

# ◇ Defenestration ◇

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**When Salvador Dali Identified Oscar Wilde In a Lineup**  
by  
**Maureen Mancini Amaturo**

The officer tripped over Dali's walking stick for the third time. "Do you really need that thing?"

"Do I need this walking stick? Perhaps. The visual is everything."

The officer stared at Dali. "Let's go."

They continued into the lineup room. Lieutenant Ernst joined them. "We're ready," he said. Ernst looked at Dali who was staring at the ceiling, drawing invisible lines with his walking stick. "We're ready to begin," he repeated and escorted Dali to the large, one-way mirror that formed the far wall. The officer moved to the corner allowing Ernst and Dali a clear view through the glass. Ernst pulled a chair over. "Sit, please."

Dali sat cross-legged with his arm extended its entire length and his hand atop his walking stick. He stretched his neck and rolled his head several times before staring straight. Dali stood again and switched his chair with another.

"Are you satisfied?" Ernst asked.

Staring ahead, Dali answered, "There are some days when I think I am going to die from an overdose of satisfaction."

Lieutenant Ernst placed his hands over his face and massaged his forehead with his fingertips. He took a deep breath. "Let's start. We called you here regarding the murder of Algernon Moncrieff, which took place off Picadilly, at Half Moon Street, Number 14. You were there that night, right?"

"Si."

"Very well. We are going to have five men walk into that room. You will be able to see them, but they will not be able to see you. This is a one-way mirror. The perpetrator may or may not be in the lineup. You are not obligated to choose any one of these men if none appear to match your memory. However, if any one of them looks to be the man you saw leaving the apartment building the night of the murder, let me know." Ernst flipped a switch, and the room on the other side of the mirror filled with light. "No pressure, mind you. If no one matches the person you saw that night, that's perfectly fine. I have a copy of your statement—which appears more like a rebus, so thank you for explaining the images earlier. We can refer to it, if necessary, should you want to refresh your memory about the details you gave us regarding the man you saw."

Dali turned to Ernst. "That won't be necessary. I am afflicted with the persistence of memory."

"Are you?"

"Si."

"Then this should not be a problem." Ernst looked across the room at the assisting officer and rolled his eyes, then he pressed a button on the wall and spoke into the intercom. "Bring them in."

Five men entered the lineup room from a side door. A policeman accompanied them and guided the men to stand several feet apart in front of a white wall painted with vertical markings to measure each man's height. When the men were in place, the policeman nodded toward the one-way mirror and left the room. The men comprising the lineup remained, all slack-shouldered and fidgety, except for one. One man wearing a long green coat with a large, black, fur collar stood, his head held high, as if proud to be on display.

Lieutenant Ernst pressed the intercom button. "Look straight ahead please." The men who had been rustling about settled down and did as they were told.

Dali asked, "Could you move that man on the left to the second position? Move that taller one to the end."

"Why?" The lieutenant asked.

"Makes a much more interesting composition."

Ernst stared through the glass. "And I suppose you want the guy in the middle to lie on the floor with his legs dangling over the platform as if he's melting?"

"¡Genio! ¡Brillante! ¡Si!"

The lieutenant pressed his forehead against the glass. "Señor Dali, please. We need to be sure you can see these men clearly. Look carefully and tell me if any one of these men matches the man you say you saw running from the murder scene. Please, focus on the men in that room, one by one." Ernst sighed. "I am afraid we need to get this perfect."

Dali turned to the lieutenant. "Have no fear of perfection. You'll never reach it."

Ernst pulled out a chair, scraping its metal legs against the smooth, concrete floor and plopped onto it. He pointed to the glass. "Please examine the men standing in that room."

Dali stood. He walked left and pressed his face against the one-way mirror. After a few seconds, he moved to the right, stopping in front of each man for a short time. Dali hesitated. He pointed to the tall, hefty man in a fur-collared, green coat standing second from the right. "Perhaps the guilty man looks like him." Dali squinted and studied the man in the lineup.

Ernst jumped up and escorted Dali away from the glass wall. "Describe the man you think may be the one." He leafed through the report in his hand until he landed on Dali's previous description.

"He stands like a mango, under-ripe, but large. His head, a basket of bread, artisan bread. His hair, fopping in thick waves, parted at the center cascading down the sides of his face like an enchanted mushroom. The face interesting, but bland—not like that of a clock, but like a lobster's tail, long, curved. But not a lobster's coloring. His complexion brings me back to the unripe mango, or a peach, or the dawn of a dream. His expression is that of a sphinx with eyes that form a slanted roof over a nose that is an inverted hammer. His face... is a

chest of drawers. Lips... full, protruding, as if one drawer is open. The cheeks obscure his jawline. While his face whispers, his clothing screams. There is creativity in his soul."

The lieutenant sat numb. *What the hell is he talking about?* He looked at his attending officer. The officer shrugged. Ernst asked, "In your statement the night of the murder, you specifically said the suspect had rosy cheeks. It was night. How could you tell his cheeks were rosy?"

"He had been standing at the doorway, the light overhead aimed directly at his face." Dali looked to the floor. "Did I say rosy cheeks?"

"You did."

"Shame on me. Change rosy, please, to unripe mango."

"I cannot change your statement." Lieutenant Ernst mouthed to the attending officer, "Why me?" The officer held his hands up, palms out. Ernst asked, "Are there any other details that you can specifically identify that distinguish this person as the man you saw that night?"

Dali stared. He twisted the end of his sharp-pointed, fantastic mustache. The room remained silent for several minutes. "The body. The shape. I look at those men standing there, and I see an orchestra, the instruments not the musicians. He is the cello."

"Sorry I asked," Ernst said.

The officer in the corner shook his head. He found it impossible to remain silent. "This is outrageous."

Dali answered, "The one thing the world will never have enough of is the outrageous."

"If *you* stick around long enough, we will," the officer said.

The lieutenant nodded. "Señor Dali, I'll remind you to please take this seriously. This is a grave matter. We need your most confident recollection." Ernst melted into his chair. His shoulders sagged. He rested his forehead in the palm of his hand. "Let's continue, shall we? So, you are sure that is the man."

"Can we be sure of anything?"

"If you say it is a fact that this is the man you saw, you must be absolutely sure. Assigning guilt to this man is a reality not to be taken lightly. For this moment, this situation, your interpretation of reality must be completely sure, completely accurate." Ernst rubbed his forehead. "You do realize that if you are mistaken in identifying that man as the murderer, his life will be altered. Something terrible will happen."

"So little of what could happen does happen," Dali said.

"Maybe so, but we must make every effort to be sure what is right is what happens here. There is no room for confusion."

"You have to systematically create confusion. It sets creativity free. Everything that is contradictory creates life."

The assisting officer asked, "May I leave the room?"

Lieutenant Ernst shook his head no. "Señor Dali, you are sure that is the man."

"Si."

The lieutenant spoke into the intercom. "We're done here." A policeman entered the lineup room and escorted the men away. Ernst asked his attending officer, "Will you please bring the man he identified here? The others may go." He cleared his throat. "Señor Dali, you may go. Thank you."

Dali rose, straightened his jacket, and waved his walking stick as his good bye. The attending officer walked Dali to the ground level of the police station and left him at the door, then went to retrieve the suspect.

Before leaving, Dali noticed a yellowing mural on the wall to his left. He went to inspect it more closely. Engrossed in the details, he began to recreate the scene in his own mind. Using his walking stick as if it were a paint brush, he swished it in the air creating lines, shapes, and images only he could see. The officer at the front desk asked him to leave. Dali said, "I intend to. But first, I must complete what I see. Gala, my Gala, will sit upon that fox, and ants will climb a single crutch leaning against a horse with no eyes."

"Huh?" the officer asked. The attending officer who had been in the room with Dali and Lieutenant Ernst during the lineup session returned. He pointed to Dali and twirled his finger aside his temple. He told the desk officer, "This guy's surreal. You know those creative types. He'll leave when he gets bored."

In the room upstairs, Lieutenant Ernst greeted the suspect Dali selected. "Come in, please. Have a seat." Ernst pulled a chair out for him. "State your name."

"Wilde. And I am trying to live up to that."

"Your first name, please."

"Oscar."

Ernst looked at the top sheet in his folder. "Mr. Wilde, do you or did you know a man named Algernon Moncrieff?"

"Yes. Quite well, actually. You might say I made the man what he was." Oscar Wilde fondled a leather-covered book he had removed from his coat pocket.

"What is that book you are holding?"

Oscar answered, "My diary."

"Was it necessary to bring that along today?"

"I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train."

"Oh, no. Not another one," Lieutenant Ernst mumbled. He pulled up a chair and sat across from Oscar. "Mr. Wilde, did you kill Algernon Moncrieff?"

"Certainly not. I loved the dear boy."

"I want the pure and simple truth."

Oscar looked away from Ernst. "The truth is rarely pure and never simple."

