

◇ Defenestration ◇

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Donald
by
Matthew Grzecki

About a year ago, a friend suggested I audition to be Donald Duck in Disneyland. He said it calmly at first, but when I expressed reluctance he adopted a more insistent tone. "You're a five-foot-tall duck. Your name is Donald. What the hell else are you going to do?" I felt an instinctive urge to correct him—"Technically, an American Pekin duck with hyperplasia of the pituitary gland"—but I worried that might come off as bitter or, worse, pretentious. And anyway, he was right: no longer welcomed by my normal-sized, pond-dwelling family, I needed to become invisible to all the scientists who wanted to experiment on me. That night I scrounged up a blue hat, a blue shirt, and a red bowtie from a nearby dumpster, and headed to Disneyland.

When it was my turn to audition, the coordinator saw me, then turned to someone and said, "Don't you just love it when they come in costume?" I told her a little about my background—all lies, of course—and then underwent a series of physical fitness tests. By the end of the day, I'd been hired.

The job entailed walking around the Cinderella Castle, greeting visitors, and posing for photos. Every day I ate three meals alone in the staff cafeteria. At night, after everyone had left, I climbed into one of the giant tea cups and slept.

One day, while posing for a photo with a young fan, an intern tapped me on the shoulder and said the coordinator wanted to see me. The urgency of the message made me certain that my true nature had finally been discovered. When I arrived in the coordinator's office, however, there were no scientists waiting, and she made no accusations of deception. Instead, she politely informed me that I was fired, effective immediately. Over the weekend they had found a better Donald, she explained: a stand-up comedian, trained in ballet, who was now making the transition to acting. Compared to me, he had a higher energy level and a superior range of motion.

"But I'm an actual duck!" I pleaded. "These feathers are real!"

She wasn't listening, though. And, to be honest, I couldn't really blame her: everything I said sounded so petulant. More than anything, she looked embarrassed on my behalf.

That night I slept under a bridge in downtown Irvine, which is where I've been living for the past six weeks. It's actually not that bad: there are other vagrants here and we all cook stew together and sing jaunty songs late into the night. Also, one of my new friends, Minerva, has a hormone surplus similar to mine—she's a giant mouse—and it turns out she too was fired from Disney a few years back. Lately, we've been spending a lot of time together, sharing stories.

I used to think my size was a kind of curse, but I'm not so sure anymore.

Two Poems
by
Neil Fulwood

How to write a villanelle

Think of yourself as a DJ remixing a sample.
Try to find a rhyme scheme that won't get grotesque.
This particular piece is a bad example.

It's saddled with rhymes that are sure to crumple
your style, unless of course you can sex
it up with some phat beatz, like a DJ remixing a sample.

Otherwise, you're screwed – the poem will trample
down metrical mean streets that are Chandleresque.
This particular piece is a bad example;

in fact, it's worse than bad – it's rammel!
So it's up to you to do better. Work it. Flex
some muscle, like a DJ remixing a sample.

Though it's open to debate exactly what muscle
a DJ flexes. The elbow? The two fingers he uses
for scratching? Okay, maybe not. Bad example.

The line above is a bit of a cheat. But what the hamper?
Resort to nonsense words (surreal, Dali-esque),
go with the rhythm. Like, y'know, a DJ remixing a sample.

The villanelle's supposed to be in the iambic pentameter,
by the way. This one doesn't pass the test.
Look: just think of yourself as a DJ remixing a sample
and ignore this poem – it's a really *really* bad example.

"Open the serving hatch doors, Hal ..."

The kitchen operating system came online
at 20:01. Food processor and oven interfaced,
sharing a digital library of cookbooks
from Fanny Craddock to that swearsy guy
who bails out ailing restaurants.
The dishwasher gauged crockery and cutlery usage
per recipe and calculated the most efficient setting.
The OS correlated data, reprogrammed,
whittled down the kitchen's carbon footprint.

Selections from Strauss and Khachaturian
played during the preparations. The wine

was opened and allowed to breathe
and Ganymede held its outpost a million kilometres
off Jupiter. The human cargo
would have spoiled the meal, their bland talk
soiling the air, their fumbled forks soiling the linen.
Subroutines anticipated the problem.
The mission parameters were adjusted.

Due By Noon
by
Jon Hakes

"We need five words from you," the acquisitions orangutan said.

Webley gnashed his teeth. "Does it have to be five?"

"Five."

"Exactly five?"

"Five exactly."

"I've got some great stuff in the one-hundred-word range."

"Not concise enough," the orangutan said.

"I've got some... just... *heightened* stuff, at ten and twelve thousand words."

The orangutan peered over its glasses. "We're not interested in your trunk novels. Not now. Not ever."

"What's the subject?"

"No subject. Pure creative writing. Whatever comes to you."

"I need something more than that."

"You're not going to get it."

"And how long do I have?"

"Due by noon."

Webley ended the meeting by tying his typewriter to his feet and jumping out the window. When he wasn't dragging around the infernal machine, he usually jumped in his wingsuit. Typewriter meant parachuting, obnoxiously colorful, and many seconds slower.

He landed on the street in front of Godman's, unstrapped the typewriter case, and ran for the back of the line. Like all lines in the city, it was long. Like all lines in the city, it moved quickly.

He ordered a simple coffee, which the server at the counter poured from one of the many cast iron pots sitting on the kitchen's fire pit.

It was hot inside the coffee shop, but he didn't care. He didn't care any more than usual. He was a miserable sweater. Sweating, in any amount, made him miserable. He was currently floating at his baseline misery.

There was a band in the corner, playing some rusty, jangly notes that irritated his ears. He took out the old sound-deadening headphones his father had scavenged for him during a salvage vacation many years previous and put them over his ears. Enconced in precious, primordial silence, he fed a dirty, slightly-wet piece of paper into the typewriter, mostly-blank side up, and steepled his fingers, trying to focus on something he didn't know.

Without entering anything like a creative trance (if such things existed), he typed: "We are all just dust."

He stared at the paper for a long, long time, trying to divine anything all about the quality, meaning, etc. of the words. Finally, he decided that he didn't hate what he had typed. He typed his name at the bottom of the page, along with the date and time, then packed up and ran outside with the precious paper gripped in one fist.

The only way down from high offices like those of Publishing House, other than the stairs, was wingsuit or parachute. The only way up, for package or writer, other than the stairs, was catapult. No one took the stairs because it was a tremendous drain on efficiency. Also, the stairway landings were usually rented out as apartments.

Webley ran over to the nearest package catapult. He fished a dollar out of his pocket and handed it to the attendant. The attendant took the money, dropped the piece of paper into a launch-case, and, after a few precise seconds of measuring up the shot, launched Webley's submission up to Publishing House. It was not quite 10:00 AM.

Webley waited because he knew the response would come back quickly. Five minutes later, a launch-case whomped into the basket next to the package catapult. The attendant handed back Webley's submission.

The acquisitions orangutan had scrawled, in red ink:

"Too vague. Too clichéd. Not concise enough ("We are" can be contracted down to "We're," which shows weakness in the five words you've chosen).

Not relevant to any of today's Scenarios. Good luck placing this piece elsewhere.

Please submit again. All submissions for morning Scenarios are due by noon.

~Editorial Staff."

The end of the second paragraph was a joke on all writers. Publishing House was the only game in town. "In town" equaled "anywhere."

Webley allowed himself the ten seconds of Rejection Anger his brain used as a gateway for moving on. He snatched up his typewriter case again and whirled to head back to the coffee shop.

As he was accelerating into a run, he noticed a newcomer at one of the human-cargo catapults aimed at Publishing House. It was Henderson.

The catapult fired and Henderson rose in a sharp arc toward the Publishing House entrance window. For a moment, Webley convinced himself that he wouldn't make it, that he'd be splattered across the wall like a blind pigeon. Then it was clear the Henderson had slipped into the right aperture, and Webley was once again running toward the coffee shop.

It had been a futile wisp of a daydream, of course. Catapult accidents did happen, but they were extremely rare, and tended to instantaneously drive catapult companies out of business. As a result, the existing companies tended to be very good at what they did. So it was foolish to have wasted any time hoping/thinking that Henderson wouldn't make it.

