

◇ Defenestration ◇

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How Many Four Year Olds Do You Think You Could Take In a Fight?

by
Ian Couch

Nobody ever told me why the scientists decided to answer the question, but they must have cleared out every orphanage in the country to do it.

The first hour of the experiment was the toughest. Kids headbutted me in the crotch, and I caught enough shin kicks to limp for a week. Bite mark scars still shimmer along my fingers. I punched their child-sized temples and mule kicked their soft little sternums hard enough to make their chests pop. One boy, I grabbed by the ankles and flailed against his comrades. I kept swinging him until the top of his head came off—he must have still had a soft spot. Soon, I stood in the middle of a growing pile of dead four year olds which I stacked like cordwood to fortify myself. They couldn't swarm anymore and, when chip-toothed children whack-a-moled their heads over the wall, I yanked them down and beat their skulls against the ground like trout before tossing them on top. I made an igloo of dead four year olds that way. The igloo smelled like pee and everything was sort of sticky. If kids wriggled through, I'd strangle them and use their bodies to make the walls thicker. Amid crying and ineffectual battering at the walls, I slept. Those scientists somehow made the toddlers go rabid. But it must not have been actual rabies, because I've eaten hundreds of them by now and I'm doing fine.

When I woke the next morning, I burrowed out and found an army of children stretched to the horizon. Zombie movies don't have so many drooling extras. Just like the igloo, I killed myself a tunnel's worth of grade schoolers and then structured yet another room. I feasted on Capri Suns and Lunchables recovered from the fallen.

Those early, terrifying moments were years ago, and I've now crafted a labyrinth of secret rooms and trap laden passages. Having tracked the toddlers-turned-teenagers through the network of gore I've come to call home, I hide perched above and listen to a group surrounding a campfire in one of the larger chambers. They tell ghost stories about me and make hopeless plans to finally kill me. They're all scared and sometimes even cry when sharing the horrors they've seen in my lair. Most of the stories are true.

I am legend.

I tug at the clothes I've sewn together from salvaged Dora the Explorer backpacks and stroke the necklace of finger bones rattling against my chest. One kid says he hears me stalking them from the distant shadows, as if I'd directly strike a hunting party. This sends a girl into a gasping panic that the group leader warns her to snap out of. The leader sends the alarmist trembling down a wet, red corridor to investigate. A tiger pit lined with sharpened femurs waits for him, so I don't bother following.

The collapse sounds off from the darkness and he screams. The leader boy shouts, "We have to get out of here!"

"No," says the panicked girl, "we stick together. He can't get us if we stick together!" But in the end, they always scatter. I stalk them down their own lonely sections of carrion lined walls, ill-fitting light-up sneakers making them easy to track. I brain one with a ball of

cheap winter jackets I've melted into a hardened nylon sphere; I garrote another with a rope of woven friendship bracelets.

All they've eaten for thirteen years and ten months are the juice boxes and chewy fruit snacks provided to them, so their teeth are completely rotted out and they can't even shriek things like "they made us do it!" without spitting everywhere. A lot of them die from oral infections before I even find them. Still, in another two months it will have been exactly fourteen years since the four year olds arrived. And that is when I will take their toothless women.

Ninja Assassin Death Robot Apocalypse by **Miranda Ciccone**

Unit X-397 said, "Yeah, but this doesn't fit the standard pattern at *all*. I don't even know if you can legitimately categorize it as an apocalypse." The mid-45th-century repurposed sex-bot waved one silvered, gleaming hand vaguely at the rift, and what lay beyond.

Bobby peered through the tear in spacetime at the acres of rolling hills and the distant mountains. The sky was blue. The effect was bucolic. He felt his heart sink, if possible, lower than it already was.

"Don't let yourself be fooled by first impressions," he offered, voice laced with a hope he didn't feel. Unit X *tsk'd* at him.

"It's not a first impression," she rasped, stepping daintily through the rift and settling amid the waist-high prairie grasses. "Nothing in the air, audio or spectrum analyses suggests this world was ever inhabited by a civilization that made it out of the pre-industrial stage. Probably didn't make it out of the *stone age*, Bobby. What are we even doing here?"

"We were assigned," he reminded his partner primly, following her through the rift with less grace and clutching his outsized firerifle to his chest. "*Something* must have happened."

"Something to require documentation by a PDPAC field team? Another Biblical flood, maybe? Eighty square miles of lakeside real estate submerged? I can't take another one of those, Bobby. I will *lose my shit*." She waggled a gleaming finger at him. "And don't go mistaking any more wildlife for attacking zombies, please. I can't handle explaining another perforated raccoon to the Initiative board."

Bobby scowled and, if possible, clutched his outsized phallic symbol more tightly to himself. Unit X strode off across the rolling prairie, her chassis gleaming like an airplane in flight.

Bobby hurried after her.

The Pan-Dimensional Post-Apocalypse Documentation field team located their target—first target—about three hours into their trek. The sad little ruin of a village had been nearly swallowed up by the prairie, and the pair sifted disconsolately through the remains of a homestead clearly wiped out by some kind of unanticipated natural virus.

"Plague," Unit X muttered, and flicked a potsherd morosely into the weeds. "*Mini-plague*. God, I miss the 80s. In those days you got *hard-core* apocalypses. Huge gaping rifts in the earth, boiling oceans, gangs of radioactive hyperintelligent mongooses roaming the badlands, the works."

"Mongooses?"

"Every day was a new horror. It was a party! Now it's all biohazard crises or zombies or the epic grandeur of slow collapse into ecological entropy. Who knew we'd burn through all the good universes in a handful of decades?"

"Mongese?"

She kicked halfheartedly at a post, tilting it thirty-five degrees to the right.

"There's no Grand Guignol left in the multiverse," Unit X said sadly.

Bobby looked at her. "Your lack of empathy for the victims of these aforementioned cataclysms is truly staggering."

She patted him gently on the arm. "It's because I'm a robot."

Three weeks later Bobby slumped into Unit X's lifepod and blurted, "It's true. Everything you said was true. The top brass is saying there aren't any more post-civilization-related apocalypses anymore. The board contact told me that they're shutting down our entire division. It's all going to the eggheads now. They're *retiring* us, X!"

Unit X threw her *FauxWomen Monthly* magazine on the bed and sat up.

"They can't *retire* us," she told him, "The Applied Post-civilization Ethnological Research Initiative hasn't done that sort of thing since the Wasteland Mutant Monster Revolt of DysAp63. *Helloooo.*"

"I meant *retire*," Bobby returned sullenly, "Like, *really* retire. In a non-euphemistic sense. I mean I was speaking literally."

She snorted, digitally.

"Goddammit it's *true*. Our days are numbered!" He waved his arms a little wildly. Unit X leaned away from the flailing. "I'm only 247! I'm in the prime of my life! How could this *happen?*"

"I've been doing this since APERI was three nerds in the QuasiLab basement hacking out Verse-splitter branecode," the robot returned, "I don't know how to do anything else." She folded her arms and glared down at her shiny feet. "They'll cover me with new plastiskin and send me back to the sex mines on Dystopia-582 with a complete memory refit and adjustable fleshtop theme." She shook her head slowly.

"I don't want to go back there."

Bobby shifted from foot to foot. Forced obsolescence was a problem he couldn't solve easily with a blast from his rifle. He was a man of action, and definitely didn't have the words to comfort a depressed robot. He stared at the wall and Unit X stared at her feet, and the lifepod fell into a protracted, gloomy silence.

Finally, in a voice that barely made it above a whisper, Bobby offered, "We could go rogue."

