



FLAPPERHOUSE # 3

Fall 2014

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ARG

Anthony Michael Morena

WE ALL HAVE OUR SPECIAL ROLES TO PLAY. Some of us have cameras. Some of us are handing out leaflets. Some of us are in a van idling across the street, waiting for the right moment. Everything has been planned and everything is going according to plan. We are gathered together at the park. This makes sense. You would want to launch an alternate reality game in a highly trafficked area. Everything makes sense.

The plot of our alternate reality game centers around the fight between aliens who have infiltrated all levels of society, a cult built around resisting them, and our players. The aliens cannot be recognized on sight. There is no way to tell who is an alien and who isn't an alien. The distinction between the aliens among us and normal humans will be up to the players to figure out. A player might even consider him or herself an alien. The pretense of secrecy suggests that everyone is being watched.

Everything is set. We have a plot, websites, email addresses, hidden objects, puzzles, codes. The flyers we are about to hand out contain an oblique warning that is actually a clue for where players can find out more. We are dressed in black jumpsuits and riot gear. We are dressed as the hidden threats among us, in Giants jerseys. This park is one of the most highly trafficked parts of the city. Its proximity to subway access and retail markets makes it the perfect place to introduce our ARG. Everything is going according to plan. Everything makes sense.

Except for cheerleaders.

Fifty cheerleaders are running into the park, waving blue and yellow pom poms. They push by us, the corners of our flyers scraping against their spandex body suits. "Wooooooh!" they yell as they pass, "Wooh!" They converge on a point directly in front of the statue of the president on horseback. They start to cheer. From vans they have parked around the park a four-to-the-floor beat shakes the already noisy downtown streets. From the banners it's clear that they're here to promote a new TV show about Southern college cheerleaders. The park has been taken over by their astroturf flash mob.

They are not alone.

From the west side of the park: a hundred people wearing red shirts singing along to music no one else can hear. They are

all wearing headphones, all of their mp3 players synched to the same track, which they dance to. They are synchronized to the voice that speaks over the rhythm. “Jump up and down” says the voice and all of the redshirts begin to jump up and down. Another group comes from the east side of the park. They are all wearing blue shirts. They are singing and dancing to another song, a different song, another one that no one else can hear. From time to time the people on the east side of the park, the blueshirts, will all throw their hands up in the direction of the people on the west side of the park, the redshirts, wiggling their fingers. The redshirts will then all start making roundhouse kicks into the air. They are doing this for fun. They are “hacking reality.” Both groups are slowly approaching the center of the park.

There, a zombie bar crawl is on its way to the college bars a few blocks away. They have already been drinking for a few hours. They are all in character, moaning for brains, running up to the frontlines of the redshirts and the blueshirts, grasping. People walk through the park trying to get to work. They are saying “This is annoying.” The zombies are saying “Braaaains.”

There is an explosion.

An explosion rips through the park.

Cheerleader bodies flip into the air in a way that almost looks coordinated. For a second, the blast is mistaken for a firework display. The people on the west and the east sides of the park start to cheer, as the explosion happened to coincide with the crescendo of one of the songs on their mp3 players, a club remix of the hit Rihanna song, “Diamonds.” Except it is becoming clear this is not a fireworks display, this is not a part of their social experiment. They can tell that because of the blood and also the smoke. The zombies confuse things. The man trailing his intestines is in fact unhurt. Is a woman running across the park with her hair on fire in real danger or another prank?

Then, improvising, the zombies start to pick up the injured cheerleaders. The redshirts and blueshirts use their smartphones to pull up first aid instructions, and to take pictures and videos of the chaos. And we are there, dressed in the black jumpsuits with black shades and riot gear meant for aliens, and are immediately taken for police, and respond as such. We take people by the hand, we tell them it will be all right. Come with me, we tell them, everything will be all right. We are the police. Everything is okay now.

People are staring at the park from the high windows of the shopping center next to the park. They are doing whatever it

is they can think of doing first: calling their parents, their children, putting their hands over their mouths, crying. One of our flyers floats up to their window in the air among the hot ash. It says:

YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO THINKS THAT SOMETHING HORRIBLE IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN.

The bent corner of the paper catches fire and the game burns in the wind.

ANTHONY MICHAEL MORENA is a writer from New York who lives in Tel Aviv. His book *The Voyager Record*, about the music, images and sounds on board the two Voyager interstellar spacecrafts, will come out in 2016 from Rose Metal Press. He also reads fiction for *Gigantic Sequins*, a black & white literary arts journal. He wants everything to be alright.

five poems by Emily O'Neill

reflect / refract

PAINT ME SILVER

with power / let mine be the mouth
to echo all of it back / no praying,
no Devil's Traps drawn in yellow
chalk / keep your scorpions, your virgin
blood above the door, that Latin
compulsion to leave the body
behind un-cursed /

I don't speak any holy
tongue / in it my name means *mirror* / call me
the rain / I'll make puddles, each puddle a leak
towards the future / in the desert even
the rocks bloom to greet rain / let everything
kiss me that way / let death twist
back around itself like a moonflower / let the moon
drop like a pebble into my mouth /

forgive me / I'll crawl up your shirtfront to lick the salt
there / *bang bang* / call me cured / the only true trap
door out of any ritual is death / the mantra to chant—no fear
without flying, without falling,
without a haunting

where there's a cliff
there's a chasm / then a chill / then a voice shouting back
each secret born from your lips & dropped
into the barren dark

PENTACOST

I WAS TOO YOUNG WHEN THE HOUSE CAUGHT FIRE to run.

I hid in the bathtub, a tower of flame
around me as the shower curtain turned ash
& the ash undressed itself & kissed my skin & the porcelain
grew warm as a sun-baked river stone. Ghosts are the only city I've seen

since childhood. They stand straighter than buildings, sigh
louder than a house settling in the suburbs. Ghosts have street between them
we call *space* and airports we call *hauntings* where they take off & land
in, on, & around us, disturbing all our night rituals. A bath will never
warm my bones the way the oven can, so I crawl inside & leave

the front door wide. No guests beyond the dead
come to stay. I've been burying letters in the mud
because rivers cannot close their ears

when someone is weeping. The bathroom is the only temple
I have left. I press my face to the honeycomb floor, waiting

quiet for the dead & their backwards sun come to swallow every day
into its slippery heat; waiting for the hive to drop.
for the whole swarm to sting me.

them bones

THERE ARE SNAKES IN THE STAIRS

& hens in your kitchen
 clucking *loving wasn't*
as hard as you made it
 & it might be a miracle
 the birds don't end
 up strangled & swallowed
 by hiss & fang

you flap & crow (stupid cock)
 so early to the after-party
 & your whole apartment
 is women telling me not to stay
 is ankle fang & feather & blood & you swallow
 your tail like a secret to keep & roll
 back down the stairs

I have nothing new to say
 about hurt or my heart but
 loving wasn't as hard as sucking the venom out
 or spite round my neck, a mink stole,
 & the bones of these ugly birds have boiled & dried
 so the question grows into how many wishes
 arrive with each break

one for death / one for dishonor / one for tassel
 shoulders & damask lampshades worn as hats /
 one for *bon voyage* / I hate you / that isn't a wish,
 just a clean break / one for the hissing truth /
 the hissing truth you'll never stomach

if ever you knelt & asked me to tell it
 I would grow scales & choke on black velvet, would spit-shine
 that idiot diamond before wearing your promise ring,
 would walk into the angry sea to drown
 before mixing my dust with yours

before snapping a hen's neck
 just to stop that awful sound

YEAR of the HORSE

I'M NOT INTERESTED IN HOW TO BREAK

a horse because what's uglier
is whether you would eat one.

Not alone in the desert
staring down saguaros, dying
at the hands of your own stupidity.

Would you eat one for dinner
just to say you've done it? Could you
look into its kind, unknowing face,

scoop out the crude oil eyes, & carve
flank into a rain of steaks to last
until your next success? When

what carries you has been devoured
what will hold you until you're away?
If tendon tangles in your teeth

I hope it tastes like trampled grass.
I hope you see daybreak as a monster.
I hope your hands stay chapped and red

for as long as it takes guilt to grow
into a shaded place hung with honey
hives where the bees sting without asking

what meat you are made of, or if
you might rot in the heat of the day.

STREET MUSIC

YOU SHOUT & I OPEN

cunt like a jewelry box:
dancer spinning over wooden toe & inside,
a jeweled egg. Yolkless.
Glittering.

Inside the egg, another dancer
with hands over her mouth.
Inside her mouth, a bird
on a perch singing needle
song, a cranking tin machine

& the needles are shining brass
& brass is a lie to tell a child
about who stays in charge

& children don't always trust
like a blind man must & the metal is cold
like a lover rolled over & we know
it will tarnish

on a long enough timeline. The chain breaks.
The blind man steps off a curb & is not thrown into crosswalk
death by a stranger's rush. The child pricks her finger on a spindle
& sleeps until she ages past ache. She will never ask
if the wolves could've raised her better
because she taught herself to howl
just fine.

The needles fly back into the bird's throat & sew a new song;
a sailor sings it from a nest above the sea
& doffs his hat for the dancer's legs, the dancer's breasts,
the dancer's hips spun and barbed like razor wire. She crumples
under the sailor's gaze, is discarded. The egg closes its shining jaws around her,

steals her from what frivolous nothing
the world says she means

& I keep dancing
away from
the cut.

EMILY O'NEILL is a writer, artist, and proud Jersey girl. Her recent poems and stories can be found in *Electric Cereal*, *Gigantic Sequins*, and *Split Rock Review*, among others. Her debut collection, *Pelican*, is the inaugural winner of Yes Yes Books' Pamet River Prize and forthcoming in 2014. You can pick her brain at emily-oneill.com.

WE CALL HER MAMA

Natalia Theodoridou

"IF I TAKE ENOUGH, WILL I BE ABLE TO DIE?" I asked.

She looked at me, with her boundless eyelashes sparkling under the club lights.

"I don't know, baby," she said. "No one has tried that before. I guess we'll have to wait and see. Here." She held out her iridescent hand. I buried my face in her open palm and snorted the golden dust. My heart imploded right then, I swear. And then we danced, danced, danced like the gods that we were, until there was no club, no dust, no Father (Who art in heaven), just her and me, her unworthy, unfashionable, forever moribund Son.

{ X }

We called her Mama. She was no-one's mother, but she was Mama to us all.

"Come on, boys and girls," she would say. "Gather round." And we did. We rushed to her feet to taste the golden dust that fell from her heels. Who was she? She was the joy of life when dying was but a party trick, and she was the face of death when we were sick and tired of living. And who were we? We liked to say we were fallen legends, desperado gods and renegade dreams, but really we were just a bunch of lost children, trying to forget we were immortal, looking for love. And she gave it to us; I don't know what was in it for her, but she loved us all, and loved us plenty.

Before love, though, there was the drug. We thought it was the fairy dust that would make us into real boys. It almost did, too; the golden drug makes you laugh hard, and fear hard, and hurt as if you were human. But that's it. Can't make you mortal.

We all took it for different reasons, of course, but Mama accommodated each of her children without judgment. We were equals in her eyes. She danced with us, lay with us, dressed our wounds and licked the blood hot off our skin. And then, when we were done, when we had gotten what we needed, she let us go.

That's how I know I'll never leave this place. I can never have what I need.

{ X }

"Look at the pretty lights," I said to the girl sitting next to me. She was wearing a silver crucifix around her neck. Was that a joke, I wonder. "What was your name, again?" I asked her. "Mary, was it? All the women in my life were called Mary."

"No, it's Justine," she said and laughed, her voice barely audible over the music.

On the stage, I saw Mama hold out her palm--her giving, bountiful, magnificent palm--to the demigod children gathering around her. The dust flowed freely and endlessly.

"Don't you need a fix?" I asked the girl. Justine, she'd said. Probably a lie.

"I just had one. I'm sky high, love. You go ahead. And then let's dance."

I got my fix and came back to her a scared boy, hungry for her humanlike skin, trying to ignore the goddess that shone underneath.

"Let it all go, love," she said. "Let's die together."

"We can't die," I said.

"I know. But let's try anyway."

I like to say that was the beginning of a beautiful relationship. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." I carved it on the headboard of our bed. We tried a different ending every night. Poisons, knives, asphyxiation. Pain was our garden, and death was the forbidden fruit, just out of reach. No grace to fall from.

Sometimes I'd wake up at dawn feeling that an iron nail was being driven through my wrist. The pain was excruciating but it was the hope that hurt worse: please, please let me not rise this time. Please, please, let this time be the last.

The dreams left me soaked in sweat and freezing. I opened my eyes and touched the round scars on my wrists. So long ago and I could still feel the pain. But then I'd shoot up some gold and all was well again. Justine was there, the sleep erasing all the humanity that her face feigned by day. I wondered who she might be. A Sumerian goddess, perhaps. A thing from a myth, an Arabian night, a jinn? Who knows. All I knew was she fucked like a fiend. She loved like one too. She might as well have been one.

{ X }

Justine left the club a few years ago. I found her calligraphed note on my pillow. It said, "Remember what the drug can and cannot do for you. I did. Love, J."

I stayed. I gradually became part of the surroundings. People came and went. The club was filled with new faces every week. There was this guy who could make all your wishes come true (all except mine, apparently). And another who could change his skin colour, like a chameleon. The chameleon-man. We truly are the stuff of dreams, aren't we? And Mama loved us all. She loved us plenty.

I tried to leave once. I did leave. I think it was an attempt to convince myself I had all I needed to go on. I made a living doing graffiti in churches for a while--I was all the rage in Spain. Without the dust, I grew numb. It wasn't a completely joyless existence, though, I have to admit that. I enjoyed desecrating His House in small ways. One time, I gave St. Francis two left hands; another, I scandalized an entire village with St. Anne's enormous bosoms. But then I was commissioned to paint Judas hanging from his neck, and I couldn't escape the image of his body swinging back and forth, back and forth, under that fig tree. Lucky bastard.

I broke down. I came back to the club. The golden dust welcomed me. Mama welcomed me.

{ X }

Father never intended me to save anyone, by the by. He just wanted me gone. So I never went back to Him. I was resurrected, sure, but all the rest? I made it up, and then sort of went with it. It made sense at the time. Judas was the only one who truly got it. And the only one who got away.

I sit at the bar and fantasize that Father walks into the club one night. I find out we are more alike than I thought. In my fantasy, He envies me. "At least you got to die once," He says. He falls to His knees and begs me to go back home. He's lonely, He says. Lonely and bored and sad.

I used to wonder what I'd do if that ever happened. I don't anymore. Now I know: I'd tell Him to sod off. Because I have a Mama now, so I can send Him away and it won't matter, not even a bit. For she will come to me and say, "It's no big deal, baby. Just shoot up some dust and dance with me. We can kill your

regrets later. We'll kill them one by one. We have all the time in the world, you know?"

I know, Mama. Mama, Mama, Mama, I know.

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BLOOD TIES

Diana Clarke

I CRUMPLE MY FINGERS AS THE CLERK APPROACHES, hiding the red crusted in my nail beds. I can smell the iron, but the clerk doesn't even turn her head. She's too focused on an errant coat three rows away. Its unrumpledness signals that it does not belong in the sale room, any more than I belong on the main floor. She approaches the coat, barcode scanner already raised like a torch or a gun, then tags the thick green fabric and drags it away, sedated. Without the weight and darkness of the coat, the retired summer clothes that are past shopping season but still appropriate for the weather outside seem to list from their hangers toward the light. They are a swarm of fireflies, they are road dust rising, they are a dandelion head diffused.

