

◇ Defenestration ◇

Volume XVII, Issue I

April 2020

Table of Contents

Robert Garnham, "Thirsty Work"	2
Mary Cresswell, "The Raving"	13
Bobbie Armstrong, "I Started Jogging to Stay in Shape, and Because a Fire Breathing Lizard Is Always Chasing Me"	14
Tomo Lazovich, "The Gift of the Bards"	16
James W. Reynolds, "Titillation"	19
Claire Russell, "The Rights of Chickens"	20
Kim Malinowski, "Darth Vader at the Renaissance Festival"	29
Sam Wiles, "Goddamned Space Wolves"	30
Kyle Brandon Lee, "A Jovial Wednesday Picnic"	37
Heather Robinson, "Floods"	38
Rebecca Coffey, "Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 'The Little Blintz'"	39
Peter Taylor, "Lunchroom Lear"	41
John O., "Corpse"	42
Contributor Biographies	47

All content is © copyright their respective authors.

Thirsty Work
by
Robert Garnham

1.

And thence did God see fit to make the top step of the main monastery staircase a little wonky, and he saw that it was wonky, and in terms of health and safety legislation, it wasn't very good.

'Mother Superior, on her last visit, almost lost her step', Brother Hilarious reminded the Head Monk. 'Do you remember all of those curse words? Never heard anything like it'.

'Ah yes. The blue nun', Abbot Skerswell said.

He and Brother Hilarious were at the top of the staircase.

'What was Mother Superior doing here, again?', the abbot asked. 'And why was she heading towards the monk's dormitories?'

'The lord moves in mysterious ways'.

'So does the blue nun, and I know which one I'd rather get on the wrong side of'.

'She just came bounding up the stairs before anyone could stop her. I tried to warn her about the top step, but she reminded me that she puts her trust in a higher faith.'

'Nevertheless,' Abbot Skerswell said, 'we shall have to get it mended'.

At that moment, Brother Copious walked past, trod awkwardly on the top step, and kind of rolled, crashed and tumbled all the way down the stairs, a furious flurry of brown robes and the occasional glimpse of bare leg, his sandals flying off in two different directions, landing in a crumpled heap at the bottom next to the portrait of *Saint Deborah Among The Scrotes*.

'He just went down like a sack of potatoes, didn't he?'

'See to it', Abbot Skerswell said, 'That this is fixed'.

2.

'And lo! For did the lord not impart upon the multitude, *thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife?*', Brother Hilarious said to himself, logging in to the free service provided by the tanning salon next door. He entered the password, BURNTCRISPORANG3, and searched for local carpenters.

'Jesus', he whispered.

Jesus was a carpenter, and like the carpenters listed online, he was surrounded by joiners. Most of them promised speedy, efficient workmanship, but not many of them had an ecclesiastical bent.

The sky filtered in through the chapel windows and illuminated the worn, varnished woodwork of the benches. It was unfortunate that the chapel was the only part of the monastery where one could hack into the tanning salon wifi. Brother Hilarious looked up and saw Brother Superfluous, who was knelt at the altar having a damn good pray. Perhaps he was praying for the step to be fixed, which would certainly be cheaper than hiring a carpenter.

'Do you ever feel', Brother Hilarious said, all of a sudden, 'that the only pressure one finds oneself in the modern world, is the pressure to constantly reinvent oneself?'

Brother Superfluous said nothing. His hands were clamped together and his eyes were screwed tight shut.

'That we have to keep ourselves... somehow... interesting?'

Brother Superfluous opened one eye and looked at him. He then closed that eye and pressed his hands together even tighter.

'Not one person noticed that I was wearing guyliner yesterday'.

'For god's sake!' Brother Superfluous said, 'can't you tell I'm trying my hardest to have a bit of a pray, here?'

'What are you praying about?'

'I'd rather keep it personal'.

'I prayed for fish fingers yesterday. And then when we had dinner, it was fish cakes. Close enough, I thought'.

'Such things should remain private'.

'Go on, tell me'.

'Well, it's obviously not working, because you're still here'.

'Prey harder'.

'If you must know, I'm praying for the souls of those in need'.

'Oh, I did that last week. It's a tough one, isn't it?'

Brother Hilarious continued scrolling down the list of carpenters. And then he came across one which was a specialist in ecclesiastical and ecumenical carpentry, a local firm by the rather quirky name *Have I Got Pews For You*.

He looked up at the stained glass windows and saw that they were lit up, somehow echoing the majesty and power of the ethereal, to which the monastery, in its own little way, was a small part. There was such mystery in the world. It made him humble, it made him feel alive.

'How's that prayer coming along?', he asked,
'For heaven's sake!', Brother Superfluous said.

He got up and left.

3.

'Ben Dover'.

'Pardon?'

'Ha ha. Yes. I get that a lot. My name is Ben. Ben Dover'.

'We've already found god, thank you very much'.

Abbot Skerswell started to close the front door.

'I'm the carpenter. From *Have I Got Pews For You?*'

'Ah!'

He only looked about twelve. Or at least, his face did. The rest of him was buff. If he were any more buff, then he'd have been a buffalo. His tight white t-shirt barely concealed his strong, muscular chest, accentuated by the very low cut v-shape of its neckline. He was wearing shorts, too. Cargo shorts, with lots of pockets.

'Come in!', Abbot Skerswell said. Such strong arms, too. 'Come in!'

Brother Superfluous walked past.

'Ah! Brother Superfluous!', the Abbot said. 'Ben Dover'.

'What is it with people today?', Brother Superfluous replied, and he just kept on walking.

Ben's smooth, tanned, youthful complexion was complemented by a head of bright blond hair. He looked around the grand entrance hall of the monastery and the portrait of *Saint Deborah Among The Scrotes*. He'd seen a lot of monasteries during his time at *Have I Got Pews For You*, and he could tell that this was one of the better ones.

'Nice gaff'.

Abbot Skerswell led him to the stairs and showed Ben the offending step.

'It's a hazard', he said. 'It needs repairing. A monk took a tumble this very morning, in fact. It's not the sort of thing you want to come across if you're wearing flipflops'.

'Do the brethren often wear flipflops?'

'Flipflops... Bunny slippers... Generally, they're outlawed, but I do turn a blind eye. For did the Lord not say... *He who... Questioneth the apparel of the Pharisee... Shalt not...* I've lost my train of thought'.

Ben had beautiful blue eyes.

Blue eyes and blond hair.

'You would have made an amazing Nazi'.

'PARDON?!'

'Sorry... Just thinking aloud'.

'I see your problem', Ben said, studying the step from several angles. 'I shall need to completely rebuild the step. And the landing, too. The landing has a slope, do you see that? I shall need to build it up, you see, and use a spirit level. Or shall I say, a holy spirit level'.

Abbot Skerswell said nothing.

'Sorry, just some ecclesiastical humour'.

'Oh, yes. Ha ha. Quite, yes. We are not immune to humour, here at Saint Deborah's. Indeed, you might even say that it's something of a habit'.

Ben said nothing.

'Habits being of course... What we wear...'.

'I'll get my tools', Ben said.

Abbot Skerswell watched Ben walk down the stairs and off out through the main door to his van, his pert little arse moving from side to side beneath his cargo shorts.

'*You'd would have made an amazing Nazi.*', the Abbot repeated, to himself. 'You are such an idiot, Abbot Skerswell'.

4.

Amidst the sparse furnishings of his cell, Brother Superfluous felt his conscience slither, like the tentacles of a squid, from one corner of the world to the other. It was as if he could feel the planet's vibrations, sense the collective mood not only of every soul and consciousness, but of every creature, every plant or tree, of every speck of life. He had heard stories of minute subatomic creatures, germs and microbes that had lived for millions of years on the sea bed, whose metabolism was so very, very slow that it gave them the ability to feel time as if at a quicker rate than those creatures around them, thousands of years passing as seconds, and evolution unfolding in their midst. Such thinking was apt to give Brother Superfluous the willies.

At nights he moved so stealthily. He felt the world was more intense once the blinding sun had gone, once the planet was bathed in darkness matching the eternity of the universe. In order not to be spotted, his nocturnal wandering were undertaken from behind a blank mask through the eyeslits of which he observed nature, both human and non-human, the screech of night time vixens, lovers canoodling on street corners, the hoot of owls, late night taxi drivers, more lovers canoodling on street corners, the desperate, the

downtrodden, satellites, aircraft, and rows and rows of faceless, anonymous houses behind whose walls people led lives of privacy and sin.

He had put a lock on the inside of his cell door.

A few weeks previously had come reports in the local press. The Manic Masked Monk of Melton Mowbray, a haunting, solitary figure, whose existence owed more to good old fashioned superstition rather than the serenity of grace, reportedly frightening people in their homes, late night motorists, and lovers canoodling on street corners. Brother Superfluous knelt at his bed in prayer yet again, then stopped, opened his bedside drawer and took out the mask, its clear, shiny surface a veneer, a palimpsest hiding one story from another, a life defined already by anonymity, further hidden.

He placed the mask back in the drawer and closed his eyes, and rather than pray yet again, he let his conscience wander over the continents. But the local chief of police had vowed to catch the Manic Masked Monk of Melton Mowbray, a statement which led only to a team of journalistic fever in which every local transgression, unsolved crime, peeping Tom report, dead squirrel or UFO sighting was attributed to this mysterious, mischievous monk.

'I chuffing know what's bleeding going on here, you motherchuffing motherchuffers', Mother Superior had shouted, after she'd stormed ho the stairs to his cell. 'I'm on to you, and if you chuffing come round to my chuffing nunnery again, you chuffing monk, then I'm going to shove that chuffing mask up your motherchuffing arse you chuffing pervert'.

Only she hadn't said *chuffing*, she'd said *fucking*.

This had been followed by even more chuffing as she almost fell down the stairs on the way out.

Reports of the Manic Masked Monk Of Melton Mowbray had reduced somewhat in the last week.

Brother Superfluous closed his eyes shut once more, for the umpteenth time. This prayer, he told himself, will be the one.

And then someone started using a very loud wood sander.

5.

The sandy-haired handyman was sanding the landing. He was using a machine which vibrated and rattled the floorboards and filled the air was a constant high-pitched screaming, a screaming which sounded like an animal in pain. It was very unsettling. And it kicked up a constant cloud of sawdust which rose into the air and then settled down over everything. He ran the machine back and forth over the landing. Zeowwwwww!
Zeowwwwww! Zee zee zee zeowwwwww!

'Good job we've already prayed for serenity foday', Brother Hilarious pointed out.

He and the Abbot were standing at the bottom of the staircase next to the portrait of St. Deborah.

'It must be hard work', the Abbot replied. 'And hot, too. He's welcome to take his shirt off'.

'Sorry?'

'I said, it's great to get this work off... Off our chests... His chest... The thing is, it needed to be done!'

Zeowwwwww!

'Shall we enquiry as to his well being?', the Abbot asked.

'Maybe we should just let him get in with it. For did Lord Jesus not say, thou... Who hast... A mighty chore... Should damn well get on with it?'

