

◇ Defenestration ◇

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Table of Contents

Hayley Rosenfield, "Sad Acorn Review"	2
Mitch Frye, "Inky, Blinky: A Pac-Man Villanelle"	3
Daniel Galef, "Anabasis"	4
Adam Millard, "Caged In"	8
Liz Sellier, "A is for Addiction"	10
Kim Gibson, "Restroom"	11
John Abernathy, "Weird Stuff"	18
Jared De Vore, "A Poem About Desolation"	20
Brooke Reynolds, "Knick Knack Wars"	21
Benjamin J. Chase, "To My Dear and Loving Cabot Extra Sharp Cheddar"	22
Klaus Nannestad, "Office Cleaning"	23
Contributor Biographies	26

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Sad Acorn Review
by
Hayley Rosenfield

It had not been a good Christmas Eve for the Nyhus family. It started off all wrong when Eric arrived late donning a new girl on his arm, a woman the family had no idea even existed, let alone would be joining them for the evening. Her name was Eden, and while friendly enough, she wore so many fake gold bangles on her arm that it caused a racket while taking communion at First Lutheran that night.

Jim was back fresh from his first semester at Madison's creative writing MFA program. Not only did he bring home a new girlfriend, whom his parents had heard of, approved of, and expected for the holiday, but also the real pride of his semester—a short story he'd hoped to read to his family.

"Professor Bell loves it," he'd told them later that night, when they'd finished unwrapping gifts. He lifted it slowly out of his briefcase in the soft glow of the multicolored tree lights. "He says I have a real shot at being published."

That was a great joy to Mr. and Mrs. Nyhus, up until Jim had finished reading the first page, and it became clear that each character was only a thinly-veiled, unflattering portrait of each family member. Eric became "Aaron," a jock who, despite his handsome appearance, left women profoundly disappointed; his mom became "Suzie," whose interests ran no deeper than the latest Sears catalogue; his dad became "Dan," who just couldn't wait to die. Jim's girlfriend, Sylvia, seemed to have no place in the story. There were, however, many sultry brunettes for whom the protagonist of the story expressed strong and unsettling desires.

A long silence followed Jim's reading. Sylvia stared down at her wool-covered knees. Some crumpled-up wrapping paper unfolded by his foot.

"Huh," Mr. Nyhus grunted. He took a swig of Budweiser and removed his new watch from its packaging. Mrs. Nyhus had returned to the cookie tray, which suddenly demanded rearranging.

"You should've made me sexier," Eric said, reaching his arm around the back of the mustard yellow chair that he and Eden shared. "It would've been truer to life that way." His chest hair spilled over his polyester polka dot shirt.

"Hold on, I think you all misunderstood," Jim said. "I am a fiction writer. My stories are made-up."

"We'll discuss this later," Mrs. Nyhus said. "Not in front of guests." Sylvia hadn't moved in minutes.

"Who's paying for that MFA anyhow, Jimmy?" Eric asked.

"Good point, Eric," Mr. Nyhus said, not lifting his eyes from tinkering with his watch. "Excellent point."

Inky, Blinky: A Pac-Man Villanelle
by
Mitch Frye

The sheet peels off. The spirit dies,
Yet sight persists as through a haze.
In death, we're left with just our eyes.

No ears to hear the ghostly sighs:
The soundtrack playing all the days
The sheet peels off, the spirit dies.

No tongue for when the fruit rolls by—
No glancing lick, no passing taste.
In death, we're left with just our eyes.

No skin to shiver tense in fright
On spying the recursive maze.
The sheet peels off; the spirit dies.

No nose to smell if, after the blight,
There lurks an odor of the grave.
In death, we're left with just our eyes.

The Pac-Man cometh, solar-bright.
We all blink blue in a soul-struck daze.
The sheet peels off; the spirit dies.
In death, we're left with just our eyes.

Anabasis
by
Daniel Galef

*Führt aus Hüllen der Nacht hinüber
In der Erkenntnisse Land.*
—Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock

Mr. Stevenson must have had a first name, but, if so, his teachers didn't know it. "Is that so, Stevenson?" they inquired. "Speak up, Stevenson, so that the whole class can hear you." Mr. Stevenson's parents probably knew his first name at one point, but may have forgotten. His friends didn't know it, for the same reason that unicorns don't know the capital of North Dakota.

At the age of ten, Mr. Stevenson wanted nothing more and nothing less than to have an adventure. He read fantasy novels with pictures of unlikely creatures on them and thought, *Something that could change my life is around every corner*. When one summer his parents took him to visit some cousins in Missouri who didn't know his first name, he got very dirty looking for the part of the abandoned barn that was secretly an old forgotten door into another land. Instead he found splinters.

At bright-eyed twenty, Mr. Stevenson read books about knots and coastlines and knew: *Adventure is a place and time. I can go there, and I will*. Soon, though, he discovered that mere relocation was not sufficient to distance himself from the overwhelming mundanities of Mr. Stevenson. He read amazing stories in *Amazing Stories* and fantastic stories in ancient epics and memorized "Miniver Cheevy" without a mote of irony. He stopped groping agricultural edifices and instead began exploring the human elements of his world, whom he found to be very much like the old barn, after all.

At thirty, sober and clear-eyed and with his head cleared of the fluff of youth, he decided that the philosophers and self-help-writers were probably right, and that life itself was the real adventure. He gave up falling in love and decided to get married instead. It took surprisingly little effort (Mr. Stevenson was not unattractive, and his melancholia was easily mistaken for poetic brooding), and one day Mr. Stevenson became *Mr. Stevenson*. Adventures are unpredictable, Mr. Stevenson remembered, and marriage, domesticity, and recreational horticulture must have been a very great adventure because it was so unpredictable that it had very little in common with an adventure. For one, it was extremely predictable.

