

◇ Defenestration ◇

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Table of Contents

Zara Karschay, "Nosferatu's Masterclass in Presenting to Stakeholders"	2
Mark Brazaitis, "The Best Bo"	4
Maria Giesbrecht, "goose shit"	6
Derek Lake Berghuis, "The Endless Televisions"	7
Oak Morse, "Man in Nursing Home"	13
Agata Antonow, "The Family Company"	14
Katherine Cowley, "The Cultural Repository"	20
Jocko Benoit, "Signs You Are A Minor Character In A Disaster Movie"	23
A.K. Blake, "The Grand Marriot Hotel ☁️◻️♠️●"	24
Emma McNamara, "Silly Little Pity/Slumber/Purge Party"	30
Katherine Gleason, "So Mote It Be!"	32
Mary Cresswell, "Lady Macbeth Channels the Cat in the Hat"	35
Robert Garnham, "In the lair of the blue-beaked noddie"	36
Heather Brown Barrett, "Flat Chicken Sandwich"	46
Susan Chertkow, "Muse Match.com"	47
Contributor Biographies	50

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Nosferatu's Masterclass in Presenting to Stakeholders

by
Zara Karschay

Ah, Fledgling, enter, do join us, you're a small one. I see you have moved at a brisk pace—beneath your dark hood you have a strange colour to your cheeks where only pallor is meant to be.

Transmogrify, take a ceiling beam if you wish, my words will retain their meaning whichever way you choose to hang. All I beseech you is, please, save your questions until the end. Dawn is but a few hours hence. And we must use what these new men call the "small hours" to master my last class in stakeholder management.

Why, yes, you did miss the earlier lessons! This is immaterial. Tonight, we cover the most essential of all: What a vampire must do to *present* to stakeholders.

Perhaps my tastes gravitate towards the arcane, but I still believe that nothing beats a good story. Remind yourself why those present wanted to have a stake in you in the first place. It will be the same as your own goals: To drink the blood of an innocent. Keep this language simple. We gathered here might all prefer the lyrical strains of Old Romanian, but we must tailor our language. Also avoid using your lordly titles. Yes, most of us here is old nobility, and I may have been called "Master" by many an awestruck mortal soul. But now is not the time for being above oneself. Set the Count Orloks and Countess Elizabeth Báthory de Ecseds to the side, and encourage stakeholders to call you by your first name, which in my case would be Mike. You would be surprised how quickly the offer of a first name disarms them, which gives you a great advantage.

One real mistake that Fledglings make is from where they choose to speak. I see so many setting their coffins in the centre of the room. Though this might look appealing to those who have visited Shakespeare's Globe—even I remember fondly a vein-burstingly good time there in the summer of 1669—and after all we vampires are a dandyish breed, upon bursting from your box you'll render yourself unable to direct your plans to all stakeholders at once, leaving yourself open to particularly, let's say "thorny feedback". Ask your underlings to push your coffin to the edge of the wall, preferably a spot under a window, which allows you to address everyone—and for easy escape should your presentation go awry.

Up you get, Fledgling at the end of the beam! You have the whole day to sleep.

Try your best to make your stakeholders aware of your boundaries. If you are not to be reached between the hours of first light and sunset, say so. And yet this is a fast-paced world, and you might find yourself needing to present to stakeholders at untoward moments. The most dangerous of these are on the road, as we vampires have such a hard time of travelling. If they insist on meeting you out in the open, perhaps on the bow of an old ship destined for England or a horse-driven carriage in the foggy moors, watch out for the sun getting in your eyes while you're presenting. Wear your cape to shield yourself—you may also use this as a presentation screen. Props generally make effective additions to your presentation. Don't *tell* them that you want to sup on their blood. *Show* them the goblet in which you plan to drink it.

While thus surrounded, remember, Fledglings, though it is tempting to go after the high stakes first, that you also do not forget to take care of the low stakes. High stakes are

certainly more dangerous if you miss, but stakes that come from below can be difficult to parry.

And, when you're ready to execute, be swift about it. Fledglings, our plans are always time-sensitive. The closer you leave it to sunrise, the more likely your stakeholders will feel they have the edge on you. This is a great time to strike. Be specific at the end, and use plain language: "I'm here to suck your blood!" is a much more powerful and clearer way to express your goals than "From this point onwards in time, stakeholder blood will be set to commence issue."

Now, the best vampires improve with every presentation. I haven't got to where I am today by just sitting around with my talons up my sphincter. But it can be difficult to get feedback when your stakeholders are gurgling their own blood. My advice: Think beyond the first stakeholder. Some lesser stakeholders may enter your presentation post facto, and their despairing cries may offer a great deal of useful information to you as well as updating future stakeholders with your execution plans at no cost to you.

I hope this was helpful, Fledgling? Oh, young thing, how your tongue lolls! If I didn't know better, if I didn't now see the floppy ears and wet nose, I'd say you've gone quite giddy with the blood of a pious vicar! I'm sorry but after all this, it seems you're in the wrong room. This is *Nosferatu's* Masterclass in Presenting to Stakeholders. You might try down the hall: *Cujo's* Masterclass in Presenting to Steak-Holders.

Do give him my regards.

The Best Bo
By
Mark Brazaitis

In retrospect, it might have been a bad idea. But Bo didn't have the luxury of living retrospectively. He lived in the now. And what he'd done in the now, which is to say a month ago, was to buy his lover a coffee mug. On the otherwise white mug, in red letters decorated with tiny hearts, were the words Best. Mom. Ever. At first he wasn't thrilled with the periods. Wouldn't the message have been better without them? Best Mom Ever. Or even a full sentence: You are the best mom ever. But, as he thought about it, he began to like the periods. They made the message emphatic.

"What's the occasion?" his lover asked when he presented his wrapped gift to her.

"The occasion of you being you," Bo said. In his lover's presence, he often felt inspired to utter off-the-cuff poetry. Most poets, he understood, wrote their best verse in their twenties. He was thirty-six and just getting started.

She unwrapped the present and lifted the mug from its box. She smiled. "I like the periods," she said.

"So do I," he said. They had a lot in common, Bo and his lover.

Like Bo and his wife, his lover and her husband, who was also named Bo, had two children. Bo knew his lover was an excellent mother because he and his wife lived next door to her and her husband. Their families saw each other frequently, sharing cookouts and other meals. His lover's children always said "please" and "thank you," and they always made it to their school bus stop on time. Sometimes his lover couldn't meet him for sex in the hotel on the highway because she had to help her kids with their homework or take them to the dentist.

His lover examined the mug he'd given her and said, "I bet you really wanted to buy me the mug that said Best. Lay. Ever."

There hadn't been such a mug, and even if there had been, he wouldn't have bought it for her because it wouldn't have been true. The best lay he'd ever had came courtesy of a woman he'd dated in Germany during his army years. Her name was Helga; she was six-foot-two, smelled like a two-decades-old, diesel-fueled Mercedes, and had underarm hair a small animal could get lost in. But—mein Gott!—when the lights went out, she knew exactly what to do.

Bo didn't like to lie, so he only smiled at his lover. She clearly interpreted this as a yes.

A few weeks after he'd given his lover the mug, she and her husband invited him and his wife over for a Sunday brunch. The meal was delicious: blueberry pancakes, eggs over easy, and hash browns with a touch of onion. Bo used to think his wife was the best cook in the world, but his lover was now a candidate for Best. Chef. Ever.

His lover served coffee to his wife in the mug that said Best. Mom. Ever.

"How sweet," his wife said to his lover. "Did Bo buy it for you?" She meant his lover's husband, of course.

But his lover misunderstood and, nodding toward the Bo who wasn't her husband, said, "Yes. How did you know?"

His wife didn't immediately understand. But then she did. "You bought this for her, honey?"

He thought about pretending to choke on a piece of toast, thereby changing the subject of conversation from the mug to the Heimlich maneuver, but he knew she would get him to spit out the truth eventually. So he simply said, "Yes."

She gave him a foreboding look.

An hour later, back at home, his wife said, "I can't believe you gave her that mug. Do you really think she's the world's best mom?"

He could have remained silent, but this would have been the same as saying yes. So he simply said, "Yes."

He tried to explain: "It's not like you're a bad mom. But sometimes you let the kids stay up late playing on their phones then yell at them the next morning for not doing their homework. And twice this month, you've forgotten to pack a vegetable in Susie's lunchbox."

"We're done," she said. She was serious. The next day, he was living in a hotel on the highway. Only Bo came to visit him. One night they drank in the hotel bar and joked about giving each other a mug that would say Best. Bo. Ever.

But after they'd had coffee to sober up, they conceded that neither of them deserved that designation. The best Bo ever, they agreed, was a former professional athlete who played both football and baseball. There was also a musician, last name of Diddley, who was probably a contender. The two of them would have to vie for third place.

goose shit
by
Maria Giesbrecht

there's a man in the park saying it's been a while since he's seen
a pretty girl open a book
and before I have time to curse his soul
to the depths of Hades
I laugh a little
it's mid July and hot girl summer—
you've been there

but the conversation wears old like wallpaper and sooner
than later I regret the hello but
I'm just grateful
it's not February / thank god I
get to watch him wipe out in some
goose shit on the way out

The Endless Televisions

by

Derek Lake Berghuis

I escort my wife into the home of an old friend, one Percival Fisk, where we will stay for a few weeks or until our latest folly blows over. The Fisk household casts an idyll of domesticity that we enjoy. Framed pictures of the Fisks are scattered throughout, mostly of their children and erstwhile pets (eight dogs, one goldfish; the cat was never caught on film) along with watercolors of the seaside and novelty wooden placards: *Welcome to the Fisk's. We love our children equally, there is no need to ask. Please do not smoke in our bathrooms.* A cable knit throw of a horse mounted cowboy dresses the couch. The living room keeps no television, nor tolerates any appliance more complex than the old tube radio.

"I've been in many living rooms, some with televisions, but also some without," a remark I make whenever we visit.

"Yes, that is a true statement," Percy says. "Our living room has never had a television. The kitchen television is proximal. The den is the primary hub for entertainment. There is no reason for a third television within this many square feet."

"Aha," I smile amusedly, "and how many square feet is that?"

My wife cuts in, eager to get settled, "why don't we put our stuff down in the guestroom?" I wink at Dawn, my apprehensive wife, to soothe her nerves.

"Please follow me," Percy walks away from the staircase that normally leads to the guestroom and down the corridor that gives to the master bedroom at the house's east end. My wife and I explored it once while the entire Fisk clan was on a cruise to celebrate Mr. and Mrs. Fisk's fortieth wedding anniversary some years prior. The spare room opposite theirs was horribly cluttered, a fire hazard if we ever saw one. I turn to give my wife a pinched expression signaling an unanticipated deviation. We know the Fisk household intimately. We keep a survey of their property in a fireproof safe. For legal reasons, we are not allowed to enter the backyard or set foot in the driveway.

Percy taps with the back of a knuckle against the master bedroom door.

"Mom, dad, is everything alright?"

"Yes, Percy, all is good, you can stop asking." The television in their room is either turned off or without sound. I brokered the deal for that very television through my European contacts, so I know it's there.

Our host indicates through pointed finger the spare room, now furnished with twin beds and a dresser. My wife looks at me with an expression of horror muted by the trained politeness of our upbringing. I respond by looking at her as if I'm not totally convinced this isn't her fault.

