



LOTUSEATER

ISSUE 10

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lotus-eatermagazine@hotmail.com

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Editors: Diana Mastrodomenico, Marco Costantini

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Prose



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Naughty Mr. Special

I've been looking forward to the dog park all day because a) my stream was unsuccessful today and b) it's Thursday, and on Thursday German Shepherd Girl typically makes an appearance. My stream was unsuccessful due to trolling in my chat feed. Delirious_Nerd97 kept asking me to join his voice party on discord while calling me virgin. Every time I banned his profile, he returned on alternate profiles and resumed said behavior. It just made for a negative experience. Some of these trolls, it's like all they want out of life is to sabotage you and your stream. They spam your chat feed with insults and like, penis drawings. But they can't actually write curse words because if they do, asterisks appear instead, but trust me: you can think up plenty of insults without cursing. Truth be told, I would argue that some of the most hurtful words aren't technically vulgar. Like, when someone calls you pig, it's a lot more hurtful than a-hole, I think. As for the lewd drawings, I know what you're thinking: 'Hasn't twitch.tv generated a high-performance algorithm for the precise purpose of blockading such drawings?' And the answer is: yes, but only for jpg and pdf files. So, in that sense, trolls can't upload pornographic images per se, but what they can do is go off and sketch

pornographic images from scratch, as in with symbols and letters, before copy/pasting them into my chat feed. And believe me, these trolls can create very accurate and graphic depictions with a couple pounds and ampersands and dollar signs. I just said this earlier today, and I'll say it again: if these trolls took a fraction of the energy they put into their sketches and channeled it toward a career, or a stream of their own, well, maybe they could do big things in this life.

My viewers frequent my stream to observe me play Rocket League (like soccer with cars, except 3D and amazing graphics), also because I offer advice on things like how to push through hard times or occasionally I'll run an IRL stream and provide commentary on how to panfry tilapia or *Poulet au Jus*. One time I IRL'd at the dog park, as the viewership enjoys my part Chihuahua Pogo, but then Pogo began mating another dog, and due to unneutered testicles I had to rush over and pull him off, and what followed was a series of troll copy/pastings alleging my own lack of experience in the sexual field due to imposing celibacy upon Pogo.

And I'm complaining a lot right now. The trolls definitely get to you. You want to ignore them, but when half of your chat feed is the word 'virgin' in all caps, it's hard to just turn a blind eye. So

then you say something, but. It's not a level playing field. You have a reputation to uphold. Your face is omnipresent, and the trolls are, I guess, faceless (that's a good one. I'll have to remember to tell that one to Delirious_Nerd97).

In terms of my social life, you might say I could use more friends. And every once in a while, I get the urge to run out of the house and uber downtown, but then I get to bar and order Margarita and commence regretting excursion. People at the bar behave like such primates, it's like: 'how are we not all seeing right through this? She just rubbed butts with three consecutive people?!' Like, I don't want to say partying is disingenuous, but isn't it just one big mating dance? Where like, people drink to summon animalism, flaunt plumage, then sex? Maybe I'm just a hopeless romantic. I'm not actually a virgin, by the way. I lost my virginity in high school, actually, to a German exchange student named Ana. So, in that respect, let's just say that I've checked off my first rodeo, sexually speaking. But I am a little unsociable. If there's more than three people in a given social scenario, as a rule of thumb I forego participation. I thrive in one-on-one scenarios. I mean, I guess 'thrive' is a strong word—I still receive anxiety around individuals. It feels like horses trotting on my chest, coupled with esophageal tickle as if by feather of grouse. You'd think, based off my demeanor on stream, that I'm always busy on Fridays, and like, I don't get nervous ordering at the drive thru. But neither of these assumptions would hold true.

But none of this matters now because I'm sitting in my car looking in the rear-view, waiting for German Shepherd Girl to pull her Honda around the corner. It's 5:23, and she usually leaves our complex right around now. We live in the same complex, she and I. She's in #1201, I'm in #908. I like to do this on Thursdays: wait for her to leave first. So that she's seated when I arrive, and therefore easier to approach. If I'm there before her, she tends to gravitate toward the other bench, in which case: forget about conversing with her. The benches are easily twenty yards apart. But: if she's comfortably seated? way easier to go and take a seat next to her. And I'm not like, creepy about it. It's not like I'm snuggling up against her or anything. She usually sits on the right end of the bench and places her backpack in the middle. Like, strategically, so no one can take an unsolicited seat to her immediate left. Like, in her personal space. I've never talked about my process before, vis a vis German Shepherd Girl, and if you interpret it the wrong way I guess it could sound... well. But it's like, is attention to detail a crime? Should denizen be flagellated for maximizing his potential for success? It's like, no. We're all just brainwashed into thinking: [21st century man who puts sliver of effort into romantic pursuits] = creep. Even though we grew up on James Bond movies and like, Tarzan, we're expected to just, give up all hope the moment she says no? And what about all the beautiful romances, where guy gets girl only after years of what would now constitute harassment?

Pogo sits in my passenger seat, stained in multiple cobwebs of brown. Pogo stares because he thinks it's time to go to the park. 'Not now, Mr. Special,' I tell him, in Mr. Special voice, which I won't even attempt to describe. Fine: it's like how you would talk to your mentally impaired child who you still love in spite of their impairment. I see the outline of a car pulling around the corner, and my heart leaps. But it's not her car. It's a pickup truck with spiked rims suggesting violent tendencies on the part of the driver. Really, it looks nothing like her car, so you wonder how I mistook it for her car at all, even for a second. Her car is smooth and petite and delicate, just like her figure. (Oh, spare me the oo's and ah's.) Her little legs crossed all feminine. Her mean brown eyes and all their thoughts, about probably not me but who knows, also maybe about me, like: 'Yeah, he's a little different, but muscular calves, wide lexicon and good enunciation.' Pogo whines. 'Quiet Pogo.' No Mr. Special voice this time.

Now I remember something I said to her last time. I said: 'Pogo lives for this,' as Pogo dug a hole under the tube designed to be jumped *through* (by dogs), trying to escape from the German Shepherd. Which obviously, he doesn't live for it at all. He hates that dog. He's like, one tenth her size, and she's always trampling him non-playfully, making him yelp. And in retrospect, it's like... 'fucking stupid fucking idiot... Not you buddy. You're good boy.' (Back to Mr. Special voice.) No wonder she ignored comment and stared into space while

disgustingly contorting mandible. I gave myself away. Now she knows: 'He lied because he wants me to think he comes to the dog park for the dog and not for selfish reasons involving human sex, with me, which he'll never get.'

Now I'm scratching Pogo's head, paying close attention to the activity in the rearview mirror. I see the leasing office and the mailboxes outside of it; the gas grills under the gazebo, depleted of propane for several months now. It's not raining, but gray. But the forecast says no rain, so German Shepherd Girl should still make an appearance.

Now it's dark and Pogo makes his mess on the passenger seat 'Bad Pogo naughty dog.' Per chemistry, the accident sinks into the fabric, but no time to fetch Lysol wipes: the built-in digital clock reads 6:23 and German Shepherd Girl works as a waitress downtown and, in light of the football contest this weekend (advertised all over tarnation), deductive reasoning indicates extended shifts in service industry due to influx of out-of-town patrons. And she might still come, gliding around the corner, not very comfortable behind the wheel (very sexy). She might still come, and Mr. Special: you'll just have to wait.

BENJAMIN D. CARSON

By the Time You Read This

For AJK

By the time you read this, I will be dead. Jesus, I thought. Not again. She does this. Suicide notes. It's her thing. She seems to be perfecting them. Once she wrote, *I am now dead*, and I thought, well that's something. Always was quite a multi-tasker. Writing while being dead. It isn't juggling, but it does have a certain *je ne sais quoi*. The first note I found, written in the strangled cursive script of someone trying to match, with a most untutored hand, the grandiloquence of the final act with the most delicate undulations of the pen, said, *I am most sincerely dead, as we speak*.

I had to laugh, frankly. The antecedents to the pronouns *I* and *we* confused me. Who is dead? And who is speaking to this dead person? Are *we* speaking sincerely or is the dead person earnestly dead: dead with an unflagging conviction? Shouldn't it be certainly? As in certainly dead? Then I saw it was signed: Caroline. There was a little frowny face for the dot above the i, as if to punctuate the depth of her sadness, as if being dead wasn't enough. But, alas, as I was studying the note, she burst into the room, saying, 'give me that, you Petite Tonkinoise,' a term of endearment I earned filching her Halloween candy when I was five and she was fifteen, though neither of us knew what it meant. Before I could ask 'who's we?' she spun out of the room like the lovechild of an aged gymnast and a tumbleweed. *Mon Dieu*.

It wasn't long after that that her suicidal missives started showing up in unexpected places: the cookie jar, which ruined snack-time for Grandpa; the mailbox, which made Lou, our mailman, request a transfer; mom's gym bag, which killed her already lukewarm commitment to Jazzercise; dad's porn stash, which, I came to find out from my Uncle Jim, made him, always the philosopher, consider the relationship between death and orgasm; and in my shoe, which made me consider the relationship between sisters and athlete's foot. Just a shtick, I thought.

By the time I found *By the time you read this, I will be dead*, Caroline was dead. At the funeral, my Grandpa said, *how could we have known?* Lou, neatly dressed in the fab couture of the mail carrier, said, *such things are so unexpected*. My father, with a certain frisson, admitted to not seeing it coming. My mother, pulling at the growing tire around her waist, thought, if nothing else, the upshot of grief is a loss of appetite. Uncle Jim could only shake his head and mumble, *nobody knows*.