Strangely enough, his opinion on the subject remained bitter even after he discovered that it could be unpredictable indeed, and Mr. Stevenson went back to being *Mr. Stevenson* (being not unattractive is almost universally a temporary mode of being, and even skillful brooding is revealed as fraudulent when it produces nothing poetic). But he read books by Peter S. Beagle and reveled in the idea that the Campbellian call can come at any age. When he saw a turtle stranded in the road, he stopped his car to help it, but only in the hope that it might grant him a wish. His doctor as he took the check told him that he shouldn't have wished for salmonella.

It was selfish and unrealistic to think adventure would fall in my lap, thought Mr. Stevenson at forty. I must work hard, and prove my grit and mettle and moxie and pith and vim before

I will be rewarded with glory. He said as much to his shift supervisor, who agreed wholeheartedly, then asked him to repeat his name, please.

At fifty, Mr. Stevenson asked his shift supervisor what he thought about his grit and mettle and moxie and pith and vim, and Mr. Stevenson's shift supervisor gave him another ten cents per hour.

At sixty, Mr. Stevenson received a handsome gold watch, which he checked three times for secret compartments.

At seventy, he went back to the old barn and tried again, even though it was now a complex of condominiums named The Old Barn.

In a medium-range nursing home, Mr. Stevenson read a paperback memoir of a milkman who came out of retirement and became a lion tamer and thought, *It's never too late to start something.* Six months later, he was on a plastic bed dying of a long Latin word.

Mr. Stevenson saw a tunnel open up before him, at the end of which was a light that represented everything he'd ever wanted and the greatest most perfect adventure there is. "I see a light!" he cried. "It represents everything I've ever wanted and the greatest most perfect adventure there is!"

"Actually, no," said a nurse, who did not know Mr. Stevenson's first name. "That's a common and explainable symptom of the brain losing oxygen."

"Oh," said Mr. Stevenson.

Then Mr. Stevenson died.

Then Mr. Stevenson had an adventure.

"Hello!" the voice said. "Welcome!"

Mr. Stevenson blinked, then realized that blinking meant that he had eyes, then realized that realizing that blinking meant he had eyes meant he had a brain. "I have a brain," said Mr. Stevenson.

"I'll bet you do!" said the voice, which belonged to a figure Mr. Stevenson recognized as a scientist, an archetype Mr. Stevenson was vaguely familiar with from experience and intimately familiar with from Flash Gordon comics.

The room was outfitted in the popular chromium-and-no-corners school of design, with a single wheel-like window framing a cutout into abyss, dotted here and there with blood-colored stars. At first, Mr. Stevenson thought it must be nighttime. "How long has it been?" he croaked.

"Jupiter," said the scientist. "Oh. What did you ask? I was expecting you to say 'Where am I?' Most do. To which the answer, then, would be 'Jupiter.' Which I said."

"Am I dead?" asked Mr. Stevenson.

"Not anymore," the second scientist said. Mr. Stevenson realized there was a second scientist. "And, in answer to your first question, the number of years that have elapsed could not easily be expressed in spoken language, the digits would be so many."

"Yes," said the first scientist. "Many digits. Many." Mr. Stevenson felt something was expected of him, and managed an impressed "Golly. Many, eh?"

"Many."

"And you've brought me here?"

"Extremely many."

The second scientist coughed.

The first scientist clapped his hands. "With the aid of a generous grant from the Central Agency for Empirical Historiography, and utilizing the metaphysical reverse-extrapolation abilities of the Newtonian de-entropic drive on our standard Eddington-Laplace-Toynbee spatiotemporal computrix, we were able to totally reconstruct your entire body from new matter, including the precise arrangement of neurons and synaptic pulses active at the instant of your ceasing to be."

The second scientist coughed again, less convincingly.

"We've brought you back. From death."

"To answer a question," the second scientist interjected. "The Agency hardly has the resources required to clutch from the cold waiting-room of the hereafter every nobody from the flyover centuries. You possess information of untold value, which even with our godlike technology we are totally unable to discover in any other way."

"Is this . . . an adventure?" Mr. Stevenson asked.

"Absolutely!" The first scientist beamed. "I couldn't have said it better myself!" The second scientist wrote something down on a clipboard which she then gave to the third scientist, who left the room. Mr. Stevenson realized there had been a third scientist.

Mr. Stevenson had been wrong too many times to accept being right without protest. "If you can perfectly recreate my brain, why couldn't you just look at that to find out?"

"We thought of that," said the second scientist. "It doesn't work. I could try to explain why, but I don't expect you would understand. It involves the word 'quantum' quite a lot, though. Does that help?"

"Quite a lot," said the first scientist.

"And, er, you wanted to ask me something?" prompted Mr. Stevenson, resigning himself to befuddlement and eager to begin his adventure.

"Several key historical facts have been completely lost to the record, existing in the blind spots of the spatiotemporal weft—"

Mr. Stevenson opened his mouth.

"—*Quantum* blind spots. The only place the information is accessible to us is in the minds of those who lived beyond those regions. We can detect *that* you know, but not *what* you know. It is the last thing we need to know, in fact, before our project is complete and we will have mapped all possible data points from your era. The only fact that was still inaccessible after simulating and exploring the entire universe with the exception of your mind, and which consequently is information entirely unique to you and your brain, to be found nowhere, nowhen else in existence."

"So tell us pretty please," said the first scientist.

"Tell you what?" said Mr. Stevenson.

"Yes, of course! Second scientist?"

The second scientist looked gravely into Mr. Stevenson's eyes while the first put his hands to Mr. Stevenson's shoulders to impress upon him the supreme importance of the next words to be spoken.

"What is your first name?"

Mr. Stevenson told them.

The second scientist wrote this down carefully, then nodded to the first scientist.

"You have contributed measurelessly to the human quest for knowledge, and for that we thank you warmly and wholeheartedly," said the first scientist, while the second scientist reached for a large switch marked OFF.

"Well, goodbye."