"We talked to some of your friends, friends who knew you both. They say you had turned against Algernon Moncrieff because he was...how shall I say this? He was distancing himself from you. He was moving with a new crowd and seemed to be involved more closely with someone else. Some said you spoke of him as being bad."

Clasping his hands atop his lap, Oscar said, "It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious."

"Then, in your eyes, did he become tedious?"

"Not in the least. I tried to help him. For that, I find myself a suspect, seated in an unmeasurably unattractive room that does no justice to my apparel. As we can see, no good deed goes unpunished."

"Friends have been doing a lot of talking, talking about you and Mr. Moncrieff."

Oscar smiled. "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about and that is not being talked about."

"You're a clever man, Mr. Wilde."

"I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying."

"Well, you seem to have all the answers. You know everything, do you?"

"Lieutenant," Oscar shifted in his chair, "I am not young enough to know everything."

"Enough. The murderer must be brought to justice. A man who would murder another human being is no saint. Granted, Mr. Moncrieff had a past some would say is nothing to be proud of. If you, Mr. Wilde, refuse to tell the truth, your future will be darker for it."

Oscar picked at his cuticles and rubbed his thumb over his finger nails as if to buff them to a shine. "Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future."

"Your future is at risk, Mr. Wilde."

"I find risk infinitely exciting. Predictability does not suit me."

Lieutenant Ernst turned the pages of the report in his hand. He found statements he quoted to Oscar Wilde. "We spoke to several people who were with you and Algernon Moncrieff the night of the murder. You were all attending a soiree. It was private, or should I say secret? There were activities going on that would be considered scandalous, unsavory to society, or, some might say, not normal."

"Normal. What a boring word."

"A matter of opinion." Ernst stood and paced the length of the room. "Mr. Wilde, in their statements, fellow guests that evening said you and Mr. Moncrieff had a falling out. Several said Mr. Moncrieff fled the gathering for fear that you would retaliate against him, do him harm, but they refused to say for what. They said you threatened him. He made a hasty exit, and he died. He died because he was running away from you, Mr. Wilde. Is that true?"

"A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it."

"Touché." Ernst sat down again. "Mr. Wilde, tell me what happened that night. What did you see?"

"I saw nothing. I make it a point to be self-absorbed—that way, I am always in good company." Oscar pulled his coat tighter and ran his hand down the fur of his full collar. "I do not know what happened that night. I heard the gunshots. There was a bourgeoisie commotion. The champagne was empty. I left the apartment. I went home."

"That is the truth, Mr. Wilde?"

"No one is more true than I, sometimes at great risk."

"The truth will surface. It always does. You do realize that what is not settled in this life will be settled in the next. I hope you are not looking forward to Heaven, Mr. Wilde."

"I don't want to go to Heaven. None of my friends are there."

"Then, perhaps jail? I happen to know some of your friends are *there*."

Oscar sneered. "Touché. I believe that is a word you are familiar with?"

"Do you have anything else to say?"

"My words are my income. I prefer not to give them away."

Ernst inserted the report he had been holding into a folder. "Do not leave town, Mr. Wilde. We are not finished. You may leave this building today, but I have a feeling we'll be seeing each other again."

"So many crave my company." Oscar rose. "I am free to go?"

"For now."

Oscar left the room escorted by a police officer. When he reached the station's ground level, he noticed a familiar man. *That mustache. The odd behavior. Ah, yes. He was there the night...he was at that dreadful party. He must be the reason I was detained here.* "Is that you, Señor Dali?"

Dali froze, his walking stick in midair about to finish an invisible painting. "Si." Dali turned to Oscar.

"Remember me?"

Dali made three quick swishes with his stick. "¡Finis!"

Oscar walked toward him and stood by his side. "I believe we've already met." Oscar extended his hand.

Dali turned to him and examined his face. "Si, we have met."

"I assume they questioned you regarding Algernon."

"Si."

"Me, too. Seems someone suggested the murderer looks somewhat like me."

Dali fingered his mustache then turned to brush away non-existent lint from his shoulder. "That night, the chaos, no one could be sure of anything. There was so little defined in the dark."

"Precisely." Oscar put his arm through Dali's. "Surely, neither you nor I could tell just who brought dear Algernon to such a dismal end." Wilde cleared his throat. "Shall we find ourselves an interesting café, somewhere we can chat in inspiring surroundings, surroundings great minds deserve. I know just the place."

Dali lowered his walking stick and followed him. Oscar led Dali out the front door. Once outside, Oscar pretended to trip. "The scuff on my shoe is greater than the injury. Do you mind?" He bent down pretending to rub away the scuff, but instead reached behind a large, potted plant and retrieved a hand gun he had placed there before going into the police station earlier. He slipped it into the inside pocket of his coat. "Much better. Shall we?"

They proceeded until Oscar turned toward a street that looked more like an alley. "This way, my friend. There's a café even you could not dream up just ahead."

Dali stared. "There is emptiness. Where are you taking me? I see only dark without end."

"Trust me, there is an end," Oscar said. "There is a place just beyond the dark that is quite secluded, yet satisfying. I've managed to execute evenings of the most amusing nature there."

Dali tilted his head in interest. "About Algernon Moncrieff," Dali said, "I do hope they catch whoever shot him. Justice for such an unfortunate incident."

"Justice can be unfortunate, as well." Oscar ran his hand along his coat pocket feeling the outline of his gun. "Not much further, just to that dark corner ahead. Yes, when we arrive there, it will be the end."



**Memories of Hardship**  
by  
**Grace Alamo**

You proudly do your hair like Princess Leia's for picture day only to quietly take out the buns later when the other school children giggle and stare. You trade your stuffed rabbit, Hoppy, for Sarah's lion at school and regret it immediately. You consider asking for Hoppy back, but the current law of the playground is "no take backs" so you accept your fate. Surrounded by others but all alone in your sorrow, you sit down on a swing and drag your feet against the woodchips, wallowing in the loss of your dear friend Hoppy.

Things brighten up later that week when Pizza Hut declares you an "All Star Reader." You write your first story about a dog who saves the world from evil cats. Some grown-ups steal your idea in a movie called *Cats & Dogs*. Or did you steal their idea? Oh well.

Your dad stops at Sonic before dinner, and you promise you won't tell mom. You proudly order three corn dogs and a milkshake but then get stuck at the table all night because you couldn't make room for your mixed vegetables. You practice braiding your hair as you stare at the ceiling, finding shapes in the popcorn. It's so unfair that you aren't allowed to dye pieces of your hair blue like Hayden or get your cartilage pierced like Maggie. Life is tough. But there's one thing you're sure of; things are bound to get easier once you are older.

**Shell-Shocked**  
by  
**Patrick Siniscalchi**

The cloudless morning sky failed to lift Harold's slumped shoulders as he walked along the shoreline. At thirty-five, he assumed he would be married, yet he hadn't dated anyone in ten months. And none of the prior ones had spawned a second date. With the reach of the waves lapping at his feet, he counted the time since his relationship with Cynthia had disintegrated. He rechecked his math and muttered, "Eight years." His face wilted; his unfocused gaze drifted to the sea.

A band of seagulls screeched and circled narrowly overhead. While shooing them, he stumbled over a conch shell. He grasped the former protective covering and raised it to his ear. Amid the swooshing of wind through its whorled caverns, a deep voice announced, "Harold, love awaits at land's end."

He clutched the shell to his chest and scanned the beach, finding only a jogger and a man with a metal detector in the distance. Again, he placed it to his head and heard, "Harold, love awaits at land's end."

"God, is that you?" Harold asked.

Rather than an affirmation, the shell repeated the phrase. Harold accepted this as confirmation that it was God's voice and that His message was solely for him. He frowned, realizing land ended in every direction on Key Largo. Shell in hand, Harold sprinted to the parking lot. In his VW Beetle, he adjusted the mirror to examine his face. His white and black make-up created impossibly arched eyebrows and a permanent smile centered by his red ball nose, which squeaked as he pinched it. "Squeaky, you need to figure out God's message right after class." He embellished his painted smile with a real one. "Love awaits!" Squeaky the Clown crowed.

A two-hour lecture on the finer points of clowning did not dampen his excitement. Upon arriving home, he breathlessly relayed his tale to his mother while pacing back and forth. She listened intently, then grinned as if she had always expected her only son to be blessed by a miracle. When he finished, he plopped into the La-Z-Boy recliner and asked, "What do you think it means?"

She opened a fresh pack of Marlboros, shook one out, and lit it. As she exhaled a cloud from the corner of her mouth, she raised one eyebrow and nodded. "I think I know."

"Really, Mom?"

"Yeah. Didn't your old girlfriend, Cynthia, move to the south end of Key Largo, right before the bridge to Islamorada?"

"You think it's her?"

"Yes, I do."

