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# Unbound

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Melissa Rhoads

Mona Corboy

Cali Powell

Maia Williams

**CONTRIBUTORS**

Rodney Cimburke    Michaela Marans  
William Crowley    Miró Merrill  
Neil Davidson    Ryan Mills  
Austin Fulton    Tahni J. Nikitins  
Lisa France    Makenzie Quinn  
Bethany Kaylor    Chris Sanchez  
Stephanie King    Phillip Smith  
Ruby Lambie    Elijah Sprints

**COVER PHOTO**

Elijah Sprints

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*(Praying)*  
**Mantis** *By Ryan Mills*

I see you.  
Standing still among the stalks of grass,  
occasionally nibbling and tilting your head  
to the touch of my finger.

I nudge your thorax and spin you around  
with my thumb and you lift your forelegs in prayer.  
I can be your God today.

I set you in my palm and you do not  
hesitate to sip the sweat from the creases  
of my skin. Your wings remain flat against your back;  
you are comfortable here, warm and protected.

I hold my eyes level with your own  
and for a moment we are the same.  
Both alien, eyes wide with wonder and antennae  
twisting around the warm wind.

And in that moment,  
I close my fist and crush your fragile body,  
spilling intestines and wet memories of your life  
across my knuckles.

Pleased,  
that something so beautiful  
can be destroyed so easily.



# THE LONELIEST ROAD

By Phillip Smith

In his rear-view mirror, the man steals a peek at the sun separating from the horizon. Smiling, he pauses in the mirror to inspect his boyish, hoax of a grin while vibrant pastel hues spill out across the eternal blue ceiling. In the distance, the thirty-foot wide strip of gray, weather-beaten asphalt becomes a blur of color atop a hazy ridgeline. Beyond this, on another plane, time stretches itself out into the vast unknown. It's still cool this morning, but the West does not stay cool for long in July. Black scavengers take to the skies while reptiles and mammals scurry across the barren earth in search of breakfast, making last minute meal dashes before the sun begins to slow broil the basin.

He is a thief of hearts, hurtling through the desert in a yellow rocket.

"Can't believe she let me take it. Ha! Never going back. She got took! Wanted it to happen from where I judged. What kind of dumb bitch gives a man she don't know the keys to her car? This ride's mine now, burn another notch in the belt with them acid tears, babe!"

Heading west on US-50, the Rally yellow Z28 rockets through endless stretches of abandoned desert wasteland. He flicks a spent Marlboro filter out the Camaro's window and recalls the forecast which had lulled him to sleep

the night before:

"...and coming up next, the search continues for a District Attorney's son. But first, a quick look at the weather."

"...Ely, Nevada. A high of eighty-five, lows tonight in the mid-sixties. Out west, Las Vegas will be reaching highs creeping up toward the one-teens, and lows won't give visitors much comfort out there on the strip tonight. Las Vegans won't be getting too far below eighty-five the res-s-s-t...of this-s-s-s...wee-e-e..." and then he was rolling away from the flickering box, tumbling out of the conscious world, drifting into the heavy darkness of road-weary slumber, until the first beams of light set fire to an old, lonely rooster's soul.

Daydreaming behind the wheel—

50

## The Loneliest

—catches his eye. He has just enough time to register that he is not reading a speed limit sign. Curious, he eases off the gas pedal. A few minutes down the road he comes upon an identical sign:

US

ROUTE

50

## "The Loneliest Road in America"

"Did I find the road, or did it find me? The loneliest man, traveling the loneliest—"

Nimble on the asphalt, a gray fox darts into the road, stopping shy of the yellow dash, frozen in the car's path. The driver jerks the wheel hard left—*shoulda just HIT it*—

*(we gon' see who outfoxes who)*

and locks eyes with the animal. For an instant, man and animal share fear. Attempting to correct the course of the careening vehicle, he cranks the wheel hard right. Rear tires scream in unison. Pavement becomes history; traction and control a memory. Momentum forces a continued slide down the steep, rocky shoulder. Screeching tires, stone chips assaulting metal. The gunshot sound of a blown tire ricochets off the distant, barren mountains.

*Which ti-*

A thought jolted from his mind before born into existence. The driver's door connects with a utility pole at the bottom of the embankment, a thunderous crunch and crushing thrust of pressure from his left, the gap between door and body nullified. His mind fires off a final snapshot series of images. Collision force ripping his hand free of its death-clutch on the steering wheel. The nails of his index and middle fingers catching the leather wrap and pulling free from the skin. Shattered glass and crunching bones. Compression forcing the last remnants of panicked, sour breath from his lungs. Tingles like cold finger tips run along his spine, and a comfortable, warm feeling spreads across his chest. The world disappears in a deepening mosaic of colors, fading to gray, becoming deeper, darker, black.

*(tellin' you, you gon' get yours one day! Ain't not a man in this world been able to outrun 'is devils now, ya' hear me?)*

Pain fires rifle shot signals up and down the left side of the body. His connection to the world is re-established by screams, the tormented cries of a woman. He believes the screams are a woman's. Eyes open, viewing a world of dull, pulsing hues. The mental fugue hangs on him like a lead-lined cloud. The incessant shrieking

from somewhere, he's too fuzzy to understand where, but he wishes it would stop. Eyes unable to focus, every thought of initiating movement triggers nausea. Lifting his head, a purple-gray cloud fills his vision. He pulls his mangled arm toward his body. The hand is limp, the wrist bent to terrifying new limits. Fingers touching forearm, a scarlet stream pouring out of the large gash in his skin, blood mixing with tar and dirt. Bone, splintered, white and glistening—exposed to the daylight. He makes an attempt to straighten his wrist. Purple and gray engulf his world in a violent swarm. The thief fades again. The screaming stops.

*(because you's a taker, and because you's the selfish one, that's why—you never done nobody no good, and you's always gon' be 'lone)*

The sun hangs high above, radiating onto the desolate Nevada landscape. A pair of vultures perched atop the pole marking the end of a Camaro's journey squawk and caw, bullying each other for footing while they wait out their prey.

Ultra-violet rays heat, redden, and burn the man's skin. Groggy and disoriented, he adjusts in the driver's seat. An agonizing flash thrusts him back into the present. Pushing himself upright, pressure shifts in swollen sectors. He reaches into the backseat, fingers fumbling and clumsy, grabbing at and pushing through the scattered belongings until they snag what he had hoped to find—a long-sleeved flannel that an ex-girlfriend from *(where was it, Wichita?)* a different life had bought for him at a gift store in a different world during a trip to the mountains about a million years ago. He uses his teeth and his good hand to tie a knot with the sleeves, which he then drapes over his neck.

*(you done gone and wronged us both—my Eliah! God above bless his ever-lovin' soul—he put his trust in you)*

The man jerks his head around. The sudden jolt brings fresh pain in a tidal wave, washing over him and nearly succeeding in taking him under again. The spotted, purple vision returns. He was sure he had just heard

someone talking. He heard a woman screaming earlier, didn't he? He slides his arm through the opening of the makeshift sling, gentle and cautious as he moves his hand and arm. *Been alone the whole ride.* Then who was screaming?

His wrist is swollen and purple, causing his hand to flex outward into a 'natural' position. A thin layer of sand has adhered to the open wound. He does not dare attempt moving his fingers, fearful of the result. The damaged limb secured, he begins the task of trying to exit the car. He pulls himself across the passenger seat. Bracing his good shoulder against the passenger door, he fights the incline with his body to force the door open, pulling himself out of the vehicle onto the embankment. The door slams shut, startling him. With his good arm, he reaches out and uses the door handle to anchor himself as he attempts to get to his feet, but he lacks the strength to stand, and drops on the hot stone chunks. Dazed, dehydrated and delirious, he surveys the area, spotting the two large birds above. They appear to be circling something in the vicinity, and he thinks *perhaps I hit that fox after all.*

After a short rest, he makes another attempt to gain his footing and succeeds. His head throbs, responding to the physical exertion. He makes his way up the embankment to the road. To his right and left, the road stretches out until it can no longer be seen, lost in the wavy blur of beyond. Alone, in the middle of no place, alongside a road which appears to come from, and go, nowhere.

"The loneliest road? Hell yeah it is. Not a single damned rubbernecker, trucker, state troopie. Never a damned cop when ya' need one, anyways. Not one damned random passerby? How long was I out? It's...later. It's hot. Sun's startin' to get ahead of me so...damn. Hot. So friggin' hot today! Skin's burned! Aw, man. My arm. *My arm!* Why does my throat hurt so bad? Like broken razors inside. Fuckin' on fire. I need water. *Damn* this sun!"

Heaving in a deep, arid breath, he prepares for what he imagines will be a loud, confident, man's bellow, belting out from his chords and

echoing off hazy mountains across the empty expanse. He anticipates a cleansing release of frustration, envisions clenched fists shaking at an indifferent sky. What his body produces,

"AAaaaagghh-gh-g-eh-eh-!"

is a half-hearted yell which ends in a coughing fit. His body throbs, his throat aches. Mouth agape, his lips crusted and flaking, an apt reflection of the badlands surrounding him.

"Maybe 2:00 P.M.? Time to think it out, talk it out, whenever it is. Got to *get* myself out. Lemme see...ninety miles out of Ely...still 'round one-seventy to Carson City. *Damn.*" He turns away from the road and looks down the slope at the Camaro, attempting to survey the damage. "Ain't changing no damn tire like this." The arm pulses agreement. "Okay, situation salva-, salav-...savable. Maybe not getting to Tahoe in time, but still getting there. Got an excuse for being a little late, anyhow. Walk it, talk it out. Keep moving. Remain conscious. Someone has *got* to come along. Somebody will stop. They gotta stop when they see the bloody mess I am. Oh, man. My arm. People are always willing to help if you strike the right chord with them, right? Right? Nobody'd just leave a broken man in the desert, now, c'mon. Pick your head up, step it out and do what you do best kid: keep moving forward.

You's got to be in stride  
when you's catchin' a ride,  
or else you gon' look  
like you's tryin' to slide.

Heh. Foolish song of a foolish old man. Hah—*that* old crotchety couple. Too damn dumb to see me stealing from right under their noses. The bitch had a lot of nerve to try and blame me for his death without no evidence, though. Can't believe I'm even remembering that shit right now."

Stumbling through an interconnected string of memories, old and new, his feet wander forward, west on US-50, the loneliest road. But he is not alone. The old man's lyrics have summoned the Spirits of Decisions Past to

accompany him for a while. The vultures never let him stray from sight.

\* \* \*

In Topeka, Kansas, a woman balls up a matte finish memory of him. She sets fire to the memory with a pink Bic Mini, cursing what she believes to be his name. The tears spill forth in a hot flood.

\* \* \*

Somewhere deep in Dixie's heartland, an old woman kisses the tips of her index and middle fingers, pressing them with gentle love against the cold, polished granite headstone marking the place where she buried her heart and soul, her beloved Eliah.

"Don' cha' worry a bit, my love. He gon' get his someday righ' soon. A drifta', maybe even a demon he is. Maybe, maybe he's the Devil himse'f, and he was testin' on us, but I ain't gon' have it. Oh, Eliah, why'd ya' got to be so damned trustin', love? He was makin' othe's do fo' hisse'f, an' you's jus' too kine to take notice. You done died wit' the biggest heart o'dem all. Them scavage's, they gon' take 'is flesh, but they gon' leave 'is soul. Just you wait and see, Eliah. They gon' leave 'im in that place called—"

\* \* \*

High above the Nevada basin, scavengers circle, follow, and wait.

