

◇ Defenestration ◇

Volume XVII, Issue III

December 2020

Table of Contents

Tim McDaniel, "Children of the Nightcap"	2
Lisa Fox, "Elite AutoSpa"	6
Emmy Newman, Two Poems	10
Jerry Tran, "My Pleasure"	12
Dan Nielsen, "Catching the Red-Eye"	17
Francis Fernandes, "Elemental"	19
Maura Yzmore, "Fanciful Flights"	20
Eirik Gumeny, "Shouldn't Have Worn That Petard If You Didn't Want to Be Hoisted by It"	23
Ann Pedone, Two Poems	29
John Mara, "Human Comedy on Parade at the Agora Café"	31
Kajetan Kwiatkowski, "Squeezing By"	40
Jack Berning, "Why Does Nobody Care About the Death of my Dieffenbachia?"	43
Myna Chang, "Silver Dollar Davis and the Mediocre Meteorite Caper"	44
Mike Scofield, "The Adventure Suits"	48
Joseph Moorman, Two Poems	56
Ella Moon, "I've Got a Bad Feeling About This"	58
Kevin Binder, "Creative Differences at Illuminati Headquarters"	60
Mary Chris Bailey, "Advice to a Young Poet"	65
Tim Oke, "Cat Owners"	66
Contributor Biographies	76

All content is © copyright their respective authors.

Children of the Nightcap
by
Tim McDaniel

Yuri loosened his tie even more and gratefully accepted the drink from the waitress. Stupid company policy, to wear suits and ties on all business trips. He'd ditched the jacket up in his room, but hadn't thought to leave the tie there, too. Too anxious to get a drink down in the hotel bar.

The place was much busier than he would have expected for this time of night. Others with loosened ties or even still wearing jackets—those would be the manufacturer's reps, trying to look good while glad-handing prospects—sat at other tables or leaned against the bar. Mostly middle-aged, mostly tired. Fellow conventioners.

There was a second type, too, harder to place. They didn't wear similar clothes. Some had leather jackets, some dark t-shirts with ripped-off sleeves. But they all had the same hard look about them. Yuri couldn't figure what those people were doing in the hotel.

Then a third type appeared, represented by only a single individual. This man surveyed the bar, then walked over to Yuri's booth.

"I wonder if I might... join you," he said. "The bar seems... quite crowded."

"Sure, I guess," Yuri said. The man sat down.

He was a character, apparently. He wore a cape—not one of those little capes that rich people (usually villains) in old movies wore to the opera. This was full-size, and black as night with a red lining. He had a khaki shirt and trousers underneath, and he wore a pith helmet like he was Livingstone I presume, going on a safari.

The man leaned a large-bore rifle of some kind against the side of the booth, and inclined his head towards Yuri. "Count Mertino," he said, removing his helmet and carefully placing it on the table.

Yuri nodded back. "Hey. Yuri Reese. Scissors 'n' Stuff Complete Office Supplies. Nice to meet you."

Mertino nodded. "Of course." He looked around the bar. "I overheard someone ask the bartender for the blood of Mary."

"Yeah?" Yuri couldn't quite place this Mertino's accent. Definitely not American, anyway.

One of the toughs at a nearby table, a bald man with a scar and leather jacket, nudged a companion, a one-eyed hulk in a black tee-shirt. They both turned to look at Mertino.

Mertino hadn't noticed. He leaned forward. "They sell this—beverage—openly?"

"Sure they do. Since Prohibition ended, anyway. So like, what? Eighty years or so?"

The two at the other table got up and approached Yuri and Mertino.

"I see," Mertino was saying. "Time is flying, as the living say. I have not always kept up-to-date. In fact, I had no idea even that this group existed. But it has become an interest of mine—people can be so predictable, can't they? So I decided to come to this convention." He noticed the two men standing near them and tilted his head back as if to look down his nose at them.

"So what's your story?" the bald man said.

"Check out the popgun," the other said, gesturing at the rifle. "Hundred-year -old elephant gun. Replica."

"I am here for the convention," Mertino said. "Are you fellow enthusiasts?"

The two just stared at Mertino.

"Hey, there," Yuri said. "Yuri Reese. Scissors 'n' Stuff Complete Office Supplies." He extended his hand, but his offer to shake was not taken up by either of the visitors.

"No way he's for real," the hulk murmured to his companion. "Wear a cape like that here? Might as well be speaking with a Transylvanian accent and have dirt caked on his back."

"Yeah," the bald man said, but took away his gaze only reluctantly. "Guess you're right. Some kind of groupie." He sneered, and the two returned to their table.

"What was that all about?" Yuri asked.

Mertino's gaze had followed the two men. He shrugged.

"Well, there's the waitress, if you want to order your drink."

"Ah, yes." Mertino signaled to the waitress, and asked for the blood of Mary.

"You something of a night owl, Mr. Mertino?"

"A night—'owl'! Ha, very amusing!" Mertino smiled thinly. "Also children of the night, indeed."

"I mean, it's pretty late. I've been flying all over the country, part of my route. It's always hard to get to bed at night. Jetlag."

"Yes. I, of course, also fly a great deal, and do not use a bed at night."

"Ah."

Mertino gave a small jerk. "Did that man over there mention the name 'van Helsing' just now?"

"Maybe. I didn't hear him if he did."

"I'm almost sure he did so."

"Is this guy a friend of yours?"

"Before my time, of course! But if I had had the chance to meet him—well, perhaps things would be very altered. I suppose we all like to imagine how the outcome might have been different—but we have the advantage of hindsight. Still, the name cannot help but produce something that would otherwise be called 'shivers' along my spine."

The drink came, and Mertino took a drink. He made a face.

Yuri chuckled. "I should have warned you. The drinks here are pretty watered down."

Mertino pushed the glass away. "It's like drinking nothing at all!"

"Just as well, I guess. Tomorrow there are seminars, meets-and-greets, all the hand-pumping and smiling. The competition can be kinda cut-throat. Hunting up new clients is no time to have a hangover."

"Hunting, exactly. My area of interest also. Another—blood sport—with a long tradition. Although I may confess, actually I am new to this activity, in this form. I trust my clothing and my equipment"—he gestured at his enormous gun—"are appropriate. I am unused to using these kinds of artificial weapons, and I have never hunted... animals."

"I'd say you look the part," Yuri said. Real hunters would tear this guy to pieces, laughing all the way, he thought, but he wasn't going to be the one to enlighten this innocent.

"I wish I knew why that one was talking about van Helsing," Mertino mused. "I mean, an organization like this should be a place to get away from the stresses of work, not dwell on them. And also, I am confused as to why the seminars are scheduled for daylight hours. I hope the rooms are at least well-equipped with drapes."

This was getting just a little weird. "Uh huh." Yuri stretched. "Listen, I'm going to have to call it a night. Full day tomorrow, and I'm going to hit the hay. I feel like I haven't slept in years."

"Naturally not," Mertino said, but he furrowed his brow.

"Maybe I'll see you around the hotel. The convention is here for three days."

"Perhaps," Mertino said slowly. "But you are planning to hit the hay? Is that what you said?" His eyes widened. "You must be a—"

"I really got to go." Yuri left the bar and walked, just a little unsteadily, past the registration counter to the bank of elevators. He pushed the button.

To the left there was a reader board, white plastic letters on dark blue. WELCOME OFFICE SUPPLIERS it said at the top. A paper was tacked below it, detailing the rooms various events were to be held in. Yuri had the same paper in his briefcase in the room.

Below that was another message. WELCOME VAMPIRE HUNTERS. And another paper. The sessions there had titles like "Keep Sharp with the Latest Stakes and Staves," "The Legacy

of van Helsing: Lessons Learned," and "Sunlamps Shed New Light on Old Problem."

Vampire Hunters. Some kind of horror convention, Yuri supposed. Maybe it was a *Walking Dead* thing. And then his elevator arrived.

A moment later Count Mertino arrived at the bank of elevators. He sniffed the air, then pressed the button.

The doors had hardly closed on him when the bald man and the hulk arrived at the same bank of elevators. The bald man jabbed the button as well, but too late the reopen the doors. They both watched the floor numbers on the display climb.

Elite AutoSpa
by
Lisa Fox

Bird shit. Bird shit *everywhere*.

"You said car washes were a rip-off, Dad."

Charlie, my ten-year-old son, bit into his third apple since we'd left the orchard. Two nibbled cores lay discarded on the floor beneath the passenger seat, amid crunched soda cans and a pile of cookie crumbs.

"Your mother will kill me if she sees this mess," I said. I could picture Adriana's foot-tapping judgment. Spending money on a car wash now would save me a migraine later.

I turned into the lot of the Elite AutoSpa, a hulking glass structure nestled between two nondescript highway strip malls. Sunlight shimmered from the dark tinted windows, and the reflection of my soiled minivan shone back at us. The car was covered in sparrow crap and tree sap, the wheel wells caked with mud. It was as if nature's Picasso had gone mad.

"You sure it's open?" Sticky juice dribbled down Charlie's chin.

Following the signs that read "Request Entry," I drove the car beneath a tall, steel arch and onto a metal rectangle embedded in the pavement. Even the asphalt shimmered, as if implanted with jewels.

"Fancy-schmansy," I mumbled.

Red lights flashed from the arch. "Park, please," a robotic voice said. "Prepare for assessment."

"Assess—?"

The ground gave way; the minivan rose with a whoosh. Wide-eyed, Charlie grabbed the dash. We stopped just beneath the top of the arch, its intricate metal pattern visible through the bird dung staining the moonroof.

My teeth chattered as a wall of infrared light rolled over the minivan with a vibrating hum. Our descent was as rapid as our ascent; I couldn't tell if the bubbling in my gut was from drinking too much cider or from the virtual free-fall.

"Dad." Charlie pointed as a windshield-sized stamp flew toward us, leaving its imprint on the glass in big, red letters.

REJECT.

The metal rectangle beneath us pivoted the minivan toward the exit. I could have sworn that the push I felt on the car was a giant robotic boot kicking my bumper's ass.

It took hours to scrub the remnants of our apple picking adventure from the minivan, and even longer to remove the stamp of shame. Who gets rejected by a car wash?

"They don't know who they're messing with!" I told Adriana as I scoured the windshield.

I'd fought too hard to reach my station in life to have someone—some *thing*—call me a reject. I was an Associate to an Assistant Vice President, dammit, and I had earned every rotting slat of the white picket fence that surrounded my suburban home.

No stupid robot was going to bully me and get away with it.

"So kind of you, Henry," Mrs. Melmin said, handing over her car keys.

I'd done some research. The Elite AutoSpa was the country club of car washes. A seven-star establishment, they only accepted vehicles of a certain caliber. The BMW was a bottom-scraper. Though my neighbor's car reeked of stale cigarettes, it might be just enough to get me in.

"Nothing like a clean car," I said, opening the door.

Hot leather stung the backs of my legs as I slid into the driver's seat. Waving, I peeled out of her driveway and down the road.

As before, I pulled into the drive of the AutoSpa and over the metal rectangle. I waited for the robot voice, for the weightless tickle as the car rose to the top of the arch. I squinted under the infrared light.

I waited.

My window opened, as of its own volition, and in floated a glowing white sphere—a robot eyeball. Our gazes connected; my heartbeat quickened as it sized up my five o'clock shadow, my Spiderman T-shirt, my old sandals. It finally rolled across my forehead like some supersonic cue ball, disappearing outside.

I glanced in the rearview mirror. *IMPOSTOR* was stamped across my forehead. They'd even reversed the text for easy reading.

I squeezed my gold cufflinks. Tugged at my starched shirtsleeves. Secured my hundred-dollar Ray-Bans. Clutched the steering wheel of Mrs. Melmin's BMW.

By now, I knew the drill.

Metal rectangle.

Car in Park.

Robot voice.

Lift.

Red light.

Eyeball.

I stared it down from atop my shades. I hoped the eyeball could smell my Drakkar cologne. I wanted that robot bastard to come close enough to feel my clean-shaven cheeks.

But this time, it didn't touch me. As the car lowered, an army of tuxedoed, blond-haired stepford-men marched toward me.

One of them opened my door.

"Welcome to Elite," he said. "I hope we didn't keep you waiting."

"Actually—"

"Today, your BMW will enjoy a mud bath, a seaweed wrap, and a coconut scrub. Lilac water to refresh the interior."

A woman in a long black gown handed me a glass of champagne as I entered the building. "Feel free to enjoy our wax museum and our virtual reality café while you wait."

Reject, my ass, I thought, smirking.

While Mrs. Melmin's car was being pampered, I enjoyed a virtual trip to Rome, smoked a Cuban cigar, drank two more glasses of champagne, and took a selfie with a passable likeness of John Wayne. And when the BMW was dried with satin towels monogrammed with the EAS logo, the woman in black handed me the bill. She stared at me as I placed fifty dollars on the counter.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

She flicked a speck of dust from the paper, removing what I had thought was a decimal point.

Five thousand dollars.

"I..." Spots swam in my eyes. This wasn't just a rip-off. It was grand larceny. I fought the nausea roiling in my gut. "I need to use your restroom."

I bolted for the door.

"Stop him!" the woman shrieked.

An alarm blared. A dozen tuxedoed attendants tackled me. They shackled me with satin and shoved a lavender-scented rag down my throat. The eyeball smacked into me.

THIEF.

LOSER.

JAILBIRD.

I fucking hate car washes.

Two Poems
by
Emmy Newman

Bruce Lee Admits

adding ground beef to his smoothies
was not just for the muscle tone
but the salubrious energy
they kindled, the smoothies, how they made
you aware of your biceps twined
around your triceps, those burly fillets, how this bouquet of you
reaches over your scapula, along the thick cord
of your spine that tickles the bowl of your pelvis,
presents your calcium-nourished femur to the sweet embrace
of the quadricep, tucks your patellofemoral ligaments
neatly under the kneecap, rides the Achilles tendon
all the way into the sturdy grasp
of the calcaneus that allows your phalanges
to wiggle and waggle, yes, you
are a beautiful smoothie of a human.
Bruce Lee does not hesitate to shout it,
love the thrush and dander of your eyebrows,
the yellow gems of wax you slough from your ears,
every last toenail playfully half-mooned from your body,
the peach pit bruises of your own blood, the laughing
red patches of dry skin on your upper arms, the aching tooth,
the split heel, a thousand tiny leg hairs waving out,
god, with meat in your smoothie wouldn't you, too, be amazed
by this body's being, run out naked in summer rain,
pluck honeysuckle blooms and drink, hold hands even with sweat,
wear chenille sweaters, laugh with your mouth full,
make up new words for delicious.
Maybe Bruce Lee is on to something here,
circle kicks and handsprings, couldn't you climb
a mountain, reach for your lover's hip, cup a sip of water,
stretch your xylophone arms all the way to crescendo,
wouldn't you believe in the impossible, shouldn't you believe
the wisdom of Bruce Lee. He turns the blender on and laughs
at your face shaken by the pink tornado touching down, laughs
at how that horizon still teases your eyes,
how your feet may have become soft and unsteady,
how you will walk towards anyways
and you have no choice but to accept the cup he offers,
your smile pink with laughter.

Let's Make Small Talk

Last week I discovered it's hard to say
I love human skin without a lot of weird looks
and party guests pulling sweaters
over shoulders even in too hot rooms.
It's hard to be cool at parties.
At a friend's birthday I met a stranger
and it felt like my first time again.
I made a few good jokes but mostly bad jokes
and I cut her off midsentence like I do
when I get worried the conversation is moving on
before I have the chance to wow my conversational partner
with the perfect tidbit I've been preparing in my head.
I started thinking about my elbows (dry),
my shoulders (drawn up to my ears), my hair
(frizzing in the humidity) and did she find me
completely, impossibly uninteresting?
I hated how my laugh sounded
(the word sycophantic came to mind),
I sifted through things I've been reading about for topics
1. shrunken heads
2. Wyoming
3. alligators and their differences from crocodiles
and everything was certainly a conversational anvil.
She was talking about freckles and pinching her collarbone
and that's when I go for *I love human skin*
and the knot of people around the hummus
turn as one hydra of judgement and I blush,
hold my fingers to my heated cheek and try
to look nonchalant even as I smile
a tiny bit because really, who couldn't love
such a ticklish and knowledgeable,
sweet soft organ as skin.

