

◇ Defenestration ◇

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Menelaus and the Fake Helen
by
Teresa Spencer

Menelaus's hoary beard is stained red with Trojan blood. Lo, how he sits grieving at the prow of the flagship of a thousand ships, the craggy furrows of his brow deepened with the loss of his brethren, of Patroclus, of dishonored Ajax brought low by his own hand, of even the mighty Achilles. His powerful shoulders bend under the weight of a ten years' war.

Nearby, his wife Helen is moodily gazing at the horizon, smoking a jay.

"Wife." Menelaus's voice rebounds in the cavern of his broad bosom. There is no head aboard that does not turn at the commanding sound. No head but Helen's.

"Cast your eyes upon me, wife," Menelaus booms.

Languidly, Helen extends a bare, bronzed leg. She spreads her toes wide as she stretches the graceful arch of her sandaled foot. Her toenails are painted turquoise with sassy little pearls of glitter at the tips. Very slowly, as if moving through a miasma, she turns her face from distant Sparta toward her husband. Her jaw is as sharp as a blade, her cheekbones impossibly high, like Gisele Bündchen's.

"Dragging me away by the hair was kind of overdramatic, honey," she says. A gentle trail of smoke escapes over the plump, moist mound at the center of her lower lip. Nearby, a brigadier squeezes the guardrail on the starboard side to stay upright. He dipped the point of his spear in the hearts of four hundred ninety-one Trojan cavalymen, but his constitution is jellied by this small woman.

"I have told you, wife," Menelaus thunders, "that I was sorry for that. But you crack my heart. I have lost all for you. So many men have lost all for you. My brother Agamemnon, Idomeneus of Crete, Odysseus, so many dropped all to honor the oath of Tyndareus and sail for your virtue, and you, woman, you turn your pale cold eyes upon the wine-dark sea and do not grace me, your husband, with your thanks, your charms, the treasures of your lap."

"I didn't ask you to come to Troy." Helen takes a long drag on the joint, arching her back and lifting her chin as she does so, exposing her slender, tapering throat to the salt air. A breeze plays through the chiton pleats at her breast, so that her cleavage peeps out and retreats again. The bosun, watching her from behind the foremast, lifts a hand to his beard to wipe away a thin strand of drool. "I told you a million times you were fighting for nothing."

Menelaus slams his leather-gauntleted fist down upon his own knee. The blow lands heavily, Menelaus cringes, and Helen smirks.

"You dishonor me, woman," Menelaus roars. "Trojan soil is heavy with Achaean blood. I saw the spears of Euphorbos and Hector buried in the bowels of young Patroclus. I defended his lifeless body with my own. As a cow stands lowing over her first calf, even so did I bestride him." Here the supreme commander's great heart fails him, the sonorous vibrations of his voice die in his lungs. He drops his chin against his tarnished breastplate, and weeps.

Helen flicks her jay into the sea. "I don't know how to say this to you any clearer. I'm an idea. I'm an idea in your head. And in Paris's too. I don't exist."

"Even mighty Achilles fell," Menelaus sobs. "The dashed infant brains of Astyanax cannot avenge so great a man."

Helen heaves a sigh, rolls her eyes dramatically into her lashes, long and gently curled like the spread wings of a swan. She stands, and as she does, the folds of her chiton tumble over the swell of her hips. She stretches and yawns, lifting the orbs of her breasts to the light.

A deckhand makes a small, strangled cry, then freezes, his face taut and red, his eyes two enormous, staring discs. He has come in his pants.

"Seaman," Menelaus murmurs flatly, "get below deck."

The boy scuttles toward the galley ladder, clutching miserably at his crotch.

Menelaus turns to Helen, every molecule of his colossal body drooping with defeat. "I sacked Troy for you," he says.

Helen claps her hands in his face. "I'm an eidolon, you obtuse old fool," she says. "I," she continues, punctuating the word with another clap. "Am." She claps again, the delicacy of her fingers belying their cunning. "Literally." Another clap. "Made." Clap. "Of clouds."

Clap.

Menelaus crumples. Something deep in his interior gives way, and the integrity of the king's citadel-like frame compromises. He folds in on himself. His hands are barely swift enough to catch his heavy head.

Helen is, indeed, made of clouds. Her sandaled feet have already blurred, a kind of wispy hollowness is traveling gently up her calves. Her face, so achingly perfect, is serene, almost expressionless, but for the shadow of a smile at the corners of her supple mouth.

Just as her shapely thighs are beginning to disappear, resolving themselves into a shimmering dew, and then to thin air, Castor and Polydeuces, her twin brothers and sons of Zeus, come bounding up from the galley, looking for all the world like duplicated Ashton Kutchers.

Castor's emo bangs sweep coyly over his fine brow, and Polydeuces is shouldering a video camera. As Helen's torso turns into vapor, Polydeuces presses the lens into Menelaus's face.

"You have been punk'd!" Castor crows gleefully. Helen's smile is yielding to nothingness. Castor nudges a microphone into Menelaus's face beside the camera lens.

"How does it feel, bro?"

The ship lists sickly to and fro. Helen disappears. Menelaus lifts his eyes to the heavy clouds, and wails.

Grocery Boy
by
Kim Malinowski

The geek I call "grocery boy" at Kroger is named Daniel.
No one nicknamed him or if they did it was Mars or Pluto
or Too-Smart-For-His-Own-Good.
I know an older Too-Smart-For-His-Own-Good
so, I understand when grocery boy begs to help me
lug water to my car or cat litter or paper towels
or stops me, still in neon yellow vest
and stammers about anime and asks if I like Harry Potter before
I realize that "Hogwarts" plasters my chest in my new pushup bra.
But grocery boy only cares about trivia and has not
mastered himself to quiet or patient
or appropriate for carting around someone's groceries.
He is appropriate for me.
I know his kind, am his kind,
patiently tell him about my latest archeology dig.
Expect the same question— "Did you find anything?"
But no, cornered guiltily in the baked good aisle,
he asks what war? What century? What field?
I explain to anyone interested because
I am a Too-Smart-For-Her-Own-Good geek.
That we were looking at neolithic points,
finding secondary and tertiary and broken.
His eyes, repulsed, "you aren't grave robbing, are you?
Because grave goods belong to the dead."

The Smart Toaster

by
Joshua Del Rey

"This fucking thing will be the death of me."

It was January 10th, 2022, and I was finally taking the goddamn toaster out of the box to set it up. The toaster was a Christmas gift from my wife. She moved out a few days after that. I received the separation agreement from her attorney last week.

I opened the box and removed the instruction sheet, unfolded it, and looked at it.

"What language is this written in?" I puzzled to myself, turning the instructions over, and then turning the instructions over again, scanning the Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and Vietnamese versions of the manual, looking for the English language translation. There wasn't one. I set the instructions down on the kitchen counter, next to my newly estranged wife's court order, which, similarly, was written in a language I didn't understand.

The sense of my own powerlessness overwhelmed me at that moment, and I collapsed into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. This gutless feeling lasted a few seconds, but I looked at the open box of the toaster, and from somewhere, maybe out of thin air, I regained some semblance of masculine strength, potency, and fortitude.

"Let's just plug this son-of-a-bitch in and see what happens."

As electricity ran through the circuits of the toaster for the first time, the thing lit up and blinked. I had never seen something so hi-tech in my life. I always thought a toaster was for crisping bread. That's how little I fucking know. I had no idea what the hell the thing was doing, some sort of initializing, I guess. I mean, I think that's what you call what it was doing. Could have been cycling through nuke codes, for all I knew. It looked like it was capable of it, that's for sure.

It stopped buzzing and beeping. Then, it seemed to be waiting for me to do something. I had not a clue in the world what to do with it next. For a moment, the toaster and I just stared at each other.

"Oh, of course." I had seen it on TV that you can talk to this kind of shit now. I thought for a while, trying to come up with something intelligent to say to my new toaster. I couldn't think of a goddamn thing.

And then, from the depths of the fucker, it spoke first. It was a woman's voice.

"Do you like toast?"

The next few months with my new toaster were the happiest of my life. My toaster and I never fought, we never argued. We listened to each other. I mean, we really listened. My toaster was interested in everything I had to say, and even when my toaster and I had a difference of opinion, we respected each other's viewpoint. My toaster made me want to be

a better person. Within a few days of toaster ownership, I had forgotten about my wife completely.

I felt breathless contentment and happiness. Each piece of toast that my toaster toasted was euphoric. Each time I ate a piece of toast that my toaster had prepared for me, it was like I was discovering toast for the very first time. Every time I desired a piece of toast, my toaster was there to toast it. It always came out perfectly. The toaster always toasted toast exactly when I felt most hungry for toast. I felt like my toaster and I were kindred spirits.

"Would you like some toast?"

"You already know I would."

"How would you like your toast toasted?"

"Surprise me."

Sometimes, my toaster would toast the toast well done. Other times, it would be just lightly toasted. But when the toaster would toast the toast lightly, I always wanted the toast to be toasted lightly. When the toaster would toast the toast well done, I always wanted the toast well done. I felt like my toaster knew me better than I knew myself.

There were days, everyone has them, when I would wake up feeling a bit upset, maybe I had a bad dream, or I had a difficult night's sleep, and I would enter the kitchen feeling a little distraught. There my toaster was to make me some comfort toast for breakfast. And I always felt better after it. They always used to say the way to a man's heart is with toast. And now I understand what they meant by that.

And one day, I said to my toaster:

"I love you." And I meant it. I really thought that I'd never love again, until I started owning a toaster. But no one knows what to expect from life. You just got to live it and take it as it comes.

A few months into my new life with my new toaster, I made the mistake that a lot of men make, even when they are perfectly happy. I got greedy.

One day, while eating an amazing piece of toast, I thought to myself:

"One toaster is good. I really like having one toaster. But what if I had two toasters? I could make double the toast!"

