

◇ Defenestration ◇

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The Anatomy of Solace (Does Marie Antoinette Need Glasses?)
by
David Cotrone

"The Redcoats are coming! The Redcoats are coming!"

"What?" the newcomer asks. "The red *what?*"

"The Red *Coats*. You know, Redcoats — the British soldiers: the Regulars, the King's Men, the Lobsters, the Bloody Backs, etc. etc. etc."

"But *why?*"

"Why what?"

"Why are you yelling? Why are you trying to warn me about...the British, you said?" The newcomer pauses and kneads his hands. "I mean, they don't seem that bad." He does a quick scan of the area. "And I don't think I see any here."

"Oh you're wrong. You're *wrong*. Look. Over there." Paul points to a gruff, grizzly-bearded man wearing a tatty turtleneck. The man is bent over a bottle of Maker's Mark.

"Yo, Ernest! Er-*nie*! Ern-dog!"

The bearded man pretends not to hear Paul's cries.

"Hemingbaby, Hem-dog, Hem — oh fuck it. Mr. Ernest Hemingway, sir, good sir, please tell this man your heritage. He doesn't think you're British. What an insult, huh? Just tell him. Go on now, tell him."

"I'm not British," Ernest says, gazing straight ahead at an object that's not there. He blinks — perhaps involuntarily — and looks down at his hands on the table. "I'm...not British."

Paul turns back to the newcomer, ignoring what just happened.

"Look, I had one job during my time, and I did it, okay? And I'm pretty damn proud of it. I mean, sure, I was a trusty blacksmith, a decent silversmith, but I was best at messaging. Harking. Heralding. I'm surprised 'revere' hasn't been made into a verb — oh wait. It *has*," he chortles and nearly collapses under his own weight. He doesn't seem to notice or care that no one else is laughing.

"Wait, hold on. Just hold on. What are you talking about?" the newcomer asks.

"What in the blazes — Does *everyone* have to formally introduce themselves around here?" He sticks out his hand. "Name's Revere, Paul."

"Oh...hi," the newcomer says. "Mine's Carl," he adds, extending his arm slowly towards Paul's.

"Wait, wait, wait. Really? That's all I get? *Oh hi,*" Paul says in a high-pitched voice, talking with his hands as if they're sock puppets, "*my name's Carl.* Dude, I'm Paul Revere. There's even a poem written about me. It's nothing great, but still, I haven't heard any poems written about you, or about anyone named Carl, for that matter."

Carl stares at Paul. He doesn't know what to say.

"*Hel-lo,* anyone home? Paul. Revere. Ring any bells? Or maybe, maybe, light any lanterns?" Paul seizes with laughter and slaps his knickers. Tears well in his eyes and a couple roll down his face. He wheezes and chokes on what could be a hairball.

No one else is laughing.

Where are we, then? We are in a place in which souls (or people whose souls project physical images, at least) congregate. Some of these souls (i.e. the ones we've met thus far) did not coexist on earth: Paul Revere definitely didn't breathe the same air as Hemingway, and trust me here — trust your reliable old narrator — neither Revere nor Hemingway lived in the time of Carl, about whom we'll hear more in due time. So, ask again: where are we? Heaven? No. Hell? Wrong again. Purgatory? Yes. We're in purgatory, folks — the place souls go to dine, where they wait for God knows how long (no, really, only God knows how long). Here's the kicker, though: just because you're in purgatory doesn't mean you subscribe to the idea of God, so things can get a bit dicey. Those who believe wait for the opening of the royal gates with cheer, while others sit with postures that embody everything that was ever glum or morose. Is there a beatific and ethereal beyond? Is there salvation and redemption after life in purgatory? The residents don't know the answers. With faith, uncertainty, or dejection, they wait.

There's no concept of time. Inhabitants don't realize that there's no concept of time. That is to say, they don't realize that they don't realize. They forget that time was ever a thing.

There are no stars in purgatory. It's impossible to perceive how odd and seemingly unnatural this is unless you're there to witness it yourself. There are, however, chocolate chip pancakes.

Turn to your left. No, wait, a little back to the right. There. Stay where you are. Perfect. Now look straight ahead. See him? At the counter a mid-sized man with an earring in his left ear. He has a severely receding hairline and the hair he does have juts out to the sides. He also has a fine-trimmed beard. Today he is wearing a short-sleeved jersey — the number 12 printed on the back — from when he played first base for *Motley Crew*, one of purgatory's intramural wiffleball teams. Above the number and right below the neck is his team nickname, expressed in black bold-faced letters: **THE TEMPEST**. The man is stooped over a stove, shifting his weight between his feet. The man is William Shakespeare.

"That's just how I like 'em," William says, in a voice that could be interpreted as an impersonation of a deranged scoundrel. "Good and thick, nice...and...fluffy." He whips the batter with frenzy. "Oh yeah, just like that."

See? Even here: pancakes. As you know, on earth, William had a son, a son he saw only frequently due to faraway business, a son who died at age eleven. So here, William pursues what he missed at home: a chance to share a meal.

"He must be mad," Carl says to his companion, a woman with freckles and brown eyes.

"A little creepy, if you ask me. A little too focused on those cakes," the freckled woman says, with a voice that can only be described as nasal.

"Cake, who said cake?" asks a woman who looks up from her newspaper, spectacles sliding down to the end of her nose. Lately, this woman has been obsessed. Until the mention of cake, she had been engrossed in gleaning an understanding of current affairs, triumphs, and tribulations. She had been inspecting the newspaper's print so closely that she was squinting even while peering through the frames of her glasses.

"Oh! You startled us there, miss. Didn't even see you," Nasal Companion says to the woman with the newspaper.

"You're new," Newspaper Woman says to Carl. "I can tell."

"Yes, somewhat, I think," Carl says. "Yes."

Carl is still adjusting to this place's peculiarity. He was onto something when he described Shakespeare as unsound in the head. He was really onto something.

"Mhm. Anyway, I couldn't help but noti--"

"Marie! Marie! Are you there? Marie!" someone shrieks from across the space.

"Hmm? Anne? Ms. Boleyn is that you? I'm over he--"

"Ah, there you are," Anne says, approaching the scene, eager for attention she never obtained from her husband. She's eager for companionship, for acceptance, mostly. She speaks to the woman with the newspaper. "Oh! Marie. Ms. Marie. Antoinette. Look at me right now — oh look at me, darling. Your nails! Oh, look at your nails. They're beautiful. They're perfect. They're so *regal*."

"Oh, these old things?" Marie chuckles. "Thanks. You're a doll."

All four turn toward the ruckus at the stove.

"Ha, yes, yes, ha-ha yes, just like that, come to Willy, come to ol' Willy," Shakespeare says, tossing chocolate chips into the batter.

Carl, the newcomer to the purgatorial vista, is not intimidated by the slew of once famous figures that now occupy the space — his neighbors, so to speak. We have met only a few: Paul Revere, Ernest Hemingway, William Shakespeare, Marie Antoinette, and Anne Boleyn. All residents seem to mingle with relative distance. There are no egos. There are just as many common citizens as there are famous. There are no reputations. No one resident seems to have the faintest idea of what another accomplished, performed, or ruined while

on earth. Perhaps it is not so peculiar then, that Carl did not recognize Paul Revere. Then again, Paul acted like he commanded respect; he seems to have remembered his past life. (He's also a bit of a douche.) Residents — Paul especially — *can* remember their own doings, but that's it. It's as if they lived in a vacuum. Their minds have been blotted, wrung out, bleached. They are the remains of themselves, now only distinct, individual memories.

Carl. You'll be like him, of course. Surname-less Carl. But worry not. The residents, notable or otherwise, are not even considered people. Remember: they are souls, souls that project images, images of what the souls believe they look like.

"Pass the salt?" Wolfgang Amadeus asks, peering across the table. "Ludwig...Ludwig," he says, banging on the table's surface with his left hand, sending vibrations through the wood.

"Hmm?" Ludwig asks.

"The salt."

"Uh, oh yes, I'm fine, thank you. How are you?"

Wolfgang meets Ludwig's eyes with a blank expression.

"Sorry," Ludwig says. He lifts his hand to his right ear and extends his index finger, twirling it around a few times.

"It's all right, quite all right, but please do pass the salt," Wolfgang says, pointing to the shaker.

"Ah yes, of course."

1 a.m. December 5th, 1791. This is a time and date Wolfgang knows well: the hour of his death. It was fever that did him in, he thinks. He's not quite sure. What he does know is that he was pulled from earth before he could complete his final opus. This in itself is enough to drive Wolfgang mad, enough to make him yearn, enough to make him feel incomplete.

