

SHIFT

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY ODDITIES



ISSUE 4



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Dear Reader,

Shift is an opera house for the wynnorrific and odd. It calls us into an elegant pirouette and foreign shoes, enticing those who dare read into its hypnotic waltz. We've combed over each piece line by line, word by word, scavenging a divine exhibition of words and images. Our eyes are no different from yours, dear reader, except that they are far more numerous than the two on your own face. Our magazine is little more than a baton and conductor of literary wonder. It is this hypnotizing song that lures and entwines us, tantalizing us as each euphonic noise echoes through our human-like ears.

There's a rhythm to our journal, a heartbeat. Can you feel it beating from page to page? Will you let yourself be pulled further in?

Dearest reader, this magazine is not for the pedestrian. It's a bizarre collection of pieces meant to tango in our ballroom of delights. While we've selected pieces that we hope will delight you, no one knows you better than yourself. Our contributors samba with pain, addiction, violence, and ableism. If you feel one of our pieces will not bring you joy, please make the responsible choice and skip to the next one. We promise, there will be more than enough to satisfy you.

Shift will make your skin and wits hum, if only you will let it. Together, let us bounce through each line; let our stories ring themselves into cacophony in your brain. Twirl along with us to the music of our literary orchestra.

Tell us, dear reader, may we have this dance?

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I Was Not Born to Drown
Sky Chandler

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In the “In Between”

Jim Ross

On most sunny and relatively dry days, the park is jammed, though slightly less so on weekdays. With temperatures hovering in the mid-80s, it was difficult to fathom that the park looked nearly empty. It felt like I was going to have the whole place to myself.

I reached the first garden, which is often “standing room only,” and found myself alone. Except in dead of winter, I can’t remember the last time I had this garden all to myself.

Then again, I wasn’t entirely alone. There was a male cardinal perched on an empty metal trellis.

I futzed with my camera, hoping to get just one good picture before he’d fly off. I tried several times but couldn’t get the camera to focus. All my shots came out fuzzy.

Finally, I realized the camera didn’t matter. The song I was listening to was coming from the cardinal. I was being serenaded.

I got the focus working. Slowly, I moved closer, because I have only a 10x zoom. I changed my position several times. So did he. He kept singing. I kept taking pictures.



Toward the end of his performance, I was close enough to see movements of his beak and throat as he released his song. I was able to look into his eyes. I became convinced he was looking back into mine. To me, he was Pavarotti on stage.



Later in my walk, I told two old Black women who are regulars about my alone-time with the cardinal. One said, “He was telling you, ‘Don’t look at me; listen to me. You need to hear me.’”

When I got home, I deleted the nine fuzzy pictures, and then got my wife Ginger to sit so I could show her the 40 or so clear shots. I knew she’d be interested because she and her siblings are convinced that every male cardinal on Earth is their dead father, whom most people called “Red.”

After we got through all the pictures, Ginger said, “As you went from picture to picture, I could see a tear dropping from his eye.” I went back through the pictures to find the tear and couldn’t. Ginger said, “You won’t find it because it fell the moment you left one picture and before you got to the next, in that fraction of a second, in between. Anyway, it already fell, so you’ll never find it.”

The Italian husband of a writer friend insists, “It’s your father,” meaning mine. That makes sense, since my dad was the singer, and, 20 years after dying, he still sings to me now and then. And his sense of theatrical comedy when he came out for his final bows makes me certain, that was my dad.



Learning Disability

Danielle Gasparro

It was not wrong
to side with anger
all those years.

A leaky ceiling is one thing.
Go ahead, kick back,
laze another day down into the wheel
of someone else's fortune.
Live it up. Pretend-buy a vowel
as that toxic blot of wet denial
oozes through the popcorn ceiling
above your snoring Wednesday head.
This will be of no grand
consequence to me.

But I am telling
you.

If your son, who is
my brother, who is
disabled, ably slams
his door once more
against the stronghold
of your self-prescribed
blindness,
this will fracture more,
I am afraid,
than a dilapidated hinge.

And yet.
Today,

inside this back-
ward flash back again to
being only now...
as I heed the nurse's siren
and speed into the living room
where the truths behind your bruised lids
have been sealed since Monday—
the whole of me, reduced,
a beast existing solely
to caress your arm skin bone
once more once
more deep within
the vacant rhythms of your morphine sighs please, God,
once more—

you greet me.

No longer a silent

I.
You
sit
up
tall
you
are
a
capital

L. Spine upright (how?
the hospice nurse cannot explain) with
frontiered eyes as wide as the life sentence of loss
they are pronouncing between us—

you greet me.

And then,
your wife.
And then,
your son.

And now,
I see.

To side with anger
all those years
was not wrong.

And it was not brave.
And it was not Love.



Self-Portrait
Samantha Sulzer

Life Support

Danielle Gasparro

I felt so big. I was so young.
What does a bank do, Mom Mom,
what is a bank for?

I loved it when we went inside.
There was always a long line, twisty,
like the road to Candyland.

You'd talk a lot with the lady who came
out from behind the puppet-show wall.
I'd fall asleep on your hip. I never saw any puppets.

Most of the time, we'd go to the drive-up window.
You made sure I saw the clear jar with the money
get sucked up into the tube that went over to the bank.

Today, I flip through Polaroids in shoeboxes hanging
on for dear life. This one, who took it? I'm so big. My head
is bigger than yours. I must have been so heavy on your hip.

But there we are. Were. You facing one way. Me,
the other. Today you're asleep on a spaceship. You won't
go to AA, I know. If you pull through. Will all the tubes work?

With Dad gone, you're lonely. And losing money, I know.
I'd like to tell you, if you pull through, I'll never find a space
as warm...as blanketed by grace...as the nook of your neck. Look,

here, in the photo, you can see, that's where
heart and head connect. Through a vessel that carries blood.
That's how they speak.

You ask me to reassure you everything is okay

Sarah Marquez

Everything seems bleak,
this last time I meet you—

Heavy silence in between
5 A.M. and the call you waited for.

Fissures of anxiety spreading
through large bones.

Up north, a smoky sky. No sound,
but the waning growl of thunder.

The 24-hour café, serving the breakfast
you don't like, that upsets your stomach.

The nearly empty parking lot, where we
hold our bodies separated and kiss. Afraid
to get too close in the pale grey morning.

Work that takes you away when we haven't
seen each other naked in a week and the week
was bad, like the omen of rain stinging the air.

Curses forming on the bow of your lip,
the closest you can get to an apology
I won't stand to hear.

Water in your red-rimmed eyes. Not enough
to put out the fire burning through the mountains,
a city of lost things.

We are our only possessions: growing out of time,
collecting dust.

Same River Twice

John Calvin Hughes

From the college, it's about an hour to the Kings River State Park. We drive in, past picnic areas, a visitor center (closed), camping spots with hook-ups for trailers, and farther on, places for tents and such. It's deserted. A sign says "Canoe Rentals," and we follow it to a turnoff toward the river. At the water's edge is an old building with a couple dozen canoes stacked outside. As we're getting out of the car, a guy steps out of the building. He's an old hippie type: tall, with long salt-and-pepper hair, cutoff jean shorts, and flip-flops. He's very surprised to see us. He reeks of pot.

"Hey, y'all," he says. "I'm John. Wanting to rent a canoe, are you?" He's brushing ashes off his shirt. I think it's a women's blouse.

"Got one big enough for the lot of us?" Lowell says in his finest Southern drawl.

"As long as you're not including me, any of these will fit the three of you just fine."

"Well, let's haul one down to the water then," Lowell says.

Old Hippie John and Lucas unchain a yellow canoe, drag it to the river, and throw paddles and life jackets into the bottom.

Old John says, "Right through here the current ain't too strong. Here's the thing, though. Whichever direction you go, in about an hour y'all need to turn around and come back. You don't want to be out there after dark. Kinda getting a late start, you know."

"Preciate it," Lowell says. He climbs into the canoe. I sit in the middle with Lowell up front and Lucas in the back. From the rental joint, the river broadens southward, and this is the direction we go. Fifteen minutes later we are floating among trees with water stretched out on either side of us out of sight. It's not a river anymore. At least not recognizable as such. I'm put in mind of a Cajun swamp such as I've seen on television.

Lowell lights a joint, and the smoke drifts back over me. Lucas says, "Did you get that off Hippie John?"

Lowell turns and silently offers it to me. I shake my head. It's dark under the canopy of trees. The air is full of birdsong, and the water mirrors the dark ripple of the leaves, another Impressionist painting.

"This river's got a real Monet thing going on," Lowell says.

"Should have left you back at the Love Shack," Lucas says.

"I was just thinking about Impressionism myself," I say. "Actually, I seem to think about it a lot."

"Freshmen," Lucas says.

The boys aren't paddling. We drift along at the same speed as the fallen leaves and sticks and insects in the water.

"Still," I say, "this is beautiful. It has to make you feel good, huh?"

Lucas says, "There is a negativity in the universe. We endure the hideous lonely emptiness of existence. Nothingness. The predicament of man forced to live in a barren, Godless eternity like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void with nothing but waste, horror, and degradation, forming a useless bleak straitjacket in a black absurd cosmos."

Lowell turns around and looks at Lucas, frowning. "You didn't just think that up. That's out of a movie."

"What movie?"

"I can't remember."

"Give me a title, Mr. Know-Every-Fucking-Thing."

"I need a minute. I'm going to find it. Where's my phone? I can look it up, Herr Plagiarism."

"Not out here, Eudora. There's no signal."

"Besides which," Lowell says, leaning back and laying his head on my leg, "you're positing Nothingness as an entity, which is in full violation of your Nietzschean worldview."

"I'm not positing shit."

"Really? Up your diction, Stand-Up-Comedy-Boy."

"I'm just expressing a response to the random nature of nature. The lack of reason and purpose. It's a reasonable reaction, I think, to the suggestion that we're floating along here in a Monet."

Lowell says, "The problem with your theory is that nature is not random. There's patterning. Where do you suppose the Teleological Argument comes from?"

"The who?"

"Stop it. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny."

"Debunked."

"Maybe."

"In any case," Lucas says, "patterns in the physical universe are just the result of predictable forces. Gravity, magnetism, quantum flux. The strong force, the weak force. All meaningless."

"What about patterns in human affairs?"

"Confirmation bias."

Lowell laughs. "Let me tell you a story."

"Fuck all you Confederates. I swear to God. Is there anything you don't have a story about? Or the overwhelming, gut-wrenching urge to tell it?"

Lowell sits up and turns around to face us. He's gorgeous. Hair lifted by the soft breeze, face haloed in the diffused light falling through the canopy of green and brown. My thigh is burning where his head lately lay.

"My father grew up poor."

Lucas snorts.

"It's true. He and his brother, Paul, and his sisters, Evie and Melissa, lived in the deep country with my grandparents, who were a mere step above sharecroppers."

"What does that mean?" I say.

"That they actually owned the poor dirt they farmed."

"What did they grow?" I ask.

"Not the point. Whatever it was, it didn't keep the great ballyhooed wolf from the door. Paul and my father started hiring themselves out to construction jobs here and there around the county and eventually started their own construction business, which is how they pulled themselves up."

"Made themselves rich." Lucas.

"Yes."

"So you're outlining a 'pattern' of avarice, greed, and social mobility?"

"No. I haven't gotten to that story yet."

"Jesus! Enough warming up. Enough foreplay. Get to it before the bourbon kicks in, Faulkner boy."

"It was my grandmother what told me this story, don't you know." Lowell is exaggerating his accent now. "Paul and my daddy were little, Daddy five or six and Paul four, I think. Evie comes running into the house and says, 'Paul's in the water.' Granny goes running out the house and down to the road. There was a big washed-out place in this dirt road where water had collected, and there she found Paul floating face down in it."

"Lord a mighty." Me.

"So she yanks him up by the feet and shakes him upside down and squeezes the water out of him, and somehow—he's not dead."

"Miracle." Me.

"Yeah."

"Nice story," Lucas says, "signifying nothing."

"Not done," Lowell says.

"I'm shocked." Lucas.

"So it's 40 years or so later. Paul is playing golf at this country club he belongs to—"

"Rich folks." Lucas.

“—and he’s on the ninth green up near the clubhouse, and he sees this commotion over by the pool. Ambulance, folks gathered round, some hollering and crying and whatnot. So he drops his putter and runs over there. And just as he gets there, the paramedics are stepping back from the laid-out body of this teenage boy, and they’re saying ‘He’s gone,’ and people are weeping and hugging up on one another. The boy had drowned in the pool, you see. Well, old Paul says, and I’m quoting my Bible-spouting grandmother here, ‘Fuck that,’ and he drops down to his knees by the boy and gives him mouth-to-mouth, every once in a while stopping to do some chest compressions. The paramedics tell him they’ve been working on the boy for 10 minutes with no luck and that Paul should just give it up. But he won’t. He breathes into the boy and pumps on his chest for 30 minutes, and damn if the boy doesn’t start breathing and coughing up water and comes right back to life and Paul is the big hero. Story goes that that young man went on to graduate high school and the University of Mississippi Law School and is a highly successful Capitol Street lawyer right this very minute.”

“Wow.” Me.

“Wow’s ass.” Lucas. “Your point?”

“Not there yet.”

“Seriously?”

“Some years later Paul and some of his friends are canoeing the Homo Chitto river, doing an overnight float. They’ve camped on a sandbar and are bonfiring and drinking expensive bourbon and smoking fine cigars and generally enjoying the good life. During the night, a flash flood washes away the sandbar and everybody on it. A couple of the guys drowned, a couple more survived, and Paul, or his body, was never found.”

“Have mercy.” Me.

“Now the point?” Lucas.

“Pattern. Water, Paul, life, death. Can’t you see it?”

“Are you crazy? That’s not pattern. It’s—poetry or something.”

“Forced to disagree. Water, the source of all life, a pattern of turning points in Paul’s life and death.”

“Stop. Please. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s simply the pattern of tragedy that runs from Oedipus through Achilles down to—”

Lucas sits up straight and says something like ‘*nnh, nnh,*’ and points at a murky dark place. He drops his paddle into the water, and the canoe slides left. Lowell puts his paddle in, and they pull hard to port, I guess you’d say.

“Darling. Scull.” Lucas.

“Skull? Where?”

“Paddle, Darling.”

“Toward the skull? Is that what you mean? Where’s it at?”

“Between the A and the T,” Lowell drawls with all his might.

