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magazine

Susan Connor

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Richard Hess.....Programs Director
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Subscriptions Contact:
Martin K. Smith
M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
919.286.7760

Advertisers Contact:
Martin K. Smith
M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
919.286.7760

Submissions and Editorial Business to:
Jenny Haniver
mermaid@blotterrag.com

Garrison Somers, Editor-in-Chief
chief@blotterrag.com

919.869.7110 (business hours only! you may
call for information about snail-mail submis-
sions)

Marketing & Public Relations Contact:
Marilyn Fontenot
marilyng_fontenot@gmail.com
919.904.7442

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Susan Connors

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“Meandering”

We hope you enjoy this summerime double-issue. Take a break. Sit in the shade, sip something cold and read, with the game on in the background. For what it’s worth, my favorite player is winding down. Winding down, nothing whatsoever like a well-constructed gold pocket watch, which never winds down, not if you keep it out of the weather and don’t bang it around. Rather, coming to an end of this aspect of his life, and preparing, I am hopeful, for the next. And when they speak of him, it is reverently, but in the past tense. How good was he, ago? Oh, very good. And they, the ubiquitous noise trying to keep everyone’s attention away from everyone else, then talk about what’s happening now. Because that is what they believe we are interested in. Now, this immediate thunderclap instant. Who’s great now? Really? And how great are they? Oh, better than anyone has ever been. An absurdity, of course, both in question and response, but no one cares. Or, rather, no one cares that I think so.

I’m not a big fan of *now*. Oh, I live in it; I comprehend the idea that the dishes need washing, that the car’s oil change is today, but I frequently find myself thinking about yesterday (it rained) and last month and 1789 and the weeks after Julius Caesar was assassinated. I think about the first moon landing, not because it was exactly fifty years ago and isn’t that so cool, but because it was summer and a good one at that, and the Mets’ Tom Terrific Seaver was Dad’s go-to-guy for afternoon entertainment on the color TV he’d borrowed from the school AV department so we could watch games (and why not? – no one at school was using it at the moment.)



The room where said TV resided had been recently added to our old house – a sunny, spacious addition off the hallway from the living room to the kitchen – entry to which was punched through the back of a walk-in coat closet. I don't expect you to visually grasp that, but suffice to say that you had to go through a gloomy little room to get to the television. (Yep, I actually had nightmares about being stuck in the TV room because of the monsters in the pass-through closet.)

Dad had found an old pleather La-Z-Boy chair somewhere, but it broke almost the day it was introduced to our house, so he'd turned it around and tipped it on its back so we kids could sit on the chair-back and lean back on the seat. Mom was not pleased with the resulting aesthetic, but nothing went to waste at the Somers'.

Games were not a formal affair. You could talk if you wanted. That is, I would ask questions and Dad would answer. Hey, can we name our next cat Cleon Jones? How come Ralph Kiner is famous? Where was Flushing, and why was it called Flushing? We chuckled at the possibilities on that one. There was always the delay – if the announcers were speaking or something exciting happened on field – between my query and his response. At eleven I was only just learning about real baseball. Not that we didn't play tons of baseball-ish games – softball, whiffle-ball, pepper, stickball and home-run derby. I threw a ball at the side of the house for about five minutes until Mom quashed that. Then I threw it up on the roof (we had an interesting house, with many tricky gables) until it got stuck in the gutter for the rest of the summer.

Dad taught me about sandwiches. He made me a liverwurst, ketchup and muenster on pumpernickel. My god, I thought. Where has this been all my life? He ate his with a Piels Real Draft in an old Rutgers beer-stein. I had mine with a cold glass of water. Best ever, I kid you not.

That summer I bought my first packet of baseball cards. Before then, I would never have released from my iron grip a nickel for anything other than Bazooka bubble gum. My pack contained but one precious Met card – Donn Clendenon, the big first baseman. He was wearing a black hat (his card was an airbrushed Pirates uniform) and he'd just joined the team around when school let out for summer, when the Mets were so far out of first place that it was impossible to imagine anything that would happen that fall. Nevertheless, by the combined chance of product-marketing and random selection off the drugstore shelf, he was my guy.

By the time the astronauts landed on the moon, the Metsies were... *fantastically* "in contention," a term that Dad explained to me meant that they were winning far more than anyone ever imagined they would. Throughout August we watched almost every televised game, with me staring closely at the little screen looking for Clendenon. He platooned that summer with Ed Kranepool at first, so if he wasn't there, I sat in front of the TV and read instead.

That summer there were so many books for me to choose - at eleven I was precociously on the cusp of leaving behind the children's books and entering the

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

Total bam-bam!

“After Loma Prieta”

by Tom Gartner

The car had stopped—so Derek and I were told by a thick-necked Highway Patrol officer—on the shoulder at the summit of Highway 17, the crest of the Santa Cruz Mountains. White Camaro, early 80s, no hubcaps. It was Grace’s car, but we didn’t tell the officer that. Sharleen had gotten out of it, he said, walked along the shoulder for a few yards, and then dashed out into the traffic.

I squeezed my jaws together until I heard something crack. Two hours after the initial phone call, I was maybe a little anesthetized by alcohol, but basically still reeling. Derek kept shaking his head, then reaching over to grip my shoulder as if he were worried one of us might blow away.

“But here’s the thing.” The CHP officer was young, not much older than us, with dark hair so short I could see white scalp through it. “We need a little help from you.”

I don’t remember exactly what he said next. I just have the image. After the noisy few seconds in which Sharleen bounces along the asphalt, and the truck that hit her jackknifes, and the following traffic tries to stop short—after all that happens, the white Camaro takes off again, turns onto Summit Road, disappears. A woman is driving.

Derek and I stared at each other, both baffled, though maybe not in quite the same way.

“Any thoughts on who that could have been?”

“She drove away?” Though I didn’t seriously think I’d misunderstood.

“That’s right. Young woman. Long hair.”

I could see that too—Grace’s hair, a wild cascade of curls and highlights. I glanced at Derek, then at the CHP officer, and I think I was about to say something, but Derek spoke first.

“You didn’t catch her?” He sounded like he was talking about some stranger who’d run a stop sign.

“We didn’t. Any thoughts?”

But surely he knew just by looking at us (Derek heavily muscled, tanned, tattooed; me in shredded jeans, drunk and feral-eyed) what his chances of a straight answer were.

When he was gone, I found the nearest segment of blank wall and banged my face into it.

*

I’d been back in Santa Cruz just ten days, my first visit since the Loma Prieta quake. Half of the buildings on the Pacific Garden Mall were gone, replaced by huge pits rimmed with cyclone fences. Piles of battered bricks and scrap lumber were everywhere. Some of the businesses were carrying on in large plastic pavilions. Logos, the used bookstore that had been Sharleen’s favorite haunt when we were students, had a fraction of its pre-quake stock arrayed in a shed behind the boarded-up main store.

For the first day or two it had been sufficient entertainment to prowl the wreckage, absorbing the changes and sifting through my memories of the place: margarita sessions under the high glass ceiling of the Catalyst; movies, dozens and dozens of them, everything from Eastwood to Godard, at the slowly moldering Del Mar Theater; long breakfasts with Sharleen in the window booth at Woolworth’s,

watching the endless parade on the sidewalk; live jazz, hot sunshine, and cold pitchers at the tables outside the Cooper House.

The Catalyst, at least, was still its old self, and that was where I ended up, in the familiar enervating tequila haze. Soon enough I remembered why I’d left the area. After Sharleen threw me out of the house in Rio Del Mar, the true nature of life in Santa Cruz had finally come through to me. There was nothing to do but get loaded, and even when you were loaded the boredom was brain-frying.

Though not for Derek, apparently. He’d grown up in Santa Cruz, skateboarding Empire Grade, cruising the Boardwalk, surfing Steamer Lane, partying from Manresa Beach to Pigeon Point to Boulder Creek. He had the lazy grace, the silent cool, of a sea otter, and like an otter he seemed unaware of any world beyond his own. When I headed home to San Diego and a rumor of a job with a film production company, he was skeptical if not positively incredulous. He and Grace stayed in Santa Cruz, living together, then apart; together, apart. Grace sang for a blues band, then a rock band, then another blues band—always on the verge of something big, never quite there. While she was waiting, she bounced from job to job, collected unemployment when she could, sold a little coke to friends. She had a lot of friends.

And Sharleen stayed. When I left, she was working for the University as a mail clerk at Cowell College, where all four of us had gotten our slightly suspect B.A.’s. Now she filed documents for an accountant on Ocean Avenue, trying (in theory at least) to scrape together enough money to go to law school. She started dropping by the Catalyst after work, knowing I’d be there, if not with Derek then alone or

with some other ghost from our UCSC years.

Though the circle kept shrinking. Like trailer homes snapped up by tornados, our old friends kept disappearing into incomprehensible darkness—marriages (mostly doomed); corporate jobs in San Francisco or on the East Coast; even, in a couple of bizarre cases, the armed forces. Maybe I would have been swallowed up too, if the film production job hadn't slipped through my fingers and I hadn't ended up doing data entry for a realtor.

I had no plan. I didn't know if Santa Cruz was a vacation, a destination, or just a waypoint. I had enough money to pay for food and drinks for a month, and Derek would let me sleep on his sofa for that long—much longer, if history was any guide.

So here I was—here we all were—drinking at the Cat, steadfast in our belief that we were waiting for something better to come along. No one could say we didn't have a good time, because we did, or at least if we didn't, we covered up well. But more than ever, it felt to me now like we needed each other, and we needed all the margaritas and white Russians and flaming shots and coke and hash and meth, to protect ourselves from the notion that our "something better" was mythical.

*

Derek and I looked for Grace at the Cat, at the brewpub on Front Street, at the Crow's Nest.... As a last resort, we tried her house, up Highway 9 in Boulder Creek.

"About Sharleen," he said, as we drove down through the redwoods to Felton. His voice was low and uncertain, not at all his normal careless style. I didn't say anything, and eventually he went on: "She didn't do this on purpose." It was half a question. "That's not her."

In fact, she'd tried to kill herself once, at the end of that last summer in Rio Del Mar. I'd started seeing someone I'd met in one of my film classes, a redheaded junior named Marjiann. By way of retaliation, Sharleen started seeing some dark-bearded weasel with a BMW. We fought a war of emotional attrition for weeks, until finally Sharleen was so battered she chose the hard way out.

I'd never told Derek about the suicide attempt, and I didn't now. She'd done it quietly, with darvocet and vodka, leaving no note, saying nothing to anyone. That was Sharleen's way—plenty of melodrama, but keep it all inside. She'd survived because the vodka made her throw up most of the pills.

"I don't think so," I said to Derek. I could still barely talk. I felt as though something enormous was cradling me in its jaws and squeezing not too gently.

"All right." He didn't seem to want to push it further.

"But it doesn't make any fucking sense." They'd been headed for San Jose—someone who'd lived in their dorm at Cowell was reading her poetry at a coffeeshop. How could something as banal as that end up the way it had?

"It's like there's a piece missing," Derek said.

When the CHP found out she'd been taking painkillers, of course, that would undoubtedly be their explanation of choice. I couldn't see it, though. Sharleen's long experience had made her proficient at staying numb but functional. Painkillers were her medium. She had three prescriptions from three different doctors for the same slipped disk. She handed out pills the way other people handed out sticks of gum. I had a couple of Demerols (her favorite) in my shirt

pocket right then.

"I guess we're going to have to find Grace for that."

"Yeah. If she even knows."

"She knows more than we do."

"Yeah." Reluctantly.

"Mainly I want to hear how she could just drive off and leave Sharleen there."

Derek's mouth opened as though there were some possible defense. Whatever he was thinking, he didn't say it. He just shook his head and looked away from me.

*

It had baffled me that Sharleen wanted to see me again. In the year I'd been gone from Santa Cruz, I'd talked to her maybe half a dozen times, and for the most part she'd treated me like a thawed-out TV dinner. Still, on the drive up from San Diego, I'd given in to flashback after flashback from our year and a half in Rio Del Mar—in May of our junior year, only a few months after we met, driving up for the first time to the crumbling pink stucco cottage with the peeling eucalyptus hunched over it; the view of Monterey Bay at the end of our block, where a cliff dropped away to the beach; Sharleen's cat hiding under a lawn chair on the Fourth of July as I sent bottle rockets hissing off toward the water; a thick brew of white vapor enveloping the house at dusk, foghorns sounding somewhere up the coast.

And Sharleen herself—memories hopelessly confused with images: I'd put her in almost every film I made at UCSC, and shot miles of impromptu footage of her besides. She was beautiful, but not garishly so, and she had the iconic glow of an Avedon photograph. She seemed to know something, or feel something, that had escaped the rest of us. Anyhow, memory or image: Sharleen asleep on our

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lint-blotched living room rug, her cheek pressed into an open copy of Middlemarch; drinking wine and playing solitaire at the kitchen table; lying on the grass in our tiny, decrepit square of back garden, naked, scorched red and gold; nights, a few of them, when she was incandescent, her perpetual calm vaporized... but then alternately, whole weeks when she seemed barely sentient.

