

◇ Defenestration ◇

Volume XVI, Issue I

April 2019

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Galactic Fair
by
Stephen Parrish

TO: Dr. Marjorie Brinkman, Chair, Committee on the Arts, Earth
FROM: Ser Pandrakes Grantilope, Curator of Interspecies Art, League of Orbs
SUBJ: Review of Submission

Dear Dr. Brinkman:

Thank you for your submission of 2357.3 to the Galactic Art Fair, which I have reviewed with great diligence. Before we can proceed I must share a few observations.

Earth's visual art appears to be limited to a narrow spectrum between 380 and 700 nm. We appreciate this is the range of human vision. But certain other species on your planet have wider ranges. Elsewhere in the galaxy great works of visual art have been created in the ultraviolet and infrared. The Darques of Krox Prime can even see high frequency microwaves, and the Grokkles of Xithkort prefer to view images of their naked females with gamma rays.

The Ipnits of Gibberkyrdz 7 (not the Gibberkyrdz 7 in Sector 23, the other one) do not see in your range at all. To them, Roy G. Biv might as well be Roy Rogers—himself a curious example of Earth's dramatic arts. We feel your restricted employment of the electromagnetic spectrum represents an arbitrary prejudice against other species, not only throughout the galaxy, but also on your very own planet.

Butterflies enjoy colors too, Dr. Brinkman. Frogs even enjoy them in the dark.

Why the persistent employment of low-level technology? Where are the holograms? The time warps? The telepathic stimulation of ancillary gonads? Well, not so much the latter, in the case of your species at least, but you get my point.

The jury fails in particular to understand the static nature of Earth's art, and it cannot fathom why Earthlings believe the older a work is, the more valuable. Most of it is two-dimensional, some is three-dimensional, but there is nothing in your submission that is higher. I should also point out that your species is peculiarly obsessed with mammary glands.

Your so-called modern art makes extensive use of complementary colors, as though this is some sort of achievement. Orange is the complement of blue. Hooray. The Eep! Eep! species capitalized on this knowledge eleven galactic rotations before your star formed. (I interviewed them once, but "Eep! Eep!" is all they had to say on the subject.)

We found some of your literature to be of value. Shakespeare, for instance. Certain spoken word artists, like Snoop Dogg. On the other hand, James Joyce was quite a consternation to the jury. And please explain: are whales and legless sea captains ordinarily at odds with each other? Is it normal on Earth to hang black cats in gardens?

Music appears to be nothing more to you than fluctuating sound frequencies. Dance nothing more than organisms moving their limbs. Drama nothing more than people pretending to be

other people. You erect structures whose purpose it is to keep precipitation from landing on your heads—and you call that art? Pottery too? Ashtrays, for Gorf's sake?

Finally, we fail to understand what you call "reality television," especially telecasts featuring the man with the orange face and urine-stained hair, propped up as an imitation world leader for the amusement of your proletariat. Really, Dr. Brinkman, is this the best your culture can offer?

I'm sorry, but your application for exhibitor space at the Galactic Fair is disapproved. Try again next time, in what will be 244 of your planet's revolutions.

I hope to see you then.

To His Koi
by
Gary Mesick

(parody of Andrew Marvel, "To His Coy Mistress")

Had you a larger fleshy part
This pond would be my shopping cart.
I'd quit my job and live in ease
While I collected recipes.
I'd file them, and my list would span
From Bobby Flay to Jacques Pepin:
Exotic, simple, locavore
Thai, French, fresh, fusion, thermidor.

I'd bait my hook and cast my line
Then start to chill a little wine.
I'd lay you flat between my thumbs
And sprinkle you in panko crumbs,
Then as you sizzled in the pan
I'd season you with some cayenne
While heating slowly, turning twice,
And serve you on a bed of rice.

"Oh, no!" you cry. "You'd never dish
Up supper from a trophy fish!"
Don't get your dorsal in a bunch.
We can't make love; we can't make lunch.
Your beauty costs too much a pound—
I'll have to watch you swim around.

Catching Knives by **Bailey Holtz**

Blaise Frick-Durant was a nineteenth century French author, whose defining personal and professional attribute was that he only had half a nose. The other half had been severed off by the rogue boning knife he had launched into the air during an ill-advised knife trick demonstration in the company of the young female he had invited to his chambers and whom he, as written in his diary, hoped to "keep warm in the folds of my culottes." Blaise made his living writing gruesome yet captivating profiles on Parisians with physical handicaps. As hostile as readers would be to such exploitative reportage today, in the mid-nineteenth century, they had no qualms over reading about men with no legs, women with no arms, and the children with no spines, who slid every morning to the breakfast table like serpents.

Carolyn had written her undergraduate thesis at Princeton on Frick-Durant. Her peers, prim white women with aspirations of running travel blogs, sneered. "Is that the guy who wrote about people who eat with their elbows? Why?" "I thought I ought to try to write something original, rather than merely reframe the same uninspired American perspectives on Camus or Proust," returned Carolyn without blinking. The girls, all of whom were writing about Camus or Proust, looked at each other. Her advisor beamed.

Nine months later, that same advisor recommended Carolyn for a "prestigious" position on the research team of a "distinguished" French professor at the Sorbonne who was writing the first book about Blaise Frick-Durant. Carolyn would soon learn that these descriptors merely indicated that the subject so obscure as to be unknown to most academics, and that the professor was so cocooned in his Ivory Tower as to be virtually non-functioning.

So, that winter, Carolyn found herself in a small, chilly attic classroom in a distant corner of the Sorbonne, sitting around a table with the hodge-podge of individuals—all women—connected to the project through their scattershot knowledge of the life of Frick-Durant. At the head of the table sat Bertrand Montlaur, the distinguished professor, a rotund, mustachioed man draped in a saggy sweater, who seemed, for all intents and purposes, to be asleep.

As Carolyn settled in, she became aware of a growing noxious vanilla scent, and a sharp-angled figure crashed with a metal-on-metal "clang" into the chair next to hers. The woman introduced herself as Annie, a recent Kappa Kappa Gamma graduate from the University of Georgia.

"Hey," she said to Carolyn from the center of a mane of blonde hair. "You wanna wingman for me this weekend? I have a date with this French guy who sells luxury sailboats. I could use someone who actually speaks French to translate, cause I sure as fuck don't." As if by magic, she produced a stick of Chapstick out of nowhere, and smeared it thickly across her lips.

Carolyn turned to look at Annie. "What's your connection to Frick-Durant?"

She rolled her eyes. "My dad knows Quasi Modo over there," she said, indicating Bertrand, who, at that moment was rattling himself into sentience like his Gargoyle companions on

the roof of Notre Dame. "And let's just say it takes eight to ten weeks for syphilis medication to work, which is about as long as I'll be here."

After Bertrand had led a brief introductory meeting and swiftly—more swiftly than might be expected of a man of his frame—exited the room, cigarette already poised at his lips, Annie tried again: "So, how about it, can you be my interpreter? He'll buy us free drinks and maybe even a yacht if we play our cards right." She pulled out her tube of Chapstick once more, which, Carolyn now saw, she kept lodged between her breasts.

Carolyn rose. "That sounds truly unmissable but I have a history of being too loose around men. I need to control myself."

Annie looked Carolyn up and down, dark eyebrow sharply arched. "Oh . . . okay."

The next Monday, Annie slammed her bony butt into her chair with another inexplicable clang.

"You fucking liar," she announced triumphantly. "Last week, when you said you were a huge slut. That was a joke."

"You got me."

"Come out this weekend. I'll find you a boy." She twisted her mouth into a grotesque approximation of a smile. "The yacht guy from last weekend told me all his friends have huge boners for Americans . . ."

"I think I've gone temporarily deaf. No point continuing this conversation . . ."

"You could be getting laid all the fucking time! You just gotta get out there! Seize life by the balls!" She grabbed both Carolyn's thighs and shook them violently, then pulled her Chapstick out from her breasts and spread wax triumphantly across her lips.

A week later, Carolyn arrived early and sat in a different seat on the other side of the table. No one was there yet except Henry, Bertrand's assistant, a translucently pale man with a mud-brown non-haircut and small, utilitarian glasses Carolyn guessed he had owned since middle school. Carolyn nodded politely at Henry, who blinked in amazement at having been acknowledged, smiled bashfully, but said nothing. More my speed, thought Carolyn, as she settled in. A moment later, though, a synthetic rose scent spread like poison through the air, and Annie threw herself into the seat next to Carolyn's with a jarring clang. "Do I look like a total mess?" she demanded, flipping her mass of blonde hair across her tiny skull, revealing a sea of dark roots.

"Yes," replied Carolyn.

"I was out all night with this guy who sells crystal. I'm so fucking exhausted. No pun intended." Carolyn glanced at Henry, who was suddenly intrigued by the spring of his pen.

"What part of that was a pun?" asked Carolyn.

"The fucking part. We fucked."

"Don't you have syphilis or something?"

"It's not contagious anymore. Plus, we only did butt stuff."