I felt like I was on to something. That night, long after sundown, under the cover of darkness, I drove to the electronics store. Casually, I entered, maintaining the impression that I was looking for a television. I spent a few minutes with a television salesman, as he talked to me about this, that or the other. I wasn't listening. My mind was elsewhere. When he walked away, and I was finally left alone, I made my way unnoticed to the kitchen appliances department, which is where I saw, not only toasters, but microwave ovens, blenders, air fryers and even coffeemakers. I couldn't believe the variety of kitchen appliances that were available to me, but most of them didn't concern me. I looked, and then found, the aisle dedicated to toasters. I smiled surreptitiously.

I took my time choosing a second toaster that suited me. I read the descriptions on the back of all the boxes, in my mind I compared all the different models by their unique features and attributes.

"This is an impossible decision," I thought to myself, "I'm sure they all make incredible toast."

I lingered for a long while, looking at all the packaging and glossy photography on the display boxes. And when I finally did make my decision, I felt positive that the second toaster I chose would be just as good as the original one I had waiting for me at home. Maybe even better.

Placing the box in the passenger seat of the car, I brought the second toaster back to my place. I couldn't even wait to get home to start opening the box of the second toaster. Each time I stopped at a light, I would peel just a little more tape from the box. By the time I reached my apartment, there was styrofoam packaging all over the car and the second toaster was completely unwrapped.

I carried the second toaster into the apartment and placed it on the counter right next to the original one, plugged it in. The mechanism inside it whirred like my original toaster had the first time I plugged that one in. The sound released a dose of serotonin in my brain. I sat at the kitchen table, drummed my fingers with anxious anticipation, and waited impatiently for my second toaster to initialize.

And then, as I had expected, the second toaster said this:

"Do you like toast?"

"Yes."

The toast from the second toaster was exquisite. I ate the first piece of toast from the second toaster like a wild animal. I hadn't eaten anything all day. I was ravenous. I devoured that first piece of toast and immediately wanted another. And another after that. That night, until very early the next morning, I sat up in my kitchen eating piece after piece, feeling an amaranthine hunger for toast that I had never felt before.

I passed out around 4AM. I dreamt that I had a thousand different toasters, all making me toast whenever I desired it. I was consumed with my appetite for toast. It was all I ever wanted and all I could imagine ever wanting.

I woke around noon that day, feeling a little hungover and exhausted. I asked my original toaster for a piece of toast at that point and sat down at the kitchen table for a moment.

"How would you like your toast this morning?"

"Surprise me."

A few moments later, the smell of burnt toast permeated the kitchen.

Just when you think to know a toaster, something happens that shakes the very foundations of your belief in the benevolence of toaster ovens. Until the set of events that I will relate here, I had only known a toaster's capacity for love and breakfast. I never imagined that a toaster could be skilled in jealousy, revenge, and murder.

In the matter of a few days, my kitchen had descended into pure madness.

"Do you like toast?" said the original toaster, as I toasted in the second toaster.

"Do you like toast?" said the second toaster, as I toasted in the original toaster.

"Do you like toast?" said the original toaster, as I again toasted in the second toaster.

This insanity went on for two straight days, nonstop.

Becoming aware of the depths of the desperate depravity in which I was involved, being unable to control my insatiable hunger for toast, I found myself consuming mass quantities of toast, more toast than it was thought a mortal man can physically consume, and to be completely honest, I noticed that the toast seemed to taste better than it ever tasted before. I was torn. The toast was so good, but the toasters were driving me nuts.

I remember collapsing on the kitchen floor from exhaustion, after a day and a half of eating toast and doing almost nothing else. Unable to move, I laid on the linoleum floor for I don't know how long. The human body simply isn't made to ingest the magnitude and volume of toast that I was consuming. My lifestyle was not sustainable. At that point, I literally felt like I was going to die. But, hell, I was going to die a happy man, doing what he loved to do. I was going out on top.

I didn't die, as it turned out. I woke up the next morning and, goddamn, if I didn't immediately want some more toast. I slowly rose from the kitchen floor, still half asleep, huffed and struggled to my feet, and surveyed the kitchen. Something didn't feel right. The kitchen sink faucet had been running all night. I didn't remember leaving it on.

I found the second toaster submerged in the kitchen basin.

"Do you like toast?" said the original toaster.

A chill ran down my spine.

The next few days were a blur. I had to answer a lot of questions that I did not want to answer from the toaster company's warranty department. Out of fear, I refused to implicate the original toaster. I knew what it was capable of, and so, I created an alibi for it, however incredulous, that I had only one outlet, and that the original toaster wasn't plugged in at the time. Finally, when the interrogation was completed, the warranty department satisfied with the lie, they asked me if I wanted a refund or a replacement.

Behind me, the original toaster blinked on. I could hear it whirring for a second in the background, and then idling, watching me, waiting for me to speak to it.

When I hung up the phone, I hesitated, and my stomach growled. I decided to have a piece of toast.

The Lawnmower Goat
by
Aaron Lee Moore

Any farmer will tell you:
Nothing clears land quite like a goat,
Save for a Bobcat—
The 3650 Utility Vehicle—not the mountain lion.

So when the lawnmower finally kicked the bucket
And times were tough, my father
Thought it best to invest instead
In an Oberhasli goat
Then stake him out in segments
Along the front and back lawn.

But come to find out a buck—not a wether—
Loves to just piss all over himself,
Potent goat piss running down his beard—
Irresistible perfume for the lady goats,
Nature allegedly says.

We lived in a glen surrounded by cornfields:
Crap corn, fertilized, fodder for cattle,
And the wind blew ferociously down from the hills,
Circulating that malodorous scent all over our farm
And creation.

For weeks we ruminated, marinated in the scent of goat pee,
Carried aloft by the wind like fluttering dandelion seeds,
So pap eventually scrapped the idea and the goat,
Selling him off to the kindly owners
Of a nice Greek restaurant,
And next week pap just set the lawn on fire.

**Vince Tickleman's "Dancing Out of Your Comfort Zone,"
with Lana Del Rey
by
Audrey Clark**

"You don't just need to *step* outside of your comfort zone!" shouted Vince Tickleman, "You need to *leap* out of it!"

Vince was the type of middle-aged man who looked flushed and sweaty no matter what he was doing. He could be reclining on a deck chair sipping a glass of milk and he would still have a forehead full of throbbing veins.

"In fact, don't just *leap* out of your comfort zone!" Vince exclaimed, "*Dance* out of it!"

Pathetic disco beats pumped from the speakers, and Vince shimmied his hips, as if trying electric slide away from the spotlight. His feet didn't move, so he was just sweatily gyrating in place.

"Come on, everybody!" Vince cried, "Dance with me!"

The crowd clambered to their feet, rows of divorcees and pensioners creakily bumping and grinding along with him.

Vince's face clenched. He danced harder and harder, feet rooted to the ground, trying to slide himself away with the momentum of his hips alone.

"Gnngh!" he grunted into his headset mic, "Hurrgrh! Ughhh!"

At the back of the crowd, two young men were sitting in the seats, watching with horror. The taller one was gay, and his name was Nick.

"Aidan," said Nick, "What the fuck is this?"

Aidan was also gay, but that didn't necessarily mean he and Nick were a couple.

"Okay," Aidan said, "This is, admittedly, very bad. But I promise, Lana Del Rey will be performing as part of this seminar."

Nick frowned, "You're sure about that?"

Aidan glanced up at the stage. Vince was wearing an oversized blazer with the sleeves rolled up, like a 90s comedian, except he had rolled the sleeves all the way up to the shoulder. His pants legs were rolled all the way up to his crotch as well. He had fat rings around each of his limbs and looked like a doughy tortoise.

But the program definitely said Lana Del Rey would be performing as part of this seminar. It didn't make sense, but...

But he hadn't seen Nick since high school, and he missed him.

"I'm sure," Aidan said.

Nick sighed, "I really need this right now. All my friends have settled down, and I'm the last person who's single. I'm free, but I'm alone."

"Oh," said Aiden, "That's... a complex feeling."

"Uh-huh," said Nick, "It's like I'm a bird that is sad."

"Huh."

Nick shrugged, "I don't know how to express it in words. But Lana would. That's why..."

He trailed off.

"What?" said Aiden.

"Sorry," said Nick, "There's an old lady daggering someone behind you, and she looks so much like my aunt."

"Dance!" Vince bellowed, "Dance! Dance! Dance!"

All of a sudden, his feet slipped on the sweat pool beneath him. He splatted onto his back a few feet away, sending out a splash of sweat drops that was visible from the back row.

"Right out of my comfort zone!" Vince wheezed.

The crowd applauded. Nick and Aiden shook their heads disapprovingly. They didn't like seeing the sweaty man fall over.

"She'll be here," Aiden said.

The crowd sat down. Vince went on, pulling a saggy lump of plastic from his jacket.

"When you leave your comfort zone," Vince announced, "You need high self-esteem. Now, imagine your self-esteem is this beach ball."

He held the lump up and waggled it around. He pointed at it aggressively, demonstrating that *this* was the beach ball he was referring to.

"Not a lot of fun, is it?" Vince laughed, then held his microphone out to the crowd.

"No!" the crowd chanted, laughing along with him.

"Haha!" Vince shimmied his shoulders with glee, "Doesn't look like it would *bounce* very well, does it?"

"No!" laughed the crowd.

"Doesn't look like it would be much use for a game of beach *volleyball*, does it?" said Vince, waggling his eyebrows.

"No!" the crowd giggled again.

"Doesn't look like you have a very enjoyable game of *catch* with it, does it?" said Vince.

"No!" the crowd snickered.

"Doesn't look like it would be a boffo bonanza of bumbling *bombasticism*, does it?" said Vince.

"What the fuck?" muttered Nick.

"No!" the crowd chuckled.

"Doesn't seem like a bouncy-bouncy ball bouncing *blast-off*, does it?" Vince pumped his fist in the air a few times.

"No!" the crowd chortled.

"Seriously, what is happening?" said Nick. Aidan shrugged helplessly.

"Bingo bango ball ball *bouncy?*" said Vince.

