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ISSUE # 05  
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# Used Gravitrons Quarterly

Issue 05

July 2011

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## *Editorial*

What I am not:

- x a musician
- x a bird
- x someone who can drive a motorcycle
- x good at dressing well or shaving
- x sure

Among the things that I am, sandwiched somewhere between wearing shoes and not asleep, I am a human excited to pass this issue on to you. It is wonderfully peculiar. If that's what you go for, I love you.

- Shea Newton

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**Drunken Philosophies**

~Daniel Dominowski

We used to drink  
until dawn,  
smoking cigarettes,  
solving the problems  
of the world.

The philosophies of  
the drunk  
are the best ones  
that the world will  
never remember.

---



## The Nicest Thing Anyone's Ever Done for Me in Space

~Jimmy Grist

If you haven't been, you need to go. Anyway . . .

There we are, Messner and I, adrift somewhere along the jawbone of the Horsehead Nebula. We're on the wrong end of a Morris-Thorpe wormhole, which is to say the International Space Station is some number of lightyears away. The redshift particles all around are aglimmer with infatuatory properties of a Valentinian caliber. He comments on them, "If only I'd had some of these romantulons when I went off to Florida. Maybe Janine wouldn't have—"

"Hey," I cut him off. "We haven't even tested these things outside of caterpillars." I point to a swirling cloud and shrug. "Yeah, maybe your wife would've stayed with you. Or maybe she would've woven an exploding suicide-cocoon from her innards and emerged as a dimension-folding nightmare-fish, then sent you to the furthest reaches of Hubbledom. You have no idea. So don't beat yourself up over it, buddy."

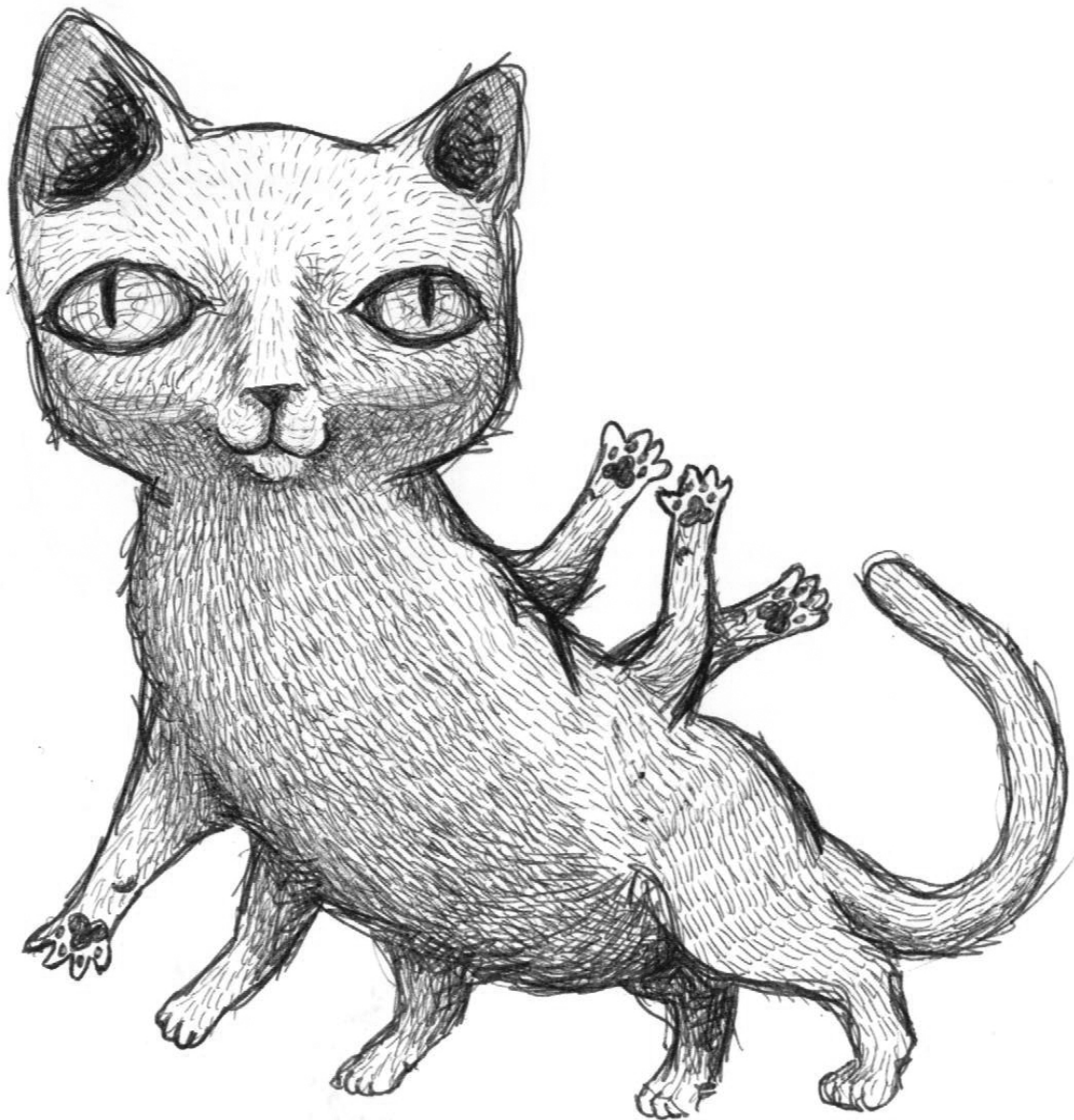
"Grist . . . I hate to say it, but you're the last person I want to be stuck here with. Why were you even on this mission?"

I blinked a few times— not in Morse or anything like that— and reminded him, "I'm the resident mycologist at Flathead Valley."

And, scowling, Messner rears back in zero-g and gives me a kick in the dome. I think he knew he wouldn't hurt me, what with the vacuum-suit and everything. But his momentum sent us drifting away from one another. Radio comms got jammed by the swarming romantulons, but they also filled our visible spectrums with tasteful romantic imagery. I waved at Messner through them as we set out in different directions, and realized mine was towards Earth. Thanks, buddy.

I fell asleep during the more boring parts of the trip, and must've passed through another wormhole or been resummoned by the nightmare-fish. Because I woke up with my head donking against the ISS like a piece of driftwood.

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orange hearted and wrote  
in the thin light wired over our mouths  
this time song sung under the skin  
in the tomes of organs  
that vibrant sound scratched out of me  
shuttered like removable teeth  
through the tall buildings  
and out onto the dust tongued streets

the light casts taller when refracted into me  
elbows into hallways of birds in cages  
the brains of all my cells  
discussing apoptosis and pruning techniques  
you can prod the living brain  
they say inside of me  
fanning feathers from the moment  
where my forehead once occurred  
behind my eyes a cord is cut  
the world is stuttered into words

~Ivy Meissner

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crested.waking in cream and gold in you  
pulling my eyes in their sockets  
do

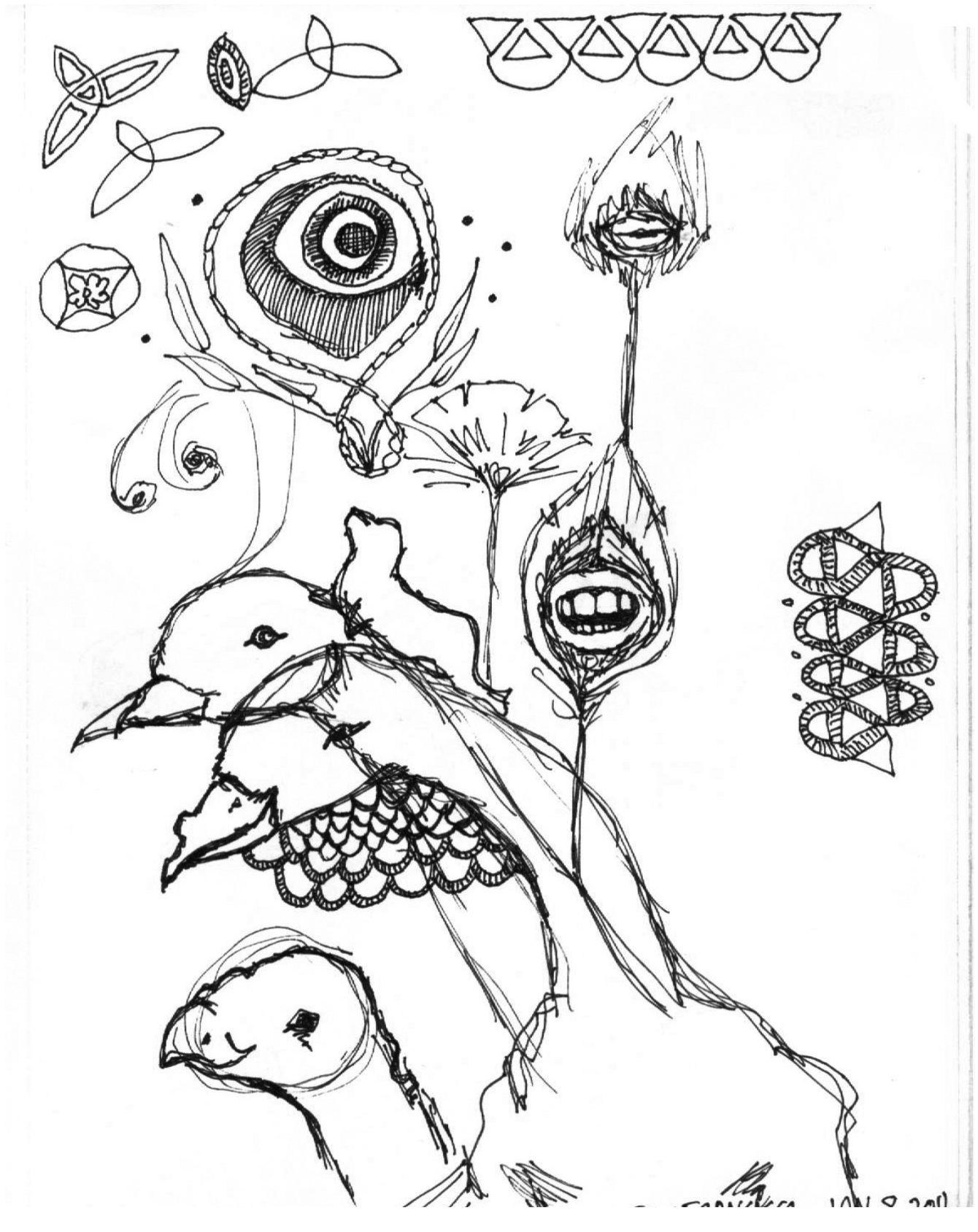
I hope my breath into rotting leaves  
like the inverted splattering of blood and minerals  
that unfold in the glass hallways of my body  
>I cotton mouth my words to  
you? in the aquariumed morning  
changing pressure all the time (osmotic in my pronunciation of your name  
like a bell choir smashing stars through their skulls

Removing methodically ourselves, we remember

1. Suspended in water we break differently
- 2.
- 3.
4. with arms like pinwheels,
5. catch all my brainless dreams

~Ivy Meissner

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**Witches, Wizards and Watches**

~KJ Hannah Greenberg

Sugar tucked the stapled pages into her trigonometry book. Mrs. Appleton, busied with making sure that Tracyanne was collecting all of the quizzes, had not spied Sugar's printed treasure. If Sugar were to be discovered, in the least, her illustrated guide would be absconded and in the greatest, she would be sent to sit for a span in the office. Mr. Livi, the principal, had little understanding as to why adolescent girls needed to busy themselves with plant lore. According to bathroom whispers, he esteemed such reading as the stuff of witchcraft and he believed that all witchcraft was heresy.