I rub my palms together, pinch my fingertips, watch my menstrual blood flake to the floor where it becomes invisible. I can never bring myself to wash it off, not when I know they'll refuse to touch me later for the fear of it. In my neighborhood, Yiddish is like a curtain we draw between us and the rest of the world—keeps us warm in winter, and dark the rest of the year. My mother doesn't even speak it well, but her gestures are so Jewish that from far away you wouldn't know it. We moved here three years ago, and in one more year I'm leaving, but for the meantime what I have is not to wash. Rebellion comes in all kinds.

When I was a child, my mother's friend Julia would sit at the kitchen table, hair piled on her head and bare shoulders shaking with laughter, remembering how the two of them used to ride the subways, how their bodies learned to bleed together, and how when they did neither one of them wore anything to stop it. "It was the eighties," Julia would say, turning to me. Years of sun had turned her brown in the deepest part of her chest. "The subways were just us and the homeless people, and even the homeless people sat at the other end of the car." My mother always shushed her with half a heart.

I would go back to my room after and imagine the wetness between their legs, how it slicked them then dried till it stuck, how they would have to peel their pants away or shower still wearing them.

My mother married a man; I don't know if she ever wanted any other kind, but I do know that she covered her head for him, once he'd gone, and to my knowledge no one but me has seen her scalp since—and even I've only snuck a few glimpses through a crack in the bathroom door. I don't blame him for leaving; I blame him for his optimism in the first place. When I come home she'll ask how my day was, and I will not mention the sale room, or the department store, or anything about Manhattan, which upsets her. But I try to save up stories for her from the subway, which I know she misses. It's not that she can't ride anymore, only that she doesn't.

If I'm by myself I prefer to walk back over the Manhattan Bridge and follow Flatbush past the hot steam of Trinidadian doubles shops until Brooklyn starts to look like the suburbs—tall sedate houses each standing disarmingly alone—even if it never ceases to smell like the city. I walk this part slower, always hoping that my eye will catch on whatever quality it is that changes, why it is that my mother can be here with ease.

The quease of the island settles in my gut. My body in its bloat does not want gossamer fabrics, but this free afternoon is too rare to squander. I gather a host of blouses in varied pale shades, and one dress with a zipper up the side. In the fitting room I spend a long time just holding the clothing against me. Their hems flit like small insects in the stream of the air conditioner. All my little hairs raise like antennae. I wish I could see in the dark.

I slide a creamy sleeveless shirt on and it skims my stomach. The muscles of my abdomen recoil at the foreign contact, at the pressure I might only be imagining. I can't stand to wear it anymore; my skin feels heavy with sweat against the light fabric. But once I've taken it off I can't let it go, and instead I ball it up like bad underwear, crumpling it in my fist and stuffing it into my back pocket. I walk out of the fitting room like it's nothing, and the woman at the door takes the pile of whipped-cream clothing without looking my way.

On the subway back to Midwood, the blouse seems to expand in my pocket like a wing. The train hurtles over the bridge. Maybe I should have bought something for my mother; even after three years, she does not know quite how to wear the Flatbush uniform. On her, the sweatpant skirts and snoods always sit wonky, as if they know something in her flesh resents their clinging—or maybe I'm just projecting, but it's true she doesn't send me to yeshiva and that the locals don't approve. It's

true that if she did I wouldn't understand a word of what was being said.

"How was the ride?" she asks when I walk in. I'm not sure what she does all day besides sit and think; I'm not sure just what about this she expected to be an escape.

"I'll tell you in a minute!" I run to the bathroom to switch out my tampon. I never remember to bring extras. But before I can fill myself up again, the bloody stump swinging between my fingers, a long fast shit slides out. I can't help taking a peek at it, swimming in the bloody bowl, before I flush.

My father was a long slow shitter. When I was little and didn't know how to hold it, I would howl and prance outside the bathroom door, pressing my hand between my legs to stop the stabbing pains that crawled from my groin into my stomach. As soon as he left, I'd rush into the bathroom, swollen with the rich mineral smell of his bowels. I recoiled because I knew I should, but a part of me liked the healthy animal stench.

The bathroom's been much cleaner since he left, and not just because we've moved. The old place was in Tribeca, in a part of town I knew both of them used to love. They liked to talk especially at parties with their friends about how they'd swept metal filings from the floor when they moved in, the first residential tenants after the factory closed. About the wilder parties they used to have, that left paint splattered on the ceiling. By the time I was old enough to listen they just drank wine on the floor again, like teenagers. It hurt them so much to see the restaurants crawl down Church Street, to see the cheap sushi shop open up on their corner when Chinatown was only a few blocks away. But it hurts me to remember the feeling of standing on the bridge over Laight Street at night, sidewalk transported into the air—to where the wind was, the rush and flow of traffic down the West Side Highway, the solitude and sweeping cold that made every headlight a buoy, marking a piece of my heart as it got pulled away.

Dad left because of Julia. I'm not really clear, though, if it was the closeness between her and my mother—a sisterhood without the chastening influence of blood relation—or something that Julia and my father did, a hurt bigger than blood relation could help my mother stand. My parents never spoke to me about it, of course, but I sensed the tension when Julia's name arose. She used to watch me when my parents were out, but she hasn't been to see us since Mom and I moved to Brooklyn, though I know she and my mother meet up sometimes, and I haven't even

talked to Dad. I know he's still in the city, because he would never go anywhere else, not for good. His gallery connections are all here, his friends, even if watching the neighborhood he knew change around him made him dry up with bitterness.

My father is not a handsome man, too skinny and a little stooped, with what he liked to call “a touch of the shtetl” in him no matter how stiff his jeans, how dark his tattoos. He and my mother were great in conversation, but they never looked like they belonged together, standing side by side. Even now, coming back into the kitchen, I am struck by my mother's beauty, though her shorn hair and baggy skirt do a good job of hiding it. Her beauty is static, one meant for lying down and being looked at, one that gets lost in the doing. The clothes she wears now—she says they're just easier. Not to be asked anything or looked at funny when leaving the house, and it doesn't matter if she stains them with clay. She still calls herself a potter, but I haven't seen her sit still long enough to throw in ages, even if she says she came here for the quiet and the space to work. My impression is that she's here because it's easier than admitting to wearing a disguise.

“How was the ride?” she asks again.

“Fine, quick.” I grasp for something to tell her, feeling bad for reading the whole way back, for not having some news. Maybe this is what it feels like to be a journalist, disappointing people over and over again. But for once my mother is not waiting on me; she has news of her own.

“Put these on the table,” she says, handing me a stack of dishes. “We're having a guest.” It's been a year since anyone came over for dinner; my school friends mostly live in Manhattan, so that's where we hang out, and my mother doesn't have friends of her own in Flatbush either. The last people to sit at the table who weren't one of us were the rabbi and his wife who my mother, in a fit of goodwill and desperation, invited for a meal. She was in madness for three days before, boiling every pot and scrubbing every surface, kashering as she went, then ruining it all the next afternoon by bringing home tacos from the Mexican place a few blocks away.

Julia comes in from the back room, her hands covered in gluey clay. I'd forgotten she was a potter too. I'd forgotten—

“Hello my dear.” Julia smiles slow before crossing to kiss me on both cheeks, holding her caking hands away from her body, so that while she's kissing me I have the sensation of two grey pigeons hovering close behind. “Sorry we didn't get to tell

you. I called your mom up this afternoon, we hadn't seen each other in ages and I just thought, why not?"

I'm amazed at the ease with which she draws close to me and pulls away. I wish I'd had more time to examine her. She's six years older than when she saw me last, barely pubescent; I wonder how I must look to her. Julia is a little more wrinkled around the eyes, but that doesn't change how beautiful she is.

My mother and Julia pull vegetables from the fridge, chopping them into piles of pure pigment. When I was small my mother would lift me up over the cutting board so I could see the palette she was cooking with, before it all browned in the heat. It was years before I realized her talk of art didn't mean she was an artist, though it's still what I tell my friends at school. An eccentric mother is better than a mother who's a failure.

By the time we sit around the table two hours later, we're all caught up—on the travel Julia's doing, her residency in Hamburg, the book she's editing. I look to detect a hint of tension between her and my mother—why they let one another go for so long. I wonder if Julia still sees my father, or talks to him. But there's no tension; my mother's face is almost slack with relief that this is real and Julia is back, that proof of her old life exists—other than me.

We feast on pans of roasted vegetables, on chicken legs with crackling skin. In the low light, our lips shining with chicken fat, my mother and Julia and I look like we belong in a magazine. We grin across the table at each other, making mocking pouts that suggest we know how silly it all is, but sucking in our cheekbones just the same—lingering long enough over our own reflections in the window—to make clear that this is what we all really want. Julia's eyes catch mine, and stay there. So we've both noticed how much I've grown up.

"Want a glass of wine, honey?" She turns to my mother. "Lily, she can have a glass of wine, right?" My mother's eyes flit between her and me.

"I don't think we've got any, but—" From somewhere in a kitchen cabinet my mother retrieves a bottle of brandy. It's more than half empty, but there's still plenty left for generous pours all around. And even though it's my mother offering, I hesitate before taking the glass she gives me. This feels unnatural. But as we raise our glasses for a cheers, there's a low throb between my legs, and a shiver crawls from my chest up into my throat. I'm in.

"Honey, I know this is a horrible question, but I've gotta ask: do you know where you're gonna be next year, what you're

doing?” I can feel the dinner sinking low in my belly, stretching it. I suck in before I reply.

“I’m still waiting to hear. I want to be in the city, I think—or else far away. Honestly I don’t know. And they don’t tell you until March or April.”

“Or what you want to study, anyway? And Lily, what’re you going to do once she goes, way out here in Midwood? Honestly I still don’t understand why you needed to be here of all places. Sure, let Ivan have Manhattan, but there are plenty of other parts of Brooklyn that aren’t so...conservative.”

My mother cringes. “Julia, it’s space to work. And think, and breathe. A place without so many memories. And here I can pass if I want to.” My mother grew up Orthodox, in Yonkers. Never anything as religious as the people out here, but I think she’s comforted by the framework of our neighbors’ lives, even if it’s not one she fits in, or wants to.

“I’m thinking of studying anthropology. Maybe photography, too.”

“She likes looking,” my mother volunteers. I’m surprised at her accuracy.

“What do you like to look at?” asks Julia.

Instead of answering, I excuse myself from the table, saying I have homework to do, suddenly angry and hot in a way I don’t understand. I don’t like her asking me this—asking us, probing into our lives after she’s been away, after she wasn’t here when we needed her. Thin tears like boiled water fill up my eyes; I’m angry at my father too, and for the first time. For not talking, not explaining a single thing to me, for leaving me alone with my mother, who doesn’t know how to. And if I can trust the reviews I read online, he’s doing fine.

When I get to my room I shut the door and pull the shirt from my back pocket. It’s crumpled beyond saving without steam, a wing with the bones all broken. That doesn’t stop me from yanking it over my head and trying to smooth the fabric in the mirror, enjoying the press of my hand over my abdomen, pushing the creases out, pushing my belly in. I lift the shirt to inspect my stomach; it feels taut and bloated, but looks soft.

I stand in front of the mirror for a long time, listening to the clatter of dishes being loaded and the repeated suck-and-thud of the refrigerator door that signals dinner is over. My mother and Julia are talking in the kitchen, but their voices are too low for me to make out any words. There’s none of the earlier laughter, but in the end Julia will be staying; I hear creaking and bounce

as my mother unfolds the sofa. It's a long subway ride back into the city at the best of times, and after ten when the trains run local, Manhattan can feel as far away as Hamburg. The difference is I've never been to Hamburg, so I can't even imagine it.

Someone knocks; it's Julia, which I can tell from how she waits for me to respond. My mother always barges in after the lightest of taps, like she's afraid that if she gives me a chance to answer I'll say no. Julia stands in the doorway for a moment, unsure for the first time I've ever seen. Her cleavage is paler than I remember, like she doesn't spend so much time in the sun anymore. But from the way Julia closes the door, slow and firm, I understand at last why she is here again, and what had so troubled my father. I am shocked by how cool and clear her gaze is, and I do not want his protection.

Julia's hand slides under the weightless shirt and against my ribs, and we are silent, breathing together. I lose everything that is not the dumb naked want of her, the numb shiver spreading from my chest. It is all I can do to stand still with the way my heart is beating. It's not so much that I feel childish as that I instinctively know she is eminently capable—that I must let her lead. And when I come the pulse of my womb forces the last of the blood out, onto the sheets and into Julia's mouth. Her head emerges from between my legs, dripping and grinning. She wipes my blood from her mouth with the back of her hand and moves in to kiss me. I taste myself between her teeth. It is the most unusual flavor.

DIANA CLARKE lives in Western Massachusetts, and during the day she works with public schools and Yiddish history. Her fiction, essays, and interviews have appeared in *Armchair/Shotgun*, *The Billfold*, *Dissent*, *Nerve.com*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Village Voice*, and elsewhere, and she has been a featured reader at the *Lamprophonic Emerging Writers Series* in Manhattan and a writing fellow at the TENT: Encounters with Jewish Culture program. Diana is also an interviews editor for *[PANK]*, and she is very fond of diners. On Twitter she goes by @dclarkwithane.

FRIDAY NIGHT, SATURDAY MORNING

M.N. Hanson

1.

WEIGHED MYSELF - WITH SHOES

Weighed myself – without shoes

Weighed myself – holding the cat

Stripped down and weighed myself naked.

Weighed myself wearing nothing but an apron and holding the cast iron skillet.

(I've always wanted to make dinner for someone and wear nothing but an apron.)

2.

There is no escape on winter nights.

Leave house, walk through cold dark to someone's darkened car.

Strapped into darkened car, shuttled through dark.

Leave darkened car, walk through cold dark to dark bar.

Oppressive darkness into oppressive light,

Oppressive pressure of bodies against bodies;

Bare bulbs blinding against deep, empty shadows,

And bodies, bodies, bodies,

Bodies all the way down.

3.

I was too drunk.

I was drunk and dehydrated.

He tried to use water for lubricant.

It didn't work –

My insides tore,

And he used my blood.

4.

When we went out for a walk, the kitchen table was still on our front porch.

The table was square – chrome and formica, legs rusted toward the bottom.

While we were gone, someone stole it.

We replaced it with a pipe organ we found,

Disassembled on the curb in front of a Lutheran church.

We didn't eat breakfast that morning; at noon, I had broth,

Huddled against the organ's wind chest,

Experimentally fingering the stop knobs.

MN. HANSON is a recent graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's master program in writing. Previously published in *Vine Leaves*, *Burningword*, *Revolver*, and *Gothic Blue* Books I & II. Please visit mnhanson.com to complain.

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Hosted by Alibi Jones.