"Hm," I utter before running my tongue along my front teeth, as if evaluating airborne algebra, "Percy, a quick word? It's not about the accommodations."

Percy stands attentively and completely within the doorjamb, expecting me to divulge right then and there. I inhale deeply through my nostrils before continuing gingerly, "how's the

old basement?" Chumming our host with a warm smile, I hope that his bedridden parents might forgive the question as simple discussion.

"The basement is downstairs. It is fine," he says, following the statement with an awkward inhalation through his nostrils that fails to impress neither me nor my wife, "I am not sure how else a basement could be."

"Psychologically speaking, sure," I say while considering the basement's wellbeing a moment. "It's been a while since we've seen it!" I turn to my wife, inspecting her face for signals. Percy's eyes look suddenly smaller, beadier. "Dawn, care to check out the basement for kicks?"

"Honey, I'm not so—"

"Percy, why are your guests asking about our basement? They are not to use it!"

"They have asked about the basement, that is a true statement. Gene pines for the basement, but that is my inference, it has not been confirmed."

"Pining seems a little strong," I say, smiling, "I'm merely an engaged houseguest, Percy and Mr. Fisk." It feels strange, yet necessary to address the previous statement to both of them.

"That basement has been renovated according to the residential building codes approved by the town and county!" Mr. Fisk shouts, the phlegm in his throat not sufficiently cleared.

"Be that as it may, I think a once over from the stairs would satisfy our innocent curiosity. Sweetie?"

"Our basement," Mr. Fisk cries out, the phlegm in his throat giving his speech a highly unattractive distortion that he does not remedy, "is perfectly legal. It is not to be used for enterprising. You may walk halfway down the steps to observe the basement for which you pine, but only for thirty seconds."

A distended pause goes well observed and I'm suddenly curious as to how long and uncomfortable it can really be. Twenty-two seconds pass in utter silence, a veritable bloodbath of social tension. Dawn clears her throat. Sensing it my turn to speak, I swing once more.

"Maybe we'll just freshen up before cocktails?" My wife's anxiety lessens by mere degrees at the suggestion. She extends her wrist so that I can take her pulse, a practice encouraged by our doctor. Percy sees this but does not ask about it.

"Of course, you may," he begins, "the bathroom is accessible only through my parents' room. You can use it whenever you like, unless they are using it, then you will have to wait."

"Naturally," I say, assuaging nothing.

"Why are they asking about the bathroom? They just walked in!" Mr. Fisk yells.

"Percy, I think it might be best to leave that bathroom to your lovely parents," I feel once again obligated to call out for the sake of the bedridden Fisks, having just addressed them indirectly, "Hello Mr. and Mrs. Fisk, so nice to see you!"

"Hello, young man. You have not seen us yet," the senior Fisk replies, which is true.

"Hello, Gene!" The affable Mrs. Fisk calls out. "And hello Gene's wife, Dawn!"

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Fisk! Thank you for such lovely accommodations, and especially on such short notice!" my wife answers. I show my wife a look of solid approval. I love the delicate smile she flashes me.

I resume my gaze over Percy Fisk more intently, now hoping that the discomfort might drive us out of the vicinity. He remains oddly still. I believe he is filing his canines again in the basement. His nails need clipping.

"Percy," I try once more, "we have one more bag left in the car, and –"

"I'll be damned if I have to go out there and get it," Percy says, his expression unchanged. He is not familiar with the proper employment of derisive humor, and he always goes too far with it. We do not engage him when he does this, we simply look elsewhere, using the moment to search for an irregularity in the house's construction or violation to report, a crack in the plaster, warping if we're lucky enough.

"Percy!" His parents call out in unison, Mrs. Fisk adding, "go get your friends' bag, it's right outside, can't be more than one hundred fifty feet from where you're standing."

"One hundred forty-seven when I measured last," Mr. Fisk boasts, unable to help himself, adding, "if they parked exactly in front like we told you to tell them."

"Yes, that is where they parked. I told them twice before they arrived."

"Yes, I know," Mr. Fisk says, calmed by his son's affirmation.

Neither of us move. Dogs begin barking in neighboring yards. A finch calls for a mate. At last, Percy leads us out. He takes a tape measure from the mantle in the living room, which we assumed was part of the home's rustic décor and said nothing for fear of insulting our host.

"Why are you bringing a tape measure?" I ask, wondering how he could assault us with it and what kind of damages we might be awarded.

"We have to be sure," he answers.

Percy approaches the car and stares at the lone duffel bag in the backseat, studying the ripples in the nylon, and critical of the stitching. He drops to a knee right beside the rear tire and measures the distance between our car and the driveway, repaved last summer by a licensed masonry contractor. He stands up. He wants us to be impressed by how precise he measures, a family trait, but we are not, nor do we bother to give him that impression inorganically.

"Another 3/16 of an inch and you would have gone too far. Do you want to walk into my parents' bedroom and tell them about the 3/16 of an inch?"

"If you insist," I tell him.

"I insist," he says. We've often theorized that his blood contains too much water. The poor bastard. I consult my wife whose eyes instruct me to oblige our host once more. Slightly disappointed, I walk back in, extending my stride by more or less a centimeter, a show of confidence. Inside, more occurs to me regarding the Fisks' carpet, which is suspiciously clean and bouncier than before.

I reach the master bedroom and tap on the door, "Mr. Fisk?" The Fisk patriarch has long been suspicious of our influence over Percy. Dawn and I once expressed interest in using Percy's bedroom for light manufacturing and were asked to leave for a period of ninety days.

"Gene, we have not left. You would have known it if we had."

"Yes. Your son—"

"Percy?"

"Yes, that's the one," I pause. "Percival has instructed me to tell you that my vehicle is exactly where it should be," pleased, I add, "and within your allotted bounds for a vehicle of my size."

Unimpressed, he asks, "by how much?"

"3/16 of an inch."

"Fine."

Back outside, Percy is answering my wife's questions with as few words as possible, abbreviating sounds where and whenever he can. He is intimidated by Dawn one-on-one. He stares at the ground, which is less jarring than when he forces eye contact, unaware that he is allowed to blink.

"What did my father say?" Percy asks, relieved by my presence.

"He said, 'I am impressed with my son's ability to relay instructions.'"

"Okay." Percy looks pale, slightly more than usual, again his blood.

"Percy, I wonder if we might have that discussion," I say, while considering contingencies, a hotel maintenance room being the absolute last resort.

"About putting a television in our living room when we already have two within sixteen and twenty-eight feet of said living room? It is not allowed. I do not recommend that you bring it up to my parents. It is their house."

"No, we—," I pause once more, "no, Percival, we are not interested in the living room, though a television would be a nice touch, my wife will agree with me. Dawn?" Dawn says nothing. We join hands furtively, our fingers clumsily lacing themselves.

"We cannot have any more televisions," the anemic declares. "Think of my home as a small town and each television set as a store that sells television sets. It would be like having three stores, all selling the same television sets within clear sight of one other. People would

not know which store to go to and all three television purveyors would go out of business." His logic seems like that of a man with diluted blood; his platelet count must be low.

"Are you saying that out of sheer confusion, people would just give up rather than choose one?"

"Think of the television stores as televisions in a home, my home if it's easier."

"Sure."

"Imagine having a television set for every surface in the home. We wouldn't know which television to watch and therefore we wouldn't watch any. The indecision would drive us insane, like my brother."

"Verne?"

"He is my only male sibling, so it could only be him." My wife gives my hand a loving squeeze. The urge to be alone with her hastens my approach and I play along expeditiously, "what is going on with Verne and his television sets?"

"He keeps having affairs because they have too many television sets. His wife just bought another one and we're worried his heart might give out. From the abundance of television sets. He's also broke."

Dawn asks, "he's betraying his wife for buying the televisions that he can't afford?"

"I only stated that she purchased one recently. We don't know where the televisions are coming from. We think it's 'spontaneous production.' Every day, two, sometimes three sets materialize in the basement or attic. The pressure from all the televisions is causing him to have sex with women who are not his wife. My parents are appalled."

"Is Verne drinking again," I wager, "tell us the truth, we won't judge."

"Do you mean alcohol?"

"Gene!" my wife is uncomfortable.

"Honey, it's fine, we're just trying to get to the bottom of this. Now, Percy, where is Verne currently living?"

"It's those damned televisions. His wife is a wreck. That's why she bought another one. For spite."

"That's slander if you can't prove that," I warn.

Dawn cuts in, "Percy, listen, don't think us ungrateful, but why not let us stay in the guestroom down the hall from yours, upstairs?"

"You will have to ask my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Fisk."

"With whom I just spoke regarding my parking, you mean them?"

"Yes, Gene, the only parents in the house," and I anticipate the statement will upset Dawn. She miscarried last year, before all the trouble. I squeeze her hand consolingly. She lays her subtle glance upon me.

"Despite our differences and past litigation, you're *our* friend, Percival! We respect your autonomy! We barely know your parents. We don't even know their first names," Dawn steps forward to bolster my argument, it concerns her as well.

"Yes, and wouldn't it be more comfortable for everyone to give us the upstairs guestroom where, if for no other reason, we wouldn't have to disturb your parents just to wash up? Would that not be agreeable to all?"

The overcast sky obscures the day's timeline giving mid-afternoon the feel of early evening. The chirping of sparrows can be heard over the blaring of Percy's television down the hall from where I've just come. Dawn is resting atop the comforter of the double bed, a coaxing image. The windowed alcove catches my eye, the perfect spot for a modest storage server; we could be back on our feet in no time.

I lie down beside my wife, waking her by doing so. I feel the urge to speak but ignore it. The stillness relaxes me as it did Dawn. I admire the room's television, a newer model, but from a brand I do not recognize. The room ensconces us, consoles us both physically and metaphysically, according to Dawn. I'm no longer under the impression that the Fisks stock alcohol. We'll have to get a case delivered, which can be done, but the trust fund is under the watchful eye of Dawn's father. We'll say the money is for a procedure that she needs.

Dawn turns and looks at me, she asks if we can inspect the backyard and driveway after everyone has gone to sleep.

"Yes, my love," I whisper, "absolutely."

Man in Nursing Home
by
Oak Morse

One morning man in nursing home
walks out of room with robe open, genitals hanging out.

Lady next door shouts *Oh my goodness!*

Then slams her door.

Man lifts genitals and says *They dead.*

Then walks onto elevator,

janitor there gasps

and man says *They dead.*

Man walks into lobby into choral huffs and sighs.

Nurse yells *Mr. Tom why you have your*

private parts all hanging out?

Man grabs them and says *They dead.*

I understand that,

but why do you have them out?

Man replies *They dead and today's the viewing.*

The Family Company
by
Agata Antonow

The Zoom meeting starts at three, unless it starts at three-ten because Tori is late logging into her computer. Or at three-twenty because Zven is talking about his kids and his photography business and no one on the screen can get a word in.

But at last it starts and we all look at Tori from our respective screens. His forehead tattoo—LOVE in comic sans font, the V slightly crooked like a gnarly tooth just above his nose—shines gently with sweat under the glow of his circle light. He nods and we all say it: "Wake up, capitalism! Let's unlock the true, loving power of business everywhere!" I squirm in my seat, thinking about my paycheck, hoping it makes up for me being captured on video saying these words.

