

# ◇ Defenestration ◇

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**After Opposites Attract**  
by  
**Robert Schladale**

When he met her at the marina with a single long-stemmed rose and the poem he had written just for her, she said if he didn't stop she would have to make him marry her. And when they took her daddy's powerboat out into Florida Bay and he told her not to worry about sharks she said fine, she trusted him. But when they snorkeled and he said that the death of the coral was caused by her father and other men like her father, they argued. They argued when she said he was unfair because he didn't know her father, hadn't even met him yet, and he said yes but a man can be judged by his impacts. They argued when he said they should drive the boat to another spot along the reef, so she could see for herself that the destruction was the same everywhere, and after they did they argued because she refused to get in the water with him.

They didn't argue when she started the Chris Craft and headed back towards the marina, crying. They didn't argue when she threw his dumb marine biology book overboard. They didn't argue when she finished the last two beers or when she turned around and ran the boat back to the red buoy where she'd left him, and they didn't argue while she watched the sun fall in the west and the tour boats leave one by one. They didn't argue when she couldn't hold it any longer and squatted on the gunwale and carefully peed over the side. They didn't argue because he'd gone off snorkeling and wasn't there for her to argue with.

They could have argued when she shouted his name over and over—Christopher, Chris, Reef Lover—if he'd heard her. They could have argued when she swore out loud that she was sorry, she never intended to abandon him and that he was the one who said the possibility of a tiger shark was remote, though it felt like arguing. They didn't argue when she screamed into the deepening twilight that if he didn't quit trying to scare her and climb aboard in the next five minutes she was going to leave him there for real, and they didn't argue when she started the engine, then stopped it and climbed down the ladder to search one last time because the water was black now and she couldn't see a thing from up on the deck. They didn't argue as she breast-stroked from the stern to the bow, and when her elbow collided with his face they didn't argue, either, because he was dead, his legs bitten off, or at least that was what made her scream until her scissor kick collided with his ankles.

They didn't argue when he came to, spit seawater across the deck and said he'd slipped and hit his head as he jumped in to snorkel. They didn't argue when she said, "Oh, God, Chris," and hugged him, or when he used three towels to dry his hair and wondered why they came away smelling faintly of urine. But they argued when she told him she'd hauled him up the ladder all by herself; he said no, that wasn't possible. They argued when she told him women have extraordinary strength in times of crisis, and even after he said, "Fine, you're right," they argued because he insisted on calling her a hero as they pulled into the marina. They argued when he shouted to a couple of oldsters that she was the Little Mermaid, she'd saved his life, and she had to yell at them not to listen. They argued as they collected their things and walked to their cars because he called her Ariel, and they argued when he said it was a pretty name, and that it fit her, Ariel, Ariel, so that finally she had to scream at him to shut up: she was not some goddamn mermaid who lived in a seaweed palace, she was a hot chick from a wealthy family. And he was no damn prince, no goddamn prince at all but just a whining eco-freak and she was glad about what had happened, even if it was an accident. At which point they stopped arguing because he understood that it is one thing to

believe that opposites attract and another to have your opposite tell you she pissed on you and wasn't sorry.

**Nature Poems**  
**by**  
**Carly Berg**

If I hear any more poems of naturestruck wonder  
Dancing leaves, twinkly peas, majestic thunder  
I will take you to some silvery waves  
I will hold you under

## The Predict-O-Ma-Tron!

by  
Chris Nelson

### The Setup:

"Why, how deliciously *morbid!*" said heavyset dowager Belinda Buxingham as she peered through lorgnette eyeglasses at the stout black box in front of her: *The Predict-O-Ma-Tron!* A thrill of exquisite, almost sensuous pleasure ran through her plump body and caused a single, elegant peacock-feather sticking out from her ornate headband to tremble rapturously.

"And you say it's never been wrong?" Belinda looked up through the aforementioned eyeglasses at Montgomery R. Whistlingcox-Falsborough, their host for this evening.

Montgomery R. Whistlingcox-Falsborough was an absolute *walrus* of a man: large, wrinkled, mustachioed, and rather ungainly when moving about on dry land. Indeed, if you were to imagine what it would be like for a walrus to dress up in a waistcoat and wear a monocle and invite some of his friends over to his Victorian-style mansion to have their deaths predicted, you'd have a pretty fair idea of what was going on this night.

"Never has been, never will be," said Montgomery proudly. "The leading experts all agree!"

"And just who might these 'leading experts' be, exactly?" asked Professor Simon Dunn skeptically. Dunn was a professor's professor—thin, bespectacled, and be-elbow-patched—indeed, the very incarnation of dry, pseudo-British sophistry. Nor was he lacking the iconic pipe, so there was no need to worry about that.

"Oh, *noted* scholars," Montgomery assured him. "From some of the country's *top* schools."

"I see," said the Professor, unconvinced. "And if you'd be so kind as to refresh my memory—how, exactly, does the device work, did you say, hmm?"

Montgomery stared blankly at Dunn for a moment, blinking. He had not the slightest idea how the machine worked. He knew that one had to have a blood-sample taken with a hypodermic needle affixed to one side of the machine, and that this sample was then submitted to the machine on a little glass plate, but as to what exactly went on *within* the machine—well, that might as well have been magic. All he knew was that, after making a small mechanical fuss, the machine would spit out a little slip of paper that would tell you exactly how you were going to die. Not where, not when, just *how*. It was as simple as that.

"Oh, various cogs and gaskets... fulcra, matrices, and what-have-you, I suppose," said Montgomery with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Steam-powered, I'm sure, or electro-mechanical hydraulics or some-such."

The Professor looked at Montgomery as though he had just explained that tomatoes were in fact very small, very red sheep.

"I see," the Professor said again.

At this point another guest spoke up: Colonel Hiram J. McGraff, a man needlessly clad in a pith-helmet, a khaki cargo shirt, and mustard-yellow jodhpurs in the middle of somebody's sitting-room.

"Is that an *elephant-gun*?" asked Professor Dunn with a measure of concern.

Colonel McGraff had recently accrued to himself quite a bit of notoriety after having discovered a lost valley of pygmies nestled deep within the steaming jungles of equatorial Africa. The discovery and subsequent Civilizing Efforts of McGraff's expedition had been met with what was being charitably called "Mixed Results!" in the news-papers, and the Colonel had, judging from his appearance, evidently suffered the tragic loss of his left eyebrow during one of the subsequent skirmishes with the natives.

"Bother *how* the machine works," said a potentially drunk McGraff, rising from his seat wobblingly and striking what he thought of as a rather valiant-looking pose. "What's important is *that* it works!" McGraff hoisted up a booted foot and landed it squarely atop an ottoman as though it were some huge lump of vanquished quarry.

Robert Waverly, a prissily-dressed and fastidiously-manicured man with slick black hair and a moustache as thin as his pretext of being happily married to a woman, happened to be sitting immediately next to the ottoman which McGraff's foot had just claimed in the name of the British Crown. The elephant-gun dangling precariously from a strap on McGraff's back swung alarmingly close to Robert's head as the Colonel gestured expansively.

Professor Dunn leaned in towards Robert and observed that it was fortunate that this was Real Life and not a play.

"...Otherwise," the Professor whispered to him, "convention would dictate that the gun 'go off' at some point during the evening, and that would be in poor taste—not to mention a perfect *cliché*."

Robert Waverly's lacily-dressed wife, Amelia, whose greatest assets were not intellectual in nature, said, "But if this *were* a play..." (here she put a single, extended index-finger to her lower-lip and looked about the room with an awe-stricken expression) "...then *this theater* would be a metaphor for *life*."

"Man," slurred the Colonel, "has already conquered the Invisible World of the Microscopic with his ingenious 'Penicillin'; he has already conquered the skies with his cunning 'Dirigibles'; now, with the advent of *the Predict-O-Ma-Tron!*, Man has conquered what little remained of the Future!"

For a moment McGraff waited for a round of polite clapping that never came. The lack of response did little to deter the stalwart Colonel, however, and he quickly resumed:

"...What's next?" McGraff asked rhetorically, with a flourish, and then answered his own question: "I'll tell you what's next: *The British Empire's conquest of the luminiferous ether!*"

Amelia gasped. Robert steadied his delicate, easily-flustered wife with a touch of his gentle hand.

"You don't mean... *outer-space*?" asked Belinda, agog.

"And just how is it, if you don't mind my asking," said Professor Dunn dryly, "that man will be able to brave the frigid, unrelenting vacuum of space, hmm?"

McGraff whirled on the professor and slurred: "Two words: *Space-Faring Dirigible*."

"That's three words," retorted the professor.

"Perhaps 'dirigible' is hyphenated?" suggested Amelia in an attempt to be helpful. She was gifted in neither Language Arts nor in Mathematics, and as the present matter involved both words *and* counting them, she was hopelessly out of her league.

"Hyphenated or not," said Robert, "such a dirigible would surely lie outside the bounds of What Man Was Meant To Trifle With, would it not? Much like that box over there..." Robert eyed the *Predict-O-Ma-Tron!* suspiciously.

Hiram McGraff, who had been nursing a gin-and-tonic since he had first arrived ("for the quinine," he had claimed; "After all, Malarial Affect isn't going to prevent itself!"), no longer harbored any qualms about observing appropriate "speaking-volume" or "interpersonal-space."

"No sense in a man pussyfooting around his destiny, Waverly!" McGraff all but shouted directly into Robert Waverly's ear.

"Well then," Robert said, annoyed, "I suppose *you'd* like to be the first to volunteer to have a go at it?"

### **Cast of Characters (Roughly In Order):**

#### **1.) Colonel Hiram J. McGraff:**

"Why, how absolutely *macabre...*" Belinda whispered to herself, feasting greedily upon the spectacle of McGraff's blood being submitted to the machine with bulging, porcine eyes.

The whole party waited in hushed expectation as the little black box whirred, churned, clanked, and, ultimately, produced a small, unassuming slip of paper.

McGraff thought it was probably even chances that he'd get either "EATEN BY SAVAGES" or "GORED BY RHINO," but in his heart of hearts he was secretly hoping to get "HURLED INTO VOLCANO BY PREHISTORIC BEAST." He didn't think this was an especially *probable* outcome, but what harm was there in permitting oneself to indulge in fanciful speculation every now and again?