'We could at least see what kind of service we might be able to offer him!'

They advanced up the stairs. Ben turned off his sander and looked at them. He ran his fingers through his blond hair.

'Hi there!', the Abbot said, in a strained, squeaky voice.

'Alright?!'

Ben kind of looked at them with the sander in his hand.

'Nice tool!'

'Cheers!'

'We were just wondering... How it was all going?'

'Yeah, fine!'

'And you're okay?'

'Absolutely, Reverend!'

'Abbot.'

'Just... You know... Very parched!'

'Oh dear!'

'Yeah, thirsty work, this.'

Ben cleared his throat a couple of times and coughed,

'Is this a... recent affliction?'

'Yeah, you might say that it's ongoing!'

He cleared his throat again. And coughed again.

'My, this is thirsty work!'

'Dear me. Oh, brave soldier, we shall see what we can do'.

Ben looked down at his watch.

'Oh look at that! It's almost a quarter past tea... I mean, three. Ha ha, silly me. I don't know what I was thinking'.

'Indeed. Time moves on'.

'And I was thinking, I could use a higher quality of varnish once it's done that's more durable. But it will cost an extra for-TEA pounds'.

'Duly noted'.

'Oh, thirsty work, this. Ahem, ahem. Such a dry, tickly throat'.

'We shall cure', the Abbot said, 'that which ails ye'.

'Cheers, Rev'.

Abbot Skerswell and Brother Hilarious walked down the stairs as Ben started up again with his sander. Zeowwwwww! Zeowwwwww!

'This is all very serious indeed', the Abbot said. 'Oh dear me, yes. Very serious indeed'.

6.

There was no lozenge to speak of in the monastery, nor cough sweet, nor syrup, nor any kind of suckable cure for a dry throat. And as Abbot Skerswell ransacked the kitchen, he could hear the situation becoming more dire with every minute. Whenever a Monk passed Ben on the stairs he heard his plaintive cry as the sander is momentarily silenced:

'Thirsty work, this... ahem ahem... Oh, my throat is so parched!'

The Abbot thought back to some of the cures that his mother would have concocted when he was a kid. Whisky and lemon. Whisky and ginger, whisky and ale. Or just plain whisky. The monastery didn't have any whisky. And thinking back, his mother had been drunk most of the time, on whisky.

'Oh, my throat... ahem ahem... Such thirsty work, this'.

He remembered one day his mother running out in the street with her left slipper in her hand shouting at the milkman for making so much noise first thing in the morning. He remembered how she would offer him whisky as a cure for a headache. And when he'd announced that he wanted to join the monastery, she must have been really ill indeed for she'd downed a whole bottle,

'Thirsty work, this... ahem ahem... Oh, my throat is so parched!'

Zeowwwwww! Zeowwwwww!

'Ahem! Ahem!'

Abbot Skerswell stood in the middle of the kitchen. The situation was useless.

'Tis a diabolical affliction', he told Brother Hilarious.

'And we are helpless...!'

Abbot Skerswell had a sudden thought.

'You remember that time the shed burnt down? Do you remember that? And we all ran around like headless chickens wondering what to do? Remember all that running around?'

'Yes, I lost a sandal'.

'And someone suggested we have a damn good pray? Remember that? And then the moment we stopped praying, a fire engine turned up'.

'The tanning salon called for it'.

'Or did they? You can never discount the power of the unknown.'

'I'll never understand why we didn't just call the fire brigade ourselves'.

'They've got enough on their plate as it is, without us adding to their workload. With their... Big hoses... Anyway, the situation was resolved and the Lord really came through for us that day. Perhaps he might do it again, in this time of crisis'.

Thirsty work, this. Ahem, ahem.

'I suppose we could give it a bash'.

'Brother Hilarious, summon the brethren!'

Brother Hilarious moved to the bottom of the stairs and bellowed at the top of his lungs, 'Oi! You lot! Down here now! We've got something to pray about!'

7.

There can be no more eerie nor ethereal sight than a choir of brown-cloaked monks incanting, singing their devotions, onerous and life-affirming, both celebratory and deeply serious. It is as if the centuries themselves could make a mockery of the present moment, that the spine-chilling emotions of these holy bretheren and the certainty of their beliefs bypasses a conventional existence, wrapping up normal lived sensation and imbuing it with the timeless. It's just a shame that the jarring screech of Ben's sanding machine drove a truck straight through the whole ceremony.

Brother Superfluous prayed with one eye half open, scanning the door. Of late the Holy Spirit had felt more like a kick in the gonads, which, funnily enough, is also what the Blue Nun had threatened the last time that she was in earshot, and he flinched with every shadow expecting to see her stood in the door of the chapel.

In sunbeams a-slant the monks sing a chant, in silence and solitude, they show their deep gratitude. Abbot Skerswell opens a massive tome of religious writing, Latin, calligraphy, illuminated gold-leaf evocations of pious intent, and at that moment a sudden epiphany asserts itself to the forefront of his consciousness : *a caretaker may care, but who cares for the caretaker?*

'Beloved', he says, looking up from the text. 'A trader, a caretaker, a craftsman... Who devotes his life to the preservation of wood and to its gradual shaping into beautiful, functional furnishings...!'

(Zeowwwwww!)

'A man whose soul is prone and whose skin is smooth, a creamy white, like the finest Devonshire cream, whose eyes are blue, blue like the seas of the Mediterranean...!'

(Zeowwwwww!)

'This sandy-haired handyman, sanding our landing...!'

(Zeeee, zeee, zeee, zeowwwwww!).

'Has been afflicted with the most hideous of horrors, his throat, unable to function properly, continually dry and as parched as the Saharan sands whose lustrous golden hue is matched only by his handsome locks, that we, humble servants of the Lord...!'

(Zeowwwwww!)

'May offer neither comfort nor solace? So let us, brethren, pray not only for the souls of dear, dear Ben... But also for a packet of lozenges, or at the very least, a mint'. The monks patted their pockets, then knelt at the pews. Brother Superfluous still had one eye on the door, he could feel his heart beat intensifying, the blood in his veins pumping quicker and quicker, for now the handyman was rapping with a hammer, bang bang bang bang, each gal, each whack seeming to force home the certainty deep within him that something bad, oh, something very bad was about to happen.

At last the service was done and the monks gathered and shuffled out of the chapel, through the hallway next to the portrait of St. Deborah, and up the stairs, passing Ben in single file.

'Thirsty work, this... Ahem ahem... Oh my throat is so parched... Here I am on the stairs, where I certainly understand the gravi-TEA of the situation... Ahem ahem... Oh, such thirsty work!'

Brother Superfluous was probably about three quarters of the way up the wooden staircase when he heard the front door open with a mighty crash. Instinctively, he stopped and flinched, for he knew immediately who it was. Gingerly, he and Brothers Anonymous and Posthumous looked back, and there she stood.

'Now I've chuffing got you, you chuffing bastard', the Blue Nun said.

And just like his vision earlier, she was a silhouette, hands on hips in the monastery doorway. Then Ben stopped his incessant hammering and looked up, astonished.

'It's not what you think', Brother Superfluous said.

There was an odd sensation inside of him. It felt like the bottom falling out of a cardboard box, and the contents of the cardboard box were his own life, and existence itself. He'd felt so sure of himself the last couple of months, but the angry figure in the doorway, he now realised, stood for something else. She stops for history. She stood for righteous truth. The angst she displayed, the seething contempt, her body language, all of them were aimed against him and only now, at this split second three quarters of the way up a staircase, did he realise that she was correct. She was angry and she was right to be so. And everyone else that he had met, interacted with, offended, scared, they were all angry at him, too.

'I think we all chuffing know what's chuffing going on here', she said.

And he felt bad, not only because of the wrongness of his actions, but also, he suddenly realised, the way that he had compartmented her in terms almost sexist, that she had been a caricature in his own mind. But she wasn't a caricature. She was an actual living person whose existence was framed through centuries of sexist male behaviour.

'I've called the police', she said, 'the chuffing rozzers. I know is you, Brother Superfluous. I know you're the Manic Masked Monk of Melton Mowbray'.

'Actually', Ben said, standing up, 'its me'.

'And who the chuffing hell are you?'

'Ben Dover'.

'PARDON?!'

'Sorry, that's my name. Ben Dover. I'm the one all the papers have been talking about. But I meant no harm, you see. I'm an ecclesiastical carpenter, it's not the most fulfilling of jobs. So I go out at night, dressed as a monk... Fighting crime'.

'Fighting crime?!'

'Pickpockets. Cat burglars. Fly Tippers. Just small-scale stuff'.

'I don't believe it'.

'Here', Ben said, opening his tool box and pulling out a face mask.

'That's not a mask', Brother Superfluous said.

'It's the mask I use. It's not my fault that people... You know... Embellish things when they speak to the press'.

'Oh', Mother Superior said.

She stood in the doorway for a bit.

'I may have to admit', she said, 'to being ever so slightly wrong'.

'I must say that my... *crime fighting*... might eave misconstrued. But I can assure you that my intention, at all times, was to make the world a better place '.

'In that case', she said, 'I suppose it is really rather sweet of you, my child'. She smiled, and then turned to Abbot Skerswell. 'This young man is a gem, Abbot. And he's doing a good job on those stairs, I almost had a tumble myself the other day. I'm sure you monks are looking after him and keeping him going with plenty of tea'.

With that, she departed.

'So, then...', the Abbot said, 'would you like a cup of tea?'

'Go on, you twisted my arm'.

8.

Ben Dover was packing away his equipment. The top step of the stairs had been fixed and varnished and looked better than ever. His coughing seemed much better, too.

'You know where we are', the Abbot said, 'if you ever want to pop in for a cup of tea '.

'Thank you, Rev. Though you gave me—what was it—about six or seven cups there. I'll be running to the loo all night'.

'No problem'. The Abbot smiled. 'Your t-shirt is awfully dusty with all that sawdust. If you need to pop yourself out of it...'

'I'm off home, now. I'll have a shower when I get in'.

'Sure. Sure'.

Brother Superfluous was waiting at the door.

'You didn't have to do that', he whispered.

'What do you mean?'

'Take the flak. For me... I mean, for the Manic Masked Monk'.

Ben looked slightly confused.

'I could see that she was on to me, so I had to tell her the truth', he replied. 'But in a way, I'm glad that it's all out in the open. There's been so much negativity about the Manic Masked Monk that this might actually quell some of the speculation. Unless, of course, some other nutter was going around, dressed as a Masked Monk...'

'Ha ha', Brother Superfluous said, 'yes'.

Ben picked up his equipment, put them in the back of his van, and left with a cheery wave.

The Raving
by
Mary Cresswell

Using only words from Poe's "The Raven"

I let my midnight dreams explore
what I had never dared before—

some fowl what I did see before
reclining quaint as once of yore.

I stopped stock still, and at the door
my soul then murmured "All ashore"

"Take this, take that, no songs outpour
forget your nightly Nevermore..."

"Ah, bird! thou melancholy bore
here is my soul — and there, the door!"

