



CROOKED

a literary journal

Shift-

issue #1

July 1, 2014

MATT ROTMAN – Editor-in-Chief
BRANDON HENSLEY – Contributing Editor
TRAVIS MAY – Contributing Editor, Webmaster General

All images used with permission from Troma Entertainment, Inc.
Cover Art: “Hey Darlin’” by Andrea Snow

© 2014 Crooked/Shift
ISSN 2333-973X

Material may not be reproduced without written consent. For more information, please contact
contact@crooked-shift.org

ALL RIGHTS REVERT BACK TO THE AUTHOR

Interested in submitting a short story, poem, or essay to Crooked/Shift? Please visit our website,
www.crooked-shift.org

Interested in submitting artwork to Crooked/Shift? Please contact Matt Rotman at
editor@crooked-shift.org

For details on being featured in our next Crooked/Speak installment, please contact Matt Rotman at
editor@crooked-shift.org

Any donations can be made on our website, www.crooked-shift.org

About the Editors

Matt Rotman

Editor-in-Chief

Matt Rotman's poetry and short stories have been featured in *Diabolique Magazine*, *Aberration Labyrinth*, *Euphemism*, and the Twelve Winters Press anthology, *[Ex]tinguished & [Ex]tinct: An Anthology of Things That No Longer [Ex]ist*. His screenplay, *Casa Inferno*, was made into a student film in 2006. A former stand up comedian, staff reporter, and speechwriter for the Department of Defense, Matt currently resides in San Diego, California, pondering if there are, indeed, any differences in those three jobs.

Brandon Hensley

Contributing Editor

Brandon Hensley is an adjunct professor in the Department of Communication & Political Science at Millikin University and doctoral student of Higher Education at Illinois State University. His articles have been published in *The Journal of Learning in Higher Education*, *The Adjunct Project*, and the *Florida Communication Journal*. Brandon spends his time misbehaving at academic conferences, reading and writing ethnography, and making fun of his pets with his partner, Melissa. His guilty writing pleasures are rhetorical/media criticism, haiku, and norm-disruptive forms of academic writing that blend the evocative with the self-reflexive.

Travis May

Contributing Editor, Webmaster General

Travis May is an associate in the research department at the Federal Reserve Bank of Saint Louis; working for the man, 9-2-5. Travis writes computer programs and personal essays on identity, and the struggle of provincialism against wanderlust when not at the mercy of a nihilistic fit.

Table of Contents

Editor's Note

Crooked/Speak: Interview with Lloyd Kaufman	3
Lobb Rittle's Moist Unusual: Wart and All: (Re)discovering Matthew Bright	12

Essays

Michael Coolen Me, Darwin, Captain Kirk, Beethoven and Napalm Death	18
Gary Vaughn Interview with the Zombie: A Veteran of World War Z Speaks Out	23

Short and Flash Fiction

Ken Poyner Diminishing Returns	30
David Novak And That Horse	33
Wendy Hammer Reminders	37
Travis Gunn The Machine	46
Phil Richardson Green Things Grow in the Spring	53

John Earnhart	
Not Rats at All...	56
 Craig Faustus Buck	
Buckshot	65
 <i>Poetry</i>	
 John Ammann	
Fell, in Love	66
Dream?	68
Will to Live	70
 About the Authors	72

Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

As I write this, I'm on a train. More specifically, I'm on the AmTrack *Pacific Surfliner* 9:25 a.m. out of San Diego to Los Angeles Downtown Union Station. The tracks lie in between Interstate 5 and the Pacific Ocean, and at times, the cars chug and bump along just twenty-five yards from the water. It's a three hour ride, but you'd never know it. The marine layer has dissipated earlier than usual, and the sun exposes the sin of all the surfers on Solano Beach who've skipped work this Friday morning.

I, myself, am no less a Hedonist. A childhood friend of mine waits in L.A., probably anxiously, as our boat leaves Newport Beach to Catalina at 2:30 p.m. for a day of sport fishing. I, myself, wonder what those poor fuckers at work are doing right at this moment. But the guilt is short-lived. Because, I, myself, am a self-made man. I mean, it was just four months ago, after weeks and weeks of hard work and years and years of dreaming, Brandon, Travis, and I launched an online literary journal.

And the dollars poured in. All of a sudden, I realize Ronald Reagan was a genius—I feel like one of those weekend warriors who's done enough coke to truly convince myself all the hard work's finally paid off (and if smacking gums was considered work, I've earned every fucking penny). This is the American Dream, this is pulling yourself up by your goddamn bootstraps, this is the justification for the Southern Strategy. I have a newfound respect for Goat Glands Brinkley. I remind myself I owe Jesse Helms an apology.

But then it dawns on me. None of this is true. I put this \$37 train ride on my credit card, and only \$37 because paying nine percent interest on the \$56 business class ticket was the red line in the sand (wait, is that conflating two different metaphors?). My friend in L.A. naively thinks I'm going to pay him back for the fishing tickets. I still owe my girlfriend my half of the rent...from last month. Man, now that I think about it, I really shouldn't have taken off work today.

We cross over into Orange County, and the houses get bigger and bigger and closer and closer to the beach. I can feel the homeowners' contempt for "train people" from here. Is this what's it's come to? I worked hard; I got educated and followed through on some initiative to found a literary journal only to be reduced to a "train person?" Where's all the glory? And money? And jet skis? Shit, I'd take even a moderate amount of notoriety at this point.

I imagine this is the longest (and most self-indulgent) way of telling you that there is no glory in any of this. There is no money, nor Kardashian sex tapes. This is purely a labor of love. Whatever that means.

But nevertheless, I am happy to introduce you to the inaugural issue of *Crooked/Shift*. When we started this, I had no idea how fast it would catch on. I was anticipating maybe five submissions a week—if we were lucky. We certainly weren't expecting fifty a week. And we certainly weren't expecting so many to be good. As a writer myself, I was dreading the idea of sending out even one rejection letter. Never did I think I would send out over two hundred. And never did I think I'd ever turn down such high quality stuff.

So this is my thank you to everyone who submitted something. If you weren't selected, then it probably didn't boil down to quality, just subject matter. I encourage you read through this issue, see what we were looking for and submit again.

Then there were those who, for whatever reason, just instinctively knew what we were after. And they are featured in this issue. I want to thank each and every one of you for giving us the chance to publish your work. This publication may be young and bare boned, but you have definitely given it a real shot in the arm. There just might be a chance of jet skis after all.

I also want to thank Andrea Snow for the glorious and beautiful E.C.-esque cover and Rob Little for his (what is hoped to be recurring) column. I owe a huge debt to Lloyd Kaufman, president of Troma Entertainment, for taking the time for an interview. His addition really makes this issue special to me. I'd also like to note I appreciate our friends, family, and colleagues who helped promote the journal.

And of course, a big thanks to you (whoever the hell is reading this right now). We appreciate you giving *Crooked/Shift* the chance to evolve into something great and sustaining in the world of obscure art and horror fiction. Now, give us a damn donation!

Sincerely,

Matt Rotman
Editor-in-Chief
June 27, 2014



Crooked/Speak Lloyd Kaufman

By **Matt** Rotman

He just **won't** go away.

Sure, he hasn't **seen** even the most modest box office success since the **mid-80's**. His film company, **Troma** Entertainment, lived forever on the brink of bankruptcy. The **MPAA** has it out for him like the **Tica Party** has it out for black people voting. Hell, he was just **devoured** by a **giant**, alien arachnid in the 2013 sleeper film, *Big Ass Spider!*

Yet, he's still here. And **vital** as ever.

Exclusive Interview

Lloyd Kaufman Opens up to *Crooked/Shift*, Discusses Troma Turning 40

Chances are, if you've found yourself on this side of the Internet, an introduction into Troma Entertainment would be a massive waste of yours and my time. Either you're a rabid fan (and big fucking nerd!), or you have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about, why you're here—perhaps even who you are and why you keep waking from those random fugue states with a bump on your forehead and a large gash in your Def Leppard t-shirt.



I couldn't possibly satisfy all two of you, so let's make this brief, shall we?

Lloyd Kaufman, co-founder of Troma Entertainment, is a very, very nice man. He bears the disposition of the Benevolent Uncle. You know, the uncle who gives you fifty dollars on your birthday, and who seems genuinely concerned about your grades (not the "benevolent" uncle who keeps smoking peeks at your cleavage). He'll ask how you are and where you're from, what books and movies you enjoy, your views on Syria....

Then you start thinking of the innocent, little boy in *The Toxic Avenger* who gets his head run over by a car full of coked up, evil teenagers. And the three-foot long penis in *Promo and Juliet*. And chicken zombies and a kabuki cop-superhero and gratuitous nudity and whatever the fuck that thing is at the end of *Class of Nuke 'Em High*.

All of a sudden, a dark cloud of suspicion begins to hang over the cusp of your fight-or-flight mechanics. That is, until it dawns on you: this guy just may be a friggin' genius.

Or at the very least, he's really, really nice.

Crooked/Speak

Kaufman founded Troma as an independent film studio in 1974 with former Yale classmate, Michael Herz (both of the same Yale class that gave us Oliver Stone and George W. Bush). In the next five subsequent years, Kaufman would land some “real” gigs: editing *Rocky*, as well as doing production work for *Saturday Night Fever* and *The Final Countdown* (the latter among my all-time favorite films, probably to Kaufman’s horror).

From 1979 to 1983, Kaufman and Herz co-wrote and directed four low-budget sex comedies (namely, *Savage Play* and *The First Turn-On*) which were distributed by Troma. Whether you love or hate the likes of *Rocky*’s and *American Pie*, you probably have these films to thank for their existence. But they did bring about a modest profit, enabling Troma to relocate its offices from New Jersey to Manhattan’s West Side, where they remained for twenty-four years. Currently, the infamous “Troma Building” resides in Long Island City.

Everything would change for Troma in 1984 with the release of *The Toxic Avenger*. *The Toxic Avenger* is considered to be Troma’s first “horror” film, although no one who ever saw it would call it that. An ultra-violent, hilarious super-hero mishap, the film was not only Troma’s highest grossing film to date, but it solidified the formula for every future Troma release: low-grade production quality, excessive gore and nudity, wooden acting, and clever political satire. (In my opinion, in conjunction with *Class of Nuke ‘Em High*, there are no better examples of satire concerning the excesses of the Reagan Eighties.) The film is so identified with Troma, that its hero, Toxic, is the company’s official mascot.



The Kaufman and Richard W. Haines directed feature, *Class of Nuke 'Em High* followed in 1986 to much the same success as *The Toxic Avenger*. What came next is the stuff of Troma legend. On a massive budget of \$3 million (for Troma), Kaufman and Herz directed the epic actioner, *Troma's War* in 1988. The MPAA completely rejected its R rating due to the violence, forcing the filmmakers to make considerable cuts. When it was rejected a second time, they made even more cuts, which resulted in a very shabby end product and even shifter box office return. The whole ordeal almost bankrupted Troma, and the box office failure of their next (classy) film, *Sgt. Kabukiman N.Y.P.D.* certainly

Crooked/Speak

didn't help matters. Fans will know of a certain car crash scene from *Sgt. Kabukiman* that has shown up in numerous Troma films since—a tradition that started because of an effort to save on production costs.

However, thanks to the ever-growing VHS market, Troma was able to keep the lights on through the '80's and onward. It was also during this time we saw Troma releases from future stars Trey Parker and Matt Stone (*Canada! The Musical*) and James Gunn (*Tromas and Juliet*). Then came a slew of Kaufman classics, including *Terror Firmer*, *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead*, and three more *Toxic Avenger* sequels. At this moment, the third sequel to *Class of Nuke 'Em High*, *Return to Class of Nuke 'Em High Vol. 3*, is making its rounds through a select group of theaters.

Troma now sits on a library of over 1,000 films, a beacon in the dark for all those aspiring independent filmmakers who need the means of distribution—how else would we ever have the chance to encounter such films as *Surf Ninjas Must Die*, *A Nymphoid Barbecue in Dinosaur Hell*, *Reckless Zombies*, *Fury Drives the Bus*, and *Tenage Capgirl in Heat*? Yeah, I know, it's like one big, never-ending Trey McClure joke. And I never even got to *Rabid Grandma*. Lucky for you, Troma has released their entire library on their YouTube channel for your viewing pleasure.

Kaufman was gracious enough to take a break from promoting *Return to Nuke 'Em High Vol. 3* to speak with me about the history of it all: his decades-long battle with the MPAA, the failure of *Big Gas*, *What's the Fix*, and the answer to one of humankind's greatest questions—how old should one be before seeing a Troma movie?

I catch him midafternoon in his New York office. When I inform him I'm calling from San Diego, he immediately tells me to check out the bakery, *Bread and Cia*, owned by none other than Charles Kaufman, Lloyd's brother and director of the criminally underappreciated 1980 Troma film, *Mother's Day*. (He makes a special point to say it's director, Eli Roth's favorite bakery.) After a few minutes discussing the Ukraine Crisis and whether or not they were serious about rounding up the Jews, we begin.

This was a phone interview conducted on April 24, 2014.

Matt Rousman: First off, congratulations on 40 years.

Lloyd Kaufman: Thank you.

MR: I've heard you say recently that Troma is like herpes in that it just won't ever go away. Does this mean I can tell my girlfriend that it's okay? That it may never clear up, but in 40 years, it'll be cured?

LK: (laughs) Absolutely. I think that's a perfectly good analogy.

MR: Speaking of me being on the west coast, is there any political motivation in keeping the Troma offices on the east coast? Or is just something as simple as the Tri-State area being home?

LK: Well, it's more to stay out of the mainstream, so we don't get corrupted or don't get our wings clipped and don't succumb to the company store—I'd owe my soul to the company store, and we don't want that. And I'm pretty impressionable. I could have easily been lured in by the Scientology people, or whoever comes along with some kind of crazy thing. And L.A. is a total mainstream—it's a company store. If you're not part of the cartel, you're not part of the club: the giant, devil-worshipping international media conglomerates. You are nothing. So the issue there is if you want some kind of self-esteem, you kind of have to hook up with the vanguard of the mainstream media. And I don't want to do that, so here we are in New York City, in TromaVille, and nobody's ever heard of us except for you. But whenever we make a movie, we're in our own little bubble, so we don't get influenced by Michael Bay or Sophia Coppola. You know what I mean?



Crooked/Speak

Crooked/Speak

MR: And so that end, and also the MPAA—and here they can be pretty much be the life or death of an independent film or company, I was wondering if you'd seen the documentary last year, *Rite of the Living Dead* and especially the part about the elementary school teacher in the Bronx teaching young school children literacy using *Night of the Living Dead*—which as an old liberal arts student, I think is great. But I also remember watching that movie when I was like eight-years old at a friend's house and was so scared, I had to call my parents to come pick me up in the middle of the night. How young is too young? And should we really give a shit about these things? Is the worst thing that could happen is you grow up to be Lloyd Kaufman?

LC: Well, I don't think children should be looking at *Troma* movies. *Carnival of Souls* and the Romero movie, those are pretty benign, but for a five year old, they're pretty freaky. I wouldn't show those to a little kid. In fact, I showed *Carnival of Souls*—we had a 16mm projector, and I got a print of *Carnival of Souls*, and I showed it to one of my daughters when I think she was seven or eight. And she was freaked out—potentially freaked out by it. You know, it's *scare*—you don't have to have blood and gore to upset people. So I would keep all that stuff away from children. We did that with my kids. We didn't show them anything until they were sixteen. We practically had them chained to a radiator down in the basement. We didn't show them anything. I mean, we didn't show them anything. Except for some dog food.

MR: (laughs) So I guess then maybe we can agree it shouldn't be up to the MPAA to keep these films out of children's eyesight?

LC: Well, the problem with the MPAA, Matt, is that it has a double standard. It permits *Bruce Willis—Die Hard*—to have all the splattering bones and serious violence and get an R rating. But *Troma's War*, which was cartoon violence, had no splattering bones to speak of. [The MPAA] dismembered the film. You know, so they'll go after your movie, my movie and destroy it, then leave the Stallone movie alone. Or the *Bruce Willis*, or the various violent movies. And the big elites, big media-conglomerate movies are left alone, and the independent movies are chopped up so they can't compete. That's what it's all about—it's the double standard. It's not fair. *The Toxic Avenger* was totally ruined in this country. In the days of the 80's, you had to have an R rating to get into a movie theater. You couldn't get in with an unrated film. So we had to have the R rating, so they took out about twenty minutes of *The Toxic Avenger* in this country. In Canada, they took away thirty seconds. In France, they took out thirty seconds of *The Toxic Avenger* and let thirteen year olds in. Meanwhile in this country, they took away twenty minutes. It's not because

of any Puritanical thing, it's because they don't want the independents to succeed. They want to disenfranchise the independents, cut their tails off, so they get no competition—so they can have Michael Bay be king of the world—and that other idiot who made *Titanic*. Right? That's what it's all about.

MR: Sure.

LR: *Status quo*. It's the *status quo*. This morning's *New York Times*: America's middle class is no longer number one. Because these elites kill off the innovation. They kill off the competition—and RINGO, the middle class is no longer the richest middle class in the world.

MR: Could it have anything to do with—*Tromeo & Zoyla*, that film really had a 'Jack Reagan' attitude about it, for sure.

LR: Of course, but that had nothing to do with the censorship. The censorship was to get rid of us. And promote Bruce Willis. That's what it's all about. It's nothing to do with protecting the public. It's nothing to do with morals. It has to do with economic censorship—economic blacklisting of anyone who wants to change the *status quo*, and anyone who wants to compete with Mr. Rupert Murdoch and his elite club of conglomerates. It's very simple. That's how it is. And if you want to be an artist, maybe you'll stay in New York or Illinois or San Diego, and you make your own damn movies, and you don't worry about if they're going to be financially successful, because they won't be. It's impossible. Unless you're a vassal of one of the majors. And the only way to be a vassal of one of the majors and get a ton of money is to be a hired gun. There's no middle ground.

MR: So I want to bring it back to herpes for a second—

LR: (laughs) Sure.

MR: —Because I think there's a funny contrast with herpes in that it comes from being careless while getting lucky at the same time.

LR: Yes!

MR: How do you assess or qualify the early missteps, such as *Rip Girl*, *What's the Fuss?*, that have just metastasized into the cherished stuff of geek legend?

Crooked/Speak



LL: Ha! It was a disgrace, yeah. It was a horrible thing. We had rich friends give us money to make a movie. And not so-rich friends, too. And we made a piece a shit. The problem is we listened to critics, and we listened to people who told us they knew better than we did. It was my big mistake, and I regret it. It's not as bad as killing someone, but it's pretty stupid what we did, right? And I'll never do it again. I made a big mistake. It was a big mistake, and the movie sucks!

(A minute or two passes discussing whether the title of our publication was *CrookedShit* or *CrookedShit*. Once we understand there's an "F," as in fact," we continue.)

MR: How serious is seriousness to you? I think films like *Troma's War* have very serious messages, but we all know that film will never be regarded next to *Fall Safe* or *Dr. Strangelove*.

LL: Well, in the fullness of time, I'm not not sure that won't happen.

