

# ◇ Defenestration ◇

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**What's wrong?**  
by  
**Priyanka Kole**

I called her,

Lily on 1st April,

Julie on 15th,

Rekha on 3rd May.

She didn't complain, yell, or punch me in the face.

*What's this about?*

Love or money.

But, she had a better-paying job than me, and we were dating just for almost a month, so love, no.

But something had to be wrong with her.

\*\*\*

We met at a funeral. I gawked at her for the entire time, then mustered the strength, and approached her with a white lily in my hand (which I tugged out from the decorations).

"You are fascinating." I commented.

"More than death," she replied, and took the white lily.

I chuckled and asked for her number.

\*\*\*

We went on dates, movies.

She liked to watch horror and thrillers, The ring, Hatchet, psycho, centipede etc but never flinched, blinked, or screamed at the gore scenes. We watched the documentaries on serial killers on Netflix, weird choice of her, on a movie night. I retched at a scene. She giggled and patted my cheek playfully.

I grabbed a bottle and gulped down some water, glancing at her, using my peripheral vision to the fullest. She played with her always loose hair. What if she was one of them, a serial killer? They won't bother names. Few were wanted by the cops in the state.

*Maybe that's what's wrong with her.*

At dinner, I gaped at her. Nah, serial killer, but recognizing one just by his or her looks would make it easier for everyone.

\*\*\*

*Avoid her*, sounds like a good plan. Ghosting her altogether would provoke her, so I tossed that idea out. She knew where I lived.

In these situations, I regretted the quality of friends I had. The number was only three, though. One could grab anything harder to get a hold on in the state if you understand what I mean, and another one only called when he needed a wingman in a club to help him. The third one had only one advice, to run away and start fresh, though he was the one still living with his parents.

The list of my friends end here. So, not anyone like a badass cop going out of his way, gleaning information about this girl, grabbing evidence and then arresting her and saving me.

\*\*\*

On a Saturday, she took me to a cemetery. "Coming here, I understand the philosophy of birth, sufferings, and death more. The silence doesn't bother me. It's quiet here for everyone."

I nodded and gulped a spit lump down my throat.

\*\*\*

She invited me to her house next Tuesday; it was her birthday. I insisted on going to a fancy restaurant. She refused, "I will cook for you."

So next Tuesday, my doom-day or maybe I was just paranoid.

I chose not to take any risks, though. A girl had robbed me on a date before. So, I bought a pepper spray, a long rope, a huge knife, and packed them in an old college bag.

I could light her curtains on fire to alert her neighbors. Use the pepper spray if she chased me and slide down her balcony by the rope if trapped, and worst-case scenario fight her with the knife. She was half my size, I could do that.

In the mellow evening, dogs howled around her house. I pressed the doorbell, and wiped my sweating forehead on my sleeve. Checked my pocket for the lighter. She opened the door.

Her brunette hair loose like always, a sparkling white dress flowed on her curves and skin glowing like clean water. Devil had a charm.

"What's in the huge bag, my gift?" she chuckled as I walked in.

"A surprise," I said.

Scented candles decorated the room. The air thick with the aroma of the food. Soft music in the background. Surely romantic on a normal date, but now it felt like I stepped in a haunted house. One I had visited as a ten-year-old then came out wailing.

\*\*\*

The plan; swap our plates when she would not look and not drink anything, not even water. No risks.

She cut her cake and offered me a piece. "I'm allergic," I said.

My eyes followed her moves while I slumped on the couch. She arranged the plates on the dinner table.

She walked towards me. I straightened my back and held my bag close. While plonking beside me, her eyes darted to mine.

"I've wanted to tell you something for a long time. Don't be mad," she said.

She held her hair back, a white plastic thing in her ear. "It's a hearing aid. I cannot hear well without it. Most of the time I kept my hair down because of that, sometimes didn't even wear it. I couldn't tell you earlier. I just didn't want you to judge me on my disability before even knowing me first. It's being a month I think you should know."

*Thank God.* "It's totally cool. I understand."

She sighed, resting her tilted head on a fist. "You are a great guy," she smiled, loosening her hair.

I ate the dinner like a beast.

"I've never seen you eating like that," she said.

"I'm sorry. I'm just extremely hungry. By the way, you look great today."

"Thank you for noticing so early," she replied. After a pause she said, "You look good too."

I insisted on leaving early. The preparations for her BIRTHDAY (double air quotes) didn't allow me to get enough sleep last night.

At the door, she said, "Are you forgetting something?" She opened her palm, pointing at my face. "My gift."

"Gift. Okay." I pulled out the pepper spray from my bag. "This, so you can always stay safe on the roads and from serial killers."

She frowned at it, "You are funny."

"I get that a lot," I snickered. "The dinner was superb."

"Thanks for coming," she said, tucking her hair back, making her aid visible.

"So goodnight and Happy Birthday once again, Julie."

And this time she heard.

"It's Rose, you moron."

## Another Server Calls me "Young Lady"

by  
Tina Barry

I've blown into the bakery, a witch  
for fine pastry—buns, biscuits and better—  
warm cookies crisp. My stare turns sweets unsavory. My broom  
sours sables, toughens muffins. Yet I stir  
the soul-patched server, a gourmand who's  
christened a cake Orange You

Peachy, and scripted it in gold, a name you  
(and by *you*, I mean me) find worthy of a snicker. I'm a witch  
alright, crone if you like, pointy hat swapped for a mohawk, whose  
'do and dramatic entrance deserve better  
than "*Hello, Young Lady*." Young Lady! How that stirs  
the burbling cauldron of my soul. Oh, Wee Lad. See this broom?

Yes, *you*. My broom!

After I park this ride, we'll have a chat you  
won't forget; (the perfect incantation stirs  
beneath my once snow white skin). Scared, your eyes scan. Which  
scone needs your attention? Little Man, you should've known better  
than to welcome me with *young* when you meant *old*. Oh, you whose

lips form the cervical O of a doughnut, who  
trembles as I near. I can cast a spell, ride this broom  
hard. Would waving a wand be better?

Ooooh, what fun I'll have with you!

Wait. Did I say *wand*? I meant *stake*! Being a witch,  
I'll hex your hair, barnacle your brows. Stirring

isn't it? "*What*," you ask, "*Young Lady offends*?" A greeting meant to stir  
the kindest emotions. Only a witch, you imply, who  
could, um, use a good brooming, only a witch  
would see a diss when affection was intended. Oh blasted broom!  
oh black cats, bats and bother! I who  
know from trial, and (rarely) error, a spell is always better.

Yes, it's me who should have known better  
then to say, "Excuse me, Small Sir" (cruel, I know, but he stirred  
ill will), "Are you listening?" You

who says *young* when he means *old*. Whose  
brown eyes, as I babble, burn to a crumb. See this broom?  
it took years to earn. So which witch do you want? The witch

who gobbles your heart like a soiled cherry? Or the witch who stirs  
a vision of your future? Hairline a receding memory. Luscious man breasts. Oh, a joy  
better—

well, it won't get better, than saying, "Hello, Young Man!" once I turn you old.

## **A Not-So-Very Special Episode of "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives"** **by** **Jeff Coe**

The verdict on the last featured menu item had been given, ("These maple turkey necks are through the roof and out the chimney"). Moments later, as it had hundreds of thousands of times previously, the iconic '67 Camaro convertible—driven by the show's host Guy Fieri—sped into frame.

"That's it this week for 'Diners, Drive-ins and Dives,' but don't you worry, there's plenty of joints all over this country..." Claire thrust her head between her knees and squeezed them as hard as she could. She finally released from her self-induced head prison and let out a breath that she had seemingly held for the duration of the episode. She had to call Marcy. Too late. Marcy was calling her.

"I couldn't watch", said Marcy. "I just couldn't. What did he say?"

