

◇ Defenestration ◇

Volume XV, Issue III

December 2018

Table of Contents

Tess Tabak, "Itsy Bitsy Spider"	2
Nathaniel Sverlow, "caveman"	5
Nick San Miguel, "My Waiter Plays Three-Dimensional Chess"	6
Emma Miller, Two Poems	10
Eli Landes, "A Somewhat More Accurate Fairy Tale"	11
Samuel Dodson, "Ernest Hemingway has balls"	17
James Davis, Two Poems	18
Virginia Revel, "Winging It"	20
Joshua Sampson, "The Beardist"	23
David McVey, "Why Do Birds?"	27
Daniel Deisinger, "Portculia"	28
Michael Augustine Dondero, "No One Cares That You Studied in 1952"	34
Contributor Biographies	36

All content is © copyright their respective authors.

The Itsy Bitsy Spider
by
Tess Tabak

"Ready for the pitch meeting, Sally?" Dave asked, pulling out a seat to sit at the conference table.

"I guess," Sally sighed. "You've been finding such weird clients lately. Last week I made a website for a woman convinced she was the next Messiah."

"Hey, I don't see you complaining when I hand you your paycheck."

"I'm not complaining, but where are you finding these people?"

"I have my ways." Dave smiled. "Anyway, you'll like these guys. They're just a couple of plumbers. Brothers, I think."

The door opened. Two rather large spiders dressed neatly in business suits crawled in. Sally gaped as they hopped from the floor to the tops of a chair, and then from the chair to the table top.

"*Hello. Iss thiss the meeting?*" one of the spiders asked. It was wearing a tiny red bowtie. The other wore a purple tie.

"Uh... yes. We're the web developers," Dave said.

"I'm sorry, are you both spiders?" Sally asked.

"*We are the plumbers, yesss.*"

Dave cleared his throat. "...Right. And what did you have in mind for your website?"

The bowtied spider spoke. "*Well, it should have webs on it.*"

"Brilliant idea. Love it. Put webs on it." Dave scribbled on his pad.

The necktie spider nodded its head. "*At first we thought that we'd be naturals to build a website. But it didn't work. It wasn't sticky.*"

"*Yesss, thissss 'web' of yours is quite enigmatic.*"

"I can see why you were confused. Let's talk content though. What did you want for your bio?"

"*We are sssspiders,*" the bowtied spider hissed.

Sally groaned. "Yes, I can see that."

"Let's dig deeper," Dave said, glaring at Sally. "Why don't you tell us how you got into the business?"

"It sssseemed like the natural choice," the necktied spider said. *"As sssspiders we have many millionsss of children to support and plumberssss are always in demand."*

"Besssides, drains are sssso cozy," the bowtied spider added.

"...Moving on," Sally said, "maybe we shouldn't mention the spider thing on the website. Some people might find it a bit frightening."

"But why? We are proud to be plumberssss," the bowtied spider cried. *"We've worked very hard to build our businesssss and we just want to let people know."*

"We just wanted to clear your pipesssss."

"Then again, I guess you wouldn't want to be surprised by that either, would you?"

"Why don't we break the spider thing in a nice gentle way," Dave said.

"We'd like our picture. On the home page," the necktied spider said.

"Yesssss," the other agreed. *"Our faces will sell many toilets."*

The spiders leaned together and made a terrifying mug.

"That's... lovely," Dave said. "Now, do you have any testimonials?"

"We're afraid not."

"So you're just starting out then?" Sally asked.

"No, it hasssss been quite a while," the bowtied spider sad.

Sally's pen hovered above her notepad. "But surely someone's said something? Given you a review or something?"

"No," the necktied spider said. *"When we're done working they all ssssay something like thisssss."* It made a horrified expression.

"We're not sure yet what it meanssss," the bowtied spider added. *"Humans are fascinating creatures."*

"OK. Right. What about special skills?" Dave asked.

"We haven't got any."

"None at all?"

"No."

"Well, what sets you apart from other plumbers?" Sally asked.

The spiders stared blankly.

"OK. Let's try something more basic. Are you good plumbers?" she asked slowly.

"Not very good, no," the bowtied spider said.

"You'd be surprised how hard it is to fix a toilet when you're our size," the necktied spider agreed.

"Turning a wrench when you've got eight legs and no arms."

"And if you get caught in the drain. A nightmare."

Sally sighed. "OK... look, I don't mean to overstep here. But do you even know what plumbers do?"

"They sssell toilets, of course."

"And crawl through the drain, exploring the delicious cloggings inside."

"We're sssstill working out the sssspeccifics. But we try sso very hard. Please give us a chance."

"We actually have a leak right in our kitchen sink," Dave said. "If you can fix it, we'll give you a great review."

"Thank you sssincccerely."

The four of them walked over to the kitchen. The spiders crawled inside the sink.

"I believe I can sssssee the problem," the necktied spider said, peering into the drain.

The drain let out a whooshing sound.

"Sssam, look out!" the other one cried.

They all looked on, horrified, as the necktied spider was sucked into the pipe.

"He'll be alright, won't he?" Sally asked. "Like the itsy bitsy spider?"

"Don't mention that name," the bowtied spider hissed.

The necktied spider crawled back into the sink, drenched. The other spider put a comforting hand on its back.

The drowned spider rocked back and forth, singing softly to itself. *"Down came the rain. Down came the rain. Down came the rain."*

caveman
by
Nathaniel Sverlow

dragging down the dead
hallways of morning
I wonder what it all means
how sex and sustenance
had evolved
into the 8-hour job

I wonder about the first
caveman that dreamt
of basement offices
fluorescent lights
adjustable chairs
Ikea desks
snack machine lunches
meticulous spreadsheets
project deadlines
remote supervisors
write-ups
quarterly reviews
and a cost-of-living raise

Man,
he must've been
one stinking, starving
son of a bitch

I imagine him
being mauled to death
by the tiger
he gave up on

and good riddance

My Waiter Plays Three-Dimensional Chess
by
Nick San Miguel

From our first interaction I could tell it was going to be a dog fight. Neither combatant was going to give the adversary an inch. That's just how things are when you are of a class as distinguished as mine. A target is placed upon your back unfairly by the world and you must try with all your might not to be struck by an arrow. I shall set the scene for one such occasion when a man of lower class tried to put me in my place. I was on a date. It was a 3rd date if you must know. I thought I'd display a touch of class by taking her to an eatery known for its gourmet burgers and brews. I could tell she was impressed.

"How many girls have you taken to Red Robin?" Rebecca asked, her lips curled just so, letting me know she already knew the answer.

"Only you, m'dear."

"Oh, Frank! You spoil me!"

I had her wrapped around my finger. 'Red Robin never fails,' I thought with a chuckle. Little did I know that Red Robin would fail, quite miserably in fact. Everything began quite amiably; the hostess showed us to our seats without error (I made a reservation implicitly saying I wanted a clear view of the nearby AMC Theatre to set up a killer joke I had planned) and the manager even stopped by to give us a pleasant nod. I felt things were going good enough that I could launch my joke upon her.

"Hey look, an AMC," I said, setting up my joke.

"Ah, yes."

"I was thinking we could maybe catch a flick after this."

"Oh that sounds delightful Frank. What shall we see?"

"Well, I was thinking we could see this movie called *Constipation*, have you heard of it?"

She shook her head.

"Yeah, well that's because it hasn't come out yet," I joked with perfect comedic timing. She stared at the floor for the next 30 seconds. I feared that maybe she hadn't understood, "You see, because with constipation the waste simply refuses to—"

"Yes Frank, I understand. I'm just disappointed, that's all. We're at a Red Robin you know? You're conducting yourself as if you were at a Texas Roadhouse with jokes like that," she shook her head solemnly, "and we're above Texas Roadhouse-goers."

"Oh Rebecca, please my dear, I just meant it as a little joke I didn't—"

"It's quite alright Frank, just remember that we are guests at this fine eatery. We aren't on a barn."

Just as she finished, our waiter approached the table and what ensued was a battle of wits and cunning on par with the likes of Holmes and Moriarty.

"Hi guys I'm Matt. What can I get started for you folks?"

Now was my chance to avenge my previous vulgarity, and I leapt at it.