MR: Well, I hope so—

LL: I think *Psycho* and *Tromas* and *Julia* and *Tropic Avenge* and *Class of Nuke 'Em High* would be, in a fair world, up there with Terrence Malick or those darlings—or Abel Ferrara, who is a drunkard and dope addict, but these guys love him, because he's tough. They're like delinquents who love motorcycle men. It's sick. I'm glad I'm not part of it. In the fullness of time, you mark my words: the day I get hit by a bus, they'll be putting *Class of Nuke 'Em High* up in the Pantheon. You wait and see. But you're a literary journal, what author do you like in the horror genre?

MR: Well, I guess I have to say I grew up on the weirdness of H.P. Lovecraft.

LC: Oh, well that stuff is really good.

MR: Yeah, and I guess he may be a fair analogy to Truena, in that in his time, he was considered a crap pulp writer.

LC: Oh yeah! He was totally dumped on. We've been much luckier than he. Fuck, we got a building and a thousand movies in our library—people like you calling us up. Shit, Lovecraft was really fucked. He was totally crushed. It was terrible what happened to him. No, we're much luckier.

MR: My last question is, do you think James Gunn will loan us any money?

LC: (laughs)

MR: I just saw the longer trailer for *Guardians*.

LC: Oh yeah—it looks great. It's huge.

MR: Do you have a role in this one?

LC: Yeah, I'm in it. [Gunn] brought me over to England. I'm in it, but you'll need your remote control to freeze frame probably.

MR: You're not Rocket Raccoon?

LC: No, no, I'm sorry to say. But I'm still honored to be part of that production. It looks like it's gonna be great.

MR: Yeah, I'm still shocked they would give someone like James Gunn that much money to make a movie, but I love it.

LC: How smart, though. You have to admire that. The mainstream doesn't always act like a jerk. They get it right sometimes. Good for them.

Lobb Rittle's
Moist Unusual

Warts and All: (Re)discovering Matthew Bright

The films connected to the writer and director Matthew Bright are some of the most damaged objects of my affection. Aficionados of oddball cinema know Bright for playing the twins Squeezit and René Henderson in Richard Elfman's cult epic, *Forbidden Zone* (1980). One of only *one* film I can name that includes a human chandelier, The Kipper Kids (performance art duo that includes Bette Midler's husband) black face, old Jews, the Devil, Tattoo from *Fantasy Island* and musical spectacles performed by the Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo. Whew! Shame on your hipster self if you haven't seen it. Bright was an original member of The Mystic Knights and a childhood friend to both director Richard Elfman and his famous brother Dannyⁱ. Bright is also co-writer of this glorious mess of a film. He continued his career with several writing credits for low-budget Full Moon productions, including *Shrunkened Heads* (1994, another Richard Elfman-directed big pile of strange) and *Dark Angel: the Ascension*. In a 2002 *Film Threat* article and interview, Bright's writing voice was described as "like that of Quentin Tarantino, dominat[ing] every frame of film it occupies."ⁱⁱⁱ That voice was given its greatest amplification when Oliver Stone, impressed with Bright's script for *Freeway*, gave him a chance to direct it.

As both writer and director of that 1996 film, Bright garnered praise for mixing fairy tale elements from Red Riding Hood with the modern crime genre (well before the graphic novel series *Fables* or NBC's *Grimm*). The Big Bad Wolf is played with suitable creep and smarm by Kiefer Sutherland. He threatens and assaults a then 19-year-old Reese Witherspoon, who plays a white-trash-resourceful, hitchhiking Red. Though criticized for excessive violence, the film was generally well-received by critics for its strong female characters and its creative blend of fairy tale mythos with a modern revenge tale. *Freeway* is probably the most mainstream of Bright's work, frequently playing pay cable channels and cheaply available through Amazon and Netflix. It establishes central conceits of Bright's subsequent films, including outsiders as protagonists, omnipresent hatred of authority and violation of genre convention. (Bright calls his works "Artsploitation.")ⁱⁱⁱ

These conceits would be extended to levels of absurdity in his next directorial assignment, *Freeway 2: Confessions of a Trick Baby* (1999). Though it has somewhat of a cult following, it is Bright's most obscure film as a director. It is also his most interesting one. *Freeway 2* is similar to the original in its fairy tale elements; this time mostly taken from Hansel and Gretel rather than Red Riding Hood. Like the original, it also features strong women defiantly rebelling against social norms. According to Bright, though, it was never intended as a sequel to *Freeway*.^{iv} The AV club review for

the film states that it was originally slated as a comeback film for Doris Wishman (*Bad Girls Go to Hell* 1965).^v Whatever the initial intentions, the film became a largely forgotten one, but it is much more amazing than online ratings sites (*Rotten Tomatoes* gives it a 30%) and reviews suggest.

Several circumstances may have contributed to the film's obscurity (or what passes for obscurity in the information age) and its less than stellar reputation. Availability is one factor. The film was a straight-to-video release and sells on Amazon for \$75 - \$100. Currently, there is an ugly and—clearly—illegal copy on YouTube with only 4,000 plus hits over the five months since its upload. (I bought my bootleg copy at the same Austin, Texas secret location where I illegally purchased Disney's racist *Song of the South*. It's more fun that way.) Another reason for the film's negative reception is that it is strikingly dissimilar in tone to the better received *Freeway*. Ultimately, both films are dark satiric comedies, but the first film is mostly traditional in its telling and characterizations, with flashes of fairy tale visuals and narrative elements. To a fan of the crime genre the second film could easily feel like it jumped the shark. The fairy tale allusions are more overt and the presentation of its revenge theme includes far more politically incorrect plot points and hyperbolic images. Another reason for the film's obscurity may be the unwillingness of its director to promote it. The movie making experience of *F2* was not a pleasant one for Bright. Among other frustrations, his own Canadian film crew actively tried to get the production shut down because of the film's subject matter!^{vi} In several interviews and commentaries Bright seems reluctant to talk about the film and relive a miserable shoot. However, the objectionable subject matter is the biggest elephant in the screening room, and another major reason for the film's negative reputation.

It is the movie's tone, not so much what happens but how the characters go about it, which likely offended its own crew. Throughout the film there is an unapologetic celebratory mood surrounding most of the mayhem, bulimia, theft, huffing, and mass murder. This is achieved from a variety of familiar genre elements being presented in atypical fashion. The end result is a film that joyfully subverts cultural values and viewer expectations, and makes the film most worthy of reexamination.

The narrative, by the broadest definition, is a picaresque, resembling a pervy *Huckleberry Finn*. Soon-to-be best friends White Girl (Natasha Lyonne) and Cyclona (Maria Celedonio) meet in a van taking them to a retention facility post-conviction. Their time behind bars is time spent establishing their characters. White Girl is an anti-authority bulimic who is incarcerated for mugging johns. The far more damaged Cyclona needs to take her meds in order to remain stable. She is looking at life for murder, either in prison or the psych. ward. She is sexually infatuated with White Girl, attempting to befriend and seduce her. Soon, they escape, beginning a journey down river (so to speak) to Tijuana, in order to find Sister Gomez (gender-bending Vincent Gallo). In the mind of Cyclona, Sister Gomez is a Christ-like savior from her abusive childhood and will be the means of the duo's current salvation. Along the way, in the picaresque tradition, the two experience a number of loosely connected adventures, granted much darker than those found along the Mississippi: huffing and driving, attempted rape, muggings, torture and cannibalism. Despite Cyclona's sexual obsession with White Girl that culminates in a make-out session, their relationship is predominately one of friendship, a friendship that deepens through their shared experiences. Also, like Twain's classic American novel, the film reveals social authority can't be trusted, particularly the masculine variety. At the end of his movie, Bright has boxed himself into a narrative corner much like the famous novel. Two *Deus ex machina* police officers and White Girl's misogynistic lawyer (David

Allen Grier) implausibly follow the duo to Mexico. The intervention of these three authority figure provide a weak, contrived denouement.

Despite the potential of their extreme behavior offending viewers, the two sociopaths are more appealing than many better known cinematic outlaws. Thelma and Louise might seem the obvious comparison to make, but that pair's brand of murder, mayhem, and style are presented much more conservatively within the studio system formula, particularly the Hayes code's leftover requirement that the guilty must be punished. Those two have to drive off that cliff, don't they? Even ending the film in medias res doesn't mute the clear message of death to transgressors. (But are they sacrificed because they are criminals or because they are women who defy cultural expectations of marriage. Hmm...) In contrast, Cyclona is a serial killer who has killed her entire family, but she is presented without sentimentality or judgment by her cinematic creator. As written and performed, she is damaged, dangerous but a vulnerable innocent. Her murders are sometimes presented as incidental (kicking the jack of a victim working under his car) or in the case of the murdering of an elderly couple and masturbating in the bed on top of them, as a bad habit she is trying kick. White Girl's damage is similarly presented without judgment or sentiment. Her puke parties in prison with fellow inmates seem like celebrations of independence and rebellion. Clearly the director is symbolically puking on authority when she projectile vomits on a snarky prison matron, the fake looking staging and prodigious amount of spew plays as broad comedy. Later, a succession of bulimic in-mates slow motion hurl into a line of toilet bowls. As shot, the scene is intentionally reminiscent of glamorously syncopated 1930s water ballerina's diving into a pool. Both ladies go about their nasty business seizing the day with twisted style, unapologetically overturning genre convention for protagonist behavior as they go.

Empathy is also created through audience understanding the male oppression, exploitation and abuse as the root of their anti-social aggression. We learn Cyclona was a victim of sexual abuse as a child. White Girl has been exploited in a variety of ways by her lawyer, pimp and clients. We root for the two because of their resourcefulness in thwarting their male oppressors, past and present, while embracing their independent, though highly damaged, self-reliance. In fact, these characteristics make them candidates for the strongest of feminist role-models (No, really, dude). Even though Cyclona dies by White Girl's hand at the end of the film, it's more of an evitable putting down of a beloved dog who has bitten someone rather than Hollywood's usual preachy punishment for female uppity-ness. In the final scene of the film, White Girl, though less murderous than Cyclona (but still complicit) seems to walk away to some kind of happy-ever-after.

A group of cinematic anti-heroes that stands in direct contrast to Bright's likable duo, are the whiny, but more famous Captain Spaulding and company (Otis and Baby) found in *The Devil's Rejects*. This mixed gendered trio is asshole-ish and mean-spirited, though working in the same debauched arena as Cyclona and White Girl. Dare I say Zombie's group exhibit the same tone of entitlement stereotypically assigned to Generation Now? I do. The characters seem to feel it is their right to murder with little or no justification for their action found in the backstory or in the behavior of their victims. The audience feels little empathy for the characters they should be rooting for. In fact, I would argue that this failure to connect is the fatal flaw for that film, and the opposite audience reaction to *Freeway 2*'s anarchists is its strength.

The soundtrack and imagery are equal partners to character in creating the film's unique appeal. Contributing to the surprising tone of the proceedings is a score that ironically juxtaposes the on-screen atrocities with jangly '90s college rock performed by the likes of Veruca Salt and Juliana Hatfield. Festive Mariachi music plays while White Girl mugs a montage of tricks in seedy

Tijuana hotels, and there is little traditional trilling of violins or building of suspense with ominous low notes expected to accompany this genre.

There is also the use of surrealistic fairy tale imagery that deepens the film's subversive nature. These elements are usually included as small, incidental moments, with little explanation or lingering of the camera, creating a sense of magical realism by their brief and casual appearance. The most memorable ones include Cyclona's brief hallucination of White Girl as a Viking, in what seems to be an extension to Cyclona's attraction to White Girl's strength. Another brief fairy tale moment is what might best be called the chicken scratching scene. White Girl uses a bag of crack rocks to mark their path back to a freight train, *à la* bread crumbs from Hansel and Gretel. Later, we see two black men in stove pipe hats and tails. (Clearly meant to be chicken-like . . . but what the hell are they? Minstrels? Hobos riding the rails?) They pick up the crack in rooster-like fashion while the soundtrack micky-mouses the action with a chicken-in-the-barnyard rift. It is brief, incidental and probably racist, but it is a moment of wondrous befuddlement. The most delicious (bad pun intended) fairy tale imagery is found at Sister Gomez's Tijuana domicile, with its traditional Mexican color palette of bright primary colors, strands of lights, eccentric Mexican reliquary, and large tortilla oven. The resulting effect is a perfect contemporary update of the gingerbread house.

Two moments of expressionistic fairy tale imagery also figure into the climax. Upon his death, Sister Gomez's dwarfish hunchback momentarily transforms into a cloven hoofed-half man, grunting like an animal. Like the Chicken Men, the moment is treated as incidental and without explanation.^{vii} Sister Gomez herself becomes the ginger bread house witch, long nose, warts and all, while being roasted in her oven. Although the association is already overt, these final transformative fairy tale elements, are the icing on the roof, so to speak.

Expressionistic touches and surreal moments in the film create the same hyper-realism that make fairy tales like those of the Brothers Grimm so appalling, yet so appealing. *Freeway 2* is grounded in a real world but the expressionistic visual elements create an alternative reality to our own world that is just as dark and violent but well-distanced from the viewer. This allows the violence to be viewed as escapist wish fulfillment rather than oppressive verisimilitude. To me, this film is the antithesis to the now fully emerged torture porn genre, where the oppressive mood and dark realism create an authenticity that I recognize but do not embrace as entertainment. Cornerstones for this genre such as *Hostel* often allow no distancing from their subject matter, no wink, no nods, and no broad abstractions for the sake of tension relief for the audience. Many of these films also imply a tone of angry cynicism specifically directed toward women. In contrast, *Freeway 2* celebrates women exacting revenge on this attitude, distancing the audience from the experiences of evisceration and bloodletting by enticing us to imagine ourselves enacting revenge on all assholes who abuse cultural and institutional power in our own lives. When the end result is absurdly dark social commentary and catharsis, give me a cholo bitch masturbating on top of an elderly couple any day over the "authentically" bleak realism of, say, *A Serbian Film*.

Despite the subversive, vice-ridden Grand Guignol proceedings, there is a moral center to the film. Pedophilia, child pornography, misogyny, and abuse of women are all presented as immoral and in need of avenging. As avengers, White Girl and Cyclona can be seen in the most positive light: The Big Bad Wolf, in the form of a boxcar-lurking, growly-voiced hobo, attempts to rape White Girl, but is defeated by Cyclona who stabs him repeatedly. Both kick his dead body out of the box car. Like all good fairy tale allegory, the implication of their action is greater than killing of just one man. The climax involves the oven burning of the he/she wicked witch Sister Gomez, who not only transforms into a witch but seems to become more masculine and aggressive as he

/she is captured and burned. All the abused children in Sister's Gomez dungeon, kept there for filming child pornography and to fill Wicked Sister Gomez's gorditas, are freed. Cyclona's murky nightmare flashbacks of her childhood sexual abuse are the only expressionistic elements that lack the élan of the others sexually explicit and violent scenes. More traditionally sinister soundtrack cues accompany these flashbacks further emphasizing the strong feminist message against sexual abuse and male exploitation. All the male reactions to the protagonists, as well as the transgendered status of the witch, leave a great deal of potential for further feminist examination of the monstrous male lurking in this film.

In the final analysis the most apropos mainstream film for comparison to *F2* would be Oliver Stone's *Natural Born killers*, which also includes typical serial killer genre conventions presented in atypical fashion. Stone's film also elicited similar negative mainstream audience reaction. Like Bright's Canadian production crew, *NBK* audiences seemed to misunderstand the way Stone presented Mickey and Mallory's violent ways. They certainly should not have been shocked by serial killers given Hollywood's penchant for this subject, but like Bright, Stone's directorial choices included expressionistic and surrealistic imagery. Most infamous in this regard might be the exposition of Mallory's incestuous home life presented sit-com style, complete with laugh track and Rodney Dangerfield cast as her father. One big difference between the two films, however, is that Stone uses expressionistic elements more ironically, to imply audience culpability in the crimes and convict the American media. A similar tone is achieved in *F2*, but with less didacticism, instead celebrating revenge on the social norm.

Bright's other recent works fail achieve anywhere near the level of intrigue generated by the freeway movies. Sandwiched between the two freeways was another Elfman directed, Bright scripted collaboration, *Modern Vampires* (1998, also known as *Revenant*). Bright again uses outsiders as protagonists, the vampires this time. Their antagonists are an unlikely pairing of Rod Steiger's Van Helsing and L.A. gang bangers (formidable). Despite clever moments of upturned genre conventions, the film cannot overcome a low budget, several forced performances, or a plodding pace. Wrapping up Bright's directorial career are two other lesser attempts. *Bundy* (2002), by far the best of the two, is a serious serial killer genre effort starring Steve Railsback. Though competently made, it is a bit unspectacular and fails to rise above genre expectations. Bright has stated that he was merely a hired gun for the film.^{viii} A viewer could easily see how the final cut of *Tiptoes* (2003), Bright's last film to date, could end a career. With an impressive star line up, Matthew McConaughey, Kate Beckinsale, Peter Dinklage and Gary Oldman (as a little person), the film would seem to have great potential, but Bright was removed from the project and the film recut after a two-and-one-half hour Austin, Texas screening. According to Dinklage in a 2012 interview, the director's cut "was gorgeous." He goes on to say, "The people who fired him [Bright] ruined the movie."^{ix} Given the themes and cinematic elements outlined above, one suspects that not only was the political incorrectness of the able-bodied Oldman playing a little person the studio's only concern. What is left is a very by-the-book rom-com whose little person aspect is made superfluous and exploitative. To watch this film is to yearn for the gorgeousness Dinklage saw in the director's cut and to despise Hollywood mainstream cinema conventions even more.

Matthew Bright has had two or three shiny moments in the back hole sun. If you are easily offended, don't bother with him, as an artist or an individual. In contemporary DVD commentaries and interviews Bright comes off as a middle age creeper, making obsessive and frank comments about his sexual attraction to cast members and not shying away from expressing his debauched proclivities. But if you watch the cinematic successes and near misses of his oeuvre, that's exactly

what you expect him to be. If you feel, like I do, that banality is much more offensive than subversion, you will forgive his unapologetically debauched and debased comments and accept them as part and parcel of his twisted artistry.

Go back and watch Matthew Bright flap his imaginary chicken wings in *Forbidden Zone* out of respect for all the misfits in the world such as yourself. Revisit *Freeway* and discover the delicious effrontery of *Freeway 2*. It is a film with an anti-authority message that entertains first without proselytizing (watch Pasolini's *Salo* for the opposite effect). Some of *Freeway 2*'s brilliant subversion may be unintentional voyeuristic perversity on the part of the director, but, no matter. I believe a reevaluation of Matthew Bright's limited body of work is in order, particularly *F2* and its strong feminist message. A rediscovery of Matthew Bright's brand of dissidence, wicked witch warts and all, will reveal a filmmaker in the running for one of the most subversive.

About Lobb Rittle:

Lobb Rittle lives.

Lobb Rittle lives in . . .

Lobb Rittle lives in your underwear drawer.

. . . and your heart.

And in Illinois.

He has a problem with your authority; he was recently dismissed from jury duty.

He's back. He's new and improved. He's fly. He's buff. He is down with it.

Oh, Lobb Rittle, oh.

He uses the word "nebbish" in sentences. He's fundamental. He's an omnivore.

He understands what that gesture means.

He can't dance, but he sure can fidget.