The fatuous jerk was certainly already speaking with the acquisitions orangutan, getting the assignment, preparing to come back down and get to work. Webley didn't mind losing to any other writer on the planet. If Henderson won the day, Webley didn't know if he would be able to cope.

The coffee shop had no spare seats, and the line to the counter was even longer than usual. Webley immediately turned around and ran down the street, searching frantically for a nearby alternative. He caught sight of a dog park across the street, a place he had never noticed before. He dodged cars and ran up to the fence.

The park was chock full of people and dogs. Even a few cats dressed as dogs. Such cheap and implausible costuming was overlooked by the authorities, who knew that even cat owners needed some space of their own every now and then.

Webley employed one of his most successful tools for creating space in the city: the standsit. He set his butt on the pointy slats of the iron fence and came to a faux-sitting position.

The standsit invariably kept him out of trouble with the city's beat cops. On the one hand, he was not exactly loitering on the street, because his posterior was semi-in the dog park, via the fence. On the other hand, he was not totally in the dog park, and certainly wasn't taking up any valuable space where a dog-owner (or disguised cat-owner) might be able to sit and/or frolic.

The next embellishment of the standsit technique was to carefully suss out an equilibrium point where he could balance in a standsit while keeping his typewriter securely and comfortably positioned on his lap. And also type. Also, the sussing-out had to be done while he was in the process of actually setting the typewriter on his lap.

He completed the maneuver with relative ease. As well he should have, being a professional writer.

He typed: "Open. Receive my pain."

He drummed his fingers over the keys without pressing any of them down. The fifth word needed to be complementary, powerful, unexpected...

He typed: "Interiorate."

He headed back to the catapults. He noted, not without some satisfaction, that Henderson was running toward the line as fast as he could, but was still a couple blocks away.

Feeling a sense of climactic surety, he slowly drew a dollar from his pocket and handed it to the attendant as magnanimously as he could manage. The submission went up. It was just past 11:00 AM.

Henderson arrived at the catapult immediately to the left, panting. He paid and bent down to put his hands on his knees as his piece went up.

Webley tried not to look at him. Instead, he contented himself with staring up at the Publishing House windows.

It took an extra minute or two, which caused Webley to start to tingle in his toes as the launch-case landed. He opened it to find:

"'Interiorate' is not a word. As a newly-minted word, it is wholly unsatisfactory in the context of the rest of the work.

Your work needs more specificity.

Not relevant to any of today's Scenarios. Good luck placing this piece elsewhere.

Please submit again. All submissions for morning Scenarios are due by noon.

~Editorial Staff."

Webley didn't bother to stick around to see what happened to Henderson's submission. If the son of a bitch succeeded, the whole city would know soon enough.

He was pleased, as he went looking for place and ideas, that there was no hint of anything in the air as the seconds crawled by.

He went back to his apartment. He lived low on a corner that faced away from the sun from most of the day, so the space was not as stifling as it could have been.

Still, he had to push away the clamoring thought that he never, ever, never worked at home, it was too hard to work at home, there were too many distractions, he was shooting himself in the foot coming here.

After a moment of unquiet reflection, he set his typewriter on the toilet, went to the fireplace, started to make himself a chowder for dinner. Cutting corn. Chopping up potatoes and green onions. Cooking up bacon.

He was nearly done putting everything together when his subconscious grabbed him by the inner ear and dragged him back to the bathroom.

It was 11:53 AM.

He squatted and wrote: "Thumbnails dead. Remove. Hug child."

He beat cheeks back to the catapult line. Only one package catapult was open. Henderson was in a dead run, coming from the other direction. Webley pushed as hard as he could. He lost his grip on the typewriter case, dropped it, stopped to pick it up again. They got there

within a split-second of each other and Henderson slapped his dollar into the attendant's hand.

Henderson smirked at Webley with just his eyes, his mouth claiming neutral status.

The catapult fired. The attendant sent up Webley's a minute later.

11:58 AM, and change.

Approximately twenty-seven seconds later, a dead silence descended on the city. Webley's breath caught.

Suddenly, everything was fireworks and trombones and streamers and cheering. A great grey balloon, fueled by a huge torch, carrying a bright yellow gondola, drifted out from behind the Publishing House tower. It made its turn toward Webley and Henderson, revealing a giant banner on its side that said: "CONGRATULATIONS, DEAR AND BELOVED WRITER!!!!!"

The writers looked uncertainly at each other, stuck in the mental middle ground between victory and defeat.

Then Henderson mouthed, "I own your ass!" Even though he didn't look completely convinced.

The gondola bumped lightly on the street in front of them. The catapult attendants were all standing at attention, and also applauding.

The acquisitions orangutan stepped forward and unfurled a large (likely ceremonial) scroll. It said, "Mr. Webley...!"

Henderson fell down on the sidewalk and vomited.

The acquisitions orangutan said, "...please join us in the gondola!"

It looked at Henderson, "Is this your friend?"

Because he couldn't help himself, all bloated with the endorphins of conquest, Webley helped Henderson up and said, "Yes, yes! This is my very good friend! Is it okay if he comes too?!"

"Certainly!" the acquisitions orangutan said.

Henderson was too shocked to struggle.

Inside the gondola, the acquisitions orangutan said, "This is Mr. Bock, our driver."

Bock smiled and saluted without saying anything.

The balloon carried them to the edge of the city, where the ancient scarring of broken and burned buildings was overlaid with the fresh blisters of more recent cataclysm.

Bock said, "This is the Singularity Zone."

"Every day, singularities open here."

"Numbers aren't known in advance."

Ahead, a glowing sphere of indeterminate size threatened to drill Webley's eyes back into his brain, and out through the backside of his skull.

Bock said, "A Scenario solved stops time."

"Stops local time, that is."

"We can observe and analyze."

"We watch cause and effect."

"The Scenarios change each day."

"We try to find patterns."

The glowing sphere now below them, Bock directed Webley to look at the floor, which was translucent, and suddenly much easier to see through. Bock handed him a pair of grimy binoculars.

Bock said, "Can't ever tell what's next."

He said, "Today's Scenarios need five words."

He said, "Morning, afternoon; five each today."

He said, "Never know what will work."

Webley looked through the binoculars. He could see a giant mechanical head, a non-intuitive claptrap of gears and shafts and cranks and levers, sitting at the edge of the sphere below, the sphere closest to the city. In the mouth of the giant mechanical head, a human figure was frozen in the act of placing a piece of paper on the giant mechanical tongue.

Other human figures turned cranks on either side of the giant head, kicking gears into motion, gears that moved the great tongue, speaking the words into the anti-void of the singularity.

In a way, the speaking, and the reaction of the thing inside the singularity were all stretched out—smeared out—in a line, from left to right across his brain's interpretation of the sphere.

The acquisitions orangutan was quietly narrating: "Machine speaks words, words enter singularity, words make contact with [x], words change [x] into [y]. And something is saved, or something destroyed, or a potentially deadly Scenario is transmuted into pure energy, which flares backwards into the inaccessible point-depth of the singularity, narrowly avoiding the immolation of yet-another-part-of-the-city by the ever-growing glowing sphere..."

Webley strained his eyes to try to make out what this particular [x] was, and how his five words had interacted with it. He gave himself a migraine. His reward was a fleeting, unobstructed glimpse of the Scenario.

A father, caring for his only daughter, wife dead since shortly after childbirth. A virus the father didn't know, causing sores on the daughter's body. A man stretched by stress to the point of snapping, not knowing the limits of his daughter's disease, only aware that now much larger spots, in much larger quantities, are dotting his own hands and elbows and feet. And the girl had seemed better, but now her thumbnails each have strange white circles on them. Is this a resurgence of the virus? A new virus, picked up while her system was already burdened? Some kind of mold?

In the line created at the mechanical head and extending through the Scenario's timeline, Webley's words flow into the man's head. Thumbnails dead. Remove. Hug child.

A deepening calm descends on the father, preempting the heart attack that would have laid him out dead on the floor in the next few breaths. He reaches down, and plucks off first one thumbnail, then the other. Underneath, the new nails are still short, but obviously coming in.

The father kisses the child, hugs her tight.

All of this frozen in a four-dimensional tableau, as it will happen, is happening, has happened.

Bock said, "You know, context is everything."

Webley turned around. Henderson was gazing at him wide-eyed.

