

T H E
oddville press

ROFL



HUCKINS
2017

S U M M E R 2 0 1 7

C O V E R A R T

ROFL

Shawn Huckins

Shawn Huckins' work is not digitally generated nor are they Photoshopped. Huckins painted each piece by hand, including the lettering. He continues his onslaught of social media based satire with his follow up series, The American __tier. Again marrying the prestige of fine art with the casual grammatical uncouthness of social media, Huckins flaunts an individual brand of artistic humor—not mention a great amount of skill and technique. Huckins graduated magna cum laude from Keene State College of New Hampshire. His work has been reviewed in The Huffington Post, New American Paintings, Forbes, and Luxe Magazine. His work has been shown in the Foster/White Gallery, Seattle, WA; Goodwin Fine Art, Denver, CO; and Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT. To see more of Huckins work, go to <http://shawnhuckins.com>.

the oddville press

Promoting today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

W W W . O D D V I L L E P R E S S . C O M

S T A F F

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D I S C L A I M E R

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as “adult content”: it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren’t an actual grown-up then please don’t read the Oddville Press, or at least, don’t complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Biting the Dream Green

Dennis Kolakowski

My God
has never won a war,
Instead babbles incessantly
from the ripples of Kinzua Creek,
Cardinal red and cornflower blue
diamonds swim,
Fins of Zen
aim hooked white jaws
into Mayfly nimbus.
This is the baptism of the planet
sun kissing retina,
Hawks spin silence
over sugar maple, birch and hemlock,
Silhouette of electrons
outline one emerald frog
floating over prehistoric rock
under my cast.
The nectar here
intoxicates while advising.
Between you and me
grows all the beauty
of the world,
Where happiness can only be found in one moment
and that moment happens
every day.

Dennis R. Kolakowski – Poems with art recently accepted for upcoming publication at Poetry Pacific, Scarlet Leaf Review and Indiana Voice Journal. Short stories, essays and poetry published throughout the 70's and 80's, screenplays throughout the past ten years. Member of the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writers Association, Penn State engineering grad and facilities manager for Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh Filmmakers, University of Pittsburgh Applied Research Center and Allegheny County Medical Examiner's Office.

Salvation: 2.29/Gallon

R.J. Roberts

I BEGAN MY CAREER as a gas station clerk at age thirty-six. I applied and was honest with the fact that I had two college degrees and plenty of work experience, but I was unemployed for the last ten years, I'd been through two rehabs this month, I was capable but unwilling to do physical labor, had fifty grand in defaulted student loan debt, no interest whatsoever in working at a gas station, and was only interested in the job as an attempt to stave off the suicide inducing boredom I'd been experiencing.

The owner, an older man named Dell, asked why I wanted to work at a gas station during my interview. I told him I didn't, and that I mentioned that on the application. He laughed, wrote something in his notebook, then said I was hired. Later he told me he didn't care what I said, but out of the ten people who applied, I was the only one who didn't look like a transient.

He immediately gave me the rundown of how the store functioned, and I drowned out his speech with thoughts of pornography and car accident videos, while I nodded and repeated what he said to make it seem like I was listening. He introduced me to the day shift clerk, an odorous lady with greasy hair who nodded unenthusiastically to me, and

proceeded to show me how the cash register worked through pantomime. She didn't need to as the register was designed intuitively, and I thought most animals could probably be trained to use it.

Dell said I started that night, at midnight, and left. The lady, who I came to know over five years and never bothered to ask her name, asked why I wanted to work at a gas station. I tried joking, saying I was obviously mentally impaired. She nodded and said nothing more to me, ever again in fact, and we both stood awkwardly in silence for several minutes. This was when I realized she actually was mentally impaired, so I left and went home.

I knew I started work that night, had basically no idea what I was doing, and I probably should have asked a lot of questions while I was at the gas station but I didn't care. I watched 1980s karate movies, then napped. At midnight exactly, I left for work and arrived twenty minutes late even though the store was only ten minutes from my place. I walked into a completely empty gas station, aside from a single confused customer standing at the counter. I didn't say a word to him and strolled behind the register, aware that I wasn't wearing a uniform of any sort.

"Do you work here?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I guess."

He told me to put twenty dollars on pump one. I mashed a handful of buttons on the digital gas pump and pushed the gas sale button on the register, which then spit open and I stuffed the money in. I sat on a stool and sighed.

The customer looked even more confused and asked, "Uh, is that it?"

"I guess." I shrugged again, and he walked out.

He ended up pumping over thirty dollars' worth and he came back in, furious that I didn't set the pump right. I told him not to worry about it, just leave.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Ok, fine, pay for it then," I said.

He counted out the exact ten dollars and forty-eight cents that he owed and left. I spent the next minute pushing random buttons on the register, until it finally opened and I stuffed the cash in. Then I went in a backroom filled with cleaning supplies and fell asleep on a bag of absorbent. Before I dozed off, I made a resolution to find out the absolute minimum effort to keep this job and do much less than that.

It was a strange sleep, the kind where I was completely coherent throughout. I thought of my life ten years ago. I was over-educated and underemployed, working jobs that didn't require a degree, just to get by. I'd get hired part-time and work full-time hours, usually doing more than one person's job, not qualifying for benefits. I worked for a year at a temp agency once. I was supposed to be hired on after four months. One day my boss came to me, smiling, saying that he just got hired on to the company. He'd been working for the temp agency, too, for over four years. I was always the one who had to care, the one who had to do everyone's else's job, just so the

place stayed together, and I was usually the first person laid off, or quit out of frustration.

The last job I had was at a trucking fleet. I was twenty-six and the youngest guy there. Everyone else was at least fifty. They were the most miserable bunch of pricks I'd ever met. All morning, the place was seething with their muttering and ranting about how they hated their job. At lunch they went to the bars, coming back in much better mood. At the end of each day, a man in his seventies, with a red and saggy face, would always smile at me and say, "Well, at least you know you'll always have a job here," before he left. The next morning, he'd be bitching a storm, and begging me to do his work for him.

One morning I walked through the parking lot and saw movement by my feet. I looked down and saw a tiny injured sparrow hobbling through the gravel. It was covered in black grease from our trucks, its wing badly maimed. The blood mixed with grease and congealed into a disgusting white gel that coated its almost amputated wing. It looked at me with tiny, panicked, pleading eyes. I wanted more than anything to save this pathetic bird, but I realized I couldn't even save myself from a horrible job. I threw a rag over it and walked to my car. As I drove away, without clocking out, I burst into tears.

Nobody from work bothered to call and ask where I went. I bought a box of wine and drank the rest of the day, and in the morning I physically couldn't get out of bed, so I called work and told them I quit.

"Do you got another job?" the foreman asked.

"No," I said.

"Oh," he said, with no emotion. "Well, alright."

For ten years after that, I drank.

I woke up in the gas station, got off the

absorbent bag, drove home, and went to sleep on the pile of blankets I called a bed. It was still night out, and I never bothered to check the time.

In the morning I went to an AA meeting a hundred yards from the gas station. Afterward, I stopped at the station. The dim-looking lady was behind the counter and she nodded to me. I stared at her without saying a word. She dazed right back for several minutes. I wondered how long she could stand this before she broke down and said something, but she never did.

Dell came out of the cleaning closet and greeted me with a smile. "Hey! How'd it go?"

I told him it went great.

"Great! You're coming back tonight, then?"

I told him sure. He smiled, pat me on the back, and left the store. I watched him drive away and looked back to the clerk as she continued to stare at me.

"Can I have this?" I grabbed a candy bar from under the counter, not waiting for a response I began eating it.

Her mouth moved, and to this day I don't know if I can describe what it did. If it was a smile, it was more like a frown, and if it was a frown, it was more like a smile.

"Cool," I said, and left. That night I used the system password, "Admin," and gained complete control of the station. I only used this power to make an alarm sound whenever the security cameras saw motion in the lot. I began my nightly habit of sleeping in the cleaning closet, only waking long enough to ring customers out. I locked everybody else out of the system but nobody ever complained, even Dell.

In the mornings I would occasionally stop by the store to see Dell and the clerk lady. Dell was always smiling, clerk lady was always weirdly numb, and nobody ever said anything

about my work ethic. Six months later, Dell told me that he was glad I was working for him.

"Why?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"Well, you don't cause any problems, everything gets done, you're a good employee," he said.

"What gets done?"

Dell laughed, patted me on the shoulder, and then left.

"What gets done around here?" I asked clerk lady, but she only stared at me.

Another day, Dell asked if it was true that I had two degrees. I said it was. He asked if I ever thought about managing a gas station. In a long speech I told him I believed the reason God created me was to be a gas station manager. He made me the manager.

I hired a pathological liar named Fred, who claimed to be Drew Carey's illegitimate son, to work my night shift, and that was basically the extent of my managerial contribution for my entire employment there. Fred loved working at a gas station because customers were basically forced to listen to his idiotic lies all night. He would detain them and talk for hours, lying about killing terrorists with a hockey stick, the Olympians he out-classed, the deplorable hygiene habits of starlets he romanced, and his demon-fast Mustang with solid gold rims and trim. I got a lot of complaints about him, but I told them he was Drew Carey's kid so there was nothing I could do.

Fred thought along the same lines as me, as one day he asked, "If I trained a pigeon to run my register for me, would you still pay me?"

I told him yes, even though if this actually happened I would have fired him and everybody else, replacing them all with cashier pigeons. Naturally, none of this came to be, but I obsessively fantasized about it every time

I was at work.

Fred didn't do much work in any case, not that I was even aware what needed done, but after showing up for the day shift several times, I discovered that clerk lady actually did the entire workload of the store during her dayshift. She stocked the shelves, cleaned, organized inventory. There's actually a lot more she did, but I never bothered to learn what it was.

The only thing I had to do was balance the tills, make deposits, and accounting work. There was much more I was supposed to do but I ignored the rest and half-assed everything else, often committing fraud by doctoring numbers that didn't add up. I always pictured myself explaining to the judge that I didn't profit off my fudged numbers, I just did it to make the math match because that was the easiest thing to do in my almost friar-like devotion to laziness.