Lucas says, “There’s no skull. Just—never mind.”

We slip up next to a place that might be called the “bank” if there were any solid ground instead of just shallow water, grass, and weeds pushed up three feet high. You couldn’t have stepped out here. Not earth, but not river proper.

What we’ve come to see is a formation of bent-over weeds and bushes, and skinny trees twisted in such a way as to form a cave-like opening. Inside is darkness and a smell out of your nightmares, equal parts rot and death and putrefaction.

“I know we ain’t even fixin’ to go up in there,” I say.

“And Darling reverts to country-speak. It’s a panic-site thing, isn’t it?” Lucas says.

“I will not be defined by my accent nor my inflection at any particular moment.” I don’t know the term “panic site,” but inferring from context, I think, yeah, that’s probably right, because I really do not want to go into that hole.

“I am put in mind of a quote heah,” Lowell says. He’s in full Scarlett O’Hara mode now, accent-wise.

I say, “It gaped like a dark open mouth.” I read “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” in the interim. Shouldn’t I be reading such things so as to impress my professors instead of these two?

“Look at little Darlin’, trotting out with the O’Connor allusion.” Lowell laughs. “Well done, Sissy.”

To this day, that’s what my father calls his sister. Sissy. Even though she died two years ago. The dead sister.

The boys tie the canoe to a spindly tree right in front of the opening. A snake swims out, and a bullfrog croaks from within. “Nest of water moccasins,” a phrase from back in my childhood somewhere, worms around in my brain’s gearbox. The water, the swamp, these woods seem to be growing darker. Of course, my panic-sight may be getting worse, glaucomatizing even.

“I think this place might be evil,” I say.

“Evil?” the boys say in unison and then jinx and coke each other.

“Can’t you feel it? I feel something here, something dark and cold, even in this heat. A place can be evil, can’t it?”

“For example?” Lucas says.

“I don’t know. That weird-ass suicide forest in Japan? Teotihuacan?”

“Tay tee a what?” Lowell says.

“There are places that make me feel good. If there are places that make

me feel good, then aren't those 'good' places? And if there are good places, why not evil places?" I say.

"Let me guess," Lucas says and waves the paddle around over his head, hurling black drops of water, which I instinctively duck from. "The library makes you feel good, the soft chairs, the smell of the books. Sitting on the bank of a river watching the swirl of leaves in water, the dance of light in the ripples, the liquid silver voices of birds in the trees—all this makes you feel good, no?"

"Maybe."

He sneers. "No maybe, Darling. You want to live in a poem, a beautiful poem, a 19th-century poem, Keats, I'm guessing, but everything you bring to your worldly experience is wish fulfillment. Those things you experience that are like your poem-world are good and those that are not are evil. Or banal."

"So, when I consider this dark and terrible hole you've brought us to and I feel dark and terrible, that's just my psychology. It's all coming from me, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, Darling," Lucas says. "It's so obvious. It's right there in your grammar. You feel, and the world corresponds to your feeling."

His voice softens here. He sounds like he actually cares about me, wants me to understand, when he says, "There is no evil in the world but what man has wrought. The universe is morally neutral."

Maybe his voice didn't soften. Maybe that was just me, wanting to be cared about, projecting that need onto him. And I see now that's probably what he would say too.

"Man doesn't make hurricanes or disease," I say. "Those seem to be evils man didn't create. And man didn't make this hole in the river, I don't guess." I'm trembling a little bit.

Lucas doesn't say anything back. He looks off, back upstream. I can't tell if I've caught him in a paradox or if he's just fed up with my recalcitrance.

Or if I've rejected his care for me.

Or if I'm too dense to see his point.

Lowell stands up in the front of the canoe, almost turning us over, nearly blinding my panic-vision, and strips. In this gloaming of green-black shadows, he is marble smooth, as if rubbed by the loving hands of a Renaissance sculptor, gleaming, radiant in a fall of white light spilling through an aperture in the tree sky. I grip the sides of the canoe, trying to keep him from tumping us into the water. He turns away from us and looks toward the swamp cave. His behind is a peach. Or an erotic poem.

Lucas pulls out his phone and photographs him.

Lowell says, "Lucas is not entirely correct here, Darling."

"Where's your phone, Darling?" Lucas asks.

"I left it in the car."

"Cliché, at this point," Lucas says.

Lowell says, "The universe is not neutral. It is, for lack of a better phrase, what it is."

"You had to get naked to say this?" Lucas.

"It moves, like music moves, only in time, cutting its path with no discernible goal. It creates and it destroys. There is no good or evil, for there is no consciousness, at least as we know it. Consciousness is, above all, about choice. Does the universe choose to expand? To hold stars together in galaxies, or is that all the function of physical law?" He turns to look at us. "Darling, you come up to the front. I want to get some pictures of you."

When I stand up, the canoe tilts again, and Lowell and I have to pass each other awkwardly, holding on to one another and sort of shuffle-stepping by. I'm pressed against his naked body. He's all sweat and musk and some aftershave or cologne I don't recognize. Maybe it's disingenuous to say I am not doing it consciously or on purpose, but in those couple of seconds when we are face to face, I arch my back just a little (I swear) so that my breasts are sort of "there" against him.

What do I want? The answer is obvious. Because I am a cliché, just as Lucas said. I want what I had with Roger, with the couple of other boys I let take me out in high school. I want him to want me. I want him to be filled. With an ocean of want. A glacier of desire. His desire and want overwhelming him. I want him to want me, to want inside me. Outside me. I can say it. I want him, both of them really, begging for my body, my heart, my soul. Or, I want them to want what they want of me. What do they desire?

Would I let them kill me, if that's what they wanted?

I have to consider the very real possibility that I'm a perv.

Lucas scoots over and Lowell sits next to him, mashed together on one seat. Naked and dressed, softhearted and hardheaded, dark and dark. I'm bent over holding the sides of canoe. Lowell motions for me to sit down.

He says, "In the scalding interior of the sun, hydrogen is broken, the promise sworn between one neutron and one proton broken again and again, becoming helium, the mayfly helium already dying as soon as it is born, becoming iron and so on until the sun collapses and flames out, flames out like shook foil, some poet says. And who would bemoan 'O poor hydrogen, poor helium, to have lived and died, and for what?' You see, those are the sorts of things that folks will think, for the will to anthropomorphize is strong. But we, too, Darling, are but hydrogen and helium and iron, no more permanent than the smallest immeasurable unit of time."

“I’m not gladdened by that.” Me.

“Darling, can you give me something other than the resting bitch face, please?” Lucas says.

Facing them, their phones, firefly flashes trapping photonic versions of my face. And the dark cave behind me.

“That’s not her rbf, old son,” Lowell says. “That’s worried Darlin’.”

“Darling. Do you imagine that there is such a thing as a perfect murder?” Lucas.

Not gladdened even more, I say, “Like maybe killing me here and stuffing me up in that hellhole?”

They look at each other. And then laugh.

“We love you, Darlin’.”

“And we’d get caught,” Lucas said.

“Would you?”

“Yeah. And that wouldn’t be the perfect murder, now would it?”

I think for a minute. “Well, if you’re really asking and if this is really not about me, I suppose a perfect murder could be done. But there would be limitations.”

“Preach, sweetheart.” Lowell.

“Well, let’s start with this well-known fact and investigative given. In 99.9999 percent of murders, the perpetrator is someone the victim knows, mostly husbands and wives, though also children and coworkers. Neighbors. Did you hear me? Someone the victim knows. I know you.”

Lowell laughs. “She knows us.”

“Yeah. Funny. Darling, we’re not gonna kill you.”

“Shoot, I hope not. I’m just joking, Lucas.”

He sighs. “So. Ninety-nine percent?”

“Yeah, and since the cops know this, they always look first at the people within the victim’s immediate circle. Eventually they find a motive, one third of the three-legged stool of guilt presumption.”

“Yeah. Three-legged huh? What?” Lucas.

“Means, Motive, Opportunity. Cops look for all three. One isn’t enough for a conviction. But once they do find one of them, they start looking for the other two, even if it takes forever. No statue of limitations on murder.”

“Darling. *Statute.*”

“What?”

“It’s *statute.*”

“What did I say?”

“Statue.”

“Bullshit.”

“Carry on then.”

“So, you couldn’t kill some asshole jock that you both hate or, let’s say, Dr. Richmond, who never gives A’s.”

“That polecat son of a bitch.” Lowell.

“Wait,” Lucas said. “There must be lots of people who want Richmond dead beyond us. People in the department, students he’s screwed over or felt up. Surely there would be a long line of suspects ahead of us.”

“Us? This us?”

“Figuratively.”

“So, figures of us. Okay. Anyway, once the cops are there on campus, we are in the suspect pool. And they’ll never give up. They will eliminate every possibility until they get to us. What does Sherlock say? Eliminate the something something something. Suddenly it’s walls closing in, concentric circles tightening around us, the center of the labyrinth just ahead.”

“Listen to Darlin’! Going all Harold Bloomy on us.” Lowell.

“If you really want to get away with it, the best option is to kill somebody we don’t know. What am I saying? We?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Lucas.

The wind has picked up and turned the canoe around so that I’m facing the hole. I was gladdened when they said unto me. But I am not gladdened now.

“Shall we stop a moment and review why we’re even talking about this?” Me.

Lucas says, “No. Let’s don’t. And fuck all this Leopold and Loeb shit. What are we? Scientists? Engineers? Nerds in white lab coats holding clipboards? Running some experiment? From which, by the way, we have removed all subjectivity? I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t even remotely want to do that. Kill somebody I don’t know for no reason. Bullshit. I want to feel what I do. I want to wallow in the sty of the subjective. I want to come from a place of will.”

“I get so hard when you go all Overman on me.” Lowell.

“Well, better close your eyes then because I’m about to go full-bukkake Nietzsche all over your all-too-human face.”

“Spray me, then.”

“There is the will to power and then there is everything else. You’re going to kill some random stranger? What’s your emotion? Neutral? Objective observation? For what? To see somebody die? To see a stranger die? You can see that every night on television, in both fiction and nonfictional accounts. And since they’re both on TV, they are, for all practical purposes, the same thing. I don’t need any neutral experiences. That’s what I have college for. That’s what these professors do. They drag the emotion and subjectivity screaming out of

every aesthetic or scientific or creative discussion in favor of the cool dispassion of analysis. No, no, no. I want to feel something. If I have enjoyed seeing my enemies punished, and I have done, then how much more will I enjoy watching one pay the ultimate price, as they say on TV?"

"And yet everything you just said places Darling's three-legged stool between us and that goal."

"Risk is part of crime." Lucas said this, but not with much fire.

"That's true, but there is no need to take it on unnecessarily. Kill Dr. Richmond. I know I might like to, but how many fold do we increase our risk versus killing someone completely unconnected to us?"

"Well, you could use forensic countermeasures," I say.

They look at me.

"The fuck you say." Lucas.

"Where did you pick up such nomenclature, sweetheart?"

"Everything I know about investigation and the criminal justice system comes right off of *Law and Order*."

"TV girl." Lucas with a mean voice.

"Kill the prof, frame the jock," I say.

"Probably doable," Lowell says.

"Lots of planning. Lots of work," I say.

The boys seem to consider the options. Eventually, they unknot the ropes and paddle us back the way we came.

"Paddle, Darling," Lucas says.

Coming back against the current, though it is meandering at best, is still harder than straight up floating downstream, so I pick the paddle up out of the brown water in the bottom of the canoe and row.

Lowell does not put his clothes on. When we get back to the rental place, Old John comes out to help pull the canoe out of the water. He looks at Lowell and then at me, but if he has anything to say, he keeps it to himself.

Two Faces

James B. Nicola

The new one is old.

The old one was young,

you see, and can admit, in time,

before the defense of ablutions and noon, after the blinking and shock have abated
and you've caught your breath and a modicum of calm and look simply,
honestly at the glass for a time
and are able to see what's there.

But these eyes look at another's face, a peach too past her prime, who says, when
she grapples the hand mirror to squeeze her eyedrops herself this time, or
to tweezer-pluck her cheeks and chin and eradicate the ghastly side effects
of medicaments, for a while,

"How ugly I've become"
almost every time.

Almost every time I hear her say this, these eyes sorely disagree.

She bought a wig once, but now never wears it, and rarely goes out, where it
would matter.

But it never mattered, to these eyes.

These eyes see only Beauty in the soul-baring smirk of gratitude that seems to
swell and shine brighter and brighter, approaching, with accelerated
slowness, the raw lightening of could-it-be-God with every fast-fading
week, even as the rest of the bespotted face wrinkles and unreddens,
daily, daily, daily.

Next morning, these eyes, even through the darkness and wetness of waking with
worry,

look back at the glass to look for the glimmer of afterglow from her spark of
yesterday

then, after catching my breath, and before my morning ablutions, turn on the
lights and eke out another ruddy, weary, humble, thankful
smile.

A Bargain

Jakob Konger

There were just two people in the alley behind the 7-11. I could see them from its mouth. One was an older woman, her hair in knots, who seemed to be sleeping in her wheelchair. The other was a man, I had to guess. The night was cold, so his face was covered by his coat. I only guessed he was a man because he was saying something to himself, or maybe singing. He had a deep voice.

“You sure you even want to ask?” Kevin said.

“There’s two of them,” I replied. “Worst case, we’re stronger.”

I crossed into the alley before Kevin could think any more about it, and he followed after. The barrel fire shuddered in the wind, shifting and resizing shadows. The bricks in the alley wall seemed to change shape. No one was watching.

“Hey,” I yelled.

The man was still saying something to himself. He was holding the coat to his face with just one hand and twirling a matchbook with the other. The woman slept.

“Hey, mister,” I said. “You, with the matches. Want some cash?”

The man stopped mumbling. He didn’t lower his coat, but we were close enough now that I could see his face. It was sweaty, but there wasn’t any dirt. It was recently washed, and unmarked beyond some stubble. He had small black eyes, and I watched them slide up to take me in. I sat down in a metal folding chair across from him. Kevin followed. The man said nothing.

“Cigarettes,” I said.

The man sat up.

“Cigarettes?” he asked.

His voice was deep, but friendly, like a robotic train announcer. Kevin looked further down into the alley. Beyond a cart of plastic bags, there really wasn’t much there. The woman had opened just one eye. She still breathed through her mouth.

I explained the idea to the man: We’d give him enough money to cover twice the cost if he bought us some Pall Mall cigarettes.