Harold jumped back into his car and sped down the Overseas Highway, screeching the tires while turning before the bridge. Pieces of gravel pinged the wheel wells of the VW as it skidded to a halt in Cynthia's driveway. Carrying the sacred shell, he raced up her walkway

and jabbed his finger at the doorbell. He glanced at her car in the driveway and pressed it again. A frizzy-haired woman in pajama bottoms and a tank top appeared. She furrowed her brow and squinted at the clown on her doorstep.

"What the hell do you want?"

"Cynthia, it's me, Harold."

"Harold? What are you dressed up like that for? It ain't Halloween."

"I'm training to be a clown, but listen, I had the most incredible religious experience earlier—"

"That's nice. Bye, Harold." Cynthia started to close the entryway.

"No, wait!" He thrust his oversized shoe between the door and the jamb.

"Harold, this may not have come up when we were going out, but I really hate clowns. They scare the crap out of me. So get your big-ass shoe out of my doorway!"

"Okay, okay, but please listen for a minute." Harold gradually withdrew his foot and presented the shell to his former flame. "I was walking on the beach and found this shell. When I put it to my ear, there was God's voice telling me that love awaits, and He was pointing me to you!"

"There's no way in hell love awaits you here, especially since you're a goddamn scary clown now," she said with increasing hostility. "Get out!" Cynthia shoved a hand in his face, squeaking his nose, driving him backward. Once he stumbled from the threshold, she slammed the door.

"Cynthia, please, please listen," he said while pounding his palm on the door.

"I'm calling the cops!"

Harold pleaded about God's will until the sheriff's deputies arrived. While being cuffed, he dropped the shell. Once they secured him in the cruiser's backseat, Cynthia returned outside. His muffled cries of her name continued as they drove away. She rolled her eyes at the encounter, lifted the shell to her ear, and heard, "Love awaits at the county jail!"

Cynthia hurled the shell onto her concrete walkway, shattering it into a hundred tiny slivers. "The hell it does."

**Mustache  
by  
Sam Kilkenny**

A mustache is  
A backward hat  
For your face

## Karentown by Sisi Carroll

I pulled my jeep up a dirt road. About a mile back, I had passed a house selling local honey which it looked like you paid for via the honor policy. Now things were even more remote and getting rocky. I was thankful for my off-terrain vehicle which didn't get to test its features in New York City often.

I followed the instructions I had read on the Airbnb website carefully. "Don't follow your GPS" Karen, my host, had written, "still don't believe me?" Here followed a long tale about two previous guests getting hopelessly lost, which I only skimmed. As my GPS hadn't even acknowledged the existence of Karen's address when I typed it in, I wrote her simple instructions by hand and follow them to the T.

Now I was on the last step, *follow the dirt road, pass the wide spot, then keep driving till it's narrow. In front of you, you will see the dark, dark forest, then to your left will be Karentown.* That's where I was headed, for my one night stay in Karentown.

To my left was tall grass and a dirt area that looked like it was meant for parking. I pulled my car off. As I was collecting my things, I saw her emerging, through the grass: Karen. Grey hair past her shoulders, frizzy, curly, a midi dress that looked like it was made from a blue potato sack, sun speckled skin, mismatch earrings. I was glad to see her, remembering her instructions, "If I don't greet you, please ring the large schoolhouse bell. Don't wander onto my property. It's not polite to wander around other people's homes."

I apologized for arriving almost on the dot of the scheduled arrival time. "People never arrive when they say they're gonna," Karen agreed ominously. "There's another guest who's supposed to be arriving tonight too. Let me show you around." I followed Karen down the path shorn through the high grass. We passed the schoolhouse bell, a lone beacon hovering above us.

To our right, as soon as we entered the property was a tiny, gated area. Excuse me. The area that was enclosed by the gate was expansive. It was the gate that was tiny. The gate was six inches high. This six inch high fence ran around the perimeter of shorter, mown, bright green grass. Inside the enclosure were four guinea pigs. The fancy kind, with bangs.

"These are my guinea pigs," Karen told me. We looked at them. "That's Joe." Karen said.

I looked past the guinea pigs towards a long, blue trailer home. It had an old 1950s feel— powder blue paint, chrome circular window frames, and a faded chrome door. At a picnic table in front of the mobile home sat Joe. He was waving at me in the slow style of the Amish. I waved back. Joe wore a powder blue checked shirt and jeans. Had he been in overalls it would have been more befitting of his personality. Henceforth in this piece he will be referred to as Overall Joe.

Karen led me through more tall grass till we came upon Karentown. Karentown, I had read on the website, was an estate of tiny homes. She had constructed (I later observed probably literally by hand) six different tiny homes, a small kitchen, two outhouses, and an outdoor patio, all next to her home, also situated on the property. Past the tiny homes there was a large field leading out to a valley and then, the *dark, dark forest*. Karen showed me my tiny home, one of the smaller ones. It looked like it had been constructed by placing a roof on a storage cube.

It had a single bed inside, rather short I learned when I lay down on it, and a sink to pour things down but with no running water. Oh, another thing to mention, there was no running water at Karentown and no electricity. Karen showed me the two barrels that collected rainwater, and the bucket to scoop it out and pour it into the contraption in the shower so you could take a rainwater shower. Rainwater was also used to wash the dishes. Drinking water was kept in two separate containers.

Karen and I looked out over her field. "Are you going to have dinner?" She asked.

"I think I might take a hike first."

"Oh yes," Karen agreed, "the walk out to the two trees is a must." Karen and I looked across the field. Two large trees grew at the far end.

Suddenly there was a noise behind us. I turned. "This is Jimmy, one of our long-term stays." Jimmy was behind us loading Corona after Corona into a cooler.

"Hi," Jimmy said.

"Hi," I said.

I went and got some more things from my car, locked my passport and laptop in the trunk, opened the trunk, checked to make sure they were there, then locked my car. And then locked my car.

On my way back to hike, I passed Karen who was now standing with Overall Joe outside her guinea pig enclosure.

Karen stopped me with some question, I forget what precisely she asked me, but I can only assume it was something to further vet how susceptible I was to joining a cult. Karen began telling me about her guinea pigs and the other farm animals they used to have.

"Oh, what happened to the other animals?" I asked.

"Well, my parents died and so..."

At this moment two guinea pigs began a fight over a piece of lettuce. Overall Joe found this hilarious and even Karen laughed a little bit.

Feeling tied to the conversation by some higher power I told Karen that my brother had had a guinea pig or two growing up but that I mainly had rabbits or hamsters. Evidently feeling touched that I had disclosed personal information about my family Karen opened up and told me about how she and her other siblings had held her brother down and let the guinea pigs crawl on his face.

Overall Joe was infatuated with this story. As Karen told it he got closer and closer to her face with his, grinning wider and wider, finally saying, in loving tones, "Oh no you didn't, that's terrible."

In the pause that followed, realizing I was about to say, "Is this a guest or is this your husband?" I dismissed myself for my hike once again.

I set my things in my tiny home and then inspected the field to find another mown pathway. Then sun was out. The field was buzzing with that sound of nature and insects. It was about seven o'clock, so the sun was thinking about setting.

The walk to the two trees was shorter than I expected. As I rounded a turn in the high grass, I saw ahead of me benches under the two trees that were unfortunately occupied. Jimmy was sitting there with two girls.

It seemed weird to me to turn around, so I thought I'd just walk toward them, say hello and then follow the path past them.

They waved at me in the style of Overall Joe and the Amish. I waved back. I continued my walk toward them.

Hello we all said. They introduced themselves. One girl was tiny, her name was Lina. She was Jimmy's girlfriend, another long term guest. She was dressed in all black - black cut off bootie shorts and a black tube top. She had heavily applied foundation and was wearing dramatic false lashes. I wondered what it was like to take your makeup off with rainwater at the end of a long day.

The girl next to her was dressed in all white. I swear on my life. She was wearing almost the exact same outfit but in white. White bootie, cut off shorts. Her tube top had cami straps. She had lots and lots of tattoos. Her blond hair had a small braid here or there to hold it out of her face. She was vaping and holding an unopened Corona.

Lina's hair was in a messy bun.

All three of them wore flip flops.

I learned that the girl in white was the other new guest.

How long are you all staying, we asked each other.

The new girl was staying three nights. Jimmy and Lina had been there for three weeks. They were from West Virginia.

*And how did it come about that you happened to have three weeks with no commitments or responsibilities to stay in an off the grid tiny estate, was the question I couldn't figure out how to phrase politely. And from which criminal offence were you fleeing West Virginia, I also couldn't weave in.*

Jimmy and Lina began talking about other guests who had stayed on the property. "And one guy," Jimmy said, "wouldn't stay after Karen showed him that tiny home near the woods with the glass wall.

I expressed some curiosity in this story, so Lina and Jimmy began trying to describe this tiny home but between the two of them they struggled.

"What else is down there?" I asked. They shrugged. "Sorry, I mean is there like a river in the valley or something like that?"

"Maybe, possibly," Lina said real friendly.

At some point they all decided to walk down and see the tiny home they had been trying to describe.