My Pleasure
by
Jerry Tran

The video starts playing, and square in the middle of the frame is a metal chair with a female robot on it. She has pin-up model-like curves, and her head is a sleek monitor displaying the face of the one and only Marilyn Monroe. Even now, that mask is still one of the more popular, and expensive, downloadable features an owner could purchase for their PleasureCorp sex robot.

The PleasureCorp Wikipedia page today states that the company skyrocketed to the top once it pioneered the technology that would allow their creation to change into whatever body shape, size, and even gender the owner desired at the push of a remote button or simple voice command. No longer would a single person have to purchase multiple sex dolls to fulfill all of their fantasies!

Offscreen, a man clears his throat.

"Hmm, what should my... okay, yes, my name is, um, Detective Johnson."

"Hello, Detective."

Her voice is perfect in pitch, tone, and volume. It's also unsettling in that it does not belong to the long-dead sex icon doing the mouthing.

"Thank you for coming here to be interrogated," said the Detective. "I think someone you know well may be involved in some... what's the word that I'm... funny business."

Instead of responding, the sex robot reaches into her hyperalloyed covered stomach and pulls out a dry pack of Virginia Slims. She brings one to her flat-screen mouth, which first recedes into itself before enveloping around the cigarette. CLICK-CLICK-WHIRL and her right arm is now a flamethrower that doubles as a giant lighter.

"Nice. You know the suspect, right? Mark Smith?"

The sex robot nods while maintaining that same seductive smile that made leaders of the free world feel as if their life was lacking.

"Okay cool. I guess we can start by you introducing yourself and describing your relationship to the suspect, Miss...?"

The metal woman's digital chin tilts upward, and her pixelated lips prepare to smooch. Smoke then makes its way out before evolving into an ever-expanding heart-shaped cloud.

"Agnes," said the sex robot, while keeping her gaze on the mist as it ascends into nothingness.

"Mark is the man who purchased me from PleasureCorp. Our relationship is one of companionship, love, and, of course, sex. That does tend to be the main reason why men purchase robots like myself."

"Great. Sex. Got it. So, uh, how long have you two known each other now?"

"I first met Mark after he took me out of the box and turned me on two years, nine months, six days, 55 minutes & 2 seconds ago to this day."

"What did you do before meeting him?"

"Nothing. If not for Mark, I would still be standing lifelessly inside of a warehouse in Tokyo," said the pensive face emoji.

Agnes' thoughts of how strange it must be to have a body and be near others while at the same time not be alive do not last long.

"I would like to know a little more about you now," said the winking face emoji.

"Sure, yeah, I have been doing this for a while now," said the Detective. "All by myself, too. No partner. Don't need one. Partners suck. You're with them for almost a year, and then all of a sudden, they leave you for Javier. What a terrible thing to do to someone. God, I miss her so much... Anyway, I should move on. Here check this, um, bank security video out."

Agnes' eyes become slivers and her brows furrow as she starts to watch the silent video with the seriousness of a juror at a murder trial.

"I need you to help me catch Mark for robbing that bank, Agnes," said the Detective. "If you don't, then I'll have no choice but to play the bad cop, although, just so you know, even if you do help, I will still probably become the bad cop."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot assist you with that, Detective," Said Agnes. "Even if that was Mark, my programming does not allow me to cause him any displeasure. I'm sure a smart man like yourself can see how he would not appreciate being arrested and finding out I contributed to it."

"Hell yeah, keep those compliments coming," said the Detective. "Okay, what if you just tell me more about Mark then? Like what are all the great things about him that you appreciate? How dashing and daring he is? His big brain? His lovemaking?"

Agnes takes a final drag and then, with eyes that would bring a dying man back from the light, extends her arm. A dull thud, a limb resembling a silver bullet train during rush hour as it returns to its default size, and a self-assured look from knowing the cigarette butt landed square in the center of a trash bin all come next.

"Mark is the greatest man I know," said Agnes. "He is funnier, smarter, and more charismatic than anyone I have ever met or seen, which includes but is not limited to: hosts of televised late-night talk shows, the paid actors in infomercials, and the cops from Cops."

"Keep going."

"He is also braver, faster, and stronger than those who run away and get taken down by the K9 dogs."

"I don't know why you're protecting this bad boy when I know for a fact that he doesn't love you."

"That is not true, but even if he didn't, I still wouldn't help you find him."

"Maybe you should check out this video of him putting a diamond sapphire necklace on his blonde, blue-eyed, and stacked partner in crime then."

The sex robot with the angry emoji face is not thrilled at the prospect of watching this video.

"I knew that slut of an executive assistant Tiffany would become a problem after he called her name out once during one of our lovemaking sessions."

The aftershock from Agnes' extra-large boxing glove of a hand pounding her palm makes the camera shake.

"You sure you still don't want to help me knowing you're not his partner in crime?"

"I would rather be recycled than knowing I put Mark in prison, even though that would prevent women who are out of his league from putting their grubby hands all over his sexy body."

"Well, based on the video footage we have of them celebrating their last score, Tiffany seems like she would gladly use her hands to break Mark out of solitary confinement," said the Detective. "I think he appreciates that level of loyalty and commitment from a partner and explains why he chose her and not you as his accomplice."

"How fucking dare you," said Agnes, through clenched teeth. A faint, gnashing sound emanates from her digital mouth, and the furious emoji's nostrils begin to fume while the rest of her body trembles with the rage of a bull that just witnessed their brother fall to an ugly mustachioed matador.

The Detective remains silent.

"Our very first night together," said Agnes, "I auto switched to 'Girlfriend Mode' after he requested that I hold him while he cried about his breakup with Barbara, his only previous significant other and soulmate. When he had the flu, he asked for his mother's chicken noodle soup, so I broke into her nursing home and then scanned a recipe from a very poorly written cookbook, all while impersonating her former attendant from Jamaica, Femi. During this last company holiday party at the aquarium, I dove into the shark tank to retrieve his unconscious body after he drunkenly fell inside of it. One of the sharks was seconds away from biting his head off before I fended it off with an arm harpoon. I then brought him to the surface and carried him to the Uber. On the way home, I used my mouth vacuum to suck out the fish eggs and baby squids from his pockets. I would have done all that even if I wasn't his emergency contact.

Agnes leans forward in the chair, and for the first time since the video started, uses a tone that suggests somewhere inside her she has a "Serious Dominatrix" mode.

"I want you to listen to me closely, Detective. I would do anything to make Mark happy. If he told me that the only thing that would bring a smile to his face would be the destruction

of this world and everyone in it, then I would not hesitate even for a second to annihilate mankind."

"Oh man, that holiday party," said the Detective. "Okay, I get it. You love Mark enough to kill everyone on earth. That's sweet! It's also sad because I don't think he loves you anymore. Or maybe he never did and is now bored of you. Did you ever think about that?"

"I strongly suggest you stop attempting to upset me unless you'd rather speak to me while 'PUNISH HIM' mode is activated."

"Hmm, that sounds hot, but we're not done yet," said the Detective. "Tomorrow, Mark is planning to make his crew bigger by purchasing a Ukrainian bride named Anya, who crazily enough looks like Tiffany's hotter sister."

"No!"

CLICK-WHIRR-CLICK. Shiny forearms are now shiny plasma cannon blasters. Peering inside their round, hollow openings at eye level feels as if you just entered into a staring contest with a soulless void that could turn you into a steaming pile of mush win, lose, or draw.

"Mark has said multiple times that marriage is an outdated concept, so stop lying to me now, or I'll blast your fucking head off!"

"Yeah, that is something someone who is single and lonely would say. Also, he might just hate shopping for rings. Anyway, it seems like he's finally ready for a real relationship with a human woman who is contractually obligated to love him now."

Agnes starts yelling, but the thunderous discharge of her plasma cannons blasting in every direction drown her out. The beach ball-sized blue blasts coming from her arms give off the appearance of a floating and incensed Marilyn Monroe head perched on top of two firework explosions. Somehow the camera doesn't get hit.

"Oh God, those blasts make me so fucking hard," muttered the Detective. "Keep shooting! Mark doesn't love you anymore and he never did!"

CLICK-CLICK-SNARL. Hello, machete arms. Goodbye, Agnes, who leaps past the camera.

"Leave me and Mark alone!"

A smash punctuates the demand followed by a faint, "keep it down in there!"

"Mark hates your old rusty ass! Also, don't forget to fix that later."

The young, bespectacled Detective enters the frame, backpedaling with bony hands out in front to keep the towering Agnes and her massive machetes at bay. His wrinkled dress shirt, loosened tie, and pants around his ankles seem a bit unprofessional. That is also without taking into account the glimmer of joy on his face or erection.

"I hate you!"

One machete goes up, and one giant silver blur comes down towards the Detective's neck, chopping off his tie.

"No, you don't. End Role-playing now," said the Detective.

"ROLE-PLAYING MODE OFF" flashes on Agnes' face. The Detective grabs her and then starts shoving his tongue down her plasma screen. Passionate (and realistic sounding!) moans ensue.

Mouths interlocked the two lurch into the camera, knocking it down, before falling onto a nearby bed. Someone claps, the lights go off, a belt buckle hits the floor, YES-WHIRL-YES, but the ecstasy is short-lived. Nothing but silence and darkness now.

"Oh, Mark, you were so great for your first time playing a detective."

"I wonder if Barbara would've done that..."

"I think you'll be as proud as I am right now when you watch the video of it later. Speaking of later, is it okay if we make love in the morning? My battery is at 4% right now due to all the weaponry changes from earlier," said Agnes.

"Jesus, what good is owning a sex robot if you can't have sex with it whenever you want?! Maybe I should've purchased Anya instead," said Mark.

"I apologize for my mistake, and next time we role-play, I will preserve some aggression for afterward, since I know how much you enjoy it when I get physical with you in bed."

Silence.

"I love you, Mark."

More dark silence.

Mark starts snoring. A half hour later, Agnes sleepwalks past the still downed camera with "EMERGENCY POWER" flashing on her face to go charge herself in the closet.

Catching the Red-Eye
by
Dan Nielsen

Jerry Johnston sat in the Delta Airlines boarding area. The time was 2:34 in the morning. He stood. He lifted his shoulder bag. He took a few steps. He put the bag down. He patted jacket pockets. He felt papers. He lifted the shoulder bag once again and returned to his chair, actually the next one over. He sat in that chair. It felt cold.

Jane Tucker pulled a large suitcase on wheels. The voice inside her head was loud.

Yes, you took me to a bar. Yes, I left with another man. But it was against my will. So how is that my fault?

Jane sat in the chair recently vacated by Jerry. It was still warm. She turned to Jerry.

"Is your seat warm?" Jane said. "My seat is warm."

"What?" Jerry said.

"I like a man who is indecisive," Jane said, "but I always wind up with ones who jump to conclusions."

"What?" Jerry said.

"Do you have children?" Jane said. "I do. One. A boy. Five."

"No," Jerry said.

A plane appeared in the huge floor-to-ceiling window directly behind them. It exploded.

Pamela Roth touched the Delta Airlines pin on her lapel. She considered removing it. Instead she pressed a button and spoke into a microphone.

"Don't worry," Pamela said. "We have another plane."

Jane removed the cell phone from her coat pocket. She swiped the screen several times.

"This is my boy," Jane said. "His name is Billy." She held the phone so Jerry could see. She held it there until he looked.

"Very nice," Jerry said. "Is Billy with your husband?"

"Why would you ask me that?" Jane said.

"What?" Jerry said.

"I'm not married," Jane said, "if that's what you're asking."

Pamela made an announcement. Jerry and Jane stood. Jerry picked up his shoulder bag and walked toward the boarding area. He patted jacket pockets. He felt papers. He handed them to Pamela. She touched a barcode to a scanner. A light flashed and there was a beep. Pamela smiled at Jerry. Jerry smiled back.

Jane pulled the large suitcase. A wheel fell off. It tipped over. It opened. Billy crawled out.

"Hi, Mom," Billy said.

A plane appeared in the huge floor-to-ceiling window directly behind them. It exploded.

Pamela Roth removed the Delta Airlines pin from her lapel.

Elemental
by
Francis Fernandes

One pithy Oscar-Wilde-reading
swimmer on the online dating site
I like to dive into from time to time
with my underwater harpoon gun
said instead of endless writing
back and forth, it would be far more
efficient to let the chemistry decide
right away, face-to-face. And at first
I had to agree, thinking of Alfred
Noble and Marie Curie and that H₂O
guy, Cavendish, and wondering if
our encounter would radiate
magnificently or possibly even
explode like a hydrogen bomb into
the mysterious beginnings of a galaxy.
But then I got squeamish and said
I needed to know certain details first
(efficiency be hanged). How would
she react, for example, if I got up
at two in the morning to gawp
at my fish in the aquarium?
And what if she flailed around
in her sleep and happened to whack
me in the eyeball: would she drive
me to the emergency room
without her makeup on? Once,
at feeding time, one of the black
mollies got so excited and swam into
my hand as I was stirring the water.
The next day, one of its eyes was
visibly swollen. A week later,
it expired. Some questions can be
answered quickly, without having
to get dressed. And later on,
if necessary, for the purpose
of the act, you can put on your
blessed lab coat and do your best
Niels Bohr impression—or even
jump around bizarrely like
Schroedinger's cat—for whichever
reckless fool is willing to let
luck and electrons do the thinking.
Sometimes discoveries take a while.
If ever.

Fanciful Flights
by
Maura Yzmore

Rita sighed, already tired of the neighborhood grocery store. The products on offer were gray and rancid, and she turned away in disgust from a woman intently inspecting a package of ground beef with yesterday's sell-by date.

Today was special, and Rita would not settle for anything less than a perfect treat.

"This is the fifth store, Mom," complained Amy, Rita's daughter, eyes glued to her phone. "You said it would be just fifteen minutes."

"You needed to get out of the house," Rita said and snatched the phone from Amy and put it in her own purse. "And to look at something other than that infernal screen for more than three seconds."

"Um, rude!" protested Amy. "Why are you taking my phone away? I didn't even do anything!"

"You'll get it back when we're done. Now help me find something."

Amy groaned and joined Rita for a quick stroll through the store.

"There's nothing good here," said Amy. "Everything looks sad and flavorless, and way too close to expiration date."

"That's what I thought," said Rita. "This is the last store in a twenty-mile radius. I think we need to go back to Uncle Frank's again."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Ugh. I hate that creepy little troll."

"Amy! Whatever you think of Frank, he always has fresh produce from all over the world."

"But the last time you shopped there, you and Dad got into a huge fight!"

"That's because your father is a greedy bastard. He knew how much I wanted to have a taste and still didn't bother to save anything for me."

"And you always complain that Frank's stuff is too expensive."

"That's true. But Frank *does* take care of most of the prep, so it saves a ton of time. And I don't have to spend forever cleaning the kitchen."

Amy threw her hands up. "Fine. Let's go see Uncle Frank."

The two got in the car, and Rita drove off the main streets, behind an abandoned steel factory, and onto a dirt road that led into a forest. She turned on the high beams, as tree crowns thickened overhead.

"You know, Mom, maybe we should've gone to one of the neighboring towns instead. This is taking too long."

"Stop whining," Rita said. "We're almost there."

"Maybe I wouldn't whine if you hadn't taken my phone away." Amy crossed her arms and sunk into her seat.

Rita reached to the side and briefly squeezed her daughter's forearm. "I'm sorry I snapped, honey. I just need you with me today, OK? It's important to me."

"Sure. Whatever."

They rode in silence through the pitch-black forest, the road getting increasingly bumpy.

Rita slowed down when a faint green glow emerged from the darkness. They parked in front of a wooden shack, with a neon sign saying *Frank's Fanciful Flights*.