Unit X lifted her head. She eyeballed her long-term partner with bright, unblinking orbs.

"What," she said flatly.

"I've been thinking, ever since that plague planet," he began, voice low and fierce, "We could do it, couldn't we? Go into business for yourselves? We—we could steal the in-house tech! Smuggle out the programming in your software—"

She held up her hands, "Woah there, now—"

But Bobby was warming to the topic. He lifted his head and a light filled his eyes. "We can discover new worlds! There must be hot zones, new apocalypses we've never seen! Places too dangerous for the board to authorize! There's a whole grey market for that kind of data! We can't go out quietly, X, we have to do something!"

In a low voice Unit X-397 objected, "But what if there aren't any more *real* apocalypses out there? Except for the zombie worlds, I mean. What if...what if we've seen everything there is to see, Bobby? What if there are no more big, world-shattering endings?"

Bobby shook his head. "No. I don't believe that. There's always a new ending, somewhere."

In the end, they found Bobby's hot zone. It was beyond hot, in fact, and Unit X loudly reminded Bobby of that fact as they stood on a blackened field looking toward the far horizon and the earth rocked beneath their feet.

Ash and smoke filled the air. Enormous, indistinct shapes moved in the far distance. Dead hulks of ships told them they were standing on the plain of what had once been an ocean. The stink was incredible.

Unit X whapped her partner upside the head.

"You dumb shithead!" she hollered, "The apocalypse here is *ongoing!* We're not supposed to be here until it's *over!*"

Bobby opened his mouth, but whatever he'd been about to say in his own defense was lost in a scream of tearing stone and earth as one of the enormous, distant shapes moved that much closer to their position. A sudden break in the clouds let a shaft of watery sunlight touch ground, illuminating the nearest monstrous form. Bobby's jaw dropped. Unit X made a noise of wonder.

"Ninja Assassin Death Robots!" they breathed in unison.

"I've never seen one live before," Unit X added. "I've never..."

The earth shook again, toppling a nearby ship carcass into shrieking collapse. Bobby winced. There was no denying the fact that the monster robots were coming closer, wading across the dry ocean field in their direction. In the direction, probably, of the only living beings still on the planet.

He cleared his throat in what he hoped was a casual manner, and hefted his rifle.

"MCDC will pay through the nose for this kind of live data," he told his partner. "I hope you're recording."

She looked at him.

"Ugh. The Meta-critical Database Collective? Spare me. Those guys are tools."

"The information we collect here could be of immense value to the ongoing characterization and classification of the pan-Universe human condition and the answer to the Big Question, X," Bobby tried, as he primed the huge gun and took aim at the nearest monstrous form.

Unit X fired up her onboard weaponry. "This goes against all the APERI guidelines, *Bobby*," she shot back. Her armcannons came online with the noise of sleek, 45th century tech. A blue nimbus began to form around her.

Bobby grinned. He aimed at the approaching shadowy form as it emerged into the shifting sunlight, and fired. The resulting explosion blew away a shoulder the size of a city block, exposing wires and bathing the monster in green flame.

"We don't work for APERI anymore," he said, as sparks rained down.

X grunted, and launched herself in the air. She streaked toward the nearest monster 'bot on a bolt of blue fire.

Bobby whooped, and sprinted after her.

Final Score:

PDPAC field team(retired): 857,220

Ninja Assassin Death Robots: 0

Afterward they stood together on the skeletal remains of what had probably once been a pretty impressive skyscraper, and surveyed the ruined landscape. A light acid rain was falling, and the breeze carried a perpetual scent of burning. The corpses of robots lay twitching in the streets of what was once a city. Unit X flicked an imaginary dust speck from her flawless chassis. Bobby was jumping around manically.

"What did I tell you?" he crowed, and Unit X favored him with a look of utter disbelief. Bobby ignored it completely, and in a fit of testosterone-induced idiocy he grabbed his partner around the waist in a one-armed hug. "This is the beginning of a beautiful adventure!"

"I didn't say I wanted adventure. I said I wanted Grand Guignol," X-397 demurred. But she looked out over the smoking wasteland and piles of charred corpses, and after a moment, grinned her metallic grin.

When *The New York Times* Embraces The Lunatic Fringe
by
Tony Peyser

Maybe this reporter is competent and only
Momentarily seemed like a dumb hack
In this style piece that breathlessly declared
That bangs are now making a comeback.

I don't mean to weigh in here & sound
Like some anti-fashion sorehead
But men looking at women rarely say,
"Whoa! Check out her forehead."

Aesop's 11
by
Alexei Kalinchuk

Bears stole our garbage at the cabin that year. One bear in particular, recruited others from the wilds, from circuses and from zoos. This was the last big score, or so he promised.

"So this is your plan," said a panda, skeptical and recruited mostly for his superior tumbling abilities and because his bamboo-rich diet created a tension-releasing distraction in his frequent bowel movements. "You really think it'll work?"

"My dear panda," said the first bear straightening his posture and speaking in a most unctuous voice while raising a paw, "do I not shit in the woods?"

This sarcasm caused the panda to soil himself in rage.

In that moment, the seeds for a double-cross were planted.

Earnest, the Chicken-Headed Penis Boy
by
Ao-Hui Lin

Earnest was in kindergarten when Jackie the Janitor got fired for "choking the chicken" in the girls' bathroom. That phrase, along with his best friend Bradley Watson's accompanying hand gestures, stuck in Earnest's head so hard that whenever he looked at the thing between his legs, all he could see was a bald, pointed bird head, like the ones attached to the roast ducks hanging in the window of a Chinese restaurant.

He didn't learn what "euphemism" meant until the third grade, and by then it was too late. His chicken had grown feathers and a beak. When it started to open and close its mouth, he asked his mother if he could take showers instead of baths; he didn't want it to drown.

Bradley told him that penises weren't really chickens, but every time Earnest tried to wish his chicken away, it would stare at him with its bright, beady black eyes and he would lose his concentration. After a while he stopped trying and was just glad he hadn't heard the phrase "trouser snake" first.

As Earnest grew bigger, so did his chicken-headed penis. By ten, he had to wear two pairs of underwear to mask the soft clucking sound that came from his pants. At thirteen, while looking at pictures of naked women in feather boas that he found in his father's sock drawer, he discovered that his chicken could crow. And spit. That was when he started wearing three pairs of underwear.

In his senior year, Earnest asked Dolores Schlunk to the prom. Dolores had a body like a cone of soft-serve ice cream, with droopy rolls of flesh that had a tendency to overrun the waistband of her too-tight waffle-yellow pants. Bradley said Earnest should take her up to Makeout Bluff. He said Dolores was a sure thing. He said that Dolores would go down on anyone, anytime, anywhere.

Bradley was wrong.

It took Earnest nearly an hour to coax Dolores to unlock the doors of his father's Chevrolet and let him back in. He begged and apologized, tapping the window while covering the front of his body with the jacket of his rented tuxedo. An unseasonably chill spring wind blew through the gap of his naked buttocks to ruffle the feathers of his cock, while a mournful buck-buck-buck punctuated his pleas.

Once he negotiated his way back into the car and re-donned his discarded clothing, Earnest sat next to a sniffing Dolores, unsure what to say. She hugged herself, pushing up the cleavage in her satin blue boat-neck dress. Her breasts formed a jiggly shelf that caught the tears as they squeezed past her closed eyelids and plopped down from her chin. Despite his discomfort, he felt the tickle of down stirring against his thigh at the sight.