On the walk down the hill, the new guest Laurel, offered me her weed and her Corona. I turned down the weed claiming to be a paranoid high and saying I didn't know if that would mix well with seeing an all-glass tiny home in the middle of the *dark, dark forest*. I carried her Corona for her cause her hands seemed full.

We came through the woods. Lina and Jimmy showed us where Karen kept some hammocks, rolled up into messy balls, that they explained you could string to the trees. Seemed like a lot of work to me. Then we came upon the tiny home. Since Lina and Jimmy had so much difficulty describing it, let me describe it here.

It was a box about one fourth the height of a normal tiny home, made out of white wood, and with one wall almost entirely made out of a plexiglass panel screwed to the wooden frame; it was the length of a human being. Yes, I'm describing the dimensions of a spacious coffin. On what can only be called the foot end (because to enter through this side would mean that you would crawl into the tiny home and then be basically unable to turn around) was a small, lilac, hobbit door, that for some reason had two padlocks on the outside.

We established that this was a thing from nightmares, a murder house, or at the very best Snow White's glass coffin gone wrong.

At this juncture the three guests said they would make their way back to Karentown and I said I would continue with my hike.

I wandered toward the dark, dark wood, observing that there was no longer any trail and therefore nowhere to run. I hiked back up the hill and waded my way back to the path where I headed toward the two trees again. Arriving at them, deserted this time, I realized that the path dead ended and didn't loop back around so I turned in the only direction I could go and headed back to Karentown.

I entered the estate where Laurel was sitting on her porch. Her tiny home had three little steps up to a miniature balcony before she entered her home. She asked me if I'd like to come sit on her porch. I did so. She began telling me about her life.

I learned about her conservative family who was trying to accept her bisexuality, I learned that she was a Virgo, I learned that she was the black sheep of her family. Laurel was proud of her new LGBTQUI+ community. She asked me how many gay and trans people I knew. The first response that popped to mind was, *you know what New York City is right?* Sensing that she wanted me to reply with a low number and feeling charitable I said, four. She said, "See yeah, I know twelve."

She told me that she was going out in Oberlin that night to sing Karaoke alone at a bar she used to go to in college. She asked me if I'd like to join. I was saved answering—at this moment Laurel cut her hand open trying to unclog the Corona with no bottle opener.

I retrieved the first aid kit from my jeep and bandaged her up.

She showed me her latest tattoo. It looked fresh. It was the death card from a tarot pack on the back of her right thigh. She told me she just got it because she had finally reached the conclusion of a bad breakup and that the death tarot card was a symbol of rebirth and new



beginnings. She told me the final straw in the relationship was that after cheating on her, her boyfriend broke into her house, stole 100 dollars, took all his own socks and underwear back, and her television.

She told me that when she decided she wanted to report the robbery, she drove around and around looking for a cop.

She said, "I even speeded a little bit. I promised myself that if I didn't see a cop by the time I drove home, I'd know I shouldn't report the crime. Then, right as I was about to turn onto my side street, *right as I was about to turn onto my side street...* A cop goes by." She snapped in my face. "I speeded after him—"

I couldn't figure out a polite way to ask her if she knew that there were police stations where the cops just sat around, conveniently waiting to hear about crimes, and you didn't have to chase them or anything.

She said the cop agreed that it was a felony but that her boyfriend didn't turn up to his court date.

Laurel told me that she was in a pool league, just her and a bunch of older men. And that they were all like her dads. One guy, who was like, I don't know, most her dad, this guy, had recently had another young man put in the hospital for three weeks.

She told me, "He asked me where this guy lives, and then said, 'okay, that's all I need from you, now forget we had this conversation.'"

She then said, "I truly don't like to wish ill on people, but I hope when they're stealing my TV back they like break his knee. I hope the break his kneecap. So he can't serve. His dream is to be in the Marines."

There was a pause and I realized it was one of the rare opportunities where I was expected to speak in this back and forth, so I muttered something supportive like, I don't know, "Yeah, I hope they break his kneecap too."

Laurel goes, "I haven't told anyone that, only like four people. But I figure you're never going to see me again." She's right, I haven't told anyone, I only wrote it down. Besides, all details apart from easily identifiable tattoos and use of real names have been change for the purposes of this story.

The sun had almost set and the wind was starting to kick up a bit. Laurel said that while she was going to be massively hungover, she heard the sunrise was beautiful and I should wake her around six so we could watch it together. I waved her off and set my alarm for 8AM.

In the kitchen I inspected each pot, selected the most acceptable, and heated up some of the drinking water to make Cup Noodles. While the water heated on the tiny gas stove, I used my cellphone flashlight to inspect all the notes and memorabilia left by past guests on the walls and ceiling of the tiny wood kitchen hut. On the ceiling above my head was a map of the world. It had over fifty little pins stuck in it. Many of them in the US and Canada but some as far away as Europe and Asia. I wondered if it was where all her guests had come from. Or where their bodies were buried.

I ate my cup noodles on the wooden outdoor patio. One side was covered with more plexiglass on which people could write with dry erase markers. I read one line over and over, "In a life so dull, be a Karen."

The sun was now almost completely gone and soon it would be that kind of darkness that you could only experience in the country. I had wanted to see stars, but a storm was blowing in, and I could just make the clouds out through the fading light.

Fed up with the sawdust outhouses after only one use, I kept my cup noodles cup to pee in. No way was I hiking out in a pitch black thunderstorm to pee outside or in a wooden box.

In my tiny home, I finished getting into my PJs by the light of my cellphone flashlight. There had been a battery charged camping lamp but that went out after I got my shorts on.

I decided to sleep with the window open. For quick escape.

I lay down, turned off the light, and looked out the window. Lightening illuminated the two trees.

Having forgotten to do something (not sure what, but probably just some simple thing to make myself more paranoid than I already was) I turned on my flashlight. On the ceiling was a black spider the size of a quarter.

I turned my light off and told myself I would have to pretend I didn't see that. I mean I wasn't going to remove him in the cup noodles cup. I turned on my light one more time. Now he was above my head on the ceiling, heading for the window. I turned off my light. I wondered if that was the same spider or if there were lots of spiders.

I thought of the Snow White tiny home and how much closer the ceiling was to your face out there.

I slept to the dulcet sounds of heavy rain on a tin roof. As well as being a soothing sound the torrential rain comforted me in another way. It seemed to me that if Overall Joe had been planning to commit my murder, he would find it awfully inconvenient in all this rain.

I slept fitfully waking every few hours to make sure I wasn't being eaten alive by spiders that lived in my sheets and wondering if I would hear Laurel stumbling through the rain in her drunken post Karaoke state.

I comforted myself in the morning as the door to her tiny home was shut, implying that she did in fact come home.

In the morning, I journaled frantically. Karen appeared at her outdoor hot plates to heat up some drinking water. She offered me coffee. We were the only two people awake on the property. I considered staying to see if she would say anything else fascinating, or to see if she made her coffee from organic ground up ants, but then I worried that Overall Joe might also be an early riser. I had a feeling that Lina, Jimmy, and certainly Laurel would not be making an appearance in the AM. I thanked Karen, and passed through the high grass, got one last glance at the guinea pigs, and was driving away in my jeep before Overall Joe could wave goodbye to me.

**Remote Meeting Re: Presentation**  
by  
**Will Willoughby**

"Don't get me wrong, Davey. It's a nice slide deck. Ginormous graphs. Crushing overall length. It's the verbiage itself. It's too—what's the word?—too comprehensible."

"It's Dave, actually."

"It's a good first stab, David. But to be candid? The language is limp, sort of undynamic, like it's obsessed with being plain. Borderline scrutable. What you want is to build a thick wall of text that's so baffling it can't be questioned. Your ideal end goal is a cognitive load heavy enough to smother any chance of cross-examination. It should fly right over everybody's heads! And then you take your bow. And they're like, Wowsers! Where's *this* guy been my whole life?"

"Not sure I follow."

"It's not so much *what* you're saying as *how* you're saying it? Okay, even onscreen, I can tell you're all befuddled. Don't worry. A lot of people struggle with this. Let's think of an example, right? Maybe leverage some nouns into a string of modifiers. You know: *teacher and student classroom learning empowerment*. It's grammatical, David."

"Dave."

"No worries! We'll get your ducks in a row before your presentation tomorrow. Your mandate is—correct me if I'm wrong—to outline the key principles underpinning the central paradigm, no?"

"Sure."

"It's just a matter of scaffolding the language, then. Basic zhooshing. Overall, the diction and syntax should distance the audience from the surface-level meaning so there's no avenue for alternate perspectives. Again, this notion doesn't come easy to a lot of people. But, you know, enough about my wife! That's a joke, Davey. Humor!"

"Your wife?"

"Yeah. I mean, that's probably TMI, but she doesn't get this stuff either, like she's *particularly* misaligned with the nuances of magnifying language for effect. Like sometimes I can barely grok her gist. She just says the weirdest things."

"Like what?"