COLD DUCK

Joseph Tomaras

- **THIS ONE TIME, I WAS SO DRUNK...**
- How drunk were you?
- I was getting to it. I was so drunk, the next morning I vomited up Raymond Carver.
- As in just one story, what we talk about when we talk about whatever, or the whole fucking *Collected Works*?
- No, not his stories or writings or whatever. I vomited up Raymond Carver.
- How the hell? He's been dead for 25 years.
- How the fuck should I know? I was that fucking drunk. He was totally alive when he came out of my mouth.
- Was it, like, a tiny Raymond Carver, like that tiny Elvis character they used to have on *SNL*?
- Fuck, no, I wish. Full size.
- How the hell did he get out of you? How the hell did he get into you?
- I already told you, I have no fucking idea. It was just one of those nights. I didn't really get any sleep, and when the sun was rising, I could tell I was going to yak. Couldn't even get to the toilet, just had enough in me to roll onto my side and face the edge of the bed so I wouldn't choke on whatever the hell was surging out of me. You know when you're really vomiting so hard that you have to keep your eyes shut the whole time, and it feels like you're giving birth out your mouth like, fucking, fucking, uh, Chronos vomiting up his kids, the Olympian gods, that's what it was like, so I didn't see what it looked like when he was coming out. It did kind of feel like I was getting jabbed with fingers, elbows and knees from the inside, though.
- Shit. Did you at least get any decent writing advice?
- Hell no. It wasn't middle-aged, sober, AA-touting Carver, it was young, party hard, angry drunk Carver. Would have to be, he'd been marinating in red wine and tequila and cheap gin and whatever the fuck else I'd been drinking that night. He smelled like a fucking gin gimlet. Which reminds me, you done mixing those?
- Oh, yeah. Right here. So what did you talk about?

- At first it was exactly the kind of conversation you would expect, a lot like we just had, a lot of “Who the fuck are you?” “I’m Raymond-fucking-Carver, who the fuck are *you*?” “You’re in *my* bedroom, where the fuck did you come from, and aren’t you supposed to be dead?” Then he said, “I’m not sure about dead but I’ve definitely felt better” and we both cracked up and that broke the tension.
- Did anyone else come out?
- Thank god, no. But what you have to keep in mind is, I’ve just vomited out the biggest purge of my life, even if I haven’t gotten all the poison out of my system it’s mostly gone, so I’ve got the sudden clear head that comes after that, but he’s still fucking drunk. So I’ve got this angry drunk 20th century writer in my bedroom and I’m feeling like the designated driver, and he still wants some fucking champagne to keep his buzz going.
- So what did you do?
- Well we stumbled out to the living room but, after whatever party I’d had going on all that was left were some empties, and it’s Sunday morning so the blue laws were in effect. So I had a choice, either I could try and throw him out on his ass, or we could drive to New Hampshire.
- And?
- You’ve seen the pictures. He was a burly guy. Off to New Hampshire we went. Only I had no cash in my wallet and I was pretty sure the ATM was not going to help me out, just one credit card that wasn’t maxed out. So we couldn’t take the turnpike, I couldn’t pay the tolls, we had to inch down Route 1, hitting stoplights in every fucking tourist trap town on the coast, and it was winter so there were snow squalls. Two fucking hours it took. At least there was the Dunkin in South Portland, so we got a couple large coffees and a dozen crullers in the drive through, but except for that he didn’t want to stop for anything.
- Wow, two hours in the car with Raymond Carver, that would be awesome. What did you talk about?
- See, that’s the thing. I mean, he’s my god, one of them anyway, his stories really cracked the fiction code for me. So you’d think we’d have this awesome conversation about the writer’s art all the way down. But that Dunkin coffee really scours you out and whatever I hadn’t already yakked up along with Carver was pooling up in my colon

and the motherfucker would not let me make a pit stop. He had the shakes already, and if I so much as mentioned making a stop he'd ball up a fist and get this look on his face. So I'm trying to hold in some explosive diarrhea and half my brain power is focused on keeping my sphincter clenched and the other half is trying just to keep the car's tires on the road through those squalls.

- So you didn't talk to him at all?
- I tried. That was part of the job of driving. If I didn't distract him from the shakes he'd start distracting me muttering about Maryann or slapping his fingers on the dashboard.
- Who's Maryann?
- His first wife, when he was a drunk. He was like, thirty-five maybe, our age, hadn't met Tess Gallagher yet.
- Who's that?
- His second wife, his muse.
- Whatever, man, I'm not as big a Carver fan as you.
- After that drive I'm not as big a Carver fan as I used to be. Anyway, this Carver who was in the car with me, he had published a few stories in *Esquire*—you know those motherfuckers don't even publish fiction anymore? But his collection hadn't come out yet, and he was teaching boneheaded undergraduates at UC, and that was mostly what he wanted to talk about. How stupid his students were and his pain in the ass department chair and what a bitch Maryann supposedly was.
- Was she?
- If you had to spend your life with that guy, you'd be a bitch, too, is what I'm saying. Maybe she was, but I'm not going to say anything based on his side of the story.
- So you didn't like him.
- Fuck, no. I mean, you know how sometimes when we're hanging out like this, drinking together, shooting the shit, one of us will say something stupid and the other one will take it the wrong way and then it's like pistols at fifty paces until one of us just decides, shit, I'll take the blame, and be cool about it. Well, every conversation with this guy was like that. I just couldn't figure the angle for anything that wouldn't piss him off. I tried explaining to him that he wasn't in the seventies any more, that he was in the future, and in this world he was acclaimed as a genius who had realigned the art of the short story for

decades to come. He just could not believe me, kept fuming about how he'd never be able to write a big novel like Philip Roth and said some anti-Semitic shit about him, too. I told him, yeah, Roth's a tool, but I'm a Jew, too, and, let's just say, that did not make the situation any better. *In vino veritas*, as they say.

- Just so you know, doesn't matter how drunk I am, I would never say anything anti-Semitic about you. You're my favorite little kike.
- Fuck you, dude. Anyway, he just would not believe me that this wasn't, fucking, 1973 or 1974. I tried pointing out the makes and models of the cars, but he couldn't see straight. Then I showed him my iPhone, and that freaked him out a bit, but then he dropped it, cracked the screen and forgot all about it. That was when I decided I was going to strand this motherfucker in New Hampshire.
- That's cold, man. One of your literary idols gets vomited out of your guts through some fucked up occult process, drunk, deranged and disoriented, and you're just going to leave him hanging out to dry?
- No, I set him up. Speaking of which, I need another gimlet.
- Coming right up.
- So we get to New Hampshire and we step into the liquor and wine superstore, and his eyes just glitter. He goes looking for the Cold Duck...
- Do they even make that shit anymore?
- I didn't think so, but fuck me, they had it, and I told him, dude, I seriously need to use the crapper, but trust me, I'll hook you up. You can get up to a hundred bucks worth of whatever you need, and I'll meet you by the cashiers. So I go and take one of those massive post-bender and Dunkin coffee shits, the kind that are pleasure and agony at the same time...
- I have no idea what you're talking about. You are one sick dude. Here's your gimlet.
- And I come back and he's got a full case of that Cold Duck shit. I buy him that and, thank god, they let me get \$20 cash back. I took it as a \$10 bill and a roll of quarters and handed him the quarters. I told him, man, it's been great, but the party's over for me, and I'm gonna find you a pay phone and you can try any of your people, I'm sure you've got some writer friends somewhere in New England.
- Where the fuck can you even find a pay phone anymore?

- They've got a few not far from the liquor store, thank god. He wanted to open a bottle right in the car and I told him fuck no, I'm not getting busted for open container, and he had no idea what I meant. I guess the laws weren't as strict back then, so he was pissed off for about a minute there before I spotted the phone and dropped him and his case off.
- And that was it?
- That was all.
- Did you ever find out what happened to him?
- Didn't care to. I'm hoping he just blacked out on Cold Duck and disappeared back into whatever wormhole spit him out into my stomach. Or got through to Gordon Lish, or was picked up by the cops as a vagrant. I don't care.
- That's cold. You should write that up as a story.
- No way, no one would ever believe it. I'd have to sell it to one of those science fiction or fantasy rags, or some alt-lit mag that doesn't pay. It'd drag down my whole CV.
- Well, you could change it up a bit, make him a delusional street corner derelict who washed up during one of your parties. Instead of puking him out, you find him curled up in your bathroom after everyone else left. And he thinks he's Raymond Carver. In his mind, he's Raymond Carver, and the physical resemblance is uncanny, but really, you're just playing along to keep him cool.
- Yeah, yeah. Not so bad. Don't fucking steal this idea!
- No worries, man. You know I'm strictly working on poetry. Another gimlet?
- I'll just nurse this one for a while. I don't want Ernest Hemingway making an appearance tomorrow.

JOSEPH TOMARAS is locally confined to southern Maine. When not helping scientists get money to test their hypotheses, or ranting about the state of the world on his blog (skinseller.blogspot.com), he leaves traces of prose in any genre or the spaces between. His fictions have appeared recently in *Clarkesworld* and the Haikasoru anthology *Phantasm Japan*. He also encourages strangers to yell at him on Twitter (@epateur).

CHICKEN SANDWICH

Rebecca Ann Jordan

{ ONE }

ONE WEEK AFTER GETTING MY NEW JOB AT MCDONALD'S, I go to the doctor because it hurts to walk. I'm told I have an in-grown toenail, and I need surgery to fix it. It's going to be a death sentence; it's dead winter in Colorado, I live alone and I have no social life except for my mom's occasional calls and now my coworkers too, and after the surgery it's going to be two months of recoup time, during which I will not be able to walk on my foot except to go to and from the bathroom.

{ TWO }

After a day of feeling sorry for myself, I think maybe I should pick up one of those old dreams that used to haunt me. I could sew, once upon a time. I Google the only fabric store in a 50-mile radius and drive an hour down a dirt road and pull up into the driveway beside a ghost-town lemonade stand. In the distance there is a fence, presumably with cows behind it. Lunch break done, I drive back to work without getting out of my car.

{ THREE }

Maybe with my last days I should try to change the world in a small way. This has never occurred to me before, but the impending two-month death has me thinking clearly. I have never been the lucky sort, but "You're up, kid," says the manager (whose name is Reba and who I think is a lesbian), because the fry cook dies suddenly in his sleep. I guess it's not hard to do if you fall asleep in your car. I notice immediately the pink slime that the media is having a heyday about: the unnatural chicken parts. It's a responsible choice for the earth, so I decide to turn vegetarian.

{ FOUR }

I try a hand at my hobbies again. With my first two weeks of wages I buy a digital camera that can do a bunch of things I've never heard of. I spend my lunch hour wandering around the parking lot photographing broken bottles, as though it's some metaphor for the state of the world or my broken toenails. Speaking of toenails, they're victims of the camera too, at night in my bathtub, with the camera strap dangling in the water and my toes on display against the tile wall.

{ FIVE }

I start getting rejection letters. The camera gets a time-out in the trunk of my car. I leave it there indefinitely, just in case.

{ SIX }

I join a local meet-up for vegetarians. We eat hummus and carrots, which somehow reminds me of snapping off dirty toes. There is a baby-faced man named Arnold who whispers something about a co-op. I don't know what a co-op is, but I've never been interested in group sex.

"Now," says a teeny little woman of 60 years, "let's talk conversion. You're new, so just watch, but feel free to chime in. What we want is to show the world about the horrific crimes that happen when we eat animals."

"I work at McDonald's." I say this to prove my *ethos*.

Instead they all begin to scorn the sort of people that enable places like McDonald's.

I second-guess my decision to be a vegetarian.

{ SEVEN }

"I want a chicken sandwich with fries."

I overlook the fact that fries have not exactly been outlawed by the FDA yet, but they can still kill you, like everything. "We're having a special," I lie, "on Big Macs."

"Oh, I don't eat beef," the man with the stiff hair and stiff tie says. "Just the chicken sandwich, please."

"No. I don't think you understand. It's cheaper with the Big Mac. I can take the patties off."

"What I want is a chicken sandwich." I think this man

hates me, but doesn't he know I'm trying to save his life?

"Please, please buy the burger."

The man leaves. Apparently Reba thinks I show promise because she lets me keep my job in the back, where I don't have to talk to anyone, just keep plopping pink slime onto the stove.

{ EIGHT }

McDonald's is open until midnight. I trudge through the snow at one in the morning. The parking lot has been cleared by salters but I put my boots down where the grass used to be and where the crystalline snow now is, because it gives me immense satisfaction to make my mark, like the satisfaction of breaking tiny bones.

I don't know why I never noticed this before. On the balcony above my unit and three units to the left, there is a woman who is naked from the waist up. She leans over the balcony, smoking a cigarette, and her hair is curlier than mine. She probably gave up trying to tame it when she hit puberty. I think, with the moon behind her like that, wouldn't she make a great photo? I run back to my car on the tiny bones and find my camera in the trunk. When I come back the glass door slides closed, and I can't see inside because it is so damn bright out with the moon. I go into my apartment and run a bath.

{ NINE }

I regret putting my contact information on the list at the vegetarian group, because I get their weekly newsletter which is mostly about how they're going to meet up soon, so put it on your calendar, and there's a few pictures of happy, emaciated people hugging each other. The 60-year-old woman who ostracized me is usually there with a JPEG of her teaching yoga at the local library, cheerfully asking subscribers to join her, because everybody can do yoga. I grab my flat tire and think, no, you idiot, not everybody can do yoga, and some of us are dying, anyway.

Their recruitment must be dropping because I usually don't take phone calls while I'm at work, but I decided to take this one out of spite of the dead chickens coming out of the tube, and it's Arnold on the phone.

"Hey," he says, "we missed you at the last two meetings."

"Thanks." I've been told I have a fear of commitment.

“Yeah, they’re kinda stuffy in there,” Arnold says.

His voice is like what I imagine a train conductor’s voice is like: puncturing when he’s working, but wheezing and hoarse when he’s quiet, from all the yelling. “Do you want to stop by the co-op sometime?”

“Maybe,” I say noncommittally.

“I have a farm, just off the 160. We raise chickens. It’s nothing much but I thought you might be interested.”

Arnold doesn’t even know me, other than the fact that I don’t like hummus. “Why?”

“I just thought. You don’t have to come. It was nice talking to you -”

“No, I’ll come.”

I don’t know what possesses me to drive out to Arnold’s farm. It’s not anything like the farms in the movies. There’s no red barn, no creaky weathervane. Arnold has about two hundred chickens, cooped in a long building with their own nests on either side, and one chestnut mare, used for rounding up the chickens, I guess. “It’s all humane, see? They’re free to wander around; that’s the difference. We don’t feed them anything that we wouldn’t feed ourselves. I trade eggs and meat for corn and vitamins at the co-op. Everybody wins.”

I snap a picture of a half-grown chick that takes a vengeful liking to my blue jeans. Maybe he senses his inhumanely-treated kin on my hands, but the picture turns out blurry.

{ TEN }

Mom calls. She asks me how my trip to the doctor went. I tell her I have foot-cancer and they have to chop it off. We both cry for a while.

I have two months until my surgery. One foot in and one foot out.

{ ELEVEN }

“I think that I can get us chicken in bulk, for cheap.”

Reba stares at me, because she expected I was going to ask for a raise. “We have chicken in bulk for cheap.”

“But it’s not humane.”

“Listen, kid, you’re new. Don’t stir the pot. You’re not the

first hippy to come in here looking to make McDonald's a better place."