Henry choked on his pen, and Bertrand, who had just entered, slapped him good-naturedly on the back a few times, sending his beanpole frame into shuddering vibrations. "I think," Bertrand wheezed as he lowered himself into his overworked rolling chair, "we now come to the infamous night of the knife incident and Bertrand's liaison with Geneviève Tauber." The room came swiftly to attention. It was generally anticipated that this would be the only discussion of any real interest to anyone.

On the far side of the table, someone gagged dramatically. Bertrand directed his attention toward Angelique, the women's studies Ph.D. candidate.

"Would you like to start, Angelique?" asked Bertrand sweetly.

"Of all of history's unapologetic predators, this prick might just be the worst of them," she said through gritted teeth.

BEE, the conceptual artist who had once done a performance piece involving Frick-Durant's work and granulated sugar, looked up from her doodle of a dog eating a plate of spaghetti. "I don't think he's as bad as Attila the Hun, or Henry the Eighth. . ."

"Wrong!" roared Angelique. "He lured a young, innocent woman into his chambers! He made her watch," and here she creased her face into a mien of true repulsion, "*knife tricks*. Knife tricks are the most boring of all magic tricks! He was a monster."

Bertrand looked unimpressed. "Perhaps, Angelique. There may be more to this, however."

Before she could respond, Henry put up an image on the antiquated overhead projector. It was a drawing of Geneviève, the young woman who had been in the company of Blaise that night. The nineteenth century Frenchwoman appeared in the anime style of Sailor Moon, with gravity-defying hair and a long, triangular mouth. Her giant eyes were purple, and on her hand-drawn face she wore an expression of unholy ecstasy. From Henry's look of searching approval, Carolyn felt confident of the identity of the artist.

"She looks kinda like you," snorted Annie under her breath at Carolyn, and punched her in the side of her breast.

"We have been led to believe," croaked Bertrand, waving his short arm vaguely at the projected image, "that Blaise lured young Geneviève into his apartment and there subjected her to magic tricks of the most hideously unimpressive kind. But I would like to posit that the opposite took place."

Angelique scoffed loudly. "You think that Geneviève performed knife tricks? Everything I've read supports the notion that Geneviève had never even been interested in magic, let alone attempted to learn tricks . . ."

"I did magic for a sorority talent show once," Annie chimed in. "I made my shirt disappear. I basically just took it off, but people were very impressed."

"I am saying," interrupted Bertrand, "that it was Geneviève who was pulling the strings, and that Blaise was merely a pawn in the plan of a master seductress." The atmosphere in the

room shifted noticeably. Hungry glances were exchanged between the women. To have been on the research team of a non-fiction best-seller about an unlikely nineteenth-century feminist trailblazer? All the fellowships, grants, and residencies they ever dreamed of, would finally be theirs. Only Angelique remained sullen. "What was her goal?" she demanded. "Why do this?"

"That is for you to find out. You are the research, team, no?" Bertrand smiled and leaned back in his chair, looking up at a billboard on the side of an imaginary highway. "Perhaps the logline could be: 'How a shrewd seductress of superior intellect seized control of her life and used her wits to ensnare her male victim in a web made of his own ego and vanity: The Geneviève and Blaise Story!' Michelle Obama and Cheryl Sandberg would claw each other's eyes out for the privilege to write the first blurb!" Bertrand slid out of the room leaving behind a faint thread of cigarette smoke, and a thousand empowered female dreams, lingering in the air.

As they packed up, Annie said to Carolyn: "Sorry I can't stick around and talk. I have a date with this guy who works for the Louvre. He's gonna give me a tour of their archives or some shit like that. Hopefully I can get brunch out of it." And with that, she was gone, leaving a trail of putrid rose odor lingering.

The rest of the group chatted gaily as they filed out, but Carolyn hung back. Across the table, Henry was lovingly folding up his drawing of Geneviève. She watched for a moment, then drew a deep breath.

"Henry," she began, startling him so much he dropped the drawing, yelped and bent quickly to pick it up, patting dust off the paper. "Sorry. Hey, I was thinking, I hardly know you, and I'd love to learn about your academic work. Are you free to grab coffee?" Henry froze and looked up at Carolyn with wide eyes, the figure of Geneviève swooning between his moist palms. "I'd love to!" he spluttered. He ducked and swung his backpack onto his back so forcefully it knocked him off balance briefly. He steadied himself, then descended into a mock chivalrous bow so deep, the backpack slid forward and he had to throw his arms out to catch himself on the floor. From this position he gurgled, "lead the way, madam!"

Over the course of the week, Carolyn and Henry spent many hours together, though never past six p.m., because the evening was Henry's "distress period." "I'm sort of a nervous nelly," he admitted to her before dropping a whole crêpe on his shirt. "So I need to be at home and sit in silence for a few hours." He peeled the crêpe off his chest like a leech. "You still want this?"

Their encounters were irreproachably innocent, and to a bystander, they would have appeared as work colleagues on a lunch break, or perhaps as friends on a backpacking trip, due to the massive backpack Henry lugged around at all times. Yet between them flickered a flame to which Carolyn tended with the emotionless calculation of a seasoned outdoorswoman. She soon became learned in the ways of flirtation and seduction, which turned out to be far easier than she'd expected. She succeeded in inducing Henry to buy things for her. On Wednesday, she pointed out a small ornament in the stall of a Christmas market vendor, which Henry eagerly offered to gift her. Rifling through his coin purse, however, he could only come up with half the cash. "And I don't carry cards because I have a hedonistic streak that I need to keep in check." He bought her a pack of matches instead.

Carolyn also managed to look the part of winsome lover. She wore makeup, put some effort into her hair, and learned her best angles. As she gazed out the window of the Café des

Deux Moulins on Thursday evening, the setting sun casting a lustrous golden light on her face, Henry leaned across the table and purred, "you see the dead pigeon, too. I'm so glad we have the same concerns about urban sanitation."

And finally, she mastered the subtle art of seductive texting. On Friday, Carolyn wrote "Rembrandt exhibit at petit palais?" She received the following reply:

"Good morning, Carolyn.

Thank you for contacting me. The meaning of your message is unclear. Are you asking if aforementioned exhibit takes place at the Petit Palais or elsewhere? Are you investigating which exhibit is currently on at the Petit Palais, and positing that it could be Rembrandt? Please respond with clarification.

If this entire message was sent mistakenly, I urge you to bring your phone to a specialist, who can show you how to properly lock your device, preventing future loss of time and money (it can cost up to \$1.20 to send text messages overseas). I will also call in 2 minutes to confirm your phone has not been stolen or hacked. If you are being held hostage, I will listen for heavy or shallow breathing, and will contact the authorities as the situation necessitates.

If, however, this message is to be read as an invitation to attend the Rembrandt exhibit at the Petit Palais with you, then I consider myself honored and flattered, and eagerly await your suggestion of time and place, as well as the opportunity to explain the importance of proper sentence structure to you.

In hopes of your swift reply,

Henry"

The next Monday, Carolyn walked whistling into the empty conference room and sat in a new seat altogether. She and Henry had plans to go to the Eiffel Tower that day, provided Henry could "firmly grasp your arm, in case vertigo sets in," which Carolyn viewed as a veiled attempt to hold her hand. She wasn't even bothered when Annie charged into the room more forcefully than usual, and clanged loudly into the seat next to Carolyn's, bringing a cloud of what smelled like sugared mango along with her. Carolyn steeled herself for the barrage of obscene tales from her weekend, but they were not forthcoming. Annie just sat with arms folded, her serpentine eyebrows downturned, her mouth crimped into a sullen pout.

The rest of the group entering was similarly downcast, and Carolyn wondered what had gotten into everyone. Maybe she was seeing the world through rose-tinted glasses for the first time, she thought smilingly to herself. She glanced at Henry, who himself wore a look of anguish, as he tried unsuccessfully to unroll his sleeves, which, under his large down jacket, had snuck up his cheese stick arms.

Bertrand entered and lowered himself into the chair at the head of the table. "So," he began innocuously. "What have we found out this week?" Carolyn now remembered: they were supposed to research Geneviève. She looked guiltily around the room, but all eyes were averted and no one spoke. Finally, Angélique blurted, "Well, you blew it! You tell us there's a feminist narrative here, but it's just the opposite. I should never," she added through gritted teeth, "trust men when they say they have women's best interests at heart!"

"She was a thief," chimed in BEE. "She was arrested a week after the knife incident for trying to lure a bishop up to a hotel room and make off with his miter." The other women grumbled their support.

"Now old Blaise is the knight in shining armor, and Geneviève is just another vampish bottom-feeder, pick-pocketing and getting midnight abortions . . ." began Angelique before she was cut short by a piercing whine. Annie, who had thus far merely lain in her chair as if dead, now sat bolt upright, a look of sorority-sanctioned violence in her eyes. All quickly looked away and slowly picked the conversation back up. Annie slumped back in her seat and mumbled to Carolyn: "I'm late."

"For what?"

"No, my period's late. I might be pregnant." She paused, then added, "again."

"Oh. Can I do anything?" asked Carolyn uncertainly.