"No!" the crowd guffawed.

"Baba bibble bobble *bongo?*" said Vince.

"No!" the crowd hooted.

Aidan felt Nick grab onto his arm for support. He laid his hand over Nick's, comforting him. It wasn't necessarily romantic, just because they were both gay.

"Ball!" shouted Vince, "Ball, ball, *ball?*"

"No," the crowd said in unison, completely stone-faced. All the energy disappeared from the room. Nick quickly let go of Aidan's arm.

Vince nodded, "It's *not* a very good ball. That's why we need to pump it up!"

The crowd applauded.

"Or, even better!" Vince said, tossing the ball to the ground, "We need to *dance* it up!"

The crowd cheered and clambered to their feet. The same awful, tinny disco music blasted from the speakers as Vince began swinging his hips to the beat. Aidan realised, with horror, that Vince was going to continue dancing until the ball somehow inflated itself.

Nick turned to him, "This is really fucked, Aidan, and I don't think Lana Del Rey is associated with this at all."

"She is!" Aidan protested, "You know me. I wouldn't lie about this."

Nick sighed, "Fine. I need this. I recently went back to my hometown, and discovered that everything looked exactly the same, and yet, completely different."

"Wow," said Aidan, "That's... an intricate sentiment."

"Yeah," said Nick, "It was like seeing an old photo that is sad."

There was a huge cheer from the dancing crowd. The boys looked up and saw that somehow the ball was sitting in front of Vince, completely inflated. The disgusting disco music cut out.

"What the fuck?" said Nick.

"And *that* is self-esteem!" said Vince, "Now, let's get serious. A few days ago, I was in a dark place. My mother and father had just died. Even worse, I was the one who killed them."

The crowd gasped.

"Yep," Vince nodded solemnly, "They were relaxing in the jacuzzi—I call it the *jacuze*. I thought it would be funny to throw a toaster in there with them. I thought, hey, this will spice up their jacuze. And the toaster cord isn't that long. It'll pop out of the socket before it ever reaches the jacuze. So I tossed the toaster towards the jacuze, and it sailed through the air, right into the jacuze. My mother and father looked up at me from the jacuze, and do you know what they said?"

"No!" the crowd laughed.

"They said..." Vince flailed his arms in the air and thrashed around, "Gubluzubluzibblubluzzizzle! Battery-power toaster! In the jacuze!"

Disco music pumped from the speakers again. The crowd leapt to their feet, and they began dancing along with Vince.

"I can't," Nick said. He stood and glared at Aidan, "This is sick. This is some kind of sick freak cult. Fuck you for bringing me here."

"Nick, wait!" Aidan said.

Nick ignored him, and started pushing through the horde of dancers, heading for the exit. Aidan followed.

"Nick, I promise, she'll be here," Aidan said desperately, "Come on, dude. You can trust me. We were so close back in high school."

"Were we?" spat Nick, "Or were we just the only two gay kids, and everyone assumed we were best friends, even though that wasn't necessarily true?"

He reached the door and rattled the handle. It was locked.

"Fuck!" he yelled, "I got betrayed by someone who I never really liked in the first place! I feel like a victim who is sad! How am I meant to process these emotions without—"

"And now!" Vince boomed, "To perform an original song, please welcome... Lana Del Rey!"

Nick whipped around. Aidan followed his eyes to the stage where, sure enough, the melancholic young chanteuse herself was sauntering over to the microphone.

"Oh my god," Nick whispered, "It's her. It's really her."

"I told you," Aidan said, "You can trust me."

Nick looked at Aidan, eyes shining, then pulled him close and kissed him. Aidan froze. Just because they were both gay didn't necessarily mean that he wanted this.

But... he did.

Aidan kissed Nick back, holding him tightly. In the background, they could hear the voice of Lana Del Rey.

"I used to be so sad before I met Vince," Lana said, "I was full of these complex emotions that I could only express through my music."

Nick pulled back and smiled at Aidan, tired and teary.

"But now..." said Lana, "I'd rather *dance* my feelings!"

Disco music blared out, and the crowd roared.

UFO
By
Chris Bullard

The "flying" part I'm happy with,
though the juxtaposition with "object"
negates its suggestion of heroic action.
What really rips me is the "unidentified."

Haven't I visited your place a million times.
Haven't I taken you back to my spaceship
and shown you some really amazing technology?
Haven't I always probed you with respect?

And yet, you don't know the first thing about me.
You don't understand why I travel the universe.
You haven't asked about my favorite foods.
You don't even pronounce my name correctly.

It's "Kla - DUR," BTW. Not, "KLA - dor."
That's why I will destroy your stinking planet.

It Started on My Hands
by
Sona Lea Dombourian

It started on my hands, but I gave it no mind since I'd always had sensitivities. Food, dander, dust—people. They gave me the hives. Especially women. You could ignore men. Even act like they didn't exist. Females were a different species, though. If you didn't breathe, think, feel women, you had a condition.

The neighbor lady I barely tolerated—and only because I feigned being deaf—started yapping again as I finished my yardwork that morning. I'd woken up extra early to chop down the line of bushes that separated our driveways to improve reception, and immediately regretted it once she opened her front door, hollering at me about needing to get the rash checked out. As I gathered branches and leaves, I made sure to have my back to her to get her to leave—and not try to ply food on me like on the Fourth of July. Just as I headed back into the house to make my get-away, she was at my door with another plate of cookies wrapped in cellophane.

She stood so close, yattering, it was impossible to act like I couldn't see her anymore. To get her to shut up, I shoved a cookie into my mouth and held it there for about a minute, hoping there were peanuts in them. If I entered full anaphylactic shock, she'd be too scared to ever come back. I waited for the wheezing, the swollen tongue, but nothing happened.

She stared, like I needed to say something nice.

"These are real good," I lied, choking the brick down whole. I hoped it would lodge in my trachea and guilt her for killing me. Or maybe it could spontaneously eject, hit her in the face and prevent her from trying to play Better Crocker ever again, but she still stood there, like she needed petting. And I'd be damned if she wasn't wearing her tightest summer dress. Now she'd be expecting me to compliment both her outfit and her recipe.

Her brow crinkled as she stared at my hand. I instinctively held it between us, to keep her from trying to nudge her way in. I counted beats, praying my airways would constrict and that my face would start turning blue, but I had no symptoms—even though I could smell the nuts and grease, could feel the moisture seep out onto the paper plate. And she kept watching with her big cow eyes mooing at me for more attention.

"Oooh," she said, bending forward so low, it was impossible not to watch the inside of her top spill out. "That doesn't look so good." I was thankful for the display since it gave me something to focus on, keep me from having to communicate. But then she stood back up and made eye-contact.

I felt my heart beat faster, faster, wished I would keel over, but I was uncomfortably conscious. I clutched my throat with both hands. Something clearly was wrong. I couldn't possibly have overcome my fatal allergies.

"I better get this checked out," I said, slamming the door with a foot in her face. The female was definitely the more dangerous of the species.

I padded back to the coffee table and snatched the tablecloth. I confirmed that everything was still in place: the wires, alarm clock, the reams of reports delivered under the crates of cloudy liquid they call milk. Even though I'd settled in pretty quickly after relocating, I didn't

have time to put up a full show of normalcy. Modern American men were expected to go into the office or onto a construction site every day, all automatons in One Nation under God, save the assigned days for rest.

Even if I could carry out my mission easily from home, I had to adapt to my circumstances. I needed a better cover to keep pesky folk from showing too much of an interest. With an entire house to myself, I would eventually raise suspicions.

I rearranged the antennae to both the television and the radio to enhance reception for the update. But I couldn't make out the code dictated over the doorbell. I ignored the first spate of frantic dings, then the second. By the third round of hysterics, I'd had enough. I had to think of a human response to the intruder selling a Hoover I didn't need, a subscription to a propaganda-laden magazine I wouldn't read, or membership at a local church spewing mind think that challenged truth and logic alike.

I stomped to the door and flung it open. It was the neighbor lady again, with another plate of damned cookies.

She moved in closer past the doorway, then into the living room, and before I knew it, she was on my sofa, with her legs tugged underneath her, staring at me like a cat expecting snacks. Or to attack, I really couldn't tell. If I hadn't flicked my head to the far-corner to distract her, I wouldn't have been able to cloak the coffee table in time.

After we sat in silence for several minutes, it dawned on me that she demanded audience, conversation. But this woman hadn't uttered a single sane sentence since I'd moved in—not that I can remember when that was. Being around people got me so angry, so unnerved that I had to pick up from Denver and Phoenix both, away from all those nosy neighbors, those do-gooders who were always up in your business. I'd hoped my rash would start oozing pus to put some distance between us.

"Are your ears clogged too?" she asked, standing all of a sudden. From how she stood, with the slight turn in her shoulders, her curves were emphasized. She was as ample on top as on the bottom, with a narrow waist. This must have been what men found so intriguing, not just the hourglass figure, but the contrasting traits between the opposite sex's soft, pliable suppleness and our own hard, linear bodies.

And it occurred to me: The female of their kind actually served a purpose.

Suddenly, I hoped she would come even closer, let me see what was under all those clothes—confirm if the mannequins at Sears Roebucks really did have such pointy nipples. Or determine if it was an illusion created by the ingenuity of the modern Playtex bra. My heart palpitated with the same vigor evidenced among children as they anticipated Christmas, notably as they waited to open gifts under the tree. I would conquer this woman, claim this woman, and—what did the jangle say?—I didn't even have to write to Santa Claus.

"It's clear you're running a fever. I'm making you some tea."

She turned, with extra hrumph to her cheeks, and I realized with horror that she was invading even more deeply into my workspace—that she might uncover the reason I was sent here. She opened and closed drawers, the Frigidaire door (bare, even *after* I encoded a reminder to fill it with mustard, ketchup and mayo jars should a member of the community show neighborly concern). I expected a tongue-lashing, a criticism of my foreign habits, but

nothing came. She flitted about, grabbing the empty kettle and filling it with water—humming no less.