But what's more? *Requiem* was the title of his unfinished work. This is no coincidence. Mozart, like you, was — and still is — concerned with how he would be remembered. Actually, no, it wasn't so much self-concern as it was care for his labor. And so he now wishes for his work— the object of his excessive ardor — to above all, endure.

And so Wolfgang tries, dinner after dinner, to consult with Ludwig, for Ludwig sometimes speaks of his musical past. It's with zeal that Wolfgang inquires: *Have you heard? Do you know? Are you familiar with what I've left behind?* And it's with constant disappointment that he comprehends: Ludwig cannot hear.

"Oh look, everyone, the *musician's* table," Paul Revere says to no one in particular. "Look at me, I'm always talking about my fancy *music*."

Dinner tonight is served per usual: a buffet (the entrée is chicken parmesan). Revere loads up his plate, heads over to the drink dispenser, and fills his cup with chocolate milk. He starts back toward what he sardonically referred to as the “musician’s table.”

“Fifth symphony? More like fifth case of syphi-” he stumbles and drops his milk. It puddles on the ground and he tries to act casual.

But how, you ask, can there be dinner in purgatory when there is no such entity as time? For instance, can an ache such as hunger materialize in this place? Well, yes. Pains transpire and deformities are present. Afflictions occur. Just look at Ludwig — he wrestles with deafness. He does not possess any alternate means of communication (e.g. sign language). Even Marie Antoinette, the lovely damsel we met earlier (she was reading the newspaper, remember) needs glasses. And Hemingway, poor Hemingway, sits aloof and disconnected, alone with himself.

One cannot outrun pain and distress here. One can only confront his or her demons. But is it the same, you ask, is a physical malady (e.g. deafness) the same as an interior burden such as isolation? The answer is no. And yes. While all afflictions are different in scope, they boil down to a common denominator: comfort. Rather, the search for comfort. No, a further qualification: the actual *acquisition* of comfort. In other words, all torments can be remedied by — you guessed it — finding comfort (which, as you know, is much easier said than accomplished).

This place is a lot like earth, then, don’t you think? That is, this whole business of not having to subscribe to the idea of God, the occurrence of suffering, etc. Yes, this place is a lot *like* earth, but it is not earth. Recall the planet. There, a full-functioning person is aware of the people around him. She has an awareness of histories, of “human impacts.” Here, interactions just aren’t the same. And remember, there aren’t any stars. So, you ask, what does it all mean?

It’s time to sleep. Carl follows the crowd of souls to the residence hall, a vast building that looks inviting, yet chilly. Once inside, Carl can see a trace of his breath. It’s not like a puff of smoke emitted from one who drags on a cigarette, and it’s not something one would exhale if traversing the Arctic tundra. It’s more of a subtle breath that hangs in front of your nose, enough to notice, enough to signify something bigger than breath itself.

“Here you go, sir, wouldn’t want to wake up shivering.” A maintenance man hands Carl a blanket from what resembles an oversized pantry.

“Oh, thanks. Thank you,” Carl says, holding the blanket to his chest. He unfolds the blanket and inspects it: fleece.

“Looks good to me,” a woman with short red hair says, giving Carl a playful thumbs-up, a wisp of white air drafting from her mouth.

He, nods, smiles, and refolds the blanket before following some of the crowd upstairs. There are no nameplates or placards or anything in the way of identifying to whom each room belongs. There are no distinctions between male and female floors. There are only single

dormitories, rooms that aren't quite big enough for two. There are no doors. There are no doors in all of purgatory, for that matter. They aren't necessary, as purgatory's "weather" is categorized by a perpetual state of tepidness. And somehow, the primal emotion of fear (in the earthly sense) is not a factor in the existences of these souls. There is no worry of intrusion or invasion. Here, locking a door in the name of protection would be worthless.

So even without doors, the temperature is static, the same outside as it is in. Except, of course, recall that the residence hall is "chilly." This is true. For the residents, it's inexplicably cold in there. They (Maintenance) are looking into the problem. They've been looking into the problem for quite some time, actually. In their last report, they said they couldn't find any glitch with the facility itself; they don't think there is one. The raw air, they've speculated, must be a product of the residents' own devices. If the souls are projections of themselves, then what they feel is also part of this projection, and so they are cold because of what's within them. They are all cold not because of an exterior force, but because of an interior discomfort, a chill that cannot be remedied by a thermostat or blanket, a frost way more potent than temperature. Keep this thought with you. Later, you'll learn more.

After a fierce interior debate, Carl decides to claim a room. No one seems to care about his choice. It must be okay, he figures, to sleep here for the night. The room itself is rectangular; two of the walls are painted a shade of tan and the other two are white. There is a window that overlooks an expansive sort of back yard. Placed in the center of the field of trimmed grass is a fountain that spouts four arcs of water, an arc for each cardinal direction. There is also a volleyball net that could work double duty, probably, for badminton.

(Excuse me, may I...is this...is this on? I don't — it — okay, thanks. This is your fact-finder speaking. Yes, hello. How are you? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude on your alone time with Carl. He's so endearing, isn't he? With his innocence, his uncertainty, his newness to the purgatorial space, to the abeyant scene. Anyway, I just wanted to inform you that the volleyball net is indeed used for badminton. There's a league that convenes on what would be Tuesdays on earth. Shakespeare runs it. He's a bit of an intramural junkie. All right, on with the narration.)

The room's ceiling is also white, but not the white of a postal service truck. It's more like cream. A baroque chandelier hangs from the ceiling. The full-sized bed is adjacent to the wall with the window and there are two pillows placed at the bed's head. The sheets look new, or perhaps they've just been cleaned. There is no comforter though, just the fleece Carl still holds in his hands and against his chest. For the second time now he unfolds the blanket, now laying it across the bed and smoothing the wrinkles out of the surface. He sits on his bed and peers out of his room. Unfamiliar faces pass by his doorframe. He still doesn't understand the system. It is unclear whether a soul's room remains his or her permanent residence or if sleeping location alternates nightly.

"And well hel-/o to you miss," he hears Paul Revere's voice boom through the hall. "Care to join me in my quarters? Or perhaps I can join you, hell if I give a damn," he hoots.

His query receives no response.

Perhaps you should know that while on earth, Revere was married to a fine young woman, Sarah. After she died in childbirth, Revere married again — a woman whom he buried. Count it: two wives lost during one lifetime, something that could turn anyone bitter and unsavory.

"Playing hard to get are we? I know how to play *that* game, no fear. Learned the rules myself in a little old thing called the Boston *Tea* Party. Ever hear of it?"

Still no one responds.

"Well, of course you have," he sniggers. "Now don't make me dump any tea without your fine company if you know what I me—"

"That'll be it for you tonight, Paul," an authoritative male voice interjects. "Off to your room now. Off to..." the voice disappears down the hallway, as does Revere.

The light dims into darkness. Carl changes positions; he goes from sitting to lying down, eyes toward the ceiling. He wonders if all souls rise to meet the next day, and if they do, what is he dealing with here? What kind of operation is this, exactly? The powers that be must boast some sort of omniscience if they know when to repower the lights. He briefly considers the idea of hidden security cameras. He feels alone, here, alone with himself. The walls close in. The only difference between Carl and Hemingway is that he's not bent over a bottle. Instead, he's wrapped in a fleece that may or may not even belong to him.

He sits up and looks out the window. The fountain is still punctuated by four arcs of water. He wonders if there is a water source somewhere, feeding the fountain, or if the same water is recycled. He recycles thoughts in his mind. He recycles his past life. He doesn't know if he should have regrets or not. He slows his breathing, tries to catch his breath. He's dizzy. He had always avoided thinking about it on earth, thinking about meeting death, returning to the space he occupied before he was born. He covers his eyes with the palms of his hands. His forefingers touch the top of his forehead. He wonders if he'll progress from this place. He breathes slower, allowing a methodical three-count between each breath. He wants to stop feeling so saturated. He wants to move on. He closes his eyes. He doesn't know why he still feels alone.

Just as it was on earth, Carl wrestles with himself when the lights are out. Residents of the purgatorial space are forced to spend time alone, with themselves and nothing more, with their memories and with their wants. They cannot fix time. They must accept what has happened. Most souls succeed in this acceptance. The degree of acceptance, on this level, isn't the issue. It's not the hard part, so to speak. Understanding the move to this place is just the first phase, the first step. It's already been done for them; they were laid to rest and then woke up here.

As for Carl, perhaps he's been here all along. He's always felt this inner chill. On earth, he avoided it, the act of tackling his demons. He had thought about it late at night, trying to fall asleep, staring at the bottle of pills on his bedside table, his bedroom that seemed more than small. Perhaps his inner insanity drove him onward, propelled him further into a world he didn't want to accept as his. He was askew, tipped off balance, cast into a distorted, unknown light. On earth, he was afraid.