ⁱ DVD Commentary, Mathew Bright and Richard Elfman, *Forbidden Zone*, Fantoma Edition, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Grove, Dave "Matthew Bright: Big Bad Wolf," Interview, Part one, *Film Threat.com*, September, 20th, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ DVD Commentary, Matthew Bright, *Freeway*, Republic, 1997.

^{iv} Grove, "Big Bad Wolf" Interview, part three, *Film Threat.com*

^v Rabin, Nathan, "Freeway II: Confessions of a Trick Baby," *AV Club.com*, March 29th, 2002

^{vi} Grove, "Big Bad Wolf" Interview, part three, *Film Threat.com*

^{vii} Little people seems to be another group of outsiders Bright finds appealing. Hervé Villechaize, famous for *Fantasy Island* and co-star of *Forbidden Zone*, was once Bright's roommate. In addition to Villechaize in *Forbidden Zone* and the dwarfish hunch back in this film, Bright's final failure of a film, *Tiptoes*, also focuses on little people.

^{viii} Grove, "Big Bad Wolf" Interview, part three, *Film Threat.com*

^{ix} Kois, Dan, "Peter Dinklage Was Smart To Say No," page 3, *New York Times*, March 29th, 2012

Me, Darwin, Captain Kirk, Beethoven, and Napalm Death

By Michael Coolen

In 1964 astronomers Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson of Bell Laboratories were using the Holmdel Horn Antenna in New Jersey to try to track radio signals between galaxies. Built in 1959 as part of NASA's passive satellite project to bounce radio signals over Earth's horizon, the Holmdel Horn is a 50-foot long microwave antenna that looks a great deal like a Romulan Bird of Prey crashed into a Stargate near Roswell, New Mexico.

Try as they might to track radio signals, the astronomers kept getting a pesky low-level background noise, like the white noise between radio channels. The noise seemed to come from everywhere in the galaxy. They tried everything they could think of to get rid of it, including climbing aboard the Horn and covering every seam and crack in the 400 square foot aperture with duct tape. I'm sure they were sure everything can surely be repaired with duct tape. Geez, on the Apollo 17 mission, astronauts Gene Cernan and Jack Schmitt used duct tape to repair their moon buggy during a mission ON THE MOON! Penzias and Wilson couldn't seem to fix an antenna located in New Jersey.

At their wits' end, the two headed up the road to Princeton to consult with a team of physicists who were trying to isolate the residual microwave background radiation from the Big Bang, a kind of Cosmic Tinnitus. After they described their problem to the lead physicist, Robert Dicke, they learned a startling truth.

"Gentlemen," Dicke told them, though perhaps not in these exact words, "you have stumbled on the proof we've been seeking for a long time. You have discovered evidence of Cosmic Microwave Background Radiation (CMBR) from the Big Bang."

Turning to his research team, Dicke then said "Gentlemen, we're screwed" (actually he said "we've been scooped" but he really meant they were screwed).

For their efforts, Penzias and Wilson received the Nobel Prize in 1978, the Holmdel Horn was designated a National Historic Site, and the group of scientists at Princeton probably didn't even receive memorial coffee cups.

There are a couple of supernova level ironies in Penzias' and Wilson's discovery. First, they made their discovery using a tool called a Dicke Radiometer. Second, their research destroyed the Steady State Universe theories promoted by the scientist Fred Hoyle, and he and his followers were left without a steady leg, so to speak, to stand on, including astronomer Robert Wilson, who didn't believe in the Big Bang. One hopes he altered his beliefs before the Nobel Prize Award ceremony in 1978.

I read about the discovery when I was just a freshman at the Sulpician Catholic Seminary outside of Seattle, and I was quite excited because the Cosmic Background Radiation had a specific wavelength. Pulling out my omnipresent slide rule, I converted the wavelength of the CMBR into a sonic wavelength and which then became a pitch. It was a D flat. The Cosmic Tinnitus of the Universe is a D flat. This is a true story, and if I do say so myself, this was a remarkable feat, not just because a 19-year old adequate pianist did it, but also because he went to a Catholic seminary whose teachers did not accept the principle of the Big Bang.

I kept my potential Nobel Prize discovery to myself, though, because I had learned an important lesson two years earlier in high school. I had been working on the equation for time travel using algorithms generated by the reciprocals of graphed negative numbers. Suddenly, I suspected that Einstein's equation was not exactly right and not exactly wrong. I shouted "Eureka" and rushed to show my results to my calculus teacher, Brother O'KnowNuthin'. He had graduated with a degree in Brit Lit. but was commanded by the principal to teach calculus. The "Beaker" (as he was known to us students because of his nose) just looked at me with irritation for having interrupted him clipping his toenails.

"Shaddup, Coolen!" he replied in his thick Brooklyn accent. "Go back to work or I'll deck ya'."

I shoulda reported such unprofessional conduct to the principal, but he woulda decked me for tattling, and when I got back to the classroom, the Beaker woulda decked me again for tattling. And that's how I learned to "Shaddup" about things like discovering that a D flat was the background pitch of the Universe. Nobody at St. Edward's Seminary wanted to know about that. In fact, nobody in the Catholic Church wanted to know about that. Still don't, really.

Throughout the years following my discovery, a D flat appeared in my life on many occasions. One of the most memorable occurred in 1976, the first time I tore the gastrocnemius muscle in my right leg playing basketball. I was going up for a right hand slam dunk when I heard a pop that sounded much like a D flat a major seventh below middle C. The pain was such that I remained airborne for several minutes in an extraordinary exhibition of levitation, trying to avoid the moment when I would land. I think I actually swooped around the hoop and returned to the other end of the court before crashing to the floor in a heap.

Writhing in agony on the free throw line, I whined.

"Why meeeeee?"

The answer came 17 years later when I tore it again going up for a slam dunk playing basketball. In both cases I tore it the day before I got involved with a certain carrot-licking dancer. I know it wasn't a coincidence because the first time I tore it, I met her for the first time, and the second time, it happened the day before I learned that she was divorced and wanted to meet me

again. In both cases, the pop sounded like a D flat, and both times I failed to listen to the CMBR sending me a painful warning to limp away, hobble off to Urgent Care, drag myself into a distant corner rather than become involved with her again. I heard the D flat, but I was tone deaf emotionally.

So I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when a D flat appeared as background noise in my right ear around 1996. During a break in rehearsing Pura Vida, the steel drum ensemble I'd formed at OSU three years before, I noticed a high-pitched humming in my right ear. I thought it was still just a noise from the room, but it kept on humming even when I went out into the hall to get a drink of water. Not only that, after I put my hands over my ears the humming was still there. It was both annoying and very frightening.

"What the fuck is this?" I thought. When it hadn't gone away by the next morning, I suspected what it was. Tinnitus. The correct pronunciation is "TIHN-ih-tus," although it is also pronounced "tihn-EYE-tus." The word comes from the Latin word *tinnere*, meaning "to ring or tinkle or experience tintinnabulation." It is likely a kind of onomatopoeic word describing the "tinkling" sound you might hear, although tinnitus is also used by people to describe everything from buzzing, white noise, clicking, chirping, and the sound of a 747 taking off.

Tinnitus is the perception of sound even though there is no external sound. The only person who hears it is the person experiencing it. Tinnitus is a neurological problem that does not originate in the ear, but in the brain, involving a breakdown in communication between damaged sensory hair cells and the brain. It's like the phantom pain experienced by amputees.

Tinnitus is not a modern condition. Charles Darwin kept daily records of his struggles with it. His overall health was poor, having contracted Chagas Disease from the bite of a "kissing bug" (aka, *Triatomines* or "the Assassin Bug") on a stop in Argentina during his voyage on the HMS Beagle. The bug passes the disease by biting the victims on the lips, and a parasite may have set up housekeeping in the tissue of Darwin's nervous system, with tinnitus the likely outcome. We do not know that for sure. It could have been his long bouts of seasickness that sparked his tinnitus. Or, Crohn's Disease, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Or aliens crashing into a Stargate.

The bug is now being found in both Arizona and Louisiana, and the State Legislatures there will doubtless need to take action to prevent not only people from kissing illegal alien insects, but also increase border patrol to prevent illegal *Triatomines* from entering the U.S.A. The stumbling point might be that, since *Triatomines* appear to be migrating north because of climate change, Southern politicians will probably have to admit there is climate change.

It is incredible that Darwin was able to accomplish as much as he did. In addition to *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin wrote *The Descent of Man*, *Selection in Relation to Sex*, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, as well as a series of other books, including one on earthworms. He achieved all of this suffering from a disease that so enervated him that he was generally unable to work more than 20 minutes at a time! Of course, he did have ten children, so he obviously wasn't entirely incapacitated.

The list of famous people who have or had tinnitus is extensive, and it includes Martin Luther, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan. But, for my money, the most famous non-musician (as he has demonstrated in recording after recording) to suffer from the

disease is your buddy and mine, Captain James T. Kirk, aka, William Shatner. Although Spock's ears were more famous, it was the tinnitus in Shatner's ears that almost drove him to suicide. He developed tinnitus on the set of Star Trek when he was standing too close to a special effects explosion. Shatner tried all kinds of methods to help alleviate the misery of his tinnitus, with no success. In a presentation to the American Tinnitus Association, he said, "There were days when I didn't know if I would survive the agony [because] I was so tormented by the screeching in my head. I really felt I really wouldn't be able to go on."

Finally, he had success with Tinnitus Retraining Therapy, which he said saved his life.

The unrelenting screeching sounds from tinnitus sometimes left victims like Shatner unsure whether they would survive. Little wonder the inability to silence the unrelenting screeching in their heads has led some to commit suicide and many others to contemplate suicide, including the most famous musician to suffer from it, Ludwig Van Beethoven.

Beethoven often complained that his ears whistled and buzzed all day and night...and that he was "leading a wretched life" In fact, tinnitus and hearing loss were so destructive in Beethoven's life that he often considered committing suicide. The Heiligenstadt Testament, written in 1802 but opened only after his death 25 years later, is a heart-breaking account of his sorrow and depression over his hearing problems. As a tinnitus sufferer myself and music educator, I have read the entire Heiligenstadt Testament (about two pages single-spaced) to hundreds of students over the years, but finally had to stop because I always broke into tears of empathy for this heart-broken musician.

Beethoven's words are very powerful, but it might be better if I translate them into more contemporary speech. In very brief summary, here's my interpretation of what Beethoven was trying to say.

My dear brothers.

I know you and others think I'm a curmudgeon and an asshole because I'm so difficult to be around. It's just that I have hidden from you and everybody else that I've been suffering from horrible ringing in my ears and progressive deafness over the past six years. Me! The best damn musician in Europe! Hearing problems and going deaf. That's why I can't stand to be around people. I hate it when someone tells me they can hear a flute in the distance and I hear nothing! I just nod as if I do. I don't want their pity. I can't hear even my own music, and the noise in my head has gotten so bad that I've considered suicide several times. But I can't do it. I have so much more music to write before I die. So I'm ready for whatever life throws at me. Love your children, and remember me as the brother who loved you both so well. Ludvig

Musicians are quite prone to developing tinnitus as a result of their occupation, and there are literally hundreds of accounts of musicians describing their experience with tinnitus. One halting, shifting comment by Jeff Beck, member of the Yardbirds, is especially touching, as he tries to describe what only he can hear. In an interview he once said, "Yes, it's in my left ear. It's excruciating... I mean, it's the worst thing 'cause it's not... It never... It does go away - it's not true to say that it doesn't but, uhh... It doesn't."

Not surprisingly, there are numerous genres of Rock and Roll whose music is so loud it can lead to tinnitus, both in performers and audience members. One sub-genre, Power Violence, is a dissonant form of hardcore punk, which boggles the imagination, wondering what a non-dissonant

form of hardcore punk sounds like. British “power violence/grindcore” band Napalm Death holds the Guinness World Record for shortest song ever recorded with the one-second “You Suffer” (1987), which you can hear and see on YouTube. The song even has lyrics which go “You suffer, but why?” Why indeed.

My tinnitus was probably the result of twenty five years of playing African and Latin American percussion, followed by three years of playing the even louder instruments of the steel drum (pan) ensemble. “Pan” is actually the proper name of these steel “drums,” and the term is short for “Pandemonium,” which gives you a good idea of the sound of these ensembles.

When I walked out of that steel drum rehearsal in 1996, I didn’t know I was embarking on a lifelong struggle with tinnitus. I thought the ringing was just temporary. A few days later, however, I noticed the ringing in my right ear had not diminished at all. I noticed it during the day, but it was at night that it was especially troubling. As I lay in bed, the house and city growing quiet, the ringing was so bad that I could not go to sleep.

Hoping to prevent any further damage to my ears, I immediately stopped playing steel drum and all percussion instruments, ending my career in playing non-Western percussion music. I don’t remember any particular sadness in having such a quick end; I think I was more focused on the hearing problem at hand.

Over the next couple of months I hoped that soon my tinnitus would get better, but it didn’t, and there were times that...well...I wasn’t suicidal. Let’s just say that if I saw a Boeing 747 crashing into my house, I may not have ducked.

It is common in our society to hear testimonials from people saying things like “the best thing that ever happened to me in my life was when my right leg developed cancer and my left leg developed gangrene, and I lost them both, as well as the feeling from my groin up the right side of my body, yada yada yada. If that’s the best thing that happened in their lives, they must have had miserable lives up to that point.

Tinnitus was not the best thing that happened in my life. My family is the best thing that has happened in my life.

The reduction of the volume of the ringing in my right ear is one of the best things that has happened in my life, and I have come to treasure those moments when my tinnitus temporarily quiets so much as to become unnoticeable, and I can experience silence again.

The fact that a Boeing 747 didn’t crash into my house is one of the best things, along with a greater understanding of the misery that plagued Beethoven’s life.

I don’t doubt that I will suffer from tinnitus for the rest of my life, and although I have written somewhat humorously about it here, tinnitus is not a funny thing. It is a merciless ordeal, one which our noisy society is coming to know ever more personally. Between veterans returning injured from wars in the Middle East and young people worldwide plugging in their ear buds and listening to music at high volume, there will be no end of future Shatners and Beethovens and Darwins and Napalm Deaths and average people who will learn from experience that tinnitus isn’t funny, but it is forever.

It is miserable kind of background noise that can’t be fixed with duct tape.

Interview with the Zombie: A Veteran of World War Z Speaks Out

By Gary Vaughn

[He shuffles slowly into the room, looking like death warmed over. Taking a seat with a sigh, he too calmly stares at me, and I instinctively roll my chair backward, only partly from the smell. I don't know how he had found me or even known about my research into what has been labeled World War Z, but his interest was genuine and compelling. I tap my pencil on the desk, wondering what I am in for. He had informed me that he wanted to be referred to as Jacob Marley, and I was eager to hear his story. Realizing the surprising and momentous nature of this interview, I turn on my recorder and clear my voice.]

Why the pseudonym of Jacob Marley?

In what you call life I was a banker. I wear the metaphorical chains of my own free-will decisions. I hit depositors with excessive fees easily triggered; I invested people's money in risky investment schemes and junk bonds; I offered mortgages to those who could not truly afford them, knowing that if the economy soured the bank would eventually foreclose on them. People blithely went along with me and forged the chains of their own bad judgments.

[He pauses and leans forward.]

These indeed are chains you can believe in.

How is it that you can be dead and still speak?

Though I am not a warm body¹, I am not dead, I don't like the term "undead," and I object to what Brooks calls "the globally accepted term"² Zombie. I prefer to be seen as alternatively alive. There is more of corporate gravy about me than of grave. And as to how I am able to speak, I don't rightly understand that any more than I understood the economy, much like Congress.

[He pauses again, leaning back. I think I see him blink, but it's just a maggot moving under his eyelid.]

Okay, Jake ... [He frowns] ... Jacob, why do you want to speak to me?

No one asked for the perspective of the alternatively alive; no one seemed to care. That is just so inhuman. Or maybe, rather, it is actually so inherently human to be unconcerned about viewpoints outside the self. It has been said that "Ignorance is the undead's strongest ally, knowledge their deadliest enemy."³ Not in the least bit true. Knowledge can calm the savage beast of fear. You people are smug about your identities and so quick to "other" others. I want to clear the air.

[He accentuates his point by waving his hand in front of his face, unavoidably accentuating his odor.]

And who better to do a historical post-mortem with than an academic?

All right. Let the insightful incisions begin.

[He takes what appears to be a deep breath.]

First, why is there all this interest in the alternatively alive? Let's look at human nature. Think back to your childhood and the game called "Tag." In that game, a designated player ("It") chases other kids and tags them; they then join "It" in tagging more players. Remember?

Un-huh.

The game, preying on the emotional need not to be outcasts and to belong to a group, implies a Nash Equilibrium⁴ wherein an initial imbalance of "sides" gradually morphs into a balanced proportion – until a tipping point is reached and a new imbalance created.

Go on.

¹ Although I cannot be sure, I suspect that Jake was referring to the movie *Warm Bodies*.

² From the Introduction to *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* by Max Brooks – the widely accepted record to which I am well indebted.

³ From the Introduction to *The Zombie Survival Guide*, also by Brooks.

⁴ Game-playing theory introduced by mathematician John Nash in his 1951 article "Non-Cooperative Games."

Well, the psychological desire not to be “alien” also plays an important role in a consumer-based economy. For instance, the 1950’s and ‘60’s saw “keeping up with the Joneses” as motivation for a conspicuous spending suburban lifestyle. Similarly, once a new “fashion fad” is created, consumers often race to participate – buying “stressed” jeans, circle scarves, Ugg Boots, or lining up to purchase the latest iPad. This consumerism (with business and government encouragement) has spurred an all-consuming motivation for the American economy to produce more and more goods and services – to feed the Gross Domestic Product, a type of reanimated GNP.⁵

[Pause.]

Yes, I catch a whiff of your meaning, but I’m not sure where you’re going.

So what happens when the economy stumbles and no longer tags people to prosperity? During the recent Great Recession, loss of jobs and homes created a collective psychological depression. Higher energy prices also eroded consumer confidence. Humans can devour nature capital only so long before the environment bites back. We felt a collective loss of control; our self-determination was being eaten by factors beyond our power to handle or even to comprehend. Frustration and anger tagged us. These emotions were vented in how we reacted to even minor news “events.” We cheered for the service workers who had had enough of poor treatment by employer or customer and who had acted out feelings we all shared. Brawls in sports became our delights. I remember reading an article in The Huffington Post that examined the enthusiasm radio talk show fans displayed about a fight between two major league baseball teams. As I recall, the author succinctly stated, “Americans have lost the passion and energy that makes life fun and exciting, and watching others lash out (and presumably lashing out ourselves) can pull us back from the land of the living dead.”⁶

[Jacob pauses, appearing to catch his breath. He does not react to the fly that has landed on his ear.]

Doesn’t the increasing popularity of literature and movies on the so-called “living dead” reflect American consumers’ lashing back at the economic forces (including a ravenous GDP) that roam the land and seek to tag them with their teeth?

So war with zombies ... uh the alternatively alive ... allows us a catharsis and thus a rebalancing of our emotions?

Precisely.

⁵ Gross National Product, a term killed in the 1990’s by the United States government because globalization made it increasingly more difficult to separate domestic production from overseas production by US companies.