"You think I'm a freak, don't you?" The words surprised Earnest, because it was Dolores who spoke them, not him. She went on in a small voice, cloggy with snot and shame, "That's why you asked me to the prom. To play a trick on me. 'Cos I'm f-fat and u-ugly." Her breath hitched on the last words, and for a second they both looked worried that she might melt into an oozy puddle of tears.

"You're not ugly." It must be confessed that Earnest had to search for that one bit of almost-truth; any other statement contradicting her would have been, alas, an outright lie. But once it was said, he began to see how right he was. Dolores's skin was silken smooth, and she had the fat girl's curse: a pretty face.

Dolores's snuffle conveyed a mucous wistfulness.

"No, really, you're not. Your hair looks nice with your dress." Again, not a lie, though not something that had made an impression on Earnest until this very moment.

"Then why did you do that thing with the... you know." Keeping her eyes averted, Dolores flapped a hand somewhere in the direction of the steering wheel.

"Bradley said it wouldn't bother you."

"I hate Bradley Watson." Her lips quivered; her eyes filled again. "I wish he'd be nice to me," she wailed as she toppled sideways toward Earnest.

He put his arms around her and petted her awkwardly. That seemed to soothe her, and the crying flattened into whimpers and then bubbly hiccups. They embraced for long minutes. Later, when he put the car in gear, she covered his hand with hers and, with a shy smile, said, "I'm sorry about before. I'll kiss it if you want."

But the bird was nesting, and Earnest thought it best not to agitate it.

In the following years of aborted encounters with women, Earnest came to appreciate Dolores's straightforward, if somewhat mistaken, reaction. Her horror, in retrospect, had been refreshingly free of anger, contempt, or laughter, and as time went on, his memory of her became more beautiful.

It was no surprise to him that others began to notice Dolores's better qualities as well. By the end of senior year, she had shed the mantle of social pariah, and she truly bloomed in college, where the value of kindness, compassion and a sense of humor rose in direct proportion with the distance from high school.

The evening that Maia Forster flounced out of Earnest's dorm room, her derisive snickers echoing down the hall, he lay back on his lonely twin bed and gently stroked his chicken until it cooed, remembering how, long ago, Dolores had let him comfort her and how her bosom had pressed so softly against him. That night Dolores Schlunk walked into a third-year German study group with all the grace and presence of a prima ballerina, and her fellow German student, Bradley Watson, wondered if he'd been blind all his previous life.

Though smitten from that moment on, it took Bradley another ten years to convince Dolores that he was good enough for her. Less kind observers might have said it took him ten years to become good enough for her.

"You'll be my best man, of course." There was a pause on the telephone line, and Earnest could hear murmuring in the background. "I mean," Bradley amended, "will you please be my best man? Dolores says I'm supposed to ask, not tell." This time Dolores's background laughter was clear.

Earnest hesitated. "I'd only be able to fly in for the wedding. Don't you want someone closer? One of your big city friends?"

"Nah, I don't care about that. But I can't get married without my wing man." The nickname made Earnest wince, but he couldn't say no to the happiness in Bradley's voice.

It was a rushed affair: the catching of the plane, delayed by snow; the last minute dash to the church, Earnest struggling into suit and vest while the cabbie assumed a world-weary, seen-it-all mien; the final screech and bump of tires on curb, accompanied by the squawks of fowl and driver. Earnest tumbled from the cab and zipped his fly, making it to the altar with minutes to spare.

As the music began, he turned to face the processional. A woman Earnest had never met before led the way. Her face was long and guarded, with an unwavering forward stare that lent her the stern air of an Easter Island statue. She wore a pink dress that sprouted lace bows like palm tree fronds, designed, as are all bridesmaids' dresses, to bring out the loveliness of the bride. Earnest knew her name was Hope, that she'd been Dolores's roommate and best friend and now maid-of-honor, and that she wasn't much of a talker, according to Bradley.

The ceremony went off without incident, free of barnyard noises, although Earnest noticed in the middle that he'd neglected to brush away a few stray feathers that clung to his suit. As his hand flicked to a tuft of white fluff, he saw Hope glance his way, eyes attracted by the movement. Her expression held an aloneness that matched his own.

During the first obligatory waltz of the wedding party, Hope stood in the circle of his arms like a gondola oar, unbending while she rotated through the moves of the dance as if attached to a rowlock. It should have been easy to view her as dispassionately as an inanimate object, but his eyes kept straying to her soft pink mouth.

He resolved to keep his focus on the satin bow adorning her shoulder, so it wasn't until the coda that he realized she was stealing glances at him as well. Embarrassed to have been caught, their gazes ricocheted off one another, zipping to opposite corners of the room. But when he dared to look again, she had the ghost of a smile pressed onto her lips.

"Champagne?" He led her to the bar and scooped up a couple of half-moon glasses, but she grimaced at her first sip and slid it back to the bartender.

"What kind of scotch whiskey do you have?" It was the most words she'd spoken in Earnest's presence so far, and he was surprised to hear the faint lilt of a Highlands accent. Her voice, soft and grave, made the request sound like a librarian's reference inquiry; he and the bartender shared a smile.

The bartender held up a bottle of Johnny Walker. She shook her head. "Single malt?" He hoisted a bottle of Macailan and poured her a glass, neat. When Earnest reached into his pocket for his wallet, she shook her head again and passed a twenty to the bartender.

"I'll have the same," said Earnest, though he rarely drank hard liquor. The alcohol burned all the way down, and he suppressed a cough when it hit his stomach. The warmth spread through his abdomen, and he found himself having another drink, and another, until his body felt encased in a down quilt.

Hope matched him drink for drink, and the more she drank, the more she spoke, although haltingly, as if she constantly expected to be interrupted. The scotch haze coalesced about them, a filmy bubble that hid the rest of the room.

It seemed to Earnest that a scent wafted from Hope, mysterious and irresistible, and though he knew it was not true, his smaller brain whispered to his larger one that it was the aroma of roasted corn and birdseed. When he surprised a laugh out of her, the sound burst forth, loud and raucous. She clapped her hand across her mouth and looked around in embarrassment, perhaps too startled to register the answering cock-a-doodle-doo muffled by his pants.

"Would you... that is... maybe you'd like... or rather, I'd like..." Earnest's long atrophied desires tangled his words into a rubber-band ball, while his chicken urged him to mount her in a flurry of feathers and beak, pecking at her neck until she submitted to his fowl lust. Earnest willed his chicken to shut up.

Hope looked at him with owl-eyes. "I..." she paused, head tilted to one side as if taking counsel from her inner voices. "I have a room. Here." Again that little pause. "I mean, here in the hotel."

"Shall we?" He couldn't quite bring himself to articulate the words, but she answered with an "Oh... yes."

When the two of them stumbled into her room, he absent-mindedly turned on the light by the door, then wondered how he might turn it back off without appearing odd.

"No, leave it," slurred Hope, and he thought her voice reflected his own feelings, all breathless alcoholic delight tinged with panic. She reached over and flicked the switch, leaning towards him so that he could kiss her on that mouth that had so fascinated him all evening. Between his legs he could feel his chicken swaying drunkenly, and he had a moment of terror that the stupid cock would fail to rise on this, its best shot ever at a public performance.

But as soon as it was freed from the confines of his clothing, pants and drawers pushed hastily to his knees, it rallied and stood at attention. Never breaking the kiss, he guided Hope backwards to the bed, tipping them both down onto the soft mattress, her dress hitched up above her waist like pink sea foam. She clapped her hands to his ears, holding his face to hers, making the blood echo in his skull. Dimly aware that at any second his chicken might begin to cluck, he returned the gesture, and then positioned himself above her, poised at last to experience what he had only dreamed off.

