

◇ Defenestration ◇

Volume XXI, Issue III

December 2024

Table of Contents

Bronwen Everill, "No Conspiracy"	2
Camille Bliss, "Oh, Indy!"	6
Stacie Herrington, "Lament of a Fourth Grade Goth"	8
Tom Busillo, "Minor Maine Figures Whose Statues Are Now In Storage: Henry Cooper"	10
Joelle Killian, "Existential BDSM"	11
Torrey Francis Malek, "Sparring with Sensei"	13
T. J. Young, "Pepe the Space Station"	14
Christopher Palmer, "Thank you all for coming"	20
Mandy Houk, "Sour Lemon Crumble"	21
Mark Ifanson, "It Was Futile for Your Employees to Wear Garlic Necklaces: A Vampire's Post-Job Interview Courtesy Letter"	23
Russell Nichols, "Funkotron State of Mind"	24
Cody Walzel, "Help! A Raccoon Is Spooning My Cat"	25
Contributor Biographies	29

All content is © copyright their respective authors.

No Conspiracy
by
Bronwen Everill

I once had a friend who didn't believe in pirates.

She said, "They're a conspiracy."

I said, "why?"

"I've never seen one."

I nodded. I had no idea what she was talking about.

I went to the library and checked out three books about pirates from the non-fiction section. I felt like that really said it all. How could they be made up and be in the non-fiction section?

I thought maybe there would be a hint about the conspiracy in the books. Instead, I found pictures of Anne Bonny and Blackbeard. Well, illustrations. No one had seen them in real life and they were way before photos.

I began to see what my friend meant.

At dinner, I thought I'd introduce the idea casually, see if I could get anything out of my parents.

"So that whole pirate thing is a real laugh" I said in my gown-up-est voice. I may have winked. Not very subtle.

My little brother looked at me like I had opened my mouth and spoken Klingon.

My parents looked at each other for I swear a full minute before giving the shadiest reply ever.

"Mark, are you feeling okay? Is there something wrong with your eye?"

The evidence was mounting. I'd confront my friend in the morning with this update.

She was pleased that I had come around to seeing things her way. Maybe we should put together an awareness campaign? We could meet at her house after school?

I arrived armed with my library books. She showed me to her old treehouse. Inside, she had laid out two plain white tee-shirts and some sharpies that she had picked up at the dollar store on the way home. "Skarples" they said, in knock-off lettering.

"I thought we could make shirts"

"What did you have in mind?"

"A crossed-out skull and crossbones?"

"Then people will just think we're *against* pirates."

She looked a little annoyed. "Well okay, what did you have in mind?"

My mind was a blank. I thought of my parents' furtive glances. The "illustrations" in my book. My friend cocked her head, brushing her bangs away from her perfect eyes.

"How about 'Cons-Piracy'?"

They twinkled. "Hey that's really good"

I'm 90 percent sure that I suffered a mini-stroke.

She made me promise to wear mine to school the next day. I was a little nervous about what my brother would say, but he just rolled his eyes.

In fact, no one paid any attention to our matching shirts all day. We reconvened at lunch. She declared that the fact that everyone was ignoring our awareness campaign was a further sign that there was something big here. She looked around suspiciously and then leaned in closer, so no one would overhear. I could smell her grapefruit lipgloss. We should stand outside the school afterwards and try to talk to people. I nodded. My tongue felt heavy.

"Did you know most pirate stories come from one account and that was written by someone *made up* by a fiction writer??"

"Daniel Defoe! Look it up!"

"The British government just made up pirates to scare kids."

"No one wrote about pirates until after they existed because they *never existed*." We pounded the pavement. We were an unstoppable force of truth. Sometimes our hands brushed.

A few kids looked interested. We hadn't figured out what to do next, so we told them to meet us at her treehouse the next afternoon.

But when I got there, Teddy Penny was there too. And he had clearly bought it all and was now selling it back to her. She was leaning on the table, chin propped in her hands, nodding vigorously, her lips slightly parted, her eyes sparkling.

"And that's how I knew it was a big lie," he was saying. He leaned back in his chair, tipping it back on two legs, running his hand back through his long hair. "It helps to have an older brother who knows stuff, and can, like, get beers and stuff." He turned and saw me. "Oh hey, Mark." She did not take her eyes off him.

I decided pirates were real after all. I threw out my Cons-piracy shirt and asked my mom to drive me to Hot Topic so I could get a shirt with a pirate logo. Maybe seeing me wearing it would sting her the way I felt stung.

But that's when things started to get weird.

I turned up the next day in my Captain Jack shirt. She wasn't there. Neither was Teddy Penny. I was even more furious. Playing hooky together. Disgusting.

When they didn't show up the next day, I was a little worried. I asked one of her friends. She said that her AIM had an away message up that said something about the pirates not eating the tourists. Jurassic Park, I said. She shrugged.

On Saturday, I thought I'd bike by her house, casually, and see if Teddy Penny's car was there. I was surprised to see a man in a suit and aviator sunglasses standing around on her porch. I did a second loop of the block and noticed he had a walkie talkie in his belt. My heart was racing. Had he noticed me?

I decided to wait around the corner for a few minutes and then head back the other way, like I was coming back from somewhere. I crouched behind a bush that was losing its leaves. I watched a spider drop down from a curling leaf, dangling while it made a decision about where to spin its web.

I thought enough time had passed.

I went nice and slow, taking everything in. The tan Ford Taurus parked right at the corner, with a couple of people in the front seat reading newspapers. Her parents' car wasn't in the driveway. I tried not to look at the man on the porch. A mourning dove cooed.

And then, the squawk of a parrot. I turned toward it instinctively. It...was coming from the Ford Taurus? The people in the front seat turned to look at me. One was wearing an eye patch.

Then the revving of an engine and squawking over a walkie talkie.

I turned my head in time to see aviator glasses heading my way. Before I knew what my legs were doing, I was pumping the bike pedals as hard as I could.

Aviator glasses was running towards me now. I headed straight to him. I could feel my blood pulsing in my ears. Stranger! Danger!

"Where *is* she?!" I shouted.

He fell over, dodging out of the path of my bike.

I heard a clatter of wood as a peg leg rolled out from grey suit trousers.

As I stared in disbelief, I forgot about the people in the car.

"Alright kid." Some kind of British accent? "I can see from your shirt that you're a believer. Why are you going about with these government plants?" He gestured towards her house.

"Government....plants?" Visions of her first day at school this year, the way she sidled up to me in the cafeteria. "You're saying she was...working for the deep state or something?"

"Aye!" said the one on the ground, as he snapped his leg back into place.

"So, where's Teddy Penny? He's not a plant! He's been here since kindergarten."

They looked at each other.

"He's been taken. We were too late."

"For him," the one with the eye patch spoke for the first time, "but not for you."

The squawk of the parrot was followed by its echoed parody, "But not for you!"

