

◇ Defenestration ◇

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The Dark Avenger

by
Chris D'Silva

This city disgusts me. I crouch up here on the corner of a building, looking down at these streets below me and all I can think about is the cesspool that this town has become. I can only imagine the community swimming in cess, with a cess lifeguard yelling at the cess kids to stop running, lest they slip on cess, just replace the community with murder, the life guard with corruption, and the kids with robbery or something. That's what I see in this town. It's all going to shit and I'm the toilet paper, except instead of being flung by hooligans into trees, I'm flinging hooligans into jails. I leap off of the corner of the building onto the roof patio behind me and make my way to the elevator. Watching the streets only does so much, action is the next step. The Dark Avenger goes to greet the night.

I exit the main entrance to a building that is not the building that I live in when I'm not wearing the mask, because all I am is the mask, so forget that idea right now. I also don't feel self conscious walking the streets in my costume, because I know civilians look to me in awe, not judgment. My suit is the embodiment of the spirit of justice. The dark gothic aesthetic demands respect from those around me and strikes fear into the hearts of criminals. My suit is H.R. Giger's wet dream, and a criminal's wet nightmare, meaning he peed the bed, because he's so afraid of me. This intricate binding of Kevlar and leather is aerodynamically perfect for urban freerunning, allowing me to move about this moral wasteland in the dark of night with severe grace and ease. The combination of subtle studded spikes and black feathers works to strike fear in the hearts of criminals as well as to distract them during fights. My suit is perfect, and no one laughs at it.

I hear a shout from an alley, from my experience these sort of things usually settle themselves, so I turn around and start in the opposite direction. The shout repeats itself, but remains indecipherable and is probably not worth the time spent investigating. I realize I'm wasting time just thinking about this mild disturbance and quicken my pace away from the shouts. Efficiency is everything. The shouts return and I start sprinting away, so I can do the most I can for the people of my city.

To be entirely honest, I wasn't always the dark spirit of the night wind for whom the city cries out. I used to be a sad civilian of a man, but I, unlike other civilians, took my destiny into my own hands, and realized my true calling as the protector of this city, and seized it. It all happened when I was walking the streets one night. I looked up to the night skies and thought that I should try being a superhero. And so it began. I quickly realized how much this city needs me. The police officers do nothing. They sit idly by in their patrol cars, watching me, turning a blind eye toward crime. In all my weeks being a crimefighter, I've seen few if any arrests. With the exception of some domestic dispute calls and some broken up drug deals, I've never seen the police doing their job. I know they're all dirty, their hands soiled with the filthy money of the streets. I've never seen a major crime syndicate fall in all my time on these streets. Simple deductive reasoning tells me that it can only be due to dirty cops. Dirty cops on dirtier streets. This city is grimy, grimy and gritty. It's seriously very gross.

I continue my patrol. I walk past the local banks just to be sure none are being robbed. None are being robbed, but that's just because they are already robbing the people with interest rates and unfair things that they do. The owner of the local bank, Mr. Pennysworth

is outside for a smoke, cigarette drooping between his hanging jowls under his round red nose. He fills an incredibly round three piece suit as best he can. He looks to me with a crooked-tooth grin, stained with the poison he inhales. "Howdy there Mr. Dark Avenger, sir! Good to see you're still keeping our fine city safe!" It takes much of my iron constitution to not snap his neck right then. I continue walking, he is a fish that I shall fry another day. I would need a bigger pan.

Suddenly, a man shoves his way past me gripping a purse. An old woman yells after him. I know what I must do. I take my grappling hook out of my belt and strategically toss it around a street lamp in front of the thief. However, in the heat of the moment, I somehow find myself unable to hold the end of the grappling hook's attached rope. The grappling hook tangles around the street lamp to high even for the great leaps of the Dark Avenger and I make a note to buy another grappling hook when I get the chance. I start running after the thief but he has already made such distance, he turns a corner and I think the chase has disappeared into the dark of night. But, just as I turn the corner after him, the police grab the thief and put him in handcuffs, handing me the purse, "Here you go ma'am." The foolish criminal scum fell right into my trap, the police may be dirty, but they're still dumb enough to be forced into upholding the law every now and again. I take the purse and return it to the old lady around the block. She looks to me with a tear still fresh in her eye and thanks me with a crippling sincerity, "Here take this." She reaches in her bag and gives me an unwrapped old hard candy from her purse's depths. I tell her I was just doing what the city demanded of me, being the spirit of justice, standing up for the innocent when the world turns a cold shoulder on their cries. I realize she has left and I begin to leave as well. Mr. Pennysworth yells after me, "Dark Avenger, you really are a grade-A fella!" Again, I don't snap his neck.

I make my way back to the building where I started my patrol, even though I don't live there. Overall, a successful night patrol, stopping a robbery, like I did tonight, is not incredibly common, but it's nothing beyond my normal capability. Every bit I can do helps in the slightest way. I hear shouts from the alley again. I decide to investigate, the nights over anyway, perhaps I can do just a bit more good before the Dark Avenger disappears to make room for daylight. I walk directly into the alley and announce my presence, "The Dark Avenger demands justice for the night! Who disturbs the peace?" An incredibly large man steps out of the shadows and nearly presses his chest to my face, "Cute mask, can I have it?" In a microsecond I analyze all possible courses of action. He removes my cowl, just as I thought he would, thanks me, and disappears into the shadows once more, cackling away.

I turn around, still wearing the rest of my suit as people look on and laugh. I suppose joy brought to people in such a shit city is positive no matter at whose expense. I enter the building that I don't live in, take the elevator to a room that isn't mine, sit on a bed that may or may not have a Batman comforter and I pop a hard candy in my mouth. I smile. Another successful night for the Dark Avenger.