"I can't believe you didn't watch!"

"Never mind that. Tell me what happened."

"As usual, it was all very dramatic... the way Guy drives into the picture... his hair not moving at all in the wind."

"Like untreated carpet fiber after it's been shampooed and vacuumed" was posted to my 'Triple D' fan page from a viewer residing in an obscure island nation."

"Let's see... he looked straight into the camera and said there was plenty of joints all over the county and not to worry that he would be on the lookout for them every minute of every day. Basically, he was implying that there would never be an end to the searching and the eating."

"Oh, thank God!"

"I know, right?"

"Was he at all circumspect?"

"He didn't seem at all taciturn. On the contrary, he seemed very upbeat, confident. It was said without guile."

"What a relief. If you've seen my latest vlog-thesis, I have actually been super worried about Guy running out of places to go. You know me—'Miss Numbers'—so I've actually been multiplying the amount of shows by the individual segments, but then I forgot how to do the math, so I got hold of the 2020 edition of the Small Restaurant Association Guide to cross-check the current data..."

"Marcy, can I interrupt and ask you if that guide is still being edited by S. Simon Collier?"

"It is and I will now pass along a pretty amazing fact. There has been 105 editions of this book and Collier has edited 70 of them."

"God bless him."

"Same associate editors too. I couldn't even believe it, but, yeah it's the usual band of crazies."

"Evelyn Kaiser-Roth too?"

"You bet."

"Wow."

"There's a couple of newbies, but otherwise... getting back to my point, I simply want to stop being in an adverse state of panic despite Guy's assurances. I can't help but think he should consider adding another 'D' to the title of the show, thus providing an additional source of visitation."

"A fourth 'D'? This is not the first time I've thought you mad."

"My head has been awash with potential candidates; Dentists, Daycare centers, Desecrated graves...."

"Marcy, no one can deny those certainly meet the 'D' criterion you've so painstakingly set forth, but where you could run into a roadblock is the lack of food service inherent in these options."

"I will readily admit to you that singular element remains a major impediment in any type of concept expansion."

"So, anyways, I'm going to go. I plan to watch the next episode with my new Amazon Oppenheimer."

"Is that the one that where you feel guilty for using it?"

"Well, that's how they get you to buy it, but I just like it for the sound quality." Claire got herself a snack, plopped on the couch and then looked on in horror for the next 24 minutes.

From the get-go this episode grabbed expectation by the face and spit in its eye. Instead of Guy interfering with people's livelihoods in restaurants, he was simply driving around. He did pull into a couple of gas stations and bought some items out of the vending machines ("This Zagnut bar just converted a 7-10 split at the Flavortown Bowl-A- Rama!"). By the end of the episode, he was simply walking into people's homes and taking stuff of their refrigerators ("If you don't look at the expiration dates, then they don't exist!") What was this all about? Claire looked for reassurance as the Camaro swerved wildly into view. It veered out of frame and then shakily reappeared with its driver's side noticeably dented. Guy labored mightily to offer his commentary over the discordant sounds of an increasingly labored engine.

"So... I'm normally... I think I may gotten off on the wrong exit. I had been up on the main stretch, but all the places I was scheduled to go to were closed or completely boarded up. There's nothing down this way either. It's a... it's a... it's not a great neighborhood. Someone threw a fax machine at my head. Who uses fax machines anymore? Am I right? I may have to start hitting the chain restaurants like Mickey D's and KFC. I mean it's going to be the same food at every location, and I might lose a spleen like Morgan Spurlock, but at

least America can still get what they tune in for... to watch me stuff my face with piles of shit! So, listen, I'll still look around if I get a chance, but there ain't no guarantees" A projectile hurtled toward the open car.

"Jesus Christ, my eye!" The car swerved out of frame. This was followed by the lilted sound of metal colliding with concrete. The screen went cold black and silent. Claire stared ahead blankly for a few moments. She was hoping that Marcy was otherwise engaged... but then the phone rang.

"Hi, Marcy."

"I know I'm being a paranoid nutcase, but I decided not to watch. What happened?" Claire sighed internally and then spoke, "Oh, you know old Guy. He looked straight into that camera and said not to worry. Everything would be just fine."

**ManToLoveNow63**  
**by**  
**Kim Horner**

GravityGhost posts a photo of himself  
in his bathroom mirror looking  
excited in his tight gray sweatpants  
MrRightNow doesn't date women as old as me  
even though I'm not as old as him  
RayBan wants a "nasty girl"  
but probably not a Nasty Woman

NateJ63 does not like implants  
which rules me out since  
I had reconstruction after breast cancer  
at least I'm not too old for That70sguy,  
a "cub looking for a cougar"  
NiceGuy287 will text me after we meet that we are not a match  
Made4U65 will date me for six weeks then disappear like a ghost  
Fool4Luv will be late because he was putting price tags on items for his garage sale

This is what it's like to swim with the other last fish in the sea  
the leftovers in the back of the fridge  
the frequent flyers of MatchOKCupidPlentyofFisheHarmony  
everyone has a story  
about a happy couple who met online  
who caught The One in the dating cesspool  
where everyone  
who loves walks on the beach  
and sunsets  
and showing off the fish they caught  
and their boats  
and cars and motorcycles

I am the one left standing after another round of online musical chairs  
but the music never stops for long  
there's always another new profile, new message or alert  
JimboJimmyJoe just sent a wink  
and Diami58 messaged that he hoped "a smile crossed my lips today"  
how could it not when just like that, there's a notification of a message from ThatBoy, who  
says:  
"You look like an awesome step mother. Would you be my pretend step mom?"

**Matching With A Mermaid**  
by  
**J.D. Harlock**

**You have matched with Ariel**

**You:** Hey baby

**Ariel: !**

**Ariel:** Hey

**You:** What you up to?

**Ariel: :')**

**You: ;)**

**You:** You want to come over?

**You: ;)**

**Ariel: !**

**You: ;))**

**Ariel:** I just want you to know...

**You:?**

**Ariel:** I'm a mermaid.

**You: ;)**

**Ariel:** You're into it?

**You: ;))**

**Ariel: ;,;**

**Ariel:** I was so worried!

**You:** Nah

**Ariel: ;)**

**Ariel:** Where do you want to meet?

**You:** I'm thinking...

**Ariel:** Ok :)

**You:** Wait

**Ariel:** Yeah?

**You:** If you're a mermaid, how do you...

**Ariel:** You mean...

**You:** Yeah...

**Ariel:** Does that bother you?

**You:** No, no

**Ariel:** Yeah...

**You:** I'm just curious.

**You:** Some of my best friends are merpeople

**Ariel:** ...

**Ariel cannot receive messages at the moment.**

**Bionic Moses**  
by  
**Josh Sippie**

Billed No. 2, the potatoes  
to Keanu's steak and you wait

wait

wait

and wait

for

Dolph

knowing that when he arrives,  
it could be anything but I bet you  
weren't expecting bionic Moses with a  
shepherd's crook beating the piss out of  
the known world and turning fools  
arms into popsicles before snapping them off  
like pretzel sticks  
crucifying good doctors and  
rocking the hair and the beard of a certain biblical man

no

I bet you weren't expecting that  
but you waited and you were rewarded  
to the patient goes the earth  
or something like that  
and when

Dolph

appears and reveals his catch phrase

"Jesus time"

you just have to accept that  
this is a brand new  
Dolph  
and we're all damn glad to have met him

## **A Day in the Life of a Dinner Plate with Decorative Ambitions** by **Miriam Jayaratna**

**6:03am:** In my recurring dream, I've been transformed from a dinner plate into a decorative plate. I'm mounted on the kitchen wall, imperiously looking down at the workaday dishware as they toil away. No one speaks to me. No one places anything upon me. Passersby admire my rendering of the Queen Mum on her 90th birthday.