“Pall Malls,” he said. “Now why would I do that?”

The woman snorted.

“I’m talking about cash here,” I said. “And if you were to, let’s say, skim a few out of the pack...”

The man began to laugh. His laugh was clear in the empty alley, louder even than passing cars. He wiped his mouth after he finished.

“Take a look at this.” He reached down into his coat. Kevin moved to stand, but before he could lift his butt out of his seat, the man’s coat was open. Inside, in two roughly sewn side pockets, he had two cartons of cigarettes. Not packs—cartons. One was ripped open at the top.

The man let his jacket hang open and laughed some more. “I don’t think I’ll need your cigarettes.”

Kevin settled back in his chair. I stared at the cigarettes. One pack was open, ripped across the top, but the other was pristine, just a little smushed from how the man was carrying it.

“Let me buy some off you,” I said. “I got the money.”

This time the woman laughed. I didn’t know if she was even with the man, but something about when she started laughing really bothered me.

“No,” the man said the moment she quit laughing. “I couldn’t take your money.”

“But you need it,” Kevin said.

“It’s real money,” I said. “If that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No,” the man said. “No, it isn’t that.”

A car passed by the mouth of the alley. A few bars of music echoed out. The man obviously enjoyed drawing this out. “You wanna smoke?”

“It’s what I’m here for,” I said.

The woman had closed her eyes again. Her heavy breathing led me to believe she was asleep.

“Alright,” the man said. “I think I might have a deal for you.” He pulled the open carton from his coat. “You want this?”

“Yes.”

“It’s yours. Except ...” He set the carton in the empty chair beside him. “I’ve always valued cigarettes. Perhaps more than a person should, if you can understand my meaning. It’s always been a bit more than a habit for me. More of a problem with my personality, if I’m being honest.”

“Okay,” I said. I kept my eyes where they were safe: on his cigarettes.

“There’s just ... a certain *pleasure* unique to cigarettes, if you understand me. It’s something I’ve always felt a lot of people overlook.”

“I understand.”

“But do you? Everyone starts smoking because it’s pleasant, am I right?”

“Mm hmm,” the woman said.

“But soon enough, they’ve gone and forgotten why they got into it in the first place. It’s what they call addiction.”

Kevin picked at the skin that grew over his fingernails.

“What I’m getting at,” the man said, “is why do *you* smoke cigarettes?”

He was leaning forward in his chair, smiling through closed lips. He was looking at me alone now, not Kevin.

“Because I love it.” I imagined he would like to hear that. “It’s who I am. I’m just a guy who loves cigarettes.”

“It’s who he is,” the man repeated.

“Mm hmm,” the woman said.

“That’s a real good answer,” the man said. He brought out that closed-lip smile again. “I like that answer, and I think I like you too. You’ve got an honest voice. I can hear the good in you. It makes me feel I’m doing the right thing.”

“Thank you.” I was careful not to phrase it like a question.

“When you get right down to it,” the man said, “you seem like the kinda guy who gets cigarettes. You really understand their meaning. You get how they really *fit* into this world. It’s all relational.”

“Yep.”

“I bet you’re the kinda guy who, the whole time he’s smoking, he’s thinking, *mmm*, this shit is *good*, this shit is *pleasure*.”

“That’s me.”

“It’s what I *want*.”

“Of course,” I said. “You’ve got it down to a science.” I looked over at Kevin. He was scanning his eyes across the alley. I had the strangest idea, just for a second, that maybe Kevin couldn’t hear a single word the man was saying, and neither could the halfway asleep woman. I held my hand up to my heart. “Nothing better than to smoke.” The man smiled openly now. He had all his teeth, and they shined with the reflection of the fire. “That’s very, very good. It’s just ...”

He picked at the little hairs under his chin.

“If I give you these cigarettes here—which I’d like to—then I’ll be losing some of this pleasure here myself, am I right? Does that seem fair?”

“I don’t know.”

“You two are young. I might tell myself that I’m doing you all a favor. It’s just ...”

What was keeping me rooted in the alley? Why couldn’t I just stand up? Kevin would follow.

“I’m selfish, I guess,” the man continued. “I don’t wanna miss *all* the fun.”

The man began laughing again. He picked up the open carton from

the chair beside him and pulled out an unopened pack. Fire reflected off of the cellophane wrap.

“You can have the whole carton,” the man said. “Or at least the rest of it. All I want in return is to watch you two smoke the first pack.”

“What?” Kevin said.

“Take as long as you want to smoke it,” the man said. “You both don’t even need to smoke equal halves. It’s just if I’m gonna be giving up my pleasure here, isn’t it fair that I get to see the two of you here enjoying it in my place? It’s not like I’ll be taking anything from you, except a little time.”

Simple enough, right? Me and Kevin would smoke a pack of cigarettes, and then we’d be done with it.

The man shifted the unopened pack between his hands. The fire on the cellophane shifted too.

“Give them here,” I said.

Kevin looked at his bleeding fingernails, then at me. I shrugged.

The man leaned across the fire and handed me the pack of cigarettes. Our skins touched. He was cold. I waited for a moment for a signal to begin, but once I realized he had no intention of saying anything, I ripped the cellophane off and set it beneath my leg. I pulled out a cigarette. Unfiltered, but I was good with that. I handed it to Kevin and then pulled another out.

“Lighter?” Kevin asked.

The woman laughed.

I pulled one out of my coat pocket.

We smoked the first two cigarettes slowly. I tried to emphasize the pleasure I got out of mine by screwing my eyes up tight after every drag I took in and exhaling with such focus the smoke almost whistled through my teeth. The only sound was the crackling fire and my breath. I felt ridiculous.

The whole time we smoked, the man leaned across the fire, watching. His eyes looked the same as before—dark but clear, and sunken just a bit into his face—but they seemed, for lack of a better word, more open. It was as though he had a second set of pupils behind each iris—pupils hardly visible to anyone even an inch further from him than I was now—and that these pupils had opened the moment I’d started to smoke. The only thing I could think to compare them to was a whale shark’s open throat. I couldn’t stand to look at them, so I watched his mouth instead. He smiled. One side of his mouth was open, showing off clean teeth.

I smoked my second cigarette at a normal pace. I smoked my third one faster. Kevin followed my lead, but the man paid attention only to me. I smoked as

quickly as I could, lighting each new cigarette with the tip of the last. I was feeling light-headed.

Even looking at the fire, I couldn't stop the feeling of the man watching me. It felt like he was sucking something out of me with his deep new eyes. I tried to think of anything else, but there was nothing. I knew there was an entire world around us, a 7-11 at the far end of the alley and an even larger universe wrapped around that, but at the moment it felt like there was nothing else in the whole of existence except me and this strange man.

I thought about myself. It was better than thinking of him. Who was I anyway? I found it hard to say. I could answer the more basic surface aspects of the question—my name is Dieter, and I lived up on the third floor of a building two train stops away. But for some reason, maybe just the fact I was light-headed, I couldn't think of very much past that. I couldn't imagine ever having looked at it. I mean the world looked—metaphorically, of course—like I was standing at the edge of a very deep but narrow pit. I was standing on the lip of the pit's edge, so to speak, where I could dangle my feet down if I sat. I somehow knew there was a brilliant city there at the bottom of the pit, but I was afraid to look into it.

Does that make sense? I couldn't look into myself. But the man continued to watch me with those eyes. He continued to smile at me with those unnaturally clean, white teeth in his mouth. So, I had no choice but to look further into myself. If I was standing scared and alone on the edge of a deep pit, then you could say that somewhere around six cigarettes in, I finally peered into its depths. I squinted into the dark.

Could I make out the distant lights of the city underground? If I fell in, would the pit be only as wide as me? I began to wonder why I really smoked cigarettes. If I had been peering into the edge of the pit before, you might say that I fell in. There, cramped up at the bottom of the pit of myself, I felt a sudden and undeniable anger at the man for throwing me in, or at least letting me fall in. It was sudden, the way a cold is after a long and sleepless night; it had been there all along and only felt sudden because I'd just noticed it.

He had *meant* to make me feel like this. That was his *real* offer: I will give you this pack of cigarettes, but in exchange you must feel worse than you ever have in your life. You must let me draw in *all* your pleasure. *That* was his intention. He'd even said it.

All of a sudden, I wanted to kill the man. I wanted to drop him straight into the fire. Why? I'd never felt so violent before.

When Kevin and I were done smoking—it had somehow taken almost an hour to get through the single pack—I thought I would never breathe again.

The man sighed and then sat back. "You did it."

When he smiled now, his mouth was completely open. His lips were nearly all the way pulled back. He picked the carton of cigarettes up from the chair and held it across the fire to me. When I grabbed it, though, he didn't let go. He held it in place a while. Our skins touched again. I felt the fire's warmth.

"Look me in the eyes," he said.

I was afraid.

"Just look up. It's not that much to ask."

I looked. He was staring at me like before, but whatever had been in his eyes was gone. His eyes were clear and wet.

"You've got good eyes. Those eyes are honest. They could never hurt a thing."

"Hurt a thing?" Again, I watched his teeth. They had a plastic shine in the fire, just like the cellophane. They weren't his real teeth, I realized. I still wanted to hurt him—more than I even understand enough to say—but seeing those fake teeth, I knew I couldn't. He was more capable of harming me without touching me than I was able to imagine.

"Thank you," he said. He let go of the carton. I'd forgotten we both were holding it.

"You don't know this," he said, "but you've just saved a life." I could feel his eyes on mine again.

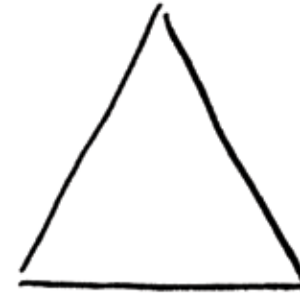
"Whose?"

The woman was back to laughing. "Whose life did you save?" she asked. "Whose?"

I had to get out of there, but I felt like I'd forgotten how.

The woman laughed again with an open mouth. Her throat looked like it sunk down into forever. I pulled at Kevin's shoulder, but he wasn't moving either. He looked down into the woman's mouth.

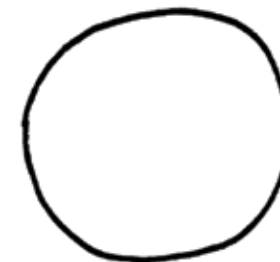
"Whose life was saved tonight?" she said.



STAYED INSIDE TODAY



8 MORE HOURS
OF WORK AT HOME



I MISSED THE MOONRISE

NO-FAULT DIVORCE

Patrick Erickson

Getting a divorce
is like hacking through bone

dividing bone from bone
and flesh from flesh

in the manner of
separating conjoined twins
joined at the hip

joined from conception
bone of their bone
and flesh of their flesh

only without the hacksaw

with a court brief
briefer than the peal
of wedding bells
and wedding bell blues

briefer than the marriage itself

Oh, it's a bone-crunching
heart-rending bloody business

this business of divorce
this bone of contention
hacking in two
two for the price of one

And it's long-lasting
and escape proof

as long-lasting
and escape proof
as buyer's remorse

and as final

There is no escape clause

Buyer beware!



Long Way to Nowhere

Destiny Summerville

In Memoriam

John King

“There is no such thing as addiction;
there are only things you enjoy
doing more than life.”

—Doug Stanhope

Kevin’s skin went yellow as his liver quit
and then his other organs fell to peer pressure.

He expired over an hour
as a doctor, learning my friend
was an accomplished
actor and scholar of Shakespeare,
spoke with him about the Bard,

and Kevin knew and did not know
he was dying, but was absorbed

one last time
with how human the Bard was,

how simple the whole thing
is, how delightful it

was to inhabit

Shakespeare’s imagination

embody these people:

Macbeth in the dark with his shotgun

Othello, a crucifix beneath his boots

Pericles weeping more tears
than a body
can hold.

In rehearsal, Kevin made an aside:

“Who wrote this shit?
He’s good!”

If a novel is a mirror carried along a road,
a great friend is a stolen lamp
burning inside one’s mind.

Sometimes, a doctor’s ear
proves medicine enough
for what one has to do.



Patterns

Erik Suchy

Neighbors

Peter Cherches

Two old men in N95 masks were having a fistfight in my building's lobby. I could tell who they were by their eyes, their hair, their bodies, and by the clothes they wore. They were both older than me by 10 or 15 years, mid-to-late-70s, but I remember when they were younger, as they both were already living here 30 years ago when I first moved in. All these years and I didn't even know their names. I'd nod hello to them, but I can't remember ever having a conversation with either. I'm pretty sure one of them was a widower and one had a wife, a diminutive woman who smiled all the time. I don't remember ever seeing them speaking with each other.

Well, they were speaking now, but I wouldn't call it a conversation, more like "You asshole!" *Pow!* and "You son of a bitch!" *Pow!*

"Hey guys," I said, "calm down. Can't you discuss whatever it is rationally?"

They paid no attention to me. "You moron!" *Pow!* "You imbecile!" *Pow!* I moved in closer. "Come on guys, break it up."

"You afterbirth!" *Pow!* "You skid mark on the jockey shorts of eternity!"

Pow!

"You're not solving anything with violence," I said.

"You pimple on a flea's ass!" *Pow!* "You smegma-smear on Earth's magnetic field!" *Pow!*

I was amazed they were both still standing. *Pow! Pow! Pow!*

"You overripe hunk of gorgonzola!" *Pow!* "You pus-pocket beneath the abscessed tooth of a two-bit centenarian whore!" *Pow!*

They were both bloody all over—red, swollen faces, nosebleeds seeping through the masks, cauliflower ears.

I was starting to worry. Should I come between them, try to break it up?

"You ringworm in a pile of chihuahua shit!" *Pow!* "You one-way ticket to the worst place on Earth!" *Pow!*

Then the little woman showed up, the wife of one of the combatants.

"When are you boys going to grow up?" she said.

They stopped dead in their tracks.

Then she said, "Let's go back upstairs," and to my surprise she got in the elevator with the man who was not her husband.

The other guy had a tear in his eye. He looked at me, sadly, and said,

"She left me last month to quarantine with that prick."