"Well I'd like to imagine we're more than 'folks'...Matt," I finished with a tinge of disdain, looking at his name tag before I addressed him even though he'd already said it so as to assert my power over such a lowly service boy.

"I'm sorry?" replied Matt, with a faux innocent look about his face.

"Well, we're eating at the Red Robin aren't we Matt? I'd like to think we're of higher caste than the 'folks' over at the Texas Roadhouse," I said, glancing out the window and gesturing towards a Texas Roadhouse next to the AMC, "or 'savages' as I like to call them."

"Well then what would you like me to call you, *Monsieur*?" replied Matt, his voice dripping with sarcasm and contempt. It was merely a game of intellectual tennis now, and I had to hold serve.

"I'd hope at an eatery of this caliber, guests would be referred to as 'patrons' or if we're going to be French, *'habitués'* if you will."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rebecca biting her lower lip with such pent up sexual desire that I thought of having her right there on the table, in full view of Matt and the two young children of the neighboring table.

'They'll have to discover sex at some point,' said the devil within my head, 'better at Red Robin than online right?'

Before I could act upon my impulses, Matt seemingly changed his tune, "Well, since you are indeed *patrons* of the Red Robin, I shall go and get you some waters. How rude of me to have forgotten."

With that he left and soon I felt a hand on my nether regions. Next thing I knew, I was aggressively raw-dogging Rebecca in the Red Robin lavatory. Before we could finish, clarity came to Rebecca and she stopped the proceedings abruptly.

"What are we, animals?" she exclaimed, "I'll bet Matt is out there worried sick about us!"

With that, we made ourselves presentable and returned to our booth just before Matt came with our waters. The waters had lemons on the rim, as one would expect from such an establishment. Upon further inspection though, I found one of the seeds from the lemon slice floating precariously atop the water's surface. A man of lesser caste would've instantly accused Matt of trying to murder him, leaving this seed hanging there in the water with the sole intent of having me choke on it. Yet I knew better, for I was civilized. I was eating at the Red Robin wasn't I?

I knew exactly what this seed in the water represented. It wasn't solely an assassination attempt, it was a form of silent protest from Matt. He obviously took exception to his work.

It was evidenced by his unkempt hair and slovenly stubble. Matt resented being forced to serve the seemingly never-ending slew of aristocrats and high-class individuals that poured into the Red Robin on a daily basis. He envied their lavish and wealth. Matt wished he was me.

One might feel a tinge of sympathy for him, but not I. For I knew this seed in my water represented his being fed up with the system, with the social hierarchy which he felt he was a slave to. Matt probably thought I wouldn't notice the seed. Foolishly, he supposed that I would be so blinded by my opulence that I wouldn't sniff out his ploy. Boy, was Matt mistaken. Just as he started to ask if we were ready to order, no doubt thinking he was off the hook, I began, "So you think you're a rebel Matt, huh?"

"What is it now sir?"

"Matt, if I wanted to play patty cake I'd have gone over there," I said, pointing towards the children sitting politely at the other table, "now don't play dumb-shit with me, okay Matt?"

"Sir, I have no idea what your problem is, but—"

I cut him off.

"Yet, I know EXACTLY what your problem is Matt!" I yelled loud enough for the entire restaurant to hear.

"Please don't yell sir," Matt pleaded, seemingly exasperated. With that, I pulled the seed out of the water and held it for Matt to behold in all its glory.

"Explain this Matt!"

"Is that seriously what you're upset about—"

"I'll explain it for you. I know how you yearn to be Rebecca and me," I said, looking over towards Rebecca who was quite visibly and unashamedly pleasuring herself to my outbursts, "you'd die to be able to wear my IZOD polos and drive my Nissan Sentra! So instead of working hard like a normal American, you instead resort to a silent protest of your duties!" Matt was speechless, "Do you even know how lucky you are that I saw right through your plot Matt? Can you even fathom the repercussions had I unknowingly drank and swallowed this seed and choked as you wanted me to do? You'd be in jail Matt! You'd be in jail if I wasn't so well versed in Three Dimensional Chess and saw right through your guise!"

I may have been banned from Red Robin that day. Not for what I described above, but for what I said just after, going into raunchy detail of Matt getting gang-banged in jail because of me hypothetically choking and dying on that lemon seed and him being arrested for premeditated murder. Rebecca and I may have also spent that evening in jail for jumping the Red Robin mascot in the parking lot as he was arriving for his evening shift as a form of our own silent protest (and when I say "silent", I mean quite loud and violent) for being banned from Red Robin. But as the old adage goes, 'Better to commit a felony than let a snot nose punk get away with trying to rebel against the system by attempted murder.'

Ironically, Matt faced no repercussions for his actions despite my explanation of his plot to kill me to the guard outside our cell. One good did come of this day as Rebecca and I conceived our first child in our jail cell that night. We named him Robin as an everlasting reminder of the fateful events of that day. A reminder that no matter how many IZOD polos you own, no matter how many loyalty points you accrue for staying at the Hampton Inn, and no matter how far above the savages of Texas Roadhouse you are, the world will resent you for being better than it.

Two Poems
by
Emma Miller

I no longer help people professionally

for I just so prefer to discuss
myself. sometimes,
when patient Twelve gets whiney,
I jab her with
my pen – once –
twice –
"why are you doing this?"
– again.
I say it's the East Coast technique. sometimes,
I vaguely hit on
my divorcing couples.
it's good to have a common enemy. Sometimes
when Twelve is going on
and on
and on
about the Disorder,
I lean in
very close
and whisper, "Twelve,
you're just so brave
to wear your hair
like *that*."
that usually shuts
her up.

The Upper West Swipe

My Tinder date is nothing like the sun—
That sun that moves at a knowable hour.
He texts in scattershot, a Gatling gun
Loves to think in uncertainty, there's power.

He's less reliable than my Prime shipments
And yet we'll never truly face a breakup.
For we're not into "labels," or commitment.
Won't disrupt the high romance of, "heyy (two y's), u up?"

And when we fail to meet at happy hour,
With him on Lex and I on Amsterdam,
I know he'll simply Uber to my bower,
To make out to *Hitch* or *Silence of the Lambs*.

How will I leave thee? Of course I'd count the ways,
But I've got a thing in the morning. So sorry, love—
can't stay.

A Somewhat More Accurate Fairy Tale by **Eli Landes**

There is a tower, they say, that stands forgotten behind the mists of time.

As things go, it's not the most specific of addresses. The unidentified "they" like to ominously declare that, "Precious few are able to find the tower," to which their listeners usually reply, "Yeah, no kidding, buddy."

But anyway. Somewhere or another, there is a tower.

In the highest room of this tower lies a book.

The book rests on a table, covered in dust and laced with cobwebs. The shadows crowd close to the book, they say; a general sense of danger hangs heavy over it.

"It's just . . . it's a general sense of danger, OK?" they exclaim when pressed for details. "Not specific. Just a general sense of something vaguely dangerous somehow connected to the book."

For those, though, who dare to open this book—for those willing to risk all in search of the unknown—its pages hold a secret of unimaginable value.

A fairy tale.

Not your typical fairy tale, obviously. That would be boring. A fairy tale different to all other fairy tales out there. It is a fairy tale filled with magic and intrigue. A fairy tale unlike any you've ever heard.

Or at least, that's what it says on the blurb.

Right after the following statement:

"The author wishes for it to be known that he was in no way coerced to write this unbelievably awesome story, and that it his everlasting and ultimate honor to share the story of our incredibly amazing, radiant, and majestic queen.

"And now for some small—and completely voluntary—words of praise to our queen.

"Oh, let the doves commit bloody homicide out of jealousy, and let psychopathic warlords engage in vile acts of tyranny in religious frenzy over her, for none is like our queen. Glory to her name and beauty to her frame, and let the vagrants worship her feet and the nobles her . . . wheat-like hair, and while all this is going on the doves will be resurrected to sing of her majesty and the waters roar triumphantly of her tranquility. And now, consider this: what can we mere mortals hope to do in comparison to her brilliance, her grace, and her generosity? Commit suicide, you say, and indeed it is only at her kindness that we still draw breath. Oh, praise be to her, and let our hearts open in outpourings of love to her name."