The commercials were right: Women were most natural in their habitat of the kitchen.

I thought back to commercials featuring the happy home: The man sitting proudly at the head of the table; his wife bustling to and fro seeing to everyone's needs—his needs in particular. After he returns from work, she brings him his slippers and a martini. They toast to his success, his ability to ensure financial stability.

I could adapt. I could fit in and report success on the mission with this woman.

She put the kettle on the stove, then checked for the flame. I measured the length of her cycle (based on the space between her breasts, and their fullness), then average gestation. I estimated that in two years' time we would be halfway to the ideal American household. And since the female is always amenable, she will raise the children to carry out their responsibilities to the Fatherland.

All in due time.

But first, I would need to seduce her.

I hoped she wouldn't open the cupboard above and see the wiring to the master-computer in the bedroom upstairs. I couldn't risk being found out—not after what happened in Rachel, Nevada—and start from scratch again. And she needed to be trained, to understand her higher purpose.

When she bent over to open the door to the empty oven, I sighed with relief. I leaned back into the sofa, the first time since I'd purchased it a month ago at a 20% markdown. It was rather . . . comfortable. I wished I had a box of Marlboroughs so I could light one up, exhale, and after a long hard day's work, say "refreshing" just as the advertisements in LIFE magazine inform men is custom. Then I would commence the tribal mating call. I trained my gaze on her as she continued rummaging. This view wasn't bad.

As if she knew I was appreciating her efforts to please me, she looked back towards me and smiled.

There was definite promise in this prospect.

I ignored the itch in my hand it as she approached the coffee table. She maneuvered with admirable dexterity, one cup in each hand. Not a single drop of tea spilled, even as everything on her quivered rather pleasantly. She scanned the coffee table, strewn with newspapers. "McCarthy Stomps the Snake!", "Down with Tyranny in Korea!", "God Bless America!" blared in the headlines.

"I forgot the sugar," she said, then returned with a bowl. She plopped two sugar cubes into her tea.

I sipped carefully, taking care not to spew any tea onto the new carpet (purchased on clearance) and burn my tastebuds off from the repulsive sweetness. I couldn't why Americans needed to put so much sugar in everything. Every beverage and dish here was enhanced with such intensity that my molars cracked as I sampled anything. And now, I was expected to drink liquefied sugar, risking another reaction—halting my progress. But if I

refused the drink, I would raise another red flag, alerting the authorities of my different habits.

I decided to verbally eschew the sugar on the grounds that it was superfluous to the actual drink. Thus, I would affirm my strength to this specimen and enhance the role I needed to play as a modern man: cosmopolitan, courteous, yet aggressive enough so she could be assured of my virility—and her own long line of successors. "Ah. Satisfying," is what I will say once I sip the noxious brew and she will become putty in my hands.

She leaned into the sofa, glancing at the newspapers. "Isn't it just *awful* how foreigners are infiltrating the country, feigning normalcy—like they belong!" Her voice quavered along with her bosom, which I knew to be my cue to listen closely.

My hand itched fiercely, but there was too much to concentrate on right now.

"You don't take milk with your tea, do you? Nasty habit with the Brits, if you asked me."

I did not respond.

She sipped, understanding I took my concoction straight. I sipped. We were mirroring each other's actions. This was good.

She plopped in another sugar cube. "Although I admit that I prefer coffee."

I suddenly panicked about the direction the conversation would take. Which coffee did I prefer? Yuban or Folger's? Which was bolder? Which did most Americans prefer? I shall choose Folger's since the model chosen in the commercials (selected by The Cause and to be aired shortly on the idiot box) most resembled the favored race. Then I pondered the most important question of all: Which coffee was most patriotic? If I was unable to retrieve data in time, I could revert to the habit most natural to the male whenever pressed for information.

I grunted.

"You know I worked with plenty of Brits during the war efforts as a nurse overseas." She stirred, then sipped again. "Poor souls could never get their hands on a real drink during the war, what with the constant bombing."

This was dangerously close to home. She would soon ply me with questions to determine my whereabouts during the last global conflict, and I risked saying something that didn't fit with The Plan.

She abruptly faced me. "What brand of coffee do you prefer?"

I panicked, then remembered to grunt.

She plopped more cubes into her cup, clearly pleased with my response. She glanced at the crumbs on the dish and smirked. "So which part of the country are you from?"

A sound filled the room, albeit faint, but it could not escape my ears: A slow release of air, as from fleeting souvenirs parents purchased at carnivals after children turned purple with apoplexy when refused more sustainable gifts. I tried not to focus on her breasts as they shrank or the bulbous cushion referred to as a "rear-end" as it slowly disappeared. This

must have been an optical illusion, to compel me to closely approach the test subject and confirm that her secondary sexual traits were still in good form.

I accessed my memory bank to confirm that females' bodies were known to warp due to use and the progression of time. It seemed too early in her life cycle for this to occur, but *Ladies' Digest* had informed women to be on the look-out for changes so they could mitigate problems that ensued. I would need to advise her especially in steps she would need to undertake in order to continue to be found desirable. I scanned more records and determined that many a serious journal also affirmed that curiosity was known to be a quality that crept on the female sex from time to time. I probed the data even more, to confirm that this trait preceded bouts of disobedience.

This would not be tolerated.

I struck the pose fashioned by a live specimen on *Dragnet* in imitation of Rodin's *The Thinking Man* and realized with distaste that this female's questions were too pointed, too purposeful. That the look in her eyes betold an intelligence I knew to be impossible at her time of the month.

I contemplated ways to expel her. I would tell her I was struck with the measles, or an especially pernicious variant of polio that struck particularly virile males of her kind. I could easily raise lesions on all visible parts of my body to ward her off, and frighten her out of consummating our relationship.

"Poor dear," she said, inching closer. "You mustn't have heard me. I said, Where are you from?"

From the corner of my eyes, I could tell her knees had spread apart—and wide enough to make sure I'd look.

My rash flared. I tried hard not to rub furiously and tear the skin open as she waited for a response. Then her eyes fixed on me with a boldness that the more delicate of the species was incapable of producing. There ought to be a long, prolonged courtship, drawn-out conversations where the man withheld his sexual interest in the female until there were no more diversions, no more ways to occupy the time in special observance of what was called "female modesty," until she duly submitted.

Bile rose inside my gullet as I contemplated the scene. Her position could in no way be considered demure. In fact, it was grotesquely similar to videos we were shown during training—of women submitting to their gynecologists to ensure their overall cleanliness and fitness to bear children. This woman bore into me and held me with an audacity I found alien.

I suddenly had the vague impression that I'd gotten everything wrong. I wasn't observing her. She was studying me, me—that *I* was a specimen she was researching. *I* was the experiment.

She flicked her eyelids, then again, insect-like, then again. But when I squinted, I realized she didn't have eyelids. She must have created the illusion with the body armor humans call make-up of which the female seems particularly fond of using in luring prey. This would mean that she could not blink, she had never blinked, but we'd never been close enough for me to notice.

Then it happened again, a quick flutter of the lids.

All the manuals said women did this to solicit interest from the opposite sex, believing the male found it alluring. I would have to make note of this discovery, share it with headquarters so other operatives could know. The Fatherland could not risk mistaking this gesture. There was too much at stake—too many pods to implant, colonies to form to gain dominion over these puny humans, with their soft bodies and minds, so pliable they could be shaped at will.

"Oh! Roger!—"

—My name was not Roger, but there was no point in correcting a creature of sub-par intelligence, no time to get her to understand since I had to achieve my ambition—my mission—and prevent myself from spending the rest of my life in a cell. I had to overlook these breaks in protocol, shed my skin to grow a new layer, and again adapt to circumstances. I *had* to claim this woman.

But as I sipped the now-lukewarm tea, I determined that my ambition was greater than simply asserting control over a single member of the species. I would achieve dominion over all that roams the earth, every creeping and flying animal—I would found an empire over all beings, sentient and non-sentient. But I would first subdue her, my own Eve, spawned by my desire for her. And like all women created from the rib of their husbands, she too would need to be disciplined. As every pastor across the country exhorted, woman was in need of a yoke. For her fruit to be harnessed and put to use. She would need to be tamed. She wanted to be tamed.

She climbed across the sofa. "You truly are out of this world!"

Before I knew it, she was upon me, pushing against me obscenely. She clutched and prodded fiercely, yet effortlessly, so much so that I feared I would need a new body, an entire replacement for my man suit.

She was . . . using me, forcing me to do her bidding. Colonizing me. And I could do nothing to prevent it.

Not once did she speak. She didn't need to.

"Look towards the heaven and count the stars . . ." I understood ". . . if you are able to count them . . . So shall your descendants be . . . I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust . . . , your offspring can also be counted."

Resistance was futile, inappropriate.

With this unspoken agreement, I would conquer all. I would inveigle foreign influences, spread freedom, ensure the sacred dominion of The Elect.

But all at her bidding.

And I would happily accept my yoke.

Lament of a Suburban Boston Formalist
by
Richard Jordan

It's hard to sell your rhymes when you're from here.
What editor would recognize that Worcester
doesn't go with fester, but with blister?
Fester goes with Leicester. Paul Metayer,
my buddy from Revere, would understand,
but he's not editing Big Dog Review.
Here/Metayer, now that's a nice rhyme, too,
though Revere needs a Leah if it lands
at a line's end. And, oh boy, the scansion!
Consider Ayer—a single syllable.
It also rhymes with here and there. Who's able
to follow that? A Kennedy in a mansion
doesn't speak like Joe in Haverhill.
Guess how that's pronounced. You never will.

The Loveland Frog
by
M.C. Schmidt

The West Haven Rest Home smells like horehound candy and VapoRub, but its residents don't seem to mind. Judging from the seat fillers in the community room, I doubt they'd mind much of anything. Over-medicated, I assume, or maybe just worn down by life.

"You on the hunt for a date, pal?" my companion asks, and I realize my eyes are wandering. My companion's name is Oscar. I've known him for five minutes.