Her name was Caroline. Caroline. And, alas, my sister. My sister who hated when I stole her candy. My sister who loved sloths and used to curl three fingers into a ball and, in slow motion, punch me in the face. My sister loved me, too, called me her beau,

her little baguette. 'Ma petite baguette,' she'd say, bowing low in a beret she'd found in the dump and kissing my hand. She worshipped Joséphine Baker. Under the beret she'd found a vinyl of Baker's *No. 2*, Orchestre Direction: Jo Bouillon, and would sing 'Touchez pas mes tomates' until her voice was raw, I her only audience, the house an empty auditorium. 'Small crowd tonight,' she'd croon, in front of the imaginary stage lights, but 'c'est la vie!' And I'd clap the clap of a sloth, six fingers and slow, and she'd take another bow.

The night of her funeral, alone in my room, on a piece of my father's finest stationary, just below Frank Townsend, Esq., I wrote, *Dearest Dad, By the time someone reads this, you'll be dead.* After a moment I added, *Mom, Grandpa, Lou, and Uncle Jim.* I read and re-read the note, and then signed it Joséphine Baker. I put the note on the butcher's block, 'donned the beret,' as Caroline would say, and went out the door, around the house, and down the path that led to the woods, on the other side of which was where the residents of Loveland relieved themselves of their flotsam, the place my sister's body was found, her wrists flayed open. 'Touchez pas mes tomates.' 'Touchez pas mes tomates,' I hummed, as I picked up a rusted steel rod. And feeling the weight in my hands, I turned back to the house. *C'est la vie.*

I Thought About Killing You

He was a Christian. It always surprised his students to hear that. Pupils questioning. Quizzical, wrinkled noses. Interrogatingly flat foreheads with froned brows. Their lips forming the opening to ‘But, I thought...’

Usually he told them, if they asked, at the end of the term as they turned in their final exams. Or, if they lingered outside the classroom inquiring about rounding and curves.

Normally, it was his World Religions class that was most inquisitive. A ‘What are you?’ coming out within the first five minutes of syllabus skimming. He had a stock answer readied:

‘Male. Married. A little hungry,’ The hungry part wasn’t true. But some of the kids snorted. More at the inexactness of their peer’s question than at his own, tired humor.

Of course, someone would ask a follow-up. Sometimes the original questioner. Sometimes not. If not, he felt bad about shooting the original student down.

But the second question always came, in variations of political correctness:

‘What are your personal religious beliefs?’

‘What faith do you identify with?’

Or, his favorite:

‘Where does your orientation find you in terms of spirituality?’

Generally, this last version of the question was asked not by the first brave questioner.

His answer was always the same:

‘Due to the academic nature of this class, I do not want to color your perspective one way or the other, so I will be respectfully unrevealing in this realm.’

Professorial correctness.

People would slump. Sigh. Shake their heads. Once, he heard a:

‘What a jib.’

But then, some third questioner, or second, would ask about the end of the term. Like it was a loophole he’d just found in his professor logic.

‘If you are still curious by term’s end, I may be more illuminating, but I promise you, I’m not that interesting.’

The original questioner would ask someone next to him what illuminating meant, in this context.

Interest would always wane once they covered Judaism. Sometimes before then, if some sleuth of a student happened to find out the other class he was teaching every term was Hebrew. Then the case of the ambiguous-faith religion teacher would be cracked. Or so they thought.

It could have happened earlier too, if anybody bothered to actually read the syllabus, they’d see his Ph.D. came from Tel-Aviv.

Until then, during the lectures of the Eastern Religions, one student would always orally submit his answer mid-lecture:

‘Jainist’

‘Buddhist’

‘Sikhist’

‘Hinduist’

Like it was written in the unread syllabus that extra credit could be earned by correctly identifying their instructor’s religious ‘orientation.’ He normally only acknowledged those who submitted ‘Jainist’ or ‘Sikhist’ or ‘Hinduist’. Saying, it’s just ‘Jain,’ ‘Sikh,’ ‘Hindu.’

But his fluency in Hebrew was a red herring. Much like the other false clues he’d leave them throughout the class. The pictures in his PowerPoint of the Hindu men he lived with in India, taken during one of the three different stints that he lived there. Or, when they covered Islam at the end of the term, he’d casually drop in that, when he lived with Sunni’s in Afghanistan, all he could stomach was the hummus.

So it was fair to see the shock spread across their faces when he admitted his Christianity. His appearance didn’t help much either.

Living nomadically, he’d grown accustomed to a beard. And now he just kept it, not out of some Samsonian facial tribute, but just cause. At it’s pointiest, his faux-nomad beard stopped at his sternum. And it wasn’t just cause. He kept his beard because the relics of hair on his head were getting scarcer by the months. He still had some vestige of vanity—about equivalent to the hair on his head.

What he didn’t tell his community college World Religions class was that he was also an Uber driver. Learning that information about their Ph.D. holding instructor would truly be soul crushing, he thought.

He’d picked up the ‘side gig,’ as his thirteen-year-old called it, when they lived in Paris. He had been a visiting scholar for *langues anciennes* at the Sorbonne. It was the most prestigious post he’d probably ever attain, even if it was just for the last half of 2015.

They lived in a squalid, little subsidized *pension* off the Rue De Vaugirard. It was beautiful. His ten-year-old, at the time, loved to get lost in *Le Jardin de Luxembourg*. His mother always concerned, but a trusting concern. Sometimes, he’d go with them and watch them play their elaborate game of hide and seek.

His second favorite place was Saint-Sulpice. It was the facades and frescoes that drew him in. Often, he’d just take a *flaneur* northwest from their walk-up until he arrived there. Delacroix fascinated him. His two large murals in the *Chapelle des Anges* were amazing.

But he didn’t get to go to *Le Jardin de Luxembourg* or Saint-Sulpice often enough. When he wasn’t instructing Hebrew across Blvd. Saint Michel, he was driving their complimentary, compact sedan around the city.

Even with the subsidized *pension* and free car, his wife’s translation royalties arbitrarily trickling in, and his Sorbonne salary, this was still Paris. Besides, the Sorbonne salary was pro-rated for a half a year, and they still had student debt.

His wife and he meet as undergrads at Azusa Pacific. They were both the oldest people in their Women of the Old Testament course. He twenty-six and already having lived in India three times; Afghanistan twice; Nepal once.

She was twenty-five. Her parents were South American missionaries. She'd lived everywhere in South America. Spoke French, Spanish, and Portuguese and had taught English in Belize before moving to her birth state of California to attend school.

She was a nice girl. Too pretty to even think about, so how she'd chosen the seat next to him was a divine miracle.

They rarely spoke, until near the end of the term, when she had brought a Simone Weil book along, in the original French. It sat between them, on the table they shared, like an invitation.

He told the back of her ring-less hand, after class, that he'd always wanted to read the work Leibniz wrote in French. Read Descartes in the original. Read *Revue des Études juives*.

She told him she was free from three to four for French lessons. Which was not even a result he could ever dream about happening from their brief conversation, but it's what happened.

For the rest of the year they sat together in classes—Survey of Biblical Literature I and II; THEO 203: Baptist Heritage; even a non-Theological economics course. And she tutored him in the library in French.

At the end of the year, their knees touched over a tricky passage in *Discours de la Méthode*. Stayed touching even after

she'd deciphered it for him. When their hour was up, she told him:

'You should ask me to the ice-cream social.'

'What ice-cream social?' he said honestly.

'Any,' And he knew she was making fun of him but he liked it.

They went out for yogurt. Afterwards, she tugged his beard and told him he should kiss her on the cheek. He complied.

So living in Paris had been as much her idea as his. She translated Christian books into French, Spanish, Portuguese. But not Joyce Meyer. Those were handled by the conglomerates. Her *oeuvre* was more artisanal. Obscure, you'd say if you didn't love her. Actually, a couple of the writers she worked with were people they had gone to school with.

Sometimes, she would work with an author of some prominence. Unbeknownst to said author. She would translate one of their books that had already been recently translated. She told him:

'There is no such thing as a definitive translation.'

Every translation being a never-ending series; a version of the truth. Which was another fascinating aspect about his beautiful wife—translating books whose chief claim was their irrevocable truths under her belief of truth's fluidity.

She told him she'd learned that translation philosophy from Borges. Had read him as a teenage girl living in Argentina, sneaking his books under her father's nose and into his house.

She was the fiction reader in their household. He rarely had time for fiction.

He barely had time for *Massora* by Elias Levita these days. However, he had read his wife's translation of Borges's 'The Gospel According to Mark' and it had pleased him, while giving him the chills at the same time.

That his wife could have worked with such borderline heresy. It made him look at her with even wider-eyed fascination. Love.

After reading it, he told her he understood why'd she had to be such a rebellious reader in her Argentine youth. To this day, he pretended that he was going to tatter-tale to her father about his daughter's teenage reading proclivities. He picked that up from her. Teasing.

She loved less-heretical writers too. Read *Gideon* by Marilyn Robinson once a year. He read that too, not once a year, but every five. She was always trying to get him to read Primo Levi's fiction. Chiam Potok. Elie Wiesel. It was funny, he was the Hebrew scholar, but she read the popular Jewish literature.