**7:25am:** The dream departs on gossamer wings as I return to the hellscape of my waking life. I feel a crushing weight: I'm stacked cheek to jowl with a dozen other plates. "Mooooorning," bellows the dish on top of me. "That dark cabinet time really flew by, eh? Always does." I imagine a laser beam coming out of me and shattering him so that he'll stop his prattling about who will get the breakfast shift today.

**8:45am:** A hand slides under me and removes me from the cabinet. *Dammit.* It's me. *I got the breakfast shift.* This day is already getting under my glaze.

**8:46am:** I'm loaded up with eggs, joined by a fork, and brought over to the table. The texture of mushy scramble against my delicate enamel must be punishment for a transgression I committed in a past life. Prong-face starts scraping up the eggs. I don't speak Utensil, but I'm also not wholly convinced it's a real language; all I can make out are barbaric screeches.

**10:00am:** I'm brought to the sink for a soothing sponge bath, which my hand-wash physique requires. There's only six of us from the wedding registry, but other than the solo sink time we're not afforded any special privileges. This fleeting moment of pampering only makes the other indignities I suffer stand out in starker relief.

**12:15pm:** No sooner am I lifted out of the drying rack than a lunch of cold leftover lasagna is slopped on me. Why is this happening? I'm used to working one or two shifts a week. Two meals in one day is downright bizarre. Shivering and miserable, I feel a pang of yearning for my ex, the blue bowl. I miss the feeling of her warm, soup-filled bottom resting on my well.

**12:16pm:** I'm placed in the microwave. "May I have this dance," the appliance thunders as I begin to spin dizzily on his glass turntable. I won't dignify that with a response. "Aren't you supposed to be microwave friendly?" he chides. *Safe,* I think to myself, *I'm microwave safe.* I've never claimed to be friendly.

**12:17pm:** I spend the lunch shift fuming over the microwave's ignorant assumptions while a deranged fork claws at me. I wish I could vent to the blue bowl, but she's still too chipped over our breakup to be friends. She needs more time to get over me, I guess.

**2:04pm:** Another trip to the sink. Once I'm alone in the dishrack, I start daydreaming. Could I actually ascend to decorative status, or is there no escaping this life of menial drudgery? Maybe if the other wedding registry plates were to break, I'd become an heirloom by default...

**6pm:** I'm jolted out of my reverie by a pair of hands lifting me up by my rim. Sweet mother of Christ, I'm working dinner. A third shift in one day?! This is bordering on inhumane. *Please just drop me,* I pray.

**6:20pm:** I'm paired with a spoon this time. It's a real dullard, meandering confusedly in search of the food while I seethe in silence. This is so degrading. I'm just about the farthest thing from a decorative plate: I'm a breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner plate.

**7:00pm:** Off to the sink again. Wait. NO. I'm placed in the dishwasher, belly-up in a row of other plates. Everyone in here is stark naked and perversely streaked with rancid food. The other dishes are trilling with excitement for the sudsy ecstasy that awaits them; this is just a trip to the spa for the dishwasher-friendly set. As scalding water begins streaming onto me from every direction, I wonder whether I'll melt or drown first. Yet I feel calm; grateful, even -- my suffering will be over soon. Maybe I'll be decorative in the afterlife.

\*\*\*

**7:30pm:** When I regain consciousness, I'm being pried out of the spinner, where I've somehow managed to lodge myself and bring the machine to a halt. I'm feverish and fragile, but I'm alive. How dreadfully disappointing. I'm placed on the counter.

**7:32pm:** I cringe to see a familiar silhouette: the blue bowl. I'm in no mood for one of her tearful tirades about my myriad failings as a boyfriend. But her curves still take my breath away. Unbidden, my mind plays a montage of her brimming with gazpacho, chocolate ice cream, Cheerios...*damn*. Everything looks good in her.

**7:33pm:** She teeters, then giggles and rights herself. I look down and realize she's precariously, absurdly perched on a tiny saucer. They're gazing at each other adoringly. She doesn't even notice I'm here. "You're a place setting with *him* now?!" I blurt out.

**7:34pm:** They startle at the sound of my voice. "That's right," she says proudly. "*He* doesn't care that I came from Salvation Army, even though he's a one-of-a-kind find from grandma's basement." A wave of regret passes over me for thrift-shaming her.

**7:36pm:** "He's so rare and delicate, we figure he'll get taken out of the rotation soon," the blue bowl sighs wistfully. "We're just trying to enjoy the time we have left together before they put me on display," the saucer squeaks from under her.

**7:37pm:** *She left me for a decorative plate. And they're in love.* I inwardly shatter into a thousand hand-wash-only shards.

**10:30pm:** I've had hours to think as I watch them canoodle. Though I envy this saucer his ornamental destiny, what I covet most is that smitten look the blue bowl is giving him. I should have appreciated what I had instead of chasing some ridiculous fantasy. Have delusions of decorative grandeur ruined my chance at happiness?

**11:13pm:** Restacked in the cabinet. Maybe I'll dream about something else tonight.

**How to Argue**  
**by**  
**Melody Wilson**

*"For a successful marriage," the grandmother said, "Always argue in the nude."*

I recall this adage from the Seventh Circle—  
no Beatrice in sight and think "Right!"  
Lot of good that would do.

Then I imagine.

At each use of foul language, we will both remove one article of clothing.

"You Prick!" I cry—blinded by words.  
I remove my blouse; you your jeans.

I pace, funny in my bra. You are serene on the chair,  
arrogant in your briefs—still, you leap to your feet—  
into my face—"Bitch!"  
Hurt, I exhale, pull off my jeans; you your shirt.

We are standing, tired and angry, we  
brush. Your thigh meets mine, our eyes  
drop their guard—an instant,  
and we have found each other.

This is ten years ago.

Tonight, "Moron," I might cry,  
and you, "Bitch!"  
And the blouse and the jeans  
and the jeans and the blouse  
and "Asshole," and "Bitch!"  
I have always been the more creative—  
and we find ourselves standing  
knee deep in laundry,  
pot-bellied and sagging  
with energy only  
to laugh.

## Previously On "Time Sock: The Sock That Travels Through Time" by Arie Kaplan

What do you *mean* you haven't seen *Time Sock: The Sock that Travels Through Time*? Like, ever? You haven't seen it *ever*? Wow, have *you* been missing out.

You can probably skip the whole first season, although the pilot episode *does* set up the premise pretty well. So maybe you should see the pilot. And then maybe episode 3. It's a decent non-pilot season 1 episode. Also, episode 4 is a good bottle episode. So just episodes 1, 3, 4, and maybe like half of episode 5, and you know what? Also episodes 6-24. In other words, watch the whole first season. It ends with Archibald Dingus wearing the Time Sock for the first time, and he's been infected with the same Time Virus that brought down Genghis Khan when *he* wore the Time Sock...

Oh man, you don't even know the premise of the show, do you? Okay, so really quickly, back in the late 1800s, H.G. Wells, author of *The Time Machine*, invented an actual, working time machine. He *also* invented a prototype for a steam-powered mechanical sock, far superior to the average, non-mechanical wool sock. But Wells was a man of his time, and one day, while doing typical 19th century things like riding a penny-farthing bicycle and snorting opium, he lost the sock!

Unbeknownst to Wells, the foot-mitten (as socks were then known) had been zapped with chroral displacement shockwaves from the time machine, and shockwave residue had embedded itself in the sock's superabsorbent polymers. And now anyone who wears the sock can travel through time!

But that's just the Time Sock itself. What about the cast of characters? Oh, you *must* learn about the grounded, relatable characters in this delightful soufflé of a show!