Zven leads us through a few yoga stretches and Tori smiles at him, mopping at LOVE. Just one more thing—the barometer readings. We all share how we're feeling starting the meeting. We hear how exasperated Zven feels with his kids—"barely holding on"—and Chris puffs out her groundhog cheeks as she tells us about her dog. She is full of dog stories for our barometer readings. I'm feeling cloudy with a chance of fed up, but I smile at my Internet camera and say "great!"

Finally Tori spreads his hands wide in the jerky motion of his suburban internet connection. "Big. . . news. . . client. Look at. . . your computers."

A portal opens in everyone's computer. My screen ripples in a round circle and the plastic seems to melt away as a passageway to another world opens. Chris watches slack jawed as Satan strolls right through the screen into her kitchen. Zven shrieks and falls from his chair as Satan walks into his home office. Tori smiles beatifically as Satan hops into his bedroom. In my own backyard, Satan arrives in a puff of smoke and the smell of sulfur. He winks at me and glances around. Everyone at the company has his own Satan.

Tori shakes his head. "What an entrance! What a guy! Team, I'd like you to meet Satan, our newest client. Let's all show him the love we're famous for, now that he's part of our family."

"So glad to be here," the Prince of Darkness in Tori's Zoom square says. "I have been talking to Tori here for a few weeks and I just know we're going to work well together. You see, I need a website and online platform refresh. In today's world, I know I will be able to reach my best audience if I present a gentler, more loving image. Who doesn't love love? I love love! And I think, with love, that we can create something wonderful."

Chris is wildly scribbling notes. Zven has picked himself off his floor. I'm distracted. My Satan (do I now have my own Satan? And how is this one independent of the one in Tori's house?) is teasing my dog with a leaf. My dog swats at it half-heartedly and rolls over, uninterested in evil. I'm most disturbed by the fact that Satan appears to be naked. In everyone else's Zoom square, Satan is modestly shown above the waist, but in my own yard, I see his round, naked butt, unnervingly red and hairy, and the long tail that starts just above it and curls delicately over the grass.

"Right," Tori is saying. "The most exciting thing here is that each of you will get a personal Satan to get to know in the next two weeks. It's all the same Satan, but different. I won't bore you with the physics. Anywhoo. Talk to your Satan and learn about his relationship to love so we can reflect that in the platform. Chris, you set up the project and keep everyone on track. Zven, I'll need you on graphics." That means I'm on website design.

I flick off the computer after the meeting and look over at the red creature in my yard. I wonder what the neighbors will think. Satan turns around, teetering on his hooves in the grass, and my eyes snap up to his face.

"Hey," I start awkwardly. "Did you want to talk about the project? Or-or evil? I didn't even think hell was, you know, a business." He ignores me and wanders off into a corner, lifts a hoof and pees against my red maple tree.

Living with Satan is hard. First of all, he drinks all the milk out of my fridge at three in the morning. He slurps really loudly, waking me up, and then I have no milk for my coffee or cereal, so I start my daily meetings chanting "Wake up, Capitalism" not feeling very awake. I feel downright grumpy.

During the days, my Satan sleeps like a cat on my porch and I work at getting the right color red for his website. I'm thinking red like a heart. Red like love. The copy stumps me, though. Unlike my Satan, clients are usually chatty, sharing their big values, grand dreams for their companies. They call their business their "baby." Their clients or sometimes their employees are their "family."

Tori calls us a family, too. And we sign our emails that way, "from your family," even if it's just one of us sending an email to the other.

I stare at Satan's new website, which so far is just a big red screen—I have the shade right, at least, having copied it off the bicep of the Satan I lived with, sneaking up him once while he sunbathed—and wonder how to write the copy to include both "Lucifer" and "family." I imagine Morningstar's family, try to link it to the business of hell, but all I come up with is the image of red Satans around a dinner table in fiery hell, laughing their red asses off at Tori, me, and all of us.

"Hey, Satan," I say quietly to the still, red form in my bay window. "What's your philosophy on love? Are you a family? Can you love?"

Satan snores on. We co-exist, him prowling at night and me working in the daytime. I get used to him and his silence. I leave out bowls of milk for him, just so he doesn't keep leaving the fridge open. But he develops a new habit: he keeps taking items from one part of the house and hiding them somewhere else. I find my hairbrush under the couch. My toothbrush is in the microwave. I spend twenty minutes one morning looking for my keys only to find them in the toilet tank. Very funny, Satan, you trickster.

"Hey, Morningstar, Tori said today that the goal of the website is to use love to attract more souls. Tori said bad capitalism and evil don't work any more—customers only respond to love. Are you sad to give up evil as a marketing strategy? You've been using it so long."

Tori is all guns firing because this is a big client. He texts me all weekend and all day. "What is it with the red on the website? How could you think that is a good idea? I had to redo the

banner myself." At night, his messages get ruder, what Zven calls his "toddler mode." *I don't know why I hired you. I don't know why I hired Zven. He's a moron. Do I have to do everything by myself?*

In meetings, Tori explains what his Satan taught him. "Lucifer is simply a businessman, and his business is customer care. Right now, he wants love to be his calling card, his call to action. He offers hope, and the payment is souls. In the third quarter, his goal is to make a 30% increase in the number of souls collected. He's very mission driven, but also values-driven. He wants to change the world by offering real hope and creating an alternative for the afterlife—one that's more authentic."

Tori's Satan seems large and more lively than mine. He's grinning and nodding while mine is curled at my feet. Is my devil somehow defective? Maybe he is not as "mission-driven?" Or just lazy? I dimly remember Sunday school and learning about the sin of sloth.

Tori ends up redoing part of the website, telling me he "had" to because he didn't like my work. I stare at the orange-red color which feels all wrong, but know I can't say anything because Tori is my boss and an artist. A few people called his summer show at the University of Guelph student gallery "brilliant." If I try to redo his work, he'll sulk for weeks, so even though the website looks awful now, I have to leave it and keep working on the copy. I notice in the "about us" section Tori has added a picture of his tattoo—a picture that makes it obvious it was done by someone in a cheap tattoo parlour two years ago on a drunk night when Tori was feeling bad about himself and his prospects as an artist.

Things don't really start falling apart until my devil starts to whisper. I find him beside me in bed, turned toward the wall, when I wake up.

He starts to whisper, at length and urgently. Spittle falls from his lips and it's hot enough to make his pillow sizzle.

"Wait. Wait. I can't understand you."

I scramble from my covers, trying to get out of range in case the bed goes up in flames, but he doesn't even slow down. He's still talking. It may be gibberish. Or some old language long forgotten. He could be telling me the secrets of the universe, but each time I ask him to speak English, he ignores me.

Over the next week, I'm sleeping less and I can't eat. It's as if some poison has entered my house. When I work on the website, I can almost taste it—a skunkweed sharpness that makes me queasy. The dog is hiding under the bed most of the time and the devil stirs more often now. I find him on my stairs, fingers wrapped around the railings, staring into my kitchen. He perches on the front stoop, pointing at passing cars, until my neighbor complains: "Well, really, if you're going to have demons at least have some respect for your neighbors and ask them to get dressed."

While I feel my eyes start to get as red as Satan's website, Tori seems to perk up. His smile gets wider and whiter. He becomes almost jovial. There are three days where he almost lives up to the stupid tattoo on his forehead. He sends us gift cards for Starbucks. He sends texts. "Good job, team!"

I work on the copy. "With millions of years under his belt, Satan knows more about love than any other being on Earth. Now, with innovative new processes in Hell, He's ready to welcome you. . ."

The more I work, the more I realize love doesn't fit anywhere. The ice cream parlour where I buy my ice cream isn't about love. It's about me getting a half-melted, four-dollar cone from a high school student who won't even look at me. My dentist claims in his emails he genuinely cares for me, but the email is the same for every patient. The man running for mayor for the third year in a row writes on his campaign posters how much he loves this city, but once he's elected he'll go right back to hibernating until he needs votes.

Love in business is stripped of every part of its meaning, until it's only consonants and vowels, all sharp edges of lines with nothing behind them. You can see right through the word to the snips of gossip. "I love Zven, but there's tension with him on this project. . ."

And a week later, Zven is laughing with Chris, who got him bumped off a project. That's all love, too—an empty word, so often repeated so you don't notice the steak knife in your back.

All our business clients are drinking this love stuff, though. It's heady. They trade stories about it like baseball cards at conferences. "We give badges." "We're all about our people." "We host retreats for our team." And their people get paler and fainter each day, echoes of who they were.

Finally, I can't handle it any more. "We're writing a website for Satan, you fucking morons. Satan! He's not about love!"

Tori grabs his heart and his eyes go wide, as though what I have said could push him into cardiac infarction. Chris holds her dog—a white shih tzu with cross eyes and brown crud leaking from his eyes—in front of her, as though the limp creature could protect her from the words I'm saying.

My Satan starts to chuckle. His tail wraps around him tight and he throws back his head and roars and roars. "Love!" he shrieks. "Love!"

I'm fired, of course. "You just don't understand love," Tori tells me, his voice dripping with faux sadness. His head is down, so I can see the top of his bald spot on my screen. His Satan is behind him, smiling and almost purring like a cat and Tori can't quite hide the smile on his face. He's enjoying this.

My Satan doesn't leave, though he stops sleeping so much. I had expected him to leave after I was fired—isn't he the company Satan, on loan to me, and to be returned with all my files upon my termination? I don't worry about it. I throw out every book I have about a kinder, better capitalism in the trash and start eating ice cream for lunch. But Lucifer hangs in there.

One night, I find my Satan peeing on the books I had tossed into the trash. I stop on the way to the bathroom and genuinely smile at him, though the next morning I swear a little as I carry the sodden bag of trash to the garbage bin.

A month into my new state of unemployment, I'm sitting in a blue bathrobe on my front stoop. My Satan brings me a local newspaper, like a faithful dog. On the front page is news

of Satan's latest project—a museum dedicated to love. There on the cover is Tori, smiling and sweating.

"Can you believe this?" I ask Satan, but he is rolling in the grass.

On the museum's opening night, I slip into a red dress—the right color, the color of blood and hearts, the sticky love of life. I leave Satan in my house, though he tries to follow me. I hear his pitiful howls as my heels click down the sidewalk.

The museum is about three blocks away. It's a modern building. I had seen it built in the past week, though I hadn't known Satan was the one bankrolling it. For a guy with no pants, he sure has deep pockets.

The outside of the museum is glittery with lights—a bright red heart, in the wrong pinky-red color, and a dollar sign. Business and love in all their garishness. The woman at the door is wearing a pink dress and her hands are damp as she tears my ticket in half.

Inside, the cold air hits me like an android caress. The whole place is shiny and rounded. I feel like I'm inside an egg.

"Hi!" A young woman with a big bowtie on the back of her head says to me. She's wearing a t-shirt with the logo of Tori's company and she's not someone I've seen before. "Welcome to the exhibit. You'll need to wear this sticker inside."

I take the map and the sticker she hands me and head further into the white space, crumpling the sticker in my hand. I trace the names of the exhibits on the museum map with my finger as I walk. "History of capitalism, the good business has brought, changing the future with companies, Satan's role in the future."

I stare at the pictures of phallic towers piercing the sky. The "changing the future with companies" exhibit is in another room. Unlike the white room, here the walls are red, covered in hearts which are purple-red, streaky as though half bled out. I see a picture of Tori's Satan and beside it a TV monitor, which clicks on as I walk by.

"It's time to get serious about business and its future," Satan says on the screen. "We need to leave behind the empty promises of capitalism in the past and recognize the love which has been part of companies for all of history. Take my own business. I am here reclaiming my rightful place as a loving business. Few people know this, but my enterprise is really run like a family . . ."