Two Poems
by
Nancy A. Henry

Letter to my Vagina

It's true that I have started avoiding you.
What did you expect?

We used to be good friends but lately you are driving
me crazy.
You are difficult, unreasonable.
You are noisy and distracting.
You keep reminding me of things I can't have anymore.

Can't you see that there is nothing I can do for you
right now?
I am lonely too.
Why don't you just shut up about it.

I think we need to give each other some space
see other people for awhile
Okay?

Anchovy

Oh anchovy
you are the very bacon of fish!
I crunch your crystal filament bones
and suck your extravagant salt
with the gusto I reserve for life's
deepest joys.

Oh wondrous catfood-smelling strip
of rosy needled flesh
you are simply great with beer and olives.
You make my breath a Liverpool fish market.
Eye-watering link to my wandering ancestors
I can take you in a backpack anywhere
your shelf life venerable, for what microbe
dares assail your brine?

Noble minnow
flashing through shallow seas
in silverfire fortresses
you are the legendary "little fish"
of the foodchain.

Select prey of sea lion, eel

and premenstrual woman
we share a king of tide
you sleep in narrow tins
waiting for the moon's dark pull
that draws me barefoot
filled with a midnight lust
just short of madness.

**Chad Faustus Interviews Lucifer for the
Community Manager Position
by
Daniel North Spooner**

Chad Faustus: Hey there! Thanks for coming in! Would you like any water or coffee or anything? Free trade organic! Our barista will make it any way you wish!

Lucifer: Teas richer than those of the ancient Five Emperors can fill your cup for all your days, and I can do greater things than these...

CF: Actually the thing is, tea orders tend to upset the barista. We do have some Keurig black tea and a killer chai?

L: Oh Faustus, stab thy arm courageously and bind thy soul that at some certain day Great Lucifer may claim it as his own — and then be thou as great as Lucifer!

CF: Haha! I'm the same way if I don't get my caffeine! You do NOT wanna talk to me!

L: Hm. Water would be fine.

CF: Sure thing, here's a bottle fresh from the fridge. OK let's jump right in, shall we?

L: It has begun, wretch.

CF: Tell me a bit about your background? Says here on your résumé that your last position was, let me see.... Ah yes, "CHIEF LORD AND REGENT OF PERPETUAL NIGHT." How 'bout you walk me through a typical day?

L: Your pitifully inadequate mortal tongue cannot articulate yet the plainest speck of Dis.

CF: Huh?

L: Right. Well, *you* might say it was... quite dark. Beyond dark. All about you an infinite, impregnable darkness roiling from every corner, binding to every atom of your being, just as a thick, reeking pitch would fill every crag and crevice on a corroded spike! Black—"blacker than a trillion midnights"—yet noisy and noisome just the same. Cold as hell, to... You'll see.

CF: Wow! Well don't you sweat it, here at Zeeemlio there's plenty of natural light in every part of our open-floor plan. And we take all our Social Ninjas' comfort and workstation resources veeerrryyy seriously. For this position you'll get a dual-monitor iMac setup—retinas!—with a convertible standing desk.

L: In hell is all manner of delight.

CF: Oh em gee, totally! You must've noticed our gorgeous etched mural made of reclaimed barn doors hanging over by the earthenware sun dial—"The Core of UX Design Is DELIGHT. Be the DELIGHT."

L: But tell me, Faustus, shall I have thy soul—and will my minion Mephostophilis be thy slave and wait on thee and give thee more that thou hast wit to ask?

CF: Oh my God I loooove your enthusiasm! We say here that an enthusiastic Social Ninja is a game-changing Social Ninja! Probs THE key ingredient to winning here and tackling the social space in general. Tell me about some of your strengths?

L: I've been known to make a grand entrance. Exits too, truth be told....

CF: Courtney at the front desk can vouch for that! I mean, let's just say that she's not gonna live that one down! What would you say is a weakness of yours?

L: There is no mercy here if mercy is what you seek.

CF: Haha too funny! Classic *The Karate Kid* reference—millennials eat that stuff up! Tell me, where do you see yourself in five years? You mentioned on the phone something about—let's see here—"enlarging your kingdom of souls"—I loooooove that! Disruptive media is totally a new realm! And it takes real authenticity to break through the noise—it takes "soul," for sure!

L: *Solamen miseri socios habuisse doloris.*

CF: Oooh, Spanish! That is fabulous, we are definitely looking to bolster our reach in growing Hispanic markets. So, what makes you passionate about Zeeemlio and the Community Manager role on our Social Ninja Squad in particular? Why'd you leave your last job?

L: Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it! Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God and tasted the eternal joys of heaven am not tormented with ten thousand hells in being deprived of everlasting bliss?

CF: Uh oh, somebody's got a case of the Mondays!

L: Thou art damned.

CF: El oh els! Well I have to say, through each round you've impressed the whole team here. Today really was just a formality—you're totes Zeeemlio Social Ninja material. We just need you to fill out some paperwork and we're good! Can you start next week?

L: At midnight I will send for thee.

CF: Terrific! That's the spirit! Oh and do you need parking validation?

L: Yes.

Two Poems
by
Michael Estabrook

Jesus

Reaching out from under
my brother's bed grabbing
his leg and screaming
as he and cousin Kathy
sat there whispering
like innocent babes
about Jesus
the Holy Ghost
and Sweet Blessed Holy Mother Mary

Temptation

Whenever he finds a spider
in the house he leaves it alone
life is tough enough
he reasons even for spiders.
But sometimes one will show up
in the bedroom
around bedtime
and his wife notices and says
"either that spider goes or I do"
So of course he captures it
releases it outside
where it belongs anyway
but honestly at times
he's tempted to leave
the damn thing
right where she found it.

