THE

oddville press

SPRING 2017

COVER ART

House

Jim Kazanjian

Jim Kazanjian received his Master of Fine Art at the Art Center College of Design in '92, after graduating from the Art Institute of Kansas City in '90. In the past 18 years he has worked professionally as a digital artist for television and the world of video games. Among the various collaborations include Nike, Adidas, NBC, CBS, HBO, NASA, HP, Intel and others. He currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

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STAFF

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Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Check Out

Genelle Chaconas

COURSE RAIN STARTS NOW. Don't tell me that ain't design. Message from the outhouse above.

Some people think angels look down pon em. Everytime milk's delivered, it's Praise Jayzus, Mother Mary fulluvit. People round this pig-knuckle gonna Praise Jayzus of this drop of piss.

Know what I see when I look up? Exit wound from a .45. Can't tell if it's in my skull or yours.

Half of what you gotta know about hitching is know odds against you. Without tits, it's ass-end impossible. Don't get me wrong, votes for women, we shall overcome. But this would be a helluva lot easier if I could flash a mile of blackseam stockings. That's facts, ma'am.

Rosy is packed up in the suitcase with the rest of the haul. Nothing fancy; cheap chic hip-cat clothes. White collars, scuffed shoes, suits that mighta cutta rug few seasons ago. College boy. It's the contents of a life, and it ain't mine, but I come to know him well enough.

It's funny thinking of yourself as someone else. Not just a lie, but a different you. How can I say it? It's like you took yourself out and pour yourself in another glass. In all the hostlin' today, I looked up in the mirror at this square, and thought, why not?

Government boys gotta belief about men in my line of work always fuck up. Slough of poindexter punks even made a name for it. Unconscious motivation. Something Greek, too, means loves dying. Gotta couple others sounding medical hogwash. My granddad had a word for shits thought a Ph.D. made em smarter that everybody. God bless that son of a bitch.

Course I don't mind we gotta excuse why men go round shooting. Truth told I'dve done it even if the stakes weren't high. And now they are. Maybe that means I wanna screw it. Maybe it don't.

Today, I looked at this face and thought I'd seen it before. Sometimes in isolation you get spooked by something dark moving across the light. It's the schmuck in the cell across the way shifting against his window. You been so quiet so long, you forgot him ten feet away. That's how this is.

The Secaucus bank job bought us enough time to clean up like college Joe Americans, shit, shower, shave, pack and haul. We splut it up as planned, no fusses. Good boys. I know the drill. Forget names and numbers. Hit the road. Turn your goods over if you can. Hit the border. Adios.

Only thing gotta learn about bank jobs is natural. Walk in natural. Play your role at the

counter natural. Smile at the lady. Play like all square john early customers. Know the cue, don't look for it. Know what's going when it's gone. Pull your piece. Look em in the eye when they're looking at the gun. They'll fuck you with the dye pack, so what? Only thing you gotta know is get em hustling. Hustling to your clock, your timetable. And don't go worrying about no John Q heroes. I know you seen that in movies. But hook and crook, every John Q's on the floor pissing they kecks too much to be the arm a justice. You ain't carrying bags, you carrying briefcases when you walk. And you walk out, tipping your hat to old ladies on the corner.

Course, now this nice-looking chum got water in his boots. I throw my thumb out just in time.

The other half of what you gotta know about hitching is your target is himself. If he wanna slap you on the back, have a laugh and discuss the price of roast beef in Hoboken, talk. If he wanna glare out the corner of his eye, shut it. If he offers you money, take it. If he asks you questions, lie. If he spooks and says get lost, get. If he lets you off at the nearest pit stop, them's the breaks. His car, his show. Don't get on his hump over it. That's a way to go headlong in the weeds.

Personally, I'll take a mean, quiet prick over a friendly one any night. I can sit in one spot for hours on end and stay that way. I wish other people'd learn. Everybody'd stay safer.

But I get one look at the muck pulling off the shoulder and I know I hooked a talker. Shakes hands through the window. Tells me his name's Tom Macalister. Well, fuck, if there ain't some hog fucking hillbilly every town coast to coast named Tom Macalister. Thank God my name's Bob Foster, slippery new ID card says so. There's two Bob Fosters in every hog fucking town.

Another thing to learn about hitchin' is if you bag a talker, it's easy to learn what's on. I don't know this neck of the woods, and if this pig knuckle closes up sundown time, I gotta know it.

But Tom Macalister ain't satisfied with the where you from son. He's got opinions. This fool government. Boyo this weather. How 'bout them Mets? I'm in the insurance business. Look at this photo my wife and four kids our vacation in Maui. My oldest already growing like a corn stalk; he gonna play college ball. Look at this photo my four-bedroom house. This beauty's my old Caddy, cherry red, mhm. Course I hadda trade-in for this Buick. Boyo this weather. Hey you want some grub? I could eat me a hog. I been on the road twelve hour. I been all over this country. Toronto to Juarez. You been overseas? I been there. Wartime. You ever left the states? Don't be shy. Boyo this weather.

If Tom Macalister hadn't bled for his country, I think I woulda done him for the peace. That daughter, though. God, when she getta be fourteen or so. But I digress. I play good boy. Done with the semester, going home to Maw for Christmas, wanna see the country myself. I ate few hours ago. Real nice people gave me a lift with the last of their picnic. What I'm wanting is shuteye. Let me off at a vacancy. Say, is there a drug store open around here?

It's endless. I been on the road off and on all day, been up since before dawn. Even though I'm wired like a light, I want behind a door with a lock. Funny. Year outta the lock, I wanna get locked in again.

Well, less'n I can change your mind, says Tom, then points out the vacancy at the Redwood Heart motel. Grungy little roach motel. A country general store cross the road. Huh. Perfecto. I haul up Rosy and the rest, give Tommy Gun a jaunty wave, ya'll come back now, ya hear.

Redwood Heart near closing. The sign blinks OPEN, but the jockey of a clerk looks comfy, cigarette on his mouth, ballgame on the radio. I rattle the door 'til he gets the message I ain't foolin'. Got a sourpuss look on his face when he opens it.

You're paying with cash? Yes, suh. Got an ID? Right here. Double bed alright? Well, ain't you got a single? Singles took up. Alright. Cost you two more dollars. I said alright. Room service? No thanks. Wanna wakeup call? Six a.m. Okay, the keys. TV's rusty, but shower's hot. Mind if I get cross the street to the store before you lock up? No problem. See ya in the morning, Bob.

Poor shit, his team's down by four. Can't blow his top, it's his job to smile. Care is our motto.

When my date come up, they asked me if I was ready to enter the good old 9 to 5 grind of the square Christian Society. In other words, you ready to lick Lady Liberty's snatch already. Until you're out those steel doors, even after you're out, you're playing ball. You say, yes mister DA sir, bless your soul, I thank you kindly, giving me the chance to reform, I got a cousin in Austin got me a swell job at a dairy farm. Course your cousin's an old cellie who'd go after the trouble of writing letters on your behalf just to avoid your face, cause you got dirt enough to send him back. I look at the young putz got a crumb job working a motel for peanuts. I can near see him dreaming up scores he'd rather have. I knew when I kissed that DA's ass, I had no intention of sucking the flag, no matter what it's dipped in.

So, this's the double. Looks like a half. I stuck Rosy and the rest in the closet. TV probably gets three channels at high noon. Good. Furnace chugs like a freight. Good. Hotter 'en hell in here.

You ever have a day where everything comes together? I feel like dropping on the bed and sleeping a thousand years. Well, can't bask in the glory all night. I got a Christmas list.

Now, I've always loved rain. You think of nights in the pen as quiet. It's a zoo. You can't sleep, year after year. Sometimes you think you're gonna knot your bed sheets for the peace. Except the nights it rains so loud you can't hear the thoughts in your head, nobody else, neither. It's blessed. Rain's the closest thing to peace I know.

But tonight, can't say why, I'm stunk up with it. Dawn rose today clear. Now it's pissing down. I see the little lights of Ye Olde general horse watering hole, and it seems miles away. I make it.

Vinegar, plenty. Baking soda, economy size. I got a good story to cover nosy old fatass behind the counter. Very good ol' boy type. Suh, I was enjoying God's good country, when of all things, skunk the size of a coyote come at me. All my clothes is drenched. Oh, yes, I'll take that bottle of whiskey behind the counter. Ain't legal to sell this time of night in this state? Well, brother Christian, I'll tell you. Me and my brand-new bride to be prettiest girl you ever did see is cross the street in a double room. Story old as time, if you can't refuse the carnal vice you must indulge another. Well, I understand, you not knowing me and all. Shame all this fine, hard earnt cash of mine. My ID? Second time I showed this today. Oh, hang on, is that chicken? Sure, one of them fried chickens. Can't let a lady go hungry. She'll skin me alive for not bringing her the pearls of China. Thanks a mill. Five dollar? Sold American.

Schmaltz and suckers. But they make the world go round. Who'd you rip off if there weren't a sucker every five feet from ya? I dunno what it was what made me come up a little wiser. Never done me good.

Those government boys got one thing

right; you can tell a con from a square just looking at him. Not that a square can't lose his head one day and never get it back. But a true con has never been a square. He's lame or something. The con of the world has been done all 'round him, and he thinks he's the only one what knows it. So, he follows his nose and ends in a clink by the age of ten or twelve years old.

I didn't know how hungry I was 'til I unwrapped that greasy fowl. I scuffed it up like a starved dog. I'm an empty oil drum inside. When I've gnawed every bit off the bones, I'm hungrier than before I'd ate. I'm tempted to break the bones and suck the marrow. But I wash my hands, pour myself three inches of the sauce, then set to work.

I only got a five-gallon ice bucket. I don't got a measure, but I gotta good nose for what I'm doin'. One big slug of the vinegar, one punch baking soda. The stink's enough to make your head spin. I give myself a little slug of the sauce to myself and let it roil.

I open the suitcase. Wrapped on top are the good old schoolboy clothes. Shaving kit, medicine bag, passports, fancy fountain pen set. Oi, that schmaltz. Load of moth-eaten paper backs under that. Search me if I read em. I only read passing time in the pen. Better things doing outside.

Then we hit the good stuff.

Rosy comes up powdered and kegged, painted as the whore she is. Course Rosy's a sawed-off Ithaca 37. Cheap little lay. Light and sweet, she can roll up in the haul no problem, señor. I hear boys carry these in the jungle country. Cops use em here. And she was a good little number in Secaucus.

It's a sad thing when a man says goodbye to a hot little rifle he sawt off himself. Sad like a one night stand. But there's no place I can pawn nor dump her, not yet. She's a good haul to have, too, incase those men south the border got no truck for American tenner.

Packed tight as sardines in a corner of the haul is four hundred fifty Benjamins. Fucking fortune a man can live on forever, 'cepting he's running, which I am. I wasn't sure they'd dried when I packed em in. But they haven't staint a thing, like some miracle.

When you see that much money in the movies, it's this big lump of glisten that fills a briefcase. You don't realize how small it is until you hold it in your hands. It's like a Bible when they go door to door selling. That's what I'm fixing to hide 'em as.

Baking soda and vinegar is a country trick. You use the mash to clean a rusty drain. You can't touch it if you don't want an itchy son of a bitch rash. Good thing they left the ice tongs right in it. It takes forever, and you keep making it fresh, but it peels the dye off the paper just enough. Now if anyone asks about a bill, it was washed in the pocket of a maroon jacket. Who'd ask?

That's when it cracks me on the skull. Fuck off, I haven't thunk up a way to get em dry. Whelp, gotta think fast. I lock the door and hustle back to the office. That punk lit himself a reefer. He puts it out fast, but I can smell it. Another day I'd shake him down for it. Today's different.

Office is closed. Well forgive me of disturbing you, but I realized I ain't read the news today. You need this one in the waiting lounge? Take it. Thanks, you're a swell boy. You'll be getting a big tip from me. Oh, one last thing I can trouble you for; do you grabbing me a box of laundry pins? My clothes got soaked and I need them for a meeting tomorrow. I figure I can air 'em. If know it's a bother, but I need 'em. I'd be sure to tell your boss what a fine turn you done me. Wait there. Mind if I step in? I said wait there. Alright. Okay, here you

are. Laundry pins and a line. I've added twenty-five cents to the bill, okay? Bless your soul, son. It's time for me to lock this door. Grand.

Now that fucker's pissed me off. So that office is his kingdom? Can't step inside, can I? And twenty-five fucking cents? How much I'd like to turn his face inside out. No. How much I'd like to leave a note telling the boss man I caught a woof of reefer on this his breath. Think I will.

I strung the line over the heater and spread the newspaper under to catch drips. Soon I got twenty Benjamins drying on the line. Like doing the whites on a May Day. They dry in a quarter hour. Well, it'll take all night, but it'll get done. I put the next batch of stained bills in the mash and stand up.

But I wobble on my feet. This draughts heavier on my head than I knew. Bad sign. I've been drinking since I was eight, I know my limits. I strip outta my clothes and throw them on the bath. I pour another draught, keep an eye on my Benjamins, and fall on the bed. I can keep an eye on the operation from here.

I can't sleep, I'm wired. But I take a long glug and put my head on the pillow. It's cool and warm at the same time.

That's when I hear it. The rustle bounce of springs muffled through a few inches of cardboard. I can't help it, I put my hand on my belt. This ain't the time, man. Only I can't keep my filthy mind to myself. In blue movies they teach women to do this howl all loud and hysterical. And then she starts with Daddy. Daddy it's big, Daddy don't stop, Daddy it's good. No wife, girlfriend, or fiancé talks to her man that way.

I admire whores. That's the oldest con in the world, most honest one, too. Women have always had a good con on men. They don't need it as much, but they know we do. Not that I haven't made a few purr and scratch, and I mean only a few. But two years after I went inside, my old lady brought me divorce papers. She had to con it on someone else, just natural. I signed her papers with a smile. Can't argue with professionals.

I gotta get my mind straight. I got memories of mattresses I'd rather forget. You do things inside. Then you spend long time outside trying to bleach it outta your head. It's not pretty, but I'm never one to regret myself.

That's an ugly thing cops'll do to you. Poke at you for what you'd done like it meant something. It's their way of getting you. You ask me, cops are the sickest kinda of cons there is. There's something evil about half of him. He just likes to see you hurt.

But fact is I ain't had use for women since. I'll pay one to do my honor, but only if it's round the corner. Which right now it is. But I don't go chasing rug like I used. You know, suit ironed with my hair's slicked back and my face shaved smooth. Works got me occupied, no excuse. Whole year I ain't chased skirt that didn't jump at me. It's not like me. I wished it didn't make me think.

So, I do myself the honor, watch the Benjamins crisp, listen to the bouncing and hollering. It's over in four minutes, which is time to put my bills down and fish the others out. Swell alarm clock. Flatten them in the paperbacks. Fish. Hang. Pour down the sink. Make the mash and soak. Think cold thoughts. I oughta focus on the laundry.

Once I get the whole project restarted, they restart theirs. My four-star review of the Redwood Heart is in the bag.

Only this time, they ain't bumping. She's squawking bout her haul. He's drunk to his guts. Sunny, Sunshine babe, Sunnygirl, put Daddy's wallet down. He ain't standing it. I hear the whistle of a slap. Creaking door gets yanked open.

First thing you gotta know about a boy

and girl fight is do not. You walk in on a gag like that you never know what. I should glug and whistle while I work. There's a batch of bills to flatten.

But before I'm half thinking, I turn the handle.

Sunny, dressed in a thread of spangled nothing, is dragging her purse. Christ on the shitter, look at her. Skinny, blue eyed and white as Wonderbread except for tight little sun-tanned tits. No bikini line; she laid in the sun without a stitch on. She's bleach blonde, but she's ironed that mane out 'til it's got no curl. She doesn't wear hoop earrings or red lipstick, but strings of beads and little gems. Little silver heels, and she's losing 'em. She looks doped, can't muster strength, but that don't stop her trying.

Fat slug salesman in black socks got his hand on the other strap yanking her back. Bare as the day he's born. I mean that wall of an ass like a side of pale beef. Neither one looks up at me. I raise my hand and feel too late I got something heavy, then bring it down on his skull.

I feel the burst from my wrist to my elbow. I hear the splash of the whiskey bottle break. He's out cold on the floor in the glass. Sunny's backed against the wall, holding her purse in front of her, shivering on her silver heeled feet, tight little breasts heaving. She can't take her eyes off it. Not me, it, neck of the bottle still in my hand. I know she's thinking. Psycho in his underwear bumps her john off, then carves her up like pulp magazines. Trickle of piss rolls down her leg.

She got something from the bottom that purse. I pin her against the wall, crushing her wrist in my grip. Purse pistol in her hand. Heat's rising off her slit. I still got a hard on. I put my mouth on her ear and tell her drop it.

She lets go. Cheap little piece. I shove her off the wall, tell her, get out, go. She don't say a word, just grabs her purse runs down the hall to the exit. I peek through the office window. Praise Jayzus, punk clerk got the radio up so loud he ain't seen anything.

Only thing you gotta know about hauling is now. You get hauling fast, your blood's still up, and a skinny guy like me can haul fat fuck. Something hot inside takes over and you are Superman. Before you blink, he's on his bed, wheezing away.

How'd this putz get doughy and soft? I'm lean as a wire cause a how I live. How'd he get weak as a Christmas rabbit?

I can't say what catches hold on me, but it does. I shove the pillow down on his face.

You know that feeling when time speeds up? Those wet wheezes heave, panic, heave bigger. But I keep my grip and buckle my weight down. He fights his blood up, gasps, groans, and gives.

It don't last long. Shorter than I expect. I feel with a shock he's been gone under me. I lift the pillow up, hold my hand on his lips. I feel for the pulse, put my ear on the chest.

Nothing.

The first thing you learn about corpses is not to expect. Not to give it too much mind what a corpse does. Color goes before the heat. Already he's going blue in the gills, his under eyes puffed like young welts. He don't retch yet, but he will in a few hour, maybe sooner account his size. But not near enough for a doper night clerk to get off his ass and look.

Been a long time since I done it without a gun. I had that crackerjack at hand the whole time and I never touched it. Shitty little nickel plated piece of crap, printed in Timbuktu or Taiwan. Sunny, you sweet-thighed fool. I couldn't swap this for a roll in a barn down south. Ain't worth the bother to file off her

serial number. I should have rid of her right now.

I press the spare pillow against one side his face. I know what I'm doing only just before I squeeze the trigger. It barely shushes. The bullet comes out the left side the skull exactly like he did it himself. Leaky brain and blood all over the sheets, along with the shiny stains.

I never thought I'd do someone I didn't had to. Every life I ever took on this earth, and that's a few, it's 'cause the man living it threated my person. All cons. Kinda men who'd roil over a drop too much hooch or a sour eye. They'll kill each other for anything. And so you do. You get to expect someone get shot, or shooting someone else up. So why not by you, too? They all that way, men meant to go the bad way someday. No loss of nobody. I expected it to be me one day. Bumping someone off gains you something. Word gets around who'd done what. That'd make sometimes more, sometimes less trouble of you. What it gains is it proves you got the eggs for it.

But this man gained me nothing. He'd done nothing more than I'd seen, and that's a big nothing. Maybe cause he lived soft. Maybe cause he'd had Sunny. Maybe cause he wanted to short her. Maybe cause my Benjamins off schedule.