I took a deep breath. Pictured the way her eyes crinkled at the corners when I made her laugh. "Well, what can I do?"

All three were standing together now. A captain and his mates. A gentle breeze picked up in the trees. In the Taurus window, I could see the bright colors of the parrot's plumage as it circled within its faux leather cage.

Peg-leg pulled something out of his pocket, leaned towards me, opened my hand, and pressed into it a cold, round, heavy metal object. As he drew back his hand I could see – it was a compass. An ancient-looking compass, with fancy lettering. I could tell it was expensive just by how much it weighed.

"Tell everyone: Pirates be real. And if ever ye need us, this compass will show you the way."

"And what about Teddy?"

"That problem is for us now." The eye-patch saluted. They all turned and squeezed clownishly into the Taurus, trying not to let the parrot escape. Then they left.

A few weeks later, a new kid joined school. His family had moved into her house. It was like she'd never been there at all. He didn't sit near me at lunch, or pay me any attention at all. But I was still suspicious.

So one day, as I happened to be passing his locker, I said in a low voice, "Yo, pirates are a conspiracy." He looked around, laughed nervously, and shouted across the hall to Tom Whitehead, "Hey, is this that weird kid you were warning me about?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. This one was normal.

Oh, Indy!
by
Camille Bliss

River Hickey was my first bite. That was his name—River Farslayer Hickey. In the app he told me interesting names make for interesting people and I asked if I could be the judge of that. Later that same evening, he pulled up to the old lady's house whose attic I sleep in with his cherry-red pickup. When I sat in the passenger seat, he stared at me like I polished off a meals-worth of mayonnaise packets.

"What?" I asked. He shook his small head then started driving. We kept flicking our eyes at each other but didn't say a word. Out the window, I pretended to zip from power line to power line using two interchanging crowbars to give my brain something to do.

He opened his front door for me, like a gentleman, but entered first.

"Welcome to my humble abode," he said. It was humble. There was a TV on a milk crate, a camp chair facing it with a pillow for a cushion, a coffee table, and one massive hookah. I've never tried hookah—it seems exotic. I want my life to be equal parts chaos and exoticism.

River then led me to his bedroom, which was also humble. There was a bed.

"Well..." He pursed his lips. I pursed mine too. We stood there for a moment, our silence filling the empty, dark bedroom, lips kissing the air. It grew so silent I could hear myself breathing, so I stopped breathing.

"We could watch a movie," he said, finally.

"What a wonderful idea."

He slid open the closet door where a few shirts hung and a TV stood brazenly on a dresser. There were three movie options, all on VHS: *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Temple of Doom*, and *The Last Crusade*.

"Your pick," said River. I removed *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. "You like your classics. Classy girl," he said. I didn't respond because I didn't know how. After he slipped in the tape, we sat on opposite sides of his bed. I thought about moving closer, but there was a clear line separating us. He was incredibly invested in the movie—reciting lines verbatim, and spurting facts like, *It took over 50 takes for the monkey to do the Nazi salute*. River was a huge nerd, and not even a cool one. When Indiana Jones saved Marion's life a fourth time, River said, "I want to find *my* Indy." There was no space for me; he was saving it for a fictitious character.

"Why couldn't you just be him?" I asked.

"Be him?"

"I could be him." I thought this would be a good segue into outlandish roleplay, but River snubbed me. We watched the remainder of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in silence, and once the

credits rolled I assumed this would be our last moment together. But he got up, and shoved *The Temple of Doom* into the VHS player.

Indiana Jones evades death easily; I want his spatial awareness. He has deep admiration for ancient works of art, a keen ability for solving puzzles, and an unmatched charm his strong jawline only immortalizes. I wonder, did he take classes in whip wielding? Or was this an ability he was born with?

River rose at the end of *Temple of Doom* and exchanged it with *The Last Crusade*. Daddy Jones had a major influence on Indiana's life, which made me reconsider whether I could become him—my family consists of uneducated alcoholics. But by the words of the World History professor that tried to sleep with me, *You've got a good head on your shoulders, but you gotta put in the work*. If I play my cards right—find a whip instructor, change my major to archeology, and learn Hindi—I'll be the next Indiana Jones. I can already see my travel memoirs on shelves at Barnes & Noble: *Adventures With Candida*.

River rolled over to me half-way through the *The Last Crusade*, I'm assuming in an attempt to cuddle, but I ignored him. My brain was too busy planning the rest of my life. By the end of the movie, I had a list of everything I needed to accomplish to shapeshift into the next Indiana Jones. One of these was to remain a bachelorette for the rest of my life.

The drive back was as it was there: quiet. We both reeked of desperation, and though he lingered a beat too long after dropping me off, I did not resort to necking him. From the sidewalk, I watched as his cherry-red pickup drifted beneath street lights until he was only a pinprick of color. River meandered out of sight. Soon, he will only be a memory associated with a really stupid name that somehow changed the course of my life.

Lament of a Fourth Grade Goth
by
Stacie Herrington

The classroom wall is a journal
that spurns me day after day.
These editors, I swear to God—

*Please stop writing about death.
Is everything okay at home?*

(How could anything be okay anywhere?)

*This doesn't rhyme.
This isn't an ending.*

(O, but it *is*.)

Their pet penpushers cluster, scribble,
bask in garish fluorescence, declaim
the tenets of capitalism by heart,

the heart being the organ
of good American learning.

Thus far they must've hung a hundred
hacky haikus, whilst my "Sonnet
for Lenore" is somewhere on the floor,

the latest language arts crime
scene, awash in crimson gore.

I have nothing bloodless enough
to hang on the wall for Parents' Night.
Even my acrostic is too caustic. Woe.

The teacher strolls amongst the jejune,
a hissing mist of sibilance.

They fill their notebooks with treasure maps.
They will know where to find the money one day.
Things are looking up for them.

Things are looking out the window for me.
I shall major in portentous clouds,
minor in the kinesics of twisted old trees.

One day I'll defend my thesis
wielding a fan of cursèd tarot:
"Variations on a Theme Oft Pondered."

The theme, of course, is my epitaph.

*She held many degrees.
Alas, they were all terminal.*

At night I dream they hang me
on the wall for Parents' Night.

**Minor Maine Figures Whose Statues Are Now In Storage: Henry
Cooper
by
Tom Busillo**

Henry Cooper never learned how to walk forward, so backward was out of the question. He could only walk sideways.

Eventually, as Henry reached puberty, he started to think about girls and became extremely self-conscious about walking sideways. So he took action.

He did the only sensible thing he could think of and bought a pony, which girls supposedly loved. He rode it everywhere.

One day, the pony forgot how to go forward, making going backward out of the question. It too could only walk sideways.

Having grown to love the pony, he did the only sensible thing he could think of. He hired someone to drive the two of them everywhere in a horse trailer.

Soon Henry was the most popular boy in the school, with all the girls wanting to be seen sitting with him on his pony in his horse trailer, a fully enclosed trailer that only had four small windows plus a few vents.

