

# ◇ Defenestration ◇

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## **Dividing by Zero** by **Daniel Hudon**

In Third Grade, we all hated arithmetic until Mrs. Podolski, with her heavy Polish accent, showed up and briefly cast a numerical spell on us. Mrs. Podolski was a short, stout woman who replaced our regular teacher for two weeks. She wore brilliant floral print dresses and prefaced almost everything she said with, "And now, children."

"And now, children," she said during Arithmetic, "if you learn anything from me, you must learn never to divide by zero. It will explode and we will all die."

If she was joking, nobody laughed. With Mrs. Close, our regular teacher, arithmetic had been silly counting games, adding up pocket change, dividing fruit and slices of pizza. It was rote memorization and multiplication tables—safe and boring.

For Mrs. Podolski, every number was special. One was sent to us directly by God and was unique; two, like our parents and eyes, was also divine. Three grew abundantly on trees in the savannahs of Africa and four was a cornerstone for geometry, pyramids and cathedrals. She had a special fondness for zero.

"And now, children," she said, "I will tell you the secrets of nothing." We held our breath.

She told us zero was like an enormous empty vessel—made of the finest china—waiting to be filled. But nothing could fill it, not apples and oranges, not our wishes or dreams. Nothing could even enter it, not even the tiniest grain of sand. Mysteriously, if you added zero to other numbers, it loomed invisibly in the background and nothing happened. But if you multiplied by zero, zero destroyed the number and turned it into nothing. The consequences of dividing by zero were even more severe: pure and utter destruction.

This was new. When Mrs. Close mentioned dividing by zero she only said never to do it, that it was against the rules. And we added it to the growing list of school don'ts: don't be late, don't chew gum, don't talk without raising your hand, and don't ever divide by zero. With Mrs. Podolski, we were fascinated and stupefied. Could numbers really have such power?

I didn't believe it. On my homework, when ten was divided by five, I imagined five slipping inside ten and splitting it apart until only two was left. I thought of three going into nine with scissors and making three equal bits of nine. I put one into four so quietly that four didn't even notice and stayed four. But zero was another matter. On the bottom of the page, I doodled about and played with dividing six by zero, seven by zero and eight by zero. They wouldn't explode at all, I thought. They would each become like unicyclists and ride away, never to come back. They would disappear, not explode.

The next day, Mrs. Podolski called me to the front of the class. She held my homework up and I could see the red "F" on it. "And now, children," she said, "we will see the consequences of dividing by zero." I stood next to her nervously and she handed me a china tea pot. Perfectly smooth with a delicate pattern of a dragon wrapped around it, it was the most precious thing I ever held.

"And now, children, he will drop it."

My jaw fell open as I looked at her. The whole class stared at me.

"Drop it, I say." She furrowed her brows and nodded at the same time. I held the teapot tightly. It was cool to my touch.

"What are you waiting for? You want to put zero on the bottom. Let's see what happens!"

If this was another of her jokes, I now despised her for it.

"Go on, drop it," she said.

"I don't want to," I finally said.

"Here," she said. She took the teapot from my hands and held it above her head. Then she let it go. Instinctively, I jumped back and when the teapot hit the ground, it exploded into millions of glittering pieces. Even the lid was destroyed. Some of the girls screamed, including Olivia Conn who always wore her hair in pigtails and never spoke. Michael Black, who sat in the second row and wore glasses, got hit in the leg with a piece of the handle and cried, "Ow!" My classmates in the front row got spattered with debris and when the shock wore off, a couple of them began to whimper. It was the math demo to end all math demos.

"And now, child, you may sit," she said.

I looked at the shards on the floor, saw the commotion around me and wanted to be sick. As I walked back to my desk, I heard the crunching under my feet.

Mrs. Podolski dusted off her dress and bent over to pick up a handful of the destroyed teapot. Instead of putting it in the garbage can, she walked around the classroom and handed each of us a piece. As she went we could hear her say, "One for you and one for you."

When she got to me, I reluctantly put out my hand and she said, "And one for you, child." And she put nothing into my hand.

Just then, the Vice Principal, Mrs. Lamb poked her head in the door. "Is everything okay, I thought I felt an earthquake coming from this room."

"No, everything is not okay," Mrs. Podolski said, shaking her finger in the air, "one of your students just divided by zero."

Mrs. Lamb gasped. "Didn't you warn them?"

"Yes," Mrs. Podolski said as she continued around the room, "but one was stubborn."

"Shall we dangle him by his ankles above the black hole that just formed in the parking lot?"

"I don't think that will be necessary," Mrs. Podolski said, "I'm giving them nothing to think about. They can give some to their friends and their friends' friends until everyone in the world many times over has some."

Without raising our hands, several of us blurted out, "But you've given us nothing!"

"Yes, children," she said, "if I divide the pot into zero pieces everyone gets nothing and if I divide it into pieces so small no one can see them, then everyone, and I do mean everyone, again gets nothing. But infinity is a topic for another day.

What she said hadn't sunk in yet for all I could think was teapot + floor = big explosion or teapot / floor = shards upon shards. But the next day, Michael Black's grandmother died, Olivia Conn couldn't come to school because her parents' basement flooded, and Russia got hit by another meteorite. I didn't know if any of these were connected, but I never divided by zero ever again.

**Emily Dickinson's Car Accident Report**  
by  
**Ken Macklin**

Because I could not stop for Death—  
My Honda hit a tree  
The state police looked at my car—  
And Death began to flee

We drove his hearse at a great speed  
They followed in his wake—  
Then suddenly I realized  
His license plate was fake!

We passed a mall  
Where people shopped  
Astounded at the sight—  
Of two dead old pedestrians  
Death said it was his right

"Their time was up"  
He shouted out, "I would have killed them—  
In their sleep  
It was on my schedule anyway  
For Saturday—  
Next week"

They took Death into custody  
And locked him in a cell  
He really freaked his cell mate out  
Bothered by his smell

"You smell like Death," he told him  
Death smiled at him and said  
"For that I'll take you earlier"  
And in a second—  
He was dead

In summing up I warn you all  
If you see Death on the road  
Avoid him at your peril  
Please—  
Especially if  
You're old

**To Sarah Connor**  
**by**  
**Benjamin J. Chase**

Baby, I went back in time for you.  
I took a trial run of the time machine  
crouching in the blue energy ball  
that opened in a Los Angeles alley—  
trash and newspaper swirling  
around my unrequited asphalt origins.  
And baby, I faced that faceless,  
muscle-bound cyborg for you.