Doubtless she'd had her memories too—knowing Sharleen, a darker sequence—but we hadn't talked about any of that. Her appearances at the Catalyst had had an eerily accidental air, and most of our history had seemed to be gone. It was as if we were two people who'd known each other slightly for a long time, and had finally decided to take it further. On the third or fourth night, without explanation, she took me home with her. She lived in Aptos now, only a mile from Rio del Mar, and only a little farther from the beach than we'd been there. On her sandy porch in the cool salt air, I held open the screen door while she found her keys. She flicked on the porch light and momentarily shifted the full force of her green eyes onto me... Her skin was copper-colored, her hair pale and lush against her bare shoulders....

If she had me confused—nothing new. Under her serene surface, there were more currents than anyone could hope to chart. "I was born neurotic," she'd told me once, and maybe that was all the explanation there could ever be for her self-absorption, her fierce silences, the sadness that always seemed to be chasing her. I couldn't help trying to read something in her face as we stood there, but she'd long ago trained herself to a perfect lack of expression.

*

At Grace's house, the driveway

was empty except for a battered VW bus that belonged to her roommates. I rang the doorbell. For a minute or so we listened to the hiss of a sprinkler next door. Then I lifted flowerpots until I found a key.

"Geoff—" Derek put a hand on my elbow as I unlocked the door. "She's not here."

I ignored him and went in. Cheap plastic garden chairs, a Persian rug with stained tassels, a leather couch, a Tom Killion print of Natural Bridges Beach. One of the living room windows had been broken and replaced with a flattened cardboard box. A faint smell of burnt plastic hung in the air.

Grace's room was littered with dirty clothes and half-smoked Marlboros, an empty liquor bottle or two. The smell of tobacco and the sight of twisted black lingerie brought back the first time Sharleen and I went to see her sing, and the bemused smile in Sharleen's eyes—nowhere else—at Grace's metamorphosis. Offstage, she was a sparrow, small, flickering, manic. With a band behind her she was all raunchy charm.

For no reason I could tell, I started kicking all the detritus off to one side of the room. Then I found myself kicking the wall, the bed, the closet door—which evidently had a mirror on the inside.

The sound of breaking glass brought Derek running. He grabbed me from behind, pinning my arms to my sides so all I could do was kick at empty air. "What the fuck, Geoff?"

I went limp, and after a moment he pulled me out of the room. "All right," I said, not sure what I meant by it. "All right."

"Yeah." He slammed the door. "Is it?" Just from the intensity of his voice and his eyes, it came clear to me with numbing force that we were look-

ing for Grace for different reasons. "You think that helped anyone?"

I just stood there listening to the blood surge through my head.

"Let's get out of here," He headed for the front door. I started after him, but as I passed the kitchen doorway I glanced inside. On the counter next to the phone was a small metal box that had originally contained raspberry candy from Belgium. Grace and Derek and I had snorted crystal meth from it a couple of nights back (Sharleen abstaining). I opened it. Not much was left, just a few little clumps skating around the bottom of the box.

It looked extremely good.

This was a bad progression, I realized. Twelve hours earlier, I'd been with Sharleen, nearly if not quite recapturing the mysterious rush of our best Rio del Mar days. San Diego and the fluorescent hell of corporate life had started, however unrealistically, to seem unreal. Now Sharleen was dead, and I was drunk and disoriented, standing in some malodorous house trying to decide whether or not to rip off a few pathetic grams of methedrine.

Though none of that necessarily argued against doing the drug.

I remembered the morning after the three of us tried it. We'd had a long, loud night—pitchers of margaritas at the Catalyst, pinball and video games at the Boardwalk, snorting the meth in Sharleen's car at Four Mile Beach, bodysurfing in the dark until we were shivering and breathless; then, at Derek's house in Davenport (a few miles up the coast from Santa Cruz—lower rents and cleaner beaches), hours of laughing and arguing and smoking and drinking while Grace and Derek fought for control of the stereo and the TV. Sharleen had fallen asleep first. Sometime around sun-

rise, Derek followed, slumping across the couch until his head touched her shoulder. Grace and I did more of the drug, and while the other two slept she told me a convoluted story about its provenance.

It wasn't exactly bona fide crystal meth. A less than sober Stanford chemistry student had concocted it with just an atom or two out of place, enough to give it a weird edge. Then the chemistry student got arrested (or left town, or went out of his head, or died...), and his roommate gave the meth away. Some of it ended up with a pot dealer from Bonnie Doon, who really wanted no part of it and was happy to unload it to Grace in exchange for an electric guitar.

Derek shouted from the driveway: "Geoff! Come on. This is a waste of time. She's not here."

I shouted something back.

It wasn't like this was all she had, I told myself now. And she was being generous with the stuff anyway. She'd already shared it with Derek and Sharleen and me—well, not Sharleen, because Sharleen had turned it down...

That thought stopped me.

Sharleen had turned down the crystal meth that night—wiped her hair back and smiled and shaken her head. She'd had a few margaritas—less than the rest of us, but still a few—and presumably a Demerol or two, and she'd seemed sleepily pleased with the world.

Reasonably safe bet, though, that Grace had done more meth that morning, before they got into Grace's car and drove up Highway 17. It seemed likely enough that she would have offered it to Sharleen again.

Nothing was wrong with it, of course, other than a little twist to the onset, something that made the drug snarl slightly. And after all, crystal

wasn't coke. You didn't expect the same subtle glow, just the hard buzz. Still.

Derek's footsteps sounded on the gravel driveway, then on the porch. I got a dollar bill out of my wallet and rolled it into a tube.

Realistically, I said to myself—What could it do?

I snorted only a little of what was left in the box, some small fraction of a gram. As I headed back outside, I fished in my pocket for one of Sharleen's Demerols, broke it in two, and swallowed the smaller piece.

*

The last conversation I had with Sharleen—two in the morning, a full moon keeping her awake, and her insomnia somehow waking me:

"Why did you come back?" she asked. "Not for me, I assume." A typically double-edged Sharleen remark: on the one hand, self-deprecatory; on the other hand, a warning that I'd best not be expecting anything of her.

"Honestly?" I said. "I don't think I had a reason." Knowing this would be a poser for Sharleen, who, emotional as she was, put on a front of being ruthlessly logical.

"I guess in the back of my mind..." Maybe if I'd already known this and made a plan to hide it from her, I could have. But just stumbling into the realization, I found myself recklessly sharing it. "When I thought about coming back, it wasn't exactly Santa Cruz I thought about."

A grunt. "It was Rio del Mar?" "Right."

"And that worked out so well." She laughed. I didn't hear any bitterness in it, just real amusement at the irony. Another one of her paradoxes, and maybe the saving grace of a perverse personality: as prone as she was to brooding, she seemed in the end not to take herself too seriously.

"So why'd you start coming to the Cat?" I asked.

"Yeah, why did I?" She put a hand over her eyes. We were lying hip to hip, so the movement rolled across to me as a gentle seismic wave.

"Because not many people are twisted enough to appreciate you?" It had taken me years to figure this out. Because of Sharleen's looks, and more than that her poise, a lot of men would have been willing to put up with her silences, her fanatical bookishness, her seeming lack of affect. But she was too completely herself to put up with being put up with.

"Well, maybe," she said. "But that's not enough."

"What, then?"

She rolled onto her side and stared at me from six inches away. "I just have to believe that we're rational enough to learn from our mistakes."

Our mistakes was a wildly generous account of things. But then apparently what had bothered her was not just what I'd done, but how she'd reacted to it. It's all just spoiled for me, she'd said when she threw me out. Both ways.

"Rational," I said now. "That's a good thing to believe."

"Of course—" again her maddening detachment—"Who's to say this isn't just a fresh mistake?"

*

We were on Route One, heading back to Derek's house, when the thing began to take hold. I looked at my hand on the steering wheel and thought something seemed odd about it, then on closer inspection decided the problem was just some odd trick of the light. When I looked again, though, the hand was breaking up into wavering pieces of light, seething with strands of color that wouldn't stay where they belonged. The dashboard started doing it too.

“Wake up,” Derek said, grabbing the steering wheel. We thumped over a couple of lane markers and nuzzled in close to the grimy wheels of a tractor-trailer rig before the car straightened. “Geoff, wake up.”

“I’m awake.” I steered the car to the shoulder and got out. Somehow I didn’t want to tell Derek what was going on. “You drive.”

When I handed him the keys, he hesitated for a moment, as if he sensed something was wrong. But after a second he shrugged. We traded places and started north again. I tried not to look too closely at anything, but those bubbling, pulsating colors began to come out of the air at me.

Just garden-variety meth weirdness, I tried to tell myself. That on top of the fact that I hadn’t slept much, and I’d drunk most of a pint of Jim Beam after the phone call about Sharleen.

A shock, a sudden dull internal impact, ran down from the base of my skull to my knees. After that I had a moment’s clarity, during which I thought first—All right, this is it, this is what happened to Sharleen, this is what got her killed; and then—Thank God I don’t have to explain to anyone how I could be fucking stupid enough to turn the same thing loose on myself.

The moment ended, the white noise of the traffic faded away. The pulsing of the colors became a vibration—outside me at first, then inside; weak, then stronger. When I closed my eyes, I felt like I was about to rotate off into space the way Frank Poole does in *2001* when HAL snips his safety line. I couldn’t speak. I heard my teeth rattling and felt my head banging against the window.

After what seemed like a long time, the car decelerated, and dust

hissed under the tires. Derek was shaking my arm. Staring down at me, he was only a tiny silhouette. I couldn’t respond.

Finally the vibration receded—not much at first. I got out of the car and walked along the shoulder to keep Derek from asking me one more time what was wrong.

I recognized the place: a path across a headland through dry grass and tick brush, a curving incline of pavement. We were almost to Davenport. Rainbow flakes of light fluttered off the landscape.

“Geoff, what’s going on?” Derek said when I got back to the car. “Tell me.”

I lay down across the hood. “Grace’s methedrine.”

“You were convulsing, man.”

I shook my head, without much conviction.

“Grace’s meth?” He thought it over. “When did you take more of that?”

I didn’t answer. I could still feel the thing pushing at me. Not good—really not good. And I’d only done a short line of crystal. And just part of a Demerol. Sharleen would have had more of both—lots more of the Demerol, knowing Sharleen. And I weighed half again what she did.

“Anyhow,” Derek said, “We all did that stuff. Grace has been doing it all week. It’s fine.”

“By itself,” I said.

“By itself?”

“But not with Demerol.”

“What?” For a second, standing there bare-chested, his hand in his blond hair, his scorched face tied up in confusion, he was the image of the brain-dead surfer. But then he made the connection. “Oh, shit. That’s what happened to Sharleen? She took them both?”

I nodded. It was harder to stop than to start. My body seemed to want to carry the rhythm on.

“I think,” I said. “I think.”

“Well, the Demerol is a foregone conclusion.”

Strictly out of habit, we both half-smiled. It was the kind of thing we were used to saying in jest.

Short silence. Derek looked at his zoris, then up at me. “So it was an accident.” He seemed almost as relieved as if he’d suddenly discovered that she was still alive. “She didn’t kill herself.”

“She didn’t kill herself. I don’t know that I’d call it an accident.”

He went stiff. He could see where I was heading. “Geoff, this kind of shit happens. It sucks, but it just happens. There’s not a lot more to say.”

He grabbed my shoulder and I shook him off. The vibration was still hissing through me like static. “Even if I don’t blame Grace that it happened,” I said, talking slowly to get the words out right, “I still blame her for driving away.”

“Yeah, but we don’t why she did that.”

“I hope you don’t think Grace gets a free pass just for being Grace.”

He pinned my shoulders with his leathery hands and stared me down. “If there’s something I can do to help Sharleen, I’ll do it,” he said. “But you’re going to have to tell me what it is. Because I don’t see anything.”

I didn’t see anything either, of course. And another thought, one that turned everything upside down yet again, was stealing into my head.

“Maybe we do know why she drove away,” I said, and unfortunately there was a small part of me that took pleasure in shaking him out of his complacency. “If Grace gave Sharleen

some of this fucked-up crystal... didn't Sharleen probably offer Grace some Demerol?"

He squinted at me as if I'd slipped out of focus. His head moved from side to side, but it wasn't an answer to my question.

*

I'd woken that morning, or half-woken, as Sharleen was getting ready to leave. For what seemed like ten minutes, I heard quiet scritch as she brushed her teeth. The sound moved around the room as if it had wings; her footsteps were too soft to hear. A little later, another sound, an unfamiliar one: Sharleen humming. Nothing recognizable, just a few bars of something slow and dreamy.

Sleep again, and then waking. Before I opened my eyes, I felt her standing by the bed: a sense of displaced air, of curved gravity. I managed to look up and register a bare red-gold shoulder, a grass-green top, pale hair falling straight toward me. Then my eyes slid shut again, and before I was even aware she'd crossed the room, I heard the door closing.

*

We spent a hellish afternoon driving the twisting roads of the Santa Cruz Mountains, from Loma Prieta to Castle Rock to Bonnie Doon. We peered into ravines, checked turnouts

for Marlboro butts, talked to old ladies on their porches and kids on their Sting Rays, inspected the paint stains on battered guardrails. After all that, we found Grace's Camaro only a few miles from Davenport, just off a steep side road called Ice Cream Grade. We walked down from the shoulder in a bluish evening light.

