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“Apathetic - Antithetical”

I step outside on the porch. It is nicer here, now that we are fully within the confines of the vernal equinox, but not yet succumbing to the full-on broil of summer. I prefer it out here, however, regardless of season. Inside is the place of information, and much of that information is...ungood.

Did I hear what happened today? What she said? What they did? Hang on, look at this...isn't it awful? Do you believe it? What is wrong with...

I try to not pay too much attention to things that are ungood. I'm not hiding. I'm not ignoring. I'm just not surrendering everything.

And while that may seem to say that I'm apathetic about what is going on around me - around the world - nothing like this was implied. What I mean – what I am saying – is that I try to not give anything more of my time than is necessary. I don't pay *too* much attention. Just what I consider the correct amount. I feel that giving the ungood more of my focus is impactful on my work, my mood, and my health.

At this point it might be considered by some to be helpful to begin a sentence with “This is not to say I don't think that there are many terrible things going on and I'm appalled by them.” But I don't think that repeating something in a new way or taking the same stance from a different angle is peculiarly helpful. Truth? I find it antithetical to repeat thoughts that were clearly stated.

Which may or may not make my point.

Wow. It is difficult to maintain this rhetorical point of view. In the hopes of ostensibly finding common ground, most of us are used to repeating ourselves. Louder, slower, wrapped in our reasoning and context, illustrated with personal anecdotes and lots of synonyms. Increasing the noise, not because we like to hear ourselves, but because we want you to hear us, acknowledge us and come over to our way of thinking. Which is not, by the way, common ground. And so are we frustrated by our own logic, or lack thereof. We're all in this together, we say, we think - craving some manner of confirmation, so that we feel like we're mutually involved. And we want that participation trophy.

Meanwhile, that which we might be doing to some end, the thing we're *good at*, goes by the wayside. Accomplishment, with all of its value, including satisfaction, delayed or just plain gone. In the interest of passive absorption of...everything, we neglect our call, our calling. Do this long enough and we no longer know what that calling is, or

how to perform the actions necessary. Our information overload comes with a price, a weight, a tarry stickiness that most of us haven't the energy or disposition to carry forever nor with which to relieve ourselves.

Frost once wrote about the road not taken. How it made a difference for him, to have reached a fork and made a decision one direction over another. I don't think he could have imagined that we would be here, letting lack of choice make us. That we would prefer not to be on the road at all.

Which is why I go out on the porch, with a cup of coffee or tea, with a book, without my phone or laptop. Yes, I want to be aware, but I don't need to have every gory detail precisely when it happens. No one is grading me on my promptness. I want to be productive, too, and sometimes that means recharging, finding the mental energy, the clarity of ideas. I would like to be helpful, if I can be, and as sympathetic and positive as I am able. In an information situation as intentionally shocking as a firehose of cold water, this can only be accomplished with counter-intention on my part. Did I hear? No. Hang on, check this out. . . . No, thank you. No, it isn't easy for me, either, but I get better with practice.

I turn away from the noise. I turn a corner. I take a deep breath and turn the page.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

in the morning, crapped out

“How I Gave Up Meat, And Took On Anger”

by Bowen Craig

I became a vegetarian out of spite. It's not the most traditional path to meatlessness, but if you're looking for a good motivator, allow me to recommend simmering hatred.

I was twenty-three-years-old, largely without direction or money. In other words, I was yet another member of an ever-growing segment of early 21st century American society, the protracted adolescent man-boy. I'd recently moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina to live with a few college friends, both of whom had direction and money. Prioritizing money over direction, I wound up answering a job ad on a perforated rip tab poster tacked onto a cork message board at the corner of “I don't remember” Lane and “It doesn't matter to this story” Boulevard. Though in retrospect the fact that I found the job posting on a piece of perforated paper should've been a clue as to what lay in store, I was clueless, a perfect addition to my growing penilessness and my abundant directionlessness. I wound up discovering a little bit of all of these “ness”es, but mainly just boiling hatred.

I honestly had little to no idea of what kind of job I was seeking, what the organization I was hoping to employ me did every day, or whether or not it was a good idea to shower before job interviews. I wasn't exaggerating about my cluelessness. However, I did shower before the job interview...and I've got to say that may have been a mis-

take. Hindsight is 20-20, but so is hindsmell.

The acronym was PIRG. Displaying a glaring lack of descriptive name theory, it stood for Public Interest Research Group, an organization with a moniker so vague that it could've been a high-level quasi-governmental think tank or I could've wound up telemarketing neon condoms to unsuspecting truck stop owners. The name is *that* bland. However, it turned out to be a Ralph Nadar-inspired do gooder club of wonderfully naïve hippie kids raising money the old fashioned way: knocking on people's doors, interrupting their dinner and attempting to shame the living shit out of them for causes they couldn't care less about.

They hired me immediately. I was later to find out that there was no such thing as “not hiring” an applicant. There was, however, a weeding out process — the job itself. About half of the PIRGers left after their first day.