Christ on the shitter.

I hoof up and swung this door shut, leave it slide just it on top of the lock, open but not locked. But to anyone nosing round the cracks of corners, it looks locked. Then spring to mine; somehow I get around all the glass and in my room, then I slide down and wonder what I gotta do to cock my way outta this.

I seen a real crazy picture once. Art therapy. Buncha feely shit they're pawning off on the lockups this country over. Bleeding hearts therapists. Needed little culture in my life. The schmaltz. This one's by some queer Irishman can't remember the name of. It was a doorway with this great chunk of body, not a body, but just this fat blood bone and muscle all rolled into a mess. When I think of these doors hanging open like that, that's what I see.

I keep on thinking that long government word, the Greek one. Twenty minutes ago, I was doing my whites. Now I gone and soiled em good. Then all the pieces fall like snow on a Winter Eve. I pour the mash out, fish the wet bills on the newspaper, and I got plan enough to put pants on.

Trouble is now that I gone got myself nervous. I'm peering round the corner like a first year thief to see if that clerk has wised or some creaky maintenance comes reading the meter. But no one's come on. The glass like dew glisten at dawn. I can't figure how good my luck is.

I cross back over to his room. I open his other hand and put the wet dirty bills in, and close his fingers round. Hayseed cops'll have a fun time figuring that one. I put the gun in his other hand. It's still warm.

My god what schmaltz this. Hayseed cops dream for a score like this. They're all so bug-eyed bored they'll cream their jeans when they see it. Sex drugs rock and roll robbery and blood, big guy in the middle. Nobody knows what to think. And by the time it's in headlines with government boys snuffing every hole in this hog fucking town, I'm adiosed. They can set the hounds on Bob Foster. Hell, I hope they find him.

Only he could do me one better. I seen that sleek town car in the parking lot. Oxblood. Nondescript. Just what I need. All I need's the keys.

It's funny. I done this twice today. Nosed around in another life and wonder how they could be like mine. I open his closet, his bathroom, his suitcases like I'm taking my time.

Here's the life. Soft, warm, fat rabbit life of a salesman. Any other time, I woulda scuffed my toes against it.

But today I ask why not? Why couldn't I have a fat rabbit life? Not that I admire it, but busting your hump like a madman the country over gets in you.

Round the lock you hear old crows yawk about some man ain't been inside for five years. They call him a stiff, how could he been out so long if he's among us? Few rounds round sewing circle someone remembers he give himself a hemp necklace few years back.

Rosy, the Benjamins, the Oxblood. One stop at a hack shop in Dallas will fix that plate in a pig's eye. Sunshine snatch won't talk, this candyass piece is hers. I'd double down she hawked it off someone else, some gold ol' boy silver daddy let her play footsie in the safe. That punk clerk ain't getting off his tail 'til relief comes at four. And ain't nobody gonna start rabbiting round 'til four thirty. Round these parts, folks sit round slupping coffee and how's your mama?

Rolling out at four thirty am. That's just a hide more'n six hours of now. I gotta hoof the laundry along. But it'll get done. I ain't slept a bit. I couldn't just now. I could stay up a week.

I think of the hot sun above with American tenner in my pockets for a vacation south the border, and it's looking nice. And it got me scared. I'm too sure of it.

I guess that's what that long Greek word they fangled up means. Means too much up on the plan, too sucked in to know when the bottle's over your shoulder, ready to fall down on your head.

Maybe the word also means I don't give a hot fuck nomore.

Genelle Chaconas is genderfluid, queer, feminist, almost-employed, over 30, an abuse survivor, and proud of it. They earned their BA in Creative writing from CSUS (2009) and their MFA in Writing and Poetics from Naropa University. Their first chapbook is Fallout, Saints and Dirty Pictures *(little m Press, 2011). Their work has been published or is forthcoming in* The New Engagement, A3, Sonora Review, Clade Song, Fjords, WomenArts Quarterly, Jet Fuel Review, Burningword, Milkfist, Image OutWrite, Crack the Spine, Third Wednesday, Bombay Gin, Calaveras Station, Late Peaches: Poems by Sacramento Poets *and others. They are a volunteer submission reader with* Tule Review, *and hosted* Red Night Poetry.

Sounding

Josh Keyes

Josh Keyes received his BFA in 1992 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an MFA in 1998 from Yale University School of Art. He has exhibited his work nationally and internationally and has work in private and public collections. Keyes currently lives and works in Portland, Oregon with his wife Lisa Ericson and daughter.

How this works

Rodd Whelpley

How this works
is you don't have to
meet me half way,
if I can pull brush,
clear the route,
find – maybe – the proper phrase
(from the list I keep)
that sits, waiting,
like a girl in back of a taxi,
lonesome but gussied up
on a Friday night,
riding a worn, aimless track,
hoping against her sad experience
to find the club with the right groove,
the nice boy,
the one the family likes.

Then we dance,
you and me, to beats
the DJ mixes out of tunes
we've both forgotten (or
else instantly discover)
are your favorites,
melodic patchwork spillings
all around, as if
glinted from a mirror ball,
and then, perhaps,
a kiss. All this.

So tell me, then
how come my fare keeps judging
every stop by its façade, or
by the hired burly man outside
she's scared
will never let her jump the line,
as if, again,
this is an errant cab,
or at least the wrong conceit –
as if you're always going
to have to meet me
sometimes more than half the way
and get comfortable enough
to never know
exactly where we are.

Rodd Whelpley began writing poetry in earnest three years ago. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in 2 River View, Antiphon, The Chagrin River Review, Driftwood Press, Eunoia Review, Literary Orphans, The Naugatuck River Review, Pudding, Right Hand Pointing, Shot Glass Journal, Spillway, Tinderbox Poetry Journal *and other literary magazines. During the day, he runs an electric efficiency program for 33 cities on behalf of the Illinois Municipal Electric Agency.*

The Last Hunt

James Vachowski

HIS HANDS WERE OLD. They was weathered too, and gnarled, but I reckon those are just more polite ways of saying the same damn thing. Yeah, somewhere along the way my daddy had gone and gotten old, so it just stands to reason that his hands would age too. I don't think I actually ever took no notice until that very moment, though, when I had time to take a good long look at his hands. Chrissaskes, the man was damn near eighty now. He'd come safely home from a war, outlasted a bankrupt business, and even soldiered on through the heartbreak of watching Mom die. In the end, though, the one thing got him was his prostrate.

Still, I'll give credit where it's due. Those callused hands of Daddy's might have been shaking just moments ago, him leaning on me as we trudged up that steep ridge slow and steady, one step at a time. But all them tremors disappeared the moment he grabbed that steel. From that point on, those hands was steady and his grip solid. Solid as them bricks in a schoolhouse wall. Daddy ran a single finger down that cold barrel, finally letting it come to rest along the trigger guard. It'd been ages since we'd been out on a hunt together. I bit my lip, trying to ignore all the layers of mist building up in my eyes. Daddy'd started me out with a .22 rifle back when I was just five. Maybe I was six. Now, here I was helping him have one last go at it. Things come full circle, I guess.

His eyes twinkled when he spied our prey. There, over the ridge, the gorgeous behemoth lumbered across the plain, his dusky hide shimmering in the light of the setting sun. The sight was so beautiful it took my breath away, and it damn near took what little was left of Daddy's. He'd always dreamed of taking down the rare black rhino, Cadillac of the Savanna, but life, being an endless number of roadblocks, had always kept him from getting to Africa. He'd wanted to travel right after high school, Uncle Sam drafted him to hunt Charlie instead. Years later, when he'd been saving up to sweep Mom off on a grand honeymoon, I came along unexpectedly and messed things up. And in retirement, now that my Daddy had finally accumulated both the money and the time to do any damn thing in the world that he wanted, the only thing that stood in his way was the cancer.

We didn't have much time left. I knew it, and Daddy seemed to sense his fate too. Not wasting any time, he got his body down into a good prone position without one bit of help, legs tucked tight together with the toes of those orthopedic sneakers dug deep into the

turf. His cheek was welded against the wood stock like it'd always been there. Liver spots reflected in the cold blue shine of the gun-metal. He raised his chin up just high enough to judge the distance—three hundred yards—then lowered it back into position. His index finger curled slowly inwards, finally coming to rest on the trigger. The wrinkled digit moved steadily backwards with a slow pull, a picture of perfect marksmanship. Daddy was determined to make his last shot count, and the explosion was painfully long in coming.

We glanced at one another before looking back downrange, out to where the big beast's slow shudder confirmed a direct hit. The rhino lumbered two steps forward, then one back, before crumpling to the deck in an undignified heap. And just like that, anticlimactic though it might have been, the last hunt was done. It'd come down to the final days of his life, but me and Daddy had managed to tick off the last wish on his bucket list. What's more, we'd spent precious time together while pulling off the impossible. He grinned at me, a silent way of offering his thanks. Daddy'd never been much with words, but I knew what he meant to say.

And right about then's when we heard the sirens. "Lower the weapon, Daddy," I whispered. "No sudden movements." I paused, watching carefully to make sure I'd been understood. "Just keep your hands where they can see them, and everything's going to be fine." I looked behind us, down the hill. A handful of security guards, dressed in khaki uniforms, closed in. The men moved fast, sprinting in disciplined zigzag patterns between points of hard cover. The zoo had been placed on lockdown, and it looked as if time was nearly up for the both of us.

James Vachowski leads an itinerant life as a quality assurance technician for an independent traveling circus, where he strives to ensure that your next ride on the Cyclone is in full compliance with most, if not all, applicable safety regulations. During the carnival's off-season, James winters in New Zealand and writes mediocre fiction. For the latest news about James' life on the road, be sure to check out jamesvachowski.com.

#211

Amy Jacoby

i knelt down on my knees
to ask for more of the same
only then did i realize
lying there on the floor
its all for not

then my corpse washed ashore

and you demand i give eulogies
for the sins i never committed
you paint your regrets onto me

you caress my face
just before gauging my eyes

when will you realize?
i exist in both worlds

just as much in your mind
as i do in the world

and thats why you love me
because you hate yourself.

Amy Jacoby is an emerging writer and artist living in Nashville, Tennessee. Along with poetry, she also writes essays, screenplays, fiction, and creates series paintings and mixed media projects. She has two sons and spends most of her time working and trying not to step on Legos.

Floater

D. Harrington Miller

PHILLIP WAS THE ONE to pull up his pants. He wasn't left with much of a choice. His sister wasn't going to do it. It's not like they could wait for their mother to get home, that just wasn't right. The last image of her husband did not need to be his naked cheeks staring up at her from the bathroom floor. She deserved better.

That's not to say it was easy. His father's body was a wet noodle in his arms. Phillip's considerable girth didn't help matters, but he had no choice.

It wasn't until a few days later that Phillip cried. Not at the funeral. That would have been the obvious choice. He was waiting in line for coffee, when he felt something on his cheek. What he and everyone else at the Tenley Town McDonald's quickly realized was that he was crying. Bawling, really. It just took his brain a few moments to realize what was going on.

Phillip wasn't even thinking of his father. His mind was occupied by other matters, like whether buttermilk ranch was a suitable substitute for ketchup, and why that ethnically ambiguous family in the countertop ad looked so damn happy over the return of the McRib. He hadn't noticed the fissures in his edifice of emotional disassociation, the cracks forming that day in the bathroom. But now it was too late. The dam had burst.

He touched the moisture on his face. Staring at the droplets on his fingertips, utterly perplexed, this was a facility long defunct, like his ability to play jazz clarinet and accurately translate Latin. He couldn't remember the last time he had cried. His great uncle Stanley passed a few years back, but that hadn't even tugged a heartstring. The time he'd split his pants on the subway barely warranted a mention. Maybe Katie Grasse. Was it that long ago?

For months after the breakup, Phillip's mind had trapped him in nostalgic bloodletting. Her smell. Her clothes. Her weird right nipple that pointed to the side, as if telling him to look elsewhere, ashamed of its own disfigurement. And then, nothing. He was over her. Benumbed.

What was sadness but your body healing itself, building up scar tissue so that the next time you were faced with the overwhelming realization that you lived, not in Rosslyn, Virginia, but in the gravity end of life's rectum, that you did not emerge from a fugue crying onto the shoulder of a baffled Korean woman. That you shrugged off the pain. That you forgot.

Phillip apologized to the Korean woman, wiped the tears from her shoulder, blew his

nose in some napkins, and pulled himself together.

In his car, the crying started again. His face flooded.

He tried to remember how it had been the past six years. Cold, emotionless Phillip Mott. The guy who remained stone-faced when his sister, Melanie, introduced him to the three-legged Dachshund puppy she had rescued from the pound. He wanted to be that guy again. To not care. To not give a shit. To break up with Greta Whitcomb, his girlfriend of seven months, over text and then play Call of Duty for twelve straight hours. He wanted his heart and brain to be bitter enemies, like in the good ol' days. This newfound communication was a problem.

Phillip left the car in the driveway of his parents' house and made a beeline for the second floor bathroom, incidentally, the place his father had died only a few days before. Despite losing a wading pool's worth of liquid through his perfidious tear ducts, Phillip's bladder required urgent evacuation.

His bathroom, in the basement, was technically closer, but Phillip didn't want to have to pass the kitchen and potentially run into his mother.

Living at home would have been less awkward if Phillip could be honest when saying he wanted to be closer to his mother in her time of need. Instead, he had to face the inconvenient reality that he had been pulling nine-fifty an hour in a temp job the past eight months and not paying rent was all he could afford right now.

Mostly, he didn't want her to see him crying, lest she assume this was about his father, which is most certainly wasn't. Clearly Phillip's eyes were suffering some form of physical deterioration of the lacrimal sac.

So he used his parents' bathroom.

It was just as it had been the previous thirty-plus years. White tiles. Blue molding. Frayed towels that wouldn't make the grade at a Motel 6.

Phillip stood right where the body had been. Where he had wrestled his dead father's trousers onto his dead father's corpse. A tear fell from his face onto the cold floor. Phillip was sure it was the exact tile his father's left thigh had been resting on. The bathroom hadn't been cleaned since it happened, his mother too upset to even step foot inside. On some microbial level, his father's corpse was still lying on that floor. The exfoliated particles tracing an invisible chalk outline of his dead body.

Phillip raised the toilet lid… and there it was. His father's turd. Floating by itself, dead center of the pot, as if frozen in time. Waiting for him. It seemed.

But this was just a piece of fecal matter, forgotten in the post-mortem ruckus. His dead father's waste. Floating in the toilet.

At first, Phillip didn't notice the tears had stopped. He was too busy staring at the turd, entranced, like he'd just seen Jesus' face in a piece of toast.

The turd didn't look like anything other than a turd. That's not what drew him. It was probably the fact that it was still there. Days later. Long after the funeral. Long after his mother's tears. After his sister's gasping sobs. After Uncle Geoff's passive aggressive toast at the post-funeral brunch. It was still there, and it was all that was left of his father on this earth. Well, above this earth. Six-feet below, over at the Methodist Cemetery, his father was still, technically… well, he was in the earth, if not exactly on it. So that left this turd — the last

drop of Paul August Mott — as the only thing Phillip's father left for him.

That wasn't totally true. Phillip's father had left him some objects. Possessions. A stack of yellowing, *Life* magazines. Two-hundred dollars, mostly in change. A seaman's cap from his years "fighting the Japs" (On Wall Street, in the '80s) which continued well into his twilight years, if his dinner table discussions of Mitsubishi and the Asian financial crisis were any indication.

Phillip wasn't left empty-handed by his dead father, but nothing carried any memories for him. Nothing felt like they really came from him. To be fair, his father didn't physically give any of those things to Phillip. The executor did. Howard J. Bronfmann Jr. Nice fellow, if a bit noisome.

This floating piece of shit was all that his father had left him.

Once he recognized that his tears had abated, Phillip knew what he had to do.

He strolled down into the kitchen, making sure to peck his mother on the cheek— she was making lasagna for dinner— and returned to the bathroom with a roll of cellophane. And then Phillip sealed the bowl. The clear plastic sheet acting as museum glass. A turd in place of taxidermy. Or maybe it was more of a Monet. Either way, it was something of a memorial to his dead father.

It felt right. The place where he died. A monument to the man. It's not exactly what he would have wanted— Phillip suspected his father would have killed for a marble statue of some kind, preferably one with him riding a horse— but Phillip liked to think that deep down his father would have appreciated the gesture.

Phillip spent much of the next week in the bathroom. Watching the turd. His eyes dry. Emotions in check. But it seemed like every time he left a certain vicinity—about ten feet from the bathroom door, give or take— the tears would start again. So he tried to limit his time away from the bathroom. Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. He took them all on the cold, tiled floor. The offenses to hygiene barely registering on his radar. He even had convinced his sister, after much hand-wringing, to bring him a TV dinner stand, so he could eat while seated on the bathtub edge.

His mother was forced to use his bathroom. Twenty minutes of arguing with her son had brought him no closer to leaving the side of the toilet bowl, so she conceded defeat and moved her toiletries into the basement. She had no idea what Phillip was doing up there in the bathroom. She assumed he just wanted to be near the spot where her husband, his father, had died.

She didn't know about the turd.

Sitting cross-legged on the bathroom floor, Phillip listened to the drip. drip. drip. of the leaky faucet. It was about noon, he estimated. His stomach agreed.

With no clock of any kind, Phillip had been using the timed "plinks" of water on porcelain as a de facto timepiece. It wasn't totally accurate, but he made do. And there was always his semi-starved digestive system, grumbling around meal times. Nature's alarm clock.

He'd long since ditched his smart phone, his last connection to the outside world — aside from his mother and sister, whom he tried to avoid. He drowned it in the bathtub, the smart phone. It didn't fizz and whir the way he'd expected. It simply went black. Like a switch went off. He never received the text

from his boss, firing him. Or the two dozen calls before that. This was Phillip's world now. Nothing else mattered.

He spent his days in an almost constant state of euphoria. It could have been his body eating itself, a byproduct of his newly observed diet of Ak-Mak crackers and carrot sticks. He'd long since lost his taste for anything else. Though that was probably because he'd long since lost his sense of taste — The inevitable result of living in a room with the fetid stench of rotting dung choking his nostrils 24-7. But he liked to think his euphoria was caused by the presence of his father's turd. Still miraculously intact, sitting there in the bowl like a island. Unto itself. Ever present. Never judging. The stench had even lifted. It was a miracle.

Phillip's stomach growled again. More of a gurgle, really. Maybe it wasn't noon.

He couldn't really rely on his stomach after all. His mother kept trying to sneak real food into his meal deliveries, but Phillip refused time and again. Aside from no longer being able to taste, he didn't see the point. Breaded chicken cutlets had not done his father any favors. He wasn't sitting here now, on the toilet, thinking about the Dow Jones Industrial Average or whatever he pondered while dropping a deuce.

Sure, Phillip took his crackers and carrot sticks like a good little boy. He wasn't going to completely starve himself to death. He just didn't see the excitement borne out of overindulgence. The old Phillip might have reveled in consuming an entire honey-baked ham, but he was a vestige of an old self. The sagging flesh that hung past new Phillip's hips, peeking out from under his sweat-stained t-shirt, the ruins of his love-handles, those were testaments to his transformation. Out of death, new life.