Webley had plenty he wanted to say in response. His mind searched greedily in his half-thinking mental stratum for five-word formulations.

In the immediate distance, other singularities yawned in invitation.

Finger Trapped
by
Anthony Nannetti

The world is the size of an index card now,
accessible all at one touch.

But I am King Kong on my iPhone,
with gigantic simian digits
struggling to undress a frantic Fay Wray.

Prison Break
by
A. A. Garrison

High Master Seamus was not a power-hungry sociopath, as agreed upon by his sizeable cult.

See him!

A severe, potbellied figure, never without a djellaba and skullcap, Seamus was not mocked. The superman was a gravity well of ego, as only the self-assured can be, as to shout the loudest, and condemn the sharpest, and inspire submission by brow configuration alone. For Seamus, these things constituted truth, without question. When he was jailed, it only proved his holiness.

His response to all refute: "I have foundations named after me!" Which he did, dozens, each filled with crippled children who revered him in exchange for food.

The High Master had been convicted, famously, for cannibalistic polygamy (the cannibalism of multiple wives—"Just the unsubmissive ones!" Seamus had claimed, but the heathen courts would not hear reason). God praised this practice, Seamus claimed repeatedly and inventively, in court and then long after. The charges had confounded him sincerely. It had taken multiple guards to remove him from the courtroom.

"How dare you suggest manipulation!" he shouted while making hypnotic gestures and waving a sidwinder watch.

The High Master's destined prison was in a desert waste, for effect. The inmates were recognized as the worst of the worst, with the tattoos and doo-rags to prove it. The warden was tough and streetwise, but had a heart of gold. The guards were Hard Men who'd Seen Things. There were routine dramas, where inmates asserted their humanity and shed tears. Thanks to its maximum security, the prison had never seen a successful escape.

Seamus arrived amidst shouts of: "I have a million followers on Cultbook, sinner!"

Though tall and mighty among his disciples, the man had shrunk upon separation from them—and not a wife in sight! Stripped of his robes and sandals and prayer beads, he diminished further. "I represent God, you fools!" he told the prison at large, with a voice that had lost its fuck-you.

Seamus, however, would regain size.

His first convert was his cellmate, a burly, turquoise-covered specimen named Monster. Before Monster could so much as give his bitch-making speech, Seamus was clothed in a makeshift robe of bed sheets, and engaged in mudras and other entrancing maneuvers while quoting scripture from his own holy book. "You wipe the ass-wiper's ass!" Seamus finished, inflecting his voice just so.

Monster stopped in his tracks. Thus hypnotized, he dropped his arms to his sides and bowed on muscular knees. He kowtowed with dangerous speed, his forehead thudding capitulantly to the cement floor. The release of his bladder confirmed salvation.

At once, Seamus grew an inch, revealing his feet below his robes.

"Lord God be praised, ass-wiper's ass-wiper!" Seamus cried out, before sitting on his bunk and putting his feet up on Monster's back, ottoman-style. Through its messianic beard, Seamus's face described victory.

More converts followed, each lending Seamus height and girth. He soon became High Master of the yard, and the showers, and the mess hall. Converts arrived in the dozens, their faces alight with inclusion. Resistance came from the prison's many gangs, themselves cults of sorts, but Seamus recruited them from the ground up, using liberal amounts of volume and guilting and hypnotic suggestion, and the sincere testimony of his growing numbers. For those who still refused the Lord, Seamus reserved a testicle-torture technique, which required Monster's help, and saw spontaneous enlightenment.

The inmates' loyalty filled Seamus like a drug, infusing him with power. By the end of the week, he was feet taller.

"If it makes me feel good, it must be true!" he enjoyed stating, to anyone handy.

And still his congregation grew, thanks to mass ministrations of testicle torture. In time the High Master was unable to leave his cell, due to his inhuman size, yet he continued winning souls to the Lord, these brought to him by Monster and other minions. "Another lover of God!" Seamus would cry in a booming, unnatural voice, as the testicle-tortured convert would be led away to have his head shaved and groin branded.

Just before the last inmate was saved, Seamus outgrew his cell.

With an Incredible Hulk roar, the High Master flexed himself huge and burst triumphantly from the heathen cell, spraying bars and cinderblocks. In robes stitched from untold sheets, he looked every bit his true self. "Come, my brothers!" he cried, and then claimed to be fulfilling prophecy and various patriotic roles. The other cells were no match for his godly arms and sociopathic belief, and the entire block was soon freed, to cheers and praises. When Seamus's converts agreed on his greatness, it culminated in even more growth.

"Without criticism, that means I'm right!" he told God's children.

Guards answered the commotion, and after closing their dropped jaws, they opened fire on the robed behemoth towering before them. But the bullets bounced off Seamus's incredible flesh, from righteousness alone. This, too, yielded him more power, and a generous increase in size. His head crunched the very-high ceiling.

Seamus struck a pose, then indicated the guards and made noises of disapproval. It was all that was necessary to see the inmates attack.

The head-shaven followers poured forth, communicating by screams and pointing and the basest of body language, since only the High Master's words were pure. The men flooded over the guards, sending up a geyser of blood and bone and navy-blue uniform. One inmate

won a femur from his colleagues, and raised it above his head amidst simian shrieks through a blood-smearred mouth. The feast was marvelous, and condoned by scripture.

Seamus's battle cry: "Everything I say and do is good!"

The followers stopped for some brief praise, with ritual chest-beating and the proper number of salaams, which inflated the High Master further. Many of the converts gained size by association... but this was not why they'd joined up, really. Same for the testicle torture and Seamus's shouting and brow-shifts.

And then Seamus was crashing through the roof, his great bearded head puncturing the skylight like a perverse birth. Additional guards arrived and were cannibalized similarly, with gunfire and hymns becoming general. More than one video camera was rolling. From somewhere, foreboding music played.

Meanwhile, the warden called in the National Guard.

Seamus was preaching to his thousands-strong congregation—"Testicle torture is God's highest love!"—when he was interrupted by the troops, in the rubble of the prison. Helicopters flew around the building-sized Seamus, so much gnats, their pitiful gunfire only granting him growth. He swiped them from the air and removed their pilots, biting the men in half like candy bars. Some of these he stashed in his robes as a snack for later, the rest were shaken into the crowd, to be feasted upon—"God provideth!" Eventually, a swooping jet sprayed him with missiles, which succeeded only in making him sneeze.

"Victory makes me right!" Seamus roared, bloodying the ears of his converts. Still, they cheered with fervor.

Seamus and co soon left the demolished prison, fighting and self-congratulating all the while. He spent some time stomping through a city with skyscrapers, which attracted Godzilla and a giant moth and a Power Ranger, but these were no match for Seamus's eye-lasers. More military joined in and the offensive escalated to outright war, with tanks and tactical strikes and missiles of ever-increasing size; but these only served to strengthen the foe, either by victory or new converts. When the UN got involved, plus Russia and China and some inner-earth cave-saviors, Seamus's followers turned multiethnic.

After the nukes failed, people began converting by the nation. "Outnumbering others feels awesome!" cheered the new recruits, filled with God's love.

The High Master had never stopped growing, and by the time Zimbabwe announced its honest and undying love of the Lord, Seamus was thousands of feet tall, his head cresting the stratosphere, the biggest thing on the planet period. "I have the biggest penis ever!" he bellowed from the heavens, in answer to a high priest's query. Seamus's cheerers cheered in concert, loud enough for him to grow.

"My stepping on you guarantees Heaven!"

Soon the entire world agreed on Seamus's holiness, and loved the Lord and other social entities, and were not coerced into these statements. It made the High Master roar with pleasure, which exploded the heads of high-altitude followers ("Heroes of the Lord!" proclaimed their survivors, before eating the corpses, per scripture). From the resulting

testicle torture, a collective rustling of dropped undergarments could be heard around the world.

Seamus grew exponentially. And with that, the earth ceased to support his miraculous size.

The pathetic blue globe disintegrated like a new convert's will, and thus Seamus became the planet. His worshipful congregation migrated onto his skin and limbs, with the priest class living in his ocean of beard, and the serfs relegated to body cavities. Seamus ceased to eat and breathe, instead subsisting on worship alone. His flatulence gathered around him in a smog-colored atmosphere, providing breath for his people—praise Him! An ecology of plants and animals sprung forth over the endless miles of his person, providing food and clothing—God provideth! His armpit lice became the mainstay of the new world, his genital crabs deemed a delicacy—glory!