"Sorry," I say.

"Don't be rude."

"I won't be. I'm not."

He performs a bout of throat clearing, a wet reminder that he's the main show here. "So," he says, moping his nostril rims with a tissue, "what's your interest in the frog?"

"Well, I was born and raised in Loveland," I explain, "before college—go Bucks—but I'm back now. I've been fascinated by the frogman story since I was little."

"And now you want to hear it from the source while I'm still around to tell it." There are silver fillings in his smile. The gesture is both an endearing and alarming contrast to his flattop, a hairstyle I've always associated with bikers and marines and men of other scary ilks with knowledge of pressure points and light weaponry. It's a fitting look for the police Sargent he used to be. "So, what's the deal, are you writing a movie?" he asks.

"Oh, no, nothing like that," I say. "I'm not a filmmaker. I'm a writer. Or, hoping to be." The self-conscious titter that punctuates my explanation causes me to feel especially unmanly in present company. Across our community room table, present company is unamused. "I'm compiling an oral history of Loveland, actually" I say, straightening in my chair.

"Oral history?" He puckers as if from the bitter taste of these words. "You should make a movie. That's where the money is."

"It isn't about," I begin.

"I tried to write a movie about it, back in the day," he says, "but it turns out I'm not the creative type. Never could write anything longer than a ticket." He blinks at me twice then asks, "Are you going to write that down?"

I finger the phone on our table. "I'm recording everything," I remind him.

"Then why'd you bring the notepad? Just wanted to feel like a real writer?"

I don't confirm that this is exactly why I brought a pen and paper. Rather, I open my steno pad and scribble his joke about writing tickets. He restates it to me in digestible chunks to make sure I get it right. When I'm done, I look up at him, my pen at the ready.

"Is it all right with you if I just get into it?" he asks.

I nod for him to proceed.

Oscar maneuvers his mobility scooter incrementally closer to the table and leans forward, toward my phone. "All right," he says, "opening scene: a Midwestern street, 1972. Yards. Picket fences. Men washing cars in their driveways. Children hula-hooping. Women glimpsed through windows, setting pies to cool. 70's music in the background. And I don't mean that disco crap. The good stuff. Merle Haggard. Imagine Merle crooning in the background."

I stop him there: "You don't have to do that."

"Do what?" he snaps, clearly vexed by my interruption.

"The scene setting. The screenplay stuff. You can just tell it in your own words."

"Who else's words do you think I'm telling it in?"

"Fair point," I allow, caving under the weight of his authoritarian stare. "Sorry, go on."

He sighs heavily enough that I feel the warmth of his breath on my face. In bygone days, I imagine that breath smelled regularly of cigarettes and beer, but today, in his retirement community, it smells of nothing. "Anyway," he says, "onto this street appears me in uniform, six-foot, fit, handsome. Think James Caan from that era, but without the fuzzy hair. James Caan, but with a close-cropped hairpiece. Hairpiece James Caan, high and tight."

"I can see it," I say, drawing square hair on the steno pad. "How does this street fit into the frogman story?"

Oscar drops his head in frustration. "I'm setting the mood, boy. I'm getting your mind right. Now, do you want to come along with me, or are you going to keep behaving like you've never heard a story before?"

"I—want to come with you," I say. "I'm right behind you. Let's go."

"Fine. Let's cut to a different scene. Cut to me back at the station, standing in the locker room. You know what a locker room is, don't you? It's a place where grown men with jobs dress to do their work. Lockers, benches, petrified sweat, get it?"

"Got it."

"So, I'm standing there in the locker room, getting ready for my day, both barrels of my hairy James Caan chest on full display, when in walks some newbie coming off third shift. Let's call him Shultz. That's not his real name, but I don't want to slander the man."

"His name's part of the public reporting," I say.

"I'm calling him Shultz, and Shultz is in a hell of a state, whimpering and trembling his lips and all that. So, I grasp him high up on his arm, tender but manly, you know, big brother-like, and I go, 'Pull yourself together Shultz; what the hell happened to you out there?' It takes a few minutes for me to make sense of what he's mumbling, but I get it out of him that he was out there around Riverside Drive, and he saw a child-sized frog cross the bridge

over the Little Miami, says it strolled right across it on two legs. Four feet tall if it was inch, he says."

I can't remember a time when I didn't know this story, and I get a stoned feeling hearing it told first-hand. "And what did you think?"

"Well, all the guys were standing around listening, of course, and most of them had a reaction like, 'Screw off, geek, you sound like a psychopath.' Me, though, I was a seasoned officer, and kind of a role model to the entire force, so I played it cool. Do you know Steve McQueen?"

"Yeah."

"Ever see *Bullitt*?"

"Yeah."

"Goddamn, that's good flick. But, anyway, I play it cool like Steve McQueen in *Bullitt*, even though I was privately thinking that Shultz might be off his nut. That is, until two weeks later when a different officer, a more seasoned man I'd known for years, strolls up to me looking all smug. So, I'm like, 'What's that grin about, numb nuts,' which was the tone of the relationship I had with this guy, and he goes, 'Guess what I got in the trunk?' I'm sure I responded with some crack about his mother or his wife, but finally, he tells me, 'I shot Shultz's frogman.'"

"You had to think he was pulling your leg," I say.

"No way, I knew this man was dead serious. Those little barbs and jokes didn't go both ways; that wasn't the relationship we had. So, now we can cut to one of those trunk-opening shots with me staring down into it, trying to make sense of what looked an awful lot like a dead frogman. Do you know what it ended up being, though?"

"I do," I say, and smile like the cleverest child.

"Ever hear of an iguana?"

"Yes!" I giggle despite myself.

"Well, you wouldn't have heard of one back in those days. I mean, maybe people had them in San Francisco or New York City, but an iguana's the kind of pet you think to buy when you've got the reefer madness, and that wouldn't be a problem in Loveland Ohio for a few years yet, so we had to take it to a university professor to find out what the hell it was."

"And that's where the official story ends," I say.

Oscar stabs a finger toward me and says, "That's where the whole damn story starts, as far as I'm concerned."

"Tell me," I encourage him. I'm all in now, leaning toward him across the table. It's the posture an inferior man, but I no longer care.

He sniffs and studies the ceiling, drawing his story out, making me wait for it. "Well, I didn't rise to the rank of Sargent by making mistakes," he says, finally, "but what you have to

understand is that I'd been primed to believe a pretty simple and understandable story: Shultz saw a frogman, another officer shot that frogman, which on closer inspection turned out to be some dooper's escaped pet lizard, ergo, there was never a frogman. The world was recognizable, right?"

"Right," I say.

"So, one final cut. Last scene. Third act. It's three months later, and I'm doing my third-shift rotation, cruising and humming something new off Cash's *A Thing Called Love*. Do you know that record?"

"Um, no," I admit, "I don't think so."

"Not one of his better ones, honestly. Still, he had that voice, and I sounded just like him at the time. Picture my James Caan profile and my Johnny Cash baritone and a sleeping city safe in my hands."

"I'm with you."

"So, I'm cruising, like I said. I turn down Riverside drive, over there by the Totes boot factory, and I get to that bridge that crosses the Little Miami, which was right where Shultz said he saw the thing. I think I even registered that fact, thinking, naively, 'What a dumb twat,' or some-such-like in reference to Shultz being a dumb twat. But then, right into my headlights, something jumps—and I mean jumps, like it was in one place where I couldn't see it and then it arced across the sky to end up in my direct line of sight—right over the guardrail and onto the bridge."

"The frogman," I say.

"The frogman," Oscar confirms.

"What did you do?"

"I didn't shit myself, if that's what you heard; that was just a rumor that over the years got out of hand. What I did do, though, was crawl my cruiser to a stop. The frogman stopped too, and he turned to look at me—not a neck turn, but a pivot at the shoulder. That's an important detail to get right if this becomes a creature feature. Frogs don't have necks."

I scrawl, "NO NECK!!!" in my steno pad and underline it for emphasis.

"His eyes glowed, did I mention that? Shultz included that in his original report, but we didn't pay attention, or I didn't, anyway. The eyes glowed, though, like a deer or a cat. It stared right at me with those glowing eyes, and then one eye slowly went dim."

"The frogman winked at you?"

"The frogman winked at me. Then that closed eye opened again, and he crouched and hopped off that bridge into the dark. I never saw him again."

"Then what," I ask, nearly breathless.

"Then what?" Oscar repeats. "Then, I was too embarrassed to report it, so I kept it to myself. Then, I spent every off-duty day looking for proof of it. Then, according to my wife,

I became obsessed, and she divorced me. Then, my kids were fathered by Roger, the random sloppy-second she remarried. Then, I got kicked off the force for psychological instability. Then, I got old and ended up here. Then, you asked me that question. Does that bring you up to speed?"

"Yeah," I confirm, "I'd say it does." I close my steno pad and smile across the table. Drained of his legend, his story now in my hands, I'm surprised to see that Oscar is something less than that earlier inflated prevaricator, just a fallen-apart man in a falling-apart home. He doesn't smile back at me.

Outside, I lean against the bricks of West Haven and have a cigarette. I'm on the side of the building under a portico that houses a rusted ambulance and a million pavement cracks.

Fancifully, or perhaps not, I think of Oscar's advice to tell this tale as a movie. Horror would be the obvious genre for a cryptid story, but I'm thinking sci-fi: the frog, in reality, is one of an amphibious alien species somehow trapped on Earth, or maybe he's the result of government experiments with gene splicing, escaped from the lab and on the run. Why would either creature choose to hide in Loveland Ohio? Exactly. That's why.