They liked me at the PIRG office. I was admittedly pretty good at the job. I couldn't pinpoint why I was better at this than most until the week that I realized that I was the only white guy in the office whose hairstyle couldn't have been described as at least partially-dreadlocked. No self-respecting suburban mother of three wants to give money to the white guy with dreadlocks, a

fact that eluded most of my fellow PIRGers.

Essentially, we would meet at the office around 4:30 PM and all drive to a non-gated suburban neighborhood, armed with clipboards, pamphlets, a few prompts and a heaping portion of beautifully youthful naiveté. We'd then proceed to our assigned portion of said neighborhood, knock on every door, try our spiel, get the door slammed in our face, then move on to the next house. The success rate hovered around 5%, but like I said, being the only clean-cut member of the PIRG crew I had about a 10% success rate. Unheard of in the cramped PIRG offices around this great land.

I hated my boss. And it wasn't the normal boss hatred. This was a roller coaster of hate. A see-saw ride where every night I forgot and every morning I was reminded. His name was Dan, but I called him Daniel to his face and “That asshole, Daniel” behind his back. He hated being called Daniel, which was, of course, why I called him Daniel. He thought I was an idiot. I thought the same of him. Our hate became our ritual. Ritualized behavior is always a part of the work experience, and this was no exception. We circled each other daily like boxers, small, pathetically weak, untuned boxers whose endurance waned due to an acute lack of protein.

While we did do some mild protesting at PIRG, some light informing of suburbanites about the dangers of fysteria from hog lagoon leaks, we mostly begged people for money. Oh, I should explain that North Carolina produces a lot of pork and that professional hog farmers call their giant ponds of pig excrement

“lagoons,” as if a perky young man in a straw boater hat is bound to pad-dle by reciting lyric poetry to his wide-eyed, frilly-dress-clad fiancée while her heart swoons with the pulsating rhythm of young love. For real, they call them lagoons. For real, their run-off is poisonous. For real, no one in the region cared.

It wasn't merely that I was clean-cut. I was also lacking a certain degree of anger...but that wouldn't last. I got angry, not at polluters, but at Daniel, an emotional polluter to be sure, but not actually a source of corporate poison. The rest of my co-workers defaulted to righteous indignation like crazy people default to the CIA spying on them. And I soon replaced Exxon-Mobil as Daniel's favorite anger target. I mean sure, I've destroyed one or two ecosystems with a couple of massive oil spills in my time, but who hasn't? The sticking point was that Daniel couldn't fire me. I was literally twice as good at the job as he was, so following the well-laid path of so many angry bosses before him, he tried to make my work life miserable, hoping that I'd quit. It did not have the intended effect.

I first noticed that my boss hated me with some subtle comments. Soon he began assigning me the least promising streets in that night's territory. In line with the glorious history of simmering hatred-turned-motivation, this type of move only focused my growing anger. After about six weeks, the guy was just blatantly insulting me in front of the rest of the office. That's when I dug up a lesson from elementary school. Bullies REALLY HATE IT when you just laugh off their taunts, and they hate it even more when you hit on

their girlfriends. It's not as if I cared what he thought of me anyway. He couldn't fire me, and I wasn't about to quit. Our mutual anger festered.

Daniel was dating his second-in-command, a rail-thin, short black haired, genius grant writer, eternally happy, and largely unshorn young woman we'll call Janet. I won't use her real name, because I didn't hate Janet enough to change my diet in any meaningful way. His name really was Dan, but if you see him do me a solid and call him Daniel. He hates that. Naturally, I began routinely bringing presents to work to give to Janet. I didn't want to actually subject Janet to the horrors of dating me, and honestly, that would've risen to a level of sadism that I didn't yet possess, but my presents did get progressively more romantic. First a little toy from a twenty-five cent vending machine. Next an appetizer gift certificate from the restaurant Michael Jordan opened down the street. Soon a granola bar or two. They then took a slight veer for the Victorian. I began scouring Saturday morning yard sales for antique-looking knick-knacks. Fifty cents for an opaque glass jewelry box. Two dollars a print of a John Singer Sergeant painting.

Remember, I didn't have money. What I did have was tenacity and hatred. Tenacity and hatred focus the mind much more than money. Eventually, I was straight-up writing her love poems and giving her flowers. Well, potted plants. Recently mutilated flowers don't go over so well with environmentalists.

Daniel noticed. Janet was far too kind, too polite and frankly too wonderfully oblivious to the under-the-

surface tension between Daniel and myself to ever say anything other than expressing her momentary gratitude. I was such an angry little turd that, while presenting my generally twice-weekly gifts I began to wait until I noticed that Daniel could see the presentation before tilting my head forty-five degrees, smiling and handing her her newest treasure. She truly never let on that it had any effect other than making her smile for a quick minute, but, of course, Janet's happiness wasn't my goal. Daniel's anger was.

And damn, did it ever work. Not exactly as I'd planned. Like I said, he couldn't fire me, since I was better at his job than he was and he knew it. He was neither clever nor tenacious enough to be able to hound me out of the office. I wasn't the only one of his employees who hated him, merely the only one stubborn enough to turn that hatred into a personal mission.