Other than that, I did alarmingly little, often only showing up to work a handful of times a month. Dell always liked to show up at a specific time in the mornings. I'd scope the store out on my drive to my AA meeting, to see if he was there. If he was, I'd stop in. He'd smile, pat me, and then leave.

After a year of this, I was a district manager. This is when the dormant tyrant in me blossomed. I began to terrorize my entire staff by overworking them and forcing them to do my jobs. I had four gas stations under me and no store managers, just clerks. I made each of them do the manager's job and still paid them as clerks. I'm sure they doctored their numbers and slept on the job, just like I did. Fred often claimed his store made a profit similar to Japan's GDP. I doctored the numbers again to make them look believable, and I turned this all into Dell.

One night, the Fred's store caught fire and actually exploded. It destroyed a grocery

store, plus an insurance building next door, and damaged all the cars at a dealership across the street. The fire chief assured me that nothing I did caused it, and I agreed. Fred claimed satanic bikers were responsible. His story made for a great newspaper article.

The next morning I saw Dell and he smiled, patted me on the back, and never said anything about the mayhem. Dell might have had something wrong with him, I don't know.

At some point, clerk lady started bringing a therapeutic dog that urinated in the store and barked fiercely at customers, which did a good job of driving them away, and in that sense made much less work for me to not do. I congratulated her by making her work two shifts a day, each at a different store, so that work actually got done there.

Had I any ambition, I suppose I could have robbed the company silly, but it never appealed to me. I didn't have much use for money. I lived in a tiny apartment above a deserted used record store that I rented for \$50 a month, ate white rice and peanut butter, drove a twenty year-old car, and cashed my checks. I didn't even know or care how much was in my accounts. My only real pastime was sleep. The building I lived in collapsed three months after I moved out.

After five years, Dell called me with excited news that he was selling the stations. I told him he couldn't do this to me, this job was the only thing supporting my inaction. He said everything would be fine, the new owners wanted to meet with me. They flew me out to their corporate headquarters in Dallas, where I immediately fell off the wagon at the airport and spent the entire series of meetings hammered and rambling.

From what I remember, they said that I had done great things for the brand and that I made something out of nothing, but now my

work was done. They wanted to take things to the next level, and go in a new and exciting direction.

I asked what exactly had I done for the brand. They praised my efforts with that warm hearted corporate droning that said nothing specific.

I do remember that I called them the best group of humans I'd ever met, stressing their kindness as I cried, and then I asked a secretary into a supply closet with me. They eventually presented their offer to buy out my contract. I didn't even know I had a contract. They gave me a severance package, and I praised the humanity of their company as I walked out the door, somehow finding my way onto a parked greyhound bus, sleeping on it for over a day, until it went into motion. I started a month long drunk across the states, hopping on and off busses until I was back in town.

I watched the gas stations as the signs were torn down and new ones put up. New flashy paint and logos. They added a homely brick veneer to all the buildings, and began putting propane tanks, firewood, mulch, racks of bottled water, and windshield washer fluid in front of the store.

One day I visited my original station on my way to the liquor store in the morning. Clerk

lady was a manager. She wore a bright green polo shirt with logos all over it and looked like they forced her to bathe. She started crying the second she saw me, and I immediately turned around and left. Fred was in the lot, doing some sort of inventory, and told me how terrible the new company was and that he talked the U.S. president into a drone strike on the station. Years later, I read that Fred died when his entire neighborhood block exploded. They theorized he was experimenting with an amateur space program.

Two months after the rebranding process, the windows were boarded up, and all the stations closed. One day I drove by, a hand on the wheel and a drink in the other, when I saw clerk lady sitting in the empty station lot, bloody and pulling her hair out. The therapeutic dog was lying next to her, motionless and maybe lifeless

I got on a plane to Alaska that afternoon, where I drank for another ten years and counting.

An ore mine investment I don't even remember making apparently made me wealthy, which I might have already been. Now I live in a trailer next to a bar and raise pigeons.

So that's basically my resume.

R.J. Roberts is a fanatical underachiever and a de jure but not de facto bum. He earned a B.S. from Kent State after 12 years of boozing on campus (Tommy Boy only took 7 btw). He's a northeast Ohio native and has recently discovered a profound happiness by learning to enjoy the Browns embarrassing themselves. He's currently working on a book series, and this is his first published story. He can be reached at r.j.roberts1@outlook.com.



Crossword

Bratsa Bonifacho

An internationally recognized artist, Bonifacho has a consistent presence in North American commercial galleries and non-profit galleries and museums. His work is in major corporate collections, museums and private collections internationally. His work expresses a tremendous vitality and love of intense emotional color. His work has been displayed at venues including Foster/White Gallery, Seattle; Bau-Xi Gallery, Vancouver, BC; the Toronto International Art Fair; The Hong Kong International Art Fair; and the Museum of Modern Art, Belgrade, Serbia. More of Bonifacho's work can be seen at bonifacho-art.com.

Baby Blues

Ilene Dube

WHEN THE BOYS LEFT HOME, they said I could throw out anything but the stuffed animals. NOT the stuffed animals! I packed them in large plastic bags and stowed them under the beds. When the boys settled into homes of their own, they still weren't ready. "Don't get rid of the stuffed animals!"

By the time they had sons of their own, the stuffed animals had grown a bit raggedy. I worried that mice would nest under the beds, so I took the plush creatures out for a party on the porch, lighting up the grill, offering drinks, letting them recline on the chaise lounge. I digitized this last escapade, archived it into a slideshow with music, then bid adieu to each by name in the large bin behind the supermarket.

Kat, whose sons had played with my boys, arrived for our walk. There was frost on the ground when I went to the front door. Two men followed, carrying a large carton.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's your refrigerator."

"What refrigerator?"

"We saw it on your front lawn and thought we'd help by carrying it in."

Then I recognized him Jim, the contractor who'd given us an estimate for remodeling our kitchen.

"But I never ordered a refrigerator. We

decided not to go ahead with the job."

I could see his eyes spinning like cash registers. Frost from his boots and the bottom of the carton were melting on the wood floor. I went to the kitchen for paper towels. When I came back, I saw a trap door of the carton had opened, and out marched the doggy, the bear, and the elephant.

Kat was making tea for the runaway bunny and the gingerbread boy. Jim's helper had set up the hippos on the sofa and turned on the TV, and Jim was setting to work on my kitchen, drilling into the walls. It sounded like a dentist drilling into my brain.

Fortunately, the frost was melting, so as soon as Kat fortified the crew, we piled everyone into the back of the Mini and set off for the park.

"Cheater cheater cheater cheater," the cardinals sang as we opened the windows in the parking lot. All our little friends, for whom there hadn't been enough seatbelts, trotted out with their smartphones onto which they had downloaded the latest bird app. Kat and I had our binoculars, and she brought along a basket to gather morels. She'd already found three at the edge of the parking lot, and the blue bunny, who left his smart phone at home, found six more at the edge of the woods that he piled into the little basket that was stitched

to his right hand. It helped that his eyes were so close to the ground.

Kat had brought along some Paleo breakfast bars she'd made with almond butter, honey, coconut oil and chia seeds, and the kids kept coming back for more until there were no more. "Eat the garlic mustard," Kat offered when her bag was empty, then spotted something up in the tree and took off into it, crashing leaves and branches as she climbed to the top. The gingerbread boy tried to follow her but couldn't get a firm footing with his clawless feet.

When she came back down Kat was wearing red cowboy boots. These were the exact same red cowboy boots I'd had about 25 years ago. I'd put them into the same collection box when I bid adieu to the animals—and now Kat was trouncing through the woods in them.

It was hard keeping track of all the little ones, but Kat told me not to worry, they'd come back, they had a homing instinct.

Suddenly a soft breeze turned into a wind that sounded like a train on a track, and there they were, the spandex-clad men on their bicycles. With sharp jaws and finely articulated calf and shoulder muscles covered with shiny black fabric, they looked like they'd jumped off the page of action comics. Their bicycles nearly flew through the woods, kicking up leaves, and yet they were silent and sleek.

After they passed, there was a silence, a sudden emptiness. That's when Kat and I looked up at the tree line and saw the giant nests. They looked like the nests in Horton Hatches an Egg. An enormous bird soared through the sky. Through the tree line, we

could see more flapping as the great blue herons tended to their nests. We heard the squawking of the adults, who had just flown in a shipment of food, and the more constant chatter of the babies. And then we saw them: like tiny fuzzy pterodactyls, shimmying up the bare branches.

Kat pulled tissues out of her pocket. I told her I'd never seen baby blues either.

She told me about a retreat she'd been on last winter during which they weren't allowed to speak for 10 days, and couldn't contact anyone from outside. "I went for a walk. I wasn't sad. I was accepting that loss is another part of life."

I looked up, but there was no more evidence of the baby blues. Even their sounds could no longer be heard.

Our furry creatures were bringing up the rear. "We want bicycles," they cried in unison.

Back in the parking lot, they climbed into the Mini, begging Kat—because they knew I'd never concede—to take them to the bicycle store.

At my house, Jim and his helper had set the refrigerator box out by the trash. Kat opened a door to the box and pulled out little spandex outfits for the runaway bunny, the blue bunny, the gingerbread boy and all the bears. They squeezed their furry little bodies into the tight lycra. I expected it to look lumpy from their fur, but instead, they became sleek and muscular. They had gone from having baby-like features to the bodies of teenagers. Kat gave them their helmets and unicycles, and she and I sat on the curb, making videos of the cycling animals to text to our sons. My younger son texted back. "Mom, whatever happened to the stuffed animals?"

Ilene Dube is a writer, artist and filmmaker. Her personal essays, fiction and poetry have been published in Atticus Review, Huffington Post, Kelsey Review, The Grief Diaries and U.S. 1 Summer Fiction. She writes a weekly arts feature, sometimes with video, for Philadelphia Public Media and others.