But it would have been nice to lick an ice cream cone. He could almost feel the milky goodness dribbling down his chin.

Phillip's thoughts turned to Katie Grasse's deformed nipple. That's what it was like now. Flitting from thought to thought. Meditation for the attention deficient. Oftentimes the thoughts were sexual in nature. It had been a long time since he'd gotten laid. Let alone rubbed one out, but it wasn't proper, it wasn't right.

It was right there. Behind its plastic window. He couldn't.

Phillip steered his mind towards something more wholesome in nature. No, not ice cream. He had to stop thinking about ice cream. It was getting painful. No, he wanted to think about something else. Wiffle ball. He'd never gotten much of a chance to play as a kid. He had told his teachers it was on account of his asthma, but that was a lie. He was fat, not asthmatic. Phillip avoided sports because… Well, because he sucked at sports. He blamed a weak arm and a poor grasp of physics. Throwing baseballs with his father was not a part of Phillip's youth. Neither was staying awake in Physics class. And the other sports, team sports. There was no "I" in team, there was no "Phillip" either, so he kept it that way.

A knock at the door. Phillip stayed stock still. Another knock. And another. This could no longer be avoided.

Phillip crossed to the door, and made the mistake of looking in the mirror. His skin looked wan. Almost bleached. It's shocking how quickly the body forgets. A tan. A bruise. A burn. A father's embrace. It was almost like he had never seen the sun, like some mole-person. There were bags under his eyes. His sallow checks hiding behind a scraggly beard that extended from the tops of his cheeks well past his Adam's apple. Phillip didn't mind the look.

Melanie greeted him with a concerned

eyebrow raise and a plate laden with carrot sticks and a Clif bar.

"It smells like shit in there."

"Where are my crackers?" mumbled Phillip.

After a few weeks of meal deliveries, Melanie Mott had figured out how to decipher her brother's mush-mouthed patois — caused by a combination of poor hygiene and the diminished use of his mouth for both speaking and chewing purposes. "No more crackers. Mom's worried about you." Melanie held up the plate for her brother to see. "She got you white chocolate. They're the best."

Phillip just stared at the plate. Not moving. Melanie couldn't even tell if he was breathing.

"Shiva only lasts seven days, you know. That's what you're doing right? Sitting shiva? The Jewish mourning period. Are you Jewish now? Mom thought maybe that's why you grew the beard… You have a razor in there."

He did have a razor in there. Phillip wasn't going to use it.

"I told all my friends you went to India. It's easier than telling them you went crazy and won't leave the bathroom."

Phillip stood there a few moments longer. The gears turning in his head. Formulating a response.

India? Why would he want to go to India? He glanced over at the toilet bowl. The turd floated there still, as plump and putrid as the moment it was evacuated from his father's bowels, but it didn't leave. It would never take any business trips. It certainly wasn't going to India.

He could see it through the cellophane. It was a healthy looking turd, at least it had been.

When Phillip first saw it — that moment a few weeks back when he really had to pee — it was a thing to behold. As wide as a Coke can. Phillip wondered if expelling that from his body was what had done it. Fuck, it must have hurt. Like giving birth.

"Earth to crazy. Come in crazy."

Phillip turned back to his sister.

"Are you going to take the plate or not? Mom says if you don't eat, she's going to call a doctor. A crazy person doctor. They're going to take you away and make you eat."

Phillip just stared at her. He felt sorry for her. She was never going to have the relationship with her father that he now had.

"Whatever. Weirdo." She placed the plate on the carpeted floor and stalked off.

Phillip was proud of himself. He'd stood up to his bitch of a sister and won. Victorious Phillip Mott! He could do anything. Vanquish any foe.

Varsity baseball team? Suck an egg fellas, he was Fat Philly no more! Brandon Bart, Middle School bully, purple nerple expert, and inventor of the Indian neck burn? Who's the loser now?! Katie Grasse? Take a hint from your crooked nipple and get bent!

He looked back at the toilet and smiled. Look at what a good boy he'd become. A winner.

His father smiled back.

Another letter slipped under the door. Phillip let it pile up with the rest. He wouldn't be picking this one up. He already knew what it said.

This was their strategy now, borrowing tactics from the Postmaster General. Two months in and Phillip was holding firm. There were towns in Italy who had put up less resistance to the Nazis.

Phillip didn't quite equate his loving mother and sister to the Nazis — they were well

intentioned, if not woefully misguided — but they were certainly on his shit list. Every attempt of theirs to remove him from his fortress of solitude had resulted in abject failure. The begging and pleading. The guilt trip. The time Melanie shut off the heat, trying to freeze him out. Phillip would not break.

The closest they had come was that most despicable act, when his mother — Phillip knew it was his mother, only she could be at once so wholly loving and blindly cruel — laid out an entire DiGregorio's fully-loaded meat lovers pizza at the end of the hall. Phillip couldn't smell it, but he knew what was out there. He sensed it. Like a dying camel senses water. It was a cheap shot. A last gasp of a broken, desperate family trying to reach out to a son they no longer understood. Phillip almost pitied their desperation. Almost.

Phillip ignored the letter and continued filling in his father's chapeau — the black fedora he used to wear to all of Melanie's middle school field hockey games. Two more dabs and it was complete. Phillip's artistic skills were crude, but that didn't matter. No one was going to judge him for crafting an inaccurate likeness, the achievement was too breathtaking.

He took a step back and admired his handiwork.

The toilet was now the centerpiece in an elaborate and, Phillip thought, profoundly moving tribute to his late father. Every detail of Paul Mott's life was meticulously depicted in the countless four-by-four inch porcelain tiles adorning the walls and floor. Phillip had gotten the idea from the Egyptian pyramids, a favorite subject of his as a child. But instead of hieroglyphs, Phillip painted miniature snapshots from his father's life, using the nail polish his mother and sister had left behind. For the darker hues, he'd used ink, having been lucky enough to con his mother into lending him a pen with which he never intended to write her a letter.

Tracking the progress of his father's life, Phillip could not help but marvel at his accomplishments, and also what a good father he was. A great father. The greatest. Perhaps the greatest father who had ever lived on this planet. That was the father Phillip remembered. Not the absentee dad who'd forgotten his only son's name on his birthday, twice. Look, here was the proof! Phillip's fourth-grade mid-semester big band recital. There was Phillip, seated with the woodwinds. Stumbling his way through "Marcia Alla Turca." Doing his best to ignore taunts from the horn section. And there was his father, watching from the front row. Beaming. Proud. The fact that Phillip's father never actually made it to the recital meant nothing to new Phillip. He wanted to be there. Phillip was sure of it. What father wouldn't want to be at their son's fourth-grade mid-semester big band recital? So Phillip gave him the life he'd wanted. The perfect life. Immortalized for everyone to see.

Next to that was a heartwarming tribute to Paul Mott's relationship with his brother-in-law, Uncle Geoff. The two men embraced in a great bear hug. Crude convex lines indicating that they were overwhelmed with joy to see one another. It was a minor point that Phillip had never seen his father touch Uncle Geoff. By all accounts he detested the man. But in his defense, Uncle Geoff was kind of a loser. On the wall though, they were the best of friends. You couldn't argue with the picture.

Over by the sink, or what was once the sink and now his de facto toilet, Phillip had commemorated the less sterling aspects of his father's life. First and foremost, his death on a toilet. Phillip rushed through that one. It was hard to tell what it was supposed to be.

The adjacent squares honored the many

attempts by his family to remove Phillip from the bathroom.

He was particularly proud of his rendition of the "lean week." The time when the food deliveries had abruptly stopped. Starvation was difficult at first, but Phillip quickly acclimated himself to the nutritional qualities of Johnson + Johnson No Tears shampoo and bath soap. He remembered his mother crying outside the bathroom door, begging him to come out, telling herself how hard it was to do this.

To achieve the desired pallor in hieroglyph Phillip's skin, real Phillip cleverly mixed some grout from the base of the sink with Melanie's Positive Pink nail lacquer. It gave the image a ghoulish, ethereal look that perfectly encapsulated the feeling of your family trying to kill you. Thankfully Phillip's mother didn't have the adequate disposition for sustained familial cruelty and the meal deliveries continued after a couple of days.

"Phillip?"

His mother's words carried through the makeshift doggie door he had installed for food drops. Barely a whisper.

"I just want to make sure you're alive…"

Her voice cracked. Words breaking apart. Syllables cascading into a pitiful torrent of boogers and tears.

She sobbed uncontrollably, yet Phillip felt nothing. Separated from his emotions by a fathomless abyss. Never to reconnect. He wasn't even sure what sadness looked like anymore. Disillusionment. Fear. Rage. Earnestness. Abstract concepts he'd forgotten like all those Latin conjugations you break your back learning, praying it will help you on your SATs. So you can finally get into that Ivy League institution you father talks about almost daily. So you can finally succeed on a test, any test, even if it's just the verbal. So you can finally not be thought of as a disappointment.

But he knew joy. The only emotion that mattered. True joy. As if embraced by God himself. That's what he knew now. His father's love.

He didn't need Latin, and he no longer needed his mother. She could waste all her tears on him, but it would not change Phillip, or his mind. He would not abandon his father. After all he had given him. Their relationship was as strong as ever. His mother was acting like a jealous child, trying to pry Phillip from his father's cold dead hands.

"We love you so much," blathered his mother, or something to that effect. Phillip wasn't really listening. She could have been saying, "Wheel of view slow muck." It would have made little sense, but Phillip didn't discount it. He no longer understood his family, the living members, and they would never understand him. What he had accomplished. What he had achieved.

A photo peeked out from under the door, a Mott family portrait, circa 2004. Paul. Valerie. Melanie. And half of Phillip. A memory bubbled to the surface. Paul Mott, not approving of Phillip's weight gain, instructing the photographer to crop the image. It was easier than paying for gastric bypass.

Philip eyed a blank tile by the towel rack, his canvas. He knew how that memory really went. The truth behind the lie. The photographer's minor oversight. Profuse apologies. His insistence on re-taking the picture. And Paul Mott, heroically accepting the botched photo as-is, because the next family in line had been waiting for an indeterminate amount of time and it wasn't right to delay them a moment longer.

Phillip could see the truth. He just needed everyone else to.

He dropped the offending family portrait into the sea of missives piled in his bathtub.

None of that mattered anymore, now that Phillip was loved. Truly. Unwaveringly. Unequivocally. Now he was the favorite.

It was a few days into the third month that Phillip's mother and sister barged into the bathroom without warning.

Phillip had been lying on his makeshift bed: a small stack of bath towels with an American Flag beach blanket rolled up as a pillow.

By then the toilet bowl had yielded to the turd. Black and green algae caked the porcelain sides. The water, a brown bog, marsh-like and grimy. The turd seemed to have grown in size— probably water weight, but Phillip thought it might have been achieving some level of sentience. The smell… well, thankfully Phillip had long ago become acclimated to it. It wasn't a nice smell.

Phillip's mother and sister stormed the castle armed with cleaning equipment and a misplaced sense of heroism. Melanie took the lead, repeatedly slamming her meaty, Varsity-field-hockey-playing shoulder into the door, while Phillip's mother jimmied the lock with a screwdriver. Uncle Geoff waited in the wings, murmuring the occasional word of encouragement.

The door quickly caved.

Having braced themselves for the unknown — and possibly satanic — the Mott women were strangely relieved to find the fruits of Phillip's madness illustrated on the bathroom walls and not carved into his body.

The sink was another story.

They leapt into action. Unloading their disinfectants on Phillip and his mausoleum.

Uncle Geoff had neglected to wear a cleaning mask, so the smell hit him especially hard — He was dry heaving in the second floor hallway while the early action occurred.

Phillip couldn't say he was surprised at the sudden assault, but to be immediately sprayed by Febreeze and hand sanitizer; that, he wasn't expecting. A bit of disinfectant hit him in the eye. Searing pain radiated out from Phillip's cornea — temporarily blinding him and causing the release of a torrent of invective that only had a place in a bathroom, ironically enough.

Vision impaired, Phillip lunged for the toilet bowl, throwing himself over the seat, using his feet to keep his mother and sister at bay. He knew their target.

"You're acting like a nut job," said his sister through her cleaning mask.

Phillip only heard a traitor's words. The poisoned notes of a mockingbird. Laughing at him. Judging him. His mother's pleas were no better.

"What are you doing with that toilet?"

They just didn't understand. Phillip was keeping his father alive. This piece of shit was all that was left of their patriarch, and they wanted to flush him. Phillip was not about to let that happen. He bared his teeth. Barking at them like a deranged mutt. He'd seen Cujo. Rabies scared the bejeezus out of people. If only he had anticipated their arrival, he could have applied some shaving cream to his mouth and really scared them pantsless. His guttural howls would have to do the convincing for him.

"What the hell are you doing?" said his sister.

It wasn't working. They were closing in. By now his Uncle Geoff had taken a few timid steps into the room, wisely wearing his cleaning mask. He had with him a garden hose, thumb jamming the water flow. Must have brought it in from the back yard. Clever. Phillip hadn't thought they'd be that pathetic, to

resort to cheap tricks.

He snatched the end of the toilet paper roll and stuffed it in his mouth. He chewed.

"Now they'll think I'm crazy," thought Phillip. "Now they'll leave me and dad alone."

Uncle Geoff threw up in his mask. He had a weak disposition, that one.

But Melanie Mott had enough. She dove for the toilet handle.

It was a ballsy move. If Phillip hadn't been mentally unstable bordering on insane, he might have been proud of her moxie. He wasn't.

He tried to intercept her, but he had stuffed a bit too much toilet paper in his mouth and now his airway was blocked. He was choking. Spots of light danced before his eyes. The room spun. Maybe he was dying. It made sense. He and his father sharing the same resting place. Every good son's dream.

And in that moment, Phillip saw him. Seated atop the sink. Pants round his ankles. Leafing through *The Economist*. The heels of his favorite pair of loafers clicking as his pasty legs dangled. Fedora tilted at the slightest angle. His father. Paul August Mott.

The old man glanced at Phillip. Recognition. Words forming in this throat.

Hands tightened around Phillip's abdomen. Clenched fists slamming his insides. Scooping. Up and in. He retched, spewing toilet paper onto the bathroom floor.

While Phillip's mother gave him the Heimlich, his sister flushed the toilet.

Phillip didn't see his father die. He didn't even get to see the turd swirl around and around the bowl before being sucked away into the sewers. He did hear the slurp though. The belch of the toilet as it took his father from him for a second time.

A quavering wail escaped Phillip's blistered lips. He cried.

D. Harrington Miller is a screenwriter and author living in a constant state of anxiety. He currently writes for the FOX series ROSEWOOD, *starring Morris Chestnut. He was born and raised in Washington, DC and received his B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania. He resides in Venice, CA with his emotional support hog,* Future Bacon.

Creek House

Lorraine Reynolds

Lorraine works in a multiple mediums ranging from fabric, collage and assemblage to video and installation. She recently relocated from New England to the Midwest with her husband, her two sons and her enormously affectionate German Shorthair Pointer. She currently resides in Dodgeville, WI. She is trained as a Technical Designer in the apparel industry and has a secret other life as a Costume Designer for theatre and films.

Carousel

ky li

A bank of broken cumulus clouds
sprinkle across the morning sky
like popcorn on a theatre floor.
Effervescent pinks and lavenders
wash awake night's gray face
as she cat-stretches and yawns
her way over the slant horizon
where my eyes catch hers in rotation
from this igneous carousel, a glimpse
from the up-and-down pony ride
circling every twenty-four hours
blurring faces like Van Gogh
who whizzed by on a stippled giraffe
some distant and bygone starry night.

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Wrong Number

Josh Rank

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG to get my first call from an unrecognized number. It was the first or second day since transferring my phone service. Voicemails and text messages continued to interrupt my meals and shifts at the bar for the next two months. I grew annoyed. I grew desensitized. And by the time Bob finally made the decision to contact his estranged sister, I had had enough.

"Hey seems like we lost touch on Facebook. I miss seeing your beautiful face," he texted.

For all I knew, it was some high school kid trying to ask his crush to the prom. Unfortunately, I was looking for an excuse to lash out at the source of my continuous annoyance, and even though this was the first time I received a message from this number, it still registered to me as A Wrong Number.

Using a phone, be it through a call or a text, assumes at least a small level of trust between the sender and receiver. Anybody can click out some letters. Voices are distorted. So you have to trust the person on the other end of the line when they tell you they are who they say they are. I think everyone makes crank phone calls when they're young. It's part of growing up. Unfortunately, it was also part of being in my late-twenties, so I wrote back:

"Hey honey. Thanks for reaching out. It's so nice to hear from you."

I thought I could maybe get through a couple more messages before the sender figured it out. Everything would be fine, and I could go about my day. This idea lasted less than a minute before my phone dinged with the response:

"I'm so glad I got a hold of you. Reconnecting with my sister has become really important to me since Jeremy died."

Then, a moment later:

"You just don't know how terrible it is to lose a child until you lose one yourself."

My stomach took a dive, and my mouth hung open. A frigid river of regret poured through me and slowed my mind beyond a coherent response. I sat back into the couch. Rachel casually walked into the living room and, even though she couldn't tell my stomach turned into a sinkhole, knew something was up.

"What's up?" she asked.

I dropped my phone onto the cushion next to me and tried to force a smile. My mind soaked in the text conversation, and I had trouble focusing on anything else.

"Nothing," I said. I glanced at my phone. The situation was wet cement. Each moment

that passed only solidified it more. The longer I waited, the harder it would be to undo what I had done.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked.

"Nobody."

"You sure dropped that phone pretty quickly for talking to nobody."

I was almost relieved by her jealousy. The fact that there wasn't a sliver of truth to her insinuations somehow comforted me. I didn't need to feel bad for her suspicions because they were a fantasy. My regret and shame were wrapped into the fact that I tried to make a stupid joke and inadvertently led a stranger to believe he was on the way to re-building his life through connecting with his family. So she could be suspicious of something that didn't exist because I was more worried about her reaction to my immature lie. How would she view that? We had been together for two years but we had just moved in together. I should've been confident by now, but I also should've politely told this man he had the wrong number. I couldn't handle losing her respect. It was hard enough losing respect for myself.

I stood and walked over to her. "Really, let's just drop it. Okay?" I put my arms around her. She barely hugged me back. My shame and nervousness caused my heart to thump in my chest. I'm sure she could feel it.

It had been a few minutes since I received his last text. The cement was firm. There was no way I could go back and tell him I was just messing with him. He sounded fragile; a peak-to-valley emotional swing would be devastating. I tried several times to find a sentence that could end it all without destroying his psyche, inciting violence, or coming across as the asshole I firmly believed myself to be. Aside from going right back to my cellular provider—and demanding a new number—I was stuck. So when Rachel released me from our awkward hug and left the room, I picked up my phone, and continued with the terrible momentum I had initiated no more than five minutes before.

The next few days were filled with surreptitious messaging and troubled, fitful sleep. Each new message sent a shockwave of nervousness through me. I would scramble to see if it was from Rachel, work, or the man I had come to know as Bob. He told me about how he felt his reason for being on the Earth had died with his son; how losing contact with the rest of his family weighed on him daily; how it was the advice of a priest that convinced him to reach out to me in the first place. I tried to limit my responses to one- or two-word non-committal phrases, but that just left him with more room. He tried to call, which I obviously didn't answer. I knew I couldn't continue sitting in my bathroom and sending text messages to someone my girlfriend believed to be another woman.

