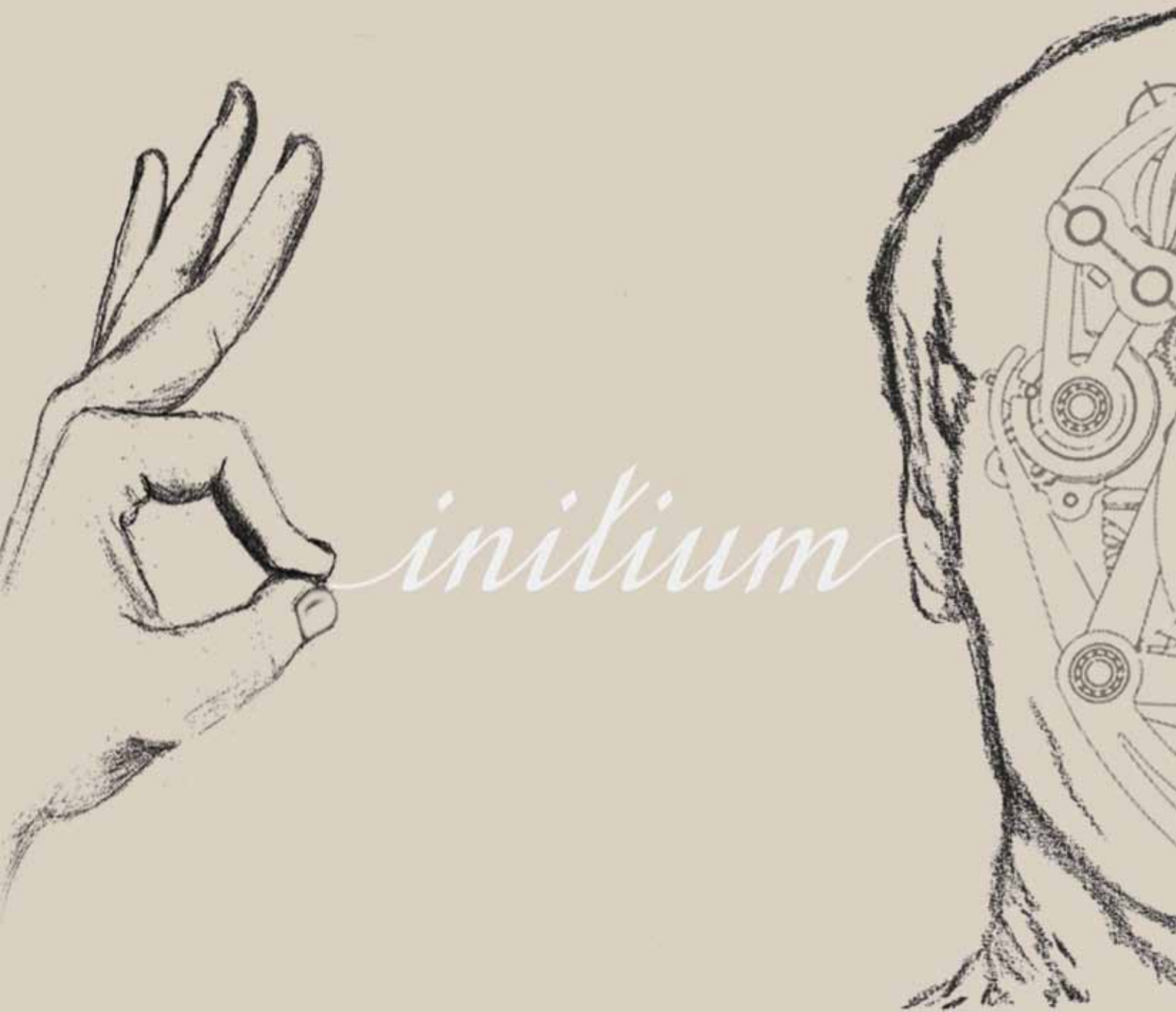


# *eclectic flash*



VOLUME 1

JANUARY 2010

## Letter from the Editor

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Sincerely,  
Brad Nelson  
Chief Editor, Eclectic Flash  
[editor@eclecticflash.com](mailto:editor@eclecticflash.com)

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## **You Like This**

by Andrew Rihn

On social networking sites,  
when I have to list all the special  
things that make me, me, I list  
my favorite movie as the Zapruder film.  
People message me about it  
because this makes me stand out.  
Look, I tell them, it isn't as though  
I hate the Kennedys or am into snuff films.  
I knock back conspiracy theories  
like cheap beer and the Zapruder film  
simply has it all: travel and romance,  
intrigue and murder. Read the novelization,  
I go on, if you want some humor.  
The Warren Report: what can you say?  
That it would have made André Breton  
proud? Zapruder has it all, I repeat.  
Everything is on that film. Except  
intent. Except motive. But like all good art,  
it leaves the audience wanting more,  
leaves us electing our little brothers. Politics  
is already like a bad Facebook quiz.  
In the future, we won't even have elections,  
only little boxes to check on our profile.  
Politics won't be anything but an identifier,  
which is less than an identity.  
Lee Harvey Oswald doesn't clean  
his rifle barrel, he updates his personal  
profile. He doesn't go to confession,  
he adds another celebrity quote  
and wrestles with a friend request.

## **Wellesley, October 2007**

by Alana Dakin

I remember what it's like to need a cigarette  
to keep putting one foot in front of the other

I remember how the frigid Massachusetts wind  
burned my cheeks

and how the collar of my wool coat  
rubbed my neck raw.

Every crack of that long sidewalk,  
every molting oak and wrought-iron lamppost

is imprinted in my mind  
like a smooth, white scar.

I remember the way the dry smoke would mix  
with the sour taste of stale coffee on my tongue

as I would follow the same path every day,  
past the Starbucks, the town bookstore, the Italian  
restaurant

I remember passing stately New England homes,  
each porch and stoop adorned with round, orange  
gourds

carefully positioned to hide the darkened patch  
where they had once lain on the cool, damp earth

And I remember looking into the light  
of those crudely carved pumpkins

and knowing what it was like to have your insides  
scraped out and discarded,

how it felt to walk around  
with that false jack-o-lantern smile.

## **Unemployment**

by Andrew Rihn

These days are like lawn mower laps  
around the yard. The wife reassures  
me I am working. Around the house.  
Like I just took some time off to spend

fixing up the things that need to be fixed.  
Each morning cracks open like a new beer,  
and when it's drained down to the bottom,  
there'll still be another in the case, just as cold.

Sometimes I feel weak, kind of drained myself.  
Without timecards, I don't have those  
knock-out punches in me anymore.  
No more punch-in, punch out for lunches.

I'm stuck on the speed bag, swinging a tiny,  
endless rhythm. I'm pushing this lawn mower  
around my yard like Sisyphus, the kids  
pushing my buttons, and I'm pushing forty.

Don't I deserve the pull of unfinished work?  
I thought when the pushing was finished  
I'd be left with something like meaning.  
Even when I'm dead I'll be pushing up daisies.

## **The Chicken Farm Sestina**

by Joe Amaral

The old man arises on the farm  
To the red rooster's crowing  
Sunlight filters in through the  
Stained windows and he grabs  
His cane to go work the soil  
He has lived on for ninety years

It is now a small family operation, as many years  
Have passed and the once mighty farm  
Has become less fertile, the soil  
Hard and compact, the black caw of the crow  
Foreshadowing death's hand as it reaches to grab  
This ancient fortress and convert the

Acreage into several city condos that the  
Developers have been salivating over for years  
My grandfather refuses to leave, gripping  
His cane firmly, limping amongst crumbled barns  
To plow fields, collect hen eggs and row  
The plots of crops fighting to ripen in ragged soil

Three generations have worked this land  
But they have all moved on to the  
Big city life, where nary a cock's crow  
Can be heard, each aging new year  
Bringing more dust and disrepair to the farm  
Which once was glorious, and now up for grabs

I go to visit him, grabbing  
A shovel and digging into the soil  
Returning to the simple life of a farmer  
Toiling steadily, sweating in the  
Noonday sun, recalling those years  
When I arose to that early cock-a-doodle-do

Today the chickens are mostly gone, the crow  
Of a solitary rooster grabs  
My heartstrings as I realize the years  
Have finally caught up to this magical place, the  
soiled  
Old man still steadfastly waters the  
Remaining life on his endangered old farm

The farm that will soon utter its last ghostly crow  
When the final crop harvest is grabbed and  
The old man returns to the soil he has haunted for  
years

## **Reprive**

by Doug Mathewson

Unexpected early dismissal from jury duty  
left me on my own  
midday midweek midtown  
used book store cafe near the court drew me in  
juror parking was free so I still had ten bucks  
clerk with race-car tattoos and vertical hair  
took six of my dollars  
for a poetry book and a scone  
scone was pear and almonds  
book was Richard Garcia  
both were great  
reading and eating in a sunny spot  
playing out my own alternate lives  
with sailor me lost at sea  
when cowboy me moved to town  
disco me died too young  
astronaut me who never took off  
royal me without a throne  
monastic me who suffered alone  
the afternoon was passing  
time to head home  
the evening was still open  
for us to decide who to be.

## **Calling It Down**

by Cassie Premo Steele

Call down an ending to all this:  
the motors whirring, engines  
running, alarms beeping,  
trucks squealing, chains sawing,  
fires igniting, claws digging,  
everywhere earth ripping.

Bring every bare hand to the  
ground again and again  
until there is an enormous  
hole to pile all the machines  
in. Let them crunch and  
grind and sing a death song  
as they go in. Cover them  
with silent earth. Say no  
prayers. Say no thing. Hold  
your breath if you can.  
Listen. Hear the silence  
filling up the world again.

## **Mulligans of Poolbeg Street**

by Hay Machine (e)

Reels of film flying over a dusty lens  
the hot bulb, the whine  
fast images of conspiring men  
from McCairn's Motors  
rolling in a silent quick-step  
smiling at the camera in nineteen fifty  
their soft hats cocked to show a light approach  
over to Mulligan's golden facade  
flickering briefly on the silver screen

This honeyed portal is unique  
the two swing doors their friendly squeak  
combed in an exaggerated yellow grain  
one to a wholesome saloon  
the other to a side-bar  
an altar to the deity of heavenly drink

It is a cathedral made for a working congregation  
it took centuries to construct  
this extravagant faith  
medieval men's ambitions  
drawn in the smoky air  
the neat stack of Afton  
the simple chair

There are two back-rooms  
one a spacious area filled with a modest light  
big broad tables from the kitchens of the kings  
the walls shining with pipe-smoker's paint  
a place to drink pints of Guinness  
without any time constraint

The other back-room is a place for bishops  
should they come  
their own waiting inner sanctum  
its stained-glass doors are locked  
some people must have been ordained in there  
the table set for a meeting of the hierarchy

The men from the Irish Press  
grey in Fred McMurray dress  
for years these oily men from printer's ink  
set a discreet tone with knowing nod and willing  
wink  
talking to each other sideways

The window seats in the main bar  
a light-filled alcove made for the high art of  
intimate talk

the sun that finds its way down into the  
narrow street  
is magnified by the pearly glass  
warming the back of the neck  
like a magic scarf

Two pints of stout  
snug into the half-keg with a companion  
a holy communion  
served by apron'd men the size of horses  
they rub the countertop with a grey wet rag  
sweeps of temporary varnish  
preparing the dry altar

Mulligan's of Poolbeg Street  
a pro-cathedral for the working man  
where generations of altar boys have learned  
how to drink porter  
to respect a home from home  
where prayers and promises are offered to  
the gods  
where decent sinners can extol  
dressed protected in the very place itself  
a golden navy-jacket for the soul

## **Our First Place**

by Mateo Amaral

We moved there in August  
when it was hot

By September  
we had begun to loathe  
the pitter-patter of little feet above us  
and things began to cool

The ceilings are too low  
And I hit my head going into the  
bedroom—is not the right word for it  
because next to our bed sits the dining room table  
side by side  
like a cat and a dog in the back seat of a tiny car

There is no dishwasher  
and sometimes the plates and pans pile  
like our patience

But in the winter  
The heater warms the tiny space in minutes  
and we huddle together on the couch  
even though we don't have to

## Lost Son

by Ellen Black

Slowly she moves  
as if in a trance  
from which there is no recovery.  
She wanders  
from room to room  
and reaches out to the small ghosts that roam  
some quiet—some loud  
all playing the same music  
in her head.

She can't stop thinking  
about the son she was forced to give away  
to an unwelcome visitor named cancer.  
He was too innocent to be afraid. She is too young  
to be this broken. She remembers  
the soft brown hair that had not grown  
beyond its baby wisps  
and the dancing blue eyes  
that were too often shadowed  
by a fever that wore a purple cape  
and danced a pas de deux  
with the monster who ate the sweet life  
out of his cells like a woman  
ravenous for chocolate.

The ghosts stop their music  
long enough to weep with her  
and soon their tears collect  
in a throw rug that has been flung  
down to hide stains painted  
on the carpet from too many glasses of wine  
too much coffee and too many cigarettes.  
She continues moving in no direction  
guided only by the ache  
that lives between her breasts.

## Landscape with Multiple Choices

by Andrew Rihn

In school I thought Scantron sheets  
looked so orderly, all their bubbles lined up  
and sorted like the overpriced medication  
that filled my grandmother's stomach,  
little white tablets separated  
by day and meal time, true and false.

When I look up at the clouds, I don't see  
exotic animals or sports cars. I see  
the problems I couldn't solve,  
their fill-in bubbles left white  
because I didn't know the answers.

Now I know that pop singers who talk  
about things like pockets full of sunshine  
are full of crap when we're sitting hats-off  
in the shade of the work truck,  
knocking down sandwiches with  
discrete beers for lunch, sunburn  
like a steaming noose around our necks.

We dug into those placement tests  
with sharp number two pencils, but  
the prescriptions they wrote for us  
were better left unfilled.

## the artist as value

by Randall Horton

the painting being studied in the art gallery  
inquisitively by onlookers behind tasseled rope

is being misunderstood, a natural concept.  
the painting (itself) on wooden easel knows that

green overlooking blue is not willows over river  
but inauguration of human, & wind blows

blue at the precipice of intelligence. the black  
dots are not birds, only shuddering reflection

from a sun not there, but behind there,  
wherever there is no one knows, for certain

the painting thinks its rare label is more than  
priceless. it is a joke on these people contemplating

sensory & complexity only in nature,  
disastrous as it might seem this becomes misnomer

to the crowd standing behind the rope looking  
silly. real value is behind each brushstroke.

## indirect object

by Ray Sharp

quail tap dancing on carport roof  
cat crouched on yellow car  
looking up

blame is transitive  
its object direct  
or strongly  
implied

regret is reflexive  
like a cat crouched  
re-  
-cur-  
-sive  
like birds on a wire

cats can  
be bedeviled by  
the unreachable closeness of birds

regret is like this too  
if the roof were gone  
he could reach the bird  
but where to stand  
and where the bird

the past is impenetrable as corrugated tin  
and wavy  
the sound of birds can fascinate  
or mock

blame the bird

## Double Cinquain

by Annmarie Lockhart

Your hat  
and my blue scarf:  
Everyone but you knew  
it could only last a minute  
or two.

Tick, tock,  
Grand Central clock:  
Time's up. But you wrote me  
the most gorgeous poem and I  
lost it.

## Forgetting Names

by William Doeski

Forgetting names distresses me  
like a glimpse of an open grave.  
Edith Piaf, the Little Sparrow,  
eluded me for half an hour.  
The star of The Thirty-Nine Steps  
evaporated for a day

until "Robert Donat" occurred  
like a meteor falling at dusk.  
I still can't label the author  
of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,  
although I think it begins with A.  
And your name—you who strode

so boldly down a dusty lane  
to greet me in the startled dawn.  
Construction of a huge building,  
some ugly species of warehouse,  
racketed a quarter mile off.  
A pond I also can't name

simmered in a daze of insects.  
You looked frail enough to topple  
like a sunflower tall on its stalk  
but your simple runner's physique  
mocked my thick peasant body  
as we crossed a violet-spangled lawn.

Not even those white and blue flowers  
spark your name from my sodden  
antique mind. Maybe you tripped  
anonymously through the sunlight  
like a last tatter of fog.  
Yet I'm sure I addressed you

as we stood by the pond to watch  
a kingfisher splash for minnows.  
No, your name, like that author's,  
begins the alphabet, I'm sure.  
Maybe I should phone and learn  
if your first-person voice responds.

I lie in bed and list the strangers  
in my life. Their names all begin  
with A. Starlight puckers  
the sightless bedroom windows,  
and the fish-smell of that pond  
censors the spot where we stood.

## **A Warning**

by Karen Campbell

Bad poetry is manipulative.  
She will ask you to overlook her clichés  
By offering you sentimentality  
(And she'll turn on the waterworks if you don't.)

Bad poetry is lazy.  
She refuses to redraft and will not use a  
dictionary.  
She gorges on mediocrity and  
Never washes up.

Bad poetry is stubborn.  
She will not listen to criticism.  
If you think her meaning is poorly expressed  
She will sulk and say you just don't get it.

Bad poetry is untrustworthy.  
She'll sleep with a good poet  
And afterwards, over lunch with a tabloid  
journalist,  
She'll giggle about his forced rhyme and  
impotent repetition.

## **A Memory**

by Don Fitzpatrick

On a nighttime flight  
across the Keystone state,  
far enough aloft to miss  
the glare from flashing signs

And far enough from cities  
to see just black below  
with here and there  
the lights of single towns.

We seemed suspended then  
between two sets of constellations,  
one high above, unmoving,  
the other slipping past below.

