

# ◇ Defenestration ◇

## Volume VII, Issue III

December 2010

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**Doing Time in Monopoly Jail**  
by  
**Keith Wisniewski**

**TOP HAT:** Hello cellmates! Top Hat, esquire, at your service. It looks as though you will have the pleasure of my company for a little while. You see, I had the utter misfortune of landing on Go to Jail, and well, here I am! But, no worries, I'm sure we will have a grand ol' time together! So, tell me, what brings the rest of you to this dreadfully decorated place of incarceration?

**THIMBLE:** Landed on Go to Jail too.

**RACE CAR:** I picked a Go to Jail card.

**TOP HAT:** And what about you, little doggie? Cat got your tongue? Ha ha.

**SCOTTIE DOG:** I murdered a hobo.

**TOP HAT:** Excuse me?

**SCOTTIE DOG:** Slit his throat ear to ear with a 12" buck knife, then dumped the body in some bushes behind the B&O railroad.

**TOP HAT:** Oh... Well... My, that is an interesting story. And what about you over there in the corner, what are you in for?

**THIMBLE:** That metal thing's not a game piece, your highness.

**SCOTTIE DOG:** No one touches the shitter. It's mine. You got it? If I see you even look at my shitter, I will gut you like a pig in your sleep.

**TOP HAT:** My word! Such colorful language in here! If these drab walls had even a fraction of that panache, our required stay would be much more pleasurable.

**RACE CAR:** You talk funny. Where you from?

**TOP HAT:** Well, good sir, I happen to own property at Marvin Gardens, Ventnor Avenue, and Atlantic Avenue. But I actually reside in the penthouse suite of a hotel I own on Park Place.

**THIMBLE:** So, this your first time in the joint?

**TOP HAT:** Most certainly!

**SCOTTIE DOG:** Then you're going to have to learn how things work in here.

**TOP HAT:** Oh please, enlighten me.

**SCOTTIE DOG:** You're my bitch. I own you, like everything else in here. You do everything that I say. It's that simple.

**TOP HAT:** Oh, I see, it's like a game of Simon Says. Oh how I loved playing that as a child! That will surely be a fun way to pass the time in here!

**SCOTTIE DOG:** Good. Now that you're my property, the first thing you're going to do is take off your shirt so I can brand you with my ballpoint pen tattoo gun here.

**TOP HAT:** But surely you jest—

**SCOTTIE DOG:** It's going to hurt, and you're going to want to scream. But if you fucking make a sound and bring the guards by, I swear to God I will shank you with this sharpened spoon shiv and watch you bleed to death.

**TOP HAT:** Oh dear... I... uh... I... must say... for someone with such a rudimentary vocabulary, you certainly are quite adept at painting a picture. But alas, it's my turn to roll. And not a moment too soon, I shall say... Here we go—drats! Doubles elude me!

**SCOTTIE DOG:** Now get your ass over here.

**TOP HAT:** Kind sir, do not make me resort to fisticuffs to defend my honor.

**SCOTTIE DOG:** NOW bitch!

**TOP HAT:** Oh look, we have a visitor!

**SCOTTIE DOG:** What? There's no one here. Hey, hey, hey, put down my shiv!

**TOP HAT:** Stand back! Don't come any closer, you hooligan!

**SCOTTIE DOG:** Just give it to me and I won't—AHHHHHHH!

**TOP HAT:** I told you to leave me alone, but you didn't listen! You want some more?

**SCOTTIE DOG:** AHHHHHHH!!!!

**TOP HAT:** Take that! And that! And that! And that! And that! And that! And that! Good luck trying to win second place in a beauty contest now, bitch.

**THIMBLE:** Jesus, you killed him.

**RACE CAR:** Damn, man, it's just a game.

**TOP HAT:** Shut up! I'll be taking those smokes! And you, get up—the top bunk's mine now! And don't anyone even think about using the shitter. Got it?

## Shopping List by Faith Gardner

- Chicken
- Shallots
- Tomatoes
- Mushrooms
- Red wine
- Rat poison

Shopping grounds me. I interpret my sense of personal success, as usual, on my alacrity and ability to bargain. Striking my Safeway card through the machine like a knife. The checker, a handsome teenager with a faint, pitiful mustache, fails to meet my gaze. Am I really so old? I ask him how his day went. The question misses him, no entry, no exit, no effect. Just *fine*. He hands me my two plastic bags. Ghosts to carry home.

Blind date. What has become of me? Suburban mishap, me. A few weeks after the hospital release I joined an online dating service. My friend Morgan told me to, I suspect out of guilt since she's recently married, impregnated and happy. She's matchmaker by proxy now, the idea of a single person gives her the shivers. So I've been communicating with this one back and forth for a week. What is his name again? Barrel, I want to say. Must be Barry, or Darryl. Harold or Merrill or Terrible. I laugh to myself as I walk through my front door with groceries.

His name will be Terrible.

I pick up the phone to call Morgan, to tell her about the rat who woke me up last night. Perched on my chest with beady little eyes. In a dreamstate, not scary, just an animal. But upon waking, I screamed, and batted at him with my pillow. A rodent in my bed! Nothing like that would have happened back in Chevy Chase. Buck up, girl. You're in the city now! I couldn't sleep a wink afterwards, fearing the return of the rat. I think, I could call my father's answering service again—but I put the phone down and decide, it's late, it's only getting later now, and I should start getting ready for my "blind date."

I don't know if blind date is the right terminology, I think, as I stand in front of the comically small bathroom mirror and spread blue eyeshadow on thick. I've spoken to what's-his-name on the phone, and through email. I liked him better through email. He has impeccable grammar and an impressive vocabulary, something a finicky middle-school English teacher like me holds higher than good looks. I flutter my lashes through the mascara wand and blink at my reflection. I can only check my face in this tiny mirror. I've squeezed myself into this pencil skirt I fear only balloons my figure into cartoon-like voluptuousness. And my hair—though a stunning "mahogany cinnamon spice" shade, according to the box—slightly resembles a helmet in shape. I make my lips into a kissy shape for the lipstick. What if he wants to have sex with me? And if he does, what if a rat decides to jump up on the bed? I put my makeup away and head to the kitchen. I'm not used to four-inch heels, so I trip and fall in the hallway. There is a rat turd on the ground and I think about banging my head repeatedly against the wall but don't.

Cooking will calm my nerves. So I lay out all the ingredients in a row on the table. All that's left in the bag is that rat poison, that paper bag with a crossed-out cartoon rat. I put it on top of the refrigerator to avoid mistakes. I wouldn't want to kill who's-its. I take my laptop into the kitchen and put on the YouTube recipe. I imitate the crabfaced lady, even her crabface. Every time I make a mistake I run into the living room and scream into the throwpillow that I call my screampillow. It's a better way to vent my anger than hitting walls or throwing my high-heeled shoes at people's heads.

Ding dong. Already, my door's ding-donging. I smooth my hair and adjust my bra—I don't need the ladies sagging on a night like tonight. Peep through the peephole. He's got flowers. One of those cheap supermarket bouquets. He's a C+ at best. Much older than he let on. He's bald, too, which I think he should have been obligated to mention online. Baldness revolts me. His glasses are round and thick and black like Mister Magoo's. He's dressed insultingly casual, in a T-shirt and khaki pants. Though I'd rather hide in a closet, I answer the door.

"Hello," I say, trying to sound professional but sounding instead like a snob. It's the affected etiquette school pronunciation that forever haunts my speech. "Good evening."

"Veta." He has a gravelly voice. He probably drinks whiskey like it's water.

I accept his cheap flowers, which smell like nothing. The plastic crinkles in my hand and covers up my, "Thank you."