A Living Fart from the Butt of a Lesser God
By
Eirik Gumeny

Bartholomew Xander Wohlblätter III threw open the door to Indiana Scones and the Raiders of the Lost Latte with significantly more effort than was required. The little bell that hung from the entryway rang madly from the effort, like there was a tiny hunchback sitting on top of the door and just going absolutely nuts on it. Everyone in the coffee shop turned to watch the visibly frustrated man enter.

Bartholomew—tall, pasty, balding, and wearing a scowl that would have scared off even the most desperate of panhandlers – stomped up to the counter and said simply:

“Coffee.”

“What size?” asked the young red-haired woman behind the counter, putting down her rag and spray bottle.

Bartholomew pulled out his wallet and riffled through some bills.

“Give me... five bucks worth,” he stated, putting a five dollar bill on the counter.

“So... most of a small then?”

“Five bucks doesn’t even get me a small?”

“Nope,” answered the coffee clerk, wiping her hands on her apron.

The man glared at her for a moment and then looked around the cafe for the first time. Only then did he see the stacked bags of whole coffee beans, illegibly scrawled blackboard menu, malformed clay mugs, and piles upon piles of hand-pressed progressive noise-pop CDs.

“God damn it,” he said, shaking his head. “I walked into one of those artisanal coffee places, didn’t I?”

“The artisanal-est.”

“Is the coffee at least good?”

“Our organic, fair-trade roasts are made from the hand-picked, small-batch, pre-digested seeds of cartel-free Colombian coffee berries, extracted freshly from a llama’s asshole every morning and flown here on a vintage prop plane by a man who looks like a lumberjack.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“The llama’s name is Geoff.”

“But does the coffee taste good? You never actually answered.”

"Well," began the redhead slowly, "that's because it tastes like literal shit, sir. I didn't want to lose a sale. We work on commission."

"Commission?" replied Bartholomew incredulously. "At a coffee shop?"

"You think six bucks for a small coffee is bad, you should see the Uretra del Diablo Quadruple Espresso. Shit's got actual Aztec gold in it."

"Well, thank God I didn't order that," the balding man grumbled. "Can I please get my coffee now?"

"I guess SOMEONE doesn't like polite chit-chat."

"No. I don't. I hate it," replied Bartholomew. "And it's been a long day. I spent the past— What time is it?"

"Three thirty-six."

"—nine hours and twelve minutes of my life chasing down some stupid doll for my nephew. I have been to, literally, twenty-seven different stores today."

"What kind of doll doesn't turn up after twenty-seven different stores?"

"An ancient proto-Himalayan hex doll made from yeti hair. With limited edition variant accessory pack."

"And Toys'R'Us didn't have it?" the clerk deadpanned.

"No! Said it wasn't even in their system. Can you believe that nonsense?"

"You must really love this kid."

"Oh, no. Not even a little. He's the human equivalent of late July swamp-ass."

"Then why—"

"Because," the man said with an exasperated sigh, "I'm sleeping with his mother and she threatened to tell my wife if I don't get this stupid yeti hair doll for Colin."

"Didn't you say he was your —"

"His dad's my brother. His mom and I aren't blood relations. It's cool."

"Well, I don't know if I'd say COOL..."

"Genetically."

"Oh. Well. Yeah, that's... technically accurate. I guess."

"Can I get my coffee now?"

"Oh, yeah, sure," said the clerk, shaking her red head. "My bad." She grabbed a cup from the stack on the side of the register and turned to the percolator on the back counter to get his drink.

"Hey, you look like one of those people that knows things that don't need knowing: how do you spell 'Himalayan?'" Bartholomew asked, typing into his phone. "I think maybe I spelled it wrong the first time I Googled it."

"You are long past Google, sir. Even if you did find someone selling that doll, that shit's probably going to take forever," said the woman. "Room for cream? It's fresh-squeezed."

"Uh, no. Black, thanks," he replied. "What do you mean, 'forever'?"

"I mean, a toy as complicated and weird as what you're looking for? You're not going to find that in any store."

"Right, I just said that."

"You're in rare-as-shit country now, sir," continued the clerk, unabated. "Chances are it's gonna be some rich dude who collects crazy whatnots, in some other state entirely, selling it from his private collection of overpriced museum garbage. There's no way you'll be able to just drive there and pick it up this afternoon." She slid the coffee forward. "Although..."

"Although...?"

"I actually might know a guy who can help."

"Why didn't you open with that?"

"Because you JUST told me about the doll, sir."

"Oh. Right."

"Also," added the redhead, "the commission."

"How much commission can you possibly make off five dollars?"

"Seven bucks."

"How -"

"I don't think you understand how artisanal we are."

Bartholomew took a sip of his coffee. His face immediately recoiled at the taste, like an introverted vampire inadvertently walking into a crowded Roman Catholic garlic festival.

"No," he said, blinking furiously, "I absolutely get it."

Bartholomew Xander Wohlblätter III pulled open the door to Indiana's Bones and the Temple of Vintage Looms with significantly more force than was necessary. The rickety

glass door rattled like a skeleton shivering in a snowstorm before limply swinging shut again.

"Hi, how can I help you?" asked the only other person in the antiques shop, a ponytailed man pushing at least sixty, stepping out from behind the register.

"I'm here about a yeti doll," explained Bartholomew, walking between two glass cabinets of ceramic naked babies. "Some lady from a terrible coffee shop sent me."

"That could be a lot of people," said the clerk, nodding his head. "All our children's toys are in that corner."

The older man pointed his bony finger at two bookcases in the far corner of the store. Bartholomew cast a quick eye towards them and saw only shelves full of rusting robots and impossibly bright plush dogs and cats and orangutans.

"No, I don't think you get it," replied the balding patron. "This thing's not some kid's toy. It's an ancient proto-Himalayan hex doll made from yeti hair."