Now they were reading the book of Ruth together, in English. First they read it in the King James, then the New International reader's Version. They both agreed that they preferred the sound of Ruth 2:10 in the NIrV than the KJV. Maybe Ruth's declaration 'I'm from another country,' sounded more relevant than the KJV's 'I'm a stranger.'

They were unanimous also in their preference for the NIrV's Ruth 4:13. That was romance for them.

When his wife had suggested they read Ruth, she'd done it in her sly, teasing way:

'You were always too distracted by my fingernails anyways, when we covered Ruth in class.'

A truth he could neither confirm nor deny. She still wore that marvelous purple polish.

Tonight was a Thursday. Mark Twain's alleged coldest winter was over. It was October. Like most nights 'side-gigging,' it took him into the city. Often times, an airport trip brought him north from San Mateo. Sometimes an airport trip would take him east too, once he was in the city, across the Bay Bridge towards Oakland.

Even with the thirty to fifty dollar fare from the city to Oakland, riders still said it was cheaper to fly out of there than SFO. The Oakland airport was nicer in his opinion too. Cleaner.

He'd picked up a rider arriving at SFO and driven him all the way to a building behind the Federal Reserve. Good fare. A banker. Talked on his phone the whole ride.

It was still early but just dark. This was a good place for ferrying red-eye departures out of Oakland, so he circled the glass-front Fidelity building a few times, but it bare no fruit. Or more like he was always just a hare too slow on his touchscreen pickings.

Driving out of the financial district, he picked up a fare by the Art Institute. And the rider didn't want to go to Haight-Asbury—a strange miracle—but wanted an address he didn't recognize.

He picked the young man up, and felt bad about stereotyping him as a hippie

artist. Clean-shaven, Princeton cut, tall, and yes, Caucasian, with a backpack that he held in his lap protectively.

Because he didn't know the destination, he didn't pay much attention to his rider, focusing on getting his bearings on the digital grid and physical one.

After a couple minutes, his passenger said, not un-aggressively:

'Do you want some advice?'

'Sure,' he said gently.

'You're new at this right?' his passenger asked accusingly.

'Relatively.'

'Well, three things. Get some snacks. M&M's maybe, but not the peanut kind. Allergies. Get some bottled water. The little stubby ones are perfect. And get a gun, or a knife. But know how to use it.'

The last piece came out not menacingly, but it was alerting. He studied his passenger before replying. His face did have a pained and conflicted look to it. A distracted quality of despair. And he was clutching the laptop in his backpack pretty tight.

'That's good advice, but I think I'm all right on the last one,' He replied evenly.

'I'm serious man,' his passenger said, looking out the front windshield scoutingly 'this is a dangerous job you do, you need to protect yourself.'

The young man's tone had softened, a little, so it didn't come off as a threat. But there was still something biting to his syllables. Something unusual to his sitting posture.

'Well, I'll put my faith in God. He'll protect me.'

The man snorted. The snort seemed

to jolt him out of his window shield gazing. His adversarial tone returned:

'You're one of those huh? You think God is gonna protect you, do you?'

'If he wants me to be protected, yes.' Trying to diffuse any aggression in the air.

The man just shook his head and snorted again. Relented a little on his backpack vice grip, like his hands and arms were in too much disbelief to function.

After a silent minute, a minute he'd assumed meant their speaking terms were through, the man said mockingly:

'You didn't see my shirt when I got into your car, did you?'

He had not seen the young man's shirt. He'd been too busy taking directions from his phone.

The man set his backpack on the middle seat with some ceremony. Spread his arms out and straightened up.

His shirt was black. It had a silver goat with exaggerated horns and a tail. A golden pentagram surrounded it. But the most striking feature was the calligraphy lettering running along the bottom, also in gold.

Even through his rearview mirror he could decipher it. It was three Hebrew sixes. Right to left to left. Looked like a cursive letter M with a curl up front.

He thought of two things: Delacroix's rendering of Mephistopheles; and why he had associated his passenger's clean-shaven appearance with virtue. Absurd, when he himself wore a graying, unruly beard.

With a neutral voice, he asked his young passenger:

‘Are you a Luciferian?’ Unsure if that term was still in fashion.

‘A Satanist,’ Was his acidic reply.

They didn’t cover Satanism in his World Religions course.

The rest of the ride was silence. He wasn’t sure where they could go from here. Not sure if it was appropriate to small talk about Satanism, ‘So, how’d you get into that?’ like it was a genre of music.

In fact, maybe music was a solution to the paling silence between them. He rarely turned the radio on, when he was driving for Uber. Not wanting to offend anybody with his un-coolness. His non-hipness. Ruin his 4.998 rating over his musical ignorance.

But he flipped it on now. Pretty sure his rating was smoke already, anyways. Scanned the stations. Commercials. Stopped it on the first thing that sounded like music. Soft. Slow. Spoken word. But the words were more uncomfortable than the silence.

A man contemplating pre-mediated murder. Suicide. How he loved himself more than he loved the object of his pre-meditations. Crazy.

And it would be too awkward to turn the dial now, because his passenger’s interest seemed piqued. Great, he thought, I’ve found the only Satanist station in the Bay Area. What were the odds? Maybe you could only get this frequency with a Satanist in the backseat.

Thankfully, it turned into a rap song. He could feel the Satanist’s disgust. He went back to his pre-radio veering out the backseat window, clutching his

backpack. The JanSport lettering was Sharpied out. Now his eye wanted to pick up on these little clues of the occult.

He’d never been grateful for rap music before, but he was now. Took the liberty to turn the radio off to no objection.

Their destination approached. It was a neighborhood, but still a main thoroughfare. There was a synagogue on the corner, three Hasidic Jews, and a providential parking spot right against the curb in front of them.

His passenger and he got out of the vehicle at the same time. His passenger because, evidently, this was close enough to his final destination. He, because it wasn’t every night you ran into Hasidic Jews in the city. Plus, the air was much less stifling outside than in his sedan right now.

He greeted the Hasidic Jews in Hebrew and they didn’t seem surprised. They returned his salutation and asked him where he was from. Where had he learned such beautiful Hebrew. He told them about his studies in Tel-Aviv and they nodded solemnly. Then their eyes shifted from side-to-side, from him to his passenger—who was, inexplicably, lingering about, listening. The Hasidic Jews had seen his shirt.

In English, he told them he was an Uber driver. Even solemn nod. The oldest—grayest beard, longest curls—asked his fare if he knew the significance of the calligraphy on his shirt.

‘Yes, they are Greek sixes, three of them,’ He said confidently.

The bravest Jew continued: ‘No, no, that is Hebrew sir,’ chuckling, ‘You are

wearing a pagan shirt with Hebrew numbers.'

'Really?' the young Satanist said intrigued.

'Yes, young man. It is a very interesting shirt, may I precede in assuming you are a Satanist?'

'If I may precede in assuming you are a Jew,' The young Satanist said, not with his usual vitriol, but almost with a smile, to his eyes.

The elder Hasidic Jew chuckled, 'Yes, you are spot on young man. Spot on.'

'Orthodox Jews?' the young Satanist motioned with his finger to the three Hasidic Jews.

'No we are Hasidic,' The same wise Jew replied.

'What's the difference?' the Satanist eyed semi-suspiciously.

'Oh, we tend not to focus on our differences. We like to focus on our own qualities.'

'And what might those be?' genuinely inquired the Satanist.

'The imminence of God in existence, a trusting heart, and enthusiasm *hitlahuvut*,' he said the Hebrew word with a nod and wink to him, the Uber driver, and 'Enthusiasm is one of my favorite of the Hasidic virtues.'

The young Satanist looked moved.

Already, the Uber driver could not wait to tell his wife of this strange encounter, and the Satanist's next words were even more surprising and unexpected.

'Do you guys drink? There is a quiet bar down the street where we can talk more,' The Satanist addressed all of them, the three Hasidic Jews, him—the

Uber driver—as if he had been contributing to the conversation in any meaningful way.

He didn't drink. But he didn't have time to state this, because the eldest Hasidic Jew spoke:

'I have an idea. Why don't we repair to my house, it isn't far, and my wife is preparing fish.'

He never thought a Hasidic Jew would out do a Satanist in terms of shock value, but he was floored. Again, he, the Uber driver, was included in this 'we'.

The Satanist seemed to take to this. Agreed, even before the eldest Hasidic Jew mentioned:

'Oh, and we might have a thing or two to drink.'

The younger Hasidic Jews shook hands with their elder. Nodded at both the Satanist and himself. They must have had other fish dinners to attend to.

The eldest Hasidic Jew told him his car would be safe there. He hadn't even agreed to go along, but somehow the man had divined that he would.

Of course he did and went along running on sheer fascination. For once, he wanted to fascinate his own beautiful wife with an exotic tale.

Walking behind the synagogue, the streets turned full residential. His mind traveled to the parallel reality of the three of them walking into a bar. A Christian, a Jew, and a Satanist—all the usual suspects for a poor joke.

He smiled to himself, as the Satanist introduced himself to the Hasidic Jew with a handshake. The young Satanist said his name was Geoffrey. The Hasidic

Jew returned his handshake and said his name was Jacob Isaac. Named after his great-great-great-grandfather, from Poland.

In turn, they shook his hand.

‘Gregory,’ He gave them as his name.

Jacob Isaac’s house was Hasidic. That’s not a style of architecture, but it was now. Forever he would associate that style of architecture with that man.