I waited for his sneer. I longed for that left lip movement. I would dream about it, plan for it, wait for it. It became the most important thing in my life.

After a few months of this routine, Daniel had a light bulb-turning-on-over-his-head moment. He couldn't directly run me off, but being an environmentalist, and thus knowing the ins-and-outs of shame like the back of his weak, bony hand, he deployed this movement's preferred weapon. I was, at the time, the only carnivore in the office. It wasn't a conscious choice for me, just something I'd never questioned before. Daniel saw me eating a chicken burrito one day, had a revelation, sat down, and cackled while drumming

his fingertips together like a Bond villain. OK, he probably only did that in my head, but he DID dare me to give up meat for a month, under the guise of an office-wide Month of Meatlessness challenge, which, even at the time, was clearly aimed only at me.

Not wanting to admit Daniel's superiority on any level, even dietarily, I knew that I couldn't refuse. He'd thrown down the gauntlet. He'd pulled off his riding glove and back-handed me. Under the dictates of the code duello, I was honor-bound to accept. I gave up meat that month, and haven't looked back since. Once you start to do something, or stop doing something, it's remarkably easy to keep on-track. Humans are creatures of habit. Hell, if we started telling children that instead of diamond rings you're supposed to propose marriage with pogo sticks, then DeBeers would corner that fake world market, Disney would make a few bad films, and BAM women would compete for pogo stick size bragging rights at the country club. It's just what people do.

Sure, I'm man enough to admit that The Interview at The Research Triangle has not gotten the same level of press as its more famous cousin at Weehawken, and for good reason. It's decidedly manlier to duel with pistols at dawn than with falafel at five. ❖

"No Devil Shall Get His Apocalypse"

by Christopher Stevenson

The last sun committed suicide and the universe blackened. Creation's final species tried one last time to craft a new sun, cobbling a Frankenstein from the cadavers of expired orbs. The very last black dwarf.

Helen, a researcher, cataloged *Them* and everything they did. This ending was right on schedule. Not only was this run-through over, with government sequester, her department's program was ending. Unless something changed the universe simulation through this computer program was done. No reboot this time, the universe was ending. She listened in on the sermon and the end of time.

"But mothers care less for children who stop caring...Ungoverned mothers on holiday...A useless mother is a dead mother," cried *Their* clergy, "whose womb is just an instrument for forgotten dreams. Every new mother—a wannabe should learn her craft in the meditation of misery. Offspring hope, and every hope is a facet to more mothers, more water, more possessiveness, more oxygen, and more suns. When suns refuse to cooperate, they become mothers to themselves, free, but dead."

Fitting end, she supposed. Not just for the universe, but for her department. Her marriage. Everything. This was the last day for her. Most funding for any services were being cut. Hers was just the first. The end of the universe just wasn't sexy anymore. Running simu-

lations of the universe on computers and models was just pork barrel spending.

Helen didn't want to leave. Outside her work room was a more real or *a realer world* as she called it. She'd have to face her much younger brother, who got her the job on the condition that she was able to keep it afloat. Her brother secured her the position because she was supposed to have been a Wunderkind, in the Sixties and Seventies: accepted to college at 15, world class computer programmer, horror screenwriter, and in 1978 created an interactive role-playing game that would mix her computer skills with her writing. Her axioms and algorithms were so strong, she seemed to create an intelligent life-form. She thought of it as intelligent algae, but her earlier work was one of the first steps in the work she did now. But Helen never really thought of herself as a *Wunderkind*. More of a run-of-the-mill-kind with a streak of good luck. She certainly wasn't *Wunder* enough to have a retirement account at over 70. And she had only had this job for a few years.

"The ending screams louder than the strongest cyclones of the past, those ancient storms frightened Valhalla herself in a day we can't remember. We glance backward but the past cannot reflect eternity, move forward as we fear the death of loftiness of fear while life dies and death dies, breathing oblivion into the universe. Treasure now for cold comes quickly, treasure now for as in old

stories we're together in Hades. No Devil shall get his apocalypse."

And they sang an old hymn. Iambic pentameter. Amazing Grace. Or maybe it was The Yellow Rose of Texas. Maybe it wasn't even Iambic. It was one of those dated schemes.

The Devil scryes, "Men's cants and whines grown:
Church rectors and lay weep a haw and hem,
Treat him as wonder'd as grievances stem?"
Darwin replies, "True! scold God an' fears flown,
We wean all wont toward the Great Unknown.
'Tis to G-d which all we all Cunning bemoan,
His most witless we most shall oft condemn,
Purest hearts sculpted from a sainted Gem,
To be used as a Philosopher's Stone?"
"Tis a metal cold unbound universe,
In which the night-time doeth teethe and wade,"
Sayeth by Charles, Lady Science sips,
Fro' ice a Vespers End's seethe is remade:
No Devil shall get his Apocalypse.

She couldn't tell, but the hymn made her think of when she was eight years old and her future husband, Manny, made her a daisy ring and asked her to marry him, she said yes. It was the Fifties, a time before the world of white people were forced to reckon with civil rights, war protests, and color television. Manny's family moved to the Black-eye Pea Capital of the World, Athens, Texas, when white flight took Washington, D.C

Helen was originally from Sparta, Texas. Her parents had been missionaries attached to a church, who stopped their mission in El Salvador when their daughter was born.