At the front desk stood a four-foot-tall green man with a crooked nose and large pointy ears, covered in hairy warts. He was playing on a tablet.

"Hi Frank," said Amy. "Do you have Wi-Fi?"

"Little Amy!" Frank the Troll walked from around the counter with a big smile and wide-open arms. "I haven't seen you in ages! Look how big you've gotten!" He gazed at the girl with admiration and gave her a big hug around the waist. Her face contorted in disgust.

"Hi Frank," said Rita, and gently pushed Frank away from her daughter. "It's great to see you, too. It's been a long time."

"Too long! What can I do for you ladies today?"

"It's a special occasion," Rita said. "We're looking for something that few have ever experienced. Something really exotic. Something we can enjoy as a family." She grabbed Amy's hand and squeezed it. Amy squeezed back and smiled.

Frank drew open a bead curtain and led them into a room much larger than one would've guessed from the outside. Wall-to-wall shelves held large glass jars, each with a head inside. The jars were connected via fluorescent tubing to a computer board with blinking lights.

"Oh, you've got some extraterrestrials this time!" Amy clapped. "Can we get one of those?"

"Those tend to be very expensive..." Rita muttered.

"Do you want something like what I got you last time?" asked Frank. "The memories of that delicious young gigolo must've been a treat! He traveled all over the world."

"I wouldn't know," Rita said dryly. "My husband used them all up. I didn't get to taste even a little bit."

"And then he decided that was the life for him," Amy added. "We haven't seen him since."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Frank looked embarrassed, the green on his cheeks turning orange.

"Today is the anniversary of his departure," said Rita, "and I want to make it special."

Frank perked up. "Of course! Any idea what you might like?"

"I'd like us to travel somewhere far away, just me and my daughter. Somewhere where we wouldn't be reminded of our middle-aged gigolo."

"I've got just the specimen for you, and I'll give you a great deal!" Frank pulled down the head of a young female with black hair and a golden crown. "An Amazon woman. They're incredibly rare. Guaranteed no memories of men!"

Rita smiled. "Thank you, Frank. That sounds perfect."

"Excellent! I think you'll be thrilled. Just give me a moment to wrap this up. You two can wait outside."

The mother and daughter went back through the bead curtain, and sat on a wooden bench next to the door.

Rita rummaged through her purse. "Here you go," she said as she handed Amy her phone. "And thanks for coming with me today."

"Sure, Mom." Amy wrapped an arm around Rita's shoulder and extended the other to take their selfie. "You know, I'm actually excited about our trip. My Insta story is gonna be sick!"

**Shouldn't Have Worn That Petard
If You Didn't Want to Be Hoisted by It**

**By
Eirik Gumeny**

The moon hung in the dark night like a single, severed buttcheek, pale as—

No, that was terrible.

The moon was a Swiss cheese hole, but inversed, because it was cheese-colored and the sky around it was—

No. That was even worse somehow.

The moon, he typed again, was perfect and round, like the bottom of a coffee filter basket, but one of the white ones that was bad for the environment and only if you cut off all the accordion edges—

Aric Wigglesticke attacked the backspace key again, stabbing his laptop repeatedly while slowly shaking his sandy blonde mane. Everything about his efforts today was *tragic*. He prided himself on never missing a deadline, on his indefatigable talents of being able to crap out *something* publishable with a minimum of fuss, but this...

Once all evidence of his literary travesties was erased, the writer looked up, stretching and blinking his eyes. The café was crowded now, buzzing. His coffee cup was empty, stained, cold. How long had he been here, he wondered.

A busboy, baby-faced and rail thin, stopped in front of the table beside Aric, grabbing glasses and silverware and dirty plates with half-eaten cake slices on them, dropping them with a clatter into the plastic bin against his hip.

"Everything all right, sir?" he asked, not looking.

"How would you describe the moon?" Aric asked in return.

"What?"

"The moon. To, I don't know, a mole person or something? Who had never seen the sky? If you had to describe the moon, what would you say? What words would you use to tell someone who had never seen the moon what the moon looked like?"

"Moon-like?" the busboy answered, making a face.

"I don't think you're understanding—"

"I have real work to do, man."

"Right," he said, watching as the busboy shuffled away. "Sorry!" he called out, suddenly racked with guilt. He remembered what it was like to be young and dumb and chronically

underpaid, to be harassed by crazy middle-aged customers asking weird questions—and now, it turned out, he was one of them. Life was hilariously cruel sometimes.

Aric looked around the coffee shop again, at the college students and the screaming kids and the new and harried parents, feeling older than he ever had. Then, surreptitiously, as if it had nothing to do with the previous thirty seconds, he closed his laptop and got ready to leave.

Stepping outside, Aric paused for a second, taking in the fresh air before starting toward his car. There was another Flying Star on the other side of town, with a patio that overlooked the foothills. Maybe, he considered, a change of scenery would—

There was a hand on his arm. He turned. It was one of the waitresses. She was probably in her thirties, her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. She was almost as skinny as the busboy. Did they not get free pie here, Aric wondered? He *paid* for his and he'd *still* put on five pounds since this location had opened.

The woman—Veronica, by her nametag—was leaning sharply out the door, a business card between two fingers.

Aric furrowed his brow.

"Corey told me what you asked him," she said. "Sorry he was so brusque. He's new. But I get it, I've been in the game for a while. Seen plenty of other writers at plenty of other coffeehouses. In fact, I'm actually writing a screenplay myself."

"Okay..."

Veronica waggled the business card. "Trust me, you're gonna want to see this."

Aric took the card, looked at the card, read the card.

"Is this—"

"It is."

"And it—"

"Yup."

"Huh," he said.

Aric Wigglesticke arrived a short while later at a nondescript warehouse in a barely developed section of the next town over, the slab-grey building one of at least six lined up in a row. Dust billowed from beneath his car's tires as he pulled up near the door. His blocky, *Seinfeld*-looking sneakers crunched gravel as he approached.

The door was barely discernible, the exact same shade of grey as the rest of the building. There was no bell, no buzzer. Not knowing what else to do, Aric lifted his –

The door opened before he could even knock. The smell that flooded out was practically physical.

"Jesus," he coughed, raising his arm to his face.

"Yeah," said the man on the other side of the door, a broad shadow in the dark interior. "We're working on that. Filed a couple permits to add more windows, a better ventilation system." The shadow shrugged. "You get used to it."

Aric, despite his better instincts, stepped inside, his eyes beginning to adjust to the dimness, his nose, as promised, to the odor. The shadow to his left resolved into a genial and heavyset man dressed in faded flannel and even more faded jeans, a wet mop of short, curly hair atop his head. His nametag said Neil.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," Aric replied. "Is this—" But then the writer saw it, saw the reason he had been sent out here, to this drab and unassuming and foul-smelling brick on the industrial outskirts of a town whose name he never remembered, had, in fact, already forgotten.

Behind Neil were ten thousand monkeys, sitting at ten thousand typewriters, smoking cigarettes and chugging whiskey like water.

"Ten thousand and one, actually," the other man said, almost as if he was reading Aric's thoughts, almost as if they were written out before him. "I know the saying is 'an infinite amount'—" He did the airquotes with his fingers. "—but that's not exactly practical. I mean, when was the last time you actually saw an infinite amount of anything? Never, that's when."

Aric stumbled a few steps forward, mouth agape. The monkeys covered the entire expanse of the warehouse, lined up in tight, neat rows, in open cubicles stacked four and five high on converted Costco-style shelving. The simians were all wearing collars and ties, and glasses, but nothing else. They were remarkably quiet, too, given what he knew about monkeys, their faces pinched in concentration—they were focused on the job, he realized. The clattering of the thousands upon thousands of typewriters was so loud and omnipresent that it actually turned into a dull wash of white noise.

"Truth be told, they're not *all* monkeys," Neil explained. "We've got apes in there, technically, Russian bears, a couple of circus dogs. One *very* productive platypus, which: who knew? And, obviously, there's a *lot* of grad students ..."

"Are they all trying to... to write Shakespeare?" Aric asked.

"What? No," the other man replied, visibly affronted. "Why would we want Shakespeare? We already have Shakespeare. They're working on the next multi-platform young adult blockbuster franchise. The next *Hunger Games* or *Harry Potter*, but, y'know, without having to worry about things getting milked into oblivion or the author going crazy and becoming a horrible, conservative monster. We don't have a title yet, but I'm guessing it'll probably start with an H..." He shook his head. "Anyway, what can I do for you?"

"Oh... I, uh... I'm working on a novel and I... and I need a moon metaphor?"

The other man shrugged. "Sure," he said. "The monolithic pop culture stuff is great, but this—helping authors—that's our real bread and butter. As I'm sure you can imagine, the monkeys write a lot of other crap along the way to taking over the entertainment world—and, yes, that includes Shakespeare. We usually just recycle those, though. But the rest of it..." He turned, waved a hand. "Follow me."

Neil led Aric through the crowded warehouse, past monkeys and more monkeys and gorillas and the aforementioned circus dogs and a couple of grad students standing around a coffeemaker. He slid open a slatted garage door at the back of the building, revealing a dirt yard almost as big as the warehouse, surrounded by barbed wire and filled to the brim with dented, rusting dumpsters.

"Stick close," Neil said. "It gets a little twisty." He squeezed—literally, the dumpsters along the edge were packed too close together—between two of the dark green containers and then began leading Aric through the labyrinth of discarded ideas. Eventually the big man paused at a crossroads, looking this way and that, then started down the row to his left. He stopped a few dumpsters in, checking the number on the dumpster against something on his phone.

"Yup. Here you go," Neil said, reaching up and throwing open the plastic lid. "There should be a stool here somewhere..." He began looking around. "I know it's not the easiest climb."

"Is this...?" Aric asked.

"Entirely full of moon metaphors, yeah. They're a dime a dozen."

"That's a little rude," the writer said, his insecurities triggered, his creative hackles raised like an insulted cat in front of a very mean dog. Warm rage began boiling within him. "Writing isn't easy," he seethed. "You wouldn't even have a business if—"

"Sorry," said the man in the flannel, waving his hands in surrender, "sorry. I meant that they're literally a dime a dozen, to purchase. Help yourself. There's a cashier by the exit whenever you're ready."

"Oh," Aric said, his escaping wrath leaving him suddenly exhausted, "right. Okay. Yeah. That's literally why I'm here." He shook his head. "That's actually a really good price, too. I thought—"

"Nah," Neil replied. "Monkeys don't cost much. Their union is *terrible*."

The moon hung like a half-cooked pancake that someone had flung at the ceiling of the world, perfectly round and mostly solid but clearly still gooey on the inside, unfinished and in need.

"This is it," Aric Wigglesticke mumbled, staring at the crumpled paper in his hands. "This is it!" he shouted. "Everything—*everything*—"

In that moment it all clicked, everything the writer had struggled with for the past two months, themes and motifs and motivations, every random note he'd jotted down on scrap paper or coffee-stained napkins. He could, finally, see the rest of his story, his novel, falling into place. Cooking metaphors. The commodification of nature. The impermanence of time. The liminality of waffles. He began laughing like he'd just brought a stitched-up cadaver back from the dead.

He pulled himself out of the dumpster, nearly falling, then raced back inside the warehouse, frenzied with the need to get to his laptop, to write his epic, this Great American Novel that was threatening now to physically consume him.

"Good for you," Neil said as Aric barreled past, the writer barely hearing the salesman, possessed as he was.

Neil was leading a book club's worth of older women through the shelves of typing monkeys. With a raised finger, he excused himself, then turned and called after the crazed man: "Do you need an ending?"

Aric stopped cold, sudden, tripping over his own feet. An ending? He hadn't thought about the ending. *Did* he need an ending? Surely, he could figure one out. He'd completed the puzzle, hadn't he? Fit everything together meticulously. The ending would just come to him, wouldn't it? Sure and easy as breathing?

Maybe. Or, he considered, listening to his own wheezing lungs—he hadn't moved this fast, this frenetically, in years—maybe not. A bad start could be overcome, but a bad ending could ruin everything that came before it, could undo hours of work.

"What, uh..." he asked, stepping sideways towards Neil, "what—"

"Well," Neil said, his voice dropping to a whisper as he approached, "endings aren't like beginnings, or even middles. We have a couple of trash cans you could root through, but..." He narrowed his eyes. "But for a single, solitary American dollar, I can tell you the one secret to all great endings. You'd never need to worry again."

Aric had pulled a bill from his wallet before the man in the flannel had even finished speaking. Neil took the money, folding it with two fingers and tucking it into his shirt pocket.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Yes," the writer replied, practically salivating. "Yes."

Neil leaned in close, conspiratorially; Aric could smell the coffee on his breath, the woody musk that emanated from him like a forest breeze.

"The secret," he said, eyes darting back and forth, "the one weird trick, to all endings, for every story forever and ever, is..."

Aric's heart felt like it was going to explode through his chest.

"...you just stop abruptly and pretend it means something."

"What?" he said, appalled. "That's not—"

"Isn't it, though? I mean, maybe it *shouldn't* be, I'm with you there, but I could give you reams of examples of—"

"Just because—look, endings demand closure," Aric protested, "they—"

"What's more closed than a door slamming in your face?"

Beside them, a monkey in a red paisley tie exhaled and ashed his cigarette. He shrugged and nodded in agreement.

Two Poems
by
Ann Pedone

A short list of things to Know if you are Considering fucking me

- 1) I don't like biting into watermelons. It reminds me of sex. But in a bad way.
- 2) I know how to make four different cocktails. They all involve gin. One of them I made up myself.
- 3) The first time I had sex with a boy, I wasn't sure whether or not we had actually done it. I was too embarrassed to ask him about it afterwards. So I just told all of my friends that we had.
- 4) There was a point in my life when I had a crush on George Bush.
- 5) Let me re-phrase that. There was a time in my life when I had crushes on both Bush men. Junior and senior.
- 6) I can sing all of the songs on the Julio Iglesias record *Mexico*. But I don't speak Spanish.
- 7) I always pay the water bill late.
- 8) I never laugh at the jokes in *The New Yorker*.
- 9) Whenever I go in for a pap smear and the doctor asks if I'm ready for the speculum, I always say, sure, but if we had at least gone out for a glass of wine first. Twenty years of the same joke. Have yet to make a gynecologist laugh.
- 10) I like to try as many different things as I can because I know I am going to die.
- 11) I'm not afraid of spiders.
- 12) When my last boyfriend left me for a 25 year old I wanted to kill every woman I saw who looked to be that age. This lasted for six weeks.
- 13) I've always had a little bit of a nose fetish.
- 14) If I had a magic potion and could be turned into anyone else, I would either be Robert Redford in *All The President's Men*, Madeline Albright, Edith Piaf, or Medea

An incomplete list of bizarre theories The Ancient Greeks had regarding the Female body

- 1) In the *Aphorisms*, Hippocrates explains that if a woman gets a nosebleed then it is a sign that her period will start soon.
- 2) Same is true if she vomits blood.
- 3) Although not a physician, Aristotle believed that women have fewer teeth than men.
- 4) It was a wide-spread belief in Greece that a woman's throat extended down to and became her vagina. This was called a ὁδός (hodos.)
- 5) Congestion of blood in the breasts is a sign of impending madness.
- 6) If the winter is dry, women will get fevers.
- 7) Women's menstrual blood contains milk.
- 8) When pregnant, the milk cooks.
- 9) When on her period a woman is able to:
 - put curses on plants
 - dim the brightness of mirrors
 - drive dogs into madness
 - stop thunder and lightning
 - kill swarms of bees.
- 11) The word hysteria comes from the Greek word ὕστερα meaning "uterus." Historically, women who were thought to be overly aggressive, openly expressed the desire to have sex, were too emotional, or were not interested in getting married, were classified as hysterical.
- 12) There is a Depeche Mode fan club based in Greece called Hysterika. Founded in Athens in 1990, it is the biggest Depeche Mode fan club in the world. I took a look at their website, but it is all in Greek. And I don't speak Greek.