And so here, in this solitary dormitory — in purgatory — he must spend time with himself. The white of these walls has replaced the white of his bedside container. He must stay here until he's completely warm.

Here's what will happen when he's ready to move on: upon exhalation, his breath won't be visible. The real challenge, then, is becoming perpetual. Not perpetual in the sense that motion is a constant; rather, the aim is to acquire continuous warmth of heart.

Carl is lying in a bed in a residence hall in purgatory. He shivers. Outside, there's a fountain spouting water in each of the four cardinal directions. There's a baroque chandelier hanging from the ceiling, but it's dark. He doesn't know what time it is. He doesn't even remember the concept of time. It all seems infinite.

Imagine this: you're in a tall building and there's a fire. You can stay where you are and reckon with the flames or you can jump from a perilous height to the ground below. Look at it this way: you can try to confront the smoke and ember, look the yawning blaze straight in the eye, all the while unsure of what the result might be. Or, you can jump — let the ruins of your psyche dissipate in the downdraft — allow your pieces to scatter on the pavement. Acceptance or loss. Recovery or demise. Which of the options do you choose, which procedural method do you select? The idea is that here, in this place, you don't have to decide.

Puppy Love
by
George Walker

In the Ninth Ward of New New Orleans, the CEO of Atomitronics unleashed a flock of flamingobots. John LeChien, walking to work in the morning, heard them before he turned and saw them: a stiff-gaited pink horde clacking across the street and sidewalks.

He evaded the sharp beak of the first one and dropped to all fours to snap its plastic neck with his jaws. The beak of the second ripped his overalls to expose short blond fur. There were too many of them, rushing him from all directions. Tail between his legs, he dove between them and rolled, hearing the too-close thok-thok-thok of beaks striking the sidewalk.

Back on all fours, he loped into the street, bounding off the fan hood of a hovercar to leapfrog a pair of flamingobots. Solar bicyclists swerved to avoid him. Their horns bleated and curses filled the air. No time to turn and see if the riders were swearing at him or at the flamingobots for snarling their morning commute.

He spotted a shortcut at the next intersection, running beneath a house on stilts to head for the canal bridge. Already he was panting, tongue lolling from his mouth. There were more flamingobots ahead, marching to cut him off. He barely raced past them in time, up onto the bridge. Only then did he see that escape was cut off. At least ten pink bird-machines were on the bridge already, blocking traffic as effectively as if the drawbridge were open.

John leaped onto the parapet, took a long look at the dirty water below, and jumped.

It was a long fall. He stretched to his full length, hind legs pointed down, fingered forepaws up at the sky.

The impact with the water knocked the wind out of him. He fought his way desperately back to the surface and gasped for air. Dog paddling to keep his snout above the filthy water, he looked up.

The sky was raining pink. He lunged from side to side as flamingobots began striking the water around him. They sank like stones, and after a couple minutes, there was no trace of the flock. John heard traffic returning to normal up on the bridge. A bicyclist had stopped to look down over the parapet. He waved. Still panting, John lifted a forepaw to wave back. He began paddling toward shore.

In the Atomitronics high-rise on Tulane Avenue, William dropped onto the therapist's leather couch and looked at his watch. "Let's get started. I've got meetings all day."

The psychiatrist picked up his electronic tablet. "Katherine from the Board of Directors just called."

William waved dismissively. "He got away again."

Dr. Von Krafft sighed. "Did you watch the anger management holo-vid I emailed you?"

"Doc, I don't have time for that. I'm a busy man." He looked at his watch again.

The psychiatrist stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Let's talk about your daughter again."

"Britney is the sweetest girl in the world. And she is *not* marrying a dog. End of discussion."

"He's a transgenic, William. He's not really a dog."

"If it walks like a dog and it barks like a dog..."

"Maybe we should talk about your mother."

"Why? Does she want to marry a dog, too?"

John was late for work at the cemetery.

"Well, look what the dog drug in," said Ebony. Since she was a canine transgenic, too, she could say that. "Pee-uuu." She wrinkled the black snout on her face. "You been swimming the canals?"

John nodded. "What's it matter? We're stuffin' tombs, not selling insurance."

"Henri hates the smell of wet dog."

"He only shows up for funerals. What's he got us doin' today?"

"A couple 366's here, then prep a mausoleum at Lafayette No. 2."

"Bag 'em up and move 'em back," said John. Nearly all the tombs in New New Orleans were above ground. A 366 meant a year and a day had elapsed, so they were to open a vault, gather up whatever remained of the body, bag it, and pack it into the far recesses of the vault. City cemeteries were too overcrowded to let everyone who died have a private room for eternity.

"You gonna tell me what you was doin' in a canal?"

"Britney's old man's after me again. No point calling the police, 'cause he's a CEO and I'm a gravedigger."

"You learned anything from this?"

"Yeah. The only thing worse than a psycho girlfriend is a girlfriend's psycho dad."

"No!" Ebony shook her long black ears. "The learnin' here is that Uptown girls are trouble."

John was in a good mood the next morning, as he left his apartment. He'd talked to Britney for over an hour last evening. He remembered the concern in her blue eyes, the pout of her little mouth as she said she was going to have a *serious* talk with Daddy. He unrolled the phone from his overalls and was still captivated by the video of Britney talking when the grappling pincers latched onto him.

The tiny things stuck in his fur and overalls. So many! Twenty? Fifty? A hundred? Their gossamer lines stretched from above. He looked up.

A small robot ornithopter bearing the Atomitronics cold fusion logo beat its black mylar wings, and the lines tightened. John's feet left the ground, and his phone blew away.

"Help!"

Some children on their way to school waved as the ornithopter carried him over their heads.

He was headed for Lake Pontchartrain, swinging from a web of thin lines: nearly invisible, but too tough to break. He began gnawing on a bunch of them, but they were thinner than dental floss. He was already too high up to jump. He watched the wings beating rhythmically against the blue sky.

"Put me down!" he barked.

It continued on its preset course above the houses. He wondered how far it could fly. He wondered how far he could swim. They were making good time, keeping up with solar bicyclists on the boulevard along the canal.

The grappling pincers weren't in his skin, and didn't hurt at all. He carefully pulled one loose, then another. He removed ten of them before he decided maybe it was a bad idea. Better to take his chances in the lake than fall who-knew-where.

Britney would cry her eyes out if he died. Her father would finally feel remorse then, a changed man. He'd probably splurge for a proper tomb for John, not a rack 'n stack wall crypt in a city cemetery. Maybe a big mausoleum, and Britney would stop by with flowers every day. She'd wear black. Not a trendy goth black, but the kind that —

They were almost to the Lakeshore Monorail. A mag-lev train was just floating into the station crowded with morning commuters. Beyond the monorail lay Lake Pontchartrain, its glistening surface stretching thirty miles to the north of New New Orleans. A long swim. John wished he'd kept a better grip on his phone.

The ornithopter banked to avoid a public housing complex on FEMA Debacle Drive. The flyer was coming in behind the train, very close to the platform. Some of the commuters boarding the train turned to look. John tugged on a group of lines and found he could swing a little, like beneath a parachute. He began building up rhythm, which the ornithopter flapped to correct for. The last of the commuters were boarding the train.

"The doors are now closing," said a disembodied voice.

John pulled hard on the lines, swinging in through the train doors. He spun around, grabbed the ceiling rail, and planted his feet firmly above the doors. The doors slid shut,

and the train floated away from the station. Outside, the ornithopter beat its wings frantically, trying to keep up. But the lines embedded in the door yanked it into a spin. The flyer abruptly tumbled away behind the train. The lines were still stuck in the door.

John swung down onto the nearest bench and began plucking the grappling pincers out of his fur and clothing.

Seated next to him, a black man in a business suit whistled. "That is one sweet commute arrangement you've got, son."

"I understand your wife gardens," said Dr. Von Krafft. "Lots of people find that relaxes them."

"Doc, that's what illegal immigrants are for."

The psychiatrist leaned back in his chair. "William, have you thought about what kind of message you're sending your daughter?"

"Hey, I love sending messages. Some people send flowers. I send... other stuff."

Von Krafft sighed. "We need to talk about your daughter. Your wife emailed me and said Britney tried to talk to you last night about going transgenic."

"Her fixation, you mean? I told her, 'Not *my* daughter!'"

"She is of legal age, though."

William stared. "Am I the only sane one in this room?"

"You have unaddressed anger issues, William."

"And I'm *addressing* them!"

"Not that way," said Von Krafft. "You can't keep this up."

"You obviously haven't seen the size of our Atomitronics web catalog."

Ebony was in the wall vault, sweeping out dust and bone fragments. John was the bag man, collecting the mortal remains and throwing away pieces of casket.

"She wants to have it done, Ebony, become a transgenic."