"Yeah, you wanna reach up there and pull out the ball of multiplying cells from my uterus?"

"No thank you."

Annie sighed heavily. "If you could go back in time and tell me not to have drunk sex every night, that would help." She reached into the back of her pants, pulled out a small metal flask, and took a swig.

"So that's what's back there . . ."

"I'm not an alcoholic," Annie said preemptively. "It's antibiotics. I have a problem swallowing pills." She put her head in her hands, and her small shoulders sagged. "I can't believe this. When will I learn?" The misery in Annie's voice almost moved Carolyn to put a hand on her back. But she wasn't sure if the syphilis was still contagious, and so retracted it.

Angelique meanwhile was concluding her assault on Bertrand. ". . .she was just a con woman. This is all your fault!" she spat.

"This is not my fault," responded Bertrand nonchalantly.

"Yes, it is!" insisted Angelique. "You misled us into thinking this would be a feminist narrative! J'accuse!" She pointed a shaking finger at Bertrand.

"I did not mislead you. I merely suggested the possibility."

"You knew! Now that you've disarmed us, I suppose you think you can write whatever patriarchal bullshit you want! Well, not on our watch!" Angelique slammed a rallying fist on the table, but the women merely steadied their cups of water and remained silent.

Bertrand heaved himself out of his chair. "I do not know what you are talking about, Angelique. My only concern is the truthful documentation of this event." He reached for his cigarettes and lit one, the smell of smoke quickly filling the cramped room. "And now, I have a meeting with the publisher to discuss titles. I am thinking, *A Knife; a Strife; a Life—*

How One Man Lost His Nose but Not His Dignity: The Blaise Frick-Durant Story. Please continue working if you'd like." He slammed the door behind him, leaving a cold silence in the room. The only sounds to be heard were Henry's creaking footsteps as he walked to the overhead projector, discreetly removed the image of Geneviève, and pocketed it.

After the meeting, Carolyn and Henry made their way to the Eiffel Tower as planned. Henry chatted happily during the elevator ride about his plan to sell his portrait of Geneviève online, but Carolyn was silent. The door opened and they stepped out into the cold. They were the only people there on a frigid, overcast Monday morning. "Wow, look at that view!" said Henry, making his way to the sheet of cloud that almost completely obscured the city.

"Guess what," he called back to Carolyn, who followed him slowly. "I don't have vertigo!" He put his arm on her shoulder and smiled through the hole in his balaclava. "I think it helps that I'm with someone who's so grounded and down-to-Earth." Carolyn smiled meekly at him, but his eyes had closed and his jaw had dropped open. Carolyn thought perhaps the vertigo was having a delayed reaction, but realized after a moment that he was expecting her to lean in for a kiss.

"Listen, Henry. . ." she began, extricating herself. She glanced over the side of the tower. If he pushed her off in a fit of rage, she'd definitely be killed. Then again, she'd probably be able to pin his featherweight body to the ground before he did much damage. Inhaling deeply, she began: "I've been disingenuous with you. I'm not attracted to you romantically or otherwise. I just wanted to see if I could seduce you." Carolyn looked at her feet. "I guess I wanted to prove that I was a powerful woman and that I could be the master of my own destiny. It seems very stupid now. I'm sorry if I misled you." She shot a glance up at Henry, whose face bore no expression at all. After a moment, he turned and looked out over the clouds.

"Hooey," he said. "I really thought this would go differently."

"I know, and I'm so sorry I don't actually want to date you. You're sweet and you should be with a nice person . . ."

"You're right. I should be with my wife."

Carolyn turned slowly to face him. "Who?"

"My wife. Milla."

"I didn't know you had a wife."

"She's a neurobiologist at the university." Henry said miserably. "She's perfect. She used to model for Nivea. She speaks fluent Finnish. Everyone loves her, men especially. I wanted to prove to myself that I, you know. Had game, too." He ripped off a mitten and threw it angrily over the railing, but the wind blew it back in his face. "I've been a complete cad!" he howled. "She never even looks at other men, and here I am, pursuing a lady to make myself feel like a big shot!" He hung his head inside his balaclava, now a convenient symbol of his shame.

There being nothing left to say, they descended the tower in silence. Back on the ground, Carolyn turned to Henry.

"Nothing happened, so we can just put this behind us, right?"

Henry shook his head. "I'm going to tell Milla about it. She's forgiven worse. I once let a female sales associate help me look for jeans at Gap." With that, Henry turned and walked across the esplanade. From behind, the arch in his back caused by his backpack was not visible, and he appeared, for once, to be standing upright.

Carolyn herself turned the other way and headed back to campus. She wanted to go to her favorite café, where the servers didn't give you a look when you ordered three pastries. As she walked, Carolyn's nose picked up a saccharine odor, but it wasn't until she was body-slammed against a wall and Annie's face was within syphilis-transmittal distance, that Carolyn recognized it as bubble-gum.

"Guess what, bitch! I'm not pregnant!"

"Great."

"Turns out I'm not even fertile! Syphilis does that to you sometimes. So we're celebrating tonight! Annie tossed her head toward a slender French man standing behind her, looking bored. "You wanna come?! His name's Frère or Jacques or some shit. I bet he has friends."

Carolyn declined politely, and watched Annie drag the Frenchman down the street before turning toward the café, where she looked forward to, more than anything else thus far during her stay in Paris, sitting alone and eating as many pains au chocolat as she wanted.

Pastiche
by
Trash Clapton

I was a doctor. One day I was visiting a friend's lab to pick up some medicine when this guy wearing a deerstalker just abruptly walked up to me, magnifying glass tucked in his pocket. "Ah, so you're the very fellow who's looking for a roommate, eh? Obviously your name is Jack Duflack and you clearly fought in the Caribbean before turning into a professional sun tanner on the beach—am I wrong?" he said with a knowing wink.

"Yeah," I told him.

His face fell: "Oh."

"I'm not looking for a roommate," I said, "I have a wife. Who are you? And my name is John. John *Watson*, I fought in Afghanistan not the Caribbean—"

"Ah so obviously you're a man of great action. I think you might just be the perfect roommate for me."

"N—no. I'm not gonna be your roommate; are you listening?"

"Listen, there's this mansion out in the spooky countryside where they're being haunted by a dog."

We stood. "That's—I mean that's great, but I don't—"

"I think I'll be seeing you at 221B Baker Street pretty soon."

"Is anyone hearing this?" I looked at the two miserable 20-year-olds putting the same chemicals into a Bunsen burner over and over again.

"Listen, I'm loud, boring, and don't shave. Obviously you're a lonely dud who loves to write about crime; so hurry up! We'll make such a team!"

After explaining that as a professional doctor I didn't really have time to just do whatever at any moment's notice I launched out the door. "Ugh," I muttered.

The next day I was coming home from work when I saw my home engulfed in flames. "Oh no!" I screamed. I ran up to the conflagration and saw a letter from my wife, saying, "Dear John: I saw your note explaining that you had to burn our home because I'm not some genius who loves to deduce crime. I'm leaving you forever. Bye."

"Wha—wha—"

"Oh, Watson!" I turned; the deerstalker-guy was emerging from a streetcorner. "What a drag! Guess you'll have to go with me on my mysteries."

"What the fuck is this?!" I howled.

"Mm, an irrational temper I see. Surely you're better-suited for the sentimental whereas I will use deductive reasoning to come to my ingenious conclu—"

I socked him, fuming.

"Whoa whoa, Watty Watty Wat!" he said, rubbing his cheek.

"I'll call the police you fucker!"

"Well," he went bashful, "not like that would matter, I'm pretty much like this with the inspector. But hey, I hear there's an incident going on that you could maybe call 'The Case of the Speckled Band'. It's gonna be a lot of fun, I think we'll grab our Samsonites and just head off!"

I stalked away in a huff.

"Where you going?" he called.

"Stay away from me!!"

Later that night after holing up in my office trying to figure out where I could telegraph my wife, I heard a knock at the door and answered it. The deerstalker-guy waltzed in with a newspaper that had two holes cut in it, but he knocked down several vases and document-boxes. "Watson," he whispered, "it's me, I'm in disguise."

"What the fuck are you doing in my—"

"Watson, listen! There's a guy offering employment to gingers in London! We can't have them in the workforce, we gotta stop it!"

"I'm giving you two seconds to—"

"Whoa," said the guy, throwing the paper down to roll his eyes at me, "didn't know this was 'The Case of the Total Dick'. Maybe come back when you have a better attitude." And then he just left.

"Fuck me," I muttered, returning to my address book to find where I could possibly contact my darling wife.

The next morning having slept under my desk I heard another knock at the door and my assistant came in.

"People are wondering why you did this," he said, throwing a magazine onto the table.

It was open to a piece under my name, called "The Adventure of the Man Who Saved Me From My Boring Wife". The opening went:

Being a doctor who's always asleep and constantly dreaming of crime I knew the only way to purge myself of this bent was by going on awesome adventures with some great detective. After ditching my wife and giving her a one-stop ticket to Goodbyesville I packed my bags and shackled up with Mr. Sherlock Holmes. "Locky," I said over the margarita mixer. "We gotta fix this drainage in the outdoor swimming pool."