Caged In
by
Adam Millard

We sat, seven of us, in a room with surgical white walls, and for the first time since arriving I felt discomfited. Being an addict is one thing, but being addicted to... to the thing that each of us present were addicted to, well, it was just plain embarrassing. Alcohol, drugs, sex, all were preferable addictions. The sooner this madness was over with, the better.

"Okay," said the moderator, an amiable enough fellow by the name of Sprocket. He looked like the kind of guy that danced to Olly Murs when no one was looking. In other words, he couldn't be trusted as far as he could be thrown. "Who wants to go first?"

We all looked at each other, hoping someone volunteered. The woman sitting directly opposite me pretended to faint, as if that might somehow get her out of it. She wasn't very convincing, and a few seconds later sat back up straight and cleared her throat.

"Come on," Sprocket said, "we're all here for the same thing. It's nothing to be ashamed of. The hardest part is coming through that door." He pointed to the door in question, and to be truthful it wasn't much to look at. Nice handle, lovely bit of Blu-Tack on the inside, but apart from that it was unremarkable. "Plus, we've only got half-an-hour. The karate club wants to get in here by eight, and I've got to shift all these chairs."

I wished I'd never come now; I could have been at home, eating butter and drinking food colouring. I hadn't done my weekly big shop yet, so snacks were a bit thin on the ground.

"You!" Sprocket said, thrusting a finger in my general direction. It wasn't even his finger, something he must have quickly realised as he tucked it back into his coat pocket. "Um, yes, what's your name again?"

"Memphis," I said. "Memphis Raines." And everyone around the room cheered, I felt silly, almost regretted switching from Toby Smythe by deed poll a little over five years ago. But that's what being an addict is. It's doing things you wouldn't normally do, not if you were in your right mind, as the black Shelby GT500 parked out front proved.

"Well, Mr. Raines, why don't you get us started?"

There was a collective sigh of relief, and also a squeak from somewhere about my person. I didn't want to do this, be the first one to admit I suffered from this debilitating illness, but I knew there was no point arguing with Sprocket. Best to just stand up, say my piece, sit down, and shut up.

"Okay," said I, rising slowly from my chair. All eyes were on me. The door opened a crack and a little man in a white karategi poked his head around, apologised profusely, and disappeared again. He didn't *really* disappear; it's never wise to mix up your karate masters and your ninjas.

"In your own time," Sprocket said, but in a tone which suggested I'd ought to get a wriggle on.

I cleared my throat, wiped the sweat from my brow, loosened my tie, and said, "My name's Memphis Raines, and I'm addicted to Nicolas Cage movies."

"Hello, Memphis!" everyone said in haunting unison. A couple of people applauded, until Sprocket held up his hands to silence them.

"Please continue," said the moderator, settling back in his chair and throwing one leg over the other.

"Well," I said. "Up until last night I was having a good week. I'd managed to limit my intake to just a couple of *Face/Offs* and a half-an-hour of *Con Air*. For some reason, last night it all went wrong. I... I don't know what came over me—maybe stress at work, or the fact I haven't heard from my wife in almost twenty-five years—whatever the reason, it's no excuse for such a bad relapse." I hung my head in shame, all at once aware that the room was deafeningly quiet.

"We're here for you, Memphis," Sprocket said.

I dry-swallowed and lifted my head once again. "Last night," I said, "I watched *The Wicker Man* all the way through."

There were hisses of disapproval, and someone—I think it was the fainting woman—threw a stuffed *Con Air* rabbit at me.

"Hey!" I said. "I thought we were all in this together? So, I like all Nicolas Cage movies, even the awful ones." But I knew why they were all so disappointed with me, could understand their rage. If *Leaving Las Vegas* was the best crack cocaine money could buy, *The Wicker Man* was a dirty needle, riddled with AIDS and syphilis and all the letters of hepatitis you could think of. I had relapsed in the most grotesque way imaginable, and it would take weeks for me to climb out of the hole I had created for myself.

"Are you having withdrawal symptoms today?" Sprocket asked, rubbing at his chin in that way therapists do when they're trying to appear interested.

"I... I took the edge off this morning with a *National Treasure* marathon, but..." I collapsed back into my chair, sobbing like a baby and blowing bubbles of snot from my nose, which I'd had altered, made crooked, so that it looked just like my hero's. "I'm a disgrace!" I cried. "I keep thinking of him, up in that burning giant, peppered with bee stings! Oh, the humanity! Oh, please, I need help!"

"Have you finished yet?" asked the karate man from the door. He seemed eager to kick some kids about the chops.

"Five minutes," Sprocket told him, but I was already up on my feet, wiping the tears from my eyes and making for the exit.

"I can't do this anymore," I said. I was in denial, for who was I to think that there was a cure for what I had? Who was I to deny myself the simple pleasure of Nicolas Cage?

I said my goodbyes, and was gone in 60 seconds.

A is for Addiction
by
Liz Sellier

A drafty basement. Bitter coffee. 12 steps.
Attendees join four-fingered hands
and bow blue, green, orange, yellow heads,
in surrender and serenity.

The leader, a feathered and beaked behemoth
asks a new attendee gently:
"Would you care to share your story?"

He wrings his blue hands,
his pupils spin maniacally.
With shame and solemnity, he says:
"Me want cookie."

He thinks about the fiendish things
He's done to score some shortbread.
He's whored himself for Oreos
and pulled a Glock on Girl Scouts.
Aghast at the monster he has become,
he fears he can't untangle
his addiction from his identity.

A gruff green street urchin
with an aluminum shell
pats the shuddering shoulder and says,
"I get it, man. I can't stay off the junk."

Nodding, the beak speaks softly:
"I suggest a cookie sponsor."

Restroom
by
Kim Gibson

"Hi, may I use the restroom?"