Meet Jamie Pendleton. She's a physics student at DiamondButt University, and she just can't seem to be on time for *anything*; class, a date, a date that happens after class, eating a date during class, a class that occurs on a certain date. Anything! Well, guess who is the first person to find the Time Sock in the corner of her dorm room, which used to be H.G. Wells's time travel lab in the late 1800s? At first Jamie tries to use the sock to cover up her clawlike feet, because she's a werewolf. Oh, didn't I mention she's a werewolf?

It's imperative that you know Jamie Pendleton is a werewolf, because she spends all of Season 4 trying to use the Time Sock to find a cure for her lycanthropy. That's why she's stationed aboard the CosmoBus in Season 4.

Wait, did you just ask me, "What's the CosmoBus?" It's only the combination space-age satellite/school bus that orbits the Earth under the command of Professor Gyrus Giuseppe, his robot monkey underling Dr. Hiropolis, and his trigger-happy head of security Bonnie Bazooka, who had her left arm replaced with an 18th century pirate's cannon. They're all tasked with helping Jamie try to stop the werewolf-pocalypse that was foretold in the Prophecy of the Wounded Spoon, back in Season 3, episode 11.

Oh yeah, there's a werewolf-pocalypse. That's where it rains for 40 days and 40 nights, but instead of raining itty-bitty raindrops, it rains fully-grown 250-pound werewolves, that just pummel the Earth into submission. Oh, it is *such* bad news. I mean, that's the entire reason the Werewolf-Busters were introduced into the cast in the second half of season 3.

Now I guess I have to explain who the Werewolf-Busters are. They're actually a splinter group of the Knights Templar. Originally known as the Mystic Order of the Bronze Mullet, the Werewolf-Busters are funded by Susan Van Wyche, heiress to the Van Wyche dental floss fortune. But she cares more about saving the world from a plague of werewolves falling from the sky than about spending her daddy's money. Because she's a hero, and that's what heroes do. How do I know she's a hero? Because she was inducted into the Hero's Guild in Season 24.

This leads directly into Season 25, which is one ginormous parody of *King Lear* spread out over 37 episodes. That season takes place in the 680th century, when the dominant life form on Earth is butter. That was a way for the show's producers to save money on actors. They just cast the whole show with sticks of butter. Some people thought the show jumped the shark that season, but you know what? They got some amazing performances out of that butter, let me tell you! I mean, sometimes you'll be watching an episode of the show from that season and you'll notice that the Time Sock is visibly drenched in butter. It's got butter stains all over it and such. But you know what? That's the price of making art.

I will say that in Seasons 44 and 45 of *Time Sock*, the producers seem to have forgotten that the show's supposed to be about a sock that enables its wearer to travel through time. Those are the two seasons that are performed through the miracle of shadow-puppetry, and I think that the show's head writer Joey Spaghetti was going through a divorce or something, because all the characters are always just talking about how the institution of marriage is a scam cooked up by the planet's five major monotheistic religions in collaboration with the strip club industry. Fascinating stuff. Where was I?

*Time Sock* really got back on track in season 700, which was the all-singing, all-dancing season. The musical numbers are incredibly well choreographed. It is kind of weird though that what's doing all the singing and dancing isn't the actors, but rather clumps of meat thrown at the set by veteran showrunner Jacques LaChoot. "Singing clumps of meat." That's what critics called that season. And they weren't wrong!

Ahhh, *Time Sock: The Sock That Travels Through Time*. It's more than a TV show. It's an experience. No, I was right the first time: it's a TV show!

**once patriarchy exhausted after centuries**  
**by**  
**Carla Sarett**

once never future husbands grilled  
burgers and explained internal combustion,  
while stroking red and black Craftsman drills  
and popping Viagra and statins.

once would-be wives binged  
on The Real Housewives of New Jersey and elsewhere  
and dabbed dirt scent prettily  
behind thrice-pierced ears.

once never future husbands expired  
mightily in designer garages and hungered  
for a stout yellow-naped Amazon parrot  
to savor their words

as once would-be wives  
used to once almost.

**I Freaking Love You!**  
by  
**Nathan Leslie**

*"Love is not just assigned to one other human. Your love isn't just for the missing piece to your puzzle." --Elite Daily, Emily Brookshire*

I love you, sunshine. Good morning! Thank you for being there for me every day, to wake me up and warm me and force me to buy overly specific lotions and SPF50. I love you!

Oh, and I love you, orange juice. You are the best kind of juice there ever was. Even in the really old days they could only dream of orange juice and they probably had to settle for grapefruit, which (and I love you too, grapefruit juice) is just not quite as orange juicy.

I love you, toast and toaster! The two of you go together, almost like bread and butter. It's like you were truly made for each other. But what's in a name? When it is all working in synch there, it is a thing of beauty, you crispy toast and toast maker deluxe!

Oh, shower head, I love you so much. You make my world spin. Without your warm jets of water none of this love would be possible. Please accept my deepest most unconditional love from the bottom of my heart.

Pillow, my SleepRight pillow—I am not supposed to be back in bed with my head resting on you, but it is just an expression of my undying love for all that you do for me. And, I mean, you don't really have to do anything other than just be there and take my slobber! I love you so much!

Simple, not fussy work shoes—I love you with all of my heart. You allow me to trudge to work and I can avoid burning little corns or blisters into my skin to do so. You match everything and anything (or at least you don't clash so obviously). I love you!

Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the shiniest of all? I love you, mirror! Because you never lie and it's good that someone doesn't because there are a lot of others who really do.

Good morning, car that won't fucking start! Oh, I love you. I still love you, despite your morning crankiness (and sometimes afternoon and/or evening crankiness). But you transport me! You delight me with your ten year old, faintly fecal-odors! I love you so freaking much it hurts!

Hello traffic, my love! Where would I be without you? Without you I would not possess this balance in my life of love and frustration. Without you I would have all of this excess time at work to do shit and to think about things. Without you I would have time for morning exercise. I love you so much for putting it all into perspective.

Hello administrative secretary from hell, Shelly. Nobody likes you as a result of your continuously bossy mannerisms and haughty bearing, but I still love you! I love you and your acrid attitude so so much. Who else would tell us minions we are unworthy to even speak to you and who else would shoot us the stink-eye if we even so much as glance at the coffee pot (even though we remain four pay grades higher)?

And there you are, computer that freezes up when I turn you on. I love you most of all because I too freeze up inside quite often. It is as if you are mirroring my exact inner state.

Yes, I have to restart you time and time again, but what else would I do with my day other than wait forty-five minutes for you to get your stupid gigabyte whatever shit together. I fucking love you!

Mr. Hendrickson, I love you, also. Well, you know that probably from yesterday and the day before and the day before that, but here I am reminding you one more time, just because. I'm sure your wife tells you that she loves you, but I can promise you nobody loves you more than I do. It's not a romantic thing, rest assured. My love for you is as a result of getting reamed out publicly in several recent staff meetings, which I love. What else says love than this kind of treatment? It is really the purest form.

Terrible life, I love you more than life itself. That sounds like a circular statement or a kind of redundancy, or both. But trust me, nothing could be better than your terribleness. It makes me want to try harder, better. It makes me want to count my blessings for once.

**Why I Am Not a Poet**  
by  
**Chris Bullard**

I am not a poet. I am a lawyer.  
Why? Because I'd rather  
make money, which I do. Well,

for instance, I stop by my friend's  
studio. "I just finished a poem,"  
she says. "How about you take  
a look and tell me what you think."  
I read. She watches me read. I  
look up, "You have a SARDINE  
there." "Yes, it's my metaphor  
for the past." "Oh," I go, "first,  
you're a vegan, so I can't see  
why you'd ever open up a tin  
of them. Second, you say  
they're brown and flat, so I  
suspect that you're thinking  
of anchovies, not SARDINES,  
which are bigger and come  
with their shiny scales on. So  
that's a pretty stupid mistake."  
"You are too much," she says.  
"I find your comments to be  
arrogant and sexist. It's  
finished between us." She  
throws me out.