*And why?* you wonder, while we make pipe bombs.  
I'll tell you—*Love*. Yes, I've loved you  
from future through present to past,  
and I'll love you long after I'm fried  
and time—that cruelest laser rifle beam—  
melts the precious Polaroid of your face.

## **Pinocchio Goes On Klonopin**

by  
**Jorja Hudson**

"This is Clonazepam, the generic for Klonopin. We'll start you off on 5mg and you can just take it any time you feel that wave of anxiety coming on."

Pinocchio had never heard of Klonopin before.

"It's just your standard benzodiazepine, like Xanax," his GP explained.

Pinocchio took the prescription and thanked Dr. Rose. He'd never taken anti-anxiety medication before, but he had heard of Xanax. He'd had a roommate before who would take Xanax and sip miso soup on the futon.

Pinocchio's anxiety was getting worse every day. He was 27 years old now, and working as a temp at a printing office in downtown Chicago. In particular, he felt anxiety about dating. He wanted to look for a serious relationship, but dreaded the point when he'd have to reveal uncomfortable things about himself, such as his nose job or the fact he'd been born a toy.

What's worse, he'd have to first acknowledge it himself and he wasn't ready to confront that just yet. He wanted to live a normal life, despite never having been technically born, but instead crafted from wood then 'wished' to life via fairy.

His identity crisis gnawed at him daily. He did all the normal things: he paid rent, ate vegetables, and frequented happy hours with his coworkers. He had the same dreams as most people, including having a family someday, that is if he actually had regular human DNA in his sperm. That was just one of the issues contributing to his overwhelming anxiety about life.

Pinocchio couldn't remember the first ten years of his life, because he hadn't, well, had them. He had no memories from his time as a toy, (politically correct terms include: *toy-man*, *toysperson* and *not-human*.) Sometimes at night, when his thoughts turned really dark, he wondered if he had been the victim of some family-based abuse and maybe that was the reason he couldn't remember his childhood. But then he'd come to his senses and acknowledge that no, he hadn't suppressed a bad childhood. He just hadn't had a childhood. Because he'd been a toy.

Pinocchio took his first dose of Klonopin that night, after coming home from work, making himself some tofu, and collapsing on his bed to binge Russian Doll (he wasn't sensitive to all-doll related material, and luckily, he didn't think the show actually featured toys or dolls specifically).

When he took the small pill, he didn't feel anything. Maybe a little bit sleepy, but it had been a long day, so he could have just been sleepy because of that. Forty minutes later, Pinocchio got up off the bed and felt a giant weight in his body, as if he was trapped underwater, but an amazing kind of underwater, like an ocean of peace and serenity weighed down by an anchor of cotton candy and dreams. He liked it. He really liked it.

Pinocchio didn't want to become dependent on anything chemical, and was painfully aware of the pill-pushing nature of the country's healthcare system. He told himself he'd only take the pill when his anxiety got too much to bear, when his identity crisis sent his thoughts spiraling late into the night and his existential burden became too heavy to contemplate all on his own.

He thought about going back to his hometown and doing research on his father slash God-like toy-craftsman. The townsfolk spoke highly of him and it was now five years since his passing. He also thought about changing his name to something normal, like Matt, but he didn't even have a birth certificate to present to the court, which was so messed up, right?!

More Klonopin.

Two weeks went by and Pinocchio was taking the Klonopin almost nightly: on Sunday nights to feel rested for the week. After a stressful day when his coworkers talked about their hometowns. On Thursday because, well, he didn't need a reason every time. After all, this was a medicine that was prescribed to him by a doctor. If he chose to take it recreationally, that was up to him.

Every time, it felt like a big hug for his brain. As if some soft heavenly creature was gently wiping all of his anxious thoughts from his mind, and covering him with a weighted blanket of safety. Pinocchio got used to this feeling and carried himself through his days in a newfound calm, placated and almost numb manner.

On a Friday in May, Pinocchio had a Bumble date. She was cute: mousy haired, big-eyed and feminine. They got drinks at Milk Cap, a Logan Square bar. Pinocchio wasn't nervous at all - he'd taken half a Klonopin with breakfast that morning.

"So, do you like your job?" she asked. Pinocchio shrugged. "It's alright, I guess."

"Hey, what's the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to you? Mine was when I got my period in eighth grade right in front of everyone." Pinocchio could tell she was trying to get personal, and while he appreciated her charming efforts, he shrugged again. "Oh, I dunno, I threw up at a college party once."

At the end of the night, Pinocchio and Jane parted ways.

"So, do you want to do this again sometime?" he asked her.

"To be honest, no. I'm sorry! You're cute and all, but you sort of have no personality."

Pinocchio nodded, taking in this constructive criticism.

"It's like you don't have any real thoughts in your head that you're comfortable sharing. Truthfully, you have no edge. Like, you haven't experienced anything difficult in your entire life."

Pinocchio nodded. Ironic, but fair.

"You're sort of hollow, or maybe you just have a rough exterior. If I'm being brutally honest, it's kind of like you're not even human at all."

Jane got into an Uber and faded into the night. Pinocchio took his bottle of Klonopin and swiftly threw it into a trashcan. He called his doctor the next day to ask for a therapist recommendation. "Have you heard of Wellbutrin?" she asked.

**Two Poems**  
by  
**Aaron Barry**

**Existential Knock-Knock Joke**

Knock knock!

Who's there?

I am.

I am...who?

I am here, he who was born into  
this world, raving and bloody, through  
the selfishness, the lust of two other  
beings, beaten into the confines of  
man's society—the will of others *vis-à-vis*  
the will of the self—only to have  
this bitter, Sisyphean struggle  
result in nothing more than in the erasure of all  
breaking down to cosmic dust  
and being broken down into dust and dust  
and cast into cold space, entropic universe  
embraced in death death  
Death.