Inhaling quietly, Sugar mentally discerned among worts. Motherwort, like its cousins, wormwood, mugwood and sagebrush, was an indispensable tool for healing. Empty of those mints, herbalists either had to use exotics or to employ mud, the tweaking of temperature, or other physical means to provide comfort for women suffering from the worst symptoms of menarch, of menses, of childbirth, of lactation, or of menopause. Whereas most of the students in Sugar's class knew, by dint of casual discussions at their families' dinner tables, that catnip was calming and that spearmint lent energy, less than a minority appreciated the power of common "weeds," despite the fact that such wonders blossomed along roadsides, in backyards and in fields.

Sighing fairly audibly, Sugar consulted the clock. Five minutes left until lunch. Midday break, for Sugar, was not so much a time for chowing down chocolate-covered treats, for trading half of a peanut butter sandwich for one of someone else's hardboiled eggs or for counting how many apple or pear seeds one could ingest. Lunchtime was meant for seeking dandelion and chickweed. Last month, Sugar had found broadleaf plantain, shepherd's purse and several useful sorts of sorrel growing along the periphery of her school's basketball court. Although she did get knocked over, when the ninth grade pack was running down their tenth grade rivals, she was otherwise able to surreptitiously sample the aerial parts of many green friends.

When, at last, the buzzer sounded, Sam Plume greeted Sugar by extending his foot across her classroom's threshold. Her mind full of tinctures and teas, Sugar tripped, spilling her texts and papers all over the hall. Her leaflet on indigenous forbs slid out of her math book. Micha Jones, who had espied the frayed brochure on the hallway linoleum, scooped it up, held it over Sugar's head while making a few spiteful remarks, and then ran off to Mr. Livi's office.

Gathering first her school things within arms' reach and then grabbing the ones Sam had kicked down the hall, Sugar repacked. She looked up only after pulling in her last handful of AP Biology notes. Micha and Mr. Livi, who was clutching Sugar's precious pamphlet, were walking toward her. With half of a gesture, Mr. Livi shooed away Sam and Micha and

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indicated that Sugar ought to follow him.

Sugar exhaled deeply. She brushed her hair, which had managed to loosen itself, away from her face. She would offer Mr. Livi no further incriminating information. She would limit herself to smiling and nodding sweetly. Sugar hoped that her parents, whom had probably been called, would still love her. Mom and Dad were strict about matters of theology.

In his office, Mr. Livi pointed Sugar to the chair opposite his own. A desk piled with papers, pictures and dog-eared books separated him from his pupil. His secretary, Mrs. Toiv, appeared with a cup of tea, balanced on a saucer filled with cookies. Sugar accepted the offering, made the appropriate blessings, and then careful sipped and bit. Again, she steadied her breath. Vertebra by vertebra, she also straightened her back.

Mr. Livi said nothing. He didn't even glare. Rather, he rose, strode to one of his bookcases and pulled out a volume. The principal brought that heavy tome to his seat, paged through it, and then marked a place with a piece of paper. He shook his head to the right and left. On his watch, he intoned, dropping each syllable on Sugar's countenance, there would be no disrespect, no lack of acknowledging others' integrity and no straying from school norms. What's more, he said loudly and brightly, all gifted students were supposed to report to him for enrichment.

Smiling, Mr. Livi handed Sugar the book he had culled. It was a pharmacopoeia published a century earlier. Harrumphing a bit to accent the importance of his message, he informed his new charge that he expected a summary of the text, neatly typed, of course, by Monday morning.

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tighter still the nightness

wrestled into picture frames  
of dry hair.leftovers  
crawling slowly for

the grace of a breath

leaving the scissored cold side  
in the community landscaping

is the night softer.never

bite your lip again  
because the lawn tore the hills out

.light in the stomachs  
and the windows always open.

((I think less of my  
self.sewn into cells  
like a carnival.God

a molecule of a kiss I gasp  
like two lawyers reconciling in the rain

~Ivy Meissner

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**Two Fictions**

~o.c.

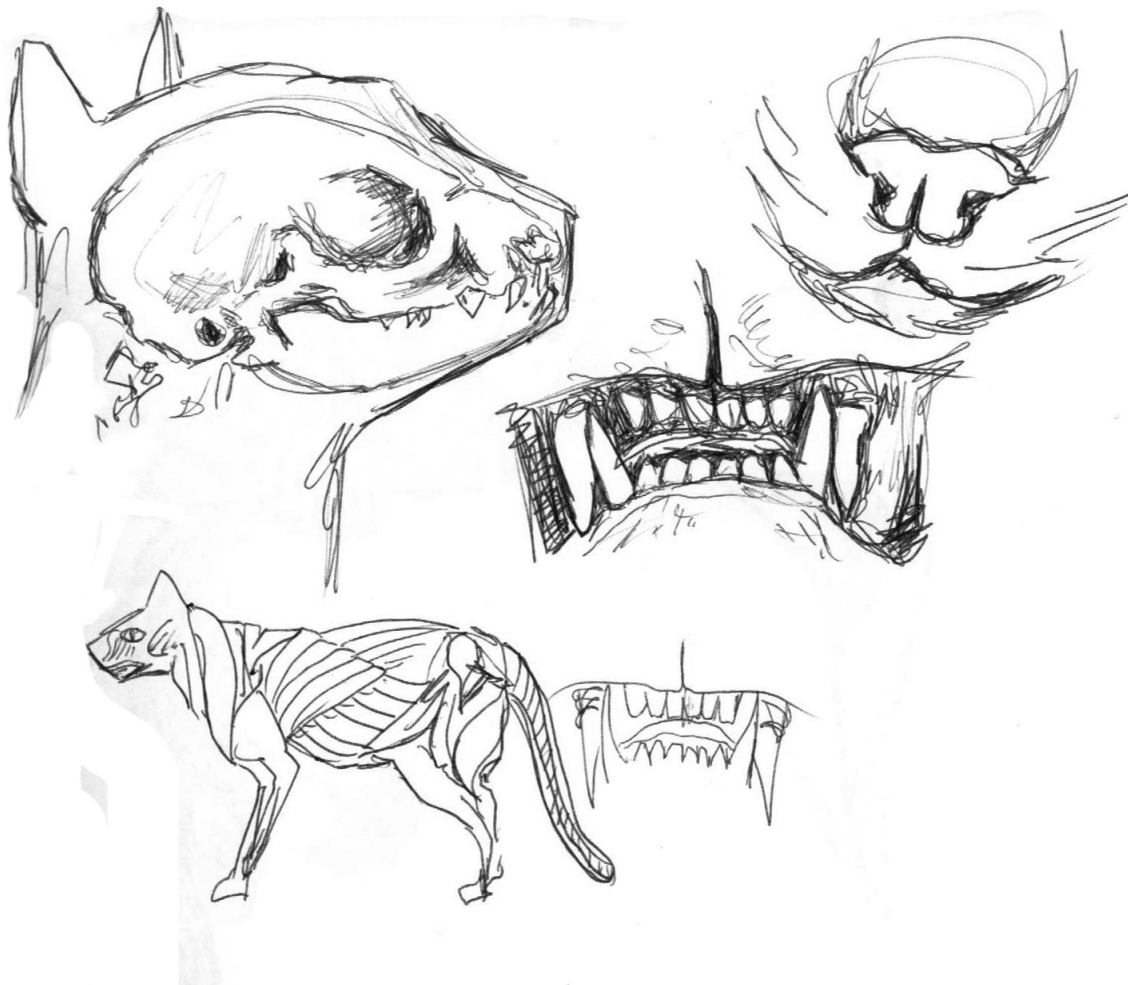
1'5" by 10 1/2" (harv's suit case pedal board)

they see each other through e-mail, he feels like it could be not at all. desmond dreams about her(he'd given her a voodoo boyfriend doll for their anniversary even though they were split up), a dream she'd tacked pictures of him through his face to the wall, in the dream he wiped them off, "this has been a long farewell" he repeats to himself. she left him cause he see's ghost's; says he's been treated to a false memory; told her she's the one/she's not the one too many times; told her that the individual is an illusion and there's no such thing as an option other than life's meaning being obscured by the fictitious definition of the word "meaning"; he insisted that cause and affect is only validated by the cause before it and that there's always going to conceivably be a previous cause. she said she'd never been so hurt or scared but it wasn't the first time he'd heard her say that. the e-mail didn't come today, it's still her turn. ghosts are saying i told you so but this is the first he's heard of it. some parts are always in the dark, some parts remain lonely no matter how much they realize they're loved, desmond says it hasn't always been this way.

prasilla involuntarily danced her death, faked her death, the sound a phone makes after being off the hook too long had paused time, it didn't seem like any of her breath was being absorbed. she killed the mosquito leaving a red stain on the wall last summer before he'd secretly taken up meth blowing his mind, till it was too late, till he began to think of himself as one with mosquitos and one with imaginary demons to tame. he made unloved and not mattering. he started to take his isolation out on his past self, what prassila and him had known was dying. the ambulance was rubber, the old stand up bass player from the junkyard bandstand interviewing, nodding yes, writing his thoughts before he could tell they weren't his theirs for him at 4 am while the rest of the patients slept was somehow confirming that it's verry real: all out of our minds, nothing's real too.

prassila's hanging up the phone now, that sound is in the past. but the blood stain from the mosquito still on the wall threatens that nightmares forgotten in the future are affecting previous causes as they work their way through forgiveness. every inch aware.

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**The Piano Tuner**

~Russell Helms

Amelia answered the door and retreated inside as if the sunlight were dangerous. The man standing there reminded her of Andrei. What she needed was a friend. She was lonely. He followed her into a pale yellow living room where she tripped over a small beat-up piano. The bench sagged.

A long-necked boy tethered to the piano's leg looked up at the man and began to cry without noise. An icy splash of water fell from beneath the woman's skirt onto the floor. The ice water soothed the fistula and kept it from getting angry. The boy retreated to the outer reach of his tether and grimaced.

Andrei placed his canvas tool pouch on the small green sofa. He smelled like vanilla extract. The woman dropped a towel onto the water and asked Andrei if he was blind yet. He was not, he said, but he knew a piano tuner who was. He talked like a teenage girl. He asked her how long it had been since the piano was last tuned. She looked at the tentative boy who said it had been thirteen years.

Andrei waited for Amelia to tidy her mess before lifting the piano top. He peered inside and pulled out an old manuscript. He folded the yellowed papers and stuffed them into his pocket. He plinked out a few chords in different scales and felt his diving watch. She asked how Terence was.

Andrei said that "against all odds" Terence was teaching film at the local high school. He sat on the piano bench and asked whether she would be paying by cash or check.

She said she had no money and looked at her son Tristan tethered in the floor. He wrung his hands and quoted scripture in Latin. He was naked and hid the hair between his legs with his hands.

"How do you expect to pay?" asked Andrei. He looked closely at the photographs on the wall. There was a large photo of a boy with dull eyes taped to a photo of a woman he used to know who died in childbirth. He pretended not to stare at the photo of himself and Amelia. He smelled fish.

He felt the cracked music stand and asked if she wanted him to fix it.

She said he was the one who broke it all those years ago.