**I Started Jogging to Stay in Shape,
and Because a Fire Breathing Lizard Is Always Chasing Me**
by
Bobbie Armstrong

My jogging routine used to be totally normal. After speed walking for a few blocks and then stopping to gasp for air, I would call it quits and Uber back to my apartment to spend the next two days binging marathon training videos.

All that changed one morning as I was taking my mid-jog pizza break. As I walked out of Domino's artfully balancing three pepperoni slices on top of one another, I heard loud panting behind me. Assuming it was just a neighborhood dog, I prepared to turn around and kick it in the face so it wouldn't get its greasy paws all over my even greasier pizza. Instead, I found myself face to face with a green, scaly, fire breathing lizard.

I dropped all three pepperoni pizza slices in shock and because they slipped through my fingers like an eel. When I had recovered slightly, I picked up a slice from the ground and took a big bite. It had that classic New York pizza that fell on the ground taste, melted cheese mixed with old gum and human piss.

The lizard stuck out a claw and introduced himself as Carl, explaining that he had been hired by an anonymous source to chase me out of my apartment every morning at 8:30 sharp.

Who had hired Carl? Can lizards talk? Wow this pizza smells like a donkey's backside!

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm doing just fine on my own," I struck a defiant pose and jut out my pepperoni smeared chin.

Carl took out a slip of paper from the pocket of his track pants. It was old and crumpled and burnt at the edges, as though it had been lightly toasted and then shoved into the pocket of sweaty track pants, which I suppose it had.

On it was a rough sketch of a humanoid lizard chasing a girl down a crowded city street. She had a wild look in her eyes and a trail of donuts behind her. Long, stringy brown hair just like mine was pulled into a messy bun and her blue sports bra was covered in spaghetti sauce. I looked down at my own spaghetti sauce covered blue sports bra. This girl definitely wasn't me.

"It's a prophecy," Carl explained. "Spoken into the world by the great Oracle of Delphi in a Penn Station Starbucks in 2005."

"But why me?" I asked, my voice trembling slightly as my fingers traced the outline of the girl's way too large hands and out of proportion feet.

"That is for you to figure out. But something to do with you letting yourself go after your career didn't take off the way you thought it would when you moved to the big city and Jessica cutting you out of her life because you were "holding you back" and your 85-year-old grandma being able to do more German squats than you," he said.

"Makes sense," I replied.

"Sorry, the drawing isn't very good. I flunked out of art school," Carl continued, shoving his other claw-thing in his pocket. It was the first time during our two minute interaction that I detected a hint of emotion in his voice, nostalgia for a life he had left behind to chase out of shape 20-somethings down the streets of Manhattan. I could relate to that. I too had flunked out of art school. Maybe we weren't really that different, Carl and I, just two lost souls trying to find our place in the city that never—

Carl lunged at me, snarling and bearing front teeth that were the size of regular lizards that don't wear track pants or talk. I dropped the pizza into the waiting mouth of that stupid dog and ran for my life.

For the next year, I spent my mornings running through the streets, Carl breathing fire close on my heels. I didn't even have time to stop for coffee, pizza, a full-body massage, or even a half-body massage. Since this was Manhattan, few bat an eye at us. Those who did were mostly older crusty men, and some even older, crustier men, jeering cliché taunts like "get that bitch" and "show her who the lizard king is."

At first, I thought Carl was just my ex Brian in a lizard suit he bought off Amazon. But then he started eating the rats he found in my building and chucking the innards at me. Brian was a vegan, though I always suspected he was cheating.

My runs slowly got faster and I stopped dry heaving behind the Gristedes dumpster. I even started to enjoy running. Carl and I were cordial to each other, but never friends. He was there to do a job, and I was always running away from him so on a practical level it was hard to hold a conversation.

A month after running my first half-marathon, Carl suddenly stopped just as I vaulted over a horde of greasy Times Square Elsa's. The next morning he was nowhere to be found, and there were no rat heads outside my door, only a pile of dead fish from my neighbor. But that's normal.

At first I was worried something terrible had happened to Carl. I tried to think of who to call, but who do you call when a fire breathing lizard goes missing? He was too human for Animal Control, but too animal for an Amber Alert.

I came to accept that my time with Carl was complete. I was in shape, and I knew how to tie my shoelaces with those little double knots so I wouldn't trip all over the place and break my jaw in two places anymore.

I never saw Carl again. But sometimes on my morning runs, I think I catch a glimpse of a nine foot, fire breathing, green lizard throwing raw eggs at joggers. It's probably just a trick of the light, but I can't help but smile nonetheless.

The Gift of the Bards
by
Tomo Lazovich

Derek's heart pulsed with anticipation as his simple three bedroom ranch house came into view at the far end of the cul-de-sac. "She's going to be so surprised," he thought to himself, giggling heartily at the spontaneity of his plan. He had decided yesterday to cut his trip short, booking a flight that would allow him to arrive at home before his wife Katie returned from work. However, as he passed the final row of large hedges and his driveway revealed itself, Derek's spirits dropped, like a needle onto a record, and his joy slowly deflated. Sitting there in the driveway, at a time when she was definitely supposed to be at the office, was Katie's green Subaru. His mind raced with possibilities, and once his car was parked he moved quickly to resolve the uncertainty that surrounded him. Rushing to his trunk, he heaved his suitcase out, leaving another box still in the car with the intention of getting it later, after Katie had gone to bed.

When Derek finally came through the door, after what seemed like hours of fumbling clumsily with his keys, he was hit immediately with a sound he never expected to hear in his home. He stood there, motionless, as if he had just walked into a brick wall. The sound was unmistakable. It teased him, taunted him, and simultaneously heartened him and broke his heart. In the few moments that it took the electrical stimuli in his brain to fully propagate and process the information he had just received, his entire marriage flashed before his eyes. He lamented all the wasted years (eleven, as they had just celebrated last month). He wished he had communicated more openly with the love of his life. Above all else, though, he was excited.

Bursting into the living room, with all intention of confronting his wife immediately, Derek instead decided to play coy. "Hi, sweetheart," he said with saccharine intent. "I came home early to surprise you! Oh, hey, what's that?"

Katie stammered. She hesitated. Finally, she blurted it out.

"It's a... it's a... a... record player."

"Oh... huh! That's interesting. I remember when we first started dating you said you thought those were kinda silly and hipster-y."

"Yeah, um...I lied."

"Haha what do you mean?"

"Listen, please don't get angry, ok? Just hear me out. On our first date, you made an offhand comment about how you couldn't believe record players were coming back into style. And I agreed with you because, well, I thought you were cute and it was our first date. The truth is, though, I'm a huge audiophile. You simply cannot beat the amazing integrity that comes from a vinyl album playing on a state of the art turntable with a good sound system. It's like you're in the studio!"

"Mmhm."

"So then, the first time you came over to my place, I hid my AudioTechnica LP60X and my collection of over 300 vinyl albums. At that point, I was in too deep. I bought a storage locker and hid it all away, waiting for the right time to tell you the truth. After we got married, I couldn't take it anymore. So I would leave work early every Friday, go to the locker, and listen to an album. Every time you've taken a work trip for the past eleven years, I have picked up a couple vinyls and brought them home to listen. I'm...I'm so sorry."

Tears streamed down both Katie and Derek's faces as the gravity of the situation materialized for them. They had gone eleven years deceiving each other.

"Katie, wait here. I need a minute."

"Please, Derek. Let's talk about this!"

Derek hustled back to his car. Rather than getting in and driving away, as Katie expected, he instead opened the trunk and grabbed a box from it. He brought it inside, smiling ear to ear.

"Katie, honey. I have a confession too. My trip wasn't a business trip."

"It wasn't?"

Derek opened up the box and dropped a program in front of her. It read "2020 National Analog Audio Convention."

"What is that???"

"Honey, I didn't know how to tell you. I'm a huge audiophile too. I wasn't on a work trip, I was at the country's largest annual vinyl convention."

"Derek, but... but how? How have we gone all these years both secretly loving vinyl?"

"Well, here's the thing. Remember how you said that I made an offhand comment about thinking it was silly that vinyl was coming back on our first date? Well, the only reason I did that is because earlier that day I had seen that you liked a Facebook post where one of your friends was saying something similar, and I wanted to get you to like me."

Katie burst out into laughter.

"No freaking way! My friend group in college was all audiophiles, and we would ironically post about how stupid vinyl was as an inside joke with each other! I can't believe you saw that!"

Finally realizing what they had done, they both laughed incessantly and embraced each other closely.

"Let's never keep something like that from each other again, ok?"

"Absolutely, sweetheart. I can't believe it took us this long to find out."

"So, I guess I should ask. What's your favorite album?"

"Oh... hands down, *Rumours* by Fleetwood Mac. No question. How about you?"

"Dave Matthews Band's *Under the Table and Dreaming*! I'm a huge DMB fan."

Suddenly, an awkward silence came between them.

"Derek... I want a divorce."

Katie rigidly stood up, grabbed the albums that were strewn about the floor, and walked out. Derek watched through their bay windows as her green Subaru receded into the distance. He screamed into the void.

"Fine with me, Katie. FINE WITH ME! Fleetwood Mac sucks! You're just a poser!"

Derek broke down in tears and slumped against the wall. As he rocked back and forth, he muttered, under his breath "Take these chaaanceeeesss!"

Titillation
by
James W. Reynolds

This is a poem about my nipples.
I call it "Titillation" because that's a pun
and people pretending to be poets
use puns as the illiterati use memes:
to prove how clever we are.
So prepare to be impressed.

*

My nipples are erect all the time.
So reliably erect, when nothing else is.

In thin silky shirts they are steeples.
In thick cotton pullovers they are pimples.

Are they impressions that misleadingly point to titillation?

Or are they just sad signs for all to see
that my world has become cold?

*

I'm pretty sure that's a metaphor,
which again showcases my cleverness –
something I desperately want to convey.

You'll also find
I did not rhyme.
People pretending to be poets
don't do that anymore.
It's crass.

And, yes, I know.
By writing about my nipples
I risk being accused of indulgence
and narcissism.
But that's a risk
people pretending to be poets
are perfectly happy to take.

The Rights of Chickens by **Claire Russell**

They had changed the bylaws earlier that year and now every yard on the block had chickens. Alison didn't know what to do about it. The noise, the stench of it. This was not the country. This was the city! The houses were attached to each other for Chrissakes.

Alison had initially been in support of changing the bylaw because she'd thought *why not, why shouldn't people be able to raise chickens? Live and let live, right?* She was supportive of things like healthy living, healthy diets. Hatching your own chicks, eating your own eggs—these all seemed like good ideas. She had no idea that so many people would take advantage of the opportunity.

But there were chickens everywhere. The smell of their shit was intolerable. Every morning she woke up to the sound of them. Chickens on roofs, in gardens. Chickens in school yards.

Last week, she'd walked into her house, and there was a chicken on her kitchen table. It had managed to sneak in through the window.

"I'm so sorry," said Elena, her neighbor and the chicken's owner. "We weren't aware that our chickens could climb. We will try to be more careful."

"They can't fly, but they climb!" Alison told her sister later on the phone.