Ha ha. Good one.

**fatherly advice**

i stood on the field  
the smell of the glove's leather  
hitting my nose  
*catch*  
my dad said  
and i caught the ball  
*remember this for as long as you live*  
he said  
*because it's even easier*  
*to catch herpes*

**A Christmas Miracle**  
by  
**Margo Hollingsworth**

Kelsey was dead now, but it was supposed to be a Christmas surprise.

Kelsey's dad was turning eighty-seven years old on Christmas Day, and Kelsey wanted to surprise him. That Christmas would be Kelsey's twentieth birthday, too. Daddy never remembered her other half brothers' and sisters' birthdays, but he couldn't forget Kelsey's! Her half siblings were older than Kelsey's mom. Her mom was no longer invited to family events, but Kelsey was her dad's favorite child.

Diane was Kelsey's oldest half-sister. She had turned sixty-one in November. She had made a big fuss about returning everyone's birthday gifts to Target. "Ninety three dollars and nineteen cents!" She had written in a group email to all of her siblings and ex-stepmoms. "I returned all of the gifts you cheap sons of bitches got me, and the total value was ninety three dollars and nineteen cents. And *thank you* to Kelsey" (Diane had never spelled Kelsey's name correctly.) "for the twenty dollar gift card so I didn't have to *bother* returning it to see what you spent!"

That email came after three pm, a few of the recipients made puns in forward emails to one another about "Chardon-rage". The rest just rolled their eyes and moved it to the trash.

Kelsey responded using her pet name for Diane: "Hey Die-already, that was the gift card you got me for my high school graduation, and I spent \$12.31 of it already, so I guess it's really only \$7.69." Kelsey was a genius at math and loved to use her prowess to make her family look and feel stupid.

Diane had sent another email to the whole family the week before telling them that she was taking them all on a three-week cruise to Italy to celebrate Dad's birthday. They would leave the day after Christmas.

Although generous, the whole family knew Diane's constant mission to outdo her siblings each year on Christmas. As a kid, she had always given dad the best gifts of all her siblings, and she loved the attention her dad showed her on that one day, his birthday and Christmas. Even into adulthood, Diane counted on getting her dad the best gift. No one even tried to compete with her. Diane had the competition licked. This all changed in 1997 when Diane bought Dad a car for his birthday, Kelsey was born two weeks early, on Christmas day. Dad had called Kelsey his best Christmas gift and Diane never forgave her.

After that, Diane never recovered. In fact, Diane had a knack for giving a second-best gift every year, and no matter how hard she tried to be thoughtful, she had never recovered what she so desperately wanted: to be the best gift-giver. Every year, Diane tried to get Dad the perfect gift, but she could never reclaim her former glory. All the kids loved when Dad made a big deal about them and their gift. He would call around and say, "And you won't believe what Laura got me this year! An exact replica of the plane I flew in Korea! I love it!" Diane had gotten him a small silver paperweight shaped like the Red Baron's bi-plane that year. Her dad didn't mention it, although it still sat on his desk in the upstairs office.

The year Dad got a Mickey Mantle baseball (for which he bought a safe and has never taken it out since to anyone's knowledge), Diane had gifted a Mark McGwire hat. The next year, a brother had procured a Honus Wagner baseball card (also in the safe), which overshadowed Diane's Darryl Strawberry baseball card. The next year a half-sister mailed him a real gold nugget from the 1849 gold rush for the safe and a replica of that 1849 gold nugget that he wouldn't be afraid to display on the mantle. Diane, like Cain's similarly unworthy gift, presented a silver nugget from the Comstock Lode and pen shaped like the Golden Spike that united the transcontinental railroads. The next year, having admittedly given up a little bit, Diane's offering (cologne in a bottle that looked like a hand grenade) was shattered by an authentic de-fused WWI landmine.

This year though—this year would be different. She had been saving for seven years. She had originally planned this for his ninetieth, but when Dad had a heart attack at eighty five, she realized time was running out. She had to win Christmas before Dad died. She got a second job and canceled her cable. Not only would she give the best gift—she would coerce her siblings into giving dad jack shit. "This year, no one will try to top my gift," she'd explained in an email entitled, *Listen up, Fuckers*. "Twenty dollars or less is acceptable, and nothing too thoughtful. I will anticipate and destroy any efforts to outshine me this year."

Kelsey laughed as she deleted the email. She wasn't about to kowtow to Diane's tyranny. Diane would be expecting some sort of math-related plan, obviously, since Kelsey was a math genius, so she decided to do something completely different.

She bought some footie pajamas with reindeer on them and a giant red bow that she put on her head. She bought an enormous suitcase at Big Lots!, and her plan was to stuff herself inside of it, (something she knew she could do because she could easily calculate her own volume and the capacity of the suitcase in her head) and give her old dad the gift of Kelsey for Christmas once again. "Suck it, Diane!" she said to herself as her boyfriend zipped her in.

She had to get her boyfriend to help, because the plan was very complicated. Too bad they were both math geniuses, but not real geniuses.

She stuffed herself inside the before-mentioned suitcase and had her boyfriend wrap it like a present.

They giggled while they decided the return address should say, North Pole. "Cute and clever, just like you!" her boyfriend said.

Then, her boyfriend dropped her off on her dad's front porch on Christmas morning. Her whole family was there celebrating, since the cruise left the next day, but Kelsey had pretended to have a math conference in Rome. She knew that dad was disappointed they weren't celebrating their birthdays together.

Kelsey expected her dad to rip open the package, and she would bust out of the suitcase, just as her mother had busted out of a cake on the night she had met Kelsey's dad, and just like the time she had busted out of her mom on Christmas morning. She would, once again, be the best present Dad had ever gotten, and Diane could go suck pennies.

Of course, Kelsey was worried that the thrill and surprise might kill her eighty-seven-year-old daddy, so she packed an emergency defibrillator that she had stolen from a hallway in the mall just to be on the safe side.

