

◇ Defenestration ◇

Volume IX, Issue III

December 2012

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The Passenger
by
Addison Clift

"North and Clybourn is next. Doors open on the right at North and Clybourn."

The train starts to move. Arms tangle with arms, grabbing for something to grab. Legs tuck in, not to trip other legs. Eyes search for a safe place, avoiding contact with other eyes. I have read the same paragraph seven times. *Seven* times. And I'll probably read it seven more. Monkeyfucking Dostoyevsky.

Work. Train. Home. Judy. Sleep. Up. Train. Work. Train. Home. Sleep. Oh God, how I want to sleep...

On Monday, after nearly forty years of casually-dressed existence (three of which I've been in their employ) Hadley's Stationers is going to start making us wear uniforms. They dropped this little bomb on us three weeks ago, and ever since then I've been dreading it like a car trip with my cousin Murph. I have spent the last nine years of my post-graduate life climbing the retail ladder, and I have finally attained a job where: 1) I can wear whatever I want, 2) I can dick around on my laptop all day, and 3) I receive benefits.

Now, after creating an environment that I could kind of almost grudgingly describe as borderline tolerable, they pull this crap. Today I tried it on for the first time. It looks like I work at Domino's. And to make matters worse, the girls preened around in them, saying they were like oh my god the cutest uniforms ever. Imbeciles. Don't they see that if they take away (1), then (2) and (3) are soon to follow? (Although I don't know what the point is of having health insurance if you have to wear a uniform. You might as well be dead.)

Judy's probably home already. Spreading her stuff out everywhere. Putting her music on. Nice of me to agree to an apartment that's a brisk ten-minute walk from her workplace, and a thirty-minute cattle car ride from mine. I am such a nice guy.

And I'm not kidding when I say cattle car. There's barely enough room in here to blink. An old woman in a hot pink jumpsuit is standing next to my seat, her ample posterior getting nice and chummy with my face. Every time the train lurches forward, her Nordstrom bag swings back and hits me in the knee.

Now, I know what you're probably thinking: *Why don't you stop being a dick and offer this woman your seat? Also, how the hell did you even get a seat at rush hour? I never can.* Please, one question at a time. I'll answer your second one first.

For the attainment of a situated position on a northbound rush hour train, I have a method. Step one: walk all the way to either the farthest car forward or the farthest back. (Fore and aft, in nautical terms.) Today I went aft, since it was the longer walk on the platform. (Longer walk = fewer walkers.) Step two—and this is more important than which car you get on—is where you get on the train in the first place. If I got on the northbound train where I work—Lake Street—I'd be standing with an armpit in my face, instead of sitting with an ass. So I walk south to Harrison Street and get on there. For a northbound train, walk south. For a southbound train, walk north. That's how to get a seat.

Now, as to your first question: why don't I quit being a dick? To be honest, I usually do. After walking all the way from Lake Street down to Harrison, just to get the goddamn seat, more often than not I end up offering it to some golden oldster so I don't spend the whole ride tormented by guilt and self-loathing and nagging questions of CTA etiquette.

Yet today, a certain paralysis has set in. Today, for whatever reason, I sit. I feel rotten about it, but still I sit. And the train moves, ever...so...slowly.

But get a load of this: up toward the middle of the car, between two scrawny kids and a stain that might be a piss stain but no one's sure but they're avoiding it anyway in case it is, this one guy looks sick. I mean, *really* sick. He's sweating and rocking back and forth on his feet, and just now he's started twitching violently. And yet the woman sitting under him just goes on reading her little e-book thingy, pretending not to notice there's a man twelve inches away going into severe convulsions.

And it's the same with everyone else. The indifference I'm seeing all around me is frankly shocking. You read about this stuff, but to witness it firsthand like this... well, it makes you wonder about the world we live in. Would it be *that hard* for someone to call 9-1-1 or alert the conductor? I mean, I'd do it, but I'm all the way back here. Makes more sense for them to. They're closer.

Anyway, back to my paragraph: "*I am crushed with tedium. After all, the direct, immediate, legitimate fruit of heightened consciousness is inertia, that is, the deliberate refusal to do anything. I have mentioned this before.*" Oh, yes. He's mentioned it before. I sure hope you're happy, Judy. I could be reading Elmore Leonard or Terry Pratchett. But no. I'm reading Dostoyevsky. I'm reading Dostoyevsky because you approve. And reading what you approve of is my way of stretching out in your lap and begging for a tummy rub.

But I'm on to you, with your fitted hoodies and your Buddy Holly glasses. You want to suck all the joy out of life, until everyone is a pale, unsmiling art student who watches Matthew Barney films and thinks urban farming has gotten too commercial.

Well, you know what, Judy? It's working.

Okay--new development. The twitchy guy just screamed something that sounded like "PHARA KOLTANA I AM YOUR VESSEL!!!" You know, I never really got this New Age stuff. One time I saw Shirley MacLaine on Letterman and she—*whoa*, hold on there. Now his arms are elongating and reconfiguring themselves into two, three...four segments? His head is thrashing violently back and forth, his neck is bulging, and...ick. His skull just split open and in its place popped out the head of what looks like...well, honestly, it looks like a mantis. Long antennae, compound eyes. And his arms have become a mantis's forelegs, complete with spiked claws at the end. Its head swivels in an almost complete circle as it coolly surveys the other passengers, all of whom are doing their best to ignore it.

Its first victim is this aspiring Lincoln Park housewife wearing a wrap cardigan over workout clothes. With lightning speed it thrusts a sharpened tibia into her back, which then comes out through her chest. From the look on her face, she is quite surprised. It pulls her to it, withdraws its clawed foreleg, and then, using the cavity it has made, cracks open her rib cage and sloppily eats her organs. I think she was actually alive for the first part of that.

Now it sets its sights on this black guy reading a *Sun-Times* over near the stain that might be a piss stain but no one's sure but they're avoiding it anyway in case it is. The mantis

closes its forelegs around him, then a chomp-chomp here and a chomp-chomp there, and suddenly this car has a lot more standing room.

There's nothing approaching panic in the other passengers, but I do notice a little anxiety. A nervous glance, a hurried text message. The woman who'd been sitting closest to the mantis has done her best to scoot away while remaining seated. This was a scoot of about one-and-a-half inches. Likewise, as we come into Fullerton, nobody with a seat seems willing to give it up. I guess they figure it's not their business, so it's not their problem. (Although I just had to duck to avoid being hit by a kidney.)

Anyway, I can't get over this damn uniform thing. What am I, a Wal-Mart greeter? A sandwich artist? Is there no indignity they won't make us suffer, just for the sake of slapping their goddamn logo on one more available space? I wanted to quit when I found out, and I wanted to quit again today when, standing before the restroom mirror, trembling with revulsion and dread, I beheld myself in that light blue polo shirt with "Hadley's" stitched across the breast in florid red cursive. Five years of college for *this*? When Josh asked me how I liked it, I should have wrapped it around his neck, cut off his oxygen, and asked him how he liked not having a soul. But did I do that? Of course not. Instead I said, "Pretty good."

Pretty good.

I must really enjoy my present state of total debasement. In fact, I think Dostoyevsky had something to say about that. Yeah, here it is: "*No, a man can't have a trace of self-respect, can he, who has attempted to find his pleasure in the consciousness of his own degradation?*" I'm way ahead of you there, Fyodor. I can state unequivocally that I have no self-respect. And now I have the uniform to prove it.

Damn. That guy's head came *right off*. I thought it would be more difficult, what with the spine and the neck muscles and all the gristle. But one swipe of the mantis's foreleg was like someone hitting a home run in tee ball. It was some LaSalle Street prick who'd been jabbering into his Bluetooth about how much money his next con job was going to make him. No great loss there. But at least I've found out one thing is true: the head goes on living for several seconds after separation from the body. As it flew in a perfect arc the whole length of the car, his lips were still making the words: "I'll have that on your desk first thing in the morning."

Guess he won't.

Judy is another problem. When we first started dating, she treated me like a new app. Now she treats me like a collection of old CDs that she never got around to throwing out, and which she's slightly embarrassed about because it's all Godsmack and Limp Bizkit and these days she only listens to German emo rock. Just last weekend I asked her if she wanted to do one of the intentionally pointless things we used to do, like rent a car and drive to Rock Island and back. She said, "What would be the point of that?" I said, "There is no point. It's pointless. That's the point." She looked at me like I was a brain tumor and said she had work to do. Later I caught her masturbating to an old picture of Neil Patrick Harris. I said, "You do realize he's gay." She said living with me was like trying to cross the ocean on a mountain bike, so I went into the kitchen and ate all the Newman-O's. It was a pretty typical weekend.

All right, now it's getting bad in here. I haven't seen this much blood since *Shark Week*. I think my fellow Red Liners are finally getting a little antsy. This guy in a turban got on at Belmont and then walked right off again. I've only got five stops to go until Bryn Mawr. I don't want to give up my seat. But I think it's about time I started looking at this with a practical eye. Given this thing's approximate body mass, I would have to think that there's a point coming in the fairly near future when its appetite for human flesh will be sated. One more rider? Two? Three? There are at least a dozen directly between it and me, so mathematically speaking, I should be okay.