Current

Eva Isaksen

Isaksen's work has always been inspired by nature: organic forms, cycles, seasons, land, water, sky, order, rhythm, repetition, growth, life, regeneration. The thin papers, which she prints on, draw on, cut up, mix, are layered endlessly on the canvas. Her work is about color, line, material, form, and space and about art as a process that always changes and grows. Isaksen's work can be seen in the Foster/White Gallery in Seattle, WA and the Duane Reed Gallery in St. Louis, MO.

Widow

John Grey

If she is lucky
her spiny edges sting
and rip like tiny thorns,
discouraging touch.
She can't pretend she is inviolate
when someone is always approaching,
drawn by her still showy flower,
fragrant stalk.
A sad heart
must have its barbs

otherwise it would be too easily abandoned
to the dark forces at work.
Her want is to be left alone.
It has become her weight.
Suffering is intractable.
So why shouldn't intruders
spill blood in its cause.
Tell me husband, she says,
in your perfect stillness,
if they won't take silence...

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in Homestead Review, Cape Rock and Columbia Review with work upcoming in Louisiana Review, Poem and Spoon River Poetry Review.

Windmill

Lawrence Berggoetz

The abandoned windmill sits
amidst grass grown
into straw
and long wisps of stick weeds,
its wooden arms set sailing
by air risen into
the quickened pulse
of windplay.
Stained by rain
into colors
even an artist's trained eyes
cannot define,
the turning planks
creak
and creak, again,
like a rusted flute
found by a child
who whistles
a few breathes
down its rotted throat.
Untamed,
the air dares
ride this sky,
bound in its chase

to drive the sea
into tides of
water spooling into
the waves which
have learned
to chisel a beach
of sand from
ancient rocks
and walls of stone.
New stanza
This stray wind
returns to stir
the quiet fields woven
with grass stalks
like spindrift spitting
salt off
the surf's white curls,
while songbirds coast
in and out
of the windmill's broken
windows,
their small nests sheltered
within its empty hull
from where their

hungry nestlings chirp
their first
faint songs.
Slowly,
the weathered planks,
no longer in toil to
the task of a mill,
catch the headsurge
of a windrush
and begin to
turn again
as birds weave fluently
around the churning masts
of its quartered arms
which ring aloud
the squeaking wood
in sudden songburst,
gracing the wind
with a voice
that will carry
like the bidden clanging
of a valley's lone
bell

Lawrence Berggoetz has poems in the spring editions of Bitter Oleander, Futures Trading, and Blue Heron, and has been previously published in periodicals such as Moria, Skidrow Penthouse, and Brussels Sprouts.



The Final Quark

Bratsa Bonifacho

May

Katie Blanchette

I MET MAY at a work party. I had been a temp there for the past month and she was there as the date of someone in Marketing. Neither of us really wanted to be there and maybe that's why it was like we gravitated toward each other.

She wasn't born in May, not even in the spring. She told me her mom handed over all naming rights to her dad and he chose it and quickly left them right after. Over one too many drinks she told me he was in and out of her life inconsistently but named her May because it was the best month for bird watching and that was the only thing he seemed to care about.

"Thankfully that's the only thing he passed on to me," she said and took another sip of her gin and tonic. When she ordered that first one I joked about it being an old person's drink but she told me about a trip to Texas one summer and how she floated along a lazy river with British men serving them to her as they floated alongside her.

"You're a bird watcher too?" I tilted my head closer to hers.

"Not like him," she said and her hand brushed my arm, leaving her heat behind, "I take notice of them. I believe in them, in their stories."

I stared at her blue eyes, bright like the sky and shining in the dark office conference room we had chose to hide in. When she spoke, her

chopped, blonde hair would stir and let loose breaths of coconut.

"Classically, the owl's story is about wisdom while a crane is about renewal and immortality. Not just that, but there's also the legend that a person who folds 1,000 paper cranes is granted a wish. I think birds have meaning and when they show up they are trying to tell you something."

I was taken by what she was saying. I hated birds. When I was young a bird flew down and took a cookie right out of my hand. It was frightening. I didn't tell her that, or that I think they lurk for food. Or that I think some birds just want to ruin your day by literally shitting on it and you. I didn't tell her any of this because I knew I could listen to her tell me about birds for the rest of time, and even though it may not convince me to like them, I would be happy to hear why she did.

Her date ended up thinking she left early when she wasn't watching, and I moved to a full-time position elsewhere pretty soon after. She gave me her number that night, on a paper crane she folded from a drink napkin, and I called immediately after. That pull we felt the first night has never wavered, not even after a year and a half.

We have a life, a routine, and I know that as I wake up this morning, and travel to the kitchen she will be sitting on the porch swing, coffee in

hand, and listening to the birds. That's why when I look out the window to the porch and see the empty, white swing I start to get worried.

"May?" I ask the empty kitchen. I yell her name to the other rooms of our small house. With no answer, I check each of them in the thirty seconds it takes to do so, grab my phone, and call her. I walk back to the kitchen listening to the ringing and when there is no answer, I sit at the counter and notice her coffee cup, partially drank, now cold. I also notice the local paper, open to the horoscopes, and read mine.

I'm a Libra. Horoscopes are something else May loves. I told her once that twelve horoscopes can't possibly represent all of the people in the world. I told her that I don't believe in any of that.

"Ye of little faith," she laughed at me, "it's all about what you take from it. That's how it speaks to each person."

LIBRA – SEEING CLEARLY IS ONLY PART OF THE TROUBLE YOU FACE TODAY. PATIENCE IN UNCOVERING TRUTHS IS IMPORTANT. LET THE ENERGY AROUND YOU HELP YOU FIND WHAT YOU NEED.

I read May's next.

LEO – THE HAWK'S CALL IS YOUR CHANCE TO START FRESH. FAMILY WILL SHOCK YOU INTO MOTION BUT DON'T LET FEAR STOP YOUR PLANETS FROM FINALLY ALIGNING.

May would've noticed the hawk. She would've expected a message. And family was the only thing that could make May disappear. May's mom insisted we have a house phone. She didn't like cell phones and told us she would refuse to call if that was her only option. The only calls we ever got at the house were from her, so I'm not surprised to hear her voice when I play the only message on the machine.

"Mayflower, this is your mom. Honey, your father had a heart attack. I saw him for a moment, but he's being brought into surgery

at Dartmouth. Come as soon as you can."

The hospital is close. I am there in less than 20 minutes. I drive around looking for May's car. Finally, I go to the main lobby to ask for her dad's room.

"Where's May?" is the first thing her mom says.

"She's not here?"

"I haven't seen her," she says and looks back at May's dad sleeping.

"She must be on her way," I say and sit down in another chair against the wall, "or in the cafeteria maybe."

"Maybe," she says and moves her hand onto his. "The surgery went well. He should be awake any minute."

I nod and think of May. Where can she be? Did she not hear the message? Did she go to the wrong hospital? Is she okay?

"May?" Her dad is waking and asking for her through the rasp in his voice. "Mayflower?" He looks at her mom slowly and around the room trying to find her.

He is groggy and is closing his eyes again before we can even answer.

"I'll go find her," I tell her mom.

"He wanted me to give her this. In case the surgery..." She hands me a picture of a bird. "I'm not sure what it means."

"Maybe she will," I tell her and leave.

May once told me that when her dad would show up he'd bring her to the river that sweeps through town. They'd sit on the bank, or a log, and he'd tell her about the birds.

"Swallows are there to protect you, Mayflower. They come to remind you of home. I saw a swallow in the city yesterday and I came to you."

May loved those moments with her dad. But he always left again right after, off to the next place the birds would send him. But that river, that was somewhere she'd go to think, to remember, to

breathe and watch on her own.

I walk along the trail by the town's small high school and look for her blonde hair in the dark trees. A summer storm had left trees down, and I find her on a log acting as a bridge across the water. She sits with her combat boots dangling over the water.

"May?" I whisper. I swear I'm too quiet for her to hear but she looks up, those blue eyes finding mine instantly. I stand on the bank as she makes her way off the log to me. When she gets close, she slides her hands through my arms, around my torso, and rests her face on my shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"My dad," she breathes into my neck. The dead leaves rustle beneath our feet and I put my hand on her lower back, pulling her into me even more. She takes a moment, looks away from me toward the green leaves hanging from the trees around us. "He's in the hospital."

"I know. I saw him. He asked for you." I take her hand and slide my thumb across her palm. "Why did you come here? I can bring you to see him right now if you're ready."

"I don't want to see him," she whispers. "I don't want to be the one who shows up when he never has."

"May," I let go of her hand and look at the river flowing loudly beside us, "you are the person who is there for someone. You come when you're needed. You're better than him. You stay."

"I don't want to see him," she says, more loudly now.

"You have to. You'll regret it if you don't."

"He doesn't."

"Doesn't he?"

She turns away from me.

"He gave this to your mom," I say and take the picture out from my back pocket, "when he didn't know if he'd be able to give it you himself."

She takes the picture in her hands, looks down at it, and back at me. Those bright blue

eyes that shined in the dark the night I met her begin to cloud over. "It's a grosbeak."

"What is?"

"The picture. The bird in the picture."

"It's pretty."

"An evening grosbeak. That type is yellow. There are others – red ones. But I always liked the yellow." She turns back to the river. "I told him it was yellow like the sun. I called it a sunshine bird."

"You should see him."

"Does he know... that I wasn't there?"

"I'm not sure. He was awake for only a second. Your mom didn't know either. I didn't. I saw your coffee on the counter and panicked. Luckily you left me your own special kind of trail. Your horoscope –" my phone begins to ring and I look down to see her mom's face flashing across the screen.

"Hello?" I answer. "Yes, I found her." I look at May, staring at the picture her father had sent along. "What?" I listen to her mom's words and take May's hand. "We'll be right there." I hang up and look at her. "Let's go."

"What's wrong?"

"Something happened. He was fine but now he's not. Your mom didn't say anything else."

