running to become mayor, Lisa’s bakery is making moneyn

that won't compare to your salary, and your youngest brother Eric, we all know he's mother's favorite." She counted with her pale fingers, each of his siblings. Jack could only shake his head, unknowing what to do.

"And then your friends, they're also doing so much better than you aren't they? There is also a reason why your wife slept with Simon, who was supposedly your closest friend. Who would stick with a guy like you?" She guffawed as his face cringed. "Look at you, pathetic. Where did you go for school, well it's not even worth mentioning isn't it? I won't even bring up the GPA you graduated with. How can anyone let you even work as a psychiatrist when you're the most dysfunctional sociopath on this planet? You are disgusting."

He shook his head until his neck was throbbing. The angel approached him, hovering as her wings flapped. She continued to unveil everything that he had been keeping suppressed. Then when she was right in front of him, their noses touching, she asked him a question, her voice suddenly whispery once more. "Would you like for me to fly you home?"

The psychiatrist stared into her golden eyes, illuminating with hope once more. She was less frightening without her being so abrasive and heartless. She traced her finger from his cheek to his chin. "Can't take you to heaven, but I can still fly you home." He realized the deviancy hidden in her voice.

"No, please leave me alone." And Jack went back to sleep.

Jack woke up, but he refused to open his eyes. He could already feel something sitting where the fat cat and the angel had appeared. He squeezed his eyes shut, bent on never opening them.

"Hey, open your eyes why don't yah." It was an old voice, croaky and hoarse. Curiosity itched at him until it became his sole incentive. He opened his eyes to see a Kappa. A creature he had read of from an old folklore; a humanoid turtle creature. Everything was as illustration had portrayed it except for one distinction. The Kappa had a very long beard that stretched all the way down to Jack's feet. His skin was scaly like a fish and was the bluest blue one would ever see. It had a large shell on its back, just the outer layer seemingly attached on its back, and its hair was like seaweed. "Finally, it was getting real boring."

"What do you want," Jack said curtly, not in the mood to deal with anything anymore.

"I want to talk! I told you I was bored. Not a good listener for a psychiatrist aren't yah?"

said the Kappa, leaning forward, then leaning back again on the boat.

Jack looked at the Kappa dubiously, unsure if he should enlighten him. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Anything! I’m bored!” The Kappa seemed to be becoming more frustrated with each of his questions, so Jack chose to deal with a Kappa that wasn’t angry with him.

“Okay, okay, how did you find me?”

“I was swimming around, and saw something orange floating around. I decided to check it out; it’s quite slow under the water these days.”

“Oh yeah? There are fast days I assume then?”

“Yeah, Poseidon sometimes throws some breathtaking parties. He said he would throw one today, that was why I was out, then I saw your boat.”

Jack became interested. “Poseidon? He’s real?”

“Of course!”

“Then are angels real?”

“Nope.”

“But I just saw one!”

“You were seeing things.”

“And I’m not seeing things right now?”

“Nope.”

Jack plopped backwards, landing on the rubbery surface, his head bouncing against the boat. “Can I come with you?”

“Guests only, Jack.”

“I knew you would say that.”

“And how did you know?”

“Hmm, well I’m actually not sure about that,” said Jack, feeling a certain dread.

“Well, Poseidon doesn’t know yah so he didn’t invite yah. The party’s for formally invited guests only Jack.”

“How do you know my name?”

“Because you told me! I’m your only friend remember?”

“No, I don’t remember that at all.”

“I’m hurt! How could yah not remember me.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I’m bad at keeping tabs on friends.”

The Kappa nodded, “No wonder you’re so alone.” The Kappa jumped off the boat, shaking its head. The psychiatrist leapt towards where the Kappa had jumped off and watched it disappear deeper into the seas.

“Don’t leave me! Wait!” The psychiatrist yelled and yelled but the Kappa kept on swimming further away. The Kappa continued to swim further away until all traces of him was enveloped by the water. Jack suddenly began to weep, continuing to ask for the Kappa to return. His heart yearned and no longer able to hold back, Jack jumped overboard, swimming to catch up to the Kappa. If he never found the Kappa, he would just crash the party; it would probably brighten up his mood. He could be a fun guy.

Trip to the Underworld

By Mary Carroll Leason

The thug leaned back against the cracked vinyl seat, trying to remember how he had gotten on the bus. The cold red surface crunched under him, unlike the soft leather Cadillac seats to which he was accustomed. His head throbbed and his nose was filled with the stench of urine. Through squinting eyes, he glanced at his broken Rolex. He had no idea how long he had been there. Like a snake, his tongue ran over the gold tooth covering on the right side—his lucky tooth.

Whatever piece of crap pulled this trick on me is dead. It's just a matter of time. No one messes with The Reverend. He reached for an itch on the back of his head, where he found stickiness. *Was I robbed?* Searching his pocket, he pulled out a thick wad of cash. Relieved, he looked about for the first time, aware that he was not alone. The other passengers on the bus paid him no mind.

His dark eyes peered out the window, trying to gage where in the hell he was. The Projects in which he had grown up loomed before him, some windows only half intact, others covered in wood, sheets, and other random materials that might prevent heat's escape. It would be winter soon. He shook his head, remembering the wind that once seeped into his bedroom with a haunting whistle.

Two children playing outside on the front stoop were ushered indoors by caretakers as a group of rowdy teens replaced them. They walked as a pack with chests puffed out; he could envision the tats they hid beneath their long sleeves. Their bravado was familiar. He did a double-take as the bus passed them by; he could swear one was his buddy from years gone by. *Damion.* An image of his fallen friend flashed before his eyes, the dark face calm as if he was

sleeping, his white t-shirt soaked in blood. But just as the hoodlum on the sidewalk turned around, the bus pulled away from the curb.

The Reverend's eyes were playing tricks on him. *Those sons-a-bitches must have hit me in the head good and hard.* Today was an unlucky day, but tomorrow would be different. Tomorrow, he'd hunt them down and have his revenge with his boys in tow. His hand went to his pocket, searching for his cell phone. *Screw those damn thieves. They'll learn not to mess with me.*

As a familiar corner came into view, the man pulled on the cord to alert the driver to stop. The looming, decrepit mansion on the corner of Chestnut and Wayne still looked the same through the dirty bus window. An empty rocker creaked back and forth in the November wind; a momentary flash of hearing stories on his grandmother's knee dissipated quickly, leaving only a brief ache in his chest. Even though he hadn't been to his Mama's house in years and she didn't speak to him anymore, he knew the neighborhood like the back of his hand. Mr. Crawley, the neighbor a few doors down, always left his garage door open. All he had to do was sneak inside with a screwdriver to get the 1987 Olds Cutlass running. The Reverend smiled at his cleverness.

He stood carefully, not quite balanced or right in the mind. Using the railings to keep himself upright, he made his way down the aisle of the bus, avoiding the wads of chewing gum and dried puddles of Coke, careful not to tarnish his new Jordans. When he reached the front of the bus, he bounded down the steps to the door. As he passed through the opening, he expected to inhale the sweet smell of autumn, but was thrust into a mirror image of the vehicle he thought he had just left behind. Like a trippy maze, he found himself back inside of the bus. It lurched forward as he climbed the stairs, disoriented. The panic began to fill his gut. *Am I trapped?*

“Hey!” he yelled at the bus driver, who paid him no mind. “Hey, you crazy lady! What the hell you doin’? I was trying to get out! Stop this thing!”

But no matter what he called her, or how threatening he became, she did not so much as glance in his direction. He was completely invisible.

He grabbed at the steering wheel, feeling for the cold metal beneath his skin, but his hand passed through as if it was a mirage. Startled, he stumbled down the aisle toward the back door. The anxiety rose in his chest like a swarm of angry bees ready to explode. He moved in slow motion, as if his feet were weighed down, trudging through mud. He cried out for help, but not one person raised their glance, or seemed to notice his tantrum down the aisle. He must be dreaming. He could think of no other explanation.

When he reached the back door, he fell into a ready stance and waited for it to open. But as the accordion entrance unfolded, revealing the dusky Cleveland air, he jumped back with a start. An angry dog growled and snapped on the street outside the bus. Its face was curled in fury, the marks of fresh fighting wounds plain on its face. It *knew* him.

He had loved the dog once, before the fight it had lost, costing him thousands of dollars. In the tradition of the dog fighters, he put him down with a bullet to the head. He had been disgraced and that was the punishment for losers. Lucifer had been his first kill—his gateway into the leadership of underground dog fighting. It was there he earned the name “The Reverend”, for he became the preacher to the trainers and the enforcer of rules.

The ginger pit bull lunged at him, spittle hanging from his mouth and anger in his eyes. The last thing the man saw before the dog pounced was the bullet hole in his skull, crusted with dried blood. The Reverend instinctively threw up his arms to protect himself and felt the sting of teeth, followed by pressure and the piercing ache of muscle being ripped from his arm. He

shrieked loudly, punching at the animal that refused to let go. Then there was a muffled whistle and Lucifer retreated, not stopping to admire the wound he had inflicted upon his murderer. As the dog bounded onto the street, the door shut behind him, leaving the man inside.

A shrill scream filled the Reverend's ears until he realized it was his own. He held his arm in pain, rocking back and forth on the floor of the bus and gasping for breath. Still, no one moved a muscle or glanced his way. "Are you people blind?" he yelled. "Help me, goddamn it!"

Nothing.

He struggled onto one of the seats, noting the blood cascading down the tatted black skin of his forearm. It dripped onto the red vinyl cover, past the graffiti and into the cracks, then down the front of the seat where it pooled on the floor. *What the hell is happening to me?* The Reverend tried to regain his composure.

His dark eyes went to the windows marked 'emergency exit'. Outside, the skyline of Cleveland was backlit by the setting sun. The bus was heading over the bridge that loomed above the Cuyahoga River. The scene's serenity was a stark contrast to the dread that infected him. He needed to get to a hospital, but before he could clear the distance between him and salvation, he felt the eyes upon him. He looked up to find them all staring at him—every single one of the passengers. He did not know their names, their faces, their stories...but he did know the look in their eyes. He had seen it a thousand times, in the faces of those who came to him for heroin.

He was a businessman. He had been since he was twelve years old on his Mama's corner. Pushing product, making the dough, and moving up in the world. One day it was a pager, then a gun, and then a car with specialized plates that said "The Reverend". Everyone in his neighborhood knew who he was. Everyone. He was somebody. He was powerful.

Yet he felt powerless at the end of their lifeless, haunting stares. They spoke not a word, but seemed to move in on him like a hypnotized bunch, seeking to regain something he had stolen from them. *Vitality? Hope? The very essence of life?* They edged closer and closer, the space around him becoming sparse. He stretched out his arm to reach toward the exit, to touch the latch to freedom, but they filled the air, suffocating him and backing him into a corner. He met their eyes shamefully, afraid, and they looked back but did not stop at his corneas. No, they sought his soul.

It was then that the whispering started, like a hushed swarm of flies buzzing too closely to his ears. The words were unintelligible at first, but something in the message conveyed abhorrence. It was like a spell cast by a banshee, her wails winding together into words on the edges of the breeze, making their way into his ears where they infested his brain. “Rotting rotting corpse you will be, and never will you leave.”

“You!” said one specter before him, her lifeless blue eyes faded and empty. “You stole my innocence,” she hissed. She neared him with an outstretched finger, as if one prick of her nail would send him into oblivion. He could not move, could not breathe. They closed in behind her like wolves circling their kill.

But then a hum came into the air, light and gentle, as the bus rolled to a stop halfway across the bridge. The haunted ones looked away from him and began to part. In the absence of their gaze, The Reverend struggled to reach the exit, but his attention was pulled to the front of the bus. The ghosts made way for a man who looked like the one his Mama prayed to on the wall.

He looked back at The Reverend with kind but sorrowful eyes then shook his head. He looked around them, taking in the specters with an empathetic face, then turned his gaze to the

driver. The woman who had been behind the wheel had been replaced by a haunting creature draped in a black shroud. It raised its head to reveal two yellow eyes of flame, then extended a bony hand. The Reverend was frozen in place.

The apparitions around him began to heave, like heroin addicts in withdrawal. One by one they were brought to their knees, puking up a mess of stuff, then finally something solid. They each dropped a coin onto the floor of the bus, clinking in musical time as they rolled past the gum, through the sticky Coke puddles, and to the bony feet of the creature in the black cloak. They rolled up its body as if the bony hand were magnetic, somehow lingering there though there was no skin to cradle them.

“Your passage has been paid,” hissed the cloaked creature, motioning to the ghosts and pocketing the coins. Then its stare landed on The Reverend. The bony hand stretched out toward him, but found no compensation. His fiery eyes bore into the man, who grew hotter and hotter by the minute, until the cloaked one went up in a puff of smoke.

The Reverend squeezed his eyes shut, certain he must have been drugged. *Someone has messed with the wrong dude. Someone will pay.* Fired up with anger, he gathered the will to endure this bad trip. He would just have to ride it out. When he lifted his lids, the man with the kind eyes remained and there was no trace of the cloaked creature. The black woman had returned to the driver’s seat, though the bus remained stalled half way across the bridge.

“This is the place you have earned,” he heard, yet saw no one’s lips move. The Reverend’s eyes sealed shut against his will, his hands rising up instinctively to pry them open. The images came at him in a barrage, one painful moment after another. His father, the one he had imagined and not the one he had been given...the heartbreak on his mother’s face when she learned of his gang involvement... his best friend’s funeral at the age of 15... Lucifer, his

beloved dog, dead at his feet... finding his sister overdosing on the bathroom floor. Then came the anger, the potent all-consuming anger that edged into a fury so big he might explode.

And then the numbness poured in, taking the pain away, leaving only emptiness in its wake. Finally able to open his eye, his gaze lifted to find the man gone and the lifeless ones filing out the bus door, one by one. They continued on foot, making their way across the river, toward the sunset.

As the last apparition exited the bus, The Reverend saw his opportunity. He pitched toward the open door, desperate to end this journey. But as he rose, arms emerged from the seat like tentacles, wrapping around his legs, digging into his skin. In a fury, he pulled and twisted, punched and stretched, trying desperately to rid himself of the entrapments. But like quicksand, the more he struggled the further he found himself entwined.

With each new limb that crept onto his body, he was flooded with a memory. The faces, like a slideshow, flashed before him, creating a panorama of death. The most recent person he had killed was first. The green eyes of a light-skinned man with no name other than “Hammer” begged for mercy. With the squeeze of a trigger The Reverend had snuffed him out; he remembered thinking it’s what he deserved for stealing from him. Anyone else would only have seen an addict desperate for his next fix.

The images fell upon him quickly, a prostitute here, a rival there, and in between the occasional traitor to his pack, who sought refuge from the gang life by snitching. The clawed hands dug deeper into his dark flesh, revealing the pink beneath, and spilling his blood onto the graffiti ridden seat, then onto the tacky Coke-covered floor of the bus. They twisted and writhed until they found their way beneath his skin and crawled under it like serpents. The images continued the barrage until the grand finale—large, dark eyes of someone he had once called a

friend. Marquis had been a solid buddy through elementary school, but stopped hanging around when mischief became the goal of each day for Samuel. *Samuel*. The Reverend remembered the shadow of who he once was, before he had fallen. *When had it happened? When did I cease to be Samuel?* And then he remembered. His gang initiation had required him to take the life of someone unworthy. He had pegged Marquis.

In an elaborate plot to lead him into the woods for the ceremony, he had concocted a story about a lost dog. Knowing that Marquis had a soft spot for animals, the unaware boy had followed him into the snare, never once questioning his old friend's intentions. The look on his face had been terrifying—innocence twisting into fear, and then betrayal as he pulled the trigger. He had only been 12. The Reverend never forgot those forsaken eyes. Never. They haunted his dreams, and, now, they would forever haunt his death.

The Reverend was tired and dizzy; sleep seductively beckoned him. Looking down at his body, he could no longer tell the difference between himself and the strangling limbs. They were a part of him now, inside of him, choking off his oxygen, creeping into his chest. His face began to freeze in place; his expression one of peace, for his old friend Marquis at last had his justice. He was sucked through the crack in the seat and into the cushion beneath, amidst the sea of intertwined bodies of lost souls. His nose filled with the smell of vinyl, his eyes forever condemned to witness the passing of others like himself. And all that marked his final resting place was a tat-inspired scribbling in black ink that said: The Reverend.

A Fool's Call

By Tim Haywood

“Alrighty then,” Chet Jackson mumbled, his frozen breath dissolving over the top shelf of the work fridge, “what’s for brunch?”

Chet’s favorite part of the workday took place somewhere between ten and ten-thirty. As usual, he’d walked intently into the lunchroom, brown sack crinkled up in his fist. Standing at the sink, he pulled out his plastic container and washed it out, head on a swivel. The coast clear, he gently pulled open the fridge door, breathing through his mouth to avoid the inevitable stale and rotting vapors. He nimbly shuffled through the nylon bags and to-go boxes, knowing anything toward the back had probably been abandoned, maybe weeks ago, and was likely covered in a thin, fuzzy rind.

Chet may have just been a temp, but it didn’t take a corporate lifer to know where the prime picking was—jammed and stacked toward the front, resting closest to his relentlessly cracked lips. Definitely not a good skin phase he was going through—his eczema had spread to his eyelids and into the crooks of his elbows. Such an odd feeling it was, the cool air soothing these chafed body patches while a warm surge of adrenaline bled into his fingers.

No big deal, this thing he did. Seriously, it benefited Chet a shitload more than any low-key distress it might cause some random co-worker. “Deserving” had even been a word that bounced around his head every once in a while, especially because since joining the program, Chet’s only source of physical contact and companionship had been Max.

Today's bounty was especially acceptable. "Mmm, Metropolitan Grill," Chet whispered, peeling back the silver seal and inhaling so hard but in a vacuum of silence. The sirloin's enticing aroma preceded the visual, but once exposed to Chet's thirsty eyes, it transformed him. This unearthed nugget of USDA choice, homely as it was shoved to the corner of its oversized box and lying askew on a ramp of garlic mashed potatoes, planted the tiniest of tingles in his groin.

No time for such foreplay, Chet whispered. Fishing a knife and fork from his bag, he deftly sawed off a hunk of steak, flicked it into his container and spread the rest of the potatoes over the meat. His snack sealed and stashed, Chet shifted his attention to his parched throat. Too much goddamn mouth breathing. He rifled hastily through anything large enough to hold a soda, finally discovering a can of Coke in an Igloo box with "Mike" sharpied on it. Perfect.

Beyond the food, his overwhelming delight arose from imagining the faces of his... victims? Too harsh. In reality, these folks were just random suckers; it was the thought of their nausea and violation after discovering a bowl of prawn fettuccine a few bites light that made Chet's hormones percolate.

He could feel his himself grinning; not the best place to daydream. Slowly straightening his body and closing the door, he rolled up the bag and snickered, thin whistles of air forcing themselves through his congested nostrils. As he turned around, the sight of his co-worker Mike jolted him, forcing one of his shoulder blades to rake against the freezer handle.

Mike worked in Cash Apps across the hall from Chet, but regrettably, they'd first met at the urinals. Seriously, where was the dude's sense of fucking personal space, introducing himself while holding his junk?

Now, here he was again, inches away, tapping his longish hipster beard and looking Chet up and down. “Dude, little early for lunch, isn’t it?”

A few faint swirls of sirloin aroma lingered in the cramped space between them. “Everything okay?” Mike said.

“Hey, man! Oh, hah... yeah,” said Chet, feeling the crimson swelling in his chapped cheeks. “You know how some mornings you’re just so goddamn hungry from the get-go? Definitely me today, man.” Talking too fast. Asshole, slow down.

“You going to happy hour tonight?” said Mike. “It’s Tiffany’s last day.”