There are only two other people in the exhibit—an older couple in long coats. She is leaning heavily on a walker that squeaks across the shiny floor. I watch as they walk towards another door, this one small and with a picture of Satan and the words "Satan's role in the future."

I wander the halls, seeing how every business is linked to love. The values of this oil firm. The scholarships offered by the state mining company. Satan's caring for the world. Behind Zven's blurry, off-centre pictures of business leaders and shiny offices, I picture the ground ripped open to pull out diamonds and oil running sticky over the ocean. Maybe they're right after all. Maybe love really does belong in business, just like any other word, like cash or value or wages. Maybe it's love that's been the problem all along, this word that can mean wedding cake or the amethyst bruise over your left eye. Love has a price.

I walk out into the street, where the lights are flickering on, one by one. My Morningstar is standing by the fire hydrant. He tucks his tail around himself when he sees me. Slowly, we walk home together.

The Cultural Repository by **Katherine Cowley**

The following is a transcription of an informal speech given by Cetulianfernstar, the Honorable Arts Chancellor of the Interplanetary Cultural Repository, to a small gathering of four Ambassadors of the Transcendent Planets. During the speech, the four guests received Transcendent drinks that had been spiced with Earthian sea salt, as well as a platter containing eight samples of Earthian food: biryani, pavlova, sushi, solyanka, mandioca frita, sucrinha, pizza, and, in the central place of honor, to celebrate the importance of Easter Island to Earth, a dessert called po'e.

The day we transported the British Museum, twenty thousand humans spilled out of the Underground and took to London's streets in protest. In their hands—humans possess only two, but still manage to use them quite effectively—they carried all manner of inventive signs: "You Can't Spell Earth Without Art," "My Heart Belongs to the British Museum," "Our History Should be Grounded in Our Soil," and "Earth Should Brexit the Alien Pact." (This last refers to the human affinity for exiting larger governing bodies and then suffering disastrous consequences.) We hope to purchase these original protest signs for a future exhibit at the Cultural Repository.

We offered our own forces to maintain the peace, but the Earth government insisted they could handle their own protesters. We allowed them this, and they did arrest some forty-six humans. We kept our forces standing by, ready to assist should the slightest need arise. One of our clever officers printed three thousand copies of a traditional human sign, "Keep Calm and Carry On." Our forces waved these signs in the air, and we believe it did much to diffuse the tension.

Yet the tumult about the British Museum did not end. Earth's Prime Minister, Fatima Costa, graced me with a videocall the very next day, and presented a petition signed by the leaders of 195 of Earth's countries.

"We are flattered that you find our British Museum so fascinating," said Minister Costa. "However, we feel that it would be best for everyone if the museum and its cultural artifacts remain on Earth where they can be appreciated in their original context, rather than being taken elsewhere."

"My dear minister," I said, for humans prefer these sorts of endearments, "Take is a very strong word."

"No, it is a soft word," she said. "Many of our concerned citizens have used stronger ones, like steal, though of course I would never put it that way myself."

I appreciated her rhetoric, and she seemed to recognize how little power is held by the prime minister of a small planet. "We never take," I explained kindly. "You do not have a word in any of your human languages for quite what we are doing, but it is best if you see it as reclaiming. Expropriating. Reallocating."

"Reallocating," she said dryly.

"Earth signed the Pact," I reminded her. "Transporting repository museums to the Cultural Repository is mentioned in part 53b of section 7132."

"Your Cultural Repository is on a planet 240 light years from Earth."

"Tut, tut, my dear human. You know as well as anyone that it only requires ten human weeks of interstellar travel to cross that gap."

"Be that as it may, these priceless artifacts will now be utterly inaccessible for the majority of Earth's population. What will you do next, take the pyramids?"

"My *dear* human," I said, giving extra emphasis to the endearment. "If you had read the Pact in more detail, you would know that we would never take the pyramids. We never transport artifacts, buildings, or cultural sites that remain in their native region. The pyramids, and even the Egyptian Museum, will remain in their present location. The British Museum is filled with objects that were, and I use your word here, *stolen* from their original locations. Think of the Balawat Gates, the Nereid Monument, the Parthenon statues, the Amaravati, the Rosetta Stone, the Ooni statue, and some thirteen million other items, the overwhelming majority of which did not originate in London."

The Prime Minister of Earth spent a moment gathering her thoughts, and then attempted to make further arguments. "Some of these artifacts that you have...transported...have religious and spiritual significance. For instance, the Hoa Hakananai'a is one of the most important statues to the residents of Easter Island."

"If your planet cared about the statue's religious and spiritual significance to Easter Island, you would have returned it to Easter Island long ago. But because of its significance, we will reserve three percent of our annual Cultural Repository scholarships for citizens of Easter Island."

"Cultural Repository scholarships?"

"We understand that it can be challenging to gather the funds to visit the Cultural Repository and experience the culture of the universe. As such, we will provide Earth citizens with five thousand scholarships a year to visit the Cultural Repository. This will include the costs of travel, and room and board for one month."

"That is a paltry number compared to the population of Earth."

"Then we shall make it six thousand scholarships." In situations like this when you have, as they say on Earth, the "upper hand," it is best to be generous.

"Many will still be unable to visit," said Minister Costa. From her tone of voice, she clearly knew she had lost the argument.

"Which is why we will provide a complete interactive virtual reality tour of the British Museum, free of charge, for your entire population."

"Why don't you use virtual reality for your Cultural Repository, instead of taking our museum?"

"You know as well as I do that there is more meaning when you experience a real object rather than a virtual one." I discreetly gazed at the time, an unusual, yet mandatory,

Earthian gesture which signals that a conversation is ending. "I apologize, my dear minister, but I must see to the other museums."

"You're taking more of our museums?"

"Only the very best ones. Attempting to prevent it would be a futile gesture on your part. They are being prepared for transport as we speak."

I shut off the call before Minister Costa panicked.

I agree—the whole ordeal was quite amusing.

Unfortunately, in an unprecedented feat which was quite uncharacteristic of the Earthians, they managed to dismantle dozens of their best museums and return tens of thousands of artifacts to their rightful locations in less than forty-eight hours. As a result, we were only able to transport a handful of other Earthian museums to the Cultural Repository, which makes our acquisition of the British Museum and its contents even more remarkable.

I hope that you will see fit to visit the British Museum, the newest jewel in our collection, and that you bring a delegation with you. The collection is vast, and we have even retained the original human docents. Yes: you can see a live human, and touch their hands (but only their hands, please; they don't appreciate it when you touch other body parts). So come, come see the best of what Earth has to offer, without taking the needless effort of traveling to Earth itself.

Signs You Are A Minor Character In A Disaster Movie

by
Jocko Benoit

You are in the middle of a bad marriage or a great affair, or you are spending your Vegas losses in a bar. Or someone on TV is talking about how something horrifically unexpected could happen, and you turn down the volume to reprimand your son for leaving toys out that people could really hurt themselves on. You haven't appreciated the good things in your life in a long time. You see someone get hit by a car, drag themselves back up to bite the driver and you complain about the spread of drugs. You think you see a flash by the nuclear power plant, but assume it was a traffic camera nailing you for speeding. You notice an extra star in your favorite constellation, but look away to swat a mosquito and shrug when the stars add up again. Every cloud you look at resembles a mushroom. You are walking by a tree when the birds evacuate it for the air and spin off in the shape of an arrow pointing anywhere else but here. A dog is barking and stops to look at you as if you ever knew what to do next.

The Grand Marriott Hotel ☼◻◆♣●
by
A.K. Blake

Dear Customer,

We hope you enjoyed your stay at the Grand Marriott Hotel ☼◻◆♣●, where our motto is "Timeless service in any timeline." Please take a few minutes to respond to a short questionnaire. As a small thanks for completing the survey, you will be entered to win a prize in the preferred currency of your dimension (rare natural objects, paper cash, antimatter, credit card, cryptocurrency, or direct cerebro-chip transfer). We look forward to serving you again soon.

Sincerest regards,
The Friendly ☼◻◆♣● Staff

Please rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being Excellent and 5 being Poor:

Staff greeted you and offered to help you.

○☼■ arrived through the portal with indigestion as usual. Something about all the spiny lights and not-fully-existing-while-existing-in-all-dimensions always gave him heartburn. He burped immediately upon stepping into the lobby, the gas congealing into a large bubble and floating toward the ceiling, only to pop on the glittering chandelier.

♣◻◻♣ slapped him with two of her appendages, her normally pearly blue coloring taking on a worrisome royal hue as her suckers left little indentations in his rubbery skin.

"Hey!"

"Do you have to make a scene everywhen we go? Can't you for once have a little decorum?"

He shrugged all four upper tentacles, which did nothing to mollify ♣◻◻♣. Insead, she turned positively navy, letting out a *harrumph* and slithering off to the front desk. Still, hard not to appreciate that wiggle of hers.

A bellhop appeared next to him with a hover for the luggage. ○☼■ thought he handled the interaction quite well, all things considered. He barely stared, even though the bellhop had only half the proper number of limbs, and he said nothing at all about its sad, completely unsinuous gait. Handled it with *decorum* you might say. Not that ♣◻◻♣ seemed to notice.

Staff were knowledgeable about products and services.

"Good anywhen, Citizen ♣◻◻♣," said the thing behind the front desk. "I notice you've selected our Romantic Eras Suite. Excellent choice. I'm sure you and your consort will be quite satisfied."

"Ought to be after how much it costs," grumbled ○㉨■.

"Oh, shush," ㉨□□㉨ said, turning back to the front desk employee. It truly was a hideous thing, with dull skin and eyes far too forward-facing. She added coquettishly, "I'm sure we'll have a *wonderful* stay, thank you. What was it again? Gron?"

"Tom," the front desk employee said. As if that were normal. As if people could be expected to remember and pronounce things like *Tom*. "Glom," ㉨□□㉨ said again, practicing it, savoring it. She glowed bioluminescent. "So nice to meet you, Glom."

None of this went by ○㉨■ unnoticed. For jelly's sake, why not just produce her egg sack right in front of him while she was at it? But this was exactly the kind of magnetic quality that had drawn ○㉨■ to ㉨□□㉨ in the first place. He still remembered the first time he'd seen her, her limbs covered in grease as she dug into the hard shell of a sea insect, laughing with her mouth full. She positively glowed in the watery light, winning fifth place in the eating contest at the Annual Echinoderm Festival. He had never seen anyone so beautiful. She was electric. She was just always *on*.

The only problem was, it didn't seem to matter who she was on *for*.

Staff went above and beyond to meet your needs.

Their luggage had already been deposited neatly at the foot of the waterbed by the time they got to their room, a level of service that left ○㉨■ begrudgingly impressed.

"Oh, squid-bean, look!" ㉨□□㉨ exclaimed, wriggling over to the viewing screens.

One depicted a winding cobblestone lane atop a rustic mountain, the path dotted with brightly shingled cabins like little pieces of candy. Another showed an underwater ball, the sort his father used to reminisce about, complete with elaborately constructed reef towers and a buffet of sea creatures so vast it took three cycles to eat all of it. Still another revealed a fantastical glitterscape, clouds of shimmering emerald dancing past sandy dunes of the palest pink.

"Which one should we visit first?"

"You want to go right now? I thought we might make our own magic first if you know what I mean..."