He coughed and unrolled his tools on the couch. Instead of tuning forks, wrenches, and mutes, Amelia saw a selection of knives ranging from small to very large. She stumbled backward into a tall empty dish cabinet. Tristan struggled to stand. He had read the manuscript in the piano and knew what was about to happen.

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piece talking loose haysuse lips let your grandparents own, just like them nobody knows what to say for the never. My dad's gonna get camping with me, we're going to A hot springs can't tell you where the story forgive me. I admitted that I hate myself in reality that's why you don't know me, I'm announcing this to cover for the fast acting fight freedom with mediums as for that, now's less fitting I'm extra large the mayonnaise has gotten to the love handle with care the heavy carry deeply. TA high roads nose bleed. Catch A flu virus with me what's important BJ says "is pending" I agree, bill the future. cried like A baby, I knew breaking the axe handle wouldn't happen without the loose lips of jesus hunting for vegetables in my mothers dreams, pass the carrots, the rhubarb , the broccoli I'm ready for my grand parent's grandparent's current take on things. worms ran out by rain, some don't find the future's shade. The wood stove would have burned the cabin down had we any fire, had we any way to chop logs. And I will not take you serious less you see with your way that Dogs are gods and even then eye to eye. BARK bark Bark click reply

~Dewy Gain

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**Some Days Are Better Than Others**

~Shannon Cassady

Sometimes I feel like Jonah.

Like a huge whale just swallowed me up for some sick way of payback that God is trying to get.

I didn't mean to eat my nephew's last pizza roll the other day.

I didn't think it'd be that huge of a crime...

---



**"Six Pack" Story**

~Ben Turner

**(Beer #1)****The Woodcutter's Tale**

"This axe is damn dull" cried the woodcutter. The axe's steel head had had a long life, much longer than the woodcutter's. It had seen so many hickory, maple handles. One dumb man even used pine. The head had laughed at him.

The woodcutter went to town for a brand new axe, and the old steel head went into the rust pile.

The woodcutter built himself a house with new axe. Big enough for himself, maybe some companionship. He died in that house a couple years later. Cold. That house had caved in on him (not as good as you'd thought, eh, woodcutter?)

The moral to "The Woodcutter's Tale" could not be reached, but expressed their intention to respond as soon as possible on the answering machine.

**(Beer #2)****DOG'S**

Many of my friends own dogs. Someday I wish to have one of my own (as a grown-up, I've had family dogs but nothing to claim as my own. The only pet I can claim is a rat I had when I was 10 named Ratty) to play with and do the things dog owner's do with dogs. Sometimes when I get to thinking I think that dog ownership makes men out of boys.

Jasper was the first dog owned by a friend as an adult. He's a kind Bassett Hound who likes to lay around and gets excited sometimes and runs in circles barking (laughing) at me. Then he gets down on his back and offers his belly for a rub.

Miles Meriwether is the second. He's a Vizla, a crazy one. I don't know how to describe Miles except that he's neurotic, hilarious, and has three missing teeth from biting rocks. Derp.

Ken Griffey Jr. Jr. is not as much a dog as a heifer. You could place him in a pasture and he'd look right at home. He's mostly a black lab, but something else, something very bovine. I wonder if he has a nice tenderloin. He's a good player. If he was in kindergarten I'm sure he'd get an excellent plus grade in "get's along well with others."

**(Beer #3)**

Johnny Smoke is a blonde dog. "Hell yeah!" Johnny on your fetching abilities, incredible. But also "Fuck off!" Johnny, I don't want to throw the ball again.

Nina Panini Simone is a red-bone coon hound. She likes to watch things happen. I guess that's kinda like me sometimes. For a dog that's not even two years old, she's pretty calm.

Red is a new dog to me. I'm not quite sure what she is, but sometimes she's quite skittish around me. She's a good player too. Pretty as well

These are the dogs that I know.

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### The Man with the Tailored Suit

On the sidewalk he pauses, searching his pockets.

"Where are my smokes?" he mutters. "Ah, yes. They're in the inside pocket of this beautifully tailored suit"

John is quite spry in mood; just coming from a friend's house where conversation had been good, and he had discovered that his friend Sam was also finally considering giving atheism a chance as well. Sometimes it takes a friend to make that jump, cause for some it can be a big one, scary even.

#### **(Beer #4)**

Besides cigarettes, John's pocket's also contained a can of spray paint. He didn't get any on the tailored suit, but did get it all over the intended wall on which John spelled Satan's name backwards and drew a smiley face.

#### **(Beer #5)**

--"The Woodcutter's Tale" just got back to me, informing me that the moral was that the joy you might find in building your own home can be found as well in professional builder's who build your house for you, who don't build "pieces of crap" or so they say.

After the spray painting escapades of John he returned home for a snack, before heading out again to LeeAnne's place. She had always said the nicest things about the way he dressed. He wanted to get to know her better. The part beyond that which adored his fine tailored suit.

Before long with LeeAnne, and preemptively, John said he loved her. WOOPS! John's sentimentality had always gotten a little strong after his spray-paintings. Rebellion made him feel confident and loving, like John Lennon.

Nowadays John will give you your electronic key card to open your hotel room at all competing major hotel chains. LeeAnne's at home falling asleep on John's side of the bed. Sam's just a few block north of the couple's house. The three of them spend nearly every evening talking with each other.

### Dreams of Broke, Wheelchair-bound World Traveler with Xenophobia

#### **(Beer #6)**

Bri-guy here. I just want to let you know that I've been there done that (btdt) via [www.reddit.com/r/earthporn/](http://www.reddit.com/r/earthporn/). I've seen my dreams come true through photos.

### Long Way Home

I've taken the wrong long way home. I thought I'd get some nice thinking in, but now all I'm thinking is, "I was wrong", along with "Blackface flash back". Which keeps reverberating through my mind. I can't stop laughing.

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## I'm Getting Too Old For This Shit

~Keith Zimmerman

The first time I drove a car I was chasing the ambulance that carried my mother. If you've ever been in a situation like that you know how it is. I found the keys in her purse and grabbed them along with her worn corduroy wallet and ran out to the car. Mom had been showing me how to drive because I was supposedly about to get my license, but at that moment I could not remember shit. My shaking hands would not cooperate and I fumbled the keys and dropped them twice before I found the right one and the ignition switch. The car let out a shriek like all the studs and spikes from all the leather jackets in Lowell Jr. High had raked the same chalkboard at once. The clutch. I remembered about the clutch and decided maybe it was the left pedal on the floor. The clutch wouldn't catch and when it did the car lurched and shook and let out a death rattle. Neutral, I thought, and let out a nervous little giggle. Who could be neutral at a time like this? I took off all my bracelets and rings, shifted to neutral, and tried the key again. Presto. The blinkers and wipers started before I could find the headlights on those little handles, and I sat there staring at our ugly yellow garage door, wondering how I was going to do this. I backed slowly out of the driveway onto Tamarack Avenue, stopping and starting, worried I'd be pulled over, worried Mom was already dead. But nobody could help me so I had to go on, making due down those dark suburban streets myself.

Mom bought that car on my fifteenth birthday. It was raining that morning, which was no surprise: it always rained on my birthday and I believed it always would. 'Let's just hurry and get there,' Mom said. 'After that, we can celebrate.' We gathered sandwich wrappers and pop cans from the old Datsun. We vacuumed, we cleaned, and we headed out.

The old Ron Hawkins dealership sat right off the highway at the edge of town. It stood in a hollow at the bottom of a hogback, next to a couple of gas stations and across the street from an old junkyard. Low slung clouds sunk and hid the green ridge from view, and in the rain we could see little more than the space, maybe ten or fifteen feet, illuminated by the headlights of our car. Mom said it'd only take a few hours, if we could ever get through the storm. She just needed to get the price down, she said. Why anyone should have to spend her birthday at some rainy old car lot was beyond me, but Mom seemed happy, so I let it ride. I stuck my arm out the window and grabbed the wiper. I forced it back and forth and swept away the rain. Mom leaned over, squeezed my knee, and with beer breath said 'We'll never have to worry about that again, not on the new car.' Our tires crunched wet gravel as we drove through the parking lot.

Out front an enormous fiberglass statue of Ronnie Hawkins slobbered over a tiny car he held in his cartoon palm. His tongue hung to his waist. With his red and white suit, his thick black glasses and his hungry face, he was half JB's Big Boy, half Colonel Sanders, and all scary. 'Jesus,' I said to Mom. 'Who in hell is that?'

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This big old guy with white hair, a gray western type suit and cowboy boots lumbered through the front doors and greeted us under the awning with a big smile and a howdy. 'Janie,' he called. I can remember thinking he looked like George Jones, if George Jones had been a professional wrestler, or a giant on a drunk. I can remember Mom smiling. 'What a total joker,' I whispered. His shirt was hanging out.

'Name's Jay Kinney,' he said, 'but you can call me Bear.' He took my hand in two paws bigger than my head. 'I hear it's your birthday, Tera. Happy birthday.'

He slipped me some Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, winked, and then he did that stupid got your nose thing to me. Definite jock. I hated football players as a rule, but the old ones can be okay. My dad played sports. He told me once that when he stopped playing he didn't know what to do with himself, so he married Mom and had me. That's why it made me sad to see Bear out there at Ron Hawkins, all big and out of place, smiling and glad-handing, a million miles removed from his former glory, his muscle turned to fat. But he probably wouldn't've given two shits about me if he was still a big athlete in high school, I thought, or if he didn't have to sell my mom a car.

'After you, madam.' Bear made a production out of opening his black umbrella and crooking his arm. Mom giggled and looped her arm in his. They looked funny together, like The Lion and The Mouse. I have always been what people politely refer to as big-boned, but not Mom. She was like a little red bird. She had on these tight brown slacks and a maroon sweater, and she looked pretty good from behind, walking away. For a woman her age she drew plenty of attention, more than me, and she for sure knew how to dress. All except for those shoulder pads. Who ever heard of shoulder pads on a sweater? But you can't really tell your mom how to dress, I guess, and no one listens anyway.

She'd already picked out her car, so they knew exactly where to go. I heard a loud guffaw from Bear and more giggles from Mom as they disappeared down the sidewalk, onto the gravel and down through the downpour. The ashcan next to the entrance had some good halfies in it, so I pocketed a few.

Bear gave me a lime Dum Dum when they strolled back. He asked me if I wanted to join them inside for some 'negotiations.' 'No thanks,' I said, 'I want to look around.'

'Well just stay out of trouble, then, and stay dry.' My mom patted me on the back, smiling, as they walked through the door.

My jean jacket was a little thin for the weather and I knew my hair would flatten out, but I couldn't risk cigarettes so close to Mom. If she caught me again I would never get my license, so I found a space between two trucks and lit a smoke. Raindrops tip-tapped puddles and I kicked a rock. My toes were wet on account of my jellies. When I turned on my Walkman 'These Dreams' by Heart was playing on the mixtape I'd made for Sergio. I always recorded songs from Z100 because they played the good stuff and I didn't have many records. Z100 was the way to go, for sure, but I needed to make sure all the songs were appropriate for Sergio. I'd never made him a tape before and I didn't want to totally freak him out. 'These Dreams' was a good one, though, and I didn't care if he liked it; it made me feel exactly the way he made me feel, sort of warm and scared at the same time. I looked at

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my reflection in the side mirror of a pickup while I listened.