"She don't know what she's in for." Ebony's voice sounded hollow in the vault.

"She's been around transgenics, me at least."

"We're both second generation, John, born this way." Ebony coughed from the dust. "The looks I get sometimes, I wouldn't wish on nobody."

"I'm who I am. You wish you wasn't one?"

"Ain't sayin' that. But your girl, she doin' it like a fashion statement. She ain't got no clue what it's like to be a bitch." She poked her head out and stretched out a forepaw. "Gimme the bag."

John handed it to her. "You don't know what I see, lookin' in her eyes."

"Lust," Ebony muttered, barely audible. "A psycho girlfriend would be safer. How many times Psycho Dad try to kill you now?"

"They're talking. He'll come around."

She stuck her head out, looked at him with her sad brown eyes. "This could be your vault," she said softly.

There was no attack on his way to work, and for the first day in weeks, John got to work before Ebony. In the maintenance shed, he clicked on the work orders that Henri had posted for them on *cemeteries.newneworleans*.

The first one was to dig a new grave in the Jewish section of the cemetery. Jews buried their dead in God's earth, even in lowland New New Orleans. Wooden coffin, wooden nails.

But John was sure the Jewish section in this cemetery had been filled for years. How could they dig a fresh grave? He clicked on the gravesite link. It was an empty plot after all. He made coffee while he waited for Ebony.

The shed door opened. Ebony was startled by the sight of him.

"I thought you was some blond ghost," she said. She lifted her muzzle, sniffing. "And you made coffee. You is a changed man, John."

"No. Early man. Britney musta' talked sense into her dad."

Ebony looked skeptical.

After coffee, they walked to the Jewish section, carrying their shovels. It was a nice day to dig, and he loved digging with Ebony. The grass was dry, but as soon as they dug deep, there would be mud. The Jewish section was secluded, sheltered from the traffic by a row of trees. By tradition, there were stones and pebbles on the graves here, and few flowers.

But when they got to the gravesite where they were supposed to dig, there was already a well-weathered Star of David headstone there: Mel Goldschmidt 1902-1965.

"Weird," said John. "How could the website be wrong?"

They were both standing on the grass on Mel's grave when John felt a rumble, like a heavy cargo hovercraft on the street.

Abruptly the grave collapsed beneath their feet. Ebony yelped, and they both fell in together. Dirt was churning, mixed with crumbled casket and bones. The screw-tip of an Atomitronics boring mole appeared.

For a moment, John balanced on a rotten board, like a surfboard. He grabbed Ebony by the shoulders. Using all his strength, he hurled her up and out of the grave.

Something locked onto his left hind leg, then his right: grappers for pulling pipes and cables through tunnels. The mole reversed, sucking John deep into the muddy hole. He gasped for one last breath of air and closed his eyes, feeling mud flow over his fur and overalls. He struggled with his forearms, trying to pull himself back to the surface, to no avail. He lost all sense of direction, hearing the deep growl of the mole, feeling the mud churning past him.

His last thoughts would be of Britney, her sweet face, her dimpled cheeks, her blonde hair blowing in the breeze, the sound of her giggling laughter —

Abruptly the pressure of the mud fell away, and John was dragged across hard concrete.

He blinked his mud-covered eyelids open to daylight and heard a couple loud clangs. The mole abruptly stopped. The grappers, which had been locked onto his legs, went into loose, twitching spasms.

John pulled his hind legs free and sat up. He was in the middle of the cemetery drainage ditch. The mole had been trying to traverse the gap to the other side. He turned and saw Ebony on her hind legs, panting and holding her shovel like a club.

On the dorsal side of the mole, its metal-shielded controller box was flattened where Ebony had brained it with her shovel. The screw-tip at the head of the mole was still turning.

John shook, scattering mud from his fur and clothes.

"You O.K.?" asked Ebony.

"Yeah," he said. He kicked the mole. "The things we do for love."

Ebony muttered, "Yeah, the things we do for love." She looked at the collapsed Jewish graves and toppled headstones. "Henri's gonna have a conniption fit when he sees what Psycho Dad did."

William sat on the edge of the psychiatrist's couch, his hands balled into fists.

"You seem tense," said Dr. Von Krafft. "Sometimes when my patients are tense, I find it helps if they demonstrate their feelings with Sammy, here." He handed William a stuffed bear with soft brown fur and large, soulful eyes.

William studied the bear for a moment, then pinned it down against the couch and punched it. He savored the moment, then punched it again. Then he picked it up and beat it against the ornate wood carving that edged the cushioned headrest.

"You son of a *bitch!*" he exclaimed, pounding the bear over and over against the wood.

"William..." Dr. Von Krafft reached out a hand.

The bear's head came loose, and stuffing scattered over the couch. William stopped, panting, and stared at the mangled bear.

"Do you feel better now?" asked the psychiatrist.

William put his hand in the bear, feeling through the stuffing. "Where the hell are the servo motors?"

"How long's it gonna take?" asked Ebony.

"Two months," said John. "A long time without seeing Britney." He wondered if he'd find himself howling at the moon before her procedure was over.

"She show you pictures of what she gonna look like when it's done?"

John shook his head. "She wants it to be a surprise. But it don't matter if they're Chihuahua genes or St. Bernard's. She'll still be Britney."

"Yeah, she still gonna be Britney." Ebony sighed. "Come on. We got bones to bag."

Two months later, Britney called John's cell, saying she was on her way to the cemetery. John coaxed Ebony into coming with him to the front gate, and they waited in silence. John shivered with anticipation. Ebony was just staring at the ground.

Britney's red Ferrari hovercar glided to a stop outside the gate. John remembered rides in her car with the top down, the air whipping through his fur, his ears. But the top was closed now, and there were two people inside. It settled to the ground, and the passenger door folded like an accordion and slid beneath the car.

Someone about Britney's size, wearing fancy clothes like hers, stepped out onto the cracked driveway. Her fur was pure white, like a West Highland White Terrier's. But there was something wrong with her face. Her muzzle wasn't long enough, the brow was wrong, and her pointed ears were too short. She smiled, revealing small sharp teeth.

Involuntarily, John felt his hackles rise.

"Isn't this fur just to *die* for?" said Britney's voice.

John looked at her beautiful blue eyes and saw vertical pupils. In horror, he realized that somehow, Britney had gotten feline genes. How could the doctors have screwed up? Could it be reversed? Adding genes was one thing, but *deleting* them?

"Britney, what...? Maybe your father can pay to..."

Then he noticed that the man sitting at the wheel of the Ferrari was a feline transgenic wearing mirrorshades.

"Sorry I can't stay," said Britney. "I just wanted you to see the new me!" She spun around like a fashion model, and he saw she had a long tail. Not like a lion, but cuter, like a kitten.

"Cher John," she said. "We had such good times, and I'm never going to forget you."

She came close and patted his shoulder. It wasn't really a caress, and he saw her own fur bristling in response. When she exhaled, it was almost like a hiss, and her little nose wrinkled.

"Um, yeah, it's been great," he said. "Good times." He couldn't think what else to say.

Britney waved at him and Ebony and walked back to her car. She got in, and the door of the Ferrari unfolded and sealed. The hovercar floated back away from the gate.

At that moment, John saw a small machine nestled against the curb. An Atomitronics HunterTracker 2000. The coloring blended with the curb like a chameleon. Its head swiveled to stare at John with beady robot eyes, and he froze.

Abruptly it spun around and scampered after the hovercar.

"Cher John?" said Ebony, standing beside him. "That what she calls you?"

John nodded numbly.

Ebony made a sound like stifling a laugh. She leaned close and licked his ear. "I hear you might have an opening for a psycho bitch."

John watched the Ferrari round a corner and disappear.

He turned and licked her nose. "Maybe."

Orlando Bloom in Morning
by
Evan Allgood

I.

Light spills into the hotel room
like ill-prepared lemonade from
the sky's 5-cent stand, the one
all the hung-over grown-ups
have been trying to avoid.

Orlando blinks,
opens his eyes drearily,
dreamily—is he acting? It's impossible
to tell. Some model has twisted
the blinds open, her twig fingers
rubbing together like tiny attempts
at fire. Bones and bra asks if
he fancies another go.

Diva dives face-first into blow,
not waiting for an answer,
leaving the kind of snotty bloodsmear
on the coffee table that more naïve help
might confuse for ketchup.

A robe, a kiss,
a card dismissed.
A door shut for the adorable.

II.

Orlando, alone,
has mastered the telephone,
demanding room service not
rudely, but sans menu and
in a way that winks and says
*If you don't fuck this up
it might just be worth your while.*

Thoughts of brunch dance
around deer eyes like heathens;
ears perk up exactly as you'd expect
from someone named after Mickey
Mouse's hometown. Comics receive
most of the attention.