In some way, I must have known it would lead to this, but it didn't occur to me until Bob finally sent it:

"I haven't felt this good since Jeremy died. Nothing would make me happier than seeing you in person."

There had been an obvious build up throughout our conversation, and if I were paying attention, I would have realized that a build up inevitably leads to a culmination. This was it. Like a man sitting at a poker table for too long, you don't notice incremental increases until the weight of it crushes you. And that's how it felt with Bob. It started with a little joke, and then all of a sudden I was being asked to meet my fake brother for lunch. I was disgusted. I needed to find some way to save face; otherwise, I would never forgive myself. I was far past the point where a text message or

a phone call would be appropriate. I needed to tell him face-to-face. After that, I would have to confess to Rachel. It might be somewhat of a relief to her that I wasn't cheating, but was being an immature liar much better?

Sitting on the lid of the toilet, the muffled voices from Rachel watching the news filtering through the bathroom door, I texted Bob:

"Name the place. I'll be there."

It was a little after noon when I walked into the restaurant. Known mostly for their burgers, the smell of the grill seemed almost tangible as I scanned the dining room. The walls were the color of ketchup and were lined with booths. Tables dotted the middle of the room, half of them with people enjoying lunch. Windows acted as the wall to the left of the door. That's where I saw a man sitting by himself. He had a glass of water, but no plate of food. The menu sat forsaken next to him. He alternated between studying the dining room and looking out of the window. We were only about ten feet from each other, but I might as well have been invisible. He was looking for his sister and everybody else was part of the backdrop. I walked up to him but didn't sit down.

"Are you Bob?" I asked the back of his head.

He glanced up for a moment but returned his attention to the window.

"And who the hell are you?" His voice was raspy and quiet, as if he was about to tell me a secret.

"Okay, well, this is kind of weird and try not to freak out—"

He glanced up at me again so I now spoke while holding eye contact. My heart raced. I had to force the breath from my lungs. If I paused, I wouldn't have been able to speak.

"—but I'm the one your supposed to meet here."

He looked at me for another moment and then shook his head.

"Get the hell out of here." He turned back to the window and acted as if I wasn't standing two feet to his left.

I couldn't find a way to make sense. How do you tell someone that the man standing next to him is his sister? I pulled out my phone and went back to the start of our conversation.

"I'm so glad I got a hold of you," I read aloud. "Reconnecting with my sister has become really important to me since Jeremy died."

He slowly turned his head and glared at me through squinted eyes.

I slid the phone back into my pocket and shrugged.

"Your sister got a new phone number," I said. "I'm sorry."

Bob glanced between the window and me before exhaling sharply. He shot another glare at me and held it. Reflexively, I took a step backwards. The added space between us seemed to pull him out of his seat. He stood as slowly as the steps I was taking away from him.

"I was talking to you?" His voice was still quiet, but now it had an edge.

I nodded. People at surrounding tables started taking notice.

Standing next to his table, he said again, louder, "I was talking to you?"

I wanted to explain that I thought he was a teenager, that I was sick of getting mistaken calls and texts, that I thought it was a harmless joke, but I couldn't form the words. Even if I could, he wouldn't have heard them. His anger inflated him. His reddening face looked like it could explode. His breaths were deep and fast. I figured that if I wasn't able to explain myself, I had no reason to see what form his

anger would take next. I quickly walked to the door, and after I was outside, ran to my car. I had done what I felt to be the honorable thing and confessed my sin in person. Letting Bob beat me senseless was a form of contrition I had no interest in. As I sped out of the parking lot, I didn't feel good, but I felt better.

I had six text messages from Bob by the time I got home, but I didn't read them. I knew they would be filled with curse words and, most likely, some form of a threat. But even if I wanted to open the messages, I didn't have time. Rachel was waiting for me.

"Where have you been?" she asked me as I closed the door behind myself.

"I, uh, I went out to lunch," I said.

"Oh really? And who with?" She had her arms crossed and her voice came out strong and indignant.

I sighed. After the confrontation with Bob, my energy was gone. Mentally exhausted, the desire to hide my transgressions had eroded to nothing. She would be relieved to hear I wasn't cheating on her. That part would feel good. But she wouldn't be happy to hear I had been pretending to be a woman and leading on another man.

"I met Bob," I said and hung my head.

"Who is…she?" Rachel's voice was a little shaky with doubt.

"Well, he's a he, and," I sighed again, "I'm the she."

She didn't say anything, just shook her head and squinted at me.

I sat on the couch and laid it all out for her. The weird calls and texts, my mis-reading of Bob's initial message, and everything up to the lunch. She sat down next to me as she processed my story.

"So, you're not seeing another woman?" she asked.

I shook my head.

She nodded and sat back into the couch. She looked relieved.

A minute passed as we sat in silence. I tried to convince myself that everything had worked out better than I had thought, that it was over. Rachel was thinking about something else.

"We have to find the real sister," she said.

"We what?"

"Confessing isn't enough. We have to find her."

I sat forward and shook my head. "But how? We don't even know her last name."

Another minute passed before she said, "Give me your phone."

I watched over her shoulder as she pulled up the many unrecognized numbers on the list of received calls. She selected one at random and hit the call button.

"Hello?" Rachel said into the phone. "Hi, yeah no this isn't her. She got a new number. Yeah. But listen, we're trying to find her. Personal emergency. Yup. What's her full name? Got it. Do you know where she works? Okay, that's fine. Yeah, thank you so much. Uh-huh. And don't call this number anymore. Bye."

She set the phone on the coffee table and smiled at me. "Jody Patrick." She nodded toward my phone. "Get to work."

I sighed and opened the Internet browser. It didn't take long to track down five different Jody Patricks, but there was only one within fifty miles. Another minute later, I found a scanned picture from her employment badge at the YMCA in Smyrna only half an hour away.

The excitement from our brief foray into the world of private investigation slowly died

during the drive, replaced by an increasing dread mixed with the now-familiar guilt. I would have to confess my sin yet again, and I was not looking forward to seeing the judgment pass through another person's eyes.

We parked in the YMCA parking lot and entered the air-conditioned building that smelled like a high school locker room. We didn't have to go more than ten yards before we came upon a folding table set up against the wall at the end of the hallway. A computer and a scanner sat on top. Jody Patrick sat behind it. Finding her was so easy that it seemed like a joke, but jokes are what started this whole mess in the first place.

"Badges are to be scanned over there, otherwise I can sign y'all up," Jody said tiredly.

"We're not here to sign up," said Rachel. She nudged me forward.

Jody looked up at me from her folding chair like she was waiting for me to place an order at a restaurant. Bored, uninterested, yet vaguely friendly. I took a deep breath and let it leak out of me before I spoke.

"Your brother wants to see you," I said.

At first, no reaction. She continued looking at me, studying my face, and I was worried we had the wrong Jody Patrick. Then she scoffed and shook her head.

"What the hell are you talking about?" she asked.

I thought about telling the same story I had told Rachel not even an hour before, but instead, I pulled out my phone, brought up my conversation with Bob, and slid it across the table. Jody picked it up and began scrolling.

"How in the hell—"

I recited my phone number. She looked up.

"It's my number now," I said. "You should really let people know you got a new one."

"So you just started pretending to be me?"

Rachel slapped a hand across my chest. "He's an idiot. He knows that."

"And how long were you planning on pretending to be a fifty-five-year-old woman?" asked Jody.

"Well, after I met him—"

"You met him?" Jody sat back in her chair and regarded me with wide, unbelieving eyes.

I nodded. "That's why we're here. I don't know what happened between you two, but he really seems to need you now."

"It's not that easy," Jody said as she started to scroll again through our conversation. "He's got such a temper."

I nodded. I could vouch for that.

"I tried to stay away from him long before Jeremy died. And when I heard about that—" She blew air out of her mouth in a voiceless whew.

"What happened?" asked Rachel.

"Bob's a harsh disciplinarian." She looked at me. "Which is why it's probably good you got out of there when you did." She returned her eyes to the phone on the table in front of her. "They were at a movie, some superhero movie, and Jeremy was being a little too rambunctious. Bob kicked him out. Made him sit in the car. It was a hundred degrees that day." She looked up at the ceiling.

"Oh my god," said Rachel.

"The police came but no charges were filed. It was an accident. Bob, I guess, was a total wreck. His wife left him. Couldn't separate him from the accident."

My guilt resurfaced and chewed up my insides.

Jody shrugged and stopped talking.

"Will you see him?" My voice came out shaky.

She shook her head. "It's been too long to just grab a plate of fries and carry on. I don't blame him for Jeremy, but it still came from his

crappy decision-making."

"Look, okay, so he has anger issues," said Rachel. "You don't think I have issues with some of the things this guy does?" She swatted at my shoulder. "He's still your brother. Like it or not, that's the way this family thing works." She reached forward and grabbed my phone off of the table, pulled up Bob's number, and hit the call button. After a brief glance at Jody, who sat quietly throughout this entire exchange, Rachel slid the phone across the table. We could hear the tinny ringing as it sat in front of Jody. After three sets of ringing, Bob picked up. The speaker was too quiet to hear exactly what he said, but the tone of his voice came through and it was not happy. Jody looked down at the phone and let her brother do a little yelling before she picked it up and put it to her ear.

"Hey Bob," she said. "Yeah, yeah it's me. I don't know. They just came walking in here."

Rachel and I retreated down the hallway to give them some privacy. From the look on Jody's face, it was not an easy call. Two minutes later, she set the phone back onto the table and we walked back.

"Well?" I asked.

"I don't want you to expect some fairy tale ending here where we have each other over for holidays and stuff," she said.

I nodded and glanced at Rachel, who was almost smiling.

"Are you going to see him?" she asked.

"We're having lunch tomorrow." Jody turned to me. "Don't consider this a victory. I'm only doing this because you put a gun to my head."

I nodded, grateful and ashamed at the same time.

Jody leaned back in her chair and groaned, probably envisioning the awkward lunch we had signed her up for. I leaned forward and grabbed my phone from the table.

"Yeah, go ahead," she said. "You've done enough damage with that thing."

I opened my messages and deleted the conversation with Bob.

"Thanks Jody," I said.

"Good luck," said Rachel.

We turned around and walked down the hallway, through the glass doors, and across the parking lot to the car. Once inside, I breathed a giant breath and wiped my hands across my face.

"Now what?" asked Rachel.

"I have to get a new phone number."

Josh Rank grew up in Appleton, Wisconsin, which is famous for Harry Houdini, Willem Defoe, and nothing else. After high school, he left for Milwaukee where he went to school for music before realizing he didn't need to know how to play an augmented G-major triad in the third inversion at eight different locations on the fret board. He eventually graduated from the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee with a BFA in creative writing. He's written a few unpublished novels and has had stories published in The Missing Slate, The Feathertale Review, Hypertext Magazine, The Oddville Press, The Satirist, Corvus Review, Inwood Indiana, *and elsewhere. He currently eats sandwiches in Nashville, TN. More ramblings can be found at* joshrank.com.

Kids Only

A.J. Rocca

THE KID NEEDS TO EAT. I pull into the lot of some dumpy diner, park the car, get out, start towards the entrance. Trying to remember what's in my wallet, trying to remember if I remembered to pay back Joey for—something's wrong. Can't hear the constant stream of words floating up from my knees. Turn around. I see the kid rapping on the car window, breathing himself a long, misty mustache on the glass. Damn passenger door never opens on a cold day.

I come over and yank on the handle until the ice crystals break and take the kid by the hand. He pulls us to the restaurant, tugging on his own arm like a Pomeranian on a leash. We're not wearing gloves, so I can feel his little finger bones. He says something about Jesus visiting his pet rabbit from school. Something about how when it's winter the sky looks like a sidewalk you can walk on. White clouds puff from his mouth just like in the comic strips, except that you can't see the words.

We spin through the revolving door out from the cold/fresh and into the warm/stale.

It's a diner like every diner. Taxidermy pies arranged behind a display case; the smell of grease and burned sugar and sweat so thick it sticks to the walls. Billy Joel or Leonard Cohen whine on the radio. There's only a couple people from table to table, most of them old, all of them poor, none of them happy.

Me and the kid wait at the front to be seated. The fat waitress walks by with a tray, all jowls and folds of pastel pink. She gives us a nasty look that says go fuck yourselves.

"Go seat yourselves," she says.

We find a booth with a comfy, ripped cushion and wait awhile. There's a guy sitting a couple booths down from us who is black. Kid starts talking again.

Something about something he saw on TV.

"Uh huh."

Something about something he something.

"Uh huh."

Black guy looks up at us. His eyes are bloodshot. I can see he's having the hangover special: strong coffee and two Advil tablets with a side of toast. I know the hangover special.

The fat waitress comes over, wading through her pastel rolls like quicksand. She flips two menus on the table like a dealer dealing cards.

"Drinks?" she groans.

"Coffee; black," I groan back.

"Got milk?" he chimes.

She goes to get them. I open the menu and start to look through it. The kid does too.

He can't read yet, but he likes to copy me.

I read down the list of breakfast stuff. My eyes skip over the food and go straight for the numbers on the right: eight dollars—elevn with tax and tip, from 280 leaves 269. Six—eight with tax and tip, from 280 leaves 272...

Always been pretty quick with numbers. Teacher used to say I could've been a scientist or something. Well I think I just came up with the winning equation:

Burnt toast + eggs over easy + nigger tip (burnt toast + eggs over easy) = just enough left to make rent.

The kid squeals.

"What?!"

He's so excited he can't even talk. He flips over the menu on the table and starts jabbing his finger at a picture of a pancake. I can't see what's so special about it until I read next to it

Mickey Mouse Pancake.....9.00
(Kids only)

Now I can see it. Those two bumps at the top are supposed to be the ears, and the cook wasn't just being cheap with the whipped cream, but drawing Mickey his face.

"That's a bit expensive, kiddo. Why don't you just get the normal pancake? It's got all the same stuff."

Something about being a loyal Mouseketeer.

"Yeah sure, but—"

Something about having Mickey pajamas and Mickey bedsheets.

"Okay, but—"

Something about his mother getting him all that Mickey stuff. Little bastard.

The waitress heaves herself back over, gives the kid his milk, pours my coffee, and takes out a pad and pen.

"What'll it be?"

The kid's still going on about that Mickey pancake.

"Uh, two eggs over easy with a side of toast, and he'll have—"

It's the look that the waitress gives me, the 'bad parent' look, which does it. Fine bitch, it's coming out of your tip.

"He'll have the Mickey Mouse pancake."

She scribbles the order into the pad and heaves her fat ass away. Nine dollars (11.50 with tax & tip) for a goddamn pancake.

The kid seems happy at least. Now he's running his mouth a mile a minute. I sip my coffee and try to enjoy it. It tastes like burnt dish water, but it's hot.

Something about Donald.

Something about Minnie.

Something about…black guy giving my kid a look. He catches my eye and looks back down at his hangover special, but I know what I saw.

Fat ass comes back about ten minutes later with the food. She sets the plates down only a little more gently than the menus and walks away. The toast isn't burnt, but they made up for it by hardboiling the eggs. I look over at the eleven-and-a-half-dollar pancake. Mickey isn't quite so pretty in person. His ear looks a little chewed on the edges, and his award-winning smile seems to be dripping down his face a bit. And his eye color has mysteriously changed from blue(berries) to brown (chocolate?). The kid is smiling though.

"Well, eat up."

I knife a little jelly on my toast and salt my Easter eggs. Take a couple bites of toast and snap a whole half of egg in my mouth; hungrier than I thought. I swig some dishwater coffee and start on the second egg. Kid's stopped talking, must be busy chewing. Good. Everything

is good for a while.

The coffee's gone and I'm down to my last piece of toast when I look up and see the kid is just staring down at his untouched pancake. He isn't smiling anymore.

"What's wrong," I ask.

"I can't," he says. Well, it is a pretty big pancake.

"Need me to cut it up for you?"

I grab a knife and fork and stick Mickey in the ear.

The kid cries and almost cuts himself grabbing at my knife hand.

The kid tells me to leave Mickey alone. Something about not wanting to be canned-able.

Canned-able?

Canned-able…

Cannibal.

I laugh.

"That's not the real Mickey Mouse, kiddo, just a pancake."

The kid doesn't say anything, but he's still holding tight on my hand. The pancake is getting cold.

"Eat, Matty. I know you're hungry."

He says he's not.

"We're not going grocery shopping until tomorrow. You need to eat now."

He says he won't.

Getting angry.

"Well, what do you want to do with the damn thing?" I ask. "Hang it in your room with your other Mickey Mouse crap? You're eating this pancake, Matt."

"No," he says.

The kid needs to eat. I push his hand back and carve off a piece of Mickey's ear.

"No!" he screams. Black guy grits his teeth.

I lift up the fork with the bit of ear and have Mickey give it a whipped cream kiss.

"Open up," I tell him.

The kid presses his lips tight and shakes his head.

"Goddamnit, Matt."

I snatch his nose and pinch. He holds his breath for a long time, but when his mouth finally splits open, I slip the pancake in.

"If you spit this out, we're headed straight for the bathroom."

He doesn't spit it out. He chews slowly and swallows. I cut another piece of ear and use it to scoop up Mickey's left eye.

"Open."

I don't have to snatch his nose this time, but he's still crying. Bits of pancake come flying out between blubbers, but he gets most of it down. I pour some pretend maple syrup over the pancake and melt Mickey's face.

"It tastes good, huh?" I ask the kid, popping Mickey's strawberry nose into his mouth.

He nods and chews, crying more loudly than ever.

We're about halfway through the pancake. The black guy just can't get his eyes off us. Mind your own business, black guy. This here's a family restaurant, black guy. Go nurse your hangover somewhere else.

"Hey man, shut that kid up."

Knife and fork slam down on the table, and I'm up on my feet.

"What'd you say, motherfucker?"

Now everyone's looking.

The black guy stares at me with eyes like two red telescopes. He starts sliding out from his booth, but he's slow. He gets out just in time for me to come over, grab him by his jacket, and toss him into the fire extinguisher hanging on the wall. The extinguisher goes ding and falls to the floor along with black guy. I come to grab him again, but he puts his hands up.

"Yeah," I say to him. "Fuck you."

I shouldn't have done this.

I walk back to our table and see the kid's eyes and sandy mop peeping up from behind the booth, watching. Fat ass waitress has somehow tucked almost all of her pastel folds behind the register and is dialing a phone.

"Hello, police?"

I really, really shouldn't have done this.

"Come on," I say to the kid. I grab him by the hand and coax him out from his seat. Now I'm the one pulling him, little finger bones sticking hard into my hand. We walk through the revolving doors back into the parking lot and make for the car. I look back at the people looking at us through the diner's window. There are no comic strip clouds coming from the kid now.

I shatter the ice crystals on the passenger door with one yank and buckle the kid in. Once I'm behind the wheel, I turn the ignition and slam on the gas. We swerve over the ice and onto the street to hide in the traffic. I look over to the kid. He's shaking a little so I start blasting the heat.