McGraff plucked the slip of paper from its slot. For a long moment he stood there, saying nothing. His face was inscrutable.

"Well?" said Belinda eagerly. "What does it say?"

Slowly, McGraff held out the card for all to see. Everyone leaned in to peer at the portentous little card.

There, written on the slip of high-quality card-stock in simple but neat Copperplate Gothic, were the words: "THE BUTLER DID IT."

No one made a sound, but it was clear from the look on Belinda's face that this party had just gone up considerably in her estimation. Then, slowly, all eyes floated over to where Spencer, the butler, stood, a tray of *hors d'oeuvre* still balanced gingerly on his fingertips. Spencer had gone ghost-white.

"Spencer!" Montgomery reproached. "Is that any way to treat a guest?"

Spencer could not have seemed more surprised. "But—but I *assure* you, Mr. McGraff," he gibbered, "I—I have no *idea* what this is all about—there must be some kind of mistake!"

Professor Dunn bit his pipe thoughtfully. He still had his doubts about the reliability of the machine, but this turn of events would provide a *most* interesting case-study in human interpersonal dynamics.

"I thought the machine didn't make mistakes?" the professor said innocently in an attempt to "get things rolling."

McGraff could not have responded with more alacrity to the novel stimulus Professor Dunn had just exposed him to. Leaping to his feet and pointing accusingly at Spencer, the Colonel boomed: "He's taking it next!"

"Me?! But—but I'm—I'm merely the butler!" said the butler.

"And that is precisely why you are taking the test next—*butler*." McGraff held up his slip and pointed to the damning word. "I may not be able to evade your treacherous death-blow, but if I'm going to be avenged I damn well want to know about it!"

The Colonel then hiccupped.

## **2.) The Butler:**

"ROBERT WAVERLY SHOT YOU IN THE HEAD WITH A GUN."

Montgomery Whistlingcox-Falsborough considered this newest turn of events, stroking his wide, brush-like moustache thoughtfully. He had heard that the machine's predictions had a tendency to be ambiguous, to mislead without ever actually telling a falsehood. A person might receive, say, "KILLED BY A HEART-ATTACK." That person would then begin a brisk exercise regimen, swear off red meat and begin to drink one glass of red wine at dinner every night only to be stabbed in the heart by a maniac one day while trying on ascots and waist-breeches at the local haberdasher's. In this case, in contrast, it seemed that the machine was doing everything in its power to make things as explicitly clear as possible.

"Well," said Professor Dunn, "it doesn't leave much to the imagination, does it?"

"And after all your kind hospitality!" Robert said plaintively to Spencer. "I must say, this makes me feel just *dreadful*."

The Colonel peered at Robert suspiciously. He wasn't too keen on the idea of this slim-waisted woman-man carrying out vengeance for his murder. But at the end of the day a dead butler was a dead butler, so there was no sense in complaining about things.



### 3.) Robert Waverly:

"AMELIA\* KILLED YOU. SHE NEEDS YOU OUT OF THE WAY BECAUSE SHE'S HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH MONTGOMERY W.-F. \*IS CARRYING HIS BABY AT MOMENT, IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING ABOUT THAT."

"I say," said Montgomery, quite pleased with himself for having made such a shrewd business investment, "this must surely be the most thorough, the most accurate—in short, the very *finest Predict-O-Ma-Tron!* yet produced!"

"Then it's true!" squealed Belinda, who was glad that—so far, at least—no one had killed her, for this meant she would be alive to spread this latest juicy little nibble of gossip. "Why, Montgomery, you *scoundrel!*" she teased, and batted her long, bovine eyelashes at him coyly.

"Well, I'll be a cuckolded ninny-britches!" said Robert vexedly, placing his hands on his hips. "You little trollop!" The idea of another man being with his wife... well, it did not particularly faze him one way or the other, but this bit of news was irksome nevertheless—it was the *principle* of the matter!

"Oh, Robert," Amelia wailed, the heart-wrench dripping from her every word, "I—I didn't mean for you to find out like this!"

"Really?" said Professor Dunn sarcastically. "Then what kind of machine *did* you intend him to find out from?"

The good Professor was by now really rather enjoying himself.

### 4.) Amelia Waverly:

"MONTGOMERY SKEWERED YOU WITH A FIRE-POKER. (YOU'RE REALLY NOT ALL THAT GOOD FOR HIS REPUTATION, WHAT WITH THE AFFAIR AND THE BASTARD LOVE-CHILD AND ALL, YOU KNOW.)"

"I say," said Amelia thoughtfully, "do you suppose foreknowledge of one's own death would cause a person to cherish the days that *were* still left to them all the more?"

Amelia was promptly ignored.

### 5.) Montgomery R. Whistlingcox-Falsborough:

"THE FAT LADY STABBED YOU RIGHT IN THE FACE WITH A KNIFE."

Belinda gasped in almost equal parts horror and elation. All eyes shot to where she sat. Then, realizing that she had attracted unnecessary attention to herself, she attempted to conceal herself behind a tiny, intricately-laced Chinese fan which she strategically positioned just in front of her face. Thinking quickly, she decided that she *just might* be able to throw the rest of them off her trail... not that she herself had any idea *why* she was going to stab their host right in the face with a knife.

"Why, I wonder who on *Earth* that could be referring to!" Belinda said loudly, adding a shrug in order to complete the caricature of An Innocent Woman. The only person whom this

succeeded in fooling was Amelia, who said: "But that means..." (here Amelia scrunched up her delicate little face in an expression of intense concentration) "...the fat lady could be *any one of us.*"

"Hah! Who are you kidding, Belinda?" McGraff barked. "I've seen *bison* with less meat on them!"

Belinda *harrumphed!* "Why, of all the *impertinence!*" she said indignantly. She snapped her fan closed and raised her waddle in an expression of self-righteous offence. "Just for that snide little quip, I'm giving Spencer a special tip for killing you. Come here, Spencer!" Belinda got out her chequebook from her purse.

Spencer eyed the man he was destined to kill nervously. "I, er, that's—that's really not necessary, Ma'am," said the poor butler, who was not keen on reminding the burly huntsman of the role he played in the circumstances of his demise.

"Nonsense!" declared Belinda. "One good turn deserves another. Now: how do you spell your surname?" She wrote a number on a check, thought for a moment, then proceeded to augment that number with a trio of zeros.

Spencer knew better than to accept checks from guests like this (why, it was positively not-in-keeping with decorum!), but when he saw the quartet of digits representing the tip she was planning to offer him, a wide-eyed Spencer suddenly forgot all his manners.

"Er, ahem, that would be S-P-E-N..."

"Don't you take money from that murderous wildebeest!" said Montgomery, whose sense of loyalty was wounded by his longtime butler's sudden turning-of-coat. But then he paused, looking puzzled. "Hold on a moment—I was under the impression that Spencer was your *first name.*"

"It *is* my first name, sir," said Spencer, then he turned back to Belinda. "Now, that's S-P-E..."

"Fine!" said McGraff. "Give the snivelling sycophant his bribe. Who knows? Maybe *I'll* be the one to kill *you*, Belinda, for tipping *Spencer* for killing *me.*"

Belinda suddenly became very sober. "Why, I hadn't thought of that," she said.

McGraff folded his arms across his chest. "Yes," he said coolly, "I thought you mightn't have."

Dunn, a relatively intelligent fish in a pond full of blithering imbeciles, was two steps ahead of the group. He realize that, if he could get *Belinda* to kill *McGraff* before *McGraff* had a chance to kill *him*, then Dunn *himself* would be free to live to the ripe-old age of 50 before succumbing to dysentery like any other upstanding Englishman.

It was simply too good an opportunity to pass up.

"...You know, as long as we're on the subject," said Professor Dunn casually, alluding to a topic which none of them had been discussing, "I believe—if I'm not mistaken—that Colonel McGraff drew a somewhat *unflattering* comparison between you, Miss Buxingham, and the

recently-extinct *Hydrodamalis gigas*—the, um, the *Steller's sea-cow*, I'm afraid—in an article he wrote for... oh, let us say... '*Natural History Periodical Quarterly*' last month." Professor Dunn then reclined in his chair and shook his head sadly as if to say, *Oh, how numerous and sundry are the plights of Man!*

"I did?" asked McGraff, who, to the best of his own knowledge, had never heard of—much less submitted any article to—the obviously made-up journal.

This was the straw that broke the hippo's back. Belinda Buxingham was, admittedly, no stranger to being likened to various aquatic megafauna—but the effect of being insulted repeatedly is cumulative, and by now Belinda had had enough.

She whirled around to face the Colonel. "Why, you loathsome, filth-mongering *brute!*" she shrieked. Then, remembering the old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words," Belinda decided to add a visual component to her insult by grabbing the first object available within her left arm's rather short radius. This object, as chance would have it, was a large vase full of orange and yellow mums which had been sitting on a side-table next to her, and this she flung with surprising force and accuracy at the head of Colonel Hiram J. McGraff.

The Colonel himself, possessed of reflexes honed over many long years of Serengeti adventuring, was mere milliseconds in aiming and firing the trusty elephant gun he kept always by his side. A loud *ker-BLAAM!* echoed through the room as the bullet first shattered the airborne vase and then proceeded to hit the "eye" of the single, elegant peacock feather that stood out from Belinda's ornate headband. The feather was obliterated, and the bullet lodged itself soundly on the other side of the room in a Complete Map of the Known World, which featured all of the world's most important countries and even alluded to a few of the less-significant ones.

Belinda's eyebrows raised slowly. Her mouth formed into a perfect, silent "O" of surprise.

Smoke, mum petals and peacock-feather shrapnel hung in the air for a protracted moment before eventually settling to the ground.

"Damn!" said Dunn, irritated by the not-quite-successful implementation of his plan. Then, noticing suspicious eyes on him, he added, "*—GOOD! —er, damn good shot, McGraff! I say, bra-vo.*" Here the Professor clapped McGraff amicably on the back, hoping that this display would pass for chummy camaraderie.

For the first time Montgomery questioned the wisdom of his having allowed Colonel McGraff into his home wielding a loaded elephant-gun.