"Oh, ○㉨■, your head is always in the gutter."

"I thought we came here to get some *us* time."

"We did, I want us to actually spend some *quality* time together. Look at all these beautiful eras. Don't you want to explore them with me?"

○㉨■ mumbled something about how the eras would be there later—that was the whole point of a timestream freeze, after all!—but ㉨□□㉨ ended the conversation by crossing all

her upper appendages and staring resolutely at the glitterscape until he gave in and let her the lead the way.

Products and services were available and as described.

The one good thing about the glitterscape, in ○☉■'s mind, was that it would require a lot of sudsing and scrubbing to get it off. He was having trouble keeping his sprongles from extending the entire visit. Instead of focusing on the cerulean statue of some tree thing that ♀□□♀ oohed and ahed over—a bit of an overreaction for what was essentially shiny concrete—○☉■ was picturing them in the tub later, ♀□□♀ practically oozing with gratitude, all sultry eyes and slick tentacles.

But he got none of this. In fact, far from appeasing ♀□□♀, their sojourn only seemed to fuel whatever it was that was annoying her. Instead of a sexy soak, she cleaned most of the glitter off herself with angry, brusque scrubbing, then wriggled out of the bath as soon as she was done, leaving him to struggle on his own. ○☉■ was at a loss. Hadn't he done everything she'd wanted? Hadn't he let her use funds from the joint cerebro account, haggled with his boss to get a full two cycles off work, and put off coupling to follow her into what was essentially an overhyped children's crafts exhibit?

♀□□♀ barely looked at him when he finally dried off and oiled himself back down. She was already in her night suit, tucked down into the warming goo of the waterbed so that no part of her luscious body was visible. She stared resolutely at the screen with the little cottages as it started to snow in that era and the young of that planet came into view to put on some kind of dance.

Staff offered pertinent advice.

Giving up, ○☉■ ordered room service. At least the food sounded good, although there were some strange dishes he skipped over involving an inordinate amount of condiments and meat in some kind of casing. Another of the ugly staff appeared at the door with a tray.

When it asked if he required anything else, ○☉■ said, "Not unless you can get me a new consort."

"Ah, I'm sure you wouldn't really want that," it said, brushing some its coarse hair behind the ungainly pair of round, fleshy things sprouting from either side of its head. "Maybe what you really need is just a little perspective."

○☉■ thought this exceedingly deep, not realizing it was one of the taglines used by Hotel ♁□◆♣● in their commercials and hammered into the vocabulary of its staff for this very purpose. ○☉■ returned to the waterbed mollified, fully prepared to take a more enlightened approach to the situation.

"Something to eat, squid-bean?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Oh, come on, 𐄂𐄂𐄂. We haven't eaten since mid-cycle. What's going on with you? Is this because of what I said at the front desk? I was just joking!"

"Nothing's wrong."

○𐄂𐄂 ripped into his plate aggressively. After a few minutes of slurping, 𐄂𐄂𐄂 continued as if he had prodded her.

"Maybe if you had just pretended to care even an ounce about that era."

○𐄂𐄂 threw down the other half of the overlarge anemone. "This about the *era*? Squiddy, it just wasn't my thing! I'm not into glitter!"

"You're not into *anything* anymore!"

"That's not true."

"Oh? What was the last new thing we did that you liked?"

○𐄂𐄂 paused, thinking. "That restaurant we ate at. The one with the bubble grasshopper dish."

"Not *food*. I mean what was the last experience we did together that you actually enjoyed instead of just sighing, and trying not to participate, and acting like it was too expensive the whole time?"

○𐄂𐄂 blinked his inner eyelids. "I don't do that."

"Yes, you do."

"Well, I can't help how I feel."

"Then you could pretend to care for my sake."

"So just lie to you? Just be a different person all the time?"

"I thought you *were* that person!"

"What in the seas made you think that?"

"I don't know," 𐄂𐄂𐄂 said abruptly. "I guess maybe...maybe you were always like that. You're right."

"Oh, ok. Well, then. Great."

𐄂𐄂𐄂 continued watching the uncoordinated young make some kind of ball shape on the ground with their bodies, but her eyes were glazed over as if the inner lids were closed.

Eventually, she said, "I guess maybe it's just getting old is the problem. I don't like dragging you around and trying to get you interested in what I like as much as I used to."

"What? ♀□□♀, we don't have to like the same activities. You can do your own activities, and I can do mine. And then when we come together, we'll have more to talk about."

"But I don't *want* to do it that way," she said, flapping her limbs against the surface of the water bed and finally turning to look at him. Her eyes were brimming just as he'd imagined they'd be in the tub. "I want to *share* things with you."

♂♂■ stared at her, the greasy anemone slipping through his appendages. "Well...I'm sorry. I thought you liked the way I was."

♀□□♀ flushed sapphire. "I thought I did too."

Staff was courteous throughout.

"Um, yes, I'd like to...check out, I guess."

"I'm sorry, Citizen, was there a problem with your room?"

"No, no. The room was fine. The other Citizen will be staying through the rest of the trip. I just, um...I'm going home early."

The thing at the front desk didn't react as it typed something in with its tiny, many-jointed appendages that hung off of its other two upper appendages.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hope you enjoyed your time with us."

"Not very much, no!" ♂♂■ said, a wave like a shiver running through his body. Then he sighed. "Not your fault, though. Not much you could've done about my breakup, is there?"

"Actually, we have a Former Partner Simulator Suite if that's something that would interest you."

"You—really?"

"It's quite popular and very discreet, I can assure you."

♂♂■ imagined some kind of holographic imitation of ♀□□♀ wrapping itself around him, her limbs suctioning hard, her skin slippery like oil. It wouldn't really be her. It wouldn't have that spark. But still...

"How much?"

♂♂■ gasped at the sum.

"No, I'll be fine, thank you. Save that for the suckers."

The thing behind the desk made a face that might be amusement, crumpling its lips and wrinkling the thing with little holes at the center of its face.

"As you wish, Citizen." It spun the screen around. "Here is your receipt. If you could just confirm everything is in order."

○◎■ nearly choked. "Is that...are those..."

"The totals. Yes, Citizen."

Next time, ○◎■ vowed, he was saying no when a consort wanted a "romantic adventure" disguised as a very expensive relationship talk. Closing his eyes, the transparent lids *and* the outer ones, ○◎■ okayed the amount.

"Thank you, Citizen. One last thing, if you wouldn't mind taking a few minutes to respond to a short questionnaire regarding our service, I would appreciate it. We look forward to serving you again soon."

Overall, how would you rate your stay at the Grand Marriott Hotel ♯□◆♣●?

My consort doesn't love me anymore. Lot of money to figure that one out. Food was good, though.

-○◎■

Silly Little Pity/Slumber/Purge Party

By
Emma McNamara

For legal reasons, this poem is simply one elaborate joke/satirical scheme. To any future employers who may have looked up my name and stumbled upon this, I'd like to apologize for referring to my ex as "a little bitch baby" on the internet. As Pete Davidson once said, "I want a career."

I'm turning my pity party into a purge party and
all my exes are invited—
dearest darlings, serenade me at
my silly little slumber party starring a bunch
of queer gals with one(1) Emma™ in common—
what could *possibly* go wrong?

ladies and theydies, would you be so kind
as to line up in chronological order, may you
engage in civil chit-chat or exchange petty pleasantries
as I mark the costar of my every
radical relationship and sneaky situationship
off my attendance sheet

may we merge and mingle and
mourn what could but probably never should have been,
may a brave soul approach me and
point to her fellow attendee and
reproach me, *sooooo, what happened between you two?*

to which I'll answer,
some gay shit
or
she left me for the woman I wasn't supposed to worry about and
now they have matching tattoos but she still drunk dials me on weekends
or
fuck if I know

peer around at your dear queer peers here
at this silly little pity/slumber/purge party and
you may notice more trends than discrepancies,
but please take note that
I don't have a *type*, I have *tendencies* and
I tend to type up my thoughts late at night and
overshare them on the internet and
then act surprised when people call me an attention whore

but alas, may I overshare with you all that
I once half-joked with one of our guests here
that perhaps if I went on a heist and
stole a STOP sign from a busy intersection and

popped a wig on its cute little red, octagonal head and
brought it into bed with us then maybe she'd
respect my boundaries without being a little bitch baby

to which she promptly remarked that
I need to get over myself and my body issues and
my trust issues and my mommy issues and
then we kissed and made up and
tuned out the toxicity like the mature,
happy, healthy 19-year-olds we were and

I reckon that all of us mature adults gathered here
know all too well what can happen *when two people
love each other very much* or *when two people
literally just met each other at a
pity/slumber/purge party* or even *when two people
can't fucking stand each other*, but
in case communication isn't your forte,
may I offer an assortment of road signs
as party favors—you get a STOP sign and
you get a SPEED LIMIT sign and
you get a DO NOT ENTER sign and
if anyone disrespects you, perhaps they'll respect
being bonked on the head with aluminum and

if things get too rowdy, fear not—
I shall holler any hostility to a halt and
cross my arms and plaster on a pout and
proclaim, *ladies and theydies, why can't we all just get along?
we're all friends here, right? look at me.
look into my eyes. this isn't you.
this is some straight people shit*, and
missy over there in the corner will pipe up and
announce that she *is* indeed straight and
not exactly sure what she's doing here and

we'll all chuckle and reconcile and
resolve to keep things playful with a pillow fight
featuring a posse of princesses and a flock of fuckgirls and
perhaps I'll graciously extend the invite to
all the boys I had fake crushes on in middle school—
what could *possibly* go wrong?

So Mote It Be!
by
Katherine Gleason

billing-noreply@spells.com
Your spells.com order #886929
To: Joanna K.,

Dear Joanna K.,

Thank you for consulting Mama Morgana and spells.com!

Your customized spell(s) from spells.com is/are below. Please remember Magick is real. We encourage you to cast each of your spells as written. Be sure to read through each spell thoroughly as soon as possible so you can order all the necessary Magickal supplies from the Shoppe. (As a valued spells.com customer, you get a 20% discount on all Magickal goods ordered within the next week.)

You have redeemed our three-for-one spring special with this order. We are so glad you were able to take advantage of this exciting new offer. (Sign up for Mama Morgana's newsletter, Morgana's Scrying Ball^(sm), to make sure you can see the future and grab the latest deals before the general public.)

Spells for Joanna K.

Because you, Joanna, were born under the sign of Pisces, you are ruled by the planets Jupiter and Neptune. It is part of your nature to be an Abundance Goddess. Mama Morgana was born under the sign of Sagittarius, also ruled by Jupiter. So, she is an Abundance Goddess, too. (We don't believe the universe ever serves up coincidences. No, this is synchronicity. You need to learn about finances and your path to personal success and prosperity. Perhaps you are being guided to sign up for Mama Morgana's newest workshop? It's Abundance Goddess 101, coming soon, from Jupiter to you!)

But without further ado, let's make some Magick!

Employment Spell for Joanna K.

Mama Morgana is sorry to learn that you were terminated from your position as Assistant Vice Principal. We understand that your job as Assistant Vice Principal was important to you. It was important because you like to help and guide young people and you like to use your skills of organization and kindness. To draw a job based in values like yours, you will, of course, need to consult employment listings. (You will also want to consider if you may have been terminated for cause.)