But me? One day I am thinking  
of a claim: a tort. I write a line  
about a tort. Pretty soon, it is a  
not just an allegation, but  
supporting documents, too.  
And then a claim for relief. There  
should be much more in damages.  
My client was horribly affected.  
I file my plea in court. I am a real  
lawyer. And one day in The New  
Yorker, I see my friend's poem  
which is obviously about me and  
it's called, "SARDINES."

## **Why Laila D Never Lent Books** by **Prarthana JA**

On a crisp summer day, while blowing bubbles with a straw into a glass of iced watermelon juice, and feeling like a child, I was faced with an adult perplexity.

I had to choose between two lovers.

Tony Manezes took long elegant strides into a room bursting with the light from his halo. He was a god descended from the skies, or so I believed at the sight of his infinitely long eyelashes, curling from a pair of knockout eyes, set into a knockout of a face. I was at an age where wisdom had not yet set in and youth was impressed by nothing but beauty, so I involuntarily shifted in my seat and wished he were mine.

I was eighteen.

Drama class was the only reprieve in a doggone semester, not only because I loved theatre, but because Tony Manezes played Sydney Carton, in this year's showcasing of *A Tale of Two Cities*. I was the brown oily girl who cut cardboard sheets into 17th century carriages, and occasionally tucked oversized costumes into place.

One day, Tony Menezes spoke to me. That had never happened before, at least not in this way, warm to the point of intimacy.

"Hey, Laila D," he said, flashing a smile I had turned over in my head and treasured for many moons.

"Would you happen to have the book? *The Tale of Two Cities*?"

"Huh," came a whimper.

I was both perplexed and astonished at the fact that Tony Menezes wanted a book, and from me. Tony, I could swear, had never read a book in his life, not for pleasure, and never spoke to oily brown girls in glasses, he certainly didn't smile at them.

"I need it for character reference," he said. "Mr. Menon says reading the book would help me play the character in depth." It seems that on inquiry, Tony was notified that I was more likely to possess the book than the school library.

"Yes... sure," the words tumbled out. Before the gravity of the matter set in, I had duly invited Tony Menezes to my house around the corner, to lend him the book.

Tony eyed my room with considerable awe. I was sure that under my brown skin, spots of hot pink appeared in a hurry. Tall shelves rose like the Great Wall of China folded in three, along the three sides of my room. Books were neatly stacked in impeccably straight lines, labelled shelves strictly housed the mentioned genres, and each book was numbered.

In all, I was the sole owner of 2,862 books, and was obnoxiously proud of it.

"Wowee," said he, mystified. "You must be so smart".

I was, but I quickly assumed a bashful and modest air and chattered with the love of my short, and currently bedazzled life. He was visibly taken by me and my intellectual yet entertaining banter. I was sure that, soon we'd be walking to school together, sharing lunch under the *tamarind* tree, falling in love, getting married and making pretty babies with a propensity for fine language.

This was short lived with the immediate dawn of reality, so harsh, so cruel. I had never lent a book in my life. You see, according to me, books should not be lent. They are strange, precious things that house a numen, irrevocably binding it to its owner, a numen that should not be tampered with. Books are sacred and delicate things. They cannot be placed open and upside down, they cannot be tossed into crowded bags, lest the pages bend. Worst of all, the abomination of dog-earring of corners cannot be committed. You cannot touch them without washing your hands, the grease and sweat might soil the crisp pages. You cannot place them in or near a kitchen or read while in traffic, unless you risk the smell of smoke and grime robbing the perfume of the paper. And you cannot lose them. You simply cannot. What if one of them was a present? As if gestures of love and affection via a book were replaceable, by any stretch of imagination.

So a fair amount of breath went out of my lungs, when I pulled out *A Tale of Two Cities*, from between a very reprimanding *John Halifax, Gentleman* and *Jane Eyre*.

He had to pull it out of my hands. "Thanks," he said, oblivious to the furor of activity inside my numbing head.

"When can I have it back?" I asked at once.

"Huh, once the play is over". He had not expected the question, and in such a severe tone.

Suddenly, Tony Menezes's halo had dimmed. He now possessed an incredible amount of power to hurt my book, and hence me.

"Alright," I said. "Promise to take care of it?"

"Sure," he said, gripping it dangerously by its corners.

"Please don't place it upside down"

"Sure," he shrugged.

"And no dog ears please... here's a bookmark," I said, grabbing one from the abundance in my room.

"Okay," His smile had shortened by an inch.

"Be sure to turn the pages gently? It's an old book."

"Okay"

"Sorry, "I gushed, "it's just that, I'm a little possessive about my books,"

"Oh I get it," No you don't, you gumball! I thought. If you did, you'd cradle it with both your hands across your chest.

"Care to stay for some orange juice?"

"Oh no I got to go, got to read... and practice." His smile was completely gone, when he rushed out of my house in a hurry. That night I dreamt of Tony Menezes standing over my spread-eagled book, muddied and torn on the floor. On some nights he was setting it on fire, on others he was tearing off pages and stuffing them into his mouth. I had never been so insomniac in all my life, as I was that entire week.

"Did you finish reading my book?" I asked him, three mornings before the staging of the play.

"Ah almost, quite a fat book," he said. My heart sank.

The evening before the event, I was quite certain he wouldn't need the book, but with one look in my direction, he disappeared through the door. I caught him between a crowd of babbling girls.

"Hey hi... you have my book on you?"

"Nope... shall give it to you after the play?"

I was angry as hell, and extensively worried.

At the drawing of curtains, I dashed at him while he was taking off the ridiculously long 17<sup>th</sup> century hat.

"Hey, about my book, do you happen to have it on you?"

"Oh no, sorry, I shall bring it tomorrow"

"Oh alright... umm and congratulations, that was a great performance"

On the morrow, while for a moment I had forgotten my predicament while blowing bubbles into my glass of watermelon juice, I saw him saunter across the cafeteria.

"That's it," I said to myself, I flew at him with an urgency of a dart to a bull's eye.

"I need my book back," I said.

He promptly unzipped his backpack, pulled out the book and stuffed it into my welcoming hands, and was gone without a word. *A Tale of Two Cities* was in fairly decent shape. Only a mild tinkering of a few pages showed at the right hand side corner. I gently eased the bends into place. Some wisdom had quickly come to me, in the form of a monumental self-realization. That I could never love a man who did not understand books as I did, how much ever of a knockout he was.

Tony Menezes never crossed my path again and all my 2,862 books were intact.

**Ode to A Magpie**  
by  
**Aubrey Steptoe**

A magpie on a slippery branch  
In the cloying wind!  
A gloomy October day...

And yellow leaves  
Pale and wet against  
Somewhat plagiarized black boughs

Anyway this magpie stares into space, or just at the sky—  
Or flies off at random to another branch  
Seeming to contemplate nothing

Because actually he/she/it really does  
Contemplate nothing  
Nor needs a lightbox for a serotonin boost

Nor vitamin D to mimic sunlight  
Nor St John's Wort whatever on earth that is  
Nor ice-cold showers in the morning

Nor needs to concentrate on being positive and *loving life* by smiling  
Vainly, idiotically—fatuously—  
In the misty bathroom mirror

For after all  
It's just a stupid magpie  
On a stupid pointless branch

**This is Dasani Water**  
by  
**Alex Connolly and Ginny Hogan**

*The following has been reprinted from a commencement speech given by Hyman L. Morrell, Senior V.P. of Marketing at the Coca-Cola Company, at his alma mater, Villanovo College.*

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the Dasani water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is Dasani water?"

It's a good question. Dasani water is the purest, most refreshing water on the market.