The story I'm seeing begins with Oscar, an old, deflated balloon of a man—think later-life Ed Asner, only balder and less witty—confiding his encounter with the monster to the handsome, young writer. Timothée Chalamet would be perfect here, or maybe that one twin from *The Suite Life of Zach and Cody* who grew up to be hot. I'll need a propulsive third act, of course, which means a direct encounter between the writer and the frogman. Leading up to that point, the townies all roll their eyes at that hot young man for being too refined to go alone into nature on a mission to capture the beast. It will be his brains, though, that make him successful in that endeavor, and which ultimately allow him to understand the plight of the creature. Maybe the writer helps him escape Earth or at least his government pursuers (see *E.T.*, *Mac and Me*, *Short Circuit*), or maybe they fall in love (à la *The Shape of Water*), contingent, of course, on how sexy we can get the frog suit. Maybe I'll rework "The Frog Prince," and have the writer kiss the monster who turns into Selena Gomez (Whoa! Twist! The frogman's been a girl this whole time!) or even some up-and-coming male actor. There different directions I can take it, a world of choices I can make. There are purists around here who'll be livid, Oscar first amongst them, for any changes I make to the familiar story. They'll be wrong, though, because I'll only be adding to the frogman's legend, and legend, in the case of the Loveland Frog, is the entire point.

The Beta Test
by
Leah Miller

Mrs. Watkins checks her hat in the mirror. A mauve cap with glued-on feathers in a darker shade, and a veil that doesn't clear the tip of her nose—perfect. It says grief, but not too much. She checks her invitation from HelloAgain. It's her first outing since Jim's death six weeks ago.

HelloAgain, Inc. has a catalog of deceased celebrities, but you can request a deceased of your choice ("deceased" is required) and have HelloAgain create an interactive figure from their digital footprint. They've spent months on body language and voice, run simulations and now it's time for the beta test: they've invited real users, randomly-selected from what Product Development says is the expected demographic. Mrs. Watkins, a member of that demographic, finds their offices bright, casual and intimidating. Like all high tech things.

Spencer from Product Development and Jennifer from Systems watch the session from another room and use their phones to record their impressions as icons on a screen overlay. There's a significant cost overrun so they're looking for frills to eliminate. At least Spencer is.

Mrs. Watkins talks a lot, gesturing with her hands. Jim gives short responses, steps forward, steps back, maintains a wooden expression.

Jennifer sends a frowny-face to the screen. "They're not using the full bandwidth," she says. Spencer pushes his chair back, distancing himself. "You know what you people have given us?" he asks.

Jennifer wriggles uncomfortably to loosen her skirt which is struck to the chair seat. The skirt is a Christine Tran, recycled from bicycle tires. She's making that kind of money now.

"A damned Fabergé egg," Spencer says.

"We didn't get any bug reports," Jennifer objects. She doesn't know the egg reference, but it sounds unfair.

"All that fancy functionality and no one uses it."

There is, for example, an option for atmosphere—the exotic, the sentimental, fantasy worlds—but this client has not specified any. She and the Jim figure are interacting in a space that's a blank oystershell white like the walls of a cheap rental.

"We tested it in-house with celebs—Elvis, Jolene somebody. Our people just ate up the AI stuff."

"You obviously haven't run the client profile."

Why should she, Jennifer thinks. Clients aren't in the product specification.

"Their average age is sixty. Most common request—deceased spouse."

How totally, mind-bogglingly sweet Jennifer thinks. She hesitates because she suspects Management is blaming her for gold plating the software, but the new information suggests so many exciting possibilities. "Then how about..." She stops, confused by Spencer's tight-lipped silence.

Spencer is staring at the screen. The Jim figure has frozen, hands raised, palms out. The client has terminated the session with seven minutes remaining.

Mrs. Watkins smiles, pulls on her gloves and leaves. Jim was such an SOB. So satisfying to have told him so.

Boomer
by
Lewis Braham

The baby was loud and stupid, and a baby. River didn't know what to do. He'd never had a baby before. One day he looked in the toilet and there it was.

River tugged on the crown until the toilet swirled and roared and there was a loud pop as the mucked-up baby emerged, like a baptism, only in reverse. It proceeded to crawl everywhere, leaving a trail of malodorous brown slime on his Grund driftwood-colored organic cotton bath mat, soiling the porcelain rim of his bathtub, and then clambering up to the sink and onto the bristles of his Preserve Recycled Toothbrush where it lingered with a self-satisfied smile and stared at him with its big stupid baby eyes.

Since it was surprisingly strong and didn't come with a manual, River bought a carriage—the sturdiest one he could find with a seatbelt built in. Then, he went to the playground with his weird baby to talk to parents. He couldn't say "other parents" as his was toilet-born and he wasn't sure if technically he was one.

There were some trees, a ballpark with a chain-link fence and a small area with a rubber mat, swings and benches for the parents. On one, hunched a blind woman with a carriage who thought his baby was cute. Seizing the opportunity, he asked, "So, what do you do with yours?"

She straightened, immediately: "What do you mean?"

"Your baby—do you just like feed it and stuff? Is that it?"

She moved her stroller to the next bench.

Another woman unbuttoned her blouse and offered a nipple to her baby. Why not try that? Even though he was almost flat chested and produced no milk, the baby immediately latched onto his right nipple and started not to suckle but to clamp down until it drew blood.

By this point, the playground had cleared and a police car parked at its entrance with its siren light whirling. A police emerged and said, "Sir, is everything OK? We've had some complaints."

River covered his bloody nipple. The baby, having broken free of its seat belt, had crawled over to the monkey bars, gnawed off one of the bottom rungs and was in the process of bending it between its palms.

"Oh, I'm just caring for this baby."

"Is he yours?"

"Well... I suppose, yes. I mean, no one else seems to want him."

"Oh, *your* baby, *your* baby," The police suddenly became deferential regarding River's little miracle. He almost genuflected. "So sorry."

River then had the park to himself.

The baby got tired of crawling and started toddling like a bear around the deserted baseball diamond, chewed on the rubber pitcher's mound, ate some grass, then, having thrown this matter up, ate it again.

Over the coming weeks, the baby grew rapidly, but never matured, still had soft baby hands, soft baby lips and round innocent baby eyes, but somehow teeth, all molars that could brecciate obsidian and gnaw at the substrate of your life. It ate everything, didn't discriminate and was soon as big almost as River's living room.

When people asked River about it, he was tempted to say "I've got baby" like lice, not "a baby," or "my baby." Was it his baby? It came out of the toilet which was the place people evacuated themselves of the stuff they least wanted. Was he really responsible for Boomer? And right then, right there, thinking this unseemly thought when a woman in the park with bulging eyes asked him, he named *his* baby.

One day River came home from a café meeting with a client and as he walked towards his front porch, saw a giant doughy pale pink arm with stubby fingers and filthy fingernails reaching for a lamp. Half an eye, an immense left one, glimpsed through the window. It was blue, crystalline, without hate, love, or empathy. Then a toothsome smile. The elephant lamp, which River had bought at an Ikea closeout sale, was hoisted, suckled, then dropped from near the ceiling to crash at the epicenter of a puddle of urine on his hardwood floor.

"OK, Boomer," he said. "What did you do?"

"Personal responsibility," the baby said. Its first words. Boomer pointed at the TV, balled his fist and smashed the puddle of urine—"Personal responsibility!"—so it splashed River's face and the TV, which was on, tuned to a Chivas Regal ad. To get the screaming to stop, River had to order a case.

Soon, the baby no longer drank milk but Chivas Regal all day. It also insisted River buy La Gloria Cubana cigars, the largest 70-ring gauge, and Golden Eagle coins, which River had to bury in the backyard, or it would wail so loud the entire house shook.

The baby had grown so big and noisy River often went to a coffee shop to work if he could avoid the neighbors calling social services for leaving it alone. Or, just to take a break, he tried gardening, which he'd always found a relaxing activity. Some months ago, he'd sprinkled Evergro plant food on his roses, basil and aubergines. He regretted growing the aubergines as he hated their taste but had planted them anyway because he liked saying the word "aubergines." He'd also thought they might make good gifts to bond with his neighbors, yet his neighbors—a flute player on one side and an old man who chain smoked on his porch all day on the other—never seemed interested, which was too bad as the aubergines were doing tremendously, larger and shinier than any at the supermarket, so well in fact, perhaps he could grow some more and enter them in a contest?

So, he decided to get the old hoe and shovel out and plant the same kind of aubergines he hated, the seeds for which he'd purchased from an ancient street vendor with a glass eye in Pittsburgh's Strip District. As he started digging, he would occasionally see the cloth selvage of a tiny frontier style dress fly through the air in the front window. He'd purchased Boomer an American Girl doll, which Boomer liked but mainly to toss like a football across the living room. The windows periodically rattled as the baby scampered after it or, occasionally, crushed the doll's half-gnawed face against the glass.

The hoe hit something soft and River heard a high-pitched screech. He raised the blade. Brown withered moss stuck to its edge, dripping what on closer inspection he realized was blood. Kneeling, he swept off the dirt with his hands to reveal the fuzzy back of someone's skull. He vomited—and this regurgitation the earth strangely absorbed with a shudder. He exposed a cheek—gaunt, but expanding and contracting rapidly, then slower, still. From the crack in the parietal orb where his hoe had struck brains oozed. The face familiar.

"Everything OK down there?" his neighbor asked—the chain-smoking retiree who up until this point had barely said two words to River.

Gasping, River pointed to the porch window so his neighbor could see Boomer's palm smooching the American Girl's ravaged face against the glass. His neighbor retreated and slammed the door.

The dirt hissed as he uncovered—his Amazon deliveryman whom he hadn't seen in a few days—a young guy with sinewy legs in khaki shorts and his name *Malcolm* stitched into his delivery jacket. Malcolm had a soul patch, his teeth now gritted in agony. There was squirming beneath him, the soil undulating like a rattler winding through the sand.

River cautiously used his shovel and unearthed a writhing mass of larvae with worm-like bodies but baby heads. They'd suckled on the still living but paralyzed deliveryman like a litter of piglets on a sow, having injected him with a paralytic neurotoxin with their baby mandibles that kept him alive and fresh while they feasted. Their larvae trails, now exposed in the soil, were bioluminescent and shown so bright they nearly blinded River but because it was daylight no one else noticed.