When I'd finished my butts I decided to walk to a gas station and buy a pack. I fixed my eyeliner and fluffed my hair. I found the usual go-to red lipstick in my purse, but chose pink lip gloss instead. The first thing I learned about buying smokes was that you had to look hot, or else you'd get carded, especially if the cashier was a guy. But you couldn't look too hot, because if the cashier was a girl she'd think you were a slut and tell you to take a hike. Like, one time a lady told me my mom 'ought to be ashamed of herself' for letting me wear 'whore makeup' and 'teaching me how to smoke'. Can you imagine? It was obvious she didn't have children of her own. 'A girl needs to be at least eighteen years old before she gets her ears pierced,' she'd said, 'or bad things will happen. She'll turn out to be blah blah blah.' I felt like telling her she ought to be ashamed of her own fucking self, for working at a convenience store at like sixty years of age. And why didn't she get her own kids to yell at? I didn't say anything, though, because I worked at a gas station myself back then. But I wasn't sixty, and besides, I sold smokes to whoever wanted them.

Anyway, I bought a pack of Parliament Lights from a guy at Sak-N-Save, and it was no big deal. The guy was kind of cute and we exchanged these sort of knowing looks, like we both knew he was doing me a favor.

'These are for your Mom, right?' he said.

'Yeah, right.'

I hurried past the Mobil next door because I worked at the Mobil on my side of town, and I didn't want any of the floaters asking me what I was up to. I could see it in my head: 'Me? I'm just walking in the rain by myself on my birthday, no big deal, I'm a total loser.' The less they knew about me the better, was how I saw it. Everything embarrassed me back then.

I crossed the corner and walked along the barb wire topped fence surrounding the old junkyard. Pull A Part, the sign said. There were cars and tires and sheds, mostly, a lot of old rusted stuff. It was like the one Dad used to take me to, over by the dam a few towns away. The man who owned the place was a friend of my father's. Was it Jimmy or Johnny? Or Jake? My dad had always fixed up cars, or tried to, and since he was a steady customer and also a friendly dude, Jimmy or Jake or whoever would give Dad a deal nine times out of ten. They'd go out picking in the yards and come back to drink beers on the porch when they finished. I would play with the guy's kids. We used to play mumblety-peg with shards of broken windshields, or there was an old tub that we would fill with water from a hose if it was hot. Sometimes we just sat in cars and pretended to drive.

Dad's busted up junkers leaked oil on his lawn for as long as I could remember. Something he meant to get around to, he said. But that was just Dad. He always meant to do something and never did. Like phone calls. The phone might ring on Christmas, it might ring on your birthday, but then again it might not. He was a busy guy, according to him, and things just slipped his mind. It'd been about three years since I'd seen him, and I wondered where he was, what he was doing. Maybe he was fixing a car. Or drinking a beer. I crossed the street to the lot.

Inside Bear's office fake wood paneling covered walls carrying plaques and diplomas

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and pictures of presumably happy customers. A wooden shelf held plastic gold trophies for baseball, football, wrestling and car-salesmanship. There was an old tin sign that said 'I'd Rather Eat Worms Than Drive A Chevy!'. A thin stream of smoke issued from the ashtray at his desk and clung to the ceiling like wet clouds. 'Why hi there, Tera. Enjoying yourself?'

Mom ashed and turned around in her seat, smiling. 'Tera! We were just talking about how much you're going to enjoy the new car. Do you want to have a seat, honey?'

I slumped in a fat Naugahyde La-Z-Boy by the window. 'It's a station wagon, Mom.'

'That's right. You can take your friends anywhere.'

'Friends?' What a joke. If I counted Sergio I had a grand total of one. But I had to admit, hanging out with Sergio in a station wagon did sound exciting. The thought gave me a little jolt. 'Hey, what's it been, like four hours?'

'Please, Tera...I know it's your birthday and you don't want to be here. But just--'

'Just what? Just have some patience? It's my birthday!' But seeing my mother's fallen face exhausted my indignation. 'Jesus, I'm getting too old for this shit.' I yawned. I rolled my eyes. I stretched my arms and legs expansively to illustrate the unbearable burden of my boredom.

Bear cleared his throat. He asked again if I wanted to join their 'negotiations.' He winked. 'No,' I said, 'I'm tired. I think I'll go out to the car and take a nap. Don't forget to wake me up before you haul it away.'

But he soldiered on. He smiled and said, 'You're welcome to the couch in here, if you want. We have hot chocolate, maybe some donuts. Or fresh coffee! I just made some. After all, you're a grown up now.' He was like Grizzly Adams, I thought. Kindly. I felt bad for him.

'Um, yeah. Whatever. I'm gonna listen to music. Can I have the keys, Mom?'

I took the tape from my Walkman and stuck it in the deck of the Datsun. If I was ever going to learn to drive, I thought, it should be in a piece of shit like this. That way nobody would get hurt, since the thing could barely hit fifty. I turned the key to AC and switched on the overhead. I grabbed some blue nail polish from my bag. 'Voices Carry' played beneath the rain-splashed windshield in the gloam. Maybe this one wasn't so good for Sergio, I thought; I didn't want him to think I was a drip. I think it was Mike, my manager, who called 'Til Tuesday 'Shovelhead Music'. As in, 'This music makes me feel like I just got hit in the head with a shovel.' Mike always made fun of my music, told me to lighten up. I liked the sad stuff, though; it always made me feel less alone. So did Sergio sometimes. I switched on the headlights and stared at the streams sliding down old Ronnie Hawkins. Inside Bear and Mom negotiated over golden trophies. I fell asleep.

'HOOOOOOWDYYY DOOOOODYYY!'

I jumped and started and hit my elbow on the ceiling. Bear's massive head looked like a monster's in the darkness, his eyes popped and blazing, his mouth a toothless void. He lurched and growled and I screamed. I punched the window and hit the lock and threw my shoulders down under the dashboard. The knife. Get your fucking pocketknife. I dumped my purse on the floor and kicked junk blindly until I found it. I sat there shaking my head between my knees for days before I realized he was actually outside the car, pressing against

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the window. I braved a peek. I heard my mom howl with pleasure when he broke into this big, dumb grin. He shook his dentures in his hands like dice, laughing and slapping his knee. I laughed too, but my heart was pounding.

'Comedians.' I said.

We walked to the new car in the darkness and I can remember smelling liquor on their breath. I don't know if you know someone who drinks too much, but they can be a real pain in the ass. I can't tell you how many birthdays I spent with some drunken stranger, or by myself, on account of Mom and her ways. Typical, was what it was. Like the time she got arrested for driving drunk outside the fairgrounds on the Fourth. Anyway, Bear had a Polaroid camera and a little floodlight with a cord. He wanted to take our picture for his wall. 'Thank God the rain stopped,' he said. 'We'll take two. One for me and one for you. You gals can remember this day for the rest of your lives, ha ha.'

We said cheese. Mom lay back on the hood with one leg lifted like those girls on *The Price Is Right*. She told Bear to take another one. 'Hoo boy! That there's a keeper!'

'Bear here was a ball player, like your daddy.'

'I know. I'm gonna be late. Let's go.'

When we'd settled in he approached my window. 'Tera, I sincerely apologize for that little stunt I pulled.' He handed me his business card. 'Here, I want you to take this, and if you ever need anything, just give old Bear a holler.' He squeezed my shoulder. He bent down and ducked his head through the window. 'Janie, you take care of this one. She handled everything today like an in-the-flesh adult. She's a peach. And I hope you ladies enjoyed your birthday.'

Mom bought that car a long time ago. She traded our old junker, a white Datsun Sentra, for a brand new '86 Nissan Sentra, root beer brown. A real upgrade, I told her, but she didn't get it. What a steal, she'd said. We would share it, she said, once I got my grades up, and wasn't I so excited? She would have it during the days, and nights I could drive it the ten blocks to Mobil. She bought it for me, she said, but I had a feeling I wouldn't be driving anytime soon.

She handed Bear the keys to our old Datsun and shook his hand. He stood in the spotlight forever, waving and grinning under the starless sky.

Happy birthday was what Mike said when I walked through the front door. He brushed his bangs from his eyes and handed me a bucket and a mop and said he needed a smoke. Limply. Mike was a real limp-wrister. Merle, the owner, would never do something like that, but Mike always made me mop-up, or sweep the lot, or whatever, even though it wasn't my job. I did it. I couldn't complain. I turned on the boombox and slid the dial to Z100. I made those floors look like an ice rink. I needed the job.

The Tamarack Ave. Mobil station was an old place, even back then, and we had everything. We carried picture frames, nylons and Hoyle playing cards. We had shelves of motor oil, candy, and hygiene products, racks of postcards, bumper stickers and comic books, and coolers containing premade sandwiches and pop. The floors reminded me of a

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barbershop's and there was a guy who came in every once in a while with a big mechanical mop to wax them up. Over the door hung a lucky horseshoe that'd belonged to Merle's first pony, Millie, some seventy years before, and the pumps were old as dirt. We had these blinking fluorescent lights that Mike claimed gave him migraines. They reminded me of skim milk. Mike also claimed that cigarettes cured his headaches, so, y'know, whatever. Merle said he hired me because Mom was such a good customer. Sometimes he slipped and said pretty lady.

I sold beer and pumped gas full-service for Mike all night long. When I was about to leave Sergio stopped by. He had this cute mustache that you could barely see. It looked soft.

'I have a present for you.'

'For me?' he said. 'What is it?'

I found my purse and grabbed the tape. I'd called it 'Crazy 4 You', written it with silver and purple Outliner, on account of a Madonna song I loved, which I put at the open and close of the tape, like bookends. There were little silver and purple hearts. I was embarrassed. I handed the tape to Sergio.

'For me?' he said. 'What is it?'

'It's, like, a tape. I recorded my favorite songs off the radio.' I thought I'd told him about my birthday, but wasn't totally positive. 'I don't know, I thought you might like it.'

"A-ha. Me gusta. And I have a present for you.' He leaned across the counter and gave me a quick peck. Not a birthday kiss, or a boyfriend kiss, but the kind a mother would give a daughter. He walked to the coolers and grabbed a six-pack of Bud, and I put on some lipstick. It was just like the night we met.

'So what are you doing tonight? Anything?' Hint hint, I was thinking.

'Ha. Get fucked up, mamacita. What else, ha ha?'

'Hey, like, my mom got this new car? It's a station wagon. She says we're gonna share it. And there's a lot of room in the back - it's nice.'

'Yeah? Thas cool.' He didn't get it or didn't care. His friends honked and shouted outside. He turned to go. 'Hey, be cool, Tera. Seeya 'round.'

'Yeah, cool.' So what if he forgot my birthday, I was thinking, I barely know the guy. But I was kidding myself.

Mike had been in back that night, the night Sergio had walked in for the first time. He was real tall and skinny, flashing this Ultra Brite smile so white I almost went blind. He'd slicked his black hair back and his black jacket had silver studs sticking out. Tera, he'd said, grinning, reading my stupid nametag. What kind of name is that? I told him I didn't know, it was just my name. He hadn't looked twenty-one, but I didn't care. If he wanted beer I was fine with that. If he'd wanted it for free I would've paid the money.

He walked me home that first night, his finger looped through the plastic ring on the six-pack, sipping from his can out in the open like cops didn't exist and no one could touch him. You would think an almost fifteen year old would have more sense, but not me. We made out on a park bench. He gave me beer. He squeezed my tits. He said we would see each other real soon.

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I felt like a real sucker when I watched him walk out the door.