I had hoped his name would come back to me somehow at this face-to-face introduction, but it hasn't. Now I'm almost certain his name must be Terrible. Terrible says, "A—cozy place you've got here—"

"Isn't it?"

He nods and looks down at me with a smile, kind of fatherly, except he's studying my figure. I want to stamp his foot and run into my room and dive under the covers. Instead, I say,

"Would you like a drink —"

"Love one."

I gesture to the sofa in the corner of my living room, which has the plastic cover on it. I always put plastic covers on when guests are around. I can't stand the thought of spills one can't clean up.

"Have a seat." I walk to the doorway. "I have whiskey, or champagne."

"Oh—no wine?"

"Umm ... actually, I might have some red."

"What kind of red?"

"Merlot, I think."

"What year?"

Decidedly, I despise this man. "Not sure. I'm no sommelier."

"Incidentally, I am," he says, and smiles at me as if this should amuse me. I stare back at him to show him, this does not, and say dryly,

"Wonderful."

"But I'll have whiskey tonight. Make it neat."

"Whiskey," I repeat through my teeth, and go into the kitchen.

The kitchen smells impressive, like a restaurant, not like my cooking. Dinner simmers. My kitchen has never appeared so welcoming as it does right now. I spend as long as possible in here, adding spices, opening the freezer and breathing in the air, looking out the window at the brick wall that constitutes my view. Finally, I pour the whiskey into a glass. The bag of rat poison seems to wink at me from the top of my refrigerator. I wonder if those pellets can be ground up? I wonder, can they dissolve in alcohol?

"Your whiskey," I say, handing him the glass. He is shifting around uncomfortably on the sofa, the plastic squeaking with his every move. I wish he'd stop. I sit across from him, on the furthest-away chair.

"What's with the plastic?" he asks.

"Oh, you know ... it's cleaner that way."

He laughs, and holds his drink up in the air. "Where's *your* drink?"

"I'd better not."

"Come on, have a drink with me."

"Drinking loosens my tongue, and—well, I'd just rather refrain this evening."

He downs his drink in one gulp and slams it on the coffeetable. He does it without even bothering to use a coaster. "Alcoholic?"

"Hardly." I grab a coaster and put it underneath his glass.

"You said you went to a hospital, though?"

"Who hasn't?" I laugh far too loud, and bat my hand through the air in a theatrical gesture. But who cares? I don't need to impress Mister Magoo.

"I haven't." He looks at me. I can hear his potbelly rumbling underneath his T-shirt. "But I would like to know what it's like. See, as I mentioned online, I'm a writer."

"Sounds lovely."

"It really is. I've wanted to write a novel that takes place in a mental hospital, so please, tell me what it's like. Is it like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*?"

I remember, in a flash, the boredom of the ward, the gray view outside the barred window much like the view outside my kitchen now. The tedious people who shuffled around in uniform slovenliness, the flickering TVs, the unsurprising rules. The ward was only a microcosm of life outside the ward. But Terrible doesn't deserve to know that. So I reply, "It was exactly like every movie you've even seen about mental hospitals."

He nods. My heart warms at the disappointed expression on his face. "So—what happened exactly to get you in there?"

"Nothing unusual, just your standard nervous breakdown."

"Did you try to —" Here he draws his hand across his throat with a "whheeeek" sound.

"Not like that," I say. "I mean, I didn't try to sever my own head off."

"Oh, I know—I just meant —"

"Another drink?" I ask him, standing up. I hate the way his eyes dance up and down, up and down my shape.

"Please," says Terrible. He flashes a yellow-toothed smile.

In the kitchen, the first thing I stare at is the rat poison. I actually have to lock myself in the pantry for a moment to calm my nerves. Not only is he old and unattractive and I can't remember his name, he's sadistically interested in me as a crazy person so he can research his book. If anyone deserved rat poison in their whiskey, it is the man singing Sinatra offkey in my living room at this moment. By the time I return with his drink, I have shaped my face into a smile again. He is standing next to my bookcase. His cheeks are flushed and he grins as I hand him his drink. During this transaction his pinky brushes against mine purposefully and I want to vomit.

"I really wish you'd have a drink with me," he says.

"Best if I don't."

"Loosens the nerves—and no offense, you look like you could use it."

"Do I?"

He holds a book up with a smirk. I can see the plaque between his teeth. This man must never floss. "Read this?"

"My friend Morgan gave it to me, but I haven't had a chance to read it yet."

He winks at me and sits down. "Right. 'Morgan' gave it to you." He laughs a phlegm-filled laugh. "I didn't suspect I was going to be dating a fan tonight."

I look at the book. Its front cover features a marathon runner sprinting from the grim reaper. *Death Leaves No Tracks*, by Astair Grimm. I look back up at Terrible's terrible face, and remember suddenly that his name is Astair. "Ah," I say, nodding. "Ah."

"So you enjoy my work?" He gulps his drink and sets the glass down on the naked coffeetable. I am ready with the coaster this time. He looks at me like he is sincerely fascinated with me now that he thinks I've read his tacky paperback.

"To be frank, I haven't read it yet."

Now he turns away as if I don't exist and studies the pictures on my piano.

"Who's this?"

"My father."

"Huh."

"He lives in Berlin."

"Oh."

"We're... very close."

"Even though he's in Berlin?"

"I speak to his assistant almost every day."

"You seem kind of old to be a daddy's girl."

"A girl can never be too old to love her father."

"Is that why you like older men?"

"But I don't like older men at all."

We stare. I notice his eyes are as gray as his eyebrows.

"You play?" he asks, and points to the dusty piano.

I shake my head.

"Then why—"

"Another drink?" I ask, rising. I raise his empty glass in the air.

"Only if you'll have one too."

"I will not."

"Well, okay, I'll still have another. Just a teensy one." He winks, and I dry heave.



Back in the kitchen, I can hear him singing off-key. He sounds drunk. He sounds nothing like Sinatra. I take the rat poison down and read the directions—just *read* them, for God’s sake, for later. Having nothing to do with the man in the other room. But what if I... no. I put the bag up on the refrigerator and pour him another awful-smelling drink of whiskey. The food smells good, I know it does, but I don’t want to eat it anymore.

Terrible bursts through the kitchen door. He’s loosened up now, from the alcohol, and his presence takes me by surprise. I freeze up as if I’ve been caught in some guilty act, but I’m only standing there, holding his drink.

“For *me*?” His speech is slightly slurred as he grabs the glass and drinks it with a saliva-spattering smack. Then he licks his lips like some kind of reptile and sniffs the air.

“Mmmmm, smells delicious. What’s cookin’ mama?” He moves closer to me, his hands coming toward my hips as if propelled by some horrible magnetic force.

“I have to set the table!” I scream, and scamper out the kitchen door.

I set the table, and he watches, humming some kind of sea-shanty. I clatter the silverware around, scratch at little invisible stains on the tablecloth. His gaze is burning a hole in the back of my skirt. How I hate him, how I wish he’d hurry home. I imagine clobbering him with my high heel. But no—too messy. Poison is so much cleaner. Stop it! I’m not going to poison him. I bring dinner out to the table. It steams from the sauté pan and resembles a picture from a culinary magazine.

“Is that chicken?” He peers over the food and squints his eyes. “Oh, I should have told you—I’m vegetarian.”

I blink at him, and feel myself filling with hot hatred. I think, I’m going to poison him.

“Actually,” he continues, and puts his hands together delicately, fingertip to fingertip, “I’m technically a *pescetarian*, as I do eat fish occasionally.”

I’m definitely going to poison him. My ears ring. I grit my teeth. “Really? I wish you’d warned me.”

“In retrospect, so do I. But you must have something else?”

I point to the steamy silver bowl next to the chicken. “Rice.”