But that's assuming it lives according to the usual rules of biology. What if it doesn't? What if it has no biology? What if it's just a giant 'Fuck You' from the universe? A cosmic Mr. Creosote that will devour us all and then burst in a fusillade of goo, thus offering a valuable lesson on the perils of overconsumption. Is this how I'm going to die, eaten by a praying mantis on my way home from a job that doesn't value me to a girlfriend who doesn't respect me?

(By the way, I just texted her and apologized about the Newman-O's, said I was really enjoying *Notes From Underground*, told her she's the most wonderful girlfriend ever, and said I might be a little late.)

All right, I need a plan. Right now this thing is perched on the back of a seat about dead center in the car, peeling an exchange student the way some people peel string cheese. It's got a good vantage point and it's watching both doors. Around Addison and Sheridan there was a mild rush for the exits, but now the standers are gone, and it's just us sitters. Which is appropriate, I think. We're the hardened long-haulers, with calloused butts and seen-it-all attitudes. This train belongs to us.

But it looks like our friend here disagrees. And it might not let us leave.

"This is Wilson."

Okay, let's see if anyone tries to get off. Three people head for the exits and...two of them make it. But the guy who didn't—ouch. He won't be doing somersaults anytime soon. Or anything else, really, that requires having a torso.

Still, two out of three. Those are pretty good odds. I see the other riders looking at each other, nodding and smiling. No one's giving up their seat just to stand on the next train, not for two out of three.

That doorbell sounds.

"Doors closing."

The train begins to move.

"Lawrence is next. Doors open on the left at Lawrence."

Do you ever feel like some line of decency has been crossed?

Get this: up near the front, this dude was sitting with his back to the carnage. He had his music up loud on one of those old-school jumbo headsets I keep meaning to pick up. I think he was the only one still blissfully unaware that this has been converted to a dining

car and we're the buffet. But his ignorance didn't last long. The mantis yanked him over the back of his seat, spiked him in the air with one foreleg, and with the other, sliced him open from chin to crotch. Everything fell out. It was gnarly.

But you know, it's really got me thinking. One minute you're sitting contentedly on the Red Line, listening to Wiz Khalifa on your tricked-out personal sound system, and the next minute you're being gutted by some overgrown cicada from God knows what dimension. Then the thing has the audacity to kneel down and start slurping up your viscera. I mean, how fucked up is that? What did this guy do to deserve such a death? Play his music too loud? That LaSalle Street prick was one thing. But this was just a regular guy, on his way home, grabbing a few minutes to relax on the train. A fellow passenger. An average Joe.

He was...Jesus, he was just like me.

"This is Lawrence."

What if Dostoyevsky was right? What if *Judy* is right? What if this is all there is? You go through the motions of your life—working and sleeping and working and never getting anywhere, wondering if you'd be better off just chucking it all, and lost in a sea of people who are probably thinking the same thing—and before you even have time to make up your mind, the cosmos sends a cricket to finish you off. And for what? What good did my life do, for me or for anyone else? What good would come of my death?

"Argyle is next. Doors open on the left at Argyle."

There has to be more than this. There *has* to be. I don't mean God or Buddha or some sort of pie-in-the-sky. I just mean that someday, I want to be able to look back on my life, and read the words that I wrote on the side of the world: *I. Was. Here.* I was here and I made my mark. I don't know what that mark will be yet, but I hope it's a little more than just my pancreas left a sticky stain on the floor of a Red Line car.

There aren't many passengers left. Just me and a few others. And now, for the first time, this thing is looking directly at me, rocking from side to side, sizing me up. I feel like I'm staring at my own Fate, and Fate is staring back at me with a thousand hungry eyes.

And you know what? It can go fuck itself. Because I am sick and tired of letting events outside my control determine the course of my life. No more will I be a leaf blown about by the agency of others. Here is where it ends.

First: Tomorrow I am going to quit that ridiculous job. Nobody puts me in a uniform. Nobody.

Second: Judy and I are done. Splitsville. Finito. This last year we've been like a fish flapping around on the bottom of a boat, slowly running out of oxygen, struggling in fruitless despair against the horrible inevitability of death. (Ironically, if our relationship were a Russian novel, I think Judy would really dig it.)

And third: I have a message for the lanky fellow who by now has made provender of most of the riders on this train. My message for you is this: *not today.* Sure, someday you may get me. Someday I may be eaten by a giant insect, or struck by lightning, or a piano might fall on my head. But not today.

Because today I'm going to ride this thing all the way to the end. I'm not getting off at Bryn Mawr. I'm going to Howard Street, and from there up to Northwestern, where I will march into the Registrar's Office and announce that I'm finishing my master's in journalism, and nothing with or without an exoskeleton is going to stop me.

And I'm going to get there sitting in this very seat.

Because I have worked too hard and put up with too much bullshit to let some big ugly grasshopper tell me what's what. Every day I get up and leave a girlfriend who doesn't appreciate me to go to a job that I'm embarrassed to admit I still work at, and when the job is done I walk all the way from Lake to Harrison, just to get this seat, just so I can have a few minutes to relax and tune the rest of it out.

The way I figure it—I've earned this seat. Screw. By. Screw.

Do you hear me, you absurdist joke? You insignificant arthropod fuckstain? You bit player in a bad cosmic soap opera?

This is my seat.

Come get me off of it. I dare you.

A Shared Monastery
by
Colin Dodds

She is on the pill. My sperm have built
a monastery inside of her.
They illuminate manuscripts all day.

The newer sperm ask the older ones
what to do.

The older ones point to the solitary egg,
like the sun in the sky and say
"Worship. And try to pass the time."

Wutown
by
Alia Volz

6:21AM

A tangerine Scion pulls into my driveway 6 minutes late. I get in the car and look the rookie over. He's cut from the funny pages: pink-cheeked and yellow-haired, with a Dennis the Menace cowlick. His new badge gleams.

"Officer Wu at your service," I say.

"Whup Ass Wu?"

"Only one I know. Sergeant Fagen asked me to ride in with you so we could have a talk before your first run."

"This is a real honor." He shows his teeth and we shake hands. "I'm Matt Taylor."

"Officer Taylor, from now on. Let's move." I direct him to the 101-South. Traffic is loose, so we crest the hill above Hollywood at 6:28AM. The city sits before us in a heap like a jigsaw puzzle in its box.

"I control 403 Adam," I say. "That's Central Hollywood. Everything from Normandie to La Brea and Franklin to Sunset is Wutown. Some of the worst offenders in the city are on my beat. I know them by make and plate. To the average officer's 30-35 per day, Wu does 50-55.

"Now you're fresh out of the package, and maybe you're nervous. You'll be tempted to stick to stick to easy stuff. I'm here to tell you that the DOT doesn't need another half-wit in uniform. We need enforcers."

The rookie purses his lips. His knuckles pale, gripping the wheel.

"Remember your 300 series? What about the 400s? If you want to excel in this organization, I suggest you study."

"Yes Sir. That manual was my—"

"I bet you're an actor, right? You came to us for a job with flexible hours, something to accommodate auditions. Listen, we got junkies, drunks and crackheads parking under the influence; got half a million third-world imports that can't read signage; got celebs, ex-celebs, producers and jackass lawyers who think the rules don't apply to them. Every breed of scumbag rat drives these streets. You can't change that. But you can encourage them to park in an orderly fashion. And that's something.

"I've ticketed Pamela Anderson, my own uncle, and probably yours too. I personally handed a citation to Mayor Villaraigosa. He gave me a campaign button and thanked me for my service."

"You ticketed Pamela?" His cheeks are looking less rosy.

"Fire hydrant."

"Holy shit."

We exit at Vermont. A left and a right take us to HQ—a squat, square building that hasn't seen paint since 1979. As we enter the parking structure, I place my hand on his shoulder.

"Officer Taylor, have a good first day. Keep your pepper spray on the ready. No fear, no mercy. Remember, parking enforcement is the great equalizer."

9:50AM

I operate 01194, a white Plymouth bearing the sundial insignia of the Los Angeles Department of Transportation. The steering wheel is constructed on the right, to facilitate chalking. I hang the chalking stick out the window and cruise up Fountain at 4 miles per hour, marking the left front tire of every car.

I'll maintain this speed until La Brea, double back via Santa Monica Boulevard, then snake through my run east of Highland, returning to this spot at precisely 11:00AM. In accordance with signage, many of the vehicles will have been removed. Anything remaining is mine. I'll issue 10-15 citations on this morning loop. Punctuality is key.

I turn onto La Brea and, right away, the vista gets bueno. I issue a 540.2 for expired registration and a 490.1 for a WHITE ZONE violation. On the next block, I spot a vehicle parked approximately 1'6" from the curb. It's a close call. I pull over, unclip the tape measurer from my belt and kneel on the concrete. The rear right tire is 1'7" away from the curb. I slap him with a 412.1.