"Well, *that's* not how Belinda dies," said Robert off-handedly. "I suppose we may as well test her next."

Belinda's surprised "O" turned slowly into a "U" of delight as she realized that she was next to face her grizzly demise. "Oh, but I *do* hope it's something marvelous like 'THROTTLED VIGOROUSLY' or 'BLUDGEONED!'"

## **6.) Belinda Buxingham:**

"EVISCERATED GORILY BY DUNN WITH A BILLIARDS-CUE"

"With a *billiards-cue!*" exclaimed McGraff, winking at Dunn conspiratorially. "Why, Professor, I didn't know you had it in you." Dunn himself appeared mildly surprised but not all that worried about the fact that the evisceration which he was inevitably going to perform on Miss Buxingham (with a *billiards-cue*) was, it seemed, going to be a gory one.

"Oh," Belinda wailed, throwing her hands in the air in an absolute paroxysm of joy, "how extraordinarily *gruesome!* Why, I might even be in the *papers!*" She began to weep, overcome by emotion. Fat, wet tears of joy splattered down from her large eyeballs.

Spencer, now indebted to Belinda to the tune of four figures and thus favorably inclined towards her, leaned forward solicitously. "Hand-kerchief, Madam?" Belinda accepted the pretty little thing and blew her giant schnauzer noisily into it. As she handed back the full, dripping cloth to him, their eyes met and a small but unmistakable thrill coursed between them like electricity.

"Why, Mr. Spencer..." Belinda said softly, realizing for the first time what kind-looking eyes, what high cheekbones the butler had.

"Please," Spencer said, taking her hand in his, "call me 'Spencer'."

Admittedly, this was going to involve more fat than Spencer would ideally have liked—but then again, so did Bedfordshire pudding-tarts, and he ate *those* all the time.

### **7.) Professor Simon Dunn:**

"HEAD BLOWN OFF BY McGRAFF"

Professor Dunn looked down at a sheet of paper he had been scribbling notes onto and drew a line connecting a stick-figure labelled "McGraff" to another labelled "Dunn." Dunn realized that this line completed a circle which connected seven different stick-figures together in a big loop.

"Oh my," he said.

### **LITERALLY HOURS OF DISCUSSION LATER:**

"...And then I kill you, and you kill me..." said Amelia excitedly, pointing first to herself, then to her husband, then to her lover, and finally to herself again.

She was really getting into the spirit of things—they all were. A warm fire burned jovially in the fireplace, two more bottles of champagne had been opened and passed around, and the host, his butler, and all five guests now huddled eagerly around a small table over which had been strewn with papers, pencils, and half-eaten *hors d'oeuvre*.

Dunn furrowed his brow and stared, perplexed, at a schema of stick-figures which had ballooned to include everyone from ex-headmasters to current hairdressers. "But that means..." (here the Professor bit his pipe pensively) "...that *Belinda* should then be murdering *Montgomery* next."

"But *Spencer* is in *Montgomery's* will," said McGraff, leafing through a stack of papers on which had been jotted down summaries of everyone's living-wills and lists of next-of-kin. "She would have no *motivation* for murdering *Montgomery*—"

Robert sprang to his feet: “—*unless Belinda wanted to kill Montgomery and then marry Spencer for the money he would inherit!*”

The room erupted in a jubilation of cheers, clapping hands, and clinking glasses.

“Oh, Robert!” cried the adulterous Amelia, and threw her arms around his neck. “I’ve never been more proud to be your wife!” She kissed him on the cheek, and he blushed as was appropriate for a gentleman.

Hiram McGraff pumped a fist vigorously in the air. “Good *show*, m’boy!” he said, and punched Robert playfully in the shoulder. This had the unintended consequence of toppling the frail little man over.

Amelia leaned over towards Belinda to congratulate her on the wedding which (apparently) she was going to be having with Spencer. Belinda reciprocated by insisting that Amelia be one of her bride’s-maids.

“I wonder when this is all going to happen,” Montgomery mused aloud.

“Well,” said Professor Dunn, refilling his pipe for a well-deserved smoke after all their hard work, “the machine doesn’t tell us any specifics, so we don’t know the *where* and the *when* of the murders. I suppose all we really know is that, *whenever* this happens, it’ll be some time when we’re all gathered together. You see, according to the machine, each of us is going to kill one other person in this room. That means that, for the circle to be completed, we’re all going to have to murder each other more or less simultaneously.”

A silence hung over the room for a moment.

It then occurred to Montgomery that *right now* was an instance of the seven of them being gathered together.

Belinda Buxingham’s sausage-like fingers toyed restlessly with the many strands of pearls looped around her thick, fat-laden neck.

She chuckled darkly.

She could hardly wait for the carnage to begin.

**THE END... OR IS IT??**

**Two Poems**  
by  
**Rachel Gellman**

**To the Ampersand**

There's a colon between our two  
separate parts. Let's add a semi in there  
to make us depend upon each other.  
I want to verb you, so we should really  
dash out of here, punctually,  
once they give us our sentence. Period,  
period, why must you get in the way  
of our desire to keep on going? I know,  
it'd be a mess out there without you—  
all those little ellipsis running around...  
But you, ampersand, oh, your voluptuousness,  
how your rolling curves save me  
from a comma splice. Why don't you  
comma little closer so you can finish  
this endless list? Please don't think  
I'd ever underscore your importance;  
no one brings things together quite like you.  
Out of a crowd, you stand—so symbolic—  
your only competition may be the mark  
of exclamation. But don't worry, the mark  
vacations all but a few days a year,  
while you, my dear, I need daily.

**Camera to Lens**

Some people might look right through you,  
but there's no way I could do that.

Your curves are working well.  
I just want to use my viewfinder

to frame your wide angles

my shutter releases.

You know what they say—  
it's not the length of the zoom,

but the way in which we zoom  
that really makes a difference.

I don't need no self-timer  
to open my aperture, baby

just let the light shine through so we can

F-stop, F-stop, F-don't-stop.

Let's focus on us tonight,  
until we just click, automatically.

Feel free to fully expose yourself—  
I won't run away with red eyes.

Your fears will be filtered, I promise.  
Just imagine our depth of field!

## **You Procrastinate**

**by**  
**Fred Smith**

You procrastinate. You study for every exam the night before. You prepare for every meeting that day. But somehow you succeed. Wildly. You are respected and known. So much so that they tap you to head the winter Olympics coming to your hometown. They appoint you five years before the Games. Does anything really take five years to prepare for? A year in, it is still four whole years away. A whole presidential term for chrissakes. With three years to go, you consider lobbing in a call to a couple of construction guys, get some estimates on a bobsled course and somesuch, but then the ex-wife rings your cell with some pain in the ass problem. Three years is 36 months. That's a buttload of months. Two years out you start a things to do for the Olympics list but don't get much past 1. consider calling Jeffrey to pitch in. Jeffrey handles concessions at the high school football games -- a good organizer. Probably a good list-maker too. You'll be sure to call him later. Last year, you actually call Jeffrey, but it goes straight to vmail. Must be on the phone. This isn't the kind of thing you leave a message for - help me with next year's Olympics of which I am in charge and have done nothing to date - so you'll call him back in five. You wake up last Tuesday. You lie in bed staring at the ceiling. Then it hits you: Holy shit, the Olympics start on Friday! You are pissed at yourself for not calling Jeffrey back last year, or at least leaving a message. Well, you have three days to do this. Fucking Christ redeemed the fucking world in three days. You'll be damned if you can't organize a fucking Olympics in the same time then. You just need to get going right fucking now! After a hearty breakfast. You need fuel. And a thorough reading of the paper. You need to be up on current events. Could come in handy when organizing an Olympics. After that, you retire to the sofa with your notepad and pen. Time for the organizer to get organized! So many questions. So many details. The games start on Friday. How long are these goddamn games anyway? You think a fortnight. Or is that Wimbledon? What is a fortnight anyway? Time to break out the computer. You google fortnight. There's a sale at Sears. You buy a pretty nice linen shirt marked down 25%. Linen can get wrinkly, but there's nothing better when it's hot. A fortnight is two weeks. But you decide to plan on three. Better safe than sorry, you always say. How many countries are coming? Let's count. Well, there's us, probably Canada. Probably a bunch of those little, cold countries too. You dig out a globe from your clothes closet. Jeez, there are a bunch of those little cold countries. You bet 30-35 countries are gonna show up. Well, all of those countries are gonna need a pot to piss in. First things first then...the Olympic Village. You call La Quinta. You tell the girl you need a couple thousand rooms for two no three (thinking!) weeks checking in Friday night. She tells you she has one. You take it. But you tell the girl in a firm voice that if any other rooms open up to be sure to give you a call. You're pretty sure she will. You trust that girl. After a few more calls to the national chains, you have 19 rooms locked down solid. Some of those countries are just gonna have to double up. And you're betting that girl is going to call back any time. Now you need to visualize the different events and what the infrastructure needs will be. You close your eyes to visualize. You wake up at 2. You'll work it out with the construction guy when you get him on the phone. You call the construction guy. You ask him if he were you and you were him what he would be asking you to get built for an Olympics. He reckoned he didn't know. Fucking idiot! Might as well get this moron started on something, though. You ask him to build you a bobsled run. He asks when you need it by. You tell him no later than Thursday night, which is crafty because you probably really don't need it till Friday. He says he's not sure what a bobsled run even looks like. You tell him to google it and get back to you asap with a quote. You actually say asap. Time to put that call into