May is thoughtful, quiet. We get along because of that. No silence has every felt awkward; no thought isn't worth sharing. The car ride is quiet; there is no need to share. I can feel every thought she has pour off of her as she stares out of the car window.

May's mom is crying when we get there. She wraps her daughter in a fierce hug and May's eyes say everything as she looks back at me waiting to hear if her father is okay.

"Mom?"

Her mom sniffs and pulls away from the hug, trying to stop her tears from continuing. "He's okay. There was a bleed. They fixed it." She speaks through deep breaths. "He's in the

room sleeping. You can go in."

May looks back at the rolled picture in her hand. She hasn't let go of it since she took it from me. I watch her walk into the hospital room with purpose.

"Thank you, you're a wonderful girl," her mom says as we walk to the closest waiting room.

"Of course."

"He isn't a bad guy," she says and looks at the floor as we sit. "He may not have been reliable, or around as much as he should've, but he loves her more than anything."

"I know."

"We're his family. There was no divorce. There was no talk. He went where he felt he needed to be and I did the same."

"She missed him."

"Did she tell you why he named her May?"

"She said because it was the best month for bird watching."

She sighs. "Just like him to say something stupid like that. It's because May, or Maia in Latin, means the great one. She was a goddess of spring."

"May wasn't born in spring."

"Doesn't mean she isn't the great one. Our great one. Our goddess."

I nod and we sit there for a moment in our own thoughts. "I'm going check how she is."

I walk to the room slowly, stand in the open doorway, and listen.

"You never did like the pine or the rose-breasted. I thought they were beautiful with their red feathers but you loved yellow. You loved sunshine."

"It was the first bird I really liked. Did I ever tell you why?"

May is leaning over her dad, holding his hand in both of hers, and laying her head on his arm.

"Why?"

"You told me they came to heal your heart. You told me they came to help families find their way."

He breathes deeply and I can see the glare of a tear roll down May's face. "The opposite of everything I am."

"Dad, that's not true. You are a bird through and through. Birds are all about freedom and future."

"What future?" he tries to laugh and looks at the monitors around him.

"Maybe you're not a grosbeak. Maybe you're a phoenix."

"So I'm a myth?"

"No. You're the bird of second chances. You're the bird to rise again."

He pushes his head back in to the pillow, closing his eyes tightly, and says, "Mayflower, you truly are my great one."

Katie Blanchette started writing when she was nine years old and promptly told her family that she had started her career. Since then, Katie has kept her interest in writing and her passion has motivated her to focus on short stories as well as working in copywriting. Her work has been published by xoJane, Rat's Ass Review, and she has received Honorable Mention in Glimmer Train's Very Short Fiction Contest. Katie lives New Hampshire and received her Bachelor's in Creative Writing as well as her Masters of Fine Arts in Fiction Writing from Southern New Hampshire University. She regularly writes about her life, her dog, and whatever comes to mind in her blog at www.katieblanchette.com.

Misty Documentary

Debarun Sarkar

A token basement exists
in her house covered with mist
Plain. Blankness. All over.
The camera moves swiftly
in her hand. The lens looks
straight in your eyes through
the mist.
Visible:
her hand
the lens
traces of the camera's body
In monsoon the basement

floods with the drainage
system leaking underground.
Her camera films
the rising water
in time-lapse.
I move my hand towards the lens
I do not want to be seen in her film.
I do not want to be seen in her house.
I do not want to be seen with her.
I do not want to be seen
like the mist.

Debarun Sarkar is currently based in Calcutta. Recent works have appeared in or are forthcoming in LAROLA, Cadaverine Magazine, Tiny Donkey, Wild Plum, Ink Sweat and Tears, among others.



Untitled #5

Michelin Basso

The graphite-on-canvas drawings of Chilean artist Michelin Basso are as intricately detailed as they are deceptively simple. Using a minimalist approach to her subjects, Basso seeks to erase the margins of visual references and invite the viewer into an intimate experience with the art. Here, the subject is transformed into an image that's profound and laden with meaning, escaping the confines of landscape to evolve into something much more.

Michelin Basso currently lives, works, and teaches in Temuco, in the south of Chile.

We Greet the Lonely

Greg November

"THERE'S REALLY NOTHING TO IT," Leo said as they set their duffel bags on the floor of the empty house. "We just have a seat here and wait."

The room in which the two women stood contained only a cushy chair with a tall lamp next to it, and a dining room table surrounded by another few chairs of the folding variety. In the middle of the table, a bowl of plastic fruit on a doily kept a telephone company. Beyond that, the bare room had the feel of abandonment and lonesomeness, like whoever lived there had already moved out, or perhaps hadn't yet completely moved in.

Drew watched as Leo picked up a book, *National Geographic Guide to American Interstates*, from the seat of the cushy chair before sitting down.

"I mean," Leo said, paging through the book, "there's nothing to do until he comes, really, except sit here and wait. Why don't you put on a pot of coffee? You brought the filters?"

"I did."

"Good. Everything else is in my duffel. I usually like to have a cup while I wait. Artsen-Graniff, for all his charms, is never timely."

While their coffee brewed in the kitchen, Drew stood by the window. In her coat pocket, she fondled the key Mrs. Carmichael

had given her and watched rain come down on Marine Boulevard. Through the dark and the rain Drew could just make out the shape of a large, newish home across the street. All its lights were out, but the imposing structure described a life of space and volume. Drew bet a family of ten could exist comfortably inside a home so large and wondered how many people in fact lived there, fronted as it was by Doric columns and massive iron gate.

"Why don't you take your coat off, dear? We're inside now."

Drew remained at the window, in her coat. She drew it close to her. "Why is it so cold in here?" she asked the window. Though by no means small, Artsen-Graniff's house was dwarfed by the castle across the street. Drew pictured darkened wood paneling and sitting rooms and chandeliers, great halls hung with greater tapestries.

"It's cold because no one lives here," Leo said. "I mean, you know. Not really. Do you hear that beeping or don't you? The coffee's ready, dear."

In the kitchen, Drew opened every cabinet looking for mugs, but all she found were sticky mousetraps and a can of aged spackle.

"Where does he keep his mugs?" Drew called out to Leo.

"Dear," Leo said. "He doesn't have any. Are you sure you understand this job? He doesn't have anything. The mugs are in my duffel."

After she'd poured their coffee, Drew sat in one of the folding chairs and watched the other woman pretend to read the book about interstates. "I can't shake the feeling it's our responsibility to do something," Drew said. "Should we clean?"

Leo looked up from her book. She closed it and placed her hands on top. "What do you see that we could clean, dear?"

"I don't know."

Leo opened her book again. "See," she said, looking down. "We're not maids. We're here to wait. That's it. Drink your coffee and wait."

Drew picked up a green plastic pear. She turned it over in her palm. It felt hollow. Something rattled inside. "Do you think this is his?" she said. "Or did Mrs. Carmichael put it here?"

"No," Leo said, turning a page, not looking up. "I don't think that's quite worth thinking about."

Drew replaced the plastic pear in its bowl. She intertwined her fingers, rested them on the tabletop, pulled them apart again. Leo turned the page of her book. The phone rang.

Leo looked up as Drew answered the phone. The young woman listened but did not speak. After a minute Drew said, "Yes."

Leo looked back to her book. She shook her head and mumbled to herself. She turned the page.

"I will," Drew spoke into the phone. "No, she's here. We're both here. Of course. I know. Fantastic. Thank you."

When Drew replaced the phone, Leo said, "Fantastic? What's fantastic?"

"Mr. Artsen-Graniff is running late and

Mrs. Carmichael wants us to stay here until he returns."

"Of course she does."

"She said she'd pay us time and a half."

"How late is he running?"

"An hour. Maybe two." Drew did the calculation in her head. Time and a half would mean an extra two or possibly three hundred dollars. Yes, it was fantastic.

Leo closed the book. She shook her head. "No," she said. "No, no. That won't do." She rose from the chair, struggling somewhat and making huffing sounds.

Drew watched but made no move to help. "Are you going somewhere?" she said.

"As a matter of fact I'm leaving." Leo looked around, searching for something.

"Your bag's over here, by the table," Drew said. "Do you need—"

Leo zipped her bag and hoisted it over a shoulder. "You'll get my coffee accouterments when you leave, yes?" she said.

"Of course."

Leo stood a moment and caught her breath, then moved toward the door with her shoulder-slung duffel bag.

"What should I tell him? He's expecting two of us to be here."

"You can tell him anything you want. Artsen-Graniff has seen me countless times. He'll appreciate having you to himself."

"You're just going to walk out?"

Leo stopped by the door and peered at Drew. The older woman looked like a crane. Or a heron. Some kind of tall, severe bird.

"Do you know how long I've been with Mrs. Carmichael?" Leo said. "Longer than you've been alive, probably. How old are you anyway?"

"Twenty-four."

"I'm not staying," Leo said again. "I've been with Mrs. Carmichael for almost as long as it

takes to grow a precious little thing like you, and I'm not staying here all through the night waiting for that man, again. I'm just not."

"I'll wait for him. You can go."

Leo looked at Drew, sitting at the table, like the younger woman was dense and didn't understand the situation. Drew knew the look. It made her glad Leo was departing. "You don't have to wait, you know," Leo said. "He doesn't need to see you. He doesn't need to see anyone. Don't you get how stupid this whole thing is, really? I can't believe I've been at it so long. These men aren't babies, are they? If you had half a brain you would leave right now with me and let Artsen-Graniff and all these stupid idiots fend for themselves."

"I need this job."

"You might need a job, but you don't need this job. And I hope you don't expect a warm hello or any sort of appreciation for staying in this empty house all night waiting for him to show."

"I don't expect it will be all night."

Leo said she'd make a scene at the station to hold up the train, should Drew reconsider, then she left. The empty house fell silent.