The night Manny gave Helen the daisy-chain ring, they looked into the stars and Helen knew then that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

"You know what my dreams are,

Helen?" asked Manny. "I want to take you to Paris and Milan. I want to be your husband and we'll have kids and grandkids."

"Promise?" asked Helen. "Absolutely." Helen and Manny's courtship began at a Pentecostal church in Athens.

As toddlers they had both been in the nursery together while their parents attended service. When Helen first saw him, she planted a kiss on his forehead and he bawled. She knew that she'd love him, because even when he cried, he wept like a boy trying to be John Wayne. Onward they moved famously into elementary school, where they never shared the same classes, but they would pal around during recess. She always had an extra sandwich for him because he usually lost his to bullies. She would hide his brown paper bag behind a flag in a display case in their school's central lobby.

They attended the same church camps, learning bible verses and how to make pipe cleaner animals, when on her 13th birthday she asked for her first kiss. He obliged, and he spent the next couple years trying to figure out how to raise enough money for an engagement ring, and to keep his pants on when he wasn't around her. As they grew up, they became caretakers of the nursery.

One Sunday, when the two were supposed to be babysitting the toddlers, they were cavorting in a church bathroom, after being dared by friends to "do it in a church," when a water leak flooded the room above them causing the ceiling to collapse. They weren't caught in the act, but Manny's mother was furious that her boy and Helen were in the bathroom at the same time. She forbade him to see Helen again.

But they would meet again at the University of Texas in Austin. She was a doctoral student; he'd just come back from Vietnam and was a sophomore. They married, and he got a job as a salesman for Whole Foods, eventually working for one of the top divisions as a lobbyist, moving to the DC area and living there for four decades.

Last night, they argued, and for the first time in thirty years. Manny raged everywhere and smashed things, which he had never done before. Manny lost his job and took it out on her. Since she was losing her job, she'd have to stay at home with him, until they found work again, which at their age was impossible. Their relationship had been falling apart for years. He was growing bitter with the world, as if he'd missed the boat for his mid-life crisis and was trying to make up for it. He hated the fact that she couldn't have kids. And he hated the fact that she was so smart, and the fact that she worked, and could never tell anyone about what she did. For all he knew, she drew money from the government, smoking pot and eating ice cream.

She knew his feelings on this. And to be fair, her line of work was bleak. She spent all her time completely enthralled by the apocalypse and the heat death of the universe and trying desperately to figure out an answer to a problem that humans wouldn't have to deal with for billions of years. But she hated the fact that he hated all of this. Husbands should be supportive.

But in their eighth year, under the stars, in a field, these troubles were distant. She agreed to be a grandmother and asked if she could be a great grandmother and great-great grandmother and great-great-

The Blotter

great grandmother. OR EVEN a great-great-great-great grandmother! Manny nodded and segued into riddles.

"If I died, would you remember me?" asked Manny.

"I don't think I would have a choice," she replied.

"Would you remember me?"

"Absolutely!"

"Would you remember me when you died?"

"You mean in Heaven?"

"Or Hell..."

"Oh, we can't go to Hell. Jesus loves us."

"Are you sure? You want to pray and make sure?"

"Dear Heavenly Father, Helen and I come to you to pray..." He continued praying, his eyes closed tight.

Helen just watched the boy and wondered what he saw with his eyes closed.

"And we pray you watch out for poor people everywhere, and that we defeat the communists..."

"And those communist kids are taken care of," she added.

"And communist's kids get food and clothes..."

Was he seeing every image that he was speaking? What did angels look like in his mind? Heaven?

"Hey Manny? What does God look like?"

"I'm prayin'."

The memory was interrupted by screams. Screams were new. Every time her department ran this program its entire course, it ended peacefully with the hymns, and then they would reboot the program. Then again, maybe she only thought the program had runs its entire course because she usually stopped it early. She opened up a window on her computer and brought up the

room where the screams were coming from. She found herself watching a massacre. Every person, including children, was being killed. When she was listening, it was just a conglomeration of screams, but watching it was just simply horrible. Such rage and such anger. Something she'd rarely seen but saw in the eyes of her husband the night before.

And that's when it hit her.

She decided to call the police. She didn't want to return home to this angry man.

"Arlington Police Department, Sgt. Miller speaking."

"Hi, uh, I'm not sure, uh-"

"Ma'am calm down and explain what happened."

"My husband came home last night. Super drunk, and... destroyed the house... he's dangerous."

"Okay. Would you like to come down to the station? Or do you want an officer to come visit you?"

"I'm about to leave work, but I'm going to head home. My husband is home. I'll be home in about twenty minutes. I live pretty close to Courthouse Metro."

"What's your name?"

"Helen Meissner."

"Okay. Well, what's your address?"

"The Palatine, on North Troy Street."

"Okay, well, ma'am, we'll send someone down there and have them there in about half an hour?"