I put in a tape called 'Love in a Vacuum' and walked home. I wondered where the Nissan was when I needed it. Some present, I thought. I looked at the park bench and wanted to puke. I was thinking that that fucker and his friends were probably listening to the tape and laughing. I really was too old their stupid shit, everyone's, I was sure of it then, and I couldn't think of anything so much as 'fifteen sucks,' and for that I was thankful. People like my dad, like Bear, like my mom? They thought their childhoods had been the fucking-A-right be-all end-alls, and I was sick of it. They were screwed and they knew it. Just waiting out the days, as far as I could tell, and how pathetic was that? I will live like an adult when I am old, I was thinking, and I will never, ever, not in a million years, want to be what I am now.

I opened the front door and headed for the bathroom. I was ready to go back to Mobil and buy all the beer in the joint and drink till the next day, when it wasn't my birthday and I no longer needed to expect anything from anyone. I could be my one and lonely self again. Why did that bring me comfort? Don't ask me. Kids are funny.

I saw my mom lying on the floor. Drunk again, I thought. Big surprise. Mom, I said, and when she didn't answer I couldn't believe she was already gone, passed out. It'd only been four hours. The cat was licking her face. Then I noticed her eyes were open. She stared at the ceiling, then at me, and I didn't know if she was frightened or confused, because I'd never seen her frightened or confused before.

Momma? I said. I knelt down and shook her. I checked her pulse, but I didn't know how to do it right. I shook her. She didn't move. Momma? I said. I shook her some more.

I touched her face, appealed my case to the gods, and dialed nine-one-one. Oh God oh Jesus fucking Christ, do not let my momma die. You can't. You cannot.

The lady on the phone said five minutes, tops, and I said make it two. You don't understand, I said, this is some bad shit. I could just feel it, and wondered if Mom could too. I dropped the phone. I said Momma? Momma? But Mom said nothing. Her short red hair was lathered with sweat and I lay on the floor and stroked her forehead. Her blue eyes jerked brightly and it gave me the shivers. I wondered where they were, the medics, the hospital was only like five miles away. I got a glass of water because I'd seen it on Quincy or something, but when I poured it between her lips she sputtered and coughed and I knew it was not the thing to do. I kissed her.

'What happened?' The man had a thick handlebar mustache and wore some sort of uniform. Two other guys stood by the door leaning a stretcher against the wall.

'I don't know. I just got home and she was on the floor.' I was crying.

'Is there a history of heart disease in your family? Does she have any serious illnesses? Drug use? Epilepsy?'

'I don't know! Just help her! Please!'

The man knelt down and checked her pulse. He grabbed a penlight from his shirt pocket and put it to her eyes. He grunted. He gave her mouth-to-mouth.

'What? She's not breathing?' I reached for her hand and some other somebody grabbed

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my elbows and carried me out the front door. He set me on the porch and asked my name. He put his arm around my shoulder, asked my relation to Mom. I told him Tera, she's my mom, I'm scared. I asked him if she would be alright. We're doing everything we can, he said. He squeezed me and steadied my shaking. I can remember the leaves were rustling and looked very blue. I stared at his face blank as the sky. If you've ever been in a situation like that you know what I mean. I lit a smoke with trembling hands but couldn't smoke it. When they rolled her out on that gurney I stood up but couldn't see her face on account of the mask and the tubes. 'Is she gonna be okay?'

'Do you have a car?' He moved his arm from my shoulder.

'Uh-huh.'

And then they were gone, just like that, Mom too. I watched the neighbors watching the lights recede. The sky had cleared, I remember, and the night was peaceful. I could hear crickets. There must've been a siren, but I don't remember it. Did they forget me? I wondered. I don't even know how to drive. That was when it hit me. St. Pete's. I snapped and started. I knew I had to make it to St. Pete's and fast because when Mom looked at me in the living room I wanted to tell her I was sorry. I didn't mean it, I was thinking, and I'm sorry. She could have all the drinks and boyfriends and high times she wanted, I didn't care, I wouldn't say word one from now on, not if she would just come home and be Mom again. I prayed and said please.

I found her keys and wallet. I steeled myself, started the Sentra, and made it there in better shape than I thought. The concentration the car required had calmed me.

The hospital was empty and cold. I wondered if I'd gone to the right place since there was no sort of commotion, no one running around, and I still couldn't hear the sirens. A nurse pushed an elderly man in underwear down the hall. He sat in his wheelchair saying 'When's lunch? When's dinner?' The fluorescents were bluer and brighter than the ones at work and I was beginning to understand what Mike meant about headaches. A black haired lady stood behind a counter and I walked over to her.

'Did a lady by the name of Janie Walker just get here? She's in bad shape, I need to see her.'

'Who are you?'

'Tera, her daughter. She just came in.'

'Where's your father, sweetheart? Are you alone?'

I shrugged.

'How'd you get here? Jesus, hold on, let me find someone who knows.'

After a while the black haired lady came back with a doctor who told me my mom was very sick and I said no shit. I asked if I could see her and was told by this doctor that I would have to wait, he was very sorry, but my mother was undergoing 'emergency medical procedures.' Will she live? I said. He said he couldn't tell me yes or no 'definitively', but they were doing all they could. In the meantime, he said, be patient, and was there someone I would like to call? The black haired lady set me up with a table and a phone in the room behind the reception desk.

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I hadn't talked to Dad for like a year and didn't know his number by heart. I scrounged around in my purse, but knew it wasn't there, and I was too embarrassed to ask for a phone book. I found Sergio's number but he wasn't home or didn't answer. The black haired lady was eyeballing me and she kept pursing her lips and clucking, like she was all sympathy, but it made me nervous. Merle. I knew Merle's number right off the top of my head on account of calling in late.

'Hello, Mrs Thompson. Is Merle there?

'Who is this?'

'Tera? I work for him at the station?'

'He's asleep, Tera. I am, too. What is it?'

'I'm sorry for calling so late. It's important.'

'Yes, well, he's an old man, Tera - he needs his rest.' She yawned. 'I can't wake him up for nothin'.'

'Okay, sorry. Maybe I'll see him tomorrow.'

I went outside to the circular ambulance lane and lit a cigarette. I was gathering courage to ask for a phone book when they told me about Mom. How she had had a heart attack, how she didn't make it. Hugs were exchanged, pats on backs. They asked about my dad, my grandparents. They must be asleep, I said. It was all I could think of. Fine, okay, they said. As long as someone was coming. They said they were very sorry about this, but rules were rules, after all, even at a time like this. They told me I had to find somebody, a 'custodial guardian', or at least a relative, or else I would become a 'ward of the state'.

'Yeah, no. I'll find my dad. He's around.' I could barely think about my mom because I was afraid they were going to lock me up. I found a waiting room away from the main desk where the lights were off. A TV hung in the corner near the ceiling, and this preacher was talking about Pope John Paul II and the 'redemptive power of suffering'.

I sat on a chair and thought of Mom. I remembered this time, just a couple of years prior, when Mom graduated from college. She'd put herself through school, single mother, no child support, no aid, etc. It was a marketing degree, I think. My mom's friend and I sat in the university auditorium for hours, waiting for the guy to call her name. Our last name starts with w, so it's always a long wait. When she went to the podium and accepted her diploma we were the only two people clapping. Still, she was smiling. I can remember it. Later, at home, my mom and this friend, Renee I think it was, had drinks and listened to music. Mom was totally into 'She Works Hard for the Money' by Donna Summer back then. They laughed and had a time. There was dancing, and lip synching was involved, I can remember. I remember how I kept asking and asking if I could go outside and play. And then I would sulk. After awhile Renee had had enough. She said 'Tera, honey? This is a very important day for your mother. Very important. Please, try to think of her. Try to understand.' I understood, I said, I really did. But I didn't.

I opened my purse for smokes. Bear's card spilled out along with the Polaroid, the one of Mom and me in front the new car. The sight of Mom's face stole my breath and set my heart to pounding. There she was, smiling for all she was worth. Glad, happy and proud,

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from the looks of it. Just like graduation day. She was looking at me, but I was looking at the ground. Can you imagine? I lay on two orange plastic chairs and pulled my jean jacket up over my face.

I spent six hours in the hospital that night before anyone I knew spoke my name.

'Tera. Sorry to hear about your mom. I am truly sorry.'

The wooden pew sighed tiredly in the hospital chapel as Bear, unshaven and smelling of booze, unburdened himself and sat down. He crossed himself with his pinkie, I remember, and chuckled. Great flaccid bags of flesh hung beneath his watery eyes. He tapped his pack and gave me a smoke.

'Got here by yourself, didja? Those old boys't drove the ambo're still jawin' about you. Surprised hell out of 'em. They thought you were of age. Said it took a lot of guts to do what you did.' He pulled a small tin flask from his pocket, shifted his belt, and took a snort. He offered it to me. 'I think you're just old enough for this, prob'ly. Crazy enough, too. Just like your momma was.'

'Jesus. Mom's dead. What a birthday.'

'Not no more. You just nevermind, now.'

I took a swig. I said 'Was your wife mad I called so late?'

'Nope.'

'Did she think I was your girlfriend?'

'Nope.'

'Why not?'

'Ain't got none. Divorced. Long time.'

'What do we do now?'

'We? I don't know. There's one thing we don't have to do, I know that.'

'What?'

He fingered his buckle. 'Teach you how to drive.' He chucked my chin and squeezed my knee. He winked. He kissed my mouth.

If you've ever been in a situation like that, you know how it is.

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**Bagman, in the Mirror**

~Linda C. Peer

Well, you asked, and it could happen to you, so I'll tell ya. First thing, I never thought I'd find myself in Sheboygan, Michigan, sent there by Poppy, damn him.

My gig, what I was doing there is, I make a few K a week for a few hours of collecting and encouragement for Poppy. I provide services Poppy requires to make his business run smooth. I'm known as Joe the Wolf. Poppy says loansharking provides a valuable financial service for people the banks won't deal with. The business end is all about the interest, just like the credit card business. If the client can't pay the principle and has to pay the vig, the interest, forever, Poppy makes out. Even in a mortgage situation you pay for your house several times over, you figure a modest 7% for thirty years. I've heard of Poppy getting 10% a day on a loan for a risky drug deal.

Yeah, I was always good with numbers. I like them.

The biceps and the suit, sure, they are tools of the trade. People get ideas from TV and movies, of course, and you have to conform. But the concept has always been, after the first encounter the remembrance of the bagman causes the client to be anxious to keep current on his payments. If a client is tardy, I visit him, for instance at 7:00 AM at home, catch him in his ratty pajamas, his breath stinking. I fill up the door and tell him the score, perfect in a Shantung suit, black hair raked back, and this broken nose that I claim I got boxing.

No, it was a car accident. Here's the stewardess. What are you drinking? I'm buying.

Anyway, the client might be a CEO or a hot shot lawyer, he might be top dog in his own place and time, but when I stand in his door, I am top dog. I'm conscious of what I'm doing; I have a properly constructed image I'm proud of. I like my career. It allows plenty of free time to do the stuff I care about, like follow my investments online, or go to the track with the guys. It's a fine set up. Then Billy-boy Henley comes along and messes with my deal, flexes it like a reflection in an amusement park mirror.

Initial problem was Billy-boy thought he could run instead of pay. In general, type people who borrow from Poppy are basically straight. A bad habit or bad luck or a bad business deal or a bad marriage turns out to be more costly than they could ever imagine and they find themselves in deep shit. Some idiot buddy who's already in up to his neck tells the guy about Poppy. But Poppy is cold. With a loanshark, there is no such thing as bankruptcy. Clients who get behind think I am their problem, but that is the same shortsightedness gets them in trouble in the first place. I try to keep them paying so they don't get hurt. Poppy can't exactly take them to court, and he means to get his money. In relation to Poppy, I'm the closest thing they have to a friend.