Of course. First it's *Can I use the restroom? Blink, blink, blink!* then *boom*, toilet paper mâché all over the goddamn floor because gas station bathroom floors are gross and can't be stepped on. Pee all over the seats. Paper towel thrown around the room like she had herself a good ol' paper towel ball fight.

She had to be about nineteen. Timid, the way she held herself. Soft like she'd never lifted anything heavier than her phone her whole life. Maybe the type who preaches she's not like all the other girls then her clothes melt like wax when some tequila walks by.

"Sorry, customers only."

"Oh. Um. All right." She looks around the till, where I've got beef jerky, breath mints, Fisherman's Friend, that sort of stuff. Below are the chocolate bars. She gets a Mr. Big and puts it on the counter.

"I'm sorry?" she says.

"What?"

"Why are you laughing?"

"Ah. No, I just." I pick up the bar and scan it. "\$1.39."

She pulls out a debit card.

"Er, minimum \$5 purchase for plastic."

"Oh," she says again.

Oh.

Let me tell you about oh's. Oh's are the source of power for passive-aggressive predators. The kind that use guilt like a plumber uses a drain snake. Yeah, slide it down your throat all finesse-like then break you up inside and somehow make you the jerk even though they were the manipulative tool that didn't have the *cojones* to deal with a situation like an adult and communicate their displeasure properly. And what the hell did she think her oh would do anyway? Magically change the purchasing rules and erase the debit transaction fee? It costs as much to process your payment as it does for you to pee and binge on rice crisp chocolate.

She goes to the cooler and gets a water, then picks up a magazine off the rack and puts it down. Something old ladyish too, like Chatelaine's or something, but a knock-off.

I scan them in. "\$4.39."

She doesn't say anything, but turns away immediately, going down another aisle, walking like she's trying to hold a dime between her knees.

She comes back with a bag of chips. Dutifully, I scan it. "Congratulations, it's over five-hundred cents!"

She slides her debit card in the receiver.

"Wait. Pull ou—ahem. Sorry, remove it for a sec?"

She does, looking up at me with big eyes. Like, anime eyes. Disney's Rapunzel. Absolutely ridiculous doe balls.

I sent the transaction to the receiver. "Kay, you can go ahead now."

This time, she tries to tap it. Why didn't she try tapping it earlier? Was it "*Oh, yeah, I can tap these magical motherfuckers to pay for things under a hundred bucks*"? Or, maybe, was it the sudden impatience of the bladder, that rush that demands the urethra be set free *right now*, that the extra four seconds it would have taken to select an account and put in a pin was just incredibly unbearable? I guess, to be fair, ladies' pee mechanisms act with gravity and get set off by coughing or something ridiculous like that.

When she tries tapping a second time, I find myself needing to intervene again. "No tap. Sorry. Says...says up there." I tap the note taped to the top.

Without looking up at me, she puts the debit card in again and follows the prompts, bending at the hips and crossing her legs.

As soon as it says "Accepted," she takes her card back and bolts for the back.

"You'll need a key!" I pick it up and wave it. It has this giant key-chain on it, a big paint stick with the Home Depot logo on it.

She wiggles back to me, and I say wiggle in the loosest sense, but that's kind of what it looked like. Man, she really had to go. I started to feel a little bad about the \$5 thing.

Even though she was clearly not having any of this, she takes the key from me gently and smiles a bit, kind of like Terminator does when he tries to smile for the first time. Then she shimmies on down to the back again, sidestepping two kids that came in for some slurpees bigger than the volume of their stomachs.

I can see her in the theft mirror up in the corner struggling with the lock. She tries it one way, then flips it, then flips it back. She's getting increasingly more frantic and fumbly with the key when finally she jams it in there and yanks.

I can hear the faint *snap* before she even reacts. She's just kind of standing there, head hung, hair covering her face, holding the paint stick in front of her, half a key dangling from it. I guess forget what I said about being soft. Jeez, when's the last time you broke a key?

Normally, depending on the time of day, I'd either be pissed or laughing my ass off at this point, but now...I don't know what it is, really, but now this kind of feels like my problem

too? Well, it is, obviously. I'm gonna have to call my manager about the jammed lock, but...on a personal level, you know? I don't know, maybe it's because she hasn't been a dick to me this whole time, but...is this sympathizing?

It might be. I'm rounding the counter right now.

I'm ready for her "Oh" face when she looks at me with big tears on her face. Those tears have taken that mascara for a run. Like, the volcano has erupted, the lava has oozed, and now it has dried and hardened into a black mass. I am concurrently startled and filled with remorse.

"I'm sorry," she whispers up at me, doing a half pistol squat with her legs tangled together.

"No, it's—don't worry about it. I'll see if I can get it open for you."

Oh. Am I now?

Where the hell did this come from?

How the *fuck* we gonna open this, Jay?

"Just...back up a bit, maybe?"

She crab-shuffles to the other side of the hall.

I stand in front of the door and oh my God you've got to be fucking me. Right. One, two, oh my God, three—

I kick the door above the handle and I severely underestimate the force I use. I feel her wet face smashed in between my shoulder blades and the paint stick cracks against my lower back, then we're a heap on the floor.

The two kids are laughing from the slurpee machine as I pull myself up off the floor. "Oh, my God, I'm so sorry, are you okay?" I find myself saying for the first time ever.

She's sitting on the floor, looking off into the corner of the hall, away from the boys, away from me, crying quietly as a dark spot blossoms on her jeans.

"Oh," I say.

That fucking *oh*. So helpful, much assist.

"Here," I say, trying to help her up by her arms. She softly shakes her head and folds them tighter around herself, twisting her legs so that no one might see.

"I can't stop it," she whispers, then clamps her eyes shut.

"Oh...shit, I'm sorry. Um." I look at the two kids, who immediately fall silent, smiles still frozen on their faces.

"You need anything else?" I bark.

They mumble something in the negative.

"Kay, I'll meet you at the till." I usher the kids to the front, checking that there's no one else in the store or at the pumps, then I take their filthy kid change for the drinks and strongly suggest they have a nice day.

