

◇ Defenestration ◇

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The Man Who Brought a Lighthouse to Pilates

by
Trae Stewart

I first met red light therapy in a gym bathroom, where all great romances begin. Above the urinals was a poster of a man whose pores looked like polished apples. "ARE YOU TIRED OF BEING A SAD POTATO?" the poster asked. "BATHE IN PHOTOBIO-MODULATION." The model's face glowed the specific shade of emergency escape signage. His smile said, "I don't get sick anymore," and also, "I definitely sell crypto."

Below the poster was a QR code and a disclaimer half the size of a fruit fly's conscience: *Not intended to diagnose, prevent, treat, cure, or illuminate anything other than the knowledge that you could be doing more for your mitochondria.*

It was persuasive. I ordered a red light panel that night, the size of a refrigerator door and marketed as "The Apollo Maxx 660/850: A Personal Sunshine Wall for People Who Fear the Sun." It arrived in a box labeled "FURNITURE—BUT FOR YOUR CELLS."

The instructions were simple: position the panel eighteen inches from your body, disrobe as legally appropriate, and bask, eyes gently closed, for 10–15 minutes per region. The manual diagram showed a hairless man beaming at a rectangle. There were arrows toward his cheekbones, his clavicles, and this is important, his groin, which the manual labeled, cheerfully, "the athletic complex."

"Please tell me this is a lamp for tomatoes," my wife said.

"It does support vegetation," I said. "Specifically, me."

We negotiated a schedule. I was allowed to glow weekday mornings, provided I didn't turn our bedroom into a haunted submarine. I set the panel on a stand and installed the companion app, which tracked my "joules," "dosage," and "smugness." When I powered it up, the room flooded with emergency Mars. The cat, Mr. Pickles, bolted. My succulents leaned toward me like worshipers.

The app pinged: **Congratulations! You just energized your cytochrome c oxidase. Share to LightBook?**

I did. Within minutes, an acquaintance from high school messaged: "Bro, did you just activate your nitric oxide?" He added a wink and a link to his affiliate code.

Being bathed in laser-adjacent daybreak changes you. The first week, I became annoying in new and specific ways. "Honey," I said at breakfast, "I think my mitochondria are doing parkour."

"Is that why you crisped the entire left flank of your body?" she asked, handing me aloe. "You look like a stop sign learned shame."

I didn't *burn*. I was *energized*. Did I begin wearing a robe? Yes. Did I announce, unprompted, that I could feel my collagen knitting itself like an industrious grandmother?

Also yes. Did I attend Pilates with my panel strapped into the passenger seat like a beloved child?

"Is that a grow light?" asked Janet from class, whose hamstrings are made of piano wire and opinions.

"It's a wellness device," I said. "Think of it as a Starbucks for cells."

She peered into the shining grid. "Is there a setting for koi? Because Kevin, mine, not the fish, thinks our pond is seasonal depression."

By week two, people were asking me to bring the light to things. "We're doing a vision board party," said our neighbor Trish, who sells essential oils with the zeal of a small nation. "Could you red-light our intentions?"

"Absolutely," I said, unfolding the Apollo Maxx at her kitchen island like a paramedic in a house made entirely of pumpkins. The mood board photos took on the glow of a Soviet parade. A woman manifesting "ABUNDANCE" burst into tears. "My father was a lighthouse keeper," she sobbed. "This feels ancestral."

From there it escalated. Doug, my barber-slash-chiropractor, asked if I'd do his elbows. The local pick-up pickleball group invited me to "pre-warm" the courts. Janet texted, "Bring your light to my book club, the book is bleak." The bartender at Bark & Bourbon wondered if it could make his terrarium moss sexier. By the end of the month, I was running an informal photo-bio-mod carpool.

The Homeowners Association noticed.

I returned from one particularly invigorating glow to find a laminated letter on my door. "Dear Resident," it began in a font that knows your Social Security number, "several neighbors have expressed concern regarding your 'red window.' The community signage policy prohibits illumination that suggests a house of ill repute, a submarine in distress, or the opening of a portal."

I wrote back: "Dear Derek (HOA President), I am not operating a brothel or a portal. I am operating my mitochondria." I printed the letter on cream bond paper and spritzed it with serenity. Two days later, I was required to attend an emergency meeting.

The HOA gathered in the clubhouse under a chandelier the size of a lunar module. Derek cleared his throat into an expensive shirt. "We've consulted the bylaws," he said, "and while there is no specific clause about light therapy, there is a clause about vibes." He read aloud. "'All vibes must be neutral to pleasant.' Your glow violates the vibe standard."

"It's medical," I said, placing the Apollo Maxx on the table like an exhibit. "Do any of you get brain fog? Skin like a day-old pancake? Knees that sound like a Jenga tower falling?"

Half the room raised a hand.

"Behold," I said, and turned the panel on. The chandelier blushed. Derek's Rolex reflected apocalypse. The HOA collectively leaned toward the warmth like a group of iguanas deciding to buy a timeshare.

"You have three minutes," Derek said, but he said it while walking closer, palms open, the way you approach a mysterious campfire that also sells MLMs. When I shut it off, they blinked as if waking from a pleasant cult. Derek adjusted his tie. "The Board," he said slowly, "will be revisiting vibe policy."

I wish that had been the end. But I felt emboldened, a dangerous setting for a man who owns a robe. My panel and I got louder. I pulled the curtains all the way back like a Renaissance merchant revealing bolts of velvet. I glowed at sunrise. I glowed at lunch. During a cold snap, I glowed my sourdough starter and it produced a loaf with the confidence of a TED Talk. Mr. Pickles began sleeping on the warm mat in front of the panel like a panther who reads Wellness Quarterly.

I became a Light Ambassador, which meant I paid \$39 a month to be allowed to say "Light Ambassador" and occasionally post things like "Remember: 660nm for surface-level tissue, 850nm for deep, like if your soul has hamstrings." I spoke at a boutique gym's "Winter Optimization Night," taking the stage after a man who sells ice baths named Blade. I quoted a study I think was about mice. I used the phrase "turn your biology into a bistro." People took notes in expensive notebooks with foxes on them.

Then came the misunderstanding with the city.

Apparently, when one neighbor tells another neighbor you have "red light therapy in your front room," and that neighbor is a precinct captain, and that precinct captain hears "red light district therapy," a certain type of municipal interest arrives at your home with a clipboard. Officer Hammersmith (real name) peered at the glowing wall. "We got complaints," he said, "about licensed and unlicensed activities."

"I'm helping my mitochondria pick up a side hustle," I said.

He squinted. "Are you doing science?"

"A kind," I said. "The app has graphs." I showed him my weekly joule count. It resembled an EKG of an overexcited ferret. He nodded, impressed in spite of himself. "My knees," he admitted, "sound like Halloween."

"If you stand right here," I said, "you'll feel like a basil plant who knows a secret."

He stood. He felt. He left with a pamphlet.

Every movement breeds its underground. A month later, city council proposed Ordinance 12.4.1: "No residence shall operate as a lighthouse." It listed wattage limits and something called "ambient aura creep." The room split into factions: Team Glow (spry retirees, yoga moms, Doug) vs. Team Night (birders, stargazers, a man named Bert who brought a stack of papers printed from a website called NightSkyFreedom.biz).

I took the podium, robe swapped for a conservative cardigan.

"Councilmembers," I began, "I have been accused of creating a maritime hazard in a landlocked suburb. I am not a ship beacon. I am a skin beacon. If the worry is that our

town will look like a premium aquarium, I propose a compromise: blackout curtains after 9 p.m., with a 'grandmother exemption' for anyone whose joints predict the weather."

"Objection," said Bert. "Grandmothers can be weaponized."

A woman clutching a golden doodle stood. "The red makes my dog nostalgic," she cried. "He won't go to sleep without the glow. He remembers being born."

Derek from the HOA rose, a new man. "The vibe," he said solemnly, "is improved."

Council tabled the ordinance. The red light community rejoiced by selling each other more lights. Blaze (formerly Blade) launched **The Glow Underground**, a speakeasy where people sat on yoga balls in a basement and paid \$40 to bask. "Remember," he murmured as he adjusted a panel. "This is not medical advice. This is ancestral electricity."

I went, of course. "How often do you come?" I asked the woman next to me.

"Twice a week," she said. "More if Mercury is cardio retrograde."

"It's just retrograde," I said.

She smiled sadly. "For some of us, it's cardio."

Sometime in spring, my wife staged what she called a "brownout." She unplugged the Apollo Maxx. The room returned to its original color: tan. "I'm calling time," she said. "Your robe has a pocket for a thermometer. The cat no longer blinks. Last week you told a cashier at Whole Foods she had 'youthful ATP.'"

"I was being supportive," I said.

"You told my mother her forehead was a 'before.'"

"I'm... recalibrating social dosage."

She waved at the unplugged tower. "You're glowing at dinner. You're glowing at funerals. You're glowing at the DMV."

"That was community service," I said. "The line moved faster. Two people decided to forgive their fathers."

She sighed. "You're chasing something that claims to be everything. It's a lamp, not a personality. Put it away for a week."

Reader, I did not take this well. I sulked in rooms. I counted my steps like a coal miner of feelings. In the absence of artificial dawn, my face became the face of a man reconsidering everything, like, for example, tomatoes.

But here is a secret: without the glow, I noticed it was spring. Actual spring. A smug white fist of blossom outside the window. I walked outside into the enormous, free blue and, with all due respect to cytochrome c oxidase, felt something you cannot track on an app. A

neighbor waved. A child fell off a scooter. The sun, that colossal unbranded lamp, did its thing.

That afternoon, a package arrived, addressed to me in a font that had abs. It was from the red light company. Inside: "The Apollo Bidet 660," a device for "photobiomodulating the athletic complex." There was a note: *Because you're a valued Light Ambassador, we're gifting you early access to our Infrared Wellness Throne. Transform bathroom time into better-you time.*

My wife looked at the box and then at me. "No," she said. "Absolutely not. We are not installing a Star Trek toilet."

I lifted the bidet from its foam cradle. It hummed with quiet purpose, like a small jet preparing to do an ethical thing. "Knees," I said weakly, as though I could bribe her with anatomy.