\* \* \*

The sun leaves them all behind, forever racing west.

\* \* \*

Somewhere in Nevada, alongside an infinite stretch of lonely, unused road, the man hobbles west, anticipating a ride. He knows it will come, because it always does. He walks, trying to remember what the old woman said.

(*you's gon' be alone, and one day you's gon' DIE alone—you gon' see—one day you's gon' need somebody, and ain't nobody gon' be there but the scavengers who's jus' like ya'—you's gon' fo'eva' be in—*)

"Something about the way this road feels. Lonely, isolated. What did that old crow say?

I'd find myself somewhere. In a place where I'd be alone, my soul left in—" He stops, mid-thought, staring at the horizon. His head whirls, the feeling of standing up too fast. Equilibrium unharnessed, he stumbles sideways, trips over his feet, and falls to his knees. The glow at the end of the world lingers, refusing to relinquish control to the night. The last ray of sunlight glows beyond the horizon, and then reappears. Gaping, awestruck, his mind attempts to grapple with the impossible observation. *I'm not seeing that. Can't be. It's NOT possible.* He continues to watch as it begins a renewed ascent on the western horizon.

His skin prickles as the wind whispers in his ear. (purgatory)

A horrifying moment of clarity. *She said they'd take my flesh—*"But my soul would be left in a place called Purgatory."

The sun separates itself from the horizon, and the man smiles. This is not reality. Agonizing pain washes over him as he regains his feet, but his confidence is high. Another traveler will be along soon. He will wake soon. *This is all a dream*, he thinks.

(*you's got a stain on that crooked soul o' yours, there and my Eliah o'erlooked the stains on a man, only interested in the hardness o' the man's hands—you mighta looked the part, but 'dem white chompers 'n that priddy boy face say to me that you ain't ne'er been no labora' no place, Nar-cee-sus—You go on 'n get now! My man may not o' known early, but he caught on—cleva' as a fox was ol' Eliah—tol' you to yo' own forsaken face 'n you ne'er even knew Ha! We gon' see who outfoxes who in the end, I 'spose—you taker, I's got pity for you, because you got the trappin's of a deaf 'n blind boy—you cain't see that someone gon' take you one day—you done killed my love and my heart, 'cuz he was holdin' on to both when he died—sweet, trustin' Eliah—past may be 'de past, but it gon' tell the future how to be 'fore it's gone—you gon' get judged for 'dem choices you done made.*)

Watching from above, the scavengers circle, follow, and wait.

\* \* \*

# Coyote

*By Austin Fulton*

In an old haunt of refuse and rot  
I saw a ragged vagabond  
sulk across the road  
with his head bowed low  
like a petty crook with  
beady eyes casting about,  
furtive, slinking from the road  
into the gutter of the wilderness.  
A highway ditch before a farmer's field,  
the slums of nature cluttered and colored with garbage,  
scented with road kill—  
bloating, fetid carcasses swelling in the sun, their bellies roiling with maggots:  
this is his familiar neighborhood.

He avoided plastic bags, soda cans,  
and burger wrappers, his snout to the ground  
swinging back and forth like a divining rod. Wading through the ghetto  
he found a deer pregnant with gasses,  
her legs obscenely spread.  
There was no thanksgiving.  
His head rose with curling jowls  
and I turned away as he fell on the doe.

That quiet rush of gas as the coyote tore at the ballooned belly  
whispered through my imagination.

# Ukiyo-e

*By Bethany Kaylor*

Images come like dreams.  
The stench of wilting honeysuckle,  
in August, the elegy of the bullfrog at dusk.  
And then the swing set, its wooden limbs  
splintered and sagging into the dark  
soft womb of the earth, the blood  
of walnut hulls staining hands green  
like aloe, like algae, like malachite, like grass.

Recollection takes root.  
Your father's song  
as he presses spatula to griddle.  
The neighbor's half-dead cat  
dragging itself across the hot asphalt, mewing.  
A photograph of a young man  
on the pier in late October,  
suit thrown over his left shoulder.  
Water lapping wood,  
wind whistling Vivaldi.

Ukiyo-e.  
Pictures of the floating world  
for sale. Memory  
is the holiest garage sale,  
half-stories bloodied and sacrificed,  
scattered around the altar.



Stephanie King  
**Silhouette**

# *Killing* MR. GIBBS

By Lisa France

“When I get older, I’m going to be a famous hockey player, like Michael Phelps,” Ruben told his older brother, Jimmy, from his position on the handlebars. The duo bounced down the street, the late afternoon sun beating down on their backs, the hint of summer still lingering in the early fall air.

“You don’t even know what hockey is,” Jimmy scoffed, using his two years of advanced experience to patronize his little brother.

“I do so!” Ruben protested, giving the handlebars a good shake, causing Jimmy to swerve rapidly to keep balance.

“Stop that!” he yelled, hitting the brakes to keep them from crashing.

“I didn’t do anything!” Ruben exclaimed.

“You did so,” Jimmy snapped. “You almost caused me to crash.

“Did not.”

“Did so! I saw you.”

Ruben paused for a long moment.

“Did not.”

“If you say that one more time, I’m going to kick you off the handlebars, and then you’ll have to walk home with no shoes on,” Jimmy threatened. And he was as good as his word too. Ruben recalled the many painful times he had to trek home alone, most of them in the rain. He did not want to repeat the experience again.

“Hey, look!” Jimmy said, diverting the argument. “There’s Mr. Gibbs!”

He pointed down the lane towards a hunched

figure at the side of the road. Mr. Gibbs was in his usual spot, sitting in the sun like a giant prune, fermenting from the great amount of whiskey he had no doubt ingested throughout the day. It was like clockwork. Every day Mr. Gibbs escaped the confines of his daughter’s home that she so ungraciously shared with him, and every day he ended up in the same spot. Had the boys been downwind of him, they probably would have thought someone had installed a new minibar up the road.

“Go say hi to him,” Jimmy ordered, prodding Ruben in the back with his finger.

“Why?”

“Don’t you remember? Mom told us to always be polite toward him, on account that he’s probably going to go to hell,” Jimmy hissed, giving his brother another shove.

“I don’t want to,” Ruben whined. “I don’t like people without teeth.”

“Too bad,” Jimmy huffed. “You have to. You almost made me crash, and if you don’t, I’ll leave you here alone with him.”

“Fine,” Ruben grumbled, hopping off the handlebars and making his way slowly toward the formidable figure of Mr. Gibbs, snoring loudly at the side of road, a pile of whiskey bottles decorated around him like one great, glimmering, alcoholic throne.

Mustering up all his courage, Ruben threw one last angry look over at his older brother, who waved him on vigorously, and cleared his throat.

“Hiya Mister!” Ruben said loudly. Mr. Gibbs gave a great start, eyes snapping open, and then gasped, clutched his chest, keeled over, and died.

There was a moment of silence.

“JIMMY! JIIIIIMMMMY!” Ruben cried, eyes glued to Mr. Gibbs, whose tongue was hanging out of his mouth.

“What?”

“Come ‘ere and look!”

“Jesus!” Jimmy exclaimed, looking at Mr. Gibbs in awe-struck horror. “Ruben, you’ve killed him!”

“I have not!”

“You have too,” Jimmy said forcefully.

“Look at him, he’s dead! You’re a murderer!”

“I am not!” Ruben snapped, annoyed. “I just said ‘hi’, is all. And then he died.”

“Are you sure he’s dead?” Jimmy asked, eyeing the old homeless man warily. “Maybe he just fainted. Check and see.”

“No, I don’t wanna touch him, he smells.”

“Yeah, and so do you. That’s probably what killed him. When’s the last time you took a bath?” Jimmy pointed out. Ruben gulped, horrified. He hadn’t taken a bath in over a week.

“What should I do?” he whispered to his older brother, eyes wide at the prospect that Jimmy could be right. He might really be a murderer.

“Yell ‘whiskey,’” Jimmy said thoughtfully, nodding. “He really likes it. If anything will bring him back from the grave, it’s that.”

“Okay,” Ruben said, swallowing hard. “WHISKEY!”

Mr. Gibbs didn’t move. His head remained determinedly rolled back, his tongue still hanging out of his mouth.

“Aww shoot,” Jimmy sighed. “He really is dead. Shoot, that makes you a murderer! And since I’m here, that makes me an accessory to murder!”

“I’m sorry Jimmy, honest. I promise I’ll take a bath more often, once a week even!”

Ruben said earnestly. Jimmy opened his mouth as if to say something, but was stopped by the sound of a bike bell ringing.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Jimmy Jones and his little brother!” a sing-song voice said from behind them.

“Oh, no,” Jimmy whispered. “It’s the loony.”

Both boys turned in absolute terror to see who had addressed them. To their horror, Jimmy was right. It was Lucy Fields, sitting on her bright pink bicycle, her hair in two ponytails, smiling at them. They were really in trouble now.

“Whatcha doing, Jimmy?” Lucy asked, pulling down her bedazzled sunglasses to survey them properly.

“Nothing!” both boys chorused at once, looking at each other in desperation.

“Oh good,” she said. “Then maybe Jimmy can accompany me home. I forgot the way again.”

“How can you forget the way home? Don’t you live there?” Ruben asked in disgust. Lucy gave him a cold look.

“Who’s that?” she asked, craning her neck to see what was behind them.

“NOTHING!” both boys cried.

“Is that Mr. Gibbs?” she asked, getting off her bike. “Is he dead?”

“NO!” they both cried again, trying to block her view. Lucy looked back up at them, raising her eyebrows.

“Yes he is,” she said. “His eyes have rolled back in his head.”

“It’s all Ruben’s fault!” Jimmy said at once, pointing a finger at his brother. Ruben stomped his feet.

“It is NOT!”

“You killed him?” Lucy asked, chewing on her sunglasses and giving Mr. Gibbs another look. “You’re gonna go to jail!”

“I don’t wanna go to jail!” Ruben cried, distraught.

“Then you have to get rid of the body,” Lucy said, shrugging. “It’s the only way you can’t be linked to the crime.”

“Yeah?” said Jimmy, folding his arms. “And how do you propose we do that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not the one who killed him, you figure it out!”

“We could drop him in a vat of sulfuric acid,” Ruben offered. “That way he’ll get eroded into nothing! Bones and everything!”

Jimmy wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“And how do you plan on finding a vat of sulfuric acid?” Lucy pointed out in a very matter-of-fact voice. “If you ask me, I’d say you should take him to Mr. Axton. He’d know what to do with a dead body.”

It wasn’t actually a bad idea. Mr. Axton knew a lot about dead stuff, on account of the fact that he shot things that he found annoying. One time, an insurance salesman had the misfortune to cross paths with him, and as a result got shot in the left buttocks. When he went to trial, the jury sympathized with him so much that Mr. Axton got off without paying even a dime.

“Okay,” Jimmy said. “That’s what we’ll do.”

“How are we gonna get him there?” Ruben asked. “I’m not carrying him, even if it is my fault. He’s fat.”

“Use your eyes stupid,” Lucy snapped. “Don’t you see he’s in a wheelchair?”