Tiffany. In the three months Chet had been at this place, he’d developed a solid thing for her. Greetings while passing each other in the hallway always went fine, but anything longer than a hello resulted in dumbass Chet predictably saying something totally half-witted: “Morning, Tiffany, I like your new haircut... oh, it is new, right? Or did you just get some sun this weekend?” Just stupid-ass stuff that made him look like a fifth-grade nerd with a crush. He hoped he’d made it up to her by sticking a nice salted caramel in her red lunch box every day for a week.

“Where’s everybody going?” Chet looked unblinkingly at his co-worker, straining to will the red from his face.

“Skinny Penguin. Ever been there?”

“Don’t think so. I just need to run it by the wife real quick, but I should be good to go.”

Chet didn't have a wife, but if anyone pressed him for details, she was a freelance PowerPoint artist and germaphobe named Christine. "Cool beans. Oh, hey, I've got a little errand to run after work, but I'll meet you there." Chet backed away in the direction of his cubicle, the one crammed into the corner of the copy room with its shitty broken chair, shittier computer and not a single ray of natural light. Nothing but the best for the temporary employee.

"Wait, what? Where the hell's my Coke?" Down the hall in the lunchroom, Chet could hear the confusion in Mike's voice along with some faint shuffling noises. "I know I brought it in this..."

Chet giggled as he disappeared around the corner, Mike's dumb-ass whining adding a bounce to his step.

Living out of extended-stay hotels and short-term apartments had taken a toll on Chet. And Max. Most places wouldn't allow pets, so it was always a challenge to sneak the poor crooked-tailed tabby in. Once they were even evicted from a Residence Inn after a maid ratted them out. Max, toothless as he was, had a tendency for depositing sluglike trails of drool and occasionally undiscovered vomit around the room, but come on, it wasn't like hotel bedspreads weren't already smothered in DNA from every continent. Jesus, fucking snitch bitch. Because of that and a few other reasons, sleeping in rental cars and showering at the Y had been a grim reality for the two of them more than a few times.

Such was life in the program—moving every six months, sometimes every month or week or even after a couple of days living in Topeka or Dayton or Tacoma. Had it made Chet a low-key freak, anointing him the new weirdo in class over and over in an endless loop? Was it a

lifestyle that forced him to constantly lie and find comfort in pathological acts? Absolutely, but fuck it, Chet thought. Solace has a million fucking faces.

After work, Chet hopped on the bus for the short ride to the Marco Polo Motor Lodge—a divey spot in the city’s industrial area. Frequented by hookers and addicts, the place had just the right formula for a guy in his situation: cheap, private, convenient. He climbed the stairs and pushed open the door to Room 27, immediately greeted by a sensory cocktail of dirty clothes and cat litter. Before the door could slam, the evening light shone on a stack of pizza boxes and Grape Crush empties covering the little table. Good, no maid today.

He flipped on the lamp by the bed. “There’s my guy. Hi, buddy!”

Grinding against Chet’s shin, Max’s damp mouth ground a thin rivulet of drool into his master’s Levi’s.

Understandably, the little fellow was starving for some Chet time after a day spent... what? Sleeping? Watching the nonstop parade of losers and junkies walk by the nicotine-cloaked window? Weird to think of a cat as collateral damage, but that’s exactly what the poor little guy was, being an unwitting participant in the program.

“I know, dude, I know. It’s no fun to be by yourself all day. How about some Friskies, huh? A little chow chow for my little meow meow?” Chet grabbed the bag of dry cat food and cranked on the bathroom tap. When the water was nearly too hot to touch, he ran it over a heaping bowl of dry food and set it down on the stained carpet. Max lapped up the tepid mush as Chet stroked his back.

“Listen, buddy, I’ve got to go again, but I’ll be back before you know it, okay?” Max’s back arched as his face stayed glued to the bowl.

Straightening up, Chet walked to the mirror. Not bad. Face not too flakey, shirt not that dirty. He looked back at Max, deciding now was a good time to head out, since nothing guilted him more than shutting the door on his cat’s adorable, neglected face. Chet quickly grabbed his coat and wallet and scanned the dingy room one last time as the door swung shut behind him. One last thing to check on.

Shit! Shit, no! He blinked, then squinted, then dug his knuckles into his eyes to make sure he was reading the door hanger correctly. *Maid Service, Please.*

Chet shivered, cold sweat seeping into his armpits and the union of his thighs. “F-f-fuck!”

Time to move again.

The Skinny Penguin was a long walk from the motel, but Chet had hiked so many corners of the country in these scuffed cowboy boots, what was another couple of miles? Besides, if this was his last hurrah in this town, springing for an Uber was a fool’s call. He walked slowly, allowing himself time to calm down, to realize that a couple hours wouldn’t mean life or death, right? In the past, anytime he’d received communication from the program, it was at least twenty-four hours until he was in legitimate danger. He entered the bar, nodding to the hostess and examining the room.

Tiffany sat at the end of a long table, chatting with a girl Chet had seen once or twice in the lunchroom. He ordered a beer at the bar and half-sat on a stool wondering what to do next.

“Hey Chet!” said Tiffany, gesturing at the empty chair next to her. “Mike was sitting here, but he’s such a social butterfly I doubt he’ll mind.” She looked so clean and beautiful with her hair up in a bun, sipping on her Cosmopolitan, he really would’ve just preferred to stand there and stare at her.

“H-hi, Tiffany. I heard it was your last day today,” Chet said, banging his shin on a chair.

“Uh, yeah, that’s why we’re all here,” she said, smiling.

“Right, right,” said Chet. Nice opener, idiot.

“Have you met Nicole? She works in Accounts Receivable.”

No, but he’d had a bite of her chicken quesadilla a couple of weeks ago. “Um, not really. Hi, Nicole,” He shakily extended his hand, even more uneasy knowing she’d feel its clamminess.

“Hi Chet, nice to meet you.”

“Chet’s a temp. How long have you been here, a couple of months?” Tiffany said.

“Um, yeah, like seventy-one days.”

“Wow, maybe you should work in A/R, with a head for numbers like that,” said Nicole.

“Hnh, yeah, maybe. But actually, it’s funny because, uh, today was my last day, too.”

“Really?” Tiffany adjusted her bun. “Why are you leaving?”

“Oh, there’s Jason,” said Nicole. I need to ask him something. Talk to you later. Nice to meet you, Chet.”

He noticed Tiffany's empty glass. "What are you drinking there, a Cosmo?" Chet scooted his chair backward. "BRB."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, uh, be right back."

"Ha, right. Thanks."

Chet returned with their drinks and found Tiffany chatting with a couple of guys from operations. He sat quietly; taking large pulls from his beer until finally they moved along.

"Cheers," she said, clinking Chet's nearly empty glass. "Looks like you might need another one of those. I need to slow down a little myself. Feeling kind of buzzed. Anyway." She touched his arm and an electric buzz shot through him. "What's this about you leaving too?"

"Well, you see my wife got a job in California, and it's a pretty good job, so we're moving."

"That's it? Just like that?"

Chet cleared his throat. "Yeah, just like that."

The waitress brought over more drinks. "Ch-ching," said Tiffany, clinking Chet's glass and taking a large sip. She scooted closer. "You're cute, you know that? In a little-boy sort of way."

He felt himself flushing. "Thanks."

"But I need to ask you something," Tiffany said quietly.

“Yeah?”

“You’re not really married, are you?”

Chet felt a drop of sweat trickle down his back. His voice was weak, quivering. “Why, um why would you think that?”

“Well, first of all,” she touched his knuckle, “there’s no ring on your finger. Second, you don’t have any pictures of her up in your cube.”

“Well, you know, that doesn’t mean... “

“And c, someone in HR told me you’re single.”

“Who?”

“I can’t tell you.”

Great. Chet flagged down the waitress, ordered another beer and looked around. “Um, okay, it’s true.”

“But why would you do something like that?”

Chet took a deep, unsteady breath. “You really want to know?” His beer came and he gulped down half.

“Yeah, it’s why I’m asking.”

Jesus, man, slow down. Remember, bonehead, you’ve never let a soul in on this program business. Why start now?

Because she's awesome, that's why. And holy shit, she said you're cute. You! Cute! The hot girl thinks Clumsy Mr. Crack-n-Peel with the dirty clothes and fake wife is cute! Too good to be true!

He blew out a breath and stared at the ceiling. A glass broke somewhere behind the bar, and forced Chet's love-smogged eyes to slowly clear as he studied Tiffany's drowsy smile. For God's sake, he just wanted to dive into those eyes and drown.

But in that moment, with the memory of her touch still hot on his skin, Chet's mind latched onto a growing ember, a sluggishly blooming seed of the instincts that had kept him alive all this time.

Of course. Of fucking course.

It *was* too good to good to be true... and frankly, pretty fucking obvious... ugly-ass Chet... beautiful Tiffany...

It all made such ridiculous sense... she was working for them.

He drained the pint glass, choking on the last of the foam. "Just never mind," Chet coughed. "Just... I have to go."

Tiffany reached across and held onto his forearm. "No, please, stay. One more drink. Please."

He shot out of his seat, powerfully upending two chairs, and escaped into the autumn night.

When he reached the Marco Polo, Chet was dripping a thick, heavy sweat, his best shirt now glued to his chest. Max was fine. Thank God.

“Okay, man.” Try as he could, he couldn't stop panting. Chet leaned down and dripped two drops onto his cat's scruff. “Time to go.” Chet clutched Max and collapsed onto the bed, ignoring Max's sharp kneads. “You know the drill, buddy. When the door hanger says *Maid Service*, it's the government telling us to skedaddle.

“And I just want to apologize.” He pulled Max into a tight hug. “I never should've left tonight. I'm sorry, man.” Max burrowed his head under Chet's chin. “Can't believe they found us again.”

Springing off the bed as if poked by an invisible stick, he gently set Max on the floor and darted around the room, stuffing everything... clothes, magazines, anything in sight, into his duffel bag. He called a cab from the room phone and sat restlessly by the window, his right leg bouncing fitfully. Curtains shut, Chet spoke softly to Max as he purred and rubbed his face against the carrier's wire grate.

Cracking the curtain, Chet saw the taxi pulling into the lot below. He surveyed the room a again. “Shit, Max,” he laughed nervously, patting his pockets, “almost forgot my goddamn phone.”

When he grabbed it off the nightstand, he realized he'd forgotten his book, too. Holy shit. Calm down or you'll forget your goddamn cat, too. It was wedged down behind the nightstand. Chet lifted it out and fanned through its pages, so dog-eared and ragged from hauling it around for God knows how long. He stopped on a couple of his favorite pages, noting the scribbles and

doodles he'd made in the margins. He'd always been so intent on making this thing work and now, by God, he felt like he'd really turned the corner.

Just keep moving, Chet thought. Watch for signs of danger, focus on communications from the government, no matter how subtle. They can protect you, but only if you pay attention.

Over time, Chet had forgotten exactly who he was running from, yet this was not the time to ignore the threat or doubt his instincts.

He stared at the book, its cover black with heavy white lettering: *More Harm Than Good—How Psychiatric Medications Can Ruin Your Life*.

“What do you think, Max?” Chet said, “am I finally over the hump?” Max pushed his damp nose through the wires and sniffed at Chet's fingers. “Hell, dude, I've been off meds for months. You've got to think it's just plain smart to have a clear head when people are trying to hunt you down and kill you, right?”

Max purred as Chet shoved the book into his bag. “Absolutely, buddy. Time to get the fuck out of Dodge.”

Chet slammed the door behind them. The door hanger flew off the knob and dropped to the floor, *Do Not Disturb* side up.

Didn't

By Jad Josey

We split a bottle of wine between the three of us, and it was early. The skyline was a riot of orange, and I sat on the creaky porch rolling the first joint of the evening, thinking of ways to capture that color in a story that I would share with you later. Maybe you'd fall in love with me, even if it only lasted for a little while.

"Come inside and light that," you called from inside. I thought about trying to describe the brilliance of the sunset aloud to you, the bright corona ballooning between the thick edge of clouds hovering above the ocean and the straight line of the horizon. I let the screen door bang shut behind me, thinking you might look up and out beyond me toward the colors, and maybe you did, but we didn't talk about it.

Your roommate was studying on the couch, reading a short story by Raymond Carver and setting the thin pages alight with swathes of yellow highlighter. "How could I have never read this before?" she said. "Have you read this one? The one with the blind guy?"

"It's one of my favorites," I said. You were watching me, and I could tell that you wanted me to light the joint. "Should I take this outside?" I asked her. "I don't want to mess with your studies—"

"Light it in here," you said, and your eyes were dark.

"I don't mind," she said. "I'd prefer it, actually."

We shared the joint, and then I started making dinner in your tiny kitchen, a vegan quiche that I had been practicing for months. I prepped everything in my meticulous way, and I hoped that you were thinking about how good I was with my hands.

“You’re pretty good with that knife,” she said, her eyes glossy and stoned. “Listen to this,” she said, and she read Carver aloud to us while you opened another bottle of wine, and I diced, but did not mince, a yellow onion.

I put the quiche in the oven and set upon washing the dishes I’d used to prep the ingredients. You glided slowly in and out of the shadows of the room, tending to things that I couldn’t quite make out in my periphery. I felt your eyes upon me often. Your roommate abandoned her Carver anthology and began setting the small dining room table, folding paper towels into napkins, each one a unique shape. You were a diamond. She was an octagon. I was an obtuse triangle.

We had just finished our meal when your dog emerged from the hall, panting heavily. She was a beautiful Rhodesian ridgeback, and she had been eying me warily all night, especially after we smoked the joint.

“Jesus,” your roommate said. “What’s wrong with her?”

A thick rib of saliva hung below her jaw, and she was shaking. You disappeared into a dark room down the hallway, emerging with a plate of something that used to be dinner—or breakfast or whatever—but was now a wild palette of bluish mold, half of it freshly eaten. It was hard not to think of the dinner we had just finished, but I concentrated on casting it from my mind.

“Goddamn it,” you said, holding the plate out in front of you. I held my hand up instinctively. That plate was dangerous, and I didn’t want any of its contents slung in my direction during the heat of an argument.

“She’ll be fine,” your roommate said, her eyes back on the Carver story. “She’s a dog.” A silence hovered in the room, and I realized I was holding my breath. The dog turned in a circle and lay down, then stood up and retched loudly.

“If she pukes, it’s yours to clean up,” you said. Your shirt had slid down off one shoulder, thin red bra strap pressing into your skin. It was the first time I’d seen that part of you.

“Fine,” she said. She looked up at me. “Can you roll another joint?”

The ceiling fan spun lazily on its lowest setting, barely coaxing the air around the room. A thin layer of smoke hung close to the ceiling, undulating and dissipating slowly. The ceiling was popcorn-style, and I thought about asbestos and men in dungarees framing the house in the ‘40s, about how their lungs burned and their joints ached, and when they died early no one wondered about the hours they spent building and breathing and siphoning death into their bloodstreams.

“Things are different now,” I said. “But here we are underneath this same poison.” I realized that I was pointing at the ceiling, and I lowered my arm slowly.

“Why even say shit like that,” she asked. “Do you think thinking about it makes any difference?”

“I think that not thinking about it makes a difference,” you said.

We were lying on the floor with thick pillows beneath our heads, the crowns of our skulls each touching the other, something your roommate had suggested. Every so often it felt like the room took a deep breath, the walls pushing out as the diaphragm dropped, sagging in on the exhale.

Your dog was sleeping in the corner, and her chest rose and fell in raucous shudders. There were dimples behind the joints of her hind legs, and I wondered if anyone had ever noticed

something like that about a dog before, and then I realized that surely you had seen it, because your eyes were different when you looked at her.

Your roommate sat up suddenly, rubbing her thighs. “That’s it,” she said. She straightened her legs and leaned down deep, pointing her toes and pressing her breasts against her knees, exhaling slowly. She turned and smiled at me, and the blades of the fan turned behind her in a fuzzy halo. The ceiling looked soft and muted, and her smile pushed out from the grayness.

We lay there in silence for a long time after she padded off into her room. Your rings clicked together as you stroked a long strand of your hair. I felt like I could almost synchronize the spinning blades with the rhythm of your fingers.

“What are you thinking about?” you asked.

There was no way to tell you about the photons spilling out across the vastness of our universe, about the power lines that partitioned the view of the sea, about how they cracked and whirred with energy when the fog lowered upon our town, about how the darkness between the edge of the fan blades and the right angle of the wall was dotted with the last traces of moonlight as it worked its way toward the ocean, about how I got from here to there and how it happened all the time until I could quiet my mind with wine and weed and sometimes the steady sound of the buoys lowing in the distance.

“I’m not sure,” I said. It was the easiest thing to say.

“I’m thinking about my bed,” you said.

If you had asked me the question again—and if I had chosen to answer honestly—we would have been thinking about the same thing. You left me no choice, and I was pretty sure you knew it.

You stood, and your shirt slipped off your shoulder again. Your dog groaned in the corner. It felt like treason. “So...” you said.

“Sleep well,” I said, and I felt like an idiot, because most people would have said “good,” but I was ten years older than you, and the teachers were different back then. Saying “well” was easy—I didn’t even have to think about it—and I was sure it had never felt that way to you.

“Come on,” you said. Your dog came to immediate attention, her head whipping up from the pillow, a web of drool bridging the divide. You patted your hip, and she rose up and sauntered in your direction. The door shut softly, in the way a door shuts when you judge the distance between the door and the jamb carefully, maybe even with your eyes closed, and you turn the handle slowly, gripping the knob as tightly as you can so it doesn’t cut loose on you mid-turn, so that the striker plate barely whispers as you release the blade.

And then you were gone.

I thought about rolling another joint, but it felt like a lot to do, so I fished around on the coffee table and found the roach. It wasn’t even a roach, really, because you had stubbed it out so early. I leaned back and dug through my pocket for a lighter. The fan moved the smoke around lazily, and when I tried to blow smoke rings, they all collapsed into fat lines and then into nothing.

My van was cold and the windshield fogged up immediately. I sat there with the engine rumbling and one of the cylinders misfiring, and I thought about your neighbors. I wondered if any of them watched you sitting on the porch in the evenings holding your wine glass, running your fingers through your long hair or twirling it lazily around a forefinger. Maybe one of them was in love. Maybe you would never know. I imagined myself killing the engine, exiting the van so

quickly that the keys were left dangling in the ignition, taking the steps to your porch two at a time, opening your bedroom door just loudly enough so you'd know I was there, quieting your dog, sliding beneath the covers you held up for me in the darkness. The windshield was starting to defrost, blossoms of clarity opening to the night sky. The stars were bright and the light was old, and I crossed the double yellow and pointed the van homeward.

Just past the curves, right before the estuary came into view and the tunnel of eucalyptus trees opened into salt marsh chaparral dotted with Indian paintbrush and sticky monkey flower, my headlights caught the gleam of two eyes on the side of the road. I slowed and rolled to a stop about twenty feet away, spotlighting the possum as he turned back to the carcass in front of him. He leaned down and pulled a chunk of viscera out onto the pavement, feasting on the roadkill of his own kind, his snout shiny with blood.

I reached to the dash and flipped off my headlights, and then I eased my van forward. I focused on the dark blueness of the sky, imagining the hard bump of his body as he ran confused into the road, the sound of his bones cracking beneath my tires. But there was only silence and the ancient light from the stars above, and I considered driving the rest of the way home with no headlights. Then I flipped them on and some of the stars disappeared. Maybe they had stopped shining millions of years ago, and the only thing different about them now was that they weren't, and they didn't, and they never would again.

Waiting

By Erica Steele

I waited for the others, but the others never came. They left me, a girl of barely nine, here beside the deep blue lake in this treeless valley. Shadowed by the smoldering volcano, it is a crossroads, a meeting point between the grazing grounds. Cousins, they said, were coming from the north. They would look for us here when the yellow flowers bloom. Tell them to go west to the red canyon and follow the river to the fertile fields.

Like a fool I believed them and waited.

“You’re my good, strong girl,” Mama said. “Just wait here until the others come. Don’t forget, I love you, Hela.” She kissed me on the one smooth patch of unmarred skin on my forehead. I reached out and plucked a tear from her cheek. I tried to hold onto her, but she forced me to sit in the tent. She left with father and the rest of our tribe.