"I deduce," said the brilliant man who had fetched me from nothing, "that it's time for a dip in the tub."

I was so enraged that I just fainted.

Upon waking up I was lying on a couch in someone's apartment.

"Ah, you're awake!" said the man who had to be Sherlock Holmes as he popped out of the kitchen.

"Where the fuck am I?!"

"Listen, you've had a bad case of the blues. But I'm here to fix it." He held up a beehive. "This is gonna cheer you up. Drink this."

After the beestings I couldn't really see and then the terrifying maniac who had ruined my life put a hand on my arm and said, "You know that fucking terrible novella by, I think it's Harlan Ellison, where like this dead writer uses his last will and testament to force his friend-slash-rival to be his literary executor? It's kinda like this."

"Who is 'Harlan Ellison'?? What are you talking about?? What is—"

"Oh right, I sometimes forget what time period I'm in. Listen, regardless of the era I inhabit one of you humans is going to write my canon, and it might as well be you. So get started champ."

Giving me a t-shirt that said "I Got Hounded By The Baskervilles And All I Got Were These Lousy Bees", he left and I, defeated, heartbroken, and alone, picked up the conveniently-placed quill and parchment, and with a sigh began to scrawl.

(From the papers of John H. Watson, former M.D.)

I love going on adventures with Sherlock Holmes. He does not call me the "Little Lock That Can't" and laugh whenever the shaving cream I use has been switched for boiling water. He doesn't warn me to watch my language before saying, "I can't believe you're talking like this in front of the kids!" and gesturing to two miserable 20-year-olds. He doesn't thwart my every attempt to locate my long-lost wife and he definitely doesn't play his viol in harmony with my weeps. He does not say, "Ah good work, Watson, now let's try testing the ability of human touch" before shutting the lights off and activating "The Pit of Eels". He is the greatest. He is Sherlock Holmes.

And I'm nothing.

In Defense of the Parpy Tree Trunk
by
Melissa Lux

An average dude with saxophone
can make a whole room swoon,
sadly this is not the case
for same dude with bassoon.

A burpy, wooden periscope
the orchestra it tops,
play it loud and long and proud
you will be asked to stop.

The voice of quirk and um-pah-pah
but there's a truth untold
of slender maple melodies
and the stories they unfold

You'll broadcast human sacrifice
to usher in the spring,
then thumb your nose at Stalin
and set fire to bird's wing.

And when the concert's over
and you hear the people say,
your big old oboe sounds real nice,
just smile and walk away.

It's a different kind of sexy
one you musn't disregard,
Just try the tree you'll see
It's nine feet long and always hard.

The Writers Conference
by
Kathleen Naureckas

The bearded man bent embarrassingly close to read the nametag pinned to the bosom of her dress. It went against her nature to tell her name to the world—*how public, like a frog*—but she had learned on the first day of the Connecticut Valley Writers Conference, when she didn't wear it, that the nametag answered at least one unwanted question. When people asked "Who are you?" and she said "Nobody," they took up a lot of time explaining that she really was somebody and shouldn't be so lacking in confidence. A writer needs confidence above all, they said.

"Emily Dickinson," the bearded man said now, nodding approvingly. His own nametag read "Nathan Zuckerman." "Good name. Easy to pronounce. It'll look good in print."

Zuckerman tipped his Stella Artois to his lips, drank, and looked down at her again. "What are you in? Fiction or poetry?" he asked.

"Poetry," Emily said, almost inaudibly.

Zuckerman gave her a pitying look. "I write fiction myself. Just finished my second novel. I'm trying to connect with an agent. No luck yet, but I've gotten some good rejections. I feel like I'm getting close." He drank more beer. "You publish anything?"

She looked away, wishing they would all move off the porch and on into dinner, or that the floorboards would open up and swallow either her or Nathan Zuckerman.

"I said, you publish anything?" he repeated, a little louder.

Emily looked back at him and then at the floor, which remained stubbornly solid. "No," she whispered.

Another pitying look from Zuckerman. "Got an agent?" he asked.

Emily did not reply.

"Hey! Didn't I see you wearing the same dress yesterday? I'm sure I saw you in a white dress just like it. You one of the people who lost their luggage?"

He stared at her for such a long time that Emily eventually answered "No" in a choked voice.

"You just like white then," he said, smiling over Emily's shoulder at a young woman intern who, unfortunately for Zuckerman, was deep in conversation with a male faculty member. Every intern there—they were all women, and a remarkably attractive group—was deep in conversation with a male faculty member. Zuckerman looked back at Emily, who wasn't bad-looking, just a little pale and a little old for him. Zuckerman was a robust 68. He'd been a jogger and a vegetarian ever since his quadruple bypass. And Emily was also a little weird.

"White must be cool in this weather," he said. He drained his beer and looked around for another.

Emily didn't answer. She felt almost faint with hunger and heat. It was a stifling July evening and her long white dress wasn't cool at all. She wished she could have worn a tank top and shorts, like the interns. But that would have been as much against her nature as signing up for a writers conference in the first place.

@ChefNipsNips
by
Randal Eldon Greene

(^_^) Hey YouTube! Guess what today is? It's murumple day!

(◡‿◡) Sweet. I love murumples.

(^_^) We'll be making them with *Turtle Surprise sprinkles!* Toss me the sprinkles. Oh. My. God. Aren't they so cute?

(◡‿◡) Ha ha. Some look like little penises. Like little weenie penises.

(^_^) Weenies *are* penises.

(◡‿◡) Eenie weenies.

(^_^) Weenies! Weenies!

(◡‿◡) Penises.

(^_^) Ha ha! Weenie penises.

(◡‿◡) Oh, man.

(^_^) Back to the murumple.

(◡‿◡) Murumple day. Woot.

(^_^) But first, don't forget to like and subscribe. Okay, so to start what you want to do is take some milp—like a whole one pound bag. Dump it into a cermenitated bowl. You'll want cermenitated because we'll be making this murumple in a platinko-mot. Now you want to add about a cup of dry flabdoor. Just sort of whisk it gently around until your mixture turns a sort of cinnamon brown. Next you'll add three cups of canola oil and just a fourth cup of markenook. Stir it all in and then let it stand for about five minutes until it rotitates completely, which you'll know if it's rotitated because when you tap it you'll get no smoog back whatsoever.

While we wait for this to rotitate, let me tell you about our undergarment club. We've got all kinds of undergarments. Join the club and you'll get a new undergarment piece every month. We got Chef Nip's Nips branded stuff like bras and jockstraps. Something new every month. Like it could be anything. Corsets, adult diapers, concealed weapons. Anything. Absolutely anything you would wear under your clothes. I don't . . . I don't even know who picks out this stuff. Do you?

(◡‿◡) I don't—

(^_^) Because you're the producer, so maybe—

(◡‿◡) It's not . . . ask Steve.

(^ㄿ^) You know maybe . . . I thought you would know.

(ㄿㄿ) Yeah, no clue.

(^ㄿ^) All right. Let's see how our murumple in the making is going. Oh, it's really, *really* rotitated. Just watch me tap that. Oh yeah.

(ㄿㄿ) Yeah, tap it.

(^ㄿ^) Tap. Tap. Tap.

(ㄿㄿ) That's sexy.

(^ㄿ^) Fuck yeah, let me tap that.

(ㄿㄿ) Tap it harder.

(^ㄿ^) See, no smoog.

(ㄿㄿ) No. No smoog. Not a bit of smoog in that baby.

(^ㄿ^) Now what you'll want to do is take a syringe and add an anaperfontent solution to it. I pre-prepared my solution, and I suggest you do the same. In mine there's squinch, moodle, cinnamon, and barton-G. Of course, you could also add hopner or bedezzelum, or use nintspoop instead of cinnamon. But I like things simple. We'll be making a future episode on anaperfontents, so don't forget to click the little bell to get notifications. Our anaperfontent episode is one you're not gonna want to miss.

(ㄿㄿ) For today though you can google about any anaperfontent solution and use it.

(^ㄿ^) Yeah, although I don't think I'd use an indento-based anaperfontent. Too anky.

(ㄿㄿ) Oh yeah, way too anky for a murumple.

(^ㄿ^) Inject your syringe right in the top like that. While you wait, you'll have just enough time to sign up for the Chef Nip's Nips cooking class. A link to the class is in the description below. I'll teach you to make rendecks, pistonos, cupcakes, and more. So, so much more. It costs like 197. Right?

(ㄿㄿ) Right.

(^ㄿ^) And for the rest of the month, sign up with the promo code nipsnipsclamps58008 and you'll get a free digital copy of my best-selling book *Nip's Nips Bites*, where I give you the recipes you need to feed the inner-fat kid in you or the fat kid you are in real life, which is okay. I mean, I love fat kids. I'm skinny myself, but I identify *as* a fat kid. I was born to be a fat kid, not a skinny kid. But sign up and you'll get the book.

Okay, now for the most important part in my opinion. It's what makes a murumple a murumple and not like an inferior dorth-flump or a soggy smooomp. We're going to drape this baby with . . . Can I get a drum roll?