He Doesn't Look Like a Punk

John Burgess

Note: Speech bubbles used for collage and redaction were found in *Archie Meets Ramones* (Archie Comic Publications, 2016).

bonsai

Samuel Haecker

minuscule and haunting,
someone asked
whether I was aware
of fine intricacies when
creasing.

your aesthetics are a
loaded color, fluttering
like honeysuckle
evaporating
and just a tad overwhelming

and as i
folded more,
i was told of
the consequences
of necessity

gazing downwards, greeting
me
are leaves, petite and
ripening to a
fault.

you told me of
the longevity of the
process, its utter
grandness to
pursue.

i said that i knew what it felt
like.
your dimples disagreed.

you were telling me of
precision, care
as if i didn't know
what could sprout
from your
mouth

yet i held the
kami
in front of me,
careful designs
emulating
the origin

say i took your
tiny passions
and kept them in my
room.
would you look
outside?

or if i
used their pulp
for an art you're
unaccustomed to
miniature mature mimicked
manipulate

and say i delicately
manhandled
your painstaking
droplets of mist, falling

with
resolute fervor
as you water,
trim,
graft,
wire.

it's a selective procedure.
beauty in a
symmetry.

windswept roots,
i craft
my own advice.
tell me what
i can make out of you.

cascading zeniths, poignant
slants. whittle them down
and i'll use them all the
same

we are both guilty
of embezzling
nature.

exercise restraint. you must
reflect its counter
parts

just as i
look to compartmentalize
my own models

you gave me shrubbery
foliage

and i gave it back
compactly.



Chiffon Dress
Cat Leivonen

In Possession of a Heart

Mackenzie Singh

The man came to me and said he was in need of a heart. The request wasn't odd. I've been a heart collector for nearly 20 years, and when you've been doing something for that long, a reputation precedes you.

No, what was odd was his hands, which I was sure I had seen before.

"Do you play?" I asked.

I was never musically inclined, but, as a former dancer, I knew my Satie and Stravinsky, my Ravel and Debussy. Mostly, I knew those hands, which belonged, I felt with certainty, to Ilya Juchkov, renowned ballet pianist from the Academy of Arts, at which I had trained for over half my life.

I knew a collector who specialized in musicians' hands. He lived down the road, and though we knew not to speak of our trade, I had seen the way visitors left his home, hands cradled like wounded birds in the crooks of their arms.

"Those are Ilya's," I said.

But I quickly apologized. I pulled a chair from the kitchen table and encouraged him to look through my binder of laminated heart photos.

"It's not like hands," I said, watching him turn the pages with meticulous care. "Aesthetic rarely determines function."

Still, I could tell he liked looking at the photos, and the hearts looked back, vulgar as too-ripe fruit. "If I may make a recommendation ..."

I leaned over his shoulder and flipped a few pages. I told him I could offer a recent acquisition from a young woman: 36 years old, resigned but healthy. A heart collector like me knows potential when they see it, and this heart was a prize.

I should explain. What makes a good heart is not its youth or strength, its ventricles or valves. What makes a good heart is the means by which it is taken.

I had observed the woman for weeks. I knew her only in passing, a tenant in the same building, one floor directly above my unit. Although we never met, I knew her schedule, her affinity for game shows, and that she had a lover who, until recently, had visited with the formal predictability of a stray.

I approached her in the lobby. I told her I often heard the shows filtering through my kitchen ceiling—the pithy voice of the host, the baffled amusement of the studio audience. After apologizing for the noise, she pointed to the lack of identity. She said to have someone expect nothing of you but one right answer, to be capable of providing such a thing, was like peeling yourself clean.

“Ask, give, take; take, ask, give,” I said, as she nodded.

I invited her to dinner.

She had a very polite way of eating, which irked me, not because it was disagreeable but because it reminded me of when I was a child, my habit of muting the smallest enthusiasm into deference, urged, most likely, by an upbringing that valued a particular brand of stoicism.

“I’m finished,” I said, unable to stand it any longer.

She looked startled but pushed her plate away. She dabbed the corners of her mouth and smiled. “An excellent meal, thank you.” Her expression was submissive but assured.

“How old are you?” I asked.

But suddenly I knew. I knew because at that moment I saw it and wondered how I had not noticed before. The realization was embarrassing, like encountering a friend with whom I’d intentionally lost touch. I looked at her body mirroring my own, long limbs and ropey strength, erect posture, the resemblance uncanny like a self-portrait put through a time lapse.

Almost instantly, I was pulled toward memories of Ilya: his carnal obsession with my interpretation of his music, his flippancy when I, on the brink of retirement, began to falter. As with any symbiotic affair that unfolds briefly, passionately, so, too, did I think of the dancer’s body—its fidelity to an art that pledged identity, then took it away.

I could tell, then, that she knew it, too. She was I, and I was she.

“Thirty-six,” I said. “Newly retired. Heartbroken.” I tried to say it empathetically, but it came out in the brazen tone used by those who resent having already weathered something. To compensate, I took her hand in mine and ran my fingers over the sloped bones of hers.

“We should have known better,” I continued, “than to fall in love with a pianist’s hands.”

“We should have known better than to fall in love at all,” she said, responding to my eyes, which were on her heart.

Loving Ilya was different from sex with Ilya, which was the airless, threatening, undelivering kind that was at once too much and not enough. Loving Ilya meant loving what he could do through his music, which was to imbue the belief that something brief was eternal.

“Do you like what you see,” I asked, “or hate it?”

“What is it that I do?” she asked, appraising me.

“You are a heart collector.”

She stared back impassively and then laughed a high-pitched sound that turned into a whimper. “Well,” she sighed.

Bristled by her disappointment, I sighed back. “Well.”

We sat: tensed, continuous.

Of course, it was strange finding myself across from my 36-year-old self while heart hunting. I scarcely knew if I was making a rescue or a steal.

“I can take away your pain,” I said, which was true. She looked at me inquiringly. “What I’m trying to say,” I continued, “is that I can make this go away. This hurt.”

“What do you need from me?” she said after a moment.

“It’s simple. I need you to relinquish your heart.”

“You’re collecting me,” she said.

I told her I was saving her.

Cutting away the heart was seamless. I gave her a sedative and laid her on the kitchen table. I removed her blouse and made the first incision in the middle of the chest. I always use the same tool: a sharp knife of stainless steel that, when held to light, glints like a fish. It can be a beautiful process. An open chest cavity is quiet, carelessly immodest. The gentle tap of blood, an incidental pleasure.

Once I had it, she was gone, and I was me.

The man and I looked at the heart together, a photo whose flash swallowed the scene and stirred conviction.

“You should use natural light,” he said, gripping the page but not turning it. “This—it’s startling.”

I stood at his shoulder and looked on with him. Hearts, so many of them, cherry-pitted prey in the wild.

I thought about how he must have money to own a pair of hands the caliber of Ilya’s. It was a shame, really, a waste, like a piano that sits silent in a living room.

“You don’t like me,” he said after a moment, still gazing upon the photo. He turned a few pages before settling once again on the heart. “Why give up something so beautiful?”

“I have no use for it,” I replied, though the feeling I got when saying it was similar to experiencing unseasonal weather. Thunder amid sun—the irresolution of it—always spoke to the part of me with pain.

The man smirked and released a facetious puff of air, the source of which was inscrutable until I realized he’d deemed my comment a slight. Good, I thought with some satisfaction. I was glad.

But immediately I was remorseful. Of course, he had wanted them. This! A chance at someone else’s talent, an attempt to meditate the perimeters of a hypothetical into being. If his transgression was one of hope, I could not fault him.

I looked at the heart.

The affair with Ilya was over on the eve of my last ballet, though we would try to sustain the relationship for weeks after. The loss of the hands was the same as the loss of performance, and I wondered if I could ever love the world without working to make it love me back, for in this space was the friction on which I'd based my life. I knew it was the same for him: the distance between the music and the dancer's body, the fragility of getting it right, the fixed tautness when it was, but mostly, the elusiveness—what we mistook time after time for love.

During our last night together, I watched him sleep and held his hands which, in repose, felt heavy and dumb. I don't know how I ended up with the knife, only that it marked a beginning and an end.

Shortly after, I moved into another apartment unit. Just a floor below where the memory of what I had done swarmed above me, vague and nearly forgotten save for the nebulous cloud that, from time to time, spoke to me in the violet hues of minor chords.

Eventually, I found I did not like collecting hands, but rather, hearts.

A heart is where the hope is.

Not the Drunkest I Have Ever Been

John King

I shouldn't have been driving,
obviously,
because I promised myself I never would,
but I navigated that first street
in totally civilized fashion,
without the euphoria of fucked-
up confidence,

although—and I was not so drunk
that this thought did not occur to me,
because that's the kind of amazing
drunk I am blessed to be—
that maybe my fucked-uppedness
might be in the very manifestation
of ordinary confidence, I mean
who the fuck did I think I was,

but I am an excellent driver, instinctually,
my feel for the road, it's a spiritual experience,
being an American, being a strange American,
being a strange, drunk American

who has found himself speeding south
on I-95 at 3 A.M.

in harmonious relations with the
symmetry of the white dashes
comprising either extremity of my lane
punctuated by reflectors

with their manic
hellos,

the orbs of the arc lamps
making the landscape merge
with my headlights and then

the shadows pull it away,

& in 30 miles or so I'll be in my own king-
sized bed,

except I might
simply
go catatonic now,

& my vehicle is emitting adventurous Muzak
from the decade of my birth, "Light My Fire,"
a lounge version with a sitar twanging between
those silky strings and jangling organs,
without the voice of Jim Morrison
(Oh, champion of strange, drunk Americans)

tempting a lover,
and if I had a lover, if I could find one,
I wouldn't be committing this crime of trying to drink myself
into another world that wanted me,
but this unspoken invitation spurred me awake,
hard-eyed, so after five minutes and

19 seconds

I played the song again,

and I played the song again,

and I played the song again, lighting my own fire
from my own fire, six times,

or was it seven,

until I could set my Doc Martens onto the driveway,

puke myself out
into a toilet,

sleep the deepest sleep of my sad life.

There would be no hangover for me,
because that's the kind of amazing drunk
I am blessed to be,

but every blink of my eyes burns with a hemorrhaged sleep

for everything I have lost,

for every glass
I haven't

kissed.



A Portrait of My Father Accompanied by Flowers

Oliver Stephenson

The Rules for Jacks

Philip Venzke

Scuttle a constellation.

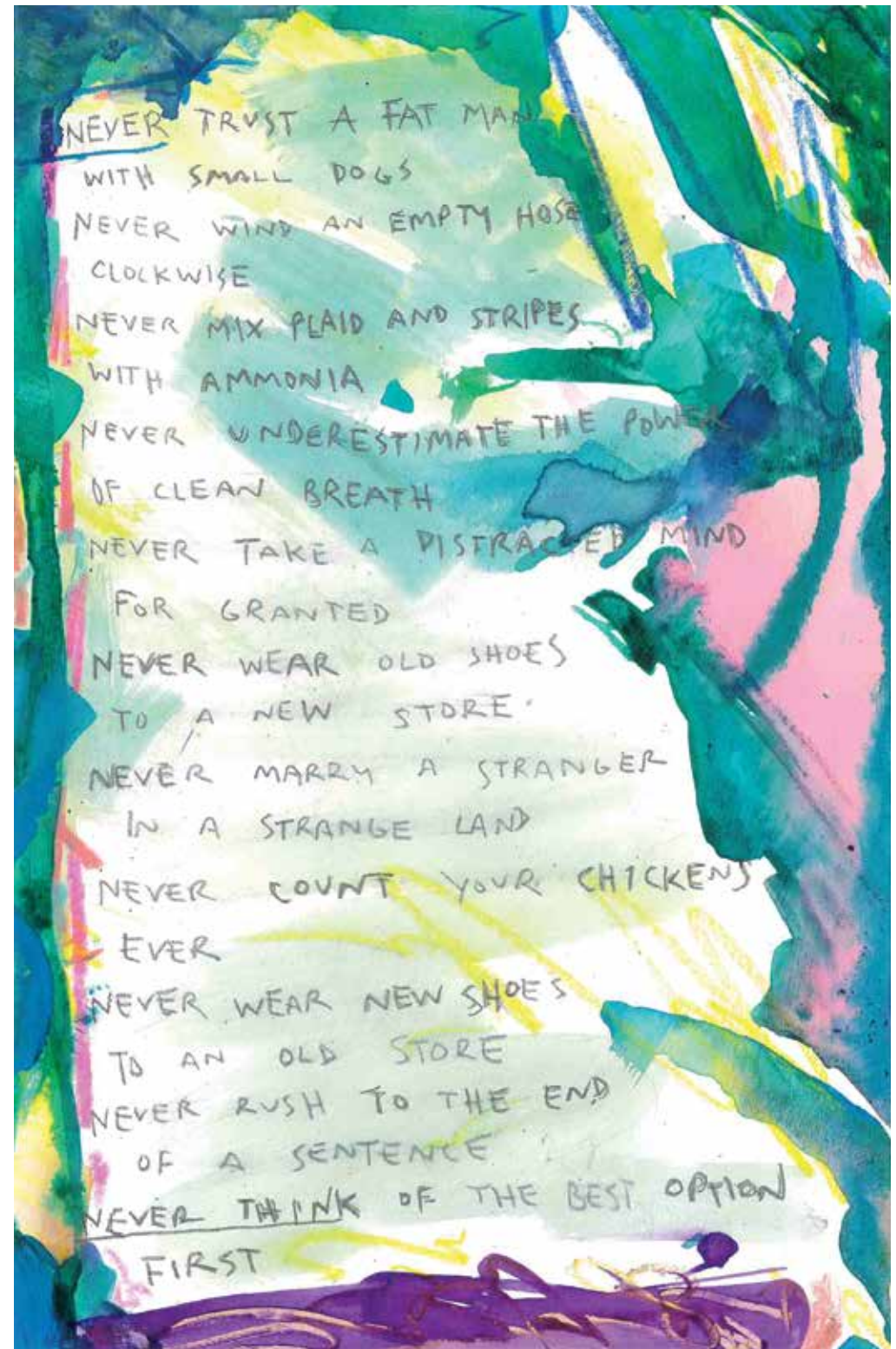
Toss and scatter
the handful of stars.

Bounce the morning sun.
Grab a star before it sets.

Bounce the sun again.
Try for twosies.

And so on until tensies.
The game is now done.

When do we get to play?



Never Never Version 1

Sean Riley

A Chrysalis for the Emperor

Briar Ripley Page

Bug watches the big nightcrawler in her best friend's hands as it twists itself up and down and around. The worm's skin is slick with mucus, and Kieran's fingertips are glistening under the high-noon sun.