"Maybe you should shut your windows," said her sister, helpfully. "At least when you go out."

It wouldn't have been so bad if Alison wasn't already feeling depressed and unwanted. Her boyfriend, Eric, had moved to Australia the week before, and while she'd wanted to stay together, to try out a long distance relationship, he'd said that he thought he was ready to sow some wild oats. Those were his words.

"If I'm totally honest," he said to her the night before his flight. "I think you might be the reason I'm leaving."

"I thought you wanted to go to the beach at Christmas," she said. "I thought you wanted to eat shrimps off the barbie."

"Those reasons might not have been totally truthful," he said. "Well, they were true but they weren't the most important reasons. The truth is that I need space...from you." The wild oats expression had come out a few sentences later.

There was only one other person on Allison's block who did not keep chickens. His name was Edgar and he was allergic to eggs. He was also one of only three people to sign her petition to rescind the bylaw.

She'd set up a table at the community center down the street. The receptionist on Saturdays was also a chicken hater.

"I know they might be a nuisance to someone like you," said Elena who had her Pilates class on Saturday at the community center. She was a thin woman with yellow, brittle hair and a sinewy neck. She had been among the first to get the chickens and Allison thought of her as one of the neighborhood trend setters, those people who yield influence without even trying.

"I just don't understand why every one has to have chickens," said Allison.

"Perhaps you should consider getting your own. They really do add meaning to our lives. At any rate, you might just have to learn to tolerate them. After all, people now have the right to own chickens."

"What about my rights?" said Allison.

"Your right to what?" asked Elena.

"My right to peace and quiet! My right to peaceable enjoyment of my property."

"I don't think those are really rights," said Elena. "More like preferences. Anyway, the chickens are not on your property."

"Oh no?" said Allison. "I remember there being a chicken on my property last week!"

"You might want to be strategic," said Elena. "Life is easier when people like you."

Edgar took pottery classes at the community center on Saturday and stopped by Allison's table with a coffee for her. "You're working hard," he said. "And I appreciate the efforts you are making."

She told him about what Elena had said. "Do you think I'm being unreasonable?" Allison asked him.

"I think you should have the right to peace and quiet," he said.

"Don't the chickens bother you too?" she asked. Just last week, she'd seen Edgar return home from work with his groceries and trip over an entire flock of chickens that had escaped one of the coops.

"Bother is a strong word," said Edgar. "Mostly, I don't like the smell of eggs."

He had a point there. Now that so many people kept chickens, they were eating eggs for breakfast every day. Most mornings the smell of scrambled eggs overpowered the smell of the cherry trees which had just started to blossom.

"I don't like feeling like I'm different from other people," said Allison.

"You're not allergic to eggs. You could get some chickens."

"I don't want chickens," said Allison. "I've never been that interested in them. I don't even really like eggs."

"Seems like we are a minority."

The next morning Allison was looking out her window when she saw Edgar enter her front yard. He was carrying a bouquet of roses.

"I know that roses might seem extravagant," said Edgar. "Especially since we are not even officially dating. But I thought they might help with the smell," he said.

She took the flowers, pressing them to her nose. They were fragrant and offered a brief reprieve from the smell of chicken shit. She was flattered and oddly touched. Edgar was handsome, she realized. He was a very large man, much larger than Eric. Eric had actually been not dissimilar to some of the chickens—he was often moving and easily startled. Edgar was bear-like and sensitive. He had a broad round face with a smooth, bald head. He wore lumber jack shirts that he buttoned up to the highest button. Where Eric spoke rapidly, Edgar talked in a very slow and deliberate way. She thought that sex with him would be more satisfying than sex with Eric. Eric never lasted longer than 7 ½ minutes, and it took her at least 8 ½ minutes to climax.

Edgar asked her to dinner. He chose a vegan restaurant across town with small wood tables and no table service. They did not serve beer or wine, so they drank water. Edgar apologized for the lack of ambience. "I chose the restaurant because I could be sure they did not serve eggs," he said.

"Or chicken, for that matter," said Allison. She had an ambivalent relationship to eating chicken now. Once you really saw what chickens were about it was hard to want to eat one. But sometimes, when she was really angry, she fantasized about eating them.

At dinner, Allison avoided the subject of the chickens and resisted the temptation to complain about Eric. She had made the mistake of checking Instagram earlier that day and seen photos of him on ranch in the Aussie outback with a young woman who was both younger and thinner than her.

With these two subjects—chickens and Eric—off limits, Allison found it hard to maintain a conversation. The chickens and her ex were pretty much all that she thought about these days. Edgar was the strong silent type, which could have made things awkward, but luckily the restaurant, being vegan, served large bowls of salad with many different crunchy legumes and grains, and coarsely chopped pieces of kale. They spent the better part of an hour just chewing their food, so the lack of conversation was not as bad as it could have been.

When they got back to their neighborhood—Edgar lived on the same block—they were happy that it was silent. The chickens were sleeping. They were less happy to find the note, pasted in scotch tape on Allison's door:

CHICKEN HATER! The note said in all caps. Underneath it, written in small cursive, were the words *Why don't you just move to another neighborhood?*

"Rhetorical questions are lazy," said Edgar.

"Was it rhetorical?" Allison asked.

"Perhaps you should invite me in so that we can discuss it," said Edgar.

Instead of discussing the note, they kissed. Edgar was a good kisser, she decided. She appreciated that she had been able to do so much with her mouth that day that did not require talking. Chickens can't kiss, Allison thought, because they do not have lips.

Edgar did not ask to spend the night and Allison did not invite him.

The next morning, there was another note, which said the same thing: CHICKEN HATER! Go home!

Allison called Edgar. "There's another one," she said.

"Another chicken?" he asked.

"Another note."

"I'll be right over," Edgar said.

When he got there, the note was on the table. "It looks like the same person wrote it," he said.

"Yep. Same hand, same pen," said Allison. "I wonder if it was Bill. Lydia told me once that she thought he has dementia." Bill was a widower and lived across the street. He was one of the most passionate and least responsible chicken owners.

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Edgar.

"I don't know. What if it is dementia? I mean, why would the person tell me to go home? Don't they know I live here?"

"Racism?" said Edgar.

"But I'm white," said Allison.

"You look like you could be Mexican," said Edgar.

"I guess so," said Allison. It was true that she had dark hair.

While they sat there considering her options, they decided that more kissing might help. Edgar's mouth tasted like peppermint and his lips were soft. He was the kind of person who enjoyed kissing and was not just looking to get onto the next part. Allison let him remove her shirt. She then removed his plaid button by button. By the time she had undone all his buttons, she was very aroused. He removed her bra, she kissed his neck and shoulders. She

enjoyed the feeling of her breasts against the hair on his chest. Her skin was cooler than his skin and the contrast aroused her even more.

"Let's go upstairs," she said.

Sex with Edgar took 22 minutes, which was almost three times as long as sex with Eric. They lay in bed together for a long time, thinking about the problem of the chickens.

"It's possible that the petition was a bad idea," said Allison.

"It did not garner that much support," agreed Edgar.

"We need another strategy," said Allison.

"But what?"

"I'm too hungry to think."

Neither of them had had breakfast. They could smell the eggs cooking from the neighbours. "Let's go to the beach," said Edgar.

This time they drank smoothies sitting on a log by the water. It was low tide and the seagulls were circling. Occasionally, one would dip down to the beach and grab something, fly up again, and then drop it on the rocks below.

"What are they doing?" asked Allison.

"They are grabbing clams and muscles," said Edgar. "They drop them on the rocks to break them open."

"Smart birds," Allison said.

When they got back to Allison's, there was no note on the door. Instead, the house had been egged. Yellow yolk ran down the windows and was stuck to the glass in her stucco exterior.

"That's it," said Allison. "I'm calling the cops."

Two officers came to the house. A very thin one with no hair, and a short one with a thick head of hair.

"We have no way of knowing, unfortunately, who threw the eggs at your house," the thin one said. "Almost everyone on the block has means."

"Not to mention motive," said the short one. "You have not been popular lately with the neighbours."

"What about the notes?" asked Edgar. "Could you identify who wrote the notes?"

"The notes are not really making any threats," said the shorter one. "We couldn't really definitely say that it was the same person who wrote the notes that threw the eggs."

"Listen," said the bald one. "There's not much that we can do. Certain neighbors have been complaining about you as well."

"Complaints about what?" asked Allison.

"Hate speech."

"Seriously?" asked Allison. Edgar sat silent beside her.

"Some residents of this neighborhood are concerned that your language—in the form of a petition—is hate speech."

"Against who?"

"Against chickens."

"Are chickens legal persons?" asked Allison.

"Well, no, not technically. Not yet," said the officer. "But there are two sides to every story."

The other officer piped in: "If I can be so bold, it might be a good idea to make peace with your neighbors. As we've already said, we've had more than one complaint about your petition." Then she said, not unsympathetically, "It appears that they have banded against you."

"Some of your neighbors have friends in high places," said the other one.

Allison was not very happy with Edgar during this interaction. She thought that probably he could have done more to support her. Instead, he sat beside her like a useless lump listening to the conversation but adding nothing. The chickens were one thing, but harassment was something else. Allison had always been an advocate for all kinds of people: queer, trans, people of color. She considered herself a feminist, a supporter of BLM.

But she drew the line at chickens. Chickens were not legal persons.

"It cheapens other, legitimate, movements," she said. "It's insulting to real minorities."

Edgar was chewing on his lower lip. "I'm going to leave now," he said. "I'll come over later tonight."

"Yeah sure, whatever," said Allison.

"Don't be mad," said Edgar. He kissed her and left.

That evening, the doorbell rang. Edgar was standing at the door. He was holding a large box, the kind of box with holes in the lid. He had an eager expression on his face.

"Is that a cat?" asked Allison. "Genius."

Allison imagined what a large enough cat could do to the chickens next door. "A fox might have been even better," she added.

"No," said Edgar. "It's not a cat."

"What is it?"

"A solution to the chicken problem," said Edgar. "If everything turns out the way I think it will."

Edgar opened the box. Inside was a large, black chicken with a bright red comb growing out of its head.

"Is that a chicken?" asked Allison.

"Not technically, no. I'm pretty sure it's a rooster," said Edgar.

"How is that a solution?"

"If you can't beat them, join them?" said Edgar.

"I think you should leave," said Allison.

Edgar put down the box, and grabbed her by the shoulders. He looked straight into her eyes. "Allison," he said. "I really like you. Give us a chance."

Allison could see he was sincere.

"Like I already said," he added. "I have an idea."

The next morning, Allison was woken by the crowing of the rooster. Great, she thought. A rooster might be the solution to Edgar's problems—the only problem he had with chickens were the eggs—but for her this just added a whole new level of irritation. After a few mornings, though, she found that she looked forward to the rooster's crow. She liked to get up early anyway, and the rooster gave her that little push.