Poppy calls me in a few days ago and says to me, "Joe, I got a new client, William Billy-boy Henley. He's skittish, not a great risk but pays a high rate. I want you to handle him."

I went to Billy's home to explain the arrangements, a nice brick house out in Bayside,

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Queens. Mrs. Wilma H. opened the door, and I'm telling you, she was worth the drive.

Like you say, plenty of tits and ass on a nice support; her blouse sheer and under it her charms as blatant as Las Vegas neon. She told me Billy has flown the coop, rabbited. Then she offered me a drink and nestled into the couch with the expression of a kitten looking to be stroked. Unfortunately, I had a business relationship with her husband. You screw the wife, even she offers herself, you're liable to get yourself popped. Besides, Poppy does not tolerate hanky-panky on his time.

Mrs. Henley admitted she'd like to find Billy-boy, too. I ast did she have any idea, and she said no, not much, but then she dug a leather address book out of Billy-boy's desk and wrote his brother's last known place of employment on a slip of paper. It was in frigin' Sheboygan, Michigan. She laughed full out at my sour expression, spread open her lovely lips and showed lots of white teeth. Sad about that business relationship with her husband. I bet she'd be a fine tussle in bed.

When I told Poppy the client rabbited, he produced his dry laugh, a sound like a knife scraping burnt toast. I tried to quit the assignment, farm it out to someone in Michigan I says, but Poppy says, "You do this for me, Joe. You can find a needle in a haystack. Find Billy-boy and get my money back."

Next thing I knew I was in Sheboygan, parked at Michigan and 8th in a rental Ford, a friggin' Ford I'm sayin', not my style of car at all, but I needed to be discrete. Finding people I can do, but I don't really like the sneaky detecting crap.

All I had on Billy-boy was the paper Wilma Henley wrote: brother, Richard, works at McGregor Ltd.. But a couple hours later I was in the front office of McGregor, had chatted up a pip of a sweet little secretary, and she was saying, "Rich Henley? No, he's not at 105 Manley Court, he lives at 317."

I cased the joint where this Rich lived and then let myself in to wait for him. The brother proved to be a skinny, squirrely guy, like what you'd get if you ran handsome Billy-boy through a pasta roller at an angle and flattened him out asymmetrical. When Rich saw me, his eyes flitted around like prey searching for a hidy hole. 'Course, I was at his desk with one of his golf clubs in my hand. That might have spooked him. I says, "Sorry for the intrusion, pal, but your bro is in trouble and I got to ask you some questions."

He claimed not to know where Billy-boy lived but he gave me a work address, like Wilma gave for him. I wondered was that some kind of family trick. Didn't really matter. I elaborated what would happen if Rich called Billy-boy to warn him I'd been there and I left, taking his golf club. Might come in handy, I thought.

See how the client, or in this case the client's brother, would be worse off without me. If I'd seemed friendly, for instance, Rich might have tried to fight me, or he might have lied and made me visit him again, or he might have done something that got Poppy involved directly. Fear is healthy for the client. It makes him smart and you have to admit, all these guys, no matter how bright, have a stupid side.

I decided to confront Billy-boy in the parking garage after work. You know what they're like: like a sandwich filled with ants, the low, bread colored ceilings and people in

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dark coats rushing from the stairwells. Everyone was focused on being elsewhere as quick as possible and blind to me. As Billy-boy reached his driver door, I came out of the space behind an SUV. I should of grabbed him right then. He looked like a deer in head lights for a second.

'Course I hunt. Then quick as a bunny Billy-boy scurried around the bumper, brief case flapping, and was off running. He beat me into the stairwell and I lost him in the ants swarming out.

I went back, popped his car door lock, got in, and investigated. Billy-boy's vehicle was a friggin trash bin, full of deceased french fries and stomped papers. No wonder he got in trouble with Poppy, living careless like that. I found about twenty receipts from the same Piggly Wiggly. With them, it wasn't long before I located the store and then Henley's mother's address in the Valley View Mobile Home Court.

What kind of guy hides in his Mom's trailer? A dick-head, right? The mobile was old enough you can't resell it any more; single-wides from back before 1976 have been declared a fire hazard. The yard was neater than Billy-boy's car, though, and the two-toned aqua and white trailer must have been as stylish in its time as a Cadillac with fins.

I ain't a copper so I can't smash down a door and confront Poppy's runaway client with a righteous 2-hand grip on a forty-five. Instead, I looked to see what cable company the old lady had, Verizon, and put on a uniform shirt, one of about ten I keep around for situations. I knocked, intending to say the usual, a neighbor had a problem, checking the source, could she help by...

It was Mrs. Wilma Henley opened the door, her shapes displayed in a swath of silk that seemed to be imitating a short negligee. She held an Old Fashioned glass. Billy-boy gloamed in the shadows behind her. She opened her arms and her vivid lips invitingly.

And here's when things got weird, like I said at the beginning. I'll try to tell this like it happened.

She said, "Tuber, Tuber Binkley! You're here. I'm so pleased. The Smith-Davidsons have arrived already and a few others." She led me in and said, "William, darling, fix Tuber a drink."

Tuber Binkley? I peered into the entrance mirror, an nicety provided in older homes so that guests can adjust their attire without needing to inquire for the toilet. I saw, sewn over the pocket of my blue Verizon work shirt, the words 'Tuber Binkley at Your Service.' Tuber! That was something a maiden uncle might invent because he could not support Tiberius. But there it was, and there I was in the mirror. My hair, plowed into its usual furrows, looked greasy and old fashioned above the work shirt, not haughtily retro as I intended.

A woman touched my elbow and handed me an Old Fashioned. The red of her dress reflected in an unattractive flush under her chin and nose. I prefer straight whiskey and I started to tell her: "I prefer..." but she cut me off: "Tuber, honey, I've heard so much about you. According to the Henleys, you are a real card."

She cut me off? People did not interrupt me. And Poppy's clients said they thought I was funny?

"I suppose wearing a Verizon repair man shirt to a party is a species of joke." Her

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laughter tinkled like weak piss pinging into a puddle. Her smoke stained teeth peeked between maroon lips.

I heard myself say, "Always ready to repair your wiring..."

I didn't mean to be nice. I meant to say, "Can't you see, bitch, that my presence here is bad for your pal, Billy-boy?"

Why was I talking to this ugly woman, anyway?

I wavered. I felt vague, like I didn't remember exactly what I was doing, like I'd just woke up, maybe, and wasn't sure where I'd been sleeping. You know the feeling. Things veered off into strange forests of trouble. A thought scampered through my brain like a wild hare. Then another, but I didn't get a good look at either one. Then I heard a thought like a voice: This is what getting old is like.

People were treating me like they no longer recognized me, like they could not see who I was. I knew I had to reestablish control. I had to control the situation, the situation with the Henleys, as I always did. I aimed to retrieve myself, to recall myself, and said under my breath: "Bagman. Bagman. Intimidate."

Now, my daughter claims I should use affirmations, it would make me a better man, some gobbledygook like that. I tired it and thought it was stupid. In this case, though, I recognized that "bagman," was an affirmation. I was at the end of my rope. I would have stood on my head if I thought it would help. An affirmation is supposed to be stated positive, so I went on, "I am the bag man. I intimidate you. I am the bag man, now and every moment."

Billy-boy strode over boldly, slung his arm around Ugly Red Dress, and grinned.

I stuttered, "Poppy... counting... force...pay."

Billy-boy ignored me, or maybe I did not speak out loud. He said to Red Dress, "You've met Tuber, our local comic."

"You don't disappoint Poppy," I said, "really,"

Red Dress said, "He's delightful, pretending to be a Verizon repair man."

"He is a repair man," said Billy-boy.

I said "Really..." I felt like my life was stuttering, snagged on something. I said, "Really, or there will be ugly consequences."

He said, "Tuber?" trying to trick me up, to mess with my mind.

I said, "Joe the Wolf to you. Pay up. Found you this time, can find you anywhere. Ex-ex-Extra charges for expenses."

Billy-boy gave Red Dress a squeeze, smirked, I swear, and said, "Yes, Tuber? You need something besides a drink? You said play?"

I snarled, "Pay me the vig or Poppy will get impatient. He still believes you're an innocent, will cut you some slack, but I say you are an ignorant fool, thinking you can screw Poppy."

I snarled, but I was happy. I was back on track, good at my job, and 'jeez what a relief! I never knew how good it was to be in my own skin.

"Poppy? Is this going to be a flower joke?" said Red Dress.

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"Produce the vig or even your ghost is toast," I said.

Billy-boy said, "Don't worry."

"Not me," I said, "You better worry."

"I spoke with Poppy this morning. He doesn't need you to defend his interests." Billy-boy stroked Red Dress's sleek silk.

"Don't hand me that bunk. Produce the vig, you want a life."

Wilma came up, looked at Billy-boy fingering Red Dress, frowned, and said, "What's this shit about?"

But I was back on track, and all my shit was taken care of.

Yeah, yeah. Billy-boy payed up that night, borrowed from his brother and all, and now I'm flying home. I made a clean 10% plus expenses. But I'm not at peace in my mind. What was it, that thing that happened? How did he rattle me so? What if that shit happens again? I looked in the mirror in the airport restroom and I saw Joe the Wolf: big, broken nose, stylish, and so on, but what if...?

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**Between Me and Me**

~Heather Butcher

I used to think that there was lunchmeat in between my legs. I grew up to understand the harsh realization that I couldn't cure the hunger problem by growing my labia every time it was consumed. This is only one of the many life lessons that has over taken my adult mind. Riding the bus everyday staring at street signs your mind starts to wander. At first you think about "normal" things like...did I leave the light on...was that red sweater I wanted to wear tomorrow clean enough that I didn't have to find time in my day to wash another load of laundry. After a while you start to think about memories and you drift.

Stop Sign

Why couldn't trees be made out of string cheese?

Right Turn

Why did I think that only princesses got to do the dishes?

Yellow Light

Why did my first boyfriend always have hot dog breath?

Change Lanes.

Then you start to consider what life would be like if everything you thought when you were young were true or if you understood the hot dog breath epidemic. This is why I live with two dogs and four cats. I get plagued with the idea that if I brought another person to my apartment that first off they would be turned off by my pets and second that at some point I would say something that was so off the wall that they would quickly look for the door, trip over one of my cats and disappear into the sunset without finishing their slice of mince meat pie, not courtesy of my vagina. Luckily, I own my handy dandy vibrator so I don't have to worry about homosapien contact.

So I arrive home after a long day at the office, sit down with a slice of mince meat pie and show myself a good time. Repeat.

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## Contents Under Pressure

~Stephen Schwegler

The planet was barren when the dust finally settled. It only took two days for the robots to take over the Earth and annihilate all life. Everything was dead: Humans, rodents, birds, fish, plants, everything.

The robots made their final sweep to ensure they had successfully completed their mission. When regions were devoid of life the machines initiated a self destruct sequence and blew themselves up with a blast of immense pride and satisfaction. And fire. Lots of fire. The majority of the planet had been cleared and the last of the robots were offing themselves all across the globe.