"No," she repeated. "Go sit in the yard like a pioneer and get the kind of light that comes with birds."

I took the bidet to the garage and sat on it in silence, uninstalled, like a man sampling a future he could not afford. Mr. Pickles jumped into my lap and purred, as if to say, *We do not need to glow to be loved. Also, feed me.*

I wish I could tell you I did a full detox and rejoined society as a person who experiences sunlight and keeps his robe for Halloween. I went three whole days without the panel. My skin didn't fall off. My mitochondria did not unionize.

And yet.

On the fourth day, around dawn, I found myself standing in front of the unplugged Apollo Maxx like a pilgrim before a secular relic. The robe was already on me. "Just a quick glow," I whispered, as if the lamp were a slot machine or an ex. I plugged it in.

The room bloomed red. My face warmed. Something deep in my body sighed like a radiator remembering warmth. I imagined, unscientifically and with great sincerity, the little workers inside me pulling on their tiny hard hats, clocking in. Hello, friends. Welcome back to the bistro.

I kept it to ten minutes. I closed the curtains. I texted Blaze that I was stepping back from the Underground, "into a relationship with moderation." He sent a heart, the red kind, obviously. I kissed my wife on her non-glowing forehead and said, "Let's go walk where there are birds."

On our way out, Derek waved from his driveway. His face was the tranquil crimson of a man who has embraced his mitochondria and his boundaries. "Vibe policy updated," he called. "We now recognize certain therapeutic glows between 7 and 9 a.m., with holiday exceptions."

"Which holidays?" I asked.

"All of them," he said. "But especially eclipse day."

We walked. The sun rose, unsubtle and free, and I did not feel like a sad potato at all. I felt like a person with a lamp, which is almost the same thing, except one of them occasionally writes an affiliate link under a humor essay and the other one is my wife, invading my Amazon cart with bird feeders.

Later, at Pilates, Janet nodded toward the dark rectangle visible in my car. "Back at it?"

"Strategically," I said.

She considered. "Can you do koi at 3? Kevin's been lethargic since the city council livestream."

"Sure," I said. "But I'm instituting a two-fish minimum."

That night I sat on the porch, listening to actual crickets instead of a podcast about mitochondrial confetti. The bidet box gleamed faintly in the garage like a promise or a threat. My phone buzzed with a notification from the app: **We miss your glow! Reengage your joules.**

I set the phone down.

A moth flapped into the porch light, chaotic and certain. Somewhere down the block, someone opened a sliding door and an unmistakable red washed briefly over the fence, soft as a blush. I gave a small, hypocritical salute and went inside, where my wife was reading a book that made no promises to her cells at all and still made her happy.

"Goodnight, Lighthouse," she said without looking up.

"It's a modest lamp," I said.

"Goodnight, modest lamp," she said, and turned off the real one. The room went pleasantly, charmingly dark.

I Kicked Your Dog Into Space
by
Abby Hays

For Megan

I kicked your dog into space.
Truly, I am sorry.
Mars requested the best of his race,
and he was very charming.

As man's best friend,
he licked my hand,
and offered me his hiney.
A contract, truly binding.

I kicked your dog into space—
Your anger is surely warranted.
I will bear it with quiet grace,
and pay for your astronaut license.

It Could be a Frog

By
Tedd Hawks

The whole thing stemmed from me trying to have sex with Carson Constance Abernathy III. For the gay male readers, I'll save you the trouble of reading further: he wasn't attractive.

But he both breathed and was homosexual in Snykes, Kansas. If you've never been to Snykes, Kansas, then you don't know the lottery-win-feeling of finding another breathing homosexual.

I was working at the Snykes National Art, Technology, and Communications Heritage or the SNATCH (said without even a giggle by many Snykesians) for the summer. My uncle had gotten me the gig. I supposed he pulled some strings, but I don't think much forced was needed. I'd majored in art history because I thought, at this time in our history, it would mostly be watching 80's MTV videos and French New Wave cinema (you know lots of cigarettes and hats and things), but—spoiler alert—you still learn about a lot of old Dutchman.

My interest had waned in the subject enough that I hadn't even registered for the coming semester's classes. I would open the screen occasionally and stare at it—see if it would allow me to register for both racquetball and ballroom dance, but that was the extent for my future planning. My family sensed all this and was worried about my future prospects as an art history major—even though Vera Wang has one—so, my mother called my uncle pleading for any connections. He had very few, so that's what landed me, without even a giggle, at the SNATCH.

My job was to sit at a desk in front of their modern art wing. Wing is generous, as it was a kind of long hallway with a fountain in the center. The fountain itself was carved to be, what I thought, a melted woman giving birth to a dog. It was poignant centerpiece for an extensive collection of questionable art from obscure artists in western states. By the end of the summer I could tell you almost anything you wanted to know about the South Dakota Renaissance.

But I should just come clean and tell you up front that I don't like modern art. There's always a shoe in the middle of a fish aquarium accompanied by a plaque with a block of text talking about how it represents the Iranian revolution, but—friend—if it takes you a block paragraph to explain yourself, maybe don't put the shoe in the water.

You can imagine, then, if shoe-in-water is what you get in New York, that the SNATCH wasn't home to the highest echelon of modern art. Our highlighted collection that summer was a plethora of melted plastic blobs made by a fifteen-year-old from Sioux Falls (yes, she was part of the Renaissance) called *Ineluctable Modality of the Invisible*. Many said it was cutting edge, but I thought it was perhaps proof of some new, emerging neurodivergence.

I learned very quickly not to give an opinion of anything in the wing-slash-hallway, as my first week I received a citation for calling the *Ineluctable* collection "colored feces from a robot dog". Mr. Briskoff said it was "untoward", so I simply began to mirror back what anyone else thought about the collection, usually starting with the benign question: "So what did y'all think?" (Note the "y'all" both folksy and approachable.)

"Oh, it was startling!" one patron said.

"Isn't it just?" I replied.

Or: "Creativity is so wonderful isn't it?"

To which I'd say, "Everyone does have a unique voice, don't they?"

Most of these mind-numbing back-and-forths were with people in their sixties and seventies, the only people in Sykes who could visit the museum in its opening hours of 10-4, but, then, one day Carson Constance Abernathy III approached my desk.

As I've already stated, he wasn't attractive. He was a kind of Picasso version of Ryan Gossling. If you squinted (and had four or five drinks), you could see it, but mostly it was a giant nose with dull, black eyes and sausage fingers. He did have an air of French New Wave about him, though (cigarettes and hats and things), most prominently the purple fedora that sat on his large head.

"Hullo," he said. The word was zhuzhed up with a kind of faux-European accent, as if he'd been to Paris, or, more likely, the French region at EPCOT, but, by the way he slathered his speech with it, like butter on a baguette, I could tell he was interested in me.

"Hi," I said.

To be transparent once again, I am also not very attractive. That's not self-deprecation, just objectivity. I don't do many of the gay things—working out, buying expensive clothes, plumping myself with filler—so I remain humbly "mid". I had also put on a bit of weight while I'd been in Sykes, (What does one do in Sykes??) so my shirt and pants were a bit tight.

"It's a lovely collection," he said turning slightly so that I could see that he was wearing a long, dangly earring. "I really think you'll be seeing Tamara Wizlund in the MoMA soon."

"She is a leading voice in the South Dakota Renaissance."

"How does one define that movement?"

"How does one not?"

At this, Carson laughed, a kind of bird warble that echoed down the hall—sorry—wing. I was sure that, thank God, I was on my way to my first sexual encounter in eight months.

It had been a dry spell since I broke up with my previous boyfriend, Ronnie. He ended things when his football season closed out and he no longer wanted me to come to his room at 3 am for quick (albeit intimate and sensual) blowjobs.

Some would say he wasn't a real boyfriend, but, if Tamara Wizlund can be a savant with piles of plastic dog poo, then I could be the boyfriend of a collegiate football player.

Carson turned back to me and smiled. His teeth were more crooked than I would have liked, but I also didn't know if a future encounter would require a lot of face-to-face time.

"Do you know Dianna Estefree?" he asked.

I was thinking about sexual release, so I, obviously, lied: "I love her. I was just telling another patron how transcendent her work is."

"The first time I saw it, I gasped."

"It's stunning. It truly can leave you breathless."

Carson's dull eyes sparkled. I had unlocked some fantasy in his mind—the erudite, twink(ish) muse who came from afar and could talk about his favorite artist. I could play the part if it would lead to an escape from the prison of my current life in Sykes (sad sandwiches, lonely TV nights and things).

"Would you like to come over and see some of my collection?"

"Oh," I said, suddenly realizing Dianna Estefree was probably someone from the Wyoming Enlightenment if Carson had access to her work. But, again, my dick was already half-hard, so I said, "That would be incredible. I've never seen one up close."

"It's a different experience. I used to see her work on the late-night art show on WBDM, and it wasn't the same as when I held the thing in my hands. I never thought a frog, you know, could do that."

"One never thinks it could be a frog." I hated myself for saying that, but, when you're twenty-one and horny, there are a lot of things you'd say for a tepid blowjob.

Carson left his number with me and said that he was free that evening.

For the record, time always moved like molasses at the SNATCH, but that afternoon was worse. Every second was a lifetime. Every conversation with a new, doddering patron was agony.

"I heard," one said, "that Wizlund's work is actually a unique take on the astrological calendar."

"I think that's quite obvious."

I sprinted out the door at 4:06 and drove quickly back to my little rented apartment. It was clear that if Carson and I moved beyond tepid blowjobs that I would be the one in the top position (he was wearing that fedora), so preparation was much less intensive than it would have been in other situations.

But I still scrubbed, shaved, and applied what few cremes, powders, and fragrances I could before putting on a tighter-than-usual button up and a pair of jeans.

When I was ready, I shot Carson a text:

Ready. Let me know when u r free

Immediately he responded with: *Amaze. Come over at 6. I'll have whine.*

The use of "whine" made me slightly uncomfortable, but, we'd crossed the event horizon, so there was no longer any use to fight it. At 5:47, I was out the door and speeding toward Carson's house on the west end of town.