“Wheelchair?” Ruben said in surprise, looking to see that she was right. “I didn’t know he was a cripple.”

“He’s not,” Lucy snapped. “He just stole one from the hospital so he wouldn’t have to walk places.”

It was decided that Ruben would get the role of pushing Mr. Gibbs, because it was his lack of bathing that got them into the huge mess anyway. Lucy, noting the state of Mr. Gibbs’s rolled back eyes, took off her sparkly pink sunglasses and put them on his face.

“There,” she said in satisfaction. “He looks

completely, one hundred percent normal.”

Jimmy and Ruben agreed. The only thing that was slightly fishy was that his tongue was still out of his mouth, and no one wanted to touch it to put it right.

“Besides,” Lucy said, “you really don’t know where that thing has been.”

Pleased with their efforts, the children set off up the hill, Lucy and Jimmy on their bikes and poor Ruben pushing Mr. Gibbs’ lardy body with all his might.

“He’s one fat bastard,” he grunted just as they reached the top of the hill, sweat breaking out over his brow.

Jimmy turned around, about to remind Ruben for what seemed to be the millionth time what their mother had told them about swearing. He felt the swell of a good lecture coming on.

“Ruben, what did Mom say about swearing?” Jimmy demanded.

“I didn’t swear,” Ruben said at once.

“You did too! Just then! I heard you, you heard him didn’t you, Lucy?” Jimmy roared at once.

“I did not!” Ruben shouted back, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You little—”

“Uhh Ruben?” Lucy said placidly, cutting across their argument.

“What?”

“You let go of Mr. Gibbs.”

Ruben’s eyes widened in horror and he turned, as if in slow motion, to see Mr. Gibbs, happily zig-zagging down the hill, bouncing along merrily, right toward a busy intersection.

“GET HIM!” Jimmy shouted, and Ruben leapt onto the back of his bicycle, the children taking off in hot pursuit.

At once, it became obvious that it would be no use. Even as they sped down the hill, getting closer and closer to Mr. Gibbs and his wayward wheelchair, they wouldn’t be able to catch him in time. Just as Jimmy was reaching

out, trying to catch onto the handle of the wheelchair, Mr. Gibbs whizzed into the horde of traffic, his tongue flapping merrily in the breeze.

“BREAK!” Ruben screeched, but it was no use. The children, by the force of their motion, followed the dead old homeless man into the sea of speeding cars.

At once it was chaos. Mr. Gibbs zoomed across the road, not even deterred by the amount of cars swerving and screeching to avoid hitting him. He wasn’t even scratched as two cars collided with each other, missing the children by inches as they bounded behind him, all screaming. His head lolled from side to side, the bright pink glasses shining in the afternoon sun as the cars piled into one another, some swerving off the road to avoid the huge collision.

And when he had passed the intersection, he rolled to a pleasant stop, right at the stop sign, the group of children coming in behind him.

“Aww shoot,” Jimmy said, looking at all the cars, their angry drivers starting to emerge, all yelling and honking their horns. “Now look what you’ve done.”

“I’ll take a bath every day for the rest of my life,” Ruben swore, eyes wide.

“You probably won’t get the chance,” Lucy said calmly. “Look who’s coming.”

Ruben gulped as a police car sped towards them, its siren blaring. The car came to a stop, right next to Mr. Gibbs, and an officer stepped out, giving them scrutinizing looks.

“What seems to be the problem here?” he demanded, adjusting his cap and tapping his gun. That’s it, Ruben thought, I’m going to jail.

“I’m so sorry officer,” Lucy said, surprising both of them. “We were just taking Mr. Gibbs for a walk.”

“A walk?” The officer said, leaning in to examine Mr. Gibbs and turning away at once, overwhelmed by the stench of alcohol. “Little

lady, this man is dead.”

Ruben felt sure he might pee himself.

“Dead?” Lucy cried, as though she had no idea that this had happened. And then, to their amazement, she burst into hysterical tears. “Do you m-mean that all this time... He’s... He’s..?”

The officer nodded gravely.

“I’m afraid so, miss,” he said, giving her a pat on the head.

“We had no idea!” She sobbed. “We thought he was sleeping!”

“She’s a natural,” Jimmy breathed in awe, looking at Lucy in a way he had never looked at her before. Ruben had to agree. He had never seen a better actress.

“You poor kids,” the officer said, giving them sympathetic looks. “There’s nothing you could have done, it was bound to happen sooner rather than later. That old drunk.”

“Oh I can’t bear it!” Lucy cried, burying her head in her hands. “I want to go home! I want Jimmy to take me home!”

And then she threw her arms around Jimmy’s neck, shrieking in fake hysterics.

“I’ll take you all home,” the officer said kindly. “Your parents must be tremendously worried.”

By the time he had gotten the kids into the car (it had taken longer than usual, seeing as Lucy refused to let go of Jimmy’s neck), more policemen had arrived. They dropped Lucy off first, and after much crying and thanking of the officer, she was finally returned to her mother. Ruben watched her as they drove away, and he swore she smiled just before her mother led her inside.

“You’d better start wearing shoes,” Jimmy informed Ruben.

“Why?”

“Because,” he said, looking out the window, mystified, “she just saved you and me from going to jail. I think she deserves to ride on my handlebars more than you do.”

# Special

By Michaela Marans

**T**he boy had been told for as long as he could remember that he was special, so special he had to stay in his special room in the basement. Mama always said the world couldn't handle his specialness, so for the good of everyone, he needed to stay inside. The boy did not mind because he had learned to appreciate the dark. The dark hid the boy from himself, the vision of terror each mirror had ever reflected back at him. He knew that mirrors lied; his reflection in his mother's eyes was a lie because her words said he was beautiful. Those words were true. The mirrors of the world were liars. His facial construction was not truly deformed. His fingers were not truly gnarled and crooked. His feet did not truly point inward, and his spine did not zig and zag. Those were the lies told to him by the mirrors of the world. The only mirror he could trust was in his world, in a corner of his special underground. Six feet by two feet, it sat near the furnace and observed him every time he approached it. The cracked image it reflected back at him placed every piece of him in the correct place. His cheekbones aligned. His crooked spine straightened. And he was beautiful. Maybe his mother's words had cracked the mirror for him. He was not sure. But he knew the spot where he stood in front of the mirror was a special place, full of dark warmth and truth. Above him was only a fearful world that illuminated and reflected lies.



Ruby Lambie  
Room Cube

Going down the hills to the funeral parlor was a treacherous drive in the best conditions. The road spooled through dark fir forests veined with the bare skeletal branches of deciduous trees—all of them growing plumb from the rocky earth. Before it spilled onto the valley floor, where it grew traffic lights and a couple of strip malls, there was a nasty chicane with a sunken grade on the outside of the last curve—no guardrail. If you left the road there, the only thing cushioning your crash would be the roofs of houses thirty feet below. Michael cursed the town for not repairing this hazard even

as it threatened to crumble completely away; according to his calculations, that particular stretch of Mallard Hollow Road lost on average three-quarters of an inch every year, and at this rate, the road would be totally washed out in a little under three years; perhaps it will be the Crumley hearse that takes the dive because the town road crew refuses to work in the rain.

Michael babied the hearse through the curves, then rode the brakes down the hill as the road flattened and became wider. The stoplight at the intersection of Mallard Hollow and First Street became visible up ahead through the brushy trees. The hearse emerged from the woods, and the rain came

back diagonally against the windshield. The town was satisfyingly quiet, grainy and sizzling in the rain.

Along the old quarter of Main Street, Michael could see the reflection of the hearse coursing along the window fronts on either side. It was like driving through a tunnel of mercury.

The hearse was a long two-tone gray and black Fleetwood that was somehow more elegant because of what it was.

Michael drove the speed limit.

The whitewall tires sliced the water, fanning it onto the empty sidewalk. The light at Main and 16th turned yellow, and Michael pumped the brakes twice, then came to a

graceful, quiet stop. Lights up and down the streets flipped colors and there was no one to stop or go but Michael in the hearse.

He pulled up to the empty curb in front of London's Market and switched off the engine. The rainwater sluiced past the tires of the hearse. He opened the door, popping his black umbrella open. In his dark gray suit, he looked like a darker part of the gray afternoon—a smudge of gathered rain crossing the sidewalk to the storefront, the water beading and sliding continuously from his umbrella.

He had gone to school with Chris London, an ex-football player two years older than Michael. Chris

had thrown away a promising career at Northwestern (and probably the NFL) due to a second-year drinking, gambling, and whoring problem, so he came back here, and his dad put him up in his shop. And, despite his problems (two-thirds of which were still a problem), he coached junior varsity at the middle school. People trusted their sons with him. Sometimes, Michael disliked the town for its open arms policy that allowed the worst miscreants, the most notorious drunken troublemakers back into the municipal fold based solely on their previous citizenship. Half the town council had taken rampaging breaks from the slow little town at some

point in their lives, and they seemed to be trying to run the town as if they were still on hiatus.

When Michael entered the store, the bell over the door clinked weakly; that same bell had hung over the entrance to London's ever since Michael could remember.

There was a woman with two small girls standing by the racks of candy and when Michael turned down the aisle, the woman placed her hands at the backs of the girls and shooed them to the other end of the store. Michael shook his head. He heard the bell clink a few seconds later as the woman and girls left the store.

His occupation carried

# The Mortician & the Clown

By Rodney Cimburke

with it a grim connotation that caused townspeople (some of which had known him as a child) to avoid him. Michael liked this just fine as it tended to keep him out of conversations with others.

He scooped a large pack of his favorite gum, Big Red, out of its shelf box and turned toward the counter at the front of the store.

Looking at big Chris London standing behind the counter, the cash register at his thighs, Michael thought that he would run for the council. If nothing else, the scorn that would surely be shown him by the incumbents would give him truer reason to dislike them, other than they had no appreciation of the town and the quiet civic order of small-town life.

Chris was taking off his apron. His father still insisted they wear them; part of the small-town charm that made the intermittent tourists spend money.

Chris whistled as Michael came up to the counter. “You in that suit, Michael Crumley,” Chris said. “Very handsome. Trim too. Hey man, you been working out or what? And your skin, so full of color.”

“I take vitamins,” Michael said.

“Yeah. You’re not as young as you once were.”

“You’re older than me.”

“Yeah, but I got the kids. The squad really keeps me fit and feeling young.” Chris dropped his apron on a stool. He pulled on his jacket, removing a flask from the inside pocket. “Yeah, those boys,” he said, stopping to pull from the flask, “they’ll really run you. Try you too, but I keep ‘em straight down there.” He paused with the flask near his mouth, staring through the store at nothing. He took another sip, and screwed the cap back on. He dropped the flask back into his pocket.

“How’s your record?” Michael asked. “I don’t keep up on it much. I read in the paper where the high school boys are already on the road to states, but I haven’t heard anything

about JV.”

“One and three. They’re a great bunch of kids though. They’re tough. Plenty of football left in the season.” Chris patted his jacket to make sure the flask was there.

Michael knew the JV team was shit. He had even heard the varsity quarterback, Danny Bluth’s kid Carson, and his go-to receiver, Stem Paulson talking about the JV team. Not good things. He thought about those poor souls who, although they were freshmen at the high school, still played JV ball. The taunting, the public insults, the hideous pressure applied by the wolf pack mentality of the varsity players. No wonder they weren’t good, they were ashamed to play. It was like that exactly when Michael was in high school. He went out for JV kicker—the laughingstock of the laughingstocks—when he was in eighth grade, and Michael could recall Chris (a petty instigator, always ravenous for attention) as a member of that wolf pack, always taunting.