On the Full or Waxing Moon, light a green or yellow candle. Place four pennies around the candle, a dollar bill under the candle, and focus on your desire. Keep your focus on your desire for employment without emphasizing your economic concerns. (Mama Morgana understands. She also needs a new car. Mama Morgana agrees: it is unfair that you are surrounded by students who drive luxury vehicles you could never afford while you are stuck with an "unreliable clunker" that has caused you to be late to work on numerous occasions.) Once you feel centered and clear, chant these words:

Assistant Vice Principal come to me.
I am kind and organized.
So mote it be.

Allow your Magickal energy to build up. (You may feel an itching in your palms. Mama Morgana does!) Then release your Magick, imagine it flying out in all directions carrying your desire on its swift wings.

Uncrossing Spell for Joanna K.

Mama Morgana understands that you ordered a binding spell. Writing a binding spell to prevent "the rich brat" from talking would violate Mama Morgana's Code of Ethics.* Remember, we do not impinge upon the free will of others. Mama Morgana also understands that you believe you have been bewitched. Reading your energy and considering the demographics, it seems unlikely that your student cast a spell on you. Perhaps "some outside force" did cause you to demand payment from this student in exchange for "hooking him up" with college admission officials and that athletic coach. To gain clarity and remove any blocks that are keeping you from seeing the truth and moving ahead, work this Uncrossing Spell on the Waning Moon.

Clean your apartment thoroughly. Take a warm shower and scrub yourself with Mama Morgana's Purifying Salt (for sale in the Shoppe. If you buy today, you get an extra 10% off your already discounted price!) While in the shower, imagine the "bad feeling" being drawn out of your body and washed down the drain. Then anoint a purple candle with Mama Morgana's Extra Strength Uncrossing Oil. (Yes, you get an extra 10% off your already discounted price!) As you do this, chant these words:

Now the wickedness of the wicked ends
I am free of them,
And with myself do make amends.

Make sure to focus on your goal and imagine yourself feeling lighter and free. Light the candle and sit with it in meditation for ten to twenty minutes. Then snuff out the flame. Repeat this every day for seven days and you will be uncrossed.

Protection Spell for Joanna K.

Mama Morgana is happy to offer you a protection spell. That said, she cannot protect you from law enforcement. It is true, a sixteen year old can seem very grown up and capable of signing contracts and entering into agreements, but if said contracts concern questionable activities and were signed under duress, are they legally enforceable?

Shield of protection
Hear my plea!
Keep this person
Away from me.

Spells are not returnable. No refunds or partial refunds will be issued for any reason, including unexpected results. By using the website spells.com you, have given consent for the use of elements of your personal information. Spells from spells.com are for your personal use only and are not to be shared on social media or blogs or by any means yet to be invented.

*Ethics really do count. (Mama Morgana could tell you stories!) Please remember, "harm none and do what you will!"

Lady Macbeth Channels the Cat in the Hat
by
Mary Cresswell

I do not like you, Duncan King,
old fart lord of everything—
I will smite you with a pox
stick you in a wooden box

Same to you, you Lord Macduff—
get off home, you've done enough
Soon you'll know in one fell swoop
what it's like to lose a group

Total bonkers I do be
just leave all the rest to me
Then my darling will be king
crafty daft hereafter king

In the lair of the blue-beaked noddie
by
Robert Garnham

'Well, someone's sure as hell spooking the blue-beaked noddies', Greg said.

We remained quiet, of course.

'Gibbering wrecks, the lot of them. The island jungle is a fragile ecosystem. They only exist on this island because there aren't any other predators. Rats . . Cats . . Humans . .'.

I was a human, and so was Liam. It was hard not to take this last remark personally.

'You know what it was like here, just a few days ago'.

I nodded.

'Blue-beaked noddies everywhere. It's the only place in the world where we managed to re-introduce a sustainable colony'.

I'd chase them away from the bins with my slipper raised over my head, but I didn't want Greg to know this.

'And we don't know what's happened, but they're all hiding in the scrub, now. The undergrowth. This isn't natural behaviour for the blue-beaked noddie. It's got to be behavioural, rather than biological. Something has sure as hell given them the willies'.

The night before, Liam and I had lost ourselves to a biology seldom studied here at the remote research station, and we had made out, naked, in the glare of the full moon in a copse where ordinarily the blue-beaked noddie would frolic to their feathery content, and as we lost ourselves to an animal passion we could hear the blue-beaked noddies chattering excitedly, their guttural chirruping adding an upbeat sleazy tempo to our nocturnal exertions. Indeed, they seemed to enjoy it. But it was probably best not to tell Greg this.

'Do you think he's on to us?', I asked, as Greg and his wide, floppy brimmed hat marched away.

'It's weird that he should just single us out, of all the people who work here', Liam replied.

The tropical sun beat down. We both had work to do. Liam was due to dive on a nearby reef and so something interesting with plankton. And I needed to rearrange my sock drawer.

We did that joke, the first time we met. You know the one. 'Oh! I've got crabs!', the moment our eyes met over the Perspex tank filled with crabs outside one of the huts at the research station. The tank was lit brilliantly by the tropical sun and his face was magnified by the water. Crikey, he's got a freakishly big head, I told myself, so I was quite relieved when he looked up and it was a normal head size.

We'd both said the same thing at the same time.

'Oh! I've got crabs!'

'Jinx!'

'You said it first'.

'Compulsive reaction'.

He'd just arrived, like, half an hour before. Dropped off his bags in one of the accommodation units, and now he was familiarising himself with the scientific amenities.

'What's your field of study?' I had asked.

'Biodiversity in the bumphead gurnard. And you?'

'I do the bins', I replied.

And he thought that this was hilarious, but that night, ironically, behind recycling dumpster number six, we made out with such intensity that he said it reminded him of the spawning methods of the common bumphead gurnard, which I took to be a compliment.

'Have you really got crabs?', he asked.

Within days we were meeting each night, making our way from the buildings of the research station into the surrounding forest which covered most of the island, whose fragile ecosystems had been sheltered from the mainland for thousands of years. The pungent, earthy aroma seemed a natural aphrodisiac as we lost ourselves to various chemical and emotional processes in a clearing under the glow of a tropical moon. And all the time he'd kept up the pretence of a lecture about the bumphead gurnard and its role in the ecology of the reef, sea grasses and mangroves, just in case anyone should catch us at it. For who was I, but a lowly bin man eager to know more about such processes.

It's just a shame that we were putting the frighteners into the blue-beaked noddies.

The first night, they'd scampered around and clucked and chattered, hopping from foot to foot. It was kind of the same the next night. The night after that, they must have known that we were coming because they all kind of sat on branches in the thicket and watched, appalled, yet fascinated. Word must have got around, because the night after that there were more of them, and some of them had brought snacks to munch on. And they were quieter, watching intently. Every now and then there would be a chirp. And when it was all over, they kind of sauntered off to their own parts of the forest.

'Those blue-beaked noddies are giving me the creeps', Liam had said.

But after a while, we didn't really think about it.

Emptying the bins in one of the labs shortly afterwards, amid the test tubes and microscopes, someone had blue tacked a poster of a blue-beaked noddie on the pristine white wall, and I just admit, I came over all unnecessary and had to go away and have a sit down.

Greg held a meeting in the main canteen of the research station.

'The situation is becoming critical', he said.

He was sitting on a table, kind of sideways, one bum cheek on the table surface, his legs dangling at an angle.

'The blue-beaked noddie is being put off its natural breeding patterns. It's being distracted. As a naturalist, I understand that each year there has to be a certain amount of wastage—that's the term we scientists use for the specimens of any species who fail to find a mate each year . . . '.

'The freaks, in other words', Liam whispered.

I tried to snort back a laugh, and Coca Cola came out of my nostrils.

'But this year the numbers are catastrophic. We've never seen anything like it. From this moment forward, all staff and scientists are to stay away from the woods on the island, is that understood?'

The floppy brim of Greg's hat wobbled with the intensity of his anger.

'I'll be placing security staff on the entrances to the woods at all hours. This has to be our top priority,'

I looked away from him for a moment towards the windows of the lab. The sun was beating down and I could see the green trees. The colours were so vibrant, what with the deep blue of the sky. So utterly pristine.

'Well', Liam whispered.

'Now, are there any questions?'

There were no questions. Greg had made his point. I wondered how uncomfortable it must have been for him, to sit like that with one bum cheek on the table and one not, all kind of sideways in a measured approximation of casual authority.

After the meeting finished, Liam and I sat on the steps of science lab number six, the trapped sun bearing down on us, trapping the heat of the concrete and the faux colonial wood veneer of the science lab.

'We're going to have to stop', he said. 'The fragile ecosystem is more important than our rampant biological urges'.

It felt a little embarrassing to be talking his way. But Liam was a scientist and he saw everything in cold, hard facts.

'Do you think . . . , our friendship will survive?'

'Why not?', he replied.

The sun lightly caressed his delicate features. Over the last few weeks I'd got to know him, or at least, I thought I had. And while it's true that he never seemed to share much beyond

his own physicality and some minor gossip about bumphead gurnards, our proximity and shared moments had become the closest thing I had to a friendship at the research station.

A small beetle crawled along in the gully formed by the gap between paving slabs. He studied it intently for a couple of seconds, and then squashed it flat.

'If Greg finds out . . .'

'He won't'.

'He's an intelligent man'.

'And I'm not? Oh, is that what this is all about?'

'Don't be silly!'

Liam was wearing a white t-shirt and cargo shorts with lots of pockets. From where we were sitting we could hear the exotic birds in the jungle and the slow lap of the sea as it broke over the reef.

'It doesn't . . . Necessarily . . . Have to be out in the jungle that we . . .'

'Then where else?'

He had a point. We all lived in shared accommodation. Scientists and menial staff alike had the same facilities.

And that's when I thought how sad it was that love should bloom in such an austere and clinical environment where every action had a consequence.

'So, this is it, then?'

'We can still be friends'.

'Those times we had . . .'

'Mere biology', he replied.

I knew he was lying and that it had meant something to him, too.

'I have to go', he said, 'I've got a bucket of dinoflagellates waiting for me in the lab'.

We both got up. The sun continued to beat down. We went our separate ways.

The next few days passed very slowly. I'd see Liam with the other scientists, his white lab coat flapping around his long, bare legs, or off out on a dinghy to dive on the reef and look at the gurnards, the wind in his hair and a kind of winsome expression on his face. I passed once while he was in a deep conversation with Doctor Emma and Professor Roger about nutrients and photosynthesis in the bottom-feeding molluscs, and he did just kind of turn, ever so slightly, and nod. I was on my way to the eco-compactor with an arm full of empty egg boxes for the recycling. As I pulled the lever on the machine a couple of moments later,

I was filled with a sudden sense of ennui and I wished that a similar machine existed which just crushed down all disappointment till it was a fraction of its normal size.

I'd go back to my accommodation unit at night and let out a deep sigh. This wasn't the easiest thing to do when you share a bedroom with five other people.

'You okay?', Professor Roger inquired.

'Fine . . .'

'I know how you feel, we're worried about the blue-beaked noddies', he said. 'But nature has a way of sorting these things out'.

I looked out the window at the gathering dusk. You could hear the birds in the forest, even at this late hour, squawking and chattering.

'Yes', I said to him, 'The noddies'

'Oh, and stop by my lab, in the morning. Nobody's emptied the waste paper bin in days'.