There was a pull back in the sexual gravity of the black hole when I arrived at his place. It looked like the location of true crime case—faded black shutters, peeling white paint, and a yard with tangled knots of weeds and grass. Had Carson not appeared in the threshold wearing a pashmina and smoking a cigarette while waving to his neighbor, I may have driven off.

He motioned for me to come in and greeted me with a hug. He smelled like cologne, cigarettes, and lavender conditioner. When I pressed against the soft flesh of his hairy chest, I wondered, once more, whether the desperation of living in Sykes had perhaps pushed me too far. But then he tousled my hair with his sausage fingers and smiled down at me—the crooked (probably gingivitisy) grin—then, with a boyish warble (the faux-European was now gone), he told me to stay in the entry hall.

"One minute! I need to position her!"

I waited and looked around, estimating the likelihood I'd make it out alive, but the inside was less haunting than the exterior. The walls had pictures of family members, and a sad umbrella stand with a busted parasol broke any preconceived notion that this man could murder anyone or anything, even a mangy housecat.

"I'm ready!" he called. "Close your eyes and walk into the family room!"

I did as was asked and felt my way into the adjoining space. I soon felt his thick fingers on my arms. He gently steered me a few feet and then stopped me.

"Okay! On the count of three," he said, his voice shaking with delight, "open!"

As he slowly counted down in his boyish bleat, I planned my reaction. There was no way in hell the "art" was going to be something more than a painting or sculpture made in some woman's garage, so I had to be ready. I had to be ready, because on the other side of this charade was the chance that I could release my seed with a real live person in the first time in eight months.

"Open!"

I flashed open my eyes and immediately fastened a joyful smile on my lips (probably too quickly).

What I was looking at, the oil painting that stood in a place of prominence over Carson's fireplace, the masterwork by esteemed (?) artist Dianna Estefree, was a large image, in a gilded frame, of a frog with a woman's bob haircut. Technically, it was fine—the frog looked like a frog, and the bob was rendered so that, some part of me, wondered where the amphibian got its hair done, but, at the end of the day, it was an animal wearing a wig.

More urgently, I noted that I had definitely seen this same image on the internet. Many places on the internet. Dianna Estefree was some kind of meme-art fraud.

But when I looked at Carson's misty eyes and quivering lip, I couldn't actually say anything. This was the man's *Mona Lisa*.

"Wow," I said finally. Years of being in the closet made me a brilliant liar: "It's even more amazing in real life. You were right."

Carson wiped a tear (a real, true to life, goddam tear) from his eye and clasped his hands. "Every time I see it, it's like seeing it for the first time." He shuffled over to another shelf and took down a smaller frame and held it out. "*Upon Hearing about the Fall of the Berlin Wall* is the masterwork, but I have others." He held out a picture of a goose with a mohawk. "I wish I could buy them all, but I had to take out a loan for the big one."

"That," I said pointing to the frog, "is called *Upon Hearing about the Fall of the Berlin Wall*?"

He nodded. "It was her breakthrough. *Genocide*," he said indicating the mohawked goose, "was from a smaller collection."

The small picture was placed in my hand. Carson didn't let go, though, he gripped my hands and pulled me closer.

"It's incredible being in this room with someone who really appreciate it. Who gets it, you know."

He flattened his face against mine (it couldn't properly be called a kiss) and kept it there for some time. As he moaned a bit, I looked around the room for any other wigged animals, but the rest of the décor was purchased from a retail store.

When he released me, he put one of his thick fingers to my lips. "You're a good kisser," he said.

"Yes," was the only thing I could think to reply.

He suddenly threw off his pashmina and twirled. "It's freeing isn't it?" he asked. "The art of it all."

"It's something," I said.

He kind of pinwheeled back toward me and put my face in his hands. "Would you do something for me? You have me so inspired."

Everything was truly upside down. I was in a murder house with an early 30s man in a pashmina who thought a frog wearing a wig represented the fall of communism. We had crossed into the black hole and this, evidently, was on the other side.

"Would you do something for me?" There was never more of a loaded question: This could have been anything from a foot massage to dressing like a member of the Partridge Family and getting on a bus.

"Sure," I said. Because I was desperate—truly—for attention, for love, for a bad blowjob, for anything that kept me from sitting on the couch that night until I went to bed at midnight.

He gripped my hand and took me into the kitchen where he had an easel set up and an assortment of watercolor paints.

He sat behind the easel and pointed to a stool. It was a standard, wooden kitchen stool, except, of course, sitting on top of it was a black bob wig.

"Put it on and let me paint you."

I did, because, at that point, it seemed as if it would be even more asinine to say no, so I sat on the stool, be-bobbed, and watched as he dramatically flourished his paintbrush. After several minutes of silence, he did flick on the radio—bland, early-2000s pop music filled the silence. As Sheryl Crow told me about soaking up the sun, Carson began to moan.

It started out very faintly, but with each brush stroke, it grew slightly louder.

At first it made me uncomfortable, and I tried to break the veil of awkwardness with polite banter.

"I do love this song," I said.

But Carson held up a finger and shook his head. "We are in the moment," was his only response.

Fifteen, twenty, then thirty minutes passed. The moaning became a steady sonic undercurrent to the radio, bubblegum pop, and advertisements for "Sneed's: Sykes Most Discounted Discount Furniture."

I had fully zoned out, starting to wonder if I had enough Bran Puffs for breakfast in the morning, when the low moaning from Carson evolved into...what could only be described as birthing sounds.

"Oh! Uh! Oohhwewehhhhhh!"

Rather than this slowing his dramatic paint flourishing, it only increased the speed at which he raced his hand over the canvas.

I began to sweat, unsure really what was happening. I was only twenty-one, so a thirty-year-old man making guttural breathing sounds could have been a heart attack? I wasn't sure what middle-aged affliction could be manifesting. Carson didn't look bad, exactly, but he didn't look great. He was biting his lip, and his face was flushed red.

"Carson..." I said finally, not wanting to ride in an ambulance that evening. "Are you—"

"IT IS THE MOMENT!" Carson growled.

He then grabbed a second brush and began almost spinning as he splashed the canvas with reds, greens, and blues. My hands tensed around the stool's seat as I watched his face turn from rose to magenta to plum.

Then, with a sudden motion, he thrust both brushes into a jar of water and then used his free hands to pull down his underwear. My mouth dropped open as I saw a, near firehose, release of semen launch from his exposed penis and splash the canvas.

I had oft wondered if there was truth to the porn-way of ejaculating, the steady river of cum that shot from some men's testes. My college boyfriend would mostly goop, and I was known to dribble, but Carson—expelled. Several long shots of white sticky liquid hit the canvas, before his dick began to soften and it dripped onto the floor.

Carson fell back, completely spent.

"My god," he said. He wiped his brow and then smiled at me. "Come here," he said. "See what you've inspired."

I got off the stool and went over to him. As weird as this evening had gotten, I was curious what he had been slapping together for the last half hour, and it came to almost no surprise that when the painting revealed itself, it could only be described as a middle-school Pollack. In the center, there was a peach dab of color with a black splash above it—what I assumed was Carson's abstract estimation of what I looked like in a black bob.

But to my surprise I was struck—nearly dumbfounded by the site of it: the color, the spray, the semen. Carson, this pashmina'd oddity with a fake European accent and obsession with pop art, had suddenly revealed himself in a forceful, chaotic mess on a canvas. Somehow this had been inside of him—a hallucinogenic blend of colors and body fluids that had been rawly inspired by me sitting on a stool in a murder-kitchen wearing a bob wig.

What insight it offered into such a human singularity as Carson Constance Abernathy III!

To my surprise, the first words out of my mouth were: "It's beautiful." Followed quickly by: "You know, it could be a frog."

Carson nodded, seriously. "It's my best yet." He closed his eyes and leaned back, sighing. "I think," he said after some thought, "I'll call it *The Killing Fields*."

After that, he served me a plate of leftover tuna salad, and we watched an episode of *House Hunters*. We chatted, and I discovered that he would soon be away on business in Topeka, and my internship was only a few more weeks, so it looked as if our paths would never cross again.

We shared a cigarette on his porch—less French New Wave than neo-noir—and then he put his face against mine one more time and we said good-bye.

There had been no tepid blow job, but—whatever the evening had been—it filled the longing which had been pressing on my heart and making my balls blue. Before I went to bed, I opened up my laptop and finally registered for the fall semester (I chose ballroom dance over racquetball, I am gay after all.)

The next morning I got to the gallery earlier than usual. I let in two elderly patrons who eventually made it to my wing and read about wunderkind Tamara Wizlund.

As they were leaving, the older man stopped while his wife moved away.

"Interesting stuff," he said noncommittally. "That Wizlund is so young."

"Yes," I said. "She's a leading voice in the South Dakota Renaissance."

The old man licked his lips and looked back down the gallery. His eyes fell on one of Wizlund's blob piles. "And," he said, amusement creeping into his voice. "How does one define that movement?"

I thought of Carson's mixed media mess from the night before. "I think," I said, gesturing broadly to the whole of the SNATCH, "it's predominant definition is possibility."

Mt. Rushmore
by
Ed Ruzicka

In my world, the busts of poets
are 5,000 foot tall and chiseled into
the side of a mountain in the Black Hills.
Poets are more amenable to proud Lakota
than are the faces of dead presidents
who never gave a damn about sacred lands.

Whitman and Eliot went up first.
Then Stevens, the insurance agent
who waxed philosophical in his off time
and sang like he had a glass throat.

Now they are thinking that
maybe I belong up there. That is
the older, more accomplished me
with the beard that hides my weak chin.

The Gas Tank Massacre by **Jill Williams**

I settled into the sofa, preparing to gorge myself on the brainless mind-candy of a trashy magazine—specifically, a deep dive into whether Carrot Top or Kathy Griffin was the "truer" redhead. It was the kind of low-stakes feud I lived for. When the phone rang, I didn't even look at the caller ID. I just crabbed, "Whoever this is, make it quick. I'm in the middle of a ginger-war."

The silence on the other end lasted a beat too long. Then, a voice as cold as a morgue slab said, "This is the Kansas City Police Department. Are you Leslie Allen's sister?"