I rush back to her. She hasn't moved, and there's a sizable puddle under her now.

"Ready to get up?" I ask.

She nods.

"Okay. I'm gonna help you up and take you behind the counter, okay? No one else is in the store, just us. Okay?" Did I ask her if it was okay? Is it okay with *you*? Okay, okay, *ohkay*. Now I'm embarrassed, and she's the one who's sitting in her own pee.

She nods again, and this time when I reach out, she takes my arms.

So, uh, have you ever been in a situation like this? Not the, I mean, crying, pee-covered girl hanging off your arm as you take her back into your place of work. Well, heh, I wouldn't judge. I mean the...doing something for someone you don't know for reasons you don't know. I kind of body checked her into incontinence, but I...I don't know, I don't think I'm doing it out of some ill-borne guilt for that.

I don't like people. They don't like me. This should be really hilarious to me. Right now I feel really bad, though, and I want to hug her but I think that may not be received well and there may already be a little bit of pee on me so I think it's best to keep it at a gentlemanly arm escort.

We get behind the counter and she slowly lets me go. Her head is still hung like her neck's broken. She sniffs hard and rubs at her lava cheek.

"All right, so. Uh. Do you...live nearby?"

She shakes her head.

"Anyone you can call to come get you?"

"No."

"I don't suppose you drove here."

She shakes her head again and starts sobbing, folding her arms over her chest.

"Oh. Shit. Sorry, I should stop doing that."

"Swearing?"

"No, saying 'oh.' Um. All right, so...I can...I'll call my manager. You just bunker down here, have some of your snacks, take a breather. Here, take my chair."

I roll the chair her way and she looks at me, startled. "Are you sure?"

"Ye—ah. Yeah, yeah, go ahead." Didn't think that one through.

"I'm okay, thanks," she says, thank God, and squats down on the floor with a water bottle and the Mr. Big.

I call Dave and about a minute later I learn he's about to go into court again so there'll be no deus ex machina unless Trent or Logan are struck with a cord of kindness and come in when they aren't scheduled. Those two guys are like me and I'm thinking...two normal me's right now would be...ugh, no, this poor girl's had enough of subdued me, I think.

I hang up the phone but I don't turn to look at her yet. I feel like I need to have a solution before I face the music. There won't even be music, she'll just be quiet and Rapunzel-eyed, and goddammit I can't disappoint a princess.

"I, um. Okay, so, I can...please don't think of this as weird, but—" I turn to face her. "I can give you my pants and you can go."

"What?"

"I know it's not exactly, uh, *kosher* to wear some strange dude's pants, I guess, but...um, if you're really in a bind, and you have no other options, I will give you my pants and you can wear them out of here and be on your way to wherever it was that you were going."

She looks up at me, tears quashed by the utter baffledness that was brought on by my offer. I mean, I wouldn't even do this in sociables with people I know. "Wear Jay's pants." Ew, no, not even *I* want to wear my pants sometimes.

"I washed them yesterday, even. Worn...uh, four hours now. I don't sweat much. You can have the belt too."

She mumbles something.

"What?"

"Okay." She isn't looking me in the eye and now she is bright red.

"Yeah?" And then it strikes me—*I am offering my pants to a lady stranger.*

She shifts awkwardly, laying her hands on her lap.

"Uh. Okay." I look out the windows—no one there and no one coming. I undo my belt, drop my jeans, realize there are at least two cameras catching this right now, and step out of them. They're baggy enough that I don't have to fight much to get them off over my shoes.

I turn back to her and set the pants on the chair next to her. Then I stand fairly close and turn my back. "I'll block the cameras," I tell her.

She mumbles, I think a "thank you," and I hear her take off her pants.

This is...this is it. This is the absolute most batshit crazy thing I've ever done. This will be the gas station story, a tale passed down the generations of staff, from tight layover to tight

layover. This will be the tale at my wedding, should it ever come, that time Jay traded in his jeans for his first shred of humanity. This will be that story my grand kids get tired of hearing. "Fuck, Grandpa, with the jeans again?"

My belt tinkles when she does it up. She stands, and I turn around to find her awkwardly holding her wet pants in one hand and the broken key in the other.

"Oh," I say, and cringe, as I take the key from her, then grab a bag, fan it out, and hand it to her wide open so she can dump her pants in.

"What are you going to do?" she asks softly.

"Probably see if I can get a locksmith in, I guess."

"No, I mean..." She looks down.

"Right!" Yep. Still not thinking any of this through. "I guess I will call my parents," I say slowly, like it's such a cool plot twist unfolding in front of me that I didn't see coming, "and see if they can bring me some pants."

She twists her lips together like she's trying to eat her tears rather than shed them. "I'm sorry."

"Wh—no, no, retract that! You don't get to say sorry unless you've gone and f—messed up like what I just did. This whole situation. Me, here, Jaying all over the place. Take my pants as my sorry, okay? I am, really, actually sorry."

I wasn't apologizing for making her pee herself, either. I was thinking about the really scathing stuff I labelled her with before she even had a chance to really say "Oh." "I *am* sorry," I said, a lot more softly than I had intended to.

Then I said, "How about you keep the pants and tell your friends this crazy story about the time the weird, creepy cashier guy gave you his pants? You know, when this blows over and you feel you can laugh at yourself again and not feel bad about it? Make it up to me by not saying sorry unless you earned it."

She looks like she's about to smile but she twists her mouth again instead. "Okay."

"Okay." I lift up the counter, she steps through, and I put the rest of her snacks in another bag and hand that to her. "Thank you," she says quietly, then leaves.

Twenty minutes later a cop comes in and I am arrested for indecent exposure because I have no pants to put on. He at least lets me close shop and call my boss on the way to the station. Dave doesn't fire me. I don't know, I can't tell you what goes on in another man's head. Maybe he feels it would not be very apropos to fire his employee after he just went into court to defend himself.