It is a rather long blurb.

Almost as long as the book, in fact. The entirely unique story—which only superficially resembles every other fairy tale ever told—is written in just a few short paragraphs.

It goes like this:

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a beautiful princess. Though she was generous of heart and kind of spirit, the princess lived a lonely life, having no friends or family to call her own. Yet despite her troubles, she retained her good nature and gentle demeanor, and was known throughout the land as a moral inspiration and role model for teenage girls.

In a neighboring land, there lived a dashing, handsome, and charming young prince. The pride of his country, he was renowned as a brave hero and fearless warrior, and could stomach no wrongdoing.

It happened to pass that, one day, the prince was journeying through the forest when he heard a woman crying. Rushing forward, he found the princess alone, a fearsome bandit holding a knife to her throat. Drawing his sword, the prince charged into battle, killing the bandit and saving the princess.

Being a dashing hero, the prince offered to escort the princess to her home. It was a long journey, and the two soon found themselves alone at night. The princess went to sleep, the prince gallantly offering to stay on watch and protect her. He even refused to eat food, lest it make him sleepy. Only water would he partake of, he declared.

He did not know that the bandits lying in wait in the forest had drugged the water.

The next morning, the prince awoke to find himself alone. Cursing himself for a fool, he jumped to his feet and raced into the forest, searching for the lost princess. Though the bandits had hidden their tracks well, the prince was a seasoned tracker, and he was able to follow them to their lair.

The prince fought his way through the lair until he came face to face with the bandit leader himself. The prince held his sword—already red with the blood of fallen bandits—aloft, and challenged the leader to a duel. The leader, terrified by the prince's reputation, tried to back away, but before he could get out a single word, the prince leapt across the room and, with a single slash of his sword, decapitated the leader.

After the remaining bandits ran away, the prince freed the princess from the cell she had been confined to. Standing there, staring into each other's eyes, the prince and princess felt their hearts stir and realized the depths of the love they had for each other. Declaring their undying devotion to each other, the two left the lair hand in hand, knowing that as long as they had each other, nothing could ever separate them again.

And they lived happily ever after.

"So ends the glorious tale of Her Majesty the Queen," the book concludes. "Never before has a more honest and original tale been told—nor, indeed, more voluntarily written without any prodding or threats from Her Royal Awesomeness. Oh, glory to her name and beauty to her frame . . ."

And so on.

It is, all things told, a serviceable enough tale. Not, perhaps, as honest or original as the author claims it to be—one expects a certain degree of liberty with these sort of tales. But it definitely possesses distinct honest and original qualities. Maybe not in the actual wording of the story *per se*, but certainly this story shares some characteristics with other stories that have words in them—and some of *those* stories are honest and original.

Of course, it would be wrong to tell the story as it actually happened. That would be an insult to the author's memory.

Then again, when the only copy of your book is lying around in some random tower no one's ever going to find, you don't really *have* much of a memory.

So let's have some fun with this.

Here's what a slightly more *accurate* version of this fairy tale would look like:

Once upon a time,

In a metaphorical sense, that is. It's not exactly 100% accurate to claim that this fairy tale is so original as to be labeled as, "Once." It is possible, perhaps, to find certain similarities in it to other fairy tales in existence. In fact, if we *were* to be entirely truthful, this completely derivative tale lacks a single original word of its own.

But dramatic openings are important.

In a faraway land, there lived a beautiful princess.

Well, a ruthless leader of a local gang. But when you demand to be called a princess and murder the first thirty or so people who refuse to call you princess, you kinda become called a princess.

Though she was generous of heart and kind of spirit,

An arguable definition—in that she argued it and everyone else, under pain of death, agreed.

The princess lived a lonely life, having no friends or family to call her own.

Having killed them all.

Yet despite her troubles, she retained her good nature and gentle demeanor,

Another harmless lie she insisted be spread about her.

And was known throughout the land as a moral inspiration and role model for teenage girls.

This was true, though it was always followed up by snorts of derisive laughter.

In a neighboring land, there lived a dashing, handsome, and charming

—and completely brainless—

Young prince. The pride of his country,

This, too, was said metaphorically, though no one seemed to know what it was meant to signify.

He was renowned as a brave hero and fearless warrior.

Obviously, it can't be expected for such a claim to be entirely accurate; a certain degree of artistic license must be allowed for such things. If we're absolutely splitting hairs, a more precise description would be that he was a coward of the highest order.

And could stomach no wrongdoing.

A pet peeve that caused very little inconvenience to the wrongdoers, as the prince—suffering from the aforementioned brainlessness issue—accepted any explanation offered to him for all forms of criminal activity he stumbled across.

It happened to pass that, one day, the prince was journeying through the forest when he heard a woman crying.

Well, that's what he thought he heard. In reality, he heard the crying of a young man being tortured by our lovely "princess".

Rushing forward,

—if trying to run away, getting lost and ending up in the right direction purely by accident can be labeled "running forward"—

He found the princess alone, a fearsome bandit holding a knife to her throat.

Or so he remembers it. In reality, he found the "princess" holding a knife to the defenseless man she had been torturing. Upon seeing the prince, she then slit the man's throat.

It was one of those scenes that are very difficult to confuse for something else, but if the prince could lay claim to anything, it was pushing the boundary of what was acceptable to find confusing.

Drawing his sword, the prince charged into battle, killing the bandit and saving the princess.

Yeaaaaah. That wasn't what happened at all. But it sounds good.

Being a dashing hero,

Artistically speaking, of course.

The prince offered to escort the princess to her home.

Um. . . let's just say that the prince was a one-track minded sorta fellow, and was a devoted follower of the whole, "Chivalry is dead," way of doing things.

It was a long journey, and the two soon found themselves alone at night. The princess went to sleep, the prince gallantly offering to stay on watch and protect her.

Well, she persistently demanded it, but let's not quibble over details.

He even refused to eat food, lest it make him hungry. Only water would he partake of, he declared.

Somewhat unconvincingly. He insisted that the huge bottle of rum in his satchel was just for "educational" purposes.

He did not know that the bandits lying in wait in the forest had drugged the water.

That is, anyway, what he later claimed had happened. There was still a noticeable drunken slur to his words when he said it.

The next morning, the prince awoke to find himself alone. Cursing himself for a fool,

—arguably the first accurate thought of his life—

He jumped to his feet,

And immediately regretted it, as his hangover—curse those bandits and their tricks!—popped up to demand that he sit back down.

And raced into the forest,

Again, for argument's sake, let's call running for your life, getting lost, and ending up in the forest, "Racing into the forest."

Searching for the lost princess.

Sure. Why not.

Though the bandits had hidden their tracks well, the prince was a seasoned tracker,

A very artistic license, it seems.

And he was able to follow them to their lair.

The fact that it was about five minutes away, had huge signs pointing to it, and was the largest building in the forest had nothing to do with his discovery.

The prince fought his way through the lair,

Or, to be more precise, they stepped aside and said that the boss wanted to talk with him.

Until he came face to face with the bandit leader himself.

That was who the "princess" *claimed* he was, anyway. In actuality, he was the sheriff of the forest, there to arrest her for her many, many crimes—but the prince couldn't have been expected know that. That's not to say there weren't clues—the sheriff's star on his shirt; the

little badge next to it that said, "Sheriff;" the fact that he kept insisting, "I'm not a bandit leader, I am the sheriff!"—but not everyone can be expected to read so subtly between the lines.

The prince held his sword—already red with the blood of fallen bandits

Metaphorically speaking, that is.

—Aloft, and challenged the leader to a duel. The leader, terrified by the prince's reputation, tried to back away, but before he could get out a single word, the prince leapt across the room and, with a single slash of his sword, decapitated the leader.

It goes without saying that this wasn't even remotely what happened.

When the sheriff saw that the prince wouldn't listen to reason, he drew his sword and charged at the prince. The prince responded with a high-pitched yelp of terror and proceeded to flee in the direction he had come. The "princess," seeing this, cried out, "Is not my love worth your life?" to which the prince responded with an emphatic, "Nope!" The prince then began running down the stairs, but stumbled over his own shoelaces. The sheriff, just a few paces behind, tripped over the prince's now prone body and went flying out the window, where he landed with a disconcerting *crunch* outside.