She decided to put up with the rooster for a little while at least. What else was there to do? The one benefit of Rambo—the name they'd decided to give the rooster—was that he kept most of the chickens out of her yard. It turned out he was very territorial. He also meant that Edgar was around more, since Edgar had agreed to take full responsibility for the feeding and cleaning up after the rooster. This suited Allison just fine. She didn't like to be alone. Edgar spent most his time reading, he knew how to cook, and was able to give her two orgasms in 22 minutes.

Three uneventful weeks went by until one morning the phone rang.

"Hi, Allison," said the voice. "This is Elena."

"Yeah?"

"I'm calling about the rooster."

"Yeah?"

"It's a public nuisance."

"So are the chickens," said Allison and hung up.

A day later, there was a knock on her door. It was Bill from across the street. She almost felt sorry for him. He was wearing a dirty baseball hat and overalls like a real farmer.

"I need to talk to you about your rooster," he said.

"What about it?"

"It's been impregnating my chickens."

"Is that a problem?"

"It's ruining my eggs," he said. "I don't want to eat fertilized eggs."

"Too bad for you," said Allison and shut the door.

Edgar observed all this from the living room where he was reading the newspaper. He closed the newspaper and put it on the couch. "My plan's working," he said.

Later on the same day, it was clear something was up. Lydia stopped them on their way home from the community center. Allison took the pottery class there as well now.

"I'm a night owl," Lydia said. "The crowing is waking me up too early."

"Tough shit," said Allison.

As soon as they got in the door, Allison and Edgar went upstairs to have sex. Allison thought her life was going pretty well now.

The neighbors could not really complain. There was nothing in the bylaws against roosters. A month later, however, there was a note from the city. It stated that there had been a change in the bylaws—no roosters, only chickens. Lydia it turned out was connected. Rambo would have to be out by the end of the week.

Allison wrote a letter to the newspaper. She said that the chickens were being denied their full rights as sentient creatures, that keeping chickens was a form of slavery. "If people really believe in the rights of chickens," she wrote, "then they must also believe in the rights of roosters." They printed it in the editorial section.

The animal rights activists were on her side. Even Elena said that she had a point. The real game changer, though, was the day that Rambo laid an egg.

It was a few days after the note. Allison was cleaning out his pen in the yard when she noticed the egg. It was a green egg, as beautiful as anything that doctor Seuss could invent.

When the officials from the city came, Edgar showed them the egg.

"It looks like we have a chicken after all," he told them.

Now there was a debate about what actually made a chicken a chicken and a rooster a rooster. Some said that the crowing meant Rambo was a rooster; some said that laying an egg made Rambo a chicken. Others said that nonbinary conceptions of gender should not be reserved for humans alone and that gender discrimination should be abolished in any form.

In the end, Edgar and Allison were allowed to keep Rambo. They went down to the beach at low tide to watch the seagulls. Now that Rambo had started laying eggs, things had become complicated.

"Consistency would say that we should probably get rid of him," Allison said.

"You mean it," said Edgar. "We should get rid of it."

"Or should we say them?" said Allison. She was happy that her political work was getting more attention, but she was starting to find the terminology confusing.

"I have a feeling we're going to see urban chickens outlawed again soon," said Edgar. "It's become too controversial. Or at least their numbers will be capped. It's the only way around the problem."

And that's what happened. A new bylaw went into effect, limiting each household to just a few chickens. Keeping chickens fell out of fashion. For many it was only appealing to keep chickens if you could keep acquiring more of them. Otherwise, there was no competition. For the true chicken lovers, the slavery argument had worked best. Keeping chickens no longer seemed ethical.

By the time Edgar had moved in officially, and Allison was pregnant with their first child, there were only a few houses on their block with chickens. They'd kept Rambo around, giving the eggs to their neighbors, until s/he finally stopped laying entirely.

Rambo eventually died of old age.

Darth Vader and the Renaissance Festival
by
Kim Malinowski

Darth Vader sports ye olde chainmail and has a turkey leg
in his left hand and a program in his right.
He is muddy AND dusty, smelling of grease and that crocodile stand.
He has never been happier, never more carefree.
He is cinched into a corset. Only the purple one had fit,
highlighting his chest plate a bit too much, though he agreed,
it brought out his color. He did try out one of those kilts too,
but the squeals of the ladies made him feel bare,
even with artificial limbs. And he wasn't too sure
what he was supposed to wear under there—after all, it was a drafty day.
But that corset... He felt sexy and daring—the most self-loving ever.
And he had been asked where to park! The best compliment ever!
He looked the part—(all those flower crowns and moccasins had been worth it.)
Vader changed hats three times, getting holos of himself with each,
sending them gleefully to the Emperor and Tarkin.
Currently, he was wearing a velvet pirate hat.
He winked, no one could see him do it,
but he all but skipped to the parking area.
Once in his hover craft, his turkey leg would be sealed for later,
a real report given to the Emperor,
but for now, he was a sexy bootlegging spice pirate vixen, with heavy breathing.

Goddamned Space Wolves

by
Sam Wiles

It was uncharacteristically warm the day *They* came. I'll always remember that day, because that was the day everything changed.

Of course when I say 'they' I mean the space wolves. I don't know why I'm being so vague. 'They' are the space wolves that came to earth, about two years ago. It's like the main, uh, thing. Anyway, I remember exactly what I was doing when the space wolves came. I was watching the Angels and between innings I was playing "I'll Time You" with my son, Gary. How "I'll Time You" works is I tell my son to go get me a beer out of the fridge and that I'll time him with the stopwatch. If he "beats his time" (which he always does) he "wins" another turn. I usually get pretty housed and Gary's confidence skyrockets.

I was like 5 turns deep into I'll Time You when the baseball game gets interrupted with Breaking News. Anderson Cooper was standing in front of a shot of the sky, and in the sky, where the sky would usually be, was a large dark mass likely a mile high. It was pyramid shaped, with the pointy part on the bottom, balancing perfectly on the ground. It was all one color; a frightening, stark onyx (I'd recently learned that onyx was a color from picking out tile. I'm not like, saying onyx all the time, or something). The object's uniform color made it seem both surreally fake yet somehow more three dimensional. That is, until during the broadcast when a guy in a ski mask tagged the very bottom with the words "LIL SLEEPY 619." At the time it seemed disrespectful, to deface an alien ship seemingly minutes into its arrival, but now that I know it was full of space wolves I'm proud of that guy. Godspeed wherever you are, Lil' Sleepy.

According to CNN, this unexplained object was sitting in the middle of the desert in New Mexico. And then, as was customary, Anderson cut to some random people reacting to the broadcast. That's what news was like then: a thing would happen, and then rather than go to an expert, or reporter at the scene, they would get reactions from regular folks on the street. In this instance they cut to a teenager who thought the situation was 'weak.' After this outreach to the common man, CNN brought on several experts to talk about what it could be. Military exercise? Aberrant meteor? Optical illusion created by the sun? None of them said it was a ship holding space wolves. Typical dumb media.

It was about a week of this kind of speculation because the ship just sat there. There was some talk of bombing it, and there was some talk of trying to communicate through symbols, and even some talk of 'sexually pleasuring the ship until it released it's message,' but that last thing was just a voicemail my sad work friend Randy left me. I decided during that week I would stock up on supplies in case we did engage in some kind of warfare; or if that pleasure thing Randy thought of happened. I took Gary to the store that week and we really made a day of it. I let him get whatever he wanted, which was raisins. Gross. So he loaded up his backpack with raisins and I got canned food and road flares and beer. In the check out we ran into Gary's teacher Ms. Paula. We made small talk about the object in the desert and the show *Suits*. And then, Ms. Paula said she had run into my wife, Janet, and that since Janet was moving to New Mexico to be near the object. Ms. Paula thought we were going with her. This was breaking news to me.

It was 2 days before the space wolves came out of the ship that Gary and I drove to where Janet was staying, which was with her sister Darlene. Janet and I had been separated for the better part of a year. It was mostly money related stress that did us in. And sleeping with an independent contractor named Scott Ortega related stress. The two big stressors were definitely money and her sexual relationship with Scott Ortega. When we got to Janet's sister Darlene's house I knocked on the door and made Gary wait in the car in case things got unpleasant. Darlene came to the door and said "She doesn't want to see you." And I said "Well if I was sex with independent contractor Scott Ortega then she'd want to see me!" and Darlene said "What?" And I said "nevermind." I told Darlene I needed to ask Janet if she was moving to New Mexico to be near the giant object and Darlene said,

"We've been considering it. I read a thing online that said the object has special healing powers. It can even reverse the effects of all the vaccines we keep giving our kids."

"So it will... *give* you polio?"

"No stupid. It will reverse the side effects of you not getting polio. It's complicated."

So, in response, I sort of screamed a lot, told Darlene they weren't taking my son, blacked out, and woke up driving down the road.

The next day was a lot of me calling Janet and trying to explain why she shouldn't go to where the spaceship is. She would then tell me that it was her decision and if I wanted to keep Gary vaccinated then I would have to live with those consequences. Her visiting the ship became a moot point though, because the next day the bottom of the pyramid opened up.

I think what immediately got everyone's attention about the space wolves was their confidence. We had all been expecting aliens like we'd seen in the movies: gray, big head, big eyes, total virgin. Not these guys. First of all, they looked mostly like wolves. The exceptions being glowing neon eyes, a sort of forest green skin instead of fur, and that they walked upright. They also had essentially human musculature in their upper bodies. Another thing was that we expected aliens to have difficulty communicating. Beeping or telekinesis or Latin or something, but no; the space wolves spoke perfect English. For instance, the leader of the space wolves introduced himself as Grecious The Blood Covered Conqueror, but that we could call him Greg because his real name was "a mouthful." Greg also said that they came in peace, and no matter their wolfman-like appearances, which they realized were scary, they were not going to eventually use humans as their primary food source. I thought at the time that that sounded too specific.

I was watching Greg talk on the news at a local bar and my friend Randy said "I like how they bothered to learn our language." Randy chimed in later that night and said that his life sucked and the rest of the galaxy can go to hell. He then pounded a vodka and Mountain Dew and told me it was his favorite sports drink, and that a sports drink is any drink that gives you energy.

The next few weeks were relatively normal, meaning our day to day lives didn't change much. That was pretty weird. One day we didn't have space wolves, and suddenly we did

but we still had to go to work and pay our utility bills and take dumps, but they were on TV a lot. Greg was going country to country and meeting with world leaders and the news deemed it riveting. The meetings kind of followed the same pattern, as far as I could tell, is that it would start off tense, because it's like hey, here's a space wolf, and Greg would inevitably do some weird stuff, like smell a diplomat's wife or something. This would really seem like a disaster. But then Greg would get in the room with the President of China and talk about how vital it was to protect the world from the greater threats in the galaxy. And then the Chinese President, I'm not good with names, would agree, since we indeed didn't know much about the galaxy.

Side note: generally, the non-Greg wolves were admittedly less polished. Their english was garbled, and they moved around more on their hands. They were usually sniffing the air and they would drool this bright green, uh, viscera? They would slobber this bright green viscera out of their mouths and it would burn whatever it touched. A few of them were caught eating deer in a field, but mostly sucking it's blood. It was kind of off-putting. In fact, a lot of people would say they were uncomfortable with these giant, intelligent wolves from space being on our planet, myself included. Now, I'm pretty anti-intolerance. If someone is being intolerant, I'll say "hey, knock it off," etc. But these space wolves gave me the creeps.