He had the sudden memory of Chris kicking him in the cafeteria once while he was tying his shoe. It wasn’t a hard kick, more of a foot shove, but it was enough to send him sprawling against the wall. Everybody saw. “Kicking the kicker!” Chris kept shouting, as if anything about the brainless phrase was funny. Yet, the whole cafeteria roared with laughter, many of the girls red in the face from it. Chris threw his arms up, signaling a field goal; Michael could remember the yellow and green letter jacket, laden with pins, riding up on Chris’ tall frame.

“Speaking of which,” Chris was saying, “I have to head on. Practice starts in ten minutes, and my dad won’t be here for another half hour. I gotta close the store. Michael?”

“Yes, Chris. Just getting this gum here,” Michael said. “As usual.”

Michael looked Chris in the eyes for some seconds. He said, “You know that time you kicked me? In high school? You should’ve said,

‘It’s good!’ instead of ‘Kicking the kicker.’”

“Aw, man, come one Mikey, that was a long time ago. Damn. I had totally forgotten about that. Man, the memory on you, huh?”

“I guess so,” Michael said, handing Chris a dollar. “Keep the change,” he said, and left the store.

Outside it was raining harder.

He drove on Main Street past the building fronts, and the park opened abruptly on his right. Over its space Michael saw the funeral home. He went down another block, to Meridian Street, and turned right, keeping it in his sight as he approached.

He passed the fire station. The ever-flashing caution lights suspended above the street swung and drooped in the weather, as if it was the day itself they were cautioning against.

There was a stand of tall firs marking the park’s northern border, and when Michael entered under the dark trees, the funeral home was obscured behind their rushing green. It reappeared when the trees fell away, twice as large, almost monstrous.

He looked up at the peaked facade of the gothic revival. Dark green with ornate white bargeboards. With its curlicues and its fluting, the wide front porch, it could’ve been a bed and breakfast—at the very least, a town museum (the actual town museum was in a back room at the library and community center), but the weird touch of elegance afforded the hearse because a hearse was impossible to bestow on the house because it was a funeral parlor. Its gables glowered.

There was a bunch of blue foil balloons twisting and bobbing on a ribbon tied to the parlor’s mailbox across the street.

On the porch he turned and looked out over the park, the town proper on the other side of it. The space was perfectly kept, quadrangular and neat, and no one was out in the slanting rain.

“Good day for a funeral,” his father said,

stepping out onto the porch behind him.

“What?” Michael said. “I didn’t know there was one today.”

“There isn’t. Not here. Still a good day for one though.”

Michael watched the balloons move. His father closed the door and came to stand beside him at the railing.

“What’s with the balloons?” Michael asked.

“Oh,” his father said. “Those weren’t there when I came out to get the paper this morning. Word travels fast in this tiny place.” Michael looked past the balloons, out across the park, the town, the stoplights colored wetly in the empty streets.

“You always make the town sound so bad. Of course word travels fast, there’s less than five thousand people that live here. What word?”

His father chuckled. “I never said this place was bad, it’s just...small. It doesn’t take long to get tiresome. Predictable. Boring. I happen to like those things, but—”

“I do too.”

“But, not everybody does. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Michael said, looking at the balloons again. “So, what’s this word?”

“Monty Buford died this morning. Not three hours ago. I assume those balloons are for him.”

“Balloons. Okay. We handling it?”

“Yes. You don’t know who he was, do you?”

“Should I? Does he live here?”

“He did, yeah. Left for many years, he would’ve been in his forties. Came back to die here. At home. Or at least that’s what his daughter told me when she called this morning. He’d only been back a few months. He was very bad off, his daughter said, but he went peacefully. When she called, she made it a point to tell me that it had just happened, a few seconds before. Gave me the impression she was poised with her hand on the telephone, watching his breathing. Unsettling.”

“Well, at least she called us.”

“Monty Buford was the clown. Puddles the

Clown.”

Michael stared down at his hands where they clutched the railing. Across the street, the balloons flapped; he had known it the minute he’d seen them, but not known it, or not believed it, that people would be so tacky as to decorate a funeral home with balloons.

He remembered the birthday party, but he didn’t remember which of his friends it was for.

Michael was eight and small for his age. His friend Ronnie Hacker had a little brother, Chester, that was four and a half and the same height as Michael. He remembered needing a booster seat so that his head was even with those of his friends at the long table inside Pit Stop Pizza. The parents sat at a separate table drinking beer and smoking, ignoring the kids’ party. Michael’s dad was not there. There was a funeral that day. Michael remembered because he saw the procession go by the window of the restaurant, and he had seen his father driving the hearse; pale and stiff with decorum, he didn’t turn to look as they passed.

There was a loud honk and Michael jumped. The clown stomped in, dressed in iridescent blue with fuzzy buttons the size of softballs, a darker blue. His face was painted chalk white, with sparkling blue arches over his eyes and a huge red grinning mouth; the mouth was the only thing not blue in the clown’s getup, and it stuck out like a wound. Michael was unable to take his eyes off of that mouth that seemed glistening with blood.

The hair on Michael’s arms stood up and his stomach fluttered when the clown drew near. He cringed every time the clown honked the bulbed horn clipped to the giant lapel of his clown suit; on the other lapel, a giant blue flower stared out at the room full of cheering kids.

The clown went through his act. Most of his gags involved water: he pulled water balloons full of goldfish from his pockets while

pretending to look for something else and gave the fish to the kids, he lifted his round blue hat, water spilling onto the floor (the waitstaff hovering near the party shook their heads), he pretended to throw a bucket of water onto the table, but it was only blue flakes of confetti. When the clown swung the bucket toward the kids, Michael cringed, almost ducking underneath the table.

When his act was over, the clown went around the table, saying goodbye to the kids one by one. When he got to Michael, he bent down so the flower on his lapel was even with Michael’s face.

“Smell it kid,” the clown said.

Michael leaned in, and a gush of water came from the flower’s center, soaking him. Everyone was laughing, especially the parents at the other table. Michael pretended to laugh along with them. He slid out of his booster seat and went to the bathroom to dry off as best he could (he hadn’t thought he’d need to bring a change of clothes), and when he was alone in a stall, he sat down on the toilet lid, and shook and cried.

Michael remembered seeing the clown around the small town sometimes, always in makeup and costume, never as a human.

Often, Puddles the Clown would set up shop in the park: the water gags, balloon animals, the whole thing. Michael hated those times when his father took him to the park and the clown was there, a ring of kids (and adults) gathered around smiling and cheering as the clown went through his tired old routines. Michael never went near. If the clown was by the swingsets, Michael wanted to play on the slides, if the clown was near the picnic tables, Michael would beg his father to take him to buy a kite so they could fly it in the meadow on the opposite side of the park. When his father caught on and asked him about the clown, Michael just said he was afraid of him, which was true,

but Michael never told his father (or anyone) about the incident at the birthday party, which had compounded that fear with unforgettable embarrassment.

For years, he saw the clown around the town: in the park, along main street, in the grocery store. Puddles was everywhere, and Michael remembered thinking the clown was following him, intent on making his life miserable because the clown knew he was afraid of him. He had begun to hate the clown more than he feared him. He could remember the relief he felt when he stopped seeing the clown and was sure he had left the town for good. That relief seemed to dissolve as he stood there on the porch of the funeral home watching those blue balloons sway.

“I remember him,” Michael told his father. The porch railing began to creak under Michael’s grip.

“Well,” Michael’s father said, causing him to jump. “We’d better get going.” Michael stared at him. “To get Monty Buford? Her daughter is expecting us.”

“Oh. Right. Right,” Michael said, jingling the hearse’s keys in his pocket.

Buford’s house was in the poorest part of town. It sagged, and large peels of yellow paint were hanging off the walls, revealing the old blue underneath. Buford’s daughter Denise was waiting for them on the warping porch. She wore a water-blue dress that didn’t come to her knees and a necklace of big pearls.

Michael remembered her from school. She was quiet like him, and they had hardly ever crossed paths, although Michael remembered her eyes when she looked at him—big innocent eyes, a little afraid, but somehow warm and a little challenging, even defiant. He never spoke to her, as she was a grade below him, and Michael already caught enough grief from his schoolmates, not only for the JV kicker thing, but also because he was the son of the town undertaker. Even then, the job that his father did—that he would one day do himself—hung

about him like a dark shroud, and most kids that didn’t make fun of him shunned him altogether. He would watch her sometimes, but could never hold her gaze when she looked at him. They were the same in their loneliness, and separated from each other by it.

Denise had stayed in the town just as Michael had, working as a nurse at the local medical clinic. He had seen her there on the few occasions that he’d needed medical attention: a sprained ankle, a badly burned right hand from losing his balance and falling against the wood stove in his tiny house up in the hills, strep throat. Still he never talked to her. She was always doing something else in the clinic when he was called to the back to see the doctor, but he felt those huge eyes on him. He didn’t know as a kid, and wouldn’t let himself believe as an adult, that he regretted never getting to know her.

He looked at her now, admiring the pale smoothness of her lower knees where the dress fell.

While Michael unloaded the gurney from the back of the hearse, his father approached the porch slowly, the appropriate expression on his face, the ideal timbre in his voice. “Miss Buford? Hello, I’m Charles Crumley, we spoke on the phone. We are sorry for your loss.” He took Denise’s hand. “My son Michael and I will take care of all the arrangements, so please don’t hesitate to ask if you require anything.”

“Thank you Mr. Crumley.”

“Charles, please.”

“Thank you. Charles. My father is right in here.” She turned into the house, Michael’s father following as he rolled the gurney up to the porch. Again, he looked at her legs, the soft fold of the back of her knee as she led the way to the body of her father.

The house was dark and cluttered. It took a little time to navigate through, Denise scurrying before them moving boxes and scattered furniture out of their way, the giant pearls on her necklace swinging against her chest.

“I’m sorry,” Denise said. “It’s not usually this messy, but ever since dad came back, he wanted to take some of his things out of storage, and...”

“It’s okay,” Michael heard himself say. “It’s really no problem. We’re fine.” He searched his memory; he was certain that was the first time he had ever heard her speak. Her voice was smooth, steady like her eyes.

Michael stopped pushing the gurney and looked at her, smiling. She smiled back, pushing a strand of shiny golden hair behind her ear. Michael’s father cleared his throat, and they continued into the bedroom.

Monty Buford laid uncovered on his bed. Next to him, perfectly composed, was the blue clown suit Michael remembered him wearing at the birthday party; he stood staring at it as his father unfolded the sheet they would move him to the gurney on.

Denise stood in the doorway, and every time Michael looked at her, she was looking at him with those big unwavering blue eyes. Still with that defiance they had in high school. She scarcely looked at the body of her father as Michael and his father moved it onto the gurney. One of Buford’s arms dangled loosely from the side of the gurney and still she looked at Michael; he could see her now out of the corner of his eye.

“So, should I follow you down there?” Denise asked. “To the funeral home? There are some specifics about the funeral my father asked me to talk to you about.”

“Of course,” Michael’s father said.