"But what if I could get it cheaper than it costs to ship the pink slime?"

Reba narrows her eyes. After a moment of silence, in which her old-fashioned cuckoo clock comes out to announce the quarter-till-the-hour, Reba shrugs. "Alright. You do the research and show me the findings. Down to the cents. That includes transportation, upkeep, and everything. And I'll think about it."

I am so elated that I am actually really nice to the stiff-haired man who comes in to get his chicken sandwich. "We're getting new chicken soon," I tell him as my coworker takes his order. "It's home-grown, right here in Durango. Humane."

"That's great," the stiff-haired man says, "and I don't care."

He doesn't even know that I'm making a better world for him. He'll miss me when I'm gone.

{ TWELVE }

"You know, those are pretty good." I'm showing Arnold all the pictures I took of his farm after we have sex with our socks on. I like the way his baby-face makes me feel more mature, even though I don't think he'll ever get the chicken smell out of him. I take a picture of his penis. He tells me I have to print him out a copy, and sign it, because someday I'll be a famous photographer and he wants to have a photo from before I was famous so he can sell it for lots of money and buy more chickens. I don't tell him that I have a death sentence. Instead I kiss him.

When I walk him out into the frigid cold, the bare-breasted woman is on her balcony. She watches Arnold go to his car and not see her and wave and drive away. She looks at me with her head cocked to the side. I take a picture of her. She scolds me by turning her curved back with the indifference of a cat. I delete the picture because I feel guilty, which is not something a real photographer would feel.

{ THIRTEEN }

I spend all week running numbers and calculating everything. I have a meeting with Reba. "Impressive," she says, but she's frowning.

"But?"

“Well, it’s not regulation. I mean, think of all the meat we’d have to ship for all the McDonald’s in the world.”

“But it’s just our place,” I say, because I’m worried that my sleeping with Arnold would be for nothing. “Just this one location. We could change out the chicken. It will be humane.”

“I’ll have to make a report...”

“No, don’t make a report. Just change out the chicken. Everyone will be healthier because it’s home-grown. And when we get all these customers in here demanding home-grown chicken, then you can make a report.”

Reba is a hard-ass. I can see she wants to follow the rules. “Help me change the world,” I plead quietly. She doesn’t know about my toe, but she agrees. I give her Arnold’s contact information.

{ FOURTEEN }

Mom shows up. She says she doesn’t want me to be alone. I don’t take the camera into the bathtub anymore, because I don’t want her to think I’m some kind of pervert, even though you can see from the slideshow I’ve put on my blog that my toe is getting even more swollen and yellow.

{ FIFTEEN }

Arnold is busy doing business with McDonald’s, and mom is always cooking me things and crying, so I Google the closest fabric store within a 50 mile radius and drive to the ghost-town lemonade stand. It might be a good subject for some photos. I start taking pictures of it, because it’s been rubbed bare by the world, and maybe I have a kinship to it, but I just convinced McDonald’s to get rid of their pink slime, so I don’t feel all that splintery today. It’s still three weeks until the surgery. I limp across the field, toward the fence where there’s a cow chewing her cud. “How now?” I ask, and she turns her head away and walks over the hill as if I’ve forgotten our anniversary.

{ SIXTEEN }

“I’m busy,” says Arnold’s conductor-voice over the phone, “I’m real busy, but maybe we can meet at the co-op later this week.”

“Can I come to your farm? I have a signed picture of a penis to give you.”

“Sure. Next week, maybe.”

I cook his chickens on McDonald’s stove. I recognize one of them, even though he’s feathered and sliced and what do they do with the chicken heads anyway? It’s the one I took the blurry picture of in the coop. The young chicken had barely had a chance to live. I eat him, because it’s the respectful thing to do in such a situation. Reba thanks me for my hard work and fires me for getting tears in the meat.

{ SEVENTEEN }

I find out on Facebook that someone back home died of cancer. I feel guilty, and also terrified, because wouldn’t it be just like God to deal me a dose of karma, and what if they find out that I really do have cancer in my foot after all?

I get three likes on my picture of the young chicken who liked my pants: Arnold, Mom, and a person named Betty Grable, who I think is one of Arnold’s friends, and who is probably not the real Betty Grable.

I don’t know why but I think that the brown cow at the fence must know something, so I drive back. The cow is there. She starts walking and I start walking too, and we break tiny bones together, and I try to touch her through the fence but it’s a weird fence to hold a cow in, not a chain link or anything like that, more like the wrought iron fences you see in front of a mansion, and I settle for snapping pictures. She doesn’t care. She takes me up a hill to the other side. There are lots of cows here, in the middle of the field, and they seem to be congregating around an old Indian statue with many arms but that doesn’t have a head anymore.

There is a snowy-haired man standing in front of a gate. I ask, “What is this?” He stares at me. I get the feeling he doesn’t have many visitors. I take pictures of him and the cows and the statue, far away beyond the fence. At home I must drop my SD card down the sink at some point, because Mom turns on the garbage disposal and then presents my wrecked pictures to me, begging me to forgive her.

{ EIGHTEEN }

I go back to the field with the cows. The brown cow greets me. "What's your name?" I ask, and she leads me around to the gatekeeper. "How do I get in?"

"You don't," he says finally, remembering he has a throat and tongue. "Not unless you do something good. To change the world. To make a difference, before, you know..." I take a picture of the headless statue. It's far away, so it's really small against the blue sky. You can't even tell the cows are cows behind the fence, this far away.

I think I must be having dreams, or demons, or a fever. But my toe really, really hurts, and so I take off my shoes and break tiny bones with my bare feet, and the woman is on her balcony with her breasts all perked up because it's damn cold outside. She doesn't even pretend she doesn't see me anymore. We stare each other down as I walk up the steps to my apartment. Tonight the moon startles me as it leers like a search beacon through the trees.

"Aren't you cold!" I scream at her. "Get off the balcony! Put a bra on at least!" She stares at me and drags on her cigarette.

I sit down on my front step and we stare at each other until I have to get up and tell mom not to worry about me because I'm not dead yet. She's won this one, with her breasts bare like that, braver than me in every way. She knows she is victorious because she finally smiles and flings her arms up to catch the last rays of moonlight.

{ NINETEEN }

I beg for my job back. It's fine, because Reba likes me, and one of her peons is out sick, so why don't I just go in the back, and no crying on the chicken this time? It's a bucket of pink slime. Where is the humane chicken?

"That's it," Reba says. "That's the humane chicken."

"But it's pink slime."

"It's easier to keep that way," Reba says. "And we make more money per chicken if we use all the parts. Head and toes and everything."

She makes the mistake of leaving me alone to fry the chicken. I dump it out, all of it, onto the sidewalk outside. She's screaming obscenities at me and my phone's ringing and a picture of Arnold's penis comes up on it, but I keep dumping all

the humane chickens onto the sidewalk, apologizing to them because they had a good life there, after all, with the corn and the vitamins, and the cops come and arrest me and I'm screaming because I don't want to spend my last nights in jail.

A doctor comes and says that he told me I shouldn't have been walking on my toe that much, because it got infected, and they have to do emergency surgery right away, and besides, my iron levels are extremely low. I wish Arnold was here, but he's busy, and I probably ruined his business with McDonald's, but I wish he was here anyway, and we could have sex one more time, or maybe I should have stuck with the sewing, and I think of all the pictures I don't want anyone else to see, because I don't want them to think of me like that, but remember me just like I was, a good kid who worked at McDonald's and didn't stir the pot, and then I feel a prick and they knock me out, the bastards.

{ TWENTY }

Mom's asleep in the chair next to my hospital bed when I wake up. Everything hurts, but I feel kind of good, like there's not too many demons in my blood anymore. There's a box next to my bed, all wrapped up in recycled paper. "I forgive you," it says on the box. "Love, Arnold." I unwrap it and find a really good lens, with a zoom feature that I don't really know how to use, but it says it's state-of-the-art and it's for my camera.

When they release me from the hospital Mom gets really mad because I lied to her about the cancer. She tells me I am a selfish, narcissistic kid, and that she worried about me, and that she thinks it's best if we don't live together anymore because I need to grow up. She moves out.

{ TWENTY-ONE }

As soon as I can walk I defy doctor's orders again and I take my high-focus camera to the fence. I take pictures of the brown cow's eyeball. We walk together all the way around the fence, further than we've ever gone. We walk past the gatekeeper, who seems like he wants to say something, but I don't let him talk because I don't care what he has to say. My breath comes out of my mouth like cigarette smoke. The lens slips between a pair of spindly wrought-iron fence posts and I start taking pictures of the cows. They look like they're sticking near the statue, which is weird. They lick its toe sometimes. It must be made of salt.

{ TWENTY-TWO }

"I know you're not coming back here for a job."

"I've changed. I don't care about the chicken anymore."

"I'm calling the cops."

"Don't call the cops. I'm not going to ruin your chicken or talk bad to the customers. I just need something to do."

She folds her huge arms over her chest. At least she's wearing a jog bra, unlike some people I know. "I heard about your toe."

"Yeah. I thought I had cancer."

She sighs. "Fine. But you're working the cash register, until I catch you stealing from it."

"Okay."

I work the cash register until midnight, when the stiff-haired guy comes in for a chicken sandwich. "You," he says, frowning. "How do you still have a job here?"

"The lesbian manager likes me."

"Do you know how hard I work every day?" the man says. "I'm under more stress than you could ever imagine. Real *pressure*. The decisions that I make affect whether my company succeeds or fails. I don't think it's too much to ask for some customer service. And they let *you* keep your *job*."

I don't know what to say to that, because I promised Reba I wouldn't talk bad to the customers.

"I want a chicken sandwich," he says. "And fries."

I wish I hadn't thrown out the bad chicken. Instead I take his money and spit in the sandwich before I come back out and give it to him. I feel bad, not for him, but for the chicken, because after all it doesn't really deserve to get spit on. But the stiff-haired guy probably wouldn't care if he knew about it because he's under *real* stress and too busy to worry about some kid's spit in his sandwich.

{ TWENTY-THREE }

I walk around the fence. I sit on the ground for a long time because my wrapped-up toe is tired. The brown cow gets bored and wanders away. The gatekeeper is watching me intently. I offer to show him my photos. He looks as I scroll through the display. I let him hold the camera and look through all my pictures, the ones of the brown cows and the white chickens and even my yellow toes, because I have no recent visitors on my blog.

I sit back down. The wind is picking up flurries of the new snow, so it's hard to see the cows. Finally the gatekeeper says, "I think you should go in."

"Really?" He nods. "Why?"

"I don't know."

I don't question him. He lets me in the gate and hands the camera back to me. I take off my shoes because it seems like the right thing to do in such a situation and limp down the hill even though I think my toe is bleeding. I take a picture of a cow's tagged ear. I try to get a picture of the statue, but through the storm there's only a thin gray outline of it on the display.

The woman is there. She's wearing ski pants and leg warmers on her arms but nothing on her chest. "What is wrong with you?" I ask.

"I have breast cancer," she answers, and I believe her; it's not just a cry for attention, but the bare boobs are definitely a cry for attention.

"Do you want me to take your picture?"

"Sure."

She leans against a cow. I do it. She looks more like Betty Grable now, or some other classic lady; the way her body, I guess, is kind of like water. What I mean is that she can move any way she wants to and still looks good. She can cleave me without touching me. "Can I kiss you?"

"Sure."

We kiss. I give her my camera. I never see her after that. Mostly because as soon as my toe's all the way healed I move back to Manhattan where I came from in the first place and get a job in the city where I don't have to look at animals anymore.

REBECCA ANN JORDAN is a speculative fiction author and artist. She has published poetry and fiction in *Infinite Science Fiction One*, *Fiction Vortex*, *FLAPPERHOUSE*, *Stranqelet*, *Swamp Biscuits & Tea*, *Yemassee Journal* and more. Becca regularly columns for DIYMFA.com, and is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing from California Institute of the Arts. See more of her work at rebeccaannjordan.com.

five poems by Jessie Janeshek

I CLIMB DOWN the TREE ONE-HANDED and in ANOTHER LIFE

to varnish trains and paint a buck by number
my right eye twitching anthems
obsessed with melon braids.

Fucking left me empty
but I miss that icy month
handprints on my ass
pink stilettos under glass
and, afterwards, two capsules.

Third date I scaled the gate
slammed the Dodge into the slag heap
glowed in neon panties, my best paper bra.

The rain starts up again.
I scrub the wild dog yellow
name a concrete goddess
Our Mother of the Birdbath.

She says the world's no worse here
it's just I stay awake
half-cracked and waiting on the meat truck.

PINEY and BUOYANT, WE WAVE, CONSECRATE

REMEMBER THE LAST NIGHT WE SAW THE FOXES
the herringbone hunter, incense and cups?

The freak accident killed two young ladies
small gobs of white
but you only bit one.

I swallowed allegiance, tried to decry
vomiting mothballs
the size of our crime.

Ours is the darkest
union, a lock.
My default is butchery.
Your faith tastes of bad milk.
I resist symmetry
let dogs lick it off.

ODE to JOY

IT'S DISINGENUOUS

to sleep through the day
when you're riding a lamb-headed
totem through fireworks
scratching morality plays in the dirt.

So I eat the mercury
hang from black rings
beg you to circle my ankles in duct tape
bludgeon the megrim from me
with a jumprobe.

Whose hand slinks up
the cat puppet's back
mouths my desire's
too greedy, taboo?

Who shaves me bald as a child on the table
spreads my legs in the loft
satyrs my crotch full of sawdust
as you jerk the ladder away?

PAINSTAKING

YOU SAY THE ONLY GOOD BIRD'S A DEAD BIRD

when Sunday's are empty
and most girls crave a witness.

I fill the oven with muscle
hope for a mermaid, a nursemaid
to spread the stovetops with slop.
I give myself leeway
to leaning into bone
on the outskirts of meaning.

You shove my head in the lake.
I let the algae dry on my face.
They gawk from the swanboat
as you ride my dark part
the brain in the jar
the key to keep
then I crawl in the treehole
cheeping to bleed.

THIS is the SHAKY PHASE

I MAKE CRISES IN MY MOUTH

harrowing the cat mask

lie down on the table
jawing *contemplate*.

So you left him in the garden
or maybe in a hot car.
He could only come in rain
jangling sharks' teeth in my face.

Tomorrow I'll leave hungry
rummaging for arrows
polka dot my toenails
red under duress.

The pink velour is nothing
but a snakecharm
or a smokescreen.

Take the mask back off
bat wings at the window flapping thick
at the bright slam of the gate
my shadow's chicken-shaped.

JESSIE JANESHEK's first book of poems is *Invisible Mink* (Iris Press, 2010). An Assistant Professor of English and the Director of Writing at Bethany College, she holds a Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and an M.F.A. from Emerson College. She co-edited the literary anthology *Outscape: Writings on Fences and Frontiers* (KWG Press, 2008).

The HOLE

Samantha Eliot Stier

WE MEET IN A HOLE IN THE SAND. There's also a dead seagull in the hole, but it's a big enough hole that we don't step on it.

He had seen some kids digging the hole earlier, he says, so it was silly of him to fall right into it. He was jogging, he says, staring at the sun as it sprinkled his eyes with little flash-pops. When he looked forward again, he couldn't see where he was going. That was how he'd fallen into the hole.