## **A Letter to the General Manager of Tesco, Frodsham Street**

by Karen Campbell

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am enquiring as to the possibility of viewing  
some CCTV footage filmed on the 20th of May 2009—  
this was the last day I saw my friend, Ed.  
He lent me a quid for the trolley  
and I helped him choose a head of lettuce.  
He asked me to his barbeque that weekend  
but I fobbed him off, saying I was busy.  
I missed the funeral too.  
Now, supermarket lights make my stomach ache  
and online shopping makes me equally nauseous.  
But I think the pain would subside a little  
if I could say for sure that I'd given him his pound  
back.

## **Table For One**

by Doug Mathewson

A table for one is just no fun.  
Traveling on business you learn.  
Tired of hotel restaurant's snappy themes  
\* Pumpnickel Pub  
\* Captain Flapjack's Galley  
\* Blarney Stone Buffet  
Break the cycle I said to myself!  
Go to the nearby "Hard Rock Cafe."  
Have pizza with Elvis and Elton,  
(Little Betty Boop won't eat a thing!)  
Quickly seated, so few solo nook requests  
Would I have a monster bacon-burger with a Gene  
Simmons?  
Maybe a cherry-coke with Norma Jeane,  
(her skirt blowing wildly between breathless sips.)  
My table was between the restrooms,  
Behind the coat rack, but it had a theme!  
The obituary of Maureen Starkey,  
Liverpool hairdresser and first wife of Ringo Starr.  
Conversationally we were well matched.

## Preserving Tradition

by Kim Klugh

Thrust like little green canoes into a spring-fed lake,  
into the wide open mouths of sterile Mason jars  
you slide the long, crisp, home-grown cucumber spears

Tucked in among frilly sprigs of dill  
and floating flecks of dried red pepper  
you pack wedges of Vidalia onion, garlic cloves  
and wild grape leaves plucked  
from the sun-soaked hedge—

from the ladle you pour a vinegary-laced fluid  
submerging the stacked green spears  
flavors fuse on the stove top  
during a steaming bath in Gran's  
big old hissing agate canner

Months later, when November's bite  
bears down upon us and we gather as family  
around the nicked up wooden table to feast  
and to give thanks for another year filled  
with both bounty and sorrow,  
we'll remove a well cured quart or two  
from the batches lined up in the pantry,  
break the seals and inhale the essence of  
this long ago August afternoon  
when barefoot in our steamy kitchen you stood,  
intent on stuffing summer's backyard garden  
bounty  
into gaping mouths of glass quart canning jars.

## Vespers

by Kim Klugh

Like a golden grace note that darts  
about the garden altar,  
the yellow finch  
lights on the lip  
of the blue-glazed birdbath,  
dips its beak and swallows.

While a tawny sparrow sentry  
side steps down  
the shed roof shingles,  
watching  
and waiting with wings tucked  
to quench its tiny thirst,

the mourning dove bobs along  
in rivers of ivy ground cover  
until she flutters upward  
from the shadows  
for her turn to sip—  
then with feet clipped  
like miniature clothespins  
to the ledge of the  
blue-glazed birdbath—  
the tips of her orange toes she soaks.

Lifting off, she settles  
among the trees,  
preens her scapular feathers  
then folds her wings—  
ready to roost.

With gray breast puffed  
to pillow her head  
her doleful tones sift downward  
through layered piney boughs  
like soft evening prayers  
gracing the twilight garden.

## Sin, Sin, Sin

by C.J. Opperthausen

I left the kitchen light switch  
staring at the ceiling.  
Sin, sin, sin.

I found a dull dime dropped  
to the sidewalk,  
claimed it.  
Sin, sin, sin.

I stumbled along with one  
shoe untied.  
Sin, sin, sin.

Now I sit  
in a dark room,  
penniless,  
barefoot,  
repenting.

## Portrait of Lulu Wilde Woodman

by Andrew Jones

By nineteen, your face is slim, angular, and defined.  
Your translucent eyes blaze through the sepia tone  
with a forthrightness that hints at their crystal blue color.  
The brim of your hat is as wide as the life you will lead,  
and even now you overshadow your sisters  
and gaze in the opposite direction.

Soon to marry the last of the neighbor's three sons,  
you fall for imagination over hypothesis and workmanship.  
For the eldest daughter, your father hosts the finest farm  
wedding  
that Rock County has yet witnessed, on a Christmas Eve  
blanketed with a soft snow. The New Year will bless you  
with a healthy son—the only child you will bear.

Then it is as though your middle name takes hold  
of your life-path. Stealing away with a dancer to another  
state,  
leaving your infant son to be raised by aunts and uncles  
in the wake of your husband's heartbreak.  
You do attempt to reconnect once, when the boy is five  
and just after you've shot a man in Kansas City.

But it fails, just like your second marriage, when you  
break a table lamp over the gambling man's head, and  
flee to Illinois,  
where you lie about your age and enroll in nursing school.  
Oh the gossip you must have garnered by proving a  
capable nurse  
and marrying the last of the bachelor doctors. At last,  
when frostbite claims his surgeon's hands you journey  
on again.

You finally settle in San Jose by the end of the first world war,  
ready to stay and waiting to make up time with your soldier  
son.  
Like most adventurers, you die a long way from your birth  
ground.  
But you have stories, you make history and create legends.  
And your eyes never lose their glare, never fade.  
Those same eyes you've passed on to my daughter.

## After Life

by Kim Klugh

After  
my father  
had been placed  
in the soft sod—  
sod warmed by early  
October's golden days—  
it must have been  
our month of tears  
that coaxed his orphaned primroses  
to bloom and dance  
around the base  
of the bone white birdbath  
come that year's  
stone cold November

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## **Cleaning House**

by Michelle Filippini

God, I've let it go—the house that is not my own. (So maybe it's not really a mess of my own making?) Until the dust fairies collectively gather to absolve me or clean the house, I patiently wait. Through the looking glass darkly my day begins. I think of my cats, reflections of me, whom I have made depressed, and it dawns on me that our outlooks on life would all be sunnier if the exterior windows got washed once in a while.

My mother would be appalled. She thinks I don't invite her to visit because she annoys me, but that's only half true. She raised me better than this. The inside of my automobile is so tidy my car guests think it's new. My clothes are regularly dry-cleaned, and I am not overweight. I appear to be a person in control. I just don't want anyone to come to my house. I choke on the shame and guilt. And dust.

My mother from my childhood: It's summertime, or the weekend, and she is doing what she is always doing, keeping house. Her house-shirt is rolled down to her waist, but there's nothing liberating about it; the points of her bra could cut glass, or a small child who asks what she's doing. I'm hot because I'm working. Though we felt bad and vaguely responsible for our mother's wretched status, my sister and I were never asked to help. Useless, we watched as she picked lint off the chocolate brown sofa with long skinny swaths of Scotch tape and exfoliated the linoleum in the kitchen with a floor sweeper, sighing. Mops weren't as efficient as a bent Jewish housewife wielding a dish-washing sponge outward across the orange and yellow vinyl expanse. Dirt and crumbs and sticky food remnants were banished, and so were we. Housecleaning was serious business. After a certain age, I reluctantly laid aside the childish things that had made me happy, and alternated between long troubled naps in my childhood bed punctuated by the vacuum outside my door, and manic bouts of cleaning my room that left me calmer. Sleeping and cleaning my room: Ah, youth!

My mother's frenzied housekeeping didn't wane over the years. She didn't have control over the tumult that was the world outside the house, nor the tumult that had breached the walls and crept

its way inside, but she owned that house. Husbands might stray, parents might fail and get old, and children would necessarily disappoint, but the house would not betray her. In pictures and in life, we were so clean we squeaked. I hated when my parents entertained. Did you really just wash your hands? It'll leave spots on the chrome.

Until this-house-that-isn't-mine, I kept a neat, careless home. I took ownership as a renter. I was like everyone else. I worked to afford where I lived, and when I wasn't working, I was working on keeping up appearances. Normal-like. Not at all like someone who had unclean thoughts.

But in this place that I love and hate, I can't keep it up. I know it's not me; anyone in my situation would do the same: nothing. From the beginning, we knew that none of this belonged to us. Someday it would, but not before then. It was filled with things not ours. We tried to fit in, tried to fit our things in, but it was a crowded, uneasy alliance. Layers of grime and dust and insect carcasses and piss from long-dead pets called out to the years we weren't here. Indifference has an odor, and this place stunk. Maybe there was a time when the tide of neglect could have been reversed or at least stemmed. The right person could have turned things around. Things could have been different.

I've spent my whole life getting here. Me and this house, we understand each other. The dirty and unloved always find a way to each other. The cobwebs in the house are also in my head. If I clean the house, my mind will be empty. Clearly, I need to get my house in order. I've got to let it go.

## **Hood River in Three Plein Air Portraits**

by Kristy Athens

What It Takes to Keep Things Pretty:  
Columbia Gorge Hotel

The sprinklers give it away. The grounds of the Columbia Gorge Hotel are expertly divided into sections that take advantage of both horizontal and vertical space: from a white, wooden chair-swing, one overlooks the "wedding garden" with its unconscionably green lawn and cobblestone, arbor-ensconced altar; beyond it a judicious fram-

ing of mature firs and maples, a wrought-iron fence, and then the grey-blue Columbia River and the Washington shoreline and bluff.

Behind and to the left, the mellow hiss of landscape irrigation—rebar stakes support tiny black spigots. The alyssum and pansies that would otherwise have crisped months ago sparkle in the sunlight, bejeweled with drops of rainwater on a perfectly blue-sky day.

If one looks closely, one spies the rebar stakes everywhere, even in what appears to be native plantings amidst what appear a natural grouping of basalt boulders. If one were to come to the hotel in the morning, one might behold the groundskeepers, trimming and fertilizing; moving the strong and replacing the weak. Mowing. Deadheading. Now, the only sign of effort are the seven spigots that rain life on one small section of grateful pinks and whites.

Picture the Old Barn:  
Rasmussen Farm

Utility is the name of the game on a farm. This barn used to protect hay bales from the rain and snow of winter. It isn't fancy; it didn't need to be. A ladder up the wall consists of odd-sized scraps of wood nailed to the two-by-fours that make up the wall itself. When a hinge broke, they tried a nail. If a nail didn't work, they tried baling wire.

The thirty-by-thirty structure is now a model of decay: scraps of roofing on sagging beams; window frames empty and impossibly angled; hayloft door jutting into nothingness, where the top of the south wall should be. But, character is the name of the game with tourists. Six-by-six posts and cables have been strategically placed to prop up what remains.

Along the interior ridgeline is the wooden track for an ancient, rusted pulley. The floor of the barn is littered with lumber and cinder blocks, overgrown with Himalayan blackberry vines, wall lettuce, grasses and other occupants that, in contrast to the finicky tomatoes and peppers in the field, aren't picky about the conditions under which they live.

Nearly roofless and all angles, the barn throws fantastic shadows. Its boards are supremely mottled in color from years of being soaked by driving rain and baked by summer sun, expanding and shrinking.

Beyond the barn, standing on the parking lot and framed in the (doorless) main entry, is a man, a tourist, in jeans and a white T-shirt; a camcorder where his head should be. His wife, the art director, points out new shots with the arm that is not laden with treats from the gift shop. On a farm, photo ops are priceless.

Prose Ode to a Dahlia:  
The Gorge White House

I try to make myself a dahlia, tucking my body into a row, risking a sting from one of the dozens, hundreds, probably thousands of bees making the rounds. Their wings buzz in my ears and their shadows flit across my paper.

O, to be a dahlia! To believe spring's promise and strain out of green dormancy, to surpass the ordinary leaves and explode, cell by cell, into a phantasm of richly colored petals. To have simple needs—rain at the feet and sun at the head. To stretch skyward, feeling the food that the leaves made pushing from below.

The hardest choice: What color? A rich, deep red that rivals even the most voluptuous rose? A yellow core that incrementally turns orange at the tips? Little-girl pink? And, what shape? A giant globe, like a mum? Compact like a zinnia? Double-flowered? Long-petaled, like the tongues of a flame?

The dahlia opens its sex to the world and knows its singular purpose. It is tickled by bee feet, heavy with pollen, and welcomes their throbbing abdomens. It rides the breezes coming down from Mt. Hood. It fears nothing, neither pruning shears nor autumn frost, knowing that its rhizome lies safe in the ground. It dies quietly, fading, answering Earth's call: "Empty your cell walls; embrace gravity; break into dust." It has no use for the noises of tractors that work nearby, nor for me and my pen and brain.

## Hobbema

by Timothy L. Marsh

It was posterity's loss that he married the maid of a burgomaster and had the sense to take advantage of a good connection.

He painted water mills, twisted foliage, broad-leaf forests, but tranquil Dutch terrains don't put food on the table 'til you've been dead a few centuries, and frankly, his family couldn't wait that long.

At thirty he gave up painting for a position collecting Amsterdam's wine tax and spent the last forty years of his life inspecting casks instead of those tawny autumn glows and stacks of summer cumulus.

Forty years. It was his duty as provider to shelve his calling. Forty years the quiet campestral scenes screamed at his instincts, kicked at his ribs. The shadows on the knolls. The huts among the trees. The dangle of cow udders. How many ripples of pond ducks never made it to canvas, no wisdom can guess.

Forty years.

It's hard to resent a man for doing what he has to, but that doesn't stop people like me during famines like this. If all the world's geniuses could feel the pang of what they don't create as it turns in the gut of the terminally mundane, it'd be far less than a rare occurrence, squandered talent.

## Freedom Village

by Catherine Zickgraf

What I noticed first in the pamphlet was the dress code. Long blue skirt, white blouse, long blue sweater, red tie—modest and patriotic clothes to free me from sexual dysfunction. The Pastor had given my folks that pamphlet in church, then I snuck it away when they went to sleep.

It said: "The girl must first realize she needs Godly Guidance in her life. She must want to turn away from her sin."

And: "We offer troubled girls a sixteen-month live-in program. But they must want to break free from

their pasts."

I doubted my parents would ask my opinion, then respect my decision. So I knew I'd be boarding the bus from Philly to upstate New York and hidden away in the Christian prison-school. It was almost Halloween. The leaves had budded, climaxed, and died. They were done, and the branches were empty. I imagined climbing into the bus, hugging my book. That's what I would pack for my sixteen months away. It begins with a hospital certificate—the kind the DMV will not accept as proof of anything. And on that card were two curled, inked feet marks, circles where his toes once touched that card. My son had touched that card. The hospital had written the wrong birth date on it, November 17, so they crossed it out and wrote "16" instead—emphasizing the six to amend their mistake.

That date was almost a year ago now, the branches again empty of leaves. I was scared of his first birthday. How do you mark such a day? For the lawyer and his wife, that was easy: baby's first chance at icing-smear hair, photos of child and toys and Grandparents. But how could my earth spin that day? And me "breaking free from my past?" I promised myself I'd make it count, at home, in my room, on the floor, with my thoughts.

But how to mourn? I didn't really know. I was only fifteen and apparently in need of Godly Guidance just to pick out my clothes.

## This Same Road

by Shane Bondi

One of the Muscovy ducks was hit by a car. There had been two of them, and three white geese, waddling along my parents' gravel road, or floating on the shallow river at the end of the driveway, under the shadows of birches and white pines. Each year, when I visit my parents in these western North Carolina mountains, the number of birds seems the same, though I'm sure some fatalities are replaced by births when I'm not watching. The Muscovy ducks, with their hamburger-meat faces and mottled black-and-white feathers, always seem to be lurking like creepy uncles as the slender-necked white geese preened gracefully, ignoring them.

I drove past the mangled body on my way to town to visit my friend Jerry, who owns a produce stand. Around the next bend in the road I waved to my father, out for his daily post-lunch three-mile walk. He'd been walking that road every morning and every afternoon since retiring here nineteen years ago. Almost twenty thousand miles, give or take. He turned seventy this year, and leans a little more on his walking stick than he used to.

Seems like every year, Jerry has a new photo of a grandchild taped to the wall behind him, next to the old-fashioned decorative thermometers with Elvis, Coca-Cola or John Deere themes. He keeps an acoustic guitar behind the counter with him, sometimes he plays me a new song he's written, strumming the guitar as we sip cans of Natural Light, hiding them from customers who stop by for peaches, tomatoes, sourwood honey or jars of chow-chow. Today a short man with grey hair came in with some magazines for Jerry to display on the counter.

"Did you hear about that fellow drowned in his car Saturday night?" Jerry asked.

"Was my best friend," the man said. "Poker buddy for thirty-six years. Went on vacations together. His wife and granddaughter were in California. Hell of a flight back."

I waved the fruit flies away from my face. Turns out the man drove off a small bridge, flipped his car, and drowned in the early hours of morning.

A woman came in looking for muscadine grapes, but Jerry said he wouldn't have any until later in the week. I watched a saloon shoot-out between some Bonanza characters on the muted TV next to the cash register. "That'll be too late," the woman said. Jerry nodded, and the woman left.

We finished our beers, and had another one each, after the man with the magazines had gone. A young couple from out of town stopped in on their way to visit the Blowing Rock, from which, legend has it, a heartsick boy leaped in despair, but the winds from beneath the rock blew him back up to the arms of his lover. They bought sodas: a bottle of Nehi grape for her, orange soda for him.

When I drove home, the surviving Muscovy duck

was standing on the side of the road, its head bent toward the black and white feathers sticking out in disarray from the gravel and dirt. It didn't even move as I drove by, and I found that I had to look away.