“Rice sounds wonderful.” He sits at the table, an adoring expression on his face, and lumps some rice onto his plate. “*You* are wonderful. Now how ‘bout toppin’ off my drink, sugar?”

I take his glass.

He tucks the napkin into his shirt like a bib, and drawls in an unexplained Southern accent. “Oh, I wish you’d have one with me, pretty lady.”

“Maybe I will.”

In the kitchen again, I rip open the rat poison bag and remove a couple giant turquoise pills. I put them in his whiskey, and stir. I crush them with a knife to make them dissolve. Then I get afraid, and wash it down the drain. You are about to do something undoable,

something crazy and permanent. You are about to *kill* someone, no joke—seriously, Veta, I’m talking to you, don’t put pellets in his glass. Do NOT poison that man. Poison that man, poison that man.

I take a swig from the whiskey bottle. He’s singing my name drunkenly from the other room. “Veeeeta,” he slurs, “Nothin’s sweeeta ...”

I think of my father, and the hospital, and everything. I think of Morgan, I wonder what jail would be like, I wonder if I’m a lesbian. And I crush the pellets in the glass. It makes a sky-colored powder. And I pour his whiskey in it, and I mix it around with a spoon, and I giggle. The liquid clouds up so I add some soda. I pour myself some whiskey, straight. Don’t want to get confused here.

“I made you a special little concoction,” I say. I place the drink in front of him before taking my seat. He is wolfing down rice, and has some stuck to his chin.

“Thanks,” he says through a mouthful.

I spoon a little chicken onto my plate, but don’t care much for it right now. Right now, I’m watching him. His bald head moves up and down. He masticates noisily, slurping up rice like it’s soup. There’s a lump in my throat, and I think, maybe I shouldn’t have, maybe I shouldn’t have—but he brings the drink to his lips and takes a sip. I watch in horror, but also with curiosity and a strange sense of accomplishment. He sniffs it and shrugs and takes another sip.

“So about the hospital,” he says, and puts the drink on the table. He smiles. “Can you give me any—oh, I don’t know, any interesting tidbits to put in my book? Tell me, sweetheart, what got you in there?”

“Attempted homicide,” I tell him with a wink.

There is no mirth in his laugh. “Really? Did you—”

“Speaking of homicide—I have a question, actually. A question about writing.”

Terrible improves his posture and places his fork gently on the table, as if he is suddenly an authority and not an old drunk slob with rice on his face. There is still rice on his face. “Yes, please, ask me.”

“Well, so I’ve been thinking about writing a story about—well, about a murder.”

“A mystery?”

“Exactly.”

“And what’s your question, love?”

His utterance of the word *love* actually makes me gag. I sip my burning drink to cover my reaction. “Well, I was thinking about having my character use rat poison. What’s your take on rat poison?”

He nods like this is the most natural thing he has ever heard. "Poison is an excellent way to go – I use it often, and particularly with my *female* characters, as it is a much more *feminine* type of murder."

"Huh—more feminine than, say, bludgeoning someone with a high-heeled shoe?"

"That, as exciting as it sounds, would in actuality be very messy and hard to accomplish. I would definitely go with the poison." He wipes his mouth with his napkin, somehow entirely missing the clump of rice that remains on his chin. "Rat poison is actually a rather good choice, as it's common – it can be bought anywhere. So it doesn't exactly limit the scope of possible suspects, you know?"

"That's what I was thinking." I watch him take another long sip from his glass, finishing it.

"This drink tastes very strong."

"It's my special concoction."

"Almost *medicinal*." He smacks his lips. "Not bad. May I use your restroom?"

"Of course." I gesture toward the door labeled with the RESTROOM sign.

I clear the table, and wonder if he's dying in there. Possibly writhing on the floor and bleeding out his orifices like a rat. What about my new white bath mat? And how I just scrubbed the tub? Oh well, sacrifices, sacrifices. Maybe I shouldn't have! I drink another drink, put the chicken away and clear the table. I even have time to do the dishes. It's been fifteen minutes now. I think he's dead. But then he comes into the room, looking healthy and happy as ever.

"That rice was great," he says, and stands behind me as I wash the dishes. I pretend he isn't smelling my hair, his hands aren't on my waist, and comfort myself with the thought that soon he will be dead as a rat. I dry my hands off on a towel and hurry into the living room. I slump onto the sofa with a plastic crunching sound. He does too, and puts his hairy arm around me. I'm a bit buzzed from the whiskey.

"About my story," I say. "How long does it take someone to die of rat poison?"

"Murder on the brain!" he says with a laugh. He raises his eyebrows at me. "I know how it is, when you've got that story swimming around in your head—it's near obsessive."

"Exactly."

"Well, rat poison takes a lot of time. You need a large dose to kill a man, and usually at least a few doses over a few days."

I nod, my insides wilting with disappointment.

"Don't be upset, sugar!" he says. He touches my face with his rough, old-man finger. "Your character will just have to do it over a few days – it's really much easier than you'd think." Terrible leans in now, his dry, lizardy tongue visible from between his lips, and he shuts his eyes behind his bifocals. His face is fast approaching my face. I want to hit him with my

shoe, I want to scream into my screampillow, I want to lock myself in the restroom. But instead, I gently push him away with my hand.

"Not yet," I say. He opens his eyes, wheezing like a grandpa. "I move—very slowly. I hope you'll understand."

"Not even a little peck?"

"No."

He looks at his lap and sighs. "But—do you like me?"

I would like to puke on his shoulder, but I say, "Very much." I stand up, and walk him to my door.

"May I see you again?" His voice shakes.

"I was going to ask if I might cook you dinner again tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow? Really?" He turns giddy, like a schoolboy, and on such an ancient man as him the sight is quite appalling. "Sounds divine!"

I shake his hand. He attempts to turn the handshake into an embrace, but I stiffen my muscles to prevent this kind of slippage.

"Not even a little kiss?" He puckers his lips. There are white specks of dried saliva in the corners of his mouth.

"See you tomorrow."

He nods respectfully. "Remember—I'm a pescetarian."

"Yes, I wouldn't forget."

We dip our heads. I watch him exit my apartment door, and give him a little wave. He skips to his car gleefully, walloping like an orangutan, and I don't regret anything. After I close my door, I run to my screampillow and scream a joyful scream.

## **Facts About Mosquitoes**

**by**  
**Ross Walton**

The average lifespan of a mosquito is between three days and one hundred years, although it is reported that one mosquito will never die. This is referred to as the Alpha Mosquito and is held in high regard by certain tribes in North Africa.

The male mosquito has the mental capacity to handle minor automotive maintenance, but not the upper body strength. Most mosquitoes live solitary lives, but vacation in groups. The female mosquito prefers Sudoku over cryptograms. It is not known why.

Mating rituals of mosquitoes vary by species, but generally occur near water and involve copious amounts of cabernet sauvignon and the greatest hits of Sammy Davis, Jr. When these optimal conditions are not available, the industrious male mosquito will substitute Rick James and a bottle of Night Train.

The larva of the urban mosquito scores consistently higher on standardized tests than its rural counterparts.

Three mosquitoes died during the final edit of this document, but it is highly doubtful that any of these was the Alpha Mosquito, unfortunately.

**Preface to a Backyard Adventure**  
by  
**Eric Hawthorn**

Our backyard sloped down like the tongue of a thirsty dog. Its steepness made for excruciating leaf raking, impossible lawn mowing, and unbelievable sledding. Of course, my fondest backyard memories are from sledding season. My two brothers and I would fight over the runner sled, which our family had owned for so long that it creaked like a rocking chair and made its own decisions, steering-wise. With enough grease on its runners and a good push, this sled really got going. The company that made it—during Colonial times, we figured—had named it “The AstroGlider.” The paint had mostly worn off, but we could still faintly read the sled’s motto, printed on one side: *The Smoothest Ride Around*. Our parents thought this was funny.