It was modestly furnished—a multi-color of brown sofa, a matching loveseat, with a simple, classic wood coffee table and a welcome smell. The dining room was to the left and behind the loveseat.

Jacob Isaac’s wife was Rachel. ‘Mrs. Rachel,’ as her husband referred to her. He had told them to take a seat at the dining room table and disappeared behind the small door, presumably leading to the kitchen.

Their Hasidic host returned with three tumblers and his wife followed shortly with Everclear and deep-red juice in a jar: R.W. Knodely. She squeezed her husband’s hand and said the fish would be out shortly. She’d already eaten.

The good host poured Geoffrey the Satanist a stiff amount of Everclear. Added some juice. He poured himself an equally stiff drink, after offering Gregory some juice. Again, seering into his soul and knowing that he did not imbibe alcohol. Or, it could have just been because he’d seen him operating a motor vehicle not ten minutes ago.

The juice was sharp and bitter, a distinct no blend cranberry. He could only imagine it with Everclear—which

was apparently kosher, in the original fastening of that word. The fish was sole, herbed and baked, flaky and scrumptious.

The conversation was a brief history of the modern Hasidic movement founded by Israel ben Eliezer, Baal Shem-Tob ‘Master of the Holy Name’.

‘It was a bit of a spiritual revolution,’ Jacob Isaac remarked. Geoffrey the Satanist liked that.

Their good host continued about Ben Eliezer’s dissatisfied youth; his incomppliance with the rigid and the rational and his attraction to the mystical and the spiritual.

‘He was a bit of a miracle worker.’

Jacob Isaac went on to expound upon his parables. His mystic expositions.

‘Baal Shem’s focus was not on the individual, on asceticism, stoicism, withdrawal, but on the activities of living in community,’ He paused over a drink, his second.

‘Such as the partaking of food.’ Smiles from all sides.

It was a scene. Geoffrey the Satanist was pretty drunk and Jacob Isaac wasn’t keeping up with him, but he wasn’t relenting on his drink either. The conversation became looser. Somewhere along the way Geoffrey the Satanist asked a question about drediel. The Hanukah game.

Jacob Isaac explained its origins. When the Jews were under Greek rule, they were forbidden from studying the Talmud and forbidden from speaking their language. So they had to devise a cover for their children’s clandestine readings.

In the Greek caves they would study their Hebrew, and when the guards would come on patrol, the books would go into hiding, and the toys would come out. Spinning their tops and whistling until the guards past—biding time until it was safe to pull the books back out.

‘Now we commemorate that tradition through dreidel.’

Gregory thought of his rebellious wife, sneaking her Borges in dark Argentine places. He’d heard her whistle before too. Maybe he should buy her a dreidel and they could play together.

As if the pleasure of the memories of his wife were visible on his face, Geoffrey the Satanist asked him how long he’d been married.

‘Fifteen years.’

Geoffrey asked Jacob Isaac the same question.

‘Twenty-five.’

And he thought he knew the answer to Geoffrey the Satanist’s angst. The angst that had been written on his face since he’d first examined him in the backseat of his car. An only story love angst.

Maybe it was the sight of the loving devotion evident between Hasidic husband and wife spurring his next question—a plea for advice really.

‘My girlfriend and I recently broke-up,’ Heavy sigh.

Jacob Isaac asked ‘Is she also a Satanist?’

‘Yes, yes,’ young Geoffrey replied ‘that’s not the problem.’

‘I only ask because many a relationship has been broken over being the wrong religion.’

‘Yes, I understand,’ Geoffrey somberly said, ‘The problem was uh, exclusivity. She believed in, well, uh, open borders.’

Though that was a hot-button political issue of the day, of all days probably, he knew Geoffrey the Satanist was referring to monogamy. Not immigration. And Jacob Isaac did too.

‘And you desired a monogamous relationship, have I got it right?’

‘Yes, yes’ Geoffrey sputtered, ‘I don’t know what to do.’

After a slight pause, Jacob Isaac stated:

‘Well, what we value in a relationship says a lot about the value we esteem in ourselves.’

Jacob Isaac’s words weren’t a direct answer to the young Satanist’s question, but a change came over him all the same. He appeared a different man. The melancholy lifted.

It truly was fascinating to Gregory. That a Satanist, a Jew, and a Christian could all desire the same thing—an intimate, monogamous relationship with another human being.

Their night came to a close. The Everclear was less than half full and the juice jar drained.

Gregory thanked their wise and generous host and excused himself. His host told him to drop by anytime. He said he would.

Before he could leave, young Geoffrey asked him to wait up. He shook their host’s hand, thanked him for his generosity, and Jacob Isaac repeated his open-ended invitation. Geoffrey gathered his backpack, the one he had kept

under his seat the whole night, and said he would stop by again, sometime.

It was after midnight so Gregory the Uber driver figured the young man needed another ride. On the walk back to the car, he asked him if he needed the ride. No charge.

‘No, thank you. I need to walk.’

‘Okay.’

Before they got to the car, Geoffrey told him:

‘You don’t know what you’ve done.’

He hadn’t said much all night. Mainly listened. So he figured it was his silence that was appreciated. Happy his fifteen years of marriage could be of service.

‘I’m sure you will find the right person.’

‘No, you don’t understand.’

They were at the car now. On the sidewalk where they had met the three Hasidic Jews, in front of the Synagogue.

Geoffrey swung his backpack gently around in front of his shirt. Unzipped it.

He knew what it was without knowing it. Like you know the Cyrillic alphabet without reading Greek. Like you know German words without speaking German. Like you know rap music without knowing the first thing about rap.

DENIS BELL

Birthday Party

A kitchen paved with marble tiles. Granite counters topped with a punch bowl and a vegetable platter. An ice cream cake and a stack of paper plates.

In a room down the hall a home movie is playing. Joanne chasing butterflies on a hot summer afternoon. Collecting snowflakes in winter. Hanging paper bats at Halloween. The magic of a first kiss. Getting wasted with Alex and Tina in a Volkswagen van on a road trip to Monterey. Riding bareback with Mark at a cabin in Big Sur.

Slow down, Joanne says, you'll be there before I'm ready.

Exchanging gifts at a friend's baby shower, a panda bear and a hand-knitted sweater with a matching pom-pom hat. The date is April 12, 1980, Elizabeth is expecting a boy at the end of May.

Perhaps they'll date in high school.

He won't be able to handle her, Joanne says.

The baby left her three months too soon and twisted something inside along the way. A tiny little thing, named Amanda Jane after Joanne's nan.

A bouncy castle and a Slip 'N Slide. A guest room set aside for surplus items. A Munchkin costume from a school play, kept all these years for no good reason. Portraits of beloved pets, long passed. Old buckets and swabs. The sweater with the hat, and a stroller. In a corner of the room sits a baby doll with eyes that look eerily like Mark's.

Joanne reaches out trembling hands and picks up the doll. Feels for an instant a pulse beating inside the small chest, a rush of warm breath on her face. Feels a world full of promise.

Joanne dresses the doll in the sweater and sets her down gently in the stroller.

Back in the kitchen a chef in a lab coat is hard at work preparing a feast. A pot of something soft and pink blistering on the stove. Plates piled high with raw nerves.

Elsewhere the party is getting underway. Jimi Hendrix and Amy Winehouse are setting up in the lounge and River Phoenix is getting ready to welcome the guests.

Excited shrieks erupt outside. A B-52 is coming in for an emergency landing and My Little Pony is kicking up a storm. A cousin packs up the mood in a plastic box to be buried in the back yard at the end of the day.

When Smoke Gets in Your Eyes

‘I now curl this meeting to ardor,’ annoonced Nicotina Turner, efficially begatting the proseedings in the scenter-city smokers’ club called Huffy Puffy. ‘The tissue at hand is to desite whether sum of our membranes should be permitten to have a non-smoking areola within the promises of Huffy Puffy. Beforay we tuck a vote, the fleer is open to discourssion. Who would like to speech up fist?’

Archie Yellowfingers raced his handy and abbroached the electern. After ahem-mingandahawing for severale seconds, he said, ‘I don’t meanie to rustle anyone’s fetters, but I don’t seize the point to habbing a non-smoking dissection in a smoking clob. It seams antitheticurl to me.’

Herbie Spitz yellbellied out, ‘Somebuddy’s been reading their interdictionary!’ After the chuckies died downy, Archie contineared, ‘Anywee, that’s all I hat to say-so. It joust seams to go against the hole idea of what this sorciety is deadicated to. Thanks and have a good dais.’ Most of the utter bored members offered their applaudits as Archie retuned to his cheer.

‘Thank you, Urchie. Who’s nixt?’ asked Nicotina. Emma Fasima rashed ovum to speech her mime. She noddled and said, ‘I’m with Urgie. It’s a stewpid knowtion. If anybuddy hates smoke, leaf the clurb!’

Leo Hackman jumpered up while Emma was steel standing on the roustrum.

‘Holden on, Leo—one at a timex!’ interobjected Nicotina.

‘That’s allrite, Nici, I’m all threw,’ Emma said. ‘Let Leo have his sayer.’ Leo rose to the caucasian and decleared, ‘As fur as I’m cancerned, this is a nun-issue. We come hero to *smoke*, rite?! That’s it, peeriod. Nobuddy is twisting anybuddy’s armistice to bee here. It’s all volunteary. So why *would* we have a non-smoking secection?! It’s a poorposterous idea.’