The blood didn't just drain from my face; it felt like it evaporated. "Yes. I'm Kim. What happened?"

The officer's voice sounded submerged, gurgling through a bad connection. "Your mother is on the phone with dispatch right now. You need to get to her house immediately."

"Is Leslie okay?" My mind did that frantic thing where it tries to catalog a lifetime in three seconds. I saw Leslie holding my hair back while I puked on Prom night. I saw us standing over Dad's grave while the fall leaves crunched like brittle bones under our feet. But mostly, I saw her standing at the altar 20 years ago, ignoring my pleas, and tying her life to Geoffrey.

Geoffrey. The man who wore a beekeeper suit to our 4th of July barbecue as a protective shield against Influenza, Bird Flu, Monkey Pox, Ebola, and Covid.

"Ma'am," the officer interrupted my spiral. "Get over there now. And for God's sake, take your husband with you."

I didn't ask why. In our family, when the police tell you to bring backup to your mother's house, you don't ask questions. You just grab your keys and hope the blood on the floor isn't someone you share DNA with.

I screamed, loud and shrill enough to curdle the ears of anyone within a twenty mile radius. My husband Joe, aka, *The Incredible Hulk* charged into the room like a Pamplona Spanish bull, nostrils flaring, voice raspy. "What's going on?"

I collapsed into his massive arms and sobbed, "It's Leslie. We need to go to Mom's now. The police said it's an emergency. I think she's dead."

He balled his hands into fists, the tattoos on his forearms and biceps pulsing. "Geoffrey," he said, teeth gritted. "I told her but she wouldn't listen, never trust a guy who designates every other Friday as 'Pamper Day.' Fucking A, a grown ass man plopping his sorry butt into a chair getting mani/ pedis while his wife works her tail off to pay for his damned harpsichord lessons."

"Dulcimer, not harpsichord," I whispered cautiously. It was a sore point between Joe and me. Geoffrey begged me for 1500 dollars to buy a dulcimer, with which he'd make bank playing at Renaissance Fairs all across the Midwest. It sits dusty in his closet as does his promise of paying me back "pronto."

"Whatever, Kim. Just get in the truck."

We rolled down the two-lane highway, the wheat fields of our Kansas town shimmering in the glow of a beautiful sunset. The hot, humid air trapped the earthy, pungent aromas of soybeans and hay. It was too pretty for a murder. The continuous sound of my choked-back tears led Joe to think I was dry-heaving.

He rolled down my window and snapped, "Come on. If you're going to hurl, do it out the window. Just because your car is a shithole doesn't mean mine has to be."

The floodgate broke. Hot, sticky tears fell from my eyes. "For your information," I warbled, "I'm absolutely gutted, and all you're worried about is the inside of your precious F-150."

I buried my face in my hands, trying to drown out Sturgill Simpson singing "A Little Light" on Joe's playlist.

He slammed on the brakes. The truck skidded, tires screeching until we came to an abrupt stop on the shoulder. He wrapped his massive arms around me. "Babe, I'm sorry. So sorry. You can puke in my truck anytime you want. And I want you to know... I'll raise Calvin and Hobbs like they're my own boys. We'll take care of them. Lord knows with those names, they'll need all the help they can get."

Geoffrey had pressed a pink Daisy razor to his own jugular, threatening a slashing if Leslie didn't agree to naming their now fifteen-year-old twin sons after the iconic comic strip. But now he was too busy being a ghost to notice them. When Geoffrey wasn't perched in front of the TV watching reruns of Sid Roth's *It's Supernatural*, he was in the basement mass-producing prune-flavored Kombucha in a filthy bathtub.

He had peddled his "health tonic" at every farmers market in the state until the health department shut him down. Twelve people were stricken with E. coli poisoning—a "Double Diarrhea" situation caused by the combination of aseptic failure and prune ingestion.

Leslie had taught the boys to drive a stick-shift. Joe took them skeet shooting. I showed them the proper way to write a check. Geoffrey provided the E. coli.

I squeezed Joe's calloused hand and didn't let go until we reached Mom's.

She was sitting on the living room floor, cross-legged, her phone balanced between her right shoulder and ear. Her skin was ashen gray, and her eyes—usually flinty and judgey-looking—were dimmed and hollowed out.

She whispered in a monotone, "Geoffrey called me. He said he killed Leslie and the boys."

The world tilted. I dropped to my knees, an otherworldly howl ripping from my throat. "No! No! No!"

Joe turned into a wooden soldier, his face a mask of stone, repeating a grim mantra: "I knew it would happen. I knew it."

But then, I heard my mom's voice. It was that flat, Midwestern intonation where the "R's" are hard enough to break teeth. She was talking to the dispatcher.

"No, officer," she said, her voice steady and matter-of-fact. "I never knew him to have weapons of any kind. And frankly... he's too lazy to kill anybody."

Too lazy to kill anybody.

The phrase hit me like a physical blow. I stopped screaming and repeated it in my mind over and over until a rip-roar of a laugh tore loose from my lips, hatching a flurry of unstoppable chuckles and snorts. Within seconds, I was rolling on the carpet, clutching my stomach, screaming in a different kind of pain.

"Too lazy!" I gasped between heaving breaths. "Oh my God! Too lazy!"

Joe looked down at me like I'd finally joined Geoffrey in the psyche ward. But I couldn't stop. In the middle of the darkest night of our lives, my mother had just delivered the most accurate performance review of Geoffrey's entire existence. He couldn't finish a dulcimer apprenticeship, he couldn't keep E. coli out of his bathtub juice, and apparently, he couldn't even manage a homicide.

I was still on the floor somewhere between a sob and a snort when the doorbell rang. Joe bolted toward it, arms swaying like he was about to dismantle whoever was on the other end.

"Afternoon folks, I'm Sergeant Brown." He removed his hat, cradling it like a newly born baby. " We just got an update on your family member, he's at um, at Kwik Trip just off I-35."

Mom stared blankly, still cross legged on the floor looking like a stoic Kansas yogi.

Joe's eyes flashed with rage. "Was he arrested and charged with..."

Sergeant Brown, interrupted, shaking his head. "No Sir he was not. He didn't kill anybody. Everyone's fine."

Mom looked up in triumph, her tongue pulverizing every consonant into Midwestern dialect dust. " Too lazy just like I said. I was right all along." She paused and smiled, "Could I offer you some apple crisp and a cup of Sanka officer?"

"No thank you ma'am, I just ate. Like I was saying, we talked to your daughter and her boys and they were shocked to hear they'd been massacred."

Mom scrunched her face and glared at me when my uncontrollable laughter returned with a vengeance. Her index finger twitched, a warning sign since childhood that I was about to get a butt-whooping if I didn't stop. In the span of two seconds I went tomb silent and mouthed, " Sorry Mom." She offered a purse-lipped, curt nod in return.

The officer continued, "Mr. Allen is currently in the back of a cruiser, clad in a bee-keeper's suit. He's enroute to the state hospital for a 72 hour hold. From what we can gather, Mr. Allen, in his deluded state, thought he forgot to fill the gas tanks last week, leaving his family starving to death since they couldn't drive to the grocery store." He gazed at his shiny black boots for a moment and said with a slight grin, "He told us he was confessing to being an awful father and husband. And was making it right with his dead family by purchasing Takis Churro Charge Chips and Mountain Dew, consuming the junk in honor of their memory."

Joe and I shared a knowing look and rolled our eyes. The massacre was over, the bathtub juice was safe and sound, and Geoffrey was exactly where he belonged: at the intersection of batshit and crazy.

Death
by
Jason Boitnott

He wears only sweatpants
beneath that black cloak,
relaxed in the knowledge
that he need not hurry,
that we're going nowhere.

His colorless scheme of goth
covers bleach-white bones
so bright that if he flashed us,
we'd be color-blind forever,
or at least until he do us part.

The hood isn't all for show,
its round crown stopping
winds from whistling loose
the crooked, filmy teeth
with which he smiles at us all.

The hourglass of history
sifts out the sands of time
in one of his dingy pockets,
leaving our lumpy lives
exposed like worms to the sun.

And in the other pocket
(next to a piece of fabric lint) —
our signatures written on
indefinite, final contracts
that we never signed.

When reaping grows grim
he'll place the bucket
we're all destined to kick
in our dark doorway and bust
out the porch light bulb.

Any day now, he'll pay us
a visit, wooden scythe snath
rapping towards us like a cane,
his pace steady as change,
as certain as taxes and him.

He's an elderly everyman,
an old-school traditionalist,
but he fancies himself mostly
a poet for all of the ages,
especially the dark ones.

He writes longhand elegies
in Old English and hard-
to-read cursive, his laments
lengthy as prolonged lives,
noted but rarely applauded.

Though it would only take
one swing of that scythe,
mostly he comes in volumes,
biting our dust not by blade
but by a thousand paper cuts.

Aunt Bijou's Birdcage
by
Kai Swanson-Dale

COUSIN GEOFF

"Did anyone find it unusual that your aunt was..."

"A Furby?"

"...so small?"

Cousin Geoff and I looked at each other. We were both clutching sodas.

"Usually nobody mentions that," said Cousin Geoff uncomfortably.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't know."

We each looked into the middle distance, not quite at but slightly next to the other. I looked over his shoulder out the kitchen window, into the garden. He looked over my shoulder at the piano, but behind the piano, on the wall, hung a photograph of the aunt in question, so this didn't help.

Poor Cousin Geoff. He definitely got the worse deal.

"So," I said, as sweat beaded on the can of soda and my hands, and I nervously laughed without saying anything further and popped the tab and slurped.

Cousin Geoff did the same, gulping nervously and snorting when his can flowed over and fizz got in his nose.

"Did Aunt Bijou, er, have any, er, kids?" I asked finally.

"Not that I know of," said Cousin Geoff.

"Oh," I said. "I see."

"But if she did, they would have been Furbies, too. Most likely."

"Yes," I agreed. "Right."

We stood awkwardly. In silence. Despite being called cousin, Geoff wasn't my relative at all—otherwise Bijou would have been *my* aunt as well. I had married Geoff's sister, Katie, who now went by her Japanese name: Katei. Katie, or Katei, was transnational—that is, she had been born American like the rest of us but identified as Japanese. Her gender was female. Her sexuality was ninja.