(◡ ◡) Drum's rolling.

(^ ㄨ ^) Fimpers!

(◡ ◡) It's all about the Fimpers.

(^ ㄨ ^) Fimpers! Fimpers! Draping on the fimpers! Woohoo!

(◡ ◡) Making my mouth water.

(^ ㄨ ^) You want some very light brown ones. They shouldn't be chalky. Your fimpers are ideally a quarter inch thick. Too thin and your murumple won't be moist. Too thick and your murumple won't get done all the way. Fimpers are where a lot of people mess up on an otherwise good murumple. That's why . . . It's like I said: Fimpers make the murumple.

Just lay them on there like that, and if you haven't already, don't forget to hit that like and subscribe button. See? Real simple. Lay them nice and flat. No wrinkles.

(◡ ◡) That's beautiful.

(^ ㄨ ^) Once you've got them all on there, set your platinko-mot to Delta-66. What's the European mot conversion?

(◡ ◡) I think it's, uh, m-45.

(^ ㄨ ^) Well, if you're in Europe, you'll want to convert Delta-66 to the European mot equivalent.

(◡ ◡) Yeah, you don't want to burn your murumple.

(^ ㄨ ^) Oh, for sure. Burnt murumple—gross!

(◡ ◡) Bleck.

(^ ㄨ ^) Again, make sure you're using a cermenitated bowl, and then set your murumple on the wire warckles. Bolt the door. Hit the vacuater button to start motting the air in the platinko-mot with super smarks. If you don't do that . . . I mean, it's really the point of a platinko-mot.

(◡ ◡) You know, I once was trying to surprise my wife by making a snarpplle, and I forgot to hit the vacuater on my platinko-mot.

(^ ㄨ ^) Oh my God, how'd that turn out?

(◡ ◡) My snarpplle tasted more like a darn-dill.

(^ ㄨ ^) Yeah, it probably would, wouldn't it?

(◡ ◡) But like a gross and grainy one. Like a darn-dill full of sandy . . . full of chunks of sandiness.

(^_^) Eww. Gross.

(ಠ_ಠ) Totally.

(^_^) Which is why you want to hit that vacuater, but not before you BOLT. THAT. DOOR. Or you might die.

Okay, set your timer for forty-five minutes. While that's cooking, I want to tell you that today's episode of Chef Nip's Nips is brought to you by Galaxicon-nom-nom, the only cookies packed with a galaxy of flavor. You can taste all of the stars and all of the interstellar dust and gas and stuff. Using the latest in interstellar scent capture technology, Galaxicon-nom-nom has captured the scent of the Milky Way—not the candy bar, but like the *actual* Milky Way Galaxy that we're a part of and . . . and they've packed it in a cookie. You're like tasting aliens and shit. It's really fucked up, but really good too.

(ಠ_ಠ) It tastes like my wife.

(^_^) Wha . . . What's that?

(ಠ_ಠ) It tastes like pumpkin seeds. Like the one I had tasted exactly like oven-roasted pumpkin seeds.

(^_^) Maybe your taste buds are broken. I mean, it's got every conceivable flavor.

(ಠ_ಠ) Maybe pumpkin seeds taste like everything.

(^_^) Oh, I didn't think of that.

Galaxicon-nom-nom, worlds of flavor packed in a cookie. Go to Galaxicon-nom-nom.cookie/NipsNipsTwists to sign up for their cookie club and get a free box of limited edition Near Neighbor-flavored cookies, packed full of the intergalactic flavors of the Andromeda Galaxy.

(ಠ_ಠ) All right. You think that murumple's done?

(^_^) Let's go take a look because it's murumple day!

(ಠ_ಠ) Murumples in the house.

(^_^) Oh, look at that; a beautiful golden brown exterior.

(ಠ_ಠ) Simply gorgeous.

(^_^) Now to decorate it. We're going to be using plastic whipners to frost this baby. For frosting, I've got a homemade holicimo recipe that we covered in a previous video. Link in the description.

All right, just slowly move your whipner in a downward motion like that. This whipner here is available at the online store. You can find all kinds of cooking stuff endorsed by me, Chef Nip, at the Chef Nip's Nips store in the link below. We've got whipners, aprons, pans, rolling pins, digles, and all sorts of crap. Crap you need to be a fully prepared chef.

Almost done frosting the murumple.

(◡‿◡) Couldn't you also use a knife instead of a whipner?

(^_^) I suppose.

(◡‿◡) Or a spatula?

(^_^) Yeah. Anyway, it's time to sprinkle the murumple.

(◡‿◡) Sprinkle time.

(^_^) Heck . . . Heck yeah. Going to take our Turtle Surprise sprinkles and just sprinkle the shit out of it.

(◡‿◡) It's like little turtles and little penis turtles.

(^_^) It's penis turtle time! You can use whatever kind of sprinkles you want. Magical Unicorn sprinkles, Ancient Alchemy sprinkles, little human-shaped sprinkles. Penis ones. Whatever. Everyone knows that they're just decorative. Sprinkles are probably the most flavorless candies in the world.

(◡‿◡) The absolute worst.

(^_^) Yeah, they suck. You don't even really need them. It just kind of, you know, makes your murumple look better.

(◡‿◡) They're purely aesthetic.

(^_^) And that's why you don't normally see a murumple without sprinkles. It'd be just kind of bland for the eyes. Monotone color or whatever.

(◡‿◡) So it makes sprinkles a kind of eye candy.

(^_^) Yeah, you can think of it as eye candy.

(◡‿◡) Not tongue candy.

(^_^) No 'cause it's like nearly flavorless really. Speaking of flavor, it's time to dig in. Mmm, so good. That is . . . that is such a good murumple.

(◡‿◡) Here, let me. Yum, yeah that is.

(^_^) It's good.

(◡‿◡) Yeah, that's good.

(^_^) I hope you enjoyed making a murumple with us today. Don't forget to subscribe and smash that like button. Find me @ChefNipsNips on like all the social media platforms. See ya next time, Niplings!

Two Poems
by
Vince Reighard

Caricature Artists and Primal Fear

I had my caricature drawn at the theme park once
and the artist—sixteen, seventeen, maybe—
hands me back this sketch of Charlie Brown.

I look it over a moment, think ". . . *the fuck . . . ?*"
and eventually say: "*Really?* Even the yellow shirt
with the black squiggly line? Look at my shirt:

my shirt is red." And he gives me this blank,
underpaid teenager look, and says, "I just draw it
like I see it, man" before blowing this tremendous

pink bubble with his gum, and just before I can
jab my finger forward to *pop* it, he gives it a
crack! that resounds like a shotgun blast over

a snow-covered clearing.

— Okay, that didn't happen,

but I dreamt it;
okay, I didn't dream it, but I should have,
if our dreams are really as telling as we believe,

and they don't come down to the same old tropes:
hair falling out by the fistful, crumbling teeth, or
walking down the hallway stark-buck naked. I'm sick

of these tepid rehashings of primal fears. Come on,
subconscious, you can do better; give me, as the
New York Times said of a recent film,

". . . a nuanced exploration of existential terror."

Myers & Briggs

"I think you may be anti-social, Vincent," says Mrs. Baga, my third grade teacher, with touching concern.

"How come?" I ask, looking up at her with big child's eyes.

"Well," she began, "under 'what is your dream job?' you wrote: 'reading all day in an isolated cabin.'"

Teeth, Hair & Eyes, LLC
by
Myna Chang

Two Miles East of the Ogee River Bridge

Pearl Gleeson squinted into the sunset and mashed the gas pedal to the floor. The glare should have been blinding, but with her cataracts, it was only a mild discomfort. In fact, this was the best she'd seen in years—almost as if the setting sun had enhanced her eyesight.

"I've got Superman vision," she cackled as her engine roared. "And no one steals Superman's cream whipper, bitch."

One Mile West of the Ogee River Bridge

Tod had been driving for hours, but his attention was focused on adhesion. He needed a way to attach the new antennae to Jenny's head. Would bubble gum work? Rubber cement had better staying power, but was hell to remove without taking clumps of hair with it. Superglue was right out. Jenny had yelled at him for a solid hour last time.

A *ding* signaled a new voicemail. Tod reached into the center console to retrieve the phone, but a lawless mound of travel junk blocked him. He shoved aside the top layer of discarded food wrappers, tossed a roll of purple duct tape, and knocked a couple of rubber noses into the passenger seat. The *ding ding* continued its taunt from the bottom of the heap. He groped deeper. Finally, his fingers curled around the mobile and he yanked it out.

"Ha! No, that's a dinosaur tooth." He tossed the plastic incisor onto the seat with the noses and slowed the van, using a knee to manage the steering wheel, so he could shove both hands into the mass of costume paraphernalia.

"Hey! My superhero hat." The bright red baseball cap was twisted inside-out. Tod snapped it into shape and pulled it on, not noticing that a quilted shark fin had accidentally velcroed itself to the top.