But this isn’t about our AstroGlider, or its gliding ability.

The winter before my ninth birthday was one of those cold-warm-cold winters. Coat-and-glove days were followed by t-shirt days. A half-foot of snow would turn mushy, only to freeze again that night. One day, my brothers and I went out back, where the snow was gray and sloppy in the afternoon sun. Using shovels, we tamped the snow into a path. The path was a straight shot from the top of the hill to the bottom. The next morning, we pulled our AstroGlider sled to the backyard, which had transformed overnight into a sheet of ice. Straight down its center, glistening, was the sweetest luge track ever.

But this isn’t about our backyard luge track.

The day before, just after we had finished smoothing the track, we built a little jump or mogul at the bottom of the hill. The jump wasn’t too high—maybe four or five feet. It was completely smooth and had frozen solid the previous night.

But this isn’t about the jump we built at the end of our icy luge track.

This is about our family dog, Sprinkles, who volunteered to go first.

## **Your Relationship with Edward Gray** by **Daniel Clausen**

He manages his finely tuned anti-élan with bureaucratic flair, killing the life out of the walls and people in our tiny office on Porter Street. He stalks the hallways with his organizationally upright diction, walk, and mannerisms. His indefatigable confidence is both boring and compulsive. Skinny, like an assemblage of toothpicks holding up a suit, the visibility of his bone structure shows a love of desk, paperwork, and company--a willingness to persevere to starvation in order to fulfill the demands of a deified "efficiency" and to bring misery to those who don't.

Who is this man? Where did he come from? He is my boss. He is your boss. Curse, nightmare, fiction, and reality, he exists inside this story, he exists outside this story. In short, his name is Edward Grey.

\*\*\*

He walks nonchalantly toward your desk. His nonchalance is as practiced as it is purposive, and you know that it's only a matter of time before he comments randomly on the weather, sports, or the latest in hip hop in a vain attempt to improve office morale. This, before he launches into a critique of some minor part of your self--work-related or not--that doesn't quite fit with his view of what a workspace should be.

At thirty-something, he says, not all that directly that your tie is too long, that the way you answer the phone needs to change, and because he's not quite sure himself what he wants, other than to draw attention to his position directly above you, you can't really help but think that there is a possibility that he may talk to you about the same thing tomorrow--only this time he'll make small talk about the latest Trick Daddy single instead of the Massacre LP.

One year after you've quit your job, he's still there, a Grey-suited coffee-stirrer of a man. His dedication to the bureaucratic arts follows you. His devotion respects neither the boundary of working hours, office space, nor time and space. You're sure it stretches past his work, into his personal life, into his letters, it infects others, replicates, cross pollinates, builds immunities, twists logic and rules of narrative, bends the physical realities of the universe itself, and then finds the time to acquire another hideous tie.

On the train, the skinny man in the suit looks nervously through his notes. He's not Edward, but he could be one of his kind. His humanity, you're sure, is drowned out by the lingering image of Edward. What is there--the tension, perhaps of a first day, nervousness over a big meeting--is drowned out by that surreal something in your mind imposing itself on this man. He becomes thinner, his suit turns from black to grey, and in your mind you feel that suddenly you've become yourself twelve years younger. He is that other kid, smaller than you, that you want to intimidate because he outshines you in class. At sixteen, you can see him oppressing you with his skinny body and perfect attendance. Though he wears nothing more dangerous than an *I Love Dr. Who* t-shirt, you can already tell that he's brimming with regulations and in need of committee guidance. He'll devote his life to making your life miserable with all his marrow. He'll sweat over it, work at it, and make it his God for reasons you'll never understand.

It's a childish feeling really, something you can't really neglect but refuse to name in detail. Whatever this disease is, it's nonlinear. Watching a movie or sitting on a bus you realize that you're sick and that this sickness has the ability to reach back into your past.

\*\*\*

One day, sitting with my therapist, she asks me to describe my dad. I start off with all his best characteristics: his natural charisma, his jokes, the way he could make you feel as if you were the only person in the world. But soon I move to a painful history I had long forgotten. I begin to describe how mom and dad used to fight. The things I knew about them without really ever seeing. The time I first suspected dad didn't really love mom. Things that always worried me about dad: his subtle authoritarianism, his love of boundaries...soon, I realize that I'm really describing Edward. In my memory, my dad is wearing a grey suit. Did my dad ever wear a grey suit? Was Edward always my dad, or has my dad somehow become Edward?

One day, Edward takes a particularly nasty tone with you, and you realize for the first time that this man might still be a virgin. You realize that the way he talks to you has a slightly sexual overtone and that at night he might just masturbate to visions of himself telling you off.

Edward, I'm sure, is the source of my impotence. One year later, I still have trouble performing sexually; thrusting forward, Edward's image supplants my own, and I see him as he might look on top of my girlfriend, Kyleen. Keeping my head up not to look in her eyes, I'm sure she knows that something is wrong.

One day you're sitting in the employee lounge with an orange. You find yourself peeling the orange ever so slowly, deliberately. You don't know why. Edward stands there nonchalantly, surveying the wallpaper. Soon you think about throwing it at him, about the deliberate act of peeling the fruit and how when it hits him, the juice will explode in his face. I play this sequence in slow motion: the juice, his reaction, all of it coalesces into a perfect moment of release, and then I'm back with Kyleen coming magnificently, screaming, "I got you, you scrawny bitch!"

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...and you wonder how many more people in the world are like that—(un)lucky, shallow people, who've simply outlasted their peers into boring middle-management jobs--working on higher standards of being rash-like and derogatory. You wonder if there is another planet somewhere that breeds them, infects other planets with them--a kind of asymmetrical warfare.

One year later and he's still more real than your new job, clothes, and your apartment. When I eat sandwiches I can taste Edward Grey's tie on my tongue. Later, when I spit out my toothpaste over the sink I see the fibers from what must be a tie spiral down the drain.

And on your last day, predictably he throws you a party. He's supplied alcohol, food, and lots of music. The people around you, usually critical of Edward, now talk about what a great guy he is for throwing you this party. They're playing the latest hip-hop. Edward feels compelled to dance. He schmoozes, he chats, he tells stories of college, and suddenly people realize what a party animal he is. The grey suit comes off, and you hate him even



more. His party guy routine is mechanical and rehearsed, more alien than his bureaucratic exo-appearance--but only you can see it.

Skinny and still sweating from doing the hustle, he comes to tell you that he appreciates the energy you've brought to the company and that you'll always be "part of the team." He shakes your hand and you realize that adulthood has no benefits. You are a dildo to this man. Confused, baffled, you slap him. The slap is more real than you. The slap shakes him. He falls down and cries a bit and you leave the party embarrassed.

\*\*\*

Walking down the street one day, I see one of my old coworkers. I try not to look at him. I try to just keep walking. But he makes eye contact with me and I know I have to talk with him. He asks me what I'm doing now, how I am, all the usual pleasantries. I know Edward will come up. I try to head it off, to confront it. I ask him about Edward. He looks confused for a second. I say the name again, this time describing him, but he seems even more confused now.

"Who?" he asks.

I realize now that my old coworker has lost quite a lot of weight. I ask him if he's been working out lately. He replies, not especially. He looks confused. I looked confused. I suddenly realize that he's no longer wearing casual clothes. Gradually, but then ever so quickly, he gets skinnier and skinnier. He's wearing a suit.

"Edward, who?" he asks. He looks confused at first, but his confusion soon turns into calm disappointment.

You're no longer on the street but in an office. Not your old office, but the Office, the pure ideal concept of what an office is according to Edward Grey. There are rules posted clearly telling employees how to dress, what to say, and how to drink their coffee.