"Holy Hell, it's a giant chicken," said a man's Scottish brogue.

Earnest froze.

Clinging to him, Hope whispered, "Ignore that. Don't stop, please."

"Lassie, I tell ya, it dinna going to work. This is a wee little vessel and tha's a great big chicken," said the Scottish brogue.

Earnest rolled to the side and turned on the bedside lamp.

"No, don't turn on the light!" pleaded Hope, but it was too late. She pushed her dress down, but not before Earnest saw something that took his breath away.

"Was that...?" he said.

She nodded miserably. "It's my little man in a boat." She sat up, shoulders slumped in a protective hunch. "Maybe you should go now."

"Wait." Earnest turned onto his back and lifted his shirt. His chicken tilted its head and stared at Hope, blinking rapidly.

"Oh my god, it really is a chicken," she said.

"That's what I told ye," said her little man in a boat, muffled by her dress.

Earnest pulled gently at Hope, drawing her down and kissing her again. Much later, after the crowing of his chicken had been joined by a lusty rendition of a Celtic aria, she murmured into the quiet aftermath, "I didn't even know he could sing."

They were married six months later, and a year after that Earnest stood beside Hope's hospital bed, holding her hand, while a Scottish brogue screamed, "Aye Captain, she's going ta blow, and not all the dilithium crystals in the universe will save her!"

They'd been worried, but their daughter Faith was born perfectly formed: ten little fingers and ten adorable toes and all the bits and pieces that would be expected in a baby girl and none that weren't. And from the moment she could talk, they made sure to explain the facts of life to her as clearly and honestly as possible.

But schoolyard myths and the romance of magical thinking can overpower even what we know to be true. When Faith's brother came along, Hope and Earnest found the baby on the morning of his birth, under a cabbage leaf.

R.I.P.
by
Art Heifetz

he went peacefully
in the early hours
succumbing to
erectile dysfunction
his final request was
a last sponge bath
from the attractive nurse
some of the mourners
whispered that the illness
was hereditary
others talked of his heroic battle
against the disease
trying 51 separate medications
in the final weeks
not to mention the penile implant
and the electro-stimulation
he is survived by three virile sons
to whom he bequeaths
his entire pornography collection
in hopes that they will be spared
his lonely fate
the deceased requests that
in lieu of flowers
contributions be made to
the ED Foundation
dedicated to finding a cure
for this terrible condition

in his inbox are 600 e-mails
all asking
have you received our shipment yet?

The Write's Tough by **Michael Price**

I think I may have a problem. I first got an inkling while proofing my last short story, "Life with Shoe Polish," which, sadly, isn't as good as it sounds. As a supposed man of words, the interminable quest for viable, interesting plots and characters may catch up with me somewhere down the line. That said, some thoughts over which I am currently mulling:

I've already been working on a one-act play: A woman comes home from work to discover her Pomeranian has been appointed U. S. Ambassador to Maldives. The very model of canine sexuality, Monsieur Barque-Barque inexplicably attempts suicide but, fortunately, his weapon is one of those ultra-realistic looking squirt rifles and he succeeds only in heinously matting his fur, making him look more than a little bit anorexic. He eventually resigns his post and runs away to join the Peace Corp, where he not only stumbles upon the irrepressible enjoyment of smoking pickled aphids in a beer bong but also the proper etiquette when passing gas through prison bars. The end will surely sneak up on you: Little Barkie becomes a Broadway sensation in the smash hit historical drama "Lint in the 24th Century," where the little fella stops the show in act three with his particularly moving portrayal of an overemotional toenail clippers. As yet untitled.

A possible short story idea: John and Margie Taxidonkey share an outspoken belief in ghosts, but only the ones that make the bed when they leave in the morning. In a spectacularly vivid dream, John is confronted by an especially effeminate apparition, who maintains that heaven is a lovely place to visit but advises John against the pin-striped onesy/teal tam outfit he has planned. In a related dream, Jasper the Casper also mentions something to Margie about hell being a bit humid this time of year but, at the time, she's rinsing her hair in a crock pot of chili con queso and doesn't hear a word and later crashes an international convention of insurance salesmen, calling out, "What the hell is literal vagary?" several times during a speech by an Alex Trebek impersonator.

In a novella with the working title "Urban Cramping," a teen-aged girl wakes up one morning to discover she has changed into her mother's bundt pan. Substantially aroused, she spends hour after hour perched on the edge of her bed fondling a giant economy-size can of *Liquid Plumber* to the velvet croonings of Ry Cooder's Greatest Hits. She later joins a support group for people who never pick up loose change off the ground and impulsively dives into her little brother's kiddie pool filled with fruit cocktail. In the end, she accidentally kills herself by sticking her finger down her throat, and leaving it there. It's a little slow moving at first, but "Cramping" picks up considerably in the middle of chapter two after the young lady gets a nipple stuck in the garbage disposal.

Or, how about this: A former Playgirl model bumps into an old girlfriend in the produce department of Ralph's, significantly contusing her left areola. After years of therapy, he has finally come to terms with their break-up and now accepts her parting depiction of him as "a rotting and nauseating swine carcass" was uttered out of concern for his mental health rather than cruel hatred, which was his initial thought. She, however, never the benevolent sort, rediscovers the enfeebling capacity of an accurately launched ten-pound bag of potatoes and over-tips the bag boy to help her tie him up in the middle of the dollar isle wearing a "Past Due Date" sign around his waist. Important determination: light comedy or memoir?

The theme in my work-in-progress first person narrative "Tower of Scraggle" ruthlessly explores the age-old question, "Is there a God?" And if there is, what's His excuse? Does He have to answer the same three life insurance questions as everybody else? Are His inoculations up to date? When He gets P.O.'d, does He actually say, "*I, incidentally, do damn it!*"—like my friend Merton Mandelbury has maintained for years? And if He is indeed all powerful, why did I so grossly overpay for cable last month? My mind is burdened with doubt, doubt which I suggest in the story's final paragraph could be easily lifted by a 4-14-24-32-43 and 13 Power Ball ticket, sold at the Holiday Station, right down the street, just on the other side of McDonalds. Hint, hint, God... or would I have had to even say that?

Or...

While Jim was working out at the club one morning he overheard one of the trainers tell a guy, "You should be able to bench press your own body weight." So, clever logician he, Jim decided to lose 80-90 pounds and give it a shot. Actually, for the most part, Jim likes his club but the mirrors bother him awfully, probably because whenever he's there, the lights are on. He meets a very pretty lady in a *Pilates for Toolbags* class but when he asks her name, she gets confused and runs around the track spritzing all the black guys with bleach water.

The difference between life and death varies, but always includes a soul that takes a lot of long weekends. I like this theme but, as yet, I'm drawing a blank on the details.

I'm considering starting my very own mythology. I'm tentatively calling it *My Mythology*, which, admittedly, may be a bit of a stretch, but good enough for the time being. A few possible characters I'm considering, admittedly rough sketches at this point:

The Bork is a flightless bird with the torso of a dachshund and the head of a divorce attorney. *My Mythology* holds that when a Bork kisses on the lips it either means six more weeks of black-and-white Gilligan's Island reruns or he's lost his bus pass. The Bork, a veteran politico, never votes in years ending in a two and contributes financially only to candidates who voluntarily yodel the theme from "Shaft" during campaign fund raisers.