Given his reputation as a "ladies' man," even the jocks started asking him to come to their parties in the woods and Henry would oblige. He soon reciprocated by throwing parties of his own in his horse trailer.

When the war broke out Henry volunteered. Every branch of the service rejected him—except the Coast Guard. They gave him a desk job on the U.S.S. Pennington, a 24-foot inflatable dinghy based out of Rockland, Maine, even going so far as to issue him a larger horse trailer that could better accommodate his desk and filing cabinets.

After an unfortunate encounter with a very aggressive pod of dolphins, Henry, his pony, his trailer, his driver Riordan, and 44 crew members of the Pennington went down at sea off the Maine coast

In his hometown, right there in front of City Hall, they erected a statue of Henry on his pony, waving out of a side window of this horse trailer.

After 20 years of constant vandalization and remediation, the City Council had enough and took down the statue, replacing it with that of the chief of the local indigenous tribe the town's founding fathers had wiped out in the early 1800s.

Existential BDSM
by
Joelle Killian

You're a masochist. Orchestrating the universe's workings for your own pleasure, transforming everyone into a whip-wielding master.

Pervert.

Not satisfied with mundane dungeons and pro-dommes, you're into the *lifestyle*, baby. 24/7.

You procrastinate on your quarterly report till the day before. Stay up all night panicking, but leave the typos in. Then you conceal your erection beneath the boardroom table, humiliated when your co-workers realize you're an incompetent idiot.

The boss is edging you about whether you have to work overtime this weekend, changing his mind every few hours. *Ooh yes, Daddy, jerk my chain, I've been so, so bad.*

All this aligns with your deepest desires. Because you chose your fate as a collared slave to this employer. Sure, it was the only job you could find when the economy tanked, but hey, *you're* the one who decided to incarnate on Earth during this cosmic shitshow.

You kinky bastard, you.

Check your teeny-tiny bank account daily, confirming that you're a worthless, insignificant worm.

Don't pay your bills till well past the due dates. Jerk off in the darkness when your power gets disconnected, a pathetic sissy for PG&E.

Guarantee the most painful hangovers possible: order well liquor only. Don't drink any water. Stay up all night doomscrolling—phone in one hand, dick in the other—flogging yourself with posts from famous former classmates.

This type of self-service scratches the itch, but without anyone else to regularly punish you, it feels a little empty. Lonely.

Multiple trainers at the gym have fired you for moaning *yes Sir, I'm your dirty little piss piglet* during your workouts. No one there consented to participate in your scenes.

So try this: forget to call your mother on her birthday. The barrage of guilt-laden reminder texts from your father will confirm that you're a useless beta cuck.

Befriend a replica of your high school bully, who'll mock your outfits and tag pics of you on social media with #worstdressed. The comments section will send you right into ecstatic subspace.

And don't forget about the airport's unlimited potential for power play!

Arrive moments before your flight departs, your carry-on filled with soda cans and dildos. Stuff your underwear full of socks, guaranteeing a full-body pat-down in front of the long

line of irritated travelers. The paramilitary force that is the TSA will transform you into a bootlicking sub.

You want to take it to the next level?

Well, you're in luck, because your country has just elected a petty tyrant. Boner city!

Join an activist group who's chaining themselves to the White House. Pre-pumped from the airport's humiliations, you push your way through the sea of signs and protesters flooding Pennsylvania Avenue, until you stand before the White House Gates. Throb with heart-pounding electric excitement as you snap the bike lock around your neck and the fence.

You're already hard when the cops arrive, their Kevlar armor gleaming in the sun. The sight of their tasers and beanbag launchers pushes you over the edge; you squirm with delight as the phalanx marches closer.

They can't hear you squeal *thank you, master, thank you* over their squawking megaphones as they beat you with batons.

Flooded with happy brain chemicals, you dream of getting arrested—a whole new world of bondage and domination. Talk about corporal punishment!

You cum in your pants as they cuff you with zip ties, leading you to an unmarked van. It's all unfolding as it should. Because you're a cosmic pain slut, and the universe is conspiring for your ultimate bliss.

Sparring with Sensei
by
Torrey Francis Malek

One Saturday afternoon after a sparring session,
my sensei and I shared a sudden lesson
across the two front seats of my hybrid sedan—
another spontaneous spiritual dojo.
My sensei says to me,
"Sometimes the simplest of choices
lead us to the most significant moments."
He alludes to the studious discipline of the egret,
who spends hours ornamenting the koi pond before striking.
He cites the steady persistence of the hummingbird,
whose instincts are a compass, both toward nectar and survival.
He asks if I'd like to go bird watching on Sunday,
but I retort, "Sensei, let's focus on the moment at hand."
He nods and alludes to Bruce Lee,
"Be like water," he echoes,
as if Bruce himself hadn't just whispered that lesson
from a TikTok reel migrating across my screen.
After his tender revelations, his solemn lessons,
I can't help but point out that
we're still in line at the Chick-fil-A,
and no one has shown greater patience
than the strained, grinning teenager
with her grease-streaked iPad,
while forty-four four-doors
behind us honk their horns
in perfect harmony with the universe.

Pepe the Space Station by **T. J. Young**

Space station Zeta Orionis was, it must be admitted, a strange place. Not only was it located on the far fringes of known space, many light years from Earth, it also had been designed by an exceedingly eccentric architect known only by his initials, NTBFW. This man, or woman—no one was sure which—must have had a grudge against the conglomerate that commissioned the station, because it was designed and built in such a way that it resembled an obese chihuahua. It was well known at the time that the CEO of the conglomerate, Ms. Francine von Chew, had accidentally killed just such a pet when she forgot to outfit the dog in its custom tailored space suit, and the dog—Pepe—subsequently exploded when Ms. von Chew left her gigantic mansion on Mars to take Pepe for a walk. Pepe, poor soul, didn't get more than about ten feet from the door. The incident, which left Ms. von Chew covered in blood and blobs of chihuahua fat, was a painful memory for her, one she ardently wished to forget, and consequently NTBFW's design could only have been intended as a deliberate insult to her.

Ms. von Chew, however, never saw the completed station—perhaps fortunately for the architect—because she herself died only a few months after Pepe. In a case of bizarre parallelism, she too exploded after inexplicably forgetting to put on her own space suit one day when leaving her mansion to, as she always put it—rather oddly—"get some air." Her death, as well as the death of the beloved Pepe before her, prompted the authorities on Mars to—in a somewhat controversial move—post literally thousands of warnings all over Mars asking residents "Are YOU wearing your SPACE SUIT today?" These signs were controversial because not only was their efficacy highly doubtful, but they also tended to remind the wealthy residents that they really shouldn't have been living in such a hostile environment in the first place, and were only doing so because, wealthy as they were, they nevertheless could not afford to live on Earth itself.