Is this it?, I asked myself. Is this all I have to look forward to in life? Liam was okay, he had his molluscs and his plankton. And his long legs, and his winning smile. I stared up at the ceiling of the accommodation unit. I was really starting to dislike Liam.

It's often funny, isn't it, how when you decide you don't really want to see someone, they just turn up all over the place. We both arrived at the cafeteria for breakfast at the same time, and we exchanged pleasantries, side by side in the queue for bangers. As usual he was dressed in a pristine white tshirt and his cargo shorts and his beautiful long legs, and I was dressed like a sack of crap. Mid-morning I was loading up the pick-up truck with bags of waste material when I found him poking around in the main skip because he'd accidentally thrown away a dorsal fin from a bumphead gurnard which had been of special scientific interest. And when I went to the loos, there he was at the urinal next to mine. I couldn't go. I pretended I had and wished him a good day and spent the rest of the afternoon busting for a wazz.

'He must be doing it on purpose', I told Doctor Emma. 'Isn't there anything you could prescribe . . . You know . . . To help me forget?'

'I'm a doctor of zoology', she replied, 'but I've heard rumours that the nutrient pellets we feed octopuses can certainly knock a grown man off his feet for a few hours, if that's what you're after'.

I thanked her for her advice and later that day snuck into the scientific store room. I found the octopus pellets and indeed, they zonked me out to such a degree that I missed dinner and woke up almost twelve hours later at breakfast. And yes, I'd forgotten Liam. I went to the queue to get some sausages and there he was, right next to me again in his pristine white t-shirt and cargo shorts with his long legs. Not only was I dressed as a sack of crap, but I had bleary eyes and I hadn't shaved, either.

'Are you okay?', Professor Roger asked, when we met by chance at the compost heap. 'You seem to be walking around in a daze, and you've lived on nothing but sausages these last few days. You haven't been at the octopus pellets, have you?'

'I'm fine . . .'

'Just make sure you get the right ones. You know, there's two different kinds of octopus pellets. One that goes into the octopus, and one, er that, . . .'

'To be honest, it's just a kind of weariness I've been feeling of late. I can't quite put my finger on it . . .'

'Just like the blue-beaked noddie', he sighed. He then seemed to snap out of his reverie. 'It's hard, here', he said. 'OK, this may be a luscious paradise of beaches and jungle, but that doesn't make the pain go away. This is life in a microcosm, an environment that we have created for ourselves. You could say that this is our own ecosystem'.

'And it functions just like one?'

'Yes, a complex web of associations and mutually beneficial behaviour. There's even a pecking order, with Greg right at the top'.

'And his hat . . .'

'Yes, yes, his hat. It's a complex system and we all play our part. And look what it does to you! I had a full head of hair when I started here'.

Professor Roger dives his hands into the compost bin and pulls out some grass cuttings. He plonks it down on top of his bald head. I laugh. He laughs. We are both laughing.

It's not that I purposefully ignore Liam. It's hard to ignore him, he's there all the time. I just try not to put myself in a position where I am exposed to him unnecessarily, because that sort of thing can really bugger up the day, I try to get on with my chores and responsibilities the best I can while not thinking about those rampant moments we had shared in the undergrowth and how it had all come to a crashing halt just because of some stupid species. But it was hard to concentrate. Carrying the sacks of waste paper warned by the sun down to the recycling bins reminded me of the warmth of his body. A fleshy jungle leaf imbued with a layer of dew brushing against my neck reminded me of his tongue. And those Perspex tanks full of crabs outside the lab, oh, they were the hardest of all. I kept expecting to see his magnified face.

'You can't force them to mate', Doctor Emma was saying to Greg, when I walked past one day.

And even that made me think of Liam.

'Perhaps it's their diet?' Greg sighed, 'we are looking at so many possibilities. Something's putting them off'.

'They might just be a generation of losers', I said, stopping next to them with a plastic tray full of empty wine bottles from the scientists accommodation unit.

'And who asked you?'

'You said so yourself. Every generation has wastage. Perhaps for some reason, this is a whole colony of . . . Wasters'.

Greg looked at me in a funny sort of way.

'Explain'.

'They just can't get dates, they're society's nerds. They have no interest in mating because, I don't know, perhaps they have other things going on'.

'And since when have you been an expert in the blue-beaked nodding?'

'Have you tried porn?'

'Really?'

'Set up some televisions throughout their habitat. Play some of those documentaries about the mating habits of the blue-beaked noddie. I've seen some of the younger scientists in the common room watching them for a laugh, along with Octopus Bloopers Volume Six. Perhaps that will put them in the mood for a bit of blue-beaked noddie action'.

Greg looked at me for a very long time. He then turned back to Doctor Emma.

'As I say, we're now looking into their diet. There's got to be some biological reason why this is happening'.

For weeks there had been nothing but sunshine and clear blue skies. Each day had been hotter than the day before. Even the trees looked like they were starting to wilt, it's no surprise that the blue-beaked noddie couldn't get it up. Towards evening, dark, ominous clouds started to roll in from the sea and the distant horizon flashed with sheet lightning, the thunder booming across the surface of the ocean to the island and the research station. I went to the accommodation unit early, and watched as blobs of rain appeared on the window, individual drops crashing in the jungle sounding more like gunfire or fireworks.

It was hot. I'd never known a heat like it. The very air seemed infused with water, the sweat was rolling down my brow. I lay back on my bunk and tried to read a magazine but the concentration necessary even for this was somehow too much. I couldn't even look at the pictures. The other scientists were all in the common room or the canteen, so at least I had the place to myself. I lay back and listened to the rain on the corrugated iron roof, intensifying as thunder cracked and lightning sizzled in the sky overhead. There's going to be leaves everywhere in the morning, I told myself. And guess who's going to have to clear them up.

It was too hot even to lie down. I got up and sat with my legs dangling from the bunk. There wasn't even the slightest breeze, I'd never felt so uncomfortably hot. Perhaps I should open a window?, I thought. Get at least some kind of air movement. There was another vicious flash of lightning as I looked over to the window only to see, in that split

second, outlined by the lightning, six blue-beaked noddies sitting on the windowsill, looking in.

I gasped. Then I told myself, no. That was a mirage. That sort of thing doesn't happen.

But then came another flash, a flicker of bright light and sure enough, the outside window ledge was crammed with blue-beaked noddies, all looking in at me.

'Well . . . This is creepy . . .'

I hopped down from the bunk. By now the rain was incredibly intense and it clattered on the iron roof of the accommodation unit. I went over to the next window and sure enough, more blue-beaked noddies.

'This can't be . . .'

I backed against the cool of the interior wall, aghast, too afraid even to move. Another flash of lightning showed that there were hundreds of them in the branches of the nearby trees, all of them looking in the window of my bedroom. And that's when I heard their chatter. The door of the unit opened as if by an unseen hand, and they all started waddling in, chattering and chirruping as they did so. There must have been thousands of blue-beaked noddies, all of them waddling towards me with their blue beaks pointed like the needles of a compass directly at me.

'Heh heh, hello chaps . . .'

I tried to back further against the wall.

And now the ones to my right started to flap and leap about, their feathers brushing against my arms and legs. They meant business, did these blue-beaked noddies, they meant me to move, so I did, the birds flapping at one side of me, the birds the other side clearing a space for me to walk. They turned around as the thunder boomed and crashed, waddled towards the door leading me outside while the birds to my right kept prodding, poking me to go the way that they wanted.

We went out into the rain. I'd never felt rain like it, as if thrown by some omniscient being, the ground an absolute quagmire of mud and mulch as the birds pushed me, flapped and pecked and shoved me out away from the accommodation unit and into the woods. Every time the lightning flashed I saw them ahead of me, marching forwards as if having claimed their prize.

I don't know for how long we walked like this, me and the blue-beaked noddies, but we came to a clearing surrounded by dense vegetation, and that's when they stopped pushing and flapping. I stood there, in the rain with the water running down me and for some reason the only thing I could think was, what if I get struck by lightning?

Amid the cacophony of the rain and the weather I heard more chattering and that's when I saw Liam. He too was being cajoled by a flock of these flightless birds flapping and jumping at him, being led with his soaking wet lab coat flopping uselessly around him. The blue-beaked noddies pushed him close towards me and then stopped their pushing. It all went very quiet.

'Hi', I said.

'Alright?' he asked.

'Not bad'.

We were both soaked. The rain ran in rivulets down our bodies. His white tshirt was clinging to him.

'Been busy?'

'Yeah, you know. Plankton'.

The blue-beaked noddies let out an angry squawk.

'OK! OK!'

We looked at each other in the flash and blip of lightning, the heat and the thunder and the crash of heavy rain on the undergrowth. We embraced. And then we started going through our usual repertoire. It was just like old times.

The next morning dawned warm and sunny and, just like I'd thought, there were leaves everywhere. But that wasn't the major concern.

The air was filled with the sound of copulating blue-beaked noddies. And it was the most rasping, primal, grunting sort of sound that seemed to go on for ages. They seemed to be doing it everywhere, from the trees to the tops of the storage huts to the steps of the canteen, they weren't shy in the slightest.

By mid morning, Greg had to call an emergency meeting, but nobody could hear him because of the all the noddie action. He opened his briefcase to find his microphone only to find a couple of blue-beaked noddies at it inside amid his paperwork. They were in the microwave. They were in the hoods of coats hung up in the doorway, they were at it everywhere.

'We now have a new crisis!' Greg called.

'Pardon?'

'We can't hear you!'

'Next year's population will be too big!', he yelled. 'The ecosystem . . . Won't be able to sustain . . .'

A couple of blue-beaked noddies hopped up on the table in front of him and started at it.

'Oh for goodness sake!'

The noise was so intense that by mid afternoon the decision had been made to abandon the research station, at least until things had cooled down a little. We all stood on the sandy beach as a fleet of dinghies ferried us to the supply vessel moored just off the reef. And as our boat pulled away from the island and the crescendo of mating blue-beaked noddies,

Liam and I kind of snuggled together, and he told me that the bumphead gurnard had also seen its numbers decrease over the last few years, and that scientists were scratching their heads, wondering what kind of methods could be put into place to shore up their population.

'Wasteage?' I asked.

'Some generations just don't have it in them'.

The boat took us further from the island. You could still hear them even from a few miles away.

The Flat Chicken Sandwich
by
Heather Brown Barrett

is a polarizing, stepped-on chicken patty in a bun,
breaded flatworm of nostalgia
or
repudiation,
breeding like grit, roughing up the roof of your mouth,
or
breeding like soggy salted cardboard,
mostly breeding, really,
foot-shaped like a Converse Chuck Taylor,
except not that cool,
shaped like the iron that stamps the finishing touch
on each loaf cut prior to freezing,
or
it's like drugs,
cut and churned with unadvertised carbs, stepped on
so many times aint no chicken flesh left within,
some people got a habit,
some gotta have it;
this is either a tribute to the breaded, oblong protozoan patty
or
you might as well put this poem in a bun and eat it.

Muse Match.com
by
Susan Chertkow

I was desperate.

I never thought I'd use an online Muse service, but there I was signing up on one, paying for premium features, adding my photo and profile to dozens of other aspiring writers. My writing block was impenetrable, my slump insurmountable, my misery inescapable. So I surrendered to the Almighty Algorithm of Muse Match.com and waited for their lifeline. Hadn't the company promised they'd match me up with a supernatural being versed in my field, a spirit whose coaching skills matched my needs? Hadn't there been glowing testimonials from established writers here and abroad? I was a believer.