The car had left the pavement at the bottom of a sweeping curve and descended a bank for about fifty yards, somehow finding an alley through a crowd of trees. Finally it had run into a fallen oak, a huge bleached ruin half covered with ferns and ivy. A twisted black and white limb had gone through the Camaro's windshield.

Derek got within a few yards and then went to his knees in a soft pool of ferns. His face had a blasted, inhuman look, as if his brain stem had just been severed.

I felt the sweet calm of shock come on as I wrenched open the passenger-side door. She was certainly dead. I leaned against the front end of the car with a fog of gnats swirling in front of me. Square-edged pebbles of broken glass dug into my palms. I couldn't think of a single thing to say or do.

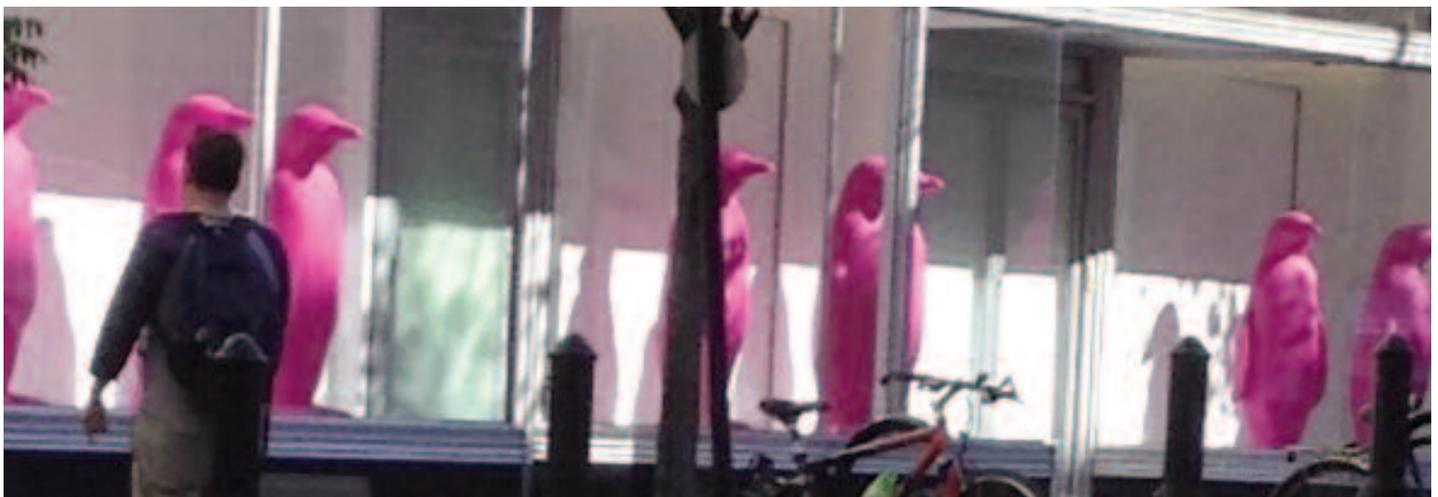
We stayed there for a long time, probably longer than we should have.

Dusk washed over us, welling out of the forests and canyons like water from a spring, but we didn't move. It seemed irreverent just to walk away. That, or maybe we somehow thought that as long as no one else knew about this, it hadn't really happened.

But I realized, finally, that we had to leave. We were going to have to drive back to the fire station on Empire Grade to get help. Traffic here after dark was minimal; the chance that anyone would stop for two disheveled barbarians like Derek and me, almost non-existent.

He didn't argue when I told him it was time to go. He just ignored me. He was still sitting in the ferns, staring at the intertwined wreckage of tree and car, breathing in awkward gasps. I put my body between him and the car and hauled him to his feet.

Then, holding onto his arm as if he were a recalcitrant five-year-old, I dragged him back up the hill. Even in the near-darkness the Camaro's track was easy to follow. At times Derek became almost a dead weight, so that I could barely keep him moving up the slope, but I didn't turn around to see if he was looking back. Finally, we pushed through a tangle of broken branches and stood on the shoulder of the road again. ❖



“The Cliffs of 3am”

by N. West Moss

She is a mess in so many ways. Fat to begin with, and unkempt, hair like a bird's nest. No sense of style, always hoping to find that one perfume that would make her identity snap into focus, but she never does, never sticks to one thing. Discipline. She lacks discipline. Flosses 5 nights in a row, then forgets until her back tooth starts to ache and then flosses again for 5 nights in a row. Puts her glasses who knows where. Knocks the moisturizer over.

Her breasts are uneven. She remembers being taken to the pediatrician when she was 8 years old for chest pains. He could find no cause, and explained that if she had an undetected murmur, it would present itself in a slightly drooped left breast later in life. Now in her fifties, she understands that the chest pain was just pure, pure worry. But today, her left breast *is* a tiny bit lower than her right one, and she lies in bed thinking Maybe I *do* have a murmur. But also, she thinks: Little Girl, you were right to be worried.

She is uneasy, waking up night after night, staring round-eyed at the ceiling, certain that her life has come to nothing, even when everything is essentially alright (she has no debt, she reminds herself — she has a happy marriage). In her secret moonlit heart, she feels she is a ship permanently wrecked on the most ferocious boulders.

What else? Well, she's wishes she

were a better partner. When she says to her husband, “Should I stop talking?” he looks over the book he's reading and smiles. “No,” he says. “I love your voice.” Perhaps he is what happiness looks like, and she wishes the world rewarded such goodness. Why does she always seem to be impatient with him? Why can't she smile over her book at him.

She never had a coherent plan for her life. In her 20s she slept with everyone. It was a good thing — gather ye rosebuds and all that. It was a delight, is what it was, the way messiness can equal freedom. There were no diseases transmitted, she broke no hearts (((well, she broke one heart))). She used to sneak out of men's beds in the dark, hopping on one foot and then the other in their driveways to slip on her shoes. And she was beautiful. She can see that now when she looks at her students. Even the ugliest 18-year olds with slack jaws and too-moist lips, even the ugliest 18-year olds covered in acne and shivering with the most pathetic longings are stunningly beautiful to her now, the way the most delicious tomatoes of summer yield puckering scars down their flanks.

She is a mess, holding how many advanced degrees and still no full-time work, no career to speak of. She has no children either. What a wasteland she turned out to be. When she was twelve, her cousin (she's still too afraid to say out loud that it was her

brother) took her aside. “Men don't like women with hair on their bodies.” She, of course, had hair on her body. Later he whispered, “Men like women who swallow,” like he was bestowing a great gift upon her. She gave such weight to his countless, long-ago edicts. How he hated her then, his wish for her erasure palpable, and how he hates her still, violently, how he strides through the world announcing all he hates as though the world is punching its catcher's mitt waiting for his derision. At Thanksgiving, he walks around now, white-haired and wrinkled, talking volubly about his hard-ons. She hasn't gone to Thanksgiving in years, isn't even invited any more. The memories of him are like a cobweb she is forever shaking off.

There are other cobwebs — a break-up with a boyfriend decades ago, for one. It's not the break-up that haunts so much as that one dim night in his childhood bedroom, when he allowed her to give him a blowjob before admitting that he was already living with someone else. And *he* actually loved me, she thinks. Still loves her thirty years on — she can tell. And it makes her a mess that someone can love and seek to humiliate at the same time, that the universe makes room for that. How does a person stop themselves from being haunted? She wants to know. How?

She gets all worked up about greed, about the guy in the BMW who cuts everyone off. The entire concept of ‘shareholder value’ rattles her cage, how the world is all *me, me, me*, and hardly ever *us, us, us*. This kind of thing lays her so stupidly low. Yet she's also aware of how pathetic it is to be righteous when she is struggling, when she is bullied by her own family,

when she is overweight. It's all quite pitiful, her indignation housed in such a messy life.

As a hedge against the mess, she invites people over to sit and drink gin with her behind the rhododendron on the porch. She picks up other people's litter from the roadside – maybe the broken world can still be fixed. She endlessly encourages her students, even though she's learned that hard work is worth nothing to anyone, that the concept of meritocracy is a big fat lie. She keeps this from them.

She keeps writing too, making art like a freezing man desperate to light a match in a typhoon. She plants elephant ear bulbs the size of coconuts in her garden. The wriggling worms in the turned-over dirt awaken in her some kind of stuttering desire to protect something. There is tangle worth to her in as-yet unsprouted bulbs and earthworms. *They* are her shareholder value.

If things had been better, if she had been able to have children, or a conventional career, if she had been an unafraid child, if she hadn't been taught to hate her own body by her own family, well maybe she wouldn't have become who she is, wouldn't have written books. She thinks about that, about the price of being an artist. If she hadn't been afraid of her own father, if she hadn't worried all the time, if her brother hadn't called her a whore for wearing mascara that one time, if she hadn't been unprotected, well, who's to say how the crucible of her particular life shaped her. For instance, if her father had never locked the car doors and shouted into her face on her thirteenth birthday, "Nobody will ever love you!" perhaps she would not have driven herself to

be as loved as she is, which is pretty thoroughly loved, really. Her father loved her a lot, too, even as he screamed at her. Another fucked up kind of love. Another thing to contemplate on the cliffs of 3am.

She figures that probably none of the mess of her life can be blamed on anyone though. Maybe she was just born broken. Maybe her father held her head under water when she was three to stop her crying because she deserved it. She does think that sometimes, believes it even, but in daylight she asks, how could that be? How could a three-year old *ever* deserve to have her head held underwater? Talk about gorgeous. Every three-year old is a pie-slice of goddamned perfection. Right?

Still, evidence shows that she is a mess, wearing this inside-out T-shirt, oh god, and it has a stain. *And* she wore it to the bank she just remembers. Her hair is so messy a comb won't go through it, just like when she was a kid and her mother raked a brush through the snarls, yanking her head back on its neck-stalk. Everything is tangled, everything is broken, asymmetrical . . . but also luminous. She is luminous, and now, in the light of day she can see it. If she wants to wear the same T-shirt three days in a row, if she decides to write weird books that may never be published, and plant five hundred *thousand* elephant ears all over the property, if she wants to stand in the rain by the birch tree getting soaked so she can watch the mallard ducks nest by the pond, no one will stop her. She can do what she wants. The only one submerging her now would be her.

Look at her, mess that she is. She has managed to steer her life to this

pond full of rain, mallards dabbling at its surface, a tipped over willow weeping its new spring leaves into the water. There is a box turtle at the edge, his slow head waving from side to side like a divining rod. There is no hope but still there *is* hope, and maybe wrecked is how things are supposed to be, half swallowed by vines.

She is no wasteland. She can see that when the sun's up. Her world is filled with porch cocktails, with the warm velvet of her snoring husband's back, with the tumbleweeds of cat hair in the living room, the stain on the shirt, the teacups in the sink, the stories spooling from her. There is no angry hand at her neck (although she still sometimes imagines it there), trying to submerge her head in a sink-full of fury. Every morning when the sun rises, her story begins anew. The pond, with its peepers screaming their lungs out, with its tipped over everything, cries, "Good for you!" Good for you, the willows murmur. Good for you, she tells herself. No one's been able to wreck her yet, try as they might. Goddammit. Good for you. ❖

“Drowning”

by Kelly Dasta

“Did you hear about the lady who drove her car into the lake last year?”

It was a Tuesday night. Crickets and nameless insects chirped as Naomi and I sat on the concrete wall along Stuart Lake. The only light that touched the water was that of the stars and the glowing green Mad Mex sign protruding from the trees. Cars rushed by from the highway behind the parking lot. I looked up. It was partially cloudy, but I could still make out the big dipper.

“No,” I responded. “Did she put her foot on the gas thinking it was the brake or something?”

“Nope. She killed herself.”

Naomi took a drag of her cigarette, the smoke puffing off her lips into a sweet-smelling cloud. An orange ring glimmered in the dark from the end of her cigarette.

“Holy shit.”

“I think you can see the skid marks over there.” She motioned off towards the parking lot.

I gazed into the water. Some bubbles popped up here and there. I imagined a woman with frown lines and dark circles under her eyes, resting her head against the seat as the muddy water leaked in at her feet and through the dashboard. It would have been ice cold, numbing her body until it crept into her nose and mouth. Once submerged, she might have fought to free herself from the seatbelt, only to give up again. The car would then sink down, kicking up dirt and moss, disturbing the fish that

swam below.

My phone buzzed. I rummaged through the clutter in my purse, dislocating it from a tangle of headphones, receipts, and an old napkin. Seven unread messages from earlier.

Whore. The word glared at me through the screen.

I shoved it back in my bag.