‘OK, thanks, Leo,’ said Nicotina. ‘Let’s here from those in flavor of it.’ Ducky Quackmire god up and took the fleer.

‘Look, the punt you’re mussing is that sum of us no lunger smoke, but we have still have fronds here. So radder than droop out, we would prefar to keep freakquenting Huffy Puffy. Habbing our own aria in which to hangar out with like-mended peeples seems a raisinable and prunish way for us to be with our own kine and still be able to leaf the non-smoking suction whenever we want to socialeyes and cough violetly with our smoking cohurts. It’s a veery good campromise.’

‘Think you,’ said Nicotina. ‘Anybaddy else?’ Momo Shantz steeped farward and said ownly, ‘I feel alike Ducky do.’

‘OK, Momo, thanks for your input,’ said Nicotina. ‘Any fodder comments?’

‘Just one morsel, Nicotina,’ said Ira Coughman, appreaching the lecturn. ‘The sololution seems simble enough. The majeerity shouldn’t be fussed to accomodote a few dissidentals. Ducky and his ilk-minded fellows can’t habit both weighs. They can’t come into our fartress and overhurl our permission statement.

‘All rite then,’ said Nicotina. ‘Let’s put the madder to a vote. All in fever of having a spacial playce for non-smokers say ‘Aye.’ OK, all those agunst the idea say ‘Nay.’ That’s it then. The Naybors win by overwheezing odds. Huffy Puffy will remain a smoke-free-free zone. I now adjournal this mating.’

As was customairy, before departying, each participant and participanty boweled before a huege poortrait of Sir Wilter Rally and chunted ‘Inhail to the chief! Inhail to the chief!’

The Man Who Saw Himself From Outside

George Bichal could only see himself from a few feet away, as others saw him. He had no awareness of looking out from a body, but always saw his body in full. At the point where the camera of his consciousness seemed to hang was nothing. The cause or mechanism behind this he could not say, as he was an accountant, not a scientist. He could not say exactly when seeing himself this way had begun; he had the feeling that he had once looked out from behind eyes like everyone, but bit by bit over the years he had grown distant from himself, until finally he floated an unchanging distance away. It was not that George helplessly watched a puppet perform: he *knew* that the body he was saw was himself, and it did and said what he willed. He saw other people from the same distance, and could turn as his body did and look around. Where a normal person was an actor, George was a director.

‘There’s nothing in your eyes, nobody’s home,’ his wife Janet said around mouthfuls of fast food cheeseburger as they sat at their dining room table. They had both gotten home late from work, and neither wanted to cook. They had no children, but a couple of cats, who were probably somewhere staring out windows into the yard or street, and

the big, new house was mostly dark and silent.

George saw his body pause with a mouthful of fries. The body gulped them down and mumbled ‘What?’ It stared at her.

‘I’m not insulting you, so don’t worry, George.’ Janet was a trim, neat woman with brown hair and a long nose. ‘I’ve been married to you for seventeen years, and I love you very much, but there’s always been something missing. I *just* saw what it was. Must be whatever chemicals they put in these burgers.’ She tried to grin, but failed.

George saw himself, a stocky man with short black hair and a bristly beard, slowly lower the burger he had been about to bite. Did she really know, or was this the preamble to another of their common, minor arguments? This was a new tactic if so. ‘Then what are you talking about? It *did* sound like you just called me stupid, suddenly, over burgers, for no reason.’

‘Not at all.’ She stared into his body’s eyes. ‘See, *there*? Your eyes aren’t really looking at me. They are looking ahead, but not at me. There’s no one *home*, no light.’ She paused and screwed up her tight face. ‘I don’t what the hell it is, George, but *something* is missing in you.’ She pulled her body up defensively,

expecting an outburst. Her bottom lip trembled slightly.

George recognized it, as they had argued often enough. But never had she said anything like this. This wasn't about home repairs, money, the car, the cats, or the idiots at work. George had told no one, ever, that he saw himself from the outside. How does one explain that? Who would believe it? But now Janet, a very intelligent but not particularly perceptive woman, had seen it. George thought furiously about what to do.

He made his body's face smile, and relaxed his muscles. Play it off, he thought, she's just upset from work, and seeing things. 'Okay, I am sorry if I seem that way. I don't mean to be, baby. Stress at work, you know, and my mind's dwelling on it. Trust me, I am in here, all the way,' he lied, making his body jerk its right thumb towards itself. He tried to make his body's eyes, face and body language alive and present for her, animated. It wasn't easy from a distance.

Janet's face soured even more. 'George, don't play me off. I know what you are doing. I've seen it before, you know?' Suddenly her face softened, her body relaxed and she placed her hands flat on the table, leaning in. 'If there is something wrong, physically, or psychologically, or even between us, *tell me*, and we will deal with it. But *don't* tell me everything's normal.'

George could feel, vaguely, the sensations of his body. He could taste the grease of the fries, and feel his heart beating faster. He felt a bead of sweat on his forehead, and a line of cold down his

spine. It was there, but distant. He saw his point of view wobble, as if something had nudged the camera. 'Babe, I promise you I am fine.' He raised his body's hands to give a gesture of exhaustion and uncertainty. 'I am just tired.' The body sighed. He felt a bolt of anger. 'Sorry I am not gazing at your loveliness in a sufficiently worshipful way', he said, and wondered where that had come from.

Janet recoiled. Then her thin fist hit the table, shaking the plates and glasses. 'Don't make this about me. It's about you, George, or rather how there is not a *you*. No you inside.' She growled in frustration. 'I can't explain it, but it's as if somebody was controlling you by strings.'

Yeah, *I am*, George thought. I am my own puppet master, my own director and producer. He watched for several seconds as his body sat there, its face and eyes towards the glaring Janet, doing nothing, seeing nothing. He could see her point, now that he looked at his body in that way. It did seem listless, still, a radio-controlled car waiting for someone to push the lever. He knew he had to get out of this before it got worse. Be *lively*. He made his body continue eating, he forced it to move with exaggerated speed and force. His eyes narrowed at Janet. 'Look, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm going to finish my burger and fries.' The body worked away, stuffing food into itself.

Janet gave a horrified yelp and started up from the table. She walked away quickly, and he heard the door to their bedroom close firmly. Well, I screwed that up royally, he thought. He knew she

would not come back out for the rest of the night. He might have to sleep in the den. His body kept eating until the food was gone. He finished Janet's burger. He saw one of the cats walk past his legs as if he was just another piece of furniture. They never wanted him to pet them anymore. It was as if he wasn't there. Oh yeah, George thought, *I'm not*. I am over here, wherever that is. His body sat alone at the table. He felt his vision point get slightly farther from it.

Janet did let him into the room later, but said no more than was necessary until she fell asleep. She did not touch him, or look directly at him, especially avoiding his body's eyes. He tried a few times to make conversation, about their fight, or anything, but she would give only one-word responses, finally taking up her tablet and reading. George saw his body in bed beside her body. Her lean body was stiff and aloof, his blockier one was unnaturally still, almost slumped. It was like was a watching a bad television show and not being able to change the channel. The silence stretched, she fell asleep and George made his body turn off his light. George perceived a dark form in darkness. He did sleep, his awareness of his body slowly fading, but somehow, he never, ever dreamed.

Janet had to be at work earlier than he did, and when he awoke she was gone. He looked for a note, but there was nothing. Her work clothes were gone, so she had likely just gone to work. George saw his body putter around the bedroom and bathroom, getting ready to go to work as usual. Then he stopped it.

It froze. I have to find some way out of this, he thought. I have to get back into my body. Before Janet leaves me, or has me committed, or before I float any farther away. Into what? Nothingness? The not-anywhere where my consciousness seems to reside? Most people, he mused, had their minds inside their bodies, and it was high time that George Bichal, respectable accountant, stopped placidly accepting this strange existence and did something about it.

His body still motionless in the middle of the dim bedroom, he realized he had no idea *what* to do. To what doctor did one go to treat out-of-body consciousness? It occurred to George that he might be technically classified as a ghost. Should he visit a medium? But it didn't fit: his body was definitely alive, and George was connected to it. He could not float around or go through walls. A psychologist? George thought of himself as a very stable person; after all, the distancing from his body, slow as it had been, had not caused him any panic and only a very little concern. A physicist? Was he some kind of energy being? That was science fiction nonsense, George decided. He realized that he might be wrong about most people, that he did not know, could not know, how many other people experienced the same phenomenon, but like him kept it quiet. There could be millions, billions, of directors trailing around behind their bodies, and a conspiracy of silence about it. How many of those had Janets to snoop them out?

This was getting him nowhere. For a second, he considered going to a priest,

but that was even less appealing than the other specialists he had considered. He had never been religious and did not believe in the soul, though he reflected that he had more evidence for it than perhaps anyone in history. He moved his now stiff body again, and got it ready to go to work, unable to think of anything else to do and not wanting to be late to the office. In many ways, he thought, my life is completely normal: I work, eat, crap, try to not flinch at the bullshit life throws my way and try not to make people mad at me. I just do it at one remove. He thought of Janet as he drove to work. What did she really think of me? Was she mad? Was she telling other people about my not-thereness? Had she in fact left me? He thought of calling her phone, but reminded himself he should not do that while driving. His body completed the task and he guided it into his office and to his cubicle.