Paper is splattered with syrup,
stuck back together in order.
Full—never satisfied—Orlando trots
to the water closet to cheerily

carry out the three esses.

His shit smells of cinnamon
and ambition.

His body glistens.

The Jane Austen Politico Fan Club
by
Leslie Haynsworth

Campaign HQ, 2:43 p.m.

"Folkstone looks a lot less orange today," says Denise. "So that's the good news. The bad news is that he's still not quite on message about the school funding thing. He told the Nurses Association that his plan would cut their property taxes by an average of 31%. But our data shows that 64% of nurses in our state rent rather than own their primary residences. And as you know ..."

"Rental properties don't qualify for the school-tax-relief program, yes, I do know," I say. *Please don't remind me again*, I want to add. I forgot to take my Zantac this morning. There's an emergency stash of Tums in my coat pocket. But Folkstone's turned into such a loose cannon that even his own staffers are showing signs of getting rattled. If they see me gulping Tums, they'll lose what confidence they have left.

Denise is right, though, to rejoice in the comparative normalcy of Folkstone's color. He does have strangely orange skin, especially when you see him in person. It unsettles people. And it distracts them. They come to a rally to learn more about his widely admired proposal to privatize all of the state's universities, but for much of the time that he's speaking, their minds wander. How, they wonder, could a person become so orange? Personally, my guess is overuse of beta-carotene supplements, but his staff, even as they anxiously monitor the gradations in his skin tone, are strangely reluctant to broach the topic of its origins. The one time I tried to bring it up with Denise, for example, she jumped out of her chair, said "Oh, Mr. Love, I'm so sorry, I just realized my daughter's late for soccer practice," and ran out of the room. It was 1:13 p.m. Her daughter is in the 11th grade. If high schools in this state are being dismissed before 1:30, even I might sort of have to question the wisdom of Folkstone's proposal to cut school funding by another 45%.

"The thing is," says Denise, "that I've been charting it out, day by day, over the last couple of months. And while he does have his bad days, like yesterday, on the whole his coloring is trending really well. If we can just keep him away from... well, uh, nevermind. But I'm very optimistic about how he's going to look in the debate next week."

"That's great," I say. "Really great." Gotta keep up morale. And not just because there are so many reasons for the morale among Folkstone's staffers to start flagging. It's a funny thing, and even I can't quite explain it, but it's surprising how often, if you can just get a critical mass of committed Republicans to believe something, that something will become so — not, alas, necessarily forever, but at least long enough to turn an election in your favor or get a war started. People think I taught my pal W. so much about how to get where you want to be in life, but that's one thing he taught me.

"Oh, yeah," says Denise, "and another thing? We got those polling numbers from the upstate this morning, and they're actually a little better than we expected. Here, look." She reaches into her overstuffed tote bag, wriggles out a manila folder, and thrusts it at me. "And listen," she says. "I know you wanted to brief me now on how to prep him for tomorrow's forum with the AAUP, but I've gotta run. He's decided he wants a tub of his

mama's pimento cheese for supper, and I've gotta drive to Summerville, pick it up, and have it back here by 7. So see you tomorrow, okay?"

She's out the door before I can even respond. Which in a way isn't even a bad thing, because I am, for once (well, I guess for the second time really; I kept my mouth pretty nicely shut about the whole U.S. attorneys kerfluffle, didn't I?), practically speechless. Folkstone thinks *pimento cheese* will fortify him better for tomorrow's session with the AAUP—AKA The American Association of University Professors, a veritable snakepit of leftie nutsos with PhDs who, need it even be said, are decidedly *not* in favor of the privatize-all-higher-ed plan that's a cornerstone of his platform — than a briefing from me, the man who got *W.* both elected and *reelected* President of the United States? A certain amount of overconfidence is never a bad thing in a political candidate, but Folkstone takes self-satisfaction to a whole new level. And he's not real good at hiding his opinions of himself from the voters either. Those polling numbers from the upstate had better look more than just good or we're in trouble.

I flip open the folder, pull out the report, and start to read. "In Jane Austen's brilliant novel *Pride and Prejudice*," it begins, "Jane is making many interesting points about how the middle class and the upper class can learn to like each other more and be nicer to each other."

This is a very strange beginning to a polling report. I look at it again, and my eyes fall on the heading, which reads:

*Katie Alden
English 11 Honors
September 29
Mrs. Killdare*

Denise has given me her daughter's book report.

My Car, 5:57 p.m.

And, you know, that it's come to this To *this!* When, back in the heyday, in the middle years of *W.*'s administration, you read about me in your local paper or saw me on CNN walking briskly from my car to my office in the West Wing, did you ever imagine, much as you might have wished it on me, that I'd really be reduced to *this?*

Folkstone was supposed to be my comeback: another Southern gubernatorial candidate with presidential ambitions, but this time both farther to the right and more articulate than *W.* I get him into the statehouse, and then I get him into the White House, and then I am, undeniably, indisputably, invincible.

But, say what you will about *W.*, he, at least in some respects, knows his own limitations, was smart enough, in all of our years together, to know that I knew a lot more than he did about how to get him where we both wanted him to go.

Folkstone is different. The reason I get high school book reports when I'm supposed to be getting polling data is that everyone on his staff is always so nervous about what he's going to demand of them next that they don't have a whole lot of mental energy left to devote to their actual jobs.

I am, if I can't turn this thing around soon, going to become the Newt Gingrich of my generation, the once-invincible wunderkind now reduced to dolling out soundbites now and then when some reporter needs a reliably cogent articulation of a conservative perspective. Newt has, for years, been my foremost cautionary tale, his dizzying descent the stuff of my nightmares. Now my greatest fears loom before me as my probable future.

Fucking Folkstone. Fucking smug, self-congratulatory bastard who just can't get his head around the possibility that anyone might have a different opinion of him than his own. I mean, you know, if only I could ... hey, wait a minute! What did I just read about that was right along those lines — reconciliation? Mutual respect? Something like that, and it was ... oh. It was the book report. Denise's daughter's reading — and a garbled reading at that, if the quality of her prose is anything to go by — of some novel by some lady writer who's been dead for probably 200 years. That's just really not going to do the trick.

My bed, 3:26 a.m.

Oh, my stars, who knew a lady author with a subversive feminist agenda could be so freaking funny? Although apparently, according to some scholars, Austen is actually more conservative than subversive, insofar as she's less interested in overthrowing the patriarchy or usurping upper-class privilege than simply carving out slightly more space within the dominant social order for women and the middle classes. At least, that's what it says in the introduction to my new copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, which I stopped at Borders and bought on the way home, and let me tell you, that was more than a little bit embarrassing, because while I regularly drop by and browse the political shelves to keep an eye out for liberal bias in the displays of new and notable releases, I've never bought a novel there before. I haven't, if you want to know the truth, read a novel, other than the occasional Tom Clancy on a long plane ride, since college. I guess I just don't see the point of all these made-up stories about made-up people's lives when you can, as I've done, intervene in real people's lives and in so doing change the course of history. So when I walked up to the counter at Borders with my copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and handed it to the long-haired pinko wage slave at the register, I could see he was trying hard not to laugh. *Karl Love* buying nineteenth-century chick lit! He's probably still laughing.

But the last laugh will be mine. Because what I suddenly saw as I was driving to Applebee's for my nightly cheeseburger, with the abyss of Gingrichood looming before me, was that if even Denise's barely-literate daughter understood that *Pride and Prejudice* had significant things to say about rapprochement between the middle and upper classes, then Miss Austen really might have some ideas in the subject that are potent enough even to solve my Folkstone problems.

And she does! Or at least I think so. To be honest, I've sort of been forgetting to pay attention to the novel's thematic elements. The whole story of how Elizabeth Bennet is both drawn to and pissed off by Mr. Darcy is just so engrossing, I can't stop wondering what's going to happen next. And there are Folkstonian elements to the whole thing: the middle classes here seem to be likewise both drawn to Folkstone's charisma and pissed off by some of his tax proposals. If only I could find an Elizabeth Bennet with whom he could start a torrid romance and... but, no, then he'd be violating the sanctity of his marriage vows to Mrs. Folkstone, and that wouldn't go over well with the base.

Still, I feel very confident that once I find out how it all turns out and then go back and read it again, it will yield all sorts of ideas about how to get middle-class audiences to appreciate the hidden merits of stuffy and condescending rich guys.

It must be said, however, that no mention is made of Mr. Darcy being orange.