They’re never coming back, a voice whispered inside me. *She’s leaving you here like she should’ve left you years ago.* I was cursed at birth—my cheeks were ridged like red rocks as if I’d been marked by a fire demon. It was my fault Mama had that burn on her arm from when I spilled hot water. My fault our old horse got spooked and ran away. My fault Mama lost my baby brother. My fault father drank too much and beat me. And my fault the drought came and horses started dying.

Fear flooded me, filling me until I was drowning. Warm liquid streamed down my leg. *No.* I wanted to run after them and scream, but I’d be ashamed. I’d promised her I’d be good and brave. I wanted to make her proud.

Father helped her onto our old brown horse. She put her hand on her round belly where my little brother or sister grew, waiting to come out. I waited for her to turn back and wave. I knew father wouldn't turn back; he was glad to be rid of me. But Mama didn't turn back either. I put my finger in my mouth. Still damp with her tear, I sucked the salt, the last bit of her I'd ever have.

Then my own tears flowed, down my mottled cheeks.

The sun set, the moon rose, and I notched a line in the center pole of my tent for each day. With a fishing net and a hunting knife, I survived. I skimmed the lake with my net to catch little silver fish, setting aside half of my catch to dry for winter. Sometimes when I tired of the fish and their sharp bones, I set snares for the soft brown rabbits that lived in the field over the bluff. As I sang the songs Mama taught me, I worked. I added rocks to my fire pit and collected wood from the crop of trees a half day's walk to the south. I found black pond root in the shallows on the far side of the lake. After boiling and mashing them, I mixed in some of the butter and ground nuts Mama had left to make a cake as flat as a stone.

The air cooled and the snows came, covering the top of the volcano. No one warned me how cold it would be, but Mama had left me her best blanket of gray wolf fur and deer skin hides. I huddled inside, stoking a small fire, careful not to let the tent fill with smoke. I told myself the stories Mama had told me when I was little about the horses that danced on the moon. Sometimes I'd hear a faint howling and hide under Mama's blanket, pretending she was there with her arms around me. But the wolves never neared.

As the long nights wore me down, I stopped singing. I stopped pretending Mama was there with me like before, like when I was small and she'd let me cuddle next to her. The faces of everyone else I'd ever known had blurred into sand. Mama's was slipping, but I still saw her eyes. As blue as the lake but brighter. Beautiful.

I didn't think I'd survive another winter's night, but one day the sun returned and glistened off the ice on the lake. It was white and shimmering, so beautiful that I cried. Soon the ice and snow began to melt. I watched the horizon every day as I collected reeds and roots, waiting for the yellow flowers to bloom.

As a thin ribbon of smoke danced up from the top of the volcano, I picked and dried reeds to make baskets and fans for the coming summer heat. When the rains came and the scrub bushes turned green, I searched the ground for signs of yellow. I clapped my hands together in joy when I found the first yellow bud.

The flowers burst open and thrived, spreading color across the brown landscape like a golden blanket. I plucked one flower each day and placed it in a bowl of water by my tent. Before falling asleep each night I'd touch the petals and whisper, "Tomorrow they'll come."

But morning turned to afternoon to night. Day after day until I had sixteen wilted flowers in my bowl. I wanted to leave to find Mama and the others, but I'd promised to stay. *What if they come late? What if they'd gotten lost or were attacked?*

"Be good and brave, Hela," Mama had said. "Wait for them."

But the yellow flowers fell to seed and still no one came. My belly churned sick and sticky, and not from the overripe yellow berries I'd eaten that morning. I tore up a basket in a fit as I sobbed.

When I calmed, I decided to leave. The red canyon couldn't be far.

I packed up my things and walked west, leaving my valley with enough dried fish to last until the next full moon. I found the red canyon, a gash of color in the brown landscape. Reds, oranges, yellow. The colors of the sunset rippled across the dirt. I followed it west to where the river widened, the canyon walls shortened, and the sunset colors turned to dark brown and green.

It took only one moon cycle to find them. I stared at my tribe in their new village. Lush fields of grass, horses and sheep grazing, children playing...it was perfect. The sort of home we'd always dreamed of. Hiding in a cluster of tall bushes near the river, I saw her—a tall, shapely woman with a basket in her hands and a sleeping baby on her back. Her yellow-tinged hair shimmered in a braid hanging down her shoulder. She saw me and her eyes widened.

"Mama," I whispered and started to step out of the shade. I wanted to throw my arms around her and feel her heart next to mine.

But she shook her head and mouthed, "No."

My heart sank, heavy as a boulder.

She looked around then walked closer. Close enough to hear, but not touch.

"You can't be here," she said.

"I waited but they never came."

The baby's eyes fluttered open. Blue, like hers.

"It doesn't matter, don't you see?" Her voice broke. "You can't stay."

"Mama, please..." A sob choked my throat.

The baby started to whimper. It looked like a boy. He had smooth, clean cheeks. Born right, not scarred like me. And big and healthy, not sickly and small like the other baby—our brother who was born too soon and died two days later.

She shushed the baby gently.

"Let me stay, please. I'll be good, I swear," I whispered.

Mama turned and saw two women walking toward us; they couldn't see me yet. When she turned back, tears glistened in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Hela. You must go."

"But why?"

Tears dripped down her chin. The baby began to cry.

"I heard there is a lake to the south so great that you can see no end. And a city with more people than we've ever seen," she said. "Go Hela. Leave now and never come back."

I ran downstream. Blinded by tears, I ran until my legs gave out. I collapsed in a thicket, falling onto a thorned bush, as the weight of the whole truth crushed me.

There were no cousins.

The sun rose and set. The moon rose and set. The summer scorched the ground. The great volcano smoldered. It was always watching and always waiting, like me. The hole in my heart was as wide and deep as its crater. I dreamed of climbing to the top and jumping in. Maybe a fire god lived inside, maybe demons, maybe nothing. I didn't care. I wanted to die but I lacked the will to even walk to the lake, let alone climb the volcano. Starving myself slowly seemed easier. I'd stopped fishing days ago.

Surviving off root paste and yellow berries, I soon stopped eating even those. My clothes hung off me. My skin seemed to shrivel on my bones as I forgot to drink water. For days I just laid in the shade and stared at the mountain, watching the thin plume of smoke dance in the pale sky.

No one would ever come. I should have known it from the start, but I was always a foolish girl. With the new baby on the way and the drought killing the grass and starving the horses and sheep, they had to be rid of me. The others would have killed me outright, but Mama was so beautiful and well-loved, despite giving birth to me. They listened to her. I wished I could tell her it wasn't merciful. She should have let them kill me rather than abandon me to die slowly and alone.

I wondered if my visit had brought ill fortune to the village. If just by breathing the same air, I'd tainted it. Half of me hoped so. I hoped my new baby brother choked and his round little cheeks turned blue.

But then I felt sick and stuck a stick under my fingernails to punish myself. I didn't wish him ill. I thought about his bright blue eyes and I wished myself there, part of the family. I would

hold him and make him giggle while Mama cooked. I'd be such a good big sister that he wouldn't care about my hideous skin. But I was just a bad memory now.

I fell into a fitful sleep and dreamed of the volcano. Voices rolled down its steep sides. A winged woman emerged from it to carry me to the great water. Bigger than a thousand lakes, it looked endless. I smiled and walked into its waves.

Then I dreamed of a strange man, cloaked in black, his face hidden, emerging from the crater and calling out to me. "Hela, it is time." Time for what, I never knew because then came the thundering of hundreds of hooves. Strange, beautiful horses taller than men, bigger than deer, of all different colors, running across the valley then across the lake—a sight so beautiful, it made me cry.

I followed them to the lake, but they vanished. Looking down at my reflection in the water, I gasped. I recognized the distorted flesh of my left cheek, but not the wrinkles around my right eye. Or the gray threads through my once brown hair. Age was kind to me. The ridges in my skin made me look wise and powerful, not weak. That was something at least. They never expected me to survive here, and I had survived a lifetime.

But my pride was empty. I would die without ever seeing another face but my own.

I woke and looked down at my hands—my skin was still young, not wrinkled and thin. I wondered how much time had passed. I forced myself to sit up and drink water. I was not going to die here like they wanted. I would stay alive to spite them. But I would not disobey Mama and return to the village. No, I was still a good girl. I would go south and look for the endless lake.

Maybe I would see those beautiful horses and find a forest with tall trees and hidden pools. Some place with deer to hunt. That was something to live for.

I left my notched stick beside my fire pit and picked up one of the rocks—a small, black oval that fit in my palm. I slipped it in my pocket to remind me. I looked at the volcano. I would miss its steady smoke, its afternoon shadow. Maybe I would return some day as that old woman and die a peaceful death here in my shelter. But first, I would live.

Freckles

By Andrew Hogan

November 1950: Jabe tried to squeeze through the classroom door before the two JV football players. The right tackle shoved Jabe against the wall.

“Watch it, you fat dwarf.”

“He looks more like a leprechaun,” the quarterback said. “A fag leprechaun.”

They laughed and went into Miss Schow’s English classroom.

Jabe rushed ahead to reach the desk next to Francine before it was taken. Jabe pushed past another student, who gave him a shove, and he lost his balance and fell into Francine’s desk.

“Be careful, Jabe. You darn near knocked me off the seat,” Francine said. “What’s gotten into you? Miss Schow’s going to give you detention for sure.”

“I just wanted to talk to you about Everett Ruess, about how he went missing around here in 1934?” Jabe said. “That’s the year before I was born.”

“So I was,” Francine said. “So was just about everybody else in the Escalante High School sophomore class, Jabe.”

“Yeah, but you all know who your real parents are.”

“Oh, God, you’re not on that kick again, are you?” Francine raised her hands as though praying.

“Make fun of me if you like, but that’s what I think.” Jabe said.

“And who do you think abandoned you here in Escalante?”

“Everett Ruess,” Jabe said. “Miss Schow said last class he palled around with that lady photographer just about the time she was getting divorced from her husband, the painter.”

“Oh, Miss Schow is such a drama queen,” Francine said. “She sees a secret affair lurking behind every story in our lit book.”

“I think Miss Schow is right this time,” Jabe said. “I think Everett Ruess and Dorothea Lange had an affair, and there was a baby.”

“Oh, posh,” Francine said. “She lived in San Francisco. How’d Ruess’ baby get to Escalante?”

“She came here looking for Ruess so they could get married, or at least to make him take the kid,” Jabe said. “Back in the thirties a respectable lady couldn’t have a baby out of wedlock. Otherwise she might lose her job taking photos for the government.”

Jabe grabbed Francine’s arm and pulled her closer so he could whisper while Miss Schow was erasing the chalkboard to write out her ‘quote of the day.’

“You know, I was born just about the time Dorothea Lange came here to take pictures for the government. I think she came to have her baby away from all her family and the gossip columns.”

“Right, and away from all those big hospitals and doctors in San Francisco,” Francine said. “So what, now you’re the love child of Dorothea Lange and Everett Ruess?”

“That’s right. Why is that so hard to believe?” Jabe said. “I mean, I am nothing like my mother or my grandparents.”

“How are you like Everett Ruess?” Francine said. “You saw the picture Miss Schow put up on the board last class. He had light brown hair, yours is red. He was five foot eight, you aren’t as tall as I am, and that’s less than five-two. He was well-built, you’re, let’s just say, chubby. His eyes were green, yours are blue.”

“I’m ready for my growth spurt, and I’ll lose all this baby fat,” Jabe said.

“And the freckles, he didn’t have freckles,” Francine said.

Miss Schow finished writing her quote of the day. “Today’s quote is from the young poet and artist we discussed in the last class: Everett Ruess. When he was not much older than you are now he wrote this.

‘I have always been unsatisfied with life as most people live it. Always I want to live more intensely and richly. Why muck and conceal one's true longings and loves, when by speaking of them one might find someone to understand them, and by acting on them one might discover oneself?’”

Jabe leaned over toward Francine again. “That quote, that’s just the way I feel about myself, that I am the true son of Everett Ruess and Dorothea Lange.”

Francine sighed. “By the time Everett Ruess was your age, he was already writing a ton of poetry, he as making woodcuts and paintings and getting ready to explore Yosemite on his own.”

“Well, his parents supported him, gave him a good education, encouraged his creativity,” Jabe said. “My mother calls me a clumsy dunce, and my grandparents treat me like the ugly duckling.”

“It doesn’t mean you’re somebody else’s son, just because your parents don’t like you,” Francine said.

“I’ll prove it to you,” Jabe said.

April 1951: Ardell Heaps was sitting on the front porch swing, staring off into the canyons of the Grand Staircase. The seat next to him was empty. Jabe slid his bike to a dusty halt in front of him.

“Grandpa.”

“What now, Jabe?” Ardell said.

“I need to talk with you.”

“I was trying to have a peaceable moment here, Jabe. I was remembering sitting with your Grandma, watching the light change on the Grand Staircase,” Ardell said.

“This is important, Grandpa. I need to know how you and Grandma were able to live so well during the Depression. The price of cattle was so low you couldn’t make any money ranching.”

“I was careful with my saving during the good times, Jabe,” Ardell said. “I already told you this.”

“I remember, but then I checked and found the Ranchers Bank of Boulder failed in 1934. People around here lost all their savings.”

“I didn’t keep my savings in that bank,” Ardell said.

“Well, most every other bank in these parts failed, Grandpa. So how did you have enough money to raise a grandkid and buy your unmarried daughter a house? Wasn’t there somebody sending you money, somebody with a good government job?”

“Your mother’s worked her whole life in the feed store. She supported herself and you both. I did buy the little house for you two. It was foreclosed; I got it for the taxes. I let her and you live rent free, and I paid the utilities and taxes. It was the least I could do for her ‘cause of her bad luck with the peddler, but it weren’t no big pile of money. Anyway, your mama’s been a big help in the store for all these years. She’s earned it.”

“Mama’s a half-wit. Everybody says so.”

“Don’t talk about your mother like that,” Ardell said.

“My real mother was that famous photographer, Dorothea Lange. She’s the one that paid for my upbringing, and the house, and the utilities, and the taxes.”

Ardell put his hands over his face, masking his feelings from Jabe. “That’s enough, Jabe. Believe what you want, but don’t ever talk to me about this again.”

“I knew I was right.”

December 1951: Jabe found Patricia Heaps sitting on the porch of her little house on the corner of South 100 and West 100. It was a warm day for December, and his caretaker mother was

enjoying the light of the afternoon sun. Jabe had been cleaning out his room all morning while she had been working in Grandpa's feed store.

"Ah," Jabe said. He didn't know what to call her anymore. "Francine will be coming by in a few minutes with her father's pickup to move me to Panguitch."

"What are you going do there?" she said.

"I got a job working on the road crew," Jabe said.

"Uncle Herman get that for you?" she said.

"No, I never asked him for that favor," Jabe said. It was only partly true. Jabe hadn't asked Great Uncle Herman to help him get a job on the county road crew, but when the road crew foreman showed no interest in hiring him and said there was no point in even filling out a job application, Jabe had dropped his great uncle's name.

"I guess my Great Uncle Herman Heaps was wrong about there being a job opening here with the county," Jabe had said.

"Oh. Well. Why didn't you say so," the crew foreman said. "Well, sure, that's what I meant about there not being a job opening. We've been holding one position reserved for Patriarch Herman's nephew."

Patricia made a face at him. Jabe knew she didn't believe him. "What about high school?" she said. "You only got but one semester to finish for a diploma."

“I’ve already dropped out of high school at the end of this semester,” Jabe said. “If I need more education, I can go back to school in Panguitch. My father only went to college the one semester because he had more important things to learn on his own.”

“Only thing you’ve learned on your own was how to be a day-dreaming fool,” Patricia said. “Your father was nothing more than a peddler. Not sure he could even read and write.”

“You’re not talking about my real father,” Jabe said. “My real father was a poet and an artist. Once I get on the road crew, I’ll be travelling all over the county. I’ll find out where he maybe got lost to.”

“I hope you do meet your real father,” Patricia said. “He won’t be out adventuring around in no pretty canyon. He’ll like to be selling fake Indian jewelry at some truck stop. All you got to do is open your eyes when you look in the mirror. Just remember that face, and when you run into your real father, you’ll know him faster than a rattlesnake knows there’s a rat it wants to eat.”

A pickup pulled into the driveway at the rear of the house where Jabe had lived as long as he could remember.

“That’s Francine now,” Jabe said. “I’ve got to load my stuff.” Jabe looked at the woman who claimed to be his mother. He thought he might have seen a tear forming in her eye, but she might just be squinting from the rays of the low-hanging sun coming through the juniper tree.

“Goodbye,” Jabe said. Patricia turned her full face toward the sun, away from Jabe.

* * *

July 1961: Jabe was cashiering at the Main Street Market when he saw Francine take two kids out of her station wagon and put them into a double stroller. It was the first time he'd seen her since joining the Army back in 1955 following his missionary service in Alberta, Canada. When Francine finished shopping, she came to Jabe's checkout aisle.

"Jabe, is that you?" Francine said. "Why I hardly recognized you. How long has it been?"

"Six years," Jabe said. "Looks like you've had some changes. How many have you got now?"

"With the twins here, five," Francine said. "I think that's enough, but George, you remember him, the quarterback in high school?"

"Sure, the tall one."

Francine laughed. "Right, he was always making fun of your size, but it looks like you had that growth spurt, like you always said you would."

"Yep, I grew." Jabe didn't mention he was wearing two inch lifts inside of his cowboy boots.

"I'm surprised to see you here working in the grocery. I thought after the service you would go back to working on the county road crew," Francine said. "I mean the pay and benefits have got to be a lot better."

"Oh, I developed a skin condition in the military. I need to stay out of the sun."

"Well, I see you outgrew your freckles too, and you actually look a little skinny, not like before."

“I’ve got food allergies, have to be careful what I eat.”

“Well, it’s nice to see you back in town. Too bad your grandpa had to sell the grocery, otherwise you could have taken over the family business.”

“I wouldn’t be working here if the Heaps still owned it.”

“Oh, yeah, you and your grandfather didn’t get along.”

“He wasn’t my real grandfather.”

“Right, I thought you might have gotten over than whole Everett Ruess thing.”

“Why, aren’t I looking more like him every day?”

“Right, I suppose you do. Did you dye your hair brown?”

“No, it changed color on its own.”

“I always liked your red hair.”

“Well, it was just a phase.”

“Look, it was nice to see you, but I’m in a bit of a hurry. We should talk again sometimes, about the old days.”

“I’ve put the old days behind me,” Jabe said.

“Okay, well, see you around.” Francine hurried the stroller and groceries out the door.

September 1974: Jabe lurked outside of the stake house where the funeral service for his caretaker-mother Patricia was about to begin.

“Jabe, what are you doing out here.” It was Francine, her husband, the quarterback, now with a significant paunch, and her two teenage twin girls.

“I’m not going in. I don’t want to hear all that Mormon crap. I don’t want to watch all the Heap family wards and bishops and stake presidents sitting up there all pompous in front of the family members,” Jabe said.

“Girls, let’s go inside,” the quarterback said.

“Jabe, don’t you want to say goodbye to your mother?” Francine said.

“I’ll say goodbye in my own time.”

“Jabe, what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing is wrong. I’ve always felt like this,” Jabe said.

“I don’t mean that. I mean what’s wrong with your face.”

“Nothing.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Oh, I had plastic surgery.”

“Why?”

“I had a problem with my nose, you know, being out in the sun too much.”

“You quit the job on the road crew almost fifteen years ago.”

“It didn’t look right.”

“What are you talking about? There was nothing wrong with your nose. They made it bigger.”

“It was too small for my face.”

“It wasn’t either.”

“I didn’t look like him.”

“Him?”

“My father, Everett Ruess.”

“Oh, God. You’re sick, you know that, you’re sick.” Francine turned away and entered the stake house.

April 1989: Jabe pulled to the side of the road near Wood Hollow Reservoir, the sheriff’s cruiser blinking its lights behind him.