But history is written by the victors—even if those victors are annoying dimwits who can't figure out how to tie their own shoelaces.

After the remaining bandits,

Officers.

Ran away, the prince freed the princess from the cell she had been confined to. Standing there, staring into each other's eyes, the prince and princess felt their hearts stirring and realized the depths of the love they had for each other.

Kinda. *She* realized that before her stood a complete moron she could trick into constantly doing her bidding. *He* realized . . . well, the prince often went weeks without realizing anything at all, so he was really just staring into her eyes.

Declaring their undying devotion to each other,

—Loudly and not particularly convincingly—

The two left the lair hand in hand, knowing that as long as they had each other, nothing could ever separate them again.

And they lived happily ever after.

Or until they got home, anyway. Then she married him, declared herself queen, and had his head impaled on a spike and displayed on the city walls.

Ironically, that's where she displayed the author's head, too.

Ernest Hemingway has balls
by
Samuel Dodson

It was a cold night and dark and I was sitting alone when I remembered I am a man with balls. I have balls and there is some hair on my balls. Sometimes women have touched them and sometimes I touch them myself; but the main thing to remember is that I am a man with balls.

"You are fondling your balls very earnestly," my wife told me. She wore a little pretty dress with yellow flowers on it. My wife did not have balls.

"It is because I am a man with balls," I told her. I was standing by the window. Outside on the horizon you could see the hills. The hills looked like lots of different pairs of balls. Some even looked like hairy balls where there were trees growing on them.

"Yes," my wife said.

I continued fondling my balls. I imagined standing in a river, fishing, and fondling my balls in the water. I would fondle them truly and well. In the river where the water comes up to your waist, your balls would be below the water, and they might be cold. Whatever you might think of the cold or of fishing or of balls doesn't mean the balls or the cold or the fishing aren't very important and beautiful and artistic and metaphorical or symbolic.

I stood many hours that day looking through that window. My wife sometimes came into the room and sometimes she left for groceries, or to run errands in the town. Occasionally the weather would break and I would think about her out in the street in the rain, looking for somewhere to shelter and wishing she had my long rubber coat. When she eventually returned in the evening her hair was wet and she ran a bath, where she stood naked in the warm water with steam rising up between her legs.

My wife did not have balls (as I have previously mentioned).

"For whom do the balls toll?" I asked her.

Two Poems
by
James Davis

Ab

"an abdominal muscle" – The Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary

I'd like just one—the upper left, why not,
indented there like the first
cookie cut into the sheet of dough—
to show off in becomingly posed photos.

Picture me in profile, reclining poolside,
my lower gut hidden under *Ulysses*,
my one dense knot
glistening with Coppertone.

Picture me in *Vogue Hommes*
modeling my chum Giorgio's white silk chemise
with its single cutout
you know where.

Up yours, ex-lover! Up yours, ennui!
I exude core power,
very specific core power,
you don't know what you're missing,

do you? Who doesn't? Touch my tummy
right there, yes, there,
lick my little nested egg,
ignore the rest, it's none of your concern,

the ho-hum chest, the wispy fur ringing the nipples,
the good old penis. I didn't suffer
this long for you not to
touch me where it counts.

Ad

"an advertisement" – The Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary

You remember every word
of the Ring Pop jingle, don't you?
It's a lollipop without a
stick, a ring of flavor you can
lick. You jammed it on your finger,
remember? The plastic setting,
the enormous, corny jewel

on your soft, small hand? You looked rich
with three shiny Pops on each hand,
rich and fancy. Maybe you were.
Maybe you were a son of a
dentist, and all the kids in your
gated community got big
white teeth for Christmas newsletters.
Or maybe you were filthy poor
and your teeth were brown, still are, but
you had television, of course,
and Mom took you to the arcade
one Saturday a month to play
a fistful or two of tokens
on Break the Bank or Wheel 'M In.
Remember the piles of tickets
you earned? Remember how it felt
like you had money? You could buy
anything you wanted, and you
wanted a Ring Pop, didn't you?
You licked it like the ad said to,
but that got old. You got antsy.
You pulled it off, started to suck.
It looked like a pacifier
in your sticky mouth, didn't it,
you baby, you poor, poor baby?

Winging It
by
Virginia Revel

"My husband is a great collector," said Kit, stirring her drink with one fingertip and smiling up at the CEO.

"Is that so? What do you collect, Avery?" The CEO glanced at Tom and then returned to a furtive study of Kit's cleavage.

Tom, who did not collect anything, felt a stab of alarm. Kit was bright-eyed and becomingly flushed, but instinct told him that she might be in one of her moods. He drew breath and was about to answer 'stamps'—a safe choice, he thought—when he heard Kitty say, "My husband collects swizzle sticks."

"Is that a fact?" said the CEO, and Ted Jarvis of Solomon, Jarvis, and Holmes, who was standing beside him, snickered.

"I only have about fifty of them," said Tom deprecatingly. "Not what you could call a collection of more than minor importance. But as... er... artifacts of popular culture, they are transformative in a certain ...uh...sociological context."

"Trendy, eh?" laughed the CEO.

Tom tried to edge closer to Kit, but Jarvis was in his way. Kit hadn't wanted to come to this party, hadn't wanted him to try for the job in the first place. She saw his future in civil liberties litigation or pro bono work for environmental causes. "You're selling out," she had told him. "Already!"

Tom knew that with two hundred thousand dollars of student loans outstanding, he couldn't afford to begin his law career defending owls and salamanders. Later, he would do that, if she wished. He would do almost anything she wished, for she was his darling, and good to him. All the same, he had had a lot of trouble persuading her to come here, to dress appropriately, to put on shoes. She hated shoes. Now she was wearing ballet slippers—not appropriate, but better than the thong sandals she had threatened to draw on her bare feet with magic marker.

For the first hour of the party she had stood with the other women and said little; Tom, glancing over now and then, had sensed aggression building up in her. He had also noted that she was drinking cocktails. For someone who usually didn't drink anything stronger than rose hip tea, this might be a bad idea. Now he leaned across Jarvis to get a closer look at his wife. Her blue eyes were unfocused and her upper lip shone with tiny beads of perspiration. She wasn't sabotaging him on purpose, he realized. She was drunk. She was seriously—though charmingly—sozzled.

"About these swizzle sticks, Avery," began Jarvis, sipping his own drink and too obviously trying not to grin.

"Not as interesting as my collection of Hellenistic coins," said Tom promptly. "I have at least one than can be safely dated to the lifetime of Alexander. Herakles in a lion skin cap on one side. Zeus with an eagle on the other."

"Remarkable," said the CEO. He was still ogling Kit, and she smiled up at him seraphically.

"They're still being found, you know. Not many in Greek Macedonia any more, but a few caches have come to light in Anatolia..." Tom chugged the rest of his Perrier and stepped away so he could put down his empty glass. His invention was running thin. He had chosen to talk about Hellenistic coins because they were not as ludicrous as swizzle sticks, but he did not know much about them, and he knew nothing about Anatolia.

He was rusty at this sort of thing. Back when he was an undergraduate and unwisely majoring in English literature, he and Kit had gone to other parties where, after a certain amount of wine had been consumed, someone would produce the innards of a coffee percolator and challenge those present to 'interpret' them. Tom had excelled at this. "The obvious circularity suggests both inescapable repetition and the Egyptian god Aten, the disk of the sun..." He could go on and on, building momentum with every word. Now his head was full of patent law and civil procedure.

He returned to the group to hear Kit say loudly, "My husband is also a notable sportsman." She almost said "shportsman," but not quite.

He got beside her and slipped an arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him and he braced himself unobtrusively against her weight.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I like to—"

"Fish," concluded Kit triumphantly. This was not what Tom had been going to say. "Offshore. For sharks."

"Oh, ho!" chortled the CEO. "You'll need two hundred pound test line for that!"

"And a bit of chain, sir," said Tom, smiling.

"Dangerous, I'll bet."

"Yes. We always keep a gun on board just in case. And we cut off the head right away."