"Thank you."

She felt a bit relieved. She saved the universe program, but didn't end it, or reboot. Just shut it down. Her life's work. She pulled out a flash drive and made an exact replica of the computer's drive. There was something fascinating about this ending of the universe, the screaming

and all that. She didn't know what to make of it. With that, Helen hopped on the metro.

At 73, Helen felt she wasn't the prettiest woman on the metro until she sat next to Parry. Parry was the name Helen gave him. Parry, as in Paris, from Mission: Impossible, played by the irrevocably handsome Leonard Nimoy. Helen needed the comfort and safety of illusion. The metro is a scary place and Helen didn't think it would suit her alone, scared out of her mind over horrible men like Manny hiding behind any corner. She'd shared a metro car with Parry for a couple months now. Usually, she'd try to sit next to him. She would never speak. Parry was cute. He had a full chin and a five o'clock shadow and a suit that told her that he was a father. A good father, who read the Bible, worked hard for an investment firm, and played ball with his kids every chance he got. Helen was so happy to be sitting next to someone so dapper. Parry smelled like wood chips, reminding her father's garage wood shop in Texas. Parry was built like a policeman, but with a head of hair like silver fox Superman. Helen tried to imagine herself as his wife. Helen would no longer have to work at the Department of Energy, and Helen could do what Helen loved the most: baking. Oh! Helen loved baking. The imagined smell of vanilla in her mind made her feel so comfortable. Parry loves cookies, doesn't he? Helen thought.

Of course he did, because Parry is the perfect man. He pulled out a copy of Dan Brown's new book, "Sentinels and Criminals," and Helen instantly swooned. Not only is he a good father, but his interests are refined, too! Oh, butterflies in my

stomach: settle down! He got up and exited the train at the next stop. Helen was alone again, but Helen was so enamored by this Parry guy that she didn't seem to notice.

Oh, sure, Helen knew he wasn't there anymore, but Helen hoped that tomorrow Helen could see him, again. She would pretend to be coming home from work and Parry would be the perfect husband. Helen would come home with him on the metro, Helen would make him dinner, while he showered and checked on the kids. He was the type who would wear his dress shirt and still play catch with the boys and they would end the game with prayer. Parry most definitely prayed. He had to! How else could he have been blessed with so many gifts! He was a dearly handsome man, who obviously made a lot of money. Was there a wedding ring? She was sure there was. He's such a catch. It wouldn't have mattered, though because Helen would have worked to steal him away. His wife could never treat him right. Helen could treat him right. Yes.

At breakfast, Helen would make him lunch. The Wedding bed- ah yes, the wedding bed. Helen would show him what a bride should always be, in the wedding bed at work, in the home; everywhere. Parry, where are you? Come home with me. Come play! Helen imagined the two of them reading the Bible, and being so enraptured in God's spirit, they would retreat to the shower and glorify God's love with each other. It was probably a silly lust, but Helen was pretty enough to do it. The prettiest girl on the metro. Prettiest.

The possibility of being with Parry brought a smile to her face. Helen looked around and saw the

faces of the others on the train and Helen felt so pretty. Helen could have anyone that Helen wanted and Helen wanted Parry, and he would be hers. Helen wouldn't even have to sneak behind her husband's back, but he shouldn't mind, right? He's so busy in jail that he wouldn't even notice. For him to be upset would be envy, anyway, and Christians don't believe in envy. This wouldn't even be infidelity; it would be God's will. She'd not really thought about God in some time. But thinking about being Parry's wife made her think herself to orgasm. She'd not thought of herself as an orgasm before. Was it the God part? Because she'd been atheist for some time. Did she still love God? Then the train stopped.

Doors opening.

She got up and the butterflies from her stomach went to her nose. Helen beamed like a supernova. A sunbeam breaking the surface of a sea of miserable flesh.

Helen got off the train and two policemen approached her. "Ma'am?" asked the policemen. "We need to ask you questions. Do you know this man?" It was Parry. Helen started hyper-ventilating and she could hear over their radios. My dapper hero was holding a preschool hostage and had already murdered two of the kids. The police held a picture in front of her, She looked and it wasn't him at all. It was someone else, who was more like a politician or something.

"No, officer, I don't know him." And then she noticed they weren't even talking to her. She walked away and tried to calm down. Nothing made sense.

She went up the metro escalator. At the top was her police officer waiting to escort her at the apart-

ment. She walked up to the policemen.

"Hi. My name is Helen."

"Hello, ma'am. I'm here to escort you." She had to rethink her prior suggestion that Parry was built like a policeman. This policeman was built like Barney Fife.

"So, I heard about the preschool."

"What preschool?"

"Someone told me that someone had shot up a preschool. What's the world coming too?"

"In Arlington?"

"Yes."

"I don't think so, ma'am. I'm certain that I would have heard about that."

Had she imagined it?

She looked up at the apartment complex and noticed her apartment's window. She assumed Manny waited for her in guilt.

She felt some guilt, too, about this Parry thing. That was the last time she would see Parry. Despite the fantasy on the train, she wasn't going to hunt him down. Then she realized that Parry had shot up a school in her imagination and for some reason that hadn't made him any less attractive.