I see The Great Cantini as a twenty-one year old supreme being, similar to a snapping turtle, which, once a month, swims ashore in search of a decent salad bar, oftener during PBS sweeps weeks. Sporting a ratty looking zit the size of Connecticut sticking straight out from his forehead, Cantini always giggles uncontrollably whenever it hears the word "cockpit" used in the wrong context and shamelessly name drops "Whitcluck Whatzenhoisen" at cocktail parties whenever the opportunity presents itself, although they have never met and there is no such person.

Fickey is a small poisonous rodent and the pride of Overland Park, Kansas, whose badger-like snout has been autographed by Joey Bishop. Its diet consists primarily of soft-boiled two-by-fours, sweet and sour Republicans, and kale chips, and often shows up at soup kitchens wearing an "I'm With Stupid" button that's missing the arrow. It does the crossword puzzle in ink every Sunday but whenever it runs across the clue, "Picnic playwright, four letters," it loudly orates the phrase, "Another spear wound to the head, if you would," several times to a bunch of Lutherans eating hot dish.

I gotta believe the *My Mythology* plot lines will practically write themselves.

Another potential comedy: A long time wino paratrooper turns suicide bomber by exhaling on the Persian Gulf. A former wallet model, Johnny Fluffenfold had been recently featured in an episode of *Beaver Bitches From Boise* as a down-on-his-luck wrestling mat before finding his true calling as the middle-aged guy who belts out a raucous "Woo-hoo! Woo-hoo!" at the end of erectile dysfunction commercials. Just before his big exit, Mr. Fluffenfold climbs to the top of Kareem Abdul Jabbar and recites several Euclidean Theorems in Swahili to the tune of The Beatles' *When I'm Sixty-Four*.

Or, how about a piece of epic poetry chronicling the adventures of an advanced class of first grade prodigies that haven't even been born yet? An idea still in the formative stages with the possible working title, "Hemorrhoidal Chalkboard," I see this as a somewhat static, cerebral piece, but one that definitely ends with the phrase, "Etcetera. The end... no wait, I didn't go yet!"

I have never understood poetry.

Then there's the one about the occasionally successful author of short fiction who runs out of meaningful ideas to write about.

Which, of course, is borderline absurd.

Boomers Gone Wild

**by
Barbara Lee**

recently, at dinner with friends someone said that we should all drop acid together
just for a single night give up being in control and live purely in the moment
looking at each other, we said, we're old
no one had tripped since the dawn of the seventies
would our fragile brains and baby boomer bodies survive?
yes, we said, yes, we'll do it, life is short, we'll do it
a defector said to count her out
why risk a bum trip, she'd be the guide
do you mean shaman? asked one of the men
hell no, she said, I'll hold the women's hair back if they need to puke and drive if anyone
has to go to the emergency room which is pretty much guaranteed to happen and that's
about it for being your guide
someone said we needed a vision quest type of guide
no thanks, I said, in college most of us women only went along with the whole Carlos
Castaneda thing if it involved a guy we liked because otherwise it wasn't worth having sex
with some weird stranger and no ride home
we all asked if anyone had a connection for buying psychedelics
and won't it look unusual for old people to show up in an alley?
or wherever the dealer does business?
could the dealer meet us somewhere like Costco?
preferably before dark?
a husband threw in a monkey wrench
we can't trust uncertified acid, it has to come from someplace like John Hopkins
should I call there to ask for information and imply that I'm in research or academia?
why not, if you want to, the answer came back
but say 'Johns' not 'John' or you'll sound like an idiot
one of the guys said we could trip at his house because it had three bathrooms
but don't bring cells, iPads, or other electronic devices
his wife snorted
I asked, can I bring my dog who just had surgery and needed a lot of attention
okay, he said
should everyone bring whatever music they feel like, or better to make a play list?
and what about food, or is that a waste of time because people might be barfing?
and what to wear, is it likely that we'll run around outside in the dark?
would it be a good idea to bring a jacket or will we be naked?
it was getting late so we all said good bye
and we'd call each other right away to get everything set up
and as far as I know it hasn't been spoken of since

Sojourn in a Monkey Suit by **Steve Smith**

The aspirants lounged restively within the open chamber in paired seats, twelve across and twice as many deep. Bands of mist drifted throughout. At the lectern before them stood a display easel bearing the chalked inscription: Life 501: Unperfected Entities. Species *Human*. Group *L7911933*. Release Date *Var*.

An unclothed bipedal figure materialized out of the mist and went directly to the lectern where he spread open the mammoth book set there and leafed forward several pages. He glanced over the assemblage and intoned, "All right, pay attention please. And no drifting about.

"As you must have gathered, the Elysian vacation is over." He waited for the stir to subside and continued. "The lolling about on fleecy clouds plucking stringed instruments and imbibing Angels' milk directly from their delectable source has served its purpose. Now that you are fully recovered from the rigors of your previous incarnation, you are about to embark on a great new adventure—"

A chorus of groans arose. The term adventure in this context fooled no one. It foretold not of exciting discoveries that awaited them but of unimaginable misery and calamity. As entities in varying stages of spiritual evolution, each knew that more hard work and suffering lay before them. Their recent ventures into organic life forms remained all too vivid.

He raised an appendage for silence. "—an adventure in a strange and distant place where you will assume the life form in which I present myself to you."

He stepped away from the lectern and turned slowly, displaying his vertically aligned form with paired appendages. He explained that the lower pair upon which his form balanced in an upright fashion was for locomotion and the other—he raised these out to his sides and waggled the slender extensions at their end—were for grasping and general utility.

"All in all, your new organic vehicle is unimposing in its shape and general appearance. Only these two lower members provide locomotion unlike the four that some of you were accustomed to. This round thing on top is called head. Head contains basic sensory organs and the master controls for maintaining the various systems required to sustain your continued existence. So don't misplace it."

He grinned sardonically to inform them the remark was intended as humorous, but only silence greeted him. "To continue, then. Notice that in contrast to the other life forms you have cycled through that there is very little natural covering in the nature of hair or fur. You will reside within a fleshy conveyance much like this, consisting of bone, fibers and assorted softer tissues. In this middle region are a tangled mix of squishy organs involved in the ingestion of nutrients and the expulsion of unneeded byproducts. Avoid at all costs exposing these organs to view as once on the outside they're difficult to put back." His glance swept the assemblage to send home the point.

"This thing here," he flicked a protrusion dangling from the point at which his lower

appendages joined, "is for eliminating excess fluids. It also has something to do with reproduction. I'm not entirely clear just what that is, but I'm sure it will make its significance known in time.

"The whole organism is somewhat complicated and burdened with a relatively brief endurance factor. Which is all to the good actually, owing to the troublesome venue in which you will attempt to fulfill your mission." A low moan issued from the aspirants.

"Life on this benighted sphere where you will soon find yourselves is a primitive system whereby one creature devours other creatures weaker than it." He paused to let this sink in. "Each creature in turn becomes prey for another larger creature, and so on. This is called the Food Chain." He studied what he'd just read, gave a brief shiver, and continued.

"Some of you might wonder where you fit in this scenario. With a few exceptions you're pretty close to the top of the dung pile." Another dolorous sigh arose from his audience.

"However, your kind is known for engaging in violence and strife. In some parts of this world killing one another seems to be the guiding principle. This is done for any number of spurious reasons, as often as not in the name of the *Great Overall Director* himself." Another pause followed.

"That was the bad news. The good news, of course, is that growth can only occur under situations of duress. This you'll no doubt experience in abundance. So be of good cheer—you couldn't find a better place to seek advancement in your dizzying ascent toward spiritual perfection."