"That sounds complicated and difficult to find."

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't."

"You a collector?" asked the elderly hippie, stepping back behind the counter and typing into the enormous laptop situated next to the register.

"No," replied Bartholomew, taking in all the bric-a-brac surrounding him. "It's for my nephew."

"You must really love him."

"God no. He's a runny crap dripping down your leg after a night of heavy drinking. His mom asked me to get it."

"Well, you must really love her then," replied the clerk, still typing.

"Parts of her, sure."

The old man looked up from the laptop. "Didn't you say this kid was your —"

"I'm related to his DAD. Not his mom."

"That doesn't make it—"

"Look, I'm not getting all up in your business, OK? By the looks of you, you've clearly done a lot of drugs—"

"I have."

"—and I'm sure that that, not to mention whatever counter-culture squirrel shit it was you did under their influence, was frowned upon by someone somewhere, so get off your high horse," said Bartholomew. "Do you have this thing or not?"

"Not," replied the aging peacenik, returning to the keyboard. "I've never even heard of a yeti hair hex doll before. And..." The clerk typed some more. "I can't find any trace of anything remotely like one in any of the national antiques databases or our competitors' inventories."

"You have access to your competitors' inventories?"

"My grandson's one of those kids who can type his way into things with all of the internets. What do you call them? Computer pirates?"

"Hackers."

"No, I don't think that's it."

"OK, sure. Back to the doll, though..."

"No dice. You're out of luck."

"Damn it." Bartholomew slammed his fist against the top of the chainsaw-carved, lion-shaped rocking chair situated at his side. "Do you know how long of a drive it was over here from that coffee place?"

"I don't know, ten minutes?"

"Two fucking hours."

"I figured it had to be either really short or really long."

"I can't believe how much time I've wasted on this stupid thing," Bartholomew muttered, rubbing a hand against his enormous forehead. "I'm starting to think this frigging doll doesn't even exist."

"Well, I know a guy who would know. If this abominable snowman voodoo thing's for real, at all, anywhere, he'll have it or know how to get it."

"I thought you said I was out of luck."

"You are," replied the clerk. "This guy's a colossal dick. I try not to work with him if I can help it. You'll probably get along like gangbusters."

"Yeah, ha ha. Can you call him?"

"He doesn't have a phone."

"Seriously? Who doesn't have a phone?"

"He's very... old fashioned."

Bartholomew sighed theatrically. "Fine. What's the address?"

Bartholomew Xander Wohlblätter III knocked on the door to the basement apartment with significantly more force than was necessary. Tiny flecks of paint fell from the door like fairies who couldn't get enough kids to give a shit about their continued well-being.

"What?" was the reply from within.

"I'm here about a yeti doll," explained Bartholomew. "Some smelly hippie from an antiques store sent me."

"Do you have gold?"

"What? No. Who carries gold around with them?"

"Then I can't help you."

"I have cash," Bartholomew pleaded, his face dangerously close to the faded, peeling paint of the door. "American cash. That's basically gold, right?"

"Not even a little. It's paper. What am I, an alchemist?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"No."

"OK, fine. You do know you can use the cash to BUY gold, though, right?"

"Yes, but why would I do that when I can make you get the gold for me?"

"Jesus horse-humping Christ," muttered the pasty visitor, shaking his head. "How about my watch? I'm pretty sure it's made of some kind of gold. It's definitely expensive."

The door opened a crack, the chain lock on the inside going taut.

"Let me see it."

Bartholomew held his wrist out. There was a grunt, and then the voice inside the apartment said, "Yeah, all right. That'll have to do, I guess."

The flimsy door closed, the chain was unchained, and then the door was opened fully. Bartholomew was greeted by a wave of musty funk fleeing from the dark apartment on horseback, while a large, amorphous shadow stayed inside.

"Come on in," said the shape.

Bartholomew took a deep breath and stepped into the tiny basement studio. The door was quickly closed behind him, dropping him into a mildewy cauldron of darkness. He immediately walked into an ottoman.

"Damn it," he mumbled, stumbling. He took a step sideways and collided with another footrest.

"What is going on in here?"

After a minute, Bartholomew's eyes adjusted to the dark. He saw ottomans everywhere, covering every part of the floor that wasn't otherwise occupied by a trunk or a chest or a China hutch or what appeared to be a giant, wet sack of laundry. The man tilted his balding head and stared at the moist pile before him. Eventually he realized what he was looking at. He was standing directly in front of a large, hunchbacked troll.

"Jesus."

"No," said the troll. "Huhzabuh."

"What?"

"My name's Huhzabuh. Not Jesus."

"OK, sure."

"The watch?" Huhzabuh raised a thick, green eyebrow and extended his lumpy hand.

"Oh, right." Bartholomew undid his watch clasp and held out the timepiece. "Here."

The troll snatched the watch from his hand and held it up suspiciously in the dim light. He turned it over and over. Seemingly satisfied, the creature stepped over to a crowded bookcase and threw the watch into a shoebox.

"Now," said Huhzabuh, turning back to Bartholomew, "what was it again you were looking for?"

"An ancient proto-Himalayan hex doll made from yeti hair," replied the man, adding, "with limited edition variant accessory pack."

"The red pack or the blue one?"

"I don't—Wait, you have it?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Oh, thank God," said Bartholomew. "I've been running all over town all day trying to find this stupid thing. You have no idea."

"Well, no, actually I do," explained the troll, with no small amount of condescension. "I mean, I HAVE the doll, with BOTH accessory packs. I clearly have some sense of how difficult an item it was to track down. YOU have no idea."

"OK, right, whatever," Bartholomew replied, waving his hand dismissively. "I'm just glad I was able to track it down while it's still technically my nephew's birthday."