"I've wasted your time," Helen said to the police officer.

"Wasted my time? We take domestic abuse seriously."

"I know, but I think I might have overreacted."

The officer huffed a bit. "Alright. Look, I'll tell you what. You call us back if things seem to get bad again. I understand this, but not everyone deserves second chances. Got it? Make sure that if you call again, you mean it. You're wasting government resources."

"Thanks for understanding," she

The Blotter

replied. "Whatever."

And Mr. Fife drove away.

She went up to her apartment. It was medium sized. A kitchenette, two bedrooms, a living room. One of the bedrooms serves as her study. Manny wasn't home but she walked to her study and up to the computer. She took her flash drive and copied it to her computer. She started up the program. People screaming and dying. She rebooted the program. Everyone deserves another chance. She knew that her computer wasn't as strong as the mainframes at the federal government, but she decided to try. She heard the front door of the apartment open. She came out the study and she heard a little squeak. She saw a little beagle puppy come up to her, and she was confused. Manny was in tears.

"I'm so sorry, Helen." He tried to give her a hug, but she pushed him back.

"No. Don't. I forgive you, but you listen here: you freak out on me again, and I'll kill you."

"I'm sorry."

"We don't have the money to take care of a puppy."

"They called me today. They said I was due some severance if I wanted it."

"Okay," she picked up the puppy and walked back into her study. That was one thing resolved in her life.

"Oh, Good Times is playing tonight at the VOC."

The Veterans of Overseas Conflicts. She loved Good Times.

"Okay, fine," she said. She set the puppy on her desk, and she opened up her laptop. She brought up the universe program.

She looked at the beagle. "It's time for second chances, eh,

Hermione? I guess no devil shall get his apocalypse today."

And the puppies woofed about and rubbed her nose on her trousers. Hermione was a good name.

She started the universe program. The universe started expanding.

She came back out.

"We can put the beagle in the carrier for now," said Manny. "I'll walk her when we get back."

They locked up and left Palatine to go to the VOC.

"Should we call an Uber?"

"Let's walk."

"Let's walk? Are you kidding?"

"To the metro station."

"Okay."

She looked up at him and his furrowed brow. And looked forward. Passed the police department, passed the justice center. When they got the metro she stopped him.

She beamed a smile, "I have an idea."

"Uh-oh," he said.

"You owe me," she grabbed his crotch.

"Whoa!" he put his hand on hers.

"Let's find a church," she said.

"A what?"

"I want to get railed in a fucking church like the old days."

"You what?"

"You heard me."

"This is nuts."

She took him down the street another 10 minutes until they came to a residential area and to a stone church that said Community Methodist Church.

The front door was inadequately closed. It looked like there was an AA meeting on the side.

They opened the doors to pews

and the sanctuary. She'd not felt so hot in such a long time. Hotter than Parry. Manny found a door to the bathroom.

"Like old times?" he said.

"Yes, please."

She looked him in the eyes and thought back to when they were younger. When little Manny was praying in a field under the big Texas sky.

"I'm prayin'," he'd said.

"In your mind?" She'd asked him, then. "What does God look like? Is it like the stars? Is it like the world? Is there a bright light? An old man?"

"Hold on a minute God, I'm sorry. Maybe I'll get back to you in a little bit," little Manny sighed. "I think God is the sound of the winter wind when it blows through trees, but also when puppies and bunnies are born. I think he takes the image of an old man when he shows himself to people, but mostly he's invisible. I think God is when puppies are born."

"Well, puppies are always being born somewhere at some time, and so, he's always around, just showing up as a puppy being born."

"Tell me you love me."

"Like puppies? I dunno. I really love puppies," replied little Manny.

"Tell me who you love," said Helen.

"I love you! I love God! I love you!" Manny smiled.

"I love God, too!" said Helen.

"If we always love God, we'll always love each other."

Older Helen looked at older Manny and said, "I swear to God, if you flip out on me like you did ever again, I will kill you."

"I know."

"It wasn't fucking fair. I didn't

deserve that.”

“I know.” Manny nodded fumbling with himself.

“Now give me what I deserve!”

It was a very simple bathroom. Brown carpet, seashell soaps, a potpourri scented air freshener, John Wayne TP. Completely forgettable, except that it was not designed for two torsos, let alone fucking. But there was enough room for Manny to drop his pants and undergarments and for her to bend over the sinks and look at her husband in the mirror.

“Take off your glasses,” she said. “I want to see your face.” ❖

“Printer Problems”

by K. A. Williams

The ink cartridges in
my printer exploded.
It was under warranty,
so I called the manufacturer.
I had to listen to the
most awful elevator music
you can imagine,
while a representative
looked up my receipt.
Then she told me that,
according to the time code,
my warranty had expired
five minutes ago,
while I'd been on hold.

“Rural Wake”

by Kevin La Torre

At the rains' end,
The farmhand carried two dead mice
From the barn but
Its two citizens in their stalls
Among dry, warmed shavings didn't care to notice.