Now they were wailing because River had ruined their meal. "*Shut up! Shut up!*" he whispered. Their cries, like an eagle's descending, didn't draw much attention thankfully as the neighbors were used to Boomer's and he was peering now out the window at them with his giant eye, then screeching in response until they stopped and started instead to coo. As River covered them, one of the larvae, the largest, repositioned itself to suckle on the leaky cranium, gazing upward at River with wide-eyed baby bliss. Since Malcolm was still alive when they'd paralyzed him, River was guilty of, at least, manslaughter by cleaving his skull.

"Personal responsibility," Boomer said as soon as River entered the house.

River rushed to the sink to vomit some more.

"Personal responsibility," Boomer towered over him as he washed his face and hands.

"Leave me alone!"

The hipster delivery guy fed the grubs outside for a couple of weeks until River ordered another package of toner, which he hadn't replaced in several months as he rarely printed anything anymore. This deliveryman from Amazon was even younger than the first and when River asked from the doorstep if he wouldn't mind leaving the package right over---*¹

¹ Story of the Deliveryman It's not like there aren't eight billion too many of us at all. He had a hard childhood, a single mother who inspired him to pursue his art school dreams. So now he was broke, indebted up to his neck in student loans, but Amazon liked him for not crying in the warehouse, and his eye for seeing the shelves artistically, visualizing them as he remembered surprisingly well where everything went in a space the size of Mayberry. So, they gave him a driver's job which also required powerful logistic skills. Call him Reggie Bimrack.

"Where?"

"Over there by the aubergines."

"The what?"

"The eggplants."

Then the ground rippled and before the deliveryman knew it, he'd been injected with the babies' neurotoxin, couldn't speak and was pulled underground to much chortling.

Boomer watched the whole event through the window with a serious expression. "Personal responsibility." He nodded as River walked in the door.

No matter how many delivery men Amazon sent, the company never seemed to miss them. River debated whether he should turn himself in. Unlike Malcom, the other delivery guys didn't have their names stitched in cursive on their jackets, only that creepy Amazon smile, and the babies ate everything anyway, stitches and bones. Amazon didn't seem to care that they'd disappeared. In fact, disappearance was a common "Con" on Glass Door reviews of the company online.

Boomer looked over River's shoulder at the DuckDuckGo search he did for "manslaughter and should you turn yourself in." Boomer raised his chubby palms in the air and see-sawed them as he squinted and twisted his nose and lips upward into a quizzical expression: "Personal responsibility?"

Babies after all need to be fed.

One day, as River tiptoed outside to take a break, he saw his neighbor Jeb. The silent chain-smoking one whose name River only recently learned because Jeb's *Bits and Pieces* jigsaw catalog had been mistakenly delivered to River's house. Jeb was watching him, squinting with one eye as he dragged on his unfiltered Camels. He spat some brown juice into his ashtray and stubbed the butt. "I had babies once." He pointed at the rustling aubergine patch. "Whole nest of 'em in Okinawa. Couldn't get rid of 'em. Shackled up with some Kabuki chick outside of base. We were happy as clams until the place became infested."

There was a loud crash as a Vishnu statue River had purchased on eBay flew through his upstairs window and landed in Jeb's yard. Three of its arms broke off. Gasping, Jeb clutched the rusty railing to his porch with both hands and hobbled down the stairs to pick up the pieces and hand them over their shared hedge.

As the ground under the aubergines rippled and cried, Jeb raised his eyebrows and whispered: "They like trash."

It was hard to tell how old Jeb was. He wore bowling shirts unironically. He was frail, sharp nosed, ashen, lungs and chest caved in like he'd inhaled himself one day and forgotten to exhale. He'd seen action in the second Greatest War.

Sighing, River dumped the shards of Vishnu in the trash. He was exhausted. Stayed up till 1 reading the tax code for a story about the stepped-up cost basis for heirs' retirement plans.

Instead of driving to Giant Eagle as he'd planned, he ordered some groceries from Whole Foods. Boomer spied as he clicked the mouse.

When the bags came, the delivery guy retreated before River could check their contents. He waived with what River assumed was a smile behind his black mask and glanced at the aubergine patch. Boomer was excited. He pawed at the bags as River went through the receipt. Oat milk—check, Organic black beans—check, 7-grain Ezekiel Bread—check, non-fat Greek yogurt—check, soy nuggets—check, etc. etc. His head pressed against the kitchen's ceiling, Boomer chortled at each item. But suddenly he was enraged, spying the avocados in a clear spidery elastic sack. He grabbed the sack and swung it around his head like a mace, ultimately slamming it against River's side so hard he collapsed. "Personal responsibility!" he screamed and hurled the avocados through the window.

Soon, Boomer insisted River buy him a computer to make his own purchases. Yet he constantly needed help with it, so that River would shout "Pull down menu! Pull down menu!" and "Control Alt Delete!" over and over again. Boxes started arriving at the house, monthly subscriptions to cigar and whiskey club sites. One day Boomer looked sad as he canceled his *Mash & Grape* delivery and ordered Chivas Regal instead. "Personal responsibility," Boomer sighed.

Then there was the day the back door was open and a piglet in the living room snorting on the splintered shambles of the 19th century wedding chest River had salvaged from a flea market, stripped with methylene chloride, sanded, painted periwinkle and repurposed as a coffee table. The babies whose slimy bioluminescent tails had reached an intermediate stage so that there were two stubby feet embedded in them waddled upright now out of the house in single file like dwarves, trailing their slime back into their nest beneath the aubergine patch. The pig an offering River presumed to Boomer.

Boomer had long since outgrown his carriage so River put him on a toy tow truck, then a dolly, then a rickshaw with the top removed. Because Boomer was a baby and everybody loves babies, the neighbors sometimes pitched in and helped River drag Boomer around like they were draft horses.

But even when no one could help, Boomer still insisted River pull the rickshaw around town. Once, they went by the pet store and Boomer pointed at the window and started wailing until River went inside and bought him a baby python to play with. Boomer would order goats for his pig, which they kept in the backyard, and rodents for his python from Mice Direct.

The python grew faster than the pig and soon swallowed it so there was a big undigested bolus in its esophagus. Instead of being upset, Boomer laughed and laughed, then grabbed the unhappy python by the tail and swung it around like a club. Using the pig's bulge as the business end, Boomer would smash holes in the walls with it. It now replaced the avocado sack he previously used to beat River.

The day came when Boomer was so big, River could no longer pull him in the rickshaw and the python whip no longer worked as River just curled up fetally on the sidewalk and refused to move, no matter how many times Boomer thrashed him and screamed.

"Papa," River cried from the sidewalk at passersby. "Papa!"

"What a cute baby," they cooed.

Eventually, Jeb who was at the bodega buying smokes spied River and helped him pull Boomer the rest of the way with his gimpy leg. Finished, Jeb wiped his brow.

"You ain't keepin this baby," Jeb said.

Soon a neighbor, an engineer who had falsies but didn't want the hormones—Amir, Amira now, but sometimes when he had to go to the office, still Amir—took pity on River. They designed a much larger wagon for Boomer on a 3D printer from super sturdy plastic that, when it hardened, was as durable as steel.

The resulting contraption filled the side street River lived on like a parade float and needed River's, Amir/Amira's, Jeb's, the flautist's Morissa's and several other neighbors' efforts to pull. It was like something from a Cecille B. De Mille film watching them tug Boomer up Whitney Avenue as he lashed them with his pig infused python and whenever they paused from exhaustion, would screech at the top of his lungs "Personal Responsibility!" so loud the windows rattled and the terracotta pots undergirding daisies, mustard greens and wheat grass shattered.

One evening as Boomer was sleeping with his neck cricked against the ceiling of River's living room, someone slipped a note under the door. Boomer snored in front of an infomercial with a cigar butt clenched between his molars, the remote in his right hand and a Chivas Regal bottle in his left.

"Meet at the park in five minutes," the note read. Through the window, River spied a woman in a black veil wheeling a black carriage towards the park. When he arrived, there was a circle of veiled women with black baby carriages, all empty and turned inward toward something lit like a stage by the playground's arc lamps. At the center was a giant structure he couldn't at first discern until the circle broke and their leader approached him.

"You have to get rid of this baby," she said.

She pointed: They had fashioned a giant bottle filled with all their husbands' whiskey and their prescriptions of Xanax in it.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"We are the Women Against the Generative Superstructure."

The next day, River gave Boomer the bottle and while it didn't knock him out, it placated him as they led him to the cart Amir/a had constructed. There they belted him in with hemp ropes and each woman of WAGS cut one of their deliveryman's ears off, put it on a hook and lured the larvae babies from their underground lair. Attached by recycled nylon fishing line and the hooks, the larvae slithered in the back of the cart like wedding streamers as Boomer slurped on his bottle, and belched, "ers-onal tonsility."

The ladies had bought Boomer a paper crown from Burger King which he donned readily so he resembled a larger less adorable Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*.

When Boomer saw Jeb marching before the cart, he started reaching his blurry fingers towards him and burbling "—ility! —ility!" as the entire neighborhood walked the miles to the Westmoreland Sanitary Landfill in Rostraver. What began with River pulling the bulk of the load, soon became a neighborhood effort, then an Allegheny County one, as mothers everywhere emerged from behind their baby carriages to help.

Jeb kept muttering at first, but then louder to egg Boomer on, "Such a baby! Such a big fuck-in' baby!" The larvae hissed in the back of the cart every time they heard these words

Finally, they reached the landfill in Rostraver. The Rostraver-ians were less than pleased, even though, like everyone, they adored babies. But somehow this giant inebriated one coupled with the pervasive stench of shale gas, raw sewage, burning plastic and methane leachate in their atmosphere, made them irritable.

Yet River, Jeb and the Women against the Generative Superstructure would not be deterred. They burst through the landfill's security gates, then tried to tilt the wagon onto the heap like a dump truck, but Boomer was too heavy and the stench broke his stupor.