I get up to leave. I walk faster, trying to get out of the Office. I leave my cubicle and start to run out the door. I feel myself getting stuck. The floor is the sticky floor of nightmares. You can't move. Escape becomes impossible. But then, suddenly, I'm being pushed out. Slowly, softly at first, but then at an ever greater speed. I realize that I'm no longer in control of my motions. The door opens by itself. There is a voice on the other side of the door, yelling "push" with increasing urgency. Out the door there are hands, big, gloved, and scary. And I'm being born again.

I cry as the doctor takes me into his hands. I look around confused, desperately needing my mother. The doctor turns me around, and I see him there, Edward, panting, crying, his skinny body convulsing in sharp breaths, his pant legs stained with blood.

"Congratulations," the doctor says. "He's an office worker."

\*\*\*

I wake up in a cold sweat and find that a memo has been left on my bed.

For the six months we've been together, Kyleen has accused me of writing them to myself. She says I wake up at night, go to my desk, and write myself memos in old office stationary I've hidden throughout the house.

This one is different. This one is from her. She tells me concisely, in clear prose, that she's leaving me. As a final insult, she tells me in a PS that I can go find myself another "scrawny bitch" to fuck.

I don't think I'll have to, because he's always there.

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People ask me if I liked my old life, my old job. I did, I say. I liked it. Because as far as I can remember it was a life and an existence where things still had tastes and smells. A place and time where my office, imperfect as it was, gave me hope. But I wouldn't really want it back. Not the way I want it to go away. Because it stalks me--shadowy and elusive. It infects me for years to come. In the very everydayness of things, it will be there robbing the world of color and life. And I will say, when people comment how down and blue I look-- I will say it in the past, the present, and the future--I will say it in memos to myself and to others, in annual progress reports, in conversation near the water cooler, that everything was fine, until Edward made it grey.

**How To Be A Member**  
by  
**Christina M. Rau**

Sign something in blood,  
Anyone's blood,  
Using a colonial quill.

Check off every box on the application  
No matter what it's for.  
MALE check! FEMALE check!  
AGE check!  
FAVORITE COLOR check!

Develop a handshake that does  
Not resemble an actual handshake.  
It should include finger wiggling,  
Some light palm slapping,  
Maybe a head fake or summersault.

Wear a shiny blue jacket,  
Gold and blue trim,  
Front snap closure,  
Nickname stitched on the front left breast,  
Some sort of sparkly transfer on the back.

Light candles. Swing a paddle.  
Fall into cadence.

Keep it hush hush.  
Mum's the word  
Unless the secret password is  
MUMS.

Change the secret password  
Frequently and at random.  
Use obscure words like  
Plangency, Deliquescing, Solipsistic.  
Use words that no one really  
Knows the meaning of:  
Ablative, Asunder, Bifurcate, Inchoate.  
Use fun words like  
Gazpacho, Umlaut, Maria Conchita Alonso.

Pay dues.  
On time.  
Every time.

Recite an oath. It should rhyme.  
Sing an anthem. It should move to tears.

Wave a flag. It should have stripes.

Laminate the membership card.  
Carry it in a wallet at all times.

Deny membership if asked.  
Deny anything exists for which membership  
Is an option.

Erase all evidence of belonging.  
Shred the bylaws and any instructional pamphlets.  
This message should self-destruct  
In five, four, three, two,  
And if it doesn't,  
Destroy it as well.

## **A Proper Sexual Education** by **Tom McMillan**

Dad started acting crazy after our mother died. Little things, mostly. Awoke four times a night to check the stove. Enrolled my brother in women's self-defence classes. Painted our basement yellow, then grey, then wallpapered it cantaloupe orange.

Twice a week he'd call the school to check that there was fruit in our lunches.

It all seemed harmless.

Until the day Nathan and I celebrated our tenth birthday, when my father walked into the kitchen and announced that boys without mothers could not afford to fall behind in sexual education.

Our family was a tripod, he said. We lacked the numbers to raise someone's lovechild.

So Dad baked waffles. He boiled homemade syrup. He winked and peeled bananas. Then he set down three plates and began stripping mystery from the human form.

"For guys, a thin tube above the testicle connects the efferent ducts to the vas deferens," my father said between chews. "Interestingly, a similar system is found in sharks."

Dad's nipples poked out through the collar of his bath robe. Nathan, that clever bastard, muffled his brain by counting chest hairs, but I just stared at the plate. I'd never heard an adult discuss semen colour before.

"Don't be embarrassed," Dad kept repeating. "This is all perfectly normal."

Only it wasn't. None of my friends learned that the urethral opening rested directly within the labium majora's protective hoop. None of their fathers railed against the horrors of genital lice.

Twenty minutes in, I began swearing oaths of lifelong abstinence just to move things along.

Then the medical textbooks appeared. Things got worse.

Those anatomical drawings — cartoon, photograph, two-dimensional black-and-white — branded into our brain stems. For weeks, Nathan had nightmares where his foreskin peeled away. Vaginas reminded me of a hairy, fleshy labyrinth. Everything looked so puffy, so pink. I feared getting lost inside.

But Dad ignored our protests. He spoke slowly. He repeated complex words. And, when the lesson finished, he stacked the books, wiped both palms on his pants and asked for questions.

\*\*\*

Joely's parents divorced when she was eight years old. Her father kept the ranch. Her mother moved to San Diego. Telling me this, she squeezed my wrist and stared into my eyes, like love was hell and pain just another thing we now shared.

This seemed unfair. My mother wasn't a plane ride away. I wouldn't wake up to find her sporting fresh tan lines and grasping a boyfriend hoping to buy my love. I had a gravestone. I had tattered memories that felt more like resembled dreams.

But Joely had cannons for breasts, so I just lowered my chin and nodded.

"It can be very hard," I mumbled, "losing a parent to Sea World."

Hoping to avoid further discussing parental abandonment, I began summarizing three years of family sexual education lessons. How I was one of two boys in school who understood the chemical basis behind urinary tract infections. How Dad bought a chalkboard. How he wanted Nathan and I to dress as ovum and sperm each Halloween.

Maybe Joely had a thing for motherless men.

Maybe my casual use of medical terminology aroused her curiosity.

Regardless, on Monday, she walked me behind the track shed and thrust a wet tongue between my lips.

Did it again on Tuesday. And Wednesday.

On Friday, Joely nibbled my fingertips, leaned in, and suggested I remove her bra.

The heart makes no sound when it stops. Only silence.

I knew the intimate details of God's sperm-to-egg-to-infant production line by heart. Blindfolded, I could sketch the vaginal cavity. But my father never discussed the complex physics of brazier removal. We never prepared for the terrifying pressure of picking that lock.

Predictable catastrophe ensued. Using one hand failed dramatically, trying two worked no better. Pulling at the front got us no closer than fumbling around the back. My heart galloped. Joely's nails click-clacked against the metal siding.

Desperate, I finally grabbed both cups and pulled the entire apparatus over her head.

Had the left breast almost free when Joely started shrieking.