As she huddled in the darkness on the porch, she heard the door open. Diane's dusty voice said, "Hey guys—there's something out here for Dad." Kelsey smiled and could barely contain her glee, covering her mouth with both hands. Her revelation was so close, and she couldn't wait to see her dad's face.

"Who sent it?" a male voice asked- probably one of her brothers. (*Maybe Dave?*)

"It just says North Pole," Diane read. Kelsey giggled at the memory and the silliness. She clamped her hands harder over her mouth. There was silence outside. Had Diane heard?

"Yike—let's hope it's not an ex-wife," he (*definitely Dave*) replied. Kelsey let out a breath, (quietly, quietly) of relief.

"Yes," Diane replied. "Hey Dave," (*yes!*) "Go inside and get Gary. Tell him to help you bring this in, would you?"

"Whatever you say, Diane." Most of the siblings ignored Diane, but Dave was usually content to just grumble and obey her. That pattern continued with his boss, his wife, and his three terrible kids.

Kelsey heard the door close.

"Listen up you fat little bitch!" Kelsey jumped when she heard Diane's pet name for her right next to her ear.

"You wanted to top my gift for Dad again this year? Wasn't being born enough for you? Why won't you ever just let me win? Well, if you want to make a scene for Dad's birthday. Don't worry. I'm going to help you out. I don't know how yet, but I will figure out a way, even though I am not a math genius like you."

The door opened again and Diane stopped talking.

"Alright, Diane, where do you want this box?" Dave asked.

She felt herself being picked up and jostled.

"Living room. Is it too heavy for your back, Gary?" Diane asked.

"No way, Diane, this is light as a feather," Gary responded. Gary was the family comedian. "Fuck you, Gary." Diane replied.

They put the box down roughly, and Kelsey's elbow hit the defibrillator. "CHARGING" the machine said. *Damn it! This machine talks!* She quickly flipped the switch to OFF, but it was too late. Her brothers and sisters were freaking out. Kelsey heard voices overlapping and panicking.

"What is that?"

"Let's open it?"

"Get it out of the house!"

So many voices were talking at once, Kelsey got confused and couldn't figure out the next step. She should have busted out then, or whispered to her siblings, but she said nothing. That left an opening for Diane to exact her revenge.

"It's a bomb! Call the police!" Diane screamed.

Voices called all at once in wavery panic.

"A bomb!" "Get the kids out!" "Where's Dad?" "Who did this?"

"Dave, get Dad!"

"I don't see why Gary couldn't—" Dave's voice trailed off as he walked away and Kelsey couldn't hear the end of the sentence.

She was busily trying to figure out what to do when she heard sirens on the street. She needed to get out, but when they put her down, she had lost hold of the suitcase's zipper, and her boyfriend had tied the ribbon so tight around the package, Kelsey could barely move. She stretched her fingers until they touched the flat backside of the zipper pull. She hooked her fingernail to the edge, but it wouldn't budge. Her finger slipped.

This was a failure. It was time to let everyone know it was her.

"Hey guys!" she called. "Guys! It's Kelsey! Help me out!"

No one responded.

Kelsey heard more screaming and soon voices came closer. They were in the foyer by the front door, about 11 feet behind her.

"Dad! Dad! Hold on, Dad!" Dave cried. "He's having a heart attack! Diane, call an ambulance!"

"Does anyone have a defibrillator?" a hysterical half sister or sister-in-law called.

Kelsey again said, "Hey guys!" but no one could tell where it was coming from. She needed to get out of there, now.

Kelsey had a brainstorm! They would definitely hear this: she pressed the on switch for the defibrillator. "CHARGING" it said in its monotone voice.

She heard screams and panicked voices. Children were crying and then the door slammed and almost at once it was silent. Everyone had run out of the house.

She heard the door open and loud footsteps.

"HELLO!" she cried.

"Police! Everyone out!" the voice answered.

"In here! In here!" she called, and within moments, the wrapping was off and the zipper opened. She had closed her eyes, and now she opened them to see the bared teeth of a

growling German Shepherd held back by a thick chain seemingly millimeters from her face. Her eyes followed the chain up to the gloved arms of a man with BOMB SQUAD written across his shirt. He and two other cops were staring at her, in her footie pajamas with a bow on her head.

No one moved. No one said anything.

"What the fuck?" One of them whispered.

"I have a defibrillator." Kelsey offered while recoiling from the vicious dog. "Save my dad!"

Snapping to action, the officer holding the dog pulled him back. Kelsey did a visual assessment, using the shadow from the leash to calculate the dog's distance from her face. 8.14 centimeters. The other officer grabbed the defibrillator and turned to run, but Diane was walking in.

"It's too late!" Her face was red and purple and white in blotches. Her unironic Christmas sweater was torn for some reason. Her hair was decidedly un-coiffed. "You killed Dad, you stupid cunt!" Diane fell to the floor crying. "You always ruin my presents!"

The officer's arm loosened his grip on the dog's leash for a moment, torn between helping the distraught woman and the teenager in the suitcase. That was all it took.

As Kelsey's face succumbed to the dog's teeth like a CPR dummy's, her soul squeezed from her body with a sucking noise and a pop, and her consciousness rose above the horrifying situation. Diane certainly wasn't thinking about herself now.

She felt a warmth, and turned towards the light. She saw her dad, walking towards her, his arms outstretched and his whole being suffused in a soft, white warmth. He looked younger, stronger. He hugged her for a long time. Then he pulled away, and held her face in his hands. He looked into Kelsey's eyes and said, "Kelsey."

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Let's haunt the fuck out of Diane."

Hand in hand, they walked away from the light, and towards the late-middle-aged woman weeping in the foyer.

**Sixteen Dollars**  
**by**  
**Lindsay Brown**

Sixteen dollars; the amount of money I spent on shampoo and conditioner last week. It was that charcoal kind that's meant for damaged hair.

Sixteen dollars is too much money to spend on hair care products, my husband says. He is not angry but confused as to why I don't know this.

Sixteen dollars is refunded back onto my credit card at the Walmart. I tell them that the bottles were cracked. They do not ask any further questions.