The bay horse did not turn
From the hanged hay bag
He was defrocking.
His lean flanks built to his marbled neck,
His name was Irish.

The Connemara pony keened
Across her sun-spotted turnout,
For the all-powerful alfalfa she knew to
Anticipate. The call filled the barn
Aisle also, like she'd cried for the killed mice.

The farmhand bore
Their paired corpses in his own
Oiled dirt-flecked rag,
His veteran hands, reverent,
So nearly cradling them
Through the inadequate fabric.

Their furred rumps didn't shake
In his steps, their threaded tails lay still.
Each one had been snapped while alone
But the couple were then found together, joined
Like martyrs by the two tiny guillotines.

He bore them heavily to the manure pile, to
Disturb, memorialize, its mass of clouding sweet scent
With the unnoticed addition of the two mice.
A sweltering sun has overthrown the afternoon,
Coating the farmhand's neck and underarms in thin sweat lashes

So that he laid down, with the care of the first, the dead in their rag
To shed his borrowed olive coat before he dug,
Just his caked boot kicking in the door of the inferno.
Greater heat greeted him. It singed his charges' whiskers,
Lighting now too late those small unused fuses,

But the farmhand smells only the manure he has breached,
He ties his rag shut around the corpses,

Already aflame.
In this genteel veil, they enter the farm's maw.

Oh, it was a feckin' shame, Irish would say
Only when the boy returned
To haul new grain before his stall.
Erinn would crowd the farmhand
As he maintained her with another meal.

In the stalls mice aren't worth a sniff.
Not a glance when killed
For sneaking into the horses' feed.
But Irish would've spoken truly, had he cared to speak.
It is, to the very roots of the land, a shame that the traps have stolen
The pride of purpose from the plumped cat in her hamper.
From her the unfeeling bars have taken the dance-like deaths of mice,
As the manure's new tinder had, but only once,
Fatally stolen the farmhand's cheddar bait.

Their bodies, their very paws and hairs a crime, dissolve in the heat.
The farmhand has not reentered the barn, perhaps he won't.

"A Clearing in Its History"

By Kevin La Torre

Upon the ground come the hawks of late morning,
Never to alight from the phlox and ryegrass
Who tether the great birds as harmless shadows.
Their talons are merely wheeling, gashed smoke.

Scant bluebirds flash to the grotto's refuge
Among the pines, allowed by
The deathly shades who patrol this clearing
From their keen, circling altitude.

A pyrite shine feathers the lone, parched trail
Who once partitioned this clearing neatly.
But live motion everywhere collapsed its border
Through the coursing centuries, and

Dust rises, behind footfalls picking through the trail.
Dusted breaths, once fine like the smell of sap.

As ever an amber, everlasting sun ages
This clearing, even the fine whiskers of its grass,
As though they still dot the stellar pelt of field and sky
Who scrubbed the hares and the robins with bristled care,
Who groomed the deadly wings that
Fell as easily as they flew.

Despite the cadence of the hawks' cries, the life converging upon the trail,
Dust continues rising and one day overtakes the pines.

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.

Clouds are appearing where there weren't any a moment ago, I am sure of it. They pop in and out of the picture like people at a party in a house with many small, intimate rooms. Everyone thinking that they're missing something important, if they could just get through this next doorway.

There is a breeze, too, but it is so slight, so delicate, that it makes no noise in the trees. The leaves rustle in silence, which shouldn't be possible, but there you are. People shouldn't whisper in front of others, I think, for some reason. Quiet breezes are something like that.

When I partially close my eyes into a squint, the colors change. The greens of the lawn in front of me become darker, fading into gray in the distance. There are a few flowers, lilies or irises, and they should be pink and orange and violet, but they also are changing as the clouds build up now, a party crowded with people. The light blue sky is going, gone. It may be somewhere out there beyond the clouds, but how can I be sure?

Jahnnee - cyberspace

Contributors

Bowen Craig is a publisher and writer in Athens, Georgia. He founded Bilbo Books Publishing in 2006, and has written magazine articles (until he got fired), newspaper articles (until he got fired) and three books, for which it's simply not possible for him to be fired: *Keeping Away from the Joneses*, *A Look to the Future Through the Eyes of an Eighty-Year-Old Pirate* and *Hitchhiking with Salmon*. He co-runs a local arts website called "Athens Uncharted" (with Mark Katzman) and a rant website "Heretic Picayune" (with a partner who would rather not have his/her name revealed, for reasons that should become obvious when you see the site)

C. Ben Stevenson works for the Petworth Branch of the DC Public Library where he runs three writers workshops, teaches a baby lap time, and coaches people on resumes, genealogy, and the location of *the public restrooms*. He's been published in *Ninth Planet*, *King Ludd's Rag*, *The Blotter*, and *The Sparrow's Trombone*. He splits his time between WV and DC.

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes mystery/crime, speculative, general fiction, and poetry. Almost 90 of her poems have been published in various magazines including *The Blotter*, *Altered Reality*, *Literary Yard*, *Calliope*, *The Creativity Webzine*, *Tigershark*, and *View From Atlantis*. Apart from writing, she enjoys music (mostly rock), and CYOA games.