Kit was becoming heavier in the circle of his arm. Tom knew that time was running out fast. "Will you excuse us, sir?" he said, and drew his wife away from the CEO, Jarvis, and the others. They threaded their way through chattering groups of partygoers, heading for a window. Perhaps if Kit got a little fresh air.... But there was a sofa, momentarily untenanted, in their way, and Kit made a move toward it.

"I need to take a nap," she said.

"No, Kit!" whispered Tom urgently. "Not yet! Try not to take a nap yet! I've got to get our coats."

"I can nap in my coat."

"Yes, yes. In the car. In the car in your coat."

"All right."

In the front hall they came upon Mrs. CEO, flashing with diamonds and very gracious. Tom thanked her for the lovely evening. It had been a privilege for him to meet the men he hoped would be his future colleagues. If he was fortunate enough to get the job, he would relish the challenge. Such a pity they had to leave early, but at this season there was always fog on the parkway after dark. Yes, they would be careful. Certainly they would.

Kit seemed to have regained her balance a little, so Tom risked leaving her with Mrs. CEO for the moment it took him to get their coats from the hired cloakroom attendant. He threw Kit's over her shoulders, knowing she wouldn't be able to find the sleeves. She was saying thank you to Mrs. CEO, and she repeated the words with increasing fervor at each step she took toward the door. Her hands sketched lovely gestures, and she looked soulful, like the mad Ophelia. In another minute she would start on "Good night, sweet ladies. Good night, good night..."

"Thank God," said Tom as the door closed behind them.

"I love you," said Kit, putting one arm around his neck and pulling at the knot of his tie with her other hand.

"Not yet," said Tom. "Don't love me yet. Love me in the car if you have to."

"All right," murmured Kit, and kissed him. Tom patted her shoulder and tried to steer her toward the car, but she wouldn't let him go, and he couldn't see very far while they were kissing. He took a long sidestep and pulled her with him. Still kissing, they shuffled crabwise down the steps, across the driveway, and, finally, off into the night.

The Beardist
by
Joshua Sampson

"Does it look okay?" I asked my girlfriend as I examined a large billboard advertisement across the street from our car that prominently displayed a new beard balm. She wasn't paying attention really, as she flipped through Reddit and Facebook in an amorphous blur, like she was simultaneously fact-checking statements made by politicians on either media platform. She wasn't. She was verifying whether the latest celebrity belly photo indicated a baby bump or too much ice cream. Meanwhile, I was looking at the advertisement and then back at my own face in the sun visor mirror. She knew I wasn't asking about the beaming gentleman on the advertisement.

"It looks fine," she said. "I think you look good even with just a little stubble. Even without a beard... you have boyish good looks. You look cute."

I don't want to look cute, I thought. I want to look like Robert Redford from Jeremiah Johnson. Rugged, handsome, bearded.

I looked in the mirror again and noticed a few patchy parts and was discontent with the hair that had grown on my face. It was a beard months in the making and I still looked like I was going through puberty. That's something people don't tell you if you have a baby face. Even at thirty years old, you still look like you should be holding a giant lollipop with a propeller hat on your head.

"It's like I never grew into a beard," I said. "My father was 35 years old by the time he could grow proper facial hair."

"Stop fretting," she said. "You are in full vacation-mode. You could wear your pajamas all day, every day if you wanted."

"Are you saying this is vacation, pajama-level beard?" I asked. "Because it sounds like that's what you're saying."

She made a *pfft sound*. "You are so sensitive. Stop worrying about it, let it grow a bit longer. For Pete's sake, you're in a city where nobody knows you. Enjoy yourself."

"While I appreciate you trying to make me feel better, I seem to be inferring that I should be ashamed of my facial hair, but because I'm on vacation in a city where nobody knows me, no one is going to point out how bad it looks."

The proceeding *Pfft* noise she made was much longer and much louder than the previous one, but instead of following it up with a response, she just went balls-deep back into her phone. I appreciated her condolences for the death of my bearded dream, but she had said in the past, after I had gotten carried away with my shaver, that I should never shave my face completely again—even if my beard fell on the slim side—because the thought of kissing a tween-age version of her boyfriend was disconcerting.

I looked at the man captured on the advertisement across the street again and reflected upon his cheerful smile. Unlike me, there was no shame in his eyes.

I had just turned from ordering a hotdog from a street vendor when I ran straight into the giant. I had seen him ambling through the crowd a few blocks down, looking for something in the way a farmer looks when strolling through a farmhouse full of poultry. He was a towering individual, at least six-four and broad shouldered. The juxtaposition of his dirty black shirt underneath his neatly groomed beard was startling, as I had imagined one who spends time manicuring themselves so acutely must likewise focus on their attire. Before I could mutter my apologies, he spoke, enunciating slowly and so perfectly that I had no trouble understanding the words uttered from behind his white teeth.

"Where do you think you're going with that small, shitty beard?"

This statement alarmed me, of course, as my serious fretting over the "beard issue" had been a private matter between me and my girlfriend, and the giant didn't appear to be the listening-in type; or, at least, why would he be listening in? I didn't reply to his question immediately as a strange sort of envy built-up inside me; his facial hair was prodigious indeed and slept on his chest like a massive comely cat, albeit a feral one. But each lock—*lock*, I say—was combed evenly and beautifully. The length was significant, but it was the sheer girth of the thing that was truly amazing. One could quite possibly crawl up inside it if they wished, and rest upon the comfortable mattress of fine scented hair that no doubt existed within. Even the gentleman on the billboard advertisement would have grimaced for inadequacies' sake in the face of this man's beard.

"I was just going to eat this hotdog and go on my way, sir," I said, sounding more like a grade school adolescent than a thirty-year-old man. *And why did I call him 'sir'?* And why were the people around me moving as though they were afraid? A cleanly shaven young man with tattoos on a skateboard rolled by, and the fear in his eyes created a knot of angst in my stomach that rested neatly next to the envy. Perhaps this giant of a man with a lovely beard was famous to the people of these parts for his size and beard; or, perhaps he was infamous. The sort of farmer who walks through a crowd of chickens and smashes their heads at his leisure. I bet you could build a reputation with behavior like that.

"I hate your face" he said, sneering with murderous intent. "I saw you a few blocks back and knew you needed to learn a lesson."

"I don't want any trouble," I said, and I looked over the giant's shoulder at my girlfriend who was sitting in our parked car. She was checking a cuticle and her other hand held her phone. Both were taking far more precedence than my current predicament. At this point, the giant removed two things from his pocket and it took me a moment to understand what they were, as this was one of those insane scenarios that would be otherwise unbelievable if it weren't happening. What he held was as follows: one can of shaving cream, the stuff that was more water than cream for whatever reason, and one of those cheap blue razors that have hidden pincers installed in them, so that every time you try to shave, it strips a chunk of flesh off your face. I think if you look close enough at that particular brand of razors, the warning would state, "Caution: Purchase only if poor."

"You are going to shave that beard," the giant said. "We don't want any of that around here."

"What are you doing with that razor?" I asked, but I already knew. He stepped toward me

and I stepped back. I was squirrely, and in more ways than just one, like stuffing food into my cheek to hoard away from my girlfriend in case the food storages at our house were running low. I also had a vertical leap of eight feet at one time. Literally, one time: I had just bought two balloons from the store—one with a smiley face and one that read, "Happy Birthday!" My girlfriend thought I should have bought two matching balloons, but I had disagreed. The smiley one made me feel better. She had said they weren't for me, but if you don't know by now—I don't trust her judgement. Anyway, we were packing to leave to a friend's birthday party and the balloons flew out of my car and into the sky. Well, I jumped. And I caught them. But I had gone up and forward and landed; oh, how did the doctor put it? Incorrectly. I sprained one ankle and broke the other. I showed up days later, and late, to my friend's birthday party with two sagging balloons. The smiley-faced one appeared much sadder than it had when we purchased it.

"Soon as I laid eyes on you I saw a problem," the bearded man said. "You're upsetting our values with your presence."

Our values, I thought. So, there was more than just one? There was a whole gang then. *The arbiters of masculine beards*.

"I think we need to just calm down and walk away," I said. "I'm not up to no good with this beard. I just thought I'd grow it for my girlfriend because she likes facial hair."

"She's leaving you," he said. "She doesn't like your beard."