Once they had the body on the gurney, Michael stood looking down at the suit but only seeing the birthday party when he was eight. There was a huge blue flower pinned to the suit’s lapel.

“He wants to be buried in it,” Denise said. “I’ll bring it with me.”

They got the gurney down the porch steps and into the back of the hearse, the gurney’s

legs scissoring neatly as they slid it into the back. As they were pulling out of the drive, Denise stood on the porch watching them go. She made eye contact with Michael behind the wheel and smiled again, waving. Michael raised his hand in return, smiling back at her.

“Well well well,” his father said over the smooth revving engine.

“Be quiet,” Michael said. He couldn’t get the image of her exposed lower legs out of his head—her little feet in the plain black flats, the crevices between her toes just visible.

When they got back to the funeral parlor, there were more balloons, and there were people moving about in the park, setting up brightly colored canopies, blue pennants flapped on the guy wires.

“Holy hell,” Michael said.

“Yep,” his father said.

Michael’s father began to prepare the body in the basement while he sat with Denise in the receiving room, discussing her father’s wishes. The flat light came through the high arches of the windows. She had her father’s clown suit folded in her lap, and she was looking at a piece of notebook paper she had pulled from her blue-sequined purse.

“All it really says is for you to do the suit and the makeup personally,” she said. “There are instructions and a diagram here for you.” She handed the paper across and Michael folded it in half without looking at it, sliding it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

He shivered.

“Me, huh?” Michael said, looking out the windows across the road to the park. There were many more people now, and more cars were pulling up. A bouncy castle flumped upright and children cheered.

“Your dad was a popular man,” Michael said.

There were people he recognized—adults that had once been the children gathered around the clown wherever he went, and

their children with them—and many Michael didn’t recognize; the clown’s fame and reach had obviously not been limited to this small town, and he felt foolish for ever having been afraid of the clown, but then he supposed, he was a kid, with a kid’s fears, which were often themselves foolish, unfounded. But what kid could know that at the time?

“I guess this will go on until after the funeral?” Michael asked.

“As far as I know it will,” Denise said. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“No, I guess not.”

“I remember you from high school,” she said abruptly.

He turned from the windows to look at her. There was pink in her pale cheeks. He held his gaze for a few seconds, then looked down into her lap at her hands. She spread her fingers, inspecting them. She had sparkly blue polish on her short, neat nails.

“I remember you too,” Michael said. He opened his mouth to say something else, then closed it again.

“Been a while,” she said, looking back up at him.

“Yes it has,” Michael said too quickly.

“Hey, would you like some coffee or tea or anything?” He said, getting up.

“Yes. Tea please. English breakfast if you have it.”

“I believe we do, yes,” Michael said, turning to leave the room.

“You’ve never left, have you?” Denise said.

“No. You?”

“Nope. Do you like living here? Have you liked it?”

“Sure. I mean, it can be slow at times. Small. But I like those things.”

“Yeah, I guess I do too, but...I don’t know.”

Michael didn’t respond, and it was very quiet in the room. A heavy clock chimed in one of the back rooms and occasionally someone whooped in the park.

“Well,” Michael said, “how’s the job at the clinic? That place seems like it would be a nice place to work.”

Denise sighed, turning her head to look out the windows at all the blue gathering in the park. “It’s *alright*,” she said.

Michael stood looking at the cords pulled taut in her milky neck, the fall of the giant pearls across the top of her breasts. “I’ll go and start that tea,” he said.

“It’s good he’s dead,” she said, still looking out the windows. Her steady voice wavered.

Michael stopped halfway to the kitchen. He turned back and she was no longer looking out the windows onto the park, but directly at him. Those huge eyes, now swimming in tears that had yet to spill. He sat back down across from her and took her tiny, soft hands in his.

“Denise,” he began.

“Michael, it’s not like that,” she said.

“Like what?”

“You think I’m glad he’s dead because I hated him. Don’t you.”

“Well, I kind of got that impression when you said, ‘It’s good he’s dead.’”

She smiled. “How was it being the mortician’s kid growing up?”

“About like you’d expect.”

“I watched you. I knew who your father was.”

“You and everybody else.”

“I know what it was like. People hated me because my dad was Puddles the Clown. Well, not hated, so much, but everyone was so weirded out by me. You know?”

“I do,” he said. “I really do.” He looked away from her, but she wouldn’t let him pull his hands away.

She told him that while there was a time she had hated her father for being who he was, that time had long passed. She said that she didn’t care—at least not now—how the kids had taunted and shunned her for the profession of her father, because her father

had taught her how silly life could be, and how precious. How life was something to be enjoyed for its hilarity and its seriousness, and how one complimented the other in such a way that made her enjoy every single moment. That lesson had helped her deal with the loss of her mother at a young age, and had helped her cope with her father too getting sick and deciding to leave the town he loved behind to split his remaining time between a cancer center back east and his surviving family members scattered between here and there. She told him how easily the peace of his passing came to her in his final hours, how then, all he could do was crack jokes, and remember the smiling times when they were all together: father, mother, and daughter. How all he had wanted for her in the end, was to be at peace with his passing, to realize there's nothing that she could do besides not moping around in grief like she had done when her mother had died.

When she had finished, Michael was the one with the wet eyes.

"Denise," he said, clearing his throat and looking away, "I'm sorry, I—"

"Michael, that's just it. There's nothing to be sorry for. He lived a great life, and so did mom, and so have I for that matter, thanks to him and her. It's good he's finally dead because he's not suffering, and it was his time—he was finished. I'm glad that so many people have shown up to honor his wishes for a party of blue instead of a depressing funeral of black." She let go of his hands. "Now," she said, thumbing the tears from her eyes, "how about that tea?"

Michael flipped the lightswitch at the bottom of the basement stairs. The lights clinked and flickered on, shining on the body of Monty Buford. He walked over to the table slowly and laid the clown suit on a chair.

The clown wore royal blue boxer shorts. His chest and belly were rounded, pale and

nearly hairless.

The suit was a one-piece, and it was difficult for Michael to slide it over the stiff body by himself, but since it was the request of the deceased that he dress and make up the body himself, he was bound.

Once he got the suit on and buttoned up, Michael smoothed out the wrinkles and stood back to look at it. He tugged on the soft fabric in a couple of places, stepped back to look again, and was satisfied. He'd have to make small adjustments again, of course, when his father helped move the body into its blue satin-lined casket, but that would be easier, as not as much of the suit would be visible in the deep folds of the coffin.

The makeup (which Denise had handed him along with the instructions, their fingers brushing softly) was easier to apply than he thought it would be. Even that horrid curved gash of a mouth went on quickly, evenly. His guard was up, but he felt an odd sort of comfort in applying the final touches to the dead clown; the pride he had in his work took over by the end, and when Michael was finished, he stood looking at the clown, a little disappointed that he was done.

He went over the suit one last time. He looked at the flower. He ran his fingers around its neat ring of petals. The flower was real, an aster, dyed, Michael guessed, because that color of blue seemed unnatural for the flower. There was a loose thread where one of the stitches of the lapel's buttonhole had come unraveled. Michael leaned in to snap the tiny string off; if he noticed it, someone else undoubtedly would. When he pulled it, the flower jetted water into his face. He leapt back, screaming. A metal tray of instruments clattered to the floor. For a moment it seemed as if the decorated clown was sitting up on the table, laughing at him, but he was still.

Michael backed against the far wall and scooted down to the floor. His heart was

hammering quickly and the blood rushed loudly in his ears. Then he began to laugh.

He laughed for a long time there on the basement floor, the dead clown on the table above him. He shook his head, saying, "He got me again! Man! The son of a bitch got me again." He was still laughing when his father opened the basement door.

"What the hell was that?" His father asked.

Michael wiped his streaming eyes and said, "He got me again. Ho boy, did he ever. Ho boy." He began to laugh again.

He explained to his father about the birthday party, and it was the first time Michael had mentioned anything about it to anyone. His father began to laugh himself.

The day of the wake, Michael walked over to the park. He weaved his way through jugglers, black-clad magicians, and clowns, a blue, honking ocean of clowns. He saw Denise standing at the back of the line for a dunk tank. She had her back to him and he looked at the curve of her hips in a shiny blue dress (not the same one she wore when they had sat together in the front room) as he walked up behind her. At first, he just stood in line behind her, and she did not know he was there. He looked back at the funeral home towering across the street from the park. With its outdone trimwork and slate tile roof it looked like a giant gingerbread house, warm and inviting, not so hard and sterile, so final, as it had always seemed before.

"Hey," he said behind her.

She turned around, her hair flipping onto her rosy cheek. Her eyes were a fiery blue to match her dress, and just about everything around them.

"You ever think about maybe leaving this place?" Michael asked, smiling.

He picked her up at her house shortly after her father was buried. She came out wearing yet a different blue dress. She looked very good crossing the patchy yard to where he waited in

the hearse.

"Don't you have a car?" She said, sliding into the passenger seat, her dress riding up.

"Sure I do, but I've just become accustomed to driving this," he said, stroking the gray dashboard lovingly.

He goosed the engine out of her gravel driveway, the hearse's tires squealing when they grabbed the asphalt of the road. Denise whooped, stamping her feet in the carpeted floorboard.

The weather had cleared during her father's interment, and the sky was a radiant blue as if the heavens themselves were in confederation with the celebration of Puddles' life. The hearse climbed the winding road toward Michael's small house in the hills, and the sunlight was very bright where it was barred through the trees. There was a warm breeze that swayed the firs slightly, giving them the attitude of waving in hello or goodbye. The deciduous trees were dotted around with lime green buds.

There was a flagman straddling the double yellow lines of the road where it bent back on itself. Michael slowed. The flagman spoke something into a walkie talkie, then put it to his ear so that he might hear the response. He waved the hearse through.

Where the road had been crumbling away, the town road crew had set up a barricade of cones and yellow tape. There was an asphalt truck parked precariously, and three men with shovels worked the steaming asphalt out of the truck and into the missing chunk of road.

As the hearse crawled past, the men stood from their work. Michael waved at them, and drove on.

# One Hundred and Ninety Calories

By Makenzie Quinn

**ONE** serving of peanut butter was one hundred and ninety calories. One hundred and ninety calories was two tablespoons of peanut butter. Two tablespoons was barely anything. The aisle was quiet and I was surrounded by cans of soup. I put my hand on my hip, sucked in, and lifted my chin. I kept my eyes on the jar. The serving size was a fucking lie. I would eat more than two tablespoons. I've been standing here too long looking at the label. I shoved my shoulders back, walked to the end of the aisle, and set the peanut butter jar down next to the display of refried beans. I kept my tongue on the roof of my mouth with my neck extended and walked away.