“Good afternoon, sir. Can I see your license and registration, please,” the deputy said.

Jabe handed over the documents. “I thought I knew all of the deputies at the Escalante Sheriff’s station.”

“I’m new. Just got out of the academy in January, and finished my training in Panguitch the end of March,” the deputy said. “I didn’t pull you over for anything serious. Your right brake light is out. You need to get it fixed.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that tomorrow morning over at the Frontier Service Station.”

“Great, just mail in the receipt for the bulb with this ticket, and everything will be fine,” the deputy said. “You know, this license photo isn’t a very good likeness, Mr. Ruess. The eye color is wrong.”

“Yes, I wear contacts. They changed my eye color from a greenish-blue to true blue. And I had to have some reconstructive surgery done.”

“Sorry to hear that,” the deputy said.

“Oh, no. It was voluntary. The new face is a big improvement.”

“You didn’t like the freckles, huh?” the deputy said.

“Too much sun. I have to apply the hydroquinone twice a day.”

“Say, you know I’m from around Salt Lake City, but isn’t Ruess some kind of famous name around here? An artist, something like that.”

“That’s right. Everett Ruess, an artist and poet and explorer. He died back in 1934, lost out in the Grand Staircase. I’m his only son,” Jabe said.

“No kidding, well it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” the deputy said. “Why don’t you give me that ticket back? I’m sure I can trust you to get the taillight fixed.”

“Well, thank you, Deputy, ah?”

“Heaps, Samuel Heaps.” The deputy smiled. “I have a lot of relatives around these parts.”

“I know,” Jabe said, taking back the ticket. “I don’t need any special treatment.” He started the car and drove off.

October 2004: Junior set up his booth of Escalante Town Park. The corner of Main and 100 West had better access to the Second Annual Everett Ruess Days Festival foot traffic, but it was all private property, and nobody would give him permission. As long as he didn't sell anything, the Chief Deputy Sheriff Heaps wouldn't be able to make him move from public land.

“Hi, folks, can I show you some of my father's memorabilia?” Junior said to a couple that had just left the Blue Grosbeak B&B.

“Whose memorabilia?” the husband said.

“My father, Everett Ruess.”

“I didn't know Everett Ruess had any children,” the wife said. “The Festival pamphlet says he died near here seventy years ago. He was only twenty. It doesn't say he was married.”

“He wasn't married,” Junior said. “He had a love child with Dorothea Lange.”

“Who? The photographer?” the husband said. He turned to his wife. “I thought she was married to that painter, Maynard Dixon?”

“The marriage to Dixon was over by 1933. My mother was photographing Hopi Indians in Arizona, when she ran into my father on the Navajo reservation. They had an affair, and she got pregnant with me. After my father disappeared, my mother came here to Escalante on her Farm Security Administration contract to photograph the human face of the Depression. She believed my father was hiding out here in Escalante, and she wanted him to take responsibility for his infant son. Once she realized my father was dead, she left her baby with a local family, the Heaps. She made it worth their while to raise me as their own, sending the Heaps money every year on my birthday.”

“Wow, that’s quite a story,” the husband said. “But what about the birth records?”

“The Heaps are a prominent family here in Escalante,” Junior said. “My Great-Uncle Herman was the mayor, and Great-Aunt Wilhelmina was the town clerk; she prepared all the birth certificates. They passed me off as the illegitimate son of their slightly retarded niece, Patricia Heaps, claiming she’d been seduced by a travelling peddler.”

The wife gave her husband a wanting-to-go look.

“Since my mother, supposed mother, was retarded and didn’t really take to me, my grandparents, Ardell and Dolly Heaps, took charge of raising me,” Jabe said. “But, you know, I was always the ugly duckling in the flock of Heaps’ grandkids. My cousins said it was because I was part Irish-Catholic that nobody much liked me. In high school I finally figured out it was because I wasn’t really their blood.”

“How did you figure out you weren’t really the son of Patricia Heaps?” the wife said.

“I just knew. From as early as I can remember, there was a barrier between me and my supposed mother,” Junior said. “She never really took to me.”

“What did your mother say?” the husband said.

“She denied it.”

Musicians began warming up their instruments in the distance.

“Mike, it’s almost 10,” the wife said. “Kenny is probably already on stage.”

“Well, thanks for the history, Mr. Ruess,” the husband said.

“Call me Junior. Here, take one of these papers. It explains the real history of my family.”

“Thanks,” the husband said. They walked toward the Festival Plaza. The husband handed the sheet to the wife, who placed it in a trash receptacle.

At 5 pm, the Dave McCraw Trio ended its first performance. There was an hour dinner break before the Trio came back to wrap up the 2004 Everett Ruess Days Festival. The Trio hung around for a few more minutes, selling CDs and signing autographs. Junior had taken some valuable time away from his booth to study the main stage sound system. He was pretty sure he'd identified the cable controlling the mikes for the instruments and the singers, and the much smaller cable for the announcement mike, which was usually turned off and placed on the left side of the stage when the musicians were performing. The announcement mike was connected to loud speakers on the main stage, but also to additional loud speakers placed at the Senior Center, the Community Center and the Park.

Junior had sharpened the set of small loppers he'd bought at the hardware store. They weren't cable cutting loppers, but certainly he could do enough damage to the cable to delay the final performance for five or ten minutes, and that's all he would need. He disciplined himself to avoid the long-winded and ramblings speeches he been criticized for giving in the past.

Once the sound system engineer left the control station, Junior slipped the loppers from under his coat and knelt down to cut the cable. He was careful to turn the cable over and cut about 80% of the way through. When he turned the cable back upright, the cut was not readily visible except on close inspection. This might give him a couple of more minutes on the stage.

Junior went to the left side of the main stage next to the announcement mike waiting for the sound system problem to be discovered. One of the festival managers came toward the

announcement mike with a slip of paper in his hand. Before he reached the stage, Junior approached him.

“They told me to tell you they’re having trouble with the sound system.” Jabe pointed to the sound engineer who had just returned from his break.

“Thanks,” the manager said.

Junior turned on the announcement mike. He could see the manager and the sound engineer talking. The engineer went over to sound console and started pressing buttons. In a few minutes, several of the musicians were called over, and everyone was scurrying around looking for the problem. This was Junior’s cue.

“Ladies and gentlemen. We’ve run into a problem with the sound system. We apologize; there will be a short delay in the last performance. In the meantime, I have been asked to give a brief overview of what I’d like to call the missing chapter of the Everett Ruess Family history.

“When Everett Ruess came to Escalante seventy years ago, he had, unbeknownst to himself, fathered a child. The child was the issue of an illicit affair with a married but soon to be divorced woman, who like Everett Ruess, was a free-spirited artist. You know her as the famous photographer Dorothea Lange. After the pregnancy became apparent, Dorothea divorced her famous painter husband, Maynard Dixon, who had taught young Everett Ruess how to paint. With a baby growing inside her, Dorothea needed to support herself during the depths of the Great Depression. She signed on as a photographer with the Farm Security Administration, one of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs. These New Deal programs were controversial, especially here in the conservative environs of the rural Utah, and back then it was unacceptable

for any woman to traipse around on official business as an unwed mother with her illegitimate son in tow. So she went looking for the father.

“Much has been written about the disappearance of my father Everett Ruess, but the simple explanation is that this free spirit was trying to avoid child support, or worse to becoming a single parent himself, saddled down with a crying baby, instead of saddling up and heading out into the wilderness with his two burros, Leopard and Chocolatero.”

Junior saw three men with white festival t-shirts and blue administration name tags talking in the back of the main stage area, occasionally pointing in his direction. One of the men left, while the other two watched him. The sheriff’s deputies would be coming soon.

“To jump ahead, Dorothea Lange arranged to could come here to Escalante to take photos of the Depression for her FSA job, but her real mission was to find Everett Ruess and unload her unwanted son so she could continue her career. Of course, she never found Everett; people are still looking for him after seventy years. Eventually, she came to the conclusion he was missing, not hiding in the wilderness. Still, she couldn’t leave town with their love child. With her alimony from Maynard Dixon and her good-paying government job, she had the resources to farm out the care of her son to dirt-poor Utah Mormon ranchers. She provided a stipend to the family that raised her son as their own; this meant secure money during the Depression when most folks had lost all their saving in the banking panic and they could barely give away the cattle they were raising.

“My Great Aunt Wilhelmina, the town clerk at the time, forged a birth certificate making her retarded niece the mother of Everett Ruess’ and Dorothea Lange’s love child. Everyone was happy except for the child, a boy who carried the genes of two free-spirited creative artists,

forced to live in a cultural backwater with uneducated Mormon ranchers. His every creative urge was suppressed, his every idea not conforming to their rigid religious ideology squelched. How could such a child be happy? How could he develop his full potential? They say Albert Einstein failed grammar school mathematics because it was too easy, too deadening to engage his brilliant mind.”

The crowd started whistling cat-calls at Junior. From the corner of his eye, Junior could see the engineer replacing the cable he'd cut.

“Please be patient. It looks like the Dave McCraw Trio will be able to begin their performance momentarily. As I was saying, if Albert Einstein had been given away to some peasant farmers in Germany and he had to devote his life to discovering his true origins, we would never have known about the theory of relativity or invented the atomic bomb. A great life would have been wasted by selfish parents and the ignorant peasants who stunted the development of a genius. Einstein could have ended up working his whole life on the county road crew or in a supermarket.”

The crowd began to stomp their feet and chant: MUSIC, MUSIC, MUSIC. The sheriff's deputies arrived. The Festival manager pointed at Junior.

What to do? If he ran now, he might escape in the confusion, but he would never have another chance to tell his story to an audience gathered specifically to celebrate his father's life.

“Let me just wrap up by saying that famous people, free-spirited people often leave behind their messes for others to clean up. Artists are often so involved in creating their art they forget their responsibilities to others; their kids are pushed aside, neglected and in my case farmed out to a family of strangers who were not prepared to take care of me, to help me develop

my full potential. The Heaps, in return for a modest stipend, admittedly money they needed to keep going during the depression, took in a baby swan and raised it to be a common barnyard duck. The result of this venial experiment is standing before you now.”

The crowd roared with laughter and clapping and whistling cat-calls at Junior, who wasn't really sure what happened, whether he should give the crowd the finger or take a bow. Then two sets of hands, one on each arm, moved him away from the mike. The crowd increased its applause. Junior's arms were twisted behind him and cuffed by the deputies, while Chief Deputy Samuel Heaps leaned into the microphone.

“Thank you, Jabe Heaps, for that comedic impression of a village idiot.”

As Junior was led away, the Festival manager took the mike.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, here is the Dave McCraw Trio, the final act of the 2004 Everett Ruess Days Festival.”

Junior was dragged through a corridor of spectators. Near the patrol car Francine was sitting in a wheelchair next to her son and granddaughter. Junior nodded at her, smiling; Francine wiped a tear from her eye. The Dave McCraw trio began playing just as Deputy Heaps grabbed Junior's head and forced him into the patrol car.

December 2008: The parole officer handed Junior the form to sign.

“You're a free man. I hope I never have to see you again.”

“Same here, Bob,” Junior said.

“You’re not going to pick any more fights over your heritage, are you?” Bob said. Junior shrugged. “Look at all you’ve lost. You were fired from your job, lost your health insurance, your pension. You spend six months in county jail, three and a half years on probation. Christ, you’re living in a little camper trailer, just barely surviving on Social Security and SSI. No wife, no kids. None of your family will talk to you.”

“They’re not my real family,” Junior said.

“See what I mean. That’s what got you into trouble.” Junior shrugged again. Bob handed him a copy of the *Four Corners Free Press*. “Look here, Jabe. Last month they think they found the remains of Everett Ruess over on Comb Ridge. Some old Navajo saw him murdered by a couple of Utes back in 1934. They’re running DNA tests right now at the University of Colorado.”

“So?” Junior said.

“You remember during your arrest they took a blood sample.” Junior nodded. “Well, I can send your DNA profile up to Boulder to match against the remains they found. I’ll do it if you give me your word that, should the test come back negative, you’re going to drop this whole Ruess-Lange love child thing—it’s just a fantasy, Jabe.”

“I don’t need a test to tell me what I know in my heart,” Junior said. “I was born special, and my so-called family took that away from me.”

Bob tossed a pen to Junior. “Sign the goddamn form and get out of my office.” Junior signed and pushed the form and the pen back across the desk.

“Good-bye,” Junior said. Bob turned his face toward the window and the setting sun.

Unbroken Things

By Sean Murphy

Question: Who wears a ring on their thumb?

My sister does. And I asked her about it, recently, when she was home for Christmas. She, of course, called it the *winter holiday*, and I asked her about that too. This type of political correctness crap is everything that's wrong these days: we're too busy trying to fix things that were never broken in the first place with multicultural this, therapy that and things like thumb rings. What exactly is a *thumb* ring supposed to signify? A statement, no doubt, a code easily identifiable to the Utopian-society, let's-right (or, left)-all-the-wrongs-in-the-world-bleeding-heart-professor-types. And to think, we were all so proud of her when she decided she wanted to be a teacher.

Question, I asked: Who wears a ring on their thumb?

Anyone, she said. Anyone who feels like it.

My sister lives in a trailer.

By choice.

From the Ivory Tower to the Painted Desert. She's charted a course that even my experience with her capriciousness couldn't have prepared me for. A trailer. In the desert. It's too much, the thought of her, hunkered down way out there, without electricity or running water, communing with the coyotes, composing poems by candlelight, subsisting on cactus nectar. For Christ's sake.

Listen: I can tolerate the vegetarianism. She's at least stuck with that, and really seems to believe it does some good, whatever *it* is exactly. If it's not hurting anybody, more power to you, I guess. No matter how idiotic you are being. If the idea of killing something, whether it's a cow or a chicken or a fucking *fish* is inconsistent with the karma you're trying to connect with, that's fine. Who cares?

In fact, I'd be dishonest if I didn't admit being somewhat envious of those PETA poster children. It *does* seem that those who desist from eating meat are invariably healthier than those of us at peace with our opposable thumbs. It's difficult to deny there is something disarmingly sublime about vegetarianism, a nutty nobility these committed individuals are capable of attaining. Something about the self-sacrifice this practice demands that most of us, with our feeble will power and lack of conviction are unwilling, or unable to make. Then again, all the hard-line vegans tend to be the most self-righteous prigs on the planet, which can be somewhat off-putting.

But my sister is not always in your face about it, or any of the assorted PC imperatives she prescribes to. In fact, she's so earnest and well-meaning she retains a childlike charm, the type that all those granola girl wannabes she teaches seek to cultivate. In short, she's an innocent, which is why I don't dig the idea of her deciding to run off and disappear in the no-man's land of Ari-godamn-zona.

Look: our family gets together once a year, and I really didn't need to listen to the folks—who aren't getting any younger and have a hard enough time accepting that their daughter, now in her thirties, is no longer a *baby*—getting bent out of shape and pumping me for details because they know I'm the only one she confides in. And they don't even know the half

of it. They believed her when she assured them she wasn't going to be alone, that she was bringing her *partner*, some hotshot visiting professor from her department. (*Partner?* See what I mean? See what I'm dealing with here?).

I'll give her this much: it was an impressive, if atypical bit of forward-thinking on her part, because if our mother knew she was actually alone—and there is no way she isn't, because I haven't heard word one about this boyfriend, therefore, he doesn't exist—there'd be no end to the obsessing and hand-wringing.

Trust me: it was difficult enough showing up without my soon-to-be-ex-wife, and dealing with questions like *if you don't remarry what are the chances of us ever getting any grandchildren?* It would be nice, for once, not to bear the burden of being the golden child, the one with the respectable job (which isn't to say teaching co-eds is not respectable but come on, let's get real here), the one who calls them every Sunday evening even when I'm on business trips, which is often.

It actually seemed, at first, that little sister was going to save the day, arriving with the announcement that the recent publication of her latest book had prompted the adult-diaper wearing deans of her department to grant her tenure. Basking in the double-fisted glow of that good news boded well for me, and my plan to divert as much attention as possible from the debacle of my disintegrated marriage. Then the *auteur*, not even halfway through dinner, drops the bomb disguised as her bright idea to trek off indefinitely into the Arizona outback. How much she's changed! Such calmness in the crossfire of mother's questions: about her safety, about her sanity, and everything in between. She's learned, and I have to credit her for that much—she no longer falls apart when the folks put the screws to her.

So: another Christmas, another family feud, par for the course. Being infinitely more sensible than my parents, I assure them that their daughter's enthusiasm will be short-lived. As always, she savored the shock value, but like the vast majority of her lofty proclamations, little would come of it. Then: the frantic call from my mother a few weeks later, saying she got a postcard which simply stated *I'm here* and the number of a P.O. box that she'd try to check every other week or so. Okay, it's for real. For now, anyway. What my mother didn't know would, of course, hurt her, or at least distress her. Fortunately, I'm aware of my sister's whereabouts, more or less. All things considered, I save up too much vacation time as it is, and it looks like I won't be spending that week in Nantucket with the wife. So: I figured it was as good a time as any for an impromptu excursion into that dusty void.

Understand: my sister is much more intelligent than her stupid decisions might lead you to believe. Sometimes I have to remind myself of this, since she's always finding new ways to outdo herself. The thing is, when she sets her mind to something, she does it well. Too well. That's the problem: what other people, *most* people, are able to regard as hobbies, or jobs, or even obligations have, for her, always seemed a matter of life and death. Once a notion lodges itself in her head, there's nothing half-ass about it, no middle ground: she's down for the count, taking no prisoners, in it to win it, *et cetera*.

Unfortunately for the rest of us, she's rarely encountered a cause she failed to support, whether it was housing a stray dog or volunteering at some stinking soup kitchen. Name it. A knee-jerker from jump-street, she was prime fodder for the left of center, pro-proletariat haven of university life. Before you know it, she's majoring in English with a minor in Sociology (Sociology!), railing about how the grading scale and standardized tests are hegemonic tools of capitalist oppression, and getting her poetry published in artsy-fartsy literary magazines that no

one but professors and other angst-ridden post-adolescents read. Predictably, she dabbled with drugs, paid lip service (literally) to the free-love farce—and if I'd been around, I at least could have slapped some of those pretty boys around, but I was already out there, out *here*, busting my ass and paying my dues. And like I told her, in the real world, the average morning commute will cut any commie-friendly college professor's ideals down to size quicker than you can say *road rage*.

Question: What's the problem?

Nothing, really. Everyone has to go through some shit like this in order to eventually emerge as a sane and productive part of the team. And yet, as always, the single-minded passion that produced those good grades and mostly conforming behavior (sure, there was plenty of big talk and over-the-top idealizing which, as is so often the case with student union rabble rousers, remained just that—talk) had her making waves about someday forsaking society and its soulless quest for material satiation. *Et cetera*.

So: a PhD, a book and a well-earned sabbatical, then *this*. Out to the desert, alone in a trailer with no phone, no contact at all with the outside world? Just to be away from distractions, she insisted, when I coaxed her into telling me what termite mound to look for in the event I needed to get in touch. And the only reason she told me is because she knew the last thing I'd ever do is come out and find her. Her enthusiasm unnerved me. What could be worse than all that time in the midst of nowhere with a whole lot of nothing going on? Nada. I'd be climbing the walls in three hours. And once again I'm reminding myself that no one knows her as well as I do, that she simply needs someone to look out for her. Which, as a big brother, is what I've always done.

During the plane ride I am, as usual, in no mood for casual conversation, especially when I see that the flight is sardine can capacity. Now, if your job is one that requires even moderate air travel, then you know my disdain goes much deeper than a simple lack of elbowroom. Which is to say, if you have a low threshold of tolerance for idle chatter with happy-go-lucky head cases or irredeemably bitter creased-collars who, like yourself, can't afford first class (in other words, if you're *normal*), then it's imperative to minimize distractions.

Question: What do you do?