He says he twisted his ankle but it will probably be fine. He reaches for my hand, but first I want to bury the seagull. I pull sand with my fingers until the seagull is covered. You can still see one of his feathers sort of sticking up through the sand, but I leave it like that, a grave marker.

What if someone else falls in the hole? I ask.

He shrugs. I say we should probably fill the hole.

But that would take too long, he says. Instead, we gather seaweed and circle the hole, so people will see it. The tide's coming in, he says.

He hobbles along next to me, asks where I'm going. If I'm not too busy, he says, would I be willing to help him distribute his CDs? He's a musician, and his musician name is Lion. He leaves his CDs under people's windshield wipers and in their mailboxes. He says people love his music so much they give his CD to their friends and family. He has Fans, he says. Lots of them.

They had told me to be more careful, and I know they would be mad if I went with this man, but I will tell them he had kind eyes, that he helped me bury the seagull.

We go to a house that's not his, he's very clear about this. It's a friend's house, so I shouldn't touch anything. The friend has a liquor cabinet, and a bottle of rum with a monkey on the label. I pour us each a glass full. That's too much, he says, looking annoyed. But he takes it anyway.

He instructs me on how to stick his CDs into brown paper envelopes. His logo is a lion. Lion himself is pale and hairless.

He puts on his CD, says he wants me to listen to it. There are only four songs, and once it's over, he plays it again. His voice is soft and drizzly, a little too high-pitched, the guitar just a tad too bare. As he listens to himself, he closes his eyes, nodding the

way I've seen people do in church or after they've done something wrong.

You're going too slow, he says, eyes open now, watching as I slip a CD into its lion sleeve.

I try to go faster, but the sleeves are difficult to peel open. He packs them in shoeboxes, and stacks those by the door. I finish my pile, gulp down my rum and crawl closer to him. Grains of sand stick to his legs and I want to sweep them off. We're almost done, he says.

It's dark now, and the CD has finally stopped playing. The room is filled with a low hum. Above me, the ceiling moves in slow circles around the fan.

Can you get up? I hear him say. Come on, we have to get these out there for the world to hear. Don't you want the world to hear my voice?

They would be mad if they knew where I am, what I'm doing. Remember what happened last time? They'd say. Haven't you learned your lesson?

The lion man ignores my sprawled body and carries another shoebox to the door. Come on, he says again. Let's go.

Out into the night, I trek bravely with my stack of lion sleeves. I snap them into place beneath windshield wipers. In the morning, people will get into their cars and see the lion staring at them. Surprised—maybe a little irritated—they'll yank it out and toss it into the passenger seat. Maybe later, when they can't find anything on the radio, they'll glance curiously at the CD. Maybe they'll stick it into the player. Maybe they'll fall in love with the lion man's high-pitched voice.

When he finds me again, he criticizes me for not distributing my whole stack. I promise to do better. He takes off, bounding toward a parking lot, his limp gone. I take my stack and go back to the friend's house. I grab the bottle of monkey rum. Arms full, I walk back to the sand, to the circle of seaweed that marks the hole.

Inside the hole, I sit with the monkey and the lion, and the dead seagull, too, in there somewhere. I know they're worried about me now. I know they wonder where I am, why I haven't come home. I know they'll think I've done it again. They'll get better locks, and it will be a long time before I can go out again.

Soon I'll climb out of this hole and bury the rum and the lion sleeves and the seagull's feather. But for now, I sit and drink, waiting for it to fill.

SAMANTHA ELIOT STIER's short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Faircloth Review*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *Infective Ink Magazine*, *Spry Literary Journal*, *Citizen Brooklyn*, *Blank Fiction Magazine*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Mojave River Press & Review*, *The Writing Disorder*, and *Gemini Magazine*. She won an honorable mention in the 2013 Writer's Digest Popular Fiction Contest, and a selection of her stories was featured as part of the 2014 New Short Fiction Series, LA's longest running spoken-word series. Samantha holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles and lives in Venice Beach, California. Visit her at SamanthaStier.com.

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in*

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JUST ANOTHER EVENING

Dusty Wallace

THAT FUCKING ALLIGATOR stretched out on the nine-foot Steinway in the center of the stage was really distracting.

I nudged the guy next to me, "Do you see that?"

He looked offended at the interruption or maybe he was just worried I'd creased his penguin suit. "Yes. Mr. Nakamura's agility makes Chopin's Minute Waltz look simple."

He was probably right. But who the fuck cares about Chopin when there's an alligator on the piano? And why were me and this posh motherfucker the only people in the theater?

"Perhaps because you're naked," said Posh Motherfucker like he's reading my mind.

Wait a tick... I'm naked. *Naked*. That explained the draft, but not the alligator.

Mr. Nakamura stopped playing, standing to face the auditorium. "Would you two please shut the fuck up?" he shouted. "It's hard enough playing with this fucking alligator on the piano. The last thing I need are two disrespectful assholes running their mouths right in the middle of the waltz."

He sat back down at the piano, cracking his knuckles, and picked up exactly where he left off.

When he hit the last note Posh and I gave a standing ovation. I clapped with such enthusiasm that my penis slapped back and forth on my naked thighs and it sounded like three people applauding.

"Like I give a fuck," Nakamura said, ambling off stage.

"Well, it was nice seein' ya," Posh said.

"Wait, aren't you gonna give me a ride home?" I asked.

"Why would I do that?"

"I'm naked. I don't even know how I got here."

"You find yourself in this position often?"

"What? Fuck you," I said.

"Good luck finding a ride," he said. "Maybe you should ask Eric."

"Who's Eric?"

Posh pointed to the stage. Only the alligator was in sight, still stretched across the old grand. "You don't really expect me to..." I began, but when I turned around Posh was gone.

{ X }

Riding an alligator is not as easy as it sounds and it doesn't sound too fucking easy.

First, I had to get the sumbitch off the piano. I tried pulling it by the tail but it wouldn't budge, had its claws gripped around the edge.

I sat down and started banging keys as loud as possible and the thing finally slid down to the floor with a thud. Getting up was tricky with the piano stool firmly adhered to my butt skin. But the alligator turned toward me so I ripped away like a band-aid except without avoiding pain. I rubbed at my sore cheeks thinking, *what now Eric?*

I opened the piano bench and shuffled through sheet music, eventually coming across a half-eaten pack of breath mints. That led me to the logical conclusion to befriend Eric with an offering.

"Here boy. Ch-ch-ch," I called to the gator. When he got close enough he opened his mouth wide and I could see down into the pits of his stomach. Pink flesh swirled into the gator's depths and loosely formed the shape of a face, my face. But it was probably just a trick of my imagination which, on occasion, gets carried away.

I tossed the mint into the gator's gaping maw and it snapped shut violently.

The second mint I left a few feet ahead of Eric so that he'd have to move for his treat. Meanwhile, I circled around the piano and behind him. As he turned his head slightly to grab the mint I jumped on his back.

Let me tell you, gators are uncomfortable. Doubly so if you're naked. I thought I'd been sliced open scrotum to anus by its sharp dorsal scales.

Surprisingly, the gator didn't seem to mind the arrangement. I realized we'd get along just fine.

{ X }

A few folks honked at Eric and I as we loped down Route 322. It was a two-lane road and Oklahoma wasn't a natural habitat for gators.

Tossing mints about ten-feet in front of Eric, I managed to guide him two miles until we reached a small service station.

I went inside and asked the clerk for some more breath mints. There were two problems; I wasn't carrying cash (no clothes), secondly, they were all out of wintergreen and I just wasn't sure spearmint would work.

The clerk, a small anthropomorphic hippopotamus named Ricky, was sympathetic to my plight and offered me the spearmint free of charge. It was a nice gesture. Something you don't normally see from hippopotami.

Finally, after close to three hours (Eric moved slower for spearmint), we finished the five-mile journey to my suburban two-story home.

Mindy, my beautiful wife, was waiting outside with a scowl as Eric pulled into the driveway.

"Jonny Jordan Johnston, where in the hell have you been?" she asked furiously.

"At a concert," I answered, "Chopin."

She smiled and gave me a hug.

DUSTY WALLACE lives in the Appalachians of Virginia with his wife and two sons. He enjoys reading, writing, and the occasional fine cigar. His story "Shaundra The Watcher" will be featured in ARES Magazine Issue #2. He's also the editor of *People Eating People - A Cannibal Anthology* available now on Amazon and other online retailers. You can keep up with him on twitter: @CosmicDustMite or at his blog DustyVersion.blogspot.com.

MEETING

Jeff Laughlin

I.

IT'S NOT THAT I DON'T BELIEVE IN LOVE,

only that I compare it to working.
 The action item list reads identical:
 --That careening of blood through
 the walls of the heart marking the
 time you did it right the first try.
 That's enough, just that one on the
 list convinces me that nothing is
 different, nothing is that moment
 more than anything else could be.

II.

To clarify the following, too:
 I have loved and lost and lived
 a million lives. I have lived in
 the margins-- those college-ruled
 maniacs trapped me there from
 the start. And I will die there,
 with no work grinding my bones
 and no laborious thought in my
 hawkish mind. I will die without
 comfort or love, but not regret.

III.

Folly of endeavor, folly of light,
 prayers for the uninitiated who
 just learned to work. Folly of fall,
 folly of man, a layer of ice upon
 the next worker who mentions he
 is on sick leave. Folly of summer,
 folly of synergy, a weigher of soul
 and reciprocity delivers the memos.
 Folly of function, folly of form, we
 are not ideas we speak into the void.

IV.

Abandoned love is unfinished work:
further proof that we desire nothing.
What fills our purpose we claim to
own. Well, if the sun has not risen and
you see light, do you falsely claim to
have seen the sunrise? Cool if you do,
but some of us enjoy the undefined
parameters. Some of us want loose
ends and to accidentally leave the
machine on over Christmas vacation.

V.

Loneliness is impossible in the tech
and information era so I must be
doing this on purpose. What strategy
do we harness when we deny our base
motivations? Please advise. And with
best regards. Discuss my temperate
disdain for the idea of happiness via
all manner of design. Best, and please
communicate your findings to the boss;
he will hate to hear that I've dissipated
into the ethereal realm to float around him.

VI.

To sum up: I am not work or love, nor even
their cousins or friends. We learned that the
search party ended, the people too tired to
keep hunting for heresy's end. My debt sits
in the middle distance: starving, alone, weary
but intolerably alive. Who has time for love?
I'll bet s/he reaches in his/her pockets just to
check and make sure that s/he has his/her keys,
wallet and phone even though s/he always
knows they are there for sublime comfort.

VII.

Adjourn, adjourn, and walk out into the sun,
 your skin soaking up what light it can carry,
 the meeting adjourned and we all know now
 that we are the Equator, we are the sheen of
 packaging, we are the continuation of our own
 argument, we are the reason that hands clench
 and release, we are the baseboard hiding the
 ants, we are the end of work and love and we
 are always welcome into death's arrogant arms
 no matter what value we have been assigned.

JEFF LAUGHLIN writes about the ~~Bobcats~~ Hornets for *Creative Loafing Charlotte* & about sports in general for *Triad City Beat* in Greensboro, NC. His first book of poetry, *Drinking with British Architects*, is riddled with mistakes but available free if you want it. His second book is *Alcoholics Are Sick People*, and if you ask nicely, he'll probably give that to you too. Contact Jeff on his seldom-used twitter (@beardsinc) or email him (repetitionisfailure@gmail.com). He likely needs a haircut.

HUMAN CHILD

Brendan Byrne

IT HAS BEEN AN ACHING DAY. The sky heals like a scab, but nothing has split it, and it has never bled an ounce of fluid. Light the first of the evening. My hands ache. Fluxing bone pain which doesn't dissipate. Rest my elbows on the black metal railing adjacent to the basement stairs. A Japanese guy with coiffed hair and a model's blank face brushes by, street-level. I think I hear him say, sotto voce, into a phone curled against the side of his skull, "...other territories... how does it feel there?"

The door jerks towards me: I catch it. The last of the maggots file out, pawing at coats, extracting packs of cigarettes, demanding lights off each other, howling about the stupidity of associates and lovers. I wait till they're halfway down the block, then go back inside. Clear the scrap-wood tables of barely begun drinks, kick the chairs and jerk the tables back into some kind of order. I have my head down, starting the wash, when the door heaves and wheezes.

Kid. Small and thin. White-stained hoodie draped, obscuring features. He's looking at my face in the way people who know you look at you. I straighten up and move down the bar towards him. Just from the way he's standing, I know I don't know him.

"Gonna have to see ID, man."

As I approach, the candle throws up yellow globe light, and I can see the shorn sides of his head. Scraped unclean with cheap razors. I tighten, keep a good deal of the bar between the two of us. I think of the metal bar under the wash.

"Not looking for a drink." His voice is a slurry of broken things. His hands jammed into the hoodie's pockets. He hasn't looked anywhere except right at me. There's a bunch of things I could say. None of them would ease the situation in the necessary direction.

His eyes are somewhere I've never been. "Knowa girl named Kimmie?"

"Don't know anyone named that, no."

"Kimmie."

"No idea."

The kid leans slightly over the bar. I can see the beginning

of lazy slashes of tribal tattooing on his wrists. There is what looks like at first a severe case of eczema on his neck, but as he comes closer, I can see it's scar-art, created through glass laceration. Thought it was out of style.

And I can smell him. Old puke and new trash. Like one of the gutter punks who camps out in Tompkins Square Park and adjoining streets, but they don't come in here, they know better than that.

"Said she knew you."

"No idea, man. Sorry."

"You're Aaron."

"No, that's not my name."

His single, simple grin. "Kimmie said."

"Not me."

"Aaron."

"No."

"Aaron." It's a statement. He places both his hands on the bar like they're dead birds he's been carrying around too long in his pockets. "She said you knew how to get back."

"Get back where?"

He thinks this is funny: his face begins to convulse around the slit of a smile. His body is impossibly still, like a caryatid of an unseen palace. Then his neck begins to spasm, and something happens to his eyes. His shoulder twitches, and his head drops as if he's mid-seizure. I step back, place the base of my spine against the counter behind me. A middle age couple comes through the door bubbling and laughing, talking about the never-removed Christmas lights, calling for two Stella. In the second I look away from the kid, he was out the door, quick-lurching up the stairs. The couple brightly ignores his transit, settling. I pour the beer, take money, give change. Stymie attempted dialogue, "How long has this place *been* here..." Curve around the bar. Outside. Up the concrete stairs.

There is nothing on the sidewalk except for dog shit, menthols smoked down to the nub, and chip bags, inside-out, gleaming. The sky is wet and swirled with grays, refusing to rain.

Army jacket hung over his sloped shoulders, a brace of white-heads running up the right side of his neck, my brother stood in front of the cafe door. It was the late morning rush, espresso hiss and plume. Early twenties with their anti-ironic plumage and their hung-over fleshmasks would walk up behind him and do a nimble three step; in New York, you can never quite believe that

the person who is in your way is not about to begin the process of getting out of it. Then they'd say something passive and suburban or touch him lightly on the shoulder. He'd turn a little, looking almost hunchback, grimace, smile down at them, then open his eyes in surprise and shuffle to the side. After they passed, he'd return to his station, staring out the window at the broken sidewalk, the trucks slamming over the surface of the street. I saw him repeat this process four or five times, always with the same surprise and lack of agility, as if he had simply become incapable of learning from past experiences. Eventually, I had to stand, take him by the shoulder and elbow, and lead him back to the table.