⁶ From John Graham’s “Baseball and the Anger of America,” *Huffington Post*, August 12, 2010.

You've obviously thought a lot about this phenomenon. Tell me more about your perspective on the economy and the alternatively alive.

Let's look at pop culture. In *The Walking Dead* (the graphic novels and the television series) the alternatively alive are sometimes given jobs – as experimental subjects, as gladiatorial-style arena entertainers, or as literally “unarmed” servants providing olfactory camouflage for humans. The alternatively alive could even be used to consume enemies or – like biological Roombas -- clean your social environment of other “undesirables” and the problems you imagine they create. What's more, caring for us is highly affordable; we don't need medicines, surgeries, doctors, or dentists. And we eliminate those who do. We are the death panels. Requiring little incentive (like fresh flesh dangling on a stick), we dehumanized “others” are a cheap labor force that, theoretically, in harnessed groups like teams of horses could be employed to plow fields, power generators or grist mills, provide simple transportation – the unskilled labor that you comfort-addicted Americans disdain. The ghouls of your imagination – job elimination, outsourcing, foreclosure, credit card and student loan debt – can thereby be tamed, and your psychological need to identify with an “in” group and to set yourselves apart from “others” can be satisfied. In your fantasies you objectify your fear of the loss of passion and personal integrity, and then you attempt to turn the tables on the alternatively alive by turning them into an alternative work force.

[He takes a long pause -- whether from a need to rest or from a desire to hear my response, I cannot tell.]

So humans are fascinated by the alternatively alive because they represent a way for us to regain a sense of control over our lives and to deal with a reality we see as unpleasant?

Yup. Americans especially are intrigued by the desire to manage death. The whole economy of the funeral business – caskets, embalming, viewing the loved ones in their “slumber” -- is based on it. And think of the Southern Gothic literary tradition, like Faulkner's Emily sleeping with her dead husband, the mummified dwarf in O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, and all those Poe characters that just won't stay dead. Preservation equals perceived power.

Like in Hitchcock's Psycho.

You got it.

But are humans really as manipulative and self-involved as you think?

Didn't I tell you I was a banker?

[We both smile.]

Certainly to the extent that they feel a need to preserve themselves and their hegemony. The humans in *The Walking Dead*, for instance, gradually become less and less focused on those they call “walkers” and more and more concerned about maintaining and extending their own power over other humans, going to the extent of fighting to be the alpha male group. They even attempt using members of their own group as either go-betweens or moles in an “other” group. One, Andrea I think is her name, is expected to turn on her lover (the leader of a rival gang), whom she is eventually convinced to believe is evil. The plan is that she should have sex with him – and then kill him in his sleep. In other words ...

[He pauses again, this time for effect.]

... the males in her group want to use her as sexual capital.

Hmmmm ... You have a point. But isn't there some value in self-sacrifice for the sake of the common good?

Utilitarianism does have its place. But it is often used as a smokescreen for imagined self-interest. Take attitudes toward immigration as an example. Some argue that “illegal aliens” (how’s that for “othering”?) are threats to job security and, thus, should be deported or fenced out to preserve the collective economic well-being. But a lot of jobs they take might simply be unwanted jobs, and sometimes undocumented workers have high-tech skills that support the economy. And don’t forget Brooks’ documentation about how Cuba prospered during World War Z.⁷ At first, as Cuba was inundated with wave after wave of boat people refugees from the US, the Cuban government established “Quarantine Resettlement Centers” for them and assigned them to compulsory hard labor as agricultural workers. But it became impossible for the government both to control them and to guard the coastline against refugee intrusion, and building a long, high wall around the entire island would have been unrealistic and ineffective. (The Berlin Wall was on a much smaller scale and still more than a bit leaky). So the Cuban government learned to permit some of the detainees to work outside of direct supervision and gave them the opportunity to use their labor to earn credits with which they could purchase other detainees’ (such as family members) freedom. This incentive initiated, as Brooks explains, an economic evolution as the workers became more and more a legitimized part of the culture and effective contributors to the economy.

What about the impact of spirituality or religion?

Again referring to Brooks’ oral history, remember how the Holy Russian Empire became holy. Soldiers could not bring themselves to kill recently bitten comrades before reanimation, and suicide of the afflicted resulted in souls being lost. Consequently, the responsibility for mercy killings gradually fell upon a rising class of priestly death squads who were, in the words of a priest Brooks interviewed, “the only ones who should bear the cross of releasing trapped souls from

⁷ See the “Around the World, and Above” section of *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* by Max Brooks.

infected bodies!”⁸ So, from your perspective, religion can have a positive impact on the survival of the human race, although I would much prefer to create my own “converts.” And I must add that I find Franciscans to have a definite saccharin aftertaste.

I take it that you’re a fan of World War Z.

Not entirely. Remember that I object to the terms Brooks uses to describe the alternatively alive, and I don’t like his ghastly descriptions of us. Yet his discussions of the far-ranging impacts of the war are often thought provoking. The book is much more accurate than the movie, by the way.

How so?

Well, for one, we simply do not run. It also takes way longer than 12 seconds for reanimation to occur. Imagine how different things would be if those two exaggerations were true.

[He attempts a sly grin.]

You wouldn’t stand a chance.

[I shift in my chair.]

You mentioned that you don’t care for depictions of your kind. How would you like to be seen?

Simple. The next time you see us ripping up flesh to eat, don’t think of us as cannibals ...

[He pauses. Do I detect a dull twinkle in his eye?]

But as ... stakeholders.

[Pause]

All righty then ...

That reminds me.

Yes?

I’m getting hungry.

⁸ From the “Around the World, and Above” section of *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* by Max Brooks.

Okaaaaay. [I stand.] I think I have enough for now. Thank you for your help. Any final food for thought you'd like to add?

Just this. You people are always so concerned about identity – who you are, what you are, and how you are similar to and different from others. Well, think carefully about what you're looking at.

[Another dramatic pause, this one longer.]

I'm you.

[With that, Jacob Marley awkwardly rises from the chair, stiffly turns, and slowly shuffles out the door, his last words lingering in the air like smoke.]

Diminishing Returns

By Ken Poyner

When we learned that the local cartel was buying heads, at first everyone thought: how silly—where would we find heads? But the mortician quickly came to market with a cart load of relatively fresh heads, and then everyone thought: why, someone would have idly buried that wealth!

The work then began of unearthing recent burials, removing the heads. Elderly to child, natural cause to mayhem, plutocrat or the working dead. We had not been given limitations on what heads would meet market designs, so we sought them all. At the start, we worked in groups, forming corporations of head collectors, setting rules for work hours and lunch breaks and a common quitting time. We carefully dug into graves; gently removed the lids of coffins – preserving the nails and tearing as little of the lining as imaginable – and labeled each head; then made sure the body went rightly back into its box, the lid was meticulously put back and faithfully secured with its original nails. Some corporations had specialist crews just for re-internment. Gatherers that were good with a shovel were as respected as the harvesters that held talent with the scythe. Pride, accomplishment and respect emanated from all aspects of the work.

But then came the lone wolves. They stealthily swarmed in, combing the cemeteries after good people were abed, breaking the lids inelegantly from coffins, removing the victims heads with a sputter of axe; and then they would be skulking off: the body left exposed to the rain and dew and neighbors' dogs, with no thought of public decency. They came wild with the thought of profit, operating in groups of three or four, or sometimes of one. We would arrive the next morning, thinking to farm a length of cemetery row in our civil, regulated way, only to find it pock marked and holed and any degree of commerce already without the least of manners drawn out of it and gone.

Who could compete? Artistry and kindness and respect sometimes simply cannot compete with a narcissistic will. So we streamlined our processes, cutting corners, hacking the heads from corpses as fast as we could and moving on: the headless resident of the grave tossed about in his or her box as though hit with a summer's hurricane; with the lid split to shreds in whatever manner

would best sunder the building material, our heavy equipment making quick work of even the most precious of everlasting departure comforts.

Public and private cemeteries were farmed, and parties drifted out to the outlying estates, peeling back the land around family plots, overturning the earth where unmarked graves were rumored to wait. Many of us began to worry what the cartel might consider a head. With fresh burials exhausted early, some people were coming up with nothing but skulls. After a while even the skulls began to seem ragged: hunters bringing in little more than jawless rounds of bone and passing it off as a head to anyone who would not know better.

More than one enterprising charlatan tried to pass off one busted skull as two separately discovered gatherings of remains, and pretend with all appearances of honesty that the find should be considered two heads. These opportunists would take the complete object before reaching market and pop off the jaw, laying it out separately from the pate, assuring everyone that this was the best pickings to come out of two distinctly different, stingy graves. The hopeful huckster would persist in the deception even when anyone could pick up the jaw, pairing it with the skull fragment it had been broken from, and show how it fit like man and wife.

There are only so many dead people. Graves disappear with time and the housing of better industry. We are not skilled archeologists, but working class folk: those who know what they know because it is told to them by people who make profit on the ignorance they sow within us. We had only so many blue prints on how to locate unobvious dead. Yet our town is like any other: it has its criminals, its lie-about, its drunkards, its reprobates, its non-believers: all of those that no clean citizen would miss, and the town would be better off without. We are as forgiving as any close knit group of common laboring people might be, but here was the chance to kill two ideas with one edict. Soon we had fresh heads for market.

No one knew why the cartel wanted them. For years they bought our produce, sold us our land and implements, took away our wives when we were tired of them, accepted our house animals and sometimes our children as tribute, explained the limits that affixed to town sovereignty, and assured us no harm would come to us if we met our end of their contract.

No harm came to us, which might be why there were so few criminals and reprobates and drunkards and lie-about and non-believers to harvest marketable heads from. It was like trying to bring feed corn out of a dry, sandy soil. Even with widening the definition of the undesirable, that broader definition for unexempt citizenry can only hold so many. A few of the industrious quickly made off with the available heads and we were back to the business of exploring unprofitable shadows for more.

The money had been good, and a man's take would beat most day's ways of laboring. Shortcuts can become contagious, comfortable. With everyone happy and the dead not caring, this industry was sure to go on.

And we thought: go on how? Everyone has his or her opportunities. A lover is most vulnerable at the end of a love affair. The neighbors' children are least prepared when they think they are safe. When the worker beside you is fixed on the ground that he thinks might hold an unmarked grave, he is then the easiest to prune. A husband or wife curiously entangled with ecstasy can muster no defense. The possibilities are as endless as the imagination of anyone who has

painted himself in self-justified chicanery to engage in the brutal contest of daily commerce with his or her fellow citizens.

Add in a town's rivalries or feuds, envy and injury, and the circle of available heads grows ever wider. No one can forgive every trespasser: injustice can lead to profit. Just to be ready for all the ugly, brief opportunities you have, a man or woman needs to carry a sickle strapped to his or her back, the handle propped up like a comma thinking semicolon above the shoulder for quick access.

I have been won over to the new line of thinking, and can do my fellow head-seeking competition one better. I come to market with my light basket held close, looking up at myself as I make my way to the exchange station. My head rolls about against the wicker and I have to balance, just so, to keep the eyes first on me, and then on the road ahead: making of walking and coordination a surly mathematics consumed with projecting direction against the tether of my own shadow. I smile at the man from the cartel when I reach his collection station and I tilt up the basket to see that he has a full cash box. This head should bring more than any other that I have delivered before, more than any of the many heads that I have dropped in the bottomless barrel just at the edge of the barter table. More than any two heads combined. It needs to. I will have to live headless off of the proceeds for a long, long time.

And That Horse

By David Novak

“Have you ever seen a horse’s penis, Mrs. Johnson?” Mr. Lacy asked into the telephone.

“Uh-huh...You grew up on a farm, you say? Well, then you certainly must recognize that the phrase ‘hung like a horse’ is by no means a misnomer. That the terminology is rather selective in its caricature. That the sheer size of a horse’s genitalia has singlehandedly launched such a popular nomenclature. That...Yes...Yes, I see...Of course...No, no. I completely understand. I simply wanted to ensure that you fully comprehended the enormity of your request, Mrs. Johnson. No pun intended, of course...Well, if there’s no changing your mind...I see...In that case, I shall be in contact with you shortly. Goodbye, Mrs. Johnson.”

Mr. Lacy hung up the telephone and sighed.

His afternoon was not going well.

“Well, Peggy,” Mr. Lacy said to his secretary, “it appears as if our worst fears have been confirmed.”

“You don’t mean to say – ”

“I’m afraid so,” Mr. Lacy interrupted. “Mrs. Johnson is still rather steadfast in her demand that I not only fuck myself but also – and I’m quoting here, Peggy – but also the horse I rode in on.”

“But sir,” Peggy stammered.

“I know, Peggy.”

“But sir, you don’t even own a horse.”

“Nor any of the subspecies of *Equus Ferus*, for that matter. Unfortunately, Mrs. Johnson seemed rather unaffected by this knowledge.”

“What do you suppose you’ll do, sir?”

Mr. Lacy sighed again as he looked out one of the many windows of his corner office. The sun still blazed high above the New York skyline, and the summer was still very much in good health – if only slightly out of reach, for the moment. “Mrs. Johnson has been one of our most loyal customers, Peggy. So if there is the slightest possibility that this demand will somehow dissipate her disappointment regarding next year’s raises in prices, then...”

He sighed for the third time.

Sometimes, Mr. Lacy wondered whether or not the responsibilities that accompanied the prestige of the corner office were worth all the headaches.

It certainly did have a nice view, though.

“Sir...” Peggy trailed off. “You couldn’t...could you?”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to, Peggy. If it’s for the good of the company, then the responsibility rests squarely on my shoulders. Or more appropriately in this case, loins.”

“But sir! How can you do it? I mean, how does one even make love to a horse?”

“No, no, Peggy. Not make love. There will be absolutely no love making performed in this act. This must remain a purely physical, emotionless affair. I shall fuck that horse and only fuck that horse, and it will be as simple as that.”

Of course, it was really not as simple as that. Because, truth be told, neither making love to nor fucking a horse seemed like a favorable prospect to Mr. Lacy.

Nevertheless, it was his duty. It was what the corner office demanded of him. He accepted that much.

And really, when he thought about it, it was the least he could do.

After all, the corner office position had been more than generous to him throughout the years. It had afforded him a number of luxuries. His house in the suburbs, for example. His Cadillac. A membership to the most prestigious country club in the tri-county area. A boat, albeit a small one.

His swimming pool.

More specifically, his in-ground swimming pool.

Or even more specifically, his collegiate sized, perfectly chlorinated, heated yet still refreshing in-ground swimming pool which came equipped with a deep end for diving and a cabana stocked with the finest choice of cigars and scotches.

It was a mighty fine pool, to say the least. And if that pool didn’t make it all worthwhile, then what on God’s green earth possibly could?

He must go for a nice swim soon, Mr. Lacy reminded himself.

The thought alone began to make him feel a bit better about this whole horse fucking business.

“Peggy, I’ll need you to get on the horn for me and begin to track down a horse. One to rent, preferably – I’d rather avoid purchasing one for what will hopefully be a one-time affair. Heaven forbid if this turns into a habit.”

“Where should I look?” Peggy asked.

“Check with the local carnival companies, for starters. One would think they should have ponies for rent for children’s parties and whatnot.” He paused for a moment. “A pony is a horse, right?”

“I’m not too sure, Mr. Lacy.”

“In that case, I’ll also need an animal encyclopedia. No reason to fuck a pony if it doesn’t fulfill Mrs. Johnson’s request, for goodness sake. We must do our research now. Measure twice, cut once. Better safe than sorry. That’s what I always say.”

“That’s very smart thinking, sir.”

“Smart thinking is how I got this corner office, Peggy.”

“I can see that, sir.” Peggy looked down, and rubbed one foot behind the other. “I do have one question, though,” she said slowly. “Just for clarification purposes.”

“And that would be?”

“Well, sir,” Peggy said. “If you don’t mind me asking: who fucks who?”

“Whom.”

“I’m sorry, sir?”

“It’s who fucks whom. The latter would be in the objective case.”

“My apologies, sir.”

“Whereas who would be the subjective case.”

“I see.”

“Improper grammar is never appropriate, Peggy. Especially in the workplace.”

“Yes sir, I understand.”

“It’s a poor reflection of the company.”

“I know, sir.”

“It makes us look vulgar.”

“Of course, sir.”

“And we can’t have that sort of reputation, you understand.”

“It won’t happen again, sir.”

“Good. Now what was it you were asking?”

“Who fucks whom, sir?”

“Well I haven’t the faintest idea.” He strummed his fingers along the front of his leg. “Nor do I know where Mrs. Johnson would prefer this act to take place. Or if she would like to be in attendance. Or if photographic or video evidence would suffice. Or if there’s a preferred time limit. Or if I need to achieve coitus. Or the horse, for that matter. Come to think of it, there’s a lot that seems to be somewhat ambiguous about this whole ordeal.” He picked up telephone. “I’ll call Mrs. Johnson and iron out these details while you begin your search. I’d prefer to act on this request as swiftly as possible. Mrs. Johnson is one of our most valuable customers, so we haven’t a moment to waste.”

Mr. Lacy dialed for Mrs. Johnson as Peggy left the office in search of a pony.

After a few rings, Mrs. Johnson picked up the line on the other end.

“Hello, Mrs. Johnson? This is Mr. Lacy and...yes, that Mr. Lacy. Which segues rather nicely into the reason for which I’m calling. You see, my secretary is looking for a horse as we speak. However, before we make any commitments, I’d like to clarify a few issues. First and foremost, where would you prefer we conduct this act. Now if I were to have any say on the matter, I would request that it not be performed in my office. You see, I’m in a corner office, and while it’s a rather nice office – in fact, the nicest in the building, I’d venture to say - there is nevertheless the legitimate concern that the horse could try to buck me and break a window and potentially endanger us all in the process. This is not to mention, of course, the logistical nightmare of physically transporting a horse up an elevator, as well as clean-up costs and associated privacy issues, and...Yes...Yes, of

course I'm familiar with the concept...I see...I see. Well in that case, Mrs. Johnson, farewell and have yourself a lovely day."

Mr. Lacy hung up the phone and called for Peggy.

"Yes, sir?" she said, entering.

"Well, Peggy," Mr. Lacy began. "It appears as if Mrs. Johnson was somewhat less sincere than we imagined."

"Sir?"

"Well, it turns out the expression 'go fuck yourself and the horse you rode in on' is just that. An expression. And a figurative one as well."

"I don't follow, sir."

"How shall I explain this? Mrs. Johnson indicated that she was not being literal in her request. That is to say, she really has no visceral interest whatsoever in watching me fuck myself nor a horse."

"Would she prefer you fuck another animal, sir?"

"No, Peggy. I don't believe so. At this point, I'm not sure if she wants me to fuck anything in particular. She also mentioned something about beating a dead horse, but I'm afraid I didn't quite follow that either."

"Well," Peggy said, exasperated. "This is certainly confusing."

"Indeed."

"I wish she would have said that in the beginning."

"I agree whole heartedly."

"I suppose it's a good thing I didn't order that horse yet."

"No, no," Mr. Lacy said. "Order the horse, just in case. I'm not sure if she was being facetious or not. Better to be safe than sorry, that's what I always say. That's how I got this corner office, you know. Now if you don't mind, Peggy, I'll be leaving early. I believe it's a lovely night for a swim."