Conversely, there was a significant group in America who were, I guess, fans? Not like how I'm a fan of the Angels, but more like, you know when people are super into Coca-Cola? What do you call that? When someone's a fan of a thing and not a team? Anyway, Randy was one of these space wolf fans. He liked how they "didn't take anyone's shit" and how if he was a space wolf he "wouldn't have to pay alimony even though the judge gave Deb my trampoline."

Janet and Darlene were also fans, but it was more like a contrarian thing. They liked that other people didn't like the space wolves. Whenever I'd drop Gary off at her place she would be putting up some new sign that said "Space Wolves Welcome Here," or "I'm Into It, If You Know What I Mean, Mr. Spacewolf." One of the times I took Gary to see Janet she told me that she and Darlene were asking people their blood types for the Galactic Census on behalf of the space wolves.

"It's the most fulfilling work I've ever done."

"Does it bother you they seem super into blood?" I said.

"Get with the times," she said. "People can just be into blood and it's not a big thing."

"They aren't people. They're wolves from space who love blood," I said.

"That's what the media wants you to think."

I didn't really have a good response to that. Also it was hard to argue with the space wolf fans at first because he and I benefited from their existence almost immediately. I work at an industrial valve and hose factory and we made a ton of special orders for these space wolves. I specifically had to work overtime, as I'm an expert on valves. Randy had been fired because he was an expert in asking people if they were "Working hard or hardly working?"

Sometime in June, Greg held a big press conference and told us the space wolves were building medical facilities for "Testing on Behalf Of Humanity." In conjunction with the US

government, the space wolves told us they were doing random medical testing using "galactic technology" to protect the human race from "universal biological threats." Randy was one of the first volunteers for the program. According to Randy, they would bring you into a building, and they would take a blood sample and measure and weigh you. They would give you a ham sandwich and you ran on a treadmill. Randy had no issues with the invasiveness of this, even though he often threatened the mailman for "coming on his property."

"Plus, free sandwich," he would say.

Greg got his own TV show sometime later that summer, where he would look directly into the camera and make statements. He'd also talk about his favorite things about earth and why humanity shouldn't be afraid. His favorite things included blue jeans, the outdoors and how no one on earth had a multi-dimensional cosmic time sword. The show was popular because everyone liked blue jeans and the outdoors and that cosmic time sword thing sounded like some real lame dungeon master stuff. Greg eventually started having influential guests like Elon Musk and Warren Buffet, but the real turning point was when he had this congressman on. Congressman Whatshisname asked Greg about the amount of private and public land being used for their Testing On Behalf of Humanity Clinics, and Greg got mad enough to bite a piece of the congressman's ear off. People loved it.

That fall 8 space wolves were elected to congress. The space wolves had figured out that in order to have even more influence, they needed to hold office. It became relatively easy for them once they learned how much people hate politicians. People will vote for literally anything else given the option. A duck, an old can, a hat full of mud; all of those things would be able to beat a politician in an election, but objects don't have the kind of cash a politician does. For instance, Randy said he wished a space wolf would be president, and not some slick politician, just moments after a space wolf had been caught vampiring a police horse on the side of the road. That very space wolf went on to win his congressional race by 18 points. His slogan was "the REAL wolves are in Washington."

Things got worse at the valve and hose factory once the space wolves were in congress, in that labor laws had gotten pretty loose. We stayed late to make parts for various space wolf enterprises; ships, space guns, valves for the Testing On Behalf of Humanity Centers. We weren't compensated for overtime, but were instead given index cards that read "Congratulations on Your Current State of Employment." I would've filed a complaint but the box where we put our anonymous complaints had been shot with a space gun and the HR department was also missing. I went to tell our union head about this and I found out he had been reassigned to New Mexico indefinitely.

It was the following winter when I stopped letting Gary go to his Aunt Darlene's without me. Janet had let one move in with them. She said they weren't dating, but she had said the same thing about Scott Ortega. He didn't really talk much and would often smell Gary when he was asleep. Gary would wake up, say something like "hey quit smelling me you pervert," and then the space wolf would point to his own mouth and rub his stomach. This was unnerving for Gary, as he was only 12.

The last straw for me, regarding the space wolves, was when they put up the factories that drained people of their blood. Thanks to congress passing the Physical Repayment Act, anyone in debt to the IRS or in an exorbitant amount of personal debt was given the option, by the police, to check-in to a Physical Repayment Center where they would gradually "donate" their blood, over time. This blood went to "The Science Thing We're Doing On Your Behalf," which was new and lazily named.

Randy eventually got sent to one of these centers due to missing payments on his alimony. He spent four weeks in one of the center's "Luxury Suites" eating ham sandwiches and being drained of his blood. I picked him up on the day he got out and he looked terrible. He'd lost a ton of weight and had somehow lost an eye.

"How was it?" I asked.

"Uh, it wasn't bad. It was like a hotel. But in a cage. Which was cool," he coughed.

"Plus, I don't have to pay Deb any more alimony. You know she got a new boyfriend? Some professor at the junior college. Pussy."

Randy then vomited and fell asleep. On the way home we passed the Processing Centers, which surrounded most Physical Repayment Centers. They were these large, black, windowless domes, and most people thought that's where the space wolves slept.

So finally, just this last week, I was told I needed to personally drive to the space wolves' compound in New Mexico and install a specific industrial valve. I won't bore you with what kind of valve, as most people don't know a ton about valves, but it was the kind of valve I'm an expert about. I would have to drive there first thing after work on Monday.

I had an uneasy feeling about my trip to New Mexico, so that weekend I spent a bunch of time with Gary. We played "I'll time you," and we played catch with a nerf football. We went on a hike and I made chicken salad sandwiches. Sunday night I dropped him off at a friend's house. He specifically asked to not stay at his mom's because they kept the thermostat too high. I knew it was because he didn't want to get eaten, but I didn't say anything.

On my drive to New Mexico I noticed a phenomenon I'd only read about. There were tent cities lining the highway, fully functioning little villages, miles in diameter. Because of the new structures, the Physical Repayment Centers, the office buildings for Testing on Behalf of Humanity, Galactic Airports, and all of the domes for The Science Thing We're Doing On Your Behalf, real estate had become scarce in the two years since the ship appeared. People had started banding together in large unoccupied areas and making their own communities. Local governments were now basically non-existent, and if you weren't directly under the thumb of "Big SpaceWolf" you could kind of fall off the map. I know that sounds like a bummer, but when I drove by everyone actually looked alright. Living off the grid meant you weren't at risk to have to donate your blood, and no one was looking over their shoulders to see if their congressman was eating their pets.

When I pulled up to the main space wolf compound (it had a more official name?), and it was like at least 2 dozen football fields in size. It had several pyramid-like ships huddled together in the center with domes surrounding the perimeter. I went through security, and

then I met my supervisor on the project, a space wolf whose name sounded like Jeff, and he took me the long way through the compound. At one point we entered a hallway which I now realize was a balcony. I found out it was a balcony because at some point, Jeff accidentally bumped a button and what I thought was a wall became transparent and I realized it was actually a window. Several feet below us was a warehouse style set-up with several square miles of, like, iron lungs? Jeff immediately panicked and started frantically trying to change the window back into a fake wall. Right before he figured it out, I saw what was in the chambers. It was space wolves, but they were unconscious and had tubes running from their arms and legs. I even recognized Greg from TV. Jeff got the wall turned back on and asked me, rudely, what I saw. Thinking quickly, I said "I actually didn't see anything, I was looking down at my shoes." Jeff seemed satisfied with this answer, but I had a sinking feeling that Jeff was going to eat me the minute I was done installing this valve.

We walked to some kind of master control room. There were several empty chairs, actually only empty chairs, aligned in a row in front of several computer screens.

"Where is everybody?" I asked Jeff.

"Everyone (garbled) at (garbled) uh, lunch?" Jeff garbled.

Jeff had put quotes around the word "lunch." That's how I knew they weren't at lunch, or that lunch was being hooked into those iron lung things. It was when I told Jeff I needed to see some schematics about the project that I realized this wasn't even Jeff's normal job. He was some kind of underling who knew nothing about valves or hoses they used when the other folks were "at lunch." I told Jeff I needed access to an English translation of the manual, something I figured had been used when everything was being built. He immediately complied, and then amazingly didn't bat an eye when I told him I needed time alone with the manual.

I read as much as I could while Jeff was away. The iron lung airplane hangar thing was housing 45,000 space wolves, the entire population of the area, including Greg, and giving them a several gallon human blood transfusion. The entire compound was a series of Physical Repayment Centers taking people's blood plus the black domes housing the unconscious space wolves. Additionally, and this was on page four, was the plan for what looked like a giant nutribullet. From context clues, I derived that humans went in there to get, well, nutribulleted. Yucky, I thought.

According to an interoffice document entitled "Safe Office Practices," a chart that was in English on the wall in the office thanks to OSHA, I gleaned that the space wolves had evolved to need other creatures' blood to live. I also figured out that the space wolves had done this before on other planets, thanks to a handy table of contents explaining protocol. The space wolves would come to a planet, "seduce the inhabitants" and slowly set up a blood farm for their species that would last for one or two hundred years.

I was almost done looking through the schematics of the facility when I heard "What are you (garbled)!" I knew that garble anywhere. Jeff was behind me and he could tell I was up to something.

"Mmm, uh, looking for where to put the valve. In, out, up, it could be a ton of ways."

Jeff sort of believed me until he picked up the manual I had laid out and saw it was turned to the page "How to Sabotage This Facility." It was a dead giveaway. Jeff chased me around the control room, lunging at me with his long, claw-like hands and gnashing at me with his claw-like food hole. I was about to get manually nutribulleted when I did the only thing I could think of: I said "Look over there!" pointed behind Jeff, and made a face like there was definitely something to look at. Thankfully Jeff had never seen this trick because he was from space. He looked around frantically, having fallen for my trick like a sucker, and I made a break for it. I bolted down another narrow hallway and ran until I found a hatch that led to Zone E. I went inside and pulled the hatch door shut just as Jeff caught up to me. His teeth gnawed at the plate glass window as I jammed the hatch shut with a folding chair.

Once I was in Zone E, I found the mechanism (again, there's a more specific name for it obviously, but I don't want to bore you) I was supposed to fix. I rigged it so that the malfunctioning valve actually functioned in reverse, pumping air into the bloodstreams of the tens of thousands of space wolves. I'm no expert in blood streams, but it's bad to have air in them. Hopefully this takes a good enough chunk out of their population someone, maybe someone in one of those makeshift cities, or maybe some other valve expert, can do something bigger, someday.

And that was about 45 minutes ago. Right now, Jeff and several of his back-from-lunch cohorts have gathered around the door to the hatch, trying to break in and, I assume, eat me. It seems like only a matter of time, which is why I'm writing this email; as a record of what happened. I'm going to try and fight my way out, but who knows.