They'd park upside down if they could.

11:48AM

It was roadwork and molasses all the way down Santa Monica. Now I must increase my chalking speed to 6 MPH to make up the difference. This requires superior skill, my own flick-of-the-wrist technique. In my haste, I nearly miss a flashing meter: EXPIRED EXPIRED EXPIRED.

A citizen approaches the vehicle: Asian or Pacific Islander female, black hair, approximately 32 y/o, professionally dressed.

"I'm putting change in right now!" she hollers, waving a handbag over her head. She smiles like someone accustomed to winning.

Although I am usually happy to educate the public, I'm in serious danger of missing the morning run on Fountain. I enter license plate FC1H332 in my hand-held for a 212.5, without slowing my vehicle.

The citizen yells "Thank you!" as I pass.

She will receive the citation via the USPS in 7-10 business days. Laws don't bend in America. They break.

3:31PM

I pull in beside a beige Oldsmobile occupying a BLUE ZONE in the Rite-Aid parking lot on Sunset.

I possess a sixth sense about DISABLED PARKING. Something is wrong here. I note a citizen behind the wheel: African-American male, gray hair, 65-70 years, indeterminate height (due to seated position).

I slide my pepper spray into the UNLOCKED position and approach the Oldsmobile. I tap on the window with my flashlight. The citizen slowly cranks the glass down. "Can I help you, Officer?"

I lean in to read the placard hanging from a cracked rearview mirror. The date is current. I'm not convinced.

"Officer Wu to dispatch," I say into my CB. "Run Disabled Placard 002112546 for me." I throb with anticipation.

"That's a Code 37, Officer," crackles Cherry, the day dispatcher. "Missing/Stolen since 1/18/10."

"Get the boys out here," I growl. "Code 4!" My instincts are sharp as tacks. Law courses through my veins.

"10-4, Officer Wu," says Cherry.

I address the citizen: "Are you the owner of this vehicle?"

"I am."

"Where did you buy that placard, MacArthur Park? Or did you steal it yourself?"

"Hold up," says the citizen. "I'm a Vietnam Vet. I got 27 pieces of shrapnel in me and I can't walk distances. I'm a disabled American—"

"Save it for the police," I say.

"You ain't the police?"

"I am a Parking Enforcement Officer. LAPD has been notified and is on its way."

The citizen's face turns the color of old sidewalk. His tongue darts out like a lizard's. He starts the car.

"Sir, you cannot leave!"

"I ain't getting strung up by my toes," he says. He backs out, tires squealing. I throw myself in front of the vehicle to block his way, but he recklessly swerves around me.

I enter license plate 5ATL712 in my handheld and generate a 312 for violation of designated DISABLED PARKING, which the citizen will receive in the mail—assuming the vehicle is properly registered, which I doubt. I wait for LAPD.

It is 104 degrees by my lapel thermometer. The air is brown with smog rotting in the sunlight, trapped in the Hollywood basin. 20 minutes pass.

I walk out to the curb, where NO STOPPING/TOW AWAY 3PM-6PM MON-FRI is in effect. One of the sign poles is a lighter color than the rest, indicating that a delinquent removed the original sign, forcing The City of Los Angeles to replace it. I scour the block for violations. Nothing. 34 minutes pass. 48 minutes.

After 73 minutes, a black-and-white eases into the lot. The citizen could have driven to San Diego by now. "Shame on you," I say to the officer at the wheel. "This is a flagrant disservice to the City of Los Angeles."

"Pull the claws back, Tiger," he says. "We'll get him next time." Sometimes I think there are no good guys in the world. Criminals foul every street corner and lurk behind most steering wheels. Some carry badges.

5:35PM

Everyone on the street has sunglasses and cell phones stuck to their faces. The only ones who don't are bums swaddled in festering blankets like burritos. A row of them stretches out on Sunset, covering as much sidewalk as possible. If I could give bums parking tickets I would do it all day long.

My shift ended an hour ago, but I can't stop driving. I feel low. With only 34 citations issued, this was the worst shift of my career. During the time I waited on the LAPD, I could have issued 15-20 citations, enough to hit the watermark. I can't go to HQ until the daytime staff is gone. I can't face them.

An idiot makes a left in a NO LEFT TURN intersection and cuts me off. No LAPD in sight. "Asshole!" I shout. I am powerless.

The CB crackles. "Come in, Officer Wu," says Cherry.

Duty forces me to depress the TALK button. "Officer Wu here."

"Where are you, Whup Ass? We've been waiting to tell you the good news."

"I had business."

"Oh, well let me tell you then. The new recruit did 62 citations his first solo flight."

"Who counted?"

"Fagen reviewed every citation personally. He said it was the best rookie shift in history. Says the kid's got real genius. I thought you'd want to congratulate him yourself. I hear you gave him a hell of a pep talk this morning."

My tongue is wooden.

"He's staying late on paperwork. The boys wanted to take him out to celebrate, but he just won't stop."

Stills from my rookie year flash in my head: my first citation, a GREEN ZONE; Fagen's cheek-busting grin when he clapped me on the back and said, "You whupped ass today. You just made DOT history"; the first of 15 times my name and photo appeared on a brass and board plaque reading PARKING ENFORCEMENT OFFICER OF THE YEAR.

Sixty-two citations. Fagen's right, the rookie must be a machine, the future of the DOT. I'm an old workhorse. In a few years they'll put me out to pasture. Retirement = death. A bubble of hot oil bursts in my gut. My hands shake so badly I swerve. I pull over to regain composure. Breathe, Whup Ass, breathe.

A green Nissan pulls in front of a liquor store across the street. The curb is painted fresh bright red. The hazard lights begin their misguided flashing (it only attracts attention).

A citizen exits the driver's side: Caucasian female, approximately 5'7", red hair. She heads into the liquor store.

Instinct tells me to jump out and issue a citation before she returns, but I'm off-duty. I logged out of the hand-held over an hour ago. Officer Toledo is on the beat now. If I try to log back in, we'll have administrative problems for the next week.

There is a way. My belt printer could, hypothetically, run out of paper, forcing me to write citations manually. I could ink in an earlier hour. No one would know the difference. The citizen couldn't prove anything. It isn't honest. It isn't right. But neither is parking in a RED ZONE.

Through the doorway of the liquor store, I see the citizen making her purchase at the counter. It's now or never. I get out the old-fashioned citation book I keep in the glove box for emergencies, and exit the patrol car.

The pen is a lead pipe in my hand. I don't have time to walk half a block to the crosswalk and wait for the signal, so I'm going to cross right here, right now. For the first time since I earned my badge, I am going to jay walk. I step into the street, feeling an exhilarating rush. So this is how the other half lives.

Tires screech. My hips whip left, my spine cracks. I roll across the hood and off the side, landing on my head and neck. A blast of agony travels from my skull down my spine and out my toes. The sunlight dwindles to a pinhole. I feel the concrete split underneath me, and liquid seeps out through the fissure. Los Angeles is spilling its putrid guts. It's high time for a flood. My uniform is soaked. It's hot. It's my blood.

A car door slams. A female voice eases slowly into focus like the volume being turned up on a television. "Oh *shit*, oh my *God*! Eddie, you hit a cop! I told you to goddamn slow down, Eddie!"

Law is in my blood. I am violated all the time. I *feel* it happening. I have a sixth sense. Laws are breaking right now, all over town, all over the world. I want to be everywhere at once.

My CB spits nearby. "Officer Wu," Cherry says, "what is your location?"

I'm off duty, off duty.

Two Poems
by
Maria Bonsanti

My Hair Defies Modernity
(with a nod to Emily)

uprooted from antiquity,
it dwells in possibility
dreaming of a vanity
it will not know –

its crowdedness unmeshing
requires scythes for threshing
to keep it from enmeshing
Corsican sheep.

No lover's – palpation
no airborne – flotation
no this-world – mutation
for my frisee.

The Fall is Just a Cover-up

Ah, autumn, you lure painters without brushes,
hunters of papaya whip – elusive slivers
in the piles of plain old orange orange;

lovers race to land on your mosaic
mounds, wrap themselves in crunch
diverting their attention from a dying green ...

Dying.

Ah, autumn, while others stoop to tweak
your apple-pumpkin cheeks, I know
the acrid whiff of winter ferments inside

your breath: the smell of conked out mulch
and deadhead droppings – tents for stinkbugs
having unprotected sex ...

Sex.

Ah, spring, will I survive to name you?

The Miracle Boy
by
Patrick Irelan

When I was fourteen years old, I began walking on water. My parents watched me walk back and forth across the pond a few times. "Angie," Dad said, "this looks like a miracle."

"Sure does," Mom said. "Good job, Michael." Then they went back to the house and sat down to figure out the profit angle. Mom and Dad were always looking for ways to make money on the farm. The hills made the place picturesque, but the soil was worthless.

Dad went into Clearfield and got three hundred dollars in change while my mom called KTVO and all the neighbors. The neighbors came right over, watched me walk on the water, and said they'd tell everyone they knew. Then Dad mowed half the hayfield north of the pond lot.