So, yeah, I'm in the back of the police car, thinking, "Good job, Jay!" but also starting to think of a new resolution to plan my actions before I do them, because it is now just occurring to me I'll be sitting in a jail cell with many strange men, for a few hours at least, bereft of pants.

Yeah. Good job, Jay.

When I come back to work, I find a pair of pants were left for me when Trent was on shift, and it is this—not the broken bathroom lock—that prompts the downward spiral that is this story, which is now embellished with Macauly Culkin-style antics, going commando, and weird romantic overtones, depending on which of my coworkers tells it.

A note came with the pants.

Sorry, not sorry.
—Rachel

Weird Stuff
by
John Abernathy

I told her, "I like weird stuff," and she didn't immediately leave.

In fact she said, "Mmmmmm," because her mouth was full of calamari rigatoni, and then, "I like weird stuff, too."

I leaned toward her and kept my voice down so the other diners wouldn't hear. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Well," she matched my whisper, "My favorite movie is Xanadu. Have you seen it?"

I said, "Mm," even though there was nothing in my mouth. She was one of *those*. Couldn't tell weird and interesting from merely quirky and banal.

"And yarn bombing. You know what that is?"

"Yeah."

"And coloring books."

The waiter drifted by. I considered cutting my losses, thought about asking him for a doggy bag. She went on whispering. I sat back and surveyed the rest of the room. All these other couples. Candlelit. Holding hands over the table. Smirking at their secrets. They had so much in common with each other, they shared interests. It was so easy for them.

I didn't notice when my date went silent. I turned back to her and said, "What? Sorry."

She spoke to her noodles. "I like other people's refrigerators. I like going through them."

"Um, like, at parties?"

"No." She wasn't eating her calamari, just stabbing it. She said, "Imagine you come home from work, or school, or vacation, and your fridge has been rearranged. Not so much you really notice, but you're almost positive those leftovers were stacked differently. And you *never* put the milk on the left side of the shelf. And so maybe you fix it or leave it alone but sometime over the next couple of days it's reversed again, and this time you notice the peanut butter's been left open. Imagine you look inside and see some marks and think, *When did I use a fork to scoop peanut butter?* but you can't remember even once using anything but a knife or spoon.

"You'd just brush it off though, right? No big deal. You'd just think you were getting a little forgetful. How long do you think it would take a person to notice? Weeks? Months?"

I had trouble deciding which of my many questions was most important. Finally I settled on, "Who refrigerates peanut butter?"

She might have laughed, though it was really more of a honk. "You wouldn't *believe* the kinds of things people put in their fridges. It's like they're paying no attention at all. You can even put stuff in there yourself, almost anything, and they'll just assume they did it themselves. Put their car keys or a TV remote in the butter tray, they'll just slap their foreheads and laugh. You can put your own things in, too. Brands of condiments they never buy. Drinks they don't drink. Leftovers from restaurants they've never been to." She pushed calamari around her plate.

"And you can do stuff *to* the food, too." She made eye contact. "*Weird* stuff."

The waiter came again. Our water was refilled. When he and enough silence had passed, my date asked, "What about you? What's your weirdness?"

I shrugged and mumbled, and she had to say, "Huh?"

I spoke to my own noodles. I said, "I like butt stuff."

She said, "Mm," even though there was nothing in her mouth. After a few more minutes of silence, she stopped the waiter and asked for a to-go box.

A Poem About Desolation
by
Jared De Vore

Knick Knack Wars

by
Brooke Reynolds

Fred opened his apartment door at Shady Maples Retirement Home to a crime scene; someone had fiddled with his knick knacks. All residents at Shady Maples were given one small end table and a smidgen of wall space to display their memories. The halls were filled with old ceramic Christmas villages, poodles made from plaster, and all the precious moments of life carved out of stone. The scent of moth balls and musty yellowed newspaper articles filled the stale morning air. Fred stared dumbfounded at the little red caboose of his Lionel train set, given to him by his late wife Gloria the day his father died, back when Fred had a full head of hair. It was now in front of the engine. Fred knew the only nimrod who would dare mess with his mementos was Albert from across the hall.

Albert was a former WWII fighter pilot and a dick, but not in that order. His doorway was decorated with framed newspaper clippings and a single metal, The Distinguishing Flying Cross. Albert started annoying Fred with simple gestures, like flipping the sun magnet by the door to signal that Fred was awake when really, he was asleep. This led to knocks on Fred's door at three am from concerned staff members. Albert the jokester. Fred hadn't dealt with annoying pranksters like this since boarding school more than sixty years ago.

With his crunched and arthritic-ridden fingers, Fred replaced the caboose to its rightful position. He looked at the pot of faux Black-eyed Susans on the table with the watercolor of the same flowers on the wall above and adjusted the painting to match the two perfectly. He kissed his shaking hand and pressed it to the painting before going about his day.

The next morning, the battle raged on when his precious painting was replaced by a painting of daffodils instead. Now the whole display was ruined. Black-eyed Susans were Gloria's favorite flowers. One of her last hobbies when she was wheel-chair ridden, was to paint wildflowers. While this was Gloria's painting, the daffodils were given to Albert. The Susans, her last painting before she passed one year ago, she saved for Fred. Fred loved the details she captured, the fuzzy black gumdrop center with yellow petals that spun off like a pinwheel. Fred hmphed. Hiding underneath Albert's end table was the missing painting. Fred didn't need his lifelong detective skills to solve this mystery. He switched the paintings and went about his day.

The following morning, Fred was greeted by a full-on war zone. His Lionel train set was tipped over on its side. Small paper drawings of flames were taped onto each car. His figurines, all the passengers and even the engineer, were painted crimson. Suspended above all the chaos was a small model WII fighter plane, making it look like as if an airstrike were responsible for the derailment. Fred had enough.