Jeffrey. Not only is he organized, he has a Subaru. Jeffrey answers, but just after he says hello, your call waiting beeps. Things are heating up now! You tell Jeffrey to hang on. It's the construction guy. He says he googled bobsled run and doesn't think he can build one by Thursday night. You smile because you know you really have until Friday morning. Maybe he will come down on the quote if you give him that extra time. Crafty. You ask him how long he thinks it will take to build the bobsled run. He says three years. You beep Jeffrey back in and tell him that you will have to call him back. You need to think. Construction guy couldn't build a bobsled run this week. Could you? You think there's some plywood in the garage. Just before you get up to go look, it hits you - inspiration. Did those Italian Greeks when they were bobsledding naked 10,000 years ago even have a bobsled run? They most certainly did not, you are betting. They probably bobsledded naked down a mountain - that's the Italian Greek way. In fact, that is going to be the tagline for this Olympics : An Italian Greek Olympics - Back to Basics. It writes itself. You should probably get a banner made that says that. You call a sign shop and ask the girl to print you a banner and you need it no later than (wink, wink) Thursday night. She says no problem, but says if you order five or more, the price per banner is better. What the hell, it's the Olympics after all. You order five. Now back to Jeffrey. You ask him if he could spare a couple of hours this afternoon to help you organize the Olympics. He says sure, good ol' Jeffrey, and pops right over. You fill him in on the Italian Greek concept and he loves it (natch). Jeffrey asks what's on the to-do list. You knew Jeffrey was so into lists, you could just sense it about the man. You explain to him that if he is wondering if official Olympic banners were still on the to-do list, he would be dead wrong. That has been taken care of in its entirety, absolutely put to bed. And if he was wondering if reserving almost 20 rooms for the Olympic Village was a dangling loose end, well, he would be one seriously mistaken Jeffrey. That, too, is no longer an item of concern. What is on the to-do list is, then, of course, everything else. But banners and 20 or so hotel rooms, do not give them another thought, no sir. Being the leader that you are, you tell Jeffrey that this Olympics organization will forthwith implement a divide and conquer strategy tailored to organizing an Olympics in the most time efficient manner possible, since the previous go it alone strategy you had executed for several hours now appears to be in need of tweaking. In that spirit, and with a nod to whom owns the Subaru, you anoint Jeffrey head of all events in which people start at the top and attempt to get to the bottom as quickly as possible. You will be in charge of all events that involve sliding. And once you and Jeffrey get those done, that should just about cover it. You can see a look in Jeffrey's eyes. His noodle is noodling. Out with it Jeffrey, out with it! The opening and closing ceremonies are on his mind. Fuck! You forgot about the ceremonies. But hang on. Is Jeffrey sure those Italian Greeks did opening and closing ceremonies 10,000 years ago? Because if they didn't, it would be a total insult to a Back to Basics Italian Greek Olympics, wouldn't it? Jeffrey's pretty sure they did. Well, leaders lead but they don't have to be perfect. No sense beating yourself up over an honest oversight. But (that Jeffrey!) he has the solution. Jeffrey's not the type to throw out potentially insoluble problems without a solution in mind. You can use the high school football stadium as the venue for those ceremonies. Jeffrey handles concessions. Jeffrey even has the key to the place and he shows it to you. Jeffrey has like 60 keys. They must weigh 5 pounds. Ok, you have the venue. But ceremony implies something ceremonial. You are thinking uniforms, you are thinking precision, a display even of awesome might. Yes, this is developing nicely. Jeffrey snaps his fingers. He really does. He's got it. That Jeffrey! Jeffrey's brother-in-law Ronnie is scoutmaster of his son's Cub Scout pack. He knows Ronnie would just jump at the chance to have those boys parade around for the Olympics. Who wouldn't? But you are not sold yet. Would they be in full uniform, and you mean full? You mean kerchiefs twirled to such perfect points they could draw blood. Yes, full uniforms guaranteed. Will they be precise? After all aren't most of them around 8? Jeffrey says you will be surprised. You hope so, but you trust Jeffrey. Leaders have to trust their hand-picked assistants. Can they display

awesome might? That might be stretching it. But now it's your turn to come up with a high wattage idea...Does Jeffrey think Ronnie can get two or three Webelos to join in? Jeffrey thinks so, and then Jeffrey goes one better...he is pretty damn sure he may be able to get a couple of actual Boy Scouts, maybe even First Class ones. Ah, bringing in the big guns. Sold!! So sold, you think maybe you should celebrate having solved the Gordian knot of those ceremonies. You and Jeffrey repair to a bar for a celebratory nip. Nine hours later you repair from a bar for a celebratory good night's sleep to hit the ground running even harder (if that is possible) tomorrow. You agree to meet Jeffrey first thing in the morning at Denny's to plan out another ridiculously productive day. You wake at 11:25 a.m. fully clothed on the toilet. The phone rings. It is Jeffrey, fucking Jeffrey. The same fucking Jeffrey that thought that 8<sup>th</sup> double vodka would be a goddamn good idea, when you passionately argued that it would be better luck to stop at 7 and which thereby clearly encouraged you to order a 9<sup>th</sup>. And 10<sup>th</sup>. Round numbers seemed important. Jeffrey sounds like he might be on the toilet too. You look in the mirror transfixed by the deep, perfectly formed knuckle prints on your cheek. Do you have kidney disease? Dialysis would suck. And it would be Jeffrey's fault. Note to self: as soon as these Olympics are over, look into suing the hell out of Jeffrey. He has assets. All those keys have to open something. Being the leader that you are, you swallow your righteous anger. Jeffrey will experience your legal vengeance when the time is right. Right now you need Jeffrey. But actually you don't need Jeffrey so much today. What you need is to figure out a way to stand up and then locate your bed in this maze of a house. Just may sue the fucking architect along with fucking Jeffrey. You tell Jeffrey in the calmest of voices that you think this Olympic Games would best be served today by reflecting on the things each of you need to do tomorrow. For example, Jeffrey might likely put rent a mountain at the top of his list, but you will leave that for Jeffrey to decide. Jeffrey says something garbled and rings off. The next morning dawns crisp and clear. It is still crisp and clear when you wake up. The day before the Olympics! You are nervous but excited. And just a little proud. Starting tomorrow, all of your hard work is going to pay off. You meet Jeffrey for a late breakfast at Denny's. You sense Jeffrey is aware just how badly he screwed up at the bar the other night. Jeffrey wants to atone for his sins, and has done so by getting up an hour ago, piling into the Subaru and searching for his mountain. And not more than 20 minutes ago he found it! Oh, Jeffrey! Jeffrey can let you down, but Jeffrey always, always picks you back up where you belong. On top of that, Jeffrey didn't see any for rent signs around his mountain, so his mountain must be unowned! What a windfall! This Olympics will probably come in under budget. But does it have snow? Jeffrey thinks it does. That's good, because snow will likely play an important role in these Olympics. But wait, there's more. Jeffrey is about to explode with excitement. What do you think is smack dab next to Jeffrey's mountain? It is a pond. A pond perfect for sliding. So the pond is frozen? Yes, most of it. You stare at Jeffrey in solemn amazement. The little man before you has in one hour assured you of organizing the best damn Italian Greek Back to Basics Olympics ever. You probably won't sue Jeffrey now. You have one more little idea. A final flourish, the little red cherry on top of this scrumptious Olympic sundae you've created. What if one of you, and you're thinking Jeffrey here since he owns the Subaru, drove the 45 minutes across the state line and bought a buttload of bottle rockets to shoot off at the opening and closing ceremonies when the Cub Scouts are marching around? Spectacular, no? You stare at Jeffrey. Jeffrey stares back at you poker-faced. His eyes are telling you that he nailed down a mountain and a pond this morning, what the hell have you done? It's a standoff. You, of course, would be happy to go, except that it is 45 minutes away, and you don't have a Subaru. Finally Jeffrey clears his throat. What if, instead, Jeffrey says, when the Cub Scouts are marching around Jeffrey flips the football stadium lights off and on really fast. Genius! Done and done and all 100% legal to boot! You lift your coffee cup. Jeffrey does the same. You declare that this Italian Greek

Back to Basics Olympics is now organized. Your cell rings. It's that girl from La Quinta. A tear comes to your eye. Yes, it is finished.

Two or three weeks later you walk through your front door. You have just come from the closing ceremonies. The Cub Scouts were particularly excellent. The President of the International Olympic Committee declared that these were a most prurient and parsimonious Olympic Games. Impressive alliteration from a foreigner. You google prurient and parsimonious. Fucking foreigner. There is a message on your machine. It's Al Gore. Al Gore says that he had heard that you were the organizer of the recent Olympics and had done an excellent job. Apparently Al Gore has not yet googled prurient and parsimonious. Al Gore was wondering if you would consider heading a task force charged with lowering worldwide carbon dioxide emissions by 75% over the next ten years. Sounds interesting. Ideas to lower worldwide carbon emissions by 75% immediately flood your brain. No way it would take ten years. You decide to accept Al Gore's offer. Definitely need to call Al Gore back tomorrow sometime.

**What Hamlet Said**  
by  
**Sameer Saklani**

I answered the phone and he said, "I'm going to do it, Sandini. I'm going to kill myself."

And I said, "Who is this?"

He informed me that it was Ernest. Knowing it was Ernest, I responded, "No, don't do that, Ernest."

But Ernest was an obstinate man, there was no dissuading him. In the past I'd told him that it was silly to go sky-diving. Ernest went sky-diving. I told him he shouldn't involve himself with a boxer's ex-woman. Ernest courted, bed, and left that woman. I told him to be wary of the mercury levels in fish. Ernest's breath always reeked of fish. In retrospect, I believe Ernest may have been suicidal longer than I had expected.

Ernest kept on insisting that he would do the deed. Knowing nothing good was on television on a Sunday night, I told him, "Hold on, I'll be right over."

"Why? You want to discover my corpse?" said Ernest.

"No, not at all," I said.

"Then what? You actually want to see me end it?"

"What? No, Ernest, just wait. I'm leaving."

I hung up and began to put on my shoes. Libby emerged from her bedroom in a white cotton robe, with her hair tied up and her reading glasses on. She was immersed in a book.

"What're you reading?" I asked.

"Shakespeare," she answered, elaborating no more.

"Go on..." I said.

She took her eyes off of me and back onto the page.

"I mean tell me which play. I spent eight years studying literature; I think it's safe for you to mention the specific name."

"*Hamlet*," she answered.

"What do you think so far?" I said.

"I think he should have done it."

"Done what?"

"I think Hamlet should have killed Cladius as immediately as possible."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean 'and then what'?"

"What would the other four acts be about?"

"Why do you ask such inane hypotheticals?" she said, dismissing my query.

I grabbed my coat and reached for the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

Thinking the entire thing too gloomy and depressing, I answered, "Oh, nowhere. I'll be right back."