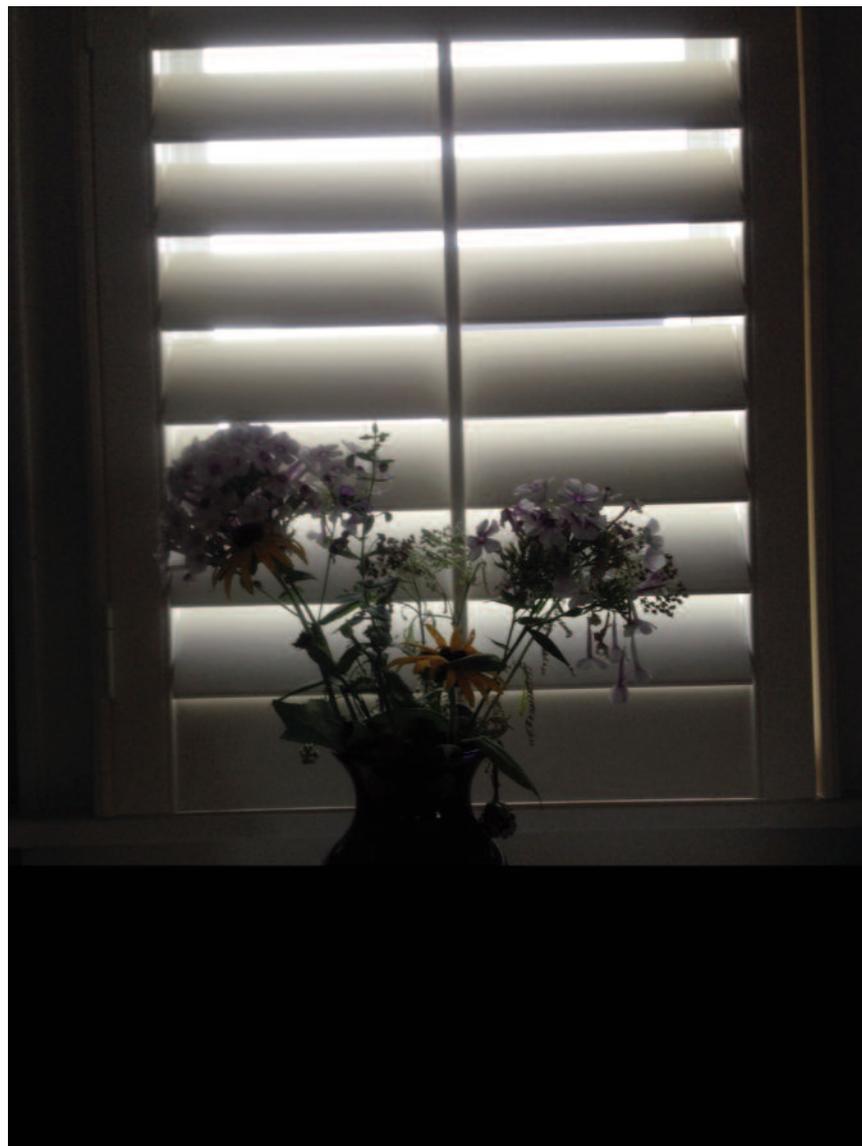
“Give me one of those.” I held out my hand.

Naomi smirked and handed me a cig and lighter. I flicked the lighter to life, holding the spark to the end of the cigarette. My own orange ring appeared. I drew the filter to my lips, letting the nicotine cool my nerves. Smoke puffed out of my mouth, dissipating into the air.

“He still bothering you?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

She snorted. “What’s he saying this time?”



“Nothing. . . it’s not true anyways.”

Naomi flicked some ash into the water and kicked her feet. “My ex told everyone I have herpes. Doesn’t matter if it’s not true.”

“I know.”

She smirked. She put out her cigarette on the rubber heel of her converse and tossed the butt into the lake. “Here. Take these away before I smoke more.” She handed me the pack. I stuffed it in my purse.

We sat in silence for a moment. My clothes clung to my skin, and my hair frizzed and adhered to my neck in the humid summer air.

“Did you know,” Naomi asked me, “statistically guys commit suicide more, but girls attempt it more?”

“How does that make any sense?”

“Girls use things like pills, but guys use things like guns.”

“Oh.”

I felt my phone vibrating again. I took it out of my bag and stared at the screen.

Nine unread messages.

The last one read: **You know you want me.**

I slid the phone into my back pocket, taking a drag. “My mom would kill me if she knew I smoked.”

“She doesn’t have to— the smoking will do it for you.”

I laughed. “You’re the one who got me started.”

“And now I’m trying to help us quit.”

Right as I was about to take another drag, she grabbed the cigarette from my hand and threw it into the lake. The spark fizzled out, leaving a small dent in the water before it smoothed over.

I stared at her. She raised an eye-

brow at me.

“You know what?” I dug her pack of cigarettes out of my bag. I pulled one out of the box and tossed it into the lake. “We should quit.”

“Interesting choice.” She snatched the box from my hands, pulling a cig out herself. She inspected it, turning it over in her hands before she lit it, inhaled, and chucked it in after the last one. Together, we tossed in a few more, before Naomi dumped out the whole box, the little white sticks spilling into the lake with a plop.

Then my phone vibrated in my pocket.

I took a tube of lip gloss out of my purse, and I applied it to my lips. Running my tongue over the strawberry gel, I threw the tube into the water.

Naomi giggled. Following my lead, she tossed in all of her rubber bracelets. “Bye, bye!” She waved to them.

Buzz buzz.

I pulled out the coins from my wallet. Naomi got rid of her chewing gum.

Buzz.

Next were my earbuds. Then Naomi’s lucky clover keychain.

Buzzzzz.

I looked at her. “I don’t have much left.”

“Same.”

So I kicked off my shoes— dropping them into the lake, one by one. Naomi squealed, hurling her converse in after them.

Then she stared at me, barefoot, a single eyebrow raised.

I took off my shirt. Standing in my bra, I launched it into the water.

“Your turn,” I said without looking at her.

She tossed in her jean shorts.

I looked down at my shorts, sliding my phone out of my back pocket as I took them off. My hands were clammy. I glanced at the screen as I held my phone in one hand, shorts in the other.

You’re ugly and fat anyways.

I dropped the shorts on the ground.

My feet balanced on the edge of the retaining wall, feeling the cold concrete through my socks. Naomi looked at me. The water was still, a mere eight feet below me. I gripped my iPhone 6 with a \$10 plastic case and hurled it as far as I could. It landed in with a smack. Little rings radiated from the impact point. I imagined the texts choking with water and algae, sinking to the bottom, never to be found again.

Naomi shrugged, taking a seat back on the wall. She pulled two cigarettes out of a new pack from her purse and handed one to me.

“It’s getting late,” she said.

“Yeah,” I responded.

We lit up. ❖

“Clean Meat”

by R. E. Hengsterman

“What do we do with it?”

“Fuck if I know,” someone said as a small crowd gathered in the street.

Uncertain of what to make of the cloven-hooved visitor, many kept their distance. The braver ones, unabated in their curiosity, leaned in for a closer look.

With my daughter tucked into the nook of my arm, I worked my way toward the front of the pack, watching it tongue the flat, thick pad above its gapped incisors.

Tink Bayman, a bruiser of a man, held its leash, which was nothing more than an old piece of heavy rope, and guided it past the onlookers—its stilted, low-step march slowing Tink to a crawl.

Once the creature was secured inside the storage building, the crowd followed, squeezing into the far corner; the twitch of its tail sped up with the volume of onlookers.

“How do we know it’s authentic?”

“Are you serious? Look at it. How can it not be real?”

My daughter slipped past Brenda Barker for a closer look, and as she did, its nostrils flared, and its plump tongue probed the air.

“Yuck,” someone said.

“It’s real,” a voice boomed. It was Martha Byrne—declaimer of the established.

The small mob had grown to greater than twenty, and along with myself and my daughter, Martha forced her way front and center. Few things

occurred in the village without her intrusion.

A ripple moved through the room as Tink and Martha jockeyed for supremacy. Tink found it, so in my mind, he was the obvious choice, though Martha and her abundant personality were vying for attention.

Mouth agape, the glossy-coated animal, without warning, emptied its bowels onto the wood floor. Mouthy Martha shrieked. Lee Chin veiled her face with her hands; several mirrored Lee as they escaped in a crush, spilling into the moon-splashed night, a mass of flesh.

Prions, they screamed.

“It can’t hurt you,” I said.

Having held a bioengineering position, I was confident it wasn’t dangerous and the remaining crowd settled with my words.

“How did it get here?” someone asked.

There was an abandoned abattoir a few miles away, but I kept that to myself.

“Not sure,” I said. “But it looks healthy.”

Devastation had been faster than predicted. A famine developed as large swaths of land became uninhabitable. The fleeing climate refugees decimated livestock populations and tipped overburdened agriculture into collapse. The government turned to lab-grown meat to offset drops in food production. I’d worked on the graphene scaffolding designed to

deliver nutrients as large bio-reactors stimulated single cells into muscle fibers with low-level electrical current. The product in the lab was indistinguishable from real meat. Factories sprang from the landscape, jam-packed with culturing vats. Over time, the food supply stabilized.

The group settled just short of a half dozen. Martha found her way home, having long given up on taking charge of something so curious. Those who stayed: Tink, myself and my daughter, Bill Rishovd, and Donna Allen, appreciated what the arrival represented. Those who left had little interest in compromising their safety.

“What do we do with it?”

It had been several hours since Tink found it wandering in a large field north of town, besieged by flies.

“I’ve read they were delicious,” my daughter said. “And they fed millions.”

I shrugged.

“Before India flooded, they were sacred,” she added.

My daughter held an unbridled curiosity for the rarity of the opportunity and continued to force the conversation. “When will we ever get another chance?”

“To what?” Bill said.

“To eat it,” my daughter snapped. Fourteen going on thirty, she balked at any unseized opportunities.

Tink left the group and returned with an aluminum baseball bat, and a crowbar.

“She’s right,” he said. “We might not get another chance. It’s a blessing.”

No one protested as the group semi-circled.

My daughter, overcome with the possibilities, stepped closer. Her big eyes locked onto the animal.

As we closed Tink swung the baseball bat at its hindquarters. The animal side-shuffled from the blow but remained upright.

"Maybe we shouldn't," Bill said. The crowbar in hand.

Tink snatched it from him and tossed the aluminum bat in my direction. "On three, go for the head."

I nodded.

"One... two... three..."

Tink and I moved in and landed quick, successive blows, forcing the animal to its knees with our savagery. Everyone held their collective breath as Tink tossed the heavy rope leash over a beam overhead.

"Pull," he said.

We hauled the hemorrhaging carcass near upright, neck elongated, fleshy underbelly exposed.

Tink worked a knot in the heavy cord as I caught my breath. Then, without warning, my daughter seized a piece of fractured glass and, with a ferocity unseen since the starving years, cut in one lengthy slice from throat to anus, letting gravity do most of the work. ❖

"I'm from the suburbs, I'm not suited for shit!"

by Darren Mileto

The lake was the color of a gangrenous wound and smelled almost as bad. I breathed deeply, feeling good about myself regardless. The sewage-like smell oddly evoking memories from my childhood spent at the Jersey shore. I stood there on the banks while little waves weighed down with algae slapped at the muddy edges, sounding a bit like a slow applause. An offering of support for the drama that was about to unfold.

"Maybe we shouldn't go through with this." Kyle said to me.

Maybe he was right.

The wind was blowing from the northwest. Both the ache in my joints as well as the cloud covered sky trundling past overhead telling me that rain was likely. I licked my pointer finger and held it up in the air, then kneeled down and put my hand to the ground.

"Dennis..." Kyle started to say in that diffident sort of whine he uses when trying to persuade people who he knows aren't going to listen, but I interrupted him before he could finish.

"Shhhhhh. I'm picking up vibrations. The land is speaking to me." I waited a bit for dramatic effect, closing my eyes like I could really feel something. Then I stood back up, my communion with nature over. "It's saying for you to stop being such a pussy."

Kyle furrowed his brow. He's a fairly large man with long, shaggy hair, a thick beard and additional scruff growing moss like down his neck. In many ways he resembles the deep-sea fisherman or the lumberjack that he in no way is. "Yeah well, it's not the land

I'm worried about."

"What could you possibly be worried about?" I asked.

He threw his arms up in an expression of incredulity that I could be so stupid I would even have to ask. "What could I be worried about? Seriously?"

No. Not seriously. I knew exactly what we had to worry about, but I seemed to be beyond caring at that point. Hopelessness breeds its own form of courage.

"I knew it. He's going to back out." Ben taunted from behind us. I shushed him with my hand. This was between Kyle and me. And the lake too, I guess.

"It's not that I *want* to back out." Kyle remonstrated. "I just don't see why we can't do it some other time. Or some other place for that matter."

"Some other place?" I asked calmly. Slightly patronizingly. Hoping my demeanor would rub off on him, or irritate him enough to spur him into action. "But the whole point was to do it here. Now."

I gestured to indicate our surroundings. His eyes followed my twirling finger the way a cat's would one of those toys on a string dangling above its head.

Office buildings sat on all sides of the lake looking fat and self-conscious. About as stylish as middle-aged tourists vacationing in Florida. Their tinted windows, blank and dull, reflected the murky dreariness of the sky. Even the buildings seemed to resent being here. Bored by their very existence.

"And besides

The Blotter

which, some other time will become never.” I added. “You know that. Silly.”