While Dad was still in the hayfield, a guy with a KTVO television camera and a woman with a microphone got set up to interview me. I walked slowly on the water along the pond bank while the woman asked questions. Then the guy with the camera tripped on something and fell into the pond. The woman and the camera guy started yelling at each other, and the redwings in the cattails flew off into the cottonwood trees. Finally, the guy found another camera and we started over again.

"How long have you been doing this?" the woman said.

"Just since this morning," I said. I glanced at the woman when I answered her questions. She was kind of cute for an adult, with blue eyes and curly blond hair.

She wasn't as cute as Katie, though. No one was. Katie was my secret girlfriend. She had to be a secret because her parents said she was too young to have a boyfriend and go out on dates. I couldn't go out on dates anyway. Katie lived in town, and I lived on the farm. It was too far to walk, and I wasn't old enough to drive anything but our John Deere tractor. Katie said her parents wouldn't like it if I parked a tractor on the driveway.

So we just hung out together at Fox County High School, where we were both freshmen, and where most of the other kids soon discovered our secret. Katie had brown eyes, long black hair with a natural wave, and a nose like one you'd see on the statue of a Greek goddess. Her face was so beautiful that I thought about her all the time. Walking on water was kind of fun, but merely holding hands with Katie was my idea of what heaven should be like. And when she opened her locker, hid behind the door, and let me kiss her, I had feelings I still can't describe.

Anyway, I talked to the woman from KTVO, and that night Mom, Dad, my little sister, and I all watched the ten o'clock news. The cameraman hadn't fallen into the pond again, so we all got a good look at my walking skills. My sister, whose name is Thelma, got jealous because I was famous and she wasn't. I told her you had to be fourteen before you could walk on water, and that she could barely walk on dry land. Mom said, "Pipe down, you two. Your father and I have to sit down again and make plans."

Thelma went into her room and slammed the door, and I went outside and walked around

the yard in the darkness, thinking about Katie. Off in the distance to the south, I could see the illuminated clock tower of the Fox County Courthouse in Clearfield. The bell would ring eleven times at eleven o'clock. It was time to do my homework for freshman algebra, but all I could think about was Katie.

The next day, Thelma had to catch the school bus, but the folks kept me home, even though I'd stayed up late to do my algebra assignment. "Today's Friday," Dad said. "It won't hurt you to miss one day."

After getting Thelma onto the school bus, Mom set up a card table on the lawn, right beside the gravel lane that connected our house to the county's blacktop road. Then she put a cashbox on the table and sat down on a lawn chair. Thanks to the KTVO news story, the cars started coming down the lane at about nine o'clock, and Mom collected the money while Dad directed traffic into the hayfield, which he now called the parking lot. Traffic on the county road at the other end of the lane got so heavy that two deputy sheriffs came out, waved their arms, and pointed first one direction then another.

Mom charged five dollars per car plus two dollars for adults and one dollar for children. Some people tried to park along the blacktop road so they wouldn't have to pay to park the car, but the deputies told them the road wasn't a parking lot and get moving.

I had a pretty good time. I walked awhile. Then I did some somersaults and cartwheels. I tried to walk on my hands, but I wasn't any good at it. One little kid said this was boring, but his mom slapped the side of his head and told him to shut up and pay attention.

One of the deputies came down the lane about four o'clock that afternoon and said they couldn't stay all night, so the folks stuck a "Closed" sign on the mailbox, and I walked away from the pond.

The next day, which was Saturday, we had everything better organized. Aunt Mary and Uncle Floyd came over with hotdogs, buns, potato chips, ice tea, and beer. One of the deputies said they'd better have a liquor license, which they didn't. So Uncle Floyd started drinking the beer himself, and by two o'clock Aunt Mary told him he was no help at all and get out of the way.

Uncle Floyd was my mom's brother. He was six-four, had a bulbous nose, and always wore his pants about five inches too short. When anyone asked why his pants were so short, he said, "To keep my ankles cool."

Aunt Mary was a foot shorter than Uncle Floyd and had a florid complexion that made everyone say she had great circulation and would live forever. After I started walking on water, Aunt Mary said one miracle in the family was enough and she didn't need to live forever.

My parents had been good-looking when their wedding pictures were taken, but they hadn't aged well. My dad had too much belly, and my mom had too many chins.

By the middle of the afternoon, I started to get tired of everything. The little kids kept telling me to do stupid things I couldn't do, and I finally said, "Why don't you little farts go drown yourselves."

I got a few laughs from that, but one of the mothers went and complained to Aunt Mary. This woke up Uncle Floyd, who told the woman to stop talking about his nephew and get her little brat away from the pond if he didn't like the show. Then the kid's dad came over and said, "Don't talk that way to my wife."

Uncle Floyd was big and strong, and could handle himself pretty well, even when he was drunk, which was most of the time. "I'll talk anyway I want," he said.

Then Dad came over and gave the man back his money and told him to go home and teach his kid some manners. So the man and woman left with their brat, and Uncle Floyd said, "Good work, Lester," and went back to sleep.

The next day, Uncle Floyd bribed someone in Des Moines and got a liquor license in record time, even though it was Sunday and the state offices were supposed to be closed. Mom said that it was a bigger miracle than walking on water. "Now all you have to do is stay sober and don't drink up all the profits," she said to Uncle Floyd. She was his older sister, and he always did what she said. He sold so much beer that the tavern owners in town complained about it, even though they weren't open on Sunday.

At five o'clock that afternoon, the sheriff drove down the lane and said the board of supervisors was griping about paying the deputies when all they did was direct traffic for our little field of dreams. He said he only had three deputies and the folks would have to hire some off-duty police from Ottumwa or call off the show. He gave them some phone numbers, and they got two young guys for Monday. Aunt Mary said she'd give them free hotdogs, but Uncle Floyd said they'd have to buy their own beer.

The folks kept me home again on Monday. I liked making money for them. We never had enough because the only thing that would grow on our hills was livestock, which in our case was hogs and beef cattle. I didn't care if I missed school, but I really wanted to see Katie more than I wanted the money.

By this time, there were so many people coming to see the show that the traffic was backed up all the way to Highway 63. The old people said there hadn't been that much traffic in Iowa since Roswell Garst brought Nikita Khrushchev over from Russia to buy Garst's hybrid seed corn.

About one o'clock that afternoon, Mom said she had so much money that she was afraid to take it to the bank by herself. So one of the policemen from Ottumwa drove her to the bank in Clearfield, and she gave him an apple pie to take home with him. Uncle Floyd gave him all the free beer he could drink, and about two hours later, the policeman went to sleep in the haymow.

Dad said, "Now look here, Floyd. Am I supposed to pay that man for sleeping all afternoon? And now we got only one guy to direct traffic the rest of the day."

"All right, all right, Lester," Uncle Floyd said. "Mary can sell the hotdogs and beer, and I'll direct traffic." This worked okay until Uncle Floyd got drunk on the twelve-pack he carried around with him. Then he started directing people into the hog lot instead of the hayfield, and they all got their cars stuck in the mud. Then the women complained about getting mud on their shoes, and Dad said he'd get the tractor and pull their cars out, and we wouldn't charge them anything to see the show.

By Tuesday, Dad had mowed the rest of the hayfield, and the parking lot had grown to about twenty acres. We had eight off-duty policemen to direct traffic and keep order. The Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad was delivering carloads of hotdogs to Ottumwa, where Uncle Floyd picked them up with his cattle truck. He always got drunk while driving the twenty miles back to the farm, but Mom didn't know about it. She was too busy taking care of the money.

The weather turned hot, and the Fox County Hospital set up an infirmary in the barn to take care of the folks who got sick. People from all over were saying that I was destined for sainthood. Father Rossi said he would definitely talk to the bishop of the Davenport Diocese, but he reminded everyone that it usually took the Church a long time to beatify anyone, and besides that I was a Methodist.

"What if we all convert?" Dad said.

"That would be fine with me, Lester," Father Rossi said, "but it won't guarantee sainthood for anyone."

Mom said it might be good for business if we all converted, but we'd have to keep it a secret from the Methodists.

All the adults in the family thought they had come up with some real good ways to improve the business, but I was starting to get sick of the whole thing. I felt like a monkey, walking back and forth on the water all day, with people pointing at me and taking pictures. Then the high-school principal called one night to ask why I wasn't going to school. "We're converting to a new religion," Dad said, "and we're spending all our time in prayer and meditation."

My dad hadn't spent a minute of time in prayer and meditation in his whole life, and the principal, like everyone else in the state, knew exactly what was going on at our pond. The speaker phone was turned on, so all of us could hear Mrs. Fleming's voice. "Mister Hudgens," she said, "the laws of Iowa say that all children must attend school until they reach the age of sixteen. There are exceptions, of course, for children with medical problems or other relevant conditions, but converting to a new religion doesn't qualify for one of those exceptions. If Michael isn't back in school by Monday at the latest, I'll have no choice but to initiate the appropriate legal proceedings. Goodbye."