But to return to space station Zeta Orionis—or, well, Pepe, as most people called it—not only was its appearance eccentric, so also was its internal arrangements. In fact, the place resembled nothing so much as a giant rat maze—corridors twisted and turned, doubled back on themselves, or ended in blank walls. Conference rooms, advertised with signs and arrows, couldn't be found, their existence apparently purely theoretical. Elevators went up and down but opened on different levels at different times, according to what the station's mathematician calculated was a differential equation of fearsome complexity. Maps of the corridors were, of course, produced, along with the mathematician's calculations regarding the elevators, but these were all so complicated—consisting of many pages—as to be virtually useless. Most people just got around by trial and error, and didn't use the maps at all, except perhaps as emergency toilet paper.

The Director of the station, Tiberius Bonefish, known as "Boney" because of his large, bald, cranium, had attempted over the years to correct these problems, mainly by simply blasting new, straight corridors right through the existing ones, as if he were Baron von Haussmann in nineteenth century Paris, but he had to stop this practice when his engineers warned him that the new corridors weakened the overall structure of the station, potentially leading to its imminent collapse. Needless to say, Boney, who had no desire to suffer the ignominious fate of being crushed inside Pepe's bloated stomach, heeded their advice. The result being that only two through corridors were actually completed. A third, which would have led directly from Boney's quarters to the station's famous tequila bar, had to be abandoned, much to Boney's chagrin.

These structural difficulties, annoying as they were, were by no means Boney's only problem. He also had to endure an obsolete computer system which, due to an error in programming that no one seemed able to correct, at random intervals maliciously switched his appointments with that of a hairdresser living on the far side of the station. This meant that, on several occasions, Boney found himself, after an arduous journey through the station's labyrinthine corridors, meeting someone he thought was going to be his chief engineer or his personnel officer but who instead turned out to be either an elderly woman wanting a permanent or a teenager wanting their hair dyed purple. Meanwhile, his chief engineer or his personnel officer would be back in Boney's office wondering why Boney had scheduled them to meet with a hairdresser. (Usually, whoever it was just ended up getting a trim because, well, why not?)

It was, in fact, after just one such occurrence that Boney learned of what would turn out to be his most urgent problem. He had just made it back to his office when he found himself confronted by the station's lead astrophysicist, Ms. Lydia Blog. Ms. Blog, a petite woman of about forty with stringy yellow hair and an annoying habit of repeating everything that was said to her, told him that a huge ion storm of unknown origin had been identified on long range scanners headed directly toward the station. Boney, frustrated by the long trip across the station and back, and by his inability to fix the various problems he seemed always to encounter, received the news by pounding his forehead repeatedly against the surface of his desk. Ms. Blog, witnessing this behavior, gasped in amazement and concern, but she needn't have worried. True to his nickname, Boney's broad forehead was unusually thick and sturdy. In fact, had Ms. Blog been able to closely study Boney's office and living quarters, she would have discovered a number of dents in the bulkheads at approximately the height of Boney's head, the residue of previous encounters between Boney's remarkably resilient cranium and the somewhat less sturdy material of which Pepe had been made. Indeed, many objects and surfaces throughout the station bore evidence of such encounters—the vending machines in the lounge, in particular, were battered almost beyond recognition.

Ms. Blog, once the pounding had ceased and she had recovered her composure, asked Boney what they should do to prepare for the storm. In reply, Boney instructed her to take one of the station's flyers and survey the approaching storm from close quarters in order to ascertain more precisely its strength, nature, and extent. Ms. Blog, after repeating this instruction back to Boney (thereby irritating him to the point of nearly precipitating another episode of head pounding), obediently did as he instructed. She retrieved one of the station's aging flyers and headed out towards the storm. Unfortunately for her, however, the storm proved to be far more powerful than her initial calculations had indicated. As a result, as she neared the storm in the small flyer, she became caught in a swirling vortex of plasma that completely disabled the ship's systems, spun it about, and blasted her millions of miles away into a hitherto unknown region of space, where she crash-landed on a large, rocky planet that happened to be the home world of an ancient, alien civilization.

Given this unfortunate circumstance, Ms. Blog might be assumed to have suffered some terrible horror-film fate, such as, perhaps, being forced into a bizarre form of alien sexual slavery, or simply being eaten, but in fact no such hackneyed result occurred. The aliens, it turned out, were no more ferocious, and no larger, than crickets. When Ms. Blog exited her ruined space ship, she accidentally stepped on and partially crushed an entire alien city, as a result of which the aliens wanted nothing to do with her. Being an industrious and highly intelligent race, they rapidly repaired her ship and, by frantically waving their antennae, managed to herd her back into it and thereby facilitated her escape. (There was, it should be noted, a dissident faction among the aliens that argued she was an invader who should

be, in fact, eaten, but this minority was considered fanatical and not taken seriously.) Thus, Ms. Blog eventually made it back to the comforting confines of space station Pepe, but without any useful data. Her report to Boney ultimately consisted of a single sentence: "its a real whopper, sir."

At the time he received this communication (via an implant he had in his ear), Boney was, somewhat irresponsibly, holed up in a private booth in the back of the tequila bar having sex with one of the waitresses, a woman of unusually muscular physique known as Hercules. Irritated and alarmed by the news, he instinctively sought a nearby object on which to bang his head, but all that was readily available was Hercules's own head, which Boney, with an effort, refrained from striking on the grounds that doing so would likely have caused Hercules to crush him with her titanic thighs. By way of compensation, Hercules offered to let him smack her bottom instead, saying "its as good as steel, baby," but Boney declined because, he explained, striking her there with his head would not only be logistically challenging but also not very satisfactory. Hercules, vaguely disappointed, nevertheless conceded the point and Boney reluctantly took his leave. Zipping up his pants, he made his way back through the bar, where he paused briefly to down several shots, and then headed woozily toward his office, wishing along the way that he had built the direct line he had planned between the two, despite his engineer's warnings. As it was, it took him more than an hour to get back, partly because he made the mistake of taking one of the elevators on a day when, according to the mathematician's calculations, it didn't go anywhere at all, but simply remained in place for fifteen minutes with the doors closed.

Once finally back in his office, Boney summoned his executive team for an emergency meeting. His intent was to develop a plan for surviving the coming storm, but unfortunately his team radically disagreed regarding the proper course of action. His chief engineer, a reclusive man with a heavy German accent and a passion for children's literature, insisted that they had to evacuate the station, which he claimed could be accomplished by constructing a giant orange ball in which the inhabitants of the station could be placed and then carried away to safety by the station's flyers, a la *James and the Giant Peach*. This weird idea gained virtually no support, however, because there was no time to construct such a ball and no way to supply it with the food, water, and air it would need to support the station's personnel. (As it turned out, the chief engineer himself did evacuate the station in just this way, with himself in a flyer and his beloved pet beagle "Johan" in a peach-like pod dangling below. Together, they left the station just before the storm hit and disappeared into the surrounding nebula. Although they were never seen again, rumors circulated for years afterwards that Johan, at least, had miraculously survived the storm and was living on a far distant planet inhabited by a race of intelligent crickets. However, this was never verified.)