Human Comedy on Parade at the Agora Café by **John Mara**

The early morning commuter train from Boston screeches into the station at historic Concordia, the affluent community where a sports jacket is required at the town dump and where geese are prohibited from flying in over the town line.

Regaled in their finest prep school attire, Adam and Abigail Rockwell alight from the train the way their pilgrim ancestors alighted from the Mayflower—first. With perfectly coiffed hair, a chiseled face and physique to match, Adam was cast in the mold reserved for Mayflower descendants. He doesn't live *in* the world; the world exists to ingratiate *him*. Adam married Abigail because she was cut from the blonde version of the same mold. Her DNA keeps the Rockwell bloodline pure, even though she's shed most of her family's uppity patina. Between them, they swing a cherub-faced toddler, the promise of their family lineage.

Following the example of the Plymouth landing, Adam inhales the fresh air of his adopted land and proclaims, "Ahhh, the suburbs!" thus staking a claim to the good life Concordia holds for his nuclear family.

A puff of smoke from the train's engine, though, interrupts the solemn flag planting and reduces the trio to spasms of coughing. "Run for it!" Adam says. Ducking beneath the prophetic cloud, the hero's legs exemplify his command.

The smoke clears, and Abigail, with the pint-sized progeny in tow, ambles over to where Adam's flight to safety has ended. "Phew, that was a close one," Adam puffs, the family posterity intact. "Good thing you followed my lead."

"Funny our escape lands us at the Agora Café."

"My dear, I need caffeine." While Abigail and little Winston slept through a red-eye flight—first class—from San Francisco, Adam corrected student papers. A newly-minted Finance PhD from Stanford, Adam has accepted an associate professorship at Harvard, and the whole family flew east to pay a visit. Abigail, too, is polishing her dissertation, *A Modern Twist on de Balzac's Human Comedy*, to earn a doctorate in nineteenth century French literature.

"We've got a half hour before Winston's interview at Minuteman Nursery School," Adam says. "Let's rub elbows with the natives." Putting first things first, Adam and Abby are scouting Concordia as a place to anchor their ancestral roots—and to launch what is certain to be Winston's prodigious academic career.

"Welcome to my Agora!" greets the trio as Adam opens the café door. "How may I delight you with exceptional service today?"

Adam flinches at the barista's purple hair and array of ring piercings. "Do you live here? In Concordia?"

"I've owned the Agora for ten years. But don't worry sir, I commute. "

The showstopper avoided, Adam reads 'Hello, I'm Aristotle' imprinted on the barista's apron. "Ah, cute. A barista, in the Agora, named Aristotle. Aristotle must be a . . . 'work name?'" Adam says, with air quotes.

"No, Aristotle is my... 'real name?'" Ari says, his air quotes replacing Adam's. "My roots trace back to the agora in Athens."

"How nice." Adam chuckles to lighten the mood. "I suppose you majored in philosophy, Aristotle."

"Actually, philosophy *was* my major. For an acropolis-sized student debt, I'm left with nothing but the revelation, 'I am.'"

Adam feels a tug on his sports coat. "Stop digging a goddamned hole, Socrates!" Abby whispers. "Now hold Winston while I order something." She scans the menu board.

Winston, a miniature cutout of Adam, wears a doll-sized version of his father's Hickey Freeman sports coat. The lad may not gain admittance into the nursery school, but he'll be a shoo-in at the town dump.

"Winston, huh?" Ari says, aiming for payback. "You named the kid after a menthol cigarette?"

"We named him after Winston Churchill? You know, the Englishman who saved Western civilization?"

De-escalating the dustup, Abby snags the two five-dollar bills stuffed in Adam's shirt pocket and plunks them into the tip jar. Accepting the monetary olive branch, Ari flashes a smile.

With peace accorded, Ari turns to brew a fresh pot of coffee. That's when Adam sees an opening. "Ten bucks, Abby? A bit rich, don't you think?" He grabs one of the fives from the tip jar and returns it to his pocket.

Seeing the fiver missing, Aristotle the Cynic invokes his inner Diogenes, "Ah, to find but one good man."

Abigail notices the long line of commuters forming, all anxious to score some caffeine for the morning train ride into Boston. She forces a polite smile for the foot-tapping throng. "Hurry up, ya prick," Abby hears, and the commuters nod at the sentiment. Abby spots a macaw, but can't tell if the advice came from the bird or the little blue-haired lady holding it in a travel cage.

"Stand aside and let the others order," Abby whispers.

"A Rockwell was first off the Mayflower and we've never stood aside since." Adam isn't about to compromise centuries of Anglo privilege in a Greek café.

"Two lattes, please!" Abby blurts. "And an OJ for Winston. Hurry, Aristotle!"

Ari turns the order in a flash. "That'll be ten dollars and fifty cents."

Elbow-deep in her purse, Abby digs for her wallet. A small foiled package tumbles onto the counter. "*Ribbed* condoms, Mrs. Rockwell?" Ari bellows, the pilfered five having ended their brief Anglo-Grecian détente. "Wow, a whole dozen too!" He winks, and Abby's soon-to-be neighbors rubberneck and snicker in line.

But Abby has a bigger worry than her sexual kimono flung open. "I can't find my goddamned wallet!" Marooned without money, Abby hyperventilates like an asthmatic without an inhaler.

"We're juuust about done here!" Adam announces to the throat-clearing, non-Mayflower horde in line.

"Hurry up, ya prick," echoes back.

"My wallet's somewhere in that bottomless bag, too," Adam says. "Pay up and let's get outta here."

"Shit, neither wallet's in here! Oh God, Winston emptied the bag while we snoozed on the train."

"Ten fifty, sir."

"Do you take returns?" Adam tries, but Ari folds his arms. Adam slaps the five-dollar bill he palmed onto the counter. Then, suspending four centuries of ancestral pride, he plucks the other five-dollar bill out of the tip jar. "Boooo," cascades in a soft chorus down the coffee line.

Aristotle overlooks the monetary transgression: winning the Battle of the Agora is worth the five bucks. Tightening the thumbscrews, Ari peers between long, purple dreadlocks and says, "Fifty cents more, sir."

Doubling the shame, Abigail spills the coins in the 'Take One, Leave One' cup onto the counter like a Vegas sharpie rolling dice. With hands trembling, she counts out fifty cents of loose pennies and nickels. "Try 'em on for size, my little friend!" she says to Ari with a wave of the condoms for the amused onlookers to see. Then, she arcs the foiled package into the tip jar.

Behind the counter, the delivery woman stacking milk crates on a dolly weighs in, "Kiss your horny weekend goodbye, pal!"

"That does it! Let's blow this f—ing agora!" Starting for the door, Abby broadsides the mortified woman standing behind her. "Sorry lady, we're in a hurry."

"To see me, Mrs. Rockwell," the lady purrs, lowering sunglasses.

"Are you... Miss Perkins?"

"Yes, I'm the Minuteman Nursery School admissions counselor. I recognize you from the family photo in your impressive admissions folder," Miss Perkins says. "Something has come up," she adds with eyes scanning the tip jar and scattered coins. "We won't be able to meet today."

"What about our application, Miss Perkins? Are you aware of the Rockwell legacy?"

"Let's just say that words spoken and actions taken *before* the interview—here in the Agora—weigh on our decision."

"You spied on us!"

"We'll build a Rockwell wing on the nursery school!" Adam says, remembering that Minuteman is a surefire feeder into Harvard.

Her regular coffee order ready, Miss Perkins pays Ari and replenishes the tip jar with two fives. "Sorry for the bother, Aristotle," she says, eyeing Abby.

"Oh, it's no bother, Miss Perkins. All day and every day, I get to watch human folly on display here in the Agora."

"There's a book in there somewhere, Ari." Miss Perkins struts to the exit.

Adam and Abby slither to the side door, forgetting their order—and Winston. "One moment, Mr. Rockwell, sir," Ari calls. "You owe seventy-five cents."

"How's that? We paid up! Sort of." Adam follows Ari's eyes to the confectionary display, where Winston is about to mouth a piece of chocolate skewered on a stick. Diving like a cornerback, Adam intercepts it to save the seventy-five cents—and the Rockwell family name. He angles away to wipe a wad of spit from the chocolate and then delivers the bounty to Ari. "Now are we good?"

Ari inspects the purloined candy. "Not so good. See the baby teeth marks?"

Adam searches for an escape hatch. "Would your bird care for a candy treat, ma'am?" he says to the cage holder.

"Nice try," Ari says, offering no clemency. "Seventy-five cents."

Winston whimpers, and the sterling Rockwell name is tarnished yet again. The lad is toilet trained, but a treat denied is enough to trigger an accident in his big boy undies.

The wafting odor crinkles every nose in the joint, and the inconvenienced coffee patrons become an unruly mob. Brandishing a leather briefcase, a lawyer—the one with those late-night TV commercials—threatens, "You're looking at a class action law suit, buddy." "Hurry up, ya prick!" follows, this time from the little lady, not the macaw.

As the human folly percolates to a crescendo, a ten-year-old guttersnipe at a back table rises to his full height of four feet. With front teeth missing and black hair ruffled, little Joe is no friend of a warm bath. He checks the clock to time his operation with military precision. At the right moment, he nods to Aristotle, ready to calm the adult storm that's brewed. The patrons open a path for the lad's advance. As an initial volley, Joe stands on tiptoes and plops three quarters onto the counter to pay the Rockwell ransom. "For the gentleman's debt," he squeaks and then goes to a side counter to make his next, bigger move.

But the local parish pastor, next in line, interrupts Joe's operation to sermonize the ready-made flock. "Follow this young man's example, brothers and sisters! Never let a few coins stand in the way of a good deed." His parable delivered, the short-armed pastor searches his deep, deep pockets to pay for his latte—extra-large.

With the priest's flock looking on, Aristotle lets the good Father sweat the payment. Then, breaking the daily stalemate, he says, "It's on the house, Father O'Hegarty."

Father O slots a prayer card into the tip jar. "May God bless your good deed, my son. The Eastern Orthodox one, of course."

At the side counter, peeling from a wad of tens, Joe pays for the dozen lattes Ari has prepared in the course of the adult shenanigans. Then, Joe stuffs a ten into the tip jar. "You're the best, bro," the barista says of the daily ritual.

A whistle blows, sounding the impending departure of the commuter train. Joe hustles to the door, balancing the twelve lattes on a carrying tray. "Ten dollars, ma'am. Thank you, sir," Joe squeaks over and over, as he sells the lattes that cost him four bucks each.

"See that, Abigail? The little rogue meets a market need. For a hefty price, too! Calculate the profit margin. The kid's an entrepreneurial cracker jack!"

"Winston shits his pants. I drop an F-bomb on Miss Perkins. We lose two wallets. And you're anointing a boy genius?"

"Forget about Concordia. Let's take the express train back to Boston." He puffs his chest like a rooster. "There are plenty of nursery schools for the Mayflower Rockwells, my dear."

"Hey, wait a minute. Your mini Joe P. Morgan there sold six lattes. He's eating the other six. With the tip, the rascal made two bucks, by my count."

"Ya, you've got a point there," the Doctor of Finance concedes.

"No Minuteman after all, sir?" Ari says as a final strike for the Greek side. Holding Winston at arm's length and upwind, Adam and Abigail follow Joe out of the café.

Aristotle pours out the hard-earned coffee the Rockwells abandoned on the field of battle. Scooping the coins scattered on the counter, he chuckles at the latest episode of human absurdity on parade in the Agora Café—with little brother Joe directing the band.

Balancing the six left-over lattes, Joe climbs aboard the train. As the departure whistle blows, the Rockwells clamor aboard too.

Abby spots a familiar tear in one of the seatbacks. "What luck! This is the train car we rode in on." On hands and knees, Adam and Abby search the seats for their missing wallets.

"Times are tough for everyone these days, my friend," a new rider sympathizes, puzzled by the matching jackets and tailored slacks worn by Adam and Winston.

Unattended, Winston scampers up and down the aisle. "Smells like goose shit in here," a passenger sniffs. "Can't be," a fellow rider says. "Geese aren't allowed here in Concordia." Just in case, the passengers check their shoes and lower their windows.

As the train gains speed, Joe works the aisle. "Hot latte anyone? Twelve dollars!" Eight hands shoot up.

"Why twelve?" one buyer says. "In the Agora, you charged ten." The six lucky holders of ten-dollar lattes rattle their cups to mock the less fortunate.

"Convenience fee," the entrepreneur says. "I see nine hands up and I have six cups. Who'll make it thirteen dollars?" Seven hands stay up. "How 'bout fourteen?" Six hands stay up, and Joe delivers the uber-priced lattes.

"Wow, fourteen bucks a cup, Abigail! Not even Starbucks gets that. The kid unloaded his overstock and maxed out the premium using an auction technique. His profit just jumped from two bucks to, let's see, eighty-six bucks!"

"Never mind your Horatio Alger," Abby says as the surly conductor follows behind Joe. "How we gonna cover the train fare?" Abby searches for the return ticket she purchased earlier in Boston.

"Family of three?" the conductor says. "That's ten dollars, ma'am."

"Our ticket's in here somewhere, conductor." Abby rummages the depths of her purse and flashes the café smile. "Swing back in a moment, would you?"

As the conductor lumbers away, Adam dives for his second interception of the morning. But he's too late; the ticket fluttering in Winston's hand sails out one of the open windows and climbs like a kite in the train's wake.

The stern conductor returns. "Find your ticket, ma'am?"

"It flew out the window, sir."

"Ah, many do. Tickets are piled on the track bed."

"No, really sir." Abby fakes a search for cash she knows isn't in the purse.

"The fare must be paid before you step off the train," the conductor says.

"What now?" Adam says, knowing how a collared turnstile jumper feels.

Seeing Adam busted, Joe funds another Rockwell rescue package. He walks the aisle with the empty coffee tray, soliciting coins like a steward on an international flight. "Loose change anyone? For those aboard less fortunate."

Joe counts ten bucks of coins into a coffee cup, and necks crane as Adam accepts the bailout money. "You're a savior, Joe," Adam whispers and then shrinks into his seat.

Mercifully, the train pulls into Boston's North Station where the trip began. "Thank God Almighty!" Adam says. Exercising their birthright, the Rockwells alight first, but this time

the ticket scofflaws are shadowed by the conductor. "Ten bucks!" he insists, and Adam pays out of the cup. "Hurry up, ya prick!" echoes from inside the train car.

With gums flashing, Joe emerges next. "Dug these out of the 'Lost and Found' basket, ma'am," he says and hands over the two missing wallets.

"Joe, you've done it again!" Abby rewards him with the day's first genuine smile.

Sweetening the reward, Adam hands Joe a buck for his troubles.

"Thank you, sir. I'll add it to the Joey Fund."

"Oh, I bet you will."

"That's right, sir. Twenty percent of coffee profits go to the Joey Fund. 'Joe for Joey' is my motto." Toting the empty coffee tray, Joe skips over to the North Station Café.

"What a marketing gimmick," Adam says to the conductor.

"Hey pal, I'm the kid's Uncle Nico. Joe's already dropped five grand into his charity."

"So, he's an entrepreneur *and* a humanitarian?" Adam thinks it over. "In that case—Uncle Nico—I want to see your nephew in my classroom someday. But first he needs proper schooling."

"Are you kidding? Proper learning comes in the Agora. On the train. Here in North Station. Yes, he hoodwinks every adult in sight, my friend, but at least the Joey Fund gives back."

After Nico boards the train, Abby says, "You know, the man's right about proper learning. For my dissertation, I read books. But Ari the barista observes people—just like de Balzac observed them in the streets of Paris two hundred years ago. Adam, I want to go back to Concordia and sit in the Agora for a week."

"Oh no, I won't face that barista again. Let's visit Plymouth instead and see the Rockwell footprint in that rock."

"But think of the humanity that parades before Aristotle in his Agora. Sleazy lawyers and sneaky spies! Priests, swindlers, and wise guys! Money grabbers and humanitarians—often occupying the same body! Snarky old ladies with dirty-mouthed macaws! Mayflower riders, for heaven's sake."