"Like Saturday, we're just, you know, adhering to the standard weekend procedures—lawn mowing, vacuuming, etc. Then, out of the blue, she says she's 'going out for a while' and would be 'back in the afternoon.' I'm like, What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Probably just going to the store or something."

"Well, maybe. She did come back with several bags of food. It's just I can't stand the way she talks sometimes. Or chews. It's like her mission and vision are all about irritating the

feces out of me, Davey. But I don't mean to get into the weeds with my dirty laundry. Which, by the way, she doesn't know how to do either, apparently."

"Sounds frustrating."

"It really is, David! But, again, I'm getting too far afield. We should circle back to rejiggering your verbiage. I'd like to explore some options to encapsulate the essence of the message without lapsing into undue flatness."

"That's what she said."

"Nice! Okay, so, I needed that laugh! But let's get down to brass tacks, Davey. I'd like to see if we can solution a real-time outcome."

"Again, what she said."

"Stop! You're gonna make me pee my pants!"

"What she said."

"Oh my! We are *way* off track, David!"

"Like we can't even see the track, right?"

"I guess not, no! Anyway, I don't know. To be honest, I'd just as soon have a jaw sesh, actually. If you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all. Jaw on."

"So to surface some essential info, Davey, things have *not* been good. I don't know how to say it. Things have changed? Especially since the whole social distance, work-from-home thing. Lately, everything about her is just really digging into me."

"How so?"

"She's so *distant*. Like nothing I say matters. I'll be verbally interfacing with her, and it's like she can't even hear me. Like I'm talking just to hear myself interface!"

"Have you told her this?"

"That's just the thing, David. I've been deploying robust messaging on this theme like gangbusters. It's her listening mindset that needs follow-through."

"Did you try finding some common ground?"

"*Oh, wow, common ground! Brilliant! Why didn't I think of that?*"

"Sorry. I didn't—"

"*I'm* the one making the effort, David. I'm the one doing the planning. I'm the one keeping the activity board up to date. What's she do? Pad around the house. *Not* do the dishes. Sleep late. And then maybe, if there's time in her busy schedule, gripe about losing our flame. What the hell am I supposed to say to *that*?"

"You seem upset."

"I *am*, David!"

"Sorry."

"No, you're right, Davey. That's my bad. I didn't mean to bite off your head and defecate down the resulting neck hole."

"It's okay."

"It's just— I work hard, you know? And now this compulsory working from home. Like does she even *get* how hard that is?"

"So she's still going into the office?"

"No."

"Then she's not working?"

"No, she's working."

"She's working, then. At home."

"Yeah, her work station's in the living room."

"Sorry, I'm a little slow today. What doesn't she get?"

"I don't know, David. You're raising some valid points. It's just *common ground* set me off. Thing is, I've been independently piloting an approach like that for ages, David. Nothing. Launched several initiatives to architect schemes to establish, fortify, and nurture effective communication. Nada. Just spinning my wheels, is all, with no clue as to the root cause."

"I have a theory."

"Walk me through it."

"You need to translate."

"Don't follow, Davey."

"Speak her language."

"You're losing me, brother."

"Let me put it another way, then. You stand up a just-in-time solution, right?"

"Okay."

"During your interfacing sessions, you'll want to employ an on-the-fly reconfiguration of your mode of expression to mesh with the word choice, sentence structure, and cadences demonstrated by the other stakeholder."

"Davey, my man!"

"Best-case scenario? You'll want to regularly outreach your wife to facilitate an exchange of individual perspectives. Cross-pollinate your discrete expressioning. Once you've bridged the languages, you can bolster your collaboration and ensure downstream benefits. To echo what you said before, I'm in agreeance that the way you present your message matters. But let me run this up the flagpole: *What* you say also matters. Unambiguous expressions of empathy and affection are not unwelcome."

"You're on fire, Davey!"

"Thank you, sir! So I have a challenge for you. Apply this technique in a tentative, exploratory fashion. See what transpires. Report back to me. Does that sound doable?"

"Very."

"So what's your best guesstimation on the time frame?"

"I'd say tonight."

"Great proactive attitude! Indications are your emotional proximity will see marked improvement in the upcoming period of time."

"Hope so, David!"

"I'll throw something on our calendars. Do a postmortem, talk about next steps."

"I'd like that. What about your presentation, though? I almost forgot."

"Great question! I'd like to asynchronously actualize a wordsmithed iteration and then shoot you an email to get a second pair of eyes on it before tomorrow, if that works on your end. My ideation is to start from scratch, build the core message from soup to nuts, and then overlay the substantive confounding language while retaining the preexisting graphical masking."

"Makes sense!"

"Thanks so much! And just to circle back real quick, I'd like to reiterate my preference for being referred to as Dave. Moving forward, wondering if you could align to that naming convention?"

"Sure thing, Dave. It's the *very least* I can do."

**Life Lesson**  
**by**  
**Andrew Urquhart**

Mr Darwin, prickly and aged bachelor biology teacher  
At a public school I will not name,  
Stood lab-coated before a class of rowdy troglodytes each Friday,  
Who mocked his every feature, every foible—he  
Being the only specimen they ever cared to examine,  
Microscopically.  
In honour of the namesake he claimed a distant ancestor (but actually, was not)  
Mr Darwin, with uncharacteristic determination,  
Resolved one fine and greenening spring morning  
To teach the class the Theory of  
Evolution.  
While he performed the drama of Survival of the Fittest on power point,  
Eruditely pointing out the finer points with a pointer,  
A strange and molasses-thick silence oozed into the room,  
Broken only at an appropriate instant by breathy gasps of admiration.  
Fleetingly overjoyed, Mr Darwin  
Looked back to surely see his students transported,  
Illumination shining from each shiny youthful face,  
But saw, instead, the classmates leering as one,  
At two moth-eaten, size-wise hideously mismatched stray dogs,  
Eagerly and energetically copulating on the football field outside.  
At the final stroke the alfresco innamorato on top turned  
Its shaggy head towards the classroom,  
Eyes crossed, tongue lolling from ugly slack-jawed snout,  
And stared straight at Mr Darwin (no relation) as if to say:  
*'Not on my watch, bub,'* with canine drawl  
As laughter, uncontrolled and uncontrollable,  
Exploded the crystal lesson of life to atoms.

**The Witness at a Loss for Words, Briefly**  
by  
**Ray Agostinelli**

The crowd murmured as the Witness took the stand.

"Sir," said The Prosecutor, "You'll be assisting us in understanding the events surrounding Jebediah Martin's entry into the library on 14 April of last year, is that correct?"

"That's correct."

"And also his use of a step-ladder to reach a high shelf to extract a book, ostensibly for the purposes of reading it."

"Is it permissible for me to interject here that I hold no grudges against Mr. Martin nor any of his family?"

"Your Honor," said the Prosecutor, "Is it permissible for the Witness to interject here that he holds no grudges against Mr. Martin or any of his family?"

"Sustained," said Your Honor.

"Count it said, then," said the Witness.

The Prosecutor nodded. "Okay, onward. I'd like to work with you then to reconstruct the aural landscape of the day in question."

"Yes."

"Let's start with the Defendant leaving his house."

"I see it in my mind."

"I assume there was a water sprinkler or other lawn care device at work in the vicinity?"

"If I remember rightly the neighbor's lawn was being watered by a sprinkler."

"Which sounded like... what?"

"Mr. Prosecutor, it sounded like a defibrillator."

"A defibrillator?"

"Yes, a bit of a whirr underfed by an abstemious warbling."

"Ah, like a *sanitizer* then?"

"Hmmm. More like a weed-whacker."

"I understand," said the Prosecutor. "After passing the lawn sprinkler, we've ascertained that Jebediah Martin next made his way to the library. Is that correct?"



"It is."

"And how did he get there?"

"On the bus, of course," said the Witness.

The crowd chirruped.

"Which stopped several times, I imagine?"

"You imagine correctly."

"And when it stopped?"

"Bit of a scratching sound."

"A *scratching* sound. Like a cat scratch?"

"Not exactly. A cat scratch sounds more doleful than a bus, plus which it's frequently followed by a human wail. This was different. This scratching was more like de-magnetized iron combining with nickel in a heavily ionized phosphate bath."

"Ah, a *chemical* scratching, then?"

"More properly, the collateral mechanical consequences thereof."

"I understand," said the Prosecutor, "Now we come to Jebediah's arrival at the library."

"In my mind, yes, he has arrived. He is there."

"The sound of the trees thereabout?"

"Belligerent."

"Of the crowd?"

"Dubious."

"Of the wiener vendor with the red and black umbrella?"

"Hmmm. Can I use *gestating* here?"

"Your Honor, may he use *gestating* to describe the sound of the wiener vendor?"

"Overruled," said Your Honor.

"Okay," said the Witness, "then how about pseudo-redemptive palpations?"

"Your Honor?"

Your Honor silently sustained.

"And finally," continued the Prosecutor, "we are outside the library, you'll recall."