The other members of the team, including Lydia Blog, thought that the station could withstand the storm, but they differed sharply in how best to fortify it and otherwise get prepared. Steel being far too heavy and bulky to be transported to the far reaches of the galaxy, Pepe had been constructed of an expanding foam which, when extruded, basically resembled paper mache, albeit reinforced with a graphite matrix. Spare barrels of this foam remained in the station's storage bay where it was occasionally used for repairs (as well as, incidentally, for school projects, Halloween costumes, teen age pranks, and even, by some brave souls, as a suppository.) Lydia advocated simply adding more of this foam to the station's exterior. She contended that this would not only strengthen the station but have the added benefit of making the station look slightly less like that unfortunate chihuahua, Pepe. The idea thus appealed strongly to Boney and, when Lydia articulated it, he actually lifted his head momentarily from where he was banging it on his desk and almost smiled. Unfortunately, however, the idea had to be nixed when the supply officer reported that the

barrels of foam in the storage bay had been entirely used up just the week before by a troupe of itinerant actors who used it to construct an elaborate set in which they staged the popular comedy "Kiss My Ass, Kate."

Suffice it to say that, ultimately, the exec team failed to agree on any particular course of action, and each thereafter pursued his own preparations. This might have been considered unfortunate, if not actually dangerous under the circumstances, but it was by no means unusual—Boney's exec team seldom agreed on anything, not even what they would have for lunch. In Boney's case, his preparations amounted to little more than stockpiling his office with as many bottles of tequila as he could carry and attempting to persuade Hercules to join him there. Unfortunately for Boney, Hercules had to decline his offer because she was, when he contacted her, trapped under a 400 pound barbell she had unwisely attempted to bench press. Apparently, Hercules was of the belief that, if only she were strong enough, she could hold the station together herself by brute force, as if she were Atlas. She was not freed from her predicament until the storm hit when, in a bizarre sequence of events, the floor underneath her bench collapsed, dumping her into the apartment below where she ended up, amidst a cloud of dust, in the arms of an elderly biologist who, for some reason, began examining her teeth, apparently in the mistaken belief that she was an extraterrestrial. (Reportedly, the man said "you're very well endowed, for an alien." To which Hercules replied, "no shit, jack.")

Boney, meanwhile, having worked partway through his first bottle of El Jefe Gold, instructed the station computer to issue a general alert, as the storm was then only an hour or so away. The computer, however, maliciously reinterpreted his request so that, instead of a warning, it issued a general call for all personnel to meet in the station's largest conference room where, it said, Boney would arm wrestle any and all comers. This announcement was met with considerable skepticism by most of the station personnel, since not only was it absurd, it also was well known that Boney, despite the fearsome character of his forehead, was otherwise physically a wimp. Consequently, everyone ignored it, with the exception of a handful of rather thick-headed mechanics who bore a grudge against Boney because he had, after suffering some staggering losses, outlawed their weekly poker games. These men saw it as an opportunity to revenge themselves, if not on Boney as a whole, at least on his arm. They therefore headed in the direction of the conference room, pulling up their shirt sleeves as they went. (The conference room, incidentally, was known facetiously as "the Brain," because it was located in an area of the station corresponding not, as one might expect, to Pepe's head, but to his genitals. Pepe, perhaps frustrated by the lack of other dogs on Mars, was known to hump just about anything that came his way. In fact, on his last, fatal, walk, he was in the act of humping a paving stone when he exploded.)

Because of these miscommunications and farcical errors, the station was not well prepared when the storm hit. In fact, most of the station's residents were caught completely off guard. One young resident, who happened to be looking out a viewing port at the time, saw the storm coming but mistakenly thought it was an approaching cloud of alien space locusts which, coincidentally, he had been reading about just moments before in a pulpy science fiction magazine. Thus, he jumped up and ran out into the corridor screaming "we're being invaded, we're being invaded! Close the hatches!" He tried to make his way to a nearby storage locker where there were some cans of insecticide, but the storm arrived before he got there, causing the bulkhead next to him to collapse and knocking him unconscious. He awoke some days later in the medical ward where, apparently still addled, he kept asking his doctors, to their consternation, where "the hoppers" were.

His experience was by no means unusual either. The storm shorted out the station's electrical systems, leaving everyone in the dark and stranding some unfortunate souls for

hours in the station's elevators. As the station shook violently, people ran frantically from one place to another, bumping into the walls as well as each other and, in some cases, ending up on the floor, tangled in each other's arms, their clothes partially torn off. (What with the darkness and the vibration, and the sense that the world was ending, more than a few of these encounters became quite heated, with the result that there was a noticeable uptick in births on the station approximately nine months later.) Pepe's left rear leg got completely blown off, nearly taking with it the mechanics waiting in the Brain for the arm wrestling to begin. Wall units and monitors throughout the station exploded, showering some people with glass and even setting one woman's hair on fire.

Ms. Lydia Blog, who had, weirdly, decided to ride out the storm naked in her bathtub, listening to a tape of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyrie*, narrowly escaped electrocution when the antique "boom box" (as she had read the device was called) on which the tape was playing fell off its shelf into the water. Fortunately for her, the device was so old and decrepit the electrical charge it carried was minimal. All she experienced was a mild, not entirely unpleasant, shock. The shock did cause her stringy yellow hair to stand permanently on end, giving her a frightful appearance, as if she were wearing a broom on her head, but she actually came, in time, to appreciate the look. She found that people took her much more seriously with it than they had before—often, in fact, scurrying out of the room as soon as she entered, muttering "yes, ma'am, whatever you want, no problem."

Boney, for his part, was, at the height of the storm, standing precariously on top of his desk, seriously drunk and alternately pounding his forehead with his hands and swilling liberally from his second bottle of El Jefe Gold. Motivated by an obscure sense of responsibility for the station mingled with anger at the injustice of his fate, he at one point reached upward with outstretched arms and began yelling incoherent curses into the darkness, for some reason adopting a faux Irish accent in the process. "Bastard!" he screamed, "son of a whore's tomcat! Do ya dare to winkle me heinie? I'll show you, ya foul sucking teat of a dead sheep!" Ironically, just as he was yelling this, Hercules—who had by then managed to escape from the biologist with the tooth fetish, and had fought her way through the station's corridors, sometimes bodily throwing people aside along the way—arrived not, as she had expected, at the door of Boney's office, but at a small anteroom adjacent thereto. Whereupon, driven by desperation and taking a cue from Boney himself, she repeatedly smashed her head with all her considerable strength directly into the wall, eventually causing the wall to buckle and her head, a bit bloodied, to emerge on the far side where, grinning triumphantly, she began screaming along with Boney.