He went back inside his apartment and retrieved a red sharpie marker. With hunched shoulders and slippers feet, Fred tiptoed across the hall to Albert's door memorial. He lifted the framed newspaper article from the wall and carefully removed it. A few circles here and a few lines there. He replaced the article, making sure it centered over the medal. Fred smiled. Now, the Nazis won the war.

To My Dear and Loving Cabot Extra Sharp Cheddar
by
Benjamin J. Chase

If ever cheese were cheese, then surely you.
I'll never eat another; that much is true.
If ever cheese was better in a slice,
compare with me, ye pantry mice.
I prize thy taste—so sharp and bold—
the finest dairy Stop N Shop doth hold.
My love is such no other snack will do—
just Wheat Thins richly adorned with you.

Office Cleaning
by
Klaus Nannestad

Jason was a charming and attractive lawyer working at one of the biggest firms in America. He was almost everything a man could wish to be, except for one thing, he was dead. Rick, meanwhile, was a cleaner who was plump, socially awkward and who had just discovered a corpse in the kitchen while mopping the third floor of the office.

For a brief moment after seeing the corpse Rick just stood gawking. The biggest disturbance to his work since he started had involved a large pot of tomato soup, but this was rather more drastic. After some deliberation Rick decided the best thing to do was to check for a pulse. Rick knelt down beside Jason's rigid body and pressed his pointer and middle finger against Jason's wrist. There was nothing. Rick scratched the stubble on his chin, now he thought about it, the fact the body was missing a head should probably have indicated to him that it was dead.

The grotesque sight made Rick think back to a murder mystery he had once watched with his grandma. They had to identify the victim using his fingerprints because being decapitated in a similar, albeit more gruesome manner, they had no head to identify the body with. *Fingerprints, shit.* Rick stood up abruptly. *Could they get fingerprints off someone's skin?* Rick wasn't sure, but if they could he knew they would find his fingerprints on this corpse.

There was only one thing to do. Rick searched through the draws of the kitchen and soon found a large butchers knife. *This will do nicely* he thought to himself smugly. He then walked back over to the corpse and began to saw at the man's arm, just above where he'd pressed his fingers to check for a pulse. After 10 minutes of hacking and sawing, Rick finally broke through bone and severed the man's hand. Triumphantly he dropped the hand and the knife in his mop bucket only to look up and see a security camera pointed above him. Rick decided this probably wouldn't look good, and he didn't feel he had the composure to explain his actions to the authorities. What Rick did decide, was that he needed to pull down that security camera. He was pretty sure pulling down the camera would ensure there would be no footage of his deed for anyone to find, or at least as sure as he was that the police could get fingerprints off a victim's skin.

The problem was that with the offices high ceilings, the security camera was quite far off the ground, far higher than Rick could reach. Standing on a chair wouldn't suffice either, but standing on a chair that was placed upon a desk, that might work.

Rick ran over to the nearest office. It had a desk perfect for the job. It looked like it would be light enough to move without any great hassle, but sturdy enough to hold the weight of both Rick and a chair. Rick grabbed one end of it and tugged heavily. It didn't budge. Rick tried again, trying with all his might to pull it towards him. But even as beads of sweat began to form on his forehead, the desk wouldn't move. Rick then tried a different approach, walking around to the back of the desk and attempting to push it. But the result was the same. Rick looked down and kicked the desk in frustration, and in doing so realised it was nailed to the floor.

Quickly, Rick rushed back to his mop bucket and grabbed the large knife out of it. He then returned to the desk and began to use it as a makeshift screwdriver, with which he could loosen the bolts. It was arduous work. Not quite comparative to hacking off a man's hand, but still fairly trying.

Eventually, however, Rick had all the bolts free and began to drag the desk to the door with relative ease. Yet as Rick reached the door he saw a problem. The desk was too wide to fit through. Examining the desk, Rick realised it was the type you assemble manually. He considered pulling it apart, and then putting it back together once he had carried the parts out the door, but he knew this would be time consuming, particularly with his lack of skill in assembling furniture. Rick remembered one time when he had bought a bedside table from IKEA. His mother had complimented him on the abstract sculpture he had built, but its practicality was limited.

Instead, Rick set off to find another, more cooperative desk. He soon found a dozen foldup tables in a conference room that had been position together in a horseshoe formation. They didn't look particularly sturdy, but Rick decided that one of them would have to do. He folded up the nearest one and carried it back to the kitchen, setting it up under the security table. Rick then returned to the conference room to grab a chair, as all the chairs in the other rooms were desk chairs, and therefore posed a problem with their wheels. Rick placed it upon the table and smiled admiringly at his wonderful construction. He'd always wanted to be an architect.

The next task for Rick was to scale his monument to ingenuity. He placed one foot atop of the table and then pause as he heard his pants begin tear. Rick cursed again, but decided not to kick the table this time in fear of knocking the chair off it. Despite them being stained and faded, Rick really liked his pants and didn't fancy tearing them any further. Subsequently, he stepped back down and removed his pants, folding them neatly and putting them next to the mop bucket.

Rick then commenced his second attempt at climbing the makeshift structure. Without his pants, getting on the table was easy. Yet getting on the chair was less simple, but Rick still managed to do so with minimal fuss. Slowly standing up to his full height on the chair, Rick gingerly reached up to seize the cables of the security camera, only to find it was just out of reach. *If only my arm was a little longer* Rick thought. Then Rick had wonderful epiphany, something comparable to when Archimedes overflowed his bathtub by pissing in it, or whatever he did.

Rick cautiously climbed down from the chair and table and pulled the severed hand out of the mop bucket. Having become largely desensitised to it, he proceeded to stuff it in his jumper pocket and then began his ascent back up.