Drew stood from the table and went to the room's bay window again. She watched Leo strut down the wet driveway with the heavy duffel bag slung over her shoulder, then teeter down the street in the rain, ineffectually protecting her head with one hand, until she disappeared around the bend where Marine Boulevard became Fourth Avenue. A light was on in the castle across the street. An upstairs room. Drew turned from the window. She sat in the chair previously occupied by Leo, under the lamp. She looked at the book about inter-states. She'd never been west of Pennsylvania, north of Armonk, or south of Staten Island. Until her wedding she hadn't ever met anyone from another time zone. She opened the book

and considered the circuitry of red lines that cut through the country. She followed some of the long, horizontal lines with her finger. She closed her eyes, imagined the far-off lands people like Artsen-Graniff and the castle-dwellers got to see, and fell almost immediately asleep.

Headlights through the bay window awoke Drew. She opened her eyes, alarmed and unsure of her surroundings. Someone was crying! No, it was the sound of tires on wet gravel. A car pulling around the circular drive. When she stood the book dropped from her lap and Drew faced the door, hands linked over her belly. A small man in a maroon slicker stepped in. He had one suitcase, which he set wetly on the floor, then closed the door behind him. He removed his slicker and hung it.

"How was your trip?" Drew said.

Mrs. Carmichael had been clear about it being her responsibility to greet him. The man peered into the room. He was mousy, at least two inches shorter than Drew, with the type of partial baldness she'd always associated with a certain dentist with large, warm hands who'd filled her cavities as a little girl. "Are you alone?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Where's Leo?"

"She left, sir."

"Where did she go?"

"Home, I suppose."

"So, it's just the two of us, then?"

"Yes, I suppose it is, sir."

"Why do you keep saying 'sir'? Do you know what my name is?"

"Melvin Artsen-Graniff."

"Yes! That's it exactly. And did you ask about my trip?"

"I did."

"Well, it was the worst. But thank you for asking. If those featherbrains think Landis

has what it takes. Landis? Talk about feather-brained. Would you like a drink? I'm sure you brought whiskey or gin. And glasses."

"I have vodka."

"What type?"

"I'm not sure. I think it's Russian."

Artsen-Graniff clapped his hands and released a thunderous laugh bordering on a belch. "Marvelous!" he said and moved over to the table. He sat down and tapped the table with the tips of two fingers. "Let's have a drink of your Russian vodka."

Drew fixed their drinks and brought one to Artsen-Graniff. He held out his glass to clink and then watched as Drew took a tiny sip. She couldn't remember the last time she had a drink. Why was she having this one? She still felt flustered, unsure of her role, and wished Leo hadn't left. She'd been told she could follow the veteran's lead, learn from her. Instead, Drew was alone in Artsen-Graniff's home with no one's lead to follow but his. He upended his drink, taking the whole thing at once, and then set his glass on the table. He handled the plastic grapes, then threw them back into their bowl. "I've told Mrs. Carmichael many times over the years there's no need to stage the place. Who does she think she's fooling?"

Drew stood holding her glass of vodka. Her mouth burned from that one sip.

"Please have a seat," Artsen-Graniff said.

Drew sat in the cushy chair.

"How about sitting a bit closer?"

"I don't think I can move this chair."

"The table then. Sit here at the table with me."

Drew moved over to the table, taking a seat at the opposite end from Artsen-Graniff. She held her glass in her lap.

"Oh, don't be like that," he said. "Leo humors me at least. Or she used to. Do you know, you are about the youngest, most won-

derful thing I've seen in ages?"

"Thank you," Drew said.

"Are you nervous?"

"A little."

"There's no need. If I was capable of harm I wouldn't need Mrs. Carmichael's services."

Drew looked into her glass. She considered having another sip but feared gagging it on the floor.

"I'm sure your life is positively brimming with love and company and you have no use whatsoever for this kind of thing," Artsen-Graniff said. "I'm sure your husband just adores you to pieces. Does he even know you're here tonight?"

"He does."

"And he doesn't mind?"

"We're in pretty desperate need of money." It was out before Drew could stop herself. She immediately blushed.

"Desperation is unsettling, isn't it? Makes a person do all sorts of things he wouldn't ordinarily condone. Such as, just for example, allowing his pretty young wife to spend a cold and rainy night waiting for a strange man to come home. Do you have any children, Mrs.--"

"Copeland," Drew said. "Yes, two. Twins."

"Boys or girls? Or is it one of each?"

"Boys."

"And what are their names?"

"If you don't mind, Mr. Artsen-Graniff, sir, I really would like to make it out of here before the last train." She no longer wished to remain in the house, even for time and a half. What had seemed a good idea in theory was now proving to be awkward and tense, and even a bit frightening. "Could we move along with the proceedings?" she said.

"I like that," Artsen-Graniff said, laughing.

"Proceedings. Yes, let's move them along."

He appraised Drew's duffel bag on the floor.

"What's in this bag, Mrs. Copeland?"

Drew didn't answer immediately. She watched the bag as if it might move. Artsen-Graniff repeated his question.

"One of my boys," Drew said.

"Pardon me?"

"They're conjoined twins and we cut them apart tonight."

After a moment, Artsen-Graniff said, "You have a grave sense of humor, Mrs. Copeland. It surprises me, given how young and pretty you are. I'd suspected you were an idiot."

They sat watching each other, a grin rending Artsen-Graniff's face, and the faint outline of fear on Drew's. "Sir. If we could move along--"

"Of course, Mrs. Copeland, by all means. The proceedings. Although, and I'm surprised you don't already know this, it's Sunday and the last train left at 11:05. I presume that's the one crotchety old Leo took. The next one comes at 5:45 in the morning. So," and here he paused, grinning in a fashion that sent marauding electrons through the smallest avenues of Drew's body. "It looks like you and I are about to have a sleepover."

A few nights before she'd taken the taxi to meet Leo at the terminal in Jamaica, Drew had assured Adam she'd be back from her first job by one or two in the morning. They sat in their drab Fort Greene kitchen at a slanting Formica table.

"How well do you know this Mrs. Carmichael?" Adam whispered. "Is she even legit?"

"Of course she's legit," Drew whispered back. "She placed the ad, didn't she?"

"Anyone can place an ad."

"Well, I got a good feeling when I met her. She has an office and everything. There's even a secretary."

"You and your feelings." This was an old joke between them. They laughed, quietly. Drew gazed over her shoulder toward the

boys' room down the hall. Adam touched her wrist and she turned back to him. They smiled at each other.

"Mrs. Carmichael pays better than I've ever seen."

"We don't need it."

"Adam."

"Maybe it will take some time to save up, but—"

"We don't have time."

"What do we have, then?" He paused, looked at his lap. "I'm sorry."

"I could go back to the laundry, then. Would that be better?"

"That job was insulting."

"It was money."

"Don't talk like that. It's sad. It's beneath you. We're fine, anyway. We didn't miss rent, did we? Or pay any of last month's bills late? Of course not. We're not that sort of people. We pay our bills, we earn our keep."

"But the surgery," Drew said. She swallowed the rest of whatever she intended to say.

"Honey, no one expects us to pay for that all at once!"

"Keep your voice down."

"They don't," Adam whispered.

"But they do expect us to pay for it. If we get the surgery we have to pay for it, right? And if we don't get the surgery—"

"We'll get the surgery. Please don't worry. Look around you. Our children are asleep. They're safe. This apartment has walls. It has a roof. You're not cold, are you? We're fine."

"I'm just sick of always being up against it. Just once I'd like to be ahead of the game." Drew's eyes began to tear, which made her angry and Adam, evidently mistaking her anger for sadness, leaned forward and placed his hand on her knee.

"How much does this outfit pay?" he said.

"A few hundred bucks a night."

"But it's not the whole night, right?"

"Of course not. The whole night? What kind of business do you think it is?"

Adam leaned back again. "You don't have to do this. We're not poor, you know."

"Well, when we can't pay our bills, it feels like we are."

"I just told you all our bills are paid."

"Not all of them."

They watched each other, converting the things they wanted to say into charged silence; both Copelands understood the responsibility they had to keep their voices down and had acquired the ability to communicate wordlessly with one another. Their children were asleep but anything louder than moderate speech threatened to wake them. Televisions, the ringing of phones, car honks, shouting. The boys slept with earplugs but even so, nights had become a tense battle against wayward sound, in which the ever-present threat of noise from outside made Drew and Adam Copeland feel isolated in a city of millions.

Adam spoke first. "You're sure it's just greeting these lonely men?"

"All I have to do is be there, in his home, when he returns. And I won't be alone. There's another woman who'll be with me. She's older. I met her in Mrs. Carmichael's office. If this job is safe for her, it's safe for me. All we do is ask how his trip was, cook a meal if he's hungry. Play some games and engage in conversation. Help him unpack, maybe. Or watch a little television. That's it. We just have to be there when they come home. Then we get to leave. I'll catch the 12:05 and be back lickity-you-know-what."

"Games?"

"Board games, I think. We're supposed to bring them. And pots and pans and stuff like that. These men don't spend a lot time at

home; they don't have much there."

"Do we even own board games?"

"I'll buy some, I guess."

"And how exactly is any of this worth a few hundred bucks?"

Drew paused. The truth was, she had no idea. She'd wanted to ask Mrs. Carmichael during their interview, but feared doing so might cause her to change her mind. "I guess we're not lonely," Drew said to her husband. "So we just don't know."

Melvin Artsen-Graniff left the living room to unpack. Drew had offered to help but he said he'd rather sort his dirty clothing in solitude so that he remained respectable in her eyes. "When I get back," he said, "we'll spend some time getting to know one another."

Drew paced the living room, worrying the buttons on her coat, which she still hadn't removed. She looked at her glass of vodka on the table, next to the phone. She thought of calling Adam to explain about the train but couldn't risk a ringing phone this late at night. Awakened suddenly, the boys would cry until their one good lung each became overwhelmed, their breaths came in shallow jags, and their skin—all of it, not just their faces—turned a horrible shade of blue. The first time this happened it had been Adam who panicked, racing around the room while Drew stroked the boys' chest, remembering the doctor's words: "The surgery to separate them is speculative and quite expensive. It might be best to wait."

"For what?" Drew had said, but the doctor didn't answer.