"Are you having an affair?" she asked suddenly.

"What, no, not at all. I'll be right back."

I was out, with the door almost closed behind me, when I stuck my head back in.

"Wait, are you?" I asked her.

"No, not even a little," she said.

"Okay, yes, well that's nice."

And with that I really left.

\*\*\*

I knocked on the door about forty-five minutes later. I had considered driving faster but there was no sense in endangering the lives of multiple people in order to save one. Either way, I hoped Ernest had not committed for life to death. Depending on the method, I may have been entirely too late or catching the last few minutes.

I waited for a reply and then knocked again.

Before becoming too worried, I heard him yell, "Open."

I opened and entered. To my initial surprise, his quaint apartment was still in order. Then I realized that suicidal persons weren't necessarily known to trash their homes in a violent rage. They were meek and mopey people so, fittingly, I found Ernest sitting in his loveseat with his head hanging low. I sat on the coach across from him.

I wasn't sure of what to say at first. I thought my presence alone would be enough of a consolation. But then I noticed that he began to become peeved that I wouldn't announce my business.

"How are you doing, Ernest?" I asked.

"Fine. I'm going to kill myself," he said.

"Don't do that. It isn't worth it," I said, quite lamely.

"Not very original," he criticized.

"Neither is killing yourself," I retorted. I felt rather proud of my witticism, and then quickly realized it was no time to be feeling proud of my witticisms.

"Prove to me it isn't worth it," said Ernest.

"Well..." I said, "I wouldn't do it."

"Of course you wouldn't do it," he said, "why the hell would *you* do it? This isn't about you. I take insulin for my diabetes, doesn't mean you've got to. Christ, shit, Sandini, what the hell are you thinking?"

"My god..." I said, taken aback.

"What else is there for me?" he asked.

I tried to think of any friends, family, or lovers he had.

"Well...there's alcohol. Have you tried that?"

He shook his head.

"Well, maybe start drinking. I mean, god, it sounds awful," I continued, "but there *is* that..."

"Doesn't interest me," said Ernest. "It seems to only be delaying the inevitable."

"I once had a girlfriend who claimed that everything we did was to delay or distract from killing ourselves. She was a bit of a pessimist. She also once posited that the world was simply a poor, running watercolor done by a crippled God. Lord, what an odd woman..."

I saw Ernest's head droop lower.

"Listen, Ernest, Libby has a psychiatrist whom she speaks really highly of," I told him. "She says he really penetrates the soul. Would you like me to get his information for you?"

"Rarely, if ever, have I enjoyed being penetrated," answered Ernest.

"Well, there's got to be something that'll get you out of this despondency. Anything, Ernest, just let me know, and I'll try my best."

"Libby," he said.

"You want to talk to Libby? Sure, sure, I'll give her a call and she'll be right over."

"No," he said, "you go home and tell her to come here."

"Okay, let's think of something else."

"Face it," said Ernest, "I've got nothing. I don't even have friends, and those are some of the easiest things to get."

"I'm your friend," I reassured. "We'll spend more time together, I promise."

"Really?" he said, a tinge of optimism in his voice.

"Of course!"

"You think we'll open our own business?" he asked, like an eager prospector.

"What? Uh, yes, sure, our business: *Sandini & Ernest.*"

"Or *Earnest & Sandini,*" he suggested.

"No, no, of course not," I said.

"Yeah, there's no way we'd be able to sell scarves in this climate anyway," he said, trailing off.

After learning of Ernest's peculiar dream of opening a winter haberdashery, I didn't have much else to say. We sat silent and still, so silent that I wished that Ernest would keep a loud clock in his apartment. But while sitting so quiet, and being able to think so lucidly, I had a thought. I remembered just how stubborn Ernest was.

"Well, Ernest, it seems like you're really going to do this," I said.

Ernest sat with his head down, making no reply.

"So I think I'll be going now," I continued. "You know what? I'm in the mood for a bagel."

"A bagel?" asked Ernest, raising his head, slightly incredulous.

"Yes, a bagel. Know where I can get a good bagel?"

"Well...there's the place on Henderson..."

"Henderson? There's no bagel place on Henderson," I told him.

"What are you talking about? Of course there is, I've eaten there often. They've got the best bagels in the city."

"There is no bagel place on Henderson. The closest bagel place around here is on Rosetta, and that's twenty miles away."

"There is a bagel shop on Henderson, right across the street from the bail bondsman and next to the used book store!" he shouted.

"What? No, no, that's a coffee shop you're thinking of."

"That is a bagel shop, you imbecile!" he said, rising to his feet in fury.

"You are simply an idiot, Ernest," I said, also rising. "There is no bagel shop on Henderson, and I am willing to place a wager of one-hundred dollars."

"Sounds like a bet," accepted Ernest.

"Okay, fine," I said. "I'll be back here tomorrow. If you can produce a bagel from this alleged bagel shop, I'll hand over a hundred dollars."

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow then," he said.

With the bet made, I left Ernest's apartment, hearing him slam the door behind me, still irked by my ignorance. I knew I would be back tomorrow and also a hundred dollars poorer.



**Venting Haiku, Composed in a Grubby Hotel Room in Pokhara, Nepal  
(dedicated to Bryan Adams, with apologies to fans)  
by  
Joel Hardin**

maudlin strains sift  
Into my thin-walled room  
God of Nepal nights

have you ever  
really, really hated  
a musician?

sixty-nine summer  
cover songs  
big in Nepal  
mediocre muse

I would die for you  
if only you could  
make him stop

## **The Non-Binding Employment Discussion** by **Thomas Mundt**

The Dad was tired of Baby Boy. Tired of his face. *Really* tired of his face, actually.

"G'morning!"

That's what Baby Boy would say in the morning, when he saw The Dad emerge from his Slumberator. (This is as good a time as any to tell you that The Dad never wore shirts when he emerged from his Slumberator. You should also know his chest was the color Burnt Sienna, after spending too many hours in the Pigmentation Alterer at his work.)

"I'm tired of your face, Baby Boy. *Really* tired of it." Baby Boy would just be sitting there in his Consumption Nook and that's what The Dad would say to him.

"You're funny!" That's how Baby Boy would reply, right before he spooned up a huge plate of Body-Invigorating Oats With (Extra) Lime Crystals. His favorite!

"That's right. I'm tired of your face. I'm tired of the way your face is all up in my Personal Habitat. And I've had it up to here with your face's inability to secure Gainful Employment."

The Dad pointed at the Designated Sustenance Quadrant's ceiling, to show Baby Boy where he'd had it. Baby Boy looked up and saw there was a hole in the ceiling. Then he saw a badger poke its nose through the hole. The badger lived in the Marginalized Goods Sector above the Quadrant and would occasionally poke its nose through the hole in the ceiling if she heard The Dad and Baby Boy talking.

"You're funny!" When Baby Boy said these words, The Dad noticed that Baby Boy's teeth were emerald-colored from all the Lime Crystals.

"I could eviscerate the fuck out of you right now, Baby Boy."

\*\*\*

Baby Boy's thirty-third birthday gift from The Dad was a Non-Binding Employment Discussion. The Non-Binding Employment Discussion was with Holdings Holdings, a family-owned-and-operated Swag Distributor in the City of Brandnewtownburg Sponsored by Cherry Vanilla Tonk With Ginseng. The Dad was able to arrange for the Non-Binding Employment Discussion because he told a very-important Rainmaking Executive at Holdings Holdings that he would pummel the not-so-living Jesus of Nazareth out of him if he didn't make The Dad's wish for Baby Boy's thirty-third birthday come true. (I should tell you that the original Holdings family died in a Partyboarding accident off of Hilton Head Island in 2008. There are new Holdings and they're Guatemalan.)

"Rise `n shine, Taint Taster." That's the Sleep Interference Communication The Dad typed into the interface on Baby Boy's Slumberator to wake him up. The Dad also played an electric guitar, the same one he bought Baby Boy hoping he would one day kick ass, which is something The Dad always wanted to do. Baby Boy just wanted to breathe.

"Is it my thirty-third birthday already?" Baby Boy had a gigantic boner as he said these words to The Dad.

"It's your day to ride your dreams raw, Baby Boy. A chance to chafe your thighs with success. An opportunity to skullfuck the stratosphere with everything your neighbor's got."

"My neighbor?"

"You're gonna boogie on out of my Personal Habitat once and for all, Baby Boy. Then you're gonna dip your wick into all kinds of crazy shit, all over the world." (The Dad was talking about Planet Earth, where he and Baby Boy lived.)

"Oh, fuck yeah!"

Baby Boy heard The Dad say those words time and time again, so *he* said them so that The Dad would know how excited he was to dip his wick. (Baby Boy wasn't entirely sure what *dip your wick* meant but he suspected it meant something incredible. He used context clues to get there.)

"That's right. You're goddamn right, Baby Boy."

"Goddamn right!"

\*\*\*

The Dad helped Baby Boy look hot as hell for his Non-Binding Employment Discussion. He rubbed Pussymagnet-brand Follicle Organizer into his hair until his scalp bled. Then he presented Baby Boy with a Suit Conducive to Discussing Important Business.

"This was your Granddad's. Buried in it for twenty-six years. Now he isn't wearing anything. Now *Granddad* isn't anything. He's a bunch of atoms."

The Dad said these things to Baby Boy but Baby Boy wasn't paying attention. Baby Boy was flirting with the image of Baby Boy in Granddad's Suit on the Reflectivationizer.

"Holy shit!" That's how hot Baby Boy thought he looked in the Reflectivationizer.

"I know." The Dad would've tried not to cry if he felt emotions related to how hot Baby Boy looked in Granddad's Suit. But he didn't. The Dad felt emotions related to The Dad inviting females over to his Personal Habitat and filling them to the brim with cock.

"Holy shit!"

After Baby Boy said those words, The Dad hit Baby Boy in the face with Holdings Holdings' *21 Pillars of Unimpeachable Excellence*, a pretty thick-ass book, so that its unimpeachably-excellent content would find its way into Baby Boy's face and, hopefully, his brain before the Non-Binding Employment Discussion. The Dad made sure to hit the side of Baby Boy's face that already looked like shit, the side Holdings Holdings would write off as a total loss from word one. (The way The Dad saw it, *no harm, no foul*. That was a line in a movie The Dad saw once, called *No Harm, No Foul IV: Eventful Happenings*.)