## **Let No Man Put Asunder**

by Annmarie Lockhart

Two facts crossed my mind as I considered the breakup: I was eighteen weeks pregnant and I had just discovered I was carrying twins. The timing of this left a lot to be desired. But breakups, like all forms of death, don't operate on conventional timetables. There was really no way around it. I figured it was for the best and I'd survive. And although that meant I'd need to relocate in a manner of speaking, how hard could it be to find another Episcopal church to call home in the Diocese of Newark?

I had a five-year love affair with this beautiful little church, the first church of my adult faith. I'd found my way to it in a nor'easter one Sunday when I woke from a decade-long agnostic nap to a sudden inexplicable need to bring my infant to religion. I threw myself into this relationship with the ardor of a new romantic. I loved its progressive politics, its open liturgy, its need for my energy. My passion for it showed no signs of abating and I couldn't imagine wanting another.

It was only in that fifth year that things took a turn. The priest left and the church entered a transition period. Suddenly I found myself not invited to planning meetings and prayer circles. The new order brought with it new traditions, but my friends were now denied their customary roles in the service and the words of collective prayer fractured into distinct voices. For the newly engaged parishioners it was a time to consider faith commitments and to celebrate their new love. For me it was a time to consider displaced affection and to struggle with betrayal, loss, and grief.

Two days after discovering I was carrying twins, I cried as the new priest led the congregation through a formal service to sever the pastoral relationship with its former ministers. I wondered why I was being called to census now and where I would find a manger in which to lay my babies.

So I approached the altar a few Sundays later after communion and asked the priest and the congregation to bless my pregnancy and the babies they would never baptize who were to be born of it. I walked out of church that day never again to walk back in the doors as a parishioner.

Of course a breakup doesn't always mean no contact ever again. Chance encounters happen; news/gossip travels far and fast. I've kept in touch with some former fellow parishioners. I went back for a funeral. I met with the rector to initiate a formal peacemaking and a kind of ritual forgiveness. It was good for me and I hope it was good for him too. The split turned out to be amicable.

It took some time, but I finally found the right manger in which to lay my infants. In a lovely Byzantine-styled church tucked where I least expected to find it under the star of Park Avenue gold, all manner of God's people attended the welcoming of my children into the body of Christ. This is not first love, not innocent and unknowing, but it is a deep love, complete with infatuation for the beauty and devotion to the quirks of the beloved. I'm completely committed to this second love. At least for now. What I may be called to tomorrow is anybody's guess.

## **Cibolo Cache**

by Mariah Daley

The early spring afternoon was damp and gray. The two boys scrambled up the trail ahead of me. Aiden was leading the way, while his friend Dylan tried to look over his shoulder.

"Hey, why do you get to hold the GPS? You held it last time."

"Dylan's right. Give it to him until we find the cache, and you can hold it on the way back to the car."

"Okay," said Aiden. Dylan turned the GPS in his hand, getting a feel for how to read it. The boys took off again, stumbling along the trail, stepping over rocks and slipping on exposed roots. Dylan held the GPS in front of him like it was an eager dog tugging at its leash and pulling him forward with impatient enthusiasm.

The path took a turn. Dylan paused and pointed the GPS into a thicket of Possumhaw and dogwood beside the trail. "This way," he called, striding into the underbrush.

"Wait, boys. If you look up there, can you see how the trail turns back just a little ways ahead? I think we'd better stick to the path. Who knows what's in those bushes."

"Good point," said Dylan, pulling brambles from his socks. They set off again, cautiously now, looking further up the trail, mentally playing the angles against each other as they went.

I paused a moment, letting them lead. I marveled at the strength of a bond forged in the heat of light saber battles and secret backyard spy missions. Dylan was older by a year and a half, but the age difference couldn't hold up to the intensity of their common interests. When our family first tried geocaching, Aiden was anxious to share the high-tech treasure hunt with Dylan.

We walked along Cibolo Creek for some time. Towering cypress trees waded in the shallows, spindly root flares laid bare where the drought had dropped the water level. The GPS indicated that we needed to head off at a sharp angle, but we kept going until the trail branched. We followed the path to the left, and our course corrected itself, leading us past thick clumps of fragrant juniper. The distance marker was counting down, fifty-five feet, thirty feet, twelve feet, as we homed in on the prize.

The trail began to curve away, skirting along a tall electric fence, but the GPS was pointing off the trail, into the bushes.

"It should be right around here," I said. We carefully picked our way into the underbrush, pulling back dry silvered branches like loaded slingshots.

"I bet it's right there," Aiden said. "See that little pile of sticks by that tree?" Aiden had developed an eye for these things. He'd seen that the caches were often covered up with logs, stones, bits of bark.

"I'll get it!" Dylan ducked under low-slung branches and poked at the pile of sticks to make sure

there were no snakes. He used his toe to nudge aside some of the sticks in the pile, uncovering a bright green tube the size of a cigar. "Found it!"

He brought it out to the trail and opened it up, handing me a rolled up piece of paper, the visitor's log. I pulled a pen out of my pack to sign and date the log, while the boys sorted through the treasure. There wasn't much in the tube, and I thought they'd be disappointed. The last cache we had found, a large ammo box, had been full of cheap plastic toys. They didn't mind, though. They each took a curled-up sticker, replacing it with something of their own – a marble and a plastic bug. Aiden buried the tube under the stick pile again, making sure none of the bright green color showed through.

We started back toward the parking lot, joyous chatter ringing in the damp air. The mist was beginning to condense into a fine drizzle. We badly needed the rain, but I hoped that it would hold off for a little while longer. I urged the boys to hurry. Maybe we could get in one more cache before the rain came and forced us to head home.

## **The Parking Ministry**

by Catherine Zickgraf

"My Mother uses a wheelchair, too," the pastor said, his arm splayed wide against his office door, holding it open for us. "Mom's such a strong woman. She trusts God, and He gives her power to do things her body doesn't want to do." He yanked a chair out of my path as Tom positioned my wheelchair in front of the wide cherry desk.

"You two will have to meet. She's a woman of great faith—and she doesn't really get depressed. She may be eighty-two and confined to a wheelchair, but she doesn't let her health stop her from doing what God wants her to do." He closed his office door, strode behind my street-dirty wheels, and settled himself in his leather chair. "So I completely understand your situation," he concluded.

Long triangles of sun flashed on his wall of theology books. For the last few months, we'd attended Covenant Fellowship Church. The building was perched on a newly-deforested hill above Route 322—its stony façade reflecting God's swirling

sky. The leadership assigned us to Pastor Machowski, and today he was interviewing us for church membership.

"Let me tell you what we expect of our members," he began. "First, you need to attend the worship service more often than not. It's easy to be missed in such a large building. So just check in with your group leader, and he can record your presence for that Sunday." I listened. Tom took notes.

"Second, it is very important that you tithe. The sacrificial giving by our members allowed us to build this large facility." He slid a cassette toward us. "Please listen to this, Malachi Chapter Two: God Commands Us to Build a Sanctuary. And then pray about how much you should give the church." Tom reached for the tape, read the title to himself, pocketed it.

"Finally, dedicate yourselves to one of the church ministries. I think we should have you, Catherine, join the Telephone Ministry. My Mom leads that team. She phones visitors during the week and encourages them to keep coming to our Church. You two can work on that together. I'm sure you guys will have a great time since you have a lot in common."

"Um, Pastor," Tom interrupted, "my wife's very ill. Obviously, she can't walk. But she doesn't have good use of her arms either. The wheelchair was specially made to support her neck because she can't even do that herself. And she hasn't been able to lift a phone up to her head in months."

Now I didn't want this ordained man of God to label me hard-hearted, not softened to the gospel of Jesus Christ, not willing to contribute to the welfare of a larger community. So I spoke up:

"There is one thing I am physically able to do. I can pray daily that the people of the church are comforted by their God in their darkest hours." I was tearing up. "People who are suffering need our compassion, and they need continued strength to endure their lives." I wished I had a tissue.

Pastor Machowski had a counter-offer, though. And I promise you this really happened: "Well, look, there's a woman named Sandy, maybe you've seen her during the service. She's the one

in the wheelchair in the front, right-hand side of the sanctuary. Boy, she has a lot of pluck—she insisted on working in the Parking Ministry. So before the church service, she circles the parking lot and directs church members to their parking spaces. We can have someone push you while you do that. Should I have her call you?”

We had no words for this man—we were astonished. As my young husband backed my wheelchair into the lobby, I was embarrassing myself: pink eyes, dripping nose. The entire secretarial staff could see on our faces our apostasy or refusal to submit to church leadership or whatever they wanted to see. We left that man in his elegant office, convinced, I’m sure, that I was too proud to sacrifice myself for others the way Jesus had done.

The following Sunday we visited another church, and we never heard from Pastor Machowski again.

### **Peaceful Warrior**

by Sueann Wells

With death out her window, she stands strong. She says she’s taking the coward’s way out, but she’s impressive. Her daughters, her husband, her friends, her neighbors, all by her side, she says, “I don’t want to fight.”

She’s fought before, battling an aggressive cancer three years ago, and she’d rather not fight again—for only two to four months. The demon has taken over three vital organs now, and may have worked its way to her brain.

The doctors say it will be nearly painless this way, compared to the tremendous pain and struggle of fighting the cancer. “What a thought,” she says, “to go to sleep and simply not wake up one day.”

Truly peaceful.

To think of what’s going on inside her body, though, does not seem peaceful, as the body is choking itself with urea and toxins, forbidden the weekly release. But with the help of morphine and other painkillers, she’s fine.

Lying in her gown and robe, snug beneath floral

covers in a naturally lit room, she talks to friends and neighbors almost as though she were completely well, except that she’s exuding last requests and final reflections on her life—her own eulogy.

Such a fine spirit. At peace with her decision. Content knowing that in less than a week she’ll see her parents once again.

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## 6 facts About Roaches and a Sighting

by Robert Scotellaro

The earliest fossil cockroach is about 280 million years old—80 million years older than the first dinosaurs.

The modern roach can swim, holding its breath for 40 minutes at a stretch.

Its heart is a simple tube with valves. The tube can pump blood backwards and forwards. It can even stop, suddenly, without causing harm.

When the roach sheds its skin, the roach turns completely white. However, the skin grows back within a period of 8 hours.

Some females mate only once and are pregnant for the rest of their lives.

The roach can live for a week without its head and only dies because without a mouth, it can no longer drink water.

\* \* \*

A renowned professor of astronomy, Eric Kliemhorn, inventor of the Kliemhorn Solar-Snoop telescope, claims to have viewed them (a grander genus—*Blattaria Giganticus*) crawling along the photosphere of the sun—radiated and plump—riding the roiling flares, one to another. Others, he states in his published findings, “Surviving Creep-Outs,” perch on fiery tips, still as agate—feelers swiping (the only parts that move), sniffing the universe. Their shells, luminous; the color of Puerto Rican rum.

From all appearances, Kliemhorn speculates, they are *waiting*—their bellies full and warm.

## Another Way Out

by Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz

She was taking too much time in the restroom and it was pissing him off.

Detective Scott glanced at his watch. She’d been in there ten, maybe fifteen minutes. Trying to stall, he thought.

Not gonna work. I’ll wait as long as you take, Little Miss Shanna Douglas. He gave her another five minutes.

He signaled for the waitress and when she came over, he asked if there was another way out. She said no—no window in the restrooms, and the only other out, by way of the kitchen’s back door. He’d been watching the front. No one had come in or gone out.

“Thanks,” he told her, both for the information and for the refill of coffee she was pouring into his cup.

He’d wait Shanna out, though he really needed to get her out of there. It was against protocol to take a found runaway anywhere but directly to the station. She’d asked, begged, for something to eat. His better judgment said to have a sandwich or pizza delivered to the station, but he’d stopped at a diner, her in tow.

“Bing,” he said under his breath when another five minutes had passed. “Time to go home.”

She had not liked the idea of going home. “What if I’m safer on the street?” she’d asked him.

He’d shook his head. He’d seen what a few years on the street could do to a girl; he told her she didn’t want that.

She repeated her question.

Something in her voice caught the detective. “You tell me, or someone else, what’s going on and it’ll be looked into,” he said.

She laughed. “Looked into,” she repeated, mimicking his voice. “That’s the problem; things are looked into,” she told him.

Det. Scott was about to say something when Shanna popped up from her seat and announced she had to go to the restroom.

He started to stand.

She told him she was just going to the restroom. She held up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

“Make it quick,” he’d told her, but she wasn’t.

“Come on,” he hissed now, willing her to come out so he could turn her in and finish the job. He was feeling like he’d been played; she hadn’t even touched that burger.

He was thankful there wasn’t a lunch crowd. Only him, an elderly couple and Shanna Douglas in the restroom. He heaved a sigh. Damn it.

No one in charge might necessarily ever know but they could find out. He didn’t need that.

He called the waitress over, requested the check and asked her to go into the restroom and tell Shanna to get out.

He was pulling out his wallet when a scream punctuated the diner. Det. Scott rushed from his seat, pushed past the waitress into the restroom to find the disarrayed objects: the one shoe propped on the sink, the broken mirror, the jagged pieces of glass, the girl—a gorged arm over her head—the blood spilling into her blonde hair.

## **Blood Sugar**

by Meg Pokrass

I miss the Bob who would admit he loves fudge sundaes. Yesterday, mom said, “where’s your bliss?”

“Hiding under my lumps of cellulite,” I said.

“Excuses,” she lobbed back. She’s had her eyes lifted so high since her surgery she looks feline.

Life feels like being stuck in a bus next to a skinny bitch—the kind that keeps blinking.

These are the “love replacements” I imagine swirling inside my mouth: pizza with everything, meatball sandwiches from Ernesto’s, triple cream Brie from Safeway.

Usually, I walk in the park right before dinner, to improve my outlook. I try and ignore the puppies getting training treats, their owners cooing, Gooouuuud Grrrrrl. Yesterday I snapped—bought a corn dog. I licked it to make it last—so slow the sun went down and I didn’t notice it was night.

I don’t think Bob’s home, he never is now, but I could call from a blocked number and check. He’s lost so much weight; he’s sprinting to the front of the meetings for achievement buttons, thanking God and whole grains for saving his life. The women always giggle, though he says the same shtick every time.

“It’s about shooting high,” mom said. She’s planning her next vacation involving dolphins, her current obsession. She wants—well, it’s her “life wish”—to ride one, and last time, she sprained her ankle just walking to the dolphin riding ticket area, tripping on a toddler.

“I have choice,” Bob’s new T-shirt says. Yup. All I have to do is choose water over cookies, celery sticks over pancakes. Cortisol has elevated my blood sugar levels, which may be why I dream about men, fat ones and thin ones, with delicious smells, yeasty as fresh dough.

The Ernesto’s delivery man comes wearing a Hawaiian shirt and flip-flops ‘cause it’s still summer. He says “we count on you as much as you count on us,” instead of “so, what’s up with you?” I’ve started tipping a dollar less, and next time he comes, I’m going to let him take it from my hand.

## **Boysenberry Jam**

by Dallas Woodburn

A place for everything, and everything in its place—though her rationale behind the placement of each item was a mystery to him. It all seemed haphazard, random. Cans of tomatoes and corn and peas stretched back into the darkness. Cereal boxes stood guard beside the Ritz crackers and hot chocolate mix. Tins of tea rattled beside plastic jars of peanut butter, store-bought, and glass jars of jam, personally canned. Some she had canned herself, others were gifts from friends. Raspberry, strawberry, boysenberry.

The pantry door squeaked slightly when opening. It sounded like an admonishment. After all, he wasn’t hungry. But he stood there, in his threadbare socks and drawstring pants, staring at the life she had accumulated for them. No matter how angry she was at him, no matter how badly her third-grade class had behaved that day, no matter

how many ragamuffin friends (or, later, ragamuffin boyfriends and girlfriends) the kids brought home with them after school to eat their food, she never complained. She always had the pantry stacked to overflowing, and she always had dinner ready on the table at 6:00 sharp, right after *Wheel of Fortune*. They ate together as a family during *Jeopardy*. The volume muted, they guessed at the answers, shouting to blank-eyed TV contestants who never heard them.

He took a jar of jam off the shelf and studied the label. Boysenberry. *For Ida Jean, With Love, Carlotta*. Carlotta was a woman Ida had met in Senior Swim Class. She favored mauve lipstick and wide plastic headbands. Carlotta had brought over the jam two days before Christmas, right after Ida came home from the hospital. They had decided to get a live-in nurse so she could remain at home, where everything was familiar, everything in its rightful place.

Last he had seen Carlotta, she was wearing a sweatshirt printed with photos of her grandchildren. He and Ida had no grandchildren, but even if they did, Ida would never have worn a sweatshirt like that.

Shortly after the funeral, Carlotta had dropped by to bring him a green bean casserole. Maybe if she hadn't been wearing the grandchildren sweatshirt he would have invited her in for a drink or something, but as it was, he had thanked her and shut the door. Now, half a week later, the casserole was growing hard in the fridge. He wondered if he would have to see her again, to give her the dish back. He probably would.

The lid of the boysenberry jam was screwed on tight. One of those lids Ida would have been unable to unscrew herself. She would have had to ask him for help. She never said the words aloud, just walked over to him, wherever in the house he happened to be, and thrust the jar at him silently. "Oh, do you need my help, Ida?" he would ask, grinning. "I would love to help you. Just tell me what you need, honey." She would thrust the jar at him again, looking down at her tiny feet. She hated asking for his help, so he delighted in helping her.

Finally, the jar of boysenberry opened. He dipped

his index finger inside and brought the dark sticky redness to his lips. He couldn't decide what it tasted like. Not happiness, exactly, or sorrow, or relief. Not anger or regret. Not desire. He took another taste. Maybe a mixture of things, crushed together.

## Con Long

by Paul Cooper

It was like a miracle. Huffing, hissing, black-coal eyes. A Dragon.