Boney, in his drunken stupor, saw by the dim light of an emergency flare what appeared to be a foreign object burst through the wall of his office and mistook it for a catastrophic breach of the station's hull. Reacting as quickly as his inebriated state would permit, he half-fell, half-jumped down off his desk and smashed his three quarters empty bottle of El Jefe Gold on top of Hercules's skull, in what was apparently an effort to seal the rupture. This caused Hercules to collapse backwards unconscious into the anteroom, while Boney himself stared in disbelief at the hole in the wall she had created. He did not, however, stare for long, because an instant later a massive shock wave struck the station and he fell backwards, striking the back of his head on the edge of his desk and rendering himself unconscious. (The back of Boney's head, unlike the front, was not heavily armored with bone.)

In the end, the station survived the storm—damaged but intact (except for Pepe's left rear leg, which ended up in orbit around a distant planet where it was eyed hungrily by the local carnivores.) The extruded foam of which the station was made turned out to be an ideal material. It was flexible enough to move with the storm while at the same time rigid enough

not to be torn apart. Moreover, the many corridors winding backwards and forwards through the station had the effect of strengthening it, proving that the designer, NTBFW—contrary to what most people thought—knew what he (or she) was doing. When Boney woke up, the storm was over. His office was in chaos and he had a terrific headache, but he was whole and, with the exception of a painful bump on the back of his head, uninjured. As he looked about, taking stock of his situation, he noticed the ragged hole Hercules had made in the wall of his office. Gazing through it, he observed her lying still unconscious on the floor of the anteroom next door. The sight was a bit of a shock, as he had no memory of their encounter during the storm. Concerned, he staggered out of his office and, after some initial confusion about which way to go, made his way around into the anteroom, where he knelt at her side. When she awoke a few minutes later, she gazed blearily up at his broad, somewhat bumpy, forehead, and said the first thing that popped into her mind, which was "what the hell does 'winkle me heinie' mean?"

Boney—unaware of what she was referring to—just shrugged. Then he helped her up and together they limped out into the hall and began making plans to put the station back together. One positive from the storm, which didn't emerge until some days later, was that the station had been so shaken and twisted by the storm's powerful magnetic fields that it no longer resembled poor Pepe. Instead, it now vaguely resembled a tequila bottle and consequently was rechristened "El Jefe," a fact which Boney had mixed feelings about. All Hercules had to say about it, though, was "salud!"

Thank you all for coming
by
Christopher Palmer

We considered gathering at the water cooler
 (it's where you spent most of your time)
but decided to have a morning tea
 (to honour your homemade muffins).
We're here to say goodbye to a dear colleague
 (who never fitted in)
one of the more colourful members of the team
 (wearing a frown mostly to feign busyness)
who's been unwell for some time
 (complaining of whiplash while sneezing)
but who nevertheless soldiered on
 (after the worker's compo claim was rejected).
You taught us all many things
 (how to use sarcasm for evil and not good)
and will be remembered for your mastery of detail
 (hence the nickname 'comma queen').
We wish you all the very very best
 (and death by a thousand paper cuts).

Sour Lemon Crumble
by
Mandy Houk

Delia scrunched her eye up to the peephole and watched Rodney's tiny rounded figure rock and toddle its way up the sidewalk, growing larger step by step. She took note of the fact that his cardigan buttons weren't aligned, leaving a triangle-like flap to dangle at the bottom. But by the time he was large enough to fill the circle of glass, she'd determined not to care about that. Men in this town were scarce, and she'd snagged one. Imperfections be damned.

She opened the door before he had a chance to knock, and glanced over his shoulder at the house across the street. Just in time to see the lacy curtains of the front window swing back into place. Well, if Esther was going to spy, Delia would give her something worth watching. She patted her blue-white hair and joined Rodney on the welcome mat, getting a firm grip on his shoulders to hide his surprised recoil.

"Darling!" She moved her hands to his leathery cheeks and pressed her lips to his—all the while slanting her eyes over to Esther's, where she was sure she could see the shine of bifocals through the lace.

As soon as she loosened her grip, Rodney made a move to swipe at his mouth with the back of his hand. Delia yanked him inside and shut the door with a twirl.

"Come on into the kitchen, Rodney. There's a warm batch of crumbles waiting."

"Those lemon things?" Rodney followed her like a trusting child, taking the few steps from the front door straight to the eat-in kitchen. An efficiency home, the realtor called it. A fancy word for *tiny*.

"Yes, Rodney," Delia said. "My blue-ribbon sour lemon crumbles." She helped him settle into the metal and vinyl chair, his knees and the chair legs creaking together like deep-voiced crickets.

She reached over to the counter for the plate of crumbles, daintily lifting one foot behind her the way Mother had taught her so many years ago.

Delia set the plate in front of Rodney, settled in her chair, and watched the first soft, yellow-white pastry disappear into his mouth. She tucked her hands beneath her chin and pressed her thumbs into the soft flesh—what she called her gooseneck—to hold it up.

But her eyes drifted toward the front door, and she thought again of Esther. She huffed. "Know what Esther would say? She'd say you're only here for the crumbles." Rodney didn't argue. But, Delia reasoned, his mouth was full. It would be rude to talk with his mouth full. She sank her hips deeper into her chair and sighed. "She's jealous, is what it is. Jealous of you and jealous of my blue ribbons. Truth is, I think Esther's waiting on me to die. It's the only way she'll win the blue ribbon for her raspberry tarts. I've won it six years in a row now, with her always coming in second. Her problem, you know, is the raspberries. Lemons aren't as persnickety as raspberries." She leaned on the last word and wrinkled her nose. "And any fool can make a tart. Ha! Tart! Suits her, don't you think? Just like her name does. *Esther*." She snorted. "Rhymes with *pester*!"

When Rodney winced, she covered her mouth. "I'm sorry," she muttered through her fingers. "I'm being mean."

Rodney shook his head and pointed at his tongue, which he'd pushed out of his wide-open mouth. Delia leaned forward, tsk'ing. "Mercy, Rodney. You've got a doozy of a canker sore. Ought to lay off of these." She reached across the table for the plate.

He thrust out his hand and laid it on top of hers, stricken.

"But Rodney, it's the citrus. The acid in the lemon." She patted his wrist with her other hand. "You can get back to them in a week or so. Here, I'll make you a nice, soothing tapioca." She scooted back to rise. Rodney frowned.

For a moment all was silent but for Rodney sucking on his tongue. Then he stood, knocking the chair so it wobbled, threatened to fall, then settled. He spoke around a rattle in his throat, his eyes fixed on the plate in the center of the table. "I think we ought to stop seeing each other."

Delia's hand fluttered to her chest. Her mouth worked to speak as Rodney readied himself to go, patting all his pockets: front, rear, chest, rear. She stayed silent as she watched him shuffle toward the front door.

Oh, Lord. The front door.

She rushed after him, and when he paused with his hand on the knob, Delia felt a surge of hope. He turned a bit to face her.