The point of the fish story is that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. But they can also have life or death importance.

It's true. If you don't drink water, you could very well die.

Because we all have to drink. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as not drinking. Everybody drinks. The only choice you get is what to drink.

Imagine a typical day in the adult world. Your mom just died. Your son just died. Your dog took a shit. Your grandma just died. The producers of MTV's *Catfish* just told you your boyfriend is actually a bored housewife in Alberta, CN. And on top of that, you're stuck in traffic on the way to your most fulfilling errand—your weekly bottled water run.

So you finally get to the grocery store, and your phone rings. Guess what? Your other grandma just died. You didn't even know she existed—you'd always been told that your father was the result of asexual reproduction.

This is a lot to process, and some pure, distilled bottled water sure would help. But you look at the available options and it looks like everything costs \$7. Also—boxes of water? Boxes? Like the things that contain the belongings of your dead family members? You don't need that energy at the grocery store. Not on a Monday.

You're in a rush, so you think, "I'll just skip the water. I don't need it. I can't afford it. I'll just take a lot of showers to keep myself hydrated from the outside." You know what happens next?

You die. Or worse, it hurts to pee, because you're dehydrated.

You have to *drink* water. But you don't have to settle for bank-breaking designer brands. And you definitely don't have to carry around a refillable water bottle. Those things might be manufactured with slave labor—we can't know for sure.

What you need is a pure, refreshing bottled water at an affordable price. Where can you turn? Big corporations won't help you much. They hum merrily along selling water of questionable purity, branded as "natural" by its association with some exotic location like "Fiji" or "Poland."

Or they tell you that your water needs to be "Smart." But if you worship being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. Basically you'll look really dumb drinking that stuff, no offense.

We don't need to drink smart-ly—we just need to drink consciously. Conscious of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over:

"This is Dasani water."

"This is Dasani water."

We wish you way more than water. We wish you Dasani.

We also wish you our condolences on the multiple family deaths.

**Mermaid**  
**by**  
**Neil Fulwood**

1.

First time I saw you, I was at the wheel  
of a powerboat, bone-rattle slamming  
over the roiling waves. I was decked out  
in rubber suit, goggles, breathing  
apparatus. The full man-of-action kit.  
I was pumped up, ready to dive, emerge,  
scramble over rocks, haul myself  
through crevices and up gradients,  
basically the whole Milk Tray scenario.

You appraised me from a promontory  
by the lighthouse, tail scooping  
a dull slop of sea water to fling  
in my wake. Your way of saying, accurately  
it turned out, that you didn't rate my chances.

2.

Months later. Me with my tourist funk on  
at the aquarium. I could have been there  
for any reason: surveillance, covert ops,  
bunking off the convention for an hour,  
tired of the other telemarketers  
and their talk of talk and targets. I could  
have been up to anything: brouhaha,  
shenanigans, shits and giggles.  
The glossy colour brochure was merely a prop.

I thought I saw you reflected in curved glass  
reflecting off other glass where lights  
and distortion and people reflected  
from other parts of the aquarium made it hard  
to be sure. I looked again and you were gone.

3.

I stood where I might have said that surf  
creamed the edges but I think  
that would be ripping off Plath. So let's just say  
I stood at some coastal outreach reading aloud  
Robert Lowell's sequence about the mermaid,  
my shot at conjuration. Ineffective  
as it transpired. I slid the book back in my rucksack,  
not that sliding and the 1186 pages  
of Lowell's *Collected* may be said to accord.

I heard it as I turned to go, your voice  
borne on the salt spray of the sea,  
yearning for something more picturesque,  
the waters off beautiful blue Nauset.  
I should have stuck with Plath after all.

4.

Now I'm writing poems, letters, transcribing  
scraps of diary entries onto the back  
of admiralty charts torn into small squares.  
I'm thinking of straits, capes, bays,  
shipping lanes. How should I send them,  
these envelopes I've addressed to  
*Sirène, La Mer ... Meerjungfrau, das Meer*  
(to use the English would be prosaic):  
should I entrust them to some old sea dog

on a container ship, politely request  
of a cruise-liner steward their kind assistance?  
Or take myself down to the shoreline, stand  
where the surf creams the edges  
and let the wind hasten them to the waves.

**Midas Clutch**  
by  
**Maura Yzmore**

"I bet it's not real," I said. "It looks like one of those little rugs you can buy, with a black hole on it."

My boss Joey caught my bluff. "Oh, yeah, Ollie? If it's not real, why don't you step on it?"

I wasn't going to, and neither was he. Nor were any of the dozen or so customers who happened to be inside Joey's Creamery on that nondescript July afternoon, seeking some respite from the sweltering heat, when a hole, perfectly round and blacker than any black I'd ever seen, opened in the floor.

I felt a jolt of anger—or maybe courage?—at Joey's mocking, so I took off one of my ratty Converse sneakers and threw it into the hole.

It vanished.

No one moved as moments passed.

But nothing happened.

"Well, looks like I'm out of a shoe," I said, feeling deflated and more than a little stupid.

"At least we know the hole is real," said a pretty girl with pink hair. She smiled at me and I smiled back, feeling the tiniest bit less stupid.

"It's not trying to pull us in or anything," said one of our regulars, Mary, a small woman with a round face and tight gray curls. "Maybe you can put a lid on it, or a Wet Floor sign?"

"You know, Mary, that's not a bad idea," said Joey. "It's not like we can stay here, staring at this thing forever." He leaned over and glanced into the void, then turned around, presumably to go to the back of the store and fetch the sign...

...when a gold-studded women's sneaker rocketed out of the hole and hit him upside the head.

People rushed to make sure he was OK. Maybe I should've, too, but I knew Joey had a thick skull, so I wasn't worried.

Mary and I went closer to the opening. The pink-haired girl emerged from the crowd surrounding fallen Joey, grinning and holding the golden sneaker in her hands.

"Throw in your other shoe!" she commanded. There was something unsettling in her eyes.

"You really want me to walk home barefoot tonight," I muttered, but complied. I always did what pretty girls said, like the schmuck that I was.

My shoe went into the pit, and shortly thereafter another gold-studded sneaker came out.

"It's a pair!" exclaimed the girl, raising both to her face. "I've got a pair!"

"Well, good for you," said Mary, "but our boy Ollie here is now without shoes."

"I think we should call the police," someone yelled from the back.

"And say what? That there's a big hole in the creamery and a sneaker flew out?" someone else responded.

"Joey's out cold. That must be assault or something," a third customer chimed in.

"You don't understand," the girl raised her voice. "These are a pair. And not just any pair. They are original Kimmy K's. They're not even out in stores yet."

"What are you talking about?" Mary spoke for all of us.

The girl rolled her eyes, put the shoes down on a nearby table, then emptied her purse and dropped it into the void.

A few moments later, a small golden handbag shot straight up from the hole, like a projectile. The girl snatched it from the air and almost fell into the abyss.

"OMG, I knew it! It's a Midas Clutch!" The girl beamed as she pressed the bag onto her chest, her shirt and hands getting coated with gold dust.

"What is going on?" I demanded. "Joey's still unconscious, and you're collecting goodies from the void?"

The girl smiled. "It's not a void."

She pulled out her phone and briefly tapped on it, then held it out for all of us to see.

It was Kim Kardashian's Instagram page.

The sneakers and the clutch were there; above them, the following notice:

*Exclusive pre-release! A hundred lucky small-business proprietors will be hooked up with samples from Kim's newest shoe-and-purse collection in a way that will bend minds, time, and space! Only 24 hours! All proceeds go toward further exploration of wormhole travel for commerce and tourism.*

I sighed and turned around, toward the back of the store.

"Where are you going?" asked Mary.

"To get that Wet Floor sign," I said.

"Don't you get what's going on?" asked the girl.

"Just trust me."