"You're doing this for some kid?" asked Huhzabuh, taken somewhat aback. "People usually don't end up talking to me unless they are SUPER desperate. You must really love him."

"Oh, God no. He's the shit-stained boxer shorts of the world."

"Then why—" The troll raised an eyebrow. "You boning his mom?"

"Yeah, how did you—"

"I've got a sixth sense for these kind of things," Huhzabuh replied. He lumbered over to an old trunk in the corner, lifted the creaky lid, and began rifling through it. "She threatening to tell your wife or something if you don't get this doll?"

"Yeah," replied Bartholomew. "Although, honestly, I think my wife's got some idea already. But still, I'd really rather not give her any hard, admissible proof, you know? I've been through one divorce as it is and it was just such a pain in the ass. She got the house AND two of the cars. I mean, all I've got now is the BMW."

The troll stopped searching for a moment, turning his head to face Bartholomew. "You are a tremendous dickhole," he said, "you know that?"

"Tremendous is a stretch."

Huhzabuh shook his head and resumed ransacking the trunk, tossing all manner of shrunken heads and monkey paws onto the floor.

"Hey, can I ask: what's with all the footrests?" inquired Bartholomew.

"Chairs hurt my back."

"Oh. OK," replied the pasty man. "That wasn't the answer I was expecting."

"What WERE you expecting?"

"I don't know. Something... weird, I guess."

"That's kind of racist."

"I don't think it is."

The troll rolled his enormous eyes. "You never did answer before: do you want the red or the blue accessory pack?"

"Which one's better?"

"I'm partial to the red variant myself."

"Then I'll take the blue."

"You really don't like this kid, do you?"

"He's a useless, ungrateful, self-centered pile of nugget-shaped turdlets."

"Well, he's a kid."

"He's turning four; he should know better."

The troll—yeti doll and accessory pack in hand—stood up from the trunk and stared at Bartholomew, blinking a few times.

“He’s... four.”

“Look, I know how it sounds,” said the man, “but I don’t think you understand what an unflushable little crap he is.”

“Oh, I’ve got an idea,” replied Huhzabuh, handing over the hex doll to Bartholomew. “Now, do you want instructions on how to use this, or—”

“It’s a doll,” he replied. “What would I possibly need instructions for?”

“It’s a HEX doll,” countered the troll.

“To-may-to, to-mah-to. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Death and dismemberment, among other things.”

“Eh. It’s just my nephew.” Bartholomew shrugged and turned for the door, half-assedly waving a hand over his shoulder at the troll. “Enjoy the watch.”

Bartholomew Xander Wohlblätter III slid open the glass door to his brother’s backyard with significantly more force than was necessary. It shook along the metal track like the ground beneath a herd of centaurs playing polo. Only one of the scores of children and adults swarming across the lit-up backyard seem to notice. She hurried across the lawn towards him.

“Bart?” asked Colleen Tiki-Wohlblätter, the brown-haired sister-in-law the bald man was affairing with. “What are you DOING here?” she hissed.

“What do you mean?” replied Bartholomew. “Why wouldn’t I be here? I’m Colin’s uncle. You invited me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.”

“When?”

“When you told me about that stupid doll. I finally found one, by the way.” Bartholomew held up the ancient proto-Himalayan yeti hair hex doll. “WITH the accessory pack.”

“What in the sugar-frosted hells is that?” asked Colleen, her face recoiling from the sight of the ratty fur figurine like a werewolf at a silversmith’s gun show.

“A yeti hair hex doll,” he explained. “You told me it was the only thing Colin wanted and I HAD to get it. Or else.”

"It's real?"

"Of course it's real." The balding man knit his brow. "What's going on, Col?"

"Colin, come here," called the brunette quickly. "Your Uncle Bart got you that... thing... you wanted."

"Here you go, Colin," said Bartholomew, tossing the raggedy hair trinket to the four-year-old as he toddled over. "Happy whatever."

"What is this?" asked Colin, tilting his tiny head and looking at the doll.

"The proto-Himalayan hex doll you wanted, made from real yeti hair."

"I don't like dolls," replied the four-year-old, scrunching his face.

"You really are a hemorrhoid on the ass of society, you know that, Colin?" said Bartholomew. "Just be thankful I got you anything, you leaky shart."

"What?"

"Bart!" chided Colleen, pulling him aside. "Stop being an asshole," she whispered.

"I'm not the asshole here," replied the balding man.

"He's FOUR."

"So he should know what manners are."

"Jesus pole-dancing Christ," she mumbled, putting her face in her hand. "I can't believe that thing was real."

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"This Neo-Tibetan sasquatch—"

"Proto-Himalayan yeti."

"Whatever. They were just a random string of words I made up to keep you away from the party," replied Colleen. "I can't believe you actually FOUND one."

"Why in the hell would you do that, Colleen? Do you have any idea how much shit I had to go through to—"

"Language, Bart!"

"Oh, come on. It's not like I said it to him."

"It doesn't matter."

"I met a God damned TROLL today, Colleen."

"Oh, come on."

"I'm serious!"

"This is why I didn't want you here, by the way. God. You're such a prick."

"I'm a prick? I'm a prick?! YOU'RE the one who threatened to blackmail me over what turned out to be a wild God damned goose chase. Who the hell does that?"

"Who the hell sleeps with a paunchy, balding relative?"

"You! You do!"

"That's my point! There is CLEARLY something wrong with me!"

"Oh God, not this again."

As his mother and his uncle stood near the glass doors arguing with one another, Colin Wohlblätter looked over the bundled yeti hair in his hands. He tossed it up and down in his hands a few times and started thinking maybe it wasn't such a bad present after all. Colin picked out a twig tangled up in the fur and dropped it to the ground, just as he saw his Uncle Bart start laying into his mother at full volume. The four-year-old instinctively pressed the hex doll tight against his chest.