Kyle let out an exasperated groan, as much at odds with himself as with me. “Fun is fun, but I think we should quit while we’re ahead. We’ve already wasted the morning and...”

“Wasted the morning? Of course we did!” I interrupted, practically shouting. “It couldn’t be any other way! Don’t you see?”

God I wanted him to see. To fully understand.

There was some laughter from the small crowd of coworkers that had gathered to watch, many of whom I didn’t know. They were new to the company. Temps in all but name. Here to perform mundane tasks like data entry and to answer phones. Most of the real work is now either done by computers or had been outsourced to

India, leaving many of us free to play solitaire, surf the internet, collect unemployment, or pursue other endeavors. Like trying to sell one’s arts and crafts projects online. Adult coloring books were also becoming really popular for some. Not so much for me though. I’m more the adventurous sort. I prefer action.

“Why are we even here today?” I said, gripping Kyle by the shoulders. “Nothing happening in that office is of any importance. Don’t you want to accomplish something meaningful?”

“Meaningful?”

I cleared my throat. Maybe not meaningful. “Memorable?”

“Memorable?” Kyle repeated. Then, “Dennis. This isn’t the grand, um, whatever, you want it to be. It’s just absurd.”

“Absurd is the point!”

He looked at me quizzically. He didn’t see.

There were glimpses of an understanding. A vague dissatisfaction simmering in his subconscious like the cooking of cabbages, but he hadn’t reached my level yet. He still believed in the job at that point, thinking it would lead somewhere. Somewhere good at any rate.

When I had come up with the idea that morning of building boats and racing them across the lake, Kyle thought it was brilliant. Okay brilliant is an exaggeration, still, at the very least there was appreciation enough for him to join me in my endeavor.

Others naturally found out about the project. They would come into the mail room needing to mail stuff and get supplies and so forth, and see the both of us hard at work, cutting, gluing, wrapping, taping. My tongue protruding slightly between my lips as I concentrated, measuring, marking things with pencils.

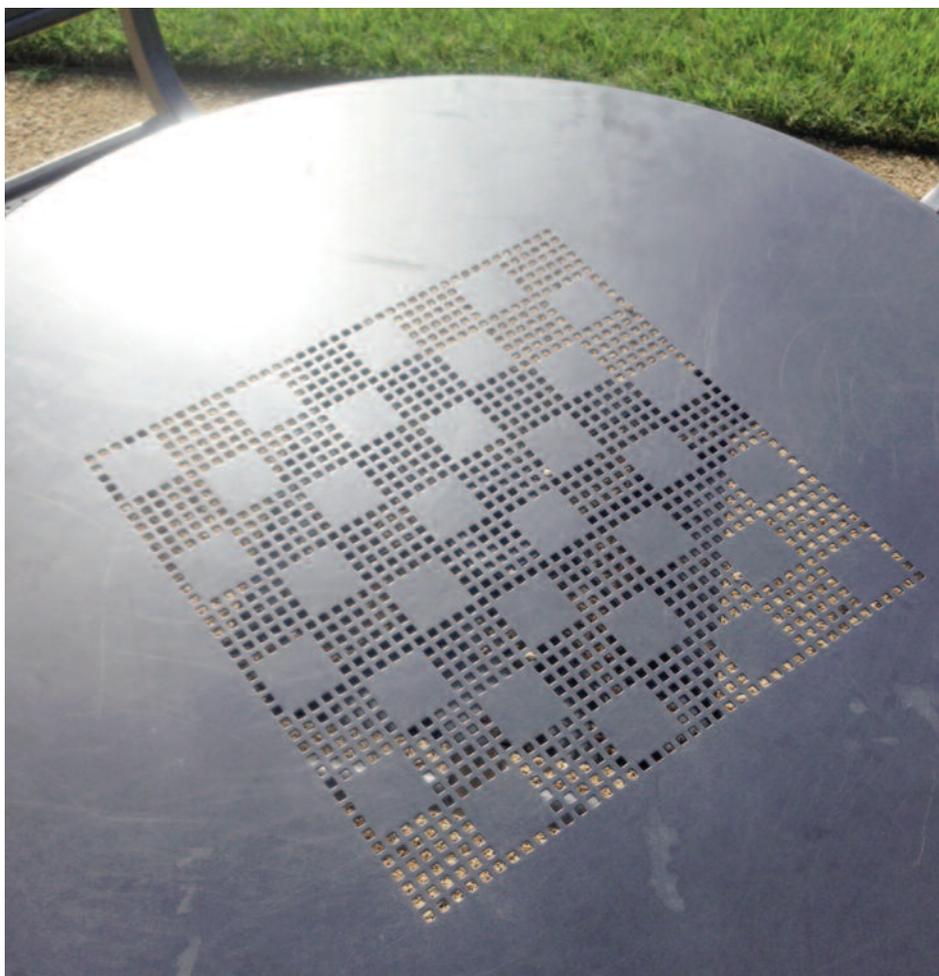
It was all very official. For the first time in months I was excited about a project that had been thought up at the office, and I’m someone who takes my work seriously. Damn it.

“You know I’m right!” I exclaimed. “Why did we spend all that time building the boats if we aren’t going to go through with it?”

“Because the idea of doing a thing like this was funny at the time you came up with it. I didn’t think we’d actually carry it this far though.” Kyle stated, his large, somewhat clumsy hands rubbing and pulling at the side of his boat.

“You didn’t?”

“No. I didn’t.” A moment passed during which I refused to comment. “Dennis, we’d probably get fired for doing something like this! What are you going to say to Celia if, or more



likely when, we get called into her office?"

Oh yeah. Such a confrontation hadn't really occurred to me. In response, I raised my hands palms up and stuck my chin out in the Sicilian manner of silently conveying indifference to a question, or an unwillingness to answer.

Celia is our current regional manager. In the four years I've been with the company, I've seen three regional managers and two marketing managers come and go. Dealing with her was not a concern of mine. Plus, I guess I was thinking that she probably wouldn't even notice. Being mostly oblivious to anything going on in the office is her one redeeming quality.

And it's not just me who feels this way. No one else has much respect for her either. She's never had a good idea or initiated any effective strategies, nor does she even really have any product knowledge. She is however adept at delegating tasks and social maneuvering. Her position is more the product of good timing than anything. Like a passenger on a plane who got bumped up to first class. She didn't pay to be there and probably won't get to go again, but she still likes to act as though she deserves the ice cream and warm face towels.

Kyle brushed the hair out of his face as the wind picked up again. "I don't want to risk losing this job." He looked around, then down at his feet. "I mean, I don't know what else I could do. It took my sister three years to get a job, and she has two degrees." He held up two fingers for emphasis.

"We'll be fine. This company likes risk takers and free thinkers." I replied, realizing I had already lost the argument. "It said so in the company statement that was included in the packet they gave us as new hires." Kyle was hired after me though, maybe they

stopped including that statement.

"I'm sorry dude. I just can't" He picked up his boat, then began to walk away, looking dejected, the boat clumsily banging against his leg. Sad music playing in the background in my mind.

There was a groaning of disappointment from the audience, some of whom also started to leave. The show over. "So that's it then?" Ben shouted. "Haha! I knew he wouldn't go through with it. Pay up. Fifty bucks." He demanded, rubbing his forefingers and thumb together.

While I had come up with the idea for a race, Ben had come up with the idea that we wouldn't. Both of us agreed that a wager was in order.

Ben hates the office about as much as I do, his attitude having gotten worse, or better really, since he decided to go back to school and get another degree. Try again.

"Why quit though?" He asked me when we had been complaining about work one day. 'Maybe they'll just promote me instead. I'm long overdue for one and actually making my goal this year. That'll take care of things. Get some unemployment, nicey nice.'

We both thought he had it coming. After the last regional manager got fired I had stood in the entrance to his cubicle and in my best Darth Vader voice announced, "You are in command now Admiral Piett," Though no such luck for Ben yet. Celia got the job instead.

"C'mon man, a bet's a bet." He continued to prod.

I ignored him and stared off into the not so distant distance. The other side of the lake being maybe a hundred or so yards away. One can tell by the shape of it and by the position of the buildings that it was dug out by backhoes. Periodically, there had been attempts to make it aesthetically pleas-

ing, a landscape architect brought in, shrubberies and flowers planted, but such efforts failed. It's utilitarian. Built for drainage runoff. It's the one thing here that can't be easily and cheaply replaced.

Of course, Kyle was right in that we need this job. Where else would people like us go? My prospects are bleak. I never learned anything practical or useful in college. I only went because it was expected. My education serves one aspect of society, and that one aspect is quickly falling apart.

However, what I needed wasn't a lecture, or common sense. It was a friend. Someone who shared my predilection for theatrics. Someone to validate what I hoped to accomplish. Such people were becoming scarce around the office these days.

I sighed. "If Rhys was still working here, we wouldn't be having this conversation. We'd be out there already."

"Yeah well, Rhys isn't here anymore. Pay up."

Rhys McKenzie is the one dude I worked with at the company that I genuinely respected. After getting himself fired and leaving in a blaze of spiteful grandstanding, rather than send out his resume and try to find something else that was similar, he broke the lease on his apartment and went out and bought himself an old Toyota Huntsman camper van. One that was in a state of appalling condition, with rust holes, peeling paint, and plumes of black smoke that would languidly drift up from both the exhaust and under the bonnet every time it ran. None of this however, deterred him from his grand vision of itinerant glory as he set back out into the world with no clear vision or direction.

We had lost touch, but I recently received a postcard

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from him. It had a grainy picture of the Detroit skyline from the twenties or thirties, with the words, 'Detroit. Where life is worth living' written in bold yellow lettering. On the back in Rhys' scrawl was, "Hey, I took the roads to America's black heart. Back to where the dream first died. Rhys."

Evidently, he had found a sense of purpose traveling around the rust belt states, photographing declining towns and despondent, grim looking people. I didn't want to tell him that there were already plenty of books about Detroit or abandoned factories and the betrayal of the American worker. It wouldn't matter if I did. He's out living on the urban edge where it's cheap and dreams have already bottomed out, regardless having found something there to hold on to. In many ways, I'm envious of him.

As I said, hopelessness breeds its own form of courage.

"Pay up nothing." I tossed my boat onto the water. It landed with a slap and bobbed around releasing ripples. The name and logo of our company facing upside down on the "bow." Without Kyle, there was no race, but that didn't matter. "I guess this will just have to be a solo journey. Lindbergh style."

"A Lindbergh style solo journey?"

"Yup."

"Across a tiny lake that's practically an open sewer?"

"Yup."

"How epic." Ben mocked.

Epic indeed. But so what? I mean seriously, tell me one thing that's epic these days?

Exactly. There's nothing epic anymore. The word itself has been diminished so that it can be applied to things like windsurfing and bungee jumping. Let's face it. The age of adventurous personal accomplishment has passed. Even people like

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Lindbergh would be irrelevant in today's age of GPS and computers. The oceans are crossed on a daily basis by probably thousands of ships. The sound barrier has been broken. Even astronauts elicit no excitement these days. All that's left is absurdity and the many lines it has drawn around our lives.

"Double or nothing." I said, to show how earnest I was.

"I don't really know what double-or-nothing means, but if you want to keep the bet at fifty, I say there's no way you even make it across."

We shook hands and everyone watched with renewed interest as I attempted to board, unsteadily putting one foot in, then the other. The boat sank down, touching a bottom that was only a few inches deep at that point. "Seems stable." I said, seating myself.

"Have you even tested that thing yet?" Someone asked.

"I'm testing it now." I replied. Rather confidently for some reason.

My finished boat was constructed out of several cardboard boxes, the thick ones we used for shipping heavy materials, with duct tape holding everything together, plus a little caulk for sealant that someone in maintenance had left by the back stairs near the fire exit. The inside was lined with heavy duty garbage bags, while I made some skirting along the side out of Styrofoam, because that seemed like an appropriate thing to do.

In an effort to move forward, I pushed off with the makeshift paddle, a broom handle with plastic binder covers taped together on the one end, while more or less scooting like a dog dragging its butt across the carpet.

"Having trouble?" Ben asked.

"Nope. Doing great here." I replied, straining, already kind of out of breath.

More suddenly than expected, I reached the deeper water where the bottom just precipitously dropped away. The boat lurched and began to drift, sinking slightly and tilting to the right. I leaned left and dug in too deep, overcompensating, my arm straining as the weight of the water pushed back against the plastic binders, bending the paddle. I spun around. Got myself pointed relatively in the right direction. Lurched forward. "And I'm off."

A few workers from the other office buildings who were outside smoking or just trying to be away from their computers for a few moments saw me. Some laughed and waived. I hadn't planned on this level of attention, but a spectacle needs spectators.

I waived back. The movement upset the delicate balance I'd achieved and sent the front sinking again, allowing a rogue wave of brownish, slimy water to splatter over on to my shoes causing a short, sharp jolt of panic to course through my spine as I realized I still had my cell phone in my pocket, and I hadn't bothered to purchase the insurance.