I was seventeen, taking a week of my break to visit him. I'd known he'd dropped out. I hadn't known he was this bad.

He tapped out a tattoo on the table with his knuckles, some kind of obscure protection. "Do you dream?" he asked me.

"Yes. Probably."

"You don't remember them?"

"Not really. Smears of them. Never faces or anything. Colors and feelings."

"So we could be having the same dream and not know it."

"I guess."

"Would you go back there with me? If we could?"

"Go back where?"

His eyes did this little animal thing, like he was catching up with me. "The marcot, Cat. Where else have you ever been that you'd want to go back to?"

"The marcot?"

His face slipped a little. Then his head began bobbing back and forth like someone had cut his jugular and physics had not yet decided what was to be done. He said, very softly, "We went there together."

"I don't remember that."

"When you were six and I was twelve."

"I don't remember much of that."

"Remember much of what?"

"Before I went away to school."

He was blinking at me, slow and deliberate.

"I don't remember much after mom and dad died."

"They didn't."

"What?"

"They didn't die."

I stood without knowing it was what I was doing, my hand

closing around backpack. My brother reached across the table and grabbed my wrist. We held the relief, slightly risen, me pulling against his grip ever so gently, for maybe an entire minute. Then I released my backpack, and he released me, and we both sat down.

That evening, I watched him do nitrous, inhaling leisurely into the fluid-rimmed balloon, frozen steam coming off its top, his one huge hand encompassing most of its fat body. And when he leaned back into unconsciousness, he was smiling, no blood in his face.

“...you couldn’t really see the expression on its face, its mouth was broken or stuffed with moss or worn away by water, or it was just hidden by shadow, it was hard to tell, but I could see the mane, the eyes. It was blue, even in the dark, you could tell it was blue, blue-black, and it was supported there, by some kind of stone column, and I asked him what it was, and he said, ‘A drain, of course,’ in that Hackney accent, and I asked him how he knew, and he said he’d been looking for it for so goddamn long of course he’d recognize it, and that was when he flopped over onto his back and began to kick his legs up in the air and let out these little shrieks. I thought something was wrong with him, his face was all screwed up and his eyes were shut and his forehead and brow, I guess you’d call it a brow, were all wrinkled. But as the shrieks, they were really these kind of small things, not that loud, rose in pitch, I realized that he was joyous and anxious too, that this was a *celebration*.” He stopped there and smiled at me.

Down at the L curve of the bar. Natalie covering my ass on a strangely quiet fall Friday.

“So? What happened?” I poured myself another two fingers of scotch. Aaron waved the proffered bottle off. His fingers seemed thicker than the last time I saw him, his face more sallow and excited. His clothes seemed bought fresh from Walmart, though they fit perfectly. The pink polo seemed particularly inappropriate.

“I dunno. This was just a scouting expedition. He had to do some more research. I got caught up in other shit. He never got in touch again.”

“He knew how to get in touch with you?”

“Everybody knew how to get in touch with me.”

“I didn’t.”

“I didn’t mean people like you.”

“People like me.”

“Yes.” He said it like everything was so evident.

“What do you think he was going to do?”

“What do I think—” His fingers knitted together over his right knee. “He was going to go down there and follow it. The old drain and the river it led to.”

“Where did he think it led to?”

“We didn’t know,” Aaron said. “But that was the point. Wasn’t it?”

I usually went out easy, slept hard, and woke late, blinking gauze away. After one particular Monday night of Ambien and Dewars, dreams crawled up my skin, up my nostrils. I woke repeatedly, each time knowing exactly where and who I was. Around five, I slipped out of bed, steadied myself against the gently flaking blue walls, slouched toward kitchen for a drink. Stopped over the couch. I’d forgotten my brother was there. Curled, flimsy covers twisted about his ankles like a homemade escape rope, less in a fetal position than like a beetle. He enacted, with wrists, elbows, lower jaw, and neck, such strange positions, somehow fluid and somehow jarring, that I didn’t think, at the time, I’d ever seen a human have purpose for. There was no noise, except for the scratching of his jeans against the rough material of the couch. I was reminded of the nature of sexual fantasy long before experiencing penetration, when all there is is the idea of warm, of hiding. “You go limp,” an ex had once observed of my sleep patterns, “And then suddenly you kick out once or twice like a dog.”

“A fucking *speck*.” It was late, and he was drunk two beers in. I’d had quite a bit more, but I was metabolizing at a steady rate in those days. Aaron sat on the beat-to-fuck blue couch, legs curled up under him. He wore one of my blotched white work shirts and an old pair of my black jeans, threads exposed on the inner left thigh. He’d shaved but had not slept well, and the weight he’d put on since living with me showed in obvious places: curled in a roll at the gut, under the folds of his arms, the chin, the cheeks.

“I’ve never stopped looking for it. And I haven’t found a *fucking speck*,” and here he showed me non-space between thumb and forefinger. “I’ve found things, yeah, I’ve found strange things, but the people who’ve, they’ve said they know what I’m talking, they didn’t give it the same name... They’ve all been looking for, I don’t know, maybe looking for attention. Notoriety. Power. Though if that makes sense.” He raised his hands,

showing me the plain palms, the fingers gripping the air between us. “Do you remember waking up after? In the ditch? My arm thrown over you, my stomach pressing against your ribs, your T-shirt? It was the green Slimer one, and the sun was above us, and there was the slow, steady rhythm of your heart under my hand. That was real. Just a for a minute. It was real. Mom and dad.” He looked off, then his gaze clipped back to me. “They were there, and then they weren’t. Maybe they’d never existed. Maybe they were an intervention. But I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter. I was never alive, never even born, until I came to the marcot, and the same goes for you, Cat. You know that.” His hands retracted and clutched his upper arms. He twisted back and forth, not quite rocking. Then, softly, looking down at that sloped, bare floor, “I know it happened. I just need to hear you say it. Just once.”

I rarely laugh from my heart, the shaking, difficult kind of laughter you can’t control, but that’s what I did then, the thing seizing me and not letting me go, shaking my torso with violence, forcing out sobs, tears, and making me gasp for air. Aaron watched me the whole time.

He’d stayed with me for almost two months. I think it was the happiest I’d ever been.

Then Kimmie.

Flame-scorched forearms, she seemed of autumn all the stronger for it. The wave-mass of tan scarration ran roughshod from thick-knobbed wrist bones to the plains of upper, fleshy arms. She refused long sleeves, even in the winter, kept to simple white T-shirts after spring bleeds into summer, but she didn’t flaunt her trauma, spectacle herself, enjoining her figure to your minor wells of pity and superstitious fear.

I first saw her staring down at a jagged tangle of glass at her feet like she had no idea where it had come from. Her iPod had reached the end of a playlist of muddy old funk, and into the crisp, new silence, the crash had been loud and immediate. The cafe had just started serving beer and wine, the latter in these really unfortunate long-stemmed glasses you’d see at a restaurant with tablecloths. She regarded the mound mutely, her body stalled in a bend forward, a position she held so long it seemed stilted, posed like a modern dance arrangement. It wasn’t this desperate unnaturalness, but the look of negation on her face,

her total rejection of the incident which made me get up from my table and approach her.

Kimemie could bleed the word "boy" of all its talk-down city connotations, shiver you with its purr. She drank good bourbon, but she drank slowly, and she did not often get drunk. She made you tell her stories about yourself, or stories others had told you; she leaned across the bar and grasped your wrist and demanded it of you, Korean features contracted by Western lilt, extremely American. Both forced a sense of wide vistas, as well as a certain lack of innocence. She wouldn't offer advice, and that was welcome enough. Telling her tales wasn't an unburdening; she offered her complete self up and drank it in readily, smiling close-mouthed and without opinion.

She came from this little thing that called itself a town, non-incorporated, in between two ranges of things that were not quite mountains in a state that really shouldn't have been a state anymore. Came from; well, was imported to, adopted and flown in, but she had no memory of being born, no memory of Korea. The town, they would have bonfires when autumn hung heavy above the abandoned mineshafts, the slim, wooden gateposts with parked motorbikes in front of what they called bars, the unstreamlined chapels. Yard refuse, dried deadwood still unsoaked by dew, crippled furniture unsalvaged by the middling talents of local craftsmen, leaves and brush, all things with their ends irrevocably stuck in them, handed down from Christ for the single purpose of burning. She described the smell, as if tar had been alight for years, as if summer itself were for burning, the excitement that came with the sacrifice of the end of the year, hailing the season of miracles, demons and godlings and pilgrimsnindians, dead n' hungry. The thrill of children who don't know that their world is limited by the laws of physics and sickness. She described her parents' drive in the dark, just highway and highway, the tractor-trailers downshifting with bunkerbuster explosions, the long pebbled climbs of emergency access roads, for when one of these behemoths went rogue. She described the food, gourd-based, and watching her mother drink and dance, slight and free, happy to become a stereotype. She did not describe the actual incident, the day when her flesh was transfigured to no longer resemble itself but something unmoving, some kind of mountain topography: dry rivers, empty valleys, useless plateaus. But it was the burning which convinced her that there was another place; she had not touched, seen, or even felt it, yet had become inexorably sure that this world could not

simply be all there is.

The stairs, inlaid and rococo, were steep and easy to misjudge. We watched the run of semi-mythological scenes sketched on the walls, muzzled bears and heavy hares, dwarf trees fruiting, a caravan of cats, and wondered if these scenes were executed from legend or just the imaginings of a hired artist, storyless, bidding his characters to cavort purposelessly.

Kimmie clung to my clothing, banging deliberately against my side on our way down, laughing loud and dirty with each collision, turning out her limbs to catch against pillars and the spaces created between railings; on one impact I swear I heard something crack. The street, when we finally came out onto it, was a mid-morning Saturday bugfuck. We just leaned in and plowed through.

Aaron grabbed my head and brought his face to mine.

"Tell me you'll come with me," he said.

Blonde and skeletal and so hunched he seemed shrunken, ligature marks on his neck and a tic in the well of his left eye, his fingers smooth and weak, his teeth small shoals in a great pale gumline. His clothes garish tatters. He, or someone drugged, had given himself a mohawk and then allowed the hair to grow back irregularly, so that the central slash of hair was now nearly obscured. He squinted like a sewer rat dragged into daylight. "Tell me."

Kimmie hit him hard on the cheek, exhaling a stylized grunt as she followed through. Aaron recoiled but didn't so much as look at her.

"Kimmie," I said. "It's okay. This is my brother."

"Fuckin' *what?*" she said.

"Aaron."

"I know how to. It's so simple."

"Let go of him. You're hurting."

"Kimmie."

The crowd churned.

"The marcot." I made myself say it.

"Yes." He put everything he had left into the affirmation.

"Hearing you say its *name*."

"It never existed."

He didn't let go of me but rather, after a single second, pressed my head firmly between his hands with a strength I had never been able to allow myself to see in him. Then he leaned forward and kissed me where the left cheek meets the mouth. He

released me then folded himself into the crowd. Kimmie stood there in the burnt-egg light, looking up at me like she hadn't, until now, seen me at all.

I ask Natalie to cover my shift, and Stewart for his car.

Everyone looks at you strange, coming into the state. *You must be lost*, they think. Were we? What could we have been doing here in the first place? Any family outing would have normally been confined to the Great Falls or Wolf Trap or, at the most experimental, 'discovered' backroads. 'West Virginia: Open For Business', read the signs as you cross the border. This is a state almost impossible to mock.

It takes some effort to find 81, more the cow path leading off it. Last time (and I am terrified by how I'm thinking of it so casually as 'last time'), Aaron knew the way here, issuing directions as he bounced, joyous and anxious, in the bucket seat of Kimmie's aunt's old gunboat.

I stopped at what I, correctly, assumed was the last place to fill up for cigarettes, Red Bull and a 22 of Bud. I chained, sunk half the energy drink, the entirety of the beer, followed by the rest of the former, its metal taste dulled by exposure to air, its violence to the palate and gullet less crisp. I tried to vomit, head between my knees, half sitting on the passenger seat, head stuck out the open door. Nothing happened.

Driving now alongside a long unbroken, unmended metal fence, no animals in sight and nothing between the sky and myself but the very fact of the car itself, I wonder at my calmness. It makes little sense, but it stays till I have navigated up the tree-engulfed path to the little ditch where she is coming to stand upright now.

Alone. Hair like scrap growing back on a tan, perfectly-curved scalp. Bagged out in a yellow jumper, burnt-orange pants, blue-black winter jacket, all three or four sizes too big. Hands emerging out of the two sleeves like shy sea spiders exiting furred coral caves. Sclerotic spine like Eros bid the body bend over, but only the upper torso gave into seduction. Face open at the center, drawn out and stretched at the edges. Mouth open ever so slightly.

She advances, tripping over herself repeatedly, calling my name in this sweet, ragged voice, nothing like the one she used to have. There is not the scrotal-thrilling fear I expect or the empty ache of the pathologically depressed. There is just an emotion I

cannot hope to capture and classify.

I throw my arm over the seat back next to me (not her eyes) and slam the shift into reverse, tear downhill. I close my own eyes, so I can't get a glimpse of her reflection in one of the rearview mirrors.

"That's where you think mom and dad died." We stood by the beginning of the curve, traffic a full and complete line to our side, the flashes of ambo lights from around the bend just barely visible on the dull chrome of rearview mirrors, the sheen of the wet road. The drivers didn't appear too upset; they checked texts, played video games on their phones as if they had nowhere to be. Perhaps they didn't.

"Around that corner?"

He nodded slowly, as if distracted. He'd grown fat in prison, or the hospital, I'd never been able to get a straight answer just which kind of institution he'd been placed in. Mostly bald, though no men in our family were so. Glum-faced with this strangely sweet new smile and horrible breath. His hands jammed into the pockets of his Wolverines hoodie.

"That's some fucking coincidence."

"Well, it's not where we're going."

I looked at him; he'd turned back to regard the long unbroken stream, now shutting off their engines, getting ready for the long haul. The harsh rhythmic wail of a copter's rotors came from above and far around the bend, refracted straight through the trees.

"Good." He smiled. "That means not everyone is dead." He began to slowly pick his way back toward our car, as if each step's province was deeply important.

"Stay in the car."

"What do you think is going to happen?"

I shut the door. My brother was already at the side of the thing he called a road, kicking wildly at a lead-covered ditch. His arms flailed wildly with each strike, as if he were a duck trying to gain balance. "Help me help me!" he shrieked.

I grabbed his arms and pressed them down to his sides. Close now, we were on the very lip of the ditch. He turned in the embrace. "We're here!" It was a kind of enthusiasm which even he might have found suspect a few years beforehand.

"Settle down," I said. "Nothing's gonna happen."

"You don't know that," he said, his foot digging at the leaves

again. “She’s probably almost dead by now.”

“What? Who are you-”

“Christina Clarke. The girl they just evacuated in the med chopper.” He blinked once. “Come *on*.” Tugging at me.

“Wait, you *knew*?”