The two sometimes-effective solutions, reading and sleeping are, I've found, ultimately inadequate. Granted, an open paperback conveys the intended message to a majority of eager would-be confidantes and often will suffice. If, however, you're unfortunate enough to end up beside someone whose personal issues impel them to seek solidarity, your book might be an unwitting icebreaker. Sleeping will work, but who can feign slumber for more than an hour or two? And why should you be held hostage by the perfectly rational disdain for exchanging banal pleasantries at 30,000 feet? The key, then, to rendering oneself *incommunicado* is a simple set of headphones, which leave you at once deaf, dumb and immune to intrusions of your personal space.

Listen: I used to let things like this bother me, but people are capable of overcoming obstacles. For instance, once I started getting insufferable bouts of bronchitis four and five times a year, it was time to quit smoking. Just like if you can't make the payments on the car you drive, you sell it and buy something you can afford. Spend too much on dry cleaning? Suck it up and iron your own shirts. And then, of course, there are the things you simply decide to deal with.

Coffee, in my case, is an Achilles heel. It's my stomach, coffee kills me. Nevertheless, I can't, and won't, go without my morning cup of java, despite my disrespectful stomach. There are just some things you have to cope with, and if you don't master them, they master you.

Question: What do I do for a living?

I work, that's what.

And whoever said you were supposed to *like* your job?

My father worked over forty years as a repairman, and I never heard him say a good word about it. He fixed anything, refrigerators, air conditioners, washing machines, name it. And he had to spend his days, his entire adult life, going into other people's houses to fix their things. His job was to make broken things work, the things people were too cheap, or too stubborn to replace, or too damn ignorant to fix themselves. So he had to spend his days inside of houses he could not afford and would never live in, being reminded of all the things he did not have. He hated them all, and said it was only the job itself, the process of fixing things, that gave him any satisfaction. Doing the job right, he'd say, is something you can hang your hat on. And so even though he despised these people whose patronage he depended upon, he went out every day and made their broken things unbroken. He did his job.

I understand how he felt.

The thing is, I'm worried about my sister. There's always been something about her that was too much like a tragedy waiting to happen. So far she's had a remarkable run and gone pretty much unscathed, but all of us have our day, sooner or later. If she wants to write her

poems, teach snot-nosed yuppies-in-training how to decipher that poetry, drink green tea and practice yoga and even wear a *thumb* ring, that's fine. But going out to the desert? Alone?

Question: *Are you happy?*

This is what she's always asking me. What is happiness, I say. This would turn the tables on just about anyone else, but not her. I usually get some sort of lyrical gibberish by way of response. Do you know what she wrote when she inscribed my copy of her latest book? *People are like snowflakes: they are more alike than not, but despite the similarity of their splendor, no two are exactly the same.*

Where the hell am I supposed to go with that? You see what I'm dealing with here?

I'm happy, she says.

What is happiness, I say.

Question: What happens if she's not there?

She isn't expecting me, and as I drive the rental car away from the airport it occurs to me, for the first time: what if she's not there? Unlikely. Where the hell else is she going to be? Besides, if I told her I was coming, she might well have made it a point *not* to be there. So I'm content, the element of surprise can only work to my advantage. Not unlike the Conquistadors, who had a surprise or two for the Indians when they arrived, uninvited, with their Spanish flags and swords. Then, later, the missionaries, who found that the sword was not nearly as mighty, or successful, as the tongue—especially a tongue that spoke so assuredly of the heavens or hells

that await us all, depending upon our faiths in the Spanish-speaking God. The Mormons swept through this place, as did the displaced Confederate Veterans and the opportunistic would-be entrepreneurs who rushed after the deceptive siren song of the gold mines.

There was not much any of them were able to do to tame or subdue this dry ocean of gray earth. And perhaps that's precisely what entices the itinerant souls who are drawn into or driven by this serene, sun-blached soil—an expansiveness that seems to solicit order and adaptation. I imagine this sense of possibility is what appealed most to my sister, and her poetic sensibilities. To be sure, there's something almost inexplicably inviting about the crimson sun setting slowly over this space, the acres upon acres of open, still uncharted *space*. The air is extraordinary, clear and dry, the type of air your body wants to breathe, and you can sense the appreciable contrast to the stifling smog of the city.

But it quickly passes. Because while the differences are drastic: no cars and congestion and crowds of commuters, there's also the *lack* of these same things which, for me at least, provide a sense of security. The rhythm of autonomy is not altogether unappealing. The routine, plodding as it can be, still serves a purpose, it reminds you that you're alive, a functioning part of a system, a bigger, better cycle. To remove oneself from the mechanized march, to step outside of time, could not actually lead to any kind of authentic enlightenment, could it? Not for my money.

The earth begins to open up, as though the air is pressing the ground low and wide. It's been about an hour, and I notice the occasional trailer. This means I'm getting closer, but I'm already thinking about how far I've come, and how long it will take me to get back. Something's

begun to bother me, the way you'll wake up in the middle of the night with a scratch in the back of your throat and know in the morning you're going to be sick.

Finally, I see a trailer that more or less resembles the one she described to me. There's a car out front—not hers—and I pause, uncertain whether I should stop or keep going. Before I can decide, the door swings open and a woman walks out. She is slightly older, and heavier, and less familiar, which is always the case. But I still don't recognize her. And then my sister walks out and stands beside her.

Question: Who is surprising whom here?

Okay, I think. So one of her professor friends is visiting. No big deal.

My sister gives me a hug and introduces her friend.

“This is Noel, my partner...”

Comment: Not Noelle, *Noel*.

Question: *Partner?*

She's about forty, I figure, but looks at least five years younger, with her perfectly coifed ponytail, necklace with the new-age turquoise crystal, and of course, the two-dozen or so stud earrings. There is more metal than cartilage in those ugly, abused ears. The only thing preventing her from being a walking mid-life crisis is that she is very obviously a professor—she's *always* been this way. Sandals, canvas smock, the obligatory stench of patchouli, she is appropriately absurd. I hate her already.

“So, *you’re* the brother I’ve heard so much about,” she begins (I’m not saying her voice is deeper than mine, but if I saw that voice in a dark alley, I wouldn’t be unconcerned), holding out her unmanicured man’s hand.

I ignore her and turn to my sister.

“Partner?”

She gives me a look.

“I mean when you say *partner*, you mean like the two of you are writing a book together or something, right?”

She gives me a look.

I turn to her partner.

“So, *you’re* the boyfriend I’ve heard so little about...”

He gives me a look.

“Listen, there’s no need to be rude,” he retorts.

Apparently he’s used to being addressed more respectfully by his colleagues and students. Which is fine with me, as I didn’t come all the way out here looking to make any new friends.

My sister asks me to sit down and offers me something to drink—sorry I don’t have any beer or anything like that, she says—and the initial tension is, unfortunately, eased. Suffice it to say, significant wind has been stolen from my sails. I had anticipated a more intimate encounter,

and am being forced to adjust my strategy on the fly. Fortunately, I do that for a living. But as we sit around and idly shoot the shit, I can't help sensing *I'm* the only one who seems ill at ease. I have to give the kid credit, she's utterly unflappable, as though somehow she half-expected me to show up.

I have the privilege of hearing all about the *partner* she didn't deem it necessary to tell me about until now, and he is happy to elaborate on all the adventures they have planned. Noel, who asserts he is part Cherokee Indian, is doing research for a book on indigenous cultures, and my sister is accompanying him on his excursions. Whatever the hell that's all about. Needless to say, I see through this charade like thinly-sliced cheese. He does have a vaguely ethnic look, I guess, which he probably disliked intensely throughout his childhood, until he found himself in academia—where it could be used to his advantage. Now, clearly, he is content to milk it for every ounce it's worth, as though to make up for lost time.

He sure can talk.

My sister and I barely get a word in edgewise while he elaborates upon the reasons he's always preferred sleeping outdoors, under the stars, to the comforts of modern life.

“So tell me,” I interject, holding up my hand. “Have you ever actually done an honest day's work?”

“I spent a summer loading crates, if that's what you mean,” he says, with precisely the piqued tone I'd hoped to provoke. “And if it wasn't for my scholarship, I would have had to put myself through school.”

“I bet you would have,” I say.

My sister, who has been staring at him, full of wonder and approval, gives me a look, again. I don't bother to acknowledge his reply, and wave my arm dismissively, as though he were a fly buzzing outside the screened porch of our conversation.

“So, are you getting any *writing* done?” I ask her.

“Yes, it's very peaceful out here, and naturally conducive to creativity. I think this will be a very productive time for Noel and me.”

Question: What's going on?

It occurs to me that the room is very warm—how the hell can you live out in the *desert* without electricity?—and I realize the two of them have continued talking (for seconds? minutes?) and I haven't heard a word they've said. For all I know they've been making jokes at my expense, right in front of my face. And just like that, it's on: I was not, as usual, able to feel it coming, but suddenly the air is sickeningly thin. Then, that sluggish feeling of being suffocated, a heart attack in slow motion.

Question: What's going on!

The first time I remember this happening, I was waiting for another routine flight to take off. As we waited our interminable turn on the runway, I became convinced the oxygen had somehow been released from the plane, and for several seconds I couldn't breathe and almost made a scene. Almost. Since then, the incidents have not been infrequent. Sometimes it's in a traffic jam, or in a cab, or worst of all, in the middle of the day, for no discernible reason, while I'm sitting at my desk, attempting to be productive. It reminds me of when my sister and I used to swim in the lake and try to touch bottom. It was always the same, going down in warm, brown

water that got colder and darker the deeper you went, and the pressure eventually made your ears pop and your eyes bulge. And the awful part, struggling to get back to the top for air, those few moments where you could *see* the surface glistening above you, but not getting there fast enough. That panic, that fear of dying. This is not something, as a grown man, you feel comfortable sharing with anyone.

What's going on?

They're both looking at me, and I'm not sure how to interpret the look on their faces, but I don't like it.

"Why are you sweating...are you okay?"

It's him, he is right in front of me—too close—and it is definitely not concern, I decide, but amusement on that smug, smiling face. There's no doubt he is laughing at me.

Question: What would *you* do?

Before I can decide, I've already taken a swing and missed. And the next thing I know I'm looking up at both of them, him with his fists still cocked and her with a dumbfounded expression that probably mirrors mine. Laid out by a lesbo, I think, by a *woman!* That just figures, my hippie turns out to be a ringer.

"Are you okay?" My sister.

I don't know yet. I can't feel anything, and keep repeating to myself: laid out by *one punch...*

And despite my humiliation, there is a rather large burden lifted—at least now my sister can put *him* in his place, and show him where her loyalty lies.

“I think you should go.” My sister. (Again).

I am so contented with the satisfaction of my expectations that I don’t understand why *he* isn’t saying anything. Only then do I look up and realize she’s talking to *me*.

Then I feel it, finally. The pain, like a scorpion sting under my eye, the letdown of this violent energy that’s been slowly imploding, back from the moment my wife told me she was in love with another man, the exhaustion from the plane ride and solitary drive through the nowhere land of this god damned desert, the bitter sum total of my own defeats, all of it. Everything.

Question: What am I doing?

All of sudden someone is sobbing and that someone is me. Sobbing! I haven’t cried since I was a teenager, but the waterworks are going now and it’s too late to stop them.

“Noel, can you please leave us alone for a moment?”

“Sure, of course, I’m sorry...”

He holds out his hand to help me up and that’s too much. Shrinking before both of them, I turn my head away, practically hearing all the school kids gathered around the sidelines, scoffing at the class bully who just got bitch slapped.

Nothing happens for a while, but I can *feel* her staring at me, that face, the concern, her shame. That face, which always wanted my help, or used to anyway.

“Are you okay?”

“I’ll get over it,” I say, still unable to look at her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s not like I’ve never been hit before...”

“No, I mean what’s *wrong*? Why did you come all the way out here?”

Finally, I look over, and her face looks exactly like I knew it would. I wonder what *my* face looks like right about now.

“I just...I figured something was up...and I needed to know *what*...”

“You know, you’re just like our father.”

Okay. So?

“Well, what if I am? What’s so wrong about that?”

“Nothing, I guess. It’s just...you don’t understand, I’m *not* like him, I never wanted to be...”

“So that’s why you come out *here*?”

“No, I came out here because I wanted to, that’s all. Now tell me, why are *you* here?”

I came out here, I guess, because I needed to.

Question: Why?

“I don’t know. I guess the folks and I were worried for nothing.”

“Worried? Why would you be worried about *me*?”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t be?”

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

“I mean what do you expect, do *normal* people just run off and live in the desert?”

“*Normal* people live their lives, and allow others to do the same...”

Ouch.

“What are you trying to say?”

“I just wish that all of you would let me live my life!”

Well, that changes everything. Her cry for help was really just a polite request to be left alone.

Question: What happened?

It doesn’t make sense, or even seem possible, seeing the tables turned so decisively. So suddenly. This is the same girl who, while never causing any real trouble, always seemed to be *troubled*, complaining about how our father never showed her enough attention or support, so ardent to express her alternative points of view. For so long, she was the black sheep, and everything followed accordingly. A family cultivates certain expectations, and if someone stops playing along, it throws a big monkey wrench in the machinery. When had she decided she no longer needed, or wanted, our approval? Perhaps she never did, or she just got over it. Over us. One thing seems certain: by getting away, she’s attained what we wouldn’t have encouraged her to seek, and has become all the things we never envisioned her being. And the thing is, it kind of kills me.

Question: So why is *she* crying?

“You’re my big brother, and I’m looking at you, telling me that you’re concerned about me...and I feel like I don’t know you, or that you don’t know me for that matter.”

Nothing like a little salt for the open sore. She might as well be telling me I don’t know myself.

I’m out of there. What else can I do?

Sometimes things need fixing, even if they don’t seem broken. And sometimes you just need to drive away. So, I’m driving. Past the sand and those trailers, and all the strangers I’ll never meet. People who may have come out here to get away from something, or to embrace something they couldn’t find anywhere else.

Not for me. It’s too hot, too clean. Too *real*. Give me the city any day, and as many different cities as possible. Enough so that, after a while, all the places look the same, and the faces all blend into one another. Everyone knowing what’s expected of them and going about it, living their lives.

Question: What’s wrong?

It’s okay, you can tell me, she says, sounding much more like a mother—or a wife for that matter—than a kid sister. *What’s wrong? Why are you so unhappy?*

Nothing’s changed, even out here: it’s the same old story. *I’m not*, I insist, smiling even though it makes the shiner under my eye sting like a son of a bitch. *I’m not unhappy*, I say,

feeling like a priest who has celebrated mass millions of times and suddenly, one day, discovers that it's just so many fancy words. *I'm not unhappy*, I repeat, over and over, even as I drive away, as though by saying it enough times, I might make one of us believe it.

As I get closer to the airport, I'm already improving. I've forgotten most of what happened, and my eye is mostly numb. Numb, my whole mind is numb. Kind of like a bad dream, it seems so vivid and disorienting when it scares you out of a deep slumber, but then you wake up and quickly get busy, losing yourself in the routine. (Again). Or, if you're lucky, you're able to drift back to sleep.

Juror #6

By Gregory Janetka

If you want an idea of how my day is going, let me tell you this—it began with the worst breakfast Mrs. O'Toole has ever made, perhaps the worst breakfast anyone has ever made. Runny eggs, bloody, under-cooked sausage and blacker than black toast—and I followed this “meal” by burning my right eye socket with a straightening iron. Not a very manly thing to do, I suppose, but then I've never been much of a man. I was trying to look nice, that's all. I mean, I thought about dressing like a derelict to get out of jury duty but I hate lying—it makes me anxious, well, more anxious, and so I showered and shaved and tried to make myself look presentable, which included straightening my laughable head of hair. And if I had gone for the derelict look I wouldn't have burned off a chunk of my eyebrow.

Anyway, the day only gets worse from there. I drive east, which I never do, find the courthouse and park on the top level of the parking structure. Garages make me claustrophobic – the air is stale and in short supply and I gasp for breath, even if I can see the light. Besides which, it was a concrete pillar in a garage that tore off my driver side mirror a month ago and the wound is still fresh.

Tossing my bag on my shoulder my anxiety rages as I pass the coffee cart in front of the courthouse and am grabbed by the girl pouring coffee but keep on. At least that's nice. Then the lines. So many lines. And on a Tuesday, no less. I hold my breath as I pass through the metal detectors that are flanked by ex-high school football stars, then get a badge, pencil and sign-in sheet and take a seat in the middle of a long room that has the tannest of tan utilitarian carpet, Easter-egg blue walls (no doubt for their purported calming quality) and airport row seats with

shared armrests. Armed security guards are holed up the corners. I glance around and see my electronically-selected compatriots are a cross-section of the general public—as they're supposed to be, I suppose. I wonder if these heads have faces on the other side and feel a creeping terror that if they turn around there won't be any. Smooth, featureless. Like a Ken doll is down there. Their eyeless slabs bore into me with jealous abandon. Mine remain full and wide, albeit one that is being overtaken by swelling reddish-pink skin.

But no one turns around. Odds are a few aren't human—or at least are far enough removed that including them in the same species would be a joke. A khaki and white clad court employee steps out and begins his spiel, setting us up for a video presentation. “California is the greatest state in the nation,” it informs us—before going on to hammer in the importance of leaving any and all bias at the door to these hallowed halls. The video ends and credits roll but the TV nearest to me shuts off prematurely during the credits, leaving me frustrated and unfulfilled. How does one land a role in videos like this? “Juror #6, California Jury Selection Video, 2002,” would be a great addition to any online profile.

Another 35 minutes of spiel and repetition to drill the handful of important points into the minds of the simple, the masses, these people who still won't check the right box on a form that only has one box. There are students and adults and me. My blue shirt with flying flowers and horses is the only splash among us all, although a handbag here and scarf there show these people are alive, or at least want to be.

The khaki man sends us on break and I go to the bathroom to check my eye, desperate to see its condition. Women are lucky they're allowed to carry mirrors. The spot is getting angrier, with a head forming in the center. It's warm to the touch and throbbing. The body healing—

trying to heal—grumbling all the while, calling me a fuck-up under its breath, still unable after 30 years to get over the fact that it's stuck with me inside, controlling what has been left to me to control.

I dab some of the day-glow pink soap on the spot. It stings making both eyes water and I wash it off. My glasses hide the majority of the embarrassment, the worst at least. I stare at my feet as I walk back to the jury lounge, grimacing as the cop at the metal detector gives elevator eyes to a cute blonde coming through the device before commenting to his buddy how she's wearing the brace on her knee correctly and how most people don't wear it correctly and she gives a fake smile and he is pleased by his attempt at a flirty compliment. I think he fist-bumped his buddy, but I'm not 100 percent sure but don't want to turn back, don't want to see his face.

Rushing into the lounge the last time I didn't notice the table covered with well-organized stacks of papers and cards and I look through and take a business card for an Aslan Mortuary which advertises two locations offering custom funerals and put it in my pocket. You never know.

Should I talk to these people? I can't see why, those women behind speaking German much too loud, the rest silent, engaged in digital pursuits on tablets, phones, smartwatches, the TV—anything to escape from here, from the rest of us, from themselves.

I am badge number 036524923, a part of group 0559. I exist in a system, as both an individual number and as part of a larger group of individual numbers. So many organizations have felt so comfortable giving me a number, a different one each time, even though as far as I can tell after exhaustive internet research, I am the only one with my name, at least of those on the grid, those that would report to jury duty.

But these people get me, or don't, rather. The only one I'd like to talk to is the girl outside at the coffee cart. The one with the pink hair and jean shorts. I thought about saying hi and buying a coffee when I passed but there was a large uniformed policeman, a wall of a man, glaring around in the 8AM sun, imposing but not talking as she went about her business. Besides which my irritable bowel was acting up from the stress and worry over the unknown to come and so I never broke stride.

So, when given a break, I stay here, convincing myself coffee would be bad for me and that I can't afford to spend the money. Last night I found out I'm too poor to even file a tax return. A benefit of poverty, I suppose. So I go back and sit and stare at the back of those heads. Every seven minutes the court employee, who never introduced himself, gets on the speaker to ask a Francisco Valhala to come back to the desk. Repeating the instructions five times wasn't enough, not for poor Francisco.