Dad's body slumped a little as he hung up the phone. "Lester," Aunt Mary said, "that business about prayer and meditation is the stupidest idea I've ever heard. An average chipmunk could've thought of something better."

"It's not easy explaining things to high-school principals," Dad said. "All they ever talk about is school and students."

Mom said that Dad did the best he could, and Aunt Mary said that wasn't much.

"We'll just have to do the show on weekends from now on," Dad said, but he was wrong again. The next morning, I started walking across the pond and quickly noticed that my shoes were filling up with water. I was walking in the pond, not on it. The miracle had ended.

"That does it," Mom said. "Floyd, go down to the other end of the lane and put the 'Closed' sign on the mailbox. Michael, go get ready for school."

I've never been as happy to go back to school as I was that day. The teachers pretended that nothing unusual had happened as they piled on all the homework I had to do.

The boys were all as bad as I knew they'd be. They called me "Saint Michael," "Your Sainthood," and other things they thought were so funny. But the girls were interested in a different subject. "Katie has a new boyfriend," one of them said. "She never wants to see you again." Every girl I saw started giggling as if I was a new life form from Comedy Central.

But when I finally caught sight of Katie, she broke all kinds of rules and ran the length of the hallway and would have knocked me down if I hadn't bent forward and braced myself. She kissed me as she never had before, and I didn't care who saw us. I didn't ever want to let go of her, and now, twenty years later, I never have.

But before all those years passed, another miracle happened. I was sixteen years old at the time. The folks had about twenty feeder calves on the farm, and I fed those calves their ground corn twice each day, yelling barnyard vulgarities at them as you have to do to make the big ones stop pushing the little ones away from the feedbunk. When yelling didn't work, I hit them with a stick. The stick didn't hurt them, but it held their attention for five or ten seconds. Then they started pushing the little calves again.

During the day, the calves went out to graze in one of the bluegrass pastures. At night, they slept wherever they wanted. But when winter came, I spread straw on the dirt floor of the barn every night so the calves could lie down and sleep while the collective heat from their bodies raised the temperature in the barn.

When summer arrived and the weather improved, I gave the farm the same treatment I gave it every year. I hitched the manure spreader to the tractor and parked it beside the door to the barn. Then I began doing what all cattle farmers used to do. Using a five-tine manure fork, I loaded the layers of straw and manure into the spreader until it was full. Then I drove the tractor out to the field, put the spreader in gear, and rode along the side of a hill as the spikes on the steel wheels at the back of the machine threw the nitrogen-rich mixture out to the rear.

Every once in a while, one of the rotating wheels didn't operate exactly right and tossed a clod of manure toward the front instead of the rear. Whenever one of those clods hit me in the back of the head, I said the sort of things that candidates for sainthood should never say.

Then one day I was driving the tractor along a hillside, looking back occasionally to see how the load was progressing. The machine was about half empty when I glanced back and saw something impossible. The steel wheels were catching the manure in the usual way and throwing out something transformed. Thousands of flower petals had flown from the back of the spreader and landed on the hillside, creating a magic pasture unlike anything that anyone had ever seen.

I stopped the tractor right there, turned off the engine, and climbed down. I wanted to

make sure I wasn't hallucinating. The flower petals were everywhere the spreader had traveled on that hillside. They included every color I had ever imagined, and they were absolutely real. I picked one up and looked at it carefully. I could still tell the difference between a flower petal and a clod of manure, and this was a flower petal. I held onto it as I turned and walked back to the house.

I didn't have to convince the folks to go out to the field to have a look. "Lester," Mom shouted, "Michael's done it again."

Dad was out front, digging a posthole for the fence between our yard and the neighbor's pasture. "I always have to fix my fences and the neighbor's," he said as he came through the door. "I wish the old fool would let me buy those forty acres like I've been offering for years." The "old fool" in this case was a man who lived in Des Moines and never did anything with his land but rent it to a sheep farmer.

"Well, Michael," Dad said, "What miracle have you done this time? Now that we've become Catholics, we need a steady supply to increase your chances for sainthood."

I handed him the flower petal, which happened to be orange in color. Then I told him the history of that petal. "Well, well," he said. "It doesn't look like cow shit. How does it smell?" He put the petal under his nose and took a deep breath. "Doesn't smell like cow shit. Angie, we'd better go take a look at this. Looks like another money maker to me."

"I'll be damned," Dad said when he saw his flower-strewn hayfield. "What do you think, Angie?"

"I'll go in and call KTVO," she said. "Then I'll call Mary. It's almost four o'clock, and Floyd won't be fit to do much of anything this late in the afternoon, but he's probably still awake."

Aunt Mary drove them right over. Just to give them the full effect of the thing, I started the tractor and pulled the spreader about twenty yards. "Son of a bitch," Uncle Floyd said several times as he followed the manure spreader. "Better not try to bale this, Lester," he said.

"Floyd," Mom said, "why don't you put that six-pack back in the car and try to sober up for once in your life. We know enough not to bale a field of flower petals. Mary," she said, turning in Aunt Mary's direction, "I don't know how you put up with him."

"He gets a lot of work done in the morning," Aunt Mary said.

"All right, all right," Dad said. "Let's call off the AA meeting and decide what to do with this new miracle."

"KTVO said they'd send someone right over," Mom said, and fifteen minutes later, a van loaded with people and equipment came down the lane, leaving a trail of gravel dust behind it.

The station ran the story that night, and everything proceeded as it had with my water-walking act, with certain differences. Early every morning, Dad, Uncle Floyd, and I had to get up and load the manure spreader. If Uncle Floyd had brought any beer along, Mom took it away from him and hid it. Once the spreader was loaded, she returned the beer, which motivated Uncle Floyd to work faster.

Then there was another important difference between the two miracles. The number of people who arrived to see the show was much smaller. Mom said it was because of a Methodist boycott, but Dad said he hadn't seen all that many Catholics. The parking lot was only half the size of the previous one, and the folks had to hire only four off-duty cops to direct traffic and keep order. "You know what I think?" Aunt Mary said.

"What?" Mom said.

"People are stupid, and they've already seen one miracle. They think if they've seen one, they've seen them all. They'd rather stay at home and watch TV instead of coming out here to see another miracle performed by a boy destined for sainthood."

Neither Mom nor Dad could think of anything to say about that. And the next morning, after only three weeks of business, the manure stopped turning into flower petals. From crap it came, and to crap it had returned.

When Katie and I were both eighteen, she got pregnant. And there was nothing immaculate about it. Father Rossi hurried things along for us. Katie was already a Catholic and didn't have to convert.

"Every birth is a miracle," Father Rossi told us, "and you don't have to walk on water to create a baby. Millions of people do it every year all over the world. And if your child grows into a healthy and happy adult, she'll be a saint. Love and care for your little miracle."

When I got home that afternoon, Aunt Mary and Uncle Floyd were there. I told everyone what Father Rossi had said. Mom, Dad, and Aunt Mary nodded in agreement.

"I don't believe a baby's a miracle," Uncle Floyd said. "It's just another baby."

"Shut up, Floyd," Mom said. "You're as drunk as always. If you're sober at your own funeral, it'll be a miracle."

Two Poems
by
Gerald So

Love Isn't Blind

We warmed to each other
grading freshman
writing exams
in annual three-day grinds,
me admiring
her conservative dress
and reserved smile,
but also the migraines
that said she and I
knew, any second
the world could
come shaking down,
and everyone would
need someone to
keep things together.
It turned out, however,
she just had
a bad prescription,
and within days of
getting new lenses,
ran into a childhood friend
who proposed
the weekend before
I would have asked her out.

Balls

When they had
nothing better
for boys to do,
Our teachers
unlocked the bin
of basketballs
and let us at it.

Today, they try
to be kind
to the slow kids,
save them
a few good ones,
scuffing out
the bloody rush's
only lesson.

My Name is Dave and I am Dead
by
Matt Demers

My name is Dave and I am dead. The doctors said it was a brain aneurysm no one could've predicted. I was only 38. Despite the circumstances, I convinced my boss Andrew to let me keep my job; minus health coverage.

"You're dead." Andrew told me while checking off pages on his metallic clipboard. The clipboard made it seem he was writing something important, but it was only inventory. "Dead people don't need benefits." Andrew continued. "They don't use prescriptions, and they don't need check-ups." He flipped a page and thumbed through a box of Payday chocolate bars, marking with his pen as he counted.

We heard an engine idle, and looked up from the sales wall to see a red F-150 coasting in from the 401 and stopping at Pump 5. The gas cap faced the wrong direction.

"Moron." Andrew said under his breath, and went back to counting confectionery.

"I could really use massage therapy once in a while, you know, for the rigor mortis." I begged.

"You think I was born yesterday? I knew a dead guy once. He said rigor mortis cures itself after two weeks. How long has it been for you? Three months?" He scribbled something down and turned to the bubble-gum rack, "Pump 5 is waiting."

I didn't recognize the vehicle until I pulled the hose over the truck bed to reach the tank. A long line of key scratches ran across the side door all the way to the back wheel well. Some of them were from me.