I picked out the four best looking green apples and put them in a plastic produce bag. They swung next to my slender legs as I moved throughout the produce section of the grocery store. The plastic's movement made swishing sounds against my kneecaps. I went toward the lettuce. There were so many kinds of fucking lettuce. A decaying woman was fingering purple and dark green ribbed leaves. I walked past the avocados, cherry tomatoes, and red peppers until I found a container of raspberries. I ate one after the other while wandering around the store. I sucked in hard while looking at the food I would never buy. Cookies and crackers and loaves of bread looked like my bloated face that washed out all my features in the picture from my 8th grade graduation. Raspberries reminded me how hungry I was and that tasted sweet like size 4 jeans fitting loose. I noticed a clerk with a contorted expression watching me eat so I flipped my blonde hair and gave him a coy smile. I looked down at the ground, pretending to be embarrassed, and then back up at him. With my eyes and my body and my pretty face, I told the clerk I was a good girl who would be bad for him. I told him I was a naughty raspberry shoplifter, and in desperate need of a spanking. He had a rat nose and the fat near his jaw hung low, dangling off his body. His eyes were beady too, like a rodent's, and his facial hair was sparse and patchy like pubic hair. By giving people attention I had learned that I could have whatever I wanted. I was a happy girl stealing berries who looked at

deformed looking men because I was pretty and it was the nice thing to do. I gave ugly people boners. I was generous.

Setting down the empty raspberry container on top of a cereal box, I made my way back to the refried beans. I grabbed the jar of peanut butter and left the store without paying, the bag of apples still swaying near my thighs.

As I walked back to my apartment I caught my reflection in the window of a dry cleaners and adjusted my hair so pieces framed my face. As two plain looking girls passed me, I felt their eyes go to my tight tummy, which was fully exposed because of the crop top I had on. In the window of a Starbucks I noticed my armpit fat sticking out. I tucked my skin into my shirt just in time to make eye contact with a cute guy in a light blue button up. I watched as he looked me up and down and when we passed I made sure to swing my hips correctly so my butt would seem perky and not flat. My reflection in a large truck reminded me to suck in and bite down on my cheeks. I saw a thin brunette outside of my apartment complex with giant tits the size of melons. I visualized my closet as I opened the door to my apartment. I knew I wanted to wear a dress for tonight and the new lavender one made my ass look tight and round.

None of my roommates were home so I set the apples and peanut butter down on the coffee table, turned on the TV, and went to the kitchen to grab a knife. *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* was on. Slicing the apple in half, I felt weak and dizzy. It was almost four o'clock, and I'd had a yogurt, coffee, water, and raspberries. The episode on was one I'd seen before, the one where Scott wants to have anal with Kourtney, and complains about how they've never done it. Kourtney says she will take it in the ass only if Scott does so first with a dildo. I set one half of the apple down next to the peanut butter and bit into the other half. Sweet, cold, and crunchy, I ate the whole thing without pausing, barely giving myself time to chew.

I watched as Kourtney, on TV, opened the box that contained the strap on dildo she had ordered. I grabbed the other half of the apple and sliced it into bite size pieces. Kourtney slid on the dildo like a pair of panties, laughing at herself and her new, large penis. I dipped an apple slice into the jar of peanut butter and suckled on the salt and the sweet of the two together. As I swallowed, I dipped another piece of apple into the jar and then into my mouth without hesitating. Every new slice got more and more peanut butter than the next. Kourtney showed Scott her new dick and swung it around in front of his face as I dipped and chewed and swallowed. All the slices were gone but only the

second half had gotten peanut butter and if I ate fast enough it was like no one would notice or it wasn't real or it would be over soon. I used two fingers to eat large scoops plain.

My fingers swiveled around the outside container and I wiped it clean. I did it again. I cleared the plastic mouth of the container with my index finger, sucked it off, and then did it again. Peanut butter clung to my chin, was smeared down the back of my hand, all over my fingers, and some even in the strands of hair that framed my face. Kourtney's large cock swayed as she chased Scott around the house and I waited ate faster because at commercial I would have to stop.

An advertisement for Clorox bleach came on and I stood up, prepared and eager. A third of the jar was gone. Peanut butter had filled in all the lines in my hands, around my nails and under them. I grabbed the jar and ran up the stairs, opening the sliding glass door to the deck. I threw the peanut butter over a tall row of bushes, and it landed in the neighbor's yard. I washed the peanut butter off my hands and hair and then knelt down in front of the toilet bowl. I put my hair up and my two fingers went to the back of my throat. They tasted like the passion fruit soap. I twiddled my fingers fast like alternating between keys on a piano. My stomach lurched and brown watered-down mucus fell into the bowl. I twiddled my fingers again at the back of my throat but only the same amount came up. It wasn't enough. I shoved three fingers down as far as I could so the sides of my mouth split and stung from my fist. I choked and gagged but didn't pull my hand out. Finally my body convulsed and a heavy amount of pink, green, and brown appeared in the bowl. Everything I had eaten today was accounted for. I threw up three more times to be safe.

Flushing the toilet, I washed my hands, and then stared at my swollen red face in the mirror. I smiled. My eyes were watering and red. My teeth were white and straight. My nose was attractive at all angles and my oversized blue eyes remained rare and mesmerizing. Turning off the bathroom light I went into my room to start getting ready and find that dress as Ellen and Rachel got home.

"Lindsey! Hey slut bag! You home?!" Ellen called from the bottom of the stairs.

"Hey my bitches!" I shouted, with a grin they could hear from the top of the stairs.

"You getting ready?" Ellen yelled up, "We are so raging tonight!"

"Fuck yes we are!" I yelled down. "I'm bringing out the sassy shoes and my fuck me dress!" I heard myself say.

# A Monologue for Jocasta

By **Tahni J. Nikitins**

*Enter JOCASTA, throwing wide the doors  
Erupting into her bridal chambers  
The sneer upon her pale face –  
Even her lips are ashen –  
Setting her maid-girls' hearts  
To a frightful race.*

JOCASTA     Leave me!

*Her voice an echo like thunder  
The maid-girls clutching their breasts  
Cower 'neath their towering madam  
As she aims her sharp-pointed finger  
Out the iron doors.*

JOCASTA     Leave this place  
                 Leave me to my bed-sheets  
                 Leave me to their memories.

*Rushing past  
Not a one looks back  
But pauses to close the door  
To make the world silent  
In the bedchamber of Jocasta and her Oedipus.*

*JOCASTA stands alone in silence  
Wraps her weary arms 'round her  
And turns to her audience  
Cloaked in shadow beyond the glare  
Of the stage lights.*

I am doomed to die  
                 Offstage  
                                 Isolated  
                                         Quietly  
As women –  
                 Even queens –  
                         Do.  
Someday, my daughter –  
                 One of them, at least –

Will have her say.  
Two and a half thousand years from now  
Her aunt by marriage  
Her would-be-mother-in-law  
Will, too.  
                 She'll forgive you  
                 For forgetting her.  
Even fair Ophelia wreathed in flowers made of air  
Will one day  
Stop killing herself.  
But I...

*JOCASTA turns away  
And on small steps  
Glides towards her bridal bed:*

I am alone with my bed-sheets  
                 And all their memories.  
                 So here is mine.

*JOCASTA with one hesitant hand  
Reaches out to her rumpled bed  
To touch the fine linens fit for kings  
As though they were  
A child's cheek.*

O, sweet babe –  
                 Was I, a child-bride  
                 Wed and made a queen and within the month swollen –  
O, this wandering curse –  
                 A thing which wormed into my womb  
                 A promise made by torrid sheets to end me.

*JOCASTA unwinds her arm  
From her weary torso  
Thinned from the years  
Which have pecked at her like crows;  
Aged by five children, one husband she has born.  
Into the bed-sheets she curls those weathered hands  
Which have pulled children from between her thighs  
Clothed them, fed them – after the first  
Whom she threw to the wolves:*

I tear these sheets as I've been torn –  
The curse, they say, a seed of Thebes  
    My husband's seed, and mine –  
A poison in my blood – it makes my heart sick, my stomach bleed –  
    O gods who've seen it fit  
    To breed pollution in this being  
        Can you find it in you  
        To bleed it from her now?

*JOCASTA tears the sheets and with a scream  
Tears her garments from her body  
To better reach her breasts  
So she can tear them, too.*

A curse we knew he would be  
They took the babe from me –  
    A little tiny mewling thing, no harm to me he seemed.  
But pluck him squalling wet and red  
Out of my hands they did –  
And allow them  
    I am impassive  
I did not watch when they took my son to die.  
    I would, I would...I would I'd done it myself.  
        Only a mother knows  
            How to properly smother  
            The life she has bestowed.

*JOCASTA drops the torn and tattered rags  
Once the dress of a queen  
To cross the stage towards the blade  
Her husband-son kept upon his desk.  
Of an audience so densely full  
Not a one moves to stop her.*

And so a curse comes home  
To where it's meant to be.  
This man, this son of mine – a husband in my bed  
Has fathered on me children...curses upon curses  
    The gods so love their jokes.  
    See they not fit  
    To bleed the curse from me?  
        Then let me bleed me –

Let me drain it from its source –  
from such wretched pollution I will set  
me free.

*JOCASTA draws the blade from inside of elbow  
To inside of wrist  
A long thin line where the skin wide splits  
And after a moment of hesitation, the blood comes forth  
No blacker for the poison.  
The audience holds their breath.*



Miró Merrill  
Untitled

# Variables By Neil Davidson

Bryce believes firmly in the luxurious predictability of numbers. Even the most frivolous and elusive of variables is essentially predictable. It cannot, willingly or otherwise, contradict its own nature. The rebellious integer remains fixed within the rules of its rebellion. The rules of Bryce's rebellion have dictated that he resist his father's wish that he would go to college. Bryce hides from the bustling crowds, a world of too many uncontrollable factors to calculate, and pores safely on the numbers and formulae hidden deep inside the textbooks he purchased for himself.

His cell phone erupts on the corner of the plywood desk, a sudden onslaught of pale blue light, half-buried beneath a small cluttered pile of paper scribbled on with numbers until it resembled a sheet written with some foreign hand. Bryce grabs the phone, and turns it over on the desk, stifling the light; it would be his mother calling, perhaps about his father. Bryce hopes that nothing changed, but with the light removed, his eyes quickly adjust to the half-dark once more, and he looks back down on his new sheet of scribbblings. He smiles, forgetting the blue glow, and returns to his world of variables.

Bryce emerges from the permanent dusk of his studio apartment, and shields his eyes from sunlight, high and clear, in the frozen blue of the sky. The infinite complexity of numbers and formulae, for the moment, left behind him. He walks toward his childhood home and his parents, who daily shrink into old age, when he sees an elderly man at the edge of a park several blocks from the apartment that he has lived in for the past year. Bryce has seen

him many times before. The old man is fixed in place like the stone bench that he sits on.

"Come and play," the old man says. His voice is far softer than Bryce would have supposed. The man has a Scrabble board on the table in front of him, and the opposite stone bench is vacant. "I've seen you walking before. Come and play a game with an old man."

"I-I'm sorry. I don't have the time," Bryce says, turning his face away from the bright-eyed man. His eyes look like they belong to a man twenty years younger, as though his life were so blessed that they never had the hope crushed out of them. The speckled gray and brown of his beard is just beginning to show itself against the crags of his face, and his coat has faded from what must have once been black. His elbow peeks out from the hole in the sleeve. The skin seems so light it could be a child's. His hands look soft in the winter's afternoon chill. "I need to get going."

"Maybe that's the problem, son. You're too busy," the old man says. "If you never have time for a silly game with an old man, maybe you should slow down. C'mon. One game."

Bryce reluctantly sits.

"You know the rules, yeah?"

Bryce nods.