The summer was hot and languid. In the air, swollen bluebottles circled clumsily, colliding with windows. Vines snaked up telegraph wires, peppers hanging from them like jewels. Everywhere, boundaries were bursting; tapioca fences straining, bamboo ploughing up the soft earth like gunfire.

Bao-Long watched with fear and no little wonder as the steam train drew up to the platform, childhood memories flooding back to him. In his village there had always been a dragon. The men of the village came together each year, all quarrels forgotten, and danced beneath the bamboo framework and the tapered, coloured paper. After Bao's sixteenth birthday, he too had danced beneath the costume; at thirty, he had been given the honour of being the dragon's head. He had bobbed and nodded to the little children of the village as they clapped their hands in the light of the torches and the stars, and a *dan nguyet*—a moon lute—had sung in the darkness.

Now, after all these years, he was seeing a dragon in the flesh. It was everything he had always imagined it to be: sleek and black—for he had never really believed the colours that the women had painted theirs—hissing and screaming, faster than the wind. The wheels were a surprise, though. He would have to tell the villagers about that.

Now he saw why so many people had started dressing like the foreigners; wearing those starched suits and bowler hats; talking about news from places he had never heard of, with exotic, outlandish names, and throwing paper money at each other like monkeys. He had never understood it before, but the foreigners had harnessed

dragons, the way he used to harness yellow cattle and mountain buffalo to his plough. How could anyone turn down such power?

His village, his stilted hut, was a world away from bowler hats, from paper money. He had known only the rice fields all his life, trousers rolled up to his knees, toes curling in the silty mud. He had a farmer's hands, brown arms as wrinkled as ox hide, and his conical *non-la* sat on his head as though it were a part of him. He was getting old, though, and now an irritating twinge in his knee meant that his working day ended long before the sun had set.

The dragon drew to a halt with one last tired hiss at the other end of the station. Bao was thankful that it had not stopped closer to him, for the thunder of its wheels had sent needles of fear darting up his spine as it passed, blowing hot air in his face as it went. In his sudden fear, the apprehension about his meeting was forgotten. So too were the questions he had been asking himself since leaving the village that morning: How many years had it been since he last saw his son? Why had he never written home?

That one letter, less than a week ago, had been so unexpected; Bao was caught off guard, stunned. The past had ambushed him.

Steam rose from the tracks, and a whistle blew somewhere. All along the length of the train, doors burst open, clattering, and a noisy throng poured from the carriages. The small station, which had been almost empty moments earlier, was suddenly like a harvest-time marketplace, except that everyone wore those same foreign suits and hats. Bao felt out of place in his cloth shirt and baggy trousers, his wide *non-la* so very different to the velvet bowlers of the foreigners. But they were no foreigners. They were all *viet*, dark and slim, wiry black hair and rich brown eyes.

"*Nguroi viet* wearing foreigner clothes..." Bao thought to himself, and shook his head a little.

Then, among the hundreds, one of the bowler hats was speaking to him, offering his hand, smiling. Bao focused slowly, his eyes not what they used to be, and he saw, in that man's face, his own.

"Father!" the man said, in perfect dialect. "It's so good to see you again." Then, in English, which Bao did not understand, "How do you do?"

"Son!" Bao burst out, his milky eyes filling with tears. "My son, it's been so long!" And he took the bowler-hatted man in his arms. He smelt of something beautiful but artificial. Not the way he used to smell.

"It's good to be home," said the boy who was now a man, who had ridden home on the back of a dragon. He took off his bowler hat, revealing the messy hair he had inherited from his father.

"I hope they will let me be the head this year."

## **Dark Turns**

by Alex DeBonis

Lurching past our bumper, exhaust-stained coat open, his naked gut begs for cover. Cop leaving the convenience store calls him Dr. Roush. Moans in response—unns and omms—like he's singing through a mouthful of bread. A doctor? *This* ruin? Vacant eyes range over the fluorescent-lit parking lot.

Two chic girls approach, faces marked with concern. Tall one with acne and fried hair follows a long-jawed blonde in wool cap. They glance at one another for money, pleased they're both so generous, and come up empty-handed. Tall one's disappointed face says it all: *Sorry. Who carries cash anymore?* They duck past. Doc in his frayed coat doesn't notice. What happened to him? Surely he had potential. And education. Money. He somehow fell to this. Jesus, the dark turns a life can take.

My hand finds my purse. Cab'll hate me giving money, but I don't care. We've been defying each other all week. I just told Cab he didn't need any mint chocolate chip from the store. About to add he was too big for the Chevy's seat belt, but he slammed the car door in my face. Always been easier for him to go against me than the other way around.

Times like these, I imagine Cab's different, doing things he'd never do. Like Cab hearing the cop,

seeing what happened with the girls, and thinking Doc's worth saving. He turns out to be the kind of person who carts Doc to our house and feeds the man his ice cream. Poor Doc's head clears immediately, and he pinches an inch of Cab, smiling. "Middle-age spread aside," Doc warns, "this weight'll do you in. Medical advice: Lay off the mint chip." Cab's eyes squint like his father's (a doughy face in photos, his heart failed at forty-nine). After a second, Cab nods, rubbing his stomach. Soon Doc's family retrieves him like he's a runaway sheepdog. Grateful waves as they drive him home.

This mirage vanishes when Cab steps past the tottering doctor like he's a rift in the sidewalk. He hands me the cold bag and falls heavily into his seat. "That homeless guy stinks to high heaven."

I drop his ice cream on the car floor. Doc's gravity pulls me out, bills clutched in my fist.

"Brenda," Cab says.

Neon dyes Doc's steaming breath scarlet. Passing hands through the red would be like touching Doc's blood, like a miracle.

Cab, leaning out his window: "Don't."

Up close Doc's a filthy monster. I reach anyway, bills clasped in fingers. He shrieks and I shield my face, stumbling back like he hit me. Saving someone always takes more than I can give. Doc continues wailing mournfully. I don't breathe returning to the passenger's side. Lower myself in, ashamed.

Cab starts the Chevy; we glide away. His mouth twists, ready to snarl, to lecture. "What the hell?"

Twisted in the seat—my hand on my mouth—I watch Doc's figure shrink in the window. Jesus, the dark turns life can take.

### **Bowling Night**

by Karen Schindler

The bag was dripping.

He unzipped it and looked inside.

Haley looked at him with disapproval.

He grinned sheepishly and lovingly brushed her hair out of her eyes.

He *had* made a pretty big mess.

He couldn't ignore the puddle on her nice clean floor.

The lanes would just have to wait a few more minutes.

He put a fresh towel in the bag.

He wrapped her leftovers in plastic and put them in the freezer.

He tidied all his knives away into the dishwasher.

Finally, he mopped the floor.

There.

Now she was happy.

At least that's how Brian read her expression.

As he zipped the bowling bag shut over it.

### **Cream Puff**

by Kenneth Radu

Some days the smell of flowers nauseates. Don't get me wrong. I am not a flower-hating sort of guy. I'm not afraid to admire roses in a city park or plant marigolds for my mother who now dribbles into her bib at the Nursing home—*try to hold your head up, dear, it makes the soup go down easier*—it's just that when confronted with a certain combination of floral beauty in a specific context, I need all my mental powers, such as they are, to suppress insurrection in my stomach.

Feeling much better today, but yesterday the fragrance became so potent that I gasped and had to be held up—held up!—me, a man of average build, no longer young, but not a decrepit octogenarian either—held up by two adolescent sons with iPods plugged into their ears like frigging Martians on a tour of Earth's hot spots, except only a

Martian would call that particular site a hot spot. "Show some respect," I wanted to say, but lack of air and fear of regurgitating undigested food made me refrain. Instead, I focused on my stomach jerking about like Michael Jackson dancing.

Of course the boys have picture phones—what kid doesn't these days? And aside from rudely snapping pictures despite my admonition and severe frowns from other relatives, they actually text messaged friends and each other while the priest carted his oxygen tank to the front and began his pre-packaged spiel about "the deceased, who had never been to church in her life, but God loved her anyway, because deep down"—and the priest knew this as "self-evident truth"—"she had not abandoned her faith." I guess all of Anna's denials over the years equalled affirmation in her husband Phil's eyes. How could the priest know what she believed "deep down" when she had never met the sanctified gentleman, unless Phil had insisted that she had never really meant what she said?

Leave it to Anna's husband to ride roughshod over her beliefs and disrespect her last wishes that no religious ceremony or words of any kind should be spoken at her funeral. At least Anna had left no child whose wishes her husband could also ignore. Despite the promises he made, Phil told me over the phone, burying Anna without benefit of clergy, without reference to God—why, Jesus, it made his heart virtually stop. God would forgive him for breaking his promise to the dying because, after all, he was bringing her to Him as he had no choice. By that time I was muddled by his pronouns.

I blurted out, "what the hell are you talking about?" which was hardly the thing to say to a man addled by grief over the sudden demise of his wife, my twin sister, whose dying made me want to heave up my innards beside the closed casket with silver rails. That, and the arrangement of giant, odoriferous white mums and blue gladioli interspersed with yellow freesias, sucking the oxygen out of the excruciatingly well-appointed salon. Magenta drapes stood at attention like guards at Buckingham Palace and the hacking priest couldn't complete one line of his formulaic prayers without coughing up syllables tainted with blood.

"Jesus," I almost screamed from exasperation,

not faith, would you please spare us the consoling anodynes and give your cancer-mangled lungs a break? Phil once smacked my head because he couldn't tolerate my happy scepticism. "You really chafe my ass with your fucking disbelief," he had said. Then he proceeded unbidden to lecture me about God's love and the reason why we were born. Anna had once told Phil that she'd divorce him if he harangued her about religion, which he had grabbed onto like a life raft after they had married.

Believers occupy the earth, their name is legion. Amazing how tuned in they are to the will of God. The odour of flowers, the stillness of conditioned air, the droning priest: not surprising that I fainted and woke up on a caramel leather sofa in the funeral home's basement lounge coiffed and manicured like the salons upstairs. In this windowless room of respite from seriousness, mournful whispers and religiosity; embalmed bodies, coffee cups and stale doughnuts abounded. A wide plasma television screen affixed to a wall broadcast the empty highway down which Michael Jackson's hearse drove.

Where were the sorrowing multitudes? The media had predicted a countless throng. Where was the carnival of public lamentation the likes of which the world had not witnessed since the first crucifixion or Princess Di's quasi-state funeral? Now, I have scant interest in celebrities and their fantasy worlds, no more real to me than comic-strip characters speaking in bubbles. The passing of a star is no occasion for wrenching grief. I saw more cops than civilians on the sidelines. Ah, a couple of fans with tearful confessions of broken hearts, feeling good about feeling bad, expressed their dismay over how their particular universe had collapsed now that Michael Jackson, a person they had never met, no longer held it up like some sort of deity, a slender Atlas in spangles and sequins.

Then I heard his daughter speak about her father, just a line, "he was a great dad," something like that, and she cried. She put to shame all the manic adulation, all the phony frenzy, all the religious hype and hyperbole, all the embarrassing drivel and mendacious eulogizing. The world did not stop turning. But Michael Jackson's daughter, a small figure in a crowd of celebrities, spoke from a personal, grieving heart, not from propaganda,

not for entertainment; so thank you, dear child, you provided the one true thing at my sister's funeral. Then I remembered how Anna and I used to drink tea together in her kitchen, each sharing the beliefs and thoughts of the other.

Holding a stale cream puff, watching Jackson's televised memorial service, I cried.

## **Devonshire, 1934**

by Richard Cody

"Ah, my dear Carmichael!" Gilbert addressed the empty drawing room, raising an empty glass to the uppermost shelf of the immense bookcase in the western corner, where a dark gap in the row of heavy tomes suggested—rather obviously, thought Gilbert—the black hole of a vacant tooth socket. "Tonight, my good man, I toast you from this empty glass."

A moment passed, during which Gilbert kept his arm raised to the corner and collected his thoughts. "To your bones, old man, may they serve me well." Unable to resist, he added with a grim chuckle, "Until, of course, they are rotting in hell."

He lowered his arm and another moment crept through the still room as he savored his empty toast and recollected the care with which he had manipulated Carmichael. It had not been easy deceiving a man of Carmichael's intelligence but—after nearly three years of grueling and laborious machinations, lubricated and kept smoothly running in no small part by the confidence he had won from Carmichael through well-played sympathy and mock friendship—he had finally secured the object of his deception.

Turning to the desk behind him with a satisfied smile, Gilbert eyed the large volume which lay there. The missing tooth, he mused; a perfect fit for that empty space in his collection, which he had kept open and waiting for just this tome: *La Langue des Mort par Jacques Perdue*.

The smile on Gilbert's face widened as he read the title. Little was known about Perdue. As the surname suggested—if, indeed, the entire name was not a fabrication as Gilbert suspected—all but the barest facts about the man had been lost

to history. Born in Marseille in 1602. Missing and presumed dead in 1678, or 1679, depending on which biographer one believed. This and the grimoire before Gilbert, *The Language of the Dead*, produced during the last twenty of those seventy odd years, were all that remained of the man.

Perdue's book, long coveted and finally wrested from Carmichael by Gilbert, was the only known transcription of the ancient and terrible tongue of its title—learned, claimed the author, after many years of communication with entities described as being from "realms beyond the five senses of man."

Gilbert smiled again, filling his empty glass from the bottle of wine beside the old grimoire. Carmichael, owner of the book for nearly a decade, hadn't known what to do with the thing despite his formidable intelligence. Or maybe he'd simply been afraid.

Gilbert, on the other hand, knew how to use Purdue's book and was not afraid to do so—which was why he was the hoary tome's new owner.

Now Carmichael, or what was left of him, wandered the countryside serving Gilbert's will. Reaching down, he stroked the leather binding of the book. Yes, a few choice word combinations, courtesy of Purdue and his entities, had turned Carmichael's own dogs against him, and what is more, raised his dead and savaged body.

Gilbert sipped his wine, shuddered with a chill delight to think of Carmichael's frightful remains even now, perhaps, paying a visit on his behalf to that parsimonious old bastard, Roberts. Ha, he thought, Roberts would finally get what he had coming to him.

It was then (rather poetically, Gilbert might have thought later, had he survived) that the drawing room window shattered behind him with a catastrophic clatter. He swung himself around, wine trailing from his glass and describing his motion in a crimson arc. Clambering through the smashed window, shards of glass jutting from his already torn and bloodied body, was Carmichael.

Gasping, Gilbert dropped his glass, now mostly empty, to the floor. "Wh— Wh— What are you do-

ing?” he shrieked.

The thing that had been Carmichael lurched, bleeding, into the room, raising tattered hands toward Gilbert. Clutched in the bloody fingers and dog-chewed stumps of its ghastly right hand, Gilbert saw a folded piece of paper bearing his name in a familiar script. Carmichael shuffled forward, and with horror, Gilbert realized he was being offered a missive.

With his heart rising in his throat and his bowels churning in terror, he plucked the paper from the cold hand, flipped it open and read the last words of his life:

*You were wrong, old boy, all these years! Purdue wrote two editions of his book. One containing information omitted from the other. Thank you for acquiring Carmichael's copy for my collection. Carmichael will bring it to me directly, as instructed, when he has finished with you.*

*All my worst,*

*E. Roberts*

### **Divination**

by Ger Killeen

We got a two-year grant, Max had said, to excavate some caves in the highlands that had interesting painted calendar glyphs. About five miles south from the dig, not quite out of the jungle, there was a small village, a pretty awful place where two dirt roads crossed, about a dozen families. You can just imagine it—the skinny dogs, the tiny Mayan women rattling away in broken Spanish and Kaqchikel, the malnourished kids peering around doors and trees, the men sullen or drunk, and, God, the mosquitoes. We hired a few of the men to haul rubble at the dig.

Anyway, the place had a bar, really just a room in a house with a few tables, the whole place smelling of beer and piss. And somehow one of us discovered that the old woman who looked after the place would sell you pot, really good pot, for cheap. So every couple of weeks or so, usually on Sunday when we had a day off, we took it in turns to go down to the village on a pot run.

The old woman, Juana, would ask if you needed *aq'om q'ayis*, medicinal herbs, and would throw her head back in a fit of laughter when you said *a'e*, yes. She would sit at a table and lay out lines of domino tiles in no particular order that I could see, and underneath the table she kept a gold-colored chicken in a cardboard box. For a few quetzales she'd plop the chicken up on the table, and the chicken would pace about, pecking at this domino and that one, and Juana would interpret the pecking and tell your fortune: how you'd surely find a great treasure up there in that cave, how there was a girl in Guaté that might marry you.

So, usually, after I'd transacted the main business of the day, I'd buy a beer and have my fortune told. Why? I don't know; just to do it and talk about it later maybe.

Anyway, this one Sunday, I sat down at the table, Juana smiling her toothless smile, a few kids looking on, the chicken striding about and pecking at tiles. Suddenly Juana stopped smiling, looked straight at me, open-mouthed, looked at the table, looked at me again, and in the clearest Spanish I'd ever heard from her said, “Señor Max, you must now leave very quickly and go back up the mountain to your friends. Now, Señor Max, now!” She stood up—she barely came up to my elbow—and physically pushed me out the door. I heard her bolt it behind me.

Well, as you can imagine, I was a bit surprised and puzzled, and okay, maybe even a bit worried—these people really believe in spirits and that kind of stuff. I used to even hear them saying prayers to the rain god, Chac, and Saint Anthony all in the same breath. There was nothing to do but head back to camp, and at least I had the pot.