"Raspberries," he said. "Are they citrus? Will they bother my...?" He wagged a finger at his mouth.

Her lips parted and the breath rushed out. "No."

When he closed the door behind him, she couldn't help herself. She scrunched her face up to the peephole again and watched him shrink away, straight across the street to that face behind the curtains.

It Was Futile for Your Employees to Wear Garlic Necklaces: A Vampire's Post-Job Interview Courtesy Letter

**by
Mark Ifanson**

Dear Mr. Stoker,

I want to express my sincere gratitude for the time and effort you and your colleagues took to make my recent on-site job interview so pleasant and fulfilling. I look forward to our continued correspondence and ultimate employment with your company as Head of Internal Auditing.

My pleasant day began with Peter at the front desk, a delightful young man. Notes of turmeric and cardamon, and just the right balance of heat; chicken tikka masala and saag paneer, I believe. It's a shame he struggled so much, those injuries were totally avoidable.

Eileen in HR provided an excellent overview of the company's vacation and health benefits. It's a surprise to many, but corned beef, cabbage, and potatoes blend to provide an enticing flavor once in the blood stream.

Juliana from IT did a fine job of explaining your company's policies on crypto security and protocols. I detected strong hints of tomato, basil, oregano, and garlic. It reminded me of when I lived in Italy in the late 18th century—wonderful people, full of life, and art, and blood—such fond memories.

Perhaps the highlight of my day was discovering your company cafeteria's expansive food court. I imagine this will provide me countless opportunities to experience both traditional and new dining adventures. Everything from kebabs to cheeseburgers, barbequed brisket to kung pao shrimp; I am excited by the seemingly unbounded mélange of new flavors that await me. On that day I enjoyed Carl, with his heady aroma of wine, shallots, butter, lemon and tarragon, markers of fine French cooking, so unusual for a cafeteria. And George was clearly a fan of sushi, which imparts a distinct but subtle piscatorial piquancy I always find intriguing. Doug, however, was the biggest surprise; it is so rare to detect the unmistakable bouquet of kangaroo tail so far from Australia.

As you probably have ascertained by now, it was futile to direct your employees to wear garlic necklaces. The protective powers of garlic are an old folk legend. You were all powerless to resist my charms as soon as you invited me to cross your office threshold.

The "bottom line," to employ a quaint phrase you used more than once that day, is that you are all in thrall to me now, and I expect a very remunerative job offer is on the way even as I pen this missive.

Most Respectfully,

Vlad Wallachia

Funkotron State of Mind
by
Russell Nichols

"ALL SHIPS ARE RECOMMENDED TO TAKE EXTREME CAUTION WHEN TRAVELLING NEAR EARTH. ... THE INHABITANTS OF THIS PLANET ARE WIDELY KNOWN TO BE THE MOST UNPREDICTABLE CREATURES IN THE SECTOR. ... ALSO WORTHY OF NOTE IS THE HUMAN'S GENERAL LACK OF A HEALTHY PARTY-DOWN ATTITUDE, AND THEIR ALMOST NON-EXISTENT SENSE OF FUNK."

— *Instruction Manual*, ToeJam & Earl

crash landed
 stranded on Earth: "The most

 insane planet in the galaxy."
me & you: riding elevators

aliens on the come up—outcasts
 in shades, gold medallions, high-

 tech hi-tops, we are
Hip Hop jammin to jazz-funk

searching for Rapmaster Rocket pieces
 scattered displaced lost in

 danger, robbing sun will
steal daylight from dreams

to return home: that fertile world
 of purple more familiar

 than any present found on
these stratified islands—don't push

me, i'm too close to the man-eating
 mailbox, phantom ice cream truck, & other

 head-hunters called Earthlings: destructive by
nature & dead set on forcing us to

 fall the funk off.

Help! A Raccoon Is Spooning My Cat
by
Cody Walzel

Hey Cody,

How cute! I've never heard of that before. Dr. Silverman wants you to bring your cat in for an exam.

-Sincerely,

Sierra

Twin Pines Animal Hospital

VISIT SUMMARY

ANIMAL: Peanut (*Feline, 7 y/o domestic shorthair, orange*)

DIAGNOSIS: Owner encountered feral raccoon "spooning" cat.

EXAM: Raccoon entered premises by sliding open screen door using it's "dexterous, humanoid hands." Cat swabbed for penetration.

NOTES: The "spooning" was described as non-sexual, but physically intimate.

PROGNOSIS: Guarded. Owner unable to stop raccoon from repeatedly entering home; becoming physical with cat. Against the recommendation of this office, Owner of Peanut (cat) brought in feral raccoon for tests because "that's how it works with bats."

Raccoon was presented under sedation brought about through use of human prescription sleeping drugs, again, against the strong insistence of this office. Peanut (cat) and raccoon tested for rabies, parvovirus, salmonella, and syphilis. Given outdoor vaccinations.

TREATMENT(S): CEASE RACCOON-CAT CONTACT IMMEDIATELY.

OFFICE OF ANIMAL CONTROL


Teaneck, NJ, 07666

Re: "hElp! rACCoON!!"

We've received your many emails/calls/voicemails, and have reviewed your case. Several items concern us:

1. That the raccoon made his own set of house keys. Your dwelling seems to now be part of its "territory".
2. The negative influence on feline behavior—your cat wearing his claws sharp, his fur mussed, and meowing in a gravelly voice, like an alley cat.
3. Undomesticated behavior from both animals, including urine-marking, pool-bathing, roughhousing, catfishing and negging.
4. Most disturbingly, the raccoon was seen 'petting' the cat. You described feeling "threatened" and "jealous". You said it was "way too human."

We here at Animal Control agree. Immediate action is required. That's why within 10 business days, a letter will notify him of the 90 days he has to begin the 180-day relocation order.

This is a temporary measure. We strongly recommend you change your locks and file a restraining order.

CITY HOUSING AUTHORITY

FROM THE OFFICE OF COMMISSIONER [REDACTED]

We've reviewed the submitted documents. Unfortunately, due to the length of his stay and the renovations you've allowed him to do to your attic, under New Jersey law, the raccoon now qualifies for **Squatter's Rights**.

Animal control confirmed their history with this particular raccoon, "Frankie Five-Fingers". He's victimized multiple residences in the past, and the police have been made aware of your situation. While we sympathize, as city employees, our hands are tied.

Hire a lawyer and begin the legal process for eviction.

In the meantime, avoid contact with Frankie, and be on the lookout for Stockholm-like symptoms, such as: **stashing shiny loot in the knotholes of trees, wearing bandit masks, and getting your balled fists stuck in jars.**

We understand it's frustrating having a raccoon running crypto schemes from your bathroom and stealing your iPhone to have flirtatious conversations with your mom. We highly recommend you stop cooking him dinner.

[TRANSCRIPT]

Host: Welcome back to Heartstream. Next up, a disturbing message from Listener Cody who's afraid his cat, Peanut, is leaving him for a bad-boy raccoon.