He forgot his intention to call Janet when he saw how much work was on his computer. The work day started, and his co-workers and his boss interacted with him as normal, as far as he could tell. *They* don't say I'm a soulless puppet, he thought. George could see, from some ways away, what his body had to do, and he did the thinking and made the body do the work. It was something he had unconsciously mastered who knew how long ago. He lost himself in work and forgot the need to solve his out-of-body problem. Eventually, he felt distant, vague pangs of hunger, realizing that in his pondering he had skipped his usual bagel, tomato slice and cheese.

George willed his body to rise and go to the office kitchen. It didn't. It would not move. He saw it sit there at his desk, working away. He was not willing it to type any more, not doing an accountancy in his mind. He simply stared, from nowhere, as his body continued to move as normal. Now panic did stab through him, as this was a new development. For some reason he blamed Janet. Had her noticing the truth done this to him? He pushed that from his mind and focused on willing the body he was watching back under his control. It did not seem to be different, but he noticed that the feeling of hunger was completely gone. He felt nothing. He could see, hear, and smell, but touch and taste, always faint, were now gone. He concentrated harder, reaching out and grabbing with his will. *Rise*, dammit, you are *my* body, *my* body, my legs and arms, my asshole and dick. *Come on*. No control came. George screamed inside wherever his mind was. He noticed that the body, no longer *his* body, was slowing down and stopping, like a wind-up toy winding down. Finally, it was still, staring dumbly at its monitor. George could only watch it from outside, the action stopped but the camera still rolling.

An unknown time passed. Mike, a co-worker, come by and talked to him. When the body did not respond, he said 'George, man, you alright?' *Get help*, you dumb bastard, George thought but the body did not say. Mike said some more things that George, thinking furiously about what to do in this situation, barely heard. Mike shrugged his shoulders and

left. Eventually others came and talked to him, got no response, were varying degrees of offended or concerned by this, and walked off. Finally, his boss, Mr. Stevens, came and asked George if he was okay.

George's body said nothing. George thought at him, *No*, I am most definitely *not* okay, I am trapped at a point in space *outside my body*. I can't even move it anymore. Call a doctor, call the police, get a god damn witch doctor, but *do something*. George had no heart to beat, no glands to sweat, but he felt panic all the same. It blurred his vision of his former body and the concerned colleagues standing around it, puzzled.

'George, I think you should go home and get some rest. Now, please.' Stevens said.

The body was motionless. George's mind, for that's all he was, rang with panic and a red, pulsing fear that he could not control.

'George, please go home. You clearly can't work. So you are taking up company time and resources. *Go home*. I promise this won't affect your pay or quarterly employee evaluation. If you go now.'

The body did not move. George was beginning to calm down, and could see the body clearly again. *Please help me*, he thought. Call somebody. He noticed that all of his senses were gone save vision and hearing, and his hearing seemed fainter.

'George, as your supervisor I am ordering you to go home,' Stephens said, his beefy hand firmly on the body's shoulder. 'I will call the security guy if you do not move.'

George could only stare as the guy came, his co-workers were told to go back to work, and Stephens and the security man, Gonzalez, tried to lug the body out of its chair. They got it up, but dropped it. George felt nothing as the body hit the carpet. Stevens and Gonzalez had a short, heated conversation, then left. Sometime later, paramedics showed up and treated the body. It seemed alive and healthy, breathing shallow but steady, heartbeat regular, temperature fine. George was numb. The paramedics hefted the body onto a stretcher and wheeled it away. *Finally*, George thought, his alertness returning a little bit. Some new scenery. Maybe somebody who can help. He expected his viewpoint to follow his body from a few feet away, as it always had.

It did not. He still stared at the paper-covered walls of his cubicle. His old body was gone, as well as everyone else. George's consciousness stayed completely still at about eye height. He was fully aware. Panic rose in him again, but not as strongly. I guess I really am a ghost, he thought. A frozen ghost. I can't even go boo or move through walls. Somehow, he laughed, a long, manic wild laugh that was only mental. For he was only mental. He could see every detail of the cubicle, but he could not affect it, could not move. The consciousness that was George Bichal stared.

After some time, the office closed. George could faintly hear them going home. He saw the dark office. He lost awareness, regained it as the office opened for the next day. He saw people coming and working as normal, and sometimes

they'd come and shake their heads at his cubicle, talking about his 'mental breakdown' yesterday. You have no idea how broken my mental is, George thought. The work day proceeded as normal, and the office closed and the night came and George's mind stayed where it was, staring, not thinking much. He had no way to communicate, move, or affect anything. He tried praying late that night. Nothing came of it. He tried talking in his mind to Janet, telepathically. He had not gained that power. The days and nights came and went, but George started unchangingly.

The next week George's things were removed and his cubicle was given to a new hire, and George absently watched the woman work. Then he ignored her, and most other things around him. He was only dimly aware of the movement of people around him, or night and day. Eventually he realized he could no longer hear, though his vision, when he wanted it to be, was clear. He wondered if his was Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, or Limbo, although all those concepts were vague to George. He asked whatever Power might be listening to his interior monologue what had happened to him, but got no answer.

Weeks passed, months, years, though George the Staring Point in Space was not really aware of time. The office changed around him, closed, a new one opened up, dozens of people spent their work lives in it, none of them ever knowing that a disembodied consciousness was watching them. The building finally closed for good, was torn down,

and a parking lot put in its place. Cars, of strange design, parked in and around George. He barely noticed them. Occasionally some atom of thought wondered how many hundreds of years had passed. An unknown time ago he had stopped losing awareness, stopped sleeping. He was an eternally observing eye without any eyes. The cars came and went, and got stranger, until George was not sure they were cars anymore. The people were odd looking as well, whenever he noticed, which was rare. They were extremely tall and beautiful, with scaly, blue iridescent skin, elongated necks like swans and large, dark eyes. Once or twice he was sure one of the beautiful giants was looking right at him, could somehow perceive him, but then it went away and left him.

The parking lot had long since stopped being that. What it was George didn't know. A strange building, or work of art? Great sweeping white curves of... something? Everything had changed except George. He stared. The whatever-it-was faded, the ground dropped away, and darkness surrounded him. George saw what he thought must be stars. There was a bright flash, maybe the sun exploding, though he of course felt no heat or force. The light faded, and eventually George saw the stars again. Like him, they burned for a long, long time.

K. P. TAYLOR

The War at Sea

It was the end of the world, and everyone was invited. Mother Earth, the battered woman, had returned to us time and time again, and we always promised that we would do better. But now she'd had enough—we were being removed, expunged... sloughed off like so much dead skin. It was difficult to process. We cycled through the five stages of grief as we mourned our future deaths. There was something like camaraderie when we accepted that we were all going to die. People were nicer to each other. There were fireworks and cookouts—it felt like the Fourth of July and Memorial Day and Christmas morning, and it seemed to go on forever. 'I almost wish the world had ended sooner,' my neighbor hollered as he led another anonymous blonde up to his apartment. We were drunk on the milk of human kindness and Miller High Life.

It had begun with the large marine mammals. Each new day more of them washed up with the tide. Their bloated corpses were towed out to sea or blown up with dynamite. Red tide, Fukushima, mercury poisoning... everyone had an opinion. Some believed that the earth's rotation had shifted a few degrees and we were now on a trajectory to oblivion. It was all meaningless conjecture, and there was no urgency to it. A live pair of juvenile blue whales showed up on

a beach in Newfoundland. People roped their tails and dragged them out to sea, but the whales kept beaching themselves. They confounded every effort to save them. Tie-dyed spiritualists came and placed flowers around their blowholes. They sang songs and played guitar for them. The whales watched, mute, milk-eyed. The government of Japan offered to take them away to conduct scientific research, but everyone was fairly certain that they just wanted to eat them. It wouldn't be dignified. So they were left on the beach, a feast for gulls.

The large terrestrial animals were next. Bulldozers carried dead giraffes from the zoo, their long necks hanging grotesquely between the steel teeth. It was all too much—we needed a palate cleanse. The Huffington Post published a fluff-piece on the last elephant in sub-Saharan Africa. At dawn each day, the large tusker would amble to the watering hole and trumpet defiantly at the shimmering horizon. Its trunk would probe the ground searching for the fallen and fermenting fruit of the Marula tree. The fruit would intoxicate the elephant, and the great beast would stumble around comically. Now this was a creature we could relate to, one that was drinking away its sorrows. The article led to a great outpouring of interest from the

general public. More than anything, people were concerned that the elephant didn't have a name. A contest was held, and the elephant was named Arthur. The world fell in love. The story of Arthur was tragic but hopeful. Arthur was proof that this Armageddon was not indiscriminate, that some of us would be spared. The sheep would be separated from the goats. A Livestream was set up to capture Arthur's daily sojourn. We awoke one day to discover that Arthur was not at the watering hole. Poachers had killed him for his tusks. A photo of a dead Arthur made the front page of the Huffington Post. '*MURDERED!*' Half of Arthur's face had been hacked away. Blood streamed from his eyes as if he had been crying. A garland of flies crowned his head. Our Heraclitus, our weeping philosopher. There was outrage! We demanded justice, but the poachers were never caught. Weeks later Arthur, the last elephant, was forgotten. Not quite forgotten but put aside and not spoken of—he had become the elephant in the room.