**On Being Born May 19<sup>th</sup>**  
**by**  
**James Valvis**

What a joy to be born on this fabulous day, May 19<sup>th</sup>,  
the same birthday as Pol Pot,  
whose name doesn't sound evil, more like something  
you might make for dinner on a busy night.  
Do such people celebrate birthdays? Did Hitler? Stalin?  
Do they put on party hats and wait for someone  
to pass out presents? Do they say, Aw, shucks, everyone,  
you really shouldn't have, while the others nod severely  
because they really shouldn't have?  
Do they blow out candles?  
Do they sing Happy birthday to you, you belong in a zoo,  
with the monkeys and the donkeys and the psychopaths too?  
Or is the ceaseless work of piling up skulls on shelves  
too consuming to stop for chocolate cake with blue frosting?  
May 19<sup>th</sup> is also the b-day of Ho Chi Minh,  
so I have a theme of political revolution going on here,  
and not the nonviolent kind, so thanks a lot, Mother.  
Couldn't you have hurried and pushed me out on the 18<sup>th</sup>?  
I could have been born the same day as Pope John Paul II  
or Brooks Robinson. Couldn't you hold back until the 20<sup>th</sup>  
when I could have been hanging out with Jimmy Stewart?  
Instead I'm born the same day as Pete Townsend,  
who last I heard was on trial for owning kiddie porn.  
So it's a real horror show, these accidental connections.  
But I guess considering how my mother jumped rope  
trying to get me to miscarriage (this was all before  
Roe v Wade), I should be happy for any birthday at all.  
So thank you, Mother, for reluctantly giving me life.  
Let's get out the punch bowl, call up friends, and party!  
It's May 19<sup>th</sup>, or as it's better known as: World Hepatitis Day.

**Arms  
by  
Kate Lu**

When Philip had woken up this morning, he'd found that his arms had disappeared.

"Well, this is no good," he said, examining the smooth skin that now covered the place where his torso should have met his shoulder. He had no idea where they'd gone; he didn't remember lending them out to anyone or leaving them somewhere. They must have either been stolen in the night or had walked off on their own—as much as arms can walk, anyway.

Getting out of bed was difficult. So was trying to work the phone so he could call his boss and explain his situation. He set the phone on the floor and dialed with his toes.

"Hey Mike, I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll be able to come in to work today," Philip said.

"Oh yeah?" Philip heard Mike yawn. "Why's that?"

"It appears I've misplaced my arms," Philip said evenly.

There was a long pause. "You've what?" said Mike.

"Misplaced my arms," Philip repeated.

There was a click, and the line went dead.

Philip decided that he would have to eat out for breakfast, because he wasn't sure that cooking with his feet would be a good idea. He picked up his wallet with his teeth and headed up the block to the diner.

Everyone stared when he walked in. He went up to the counter and ordered a plate of scrambled eggs before sitting down.

"What happened?" The owner, Lulu, set his food in front of him.

"Misplaced my arms," Philip explained. He put his face into the plate and tried to eat.

"I saw a man two blocks over selling some arms," she said. "Maybe you should talk to him."

After Philip had finished eating, and Lulu had wiped the excess egg off his face, he went to find the vendor who was selling arms. He was a grizzled-looking man with salt-and-pepper hair and shifty eyes. He had a table covered in a black cloth, littered with disembodied, but perfectly healthy, arms.

"Excuse me," Philip said, walking up to the table. "I think you might have my arms."

The man looked astonished. He gibbered. "Your—I don't think I— Couldn't have—"



"But they're right there," Philip said, pointing with his chin at a pair of pale arms sitting at the end of the table. "Look, I know times are hard, but can you just give them back, please? I won't press charges, I just need them."

The vendor paled. "All right. I don't want any trouble, okay?" He fitted Philip's arms back on his shoulders. They were a little numb at first, but they felt natural once they had warmed up.

"Thanks," Philip said to the vendor. He turned around and headed home.

When he woke up the next morning, though, one of his legs was missing.

Philip sighed. "This is going to be a difficult day."

**Not That Big of a Stretch**  
by  
**Becky Cardwell**

*"Stretch Armstrong is a character I have wanted to see on screen for a long time... It's a story about a guy stretching... the limits of what is possible to become all that he can be."*

-Brian Gazer, Producer

I just wanted to thank-you again for auditioning me in your upcoming sure-to-be-a-Blockbuster hit, Stretch Armstrong.

I don't want to jump the gun or anything, but I think you'll agree that besides a few minor hiccups, it went perfectly. I feel like I was born to play "Guy Sitting Next to Stretch Armstrong in the Diner". The character just comes so naturally to me, it's like I'm not even acting, I'm actually that guy, sitting at the diner beside Stretch Armstrong. And the stand-in and I had some real chemistry going, wouldn't you agree? I could tell he was really feeding off my positive energy.

Now, before I go, I thought I'd share a few ideas I had, ways to make the guy in the diner seem less one-dimensional. Granted, seeing as his only line is "Are you going to eat that?" it's not like he has enough screen time to develop too many dimensions, but still. I was thinking that instead of the diner guy asking Stretch "Are you going to eat that?" he could somehow already know that he was. Like he has some kind of superpower that tells him these things. Nothing big like being able to stretch, mind you. Stretch is the star here, so obviously the most important superpower should go to him. But maybe he could have, like, a sixth-sense. Or really strong hunches, even.

I was also thinking that rather than sitting on the stool, he could be hovering over it. Not super high or anything, just enough so that Stretch has to stretch his neck to hear him. That way both of us can show off our superpowers at the same time. Kind of like a one-two-punch kind of deal. Then, just to lighten the mood a little, I could say something like "Nice stretch, Stretch!" You know, just for comic relief.

Speaking of Stretch, don't you think it's a little weird for him to be wearing swimming trunks when everyone else is dressed in regular street clothes? I mean, sure it's summer and all, but given that most diners have a strict "No Shoes, No Shirt No Service" policy I find it hard to believe they'd let a half-naked guy inside, even if he was a Superhero.

Maybe you could put him in a loose-fitting turtleneck and denim overalls. Or, better yet, what if the scene took place at the beach? That way I could be wearing a pair of swim trunks too. You guys take care of personal trainers and chefs and all that, right? Not that I'm out of shape or anything, but given that the camera adds ten pounds, a little toning definitely wouldn't hurt.

Now, here's the thing. If diner guy is going to be at the beach, we can't really go around calling him "Diner Guy," now can we? How about instead of being diner guy, he could be Stretch's cool-ass surfer cousin from California. Or his brother. Not his evil brother Wretch, but his other brother, the one that nobody knows about because he was put up for adoption. No, wait, I know! He's actually Stretch's twin brother, but he was stolen at birth

and the Nurses told their mother that only one of her kids survived. He could be like the brooding artist type, and you could call him "Etch A Sketch". Etch a Sketch Armstrong, the forensic sketch artist who helps Sketch catch the bad guys by drawing kickass pictures of the perps.

Or, if you don't think that's believable--which doesn't make sense seeing as nobody would believe a guy could stretch like that in the first place but whatever it's your movie--what if his name was Ketch Armstrong? He could be Sketch's sidekick, the two-masted sailing vessel who avenges Stretch's death after his arch nemesis evil brother Wretch brutally stabs him with a number two HB pencil in the opening scene. Huzzah!

I realize that part isn't in the script, but we have to face facts here. If we don't get rid of Stretch right away, there's really no sense introducing Etch a Sketch, or even Ketch for that matter. And besides, if we kill him off just after the opening credits, it will distract the audience noticing that his dog Fetch isn't around. Not that I don't like dogs or anything, I'm just allergic to dog hair.

So, yeah, you might want to go over these changes with the producers and when you figure out which direction you want diner guy to go, let me know. Oh, and remember look into the trainer and personal chef dude too. Don't worry about getting me a trailer, seeing as Sketch isn't going to be in it much, I'll just use his.

Anyway, you have my Hotmail, Yahoo, and Gmail addresses, as well as my cell number and the direct line to the Dominos Pizza I'm working at until my acting career gets going. And if you call me at work and I'm not there, just tell Hal to look out back, I'm probably just on a smoke break.

**Just Because a Rabbit Isn't Chocolate...**  
**by**  
**F. John Sharp**

I've set a trap for the Easter  
bunny, made of carrot  
flavored jelly beans and  
a snare, outside in a bed  
of tulips near a colorful  
basket bearing the name  
of a child. My kids  
will be only slightly  
disappointed there is no candy—  
which we'll buy on sale  
tomorrow—but will  
simply love the dinner we're having,  
which I will say is chicken.