“Not quite. It doesn’t make-” His face went slack; he let go and stumbled down to his hands and knees. “*Cat*.” His voice registers lower than it should have been, than I have ever heard anybody’s go.

I turned to the car, where Kimmie sat watching us through the window, her mouth open ever so slightly.

“Cat!”

I watched her face as it happened.

The car barely moves at seventy-six miles an hour. No backroads here. Just highway, dead trees, cars, strip malls, all choppy, misdirected, fractal, only visible in the periphery. In the side mirror, its edges ridged, the collapse of light breaks spastically in the form of a lesser inhabitant of a bestiary, deliberately lost, amorphous, without intent, neither advancing nor retreating, its form caught in a transition, a relationship impossible to sever.

BRENDAN BYRNE's fiction has appeared in *FLURB*, his nonfiction in *Arc*. His novella *The Showing of The Instruments* was published by Phone Booth Press in 2011. He is a contributing editor at *Rhizome*.

LAUNDROMAT

Smith Smith

THE LAUNDROMAT LOOKED NO DIFFERENT ON THE OUTSIDE. It was bulbous and tar-black, rising from the concrete at the intersection of Garden Street and a pile of rusted bicycles, where it had stood for ninety nine years.

But what I found inside was a ghost-man, a functional yet parasitic half-being. As I entered, my thoughts blended with his as if we were light and shadow, as if one of us could only exist as a function of the other. He drank from a mug. He wore dark jeans and faced with tired eyes the spinning, noisy chambers that washed the traces of a town's life from its clothes.

He spoke first, "You're early"

"Don't be silly. I have never seen you before"

He rolled his eyes. The ease of our interaction was uncanny, our words and thoughts like echoes.

"Go home. I'm working" he told me before taking a sip of his drink, his sagging eyes in a trance, following the cycling of the chambers.

"Oh please, nobody knows you exist"

He grunted and said something absurd.

His tone suggested omnipotence and I decided to call him out, "Yeah like hell you are, and I'm the devil."

He turned to face me and I could no longer see him. I laughed and spat on the floor, wiping blood from my brow. The roar of the spinning chambers rose in volume until we were both part of the crescendo. I felt airless, lungless.

Yet I spoke, "sorry I just expected –" then he spoke from nowhere, "don't expect things"

my

mind began to fill with static, with hallucinations of threadbare roads

my

mother's withered screams overlaid with finger-mist
drowning us in His brightness

I

felt shadows and an unworldly heat beneath my eyes I lost
autonomy

And our voices erupted.

“the consciousness of man is a fucking fallacy”

Our eyes softened. We were fading and we knew it.

“trust me you need me you’re lost let me inside you”

“you feed on the young, the hopeless”

“take me inside you”

“I couldn’t care less about your metaphysical cock”

Yet we

rambled for years about giving and taking, unable to
distinguish us from us

We

decided to stop expecting sensation

We

fell in a sort of exhausted love, the ghost-man and I

We

spent nights dying together on that tile floor, unclothed,
unbodied, listening to the roar of the walls, wondering silently
if we

were platonic

SMITH SMITH lives and ruminates in the Midwest.

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MAP of the TWENTIETH CENTURY

Samantha Duncan

YOU CAN STOP IN THE MIDDLE of Interstate 45 and buy a small or medium trailer to store any right-brained assertions about the maternal instincts of Texas hills. It exists, and wildfires apologize a thousand times to the Sam Houston statue, with whom you

always promise to take a picture, but continue to take that curve going eighty, like you're expecting a hooker holding chocolate strawberries around the bend. Every bridge bisecting the road is hard up for cash, and every penny you have is

spent on someone else. Questions cost the same as the courage for vitriol. Corsicana could have your long lost esophagus, everything inside you is shelled. Mile markers are doctor appointments, the ones you'll remember for the book,

and all you'll need is hidden somewhere, or disguised as debris. Faces are painted over and not on, the resilience of a continuous motion, and there is a green on a tree that has yet to be named. A direct result of

250 miles of a sickly giraffe's tongue lapping up un-wanton beaver nuggets. If you aren't careful, you inhale a tire off an eighteen-wheeler, discarded like the last piece of brisket on a lover's plate, he always takes too much. Don't mess with tires.

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WE DREAM of OUR DEAD PETS

Carl Fuerst

I DROVE ON THE ROAD THAT CIRCLES THE TOWN where I live, an island of crumbling low-roofed brick buildings surrounded by countless miles of cornfields. Once, three summers before, on a late summer night bordering on an early summer morning, I stood on the balcony of my second-floor apartment and watched the cornstalks in the rising sun, anticipating the brief and unpredictable moment when the new day's light would make the leaves look like emeralds heated to their melting point and hammered flat.

Since then, I'd been in my car, and a small part of me was starting to wonder why it had always been night.

I took a road into the cornfields. It had recently snowed, and the roads were dark, snowy, icy, and bad. A blurry, white-robed man hunched by the road's shoulder every few miles. Whenever I passed, he strained towards the car, snapping his jaws and howling, some invisible force dragging him in the direction of the fields.

This made it difficult to listen to my passenger, who reclined in the back seat, smoking a joint and staring at his phone's glowing screen.

"See, stars form when gas inside galaxies becomes dense enough to collapse," he said, "usually under the effect of gravitation. But when galaxies merge, see, it increases the random motions of their gas-generating whirls of turbulence, which should hinder the collapse of the gas. Intuitively, this turbulence should slow down the formation of the stars, but, in reality, the opposite is true."

"Do galaxies collide often?" I asked. "Is this something we should be worried about?" It was nice, for once, to think about something besides the reasons why I couldn't remember when I wasn't driving in circles around the little corn-town where I lived.

"It's very common," said my passenger. "But 'interaction' would be a more accurate term than 'collision,' accounting for the extremely tenuous distribution of matter in galaxies."

"Sure," I said.

"Meanwhile, galactic cannibalism happens when a galaxy, through tidal gravitational interactions with a companion, merges with that companion, resulting in a larger, often irregular galaxy."

My car skidded off the road and down a steep hill and rolled to a stop on a farm pond's black bank. I got out of my car and snow spilled into my boots. The pond wasn't frozen. I watched icy water lap at my front two tires.

At the top of the hill, pickups crowded the road's shoulder. I was far from town, where nothing and nobody ever is, so I went up to see what it was all about.

The trucks' engines were running and their lights were on, and I heard men and dogs bark in the woods. Lantern light slashed through the dark.

Short-legged, long-beaked birds strutted along the shoulder, pecking the snow. They wore metal bands around their ankles, with tiny transmitters attached to each band.

A man leaned against a truck's tailgate, shining a flashlight into the woods. He wore the plaid-and-flannel of hunters in illustrated children's books.

"I know exactly what's wrong," he said. "You're out of fuel."

"Actually, I'm fine."

Something happened in the woods, just beyond our range of vision. I can't remember what it was, and I can't imagine what it might have been, but I was overcome with the feeling—an unfounded certainty—that we were actually indoors.

"How long have you been hunting?" I asked.

"Longer than we planned."

"What's holding you up?"

"It's the chasing and the wounded things and the crying and fighting and always being hungry...." He trailed off. He wiped a tear from his cheek.

I played with the cigarette lighter in my coat pocket. When I flicked its wheel, it sparked not fire but warm clouds of microscopic birds.

"There's a band I like called Nightshot. Do you know that band?"

"No," I said, "but I live across the street from the bar where they play."

He nodded, and it was understood that we'd always meet at that bar only after having a dinner of gray steaks, hash browns, and day-old coffee at the truck-stop restaurant in the town where I lived. The meals we'd regularly have together there would be a welcome routine in our otherwise unpredictable and lonely lives. After dinner, we'd usually go see Nightshot and, after that, we'd go to our apartments to drink scotch and listen to old

records. Our friendship would be challenged when we both fell in love with the same big-minded and hard-hearted woman (not that she'd be interested in either of us), but this conflict would pass and our friendship would endure, changed, maybe in a weakened state.

The dogs came out of the woods all at once. Dozens of yelping knee-high hounds, caked with blood and mud. They urinated nervously on trees and scrub and they shivered against each other. Tails between skinny, muddy legs. They bolted into the kennels stacked in the beds of the trucks. All except an old beagle with a big sore on the center of his forehead. The sore blossomed like a festering rosebud. The beagle could barely stand. He whimpered against my shins.

I knelt and kissed him, carefully avoiding the sore.

"How do you know Petey?" I asked. "I miss him."

"I keep expecting that one not to come back," he said. "He keeps coming back."

I lifted Petey. He was like a bag of dried leaves.

"Do you mind if I go see that band tonight?" The hunter removed his cap. "What I meant to say is that, if I see you at the bar where Nightshot plays, would you mind that?"

"Of course not," I said.

"That's real nice."

Somebody took Petey away.

"Time to go," I said.

I went to my car and found another dog in the driver's seat. It was the size of a riding lawn mower, with fur that was white and clean. It had muscular shoulders and a serious stare.

I pet it. Its fur was cold and sticky, and I wiped my hands on my jeans.

It bit me on the arm. I kicked it in the belly and pried its jaws and threw it into the icy pond. It swam back and bit me again so I kicked it away. I ran to my car but it was already inside, and I was too scared to get in or to try to convince the dog to leave.

I walked back to the trucks, but the hunters were already gone.

Astronomers have estimated that our galaxy, the Milky Way, will collide with the Andromeda galaxy in about 4.5 billion years. The Andromeda galaxy contains one trillion stars, and the Milky Way galaxy contains 300 billion stars, but, when this collision inevitably occurs, the chances any of them actually colliding is next to none, mathematically speaking.

I climbed back down the hill and went to my car, where that dog reclined in the back seat, and I opened all the car doors and crouched in the snow, blowing into my hands and waiting for that abomination of a dog to get out. I knew, I knew, I'd be waiting for a very long time.

CARL FUERST is the head editor of *The Breakroom Stories*, an audio journal specializing in strange fiction. He is also an editor for *The Again*, an illustrated magazine of odd tales. He lives in Wisconsin, and many of his stories have appeared in many print and online journals.



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BURIED TREASURE

Ashley Lister

YOU ARE ONE OF SEVERAL PEOPLE SITTING BEFORE A SOLICITOR. You are in the room that was your late Uncle John's home office. It's a sombre day because you're attending to hear the reading of Uncle John's will. Uncle John was one of your favourite relatives. He made his vast fortune from writing Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories.

Do you attentively reflect on the incongruities and peculiarities of all the other beneficiaries? (GO TO SECTION A.) Or do you tell the solicitor to hurry the fuck up? (GO TO SECTION B.)

{ A }

The walls bear framed covers from Uncle John's many adventure stories. The room is dominated by a large old-fashioned desk that takes up half the room. Behind the desk sits the small, bespectacled solicitor.

The other half of the room is crowded.

Aside from being a popular writer, Uncle John was something of a ladies' man. It's been suggested this is what probably killed him. Your parents had always advised you to never eat at his house, especially not anything from the fruit bowl. Your mother always said he had more STIs than readers – and she made this remark after Uncle John had been on the NYT Bestsellers list. Your father claimed the coffee at Uncle John's house tasted of rohypnol.

Many of the female beneficiaries are dressed in black. Some of them are sniffing into delicate, lace-edged handkerchiefs. Most of them are giving evils to each other through smudgy eye makeup as though only one of them is entitled to feel bereaved.

The most obviously upset is Dorothy.

Dorothy had been Uncle John's off-again on-again girlfriend for the best part of a decade. She'd been living with Uncle John and putting up with his peculiar ways for the past five years. It's widely known that she has forgiven more unforgivable indiscretions than the last three Popes. With jet black hair and jet black eyes and a jet black dress she looks like

she's auditioning for the role Morticia Addams. Her lips are thin. Her eyes are tired and bloodshot. And she's glaring at the redhead wearing skin-tight leather pants.

The redhead is deliberately ignoring Dorothy. It's likely the redhead was the most recent of Uncle John's indiscretions. If there is any truth in the stories about his body being found in a wardrobe, with a shoelace round his balls and an orange up his arse, then it was probably a wardrobe in the redhead's house. Even though she looks the sort who would introduce citrus fruit to sphincters, her tears look genuine.

There aren't many men in the solicitor's office.

You've met Tommy before. Tommy was Uncle John's simple best friend. He'd read all of Uncle John's Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories and proudly told anyone who'd listen that each new title was another book all about him and his exploits. You suspect the scars on Tommy's forehead are the results of corrective surgery that was possibly too invasive.

You also recognise Uncle Jack, Uncle John's brother. Uncle Jack is a police officer although he inspires no trust. He's the type who will likely one day have to take early retirement under the embarrassing cloud of a bribery accusation, or the discovery of his improper involvement with a cache of controlled substances. Uncle Jack keeps glancing at his watch.

You clear your throat, ready to tell the solicitor to hurry up.

{ B }

Before you can speak Uncle Jack shouts, "Hurry the fuck up, man. We haven't got all day to put up with you and your fanning around."

A handful of those gathered chastise Uncle Jack for his coarse turn of phrase but there seems to be a consensus that the solicitor has been fanning around. Suitably motivated, the solicitor polishes his wire-framed glasses and then begins to read out the contents of Uncle John's will.

Do you listen attentively to the final will and testament of your beloved relative? (GO TO SECTION C.) Or do you doze for a while and come back to your senses when you hear your name being mentioned? (GO TO SECTION D.)

{ C }

The solicitor skims over the material with unseemly efficiency. He swiftly blah-blah-blabs his way through the ‘hereby bequeaths’ and ‘direct my executors’ so those gathered don’t get bored with the long words and technical details of the legal jargon.

It’s a relief to hear Uncle John has done the right thing by Dorothy. This is a relief because Dorothy would have kicked off if she’d felt slighted and, although she looks like Morticia Addams, the woman is known to have a mean right hook. Uncle John has given her the house they shared and a substantial portion of the money from his estate. It’s a generous bequest.

There are small bequests for several of the female beneficiaries attending. These have the unpleasant feel of being achievement awards handed out in return for sexual accomplishments.

“The contents of my wine cellar go to Betty,” the solicitor reads from Uncle John’s will. “And I hope she gets as much pleasure from swallowing what’s there, as she seemed to get from swallowing everything I gave to her on the special Saturdays we shared together. She really should show others the trick she can do with a wine cork.”

Betty has the good grace to blush.

Dorothy glares at the woman and squeezes her knuckles into a fist.

“My pair of Georgian tea sets are to be shared between Agatha and Gertrude,” the solicitor continues.

Agatha and Gertrude stiffen in their seats. Their smiles are guarded.

“I had plenty of proof that they’re both very capable of sharing,” the solicitor reads. “And I like to think they’ll get as much satisfaction drinking from a Georgian tea set as they got from drinking from each other’s furry cups.”

The solicitor continues reading the bequests.

He gives signed first editions to someone called Natalie, allocates the royalties and merchandising from his books to Tommy and bequeaths John’s garage of classic cars to Uncle Jack. Then he mentions your name.