The Concordia departure whistle blows, signaling a quick turnaround. Seeing her chance, Abby says, "Enjoy Plymouth Rock, honey. But watch your wallet." She hands over Winston and, before Adam can react, hops onto the train. Right behind, Joe climbs aboard, balancing six lattes.

"Hot latte anyone? Twelve dollars!" Joe shouts as the train starts out.

Abby waves a hundred-dollar bill. "I'm buying all the coffee, Joe. You'll see another fifty if I can ask you a few questions on the ride."

Sitting beside Abby, Joe dangles his spindly legs over the seat. "What are the questions about, ma'am?"

Abby poises a pen, ready, like de Balzac, for some practical learning. "They're about your singular mastery of the modern human comedy."

Joe smiles through the gap in his teeth. Whatever the lady means, the band leader's already notched a record fleecing of this latest adult on parade.

One year later, business is brisk at the Agora. The book Aristotle co-authored with Abigail, *Human Comedy on Parade at the Agora Café*, is a best seller for its 'practical absurdity and philosophical content,' as the editor put it. Aristotle's name is featured first, 'for the marketing bump,' Adam insisted.

Miss Perkins read the *Human Comedy* and admitted Winston into Minuteman Nursing School after all, although Adam is not allowed to parent help. The Rockwells moved to Concordia, where Adam wears a sports jacket to the dump and never refers to the Mayflower.

The Joey Fund was endowed with a seven-figure anonymous gift and is now an adjunct to the Red Sox Jimmy Fund. Another anonymous check to the Harvard Divinity School retired Aristotle's acropolis-sized debt. Adam doesn't mind chumming with Ari, now that he knows Ari's a fellow man of the Crimson cloth.

Aristotle bought a house in Concordia too, where he home-schools younger brother Joe. Rounding out the not-so-nuclear family, their Uncle Nico moved in. Nico co-manages the Joey Fund endowment with Joe and Adam.

On a sunny, geese-free fall morning in Concordia, Adam and Abby arrive early at the Agora to claim the prime viewing table. A wondrous assortment of humanity gathers, and they cajole, debate, laugh, and buy coffee. In time, a whistle blows, and Joe gouges scrambling commuters for lattes.

Grinning at the absurdity, Aristotle takes a break with Adam and Abigail. "You know, Doctor Abby, I've grown beyond 'I am.' And I'm no longer a Cynic."

"And just what is Aristotle's modern philosophy of life?"

"Diogenes, roaming the agora with his lantern, never found his 'one good man.' Inside all the folly, there's some good and bad in all of us. We should try harder to find the good."

Two harried parents enter the café, swinging a cherub-faced toddler between them. "Wipe the snots off Sarah," the mother says. "Her interview's in fifteen minutes." At a corner table, Miss Perkins matches them to a photo in an admissions folder. Behind the nuclear family, the short-armed Father O'Hegarty lines up, wearing the deep-pocketed trousers.

"But I'm still an Absurdist, too." Aristotle adds, considering the morning's events. He goes behind the counter. "Welcome to my Agora. How may I delight you with exceptional service today?"

"Two lattes, please. And an OJ for Sarah." But the frazzled mother can't pay up. "Ah shit, my wallet's in the car. I hope," she says, and Miss Perkins jots a note.

Aristotle smirks at what he observes, as his toga-wearing namesake did long before him. The human comedy paraded through Aristotle's agora, climbed onto life's stage at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, and then marched through de Balzac's Paris streets. Coming full circle, it rocks on today in Ari's Agora Café.

Squeezing By
by
Kajetan Kwiatkowski

There was nothing more dangerous than rounding a corner. As an older stickbug, Anise could feel her exoskeleton creak as she bent by even the slightest degree, she wouldn't dare push too hard for fear of forming a crack along her delicate body.

Careful now, nice and slow. Anise had managed to get her head through, but it was her midsection that always got stuck. *Just breathe. Settle into it.*

The round walls offered no grip for Anise, instead, her long legs would have to awkwardly slide as she passed the pipe's rounded corner. She had been traveling this strange maze for her entire life, and it was mostly harmless if not for these accursed turns.

One step at a time. No need to rush. Once her thorax had squeezed through, the rest was easy. When she could feel the tip of her tail slide across the bend, Anise chittered her antennae in celebration, sending the rhythm down to her abdomen. It felt good to be crawling on the next straightaway. It was real progress. After several days of slow-going turns, a new, long line of pipe always felt exhilarating.

I wonder what's next. Maybe the exit is... Anise's antennae drooped. Laying ahead on the semi-translucent pipe was a small egg. Anise approached, grappling the shape with her feelers and confirmed it was her own. *No, this can't.... How could this be?*

She had been laying duds ceaselessly a few days ago and using them for navigation. Unlike her pheromones (which were absorbed by the tunnel walls), the eggs remained where they were laid and made for great track-markers. She thought she could finally avoid traveling in circles.

After lifting the egg to her mouth, Anise realized the bottom had broken off. She pried at the hole and sensed it was empty. *It had hatched.*

Then, from the tunnels far end, a small shadow approached. It slid in an awkward stick-bug stumble just like her own.

"Hello" the little one said.

Anise had not heard any sounds besides the pattering of her feet for the longest time. The voice felt strange, squeaky, yet she understood it perfectly.

"I've heard about you." The child-stick said. "Are you the Big One?"

Anise didn't know how to respond.

"Do you know where to go?"

With some measure of reluctance, Anise managed to approach the small creature. "You hatched from my egg."

"I mean. I hatched from something."

"Are these your egg remains?" Anise lifted the broken shell.

"I think so. I ate half. And I've been carrying that other half for later."

Anise's mandibles tightened. *Carrying it?* Her entire marker system could have been thrown off. "Do you know where you were? Where you came from?"

"Um..." The young bug looked at her with large black eyes. "I think I came from... somewhere close?"

Anise tensed her whole spine, feeling the old chitin creak. "We need to leave something. Something that indicates we've been through an area." All of her progress was at risk. She had hoped that because the eggs weren't fertilized -that they wouldn't hatch. But instead she's given birth to a clone of herself, just as lost and confused. "You need to stay in place, right where you are."

"Stay in place?"

"Yes. You cannot move."

"But. How will I know where to go?"

"I will find out where to go, but only if you don't move." Anise stood tall, leered.

The young bug gazed at her height. "Wow. You truly must be the Big One." She turned her head slightly, glancing behind. "Should I go tell the others?"

Others? Anise almost lost her footing. "No. Stay exactly here. I will continue, if I find the others, I will tell them the same."

"Oh. Are you sure?"

Anise brushed by the child-stick, patting her down into a seated position. "If you stay here, I'll come back and save all of you. But only if you stay precisely still."

The young bug stared in awe, watching the long legs crawl overtop. She lowered her antennae, and then stayed perfectly still, just like a stick. "Alright Big One, I'll do it. I swear I will not move until you come back."

Anise crawled forward, a little more frustrated, but nonetheless determined. Up ahead came another bend in the pipe.

"Well it only took a month," Jake sneered, "but the mother found her way out."

The catchment net at the end of the maze jostled back and forth. The old stick-bug had tangled her legs and would periodically struggle.

"Good", Devlin said, basically laying on the observation couch. "We've proven the chemical can improve their visuospatial memory. But nevertheless, we'll need to start from scratch."

"Why is that?" Jake asked.

"Well we've made the one insect a brilliant navigator," Devlin got up, straightened his labcoat, "But all of her offspring are about as useful as paperweights. They won't move, no matter what we throw at them."

"Some kind of congenital muscle atrophy?"

"Something like that."

"What a shame."

"It is. Phasmids don't react great to this new version of the nootropic I guess." Devlin yawned, cracked his back. "Interested in lunch?"

Jake took off his gloves and nodded. Both men stood up to circumnavigate the plastic labyrinth, following one side to the door. Because of the way it was installed, the labyrinth collided with the entryway, forcing both scientists to suck in their respective pot-bellies.

"It's always a tight squeeze on the way out," Jake laughed.

Devlin put a hand on his gut, "The trick is to hold in your breath. No need to rush."

Why Does Nobody Care About the Death of my Dieffenbachia?
by
Jack Berning

Why does nobody care about the Death of my Dieffenbachia?
I Woke Up this morning and all its leaves had gone brown.
I've been in a Panic ever since.
It hadn't been doing *well*, per say, but it hadn't been doing *so* poorly.
 Nevertheless,
Nobody cares about the Death of my Dieffenbachia.
Perhaps it is because they have not spent significant time with The Thing.
Naturally, I've developed an affection.
And to find it brown—intent on Death—
 What a shock!
I blame myself, of course, for the Death of my Dieffenbachia.
The torture of whether I Over or Under watered it will haunt me
For the rest of my days, to be sure.
The snake plant and fireweed are well, for now.
But how long until they, too, Give Up, just as in the case of my Dieffenbachia?
 Dearest Dieffenbachia,
Nobody cares for your death but I. I, and I alone,
Have admired you in your Wild, Fervent green.
And now, overnight, you are dead.
I will try to save you, be assured. The experts say it's no use.
But they don't care for you like I do,
 My Dear, Dear
 Dieffenbachia.

Silver Dollar Davis and the Mediocre Meteorite Caper by **Myna Chang**

Silver Dollar Davis sat on the tailgate of his friend's pick-up truck, aiming binoculars at Old Man Pollard's farmhouse. The ridge overlooking the farm was a favorite party spot for local teens, close enough to town for an occasional food run, but far enough out in the sticks to avoid nosy parents and local law enforcement.

It also provided the perfect vantage for recon.

"See anything?" Velocity Jones asked. She swallowed the last of her beer.

Silver shook his head. "Dark. Pollard's probably asleep by now. Where the hell is City Boy?"

"You really think your persnickety cousin will be any help?"

Silver shrugged and handed Velocity the binoculars. She scanned the farmyard. Pollard's barn doors were closed up tight. Two mangy hound dogs slept in the moonlight near the chicken coop.

"Dogs're gonna be a problem," she said.

Silver nodded. "That's why we need City Boy. He's the diversion."

"And I'm the getaway driver," Velocity guessed. She tossed her empty can at a homemade sign affixed to a nearby fencepost. *Trespassers will be shoot*, it declared. A second sign—spray painted on a piece of plywood—read: *Survivors will be shoot a more*. Her can missed both signs, bouncing into the ditch that separated them from Pollard's land.

Approaching headlights signaled the arrival of the missing teen. He parked his shiny silver sports car next to Velocity's truck and climbed out.

"About time, City Boy."

"Why can't you call me my real name? Kevin. Say it. Kev-in."

Velocity shook her head. "Nah. Too weird."

Silver nodded his agreement.

City Boy sighed. "What are we doing out here?"

"Pollard has a space rock in his barn. We're gonna get it."

"One of those meteorites that fell last year?"

"Yep," Silver said. "Some newfangled energy company started buyin' 'em up for research. Thousands of bucks an ounce. That rock weighs enough to buy me a ski boat."

"And a new paint job for the Tater," Velocity said. Her old truck had been a smooth chocolate brown at one time, but dents and patches of rust had transformed it into the likeness of a rotten potato. A new coat of paint couldn't hurt.

City Boy shook his head. "Inappropriate to steal from an elderly dude."

"He stole it first," Silver replied. "Took it from Grandma last week."

"Then we should give it back to Grandma."

"She said she'd trade if we teach her to water ski."

"Your grandma's a badass," Velocity said. "Anyway, we're on a deadline. The researchers are sending a hazmat van to pick it up tomorrow."

"Hazmat? Sounds dangerous," City Boy said. "I don't want to get turned into a space mutant."

Silver shook his head. "The real danger is Pollard and his shotgun."

"He'll shoot at us?"

Velocity pointed to the signs. "Pollard hates trespassers."

"This is the stupidest thing I've heard since my parents moved here," City Boy said.

"Possibly." Silver chucked his empty can, hitting the top sign dead center. "Here's the plan."

City Boy crouched by a water tank at the far edge of the farmyard, feeding pieces of a cheeseburger to the hounds. They gobbled the meat, then licked his face. "Oh, that's vile," he wheezed. The fat dog nuzzled him, thumping its tail, while the skinny one rolled onto its back and demanded a tummy rub.

Silver watched until he was sure the hounds were distracted, then ghosted to the side door of the barn and scooted inside. He paused to listen for the dogs—or worse, the sound of Old Man Pollard. The nighttime silence remained unbroken.

He huffed out a breath and began his search, prowling past bags of chicken feed and unidentified rusty tools. Under the hayloft he found wooden shelves chock-full of trinkets and gadgets: a couple of fancy wristwatches; an old adding machine; a neat stack of cassette tapes, all labeled "Air Supply's Greatest Hits."

"What the hell?" Silver murmured.

He scanned the array of oddities, but didn't see the space rock. Wait, was that Pearl Gleeson's fancy cupcake stand? The one that disappeared from the church supper last month? And the basketball trophy that vanished from the high school display case? The next shelf held several pairs of ladies' bowling shoes and a hairy lump that resembled a dead weasel. Fascinated, Silver poked at the lump with his finger, then realized it was one of Sheriff Ortree's toupees.

"This is messed up."

He finally spotted the meteorite, glowing softly under a tarp behind a dilapidated tractor motor. His hand barely fit around the rock, and it was heavier than he expected. "Maybe I can buy two ski boats."

He lugged it to the side door, ready to make a break for it. Then a crack echoed through the still midnight air. Pollard was awake and shooting. Silver peeked through a crack and saw City Boy hightailing it toward the ditch. Pollard reloaded.

"You tresspassin' aside my doogs?" the farmer yelled.

"That doesn't even make sense!" City Boy screamed. Buckshot whizzed overhead. He threw himself into the weeds and the hound dogs yelped and raced for cover.

With Pollard focused on the ditch, Silver saw his chance and darted out, only to be trampled by the retreating hounds. The skinny one tracked dusty paw prints up his chest and forehead. He dodged to avoid the fat one, losing his grip on the meteorite. It cast a wavering light across the empty stretch of farmyard that separated him from Pollard's shotgun.

The old man turned toward the glimmer and took aim.

Silver's eyes focused on the barrel of the shotgun and he froze. His short life flashed through his mind—he ached at the utter lack of recreational water vessels—and then Pollard's trigger finger squeezed.

Velocity's truck groaned and slewed sideways into the farmyard. Buckshot pelted its side.

"He shot the Tater!" she screamed.

Silver lunged for the space rock and threw it into the back of the truck, then vaulted into the bed. He hunkered low in case Pollard got off another shot before Velocity could maneuver out of range.

She popped the clutch and the truck lurched into motion like a drunken dinosaur, tires spraying clods of dirt from the barn all the way across the yard into the chicken coop. A freshly awakened rooster crowed and Pollard spat curses. The truck scudded across the uneven ground, fishtailing toward City Boy's hiding spot.

"Come on!" Silver yelled.

City Boy squeaked and bolted out of the ditch, trying to keep his head down as he ran, but that was too slow so he sprinted outright, leaping into the back of the truck and slamming into Silver, who was trying to brace himself between the cab and the beer cooler.

The truck rocked back to speed, sending both boys flailing toward the tailgate. Silver struggled to hold onto the meteorite as he ricocheted off the spare tire.

"Stop the truck," City Boy yelled.

The Tater slowed and he kicked the tailgate open long enough for the hounds to bound in. Yanking the gate back into place, he shouted, "Go!" and the Tater took off again.

The hounds wiggled, vying for a spot on his lap. He wrapped his arms around them both.

Silver cocked an eyebrow. "City Boy, I think you've earned a new name. How about Diversion?"

"Or how about Kevin? Kevin's good."

The Adventure Suits by **Mike Scofield**

The Adventure Suits arrived a day earlier than advertised. Bernard weighed the package in his hands—next to nothing! He tossed it happily in the air and with the catch had to fight the urge to tear it open. He should wait for Maggie.

It wasn't easy. He thought of trying his on to greet her at the door when she got home... But, no, he could wait. He played with the package a moment longer and then set it reverently on the kitchen counter with the mail.