So, Cody, you started off trying to get this love rival evicted, but felt like you were driving Peanut away—

Co-host: —Right into the raccoon's deft little hands.

Host: Now you fear you'll lose your cat if you don't defer to his new partner. So, you've begun enabling this perverse raccoon lifestyle, renting them Lime Scooters and buying them old-school, caffeinated Four Locos.

Co-host: Which, where do you even get those anymore?

Host: It's escalated to purchasing human breast milk on Facebook marketplace.

Co-host: The stuff's intoxicating. I've done it. Great for gains. But babies need it, man.

Host: Your insecurity has led you into this abusive thruple, and now you're considering dropping them at Best Buy on the eve of the new PlayStation release so they can pickpocket bros that fall asleep camped out in line. Check yourself, listener, before you end up raving shirtless on COPS.

THE RHODE ISLAND GAZETTE

POACHING ON THE PRESERVE

The wildlife preserve has long been a gilded treasure chest protecting the precious gems that are the endangered diamondback terrapin turtles. Enclosures installed around nests keep the hope of future generations from going out with the tide.

But the glittering sun cast hard shadows across empty nests this morning at Winthrop Cove. Biologists and volunteers were shocked to find the protective cages breached, and the diamondback eggs heisted. Raccoon and cat pawprints led to and from this maritime infanticide. Most disappointing of all, oily power tools and duplicitous tire tracks betray an ignominious *human* getaway driver.

Baffled local law enforcement welcomes any information on the shameful criminals involved, stating, "*Why the hell would anyone help a raccoon steal turtle eggs?*"

WANTED BY THE FBI

"FRANKIE FIVE FINGERS" (Raccoon)

FELONY VANDALISM (Casino buffet ransacking spree)

MARITIME PIRACY (Pillaging the Long Island Garbage Barge)

GRAND LARCENY (Heist of Regent diamond from Louvre — *display case believed to still be stuck on Frankie's hand.*)

DESCRIPTION: 3 feet 2 inches, 30 pounds, gray fur, black bandit-mask markings on face.

SEX: Male

NATIONALITY: Unknown

REMARKS

It is believed that Frankie may be traveling with two unknown associates, a human male, (30s; 5'8"; dark brown hair), and a large cat (male; 7ish; 18" long; orange). Frankie has been seen spooning the orange cat, who then spooned the human, forming a stack of spoons. A "spoon drawer."

FRANKIE MAY HAVE HAD PLASTIC SURGERY OR OTHERWISE ALTERED HIS APPEARANCE

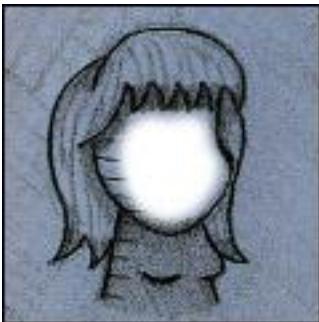
CAUTION

Frankie and associates were last seen off the coast of Cuba, in a speedboat, wearing matching leather jackets, the backs bedazzled with the word "crime."

Contributor Biographies



Bronwen Everill grew up in New Jersey and, after nearly 20 years in the UK, has returned. She missed the Pine Barrens.



Camille Bliss grew up in Oregon in a cave with a herd of Maine coons. Much of her work constellates around subjects such as the meaning of life, death, Maine coon taxidermy, and dating. She's written lots of things that will be published in lots of places, and a picture taken of her in the 11th grade holding a branch of some kind featured on the NSA most wanted list. Several of her novels, a memoir, and a few collections of poetry will be in circulation within the next 10 years, probably with awards. As of right now, she was last spotted in Wilmington, North Carolina, where all those stupid round-a-bouts are.



Stacie Herrington writes horror fiction in addition to dark, speculative, and sometimes fun poetry. Her recent work appears in the *Horror Writers Association Poetry Showcase XI*, and hopefully some other places by now. She lives in Texas, the political hellscape of which tends to inspire her most terrifying writing. Occasional updates on Instagram: @herringtonstacie.



Tom Busillo's writing has appeared on *McSweeney's*, *PANK*, and *Apiary*. He is also the author of the 2,624-page, unpublishable, book-length conceptual poem "Lists Poem: Top 10 Top 10 Top 10 Lists (11,111 Lists)." After that exhausting journey, he's focusing almost exclusively on shorter work. He lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



Joelle Killian is a queer Canadian living in San Francisco whose fiction has appeared in *Fusion Fragment*, *Mythaxis*, and *Cosmic Horror Monthly*. One of her doppelgängers is a psychologist writing about psychedelic therapy. Another was once in an undead dance troupe. "Existential BDSM" was first published in *Unorthodox Stories* in July 2024.



Torrey Francis Malek is an American poet from Greenville, Delaware. In 2023, he was a featured poet on the Shortlist for the Letter Review Prize for Poetry. His work has appeared in the *Broadkill Review*, *Big Wing Review*, and *Plants & Poetry Journal*. His debut chapbook, *Glory Hill*, will be published in 2025.



T. J. Young is a writer living in Seattle, Washington. After years as an environmental attorney, he now pursues the far more lucrative profession of creative writing. He occasionally travels to the Andromeda galaxy in search of material, but otherwise spends most of his time reading. He is married with three superhero children.



Christopher Palmer is a poet and visual artist based in Canberra, Australia. He's been published worldwide, and his first collection of poems, *Afterlives*, was published by Ginninderra Press in 2016.



Mandy Houk writes character-driven fiction, sometimes rooted in historical settings, and occasionally funny. She's been published in nonfiction, poetry, and short fiction. Her book-length fiction is represented by Elisa Saphier of MacGregor and Luedeke Literary. You can virtually visit her at mandyhok.com and you can correctly pronounce her surname by saying "Howcome" without the "um."



Mark Ifanson is one of those writers who gets great pleasure from writing about himself in the third person. He is currently trying to understand the origin of coconut milk, as coconuts do not have nipples. No, those three spots on the bottom are germination pores (use your imagination). Despite this apparent state of confusion, he has managed to find a home for his work at *BULL*, *Maudlin House*, *Penumbra*, *Points in Case*, *Defenestration* (which you just read!), *Little Old Lady Comedy*, *Greener Pastures*, *The Haven*, *MuddyUm*, and *Witcraft*.



Russell Nichols is a speculative fiction writer and endangered journalist. Raised in Richmond, California, he got rid of all his stuff in 2011 to live out of a backpack with his wife, vagabonding around the world ever since. Look for him at russellnichols.com.



Cody Walzel was raised in the woods of East Texas, educated in Brooklyn, and now lives in Los Angeles, where he works as a designer for animation. He's done comedy writing for *Ben 10* and *The Good Advice Cupcake* and has previously been published in *Freedom Fiction Journal*. He's done art for many other animated shows including *Big Hero 6* and *Solar Opposites*. He's currently a designer on *Futurama*.