Baby Boy tried to say *holy shit* again because the *Pillars* was so powerful but he was too busy barfing up barf. Baby Boy could still see himself in the Reflectivationizer, though. He still looked hot in Granddad's Suit.

\*\*\*

Mr. Alejandro Holdings offered Baby Boy a Hard Drugs before the Non-Binding Employment discussion began but Baby Boy told him that he wasn't thirsty.

"I don't want a Hard Drugs, Mr. Alejandro Holdings. What I want is--"

Baby Boy really *did* want a Hard Drugs because it was his favorite soft drink and it made him feel like prancing but his head was too busy trying to remember what The Dad told him to say to Mr. Alejandro Holdings so that Mr. Alejandro Holdings would take Baby Boy away from The Dad and give Baby Boy a shitload of Job-Related Happiness. Eureka!

"What I want, Mr. Alejandro Holdings, is a shitload of Job-Related Happiness."

Mr. Alejandro Holdings was pleased by the words Baby Boy was saying. So pleased that he holstered his antique Uzbek Killgun instead of using it to shoot Baby Boy in the brain.

"Baby Boy, I'll be blunt."

Mr. Alejandro Holdings settled into his throne and started Virtuatexting a bunch of dudes with whom he played Games of Chance and attended Local Competitive Athletic Events. He wanted to see if any of them had a strong interest in partying after Baby Boy's Non-Binding Employment Discussion. (Several of the dudes showed strong, immediate interest.)

"Baby Boy, I'll be even blunter."

Baby Boy thought Mr. Alejandro Holdings was being perfectly blunt when he started Virtuatexting all those dudes, so it came as quite a shock to hear him say he'd be even blunter.

"Please be blunt as fuck, Mr. Alejandro Holdings." (Baby Boy knew The Dad would be extra proud that he remembered to say *as fuck*, which is Proper As Fuck Business Etiquette.)

"Baby Boy, let me be the Bluntest Motherfucker in the Galaxy. You're First Mate on a Chinese Shit-Ship, *sans* GPS."

"That sounds serious!"

"Oh, but it is. Do you know what *sans* means, you Wanderin'-Ass, Shit-Ship-Clingin' Butt-Toucher?"

"Saaaaa--"

"It means *without as fuck*."

"Saaaaa--"

While Baby Boy tried to pronounce the word that stood for the words *without as fuck*, Mr. Alejandro Holdings touched himself as he browsed images on his Pleasurescreen. The images were of extinct-as-fuck Beluga whales jumping onto vintage sailboats and Mr. Alejandro Holdings was very aroused by the Belugas' power and sailboat-shattering abilities. When he finished ravishing himself, Mr. Alejandro Holdings ordered his Senior Subordinate to rid his Achievement Station of sperm. Then Mr. Alejandro Holdings shared with Baby Boy some Absolutely Terrific News.

"Baby Boy, I'd like to share with you some Absolutely Terrific News. The News is, I've decided that I hate you. I hate you, Baby Boy, and I never want you to work for Holdings Holdings."

Baby Boy knew The Dad would not be happy to hear that Mr. Alejandro Holdings hated him, that Baby Boy would never work for Holdings Holdings. He knew it so hard that he barfed.

"NEVER!"

Baby Boy kept barfing and soon Mr. Alejandro Holdings' Career Objective Attainment Pod smelled of Chocolate-Enscenced Turnip Crisps, which are what Baby Boy ate for energy before the Non-Binding Employment Discussion. Mr. Alejandro Holdings and the Senior Subordinate exchanged an Approval Slap when they saw just how many Crisps Baby Boy had eaten and turned into barf. Then Mr. Alejandro Holdings unholstered his antique Uzbek Killgun and shot the Senior Subordinate in the brain.

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The morning after the day of the Non-Binding Employment Discussion, Baby Boy did not receive a Sleep Interference Communication from The Dad on his Slumberator's interface. Baby Boy had slept for-fucking-ever, had a shitload of dreams where Baby Boy took his Gnarlyscooter off jumps and pleased his peers in an Underground Intercourse Dwelling. Baby Boy felt great!

When Baby Boy took a seat at his Consumption Nook he noticed there was an Urgent Tidings from The Dad on the Dispatch Display. The message said:

*Baby Boy,*

*I've abandoned the fuck out of you. My intention is to sire an ass-ton of sons, all infinitely better-suited for Gainful Employment and Life Activities in general, with a new, unbelievably-sultry Domestic Partner. To do so, I've gone to Macon in the State of Georgia in the Formerly-United But Currently-Disheveled States of America.*

*Don't try to find me in Macon in the State of Georgia in the Formerly-United But Currently-Disheveled States of America.*

*You have been well-compensated for the abandonment. You won't have to do shit. If that manner of living sounds familiar to you, it should.*

*You won,*

*The Dad*

*P.S. You are hereby denied use of my Pleasurescreen. I may ask you to Expedited Express that to me at a later date.*

When Baby Boy finished reading the Urgent Tidings he powered on the Nourishment Preparer and pushed the Special Requests button three times to add extra Lime Crystals to his Oats, just like he always did. After twelve nanoseconds his Oats With (Extra) Lime Crystals were ready, but this time he didn't spoon them. Baby Boy slapped his face, the same face The Dad was so tired of, *really* tired of, into his Oats and sucked. He sucked and sucked and let the scorching Oats With (Extra) Lime slide down his throat and into his stomach.

Baby Boy didn't realize that the Oats With (Extra) Lime were setting the skin of his face on fire and that's why The Dad had always insisted that he spoon them. The Dad wasn't there to tell Baby Boy important things like that anymore but Baby Boy didn't think about that. Not once.

**Consummation**  
**by**  
**Lloyd Aquino**

Ever stick a vibrator  
in your mouth, bite  
down, and pull  
the trigger?

I bought a new  
electric toothbrush  
that cleans almost  
everywhere.

**Umbro-Matic**  
by  
**Gary Newhook**

He got the idea from a Persian Silk Tree in the backyard. It would make him rich; a patio umbrella that automatically opened when it rained. He spent a small fortune conducting research and building a prototype. A small circle that was three inches across at the top of the umbrella tied into some motors inside. When water landed on the circle, or wet mat as he called it, the umbrella opened with a "splong." It had some wires sticking out, the edges where he had made cuts in the pole were rough, it had to be hooked up to a car battery, and it opened far too quickly, but it worked.

After years of shopping the idea around in his spare time, he got a spot on a popular TV show called Serpent's Lounge, where powerful people in the world of business listened to pitches. It was sort of like a game show that you won if you could get someone to invest in your idea. His pitch on the show was going perfectly; he was engaging the investors, and they seemed genuinely interested. "Think about it," he said, "You're planning a barbeque, but all of a sudden it starts to rain. You're at work, and you know that by the time you get home, the patio is going to be soaked. Well, with the Umbro-matic, you don't have to worry. It'll open itself and keep you patio, and barbeque, dry. "

It came time to demonstrate his prototype, so he poured a glass of water onto the wet mat. Splong! The Umbro-matic opened too quickly. It smacked him in the face, bruised his cheek, and he struck his head on the floor. The investors passed on his product, saying it was too dangerous.

Perhaps it was due to the mild concussion, or perhaps it was just determination, but after coming so close to selling his idea on Serpent's Lounge, he quit his job, and devoted all his time to pitching the Umbro-matic. After the episode aired on television, a video was posted on the internet and went viral. Everyone had seen it, and even when he managed to get a pitch meeting, he was laughed out of the office. Despite all this, he kept trying.

Eventually his wife got sick of the entire situation, and ran off with the inventor of the Choptastic 9000. Arnold Watson, inventor of Watson's Self Gutting Fish, would call him on the phone and taunt him, until the phone company finally cut him for not paying his bill.

His brother made him go to a support group for inventors with terrible ideas.

"I'm Doug Snelgrove, inventor of the rotating frying pan," began one man.

"Hi Doug!" The group enthusiastically chirped.

"I spent my entire life savings developing a frying pan with a rotating handle, so you could easily dump pancakes onto a plate. It consumed my life. Thanks to you folks, I've turned my life around. I have a new wife and a son on the way, and I just got hired as a network analyst. Since I've given up on the rotating frying pan, my life has never been better."

His brother leaned toward him and whispered, "Are you learning anything from this?"

"No," he replied, "Because my invention isn't terrible."



He moved into his brother's basement. When another Umbro-matic incident, resulted in a compound fracture in one of his nephew's arms, he moved into the street.

He sat on the corner, penniless and alone. Just when he thought things couldn't get any worse, it began to rain.

Splong!

**The Doritos Guy**  
**by**  
**Eric K. Auld**

Somebody told me  
the Doritos guy  
died recently.

Although I wasn't  
paralyzed  
at hearing this news,  
a sadness overcame me,  
one that leaves  
a crumbling, artificial  
powdered-cheese sensation  
in my throat,  
with bags of guilt to follow.

I wonder  
what he thought about his life,  
this Doritos guy,  
that all we know him now as is  
the Doritos guy  
and nothing more.

What was his name?  
Was it Joe Dorito?  
Steve Dorito?  
Was his last name even Dorito?  
I bet it was something simple  
and easy-to-remember like  
Smith or Jones.

I wonder  
what his final words were,  
lying on his deathbed,  
knowing his greatest gift to humanity  
was a mass-produced tortilla chip.

Was he a religious man?  
His chips were all triangulated  
like the Holy Trinity—  
or maybe I'm overthinking this.

I wonder if he even liked  
Doritos.  
Maybe he preferred potato chips  
or raw vegetables  
instead.

I'm sure his final words  
had nothing to do with  
Doritos  
at all.

I can see him sitting up,  
accepting his mass-produced fate,  
calling a nurse to scratch his foot  
or change another colostomy bag,  
when, all of a sudden,  
a blinding light,  
his final breath,  
one last collapse back down to earth  
with an overwhelming  
*crunch.*

**Alone, in Good Company**  
by  
**Hall Jameson**

Melissa's guaranteed quick fix for depression wasn't exercise, drugs, or food; it was George Clooney. On a bad day, she could close her eyes and summon him, and they would stroll in the park, go snorkeling in Key West, or sit in front of the fire and talk. His presence in her life, though imaginary rather than tangible, was essential.