Reminders

By Wendy Hammer

“Sixteen ounce ginger soy latte.” The barista called out the order and scanned the crowd.

Janet knew he’d have to wait. It always went like this.

He took another look at the ticket and added, “For Madison?”

That would do it. Janet watched as Madison pushed her way to the front. Her sunny blonde hair and delicate features glowed. A few of the men smiled at her, a couple others openly checked her out, and one blushed when she brushed by.

Janet choked down a surge of jealousy—Madison always pulled that kind of attention. The one consolation was that initial enchantment usually didn’t survive long.

Madison scowled. “Is that a vegan ginger soy latte?”

“Well, yeah.” The barista stared at her. The silence stretched. “I mean, it’s soy, so...”

She huffed. “Non-GMO soy, right? I was assured it was Non-GMO and organic.”

He shrugged. “That’s what the label says.” He nudged the drink over. “Enjoy your beverage.”

Madison picked up the cup and moved over to where the others were seated. She was still seething when Janet joined them.

“I should talk to his manager about the unacceptable attitude.” When Madison got angry, the Atlanta came out in her voice. It went burnt-sugar sweet, a caramel that could slice deep.

Janet knew that Madison had been brutal in her efforts to cut out all traces of her Southern roots, but some stubborn echoes remained. It was a sore spot—Madison couldn’t stand being linked to a region where pork is considered a seasoning.

He stood up and said, “I’ll go talk to him. It’s your right to know what you’re putting in your body.” He flushed and touched his mustache, fiddling with a curled end. It was a relatively new affectation, but he’d really taken to it.

Janet didn’t mind. They’d all tried out a lot of different things. That’s part of what college is about, after all.

He continued, “I mean, he needs to take his ingredients seriously. And...”

Madison waved him off. “Don’t be ridiculous. If poor service is the price we have to pay for Fair-Trade coffee, I’ll do it.” She sat down in the center of the couch, lifted the cup, and took a sip. She tilted her head for him to take his place beside her.

He did so immediately, maintaining a careful few inches between them. Janet wished he’d just make his move and be done with it, but also sympathized with the perilous comforts of the friend zone.

Janet took a sip of her chai and glanced over at the fourth member of their group. Che’s attempts at chivalry always set Harper off. Janet knew she shouldn’t think it was funny, but the reactions were usually way out of proportion to the situation.

Harper said, “She can fight her own battles, man. Jeez. Congratulations on perpetuating stereotypical gender roles for yet another day, dude.”

Janet suppressed a smirk and spoke up before things devolved into bickering. “I got all the things you asked me to, Madison. And Charlie B is ready to go.”

Madison clapped with delight. “Great! Site traffic is way down. The climate-change sketch has run its course so it’s time to launch another production. We can’t let apathy get a grip on our viewers.” She turned to each attending member of the Social Justice Players: the area’s first and only guerilla theater troupe.

The fifth actor, Charles Barkowski, was back at Janet’s apartment, trying to his best to rub off the effects of his trip to the groomer by rolling on the carpet.

Until Janet’s German Shepherd had started appearing in their videos, the SJP website had received fewer than ten hits a semester. As of last week, the site had drawn hundreds. The next step would be thousands. The group told themselves that people may come to see a dog dressed in costume, but they stayed for the power of the message.

Janet wasn’t always so sure that was the whole truth, but she did believe what they were trying to do was right. The world wasn’t going to change if nobody tried to do anything about it. And as grating as she could be, Madison’s driven and demanding nature was just the kind of force that could get results. They all knew it.

Harper leaned forward. “Awesome. What’s the plan?” Her mousy brown dreadlocks dangled around her pale face. “And, more important, how many lines do I have?”

Madison said, “We’re taking on the monster. The most evil place around.” She lifted her latte in a mocking toast. “It’s time for a road trip. We’re heading to the biggest of the big-box stores.”

#

The troupe liked to strike like lightning and disappear, so it wasn’t surprising to Janet that they’d managed to get the production together in a matter of hours. Usually locations were the main problem, but this one was proving to be a cakewalk. She’d feel better if it wasn’t so dark outside, but she knew they needed the cover.

Che's muscles strained as he worked the bolt cutters. Metal screamed against metal before the chain finally broke. The clang carried through the crisp night air and the group was surprised into stillness.

Nothing happened.

Charlie B growled: a low, rumbling complaint. Janet flexed her fingers in the hair covering the scruff of his neck and he calmed. She shifted and readjusted her backpack.

"Don't worry, guys. There's nobody around for miles." Che looked dewy from sweat, but confident in his assertion.

Janet trusted him. The building had been empty for going on three years now. It was hard to believe that their school was just ten miles away from this abandoned place. The group seldom ventured out of the familiar bustle of college coffee shops, bookstores, bars, and classrooms. They clung to campus even as they complained about its lack of sophistication, its sleepy and conservative core. Janet was okay with the routine, especially if leaving it meant coming out to the armpit of nowhere.

It was too quiet. What little sound there was grew amplified by contrast. The wind rustled through the weeds that had pushed their way up through the cracks in the parking lot. Crickets chirped. Janet's breath and heartbeat sounded so loud in her ears, she hoped no one else noticed. She froze in a fit of self-consciousness and looked for distraction by focusing on the building.

Butcher paper covered the front windows of the abandoned store. The word CLOSED ran along its length in crooked red scrawls. The towering letters seemed to shake as their flashlights shimmied across them. It felt like a warning. Janet wanted to turn back, but snapped back to attention when Madison took charge.

"We need to get moving. Che, Harper, get the rest of the gear. Janet, bring the dog, and come inside with me." Madison didn't wait for an answer. She grabbed the door and entered the building.

Charlie B barked twice, but hushed at Janet's command. She stepped forward with slow, reluctant steps, and entered. The cavernous interior yawned before her, a vast expanse of darkness. Their flashlights were pitiful dim beams—no match for the black. All they could manage to reveal were glimpses of old fixtures, some tilted shelving, discarded boxes and clumps of dust. Janet imagined that all manner of critters could have taken refuge in the store. Her skin twitched in anticipation of an unwanted touch.

Madison stood her ground, apparently unaffected by the atmosphere. Her expression was set in a look of fierce concentration. Janet felt like a fool.

It was a relief when the others came in with the rest of the gear. It was even better once Che got their lights running. At Madison's order, he continued setting up, creating a stage close to the banks of stripped register stations and the snack-bar. He was silent and moved with competent purpose. Janet always admired that about him, the way he would commit to a task so selflessly.

Madison talked while he worked. Her monologue grew louder and more heated as it went on. "I just hate this place so much. It's everything evil about America. It's corporate greed personified."

The lights flickered for a moment, then steadied.

He nodded and agreed, as he almost always did.

Madison opened her arms wide. “Just think of all the workers this one location alone managed to oppress and disenfranchise. And the customers! It appeals to the lowest common denominator. It keeps them in cheap sweatshop clothes, processed food, and entertainment. No one remembers the plight of the factory...”

Janet tuned her out. She’d heard it all before. She took off her pack, began to take out a pile of clothing, and glared at the dingy blue smock, not thrilled at tonight’s part. It was true she didn’t have the chic wardrobe Madison did, and it made sense to use clothes for professional roles, but it didn’t feel fair. Pretty soon her standard credit would read: Janet Morimoto as “The Frump.”

Janet shrugged. Playing the cashier this time might not be so bad, given Harper’s get-up—she found herself in a lot of provocative outfits. Janet was surprised she never made a fuss about it, not even when it really didn’t seem to fit the story. It wouldn’t be a big deal, but Janet had listened to more than a few of Harper’s heated tirades about exploitation and body shaming and sexism in response to similar costumes on actresses in mass-media entertainment. Janet stole a look.

“This thong has totally jammed itself up my ass.” Harper turned around and pointed at her neon pink whale tail. It was pulled up a good three inches above her booty shorts. She did a comical dance and the rhythm of her flip-flops kept time. She stopped when she noticed Janet’s stare. She pulled at her tube top and said, “What’s the matter? Do I look fat?”

Janet ignored the question and turned her attention to Charlie B. He was unusually subdued. He hadn’t moved from where he’d hunkered down at her side. She made soothing noises as she pulled out his costume for the skit. It took some doing, but she eventually wrestled him into his NASCAR shirt, fanny pack and mullet wig.

Harper moved to give him an affectionate pat. She posed as the dog sat, panting. She laughed. “We’re going to make a fine pair of mouth-breathers, Charlie B.” Janet pursed her lips.

“Oh, get off it, Janet. So we’re trading in stereotypes. Sometimes you have to—and you know that there’s sometimes truth hidden in them. Besides, every one of my cousins is a die-hard fan of this place. The whole family spends every Sunday at one. They eat, shop, play games, gossip, whatever. It’s like a redneck carnival and family reunion all in one.” She spluttered. “It’s mortifying. My aunt and uncle are one of those couples spending their retirement in an RV. They go from town to town just to camp in the damned parking lots. It’s like some kind of fucked up pilgrimage. They worship here.”

Janet shivered, suddenly cold.

“We had a huge fight about it last Thanksgiving. They said I was a humorless snob and anti-American. I left early. So if I want to poke some fun at this place, I think I’ve earned the right.”

Janet didn’t really know what to say. This was looking like one of those polarizing subjects, the kind that nuked all attempts to find common ground. Still, they had to try. She said, “I guess you’ll be able to get into character a lot easier, then, right?”

Harper shrugged.

Madison hurried over. “Are you about ready?” She stared pointedly at Janet.

In response, Janet hustled into her smock and grabbed her favorite lipstick from her pack. She may have to play a brainwashed company peon, but she didn't have to look washed out while doing so. By the time she stood up, the other two had moved on. "Come on, Charlie B," Janet said.

The dog didn't budge.

"Charlie! Up! Come!" She gave him the obedience school command and signal.

The Shepherd winced and whined, but rose.

"Heel." Janet wasn't taking any more chances. They had to hurry. Madison would flip out if they held things up.

Madison was fussing over the lights, the blocking, and with lines. "We aren't going to affect real change by doing things halfway, you know."

Harper crossed her arms. "Micromanage much?" She moved her hands to her hips and waited.

Madison shot her a dirty look. Her lips thinned.

Janet chose not to make eye contact or look at her watch. She knew what time it was. Harper's Challenge and Madison's Martyr Routine commenced at this point during almost every production.

Charlie B whimpered.

Madison's voice rose. "You know, it would be really nice if everyone cared as much as I do about our success. Maybe if someone else would take the lead sometime, we'd get more done."

The air went strange and Janet stiffened in response. It felt heavy and charged like that moment before a massive storm hits, but it was so cold. Foggy plumes curled out of their mouths. Janet's skin broke out in goose bumps.

Madison twitched, but didn't lose momentum. "It isn't as if I actually like having to take all the responsibility. I..." She was cut off by an immense thundering crack, like a sonic boom. The sound hit them, rocked them. Hearts and breath stuttered and stumbled before tentatively grasping the edges of their rhythms once more.

Madison kept jittering, hopping like a drop of water thrown in a sizzling hot pan. A keening scream launched out of her throat. The pitch went higher and higher.

The laptop and their cellphones popped, fizzed, and died.

Charlie B howled.

And then Madison...

Blew apart.

One moment she was an uptight blonde and then she was nothing but loose red: a viscous, lurid squelch of blood and tissue.

It was the heavy slap of liquid hitting the floor that propelled Janet into motion. She didn't even think—she just reacted. Maybe it was from her Magick period, maybe it was something deeper, but her instinct said: protective circle. She used the only thing she had on hand. She twisted the top off the tube of lipstick, crouched down, and drew a large circle on the industrial gray linoleum. She waved over Harper and Che. "Get inside!"

Harper ran over. Her pale dreadlocks bounced, waving around her head as if they were alive. Tears streamed down her face, and her flip-flops slapped against her heels, creating a frantic beat.

Che remained fixed to the spot. He turned his head from side to side—his face blanched and went taut. “Guys? Where’s Madison?”

Janet was reeling, but the look of dumb shock and hope on his face made her throat clench. The loss would be the worst for him. Everyone knew he had it bad for Madison. It was a shame he’d never had the courage to admit his feelings and do something about it.

Che’s voice warbled when he spoke. “Can’t be gone. She’s so, she’s my, she’s such a—beautiful,” he swallowed and whispered, “leader.” Even now he dodged the truth. He rubbed his neck as if massaging away pain.

The pressure started to build again. Janet felt it, even inside the circle, and began to wave him over again.

Harper cried, “For fuck’s sake! She’s dead. Get over here. Now.”

The temperature rose ten, twenty, thirty degrees in seconds. Waves of sweat, sour with fear, slid out of their pores.

“Move, you dumbass, move!”

Che walked forward, but stopped a short distance from the circle. He took one last look at the floor. “Madison. We could have . . . saved the world together.” He shook his head ruefully and opened his mouth to speak again.

There was heat and a sense of motion.

Che’s next words were lost in a surprised gurgle. His head continued its twisting motion. It was forced around and around. The bones screeched and ground. There was a ludicrous pop and a meaty slurp as his head was torn off.

It hit the ground with a dull bony thud and bounced twice before awkwardly rolling another six feet or so. His body stood for a moment longer before collapsing into an undignified heap.

Janet stole a look at the head. Che’s eyes were jogging from side to side and his mouth kept moving. Janet tried not to read his lips, sure she’d lose her mind if she recognized real words. One side of his handlebar mustache was still rakishly twirled. The other drooped a bit under the weight of something orange and shiny.

Janet couldn’t stop staring at it. It was so familiar. Che’s lip twitched in a fierce spasm, this time with enough force to dislodge the object. It clattered to the floor and rocked back and forth for a second or two. Janet groaned. She recognized it as one of Madison’s fingernails. It was all that was left of her. She’d splurged on a manicure for their production. For her character, she’d said. As if it was somehow so shameful to want to do something nice for yourself.

Janet wished Madison had let herself relax more often. She’d seen a few glimpses of a softer side to her, but the demands of perfection had taken hold. Madison had driven herself through college like it was . . . life and death competition. Janet swallowed hard.

Harper and Janet clutched at one another, huddling close. Charlie B pressed up against their legs. A haze of shock settled in. Janet accepted the numbing caress with gratitude.

When it finally started to thin, Janet remembered to strip the dog of his costume. He thumped his tail twice as if in thanks.

She pulled out a Zippo and a pack of Natural American Spirit cigarettes from the pouch she'd removed. She was grateful they hadn't gone with the can of chewing tobacco. Gum or a snack would have been nice, but they'd packed to make a statement, not for an emergency.

They didn't know what else to do, so the surviving women sat in the circle and smoked, working their way methodically through the cache. It was better than facing what was outside the circle. Better than thinking about what had happened to their friends.

Charlie B curled up beside them. He must have found some comfort because he fell asleep. His breathing became deep and slow, but he jerked and twitched. Janet left him to whatever peace he could find.

She wasn't sure why the circle had kept them safe. For all she knew, it wasn't doing a damned thing, but the faint plum arc of Cruelty-Free cosmetic offered comfort. Janet knew they couldn't stay there forever, but for now she'd drawn a line and planned to stick by it.

Harper offered nothing. She stared into the middle distance, at the edges of darkness. Janet tried to prod her into conversation. "This is some epic tomfuckery, isn't it?"

Harper exhaled a plume of smoke. It hung in the air and then dissipated. She did not turn.

Janet wasn't getting anywhere there. She picked up the pack of smokes and pulled out the second to last. She lit it and inhaled. She turned the pack over and over in her hands. The headdress and peace pipe on the logo's figure caught her attention.

This situation defied logic, physics, and everything else she knew about the world. After trying a lot of different spiritual paths, Janet had become a public atheist and a private agnostic, but defaulted to the language of her upbringing. This was demonic. Hellish. Evil.

Who thought of this kind of stuff, anyway? She could only think of one other approach to this madness: horror movies. She perked up. Maybe they held some wisdom. She went through her mental catalogue of terrors and solutions, taboos and treaties, violations and messages. She looked at the pack again and an idea flickered and came to life.

Harper reached over, gently pulled out the last cigarette, and fired it up. She finally spoke. "You know that Che's real name was Rudy? Rudy Smith-Suarez. His dad's an orthodontist." She inhaled and exhaled. "Putz."

Harper took another long drag before grinding out the cigarette. She stood up and said, "Fuck this. I'm getting out of here."

The dog stirred and woke. He sat up, but stayed put.

Janet tried to stop her. "Wait! I've been thinking. Places like this are the focal point of incredible energy. There's so much hate for it, but so much loyalty and love too. The two sides are all amped up, so dead-set against everything it sees the other represents ... all that force has to go somewhere, right? Something had to break." She held up her hands in supplication. "It's too dangerous to risk."

"I don't care." Harper stepped outside the circle and began to walk to the door. "See? I'm fine. Follow along or don't. Your call."

Janet called after her. "Just listen! These stores are part of us all, like it or not. You said it yourself—people worship here. This is like their sacred ground, right? But it's all messed up, twisted. It's tainted by all kinds of bad vibes. You know, like in those movies when they build a subdivision

or a resort on a sacred Indian burial ground. You don't mess with . . . ” Janet cut herself off. That wasn't what she meant. She couldn't get her brain and tongue to articulate it right, could only speak in bad old movie tropes.

Harper stopped and responded reflexively, derisively, “Seriously, Janet? I'd have thought you, of all people, would be more sensitive.” She took another step forward. A hitch in her gait made it look like she was trying to walk off a sudden cramp.

Janet sat, stunned. The statement was so wrong, so cutting, but could Harper be right? Had she fallen into racism so easily? It was just that the logo had sparked a connection, and—Janet flushed and shook her head.

Harper sneered at what looked like Janet's incomprehension. “You don't even know, do you? You're so acclimated to the white hegemony that you're blind. It's Native American burial ground.” She took another halting step and shot back, “You are so bourgeois. And not to be racist or anything, but you are such a— ”

And just like that, it returned.

Janet saw a tear begin at the crotch of Harper's shorts. The girl screamed and there was an impossible yank and pull. Her clothes, hair, and skin were torn away as she was ripped in two. The left and right sides of her body tipped and fell neatly to the floor, dispersing their cargo in the center. Almost fourteen pounds of internal organs smacked to the ground, buoyed downward on a cascade of blood.

The pool flowed over to the circle, but stopped short of it. Janet leaned over its edge and emptied the contents of her stomach. It tasted like bitter bile and ashes. She wiped her mouth and began to sob.

Her dog nudged her, his cold nose digging into the crook of her neck. He licked her face once and then stepped out of the circle.

“Charlie, no!” She reached for him, but missed.

He padded around, dodging the gore, snuffling the ground. He looked at her expectantly. He wagged his tail and trotted away. He stopped when he reached the exit, turned, and barked. She could almost imagine what he was trying to say. “C'mon, Janet! C'mon. Good girl! You can do it.”

He stood and grinned, big tongue lolling out.

She thought about what she'd seen—about patterns, about the circle, and Charlie B. She stood.

Janet believed in the protective power of the circle like she believed that the brand of lipstick she'd chosen was right. Balancing eating meat with respect for animals wasn't easy. She liked to look pretty, but didn't condone inhumane testing. The decision was hard won, and she stood by her choice, knowing it was true to herself.