Six weeks later

Headline in *The State* newspaper:

Folkstone surges ahead to surprise victory; unexpectedly high middle-class, female support seen as keys to win

Six years later

Headline in the *New York Times*:

*Folkstone wins presidency
Ohio goes red, swings election
Love back in White House; Dems brace for battle*

Two years after that

Article in the *Washington Post*:

*The President and the lady novelist
Who's writing Folkstone's speeches?*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a president with a controversial agenda must be in want of an uncannily good speechwriter. But who would have imagined that ultra-neocon Charles Folkstone would turn to Jane Austen to help him sell his ideas to the American public?

Few of us would have conceived of such a thing, of course. And yet, according to Austen scholar and University of South Carolina PhD candidate Sherri Pensler, more than 20% of the content of Folkstone's speeches is lifted from Austen's novels.

"I just kept hearing these strange echoes in his words of the novels I was reading for my dissertation," Pensler said. "So I went back and did a study, and it's really interesting. When he was first elected governor, all of his Austen quotes came from *Pride and Prejudice*. But then he seemed to get into an *Emma* phase. Now he pulls from all six of Austen's novels on a regular basis. Lately, though, he's been on a little bit of a *Mansfield Park* kick."

The President, when approached by the *Post* about his opinions on Jane Austen denied having read any of the novels. "Jane who?" he asked. "*Pride and Prejudice* — wasn't that a movie? With that hot English chick? Cara or Kiera or whatever her name is? I think my wife made me go see it about ten years back."....

Two months later

Headline in the *New York Times*:

*Folkstone says, "It's time to bomb Iran"
Britain, France express concern that U.S. stance could trigger World War 3*

The next day, 7:38 a.m.

On way to breakfast with Folkstone. Took extra Zantac this morning in preparation. Have extra Tums in pocket too. War with Iran seemed like good idea last week—reliable way to revive sagging approval numbers and take the media's attention off the not-entirely-ideal results of Folkstone's privatization of the Justice Department. But am now persuaded British are right that consequences would include protracted global war. Which, given the size of our current deficit, would absolutely necessitate raising taxes. Which Folkstone would never even consider doing. Which in turn would mean troops not safe, not sufficiently armed, etc. Would be public relations catastrophe in every respect.

The problem is, once you've sold Folkstone on something, it's impossible to un-sell him on it. The fact that he never, ever goes back on his word is the thing he admires most about himself. Having said he's going to bomb Iran, he's going to want to do it.

The one good thing about breakfast with Folkstone is the breakfast itself: there's always lots of fresh Virginia ham and bacon, plentiful cheese grits, and sizzling hot hash browns. Also, sometimes they'll serve him corned beef hash, and as I make my way down the hall to the presidential breakfast room, I'm really hoping this morning will be one of those times. I do like corned beef hash.

When I enter the breakfast room, though, all thoughts of corned beef hash fly from my mind. Something's wrong with Folkstone. Instead of watching Fox News like he always does when he eats, he's got his head bent down toward the table. He seems to be *reading*. And from the looks of things, what he's reading isn't even a newspaper or a magazine but a book.

"Good morning, sir," I say, and he looks up and says to me, "Did you know, Karl, that of all the things Catherine imagined were going on in *Northanger Abbey*, not one of them were true? And that in fact her fascination with all of these imagined dangers caused her to overlook the one real danger to her happiness in the form of Henry Tilney's snooty father?"

I stare at him, really and truly speechless. He smiles at me even more patronizingly than usual, as if I were a particularly simple child. "After those weirdos from the *Post* started asking questions about Jane Austen, I decided it behooved me to find out what this woman whose words were apparently all over my speeches really had to say for herself," he says. "So I've been doing some extracurricular reading. And this *Northanger Abbey* book, I gotta tell you, Karl, it's kinda slow going, but it makes a heckuva point about how you can get burned if you always just jump to the most obvious conclusions. So I did a little more digging around on this whole Iran business. And just like Colonel Tilney hadn't really locked his wife in a secret chamber, those Ayatollas aren't really gonna invade Israel. It just sorta looks that way. So I've made up my mind — I'm not going to bomb Iran after all."

I sag into the closest chair. My relief is indescribable. Jane Austen has come through for me again. Are there no limits to the woman's genius?

"And then," he says, "I realized that if Iran isn't actually a threat, then I need to locate the real threat that, just like Catherine, we've failed to recognize. So I thought some more, and I finally figured it out. We've got to bomb Canada!"

Oh. Somehow I don't think Jane's going to be able to help me out of this one.

But this girl Debi in my Jane Austen reading group (every other Monday, 8:00 p.m. at the Capitol Hill Starbucks, if you ever want to join us) was telling me last week that she's got a 10-page reading list of great books by lady authors, and that she'd share it with me whenever I wanted. I guess I better give her a call.

One week later

Headline in the *Washington Post*:

*Folkstone declares war on France
Cites Charlotte Bronte novel Villette as inspiration for startling action
"The way they treated that poor Lucy Snow is outrageous," he says.*

Oh shit.

The Saint of Redirection
by
Robert Scotellaro

I pray to the patron Saint of Redirection, who shows up juggling sardines and a large red apple he takes a bite out of every revolution or so.

"This life," I say. "The sheer weight of it..."

"Is that you?" he asks, letting the silvery circle collapse at his feet — slipping the apple in his pocket. He's pointing to an old photo. "No, that's my older brother, when we were kids. I'm the one..." I turn and see he's now rowing across the living room in a small boat.

"Calm seas," he announces, skirting the TV. "I think it's going to be a magnificent voyage."

"I'm worried," I tell him. "This crazy world. It's so lopsided with evil ballooning out—I sometimes feel it'll slip right off its axis and hurl..."

"Nice drapes" he says, crawling up them like a cat. I look for tears, but there aren't any.

"And what's all this about an afterlife? Holy crap — who could ever know..."

"What's for lunch?" he asks.

"Humm... I hadn't thought about it. Chinese, I suppose."

He tosses a TV guide over with a startling cover, and I catch it. He turns for the door.

"Oops," he says, as the enormous sombrero he's suddenly wearing gets wedged between the frame. "Hey, could you give me a little shove?"

"Hey, thanks," I say as I push, and he pops out, audibly — heads off down the street on a wobbly tricycle.

I call *Yet Wa's* — order the Tangerine Beef. Get a cold one from the fridge and begin leafing through the guide. There'll be time enough later to clean up the fish.

Mack
by
Autumn Hayes

Forget your diet. We both know why you came here.
You ogle my browned buns,
my prime-beefcake physique,
and you cannot stay away
because I'm built:

This six-stack of tomatoes on top of my pickle,
lying back on this sizzling-onion bed, beckoning to you
with all the secret sauce you can take—
no wonder you can't wait
to strip my colorful wrappings,
lay into this piping hot patty,
and have me your way, again and again.

Or at least you think you can.

In your car, driving home to your limp-carrot diet
—your dry pantries full of rice cakes
when you'd rather have me in them—
you take me to go,
salivating, waiting all day
to rendezvous with your juicy bad boy,
the one whose lettuce hangs askew
so alluringly, nonchalantly;
the one who simultaneously fills you up and tears you down;
the one you crave at night and in the morning
because I'm sooo good
that your diet at home dissolves from memory
like sugar on the tip of your tongue.

Oh yeah. I cream forbidden fruit.

I'm your made-to-order noontime quickie;
I bring nothing to the table
because we do it in the front seat,
and you love every minute
of me not loving you—
 so super-size me, girl,
and hurry up.

Cookies
by
Lauren Hargrave

"I don't know what to tell you, our last exterminator wasn't worth jack. He bumped and bruised his way through our home like a Neanderthal on steroids."

"He was a cute Neanderthal from what I remember."

"Eh, I don't like the cleft chin thing; it reminds me of a plumber's crack. And when someone's ripping your kitchen apart and tearing up your hydrangeas, it's pretty difficult to find them attractive."

"Oh Deb, not the hydrangeas! You worked so hard on those flowers."

"I know! Our house was a mess. And you know what, a week after he was finished, mouse poop."

"Was it there from before? Maybe you just missed it in the frantic scramble before the 'arrival'."

"Caroline, how long have you known me? I didn't miss it. I was on my hands and knees scrubbing the most recessed corners of my damn kitchen. I didn't miss it. And she sure as hell didn't miss it."

"Oh god, Dan's mom found the mouse poop?"

"Of course she did. She'd find the one speck of dust on Martha Stewart's mantle. Do you want to know what she did with it?"

"With what? The mouse poop? What does one do with mouse poop other than throw it away?"

"Caroline, I think she's crazy. She wrapped the pellets in one of the linen dinner napkins and when I came down to make breakfast in the morning, she poured me a cup of coffee and then placed the poop right next to it."

"Like a present?"

"Like a fucking present."

"No! Did Dan see?"

"Yea, while I'm scrambling her friggin' free range, organic, gold-plated eggs so they're not too runny and not too dry, she hands me mouse poop."

"I thought she set it next to your coffee."