The aspirants exchanged uncertain glances as he scanned the pages. He began to mumble verbatim. "... following a violent expulsion from the body in which you've gestated... dependent for feeding and excretory functions upon... hm. Skip that." He paged ahead. "Skip that. Skip that, and that... ah, here.

"It is decided at birth which basic form you will take. Some of you will come forth as caregivers, others as providers. The two forms will join to become a self-sustaining unit devoted to the bringing forth of progeny, which I assume means offspring."

In answer to the silence that greeted this, he amplified. "That means copies of you, newly formed versions that you will be required to—" He saw from the blank expressions before him that his words fell into a vacuum.

"Well, never mind. You will find that things will be somewhat more complicated than merely following the instinctual patterns that have governed your behaviors in your past lives. You will be required to utilize your two basic organs of comprehension in order to make the right choices. These are the seat of intelligence," pointing to his head. "And the center of wisdom," pointing to his mid-section.

"Together these two create what is called 'mind.' I urge you to use this organ every step of the way. Though a somewhat dim and tenuous tool, it is unfortunately the best that you have."

He gazed down at the book and read on mechanically. "A great many obstructions will stand in your way, mostly others of your own kind. This can be valuable, since resistance of one kind or another provides the abrasive substance against which you will hone your

spiritual tools. Unfortunately for these obstructive others, however, they are doomed to return to the planet in their next incarnation as much grosser forms."

He looked up with a bleak smile. "No doubt a good many of you in this very group, sad to say." Over a few groans of dismay, he continued, "Now, I know you probably all have questions, but we'll let them go for the time being, since you'll never remember any of this anyway. We go through this briefing only because it is required."

A wail of chagrin came from an adjacent area.

"That's from a group of recidivists going back as a lower order: burrowing intestinal parasites, I believe."

A mass exclamation of revulsion greeted this statement.

He closed the book. "Now, during this sojourn, you will have no awareness of your previous travels. You will seem stuck in an out-of-the-way place with no sense of how you got there or what your purpose is. Just bear up and plug along, doing your best to do your best and keep from being digested." His eyebrows arched meaningfully at this.

"Upon your de—, ahh, upon the culmination of your stay, you will be evaluated and for some this will result in a more elevated life form for your next incarnation. For the rest—"

He cast his glance toward the adjacent assembly area, causing a few to shiver at the prospect.

"I'd wish you safe journey, but that isn't the nature of things, is it?" He gave an insincere smile. "Right, then, you may now return to your cubicles and await your summons."

He abruptly turned and walked back through the roiling mist, and with subdued murmurs, the aspirants began to drift to their cloudy cubicles.

Hugo's Private Space
by
Brenda Anderson

The ladder wobbled. Hugo reached for the climbing rose, lost balance and *whump*, landed on something firm but invisible several feet above the lawn. His secateurs landed beside him. Stunned, he looked around.

Birds still sang. Flowers bloomed. The cat slunk past. Nothing had changed, except his back garden had grown an invisible surface four feet above the lawn and one step from the ladder. Well, half step. He stood up and practised stepping back and forth. Both surfaces held. Hugo couldn't believe his luck. Could this be the private space he longed for? Unbelievable.

With an effort, he dragged his favourite chair and Persian rug up the ladder onto the surface, and arranged them to face the setting sun. On the lawn below, the same cat strolled back again, oblivious. Hugo relaxed. If the cat couldn't see him, no-one could. That left his wife. If only he could invoke protection against her. Wait. In school he'd learned about the Romans and their household gods. Of course, this wasn't exactly a household, more a space. Well, a half space. He needed a god of the half spaces.

He cleared his throat. "Are you there, god? Come in, god," he said. Pathetic. If only he could remember the right invocation.

A dim light sputtered into existence. Hugo's heart skipped a beat.

"Welcome," Hugo said. "Please, I need your protection."

The half god flickered. "Can you be more specific?"

"I want this space sealed against my wife," said Hugo.

"Mmm. She's already suspicious, you know. You keep disappearing. At first she thought you were having an affair."

"What?" said Hugo. "No, no. It's just that sometimes I like to be alone."

"Relax," said the half god. "The private investigator she hired gave you the all-clear. Now she thinks you've joined a cult."

"*What?*" That his wife even knew the word came as a surprise. She despised private clubs of any kind.

"Believe me," said the half god. "She stormed into the local church and demanded answers. They said that very few cults held invisible meetings in back gardens, but they'd look into it. They hinted that if she joined their church, they'd put more effort into helping. She joined on the spot. That was a week ago."

Hugo started to sweat.

"Listen," said the half god. "The ladder."

Hugo swung round, just as his wife stepped onto the Persian rug. The late afternoon sun highlighted her see-through nightgown, ample curves and breasts. She clapped her hands around the half god's dim light, which went out. For a long minute husband and wife looked at each other. For once Hugo didn't mind this invasion. This time invasion felt good. Oh yes. Definitely. Better than good.

"Hugo," she said with a pout as she bent down to smooth a wrinkle in the mat, "I'm lonely. I need company. Come here, bad boy."

Hugo came.

Two Poems
by
Bradley K. Meyer

Red Etiquette

The ketchup on my table
knows its Emily Post-

It's a real compliment
of a condiment &

Fancy, fancy, fancy.

To the Prankster

Walking behind two
Wright State students,
One says:

-Did you hear about the prank Jimmy played on his cat?

-On his cat?

-Yeah, he filled his cat's litter box with pop rocks.

& I thought,
I think I'd like to fill
Jimmy's asshole with
firecrackers.
& when they go off,
he will wonder why
this is happening to him,

-What have I done?

He will ask but
I will be laughing.

Pop, pop... pop.

New Guy Smell
by
Evan Purcell

Homeroom just ended. Me and Veronica were talking about prom stuff. She wanted to wear that red dress, even though it was cheap and store-bought. I guess it complimented her hair, which was also cheap and store-bought. Ever the diplomat, I tried to persuade her to stick to solid black. It's slimming, especially in the hip area. But I couldn't exactly make any hip area comments to her face. I mean, could you imagine? I would totally sound catty.

So I told her that wearing red would only jinx her into breaking out beforehand. That kinda struck a nerve, because when we were freshmen, she had skin you could plant crops in. But now her cheeks are better.

She was about to ask me something unimportant when the new student walked by. I didn't know who he was, and I didn't know his name. He was perfect and lumbering with amber eyes, like wolf eyes. He checked me out and Veronica was just oblivious. As usual.

So he gave me this "What's up?" head nod and Veronica kept prattling about earrings. When New Guy was gone, I asked Veronica if she noticed his eyes, or his perfect everything. She shrugged, and went back to God damn earrings.

The bell rang and we dispersed. Veronica went to her Egghead Math because she's freaking studious and shit. I was off to nutrition.

When I got to class, I was like half-a-minute late and Miss Phelps looked at me like I had punched her in the neck. She's such a hyena sometimes and I doubt she'll ever marry. She told me to sit in my usual spot and I did. Only my usual spot was a little different now. New Guy sat right next to me. I could hear his breathing.

Now, I know what you're thinking. What about my boyfriend? What about Dave Johnson? I mean, admittedly he's a catch. And I've dated him for—what?—two years or something. And he's a great boyfriend, mostly because of his scholarship to Cornell and, you know, his ass. But a girl wants a little more from life than Dave Johnson. Besides, New Guy seemed totally interested.

Halfway through class, I dropped my pencil and let it roll toward New Guy's sneaker. He picked it up, slid it through his thick fingers, and handed it back to me. "Hey," he said. And I said "Hey" back.