"Did you get enough to eat?" I ask.

His head rattles up and down a few times. There's pretend maple syrup all over his face and dripping down his front. I pet him on the back of the neck.

"Good."

A.J. Rocca is an alumnus of Western Illinois University and a fervent disciple of the three Rs: Reading, writing, and running...he dropped math class for track. He has run all over the world, and at time of publication is running around Sydney, Australia. He writes short stories, critical essays, and the occasional YouTube video script, and his work has been published at the Prairie Light Review *and on* Popmatters.com. *He is also a passable piano player, and he likes to watch cartoons. You can follow him on twitter* @AJromeda *and find more of his work on his website,* ajrocca.com.

#311

Amy Jacoby

i will build a holy place apart from you
i will transfix myself
into the heat of this pain

and i will be reborn

i am the consequence
of your deception
i was the decadence that you warped
into decay

you once called me a moth to flame
because in that time
you bound my eyes and called me blind

you relished in your cleverness
because you never understood

i am the flame

Mara

Ben Rosenthal

THE CABLE MAN said the leafcutter must have climbed the roof and done something silly; some misdirected end run around the power lines, and in taking his shears to the hanging palm, cut the line that ran four hundred and eighty-six HD channels (excluding premiums) into the posh den of Bunny Weidman's ranch-style home. Mara went into the guesthouse and retrieved the only ladder she could find. She presented it to the repairman, whose coverall nametag read Narek. He was a darkish-colored Armenian, thick, potbellied, his face oddly rotund, like an infant's.

"Be an hour, think," he said. "I will run a new line, clip this to the siding with a clip. Then we'll resend the signal from central."

"Okay," said Mara. "I'll tell Doctor Weidman that's what you're doing."

She rounded the house where Tommy was shining his rims. Her lipstick was on his neck and it looked like part of his tattoo. He looked up at the roof.

"That's the guy?"

"He is," said Mara.

Tommy squinted. About twelve feet under the pitched roof, on the deck overlooking the swimming pool where Bunny Weidman sat reading about the sports cars he would happily lend to his fetching tenant, was Stan Weidman, still in his bathrobe, pantomiming golf strokes, sipping warm morning coffee.

"You know," said Tommy, eyeing Stan. "Once they fix that line that prick is going to be a feature of this place."

"Who are you to complain?"

"Who are you? Do you want me to get started on that?"

"Right on," said Mara, "You just wrench."

She walked away, noting the color splash of Tommy's new bull rider tattoo as he bent to crank the jack.

Narek set the ladder up and began climbing.

Mara McNamara was a runaway. New Jersey had held a receding claim on her but now and then it would stab out, sting her like a prank-calling ex. She had, at the age of eighteen, asserted her position with her mother fundamentally. It was the culmination of a verbal sparring that began when her father fled the manor to skirt chase his way across Monmouth County with a trunkful of widgets he could sell. He'd phone them from lesser hotels, Day's Inns and Econo Lodges, Red Roofs and Marriots as far south as Cherry Hill, never saying what the trunk held or what exactly was the gambit. In the coming months, Joe

McNamara would alight in rural Tennessee with a cosmetician from Moldova by his side. Somehow Mara was seen as the cause of his leaving; having flouted her mom's edicts, having "dabbled" in white Incan substances; but really, having done nothing more than be her daughter. At long last, there in the linoleum, she and her mother, a former majorette in Parsippany whose try at hawking Mary Kay to homemakers came to a lot of handwringing when the HQ got frightened calls about the kind of roundabout whack-spiels the wives were getting, had it all out in a plate hurling contest. But it wasn't the back and forth about dad or even the crashing ceramic sounds that were so liberating to mom and daughter; it was the airing out of something words, and even plate hurling, could only begin to grope at.

The Lindo Baby was resettled. It was down to Mom.

That was indisputable.

So Mara tore out, fled to the depot, a striking brow gash from one of her mother's side-armed tosses likely a permanent trademark on her face.

A westbound Trailways out of Elizabethtown was like an air-suspension horse wagon running her across the Great Divide. At the end of I-40 she would cannibalize her pipe dreams in the fast lane, L.A. style. Failure was written into its nuclei, her nuclei. That was the plan. Why not cry uncle in a warmer place? The solar rays of L.A. had a cleansing fluorescence, nothing like the spuming greys that hung over the rooftops of those tidy and judgmental Tudor tracts in Bayonne.

She thought she'd "act".

Thus weekly improv group sessions in which she played the ditz (less present wit demanded) allowed her to explore her range. She auditioned for a small one-act opposite a declining soap star and summarily "went up" on her chosen "sides." Did she really care whether she was a medium between words on a page and eyes that were only pinned on her décolleté? Did she care about anything? Acting was a religion to some people as likewise religion was acting to most. The secular choice was to fade, do nothing; not even temp, waste away backdating insurance claims in a dental office, or sire more kids. The trick was to find a pool and wake up beside it at sixty-five, half keeled over on Bloody Ma and breaded kale, lounging until the mortuary claimed you.

To that effect, she now cohabitated in a craftsman split ranch owned by the semiretired urologist, Arnold "Bunny" Weidman, and had to ritually deflect his no-go golf pro of an offspring, Stan, who would come around and beg his scrip pad while wearing the wraparound sunglasses that cinched his scanty locks into a ducktail. Mara thought a guy like this didn't need to open his mouth to be an asshole. What he wanted was usually painkillers, sometimes a bit more zip. On one of his visits he saw Mara binning trash near the guesthouse and became a solid fixture for a week. When nothing amorous came to pass, he took his scripts and removed himself back to the links around Alameda, where biotech wunderkinds were sealing deals near the water hazards and would pay through the nose for his golfing knowhow. He was back again this weekend, on the fiend, and Mara missed the spatial fluidity, the good spans when she only waited on Bunny Weidman, slipping a dustpan under broom hairs and sometimes running errands in his Kharman Ghia. The unmarriable physician was eyeing her like a caged dog on those errand drives, his eyes seizing on her midriff and her soft manipulating of the spoked wheel. He was a fiddle she could play, whether it would be a jig or a symphony was

up to her. For now, eschewing his company, she would try and take those drives alone. Clear the mind. She would buy tacos al pastor above the Tujunga Wash and then stare at the fly-buzzing water, the stalled trough of diverted river sludge that began as rainwater in the heavens. She would eat tacos and watch trespassing coyotes holding their sunset battles in the channel mud. Sometimes she would drive to overlooks which gave her a less impeded survey of the balding molehills, the dried San Gabriel Mountains, their brush kindling wildfire distress signals to her place among the chaparral. She would greet these distress signals. She would live in them.

Narek was hammering in a new line and beating away fronds from the nearby palm. His banging was spaced, more like an inebriated door knocking than a hammering of the utility type.

Mara sat by the pool and modeled her silver pedicure for the urologist, letting her feet slap the surface of the water. He admired her from his chair but made no motions. Up on the roof deck Stan in the paisley bathrobe chain-smoked his vape sticks and peeked out indifferently at the chlorinated lagoon with its bright rim of ersatz sea coral, at the seamless nothing-going-on down there. He looked and amid the nothing saw the muscular ax-thumping roustabout Mara went to bed with at night, swimming breaststrokes. Mara let the straps fall on her bikini top. Bunny Weidman perused Road & Track; doggedly unaroused behind his mag. Mara looked over the landscaping, not so much chuffed at the premium digs as just observing where she'd fetched up. She noted at once the atavistic plant life a bladder doctor could trick out his prefab spread with, the Japanese lantern skiffs in the waterless fishpond cut in handsomely by the sandstone walkway. There were Bose speakers tacked to Palo Verdes so primordial noises could accompany some early morning Tai Chi. A birdfeeder proffered suet to scrub jays and a plasma screen fireplace rippled.

She fell in and out of sleep now; at the moments she would wake up, she would look at Tommy, another whack across the chops from her own hand. Why Tommy, who played dank rooms and slashed through feedback-heavy, only nominally ironic country punk. When he wasn't fouling the air with his Rickenbacker, he was showering Mara with the bright stubble shavings of his true love. He wanted to shotgun it in the desert with her to some outpost wedding chapel but Mara wondered seriously if she would ever return alive. She had seen him level a band mate with a Kryptonite bike lock for doing nothing more than breaking tempo on a power-chord sandblaster indistinguishable all the other noise he ever made. He drove a refurbished black Packard with flame trails to his gigs and his arm read Lucy, You Got Some Splainin To Do, the inking courtesy of the El Sereno tattoo shop he co-ran with a quasi-remediated arsonist from Gardenia. He was not a violent guy, just you know it, and he believed Israel downed the Twin Towers; furry, iniquitous Shin Bet had placed covert calls to Zionist fellow travelers awaiting the high sign from Tel Aviv in the sky lobby. "Clear out. Incoming. Zein gazunt."

Tommy thought this Bunny Weidman was bound to swansong early. A rancid porridge of unaired thoughts was surely stewing in his body canals, mostly regarding the bum-son Stan. And really, one only had to look at his bed table: a murderer's row of Pepto Pinks, anticoagulants, Benefibers; Prilosecs in seven day squares.

"I won't pimp you," Tommy said to Mara once, "But you'n give him eyeful here and there, you know. Flash those headlights in some clear lace. Guy's got a sweet spot, you know?"

"I don't want to use him any more than I am," she said. "He's sad."

"He's a profiteer," said Tommy. "Know your pharma."

Now her man was fake-ruddering in the water, wetting down those stupid "tats". She reapplied her Coppertone and closed her eyes once more. The hammering from the cable man had stopped a while back, her mind had traced that.

"Hey, Stan," yelled Tommy, buoyant on a duck raft, "Nice robe."

"I'm glad you admire it," Stan replied nasally from the deck. "Is that a bull rider you've got on your carotid?"

"Sure as day."

Tommy spun into the depths off the raft, kicking up a great deal of spray. When he came up again he peered at the top gable.

"Doctor Weidman," he said, after a moment, "That guy is still up on the roof."

Mara opened her eyes.

"What?" said the doctor.

"The high speed guy from the cable company."

Weidman lowered his Road & Track.

"Hmm," he said, as though having spotted a rare bird.

"He's just sitting there," said Tommy.

"Maybe taking a break."

"But Doctor Weidman," said Tommy, scratching his new bull rider, "The line is in. The guy like finished it an hour ago."

Stan went over to the gable first. From the pool, they saw him talking to the cable man, his head shaking back and forth, hands flexed into the pockets of his robe. The cable man seemed to be dispensing wordless kernels, like an Indian baba would, his movements spare and precise, his mouth sealed. Stan shrugged at the man and walked back over to the pool, shaking his head.

"He's not talking," he said.

"What do you mean, he's not talking?" said Tommy, slicking his hair back with force.

"He's just sitting there." Stan shrugged.

"Does he seem dehydrated?" asked Weidman.

"No, dad, he seems fine. He just won't talk or move."

"What if he's having a stroke?" said Mara.

"Nah, that's not it," said Stan. "He's just, I dunno, he's like in some place. You know, a zone. I don't think he's happy."

The four of them walked over under the gable.

Bunny smiled up at the man, "How's it goin', buddy?"

The man said nothing.

"Mister," said Mara, eyes in a mercy squint, "Why don't you want to come down? Are you okay?"

Narek shrugged his shoulders, his mouth furling in little glum ticks.

"The hell is that?" said Tommy. "He shrugs?"

Mara placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

Bunny Weidman took a second, smiled at Narek like a realtor and said, "I'll bet that system is running famously. You seem to know your wires. Have they resent the signal? We real get antsy in this household without our cable on, kind of jones for our weekday lineup. So thank you, man. But much as I hate to add this, we're going to have to call some people in authority if you won't take those splicers

there and, you know, come down."

Narek shrugged again. Stan half-giggled into the cloth of his robe.

Tommy bit his own hand and said, "Where's the ladder?" Mara pointed at the roof. The ladder lay on its side, folded, next to Narek.

"You don't have another one?" said Tommy. Weidman shook his head.

"Listen, guy," said Tommy. "This is not what a repairmen does. You did the work, now get into the van that you came in. I'm not gonna tell you again."

Narek grunted but said no more. He looked even glummer now.

Stan said, "At least tell me the cable works. I mean at least tell me that."

Weidman Senior shook his head, walked inside, clicked on the remote and gestured in the affirmative. Stan puffed out some air.

Mara stared at Narek on the gable. Tommy jazzed his eyes around. There were no lintels or footholds he could see, no landing on which to hoist himself up to where the Armenian was sitting; it was sheer under the top and even the split portion on the lower side was unclimbable.

"Shit. Ain't this a bitch," said Tommy.

"We could wait him out?" said Stan.

"I don't wanna wait him out."

Mara thought Tommy was working too hard to convince the elder Weidman he was an ally, a loyal lieutenant who stood for the peace of the ranch and undoubtedly deserved the perks. Finally, his temper could be trained on something beyond noise. But it was agitating everybody.

Bunny Weidman stepped back onto the deck through the sliding door. He shook some horse pills out of a tinted phial and downed them with some wheatgrass slurry Stan had left burbling in the blender. Narek had sat his ample fundament right on the pitch of the gable roof and he looked like something in a storybook.

They had gone back to the pool to wait him out but it just wasn't working. Tommy seemed to be doing anger revs, the sort of knuckle-cracking foreplay of a man who doesn't want to spend his wad before he can work up a full torrent. Mara knew Weidman had brooked Stan and Stan's misgivings about launching himself into anything with solid rigor, so he could, for a while, brook Narek. Mara worried about Narek. She told them not to call the police. It was for her they were refraining. This was power, she guessed. They were being courtly.

But the man wasn't moving, and try as they might to stretch this impasse into a war of sunburned attrition, there was the question of liability remaining. He might slide off the roof and impale on the lattice. The dumb old hulking sulker might just heatstroke and sue.

Tommy passed under the roof where Narek was sitting and messily eating a Snicker's bar.

"Live it up, faggot," Tommy said. "I'll bet that nougat is just boss."

"Don't talk like that," Mara said, walking behind him. "He's not in a good way."

"I hope you like eating mice, asshole, because you're gonna be out of a job faster than you can spit."

Bunny Weidman had put his clothes on (kakis, square-toed henna slippers, a paisley shirt identical in color to Stan's bathrobe) and planted himself next to them.

"Maybe we should spray him with the sprinkler water," he said.

"Electrolytes," said Stan, pantomiming a 9-iron swing.

"I'm going to the neighbor's to get a ladder," said Tommy, "and when I come back, I suggest you ditch the roof, man. Doc doesn't have time for this. Maybe Stan does but doc doesn't. Mara's got scripts to read. Mara's face here is gonna be in lights. Everyone has got dreams, Bluto, and we can't just wait for you to be mindful up there before we hit the ground running on them, you know? You effing register me?"

The man maybe did or didn't smile a tiny bit, and remained stationary on the gable. He was sitting what used to be called Indian Style but was now called crisscross-apple-sauce.

Stan said, "You think at least it would be hurting his buttocks."

Weidman said, "All right, I can't have this, we've got to call the black and tans."

Stan said, "What if he's suicidal?"

Tommy said: "good, I'll climb up there with some mountaineering shit and write his own note for him."

"Why don't you just play your music?" said Stan. "He'll roll right off." Tommy quick- faked a smile and then socked Stan in the jaw and Stan went down just that quickly. His lip was fat upon rising, and before they knew it he had gone right back down again.

Narek on the roof shook his head back and forth in parochial condemnation.

"You hit him!" said Mara. She socked Tommy in the side. "What are you taking these days?"

"I'm a mess," said Tommy. "I'm displacing shit. Hence the force of my sound. Have you noticed how hard my music's getting?"

Bunny Weidman looked down at his son Stan.

"You all right?"

"Lip is, I dunno," he said.

"Teeth?"

Stan wiggled them: all clear. Bunny pulled out his cellphone and walked a few steps away.

"Who you calling?" asked Tommy.

"The black and tans," said Weidman, almost casually.

"On him or me?" said Tommy, pointing at the roof.

"Both," said Weidman.

It was only a matter of minutes before the police and the fire department were there. Tommy got cuffed. The Weidmans, thinking only of Mara, implored them to let him remain on the scene, but two tall men led him down the Japanese rock garden to their cruiser. The pitched roof was just low enough that one didn't have to raise their voice but pretty quick the marshal seized the chance, producing a handheld loudspeaker through which he would try to talk the Armenian down. The firemen were loath to go up there because the man was big and, owing to his sprawled arsenal of weighted cable wires, could potentially be a threat.

Where had this Armenian been, Mara wondered? What was his main distraction? His, his deal, as Tommy would say. He was sitting crisscross on the roof tile and barely meditative, and though the Palo trees were losing leaves to the propeller wind of a fast-banking local news copter, his sparse hairs were barely flicking. She could swear he was looking at her, through her. He seemed dumb and wise at once, the way babies did; the way they silently judged you. The boy within him was here, surfacing; hypnotizing her. Did he know the Lindo Baby or was the Lindo baby his eyes in his head? "Que lindo," she mouthed to Narek, but he said nothing in return. Why would he? The Spanish salon girls in Bayonne, those tousling mamacitas next door, when she'd wheeled the baby by, had always said "Que lindo" and "frio" when it was too cold and she hadn't the plain reserves of motherly finesse to bundle

the little one up. Her mother Linda eventually offered to watch the child when Mara was too stunned, too slung out, too working, but the mother took palmfuls of Ambiens and soon collapsed in a leaf pile hallucinating about God knows-what. The child, wet from the leaves, was found walking in circles around the mother, a fulminating halfwit speechifying to a Breathalyzer and a badge. She had not taken her wallet with her, had sought no friends beyond the promotion of her Mary Kay, so nobody knew who she was or to whom the child belonged. There was a marauding look-see cruise in squad car 109 to poll residents of the housing tracts but eventually they took the little unnamed to the precinct, pro forma measures. Calls were made, hours fizzled, and quickly ACS commandeered the stripling because time lapsed and they did that. By the time Mara got home from the Vitaldent the boy had been "placed". They couldn't wait forever. There was a warring courtroom but it was only a little warring. Mara was not flush, only seventeen, and the Mastersons lived in Montvale, which was nicer; eventually visitations would dwindle and it was decided the child fared best in an atmosphere of "consistency". The last time she saw him, the time that mattered, he was simply playing on the Jungle Jim; calling out regimental orders to the step sibs. He gave her a quick hug, his face turned to the side, when she went away. A stoplight at a jug handle, an onramp, and she was zipping along Route 4 in no time. Raindrops.

Que lindo? The cable man wasn't going anywhere. He was all crisscross applesauce and no-no. He was staying put. Mara had Stan planting a hand on one shoulder and the senior Bunny Weidman on the other, imploring her to please step back, using the cop's own talk. The copter rotors were blurring everything. She wouldn't move.

The Armenian smiled with his eyes. His lids, when he did it, made a kind of nascent flutter and it was clear, very clear, this was a place like many other places she had been and would be and could never call home; there would be no place like that for this mother.