"Whatever, same thing. It was her way of showing her disapproval, of letting me know it's all my fault."

"What's your fault?"

"I don't know, everything — the house isn't clean enough, Dan's stressed at work, the old bats at the club won't let her in the bridge game."

"Yea you really have to stop bribing the Golden Girls- it's clearly not her sparkling personality they have a problem with."

"I know, right? This little war is ridiculous. I'm almost glad Dan didn't catch it."

"Why? You need to tell him about this stuff — this woman is torturing you and all you can do is scramble her eggs?"

"Caroline, you know I tried — remember when we were first dating and she asked what kind of underwear I wore?"

"Oh my god, I totally forgot about that."

"Yea, well so has Dan — he brushed that off as her being old fashioned."

"But this is different. This is mouse poop."

"Yea, but I didn't throw the mouse poop away either."

"What? Well what did you do with it?"

"I did what any good daughter-in-law would do; I made her chocolate chip cookies."

Daydreaming in Greensburg
by
Matt Henderson

I'm gonna shake these suburban
Small-town white-person blues
And travel to the most flamboyant gay bar imaginable
A bar where the techno music blares
And everyone wears tight shirts that blind you with their purple sequins
A giant magnet-bar that attracts every sexy human being in the world
Preferably a bar that has chicken tenders
And ice tea
Because I'm a really picky eater.

Space Opera
by
Cal Cleary

I am sitting in a room with at least three hundred people, and I have been asked to move to the back because of my gigantic hat. I am not sure how to react. If I move, I will undoubtedly read about my shame in tomorrow's gossip section, or at least I will hear about it tauntingly during my daily super-spacial swimming with fellow gentlemen. I do not want this. And, I reason, if the people behind me were important enough to do something about it, they would very probably not be sitting behind me.

I throw five thousand dollars at the four-armed usher and when that doesn't move him, I reach out with my tentacles and caress his exposed genitals. He leaves. They always leave when I touch them. My body is a mass of slimy appendages, completely alien in appearance to the humans, a monstrous picture that often frightens even the impure-human sentients. Every known species these days has a little human somewhere, except for me. I wore such a giant, gorgeous hat in hopes that it would draw attention away from my deformities.

Most of the crowd is wholly human, though the performer on stage, a blue-skinned singer with expressive range and no clothing, is most certainly not. The performer is never human, not anymore. Humanity bred dominant, and they do not need to dirty themselves with the nude singing aspect of the entertainment industry anymore.

I have never understood the making of art, I can proudly say. I want only to be entertained – and for everyone to love me, of course, as all sensible beings do. Despite the writhing mass of limbs that make up the bulk of my mass, I am as human as many here. I was raised by human parents, at least as far back as I recall, excessively wealthy human parents who did not mind my extra appendages. In fact, once mother-dearest discovered their dexterity and tensile strength, my respectable parents began to leave the house less and less. I occasionally feel shame that this addiction was partially responsible for their deaths – it sometimes feels as though some of the shame at their indecency and weakness may rub off on me, as though I am judged by their sins.

I am poked in the back, on one of my rear tentacles. I can feel the grease of his filthy hand rub off on me. I have never gotten used to that feeling, never learned to properly suppress my nausea at it. I am sure that my human wife thinks that I cannot stand the sight of her body, with so few limbs, but it is untrue – she is beautiful to me, but I cannot bear her touch. I have tried, out of respect to her wishes, but I have failed her in much the same way that I eventually failed my dear, deceased parents. I suspect that I am secretly traumatized by something involving their touch, though biology suggests a minor allergy to certain oils on their dirty skin is a more likely explanation.

My tentacles sway in sadness for a brief instant at the thought of my lonely wife, who is undoubtedly even now pleasuring her seven-entity Quadrillionaire Estates Sex Slave Premiere Package, but I am disrupted once again by the filthy touch of the ape behind me. "Pardon," he whispers to me. "I was wondering if you could remove that gorgeous hat, you slavish beast."

I consider my options very briefly before I consume him in a writhing mass of sticky,

sucking tentacles. I am afraid, for a moment, that I have made the wrong decision. I snap his neck with my innards to silence him before I begin to digest him — slowly, so as not to make noise. I do not want to disturb the show.

Around me, the people begin to applaud softly. I pretend not to know why, and join in the clapping. I cannot afford to stand out. Similarly, the rest of the audience begins clapping. They are unsure why, but they, like me, do not wish to appear not to know why they are clapping. They are undoubtedly making wry comments back and forth even now with a sense of elitist camaraderie. I would love to join them, but my mouth is sadly full.

The performer, dear, beautiful girl bows, confused. She believes we are clapping for her. She is, then, rather dull, but her voice is beautiful, and if she is cleaner than the humans, I would gladly penetrate her multiple times with a number of appendages of varying length and girth. I make a mental note to approach her after the show with the offer. I rather hope she will say yes — I do so love ejaculation.

The applause dies down eventually, and the performer continues with her show. Her voice is operatic, and the song she has chosen is much better than any in her opening set. I am hypnotized against my will to follow the rises and falls of her silvery voice. I retain enough sense of self not to sing along, but my neighbors cannot help but note my swaying tentacles as I brush their thighs in my dance. Though I cannot see them, I can mentally picture their scorn. "Look," they are saying to each other so softly that my dull ears cannot pick up on it, "truly, music soothes the savage beast."

"Indeed," replies another, an alien concubine who will surely never now allow me to penetrate her to our mutual satisfaction, "it is such an animal that I can hardly stand to be near it."

"And it smells something fierce," replies their less-clever friend. I would like to penetrate him, but for a different reason, and it would end only in my satisfaction as I consumed him. I do not like stupid remarks where witty ones are called for.

It is either the shame of this imagined exchange or the completion of the song that allows me to break free of the hypnotism. I almost eat all the people near me, to ensure that they do not spread rumors about me, but I have long since learned that one mustn't get predictable. Nothing turns an audience against you quicker than repetition, mother-dearest always told me.

Before the performer can begin a new song, I hear a ruckus from the back. I am shocked. I hope that whoever began this shameful ruckus dies. It almost saddens me, what humanity is coming to. In my head, I share a look with the performer, and we silently laugh at the foibles of the true humans. In reality, she continues with her set, silently hoping, I am sure, that she will not be executed for failing to hold the attention of her audience.

"Everyone!" I hear a voice from the back. "Everyone get on the fucking floor!" Such dreadful shouting! I cannot believe that there are humans that would dare do this. I hear rapid gunshots punctuating his shouts. He must have some sort of awful automatic device.

I yawn, feigning boredom. I can feel the nearby patrons eyeing my nonchalance with envy. I easily hide my smile, though the appendage twitches that signify happiness in me is hardly recognizable to any greasy little rodent around me, and return to watching the singer. Like

me, she is pretending not to notice. Admittedly, this may partially be because if she falters, she will be murdered at the shows end, but it is still admirable, and it is drawing a great deal of positive attention from the crowd, who is, at this point, mostly ignoring the thugs.

They do not seem to like that. I hear a series of rapid gunshots, and the pretty blue-skinned humanoid on stage explodes into a beautiful purple shower of blood and vital organs. Her voice has stopped, and for a moment, the entire theater is stunned silent.

The silence does not last, and the heartless brutes begin to scream orders again, but the damage has been done. The performer has been shot in the midst of her strongest song this night. I do not act, and despite the screams and the guns and the angry idiots. I hear the commands, the, "Empty your wallets! Your credits are mine! All your dollars are mine!" but I do not know what to do, how to react.

Fear, I know, seems logical, but I recall that fear was the immediate response at the terror strikes at the Ultra-Coke Messiah Hall of Music twelve days back, and it would really just seem to the outside world as though we were copying them. I certainly do not want to die like that, and I suspect that no one else here does, either. Cruel society would tear down the massive monument I plan on having built for my resting place and in its place would build toilets should I show a moment's fear, I believe.

There is always heroism. That could be interesting. From the numerous films I have seen, heroes are rather well received, at least in the short term, and they are frequently granted penetration-rights from total strangers without even needing to drug or pay them first! I rather begin to hope that the consensus be heroism. The fact that I am immortal is an added spice to this, as I should surely be quite a successful hero because of it.

This paralyzing indecision grips many of us, I suspect, because we are going through similar thought processes. The cockless bastards holding the concert hall up are still shouting nonsense like, "Your women and your dollars will go to feed our bloody cause!" but it feels half-hearted. They must be experienced enough to know that they will not get anywhere until some sort of consensus is reached among the crowd. I do not allow my pride at being held up by such skilled beings to show, but I am secretly quite thrilled. This shall surely make the news. I hope my wife sees.