Next morning, none of the laborers from the village showed up for work, so someone—a young guy from somewhere in Texas—was sent down in the jeep to see what was going on and roust them. I was copying some glyphs in the shade when he came roaring back, laying on the horn, screaming.

The villagers were all dead, every man, woman and child, shot in the back of the head, shot in the face, shot in the heart. Most of the women and girls had been raped. Even the dogs were dead. The army and their friends, you know...

I remember thinking I had no idea the smell of blood could make your eyes burn like from smoke. I remember thinking, today is 9 *Lamat*, 16 *K'ayab*—or 9 Venus, 16 Turtle, in the old calendar. I remember seeing Juana's golden chicken pecking near the feet of a small child.

## **Freaky Animal Day**

by Robert Scotellaro

When I enter the living room, I see the fish, a fancy platy, shoot from the tank, half-way across the room, into my son's glass of Kool-Aid.

"Oooh, gross!" He grimaces and pours the fish, drink and all, back into the water. Then my oldest daughter comes bounding down the stairs and I notice the two live baby alligators dangling from her ears by their small clenched teeth.

"Hi, Dad," she pipes. "Gotta run." A car beeps outside.

"Doesn't that hurt?" I ask.

"Not really," she says. "They're not squeezing all that hard. And besides, I've always wanted multiple piercings." She chuckles at her own joke. I'm not amused.

As she is nearly out the door, my wife comes in from the yard with a long necklace of bees, buzzing loudly, clear down to her cleavage. "Get home at a decent hour," she says in our daughter's wake.

I stare at the perfectly formed, living adornment—the symmetrical yellow and black pattern, the stationary wing-flutters against her skin.

"What the hell's going on?" I say.

"She's growing up is all."

"I don't mean that. The earrings, the bees."

"Oh, that. It's Freaky Animal Day, silly," she reminds me. I take out the calendar card I keep in my wallet—study it. "Oh, yeah," I say, a little sheepishly. "It's hard keeping up."

She beams, then points. "So, what do you think?"

"They're... It's lovely," I tell her. I gaze at the calendar for a moment longer, then slip it back in my wallet.

In the bedroom, I take out the bulletproof vests and lay them on the bed. I hear a tapping at the window, turning in time to see a crow poised at the glass with a red Mr. Potato Head derby hat in its beak before it flies off.

I smooth out each vest, check for any unmended holes in the outer cloth. My youngest daughter's is tiny, with pink polka-dots. Amazing, I think, that they can make them so small. There're a few tears I'll have to patch with duct tape 'til I can have them professionally repaired. Later, I'll go to the garage and dig out the helmets.

I hear a loud *thump!*—something heavy lands on the roof and walks across it. Okay, so I screwed up, I tell myself—forgot what day it was. That's okay. I gather the vests in a neat little pile and place them on the nightstand beside my alarm clock.

Freaky animals are one thing—no biggie. But no way, no way in hell I'm forgetting tomorrow is Random Drive-by Shooting Day.

## **Frustrating Phrases**

by Doug Mathewson

On the train, looking through an independent literary journal, I read a poem that made no sense to me at all. It was mostly about watching TV in the desert (I think). The train groaned and swayed along and my eyes were suddenly caught by the line "Alien Cave Woman Sex." Absolutely no image came to mind, none. Nothing at all. In my best David Sedaris voice I thought, "Well, that's interesting," and read something else. But the words "Alien Cave Woman Sex" wouldn't leave. Weeks later, I was reading a novel about a family of circus performers. They worked sideshows as "Living Oddities." Their acts were not "Big Tent Material." The narrator says to another character, "It's like having a secret. Like having a bluebird tattooed under your pubic hair." I can clearly see a small vivid cartoon bluebird, but not on anyone (anywhere!), just by itself. Another twist of words stuck in my head. Another unclaimed picture.

Neither phrase would go away. They would not be banished. Why couldn't I leave them somewhere? Casually work them into conversation and abandon them. Give them to a stranger. Let someone else deal with the mess. I didn't make up either one. Why should I be stuck burdened for months with these two unspeakable clunkers? Finally, I wrote my way out of this putrid mess with a short story.

A handsome and mysterious stranger is suddenly struck with appendicitis while waiting in line for the Alien Cave Woman Sex theme ride. While prepping him for surgery, Carnival Nurse Betty Brazen was surprised (and intrigued) to discover his secret tattoo. And quick as that, both phrases were gone! Vanquished forever! Freedom at last, because now, they have become yours. Enjoy.

### **Jam Session**

by Robert C. Eccles

Skip had just engineered a recording session for a cookie-cutter teen pop starlet. He couldn't help but wonder what had happened to music. What passed for music today consisted of two or three chords, a lot of electronics and no feeling whatsoever. Recording gigs like these made Skip sick to his stomach. Sure, they paid the bills, but that didn't mean he had to enjoy them.

He was making sure everything in the booth was shut down for the night when he thought he heard drums. He cocked his head to the side, and yes, he was sure he heard drums. The sound was very faint, but getting louder. Skip looked at the control board and saw one of the faders inching its way up by itself. He glanced into the studio, where a drum kit materialized. A man with short, dark hair, a thick mouth and a cigarette dangling between his lips was hunched over the drums, laying down an unmistakable jazz time signature. Skip blinked, expecting the drummer to disappear, but when he opened his eyes the drummer was still there. And Skip was sure he recognized him.

"Buddy Rich?" Skip mumbled. The drummer nodded and smiled as he executed a masterful cross-over riff. Buddy Rich had died of heart failure in 1987. But here he was, beatin' the skins in Skip's studio.

Suddenly, Skip heard a woman singing, quietly at first, then louder and louder. The woman scatted, mimicking the sound of instruments with her wonderful voice. There was no mistaking that voice. As Skip watched another fader on the console move up on its own, he saw Ella Fitzgerald fade into view in the studio.

"Don't look so surprised, sugar," Ella said. "You'd better close your mouth, or you're gonna draw flies."

"But..." That was all Skip could manage. Ella Fitzgerald had been dead since 1996. Despite this fact she kept singing, exhibiting her amazing vocal talents.

Another fader started to move, and Skip heard a saxophone. It was an alto sax, and from the bebop style, there was no question who was playing it. As Skip watched, a large man in a shiny suit and colorful tie appeared.

Skip was smiling broadly now.

"Bird? Is that you?"

Charlie Parker, who had died in 1955, bowed in Skip's direction and continued to play.

Two more faders slid up, and Skip could hear a stand-up bass and a trumpet fading in. He watched the studio like a kid on Christmas morning as Charles Mingus appeared behind his bass and Miles Davis materialized on the trumpet. Mingus's hand was a blur on the finger board, and Davis blew soulful, low-register notes behind his dark sunglasses. Mingus had left this world in 1979, and Davis had followed in 1991. Yet here they were, jamming with Buddy Rich and Ella Fitzgerald.

All of a sudden, Skip remembered where he was and smacked himself on the forehead. He ran over to the big reel-to-reel tape deck and fired it up. The red record light glowed, the reels turned, and the needles on the VU meters bounced back and forth in time with the music.

Ella Fitzgerald spoke: "Let's play one for the Duke, boys, what do you say?"

The band members nodded their agreement, and launched seamlessly into *It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*.

Skip plopped into a chair, overwhelmed. He sat there, mouth open, eyes wide, toe tapping through the last note of the song. He stood up, went to the tape deck and stopped it.

"I guess I should've kept this rolling in case you wanted to play another tune," he said, turning around. The studio was empty. Skip peered through the glass, searching the corners of the studio. There was no one there.

He rewound the tape to the beginning and hit play. There was nothing but a low hiss. The tape was blank.

### **Mall Minister**

by Maureen Sherbondy

My fellow ministers don't understand the thrill of this assignment at the center of excess, where gluttons roam in herds, driven into debt and theft by advertisements and impulses. Eventually, people take a break from shopping and drop in, some with newly stolen goods in their pocketbooks or on their wrists. They need to clear the air of self-loathing, crimes, and doubts, and seem relieved to find me here, all ears and patience, in this rackless, hangerless sanctuary within the building buzzing with the chaos of Muzak and bright adrenaline-red clearance signs. They spill their guts, seek guidance, walk away smiling as if heavy shopping bags have been lifted.

Buffered here between Cookie King and Tuxedo Trends, how sweet it is to see a prospective bride and groom walk in holding hands in rented tux and veil. For a paltry fee of three hundred dollars, I play the wedding background CD purchased at the music store. My assistant scatters rice, and the couple leaves joined as one, wearing golden bands selected an hour before at Jewelry Palace, three stores down. I throw in a just-married Polaroid photo for page one of their Hallmark newlywed album.

Once, while shopping at Macy's, a woman received news of her father's death right there in the

lingerie aisle, seeking solace she stumbled in, fell into a back pew and wept for hours. When she composed herself enough to leave, she told me she didn't know what she'd have done without me.

You have to go to the people, I always believed, and the people—the people are shopping at the mall evenings, weekdays, Sundays too, except on Christmas Day and Easter Sunday.

### **Merrie Melodies**

by Mark Rosenblum

As he spooned chicken curry from a small Tupperware bowl, Sujan Patel glanced above the portable TV that sat alongside the mini-mart cash register. He noticed, just outside his glass enclosed booth, an overweight woman struggling with gas pump number three. The music accompanying the old Loony Tunes cartoon blasting from the TV comically matched the goings on outside.

Using her wide hips, the woman was trying to brace the gas hose against her car in an effort to fight off its overzealous retracting mechanism. She also found squeezing the little metal trigger on the handle difficult with just one hand and was attempting to use them both while continuing to use her hips and legs to restrain the unwieldy hose. After two minutes of comic tango, she had only managed to deposit eighteen-cents worth of regular into her tank.

Since there were no other customers, Sujan decided to walk outside to assist. He called out to the woman and asked if she would like some help. She yelled back that she was not interested in converting to Krishna, Hindu, Buddhism or anything else he was selling. Sujan turned and walked back into the mini-mart. He sat down and scooped some chicken curry into his mouth, then reached toward a panel of switches and shut off gas pump number three.

As Elmer Fudd chased Bugs Bunny, Sujan watched the woman outside pointlessly continue to struggle—accompanied by the frenzied soundtrack of the Warner Brothers Studio Orchestra.

## Movie Ticket Taker

by Maureen Sherbondy

It's not as easy as it appears standing here guard-like by the metal poles and velvet ropes for hours, nodding, asking for show tickets. Some lose the printed slips of paper, hold up the line; tactfully I ask them to step aside to search for proof-of-purchase. There's an art to tearing that ticket apart into two equal stubs and quickly returning one half to the patron. After a popular movie premiere with big-name stars, my fingers cramp and hurt by night's end. Arthritis is beginning in my hands; two swollen fingers bend and fail to straighten.

I can always tell which patrons smuggle in sweet treats, ignoring the decree posted on the sign. These rule breakers keep one hand inside their bulging pockets and fail to look me in the eye. What can I do? Pat them down as though it's a felony? There's no movie prison, only the door to throw them out. I just nod, wave them in, and always say *Enjoy the show*.

## MWF, 39

by Mariah Daley

MWF, 39, seeks GM, any age, except not too young. Like, if you Twitter, or even just text, for that matter, you may be too young. Though maybe that would be a good thing, as you could catch me up on all the big tech advances that I've been avoiding. Otherwise, I may end up like my grandmother, who still doesn't know how to work her answering machine. Let's put it this way: if you believe that you know everything that is worth knowing, or that anything that happened before the new millennium is ancient history, you are probably too young. If you think Miley Cyrus is way cool, you are definitely too young. If you like the Jonas Brothers' music, you are too young; though if you just want to defile them, that would be understandable.

So, MWF, 39, seeks GM, lets say 23-90, for platonic (though it would be kind of nice if you would once, while fairly drunk, make a pass at me, and tell me that I am the only female that you have ever been attracted to, which we will laugh about the next day and blame on the yummy passion fruit margaritas) BFF-type (only sort of, as I already have a BFF, though we are not nearly Paris

Hilton enough to ever refer to each other as such) hanging out and gossiping-type fun. Though not technically a BFF position, there is a possibility of future advancement, seeing as the current actual BFF has so far failed at her half-hearted attempts to quit smoking.

I am a slightly-overweight, middle-aged, middle-class, suburban, stay-at-home mother. Hobbies include cheating at crossword puzzles, cyber stalking Adam Lambert, and psychoanalyzing anyone with a psyche, most especially mothers of all varieties. I also enjoy writing, though it occurs to me that enjoy is not the correct word exactly, as it doesn't convey the correct level of dread, struggle, and anxiety. Other likes include reading tarot cards, speed walking like a manic fool while listening to my iPod, and occasionally joining Bible study groups for the rigorous debate. This last thing always ends badly, with me dropping out because all opposing arguments come back to the same because-it-says-so-in-the-Bible contention, which only holds up if you believe that everything in the Bible is true, and the only supporting evidence I have thus far been able to find for this is "...because it says so in the Bible."

I consider myself to be socially progressive, and I think Bill O'Reilly is an ass for using the term "social progressive" like some kind of slur, like he's saying "pinko commie" or "fatty, fatty two by four" or something. I like to think of myself as creative in theory, if not in practice. I have tons of creative ideas running laps in my head, though actual creation requires a bit too much effort. At this point my creativity is mostly limited to creating new life (I have three spectacular kids); hand knitting blankets, scarves, dishcloths, etc. (mainly anything square or rectangular that does not require precise size or shaping); and making the occasional big pot of soup. I am contentedly married to a man that is so straight that discussions of clothing, hairstyles, Oprah's book club, or anything to do with celebrities are entirely out of the question.

You should be definitely gay. I would consider either a Jack or a Will type, though you should be aware that I'm much more of a Grace than a Karen. I am also prone to stereotypical categorization—if that's an issue for you. In any case, I can go for most types of gay, but I am for sure not seeking the Hairy Biker Dude with piercings

on his ouchie parts who's on an ongoing quest to shove ever larger objects up his ass. If you have a bushy handlebar mustache, lots of tattoos, and enjoy nipple clamps, this ad is *not* aimed at you.

Any ethnic background is acceptable, though something exotic, like let's say part Ethiopian, part Filipino, part Apache might be interesting. If you are white and waspy there is a good chance that either you already took me to the prom, or at some other time I attempted (and failed) to convert you. You should be good at mixing fruity drinks, and I am not talking that Kool-Aid-and-Everclear shit the frat boys used to serve up in college. You should be (this goes without saying, but...) witty, clever, creative, fashionable, and fun. You must live relatively nearby and have a successful, active career in some sort of creative field, like acting, sculpting, tasteful performance art, etc. This will give us something to talk about other than who you hooked up with at the club, or which of my kids is going to need braces.

Also, you must have a totally cool, reliable, loving mother who is so disappointed that you are never going to give her grandbabies that she will happily watch my kids for free while we hang out, or even just if I have a doctor's appointment or something. Or maybe you are in a committed relationship and have used surrogates to make your own babies, in which case we can have playdates at the park. Or even better, we can sit on your fabulous patio, taking in the sweeping views, sipping white wine spritzers, and talking for hours while the kids play nearby.

## **Negative Space**

by Mariah Daley

He messages her on Facebook. He says how happy he is to have stumbled across her. That he hopes she is well. He says where he lives, how many kids he has. *He doesn't say he felt a little creepy when he looked her up, a little like a stalker. He doesn't try to friend her.*

She messages back. She says where she lives, how many kids she has. She says her grandmother lives in the next town over from him, but she almost never gets up there for a visit. She says it is too cold there in the winter. *She doesn't say that*

*she already knew where he lives, because she, too, uses the internet to stalk exes. She doesn't say that it took a lot of digging to find a picture of him online to confirm that the teacher with his exact name at the high school in the next town over from her grandmother was actually him. That when she saw his picture, she felt like the air had been sucked from her lungs. She doesn't say that she recognized him instantly, that she was surprised to see that he has gotten older. Like she hasn't. Like she's still eighteen.*

He says he hopes it is not uncomfortable for her to hear from him. That maybe he represents a time in her life that she'd rather forget. *He doesn't say that he can't forget.*

She says that she is happy. That there was a time when maybe it would have been too difficult to hear from him, but that she's okay now. *She doesn't say that she never resented him, even when everyone else said a teacher should know better. That, looking back, she can see that he was just a kid, too. That she thinks they really shouldn't let twenty-four-year-old boys teach high school, with all those teenage girls just discovering their sexual power, eager to try it out. Like her, at eighteen.*

He says that his kids are nothing like he would have imagined. That they are not free-spirited, that they must get their temperament from his wife. *He doesn't say that he wonders what sort of kids he would have had with her. He doesn't say that he's a good father now. That he wouldn't have been then.*

She says that her kids are great. That they are nothing like she could have imagined, but they are better. *She doesn't say that she used to wonder what kind of children she would have had with him. She doesn't say that she is a good mother now, that she wasn't ready then. She doesn't say that she could never have been happy with him. That she knows a part of him will always belong to the previous woman, the possibility of what might have been. That now she is the previous, the possible. She doesn't say that she feels a little sad for his wife. She doesn't say that she stopped thinking about what might have been a long time ago. That she would never give up the now, the what is. That she thinks it all happened the way it was*

supposed to. That maybe she lost their baby so that she could have the ones she has now. She doesn't say that, still she thinks about him sometimes.

She says that she hopes he is well. She doesn't try to friend him.

## **Oscar**

by Donald Fitzpatrick

Oscar sat on the park bench. It was one of his favorite places. Most of the day the big oak tree shaded it, so it was always cooler than the benches out in the open.

He liked to watch the people pass by, but he didn't like the joggers. They were usually in too much of a hurry to stop and smile at him or too out of breath to say "Hi" as they went past.