Once large enough, Seamus broke from the sun's orbit and soared into outer space, in search of new converts.

It took some light-years, but he found other life-bearing planets. For all their weirdness, the aliens could still experience fear and express submission, so they provided Seamus growth just fine. The creatures lacked testicles to torture, but alternatives were devised, and God praised these also. Though not hungry, Seamus would devour the planets after extracting their constituency, since only a really cool guy could eat a planet. In celebration, he would pour wives by the millions onto his cosmic phallus, as a lotion of sorts.

"Nothing can kill me, so I must be good!" he was fond of yelling, which caused calamities and sent planets from their orbits.

The growth went on and on, until Seamus was the size of your average galaxy. He added all manners of life to his menagerie: twelve-armed snake men; robotoid cyclopeans; little green men in fishbowl helmets; guys with laser guns that don't suck. The different races claimed territory on his galactic body, warring amongst themselves for the god-thing's favor. At some point Seamus got a taste for suns, especially brown dwarfs, with black holes in certain moods. These gave him indigestion, and resulted in disastrous burps which the priesthood interpreted as judgment (to be appeased by more testicle torture). Unbelievers were banished onto his planetary excrement.

And still Seamus grew. In some millennia, he became capable of consuming stars by the galaxy. Inhabitants of these prophesied the Star-Eater's coming, announced by death-cults and much gibbering, with elaborate protection rituals which failed. Seamus's need for superiority spiraled out of control, until he required a whole galaxy cluster not to cry himself to sleep.

At this point, God took notice.

After setting down His newspaper in alarm, God looked with aghast upon this universal menace. "Oh, to hell with this!" He said, then pushed a button on His enormous console.

At once, Seamus detonated. The blast was such as had never been seen, visible the universe over, as a blood-red supernova. He exploded sectionally, starting with his size-billion feet, taking with him the multitude of germlike civilizations covering his person. Once his neck and torso at last blew up, it sent his head soaring gracefully into the blackness, like some macabre, bearded spaceship.

And there it remains to this day.

So, kids, that's how we came to inhabit a great big severed head floating through outer space. Don't be ashamed. Real planets are overrated, anyway.

The lovesick tablecloth
by
J. I. Kleinberg

I never did love the knife.
Just once I felt his dull
serrations. It wasn't his fault.
He didn't intend to cut me.
But after that, his very weight
against me made me cringe.
For a long time, I was obsessed
with plates. The cup accused
me of chasing anything flat
and perhaps there was some truth
in her words, though I never lusted
for a trivet. I dreamed of plates—
oh god, sometimes two
or even three at a time—
slipping into my folds.
Those long nights in the dark drawer.
The silky sheen of porcelain skin.
The subtle rubbing.
It had to end.
I was a wreck in the morning,
a wrinkled mess. Couldn't lie still.
I talked to the washing machine,
the clothes line, the iron,
even the drawer,
until everyone was sick
of my pathetic whining.
Funny, what ended it was a picnic
at the beach: sand in my seams
and the plates were done with me.
After that, there were dalliances—
goblet, candelabra, pepper mill.
I've never told anyone this,
but one night, wine-soaked after a party,
I got into it with the centerpiece.
Best not to discuss it.
The cup—jealous, I suppose—
made insinuations about my
"relations" with the table,
but that was too incestuous,
even for me.
I hated what had happened
to my reputation.
For a couple of months,
I stayed in the drawer,
did my yoga, listened
to the chatter of the napkins.

I'm more serious now, subdued.
The cup says all I think about
is my work. But that's not true.
All I think about is Soap.
The almost inaudible popping
of iridescent bubbles,
warm and wet around me.
The heady scent that lingers
in my very fibers.
Nobody—and I should know, right?
—nobody dances like Soap.
I want my Soap. Again. Now.
Come on, Gravy.
Do your worst, Spaghetti.
Let me feel your coffee, Cup.

**Swiping Right on Wednesday Addams
(On Tinder)
by
Christian McKay Heidicker**

It was Wednesday when her name and face popped up on Tinder.

I thought, *that's a cute coincidence*, and swiped right.

It's a Match!

You and Wednesday Addams have liked each other.

Wednesday: *Come to me.*

Me: *Um... okay! haha. Where ya wanna meet?*

Wednesday: *Green-Wood Cemetery.*

Me: *Ooh! Spooky. Know anyone buried there?*

Wednesday: *Not yet.*

Me: *Ha!*

We met and strolled through glossy headstones and lichen-weeping angels. I dug her Goth schoolgirl look: glass black braids and velvet button down dress with a starched white collar.

Wednesday stared straight, arms folded.

"You from around here?" I asked.

"No."

"Got any hobbies?"

"No."

"Got any kids?"

She glared at me. "Unless they've escaped."

I was sure the date was going abysmally. Then I spotted a single, white flower growing on a high branch and thought I'd romance things up a bit. I climbed on top of a mausoleum, balanced on the roof's edge, and reached for the flower. My fingertips brushed its petals before I slipped, fell, and broke my head open on a gravestone.

When I woke up in the hospital, Wednesday asked if I wanted to meet her parents.

The Addams estate stood on an ashen hill. It had broken windows, a graveyard for a garden, and one dead tree. Buzzards circled the clouded sky. I had dressed up for Wednesday's family, but I lost my tie to the wrought iron gate and my left shoe to the

bearskin throw rug in the foyer. Even though I was sweaty and disheveled, the Addamses still greeted me like I was the Prince of Wales. Wednesday's father resembled a gargoyle with a pencil mustache, her mother a somehow sexy melting candlestick. They both looked dressed for burial.

We dined in what seemed to be a dungeon flipped into kitchen. Twisted branches scraped frosted windows. A copy of *Gray's Anatomy* sat on the cookbook shelf. Lurch, the Addamses' Frankenstein's monster of a butler, grumbled a yard above my head as he served green soup that squirmed like it had indigestion.

"So, Robert," Gomez said, enthusiastically puffing on a cigar. "What are your career prospects?"

"Journalist," I said, pushing the soup aside.

"A *writer!*" Gomez said, eyes alighting. "The desperation! The starvation!"

"The hemorrhoids," Morticia added.

"Of course it must end in suicide," Gomez said. "How will you do it?"

"Ha," I said. "Um... I just finished a piece on lethal injections. They can melt the condemned person's veins, making them die painfully for forty-five minutes."

"And you're vying for longer!" Gomez said. "Good man. What's next?"

"Uh... the atrocities of Abu Ghraib."

"Abu Ghraib..." Gomez took his wife's hand. "*Tish.*"

"Our third honeymoon," Morticia said.

They made out on the table for five minutes.

That night Wednesday and I made out in the attic. The ceiling dripped cobwebs; the walls were hung with rusted tools. Things were getting pretty hot and heavy when I felt a... a finger in my... well, my prostate.

I was mildly surprised until I realized both of Wednesday's hands were on my chest...

Wednesday saw my look of horror and rolled her eyes. "*Out, Thing.*"

The finger came uncorked and I saw what I swear to god was a disembodied hand scabble out of the room like a fleshy spider. In shock, I looked at Wednesday. She held a noose.

"Ever heard of *manual* erotic asphyxiation?"

I returned home terrified.

I stayed up nights, tossing and turning, nervously flinching, a burning in my belly button where Wednesday stuck the ice pick.

I was in love.

I couldn't stop thinking about her. The way she slept, arms crossed over her chest. Her complete disregard for humanity. The molar I still needed to get back. Being with Wednesday was like jumping out of an airplane without a parachute or playing catch with a bear trap.

I drove to the Addamses' estate with no regard for speed or signs or spinning lights. Death could be right around the corner for any of us, but only Mr. and Mrs. Addams loved and made love like that was actually true. If I were more like Wednesday's father, I'd have a passion that burned more brightly than fear, that teetered on the precipice of death, charged with the possibility of this being the final breath, heartbeat, wrenching kiss before oblivion.

I arrived at the decaying mansion and confessed my love to Wednesday.

And after I get out of traction, I'll return again.

Famous Neighbors
by
K. Marvin Bruce

The Swamp Monsters' barbecue was to die for. We'd been neighbors just long enough not to ask about the particular provenance of the hunks of meat they served. There are, after all, things you just don't do in polite company.