"Don't talk much, do we? That's fine. Your game will do the talking." He shuffles the tiles in a bright purple Crown Royal bag. The rhythm of the old man's shuffling reminds Bryce of the rattling gears of his father's broken pocket watch. The same three beat rattle. Bryce is comforted by the sound. As far back as he can remember his father carried a pocket watch with him, and to Bryce it seemed to

have been broken as long as it had ever existed. It was like God, that watch, always there but never doing anything—never moving forward. The gears stuck in place, and the hands remain perpetually still. His father would swing that watch back and forth when he was nervous, and flip it open with a swift push of his thumb on the top button near the chain attached to his belt loop. It was stopped at 3:12. His father would then shake the little tomb of gears, and the mechanical bones would rattle. It was an affectionate sort of ritual, and his father never seemed disappointed at the inaccuracy of the watch. Sometimes Bryce could swear he saw a slight flicker of a smile when his father looked at the watch, but, more often, he seemed entirely unaware of what he did. The swinging of the chain was a strange kind of instinct—vestigial, but now it seemed that the evolution of his Father had weeded out the movement. He spun the watch on its shining chain less and less, until one day he stopped, and the chain no longer hung loosely from his hip. That safety no longer tethered his father to the health and vitality of his younger years, or so Bryce sometimes thought. It sat in a drawer for years, unused, until Bryce stole it. He carries it with him everywhere, hoping and praying for the stability that it brings.

The old man holds out the purple bag toward Bryce.

“Grab your seven tiles,” he says. “You got a name, son?”

Bryce quietly answers and grabs the tiles.

“You remind me of my boy, Bryce,” the old man says, and his face briefly contorts like a flinch as he says it. “He’s—he was a good child. I ain’t heard from him in a while though.” His fist clenches and unclenches at his hip, until Bryce lays down four tiles. The old man seems to leap at the opportunity to think of something else, and his expression

becomes one of gratitude as he looks down on the battered corners of the Scrabble board.

“You’re still young,” the old man says. “You’ll know loss one day, boy, and it’ll change you. I don’t mean to scare you, but it happens to all of us.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Bryce says. His voice wavers like he doesn’t quite believe it himself.

“You really believe that, son? Because you’ll see what I’m telling you one day. You have to make sure to be there. It ain’t easy to know when someone is going to disappear.”

Bryce can’t say anything against the barrage of discomfort. There is no known constant to plug in, no mystical combination of words that he can introduce to cancel out the flood of memory that the old man has forced him into. He remembers Jared pale and sickly in the paper-thin hospital sheets.

“I r-really need to go,” Bryce finally says. He retreats back into the safety of his home, but the memories are relentless and unsolvable. He tries to throw himself into a proof that has eluded simplification for the past week, but the numbers blur in his eyes as they fill with tears. He falls into his bed, a pillow clutched tightly to his chest, and weeps.

The water from the hose in Bryce’s hand catches the curve of the bowl and showers his face with dishwater. He tries to ignore the dewy collection of drops attached to the hair of his arm up to his elbow. A drop tickles as it rolls down the bridge of his nose. He gruffly brushes it off with a sleeve.

“Hey, Bryce,” Bryce tries not to jump at the low rumble of the man’s voice. “Could you do a run on the bus tubs in the lobby? After that you can go ahead and clock.” Jonathan’s sandy-blond hair looked impeccable with the part just off of center as per usual. He looked exactly like the kind of person that should be

promoted to supervisor within six months of being hired—clean and sculpted like consummate professionalism. His rise within the company was a linear, rise of predictable slope unlike Bryce’s own stagnated plateau.

Bryce nods, and Jonathan goes back to do whatever it is that other people do in the restaurant. Bryce likes the dish pit, spraying down the uniform plates and bowls, circling the lobby with the same route. A route that was programmed into his legs over the past year by every time he refused to deviate from it. He quickly lugs back the black plastic tubs that rattle and clank with glass, ceramic, and metal dishes.

“Thanks, Bryce,” Jonathan shouts from the kitchen. Jonathan is one of the only people in the restaurant who still tries to connect with him, and Bryce appreciates the attention. He smiles at Jonathan when he walks out, but the other’s attention is fixed on a troublesome ticket.

“Tonya! What the hell is this supposed to read? We can’t read this shit.”

Tonya rushes to the back, and doesn’t see Bryce as she passes him, his back pressed firmly against the wall to allow her room in the narrow hall. She glares as she rushes by, shouting incomprehensible abbreviations of menu items.

On his way to the door Bryce sees that the special today is nine ninety-five, the total of the troublesome ticket is twenty-four thirty-five, and the card printout laying on the counter only wrote in a tip of sixteen percent, despite the standard tip for adequate service being eighteen percent. The door slams itself shut behind him, and he begins his usual walk to his parent’s home. From across the street he sees their bustling lives growing slower and slower with age. But today he doesn’t. He turns and heads back to the old man and the park,

and the already gray sky darkens a bit more.

“Another game, son?” the old man says.

The sky over the park looks ready to burst, but Bryce sits on the stone bench opposite the old man anyway. His Scrabble board is already out, and lightly decorated with tiles.

“Scared of a little rain? It’s the price we have to pay for the beauty all around us.” He waves a gently wrinkled red hand to the trees and green surrounding the path. “What a beautiful world,” he says, seeming to have forgotten that Bryce was there at all, but he soon returns and shakes up the purple sack of tiles. “Thanks for humoring a crazy ol’ codger.” He chuckles at his own self deprecation, and for a second he looks like he believes his own mockery. His jaw sags into a depressed scowl, but then the smile emerges once more, but weaker than it was. “I’ll try to finish it quick.”

He lays down a word: “Thwart,” twenty-four points. Bryce uses the ‘a’ to lay down “Adopt,” eight points. There was something that Bryce found comforting about the man who always remained on the same stone bench with the same board game tucked underneath his arm. The predictability of the old man’s ritual had seduced Bryce.

“I have lost someone, you know,” Bryce says.

The old man looks up, his hand hovering over the board with a tile in it.

“His name was Jared,” Bryce says. “Cancer took him a year ago.”

“Why are you telling me this?” the old man says. There is no trace left of his former smile.

“You told me about your son.”

“But that was my own damn fault, boy. You didn’t deserve seeing another man die. There ain’t nothing that could deserve that.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I shouldn’t have stolen the watch from my father,” Bryce says.

He feels the watch's heavy presence in his pocket. It weighs on him.

"The watch?"

"I've seen it do strange things, that watch," Bryce says, lost in thought his gaze travels downward from the old man until he stares at a single branch on the ground. "There was a moment when I was far younger, only a child, where father grew terribly ill. No one talked to me about it, but I could still see how terrified my mother was, and all the while father's pocket watch was locked away in the top drawer of his desk. I saw him getting weaker every day. Then he took that watch out one day, and I know that it saved his life. His color came back, and I watched it with my own eyes."

Neither of them say anything for a moment.

"It wasn't as if he was using it," Bryce continues. "Father had put it away himself. It was his choice to change. I only stole it after—Jared could have used it. Could have held it. Maybe if I had convinced myself to give it to him I wouldn't have had to watch him go."

"Boy, that watch could never have changed nothing," the old man says. "There's no way it could have. I know you think you know what you saw, but it's just a watch."

Bryce's head snaps up, and he looks at the old man, unbelieving.

"It's about time that I left," Bryce says. "Thank you for the game, sir."

Bryce heads to his childhood home from the park quickly at first, but when he sees the vibrant white paint faded into a soap-scum gray he slows. The variations that time brought never ceased to surprise him. Bryce does not like this gray, and approaches hesitantly. He sits, hidden from the view of neighbours, in front of a hedge across from the home, and watches the sun sink behind the low sloped

roof. The shadowy figure of Bryce's father emerges from the house, and gets into his truck. A throaty rumble fills the street as the engine starts, and drives slowly off like a giant, red plastic toy, and breath comes a little bit lighter and easier to Bryce's lungs.

The three maple trees off the right of the lawn remain untouched, unfazed by the passing of time, except for maybe the slightest slimness of branches that Bryce could not recall from the last time he had come to their house, perhaps he hadn't been looking. The battered screen door has far too much wood exposed underneath peeling paint. Through a window it appears that his mother remains seated at the kitchen table. Bryce tries to remember the specific nicks and dents on the finished wood, but can't. His hand doesn't remember the texture of the wood underneath it anymore.

Jared had never been here, but the thought of the four of them around that table makes sense to Bryce. Jared had been studying business before he got sick, and was always kind to Bryce. Bryce had been staring shamelessly at Jared's calculus textbook on the table in the library one day as Jared studied, and when he saw this he invited Bryce over. Bryce ran to the book, but said nothing to Jared. He hovered in the same spot everyday by the giant windows that overlooked the campus, until Jared would arrive, and they worked silently out of their respective texts. Bryce's silence was finally shattered after two weeks of this routine.

"Do you have another one?" Bryce asked.

"Another what?"

"Textbook. I finished this one."

The margins of the textbook were covered in numbers, Greek letters, and signs of calculation. The notations were small, but meticulous and clean. The next day Jared gave him the textbook for the next semester,

saying that he would need to get it eventually, anyway. Bryce hugged him, and dove into the pages with a pen.

There was a table in the hospital, but it had room for only Bryce, and Jared watched from across sterilized room. It seemed as though each day Jared drifted a little farther back into the hospital sheets, and Bryce searched the math textbooks everyday for the formula that would draw Jared back to him, but there was no such formula. He solved an uncountable number of proofs, and after each one looked for life in Jared's pallid face, but none of them seemed to register on that pale cheek. One day, Bryce walked into an empty room. Still, he had pulled out his books, and offered himself to the empty room and to the variables that hadn't been able to stop Jared from changing. He had stolen the watch weeks before, thinking that it might be the missing component of the equation that could heal Jared, but as he walked to hand over the trinket a fear seized him: if he gave the watch away, wouldn't he bring the sickness on himself? Instead, he put a hand on Jared's shoulder, and Jared looked up at him gratefully.

"Thank you, Bryce," he had said. "I appreciate you being here."

"I should get back to looking," Bryce mumbled, and looked halfheartedly for the mathematical solution to the sickness that he knew he would never find.

Bryce stands and brushes himself off. He walks across the street, and hesitantly knocks on the door of his parent's home. He hears his mother scuffling faintly between rooms, and briefly considers running away. The moment passes, and the door opens. She is tiny—this woman who once appeared to command the world—her dirty blonde mane of curls has grown straight and far too much of her scalp is visible beneath the thinning hair,

cropped off at the shoulder. Her shoulders are so small that she seems to disappear when Bryce reaches out to hug her. She looks up from his embrace, not believing the sight of her son.

"It's been so long," she says. "We called, but you never answered. We had no idea where you had gone when you left your old apartment." Tears are in her eyes, but she brushes them quickly aside. "We heard about Jared, then you disappeared. We didn't know what to think."

"I've been in town. I even met an old man the other day," Bryce says. "He reminded me of the way father used to be. He sits at the park that we used to go to when I was a kid."

"The way your father used to be?"

"Yeah," he says. "When he always had that pocket watch in his hand. I miss that. He always looked so young holding it like that."

"But your father isn't young anymore." No trace of her earlier tears remain, instead she looks up at Bryce with a puzzled expression, as though she is seeing something for the first time, and can't quite place what it is. "No watch is going to fix that. Why do you think we've been trying so hard to see you?"

Bryce says nothing.