When Melvin Artsen-Graniff returned to the front room it was after midnight. He'd changed into dry clothes and had run a comb through his hair. She'd finally removed her coat and hung it over the back of her chair. "Are you hungry?" Drew said.

"I couldn't eat a thing."

"Do you want to play a board game?"

Artsen-Graniff said all he wanted to do was drink vodka and coffee and talk. Drew sat holding her mug with two hands while Artsen-Graniff paged through the book he'd noticed on the floor. "What a strange little book," he said, paging slowly.

"Is it yours?"

"I do most of my traveling by plane, Mrs. Copeland. And the occasional train. I can't remember the last time I was in a car for more than forty minutes."

Drew set her mug on the table and Artsen-Graniff extended his own hand, placing it on hers. His sleeve pulled up to reveal dark, hairy wrists. "I have no use for subterfuge, Mrs. Copeland," he said.

"I'm sure she's just trying to spruce up the place."

Drew attempted to pull her hand free but Artsen-Graniff was holding on.

"That's not what I mean," he said. Then softening his tone somewhat: "Do you do much traveling, Mrs. Copeland?"

"Not much. Excuse me." Drew yanked her hand free.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Copeland. I'm afraid I'm not much for boundaries. Leo is always saying I get too close to her. Did you say you don't do much traveling? Why not?"

"I have an aunt who lives in Armonk. That's where we spend holidays. Beyond that, I haven't had much reason to travel anywhere. And now—"

"Now?"

"Now things are different, Mr. Artsen-Graniff."

"In what way?"

"No one said I would be asked to speak about myself."

"What did you think you signed on for,

Mrs. Copeland?"

Drew hesitated. "To provide you with company. To sit and talk with you."

"Isn't that what we're doing?"

"And then go home."

Artsen-Graniff shut the book and set it on the table. "Of course," he said. "I could always drive you home. It would take longer than forty minutes, but that's no matter. I guess I'm due for a decent car ride."

Drew looked up, suddenly hopeful.

"Would you mind?"

"I'll need something from you first."

"What?"

"I'll need you to unzip that bag and show me what's inside."

"And then you'll drive me home?"

"I will."

"And I'll still get paid?"

"Of course."

"The full amount? Mrs. Carmichael promised me time and a half."

"Mrs. Copeland, I'm not in the habit of stiffing people."

"All right then."

"Mrs. Copeland, do you remember what you told me is in the bag?"

"I do."

"And am I still to understand that you cut apart your conjoined twins, before coming over here tonight, and that one of them is, as we speak, in this bag on the floor."

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, is he alive or dead?"

"He's alive, the last I checked."

"And where's his brother?"

"In another bag. Leo left with him a while back."

"Whatever for?"

Drew took a small sip of coffee. She'd always disliked coffee, perhaps more than liquor, but now attempted a brave expression.

"Isn't that how these stories work?"

"What stories, Mrs. Copeland?"

"Stories about two brothers. They're born into an unfortunate family and then separated when young by some accident or another and they grow up in different circumstances. One lives an easy life and is rich, handsome, admired by many. The other endures a life of toil and burden. He's hard and tough and poor. He trusts no one. Until the day some unforeseen coincidence, a train running late while another boards early, brings them to encounter one another and they realize their connection. They fill the voids in each other's lives."

Artsen-Graniff looked at her appraisingly. "You've certainly got an imagination, Mrs. Copeland. I bet your husband finds you quite exciting."

"Thank you."

"But tell me, which brother is which? You have one and old Leo has one. So which brother will endure, how did you put it?"

"A life of toil and burden."

"Yes, that's it! So, which of your two sons will endure a life of toil and burden?"

"The one left with me."

Melvin Artsen-Graniff laughed. "How wonderful, Mrs. Copeland! So if I follow, that means old Leo has carried your other son off to his destiny of riches and so on?"

"That's right."

"Wonderful, Mrs. Copeland. The perfect plan. Except that Leo herself is not rich at all. She doesn't even own a car. How can she provide your other son with riches and the life of leisure your story requires?"

Drew didn't answer.

Artsen-Graniff laughed again. "Oh, you're wonderful, Mrs. Copeland. Worth absolutely every penny, even if you don't spend the night. You have such a wild and edgy imagination.

You have not let me down. I'm enjoying your company immensely and will certainly request it again. Leo can officially consider herself out of a job, at least as far as I'm concerned." He sipped his coffee, sighed, shook his head, and laughed to himself.

Drew stared at the duffel bag on the floor.

"Finish your coffee, Mrs. Copeland. Then I'd be happy to drive you home."

Drew continued staring at the duffel bag. She did not respond.

"Mrs. Copeland?"

Finally, Drew looked up at Melvin Artsen-Graniff. "Can you tell me who lives across the street? In that castle."

"Across the street? I'm afraid I don't know. Is there a castle? It must be new. I don't spend much time around here, you understand. Haven't had many opportunities to meet the neighbors."

"Excuse me," Drew said, standing. "I need to use the restroom."

"Of course, Mrs. Copeland. It's down the hall."

"Then you'll drive me home?"

"Then I'll drive you home, Mrs. Copeland. Oh, and Mrs. Copeland, there are no hand towels in the bathroom. Or soap. Unless you brought those things."

Drew took another look at her duffel on the floor. "Your key is in my coat pocket," she said.

"Keep it, Mrs. Copeland. I'll enjoy remembering that you have it."

While Drew was in the bathroom, Melvin Artsen-Graniff sipped his coffee. Had he taken the game a step too far? He shook his head, muttered to himself, and then laughed out loud. The girl's glass of vodka and mug of coffee were set next to each other on the table, neither more than half consumed. Artsen-Graniff bent forward toward the duffel

bag. He put his hand on it, feeling its contents. Unzipping the bag slowly, he made a show, if only for himself, of closing his eyes and holding his breath. Then, opening his eyes again and exhaling dramatically, he pulled open the duffel.

He laughed once more to himself. Melvin Artsen-Graniff sat back in his chair, crossed his arms, and awaited Drew's return to the room. "What a wonderful imagination that girl has," he said to himself. "Simply wonderful."

Originally from Philadelphia, Greg November has been living and writing on the west coast since 2006. He received an MFA in fiction from University of California, Irvine in 2010 and his short stories have appeared in Juked, Crab Creek Review, Orange Coast Review, Entasis, The Writing Disorder Anthology Vol II, and in the collection Philly Fiction (Don Ron Books, 2006) among other places. He lives in Seattle with his wife and two small children and teaches writing at both North Seattle College and Highline College.

Pass/fail

Patrick Erickson

If I were a bluebird
I'd carry a blue note
and belong again to the sky
I'd carry the day
I'd hold my own against any bluebook exam
that proves us difficult
by probing our extremity
goads us
I'd gladly inhabit
the bent forces of trees
and be far-flung
I'd cash in my savings
and zero out my account

and zero in on the sky
investing heavily
dream late model dreams
graying in the twilight
and spreading gloom
no red tongues
to sing a lament
or wave a red flag
or only intone this litany
no red tag specials
beneath dead trees
to mark our demise
Dying is beneath us.

Patrick Theron Erickson, a resident of Garland, Texas, a Tree City, just south of Duck Creek, is a retired parish pastor put out to pasture himself. His work has appeared in The Oddville Press, Grey Sparrow Journal, Cobalt Review, and Burningword Literary Journal, among other publications, and more recently in Right Hand Pointing, The Penwood Review, Tipton Poetry Journal, and Wilderness House Literary Review.

Never the Same River

Darry Dinnell

THE COLD OCTOBER RAIN beats against the window of the Arby's, and across the Formica table, John and Laura tilt their rictuses of sorrow in synchrony. My half-eaten, half-unwrapped beef dip sits between us, its thin companionate bullion cooling beside it. John and Laura had dined before they came.

"It's just too bad," Laura says, "it didn't work out for you and Paula."

She kneads John's hand as she says this as if squeezing out strength from his palm. She pauses because she knows he is going to say something. They have been together since I first met them in college.

"It must feel like you're back at square one," he says.

I shake my head and twist my lip. "No. Not at all."

It all started here almost a year ago, the same table, the same empty Arby's at supper time. While I was eating, John and Laura remarked on the fact that I was in my late twenties now and without a significant other.

"Because you should be dating," Laura had said after I'd parried their unsolicited life advice with excuses spanning finances, career, and a shitty apartment. John bobbed his head along with her.

"You know," Laura had gone on to say,

"I know someone who you'd really get along well with. She's into a lot of the same things as you."

And with the pronoun "she", it began. Although I had mounted a protest, mouth full of sandwich, that little pang of possibility had hitched in my stomach – not the Arby's churning prematurely but rather curiosity, anticipation, hope. Swallowing that ragged, rubbery Arby's bolus along with my pride, I gave in.

What resulted was an arranged meeting, the two high school sweethearts introducing the blind neophytes at a non-Arby's restaurant. Paula turned out to be perfectly amiable, much more elegant than I'd expected. Upon seeing her, I was overcome with nerves. Have you ever gone into an interview for a job in which you are unqualified and then, by a conspiracy of anxiety and adrenaline, absolutely killed it? I have not, but I can imagine the feeling based on that evening I met Paula. Whenever I needed wit, charm, pith – it was there. She asked to see me again, and then we were dating.

"What was the issue?" John is asking presently.

"No real issue," I say. "We just wanted different things."

"That's pretty general," Laura says. "It must

have been something else.”

“It’s a bit personal,” I say, figuring that will be the end of it.

“Well,” John says. “Now you have to tell.”

“Do we want to hear?” Laura asks.

“I don’t know that you have to,” I say.

“Come on,” John says. “We want to understand.” Now he has assumed the active role in palm-kneading.

“This won’t get back to Paula?”

“Of course not,” John says.

Laura keeps nodding, eyes wide.

“Well,” I say. “There were problems in the bedroom.”

“Oh wow,” Laura says, the bobbing of her head halting abruptly. “I thought maybe we wouldn’t want to know.”

“Were they problems with you or with her?” John asks.

“Both, I suppose. It just wasn’t working.”