I, meanwhile, was a male lesbian... and Cousin Geoff was, sexually, a pineapple. We were a whole family of sexual deviants.

"Do you think your sister will be home soon?" I asked Cousin Geoff.

Geoff let out his breath heavily, like he had been filled up and was now deflating. "I hope so," he said. "Do you think your wife will be home soon?"

"I hope so," I said. "I think they'll probably get home about the same time."

Cousin Geoff nodded solemnly and finished his soda. He was looking at the floor, down at his sock feet. "Do you want me to tell you about... Aunt Bijou?" he asked finally, looking up.

I gulped, struggled to swallow, gulped again. Then, "Yes," I croaked.

"Ok," said Cousin Geoff. "It was like this."

AUNT BIJOU'S BIRDCAGE

Aunt Bijou had a birdcage, it was approximately twelve inches high and nine inches wide, and made of wood and shaped like a tulip bulb. It hung from the doorframe, here, by the yard, but every door in the house had a hook, because the birdcage was transportable.

Aunt Bijou *made* the birdcage, she collected the twigs herself. She only collected the very finest twigs, and she had a rule that each twig had to come from a different tree—but always the same *type* of tree. Then she shaved the twigs with her claws, and sanded them with her beak. So what Aunt Bijou made was a piece of art.

It was a very spindly, delicate cage, but a very tasteful, feminine cage—and at the front of the little tulip-bulb-shaped contraption was a swinging door. The door had proper hinges and could open side to side or top to bottom... or even bottom to top, because there were hinges on all four sides, but only two of them were ever in use.

Inside were a few personal artifacts, including a whistle, a broken eggshell, and a comb, along with a tea cozy and a cork coaster. These belonged to Aunt Bijou, and for all of my life growing up, this birdcage was Aunt Bijou's home. She had built it herself, to live in herself—and she did.

The eggshell was what remained of the egg from which she herself had hatched— with the comb she did her hair—the cozy and coaster were her bed and blanket— and the whistle was supposed to make gems spontaneously appear... but Aunt Bijou would never blow the whistle, so I don't know if it did.

Now: Aunt Bijou traveled with this cage from place to place before setting up residence in our home, and added new pieces to it all the time. And how long did it take her to build it? Twenty-two years. And how long did she live with us? As long as I can remember. If I'm twenty-six now, and I can remember back to when I was six, it was at least that long— minus the time she's been gone. So how old was Aunt Bijou? I have no idea. But we loved her, and she loved us, and we all tried not to notice that she was a Furby. We're all deviants in this family—is it really a surprise that some of us would turn out to be Furbies as well?

—My thoughts exactly, I said, breaking into Cousin Geoff's story. But what happened to the birdcage?

—Well, said Cousin Geoff, I can tell you about that, but I'd like to wait until Katei gets home.

—Of course, I agreed. It was only right.

GEOFF AND I SHACK UP

Despite what we'd said about hoping Katei would return soon, there was no way to tell when she actually would. She might have had to work late, doing whatever it was she did, she might have gotten stuck in traffic ("you're not stuck in traffic," she would say; "you *are* traffic." Now that was indisputable!), she might have had to stop at the store.

I broke the silence that had descended on us like a commercial fishing net by gulping the final sip from my can. But as it was really a sip, only a few drops came out and most of what I gulped was air.

"What do you propose we do while we wait?" I asked Cousin Geoff under a sudden apprehension of nerves.

"We could go to the shack out back," Geoff suggested, indicating an old and dilapidated toolshed in the backyard, "and take a look at it."

"What's inside the shed?" was the information I requested.

"Just us, if we go inside it," said Geoff.

Well, well, well! This was a strange and somewhat intimidating offer, but under the circumstances it was preferable to remaining under the fishing net. We relocated to the shed, both of us in our sock feet, and Cousin Geoff closed the door.

It was very dark in the shed and there was an earthy smell, as of woodchips. What's more it was very cramped, being a shed truly equipped only for one, so Cousin Geoff and I had to stand toe to toe and I could feel his warm and soda-y breath. Although he did not say as much, I presume he could also feel mine.

"Mightn't be there a light in the shed?" I asked presently. We had been standing this way for a while. It was getting somewhat steamy in the shed.

"I believe so," said Cousin Geoff, "but without light to see by, I won't know very well where it is—if indeed there is one."

"It might be behind you," I suggested, and with his permission I felt that way in the darkness, but my hands brushed only the rough-hewn boards of the wall.

"Contrariwise, it might be behind you," Cousin Geoff said. "If I may?" And at my acquiescence he felt in the general direction of me, but likewise found only the second wall, and an open bag of potting soil.

Having exhausted those options, there seemed to be only one place it could be, and I said so.

"Do you think there is still even one place?" said Cousin Geoff. "I myself had begun to think that there was no light."

"Indeed I do," said I.

"And where is that?" said he.

I indicated the space between us, but as it was dark neither of us could see me do so, even though our eyes had by now adjusted. I could see the faintest outline of one side of his face, but that was all. I raised my right hand and held it between our two faces and made to grip the air. Instead I found a pullcord, and it was on this I pulled.

Light blossomed in the darkness, and we were both temporarily blinded, for the bulb hung between us at forehead level. When the stars had faded from our eyes, we took in the contents of the shed, but there really wasn't anything to see. The boards were much as we had felt them to be, all the way round, and besides the two of us, and the bag of potting soil (already mentioned), there was only a spider lying dead on its back in the far left-hand corner. Its web had undergone transubstantiation from spider- to cob-, and dangled from the ceiling tenuously.

"It's rather claustrophobic in here," I said, for the back of the shed was mere inches away. Cousin Geoff's face was distractingly close to my own face, and it was difficult to focus on. "I rather preferred imagining the shed to be a deep one, when the light was off."

"Quite," said Cousin Geoff, and with this accord reached we turned the light back off.

KATEI COMES HOME

A crunch of gravel in the yard outside announced the approach of a vehicle, and, what with the time spent in the shed, the odds of it belonging to Katei were quite good—even with traffic. So, both of us feeling in the dark for the handle of the door, Cousin Geoff and I exited the shed, took off our socks at the slider to the kitchen and changed them for a fresh pair upstairs, then resumed our previous positions in the kitchen.

"Soda?" Cousin Geoff asked.

"Please, thanks."

He crushed our last two cans, which were still empty, and put them in the recycling bin, then rummaged around in the fridge. He was at work on this task when Katei—for it was she—came into the house. We could hear her take off her shoes; they went thunk in the hall.

Cousin Geoff handed me a soda.

"Cheers," said I.

"Cheers," said he. He had gotten one out for Katei as well and set it on the table. At that moment my wife and his sister walked in the door, together.

"Hello!" said Cousin Geoff to his sister.

"Hello!" said Katei to him, taking the soda from the table.

"Hello!" said I to my wife.

"Hello!" said she to me, popping the tab.

"Have you met each other already?" I asked all round, greetings exchanged.

"We took a rideshare from work," Katei agreed. Then she drank the soda.

"And what have you two been up to today?" she asked.

"We've consumed a great quantity of soda," I volunteered, indicated the recycling bin, which was overflowing, "and spent a good long while standing in the shed."

"Mm," Katei said agreeably. "Did you find it extensive?"

"I believed so at first, when it was dark. But upon turning on the light, I found it significantly less extensive than I expected."

"I leave the light off, myself," said Katei, "when I spend a lot of time in the shed."

I decided not to plumb the depths of that topic, which was proving to be deeper than the actual shed, and instead changed the subject. "How was your day at work?" I asked her. "If indeed it was to work you went?"

"It was," said she, "and I did a lot of whatever it is I usually do. So much of it was to be done, in fact, I had to work late, instead of leaving half an hour early as per usual. Then I was trapped in traffic, and it was moving so slowly I had time to get out and go to the store. When I got back to my car, traffic had cleared considerably ahead of me, but not very much at all behind! A few minutes later I arrived here."

"Bravo!"

Cousin Geoff and I both applauded her tale. She curtsied slightly and put on her ninja mask, which she had removed to drink the soda. She was dressed in full ninja apparel.

"What say we cook dinner?" said Cousin Geoff. He must have gotten hungry after all the soda.

"That would be ideal," said Katei, and the two of them set to it, while I stood there unhelpfully and looked at the pilling on my socks.

We were eating dinner now, a stir fry of sorts in keeping with the theme. There was a dish of wasabi in the center of the table for us to share, a pitcher of soda with ice in it, and slices of pineapple for dessert, although Cousin Geoff had put some in his stir fry for now.

"Your husband has been asking me about Aunt Bijou," Cousin Geoff said as we ate, not one to beat around the bush. "But I said we ought to wait till you got home."

"Your brother has been most obliging in informing me, as much as he has," I assured her.

"Oh, Aunt Bijou," sighed Katei wistfully, holding her chopsticks. "All right, then. It was like this."

AUNT BIJOU'S BIRDCAGE, CONTD.

Picking up precisely where Cousin Geoff left off, as if she had been privy to that conversation, Katei began:

Part of the reason Aunt Bijou traveled so much—in fact the main reason—was her self-imposed restriction on twig-gathering. Taking only one twig from each of only one type of tree, she soon ran out of possibilities in any given area, and had to expand her range. Such trees as she used only grow in particular climates, it might be added, so some of her gathering missions went on for years at a stretch. Compounding the problem, she could only carry so many at once in her beak, and had to set them down to eat and drink. This problem was alleviated somewhat when she learned to tie them in bundles and carry them around on her back, but even then the weight was a burden. She would often spend months bearing a bunch to her current encampment, only to turn round and make the pilgrimage back to her foraging grounds. This was in the early days, of course, before she had enough cage-structure to be able to carry the cage with her.

—I remember those times, said Cousin Geoff.

We tried to help her, of course, when we were older, but the twigs we found were rarely up to the standard she had set. Too small, too large, too old, too brittle. You name it, there was always something. Once I came home with what I believed to be, according to her criteria, the perfect twig. And it was the perfect twig—but it came from a tree where she had already gathered.

—It was an impossible task! said Cousin Geoff.