{ D }

When you hear your name being mentioned you start in surprise. It appears Uncle John has left you a pen. At first you feel

justifiably disappointed. You're in a room full of people who have been given gifts of substantial financial value and all you're getting is a shitty pen. Yes, he was a writer. And there's likely some sentimental attachment to the bequest of a writer's pen. But sentimental attachment has never paid anyone's rent. More importantly, he was also a pisstag and undoubtedly had as much emotional attachment for the contents of the wine cellar that he gave to blowjob-Betty. Whilst you're thinking that you've drawn a very short straw in the scheme of things, you listen to the grumble of discontent that rumbles around the room. There are several muttered voices suggesting you don't deserve such a substantial gift. You begin to wonder if the bequest of a pen is quite as shitty as you'd first feared.

"It's a Caran d'Ache 1010," the solicitor explains. He hands over a chunky black box. "It's one of an extremely limited edition," he goes on. "It's made from solid 18ct gold. The clip is set with a VVS diamond. It's been conservatively insured at a value of £100,000."

If an artist could draw you in this moment, your face would look like a cartoon character with dollar signs in the eyeballs. An expensive pen now sounds like a bequest worth having. You're already trying to decide what sort of auction listing it should have when you list it on eBay.

You open the chunky box and look inside.

Although you're not an expert on pens, you immediately deduce that this is not a Caran d'Ache 1010. The pen that sits in the box is a scabby looking Bic biro with a yellow stem and a blue plastic end. There's a dribble of runny ink on the ballpoint nib. The blue plastic end has been chewed.

Do you demand to know who's stolen your pen? (GO TO SECTION E.) Or do you resolve to find out what has happened on your own? (GO TO SECTION F.)

{ E }

"Who the fuck stole my pen?" you demand.

The solicitor asks you to explain what you mean. You show him the box and he looks puzzled. The solicitor asks Uncle Jack for advice in his capacity as a police officer.

Uncle Jack says he's off duty.

Tommy examines the Bic and says he doesn't think it's a Caran d'Ache.

Dorothy and the redhead are shaking their heads. The other beneficiaries are grumbling together. The solicitor says it's all very odd but offers no helpful suggestions. Your bequest was the last item on the list. The solicitor is already packing his paperwork back into his valise and preparing to leave.

{ F }

"Fine," you declare dramatically. "I'll find out what's happened on my own."

Storming angrily from the room you waylay one of the house servants and ask to be taken to Uncle John's safe. It makes logical sense that, if Uncle John had a very expensive pen he might keep it secured in a safe. If not, you intend to turn the house upside down in your endeavour to find the £100,000 pen you've been bequeathed.

The servant takes you to a room on the upper floor and points to a wall safe.

It's locked.

Do you talk with the servant about your late uncle? (GO TO SECTION G.) Or do you tell the servant to fuck off and leave you to breaking the safe? (GO TO SECTION H.)

{ G }

"Your Uncle John is lucky to be dead," the servant says.

The comment surprises you. "Lucky?"

"There's not a lot of love in this house," the servant explains. "There's not a lot of love in this family."

You think of all the women who were mourning Uncle John's passing and start to argue the point.

The servant waves aside your protests. "John's best friend was a blackmailer. His brother was trying to squeeze money out of him. His girlfriend was getting ready to leave him."

You raise a sceptical eyebrow. "Do you have proof of these things?"

"There's proof in John's office." Before you can say anything the servant adds, "In John's *real* office."

You digest that piece of information. You're sure it's important.

"John died at the right time," the servant explains. "If he'd left it a week longer he would be so miserable now."

It's a moot point. You're not sure Uncle John is better off being dead than unhappy. You ask, "Are you suggesting there might have been foul play involved with his death?"

The servant laughs at the idea. "Not from that lot." He nods toward the door and says, "They're scavengers, not predators. John's death was relatively natural. Well, as relatively natural as autoerotic asphyxiation can get. These vultures just stayed close to him so they could strip the meat from his carcass."

He gives you a considered scowl and says, "These are the sort of vultures who will start riffling through his possessions in search of a pen they want to flog on eBay."

{ H }

"Fuck off and leave me to work on the safe," you tell the servant.

Obligingly, the servant fucks off.

The safe is no challenge to someone blessed with your unconventional skills and you easily crack it. Inside you find only a photograph of Uncle John laid in his coffin. It's a Polaroid snapshot and you wonder why someone would take a picture of your dead uncle and secure the photograph inside a locked safe. In the image he looks resplendent in a Harris Tweed blazer. You are saddened to think you'll never again be able to enjoy Uncle John's company and you feel disappointed that his memory is now tainted by the reprobates currently scavenging for morsels from his estate.

Do you go through all the drawers on your uncle's desk? (GO TO SECTION I.) Or do you search the bedrooms on the upper floors? (GO TO SECTION J.) Or do you examine the secret doorway in the upper hallway that leads to Uncle John's secret office? (GO TO SECTION K.)

{ I }

There is nothing in the drawers.

{ J }

There is nothing in the bedrooms except for a handful of used and unsettlingly sticky sex toys that you didn't want to encounter. What the hell was wrong with that man's libido? You find a

banana in one bedroom but, although you're hungry, you know better than to be tempted by such forbidden fruit.

{ K }

You've known about the secret doorway since you were a child. Uncle John, as well as having the well-appointed office where the solicitor was earlier holding court, also had a second office.

The passageway to this office begins through a secret doorway, disguised as a wall of library shelves. You clamber down a spiral staircase that is dark and festooned with cobwebs. Unable to find an electric light switch you have to use the flashlight app on your smartphone.

At the bottom of the staircase you discover your uncle's secret office. This is where he used to do all of his writing. It's a cosy little room with bookshelves, comfortable chairs and a soot-blackened fireplace. You find notes on the next series of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories he was planning to write. None of them sound particularly interesting. You also find some important-looking correspondence on his desk.

Curious, you read through the materials.

There are three documents.

The first item you find is a note that says, "Give me ten grand or I'll go to the police." You're not an expert on handwriting but you think this looks like it was written by Tommy. It helps your impromptu investigation that Tommy has signed the bottom of the note.

The second item is a set of legal papers. A post-it note on the front of them says: "I've had enough of your philandering, you bastard. I'm leaving you and I want half of everything you own." Dorothy doesn't need to have signed the note for you to know that's from her.

The final item you find is a revised will. The date on the top of the will was the same date that Uncle John died. It's signed and witnessed and succeeds the will that has just been read. After briefly scanning through the document you see that there is no mention of Tommy being bequeathed royalties. There is no mention of Uncle Jack being the recipient of a garage of classic cars. And there is no mention of Dorothy being given the bulk of John's estate. There is however, a final line in the will where Uncle John says he wants you to have the Caran d'Ache 1010.

Do you go back to the solicitor and demand he reconsiders the will in light of this discovery? (GO TO SECTION L.) Or do you

keep these details in mind as you try to get answers from the individual beneficiaries? (GO TO SECTION M.)

{ L }

The solicitor has already left when you return to Uncle John's office. The only people remaining are Uncle Jack, Tommy, Dorothy, Betty and the redhead. Uncle Jack is chatting with Betty. She doesn't seem interested in him, although she's showing off a trick where she manages to suck the cork from an unopened wine bottle. If your investigation wasn't so pressing you'd stand around and watch. The sight makes Uncle Jack squirm.

{ M }

You approach the redhead. She's one of the few people who seem genuinely upset by Uncle John's death. You remember she was bequeathed signed first edition copies of Uncle John's books. You comment on how thoughtful this was. She doesn't appear particularly impressed.

"Choose-your-own-adventure stories are for losers," she says.

Do you agree? (GO TO SECTION N.) Or do you ignore her and interview Dorothy? (GO TO SECTION O.)

{ N }

The redhead's name is Natalie. She and Uncle John had been involved in a sexual relationship but she says it was only physical. There was no emotional or spiritual commitment. It was only depraved, unwholesome and yet surprisingly satisfying sex.

"Do you know what he might have done with my pen?"

Natalie shrugs. "He was an old pervert. If I was looking for something that shape and size, I'd start exploring his arsehole first."

{ O }

Dorothy wants to know why you were talking to the redhead. When you ask her about the pen she says it was in the box the last time she saw it. She refuses to say anything further, other than reminding you that you should be grateful you were

mentioned in the will. All the time, she's speaking, Dorothy is curling her lip and glaring at Betty.

Do you go and interrupt Uncle Jack and Betty? (GO TO SECTION P.) Or do you talk with Tommy? (GO TO SECTION Q.)

{ P }

Uncle Jack tells you to piss off. He says, if you keep trying to interrupt him whilst he's making a play for blowjob Betty, he'll find some way of having you arrested so you spend the night in the cells. When you query the validity of this claim, Uncle Jack assures you he's had it done before. He makes sure Betty hears this comment and she finally begins to start listening to him.

She holds a freshly sucked cork between her lips and winks at him.

Uncle Jack winks back.

{ Q }

You go to Tommy and ask him why he was blackmailing your uncle. Tommy tries to deny this but you eventually sway him with a reasoned argument, and by showing him the paperwork he'd signed.

"I'm just trying to find the pen my uncle left me," you explain.

"What does it look like?"

"Gold with a diamond on the clip."

Tommy seems to think he's seen something similar recently. But he can't quite bring it to mind. He's known to have memory problems. The scars on his forehead throb dully when he frowns in concentration. Tommy takes your mobile number and promises he'll call you if he remembers.

You hear screams coming behind the secret doorway. Dorothy is nearby and you ask her what the noises might be.

"It sounds like your Uncle Jack having an orgasm," she says nonchalantly.

Do you ask her how she knows? (GO TO SECTION R.) Or do you figure that's TMI and move on with your investigation? (GO TO SECTION S.)

{ R }

“Your Uncle John wasn’t the only one who enjoyed playing away from home,” she explains. “Uncle Jack called here regularly whilst your Uncle John was out visiting those skanky bitches who were here earlier.” Defensively she adds, “I’m only human. And there were times when I needed the cobwebs cleared out.”

{ S }

You run down the stairs and find Uncle Jack is just pulling his pants back up. Betty is swigging from a bottle of wine as though trying to remove an unpleasant taste from her mouth.

Uncle Jack demands you give him the revised will. He wants to destroy it.

Do you feign ignorance? (GO TO SECTION T.) Or do you tell him you have it? (GO TO SECTION U.)

{ T }

“What will, Uncle Jack?”

“The one sticking out of your jacket pocket.”

You glance down and see that a scroll of paperwork is protruding from your pocket. Words on the top of the document, and clearly visible to Uncle Jack, read: LAST WILL AND-.

{ U }

“OK,” you admit. “I have the will. And, whilst I don’t care about how this affects others, I do want the pen I was bequeathed.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Uncle Jack says. “If you give me that will, so I can destroy it, I’ll help you find your pen.”

Do you refuse? (GO TO SECTION V.) Or do you give him the will?” (GO TO SECTION W.)

{ V }

“You’re not having the will, Uncle Jack.”

“Very well,” says Jack. “I’ll have you arrested now. When you get strip searched before being thrown in the cells, I’ll be able to take it out of your possessions.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I’m a corrupt policeman,” he reminds you. “I do that on a regular basis.”

{ W }

“Very well,” you say. “I’ll give you this will in exchange for the Caran d’Ache.”

Uncle Jack takes the will and throws it into the fireplace. He lights it and, whilst the evidence burns, he leads you up the stairs to Uncle John’s safe. The room looks exactly the same as you’d left it. The safe door is open.

“It was in here,” Uncle Jack explains.

“It wasn’t here,” you tell him. “I opened that safe earlier and the only thing in here was this photograph.” You show him the picture of Uncle John resting in his coffin.

Uncle Jack looks genuinely perplexed.

Tommy appears in the doorway. “You found the picture,” he smiles.

“You left it there?” Jack asks.

Tommy nods.

You ask, “What was the photograph doing in the safe?”

“I put it in there to show what I’d done with John’s pen,” Tommy explains. He smacks his forehead in surprise and says, “That’s where I’ve seen the pen before. Now I remember.”

The comment puzzles you until you look more closely at the picture. There is a pen in the breast pocket of Uncle John’s Harris Tweed. It is a gold coloured pen and has a VVS diamond on the clip.

“You put a £100,000 pen in a dead man’s pocket,” you exclaim incredulously.

“He’s an idiot,” Uncle Jack reminds you. He regards Tommy with abject contempt. “Of course he did that.” With a sarcastic sneer he adds, “You don’t think he just put the pen there and then took a photo of it so we all thought the pen was buried, did you?”

Do you threaten Uncle Jack and Tommy with repercussions if they don’t help you to get your pen back? (GO TO SECTION X.) Or do you try to find a legitimate way to start the legal processes for an exhumation? (GO TO SECTION Y.) Or do you go into the graveyard at midnight and illegally dig up your uncle’s corpse? (GO TO SECTION Z.)

{ X }

“Uncle Jack,” you begin. “I swear to God, if you don’t help me get this resolved I’ll-”

Uncle Jack punches you in the nose before you can finish your threat.

“You’ve got nothing on me,” Uncle Jack says coldly. “And if I ever hear you talking as though you do have something on me, I’ll make sure you’re behind bars where no one is going to listen.”

Uncle Jack storms out of the room. Tommy goes with him.

{ Y }

You call the solicitor and explain that the pen has been buried with the deceased. It’s difficult to make yourself understood because you’re talking with a broken nose.

“That’s unfortunate,” the solicitor says.

“How do I get it back?”

“You don’t,” the solicitor says. “The cost of such an action would be prohibitive. There would be the cost of a disinterment, which includes the legal costs, the parish charges and the labour charges. I don’t doubt the local church would fight the case and they’d have a pretty strong position. You’re talking about removing a pen from a writer’s last writing place. Even if you did get permission, and it all went through smoothly, it would take the best part of six months before you got the pen back and then you’d need to sell it immediately to cover all the costs you’d built up.”

Frustrated by this development you close your eyes and try not to moan in despair. “As my uncle’s former solicitor,” you begin patiently. “What would you suggest I do?”

The solicitor lowers his voice to a whisper. “Have you got a shovel, and some sort of flashlight app on your smartphone?”

{ Z }

It’s midnight. You’re in a graveyard with a shovel and you’ve been digging for the past three hours. Fortunately it’s autumn and not many people choose to visit a cemetery in the middle of an autumn night.

The night would be cool but the exertion of shovelling six foot down has helped to keep you warm. The sounds of owls and

faraway traffic were making you nervous at first but now you're no longer worried.

You finally get through to the coffin.

It takes a little while longer to clear away enough earth so you can lift the lid but you eventually move it and find your dead uncle laying there. You switch on your flashlight app and shine it on the breast pocket of your uncle's suit. There is nothing there.

You remember a comment that Natalie made earlier. *"He was an old pervert. If I was looking for something that shape and size, I'd start exploring his arsehole first."*

Is that where you're meant to start searching now? The idea is too horrifying to consider.

You remember another comment from earlier in the day. This one had been made sarcastically by Uncle Jack. *"You don't think he just put the pen there and then took a photo of it so we all thought the pen was buried, did you?"*

You wonder if that's what really happened.

Before you can dwell on the problem any further there are lights shining into the grave where you stand. You see a host of faces gathering in the night sky above the grave's edge.

Tommy is one of those faces. Uncle Jack is another and you see he is taking notes. Somebody starts to tell you that you're being arrested. Uncle Jack is shaking his head with apparent disapproval. The pen he holds to take notes is an elegant gold colour and it looks like there is a diamond on the clip: a VVS diamond.

{ THE END }

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