"Mr. Anderson?" I asked, positive it was his truck but not sure if it was him or his kid driving it. Cataracts are one of many afflictions of being dead.

"Dave?"

It was him. I could tell by his smoker's rasp. He taught me wood shop in grade 9/10 split, and was probably the school's most hated teacher. That was all water under the bridge though.

"Dave, I thought you died."

"Yeah, I did."

He rubbed his steering wheel pretending to smudge out imaginary grit. People get awkward once you confirm that yes, you are in fact dead.

"So, you're still walking around eh? Isn't that somethin'?" He asked.

It was something. But people asked the same old questions, and it was starting to get annoying. Now I know how muscle guys feel—*How much do you bench?*

He continued, "I must say, you look pretty good for a dead guy. What's your secret?"

I gave him the same pre-fab answer I always used, "Well, I moisturise daily with Aloe Vera, and I've got something worked out with Marty, you know, the mortician on 2nd ave? He pumps me full of embalming fluid twice a month. I figure, if it works for Vladimir Lenin..."

"Who?"

No one ever got that joke, but everyone knew who Marty the mortician was. He dressed nice, and always had a metallic, chemical smell to him. He sponsored a little league team that wore bright yellow uniforms with his slogan: "Marty's Morticianary Services: "We think outside the box so you don't worry about whose in it." Was "morticianary" even a word?

The hose wouldn't reach despite a good yank, so Anderson flipped around to pump 2, where his cap would face the right direction. He warned me about humidity in the forecast and left with a reluctant handshake. I decided that even in death I didn't like him.

We had a busy day at the gas station. Two people leaked rad fluid, and one couldn't get their Volvo started after a fill-up. Another person's credit card wouldn't go through, and we both pretended that "insufficient funds" was a glitch in the system. "I've plenty of money," the frumpy redhead said. *Sure you do, honey. You've got cash like I've got blood pressure.*

Being dead was kind of a pain in the ass. It confused the hell out of dogs, and during social events people always sat me at the kiddie table. I'm guessing because I made things awkward for anyone. Even Marty the mortician couldn't resist passing me off to the little rug rats who would no doubt question me on my palate for brains. He asked while inserting the catheter into my stomach:

"Dave, I've got a wedding coming up. Got anything going on next fall?"

"That depends. Will I be sitting with grown-ups?"

He shrugged the question off with a sniff, like it was absurd I was even asking, but he didn't answer back, which confirmed my status as a social outcast. Luckily, "Who let the dogs out" rang from my pocket, and I fumbled for my Blackberry, thankful for the broken silence.

"Oh, hi honey. Mr. Berkowitz called me again today. You remember him don't you—Marty's boss?"

I knew what this was about, and so did Marty. My mom was loud enough that he could hear her gabbing on. He shrugged his shoulders in a way that said: *Friend, I was going to fill you in, but; you know how these things go.*

"He's such a nice man isn't he?" My mom screeched. "You know his daughter is single and looking? And she's a veterinarian. Oh, I know how you hate when I try setting you up, but I only do what's best."

She seemed distracted by something else, like she was cooking or ironing or god knows what else. I heard what sounded like pots being scrubbed in the background.

"Anyway, I was calling because Mr. Berkowitz and I have decided go through with the funeral regardless. I mean, we've paid for the flowers and the reception already, so we might as well get the family together. Plus, Aunt Rita's air flight is non-refundable, and she really wants to see *Les Misérables* at the Fox."

I could hear her flipping through tracks on the living room stereo—*Prologue, Lovely Ladies, Master of the House*, then back to *Lovely Ladies*. I knew the soundtrack off by heart. Mom saturated my childhood with Jean Valjean and his gang of French whiners. I hated that shit. I hated funerals too.

And it's no different even when it's your own. Actually, it's probably worse. I couldn't convince my mother to keep it closed casket, and the inner lining was uncomfortable. My nephew kept getting in line to poke me with a broken car antenna he kept hidden in his cashmere sweater, and it was hard to keep still and pretend I wasn't aware of the whole ordeal.

"Can you guys *not* take pictures of me while I'm lying here," I said to my mother's friends when the flashing began to itch the irritated raisins that used to be my eyes. Who takes photos of a corpse at a funeral anyway? Some people.

The rest of the procession was a write-off, with me being in a grumpy mood. Even the eulogy was disappointing, my brother reminding everyone that I'd wet myself in grade 5 and how I said it was apple juice even though everyone knew apple juice doesn't smell like piss. But, he said good things too; how I stayed up late one night to catch his pet hamster that'd broken out of his run-about ball. That was nice.

Regardless, I was sick of these people. Now that I had my own casket, no matter how uncomfortable, I figured now was my chance. When mom signalled it was time to go after the last of my relatives left, I just laid with my arms crossed looking vacantly out the stained glass windows.

"We have to go before it starts to drizzle. You smell like fermented cabbage when you get wet." She warned.

"I'm not going, mum. I'm staying in here."

She fiddled with the purse straps, "You can't stay. Andrew needs you pumping gas tomorrow morning."

I stood my ground, "Dead people don't work. Plus, you bought a plot in the cemetery. We might as well use it."

My mum sat in the front pew, crossing her arms and holding her purse looking like an impatient mother waiting out her child's temper tantrum. I wanted to be in the ground like dad. Just leave me a pair of headphones, some audio books, and a pack of Duracells. I'd be fine.

After a lot of plodding and pleading I convinced mom and Mr. Berkowitz to let me rest. I'll probably be more bored than most dead people, but at least I won't have to deal with the idiotic questions. It took death for me to realize that I never really enjoyed being alive in the first place. Before I closed the lid on myself at the graveyard, I handed Berkowitz a bribery cheque with most of my savings written on it. I wanted my epitaph changed right

after my mum left. I told him that once they lowered me down and backhoed the dirt, to pay a scribe to chisel my gravestone so it read:

"Here lies David Mannford, beloved son and brother. Leave me the fuck alone."

The End (no pun intended).

'Tis Relative
by
Shannon Connor Winward

"'Tis a present for the King,"
declared the first blind crone,
"A two-mouthed serpent, a mighty thing
to drape upon his royal throne."

"Nay, 'tis a giant," stated the next
"as big in height as he is around,"
and, groping, she stumbled, vexed
o'er the third blind sister on the ground.

"'Tis a breeding slave," proclaimed the third.
"Feel her pendulous belly sag."
"'Tis a wrinkly deaf-mute with breath like a turd,"
insisted, with venom, the fourth blind hag.

Thus, each avowed such truth as touch did gain her
while together, apart, they o'er looked the elephant in the chamber.

Sighting
by
Steven Gowin

Morning... Jesus came down and said I could see him in French toast if I wanted.

I said, "Jesus," addressing him directly, "that's pretty god damned clichéd." Jesus said that that hurt his feelings because he'd seen me in a pancake. He might cry special tears now.

Jesus is a manipulative bastard. He'll say anything. He's a liar, by god. I told him to go fuck himself, which I guess, not surprisingly, he can actually do and did do.

Seeing that once was enough. It ruined breakfast forever.

Introducing Entropy Girl

by
Wayne Helge

I let the mayor's plane buzz Chicago's lakeshore twice before I reach into the cockpit with my mind and jam the yoke sideways. I fully expect Zooster to show up and fight me, but not before I execute a few barrel rolls and then land the plane in the middle of Grant Park. My name is Rogue Agent. I used to be a hero called Z-pack, Chicago's favorite sidekick, fighting for order and justice.

Now all I want is to see a picture of the mayor's wet pants on the front page of the Tribune tomorrow.

Somewhere in the middle of the second barrel roll, I see movement to my left. I turn my head just in time to catch sight of the new Z-pack as he clomps me on the ear. My cowl turns sideways and another punch hammers into my gut. I taste the acidic gristle of this afternoon's sausage sub and spit it in his general direction. He screams like the kid he is and backs off long enough for me to adjust my cowl. When I can see again, I realize the douchebag has caused me to lose mental control of the mayor's plane. I look up in time to see the aircraft spin north and smash into the Chicago bean. Fire licks at the city's skyline. I imagine the mayor's bacon getting cooked and realize that for the second time in as many years, I'll be accused of murder.

I walk over to Z-pack, still flicking individual specks of partially-digested sausage from his tights, and crack him in the jaw. "What'd you do that for?" I say. "I wasn't going to hurt him."

He drops to the ground but bounces back to his feet like an acrobat. An acrobat with biceps that look like softballs under his shirt. I think *Damn, I never looked that good in the costume*. He squares off and looks like he's about to take another shot when I say, "Later. Right now we need to get the mayor out of there."

Z-pack's eyes dart toward the wreckage and I take that as agreement. We both sprint over toward the spot where the bean used to be, hopping over shredded fiberglass and sheared metal as we go. The flames are high and growing. We take turns trying to grab at the door latch, but it's too hot.

"Where the hell's Zooster?" I say. "We could use his asbestos underwear about now." In all likelihood, I realize Zooster is probably on some sex-capade and has left the town to Z-pack. I should know. The bastard used to do it to me all the time.