Ben and the others behind me laughed in anticipation of my failure. I was determined to prove them wrong as every gust of wind and lolling wave pushed me around, the boat listing, evidently from some inherent design flaw, forcing me to constantly shift my body weight. The physical exertion felt good compared to the lethargy induced by the office. But I've spent too long at a desk. My body was confused and angered by what was being expected of it. Even my abs were starting to hurt. Who knew I would be using my abs?

Progress was slow, but I found myself in the middle, completely committed now with no point in turning back. There would only be forward.

For a moment, I thought I might actually get across, collect a cool fifty dollars for myself, get talked about as a legend around the office for whoever was left to remember and tell the tale.

Then the bow of the boat began to sag inwards. Then the fear I should've felt from the beginning set in, and all I wanted was for this to be over and to just be able to slip back inside, go to my cubicle and return to work as if nothing happened.

"Shit. Not yet." I implored. "Come on baby. Hold on. Hold on." Upping my pace to 'desperate,' I began paddling frantically. Well as frantically as I could, given how out of shape I am.

The skirting, which was shoddily held on by tape, began to come loose, the Styrofoam flopping about. I paddled with one hand, while trying to get the tape to stick again with the other, but it was proving futile.

My boat was a total piece of crap, though this was to be expected. To build the boat properly would've required planning and construction skills, which I don't have. No mechanical skills either, and for that matter, no survival skills and only a basic understanding of nature.

I'm from the suburbs. I'm not suited for shit. If stuck out in the woods, I would probably wind up eating some type of poisonous nut or berry, get diarrhea and die from dehydration. After my death, a picture of some smiling younger me would be posted on NEWS reports as a warning about the dangers of being outside.

Two thirds of the way across and the paddle snapped in half, the binders sinking as I looked at the splintered end.

My mind was the only thing racing at this point. Maybe I could've tried harder building the boat. Maybe I should've tried harder at work, apply-

ing myself to my job. Who knows? Life is for second guessing.

The seams of the boxes began to soften as my sense of frustration grew. I hurled the remainder of the broom handle as far as I was able from my awkward seated position. It plopped into the water about fifteen feet away.

The garbage bag liners started to bulge inwards. The front of the boat sagging. "You bastard..." I started to say leaning back to keep the weight off the front, when the rear completely split apart, sending me plunging through a layer of algae, leaving what I later imagined to be a man shaped hole in the surface.

Underneath, I allowed myself to stay submerged. The laughter, noise, wind, stench, the office, they were all gone. It was peaceful. I didn't want to open my eyes; mostly out of fear of getting some type of bacterial infection, put partly because I didn't want to now confront reality. I needed a moment to process the situation.

What now? Every side of the lake is the same anyway. What would it matter if I worked from home, putting in an extra twenty or thirty hours? If I didn't get fired for this, I would just get fired for something else. No amount of work is ever enough. My sales goal has doubled. The economy shrunk. The managers who liked me are gone, replaced by an idiot.

I was wrong. Forward and backwards are not the only direction one can head in life.

Reluctantly, I came up for air.

Crawling out of the lake, I carried the remains of the boat to the dumpster and threw it in, Ben and the gaggle of coworkers trailing behind me. "Looks like you didn't make it."

"Yeah." I replied, a puddle forming at my feet. "Maybe I should've fashioned a sail of some sort." There were those canvas tote bags left over

from a sales campaign from one of the other reps. "Hmmm. That would've been a good idea." The best ideas always stem from failures.

"I think a good idea would've probably been to not do this at all." Ben replied, smirking, slapping me on the shoulder, then pulling his hand away and wiping it on his pants, while others snickered.

Let them laugh, they'll be screwed too one day.

I walked back into the office without talking to anyone, leaving muddy footprints, my clothes making squishing noises, now believing that I understood what Rhys had discovered out there on his journey, down near the bottom. That thing he was holding on to.

At my desk I checked my emails. Two hundred and forty-eight since the morning. I deleted them all, shut the computer off.

Then my phone rang. It was Celia's extension. She didn't wait for me to speak.

"Dennis you idiot! Get in my office, now!"

"Sure. Whatever could this be about?"

"Get in here immediately!" She shouted. Her voice shrill. God I hated her voice.

I stood up, trying to calm myself down. Rehearsing in my head how the meeting with her would go. I'd enter, utterly filthy - there was a clump of algae still stuck to my shirt - and after she says her piece, I'd extend my dirty hand across her desk, dripping water over her papers, her folders, hopefully her computer, and offer to shake her hand. A way of indicating that there aren't any hard feelings. She can do what she has to do and I'll do what I have to do. Then I'd say, "thanks for the opportunity, but I'll be moving on now." ❖

“Vacation”

by Shaunacy Ferro

That winter was brutal and to be perfectly honest, not to sound like a pussy, but I was dealing with a little case of the winter blues. I just needed some fucking sunshine, alright? I was dreaming of a getaway, you know, just me and maybe a lady, or maybe I'd pick one up there. I was feeling Florida, obviously, the Sunshine State, right? Or is that California? I think it's Florida. It doesn't matter because California might as well be a foreign country, by the time the plane landed the weekend would be half over. But it turns out a lot of people want to go to Miami when it gets real dark in shit-holes like Cleveland. Nobody's paying for those tickets on the kind of paycheck I make pushing underage ass-wipes out of bars. (You wouldn't know it by looking but I'm one tough motherfucker to knock down. I've got great balance.) A couple years ago I would have just canned the whole idea but suddenly I feel too old to deal with this kind of bullshit every day without occasionally taking a little vacation. Put it on the credit card, honey.

And so Pensacola it was. Not a great January destination, turns out, no matter what they tell you. No snow or nothing, but not exactly warm ocean breezes, either. But at least rooms were cheap and it was near the water, that was all I wanted. Nothing I could do except find some shithole bar with a shot special and see what kind of other desperate soul I could take home for the price of a Long Island Iced Tea.

So I'm sitting at this place down

the highway, the kind of joint where smoking's still a-OK, posted up at the bar wondering what kind of god-forsaken sticky liquid is gluing my shirt to the wood and staring down this biker-looking chick in the corner, when this guy comes swinging by my stool, a big fella, and parks up next to me.

I barely have time to look his way when suddenly I feel a slap across my back and who appears around my other side but Joey Lombardo.

“Well look if it isn't Ricky the Runaway.” I guess I deserved the new nickname. At this point, I've been on the lam for almost two years, with pretty good success. No one has shown up in Cleveland looking for me yet. But my luck might have run out.

Joey and me were never that tight but he ran with some of the guys I used to do business with back in Philly. Once or twice, back when I was still doing low-level shit like carting smuggled cigarettes up to Brooklyn from down south, he'd set me up with a few jobs. Once I graduated to hits he kind of fell off my radar. I was never hurting for work and the kind of scams he got up to were usually below my pay grade.

That was long before O'Flannigan's and the drunk college kids and learning how to spot a fake ID from Idaho without even needing those new reading glasses. (No one's from Idaho.) Sometimes I miss it, to get real with you, but there's a point where you get too old to be taking out small-time drug lords and turncoats and cheapskate business partners trying to skip town. It's just embarrassing

to have to bring earplugs on a job because even the quietest gunshot will make your ears ring. Not many hitmen live to be my age, but when they do they're deaf as shit, which definitely doesn't help the paranoia. So I cashed out, moved away, started over, retirement, second career, whatever you want to call it. Got out while I still could. And I plan to keep it that way.

“This here is Punchy,” Joey says, waving his hand toward the big guy on my right. “He and I are doing a job down here. Punchy, Ricky here is a friend of mine, he used to run with us up in Philly,” he says over my head to the guy. “Before he up and disappeared.” He smirks. “You been down here this whole time, Ricky? Hanging out here on the beach while us working stiffs keep it together up north?”

I do some quick calculation. I guess it'd be better if word got around that I was living down here. I could go back to Cleveland, no one would know. They'd be too busy hunting me here.

“You know me,” I say, clapping his shoulder, real friendly. “I'm a beach bunny at heart.”

We shoot the shit like that for a while, sure, but I can see there's something else he's getting up to saying, and I can tell I'm not gonna like it. No getting away from him now, though.

“Well,” he says finally, this little grin on his face, “We've got a little piece of work to take care of down here. Maybe you could help us out, seeing as you're here and all. Since you're not gonna be back in Philly anytime soon, right? Or what?”

The implication being, help me out or the big shots back home might get a tip about where you've been hiding. Something tells me he's about to low-ball me, hard.

But there's this little part of me

that doesn't care about that as much as I should. There's that little voice—real little—that says, this is who you are. Having a job—a *job* job, not like getting paid to bounce rowdy drunks out of bars—has always given me this little high that I can feel dancing up the back of my neck. It's a real rush, let me tell you. Knowing you're gonna get one over on somebody. Making a quick buck on it doesn't hurt, but for me, it's always been something else, too. I never feel more like a man, a *real man*, than when I'm shoving a gun down someone's throat. I know that's pretty messed up, trust me. But what's a fat bastard like me gonna do otherwise? I've been running scams and sticking people up since I was 13, not like I have any other marketable skills. This is who I am. No running from that.

I don't want to give him the satisfaction of saying yes immediately, though. "Alright, I'm listening," I say. "What's going down?"

He looks up at the bartender, makes sure he's out of earshot. "A broad. Real mouthy, if you know what I mean. We got a friend who isn't too happy about it." Personally I don't like to take out ladies—it feels uncouth, as my mother—rest her soul—might say—but it's not like I've never done it.

I don't like to ask too many questions. The more you know, the more you can tell. And you don't want people to think you've got anything to tell. That's what gets you in the end. No one's more paranoid than guys in the life, and sooner or later, no matter how tight you think you are, someone's gonna decide you aren't worth the risk to keep around. You can love a guy, kiss his cheeks, drink every night with him, but in the end you can only trust yourself. Business trumps friendship. Every time. I've seen guys order hits on their right-hand men,

their best friends since diapers, their own family even. The higher up you get, the bigger the target on your back.

I give it a couple seconds, but I don't need that much convincing. Plus, I could use the extra cash. "Alright," I say. Against my better judgment, mind you. "Just this once. Then I'm out. I'm straight now."

He laughs. "Yeah, sure."

He flags down the bartender, orders us a couple of whiskeys. "A toast," he says, raising his glass just a little toward me. "To good business."

I clink my glass against his, though I have the urge to smash it against his head instead, the arrogant prick. "Or something like that."

All I wanted was a vacation, remember?

Seems like only a second later I find myself alone in the dark parking lot, lit up under the orange filter of the streetlights, wondering if I'm a chump for saying yes to this. Joey palmed me a folded picture, some girl, hot in the right light, a tank top that reminds me of the warm beach I should be on right now. Anna Torres. Her address already written on the back. Too bad for her.

He threw me a duffel bag full of stuff for the job, too, cleanup stuff, mostly. I didn't really want to prolong the conversation, figured I could work it out on my own. I'm a professional. I pop the trunk of my rental car, this shiny little white Mazda that sure as shit would make me easy to follow out of this place, throw in the stuff Joey gave me. It feels like picking a basketball back up after riding the bench for a few weeks with a sprain. A little off, but familiar. Something hits the carpet with a metallic thud. I know the sound of a gun hitting the bottom of a trunk. I told him I didn't carry anymore, so he'd have to get me something. He's

probably got at least three extra pieces hidden in his car, I knew he could spare it.

I take a glance around, but no one's watching. That I can see. I'm starting to regret this. I try to breathe deep. I read on the Internet that just breathing can lower your blood pressure. I've been trying to stop carrying so much stress but I can feel it tight in my hips when I piss, like something has a vice-grip on my bladder and won't let go. That's what happens if you're lucky enough to get old in this job.

I've spent so many months trying to get away from shit like this, but here I am. My fault. If I hadn't been too stingy to shell out for a plane ticket to someplace nice like San Diego, maybe I'd be lounging by a pool and my biggest problem would be how bad my sunburn was about to get.

I could cut and run now, wipe my prints, and probably be back in Cleveland in time for breakfast. But sitting in an airport for hours is not best practice for a guy who's trying to ditch guys who have already shown a willingness to put out hits on people that annoy them. And who knows which one of these cars sitting cold on this street is going to peel out behind me when I leave.

I don't want to cop to being jazzed about getting dragged back onto this side of the law, especially not in a death penalty state. But you know that tingle in your arms when you're hitting your stride, when you know you're doing something you're good at? I can shine my flashlight on shitty IDs for the next ten years, but I'm sorry, this is my art. It's not my fault that my specialty happens to be a service nobody wants to be on the receiving end of.

So yeah, I map out my route to her house on my fold-out city map I

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got at the airport and hope when all this is done I'll at least get enough to fund a real vacation. I don't work for free. This feels like amateur hour, yeah, but I know Joey knows the price of a hit. Usually I won't take less than five figures, minimum, but he got me down to 8K, on account of us being "friends" and all. A discount for letting me disappear again after this.

By the time the sun comes up bright the next morning I'm scarfing down pastries at some local coffee place that serves liquid dirt and a mean blueberry muffin. It's important to carbo-load. Don't want to run out of juice just when things get dicey. Plus, do you know how much work it is to move a body? I guess that kind of thinking is probably why I look like I'm carrying a bowling ball around in my gut. I miss being 22 and having a six-pack, let me tell you that.