And yet, she did it! By now she was so worn out from her years of pilgrimage, though, that she only went to gather new twigs for repairs—for example, after a storm. The rest of the time she perched in her cage and slept, waking from time to time to rearrange her eggshells and her whistle.

—But what *became* of the cage? I asked her. I had looked round and round but there was no sign of it anywhere. Nor had I ever seen it, and Katei and I had been married for several years.

—This is a good part, said Cousin Geoff.

"Well," said Katei circumspectly, "we planted it."

"After all her hard work?" I cried.

"She had left us by then," Cousin Geoff explained.

"Where did she go?"

"Where we all go," said Katei.

"Where is that?" I asked.

They didn't know.

"It had been her intention all along," said Katei, "that after she left us, we should plant her cage—along with her eggshell."

"Both of her homes," Cousin Geoff explained.

"Fine," I said. "What about the whistle?"

"I'm getting to the whistle," said Katei.

"This is a good part," said Cousin Geoff.

After she left us, said Katei, we let her cage hang for a week. Then, in accordance with her wishes, we took it down and photographed it for the museum. After they had built a replica of it for posterity, we planted the original in the back garden, where before long it had grown into a tree. The tree grew very quickly and was soon as big as a house. What's more, it had grown in the shape of a birdcage. This was the state of affairs for about six months, at which point during an unexpected weather event the birdcage-tree uprooted and blew away.

—And that was the end of the cage? I burst out. Sometimes I can't restrain myself.

—No, said Katei.

The tree came down in a field and splintered into a thousand twigs. Each of the twigs landed upright, which is quite an unlikely thing, but that's how it was. And each of the twigs grew into another tree, this time regular shaped.

—The cycle could begin again! said Cousin Geoff.

New foragers flocked to the forest and picked the trees clean until they were just trunks. Then loggers cut the trunks down and gave us the boards, and with the boards we built the shed.

—Gosh, I said. It was enough to make my head spin.

But the boards weren't very good quality, as you've seen. We expect the shed to collapse any day now.

—And goodness knows what it will turn into, then! said Cousin Geoff.

AUNT BIJOU SWALLOWS THE WHISTLE

"The last part of the story," said Katei, "is how Aunt Bijou met her fate."

"Yes, please," I said, for I felt that this was the exciting part.

"Aunt Bijou had a whistle, as you know, and, as you know, when she blew on the whistle it was supposed to make gems appear from thin air. But she never blew on the whistle, so none of us really believed it—including, it seems, Aunt Bijou. For she was out there one day, tooting on that whistle, trying to make it work.

"She had it clenched in her beak, with her head tipped back, and while true it made a feeble chirping sound, it was no different from any number of birdcalls or the sounds Aunt Bijou made herself."

"I burst out onto the patio," said Cousin Geoff, taking the reins of the story, "for I'd heard the peculiar sounds. I thought she was in distress. Aunt Bijou, though, was quite deaf at the time, so she probably wasn't aware that she was making any noise. On seeing me burst onto the patio, and being caught with the whistle around which so much legend had grown, but the use of which she had never demonstrated, she was so startled she opened her beak."

"And the whistle went down her throat," said Katei.

"Aunt Bijou swallowed the whistle," said Cousin Geoff.

I gulped. "And after swallowing it..." I said.

"She died."

CONCLUSION

"Well."

That last was me. The other had been said in unison.

"Yeah," said Cousin Geoff. "Ruminate on that."

I ruminated in silence, though this silence was less awkward than the previous ones now that all the secrets had been let out to air. "It's good to know these sorts of things about your family," I said finally, for I had come to realize over the course of the day what I already suspected, that I didn't know these two very well at all, despite my relation to them.

"Does this change the way you feel about my sister?" asked Cousin Geoff.

"No," I said truthfully, "I don't think so. Does it change the way you think about my wife?"

"Not particularly," said Cousin Geoff. "Katei," he double-checked with her, "has anything changed for you?"

"I don't think so," she said, "but then again to me none of this was news."

"Except at the time," I pointed out.

We all thought about that. Then we had another soda, and after that we did the dishes, and after *that* we went to bed.

My Underpants
by
Paul Hostovsky

I found them on the bathroom floor
after my cousin and her boyfriend
left for Ithaca. They were green
with gold stripes and they weren't
mine. I stood there for a long time
considering them. They weren't
dirty but they weren't exactly clean
either. They were unwashed.

But they weren't unclean the way
a dead bird is unclean, or the way
an unsanctified thing or an unholy thing
is unclean. I picked them up, and did I
smell them? I want to say I smelled them.
I may have smelled them because
they weren't unclean and they were undoubtedly
my cousin's boyfriend's and he is a good man,
not a holy man but a good man with a good
job in Ithaca, New York and an excellent beard.
Of course I thought about returning them,
sending them back in a mailer or small brown box,
and I thought about washing them,
though they weren't mine and they weren't
unclean, only unwashed, and they weren't
sexy, only colorful. They were more colorful
than all of my underpants put together.
You will want to know I am wearing them
as I write this. Much time has elapsed
since that day in the bathroom. My cousin
and her boyfriend have gotten married.
I have gotten married myself. My wife
has no idea about the provenance
of the green underpants. She thinks they are mine.
She washes them with my underpants
and her underpants, and she puts them all
in a sweet-smelling pile on top of the dresser.
I think there is something a little holy
about a pile of clean underpants on top of a dresser.
I think that putting them away in a drawer
would be like putting your light under a bushel,
or like locking a bird up in a cage,
or like packing up a good green thing
in a small brown box
and sending it far, far away from you.

What the People, Whose Houses I am Breaking Into, Have to Say About the Subjectivity of Art

**by
Jay Servedio**

It was 3:14 am in the Salazar home. Its owners, Anthony and Monica, slept deeply and breathed heavily in their marital bed.

I stood over them, still and silent, mentally preparing myself to execute the final part of the plan.

"Anthony," I said softly. "Anthooooonyyyyyy?" I repeated, booping him on the nose. "Anthony, do you have a second?" His eyes fluttered open; when they focused on me, they got big.

"AYO WHAT THE FUCK!?" He shot up. "WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?"

"That's the question isn't it? I think that's what Goya was trying to ascertain through his life's work, would you agree?" Most did, but not everyone sought out intellectually stimulating conversation before the break of dawn. I am not everyone.

I've been breaking into the homes of the everyman in the middle of the night for six months now, searching for the answers of art's greatest questions. My reason for doing so? It's my last viable option for stimulating conversion. I've been black listed from every art forum, discord server, and subreddit art was ever discussed on.

Why? Because the other snobs simply couldn't get on my level. I turned next to talk to friends and family to garner their thoughts on human-kind's greatest creations. They say I "over did it," hence the unilateral move to block me on all platforms. This was honestly for the best: my father's turkey was always *over done* on Thanksgiving, and I'd prefer to spend the holiday alone anyway.

Which led me down the road I am on today: breaking into the homes of unsuspecting John Q. Publics, hoping to hear their thoughts on what really is at the core of the greatest contributions to the arts. You may be asking yourself: "that's all fine and good, but why bother them in the middle of the night?"

The simple answer: I would do it during the day, but I work at UniQlo from eight to six-thirty so I have to work with the cards I've been dealt.

"WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?!" I was beginning to like Anthony's inquisitive spirit.

"It baffles me too, Anthony. I think the search for meaning is quite possibly the greatest engine for creativity. When someone takes the initiative to share their soul with canvas—"

"Anthonyyyy," Monica groaned. "why are you on the phone, it's— AHHH JESUS CHRIST, WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?!"

"I was just saying to your husband, I often ask myself the same thin—" she interrupted me before I could finish philosophizing.

"Are you here to rob us?" She looked to her spouse. "Why didn't you shoot him if he is here to rob us, Anthony?!"

"Because the gun is in the closet and he's blocking it!" retorted the aforementioned.

"Well now he knows where the gun is, ANTHONY!!!" Monica screamed, flailing her arms.

"I am not here to rob you, I said, raising my hands. "All I want is—"

"Oh my GOSH, HE'S HERE TO KILL US! Anthony, kill him first!"

"With WHAT? He's blocking the gun closet!"

"What macabre discourse," I offered. "Reminds me of Goya's Black Series of paintings. How fate can be so cruel to us mere mortals. How madness can conquer a brilliant mind and mush it like clay. How do you think the manifestation of mental illness in Goya's later years affected his already disillusioned view of the world?" I whipped out my notepad and readied myself to take notes.

"Anthony, he's talking about beans and crazy people now!"

"I know! I wish I could get to our gun!"

Now THAT was something I could work with.

"Fear and Desire! YES! Two of the strongest motivators! Would you say art created in the spirit of those two emotions is what you feel most connected to?"

"Why do you keep asking us about art, bro?" asked Anthony. I got on my soapbox that I take with me to every break in.

"Because! These are the conversations we should be having as a society! What motivates us to go out and create? What forms of expression do we feel connect us the most?"

"I like Monet," replied Monica, a little calmer now.

"I know, I saw your phone case when I was standing on your side of the bed."

"I got that for her, actually," Anthony added, somewhat defensive.

"What about Monet speaks to you, Monica?" She took a second to herself and really thought about it before answering me.

"Probably the colors."

"That's it?" asked Anthony, unimpressed.

"Don't discourage, Anthony," I said. "That's a plenty good answer."

"Yeah, Anthony," snapped Monica. "But, yeah. The colors. They're pretty. Also, it's like, simple, ya know? There's like, beauty in simplicity, or whatever. I don't know."

"Wow," said an astonished Anthony. "That's really profound, babe."

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeah. That's like, wow."

"Thanks," she said through a smile. She was blushing so brightly, you could see it in the dark. Their eyes locked. There was passion. It was exceptional to see but I refused to let the emotional momentum die.

"Simplicity! Life is anything but it, sure, but Monica you've brought up an excellent point." They ignored me and began to kiss like it was going out of style. I was losing them. "Art that can help us focus on the present moment—" they began to strip— "on being aware, being where our feet are, that's what's most important."

"I think it's real important for you to take those two feet and be somewhere else right now. I'm tryna make a woman outta the art critic over here."

"Tell him, Anthony."