Unable to bear the repeated calls, the endless highlighting of the diminished quality of the all but defunct American mind and its ability to follow even the simplest of instructions, (for god's sake am I the only one who knows how a turn signal works or who goes first at a four-way stop?), I walk to the next room and take a red plastic tray. The best meals are served on trays and then you can go sledding afterwards. The cafe has four food stations, giving the impression of variety but when you got down to it it was the same as choosing a restaurant in a suburban strip mall—futile. So I eat because I am hungry and because it is something to do—an action, a movement. Tired of these people I reread the letter that came with my summons. It begins with an acknowledgment of the “important civic responsibility” I am about to undertake and ends with a list of tips on how to “live green” and a thanks “for cooperation and jury service.” Perhaps someday we'll drop the pretense and say what we mean, but not today.

My belly full, I walk outside to the sun and the blocky buildings that surround the court on all sides. The sun hits the steel of the coffee cart and there she is, mobile yet confined so long as the courts are open. No doubt an angel who dropped out of high school, not because she got knocked up but for a good reason, like helping her family pay rent. That sounds good, I suppose.

My stomach rumbles as I begin towards her and I stop to admire the landscaping but if we're being honest it's really to release the pressure. I clear my throat and, smiling, ask for a small regular coffee. She smiles back and hands it to me. Would I like a lid? I notice her black Sierra Club button against her white t-shirt that shows all the best lines and I say no thanks, we're all in this together, and wink. I reach for the cup but the wink is enough to split the wound above my eye and as pus drips down I jostle the cup, spilling some on her hand and shirt as well as splashing my own. I grab napkins as she recoils and I put a fistful to my eye. It turns out pus in the eye hurts a great deal—or maybe that was the residue of the day-glow soap. I apologize but she disappears behind the cart to wash her hands and I walk away, sipping some of the most mediocre coffee ever devised by man. It isn't even worthwhile for its terribleness, its ability to be mentioned in conversation later that would lead to a discussion of the worst coffee Mrs. O'Toole and I ever had, no, it has no capacity to stand out but rather winds itself into the camp of the instantly forgotten.

When I return to the jury lounge they're still calling for Francisco to come and sign his form and I begin to think Francisco isn't so dumb after all—like my father who pretended to be terrible at washing dishes to the point it annoyed my mother and she pushed him out of the way to do it herself. Well done Francisco, well done.

Before I'm able to sit they begin calling names and mine is the fourth on the list and they send the group of 30 or so of us up to the fifth floor, room 16, where we wait. The bailiff takes role and says we have time before the judge arrives so I go to the bathroom and try to move my bowels but nothing happens—feast or famine, they are—and then I check my eye to find it worse than ever. A delicate, thin film, shiny and reflective, covers the wound, appearing wet even though nothing comes off on a paper towel.

I go back. No one has moved. Everyone is standing in a circle, most keeping to themselves. I stare out the window at the hazy horizon line at the end of the gut-twisting sprawl and listen to the two men sitting below it. They wear the uniform of their kind—cell phones strapped to belts, short-sleeved three button shirts tucked into shorts that end well above the knee. Why isn't there such a uniform for middle-aged women? Even at their most boring they seek some sort of style, such as it is, I suppose.

“The biggest fluctuation is asphalt...” one says.

“I hate the online databases...” says the other.

I thought he was going to say “online dating,” but it's evident there's none of that going on. Why is it that the people with the most boring lives talk the most? Oh well, at least they're not talking to me—and they have each other—and bully for that. Everyone's just looking for connection, I suppose.

Ten more minutes of listening to them talk at each other and we're ushered into the courtroom by the bailiff. An older man, the fluorescent light reflects off of his great under-cooked ham of a head as he passes out oversized numbers in protective plastic shields. I am number 11 and take the second to last seat in the jury box. To my left is number 12, the blonde

German-speaking woman from the lounge. To my right is number 9, a middle-aged man in overalls. We look around, the sedate tan-on-tan furnishings offer a laughable reality to the years of courtroom dramas I was promised by the screen.

I try to get comfortable but that day will never come, not here. The defendant, a young woman, sits on the far side, a red streak cutting through her dark brown hair—rebellious without any rebellion, with everything and nothing tangible to rebel from or against. It's obvious she hasn't worn dress clothes of her own volition for some time, if ever. The lawyers, both female, have their heads down, busy filling out sheets covered in yellow sticky notes—one square for each of us, I suppose. The judge, also a woman, enters and I can't but half laugh at a profession that wears a copy of my graduation gown as a uniform and expects to be taken seriously.

She sits down, introduces herself, and I immediately forget her name. After some brief instructions she provides details on the case—domestic violence—Miss Wood of red-streak fame is charged with the physical abuse of her live-in boyfriend. The judge then addresses questions to the entire jury pool to determine bias. As if by reflex, the German woman to my left raises her hand to all but one question. Her desperation to be excused is choking and obvious and I throw her a sideways glance but she's too far removed to notice or care.

Then it's on to the individual questions.

As juror number 1, a round man with round plastic frames that keep slipping down his face, gives his back story I feel the warm throbbing above my eye and find blinking has become painful. I try to distract myself, first by counting ceiling tiles then by trying to make love connections between this globular mass of humanity. What's that? Number 33 said he knows

number 9? Number 9 acknowledges this, admitting that yes, they share a love of model railroading and go to the same shop. Children, all of us.

My turn. When asked what I do for a living I think about lying but don't. Not because I'm worried about them knowing how far I've fallen but because lying takes effort and my main focus is on my gut—the rumbling, gurgling, pressure of an angry bowel. Damn cafeteria trash. What did the judge say? I'm afraid to ask and so nod in the affirmative. What's that? Is there anything that could disqualify me? I first thought it would be funny to say I am “inordinately attracted to the defendant,” but instead say, “If it came to be that a possible prison term would be the result of a guilty verdict I don't know if I could vote to convict, no matter the circumstances. I don't see being locked up as helping anyone but those doing the locking.”

The judge tells me it is not my job to consider the punishment and I tell her I understand but still would have a difficult time knowing that could be a result. The lawyers make a note as someone scoffs and the court moves on.

As the German woman starts talking I take a deep breath and try to release the pressure but soon realize how dangerous a line that is to toe. There is no being excused at this point and so I focus my attention on not shitting myself. My college career could have been so much more successful if only I hadn't had to spend so much time and effort on not shitting myself. It was good practice though and I feel confident in my abilities. However, things escalate in a heartbeat—coffee as a catalyst. Damn it, why did I do this again? I turn and wince and as I do so the blister above my eye tears open and pus flows down, stinging, leading me to lose focus on my gut, sending a rip into the air. Heads turn. They do have eyes and faces, and have no problem sitting in judgment.

“Juror number 11? Juror number 11, is everything okay?”

“Fine your honor, sorry, just fine,” I say, holding my hand over as much of the right side of my face as I can. I dig through my bag and then my pockets, sure I'd stuffed a napkin somewhere, but all I come out with is the business card from Aslan Mortuary. Shoving it back in my pocket I remove my glasses and press my shoulder to my eye socket to absorb what I can. The German woman keeps muttering the word “unbelievable” under her breath and I am torn between apologizing and saying, “Hey! See how you'd do if your eye was swimming in pus and you might shit yourself at any moment!” but instead I say nothing. Such is the way of most interactions, I suppose.

They finish the preliminary questions and then both lawyers get to have a go at us. It lasts an eternity. Questions and statements and notes. And more notes. Endless yellow sticky notes. They thank us and retreat to confer with the judge and I stare at the carpeting with my one good eye. Well, as good as it is with the thick prescription lenses removed.

They return.

“Jurors number 2, 11, 30, 32 and 38, you are excused, your service here is done. Thank you for your time. The rest of you will wait for those excused to leave and we will begin the next round.”

Free! Thank god. The other four head to the elevators as I make a beeline to the bathroom and empty my bowels. Sweet relief, there is nothing like it. Able to look at my face again I am met with a mix of bodily fluids—reds, greens, yellows—in short, a mess. I clean it up as much as I can with the soap and hope it doesn't get infected.

Strolling to the elevator alone, I exhale and stare at the hazy horizon line out the window.

On the way to the car I pass the coffee cart. There she is. And refills are 25 cents. I finger the empty cup in my bag, feeling a drop of cold liquid on my finger, then pull it out and toss it aside as I find myself whistling the Mahna Mahna song, of all things. Such is the way of all things, I suppose.

Unexpected Things

By Philip Goldberg

As rain emptied from bruised clouds, she stopped her road-weary car across from the flashing red neon letters. T I P S Y S blinked and blinked on the squat building's roof. She knew those large plastic letters by heart, as well as she knew the prayer that prevented her from entering the front door beneath them. Staring through the rain-splattered windshield, she thought she heard music blaring from inside.

But what she heard was music from that night. But it was just in her head. A slow song. One where she'd danced tight with her ex, inhaling his musty scent and boozy exhalations. The music, the closeness, her own inebriation fueled her passion, which led to the locked bathroom of wild fucking.

The music, the smell of him, the feeling of him vanished, replaced by the blinking red light confronting her. All because the deluge had flooded her usual road and forced her onto one that passed this place and its neon sign. Seeing the light, feeling its raw power filled her with dread as well as a desperate need to drive away, as she recited the words that kept her clean for nearly three years.

Driving along splashy streets, she needed to put the blinking light in her rearview mirror. But she couldn't, as was often the case.

She gripped the steering wheel tight, so tight her hands became hot, red and damp, wishing she had somewhere to go other than home. Her family lived three states away, place of her first beer at age twelve. Unfortunately she'd relished it and began drinking herself deeper and deeper

into the abyss. The more she came home shitfaced, the more it strained the relationship to where now she wasn't on good terms with any of them.

As for friends, she'd abandoned the few she'd made here. All they did was switch on the blinking light.

With both headlights illuminating the slashing rain, she asked herself a question she often did: Why hadn't she left this place? Because she felt wiped out from the constant struggle with her past to rack her brain over it. Because when she found the energy to do so, she had no clue where to go, except the one bedroom cottage on the edge of town that she called home.

Once home, she brewed a cup of Chamomile tea. Sitting at the dining room table, she nursed it as rain continued rippling tree leaves in the backyard. Eying the curling steam rise from the cup, she grew entranced, recalling the day she'd had at her checkout station in Willard's Super Mart.

During her shift, customers had been faceless blobs, as they often were, who placed items on the moving belt and then paid in paper or plastic. Meaningless pleasantries had been exchanged, but who recalled them? Certainly she hadn't.

Sometimes an item on the belt broke through her haze: a pair of underwear, a baby's bottle, or a case of beer. Especially the beer.

The neighbor's dog started barking, ripping away thoughts of her workday and running a chill down her spine. So when someone knocked at the front door, she bolted out of her seat and approached it as if glass shards threatened her feet. Cautiously she placed an eye near the peephole and then gasped at the sight of her ex, whom she hadn't laid eyes on since that night. Thought he'd gone west. But there he stood on the other side of the door, dripping rain.

Should she ignore him? Maybe he'd go away. But then she remembered her car parked in the driveway. So she pulled in a deep breath and opened the door.

Seeing her, a slim smile crossed his lips. His aquamarine eyes were still piercing. His smile, still disarming, widened into a grin. "Passing through," he said, his voice as smoky as ever. "Just couldn't resist seeing the shock on your face."

"Did I make it worth your while?"

"Kind of brought back the good old days," he replied.

She hesitated, deciding whether or not to let him enter what was once his home, too. After all, it had taken her a long time processing the pain of their marriage to put him in her rearview mirror (her memory outside TIPSYS a rare occurrence). But she always had a hard time resisting his boyish grin, his flirty eyes. So she stepped aside, smelling his scent of rain and cigarettes as he edged by.

He removed his wet jacket, his soaked baseball cap and placed them on a wobbly coat rack in the narrow hallway. He shook himself. Drops of rain flew everywhere, sprinkling her.

"Are you a dog?" She barked.

"A big hound dog," he cracked back.

She shook her head in displeasure.

Looking around, he said: "Place hasn't changed much. It's still a shit-box." He laughed but stopped when she didn't join him. "What's it been, about three years?"

She nodded and then proceeded to the snug dining room: "Can I get you something?"

Entering behind her, he replied: “Beer would be nice.”

“I don’t drink anymore,” she said timidly, sitting before her teacup. No further steam curled out of it. She stared at her clasped hands atop the table.

Taking a seat opposite her, he nodded reflectively and asked: “How long since the last one?”

She looked up, caught his curious gaze. “Around three years. Since the night I entered that meeting room in the church basement.”

His eyes grew knowing.

Suddenly she imagined his face blinking red, like a warning light at the town’s railroad crossing. She couldn’t stop seeing it no matter how hard she mentally hit the brake. Her mind filled again with the prayer, helping steady her until the train of thoughts roared past. With it went the blinking light. Only then did she gather the strength to ask: “Why are you here?”

“I told you why. I was heading south and my route took me right through here.”

She was skeptical, but she kept her expression blank.

Lightning flashed the windows.

Flashes of her younger frightened face, his twisted and enraged, held her tight.

Thunder rumbled.

Familiar thunderous voices rumbled through her mind.

With eyes glued to the teacup, she found herself recalling empty beer bottles littered across the same table. That was their past. His return had brought it home sharp and clear. “I can’t go back,” she snapped, shaking her head fiercely.

“Those were hard times,” he said. “We were hard people.” He eyed her hands, the teacup.
“You’ve changed. So have I.”

She unclasped her hands and placed them palms-down on the wood veneer tabletop. “You still drink a lot?”

He nodded. “Nothing like I did.”

“Still smoke?”

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t,” he blew the words through his lips like a cancerous stream of smoke.

“Then why should I believe in miracles?” She ran her palms over the cool veneer.

“Cause you’re a good Christian.”

She let loose a raw laugh. She shook her head, saying: “God have mercy.” Wrapping her hands around the cup, she lifted it and took a sip.

“Believe what you want,” he said. “I have.”

More lightning lit the windows. Wind gusted, and the panes trembled. Thunder cracked; its vibrations rattled glasses and cups in a kitchen cabinet.

“Crummy night,” he announced as if it were news.

The image of his hand striking her assaulted her mind. She closed her eyes and placed two fingers against two lids.

“Something wrong?” His voice sounded concerned.

She struggled answering. Her pained face took the place of words.

He forced out a long breath, which crackled in the still air. “Hell, I just thought... for old times

sake. I've changed, really, truly, god-as-my-witness."

Opening her eyes, she stared. Her expression frosted over.

He extended a hand across the table and placed it by hers.

Seeing his hand there, it felt like a stranger in her home. She pulled both of hers away, placing them on her lap and out of sight. The thought of his touch made her cringe. "When I threw you out," she said in a slow, quaking voice, "it was the bravest thing I'd ever done."

He eyed his hand on the table, alone and in need of company. "You were a hellcat that night," he recalled, balling the lonely hand's fingers into a fist.

"Most times fear freezes you," she continued. "But if the moment's right, if you've been pushed far enough, you feel that you can do things you thought yourself incapable of."

He looked at her. The intensity in his eyes flickered. "Man, I could use a beer." He licked his lower lip as if seeking remnants of a recent drink.

She imagined the red neon letters, each blinking, each buzzing, at one time welcoming. But not now. Her ears perked at the raindrops pattering against the house. Finally she replied: "Guess you'll have to go elsewhere for that."

"You'd kick me out on a night like this?"

"What do you think?" Her voice was resolute.

"That's cold." He sounded wounded. "Real cold."

"It's self-survival."

He shook his head with remorse. "Guess there's no point staying any longer," he said and then rose reluctantly. "We did have good times, didn't we?"

Without answering, she stood. Her muscles tensed. She stayed behind her side of the table as

if it were a face-off, as if all they needed were holstered guns at their hips and someone to shout,
Draw.

Without warning, he walked at her and made a move to hug her.

She recoiled.

Stopping, he shook his head dolefully. “Believe me, I’ve changed.”

“Maybe you have, but it doesn’t change a thing.”

He sighed and then turned, walking to the wobbly coat rack.

Guardedly she made her way from behind the table and into the hallway, keeping the space between them wide.

He gathered his still-wet jacket and cap. “Real crummy night,” he said before donning both. Stepping to the door, he stopped again and faced her. “You’ve got to move on.”

“So do you.”

Shaking his head dismissively, he left.

Stepping to the shut door, leaning against it, she heard his footsteps splashing the puddles on the stone path. Then they stopped. She braced herself, feeling his hesitation in the air. But after a few moments, his steps continued, growing fainter and fainter until only the pitter-pattering rain filled the air.

Sometime after he had left, after the rain had ended, after she’d sat on the frayed sofa, the blinking red neon light began haunting her once more. With it, her hands started trembling. She fled to the bathroom on shaky legs, shutting the door, turning the faucet handle and plopping on to the toilet seat. “Fuck him for coming here,” she muttered as tinkling, flowing water filled her ears. Concentrating on her breathing, both hands still shook. She tried

the Serenity Prayer, but it didn't release her from what she felt. It was as if his visit, his presence had stolen her power to cope, robbed her of her right to rule over her demons. Desperate, she thought of calling her sponsor as she had before. But the turmoil within felt sharper, more severe, and clouded her judgment. Alone and afraid, she found herself recalling the night three years ago.

She had been drinking with him all day, as often had been the case. She'd done so to ease the pain of being with him, her revulsion at every detail of him: from the way he picked his ears, to the way he left his clothes scattered about, to the way he fucked (which wasn't much anymore). Yet she believed herself incapable of leaving him, and fearful that he'd leave on his own.

He glowered and raised his voice as he often did, bitching about money, about how hard it was to get a job, about how she busted his ass over everything.

Hearing his screed, she bristled: "You keep the fucking fridge stocked with beer better than you keep a job."

It didn't take long before he came at her with both fists flying, exorcizing his demons across her face, her chest, her stomach, her defensive arms and hands.

She reeled backwards. Without remembering how, she grabbed the Chef's knife and started brandishing it at him, threatening him with a raging voice. "I'm gonna kill you!"

"Go ahead and try," he taunted, stepping toward her, hands extended, reaching for the blade's handle and coming up empty.

Fraught with fear, fueled by fury, she lunged at him, slashing his right hand, drawing blood.

He screamed in pain and grabbed it, blood oozing through the spaces between his fingers. His eyes grew big and bestial. "What the fuck," he roared and then went at her, determined to

pummel her into submission.

But she slashed him again across the other hand. And then she saw something unexpected in his eyes: fear. And not just fear, but panic.

He retreated toward the front door.

Still flashing the knife, still thrusting it at him, she screamed: “Come back, and I’ll kill you.” She could see on his face that he took her threat to heart. With the slam of the door in her ears, she dropped to her knees, letting the bloodied knife fall to the floor. Then everything that had just occurred overcame her, and the tears flowed.

Still frozen on the toilet seat, her tears blurred everything around her. Even still she saw the blinking neon letters as if they were hanging in the bathroom. These letters, that blinking red neon light were shadows of her past, which could still tempt her, as they often did. But she could not, would not follow them again. She wouldn’t be this weak, wouldn’t permit his unexpected visit to stoke this damning fire within her. She would rely on what she’d accomplished that night, how she felt about it now to help switch off the light. And she did so now. With its disappearance, she shut the tap, stood and caught herself in the mirror. The raw prettiness still broke through her plumper face. The blue eyes still sparkled. The full lips still exuded sensuality. As if seeing herself in an unexpected way, she broke into a slight smile. Wiping away the remaining tears still dotting her cheeks, she left her sanctuary and headed back to the quiet of the living room. Despite the night she’d had, she was still sober, and this made her feel victorious for the moment.

Brotherly Love

By Gary R Hoffman

Benny Larson tried three keys before putting the correct one in the ignition of his Lincoln Town Car. When the engine did fire, it roared because he had too much pressure on the accelerator. "Stupid son-of-a-bitch." he mumbled referring to the bartender at Mitch's who had refused to serve him because he said Benny had enough to drink.