**Strange Fish**  
by  
**David Powell**

"I've bought you something," she said. She looked excited, like a puppy eager to please.

"Oh really? What could that be? A season ticket to the opera, or a year's supply of anti-depressants?" he said and shut the front door.

"Ow," said the door. "Not so hard."

"You'll like it, I think," she said. Her tongue was hanging out and she'd cocked her head to one side so that her ear flopped in a cute way over her left eye. "It's to help your recovery. Come through."

She led him into the sitting room.

"It's an aquarium," he said. "It's just what I've always wanted. Is there a sunken ship?"

"Yes, and a cave and it's got pebbles in it."

"Does it have any fish?"

"No, not yet."

"Wow, it's like...zen aquarium. I can imagine the sound of one fish clapping."

"No." She scratched behind her ear. "You can pick the ones you want. I've arranged for you to go to the shop tomorrow. It's all paid for - you just have to choose."

"Thank you," he said and burst into tears.

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The next morning he walked to the pet shop.

"Mornin', Guv'nor," said a squat looking rubbish bin outside. "Just put that ciggy in here."

He dropped the cigarette he'd been smoking on the floor and crushed it. "Don't tell me what to do," he said to the bin.

"You can't do that," the bin shouted after him.

"My wife, she said I could have fish," he said to the man behind the counter.

"Ah, yes mister...?"

"Fish," he stated again.

"Marion, Mister Fish is here for his erm... fish.

"Oh yes," Marion said from 'out the back'. "Your wife came in yesterday, didn't she. She told me about you. Please choose whatever you want from the tanks in this area here," she said indicating like a weather forecaster. "I recommend about twenty five small fish for your size aquarium."

"One of these," he said. A fish with a red strip down its side.

"I recommend at least four of those," she said.

"Why?" he said.

"They like to be in groups."

"Ah, strength in numbers, clever blighters," he said. "Okay, I'll take five. Three of these, two of these, four of these, three of these..." and so on until:

"You've got one more to choose," she said.

"Difficult," he said and flanked the bank of tanks like a general inspecting an armoured brigade. Then he saw it, right down at the bottom of the last tank; it was hiding. "This one; the strange fish."

"Really, are you sure?" she said. "Wouldn't you prefer something from higher up? They're prettier."

"No, I like his muddy brown complexion and his stern countenance. He reminds me of me."

"Very well," she said and caught the strange fish and put him in with the others. She'd packed all the fish into plastic bags full of water and put all the bags into a polystyrene box. "Can you carry this home, or shall I deliver it?"

"I can carry it," he said. "Good bye, Marion and thank you for the fish. We'll be very happy."

"You're welcome. If you need any advice-"

"I know," he said and smiled. "I'm to ask the strange fish. Goodbye."

He left the shop.

"Oi, I want a word with you," said the bin.

"Piss off," he said. "I've got fish to take home."

"Such rudery."

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"Ther yer go my beauties," he said as he emptied the last few fish into the tank.

"Oh, they're lovely," his wife said and licked his face.

"Yes. Which one do you think is my favourite?"

"Oh I don't know, maybe this one," she said pointing to an electric blue with a yellow stripe down the side.

"No, no, no. Oh dear me no. Far too flash. This one, hiding; the strange fish."

"Really, dear? Are you sure?" She looked worried.

"He likes the sunken ship because he's melancholy."

"Very probably," she said. "What do you want for tea?"

"Fish fingers." He sat and watched the fish.

The inane chitter chatter of the other fish was very distracting. No wonder the strange fish didn't want to come out. And what was worse, they were cliquey, patrolling the tank in groups with their noses stuck up, looking down on anybody who was different.

The strange fish was still inside the sunken ship.

"Yeah, I can probably get an estimate done by Friday," it was saying. "Won't be cheap though. I'll have to order the parts... well it's an old model innit...Yeah I know mate... oop, gotta go, someone's outside...never rains but it pours...Okay, mate, yeah...you too, seeya." As it spoke, bubbles came out of the broken hull of the ship.

"Yes, mate. Can I help you?" it said and adopted an expression of polite expectation.

"I thought you were melancholy," he said.

"What me? Never," the strange fish said and looked a little hurt.

"This is what comes of going on appearances isn't it. I'm sorry. Is this all right, the tank I mean? Marion said I should ask you if I needed advice."

"Lovely," the strange fish said. "Good temperature, filters working nicely. A diverting selection of tank furniture. Far too good for the chattering classes up there," he said a nodding his head towards the bright slivers of light at the top of the tank.

"Oh good. Is there anything you need?"

"You mean apart from an extra pair of hands and twenty six hours in the day? No, I'm fine."

"I'll just sit here and watch if that's okay with you?"

"Fine."

Later, he ate his fish fingers.

"Are they okay?" his wife said.

"They use only the whitest, most tender pieces of cod - no grey bits," he said.

"It does appear that way," she said. "What do you want for pudding?"

"You should eat more fruit," said the fruit bowl. "A man in your condition. I've got a couple of nice apples, or perhaps a clementine."

"You would say that," he said. "You've a vested interest."

"Have I?" his wife said.

"Yes. I'll have cake if you've got it."

"That won't count as one of your 'five-a-day'," the fruit bowl said.

"And can you take that fruit bowl out with you? It's annoying me."

"Don't come crying to me when you have a heart attack," the fruit bowl shouted as it was carried outside.

\*\*\*

Later that evening he watched the fish again. They were doing the same things they'd been doing before. Swimming around the tank in groups. One was stationary inside the cave.

"Now what did I come in here for again?" it said. "I've got a head like a sieve."

"Back again?" said the strange fish. "I'm just closing for the day." He was still in the sunken ship.

"Yes, I'm supposed to watch you lot. It's part of my therapy - to make me relax. The constant flow and movement is meant to sooth my overwrought mind. That's what the doctor said."

"Is your mind overwrought?" the strange fish said.

"Wrought:" he said. "Shaped to fit by, or as if by, altering the contours of a pliable mass (as by work or effort). Therefore overwrought means I've over-shaped my mind to fit something by altering its pliable mass too much. I don't think I know what that means really."

"Sounds like a load of rubbish to me," the strange fish said. "How do you 'over-shape' something?"

"Not sure, but that's what I've done. They said so. Anyway, things talk to me. They all have an opinion—I'm getting a bit sick of it."

"Sounds awful."

"It is sometimes. Tell me, what are you going to do now and can I watch?"

"I thought I'd pop up to the surface for a bite to eat—you have fed us haven't you?"



"Yes."

"Then I might sleep for while in that clump of weeds."

"Okay, let's go."

\*\*\*

In bed that night he couldn't sleep. His cufflinks were bickering about which one was the most beautiful. Then the bedside lamp started up a long and boring discourse on the merits of ecological light bulbs. He went downstairs to get a drink.

"Couldn't sleep?" the strange fish said when he passed the aquarium.

"Too many opinions, too much talking," he said.

"Overwrought mind again?"

"Probably the excitement. They get worse when there's excitement."

"I've had an idea," the strange fish said and told him about it.

\*\*\*

"I'm off out today to see my sister," said his wife next morning. "I'll be gone all day. You're sure you'll be all right?"

"Oh yes, I've got plenty to do. You go on. Don't worry about me."

When she'd gone, he took the car out of the garage and began to load it up. He couldn't hear himself think for all the chattering coming from the back.

"I don't know why I didn't think of this before," he said when he'd reversed the car up to the chute. "It's the obvious solution."

"Whoa, hold on mate," a man in overalls said. "You don't want any of this stuff?"

"No, it's got far too much to say for itself."

"Just stick it down 'ere will you. I'll sort through it for you."