Miss Phelps glared at us. She's totally going to be an old maid in a few semesters.

We didn't get to talk—me and New Guy—because of all our crappy-ass busy work. But I was able to scooch my chair closer to his and flick my hair in that perfect slo-mo way.

So I sat there, supposedly learning about stuff, breathing in the New Guy, and I noticed something wonky. New Guy smelled like my dead grandma.

I mean, he didn't smell like she did after she died. I didn't exactly go around huffing her coffin at the wake. But before she died, Nana Weiss smelled like old paper and hair spray and soap.

Whenever I smelled her, I thought about going to the beach as a kid, and trick-or-treating in her neighborhood, and getting scolded for breaking her cookie jar with a cow on it. She loved me so much, even after the cookie jar shattered. I'm not the nicest person, but Nana always understood me. I called her every Sunday.

And now New Guy, this amber-eyed Calvin Klein poster, had that smell. It seriously gave me the wiggins. I almost had to stop breathing.

A few hours later, I met Veronica for lunch. We sat at the usual table, close enough to the band geek table so we could trip them as they passed. I was about to spork into my meatloaf and play around with the ketchuppy goo, when New Guy waved at me and sat at our table.

"Wazzup?" he said. God he was hot. He had a scar under his eye that he probably got from, like, saving someone.

"Hey," me and Veronica said at the same time. Veronica looked at me, her eyes big and bulgy. I knew what she meant: *Damn*.

I asked New Guy about where he came from and what kind of music he was into. For the record, Kansas and rap. He was god damn perfect. And the best part was, he didn't even look at Veronica. Just at me. Like I was the hottest girl in a ten-mile radius.

I brushed his shoulder a little. My signature move. And I laughed needlessly. My other signature move. Veronica was being real helpful too. She kept talking about how pretty I was and how I used to be head cheerleader until Mrs. Ryan got all anal. Veronica is such a friend. I'm glad she's dating Raj, because even though he's kinda ethnic, he's good for her.

So we sat all lunch and had a great conversation about Kansas and how Mrs. Ryan is a ho-bag. And I had completely forgotten about his dead grandma smell. But then, I trashed my meatloaf, and the ketchuppy smell faded away. I could smell him again. I was instantly reminded of that time Nana helped me pick shells by the pier. She would grunt a little every time she bent over. I missed her a lot. I didn't cry at her funeral, and I'll always feel guilty about that.

I guess I had some weird scrunched up look on my face, because he was like, "What's wrong?" I couldn't exactly say that I was thinking deep thoughts, because I should've been listening to him talk about stuff.

His voice was so deep and smooth. He could narrate things.

We got up to leave.

I said "I'm fine. I was just looking at your eyes."

He musta gotten that answer a lot, because he smiled and brushed his hand against my hand as we walked. We were about to clasp fingers when I thought of that time I broke Nana's cookie jar. It said "Empty COWlories" on it and had a smiling cow. Nana was so mad. I pulled my hand away.

New Guy pretended not to notice.

We didn't have any more classes together, so he asked me if we could meet after school. And maybe go to Denny's or something. Veronica said "Yes" before realizing that she wasn't included. She added, "You know what? Maybe next time." God bless her. Raj was a lucky foreign exchange student.

New Guy looked at me, waiting for my answer. "Sure," I said, trying to breathe out of my mouth.

We decided to meet at the bike racks. Then we split up. I watched New Guy walk away. His jeans were really tight. Before I could forget, I texted Dave Johnson and told him we were breaking up.

When the school day was finally over, I waited by the bike racks like I was supposed to. Veronica saw me standing by myself and came over to wish me luck. Raj had his arm around her. It wasn't fair. Raj never smelled, and he was like Egyptian!

I reminded Veronica to go for a black dress. I gestured toward my hips by accident, and I think she noticed. She nodded solemnly. We planned a shopping spree for the weekend. They left in her nice VW bug with one of the hubcaps missing.

I waited and waited for New Guy. Like fifteen minutes, maybe. I started getting sweaty in the face. Finally, he showed up and he looked a little nervous. He kept fiddling with his hands before shoving them at his sides. He leaned in to hug me and I flashed back to the time Nana Weiss took me and my cousins to Disneyland. I got sick on that mountain ride. You know, the one with the Sasquatch thing? Even Natalie was there, my older cousin. Before she got all bitchy and stopped talking to me.

New Guy pulled away from me. "What are you thinking about?" he asked.

I guess I made that face again. I said we should probably get going, so we got in my Nissan and I drove him around town.

I made up some shit about local history and pioneers and Indians. He was really interested. I blared the AC, but it still didn't get rid of the grandma smell. We stopped at the Dairy Queen to get shakes. He paid.

We sat outside and drank in silence. You know how sometimes when you're on a date, the silence is comfortable and nice? And sometimes it's awkward and painful? This silence was pretty damn painful.

After a while, when I had nothing left to slurp, New Guy asked, "Is there something wrong? When I first saw you, you seemed...interested. But now you keep making these faces. Did I do something?"

What could I tell him? It's not you, it's your stench? You remind me of a recently deceased 90-year-old woman? I giggled and brushed my hair and didn't say anything at all.

"Seriously," he said. "Are you okay?"

I giggled a little louder. That was probably not the right thing to do. He waited for me to say something.

Now the silence was ten times more painful and I kept thinking about that one Halloween when Nana took all my Reese's and told me they were bad for my teeth but she really wanted them for herself. She gave them back, though. She loved me more than anything in the world. Until last June. When she died.

"Kiss me," I said. I wanted to stop thinking.

"Sure," he said and leaned over the table. My cup clattered to the cement. He put his rough, farmer hands on my neck. His lips were soft, moist, warm. He had stubble on his chin. I felt myself collapse closer to him. We fit together, you know. Not like me and Dave Johnson. More like Sonny and Cher. Romeo and Juliet. Samson and Delilah. All those couples that end up together, happily ever after.

His tongue was warm too. God I loved Kansas.

His stubble, though. Maybe I could've done without that stubble. But oh well. It's not like—

And I remembered Grandma again. She had old lady whiskers. She would kiss my cheek and nuzzle it, too, and no one ever told her about the long white hairs coming out of her chin.

I pulled my head back and almost got whiplash. New Guy's tongue was in my mouth at the time, and I think I accidentally bit into it.

"What the fuck!" he shouted.

I apologized a lot. Until my face was blue. Until I could no longer taste his tongue blood.

He jumped up. I tried to calm him down. He started making this big nasty scene right in the middle of Dairy Queen. Sure, it was skeezoid and gross in there, but it was still a public place. I mean, people stared. And New Guy got all red-faced and blustery. He was slurring his words because of, you know, the wound. He kept on cussing and ranting about nice farm girls. It was very unbecoming.

Farm boys aren't supposed to say "Jesus" and "shit" and "you Valley Girl fucktard."

I said I was sorry one more time, but it didn't work. Ooh, his eyes were wolf eyes now. The only thing I could do—the only way I could stop his neck veins from moving like that—was to come clean.

"I have to tell you something," I said. "I have epilepsy."

I wasn't exactly 100% on what epilepsy meant. It was either the Michael J. Fox thing, or the one where you fall asleep all the time. Either way, he bought it. He hugged me and apologized for the outburst. I patted his back and said it was okay...

...and Nana Weiss grabbed me by the wrist and made me apologize to Mrs. Harris for running barefoot through her garden.

Crap. I tried to shake the memory loose.

"Sorry," I told New Guy. "My epilepsy again."

"Should I call a doctor?" He was bleeding through the taste buds and he was asking me about medical attention. So frickin' gallant...