I came back carrying the Wet Floor sign and threw it into the hole.

Out came a large sidewalk board, featuring a gold-studded announcement of the Kardashian sale.

"Kim's a shrewd businesswoman," I said. "I knew she'd have thought of advertising."

I put the sign outside the store. I hoped Joey would appreciate my initiative.

**Two Poems**  
by  
**Kara Richter**

**The Student's Prayer**

Let my grants be bountiful,  
And my meal plan be plenty.  
Let my boxed wine runneth over.

Grant me sanctuary  
At an empty library table,  
In a tranquil and secluded corner,  
That I may abide in silence  
Separate from those who shalt tempt me with distraction.

Let my grades flourish  
And proceed upward.  
Let paid internships flow  
Like milk from the cow's teat,  
That I may quit my thankless job  
And also receive class credit.

Let my classes be gentle,  
And my stats professor forgiving.  
Lead me not into overfilled lecture halls  
Where nobody adds me to the study group on Whatsapp,  
And deliver me from oral presentations.

Lead me from the shadows of my bedroom  
Where I keep watch over the grades center until finals are posted,  
And into The Boogie's glorious light.

Let the tunes be poppin'  
In this club tonight.

**The Perfect Shirt**

When I was seven years old, my father took me to the Disney store.  
I ran below the hallowed, light-up sign  
And headed straight for the *Aristocats* table.  
I was drawn in by half a headless mannequin  
Wearing a sparkly, pink shirt  
Decorated with my favorite character.  
I stared, enraptured, at the the perfect shirt  
So tastefully hugging the mannequin's curves.

"Is that the one?" my father asked,  
"Let's try it on."

I danced my way to the fitting room,  
Clinging to my cat-plastered shirt.  
I just knew that this is the shirt I'd be wearing  
On the day I finally ran into the Jonas Brothers, and they'd  
Fall deeply, madly in love with me.

Five minutes of struggle left me glaring  
At my sparkling, pink reflection.  
My flat torso could not compare  
To the heavy-breasted mannequin  
Who wore the same shirt across the store.

"Is that the one?" my father's voice floated through the plastic door.

"I dunno,"  
Came my glum reply,  
"I guess it looks better on people with boobies."

**Glass Houses**  
by  
**Rebecca Fletcher**

Robert was getting concerned. He was floating in the ocean in a glass bottle as broad as his shoulders. Its neck accommodated his own, leaving his head poking out of the top.

He was looking for his hat.

He squinted as he tried to focus on the far, far distance, where the sky and the water melted into each other, an endless blanket of variegated blue.

"Well, not much for it," he reassured himself out loud.

"Oh, is someone else there?" a voice piped up behind him.

"Yes, hello!" said Robert. "I thought I was all alone out here."

"Oh no, there are some others around, but because of the moving it's hard to make friends."

"Of course. I'm Robert, by the way."

"Jocelyn."

The ocean filled the momentary silence.

"I hate to be a bother," Robert said, "but I seem to have lost my hat. Have you seen it?"

"What does it look like?"

"Why, have you seen a hat?"

"No, but this way if I see one, I'll know if it's yours or not."

"Ah well, never mind."

"Actually," Jocelyn started, "maybe you could help me with something as well."

"Of course!" Robert tried to swivel around to see her but couldn't even twist his head.

"My ankle is terribly itchy, and I can't reach it. Do you think you could..." Her voice trailed off hopefully, and only partly because they were now beginning to drift away from one another.

"I'm so sorry," Robert explained, "but I don't think that I could reach."

"Oh how annoying, that's the problem I'm having as well." She sounded farther away than before. "I think it's time for us to move on. I'll keep looking for your hat."

"Good luck with your ankle!" Robert offered, immediately wishing he hadn't.

The waves slowly jostled them away from one another.

Robert gently bobbed through the ocean, hatless and haunted by his conversation with Jocelyn. He was just working himself into a lather of self-loathing when he saw another bottle moving towards him.

"Hello!" he called out.

"Hello!" came the reply. "Isn't this simply glorious weather?"

Robert supposed it was.

"Absolutely glorious!" the stranger continued. "It reminds me of the summer I spent in Argentina last year."

"Really?" Robert offered by way of conversation.

"Oh yes, absolutely stunning, the people there were so gorgeous. Everyone was, the women and the men!"

"It sounds lovely. Look, I hate to be forward but I was wondering if you could help."

"The only thing more beautiful than the women..." the stranger started.

"...and the men," Robert contributed to no apparent effect.

"...was the weather!" the stranger finished. The water between them began to shift. Seeing the bottle begin to drift away, Robert decided to try his luck.

"It's just that I've lost my hat," he persevered, "and I was wondering if you had seen it."

"They don't wear hats in Argentina." The stranger was a little quieter now as the waves slowly carried him away. He seemed to continue explaining but Robert suspected he hadn't seen his hat.

Jerked by the waves, Robert unfocused his mind. As the water became choppy it was relaxing to be rocked by it. He closed his eyes and let time pass.

Clink.

"Why hello there!" he offered jovially to the bottle behind him.

"What?" came the less friendly reply.

"Sorry, I thought you were someone else."

"I am," she replied. "I'm Carrie. Expecting someone?"

"No, I just..." He wasn't sure what he just.

"Look, I'm not sure how to feel about all this."

"All what?" Robert asked with some sincerity, having no idea what was going on.

It took some effort to determine how much of the ensuing noise was the ocean and how much was Carrie's frustration. "What's the deal with these bottles? Why are we in the ocean?"

"Steady on," Robert offered, "I don't know about that. I was just wondering if you'd seen my hat."

"We're in the middle of the ocean in bottles and you're looking for a hat?"

"Well, not just a hat. My hat. It was a good one too, with a fabric band around it."

"If that's a metaphor," came the reply, "it's a pretty poor one."

"A what?"

"A metaphor."

"Oh."

"I suppose it could be an allegory, but it feels more like a metaphor."

Robert considered the statement. "No, I don't think so. I think that sometimes people just lose hats."

"You," Carrie offered with absolutely no attempt at moderating her tone, "are an idiot".

Nothing else was said as the bottles slowly drifted away from each other.

"Didn't need to be rude about it," Robert mouthed.

Carried by the waves, Robert noticed that the sun had moved in the sky. He wouldn't be able to find his hat at night. He stared down into the ocean.

"Fancy meeting you here again!" Robert recognised Jocelyn's voice and smiled. He hadn't thought much of her at first, but she was the nicest person he'd found out here. "Did you find your hat?"

"No I didn't. How's the ankle?"

"Worse! I can't believe I was complaining about it before. It's torture now."

They heard a splashing noise and tried to swivel around to see where it was coming from. There was nothing that could fall from anywhere to make a splash. What they weren't expecting to see was a man, stark naked, swimming freestyle through the ocean towards them, but they saw it anyway.

"You'd think he'd keep his clothes on," Jocelyn offered.

"That would make it harder to swim."

"Yes but I mean, it's hardly appropriate, is it?"

"I wonder if we should ask him for help."

"If you want help from a naked man, be my guest."

"No, I suppose you're right."

They bobbed in silence as he swam past them, continuing off into the distance.

"Dammit!" Robert broke the silence the swimmer had left in his wake.

"What's that?" Jocelyn asked.

"I didn't ask him if he'd seen my hat."

## Contributor Biographies



**Priyanka Kole** is currently an undergraduate medical student in India. She is pursuing her MBBS degree from RG Kar Medical College, Kolkata. She is a daydreamer, reader, and writer. Her work has appeared in *The Tint Journal*, *Short Kid Stories Magazine*, and *The Potato Soup Journal*.