Janet took a deep but shaky breath and took a tentative step forward. She immediately felt a small dancing pressure, like the drumming taps of fingers, on her skin. She fought down panic and began to walk toward the door.

“I don't mean any harm.” She tried to control the pitch of her voice, but it was difficult to keep her breathing steady. She wanted to gulp in air. The prodding grew in intensity, like the fingers

had sprouted needles. They pressed against her flesh, not quite hurting, but she could feel the strength behind it.

She hoped there was some intelligence to be found in the force, some chance for mercy. “I’m Janet. The dog is Charles Barkowski. I thought the name was cool, but it started to feel kinda pretentious. I mostly call him Charlie B. He’s a great dog and I love him.” Some of the pressure eased.

Janet moved a bit faster and continued to talk. “I gotta say that I never knew horror films might come in handy. I watch them on the sly. I’m bored by a lot of art films. I can appreciate them, but they aren’t always much fun. I go because I want people to think I’m smart.” She kept walking, focusing on her dog waiting by the door. The taps seemed lighter to her, almost just a tickle.

As she passed the snack-bar she confessed, “I like organic whole foods most of the time, but sometimes I just want fried food on a stick. It reminds me of my childhood and it’s fun. I pretend I don’t eat that stuff because I don’t want people to think I’m tacky.” She felt the invisible fingers run through her hair. They pulled it just a touch, but not enough to cause pain. It was the potential for more that kept her fear wound tight.

She picked up her pace, but remained cautious. She didn’t know what running might trigger. “I like Jackson Pollock paintings though I have no idea what they’re supposed to be about. I just think they’re pretty. I love Sartre and Murakami.” The soles of her feet tingled.

She rode a wave of exhilaration forward. “But screw it! I also really like Nickelback. I know I’m not supposed to, but I do.” She began to sing one of their hits as she reached the exit. She laughed, touched the door, and walked outside, Charlie B at her heels.

Janet took a deep breath of the sweet outside air. The presence seemed to have gone. She felt almost weightless.

She’d have to think about what to do. Even if they’d not really summoned, provoked, or helped create whatever was in that place, she felt a responsibility.

She crouched down and gave the dog a big hug. “I’m going to be different from now on, Charlie B. No more taking the easy way out.”

The pressure returned, and Janet felt the bite of hundreds of razor sharp teeth. They barely broke the skin. Her next words came out in a desperate rush. “Wait. I’ll wimp out sometimes—screw up. I’ll do the best I can. I can stay true to who I am.” She closed her eyes tight.

The sensation went away.

Janet stood there in the dark another few minutes before moving on. The cold stung her pinprick wounds, but she didn’t really feel them. She hadn’t yet registered that she was covered from head to toe with tiny beads of blood.

“Let’s go, Charlie B.”

The dog sneezed, shook his body as if he was trying to dislodge water, and then bounded to the car. Janet followed.

She was sure change could come. Janet believed most people want to do the right thing, want to be reasonable and honest. They just need a reminder every once in a while.

The Machine

By Travis Gunn

Marilyn woke up cold and sore. Her muscles were stiff and a dull pain throbbed just beneath the surface of her skull. She moved to massage her temples but found herself restrained.

Marilyn blinked the world into view, her vision blurred at the edges. Her confusion clarified as she realized the situation in which she found herself. She had been tied to a chair, the rope which bound her to the seat thin and taut. Her hands were clasped together behind her at the small of her back, bound together at the wrists by some sort of sharp plastic that dug into her skin.

Her confusion evolved into panic. She looked around the room, strands of black hair momentarily obscuring her vision and getting caught in her open mouth.

"Hello?" Her throat was dry and the word hurt. "Hello? Is anybody there?" Her voice was cracked and weak. Unused.

She twisted as much as possible in the chair. It was not a large room. Four walls, a floor, and a ceiling. All a gray cement. She shivered as the cold numbed her bare feet. In the corner was a metal object that hummed. It was a large, rectangular box that stood a few feet higher than Marilyn if she were to stand. It rose not too far from the ceiling. The box's plating was a dark silver, punctuated by white and yellow buttons scattered across its lengthwise side.

The box captured Marilyn's attention for only a few moments before the voice spoke.

"You're awake." A hoarse scream escaped Marilyn. The voice did not appear to originate from anywhere. It seemed to be everywhere.

"You're awake. Good." The voice was mechanical and augmented to a much too low pitch. "Good." Marilyn twisted around as much as she could, the ropes digging into clothes and flesh. There was a mirror on the wall behind her.

"Hey!" She tried to keep twisting, but to no avail. "Hey, let me out of here!"

She returned to a forward facing position and the bindings no longer burned. A moment passed and then, realizing what to do, she started pushing her feet against the floor so as to pivot the chair on one of its legs. The chair was much heavier than Marilyn had thought. Or perhaps she was weaker than she had realized. But she managed to accomplish her goal, having spun the chair around in a half moon trajectory. She now faced the wall with the mirror, although she was no longer situated in the center of the room and was much closer to the wall opposite the metal box.

Marilyn looked at herself in the reflection. The figure who returned her stare was gaunt and haggard. How long had she been out? Her nightshirt was worn and the white and pink design of

her pajama pants was blotched with grime. That was the last thing she remembered: changing into these clothes. She had been in her room at home. It had not been late, but she was going to have an early morning the next day. It was all very important, but the details were hazy. Had she been drugged?

"Marilyn." Her muscles involuntarily jerked at her name and she was once more in the here and now. "I need you to focus."

"Who are you? Where am I?" She didn't care that the words felt like glass against her throat. The pain was present and real, but muted. She had definitely been drugged. She began struggling against her restraints and the bindings felt like knives slicing into her skin. The voice was silent. Several minutes passed but Marilyn made no progress.

"I want to help you, Marilyn." Marilyn stopped struggling. "I want to help you, Marilyn. But I need you to touch the machine." She looked up into the mirror and stared back at the reflection. She narrowed her eyes in confusion, her brow furrowed into a frown. "I need you to touch the machine, Marilyn." Then, in the corner of the mirror, the metal box caught her eye. The machine continued to hum.

Marilyn looked back into her own eyes, trying to peer through to the other side. She remained completely still, allowing the room to fill up on her silence. Her mind tried to break through its fog, but her thoughts were slow.

"Fine." Maybe an opening would present itself. "I'll do it. Just get me out of these." There was no response. "Well? I don't know how else you want me to do this." She thought she could feel the machine's vibrations through the floor.

Her memory sparked and she remembered the flat coolness of the hardwood floors in her own home. They had vibrated too, that evening. There had been a low and steady roar that had grown increasingly close. Panic had set in. She had been discovered. Her whole bedroom shook as the roar became deafening. A brilliant whiteness had pierced her windows and illuminated the room. Everything became overexposed.

"Behind you. To your left." Marilyn returned to the voice and twisted in her seat. The rope's teeth had a familiar bite. "The wall near the floor."

At first, there was nothing to see. But then her eyes adjusted to the monochromatic gray and she could see a blade wedged in-between two cement blocks just inches above where the back wall met the floor. Marilyn turned back around. "What?" She took another look behind her. "How am I supposed to reach that?" Her question went unanswered.

"Fine." Marilyn pushed her feet against the floor and maneuvered the chair into another half moon semicircle. It was more difficult than before, and the chair's complaints reverberated off the cement. But she made it. Her back to the mirror, Marilyn could now reach out and touch the side wall if she could just lift her arms. She stared at the back wall, the short distance a daunting obstacle, considering her situation.

Thoughts flashed behind Marilyn's eyes. She tried shuffling the chair forward. No success. She next started shifting her weight from one side to the other, and soon the chair was rocking on its legs from side to side. Finally, the chair toppled over away from the wall with a meaty smack. Marilyn had braced for the impact, but it did little to lessen the blunt pain that raced through her shoulder and down her arm. The drugs were wearing off.

Marilyn moved back and forth, and the momentary flash of how absurd she must look caused her to grimace. It was the best smile she could muster. It appeared that the wooden chair had splintered at its joints, so there was some cause to have hope. With effort, she managed to twist her upper body away from the seat while kicking away the bottom half of the chair.

She took a moment to catch her breath, staring up at the ceiling. She was still bound to the back of the chair, the even slats providing some comfort so that she wasn't resting entirely on her

hands. Marilyn waited for her breathing to return to normal. Just how long she had been kept out to be reduced to such a weakened state? She had been so strong in her last moments. So prepared. She had no easy task before her, but she had trained her mind and body to ensure victory.

She couldn't remember if she had trained for this. For the possibility of discovery. For the inevitability. A memory of distrust manifested, but it was vague and distant.

Marilyn's vision sharpened and two speakers came into focus overhead, bookending a single florescent light, thin and uncovered. She tried clenching her fists but her fingers ached. She couldn't wait any longer. A sharp groan escaped her as she tried rolling over, the wide back of the chair making it difficult. She tried several more times, using the momentum of rocking back and forth to her advantage. Then, finally, enough force was on her side and she was rolling over onto her stomach. A sharp crack accompanied the movement, one of the chair slats splitting from the combination of weight and pressure. Wood dug into her lower back and a jagged pain crawled down her legs, but she kept the momentum going and continued rolling back-to-stomach-to-back until she reached the back wall.

Reaching the wall while on her stomach, she stopped to once again catch her breath. She rested her cheek against the cold cement, a steady vibration lulling her away.

"Marilyn!" She jerked awake. She looked up at the mirror, but nothing further was said.

She looked back to the wall. The blade had been forced into the cement, some sort of sealant keeping it in place. At this distance Marilyn recognized the saw's design, its jagged teeth raised upwards. Bits of fiber and cloth were still caught, the sheen dulled with age and stained with use. She struggled against the rope, its grip loosened by the fracturing of the chair, and shifted her weight to a shoulder, managing to roll up and back so that she was in a kneeling position. She rolled her shoulders and torso, writhing against the ropes, and the chair fractured more. The destruction built upon itself, so that the more the chair splintered the easier it crumbled. Before long, the rope became slack and drooped along her midsection.

Her knees were already sore, and walking on them towards the back wall forced a high pitched complaint out of her. But she was determined, and positioned herself alongside the saw blade with focused care. Holding her arms out behind her, she found the blade with her hands and began the slow process of cutting the plastic binding on her wrists.

When the plastic finally snapped, Marilyn gave a soft cry of joy. She brought her hands before her, alternatively rubbing her wrists and slowly stretching and clenching her fingers. Then, carefully, she rose to her feet, her knees popping. The rope fell away, harmless. Her back sharpened and her shoulders convulsed forward to relieve the pain. Reaching behind her, her fingers tentatively explored the area. Marilyn pulled a splintered piece of wooden chair out from the wound and held it before it. She grimaced, the exposed break in the wood stained a muddied red. She let the wooden shard drop from her grip.

"Good. Very good, Marilyn." She ignored the mirror. "I knew you could do it. Now, just touch the machine. Touch the machine, Marilyn, and I can help you."

She grimaced as she knelt back on the floor. She grabbed a hold of the saw by its flat underbelly, unsuccessfully attempting to pull the blade out. Giving it a moment's thought, she then tried forcing the blade up and down. The caulking keeping it in place was new and cracked easily. She made steady progress, and soon the blade came free. She grabbed onto the flat base that had been stained white and cut off one of her pajama legs at the shin. Wrapping the fabric around the larger end of the blade, she held the weapon in her hand confident that it would do more damage to another than herself.

Marilyn walked to the mirror, stopping inches from the glass. It appeared to have been built into the wall itself, starting at her hips and reaching all the way up into the ceiling. She tapped the saw against the glass and pulled downwards, the teeth failing to leave their mark.

"Marilyn, please."

She turned around and reassessed the room. Four walls, a floor, and a ceiling. All a gray cement. A mirror behind her. Obviously more than a simple reflection. A metal box in the back right corner. Speakers and a light in the ceiling. Remnants of the chair strewn across the right-side wall. But no doors.

No doors. She walked along the edges of the room, studying the cement blocks. She made a wide circle around the metal box and continued her search. Returning to the mirror, she looked once again around the room and then, satisfied, walked up to the box.

She stopped at arm's length. Up close, shades of a dark, royal blue swirled and mixed with the metal paneling's overriding silver. The machine's hum was much more noticeable at this distance. She looked over the two rows of unmarked buttons on the machine's lengthwise face, their white and yellow sequence without a pattern. The machine wasn't flush with the wall.

Marilyn bit down on her lower lip. She pressed up against the wall and peered behind the box's short end. Cement bricks. She walked around the machine and peered behind the lengthwise side. More bricks—and something else. It was hard to discern in the shadow, but she was certain that a rectangular outline was carved into the wall. A doorway.

She stepped away from the machine. "Marilyn, there isn't much time."

"Ask me again." No response. She looked at the mirror. "I said, Ask. Me. Again."

Silence.

And then: "Marilyn. Touch the machine."

She lifted a hand up to the machine, fingers together, palm forward. Just inches from the metal, the vibrations hummed through the air. There was energy here. Power. She wrapped her fingers in, making a fist with her thumb sticking out. She reached around to push the closest button with her thumb.

"No!" The panic was unmistakable. "No, not a button. Not a button, Marilyn. Not a button. The machine, Marilyn. Touch the machine. Don't press a button." She kept her thumb on the button's plastic covering, looking back to the mirror. "Please, Marilyn. For the love of God, Marilyn. Please. Let me help you. Do this and I can help you."

Marilyn's grip tightened on the saw blade. She stared into the reflection. "Fuck you." Her thumb pressed into the button.

The machine sounded an alarm, a high-pitched monotone note wailing from its internal workings. Marilyn backed away. Movement caught her eye and her attention returned to the mirror. That glass was traveling upwards, back into the ceiling, revealing a small room on the other side of the wall.

For a moment, Marilyn failed to comprehend what she was seeing. Another mirror?

No. Instead, there sat Marilyn. She was strapped into a metal chair, cuffs chaining her arms to the seat. Some sort of control panel stretched out before her, a microphone reaching up to her lips. The Marilyn behind the desk pressed a button and spoke into the microphone, instinctual.

"Oh God, no. No. No! Touch the machine, Marilyn! Please! Please! Touch the fucking machine!" The augmented voice blared out from above, but that natural voice was no longer blocked by the mirror. It was weak and scared but undeniably familiar.

Marilyn couldn't remember how to breathe. She staggered forward, staring at herself behind the control panel. She drank in the sight before her and truly looked at herself. This Marilyn was thin and weak. Her skin clung to bone, and her eyes seemed to bulge. Her hair had thinned and stuck to her skull in wet clumps. She was wearing the same shirt and pants that Marilyn had worn that night. Was wearing. A high pitched whine emanated from the small control room and Marilyn's figure began to convulse. Her eyes rolled back and spit and drool foamed at her mouth.

A door in the control room swung open. A man walked through, held up a gloved hand to the back of Marilyn's head, and a muffled pop sounded beneath the alarm. A mist of red sprayed out from behind her ear, and she fell over in her chair onto the control panel.

Marilyn was lightheaded. She rushed forward, pressing her full body up against the wall beside the mirror's opening so that the man had no line of sight. Her actions felt sluggish, as if she was underwater. She cocked her head to the side, trying to hear beyond the machine's alarm.

After a few moments a body was rolled out the open window. It fell to the cement floor with heaviness and finality. It was the other Marilyn. She was dead. Marilyn squeezed the saw blade and her muscles tightened. She waited.

There were voices, but she couldn't hear what they were saying. Finally, one called out. "If you stab me with that thing I will shoot you in the face." It was male. He sounded young. "I need you to tell me you heard me."

Marilyn quickly glanced around empty room and then looked back to the body. Her chest heaved.

"I need you to tell me you understand. Otherwise, I'm just going to kill you." She clasped her other hand around the thick hilt of the blade and held the weapon up to her chest. "Fine."

"I understand." Her voice was a whisper.

"Say again?"

She willed herself to speak louder. "I understand." The words were dry, but even and calm. That was good.

"What do you understand?"

"No stabbing." A moment passed.

"Good enough."

A leg came into view, and then the other. Marilyn pressed herself as far as she could into the wall. The rest of his figure then slid out from the opening. He dropped to the floor and, ignoring the body he straddled with his feet, looked around and settled his attention on Marilyn.

He wasn't the one with the gun. He was much younger, and had more weight to him. She held his gaze until, finally, he looked down towards the body. Paying Marilyn no further attention, the boy wrapped his arms under the body's shoulders, and dragged the corpse over to the machine.

"Alright, you can cut it." He looked past her, talking to the open window. The machine's alarm was cut, and only silence remained. It took Marilyn a moment to realize that it was real, true silence. Not even the machine's hum continued. The boy nodded and then grabbed ahold of the metal box, pulling the machine out away from the wall and exposing the door.

Marilyn moved carefully along the front wall until she reached the opening where the mirror had been. Certain that the boy was focused more on his work than her, she peered around the edge to look into the control room.

There he was. The man with the gun. He stared at her, gun in hand, held casually at his waist and pointed right at her. He returned her stare, but no expression crossed his face. She retreated, back still pressed against the wall, so that she could no longer see the man and he could no longer see her.

The boy had opened the door behind the machine and was dragging the body through the exit. Flickers of hot red light brightened the scene as he moved into the next room. He vanished and sounds of metal scraping against itself broke the silence. Several minutes later he returned into view, flushed and sweating. He shut the door behind him and returned the machine to its place. She heard a click in the control office and the metal hum resumed.

Marilyn's mind was racing. She knew that her window of opportunity was diminishing. But opportunity to do what?

The boy reached the window and hoisted a leg up. This was it, then. Marilyn rushed forward, jabbing the blade repeatedly into the boy as she positioned herself behind him. His figure jerked about as the metal pierced clothing and skin, stabbing first through his raised leg and then his side and then deep into his back. Marilyn's other arm wrapped around his chest, holding him against her. The sudden fury of attack must have caught him unaware, and his weight became heavy as his life drained.

The man in the control room stared at her without surprise or emotion at this turn of events. The gun stayed leveled at the two of them. Marilyn struggled to keep the boy standing, to keep herself shielded. But it was too much, and she was too weak. She let the boy fold forward on himself and fall into a heap on the floor. She waited, but the man did not fire.

"You're going to drop the weapon." It wasn't a command, but an observation of fact. She nodded. The blade fell to the floor.

He stepped back, leaving plenty of room between him and the control panel. "Now you're going to climb through." She complied, moving forward and pushing herself headfirst through the opening. She slid forward over the panel and, reaching the edge, swung her body around so that she landed feet first.

"Sit." She stared back at the man. He wasn't going to be taken by surprise, not like the boy. This was a routine for him. "Sit. Down. I won't repeat myself again." She knew he was telling the truth. This was another choice, perhaps her last opportunity. Sit or die. She chose.

Marilyn sat in the chair. He moved forward and, with a knowing expertise, quickly had her cuffed to the chair. He pressed a round, black button near the top left of the control panel. Far beyond what the restraints would allow her to reach. The mirror was released from the ceiling and slowly dropped down to seal the opening. Peering through the two-way glass, the entire room became a dark, monotone silver.