It was half a minute to midnight, and society began to unravel. The Science Technology and Religion Tribunal (START, because people still loved acronyms) was established. START was meant to finally bridge the gap between the secular and religious worlds. They held a symposium. The man of science spoke first. 'Our existence is only a footnote in the story of the universe. We should not mourn the few months we have left but celebrate the 200,000 years the human race has existed.' The man of

religion, the sweating, smiling preacher man, objected to this opening statement on the grounds that the human race had existed for only 6000 years. The technologist suggested that we should forget the past and look to the future. There was a shuttle, a great gleaming silver shuttle that could ferry a dozen of us to Mars. Time was of the essence. They took our best and brightest. The launch was broadcast around the world. We cheered, we cried, we would never learn if they made it. We sent them off with all of our hopes, like a message in a bottle cast into an unquiet sea.

We weren't dead yet. The conservative press called it 'The Apocalypse at Sea' after 'The War at Sea,' those strange eight months at the beginning of the Second World War when no major power launched a land offensive. All that the people of the time had known were smiling faces and pressed trousers boarding warships for some far away front. It wasn't real. Not until the bombs fell. *Drôle de guerre*. We had yet to have our Blitz or Normandy. We weren't yet chugged off to our Treblinka or our Auschwitz. So we carried on, operating on a collective anxiety. We did those things we had always promised ourselves we would do. We climbed mountains and took piano lessons, but mostly we just got drunk and bought things. The real world still pressed against us—there were car payments and mortgages and student loans, and no one wanted to be out on the street when the apocalypse finally arrived.

A great multitude of small birds settled in the trees of Central Park. They

were charming creatures, bobbing and dancing on the branches. Singing for their lives. They brought us some measure of happiness. In the weeks to come, they would fall to the ground, one by one, like so many dead apples. ‘There is a biblical precedent...’ the preacher explained as he mopped his brow with a handkerchief, ‘...when God delivered manna from heaven to feed the starving Israelites. It is all part of God’s plan.’ Somehow we had expected God’s plan to be grander, all scorched earth and Battle of Megiddo. Not this. Not hundreds of dead wrens and sparrows. The preacher smiled too much, and he perspired too much. The jig was up.

So we waited. Like the man at the train station who checks his watch and peers down the track. He waits for the train that will come. He looks up the track and down the track, and they appear one and the same. And it seems to take forever. Then all at once, it is upon him. It was quiet in the city. No distant rumble of airplanes. No dogs barking. No sound of weeping or laughing. No sound at all.

[First published in *Kōan*]

BROOK BHAGAT

Once Upon a Time I Died

Once upon a time I died. I crucified myself on a ladder made from the bones of birds, hollow, not yet cleaned by cannibals or the sun, yet flightworthy by nature. My vertebrae dissolved without the soft bits to hold them together, my rich cartilage collection of the fastest way to get to the airport and how much salt goes in curry and how to cut the baby's nails suddenly useless.

I trickled down, fell like beads when I cut my own string. Some days I can laugh at the little pearls, curling up like roly-polies. Some days I can't. Won't, I mean, but I don't have to be fair anymore.

My favorite thin cotton pillowcase and my favorite cup and the face I saw in a cloud in my Dostoyevsky days—what are they worth? I didn't want to laugh, some days. It's not funny when an ocean evaporates. Make a list, and another list, and another. I know it's a lie, but I want to see them on the shelves.

I remember only the days of building, winding my hair around each rung, chanting *cancer, cancer, enlightenment, fault! Itsy bitsy alakazam! Ashes, ashes, we all fall up*. Don't we?

I took someone's word for it somewhere along the line, or I wouldn't have made this scaffolding in the first place, getting more precarious the higher I go. I had a blueprint, I know. It was on the fridge, held by letter magnets next to the boy's kindergarten drawing of all of us together and the grocery list and the photo booth pictures where we look so silly and free, before we knew. It must have blown off some night when I forgot the kitchen window open, or whirled around after stepping on the cat's tail, or some other accident. But I had a plan. It was all very clear at one point, the instructions coming in snippets of radio songs, dreams and omens and the language of color behind closed eyes, the language of sunlight through lace curtains on the warm wood floor: *Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself*.

But will it come if I am full of rocks? They emerge from my palms, igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary: obsidian, slate, granite, marble, each with their own sharp edges, their own important veins. Graceless, they tumble, following the fragments of my skeleton down the dry riverbeds where I was born to build. I can wait a thousand years to reach the ocean if I know I am going, even piece by piece.

I would rather not, of course. Waiting and building and falling apart are not my way at all. To tell you the truth, it's not finished. I ran out of hair, I ran out of feathers, I ran out of funny and beautiful and brilliant and everything else I have used to tie you to me. What else do I have? How many days can I wait for the boiling point?

I give up, I give up: I tear free and jump. Fuck it, fuck it: I run. I run so hard I land in California, Mumbai, the Ivory Coast. I take like a fire to the world, licking the crops of every continent black, wiping the slate clean with one snap of my neck like a dragon the size of a star.

And after the slash and burn, the land could breathe. In the early morning, before the new growth, I remembered the dream I had of freedom from my favorite jeans and my best work, and I was home in time to make dinner from the ashes.

In my spare time, I am building a ladder made from the bones of birds, hollow, not yet cleaned by cannibals or the sun, yet flightworthy by nature.

Poetry



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Chris Tait

GALES ARE DIALECTIC RAPS

A kettle boiled gale force
Pours sea over the dock
With bones spit from a main course
Hour glasses level rocks

Boats traverse the trails of shoals
Upon layers of maps
Isles are tins, cups and bowls
Gales are dialect raps

Waves lather stone to soap
Nets are spun like webs
A coral kaleidoscope
Strobes floodlight the ebb

David Wyman

UPSTAIRS DOGS

Say this. We hope that you will confirm it exceeds your expectations. Like figures in a group sculpture, still the only clue. Guffaw, guffaw, their wings are gossamer. On earth the color change is inaudible and probably too lofty. I can watch this maybe one more time but I'm not really anonymous anymore. Bubbles coming out of the clown's mouth were hieroglyphics and we knew we could read them, but silently at our desks. Here the real sky hangs like a loose tarp. Do you know when someone *is* watching you? Meandering is how it came out, referring to the glaze.

Various sayings and so many angels sorting out petitions written on voluminous paper sheets and scraps from people all over the world. What can be heard is *in* the walls. Swim is the verb. Do not walk barefoot on hot surfaces. Some of the old whales choose to stay in the northern sea. Why do I dream this, that I'm not welcome in the house? Like unnecessary *italics*, we joined for just one day. Say he ponders quite eloquently about the entirety of the journey. And the elevator regularly continuing, continuing without stopping. Then. An opening, but no sound, no wind, no words, nothing.

Gerard Sarnat

HOMERIC HEIST

Guise of loyal beggar, cross-winds magic returned Odysseus to Ithaca to gather kindling.

During Trojan Wars, matter referred to a maker of mats.

Under earthen lamp light, tailors stitched royal clothes from bolts of silk.

Mythical journeys celebrate finding places in ourselves that represent home.

Cleave is the Janus verb which means both to stick tight and to fall away.

Zebulon Huset

REMINISCENT OF VIOLETS

The chisel chip chip chips
the rock down down
down.

The hole opens not as a rose or a scar or a maw into the belly of hell like the narrow Kola Hole boring into that burning emptiness unfillable by vodka whether potato or wheat. The rubble will be cleared in time, they say.

Stop and smell the violets.

They coat your nose
with their chemicals
which block
their scent. Forcing you to breathe.

To breathe.

To breathe until the scent receptors are bathed in the dry friction of air and repetition and scrubbed of her scent like a blanket and pillow washed with a whole bottle of fabric softener accompanied by distilled starches outside of the machine.

The red one is often lauded
but the rose has no thorns.
Mere prickles which barb the stem
less spine than irritating ornament.

She was no plant, though were she immobile
her sting would equal the Gympie Gympie.
Its thin blonde hairs wiggle deeper
into your pores with each rub.
And the burn from its touch can be felt
half a lifetime later by bodies which we're told
have a goldfish's memory for pain.

And then we're told goldfish can learn tricks for the patient.

Can become sad.

Can become more than a metaphor you can starve in a bowl on the dresser.

And then we smell the cries of mown grass lashing out in their only voice: chemicals which attach themselves to your nose and attract insects that eat insects that eat grass. That horrid, florid smell, reminiscent of violets, keep one coming back for that last smell that can't be expunged from the brain entirely, leaving wisps of scent like bits of cottonwood fuzz traipsing across the landscape with their fluff-wrapped seeds.

“You don't know what you got til it's gone”
the radio croons with audible
feathered bangs.

But then it's gone. And memories change with each revisit. Each slight misremembrance gets saved onto the tape. Each time you return to the violet you're breathing that half-memory new life, unsure if it's a fresh dose on your receptors

or just the ghost

of the last time you smelled her hair next to you
as you surrendered to sleep.

EGG ARTIST

When the tattoo artist discovered egg art, first he started focusing on Easter-themed inkwork, then he took a leave of absence. His junior tat crew loved their extra hours. Their newfound freedom at the office was like being cage free and their creativity and business soared while he hoarded his time in a different windowless basement. His world became more egg-shaped than the earth, too pinched at the poles. He swapped needles for pins, gained and lost weight. He couldn't decide if this was a rebirth, or somehow, the first.