**Tina Barry** was the world's crankiest secretary turned textile designer. She now teaches poetry and short fiction. Tina is the author of *Beautiful Raft* (Big Table Publishing, 2019) and *Mall Flower* (Big Table Publishing, 2016). Her work can be found in the *Best Short Fictions 2020* (spotlighted story) and 2016, *The Nasty Women Poets*, *Feckless Cunt*, *Drunken Boat*, *Inch Magazine*, *Yes, Poetry*, *Connotation Press* and elsewhere. Tina is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee and has had several Best of the Net nods.



**Jeff Coe** is a humor writer residing outside of Chicago. He is currently employed writing captions for ultrasounds. He can be contacted at [twitter.com/cineboy2](https://twitter.com/cineboy2)



**Kim Horner** is author of *Probably Someday Cancer: Genetic Risk and Preventative Mastectomy* (The University of North Texas Press, 2019). Her work also has appeared in *The Dallas Morning News*, *Seventeen*, *Minnnow*, *Weevil Pond*, and *Parhelion*. She is pursuing an MFA in creative writing from The University of Arkansas at Monticello.



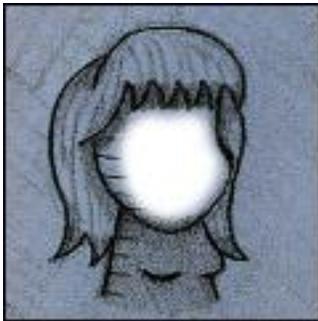
**J.D. Harlock** is a Lebanese writer based in Beirut. His short stories have been featured in *The Deadlands*, *Sciencefictionary*, and the *Decoded Pride Anthology*, his poetry has been featured in *Mobius* and *Black Cat Magazine*, and his articles have been featured in *Mermaids Monthly*, *Interstellar Flight Press*, and on the SFWA Blog. You can find him on Twitter and Instagram @JD\_Harlock.



**Josh Sippie** is a foolish mortal who, when not writing, can be found wondering why he isn't writing. Clearly he needs to watch some films that don't have Dolph Lundgren in them.



**Miriam Jayaratna** is a clinical psychologist and writer based in New York City. She is a contributor for *Reductress* and her other work can be found on *The Belladonna*, *Slackjaw*, *Points in Case*, *251*, and various psychology journals. She enjoys writing funny things because Freud said humor is the best coping strategy, once you've blown through all your cocaine.



**Melody Wilson** has an Academy of American Poets Award before beginning her teaching career. She returned to poetry in 2019 and received a 2020 Kay Snow Poetry Award. Recent work appears in *Front Porch Review*, *One Art Poetry Review*, *Quartet* and *failbetter*. Upcoming work will be in *Cirque*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Timberline Review*.



**Arie Kaplan** is a comedy writer. His work has been published in *MAD Magazine*, *Points in Case*, *Weekly Humorist*, *The Daily Drunk*, *Slate*, and *National Lampoon*. Arie's television writing credits include *World's Dumbest* (TruTV), *Cyberchase* (PBS Kids), and *Codename: Kids Next Door* (Cartoon Network). He is also the author of three *LEGO Star Wars* humor books for children, all of which are currently available from Scholastic. Follow him on Twitter at @ariekaplan and check out his website, [www.ariekaplan.com](http://www.ariekaplan.com).



**Carla Sarett**'s recent poems appear in *Blue Unicorn*, *Trampoline*, *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, and elsewhere. She awaits publication of her debut (comic) novel, *A Closet Feminist* in 2022, and, later this year, a novella, *The Looking Glass*. Carla lives in San Francisco.



**Nathan Leslie** won the 2019 Washington Writers' Publishing House prize for fiction for his satirical collection of short stories, *Hurry Up and Relax*. Nathan's nine previous books of fiction include *Three Men*, *Root and Shoot*, *Sibs*, and *The Tall Tale of Tommy Twice*. He is also the author of a collection of poems, *Night Sweat*. His fiction has been published in hundreds of literary magazines such as *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, *Boulevard*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Cimarron Review*. Nathan's nonfiction has been published in *The Washington Post*, *Kansas City Star*, and *Orlando Sentinel*. His humor has been published in *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *Defenestration*, and *Maryland Literary Review*.



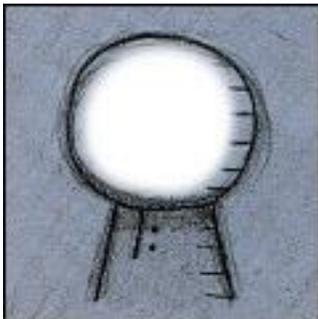
**Chris Bullard** lives in Philadelphia. He received his B.A. in English from the University of Pennsylvania and his M.F.A. from Wilkes University. Kattywompus Press published *High Pulp*, a collection of his flash fiction, in 2017, and Grey Book Press published *Continued*, a poetry chapbook, this year. His work has appeared in recent issues of *Nimrod*, *Muse/A Journal*, *The Woven Tale*, *Red Coyote*, *Cutthroat*, and *The Offbeat*.



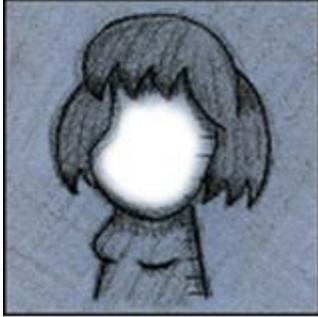
**Prarthana JA**, is a stay-at-home mom from Bangalore, India, who has perfected the art of cooking, typing, and cleaning with one hand while holding a toddler in the other. As a former corporate writer for almost a decade, she quit her dead-end job because she simply had to write a novel, a very serious one, so she balances it off with writing humorous short stories. A writer has to start somewhere. She really hopes she can start here.



The late **Aubrey Steptoe** was brought up in Surrey, England, but then migrated to the United States before returning back (that same afternoon) to Surrey.



**Alex Connolly** has been a contributor to *The New Yorker*, *McSweeney's*, and Ginny Hogan's twitter (he wrote that one good joke). It hurts him that people have turned his favorite writer into a punchline these days, even though that is also what he and Ginny did in this piece.



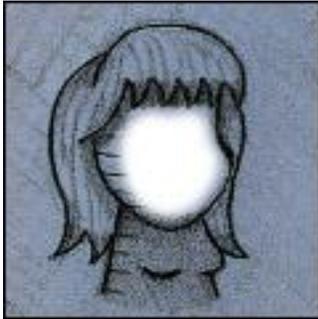
**Ginny Hogan** is an LA-based writer and comedian. She's the author of *Toxic Femininity in the Workplace*.



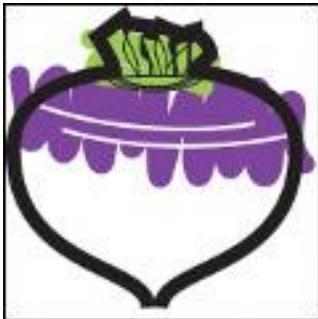
**Neil Fulwood** was born in Nottingham, England, where he still lives and works. He has two collections out with Shoestring Press: *No Avoiding It* and *Can't Take Me Anywhere*. His new collection, *Service Cancelled*, is out now.



**Maura Yzmore** writes short fiction, long equations, and goofy poetry. Some of her more ridiculous fare can be found in *Bending Genres*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Rat's Ass Review*, and the one and only *Defenestration*. Find out more at <https://maurayzmore.com> or on Twitter @MauraYzmore.



**Kara Richter** is a recent Professional and Technical Writing graduate from Missouri. She was forced to take some creative writing electives in college, and now she prefers writing poetry over software documentation.



**Rebecca Fletcher** is an Australian writer fuelled entirely by spite and Guinness. This year she's aiming for 100 rejections. You can follow her at [saltyturnip.com](http://saltyturnip.com) or watch her struggle with the Twitters at [@notaturnip](https://twitter.com/notaturnip).