He moved to the other side of her, and pressed a round, red button near the top right of the control panel. Once again well beyond her reach. An opening appeared in the left-side wall, and a door swung outwards. So she had missed an exit after all. Another man appeared and began gathering up the pieces of the wooden chair and rope and binding that Marilyn had destroyed. He removed those artifacts and another wooden chair was brought in, placed in the center of the room and facing away from the mirror. He found the blade and returned it to the small crevasse in the back wall, taking no real effort to make sure that it was secured. The man then collected the boy and exited.

Several minutes passed, and Marilyn looked back to her captor. He was ignoring the room, staring only at her. When she looked back to the glass, the other man had returned. He was dragging in another body, his arms wrapped under her shoulders. With a smooth transition, the woman was dropped into the chair and the man began binding the figure. He pulled her arms behind her, tying her hands together. A rope's coils were then spun around her midsection, binding her to the back of the chair.

The man checked his work with a few quick tugs and then gave the mirror a thumb's up. He retrieved a needle from a breast pocket and jabbed it into the figure's forearm with clinical precision. He then left the room and closed the door behind him. The red button on the top right of the control panel clicked outwards as the door shut. The wall was once again flat and unbroken. Four walls, a floor, and a ceiling. No doors.

Her captor moved forward, standing beside her. He holstered his weapon.

"Alright, Replacement." He looked at her. "You get them to touch the machine. If they touch the machine, your pain stops until the next Replacement. If they press a button, they take your place. That's it." He went for the exit.

"Wait!" He stopped. "Wait. What? What is this? Why?"

The man turned to her and emotion actually flashed across his face. Confusion. "You really ought to have expected this."

She tried to restart her memory, but it was blotted out in shadow and blackness. "What? No. I'm not--. No. That wasn't me!" The man's features resumed their neutral passivity. He was beyond her pleas.

"Just do as you're told, and all will be forgiven." He exited, and the door shut behind him. Marilyn was left in near darkness, the dull light from the adjacent room barely illuminating the panel before her.

* * *

The woman behind the glass pushed a round, green button on the control panel, and moved forward so that her lips pressed gently against the microphone. The chair's inflicted pain had already shifted upwards from its base level, but the woman had long ago learned to use the pain as a weapon.

"Marilyn. Marilyn, I want you to wake up."

The figure beyond the glass slowly stirred. The woman watched as Marilyn came to her senses and looked around the room in panic.

"No. No. None of that, Marilyn. It's okay. I'm here with you." Marilyn's shoulders were heaving. "It's okay. I'm behind you." Marilyn twisted around. She stared into the mirror, pain contorting her features. "Yes. Here I am." This Marilyn made quick work of it, pushing the chair around in a tight semicircle so that she faced the mirror. "I want to help you. I do. But first, I need to know what you remember."

"Who are you?" Marilyn's words were muffled, but understandable. "Where am I?" She was screaming. Veins bulged in her neck.

"None of that. I'm not going to lie to you." The pain increased another level. "I'm not going to lie to you, Marilyn. You wouldn't understand if I told you who I am. I have to show you. And I will. But I am your friend." Marilyn was shaking her head. "You don't have to believe me. I can earn your trust."

"But first. First, tell me what you remember." Marilyn furrowed her brow and opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

The pain increased another level. "Marilyn, please."

"I don't remember! I don't remember anything!" Her voice was cracking.

"No, no. Don't worry about that. That's okay, Marilyn. That's okay. Not everyone does. We can work through this." Marilyn began to shift in her chair, struggling against her bindings.

"Yes, that's it. Trust me, we can work through this. We can get you out of there. All I need for you to do, though, is touch the machine."

Marilyn looked up from her struggles, her eyes wide and face wet. Disgust struck the woman. Marilyn looked pathetic, so willing to grasp at this possibility of hope. Too bad about this one's memories. Perhaps the next would be of more use.

"It's okay, Marilyn. I can get you out of there."

The woman behind the glass had learned how to survive. She could feed the machine as much as it needed. And at the end of things, she would be forgiven. She was certain of it. She just had to learn what exactly had been her transgressions. Then, and only then, would the machine give absolution.

"Just touch the machine."

Green Things Grow in the Spring

By Phil Richardson

The Dongles were tiny when they first appeared on the Williams farm—no bigger than a pinhead. Most people didn't see them even when they appeared alongside the grass in lawns or in potted plants. More importantly, no one noticed that they had hands with opposing thumbs and a mouth full of very sharp teeth. Weeds don't get much attention.

The grazing animals noticed them almost immediately and they avoided eating them; if what you are chewing bites back, then you tend not to chew on it anymore. This meant, of course, that the cows and horses and goats and whatever couldn't graze in the pastures and they began to go hungry.

Greg Williams--the owner of the small farm where the Dongles first appeared--and his brother Bob, saw their milk cow, Blondie, was getting thinner and wasn't chewing her cud. Blondie just stood around, as cows will, and mooed and bawled and made other obnoxious sounds. Since Blondie wouldn't graze in the pasture, Bob had to go to the feed store and buy expensive grain not only to keep her from starving, but also to stop her making so much noise,

"Something is seriously wrong," Greg said to Bob. "Something has happened in the pasture and we have to find out what it is. Do you think it might be that new fertilizer you invented?"

"It couldn't be my fertilizer. I only used normal ingredients except for that powdery stuff I found in the storeroom and I think that was just nitrogen. If there's any investigating to be done, it will have to be me, I guess," Bob said. "You're about as close to being a Sherlock Holmes as I am to being a millionaire."

Bob went out and bought a magnifying glass so he could "investigate" the grass in the pasture. He got two surprises; the first was that when he plucked one of the weeds he got bitten; the second was that when he looked closely at one in his magnifying glass, he saw the weed had a face and hands. He felt like the thing was peering back at him as he observed it through the lens—so much so that he reared back slightly in his chair before he resumed staring.

"Damndest thing," he told Greg. "We've got a new species of plant and it looks like that's why the animals won't eat the grass in the pasture. Probably tastes bad. It sure is ugly."

"Well," Greg said, "if we've discovered a new plant, we get the honor of naming it. It's weird looking and we need a weird name."

"Where did you get that 'we've discovered,' Bob asked. "I discovered it so I get to name it. I choose 'Dongle'."

"I guess you're right. Okay, Dongle it is. Now you take care of telling somebody about it since "you discovered" them.

Bob called an agriculture specialist he knew at the state office and she responded that he should lay off Greg Williams' hard cider.

"See what it does to your brain," she said. "Now you're imagining plants with faces and hands. Next thing you know, they'll grow feet and start walking around. "

Which they could and they did.

They also grew a bit. Bob wasn't sure how they got nourishment but he did notice that the numbers of ants and beetles in the fields dropped and all the mice seemed to be gone from the barn.

"It's a good thing they can't fly," Greg said to his friend. "If they could they'd probably start eating bats and birds."

Which they could and they did.

Even some of the larger farm animals seemed scared of the Dolgens and the cows would hardly leave the barn. They paced nervously back and forth in their stalls and snorted and huffed and puffed whenever a Dolgen came near.

After a month there were hordes of Dolgens. They had grown to about the size of rabbits and seemed to be able to eat anything. Only the fastest birds evaded them and all the small animals were either eaten or had fled the area.

"I guess hunting is not going to be very good this fall," Bob said.

"Not unless you want to hunt Dolgens," Greg answered.

As it turned out that wouldn't be possible either.

Fall arrived and at the first sign of frost all the Dolgens disappeared. It was obvious where they had gone because there were holes about the size of rabbit holes all over the open fields.

"Damndest thing," Bob said. "A hibernating plant. I never heard of such a thing and I've been studying plants for years."

I guess we've got a few things to learn about Dolgens," Greg replied.

As it turned out, they did.

Spring came and with it the rains. The Dolgen holes all filled up with water and both Bob and Greg complained about the danger of stepping in one of those holes because they were really deep and you could break a leg. They kept Blondie in the barnyard most of the time so she wouldn't get injured.

When the rains stopped, the new Dolgens appeared. They were now four feet tall and they came out of their holes in the ground like rubber snakes from a magician's hat--flying up into the air about six feet and then landing adroitly on their amply sized feet.

"Never seen nothing like it," Bob said to Greg. "Look at them eyes; they're purple and they look like there's some brain behind them. They're almost as tall as you."

"Did you notice the blue teeth," Greg said. "I never saw teeth on a plant before and I sure never saw pointy teeth like that."

"Might be a good idea to keep a gun handy if you go outdoors," Bob said as he pushed his way through a crowd of Dolgens. "I'm not real sure what they are going to eat now that all the wildlife is gone."

As it turned out, the Dolgens knew.

Bob and Greg had a bunch of laying hens that they depended on for the eggs they ate for breakfast. The first thing that disappeared was the eggs and then, the hens. Feathers and beaks and scrawny legs were all that was left in the chicken coop.

"I wonder what they're gonna eat now that the chickens are gone?" Greg said to Bob as he looked at the empty coop.

They found out the next morning. Bob went to the barn to milk the Blondie, and found an empty stall except for the cow hobbles, which had kept Blondie from kicking while she was being milked. They were lying on the floor in the straw but every scrap of the cow was gone. The oats in the feeding trough were gone too and it looked like an effort had been made to break into the feed bin but Bob had locked it.

"All right, Greg," Bob said as he burst into the kitchen. "This is war!"

"What's up?" Greg asked.

"Those damn Dolgens have eaten our cow! Now we got no milk and no eggs because they ate the chickens too. What are we going to eat?"

"How about Dolgens?" Greg asked.

Bob stopped pacing and scratched his head. "Well, it's worth a try."

With that the two men grabbed their shotguns from the hall closet and headed out the door.

As it turned out, shotguns were not too effective against Dolgens. If a shot blew them in half, they just grew back together again. The booming noise of the shotguns did seem to bother them, however, as they put their little hands over their little ears when the shooting began.

"Damndest thing," Bob said as he rested his gun against the fence. "Those critters won't stay dead."

"I noticed that but did you see that they really got annoyed when we began firing?"

"Can you annoy a plant?" Greg asked.

As it turned out, you could.

The Dolgens suddenly surrounded them and Dolgen hands reached out to grab their guns and then the hands pushed and shoved them toward the barn. Although the men were stronger, there were just too many Dolgens. They fastened the cow hobbles to Bob and Greg's ankles and then left them.

"I guess they're not hungry now," Bob said. "Blondie was a pretty big cow."

"Maybe," Greg said, "but they'll be back."

Bob looked at his brother and asked, "Do you suppose a plant have a taste for humans? Could they eat us?"

They could and they did.

Not Rats at All...

By John Earnhart

Dab was looking out his window into the back yard when the sun finally broke over the line of trees that separated his lot from his neighbors. The sky had slowly grown from pitch black to a soft purple before finally becoming the gunmetal gray haze that now sat over his neighbor's pig sty of a yard like a halo. In the center, was a foggy looking sun, still shining through the morning's low altitude pollutants. It made the Thornbury's place look like some kind of trash heap heaven.

Something caught his eye in his own back yard. Movement somewhere in the grass close to the tree line. Maybe a cat, he thought. Or a dog.

"Or a rat," he said to himself before sipping his coffee. He'd been putting off mowing the grass for almost a month. It started when his mower threw a blade out the side of his deck in spectacular fashion back in July. That had taken a couple weeks to repair: one week to wait for a fresh paycheck, another for the repair down at Stockman's. After that, it had just been too damn *hot!*

"You'll need to start soon if you wanna get a jump on that heat," said his wife, Carol, scooting through the kitchen in her robe and slippers. "They're calling for 104 degrees today." She made her own coffee – it was coffee in name only; it was really a chocolate drink mix with a ton of caffeine in it – and went back into the bedroom to finish getting ready for work.

Dab looked back out to the yard and sighed. 104 degrees. Awesome. It was probably already about 90 or so out there then. He thought maybe that had been the low last night. He gritted his teeth a little and chugged the last of his coffee, letting it burn his throat on the way down. He needed to get a move on if he planned on getting the jump on the yard.

He walked Carol out to her car. She wore jeans and a screen print t-shirt with Jimmy Hendrix on it. She kissed Dab on the cheek, "Enjoy your day off. Wish I got one." She slid into her Camaro. Dab leaned in and kissed her on top of her head, "Benefits of federal employment, love."

"Remember that next time you get furloughed."

Well, he didn't really have anything to counter that with. He waved goodbye but left the garage door open after she'd pulled out. He picked up a red, plastic gas can in the corner of the garage and started for his Cub.

After topping off the tank, Dab checked the oil and the tires. He started to take the air filter off to clean it and stopped. *You're stalling.*

So he stood there. Staring. He sighed again and looked the mower over. His parents had bought it for him two years ago and it had been a good mower, but the damn mower deck was an absolute bitch to work on and maintain. Belts, bearings, blades. Every year it needed more of them and they were expensive. Belts alone were \$80. Blades were another \$80. It made him feel cheap to bitch so much about money but Carol was right, he *had* been furloughed for three months during the Spring.

He thought of his grandpa. He used to save money by fixing everything himself; usually with only a flathead screwdriver and a hammer. That meant the issue only *sometimes* got fixed and probably not that well even then.

Looking out at his insanely overgrown yard, he thought of the time his parents had lived in a trailer out in Prattsville. Their yard had grown up too much once as well and giant rats had moved in because of it. They liked the thick cover for protection against the hawks and owls in the trees.

One time, his dad put out poison for the rats. Later that same month, his grandpa decided to do his son-in-law a favor and mow his ridiculously tall grass for him. It had been a hot summer just like the one Dab was dealing with now. His grandpa started out mowing the yard around the trailer but didn't get but about ten minutes into the job before hitting the first dead rat. His mower deck ate it up with a series of dull *thump-thump-thump!* sounds. After keeling over, the rats had been baking in the sun for weeks. The smell – along with that horrible *thump*-ing sound – eventually caused his grandpa to stop and throw up about every couple passes.

It was a story Dab had heard since he was a kid. His dad would tell it in the truck and Dab and his father would laugh hysterically while his mother wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Dabney Eric, that's not funny," his mother would say. But his father only had to glance at him in the rear view mirror before they both started off again, laughing all the way to church or the grocery store.

Dab smiled and climbed onto the mower.

It was slow going. He started out by the highway and began working his way back up to the house. In all, Dab's lot was over three and a half acres. It normally took about four hours to mow it. Today would take maybe six because the grass was so tall. He wondered if a bush hog wouldn't be a better idea; his dad had one, it went behind their old John Deere tractor. He decided to just keep on and do it himself. If he asked his dad, his dad would just come out there and do it all himself. Dab didn't want to bother his dad, who was trying to transition into retirement that year – it hadn't been going well.

He turned a corner and saw movement again to his right. *Rats?* No, this was further out and, besides, he could plainly see that it was his neighbors' kids. Two boys and a girl. They liked to

use his yard as a ball field. It always made him feel like a dick, but Dab would have to run them off. His yard was full of holes left over from when the land was developed back in 2004. A lot of old pines once grew there and when they were cut down and dug up, the holes remained. Dab and Carol always worried about one of the kids tripping in a hole and breaking their ankle. The thought of a resulting lawsuit didn't sound great, either.

He turned off the PTO and started off that way. The oldest boy, he knew, was about nineteen. He had long, stringy hair that hung over his shoulders. Pimples dimpled his forehead and chin. He'd graduated high school back in May but was still living off his parents. He saw Dab pulling up on the mower and rolled his eyes.

"Hey," Dab said, shutting his mower off, "There's holes out here and—"

"Yeah," said the oldest boy, "we know, you've told us. Holes from the old trees, we'll get hurt, blah, blah, blah. We know!"

"Then what are you doing out here?" Dab felt his face getting hot. He began to breathe deeply, trying to calm down. *Just keep calm, don't blow up on these kids.*

"We're playing ball," said a younger boy. He was skinny as a rail and his head was shaved. He wore an Avenged Sevenfold shirt with the sleeves cut off and blue jean shorts. "Wanna play with us?"

Dab whiplashed back into feeling like a dick. "I'm sorry, guy," he said, "I'm mowing today. You guys really don't need to be out here. I'm gonna be mowing all over."

The girl – maybe eleven years old, freckled face framed in dirty blonde hair – said, "Come on, Billy, we can go play Xbox."

Billy, the oldest, looked from the girl to Dab, "When will you be done mowing?"

"What does it matter?"

"Because we'll come back then."

Before Dab could say anything, he saw the younger boy in the Avenged Sevenfold shirt peeing with his back to them. A car on the highway honked as it passed by. The boy looked over at it and started to finish up; two shakes and zip!

Dab noticed Billy staring at him, *Well?*

"No," he said, "and you guys know why."

"You're not our dad, you know," said the younger boy in an innocent enough tone, "I don't think you can tell us to not be here." He put a hand over his eyes and squinted at Dab.

Dab took a breath again and tried to not blow up on them, "Son, I own this yard. It's mine. I hate to be the grumpy old man here, but you guys could get hurt playing out here."

"And then we could sue you," Billy said. He sniffed and ran a hand through his oily hair.

The girl was starting back towards their yard, "I'm leaving! I'll be inside playing Pokemon." The younger boy took a step in her direction and looked back to Billy, "Come on, Billy, I don't want to play anymore. That's my Pokemon game and I don't want her using it. She erased my saves last time." He started off after her at a trot.

That left Billy. He stared at Dab and then leaned over and spit a pearly-white loogie into the grass. "Your yard sucks anyway. When was the last time you mowed it?" He turned and started to walk back then.

“Hey,” Dab called out. Already, his mind was on Red Alert, *Stop! Danger ahead! Reconsider! Reconsider!* But it didn’t happen. Dab got off his mower and walked towards the kid, “If you wanna play ball and piss and shit in your own yard, you go right ahead. But you do it in *your* yard. If you want a ball field, tell your daddy to buy one of his own.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you!”

Billy looked up to Dab’s garage and said, “You got a lot of nice stuff up in that big garage of yours. It’d be a shame if any of it up and walked off.”

Dab had to remind himself to unclench his fists, this was getting out of hand... but still, he went on with it, “Yeah, you try to steal some of my shit and you’ll be the first name I give to the cops.”

“My uncle’s a deputy. You know how many times I’ve already got off? Besides, maybe I’ll just trip in one of these holes instead. Maybe pull a muscle in my neck or something. This grass is pretty tall, it’s kinda hard to see where those holes are at. Sounds like negligence to me.”

The kid knew what negligence meant. Huh.

“I’m calling the cops and reporting this. You try pulling that after I report this conversation. It won’t hold up.”

“Oh, you’re gonna call Uncle Fred?”

“Yes, motherfucker, I am!” Dab hopped on his mower and headed back towards his house. His hands were shaking and he was trying to remember to breathe.

At the garage, he shut the mower off and looked back to the tree line. Billy was standing there. Dab started to go inside but stopped when he saw Billy flipping him the bird with both hands.

“My name?” Dab held the cordless phone in the crook of his neck. His hands were busy writing down whatever info he felt he needed to remember. “Dabney Solomon. Dabney. Yeah, like that guy. No, I haven’t seen Short Time in ages.”

The phone call to Granite County Sheriff’s Department amounted to a lot of nothing but he felt better knowing that it had been documented that the kid had threatened him. In the end, the lady in dispatch said they’d send someone over to talk to Billy, but Dab doubted that would happen.