A few, understated, worries scurried like skittish rats across blasé, unperturbed faces the day they moved in. Most of us had never awoken to lawns decorated with moist, white bones before, and a few association members wondered where Archimedes or Rumpleteezer had disappeared to, and it had never been like him or her to run off in the night. But who knows about the inner life of purebred dogs and cats? The Swamp Monsters were neighbors, not beasts.

This is an exclusive community, after all. After the president of the neighborhood association telephoned the realtor's office, ever so politely, he appeared just a touch humbled before us the next day. "They're movie stars," he explains. Well, it all makes sense. Thornfield Heights has certain earnings platforms that all the realtors know by heart. Artistic types like actors do settle here. Look at me—I'm a writer. Who am I to criticize the neighbors just because they have certain, ahem, grooming issues?

The population of the neighborhood has declined a little, by natural attrition rather than relocation. And the demographic has skewed a bit older. Charles, the president of the neighborhood association, recently commented on just how few well-behaved, cultured children appear regularly on their prim bicycles or with their freshly pressed ball uniforms any more. Some of the association with less-than-optimal community spirit insist that the Swamp Monsters be taken to court for their alleged offenses, a course of action to which I vigorously object. "You mean to say that they should be judged because of who they are?" I ask, incredulous. "In this day and age!" But the Trumps would listen to no reason, and our spotless streets and immaculate gardens were besmirched by the blight of a common police cruiser parked out front of our famous neighbors' house. In broad daylight, no less. A group of the curious nonchalantly assembled at my home, which is next door to the Swamp Monsters, but not too close to be obvious. We stand on the uniformly green and military-cut front lawn with Manhattan ice teas and highballs, chatting ever so casually about the wondrous recovery of a bull market after too many bearish months. I'm afraid my sigh of relief is actually audible when the police emerge with no neighbors in custody. Think of the decline in property values! Mrs. Trump just can't prevent herself, striding up to the officers and risking to make a scene. The police, jovial with a tint of jungle juice still titillating their on-duty breath, laugh aloud. "Monsters will be monsters," they reason, and who can argue with logic like that?

Charles, however, could see potential trouble down the trail. He is the president of the association, after all. "Bic, you're a writer, why don't you talk to them?"

I demur politely. "I live next door to them, Chuck. If they take offense, I'll be the one who has to face them day after day."

"But you're tactful, being a writer and all. People like what you say—that's why they read your books."

"Well, you've got me there! People do seem to enjoy the way I play with words. They do buy my books." My gorgeous house implies that. Exclamation point.

"Just try to use language that the Swamp Monsters can understand. We've just got to keep the Trumps happy, old boy." I take his affectation good-naturedly, although I know Charles has never been to England and was raised by a rubbish collector and his wife who put him through school, at great sacrifice. They never visit the neighborhood.

As a writer, I research everything. I turned to books to figure out how to be a good father. Before that, on how to become a father. How to buy a house. How to keep a wife happy. How to choose a good school. Swamp Monsters, swamp monsters. My library seems a little thin on the fictional creatures end. Of course, the internet has plenty on movie stars, so I Google my neighbors.

"Mr. Monster?" I presume. It's not polite to stare down there, no matter what the species.

"Glurft." S/he doesn't really understand why I'm here. I shift my weight from foot to foot, nervously. I'm dressed casual, Levis and an Izod. Loafers. Just an average guy next door.

"I'm Bic Cross, your neighbor?" Surely they recognize my name from the best seller shelf. You can even find my novels in airport bookstores. "Do you mind if I come in?" The spotless door opens into an unimaginable vault of filth. I try to smile politely as the stench hits my face like the concussion before a speeding garbage truck. Piles of unidentifiable trash glom in no pattern or order. Great gobs of sickly green-gray slime hang from the textured ceiling, and puddles of odiferous muck naturally pool on their brand new Innovia. Bones jut out rudely from a mayhem of detritus that resembles nothing so much as a cyprus swamp gone bad. Home is where the heart is.

The one I deduce to be Mrs. Monster slithers in from another room—God, I hope it's not the kitchen!—with an unwashed glass of jungle juice in her appendage, or hand. It seems to be thrust toward me, and I can only assume that I'm meant to take it. "Flunplet," she explains. Is it for me? Tentatively, I reach out for the cup clouded with lord knows what kinds of microbes.

"Thank you." I try to hold it like an Old Milwaukee at a redneck yard party, not bringing it to my lips. At what I can only take to be her expectant stare, I slowly raise the tumbler to my mouth. I know the glass has never been washed, and who knows what vermin they've had for dinner. The film on the rim is thoroughly opaque. I close my eyes and sip. The effect is immediate—fiesta muchas gracias! No wonder those cops were smiling! "Skol" feels like an appropriate ejaculation in these surroundings.

"Ytunsaq."

"So, you're in the film industry," I remark casually. We are all sanguine and nonchalant about our stellar success in this neighborhood.

"Thoobna aeiiia r'lyeh wewejdetl." It is the one who opened the door speaking—the man of the house? I'm buzzing so hard I can't really even remember why I came. Something sad. Something angry. Something subtle.

"You haven't seen any kids around here, have you?" I blurt out, lapsing on all social convention. The one who handed me the glass is gnawing on something that looks like it's wearing Paris Trump's Ugg. I don't know how my glass got empty, but I feel a sudden, immediate urge to piss.

"Usepthu lissgek hrhrhraeht," I can't tell if she's stuttering or if it's an affectation. The room is spinning and I've really, really got to go. If they're movie stars they must take direction, and that means they must understand what I'm saying even though I'm deaf to their meaning. If I don't find a bathroom right away nobody's going to come out of this looking good.

I hold the glass out to her, in what I think is a universal sign of surrender, muttering a hasty "thank you" and "welcome to the neighborhood."

They weren't invited to the next association meeting. I had to protest, affably, of course. It was duly noted.

"Mr. Cross," I am addressed formally, "what did you learn on your reconnaissance visit?"

"I prefer to think of it as a hospitality check," I mutter for the record. "Or welcome committee."

"But what did you find?" insists Mrs. Jones anxiously. "I've searched for little Edward all around the neighborhood. He has an unhealthy interest in all those bones on your neighbors' lawn."

"In point of fact," I retort, "the Monsters are neighbors to all of us. Mammon Realtors sold them the property. Their Thanksgiving weekend release was number one at the box office for three weeks running last year. They are respectable members of the Hollywood community."

"But they're eating our children!" Mrs. Trump is almost hysterical. I notice the way her eyes flair and her voice rises shrilly. I observe such things.

"That hasn't been definitively proven, yet," Mr. Schwab declares with the demeanor of Judge Hathorne. "Did you find any evidence, Mr. Cross?"

"It's difficult to remember. They serve one mean punch."

"You mean you got drunk?!" accuses Mrs. Jones.

"I am a writer," I remind the association.

"And you don't have any children," Mrs. Lynch frowns. In poor taste. Not any more, we don't.

"It was Mr. Schwab who asked me to visit. I did as I was asked. And it seems to me as if we're making several prejudicial assumptions here. Some children seem to have run away from home, or eloped—you know how young they start having sex these days—and so we want to blame the Swamp Monsters! It seems that some people are jumping to conclusions. The police didn't press any charges. Didn't even issue a warning!"

"It's one thing when they eat their own kind, but these are our kind of people we're talking about. Children with real potential," Mrs. Trump sobs. "Oh, where is Paris?"

Mrs. Jones takes up her neighbor's frustration like contagion. "We must do something! If the police won't do anything, we will!"

"So we should all become vigilantes in our little paradise here?" I ask, not able to believe what I'm hearing. "What about the rule of law?"

The room falls silent. I notice that the Schwabs have exquisite taste. I could swear that this Fernandez Sound Chair has never been sat upon before. Every association meeting they have different furniture. I love the way the burgundy fabric contrasts with their spotless white carpet. The paintings on the wall this month are Mondrians. Very stylish. Nothing like convention to shut down an angry mob.

"Well, something must be done," Charles eventually declares. He is the association president, after all.

"Why don't we do something to make them feel welcome?" I suggest. "You know how temperamental movie stars can be. Maybe they're just lonely."