Having managed to once again balance himself atop of the chair, Rick pulled the severed hand out of his pocket and reached up with it to try and use it to grab the cables of the security camera. Rick stretched himself as much as he was game, and then a little further. The fingertips of the hand brushed the cable, but he still needed more height. Rick went up on his tippy toes and reached for the cables once more. This time the fingers gripped the cables. Now Rick just had to apply some force to pull them out. He slowly but surely tugged at the cables harder and harder with the severed hand. Then just as he thought he was about to pull them out, the cables slipped from the hands rigid grip. This took Rick by surprise, and he stumbled atop the chair with all the grace of a drunken giraffe, and then chair began to tip backwards.

Time seemed to float frozen for Rick as he fell. Yet all he could think about was how his brilliant planning had possibly failed him. His head then smacked against the hard floor and Rick lost consciousness.

Rick awoke to see two police officers standing above him with perplexed expressions on their faces, and several more officers walking around the office kitchens.

"Oh, you're awake," Said one of the two officers, not seemingly particularly concerned for Rick.

"Where's the head?" The other officer asked him, hands on hips.

Rick reached his hands up to feel his throbbing head. It was still where it normally was.

"No, I mean the head of the man next to you."

Rick turned to his left to see the corpse right where he had found it, now just a few inches from him.

"How would I know?" Rick exclaimed, not yet trusting himself to stand.

"Well," The officer tilted his head to one side "You did cut the man's hand off."

The officer pointed to Rick's right. Rick rolled his head over to the other side to see the severed hand almost touching his nose.

"It was like that when I got here." Rick replied unconvincingly.

"Then how come we have security footage of you sawing the man's hand off, and then building some structure with a table and chair so you could swat at the camera with it?"

Rick didn't answer, he didn't really know how he could.

"We'd be very interested to know the answer to that," The other officer was now speaking, his tone similarly patronising "But what I really want to know is why you're not wearing any pants."

Rick now looked down at his bare legs, and then over to his folded pants near the mop bucket.

"I didn't want to rip my pants and have to walk home with a massive tear in them."

"Yes," The officer said thoughtfully "that would have made you look silly."

Contributor Biographies



Hayley Rosenfield is an English teacher and a dorm parent to a house full of high schoolers. When she's not extinguishing vacuum cleaner fires, she writes poetry, short stories, and song lyrics. She lives in southern Minnesota.



Mitch Frye teaches and writes in Mobile, Alabama. His critical essays have appeared in such venues as *Critique* and *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*. His non-critical essays have received treatment at a local urgent care.



Daniel Galef has published humor in *The American Bystander*, *Kugelmass*, and *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*. Until 2017 he was editor-in-chief of *The Plumber's Faucet*, the humor magazine at McGill University, where he also performed improv, stand-up, and sketch comedy and won First Prize at the 2016 McGill Drama Festival.



Adam Millard is the author of twenty-six novels, twelve novellas, and more than two hundred short stories, which can be found in various collections, magazines, and anthologies. Probably best known for his post-apocalyptic and comedy-horror fiction, Adam also writes fantasy/horror for children, as well as bizarro fiction for several publishers. His work has recently been translated for the German market.



Liz Sellier is a writer living in San Francisco. She studied English at UCLA and works in tech. She hopes to see her name in the *New Yorker* one day, even if it's just for winning the Cartoon Caption Contest. Find her at her website, Medium, or Twitter.



Kim Gibson has been writing mostly garish fan fiction since she was seven. However, her first work, "The Indiana Jones Ride," has been met with strong praise. "Wow! It's like I'm on the ride again! Good work, Kimberly. Love, Mom" is among the positive reception from critics. She used to spend her time worrying about the man with the clipboard until the day came when she suddenly was the man with the clipboard. Almost literally, for she carries a clipboard as she judges children's work by day and writes dubious tales by night.



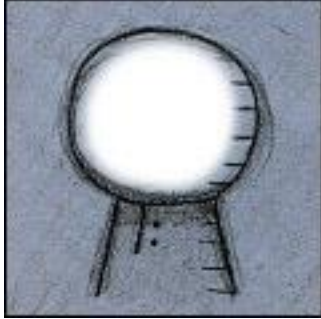
This summer **John Abernathy** visited the Crystal Palace dinosaurs. They were sculpted in the mid 1850's just after the first World's Fair. Back then we weren't completely sure what dinosaurs looked like, I guess we still aren't, but we were ESPECIALLY wrong 168 years ago. John first saw these dinosaur sculptures in the late 1980s on a VHS called "Dinosaurs! Dinosaurs! Dinosaurs!" with Gary Owens. At that point John was scared of them. Today John works at a college or something.



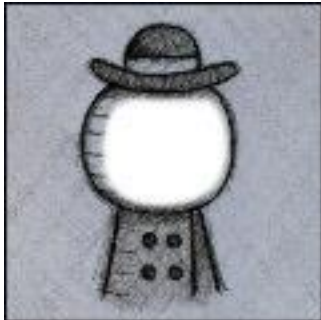
Jared De Vore is a History student at the University of Arkansas.



Brooke Reynolds is a veterinarian from Charlotte, North Carolina. When she isn't saving animals, she enjoys writing fiction. Her stories have appeared at such online and print markets as *The Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Massacre Magazine*, *Fantasia Divinity*, *The Aironaut*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Riggwelter Press*, and *Every Day Fiction*. Her story "Dr. Google" won 2nd place in the 2016 Short Story Contest for Channillo. For more information, check out her website reynoldswrites.org. You can follow her on twitter @psubamit



Benjamin J. Chase has published poems in *The Aurean*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Windhover*, and many other literary journals. A Connecticut native, he is working on an M.F.A. in Poetry at Western Connecticut.



Klaus Nannestad was born in Wagga Wagga, Australia, and it's really been downhill since then. Now living in Bendigo, he is currently studying a Bachelor of Media and Communications through the University of New England. Klaus is a frequent contributor to online sports site *The Roar* and enjoys writing strange and unusual stories that are really just a cry for help. Klaus has also won many prestigious writing awards, but is simply too modest to say so.