He grabbed for the gear shift lever and pulled it into drive. He was only about a foot from the barricade in the parking lot, so the "crash" was minimal. He flopped forward, his hand flailed around trying to find the shifter. He found it and pushed it into reverse. He floored the car and attempted to turn it at the same time, but since his reflexes were more than a little impaired, he hit the car behind him—not bad, but he did ding it. He looked to either side to make sure no one else was in the parking lot and started to leave. He then noticed a car had pulled in and was blocking the exit.

Quinton Cardenas was an off-duty policeman who was driving by Mitch's when he saw a car lurch forward and hit the barricade in front of it. He pulled into the parking lot and chuckled as the guy went in reverse and hit another vehicle. "Boy, is this a lulu," he said to himself.

He walked across the parking lot to talk to the man. Benny saw him and shut down his engine. He thought he saw the man holding a badge up in his left hand. He opened his window. "Hello, officer."

"Evening, sir. Could I see your driver's license, registration, and insurance papers please?"

"Isss there a problem, officer?"

"Yes, sir. I believe there is."

"So what'sss the problem?" Benny slurred out.

"May I please see your driver's license and insurance papers please?"

"Sssure." Quinton stepped back and flashed a small flashlight into the car as the driver reached for the glove compartment. Benny handed him a handful of papers. "They ssshould be in there, sssumewhere."

Quinton shook his head. "Don't you have a card they gave you to carry with you?"

Benny held his finger in the air. "I do." he said with a great deal of satisfaction he had thought of that. He took his wallet from the inside pocket of his suit coat and handed it to the policeman.

Quinton didn't touch it. In fact, he pulled his hands back. "Would you please get the items out and hand them to me?" His training taught him never to take the whole wallet from someone—they could later claim he stole something.

He held the light so Benny could see what he was looking for. After a minute of fumbling around, Benny handed him the insurance card and his driver's license. Quinton took a small notebook from his pocket and began writing. "Are you gonna givf me a ticket?" Benny asked.

"No, sir. This is still private property, but I need to turn in an incident report because of the damage to the other car. You were trying to leave the scene of the accident, so that will have

to be reported, too." He wrote for several seconds. Benny was leaning on the head rest, and he was drifting off. "Okay, sir. Get out of the car."

"Are you taking me to jail?"

"No. Home. I don't think you're in any condition to drive."

Quinton steadied Benny as he walked him towards his car. Once he had him settled in the front seat, he walked to the other side and retrieved his keys. He then pulled Benny's car back into the parking place, took the keys, and locked it when he got out. He went to the damaged vehicle and wrote down the license number.

Fifteen minutes later, he dropped Benny off in front of his house, after returning his keys to him. He watched as Benny staggered to the porch and shook his head when he was having trouble getting in. Quinton finally left when the front door closed behind Benny.

I wonder what kind of reception Mrs. Larson is going to give him?

Actually, she gave him no reception because she had taken a couple of sleeping pills and was gorked out when Benny tripped over the rug in the front hall and crawled to the couch to sleep for the night.

Benny woke at nine the next morning. He wasn't sure he would ever get saliva in his mouth again or be able to taste anything. His head seemed to have grown twice its normal size. He swung his legs over the edge of the couch and cracked an ankle on a corner of the coffee table. "Shit."

He hobbled towards the kitchen and the fridge where he was sure there was a carton of orange juice. His wife, Luann, was sitting at the table drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette. The morning's paper covered most of the surface, and she had a pair of scissors at the ready. He knew immediately she was clipping coupons.

"Well, good morning, sunshine," she said.

"Rumph." He thought it took forever to cross to the fridge, but he finally made it. He tipped the carton of orange juice and drank directly from it.

"Benny, how many times have I asked you not to do that?"

"Too many." He took another drink. He could feel the cool juice cascading down his esophagus and coating the sides of his stomach. Then he noticed the smell. It seemed to be coming from under his arm as he lifted it to drink. He lowered it and replaced the juice in the fridge. The smell was doing nothing to help his queasy stomach. He headed for their bedroom, stripped, and took a shower under the hottest water he could stand.

He felt close to his old self when he returned to the kitchen. Luann was still smoking, drinking, and clipping. He poured himself a coffee and sat opposite her. He pushed a few newspapers out of the way to set his cup on the table. "Careful now," she said. "Don't mess things up for me. I know where everything is."

He shook his head because he believed her. "How long are you going to keep clipping coupons, Luann? Saving thirty cents on a tube of toothpaste surely can't be worth all the trouble you go through."

She leaned back and scratched something on her wrinkled neck. "It's just part of the game, Benny. I enjoy saving money."

Benny took a sip of coffee. He knew there was no sense arguing with her. Luann was one of the richest women in Oak Arbor when he married her, and she probably still was. He had money he made during his twenty-five years of selling cars to people from all over the county and many surrounding counties, but nothing compared to the fortune her father left her. The woman was just frugal on some things, and she always would be.

"I think you should know I had a little problem last night," Benny said.

"Oh?"

"Yes, I'm going to need you to drive me downtown to get my car this morning."

"You left your car downtown?" A bit of ash fell from the cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth and made a scorched spot on one of her coupons. "Damn," she said and slapped her hand on it to keep it from burning a bigger hole in it.

Benny relayed as much of the story as he could remember. She took the cigarette from her mouth and laid it in an already full ashtray. "You need money for a fine?"

"No, I don't need money for a fine. Right now I just need you to drive me back to Mitch's for my car."

"Well, that shouldn't be a problem. Oh, look, here's seventy-five cents off a can of tamales."

Benny sighed. "How long has it been since we've eaten tamales? As I recall, you don't even like them."

"Well, people's tastes do change. Did you offer this policeman some money just to let this incident ride?"

"No. The whole thing is bad enough. Trying to bribe an officer of the law would just make it worse. If my political opponents hear about this, it could do me a great deal of harm." Benny had been on the city council for two terms now, but he wanted more. He felt since he had stood election twice, won, and had a recognizable name throughout several counties, he would try for state representative from the 115th district. So far, no one had expressed any interest in running against him, but he knew that could change if this story got out. He had plenty of money to fund a campaign and, so far, a good reputation in the community.

"Why don't you go talk to Nick?" Luann said.

Benny's demeanor brightened. "You know, I never thought of that."

"Well, he is a cop. They help each other. Maybe he could get this guy from last night to put a lid on the case."

Benny slapped the table. "That's a great idea, Lu."

"Careful. You'll slop coffee on my coupons."

Luann decided she would rather stay home and finish clipping her coupons for the day, so she told him to take a cab back to Mitch's. "Stupid woman," he mumbled to himself on the ride.

"Cab fare will be at least ten times more than she's going to save on groceries we probably won't use. That'll make it even more expensive."

Benny got his car and drove directly to his brother's. He refused to call it a house, because as far as he was concerned, his brother lived in a dump.

The "dump" was actually a double wide trailer that Nick really didn't keep up. It was held up on concrete blocks to level it. Nick had put "skirting" around the bottom to keep out the cold of Missouri winters, but instead of using the attractive metal skirting most people used, he had piled bales of straw around his trailer. He stacked up old pallets for a porch and steps. In many places, weeds were as tall as the bottom of the windows. All Nick cared about was if the place kept him warm and dry.

And then there were his animals. Nick loved his dogs and cats. The yard was well fenced because he didn't want his pets getting away to wonder the streets and get picked up or hit.

Benny parked by the front gate. He got out, already feeling like he needed another shower. He quickly realized why it had been four years since he last visited his brother. Two dogs came running around the side of the trailer to greet him. They were barking madly and wagging their tails at the same time. The noise caused Nick to come to the door. "It's okay, guys. It's okay," he said as soon as he saw Benny. "Come on in, brother."

Benny opened the gate and the dogs proceeded to welcome him. They were jumping on his clean suit and trying to lick his hands. "No. No." he said.

"They won't hurt you," Nick said. "They're 'bout as friendly as any critters in the world."

"I'm sure that doesn't bother you, but you don't wear five hundred dollar suits."

Nick laughed. "Not hardly." Benny was to the door by then. "Come on in. Want a beer?"

The idea was slightly revolting to Benny, not that he was against drinking beer, but because his stomach was still rolling. "No thanks."

"Have a seat," Nick told him. Two more dogs came running into the living room from the kitchen where Benny saw a cat jump from the counter. All the furniture in the living room was covered with old sheets, but they were full of with animal hair. Benny headed for the sofa, but pulled the corner of the sheet back before he sat down. There was more hair underneath it. He grimaced and sat.

"So what brings you out my way, Benny?"

Benny had a dog trying to move under his hand so he would pet it. Another cat jumped on the back of the couch. He decided to get right to the point. "I need your help."

"You? Need my help? Well, this may be a first." Benny again relayed the story of what had happened to him last night. "So what do you want me to do about it? You broke the law by trying to drive drunk and leaving the scene of an accident."

"Well, it was only one time, and I swear I'll never do it again. If this story gets out, Nicky, it could really hurt my political ambitions."

"Sounds like you should have thought about that first."

Benny squinted at him and wrinkled his brow. "That's not really the attitude I'd hoped you'd have. I thought you might talk to the man and get him to lose his notes on this or something. I mean, information gets lost all the time, doesn't it?"

"Sometimes," Nick said slowly. "Do you even know who this officer is?"

"I can't say that he gave me his name, but he was off-duty at the time. He's about five ten, dark complexion, maybe Hispanic."

"Sounds like Cardenas."

"See. You know him. Won't he do you a favor?"

"Might, just depends on whether I want him to or not."

Benny thought about that for a few seconds. He looked around the room. "Look, Nicky, how about if I give you some money to fix up this place?"

"Actually, I like this place just fine, Benny."

"Well, surely you could use some extra money for something. I mean, cops don't exactly top the salary charts."

Nick made a clicking noise with his mouth. "No, that we don't, but most of us aren't in it for the money."

"Well, I didn't mean to imply you were," Benny said realizing he had crossed a line.

"I guess I'll have to give this one some real deep thought," Nick said, "but I wouldn't hold your breath." He looked down. "Anything else?"

Benny stood. "No, Nick. Nothing else." He walked to the front door and turned back to his brother. "You know, Nick, I've been on the town council for almost eight years now. I know most of the laws that govern this community."

"I'm sure you do."

"Are you aware there is a law on the books limiting the number of animals a person can keep in Oak Arbor?"

Nick frowned. "No, I wasn't."

"Well, there is. No more than five total. So far today, I've seen four dogs and two cats, and I'd bet there's more, someplace. Be a shame to have to get rid of some of them."

"Get out of my house."

"Oh, I'm going. There's also an ordinance about steps having railings on them. Might want to keep all of this in mind, but I'm sure I could find more things if I took the time to look. Nice seeing you again, brother."

All the police in Oak Arbor worked a swing shift. This week, Nick was on the four to midnight slot. He had a few errands to run before he reported in for duty, so he started getting ready early, even though he was still fuming about his brother and his money. Nick thought Benny figured he could buy anyone if the price was right. His thoughts then switched to his animals. He also knew Benny wasn't one to make idle threats.

After he had his uniform on, he made sure the animals had plenty of food and water. He got all the dogs in the house. Two of the cats were still outside, but they wouldn't come in until he got home. That was their standard procedure.

He climbed in his old pick-up and headed for the station. On the drive, he wondered which of his animals he would give up if he had to. He thought about the conditions at the city dog pound. He had rescued all but one of his own dogs from there, right before they were going to be put down because the city only kept them for so long. He shivered at the thought of them having to go through being penned up again and then maybe being put down. He hit the steering wheel. "Damn him anyway."

His first stop was the city library. He had books to return, and he wanted to pick up some more. As he was browsing through the stacks containing mystery books, his mind wasn't concentrating on what he had or hadn't read. He finally gave up and started to leave empty handed. His mind just wasn't into reading books. He went to the front desk and asked a librarian about a book on city ordinances.

The law about animals wasn't quite as his brother explained it to him, but he was sure Benny could use it to his advantage. The wording was that a person could have no more than five animals unless someone from the city inspected the property and stated that there was no health hazard or danger to any humans in the area. He knew Benny could get any kind of a report he wanted. All he'd have to do would throw a little money around.

He went to the grocery store for some things that didn't require refrigeration. He needed more food for his animals. He looked at the bags and wondered how long it would be before Benny put his threat into action. He went ahead and bought the large ones, knowing it wouldn't

go to waste because he would still have some of his pets. But which ones? He got back to his truck and started writing all their names in his notebook he carried on the job. He ended up with eight names—four dogs and four cats. Three of them would have to go.

How in the world am I going to decide which ones to keep? How can I choose? Maybe put all their names in a hat and draw out the ones to go or the ones to keep. "How could my brother be such an ass?" he said out loud and hit the dashboard. "Maybe I'll just let the city come out and the first three they can catch, they can have. I keep the rest. But they'd get three dogs. The dogs are always friendlier." He bit his lip to hold back the tears.

Maybe there's someone who would be willing to take the animals. Surely there's someone to help me.

He kind of gave up on that because he had run out of people to take animals one time when one of his cats had kittens before he could get her spayed.

Maybe I can board some of them in a private kennel until the city people come to check on how many animals I have. Then I'll just go get them after the city folks leave. Surely they wouldn't come more than once. Their budget isn't very strong, either. And I'm pretty sure my brother isn't coming back. Probably for any reason.

Nick fired up his truck and headed for K-Mart, one more stop before he went on duty. He was looking for a new pair of house slippers since one of his dogs, Charlie, decided his old pair was great fun to chew on. He shook his head when he thought about old crazy Charlie. He was already thirteen years old. He had to stay.

As in most large discount stores, he had to cut through several departments before he found what he was looking for. He was going through material and sewing stuff when he spotted Luann in the aisle ahead of him. He smiled and thought maybe he could talk to her and see if she could speak to Benny and pound some sense into his head. As he got closer, he saw her pick up a spool of thread, look at it, and appear to put it back on the rack, but the space where the spool had been was still empty. He then saw her drop the spool into her purse. He walked up behind her and grabbed her arm. "Luann, you're under arrest."

She turned and looked at him. She had a panicked look on her face. "Oh, my God, Nicky, you scared me to death."

"Well, I should have. I saw you taking that spool of thread. Luann, it's marked a dollar nineteen. Don't you have enough money to pay for it?"

She jerked her arm away from him. "Well, of course I do. I just can't stand for these big companies to make money off me."

"Well, you're under arrest, and you're coming with me."

"Where are you taking me? Not to jail are you? I couldn't stand for someone to strip search me."

"Just come along, quietly."

Nick led her to a restaurant in the front of the store. "Now you sit there," he told her. "Try to leave, and I'll handcuff you to the table."

He sat across from her and took out his cell phone. "What's Benny's number at the agency?"

"You're gonna tell Benny?"

"Sort of. Just sit there and be quiet. Now what's his number?" After a three minute wait, Benny came on the line. "Brother, this is Nick. I'm down at K-Mart with Luann, who is presently under arrest for shoplifting."

"What?"

"You heard me. Under arrest for shoplifting."

"What are you going to do to her?"

"Nothing, if we can come to an agreement."

There was a pause on the line. "What sort of an agreement? You can't let this get out, Nicky. It could ruin me."

Nick smiled. "I'm well aware of that. We're sitting at a table in the restaurant in the front part of the store. I'm going to wait here for one hour. After that hour, I'm taking her to jail."

"So what do you want me to do?" Benny asked.

"I want you to show up within that hour with a signed paper, since you are a city official, stating that you have inspected my property and that my animals pose no harm to anyone for any reason."

Benny snickered. "That all? That's simple. Why don't you just let Luann go and I'll bring you the paper tomorrow?"

"Because I don't trust you, that's why. One hour. Signed, sealed, and delivered."

Nick put the paper in his locker at the station before going on duty. He had decided to leave it there just in case someone came looking for it at his house. Quinton Cardenas walked in. "Hey, Quin. Heard you had a little run in with my brother last night."

"Your brother? I didn't know you had one. You never talk about him."

"Well, we're not real close. You gonna go ahead and issue him a citation? Heard he was too drunk to drive."

"Oh, that guy." Quinton looked around and grabbed Nick by the arm and led him to the rear of the locker room. "This is really dumb, man, but I have a slight problem."

"Oh?"

"I got no way to prove the whole thing even happened."

"What?"

"My wife did laundry this morning. She didn't check my shirt pockets, and she washed my notebook. Some of the pages are still in there, but they're so blurry I can't tell what the hell's written on them. Sorry."

Nick thought for a minute. "That's okay. Maybe it will all work out for the best."

####

Benny called Nick a week later. "What happened with the ticket and accident? I haven't heard anything."

"You won't. It got washed out."

"Washed out?"

"Police term."

"Oh, well.... thank you for making it go away."

"Just don't drink when you've got to drive, ok?" Nick said.

"You know, I really like this. You save Luann from a shoplifting charge and get my ticket to disappear. You're getting as dishonest as I am. Maybe you should go into politics."

"Goodbye, Benny."

Two nights later, Nick was taking a break for coffee and a donut. He sat at the counter of the coffee shop and looked at himself in the mirror behind the shelves of pastries.

Representative Nick Larson. Maybe I should go into politics. I could run against Benny. I've sure as shit got some dirt I could use against him. Don't think this state's ever had a brother run against a brother for the same office.

Ghost Towns

By Justus Humphrey

This cluttered shop feels familiar, full of relics from my childhood. In rows on a shelf sit pine train whistles identical to the one my family used for announcing dinner. Other shelves house books on local history, amethyst bookends, and velveteen pouches full of colored stones. Tchotchkes such as these were sold throughout my home state: at the Grand Canyon; in Tombstone; and in the territorial capital, Prescott, my hometown. What sets this gift shop apart from those of my childhood is the lack of pyrite, or fool's gold; instead, there are souvenir lumps of coal. I'm in Ashland, Pennsylvania. Outside, train tracks lead into a cool, wet mine, now frequented by tourists rather than miners. My friend Shane is visiting, and we want to take in some local attractions: next week, the Gettysburg battlefield; today, coal country.

Shane peers into a glass case at pewter dragons clutching chunks of blue and purple amethyst. A sales clerk, less than four feet tall, stands nearly hidden behind the cash register. I wonder how often this employee hears customers comment on the dwarf miners of Middle Earth or if visiting children ever hum "Hi Ho, Hi Ho." A pretty woman with long dark hair and a slender figure steps toward the register, leaving her companion, a preteen girl, plucking at key chains. "We want to visit Centralia. I got directions to the town, but once we get there, do you know where we go?" I cock my head to listen. Shane and I are also heading there today.

Centralia was once a coalmining town. In 1962, an accident ignited a fire that could not be contained and has burned underground ever since. In the 1980s, the state relocated the locals,

creating a modern ghost town. Shane and I have visions of a post-apocalypse world: abandoned buildings, cracked asphalt, desolated landscape—something exciting and strange.

Up to now, his visit has been nice, but it highlights how mundane our lives are. In the past few days, Shane and I have discussed old times, played game after game of Scrabble, and commiserated over beers about our massive student loan debts and lack of full-time employment. For much of his stay, we've worked quietly at our separate laptops—he's writing freelance web content and I'm preparing to teach a summer course. I'd rather have the summer off, especially since only six people are enrolled in my class, but my finances are too tight to turn it down, even though I'll only clear a few hundred dollars for my efforts.

I've also shared a bit with Shane about my ex-girlfriend, especially our disastrous breakup—I'd chosen to attend a friend's memorial service rather than give her the attention she craved, so she swallowed a bottle of pills, leading to an ambulance drive to the emergency room and my firm decision I couldn't put up with her behavior anymore. The whole relationship was a mistake, I see now. We never had much in common, and rather than a boyfriend, I often felt like a therapist—dealing with her manic depression, codependence, self-loathing, and even self-mutilation. After a lifetime of being awkward and anxious around women, I'd reached my thirties thinking I couldn't expect anything better, that she was my best chance of escaping solitude. Now I'm resigning myself once more to being alone, maybe forever this time.