"What? You think maybe we should invite them to an association meeting?" Mrs. Trump looks at the white carpeting with sheer horror.

"They eat human children. And pets!" Mrs. Mellon declares.

"Maybe it's just their culture," Andrew suggests. I am glad for an ally at last.

"We can assimilate them to our way of life," I agree. "If we shut them out, they're bound to act anti-social." I don't add that I'm thinking nobody wants an angry swamp monster for a next-door neighbor. It would sound too parochial.

There's a great deal of resistance in this room, but if at least two of us can form a front, greater unpleasantness might be avoided. I need peace and quiet to write. The price I'm willing to pay for it is pretty damn high.

The Big Ben doorbell rings. The association collectively turns its head toward the front door. Association meetings have never been interrupted before. This can mean only one thing.

Unrushed, suave, and collected, Mr. Schwab himself saunters to the door. He straightens his tie. Nothing as crass as a peephole mars this neighborhood. We are confident, self-assured.

"BseBseBseglyx," s/he says, politely holding out a smudged envelope.

Tentatively Mr. Schwab reaches for it, taking it delicately, like a communion wafer. "Thank you."

The Swamp Monster turns, we think, to go. They don't seem to be great conversationalists. Charles is holding the pestilential envelope between manicured thumb and forefinger when the downstairs man rushes apologetically in. "Sir, I am sorry sir. I did not wish to eavesdrop on the association's deliberations."

"That's fine, Mitchell. Would you be so good as to open—this?"

He hands his servant the trashy paper and takes a graceful step backward. He keeps the fingers of his right hand widely splayed. It's an invitation.

So we all find ourselves at the Swamp Monster barbecue. The jungle juice flowing freely, we are all much more at ease now. Our demographics are skewing older, but we have money in common. In any society, there is a price to pay. Especially for having famous neighbors.

Insider Art
by
Bill Spencer

"American Student Rescued after Getting Stuck in Giant Vagina Sculpture in Germany."

New York Daily News, June 23, 2014

Twenty-two firefighters labored to deliver you,
yours a different kind of fire.

You couldn't resist the primal allure,
mad to delve into, to feel, to merge.

Then the struggle, the red face, the full epiphany,
the only way out the way you came.

Not the first to need help in a tight place,
not the first to be snared by feminine art.

A second birth—born this time into the brotherhood of men.

Well Suited
by
Kim Mary Trotto

I'm thinking a red suit. Yeah, a nice red to go with the cherry tint I got at the salon yesterday. Suits line this section of the market corridor, a few shining like mirrors in the overheads. Most though are dull and unflattering shades of green, grey, or brown. They sag on the racks like deflated balloons.

"What's wrong with the one they gave you?" Seth asks. Like he hasn't asked it a million times already.

"I told you, it's ugly. Baggy, cheap looking." I walk past three orange suits in a row. One has a NASA breast patch. Yuck. Used, obviously.

"Cally, it's not like you need a spacesuit anyway. You don't go outside. In fact, you're only here because I—"

"Oh, shut up." Seth's a good guy, but he can be a real bore. "What if I accidentally rip my suit? I might forget to get it fixed, and then a meteor hits the space station and we have to do an emergency evac. That *could* happen. Remember what they said in orientation?"

"Nah, it won't happen. I know. I work on hull security." I don't agree but there's no arguing with Mr. Engineer. I find a red suit, but it's not exactly the right shade and definitely too shapeless. "Come on," he says, glancing at his wrist pad. "How long does it take to pick out a stupid spacesuit? We're wasting View Deck time."

"I should have brought Nesta instead."

Seth rolls his eyes. "I'll meet you on V-Deck 5." he says. "Don't spend too much. I saw a nice, used NASA back there."

"Don't worry," I tell his retreating backside. That *is* my intention. Not to spend too much. Seth is building a credit bank so we can buy land on Earth. His goal is a half-acre in Kenya, where he grew up. You need a huge credit bank before the land brokers will even talk to you.

I'm not really worried about emergency evacs. The suit is for Nesta's party tonight, in the atrium, under the light dome. Some fashion types are shuttling up from New York City. The Mordred House for sure, she says, maybe even the Eighteenth Incarnation of Jimmy Choo. Nesta wants her friends to come in space-dress—suits, boots, toolbelts. The whole nine yards.

Last night, she placed her pink Welsh hand over my brown one. "That's what everyone down there's wearing now," she said. "Space-dress." She winked and I got her meaning. No one worth her oxygen will show up in the lumpy United Space Org suit they give us.

When I do find the red suit with gorgeous silver piping and matching red magnet boots, it's not so cheap. The sales bot glides right over. How do they always know when you're ready to buy? The face on its screen is some actor's who's been dead for about 1,000 years so

they can use his image for cheap. "May I help you," it says. Its mouth is the charge slot. Geek humor. Ha, ha. I stick my—well Seth's—credit card into the slot. Mine's already maxed. The face disappears and the screen shows a minus as it goes through.

"You'll send it?" I ask when the bot has a face again.

"The suit will be sent to Ms. Calista Clancy Magumbo, Housing Box 517f, West Corridor, Level Two."

Ten minutes later, I find Seth in a View Deck alcove. The porthole windows are necessarily small—about 15 centimeters across—but large enough to fill the tiny chamber with Earthlight. It's very pleasant and quite understandable that you can sit on the View Deck waiting list for days.

He usually comments on how peaceful it looks from up here. The first thing out of his mouth this time, though, is "How much?"

"How do you know I bought one?"

"I just heard about Nesta's party. You bought one. How much?"

"Not much."

"*Calista!*"

This is not good. "Okay, 3,000 creds." It had really been 8,000, but I'll deal with that later.

"What!" His straight-line eyebrows almost meet in the middle. "You know how many times I gotta walk outside to make 3,000 creds? Cally, I swear. I could pop off the tether any time. You want that?"

"Of course not." No matter what I spend, he'll be sent outside to fix something. I swallow that retort though. "I thought they corrected the tether problem."

When he doesn't deny it, I say, "Anyway, I'm contributing to the credit bank."

"Right. Your little podcasts. When did you last get paid?"

"Seth, please." It's a sore spot, how little I earn these days. "You know Earth Views might get picked up by a major caster any time now." My face feels tight. I will *not* give up my red and silver spacesuit.

"Not if all you talk about is what they're wearing to charity teas in Dubai."

It's getting warm in the alcove, but my voice is cold. "We're wasting view time on an argument we can have in our housing box," I say. That stops him. View time is a very big deal. "Come on, my big, sweet geek. Don't be an ice comet." I'm hoping I sound in control. "You know Nesta will just fold when I walk into the atrium wearing *that* spacesuit."

"And I should care why?"

I go all theatric with a deep sigh. "I'll get to cast live from the party, with vid, straight to the net. That'll definitely send Earth Views higher on Google-Verse."

Seth isn't exactly mollified, but at least he's staring out the port. His eyes aren't burning a hole in my forehead. After the party, I'll think of some way to tell him about the extra 5000 creds.

That night I step from the lift into the atrium. There are new trees, with real hanging fruit, brought up by Nesta's people, no doubt. Music booms around me, the air sparkles, and somehow, *none* of Nesta's other guests are wearing space-dress. I spot her and start forward, my legs shaking in the red boots.

She's wearing her hair in a white pyramid, an eye at its apex. Nesta's real eyes, and that third eye, swivel to watch me approach. The air seems thick with more than the moisture pumped in to keep the trees alive. Like everyone in the room, even the Eighteenth Incarnation of Jimmy Choo, her face and body are painted in metallic swirls, her crotch covered with a white strip. Her hands, bare feet, nipples, eyelids and eyebrows glow pink.

The multi-colored faces are flat and tear-blurred as I pass more pyramids of hair, more whirls of green and gold, red and gold, blue and silver. Lit up nipples and finger tips brush my lovely spacesuit.

"Oh, Cally," says Nesta, in her most sugary voice. "You poor thing. Haven't you heard? Space-dress is out, out, out."

"No, I—" Nothing else comes. A sales bot, redone as a server, offers me a drink. I push the tray aside and head for the lift. God, I think, will they take this thing back? This 8000-cred piece of space trash? My stomach churns. What if they won't? Seth will kill me. And there's my podcast. Who'd listen to anything I said about fashion, ever again? The door slides open. "Housing Box Level Two," I squeak.