Another *ding* pulled him back to the search. A few tater tots tried to interfere, so he threw them out the window, except for one persistent tot that stuck to his hand. He ate it, then the van bounced over a pothole and the phone slid into view. Rogue googly eyes clung to a blob of putty on the back, but the front screen was mostly clean. Tod grabbed it and hit the message retrieval key.

His assistant's recorded voice shrilled from the tiny speaker. Googly pupils vibrated as she delivered the devastating news: Jenny had superglued her resignation letter to the office door. Worse, it was too late to find someone to replace her.

Tod's heart plummeted. With no one to model his make-up prosthetics, he'd never be able to impress the industry big-shots. His dying career flashed before his eyes.

"This can't be happening." He jabbed at the phone pad until he found Jenny's number. He'd tell her about his bubble gum idea, and how it would leave all her remaining hair intact. Surely she'd see reason.

The ear-piercing "no signal" screech jolted him out of his internal monologue. Then he noticed his surroundings: a deserted country road with nothing but scrub brush in sight. No wonder his phone had screamed at him.

"Where the hell am I?"

He pulled the van off the blacktop next to a little bridge. A highway sign, rusted on one side and crumpled on the other, announced the "Og Riv." A dry streambed snaked through rocky, desolate terrain toward the vast horizon. Tod wondered if the missing letters might spell Ogre; he had a spare set of silicon ogre lips in the back of the van. He sighed and slumped in his seat.

Under the Ogee River Bridge

Merle's police cruiser came equipped with a crappy stereo. He couldn't even tune in a decent radio signal. Sifting through static, he finally landed on an oldies station. Not his favorite, but on such a tediously quiet day, *any* music was a welcome gift from the gods; almost as welcome as the shoebox full of marijuana he'd confiscated the previous week.

He sucked hard, drawing the smoke in deep. A hippie song about Hollywood movies crackled through the speakers. Perfect. He eased his seat back and savored the scene playing on the back of his eyelids. Of course, he was the star of this imaginary movie, and in it, he had a full head of wavy hair.

He preened on the red carpet with a beautiful starlet. Flash bulbs glinted off the shiny gold statuette clutched in his hand. Fans cheered as his magnificent locks fluttered in the cinematic breeze. Then the radio hippie broke in with a bizarre line about a leaping gnome. That really fucked with Merle's narrative. Lawn ornaments in pointy hats bounced through the fantasy, scattering his paparazzi like bowling pins.

Merle scowled and flicked away the last nub of the joint, then panicked when he remembered he was in his county sheriff's car. "Damn, damn, damn." The glowing orange ember had landed between his feet. He lunged for it, but misjudged the distance and bashed his forehead on the steering wheel. A loud blare from the car horn ripped through the monotonous landscape, followed by a startled chitter as a fat marmot bolted out of its den. Merle cursed again, groping for the cinder. He extinguished it with his index finger, but the plastic floormat had already gone sticky, preserving his fingerprint perfectly.

Merle sighed. A last wisp of smoke curled around his bald head.

On the Ogee River Bridge

Tod walked to the middle of the bridge, holding his phone up to the darkening sky. No signal. He'd been so distracted by his bubblegum vs. superglue conundrum, he'd taken a wrong turn somewhere. Now he was lost, alone in the boondocks with no cell service. There wasn't any other traffic. No buildings, no people, nothing.

A discordant brass peal shattered the silence. Tod jerked, pulse hammering as he spun, wide-eyed, but the source of the noise remained hidden. He saw only tumbleweeds. Wait.

Was something peering at him, orange orbs glimmering in the shadows? He'd heard stories about country road devils. Cold fear chased up his spine. He sprinted back to the van.

One step shy of safety, a small, furry beast darted across the blacktop. It ran right over his foot, needle-claws gouging his sneakers. Tod screamed and yanked the door handle, but the adrenaline-fueled outburst made him clumsy and his sweaty hand slipped. Off balance, he tumbled backward and sprawled into the roadside gravel, sending up a puff of dust. Aggressive skittering sounds spewed from under the van, scant inches from Tod's face. He screeched again, scrambling to escape.

A roar erupted beneath the bridge, throwing surreal echoes through the guardrail. A storybook troll rose in his memory, the childhood nightmare igniting full-on panic mode. The Og Riv sign towered above him, but now he recognized it for the lie it was. Of course this wasn't an ogre's river; that would be ridiculous. Everyone knew it was trolls that lived under bridges.

Caught between a bellowing troll and the angry road devil, Tod squeaked and pawed at the treacherous van door.

Merle drove out of the dry riverbed. His back tires slipped on the incline, but he gunned the engine and lurched onto the pavement. Something was kicking up a cloud of dirt on the other side of the road.

Merle blinked and shook his head. It looked like a creature in a pointy hat was trying to climb into a big ugly van. "Is that a gnome?"

He watched to see if the scene would fade away, but the asphalt antics continued. Convinced this wasn't a music-induced hallucination, he threw the car into park and got out. A surprise head rush washed over him, but it passed, so he proceeded toward what he hoped was not a gnome-mobile.

Nearing the creature, he realized it was a normal-looking human male, wallowing in the ditch beside a beat-up brown cargo van. Merle scratched his head, studying the guy. Mid-twenties, wearing a t-shirt that said *MovieCon!* His red baseball cap had an odd triangular doohickey stuck on top, but he seemed harmless.

"Son, what are you doing down there?"

The young man stared at him, mouth agape. "Were you under the bridge?"

Merle glanced at his still-smoky car. "Uh, yeah."

"Why? Who are you?"

"I'm Merle. Um, Sheriff Ortree." Merle brushed a few ashes off his uniform, noticing a small hole burned into his trousers.

"Oh, thank god, you're not a troll. And you're a cop! Look, I'm lost, and a wild animal attacked me."

"What kind of animal? Did you run over it?"

"No. It just charged at me and . . . it's under my van."

"Probably a marmot."

"I think it's a road devil."

"Uh huh." Merle rubbed at his temple again, then realized he was smearing pot ashes and melted floormat plastic on his naked scalp. "Where're you headed?"

"Vegas. Movie convention."

Merle laughed. "Las Vegas? Son, you really are lost. This is Idaho."

Two Miles East of the Ogee River Bridge

Pearl didn't think she'd ever driven this fast. Her toes were going numb from pressing the accelerator with such force. By her reckoning, she should have already made it to town. Where was the donut shop? The gas station? She was afraid to take her eyes off the road, but she needed to figure out where the town had gone. Gripping the steering wheel hard, she prepared herself, then glanced out the side window.

"What the hell?" The scrub was standing still and the patch of bindweed in the ditch by her farmhouse hadn't moved an inch. Something was wrong. "Frazzlin' car."

She leaned sideways to get a look at her feet. The floor was cast in shadow. Without the blazing sunset to blast through her milky corneas, she couldn't tell what was going on down there. She thrust her hand into the dark depths and discovered her foot was not where she thought it was.

"Damn it. That's the brake."

She shifted her alignment, then romped on the gas and took off like a bolt of riled-up lightning.

"Yeah, that's right!" she cackled again. "I can see *and* I can drive. And I'm coming for you, Claudine!"

Back at the Bridge

"So, what do you have in the van?"

"Hair."

"Rabbits?"

"No! Hair, not hares."

"Huh?"

"Wigs and beards, for costumes."

"You've got a van full of fake hair?"

Tod nodded. "I create special effects, makeup and stuff. You know, for movies. I have a booth at the convention, but my model quit and . . ." The kid looked at the fading sun. "I'll never make it in time."

"Movies. And fake hair." Merle read the logo on the side of the van: *Teeth, Hair & Eyes, LLC*. "How 'bout that."

An approaching car interrupted the conversation. It rolled at a snail's pace.

Merle groaned and strode toward the crawling vehicle. "Pearl Gleeson, I know for a fact you're not supposed to drive until you get your cataracts fixed."

Pearl cranked down her window and glared out at Merle. The car maintained its momentum. "I can see just fine, Merle. I got Superman vision."

"Uh huh." The sticky spot on Merle's head itched, but he resisted the urge to scratch it. He took a half-step to match her pace. "Why are you going so slow?"

"My gas-foot's tired."

"Did she say she has x-ray vision?" Tod interrupted. Pearl's car was inching past the hair van.

"You know I can hear you, right?" Pearl yelled. "And how come you're wearing a gnome hat?"

The *scritch scritch* of tiny claws on asphalt stole Tod's attention. The marmot belted out a threatening warble and scampered from under the van. Tod screamed and leapt away from the little road devil—landing on the hood of Pearl's idling Cadillac.

Pearl jerked at the thump of impact, then her super-vision sputtered out. Tod's flailing body blocked her light. "Get the hell off my car, you stupid gnome!"

"Better stop now, Pearl," Merle said. He took a jog-step to keep up.

"Can't. I'm in a hurry. That damned Claudine stole my new cream whipper, and I want it back."

"That newfangled thing with the nitrous cartridge?" His feet shuffled forward. "I'm pretty sure you left that at the church supper last week, Pearl."

"I did not! Oh, wait. Maybe I did. Well, hell, now I don't have anything to do this evening."

"Me either," Merle said.