The best thing about the rental I'm cruising around in is that people don't expect criminals to be driving shiny white sedans covered in Hertz stickers. Rental cars leave a paper trail, sure, but at least you blend into whatever ritzy neighborhood you're staking out. Not that this girl lives in a ritzy neighborhood. It's a pretty standard picket-fence type, actually. A nice little porch that looks good for a summer margarita, a big tree in the front yard that's got grooves in the branches, ghost of a tire swing, maybe. I would wonder if this was her parents' place once, if she's got two kids whose lunches she packs most days except when it slips her mind and she shoves a five into each of their backpacks for cafeteria slop. But wondering is unprofessional and while I may not be exactly what you'd call "put together," I'm nothing if not a professional.

It's a quiet neighborhood at this time of day, midmorning. There's no car in the driveway, no sign of life. I

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decide now's as good a time as ever to do some recon. Maybe figure out what this chick has done to deserve me. I leave the gun in the car, because it's hard to play off the "lost repairman" routine if you've got a piece sticking out of your waistband. This isn't the right neighborhood to go in muzzle-first. Guns make people jumpy, do stuff they shouldn't.

I slide along the side of the house toward the backyard, which looks like it hasn't been picked up since two hurricanes ago. Tree branches and rotting wood furniture spread out over what little grass there is. I've got decent lock-picking skills, but the kitchen window slides open easy as pie. I just stick my arm through and even with my bad shoulder I can reach the door handle.

If I wasn't sure she lived alone before, the kitchen makes it obvious. Pots teetering in a pile in the sink, a single set of cutlery and one plate on the drying rack. I'm familiar with the aesthetics of the bachelor life. Coffee pot is empty, and the grounds in the filter are stone cold. Heat is set to 55. No signs of someone dipshitting around in their pajamas in the middle of the day, in other words.

I take off my shoes, careful not to track dirt on the linoleum. It's good business practice, plus it's just polite. Somebody's going to have to clean this house up after this, even if it's not gonna be her. Not to mention, I'm not gonna get put away for a stray shoeprint, no sir. I'm padding through the living room, taking a look around—no picture frames, dirty carpet, a laptop on the coffee table open to the local newspaper's site (some councilman got caught running a prostitution ring, an exciting day in small-town news, I assume)—when my hackles start to go up. Who leaves their laptop open after they leave the

house? And then I hear floorboards creaking. Shit.

Back it up slowly, take a deep breath, no big, I tell myself. I'm out of practice, obviously, but I've been in worse jams. Might just be a dog.

There's a scream behind me—more like a grunt, really, that horrible sound that comes out when a body recognizes danger before its mind. God dammit. One of many reasons hitmen aren't old. Your senses just aren't what they used to be.

She's grabbed the first thing in her sight line, clearly, and is waving it at me like it's a sword and we're at some goddamn Renaissance fair or something. It's one of those particle-board shelves, about arm's length. Just ripped straight off the wall. Clearly not very well installed in the first place. Bet she didn't put in the drywall anchors. People never do.

"Who are you?" she tells me, her voice guttural, her eyes big.

I'm not even thinking, it's just instinct. Survival. My hand is on her throat, slamming her head against the wall, my grip tightening around her neck as her eyes bulge. She lets out this quiet, sick cough-gurgle. It's a sound I've heard—that I've made happen—so many times.

My hand goes to my leg, where I always keep a knife, because you just never know what might come up. But TSA doesn't let you fly with those anymore. Most the time when I know things could get hairy on a job (and they always do, I should know that) I have a spare piece, too. But I left the only gun I had back in Cleveland, stuck under my mattress where it belongs. I've just got what Joey loaned me, and that's in the car. Because I thought that would be the smarter option. It's embarrassing, frankly.

And then I feel a little tap on the back of my shoulder. She's hitting me

with that dumb little shelf. Somehow she still has a grip on it. Impressive, I'll admit. It's not even wood, it's that cardboard bullshit. It feels gentle, like a slap on the back from a buddy I haven't seen in a while.

I look this girl up and down. She's not a giant or anything, but she's not one of those itty-bitty ladies, either. I peg her at maybe five-seven, maybe even five-eight on a good day. Probably a runner, if I had to guess. I start thinking about when this is all over, me having to muscle those meaty thighs into that duffle bag before they get too stiff. I'd prefer a steel barrel, to be honest—no smell, you know—but you can't just stop by a hardware store and grab one of those. My back hurts just thinking about the whole thing.

I don't know what to tell you. Something in me just snaps. Like, this is what I've come to? Choking out broads for some guy I barely know? I came here to chug beers on the beach, not pull my back out trying to wedge some lady into a suitcase.

I can't help it. I relax my hand, step away.

It feels weird, I'll give you that. I don't usually let go until they stop kicking.

I let her slide down the wall. "Sorry," I say, like I just bumped into her at the grocery store or something. I know I don't exactly sound sincere. I don't even know if she hears me, anyway. She's doubled over coughing.

"What—" she manages to get out. "The—." She coughs again, hard. "—Fuck."

I don't know why, I go to sort of pat her on the shoulder, reassuring her or something. "Whoa, whoa," I say in the voice I use on stray cats. I'd like to think it's soothing. "Let's all just calm down." The bruises on her neck will be brutal, hope she's not planning on going out in the next couple days.

I've got—well, had—a friend in the business who likes cyanide for just that reason. Doesn't leave anything visible. You don't even have to worry about getting rid of a body if there's not even a trace of you on 'em. I like to do things the old-fashioned way, mostly because I'm a little worried I would spill poison on myself instead of the target on accident, I gotta say.

"Don't fucking tell me to calm down." Her voice rises to a squeak. I start to remember that phrase has never gotten me very far with women. "This is my house." She waves the shelf around some more. I can see her eyeing the laptop behind me. Can you email 911 these days? I still have a flip phone, how would I know?

"Sorry, sorry, I'm sorry, lady," I find myself saying for no good reason. If there were a handbook for my line of work, they wouldn't even need to put "don't apologize" in it, because that's obvious to even the biggest rube. Her hands are shaking and I can smell the sharp spice of fear-sweat pouring out of her jacket. But I say it anyway. Just a reflex made of years of my mom hitting me topside of the head for being rude, but I also mean it this time. "I didn't mean to hurt you." Well, that's a lie. But I mean, in some sense, yeah, I didn't mean to. "I mean, or, I didn't want to. I shouldn't have."

"I already called the cops," she says, staring up at me, her hand on her throat. "The second I heard you. They'll be here soon."

I take another deep breath. Calm. Yeah, right. That's what they all say.

"We both know that isn't true."

She stares up at me, and I stare back. Not really the kind of chit-chat I was prepared for, is it?

"So," I say, catching my own breath. God, I forgot how much throwing people around can take out of you. "Made any enemies lately?" I

ask, not really knowing why I care. I don't care. If I was the caring sort I'd be a salesman or something. The difference between me and other people, what has kept me alive this long, is that I'm not afraid of other people's pain. Crunching bones, blood splatter on my face, the screaming, it's whatever. We all gotta meet our maker eventually. Why should I care whether they do it now or later? No skin off my back.

"What?"

I can't help it. I should have been on vacation, anyway. There's a reason I retired. Key word: tired.

"Joey Lombardo?" I ask. Bad form to go ratting out your employer, but here we are, again, me running my mouth when I shouldn't.

"Who is that?"

Of course, he's just the conduit, even if he fronts like he's a made man. Who knows who hired him in the first place, or what kind of dough he planned on skimming off the top after I did his dirty work.

"You pissed someone off, I don't know," I tell her. God knows why. "But they're a little more trigger happy than I'd like my friends, if you catch my meaning." I don't usually spend a lot of time explaining myself to a target, and I'm not quite sure how to do it.

"I piss people off every day. I'm a reporter."

"Oh." That's a new one.

I've dealt with jilted exes and plenty of clients who feel their mistress is just a little too chatty after a few drinks at the bar, plus the usual con men and snitches and guys who wouldn't pay up and drug lords who'd lost their edge and even a couple wise guys the family couldn't trust anymore. Those guys knew their time would come, you don't get into the life because you like the stability. Not

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so much the political-type hits for me, though. I don't fuck with freedom of speech. I'm a patriot, even if I haven't filed my taxes in a decade. Hand over heart.

"Well, someone's unhappy with you. Just—" I don't know how to reassure someone that no, I didn't break into her house just to rob and kill her, like some random lowlife. Well, just to do some research before offing her, but maybe I've changed my mind. Maybe. I can't see how I can make an explanation like that sound okay.

I've never let a hit go, never ever. Sure, I've let them think I would, once or twice. It's a rush, I gotta tell you. But I feel for this lady. She's got spunk. And I've got no loyalties down here.

So I back away, as dumb as that sounds.

I open my mouth to try to explain. But at this point, the adrenaline is wearing off, and it hits me that I haven't gone to the bathroom since I left the motel. Like, hours ago, and more important, many coffees ago. Buddy, let me tell you, it's hell getting old. My prostate is the size of a watermelon at this point. I'm pissed at myself. The worst rookie move.

"I gotta take a leak," I tell her.

"What?" she says, like I've asked for her firstborn child or something.

"I'm just gonna use your john real quick," I say.

She seems more surprised by this than she was by me walking in in the first place. I get it, this whole situation is pretty messed up at this point.

"Um," she goes, "it's—" she starts to point down the hall, but I've already seen half the house, remember?

"I know, I got it," I tell her.

I try not to mess up the towels with my grubby hands when I'm done, so I wipe 'em on my jeans a bit before I come out. Nice lavender-type color,

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very classy. Same color as the candle on the back of the toilet.

When I open the door I'm staring into the bowels of a .22.

I'm a goddamn idiot. I could have just walked out, and I'd be halfway back to the Midwest by now. I could have gone to the bathroom at the Starbucks down the street.

"The police on their way yet?" I ask the gun.

"Not just yet," Anna says.

Now that she has a little control over the situation, the wild, animal look is gone, replaced with a certain confidence I usually see on criminals who know exactly how to dispose of a body. "Sit down," she gestures toward the couch in the living room. The blazer is off. "Let's talk a little," she says.

I see her eyes moving up and down to take in my bald spot—goddamn stress—and the paunch that seems like it holds damn near every beer I've ever seen fit to drink, the skin that's seen too many cigarettes and not enough sunscreen in this lifetime.

"Everyone around here has a gun," she says with a smirk as I back away. "When I moved here I hated it. Your kid is a lot more likely to shoot your face off than you are to kill a burglar in the middle of the night. But hey, looks like it came in handy after all, didn't it." She waves the piece at me again. "A gift from my grandma—you like it?"

A smart old bird. "I feel like me and your grandma might get along." We both laugh a little at that one, just the little barking sounds you make when something's not funny but your body still wants to let out air. I'm not sure whether to look her in the eye or the gun. I've gone soft since I left Philly. No, even before that, or I wouldn't have left.

I walk over and sit down on the

couch, real slow, hands up in front of me. "I left mine in the car," I say, "so let's not get carried away." I don't need to get popped for reaching for a phantom gun. This is the dumbest situation I've gotten myself wrapped up in for at least a decade, that's for sure. What was I thinking? Oh, right, that some lady in slacks wasn't about to take me down in the middle of a Tuesday morning. Maybe not the old me, sure.

She looks like she's held a gun before but her wrist is still wobbling. What they don't show in the movies is where your arm gets so tired from waving your piece around that you just drop it and let yourself get shot. Laptop's still open on the coffee table.

"How did you find me?" she asks. "Have you been stalking me?" She's losing her cool, for sure. She wipes her bangs out of her eyes with the back of her wrist.

"Not me. I'm not even from here," I say. "I'm on vacation!" This sounds as ridiculous to me as it does to her, I bet. I keep repeating that line like it matters to anyone what I'm doing here. "No, really. Someone just dumped this shit on me, I shouldn't even be here. Look," I finally say. "I don't do hits anymore."

"A hit. Like, someone wants to kill me."

I thought we were clear on that one by now, but I imagine she isn't thinking that clearly at this particular moment.

"That's what I'm saying." I nod hard, trying not to sound like I think she's an idiot. No use in pissing off a woman who has a gun in your face, I've learned that much in my life.

She looks like she's trying to kill me with her eyes, like she can't quite believe that there are no white-hot lasers shooting out of her pupils at this very second. But I also know that

she hasn't called the police, even though I see the iPhone sticking out of her back pocket. My ex always used to complain that these big-ass new smartphones never fit in women's pants.

"So you're like, a hitman?"

"Yeah—no, no. Not anymore, at least."

Her eyebrows shoot up like she's just thought up the answer to Final Jeopardy. Pointing the gun haphazardly half at me, half at some point between me and the floor (I can't help but cover my crotch) she slides over to the dining table and sticks her hand elbow-deep into the giant purse slopped over one of the chairs.

She comes up with something white and plastic and moves back my way. She raises it up for me, pushes a button. "I'm recording. Not that you deserve any explanation from me," she smirks, "but legally, I have to tell you. In some states." I raise my hands up all the way by my ears, the international symbol for *bey, let's all be friendly now*. Nice that she's worried about legalities here.