I left out the window I shattered on the first floor and moans followed me the whole way out. The night and the conversation hadn't gone as I had planned for them to, but when you think about it, if something does go as planned, can you even call it art?

sweet treat
by
Devarya Singhania

it's like a raspberry tart that
fell.

mom should bake more & amma used to make milk cakes & i miss those.

small cherry centre, uneven white base;
mom's red velvet cupcakes!

should i step on it?
the grey things now look like cookie crumbs-
i'll ask mom to make me a shake tonight
she'll like it
she'll scold me
she'll like it-
i should step on it.

so cute this sweet thing on the cement
MG Road from where our blue Audi RS Q8 goes.

dad should be back in an hour.
maybe when he comes, Michelin's newest tires
will bring home some of this dead pigeon.

Horribile dictu
by
Luci Kelemen

Baron von Blütvinnich's manic cackles echoed through the halls of his ancestral home as the cathedral bell struck midnight. A bolt of lightning hit the manor's ornate dome just as the clangs faded away, exactly as he had planned it.

The loyal oak bookshelves, creaking from centuries of forlorn duty, finally snapped under the weight of volumes new and old. They held firm against the antique titles of *Liber de compositione alchemiae* and *De viribus herbarum*, but they could no longer withstand the added pressure of *Latin for Dummies* and *Best Speeches of the 1835 Conference of Amateur Vivisectionists*, new volumes hastily piled atop the past centuries of forbidden knowledge. Then again, the world as we knew it was about to end if the baron's experiment turned out to be a success, and, let's be real, who needs hundred-year-old bookshelves in the post-apocalypse, anyway?

Out in the corridor, toothless gargoyles and stone angels with broken wings cast furtive glances toward each other and the basement entrance in equal measure. Had they had the capacity to think, they surely would have cried in horror about the desecration of this ancient manor, much like how the murky paintings on the wall of ancestors long past would have echoed their disappointed resentment of the sixteenth von Blütvinnich, hollowed was his name, a failed academic with a meaningless language-teaching job who turned to the dark arts to resurrect the family glory and to carve out his own place in the history books.

With every passing year, the staircase leading to the basement showed more and more of the makings of a shaft. In fact, those in the habit of nitpicking might have called it a dungeon rather than a basement at this point. No matter.

It was not possible, they said. You will go mad, they said. You are mad, they said. Baron von Blütvinnich XVI, amateur chess player and legendary regular of Köln's oldest teahouse, never listened to these dastardly voices. Who knows, they may have only been in his head, after all, and why listen to the sounds of conscience and idiocy, no matter whether they are the whispers of your mind or the whinings of some irrelevant university Sekretärin or a white-coated Doctor Something-or-other and his thrice-damned so-called analysis of the psychiatric kind? You've got a world to change, after all.

"Co... Cog..." rasped an otherworldly voice in the underground chamber. The baron could hardly contain his excitement. After so many successive snafus, the moment had finally come. Not since the day he got to hand out forty-three different failing grades across two final exams has he felt this alive, this much of a man.

The rising wind blew open the shutters upstairs, and a stream of bats flew into the manor.

"Cogitoooooo," came the raspy voice again, the being behind it still finding its footing in this world. "Cogitoooooo, eeeeeergoooooo..."

"Go on, my child," the baron cried out. He thought this day would never come. The idea of calling someone his child became rather far-fetched after the velocipede accident that took away most of his self-esteem and both of his testicles.

"Cogitoooooo... ergo.... sum...."

"Yes! Yes!" cried the baron. "Yes! Yes! Ita! Vero! Certe! Sic!" Could he believe his eyes? Has it really happened? After so many languages that didn't come back to life despite his best efforts, has he finally succeeded, with the granddaddy of them all, no less?

The amorphous blob of flesh and words sitting upright on the slab reminded him of someone he once knew. No, not the butcher boy he tossed down the stairs yesterday in a bid to acquire just the right amount of human essence after tracing his family lineage back all the way to the collapse of the Roman Empire to ensure there is the perfect portion of Latin in his genes, nor the excerpts taken from the Romantic and necromantic books from the university's forbidden underground library, which were now hastily orbiting his reborn creation. No, it was the eyes, cold and blue, staring back at him that brought on the memory: The former owner of the teahouse, may God rest his soul. These were his final gift to the baron.

"Anything for my loyal guest and his important experiment!" That's what he said before the blade chopped his head clean off. Or was that one of those... What did Doctor Something-or-other call them? Hallucinations?

No matter. The reborn Latin language was sitting in front of him now, ready to transform the world into something altogether new, a place where long-forgotten dynasties that withered into underpaid professors at West German universities would rule anew with divine right.

The shadowy, shapeless being, part bloody pulp, part Roman classics, some black magic and a bit of snake oil, got up and shambled towards the staircase. The baron was too gleeful to notice, lost in his hazy thoughts of linguistic world domination.

If the dilapidated gargoyles could speak, they would surely have exclaimed "oh my god what the fuck" as they watched the undead being drag itself up to the hall, slowly making its way past ancestors annoyed and aroused in equal measure. That's the thing with newly resurrected zombie languages: no matter how weird and messy they may seem, they do have some semblance of will of their own, and while the baron's dreams were also of the destructive kind, he had somewhat more specific terroristic aspects in mind than the mere idea of random uncontrolled linguistic carnage.

No, he wanted to tie up and weaponize his new creation, load it into a trumpet-like device he called the Latinizer 4000 (of the Unholy Kind), walk up to the city hall on a cloud-filled early morning and threaten the mayor with the instant and permanent latinization of everything the residents of Köln hold near and dear to them, cultural heritage and superior Germanic status be damned. One by one, he would hold all elected officials of the Holy Roman Empire at languagepoint and extract significant enough concessions to make his long-forgotten university classes the most important occasions of the land, catapulting himself into a position of supreme importance. Mwahahaha, he thought to himself.

His unspoken evil laugh was rudely interrupted by the rapidly developing situation outside his head.

He only figured that something had gone very wrong when he heard the words "bella, horrida bella" from upstairs. The zombie Latin was not supposed to emerge from underground, not in this unshackled form! He growled and ran after the undead monster of communication, racing past the crumbling gargoyles and the angry ancestors and the broken bookshelves and the piles of custom-made underwear and the unpaid bills and the

empty beer bottles, but his creation had already escaped the premises. He spotted its contours at the metal gate, forming an eerie shadow below the iron-cast family symbol, the crest with the goat and the half-eaten cabbage surrounded by ravens of subpar intelligence, each flying in a different direction to form a teardrop of idiocy.

The baron cursed. He only wanted himself a nice little weapon with which to change the world. What he got instead was a loose cannon of the Ciceronian kind.

"Get back here, you deformis-deformis-deforme fuck!" he screamed, but the reborn Latin language paid him no heed as it shambled across the narrow streets of Kölner cobblestone, busy exploring and transforming its newfound Germanic surroundings into something altogether more vile and ancient. "Alea iacta est," it screamed at a hospital, and it turned into a gambling den. "Memento mori," it howled at a cheese shop, and, poof, it was now a cemetery.

In response, the baron opened up a secret hatch in the garden shed to unveil the Language Catch-O-Tron 5000, an emergency device he devised for potential catastrophes like this. He never expected to need such a blunt instrument in his hour of triumph, but Baron von Blütvinnich, the sixteenth of his line, was nothing if not prepared.

Testicle-less and ambition-filled, he raced after his shambling zombie language creation into the cold winter night of Köln. No one in the city knew it yet, but a new era had just begun.

Grilling a Suspect
by
Paul Burgess

They grilled the thief for half a day,
and now the job's completely done.
I let them handle things their way.
They grilled the thief for half a day.
It's tender meat, you've got to say,
and tastes exquisite on a bun.
They grilled the thief for half a day,
and now the job's completely done.

Forget Plastics: Think Ant Farms
by
Rick Kast

"Ant farms?"

Arthur sat on the other side of his desk. His countenance was inscrutable. But that was what he'd said, wasn't it?

"Yes. Clearly. Take it from me."

"But everything?"

"Traditional investments are faltering. The bubble is going to burst. Real estate, energy, pork bellies. It's all going to crash."

"But not ant farms."

"Did you ever hear of an ant farm crash?"

"No. But I've never heard of anyone who has invested in them either."

"Exactly. Corner the market. Sell everything."

Arthur had been my investment advisor for pretty much as long as I had been investing. But he'd obviously lost it. Maybe it was those pink pills he kept popping.

"Where would I even go to make such an investment."

"I know a guy."

"What's his name? Peter Pismire?"

Arthur didn't smile. He'd used to have a sense of humor.

"No, no. Gregory Glockenspiel."

"Huh?"

"That's his name."

"You're kidding me."

"No, really. Mind like a steel trap. Known him since the University. The business faculty was in awe of him."

"Glockenspiel? Spelled like glockenspiel?"

"Wonderful wife. Dorothy. Beautiful teeth. What a smile! No, maybe Ginger."

"Ginger Glockenspiel?"

"That's the ticket. Beautiful teeth. Interior designer. Big armoires of gleaming mahogany. Aspidistras. Not Glockenspiel though. She kept her name."

"That's understandable."

"Manischewitz."

"Like the wine. Like Sammy Davis Jr. saying, 'Man, oh Manischewitz?'"

Arthur was scribbling on the back of one of his business cards.

"Here," he said, poking it at me. It was the name and phone number of Glockenspiel. "Give him a call. Ant farms."

"One hundred percent?"

"Absolutely."

"I don't know," Glockenspiel said on the phone. "Ever since Arthur started taking those pills..."

His voice trailed off.

"So you don't recommend that I sell everything and invest it all in ant farms/"

"Here's the thing, Steve. It's Steve, isn't it."

"Mike."

"Here's the thing, Mike. There's been this buzz about the Department of Education is going to mandate that all elementary schools buy ant farms and use them as instructional aids. Teach diligence, social skills, that sort of thing. God knows we need something like that. But even if they do, whatever happened to a diversified portfolio?"

"My thoughts exactly."

"Right, Steve. I advise you invest no more than half of your assets in ant farms. The other half should go into alligator lagoons in Florida."