And then Bartholomew Xander Wohlblätter III exploded. With a sound like a rotting pumpkin shoved full of M80s. Pieces of the balding man splattered against the sliding door like Spaghetti-Os and rained down over the partygoers like meaty confetti.

"What... What just happened?" asked Colleen, hands in the air, spitting pieces of Bartholomew out of her mouth.

Colin shrugged.

"He was being a poop."

I Am Not A People Person
by
Nancy Gauquier

Don't get me wrong, I like people
once in a while and in moderation,
I like people who are high
in energy and low in calories,
but never more than one or two at a time,
because I am way too easily influenced.
Secretly I know I can't keep up.
I know they'll just get bored.
I say things that sound unbelievably lame
ten seconds after I say them, like,
for instance, I am not a people person.
It's that damned Mercury in Aries.
I am a planet person, a cosmos person,
a double Pisces way too sensitive person,
I am so deep and all-encompassing
that no one ever has a clue.
I am a broken down, wound up, tipped over,
poured out, out of balance, out of sync,
out of money, out of luck, out of time,
out of my mind and into quantum physics
kind of person.
Don't get me wrong, I love people persons,
I love watching them at parties,
they are walking mysteries, living stories,
gliding effortlessly from one word to the next.
I love parties when I can be an old flyer
on the wall and look around and just listen.
I like to find an empty corner where I can
disappear, and never open my mouth,
except I am usually real close to the snack table.
I'm an indecipherable introvert,
but don't get me wrong, I got nothing against people.
I grew up in a house full of people,
I think I was just overwhelmed at an early age.

Cheese in Space
by
Robin Wyatt Dunn

Cheese in space! It is Gruyere and it is brave!

"We've got a lock on the little devil. Get him." Cheese has enemies. Cut from a mighty wheel, flung at relativistic speeds outward into the dark to defend its own, cheese is brave, and cheese is lonely.

Cheese in space! It is alive! It will survive!

Its viscosity obeys the equation: vacuum kills. To that end, it must be somewhat evil in its habits. It must penetrate.

"Oh my God, it's coming in!"

The men are right. It is.

Cheese in space! It is a victory. It is a love.

The men are screaming. They flee the cheese; they know it means death. It approaches quickly. The Cheese is so brave. It knows that even occupying this vessel will only keep the vacuum out for a millennium or two. Cheese needs more time. It matures slow. It has a mission from its Great Gruyere God. It must journey; it must forefend.

Cheese in space! Sing to me Spicy Jack Muse of its many victories and heroisms! Sing to me slow of its spicy fragrance and delicate texture! Sing to me of its passions, and fears, for it is one of us, the hero, Cheese Hero, watching over its Cheese Flock, without doubt, without hesitation, filled with yeasty fire.

"No! No, Cheese! Please, no!" The little girl whimpers. She is food for the Cheese, but Cheese knows she may have other uses: intelligence, entertainment, justice.

The Cheese Speaks: "Awwwwkklllglrrppp itsss s oakkgikbppp!"

The girl screams and screams! The Cheese must switch languages; it has learned many.

The Cheese Speaks: "I know you are little girl. I am Cheese. Tell me name of you, girl."

"I'm Martha," she says, and we fall in love. We fall in love, for she is Martha, and young and innocent and blonde, with blue eyes! Our best Aryan hope! Our great white hope of old in the eyes of a little girl, trapped by the Space Cheese. She is our ultimate figure of life, the colorless hair, the pale skin, the joys we lavish her with, the legacy of our peculiar cold wildernesses on our Old Earth.

"I am of the Clan Gruyere," says Space Cheese.

"I'm a Smith," says Martha, sniffing.

"Martha Smith," grates Space Cheese.

"Yes," she says.

Sing to me Muse of our Food, Sing to me of the Justice of the Galaxy, for it bends towards Justice, does it not? This is what we are told, and in your journeys, Muse, have you known it to be true? Sing to us, woman, galactic woman, of what you have seen.

I have seen all. I have seen too much. I have seen...

Shut up, I told you to sing.

*Cheese fights for freedom,
Cheese knows the love of the wide hope in the dark,
Cheese knows lonely.
Martha sings, sings for him.
She sings to the cheese.
As her Norwegian ancestors did.*

Singing to the cheese, singing to the wheel of cheese, as we sway in the dark. Hold my hand, Muse. Muse, what does it mean?

The Doctor, the Lawyer, the Indian Chef by **Linda Lowe**

After giving birth to triplets, their exhausted mother lay down on the couch and fell into a deep sleep. Thus the triplets were left to their own devices.

When it was time to go to school, the Doctor went dressed in a long white coat, with the collar of his crisp white dress shirt and knot of his blue silk tie peeking out the top. He wore jeans instead of slacks because he was still in possession of a little boy's body, a stocky one at that.

One day the teacher called him up to her desk. "Doctor," she said. "You should get out there at recess and brawl with the bully. Wouldn't you like the other kids rooting for you instead of making fun of you?" she said, not unkindly.

The Doctor was taken aback by such talk. Taken aback because what about the Hippocratic Oath? Wasn't there a "Do no harm" clause? "Teacher, you look a little peaked. Let me prick your finger," he said nervously.

"No needles," she said.

"Let me take your pulse," he said, grabbing her wrist. He was beginning to sweat.

"It's about the oath, isn't it," the teacher said, full of teacher knowledge. "No worries. You can't take the oath if you can't read it, and right now, you've got your hands full with *Good Night Moon*." She gently withdrew her hand. "Now go back to your seat."

The Lawyer went to kindergarten wearing Valentino suits and Jimmy Choo shoes. Her high, high heels were the envy of all the little girls, who were stuck in their Mary Janes. Along with her briefcase she carried a thermos full of black coffee. One day at recess, while she sat at one of the lunch tables going over some briefs, the principal happened by. "I smell coffee," he said. "Coffee's not allowed."