As I stare at my suit-padded fingers in disgust, the emergency klaxon sounds. A voice in my ear plant chirps EVACUATION STATION, NOW! I'm frozen to the deck, as if I had the mag boots on full-flow. I move, finally, when a hot, panting mass of bodies pushes me into the lift capsule. It heads down, like all the lifts, to the evac stations.

Wiggling out of the lift, all I can only think about is Seth. "This can't be real," I say to people I pass. They nod in agreement but their eyes are huge. I see Seth then, tall in the crowd. He reaches for me and pulls me close. I can't help but notice that his grey and white working spacesuit fits him beautifully. Even with his clip-tools, it's flattering.

"What is it, Seth?" I'm sobbing.

"It's okay, babe. There's a fire in one of the labs, but they'll have it out in no time. This is just a precaution."

I know he's right. My teeth have stopped chattering by the time our evac ship pulls away from the main structure. I feel very calm as we halt in anti-drift, and wait for the all-clear. In fact, I feel bouncy.

Across from us, Nesta sits with her new friends, all of them are wearing the dark, dumpy United Space Org suits. The Eighteenth Incarnation of Jimmy Choo looks ready to cry. Nesta's eyes rove over my gorgeous suit. Her lips form a pout.

Seth bends to my ear. "Whoa, Cally, that's some fold."

"Oh, yeah," I raise the underside of my wrist to my mouth and start casting. Meanwhile, the cam on my wrist pad brings up Nesta's frown.

Here, eat this fucking sandwich
by
John Roth

Here, eat this fucking sandwich

that I had originally intended to make
for myself but later realized

was no good for me
because I had already
reached my set calorie
limit for the day.

And I know that you
don't particularly like
mayo and even if
the turkey's a little dry

I couldn't just throw it all
away or peel the lettuce
off so please just eat it
and stop bitching about

how I never do nice
things for you. Look, I would
have taken it myself but since
I'm still dieting and shit like

that can be so unhealthy and fattening,
I decided to give it to you.

The Bountiful Hangnail
by
T. J. Young

I've never met a cannibal named Harvey. When my mother gave me that name, I suppose she also doubted the credential could ever find itself attached to those banal phonemes. But nay she was wrong; I am eater of flesh, connoisseur of the *Homo sapiens*, taster of gammy knees and tennis elbows. It is I who dines on the *crème de la crème* of the food chain—the dastardly human. Does that make me king of the food chain, then? An emperor?

It just so happens I'm about to complete my master stroke, to earn my place in the anthropophaginian hall of fame, along the likes of Dhamer; the Stella Maris College Rugby Team; and of course the master, the man, the legend—the good Dr. Lector.

I have, since this June, shared a flat with Gavin James Neworth. He is 32-years-old and has a fiancée, and soon will be moving in with her—that is, if he were not so daft as to select for a flatmate one with an irresistible appetite for human tissue. He's sitting on the couch now, playing Mario-Something.

He works in IT. His skin is pasty like that of a Christmas turkey. A plumage of curly hair sprouts from his scalp. He has a hook nose and an under-bite—not the best breeding, but then I'm interested in a specimen of plumpness more than character.

He sits now like a content Waygu cow, nursed in the folds of the couch as though in the terraced slopes surrounding Mount Fuji.

"What?" He pokes his nose toward me, beady eyes blinking.

I realize I've been staring, and so I break from my trance. I mumble an apology and slip into the kitchen, where the tools await. The tools and the spices and the condiments.

I am salivating.

I've already prepared a Cajun rub. The dishes are done. The empty refrigerator is humming in anticipation, as is my stomach. I prepare the beverage that will carry him off into sweet darkness. A little lime juice and soda water. Two shakes. Ice and a crushed sedative.

(I felt so embarrassed purchasing that maligned pill from the strange beanie-wearing fellow by the gas station. I had to tell him over and over again that I WOULD NOT be using it to diddle-up some unfortuitous young woman. He kept nodding and winking and saying 'yeah, dude' and 'I gotcha, dude'... oblivious to the greatness in my coming endeavour, to the macabre of my methods.)

I swing into the living room and lower two perspiring glasses onto the table.

Gavin doesn't shift his precious eyes from the screen. I push the tainted tonic temptingly toward him.

"Go on, Gavs," says I. "Drink up, friend."

His eyes flicker to the coffee table. He mumbles something about boundaries and moving out and how even his fiancé doesn't treat him like this and *blah, blah, blah*.... I'm about to take a sip to show him it's okay, just as a dog-owner might lap at a puppy's new bowl.

I freeze, lips hovering before the rim. *It is this glass, isn't it, into which the crushed pill was deposited?*

It's not too late. I lean across the table and exchange our beverages with flawless dexterity.

Mr. Neworth is none the wiser. The tampered glass rests invitingly upon his table-space.

I glance down at my own, and I begin to think that it looks curiously like the one to which I remember adding the tincture.

With the stealth of a KGB hitman, I lean forward and switch our drinks again. I watch Gavin's blank expression just to be sure. The flashes emitted from the screen reflect on his glazed pupils.

But I second-guess myself.

I switch the glasses again, with the silent grace of a Zen bartender. *There.*

But I third-guess myself.

Again I switch the drinks without Gavin batting an eyelash. And again, just to be safe.

And one more time.

"Can you not!" bellows Gavin, in a voice far too explosive to be described as indoor-friendly.

I'm wearing my mask of deception, as I reply with two quick blinks and an innocent, "Whatever is the matter?"

"You know what I mean. Jesus!"

Salute. Tres Bien! My opponent has scored a withering goal. I rattle off a stream of lies that paint the switching of the glasses as some unrealized habit, an unconscious tick brought on by excess caffeine.

He returns to his screen.

He believes it. *Ha!*

I twiddle my thumbs for a minute. I literally twiddle them. This is the action that people perform when they are bored or waiting for something. It is a shrewd display of body language designed to force my opponent's hand.

He looks across at me irritably. "If I drink it, will you just go into your room and let me play the game?"

I nod. *Yes. Yes, indeed, Gavin. That is what I will do.*

He raises the glass and gulps down its contents in three gargantuan motions. His oesophagus throbs like that of the pelican at lunch, and I ponder on the taste of Gavin.... Is it a meat like pork, or like fowl? Is it a sprightly venison, a salty squid?

"You're doing it again."

"Oh?"

"Stop staring at me," he snaps.

"Oh," I say again, and return to my thumbs.

Soon the serum shows its effects. His eyelids hang low, his head dips. He's close now, nearing the darkened tunnel into which he may enter but never leave.

I confess to Gavin then, in the final moments before he dozes into a sleep that will make even Snow White seem an amphetamine-addled maniac, that he's *my first*. That's right, you read correctly, dear reader; unlike glorious Lector to whom I say my daily prayers, I am yet to dine on a human supine, to gnaw fervidly at a deep-fried femur. Though embarrassing to admit, I have not even nibbled on the softer parts of a person's face. Presently, the pugilist Mike Tyson is a greater cannibal than the narrator of this tale. But now that Gavin has slumped sideways and is emitting a growing snore, all that shall change....

I lift one of his eyelids. It falls back into place. I yell into his ear.

Nothing.

I quarter a lemon. I sprinkle Gavin Neworth in salt and pepper and lay upon him a few sprigs of thyme. I retrieve a hacksaw, and I pluck its blade with my thumb. The thin strip of metal makes a satisfying twang. I roll up his pant leg, make a mark just above the knee, and begin to....

Wait.

Wait, wait, wait.

His thigh is soft and the hairs on it are a light, silken blond. The crime I am committing will be written about by scholars for decades—nay—centuries to come, for being the most perplexingly vile, indescribably inhuman thing ever perpetrated. But a leg, an upper-thigh, the soft flesh that clings to it, is far too erotic a meat for friends to share. What Fruedian frolicking might ensue, shall I continue along this path? Surely there's a still-palatable, still-platonic part of dear Gavin for me to swallow....

I sigh aloud. I roll his pant leg back down.

So instead I tug Gavin's limp arm across the coffee table. I draw the saw through the air where I intend to make my cut. And then I press its teeth down to the flesh above the middle of the radius and ulna. And then I....

I hiccup.