As for my profile, I rewrote it at least twenty times. Did I mention my writing block? I listed my genres: Bizarro Fiction, Bizarro Romance, and Bizarro Crime. I had recently switched from Westerns in order to tap a contemporary market. I provided a writing sample and listed my publications (meager), my aspirations (modest), my income (minimum wage.)

For my picture, I borrowed my friend's cat, Schnitzel, who assumed an erudite pose next to me in exchange for multiple treats. I wore a black sweater and jeans—my best coffee house look.

Then I waited. One month went by. Then two months. Then four months.

Finally, I received a message from Muse Match.com: "We've done a lot of digging and we found a Muse Match for you. Her name is Philomena and her photo is attached."

Just when I was beginning to think Muse Match.com was a scam, I acquired my own muse—Philomena—and her photo, too! Actually, it was an out-of-focus photo, but I suppose that was due to her immaterial nature. Floating in layers of gauzy chiffon, Philomena frolicked among Greek columns. She wasn't young, but she wasn't old either—sort of locked in at middle-aged. It was hard to tell. Did I mention that the photo was out-of-focus?

I hadn't any doubts she was a real spirit—either an ancient goddess or a descendant of one. To my delight, Philomena sent me a message:

Schnitzel,

I enjoyed reading your profile, and I look forward to working with you. I'm not familiar with Bizarro Fiction, but it sounds intriguing. Unfortunately, my caseload is heavy, so all I can offer you is a Shared Time Muse Arrangement, say once a month on a Tuesday for 45 minutes. Let me know if that works for you. Philomena.

I was disappointed—she called me by the cat's name. (My fault. I shouldn't have identified him.) She wasn't familiar with Bizarro Fiction, and her availability was extremely limited. I had notified Muse Match.com about the lack of matches for me, but their response was a list of writing prompts. Philomena was my one and only option. I accepted the terms.

Did I mention that I was desperate?

The Build-Up

I counted the days, hours, and minutes until Philomena's arrival for our Tuesday session. I fantasized about my muse unlocking the doors to the Literary Fort Knox. I took out a fresh yellow pad, a pen, and refreshed my computer. I wanted to be a good host, a worthy client, so I prepared refreshments—coffee, tea, and a plate of Pepperidge Farm Assorted Cookies.

The Let-Down

Philomena arrived like a chiffon-covered Rose Bowl Float—a voluminous entity all fuzzy and faded around the edges. She appeared out of focus, just like her photo. Her British-accented voice was billowy, soft and mellow. To my dismay, she spent the first fifteen minutes of *my* session extolling the accomplishments of her favorite client, 17th-century hymnist Isaac Watts, who wrote hundreds of enduring hymns.

Obviously, the Almighty Algorithm of Muse Match.com got my needs all wrong. I was deflated, demoralized, and despondent. Philomena managed to notice my mood shift while bolting down the cookies.

"Dear Schnitzel, how can I help you?"

"First of all, my name's not Schnitzel. Schnitzel is the name of my friend's cat. I borrowed him for my photo. My name is Ian."

"By the way, these cookies are wonderful!" interrupted Philomena. "I like the variety. I like them all."

I handed Philomena the box of cookies. She emptied the contents and arranged each one in a circular pattern on the plate.

I tried to describe Bizarro Fiction. "They're modern horror stories sometimes filled with gore and carnage, basically weird stuff and twisted plots. Actually, why am I even talking about them ... I can't write anything. I have a severe case of writer's block. I'm sure you're good at what you do, but I need a modern muse. Do you know any modern muses?"

"I've met a few at our bi-centennial conventions. Hmm, before I go, I may as well teach you how to write a good hymn."

I couldn't hold her back—not by protests, nor by references to our session's concluding time. Philomena was unyielding. Patiently, she taught me how to infuse a hymn with piety and praise, universality, and vivid poetic elements. In overtime, she showed me how to update a 17th-century exorcism that casts out demons. Then we performed the rite.

The Outcome

When Philomena floated out in a cumulus cloud of chiffon, I had to admit I felt much better—more relaxed, yet energized. That exorcism did wonders for demolishing my writer's block. I was happy to pass the ritual on to other writers and artists. Then I went on a writing binge—writing modern odes of praise, in celebration of everyday marvels, such as Zip Loc Bags, Anti-Depressants, Doritos, Netflix, Duct Tape, Blogs, Febreze, Non-Stick Pans, Breath Mints, Caller ID, Guacamole, Face-Time, Carry Out Foods, and Grub-Hub. Eventually, I created my own blog and acquired hundreds of loyal followers. I wrote a hymn, too.

If you ever apply to Muse Match.com and come in contact with Philomena, keep an open

mind.

Have an ample supply of cookies, take careful notes, and be sure to tell her Schnitzel sends his warmest regards.

Contributor Biographies



Zara Karschay is a writer and artist based in Hamburg.



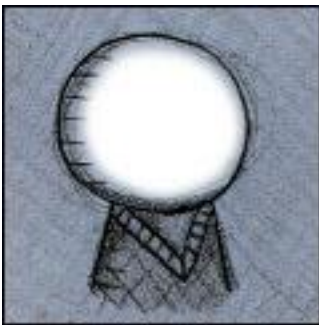
Mark Brazaitis is the author of eight books, including *The Rink Girl: Stories*, winner of the 2008 Prize Americana. His stories have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *The Sun*, *Witness*, *Michigan Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He has worked as a sportswriter, carnival-game operator, Peace Corps volunteer, and professor. He was once the deputy mayor of Morgantown, West Virginia.



Maria Giesbrecht is a Canadian poet residing in Guelph, Ontario. Her style reflects her love of storytelling and vivid imagery. Maria has been published in *Sunday Mornings at the River*, *The Sunshine Review*, *CV2*, *the York Journal*, and *the Imposter Poetry Journal*.



Derek Lake Berghuis is a Dutch American writer and PhD student. He also writes poetry and enjoys taking photos, the latter of which can be seen on his website, dereklakeberghuis.com. His passion for the written word took root as a young child and has grown with him ever since. He prefers to shower at night.



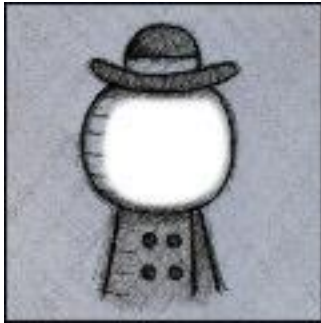
Oak Morse lives in Houston, Texas, where he teaches creative writing and theatre and leads a youth poetry troop, the Phoenix Fire-Spitters. He was the winner of the 2017 Magpie Award for Poetry in Pulp Literature, a Finalist for the 2020 Witness Literary Award and a Semi-Finalist for the 2020 Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry. Currently a Warren Wilson MFA candidate, Oak has received Pushcart Prize nominations, fellowships from Brooklyn Poets, Twelve Literary Arts, Cave Canem, Palm Beach Poetry Festival as well as a Stars in the Classroom honor from the Houston Texans. His work appears in *Black Warrior Review*, *Tupelo*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Nimrod*, *Cosmonaut Avenue*, *Solstice*, among others.



Agata Antonow is a writer based in New Brunswick, Canada, in a small town known as the French Dry Capital of the World. She has been published a few times.



Katherine Cowley has visited the British Museum, but only in its original Earthian location. Her debut novel, [*The Secret Life of Miss Mary Bennet*](#), was nominated for the Mary Higgins Clark Award. She is also the author of *The True Confessions of a London Spy* and the forthcoming *The Lady's Guide to Death and Deception*. Her short fiction has appeared previously in *Defenestration*, as well as in *Unspun: A Collection of Tattered Fairy Tales*, *365 Tomorrows*, *Segullah*, and in other publications.



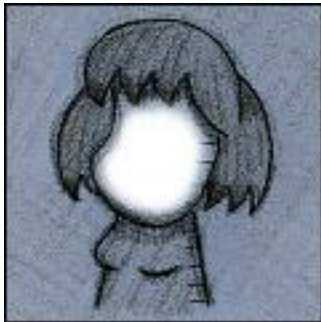
Jocko Benoit is the author of three collections of poetry, the most recent of which is *Real Estate Deals of the Apocalypse (Poems About Donald Trump)*. His poetry has appeared in *Gargoyle*, *New Ohio Review*, *Rattle Poets Respond*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Spillway* and other journals. He used to work as a cardboard box durability tester until the accident.



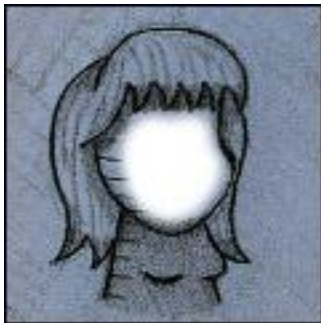
A.K. Blake enjoys ice cream more than most people. She also likes science fiction, summer breezes, and shooting things in video games. You can find more of her stories at *365Tomorrows* and *Daily Science Fiction!*



Emma McNamara, author of *Of My Many Years of Youth* (a novel) and *A Truth or a Gift?* (a novelette), both available on Amazon, is a 20-year-old national award-winning writer from Hopkinton, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in literary and scientific journals around the world, including *Scholastic Art and Writing*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Beyond Words*, *Defenestration*, *Storm of Blue*, and *Tech Directions*. Her writing earned a Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition presented by U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren, and she is currently an editorial board member at *Beyond Queer Words*. Emma's favorite word is "impish," and her passions include mental health awareness, disability advocacy, and LGBTQ+ issues. Follow her on Instagram at @author_emma.



Katherine Gleason's stories have appeared in *Cheap Pop*, *The Drabble*, *Derelict Lit*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Hobart*, *Juked*, *Jellyfish Review*, and *Menacing Hedge*. She won first prize in the *River Styx/Schlaflly Beer* Micro-Fiction Contest, garnered an honorable mention from *Glimmer Train*, and has been nominated for a Best of the Net award. Her play "The Toe Incident" won the Christopher Hewitt Award for Drama in 2020.



Mary Cresswell is from Los Angeles and has lived for many many years on New Zealand's Kapiti coast. As a child, they fed her Edgar Allen Poe, Ogden Nash, and Cole Porter, hence her lingering passion for light verse. Go figure.



Robert Garnham's short stories have been published widely in magazines such as *Stand*, *Defenestration*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Ink Sweat and Tears* and others, and his poetry in *Acumen*, *Tribe* and the *Broadsheet*. In 2021 he was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He writes a humorous newspaper column in the *Herald Express*. He also performs comedy poetry all over the UK at fringes, festivals and TV, and had one of the funniest one-liners of the 2018 Edinburgh Fringe. For more information on Robert Garnham go to <https://professorofwhimsy.com/>



Heather Brown Barrett is a poet and an imp making mischief in Virginia. Wait, she didn't mean imp, she meant IMP: Important Mothering Person. She mothers her young son, and contemplates the meaning of life, the universe, and everything with her writer husband. Her poetry has been published by *AvantAppal(achia)*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Superpresent Magazine*, *Backwards Trajectory*, and by SEZ Publishing. She has work forthcoming in *OyeDrum Magazine*.



Susan Chertkow is an artist and writer. She has a poetry blog at tuesdaypoems.com. She is also the author and illustrator of the urban fantasy novel, *The Gnome and Mrs. Meyers*, which is also a podiobook at gnomehomestay.com. Susan resides in Chicago, but claims her imagination dwells in multiple realms.