"I object," she said.

"Overruled," he said.

"Your Honor, I'd like to call a recess."

"You're at recess," he said.

The lawyer put the briefs back in her briefcase. "Leading the witness?" she said, desperately.

"What witness? It's just you and me here."

"Then, then, it's... hearsay. It won't hold up in court!"

"Do you move to strike?"

"Maybe." she said, pouting. "Maybe not."

"Will you stop drinking coffee at school?"

The Lawyer stood up, wobbly from the high heels and too much caffeine. "I refuse to answer on the grounds that it might in...in...something!" Then she broke down, unable to stop a flood of little girl tears.

Each morning before kindergarten the Indian Chef, dressed in one of her many colorful silk saris, fixed breakfast for her siblings. They loved whatever she cooked, but at school she was shunned by the other kids because she smelled so spicy. One day she came home and said aloud, to no one, really, as her mother was as usual dead asleep on the couch, "I want to go to New York City and be on 'Chopped.' I want to win the \$10,000.00 prize."

With that, the mother awoke, filled with the gift of gab. "I will cry and cry if you go to New York City to be on 'Chopped,' but I know that of my three children, you will be the one to make me proud in the cooking department." She sat up with great effort in her tired quilted robe and boxy Isotoner slippers. She leaned over and picked up a ball that was resting on the coffee table. "I can see only so much in this ball, which appears to be crystal," she said, holding it gently in her right hand. "This ball is somewhat smaller than a volley ball, but bigger than a softball. It's been sitting here since before you were born, unbeknownst to you and your two siblings, it would seem, as it remains unbroken. Yes," she went on, peering into the ball now, "I see you in New York City, and oh yes again, I see..."

"What, Mommy, what?" said the Indian Chef.

"You will become an Iron Chef, creating masterpieces in Kitchen Stadium, on television Sunday nights at 10:00 Eastern. In time you will stop watching yourself in reruns. You will be the author of a multitude of cookbooks, featuring delicacies from the four corners of the world. If indeed there be corners," she said, gently setting the ball back down on the coffee table.

"Oh, goody!" said the Indian Chef. "I'll go make tea," she said, skipping off to the kitchen. Just as she came back with a steaming pot of tea on a tray and cups for all, in walked the Doctor and the Lawyer, who had to take the late bus home because the Doctor had gotten into a fight with the bully, and the Lawyer, while haughtily click, click, clicking her way down the front steps of the school, had broken a heel which sent her tumbling to the bottom, landing in a disheveled heap on the wet grass.

"Hello, my darlings," the mother said, giddy with wakefulness.

"I love fighting," the Doctor said, ripping off his coat while his eye blackened.

"I hate these shoes!" the Lawyer said, more like a child than a woman of the law.

"Your sister has brewed a fine cup of tea. Now let's all sit around and get to know one another," the mother said, sipping. She started to say something more, something prophetic, perhaps, but instead she put down her cup and sighed. She sighed and sighed, while her children sipped, and soon the mother's sighs turned to little sussing sounds, and her eyes closed, and opened, and closed.

"I think she needs an upper," the Doctor said, "but I don't have access to controlled substances."

"What she needs is illegal," the Lawyer said.

"I need to catch a plane," said the Indian Chef, and rushed off to pack.

The Lawyer picked up the crystal ball and peered into it. "Ohmygod!" she said, tossing it to the Doctor.

Bridge May Be Icy
by
Larry O. Dean

Bridge may be icy, or not.
Its reputation for iciness is renowned
but don't get your hopes up
if you're an ice aficionado
and its slipperiness is nil.

I know some guys. We could
buy out all the bagged ice
at 7-11 and dump it on the crest
of the bridge, if that
would make you happy. But if

you're addicted to ice, instead
me and the same guys
will convene an intervention,
calling in friends and family
to help wean you off

of the harder stuff—icicles,
hail, icebergs—the Titanic sinkers
and skate pond tricksters, looking
oh so smooth, safe or weight-
bearing to those unschooled

in the ways of the fifteen
known solid phases of water.

Childhood by Jeremiah Budin

As kids, we were always getting in trouble—fights with other neighborhood kids and bad report cards and petty arson, and for the most part Mom took it in stride. But there were times when we pushed her too far, and that was when our middle names would come out. “Alexander Lawrence Hidecress,” she’d say, and my back would stiffen reflexively, sweat beading on my face.

When she called us by our *other* middle names, then we were really in trouble. To this day the words “Alexander Lawrence Bartholomew Hidecress” cause a tingling in my extremities. Even if I happen to catch a glimpse of them on my driver’s license or cable bill a mixture of shame and fear wells up inside me. It’s not that I’m expecting Mom to jump out of the closet and start shouting, but there are some things that just become ingrained, I guess.

If Mom ever used one of our suffixes—Junior, Esquire, His Eminence—we’d run straight into the woods and hide for a few weeks.

On occasion, Mom wouldn’t use our names at all and would instead address us with a high-pitched whine, and that meant we’d done something good, like sharing with a younger sibling or cleaning our rooms without being asked. But that was not to be confused with the high-pitched *wail*, which meant that she was about to sic her pet crow, Landry, on us.

There were also those times when Mom would translate our names into French and chant them while brandishing a whiskbroom. That didn’t mean anything, it was just a fun thing she liked to do.