Bug is no kin to annelids; she finds them as gross as most people do. Still, she feels sorry for the fat red-brown creature.

"Hey," Kieran says. "C'mon, Bug. You gotta choose. Should I let him live, or execute him?" His fists begin to tighten.

Bug gives him the thumbs-up. If Bug gave the thumbs-down, Kieran would smoosh the worm until there was nothing left of it but sticky paste. This, Kieran says, is how the ancient Romans decided whether or not to kill prevailing gladiators: ratio of thumbs up to thumbs down from the crowd in the arena, and the emperor overrode them all. "You're the emperor, Bug," he told her, the day he invented the game. He put a hand in her long, wild hair and only winced a little when one of Bug's chitinous insect antennae, hidden in the curls, grazed his palm.

"I'm the executioner."

Bug is a benevolent emperor. She always lets the prisoners go.

"Shit." Kieran drops the worm in the grass. He drops himself in the grass, too, stretching out on his back. "You should let me kill one sometime, Bug. Just once."

Bug shakes her head. She's not a killer. She's not a bad kid—she hopes she isn't. She tries to affect a stern facial expression, but she's not very good at facial expressions in general. The muscles and skin of her face feel wrong to her, too tight or too loose or something, alien.

The bell rings. It's time for class. Bug pulls on Kieran's shirtsleeve when he shows no sign of moving. He rises slowly, groaning and rolling his eyes.

"Aw, c'mon, Bug. Just this once, let's skip. We could hide behind the woodshop shed. They'd never find us before the period was over."

Bug shakes her head again. She shapes some words carefully, forcing them through her throat. They come out in the creaky, hissing voice nobody wants Bug to use, not the girlvoice she's supposed to practice, but Kieran's the only other one here and he doesn't care.

"Come," hisses Bug. "More trouble tomorrow if we're gone today."

They walk down the gentle slope of the hill to the low brick school building together.

In Special Ed, Mr. Corcoran is trying to teach Kieran math. Kieran is 12, like Bug, but he still can't do multiplication or long division without a calculator. The most rudimentary pre-algebra fills him with rage. Bug can hear him shouting from the room next door. "Screw this!" There's a noise of paper ripping and crumpling. "I don't need to learn this shit! I don't want to learn this shit! Stop talking to me like I'm stupid, you big walrus!"

Bug would laugh if laughing didn't get her in trouble. Mr. Corcoran really does look like a walrus, with his tiny eyes and bristling mustache.

"Samantha?" says Mrs. Metzger. "Pay attention."

Bug looks at Mrs. Metzger's nose to simulate appropriate eye contact. She nods.

"Show me what you've practiced since last week, Samantha," says Mrs. Metzger.

Bug sits up straight in her hard plastic chair. "My name," Bug lies, "is Samantha Gregory. It's a pleazzzure to m ... meet you."

Mrs. Metzger winces. "Samantha. Be honest. Have you been practicing at all? At home after school, like I've asked you?"

"Yezz," Bug lies. Speech therapy has turned her into a liar. If Mrs. Metzger has her way, Bug will eventually become so good at lying that even Bug believes herself to be telling the truth.

"Samantha."

Bug closes her eyes.

"Samantha, please look at me."

Bug opens her eyes. Mrs. Metzger is leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, trying to seem sympathetic.

"Samantha, I know this is difficult for you. I know it's embarrassing to have to practice things that come naturally to others—" Mrs. Metzger begins. She's interrupted when the door between the two small Special Ed rooms swings open. Mr. Corcoran has Kieran by the arms. Kieran makes a big show of stomping and cussing but doesn't really try that hard to get away, doesn't do anything that would give Mr. Corcoran license to throw him to the ground in a more painful kind of restraining hold.

Mr. Corcoran marches Kieran to the Quiet Closet. Through the doorway, Bug can see the other three kids in Kieran's remedial math group sitting in a circle around the particleboard table, pretending not to stare.

"Phil, please," says Mrs. Metzger. "This is the third time this week."

"Not my fault, Janice," says Mr. Corcoran through his mustache. Then, to Kieran, in a much louder voice: "All right, you. Fifteen minutes. After that, you can

sit with the group until the end of the period if you're calm." He opens the door of the Quiet Closet and thrusts Kieran inside.

Bug's antennae rise involuntarily from the mass of her hair. They're chitinous, matte black, about nine inches long and as thick as Bug's pinky finger. They have a sense the rest of her body lacks, a sense that is sort of like touch and sort of like smell and sort of like dreaming. Through her antennae, Bug feel-smells Kieran in the Quiet Closet, exuding something sour and despairing and joyous all at once.

Mrs. Metzger sits across from Bug in a haze of feel-smell like tobacco and dish detergent wrapped in denim. "Oh, Samantha," she says, with a disgust she thinks she's hiding. "We talked about this. Look at me."

Bug stares at Mrs. Metzger's nose again. She wishes she were anyplace else.

"You're really a bright child," says Mrs. Metzger, "despite your ... difficulties. Your condition is mild; you're lucky in that. Many children with your disorder have no chance of leading a normal life."

Bug nods her head up and down, conscious of its relative normalcy. Apart from the antennae and a certain glossy stickiness to the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet, she just looks like a short, ugly 12-year-old girl. She has a cousin a few years older than she is who looks like a five-foot six-inch cockroach. He can't talk at all, or hold a pencil, or go to a regular school. His mom, Bug's aunt, thinks her son and Bug are the way they are because of vaccines, and now every time Bug gets a shot she wonders if she's going to wake up with compound eyes and an exoskeleton. Sometimes Bug even thinks that might not be so bad.

"But Samantha," Mrs. Metzger sighs, "you have to want a normal life. You have to want it, and you have to be willing to work for it. To cooperate with all of us here who are trying to help you. Otherwise ... well, who knows." She looks pointedly at Bug's antennae. "Now. Do ordinary girls have antennae?"

"No," mumbles Bug in a girl voice.

"What's the appropriate thing to do when we find ourselves growing parts that don't belong?"

"Cut them off," mumbles Bug in a girlvoice.

"Yes!" Mrs. Metzger smiles in a way she probably imagines is warm and motherly. "Looking after our hygiene and personal grooming is so important, especially as we approach our teen years. I want to see you with a smooth, clean head when you come in tomorrow, Samantha."

Bug sits next to Kieran at their usual biology table. It's at the back of the classroom, in the corner closest to the door. She hoists herself up on the tall metal stool and lets her backpack slump between the stool's three long legs. She watches her distorted reflection shimmer alongside Kieran's in the dull silver of the little sink set inside the black tabletop.

"Hey," whispers Kieran.

Bug holds up one finger: Wait a second. She gets her notebook and a pencil out of her backpack and starts writing on a blank page. It's much easier than talking.

ARE YOU OKAY? Bug writes. HOW WAS THE QUIET CLOSET?

Kieran shrugs. "Same as ever," he says. "It's really not that bad. Beats having to sit through the whole math period."

Bug shudders. Her antennae rise into the air again and sense the slimy glint of a lie around Kieran.

"Whoa," Kieran says. "Dude. I thought they told you to trim those things."

THEY DID, Bug writes. I FORGOT. She hesitates, then scribbles heavily over FORGOT. DIDN'T WANT TO, she writes in smaller letters underneath. IT HURTS.

"Screw that, then. I like your antennae."

GIRLS DON'T HAVE ANTENNAE, writes Bug.

"So, you're not a girl." Kieran shrugs again. "You're you. You're Bug."

Bug smiles. Her antennae stretch higher, like plants seeking the sun somewhere above the roughly textured paste-colored ceiling tile. She forces them down fast when she hears the classroom door swinging open and Mr. Poole's voice booming out towards her.

"All right, you mad scientists," he says. "I've got good news!"

There are mutters of excitement and interest from the students who aren't Kieran and Bug. The thing about Mr. Poole is, he's supposed to be one of the cool teachers. Most kids love his edgy humor and willingness to sometimes cuss in front of his classes. They love his enthusiasm for taking animals apart and revealing their inner secrets. Mr. Poole makes no secret of his contempt for Kieran and, especially, for Bug, but if anything, that just adds to his coolness for all the others. Kieran and Bug are not likable or liked.

Mr. Poole is middle-aged, medium height, bespectacled, built like a boxer. He wears his shirtsleeves rolled halfway up his broad forearms. Bug feels strangely envious of those forearms, with their thick black hairs like small antennae. Bug wishes she were strong.

Today, Mr. Poole is carrying a big leather thing like a briefcase. Bug

wonders what could be inside it, and then, as he carefully places it on top of his desk and begins to undo the latches, she remembers.

No, Bug thinks. Oh, no. She grips the cold edges of her stool. She squeezes her eyes shut tight.

“You asked for it, and now I proudly present to you—the Andrew Poole Beetle Collection!” says Mr. Poole’s voice.

Bug rocks back and forth a little. She’ll be okay. She’ll get through this. She’s being too sensitive.

“Bug?” says Kieran’s voice beside her. “Hey, do you need to go out in the hall or anything?”

Bug shakes her head.

“Samantha!” booms Mr. Poole. “What’s going on back there? Is your boyfriend groping you under the table?” There are gasps and titters from the rest of the class.

Bug makes herself open her eyes. Mr. Poole is carrying something toward her and Kieran’s table, smiling like he’s bringing them both a gift. The something has a wooden frame and a shiny glass front like a painting in a museum, but it isn’t a painting. It’s a tray full of dead beetles, each insect stabbed through with a silver pin and neatly labeled in minute letters. The beetles are terribly still. Their legs and antennae are like the ink lines of anatomical diagrams. Their wings are all sheathed.

Bug knows other people would think they were beautiful. People who would scream if they saw an insect crawling alive through their house will admire its shimmering colors once it exists only as an object on display.

“Here,” says Mr. Poole, handing the tray to Kieran. “You two take a good, long look at these, and then pass them back to the front of the room. Don’t get your greasy fingerprints on the glass, or I’ll smack you.” He winks at them, but Bug doesn’t think he’s joking.

Kieran holds the tray limply. Bug averts her gaze. Mr. Poole won’t be defeated so easily, though.

“Come on, Samantha!” he says. “You, of all people! These are practically your cousins, right? Take a look!”

“Yeah!” someone yells from another table. “Look at your cousins!”

Bug takes a deep breath and looks. There’s a beetle with enormous, hornlike jaws, now useless to him. There’s a beetle iridescently blue as the sky reflected in a puddle of gasoline. They float against a white background.

Acid starts to rise in Bug’s throat. She shakes and makes a little noise. She feels her antennae rise, too. They’re in the air, waving wildly, brushing Kieran’s inflamed cheek through a haze of angry humiliation, feel-smelling something oily and bitter and self-satisfied from Mr. Poole.

“Samantha!” Mr. Poole thunders. “That’s no way to behave. If you’re going to cause a disruption, I’ll have to send you out of the room.”

His words are melting into an incomprehensible slurry in Bug’s ears. Bug feels feverish and cold at the same time. There’s too much sensory data in the classroom now for her to process; she doesn’t know what to make of everything she feel-smells through her antennae. She pulls herself from Kieran’s side, and she turns a little, and she lets herself spew rancid citrus-scented puke all over Mr. Poole’s button-down shirt and hairy forearms. It sprays out of her like she’s a busted fire hydrant. The chaos around her heightens and shimmers. It’s so overwhelming she actually thinks for a moment that she might die.

Someone is grabbing Bug’s arms. Someone is pulling her backwards. Bug realizes it’s Kieran holding her. She lets him lead her through the door, into the mostly deserted hallway. Kieran keeps his hands on Bug, steadying her. He holds her close and tight.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t her fault!” Kieran shouts, back in the Special Ed rooms. “He brought his bug collection! Looking at them made her sick, I mean, can you blame her? It’d be like if he brought in a box of aborted fetuses or something! From her perspective, you know? She couldn’t help it.”

“Samantha,” Mrs. Metzger says softly, touching the underside of Bug’s chin to make her look up, “is that what happened? Did you mean to throw up on your teacher, or was it an accident?”

Bug hates the Quiet Closet. Bug could lie. Bug is a better liar every day.

“I aimed,” says Bug, making eye contact. “I meant it.” Her voice buzzes, but the words are clearer than they’ve ever been.

“Well,” says Mrs. Metzger, shaking her head in sad disappointment.

The Quiet Closet is ostensibly not a punishment. It’s supposed to be a place for Special Ed kids to calm down from mood swings or overstimulation and reflect on their behavior. Both teachers and kids know the truth, though, even if they don’t say it out loud.

Bug trembles as the door clicks shut behind her. Two hours, said Mrs. Metzger. Bug has never spent more than 10 or 15 minutes in the Quiet Closet before.

The interior of the Quiet Closet is soundproofed, padded, and entirely, seamlessly white. If Bug reaches out, her palm brushes the back wall and leaves a glistening smudge there. Its nearness makes her claustrophobic. When she withdraws her arm, she’s adrift in an endless sea of nothing—nothing but herself and the smudge of her own slime.

Bug screams. It doesn't make her feel any better.

She throws herself to the floor and lies there like she's been pinned, for what feels like forever. That doesn't make her feel better either, and she gets dizzy from looking at all that nothing. It feels like she's falling up.

Bug curls up on her side in the smallest ball she can, whimpering and lightly smacking herself in the face. That helps a little bit, a very little. She almost thinks she can see the layers of white paint and padding start to take on depth and form around her.

Bug's body feels suddenly bloated and squishy, although she hasn't eaten all day. She twists around to look at it, and finds that she's become a fat, smooth, girl-sized grub. She has three rows of stubby legs that wave in the air.

Around her, the Quiet Closet melts into sunshine and grass. She's on top of the hill behind the school where she and Kieran play their game. The daylight is brutal on Bug's new skin. She has to protect herself from it.

As soon as she has the thought, she feels herself excreting something. It oozes out of her in huge, yellowish globs. She rolls around until she's covered in it, until she can't feel the ground beneath her anymore, until it clouds her vision. Until it's hardening into a coffin.

Bug begins to dissolve. She feels herself turning into soup. There is no Bug anymore. There is organic liquid in a perfect grub-shaped box, sloshing around, reshaping itself, suffused with a vague anticipation.

Time passes. The liquid doesn't feel it. There's no Special Ed, no Quiet Room, no Kieran or Mr. Poole or speech therapy or speech or names for minutes and hours.

The liquid starts to reconfigure.