Sixteen dollars is the amount of money my kids need for new recorders for music class this year. Sophie wants a lime green one.

Sixteen dollars is one more dollar than what I would make as a cashier at the No Frills grocery store. We used to own a small business. A sandwich shop, but

Sixteen dollars was too much for customers to pay for a sandwich. So our business sunk. My husband now works for a large corporation where he makes far more than

Sixteen dollars. So he stays. Our family dog, Chevy, is old. His teeth are falling out. This means he can only eat food that comes from a can and is wet and is high in nutrition.

Sixteen dollars is what canned dog food costs per week. Sometimes it gives him diarrhea, and he shits all over the basement floor. The good floor cleaning detergent costs, you guessed it,

Sixteen dollars per 1L bottle. One day I won't have to count pennies and hoard dollar coins in mason jars secreted away in corner cupboards for when the refrigerator breaks.

Sixteen dollars is what I have saved so far. When my dog isn't shitting in the basement, and I'm not at the store refunding unnecessary items, I like to take him on his walkies.

Sixteen dollars is probably what a cab ride would cost from my place to our favorite pond. But, we walk, so it costs us nothing.

Sixteen dollars is undoubtedly pocket change for the people who live in the mansions that surround this pond. Their houses painted dark blacks and greys in verification of this fact.

Sixteen dollars is four fewer dollars than what I found while walking this pond path last Saturday. I don't feel guilty. They can afford the loss. Plus, now I have

Twenty dollars.

**When Billionaires Flee to Proxima b**  
by  
**Chris Panatier**

The billionaires gathered inside their special room, the hermetically sealed one with piped-in HEPA air, aromatherapy diffusers, and personal attention chambers. The room, rarely used, was reserved for emergencies only, and nobody present would dispute that this was an emergency.

The world was burning. Literally. Climate change had turned California into a tinderbox, while the rain forests of the Southern Hemisphere were being purposefully incinerated to make grazing room for the rare cattle with beautifully marbled meat that the billionaires preferred.

"Did you guys know that one out of every five breaths of air that we take is owed to oxygen produced by the Amazon?" asked the unblinking child-like billionaire with the waxy face and acorn-cap hair.

"My Amazon?" asked the bald billionaire.

"No, the forest Amazon. With the river."

"Ah."

The others nodded. The world's problems, ranging from this current climate kerfuffle, to the so-called "income gap" millennials were always complaining of, to never-ending wars and labor disputes, were becoming quite the nuisance. People were even grumbling about making their companies pay taxes! The billionaires freely acknowledged their roles in the swelling debacle and their apathy in responding to it, but there had been shareholders to answer to. It was all water over the bridge now. They were past the brink, and the golf courses weren't going to un flood themselves.

The billionaire sitting on the yoga mat stirred from his meditation and gracefully folded himself into an exquisite *Eka Pada Koundinyanasana*. Coming out of the pose, he took a decorous sip of mango kombucha. "I'd say it's time to consolidate the rocket fuel."

The men at the table nodded somberly in the affirmative. They hated to leave Earth, with its spendy populations, hunting reserves, and discrete massage salons. The eccentric one—they were all eccentric, but he was the one the rest of them deemed disproportionately eccentric relative to themselves—scribbled some notes on a disposable handmade silk napkin. "Well, I'll tell you," he said, underlining something. "It's fortunate we developed the alternative fuel source to get us to Proxima b," he said. "Conventional fuels could have done the job, but I'd not factored in the vintage cars."

"I don't go anywhere without my Boo-bu-gatti," said Bald, making a pouty baby face.

The problem caused by the additional payload, which had ballooned to include not only the billionaires' exotic cars, but their vast art collections, rare and endangered animals, exercise equipment, cryogenic chambers, and personal chefs, was that regular rocket fuel—a mixture of liquid oxygen and kerosene—simply wouldn't get them off the Earth, much less to the red

dwarf star Proxima Centauri, where Proxima b orbited in the habitable zone. Always diligent in anticipating contingencies, the billionaires had, over the preceding decade, quietly developed a new fuel. It burned longer and hotter, which gave it a specific impulse—the measure of how efficiently a rocket fuel burns—that far exceeded the usual solid or liquid propellants. But it was also plentiful, easy to collect, and refine. Best of all, it was free.

The new fuel was human souls.

"We really owe it to you," said Unblinking Waxy Boy to the Kombucha billionaire. "You developed the extraction technology."

"I can't take all the credit," said Kombucha. "You figured out how to get it onto all the platforms. That easily quadrupled our production."

"What are we at in terms of total harvest to date?" asked Eccentric.

"Great question," said Bald, bringing up some statistics on a wall screen. "We're pacing at just under six hundred million tweets per day. Hmm. That's up."

"Nice," added Waxy Boy.

Bald struggled to pull free a strip of monkey jerky with his teeth, then continued as he battled the wad of meat, "What's the math on that, overall?"

Eccentric consulted the napkin for a moment and said, "Well, we're a little over two hundred billion tweets per year, with every tweet garnering about a picogram of each tweeters' soul. We've been collecting since the aughts. Hmm-mm. I have us safely over a trillion tweets. That's one gram of pure soul. Easily enough to get us to our new home and then some." He chortled. "Mars shmarz."

"One gram, that's it?" asked Waxy. "I thought we'd need more."

"Soular power is unrivaled," said Eccentric. "Each person has a *million* Chernobyls' worth of energy locked within their soul. We just withdrew a tiny bit every time they tweeted a cat meme."

"Guess that's why people say they feel like they die a little bit when they go on Twitter," said Waxy.

Kombucha selected an essential oil he liked, bergamot, and anointed himself at the brow and then under his armpits. "That's exactly why."

Waxy slapped the table. "Welp, I guess I'll have to start packing. Any of you bringing your girlfriends?"

"No!" yelled the chorus.

"Wait a second," said Bald, standing. "I've sent tweets. Was my soul being harvested?"

The room fell silent. The billionaires stopped what they were doing and looked at Bald, wide-eyed at his revelation. Kombucha cracked a smile then burst out laughing. The others, including Bald, followed suit. And they laughed.