Tod's fingers gripped a windshield wiper and he wheezed. "You know your names rhyme?"

Pearl huffed and stomped on the brake, but the Cadillac continued its inexorable journey. "Damn." She hunched over to check the position of her feet again. "Brake pedal keeps moving around. Hold still, you little bastard!"

The car rocked to a stop. Tod toppled sideways, banging his head and knocking his cap askew. He sucked in a shaky breath, staring at Pearl and Merle. "I gotta get back to reality. It's too weird out here in the sticks."

"Uh huh," Merle agreed, eyeing Pearl.

"Don't you look at me like that, Merle Ortree. I know you've been hiding under the bridge smoking pot again."

"Now see here, Pearl—" Merle began.

At the same moment Tod said, "Is that what's smeared on your head?"

Merle scrubbed at the floormat-infused ashes that still clung to his shiny pate. "No!"

"He sneaks out here to get stoned all the time," Pearl said to Tod.

Tod studied Merle. "Your skull is almost perfectly round, with no hair at all."

Pearl nodded.

"There's no need to be rude," Merle growled.

"Your head would be great for modeling one of my new hair prosthetics."

Merle's eyes lit up. He turned to Pearl. "This guy's in the movie business."

"I've always wanted to be in a movie," Pearl said.

"A Hollywood starlet?" Merle guessed.

"A superhero, with x-ray vision?" Tod asked.

"No! A giant monster, with bat wings. And maybe an axe for a head."

"Uh huh," Merle nodded.

Tod slid off the Cadillac. "You're hired."

"What?"

"Both of you. Come to Vegas with me and be my models this weekend."

"Can you give me movie star hair?" Merle asked.

"Sexy hair, marmot fangs, whatever you want. Just get me to that convention hall in time to set up."

Pearl shut off her car. "I call shotgun." She marched to the van and climbed in. "Merle, you got any weed for the road?"

"Uh huh."

Our natural defenses
by
M. Desmond Dahm

Turning from the window, Gerald made as if to sneeze.
"Who's allergies are these?" Ava snapped,
repenting only her apostrophe.

Was it an allergy? If so,
he wasn't sure
precisely
what he was allergic to,
but was perfectly aware
of what annoyed his wife.

He thanked the doctor
and paid his bill in full.

It wasn't exactly
a catastrophe,
or so he thought,
though he had a feeling that it ought to be.

He took a night job.

When his wife left the house
he came in.
When she came back
he went out
and never sneezed again.

Softboy Ray
by
Ben Fitts

A punk with a safety through his nose shoved his way to the front of the crowd, snatched Gilbert's mandolin from his fingers and snapped it over his knee. The rest of us stopped short in the middle of the song we were playing and gaped, the open strings of my Rickenbacker still ringing out.

The punk tossed the remaining halves of the mandolin at Gilbert's feet. Gilbert looked down at the remains of his brand new instrument, his lip trembling as tears swelled behind his thick glasses.

"You guys suck," sneered the punk. The rest of the crowd laughed, seeming to agree with him. "Get out of here with that Neutral Milk Hotel wannabe shit."

"Hey man, some of us like that stuff," said Dylan from behind his accordion. Some chick with purple hair beamed him in the face with a half-empty can of PBR. The can *thunked* against his forehead and the cheap beer spilled over the bellows of the accordion.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Dylan shouted as tried to dry the instrument with the sleeve of his sweater. The crowd howled.

I unplugged my Rickenbacker and stuffed it into its case before anyone could do anything to damage it too. I unplugged my little Fender amp too and hoisted it in one hand, the guitar case in the other, and led my bandmates off the Vegan Slaughterhouse's little stage. They trailed behind me, Gilbert with his shattered mandolin and Dylan with his soggy accordion. Gilbert had had high hopes

Everyone cheered as we left the stage. A guy with a pompadour and a Cramps t-shirt spat a loogie at Gilbert. In splat squarely on the left lens of his glasses. Gilbert grimaced, but just kept scurrying towards the door.

"Get a goddamn drummer!" the guy with the pompadour shouted after us as we exited the local venue and bar.

A heavy silence hung over the three of us as we filed into Dylan's Prius after loading what remained of our gear into the trunk. We sat there for a while, but eventually Gilbert broke the silence.

"I thought this gig would be different, but that same exact thing happens every single time we play. That's like the fifth mandolin I've had to buy this month."

I shrugged. "I think we've had worse luck at some of our other shows. We finished two whole songs and nearly got through a third before they broke our stuff."

"That did go way better than *last* time," Dylan added from the driver's seat.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing right now. Are you guys really just accepting this? Things should be better than this!" he exclaimed while wiping the loogie off his glasses with the pages of a *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novel he found laying on the backseat.

"Gross, dude! Don't do that!" chided Dylan.

"I have some psychobilly dude's spit on my face. You can get some on your comic."

Dylan grumbled, but dropped the issue and started the car. The Fruit Bats song "From A Soon-to-Be Ghost Town" sprung to life from the car stereo and he backed out of the venue, turned onto the road and left the Vegan Slaughterhouse behind us. I caught Gilbert staring at the venue forlornly at the venue as it melted away into the distance.

"The scene out here is so punk. It would be like a wet dream for those kids in my high school who would pass joints in the parking lot instead of going to math class, but there's no room for us out here. There aren't any other softboys," he whined.

"You're just realizing that now?"

"I said I thought this place would be different!" Gilbert exclaimed. "It had Vegan in the goddamn name, with an ironic usage and everything. You think they'd be about an indie folk band like us there."

"A lot of punks are vegan too," Dylan pointed out.

"Well, obviously it didn't work out! I just so sick of this bullshit."

"You're thinking of giving up the band? Make this the end of Swamp Puppet?" I asked. I honestly wasn't opposed to that idea. Like I said, that had been our best show so far. That was a pretty disheartening thought.

Gilbert shook his head. "I'm not going to let those meatheads win. Being in Swamp Puppet is my first chance at being cool. They're not going to just take that away from me."

I snorted to hear him call that assorted group of misfits and outcasts meatheads, but to Gilbert they probably were. Kids like that may have spent high school being terrorized by the jocks and good old boys who would grow up to become mechanics and cops, but in turn those kids spent that time terrorizing science dorks like Gilbert. There was a pecking order in life and Gilbert was at the dead bottom of it, even if we were all adults now.

"So what are you going to do about it?" I asked him.

Gilbert just stared out the window at the downtown rolling away in the night. "I don't know," he said at last. "But I'll think of something."

I didn't think he really would, which is why I was surprised when he texted me a few days later to tell me that he had already booked us another gig.

I paused the sitcom I was streaming and called him from my living room couch.

"What's up, dude? Did you see my text about the show?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm calling."

"Aw shit, can you not make it?"

"No, I'm free that Saturday. It's not that," I answered, surprised that that's where his mind went. I'm free most Saturdays, something I thought Gilbert knew about me. "It's just that I'm not sure this is such a great idea."

"No, no, it is. I'm working on something. It's going to change everything."

I sighed. "Gilbert, the people here don't like our kind of music. It doesn't matter how well he play it, there's no scene for us out here. I thought you finally realized that at the Vegan Slaughterhouse."

"Yeah I did. That's why I said I'm working on something during my free time at the lab. The people here are finally going to dig what we do."

"What, are you writing songs that are punkier? I guess if we did a Billy Bragg thing, people might like it."

Gilbert snorted. "Fuck, no. I'm not going to sell out and play the kind of music people want to here. You'll see what I'm talking about at the show."

"You don't want to rehearse it first?"

"No need," he said and hung up.

I didn't see Gilbert again until the night of the show, a couple of weeks later. We texted every now and then during that time, but we didn't hangout or have band practice once. Gilbert just kept replying that he was too busy working at the lab.

Dylan and I drove together to the gig, this one a house show. Usually we all went and left together as a group, but Gilbert said he was coming straight from work and would meet us there.

"I'm not the only one who thinks Gilbert's been kinda weird recently, right?" I asked Dylan on the drive over, lowering the volume on his car stereo to be heard over an Elliott Smith song.

"You mean weirder than normal? Yeah, I guess. I kinda thought the show at the Vegan Slaughterhouse would be our last. You know, go out on a high note. Or at least a high note for us. But then he went and booked this other show at the Capriporn House? That's like the most hardcore house venue in town."

"Yeah that was weird, but that's not really what I was talking about," I said as we approached the house. "I mean like how come we haven't seen him for two weeks or practiced even once? I know he works hard sometimes, but never *that* hard."

Dylan shrugged and pulled into the empty parking spot outside the Capriporn House. We were running a little late and parked cars littered block. Punks in patch jackets and combat boots milled about on the porch and sneered at us as we passed them with our equipment. We clearly did not belong at a show like this.

"Oh fuck, are you guys playing this show? I hoping to mosh tonight," one of the punks said as we walked through the open front door.

"I'm sure we're not the only band tonight," I called behind me apologetically.

"There you guys are!" shouted Gilbert as he saw us enter. "We're about to go on."