He didn't much like the skateboarders either. They went by in noisy packs, some trying new tricks. They were certainly wrapped up in themselves.

He did like seeing the small children though, especially the youngest ones out trying new walking skills or still in strollers pushed by their moms or dads or older sisters. They always noticed him and smiled and asked his name.

After a while, he began to feel hungry, so he left the bench and walked across the park, not paying much attention to the paved paths.

When he reached the street on the far side, he waited for a break in the traffic before he left the curb.

Once across, he scooted up the walk leading to the porch of his house. Tommy was there to open the screen door for him, scratch him behind the ears, and offer him a Milk Bone.

Oscar went into the family room and curled up on his favorite chair.

Truly, it was a dog's life.

## **Richard III is Dead? Really?**

by Steven Anthony George

Ah, a London street! These would be the last three or four years of the Middle Ages in England, I suppose, as my shoes are no longer pointy and cloth of gold has become quite popular. I'm rather lucky. Not everyone lives to see an era turn over. And I am... I am... Richard, Duke of Gloucester. Yet this little book is titled *Richard the Third*. What are the chances that there are two characters in this play named Richard? Yes, it appears I'm very lucky, indeed.

The playwright is Mr. William Shakespeare. Oh, I've long admired his work. After all, he's created Julius Caesar, a couple of the Anglo-Saxons, and King John! I wonder how he's depicted *me*. If he can do for me what he did for Henry V, I'll be legendary. It will be interesting to see how my life will end. The play opens with a soliloquy. I should begin.

*Now is the hour of our discontent*

*Made glorious summer by this sun of York*

Oh yes, this is a fine soliloquy. Yes it is—or is it a monologue? I forget which is which. I seem to be forming a couple of clever puns. Yes, delightful. Hmm... not only is the word "sun," s-u-n, a homophone for "son," s-o-n, but it can be applied to myself as well as to my brother. I must check the OED to see if the word homophone has been invented yet. Of course, the OED hasn't been invented yet.

*...But I am not shaped for sportive tricks*

*Nor made to court an amorous looking glass*

Now, wait a minute, this seems to be some kind of comment on either my sexual prowess or my physical appearance in general. I am, I believe, quite well endowed, although they do say size doesn't matter. As to my appearance, I've seen a portrait and I'm respectable, if I must say so, and although they say it's not contemporary, just how far off can it be?

*I, that am rudely shaped and want love's majesty...*

Oh, no! I'm definitely not hot property. What has Shakespeare done to me? What have I done to him?

*...so lamely and unfashionable*

*That dogs bark at me as I halt by them*

Whoa! What's this? Now, I cannot possibly be so hideous that dogs threaten to attack. That reminds me of a joke about a pork chop. I suppose I'll need to find one if I'm to wander about safely.

*...since I cannot prove a lover*

*To entertain these fair well-spoken days,*

*I am determinéd to prove a villain*

I really don't like the sound of this at all. I have the opening soliloquy—monologue, whichever! Doesn't that make me the hero? Okay, I'm an ugly hero, we established that, but doesn't the chap that the entire play is named for get to wear the white hat, so to speak? Oh, scratch that! We don't have American westerns for another four hundred years, but am I given no speech to rouse and inspire my army as we head into battle?

*Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous*

*By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams...*

Perhaps before I decide to take on this role, I should flip to the last page. . .

Egads!

## **Smiling Faces**

by Christopher Hagen

In an earlier age, ordinary people had no smiles. This was because all the smiles were kept high atop a cloud, out of reach of any ordinaries like you or me. On that cloud a farmer tended crops of smiles, precious gifts the immortals frequently presented each other. The crop was grown from teeth laid by in a small cache the farmer kept. These smiles resembled peeled ears of white corn, blooming on white-stalked, white-leaved plants—a coloring similar to snow, sleet or hail.

Numerous varieties were cultivated, for the immortals delighted in an array of choices.

Although no one is certain, it's believed that, during the wars between the old gods and their successors, the cache of teeth was dislodged from the cloud and plummeted to earth. The farmer, taking shelter from the fury, or so some historians speculate, apparently didn't notice for several centuries.

On the ground, people found the scattered smiles and did what ordinaries did with most of their discoveries—attempted to ingest them. They found the smiles useless as food, but enjoyed the sensation in their mouths. This remains true today.

## **The Bastards of Hollybird**

by Michael A. Kechula

It's very easy to kidnap somebody. I know. I did it, and got away with it.

It wasn't done for ransom, political reasons, or rape. Hell, I'm extremely wealthy, apolitical, and get serviced regularly by a bevy of acrobatic call girls.

I did it to get satisfaction for receiving eight, pre-printed, nondescript, three-by-four-inch, generic, rejection slips from those bastards at Hollybird Publishing.

I'd sent them magnificent novella manuscripts. Eight in four years. And they didn't have the damn decency to type or write a single word on their rejections. The preprinted rejection slips they stuffed into my self-addressed stamped envelopes were barely legible. And they all said the same thing about my novellas not meeting their current needs. Damn jerks!

Before I even dreamed of kidnapping, I was pretty happy-go-lucky. Money does that. At thirty-six, I'd seen it all, been everywhere, and done it all, with one exception: I'd never written a best seller. It shouldn't have mattered. But one day, walking into a huge library, I noticed the mountain of books. Not a single one bore my name. The thought bugged me.

As new books were added to the library shelves, my frustration increased. To relieve my distress, I wrote eight sci-fi western novellas. Masterpieces. Followed every rule of fiction. My opening sentences had gripping hooks, the kind that knock your drawers off. My descriptions were divinely inspired. The dialog was crisp, dynamic, incredibly moving.

Self-publish or use the vanity press? Nope. Anybody can do that. I wanted my creations to bubble to the top by their sheer magnificence. I wanted to inspire and change readers' lives.

But all I got were crummy reject slips.

Enough! I'd make them pay. Principle was involved. I made a plan.

First, I added a forty-by-fifty-foot luxury bedroom and bath to my estate. Installed every convenience.

Then, a few calls to Hollybird identified Ms. Victoria Chubbs as the Editor-in-Chief. I paid triple the going rate for a private investigator who'd keep secrets. I learned where Chubbs lived, dined, and shopped. White Plains, New York. Tavern on the Green. Macy's. But, she'd bought groceries at Wal-Mart, ten Sundays in a row.

That's where I snatched her.

I locked her in the new bedroom.

When the chloroform wore off, she panicked. "Where am I? What's going on? I wanna go home."

"There's nothing to worry about," I said gently over the intercom. "The bar's full. Snacks are behind the bar. You'll get gourmet meals. All your needs will be met scrupulously and respectfully. I'm not a rapist, or insane."

"Please let me go."

"After you complete certain tasks, I promise to release you unharmed, with twenty thousand dollars in your handbag. Make yourself at home. Look around. You'll never rest your head in a more sumptuous room, or enjoy better food. Wait until you see the bathroom. Think of this as a vaca-

tion—a working vacation."

"What do you want me to do?"

"In the desk are eight manuscripts. Each bears a rejection slip from Hollybird. Read all the manuscripts and write in longhand why they were rejected. Make suggestions for improvement. That's all. Just that."

"You gotta be kidding."

"Nope. Dinner is at 7:00. *Coq Au Vin*. I'll serve it through the dumbwaiter by the bar. Meanwhile, have a drink to settle your nerves."

She looked around warily. Hopefully the fabulous surroundings and the vodka she poured would help calm her.

The surveillance camera showed her heading for the bathroom.

"I guess you're gonna watch," she said.

"The bathroom's surveillance-free. I'm not a voyeur."

Later, she ran her hand down the beautiful marble columns and exquisite tapestries. She examined paintings, and toyed with the satellite radio. She watched CNN on wide-screen, high-definition TV.

After dinner, she opened the first manuscript.

"Are you there?" she called.

"Yep."

"I guess I have to say everything is just peachy, or else you'll—"

"I won't harm you. I'll accept your honest opinion. Let the chips fall."

"This opening line is—well, unsatisfactory. 'It was a dark and stormy night when Brace Brute, the ambidextrous, bisexual, Martian sheriff half-galoped toward the groveling town of Destiny, heading for the Bucket of Blood saloon, knowing that buried beneath was the Ark of the Covenant.'"

“Write down why you think it’s bad.”

She scribbled.

“This description doesn’t work. ‘His nose dribbled like the anus of a horse with diarrhea.’ It’ll turn your readers off. Makes me wanna puke.”

“Don’t tell me everything. Write it all down.”

Four days later, all eight manuscripts had been critiqued.

After feasting on *Boef de l’Orange de Mandarin*, she complained of dizziness.

“I put a sedative in your espresso. When you wake, you’ll be near a pay phone. Hang on to your purse; I’ve put twenty thousand dollars inside. When you return to Hollybird, burn those miserable preprinted reject slips. Henceforth, make your readers and editors handwrite comments on all rejections. Show some respect for writers.”

“But, we get hundreds of unsolicited manuscripts every day.”

“Find a way to do it. And sign them yourself. Oh, and I wanna see faster turnaround too. Unless you’d like to return here for an extended vacation?”

She shook her head and passed out.

At midnight, I took her to a park, then called 911.

I read her critiques. What a bitch! She wouldn’t know talent if it bit her in the ass.

Four months later, I sent a fabulous 500-page pirate story to Hollybird Publishing.

After three weeks, a two-page rejection letter arrived signed by Victoria Chubbs. Her highfalutin words said my story stank.

Originally against the idea, I decided to self-published the pirate story. It was too good to leave unpublished. I donated copies to all the libraries in town. It looks good on the shelves.

I’m bored with writing.

I think I’ll compose a symphony.

## **Spoon?**

by Louis Gallo

I’m trying to repair the light fixture that dangles from the ceiling of my mother’s back shed. I am here on vacation, visiting what little Katrina left of the city and what few relatives and friends remain—and trying to help out my mother by taking on chores long overdue. I arrive each year in June and am always stunned at how a mere twelve moons change reality.

My mother can hardly get around with two canes or a walker now. Her widow’s hump has nearly bent her in half. I try not to notice, I try to remember better days, but...

This year we have a surprise visitor, my mother’s sister, Aunt Leah, who is ninety-six years old. I haven’t seen her in a decade and didn’t recognize her at first. Oh, the degradations. She has shriveled to half her size, speaks in a cartoon rasp and she too requires a walker. My mother says that Aunt Leah’s children kicked her out of the house in Picayune after a spat, and Mom drove all the way to Mississippi to collect her, Mom, who can hardly walk. Talk about the blind leading the blind.

I recall visiting Picayune decades ago to see Aunt Leah, but feeling uncomfortable in her newly refurbished den as we chatted. On the mantle of a fake blond brick fireplace stood two urns, the ashes of her husband in one, those of her son-in-law in the other. At the time, Aunt Leah still seemed human. Nevertheless, she addressed not me when she spoke but one or other of the urns. I respect grief, especially for a spouse, but why the son-in-law, a legendary, adulterous drunk killed on I-10 where he drove in the wrong direction and was decapitated after crashing a truck loaded with chicken crates. The lights of the truck didn’t work, true, and loose chicken feathers enshrouded the road, but still...

And now what’s left of her family—dozens of bare-foot, filthy grandchildren, the boys all named Harry and the girls Harriet—have kicked her out. Imagine kicking an ancient shrimp out onto the road.

Anyway, I have unscrewed the filthy, greasy bulb from its socket and need a new seventy-five watt to test if the fixture is getting juice. I return to the house to find Mom and Aunt Leah slouched over the kitchen table with bowls of fresh figs, oatmeal and two steaming cups of Community Coffee with chicory. The fluorescent light has gone dim and buzzes erratically. Exactly when did age undo them both? I can't pinpoint the moment. I don't recall them as wizened crones, and I expect them to emerge rejuvenated at any moment. As they were. As we all were. Who goes unscathed?

My good friend Pierre in Virginia groans that, whenever he peers into the mirror, he beholds Colonel Khadafi. When I so peer, I see a shadowy, desolate Nosferatu.

I take a deep breath and prepare to ask Mom where she keeps her spare light bulbs. Nothing is ever where it is. You might find light bulbs in the freezer along side a plastic bag of ravioli frozen in 1999. And everything is broken. I rooted through the designated tool drawer this morning, seeking a screwdriver, and found one missing its handle. Ever try using a screwdriver without a handle? I found the handle later, secured to an ice pick with black electrical tape.

"Hi, Jake," Mom laughs, still chipper despite it all. "Want some coffee? Just made it."

Mom remains the most optimistic, cheerful, generous person I've ever known, and, like Richard Nixon's mother, she is a true saint. She refuses to let infirmity defeat her, and I envy such courage and audacity, mainly because I have inherited none of it.

"Mom, do you have a light bulb?" I clear my throat. "So I can tell if it's the bulb or fixture that's bad. Well, I know the old bulb is bad."

Both women wear shapeless cotton shifts that drape loosely over their bones. The women in my family are classic lookers—were, that is.

My mother cocks an ear. "Ehhhhh?" she says. She is going deaf and sleeps in a rocker before the television set, the volume up to max. My guest bedroom is upstairs and sometimes I hear *The Star Spangled Banner* blasting through the house

as a station signs off for the night.

Aunt Leah looks startled, the way really old people often do. She slowly raises her thin, tissuey, onion-skinned arm towards me, a kitchen utensil pinched between her fingers. "You need a spoon?" she croaks.

"Light bulb," I say, ready to both laugh and cry.

Globs of slimy oatmeal drip from Aunt Leah's chin onto the linoleum floor.

It dawns that no one in this whole freaking world ever really needs a seventy-five watt light bulb, much less a gooey spoon, and that everything is falling apart and askew and beyond hope. And worse—or better?—it doesn't matter.

The spoon still quivers between Aunt's Leah's twig-like fingers. I reach for it.

"Thank you so much," I say. "This will solve the problem. Now I'm off to repair something. I don't know exactly what, and don't know if it can be done, or when, so wish me luck."

"Ehhhh?" Mom asks.

"You deaf?" Aunt Leah snickers. "Harry's fixing that light bulb. That boy's looking too old, you know."

## **The Beauty of Letting Go**

by Helen Dring

"This is it." Ginny stops suddenly and exhales against the cold of the air. She eases herself down onto the grass, and I have little choice but to do the same. This is how things have always been between us: Ginny says; I follow. I lace one of my legs under hers as I sit down and she smiles at me, leaning her head against my chest so that I can smell the droplets of frost that have gathered on her hair. It was a strange choice of morning for a walk, one of those days when the ground seemed sprinkled with a coating of glitter that could wipe your feet from underneath you in seconds. I didn't want to come. I didn't want her to leave the house yet. I wanted to curl up on our half-dead couch and read old love songs to each other. Like I said, I always seem to follow her.

I run my fingers gently through her hair, and she glares at me. I move, instead letting my fingers work softly at the knots in her shoulders that I can feel even through layers of sweaters and coats. I catch sight of the loose strands of hair caught on my fingers and say nothing. For now, it is only a few strands, a clump here and there. She puts her own hand up to it as if to count. I'm sure she has taken stock of every wavy strand still on her head.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, moving my hand from her shoulder and taking it in hers, forcing me into a closer embrace.

"Shhh, it's okay," I murmur back, and she eases me backwards so that we are lying on the cold, damp ground, her body held aloft by mine.

"You didn't hear me, did you?" She quizzes. "I said, this is it."

"I know."

I have spent the last two months trying to distract her from this conversation, but now, with her green eyes fixed on me, I know that this will end up just one more thing that I do without questioning.

"Hayley," she leans in close, her forehead pressing against mine so that her words hit my skin before I hear them, "please."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I know. But what if we never talk about it because you don't want to and then..."

"It's too late."

"It's too late." She sighs. "I'm sorry. You know, sometimes, I wish all this was the other way around."

"Don't..."

"No, I do, really."

I lift myself up, my now damp jacket clinging to my back, and cup her face with my only free hand. I pull her in lightly so that I can kiss her, and inside the kiss, I sigh.

"So, this is it, huh?"

"It's just—It's perfect, don't you think?" I look out across the view, at the hills that seem to roll away endlessly, at the heather that, even though it is covered with frost, somehow is still growing. I have to agree that she's right.

"I guess it is. Look at that." I point to the crop of heather I have been studying and she smiles.

"See, you get it."

"I get it." I pull her in close, tucking her head under my chin, and together we look out at the place she has chosen. With her head below me, I can afford to let my tears flow down my cheeks. The tears feel warm against my skin, and I can almost feel myself letting go of her. I didn't want to come on this trip. I didn't want anything to do with this search she had her heart set on. But I can never refuse her anything, not even this.

"You'll come and visit?" She lifts her head to me, and her voice sounds lighter than before.

"You won't be here."

"I will be when you visit."

\* \* \*

By the time I get to the top of the hill, I am exhausted. The sun hits my back mercilessly, and I can feel rivulets of sweat gathering near my spine. I stop and try to catch my breath, slumping down onto the ground as I do so. In the last six months, I seem to have gotten used to doing things on my own, to being on my own. I lie down and the grass prickles against my dripping back. I look up at the blue sky and remember how I have seen it change in the time I have been coming here. I remember how wild the wind can be up here, how, on the day I let Ginny go, the particles of her seemed to take off and dance along the crests of the breeze, and how I felt like running after them and catching each single grain, in a hope of putting her back together again. I have learned not to wonder about where she landed, just to keep hold of the pieces of her I got to keep.

The summer doesn't make it any easier. I lie un-

der the heat, the only person in probably a twenty-mile radius, and let the sun's rays tattoo my skin, my eyelids, as I close my eyes and whisper secrets to the faint semblance of the breeze.