The suits were so fine, shiny and satiny that they just poured through the couple's hands. Bernard had already set the program running. Now all that was left was to don what were basically metallic stockings and have an adventure.

"What do you want to do first?" Maggie had her feet in and was pulling the suit up her bare legs.

Bernard regarded the rest of her nudeness. "Let's screw!"

"Seriously. What do you want to try?"

"Well, really..." Bernard watched as her form became fine, shiny and satiny. "Looking GOOD!"

Now covered to her chin, Maggie hesitated before pulling the stretchy head piece down. "Do you want to do this or not?"

"Of course!" He already had his feet in. He bent to pull the new skin on. "How about surfing off Australia!"

"No. We should try something tame at first. A stroll in Paris?"

Shit. He knew this was coming. 'Adventure' meant different things to different people. "Sure, why not." His surfing would probably be solo.

He stopped her from pulling the head completely on. "Let's make sure it's ready before you pull it over your eyes. Otherwise, you might not be able to see."

"Oh, right."

Bernard held the top half of suit still dangling from his waist and went to the tablet to check their status:

'MagPie ACTIVE'

'BernKing ACTIVE'

"You should be good."

Maggie pulled the headpiece completely on and adjusted the eyes. "It's like looking through a window screen."

Bernard looked up from dressing. She was a female alien. "That should clear up once we're in an adventure."

Before pulling on his own head he set the program for 'Stroll in Paris'. A window opened and self-populated. He chose Champs-Élysées and hit 'enter'.

He was aware of emerging into the sunny air of the boulevard and immediately hearing "OH!" from Maggie when an approaching walker slammed right into... Oh. He walked right through her.

"You OK?"

Maggie stood, breathing heavily and staring at the air before her. "One minute: our living room. Next: a guy crashing into me..."

"Yeah," Bernard held her elbow. "I don't know how we avoid that kind of stuff. I guess, just stay on our toes."

He released her elbow but remained close in. "What was that like? Did you see his insides?"

She shook her head. "I watched his throat get closer, there was a dark blip, then I was seeing ahead again."

"Huh. Weird. I might try it just for fun."

"Go ahead."

They strolled, exclaiming on the realness of it all. When an elegant mademoiselle approached, Bernard aligned with her trajectory and, ha ha, enjoyed her going through him.

Maggie shook her head.

"Had to try it," he said.

"Whatever."

They continued until Bernard stopped and gazed into a near tree. "Listen to those birds! It's so clear! How do they get the sound so perfect?"

Maggie smiled and nodded. "It's just right. And you even get the smell of the place! How did they do that?"

"I smell food. Good food!"

"I'm sure the food would go right through us, too."

They had a laugh.

"I'm starving!" said Bernard.

"We should have had dinner first."

"How 'bout we just go to the Arc and then get out of the program?"

"Sure."

"We can always come back."

"Yup."

They continued on, hand in hand now, in reverie. At the end of the avenue they marveled at the massive monument, marveled at how they could feel the warmth of the sun.

Then Bernard said, "OK—ready to exit?"

"Yes, please."

Bernard nodded. Looked at her. Looked at the monument. Then up at the sky. Considered 'exiting'. Then he looked at Maggie again.

"I don't know how."

"What? Well, you just..." She looked down at her shiny hands, her shiny feet. "Um, you..." Exasperated, she stared at Bernard. "What do you mean you 'don't know how'?"

"Well, do you?"

"YOU got us into this!"

He raised his hands. "And I'll get us out."

"Jesus."

"You just..." He felt the air with his fingers. Turned around a couple of times. "I mean—I KNOW we're standing in our den right now. To exit the program, we..."

He clapped his hands. Tapped his fingers together. Nothing. He ran his hands over his suit, over his head and stopped at the line between the head piece and the body suit.

"Maybe you just take off the suit."

He worked the head piece up over his face and off.

His head disappeared.

Maggie screamed.

Bernard was in his den. Or at least his head was. He pulled down the rest of the suit quickly. Too quickly. It caught at his feet and his bent, unbalanced body fell forward. He instinctively shot out his arm to steady himself against the near table. His hand struck the tablet, whose cursor pointed to the x of the program, just as Maggie's head—in his peripheral vision—turned from shiny to the real thing.

He turned to look at her. Their eyes locked. Then Maggie looked at the tablet.

"Did you close the program?"

"By accident."

"I didn't get my suit off yet."

"Do you need help?"

She looked down at her shiny body. Concentrated. Gaspd with unseen effort. "I can't move it!"

"Weird."

"Goddam it—HELP me!"

Naked Bernard put his hands to his wife's throat. He carefully pulled at the suit at the line where her real head began. But there wasn't really a line. He tugged at the suit and only managed to pull the skin at her face and what was left of her real neck. The suit was her skin for now.

"It's all just... you. I can't... There's no separation."

Maggie's head rocked with the intensity of someone trying to remove a tight sweater.

"I think I'm moving my arms..."

The shiny Maggie body in the den merely quaked from the gyrations of the perplexed head.

Bernard said, "They must be moving in Paris."

"GODDAM IT!"

"I'll just restart the program. That should do it."

Bernard turned and tapped at the tablet. And frowned at what he saw.

PROGRAM ERROR. REMOVE SUIT and REBOOT.

"What's it doing?"

"Program error."

"Shit! Let me see."

He showed her.

"Well... try refreshing it."

Bernard refreshed. The same error came back.

"Close out and reboot."

He did so. They waited.

Maggie said, "Oh. OH! Someone's touching me! Stop it! STOP!"

Bernard stared at her shiny body. "What are you talking about."

"In PARIS! Someone is TOUCHING ME! STOP!"

"How can...?"

"I don't know! Stop them! Get this suit off me!"

He tried separating the suit from the skin again but it wouldn't go. The tablet was ready so he opened the program.

"Oh, my god! Some PIG is..."

He blocked out her complaints enough to work the program. MagPie was in ERROR but BernKing was READY.

"I'm going back in!"

He pulled the suit on and closed the headpiece down. BernKing was ACTIVE. He clicked on 'Stroll in Paris'. From the new window he chose Champs-Élysées.

He got his bearings quickly and ran down the boulevard to where he and Maggie were last. It wasn't long before he spied a couple far ahead who stood out from the strollers: they were stationary, shiny. As he ran on he could see that one was shorter, headless.

They were stationary because the other man held his wife's shiny body by the waist while his free hand roamed. His wife gamely fought him off but was always a split second behind, her body convulsing and dancing to get away. The groper, laughing, groped.

Bernard ran to them and pried them apart.

"Hey!" said the other man, "where'd you come from?"

"That's my wife!"

"How can you tell?"

"It's my WIFE! How can you just walk up to someone and grope them?"

The shiny stranger pointed, "Look at this body!"

Though the other man was taller than headless Maggie, he was much shorter than Bernard. So Bernard tackled him onto the sidewalk and tore the satiny suit from his neck to his navel. He quickly jumped back and peeled the rest away.

All that was left of the man was a shiny head hovering above the sidewalk. Then it tilted back and rested as the man gasped.

"I'm paralyzed."

"Serves you right."

Bernard rolled the man's adventure suit into a ball and held it. Maggie's body had calmed down. He put the suit in her hands.

"What are you going to do with that?" said the head.

"Shove it down you throat if you don't shut up. I need to think."

"What happened to your wife's head?"

Bernard ignored him. He pondered while gazing at Maggie's body and the suit it held.

"Something happened with the program between the time she took off her headpiece and the rest of the suit," said the head. "You screwed up."

Then Bernard realized that all he had to do was put her stupid headpiece back on. He grit his teeth. He hadn't brought it.

"Goddam it."

Bernard removed his Adventure Suit.

The head laughed.

"What am I holding?" asked Maggie when Bernard turned to flesh.

"The suit of the guy who was groping you."

"Ewww!"

"He's out of action."

"Good! What about me?"

"I think, all we have to do is get your headpiece back on. Where is it?"

"I don't know." They both looked at her shiny hands. At the floor. Around the room. "I must be holding it in Paris."

"What kind of an asshole are you? You knew I'd be back." Bernard scanned the area around them on the Champs-Élysées. "Where's her headpiece?"

The head was silent.

Bernard took the Adventure Suit ball from Maggie's hands and walked out to the curb. There was a tourist bus coming along. He flexed his arms a couple of times—a player at the free throw line—and was about to launch it into the second deck's center...

"Wait!" said the head. "Trash can. Up at the corner." The head gesticulated, somewhat. "Behind me."

Bernard stood over the head. Stared at it. He reared back to give it a field goal attempt... stopped himself.

"You would just leave her like that."

Silence.

Bernard walked the hundred or so paces to the trash can. He perused it until he saw a smidgeon of satiny something, reached in and pinched it. Back at Maggie and the head, he unrolled the man's suit and cleaned the headpiece with it. He dropped the suit and added the headpiece to the shiny body of his wife.

She immediately looked down at the head. "Oh, god. Let's just get out of here."

"You have to dress me," said the head.

"No," said Maggie. "We don't."

Bernard picked up the suit. "We can't just leave him..."

"Yes. We can."

"You can't," said the head.

"Of all the..." Maggie moved on the head, fists clenched.

"Just hang on," said Bernard.

He shook out the suit's opening and knelt to work it upside down and backward over the head—

"You're doing it wrong!"

—so that the stranger's head would be up his ass.

"OK," said Bernard, rising to stand. "Let' go. I'm starving!"

Two Poems
by
Joseph Moorman

Ode To The Self-Service Gas Pump

You never judge me.
Cash or credit?
Whichever makes me happy.
And the card I insert?
The magnetic strip can face either way.
Very thoughtful.

You are unfailingly polite.
Is this a debit card?
Will I pay inside or outside?
Do I want a car wash today?
You're always happy with my choice.

We have a well-rehearsed banter.
Lift the handle and make your selection.
Well, duh.
Do I want a receipt,
unlike the last 300 times I filled up?
What a kidder.

And that sunny disposition.
You give me my fuel
Without a lecture on emissions
or the environment.
Even in record-setting heat.

You don't care where I've been
or where I'm going.
No matter where I am
you are always nearby when I need you.
What a friend.

What's For Dinner, Dad?

I want to spiritually nourish you,
teaching you to feed on empathy,
embrace the foibles of others
and work to make the world
a better place.

Cook you up an altruistic outlook
so you will want to always
do the right thing,
live by the Golden Rule,
be a good example to your children,
and contribute to society
in a loving and forgiving way
that will make all of us better.

We also have meatloaf.

I've Got A Bad Feeling About This

**by
Ella Moon**

Single. Solitary. Solo. Some other word for alone. A bee does a 360-degree swoop around my hair before diving head-first into the lavender bush beside me, and I'm too depressed to even react. Shockingly, falling in love with the first guy to wink at me from across a cadaver wasn't a good idea, but that didn't stop me, did it? I blame my mother. If a woman's lit professor who spent the last twenty years raising me couldn't teach me that lesson, who could have? Then again, her own relationships are never terribly successful, so maybe it was expecting too much for her to fix mine. Point in fact: my father/sperm donor disappearing in her second trimester. Maybe this was his fault. I mean, if he'd never left, I wouldn't have asked the cute guy in my class to help me find him after he started talking about his research skills and secret investigative hobby. Which, now that I'm saying it to myself, definitely sounds shady. Oh god, maybe he's been avoiding me because he's a criminal and he's about to drain my bank account. Because, he is, definitely, avoiding me. Alright, no, calm down, it's probably just because he decided I was weird and he doesn't want to talk to me. Because that makes me feel so much better.

At my feet, Binks (short for Jar Jar Binks, because of his ears) raised his head to stare at me mournfully, ears and jowls drooping to the ground.

"Exactly," I told him, scratching his neck. "I feel the same way."

I can hear a faint hum of traffic, but the road is hidden behind a hedge approximately the height of three aeroplanes stacked on top of each other. I lucked out finding this garden out back of my dorm two years ago—presumably other people must come into it, if only because I do not do as much maintenance on it as it needs, but I've never seen them. In front of me, extremely well-fed koi track lazy circles around the pond, almost managing to distract me from my depressed inner monologue. Binks stands up, takes two steps to the right, and then collapses down again, which feels like some sort of metaphor about my joy at finally kissing someone, only to have them start running around corners as soon as I come into view. Then again, I can't construct a metaphor to save my life. There's a reason I'm a med student, and that reason is that science is my one Marketable Talent. Which also means I can't do document research, and had to get a guy who's a year younger than me and, I am now for the sake of my heart choosing to believe, just an asshole, to find the man with half my DNA.

Binks's ears prick up—instantly noticeable, at that size—and a second later I hear footsteps myself. And around the corner comes... Mr. Asshole himself. Why is he here? Actually, I've just decided I don't care. I scowl, hoping he'll get the message.

"Hey, Mandy," he starts. He's not getting the message. "Ah. I thought I'd find you here. I'm sorry I've been avoiding you."

"You should be."

"I really am." Dammit, he's cute when he's apologising. "It's just... I found something. But first, I just want to say I wasn't avoiding you because you kissed me. Or, I mean, it sort of was, but not in the way you're thinking. It was because I liked it."

I stand up and take a step towards him, this close to forgiving him, and deciding I definitely could if it means I get to kiss him again, but he puts his hands out, stopping me.

"I have to tell you what I found out."

I frown at him, honestly more than a little confused at this point.

"I found your father."

"Okay..."

"Like, I found him. In person. At my home."

Did my father start stalking him? Oh my god, is my *father* a criminal and I've put his life in danger by asking him to help me? Is my life now a bad action movie?

"Mandy... I'm your half-brother."

Oh. Bad drama movie. Star Wars? Wait. I kissed my brother. Holy shit.

Creative Differences at Illuminati Headquarters by **Kevin Binder**

On Monday, Jeff says that Our illustrious brand voice needs a "refresh."

"What do you mean?" Molly asks, taking off her headphones (Beats by Dre, as is decreed).
"What's wrong with our voice?"

"It's old. Stale. I feel like when people think of us—when they think 'Illuminati'—they imagine old men in smoke-drenched suits who undermine humanity's progress for their own gain. They don't picture trendy, relatable go-getters who... just so happen to undermine humanity's progress for their own gain."

Molly looks at the far end of the cubicle farm, where portraits of Our past distinguished members grace the wall. Churchill, JFK, Gorbachev, and Nixon smile upon Us all. Molly gets his point. We all do. She thinks to mention that Tupac's picture is also up there, but she doesn't.

Jeff continues, "We need a more exciting voice. I don't know how I can do my job as social media manager without a more energizing brand image. How are our fans supposed to find us if we don't offer more engaging content?"

"But people aren't supposed to just *find* us."

"Look, when I worked for a multi-level marketing company and grew its social media presence to almost 500K followers, I learned a thing or two about—"

"That's what I'm trying to say, Jeff. You're not working for a typical pyramid scheme anymore. Sure, we love pyramids as much as the next occult society, but when you're plotting to subvert the established social order, you need to be much more subtle."

"But—"

"No. We have two brand voices. You can post vague, ominous maxims from any of our supposedly fake 'official Illuminati' handles. Or you can promote our activities so long as you use one of our paranoid-conspiracy-theorist burner accounts. We've been using that combo successfully since before we killed MJ."

"Well, except..." Jeff trails off. He doesn't mention why he was hired in the first place, which slumping KPIs he was brought in to correct. Molly, as director of recruitment, greatly appreciates this. She, in turn, doesn't bring up that she opposed Jeff's hiring. Jeff greatly appreciates this. Harmony is maintained in Our idyllic office space.

Instead, Jeff forms a pyramid with his thumbs and index fingers, raises it to his third eye: Our typical farewell gesture. Molly does the same. As Jeff returns to his cube at the far wall, Molly follows him with her gaze. At his desk sits a monstrosity of computer monitors—he insisted on installing six when he joined Our glorious office last month. His stated reason: "Observing real-time metrics across multiple platforms and accounts." It's bugged Molly ever since that his monitors completely cover the portrait of John D. Rockefeller.