And laughed.

And laughed.

**Two Poems**  
by  
**Norman Minnick**

**The Nun in the Wheelchair**

She pushes the little lever forward and moves forward.  
She pushes the little lever to the left and turns left.  
She pushes the little lever to the right and turns right.  
She pushes the little lever backward and moves backward.  
She pushes the little lever back and forth  
Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth,  
And suddenly she stiffens, stares heavenward, and shouts "Ecce venio!"

**Beast**

As I slept my father searched my scalp  
for the number he was afraid to find.

Luckily, he tells me, the number he found  
was nine hundred ninety-nine.

**Pacification**  
**by**  
**Virginia Revel**

The Prince stood at the palace windows, pensively perusing the panorama below. He was, from his own perspective, a progressive potentate. He protected his people from pirates and other predators. He promoted prosperity. He persecuted the peasants only when they were presumptuous, and he had recently postponed a projected purge of the petty bourgeoisie. Yet on this day he was preoccupied with problems.

The press portrayed him as power-hungry and peculiar. Pockmarks, and sometimes even pimples, were penciled on his portraits. Plainly, he needed to present a more positive picture of himself. After pondering his predicament, he proposed to propitiate the population by permitting some of his prisoners to plead for pardon.

A platform was put up in the principal piazza for this purpose, and the presiding prosecutor promptly took his place upon it. People from all precincts pressed forward to participate: plumbers, potters, pensioners, printers, and busy among them, pickpockets.

The first prisoner, a page in parti-colored pantaloons, had been found in possession of pearls belonging to the princess. He claimed he had only been polishing them and he was planning to put them back.

"Why didn't you?" asked the prosecutor.

"The Prince pounced on me and I was petrified," said the page.

"Poppycock," said the prosecutor. "Next!"

A portly priest was propelled onto the platform, prodded in the posterior by a prison guard.

"Parishioners!" he burst out. "I preached about providence and predestination, as is the prerogative of my profession."

"And?"

"I tried to persuade the Prince to do penance for his peccadilloes."

"Preposterous. The Prince is a paragon of piety," said the prosecutor.

"Piffle!" cried a pugnacious porter in the piazza. "Put the priest back in his pulpit!"

The prosecutor pretended not to be perturbed, but he knew he was in a potentially perilous position. After a portentous pause, he pushed the priest aside and called for the next prisoner.

A puny publican emerged, pallid and patently pessimistic.

"I prepared a potion to give the Prince more pep," he said.

"Well?"

"It came out pink and pulpy."

"Why didn't you pour it down a privy?"

"The Prince had already picked it up. It didn't please his palate, so he had me put in prison as a poisoner."

"Pitiful!" cried a prominent poet who was usually more prudent.

The fourth prisoner popped up prematurely from behind a pile of planks. "Patriots, pay attention!" he said. "I have been pent up since Pentecost and made to subsist on porridge and potato peelings. I, a peer of the realm!"

"That is because you were seen patting the princess while she was practicing a prelude on the pianoforte," said the prosecutor.

"I was only pointing out the pianissimo part of the piece. But the Prince pinned me against the paneling and pummeled me till I was purple. The Prince will plague us in perpetuity if we placate him! We need political power! We need a parliamentary system as practiced in other places!"

"Precisely!" cried the porter.

The piazza began to pulse with proletarian passion, and the people spoke.

"The Prince should piss off!"

"Let's pelt him with pebbles!"

"Let's prick him with pitchforks!"

"Proceed to the palace, everyone" cried the peer, "and as you go, pry up the paving stones!"

A prey to panic, the Prince paced up and down. He would have preferred to mount his prancing palomino, pick up a pike, and punish the protesters personally, but because they were as plentiful as protozoa, this was not practical. Instead he procured a piece of paper and penned a new program. He promised more pay and prestige to everyone, particularly pages, priests, and publicans. He proclaimed that he and the princess were planning a protracted pilgrimage, and that while they were gone, the peer could be president.

When presented with this plan, the protesters pronounced it passable, the peer, perfect. People put down their projectiles, pubs provided them with pints, and presently, throughout the province, there was peace.

**Cherry Berry Lick-A-Licious**  
by  
**Cayce Osborne**

*Lord Abernathy's piercing gaze blazed across the ballroom, the fire in his azure eyes burning a trail directly to Lady Annabelle's loins. With a swish—*

The shift whistle screamed, breaking Annie's concentration. She clicked save on her latest story before stowing the laptop in her locker. Tucking blonde curls into her hairnet and stuffing the last of her tuna salad sandwich into her mouth, she hurried out to the bottling floor.

Doreen was already seated across the conveyor belt, wearing a novelty sweatshirt featuring a splay-legged cat grooming its huge, hairy testicles under the words SEND NUDES.

"How are they hanging, Doreen?" Annie wasn't fond the expression, but it was the only greeting her co-worker responded to.

"Long and loose and full of juice." Doreen hoisted a breast in each hand and jiggled.

The production line lurched into motion, sending plastic bottles streaming past Annie and Doreen's station. In charge of quality control, they were a good team—keeping each other alert with chit chat or shin kicks (when necessary) so their accuracy rating didn't suffer. The idea of being demoted to Taste-Tester made Annie shudder.

Doreen peeled a wad of Doublemint gum off the underside of her stool and popped it into her mouth. Both women donned their nose plugs as the unmistakable scent of Cherry Berry Lick-A-Licious filled the air. It wasn't quite as bad as Woo Woo Watermelon, but going without plugs was still inadvisable.

"Talk that hoity-toity Englishman into meeting up yet? About time you let him beat around your bush." Doreen laughed until her Wrigley's threatened to launch.

Annie pulled a cracked bottle off the line and put it in the duds bin that sat next to her stool.

"No, not yet. But at least on Skype I can enjoy Gareth's dreamy accent and gorgeous brown eyes. It's a huge commitment to fly to another country when we've never *actually* met. Online dating is tricky, I wanna do this right."

"*Riiight*," said Doreen.