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Robert and Clara

Robert Wexelblatt

FROM THE FIRST, Robert's wooing of Clara was an onslaught. E-mails, midnight phone calls, and then, after that first afternoon, more sublime sex than she'd imagined possible. Robert's passion, insistent and excessive yet sincere, simply overwhelmed her. In public he couldn't keep from putting a finger on her elbow, brushing her shoulder, fixing her hair. He loved to rehearse their meeting, swearing his knees buckled when he caught a whiff of her nape, even before he glimpsed her face. He said he dreamed of her every dawn and woke aroused. Robert gave her a slew of presents. There were black-and-white stills from her favorite movies (The Philadelphia Story, The Wizard of Oz, Adam's Rib), a guillotine bagel slicer, a bonsai juniper, a three-tiered necklace with stones the color of her eyes. He shyly whispered his fantasies to Clara. How he imagined her at the sink in nothing but a short apron or supine with whipped cream on her stomach. He described complicated variations on erotic massage. To her surprise, Clara sometimes consented to act out these scenarios. Her life had changed because of this man who seemed always to be two things at once: aflame and devoted, demanding and considerate, indirect but candid, aggressive yet bashful. When he asked about her fantasies, Clara was at a loss and said she supposed he was her fantasy. She recalled how her grandmother's friends used to pinch her and squeal, the way old women do, "Oh, I could just eat you up." Robert said the same thing but really meant it. His favorite joke about her diet was: "If I come back as a cannibal I promise I'm only going to eat vegetarians."

After a month of this rush, Clara underwent a crisis. Was all this intensity and importunity just too much? Could it be trusted? She ran through all the clichés. You're suffocating me. … I need space. . . I'm not the paragon you take me for… This is bound to burn out… But Clara was divorced and thirty-three. She had been alone for a long time. Robert was thirty-four and had never married at all. She confided in two friends. Linda warned Watch out! Go for it! said Bonnie. Clara would have preferred that someone say something that ended with a period, including her mother.

Clara's doubts about Robert led to a moment of weakness; she violated her rule about discussing her love life with her mother whose curiosity she invariably discouraged. But when her mother invited her for a dinner at a new French restaurant, Clara stared into her apéritif and broached the topic or Robert, perhaps because she could think of little else.

Clara wasn't sure she could rely on anything her mother might say. She had settled so seamlessly and complacently into the martini-bridge-and-luncheon-fueled sorority of widows that Clara wondered if all that crying when her father's heart gave out might have been owing more to relief than grief. Nevertheless, Clara sketched an expurgated portrait of her relationship with Robert and raised her concerns. Her mother smiled then reached across the table and touched Clara's hand. Do you love him? Do you love him, Clara? I mean, isn't that all that matters? Three question marks. Again, no periods.

Well, Clara wasn't suffocating and, before Robert's assault, had had enough space to get lost in. She enjoyed her job as an administrative assistant at a private music school; she liked her apartment, had a few friends, vegetarian cooking, Netflix, and the library. Her less-than-two-year goof of a marriage to Wesley Doty, a Southern Baptist, felt as far away as junior high acne and the taste of roast beef. Was she flattered by Robert's ardor or sex-addled? Was she scared of being alone? Love had always seemed to her a mystery, a fairy tale, a vaguely shining thing that Cinderella felt for her vaguely shiny prince.

To her mother's sentimental questions Clara replied Of course. But it might have been more truthful to say all she knew was that she didn't want Robert to go away, like a fish who gobbles up the bait then slips the hook.

One of the dozen love poems Robert wrote for Clara was nearly a sonnet; at least it had fourteen lines and a crazy rhyme scheme. It commemorated the day he'd borrowed a friend's boat and taken her out sailing. They were two landlubbers messing with the gear and joking about being swept out to sea. The August sun was strong but, when the wind sprang up and raised alarming waves, he tossed the anchor overboard and wrestled down the sail. "Well," he said, "if we lie down it'll be warm; we won't feel the wind." Then he undressed her.

Content to be our mouths and hands
we lay tangled all the afternoon
close gathered in the seine that snared
us by our hair and clutched our feet
beneath the sun well off from land
floundering so we could scarcely wait:
our union's net could not tighten soon
enough. We coupled, the hour grew late;
in late summer light we stared
at the bodies our own once more
sprawled atop that stiff canvas sheet,
our common wish to be one again and
to stretch and arch like two gasping fish
leaving the world to fret itself ashore.

For Robert, it was love at first sniff. He and Clara had both been invited to a wedding—her cousin, his colleague—and both had come alone. He sent steak knives (Nobody should enter matrimony unarmed, he joked on the card). She chose matching linen placemats and napkins (Congratulations! Hope these match your colors!). Clara had been in front of Robert at the buffet. When he leaned over her shoulder to see what was on offer his knees really did buckle. With this olfactory coup de foudre, his blitz of desire began.

Clara, Robert confided to his friend Rahul, didn't just smell good; it was more than good. Not like other women. Like childhood. Like the safest place on earth. Like home.

Rahul smiled. "Pheromones," he said knowingly.

It was odd, Robert said, because recently some things that used to smell and taste just fine had become repugnant to him. What things? Just a few. Cola, tangerines, Cheerios, both his mouthwash and after-shave.

Rahul knew a guy in college who had the same problem, sudden changes of taste. Turned out to be magnesium deficiency. "You should really check with your doctor."

Robert didn't go to the doctor and he didn't tell Clara about this problem. It seemed so minor. Besides, he didn't want her to think him in any way defective.

He bought a ring and made an October reservation at a B&B in New Hampshire. "Mostly bed but breakfast too," he quipped. "We'll go hiking. The foliage will be fantastic."

When they reached the top of Mount Adams he proposed.

Clara said yes, and insisted on a June wedding.

"June? But that's eight months away," he protested.

"I'm sorry. I'm a terribly conventional girl."

"Then I'll marry you conventionally and love you in my fashion."

Even if it wanted to science couldn't help shouldering mystery aside with superstition. A good thing, too. The person in the lab coat is the pinnacle of evolution so far, the consciousness of the cosmos, albeit a tiny and often puffed-up one.

So it was with the mystery of Robert's passion for Clara. What's notable isn't that he desired her or the immediacy of his infatuation, but that this sudden sexual impulse should turn at once to love, the real thing. Even a coup de foudre ought to require days or weeks for that, some time for feeling to permeate the lover's being. For Robert, a man who had run though a dozen women and was content to go for a long stretches without any, this ardent and monogamous emotion for Clara was a first. He was crazy about her but in a steady way.

When Robert developed a bad taste in his mouth that it wouldn't go away, he finally made an appointment to see Dr. Kaufman who was, as always, brisk and cordial as doctors can afford to be with the healthy. After listening to Robert's account of his symptoms, he quickly diagnosed acid reflux, and referred him to a gastroenterologist. "Nothing terribly unusual, nothing to worry you. He'll make sure it's reflux and give you a prescription that should take care of it." However, Dr. Mulrennan ruled out reflux and, as if to demonstrate how unconcerned he was, played casually with his new goatee. "It happens sometimes," he said. "Tastes can change with age. True, you're kind of young for that sort of thing, but it's not at all unknown. Can happen at any age, really. And it can go away as quickly as it arrived."

Robert might have left it at that—satisfied with root beer and non-alcoholic mouthwash—but then he developed a new symptom, a slight blurring of vision in his right eye. In dim light things looked filmy around the edges, like flashbacks in bad movies. So he went back to Dr. Kaufman who still spoke breezily but looked a little more grave this time. "Maybe we should get some pictures. Just to be prudent." And that's how Robert came to the office of Dr. Shirani, a courtly clinical neurologist and adjunct professor of medicine. At the University he conducted brain research.

Dr. Shirani ordered a Flow-Sensitive MRI, for which there would be a week's wait. "Why Flow-Sensitive?" Robert asked because he'd never heard the term. "Oh,

just a personal preference," Dr. Shirani said in the Oxbridge English that made him sound like God in one of Hollywood's biblical epics. "As much aesthetic as anything else. They're rather pretty."

Robert wanted to tell Clara everything that night; he even wondered whether he was obliged to do so. But then he considered that not having done said anything already was bound to upset her; she might be angry with him. Still, it wasn't easy to keep from betraying his anxiety.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, no. Everything's fine."

"You're sure? You seem a little on edge."

"Absolutely peachy."

Dr. Shirani's nurse wouldn't divulge the results over the phone. Was that bad or just protocol? Robert was a technical writer who worked by project rather than the clock. His hours were flexible so it was not a problem to take a morning off to hear the verdict in person.

The half-hour he spent in the waiting room felt much longer. He didn't like the bland prints on the wall, the dated magazines, the way everybody avoided looking at one another. He felt some irrational hostility toward the receptionist and wondered if the glass that separated her from the patients was bulletproof.

Dr. Shirani sat behind his desk scrutinizing pictures of Robert's brain. It was a few seconds before he looked up. He smiled tightly.

"There's good news and, I'm afraid, some bad as well."

Robert thought that to somebody in Shirani's line of work anything short of a death sentence would seem like good news.

The doctor got up, motioned to Robert, and laid the pictures on a metal table in a corner. The table had a light in it, which the doctor switched on. "Look just here."

Robert looked there. His brain tried to take in the picture his brain. It looked like an abstract painting, not an especially beautiful one.

"See this? It's called a colloidal cyst. Non-cancerous, Robert. Benign. Think of it as a small balloon filled with something thick, like dark Jell-O. Grape, maybe."

"Jell-O?"

"Nobody's figured out what causes colloidal cysts, let alone how to prevent them. Not yet, at least."

"The treatment?"

"Well, that's the bad part. The only treatment is surgery. The procedure can be more or less challenging, depending on the cyst's location. Yours is in a relatively good spot, between the insula and striatum. It'll be tricky; there's always some risk, but I'm reasonably confident it can be removed completely and safely."

"With no. . . collateral damage."

"Not if we're careful, and lucky."

"And without surgery—what's the prognosis?"

"Impossible to say with certainty. But it could migrate, even expand. Neither would be desirable."

"I see. So?"

"I recommend you have the procedure. You're welcome to seek a second opinion, of course. That's prudent."

"What if it were you?"

"If it were me? I wouldn't hesitate."

Robert told Clara everything that night but only after making love to her so furiously that she was still panting as she struggled with the new words, words like ugly burrs that pricked and stuck: colloidal cyst, insula, pre-frontal, temporal folds. . . . She clutched at Robert and wept. He held her tightly and murmured, "Just a tiny water balloon with Jell-O in it, that's all."

The operation was scheduled for the first week in May. There would be plenty of time to recover before the wedding, assuming all went well.

Robert was brave and optimistic. Clara's misgivings evaporated; she was was so worried about Robert that she was certain that she must love him. As they faced each other in bed the night before the operation, he whispered, "You're my home. How about I come inside?"

A kangaroo rushing across the Outback proceeds by leaps and, these days, so does brain science. Discoveries seem almost to tumble over one another. Moral decision-making, a talent for numbers, language acquisition, various manias, even the wellspring of our dreams—these are being hunted down, their locations fixed. Next week free will may be explained, or religious zeal. Neuropsychology doesn't claim knowing the where is just the same as knowing why, but it is progress nonetheless; it is good-in-itself. Besides, evolutionary psychology can be relied on to work out the whys in the fullness of time. The tools of neuroscience are not imagination and metaphor but magnetic imaging and precise stimulation. Already our self-consciousness about consciousness has advanced so far that the myth-making Freud has been drummed out of the discipline he founded. The theory's not all that new, though; four centuries ago there were natural philosophers who dared to declare that all mental phenomena are physiological motions.

Sexual desire is simple enough to situate. Lust lies in the activation of the same regions of the striatum that are stimulated by chocolate cake and back rubs—that is, the pleasure center. Love is certainly more complicated than desire but hardly beyond the grasp of gifted researchers, people who keep up with the literature like Dr. Faheem Shirani.

Already we've learned that love is associated with a process of conditioning that pairs experiences with rewards. If the pattern of reinforcement persists then, by habituation, such experiences (the scent of the nape of a woman's neck for instance, the curve of her hip, or that she calls any piece of music as a "song" and finds all religions equally absurd) achieve a value that deserves to be called inherent. What begins as desire in one area of the striatum turns into love when it is processed through another. In this respect, love begins just like any addiction, though it develops differently both neurologically and socially. Nevertheless, it has been established that love starts as a habit fortified by more or less crude rewards.

Over time, the habit of desire may activate pathways that the latest research has linked to pair-bonding, monogamy. When these synaptic roads firm up, so to speak, the truly decisive step is reached, the crossroad where emotion becomes independent of the physical presence of the stimulus. This is when integrative representation rises or deepens from sensation to feeling. Raw lust and platonic love exist on a spectrum, and the trail from one to the other meanders through the forebrain, between

striatum and insula.

Robert's colloidal cyst had lodged at the aforementioned crossroads and created what, for lack of a better metaphor, may be called a short circuit. His instant sexual desire for Clara, triggered by scent, may have been intensified by the cyst, but it was still just that, uncooked desire; however, owing to the cyst, what he felt was simultaneously love. What ought to have taken months, even years to develop took no time at all. It was like getting credit for a course not taken. Therefore, Robert's love for Clara was entirely genuine yet also, it has to be admitted, not.

Robert's bedroom, once the setting for professions of passion and sexual athletics, felt as dim and exhausted as the man lying alone on the bed. The dark blue curtains, the Shiraz rug, his parents' high old walnut dresser—all seemed to have lost their sentimental value. On the end-table beside his bed rose the slender black reading lamp Clara once said reminded her of a hypocritical Jesuit.

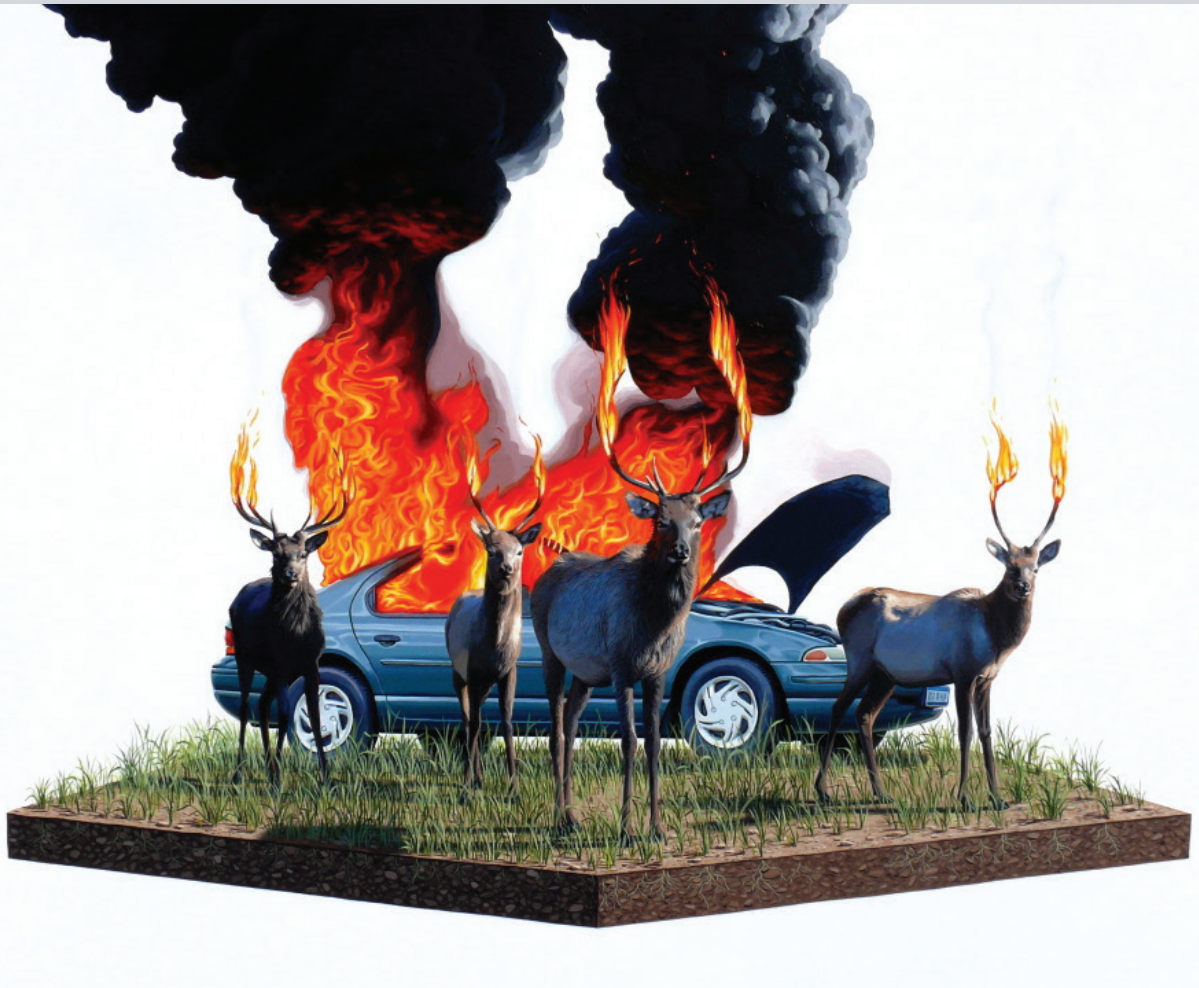
The operation had taken a little over an hour and was, so far as Dr. Shirani was concerned, a complete success. Before the surgery he must have been less confident than he'd let on, because when the doctor visited Robert in the recovery room he beamed with relief. "It came out like a dream, completely intact. No leaking and nothing else disturbed in the least." In that respect, yes, the procedure had been a success.

"I don't understand," Clara had said, her body already recoiling from him. "What are you trying to say?"

But he'd already said it, freed the black words he had been suppressing for nearly two weeks, words it was his duty equally to withhold and to speak. They rose between them like so many dark balloons, Clara watching them hover before her eyes, not yet taking them in, trying hard to deny their blackness.

"What are you saying?"

Robert Wexelblatt is professor of humanities at Boston University's College of General Studies. He has published the story collections, Life in the Temperate Zone, The Decline of Our Neighborhood, The Artist Wears Rough Clothing, and Heiberg's Twitch; *a book of essays,* Professors at Play; *two short novels,* Losses *and* The Derangement of Jules Torquemal, *and essays, stories, and poems in a variety of scholarly and literary journals. His novel* Zublinka Among Women *won the Indie Book Awards first-place prize for fiction. A collection of essays,* The Posthumous Papers of Sidney Fein, *is forthcoming.*



Scorch II

Josh Keyes

Say Goodbye to Hollywood

Bill Mullen

A VOICE-OVER on my limousine television informs me that nearly fifty million TV screens across America are about to broadcast Tracy Morgan welcoming viewers to the 85th Academy Awards. The date is Sunday, February 24, 2013. The location is the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, California. The channel is ABC, the American Broadcasting Company. The same voice-over tells me that the program will be right back after these commercials. It's the same thing year after year. The first commercial asks for money to feed a bunch of sorry looking children and educate them afterwards. The kids live in a place I've never been and don't plan to go.

"It's commercials like this that bother me. Why can't they help themselves?" I ask Deborah, who is finishing her lipstick application.

"You could make history tonight, Frankie," says Deborah, blotting her Jazz~Myne colored lips on a tissue. The brand name was smeared down the side in a font I'd never choose. She then takes the olive out of her martini and pulls it off the toothpick with her bleached teeth.