“Next time, though,” she’d told him, “Just call us first and we’ll pick him up for trespassing. Be sure and post some ‘No Trespassing’ signs first though.”

He put the phone down and glanced out the window. The sun was now high up in the sky, casting little to no shadows. Dab looked over at the clock; eleven-thirty. “Shit!”

Back on the mower, Dab tried to pick up the pace a little. The mower deck couldn’t quite keep up but anything was better than nothing. He pressed on and kept an eye on Billy’s house. *Just try to get in my garage to steal stuff, buddy. I’ve got a Remington 870 I’d like to show you.*

He turned the big Cub towards the back tree line and began to work his way to the other side of the yard. Running parallel to the trees, he looked over into Billy’s yard. He counted at least three old cars up on cinder blocks: an old third generation Camaro, a 90s model S-10 and an 80s

model Blazer. All of their hoods were up, leaving the engines exposed to rain and the sun. Patches of rust covered the Camaro and a tree was growing up through the bed of the S-10. The Blazer had it the worst. It looked as though it had had a decent fire sometime in its history. Its doors were missing and the coil springs in the seat were exposed, and rusted, of course.

Somewhere past the cars, up on the back porch, an older Kawasaki Ninja was on its side. A huge oil stain surrounded it. Its fairings were cracked and one of the handle bars was bent over like a fishing rod reeling in a huge lunker. Dab didn't even know how something like that happened.

Suddenly, the Cub lurched over something and the mower deck made a *thump-thump* sound. Dab stopped and looked back, immediately thinking of his grandpa. Sitting amongst the fresh-cut grass was a long, green tail flipping from side to side. Dab had just enough time to think, *The hell?* before the grass parted and something scurried further into his yard. He didn't get a look at it.

Dab shut the mower off and walked back to the tail in the grass, making sure to stay in the mowed part of the yard. He stood over the tail and watched as it began to slow down and die. It was about eight or nine inches long, green on top and white on the bottom.

His first thought was that Billy's little brother must have lost a pet iguana or something. "Great," he said. That would complicate things a little.

He thought about picking it up, but then imagined it squirming in his hands, trying to get away. He shivered then and wrinkled his nose, a tick inherited from his mother.

He left the tail there and turned around to get back on the Cub. Something about getting off the grass and back in the nice, comfy seat of the Cub made him kinda hop and skip back to it. He stepped up using the deck and plopped in the seat. Something moved under his butt and tried to get out from under him.

He let out an embarrassing yelp and jumped right back out of the seat.

He swatted at his butt and craned his neck around so he could look back there to see what was the matter. There was nothing there but dead grass clippings. In swatting, he'd popped his knuckle up against the pocket knife he carried by his wallet. He put the knuckle to his mouth and sucked on it.

"Mmmm."

He glanced at the seat and stopped. Laid out in the crease of the seat, rolled on its back was a lizard. A little, green anole. Mostly known as the Carolina Anole. How did he know that? He wondered for a bit before remembering Mrs. Swilling's science class in fifth grade. She'd kept a grass snake in a terrarium and let them play with it if they were good. They'd named it Booger.

Furthermore, Mrs. Swilling had also taught them about other reptiles that year, including lizards. She'd brought some of the more common ones to class one day. Dab remembered how the anole she brought liked to stick its neck out and create a big, red bulge. Mrs. Swilling had said that was for mating. Dab thought that was gross.

The anole laid out in the seat of the Cub was dead. Its belly shined bright white in the sun; its tiny legs were splayed out. Dab checked his ass one more time to make sure there wasn't any blood or guts stuck on him, because that sounded gross, too. Seeing none, he grabbed the lizard by the tail and picked it up. He looked around to make sure no one was seeing him act like such a wuss and then tossed the little guy over by the much larger severed tail.

He went on.

Halfway there.

Dab looked at the half mowed yard and couldn't help but grin. He was soaked in sweat, his face was absolutely *dark* with dust and clippings, but he was making headway on a yard he'd once thought had grown too tall for the Cub to mow. A little voice in his mind said, *You've still got to weed-eat around the house and the mailbox*, but that was something he'd worry about later. For now, he was making it just fine.

And then the mower deck answered those thoughts with a horrible squealing sound. The entire deck began to shake underneath him. He flipped off the PTO and stopped. "Mother fucker."

He started to hop off but stopped. He glanced out at the half-acre patch of yard he had left to mow. He thought of the tail and its former owner scurrying off in that direction. He looked over to the tree line where he'd left the tail. He couldn't see it, but he thought he could maybe see the white belly of the anole he'd left with it.

He stared down at the deck's exhaust chute. He knelt down and put his hand on the deck's belt. It seemed tight enough and didn't look worn. Maybe he hit something...

He wrinkled his nose again and finally hopped off. He couldn't see anything under the deck for the exhaust chute's black, plastic cover. He reached out and flipped it up.

At first he didn't see it. Whether it was just too crazy or too mangled, he never knew, but he was looking at the blades for about a minute or so before he saw the lizard's head wedged in between one of the blades and his mower deck. It was the same bright green as the one he'd sat on; only this was larger than the one he'd sat on. *Much* larger. This one head was about twice the size of the entire anole he'd sat on.

But this *was* another anole, he was sure of it. The same bright green skin stood out like a firecracker under the Cub's flaky, rusted, yellow paint. He saw the rest of the lizard wrapped around the second blade in the middle of the deck. It was pressed in so tight, the blades could no longer move. That was what caused the belt to squeal and the deck to shake.

Its legs and feet dangled over the blades at crazy right angles. The rib cage was pressed together like an accordion against the blade's spindle. Dab saw the huge anole's disembodied head open its mouth and he recoiled in fear. The exhaust chute's safety cover slapped shut.

In the garage, he found the old push broom he'd bought when they moved in. Walking back to the mower, he fought the urge to shiver. It occurred to him that burning the rest of the yard might not be a bad idea. No, dumbass, he thought, go out there, be a man and handle your business.

He used the handle of the broom to open the safety cover on the exhaust chute. There was the huge anole again, staring at him with its black eyes, asking why Dab had seen fit to run it over with a damn lawn mower.

Dab suppressed a cringe, closed his eyes and poked the head with the broom handle. He felt a slight squish through the handle and exhaled, "Blurgh!" He looked into the deck and saw that the

head was still wedged in between the deck and the blades, but was now facing the front of the mower, looking down to the ground.

Dab closed his eyes again and gave one more hard shove with the broom handle. He heard a soft *thump* and was happy to see the head lying in the fresh-cut grass under the mower.

“Big mother fucker,” Dab said, looking at the rest of the anole wrapped up in the blades. He grimaced and leaned in closer with the broom. When he shut his eyes and pushed this time, nothing moved. He looked and saw that he’d pushed the rib cage in some more, but that was it.

I’ll have to reverse the blades, he thought.

He shimmied the broom handle back out of the deck and threw it behind him. Taking a deep breath, he knelt down even further and grabbed one of the blades. He turned the blades in the deck in the reverse direction, hoping it would cause the rest of the anole to fall out. He watched as the remains began to loosen. He pushed even harder then and got the blades about a half a rotation back around when his hand grazed the open mouth of the head in the grass. The lizard’s reflexes were still working because it bit down, softly, on his pinky knuckle.

Dab screamed and scrambled backwards. He fell on his butt and crab walked back a couple feet. He looked from the deck to his hand and saw blood coming from his knuckles. He shook the pain out of his hand and began back towards the deck. He flung open the chute, “There you are you little shit.” He stuck the broom handle in there and gave it a flick. It rolled out from under the mower and stopped at the edge of the uncut grass.

He grabbed the blade again and began to turn it in reverse again. The lizard’s remains were loosening, loosening... and then the blades stopped. It was stuck again. Dab took a breath and tried pushing the blades back and forth to work it out. It was hung up in there tight.

Dab sighed; *I’ll have to remove the blade.*

He let the chute drop closed again and suddenly heard a sound coming from the tall grass. It was like a loud snap buried under the sound of grass being pushed around. Dab whipped his head around and, like before, couldn’t make out what he was seeing at first. It was another anole, but this one was even bigger. Its skin was a duller shade of green, almost brown. It had the head from Dab’s mower deck about halfway down its throat already. This new anole, Dab noted, was missing its tail.

I waited entirely too damn long to mow the fuckin’ grass.

He immediately cried out as a small, burning patch of pain broke out on the back of his left arm. He began to shake it and felt the anole there flipping and flopping with his movements. It finally let go, but Dab never saw the third one that had climbed onto the big, comfy seat of his Cub. That one lunged and grabbed a hold of his earlobe.

“Hey, Billy,” Ted called from the window, “Come look at your dumb ass neighbor.”

Billy was playing Skyrim on his 360 – his siblings never got to argue about Pokemon because they never got to play it at all that day – and called over his shoulder, “What is it?”

Ted pushed the hair back from his face and said, “Man, that dude’s hot doggin’ it all the way across that field!”

Billy sputtered laughter, “W-what?” He hit pause and tossed the controller onto the bed. He came to the window and saw that dickhead from across the way running towards his house, flailing his arms out like Kermit the Frog. “I wonder what *that’s* all about. What’s that hanging from his ear?”

Ted looked over at him, “Wanna find out?”

Dab ran to the master bathroom and turned the sink on. He leaned over and began splashing water on his earlobe. Blood trickled down the drain. It dripped from his left elbow onto the white tile floor, too.

He’d finally slung the anole from his ear in his garage. It hit the floor with a loud *splat!*

As he let the cold water flow over his head, his mind raced back to Mrs. Swilling’s class in fifth grade. Were anole’s poisonous? What about giant-ass, rat-eating anoles? Would one of *those* hurt him? Obviously so, but he wanted to know—

“Am I gonna die?” he said with water from the faucet splashing into his mouth.

Suddenly, he stopped; flipped the water off.

Someone was knocking on his front door.

“Hey, there, mister!”

The kid was wearing a white tee shirt with brown stains along the sides. Holes gathered around the neck where a ring of dirt had formed permanently. He extended his hand and Dab shook it, warily.

“What is it? I’m kind of busy.”

The kid looked at Dab’s bleeding arm holding his bleeding ear and said, “Yeah, I can see that.” He looked at Dab again and kind of huffed out a short bark of laughter.

Dab stood there, waiting.

“Anyway,” the kid continued, “My name’s Ted and my buddy and I just wanted to come by and see if you wanted us to mow the rest of your yard for you. We thought it looked like you were having some trouble and Billy... Well, he kinda felt bad about earlier. Whatdayasay? \$50 and we’re yours!”

Dab saw Billy standing further behind Ted. He was looking out at the highway with his hands in his pockets. Dab looked back at Ted and said, “Hold on.”

He slammed the door in the kid’s face.

“I told you this was dumb,” Billy said. Ted was still only fourteen and often came up with some stupid ideas. Once, Ted had pissed on an electric fence on a dare. It turned his tip black for a week.

“Don’t sweat it, man,” Ted told him trotting back down the steps of Dab’s porch. “If we wanna make some money, we can mow dude’s yard. If it turns out to be too tough, we can split and he can keep his money. Did you see the guy bleedin’? That was worth the price of admission right there!”

Billy looked at him, “I wanna see what was over by the lawnmower that got him to goose-steppin’ like that.”

Ted grinned, “And you shall!”

In the end, Ted wrote them a check for fifty dollars but said he’d only give it to them once they finished. They nodded and then walked back around the house to find his mower.

Presently, Dab was in bed. His earlobe was covered by a couple band-aids. His arm was wrapped in bandages. A drop of blood had still made it onto his pillow though. He leaned over and looked at his clock: 2:00pm. He smiled. Enough time for a good, solid nap before Carol got home from work. He leaned back and began to close his eyes...

Oh! Wait a minute!

He got back up on one elbow and leaned over to his night stand again. He rummaged through his stuff until he brought out the check he’d written to ‘Ted Delaney.’ He tore it up and let the confetti fall to the floor like a sort of sad surprise party.

As he was drifting off to sleep, he thought about how soothing the sound of the mower was outside; so steady and constant. It was a droning noise, like tires on a long highway. It hypnotized you, sort of.

Just before he fell asleep, he heard the mower stop. Then he heard screaming.

That night Dab dreamed of big lizards driving John Deere tractors and wearing old trucker hats and thick glasses like his grandpa’s old pair, but before he did that, he had one thing left to say to the boys in his back field.

“Stay out of my yard.”

Buckshot

By Craig Faustus Buck

He couldn't just ring her neck like a normal person; he had to take her down with buckshot. 'Course on Thanksgiving morning he couldn't be bothered to tweeze the shot from her carcass, so the bother was mine. Ma wasn't too happy about the bird being half shredded but she was sleeping with the trigger-happy son-of-a-bitch so she teared up but shut up. When the bird come out dry, he smacked her in the mouth, just like he did when she caught him naked in my bed last night. So I took his shotgun and avenged that turkey.

Fell, in Love

By John Ammann

Anna dead, mouth full of spiders
Anna's boyfriend, dead beside her
8 years missing in a well
8 years since the lovers fell

Anna's eyes now sunken deep
Where they were the worms now creep
Anna's boyfriend dead flowers grasped
In his pocket the ring to ask

Anna's chest, bare of flesh
Beneath what was her favorite dress
Had he asked, she'd have said yes
Before he could, the well wall regressed

A wish he said to her he'd make
A wish that she would soon elate
He leaned too far but was too late
To help themselves shift the weight

They tumbled down worried first
Then they laughed in sudden burst
They'd be out soon they told themselves
Someone would see the damaged well

Anna's fingers no more than bones
Her lover's leg beneath the stone
Night comes when they choose to scream
The night sky offers darker schemes

Anna's belly an empty space
Once filled with her boyfriend's face
When he died nine days in
Her only food was that of him

She ate until the meat went rank
And still she tried despite how it stank
Before she died two weeks in
She'd lost her mind and talked to him

"I'll marry you, of course I will
You need not ask, but ask me still"
And in her mind he would ask
Through torn off flesh, a gruesome mask

Anna dead, skull full of rue
Her boyfriend's wish now comes true
To be with her now and forever
Grow old and maybe die together

Dream?

By John Ammann

He ate the feet
He ate the hands
And laughed he could not clap or stand

He ate the eyes
He ate the ears
Found it funny when he could not hear

He ate the lips
He ate the nose
He chewed a piece of each elbow

Then the tongue
Next the knees
He arranged the teeth like piano keys

Having had his fill
He pushed away
Parts left he'd eat another day

He springs awake
Full of fear
That horrid dream so vivid clear

In his mouth
He tastes the meat
His stomach turns then coats the sheets

He wipes his mouth
Free of bile
And sees the eyeball in the pile

Will to Live

By John Ammann

She feels the nail pierce her eye
She feels the hammer crush her thigh
She hears his laughter shrill and high
And still she does not cry

She smells her blood pooled below
She hears the snap at her elbow
She knows what he does not know
So still she does not cry

She sees him leave through the door
Her one eye left trains itself upon the floor
He returns again and promises more
And still she does not cry

He reaches there beneath her skirt
He says it's there he'll make it hurt
She'll cry this time he says in curt
And still she does not cry

He runs the saw across her thigh
A single tear escapes her eye
Anymore and her chance flees by
And so she starts to cry

He leans in close and smiles big now
A kiss he leaves across her brow
"That's all I wanted" he bellows loud
And now she starts to smile

He ask her why her smile comes now
She whispers something low and proud
He leans in close to hear her vow
And soon he starts to cry

Her once trapped hand now free from tape
Finds a soft spot in his neck's nape
Sweat soaked fingers dig, claw and gape
He chokes on blood between his cries

He lay still no longer alive
She sees the floor where she trained her eye
Her daughter's picture: her will to survive
The reason she would not cry

"I thought of you" she says to the floor
Just when I thought I could take no more
And to the man she said, "I swore."
"I swore I'd hear YOU cry!"

About the Authors

John Ammann was born and raised in Washington D.C. Having self-published a collection of short horror stories in 2009 called *Evidence of Hell*, he currently lives in West Orange, NJ with his wife of twenty-two years and two children. Noteworthy: in or around 1990, he challenged Stephen King to a short story writing contest. King's publicist said they considered it but ultimately decided not to do it.

Craig Faustus Buck is a writer of many faces having been a journalist, nonfiction book co-author, TV writer-producer, and feature film and crime writer. He wrote the Oscar-nominated short film, *Overnight Sensation*, as well as co-wrote the seminal NBC miniseries *V: The Final Battle*. Buck has co-authored six nonfiction books, including *Toxic Parents*, a *New York Times* #1 bestseller. His first noir mystery novel, *Go Down Hard*, was the First Runner-up for the Claymore Award at Killer Nashville in 2011.

Michael Coolen is a pianist, composer, actor, and writer who lives in Corvallis, Oregon. In addition to having written two musicals and numerous musical compositions, he has published his writings in *Western Folklore*, *Oregon Humanities*, *50words Online*, *The Gold Man Review*. He is currently working on his memoirs, titled *Consonances and Dissonances: the Musings of a Restless Pianist*. In September 2014, he will be performing his one-man performance art production, *The Penile Colonies: Living With XY Disorder*, a trope on *The Vagina Monologues*.

John Earnhart lives and writes out of Sheridan, AR. This is his first publication, so congrats!

Travis Gunn is the author of a few, dry legal articles, with this being his first foray into the world of fiction. Born in South Carolina, he graduated from the College of Charleston with a BA in English and Political Science, and received a JD from William & Mary Law School. Travis lives in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Wendy Hammer teaches literature and composition at a community college. Her stories can be found in the anthology *Gaia: Shadows and Breath* (*Pantheon Magazine*), *Plasma Frequency*, and *Liquid Imagination*. Others will appear in the forthcoming anthologies: *Suspended in Dusk* (Books of the Dead Press) and *Legend: True Stories from a Friend of a Friend* (Thunderdome Press). Wendy lives in West Lafayette, Indiana with her husband.

Dave Novak works in an office in northern New Jersey that requires him to be somewhat serious. Whenever he wants to be less or more serious, he writes.

Ken Poyner often serves as unlikely eye-candy at his wife's powerlifting meets. His latest collection of brief fictions, *Constant Animals*, can be located through links on his website, www.kpoyner.com. His most recent work can be found in *Corium*, *Asimov's*, *Poet Lore*, *Sein Und Werden*, and a few dozen other places.

Phil Richardson is retired and lives in Athens, Ohio where he writes fiction and memoirs. Two of Phil's stories were nominated for the Pushcart Prize in Fiction, and he has won or placed in several writing contests, including *The Starving Writer*, *Five Stop Story*, *Wild Violet*, *Writers Digest Contest*, *Green River Writers*, and *ELF: Eclectic Literary Forum*. His publications include over seventy stories in such magazines as *Five Stop Story* (UK), *Big Pulp*, *Greensilk Journal*, *Danse Macabre*, and *The Starving Writer*, and *The Storyteller*. Some of the anthologies which have published his work include: *Writing on Walls*, *Anthology of Ichor*, *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader: Flush Fiction*, *Whacked*, *OBE: Out of Body Experience*, *Literary Foray*, and fifteen others. Phil's website with links to some published stories is philrichardsonstories.com.

Gary Vaughn is an associate professor of English at the University of Cincinnati and is the author and co-author of many peer reviewed publications, reviews, and paper presentations.