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Gareth had successfully evaded the factory's security guards thus far, but the difficult bit was yet to come. He'd begun to sweat in his tuxedo. He took off his dove grey top hat to check that the diamond ring, purchased at a lovely shop on Minge Lane, was still wedged in the silk hat band. Satisfied, he gave his ensemble one final look—praying he could pull off his planned homage to *My Fair Lady*, Annie's favorite movie—and wrenched open the back door of the factory.

Hit with a cloying face-full of artificial fruit, he nearly packed it in right then. Annie had refused to provide details about her factory work, and Gareth couldn't fathom what concoction would require such a fragrance.

The machinery made such a bruhaha he feared his plan would be ruined. He scanned the hair-netted employees, but none looked like Annie. He'd just have to get on with it and hope for the best.

Breathing shallow to avoid gagging, he burst forth, sliding across the floor on his slick-bottomed oxfords.

*"I have often walked down the street before,"* he crooned, vibrato on full.

*"But the pavement always stayed beneath my feet before..."*

No one could hear his song with all the noise!

The rotund shift manager, walking above on the metal catwalk in a penguinated waddle due to the shockingly low inseam on his trousers, glared down at him. Gareth sang directly to the man, playing to his audience of one, as it were.

The manager blanched, and with a wary eye on the tuxedoed intruder, slammed the red EMERGENCY STOP button with a meaty palm.

The motors and rotors and belts and bottles wound down with a clanking rattle. All eyes raised to the manager. He pointed accusingly. The entire population of the factory swiveled in unison from him to Gareth, as if watching a tennis match.

In the sudden quiet, Gareth held back a bilious cherry-imbued burp and launched into song once again, searching for Annie.

*"People stop and stare, they don't bother me..."*

There she was! That beautiful, kind-eyed visage! Joy propelled him forward.

*"For there's nowhere else on earth that I would rather be."*

*Hurk!* went his gag reflex. But his midday pudding stayed blessedly put.

He kneeled at her feet, pulling off his hat with a flourish and throwing his arms wide before delivering the song's closing line.

*"Let me be on the street where you live."*

He almost choked on the final note as his eyes were drawn to a tiny metal object arcing away from him, through the air toward a large open vat. The song's conclusion was punctuated by a dreadful *blerp* as it landed. With a sick feeling that had nothing to do with the miasma in the air, he looked at his hat-in-hand and saw—with a horror usually reserved for gentlemen donning seersucker post-Labor Day—that the ring was gone.

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"Gareth, you're... *here!*" Annie helped him off his knees and locked him in a fierce hug. He smelled like oiled leather and fresh pipe tobacco, just as she'd imagined.

"Darling! My heart lifts at your nearness, but I regret that the engagement ring I hoped to slip onto your lovely finger has landed over, *erm*, there... in that rather large... quite odorous... vessel." He pointed at the steel vat squatting behind the bottling line. "What *do* you make here, anyway?"

A becoming blush spread from Annie's cheeks to her ears.

"Um, *persmumble lumumble.*"

"What was that, dearest?"

"It's lube!" yelled Doreen. "Sex sauce! Penis paint! *Per-son-al lu-bri-cant.*"

After recovering from this unexpected information—not to mention Doreen's robust delivery—Gareth stripped off his jacket and set his hat atop Annie's head. He climbed the vat's ladder and dove into the pool of Cherry Berry Lick-A-Licious Personal Lubricant™ with a terrific splat.

Annie, dodging the wave of sludge that slopped over the edge, suffered a moment of indecision. This was a huge step, and he hadn't even consulted her. How unlike him! How... *bold and delightful!* She made it up the ladder as he emerged from the pink ooze like a crowning calf, covered in gelatinous goo and holding the ring aloft. Annie pulled him close and wiped the gunk from his face, combing dark hair out of his eyes. Snuggling her nose plugs tighter, she gave him a long, lube-a-licious kiss.

"He's a keeper," Doreen yelled. "But I'd hose him down first... or not. Whatever you kids are into."

When Annie broke their embrace, she was seized by Gareth's piercing gaze. The fire in his azure eyes burned a trail directly to her loins.

**Reading Advice on Writing from Ernest Hemingway**  
by  
**David W. Landrum**

You like his advice because  
he was tough—a hunter, deep-sea fisher,  
one who had seen war, and not  
some namby-pamby academic  
who sat behind a desk  
all his days and only imagined  
what killing, sex, and getting  
drunk were like. And you  
are dazzled by the way he made  
his words come out.  
He has amazed you many times  
with phrases clear as the water  
in the trout streams where he fished,  
pure as the good rum  
he used to drink in Cuba and Key West.  
So when he says, *Write one  
story about each thing you know,*  
you start composing  
about a man who can repair guitars  
and there is a beautiful woman  
with a tragic past who brings  
her Martin D-18 dreadnaught  
to you because it makes  
a buzzing sound when strummed.  
You repair it. She repairs  
your damaged soul and you  
repair hers too. Then she dies.  
You still have the guitar.

**While You Were Away**  
by  
**Martin S. Hadfield**

A few things happened that you should probably know about. I tripped over the corner of the rug because it was curling up at the edge. Isn't there something you can get to stick it down? Maybe A double-sided tape or something. Don't worry this time because I was fine. As I was falling, I caught hold of the fish tank which saved me from crashing into the coffee table. Although the fish tank did wobble quite a bit before falling off its stand and smashing on to the floor. Luckily it completely missed the coffee table. Maybe you had better not walk around the house with bare feet for a while.

The good news was that Gabriel the angel fish was fine. I scooped him up in my hand and put him in the only sterile water container I could find. Your kettle. He stayed there while I was googling the price of new fish tanks. There's quite a few on sale at the moment. I reckon you could pick up a really good setup for less than five hundred dollars.

I forgot to mention that the cat ate the catfish. It's sad but you've got to admit it is kind of funny too. From the catfish's point of view, it's not a bad way to go. And the cat shouldn't be going barefoot in the house either. But you don't have to worry about that until the bandages come off. You see, he trod on a few pieces of glass on his way to the catfish, and the vet had to bandage all four of his paws.