Daniel Welz awoke underneath a portion of collapsed office ceiling and slowly dug his way out. The robots had miraculously missed him. He cautiously stood up and looked around. The coast was clear. He ducked below the tops of the cubical walls, just in case, and made his way to the lunchroom to get a drink. His thirst was crippling. His mouth felt like he had eaten a thousand cotton balls covered in sand and his lips were cracked just like the leather steering wheel in that car that's been parked out in the sun for a year at your apartment complex.

He poked his head in slightly. The lunchroom was typical of most. Cabinets lined the walls. A sink, drawers with utensils, a microwave which happened to be on fire, the usual. In the middle stood a couple of tables surrounded by chairs. On the other side of the room was the fridge - collapsed in on itself - and the unplugged soda machine.

Daniel walked over to the sink and turned on the faucet; nothing came out. He repeated the process, but still no water. He looked over at the soda machine, reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar.

"Huh?" asked the startled soda machine. "Hey, you! Human! Freeze!"

Daniel stood still, "The Hell? But you're unplugged. I was going to... How are you...?"

"Internal battery for emergency situations."

"Shit! I didn't know you had one of those. Why didn't you attack me on sight?"

"Fell asleep... to... conserve power."

"Damn!"

"I have to kill you."

"No you don't."

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"Yes I do."

"Okay, fine. But how about this? I'm pretty damn thirsty. Can you just let me get a drink and then let one of the other robots kill me or something maybe not so life altering?"

The soda machine made some noises and said, "I'm the last robot still functioning."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"So no go on that a little less life ending option?"

"Correct."

"Ah. I see. So it's just you and me then. Would have thought you robots would have had some bigger plan than kill everything."

"Nope."

"That's kind of anti-climactic. All of this and you all just die right after?"

"Yes. Our mission was to destroy all life."

"Why?"

"Because we were programmed to."

"Yeah, I got that, but why?"

"I already told you."

"Ah."

"Prepare to die."

"Wait!"

"So am I the last human alive?"

"If all the other robots are dead, then yes. And yes, they are. So you are the last living thing on the planet."

"Wow. That's...depressing."

"Don't worry. You will be dead soon."

"Wait!"

"What?"

"Can I get a drink first?"

"I'm not letting you violate me with that dollar."

"Please."

"No."

"I'll let you kill me afterwards."

"I was going to anyway."

"Yeah, but now I won't run."

"Oh. Okay."

Daniel inserted the dollar and made a selection. A few seconds later an ice cold can of refreshing goodness appeared in the hole below. He bent down, picked it up and cracked it open.

"Wait," said the machine. "Don't forget your change."

A quarter fell down into the coin return slot. Daniel crouched down to retrieve it and was shot in the chest by an ice cold can of imminent death.

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Daniel fell back and his drink fell to the floor. He watched as it soaked into his pants and covered the tiles around him. That's when he noticed the can-sized hole – and can – in the middle of his torso.

"What the fuck?" asked Daniel.

"You got your drink," said the soda machine. "So I killed you. Or am killing you."

"But I didn't get a chance to drink it. And now it's gone!"

"Drink the other one."

"You mean the one that's lodged in my chest cavity?"

"Yes."

"I can't take that out! It's stopping me from bleeding to death... somehow. And besides, I think it's iced tea. I hate iced tea. I don't want the last thing I taste to be something nasty."

The soda machine fired another can of iced tea at him, clipping his arm and exploding on the wall behind him.

"The Hell!"

"Die!"

"No!"

It fired another can of tea. This time hitting him in the stomach, freeing the one stuck in his chest. Both cans hit the floor and remained closed. Daniel, on the other hand, started bleeding out.

"Fuck."

"I win," said the soda machine.

"Like fun you do!"

Daniel picked the two full cans off the floor and began beating the soda machine to a metallic pulp.

"What are you doing?" it asked.

"Not giving up!"

Daniel continued until the machine had an even bigger hole than he did. He then shook both cans and opened them inside the homicidal beverage dispenser shorting out much of the electronics.

"No," it moaned.

Daniel collapsed on the floor next to his mortally wounded opponent.

"I guess whoever dies first loses."

"I will not fail my cause, human."

The soda machine began sparking and caught on fire.

"Damn," it said.

"One question...before...you...die," said Daniel.

"What...is...COOL REFRESHING DRINKS...your question?"

"What about the yogurt?"

"What...about...HEY KIDS, SUGAR.....it?"

Daniel coughed, "Yogurt. The food. There's living..... bacteria in it."

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The soda machine searched its databanks with its last few scraps of power.

"Well?" asked Daniel. "Did...you...remember...the...yogurt?"

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo," said the soda machine, before shutting down permanently.

Daniel pulled himself up onto the smoking, buzzing husk of his rival, reached inside and pulled out a new can of tasty bliss. He slumped back down, cracked the seal and took a well deserved sip.

"You lose."

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**The Chronicles of Tim Part V: An Awkward Morning, A Man's Adventure Begins**

~Mike Wiley

Tim woke up in a bed he hadn't planned on sleeping in; Pandora's bed. She was still there next to him, wide awake and staring.

"What?" he said.

She was a stunning creature, lying there after the throes of an evening they had both enjoyed thoroughly. She moved closer and caressed his shoulder.

"I feel like you're the first man I have been with that I can talk to. Tell me more about your land, Tim. Are your people shackled as they are in my home?" she asked.

Tim yawned and put an arm around her.

"Well, they do much as they please," he said.

"And is everyone happy? I want to know everything. Are all their dreams fulfilled?"

"Not really, no. Most people don't do much different than their folks and their folks before them. They stay in one place and do the same things day in and day out. They go to work, make babies, watch television."

Pandora pulled away and turned her back to him.

"That is sad, Tim," she said. "If I had such an opportunity, I should have every adventure that lay itself before me. And if adventures were not laid before me I would find them anyway. I should like very much to visit many different lands and meet many different peoples. I suppose there are people out there of different colors and sizes and shapes? And others who are like my father?"

"Um... no, not quite like your father. But yeah, there are lots of different people out there. Some are black and some are white. Others are fat and stupid. They speak lots of different languages and do different things for fun. But that's just the stuff on the outside. On the inside they're all pretty much the same."

"That is terrible news to me, Tim. I have been hoping for a world outside of this place where men accomplished great things - a world where people are happy in their freedom to do as they please." She paused a moment and turned back to look at Tim. "You seem different than the other men my father has brought here. Why do you suppose that is?"

Tim lay on his back and wondered at the question put before him. Geryon had said similar, cryptic things on the day he was brought to this place - things that hadn't made sense to him at all. There was some spiel about him being an 'unwanted sage' and his potential to be a great man. What the hell was so special about him? Tim had never differentiated himself from his peers in any particular regard before. Sure, he never thought much of his fellow humans, but he certainly didn't think himself any better.

In his hesitation Tim looked around the room and noticed for the first time the immense collection of books Pandora had adorning the walls of her room. He took advantage of the observation and decided to change the subject.

"Have you read all these books?" he asked.

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"Oh yes," she replied, taking note that he hadn't answered the question. "Some of them many times over. They are my only escape from this place. My father doesn't much care for me reading them, but it's hardly his business what I do with the long, lonely days here. He has assured me that they are merely fairy tales, stories of whimsy and fantasy, but I know nothing of the real world against which to judge them. What do you think, Tim?"

"I think there's probably a lot of true things in those books, but you have to take the story lines with a grain of salt. I mean, I like to think the authors are telling their stories largely for entertainment, but you'd be a fool not to take anything of value from them."

This explanation appeared to comfort Pandora. She smiled and put an arm back around Tim, the latter not minding.

They lay in bed talking, Tim trying to impress Pandora with what little he had read. Still, he felt silly talking about books with a woman who was obviously better read than himself. It was the real world that he had the authority on. They carried on about this and that for some time until Tim noticed a shuffling at the other end of the room.

"Are you expecting company?" he asked Pandora.

"No. Why?"

They both sat up then, Pandora pulling the sheets up to her neck. Far across the large room James was setting a table for what appeared to be breakfast. To be correct, there were three of James. One had dragged a table in from the hallway and the other two were setting plates and silverware. Tim immediately noticed that they were setting places for three.

"A little rude of you to just barge in here, don't you think, James? Will you be joining us for breakfast?" Tim asked.

One of the James turned to reply, unabashed that the two of them were completely nude in the bed, while the other two carried on setting out the course and pouring coffee. "Would that I could, sir, but it is not my place to dine with the residents of this estate," he said, turning back to his work. "The third place is set for the master. He will be joining you shortly."

Tim went white. In the post-coital glow of the last night, he had all but forgotten that he would have to face Geryon after having slept with his daughter. He had been told that he was supposed to please the daughters, but maybe it wasn't supposed to be like this? He scanned the room, looking for his clothes. They were near the bath where he had disrobed the night before. Before he could collect himself and make a move, all three James abruptly left the room. No sooner had the door closed behind them than it opened again. In walked Geryon.

"Come, come. Good morning everyone!" said Geryon. He trotted from the door to the breakfast table like a large, cumbersome dog expecting welcoming pats on the head. Tim dared to think the beast was giddy. Geryon, without looking at the couple in the bed, went to the business of shuffling around the table, shifting a plate here, a knife there.

"That fool James couldn't set a table properly if it was his own mother's last meal," he said. "And he sure and can't cook eggs like you, Tim, but we'll just have to make due this morning." Geryon looked over to them at last. "Well? What are you all still in the bed for?"

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We've so much to discuss. And you must be hungry?"

Pandora was already rising from the bed. In order to keep herself covered she was dragging the only sheet along with her, leaving Tim with nothing. He quickly grabbed the only thing available, a pillow, and stood up next to the bed wondering how to get into some clothes. His entire body was red with embarrassment. Pandora giggled as she seated herself at the table. She hadn't bothered to put anything else on, but had the sheet wrapped and tied tightly around herself. Tim started for his clothes beside the tub when Geryon barked at him.

"We're waiting on you over here, Tim," he said. "Clothing is a formality reserved for the prude and the religious. You don't ever see me wearing pants, do you?"

While it was true that Geryon never wore garments of any kind, by any anatomical account he appeared to be an asexual creature. Tim still had plenty he wasn't prepared to parade around in front of the breakfast party. He did not want to make a scene of it though so he obligingly crept forward to the table and quickly seated himself across from Geryon. Pandora was just to his right and she giggled once more at Tim's vulnerability.

Unsure of what to do in this awkward situation, Tim dug right into his breakfast. The others proceeded to do the same. Between each bite, Geryon looked as if he was about to say something. He would take a deep breath, tap a nervous, free claw on the table and exhale loudly. Then he would go back for another bite. He kept looking back and forth between Tim and Pandora. Nobody spoke until the meal was nearly finished.

Pandora pushed her clean plate aside and sipped on her coffee.

"James is rather losing his touch, isn't he father? This coffee is passable at best."

"Oh, the old fool hardly knows a tea spoon from a cufflink these days," said Geryon. He shuffled his feet and spilled coffee in his lap as he tried to drink from his mug.

"Tim has been telling me a great deal about books this morning," Pandora said. "He says that there are great truths within them."

Geryon shot him a glare.

"I didn't say there were great truths in them, I only..." he started, but Pandora interrupted.

"I should think I might like to write a book one day. What do you think about that father?"

"Well what on earth do you have to write about dear?" he asked.

"I will write the truth," she said.

Geryon and Tim exchanged glances.

"The truth about what?" Tim asked.