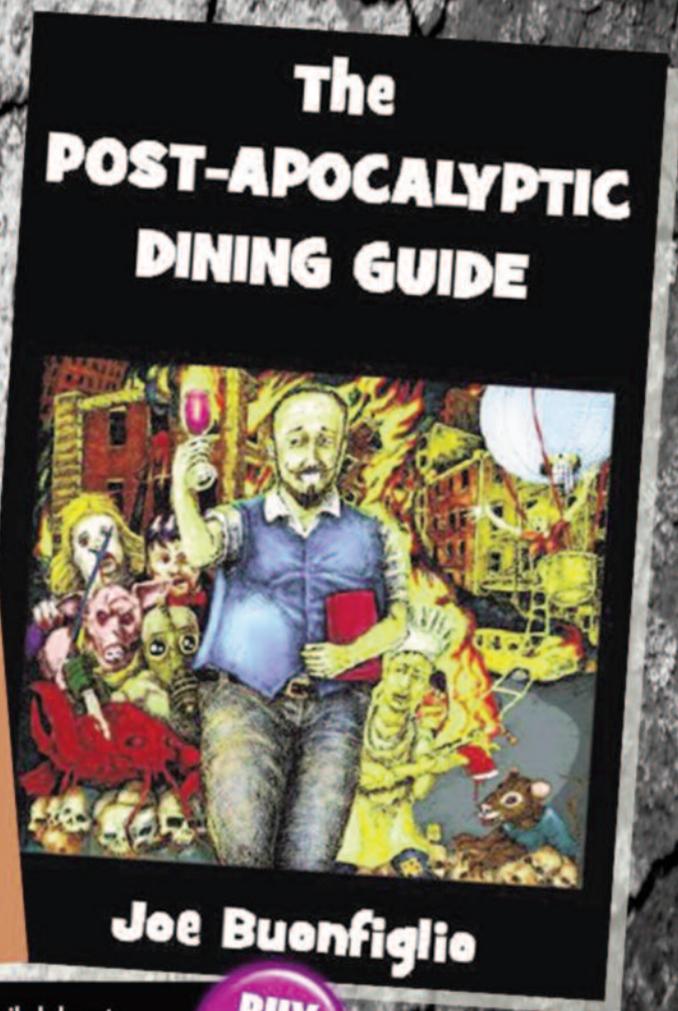
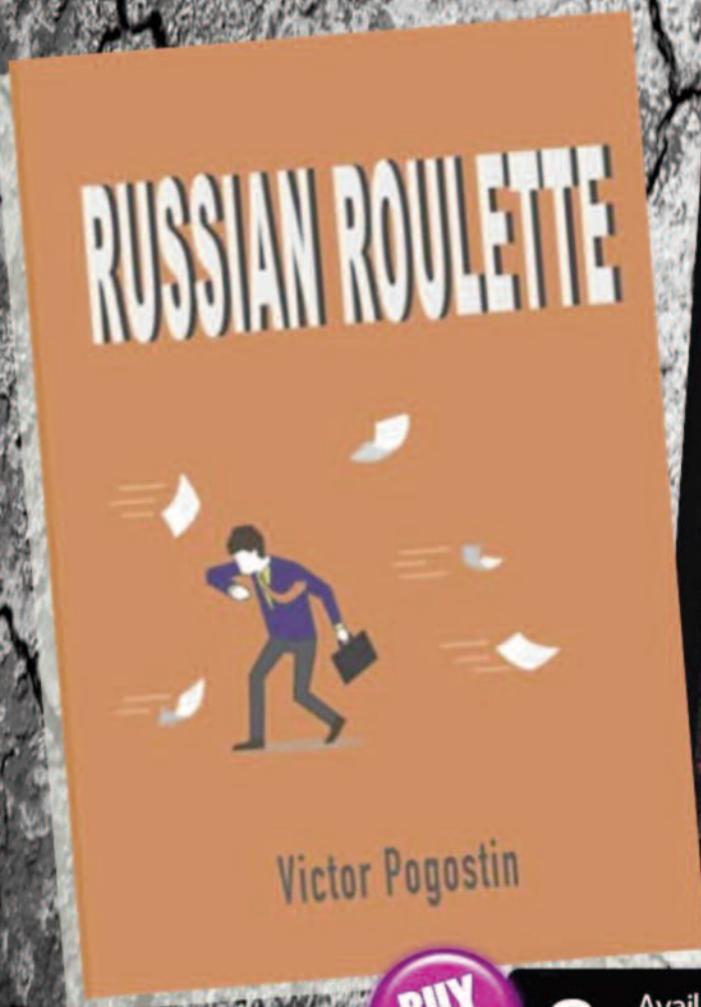
Kevin LaTorre is a poet and writer living in North Carolina, lucky enough to be a repeat offender with *The Blotter*. His work has appeared in *Echo Literary Magazine*, *Walter Magazine*, and *Storybook Corner*. He has work forthcoming in *Fine Books* and *Collections Magazine*.

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