"It's not every day you get to interview a hitman, right?" she tells me, and even though I can hear the sarcasm it sends a little jolt up my spine. What a trip—interviewed! Maybe I'll get my life story in the papers, maybe get myself a book contract for one of them tell-alls. I'm thinking. I bet the money'd be good. Well, if the ink has time to dry before my old bosses find me. Usually guys like me don't start talking until everyone they know is good and dead.

I tell it from the top, the whole thing, airport to the dumpy diner where I ate breakfast. I skip over some parts about Joey Lombardo, because who wants that liability. It's still the longest I've talked to another human in a couple days, and I start to go hoarse.

"I guess I don't really know whose money is behind this," I tell her at the end. "You going to give me your theory? Or are you just going to pump me for information and then ditch my body in some swamp?"

This, she seems to get a kick out of. "It's a little chilly for that, don't you think? You wouldn't decompose fast enough," she says. "But I guess you know more about that than I do." She's not giving me much leeway, but I can imagine a time when we'd be

friends. Not friends exactly, no, more like the kind of people who nod at each other at the bar and then go back to staring into their drinks. But civil, sure.

"I have some sources that can take care of you later," she says. I can't tell if she's for real. "You can see my story there," she says. Gestures the gun at the laptop. "The politician? Bill Heany. He's not too fond of me right now, but it's not my fault he couldn't resist dipping into the city coffers to



Photo by BCS

The Blotter

fund his third-rate brothel in the most obvious part of town. I didn't think he had the balls to do anything about it, but I guess I was wrong on that one. Suppose I'm lucky he's too dumb to outsource his dirty work to a reliable professional."

I should be offended that she doesn't think *I'm* a reliable professional. I have decades of experience! *Decades!* I want to tell her. But mostly, I'm just wishing I was back in a place where the most dangerous threat is an overzealous frat boy with a pharmaceutical hookup.

She sighs. "Here I thought the worst part of today was going to be trying to get my car out of the shop."

"Maybe I could give you a ride," I say, trying to sound extra helpful, because again, I'm not the one with the gun here.

She laughs for real this time. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not looking to get in any sort of vehicle with you." She's not stupid, that's for sure.

We stare at each other for a long minute. I've never had to make small talk with a target. By the time you've opened your mouth you've already ruined the hit. Obviously. "So."

"So."

"Should I just...leave, then?"

"You're not sleeping on my couch, if that's what you're asking. And no, there's nothing in my fridge." Who does she think I am?

"Wasn't going to ask. How about I just let myself out?" I ask. "You mind putting the gun down, just a little maybe?"

She lowers her arm, gun on the table, shaking out her wrist. "I sort of forgot about it."

I sure didn't. I stand up quick, not looking to waste my chance to get out a second time. She follows me with her eyes as I move, picking up

the gun again.

Still, I figure I've got enough leeway to negotiate a little. "Maybe you could give me a couple minutes before you call the police. Since I did you this favor, you know."

"Gee, thanks for the consideration. I'm always so grateful for men who don't kill me."

"I really did just come down here for a vacation," I say, knowing as it comes out that it sounds like the worst kind of lie—a pointless one. It would take too long to explain. "I didn't want to be here." Not entirely true, but not totally false, either. "I just got roped into this whole stupid thing."

I can tell she doesn't give a shit about what brought me here, at least not in the grand sense. I wonder how long it'll be before Joey realizes I ran off on him. I definitely don't want to wait around for that. But I don't feel ready to go back to my stupid shitty job and my depressing lonely apartment in Cleveland just yet, either. Maybe I add a couple days to the rental car, get down to Miami, I think. Have a real beach vacation. Just me and a Corona in the sand. Better yet, maybe I'll just stay down there. But no, too many wise guys down there.

I look at her hand on the gun, still shaky. I think about the gun in the car, waiting for me. I don't leave loose ends. They're dangerous. That's always been my thing. I'm very thorough. Anybody who can still move their mouth can rat you out.

Why would I take that kind of chance? ❖

"Nigel"

I'm not devastated, per se.
It felt more like
I lost a science experiment—
or social experiment, perhaps,
given the trust placed in a hairy spider
the size of your hand.

But still a life was lost
rendered crippled on the shower floor
while tinier ants—
who didn't possess a fraction of his grandeur,
mind you—
toted away the last of his use.
Or juice.
Or whatever ants do.

And I must not have cared too much
because I never gave him the burial he deserved.
I just swept him into a corner
where water wouldn't carry him away.
Because truthfully
I want him around
still
and as long as the exoskeleton persists
(forever, I assume?)
I can keep pretending that
I'm not devastated, per se.

Two by M. L. Hassell

"Camellia"

...Or is it Gardenia?
Fuck.

You gently correct me every time we
pass the fragrant white-blossomed bush and
even though I don't like the smell I
like when you pick them for me.

I
guess it's just one of those things that
we have to translate between us.
We
can look each other in the eye but
not always speak the same language.

"Still things I haven't done"

I was going to write a about Africa
but I've never been
to Africa.

and I was going to write about sledding
but I've never been on a sled.

I was going to write about
a rifle, hunting bobcats,
but the only bobcat I've seen
was this sad lonely
skinny thing
sitting on a log
in a London zoo.

then I thought, off that,
that I'd write a poem about London
but it felt
obvious. and lots of people
have written poems about London before.
they've written about Africa too,
and sled-dogs,
but somehow that seems more romantic to me,
I suppose because those are still things
I haven't done.

I was going to write a poem about manual labor
(which I have done)
but it still seemed dishonest,
since now I work in an office
and I have a window
and a laptop I can take home.
and I was going to write a poem
about an ex-girlfriend, but I didn't.
they get enough poems
and anyway

Three by DS Maolalain

most of them are just
new ways to say "you broke my heart"
which have been taken away,
all by other people. so have the good ways to say
"It was me and I'm sorry"
or "and I'm not sorry."

but I am sorry. but it's not romantic
because I've said it before. I was going to put it
something like
"your heart was a plate
and I dropped it too early
and your hand was a wineglass
and I squeezed it too hard
and you are delicate
and should find someone less clumsy than
I am"

but I didn't do that
either.

and I was going to write another one
about how I should improve my writing
or learn to apologize properly
or do more things than sitting
and drinking
and writing poems about poetry
and I suppose one of those is the thing
I eventually tried to do.

"The ends of may"

are cigarette ends, grey
 as the stubble
 of an ashtray. I step outside
 and take in
 cold lungfuls, filling myself
 until I rupture
 and hiss. the air is grey,
 sky grey infinite,
 the grass seems to wave green
 through a thick grey
 filter. the cars belch
 pollution, microscopic,
 though it also cannot help. the walls
 of the house are old, they flake to grey,
 away from painted colour. my girlfriend
 is gone after a weekend
 spent together
 and the birds
 are all pigeons.

"The clap clinic"

I remember
 uncomfortable seats
 like waiting at a bus station,
 the clap clinic
 in toronto, based
 in the gay neighbourhood
 30 minutes walk,
 waiting for our turn
 to be taken in
 and examined
 for something
 which each were sure
 was unserious
 but still felt like
 should be checked.

there was something on the wall
 about hpv; how it's dangerous
 for men too - it can cause cancer
 even if you don't know
 that you have it. and looking around
 at people; looking at how they
 sat. trying to work out
 who was there for what
 though we were all
 really
 the same:

there for the memory
 of happiness
 and the same unhappy
 thing.

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

mermaid@blotterrag.com

The inside of my eyelids are a fireworks show tonight; too much staring at screens, I guess. My phone, the TV, i-Pad, et. al. It makes it difficult to settle down to the beginnings of sleep, but is entertaining as hell. One moment a thunderhead building in the distance, the next a ball of earth-worms in a coffee-can. I remember reading about the work to develop a mathematical theory for what appears to be chaos, a gentleman by the name of Benoit Mandelbrot, and what eventually became known as "Fractals." I love the spinning, splashing look that my brain receives from the mash-up of my eyes and my imagination. These...pixels? become the dreams that I will have tonight. Not quite yet, but soon.

Garrett - cyberspace

continued from page 3

realm of grown-up books. I read a lot, but the one I kept coming back to was Jean Craighead George's masterpiece *My Side of the Mountain*. The marvelous appeal of running away from home to the Catskill mountains, living off the fat of the land. Frightful the falcon! And Sam Gibley writing down his story, with pictures, on birch bark.

Did I already want to be a writer? Not yet, not quite, but there was already something here, the nucleus of an idea feeding on the marvel of strolling into the public library (our town's was just across the street from my house) and seeing all of this summer's bestsellers arranged on a table – *The Godfather*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Andromeda Strain*. 1969 was a very good year for readers. At night, in their living-room chairs beneath lamplight, they read; Mom working on William Armstrong's *Sounder* and Dad deep into the Bruce Catton Civil War epic *Grant Takes Command*. Our dining room had hundreds of books on four large white pine bookshelves. Perched atop the shelves were five-gallon aquariums humming and bubbling, Mollies and Platies, Guppies, Corydoras and Angels darting around within. What, they must have wondered, was I looking at beneath them? The revelatory spines of Dad and Mom's book collection.

I think I started looking at their shelves about the same time I stopped watching cartoons on Saturday mornings, going outside early to smack newly-fallen walnuts into the woods with a stick, where in my imagination I was Clendenon hitting home-runs into right-field stands at Shea. Many of those volumes are now in my possession. Dad's copy of *Paths of Glory*. His *Ben-Hur*. Two small collections of Robert Service's poems. A coffee-table book pictorial history of World War II. Mom's copies of *The Water Is Wide* and *The Endless Steppe*.

I just finished the lovely memoir "The Lambs" by Carole George. If there is such a thing, this is a perfect book. Happy, sad, sweet, occasionally silly. The illustrations seem to be her own snapshots – intimate, captured happenstance. Her writing-voice is easy to listen to, and the paper thick and creamy. It is a book built with regard for the reader, and meant to be kept on a shelf for years. A volume to be brought out each summer when the rain keeps one off the field, or in the evening in a comfortable chair with a good lamp, to be read aloud to someone you love. In a couple of weeks I'm bringing it with me to Mom's, for just that purpose.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

CONTRIBUTORS:

Tom Gartner writes, “My background: I’ve had short fiction and poetry published in various journals, including *Whetstone*, *California Quarterly*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, and (most recently) *Concho River Review*. One story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. I work as a buyer for an independent bookstore in San Francisco.”

N. West Moss is the author of the short story collection, **The Subway Stops at Bryant Park**. She is also the author of an illness memoir and a middle grade novel. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Salon*, *McSweeney's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and elsewhere. All she ever wants to do is write, read, talk about writing, think about writing, and then write some more.

Kelly Dasta holds a B.A. from the University of Pittsburgh, double-majoring in fiction writing and communications. Her work has appeared in *Coal Hill Review*, *Her Campus*, and *The Fifth Floor*. Currently, she resides in Pittsburgh, working at a local nonprofit.

R.E. Hengsterman is an award-winning writer and photographer. He lives in North Carolina with “the family” and sometimes wears pants. His work can be found at www.rehengsterman.com and the occasional tweet @robhengsterman. This piece is an edited reprint, originally published in the *Eunoia Review*.

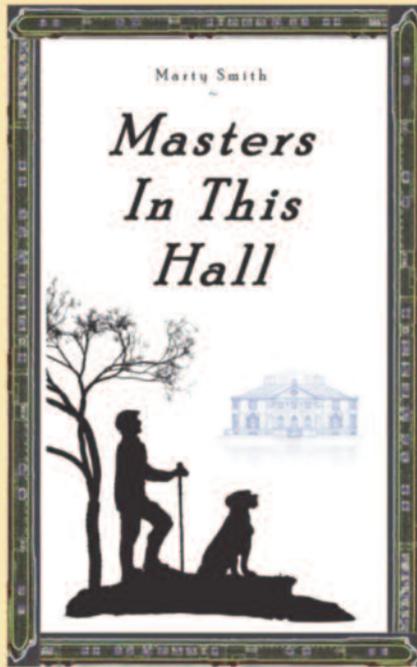
Darren Mileto writes, “In case you need a biography: I live in Philadelphia. I am from New Jersey. I still fantasize about being a professional baseball player even though I was always terrible at it. I have stories published in *The Coal City Review* and *Down in the Dirt*.”

Shaunacy Ferro is a Brooklyn-based writer and editor whose work has appeared in outlets like *Mental Floss*, *Fast Company*, *The Cut*, *The Cleveland Review of Books*, and more. Her fiction can be found in *Ink in Thirds* and *Gravel*.

M. L. Hassell is a middle child. She has been spotted in Chatham, Orange, and Guilford counties, usually doing what she enjoys most: farming, cycling, welding, and making people laugh. In her spare time, she pursues a degree in environmental science from UNC Chapel Hill.

DS Maolalai has been nominated for Best of the Web and twice for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, **Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden** (Encircle Press, 2016) and **Sad Havoc Among the Birds** (Turas Press, 2019). He lives in Ireland.

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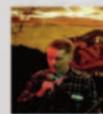
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