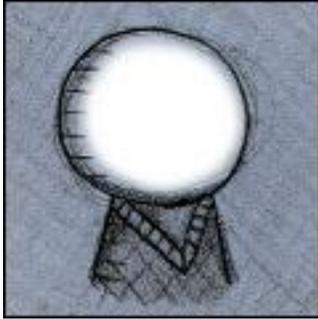
The worst of all, though, was when she wouldn’t call us anything. She would just stare at us and the look in her eyes would communicate more than names ever could. *You are all simultaneously my greatest achievements and my greatest disappointments, her eyes would say. I have sacrificed everything—my body, my youthful vitality, my own sense of self to birth and to raise you, and you have repaid me with nothing but careless disregard and sullen impertinence, but then again, you are your own people and I wish nothing for you but to discover the truth within yourselves.* We had to pay careful attention to the eyes because as soon as they were done making their little speech she’d start kicking at us with her pointy boots.

Of course, if she ever called you by your entire name you were never seen or heard from again. It may have been harsh, but that was the way it was, and besides, you’d probably done something to really deserve it. As a single parent of thirty-four children Mom couldn’t just let one of us run amok. Our third youngest sister, for instance, once sabotaged the town carnival by sticking a wad of chewing gum in the gears of the Tilt-A-Whirl. When we got home that night Mom was standing over her caldron saying “Marjory-Anne Cavendish Garcia Vazquez del Candelaria Dingle-Dangle Baxter Hollandaise Jennifer Hidecress the Great” while stirring a frothing mixture of unknown substance. Sure enough, the next morning Marjy’s bed was empty except for a thin streak of purplish residue. Another time, Dennis happened catch Mom whispering his name in her sleep and he had to strike her repeatedly with a toaster oven to wake her up. But that kind of thing happened very infrequently, only once every other week or so.

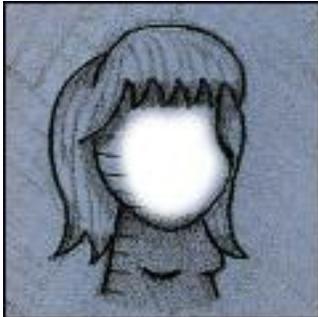
Did Mom have a problem controlling her anger? Sure, yeah, absolutely. But those were different times. All the parents were hexing their children in those days. It was not uncommon to see the Fishman kids from down the block show up to school with their fingers dark and swollen to the size of eggplants, or with their heads sewn onto each other's bodies, so it's not like our family was anything special.

The important thing was that we knew Mom loved us. Her displays of affection were infrequent but that only made us treasure them more. She would slither up through the floorboards in the dead of night and sit on the edges of our beds, stroking our hair with her webbed fingers. "I love you," she would say, simply, and our hearts would fill with warmth, the kind of warmth that burns inside as if you drank a bottle of vinegar. "I love you and I know that all of your dreams will come true." And then she and Landry would fly out through the window, cackling into the night.

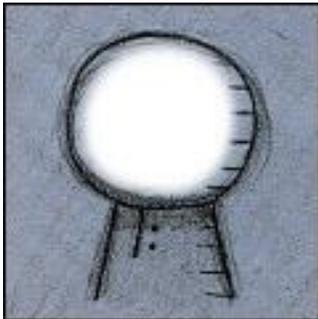
Contributor Biographies



Chris D'Silva is a current freshman at Williams College and loves humor more than his parents would like him to.



Nancy A. Henry's poems have been published in Rattle, Atlanta Review, Southern Humanities Review, and featured on NPR's "The Writers' Almanac."



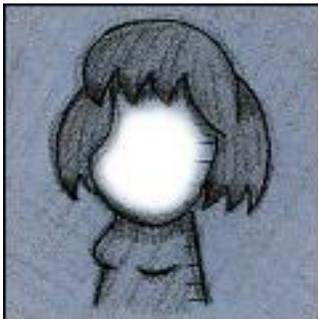
Daniel North Spooner once rescued a snake, only to have it bite him on the hand. In other words, he lived out a parable about being a freelance writer. He currently lives in the sunny wastelands of L.A., where he pollutes the earth with marketing and occasionally blogs at alwaysotherwise.com. He has narrowly escaped death three times (the stupid snake doesn't count) and looks forward to doing so again.



Michael Estabrook is a recently retired baby boomer child-of-the-sixties poet freed finally after working 40 years for "The Man" and sometimes "The Woman." No more useless meetings under florescent lights in stuffy windowless rooms. Now he's able to devote serious time to making better poems when he's not, of course, trying to satisfy his wife's legendary Honey-Do List.



Eirik Gumeny is the author of the *Exponential Apocalypse* series. He lives in New Mexico where he regularly has to fight giant atomic ants with a flamethrower. His website is www.egumeny.com.



Nancy Gauquier lives in central coastal California with my companion cat and a slightly feral cat by a bird sanctuary. She did stand-up comedy and poetry slams for a couple years in San Francisco and the Bay Area. Her writing has appeared in many lit mags, including *The Camel Saloon*, *Melancholy Hyperbole*, *Poems-For-All*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *The Short Humour Site* (and their anthology, *People of Few Words 2*) and the *Longest Hours* anthology.



Robin Wyatt Dunn writes and teaches in Los Angeles. You can find him online at robindunn.com and fb.com/settdigger.



Linda Lowe received her M.F.A. from the University of California, Irvine. A chapbook of her poems, "Karmic Negotiations," was published by Sarasota Theatre Press. Online, her stories have appeared in *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *The Linnet's Wings*, and others. She has stories forthcoming in *Gone Lawn* and *Future Cycle Press*.



Larry O. Dean was born and raised in Flint, Michigan. His numerous books include *Brief Nudity* (2013), *Basic Cable Couplets* (2012), *abbrev* (2011), *About the Author* (2011), and *I Am Spam* (2004). He is also an acclaimed songwriter whose latest solo album, *Good Grief*, is due this year, along with the sophomore album from his band, The Injured Parties. For more info, go to larryodean.com.



Jeremiah Budin is the inventor of the short story. Visit him at jeremiahbudin.com.