George was happiness.

Unfortunately, the *George-trick* wasn't working lately, not since her boyfriend Kyle moved out. The absence of both men left her heartbroken and numb, and to make matters worse, she now had peculiar new visitors.

She called them *The Interlopers*.

She had no control over *The Interlopers*; they just appeared, uninvited—in the shower, at the grocery store, while she was pumping gas, in the women's locker room at the gym. They had driven George away—the *gatecrashers*: Vincent Van Gogh, Tiny Tim, and Lou Albano.

Vincent Van Gogh, brilliant, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dutch Painter—her mother had kept a book of his self-portraits on their coffee table that Melissa had devoured as a child, seeing something familiar in his sad eyes, pale skin, and the swirling brushstrokes of his strawberry hair.

Tiny Tim—the musician (not the fictional Dickens' character)—was another of her mother's curious darlings. An autographed picture of him had hung in their kitchen for years. A hulking man with a disturbingly tremulous voice and wicked tresses, he had watched Melissa whenever she poured a glass of orange juice or milk, and had frequented her nightmares.

Lou Albano, the professional wrestler, turned manager, with odd rubber band facial piercings and a scraggly beard, had been a favorite character, not of her mother, but of her younger brother, Andy. Lou had been bold, cantankerous, and eccentric—the opposite of Andy. Her dear brother was quiet, intellectual, and brimming with anger. That last part he shared with Lou.

Of the three, Vincent was the most morose, while Tiny was quirky and askew, and Lou consistently conjured the dramatic out of the banal. The latter visited when she was agitated, encouraging the anger, devouring it. After the anger, Vincent appeared, miserably dismal and tragically doting. He would stare, wearing his familiar, fixed, self-portrait gaze. *Woe is me. Woe is you, dear Melissa.*

Today, she was at Macy's, because now that George was no longer a remedy for her depression, she shopped.

She sorted aggressively through the clearance racks, seeking the perfect top, or pair of jeans, something to make her feel intact. Vincent stood to her right, pawing through the neighboring racks.

"How about something in black?" he asked, presenting a solemn turtleneck. He held it up to Melissa's chest, frowning.

"Hmmm. Maybe something in gray or brown would suit you better; this merely highlights your sallow pallor, and brings out the dark circles under your eyes. Those of us cursed with a redhead's complexion need to take special care with the palette of our wardrobe."

Melissa shoved the garment aside and turned toward the mirror, holding up a scarlet sweater. Lou peered over her shoulder. "Red is good, it's bold, it's aggressive, it lets people know you're in charge!"

Ignoring him, she gathered a collection of tops in bright colors and headed for the fitting room. She locked the door and leaned against it, screwing her eyes shut, trying to picture George—the strong jaw, the soft dark eyes, the perfect, movie-star hair—but there were only starbursts and spirals, strange one-eyed animals, and wobbly-hooved creatures. Was she losing her mind?

A giggle interrupted her. Tiny Tim had joined her in the fitting room.

"Tim, would you please just leave me alone?" she whimpered.

"I don't think you should be alone right now, do you, Lissa?" he tittered. "Talk to me. You'll feel better. Maybe we could sing." A huge man, he towered over her, his face a pasty plate, a blue-bruise smudge under each eye. His auburn hair toppled in waves from his center part, frizzy and wild.

"I don't want to sing," she groaned. She glanced at her own reflection in the fitting room mirror. Her hair was dull; her skin pale and scattered with pimples; her eyes hollow.

"You are absolutely hideous!" Tiny sneered. He began to hum in exaggerated tremolo; a familiar tune, shifting to something peculiar, as if the familiar weren't peculiar enough.

"I think you should try this one on first." He held up an ugly polyester blouse. She glanced at the other garments on the hangers: a filmy halter-top; a purple bra with tassels; a tie-dye shawl, and lastly, the black turtleneck that Vincent had picked out—these were not the items she had selected.

She hurled the clothes at Tiny and stormed out of the fitting room, skirting past Lou Albano, accidentally bumping a mannequin as she rounded the corner of the aisle. The mannequin teetered, prompting Lou to charge and knock it over. He shouted triumphantly when it fell with a crash, then bowed to the lingerie section.

"We're the perfect tag-team, you and I!" he yelled after her, his billy-goat beard quivering.

Melissa began to cry as she ran out the front entrance of the store, Vincent at her side as they jogged across the parking lot. She suddenly wanted to get home and hide.

"Get away from me!" she yelled, shaking a fist at Vincent, stopping when she realized she clenched something in her fist. It was the black turtleneck. She stared at it dumbly.

Bells rang from the interior of the store—accusing bells! A man in a red polo shirt and khaki pants shot through the front doors and grabbed her by the arm. She did not resist. She handed him the turtleneck guiltily and allowed him to lead her back into the store. Vincent linked arms with her, shaking his head sadly, Tiny skipped next to her, giggling, and Lou stood on the hood of her Outback, applauding—a standing ovation for a tainted performance.

\*\*\*

Kurt Cobain shook his head. “Make some music. Keep to yourself. Have a secret, creative day,” was his suggestion. Princess Di sat in the rocking chair near the bow window, she smiled tenderly. Melissa was so happy to see them—these *cool* intruders. The usual interlopers were not there.

*Please God, let them be gone!*

Diana held out her hand to Melissa. *Come with me*, she whispered. She was lovely.

*I will!* Melissa breathed. *I'll go anywhere with you, Princess Di!*

Kurt began to strum Melissa's acoustic guitar, and a plucky version of “Tiptoe through the Tulips” drifted through the room.

*Wait! That's not right.* Melissa reached for the guitar. *Stop that Kurt! We have to go. We have to go with Diana.* Her fingers closed around the neck of the guitar, which grew soft in her grip, no longer a guitar at all, but a black turtleneck.

“No!” Melissa yelled and rolled off the couch, hitting the floor hard. She felt dazed. Vincent lay next to her on the floor, rubbing his head. It was morning. She had fallen asleep on the couch. The events of yesterday came back in a rush: she was a shoplifter, a *criminal*—that's what the store detective had called her.

She sat up and looked for Kurt, but he was no longer there. Tiny sat in the rocker cradling his ukulele, Princess Diana was gone. Melissa closed her eyes and moaned. She had wanted so badly to go with Diana.

Vincent began stroking her hair, pausing to run his fingers along the outline of her ear. “So perfect. So perfect for Kyle, if you want him back...”

“Stop that!” she yelled.

“Yeah! Knock that the fuck off!” Lou shouted, emerging from the bedroom, flexing his biceps menacingly at Vincent.

Melissa eased into the lone kitchen chair by the window. Charcoal clouds swathed the sky as she sipped cold coffee from yesterday's mug, longing for the rain, which did not fall. The sky remained urgent, close to bursting, the way she felt. She turned to her nearly blank living room; her naked kitchen—the easy chairs, the braided rug, the kitchen table, and the antique coat tree—all had left with Kyle. The emptiness reminded her of him, the way he made her feel. She began to cry, surrendering to Vincent's embrace, and when Tiny began to sing “Smells like Teen Spirit,” she sang along in an unabashed, quaking vibrato.

\*\*\*

Saturday night. Melissa's heels clicked on the sidewalk—a crisp, reassuring sound, almost real. Her girlfriend, Tamara, had invited her to an opening at the *A-Line Gallery*. Tamara, a good friend, knew Melissa was struggling since her breakup with Kyle.

The sequins on the collar of her little black dress sparkled as she entered the gallery. She checked her reflection in the glass: her hair shone, her eyes were bright, and the dress flattered her figure. It felt good to be out of her apartment. Besides Macy's, this was her first outing in weeks, and what made it particularly special was that she was alone; interloper-free. In fact, she had not seen them for two days, not since the prolonged bout of crying and singing. She almost missed them.

Melissa jumped when she felt a hand squeeze her arm.

*No! I take it back! I don't miss them at all!*

"Melissa! I'm so happy you came!" a friendly voice sang. It was Tamara, beautiful Tamara!

"Hi, Tamara. I'm so glad it's you," she squeaked.

"I have someone fabulous I want you to meet," Tamara said, linking arms with Melissa, guiding her to an installation of wire and wood, and a tall man with toffee skin and dark, wavy hair. "This is Paul. He's the creator of all this amazing work."

Paul was intelligent, sharp, and witty, and the conversation was surprisingly easy. They chatted for an hour and Melissa felt almost normal. Then she saw Kyle, and her optimism ground to a halt.

He stood by a huge red painting against the opposite wall, dressed in a white shirt and indigo jeans, a beret perched jauntily on his head.

*The beret's a little much*, Melissa thought.

A tall Blonde sauntered up and kissed Kyle on the mouth. Melissa felt numb. Seconds later, Vincent emerged from behind the pillar next to Kyle, and walked to Melissa, his head hung low. The string quartet began to play Mozart's, *Air on the G-String*, and Tiny stepped out from behind the cello player, shaking his rear obscenely to the elegant music. To his left a small bar served champagne and Perrier. Lou was perched on his toes in the center of the bar in a red unitard, ready to spring. They had been here all along, in hiding, waiting for her imminent return to the truth.

Paul whispered something to her, but she did not hear it. She nodded and laughed politely, feeling false and mechanical. Vincent leaned his head on her shoulder and sniveled as they watched Kyle and his new girlfriend work the room, slowly heading in her direction. Tiny danced behind them, all frantic hair and magic fingers.

"I have to go," she whispered to Paul, but he caught her arm gently.

"Do you have to?" he sounded disappointed.

"Yes," she said hoarsely, pulling away quickly, and walking directly into one of the massive wooden and wire sculptures. It collapsed with her snagged in its wire center. There were gasps, as the other patrons turned to look. She tried to free herself, but the wire caught her skirt and pulled her down. She lurched upward desperately, feeling her dress tear. Off balance, she stumbled for the front entrance, but Lou struck her from the side in a full body slam. "Where are you going?" He hissed, as Melissa fell to the hardwood floor. "You can't leave us!" he threatened.