“Alright,” Laura says, shifting sideward in her seat. “This sounds like guy stuff.”

“No,” I scoff. “It’s not about not functioning physically. Not that at all.”

“Even that’s more than I’d like to hear,” Laura says, sliding out of the booth, bringing her index fingers toward her ears and then pausing on the verge of insertion. “I’m going to check out that Halloween store across the street. I’ll leave the guy stuff to you two.”

“But it’s not guy stuff,” I say, abhorring the sound of the words in my mouth. “It’s just basic human—”

“No, no, no,” Laura says. “I’ll leave you to it. If I don’t see you again Dave, bye, and I just hope things work out better with the next girl – because there will be another, you know.”

I watch as she hurries out of Arby’s, pulling up the hood of her jacket against the rain. When I turn back to John, he is staring at the sagging beef dip. Slowly, he meets my gaze.

“So,” he says. “Performance issues.”

“I can get an erection. Didn’t you hear what I told Laura?”

“Then what was the problem?”

“As I said, we wanted different things.”

“You wanted to try some kinky stuff, or—”

“Again, no,” I say. “It was more a matter of frequency. She wanted to make love four times a week.”

“And you wanted to do it every day.”

“No!” I bellow. “To me, it’s not about a certain number of times it happens. I just want it to feel inspired when it happens. She read it on some blog that had apparently done all the ratios and calculations. It has to be at least four times a week if you want to get optimal intimacy out of your relationship – those were the words the website used, and that was what she believed.”

“Let me see if I understand,” John says.

“You’re complaining that your girlfriend wanted to have more sex. You’re a guy, Dave.”

“It’s not about the sex,” I say. “It’s about the number. It was the idea of putting a numeral on it that bothered me the most. I mean, she turned it into a counting statistic, a figure. It was this mark that we had to hit. Once a week the mood would be perfect, and it would be great, sometimes even twice. But when it came to that third or fourth time, it became a task. All the life had been sucked out of it.”

“Then you did have troubles keeping it up.”

“NO!” I slam my fanned palm down on the Formica. One of the cow-eyed teenage employees stops in the middle of stacking the empty trays and looks over at us. I consign my protest to a hissing whisper.

“The problem wasn’t keeping it up. The problem was what I was keeping it up for. It wasn’t for her or for me but for that stupid number set by god only knows who. Love-

making became a sub-clause, a technicality, a pie-chart in Paula's mind. Pretty soon, it wasn't ever inspiring, not even once a week. Maybe if she hadn't trotted out that goddamn number all the time, we could have done it four times, five times, six times a week. Hell, everyday even, if it was inspired. But who the hell does it every day?"

"Laura and I do it every day," John says, staring blankly at the beef dip.

"What? You're serious? You try to do it every day?"

"No," John says. "We do do it every day."

"Really? No. This is just something you're experimenting with or—"

"No," John says. "It's always been this way."

"Well for how long?"

"Ever since we became serious."

"But you've been serious for like a decade..."

John is nodding again.

"Even still?"

"Oh, yes."

"You are serious," I say, eyeing the tightening purse of John's lips. "Okay. That strikes me as impossible but how do you keep it – how do you sustain it? I mean, you're busy people. You have careers."

"We make a point of making time," John says.

"But doesn't that get tiresome?"

"Not at all," John says. "It's energizing, if anything."

"Yeah, but doesn't it also become uninspired?"

"Never," John says severely, and then concedes on half of his mouth a smile that looks far too involuntary and indulgent to be anything other than genuine. When he composes himself, he sits up even straighter and meets my eye again, resolutely.

"If anything," he says, "it gets more inspired."

"Seriously," I say. "How do you do it?"

"We love each other. We've never fallen out of love, and we never intend to."

"Okay," I say, "but the same person, the same routine all the time. You must have some kind of insight for the blogosphere."

"Well," John says. "With Laura, watching her grow and always becoming a new person, I can always see the newness in her. It's kind of like that one philosopher said. No man steps in the same river twice. It sounds crass when you say it that way, but it's never the same river, and it's never the same man."

"And it's never the same woman," I mutter. "Heraclitus. Jesus Christ."

"And the key," John continues, "is finding someone like that who will always make you feel inspired, as you put it, to see the newness."

"Oh, good god," I say. "You don't have to peddle this abstruse horseshit more-capable-of-love-than-thou pseudo-philosophy on me, John. It makes me feel like an asshole for even letting you set me up in the first place."

"Okay," John says, pushing back in the booth. "Fine. You want to know how it really is?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Laura and I have a system in which we've each assumed nineteen possible archetypes."

"What?"

"Archetypes. You know, roles, guises, personae, whatever you want to call them. Common characters like the cowboy, the quarterback, the spaceman for me. For her: cowgirl, cheerleader, various species of alien. The list goes on. We make additions and substitutions from year to year."

"So you're talking about, like, cosplay?"

"Some would call it that," John says, rapidly blinking as if gathering up momentum by which to continue. "But for us, it's so much more."

We each have our nineteen roles, which creates 361 possible combinations of archetype hookups. We move through those over the course of a year. We made up a semi-randomized scheduling algorithm."

"Seriously? Come on."

"I wouldn't lie to you."

"Three-hundred-sixty-one. What do you do the other four days of the year?"

"That accounts for Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter at either of our parents' houses. We try to keep it low key on the holidays. No costumes."

"That still leaves one day."

"Our anniversary. We just go as ourselves."

By now I have shifted my gaze from the beef dip to the bullion. I imagine it is ice-cold now, colder than the rain outside, and that if I were to stick my finger into it, I would freeze. I shake my head to remind myself I am not already frozen.

"Well, what about, like, when she's having her period?"

John nods. "Females from the crab nebula reproduce through their mouths."

I look grimly at the half-eaten sandwich, trying to process it. When I speak, my voice is a low croak.

"What about leap years?"

"That," John says, "is personal."

Eventually, I pick up the sandwich. I take a bite. It tastes like it has fully turned to plastic.

I set it down between us, folding the foil over it. I set the opaque plastic lid back atop the bullion.

"Incidentally," John says, "nineteenth-century circus strongman and frazzled soccer mom is the highlight of any given year. It's like the Super Bowl of our sex life."

After a while, I nod.

After a while, Laura reappears outside the doors. The rain has died down. She smiles sunnily, waving for John. On her other arm dangles a black paper bag, an orange cartoon jack-o'lantern printed on its side.

We make our way over to the door, and I quickly fall behind. I watch as Laura opens the door for John, his arms finding their way lovingly around her jacketed waist. Laura kisses him and then slips out of his embrace to hug me.

"Again, it was really nice seeing you," Laura says. Into my shoulder, she adds: "And just know that things will turn around. There's plenty of fish out there. There's still hope."

I smile wanly. We say our final goodbyes, and then John and Laura start up the rain-slicked sidewalk toward where they parked. They walk briskly, purposefully, a couple in love with places to go and things to do, their heads wobbling with enthused conversation. The jack-o'lantern bag swings pendulously from Laura's arm.

I wish I could convince myself the contents of that bag are strictly seasonal.

Darry Dinnell lives in Montreal. He suffers from a minor phobia in which he believes that all his friends and acquaintances are perpetually planning interventions on his behalf. This renders multi-person social outings particularly nerve-wracking, as they leave him beset with a continual dread that any given transition in conversation will occasion the phrase "we're actually here because we want to help you..."

Failure of a Miraculous Birthday

Timothy Robbins

He turned twenty-one thirty minutes
before the end of his shift —
seven hours of a riveting machine
insanely chanting Senator Trotsky,
Senator Trotsky...
Afraid of the queer-baiting
taverns, he repaired to the 24-hour
Waffle House for silver dollar
pancakes that dared not mock his
size. He talked a little more
than usual with a cross between
Johnny Cash and Van Gogh's
wheat field with crows.
He enjoyed his surprise without
questioning it, hoping for a mind
that would always be two-stepping
with an immaterial partner,
riding a bucking machine,
being thrown, moaning
on a mattress the management
plopped down to avoid liability.

Timothy Robbins grew up in a small town in Indiana, raised by parents who were always supportive of his gay identity. He now lives with his partner of twenty years in Wisconsin, where he teaches ESL and does freelance translation. He has a BA in French and an MA in Applied Linguistics from Indiana University. He has been a regular contributor to Hanging Loose since 1978. His poems have also appeared in Three New Poets, Long Shot, Bayou Magazine, Off the Coast, The Tishman Review, Tipton Review, Slant, Main Street Rag and others. He is also a visual artist and songwriter.



Si Vous Plait, Madame

Bratsa Bonifacho

Animalism

James Jackson

Listen: the Earth's siren wails
in tones only animals like us can understand.
We are pretending we do not caress ourselves
on the bed of feather blankets.
Wings— and we call them feathers.
Our weightlessness is contagious.
A broken Bob Dylan vinyl.
Tender was the night until the day absolved it so.
If a wolf sleeps through whistle
has he lost his lust? The life
of choice. We are obese with wrong decisions
and our belts contain the weight dribbling
past our buckles.
Kentucky Fried Chicken. Kentucky annexed
by memory. Junebugs live there in relative obscurity.
Junebugs. June bugs.

James Croal Jackson is the author of The Frayed Edge of Memory (Writing Knights Press, 2017). His poetry has appeared in The Bitter Oleander, Rust + Moth, Cosmonauts Avenue, and elsewhere. He has won the William Redding Memorial Poetry Contest and has been a finalist for the Princemere Poetry Prize. Find him in Columbus, Ohio or at jimjakk.com.