It separates itself into segments that harden and cohere. It forms a glossy carapace. A long, sleek horn. Six strong, thin legs. Two tall, flexible antennae.

Soon, a newborn beetle tears through the hard box that holds it captive. The material crumples to tissue-paper shreds as the beetle emerges, its shell like armor, its antennae smell-feeling everything the world has to offer. It is bigger than a school bus and stronger than a storm.

With a loud whirring rattle, the monstrous insect spreads its translucent amber wings and ...

And falls abruptly back into a human body, whirling, collapsing, scrabbling for purchase on white foam as the door of the Quiet Closet whispers open.

"Samantha?" says Mrs. Metzger. She crosses her arms in front of her. "I hope you've been using this time in a productive manner."

Bug blinks blearily. She bobs her head up and down.

"Good," says Mrs. Metzger. A bell rings shrill and hollow. It's time to go.

Bug's parents work late and don't like her to be unsupervised, so she gets off the bus with Kieran after school. Kieran's dad doesn't care what Kieran and Bug do as long as they don't interrupt him while he's watching TV and drinking beer in the basement, but Bug's parents don't need to know that.

"Are you sure about this?" asks Kieran. They're standing in Kieran's bathroom, which is very small and smells like iodine. Bug's taken her shirt off; Kieran's not looking at her chest but at her hair. Her hair and her antennae sticking out of it. He's holding a pair of scissors.

"Yezz," says Bug. "Sure." She sits down on the closed lid of the toilet. "Do it now."

"What if I hurt you by accident?"

"Don't care. Cut."

"What if it looks stupid?"

"Cut, Kieran."

"You know what Mrs. Metzger and them are gonna say. You know what they'll—"

Bug glares, and then Bug laughs. "Kieran, you wusszzz. I'm the emp-er-or, remember? When I say you cut, you cut."

Kieran laughs, too. "Can't argue with that, your majesty." He brings the scissors close. They make swishing sounds around Bug's head.

There is no pain. Long curls of dark hair fall to the tile floor, where they lie like dead worms.

When Kieran is finished, Bug's hair is shorter than his. She turns her face from side to side as she examines his work in the mirror. The back of her neck feels tender and naked. Her antennae are as visible as radio towers in an open field. They're as visible as a pinned beetle on a white background. There's no hiding them.

"You're in so much trouble," says Kieran, but he's grinning. "So much trouble. But what do you think? Did I do an okay job?"

Bug nods. Still entranced by her reflection, she lifts her hands and gives Kieran two thumbs up.

Jello Pool Cake

Mercury-Marvin Sunderland

on one birthday
my mother made me
a jello pool cake.

complete with all the little gummy bears
lining both
the cake sides
& blue raspberry jello water

sunbathing on rainbow belt beach towels
& on the deep end

that one bear
starts
drowning.

we do not notice
because it does not look
like the stereotypical splashing & screaming

instead he falls silently
into deep depths

he had told
the lifeguard before

that he cannot swim.

just barely did he touch the shallow end
before crowds & peer pressure turned into a current

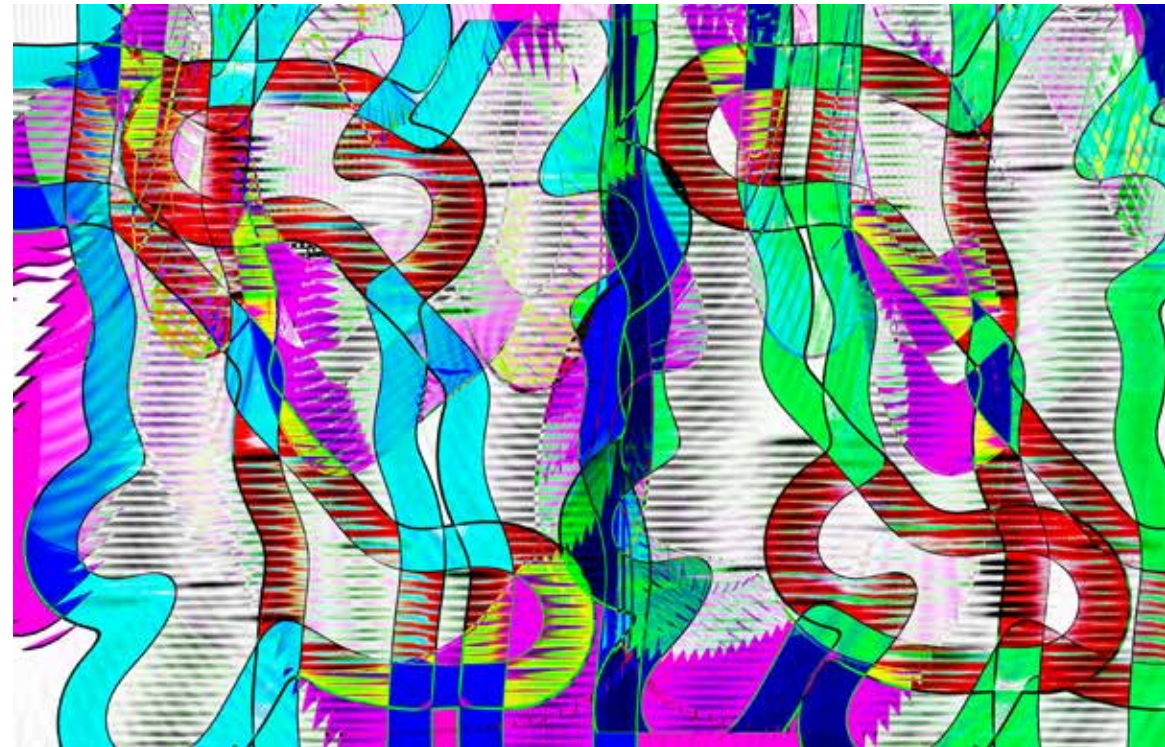
he is forced to breathe his own air before his lips run out of strength

one person might say
why is he even here?

but no one has said
why did no one pay attention
when all he wanted
was help?

on one birthday
my mother made me
a jello pool cake.

complete with all the little gummy bears
lining both
the cake sides
& blue raspberry jello water.



Tangled Up in Blue 2

Edward Michael Supranowicz

The Chair

David Romanda

A dentist
invented
the electric chair.
Isn't that
just perfect?



Screaming

Madison Kaylor

The Third Giant

Daniel Rolnik

Some men want a fast car, but I just want to eat the best meal of my life and then die. There is only one problem. One excruciatingly difficult riddle to solve. What is the best meal? More specifically, what is the best meal for me?

To find out, I will enlist a team of neurologists, food scientists, psychologists, chefs, MICHELIN Guide reviewers, and a historical record of the last meals of prisoners on death row. Worst case scenario, I get too afraid and call the whole thing off. Best case scenario, I discover the perfect meal and make sure to always have it handy in the same way that some people have necklaces that signify their allergy to penicillin or others have tattoos that say “Do Not Resuscitate.”

Gustave Doré illustrated an edition of Rabelais' *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel* (see below)—a 16th-century series of novels that are often cited as one of the earliest examples of irreverent humor. As part of this study, I will commission illustrators to draw me feasting upon my various meals in grand hyperbole. My text will illuminate the process of discovering each meal as well as imagined scenarios in which I die, based on an ongoing list of fears I keep in journals. Sequels to the book will include studies of discovering the right music, lighting, clothing, company, and cutlery to accompany this macabre event, eventually forming a coffee-table book to satiate the curious appetite of strange and humorous readers.



Gustave Doré (public domain)

Homo Sapiens Drinks Alone in God's Country, Texas

Jonathan Travelstead

How to love someone who scatters red herrings
like dinosaur bones, then hides in the interstitial legalese
of new particles? How to feel for a father
who jury-rigs our odometers so they roll over
on a string of zeroes? Divine bully, withholding grace
from the albatross's landing the way boys tear wings
from everything beautiful. Admit you exist.
The Church tells me they lost the adoption paperwork.
Always do. Still nada from the State on my existence.
The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence
won't return my calls.
But, wait. Look at you. Still drunk.
Hungover from all that Old Testament smiting.
Ursine body, slurring the dusty, peanut shell-strewn floor
so much like this one. I'll find you.
I'll search these stones in my rocks glass
or the dark side of the moon for a glint of silver,
artifact of your stubbled face. Knocked here,
now. Let me see those leathery hands worrying
a hat's brim & I might allow you or the Holy Ghost inside,
another waft of smoke drifting into the dark.
Help me surrender this anger & a lifetime's resentment.
How to stop loving someone who's never loved me,
who could leave their precious child behind?



Post-Pandemic

Kiya Wells

Lemon and Almond Tart for Manny Eggertsville

Lorraine Martindale

By Monta Eggertsville

Serves six

A sugar crust pastry, instructions below

4 lemons

Julienne strips with peeler

No pith

Simmer in water

1 1/2 cups sugar

2/3 cup filtered water

1/2 tsp vanilla

Boil to thread stage in copper saucepan

Use candy thermometer

2 eggs

1 cup sugar

Beat into ribbons with wire whip in silver bowl

1 cup almonds

Pulverize with mortar and pestle

Almond extract

The grated rind and strained juice of 2 1/2 lemons

Beat together, pour in shell

Put baked tart on rack

Serve cold

Commentary:

Sugar crust pastry. A trick: You need only butter, flour, and a little ice water to hold the pastry together. The sugar isn't necessary, but it was Monta's favorite. My character Manny Eggertsville, former protagonist of my short story "Eggertsville" (before he was reduced to the sidelines because his sister Mary's story was more important), has never cooked pastry. He has never baked a tart, a quiche, etc. However, Mary likes to eat lemon tarts—Monta's, particularly, when she was young and Monta was alive—though she has never made this recipe.

Manny's father, Melvin Eggertsville, found the recipe and made the tart after Monta died but forgot to bake the pie shell. He served it to his children without noticing the crust was raw. "There were no instructions," Melvin said.

Monta would yell at Melvin when he played cards with his friends. "You're all going to hell," she said, gesturing wildly at their cigarette smoke and tumblers of whisky. She was a painter, and a fundamentalist.

4 lemons. Manny has little experience with lemons. He finds them bitter. Nor would he know how to boil sugar and water to a "thread stage." He has never used a candy thermometer.

2 eggs. Manny does open up his refrigerator and see eggs. One day he saw an egg, half a yellow onion, a beet, and a large carrot. This became dinner, chopped and scrambled in a cast-iron skillet. Manny tends to cook what appears in his refrigerator that day. Manny and Mary's mother, Clara, often makes scrambled eggs. She collected the silver bowl, copper saucepan, and other things of Monta's after she died.

Manny is a sculptor and works with bricks because they are the only medium available. One day he walked into the woods and discovered a hut. An artist named James Bow was painting the walls. In the hut were two paintings: a gigantic green egg, with three spots of gold near the top of the oval, and a portrait of a man, with long hair and a flowing purple cloak, surrounded in velvet, wearing a yellow hat with a feather. A peacock rests in his arms, and his expression is half-cocked, reeking of a sly, intimidating disdain. In the final story, the painting of the egg was cut. Who is the man in the painting? Manny and Mary's father, Melvin.

Clara painted it on the wall of an abandoned brickyard, after she had to sell his real portrait in the final story.

Manny became a scowling, puny, pouty young man who stacks bricks in strange shapes and watches television after his father died because there was nothing else to do. Before, he experienced still-lives and met painters in huts and cooked dinners with strange ingredients. I wish Manny could make this tart in “Eggertsville” and try to interpret Monta’s recipe. But he never would. He wouldn’t behave. He kept going off on tangents. I never quite understood him, but he became more interesting after I stopped trying to make him do things. People ask about him now. Who is he? I want to know more about him.

1 cup almonds. Manny took Monta’s mortar and pestle, which he remembered her using. He could grind almonds all day. This I know.



Untitled

Julia Zhu

An Obsessive-Compulsive’s Guide to Rhyme

Karen Young

Hire, tire, mire, fire, liar—no, dire, wire, spire ... Okay.

Liar, briar, pliar—no, friar ... Okay.

Pyre, gyre, lyre ... Okay.

Buyer, dryer, flyer ... Good enough.

And the oddballs: *higher, choir*. This is a good batch, I think, lying on my back in bed, 4:26 in the morning, the hum and thrum (*hum, thrum—have done that one*) of my apartment building intruding into my efforts. Yes, a good batch. But why do I think doing this helps me fall back to sleep? My brain is alight, the synapses firing away (*firing, hiring, tiring, wiring, siring ...*). I bet my head would look like a lampshade, a warm glow emanating from my skull, some lovely russet or lemon-colored light visible for someone (if there were someone, and there isn’t anyone) to comment on. “Oh, darling,” a sweetie might remark, “my great aunt Margaret’s Sunday dress was just that shade!”

But I don’t have a sweetie.

“Oh, Mommy!” my child might exclaim. “Your bwainsth are allll yel-low! Like Jel-lo!” (*fellow, mellow, bellow—no, cello, hello—no—accent is on the 2nd syllable*).

But I don’t have one of those, either.

If I were a normal (*formal—formal ... that’s it?!*) person, I would’ve taken a Xanax, which always knocks me flat, long before this. I have Xanax, in my bedside-table drawer, but my bitch of a primary care physician will only prescribe 15 per fucking year now, for panic attacks. I just refilled the prescription six weeks ago and only have eight left, so I need to conserve them. I need a new doctor (*doctor—doctor—doctor—seriously?! PROCTOR!!*) In the meantime, I have a drawer full of health-food store alternatives that every one of whose manufacturers should be sued (*food—no, crude—no, lewd—no, booed—no ...*) for false advertising.

Hmm ... I wonder how Carlos is doing? My Cuban ex, with his cut-like-a-diamond nostrils and black curls. Love of my life (*wife, strife, knife—*). Not literally, but that about sums it up. I shouldn’t think about Carlos.

Honestly, where does that pudgy bottle-blond bitch get off telling me she read a study that long-term usage of Xanax causes memory loss (*toss, floss, sauce—no, boss, doss-ier—no!, cross, loss ...*)? I’ve been on it since—can’t remember—for a very long time! So, like, really, you read a study and start

denying?! I thought the medical establishment was supposed to help people—people like me, your patient, lying here in a shambles (*rambles, gambles, brambles, Campbell's*—no ...), who's going to have to get up to get to work soon, where I'll be dragging my ass being office manager to a bunch of overeducated, overly-entitled whiners who come up to me all day long, "Oh, Ms. Hoelenbeck, I promise I won't ever ask again: What do I do to place my order for _____? Where do I find the _____? Remind me what the protocol is for _____?" looking all cutesy, the naked vacancy in their eyes betraying their words (*turds*—no--yes! They are *turds!*).