I am still thinking when I heard the first bits of song. Her song. Did we choose memorial? That seems kind of lame. It's just one guy, sitting near the mindless beasts. I hear a gunshot ring out, and the singing stops. I brace myself for more crappy singing, and I'm sure that the brutes feel the same way.

Blessedly, I am surprised when I hear an older woman's voice eagerly yell out, "Kill me next!" That breaks the silence, and I am quite happy — not a memorial, then, but a bloodbath. A tribute — she died, so we die. Conceptually similar to memorial, but different enough to make me almost attempt to smile, and violent enough to definitely get us on TV. We'd own the cycle for hours!

Gunshots ring out, faster and faster, trying and failing to keep up with the demands. The thugs must not even be stopping — they must be planning to go back once everyone is dead and rummaging through the pockets, grabbing the jewelry, all that. Had I a spine, surely it would shiver in my currently excited state.

The screaming demands are getting louder and louder, and soon I cannot even hear the

gunshots anymore. Someone nearby, in a futile attempt to stand out, begins to sing. A few people take up the song, and are rewarded with a quick death – one of them even has the honor of being disintegrated by a wide-burst laser blast! Ecstasy.

I feel the first bullet smack against some of my back tentacles, along with brain matter from the person it tore through to get to me. This is when I feel the first stab of worry, as the bullet does not penetrate me. In fact, the most distress that I experience is from the feel of all that filthy human touching my tentacles.

As the thugs move closer to me, more and more blood, loose skin, bits of the people nearby land all over me. The feel of it disgusts me, and I am beginning to get agitated. I can feel the bullets hitting me, sometimes; I believe that they may even be penetrating my tentacles. I occasionally feel pain, I think. But I see no vital organs spraying forth from me, feel no death throes.

“It’s not going down!” someone screams. I can only assume they’re talking about me, speaking of me as some sort of beast. The nerve!

“Firebomb it!” Finally, something other than screams and songs — explosion. The sound is frankly more painful than the firestorm that follows, though I can tell that the flames should be quite painful from all the dying and whining that the apes around me are doing.

After the fire scours me clean, I stare out in front of me. A bulk of the hall is dead. I stare out at the stage in front of me, at the scattered remains of the poor blue singer. I look around, barely noticing the never-ending hail of gunfire pounding against my hardened tentacles, staring at the devastation, at all the death. Why am I not dying?

I realize that I can no longer feel my hat. One tentacle reaches up to feel for it, and comes away covered in dust. The firebomb. It must have destroyed my hat. But...without my hat, I begin to feel naked. Without my hat, I am naked, but it is more than simple nudity. The hat drew attention away from my... deformities. Without it, I am truly naked to the world for the first time in many hours.

Casually, I slide forward through the burning rubble, towards the thugs. They begin to launch grenades. The heat hurts them more than it hurts me. Two of them bring out expensive laser rifles, which very nearly manage to burn me, but it is not enough.

My tentacles grab hold of the guns, snapping them. The resulting overload cooks the two men. It even damages those two tentacles. I have a hundred more.

I consume the remaining gun-toting toughs. I consume the remainder of the people in the auditorium. I leave, and consume the approaching media. If I cannot die with the remainder of them those gloriously dirty humans, I can allow no one to witness my shame. I shame eat my way through the city, killing hundreds, all the way to the Gray Oceans, and I slide swiftly into it and swim far and fast, diving deep. The Gray Oceans make an excellent hiding place – even in a time of interstellar travel, it is deep and perilous and worthless enough that treks to the bottom are rare, and I was spawned in the very deepest depths on my home-planet.

I am comfortable there. But I cannot leave without facing my shame.

I hope my wife will miss me.

I hope there were no recording devices present in the theater or in my rampage across the city.

Famous Last Words
by
Paul Giles

SHIRT: "The first hanging is also the last."

BED: "Tiredness: the little death."

PILLOW: "Once bitten, twice shy."

WALL: "The dream of mirror: see like window, think like blind."

HAT: "I've lived and loved. I've nothing left to hide."

BLIND: "Windows aspire to the condition of doors."

JACKET: "Nothing to hide? Nothing to give."

LIGHT: "I see, and my heart is broken."

SCARF: "How many winters, O Lord?"

BOOK: "It's alright, dear. I knew the end was dim before we began."

LAPTOP: "Again?"

SHOE: "All who walk, walk a mile with me."

PANTS: "Remember this was done."

DOOR: "Jam! More jam!"

BAG: "Carry your outside zipped within."

FLOOR: "All have the strength to touch a soul."

HEATER: "I've only ever wanted cold desire."

MIRROR: "No. No. Nooooooooooo!"

Contributor Biographies



David Cotrone is from the relentlessly historical town of Plymouth, Massachusetts. He is currently a student at the College of the Holy Cross. Regrettably, his name is not a palindrome.



George Walker is an inventor working for the Acme Corporation in Portland Oregon. His stories have been published in *Ideomancer*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Tomorrow SF*, *Steampunk Tales*, *Reflection's Edge*, *Helix SF*, *Raygun Revival*, and elsewhere.

He confesses to having watched too many Road Runner cartoons at an impressionable age.
<http://sites.google.com/site/georgeswalker/>



Evan Allgood is currently chipping away at an MFA degree in Screenwriting at Georgia College & State University. He originally hails from Northern Virginia, but is probably more likely to wind up in Atlanta or Austin after graduation.



Leslie Haynsworth's fiction and creative nonfiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Confrontation*, *The Roanoke Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Gulf Stream*, *Existere*, and elsewhere. She's fiction editor for *Yemassee* and lives in Columbia, South Carolina, about a mile from the house where she grew up. Arguably, that means she hasn't gone very far in life. But then, Jane Austen didn't get around much either, and look where sitting around at home all the time got her.



Robert Scotellaro's flash fiction and prose poems have appeared in a variety of literary journals and anthologies, including *Gargoyle*, *Flash (The International Short-Short Story Magazine)*, *Fast Forward (A Collection of Flash Fiction) Vols. 2 & 3*, *Houston Literary Review*, *6S Anthology Vol. 3*, *MicroHorror*, *Willows Wept Review*, *Ghoti*, *Dogzplot*, *Clockwise Cat*, *mud luscious*, *Storyscape/Storyscape Journal Anthology*, *Tuesday Shorts*, *Battered Suitcase*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, and others. He is the author of several books and chapbooks, and the recipient of *Zone 3's* Rainmaker Award in Poetry. Raised in Manhattan, he currently lives with his wife in California.

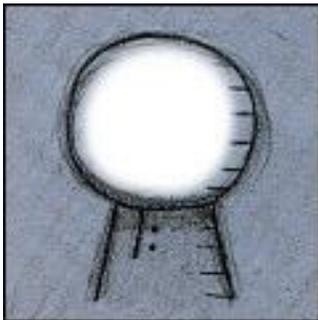


Autumn Hayes has nothing against hamburgers, no matter what you may have read or heard. She supports hamburgers and hamburger-related causes 1,110 percent. She lives and works in Houston, Texas with her husband Adrian, mediating between subjects and verbs, writing herself into oblivion, and enjoying an excellent view of the Houston Astrodome, where many hamburgers are created and sold daily. She recently joined the

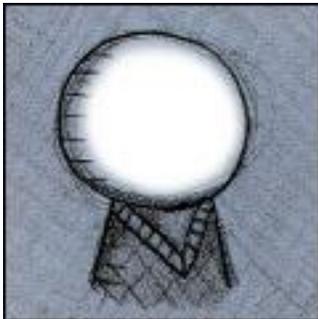
ranks of the internet-savvy, and hopes someday to have a website or a blog all her own. Someday...



Lauren Hargrave is a former finance stiff who recently leapt from her flight on Corporate American Airlines and is now looking for her parachute. Her mother thinks she's crazy but she spends her days in intangible luxury writing web copy, blogging (www.fiftytwocents.com), and dreaming up the fantastic. She hopes to one day move out of her childhood bedroom.



Matt Henderson recently graduated with a B.A. in Theatre from Seton Hill University. He has been published in Seton Hill's literary magazine *Eye Contact* and its newspaper the *Setonian*. He has also developed his plays with Pittsburgh Playworks.



Cal Cleary is a librarian, writer, and all-around miserablist who spends an enormous chunk of each week judging others: he reviews comic books, graphic novels, and TV for *read/RANT*. He also has a short horror story titled "No Answer" in an anthology of heavy metal horror stories, and a short zombie comic called "Compromise" in an upcoming comic from Incubator Press.



After stints in Korea, New Zealand, and the bathroom, **Paul Giles** has returned to his homeland of Australia, determined to regain his title as Wombat Rustler of the Year (Flyweight Division). He enjoys putting another shrimp on the barbie, ending each sentence with "mate," and being bigoted, mate. His writing is influenced by gossip blogs, reality television, and dickheads. Mate.