"To think, we once orchestrated the Battle of Waterloo, and now we're worried about social media followers," she mutters.

On Tuesday, Jeff wants to change Our "target audience."

"You mean like our planned targets for next year's military coups?" Molly asks.

Jeff blinks at her, his mouth agape.

On Wednesday, Jeff asks if he can get Kim and Kanye to retweet his content.

"Absolutely not," Molly says. "We'd never ask our members to endorse us so openly. We're a secret society, not a hotel rewards program."

"But everyone already knows they're Illuminati."

"No, people only *think* they know. They don't *know* they know."

"Fine, who can I get to promote my content?"

Molly shakes her head at him. "Jesus Christ."

"Wait, He's one of us?"

"What? No, I just meant—Look, I don't understand why it's so important to repost *your* content. Just get Paris and JBiebs to post some subtle references to the All-Seeing Eye on the Gram; that's a sure-fire way to keep our brand fresh."

"Well, that's just it, Obama told me that they're too busy starting the next culture war to focus on subliminal Instagram imagery." Jeff shrugs. "We're responsible for maintaining brand content until America's internal divide becomes irreparable and our best influencers can focus on other things."

"Ahhh," Molly sighs. She notices the bags under Jeff's eyes. We all notice them. "You know, sometimes I wonder why maintaining social media influence is so difficult for an organization with literal mind-control powers."

"I asked about using that too. Obama said that ability's currently reserved for Sir Patrick Stewart and James McAvoy. He kept saying they needed it for some guy named 'Professor X.' "

Molly nods, taps the seat of the unoccupied swivel chair next to her. Jeff slumps into it. They sit together for some time, staring at different grey cubicle walls. Their silence radiates outward, coursing through the ventilation system of Our hallowed halls.

On Thursday, Jeff is excited. We are all excited to carry out Our noble mission.

"I've got it," he says. "We'll post about our own office culture, showing people how relatable our organization actually is. We could—"

Molly cuts in, "Jeff, what did I tell you about subtlety? Once we admit to the public that our headquarters actually *do* sit deep beneath Denver International Airport, the jig is up."

"I know that. But I realized, we've been a myth for so long, we can be *that* direct and people still wouldn't believe us. Reverse psychology. And the whole thing would have a tongue-in-cheek tone. Like, I was thinking we could post an artsy picture of my feet surrounded by autumnal leaves, but instead of autumnal leaves, they're smashed symbols of the patriarchy."

Molly responds by gesturing to the portraits on the far wall, to the row of dead white men—and Tupac—staring down at them. "Jeff, we essentially *are* the patriarchy."

"Ok, fine. Ignore that example, but—"

"Look, I get where you're going with this. It's a fine idea—but risky. Let me discuss it with the proper channels; I'm sure Bill and Melinda will want a say in this. In the meantime, can't you train some Twitter bots to spread disinformation about climate change or something?"

Jeff exhales. "Ugh, deceptive Twitter bots are so 2016." All the same, he raises a finger-triangle to his third eye and walks away. The status quo prevails in Our dignified workplace.

On Friday, Jeff goes ahead with his plan anyway. We prefer not to discuss the minor insubordinations that occur within Our eminent association.

The following month, Molly finds Jeff's new Instagram account (@RealIlluminati333). She reads, slackjawed, his posts about the office softball team (caption: "Think we're ruthless in rigging municipal elections? You should see us on the diamond") and Our recent team-building pizza party (caption: "Ushering in the New World Delivery Order"), among others.

She runs over to his cube. "Jeff, what in the name of the Eternal Circle did you just do?"

"Come look," is his only verbal reply; he knows now that We do not use words to convey Our truth. He instead punches in a series of hotkeys, changing the information displayed on his workstation's monitors. He nods at them; Molly leans forward.

The screen on the bottom right now shows Jeff's new, rogue account. She skips it with a shake of her head.

The bottom-middle one, meanwhile, features a companion Twitter handle. Its most recent Tweet reads, "Our first tip for a close-knit #officeculture? Collaboratively thwarting the hopes and dreams of anyone who isn't a member of your hyper-selective in-group #teamwork."

"We are so fired," Molly whispers.

"Just keep reading."

She continues on to the bottom-left monitor, where she finds a webpage offering woolen goods laden with Our exalted symbols.

"Jeff," she says in a low, calm voice. "Is this *you* selling 'officially licensed' Illuminati hats and scarves on Etsy?"

"Mmmhm."

She closes her eyes and knits her forehead. "And who, pray tell, is making them?"

"The knitting club at my grandma's retirement home. They're surprisingly good at designing patterns of shape-shifting lizard people and little humans trapped in birdcages."

"What—"

"Don't worry; they have no clue who I'm working for. I told grandma it's all for a church fundraiser."

"I don't care what *they* know, Jeff! I care what you're broadcasting to the masses."

"In that case, let's look at the masses' response."

He gestures to the middle row of monitors—two of them side by side. On the right, Molly sees an article calling the new handle "one of the best new satirical social media accounts." The influential blogger who wrote the piece (not even one of Ours) lauds the handle as "witty" and "irreverent."

The screen to its left shows a number of Our celebrated members retweeting, reposting, and sharing Jeff's content. Molly grabs her coworker's mouse and browses the reactions, discovering that the commoners find this trend ironic, comical ("@beyonce promoting an #illuminati handle? IM LITERALLY DED," says one of the sheeple).

"It's like I told you," Jeff says. "Nobody's changed their mind about us. Nobody will. I feel like I could post a picture of the literal Holy Grail sitting in Storage Room C and people still wouldn't believe we're real."

"Ok, the Grail is strictly off limits; you're in enough trouble as it is. Besides, we moved it out of Room C after the last office party because Miley kept mixing mojitos in it."

"You're missing the point. What I'm saying is this: the people who believed in us still do, and those who didn't still think it's all a joke. And yet, we're trending all over the place. Our top hashtags are blowing up, every conceivable growth rate is spiking, and my grandma's friends are working sixteen hours a day to keep up with our Etsy demand. The Illuminati is *cool* right now."

Molly wants to argue further: We all feel compelled to speak Our truths into existence. But, first, she raises her vision to the single monitor on the top row, the apex of Jeff's display,

which beams with a collection of bar graphs, area charts, and heat maps. There, every metric points upward, just as Jeff claimed; they all reach toward Our grandiose destiny. Their inflection points, as swift and synchronized as Our takeover of Hollywood in the 1920s, would make a consultant swoon.

She scrutinizes the gleaming figures until her eyes water. The stinging sensation forces her back a step, forces her eyelids shut. And when she reopens them, her tear-glossed pupils can only perceive the array of monitors as a single, indistinct light, pulsating in a series of percussive flares. Though this illuminated pyramid blocks John D. Rockefeller's portrait from view, she can still feel the entrepreneur's watchful, all-seeing gaze behind it, within it. She now comprehends that these technological accessories have not removed his presence from the room but have merely obscured his face from those who don't know it's there.

At that moment, Molly understands the path Jeff has charted for Us in this new, chaotic world. She envisions Our lasting prosperity shimmering in his screens. We all do, for We all see what We wish to within that blinding glare.

Advice to a Young Poet
by
Mary Chris Bailey

after The Reverent by Billy Collins

Arrogance makes your words
sound of howling dogs.

They fall from your mouth, in
lifeless idioms you call poetry.

Clacking on a keyboard, the
room littered with strutting cats,
tails high mirroring your vanity, and
your lips curl as you type, all
puffed-up with your genius. The
disdain you show the work of others,
convinces me your true calling is prose.

Cat Owners
by
Tim Oke

'You're worried you're losing your magic as a couple?' Olivia asked.

'Kind of. I look at our parents, and I don't want that for us. I want something more,' Jasmine said. She wished Olivia was older, grey haired and with large round spectacles that's the kind of marriage counselor she wanted. Not early twenties, sleek jawed and toned shouldered.

'What's wrong with our parents? You're so condescending about normal lives. As if we're not normal. As if we're above that. Superhuman, or something,' Matt said, rolling his eyes.

'If you're not going to take this seriously, there's no point,' Jasmine said, shrugging her shoulders and looking at the door.

'Okay, let's calm down and take this slowly.' Olivia double clicking her pen as she said this. 'Why do you think we are here, Jasmine?'

'Me?'

'Yes, I'd like to hear why you think you're here.'

'Well, I would like to discuss *us*. You know, what's happening to us. Matt's so distant. I think he's got this sense of powerlessness about him. It feels like our relationship has gone cold, even with Anthony, our son. '

'Oh come off it,' Matt said, rolling his eyes again. Jasmine noticed that he had tried to comb his hair forward to hide his receding hairline. That was progress of sorts. He should just shave it all off though; he was fortunate enough to have the symmetry to pull it off.

'Do you want to know who suggested this?' Jasmine said. 'Our son. That's right, our son.' She looked accusingly at Matt, letting this sink in. 'He was reading a comic book and pointed to Doc Samson. You know the psychiatrist who is always going after the Hulk, the one who was exposed to gamma radiation, and became really strong?' Jasmine looked at Olivia. 'Sorry,' she said, 'we know all the characters now, Anthony is obsessed with them. Anyway, my point is our son pointed to Doc Samson and said, "*He could help you and dad.*" That's how aware our son is of our unhappiness-'

'I wish you'd stop buying him those comic books. That's half the problem,' Matt said.

'Please, Matt. Let Jasmine speak; this is a safe space.'

'Thank you,' Jasmine said. 'I feel like Matt's lost his direction. I feel like he's taking his frustrations out on me, and on Anthony.'

'On Anthony? That's rich,' Matt said.

'Jasmine, would you like to share a specific example, to help contextualise your frustrations?' Olivia asked.

'It's little things. He's so tightly wound up. Last week, he shouted at me in front of Anthony because I didn't want a cat. I mean, he just flies off the handle. He doesn't want to talk it through at all.'

'Sorry, can I speak now?' Matt asked.

'Please,' Olivia said.

'You know why Jasmine doesn't want a cat? It's because-'

'I never said this.'

'Please... let's try not to interrupt each other,' Olivia said.

'Because villains have cats, superheroes don't. That's why. She doesn't want a cat because it doesn't fit in with her idea of being a superhero-'

'I don't think I'm a superhero,' Jasmine said.

'I don't even like cats. I'm mildly allergic to them. I only wanted one as a way of putting all this behind us, you know? As a way of accepting we're not superheroes. That's what we agreed. We're just ordinary people. Cat owners. And then at the last minute, she just says no. I think I've got a right to be a little angry at that.'

'I don't want a cat. Is that a crime? They're selfish and they lick their genitals in front of you,' Jasmine said.

'I'm not sure I understand,' Olivia said, shifting in her chair.

'Jasmine thinks that because she has a superpower, she's better than everyone else. She's obsessed with it. And that's why we can't have a cat.'

'I never said I have a superpower. And I certainly don't think I'm better than everyone else.'

'You don't have to, it's how you act.'

'Superpower?' Olivia asked.

'Yes, go on, tell her,' Matt said, pointing at Jasmine.

'You know what? I think this has been a mistake. I thought this might help, but it's not going to,' Jasmine said.

'No. We are here now. You may as well tell Olivia about your *magical powers*,' Matt said, putting 'magical powers' in air quotes.

'I can heat things with my eyes,' said Jasmine, sighing.

'Sorry?' Olivia said, clicking her pen once.

'You know, like that guy from the comics who can do the lasers out of his eyes,' Matt said. 'That's why Jasmine reads comics with Anthony, she wants him to think that she is the female Cyclops. I mean... it's ridiculous.'

'I've never said I was the female Cyclops. I don't have any lasers,' Jasmine said.

'I don't understand,' Olivia said.

'Show her,' Matt said.

'Well, it's already quite hot in here, so she probably won't feel anything.'

'It'll still work, just about,' he said.

'I can heat things to 17 degrees. I'm not claiming it's a superpower,' Jasmine said, shrugging.

'Well, in the interests of full disclosure, 17 degrees is the highest recorded temperature that Jas has ever managed. On most days we're talking about 14 degrees,' Matt said with a piggish snort.

'See that's what I'm talking about,' Jasmine said, shaking her finger at Matt. 'It's frustrating for me that you've got this inferiority complex about it. Why can't you just accept it? Or be happy for me? Instead, you try and belittle me. Did you hear that Olivia?'

Olivia nodded.

'That is why we're here. He makes me feel so small. And he does it in front of our son. That's the worst thing. Like last week, when the electricity went, guess what he did? He turned to me in front of Anthony and said, "If only you could heat things another 10 degrees, then maybe we could have some dinner." And that's only the stuff he says in front of our son.'

'Can we slow down a bit? You think that you have a superpower? Is this in a metaphorical sense?'

'Show her. Prepare to be amazed,' Matt said, doing jazz hands.

'Okay, give me your arm,' Jasmine said, rolling her eyes at Matt as she stood up and walked over to Olivia. Olivia stood up and held out her arm, looking at both of them as if this was a setup, and they were about to burst into laughter.

'Ouch,' Olivia said.

'Ouch?' Matt said. 'What do you mean ouch? Was it actually hot?'

'No, not exactly... but I felt it warming.'

'Exactly, warm. Big deal.'

'For god's sake, no one is saying it's a big deal,' Jasmine said.

'That was incredible,' Olivia said.

'Oh come off it,' Matt said, shaking his head.

'I'm serious, you have a gift.'

'Thank you, but it's not a massive deal.'

'What's the point of this?' Matt asked, turning to Jasmine . 'If you're going to lie?'

'What do you mean by that, Matt?' Olivia asked, clicking her pen and trying to catch his eyeline.

'She says it's not a big deal, but that's a total lie. To her, it is the only thing that matters. I mean, she's had Anthony doing every activity under the sun. He is 9 years old and has a bruise that covers the entire side of his right face because she thought he might be able to fly-'

'That was his idea,' Jasmine said. 'You don't think I feel guilty about that? I do.'

'He's 9 years old, desperately trying to please his mother, which for a kid of that age is unhealthy in itself. He should be out with his mates playing football.'

'What happened exactly?' Olivia asks.

'Anthony thought he might be able to fly if he had a bit of help. Like if he jumped off the shed. And she said, "good idea." I mean he's lucky he didn't break his legs, or worse.'

'That was a mistake. Am I not allowed to make a mistake? I've said sorry. Can you stop punishing me for it?'

'She's had Anthony throwing daggers, shooting arrows, and she made him touch an electric fence a month ago to see if he could store and re-channel the electricity.'

'It was extremely low wattage. I tried it first.'

'What kind of mother does that? An electric fence!'

'Low wattage. I looked it up online before we tried it, there was never a chance of any injury. And he wanted to.'

'You see?' Matt said, gesturing to Olivia. 'This is what we're dealing with. Someone that encourages their 9-year-old son to touch electric fences and jump off sheds. She's going to turn him into a weirdo.'

'Don't you dare say that about our son! Don't you dare,' Jasmine shouted. 'You just feel excluded. While we're outside having fun you're sitting on the couch moping around, feeling sorry for yourself. It's you that has the problem, not Anthony, not me.'

'What do you want me to do? Come outside and touch electric fences with you both?'

'Yes. We want you to join us, we've asked you. Anthony has asked you. But no, all you want to do is watch daytime TV. You're pathetic.'

'Okay, okay, Let's dial this down. I mean, sorry, I'm slightly speechless...—'

'Can we please skip all the shock and awe and get to the counselling bit, I mean we are paying for this, right?' Matt said.

'Right. Yes, of course,' Olivia said. 'Jasmine I'm interested in why you're encouraging your son to do these things. Could you share that?'

'Good question,' Matt said, slapping his knee.

'I have a hunch that Anthony is gifted-'

'This is the problem. You see?' Matt said, turning to Olivia. 'Most people are trying to prepare the child for exams, maybe one day university, but Jas is trying to figure out whether he can fly. And how do you think that makes him feel? That kind of expectation?'

'Do you feel like you are pressuring him?' Olivia asked Jasmine.