"What?" I asked and looked over his shoulder, but my girlfriend still wasn't looking at me. Her boyfriend was being verbally assaulted, and she was looking at cute pictures of cupcakes on Pinterest. "She wouldn't leave me, we've been together for three years! Our relationship is rock-solid!" I at once realized how silly that statement sounded.

"She saw what a man looks like," he said, and he comically swiped his hand across his face as if he were unveiling a grand prize. "Your beard looks like a twelve-year-old boy wiped shit across his upper lip. It sucks." He moved closer toward me, the razor and shaving cream held out in front of him. "Shave it off or I'll shave it for you."

"Oh my god—you're insane," I said as his shadow loomed over me, consuming all light and dignity. I realized there was little room for escape so began offering the giant my bargaining chips: "Why would you want such a prominent beard anyway? I heard they get scratchy and are more prone to fecal particles."

"Shut up," he said. "And shave your stupid beard while I kiss your girlfriend. I am gonna kiss her so hard, man. Just let her feel my beard on her chin."

"Get away from me, you psycho!" I screamed. The shrillness in my voice evoked memories of jumping eight feet into the air grasping for balloons, only to land on both my ankles ... oh, how did my doctor put it? Like a real dumb shit. I tried to back away a few more steps but his shadow loomed even larger until I was cornered by his massive frame.

Meanwhile, he was whispering hysterically: "Shave your stupid beard. Shave that stupid damn beard. Shave your dumb face."

He grabbed me around the neck and smeared a palm-full of shaving cream across my cheeks and over my lips. I tried to fight back but he was too strong. One arm held me as

my body flailed like a struck piñata. He dragged the razor across my face, inaccurate and rough. My chin hair was not so much shaved from my face as it was ripped by the uneven, cheap razor.

"Please, stop this madness," I said as he shaved my tongue and one of my eyebrows by accident.

"Hold still, crappy beard-boy," he said. There was shaving cream all over his arm, in his beard, and on his shirt. "Stop giving me trouble and let me get rid of that stupid thing on your face!"

"Screw you, man!" I yelled, and the stillness that followed as he carefully trimmed my sideburns was unsettling. He was making sure there was no trace left. At least with stubble I could pass for twenty-one, but he was turning me into a teenage boy. Pre-pubescent even.

"I'm going to kiss your girlfriend so hard," he whispered angrily. "And she is going to run her hands through my beard. She will know what a real man feels like."

I started to cry as he finished shaving my face, and then he dropped me on the street, where I fell into a pile of shivering agony. He had turned me into a sad toddler left in a toy aisle, a shrieking dog put into a kennel, a shaved man with the face of a child.

"Why? But why?" I asked.

"Behold," he said, and I looked upon the majesty of his beard once more. I had to use the shade from my left hand to conceal the magnificent glow emanating from his face, and even then, I could only see it through the cracks of my fingers. "You can only dream of this beard," he said proudly. "And, only when you can comprehend its majesty, only when you can grow one as impressive as this one ... only then will you understand my motivations." He dropped the razor and the shaving cream and began to walk away. Over his shoulder, as if to make his actions very clear, he said: "Your beard looked like shit."

As he disappeared into a crowd of passersby, my girlfriend ran to me from our car, large tears welling in her puffy eyes. "Who was that?" she asked. "I looked over and you were gone and then saw you backed into a corner by that brute."

I cried some more: "He was so mean!"

"Oh, baby," she said as she placed her hand on my cheek. "Everything is going to be fine." She was smiling now, a few remaining tears on her cheek, and then her expression changed and grew more intent. "Oh my," she said and placed her hand to her mouth. "Look at your face—you look like a little boy."

At that point, I was inconsolable.

Why Do Birds?
by
David McVey

Why do birds suddenly appear
every time you are near?
It must be the mealworms
that live in your ear.

Why do stars fall down from the sky
every time you walk by?
You're a cosmic disaster
With your staricide eye.

Portculia
by
Daniel Deisinger

"We journeyed through the forest of the frenzied fists," Armella said. She had her hands on her hips, frowning. "I got punched in the eye by a maple."

"She got punched in the eye by a maple."

"We crossed the living mountains. Triyn almost became a rock-husband to a village of stone maidens."

"I almost became a rock-husband."

"We had to walk all the way around the lake of boiling glass. That was fine; it was very pretty. What wasn't pretty was when those goblins tried to sacrifice you to the Mirror Soul. You haven't even thanked us for rescuing you, and you were seconds away from being torn into glittering shreds by the Soul's thousand knife-fingers." "I would have been fine."

"She would have been fine."

"You didn't even thank us!"

"You didn't even thank us."

Both of the women glanced at the warrior. His eyes hung half-closed, and every few seconds he would smack his unlatched mouth shut to keep from drooling on his hauberk.

"I hired you to escort me," Poth said. She crossed her arms. "The pay you get will be thanks enough. Or do you want to go back to working at the inn and watching all the other adventurers go on quests?"

Armella scowled. "It was just to earn some money!"

"A warrior who has to close one eye to count to one," Poth said. Triyn blinked, though the right eye led a little. "And a cleric of the god of stubbed toes. Just how many clerics are there for Furnitus?"

Armella crossed her arms over Furnitus' symbol—a crumpled foot with lightning bolts lancing out from it—on her tunic's front. "Eleven!"

"Oh. Excuse me. I hope Furnitus doesn't strike me down with some mildly inconvenient foot pain! Well, we're here, aren't we? We made it. Portculia."

The three of them stood on a door set in the floor. They had opened a door which had a tiny door as a handle. Before them walls made of doors, ceilings made of doors waited for a hand to pry them open and gaze beyond. Long, narrow doors, backwards and sideways and upside-down, made up stairs.

A door-shaped chandelier swayed above them.

"Somewhere in this structure is a door that can lead us to an unimaginable treasure," Poth said. She gestured forward with her staff. "All we have to do is find which one it is. Every single surface can be opened and entered."

The three of them fell onto a walkway next to a banister after Triyn reached down and opened the door under them. The warrior landed first, then Poth, then Armella flattened her. The handle of the cleric's mace cracked her head. "Maybe we should split up." Armella said. "Triyn, you go over there. I'll work on the main entrance. Give a shout if you find something good."

"Will shout."

"I'm going to try that hallway down there," Poth said. "If either of you try to escape with the treasure, just know that I'll be sure to hunt you down!" She stomped away, rearranging her robe.

Triyn clumped down a hallway of doors. His fingers wiggled out and seized one of the handles at his side, and the door opened. Snow and gusting wind blew in the doorway. A few snowballs pelted him in the chest and face. He shut the door. The next presented a roaring crowd, this time flinging balls of mustard.

Armella looked around the big main entrance. The doors looked like part of the decor: brown tiles for the floor, pale white walls. She tried a door only a foot long and wide, set in the floor. When she opened it, a swarm of spring-loaded snakes shot out, landing around her as she covered her head.

Poth stood in a big room, which appeared to be a library or sitting room. All of the bookshelves had handles on them. She stomped into the middle of the room and eyed her choices. She chose one of the bookshelves, and when she opened it she found another bookshelf, this one with functioning books. She closed it and went to the next one, wondering what it could contain. It contained a possum.

Looking around, she realized doors made up the couch, chairs, and even lamps. One of them hung ajar. Her old master, the Western Sage, would have warned her against investigating, but then again she hadn't died after insulting his Sharpness the Bladelord. She nodded to herself, adjusted her hat, and pried open the door.

A few hundred miles away a princess lounged on a garden bench in the sunshine, reading poetry from a suitor. She opened her mouth to ask her governess about one of the bigger words when Poth landed on top of her.

Armella tried counting all doors she had left to try, just in the entrance area, when Poth reappeared, smoking from the effects of a transportation spell and grumbling to herself. Armella had already found a door leading to a thunder-topped tower in a wide meadow, a tea party of woodland creatures, and a male version of herself. He had winked at her, and she had spent some time sitting on the steps of the entrance, reflecting on the event. Now she wandered away from the entrance, having lost count of those she'd tried and had yet to try, finding what looked to be a bedroom. She went to the wardrobe first, and discovered an immense rack of clothing, endlessly cycling past her eyes. She picked a few of the items out, and when she wanted to replace the items, the rack jolted to a halt. She came across a window; when she pushed it up a band began to march past, and listened for a while until the window came unstuck and slammed on her fingers.