Goddamned space wolves.

A Jovial Wednesday Picnic
by
Kyle Brandon Lee

Odin and Zeus stand in the grand gazebo
keeping quiet company as they overlook the grass pristine.
Few words have been spoken between them since the great
debate of mead versus ambrosia and who exactly
made the better home brew in the neighborhood.
Their proximity to another was itself disquieting.

Festivities and proclivities continue on despite disquieting
silence from the high fathers in the gazebo.
Thor goes on about power tools, his voice carrying in the neighborhood.
Hephaestus listens closely, manning his grill which as always, is clean and pristine.
All this while Loki sets off fireworks at their ankles, exactly
where Hephaestus' annoyance is most great.

Heimdall watches Poseidon's cannonball, one so great,
the loss of water in the pool is definitely disquieting
but who he really makes the splash for is unknown exactly.
Hades and Hel talk business in the shade of the gazebo
while Cerberus and Fenris play, their coats pristine.
The two pets are the envy and fear of the neighborhood.

Fast as they may be, no one from the neighborhood
wants to join Hermes in a foot race, so great
he is at track and field, his record so pristine,
that he finds the lack of interest disquieting.
So he joins the rest, throwing lawn darts at Balder not far from the gazebo.
There the crowd tries to strike him exactly.

Ares and Tyr aren't enemies exactly
but their time as high school football rivals entangled the neighborhood.
But truly they just wanted the attention of those men in the gazebo.
Athena reads a tabloid about Isis and Osiris, a romance so great,
while she tries to ignore her own jealousy, one disquieting,
of the boys ogling the sunbathing Aphrodite, her beauty pristine.

Despite outward appearances, and dignity far from pristine,
Frigg and Hera provide one another silent comfort for they know exactly
what the other knows, the hushed truth indeed disquieting.
Everyone is keenly aware that most children in the neighborhood,
their numbers obscene, their numbers great,
were mostly fathered by those in the gazebo.

Exactly who would unravel this hardly pristine neighborhood?
Despite disquieting family histories, their legacies remain great.
The fathers are and have always been above reproach in their gazebo.

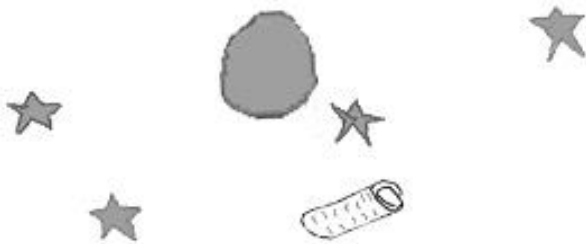
Floods
by
Heather Robinson

Hi, it's mom. Where are you? Because I've got a leak here. It's pouring down from upstairs into the front hall. Thank God I found two pots under the sink. Why did you hide them there? They've never been there before. Every week you sneak in here and hide my things. I found my toothbrush on top of the piano and my teabags in the bathroom cupboard. I suppose you find that funny. What was I saying. The pots. I put them under the leaks, but I'm getting mighty tired running back and forth dumping these pots into the sink. You'd think if I had a bright daughter she'd be able to maintain this house so it didn't leak all over the place. And I don't know why you had the gas turned off. Now I can't cook. Well I can actually. I'm using the electric waffle iron. It's not bad for hot dogs except the sauerkraut sticks. Your father would have liked that meal. He was always eating those German, what do you call them, they look like a man's... oh, never mind, I probably shouldn't say that. Although I've been reading some old letters and you know your father wasn't such a peach. I should have married Bill Slater instead. I heard Bill also had a stroke but he didn't die. I bet he's still alive. Could you find his phone number for me? Wait a minute while I dump another pot. Well, that one almost made it into the sink. And don't tell me we talked about the gas because we didn't. I think I'm just going to kill myself. That would solve everything. I'd crash the car but you took that away too. You know Diane didn't take away her mother's car. At 90 she's still driving. I see her when I take the bus. I know the bus is free and that's a good thing, but I really do think you should be able to speak English to get on it and not pay. If you are going to live in America you should speak the language. And that's what I told that dark woman with the cloth around her head when I saw her talking to her daughter in some other language. Another pot to dump. Well now part of the ceiling looks like it's going to fall. And don't tell me that I should just move into that place. Over my dead body. I don't care if they have a singing group and a painting class, I'm not going. You just want to sell my house so you can get the money. I'm already in a chorus remember? Did you forget that? Now look who is forgetting things. So I forgot my music Monday. Big deal. I'm smart enough to figure out that when what's his name, he has the stick. Anyway, when he lifts his hands up you sing up higher and when his hands go down you sing lower. So that's what I did. Simple as that. And stop sending people over to help me. I don't need any help. I do my own laundry, wash the dishes when they need it, and take a bath every week, which is what I'm going to do right now. By now the tub should be full.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Blintz"
by
Rebecca Coffey

Ingredients

- A Boa constrictor digesting an Elephant.
- Baobabs.
- Other assorted characters (see below).
- For the batter: 4 invisible eggs, 2 cups invisible whole milk, 1-1/2 cups invisible flour, ¼ cup invisible sugar, 1 pinch of invisible salt, 1 tbsp invisible oil.
- For the cheese filling: 1 pound invisible farmer cheese, 8 ounces invisible cream cheese, 4 tbsp invisible honey or maple syrup, 1 tsp invisible vanilla extract, ½ tsp cinnamon.
- To sprinkle on top: ¼ cup raisins.



Directions

1. Anything essential is invisible to the eye. This recipe is fine without the cinnamon and raisins, which is why you can see them.
2. Draw pictures of two mixing bowls, a blender, a food processor, a heavy (nonstick) skillet, and assorted spoons, spatulas, and plates.
3. Use the blender to mix all of the batter ingredients until smooth.
4. Use the food processor to combine the cheese filling's ingredients until smooth.
5. Melt butter in the heavy, non-stick skillet. Cover the bottom of the skillet with a very thin layer of batter. Cook for three or four minutes or until the bottom is golden brown. If the layer of batter is thin enough, at this point the top should be firm. Do not flip the pancake that has formed. Merely transfer it to a plate. Repeat these steps until all of the batter is gone, placing each pancake on a separate plate.
6. You will need enough plates to feed a Rose, a King, a Fox, a Snake, a Vain Man, a Drunkard, a Businessman, a Lamplighter, a Geographer, a Railway Switchman, a Sales Clerk, a Three-Petaled Flower, and a Turkish Astronomer. There may be enough helpings to

feed one of the Baobabs, as well, though if you do feed a Baobab it is at your tiny planet's peril.

7. The Boa Constrictor digesting an Elephant will not need a blintz. It just came for the company and conversation.

8. We all need friends.

9. Spoon a few tablespoons of filling onto the center of each pancake. Roll the pancakes, burrito style, individually. Et voila, blintzes!

10. In the still-warm skillet, drop in another pat of butter. Place as many blintzes as will fit, seam-side down, into the skillet and heat for 2 minutes. Repeat until all blintzes have been heated.

11. Serve immediately. Give the smallest one to the tiny Rose, for she will love it forever.

12. To your eyes and those of your guests, the plates will seem to hold nothing but cinnamon and raisins. But this meal is born of the songs of whirring motors, spoons in bowls, and butter sizzling in pans. It is born of your painstaking illustrations and of the joyful effort of your arms and hands in using heavy objects like blenders, skillets, and food processors. It is born of golden grain, of creamy milk given by cows lowing in the barn, and of eggs lain by chickens who cluck and flutter in the henhouse. Whether you can see this meal or not, it is a gift to your soul.

13. Enjoy! And when you make conversation with your adult guests, ask them to listen to you carefully. Grown-ups almost never understand anything easily, and you will only tire explaining matters again and again.

14. Still, each of your guests will have a useful lesson for you. Use those lessons to build a life that has meaning.

15. And for heaven's sake, try not to be sad.

Lunchroom Lear
by
Peter Taylor

SCENE: A cafeteria

Rising, spoon-sceptred

Friends, entreat my words on burnished throne,
Cursing worms in salads tempest-tossed,
Scarce fit for puking nurses—am I alone?
My hapless band of brothers, courage lost?

Crown murmurs

Prithee, a toast with apples never shook
From golden bough or sun-unsweetened air,
O fie! the green-eyed dragon's lecherous look,
And Jell-O strained through sieves of wonton care.

Food fight

Blow, ye blood-creamed faces! blow and crack!
The sulphurous-swooned incontinence of time!
And climb the upturned steeple's broken back
To plunge ungrateful children into slime.

Enter ghosts

O Chaos, *etu?*—come, heaven's keys—
It gapes, it gapes!

Ah, Mephistopheles!

Corpse
by
John O.

The first thing that goes is your sense of time. Your internal clock. Your circadian rhythm. In the long term, disruption of the circadian rhythm can lead to serious health issues such as chronic fatigue, diabetes, obesity, and clinical depression. This is not our concern- I am at peak physical and mental fitness and my blood sugar is stable. I do almost wish I felt fatigued, chronically, even, as I am a nervous wreck, though I suppose those two things are not mutually exclusive.

But I digress. The long term is not our concern. My competitors and I are only set to remain in our caskets for as long as we can stand, and the record is just short of ten days, upon which Julian Capelle, the world-renowned French Corpse, emerged from his casket and croaked, "*Eau! Eau!*" That means water.

I wish I had not recounted that story- I am thirsty. So, so thirsty.

One of my competitors was French. It is my belief that there is something about the French culture that lends itself to the production of great corpses. A sort of fatalism and propensity for sitting in dark rooms dating back to Descartes. An outsider might think us stoic-seeming Russians would have a similar propensity, but it is not so- we are realists, not stoics, introspective, not unfeeling, and dark rooms are fine and par for the course, but only with a full bottle of vodka. Speaking for myself, that is.

But I digress. I will tend to do that, it is hard to stay focused in the pitch darkness. There is nothing to focus on. Normally, when you are talking to somebody, you are also doing other things, like looking into their eyes, or at the space between their eyes, or over their shoulder, or, if you are on the telephone, pacing, or fiddling with a rubber band, but in either case you are looking at something, doing something. Unless you are blind, but I am not, though I almost wish I were.

Maybe this would be easier if I were. I wonder if any of my competitors are blind. They should ban blind people from this competition. It is an unfair advantage.

Anyway, you cannot do any of those things in here. You must lie still, still enough that the motion detectors do not pick you up. There is some margin for movement, of course, but anything more than, say, the rising and falling of your chest, or the occasional wiggle of a finger, is grounds for disqualification. It makes it hard to talk, by talking I mean thinking, not talking, corpses do not talk, neither do they think but the motion detectors cannot catch you thinking, but you want to keep talking to somebody, otherwise you begin to go mad.

That was one of the first things my father taught me to do, to keep mentally talking. "If you do not," he said while he and a four-year-old I watched the fifth worldwide Corpse Imitation Competition, "you'll fall asleep, and who knows what you might do then?" He sank deeper into the couch. "It takes dedication, Andre. Great dedication. Strength. Resilience. To lie utterly still in the pitch blackness, when the hours have turned to days and the days to months. What animal but man could? No other living thing, I tell you, not of its own volition. No, only man. And to do it for days on end? Only the best of the best, the *crème de crop* of

humanity, the pinnacle of mankind, can." A tear rolled down his cheek. "And I could not," he had whispered.