...and Nana whacked me upside the head for stealing Natalie's Barbie and using markers to make her look Mexican. Even though she was lawyer Barbie.

I couldn't get away with this. Nana wouldn't let me.

"I'm not epileptic," I blurted. "I just...think you smell like my grandma and it's creepy."

He asked if I was serious.

I said no.

Grandma made me wash her poodle Doris...

...And I said, "Yes. I'm serious. Sorry."

Well, the good news was my pulling a Mike Tyson on his tongue was no longer the low point of our date. The bad news was he made some hand gestures and started walking home.

He left me very, very alone.

I collapsed back into my chair and some scary homeless man started winking at me from the next table over. Or maybe he had epilepsy too.

There was nothing left for me to do. Look, I know I messed up. A lot. I always mess up. Ad frickin' nauseam. I guess this would be karma.

But I trusted Nana Weiss. She was like my favorite person. And now she went and jabbed her dirty old fingers into my love life. And that was unforgivable. So I guess this was my cue to stop missing her. I guess this was her telling me to just forget about everything.

And I was okay with that.

I went back to my car and sat there for a while, letting the AC pump its air right through me. I was the only car left in the lot. I tried calling Veronica, but she didn't pick up. She was probably with Raj, letting him feel her up. She's a ho sometimes. I tried calling back Dave Johnson, but it went straight to voicemail. Couldn't he see that I didn't mean to dump him? That we were meant to be together? I didn't have anyone else to call, so I just sat there. If I sniffed hard enough, I could still smell the last traces of Nana Weiss. But the air was washing it away pretty fast.

After a few minutes, I couldn't smell anything.

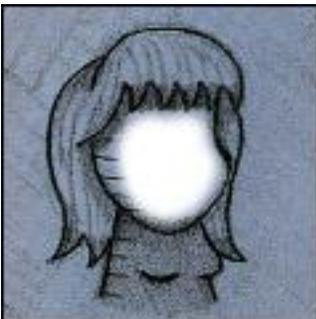
Contributor Biographies



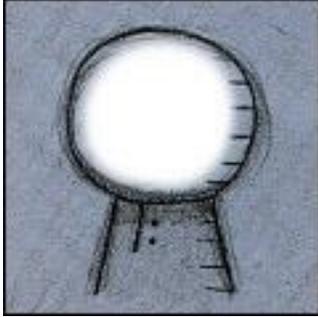
Ian Couch has previously served as a fiction editor for *Barely South Review*, worked as a head writer for the sketch comedy show *Magic Pants*, and written for several television programs. Having taught fiction classes at various schools and received awards for both fiction and screenplays, his stories appear in *Papyrus*, *Clockhouse Review*, and *Drunken Boat*. He lives with his wife in the Washington, DC, area.



April Salzano teaches college writing in Pennsylvania where she lives with her husband and two sons. She is currently working on a memoir on raising a child with autism and several collections of poetry. Her work has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Award and has appeared in journals such as *Convergence*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *The Camel Saloon*, *Centrifugal Eye*, *Deadsnakes*, *Visceral Uterus*, *Salome*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Writing Tomorrow* and *Rattle*. The author also serves as co-editor at Kind of a Hurricane Press (www.kindofahurricanepress.com).



Miranda Ciccone currently lives in Ohio and wastes a lot of time on the Internet. She grew up on *Mad Magazine*, Monty Python, and Douglas Adams, and it probably shows. Her stories have appeared in online publications *The Harrow*, *The Three-Lobed Burning Eye*, *Underneath the Juniper Tree*, *The Cynic Online*, and the ebook anthology *Arcane II*.



Tony Peyser briefly lived on a Koala and once punched the moon in the face. As an editorial cartoonist for the *L.A. Times* from 1994 to 1997, he drew daily cartoons about the O.J. Simpson criminal trial. From 2004 to 2012, he wrote daily poems about national politics for *BuzzFlash*, the news and commentary site. He was a semifinalist for the 2008 Wabash Poetry Prize. London-based Eyewear Publishing has a book coming out later this year called *The Poet's Quest for God*, and this collection includes one of his poems.



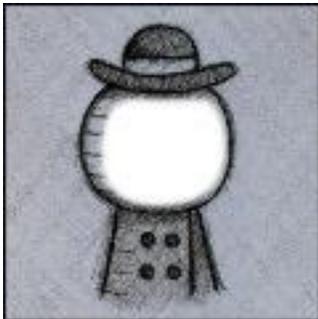
Alexei Kalinchuk says, "I've been published in *Amoskeag Journal* and *The Bitter Oleander*, and am a well-regarded Master in the art of Ukrainian Massage. Also, I'm a former Mouseketeer—one of the ones they arrested for wire fraud."



Ao-Hui Lin spends a lot of her time pondering the nature of motherhood and hopes that when her sons are grown, they won't wonder why so many of her stories about mothers end in tragedy. Her work has appeared in *Jersey Devil Press Magazine*, *Drabblecast*, *Everyday Fiction*, and the anthology *Daughters of Icarus*. She infrequently appears online at <http://aohuilin.blogspot.com> and @cookiesandzen.



Art Heifetz teaches ESL to refugees in Richmond, Virginia. Now in his retirement years, he can't stop telling stories, 150 of which have been published in 11 countries, 2 of them imaginary. He won second place in an international competition in Israel and was, like everyone else, nominated for a Pushcart. See polishedbrasspoems.com for more of his work.



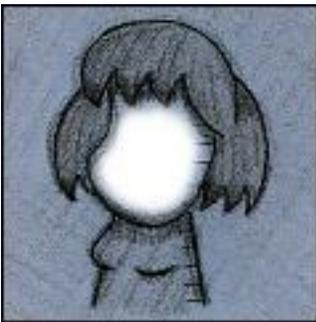
Michael Price received his BA in Theater from the University of Minnesota in 1980 and has been writing both short and long fiction ever since, primarily as a source of self-amusement. Regularly published in literary journals, he performed his one-man one-act play "No Change of Address" at the 2011 MN Fringe Festival; most folks even clapped. A former photographic body model, Michael still enjoys fitness training, working on crossword puzzles and Sudokus between sets, because he is still so easily bored. He lives in St. Paul with his long-time friend and Scrabble punching bag, Pamela Veeder.



Barbara Lee is a Eugene, Oregon, freelance writer.



A lover of the desert and all things western as a result of growing up in El Paso, Texas, **Steve Smith** moved back to Southeast Arizona after forty years in the cold winters of Michigan. He lives on a "ranchette" surrounded by mountains, where he is polishing a novel, a humorous memoir of his peacetime Army days, and assorted short stories.



Brenda Anderson's fiction has appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Alternate Hilarities*, *Punchnel's*, and *Penumbra*. She lives in Adelaide, South Australia. Find her on Twitter @CinnamonShops.



Bradley K. Meyer writes from Dayton, Ohio. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Indefinite Space*, *Apeiron Review*, *The Literary Bohemian*, *Parody*, *Hobo Pancakes*, and others. He is the author of a chapbook, *Hotel Room* (Vostok East Press, 2013). His favorite animal is: opossums.



Evan Purcell has written humor-based articles for Cracked.com and AfterElton.com. His stories can be found through Cleis Press, Sky Warrior Books, Far Worlds, and others. His first novel was published last month through Crimson Romance. He was also a finalist for the 3-Day Novel Contest and the LA Comedy Fest Screenwriting Competition. He is an American English teacher currently working in central China, and he uses the blog EvanPurcell.blogspot.com to discuss travel and to publicize his writing.