"We're getting older, your father and I, and we've been thinking about what that means for you. There's only so much time that we have left." She pauses. "Your father took out a life insurance policy several weeks back. You're listed as the sole beneficiary. But more than anything we want to spend more time with you, Bryce. Every moment we have together could be important. I understand how painful it was for you to watch Jared, but we need you to be here."

Bryce stirs against the kitchen counter, made uncomfortable by the strength of her gaze and the weakening slump of her shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Bryce says. “I can—” The door opens, and his father stands in the doorway, stunned, with a brown paper bag of groceries under his arm.

“My boy,” he says, shoving away the groceries to embrace Bryce. His father comes out of the hug holding Bryce by his shoulders, and Bryce feels as he did when he was much younger. He smiles down at his son, and the happiness on his face washes the doubt from Bryce’s mind. The crags and sagging skin remained untouched, but in his father’s eyes is a light that Bryce has not often seen, and the pocket watch is far from Bryce’s mind.

“Son,” his father says. “Please don’t leave us again. We—I’ve missed you.”

The old man exhales sharply with a breathy ‘ah’, and lays down his five tiles with a rhythmic tick of wood on board. He looks up from the board with apparent satisfaction. A thin layer of cloud covers the sky, and the sun struggles to break into the green walls of the park.

“It’s on you,” the old man says. He snaps his fingers, laughing, in front of Bryce’s face. “You here, boy?”

“Wha—yeah. Sorry,” Bryce says, and looks intently down at the tiles. “I saw my mom and dad yesterday. It’s been on my mind.”

“Mom and dad? Isn’t that cute,” the old man says. “You patched up your little world then?”

Bryce looks up from the tiles, and the old man doesn’t meet his gaze. A heated flush rests on the old man’s cheeks.

“It must be so great for you,” the old man says. “Everything falling back into place. I still ain’t so much as seen my own boy for over three years. It sure as shit don’t seem like he’s going to be playing scrabble with anyone who’ll fix us. I ain’t got any hope for the happy ending you do. Play your fucking word, boy.”

Bryce lays down his tiles barely seeing whether they form a real word or not. The old man fidgets in his seat, fists clenching and

unclenching at his sides.

“I didn’t do this to you,” Bryce says. “I don’t mean any disrespect, but I didn’t make your son leave. If I could change it somehow, I would.”

“Says the boy who believes in a magical fucking watch.”

“What was that?”

“You didn’t make my son leave? No,” says the old man. “He left on his own. Abandoned his old man, but we don’t have a watch that keeps our family together like you, do we boy? All my family has is a crotchety old man with a scrabble board, and that won’t hold anything together.”

“I wish I could—”

“You wish you could change it? You can’t, boy. Or give me the watch, and we’ll see what magic its got,” he says. “You think we can flip a switch on this shit? You think a man decides what kind of crazy drives him? You got your watch, and I got my whatever, and it’s just there. The crazy is just there. Ain’t no changing that.”

Bryce looks down at the Scrabble board and back at the old man, desperate for something to change, but they both stare back, unmoving.

“Game’s over, son,” the old man says and picks up the board. The tiles collapse in on the middle when the old man folds the board closed. He dumps the whole mess back in the box, and walks away from the stone bench.

Bryce remains stunned, until his cell phone vibrates furiously against his leg. He answers. His mother tells him that his father is going to the hospital. Unbearable pain. He catches the basic details. The address and such. Bryce stands up and walks to their home.

Bryce stands outside the soap-scum gray home. There is no flickering of lights, on and off, from his mother moving through rooms and switching off the light behind her in an obsessive concern with thrift. The stationary lights create a throbbing silence in

the neighborhood, and for a moment Bryce is convinced that there are no sounds on the block whatsoever. His heart suddenly beats quick, and a sob lodges in his throat. He takes the broken watch from his pocket, and tries to swing it like his father had, but it feels clumsy in his hand. He unclips the chain from his belt loop, and walks to hospital.

The walls of the hospital are scathingly white, and seem to glow with some scientific phosphorescence. A nurse looks up at him from behind a desk, her scrubs seafoam green, and Bryce thinks maybe it’s only in the movies that nurses camouflage themselves against the white walls with a red and bloody cross of cloth against their chest.

“Can I help you with something?” she asks. Another nurse walks by, his scrubs are a pale blue with close-cropped brown hair, and he doesn’t look up from a clipboard when he bustles past.

“Y-yes, I’m sorry,” Bryce says. “Room for Millet. I’m Bryce Millet.”

“Millet?” she says, and types furiously on the computer keyboard, and finding something seemed to find satisfaction. A smile graced her lips, and something about the alteration of her mood unsettled Bryce briefly, as if she might lie to him. “They’re in room 314. You’re the son, yes? They told us that you might be on the way.”

As Bryce passes each bleached room he wonders if they purposefully make each room so perfectly identical. Do the muted trappings reach out and absorb the mourning and sickened into the white walls, or do the hospital staff in a moment of inconceivable cruelty switch a patient from room to room just to watch those below scramble in search of those they have loved? Does anyone remember who died in room 112 last week? Maybe that person will look the same forever to whoever loved them most, until they fade from memory. Maybe that was Jared’s room. Bryce couldn’t remember which room he had

spent all that time in. He remembers the table and the room itself, but can’t recall how he got there. Walking in each day had been a haze of disinfectant, and his feet remembered the path far better than his mind had.

The dull gray of the elevator doors open, and Bryce steps out. The number 314 reads boldly in black letters in front of him. Sitting on the bed is his father attempting to look stoic and strong for his only son, but there are still tear streaks glistening on his cheeks from the moments before he heard the door handle turning. The broken watch is heavy in Bryce’s jacket pocket.

“They did some tests,” he says with a shrug to his son. His face is flushed with embarrassment. “Turns out the pain is only from a kidney stone. Not actually going to kill me, just feels like it.”

Bryce’s mother still clings tightly to her husband, her face buried in his shoulder. He caresses her hair and whispers to her, telling her that everything will be fine. Maybe he’s right.

“They’re going to blast up the stone with an ultra-sound,” his father says. “Make the transition easier. Less painful.”

But Bryce thinks only of the watch, and how heavy it seems. He pulls it out, and looks down at the bronze glow. It is entirely free of rust or decay, and there is no evidence that it has ever been touched by time at all.

“What do you have there, son?”

“I brought you your watch,” Bryce says.

“Thanks,” his father says, but he looks confused as he clips it on.

Bryce shares a brief meal with them. He can feel a tickle in the back of his throat, signifying a cold coming on, and takes a bite of tasteless hospital food. His father absentmindedly holds the watch in his hand, and Bryce tries to catch a glimpse of himself in the burnished bronze. He is certain he will already see a corpse-like pallor draining his cheeks of color.

# I Can't Tell

I want to tell you  
how much I hate taking off your boots  
when you are too drunk to remember  
where we are.

I want to tell you  
how foolish  
I think you are for letting yourself  
be yourself in places where we aren't  
allowed to be ourselves.

I want to tell you  
that I think you are beautiful  
and for once I want you to  
believe me.

I want to tell you  
that when we fuck  
I feel like we are making love  
even if I don't look you in the eye.

I want to tell you  
that every day since the day  
I met you  
I die a little bit  
and grow a little bit more.

I want to tell you  
that all these things that I want to tell you  
are just excuses to love you

but I can't tell.

By Ryan Mills

# Thirsty for Justice

By Phillip Smith

They're likely to haul my ass off, but I just don't give a damn today. Driving my heel through the glass—this is the peak of liberation! They didn't listen when I told them their machine was stealing more often than vending. Now they've got something worth fixing. Reaching past the broken glass, I'm mindful of the jagged shards (these hands have been cut before) and take that which is rightfully *mine*.

Go ahead, ignore my trouble calls. Deny my refund request. Lie to me once more and tell me the machine has been fixed. I get mine. Mine. Bought and paid for in plain view of the security camera, yes, mine.

Twisting the bottle top, brimming with satisfaction as the plastic cracks on the tamper ring as it breaks free, I wait for the fizzing to subside and then take that first drink, long and satisfying. Nearby, the sheeple gawk. I am their momentary distraction from mundane reading, a ten second sideshow, and if anyone's recording I'm about to be viral. Text book definitions and flash cards and essay research and Hemingway's shortest short story and conversations about the upcoming party at Tappa Kegga Day just took a backseat to my spontaneous eruption and I couldn't be more...indifferent. I just want what's mine when the money's spent. Fool me once machine, shame on me. Fool me twice, you thieving ass Vendo-O-Matic, shame on you. Fool me three times, and the charm of

convenience that once held sway over me is relinquished, the glass barrier separating me from mine had to be vanquished.

I turn with my middle finger raised in resentful salutation to that soulless, black see-all mounted in the ceiling corner, and take another triumphant swig. And then I smile wide enough for whoever's on the other side to count my teeth. There's a clamorous echo growing in the stairwell and it stirs the flighty alarm within but I stand fast while a cardiac fist begins to pummel my ribs. The familiar chime of the arriving elevator signals the end and I think *roll credits* as the doors open in slow motion. There's a sharp pang of shame as I lock eyes with the professor who teaches my next class. Just a stab and then the feeling is gone because I'm being seized from behind by many large, powerful hands that force me to the cold, polished concrete. My soda, my triple-priced prize, is still half-full and jostles loose from my grip, rolling through the open elevator doors, and I watch with the eye that isn't being ground into the floor as wasted liberation glugs and splats and splashes my professor's shoe (*sorry about that prof*), forever escaping me.

For one minute I lived free. In that moment, I tasted victory.



William Crowley  
Passage to Oneness

## In the Pale Blue

By **Chris Sanchez**

In the pale blue, before the lifting sun,  
currents breathe between the bird hush,  
our eyes share themselves, both awoken,  
and something still happens among the sighs:

The morning is stopped by the light  
splintering off forest clusters,  
coursing through windows,  
where latent warmth is ignited.

Valleys never fill at once.  
Encroaching slow, the motionless sun  
encloses the cold and drains it with  
bursting pulses and poured flame.

# ODE TO A BOXING GLOVE

By Neil Davidson

Man, you smell like shit.  
Your velcro strap across my wrist,  
Just below the shining black gloss  
Of the padded fist,  
And the gray cloth patch  
That reads: *Everlast* in black,  
Faded by the number of times  
I've pulled it tight,  
With my teeth.  
The thumb of my right hand  
Finds a hole in your lining,  
Ripped by floating about  
When he should have been tight-gripped  
Like the rest of the fingers.  
The black padded surface shines  
As brightly as the day that I bought you,  
Washed clean in uppercut sweat  
From someone else's chin,  
Eyes swollen shut for three days,  
And hugging afterward when a buzzer  
Went off and a voice yells: "Time!"

Do you remember that day?  
When Wilhelm kicked us  
With those nine-foot tall bean-pole legs?  
Damn. That was a good day.  
I had looked down-- so tired--  
To see my feet, and you perched on my shoulder,  
When it hit us.  
My ear still talks about it--  
About you. How you covered him,  
Protecting him. Taking the brunt  
Of the hit from that skinny leg.  
We got on the inside, where long legs and arms  
Meant nothing, and we struck:  
Body, head, body, head.  
I felt my bones rattle  
Beneath the force of our every impact  
From shoulder to fist,  
Where you covered fragile hands.  
Damn. That was a good day.



Julie Twitchell  
**Hideout**

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