I'm calling Doctor Proctor tomorrow, whoever that turns out to be, and get me some more meds. Goddamnit, I'm a grown woman! All right—I have to calm down. *Hum-hum-hum-hum-hum-hummmmm, hum-hum-hum-hum*—what am I humming? OMG—"Lose This Skin" by the Clash (*smash* your teeth in, *mash* your face to a pulp, *lash* as in whip, *gnash* on your bones after I cook them, *hash* tag your ass to Kingdom Come, *ash*—what my brains are gonna turn into—)! I have to stop; this isn't going well. Okay. Okay. (*Bash* your head in—STOP!) Okay. Okay. There are many other words that rhyme with *clash*, yes, but not right now. I'll just sing the song instead:

I've got to lose this ski-i-i-n

I'm imprisoned in

Dah dah de dah

Dah dee da dee

What's it like to be so fre-e-e-e

So free it l-o-o-o-ks like lost to me-e-e-e

Oh, God, I'm exhausted. And not the sleepy kind. Oh, no—have I gone crazy (*hazy, daisy*—no, *lazy* ...)?! I am not hazy. Never have been. I do wish I was lazy, though, and not so fucking high-strung! Oh, God. This is what I've come to: I'm an unpetalled crazy daisy. Uuh, and all I did was take my medicine, and now my brain is Xanax-compromised (like I give a shit). This is entirely too much. I work so hard! I do everything I'm supposed to, and this is my reward—yuuuuuhuh—a nice big yawn, hmm, I feel something, hmm ... I feel ... um ... I feel ... slee ...

Oh, crap! My alarm (*agarm, asarm, atarm*—ahh!) hasn't gone off—I'm fucked—I'm out of rhyme (*time*—no!)

Reindeer Games: Rudolph as Homoerotic Fantasia

Gaylord Brewer

Nativity

Donner, packing an enormous rack (of antlers), staring down in confusion and anger at his newborn, the infant's blinking cherry of a nose. Will the boy grow out of it? Santa—squire in deerstalker and herringbone jacket—arriving in a surprise visit, delivering the scarcely concealed threat: "Let's hope so." The father's further denial: "You'll be a normal little buck like everybody else" Smearing the kid's bulb with mud. Even Sam the Snowman, narrator, concurring that "for the first year the Donners did a pretty good job of hiding Rudolph's, uh, uh, *nonconformity*"

Little Helpers

The elves, rarely seen outside of Santa's castle, jolly and indistinguishable in its toymaking sweatshop. "Papa" Santa, oligarch and alpha human of Christmas Town, visibly uncomfortable and impatient during their seasonal song of praise to him.

(Def. *eunuch*: "A man castrated to perform a specific social function.")

Def. *castrato*: "A type of classical male singing voice equivalent to that of a soprano.")

Only lonely elf Hermey, soon to join Rudolph in his Misfit Trio, only Hermey, dentist manqué creepily "fixing" mouths of dolls during off-hours, shock of flamboyant blond hair intimating his effeminate vitality, only he demurring, at cost of ridicule and mockery.

Reindeer Games

The randy, spirited Fireball, Rudolph's self-appointed new pal, leading his naïf friend to the games that "make antlers grow," encouraging him to check out the does, first to recoil, face contorted, when Rudolph's grotesque costume proboscis inevitably pops off. "Get away! Get away from me!" The brutish old-school coach of the games, sleigh veteran Comet, quick to lead in Rudolph's humiliation and announce his banishment, egging on the yearlings in their jeers. "From now on, gang, we won't let Rudolph join in *any* reindeer games, right?"

As to the adorable and too-good-to-believe Clarice, unwavering in approbation for Rudolph's "handsome" real nose.

A beard from the beginning?

Exile

Rudolph and Hermey, paired by chance, recognizing each other immediately, celebrating in song being “different from the rest” Spending their first night together in the arctic wasteland outside of Christmas Town, next morning the bearish Yukon Cornelius appearing on cue, rescuing the youngsters by pulling them by their exposed asses from a snowbank. Yukon Cornelius, master of the brutal terrain, Yukon of nimble tongue forever exploring the tip of his pickaxe for elusive gold, Yukon who has lived alone, forever resigned to disappointment: “Nuthin’.” Yukon, expert on the Abominable Snow Monster, rescuing his new companions again, Rudolph and both orally compulsive soulmates escaping by the older man’s skill and quick thinking. The three casting off adrift on a wedge of ice across a dark and inhospitable sea. “Yukon Cornelius scores again!” the protector announcing, going third-person.

The Abominable Snow Monster

Aka a “Bumble,” a hairy, raging libido, not too smart, kind of cute in a bestial way. Drawn to yet apparently enraged by Rudolph’s nose. Ultimately rendered toothless by Hermey’s wrenching pliers, the “dentist’s” first patient tortured, emasculated. (To lure the Bumble from his lair, Hermey, on Yukon’s advice, on his knees, oinking like a pig. “Oink. Oink.” Hm ...) “You’re looking at one humble Bumble!” Yukon trumpeting joyfully, later dragging the monster by leash into Santa’s castle. The Bumble’s final ignominy as he is made to place a banal and gaudy star atop the Christmas tree, the same tree from which Yukon Cornelius’s dream of precious metals hangs as cheap tinsel decoration. (Too much? Note juxtaposition of Sam the Snowman’s earlier performance of “Silver and Gold.”)

Speaking of Sam the Snowman

With his holly-adorned derby hat, tartan vest, and umbrella (rotund body otherwise naked and visibly lacking genitalia), a bit of a dandy? A misfit himself never allowed into Santa’s circle? Asexual chronicler of truths, peering from outside through a frosty window at festivities that exclude him?

The Island of Misfit Toys

“My name is all wrong. No child wants to play with a ‘Charlie in the Box.’” (Among Wikipedia’s list of LGBT slang terms for men: “Charlie.”)

A cowboy riding an ostrich. A choo-choo with square wheels on its “caboose.” A bird that swims. Loads of identity confusion and frustration on the island. Who created such toy misfits? Who is responsible for their exile? The singing elves? Santa as notional savior? No one talking, but lamenting together in their own song that “on the island of unwanted toys, [they’ll] miss all the fun with the girls and the boys.” Indeed.

Rudolph and company, washed upon that shore, denied sanctuary but granted shelter for the night. King Moonracer, Aslan the Lion wannabe, entreating for Santa’s intervention “to find little boys and girls who would be happy” playing with his castaways, then setting up the ménage à trois in a cute-as-a-button dream cottage, pink. Pink curtains. Pink sheets on the small bed they share.

Earlier, the water pistol that “shoots jelly” exploding its mess into young Hermey’s astonished face. Enough said. More than enough.

“Christmas Is Cancelled.”

Flash forward. The “storm of storms” arriving. Santa, fretting over weather and “that silly elf song driving [him] crazy,” unable to eat. The broken Bumble hauled in obedient and enslaved. The sum total of Santa’s holiday ideology a megalomaniacal fever dream of distribution and hyper-consumerism. No toy delivery, no Christmas.

At last, the man seeing the light. Rudolph’s nose incandescent, uncontrollable, squeaking wildly, virtually throbbing. Old man blinded into epiphany, hyperbole, delusion. “You and that wonderful nose of yours. Ho ho. From what I see now, that’ll cut through the murkiest storm they can dish out.” One shining, revealed nose against the blowing tumult of the “storm of storms” that is the world. The unnamed “they” a cry of paranoia.

Even so, in quick succession: Santa fat, bloated, spoon-fed by Mama, recognized: “Now, *that’s* my Santa.” Summoned, the eunuch-elves dressing Papa in traditional costume of lush red velvet gorgeously trimmed in white fur. Hm.

Yukon Cornelius landing his axe, licking heartily, tasting “peppermint. What I’ve been searching for all my life Wa-hoo!” The force of his excitement knocking Hermey backward onto the snow, the boy’s pretty “o” of an amazed mouth widening suddenly into a lipstick smile red as candy cane. Abandoned by the assimilated Rudolph, the two now a couple?

Santa, after an impromptu landing, magically accommodating all of the misfit toys into his single bag. The entourage airborne again, eunuch-elf throwing one misfit after another from the sleigh into the raging night, each with only a small open umbrella for navigation/survival (shades of Sam the Snowman?). *Only* the misfit toys discarded to plummet into blackness. (Should’ve stayed on the island?)

During the massacre, Santa glassy-eyed, working himself into a lather, whipping the sleigh team, repeatedly barking a demented “Merry Christmas!” to no one in particular. Finally: “Rudolph: full power!”

Panning shot: Rudolph a glowing speck in the distance, leading the team on a seeming collision course with a luminous and indifferent moon. Christmas saved.



INTERVIEW

No Way No Way

Jim Ross

Stephen Graham Jones: Boots and Bestsellers

Interview by Logan Faulkner

Stephen Graham Jones is a bestselling horror writer from Boulder, Colorado, who has written more than 30 novels, with a few comic books and novellas besides. I had the pleasure of hearing him speak at Ringling College of Art and Design's Visiting Writers Forum in the spring of 2021. In the fall, I interviewed Jones and asked him about his writing, his life, and his expansive boot collection.



One of fiction's best uses is to instill hope in the readership, in the audience, and just in the individual. Horror stories are wonderfully built to do that, because it's always the underdog character who shouldn't survive this night or win against this monster or whatever it is. Yet they find it within themselves to somehow do that, and I think that gives us all hope that we in our own lives can do that as well.

~Stephen Graham Jones

LF: Wikipedia identifies you as a Blackfeet Native American author. Is that how you like to be identified?

SGJ: I just like to be a writer. Any time you let the market or the critical establishment put an adjective in front of your name, it's like a handle; they can use it to throw you away, or put you on a shelf, out of view. If anything, the one adjective I like is *bestselling*. I like *bestselling* a lot.

I am Blackfeet. I'm proud of being Blackfeet. It's definitely who I am. I'm also a horror writer, but also do a lot of other genres, too.

LF: When you were at the Visiting Writers Forum at Ringling, you said that a lot of your stories are a way for you to work out and conquer your own fears. How do you keep track of these fears as inspiration?

SGJ: It's never about keeping track of my fears, because my fears are always super present and right in front of my eyes. All I have to do is sit there at the keyboard, and all of my fears and also all of my grievances, all the axes I want to sharpen against the world, are right there.

All we have to do as writers is be who we are, and not be afraid of being who we are. And then our angers, jealousies, grievances, and whatever find their way to the page. I just try to tell a story about an elephant who dresses up like Frankenstein and scares the other zoo animals. I can tell a story like that. But while I'm telling that, I get to grind on my axes.

LF: What is the biggest fear you have yet to tackle in your writing?

SGJ: The type of story that scares me the very most is a possession narrative. Those are really, really terrifying to me. The idea that a person can be animated by something that is not themselves—it really puts me off. And it's not necessarily a religious fear. It's a fear of loss of control probably. So, I've yet to tell a possession story. I've got one in mind. It waits to be seen whether I have the nerve to get it down on the page.

LF: What do you believe makes great horror?

SGJ: Great horror comes from writers who are legitimately scared. Maybe a dif-

ferent way to look at it is, the best comedians are angry about this or that. They're not the ones who are just idly telling jokes, but the ones like George Carlin who are just pissed off at the world. The way I know that a horror story is going well is that I become quite scared myself when I'm writing, and I don't want to write at night.

LF: In your piece "Why I Write," you said, "I write because once upon a time, I read the exact perfect book, and it changed my life forever." What was that perfect book? And what changed?

SGJ: It was probably *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls. It's a novel about coon hunting, back in the '30s, or something. It's a young adult book, I believe; it could even be a children's book. But what changed me about that book was the ending. At the end of that book, there's an old, rusted axe head stuck into a tree, and there's an old rusty lantern hanging from it. It's been there for 20 years. It's kind of a fast forward. And I distinctly remember when I read that in fourth grade, I closed the last page and held the book close, and I thought, I can do this. I can hang a lantern on a tree, on an axe on a tree, and wait 20 years. That novel both breaks your heart and puts your heart back together. I think that's what I'm always trying to do on the page.

LF: Also in "Why I Write," you said, "I write because books have saved my life." How have they saved your life?

SGJ: Probably the best example of that is a comic book series, *Secret Wars*, that I found in 1984. Issue 10 of that has Doctor Doom, the bad guy in the book, going against this cosmic entity of limitless power ... called the Beyonder. And the Beyonder is just ripping Doctor Doom to shreds: He's lost a leg, he's 99% dead, but Doctor Doom keeps pushing on and keeps pushing on, insisting that he can win because he just believes in himself that much. I mean, he's a villain, so of course, he has an exaggerated grand view of himself.

Nevertheless, when I read that at 12 years old, I held onto it very tightly, and I held onto that issue all through high school, in my head at least. Every time I felt like I was facing insurmountable odds, I would remember Doctor Doom having his leg cut off, losing an arm, having his face mask torn away—all the bad things that happened to him. And I'd think, You know, if Doctor Doom could do that, then I can make it through this semester, this move, this whatever it is. Had I not had issue number 10 of *Secret Wars* to fall back on, I probably would have given up, and who knows what would have happened to me.

LF: What are the differences in the creation process between novels, novellas, and comic books?

SGJ: I think of a novel as a season of television; I think of the novella as a feature film Comic books are really tricky to write. With comic books, you have to plan everything out.

LF: What is your favorite medium to write in?

SGJ: Flash fiction, probably. I love getting into them and then getting right back out really, really quickly.

LF: What is your typical day like?

SGJ: It seems never to be the same schedule. Ideally, I get up about seven or eight and hit the gym or go on a trail, do some sort of physical activity, because I'll wake up with a lot of energy and I've got to burn it. Then I come back and keyboard right until lunch and watch a *Magnum P.I.* or something stupid for lunch, and then hit the keyboard again for a couple hours. My writing day is done at two or three in the afternoon. And then I can take care of errands, and life, and work, and everything else.

LF: What occupies your time when you're not writing?