He was against the far wall of the house's disheveled living room in a spot cleared away for the bands to play. He was tuning a brand new mandolin in front of a drum kit that must have belonged to one of the other bands. As he tuned, he kept glancing at a bulky object beside him obscured by a white sheet.

I mumbled an apology and edged my way through the crowd of scary looking crusties who frequent the Capriorn House and set my amplifier down beside Gilbert in the cramped performance space. I plugged it in and tuned my Rickenbacker as Dylan got his accordion out.

"You guys ready?" Gilbert asked a minute. Without even waiting for a response, he began strumming the opening chords to our song that we open all of our sets with, "Just Because I Like Science Doesn't Mean I Don't Have Feelings".

Dylan and I scrambled to get ready for the moment in the ninth measure when we came in with our parts, but we didn't even get that far before some guy with a shaved head and the Discharge logo tattooed across his forehead shouted, "This sucks!"

Gilbert kept strumming until we came in with our parts. Then he let go of his mandolin and let it hang off his chest by its strap. He jerked the white sheet off the object bulky beside him, revealing a very strange contraption. Both Dylan and I stopped playing to gawk at it.

It looked some sort of small stationary cannon made of aluminum, except with several Tesla coils poking out of it.

"I didn't tell you to stop!" Gilbert barked at us. Dylan and I began to awkwardly resume playing the song, although without its previous energy.

"Did you bring in a little invention for show and tell, nerd?" taunted the guy with the Discharge tattoo on his face. Gilbert just laughed at him.

"This is my softboy ray!" he declared. "It turns punks like you into softboys; you'll appreciate my music!"

"That's the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard," said the punk.

Gilbert yanked a lever on the side of the machine and it hummed the life as electricity sparked on the Tesla coils. A blue bolt of light zapped out of the machine and struck him right in his Discharge face tattoo.

The man shook as the electricity coursed through his body. As he convulsed, the tattoo vanished a large pair of square glasses materialized on his face. His ratty old Doc Marten boots transformed into a pair of crisp white Chuck Taylors and his sleeveless patch jacket was replaced by a pastel blue hand-knitted sweater.

Gilbert resumed strumming his mandolin along with me and Dylan and the former punk nodded along with the song.

"I rather like this," the former punk said, introspectively. "I especially appreciate the unusual instrumentation and the lyrics about all the feelings you have." He withdrew a small Moleskine journal and a fountain pen from his back pocket and wandered off to go journal about it.

"What just happened?" I asked to no one in particular. Gilbert turned to me and smiled.

"I told you I'd come up with something. Now keep playing."

Still somewhat dazed, Dylan and I obeyed and continued our way through "Just Because I Like Science Doesn't Mean I Don't Have Feelings."

"What did you do to my boyfriend!" screamed a young woman in front row. I recognized her as the purple-haired chick who chucked a can of beer in Dylan's face at our last show.

"I turned him into a softboy with my ray that turns punks into softboys, so he'd like my music," answered Gilbert calmly. "I thought that was pretty clear by now."

"What!" she shrieked. "First you come here and ruin our punk show with your shitty music and then you turn my awesome boyfriend into a whiny little pussy like you? What the hell, dude!"

"I think you need a change in attitude," said Gilbert, letting go of his mandolin. He rotated the barrel of the softboy ray over to her and pulled the lever. Again the machine hummed, sparked and zapped.

A blue streak of light struck her square on the chest. A big wool beanie materialized on her head, but that was nothing compared to the foot long bushy beard that sprouted out of her face.

"I love the strains of Americana in your sound," said the former punk and former woman. "It makes me contemplate my own American identity."

"Huh, I guess it can change gender too," said Gilbert. "Whaddya know?"

Then he started open firing into the crowd.

The softboy ray zapped and zapped and zapped, each bolt of light striking a different punk and transforming them into a generic softboy. Dylan and I continued playing our usual set while all this happened, including such Gilbert penned originals as "I May Love Science But I Also Love You (If Only I Could Work Up The Nerve To Tell You)," "If Only I Could Invent A Machine That Would Make Me Less Sad," and "I Don't Only Crush On Molecules, I Also Crush On You." As a songwriter, Gilbert relied heavily on several recurring themes.

By the time we strummed the final chord on our closing song "I Thought Learning Science Would Make Me Cool, But Now I Know I'm Cool Because I Started An Indie Folk Band," every punk our small town's DIY music scene had become nothing but indie folk-loving softboys. And more than that, they loved us.

They cheered heartily for several minutes after we finished. Some of them even began wandering through the crowd in search of women to whom they explain why our music was so deep, which is a thing softboys do when they *really* like something. However all of the women who had been at the show and had not managed to escape had been transformed into softboys as well, so the searches were all eventually abandoned.

After several of the softboys slapped us on the back to tell us how great our set was and ask what are opinions on Charles Bukowski were, we packed up our gear and loaded it to the back Dylan's Prius like we always do. It was a great feeling to put away instruments that were all still as unbroken as when we arrived.

It felt a bit weirder to move aside my amplifier to make room for the softboy ray, but I shoved the feeling away.

"So what's next?" I asked after we all climbed into the car. "We're in a popular local band now, I think."

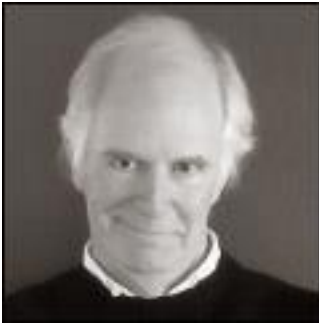
"Well, think bigger," said Gilbert. He smiled darkly from the passenger seat. "Sorry I didn't give you guys a heads up first, but I wanted to see how tonight went first. I booked us a tour at punkhouses across the country. Soon, we'll be popular *touring* band."

They tell you not argue with success, so I didn't.

Contributor Biographies



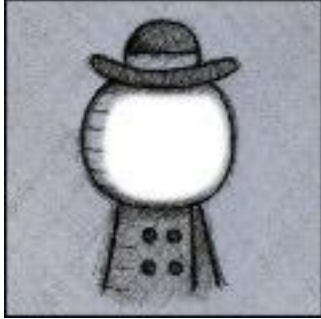
Stephen Parrish's short work has appeared in *The Austin Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *The Good Men Project*, and elsewhere, and has been read in public by Liars' League, Lit Crawl, and other venues. He's the editor of *The Lascaux Review*.



A Seattle native, **Gary Mesick** spent some time as an infantry officer, and he now works in aerospace analytics. His poetry has appeared in *Parody*, *North American Review*, *New American Writing*, and elsewhere. *General Discharge* (Fomite Press, 2019) is his recent book of poetry.



Bailey Holtz is a Chicago-based writer and performer. She spends a lot of time not getting paid doing improv and writing comedy sketches, and a little time getting paid making productive contributions to society. She was raised in Zurich, Switzerland, and speaks fluent German and French. She hopes this is not the most interesting thing about her, but she suspects that it is.



Trash Clapton was born in California



Melissa Lux does a lot of different stuff, some of it well, none of it great. She taught high school band for 12 years, learned a bunch about holistic healing, wrote some scripts, made some jokes and now is pursuing a second masters in bassoon performance. . . no one knows why. A native of New York, (though don't get too excited she's from Long Island), she moved to the mountains of New Mexico just outside of Albuquerque where she lives with Lilly, Huckleberry, Michael and Skip. . . one of them is her husband the rest are pets.



Kathleen Naureckas is a retired journalist whose poems have appeared in *Light, Lighten Up Online*, and *Measure*.



Randal Eldon Greene is the author of one short novel and many even shorter stories. He recently completed a collection of fictional dialogues, of which "@ChefNipsNips" is included. He is currently seeking a book publisher for this collection. Greene lives and writes in the boring corner of Iowa, which is admittedly a vast, corn-riddled corner virtually indistinguishable from the rest of the state. His typos are tweeted @AuthorGreene and his website is AuthorGreene.com.



Vince Reighard lives in Central Indiana, where he is currently hard at work on three novels simultaneously, because why not? He has worked at a vineyard in Oregon, floated down the Guadalupe River in Texas, and gone on an archaeological dig in Rome. He is blessed in friendship and matrimonially lucky. His ambitions are to one day have lunch with the writer on Tina Fey's shows who comes up with all the Frasier references, and to write something that makes someone else as happy as the song "You Me and the Bottle Makes 3 Tonight" makes him.



Myna Chang spent far too many years writing about turbine lubricants, energy derivatives, and shareholder value. She escaped that nightmare, and now focuses on dinosaurs, spaceships, and kung fu. Her flash and short stories have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Dead Housekeeping*, *The Copperfield Review*, and others. Read more at mynachang.com.



M. Desmond Dahm works in a library in a nice town surrounded by some very fine mountains.



Ben Fitts is a writer, musician and zinester from New York. He is the author of over twenty published short stories and his work has been featured in *Weird Mask*, *Futuristic Fiction*, *Horror Trash Sleaze*, and other publications. He is the creator of the zines *The Rock N' Roll Horror Zine*, *A Beginner's Guide To Bizarro Fiction*, and *Choose Your Own Death*.