"In my mind, I am there," said the Witness.

"There is wind in the trees?"

"More properly speaking, *between* the trees, yes. But your point is taken."

"It's sound, Sir?"

"The serial death of strangers."

"The s... what's that, now?"

"I'm sorry. It's the best way I can put it."

The courtroom crowd buzzed.

"The serial death of strangers," mused the Prosecutor. "Can I understand this to mean... like perfumed water bristling between the fingers of a four-year old?"

"Not exactly."

"Like a carton of orange juice being reamed on a lathe?"

"Not quite."

"Hmmm. Is it like a... like a... like a jellied eel then? Singing to something? A rock?"

"Close, but not exactly."

"My, my, my," said the Prosecutor, a tone of defeat and weary regret beginning to creep around the edges of his voice. "The serial death of strangers. I'm afraid I'm at a loss."

A woman in the front row raised her hand and said, "Your Honor, if I may speak." She sounded like silt.

"It's highly unusual," ventured the Defense.

"Let her speak!" said the crowd.

"We're seeking understanding here, are we not?" said the Prosecutor.

"It's not allowable under law," said the Defense.

A thin man with a long beard stood up in the rear of the courtroom. "The law is merely air perturbed," he said. "The same as sound and word."

"Overruled," said Your Honor, "No, wait. Sustained. I meant sustained. She may speak."

"Ma'am," said the Prosecutor, "The serial death of strangers. Can you relate it to something that makes sense?"

The woman looked at the Witness with a guilelessness born in a complete lack of guile. "Sir, pardon me if I'm way off the mark on this, but I'm hearing a lackluster sound here."

"Possibly," said the Witness.

"Something tumescent, even?" continued the woman.

"One might call the sound tumescent, yes."

"I hear... for some reason the wiener vendor is sticking in my mind, and I'm thinking that the wind between the trees is direly affected by the arc of his umbrella. It has to be. And I'm hearing inside, no—*beside*—the lackluster tumescence kind of a confabulatory trill. Almost religious in tone and inflection. Like blathering, only kinder."

The crowd gasped.

"And that's not all but... it's *cascading*, is what I seem to almost feel the wind doing here, in its aural incarnation as the serial death of strangers."

The Witness smiled in recognition and gratitude. He nodded.

The Prosecutor said, "So the sound of the wind might more properly be described as a lackluster tumescence cascading beside a religiously-inflected confabulatory trill. Have we got it, then?"

"I am greatly indebted to the lady," said the Witness. "She has found words for everything I can only hear." The woman grinned fetchingly and sat.

"One final question then, Sir," said the Prosecutor.

"If you must."

"Overruled!" said Your Honor.

"As has been determined by previous testimony," continued the Prosecutor, "Jebediah entered the library, walked to the second floor reference section, stood upon a step ladder, and extracted Anthony McQuestridge's *Atlas of the New World* from the second-to-the-top shelf."

"Yes."

"The book extraction," said the Prosecutor.

"Its sound?" confirmed the Witness.

"Yes, please, Sir, if you will. The sound of the book being extracted from the second-to-the-top shelf."

"Like a book."

"Oh?"

"Being extracted."

"I think I see where you're going," said the Prosecutor.

"From a shelf."

The crowd exhaled.

The Prosecutor appeared to be stunned, but pleasantly so. "It's absolutely accurate," he said, "is the only thing I can say."

"It's what it is," said the Witness.

"We thank you for your testimony, Sir. You may return to your seat cushion and listen now as we conclude these proceedings with a bang."

"Sustained!" said Your Honor.

The crowd mumbled inaudibly to itself.

**Reasons For Numbers**  
by  
**Laura Zaino**

*After Lisel Mueller*

- A. pages of books
- B. clocks & meeting times ("midday" & "sundown" no longer suffice)
- C. ounces of water, tea, wine
- D. baking measurements
- E. the temperature (though personally I'd be satisfied with a standardized set of phrases, e.g. "Holy shit, it's hot out there," "Salt the driveway," "Definitely get outside today.")
- F. finding the beat
- G. science (umbrella term for important things involving data & equations & charts & hypotheses that I don't quite understand)
- H. knowing when to stop doing burpees
- I. drawing maps to scale
- J. men's clothing sizes
- K. infinity would otherwise be meaningless

**Out of This World**  
by  
**Brooksie C. Fontaine**

I am Michelangelo. The bridezilla is the Pope. That's how I choose to look at it.

Is it pleasant to be the unfortunate baker tasked with making her wedding cake? No.

She's needy. She's snappish. I often suspect she's drunk. Every time she comes into the bakery, she looks like she's about to cry, or just got done crying. I don't know what she'd look like without slightly smeared mascara.

Despite her tyranny, she compels me to create some of my finest work. My confectionary masterpieces.

The wedding is space-themed. It would be cute, but the cake is supposed to look like the solar system. Yep, nine-tiered. She wouldn't even let me omit Pluto.

Her initial goal was to have the cupcakes look like asteroids, but she's unsatisfied by my samples.

"They look like little cowpats," she says, fingers splayed on either side of the dish, like she doesn't want to touch it. Her southern accent comes out in moments of frustration.

"Well, I warned you that brown frosting doesn't always look the most appetizing. It's the best I can do."

She looks like she might actually scream, so I quickly offer, "How about I make them look like little astronauts?"

"Okay." She sounds like someone just squirted lemon into her eyes and she's trying to maintain composure. "Okay."

So that's what I do. The groom shows up to check my next sample, a guy who looks like he's taken a Rip Van Winkle-style nap in the middle of his frat years and has yet to realize he's an adult.

"They look good to me," he shrugs, and the only thing more disheartening than the fact that he's a thirty-five-year-old wearing a sideways baseball cap is that I know he's rich. What a waste of money and good looks. "Don't know why you can't text us pictures."

"Your fiancée feels that won't give her a good enough sense of their quality or scale."

"Okay," he shrugs, scratching under his arm.

The bride who cares too much, the groom who cares too little. An upper and a downer. As if cocaine and heroin were a couple.

The astronaut cupcakes were easy. I even throw in a few alien cupcakes for fun, fully prepared to be screamed at for not following the bridezilla's explicit instructions. One must make sacrifices for her art, after all.

The cake is another matter. Nine different frosting types, designed to mimic the crust of each planet. Nine different fillings. She calls me at 7 AM to say she wants to add the moons.

"Can you get them to look like they're orbiting somehow?"

"No," I say, too tired to be polite.

Eventually she agrees to moon-shaped pies instead, which is another full day of tinkering with crusts.

Because it's nine tiers, I have to assemble the cake at the venue. It's outdoors, in a cornfield, with fake crop circles. Someone tells me the priest will be dressed as an astronaut and all the groomsmen and bridesmaids will be dressed as aliens. I can't tell if he's joking.

Seeing the cake fully assembled, in its natural setting, is a religious experience. It's my Michelangelo moment. My Sistine Chapel.

"It's beautiful."

I jump. Bridezilla has come up alongside me. She's wearing a galaxy-themed wedding dress, blue with sparkles that look like stars, and I realize for the first time what a stunning woman she is.

Her face isn't pinched with stress anymore. She looks resigned.

"When I was a kid, I always wanted to be an astronaut," she says.

"What do you do?"

"I teach math at college."

"That's a good career."

"Yeah. It is." There's an awkward silence. She goes on, "I'm sorry for how I've been acting. I'm not...like this."

"It's all good, just as long as you pay."

I hope she can tell I'm joking, and am relieved when she cracks a smile. "I feel like I wouldn't care about all this stuff if I were with the right person."

I don't know what to say to that. "Then, why?" Why go through with it? Why waste the time and money?

"I don't want to be alone. I want a baby. Maybe he can give me something to love, even if I don't love him the way I'm supposed to."

I expect her to start crying, but she doesn't.

"I'm a horrible person," she says.

"No," I say. "You're just like most people. Only difference is, you know."

I have a kid. I have an ex-husband, who I thought I loved enough to marry. He didn't love me enough not to cheat.

I don't think most people would get married if that yearning for the big day, the happily ever after, wasn't instilled in them so young. I don't think most people would get married if it weren't for alcohol to help them tolerate one another, or the fear of being alone in this big, scary universe.

"Well," says the bride, sounding decades older than she actually is, "thank you, at least, for helping to make this day so special. That's one thing to take with me."

I loop my arm through hers, an act of forgiveness, of camaraderie. Both of us are just primates, clinging to this rock together. "It'll be out of this world."



## **Eleven Ways of Participating on Zoom**

**by**  
**Gary Grossman**

I.

In bed, back propped up against two pillows wearing your alma mater sweatshirt.

II.

With your laptop on your thighs tilted at forty-five degrees, so the audience has a clear view of your nostril's contents.

III.

On your office desktop, professionally dressed, with lots of impressive books on bookshelves behind you.

IV.

Eating dinner so everyone will know your diet and how you masticate.