"I should have already made history. Those sons of bitches at the Academy, they didn't even nominate me for the eighty-second," I declare. "No, they nominate George Clooney, Morgan Freeman, and three other sons of bitches I've never heard of and don't remember."

"Jeff Bridges, darling. He won, remember?"

"The Academy picks a musical over a historical drama. They don't know what makes good film. It's all political. They don't know good acting. The Dude's ok, but that's all he is now. He took that role, and now that role took him. I can't let that happen to me."

I gulp my shot of Johnny Walker Blue Label. It opens my sinuses, and I smell Deborah's perfume—Paris Hilton's brand. Sweet, like apples and cherries in a barrel of sugar water with a hint of lime.

"Why can't you be happy this year, Frankie? This could be three in a row!" She finishes her martini and pours another.

"It's not about that. My acting in Ivan the Terrible was far better than Jeff Bridges'…the prick."

"I thought you liked JB. You just visited him three days ago, or was all that just bullshit?" "Bullshit. Another A-list event to get your picture in *Variety*. You have to keep up in this town. You've been here long enough to know that."

She touches her nose.

The Academy Awards comes back on.

The limousine turns on to Hollywood Boulevard from Las Palmas.

"One day, you're king of the mountain. The next day, you're thrown away and forgotten. Aside from a slab of coal and terrazzo, what is there?"

"Immortality."

"Bah. It's few and far between who remembers the greats. I know I'm a great actor, but I'm not memorable like Jack, Al and Robert. They'll live on another twenty years. I'll be forgotten in a few, like Roberto Benigni. What they don't realize is that I'm an artist. I'm the full package. I got the best idea for a movie that Hollywood's dying for. It'll be bigger than Titanic and Avatar. Then, they'll give me the respect that I deserve. They'll see that I'm more than a face and great actor. I'm the full package. And they'll give me the respect I deserve."

She sips her martini. "I know, darling."

"I'm Rudy Valentino without the skeletons."

The limousine nears the entrance to the Kodak Theatre. I open the sunroof to a blue sky and faint wind that smells of roasted pecans from the street vendor a half block down the boulevard.

"Fashionably late."

"I'm big time now. I have to be late, or I'll seem too eager. Nobody's ever on time in this town. What'll my fans think if I stroll in ten minutes early? It's not actorly correct to be on time…never has been."

"Fans?" She laughed. "You know they're all paid to be there."

"I know. I'm not that naïve. Can't you let me act for while, though?" I give her a smile to let her know I'm teasing before having a taste of Jazz~Myne. It has no flavor.

The limousine is three cars down from the red carpet.

"So, what's this idea that's gonna be bigger than *Titanic* and *Avatar*?"

A sharp clap of thunder erupts; the limousine shakes. The television turns to a blue screen. "Earthquake! Tonight?" Looking out the sunroof, I see smoke beginning to rise outside. "Come on."

I open my door and am about to step out onto the sidewalk when I see a U-haul truck speeding toward me. I jump back into the limousine. "Jesus, you believe this guy?"

It turns and barrels by the red carpet toward the entrance of the Kodak. There is screaming. Women screaming. I can't move. Deborah grabs my arm tightly with both hands. I feel liquid on my leg. I can't move. I hear thunder again.

Sirens are wailing. Car alarms are beeping. Voices are screaming incomprehensible words. A dog is barking. It's a deep bark. There's smoke. Thick smoke. I open my eyes to the foggy image of a bronze circle with a motion picture camera in its center. I can't move my legs. I close my eyes. "Just a dream." But the smell doesn't go away. I've smelled it before… it is hair. Burning hair.

I inspect my own hair, making sure it's in tact. It is.

I can't feel my legs. More screaming from somewhere…

"Deborah!" I yell. "Help me out." I finally realize that I'm in a limousine. I'm upside down. No, the limo is upside down. I am staring down through the sunroof at Matt Damon's star. "Deborah!" I try moving my legs again, then the image of a war film pops in my head—*Platoon*. The soldier is walking through a jungle, then he steps on a land mine. Blows

his leg right off.

Holy Christ, Jesus, please tell me that I still have my legs…oh Lord, please. I try moving my toes: nothing. I jerk my hips back and forth and manage to roll over on my side. My legs are there. Thank you, Lord. On them is Deborah, but I can barely see her through the smoke. She's not moving. She'd probably gotten knocked out like I had. Sirens are getting closer.

"Deborah! Wake up!" She doesn't move. The dog has stopped barking. I bend forward and grab her right arm. The pungent stink of burning hair mixes with the new odor of gasoline. "Deborah." Still, nothing. Letting go of her limp arm, I take my hands and pull each of my legs out from under her, then scoot to her side. There are tiny bubbles of blood scattered across her cheek and forehead. Thank God it missed your eyes. The smoke is getting thicker. I have to get us out of this damn car before we suffocate.

I check the window: it's gone. The smoke is coming from outside. My legs are crawling with razor-worms now. I know the feeling will only take a minute to pass, but the smoke is starting to make me cough. I break off the bits of glass still surrounding the opening so that I don't cut myself.

I crawl out of the limousine, then pull Deborah out and onto the street. The smoke is choking me now. In the light, amidst the debilitating smoke, I realize that Deborah isn't breathing. I can't get my breath.

My legs are no longer in pain. I stand up and stagger forward while coughing, only able to see a car length in front of me. My throat feels like it's being sandblasted. The sirens are deafening now. The screams drown out. I must find help. I have to find help for Deborah. I have to—

"Sir!"

I turn around and see a blurry white image. I can't stop coughing.

"Are you ok, sir?"

I try to say, help Deborah, but I can only cough and cough more, as if I have lost control of my mouth. The smoke tastes of plastic and burnt meat.

"Sir!"

The blurry image then runs past me and into the white haze.

Flashing lights tint the smoke. I start toward them, staggering more. I take my tuxedo jacket off and put it over my face. It helps. The coughing weakens. Then, I see it. The ambulance. There's a police car just pulling up, too. I continue heading in their direction.

"Help—" cough…cough "Deborah!" I collapse onto the hood of the police car.

"That's Frankie Valentine," I hear someone say.

"Get him in the ambulance," another voice calls.

"Hel—"

"Shhh, now. We're gonna take care of you, Mr. Valentine."

They take me by the arms, I have no strength to fight back, and flop me down on a stretcher.

Before I can protest, they're wheeling me to the ambulance with a mask pressed over my face. My vision is fading. The medic keeps getting blurrier. The rush of fresh oxygen eases the cough, but not my mind. "Help Deborah," I say through the mask being pressed to my face with the force of a murderer trying to smother me with a pillow, but I'm ignored.

By the time I'm inside the ambulance, I'm able to catch my breath and not cough. I grab the mask and tear it from my face. "My wife needs help!" I yell at the medic.

He looks at me with an expression I can only describe as shock. I lean up and smack the

medic, who can be no more than twenty-five years old.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Valentine—"

"Don't be sorry. Help me!"

I have renewed strength without that damn cough, and the medic hands me a gas mask, which I put on, and we exit the ambulance. I jog toward the sidewalk where I think Deborah is. A breeze from the Pacific comes in strong, at least fifteen miles per hour, shifting the smoke towards the Hollywood Hills and clearing the street.

It is this moment that I realize what has happened. The Kodak Theatre is practically gone. A few walls remain standing. I had been on my way to the Academy Awards…

I shift my gaze to the sidewalk. It's my limousine; at least I think it is. I can see half a dozen black limos not sitting on all four tires. But Deborah is not where I left her. I start for the vehicle and trip over something hard and slick. I look down to find a human hand and forearm, half singed, half covered in blood. It's a left hand, wedding band, and diamond-less engagement ring. That means a woman. Oh, Christ. I can feel my heart pounding in my temple as I scan the rest of Hollywood Boulevard. It is covered with bodies and what appear to be parts of bodies. A second later, I fill the mask with vomit, then throw it off my face. I wipe my mouth with my shirtsleeve.

My legs grow weak, and I fall to my knees.

This can't be real. This must be some drug-enhanced nightmare. I don't remember taking anything.

No, that's what I would say in a movie. This is real. Goddamn it! The pain in my head and the side of my face is real.

I put my hand up to my face and wince at the sting of what must be tiny cuts. It's the first time I notice the pain. The blood. My blood.

Some of the bodies are on fire. Some are just smoking. None are moving.

I have to find Deborah and make sure she is all right. I get back on my feet and search for other ambulances. They are lined up Hollywood Boulevard. The wind stays constant. I think about running, then think better of it for all of the debris.

"Deborah!" I call out in case she has regained consciousness and sought help on her own.

Paramedics and police officers are running in my direction from Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Firefighters are mixed in, too. I don't see many pedestrians helping.

I focus on what's in front of me so I don't trip and fall. It looks like a truck full of mannequins had exploded. But mannequins don't bleed. Their plastic doesn't burn with a nauseating pungency mixed with backyard barbecue. Mannequins don't live and breathe. They're just plastic and hollow. Machines without the motor, without a soul.

I finally make it to a few overturned limousines and peer inside the first one. Nothing is moving inside, and the smell of gasoline is strong. Three limos down, a fire starts and is then followed by a small explosion when the gas tank ignites.

"Deborah!" I yell again. I can't believe a medic would have gotten to her already. She had to be alive.

I look on the other side of the limos, between them and the façades. Nothing.

I hear the sound of screaming again. It's on the periphery of this carnage, and I try and ignore it. In the gutter at my feet, I see a thing of Jazz~Myne lipstick. This is my limo. There's no sign of Leo, the driver.

Leo could have taken her to an ambulance.

I hear the chopping from the sky for the first time and realize that the breeze I thought

was coming from the Pacific could very well have been coming from those machines. The eyes in the sky. I count seven of them before my attention goes back to reaching the ambulances.

I look in eight ambulances, and there is no sign of Deborah. I never should have left her. Goddamn it!

"Holy shit, Mr. Valentine. Let me help you, sir," came a guy's voice.

I raise my hand and say no. I don't even open my eyes to see what the guy looks like.

When I open my eyes again, I watch a stretcher go by with bloody but living Johnny Depp. A few other stretchers go by with actors that look like they will not make it. I don't know where to look for my wife. Where is Deborah? "Deborah!"

A rumbling sound. I eye the Kodak, and one of the remaining three walls collapse.

I run back to the sidewalk where I'd found Deborah's lipstick. I don't smell the burning bodies or gasoline anymore. I don't smell anything. I sit on the curb. The remaining two walls of the Kodak fall simultaneously.

I can only sit and stare at the scene in front of me, paralyzed. Terrified. Ironic. It looks like a movie set. Something from Tom Savini's portfolio. Except the rubble that was the Kodak Theatre would be a green screen, and the fires would be placed in during post-production using computer-generated imagery. Some of the medics would be CGI, too. The sirens and screams would all be stitched in by the editor. There would be dramatic music, fast paced at first, then slow and melancholy during the aftermath. There would be no sense of smell, just the potent latex from Tom's bodies scattered across a fake Hollywood Boulevard.

I bury my head in my hands and start to cry for the first real time in seventeen years. There's no music pulling the tears out of me. There's no music telling me what to expect in the next scene. There's only real li—

"Frankie!"

I smell apples and cherries in a barrel of sugar water with a hint of lime.

"Deborah?" I turn to my right. And there she is. My lovely wife. Just like a movie. I hold her loosely because that is all the strength I have. We walk together through the bodies of my contemporaries, my fans, and paid actors to pose as fans.

We walk to the ambulances. I see Johnny Depp exiting one, and he approaches us.

"Frankie. Jesus Christ," says Johnny, crushing a cigarette into his dirty pants with one hand while lighting one between his lips with his other. "We might be all Hollywood has left after this fucking catastrophe."

"We're all this town needs, Johnny."

"That's the dumbest fucking story I've ever heard, Frankie. That's not going to top Titanic. Do you really think this town would allow a film to do something like that? To show all its stars get blown up like that?"

"Of course. It's a purely original idea that no one will be able to turn away from. Can you imagine the turnout? I was even thinking of reworking the entire idea and having it come from the point of view of the President. The President watches the Oscars."

"Frankie, someone bombing the Oscars and then having you and Johnny Depp as the last men standing is ridiculous."

"Why, Deborah? Why is it so ridiculous?"

"It doesn't make sense. You don't even like Johnny. And Johnny's not coming to this year's show. It's historically inaccurate."

"That's the beauty of film-making, Deborah. It doesn't matter. All we have to do is sell the idea that the Oscars get bombed. Don't

you see? The movie doesn't matter. If my name is on it, and Johnny's name is on it, it'll sell tickets."

"I think you should give the idea to a good screenwriter so it can have some substance."

"It's full of substance. Man loses wife. Man searches for wife. Man finds wife."

"Actually, wife finds man in your analogy."

"Whatever. The point is, it will work."

"Why do you think Johnny will agree to it?"

"He has to agree to it. Why wouldn't he? Look at all the huge movies he's been in through his career. The pirate movies, Burton's movies, last year's remake of *A Clockwork Orange*."

"Which shouldn't have been remade," Deborah says.

"It made fifty million dollars."

She just rolls her eyes at me.

"Besides, throw his name on any movie and you've guaranteed yourself a profit."

"And what did you say you wanted the title of this movie of yours to be?"

"*Say Goodbye to Hollywood*. You know, like the Billy Joel song. It's an awesome song that fits right in with the plot."

"I love you, honey."

"You're going to love me even more when you find out who I have in mind to play you."

I smile at her, then open the door and step out onto the red carpet.

Bill Mullen was born in England and holds an MFA from the Bluegrass Writers Studio. He now lives in Kentucky where he teaches literature and composition at Eastern Kentucky University. His work can be found in Pacific Review, Dark Matter Journal, *and GRAVEL LITERARY JOURNAL. His first novel, RED NOCTURNE, was released in March 2016.*

Vocabulary

Martin Crabtree

Dorchester, Massachusetts, Fall of 1938

I THINK YOU'LL LIKE THIS, TERRY." Sheila Fitzgerald whispered to her sister so she wouldn't disturb the other library patrons. "It's a very long book, with lots of big words!" She pushed her glasses against the bridge of her nose and settled down to read. "Call me Ishmael…"

Sheila read softly, losing herself in the story, her ten-year old voice soft and high, hardly ever struggling with the big words. But she stopped and sniffed. Something smelled like church, something different, something not a library smell. She looked around to see what was wrong.

The radiator behind them steamed their wet wool mittens. "Oh no, Terry!" Sheila whispered as loud as she dared. "Mittens don't go on radiators. Ma won't understand. We can't burn down the library!" Sheila leaned back in her chair and pulled the mittens by their strings. Her sister did not stir.

A sudden beam of sunlight from a high window caught Terry's copper hair; Sheila looked up and thought it made it her sister look like one of the pictures in her religion book, one of the pictures of pious saints with the Paraclete Tongues of Flame. Sheila loved learning new words, even if Sister Stella Maris' vocabulary lessons were very strict.

Sheila started reading again. Terry moved her head in and out of the sunbeam, playing with light and shadows on the inside of her eyelids. Their corner of the Dorchester Public Library glowed. Muffled traffic rolled by on Neponset Avenue outside, like the waves at nearby Tenean Beach. Both girls grew sleepy. It was a perfect afternoon in Dorchester, cuddled up against Boston. Dorchester was in its middle-aged glory. The world was at peace, and the early fall of 1938 was especially crisp and dry.

Long before the girls met Captain Ahab it was time to go. The sunbeam faded and Sheila could feel the cool October air seeping through the library walls.

"Come on, Terry, wake up!" Sheila said and snapped the book shut. "You can sleep anywhere, can't you?" She helped her sister with her coat, scarf, mittens, and hat.

As the girls left the library, they waved to the brownstone across the street. Terry cupped her mittened hands and yelled, "Hello, Aunt May! Hello, Uncle Joe!" There was no sign of life behind the curtains Aunt May had

crocheted from kite string.

Sheila turned and quietly said, "Tooda-loo, Library!"

On the way home they waved to the house where Aunt Shirley and Uncle Al lived, Pope's Hill where Aunt Sadie lived, and waved to Mrs. Quinlovan on her way to a Novena. No one was a stranger in Dorchester.

Heady smells of corned beef and cabbage perfumed Neponset Avenue. Early evening traffic hummed beside them. Trolleys rang bells and truck tires sang. For two blocks Sheila had to pull at Terry's elbow half a dozen times; she liked to stop to pet dogs and chuck them under their chins. They listened to her slow speech, wagging their tails and drooling over their enormous teeth.

"Come on, Theresa Louise. If we're late, Ma will be truculent!" Terry was twelve—almost two years older—but Sheila knew her sister wouldn't understand the new vocabulary word. Terry was retarded.

Sheila learned that word last year from Sister Stella Maris. It was a few days after the fifth grade took the Revised Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test that Sister asked Sheila to have her mother come by after school. Sheila waited at her desk while Sister spoke with Mrs. Fitzgerald in the hallway. Through the wavy glass of the classroom door, Sheila could see the figure of Sister wiggle as she crossed herself. The nun's sharp voice resonated down the hallway and Sheila heard her say But God gave you one who is so bright. We really should have skipped her another two grades. Sister's voice dropped, and Sheila knew this must be about Terry. The nun said something less distinct, something about retarded and has an IQ of less than 70. Mrs. Fitzgerald did not move, and Sheila could not hear her speak. Ever since then, St. Ann's School let Terry sit in the back of the classroom and look out the window; she did not have to answer Sister's strict questions.

Retarded! thought Sheila as she walked along Neponset Avenue. That doesn't tell you how beautiful and sweet she is. The sun flamed cherry red and the wind was picking up.

When the girls turned onto Southwick Street, Sheila grabbed Terry's hand and ran down the short hill to their brownstone. Together the girls pushed open the front door of Number Eight. The lace curtain on the door's oval window fanned out across the wallpaper's faded roses.

"Ma! We're home!" "We're home!" echoed Terry, beaming. The girls pulled off their mittens and hats and dropped them on the hallway table.

Mrs. Fitzgerald came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her flowered apron, her face a ruddy rose from the stove and gin. "Which of you girls left that wagon in the parlor?" she demanded. "Sheila?" Her voice blended first-generation Boston and Brogue.

Sheila stamped her foot. "But ma, why do you always think it's me? Terry could have—"

"Never mind about Terry." Mrs. Fitzgerald steered Sheila's thin shoulders toward the wagon in the front room. "Just put the wagon on the back porch. You'll be needing it in the morning. Tomorrow's Commodities Day. Now there's a good girl."

Sheila gave a little groan. Every Thursday morning before school, she and Terry took the wagon to Maggie's Dry Goods on Pope's Hill to get their share of Commodities for the Needy. They filled the wagon with tin cans donated by more affluent neighbors; Sheila thought they gave only what they didn't like.

"Then I want you both to wash up for supper. Terry, you get to set the table tonight." Mrs. Fitzgerald returned to the kitchen, back to

her drink and dinner preparations.

"Did you hear that, Sheila? I get to set the table tonight, I get to set the table tonight" Terry sing-songed as she followed her sister to the back porch. She was beaming.

"Yes, sweetie," Sheila said absently. She dropped the wagon's handle on the painted wood floor beside the piles of laundry Mrs. Fitzgerald washed for her neighbors—those that could find work. The stacks of clothing nearly filled the back porch, completely hiding the wicker couch that used to live in their house on Cape Cod. Clothes lines criss-crossed the small room; empty overalls and cotton dresses dangled like abandoned bodies. A wool coat was draped across the oil heater that made the room smell like church.