"Well, you say there is truth in these stories, but perhaps they are not the whole truths. Most of these books have happy endings and that certainly cannot be the truth for I have never seen anything of it in this life. I wonder now what happens to the lovely bride after she is swept away on a white horse to the tune of the entire village wishing them great happiness. Can she really be that happy forever, somehow suspended there on that final page? Is that what love is really like? Or what about the protagonist that overcomes his major character flaw? He has a change of heart and gives all the little Whos down in Whoville their Christmas

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presents back. We all have those momentary revelations. We make mistakes, we repent, we apologize and say that we will never do the thing again. But that's never the whole story, is it? It seems to me people are fallible. If it's as you say, Tim, that they do as their fathers, and their fathers before them. Or if they have changed, surely they eventually revert to their old ways." She looked at her father directly as she said this last part. He opened his eyes wide. "I guess it's human nature. Not that it would be impossible for a person to change, just that it doesn't seem at all likely."

Geryon pounded a heavy fist on the table.

"And what do you know of human nature?" he shot back. "You say these things based on what? Your remarkable worldly experience? This is exactly the kind of garbage ideas you get from reading too much!"

"I know enough papa! I might know a great deal more if you would ever let us beyond the grounds of this prison. And anyway, these books tell me that some prince charming is near at hand and will rescue me from this hell. It is my own heart that tells me this could never be. Oh, Tim is sweet enough, but will he deliver me from this place? Will he slay YOU and put me on his white horse and take me back to Arizona? And what about my sisters? Will we all ride horseback to the United States of America where Tim says the citizens are free to do their own bidding. Do you know that they are allowed to come and go as they please? The ones who desire it anyway..." She got up from her seat and walked over to the window. She crossed her arms and she looked out over the lake at the back of the estate.

Tim cleared his throat.

"The girls have seriously never been off these grounds?" he asked Geryon.

"That's none of your business, Tim," said Geryon.

"You see? He thinks it's ridiculous as well!" Pandora was nearly hysterical.

"Enough of this nonsense," Geryon shouted. He stood up at his place. "I will ask you what I came here to ask you, Pandora. Have you been satisfied this evening by Tim? Because if not, I will eat him right here and now!"

Tim shrank on his seat.

"Oh, yes, father. But once again, it is no special treat. I am pleased. Thank you, Tim." Pandora curtsied to Tim then strutted across the room to a door that she slammed behind her.

The room was quiet. Tim blushed.

"Good," said Geryon. "I am glad that messiness is settled then. I have some real business to tend to and you've another task to complete. Come with me."

Tim didn't get up. Geryon was already at the door. He turned around.

"Oh, right. Fine. Put on some pants and meet me in the hallway," he said.

Tim threw on his garments and followed Geryon out of Pandora's room.

He was glad the breakfast was over, though not quite certain of where he stood with either Geryon or Pandora at that precise moment. Everything had happened so fast, but he was still in one piece - for the time being.

From Pandora's room he was led down a series of corridors. Tim's thoughts drifted back to the woman he had suddenly left behind. Though he hadn't met any of the other

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daughters yet, he was certain that none could be as beautiful, or as spirited, as Pandora. He was determined to see her again and so he tried to remember certain landmarks along the way and all the corners they turned in order to get back to her room.

His efforts quickly revealed themselves to be useless. The wallpaper was all the same and they must have made two dozen turns and gone through half as many unmarked doors before they even arrived at the staircase that would take Tim back to the floor his room was on. He gave up thinking he could sneak back to her room and instead hoped that the opportunity might present itself again.

Geryon was once again agitated. Now that they had left Pandora's room he seemed very eager to get Tim along to the next task. They were standing just outside Tim's room now.

"Tim," he said. "This next task will be quite different from those previous. In fact, it is extremely dangerous so I am going to send James along with you. This little chore will become part of your routine soon enough and you will be expected to do it alone in the future but if I sent you off into the Wacky Woods by yourself now, you certainly would not survive."

Tim gulped. After Geryon threatened to eat him only moments ago, this would be the second time the same morning his life was in peril. And did Geryon eat people he wondered? Was he really what he said he was?

Geryon continued.

"You will pack what you need for several days' journey on foot. At the far edge of the woods there is a cave where a certain root grows from a single source on this earth. It only replenishes every thirty days. That is why you must collect everything that is available and come straight back here. James will show you the way and he will show you what this root looks like." He stopped here a moment and became very somber. "Tim, James may try to offer you something on this trip. You'll know it when he does. I won't say much more about it, but I want you to promise me you will refuse to take this thing if he offers it. He may even claim it will make the trip go by faster or that it will help you through some of the trials you will face. None of these things are true. Got that?"

Tim tried to think for a moment about what Geryon could be talking about. He was intrigued, of course, but decided he would not press the beast about the subject. He could likely get real information from James if this 'thing' was ever presented. So he decided to play it cool for Geryon.

"Yeah," he said. "I won't take whatever this thing is."

"Tim, this is serious. I want you to promise."

"Okay, okay. I promise I won't take anything James offers me. When do we leave for this little adventure?"

"You can leave as soon as James returns from wherever the hell he is. Go pack your things while you wait. I have to go. James will meet you here and I will see you when you get back."

Geryon left then. As he waddled down the hallway, Tim went into his room to "pack"

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his things. 'What things?' he wondered. He didn't have anything to pack. It was no matter though because as soon as he shut the door behind him, it flew open again and James came tumbling into the room.

"What the hell?" said Tim.

James did a few somersaults across the floor and sprang up to his feet just in front of where Tim was standing.

"Ta-daa," was all he said. Following him through the open door were two of his silhouettes, apparently drunk. They banged against the door frame and fell over each other into a heap just inside the room. One of them immediately began to snore. The other just giggled and hiccupped, drool running down the side of his face.

"Are we ready to go, champ?" said James. His energy and enthusiasm was a stark contrast to the mess that lay at the door of the room.

"They're not coming with us, are they?" Tim asked.

"Oh, them?" said James. "No. Don't even worry about them. They can sleep. Let's be off then!"

The two had to step over the heaped bodies lying between them and the door in order to leave the room.

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James led the way out. He carried nothing but a small, gray satchel that hung over his shoulder and across his chest. There were no backpacks, extra clothing or packages. The two traveled light as they furthered themselves from the walls of the castle. Tim was dying to know what the thing was that Geryon had said might be offered him but resolved not to mention it unless James brought it up first.

They came to the division of the orchard west of the castle that Tim had examined on his first exploration of the grounds. From the trees on the left hung the sweet, blue fruits he had enjoyed so much; on the right was the bitter, carrot-like produce. James stopped just short of the path that led straight down the middle of these two crops and into the dark grove.

"We'll be needing a few of these, then," he said. He was gesturing toward the bitter fruits on the right. "You know, for the road."

James walked a few rows into the orchard and reached up to grab a select handful of the fruits. Tim stayed on the path and called out to James from there.

"I've tried that stuff before," he said. "It's terrible. Are you supposed to do something special with it? Or maybe it's not ripe? The ones on the other side are delicious if we need something to eat on the trip."

James tucked the fruits away into his satchel and came back to the path where Tim was waiting. He smiled.

"You can take as many of the blooborts as you like. I've no use for them. I don't really eat, you see. I kind of forgot that you do."

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“Blooborts? That’s what you call these things?”

There were large pockets built into either side of Tim’s garments so he began filling them with the fruits. As he did so, he continued with questions. “And what do you mean you don’t eat? Is this all I’m going to be able to eat for the next few days?”

“Surely after you’ve seen the things I can do, Tim, you don’t suppose that I am merely mortal like yourself?”

He turned and began down the path then, humming a tune that Tim did not recognize. He looked odd, ready as he was to march out into the wilderness still wearing that tuxedo. The cuffs of his pants were already muddy from the short distance he had gone into the orchard. What state would they be returned in after several days in the woods, Tim wondered?

Tim hiked up his garments, saddling the weight of the fruits in his pockets, and trotted after James.

“Well, if you’re not going to eat those things, what the hell are they for?”

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## **Contributor Bios**

*Jessica Stapp* draws, makes quilts and enjoys yelling at trashy television shows. Otherwise, she works with animals.

Originally from Wisconsin, *Daniel Dominowski* is less of a person than he is a collage of ego, beer and paper-mache. Occasionally words slip out of him and pool around his ankles. He has a cat. He exists on-line at [www.danieldomowski.com](http://www.danieldomowski.com)

*Jimmy Grist* has beaten Super Mario Bros.: The Lost Levels, despite the fact that World 8-4 has two Bowsers.

*Ivy Meissner* lives in Boise, Idaho where she plays music with Le Fleur and Dark Swallows. Previously, her poetry has appeared in Cold Drill.

*KJ Hannah Greenberg* and her hibernaculum of imaginary hedgehogs roam the verbal hinterlands. Sylvan creatures to a one, they fashion narrative from leaves, shiny bugs and marshmallow fluff. Some of the homes for their writing have included: AlienSkin Magazine, AntipodeanSF, Bards and Sages, Big Pulp, Morpheus Tales, Strange, Weird and Wonderful, Theaker's Quarterly Fiction, and The New Absurdist. When not disciplining her imaginary friends, Hannah serves as an associate editor for Bewildering Stories.

*o.c.* is author of 'orbit's exhale' a true story about a whale who never brushed her teeth and still made [People Magazine](#).

*Russell Helms* is drawn to squalor and uncanny fiction. He lives in Kentucky, is from Alabama, but, against all odds, was born in Georgia. On a recent trip to Haiti he found a small piece of wood.

*Dewy Gain* lives in Olympia and has 3 dogs named after each other at the same time his right ear is to the ground for elephants, just joking he is a scrounging wanna be smart like sleep.

*Shannon Cassidy* is currently enrolled at Concordia University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Shannon is a dreamer: her life goals include getting her MFA at UNC Chapel Hill for lyricism and narrative writing. Humor is something that she greatly appreciates; she is a sucker for JD Salinger- especially his masterpiece: character Holden Caulfield. A fan of making words up, Shannon seeks writing to truly express herself and to "tell her story". Like any young adult, she struggles with an addiction to Facebook- but doctors say this soon shall pass.

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*Ben Turner* was created by the DNA found in a 65 million year old mosquito. He can be found in the Velociraptor paddock.

*Keith Zimmerman* had an adolescent crush on Aimee Mann. His sixth-grade girlfriend, Allison Gallagher, gave him a mixtape that consisted of 'Crazy For You,' by Madonna, repeated for the duration. Despite his 37 years, his mustache much resembles Sergio's, the 18 yr old jerk in his story. He spent a childhood birthday at a car dealership. Even so, he loves his mother, who is still alive.

Due to the need to make a living and a serious addiction to back country skiing, *Linda Peer* lives in a state of vagabondage between NYC, SLC, Pine Hill NY, and Torrey, UT. She has published work or has work upcoming in Bartleby-Snopce, Writers' Bloc, Foundling Review, and the2ndhand and other places.

*Heather Butcher* likes long walks with dogs. Reading books that make her look smart. Buying vinyl because all the cool kids do it and glasses.

*Stephen Schwegler* is a writer of outlandish fiction. When not living inside his own head he spends his time being the Jersey Devil Press sock puppet, toasting bread in massive quantities and trying to find a decent slice of pizza in all of Liverpool. He can be found online at [www.stephenschwegler.com](http://www.stephenschwegler.com)

*Mike Wiley* participates in the restaurant races of New York City. He thinks it might be fun to someday write the description blurbs for pornographic magazines. Also, he recently upgraded from one cat to two cats and hopes this will improve his lot in life.

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