Z-pack says nothing, but the flames turn our costumes hot enough to burn skin and we both back away. That's when Z-pack throws another loose punch my way. I realize he's given up on the mayor.

"You know you're named after an antibiotic?" I say, trying to get him talking. He doesn't bite and I dodge a better swing. "It's a lame name," I say. "And Zooster knows it. It's his way of keeping you--"

He connects with a solid shot to my cheek and I fall toward a burning engine. He steps close and winds up for another swing. That's when we both see the girl run toward the plane and drive the flames down, back into the gas tank. She doesn't have any tools, or even a costume. It's just a girl waving her hands like David Copperfield--the magician, not the orphan. It's like she's running the camera backwards.

When she's done, the flames are gone, the gas tank is sealed up again, and even the heat has dissipated. I stand to thank her but she turns and runs, like she doesn't want to be identified. No matter. I already recognize her.

She's my *barrista*.

She's Emily Johnson.

But from now on, I'm going to call her Entropy Girl.

The next morning, I'm about to place my order at the coffee shop when a customer in a suit pushes in front of me. He forces his coffee into Emily's hands.

"I said no sugar in this," he says. "I have a very serious condition."

Emily wears the sweetest smile and says, "No problem."

Then she plunks her finger into his steaming cuppajoe and gives it a swirl. Next thing I know, she has all the sugar floating on top of the brew. She scoops it out with a spoon onto a soggy napkin.

"You just put your finger in my coffee," he says, the annoyance from his voice practically dripping on my shoes. "How about a new coffee instead?"

"No problem," Emily says again. But before she can throw the old cup out, I reach for it and take a sip. There's no sweetness left in it.

As Emily is pouring the new cup, the man turns to me. "How hard is it to get a coffee order right? No wonder the economy's in the crapper."

When Emily turns back, she's still wearing the smile but I can tell she heard him. She hands over the new cup and breathes deeply as he walks away. "What can I do for you?" she says to me.

"Coffee with sugar," I say. "Then I want to see you do that trick again. And I won't make a dick comment if you put your finger in my drink."

We both glance over to watch the asshole customer on his way out the door.

"He's in for a surprise," I say, off-handedly.

"I don't follow," she says.

"I just changed his cell phone ringer, you know, with my mind."

"You did what? Wait. What song?" she says, more concerned about revenge than my power.

"'Fat Bottomed Girls,' by Queen," I say. "The chorus."

Emily's smile is real again, and it warms me up.

"And I'm going to call him every fifteen minutes today," I say. She lets an un-girly guffaw slip out before covering her mouth with her hand.

And that's how Entropy Girl and I start dating.

I'm on my way out to visit the evil Dr. Churro when Emily knocks on my lab door. She's wearing her street clothes and has her green apron folded over her arm.

"You want to go see it?" I say, telling her about Churro's new submarine. "It's long and hard and full of cinnamon."

"Will he mind?"

"He'd love to show it off," I say. "I offered to pick up Kitty Twister on the way. We can do a double date thing."

"Sounds fun," Emily says in that bubbly way she talks after a long shift at the shop. We climb into my convertible and race out the tunnel with the headlights off. She grips my arm the whole way.

"Tell me about Kitty," she says as we hit the street.

"She can shape-change into a very flexible cat. Hence her name."

"So she'll sit where?" Emily says.

"On my lap?" I say, shifting into fourth and leaning into the accelerator.

"That seat's taken," Emily says, and pats my leg.

We cruise into Kitty's driveway four minutes later and I throw the shifter into neutral without killing the engine. "You want to ring the bell?" I say to Emily.

"She probably heard us roll up," Emily says, looking first at me then past me. "Say, check out that guy." She points over my shoulder.

I turn to my left and about crap my pants. There in the darkened driveway next to us, mounting Auntie Athena on the hood of his car, is Zooster. His lips are stuck to hers and he's digging at his codpiece like there's something crawling around in there.

"That's Zooster," I whisper, knowing that Emily remembers my stories about him. "Getting his groove on." My hand moves to the door handle. I don't hold a grudge, but I wouldn't mind slapping him around a little.

"You're not going to fight him, are you?" Emily says, her hand gripping my arm. "That'd be like surprising two cats screwing in the road."

"Very much like that," I say, flexing.

"I can stop you from doing this," Emily says. "I can undo the disorder."

"You think I should let him be?" I say.

"Yes," Emily says, removing her hand.

And right then, sitting next to her, I realize that she's right.

"Okay," I say. "And knowing Zooster, he'd take an Athena sister in the hand over two in the bush."

"It looks like it's the other way around," Emily says, leaning to see past me. "How does he not see us?"

I turn to watch too. "Old Zooster, once he gets going, it's tunnel vision for a good two, three minutes."

In the excitement of the show, I totally forget about Kitty until I hear her cat-call. It's a whiney meow from somewhere just outside the car. I turn, expecting to find her perched on the edge of Emily's door. Instead, she's floating in space. Her hind legs are held aloft by a kid in a mask. A sparkly "Z" skids down the front of his uniform.

It's Z-pack. And he's about to take a swing.

"Emily, move! It's a set-up!"

I leap over the door as the cat--still in his grip--swipes at my head like, well, like a stretched-out animal used as a weapon. There's no other way to describe it. Kitty's extended claws reach for something to hold onto and pass an inch from my eyes. I roll out of the car and into the grass, then bounce onto my feet in time to see Z-pack thump Emily--still in the passenger's seat--behind the ear with his free hand. A splatter of red splashes out onto my dashboard. And then Z-pack is up, standing with his muddy boots on my car seat. He loops the cat slowly, like a lasso.

"Hands off the kitty," I say.

Z-pack looks down at Emily, unconscious in the front seat. "I didn't touch her," he says, making another swipe at me with Kitty's claws. I hop out of reach and he follows with another swipe. I realize too late that he's leading me into a trap and turn just in time to run into Zooster. He wraps me up in his arms and spins me around. I try to break free but his hands are locked together and won't budge. Unlike last time we fought, he's back in shape and stronger than ever.

"How's the new kid working out?" I say to Zooster.

"He's more loyal than you ever were," Zooster says from behind me. I feel his spit spray my ear and smell the White Castles on his ripe breath. A woman's laugh creeps up too. The Athena sister steps onto the driveway where I can see her.

"Auntie Athena," I said. "I didn't recognize you with your clothes on."

Her face turns overcast and she kicks the toe of her shoe at my crotch. I fold one leg over the other to block it, but she taps my sack just right. I wait for the ache in my stomach to start.

Then Z-pack steps forward. "You have some atoning to do," he says. He swings Kitty at my face. I close my eyes but feel flesh tear from my cheek as her claws grasp at me. Then before I can recover she comes from the other side, giving me a matched set of cuts.

"Jesus!" I say, opening my eyes in time to see Z-pack give Kitty a toss over the house and into the night. He steps forward with fists clenched.

"Looks like we caught a murderer," he says to Zooster. "The mayor will be thrilled."

"As if the people of Chicago needed another reason to love us," Zooster says.

"Make no mistake about it," I say to the kid. "He'll sell you down the river to save his own ass." Auntie Athena looks worried, and I wondered what Zooster thinks of the conversation.

"I know the story about you," Z-pack says. "You never knew your place." He throws a punch into my abdomen. I feel bile in my throat and inhale it while trying to take a breath.

He winds up again. I close my eyes and tighten my stomach, expecting to take the punch.

The hit never comes.

Then Zooster's grip goes loose.

I break free and jerk away with weak legs. All three of them--Zooster, Z-pack, and Auntie Athena--are down on their knees. Their eyes roll back in their heads. I lean against the hood of my car, taking it all in.

"Now I know what you mean," says a voice. Emily sits up in her seat, holding her hand to the back of her head. "Zooster's a real dick. And I don't particularly care for that kid or the lady either."

"What did you do to them?" I say, flopping into the car.

"Separated the oxygen from their blood," she says, very matter-of-factly. "They are suffocating right now."

"Don't kill them," I say, worried about another murder accusation.

"I can only control it from so far away," she says. "So if you want them to live, you better drive fast." And I see in her eyes that she means to kill if I don't do something.

I drive like an alderman stealing an election.

And that's how Emily and I break up.

I walk into the coffee shop, knowing that I'm not welcomed here anymore. My hair is smoking, there's blood on my arms up to the elbows, and my clothes smell like I just extinguished a flaming bag of dog crap with my armpit. I should shower. I should change out of my lab coat. I should probably take a nap. But what I really need is a favor.

She's there behind the counter, with her matching green visor and apron, pouring a cup of coffee for some chemist in a suit and white coat. Two more people are in line. I don't have time to waste. And if there's one thing I know for truth, it's that you don't screw with a bloody man who reeks of roasted dog crap. I waft my smell their way as I push past. "Who's up for some high fives?" I say. A woman in a business suit talking on an iPhone sneers at me. "Up top," I say, and she walks out. The other customers follow.

And then I'm all alone with Emily.

"Those were my regulars," she says with a what-the-fuck shoulder shrug.