Marine

Erren Kelly

I didnt tell her this
Would be my only day in
San Francisco
I was just here to read
Some poems
And then back to l.a.
I may live there, but san
Francisco will always have
My heart
I couldnt stop looking at
Her, everytime she walked
Past me in the kitchen
She had the kind of body
Im not supposed to like
But i did, anyway, long and
Linear, as if she were a bicyclist
Or a soccer player
She could climb her the crooked
Street effortlessly

Maybe i shouldnt look at her
As we're talking, maybe i shouldnt
Tell her that her english is
Flawless
Though, she would be in her
Element on a beach in
The riviera
Like her name, she is calm
Peaceful as a wave, like a girl
In monet's landscapes
Maybe i shouldnt look at girls
Like her, or be enamored
Maybe chasing her is
Is pointless
But i live to chase a rabbit
I would rather die chasing a
Dream
Than grow old with regrets

Erren Geraud Kelly's work has appeared in dozens of publications in print and online, in the United States, Canada and around the world. Kelly's work currently appears in anthologies, The Soul's Bright Home, and Black Lives Haves Always Mattered, from 2 Leaf Press. Mr. Kelly received his B.A. in English Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Erren lives in Los Angeles.

Night Letter

Lawrence Syldan

Science says nothing about what truly matters to people. Grand matrices of space squat low over this downtown apartment. Philosophers are lost, many of them laughing at the center of things. Please come to me. I can never explain.... It is this dragon identity; and the funny creases in empty shoes. At times it is atremble—something out of the question. IT is a gift, you pronounced. Well, life is no gift, as no one gives being to no one. All of us share this peculiar neck of solitude. I hear only the clangor of an old ring of keys and the long ovation of traffic and some prime minister making peace noises. Yet these are small comfort now that the very walls begin to ascend to the next story. But where is the author? And please tell who is the audience for which this dream performs?

A retired instructor and counselor, Lawrence Syldan now devotes most of his hours to three grandchildren, the ocean and woods, and to writing concoctions sometimes called poems and vignettes. He has been about the poetry circus for many years and has felt it to be delightful and boring alternately. As he grows even older, whoa, the matter of style grows more and more salient for him.



Untitled #9

Michelin Basso

Corpselike

Gabriella Garofalo

Corpselike,
Dazzled by theorems, charms and lilacs
My mind ejected against God,
But my heat failed to get him,
darn, not even a graze,
So he smiled, maybe thinking my mind was
A squirt of Coke suddenly splashing off —
This is the night swag I find in my cupboard,
Rattly words, Escher stairs, falling limbs,
Yet you smile, say thanks, ever thought
I've been starving all my life for blasts,
Spliffs, whims, blessed Catherine wheels
On Gunpowder Night?
Shift change, it's my turn now:
For the light she never saw
For the wrath she never shed
Do shake, earth, in glee and nonchalance —

Too many eyes at the art den, too much white,
Too many lovers in the keep harking to hot jazz,
Too many women with four eyes, of course,
As they see wise and beyond,
Except wrath shouts louder
If you can't blind her voice—
Wonder why so many eyes, you say? —
Oh, play along, just play the good ol' game,
Delays, flirty smiles, more delays,
It's safer, mind, simple as that,
Nasty shame he wasn't impressed
When he first saw her —
What, not even once?
Never, I say, or do you mean it's ice?
Nope, for pictured ladies and pliant muses
It's just bedazzling white.

*Born in Italy some decades ago, Gabriella Garofalo fell in love with the English language at six, started writing poems (in Italian) at six and is the author of *Lo sguardo di Orfeo*, *L'inverno di vetro*, *Di altre stelle polari*, and *Blue branches*.*

The Tragedy at Grób Theater

Travis Gouré

LIKE IT HAD EVERY MORNING BEFORE, the work at Grób Theater began early. Each of the actors, invariably pale faced and exhausted, got out of their cot, drank a small glass of water, and went to the square to set up. They arrived at the same time, clutching hands underneath muddy, sullen clouds. In mind they were whipping themselves for their failure. For the nth time no one had come to see them. But they gathered their nerve. 'Again, again! As we must!' They yelled, and then dispersed. The bulk of them hurried to the back of the stage, a broad and rusted gate fixed at the front of the square. The actors – there were perhaps only a dozen left by now – were charged with setting up a countless number of chairs for a countless number of patrons. Backstage they would jog one after the other into a massive black shed, retrieving as many chairs as they could hold, before running up front to assemble them. Tidy row after calculated column would be formed, and the troop would tremble and sweat but since time was of the essence they would not slow down. 'It is impossible,' one of them said presently, 'there is always another chair where the last one was taken,' and began to kneel on the rough cobblestone. Before their knees touched the ground, however, two

actors were there to prop them up. The one shouted: 'The Earth! The Earth is near to splitting!' and the other: 'Get up! As we must!' And they continued about their work, setting up the little chairs, as clean and untouched as they had been the night before.

From a remote distance, drilling through a thick and writhing sheet of cloud, a great frame of pixelated light was pulsing, spitting out deep and aggravated tides of sound. Sometimes the actors looked up, disheartened, but would burrow back into their work, moving even more quickly than before, pretending they hadn't noticed. And up on the stage a few of them tidied and shifted about. Furniture was moved, a window was placed. A candle was lit, snuffed by the wind, and lit again. The sky twisted on itself. By now the ones raising chairs had done the best they could, and the shed, which seemed to go on interminably, could be no further navigated. 'This will have to do,' was said, and they ran to help prepare the scenery, because time was of the essence.

It was not the light they were losing. At Grób Theater a sunset was irrelevant, since that faraway neon giant never dimmed, and provided ample enough light for performances to be discernable, no matter the hour. At Grób Theater they were only losing time enough.

Without exception they were certain it was the planet up there on stage. A world pulled taut, shivering, prepared to split open if the performance wasn't perfect. So all in sweat and deeply aching the desperate troop settled the final details, and, arranging in a ring, fell to prayer.

Behind shut eyes a total dread was fuming.

Maddened air, like a respiring consequence, rolled over sore shoulder blades, and their locked hands shook. There was a prayer to Christ, and a prayer to smoke. Some prayed to the arch of their very bones to move divinely. And images that coursed in their brain began folding over themselves in a delirium war. The patrons would be filing in now. They would be sitting, removing their great-coats, closing their umbrellas. They would be watching the prayer circle intently. Maybe they would say a prayer of their own.

Then, when it was time, and the sky seemed prepared to fall down upon them all in one great piece, the troop stood together, and turned their bodies out toward the square. They bowed, as if before the gates of god, and all but one then left the stage.

'My friends, my whole heart, you have come to save us, and we have come to save you,' they said. 'For nights on end, we have worked ourselves wretched upon this stage, in order that the key might fall somewhere in view. . .the key of that nameless thing, once gripped, we think, but lost – and only God remains here. Be with us, souls, all and none, like gods, all and none! Hear the closing plea – this festival of dread which has been censored! My heart is at home in your heart, and your heart is at home in mine.' And their shouting was louder and louder, filling as best it could the square with determined song. At once their rage was meant for the patrons, and well as that bright, imperious satellite, blinking like the eye of last judgment.

'Our performance is for the matter at hand, that task which brings even enemies to embracing: that we have always lived in betrayal, that we continue in betrayal, and breathe, with all things, suspicion.' And they took a moment then, like something was bearing down on them.

'We are as humble to creation as we are to all destruction.' They said. Then with a fierce wave of the hand, which arched before the world, they shouted into the square: 'I pray that you enjoy!'

And it echoed quickly back.

And the actors all gathered their nerve. They swayed in meditation, begging themselves to be excellent. And the lines began to be read, and the music began to be played. And face after paling face ascended those rugged stairs, tore through the theater door, into the wild game. They laughed with the power of steam engines; they cried tears from archives in whole histories of grief. They let their flesh turn out on itself, sparing not an ounce of their sinew's strength if it meant deliverance. And the rain began to dive like blades. And like steam-hammers swung through mist large hail was falling, while music played over the tremendous hum of the distant light. And it cut through their cheeks, but they carried on. . .in unfathomable winds, and knocked out teeth, and cold knuckles all. It was hell, this work, or a curse, and yet it was. If they were vessels, they were dignified. They shouted their words, each in a different language, the very same entreaty, hours upon end. How the audience would be proud! How they would remain through the sleet for the very utterances of God were laid before them. How they would cry in the bedrooms that night, never the same.

And from a remote distance that furious light there pulsed. And one at a time they

were overtaken. One by rock, some other by fatigue. And when it was clear, for the storm's austere savagery, that the performance could not continue, those wounded two who still stood conscious commenced to scream. Their bloody arms heaved forward like arrows to that glowing giant in the offing:

Look what we have done for you!

Look what we have done!

What more can you ask?

And what returned was uninterpretable.

A growl from an epoch away. A wolf from another age.

They each blew a kiss to the house, and

soaked and weak, lay prostrate in the light. For on such a night that storm which for so many evenings they had borne bravely was unconquerable. Its stones had been thrown this time with precision and strength. A dozen or so bodies were laying still on a rainsoaked set. And the window had long since broken. And the furniture seemed to be melting. For all their energy, for all their fear, what was left was what had been: a momentous play, and an empty square.

And from a tremendous height a great frame of light pulsed resolutely, all in pixels and silvery, veiled in unthinkable noise.

Travis Gouré is a young writer living outside of Atlanta, GA. He has interned as a poetry editor for Deep South Magazine, and as a contributor for Rush Hour Daily News. His poetry and prose have appeared in Menacing Hedge literary journal, The Sacred Cow Magazine, and The Scarlet Leaf Review. He is a student at Kennesaw State University, studying Psychology, and pursuing a Masters in Social Work.

Broken and Weightless

Dennis Kolakowski

Alone
with a dozen or so
renditions of myself,
how does the traffic
avoid hitting any of us?
My dangerous God
would surely crash into the street
and try like hell
if he was paying any attention.
Homeless hold up their mirrors,
newspaper tumbleweeds dance,
concrete veins burst,
children point,
buses groan pregnant
with innocent bystanders
who will chase the same breast as me
when the streets conquer the seats.

Republicans are raping Democrats,
Democrats are strangling Independents,
Independents are ignoring their epitaphs,
All as common enemies
of poverty and bliss,
but the kings aren't even
elected.
Speech has become so free
It's damn near worthless.
Our city is sinking
as I float to the brink of identity,
washed up to the skyline shores,
broken and weightless
at last.