### **The Language of Angels**

by Jonathan Pinnock

*"Bonjour, m'sieur,"* said the guy with the wings, *"J'espère que votre mort n'était pas trop douloureuse?"*

"You what?" said Jim. The air smelled vaguely of croissants.

*"Pardon? Je ne vous comprends pas, m'sieur. Je suis St Pierre. Vous êtes...?"*

Jim racked his brains for a moment, trying to work out what was going on. Was the guy saying that he didn't understand him? Well that made two of them. Then he remembered something important from his school days.

*"Pouvez-vous répéter la question?"*

The guy with the wings looked at him for a moment, then burst out laughing.

*"Répéter, m'sieur. Répéter!"*

Then Jim realised. *Répéter* meant to re-fart, didn't it? He vaguely recalled his old French teacher forever banging on about that. He had a feeling that he wasn't making a very good impression.

*"Pouvez-vous répéter...?"* he began. It probably wasn't going to help, but at least it would give him more time to think.

*"Comment vous appelez-vous?"* said the angel.

*"Ah! Je m'appelle Jim,"* said Jim, with a note of triumph.

*"Ah. Jim! C'est un nom anglais, n'est-ce pas?"*

"Er...oui?" said Jim, struggling to keep up.

*"Ah. Dans le ciel, on parle Français. Vous ne parlez pas bien Français, je pense?"*

Huh? Something about speaking French here? Was that why they'd insisted on teaching it at school? He would have paid more attention if he'd known.

"SORRY," he said, in a very slow, loud voice. "I ... DON'T ... REALLY ... UNDERSTAND ... YOU. CAN ... I ... HAVE ... A ... BIT ... MORE ... TIME ... TO ... THINK?"

The angel gave him a blank look. Then he shrugged and pulled a lever next to him. The floor under Jim opened up, and he fell down a long shaft, which twisted around several times before coming to a halt in a large, warm room. A face peered down at him.

"You all right, mate?"

"I think so," said Jim. "Do you speak English here?"

"Yeah."

"Thank God for that," said Jim.

"Nearly right," said the guy with the horns.

### **Back End of the Year**

by Corinna Underwood

Her head is bright-wrapped in a scarf, set to outbid the falling glory, downcast to avoid the wind which slaps wet treasures of autumn at her rubber shoes. With a useless broom she beats the path. Her hands knotted like the naked branches. She is making and remaking mulch piles just to see if she still can. I watch her every autumn. She nods briskly to me as I crackle the dryleaf underfoot, and she calls, "back end again." And I nod back and crunch away. But this autumn—this autumn is different. Her scarf is faded and her rubber boots have lost their shine. Her fingers stump around the broom and the pile defeats her. When I crunch past her house, she does not call, but stays bent over the mulch. Then suddenly the broom falls from her fingers, and so still she stands amid the swirling leaves. I crunch over and call, "it's back end again." Gently, I pick up the broom and take her gnarled hand in mine, and I smile because it has the warmth of the living. We go inside, and I

steam the teapot; then we sit together and watch the leaves through the window.

## **The Sinking Blades**

by Bryan Jones

The father lived with his little daughter in the ice-bound village near the river. Glaciers strangled the surrounding mountains. The winter storms were merciless.

Despite the adversity, the father had dreams for his eleven-year-old girl. He hoped she would become a great ice skater. On Saturdays, he took her down to one of the frozen ponds and taught her to twirl on the pair of skates that had been his when he was a boy. It was the only pair of skates he had ever owned. It gave him great satisfaction to see her laughing and twirling with her arms flung out wide. He wanted to join her, but he didn't dare venture out because, in the last few years, he had put on weight and he couldn't be sure about the strength of the frozen surface. He was content to dream of the day when the ice would inspire confidence and he could join her. It made him realize how badly he wanted something that he had missed in the years since his wife's death. It was so lonely in that frozen part of the world, and they had so little, this father and daughter.

One afternoon, on the walk home from the country schoolhouse, the little girl slipped near the high gorge and fell among the rocks. They didn't find her body until that evening. The father's grief was unimaginable. He locked himself behind the door of the only home his daughter had ever known. No one could understand his terrible loneliness, but the villagers agreed it wasn't healthy for him to stay shut inside there with all those memories.

What the villagers didn't know was that the father wasn't alone inside that dark house. The shadow was with him. It hadn't been long after he had closed himself off that he had noticed it. He had been sitting in his old chair one night when, from out of the corner of his eye, he saw the shadow of his daughter moving along the back wall in the main room. He called to it. It had stopped at the sound of his voice. He talked to it, and it seemed to listen intently. The first evening it had appeared, he tried to tell it all the things he would have told

his daughter if there had been more time.

After several days, the father began to take comfort in the shadow's presence. He tried to please it by making use of other shadows in the house. Years ago, after the death of his wife, he had learned to sew. He stitched together a dress of shadows which he gave as a present to the shadow of his little girl. But he never could tell if the shadow ever wore it. Another night, he prepared a shadow meal and invited the shadow to supper. His guest didn't eat anything, but he remembered his manners and chewed with his mouth closed. Later, the father slept under a blanket of shadows and dreamed about his little girl skating in competitions and winning gold medals to thunderous applause.

The next week, a fierce winter storm descended upon the village late in the day, knocking out the electricity. Inside the father's home, flames from the fireplace provided the only heat and light. Just as he was about to put another log on the fire, the shadow appeared on the back wall. But this time it wasn't the shadow of his little girl. It was the shadow of a woman he didn't know. He dropped the log on the hearth and stood to face the strange presence. Then the shadow began twirling and the father couldn't understand it. He moved closer to the wall, expecting his own shadow to appear, but instead, he saw the shadow of a thin young man that moved as if someone had been skating along the floorboards and the two shadows joined hands and embraced there on the undecorated wall. Then the shadows of the couple reached for the edges of other shadows on the wall, which they pulled over themselves like covers. The father didn't understand why the shadows were behaving like that, so he turned and went into the bedroom and felt his way through the darkness to the old wooden chest where he had stored away his daughter's things. He rifled through the little-girl dresses and schoolbooks until his hands found the old pair of ice skates, which he carried back into the flickering light of the main room. He refused to look at the shadow-covered wall as he hurried over to the door and opened it to face the storm. He clutched the skates to his chest and walked outside.

He fought the gusting wind and wild flurries down to the snowy bank of the river that was lined

with huge gray boulders. He stepped up on one, reared back his arm, and threw the skates out into the cold water. They landed with a loud splash and sank from view. But before the ripples died, the current turned back upon itself to form a huge whirlpool. It grew larger and larger until its perimeter touched the banks and the father recognized in that swirling water the grace of his daughter spinning on the ice in an unbroken dream without a beginning or an end, and he wanted to join her finally, to hold her hands and twirl with her until they vanished into that roaring vortex. The villagers who were bundled up in their heaviest winter coats shouted down to him from the open doors of their houses, but he had lost all interest in them as he balanced on the slippery boulder which had been worn smooth over the years by the relentless current, and he never even looked back before leaping out of their lives forever, into the raging waters that everyone knew were cold enough to stop a healthy man's heart.

### **Paper Life**

by Leah Browning

Maija sat at the kitchen table, cutting long rows of paper dolls, all connected at the tips of their outstretched fingers and the flowing points of their skirts. Snips of white paper fell onto the surface of the table as she worked. She had found a pair of sharp silver scissors in the junk drawer, buried in a nest of string and tape and coils of postage stamps. There was also a Polaroid of my mother without her wig, after the chemotherapy. Maija had not commented on the photograph.

In the fading light from the kitchen window, she folded fine pleats in the paper and cut. The only other sound in the room was the cold clicking of the clock's second hand completing its revolutions. I hadn't spoken in days. Maija didn't look at me, only went on cutting and cutting. There were white vines, a flock of birds, wisps of paper falling to the table. Everything around us—the avocado appliances, the navy blue wallpaper with its pattern of pale pink flowers and green pears—began to disappear under the snowfall from the scissors.

She cut out a dress, a simple white sheath, and slipped it on over her school uniform. I had a sharp desire to see her bare skin, then go back in time

a few weeks, but we remained in the house in the kitchen, with my father's leather shoes lined up at the door. Maija turned the paper this way and that, fashioning clothes for me, I saw. She set down the scissors and dressed me tenderly, easing my wrists through the sleeves and pressing each paper button through the proper paper buttonhole.

The house was the last thing she made, a paper replica of my house, with white paper versions of the stove and refrigerator and the ticking, ticking clock. Maija took my hand and pulled me inside the paper cuttings. Our white paper knapsacks lay on the paper floor, and paper scissors lay on the paper table, and I knew that if I opened the paper cabinets I would find paper dishes. Almost everything was still in its place.

"Stay here with me," Maija said, and pressed her cheek to mine. Her skin carried the faint scent of fresh snow and peach soap. I closed my eyes for the first time in three days and let her wrap her arms around me. She held on, she held me close, and I was almost able to forget, for a moment, my mother's absence at the breakfast table, my father's weary silence. All I felt was Maija's cheek on my cheek, the warmth of her skin, and then I lifted my arms. I put my arms around her, too; I clung to her, and I didn't open my eyes, even as I felt the house fall softly around us like so many paper flowers.

### **Letter to Santa**

by Charles Musser

December 26th

Dear Santa,

I know this letter is late, but these are desperate times. Uncle Billy's missing his left butt-cheek; Pa's Gremlin is somewhere at the bottom of the Boca Louis Swamp; Ned Bergland, our minister, is coolin' his heels in the Oshkosh County jail; and that famous ol' bear, Rousseau, got shot dead. I blame you and your damn Christmas.

You'd think that if ever there was a time to believe in something, now would be it. My name's Johnny Earle, and I never believed in you. Serves you right, I'm thinkin'.

Three months ago, they closed down the Flatt River Lumber Yard, the only work for 50 miles. A big corporation from Green Bay bought it out, and now they're hauling off the last decent hardwood and writing off the rest as a tax loss.

The bottom line is everybody hereabouts is out of work, and we can't pay our bills. Lots of people got bad teeth or are sick; they can't afford to go to the clinic; and the church addition is nothing but a half-finished frame.

As if there was any proof needed that our town deserves everything it gets, Pa and Uncle Billy got together over a few cases of Miller Lite, and decided it would be their job to confiscate enough of the tax-write-off lumber from the Flatt River Co. to finish the church community room in time for our town's annual Christmas dinner. That wood was gonna rot in the yards anyways, and the company had used the pension funds earmarked for employees to pay owners and management a fat bonus before closing the doors. So everyone in town kinda figured they owed it to us, know what I mean?

If it wasn't for you and your Christmas spirit crap, we woulda just closed our doors and walked out of here into the winter gloom. That would have been sad, but would have made sense. Instead, we're on some wild and foolish mission to finish the church, which is just gonna grow cobwebs, since nobody around here can afford to live anymore, let alone go to church. You're worse than God. You make everybody act like that old fart, Don Quixote. I'm just happy to be Sancho.

On Christmas Eve, the four of us—me, Pa, Uncle Billy, and Reverend Ned—got in Pa's Gremlin. We hooked up a trailer and headed through heavy snow for the lumber yards to pick up the last batch of cedar shingles for the church roof.

We loaded up okay, except Uncle Billy hooched an extra portion of Cap'n Morgan's rum, and wandered off to pee on the Flatt River Lumber Company's giant sign. If that wasn't bad enough, he started singing *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*, but changed the lyrics to "I Saw Santa Kicking Joe Boone's Ass." (Joe Boone was the former owner who sold us down the sawdust river and moved to L.A.) I knew it was a bad omen.

Now, I don't know how, but the new owners must have gotten wise to the goings on up here and sent some goons to keep an eye on things. Next thing I know, shotguns start blasting. Uncle Billy's chuffing like a locomotive toward us fast as his stumpy legs can carry him, holding his butt with one hand. I notice there are two fat security guards and a couple German Shepherds not too far behind.

Me, Pa, and the Reverend started to pile in the car. But the Reverend changed his mind, crossed himself, and headed up the path toward the stampede. I guess he was gonna bless them?

Suddenly, Rousseau the bear, like some Roman war-machine, spitting fury and thunder, exploded from the woods and careened down upon the dogs and guards. Rousseau is a legend in this town. Some say he's 100 years old and a re-incarnated Indian. Some say he's just a ghost. I saw him, and I know he's real. Whatever the case, Billy made it to the car and we headed off, sans Padre.

I found out later they shot ol' Rousseau, and arrested Reverend Bergland. Nobody knows what riled up Rousseau like that, but folks speculate he was sad to see the town die, and tried to commit suicide. Me? I think he was senile, just like most old folks around here.

Pa got scared and drove us right into the bottomless mud of the Boca Louis. We managed to get out, but we lost the car and shingles. Uncle Billy lost half his shredded ass to buckshot. The last small patch of roof never got shingled on the church. And we ate Christmas dinner, provided by the Ladies Auxiliary, under a light snowfall. Reverend Bergland won't talk; he faces charges of trespass and theft. And Rousseau the bear, the spirit of Belle de Nuit, lies dead as a smith's stone behind a pile of rotting lumber, deep in the yards. Or so they told us...

We had a nice Christmas dinner, but didn't see hide nor hair of you, you old fakir.

Uncle Billy and Pa are planning a guerrilla raid on the county jail to spring the Reverend, and they want me to drive the getaway pickup (my pride and joy).

Something will go wrong.

So I'm planning to be absent, likely hanging out with my buddies down behind the Dollar Store, smoking a joint.

But who knows? Perhaps, one of these days, instead of your crappy "Christmas spirit," I'll find my Dulcinea and put on my armor. Stranger legends have proven to be true. After all, I just saw Rousseau lumber by outside my window in the moonlight. If I didn't know it was the high-quality ganja in my lungs, I'd swear he winked at me.

Very Truly Yours,

Johnny Earle  
Resident of the former proud town  
of Belle de Nuit, Est. 1889 - Died 2009 (maybe)

## **Breakers**

by Diana Gallagher

"Do you need help?"

He trots over. The board slides away from my straining arm while thousands of heated sand grains burn my feet. I resist the urge to do a silly dance to relieve the heat.

"I got it!" I call.

He lifts an end. Muscle strain releases.

"Thanks."

He smiles, I think, but the sun slits my eyes. "Great waves today," he says. "Best I've seen in three weeks."

A burst of breeze whips the hair from my face. The ocean glimmers everywhere, breaking and shattering only to find itself again. Under gray skies, waves tumble uneasily. They cannot be reconciled to meeting themselves. But today, the waves foam and frolic joyfully. *Come to me*, they laugh.

"So you're here...a lot?" I ask.

"Absolutely." I respect males who use more than one syllable. "Ocean in the summer, mountains in the winter. I can't stay inside." His back muscles tense and yield, tense and yield. I step cautiously

around towels with sleeping teenagers, plastic shovels, and beer bottles. He glides forward.

I've been inside longer than I'd realized. My skin twitches beneath the sun.

"My stuff's here," he offers, nudging a towel. A water bottle, set of keys, and wallet decorate the faded blue cloth. We ease the board onto the sand. I begin to rub the wax on. He, too, picks up a piece and smooths the other end.

My shoulders recall the old ritual: my father, brother, and I in a row, waxing without speaking. I'm not much taller now. "Listen," my father said that first time. I was lamenting yet another fall, complaining that Mark had taken my wave. I paused. He waited until my eyes had lost their frustrated glare. "None of those things," he said, "matters."

Not matter? Wasn't the fundamental part of surfing the actual standing up and riding of a wave? When I finally caught one and wobbled in, I thought I understood. But I couldn't be sure.

Too much has mattered since then. So I've returned, to another coast, with a board still too large for my embrace.

I see the license carelessly poking from his wallet. I'd rather not know names. I'd rather let this encounter rest as a pleasant daydream instead of facts. I deny the letters, but read a year.

"You're good to go," he says, straightening up. Blue eyes, as I'd suspected—a subtle blue.

Then he smiles. The kind of smile that makes you smile back, unconscious of how or why you're doing it. Why don't people smile that way anymore? What happened to sincerity? To simply enjoying the sensation of being alive?

And I understand.

But now I break my gaze and look towards the leaping breakers. I lift the board. "Thank you," I say.

"You got it?"

"Absolutely."

I step down to the shoreline. Thank you, seventeen-year-old boy. Cold water slaps my skin. Foam stings. I laugh. Sand rushes away as water prepares to break and unite again.

I've broken away. I'm here again. This matters.

### **The Kiss**

by Donna Gagnon

They've all come to celebrate surrender. In the heat of an August morning, the sun rises over a wild America. Alfred stands sweating in Times Square. He watches crowds of sailors dressed in damp cotton, and dark-suited soldiers throwing hard caps in the air. Women with shining red lips smile indulgently at their exuberant men in uniform.

A little fellow, Alfred stands unobtrusively, watching quietly through his camera, knowing that many here are remembering black-edged telegrams, sweet voices, and warm fingers they will never touch again.

A slim youth runs by and yells at Alfred: "Which one ya gonna kiss?"

Alfred smiles. "I'm working, buddy. They're all yours."

His finger clicks calmly as men grab stout grandmothers, shy school teachers, and young girls. Later, one black and white image of this day will become eternally famous, but Alfred's not thinking about tomorrow. He's seeing light and dark, gleeful movement, and hearing unleashed happiness for the first time in years. Strangers touching strangers and smiling, laughing outrageously, cheering their country's victory.

Spontaneity. This is what he hopes to capture, to see growing out of a water bath in a darkroom in the afternoon—these few seconds in America's life when no one else is paying attention to the cost or the sadness of loss. This is his job, his passion. To stand, unobserved, observing and preserving. His camera will remember this day in ways that will be understood by children who haven't even been born yet.