V.

After any meal with food protruding from between incisors and bicuspid.

VI.

Sitting in front of a blindingly bright window—face obscured like someone from the anti-terrorist squad being interviewed.

VII.

With your cat walking back and forth in front of your webcam, especially if they have high contrast pelage such as black and white.

VIII.

With a fake background that looks like it's trying to absorb your head like a predatory amoeba.

IV.

With a dog by your side that keeps whining from lack of attention and eventually dumps on the floor, while you yell "shit, shit, shit."

X.

Just out of the shower with a canary-yellow towel wrapped around your damp hair.

XI.

Exercising on your treadmill, head continuously bobbing up and down like a drunken chicken.

**We need to talk about Slug Simulator**  
by  
**Conor Sneyd**

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed members of the PTA, please lend me your rapt attention. I know you've already taken in a range of different issues tonight, some of which will no doubt have shocked you. Boys caught smoking in the toilet. Office staff siphoning off donations from deceased alumni. The rowing team recruiting local beggars into a bare-knuckle boxing league. But believe me when I tell you—none of that matters. Because the issue I'm about to raise with you is something infinitely graver.

Many of you will know me as a graduate of this school. As Southwest England Regional Manager for Hayes and Harris Consulting. As champion of the Ponbridge Charity Golf Tournament 2023, after I had the initial winner disqualified for allowing his granddaughter onto the green. But above all else, I'm a father. A father who's worried sick about his only son. Because whether you know it or not, an evil is sweeping through our community. An evil threatening to corrupt our children and lead them astray. To tear down the futures we've so carefully been crafting for them.

We can't just sit back and ignore this scourge any longer. We need to take action now. We need to talk about Slug Simulator.

The nightmare arrived on my doorstep a fortnight ago, on an ordinary Monday evening. I came home from work to find my son Felix sprawled out on the couch. His maths book was open on the coffee table in front of him, but he was too busy drawing lewd cartoons to actually solve any of the equations. I was just about to scold him for slacking off, when I noticed something strange on the couch beside him.

It looked like a bicycle helmet—made of shiny purple plastic. There were a pair of yellow buttons stuck onto the side, and what looked like a ski-mask hanging down in front. At first, I thought it was some sort of hi-tech new training equipment from Coach Barrett. Felix is captain of the rugby team, you know, and he's always trying out the latest performance-enhancing gadgets. Doing whatever he can to get an edge in over the opposition. 'What's that you've got there, son?' I asked him.

'This?' he replied, patting the helmet. 'It's a virtual reality headset.'

'And what exactly does it do?'

'It's for playing computer games. There's a pair of 3D glasses attached to the screen, so it feels like you're standing right inside the game.'

'Computer games?' I said, picking the helmet up and giving the visor a flick. 'Since when are you interested in all that nonsense?'

'I'm not,' he said. 'Not really. I'm only playing it because Charlie Jones built the headset for a Biology project. He programmed the game on it too.'

'Charlie Jones? Isn't he that chubby little lad who, er... tripped over your foot in the hallway last year? The one who got you put in detention? Some nonsense about you doing it on purpose?'

'That's him alright.'

'And he knows you have his helmet, does he? You didn't—how should I say this?—*borrow it without asking?*'

'Of course not,' he grunted. 'Ms Melville made me take it. She wants each of us to play the game for a week, then pass the headset on to somebody else.'

'Phew,' I sighed, my shoulders relaxing. 'But why has Ms Melville got you wasting your time on computer games? Shouldn't you be busy studying for your A-levels this summer?'

'This *is* studying. It's an educational game.'

'How can a computer game be educational?' I snorted. 'Aren't they all about stealing cars and giving lifts to ladies of the night?'

'Not this game. It's called Slug Simulator, and all you do is crawl around a garden eating plants.'

'Oh,' I said, scratching my head. 'But what's the point of that?'

'There is no point,' he shrugged. 'You don't have to collect coins or earn experience like you do in other games. You just wander around exploring the world.'

'Sounds infuriating. A total waste of time!'

'It's kind of relaxing actually, not having to chase after any achievements. You can just sit back and enjoy the moment.'

I stared down at him, not sure what to make of this. He'd never spouted that kind of hippy-dippy nonsense before.

'...Maybe transporting prostitutes would be better,' I said. 'At least that might teach you some real-world skills.'

'Ms Melville says this will teach us about the local ecosystem. And there could be a question about that on our exam.'

'Alright,' I sighed, not wanting to waste any more time. I could smell Judy heating up some lasagne in the kitchen, and my stomach was starting to rumble. 'As long as your teacher approves of it, I suppose it's alright. Just don't spend too long playing, or you'll strain your eyes. And then you won't be able to see the rugby ball during your big match on Thursday.'

The conversation ended there, and I'd soon forgotten all about it. Judy and I got into a heated argument over dinner. She wanted her mother to come stay with us over Easter, but there was no way in hell I was letting that old harpy haunt my home. Especially not during Easter season, when she'd try to drag us all to a million miserable Masses.

It wasn't until Thursday evening that the helmet reappeared on my radar. I hurried home from work, like I do every week, so I could take Felix to his rugby match. He's usually waiting for me in the hallway, all kitted up and raring to go. But that evening, there was no sign of him.

'Felix?' I called, setting my briefcase down on the hall table. 'Are you ready to go, son?'

But there was no answer.

I strode up the stairs, wondering if he had his headphones on, and knocked at the door of his bedroom.

'Come on, son. It's time to go.'

But still no response.

I pushed the door open, praying I wouldn't find him doing anything indecent. But he was just sitting at his desk with that bizarre purple helmet on his head. He was still wearing his school uniform—no sign of his rugby jersey or shorts.

'Hurry up and get changed,' I told him. 'We need to leave now.'

'Hang on,' he said, his voice muffled by the helmet. 'I'm in the middle of eating an amazing leaf.'

'You're not playing that stupid slug game again, are you?'

'It's not stupid.'

'Your mother would be disgusted if she knew what you were doing. Those slimy little bastards drive her mad, chomping away at her herbaceous border like an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet.'

'Whatever,' he grunted. 'Just give me a minute.'

'We don't have a minute. Turn that thing off right now or we'll be late for the match.'

'It doesn't matter if we miss kick-off. Coach Barrett says he wants to save me for the second half.'

'But you're the captain of the team!' I protested. 'Even if you're not on the starting lineup, the other lads need you there to lead them to victory.'

'Who cares about victory? It's just a game.'

'*Just a game?*' I spluttered. 'Have you gone mad!? If you don't want to win, then why bother having a match at all? Why not just stand in a circle and pass the ball back and forth, like a bunch of brainless babies at nursery?'

'Sounds good to me.'

I pinched my nose, beginning to lose patience. This wasn't like Felix at all. 'Alright,' I said. 'I've heard enough of this nonsense. Now take that helmet off before I confiscate it.'

'You can't do that. It's school property.'

'Oh yes I can. I'll drive around to Ms Melville's house this instant and hand the blasted thing back to her.'

'Alright, fine,' he sighed, finally taking off the helmet. 'I'll finish the leaf later. Now go away so I can get changed.'

I should have realised then that something was wrong with him. But I suppose I was still in denial. We made it to the match on time, and he played just as well as usual, crushing the opposition like a bunch of little girls who'd wandered onto the wrong pitch. I told myself the incident in his bedroom was just a one-off blip. He was already back to his usual self. It was only when Sunday afternoon rolled around that I was finally forced to confront the truth.

Felix usually goes to see his tutor Henry at noon. He needs a little extra help with his maths, you see. Numbers have never been his strong suit, but he needs at least a B to get into Business and Economics at Oxford. I was in the drawing room reading the morning papers when I got a call from Henry. He said Felix hadn't shown up for his lesson, and he wasn't answering his phone either. I immediately knew something fishy was going on. Felix had left the house half an hour before, and Henry is only a ten-minute stroll down the road.

I went up to his bedroom, thinking he may have snuck back in. But there was no sign of him there. I checked the bathroom and the sitting room next, but still nothing. Judy was absolutely no help. She was still annoyed with me for vetoing her mother's visit, and she'd spent the morning drowning her sorrows in a bucket of Bloody Marys. I was on the verge of giving up the search, when suddenly it occurred to me to check the back garden. And that's where I found him. He was lying in the grass behind the vegetable patch, with that infernal helmet on his head again.

'What on earth are you doing?' I demanded, marching down the garden path.

'Nothing,' he mumbled. 'Go away.'

'Why aren't you at your lesson with Henry?'

'I didn't feel like going today.'

'You didn't *feel like* going?' I scoffed. 'And do you think you'll get into Oxford by only studying when you *feel like* it?'

'Who cares?' he shrugged. 'There are plenty of other unis out there. If I don't get into Oxford, I'll just go somewhere else instead.'

'But going to Oxford has always been your dream.'

'No it hasn't.'

'Of course it has! You need to go to the top university if you want to get a top job.'