Sheila picked up a small rubber ball and several shiny metal stars and held them out to her sister. "Jacks?" she asked.

"Yes!" Terry loved to play jacks. She said, in her slow, happy way as she always did, "I could play this forever!" Terry never missed, and Sheila usually grew quite bored. Sheila spent most of their games fetching the ball when it got away from her. Sometimes she regretted having taught her sister the game. Tonight, though, Sheila thought her sister looked like an angel and could refuse her nothing.

The girls collapsed onto the floor and played until Mrs. Fitzgerald called them to supper.

"Sheila. Sheila. Wake up, for the love of Pete." Mrs. Fitzgerald shook her daughter's feet beneath the worn Chenille bedspread. Sheila woke to see her mother's figure breaking the line of light from the hallway; the bedroom door was open just a sliver.

"What? What?" Sheila asked. "What time is it?"

"It's Tuesday, that's what time it is. Don't wake your sister, though. She isn't feeling well today. I'm surprised you didn't hear her crying last night. You'll have to go alone. Dress warm, it's blessed cold outside this morning."

Sheila got up mechanically and started to dress. Tuesday, she thought. On Tuesday it's dairy from St. Ann's, and Thursday it's Commodities for the Needy. I wish I didn't know what commodities meant. I'll bet rich people don't have to get their food in a wagon. And we wouldn't be so poor if… She looked at her sister, immobile under her blankets, a scarlet string of hair on the pillow. I wonder what she thought when Daddy died. I'm sure that's why she cries.

Last summer had seemed kind, sunnier than most Dorchester summers. Right after Mass at St. Ann's, the whole family and two uncles walked the half mile to Tenean Beach with their bathing suits under their clothes, their beach shoes the only outward sign of their destination. Sheila's father made both his daughters stop and look as they crossed the tracks of the railroad where he worked. "You can't be too careful," Tommy Fitzgerald said.

The girls left Uncle Patrick and Uncle Sean on the beach—Tenean was mostly rocks and cold water—to talk about their new jobs at the fire station and other adult things with Sheila's mother. Tommy played in the sparkling water with his children.

"Ma!" Sheila called from the water, "Uncle Pat! Look at Daddy. See how he can float!" Sheila and Terry clapped their hands, their father face down in the water.

At the wake, Terry kept asking her sister what condolences meant. Mrs. Fitzgerald never spoke of her husband again.

A sharp rap on the door brought Sheila back to the cold morning. "Time's God's gift, Sheila, don't waste it." Terry moaned as Sheila

slipped out the door and headed down the stairs. Slivers of cold air blew down from the leaky skylight; Sheila was glad the trip to school was only one block.

Mrs. Fitzgerald headed out the door. "There's oatmeal on the stove. Eat it, don't play with it. Put some coal in the furnace, and turn up the heater on the back porch. I want those things dry by the time I get home. Now, I'm cleaning for the McAlesters today, and I'll be home late."

"What about Terry?" Sheila asked, still wiping sleep from her eyes.

"She'll be fine. She can sleep today. God watches out for children," she said as she slid into the cold.

"Verbose. Verbose. Don't make me say it again, child of God. And stand up when you answer." Sister Stella Maris loomed over Sheila, not giving her enough room to stand up without backing up at the same time. "Anyone would think you're the slow one today!" The class gave a nervous laugh. Sister Stella Maris once told her class she was acknowledged among the other nuns as unusually kind because she never hit a child in anger. Never.

"Verbose," said Sheila. "Wordy." She tucked the pleats of her school uniform against her thin legs and sat down.

Sister's ruler came down hard on the desk, nearly spilling ink from the well. "Never sit down without asking permission," she said, "or until I say you can. Stand up, child, and use your vocabulary word in a sentence. Use a little common sense."

Sheila stood up slowly, still tired from her morning trip to the school to get milk and butter. "Verbose. I do not feel at all verbose today."

There was a moment of silence. "Why you impudent little—"

The clang of a fire truck right outside the classroom cut off Sister's tirade.

From the front row high-strung Jameson Short shouted above the noise. "Look!" he yelled, "Look! I can see smoke over there!!" He pointed north where whorls of dark smoke hovered above nearby townhouses. As if rehearsed, the entire class ran to the windows. Sheila's view was blocked by her taller classmates.

"Away from those windows! Away!" Sister Stella Maris yanked the hair of some of the boys to make them take their seats. "Let's turn to our elocution lessons, class," she said. "We'll review our vocabulary after lunch."

"Yes, sister," came the chorus of thirty-eight altos.

Sheila thought she could smell smoke.

A few minutes later Mrs. Quinlovan, the office volunteer, opened the classroom door and beckoned Sister to meet with her in the hallway. Sister gave her class instructions to say ten Hail Mary's, and gave them a stern sideways glance—as much as her habit would allow—as she navigated the rows of desks to step out of the classroom. Sister and Mrs. Quinlovan kept their voices low and could not be heard clearly over the murmur of the children. The door opened again, and a crooked finger snaked out of Sister's wide sleeve to beckon Sheila.

"You are to report home immediately," the nun said. "Go now, child. Mrs. Quinlovan will go with you."

Sheila ran down the stairs, nearly tripping as she threw open the old wooden door. Her glasses flew off, and she scrambled to get them. Just as Mrs. Quinlovan caught up with her, Sheila saw her Uncle Pat and Uncle Sean walking toward the school. She ran to them and threw her arms around them both. They

smelled like smoke.

"Glory be, child. Hold on. We're here, we just came to get you."

Sheila pulled back, confused. "What's wrong? Sister didn't tell me." Her chin started to quiver. "Ma? Is Ma okay?"

Her uncles looked at each other, then looked at Mrs. Quinlovan. "We'll take care of her, thanks," said Uncle Sean. They each took a hand and walked with her the long block to her street. Parked at a crazy angle across Southwick Street was a dark red fire engine. Sheila saw the Home part of the hopscotch she and Terry drew in the middle of the street last week—last week when Southwick Street was safe and quiet, a large bumpy slate for soft chalk.

Sheila took it all in, piece by piece. The door to Number Eight was open, the beveled glass smashed to smithereens, the lace curtain caught on shards. A fire hose ran from a hydrant on the lower corner of the street—the hydrant they'd passed many times on the way to the beach and never noticed—the hose ran like the evil snake Sister Stella Maris told them about, ran into the house, past imitation Queen Anne furniture brought from Ireland, past the stairs with scratches in the varnish, through the kitchen where Mrs. Fitzgerald's gin stood in a clear bottle on a shelf above an immaculate stove, out to the back porch that was blacker than any sin Sheila ever heard about.

Tattered clothes, smeared with soot, sat and stank in chaotic, wet piles. The walls dripped water, and the painted floor was slippery. The wool coat that just last night was draped across the oil heater—turned over now, its stubby metal legs making it look dead—the coat was stretched across a lump on the unearthed wicker sofa. Just as she saw the fleck of copper at the top of the coat and lunged forward, her Uncle Pat fixed his large hands on Sheila's shoulders and pushed her out the back door. Sheila kicked and cried and tried to reach her sister.

"It's too late, darlin'. It's too late, girl." They led her out the back steps to the alley behind the brownstone. Sheila thought she could hear her mother shrieking in the kitchen.

Mrs. Fitzgerald never spoke of Terry again. Uncle Sean said the accident was probably caused when the oil heater tipped over, the wool coat catching and fanning out across the laundry; they found a rubber ball under the heater, melted to the floor.

It was a month before Sheila returned to Sister Stella Maris' classroom, a month of silence with her mother, a month of pulling the wagon by herself. On Tuesday it was dairy from the St. Ann's, on Thursday it was Commodities for the Needy.

Sister was working with her after school to help her catch up on her vocabulary, but Sheila didn't think Sister would be able to help her find the right words.

Martin Crabtree, a native of Dorchester, Massachusetts, enjoyed a career as a bassoonist, typesetter, and software trainer in Washington, D.C. Fearing for his sanity, he retired to Florida, where he holds a weak grip on reality. His lifelong philosophy is that life makes no sense, so we might as well all develop a strong sense of the absurd. Even as an adult, he is haunted by the advice from his fifth grade nun. "Martin," she said, "a word to the wise is sufficient."

Alone on a Seesaw

T.R. Healy

"TICKET, PLEASE?"

"Sorry?"

"May I see your ticket?" Russell Morley asked a slouched over man seconds after he emerged from the rear car of the light rail train.

"All right, all right," he stammered, rummaging through his pockets for the ticket, which he found wadded up in a side pocket of his denim jacket. "Here you are."

Morley checked to see if the ticket had expired—it hadn't—then handed it back to him. "Thank you, sir."

Irritated, the man threw the ticket on the ground. He headed for the stairs while Morley asked to see the ticket of another passenger who seemed even more irritated by the request. Quickly, he understood why: the ticket she presented to him expired two hours ago.

"You know this ticket isn't good anymore?"

"I know, officer, but I was visiting my aunt in the hospital and she wanted me to stay longer than I planned."

He didn't know if she was telling the truth. Often, when he discovered someone without a valid ticket, the person came up with a seemingly plausible excuse. It didn't really matter whether he believed her or not, though, because earlier this morning he was informed by his supervisor only to issue warnings, not citations. She was fortunate. If it was up to him, he would have given her a ticket, just as he did to almost every violator he discovered.

Morley was a security officer with the Transit Authority. It was a job he got, not quite a year and a half ago, through another officer he met while tending bar at a lounge across the street. Usually he worked aboard trains, but this week his assignment was to stand on the platform to make sure the passengers getting off the trains were not free riders. At least twice a year, the Transit Authority stationed officers on platforms to inspect passengers' tickets. Scores of violators were always discovered, but because prosecuting them would overwhelm the courts, only warnings were issued. So far today, he had issued fourteen warnings, and he expected to issue many more by the time his shift ended.

Shoving back the left sleeve of his pine green windbreaker, he looked at his watch. The next train was not scheduled to arrive for another six minutes. Sighing, he removed his baseball cap to wipe the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Though it was only a quarter to eleven, it was already warm. He wished he could leave his cap off and remove his jacket, but that was against regulations and he didn't want to be reported

for being out of uniform.

Standing in the shade of a maple tree, still sweating profusely, he watched a boy and a girl seated on a seesaw in the middle of the small park across the street from the station. The girl was bigger than the boy so she was in control and for long moments kept him in the air until he demanded to be let down. Occasionally, they managed to establish a tenuous balance, but most of the time the boy was up, his sneakered feet dangling beneath him, while the girl's feet remained firmly on the ground.

Smiling, he recalled all the times he and his sister used to play on the crude seesaw their father made for them in the backyard. A cedar stump, which their father cut a deep groove into, served as a fulcrum in which he fitted a long plank of birch wood. Morley was two years older than Bess and several pounds heavier. Both of them enjoyed riding on it, though Bess enjoyed it more than he did. She smiled the moment she sat down on her end. She even grinned while she screamed when he kept her above him too long.

He still could hear her screams as clearly now as the whistles of the trains pulling into the station.

The last time he heard his sister's voice she screamed so fiercely he thought his ears would fall off. It was late at night and so cold out he had the heater in their father's Oldsmobile going full blast. She had just returned from visiting a friend in San Francisco, and he offered to pick her up at the airport. He had never been to California and was eager to find out what it was like. But she was so tired she dozed off just moments after she climbed into the car so he decided to wait until morning to ask his questions. They were only a few blocks from home when he heard her scream and, having dozed off himself, he looked up just as the car smashed into an elm tree on the corner.

That happened nearly nineteen years ago, so it was not surprising that he could not remember what her normal speaking voice sounded like. But he could never forget the sound of her scream. It was a sharp, plaintive cry burned into his memory.

"It's amazing," Morley remarked after an older passenger showed him her ticket.

"What's that, officer?"

"Those kids riding that seesaw in the pouring rain."

"I don't see any kids."

"You don't?"

After the next batch of passengers left the platform, Morley resumed watching the boy and girl on the seesaw while he waited for the Orange Line train to arrive. Up and down they went, bobbing like buoys in turbulent water. Then, for a couple of minutes, they managed to maintain their balance and were so still they looked like figures in an oil painting. He was almost tempted to applaud their achievement but didn't want them to know he was watching so he kept his hands in his pockets.

Because he was heavier than his sister, the only times they were ever in balance was when he edged closer to the center of the rickety seesaw. He seldom did that because he liked keeping his sister in the air and hearing her scream in excitement. The thought of that now made him cringe, and he wished he had never done such a thing but he did to his everlasting shame.

Morley suffered a concussion and three broken ribs in the crash and spent almost a week in the hospital. Each day, he was visited by his mother. She could not conceal the pain and disappointment in her eyes however hard she tried. The only time his father came to the hospital was to take him home. Usually as garrulous as his mother, he scarcely said a word during the drive, preoccupied with finding something he could listen to on the radio. Then, as he turned onto their street, he said almost in a whisper, "You'll never be allowed to drive this car again. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's how it has to be."

"I understand."

Twice that first week back home, he sat down for a few minutes on the seesaw and pretended Bess was on the other end. Again and again he apologized to her for falling asleep at the wheel, adamant he should have been the one who died, not her. It was foolish sitting there, but it helped him to remember her as she was years ago, when they used to ride the contraption. She was such a beautiful little girl, with hair as bright as the sun and so long it graced her hips.

"What the hell are you doing out there?" his father demanded when he saw him back on the seesaw the next week.

"Just sitting."

"Get a chair if you want to sit somewhere," he barked. "We've got plenty of them in the house."

Later that day, without consulting him, his father took the seesaw apart and put the pieces in a corner of the garage. When Morley asked him why he dismantled it, his father just shook his head as if the reason was too obvious for an explanation.

His parents scarcely had anything to say to him after the accident, other than to complain about one thing or another. They never spoke about Bess in front of him. It was as though she had become a ghost in the house, a presence that was never acknowledged despite the large framed photograph of her that sat on top of the piano. He realized how hurt his parents were and how angry they were with him. He didn't blame them, because he was just as angry at himself for his unforgivable negligence. It was so unlike him to fall asleep while driving because he was regarded as the most responsible person in the family. If something needed to be done, he was the one who did it. He was the one with the right instincts and the sure hands.

Some nights, lying awake in bed, he wished his parents would scream at him until all their anger was exhausted. Instead, they kept it inside and averted their eyes when he looked at them. He seemed to become as much of a ghost as Bess to them. So, shortly after he graduated from high school, he left to visit an aunt in Reno who worked as a blackjack dealer at one of the casinos. He intended to spend three days with her but spent only one afternoon then got on a bus for California. He figured he would visit San Francisco because it was the last place Bess visited before the accident. But halfway through the ride he overheard a passenger behind him complain about having to return to Portland to attend a wedding.

"It's the gloomiest place I've ever been to," he declared. "All it does there is rain, night and day, day and night. It's overcast so much of the time it feels like a gigantic cloud hangs above it like a chandelier."

Morley also detested the rain so he reckoned it might be fitting for him to go there instead of San Francisco as a kind of penance for his negligence. His first night in Portland he

slept in the bus station, scrunched up in a chair near the ticket counter. He moved to a shelter the next night, and by the end of the week found work as a busboy at an oyster house a few blocks from the station. The city was every bit as dismal and depressing as the passenger on the bus claimed. The first three weeks he was there it rained every day, and soon his throat was so sore he could barely swallow a sip of water. He didn't complain, though, because he believed he deserved to be in such a miserable place.

"I'm here in Portland, the City of Roses," he scribbled on a glossy postcard he purchased at the shelter. "I'm writing to let you know I won't be returning home. Not for a while, anyway."

He didn't provide the address of the shelter because he didn't figure his parents would be interested in writing back to him. They were done with him, he believed. Though he intended to return in a few weeks, he never got around to it and never wrote to his parents again.

Morley had not been on the job a week when Bernie, another busboy, stepped next to him in the pantry one afternoon and whispered, "Here, let me show you something."

"What?"

Not answering him, he leaned in and wrapped his right arm around Morley's neck, grinning mischievously.

"What are you doing?"

"Relax," he told him, slowly applying pressure to his carotid artery. "Trust me, you're going to feel as good as you've ever felt."

Futilely, he struggled to squirm loose, but Bernie's grip was as tight as a noose. Soon his mouth grew numb, and he started to feel light-headed. Afraid he was going to lose his balance, Morley reached for one of the bread shelves, but it was too far away. He tried to scream but was unable to, and in a matter of seconds, lost consciousness and collapsed into Bernie's arms.

"Did you feel it?" he demanded as soon as Morley recovered. "Did you, chum?"

"Feel what?"

"That strangeness … that sense of being somewhere else. Near the other side, you know. Near the final curtain."

"All I know is you caused me to blackout with your little stunt."

He chuckled, folding his burly arms across his chest. "You should get down on your knees and thank me, Russ. I let you feel something no one else has let you feel. I'm sure of it."

"You could have killed me."

"Not a chance," he said vehemently. "I knew exactly what I was doing."

Before he blacked out Morley did experience a strange rushing sensation caused, according to Bernie, when oxygen was cut off to his brain. It was a feeling, however brief, that made him forget about what happened to his sister. Twice more that week he asked Bernie to put him out, which he did, but when he asked him again the next week, he refused.

"How come?"

"You don't need me, Russ. You can do it yourself."

"I can?"

"You wear a belt to keep up your pants, don't you?"

He nodded. "So?"

"Use that to put around your neck," he said. "But you have to be careful you don't cinch it too tight or else that could be it for you."

Later that night, in the laundry room of

the shelter, he removed his belt and slipped it around his neck and started to tighten it. Then, all of a sudden, he stopped. The temptation to cinch it tighter than he should was too great. He slumped back against one of the washing machines with the belt dangling from his neck. For several minutes he remained there, trying to convince himself he had to accept what he did to his sister and move on with his life. Certainly he could never forget what happened, but he mustn't let it destroy him, either. That, he was sure, was not something Bess would want him to do.

"I'll bet you a milkshake you can lift this bag of peat moss," his father challenged him one afternoon while they were weeding in the backyard.

"By myself?"

"That's right."

"I couldn't do that if my life depended on it."

"Sure you can."

"No way."

His father then picked up the bag with both hands and, groaning audibly, lugged it to the middle of the yard and set it on one end of the seesaw.

"Now go sit down on the other end," he told him, and as soon as he did, the bag was lifted. "See, I told you that you could do it. Now you owe me a milkshake."

"It's a trick. That's not fair."

Earnestly he shook his head. "No, son, it's a simple principle of physics. The board you're sitting on is really a lever, and with it you can defy gravity and lift things you never thought you could lift."

"Is it every going to stop raining today?" a passenger wondered as she showed Morley her ticket.

He shrugged his left shoulder. "You know what goes up when the rain comes down?"

"What?"

"An umbrella."

The woman smiled. "That's for sure."

Again he looked over at the rain-soaked seesaw. One end was raised high in the air as if someone was seated on the other end, and he stared until he was sure it was Bess.

T.R. Healy, was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, and my stories have appeared in such journals as Gravel, Hawaii Review, Scrutiny, *and* Welter.