"Something happened," I say. "Something big. I need you to undo it."

"Like what?" she says with folded arms, and I can tell she doesn't give a shit.

"He's dead," I say, and feel tears sprout from the corners of my eyes. It could have been me, just as easily. The irony of it kills me.

She shakes her head no. "You should be calling an ambulance," she says. "Not--"

"But he needs you," I say. "Come with me. See what happened."

"And what if I can't help?" she says.

"Just try," I say, and her arms relax. Somehow, I've convinced her.

We drive to my lab in silence and I show her the hidden tunnel entrance. It runs underneath Lake Michigan, all the way to Zooster's hideout, the Tub. Where I got my start as a hero.

"Where are we going?" Emily says.

I tell her all about the Tub. About my solitaire games with Guppy while Zooster was out on patrol. About how I lost my virginity to Morning Myst the day after my solo run-in with The Midshipman. About how Cabin Girl had to swing by before school each morning to scrub the teak. I realize I'm rambling.

"That sounds like no way for a teenager to grow up," Emily says.

"Yeah," I say, not really agreeing. Because it was great. All of it.

And then I explain the tunnel. "We're enemies and all, but there's something about both of us existing in this town. It's like we need each other."

"I don't like where this is going," she says over me, but I keep talking.

"So earlier tonight, I'm coming down here to go over our operating agreement--"

"Your what?"

"Our agreement. We hash out who goes where and when. We make sure we run into each other and fight from time to time."

Emily stops dead and stares at me.

"This is all canned?"

I grab her hands but she pulls away. "It's a huge town, Emily. Do you think we'd ever run into each other otherwise? Besides, it's good for our public personas. He rents my hideout to me for 1972 rates thanks to a great sub-lease. In exchange, he gets credit for stopping me from time to time, and I make him look necessary to the city. It's a win-win. Except when somebody loses." I continue walking through the darkness with only my cowl-lamp to guide us. Emily races to keep up.

And that's when she sees him. It's Z-pack, still in his costume. And he's been beaten to a pulp. Bruises have blossomed on his face. His left arm has an extra elbow up near the shoulder, the hair on his head has been cooked off, and the shredded fabric across his chest can't hide the exposed ribs sprouting from his skin.

"What did you do?" Emily says. I turn to talk to her but she's stepping back. I can't tell if it's fear or hate in her eyes.

"It wasn't me," I say. "It was Zooster. Z-pack caught us in the middle of our meeting and started railing on me. Zooster was protecting me."

"Z-pack was his sidekick."

"Yeah," I say, looking down at the mangled mess below me. "And it's not right. I may be an evil genius, but I deal in pranks grounded in 70s stadium rock. I can't live with this."

"What do you want me to do?" Emily says.

"Fix it," I say. "Undo the chaos. Bring back the order."

Emily is down on her knees, next to Z-pack. She glances up at me. "I can't save him."

"Of course you can," I say. "You're Entropy Girl."

And that's when I start to feel light-headed. Like I'm going to pass out.

Emily stands. "You think the only way I work is by restoring order?" She steps closer to me. I try to back up but my muscles are busted rubber bands. I go down face-first next to her perfect boots. She's clean. Everything about her is clean, clean, clean.

"I can also destroy the chaos," she says, and I see where she's going with all this. My heart pumps faster but my lungs have scrounged nearly all the available oxygen from my blood. The rest of the oxygen collects in a bubble. I can feel it starting in my leg.

"If I let it go to your heart, you will die," she says, and I know she isn't lying.

"But I'm not going to let you die today, Rogue Agent." Her boot hooks under my shoulder and she flips me over. Standing behind her is Zooster.

"But we will let you take the fall for Z-pack's death," Zooster says. Behind him, bouncing flashlights are approaching down the tunnel from the city. Cops.

"Order from the chaos," Emily says, allowing the oxygen to disburse through my body again.

"This is going to be great," Zooster says, visibly giddy. "Rogue Agent killed my sidekick, Rogue Agent killed my sidekick!" He hops up and down and claps. "And I'm going to be swimming in pity pussy!"

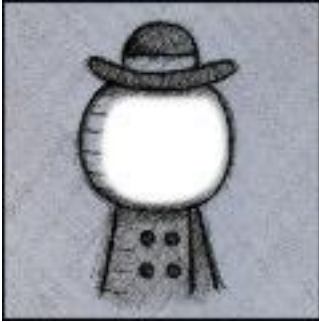
And then suddenly he collapses on the ground next to me. He's foaming at the mouth. I can see Emily's smile grow and I realize that she's beaten us both.

"So about the Tub," she says, kneeling between Zooster and me. "It's about to become the home base of Entropy Girl." She looks over at Zooster and his dopey face. He's spreading his nostrils with his hands, trying to get air. Thick black hairs streak outward like tentacles. He looks like an idiot.

"Spread the word," she says.

She touches my cheek for just a moment and then is gone before the cops arrive. As I watch her disappear into the dark, toward the Tub, I realize that when I break out of prison (because I will *definitely* break out of prison), and everyone's cell phone ringer changes to "Purple Rain," there'll be a new hero chasing me down. I just hope she can live with the terms of my operating agreement. Because I'm a real bastard of a haggler. Especially when I don't get my coffee how I like it.

Contributor Biographies



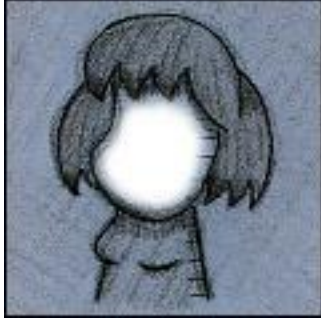
Addison Clift recently left a position with the prestigious Los Zetas cartel to serve as U.S. Under Secretary of Agriculture. In his spare time he writes fiction, which is also upcoming at Shock Totem. He lives on the Massachusetts-Illinois line.



Colin Dodds grew up in Massachusetts and completed his education in New York City. He's the author of several novels, including *The Last Bad Job*, which the late Norman Mailer touted as showing "something that very few writers have; a species of inner talent that owes very little to other people." Dodds' screenplay, *Refreshment – A Tragedy*, was named a semi-finalist in 2010 American Zoetrope Contest. His poems have appeared in dozens of publications, and have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife Samantha.



Alia Volz spent 9,366 hours hosting and producing *Literary Death Match*, a raucous reading series that throws naturally timid, introverted authors into a vicious battle for domination. She recently impersonated Anaïs Nin, Louise Brooks, and the 16-time WWF World Heavyweight Champion Slick Ric Flair—for the good of literature. Her work appears in some delicious magazines, but Alia is starting to think she should quit writing and join a fourth-tier celebrity review in Reno, where she can live out her true calling. Stalk her at www.aliavolz.com.



Maria Bonsanti is a non-literary translator for a humorless entity that would fire her if she ever dared sneak any wit into her work. So she turns to poetry to entertain others and satisfy her need to be heard. Additional results of her soul-sharing travail can be found in *Literary Juice* and *Red Poppy Review*. A lifelong New Yorker, Maria finds it easier to fly to Europe than to cross the George Washington Bridge into New Jersey.



Patrick Irelan says: "My short stories have appeared in *Opium Magazine*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Iowa City Magazine*, *Skive*, and many other worthy publications. In 2009, the Ice Cube Press published *Reruns*, my collection of comic short stories."



Still car-less on Long Island, **Gerald So** currently edits *The 5-2: Crime Poetry Weekly* at <http://poemsoncrime.blogspot.com>. Follow him on Twitter [@g_so](#), where he questions superhero physics and pop song lyrics.



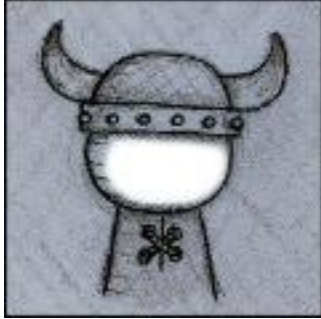
Matt Demers hails from Windsor, ON. He's been published in a number of anthologies and books and currently the lead editor of *Gore Magazine*, available at www.goremagazine.com



Shannon Connor Winward is an old witch in the making. She fumbles, grumbles, and opines in Newark, Delaware, with appearances in such venues as *Strange Horizons*, *Short Fast & Deadly*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *This Modern Writer [Pank Magazine]*, *Hip Mama Zine* and *The Vestal Review*. Visit her blog at <http://ladytairngire.livejournal.com>.



Steven Gowin produces corporate video in San Francisco. His fiction has appeared in *Untoward Magazine*, *Dark Sky*, *The Fiddleback*, *Emprise Review*, and others. A would-be atheist, Gowin holds an MFA from the Iowa Writer's Workshop (although he sees little connection between those facts).



Wayne Helge's stories have been sung by traveling minstrels since 1612, but have only been committed to paper seriously since 2006. He is considered a pioneer in the field of e-writing, meaning that many of his best typed words have died of bacterial dysentery. He tweets the occasional hot stock tip at [@waynsdeepkimchi](https://twitter.com/waynsdeepkimchi).