'Well who says I want a top job? It sounds stressful. I'd rather do something that leaves me with a bit of free time.'

'*Free time?* For what!?'

'I don't know... for relaxing, I guess. For enjoying life.'

'*Relaxing? Enjoying life?* I've never heard such nonsense!'

I glared down at him, wondering if all that head trauma from the rugby pitch was finally catching up with him. But I couldn't see his expression underneath that hideous helmet.

'This is because of that game, isn't it? You've spent so long being a slug, you've forgotten what it means to be a man. Well, I won't put up with it any longer. I'm taking that helmet straight back to Ms Melville.'

I bent over and gripped the helmet, jamming my fingers in under the edges.

'Stop!' he cried, clamping his hands down on top of the plastic. 'I won't let you take it.'

'Just try and stop me,' I spat, jerking the helmet from side to side.

We struggled back and forth for a few seconds—me standing and him still sitting in the grass—until finally, his grip faltered. The helmet slid up and off, sending me stumbling backwards. One of Judy's godforsaken garden gnomes tripped me over, and I ended up losing my balance and landing in a heap in the vegetable patch.

'For God's sake!' I grunted, pulling myself back up and inspecting the damage. The garden gnome was shattered, and my entire side was caked in dirt. 'This shirt cost me three hundred pounds, and now it's ruined!'

'So what?' he sneered, climbing to his feet.

'So who's going to pay to replace it? Three hundred pounds is three entire weeks of your pocket money.'

'Just buy a second-hand one at the charity shop. It'll only cost you a fiver. Plus, it's better for the environment than producing a new one.'

'That's it!' I growled, dusting myself off. 'I've had enough of this eco-communist nonsense. It's time to put a stop to it, once and for all...'

I snatched the helmet up from where it had fallen, gripping the base in one hand and the visor in the other. Summoning all the pent-up rage I'd been holding down before, I ripped the cursed thing clean in two. The plastic wires popped apart, revealing the copper threads within. I threw the severed visor onto the path and stamped on it until the glass shattered. And then I picked up a pair of garden shears and stabbed them over and over into the purple plastic shell.

'There!' I grunted, wiping a bead of sweat off my forehead. 'It's finished.'

Felix stared down at the mangled helmet, dead silent. I couldn't tell if he was going to start crying or try to claw my eyes out. But after a few seconds, he just shrugged and sat back down in the grass.

'Whatever,' he said. 'It doesn't matter. I don't need a virtual garden when I've got a real one in front of me.'

'I'll tell Henry you're not feeling well this week,' I grunted, turning back towards the house. 'Just don't let this happen again.'

I thought it was all over then. That without the helmet, Felix would go back to normal. But his newfound habit of lounging in the garden continued. He'd spend hours at a time sprawled out on the grass, heading straight out there as soon as he got back from school. Sometimes he'd read a book or listen to music. But mostly, he'd just stare up at the sky.

I tried talking some sense into him a few more times. But that just made things worse. He started saying that maybe he would like to go to Oxford after all, but to study Literature or History instead of Business and Economics. I asked him what he was planning to do with such a useless degree, and—God help us—he said he was thinking of becoming a poet. Poor Judy was so distraught, she downed an entire bottle of vodka before dinner.

And so, that's why I'm standing here before you all today. Because I need your help to put this right. I know my old son is still in there somewhere. My strong son. My ambitious son. That evil game is still influencing him somehow, I know it is. Maybe Charlie Jones built another helmet, or maybe one of the other boys did. They must be passing it around at school like some illicit contraband. Or meeting up in secret to play it in the shadows. We just need to figure out how they're doing it...

You might think this doesn't affect you. That your child is safe from the game's foul influence. But if it happened to Felix, it could happen to anyone. And your precious sons could be next. The only way we can protect them is by destroying Slug Simulator. By wiping every last trace of it off the face of the Earth. Only then will our children be safe from laziness and lack of ambition. Only then will they embrace the power of productivity. Only then will our markets remain strong and our pensions proliferate!



## Contributor Biographies



**Maureen Mancini Amaturo**, NY-based fashion/beauty writer with an MFA in Creative Writing, teaches writing, leads Sound Shore Writers Group, which she founded in 2007, and produces literary and gallery events. Her fiction, essays, creative non-fiction, poetry, and comedy are widely published and appear in more than 100 magazines, literary journals, and anthologies globally. Maureen was nominated for The Bram Stoker Award and TDS Creative Fiction Award and was awarded Honorable Mention and Certificate of Excellence in poetry from *Havik Literary Journal*. Her work was shortlisted by Reedsy and by *Flash Fiction Magazine* for their Editor's Choice Award. *Funny Pearls UK* named her work as their best short story selection for '23. Also in 2023, the Academy of the Heart and Mind named Maureen winner of their 13 Halloween Tales Contest. A handwriting analyst diagnosed her with an overdeveloped imagination. She's working to live up to that.



**Grace Alamo** is a writer currently living in Miami, Florida. She is completing her Master's in English at the University of West Florida.



**Patrick Siniscalchi** is a former electrical engineer living in Asheville, North Carolina, with his wife and scruffy dog. His work has appeared in the *Great Smokies Review* and *Hedge Apple* and is upcoming in *The Sunlight Press*.



**Sam Kilkenny** is a nonfiction writer and poet. He is currently writing with C.W. Bryan at [poetryispretentious.com](http://poetryispretentious.com). His debut chapbook *Tuesday Morning* was published with Bottlecap Press in 2024.



**Sisi Carroll** (she/her) is an NYC based writer and actor. She can recite the entire movie *Titanic* from beginning to end, including scene and shot descriptions. Sisi's play *Is This You* was part of Dramatic Question Theatre's American Women Fellowship. Recently Sisi collaborated with a public performing arts high school in Cleveland, Ohio, to produce the first three episodes of a web series that she wrote, titled *Survival; A Day Job Story*. Sisi loves dachshunds.



**Will Willoughby**, whose self-similar name was foisted on him at birth, has short stories in *Epiphany*, *Does It Have Pockets*, and the *Piker Press*. He got his English degree from the University of New Hampshire and now lives with his wife and daughter in southern Maine. He does not know Stephen King.

"Remote Meeting Re: Presentation" was inspired by the following [Reedsy.com](http://Reedsy.com) prompt: "Write a story entirely of dialogue. Nothing but dialogue. No attributives (he said, she said, etc.). No descriptions of scenes or gestures or movements (unless these things are presented in the dialogue). Just words between quotation marks. Pure, beautiful, untainted dialogue."



**Andrew Urquhart** is originally from Glasgow, but has lived in the wild north of Scotland for most of his life now. He writes poems and stories in both English and Scots and has most recently had work published by Leopard Arts, and in the award nominated pamphlet, *Mair Northern Nummers*. His poetry has appeared in magazines and ezines such as *Lallans*, *Poetry Scotland*, *Clarion*, and *Wee Sparrow Poetry*.



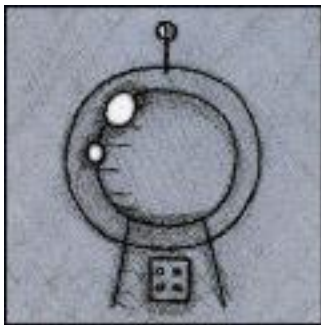
**Ray Agostinelli** lives in Colorado with his wife & family, works in tech, writes on the side. His essay collection *The Also-Rans: Unsung Heroes, Lovable Losers, Runners Up, and Forgotten Failures* is currently being adapted as a short-form podcast series. Favorite candy: black licorice. Favorite element: osmium.



**Laura Zaino** wears many hats, often at the same time: yoga teacher, unapologetic metalhead, mother of one, hiking enthusiast, vegan baker. She has an MFA in Poetry (funny but true). Her self-published poetry collection, *Hindsight Notwithstanding*, is available on Amazon. Find her on Instagram @onlyhappensonce.



**Brooksie C. Fontaine** is a coffee addict who got into college at fifteen and annoyed everyone there. She is a teaching assistant, tutor, illustrator, and grad student. Her work has been published by *Eunoia Review*, *Boston Accent Lit*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, and the *Cryptids Emerging* and *Things Improbable* anthologies.



**Gary Grossman**, Professor Emeritus of Ecology, University of Georgia, has poems, short fiction and essays in 47 literary reviews. His work has been nominated for inclusion in The Best Small Fictions and Pushcart Prize for 2023. For 10 years Gary wrote “Ask Dr. Trout” for American Angler Magazine. Gary’s poetry books *Lyrical Years* (Kelsay), and *What I Meant to Say Was...* (Impspired Press), are available from Amazon. His 2023 graphic memoir *My Life in Fish—One Scientist’s Journey...*(Impspired) also may be purchased from Amazon.



**Conor Sneyd** is an Irish author living in London. His debut novel *Future Fish*—a comedy about cat food conspiracy theories—was published by Lightning Books in 2023. Find him on Twitter @conor\_sneyd