Triyn walked up and down the hallway, looking for the right door. The most exciting by far had been the door containing an enchanting, nubile temptress with thirty-one hands, each one holding a sundae. He had also found a door containing a trio of people wearing colorful capes and masks fighting an army of steel-made men, and what could be best described as the "falling dream" door. He had participated for a few minutes, but the funny feeling in your stomach disappears once you realize the ground isn't getting any closer. He tried a door. Within, sights beyond compare.

He closed it and went to the next one, revealing a small sitting room, not constructed of doors but of fluffy sponges. He sat and finished his sundae, leaving it on the table before rising. The room refused to let him leave, making the sponges sticky and hindering. By the time he flopped out of the room they covered him head to toe in all the colors of the rainbow, and made little wheezing sounds whenever he tried to pick them off.

An hour passed. Poth opened a door onto a sea tossing in the wind, the sky bursting with lightning-clouds, and made to close it. She turned as she did so, stumbling and falling through the opening. A bit of sea water splashed into the room, and when Poth had teleported back to Portculia, she slammed the door with a clamped jaw and burning eyes. The teleportation spell had dried her out, but her clothes had gained a few burned patches, and smoked slightly. After straightening her cravat, she tried the next door.

A rather dark room, lit with a few lamps spilling purple light onto the walls and floor, stretched beyond her sight. She couldn't see a ceiling, and sounds seemed to echo a little louder. After only a few steps in she realized there would be nothing worthwhile, and ran back to the door. Not because she was afraid, of course. She had many other doors to open, you know. She couldn't be scared by something like an endless, yawning darkness, through which hot winds moaned, and the light of the lamps becoming darker as she stared. And she certainly didn't need a little bit of a rest to slow her heartbeat, no.

She left the room, yet failed to see she hadn't fully closed the door to the dark place behind her. Some time passed--during which Triyn got the help of a many-armed woman wearing a lei and a grass skirt to remove the colorful sponges, and Armella spent a little bit of time conversing with a crossing guard who carried a sign reading "iToros!"—and the door eased open. Purple light tumbled out, casting shadows from the many handles around the room, and the light rolled across the floor, morphing into a vaguely humanoid shape, like Triyn after just waking from a nap.

And Armella encountered it first, after discovering the doorway of sow bored her quite a bit more than she had hoped. The Purple Being rose in front of her as she brushed dirt from her tunic, muttering about how she had just wanted to meet some pigs. Black in the center but purple around the edges, huge and hulking, twice her height, with a head lodged into its shoulders, and burning yellow eyes.

She looked up, squinted, looked behind her, and then back at it. "Triyn?"

It reached a clawed hand toward her, and she took a step back. "It isn't time for your daily hug yet. Why don't you go over to that hallway there? And get all that...stuff off you. You know you aren't a winter." She turned around and went to find an unexplored area, leaving the Purple Being standing with its hand out. It headed in the direction she had pointed, before a thought penetrated its ancient, shriveled brain. By then she had disappeared, and it did its best version of a shrug, plunging its head down for a moment.

It lumbered on, through the many halls and rooms of Portculia, and when it passed Triyn, neither noticed for a few seconds. Then they both spun around, legs wide and arms out to their sides, sizing each other up.

In this battle of wits, neither combatant had the upper hand, but eventually the purple being opened its mouth, releasing a roar, and charged ahead. Either Triyn let it get close enough to make it impossible for it to change course, or his reaction time really did suck. Regardless, Triyn stepped out of the way and the purple being crashed over a banister, tiny doors making it up flipping open as he spun around it. It fell onto Poth.

"Triyn, get off me, you bipedal meat pie! It's Armella's turn to hug you!" She felt her hair burning, and twisted her neck to peer directly into the abyss made form, the darkness between the stars, the chaotic entropy of death become life. She blinked. "You aren't Triyn."

Perhaps it opened its mouth. Poth couldn't see anything, but she felt warm, moist air roll over her, and the stench of most evil things. She kicked away from it, squealing, and stumbled up to her feet, putting on a burst of speed. The Purple Being rose and rumbled after her, shaking the doors open slightly. From one, a rotting hand emerged, and tripped Poth, who fell into the next door. It slammed shut after her, and she found herself very suddenly riding what looked like the illegitimate child of an elephant and a kangaroo.

The Purple Being, now lacking prey, glanced around, and found Triyn still standing on the upper level of the room. It ran to the wall and began climbing, digging claws of darkness into the stone doors.

Triyn used his foot to flip open the door at the edge of the balcony, cracking the being on the head and making it fall back down to the first level. From the door he had opened, the cutest little bunny rabbits emerged, with eyes big enough, and fur soft enough for even the most eristic princess. Triyn had a wonderful time playing with them as the beast rolled to its hands and knees, rubbed its dented head, stood up, and looked around. It pointed a claw at Triyn, and Triyn pointed a finger back, moments before hurling bunnies at it. They latched on with their incisors, making the being howl with pain and rage, and this kept them occupied until Poth had returned, putting out small fires on her outfit.

"Triyn!" Poth yelled up to the second level. "Don't try to fight it! It's a being from another realm of existence! It--oh, fudge."

She turned and ran, bunny-laden being hot on her heels. She turned a corner, entering a long hallway. It also contained Armella. "Run!" Poth shouted. "It isn't Triyn!"

Armella struggled to keep up as Poth raced past her. The Purple Being changed its attention to the cleric, and she diverted into a room, one she had already explored. She yanked open one of the doors and leapt in. The being dove in after her. A few minutes later Armella emerged wearing a t-shirt for the Bounding Boulders, and the Purple Being wore an immense sundress. Armella fled as it struggled to free itself from its colorful confines.

When it finally rushed out of the room, not realizing it still had a wide straw hat on its head, it found the hallway deserted. It lumbered forward, yellow eyes squinting to peer into the shadows. Triyn entered the hallway behind it. It spun, and the two squared off again, legs spread wide and fingers quivering alongside their hips.

Their eyes narrowed.

The being rushed ahead, claws ready to tear. Triyn dove down the stairs to his right, armor banging on each step as he went ass-over-hauberk. He rolled up to his feet as the being jumped down after him, coming into a picturesque three-point landing Triyn didn't appreciate—he had already left the room. The being followed him, finding him standing in front of a door with his hand ready to open it, his upper lip stretched up to press against his nostrils. The Purple Being charged, and Triyn wrenched open the door.

A huge ball of yellow mustard fired out, covering the entire top half of the being with a loud and violent splorp sound. The force of the boulder carried it backward, and Poth, stationed behind it, opened a door in the floor.

It ended up elsewhere in the complex, landing on the floor still half-buried in condiment. It snarled and thrashed, curling its claws into tight fists and roaring. After extricating itself from the mustard, it stood, ready to hunt.

It lumbered through the halls and corridors of Portculia until it spotted Triyn, eating another sundae. He fled, and the being gave chase, following the scent of butterscotch.

A few minutes later sticky sponges covered the Purple Being, still dripping with mustard. The hat had also survived, though the floral arrangement upon it had seen better days. It bared its teeth, and charged after Triyn with all the unworldly strength it possessed.

It skidded to a stop, perceiving something out of the corner of its eye. It swiveled itself around, finding Poth hiding in a room, waiting for it to go past. It grinned, showing off its long, dark-purple teeth, and entered the room. Poth's eyes went wide. It snarled and charged at her.

Armella, also in the room, watched the being rush past her, claws outstretched to add more holes to Poth's raggedy robe. She looked for something she could use, and looked at the furniture in the room, even with its door-construction. She raised her mace. "I call upon the power of Furnitus!"

The being's toe snagged on a handle sticking out of the floor. Bellowing with pain, it somersaulted forward, right into a still-open door from the first time Poth had been in the room. It obliterated the garden bench, and the suitor now lounging on it, into tiny pieces.

Poth slammed the door shut, cast a spell to place a padlock on the handle, and looked up. "Okay! Okay! New mission! Are either of your familiar with the kingdom of Seawind?"

"But the treasure?" Triyn asked, wiping his hands on his pants.