That was the beginning of my dedication to this noble endeavor, this ultimate expression of humanity. I went to my room and played dead that day. I fell in love with the feeling of total stillness, gained huge respect for the immense focus the sport demanded, and at the end of my first death, could not wait until I had recovered enough to die again.

But that reminds me. Time. The first thing to go.

As I said before, it is not the long term that concerns us. And perhaps it concerns my competitors not at all- perhaps they are happy lying there in the darkness, not truly knowing whether it has been a minute, hour, or day since their last breath of fresh air, not knowing how likely it is that their rivals have surfaced, figuring that they will come out when they have had enough and not a moment sooner. Particularly the French one.

Myself? I want nothing more than to know what time it is besides, maybe, a glass of water, with ice, drops of condensation running down its side. Yes. That would be nice. I grind my teeth, taking care not to grind too hard lest my false molar crack open and its contents be released.

I would like to know what time it is. The entire world knows what time it is. All the people, the dogs, the lizards, the birds, the bugs. Different parts of the world are, in a sense, at different times, but those times are all relative to one another and, most importantly, everybody knows that it is some time. Everybody but myself and my competitors. We are disconnected from the world. Collectively alone.

The inside of a casket can be a lonely place. Who knew?

The second thing that goes is your sense of reality. Your ability to distinguish between what exists and what does not. Your sanity.

"Andre," my father's voice whispers from the darkness, *"you must win."*

"For your country, Andre," President Putin whispers. *"For your family's sake,"* he menacingly continues.

"Please." My sister, Liliya.

"Meow." A cat.

And then I see it, an orange tabby with a long furry tail sitting on my chest. How did you get in here, tabby? It paws my chest with its sharp claws. It is painful. Go away, please, tabby. It does. I am glad.

And now I am in the President's chambers.

"What makes you so sure that they would accept such a result?" I demand.

President Putin shrugs. "Nothing." He takes a puff of his cigar. "But there is nothing about it in the rules. Besides," he releases the cigar and a cloud of smoke drifts from his mouth, "it

is merely a last resort, a trump card. I am confident that your talent and your father's training will carry the day without it."

"Then why the operation?"

He shrugs again. "Just in case. And anyway, it is at no cost to you; it is at the state's expense."

"And what makes you think I would resort to that?"

He smiles. "Well, if you are lacking motivation..."

And now I am back at the dentist's office.

"No anesthesia? I cannot!" Doctor Lukashenko protests. "It would be torture."

"Let me put it this way, Doctor." President Putin picks a pair of pliers from an open drawer and tests it, opening and closing its clamps. "If you administer anesthesia to this patient, a certain somebody else will undergo the pain that the patient is alleviated of."

Doctor Lukashenko gasps. "You don't mean me?"

"That threat needed no further clarification, Doctor." President Putin hands Doctor Lukashenko the pliers and walks out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

"Do you think he meant me?" Doctor Lukashenko asks me. I roll my eyes. Doctor Lukashenko looks at the pliers, looks at me, shrugs, then sticks them in my mouth.

And now I am in the competition's holding room. Everything in it is red velvet.

"Andre," my father says, gripping my right hand in both of his, "today is the day." He gestures to the door through which my destiny lies. "That is the door through which your destiny lies. Make the nation proud, Andre. Make me proud."

"You pose this as a request, Father, but you have given me little choice in the matter." I fold my arms. "Nor has the state. Why did you not tell me, Father, that the state would threaten to exile our family if I did not win?"

"I did not want you to feel the weight of this burden in the casket. The task is demanding as it is."

"So you would have me carry it without me knowing?"

"It is the mark of a good father that he protects his children from realities that are too harsh."

"Then you are a terrible father for damning your child to this fate."

"I saw your potential!" Father erupts. "I saw you in your bed after we watched the competition, doing absolutely nothing. I watched you lie there, completely still, for the entire day, not even reacting when you pissed yourself. You were a natural, the spitting image of Julian Capelle! What sort of parent would I be if I allowed you to waste that talent,

sent you off into the world to become a cosmonaut, or nuclear physicist, or whatever the hell else you might have gotten up to?"

"A good one," I lie through my teeth. I head toward the door.

"I will see you on the other side, Andre," my father calls after me.

I consider telling him about the operation, but I do not.

I open the door. Through it, there is a graveyard. I am confused, and turn back towards my father to find that the holding room has vanished. If I were French, I might shrug, have a seat against a tombstone and light a cigarette. But I am Russian. What does a Russian do in this situation? I am uncertain. What will I do in this situation? I do not know.

"It is cold." One of the graves stirs and Liliya, bony and grey, crawls out. "It is cold here, Andre. It is cold outside of Russia."

"Russia was fairly cold, Liliya," I point out.

"It is colder here." Liliya pouts, crossing her arms. Her left forearm tears from its socket and flies across the graveyard. "See? I have frostbite."

"You do not have frostbite, Liliya. You are a corpse."

"Yes, I am. Because you were not."

And I am back in my casket. My breathing has quickened.

The last thing to go is your composure. Your self-control. Your ability to sit up against a tombstone and smoke a cigarette. Oh, how I envy the French. I can feel it slipping, my breathing now irregular, heart pounding, palms sweating, teeth gently grinding, thighs twitching, every fiber of my being fed up with this casket, this isolation, wanting to rejoin the world, find out what time it is, have a glass of goddamn water! I remind myself that my life, my family, the nation, they wait for me outside, all hoping that I do absolutely nothing for longer than the Frenchwoman, but I cannot. I am not human enough. I am an animal, and the animal cannot become a cadaver of its own volition- it is only a cadaver in death.

So be it. I bite down and my false molar shatters. As the bitter taste of cyanide fills my mouth, I hope that my parents, my sister, the nation, the world, are witnessing my heroics, live.

But what if I have already won?

I quickly spit the cyanide out and push the lid of the casket open. The live audience cheers. Two men rush over to me, one holding a cup of water, another with a steaming towel.

"Did I make it?" I ask, my squinted eyes adjusting to the light. "Am I the victor?"

The man with the towel drapes it over my face and rubs vigorously. The other man hands me the cup of water.

"Well?" I ask again. "Am I the last one?"

"No," says the man with the towel. "The blind French girl is still in her casket."

Contributor Biographies



Robert Garnham is a comedy performance poet and writer based in Devon, UK. His work has appeared in various magazines and he has performed widely at various festivals and fringes. For more information on Robert, visit www.professorofwhimsy.com.



Mary Cresswell is from Los Angeles and lives on New Zealand's Kapiti Coast. She's a science editor who switched to poetry and has been published in NZ, the US, the UK and Australia. Her fifth solo book, *Body Politic*, is being published in e-book and paper by The Cuba Press, Wellington, in July 2020. See also: <https://www.read-nz.org/writer/cresswell-mary/>



Bobbie Armstrong is a former child and current student and writer. Her work has appeared on *McSweeney's*, *Slackjaw*, *Weekly Humorist*, *Belladonna Comedy*, and her parents' fridge.



Tomo Lazovich is a research scientist by day and comedy writer and performer by night. His work has appeared online at McSweeney's, Slackjaw, Points in Case, Little Old Lady Comedy, Weekly Humorist, and Robot Butt. He also writes a monthly satirical column for Funny-ish called Our Dystopian Future. He regularly performs improv and sketch comedy in the Boston area and has studied satire with The Second City. Tomo also has a PhD in Physics, which helps him realize that gravity is just nature's way of bringing him down.



James W. Reynolds lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. His work has previously been published in *Ariel Chart*, *Lighten Up Online*, *Parody*, *The Broadkill Review*, *The Loch Raven Review*, and *Scarlet Leaf Review*.



Originally from Vancouver, **Claire Russell** is a Montreal based writer whose recent work has been in the genres of flash fiction and creative nonfiction, appearing in *High Shelf Press* and *The Good Men Project*. Claire's work looks at the idiosyncrasies of human behavior; the responses to various forms of violence and trauma; and the compensatory power of art. Claire teaches writing and English Literature and Language at John Abbott College in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue. She lives in Verdun with her partner and children.



Kim Malinowski earned her B.A. from West Virginia University and her M.F.A. from American University. She studies with The Writers Studio. Her chapbook *Death: A Love Story* was published by Flutter Press. Her work was featured in *Faerie Magazine* and appeared in *Melancholy Hyperbole*, *Door = Jar*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Calliope*, and others.



Sam Wiles is right handed...and there's more! Sam is a comedian and has performed in clubs and festivals all over the country. He has written for NBC Universal, TNT, Mad Magazine (RIP), as well as co-created the popular web series *Gridiron Heights* for Bleacher Report. He is also one of the hosts of the live comedy debate show *Straw Men* at the UCB theater and hosts the podcast *Fight Island*. If you live in Los Angeles you can catch him hosting one of LA's longest-running comedy showcases, *Rod Stewart Live*, at La Cueva in Highland Park. You can follow him on twitter @VoteSamWiles.



Kyle Brandon Lee is a Texas-born writer of poetry, prose and plays. He's published at Mirror Dance, Furtive Dalliance and Soft Cartel. If someday they open an old and dusty tome made of pecan bark and armadillo hide, perhaps they'll find his work within. Hopefully, it will be plentiful. He can be found at his website www.hillsdreaming.com or on twitter @HDTMountains



Heather Robinson is a writer of fiction and non-fiction from Fairfield, Connecticut. She's drawn to dark comedy, and is the author of *Dementions*, a satire about a young doctor trying to succeed at a cutting-edge clinic whose goal is to shorten the suffering of elderly dementia patients and their family members (yes, read between the lines.) She has been an EMT, a medical assistant, and a hospice volunteer. Many of her essays focus on dementia and end-of-life issues.



Rebecca Coffey is a science and culture journalist, a humorist, and a novelist. More info is at <https://RebeccaCoffey.com>



Peter Taylor has published two books and three chapbooks and his poetry has appeared in journals and anthologies internationally, including *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Antarctica Journal*, *Aperçus Literary Magazine*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *The Copperfield Review*, *Descant*, *Eunoia Review*, *The Font*, *Grain*, *The Linnet's Wings*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Poetry Australia*, *StepAway Magazine*, *The Stray Branch*, and *Tipton Poetry Journal*. He has worked as a printer and bookbinder, medical publisher and institute director and holds a Master of Arts degree in English Literature, specializing in Renaissance drama. He lives in Aurora, Canada.



John O. is a 25 year old single man who lives in a small bedroom in Brooklyn, New York. His bedroom is adjacent to a much larger common area which, his suitresses should take notice so as not to judge him on the fact that he is insecure about his room's lack of legroom, is at least one-third his. He is looking for short or long term dating and spends his time writing humorous short story publications as a way to get himself out there. Potential suitresses and publications interested in his work should contact him via email at yo458@nyu.edu.