The vet was lovely, and it was lucky she was happy to just send you the bill, because I didn't have any money on me. In hindsight I probably shouldn't have offered her that cup of tea. You know the old saying, "If you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen"? Well, poor Gabriel the angel fish couldn't stand the heat when I boiled the kettle for the tea. You really should keep some sterilised containers handy. Then I wouldn't have had to put Gabriel in the kettle.

Apparently, angel fish aren't as tasty as other sorts of fish because Jane (that's the vet) vomited on your rug. You'll probably need to give it a good clean when you have some time.

I've had to write this note and go because Jane the vet and I are having dinner, so it all turned out to be a pretty good day for me in the end. Oh, and don't worry if you notice a burning smell near the power socket where the fish tank used to be. It got wet from the fish tank and the odour was pretty strong. But I turned off the circuit in the fuse box to stop it getting worse. It's on the same circuit as the hot water so you might not get a hot shower until you get it fixed. My brother is an electrician and I can see if he can take a look at it if you want. He's not cheap but he does a good job.

So, don't forget, happy to take care of your place any time. And don't forget to fix that curl in the corner of the rug.

## Contributor Biographies



**Daniel Hudon** is an unapologetic Canadian who spends his days educating a subset of the masses and his nights wondering why moonlight is so darn enchanting. He is the author of "The Bluffer's Guide to the Cosmos" and "Brief Eulogies for Lost Animals: An Extinction Reader," named a Must Read in the 2019 Mass Book Awards. He hangs out at [danielhudon.com](http://danielhudon.com) and [@daniel\\_hudon](https://twitter.com/daniel_hudon).



**Ken Macklin** earned a degree in East Asian Studies from Binghamton University. He did graduate work towards a master's degree at U.C. Berkeley in Chinese Studies, only to drop out after getting sick of eating too much top ramen and being poor. He recently retired as a software developer and has burned all his programming books in a bonfire. He studied with the poet Louise Gluck at Goddard College in the early 1970s, and he is an amateur music composer.



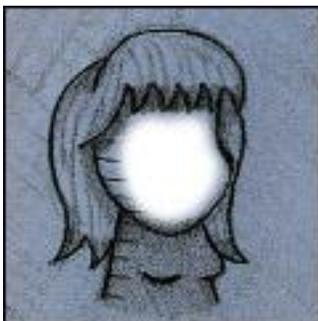
**Benjamin J. Chase** has published poems in *The Aurean*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Windhover*, and many other journals. A Connecticut native, he has an M.F.A. from Western Connecticut and currently teaches high school English.



**Jorja Hudson** is an Award-Winning comedy writer and filmmaker. Her web series *Myrtle & Willoughby* was the winner of Just For Laughs 2018 Pitch Competition and an official selection in over a dozen festivals. Her work has been featured on *Reductress*, *Points in Case*, *Funny or Die*, *College Humor*, *Seriously.tv*, *Elite Daily* and more. She is one half of Jomey Productions and is currently in production on her first short film *Withdrawals*, a dark comedy about quitting antidepressants cold turkey. She is based in Brooklyn. See more at: <http://www.jorjahudsonportfolio.com/>



**Aaron Barry** is an English teacher, respected dad-rock critic, and retired pugilist (1903-1914). His work has been featured in over thirty magazines, including *Modern Haiku Magazine*, *The Peak*, and *Poetry Pause* (forthcoming), which he frequently brings up when talking to strangers. He is currently working on a book of writing prompts and may be found on Instagram as @a.m.barry.



**Margo Hollingsworth** is not a math genius. She studied at the George Washington University and currently teaches high school English in Sacramento, where she lives with her daughter and her cat. She has been published in *Mutha Magazine* and once told her college roommate that she was not interested in learning about hashtags or how to use them.



**Lindsay Brown** is a mother of two, a wife of one, and a shameless user of many hashtags. During her off time, she loves to craft strange stories. You can find more of Lindsay's work on her personal website, Doing The Life Things. Lindsay has recently published a collection of short fiction called, *Incompetent Overlords: A Collection of Strange Stories*. Visit her at <https://doingthelifethings.com/blog/>



**Chris Panatier's** short fiction has appeared in *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Tales to Terrify*, and others. As an artist, he illustrates album covers for metal bands, and used to be an editorial cartoonist. He thinks one of his dogs might be a goat. Tweets from @chrispanatier.



Being a child of the seventies, **Norman Minnick** has what some consider an irrational fear of being crushed by a falling anvil or grand piano, or running along and realizing that there is no ground beneath him. His poetry collections are *To Taste the Water* (winner of the First Series Award from Mid-List Press) and *Folly* (Wind Publications). He is the editor of *Between Water and Song: New Poets for the Twenty-First Century* (White Pine Press) and *Work Toward Knowing: Beginning with Blake* (Kinchafoonee Creek Press).



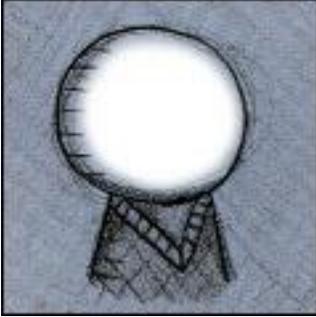
**Virginia Revel** grew up in the U.S. but has lived in Europe for many years. She writes speeches and diplomatic correspondence for a living and fiction for fun. She rides, paints, and watches fish in the Schoenbrunn aquarium.



**Cayce Osborne** works in science communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has been published in *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Exposition Review*, and *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal*. She lives in Madison with her husband Mike, sons Devon and Rhys, and two belligerent cats. Read more at [cayceosborne.com](http://cayceosborne.com).



**David W. Landrum** lives and writes in Western Michigan. His poetry has appeared in many publications in the US, UK, Canada, Asia, and Australia. He is also a partially employed adjunct professor and a blues guitarist who performs locally (when he can get gigs).



**Martin S. Hadfield** has been roaming the wilds of Australia for many years searching for the secret of universal humour. After many pies in his face and slips on banana peels he is still searching. Now, by simply placing one word in front of the other he is sharing the fruits of his incomplete quest with the world.