"Perhaps the treasure," Armella said, "is the friendsh—"

"No! It isn't! I hate you two!" Poth said. "I hired you to help me find the treasure of Portculia, and I'm not paying you until we find it! We just need to go to Seawind and... make sure... things are okay."

"Because of the ancient, unknowable, and limitless evil we've unleashed on it, with the ferocity of chaos and the endless malignancy of the darkness between the stars?"

Poth glared at Armella. Triyn went to a nearby door. Would it contain an endless realm of fire, thronged with the charred armies of kings? A dragon, full of poison and rage? The scattered fragments of a lost queen, wailing in the ash? It contained another possum.

No One Cares That You Studied in 1952
by
Michael Augustine Dondero

Gabe's been super annoying ever since he got back from studying in 1952. Just the worst.

Look, we get it, Gabe. You spent a semester living in Wisconsin in the 1950s. Well, guess what: not all of us can afford the new Live History program. Some of us have to settle for good old fashioned study abroad. (I did a semester in Seville; a truly transformative experience.)

Take the other night while we were out for dumplings, for example. He took one taste of the garlic eggplant and: "It's so hard to *really* enjoy food ever since I got back. Like, I can taste the GMOs! Everything just tasted different back then. I lost eight pounds back in '52."

Can you believe that? *Back in '52.*

Or this: "I've been really into '50s fitness. All this stuff today like Cross Fit, it's just so excessive. I've been focusing on calisthenics. All these advancements in nutrition today but you know, I rarely saw any overweight people in '52. Not like today."

I said, "Well, you know, Gabe, maybe obesity rates have gone up but there have also been major advancements in medicine. For example, polio is extremely rare but that used to be a serious concern for families back then."

"Ugh, yeah. Don't even get me *started*. I knew some families affected by it. So sad. But I guess I just mean like people just lived healthier lives back then."

"Way more people smoked."

"Yeah, but even cigarettes just *felt* healthier back then. They load them with so many more chemicals now. And we walked more."

"We"?

Gabe engages anyone with grey hair to find out precisely when they were born. Once he confirms they make the cut-off, he chats them up about the '50s like talking to an old war buddy. I actually once heard him say, "No, I do like music today, Estelle. I do. But I'll take Buddy Holly over Post Malone any day."

Does he even know Buddy Holly didn't make it big until the late '50s?

Or what really annoys me is the way he asks every other student whether they studied abroad. Then he proceeds to ask a series of questions all in anticipation of the inevitable follow-up question. "What about you?"

"Oh, yeah...I actually studied abroad in America."

He dangles that bit of intrigue, forcing the person to inquire further.

"What do you mean, 'America'?"

"I studied abroad in Wisconsin," he smirks coyly, "in 1952..."

Oh, and the other day, I had this conversation with him on the subway:

"I forgot how rude people were in the present," he said. Everyone looking at their phones. So few people value conversation. Everyone was just so nice when I was in '52. I sometimes wish I could've stayed."

"People were nice. But you're also white. And a man."

He sucked in his lips, closed his eyes and nodded softly. "I know. That's the one drawback. The racism and misogyny. It was so painful to really live it. *That's* really the most frustrating part of studying abroad in the past: not being able to really change anything." He cocked his head, narrowed his eyes. "You know what I did while I was there? I quoted MLK often. Just to plant the seed. He wouldn't even come to prominence for a few more years. I know, I know. I know it won't have any affect on the present. Those are the rules of Live History, but you know what? I like to believe that somehow, some way, my actions spawned some alternate universe where racial intolerance really did improve. I just know deep down that I left 1952 somehow better."

I told him about when I ran with the bulls in Pamplona during my study abroad in Spain.

He said, "I love Hemingway. I was actually there when *The Old Man and the Sea* was published. The running of the bulls has become so commercialized, though, since Papa's time. Now it's all about the Instagram post. I wish people would live more in the moment."

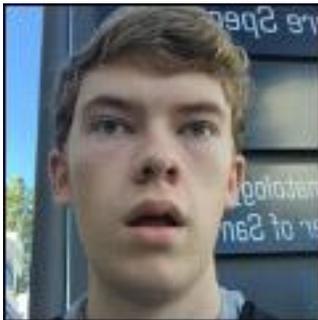
Contributor Biographies



Tess Tabak is a freelance writer living in New York City, currently working as a ghost writer (boo!). She co-edits the *Furious Gazelle* (thefuriousgazelle.com), an online literary magazine devoted to art and fury. She graduated from the Purchase College fiction program where she won the Ginny Wray Senior Prize in Fiction. Her publishing credits include *Athena's Daughter's II*, *The Big Jewel*, and *Janice Magazine*.



Nathaniel Sverlow is a freelance writer of poetry and prose. He was born in 1983 in San Diego, California, and has since spent most of his time hunched over a laptop randomly pressing keys. He currently resides in the Sacramento area with three cats, one incredibly supportive wife, and a newborn son. His previous publishing credits include *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Map Literary*, *Ricky's Backyard*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *Literary Orphans*, *Squawk Back*, and *Bone Parade*.



Nick San Miguel is currently a student in college who has too much time on his hands. He likes to write things that blur the line between genius and idiocy but when you really think about it you realize it's just plain idiocy.



Emma Miller ([@preemmanence](#)) is a writer and editor in New York City. Her fiction has recently appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Molotov Cocktail Literary Magazine*, and *Apparition Literary Magazine*. Her fact has appeared in *Time*, *Money*, *Forbes*, *USA Today*, *CB Insights*, and other similar outlets.



Eli Landes is a marketing copywriter by day and a fiction writer whenever he can squeeze in the time. He writes about pretty much anything and everything, but everything he writes has a little bit of novelty to it; a little bit of different. For more—including unique, never-before-published short stories—follow him at his blog, [regardingwriting.com](#).



Samuel Dodson is a twenty-something writer based in London. A graduate of the Warwick University Writing Programme, his stories and essays have been published in a number of literary magazines and anthologies, including by Litro, The TSS, and Almond Press, while his flash fiction has been shortlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction award and Bare Fiction prize. Currently working on his debut novel (who isn't?), he is the founder of creative collective Nothing in the Rulebook and tweets as [@instantidealism](#).



James Davis lives in Denver, where he writes training materials for Chipotle, takes classes at the Lighthouse Writers Workshop, and directs the Denver/Boulder Scrabble Club (denverscrabble.com). His poetry and prose have appeared online at *HTMLGiant*, *NANO Fiction*, and *Otoliths*, and in print at *32 Poems*, *Copper Nickel*, *Best New Poets*, and elsewhere. He is currently working on a book of poems for every two-letter word in the *Official Scrabble Players Dictionary*.



Virginia Revel was born in the U.S. but has lived in Europe for many years. She writes speeches and diplomatic correspondence for a living and fiction for fun. She rides, paints, and watches fish in the Schoenbrunn aquarium. One of her pieces will appear presently on *Literally Stories*.



Joshua Sampson is a short fiction hobbyist and graduate student at Eastern Michigan University. While he wants to move to a warmer climate some day, he has resigned himself to continue writing stories about hunchbacks and alcoholic clowns until his untimely death in a snowstorm somewhere near Lake Michigan.



David McVey lectures in Communication at New College Lanarkshire. He has published over 120 short stories and a great deal of non-fiction that focuses on history and the outdoors. He enjoys hillwalking, visiting historic sites, reading, watching telly, and supporting his home-town football team, Kirkintilloch Rob Roy FC.



Daniel Deisinger lives in Minnesota, writing for work and fun. His writing can also be found in *Whisky Island*, *Outposts of Beyond*, and online at Saturdaystory-time.weebly.com. He is on twitter at [@danny_deisinger](https://twitter.com/danny_deisinger). (Photo credit Kjerstin Balk)



Michael Augustine Dondero is a writer, podcaster and filmmaker based in Brooklyn, NY. He is the co-creator of the [The Lost Signal Society](#), a horror and sci-fi podcast that premiered in fall 2018. His film and television credits include producing historical documentaries for PBS and working on TV shows such as *Mr. Robot* and *High Maintenance*. As a bass guitarist, he has rocked out alongside dozens of great albums in his basement. His previous works in *Defenestration* can be found [here](#) and [here](#). You can reach him at www.augustinedondero.com.