Paul helped her to her feet. "Melissa, are you okay?" he mouthed, but she couldn't hear the words over Vincent's sobbing, Lou's shouting, and Tiny's singing. Kyle watched her from the edge of the crowd, smirking, pretending not to know her.

"That beret is fucking ridiculous!" she shrieked, as she left the gallery, allowing Vincent to slide out with her. She turned and pressed the door shut with her palms, looking back through the glass at Tiny and Lou.

"Don't follow me! I don't need you anymore..." she said to them, and to Kyle, and it was the truth.

\*\*\*

Melissa held hands with Vincent as she walked toward the bridge. They climbed up on the edge together and gingerly stepped over the rail. Vincent squeezed her hand, and then he was gone, disappearing into the dark air. The sadness left her, and she stood alone on the rail, alone for the first time in a long while. That was how it would end, how it ended for everyone.

As requested, Tiny Tim had not followed her. There was no madness here. Everything was perfectly clear. Finally.

Lou was also not there. There was no anger left; she was scrubbed clean by the breeze.

She breathed in the crisp night air and smiled. She stretched and posed, readying herself for the move she and Lou had practiced many times in her empty apartment, a diving elbow drop from the ropes, or perhaps a Moonsault; both special moves for the ring.

The billboard at the far edge of the bridge glowed softly, catching the sequins of her dress. The amber light illuminated a movie poster—a new release. The face on the poster was in profile, but she immediately recognized the square jaw; the dark eyes; the perfectly cropped, movie-star hair. Everyone else had left her, but he was back.

George had found her. She had found George.

She climbed down from the rail and walked back to her apartment, alone, in good company.

\*\*\*

Melissa scanned the produce section of the grocery store, looking for pomegranates. She loved this part of the store with its vibrant colors, smooth shapes, and promise of sweetness.



She heard a familiar laugh and noticed Kyle by the avocados. She hadn't seen him since that night at the gallery, three months ago. He seemed dim against the bright backdrop of fresh fruit and veggies, his gray fedora and its teal feather, a prop. He was with a different woman today, a Brunette, skinny, another prop.

Their presence did not disturb her. Things had been going well: it had rained; she had new furniture; and she was dating Paul, the artist from the A-Line Gallery who had shown up at her apartment the day after the incident to check on her, wanting to know more about the mysterious woman who had trashed his show.

She saw Vincent stationed by the onions nervously stroking his beard, watching with watery eyes. "Do you need me?" he mouthed. She shook her head and he looked disappointed, but only briefly. A smile flickered across his mouth, so quick that Melissa wasn't sure she had seen it. Then he disappeared through the swinging doors that lead into the store's stockroom.

She caught Kyle's eye. He nodded to her cautiously. She cocked her head at him. Between them, Tiny juggled oranges and pears. "Do you want to sing?" he mouthed and she shook her head. Tiny winked at her and followed Vincent through the stockroom doors.

Almost to Kyle, Lou stepped in front of her. "Do you want me to put him in a headlock? A chicken wing? A neck crank? Anything?"

"No, Lou, nothing like that," she said. Disappointed, Lou bumped the display of cantaloupes with his hip, nearly starting a melon avalanche, but Melissa caught the slide before any fell to the ground. Lou grumbled and walked past her, punching through the swinging doors.

She was in front of Kyle now. He stepped back, flinching slightly, as she reached behind him.

"Excuse me," she said, picking out a perfect pomegranate. "My boyfriend loves these," she said, smiling brightly at the twiggy Brunette. "Bye, guys."

"Take care, Melissa," Kyle said quietly.

"You too, Kyle," she said, not looking back. "Nice hat."

Walking back to her apartment, she felt light. A man sat at a café table in front of the coffee shop near her apartment. The other tables were empty.

"Cappuccino, please," he said to the barista. His voice was familiar and she felt strangely disoriented. What was *that* voice doing here in *this* space? She stopped next to the man and immediately recognized the strong jaw, the dark eyes, the perfectly cropped, movie-star hair.

George.

She reached out, and gently poked him in the shoulder with her index finger.

He was real. He did not seem surprised or alarmed, only mildly intrigued, as if strange women poked him in the arm all the time. Perhaps they did.

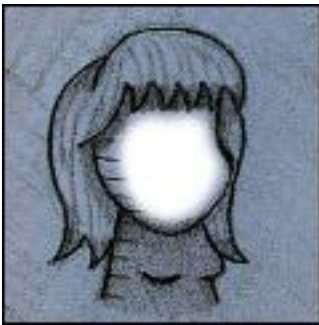
She nodded to him. He nodded back.

Melissa was happiness.

## Contributor Biographies



**Robert Schladale** currently occupies a small patch of Northern California where he is a recovering technical writer, gardener, Italian ice vendor, shoe salesman, Assistant Secretary for Health and Human Services, toll collector on the New Jersey Turnpike, nursing home orderly, mail man, energy economist, janitor, substitute teacher, research assistant at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, paperboy, and board member of the California Tahoe Conservancy. Most recently his work has appeared in *The Smoking Poet*, *Everyday Fiction*, *Word Riot*, and *Smokelong Quarterly*.



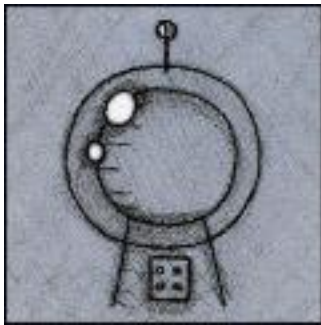
**Carly Berg** has a B.A. in English from Southern Illinois University and a M.S.W. from The University of Houston. Her work has been accepted by *PANK*, *Front Porch Review*, *A Good, Small Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, *Every Night Erotica*, and others. She wonders if a fruitbat bounced off her head that one time or if she just made it up.



**Chris Nelson** is 26 years old and lives in Allston, Massachusetts. As a Clydesdale, he is the first of his family (and indeed, species) to go to college, which he did at Washington University in St. Louis in order to fulfill a so-called "Quadruped-Quota" which they'd been having hells of trouble with. Chris would like to thank his steadfast companion Brian D. Stone, who tirelessly transcribes his stories from Hoof-Clop into Standard English. Chris's parents are conservative Southern Baptists, but to their credit they are gradually coming to terms with his being a Clydesdale. Chris loves them!



**Rachel Gellman** is a Bay Area-native poet and teacher living in San Diego. She does not speak Latin or ride a motorcycle, but she is an adequate kazoo player. Her poems appear or are forthcoming in *The San Diego Poetry Annual*, *The Serving House Journal*, *Aperçus Quarterly*, and *Poetry International*, among others. If she could be anyone else, she'd be Beyonce.



**Fred Smith** says: "I live in Ames, Iowa and attempt to make a living. I am consistently impressed by the writing of others. What I think is funny in my mind is outshined by the stuff I read on publications like *Defenestration*. So that spurs me on. I would really appreciate any comments from readers of this piece!"



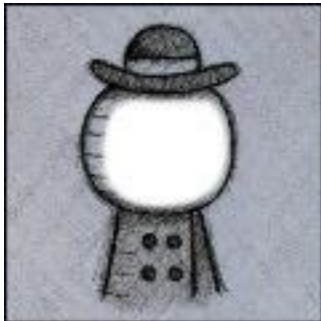
**Sameer Saklani** says: "The Supervillain is constantly copied, rarely replicated! Step right up and witness his histrionics, his swift gesticulations, his brilliant ballyhoo! He is the liquid Lothario! The charismatic Casanova! The amoral Adonis! Extra, Extra! Man lands on Moon and discovers Supervillain has been greater all along! He is the vanguard of verse, the Raja of writing, the tsar of the typewriter! The Supervillain currently resides in Tampa, FL and works as a wordsmith, huckster, jester, pugilist, and philanderer. Ladies and Gentlemen, you can contact him at [ssaklani@mail.usf.edu](mailto:ssaklani@mail.usf.edu) for whatever intellectual or loose reasons. I would prefer the Gentlemen to be intellectuals and the Ladies to be loose."



Smitten by wanderlust at an early age, **Joel Hardin** has spent a considerable part of his life dreaming of travel and earning the money to make those dreams come true... and a disproportionately small portion of that time actually traveling. During that time he has backpacked through much of Asia and Europe, and touched upon African and South America. After losing himself in the Himalayas for a few months recently (not intentionally), he has once again abandoned his native Texas, this time for the jungles of Costa Rica, where he currently resides in a mud hut on the Pacific coast, sipping Chilean wine and scrawling haiku on the backs of iguanas.



**Thomas Mundt** is the author of the short-story collection, *You Have Until Noon to Unlock the Secrets of the Universe* (Lady Lazarus Press, 2011). He lives in Chicago, but not the one you're thinking about. Read more at [www.dontdissthewizard.blogspot.com](http://www.dontdissthewizard.blogspot.com).



**Lloyd Aquino** began to disguise himself as a teacher-by-day, poet-by-night lothario because of the money, power, women, and free soft drinks at Subway the position supposedly afforded. That hasn't gone exactly as he'd planned, but he has had poetry published in *Pomona Valley Review*, *Suisun Valley Review*, *Turbulence*, *Underground Voices* and *Chaffey Review*. And he doesn't cry over the lack of free soft drinks. Not much, anyhow.



**Gary Newhook** is an amateur playwright from St. John's Newfoundland who is trying to make a transition into the world of fiction. He has been fired from Quizno's and once woke up on a strange couch after a night of binge drinking. You can follow him on Twitter @Gary1985.



**Eric K. Auld** has been writing poetry since he carved a haiku in his mother's womb at the age of -3 months. He is currently a Lecturer in English at SUNY Adirondack in Queensbury, NY and Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield, MA. He is an aspiring Nihilist and is working hard until he doesn't have to anymore.



**Hall Jameson** is a writer and fine art photographer who lives in Helena, Montana. Her writing and artwork has recently appeared, or is forthcoming in, *Up the Staircase*, *Blue Earth Review*, *Redivider*, and *Fractured West*. When she's not writing or snapping photos, Hall enjoys hiking, playing the piano, and cat wrangling.