"Fine, do as you want."

When he returned to the house, it was significantly quieter. "Cat got your tongues?" he said. He went over to the aquarium. "How am I doing?"

"Great," the strange fish said. "Keep going."

The fruit bowl started crying as he was taking it out to the car.

"Please don't," it said. "I won't say anything else. I promise."

"Too late for that," he said. "I warned you and warned you, but you kept on with that 'five-a-day' bollocks didn't you?"

Six trips later, he just about got everything. He had to saw the front door in half to get it into the car. On his way, he passed the pet shop and, just for completeness, he put the jobsworth bin in the car too.

"I really think this is taking things too far," it said. "I'm going to make a formal complaint."

"You do that," he said.

When he returned, the house was quiet if reverberant. It had never had much to say for itself anyway but now, it daren't.

"So, I've done it and I have to say, I feel much better," he said to the strange fish.

"You see, I knew it would work. I just had a flash of inspiration last night when you came down for that drink."

He heard his wife come in through the hole where the front door used to be.

"I'm in the back room with the strange fish," he shouted. "Do you like it? I've been busy all day. It's minimalist isn't it."

She had somebody with her.

"Oh I didn't realise you'd brought a friend back with you," he said. "You'll have to sit on the floor. Those chairs just wouldn't stop bleating."

"Hello there," said the friend. "My, you have worked hard today." He walked around the aquarium.

"Yes. It was all the idea of the strange fish. Bloody good one though, don't you think?"

"And tell me," said the friend, "do you feel excited now?"

"No, I feel fine. Relaxed."

"Well, you know what I think we should do?"

"No."

"I think we should go to this place I know; it's quiet and all the things are really shy so they won't say anything to you. We can have a chat about what you did today. Do think that's a good idea?"

"I don't know. If you say so. It might be good to talk. I like talking to the strange fish but..." he covered his mouth with his hand, "he's a bit of a know-all."

They got up to go.

"See you later then," the strange fish said. "I'm always here. If there's anything else you need advice with, you know where to find me."

"Yeah, okay. See you later. I'm just going off with this gentleman for a chat and perhaps a cup of tea."

He saw the wife standing in the hall. She had a tear in her eye and her tail was between her legs.

"Hello dear," he said. "I'm just off out for a bit with your friend."

She put her paw on his arm as he passed and nuzzled his neck.

"Might be easier if you got a take-away tonight," he said. "And don't forget to feed the fish."

## Contributor Biographies



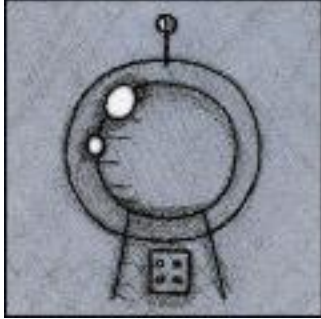
**Keith Wisniewski** is a writer currently living in the Pacific Northwest. Among his many achievements, he was one of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence, and the first to coin the popular phrase, "The hooker was dead when I got here."



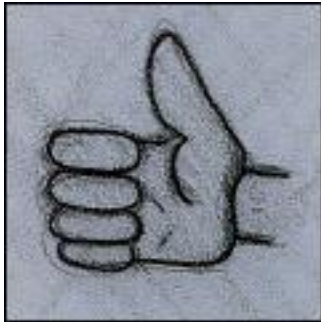
**Faith Gardner** lives in Oakland. Past publications, music she plays and other products of her whimsy can be found at [faithgardner.com](http://faithgardner.com)



**Ross Walton** is a graduate student studying creative fiction at the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Writers. He has studied fiction under Rick Barthelme, Mary Robison, and Steve Barthelme, as well as poetry under Julia Johnson and Angela Ball. Ross works as a sound engineer for the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage and is associate producer/writer for Mississippi Moments, a radio program heard weekly on Mississippi Public Radio.



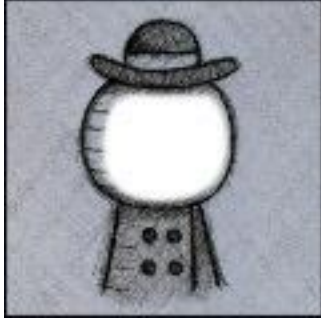
**Eric Hawthorn** lives in Boulder, Colorado, where he is pursuing an MFA at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, the finest MFA program he could get into. Previously, his work has been published in *Dog Oil Press*, *The Battered Suitcase*, and *Denver Syntax*.



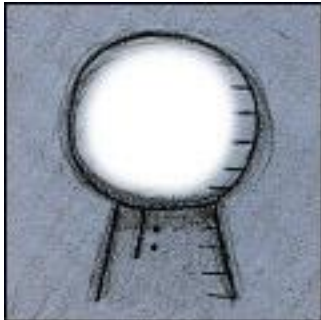
**Daniel Clausen's** work has been published in *Slipstream Magazine*, *Leading Edge Science Fiction*, and *Black Petals*. His short story collection *The Lexical Funk: A Triumph of Words* is free for anyone to download from [lulu.com/danielclausen](http://lulu.com/danielclausen). He has also finished a novel (currently in the process of submitting) entitled *The Ghosts of Nagasaki*.



**Christina M. Rau** is a professor of English at Nassau Community College and the founder of Poets In Nassau, a reading circuit on Long Island, NY. More importantly, she once played a tightrope walker in a fake circus in the second grade and has been petrified of balance beams ever since. She's also scared of human-sized costumed characters, but that's an entirely different story. She loves moonbeams, puppies, and sarcasm.



**Tom McMillan** lives and writes in Ottawa, Canada. He once saved a horse's life. It was not the least bit grateful.



**James Valvis** lives in Issaquah, Washington, where he is a professional hooky player. His poems or stories have appeared in *5 AM*, *Confrontation*, *Eclectica*, *Rattle*, and *Southern Indiana Review*, and are forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *Atlanta Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Hanging Loose*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *New York Quarterly*, *Nimrod*, *Pank*, *South Carolina Review*, and elsewhere. A novelette, "One of those Zombie Lovers," was a story *South Notable Story*, and a book-length collection of his poems is due from Aortic Books in 2011. Mostly though, he's just looking for a diet soda that doesn't suck.



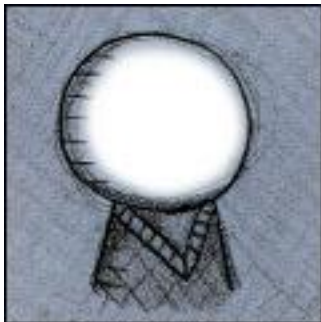
**Kate Lu**, a native New Yorker, is currently a student majoring in English and Creative Writing at The George Washington University, where she is also the fiction editor of the *G.W. Review*. When she's not writing, she enjoys taking epic walks around Washington, DC, and sassing people. Her work has previously appeared in *Sillymess* and *Gone Lawn*, and is forthcoming in *The Battered Suitcase*.



**Becky Cardwell's** writing has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Defenestration*, *The Rumpus*, *The Big Jewel*, *Hobo Pancakes*, *HumorPress*, *On a Junket Travel*, and *Wanderlust and Lipstick Travel*, among others. She currently lives in Vancouver, Canada, where she's hard at work on her first novel, provisionally titled *The Laboriousness of Writing a First Novel*. You can find her at [www.justmakingconvo.com](http://www.justmakingconvo.com).



**F. John Sharp** lives and works in the Cleveland, Ohio area. His poetry and fiction have been widely published in both print and electronic form, and he is the fiction editor for Right Hand Pointing. He can be found at [fjohnsharp.com](http://fjohnsharp.com), trying to build a worse mousetrap.



**David Powell** has worked as a professional musician, photographer, and motorcycle courier. He lives in Italy.