I hope Centralia will be a diversion from my depressing money problems and personal life. This ghost town presents danger, adventure, the threat that a false step will lead to a fiery death. Seeing something fantastic and amazing may take me out of myself, out of my head, and show me the world still has wonder in it.

The cashier tells the woman to turn at the cemetery. As the woman wanders the store, I try to estimate her age. She could be in her twenties, accompanying her little sister on a summer excursion, or she may be my age, out with her daughter. I could speak to her, suggest we make an afternoon of it as a group. It may turn out she lives near me and we have a lot in common. But if I were someone who approached pretty women in gift shops, I would be a very different man.

#

When I was in sixth grade, a group of popular high school kids came to talk to us, propaganda-style, about saying no to drugs. More than their testimonies, I remember the flirtation between a cute girl and a boy. She said how fun it had been to ride from the high school to the elementary school in his Jeep with the top off and the wind whipping through her hair.

When I went through my model-building phase the next year, among all my dragons, aliens, and monsters, I assembled a single vehicle—a Jeep. As I approached sixteen and got my learner's permit, my grandfather sent a check and told me to practice my one-handed driving, suggesting my other hand would be on a girl's knee. I searched the classifieds for a used Jeep and discovered my grandfather's funds fell short. With a little research, however, I found a cheap off-brand version with the same basic look, and weeks later, a squat vehicle sat in our driveway. If I could ever get a girl to ride in it, the wind would whip at her hair.

I began to learn the manual transmission by driving in circles around our church parking lot, a perfect empty space in the middle of the week. I practiced starting and stopping, shifting up and down. I progressed to neighborhoods with little traffic and then to Aspen Street, which presented the dual challenge of being steep and lacking pavement. I worked on making the turn onto Aspen slowly enough to avoid spinning the tires and sending clouds of dust and gravel

flying. I stopped on the incline and shifted into first. My dad had me balance the clutch and the accelerator until I could maintain equilibrium: enough gas to keep the car from rolling back without lurching forward, to stay still without stalling out. We eventually moved into heavier traffic and all the way to Union Street, steeper even than Aspen, angled like San Francisco streets, with the added difficulty of a stop sign at the top, where even an automatic tended to drift backward.

Stops and starts, upshifts and down, dirt roads and steep hills—I overcame them all until I'd mastered one-handed driving, but my other hand never held a girl's knee; it gripped the stick.

#

After our mine tour, Shane and I drive down narrow back alleys to return to Ashland's main road, which ascends at a steeper angle than Union or Aspen back in Prescott. I feel like I'm driving up a straight wall; pedestrians become optical illusions, their bodies forming acute angles with the sidewalk. I rev the engine in first gear and get a good start before upshifting.

I commute over a hundred miles a day in my life as a college adjunct, so four months ago I downsized to a more fuel-efficient car. After more than a decade of driving automatics, I'm adjusting to shifting again. I'm not as smooth as I was half my lifetime ago. My jerky shifting induced nausea more than once in my ex-girlfriend.

#

Kinetosis, or motion sickness, results from disagreement between expectations and reality. The eyes see the still interior of a car or plane or boat and expect a tranquil world, but the inner ears feel upheaval. This dissonance regularly caused problems for my youngest sister,

Tessa. Many family trips involved my father pulling to the shoulder so she could dart out the door.

Before one daytrip, to the town of Jerome, my parents dosed us all with Dramamine. Nobody liked the taste of the acrid yellow pill, but Nate, Ashley, and I all knocked ours back with swallows of water; five-year-old Tessa, however, insisted she didn't like it and wouldn't take it. After minutes of pleading and reasoning, my mom forced Tessa's mouth open as my dad placed the pill on her tongue and pushed it with one finger to the back. Tessa gagged, spluttered, and choked down some water.

The reason for our parents' insistence on the Dramamine became obvious after we passed our city limits. The road in front of us looped forward and back as we climbed a mountain. Out one window, steep cliffs rose high; out the other, the land dropped away. Yellow diamond signs warned of falling rocks. My father spun the wheel from left to right and back again around loops and bends. Our ears popped as we changed altitude.

By the time we reached our destination, Tessa looked as yellow as the pill she didn't want to take. As soon as we parked, she rushed for the door. After cleaning Tessa's lips and chin with a napkin, my mom paused and told Tessa to stick out her tongue. She did, revealing a yellow stain across the back and the tiny, half-dissolved pill she had refused to swallow.

From my parents' description of Jerome as a ghost town, I expected it to look like a John Wayne picture: dirt streets, hitching posts, and a prominent saloon. I assumed the only difference between movies and reality would be instead of cowboys crossing the road to the general store, we'd see tumbleweeds. Instead, outside a drugstore stood a plywood board with the painted image of a cowboy and a woman in a prairie dress, the faces cut out so tourists could peak

through and get snapshots of themselves as cartoons. We wandered the town that afternoon, seeing little of the history I thought would come alive. Instead of tan dust, black asphalt covered the roads. Though weather and years had touched many buildings, they didn't look different from those back home. Restaurants and shops sold hats and t-shirts alongside small flakes of real gold and big chunks of fool's gold.

#

Shane and I pull to a four-way stop at a perpendicular crossroads, at which point my GPS's robotic female voice announces we have reached our destination. Ahead of us, the road disappears over a hill. To the left and the right, the road goes straight and flat for miles between tall trees at the peak of their summer foliage.

This is not what I expected of Centralia. I had a vision of block after block of abandoned houses and smoke wafting up through cracks in the road. I expected the entire place to smell like a charcoal-burning backyard grill. I thought we would see warning signs—"DANGER! DO NOT PASS"—at which point we would have to decide whether to stand safely back or take the risk and step forward, a brittle crust of earth protecting us from the inferno beneath. Instead, we see trees and bushes and ferns. In place of gray smoke, decay, and abandoned dreams, verdant forest surrounds us.

We drive forward and pass a building. Peeled yellow paint reveals the faded gray wood façade. No flag flies from the pole out front. Our only sign of the abandoned city comes in the form of bold white letters clinging to red bricks:

MUNICIPAL BUILDING
BOROUGH OF CENTRALIA COLUMBIA CO
PENNSYLVANIA

My car begins to chug on the steep hill, so I downshift. An orange diamond sign warns of loose gravel, which pit-pats underneath my car as we round a bend. Then another sign welcomes us to Aristes. Having somehow bypassed our destination, we turn around.

Back near the municipal building, we venture onto a side road, which seems like it will take us into a residential neighborhood, but it reaches a T without passing any houses. I feel like we're driving through a new development that has yet to begin construction, except instead of winding through cleared dirt lots, these streets meander through untamed woods. We wind up on a road that runs along the edge of a steep hill, practically a cliff, and then disappears among greenery. A guardrail remains visible in patches where the leaves and weeds haven't quite swallowed it.

We climb out of the car to explore on foot. Neon pink graffiti covers the asphalt, but creeping vines and dead branches obscure the words. Broken particleboard shelves, large plastic tarps, even the heavy square lid to a backyard hot tub are strewn all around. Down the hillside below us rest an old washing machine and a child's plastic playhouse, both on their sides, and a mattress, up against a tree like a leaner in a game of horseshoes. I wonder for a moment if Centralia residents fled in such a hurry they dropped these remnants of their lives. But the underground fire burned for two decades before the state declared eminent domain and paid

Centralia's citizens to leave. Nobody was rushed out. No, this place is now a dumping ground, an easy spot to deposit items too large to toss in a curbside bin.

We duck under a canopy of branches to find a set of cement steps, lingering evidence a home once stood here. Now I understand why we don't see dilapidated houses: they have been demolished. Only the concrete porches, driveways, and steps remain. Of course the state wouldn't leave empty buildings for animals to infest or local teens to party in.

Back in the car, I turn the key, and my dashboard lights blink on and off, except the check engine light, which stays on. Shit. I bought this car to save money, but if I have an expensive repair, I'll be in the hole. Can't anything go according to plan?

#

Another family drive took us to Old Tucson Studios—the back lot that saw the filming of such movies and shows as Rio Bravo, Hombre, and High Chaparral. By my childhood, it was a theme park more than a working studio and, like Jerome, unimpressive. I wanted escape, adventure, travel back in time to the Old West. What I got wasn't even Disneyland. A small train ride lacked the excitement of a true roller coaster, and the stuntman shootout, while fun, left a lot of afternoon to kill.

By the time we hit the road, my family felt tired, and the air conditioner was declaring defeat in the war against the Sonoran sun. The minivan began to chug, and as smoke drifted from under the hood, it became clear the air conditioning wasn't the only problem. Despite his experience pulling to the shoulder any time a faint child's voice called, "I feel sick," my father failed to get to the side of the road before the engine died.

We all climbed out. My dad stood by the driver's open door with one hand on the frame and the other turning the steering wheel. The rest of us gathered behind and pushed. The flattened corpse of a green lizard, not much wider than a pencil, emerged from beneath the tire rolling in front of me. I wondered how that creature could possibly have been surprised and overtaken by a two-thousand-pound vehicle pushed by a group of kids.

Once safely out of traffic, we settled in to wait. Soon enough, some good Samaritans stopped. My dad hitched a ride to a gas station to call for a tow, and a kind truck-driving cowboy gave us a gallon of water to make sure we stayed hydrated. Sitting for an hour probably posed little real threat, but rationing the water to stave off heat stroke felt exciting, like we were having a true adventure.

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The road to Centralia's cemetery stretches across the top of a hill uncluttered by vegetation. Clearly a street once ran across the top, but heavy machines have torn it up in order to prevent foolish rubberneckers like us from driving into dangerous territory. We park behind another car and step out to gaze across the valley below us, at the straight lines of roads and the lush hill where we stood minutes ago. In the distance, a church steeple punctures the rolling green.

The pretty woman and the girl from the Ashland gift shop stand here too, giving me a second chance to say hello. I imagine people at our wedding asking how we met. *Funny story*, we'll say. *We met in a ghost town*. And they'll say, *How adventurous*.

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My dad decided a good final examination of my shifting abilities would be a trip to Jerome. Up and down through twists and turns and increasing elevation, I never stalled out, and I maintained my calm even around the narrow corners with the risk of falling rocks and steep drops.

The supposed ghost town had changed little in the seven years since our family daytrip. My strongest memory of that afternoon is the casual restaurant where we grabbed lunch. The menu featured a rattlesnake special, which sounded exciting, so my dad and I shared an order. Nothing exotic stood out about the look or flavor, however, and it feels unfair now to tell people I've eaten rattlesnake, since the image called to mind of a venomous serpent skewered over a campfire hardly represents the truth: an appetizer of ground-meat patties that could have been chicken without our knowing the difference.

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I say nothing to the woman, and after a final look at Centralia's corpse, she and the girl get into their car and drive away.

Shane and I climb over a four-foot-high wall of torn-up pavement. Earth consumes what was once a road, leaving few remnants of a double yellow line visible. There seems little point in wandering farther. Fifty feet ahead stand more trees.

Then I spy a crack among chunks of asphalt, which jut up, obscuring the fissure's depth. I lean down for a closer look. I wish to see tendrils of smoke, but none emerge. I wish life were exciting, full of danger and mystery and love instead of work and loneliness and disappointment.

This hole looks deep, though. It may lead to a labyrinth of burning coal. “Does it feel hotter here?”

“I think so,” Shane says.

“Maybe it’s because we were in the shade under trees, and now we’re out in the open,” I say. “Plus, we had the air on in the car.”

I wonder if running my air conditioner created the problem with the check engine light. Or maybe I’ve been shifting improperly due to lack of practice. My car will probably break down on the way home, stranding us in the middle of nowhere on a country road, one devoid of helpful cowboys, and all because I wanted to see a ghost town that doesn’t exist. There are no real ghost towns, not like I wish them to be.

“No,” Shane says. “It seems like the heat is coming from underneath us.”

I squat down and stretch one hand above the fissure. This narrow hole may extend down, down, far into darkness, before expanding, stretching, and making connections with other gaps and crevices, until they all merge in a deep underground tunnel, where the darkness dissipates, replaced by orange, yellow, and white flames as veins of coal blaze bright, burning forever.

“You’re right,” I say. “It’s definitely hotter here.”

Contributor Bios

Cover Photo

John Zheng is editor of Valley Voices: A Literary Review. His published photographic projects include African American hospitals and clinics in the Mississippi Delta, Emmett Till, Blues musician Robert Johnson, the Lower Mississippi River, Delta shacks, among others. His photographs have been exhibited and used for the covers of books and literary magazines. He is the author and editor of *The Landscape of Mind*, *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on His Haiku*, *African American Haiku: Cultural Visions*, and *Conversations with Sterling Plumpp*. He travels across the country and catches eyescapes through the lens.

Poetry

Tom Darin Liskey spent nearly a decade working as a journalist in Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil. He is a graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi. His writing has appeared in the Crime Factory, HeartWood Literary Magazine, Live Nude Poems, Driftwood Press, and Biostories, among others. His photographs have been published in Hobo Camp Review, Blue Hour Magazine, Synesthesia Literary Journal and Midwestern Gothic. He uses images and words for a monthly narrative photography column at Change Seven.

Marie-Andree Auclair's poems have appeared both online and in print in a variety of publications. Some publications are local, like In/Words Magazine — who released her chapbook *Contrails* in 2013 — *The Steel Chisel*, *Bywords*, *Canthus* and some are from further away, like *Filling Station* (Alberta), *The Maynard* (British Columbia), *Contemporary Verse 2* (Manitoba), *First Literary Review-East* (New York), *The Northern Cardinal Review* (Michigan), *Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review*, (Virginia), *Apeiron* (Pennsylvania), *Structo* (U.K.) and more. She received a Certificate in Creative Writing (Poetry) from the University of Toronto, Continuing Studies in 2014. She enjoys very much the poetry community of Ottawa, Canada, where she lives. In addition to writing poetry and working on another chapbook, she likes traveling and practices yoga and photography.

M. A. Schaffner has had poems published in *Shenandoah*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Agni*, *Beloit Poetry Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Magma* (UK), *Stand* (UK), and elsewhere -- most recently in *Former People*, *Raintown Review*, and *Rock River Review*. Long-ago-published books include the poetry collection *The Good Opinion of Squirrels* and the novel *War Boys*. Schaffner spends most days in Arlington, Virginia juggling a laptop, smart phone, percussion caps, pugs, and a Gillott 404.

Richard Weaver lives in Baltimore Maryland where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank. One day he hopes to make the last payment on his student loans. During the winter months he acts as an unofficial snowflake counter for the weather bureau. His book, *The Stars Undone*, was taken from a larger collection about the Mississippi artist, Walter Anderson. Four poems became the libretto for a symphony, *Of Sea and Stars*, composed by Eric Ewazen of Juilliard. The symphony has been performed four times to date. His interest in the art of Franz Marc dates back more than a decade.

The poem in *Twisted Vine* is from a MS based in part on the art, writing, correspondence, and life of the German Expressionist painter Franz Marc (1880-1916). They focus on his life and art between the years 1912 and 1916. Marc and Kandinsky founded the Blue Rider movement. 2016 publications or acceptances include *Aberration Labyrinth*, *Allegro*, *Clade Song*, *Conjunctions*, *Crack the spine*, *Dead Mule*, *Five 2 One*, *Gingerbread House*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *Gnarled Oak*, *Kestrel*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Magnolia Review*, *OffCourse*, *Quiddity*, *Red Eft Review*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Steel Toe Review*, *Stonecoast Review*, *The Litterateur*, & *Triggerfish*.

Fiction

Paul Y.J Kim is a Korean American writer from New York. His writing concentrates on Fantasy and Science Fiction, but also Fiction that is whimsical and at times realistic enough. He hopes to continue to publish his work and help readers escape into his writing.

Mary Carroll Leoson teaches English and psychology courses at numerous colleges in Cleveland, Ohio. She holds an M.A. in English and Writing from Western New Mexico University, an M.S. in Psychology from Walden University, and a B.S. in Criminology from Indiana State University. In her spare time, she weaves words and hopes to heal the world one story at a time. She lives with her husband, daughter, and three rescued dogs.

Tim Haywood is a Seattle-area graphic designer and author of two middle grade novels. His recent work of crime noir fiction, *'Incident at Vinny's Cabin,'* was featured in the July edition of *'Heater'* magazine.

In addition, since 2009 Tim has written a blog entitled, *'Reflections of a Shallow Pond,'* offering his musings on parenthood, middle-age and his perspective as a tail-end Baby Boomer. He has performed several commentaries as well, for Seattle public radio stations KNKX and KUOW, and written guest essays for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Jad Josey has been writing short fiction for over twenty years. His fiction has appeared in *Crack the Spine* and *The Golden Triangle*, and his non-fiction has appeared in *Overland Journal*, All-Life.com, *Common Ground*, and *Whole Life Magazine*. Jad resides on the beautiful central coast of California with his wife, three children, and their very large cat. He is the general manager of a robust VW camper business, which means most of his creative writing happens in the late hours of the night. Jad received his B.A. and M.A. degrees in English Literature from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

Erica Steele is a writer and editor living near Portland, Oregon, who loves strong coffee and gentle rain.

Andrew Hogan received his doctorate in development studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Before retirement, he was a faculty member at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, where he taught medical ethics, health policy and the social organization of medicine in the College of Human Medicine.

Dr. Hogan published more than five-dozen professional articles on health services research and health policy. He has published sixty-seven works of fiction in the OASIS Journal, Hobo Pancakes, Twisted Dreams, Thick Jam, Grim Corps, Long Story Short, Defenestration, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, The Blue Guitar Magazine, Fabula Argentea, Mobius, Thrice, The Lorelei Signal, Colliers, SANDSCRIPT, the Copperfield Review and others.

Sean Murphy has been publishing fiction, poetry, reviews (of music, movie, book, food), and essays on the technology industry for almost twenty years. He has appeared on NPR's "All Things Considered" and been quoted in USA Today, The New York Times, The Huffington Post, Forbes and AdAge. In addition, he is an associate editor at The Weeklings, where he contributes a monthly column. He writes regularly for PopMatters, and his work has also appeared in Salon, The Village Voice, The New York Post, The Good Men Project, All About Jazz, AlterNet, Web Del Sol, Elephant Journal, Punchnel's and Northern Virginia Magazine. He is currently the writer-in-residence at Noepe Center for Literary Arts at Martha's Vineyard. Murphy's best-selling memoir PLEASE TALK ABOUT ME WHEN I'M GONE was released in 2013. His novel NOT TO MENTION A NICE LIFE was published in June 2015, and his first collection of non-fiction, MURPHY'S LAW, VOL. ONE, in spring 2016.

To learn more about Sean Murphy's writing and to check his events schedule, please visit seanmurphy.net/.

Gregory T. Janetka is a writer from Chicago who currently lives in San Diego. His work has been featured in Gravel, The Birch Gang Review, Scarlet Leaf Review, and other publications. He is terribly good at jigsaw puzzles and drinks a great deal of tea. More of his writings can be found at gregorytjanetka.com.

Philip Goldberg Over forty of Philip Goldberg's short stories have appeared in both literary and small press publications including Straylight, The Chaffin Journal, Main Street Rag, and Foliate Oak. He is working a novel.

Gary R. Hoffman was born at an early age. Five years later, when he was five, he started school which lasted a long time. A college education supposedly taught him how to teach, but the only thing he really learned was that no one can teach a person how to teach. The teaching gig lasted twenty-five years, until he got tired of the federal government thinking they had the answer on how everyone should teach. He quit and went into business for himself. Later, like all good mid-westerners, when he retired, he moved to snowless Florida and started writing. He has had over four hundred short stories, essays, or poems published or placed in contests. So far, so good.

Non-Fiction

Justus Humphrey's work has appeared in various literary journals, including [PANK] and Bayou Magazine, and in the book *Atheists in America*. He has an MFA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and currently teaches English at Penn State Harrisburg, where he is the Coordinator of Composition. He has helped with editorial duties for a few journals, including most recently Driftwood Press.