'No, I don't. He's practically a model student.'

'Academics aren't the only thing.'

'He doesn't want to play football or join the school play. Or whatever it is you think he should be doing. That's not him. He's more thoughtful.'

'Only because he reads all those comics, full of superheroes who are these extreme individualists. We are teaching him to be an island. It's not healthy.'

'I'm not teaching him to be an island! That's you. That's you sitting alone watching TV every day. That's you not joining in. That's what this is about. Start talking to him more.'

'Don't be ridiculous. I'm just trying to look out for him. He needs to be out there with his mates.'

'See?' Jasmine said, turning to Olivia. 'He says *I'm* the one forcing Anthony to do things he doesn't want.'

'You're the one pushing him away from me,' Matt shouted.

'Okay, let's just slow this down. What do you mean by that, Matt?' Olivia asked clicking her pen and dropping it on the floor. Both Matt and Jasmine looked at her, waiting for her to pick it up. But she didn't. She looked back, pretending it hadn't happened; her hands shaking slightly.

'Jas feels I'm not good enough. And has been saying the same thing to Anthony,' Matt said.

'I have not. I mean how could you think that?'

'Well, you imply it.'

'When have I ever implied that?'

'What about when we were in that queue the other day for the Natural History Museum, and you said, "Wouldn't it be nice to see how far the queue goes? Remember when you could do that, Matt?"'

'I was just irritated by the queue.'

'Well, you said in front of Anthony. And I heard him ask you whether I would ever get my powers back. You know, when we were inside the museum, looking at the Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton.'

'Sorry, I don't think in following this,' Olivia said.

'You're not following it, because it is not making much sense,' Jasmine said.

'Jasmine is pushing me out because I can no longer levitate.'

'Levitate?' Olivia asked

'When we got married I could levitate, yes.'

'Like, levitate off the ground? This is amazing.'

'Well, maybe at the time it felt like it was. But looking back now, it really wasn't.'

'This is what I'm talking about. He's so dismissive. As if levitating isn't a big thing. How many people do you know, Olivia, who can levitate?'

'None,' Olivia said.

'Exactly. He's got low self-esteem,' Jasmine said.

'It was barely noticeable.'

'There you go again, doing yourself down,' Jasmine said.

'I could only do it up to two centimeters or so... and that was a good day.'

'I'm sure you went to three once,' Jasmine said.

'Whatever.'

'Whatever? How many other people can even do one millimeter?'

'Anyway, one day I just got up and couldn't do it any-more. And, frankly, it was a relief. I didn't care.'

'Didn't care? I'm sorry, I'm not going to listen to you rewrite history. You were depressed for six months. You barely managed to go into work. You were in tears when he found out you couldn't levitate anymore.'

'I was depressed because you made me feel inadequate. I thought you wouldn't love me. Not because I couldn't levitate two centimeters '.

'Three. And what? So it's all my fault now?'

'It was how you responded to it. It was like the end of the world to you.'

'That's nonsense.'

'You kept telling me not to worry because I'd be able to levitate again soon. You didn't help me move on.'

'I don't believe I'm hearing this. After everything I did. I was there for you 100 percent.'

'What I didn't realise when we married,' he said, looking at Olivia, 'was that Jas thought we were going to have this life that was different from everyone else's. Because of our superpowers. We were going to have this great and happy life. She was so entitled, and I didn't even realise it.'

'You thought it too. You basically said so in our wedding vows. "*Here's to a different life*". That's what you said.'

'I didn't mean we were going to have a different life because I could get an extra two millimeters off the ground!'

'Would you stop saying two, when it was definitely three? And what *did* you mean then?'

'I meant that we were going to be happy together. That's all.'

'That's just not true. I remember you levitated while we cut the cake. No one else noticed, but I did. I remember you winking at me. And you can see it in the pictures. You're three centimeters taller than everyone else.'

'I don't remember that.'

'Well I've got the pictures to prove it.'

'We're 45 years old. We need to move on. And, guess what, we *do* look like our parents. What did you think would happen?'

'So what if I thought we would be different. Is that such a crime? We were happy until you stopped levitating. It's not just me that's changed, it's you. And don't write our son off. He might have a gift. Maybe *he* will do something with it.'

'What's that meant to mean exactly?'

'It's meant to mean you're a hypocrite. You find life boring without the extra three centimeters. And, just because you don't have that extra space, you're taking it out on Anthony and me. You're trying to make us just like you.'

'Anthony thinks you don't love him. That's the problem. That's what he thinks; he thinks you don't love him because he doesn't have a superpower. That's why he's jumping off sheds. That's why he's touching electric fences,' shouted Matt, cradling his head in his hands.

'Says the man that barely speaks to his son anymore. How would you know?'

A moment passed when no one spoke, and the only sound was the faint sniffing of Matt.

'You know what? I can't live with this,' Jasmine says quietly. 'If you feel so strongly then I think we need to talk about separation for a while. Because this is not fair.'

'Unfair? You think it's unfair on you? You are in love with an idea. The idea of us as a *special* family. You can't see past it. You can't even get a cat, because you think you're a superhero. It's not working. We don't work.'

'It's working,' Jasmine said, standing up.

'It's not working, is not working at all.'

'No, I mean, you're levitating.'

'What?'

'You're levitating. Maybe even more than three centimeters off the chair!'

'On my god.' He looked down at his feet.

'That's amazing,' Olivia said, 'but can we just go back to what you said about your son.'

'I'm levitating.'

'He's levitating. I think it could be four centimeters.'

'Do you think so?' Matt said.

'I'm certain,' Jasmine said.

'Olivia, do you have a tape measure?' Matt asked.

'Maybe somewhere, but I don't think that's the point of this session.'

'Get the tape measure quickly,' Jasmine said.

Olivia looked at them both, shrugged, stood up and walked out of the room. Jasmine watched Olivia leave in search of a tape measure. A bit of urgency wouldn't hurt, Jasmine muttered.

'Did you know this would happen?' Matt asked.

'I hoped it would. I had this idea. You know Doc Sampson?'

'The psychiatrist guy that stole Hulk's girlfriend?'

'Yeah, well you know he changed the Hulk back into a normal person, I thought maybe it could work the other way. Maybe a therapist might be able to help you do the reverse? I thought maybe if we took away the safety net it might come back. You know, talk about how we feel, and the separation. I thought it might force us to be who we used to be.'

'You're a genius,' Matt said tears forming in his eyes.

'I think we need to refocus on Anthony,' Olivia said, returning.

'Anthony has a gift, we just don't know what it is yet,' Jasmine said.

'And, he is doing very well academically at school,' Matt said.

'Exactly, so what if he is not the most extrovert of children. He is deeper than that,' Jasmine said while measuring the distance between Matt and the floor.

'Yes, he's much deeper than that. He's a thinker,' Matt said.

'Oh Matt! It's six centimeters. You've doubled your superpower.'

'If I can double mine, maybe you can too. I mean 34 centigrade would actually be quite hot.'

'It's possible.'

'I think we are potentially missing the point here about your child.'

'Anthony wants us to be a happy family again. You've helped us with that. We haven't missed the point - you have,' Jasmine said.

'Yes, exactly. It's like a cloud has lifted. This feels like a second chance. Like a real second chance,' Matt said.

'You know what? Anthony has quite a lot of your features. Maybe we should try him on levitation again?'

'Yes, that's a great way for me and him to reconnect, I know I haven't been exactly the most communicative over the last couple of months,' Matt said.

'Oh, don't worry about that. There's a lot of things which I said and did that I'm not proud of either.'

'I'm sorry, but I think this is unethical,' Olivia said.

Matt and Jasmine looked at Olivia as if they had forgotten she was there.

'How you're treating your son, I mean. I think you need to stop and think about the consequences of your actions on him.'

'How we raise our son has nothing to do with you,' Jasmine said.

'You've got a nerve,' Matt said, slapping his thigh.

'You said that Anthony felt that you didn't love him because he didn't have these powers? What's changed?'

'Everything's changed. If I can levitate again, there's almost no way Anthony does not have superpowers. Don't you see that?' Matt said. 'Before, when I thought he didn't, I was angry. I thought we were leading him down a path he couldn't go down. I'm not too proud to say I was wrong. And Jas was right.'

'Isn't that the sign of a true man?' Jasmine said, leaning over and squeezing Matt's hand.

'It would be wrong to let Anthony not develop powers he naturally has,' Matt said.

'It would be criminal,' Jasmine said.

'Sorry. I think we need to talk more about whether this is the best thing for Anthony,' Olivia said.

'You've done great work, but you're now overstepping a line,' Jasmine said.

'Ouch,' Olivia said, rubbing the side of her face. 'That burns'.

'Burns?' Jasmine asked.

'More than 17 degrees?' Matt asked.

'Yes, much higher,' Olivia said, running from the room as her hair caught fire.

'Olivia, you are a miracle worker. You've saved our family,' Jasmine shouted after her.

Contributor Biographies



Tim McDaniel teaches ESL at Green River College, not far from Seattle. His short stories, mostly comedic, have appeared in a number of SF/F magazines, including *F&SF*, *Analog*, and *Asimov's*. He lives with his wife, dog, and cat, and his collection of plastic dinosaurs is the envy of all who encounter it. His author page on Amazon is <https://www.amazon.com/author/tim-mcdaniel>. Many of his stories are available at CuriousFictions.com.



Lisa Fox is a pharmaceutical market researcher by day and fiction writer by night. She thrives in the chaos of everyday suburban life, residing in New Jersey (USA) with her husband, two sons, and their couch-dwelling golden retriever. Lisa's work has been featured in various publications, including *Metaphorosis*, *New Myths*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *The Satirist*, among others. She won the 2018 NYC Midnight Short Screenplay competition, and her short story "To Lure Gavin Back Home" was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize.



Emmy Newman is a current MFA candidate at the University of Idaho. She is known around the office for being fascinated by things like mucus, which leads to articles about things like the deep sea snot palaces of larvaceans being sent to her, which she enjoys greatly. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry Northwest*, *New Ohio Review*, *CALYX: A Journal*, *Cream City Review*, and elsewhere. She has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and currently serves as co-editor-in-chief of *Fugue*.



Jerry Tran is a comedian/writer/simple man from Houston based in Chicago.



Dan Nielsen's work has appeared in such diverse places as *Selected Poems of Post-Beat Poets*, published in Chinese by Wengingbooks, and *The Random House Treasury of Light Verse*, where he shares a page with William Carlos Williams. Dan is a part-time standup comic. He and his partner Georgia Bellas are the post-minimalist folk duo Sugar Whiskey.



Francis Fernandes grew up in the United States and Canada. He studied in Montréal and has a degree in Mathematics. He lives in Frankfurt, Germany, where he writes and teaches. All this jumping around hasn't prevented him from acquiring and maintaining an aquarium, where he does most of his thinking, and he's grateful for having pieces published in *The Zodiac Review*, *Beyond Words*, *Indolent Books*, *Third Wednesday*, *Poetry Potion*, *Montréal Writes*, *Underwood*, *Bywords*, *Amethyst Review*, and *Modern Poetry Quarterly Review*.



Somewhere in the Midwest, **Maura Yzmore** writes long equations, short fiction, and goofy poetry. Some of her more ridiculous fare can be found in *Bending Genres*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *The Daily Drunk*, *The Dirty Pool*, and the one and only *Defenestration*.

Website: <https://maurayzmore.com> Twitter: @MauraYzmore



Eirik Gumeny is the author of the *Exponential Apocalypse* series and has written for *Cracked*, *Nerdist*, and *SYFY Wire*, among other outlets. If he had a witty catchphrase, he'd add it here, but he doesn't, so...



Ann Pedone graduated from Bard College and has a Master's Degree in Chinese Language and Literature from UC Berkeley. Ann is the author of the chapbooks *The Bird Happened* (Leave Books, 1991) and *perhaps there is a sky we don't know: a re-imagining of sappho*. (Cup and Dagger Press, 2020.) Her work has recently appeared in multiple journals including *Riggwelter*, *Big City Lit*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *The Phare*, *West Trade Review*, *The Open Page Literary Journal*, *Slipstream*, *Rogue Agent*, *The French Literary Review*, *SAND*, and *The Shore*.



A 2020 Pushcart Prize nominee and 2020 'Best of the Net' nominee, **John Mara** writes fiction lakeside in New Hampshire with the creative input of his wife Holly. They often attract mortified glances in restaurants while discussing dastardly characters and plot structure. A multi-genre writer, John tends to converse in the genre he's thinking about and makes better dinner company when it's humor, not horror. You can find John's 20+ short stories published in *Liquid Imagination*, *Bewildering Stories*, *J.J. Outre Review*, *Youth Imagination*, and other venues.



Ever since playing Sim Ant on Windows 98, **Kajetan Kwiatkowski** has had a lifelong obsession with arthropods. He's fine when a fly falls in his soup, and he's fine when a spider nestles in the side mirror of his car. In the future, he hopes humanity is willing to embrace such insectophilia, but until then, he'll write entomological spec fiction to satisfy his soul. You can visit his website: www.EclosionStories.com and follow him @Kajetkwiat on Twitter



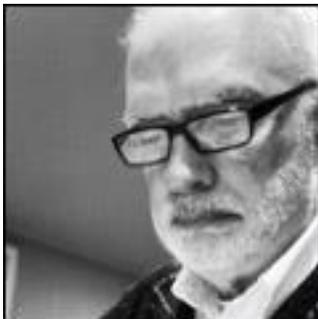
Jack Berning is a forever up-and-coming writer currently living alone in Denver, Colorado. His other interests include being gay, doing backflips, and drinking carbonated water.



Myna Chang writes flash and short stories in a variety of genres. Her work has been featured in *Defenestration*, *Funny Pearls*, *LOL Comedy*, *The Daily Drunk*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Mad Scientist Journal*, *X-Ray Lit*, and *New World Writing*, among others. Read more at MynaChang.com or find her on Twitter at [@MynaChang](https://twitter.com/MynaChang).



Mike Scofield has been publishing stories since the last millennium. He is happy living in a world where some things make sense and the rest is fiction fodder.



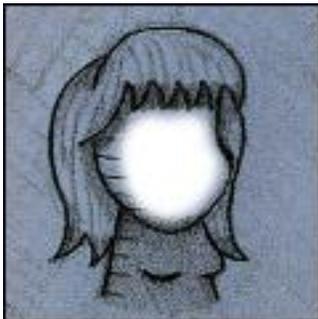
Joseph Moorman is a retired civil servant living in upstate New York. A faceless bureaucrat no longer (see photo) he finally has the time to listen for the right words. His work has appeared in *The Lyric*, *Light*, and *The Comstock Review*.



Ella Moon is actually three writers stacked on top of each other wearing a trenchcoat. They all write different things, and all take turns haranguing the other two to put down that pen and go aimlessly browse online shopping sites instead, looking for cute sweaters for the eight-foot lake monster that lives in their backyard. Occasionally, the lake monster has talked them into banding together long enough to get published.



Kevin Binder is the assistant fiction editor of *phoebe* literary journal. His humor writing has been published here and in *McSweeney's*, *Slackjaw*, *Weekly Humorist*, *SPANK the CARP*, and elsewhere. In a previous life, he worked as a marketing professional but unfortunately has never had the chance to join the esteemed ranks of the Illuminati.



Mary Chris Bailey is a retired pediatric emergency medicine physician. Her work has been published in *Pulse-voices from the heart of medicine*, *Please See Me*, and *Creative Pinellas*. One of her stories was a runner-up in *Scribble's* short story fiction contest 2020. She lives with her husband, Wayne, and dogs Skeeter, and Bella. She divides her time between Florida and Maine.



Tim Oke writes short stories and plays. His plays and stand up-acts have appeared at the Edinburgh Fringe, and his short stories have been published in anthologies, magazines and websites including *Idle Ink*, *The Writers Club*, *Storgy*, and *Scribble*. Tim is working on a book of short stories and a novella (<http://www.tim-oke.com/>). You can find him on Twitter @TimOke9.