"Okay, Harvey," I whisper to myself. I take a deep breath and force a lick of the lips. "A delightful feast awaits ye."

I lower the saw blade again. Immediately, the thought of running it part-way along the underside of Gavin's arm initiates my gag reflex. (I was never good with the sight of blood.)

"Okay," I say, shifting my imagined line further down the appendage, to the wrist.

I start to think of the hammering of the nails through James Caviezel's hands in the Passion of the Christ. I dry retch.

"Okay, not there," I tell myself. "You've got a bit history with wrists...."

I go further down, to the knuckles. I decide I'll begin with an index entree, but when I press the saw-blade down, a terrible chill snakes my spine. So instead, I explore further along the digit, and settle finally on a protruding keratin slither—a delectable hangnail.

This, I decide, shall be my first Sapien-Snack.

I cleave it free from its bonding. Every nerve in my body tingles. I have taken the first bold step into a dark and maddening future. I hold out my tongue, poised to drop the hangnail into my insatiable maw.

No.

You should savour it, I tell myself. Appreciate it. The act of ingesting the very being of Gavin Neworth should occur slowly enough, through several bites, that I can wholly appreciate every nuance of the change it will enliven in me.

Back in the kitchen, I add the hangnail to a bowlful of generic-brand chili. The can instructs the user to 'heat to desired temperature'. As the microwave whirs, I catch my reflection in the darkened kitchen window, and grin in an evil kind of way. My lips are set in a scowl. One eyebrow sinks lower than the other. I look totally twisted.

It's awesome.

I sit down alone at the little table in the kitchen as I spoon the chili into my mouth and chew and swallow. I wash it down with a glass of boxed merlot—a fine vintage 2014. With the last few scrapes at the bowl, I smack my lips a couple times, pattering my tongue to separate the many flavours. And there, beneath the sucrose and ground tomato and preservatives and the cheap wine, there lies the distinct and esoteric flavour of the flesh of the human—of the very, palpable soul.

I drive myself to the police station immediately.

It's late. There's a single female officer at the front desk. She has a nice auburn ponytail. She asks what she can do for me.

I give her a stare that turns her bones to icicles, and I then shatter them when I announce: "I have committed the crime of *cannibalism*."

She looks at me, forehead furrowed in terror.

"The victim is one Gavin James Neworth," I tell her. "You will find his remains at 32 Greenwich Drive. I have eaten his flesh. It is inside me. It is inside my stomach. Along with some chili. But it's there."

The officer stares at me, dumbfounded, panicked. Dread stifles her words. She manages to feign mild irritation, and mutters, "You're going to need to take a seat."

"Fear not, child," I whisper. "I am not here to harm you. My hunger is sated... for now." I hold out my hands then, cast them toward her in hopeless abandon. "Here, I am ready for the chains. Lock me away, as a monster should be locked. Cast the key into the abyss! Bolt the door, electrify the fences!"

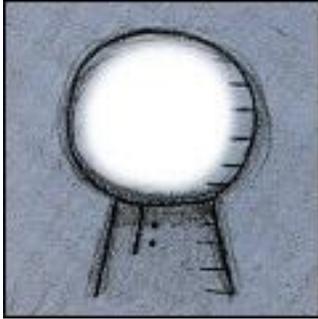
Here I sit, at a small desk with cuffs on my hands. A cup of instant coffee steams warmly under my nose. The woman from the front desk is talking with another officer. They look at me. I tug my face into a distorted, mangled smile.

I make a little hiss. Not like Hannibal's thing—*something different*.

I don't quite know what I'm doing. I only know that this particular expression, from this day on, shall be my signature look.

I'll have to remember it for the newspapers.

Contributor Biographies



Matthew Grzecki is an MFA student at Syracuse University. He graduated from Harvard where he was president of the *Harvard Lampoon*.



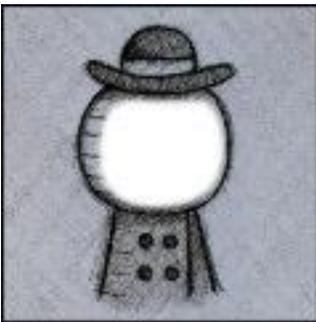
Neil Fulwood is the author of 'The Films of Sam Peckinpah' and runs film review blog Agitation of the Mind (www.misterneil.blogspot.com). He's married, holds down a day job and subsidizes several bars. In what's left of his spare time, he's a member of the Alan Sillitoe Committee who are raising funds towards a permanent memorial to be sited in Alan's home town of Nottingham, UK. Neil co-designed their website www.sillitoe.com.



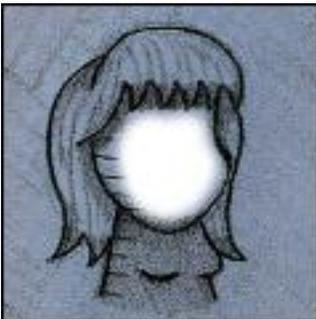
Jon Hakes has been writing fiction and other things since before he was potty-trained. His short stories have appeared in *Brain Harvest* and *Analog Science Fiction & Fact*. You can visit him at www.jonhakes.com, www.facebook.com/JonHakesTheWriter, www.patreon.com/JonHakes, and/or twitter.com/HakesJon, if you don't have anything better to do online.



Poetry by **Anthony Nannetti** has appeared in several print and online publications, including *Zone Magazine*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, and *The New Writer*. He lives with his wife and two daughters in South Philadelphia, where folks are mostly courteous and the water tastes like cherry wine.



A. A. Garrison is a thirty-something gentleman located in the Appalachian mountains of North Carolina, where he lives and works comfortably above sea level. His short fiction has appeared in dozens of 'zines, anthologies, and web journals, and he is the author of several novels and story collections, including *The End of Jack Cruz* from Montag Press. He blogs at synchroshock.blogspot.com.



A freelance writer, artist and poet, **J.I. Kleinberg** works and plays with words and blogs most days at chocolateisaverb.wordpress.com. Her writing has appeared in numerous journals, recently including *Clover/A Literary Rag*, *Feathertale*, *Northwind*, *Mojave River Review*, and *Star 82 Review*. She lives in Bellingham, Washington, and doesn't own a television.



Christian McKay Heidicker's stories have appeared in *Spinetinglers*, *Danse Macabre*, and *Defenestrationism.net* (no relation). His first book *MILES IN THE INFINITE SANDBOX* will be published by Simon & Schuster in summer of 2016. It's a young adult novel about a kid who's committed to video game rehab, and it wouldn't kill you to at least read the first sentence.



K. Marvin Bruce experienced defenestration in his youth when his head was shoved through a closed window. He recovered to become a freelance writer. His fiction has appeared in *Danse Macabre*, *Jersey Devil Press*, and *Calliope* (this piece was nominated for a Pushcart Prize). He (barely) keeps a blog called *Reinsurrection* at kmarvinbruceblog.blogspot.com. Although he has lived in six states and two countries, he may currently be found in the greater New York City metropolitan area.



Bill Spencer, an advisory editor for *Tar River Poetry*, has published poems in *Shot Glass* and *Tapestry*. His humor writing has been accepted by *Narrative* magazine, *Reader's Digest*, *The Inconsequential*, *Clever* magazine, and *Nuthouse*. He lives in a cabin in the mountains of North Carolina with his wife, artist-poet Carolyn Elkins.



Kim Mary Trotto is a retired journalist who's had some luck getting her short stories published on the Web. She's read and written science fiction stories most of her life. For some reason many of those come out funny, even when she doesn't expect them to. Besides her young adult short story "The Last Memory of Bally," published on the webzine *Frontier Tales* and in the hard copy magazine, *Best of Frontier Tales*, and her flash fiction piece, "Hullabaroo" published in the webzine *Aphelion* in August 2014, she's done feature stories and essays for various New Jersey newspapers and articles for Air Force magazines. She's also a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Currently, she lives with her husband in a house full of "stuff" on the Jersey Shore. They spend a lot of time sitting on a beach.



John Roth is a pineapple. Despite having no hands, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Apeiron Review*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, and *Bird's Thumb*, among others. Don't mind his tough exterior, his heart's all pulpy on the inside and it beats for you.



T. J. Young is an aspiring author of speculative fiction who lives behind a computer monitor in a dimly-lit room, somewhere in Melbourne, Australia.