Holy shit, this guy was as crazy as Arthur.

"Do you know that there are 1.3 million alligators in Florida?" Glockenspiel was saying. "That's about one alligator for every twenty people. This is an untapped asset, Steve. Wily entrepreneurs are beginning to take notice. It won't just be purses and belts and shoes anymore. No, say sayonara to that New York strip steak. It will be alligator steaks everywhere. They're already putting alligator meat in the turtle soup in New Orleans. Do you know how much it costs to raise a beef cow to maturity and slaughter it? How damaging the whole enterprise is to the environment? Alligator lagoons, Steve. That and ant farms should make your financial future secure."

When he'd finally run down, I asked how Ginger was doing.

"Who?"

"Your wife."

"Oh, you mean Bunny?"

"Yeah, Bunny Maneschewitz."

"Fine, fine. Her dental practice is thriving."

That evening I poured myself a stiff Scotch and examined my last stock prospectus. It was grim. It was diversified. Multiple opportunities for failure. Then I looked at the Bible: the *WSJ*. Sebastian Smeedle, one of the most astute economic commentators in my humble opinion, had a piece. "There is a lot of talk about Ant Farms and Alligator Lagoons," Smeedle wrote. "But beware of those who extoll their virtues. True, a huge economic collapse is on the horizon. But what you want to invest in is MET."

I felt a bit out of it. Invest in the Metropolitan Museum of Art? The Metropolitan Opera? Surely not! What was MET? The gurus of the internet told me: "Monetary Electronic Tokens."

Looking into it further, I found Smeedle noting: "What is money worth anyway? Nothing without belief. Faith. That's what makes any economic currency valuable. Confederate money had a brief period of belief and value. Does anyone try to spend Greek drachmas today? Or beaver pelts? Get on the bandwagon with MET. That's where the action is."

I called Arthur.

"What do you think about MET?" I asked.

"Huh?" Arthur said, sounding groggy and sodden. I knew that he got into his cups after five or so but I was desperate.

"MET, Arthur. Monetary Electronic Tokens."

"Is that you, Steve?"

"No, Mike."

"MET is SHIT, Mike. You can take it to the bank."

He hung up, leaving me uncertain as to why I would want to take shit to the bank. Wasn't the whole point that I didn't want to take shit to the bank?

Desperate, I called Gregory Glockenspiel at his home number, which Arthur had helpfully written on the back of his card.

"He's in a ZOOM meeting," said a female voice. "Absolutely can't be interrupted."

"Is this Ginger?"

"No, Bunny."

"Sorry. Bunny."

"Yes."

"I wanted to talk to him about MET?"

"Oh, I can tell you all about that. It's great. Do you want an appointment? Call Amy in my office tomorrow. We just had a cancellation and can get you in."

"MET, Bunny, MET."

"Yes, yes, of course. Maxillary Electronic Titillation. It will make your gums sing like a tuning fork having an orgasm. I've seen it. I've heard it."

What the hell did a tuning fork having an orgasm sound like anyway? I guess maybe I'd find out. While that was going on maybe I could figure out my finances. And whether ant farms would be in my portfolio.

Nose
by
David Henson

It started with Delbert and Martha Robinson. At least their incident was the first made public.

Nose popped into their kitchen out of nowhere, glided to the vegetable soup on the stove, then to Delbert's collar. Next day the Robinsons received an email: Soup needs more broth, Delbert less cologne.—Nose.

Over the next few weeks, more and more people began reporting Nose encounters and emails.

Flower garden scent has too many roses.

Basement is musty, needs dehumidifier.

That boy of yours is just plain gross.

Innocent as Nose seemed, most folks viewed it as an uninvited guest. But Nose darted like a hummingbird on steroids, dodging ball bats, frying pans, butterfly nets. And if ever cornered, it disappeared, apparently to wherever it came from.

Some messages from Nose were ominous. Delbert smells of sex with another woman. Martha printed out the email, and thrust it at her husband. He claimed Nose was off its face.

When an email warned Lucy Carter that she smelled of disease, but a doctor said she was fine, headlines screamed Nose Blows! Delbert said told you so to Martha. Then texted his girlfriend that they were back on. Lucky for Lucy, Nose was a nag, and she got a second opinion.

People incorporated Nose into their lives, hardly blinked when it bobbed through their homes.

Checking for emails and reading those shared on Let's Be Nosy became part of the daily routine.

When Delbert read one that said The nostrils reveal a person's character, he lowered his chin whenever his wife was around.

Martha cherished visits from Nose and talked to it as if it were an ear. One day it sent her an email saying she deserved better.

After about a year, visits from Nose began tapering off. One day Nose sent the same email to everyone:

Sound of waves, beauty
of stars, Nose can only dream
I will miss you all

Nose was never seen or heard from again.

The reaction was a bell curve. A few people, like Delbert, clicked the heels of their minds. Most folks had sweet and sour reactions. Some, like Martha, couldn't get out of bed.

But no one. Absolutely no one. Ever looked at their nose the same again.

Contributor Biographies



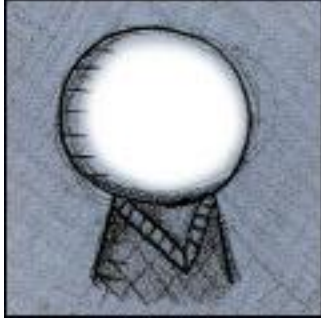
Trae Stewart is a professor, author, and psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner. His poetry and short stories have appeared in *Switchgrass Review*, *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*, *San Antonio Review*, *Medicine and Meaning*, and *Rappahannock Review*, among others.



Abby Hays is a high school English teacher in rural Kentucky who writes poetry when she should be grading papers—believing every mediocre pen scratch is the next stroke of genius. She is profoundly lacking in accolades and is currently pinching herself.



Tedd Hawks is a writer, teacher, coach, and developmental editor from Chicago. He's been writing stories since he could read—focused initially on magic rabbits, his work now centers on dramatic fish. (There has been some improvement in his prose in the process.) He has self-published works ranging from LGBTQ+ YA fiction to satirical poetry. You can connect with him via [Instagram](#), [Substack](#), or [his website](#).



Ed Ruzicka has published four full-length books of poetry, most recently "In the Wind", by Sligo Creek Publishing. Ed's poems have appeared in the *Atlanta Review*, the *Chicago Literary Review*, *Rattle*, *Canary*, and many others. A number of his poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Ed is also president of the Poetry Society of Louisiana. Ed lives quietly under the green of live oak trees in Baton Rouge with his wife, Renee.



Jill Williams is a Midwestern transplant to Georgia with a penchant for exiting moving cars before they reach a full stop. Her prose has appeared or is forthcoming in *Expat Press*, *Bristol Noir*, *Bull Lit*, *Close to the Bone*, and *Horror Sleaze Trash*. When she isn't drafting transgressive fiction, she finds a ridiculous amount of pleasure in the mechanical violence of county fair tractor pulls.



Jason Boitnott is a lifelong rural Nebraskan (isolated), family man (lonely), twenty-nine-year educator (insane), and livestock farmer (masochistic). His poems can be found in recent or upcoming issues of *Comstock Review*, *Midwest Review*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Last Leaves*, *Split Rock Review*, *Poetry Rabble*, and other journals.



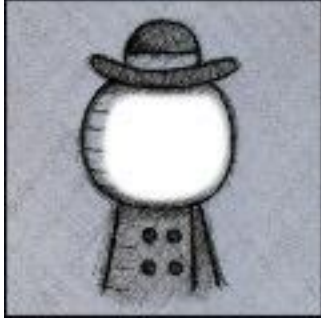
Kai Swanson-Dale currently lives in the United States. You can read more of his original fiction at kaiswansondale.com and milemarker79.com.



Paul Hostovsky's poems appear and disappear simultaneously (ta-da!) and have recently been sighted in those places where they pay you for your trouble with your own trouble doubled, and other people's troubles thrown in, which never seem to him as great as his troubles, though he tries not to compare. He has no life and spends it with his poems, trying to perfect their perfect disappearances. Visit him at: <https://paulhostovsky.com/>. "My Underpants" first appeared in *The Bad Guys*, FutureCycle Press.



Jay Servedio is a writer-comedian based in the Hudson Valley of New York. He runs the satirical publication *Ramblin' Mind* on Substack and hosts the indie late-night show *On the Watchlist with Jay Servedio* on YouTube. He performs stand up, sketch, and satire all over the east coast, and has had his work featured in *Weekly Humorist*, *Points in Case*, and *Sports Riot*. He is taking *On the Watchlist* to the Edinburgh Fringe this August.



Devarya Singhania (he/him) is a writer from India. His poems appear in *Poems India*, *UC Review*, and elsewhere. His website is <https://www.devaryasinghania.com/>



Luci Kelemen is a Budapest-based human product that may contain traces of writer. He has spent a decade and a half packaging up words in his mind's warehouse and selling them off to the middlest bidder, with non- often attached to fiction. His debut Hungarian short story collection, *Szivárványpitypang* (Rainbow Dandelion), was published this March.



Originally from Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, **Paul Burgess** now lives in Lexington, Kentucky, where he works as a private teacher, translator, and interpreter of English, Japanese, and Spanish. He has recently contributed work to *The Road Not Taken*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Light*, *The Orchards*, *Snakeskin*, *Pulsebeat*, *The New Verse News* and several other publications.



Rick Kast is a lawyer who never quite got over being an English major and has written fiction and humor pieces since the late Pleistocene. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, with his wife and Nigel Tawny, a large orange cat. In addition to writing, his hobbies include cooking, gardening, listening to music, and engaging in snappy repartee with computerized phone calls. In addition to this fine publication, his works have appeared in several journals, some of which actually still exist. His novels *Romance with Variations*, *Three-Part Invention*, and his short story collection *Hear His Cosmic Laugh*, *Mister Dog* are available on Amazon and elsewhere where books are sold.



David Henson and his wife have lived in Brussels and Hong Kong and now reside in Illinois. His work has been accepted by some journals, rejected by many, and is pending with a few. Some of his stories have yet to be written. Whether those are his best or worse is TBD. His website is <http://writings217.wordpress.com>. His X handle is @annalou8.