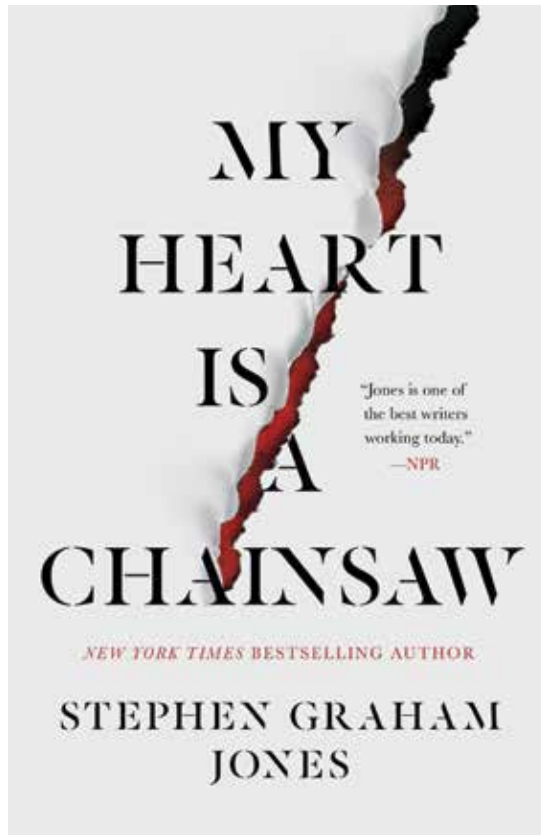
SGJ: Family always comes first. I'm always either hanging with my wife, or my kids, or walking the dog, or at the gym, or doing some sort of exercise and activity. Those are probably the main things.

LF: I know from the Visitor Writers Forum that you have a large collection of boots. What is your favorite pair?

SGJ: That's a hard call. Probably this pair of ostrich boots I have; they're just really supple and soft. And they have a really chunky heel on them so that I don't twist my ankle on them very much. They have a shank and ... so they're a real boot, but they kind of have a big, big chunky heel as well. They're really comfortable, and they look pretty cool too.

LF: What is on the horizon for you, either as a writer or in life?

SGJ: I have two novels coming out in 2022, a haunted house novel and the sequel to *My Heart Is a Chainsaw—Don't Fear the Reaper*. I've got other books coming out as well, already written. Publishers don't want you to go that fast. I want to go faster, but a good compromise is one or two books a year.



CONTRIBUTORS

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John Burgess grew up in upstate New York, worked on a survey crew in Montana, taught English in Japan, and now writes in Seattle. He has five books of poetry from Ravenna Press, each with an increasing number of maps, graphs, and comics interwoven. More at punkpoet.net.

Sky Chandler is an illustrator based in Sarasota, FL, interested in creating art that tells stories, captures fleeting memories, and shares personal experiences. Chandler began her artistic journey in her small Michigan hometown and is now pursuing a BFA at Ringling College of Art and Design with a focus in illustration. She considers herself a storyteller and enjoys showcasing human connection and intertwinement with nature within her pieces.

Peter Cherches has been called “one of the innovators of the short short story” by *Publishers Weekly*. His most recent book is *Tracks: Memoirs from a Life with Music* (Bamboo Dart Press). His writing has appeared in scores of magazines, anthologies, and websites, including *Harper's*, *Litro*, *Flash*, *Bomb*, *Semiotext(e)*, and *Fiction International*, as well as *Billy Collins' Poetry 180* website and anthology. He has published three volumes of short prose fiction with Pelekinesis since 2013.

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John Calvin Hughes' books include a critical study, *The Novels and Short Stories of Frederick Barthelme*; two poetry chapbooks, *The Shape of Our Luck* and *Cul-de-sac Agonistes*; a full-length poetry collection, *Music from a Farther Room*; and three novels, *Twilight of the Lesser Gods*, *Killing Rush*, and *The Lost Gospel of Darnell Rabren*. His next novel, from which “Same River Twice” is excerpted, is *The Boys*, to be published by Regal House in 2023.

Steven Graham Jones is the *New York Times* bestselling author of nearly 30 novels and collections, and there are some novellas and comic books in there as well. Most recent are *The Only Good Indians* and *My Heart Is a Chainsaw*. Up next is *Don't Fear the Reaper*. He lives and teaches in Boulder, CO.

Madison Kaylor is an illustrator based in the United States. She's continuing to refine her skills in traditional media such as pen and ink, cut paper, acrylic paints, and in digital media through programs like Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. She enjoys studying the organic shapes in the world around her and is continually inspired from them. She hopes one day to travel the world through her art and explore the creativity found in other cultures.

John King is the author of the literary adventure novel, *Guy Psycho and the Ziggurat of Shame*. For over nine years, he has hosted *The Drunken Odyssey: A Podcast About the Writing Life*. His poetry has appeared in *Gargoyle*, *The South Florida Poetry Journal*, and *Palooka*.

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Cat Leivonen has been drawing since before she can remember, always carrying a sketchbook with her everywhere and doodling out all of her ideas. Throughout her life, Cat has experimented with various fine art mediums, discovered a personal purpose for her art, and found her own definition of art as visual communication. After working as an art teacher, Cat has taken time to focus on her areas of interest and invest in developing those skills.

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James B. Nicola's poetry and prose have garnered a Dana Literary Award, two *Willow Review* awards, and eight Pushcart Prize nominations. His full-length poetry collections are *Manhattan Plaza* (2014), *Stage to Page* (2016), *Wind in the Cave* (2017), *Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists* (2018), *Quickening: Poems from Before and Beyond* (2019), and *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense* (2021). His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice* magazine award.

Sean Riley teaches art in the Washington, DC, region and makes art in Italy's Turano Valley, where he has a home and studio. The valley offers a complex landscape of mountains, lake, trees, and sky, which Riley depicts in his mixed media paintings on paper and canvas. Original poetic fragments will occasionally find their way into the imagery. More of his work can be seen at seanrileystudio.com.

Briar Ripley Page is the author of *Corrupted Vessels*, a surreal southern gothic novella from swallow::tale press. They can be found online at briarripleypage.xyz, or in real life on a terrible island with their true love and some cats.

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Jim Ross jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after a rewarding public-health research career. With a graduate degree from Howard University, he's since published nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and photography in over 150 journals and on four continents. Publications include *Hippocampus*, *Ilanot Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Kestrel*, *Manchester Review*, *The Atlantic*, and *Typehouse*. A similar photo/text story, "The Listener," may be found in *Sweet: A Literary Confection*. Jim and his wife split their time between city and mountains.

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Oliver Stephenson is a Florida-based artist, currently residing in Sarasota, where he's a full-time illustration student at Ringling College of Art and Design. He's driven by bold colors and shapes, with a focus on character design and narrative illustration. Creating illustrations that feel like they're from a different era is what he's all about! He's always looking to learn new things as well as striving to work with others.

Erik Suchy's photography has appeared or is forthcoming in *Haute Dish*, *Shift: A Journal of Literary Oddities*, *In Parentheses*, *Cardinal Sins*, and *Sheepshead Review*. A soon-to-be-graduate of Metropolitan State University's creative writing program, he resides in North St. Paul, MN, with his family and Labrador/German Shorthaired Pointer mix dog, Blaze.

Sami Sulzer grew up in Dallas, TX, as a creative kid who loved to scribble with crayons and markers. When older, she realized that art could be continued into college and turned into a career. She recognized the challenge but knew creating would excite her for the rest of her life. She dedicated her time to bettering her storytelling skills and observational abilities by immersing herself in extracurricular art classes and constant practice.

Destiny Summerville is a Florida-based artist with an education focusing in digital media in a realistic manner. The artwork flows between realistic fantasy and surreal scenes with the intention of creating story and emotion. The work helps you see the lens of fantasy and creativity that artists use all over the world, highlighting the parts you must interpret.

Mercury-Marvin Sunderland (he/him) is a transgender autistic gay man with borderline personality disorder. He's from Seattle and currently attends The Evergreen State College. He's been published by University of Amsterdam's *Writer's Block*, UC Davis's *Open Cellings*, UC Riverside's *Santa Ana River Review*, UC Santa Barbara's *Spectrum*, and The New School's *The Inquisitive Eater*. His lifelong dream is to become the most banned author in human history. He's @RomanGodMercury on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet.

Jonathan Travelstead served in the Air Force for six years as a firefighter and currently works as a full-time firefighter. Since finishing his MFA in poetry at Southern Illinois University of Carbondale, he spends much of his time turning his lathe and apprenticing for a jewelersmith. His first collection *How We Bury Our Dead* by Cobalt Press was released in March 2015, and *Conflict Tours* (Cobalt Press) was released in 2017.

Philip Venzke grew up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. His most recent poems have appeared in *Harbinger Asylum*, *SurVision Magazine*, *Door Is A Jar*, *Bramble*, *Verse Wisconsin*, *The Deronda Review*, *Litterbox*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Illumen*, *Thunderclap! Magazine*, *Clockwise Cat*, and *Right Hand Pointing*. His chapbook *Chant to Save the World* received a 2nd place prize in *Survision Magazine* and Book's 4th James Tate International Poetry Prize (to be published in Spring 2022).

Kiya (Taki Sarah) Wells was born in Kenya—where fauna stage the day and call night, the sun explodes into the Milky Way. Town, two hours away along a dusty amber road—smelling rain, it furthered, sliding into four. Stepping ... to be framed in concrete jungles—where construction cranes replace giraffes and sirens drown the birds. She moves through art between worlds, discovering the beauty of connection, painting the unity of diversity. Tilted, 8 becomes infinity. Kenya never left her.

Karen Young has a BA in English literature from Douglass College, Rutgers University. Upcoming work will appear in *The Adirondack Review*. She divides her time between central Maine and Buenos Aires, Argentina.

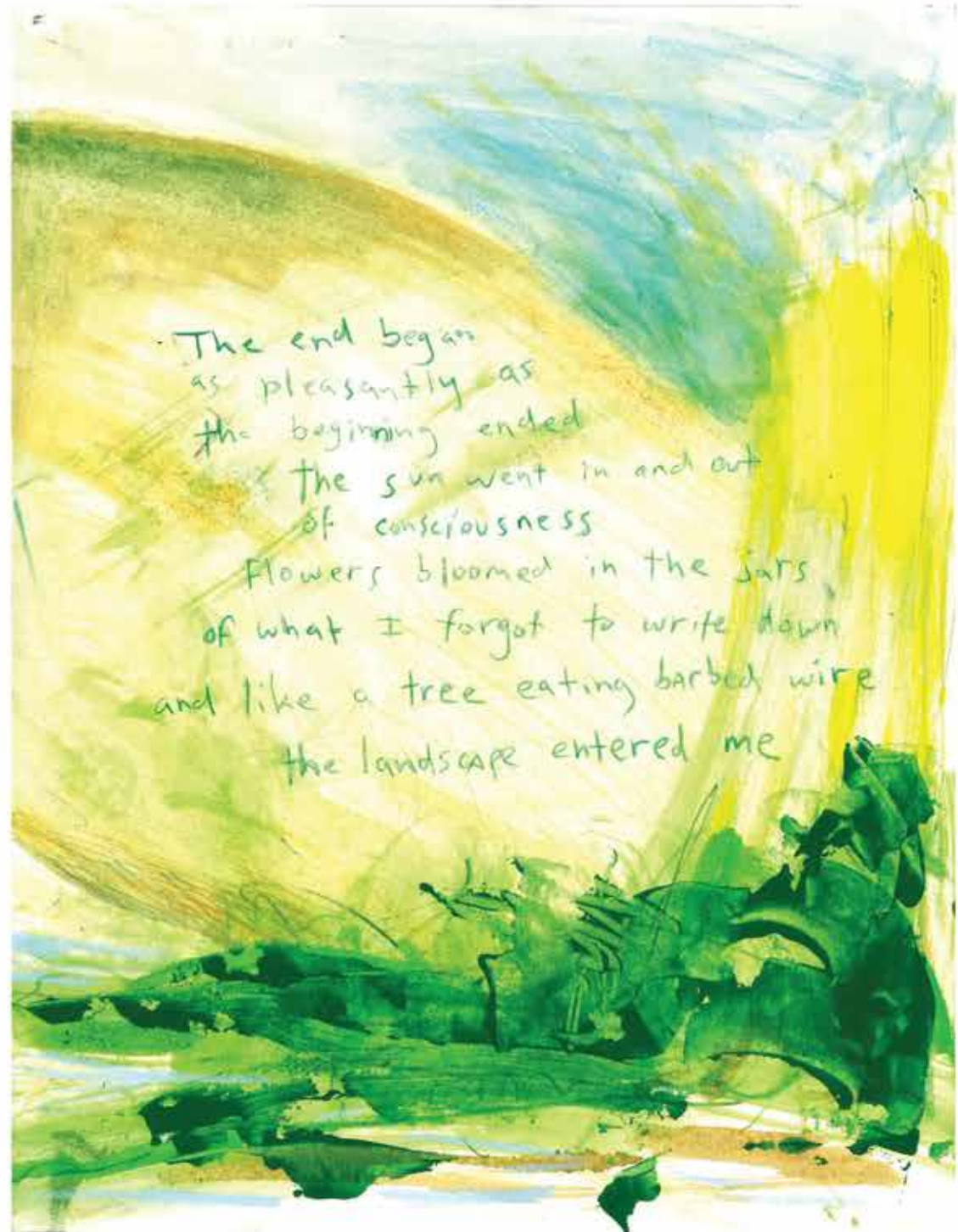
Julia Zhu is a junior majoring in illustration at Ringling College of Art and Design. She loves using expressive brushwork and vivacious colors to convey a sense of lively energy in her art.



The End Began

Sean Riley

92



The end began
as pleasantly as
the beginning ended
the sun went in and out
of consciousness
Flowers bloomed in the gaps
of what I forgot to write down
and like a tree eating barbed wire
the landscape entered me

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Gaylord Brewer
John Burgess
Sky Chandler
Peter Cherches
Patrick Erickson
Logan Faulkner
Danielle Gasparro
Samuel Haecker
John Calvin Hughes
Stephen Graham Jones
Madison Kaylor
John King
Jakob Konger
Edward Lee
Cat Leivonen
Sarah Marquez
Lorraine Martindale

James B. Nicola
Briar Ripley Page
Sean Riley
Daniel Rolnik
David Romanda
Jim Ross
Mackenzie Singh
Oliver Stephenson
Erik Suchy
Sami Sulzer
Destiny Summerville
Mercury-Marvin Sunderland
Edward Supranowicz
Jonathan Travelstead
Philip Venzke
Kiya Wells
Karen Young
Julia Zhu