Alfred holds his Leica over his shoulder and runs ahead of the young soldiers chasing women up the street. Then, in a flash, he sees something white being grabbed. A sailor bends a nurse steeply backwards. Alfred turns and snaps, and keeps clicking in the Square until there are no frames left on the film. He stops before reloading and lights up a Lucky Strike. Blowing smoke into the newly-invigorated New York air, he wipes his damp forehead with the back of his hand and becomes, for a second, just one more body in the crowd. He thinks about a large cloud that obliterated an entire city and many of its people across the ocean. He thinks about asking a soft-haired woman to marry him.

In a few days, he will write a date on an envelope—August 14, 1945—and meet his editor to hand over hundreds of photographs in the *LIFE* offices in Rockefeller Square. And his life will be changed by a kiss, forever.

### **Present Distress**

by Sarah Ashwood

"Will you stop watching that clock? You ain't goin' nowhere."

She turned to look at him, her gaze a disconcerting mix of fear and sympathy. Why did she keep staring at him like that?

An hour ago, he'd burst in on her, waving his gun, screaming at her to get over on the couch, shut up, and not move. Though terrified, she'd meekly obeyed. Ever since, she'd sat there silent and pale: no stupid questions, no threatening to call the cops.

"Anybody else live here?" he'd demanded twenty minutes into it. He felt jumpy; the silence grated on his overwrought nerves.

"My parents and sister." Her voice was low, soft. Judging from the photos and religious paraphernalia scattered about, he guessed her daddy was a preacher.

"They're off doing nursing home visits. I—I had college homework due, so I stayed home."

"Nursing home visits," he'd sneered. "What kind

of idiots visit geezers in the nursing home? Who cares?"

She shrugged. "It never hurts to care about other people, even strangers."

He'd stared incredulously. Where did people like her come from? She was like nobody from his section of town—the whores, gangs members, drug addicts, drunkards. She wasn't like him: an ex-con on the lam, using her home as a temporary hideout 'til Marlene could get here and pick him up.

She glanced at the clock. "Hey," he snapped, "thought I told you to quit doing that."

"I'm sorry, but I've got a cake in the oven. It needs to come out. Would you mind?"

He was holding her at gunpoint, and she wanted to take a cake out the oven?

Despite his incredulity, he could see no reason to refuse her. "Fine. But remember, I can see you through the doorway. Don't try anything stupid."

"No," she replied simply and got up.

He watched her the entire time. She snapped on the radio and sang along with Carrie Underwood's, *Jesus Take the Wheel*. Irritated, he ground his teeth. She had a nice voice; he bet she sang in the church choir.

She came back bearing a piece of cake, a fork, and a mug of coffee.

He was holding her at gunpoint and she was hungry?

"Here," she said, placing all items on the coffee table. "I hope you like chocolate."

He gaped, dumbfounded, as she re-seated herself on the couch.

Was she trying to make an idiot of him? Soften him up? It made him angry. Angry because it was working. Angry because she was treating him nicer than anybody ever had. Angry because he didn't deserve it, but couldn't help craving it. Angry

because he ought to be in control, but she was stronger.

"What," he said sharply, rising, stalking towards her, "do you think you're doing? You think I want your cake and coffee? You think you can soften me up? You think you can make me do what you want?"

She shrank into the couch, those silvery-blue eyes widening. "I—I didn't mean..."

"Like crap you didn't," he growled. He grabbed her, pushing her down. The song on the radio had changed. It was fast, sexy, exciting. "Idiot. Is this what you want? Is this what you're trying to make me do?"

She gasped, but he smothered her cry with his mouth. He ran his hands over her, tugging at her clothing. She felt good, she tasted good. He deepened the kiss, reveling in her obvious inexperience. Reveling...until he realized she was crying, scared to death. She broke away, her head rolling against the couch cushion.

"Please," she sobbed. "Please..."

He was breathing hard. He wanted her; he didn't want to stop. But suddenly...he felt ill.

What was he, some kind of sick freak? An Animal?

Swearing, he rolled off her. Forgetting his gun along with everything else, he fled, desperate to escape a preacher's house and the innocent inhabitant knotting him up inside.

\* \* \*

They told him he had a visitor. Unexpected, but with nothing better to do, he went. He ambled into the visiting room, cocky, but at the sight of the figure awaiting him, stopped cold.

What was *she* doing here?

Warily, he shuffled over. When she picked up the phone, he did, too. As before, her eyes held no judgment, no censure.

"Hello," she began in the voice that had haunted

his dreams. "How are you?"

He shrugged, brushing off the inquiry. "How'd you find me?"

"It—it was in the paper. Sorry I couldn't come before now."

"I didn't expect you to come at all."

"No?"

"No. Why did you? People like you don't care about trash like me."

She smiled sadly; somehow, it made her beautiful. "People like me care about lots of things, especially the things others overlook."

His eyes flickered to the cross gleaming in the hollow of her smooth throat. He swallowed hard, hating the tears that leapt to his eyes.

"Hey, it's alright," she whispered. She pressed a hand flat against the glass separating them. He hesitated, then did the same: the closest he could come to touching her. "I forgive you," she said.

He shook his head. "You're an idiot. You don't know me, or what I've done."

"I don't need to."

"Hey, Norris, time's up," interrupted the guard who appeared at his elbow. "Hang up now. Miss, it's time for you to go."

"Will you come again?" he faltered into the speaker.

"Do you want me to?"

How could he say that losing her would be like dying? That his entire soul hung balanced upon her response? He couldn't, so he nodded, hoping she'd understand.

She did. Her silvery eyes shone brilliantly. "I'll come," she promised.

His heart turned over. Dare he trust the heartbreaking tenderness in her face, eyes, smile?

Slowly he withdrew his hand, leaving his fingertips against the glass as long as possible. At the doorway, he turned back. She was still sitting there. Her eyes were very soft. The cross glimmered peacefully at her throat.

## **Firewall**

by Sue Pickard

"I downloaded the form for you to have a look at."

Dan handed over a sheaf of papers.

"Blimey. It must be twenty pages long."

"I've seen worse," said Dan.

"We've all seen worse." Emma shook her head. "Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, it might mark us out as—"

"As what?"

"As—well, subversives."

"Don't be daft," said Dan with more conviction than he felt.

Emma put the papers down on the table. "Can't we just go to the public display? Everyone else does."

"But it's not the same, is it? Having to stand miles away behind that huge soundproof, fire resistant screen. There's no atmosphere; you don't get the noises, the whiz bangs, the ooh-aah factor; and you don't get the smells either. You can remember the smells, can't you?"

Emma thought about it. Only just. It had all been a long time ago. "Are you really determined to do this?"

Dan nodded. "Yes. As you know I'm a bit of a traditionalist."

Trust me, thought Emma, to get lumbered with a traditionalist. She picked up the form from the table. "Okay, let's have a look at it. Right. Serial number."

"They'll have that on the database."

"Location?"

'Back garden.'

"You can't just put 'back garden.'"

"Why not? They know where we live."

"True. Right. What's next? 'Who might be harmed and how?'"

Dan considered this. "Well, children, I suppose, and the neighbours."

"Do you think they'll come?"

"I hope so. Although not George, obviously."

"No. What do you think he'll get for disabling a camera?"

"Three to five years, probably."

Emma glanced up at the corner of the room. "Fair enough, I suppose. We don't want to go back to the bad old days: people smoking at home, eating junk food, not recycling their rubbish, viewing kiddie porn on the internet. That's what led to all those child abductions."

Dan looked round warily then mouthed something at Emma. "I've heard they still go on." She shook her head in vigorous warning.

Dan turned his attention back to the form. "And then we have to assess the risk: 'Trivial,' 'Adequately controlled,' 'Not adequately controlled,' 'Action required,' or 'Unknown.'"

Emma sighed. "This was your idea. You deal with it."

Dan went through the form, considering each section. When he was satisfied he could answer all the questions, he sat down in front of the computer, set up the webcam, activated the iris recognition software, and logged on. The screen flashed up a message: "Firewall installed." Dan uploaded the form, filled in all the sections, pressed send. A grinning talking head, affecting cosy bonhomie,

appeared on the screen. "Welcome, Head of unit 100038902." Dan smiled back. He'd found it was the safest thing to do. "We are processing your application. Please could you confirm that all the adults attending are in possession of up-to-date Criminal Record Bureau checks."

"Of course," said Dan. Stupid question.

"Excellent. We'll get back to you."

Jamie came running over. He was Dan and Emma's only child. Under the rules they were only allowed one. "Dad, are we really going to have—"

Dan reached out to ruffle the boy's hair then hastily withdrew his hand. Overt displays of affection towards children could look incriminating on camera. "I hope so, son."

The talking head reappeared on the screen. "I'm afraid we've encountered a problem." It looked pleased to be able to impart this information. "Head of unit 100038902 is in possession of a lapsed CRB check."

Jamie looked at his father in dismay. "Not again, dad."

The boy had a point. Third time this year. Dan could have sworn he'd updated his CRB, but this latest requirement for parents to renew them every three months was catching a lot of people out.

Emma came in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel. "Did I hear that right?"

Dan nodded miserably. "How long do you think we've got?"

"It's usually fifteen to twenty minutes."

Twenty minutes later, they heard the scream of sirens and then the sound of a pass key being turned in the front door. You never knew what you were going to get with the child protection enforcement officers. Some were okay, others were heavy handed. Dan didn't like the look of these two.

"Making a bit of a habit of this, aren't you?" said one of them as she snapped the handcuffs on

Dan's wrists. "Anyone would think you had something to hide."

Dan could feel the sweat forming on his upper lip. "Of course I haven't."

The other officer came in close and, although careful not to touch Dan, his words were like jabs in the ribs. "Really? That's odd. Because everyone is a suspect."

How could Dan forget? That slogan was plastered everywhere.

Before they took him away, Emma plucked up the courage to ask when Dan was likely to be home again. The female officer shrugged. "If he gets clearance, about four weeks."

Dan did a quick calculation. A month. The end of November.

Looking through the upstairs bedroom window as rockets from the public display bloomed silently in the night sky, Emma couldn't help thinking that in some ways Dan had got his wish. This year they were staying at home to watch the fireworks.

## **We'll See**

by Jason M. Vaughn

"You take your pills yet, Daddy?"

The old man pauses in chewing his scrambled eggs. He is thinking.

"I don't think you took them, Daddy. I'm almost sure of it."

The old man sips his coffee, still thinking. He is frail and looks much older when he thinks, his brow crumpling into deep folds like those on a bed unmade. He's a seventy-nine-year-old widower who lives with his daughter and her new husband; his daughter cannot have children, no matter how many husbands. When she asked him to live with them for a while, he accepted. He is an old man, after all, and forgetful; this can be dangerous when medications are involved. A bit of goading helped him finally recognize this. Also, his wife had passed on only three months before,

and he had begun to dislike living alone in a home he'd shared. "But only for a little while," he told his daughter, never intending to fully abandon or sell his house. "I'm not makin' any promises. We'll just try it out for a while and see."

His blue-gray eyes peer ahead now at nothing, and then he reaches mechanically for the salt.

"Don't you dare!" his daughter snaps, lightly slapping his hand. "It's no good for you," she says. "You know it isn't." For a moment she watches him out of the corner of her eye, and then looks down into the newspaper in her hands.

The old man lets his fork drop to the plate with a harsh clank. He puffs an irritated breath toward what's left of his eggs, then reaches for his coffee cup without looking and brings it slowly to his pouting lips.

His daughter eyes him, folding and unfolding the paper this way and that with a raucous crinkling. "Please, Daddy," she says. "Your pills."

He drinks down the last of his coffee and says, "I read an article today in that *Men's Health* magazine of your husband's." He points to the magazine on her side of the table, his eyes flickering suddenly with the hopefulness of a child.

"Now Daddy," his daughter says and smirks at him.

Eagerly he continues: "That article talks about men who're goin' on ninety but still runnin' marathons and water-skiing, healthy as forty-year-olds."

"Are you saying you wanna water-ski, Daddy?"

"No, but I think I should maybe get a job again. I need to *do* somethin'."

"Don't be silly," she says. "Why would you want a job? How about a hobby instead. You could take up watercolors, or build a bird house or something like that."

"I think I should move back home, too," he says, crossing his arms on his chest. "I appreciate you takin' me in for a while, but I can look after myself. I'll get one of those pill organizers to help me re-

member.”

She seems caught somewhere between surprise and laughter, her thin-lipped mouth hanging open. “We’ll see,” she says, then looks back down at her paper.

“And I’ll start exercisin’,” he continues, knocking on the table. “I wanna last.”

She laughs hesitantly, her blunted fingers held to her mouth, looking at him as if waiting for a punch line. Finally she says, “It’s a little late—don’t you think, Daddy?—for you to try and be young.” She fills a small glass with orange juice and pushes it across the table.

“That magazine there says it’s never too late to get in shape. And I’m not tryin’ to be young, dammit, just to last!”

“Please drink this, Daddy, and take your pills. We can talk more when George gets home.”

“I’ve made up my mind,” he says, staring up at his daughter. “Your George has nothin’ to do with it.”

“All right, Daddy. Whatever you say. Please take your pills, though.”

“I might *stop* takin’ them,” he says, looking away from her. “You can’t make me take them. They’re prob’ly no good for me anyways.”

“Daddy.”

The old man shakes his head, but says nothing.

His daughter sighs dramatically. “When George gets home, we’ll get it all figured out.” She scans her newspaper but can’t seem to decide what to read.

The old man looks over at the magazine again, at the muscular young man on the cover. He clenches his jaw and clears his throat, then stares long at his daughter. He notes the fine lines around her eyes, the deeper lines running across her forehead, and cannot remember what she looked like as a girl. He wants to be alone now, back in the home he used to share. He wants to cook his own food and salt the hell out of it, to have coffee all

day long, instead of just in the morning, and to not be told what to do ever again until the day he dies.

He hears the crackling hiss of tires over pavement as George pulls into the driveway. The truck’s door creaks open and then slams shut with a terrible clarity.

He licks his dry lips, reaches for the glass of orange juice and then for the bottle of pills. He studies the bottle, clicks his fingernails on it, then flips off the cap and clears his throat again. He shakes three white pills into the palm of his hand, then licks his lips again but can’t seem to moisten them.

George’s thumping footsteps are coming up the sidewalk. He’s wearin’ his boots today, the old man thinks.

The front door opens. Now it closes again. George announces loudly from the front room that he is home.

After a final glare toward his daughter, who seems to be reading intently now, the old man sighs miserably and slurps down his medication with an all-over puckering of his face, like a child who has tasted something sour.

## **The Machine**

by Aleathia Drehmer

Punja looked over the well-browned backs of his fellow workers. The processes of their spines made them look like great tortoises shined with human oil and sweat. The bodies of the men moved with an undiscussed synchronicity as hundreds of pick-axes connected to stone simultaneously. It was a thunderous sound, at first, that made Punja’s ears feel as if they might bleed, but over time—day after day after day—it became a heartbeat that drove each of them without their knowing it. Arms swung over their heads in unison, arms vibrated with the contact, palms stung with pain until they were numb, and they all inhaled like a great solar wind before beginning again.

Each of them had committed some crime against the ruling power; some could not muster living a mendacious lifestyle that supported the rich few and drowned the masses in unequal rights and

poverty. They could not live in that place and pray to their gods feeling clean. Punja had abjured the government and now he was in this labor camp, most likely until he died, just like the rest of them.

He thought about knowledge as he swung his axe. He thought about its power to unleash fear in those who lacked it. He thought of the uprising that could take place if everyone were allowed an education, and how that would never happen. The government knew the ignorant and hungry and poor were easily manipulated by the fear of losing what little they already had.

Punja had spoken on the dirty, crowded street corners of the city about these things. He talked and shouted until his voice was no more than a harsh, inaudible breath. He now missed those moments when his people moved like a swarm of bees in the hive crawling all over each other: the low buzz of their movements, the smell of curry and cardamom and tea, and the children's laughter despite their empty bellies—instances when the universe lifted him out of his body to look at it all from above, to show him the subjects of his life's mission.

He remembered these moments like a sylph passing by electrifying his every nerve. He remembered them as his back ached, as his arms burned, as his head pounded from dehydration.

He was lost now in the last conversation he had ever had with another. A young girl had heard him yelling on the street and tugged on his dust covered pants. He stopped mid-sentence and looked down at her. She was drowning in a sea of legs as they passed by, so he bent closer to hear her tiny voice. She asked him what it all meant, all his words of education and knowledge. Punja squatted on his heels in silence, really thinking of the best thing he could leave her, something she could understand.

She waited with eyes wide, lips parted showing her fragile teeth, and gently placed her tiny hand upon his cheek as his head hung there in contemplation. He slowly raised his head and opened his eyes, heart more full than it had ever been, as he sifted from his brain a great lesson from the *Talmud* that he had once read. He told the young girl: "Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over and whispers, 'Grow, grow.'"

The girl smiled at him and nodded, but did not say anything. She put her hands together in front of her heart and bowed slightly, backing into the wave of pedestrians until she was carried away by its undulation. Punja sat on his haunches for a long time tasting that truth. Shortly thereafter, he was arrested and sentenced without trial. Now, he was part of the masses again, part of the fearful, part of the voiceless sea, and he felt empty and hopeless.

Punja stood up right then, breaking the smooth machine, removing the sound of his axe from the song of the laborers. He heard shouts from the overseer, but he did not move. Punja stood there as they whipped him; stood there as his back trickled blood rivers; stood there while pain transmuted to elation; stood there as the machine stopped all together and the only sounds that could be heard were the leather against his skin and his voice crying: "Grow, grow."

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