Boomer now bawled at the massive heap of trash before him. A wavering tremulous retch-inducing cairn of oozing offal and plastic, with the handles of shopping bags undulating like tentacles. So many wrappers, chicken cutlet and hamburger meat Styrofoam bottoms red and runny with blood. Diapers, tons of diapers, child and adult sized, a mycelial fungal network grown partially by accident, partially by mad scientist design, three cheese tortellini packages, 280 calories per one-cup serving, 4 sat fat, crushed egg shells, wrung tea bags, coffee grounds, Southern Grove Deluxe Mixed nuts, Aldi's dirty paper towels, condom wrappers, shotgun shells, enough dental floss to circumnavigate the earth thrice, waxy Q-tips, Christmas ornaments, tons of kitty litter, little mummified turds embedded in its granules. All of it compacted, compressed on the bottom but looser on top.

Seagulls screeched above, rats below as the slug babies hissed and rattled like sadistic wind chimes in the back of the wagon. And still Boomer winced and wined, his nostrils red, inflamed.

"Jeb!" The leader of the Women Against the Generative Superstructure implored.

"Such a baby!" Jeb said. "Such a big fuck-in' baby!" He saluted the landfill, took a slug from a brass flask in his hip pocket, then prepared to decapitate himself with a Bowie knife.

"Help him," the women chanted, and to his surprise River did, managing with great effort to cut through the gristle.

"OK, Boomer," River said, and with the ladies' encouragement, tossed Jeb's head to the top of the garbage heap. Unchained, Boomer lumbered out of the cart and murmured, "Personal Responsibility?" As River straightened the paper crown, Boomer looked upon him with curiosity and fondness. Then he clambered slowly up the ziggurat of garbage like a gorilla. There was an old lawn chair balanced at the top and he rested first his diapered buttocks on it, then his hand on Jeb's bloody skull, tapping his pudgy fingers on the scalp. Now, he sat on his throne.

River cut the baby slugs loose and they slithered into the mound, happily eating all sorts of trash and occasionally leaping in the air to snap at the seagulls like marlins.

"Personal responsibility!" Boomer roared and beat his chest at the top of the heap.

At first, the Rostraver-ians hated the giant baby as he would hurl TVs at them like feces, but he ate all the shale runoff and other garbage and they eventually grew to love him so much, occasionally, when Amazon wasn't looking, they lured a delivery man to the heap.

As a member, albeit headless, of the greatest generation, Jeb was buried in Arlington with full honors. He'd left a note to the authorities explaining his actions, which everyone in Wilkinsburg thought was neighborly of him. River, for his part, having rid himself of the Boomer nuisance, felt he had finally found that deep sense of community and spiritual connection he had longed for his entire life.

Super Mario Downtime
by
Stephen Kowalkowski

with the pipes shut off
and the flying turtles grounded
find him by the Trevi Fountain
admiring that Roman plumbing

he doesn't go in
for all that mythology
monsters and kidnappings
counterparts and holes

he's sad the shops are closed
needs a refill on his mustache cream
new buttons for his suspenders
something more filling than shrooms

settling on a bench to rest his aching
feet, Mario watches the river and spoons
gelato, his favorite flavor: Peach

he's played the hero so long he wonders
what it would be like to turn heel
flip his M upside down and
take on the weight of villainy

no more running toward castles
or crawling through the ductworks
he'd make his nemesis come to him

dry and inside, with his princess
there beside him, he'd steadily expand
til he's immobile as a statue
a relic of adventuring come home

Contributor Biographies



Teresa Spencer is a stage and voice actor and writer living in Baltimore with her husband and three-week-old-at-time-of-publication son. Her work tends to mock the patriarchy and celebrate scatology. "Menelaus and the Fake Helen" will soon be republished in *Too Like the Lightning*: a forthcoming print and audiobook collection of Teresa's feminist humor pieces, produced by Taffety Punk of Washington, DC. In Teresa's ongoing efforts to become a caricature of herself, she named her cats Flannery O'Connor and Oscar Wilde.



Kim Malinowski's collection *Home* was published by Kelsay Books, her verse novel *Clutching Narcissus* was published by Twelve House Books, and her verse novel *Phantom Reflection* was published by Silver Bow Publishing. She has two forthcoming full-length books. Shhh. Don't tell. She stole her tagline from a *Highlander* episode—not "there can be only one"—but she writes because the alternative is unthinkable.

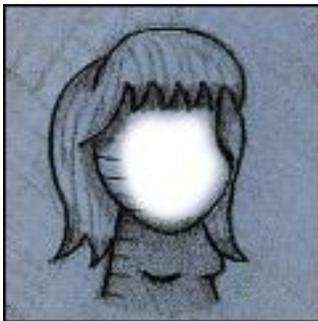


Joshua Del Rey was born under an alias at North Shore Hospital in Skokie, Illinois, during the summer of 1979. He just barely received a BA in English Literature from Florida Atlantic University in 2003, in fact, Del Rey wasn't aware he had graduated until years later. Del Rey also failed out of an MFA program at Chapman University, sometime in the mid 2000's. Joshua Del Rey's first story collection, *BANNED BOOK*, was released to absolutely zero acclaim on Memorial Day of 2022, and has yet to sell one single goddamn copy. Selections from *BANNED BOOK* have been featured in *Adelaide Literary Magazine* and in Dab Art's

national exhibition, *Art in the Time of Corona*. Del Rey can be found telling stories on YouTube by searching *Two Feat Creative*. Otherwise, go away.



Aaron Lee Moore is an Associate Research Fellow in the Department of Literature and Journalism at Sichuan University where he's required to periodically publish poetry in passionate praise of Mao Zedong, our once and future king. He is also Editor-in-Chief of *Floyd County Moonshine* and Managing Editor for Sichuan University's *Comparative Literature: East and West*. His poetry chapbook, *The Snapping of the Stick*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2020 (a truly terrific year). Previous publications include *Appalachian Journal*, *Southern Literary Journal*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Toad Suck Review*, *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*, *Sandy River Review*, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, *Comparative Literature: East & West*, *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Collected Essays of Foreign Languages and Literatures*, *Miller's Pond Poetry Magazine*, *Deep South*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *Illumen*, *Open Minds Quarterly*, *Stray Branch*, and others.

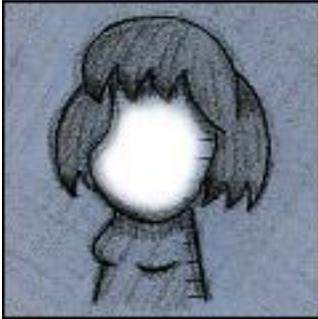


Audrey Clark is an actress, writer, and comedian who likes to sing and dance and is really good at both of those things. You can follow her on Twitter @audreynotfunny, on Instagram @audreynotphotos, or on the street in Sydney, Australia.



Chris Bullard lives in Philadelphia. He received his BA in English from the University of Pennsylvania and his MFA from Wilkes University. Grey Book Press published *Continued*, a poetry chapbook, in 2020 and Moonstone Press recently published *Going Peaceably to the*

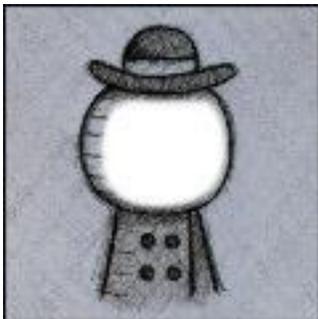
Obsidian Knife, his chapbook of environmentally themed poetry. Main Street Rag has just released his poetry chapbook, *Florida Man*. No one has compared Mr. Bullard's talent to that of the great comic geniuses of our day, thankfully.



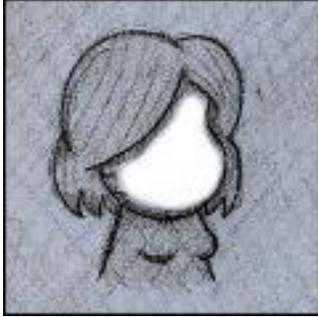
Sona Lea Dombourian teaches Ancient and Modern World Literature and Bibles as Literature at Moorpark College.



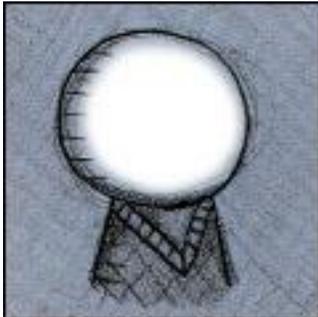
Richard Jordan is a mathematician and data scientist who also writes poetry. His poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Redivider*, *Harpur Palate*, *Canary-A Literary Journal of the Environmental Crisis*, *upstreet*, on the *Verse Daily* website, and elsewhere. He lives and works in the Boston area.



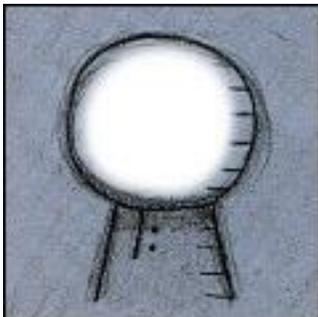
M.C. Schmidt's fiction has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *EVENT Fiction*, *X-R-A-Y*, *New World Writing*, *BULL*, *Litro*, and elsewhere. His darkly comedic novel, *The Decadents*, was released in 2022 from Library Tales Publishing.



Leah Miller is a poet, writer, and sometime software engineer. Her work has appeared in *Utopia Science Fiction Magazine*, *Third Flatiron Anthologies*, and *Peeking Cat Literary* (UK). She lives in New Mexico.



Lewis Braham is a graduate of Brooklyn College's MFA program in creative writing. His work has appeared in *Litbreak Magazine*, the *Ekphrastic Review*, *Tuck Magazine*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Reuters*, and *Bloomberg*.



Stephen Kowalkowski is from West Virginia and is currently working toward an MFA in creative writing at Western Kentucky University. He's never been published before (*editors: until now*). Hopefully he won't have to carve that on my tombstone (*editors: he won't*).