THE FUTURE WITHOUT HER

Like a greyhound,
she could've found him by scent
in the beheaded autumn fields.
She loved his three-day-old stubble – a newborn hedgehog.
She kept photos where they were together –
return tickets to the moon.
She felt him like a fiberglass pole feels the pole vaulter –
the wave of his muscular back
in an athletic shirt.
She directed him towards the world record,
generously gave him to the sky
pushing him up.
She liked to walk in his eyes,
which looked like an area where guard dogs are trained.
Without blinking an eye, like the Little Mermaid,
she'd have cut off her legs
if he had asked.
But he looked through her as if she were rain,
as if she were a bamboo curtain in the hall.
The sound of her heartbeat merged with the ticking of the desk clock.
Her blood type changed,
becoming his blood type,
but he wasn't wounded and didn't need
her blood for transfusions.
And he didn't miss his rib.
Sometimes he buried himself in her
like a freezing French grenadier in a horse's bowels
and warmed himself.
Like a moth, she flew into the candlelight,
anticipating burns and burned wings,
but there were none.
Instead there was the air permeated with the future without her,
like African sky is permeated with the presence of giraffes.
She followed him like the naïve ram followed Abraham,

but he went through her
into his future. It was drizzling,
and he felt a wing growing on his back
like a silky hump.

[Translated from Russian by Sergey Gerasimov]

Mark Mazzoli

MUTTER

Our skulls are like borders
always suspicious of what
passes through

In a bright room where the light hangs heavy on
every eyelash it's hard to travel without
dragging your feet

Most dreams interpreted have a
salad and an entrée or
a Marxist period but
never all three.

I guess if breathless texts can stand what they've stood
swaying in an absent breeze
they will always be there

in the shape of a girl laughing and speaking to herself in
a dark house, her long hair curling up around
light fixtures and around table legs

not that you could see it

When your heart beats as erratically as the chirping of a bird
there's no time to wait till the sun touches the
earth so you can just walk over

and I hear at 5AM the fish
jump right in the boat

with a whole night of planning
they don't stand a chance

[First published in the *Mississippi Review*]

LUCK AND SPIDERS

Desperation is commonplace when
 even your old friend night terrifies you with
 its hunger; swallowing rooms as you leave them so that the
 world is never much more than a lamp and what it casts
 its light upon—

The snowflakes that fill the outdoors
 make it all seem like it's worth something
 Roads must be cleared
 church must be gotten to

I want to know why
 I saved all those spiders over the years
 trapping them in cups to free them outside the house
 instead of just squashing them
 or washing them down the drain

It was supposed to be good luck
 having that much respect for life
 or at least not interfering, letting the vegetable grow
 but some are fallible and will
 kill indiscriminately even themselves should the
 opportunity arise

And so a curse is passed down much like an inheritance
 We must carry the ones who don't make it through the war
 The soldiers who died from the minute battles within the day
 and fell on the sword of
 everything that ever tempted them to
 take the bull by the horns
 with a promise that they would be honored
 when it was all over

But the war is never over
 and so I save spiders hoping that small graces
 can slow the rotation of the sun and
 inflate our moments so there will be
 just a little bit more
 to every squealing second



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Contributors

BEN AUSTIN is a writer from Austin, TX. He likes to fish and hike in his spare time.

BROOK BHAGAT's poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and humor have appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Empty Mirror Magazine*, *Little India*, *Nowhere Poetry*, *A Story in 100 Words*, *Anthem: A Tribute to Leonard Cohen*, and other journals and anthologies, and she is the editor of *Blue Planet Journal*. She holds an MFA from Lindenwood University and teaches creative writing at a community college. More at brook-bhagat.com

DENIS BELL is a professor of Mathematics at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. He grew up in London, England and studied at the Universities of Manchester and Warwick. He has received several awards for his scientific work, including an Outstanding Scholarship Award from the University of North Florida and a Research Professorship at the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute in Berkeley, California. A spinner of small tales for many years, he started publishing short fiction around five years ago. His work has since appeared in many literary magazines and journals. A first collection of his work, *A Box of Dreams* was published by Adelaide Books in 2017.

DMITRY BLIZNIUK lives in Kharkov, Ukraine. His most recent poems have appeared in *The Pinch*, *River Poets*, *Dream Catcher*, *Magma*, *Press53*, *Sheila Na Gig*, *Adelaide*, *The Nassau Review*, *Havik*, *Saint Katherine Review*, *Phenomenal Literature*, *Star 82*, *Pif Magazine*, *Naugatuck River*, *Tipton*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Stickman Review*, *Lighthouse*, *The Gutter*, *Palm Beach Poetry Festival* and many others. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is also the author of *The Red Forest* (Fowlpox Press, 2018).

BENJAMIN D. CARSON lives with his dog Dora on the South Shore of Massachusetts. His creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Red Fez*, *The Ampersand Review*, *Cactus Heart*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *The Somerville Times*, *Poetry24*, *Free Inquiry*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Poetry Leaves*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *The Poetry Porch*, *I am not a silent poet*, *Not Your Mother's Breast Milk*, *Gyroscope*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Rumble Fish Quarterly*, *Catholic Poetry Room*, *Eunoia Review*, and *The Charles River Journal*.

JIM GEORGE is a writer-artist-songwriter-musician from Reading, PA. His fiction, poems and artwork have appeared (or will appear) in *Otoliths*, *The MOON*, *The Sea Letter*, *The Ear*, *Pennsylvania Bards*, *Southeast Poetry Review*, *Defenestration*, *What Are*

Birds, Angry Old Man, Fleas On The Dog, ANON, Hock Spit Slurp, Queen Mob's Tea House, The Five-Two, The Disappointed Housewife, and Praxis; his nonfiction has been published in *Playboy, Cinema Retro, and Best Classic Bands*; and his songs have been used in television and film. *Jim Shorts*, his first book, is a humorous collection of wordplayful stories, poems, and line drawings, available as a PDF from the author. More information at byjimgeorge.wordpress.com

ZEBULON HUSET is a writer and photographer living in San Diego. His writing has recently appeared in *The Southern Review, Texas Review, Rosebud, Louisville Review, Meridian, North American Review, The Cortland Review, The Portland Review, and The Roanoke Review* among others. He publishes a writing prompt blog (Notebooking Daily) and his flash fiction submission guide was featured at *The Review Review*.

MARK MAZZOLI lives in Syracuse, NY with a rotating cast of boyfriends. His work has previously appeared in *Bombay Gin, Structo, Oddball, Otis Nebula, Common Ground Review, and the Mississippi Review*, among many other literary magazines.

GERARD SARNAT is a physician who's built and staffed homeless and prison clinics as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/resources to deal with global warming. Sarnat won the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. He is widely published in academic-related journals (University of Chicago, Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan) plus national (*Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, MiPOesias, American Journal Of Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, Poetry Circle, Poets And War, Cliterature, Qommunicate, Texas Review, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, The Los Angeles Review and The New York Times*) and international publications. He's authored the collections *Homeless Chronicles* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014), *Melting the Ice King* (2016). He is been married since 1969 with three kids, five grandsons with a sixth incubating. More at gerardsarnat.com

PRZEMYSŁAW SZAWŁOWSKI was born in Poland and lives in Wrocław. He is inspired by such authors as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Roland Topor, and a lot of influence on his imagination is also exerted by film works of such directors as Stanley Kubrick and Andrzej Tarkowski. In his works he uses grotesque, irony, horror, abstractions and neoexpressionism. He loves black and white photography, which reminds him of the world in which he grew up and entered adulthood, in photography he tries to show human loneliness, nature, forgotten places and things that are not noticed by other people. His successes include the publication of photos in the *Grotesque Quarterly Magazine* and *The3ninesarts*.

GREGORIO TAFOYA is the fiction editor at LittleRoseMagazine.com and still wishes he would have been the first writer to lament, in an author bio, about not writing the play Arcadia. You can follow him on twitter @GregorioTafoya.

CHRIS TAIT is from Shetland and lives in Glasgow. She attends many writers groups and open mic poetry sessions in Scotland which has given her opportunities to read on the radio. She has published two graphic novels, *Diablo. The Fantastical Adventures of an Unloved Chess Piece* and *Diablo and the Leprechaun Figurehead*.

K. P. TAYLOR was born and raised in South Africa. He came to the US at 29 to work at an amusement park for a summer and never left (the US, not the amusement park). His writing has been featured in *Kōan* and *The Write Launch* and is forthcoming in *Gargoyle*. He also has a few self-published short stories on Amazon. He currently lives in Pennsylvania with his wife, their son, and several cats.

GARY CHARLES WILKENS' first book, *The Red Light Was My Mind*, won the 2006 Texas Review Breakthrough Poetry Prize. His manuscript *Fayetteville* was a Finalist in the 2014 Moon City Review Poetry Contest. His poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *The Texas Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Passages North*, the *Adirondack Review*, *James Dickey Review*, *Melancholy Hyperbole*, and *Midwest Quarterly*. His fiction has appeared in *Drunk Monkeys*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, and *Pale Ghosts Magazine*. His day job is Associate Professor of English at Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia.

DAVID WYMAN's first poetry collection *Proletariat Sunrise* was published by Kelsay Books in 2017. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *BlazeVOX*, *Dissident Voice*, *Clockwise Cat*, *Picaroon Poetry*, *Down In The Dirt*, *The Voices Project*, *Squawk Back*, *Tuck Magazine*, *The Aurorean*, *Zombie Logic Review*, *S/WORD* and *Genre: Urban Arts* among other publications. He's a fan of Karl Marx, jazz guitar and the visionary poetry of William Blake. He lives in Massachusetts where he teaches American Literature and Composition at Mount Wachusett Community College.